

## “SMOKING IS PROHIBITED”

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India

It was a scorching June in Bengal, and a bus full of passengers of mostly complacent type were on their way from the sub-divisional town Mirpur to its counterpart Majdia, thirty-three kilometres away. Sweats, noise, dust, and the resulting unease had made the atmosphere inside the bus very tense and tight. The passengers standing in the jam-packed vehicle were having a nightmarish suffering visible in their facial expressions.

In this part of the world where irregularities and lawlessness were rampant, the few cultured individuals struggled to keep their honour intact sometimes by questioning those foibles and unchecked shamelessness. Each bus going from each depot to its destination had an inscription, either in white or in coloured bold letters, written obviously by hand, planted on the upper front head of the inner part of the big bus doors—“SMOKING IS PROHIBITED.”

Pawan, who lived with his small family near the local bazaar area of Mirpur, was a part-time educator at Hatgachia High School. He availed himself of this bus very often and descended at the Hatgachia bus stop. He always noticed the same kind of indifference from his fellow Bengal people in observing the minimum health rules in respect of smoking in the bus. When those who make the rules, or those meant to maintain their spirit, arrogantly break them in a dystopian vein, the system collapses entirely, leaving behind a long trail of social and moral irresponsibilities. Pawan often noticed to his bemusement that it was the conductors or drivers who started smoking first, after having a light tiffin. The buses halted for nearly ten odd minutes (this too, ignoring the rule) just after coming one or two kilometres from the Mirpur depot, and the driver, the conductor, and the helpers finished their morning tiffin with loud belches in front of the eagerly waiting passengers, who perspired profusely with the expectation that the bus would start sooner; but never to be.

Pawan often thought of complaining against these non-complying, unruly bus-workers to the bus union, but knowing that he was a daily passenger

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and had to maintain a minimum talking term, ultimately decided to refrain. But when the bus did halt for the tiffin break and the passengers suffered from the extreme temperature and loss of time, he protested, even though, mildly by simply saying sarcastically to the conductor, “You could have stayed for another ten minutes. We have no hurry, you see.” The conductor along with some other passengers joined in a short understanding laughter, but the situation of lawlessness never changed.

It so happened also that Pawan occasionally entangled himself in heated altercations with the driver who often started smoking immediately after boarding the bus from tiffin break. The conductor and the helper always strengthened their team by coming in support of the driver and plainly, unabashedly told him, “After our meal we need a relaxation and so light a beedi or a cigarette. Try to understand.” Pawan, incensed greatly at the undue request for a compromise, somehow managed to smile at their effort. Moreover, he thought how shamelessly the bus workers did the smoking day-in and day-out. More surprisingly, most of the passengers remained silent and did not show any sign of protest. There was an obvious reason behind this: most of the passengers, especially the male ones, were smokers themselves. So, castigating the smoking bus personnel meant demeaning themselves indirectly. And they definitely didn’t want that.

As days passed and Pawan’s culture and identity began to be known among the bus regulars, he began to be seen through crooked eyes by the smokers. Three of Pawan’s colleagues, who were among the few that were educated, did not bother to interfere in the total business. They only watched. One day, Pawan asked one of these three co-passengers of his, Chandan Dey, an Assistant Teacher at his school about how a petition should be submitted to the Secretary of the bus union for checking this uncontrolled smoking; in that case, the indiscipline of the driver in the matter of spoiling of time could also be brought into notice. Chandan only warned him, “Don’t do anything of the kind. You can’t split a single hair from their head.” Pawan was not satisfied with the reply. He knew the mentality of all of his colleagues well. They didn’t have the guts. But it was a hard thing to digest how the bus workers, through their smoking, were hampering his health by turning him into a passive smoker and influencing others, who previously had never smoked in the bus, to smoke with zest. He was not particularly concerned about his health—both mental and physical—but also generally about those little innocent babies in the lap of their mothers, who were shanghaiied into breathing the harmful nicotine, let alone the grave futurity that these babies would sooner or later imitate their harmers. Thus, Pawan viewed this issue—which was so minor and insignificant to his colleagues and others—in a broader spectrum by calculating its different social and moral implications. Pawan firmly believed in the English proverb, “One swallow does

not make a summer.” But he was certain that he would get no others in this struggle of his.

Thus, Pawan had been storing experiences, bitter and acrid, with the nonchalant non-observers of smoking rules for three years. He had joined the school with the full exuberance of his youth. He enjoyed teaching a lot and he was well loved by his students. All noticed a kind of different outlook oozing out of him, who used to look into the heart of things. He couldn't tolerate injustice. He was happy in his not-so-well-paid part-time job, but the little time he travelled on the bus was a sort of hell for him: he couldn't bear with the fact that he was made to be the passive smoker every day along with the many little children who travelled on the bus. Actually, he deeply inculcated a particular lesson taught to him in his childhood by one of his primary school teachers, Sadananda Deb, when he was a standard four pupil.

Sadananda Deb, in one of his Bengali language classes, reminded the likes of little Pawan how little tolerance of an evil practice ultimately makes man a slave to the tolerance of everything unjust. Pawan saw how Sadananda sir himself protested against the wilful bunking of classes of his colleagues who spent time laughing and talking while students used to clutter the classroom with messes and fight between themselves. He particularly envisioned one example of Sadananda sir's commitment to his words when he openly criticised the evil manners of a newly appointed teacher, who happened to be the son of the then local MLA, and told him, “Remember, you come here to teach these innocent, ignorant pupils. Mend your ways, and be an example to them.” All the other teachers really appreciated later the way Sadananda sir literally chastised a young wayward teacher who had also strong political connections. Pawan was much inundated by the ideal standards of his favourite teacher whom he endeavoured to emulate in his different practical expressions.

A country where extreme disregard for regulations was always on the go, his little unease of some sure insignificance had no value, Pawan felt. Some of his colleagues knew it well that someday there would be a big racket or rancour which would leave Pawan speechless and make him see things in their practicality.

Pawan romantically hoped that all this would certainly change via a Greater Consciousness. But how and when would this Greater Consciousness come? It might be a gigantically powerful conscientious government, or a plentifully courageous crowd of truth-seekers who would be ransacking each and every corner of injustice and irregularity and rip apart its harmful teeth. Pawan, while being bussed through the latter part of his journey when the smokers became silent, often thought of such la-la-land matters.

Today he was somehow disturbed in mind. He was not at all prepared for what was to follow. He was in a hurry as he would today get off at Shibpur, five kilometres away from his school and do some banking. The bank was almost five minutes away then. The bus, as if vehemently desirous to defenestrate some

of its overflowing, redundant riders, was showing no intent in moving fast. It was moving at a cart's speed. The suffocating heat inside the sweating stench of the passengers, and the slothful movement of the bus mingled together and made the total atmosphere very baneful and loathsome.

Pawan, sitting in the rear five-seater couch, was undergoing all the nasty aspects of the journey. He was in a different sort of mental state today, his eyes looked busy for a certain tension. He had actually to repay a loan of a considerable amount by withdrawing from his bank account with the Shibpur State Bank. He was busy in his own world of crises, troubles, and family disputes. "How our lives are dependent on trivial things. What a burden this thing called 'family' often brings to our waking consciousness!" he was inwardly ruminating. But he had no idea of another triviality on his way lurking a little further away.

From the middle part of the bus, almost waddling and scuttling the jostling crowd through, Manohar Saha, the Headmaster of Kakuria High School, four kilometres from Shibpur, who normally did not board this bus and so wasn't acquainted with Pawan, came up to the spot where Pawan was sitting near the back entrance of the bus. Manohar was a dark-skinned, obtuse man having a pair of spectacles on and having a very rough-looking appearance, and he took so much of pain, as Pawan perceived slowly, only to light a cigar. The bus conductor took a look at Pawan and another short look at Manohar, anticipating a kind of storm that loomed large over the eyebrows of Pawan. Seeing that the man was aged and was looking civil, educated by his dress, Pawan hoped against hope that somehow the man would not enrage him by doing anything silly and unsophisticated. But his excessive hope brought out his anger excessively from within when Manohar Saha lighted the cigar smartly and exuded a long train of smoke that directly affected Pawan.

"Is it a place for smoking? Can't you see the written statement just above your head?" Pawan burst out, pointing to the area where the ignored mandate seemed to burn bright—"SMOKING IS PROHIBITED." The old man, whose temper was somewhat known to the conductor who occasionally saw him catching this bus and smoking cigars in profusion, and to some other passengers whose recognising stare at him was indicative enough, gazed with ruthless, ferocious eyes at Pawan, totally incensed at the sermonising, admonitory way of protest from a young chap. He revealed his vexation: "I smoked in the past, am smoking now and will continue to smoke in future too. Change it if you can." He threw a straightforward challenge to Pawan and emitted a long line of pale white smoke full of strong tobacco odour that was evidently intended to defend the strength of his challenge. All the bystanders who knew Pawan well and those who didn't know him at all gave him an uneasy stare.

Pawan who didn't like to altercate in public and maintained formal, public decorum became wordless and petrified all of a sudden. He, in no way, expected

such barbarity. His extreme anger vanished away as quickly as it came to him, and in its place fear, uncertainty, shame, and a strong dislike for the monkeyish, hoarse-sounding, formidable, uncultured Manohar seized his guiltless, palpitating soul. He did not know what to say, how to respond to such an unwanted, unforeseen vulgar situation. Manohar, in the feeling of an obvious triumph, smoked the cigar in full in front of Pawan who in turn looked with disdain once or twice into the face of the oppressor. Pawan looked for some support, with his strong amazement, hither and thither, but the callous, amused, stony humanity stood around him like an unbreachable black wall. He succumbed to the evil faces all around. He was defeated. But luckily for him, no colleagues from his school were with him. He at least could continue serving in school undisturbed, unhumiliated, he thought.

The bus came to Shibpur some seconds later. The inwardly happy, but outwardly sombre, conductor stayed away from the gate, and Pawan got down without looking at him. Earth seemed to be a place too torturous and burdensome for him, and he wished he could hide somewhere at that instant from the piercing, covetous eyes of the worthless witnesses who had voraciously savoured the dramatic scene of his humiliation. His vision seemed to have hazed a little, he could feel. And with that he started walking towards the bank with one or two slow but unwilling steps.

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