

SPOTLIGHT

To introduce Bangladesh in the World Wide Web as the most densely populated country in the world, probably the most used photo is of a train crazily overcrowded by Eid holidaymakers where thousands are seen fighting for a spare spot on the roof of the carriage. Considered as the safer, cheaper

and more reliable means of transportation, every year Bangladesh railway carries around 70 million passengers and during vacations like Eid, the struggle for managing a seat in the trains to reach home becomes one of the toughest jobs in the world.

With only a total of 339 trains and a network of 2877.1 kilometres of poorly maintained tracks, Bangladesh railway has to carry out this enormous task of transporting a huge number of people

which is more than the total population of United Kingdom and France individually. On the other hand, one third posts of this highly important government department remain vacant all year round. According to the railway authorities, at present among 40, 264 posts 12, 729 posts are still vacant whereas the authority is preparing for tackling another monstrous rush for the upcoming 9 day-long Eid holidays as it has already declared that the advance tickets for Eid holidaymakers will be available from 22nd June. As a result, the probability is high that, like the previous years, Bangladesh railway is going to give a very unpleasant experience for millions of its commuters.

Every year, passengers seeking train tickets for Eid holidays come up with a very common objection. As Najmul Hossain, a student of Dhaka University says, "Last year on the first day of selling advance tickets I reached the station at 4 am to buy 4 tickets of Chittagong bound Turna Nishitha for my family members. There were around 30 or 40 people in the queue before me."

"However, within less than one hour of opening the ticket counter, the officials informed us that all the tickets were sold out. With extreme grievances, I had to return home with nothing. Everyone had just one question: "where did all the tickets go?" adds Najmul.

The answer to the questions could be

found in the station itself. Not very far from the ticket counters, passengers were seen buying tickets from certain individuals at a double or triple rate. Unfortunately, this was the only way for Najmul to purchase tickets for the holidays. Like many other desperate travellers, Najmul opted for the black market.

"On the second day, when I came to the station I was approached by three people and they asked me to go to a corner. When I went with them, they showed me tickets of four seats side by side -- just how I wanted. I was surprised because getting adjacent seats was almost impossible during the Eid rush. However I bought those four tickets paying triple the original price," says Najmul. In fact, law enforcers often arrest people with large number of tickets which they obtain from the dishonest officials of the railway department. And, due to these malpractices, thousands of passengers

waiting hour after hour in the queue to buy tickets are refused harshly.

However, Abdul Mazid, Officer-in-charge (OC), of Kamapur Railway Police Station says, "During Eid season, blackers cannot enjoy proper benefit. According to my long experience of working here, I have found that many brokers as well as students buy the maximum number of tickets (as one can buy 4 tickets) and then sell them at high prices on Social Media or online markets (like-bikroy.com)." Contrary to his statement, railway police arrested a gang of blackers on the first day of the last Eid season with 17 tickets of different trains (The Daily Star, September 7, 2015).

Nevertheless it is a fact that the demand for tickets is much more than the carrying capacity of Bangladesh railway. During last year's Eid season, the demand of train tickets was 50,000 however only around 14,000 tickets could be offered to

the passengers. The officers of Government Railway police also blamed the existing ticket selling system for continuous malpractices. According to the railway police, if the passenger's name, contact number or address can be written down in the purchased ticket, black marketing of train tickets would be almost impossible. On the other hand, a responsible railway official who has requested to be kept anonymous said that the preparation of computerised tickets has been assigned to a particular company called CNS which has huge influence over the railway department and due to their influence, this system could not be updated for more than ten years.

Recently the railway has introduced an online ticketing facility which is also in a very decrepit condition. According to its users, many a times, the website for purchasing train ticket is found shut down and during rush hours, the server fails frequently. Without correcting these facilities, the railway department has arranged 10 special trains for Eid season by procuring coaches from Indonesia and India, which is a good initiative but far from a proper solution.

It is very unfortunate and surprising that despite such huge public demand, the annual loss of Bangladesh railway is a staggering 900 crore takas. While a drive against corruption among railway officials has been pushed to the edge, the authority has increased railway fare several times

which made little impact to recover such a huge loss. The recently increased fare (increased in January, 2016) would add only 45 crore Tk to the railway funds. Besides jacking up fares, the authority should also make the railways department more efficient by preventing corruption, mismanagement, and by increasing transparency and accountability.

Soon after the opening of advance Eid tickets on 22nd June, ticket seekers will be seen waiting in the station from almost midnight for the ticket. With such shortage of manpower, inadequate capacity and sustained mismanagement, it is inevitable that, like Najmul, many people will return with nothing from those overstretched ticketing queues. While black marketers will be on the prowl to grab these opportunities, the hijackers and robbers will also try to make fortune by victimising these passengers in the rush.

In this situation, to ensure a safe Eid journey and holidays for millions of railways passengers this year, a coordinated effort of the Bangladesh railway, railway ministry and law enforcing agencies is essential. With well coordinated initiatives, it is possible to ensure a safe journey even for this huge number of people within this limited capacity. However, the government must adopt a long term plan to bring an end to such crisis in one of the country's most significant means of communication and transportation. ■

# EID CHRONICLES THE RAILWAY RUSH

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

