

Long Bus Rides

JOY CHATTERJEE

*Dhomtola – Pak Stit – Gorihat – Dhakuia – Jaoppur;
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Conductors are shouting from the gates of the mini and private buses. Taxi and auto ricksha horns, and the gentle sound of tram bells in a series of traffic jams. Mid-1970s Calcutta roads were busy and noisy. On the other hand, Delhi roads were like drawings by a lazy kid. Empty spaces and roads. Perhaps one car in the middle of the road and a Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) bus, painted green and yellow standing in front of bus shelter with a few passengers. Delhi conductors used to be quiet and cool, in the '70s. A few motorcycles turned into carriages (*phatphatis*) could occasionally be heard faintly calling *Paharganj – Naidilli – Canaught Palace*.

Most of the '70s I used to live in the Safdarjung and Nauroji Nagar areas, and my movement was limited to the All India Medical Institute at one end and Moti Bagh on the other. We used to travel by buses and occasionally by *phatpati*. For me Delhi used to end at Moti Bagh as I could only see hills and scrub beyond. Longer journeys started when I joined school, which was in Lodi Road. I don't remember much about those journeys other than the long old-fashioned buses, which used to break down quite frequently.

In 1977, I shifted to Chittaranjan Park. Though at that time there were many buses, along with two mini-buses, plying through C.R. Park, the only bus we used was route number 444, + or -. This bus had a circular route, starting from Kalkaji and back to Kalkaji, so it used to ply in both directions, clockwise and anti-clockwise, i.e. + or -. As far as I remember, this bus used to come every half-hour, and we at the bus stand would speculate looking at oncoming buses whether there was a 444 or not. Initially I could surprise my companions with my perfect predictions, as the 444s were old TATA buses whereas the others were Ashok Leyland buses.

Gradually, as I started travelling further, more buses were added to my list: 430, 440 and so on. There were only four flyovers in South Delhi area at that time. They were located near Safdarjung Airport, Defence Colony, Ashram and Bhogal. All of them were built over railway lines. But at the end of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s we could see more bridges growing, this time not on railway lines but over road crossings. It was the beginning of a new configuration of Delhi roads.

Then came 1982, and New Delhi hosted the IXth Asian Games. Actually those flyovers were built for this, and roads were made wider and smoother for the faster movement of vehicles. More accidents began to happen. DTC buses began to be called killer buses. As

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the conductors in the buses sat at the end of the bus and gave minimum attention to happenings at the bus stand, the driver rushed the bus and the public had to run after to board.

Till 1982 Delhi didn't have any private bus operators. During the Asian Games, for the first time, a private bus appeared on Delhi roads. The Luxury bus had a Rs. 1 ticket, whereas normal bus tickets cost 30 *paise*, 40 *paise* and 50 *paise*. These luxury buses used to ply on very few routes. Another special bus service started at the time was the Green Line (GL), which used to ply between bus depots and the railway stations. These GL buses were ordinary DTC buses, but with a Rs. 1 ticket.

By the end of the '80s, Delhi roads were full of private buses. And the other phenomenon that happened was 'Maruti, the middle-class car' and Hero Honda Motor Cycle, the 'Fill it and forget it' motorbike. Delhi drivers thus acquired high 'pick-up' vehicles to squeeze through the traffic and slip under buses and trucks. This new driving style was complemented by the new private bus drivers who competed with each other to pick up some passengers and kill others. For most of the '80s and the first part of the '90s, these private buses were painted white and red and were called Red Line buses. These began to be called Blood Line buses for their embarrassing number of accidents. By the mid-'90s, the government had to withdraw these buses, but they returned afresh, painted blue and called Blue Line. In the meantime the cost of the bus ticket was revised thrice. By now, tickets cost Rs. 2, Rs. 4, Rs. 6.

After the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Sikh massacre of 1984, Delhi roads started looking different with barricades installed at every corner of the city. Bombs were found in the form of transistors, dolls, briefcases etc. Almost all public information systems cautioned us not to touch these things if found lying unidentified or unclaimed. Public buses being public also carried these messages of caution imprinted on the back of every seat. They said, "*kisi anjaan vastu ko na chuye, yeh bomb ho sakta hai*". "Don't touch any unidentified object, it can be a bomb". Initially it was frightening to see those messages – people actually looked under their seats. But with time the print faded, and so did the fear. Other than these messages, there were other messages as well. "Beware of pickpockets", "Owners are responsible for their luggage", "Please leave seats for ladies and old citizens". But all these messages were hardly readable as printing quality was very bad. Passengers were hardly aware of these rules. Another important text one could see on the back of almost every seat was a declaration of love. "Sonu loves Sunita", "Monu loves Munni" were written, engraved, painted in many styles and formats on the back of almost every seat. The third kind of text was and is stickers. Whether for sexologist or tutor, Amarnath *Yatra* or *shadi.com*, one can still see many small stickers pasted on the walls and windows of buses. People who talk of the shaping of Indian culture by big advertisement firms should have a look at these advertisements as well!

Whether it is the DTC or a private bus, the interior design of both the buses is the same. The bus is divided into a 2x2 sitting arrangement, with the conductor's seat just in front of the rear door. Passengers are supposed to board from the rear door and alight from the front. This rule is more or less strictly followed in DTC buses but private bus operators cannot afford the luxury of regulations. They don't dare refuse any customer boarding from the front. But they won't stop the bus for anyone who wants to get down from the rear door,



if there is no one to get down from the front door. They will ask you to go to the front door even though by that time you might have reached the next stop. Then you need to take another bus to go back. Generally, operators are very generous while picking up the customers and equally absent-minded while dropping them.

However, even though I say that they are generous picking up passengers, this does not hold if there is only one passenger standing at the bus stand. Where's the economy of that? They will, however, stop for 10-15 minutes (which to a passenger feels like hours) at some bus stands if they feel that the bus is not full enough. Different bus drivers have different strategies to avoid public rage for such long stoppages. Some drivers constantly start and stop the bus to give a feel of 'about to launch' the bus on the road. Some get down and go off for a while, and some play the radio. But if they realise that another bus of the same route is coming behind them, the driver will start blowing the horn madly, the helper will furiously bang the body of the bus and the bus will take off like a rocket. Sometimes the public opposes this, and sometimes enjoys this mad rush. After all, everyone wants to reach their destination as soon as possible. No wonder in the year 2001 the number of deaths by accident had crossed 1,600 by the middle of December!

I have mentioned how silent Delhi roads were in the 1970s, and this includes the sound of music. DTC buses are not allowed to play music. But with private buses, music became an integral part of the bus journey. To reach college I had to change two buses – 490 to reach Jantar Mantar and then 70 or 187 to reach Patel Nagar. In the morning I would often take a DTC bus and it would be relatively silent, although as it would start nearing the centre of the city, it would fill up with middle-class office goers who would discuss everything from politics to cricket. Everyone had an opinion, and almost everyone could solve India's problems!

While coming back from college, I enjoyed the luxury of being able to listen to music and relax. Route number 70 and 187 used to ply between Palika Kendra near Connaught Place to Naraina in West Delhi. Since the partition, West Delhi has been a place for migrants from Punjab. I don't know if it was due to this or something else, but the drivers of 70 and 187 always played Punjabi songs. They also had an inclination for the T-Series produced film songs, which are basically cheap tapes of cover versions of popular songs. In contrast, when I took 490 it would mostly play songs of Kishore Kumar, Mohammad Rafi etc., mainstream Hindi film songs that are popular amongst cosmopolitan urban citizens.

Gradually, other forms of music also began to be played in almost all kinds of buses. There are now Bhojpuri songs as well as Haryanvi songs (with dialogue). But the most popular audio stream is the All India FM radio. I have noticed that they switch off the radio when it starts playing English songs but they often don't mind the English commentary that comes between Hindi songs. Music is being played not only for fun, but also to control the temperaments of the passengers. From the IT factory to the bus, almost every worker listens to music to get rid of the monotony of the work...

Passengers of public buses are constituted from mostly the lower and lower middle class, with a pinch of the middle class. There are routes which are classified as 'gentlemen' routes but the middle class mostly prefers to use chartered buses. (Chartered buses are specially hired only for travelling between residences and offices). Since they generally

avoid public buses, cars and auto *rickshas* are very popular in Delhi. Almost every middle-class family has at least one car in the house. Even then, getting a public bus after office hours is very difficult in Delhi.

Recently DTC has reduced the number of buses on the road. So at night, since most buses are filled with tired and exhausted working people, private bus operators tend to exercise power on them. Very often they ask for more than the actual ticket cost. If the distance should cost a Rs. 2 ticket, conductors very often end up taking Rs. 4 or even Rs. 6. For newcomers, conductors are a nightmare. The other day an old man seated next to me asked, "When will Tughlaqabad come?". I told him that the bus would not go to Tughlaqabad. He said "But the conductor told me it will go to Tughlaqabad!". I had to convince him that he would have to get down at Kalkaji and then take another bus for Tughlaqabad. Another time, a passenger fell asleep and woke up after crossing four or five stands beyond where he was supposed to get down. He shouted for the bus to stop, but not only did the bus not stop, the conductor charged him more money for travelling the extra distance.

Very often, the bus owner or some associate of his sits with the conductor, and they are usually more violent than the drivers or conductors. They not only charge the passengers, they also charge the conductors if they find conductors are not shouting properly for passengers when the bus is at the bus stop. Another important job these associates do is to tackle the competition. If two buses are plying on the same route then there should be enough of a time-gap between the buses so that both of them can get a good number of passengers. Too often the first bus gets late, and as a result the next bus suffers due to a lack of passengers. Somewhere in the middle of the route the second bus will catch up with the first bus, and then they begin a 'fight' which is often like a chase scene in a film. Sometimes they come to the compromise that the second bus will have to wait to increase the time-gap, even if this is at the cost of the passengers' time. Recently a new phenomenon has started. If the bus operator finds that there aren't enough passengers, the bus is stopped and the passengers moved to another bus of the same route, even though it is already comfortably filled with passengers.

Today, Delhi roads are manifold busier than Calcutta. With many more cars, bikes, buses and auto *rickshas* Delhi looks like a painting of an artist who doesn't know when to stop. Every bus stand looks like fish market, where each call is louder than the other.

Gobinpuri – Nehru Palace – Central school – Deface Clony – Pragti Madan – Kanat Palace
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