

Buses blind to the disabled

The physically challenged commuters denied of rights as few follow govt order to keep reserved seats for them

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Although people with disabilities are supposed to have seats reserved for them in all public buses in the city as per a government order, they are regularly being denied of their rights by bus operators including the state-run BRTC.

According to a government decision taken in September this year all the public buses in the city are supposed to have two designated seats for people with any type of disabilities. The two seats are supposed to be marked and positioned in easily accessible location.

However, very few buses were found following the new order.

In reality the disabled people are in most cases barred from boarding public buses. The designated seats mostly remain occupied by other passengers.

The blind and the disabled persons are also allowed to travel in Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) buses with half fare. To avail the service the disabled persons need to have a card issued from the BRTC office.

However the special offer remains only on papers. BRTC workers said they have no such instructions from the authorities.

Rashidul Azam Russell, a physically challenged person who was born with no arms gives accounts of his painful experience a few days ago.

"I was travelling from Gazipur to Mirpur. When I boarded the bus I saw the



SATR PHOTO

Reserved seats in buses are rarely kept reserved for the disabled.

designated seats occupied. When I requested, no one responded positively. I stood all the way from Gazipur to Banani without any sign of empathy from anyone," said Russell, currently working as an assistant coordinator, Centre for Disability in Development (CDD).

Russell added, "I had no help while I got on the bus. During the whole time I was standing without any balance. We all know how the streets of Dhaka are. Whenever there were hard brakes, turns and bumps I could not help but trip over."

There is no recent survey regarding the total number of persons with disabilities in the country. According to a survey conducted by the World Health Organisation in 2000 about ten percent of the total population in Bangladesh is disabled. The estimated number is around 1.5 crore. Within 2007 the

number has increased, say experts.

Around 5,500 buses and minibuses are currently operating on 40 routes and 149 sub-routes in the city. BRTC is operating 171 buses including 50 double-deckers.

BRTC also leased out 127 buses to private operators for carrying passengers between the city and its peripheries. These buses are supposed to follow all the rules of the corporation. Total number of BRTC buses running in the country is 550.

The persons with disabilities have no place in all these buses.

Dr Nafeesur Rahman, director, National Forum of Organisations Working With the Disabled (NFOWD) said, "Public transportation system in the country is not at all friendly to the people with disabilities in the first

place but occupying designated seats while a disabled person stands shows serious lack of morality."

Rahman said in most cases public buses remain in a hurry loading and unloading passengers in the middle of the streets. There is no specific pick up points. Height of the footpath and buses are different. Besides, buses are designed differently. Some buses have entrance in the middle while some has the gate in the front. Passengers always compete for seats due to shortage of buses.

"All these factors create problems for the people with disabilities who need help to get on. But no one wants to spend extra time helping a disabled person, so they prefer not to allow them in the bus," said Rahman.

Those who belong to the well off class can avail better

transport but it is the poor who suffer, he mentioned.

BRTC Chairman Colonel Aktar Kamal said, "Most people with disabilities are unaware of the BRTC social service mostly for lack of publicity. We are trying to develop a service friendly to everyone but our workers are not aware enough. With a little support from NGOs it is possible to train the workers on how to handle a disabled person."

Khandakar Rafiqul Hossain (Kajal), president of the Association of Bus Companies of Bangladesh, admitted the fact of denying the rights of the disabled. He said, "It is a social issue. Most of our workers are illiterate and they come from a class where they have to struggle to earn a living. They are also ignorant of rights issues."

"For them helping to a disabled person to board the bus means waste of time when they drive fast to the next stoppage and get more passengers," he added.

Kajal also blamed the general commuters for not cooperating. "Sometimes commuters refuse to give up the seat. They even tear up the stickers marking the designated seats. Drivers and helpers who are often abused by passengers remain silent just to avoid quarrels," he said.

Kajal said the association is thinking of arranging training sessions for drivers and helpers. "However, I don't know whether it will help as most helpers are floating people and they work on temporary basis," he noted.



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Azad Cinema, the fourth oldest theatre hall in the city, is going to become a history soon as talks are on to demolish the structure. The hall authorities are meeting different groups interested to build multi-storied markets or apartment buildings at the venue. Shabistan, Gulistan, Naz, Cinema Palace and Diamond Jubilee met the same fate in the past. The attraction of cinema went down due to the popularity of home entertainment facilities like cable TV, VCD and DVD etc.

Playing at future of playgrounds

Report on parks and playgrounds submitted to the ministry 10 months ago for better maintenance still gathering dust

TAWFIQUE ALI

The local government ministry is yet to take measures on the basis of a report submitted 10 months ago for better maintenance of the city's parks and playgrounds.

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) submitted the report to the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD) along with a list of public parks and playgrounds maintained by different agencies in the city.

But ministry officials now say they have to check again whether any such report was submitted to them. "I am not sure and do not remember any such report," said Md. Delwar Hossain, senior assistant secretary of section Poura-1 of the ministry.

The DCC, according to the records, submitted the report on January 24 this year.

Interestingly, the LGRD ministry formed a 10-member inter-ministerial committee on September 5 last year for stocktaking of the parks and playgrounds under custody of different agencies in the DCC area with a 15-day deadline.

A team of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa) met the adviser to the LGRD ministry on August 21 last year and demanded that public parks and playgrounds be restored with coordinated maintenance and conservation with community participation.

Sharif Jamil, member secretary of Bapa's parks and grounds programme, said that nothing has happened since the report was submitted. "The ministry's being oblivious of the report

shows how irresponsible the government is in this regard," he said.

The committee, with the DCC chief estate officer as convener, submitted a compilation of lists provided by different agencies concerned to the LGRD secretary delineating locations and latest status of the city parks and playgrounds.

The lists submitted by respective agencies have basic information and focus on the present use, area, latest status and whether there are any illegal set-ups in the parks, playgrounds and graveyards, said DCC officials.

The move was a part of an attempt to take measures to reclaim and restore the

public parks and playgrounds from abuse. The agencies concerned were supposed to take actions in accordance with the ministerial instructions on the report.

The DCC officials concerned said that they have not yet got any directions from the ministry in the light of the report.

Public Works Department (PWD) and National Housing Authority (NHA) came up with partial lists of parks at their disposal much later than submission of the final report.

A good number parks and playgrounds are supposed to be at the disposal of PWD.

According to the lists provided by different agen-

cies, the DCC has a total of 49 parks, 10 playgrounds, six graveyards and two crematoriums at its disposal.

Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) has 11 parks and playgrounds. Bangladesh Railway has three playgrounds and National Sports Council has seven.

Public parks and playgrounds under custodianship of DCC are at deplorable state due to lack of maintenance.

Rajuk handed over 42 public parks in the capital city to DCC for maintenance by an order in the 1980s. Many of those are untraceable as parks today, sources said.

Some of the parks exist

only on paper.

There are an unspecified number of city parks and playgrounds that are in possession of different clubs and groups for exclusive and commercial uses.

According to separate surveys conducted by DCC and Bapa, children's parks and playgrounds in the city in many instances have been turned into truck stand, kitchen market, waste dumping ground, junkyard, car park and place for makeshift shops.

Moreover, government agencies have encroached on many parks and playgrounds with security personnel camps, public toilets, water pumps and offices of DCC ward commissioners.



SATR PHOTO

PARK AT FARMGATE: The lone place for leisure in a densely populated area.



SATR PHOTO

Children playing at T&T ground at Indira Road.



SATR PHOTO

AN UNFAIR MOVE: All set for holding a fair at a playground in Banani.