

# CNG drivers continue to exploit commuters

SHARMIN MEHRIBAN

At a certain destination in the city, a man walks off a CNG. The CNG driver casually asks for an extra Tk 10 than the meter reading. The man frets, pays the money and heads towards his workplace, not realising there were phone numbers for complaints written behind the CNG.

Despite the introduction of the meter system in auto-rickshaws, charging fares above the meter readings is still persistent with commuters blaming it on drivers.

These drivers blame it on the CNG owners, time limits and the ineffectiveness of the meter system and authorities blame the indifference of both the public and the CNG drivers.

Commuters say that drivers ask for a little more than the metered fare when there is a traffic jam or when commuters are accompanied by young children all ready to go to festivals. They also take a chance at spots where vehicles are scarce or when commuters are students carrying books.

Some even allege that drivers wilfully manipulate the meters while some others use meters meant for taxicabs.

The drivers in turn justified the higher charge stating that they

have to operate for a limited number of hours, yet pay the owners a daily rent of Tk 300-600, in addition to Tk 60-80 for fuel.

The drivers work on shift basis -- from 7am to 7pm or to 9pm.

A lot of time is wasted at traffic jams and I have to make it up by charging a higher fare as I have to pay the regular rent, no matter how many trips I have made or the amount I earned," said a CNG driver.

**Despite the introduction of the meter system in auto-rickshaws, charging fares above the meter readings is still persistent with commuters blaming it on drivers.**

Many auto-rickshaws are found either operating with faulty meters or no meters at all. The drivers of such vehicles said that meters frequently go out of order and repairing them cost between Tk 200 to 600.

"We can operate on meter readings if owners reduce the rent and increase the hours of a shift," said another CNG driver.

"Charging fares in excess of meter readings is against BRTA

regulation regardless of the excuses drivers give," said a Communications ministry official, who travels by CNG himself.

He admitted that he often gives in by paying an extra Tk 10 above the meter reading as this amount does not make much difference to him.

When contacted, the deputy police commissioner of DC Traffic, Firoz Al Mujahid Khan, said they were aware of the problem but

uniform. Khan said the action that would be taken against drivers' accused of malpractices is the cancellation of the road permit forever.

Commuters' response to written complaints varied.

"When I get into a CNG to fetch my daughter, my only concern is to bring her back home safely. At no point of time do I have the patience nor the frame of mind to think of the driver's name or registration number," said a commuter from Elephant Road.

"I can't waste my time hassling over the fare when I have to attend a class," said a private university student.

Another commuter said even if he gets the registration number of the vehicle finding out the name of the driver would be a problem.

"The driver could refuse to give me his name or give me a false name," said another commuter.

When asked about the effectiveness of filing a written complaint, the commuter replied that to his knowledge rules do not exist in Bangladesh.

"What can we expect from filing a traffic complaint in a country where bigger criminals go unpunished?" questioned another commuter.

## INDEPENDENCE MONUMENT

# Construction to end by June '06

WAHIDA MITU

Construction of the Swadhinata Stambha (Independence Monument) at the Suhrawardy Udyan is going to be completed within June 2006, said sources in the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

Almost 75 percent of the monument's work has been completed. The project is awaiting completion as a 100-foot high glass tower is yet to be constructed, said sources in the ministry.

"The work of the project is in progress and we are expecting to finish it within June 2006," said Prof Rezaul Karim, state minister for Liberation War Affairs.

"We invited tender for the fourth time for the tower and will wait for the response, after that we will think what can be done regarding the tower right now," he added.

The Ministry of Public Works has already handed over the project to the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs for its completion.

The memorial includes some murals depicting the history of the Liberation War and the struggle for freedom from 1948 to 1971. The murals were built at a cost of

Tk 1.75 crore, sprawling over an area of 67 acres.

It also includes an underground theatre, an underground museum, a 157-seat audiovisual auditorium, a display gallery and a decorative fountain.

Suhrawardy Udyan, formerly known as Race Course maidan, has been selected for constructing the memorial as the Pakistan occupation army surrendered on this ground on December 16, 1971 after the nine-month bloody war.

The construction of Swadhinata Stambha began in July 1998, when Awami League was in power, with an estimated cost of Tk 81.27 crore. In 2001, with the addition of the glass tower the total project cost was raised to Tk 171 crore and it was scheduled to be completed in 2002.

The BNP-led four-party government stopped the construction after taking office in 2001 for alleged irregularities. Then the work remained suspended for three years. After some revisions,



the present government however revived the project at the end of 2004 curtailing the cost to Tk 76 crore.

About the irregularities, ministry sources said any project with a budget of over Tk 25 crore must have the approval of the government's purchase committee

which the project had lacked during its initiation in 1998. But a ministry official seeking anonymity said it was a 'political decision' to halt the project.

4x3

4x3

8x3

12x2

9x3