

# Dilli Gate

*Yashoda*

Dilli Gate, which is a well known landmark in Delhi. Where there is always too much traffic. A pigeon cote separating two roads stands here. It has become well known because of people who, despite leading busy lives, try to do some good work and earn some goodwill. Today when I passed by here, I witnessed a strange bond between all these people who are related to the place, and which I had not noticed before.

I had stepped out just after a bath, so I was feeling slightly cold. And the sun here seemed very warm. I sat down on a low, broad coping. In spite of all the noise, an unknown calm was making its way inside me. Silently, I was moving my eyes about, examining the place. I could see the Emergency Ward ahead of me. Outside it were a number of fruit vendors with their carts. Amidst the coming and going of the patients were also the groups of healthy people, passing by in either direction.

Behind me were buildings of big companies. Sunlight was falling directly on them, so their names could be read clearly. The rally of people passing by this road is never-ending. Looking at the crowds passing by, I remembered a friend who had asked a question, "If we were to stand in a crowd and look at one another, what would the eyes of the crowd say to us? Move! Get out of the way!" The question hammered in my brain. I began to look at the people on the road in front of me under the pressure of the question.

I saw a woman. Her face was dark-complexioned and experienced. She was trying to cross the road, and was coming in my direction. Four to five men were passing by in front of her. I wasn't looking at them; I could see only the woman. My eyes were fixed on the woman's eyes, to see how she reacts while passing through these people.

But it wasn't only her eyes that were reacting. The expressions on her entire face were changing. A face that had looked normal till then, now had an expression of distress. Her hands, fixing the *dupatta*, were playing on her body. Her eyes were raised towards those people, and mine towards her. In her eyes I could see the need to hurry past. She passed by those people in one second. But in that second, how many expressions had adorned her. She walked on, past me.

But what the eyes of those people said to her was not revealed to me. I still didn't have an answer to that question. My mind felt tired. And I started looking at the pigeons, pecking on their feed in front of me. I had decided I was not going to turn to look at this question again. I was looking affectionately at the pigeons. And also at an elderly man who was short and wearing a *kurta-pyjama*, with plastic shoes on his feet, which were quite worn out. His hair was white with age, and his skin looked like it had burnt in the sun. His features were all right. He was filling water for the birds in earthen bowls. The bowls were half-filled with water, and so their top half was dry. When the man would pour water into them, the smell of wet earth would pass through me. It was a beautiful sight. And around it was spread a web of soft emotions. There was no room for anyone in these feelings – not friends, not dear ones, not strangers, and not for the past which I had left behind for a few moments after so many years. I didn't know what unknown calm this was that flowed from my body like soft light, and spread out.

My eyes wouldn't leave the pigeons and the man. The man would go among the pigeons again and again, and fill water in their bowls, and collect the seeds together with a broom. He was very close to the pigeons, but they were not frightened of him. Between him and the pigeons flowed the understanding of the seeds, and it secured their relationship.

The man finished his work and went and sat with the millet seller. I was also getting up to leave, when my eyes fell on a pigeon which was

pecking at another pigeon for seeds. There were many seeds scattered around him, but he was still trying to snatch away seeds from the other pigeon. Seeing this, my viewing of the pigeons became more intense, and many words started circling in my head.

In the middle of all of this, the loud *pi-pi* sound of a two-wheeler from behind me broke my concentration. I turned my neck, and saw a young man who was wearing black pants and a parrot-coloured shirt. He was light-skinned, his eyes were brown. He was looking at me. Casting a wary glance at him, I turned my neck away and looked at my watch. It was 11:30. Then the *pi-pi* sound came again. Brushing my hands through my hair, I turned again to see that the boy was still standing there, looking at me. I looked at him carefully. There was anger in my eyes, but there was mischief in his. He looked at me for two minutes, and then moved on, smiling. I turned my head, and started looking at my nails.

And I started thinking. I have so many encounters, which I remember for a long time. Then instead of peeping inside the mould of my own mind, why am I pecking here and there, trying to look for feed. When I pass through the crowds of a market, of a bus, of a street, so many eyes meet, clash with mine. And in that crowd, in those eyes, somewhere I see lust, somewhere a compelling need to quickly pass by, somewhere shyness, somewhere the lines of distress, and somewhere an emptiness – where there is no interest in either the self, or in those around them. A crowd's eyes don't just tell us to get out of the way. Because they are not comprised of just one person with a single thought. There are kinds and kinds of people in a crowd. In a crowd one doesn't necessarily always see only goons, brothers or friends. It depends on our mood – our eyes change with our frame of mind.

This could also be said about the eyes of a crowd. Eyes that are unfamiliar, which depend on their mood. But what can be said of glances that are not from strangers, but well-wishers? They seem unfamiliar sometimes. What are these looks? They leave a trace of suffocation in my life which

otherwise seems to be going on just right. Even if I want to tell others about these looks, I can't. Because I don't understand them myself. Because in the courthouse of glances, there are no eyewitnesses.

## A Bus Journey

One Friday morning, Nasreen recounts a bus accident she witnessed some years ago, to her friends at the Compughar. Some conversations around the incident...

### **[Nasreen's text]**

I have travelled a lot by bus. But it was the first time I was travelling such a long distance. I was going to my mother's maternal home.

This happened three to four years ago. We caught a bus to Loni from the Inter State Bus Terminus. Buses to Loni were very infrequent then. We were half way to our destination. It was very hot. And the bus was moving in fits and starts, jerking. Whenever the bus would turn, I would think the bus was going to topple over. The bus was very crowded; there was no room for anyone to get on. My brother was standing at the door.

Frankly, it was quite scary.

Many people were trying to get on. But because the bus was crowded, the driver was speeding, halting at the stops very briefly. One man, who was trying to get on, was clutching on to the handle on the door. He was trying to put one foot on the steps of the bus. But unfortunately, he slipped, and along with that, his hand also lost its grip on the handle. He fell. The driver drove on.

When people in the bus heard the man fall, they started yelling to the

driver to stop. But he didn't stop. One man caught hold of his collar from behind and said, "You are busy driving the bus! Do you even know one man has fallen off!"

At this, the driver stopped the bus. Everyone got off to check on the man who had fallen. My brother also went. The man was lying there, dead. His head had burst when he fell.

We got off the bus to look for our brother. *Ammi* was still wondering why the bus had stopped. We were already late, and we also had to get back the same day. After some time, I saw my brother coming. *Ammi* asked him, "What has happened?" He told her that a man had fallen off the bus while trying to get on, and died. Then our brother took us to show the dead body. The man's skull was completely split and blood was flowing out.

Police came after some time and started to chase everyone away. The driver had left the bus and run away. The police only got the bus, but no driver. No one knew anything about the poor man who had died. I was wondering what would become of him now. Will his relatives even get to know about his death? When they do get to know, there will be such mourning in the family. I wished I knew where the man lived, so I could inform his family.

Another bus came. We climbed on and soon we reached our destination. Then we also returned home, but the thought of the dead man didn't leave me. I could think of nothing else for days afterwards.

**[What everyone said]**

**[Bobby Khan]**

This happened about a year and a half back. All of my family, except *Abbu* and *Pappu Mama* were going to *Loni* to meet my *Chachi*. We took a bus from *Zakir Hussain* to *Khajuri*. (There were four of us – me, my mother, my three brothers, three sisters and my aunt's son *Naushad*. *Naushad Bhai* is tall and a little heavy set. He is dark. He was wearing

a T-shirt.) The one and a half hour journey till Khajuri was comfortable, because we got a seat to sit.

We got off at Khajuri and waited for our bus – Number One. Another boy was standing there, maybe he was also waiting for a bus. He was wearing a white *kurta-pyjama*, a black cap on his head, and a scarf with checks around his neck. He was fair, had big eyes, and was of medium height. He was wearing *nagra* style shoes [from Jaipur], and was holding a black bag in his hand.

Suddenly, he started moving towards the bus-stand on the other side of the road. He got run over by a tempo. He went and fell far away. It was just like when Sachin Tendulkar hits a six and it becomes difficult to figure out if the ball has fallen within the stadium, or reached the public.

Blood was flowing from his head. A crowd gathered to watch. We also went to see, but couldn't see much because of the crowd. All we could see was blood on the ground, and half of his body. *Ammi* came and took us back to the bus stand. Our bus came, and all of us got in. But I was still thinking of the boy. Was he alive, or dead? We didn't get to know.

When I was listening to Nasreen's story, this accident, the scene, and the boy's face started circling in front of my eyes. It seems the accident happened just yesterday.

### **[Masooma Ansari]**

When I heard Nasreen's story, incidents and images due to the carelessness of drivers came before my eyes. Bus drivers are often careless. They seem only to care about driving, without any care about who is getting on or off from the bus. If it pleases them, they stop the bus for half an hour at a stretch. And if they don't want to, they don't stop for even half a minute.

On hearing about the accident, I remembered an incident that happened to my grandmother. I was not with her then. My *Ammi* told me about it when she and my grandmother got back home. She told me that because the bus driver was in a rush, *Badi Ma* almost fell off the bus while getting off.

This happened when my brother Shabbir had run away from home and couldn't be traced in spite of all our attempts to find him. Everyone at home was trying to look for him, praying for a reunion. *Badi Ma* would pray at every *dargah* and shrine. It was Thursday. Like every week, my mother accompanied *Badi Ma* to the Feroz Shah Kotla *dargah*. By the time they had finished offering their *namaaz* and a special prayer for my brother, it was four thirty. Because they were late, they decided to take a bus. They got on to bus number 39 which comes from ITO. The bus was not very crowded. When the bus stopped at a red light before Zakir Hussain College, they thought of getting off. As they were getting off, the driver drove on. *Badi Ma* lost her balance because of the sudden movement, and she fell. Her head hit a stone on the footpath and started to bleed. But the bus driver still didn't stop the bus and recklessly drove on.

Mummy somehow brought her home and bandaged her.

**[Nasreen]**

You asked, "Why are you not able to forget that incident?"

Because I had seen it with my own eyes. Perhaps if I had only been told about it by someone, I would have forgotten it in a matter of a few days, maybe months.

**[Neelofar]**

When I was listening to Nasreen's story I was remembering scenes when people, especially boys, run to get on moving buses. Some do this because the bus doesn't stop long enough, while others get off the bus when it stops and then get on again when the bus starts to move. Bus conductors do this often. When I see this, I feel they are trying to

show off their bravery. Such people annoy me. They risk their lives for a little style. I like it when people first let the woman, or family members they are travelling with, board the bus, and then get on.

I haven't seen any incident like this, but I have heard about them. When I was listening to Nasreen's story, I could visualise that man's running legs, the speed of the bus and the helpless hand that could not grip, or gripped and then lost hold of, the handle of the door.

**[Shahana Qureshi]**

When Nasreen was reading out her text, my ears were listening to her voice, but I was transported to four years ago.

Four years ago, my *Khala* and I were going to Zafrabad. My older *Khala* lives there. When our bus reached the main crossing of Zafrabad, we saw a police vehicle standing there. The traffic had come to a halt. We peeped out of the bus window and saw three dead bodies lying on the road. A two-wheeler was standing near the bodies. Our bus driver asked a policeman about the accident. The policeman said it was a family – a husband and wife, and a child. A truck had rammed into them.

Seeing three dead people, I started wondering about them. Who are they? Where must they have been coming from? Where could they have been going? What a tragic death! This child would have seen nothing of the world yet. His parents must have had so many dreams for him. And what will their relatives go through when they hear of the accident?

When their bodies were taken away in an ambulance, our bus started moving. But now I wasn't glad to be going to my *Khala's* house any more. The house was just two minutes away from the scene of the accident. But the two minutes seemed endless. What if I die this way? My body shivered with the thought. We couldn't sit in *Khala's* house for long. My younger *Khala* also kept mentioning the accident over and over again during our conversations.

When we were returning home, our bus stopped again at the red light and the scene flashed before my eyes. When we got off at Dilli Gate and took a rickshaw to go home, we saw there had been another accident near LNJP Hospital. This time it was a rickshaw-*wala*. But there were no dead bodies. The rickshaw was broken, and glass from the bus standing next to it was scattered on the road, near the rickshaw. I turned to my aunt and said, "Another accident?" Then our rickshaw-*wala* told us there had been an accident in which the rickshaw-*wala* had died.

I had seen two accidents in the span of a few hours.

**[Shamsher Ali]**

Listening to the story, I feel like I am the driver and am driving the vehicle, looking at either side. I am glancing at the rear view mirror, and looking at the road as well, which will take the travellers in the bus to their destination. But my attention is not on the passengers at all. I am waiting for the destination.

If what happened to the man in Nasreen's story had happened with Nasreen's brother, and her mother had not got to know, what would Nasreen have done? Would she have done what she has said she did in the text, or would she have acted differently?

What do you mean, "A little"? And then what will happen between the two? What can get left out, Nasreen?

**[Yashoda]**

I don't know why, but I have started feeling angry towards bus drivers after hearing Nasreen's text. It's not that I haven't felt anger towards them before. But today, this suppressed anger seems to be surfacing. Many anecdotes and incidents related with buses are dancing around me.

It was the first time I had got into a bus. My friends and I were going home from school. We thought, "Why not take a bus today?" We got

into a bus from Zeenat Mahal. I had got into the bus, but my heart was jumping up to the height of a yard. The next stop was ours. The driver stopped at the bus stop, and all my friends got off. I had reached the steps to get off. I was about to put my foot down on the ground, when the driver moved the bus with a jerk, and I froze right there on the steps.

An elderly man was standing behind me. Seeing my actions, he said, "*Arre Bhai!* Let the girl get off first". I turned around to look at the driver. That moustachioed monkey was looking at me and smiling. His gaze at me was deep. I started feeling scared of him. I got off the bus immediately.

Though I was walking with everyone, I felt cut off from them. I was cursing him, silently, "Rascal, dog! What a wretched being. He carts around fresh flowers for Lord Shiva, but carries bad intentions in his eyes".

I was walking along, thinking these thoughts, muttering under my breath when a car whizzed past me, very close to me. And like the incident in the bus, the sound of the vehicle kept fading, moving away from me.

What happened in the bus still happens with me sometimes. But the feelings elicited in me now are not the same as they were in the first bus ride. Why do bus drivers think of buses as their personal property? Do buses exist because of the public, or the public because of buses? When we pay rent for something, we can't have any claims on it. Why? Do we buy the tickets for our satisfaction, or does the conductor get some personal satisfaction by selling us the ticket?

I haven't been able to understand this, but would like to. Can someone help me in this?

# Gaps in a Crowd

## From Above and from Within

*Azra Tabassum*

### **Crowds, from above and afar**

I looked down from a height of about 25 feet. It was very crowded. People were coming and going. It seemed as if despite walking in the middle of the crowd, their faces were not worried. From above, it looked like there was no ground beneath their feet. The surroundings were settling into my eyes with ease. There were many shops, and each shop had a crowd before it. I was wondering how people were able to buy anything when it was so crowded. There were countless people. Many more people were coming in than there were people leaving. Sometimes it would seem like a beehive, sometimes like insects crawling on the ground. I was finding it difficult to look at anything with close attention or care. It seemed there were no intervening spaces in the crowd. If we were to try, we might not be able to get through.

Sometimes we feel we are in the crowd, even when we are not. Strange fears appear and stir in our hearts. It seems these sensations try and show us different facets of being in a crowd. It seems they are trying to save us from the crowds. There are many sounds, but none reach our ears properly.

People danced around shops as if they were getting things for free.

### **Crowds, face to face**

When you stand at level with the crowd, you can see faces. You see different features and appearances that could not be seen from above. Expressions on every face can be seen. Some faces seem to be searching for something. Sometimes it is a glimpse of the unknown, and sometimes a somewhat intimate search. Eyes dance around in all directions. One can't make out where the gaps are, where people are putting their feet. Some faces are smiling, and it seems they have no wor-

ries or problems walking in this crowd. Sometimes it seems people have not come to buy something, but for a stroll.

If you look closely, you realise people are keeping in step with one another. When two to three people walk past us, it feels like they are angels of death, here to take us into the crowd, into that hotch-potch. We keep staring at them, without a pause, till those faces leave us behind.

### **Crowds, when you enter the gap**

Even though it seems there is no space in the crowd, in the hotch-potch, once you enter it, you find intervening spaces. On entering the crowd you get to know what is easy, and what is difficult. You ignore the surroundings a little. Even if something attracts your attention, the heart feels a little strained. Because the heart can feel lonely even in a crowd.

## **Joy and Fire in the Veil**

*Yashoda*

On 9th June, passing through the lanes of DakshinPuri, I thought of a mischief. I said to Shahana, "I feel like covering my face with a veil while walking". It's something that women are sometimes forced to do. Fixing my *dupatta*, I covered my head with a long veil. Now no one could see my face. But I could see everyone easily. Shahana was wearing pants and a T-shirt. And I was wearing stylish flared pajamas, with embroidery on the flare.

We walked on, lost in our own worlds, towards the road outside. Some women sitting in the lanes were looking at us with great interest. They had not paid so much attention to us before, ever! I thought to myself that we had done some strange deed. We reached the bus stop outside,

chatting with one another. And then we took an RTV bus.

In all this, my veil was just as I had wanted it to be. I had not let the veil slip up or down. Both of us sat down on the long seat in the RTV. There were more men than women. I think there were just two to three women. I was the centre of everyone's attention. No one could see me, but I was looking at everyone with great interest.

Their eyes were filled with curiosity. They were looking for something. Maybe my face, which had got lost in the darkness of the grey cotton *dupatta*. This might not have happened if I had got on the bus without a veil.

Two men were sitting right in front of me. They must have been 25-26 years old. They would turn their heads from one side to another, and then start looking at me. They were also looking at my hands and feet with surprise. There was a strange restlessness in them. But for me, this was fun. In it was nothing else but playful abandon.

And an unnamed happiness that was filling up inside me.

We got off at our stop, which is Pushpa Vihar. The looks of people in the bus were still following us with the desire to see an unknown, unfamiliar object. After two minutes, the bus moved on.

After the bus left, I removed my veil. And, looking at Shahana, I started to laugh. I said, "This is so much fun!"

There is a different happiness in playing with strangers.

I thought to myself, "I definitely must have given the people sitting in the bus something or the other to think about:

Is she married, or not?

So modern, and yet why had she covered her face?

No bangles on the wrist, no rings on the toes, then why a veil?

Maybe she has an ugly mark on her face?  
Such beautiful hands and feet! How must her face be?"

I had so much fun today! Because I thought of nothing new today but compelled others to think. Through my being, I raised questions in their minds, and left them to find the answers themselves. Anyway, that is what I am thinking. It's possible they didn't think anything at all!

At home I drank cold water. And thinking of all this, I kept smiling to myself. Seeing me smile my sister Lakshmi asked, "What happened? Why are you smiling to yourself?" I told Lakshmi the whole story. I was certain she would laugh. But instead of laughing, she started looking carefully at me. And said, "So this is a joke? But this joke could set aflame people's houses".

I asked, "Why?" I was surprised to hear what she had said. Looking at me, she said, "It's not necessary all of them were bachelors. Some of them must be married. Now some of their wives probably cover their faces, and some must argue about having to cover their faces. Won't the men who have differences with their wives over this tell them, 'When a modern woman, who moves around outside her house can cover her face, why can't you cover yours when you are inside the house?' At this, the wives will say, 'When you travel by bus, do you stare at other peoples' wives?' The men will remain stubborn about their point, and you will be present in the houses even in your absence".

I looked at her with rapt attention and said, "But why should this happen?" Picking up the tumblers, she said, "But what if it happens?" She went off to the other room to wash utensils. The matter was not so big, but now I was feeling guilty. I felt as if a molehill had turned into a mountain.

For me it was just a funny joke. A joke I had uttered, but not thought about how it would mark others...