

## Spotlight Vol. 7, No. 21: Boarding Buses in Bangladesh

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Sitting in the center of Bangladesh, Dhaka is unique among the world's megacities because it is the only one lacking an organized mass transit system. It is the capital of the densest country in the world, and a lack of planning and notorious corruption makes progress difficult. And with the population density of Dhaka's 14 million people being over four times that of New York City, the situation is dire.

Just like New Yorkers, Dhaka residents don't drive. But instead of relying on public transit, as New Yorkers do, they walk - Dhaka has the highest rate of pedestrianism of all megacities - or they use private bus services, rickshaws and all types of other vehicles, from hand-pulled carts to taxis.

What Dhaka needs sorely is a comprehensive public transit system with reliable bus service, and even possibly subway and commuter rail. Without a robust mass transit rail system to complement the roads, there is no alternative to the streets of Dhaka that remain jammed from morning to night with speeds frequently averaging less than 10mph. New York's traffic on its worst days pales in comparison to what Dhaka experiences.

For cross-town trips, Dhaka residents depend on buses, an affordable way to travel the longer distances. Although only one in ten vehicles on Dhaka streets is a bus, more than half of all vehicle-trips are made in buses. The vast majority of the bus services are privately owned and operated, and the different companies do not cooperate to provide consistent service or essential travel information. They often don't even follow routes and stops strictly, despite recent legislation requiring such consistency. So without schedules or maps, without printed route numbers or destinations on the buses, the system relies on human interaction to function.

At bus "stops," which are often just a stretch of road that buses travel through more slowly, conductors yell the bus's destinations to passing pedestrians. Other, more expensive services have ticket counters, where tellers help travelers figure out which bus to take. In a sense, this verbal system makes the bus system more accessible to all, including the half of Dhaka residents who are illiterate. Even for those who don't know the city, travel advice from workers and other travelers is always quickly given.

New Yorkers may sometimes feel like our transit system is crowded, but it's nothing like in Dhaka - a Bangladeshi dropped onto the Lexington Avenue 4 or 5 train at rush hour would feel like they have some elbow room. Like buses in many South Asian cities, Dhaka's are so crowded that getting through the door requires elbow jabbing and several good pushes. Riders hang out the door and sometimes grab a seat on the roof. Bus operators, however, make their money by jamming these buses full, and thus will wait at the curb if the bus has any usable space. In other words, being on a crowded bus will get you to your destination more quickly, as your driver won't frequently stop along the road to gather more riders. You just have to put up with someone else sweating on you.

Fortunately, progress appears to be in the works. In the past year, the government approved a Strategic Transportation Plan for Dhaka. The plan calls for a vast array of improvements to be made. Immediately, critical east-west roads are to be constructed, making it easier to get across town, at least in the short term. Down the line, a mix of bus rapid transit and underground metro lines will be built, but these are over a decade-and-a-half away under current plans, assuming they stay on track. What was to be the third flyover bridge or overpass in the city was cancelled in late

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2007 due to Bangladesh's number one problem: corruption. Beyond the infrastructure, the plan points out ways to reduce the congestion through proper enforcement of traffic laws and roadway usage.

How extensively the transportation plan is carried out depends in part on the upcoming December elections, which will return the country to democratic rule. The new government may have its own urban and transportation agenda. And as always, there is the issue of how to gain the funds to build out the \$5.5 billion plan.

Until the desired mass transit system can get built, the privately owned buses of Dhaka will be the only option for many people, and will dominate the roads. Any current effort to reduce crowding levels and make the ride more comfortable for Dhaka residents would probably be futile. Adding more buses, in order to relieve overcrowding, would require dedicated bus lanes, congestion pricing or some other comprehensive plan. Such policies would be very difficult to enforce, even if passed, in a country that has difficulties enforcing even the most basic of traffic laws. Until some combination of new infrastructure and proper planning policies are implemented, the best option for a Dhaka commuter taking the bus is perhaps a pair of new Converse sneakers in order to run faster as the bus rolls by, jump higher for the door, and then push harder for elbow room.

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