

| SPOTLIGHT |

When we say we are going home for Eid, it simply does not mean buying a ticket, boarding a train and reaching the destination.

Going home means a prolonged struggle. It's a methodical procedure that I tend to divide into three phases-

1. Pre journey phase, (the most important and stressful phase of this process)

2. Mid journey phase,

3. Post journey phase

The pre journey phase starts with buying tickets, which requires weeks of planning, ounces of perseverance and most importantly a contact list of people who can help you get a ticket. Because we don't buy tickets, we hunt them.

Ideally, a total of 25 percent of the tickets are sold online, five per cent are kept for VIPs, five per cent for railway staff and the remaining 65 percent are sold from counters.

But who is the single most influential body in this transaction? The regular train commuters know that answer is none of the above. It's the black marketers. When no one can give you a ticket, when you almost drown in depression and the fear of spending the holiday all alone, they bring back the spirit of Eid in your life. No



official document or railway personnel ever mention the share that the black marketers hold in ticket distribution. But you know their worth, even though they might charge you Tk 2,000 for a ticket worth Tk 450.

We are ready to pay it, because we realise the happiness of going home is priceless.

Last year, I tried my luck with purchasing a ticket online, but the server was shown to be offline. The server could not take the load during peak hour, so it crashed. After a good fifteen minutes, when I found the server to be working, no more tickets were available.

I heard one of my friend's luck was even more amazing. The day Bangladesh Railway started selling advance tickets from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm; he decided to waste a better part of his day by standing

in line for tickets right after suhoor. When he arrived at the counter, he found that there were many other people already setting camp, rolling up blankets and packing away tools to get their tickets at the first possible opportunity. However, it did not end quite well for him, because all the tickets were magically sold out within the first two hours and he could not purchase a ticket to go home. Like every year, the TV camera was there to capture the reaction of the disgruntled and angry people who failed to get a single ticket, even after hours of wait. While in front of TV cameras, the railway authority, as usual, blatantly denied the allegation of tickets being sold out in the black market, and I saw my friend mumbling and grumbling at his failure.

"You could not get any ticket, at least you were on a national TV," I consoled him.

There is another group of ticket dealers who also happen to be our friends or relatives. They do their business through their Facebook profiles with a picture of the tickets that they purchase, taken in an attractive manner with luring captions like "inbox me if you need them." I did message once and thus began a hard negotiation over the price.

So this year too, I thought it would be better if I called up my 'blacker' who asked to meet in our usual meeting place. After paying a thousand times more than

OPERATION JOURNEY BY TRAIN

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

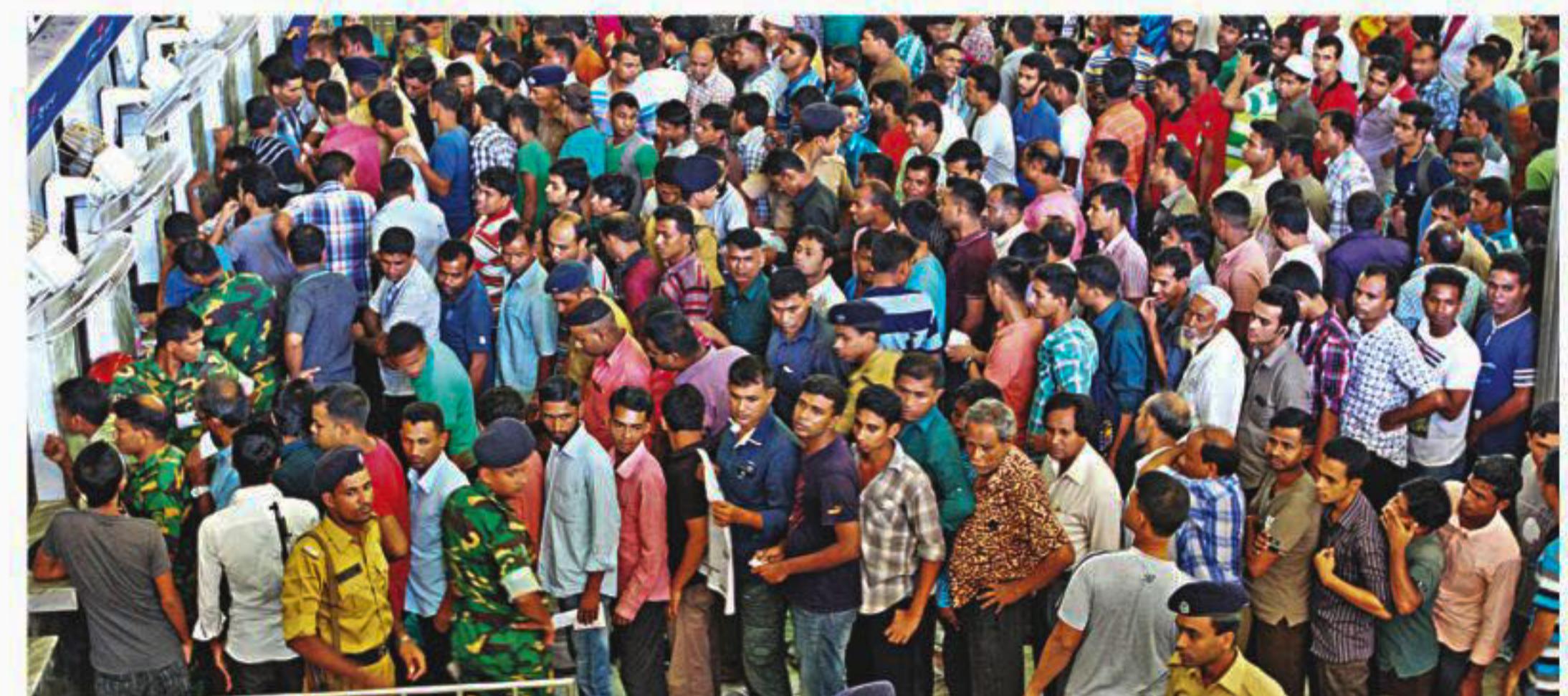
PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS



the actual price, when he secretly passed those tickets to me, I received them while my hands were trembling with excitement.

Phase one completed with tickets in my hands and a wave of pride rising from the stomach to my face.

Phase two is all about securing your place in the train with the ticket that you bought. Because, unfortunately, having a ticket does not always mean having a seat. This phase starts with a whistle, followed by a loud but inaudible announcement from the railway authority. You will find people running with their belongings to get on the train. Many of them climb and crawl on the roofs of moving trains, using no climbing equipment except for their luggage. You might also find people throwing their bags



is when the pages of my book become my best friends.

Finally, there comes the moment when the Bangladesh Railway force feeds the same old music to you (if you travel frequently, you know the song Ar koto kal eka thakbo or O bondhu tumi shunte ki pao), you know you have almost reached your home.

The moment you disembark with an aching back, a pair of numb legs and all your suitcases surrounding you, phase two ends.

Phase three or the post journey phase is rather brief. It mostly includes bragging about your heroic survival during the first two phases to your friends and family, with a little more spice added

to the tale. It also includes sleeping for the whole day and contacting your other set of blackers for the return ticket.

How does it end?

It mostly ends back in square one, on another journey, sitting in that very train, wondering if there is another, more dramatic solution to coming home. You make promises and stern decisions, and a mental note of never embarking on a train journey ever again. Nevertheless, next year you seem to forget your vow and repeat the same mission. And that's how it ends.

Disclaimer: Taking part in such a mission demands a certain level of maturity to handle disappointments and accept a series of unexpected dramas.