



URMILA CONDUCTS

WOMEN AND LABOUR IN THE STREETS OF HYDERABAD

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We started this project with the intention of getting a clearer idea as to how comfortable women are in public areas. Many a times we see men just loitering, standing about without necessarily doing anything on street corners/bus stops/parapet walls etc. On the other hand, women don't seem too comfortable doing the same. Either they need a sense of purpose, for instance going from location A to location B or they feel "safe" only when accompanied by a man. Shilpa Phadke, in her book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, delves into understanding why women don't feel safe enough to use public spaces without a specific purpose. In an attempt to understand this better for ourselves, we went out on to the streets of Hyderabad to obtain a glimpse of how women navigated public spaces.

We decided upon a photo essay as the medium of our research to add a complex visual structure to this study. The idea to make a female bus conductor the primary subject struck us when we thought of women who are constantly getting out and about, and travelling in the city. On the first day of field work, we visited the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC)

Head Office at RTC 'X' Roads where we were turned away right at the entrance. The police men who were stationed there very politely told us this place could be of no help and we should try at the Bus Depots. A man walking by happened to overhear us and in a very brisk manner told us that he was going to the Falaknuma Bus Depot and that we could accompany him if we so wished. Without giving it another thought, we chased after him. He turned out to be Ramaiyya, a bus driver who was later assigned a desk job. We hopped onto the first bus to Falaknuma, little did we know we'd have to hop on and off a medley of buses! Ramaiyya turned out to be an extremely talkative man and very passionate about his love for yoga- showering us with his many certificates and photographs of his yogic achievements. It reached the point where we found it a real feat to get him back on track to talk about our project on female bus conductors! He told us that he worked with Urmila, one woman bus conductor for a long time and immediately dialed her to put us in touch. After changing at least five buses, we finally reached Falaknuma Bus Depot where Ramaiyya told us not to enter with him and not to tell 'Madam'(Depot Manager) that we knew him.



A few days later we learned from Urmila that she was working the bus route 65M that travelled between Falaknuma and Mehdipatnam. We reached Afzalgunj bus stop at 8 A.M., not knowing that her bus had been delayed or (most importantly) what she looked like. After having waited for nearly an hour and a half, peeping into each bus to see if it had a female bus conductor, we finally boarded a small bus with only one hint of acknowledgement from a small woman with cropped hair (whom we presumed to be Urmila in our hurried state!) and went to sit at the back where only men usually sit. As we began conversing with Urmila, people couldn't take their eyes off us and turned around to look at us. While we were perturbed by the obvious gawking, we also crucially noted that unhesitant (and righteous) stares were not only the supposedly normal atmosphere that women were unconditionally exposed to, but also severely affected their behaviors, decisions, and even travel arrangements in public spaces. When the topic of

photography was broached, Urmila initially declined – a decision we expected considering the common notion of the camera being intrusive. However it didn't take much to convince her when she heard that we're college students working on a project.

'I understand your pain. My children also have a lot of projects and assignments to do!'

The bus driver, Krishna, was a jovial fellow who was very keen to know what we were up to and constantly kept himself in the loop by asking about us.



On the proposed Sunday, we waited outside Falaknuma Bus Depot as they (Urmila and Krishna) had asked us to since they didn't want the Depot Manager to see us. We boarded the bus and were greeted with warm 'Good Mornings!' and we bought a full day bus pass from Urmila. Since it was Sunday and the month of Ramzan, it was a slow morning. We halted after half an hour for the first ten minute break. Urmila used this time to change the destination boards of the bus. On asking, she told us about her family life, about how her husband helped her out at home especially with cooking, but her two boys (the elder son was pursuing a polytechnic course and the younger one was in 9th grade) wouldn't lift a finger! Urmila herself was pursuing a Masters degree in Public Administration from Ambedkar Open University in the hope of being upgraded to a desk job at TSRTC. While her husband worked as an accountant in a jewelry shop owned by her Uncle, Urmila maintained that she was encouraged to take up a job at TSRTC right after school as it provided a steady income. Throughout our bus journey, Urmila was constantly on her phone, updating her husband about her day and inquiring about his.



One of the first things that struck us was the amusing relationship Urmila shared with Krishna- a blend of professional and personal, often spilling over into the familial. The incessant chatter between the two ranged from discussions on the abysmal conditions of the roads to ridicule of one another's lunch boxes. While Krishna remained a defendant of his views and actions, Urmila's obsessive rambling often goaded her professional partner into the debate, which he always silently seemed assured of losing.

As Krishna boarded the bus after ten minutes of an agitated phone call at the Charminar stopover, Urmila said:

“What happened anna? Why are you so frustrated?”

“Nothing.”

“If that’s the face you have on, I don’t think it’s nothing.”

“No, really. It’s nothing.”

“If you were talking to your friend and dancing around, I would believe you more.”

“Argh. My children, they have no idea how to cook rice. Grown up children! This is absolutely embarrassing. What if we had guests?!”

“Oh, children just need to be taught. You can’t expect them to be born with natural rice-cooking talent!”

“They’re supposed to have learnt by now.”

“Just teach them. Wait, you know how to cook rice, don’t you?”

Confessional silence

“Well, no wonder! All of you come home one day, and I’ll teach you to cook a meal! Now, stop moping around. We are late for the next trip!”



Hailing from Srisailem in Mahaboobnagar district, Urmila moved to Hyderabad with her newly married husband in 1994. Although she vehemently denies having had any initial interest in the job she does, stating that she has become a conductor only for the money, Urmila does not disagree that she has come to enjoy her work.

“It’s the people you meet. One can’t not make friends here.”

That was indeed true. At the stopover for breakfast at Charminar, we met a community of bus drivers and conductors sharing the table, food and gossip. Mahalakshmi, a bus conductor working on the Charminar-Golconda route was a particular delight to encounter. A state level athlete, Mahalakshmi was a strong woman both in her build and her words. Bold and vivacious, her jovial jabs and sharp sarcasm spared nobody. Embarrassed by her friend’s continuous outbursts, Urmila apologetically mentioned, *“She is from Dhulpet.”*

We learned later that Dhulpet was (*in*)famous for three reasons- production of country liquor, construction of Ganesh idols, and riots.



“I am a no-nonsense kind of person. If anybody misbehaves or refuses to buy a ticket, I ask Krishna anna to take the bus straight to the local Police Station. It always works.”

Urmila declared to us that bus drivers were very supportive of the female conductors in such circumstances however, our day trip with her proved that she needed no help navigating the bus and the sea of passengers. Urmila maintained that the absence of toilets on the routes was the primary challenge of this profession and needed to be immediately addressed by the authorities. The failure to do so until now has severely affected the health of many workers who often have to go long hours without using the toilet. We observed that Urmila herself used the toilet only once during her seven hour shift at the Charminar bus stop because she felt it was the only usable one. She also declared that all conductors should be given *chillar* (small change) at the beginning of their shifts as it’s a nuisance to work without it. As we clicked away while listening to Urmila, Krishna and she were very fascinated about us photographing every single detail like her slippers and the ticket machine.



Interestingly, obtaining information from the TSRTC office (where we spent many hours waiting on officials) proved to be a more difficult task than befriending Urmila. We met the Depot Manager who seemed very suspicious of us and insisted that we bring a letter of permission from the Bus Bhawan Head Quarters. We met with several such dejections and were even shooed away by a policeman while attempting to talk to an elderly female bus conductor. The Law Officer of the TSRTC informed us about the importance of the Workmen Compensation Act that covers matters such as if a worker works an extra hour, he/she has to be paid twice the amount i.e. for two hours and if he/she works a day which is a holiday, he/she is entitled to a compensatory off.

While collecting data we also came to know that people come from all districts and areas into the Hyderabad zone and while this is not necessarily the preferred job for many, the lack of employment in their chosen fields, often left them with little choice. For this reason, although the minimum qualification required is a 10th class certificate, even highly qualified men (not that

many women) apply for a secure government job in the TSRTC. There are several women who often start work as bus conductors and move onto technical/IT jobs on computers within





the TSRTC, an upgrade every college educated worker strives for to escape the laborious job of a conductor. While the minimum age required is 21 years, most TSRTC employees are usually between 25-30 years of age. Apart from a few who are single, most female bus conductors are married and work to support their family, since the husband may have a non-secure job.

The Deputy Chief Manager at Jubilee Bus Station was more than willing to help us out with the statistics. According to her, women bus conductors in the TSRTC are “offered” many benefits like in almost all government organizations. All TSRTC employees are provided with 15 casual leaves but women get an extra 3 days making it 18 days in a year. They are provided three breaks for ten minutes each during their shifts which last for seven and a half hours. Women are largely exempted from late night shifts and a policy of one day of the week off is maintained for all employees. Although there is no separate worker’s union for women, we gathered that all unions played an active role in voicing women’s issues. Interestingly, we found that although women are included in the union, they do not hold many posts, a trend neither the DCM nor Urmila could make sense of. According to the DCM at Jubilee Bus Station, the demands of the female workers include: more leave, better sanitation facilities, day duties, light and sophisticated duties (like in AC buses as they are slightly more expensive, and are not as crowded). While most of these demands were highly motivated by caution and safety, the desire to exercise a certain degree of comfort (air-conditioned buses, small buses etc.) in the workspace can also be noted. However, in such issues, the case of seniority was strictly maintained and such desires were seldom translated into realities.



The number of women in the workspace has increased over the years but they still seem dismally low. In Hyderabad city there are a total of 9000 conductors, both male and female, and of which 1600-1800 are female bus conductors. “Since the 1990s the number of female bus conductors in the organization has gone up. Earlier it was uncommon but now everybody seems accustomed to seeing women in the workspace. ”says the Deputy Chief Manager. As a woman overlooking all the Depots, she is of the opinion that there is a decent female representation. There are a total of 95 Depot Managers in Hyderabad City, out of which twelve are women; a figure she feels is nominal considering they have risen with time. Women get hundred and eighty days of maternity leave and a request for extension is often agreed to by the TSRTC. According to the DCM, most women employees do come back to work after their pregnancy in order to add extra income to the household. The income earned by both male and female bus conductors is the same and increases with seniority- bus conductors start with Rs. 6000 as their base income per month and senior employees receive up to Rs. 20,000. Most TSRTC employees refrain from applying for leave unless absolutely necessary in order to maintain a good track record and not risk pay cuts. On asking why there is no legal provision for women to apply for the position of bus drivers, the Deputy Chief Manager was of the opinion that since women are generally perceived as being weaker in physical aspects they aren’t given a chance to take it up as a profession.



Travelling across the city and engaging with people from all walks of life made us understand the complex issue of working with a camera in public spaces. Not only did we attract attention to ourselves wherever we went, we also continuously had to convince people to overcome their fear of the camera and our intentions. Through this exercise, we also realized the insurmountable problem of perception and decided early on to ensure to our knowledgeable best that our camerawork will be communicative, not intrusive. This project enabled us to introspect on the theme of working women in the public sphere more intricately and photography allowed us to articulate this in a complex narrative. Photographs provided us with a glimpse into many aspects that we could not achieve by verbal communications and silences we couldn't breach. Travelling by bus not only exposed us to different parts of the city and its numerous gullies, but also helped us understand the bus as the lifeline of the city-a melting pot of all classes. Class featured as a major barrier for us through the course of the study since our middle class backgrounds often made us outsiders to many people's lives. While we also wanted this project to cover Urmila's life outside of work and how she balanced her household with her workspace, obtaining access to her home proved to be a challenge that we weren't able to overcome. Working with Urmila for an entire shift not only exposed us to the difficulties of the work of a conductor but also to the life away from home that she leads and has come to enjoy. Her job has provided her with a family outside of her home, one that she keenly acknowledges and involves even in her personal "home" life.

During the course of the project we came to realize that Urmila didn't operate as a stand-alone individual but thrived within her professional community. In the future, we hope to expand on this project to study how women build and interact in professional communities and navigate workspaces.



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