

Bara Katra, in south Chawk, close to the river Buriganga, was a prominent building in Dhaka during the reign of Mughals. In 1822 Doylee wrote: Bara Katra was a pompous, huge and beautiful. Shah Suja wanted to build his own palace in Dhaka but Shah Suja did not like the Bara Katra after it was finished, he donated it to Abul Kasem, the chief architect.

## Catch a rundown bus, earn special cash incentive

DMP's dramatic drive to inspire cops to track down 15-20 year old culprits

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has announced special incentive for its traffic personnel if they manage to seize old buses that are banned from the city streets.

"We have announced a special 1,000 taka incentive for any sergeant who will seize a bus 15 to 20 years old. Special drive is also going on to rid the city of unfit buses," DMP Joint Commissioner (Traffic) Jashimuddin told Star City.

Run-down buses however are slipping through the tight net of the traffic personnel. A large number of the banned 20-year-old minibuses, most of them in a severely dilapidated condition, are still operating in the city.

These buses remain in hiding whenever there are special drives and they return to the streets right after each drive is over. Some of them ply after sundown taking advantage of the lax policing after iftar in Ramadan.

The old and unfit buses are mostly operating in Jurain, Postagola, Sayedabad, Jatrabari, Demra, Shanir Akhra, Gulistan, Sadarghat, Keraniganj, Mirpur, Gabtoli, Rampura, Sadarghat and Kamalapur.

According to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), 3,668 registered minibuses are currently plying on 40 routes in the capital. Another 1,097 minibuses travel to the city every day from the surrounding areas.

Sources at the BRTA said 50 percent of these vehicles are 15 to 20 years old. Besides, 1,725 of the total number of buses did not appear for fitness certificate

for a long time.

There are also many vehicles operating without legal documents. However, there is no estimation of the illegal vehicles.

Abu Bakkar Md Shahjahan, executive director, Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) said, "These unfit vehicles are responsible for traffic congestion as they often break down in the middle of the street. Accidents involving these vehicles are regular. Commuting time becomes longer because of these problems."

He said these unfit buses are one of the major sources of air pollution in the city as they emit

a huge amount of black smoke. They are also causing visual pollution as most of these buses are in dreadful physical condition.

"It is important to phase out old buses as the number of buses and other vehicles is increasing every year going beyond the capacity of Dhaka streets," he suggested.

Shahjahan said around 37,000 new vehicles were registered in the city in 2007 alone.

The communications ministry in 2002 decided that buses that have already exceeded 20 years of running period will be phased out from the city to

reduce air pollution and traffic congestion in Dhaka city.

Following the ban, DMP seized a good number of old vehicles. Many vehicles moved out of the city. However, within a few months most of the unfit vehicles started operating again in the city only by changing colours and overhauling some of the parts. Papers of these vehicles were updated with the help of a section of BRTA officials.

To date the decision could never be implemented.

The authorities last month again announced that from September 1 more than 15 years old buses cannot run in the city

streets. It was also decided that these minibuses would be gradually replaced by 52-seat CNG-run buses.

Humayan Rashid Khalifa, director (operations), BRTA, said, "We are not giving route permit to any buses that exceeded 15 years. We have also prepared a list of buses that did not appear for fitness this year and sent it to the DMP traffic division."

Bus owners, however, said 50 percent of them will go bankrupt if the decision to phase out old buses from the city is implemented.

Abul Hashem Dewan, general secretary, Dhaka Sarak Paribahan Samiti, said before phasing out these old buses the authorities will have to think about what will happen to the commuters and bus owners.

"Around 50 percent buses would go off the city roads if this decision is implemented. Withdrawing these vehicles from the city all of a sudden will also create pressure on the transport system causing suffering to the commuters," he said.

Dewan said, "All these buses have been purchased with bank financing. If we don't run the buses we can't pay the interest or repay the loan. Spending on spare parts, repair and gas, it takes about 10 years to finish the entire loan repayment process."

"It will not be possible to bring an end to traffic congestion by only getting rid of old buses. There are many things to consider. The authorities should sit with the owners before taking decisions," he said.



STAR PHOTO



SHAHNAZ GHANAI

## Living a life of Sisiphus

A dozen of luckless kids push vehicles on to a bridge at Kamrangirchar

DURDANA GHIAS

Rubel was pushing a rickshaw full of sacks and a man was sitting on the sacks. Though 12 years old the malnourished boy looked not more than 10 years of age.

A dozen other kids were doing the same type of jobs. They were helping the vehicles to climb the ramp of a bridge.

Scores of people and non-motorised vehicles like rickshaws and rickshaw vans cross the Lohar Bridge every day at Kamrangirchar, one of the vital links connecting the char with the city.

It is really astounding to see how these little boys manage to push the heavily loaded rickshaws and vans all the day just for Tk 2 per vehicle.

Most of the children were thin and wiry and looked tiny than their actual age. They work from the crack of the dawn till midnight. Some of them do it because they have to support their families. Some do it because they want to earn for themselves and spend on whatever things they want to including drugs.

"I push rickshaws because I don't have any other work to do," said Rubel while pushing the rickshaw in the sweltering heat.

He gets around Tk 100 daily by pushing rickshaws and rickshaw vans from seven in the morning to two in the afternoon.

Asked what he does with the money Rubel said he gives the money to his mother to support his family of four that his rickshaw puller father cannot run.

Despite all he has a dream. "I want to go to the school and want to be a doctor when I grow up," he said.

Like Rubel other children were pushing rickshaws and other non-motorised vehicles up to the bridge.

Athin is pushing rickshaws from dawn to twelve at night for the last three years.

"I know it is hard work but I don't feel that

way anymore," said an all smile Athin, looks around 12 but is unable to say how old he is.

His older brothers work as motor mechanics and liftmen at different companies in the commercial areas in the city but still he likes to fend for himself, he said.

"I am fine. I am happy that I get around Tk 200 every day," he said.

Asked what he does with the money Athin said sometimes he gives an amount to his mother but mostly he spends it all for himself.

"I like biscuits, lozenges, heroin and ganja," he said frankly disclosing the fact that a large number of street children earning for themselves spend their income on drugs.

When asked whether he knows about the bad effects of drug Athin said, "Addiction is a very good thing and it doesn't harm the body," while his rickshaw-pushing mates agreed with him.

According to those working with street children admit that till now there is no statistics at the government or NGO level on the exact number of street children or those using drugs.

"We know there are scores of street children but we are yet to know the number and ratio of drug users," said Iqbal Masud, programme coordinator of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, who has been working with addicted street children for the last two years.

As for the NGOs, some organisations have worked sporadically with street children. But vital questions remain unanswered because of their piecemeal approach to the issue, he said.

"In the last one and a half years we detoxified 35 addicted street children and we gave life-skill training to 25 children. But we could not continue the programme because of fund constraint. There is poor response from donors for street children. They are more interested to donate for HIV/AIDS and for buying condoms but not for street children," said Masud.

## Brisk trade in a danger zone

Hundreds of vendors sell goods on rail tracks at Jurain

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

As a cargo train announced its arrival at the Jurain rail crossing with its ear-piercing horn, it sparked a wave of activities across one and a half kilometres of rail tracks ahead of it.

Over 200 vendors rolled their goods off the muddy, rusting tracks. The merchants dismantled the overhead polythene hoods, packed half their shops in a safe corner and waited for the train to pass. Anxious crowd of shoppers hustled to safer ground.

After the train passed the area, the hawkers reassembled their overhead hoods, rolled out the goods on the tracks and resumed haggling with their customers. The whole market was back as if nothing hap-

pened.

This is an everyday scene at Jurain Railgate Market where around 600 hawkers are operating their business on the rail tracks, exposing hundreds of customers to danger.

These open shops' awkward location around the rail tracks barely leaves any room for passing trains and the customers are compelled to walk on the tracks.

During a visit to the market, this correspondent had a rough time making his way around the market thanks to the heavy foot traffic of shoppers on the tracks.

This correspondent approached a customer who was seen haggling with a peddler standing on the rail tracks. Shrugging off the possible danger, he said: "Yes, I know that the

train can arrive at any moment. What can I do? I have to shop here after all."

A security officer was seen alerting the people flocking over the rail tracks about the approaching train.

"Accidents happen sometimes, but they are not major. Sometimes a shopper would bump in the railway track or mud and hurt himself. Sometimes some products that were too close to the tracks would get thrashed," said Muniir, the security officer. "But other than that no major accidents have occurred here as far as I can remember."

However, some shopkeepers told this correspondent that there have been isolated incidents of accidents on the rail tracks.

"Accidents take place quite often," said Moktar Hossain, a vendor who was seen selling vegetables beside the tracks. "One or two people even died in the past year or two. But the authorities would not do anything until something really bad happens," he added.

Almost all the shops operating on the railroad tracks are illegally occupying the land owned by the Bangladesh Railway (BR).

When asked about the legitimacy of the position of his shop, Golam Hossain, an elderly trader told this correspondent: "We just sell our goods and pay the rents. Legal issues are best left to the shop owners, not the poor traders," he said.

According to locals, influential people control most of land

margin at the rail tracks and force the helpless vendors pay rental charges. "Even the floating peddlers have to pay an amount of toll to the patrol police to hawk their goods," said a vendor.

Locals alleged that one Md Solaiman controls a large portion of the floating market collecting around Tk 10 lakh as toll each month. Also, Md Alamgir and Abdur Rahim, two influential members of local traders' association, control other parts of the market.

The toll rates depend on the size of the shop. For a big size shop the association charges Tk 50 to 60 a day. For smaller shops, the rate is around Tk 30. Besides, each of the shop-owners allegedly pays Tk 10 to 20 to the police every day.

"There have been many protests against this. But these people are really influential. They seem to have contacts with higher authorities," said a shop owner. "The occasional steps taken by the authorities turn out to be nothing but eye-wash."

Officials at the Shyampur Police Station blamed the vast slum area and floating population living in Shyampur and the adjoining area for the futility of their efforts. "Things would not be much different unless all the floating population illegally living in that area are evicted," the official added.

Sources at Bangladesh Railway said they do not have any immediate plans regarding this matter. "We rely on the police to rid the lands of illegal occupants and I heard they raid the kitchen markets quite often," said an official requesting anonymity.

"Dhaka City Corporation should try and regulate the conducts in these kitchen markets to solve the problem completely," he added.



STAR PHOTO

The makeshift shops on the rail tracks at Jurain crossing. Vendors pull down the hoods when a train approaches and put them in places after the train passes off.



STYED ZAKIA HOSSAIN

The demolition work of 22-storey Rangs Bhaban is going on for the last several months. Early demolition of this building will help early completion of the planned link road connecting Bijoy Sarani and Tongi Diversion Road at Tejgaon Industrial Area.