

DHAKA-SHILIGURI BUS SERVICE

Passengers want direct buses

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

The Dhaka-Shiliguri bus service is failing to attract enough passengers as the Indian government is not allowing direct passage on this route.

Bus operators and passengers believe that an arrangement similar to the Dhaka-Kolkata service, where passengers of buses belonging to certain companies can travel the entire distance on the same vehicle, could make the Dhaka-Shiliguri route more popular.

"We are hopeful of getting permission from the Indian authorities soon. Apart from this limitation, we are providing the passengers with every possible service and assisting them in passing through the custom and immigration just like it is done on the Dhaka-Kolkata route," said Romesh Chandra Gosh, managing director of Shayamoli Paribahan.

Indian officials however said that a direct service might take a little time to start. "The

government of India is considering permitting the direct service but it would not be possible unless the number of passengers increase," said Debashis Roy, an immigration officer.

Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) authorities informed that they too were trying to get the permission.

"I have personally talked to the West Bengal transport authority. BRTC will soon submit an official request to them to allow the direct bus service," said Taimur Alam Khondaker, chairman of BRTC.

On February 10 this year, two Bangladeshi transport companies -- Shayamoli Paribahan and SR Travels jointly started the bus service between Dhaka and Shiliguri in Assam.

The passengers, especially Bangladeshi students who are studying in schools in Darjeeling and Shiliguri, appreciated the initiative. But they too have called for a direct service.

Under the present arrange-

ment, air-conditioned (AC) 40-seater buses carry passengers up to the Burimari land port in Lalmonirhat from Dhaka's Kamalapur. After the custom and immigration check at the border, passengers travel to Shiliguri from Chengrabandha on the Indian side on TATA Sumo microbuses.

Those who have traveled the route said they were very happy with the service from Dhaka to Burimari but the Indian part of the journey left a lot to be desired.

"Initially, they carried us to Shiliguri from Chengrabandha on buses. But after a few days, buses were replaced by microbuses. Travelling on a TATA Sumo microbus is a horrible experience," said Zinat Ara, a regular passenger on this route who has a son studying in Darjeeling.

Officials of the bus operating companies said they had to withdraw the buses on the Indian side due to lack of passengers.

"Most of the days we do not get more than 20 to 24 passengers while the capacity of

a minibus is not less than 32. That is why it becomes a loss concern for us," said Bablu Banerjee, a supervisor of the service at Shiliguri. He however said that if the number of passengers increase, they would again run buses on this route.

According to sources, around a hundred passengers travel through this route everyday eighty percent of whom are Bangladeshis.

Despite the absence of a direct service, most passengers were still highly appreciative of the effort of the bus operators.

"They are providing snacks, refreshments and a very good rest room for us. They are also helping us with immigration and custom which is particularly helpful," said Liakat Azim Chowdhury, a tourist to India.

A return ticket for the journey is Tk 1,300. Most of the passengers are students at different schools in Shiliguri and Darjeeling, their guardians and tourists to India, Nepal and Bhutan.



A ticket-counter for the Dhaka-Shiliguri route at the Kamalapur International bus depot.

Where has the market's money gone?

BDNEWS, Dhaka

Nearly Tk five crore has been collected from businessmen of

the Shaheed Suhrawardy Market under the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) at Kaptanbazar in the last decade. But no part of this money has been deposited with

the DCC depriving it of a huge amount of revenue.

It is learnt that this sum of money went to the pockets of a section of dishonest officials of the DCC and some influential persons of the area.

Executive engineer of the DCC's market circle Syed Mozaffar Hossain admitted the allegations.

He told BDNEWS that a court

directed DCC to postpone the allocation of shops and asked to keep the market locked following a case filed by some shop owners. But before the court order had been issued, the basement and 1,300 shops on the ground floor were already completed.

The executive engineer said no shop was allotted legally in the last 10 years as the case was not resolved. However, a section of

businessmen occupied the market under the shelter of 'influential persons'.

DCC authorities could not recover the market from their grip.

Sources said that DCC started negotiations with the occupiers to solve the problem and the case might be withdrawn within one month.

After the withdrawal of the

case, construction work of the market will be completed and shops will be allotted.

Sources said after filing the case, DCC as per the directive of the court locked the market, but these influential persons had unlocked the premises with the help of the ruling party-men.

Concerned sources said a number of businessmen, with the help of these influentials, occu-

piated the shops despite the court order, paying a large sum of money and regular rent.

During the last 10 years an estimated amount of Tk 3,90,000 is collected each month as rent from the shops of the market.

Apart from this, each shop owner was charged Tk 50 lakhs as possession money but nothing from this collection went to the DCC fund.

Sources said that Moslem and Shamsul Haque, associates of the acting president of the market committee, Jainal Hossain, collect the money and share it among those involved in the shop allocation.

Syed Mozaffar Hossain said some DCC officials may have been involved in this connection but the problem will be solved soon.

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Intensified security planned for Pahela Baishakh celebration



CITY CORRESPONDENT

The DMP authorities have planned to take foolproof security measures to ensure peaceful celebration of Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla New Year, on Thursday as people still remember the deadly bomb blasts at Ramna in 2001.

"Last three years' peaceful celebration under tight security has restored people's confidence. This year we will further intensify the security measures," said SM Mizanur Rahman, commissioner, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

Cultural organisations are now busy doing the final rehearsal of their daylong Pahela Baishakh programmes to be held at the traditional venue, popularly known as 'Ramna Batamul' inside the city's lush green Ramna Park.

The New Year celebrations in the last three years drew less number of visitors due to a panic stemmed from the 2001 tragedy -- the killing of at least 10 people in bomb blasts in a Pahela Baishakh cultural function.

As the authorities took highest security during the Pahela Baishakh celebrations after 2001, New Year revellers are now apparently regaining their enthusiasm to join the festival which was seen in the years before the bomb attack.

"I missed the Pahela Baishakh functions at Ramna Batamul in the last three years because I felt insecure after the bomb attack. But this year I wish I would join the festival again," said Advocate

Rokonuzzaman.

This year DMP will deploy a huge contingent of police at the venue to avert any untoward incident. "The police, DB, SB and Rapid Action Battalion men will guard the entire area along with dog squads," said the police commissioner.

Chhayanaut, an organisation working for promoting Bangalee culture and traditions, introduced the Pahela Baishakh functions at Ramna Batamul in 1964 which has become the main celebration of the Bangla New Year.

Sanjida Khatun, principal of Chhayanaut, said nothing can stop the Bangladeshis from celebrating Pahela Baishakh with enthusiasm.

Expressing satisfaction with the last three years' security arrangements, she said Chhayanaut volunteers will keep watch on the venue and assist the law-enforcement agencies to ensure security of the revellers and performers.

In the capital, the main programmes of Bangla New Year will be held at Ramna, Shishu Academy, Dhanmondi Lake, and on the Dhaka University campus.

Officer in-charge of Ramna Police Station M Mahubur Rahman said they will separate the entry and exit points of all festival spots. "We will set up checkpoints at all entrances to Ramna and Dhaka University campus," he added.