

Killed

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Of the rest, nine accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, 11 were acquitted and two died during the hearing of the case.

"No one told us Ratan was dead. I went looking for him and reaching the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, I came to know of his death," said Ratan's father Foyezur Rahman.

That year Ratan had sat for his Secondary School Certificate examination from Naogaon's Abdul Majid High School, said his father.

"After the exams, as he had time to spare, he would often go to attend the meetings and processions organised by Ahsanullah Sir," said his mother.

"He didn't understand anything about politics but would put on a bandana and walk at the front of processions," Salma reminisced. "He used to tell me 'Ma I like going to meetings and processions'."

On May 7, 2004, Ratan had gone to biennial conference of Awami Swechhasebak League at Noagaon of Tongi.

Ahsanullah Sir had asked him for water. He brought water and Ahsanullah Sir even drank it, after which Sir was shot," Foyezur recounted the event of that fateful day.

Assailants shot 54-year-old Ahsanullah around 12:25pm from behind the dais. Ratan was fatally wounded while 17 other people were injured.

"He was a brave and honest boy. He had caught hold of a guy after the first round of shots, but then he too was gunned down by the assailants," said Foyezur.

"None barred us from filing a case. We ourselves chose not to file one," said Salma, adding that the family knew that they could not afford the legal expenses.

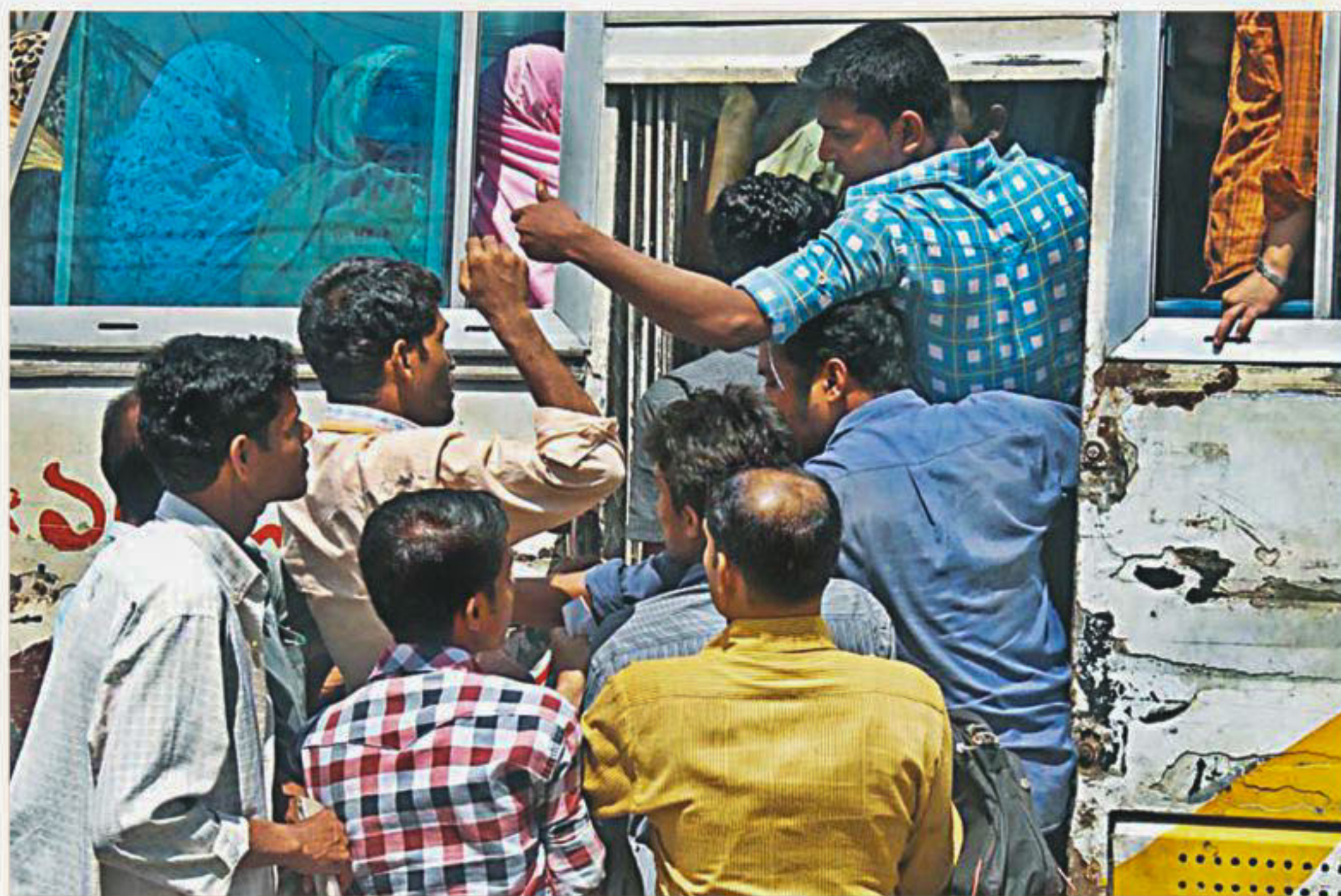
"Since Ahsanullah Sir's brother filed the case as a plaintiff, we hoped that we would get justice," she said.

The HC in its judgment had mentioned that just like Ahsanullah Master's family members, Omar Faruque Ratan's father and mother also expect justice.

But the sentence awarded to the accused could not bring peace to Ratan's parents. "We would be happy if the previous verdict was upheld," said Foyezur, referring to the lower court verdict.

He hoped that the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court would uphold the lower court verdict.

"For 12 years I held my hope. I prayed to Allah so that the actual assailants of Ahsanullah Sir and my Baba [Ratan] are brought to book, hoping that if the killers are not tried in their lifetimes then Allah would try them in the afterlife," said the bereaved mother.



People struggling to get into a city bus in Chittagong. Indifference of traffic police, the BRTA, and drivers has lead to passengers suffering on the streets.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

A journey by bus

MINHAJ UDDIN, Chittagong

Ever read a "Journey by bus" essay in school? In the textbook, the journey is always enjoyable and "a memory worth cherishing for the rest of the life". But if you are a commuter in Chittagong, or any other metropolitan cities for that matter, memories of public bus journey could instead HAUNT you for the rest of your life.

Imagine yourself a passenger of route 10 in the port city. Your suffering starts when you arrive at the station.

You see many route 10 buses. When you are about to board one, the conductor would say it would take route 12. So you go to the next. It would go through the right route, but only halfway. It has a "reserved trip," you are told.

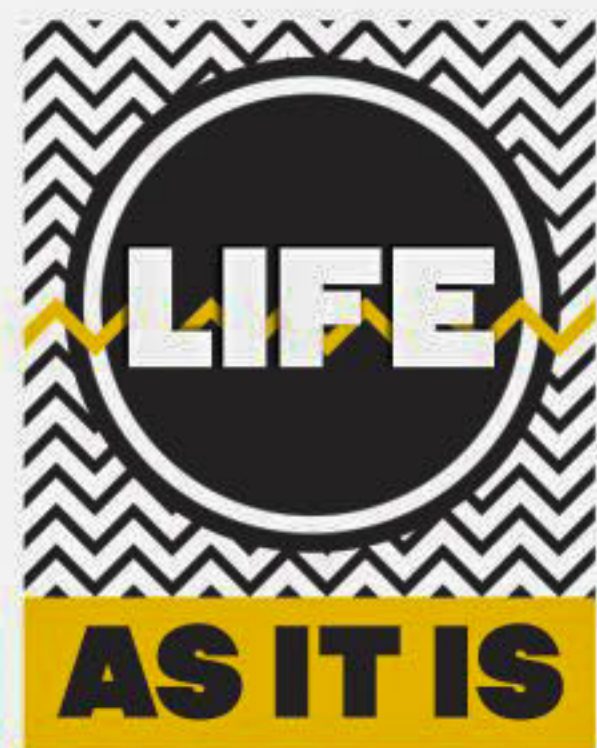
What they are doing is violation of traffic rules, but what can you do? So you live with it. If you draw the attention of the nearby traffic police, he would give you a gaze as if you were an alien.

After waiting for long under the scorching sun, you find one willing to go to your destination. But don't rush. If you do,

you run the risk of tearing your garments or even injuring yourself. Most buses are in a morbid condition, with spikes coming out from here and there.

The bus is full and yet it does not move an inch.

"Empty bus, empty bus", hollers the conductor and asks



the standing passengers in the narrow aisle to press inside. The bus would start only when it is crammed up to the entrance.

You feel you are on a coal burner and you are sweat-drenched.

More trouble pops up as the bus moves along.

A bitter odour takes over. You discover its source without much difficulty: standing passengers holding the iron rod above to prevent fall, their armpits wide open inches from your nose.

As a way out from your misery, you yell at the driver to speed up. The driver, nonchalant as usual, keeps his composure. If you shout a lot, he returns: "Go catch a private auto-rickshaw instead. Nawab!"

Embarrassed, you fall silent and close your eyes, contemplating how it would have been if there were flower gardens along the road instead of garbage cans.

But you suddenly hear a hue and cry over one taka. A fellow passenger and the conductor are exchanging abuses over the fare. It's an everyday scene and you return to your daydreaming.

You swallow all these irregularities, chaos, sufferings and whimsical attitudes in gut-wrenching silence. Still, all the while you dream someday the public bus journey would be as pleasurable as those in the textbook.

A lot goes on around us. In this new news project, we started running feature contents based on personal experience. We also invite our readers to send similar write-ups for publishing, subject to editing and verification. Please send your pieces and also comments and feedback to reporting@thedailystar.net.

Get rid of rowdy activists

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Omar Faruq Ratan, a school student, and wounded 17 others in a staccato burst of fire at a rally of Awami Swechhasebak League, the AL's volunteers' front, at Noagaon near the legislator's house in Tongi.

Yesterday, the HC bench of Justice Obaidul Hassan and Justice Krishna Debnath delivered the verdict in the sensational political killing of the popular labour leader.

Justice Obaidul Hassan made some observations shedding light on the motive of the killers, their ferociousness, life of Ahsanullah and the loss the country incurred and the confrontational politics.

"The killing on which we received the death reference is undoubtedly a heinous incident. Such a killing has rarely happened in the history of Bangladesh. The incident that unfolded at MA Mazid School in Noagaon [the killing spot] clearly indicates what extent criminalisation of politics has reached," the judge said.

Justice Hassan said Ahsanullah Master was respected by all, irrespective of party affiliations. He was active in running anti-drug campaigns and activities in Tongi of Gazipur.

"If an ideal lawmaker like Ahsanullah Master was alive, he could have done many more good deeds for the people passing laws that the nation would have benefited by," said the presiding judge of the bench, adding that the convicts deprived the nation of such opportunities.

"They killed an ideology. Political

leader with principles, like Ahsanullah Master, is hard to come by in our society these days," he said in his observations.

Touching on the motive behind the killing, Justice Hassan said the convict, Nurul Islam Sarkar, who masterminded the killing, had political rivalry with Ahsanullah Master and business enmity with Mahfuzur Rahman Mohol, a Jubo League leader and a local businessman, who was maimed by the attack and has been paralysed from the waist down.

Ahsanullah and Mahfuzur were Nurul's target and he did not want to lose the chance to kill them, he said.

Terming it a "mass killing", he said Nurul and his cohorts were undoubtedly directly responsible for the killing.

About the viciousness of the convicts, the judge said they were not bothered that their indiscriminate firing on the rally could cause deaths of many.

"They even did not use any masks while carrying out the attack in broad daylight as they thought nothing would happen to them even if someone recognised them," said Justice Hassan.

The reason behind such recklessness was that they had such a power behind them which had the capacity to protect them from any possible problem in future, he said.

The local unruly political goons had such a belief because the political parties do not tend to shun these people, the judge said.

Police now say

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and firearms.

Since Friday, some 166 suspected militants have been arrested, 21 of them in the past 24 hours. The number of total arrests between Saturday and Wednesday stands at 11,684, according to the police HQ.

On a normal day, some 1,000-1,100 people are arrested every day across the country, police sources say.

However, the drive drew huge flak with increasing number of allegations that police are harassing many innocent people and opposition party men, and extorting money from them. Some of those arrested are Awami League men. This has naturally angered the ruling party leaders and high-ups.

Over the last two days, this newspaper ran reports of such harassments and the "arrest trade".

According to media reports, in June 2008, around 12,000 people had been detained and sent to prison in the first eight days of a special drive against known and listed criminals. Ahead of the then opposition Awami League's April 30, 2004, deadline to topple the then BNP government, more than 15,000 were picked up in an eight-day dragnet.

Law enforcers arrested around 8,000 people on February 1-5 in 2006 across the country centring on a long march of the then opposition AL, according to rights body Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

Asked, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said the prime minister instructed them so that no innocent people suffered at the hands of law enforcers in the name of anti-terror drive. "We are more careful after getting prime minister's instructions."

But he claimed no one was arrested with political motives.

The drive against militants came in the wake of the murder of a top police official's wife by suspected militants in Chittagong on June 5.

Over the last three years, suspected militants have attacked and killed university professors, writers, publishers, secular bloggers, gay rights activists, foreigners, policemen and members of religious minorities, including Shia and Sufi Muslims, Christians and Hindus.

Reportedly, Islamic State claimed responsibilities for many of the attacks. But the government maintains

the group has no presence in the country, and blames the opposition parties for those.

'COPS EARNED TK 5 CRORE'

Jessore district AL General Secretary Shahin Chaklader accused the police of making quick bucks through mass arrests. According to him, the ongoing drive is not about nabbing militants, but about money.

"Police in Jessore are detaining common people, workers and businessmen. They release them after taking money ... The district police earned Tk 5 crore through this business in the current week," he told The Daily Star.

Chaklader said the drive should stop immediately, as the government lost its popularity because of the mass arrests.

Sunamganj district AL President Motiur Rahman said in some cases police detained party men on the basis of wrong information. "But police released them after we conveyed the message."

But Nurul Islam, of Barahatia union in Lohagara upazila in Chittagong, was not so lucky. He had to pay for his freedom.

The 48-year-old was picked up on Monday afternoon from his tea stall near his house at Ghonar Mor and hauled to Lohagara Police Station. When his elder brother Ahmed Hossain went to the police station, police told him that Nurul was part of an anti-state and anti-government discussion at the shop.

Family members say Nurul is not in politics nor has he faced any case.

However, when his family members went to the police station again on Tuesday for his release, some middlemen demanded Tk 1 lakh.

The family could arrange Tk 34,500 with which they managed to free Nurul around 7:00pm, said a relative of the victim. He spoke on condition of anonymity fearing retribution.

Md Shahjahan, OC of the station, admitted to have detained Nurul but that they released him with a warning. He claimed he had no knowledge of the money.

(Senior reporter Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee, Pranabesh Chakraborty and Minhaj Uddin in Chittagong, Kongkon Karmaker in Dinajpur and Mamun-ur-Rashid in Bogra contributed to the report.)



Worried, the wife and sister-in-law of Ripon try to comfort each other at Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital yesterday.

PHOTO: ARIFUR RAHMAN

Fitra fixed

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Mukarram office. Maulana Muhammad Abdus Salam, director of religious culture affairs wing of the foundation, presided over the meeting.

"Fitra has been fixed in accordance with the market price of food items, and it can also be given according to the local market price," said Abdus Salam.

The Fitra has been set taking into account the market prices of wheat or flour, barley, date, raisin, cheese and other food items.

With the minimum amount of money, one can either buy 1.65 kg of wheat or flour. If anyone wants to pay Fitra by other food items, he or she will have to pay Tk 200, price of 3.3 kg of barley, Tk 1,000, price of 3.3 kg of raisin, Tk 1,500, price of 3.3 kg of date, and Tk 1,650, 3.3 kg of cheese.

Muslims with minimal affluence are obligated to offer Fitra or charity gift to the poor ahead of the biggest Muslim festival, Eid-ul-Fitr.

Maiden consignment ready for delivery

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pledged to India last year would reduce the time and cost needed for supplying goods to those states through the Indian territory.

Preparations were underway yesterday at the jetty ghat of Ashuganj port on the bank of the Meghna river to unload the goods.

The unloading will take place today through an inaugural ceremony in the presence of ministers, lawmakers, senior government officials and top diplomats of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka, said Rafiqul Islam, additional director of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

The goods will then be loaded onto trucks to carry those across the border through Akhaura checkpoint. They will travel another 32 kilometres to deliver the consignment to warehouses in Tripura.

Ashuganj port requires a jetty with

high capacity to handle large volumes of goods expected under the arrangement, BIWTA officials said. And so a new jetty has been constructed for unloading and then loading of goods.

A makeshift customs office has also been set up.

Rafiqul could not say immediately when trucks with Indian goods will set out for Akhaura.

Twenty trucks will carry the goods to Agartala, capital of Tripura, 80km from Ashuganj. They will make several trips to deliver the whole consignment, which will take four to five days, said Mahmud-ur-Rahman Siddiqui, general manager of Anbis Development Ltd, a Bangladeshi operator that hired MV Newtek-6 to carry the goods from Kolkata to Ashuganj.

Rakib Transport, a local transport company, has been given the charge of mobilising trucks.

The first consignment reached

Ashuganj on Tuesday. The ship started from Khidirpur port in Kolkata on June 3 and reached Khulna's Angtiara, the first checkpoint on the Bangladesh side, on June 7, said Mirajul Islam, master of the ship.

The port's customs officials told the crew to go to Khulna to deposit the transshipment fees, amounting to Tk 130,574, with the office of the National Board of Revenue there and get clearance.

Ripon Sheikh, supervisor of the ship, travelled by trawler, motor bike and then bus for nine hours to deposit the fee. He made another nine-hour journey back.

The vessel remained moored at Angtiara the whole time and finally set out for Ashuganj on June 11 with the clearance.

Altogether, it took 12 days to reach Ashuganj, said Mirajul who along with 12 others went to Kolkata to

bring the consignment.

"We did not know that we would have to deposit any fee," said the ship master, referring to the transshipment charge made effective on May 25.

"We will be able to avoid the delay from next trips."

Both the countries will reap the benefits of the new arrangement, Rafiqul of the BIWTA said.

India's cost of carrying goods from Kolkata will be less because of transshipment arrangement while Bangladeshi ships and trucks will be engaged in carrying them, he explained.

At present, trucks from Kolkata travel around 1,600km to reach Agartala. The distance through Bangladesh would be only 500km, according to experts and businesspeople.

The cost of transporting goods to Agartala from Kolkata is \$67 per

tonne and it takes 30 days, said SK Mahfuz Hamid, a member of the Bangladeshi team negotiating an agreement on transshipment with the Indian side.

The same consignment would take around 10 days to reach Tripura from Kolkata via Ashuganj at a cost of \$40 per tonne, according to operators.

Akhaura is expected to be one of the main doorways of the trade corridor between the neighbouring countries.

Locals said transshipment would boost trade activity.

"Our people will get more scopes to work and earn," said Omar Faruq, a boatman near the jetty in Ashuganj.

To make transshipment a reality, the two countries signed a revised river protocol in Dhaka in June last year.

The transshipment fee has been set at Tk 192.25 per tonne, said Mofizur Rahman, director (traffic) of the

BIWTA. Apart from the regular fee, India would have to pay other charges.

If Bangladesh provides security for consignments, India will pay an additional Tk 50 for each tonne of goods from Ashuganj to Akhaura, Mofizur said.

On a trial basis, India used the route to bring a consignment of iron rods to Agartala three years ago. At Delhi's request, Dhaka also allowed India to carry heavy machinery through the route to Palatana power plant in Tripura.

Though the transshipment facility has already been given through Ashuganj, the port there does not have the infrastructure ready yet, according to BIWTA officials.

Bangladesh spent around Tk 10 crore from its own funds to provide the facility, they said.