

A case in point

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By Dr Noman Ahmed

POINT buses or university/campus shuttles are a moving symbol of the respective institution. For the common people, these vehicles represent the image of the institution to which they belong. Despite the fact that many of them are extremely worn out and rickety in appearance, they are over utilised by the student fraternity and staff members.

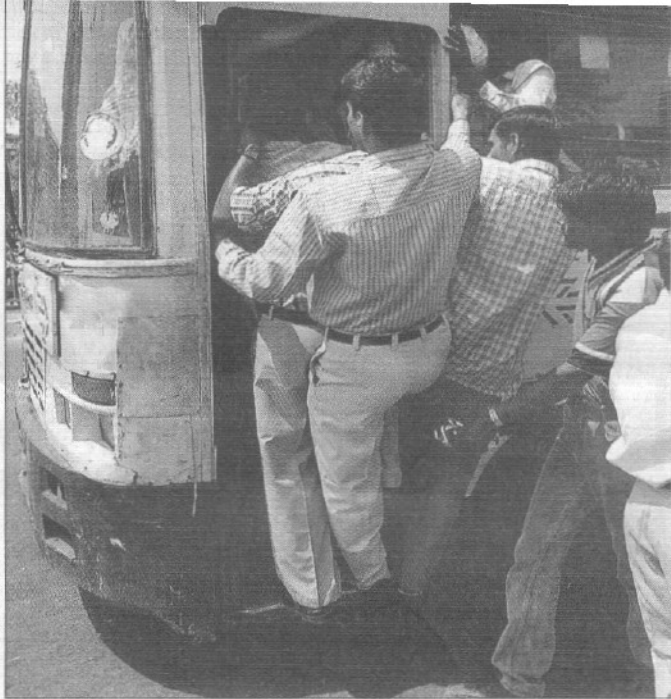
Morning and afternoon hours are times when they can be cited in large frequencies on the city streets. Over-packed with students — also observed riding the foot boards, roof tops, bumper guards and window openings — the buses compete in speed and recklessness. Drivers negotiate the most acute of turns maintaining high velocity with effortless ease while the traffic police prefers looking the other way as they do not dare stop and check the moving devils for the collective clout enjoyed by them. It is, however, sad to recall that many fatal accidents have also taken place due to over speeding, lack of safety arrangements and overcrowding. These shortcomings do not diminish the significance that this wonderful experience has generated in the past and even present times.

Veteran professionals and bureaucrats will remember that the point bus ride was more than a mere journey. When Karachi University was shifted to its present campus during the mid 1950s, it was very far away from the existing settlements. The students, staff and teaching faculty had to invariably rely on the point buses that operated on a flexible timetable. White collar neighbourhoods such as Pir Illahi Bux Colony, Jehangir Road Quarters and Martin Quarters were places where a bulk of teachers used to reside. The time spent in the bus was utilised in most fruitful discussions between students and the faculty. From current affairs to art, literature, films, poetry and even philosophy, the informal space of the bus provided an opportunity of exchange of views in all dimensions.

As the bus ride symbolised egalitarianism to its finest degree, everyone — affluent or common man — could be found taking pride in the company of his comrades and peers. The space was so fertile that students of science along with members of their faculty would come up with all kinds of opinions about art and literary domains making candid remarks and objective criticisms right there. As pointed out by a veteran professor, the learning experience would begin from the foot board of the bus and continue till one got down after the journey back home. Many acclaimed writers and columnists, including Ibrahim Jalees, have chronicled this exciting experience of its time.

Point bus ride was full of joy and happiness for several reasons. For many folks, it was a rare opportunity to access any form of mechanized transport which was scant in number.

It was a place where friendships evolved, developed and sustained beyond times. Many of the students held on to the solid relationships even after becoming icons in their respective fields. It was a place where political ideologies and viewpoints were discussed, promoted, criticised and analysed without the fear of persecution by any end. A hard core right winger could be found professing merits of his political lineage with a bunch of *Khadar Poshes*. The next instant, all of them would be spotted laughing their hearts out on any lighter subject. The innocent days were devoid of the violence



THE POINT BUS RIDE: More than a mere journey.

seen today. Thus the question of dominating the bus operations never hit the heads of those present. It was also a chance opportunity to try your luck into forced infatuations of sort. The fairer sex was lesser in number but superior in circuiting magnetic attraction. They brought the much-needed romantic air into the bus environment. Many knots were tied as a consequence of these adventurous sojourns.

But the situation took an ugly turn towards the late '70s and after. An end to rational politics and ingress of fire arms in student affairs changed the entire scenario. The point buses were used by rowdy student groups and their political mentors for ulterior motives. Many political rallies and conventions would be facilitated by hijacked point buses. Some hidden heads even used them to disrupt civic order. For instance, notorious gangs mounted the buses to loot business houses or hold people for ransom during the 1980s. Some gang ring leaders colluded with student groups to use the point buses to transport arms and ammunition during the political strife. On May 12, 2007 unknown culprits hijacked shuttle buses of several institutions, including the University of Karachi, in order to promote their political activities and block the others'.

The present scene on the operational front is dismal. Given the high numbers of students, point buses are extremely limited in number. The University of Karachi has around 26 buses for a student body of over 26,000. Earlier, such shortages were partly shouldered by the Karachi Transport Corporation (KTC). KTC plied 100 buses across the city at one point during the 1990s. The closure of KTC around the same time has added to the problems.

An occasional donation of buses from the city municipal authorities is not a permanent solution. Commuting to campuses is seriously hampered due to shortage of buses in absence of a mass transit system. It may be noted that all the prime educational institutions are either located along the east or the south of the city. Keeping that in mind, expansion to the fleets is a necessary requirement. Controlling fare levels and finding a way for its effective collection must be carried out to make the operation of buses viable for respective agencies at least.

It has been found that this aspect is totally ignored in many institutions. A public sector input in this direction is vital. University managements may also be asked to improve the management and control in order to benefit from any investment in this sector. Transport safety education and its application must be ensured without delay. ■

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