

WELCOME, WITH CAUTION

Lack of pragmatic policy to regulate app-based ride sharing apps is threatening the future of the service

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Md Nasir Uddin, an employee of a private company, has been using shared motorbike rides through ride sharing apps regularly since September 2017. His rating with Uber and Pathao, two popular ride-sharing apps operating in Bangladesh, is 4.9 out of 5 and 93 percent respectively. He uses these apps every day to move through Dhaka's nightmarish traffic on a shared motorbike. "My office is located at Karwan Bazaar and I live in Mohammadpur. When these motorbike-sharing apps were launched, it was a relief because there is no direct public transport from Mohammadpur to Karwan Bazar. I am now totally dependent on motorbikes for my transport in Dhaka city."

Another factor that pulled Nasir towards app-based motorbike rides is its cost-efficiency. Thanks to his reputation as a regular client, Nasir enjoys a good amount of discount from the ride-sharing companies. "I usually get 30 percent to 55 percent discount on motorbike rides limiting my transport expenditure from home to office and back within Tk 70 to 100. When I used to hire CNG-run three-wheelers, it used to cost at least Tk 150 just from home to office."

However, for the last couple of months Nasir has been experiencing a problem that reveals a stark limitation of these tech companies. According to Nasir, during rush hours, motorbike drivers, nowadays, don't want to travel relatively short distances unless it matches with their preferred destination. The rate of rejection from drivers has increased so much that Nasir sometimes has to resort to CNG-run three-wheelers to reach office on time. To his surprise, when Nasir goes to hire CNGs, he finds dozens of motorbike drivers waiting



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

near the Mohammadpur bus terminal calling for passengers just like CNG drivers—they just don't want to be hired through apps.

"One day, when I was looking for CNGs, a biker came to me and said, I know you want to go to Karwan Bazaar. I had taken you there before. If you want to hire me for Tk 100, I can take you there within 20 minutes." Seeing no better alternative, Nasir had to agree to that proposal but now passengers like Nasir think that this growing trend among bikers can be the prelude to the end of the dependability that app-based motorbike rides gave to clients like him. In fact, companies like Pathao and Uber are still helpless to prevent this practice as they cannot act without being notified by the customer. And, if the driver doesn't start the trip using the app, the customer cannot file a complaint or notify the company about the driver.

Motorbike drivers themselves admit to opting for personal contracts with the passengers instead of being hired through the app. Mohammad Kamrul Islam, a motor-biker who has

given more than 300 rides with Uber and Pathao says, "The companies are giving discounts extensively, mostly for motorbike users. The discounted fare is then adjusted to our account several days later. This is why I often take passengers without the apps."

Spokespersons of the ride sharing companies opine that the practice of taking a ride evading the app entails serious security concerns. According to ride sharing platforms such as Uber and Pathao, a passenger can see a driver's details in advance including his name, photograph, vehicle and the vehicle registration number.

During a ride, Uber also offers the benefit of GPS tracking and using the "Share My Status" option, which enables the passenger to share their trip details with as many contacts on their phonebook as they want. Both

that their online supervision is still not smart enough to ensure adequate safety of their driver partners and clients. Syed Athar, a lecturer of a private university, hired a Pathao ride to go home from his university at Bashundhara residential area. Coincidentally, the driver was a former student of the same university who was allegedly expelled from the institution. The driver, knowing that his passenger was a teacher of that university, started to use abusive remarks against Syed. At one stage, when Syed protested, the driver parked the motorcycle and made a phone call. Two more men appeared out of nowhere and assaulted Syed. Having done the deed, the biker and his cronies ran away with the bike, leaving Syed with minor injuries.

"I tried to reach out to Pathao on several platforms—the app itself did not have a number to a helpline. I messaged Pathao's Facebook page—there was no response. In the mean time I called my

Although the app-based ride sharing platforms are repeatedly expressing their commitment to safety and security of their driver partners and passengers, there are allegations that their online supervision is still not smart enough to ensure adequate safety of their driver partners and clients.

these apps also have options for the passengers to submit feedback on a specific ride.

On the other hand, when a passenger hires a driver without these apps, s/he and the driver cannot be monitored at all and the passenger's safety lies solely in the hands of the driver. The driver and his/her vehicle become extremely vulnerable as well if the passenger has any subversive intention.

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fiancée to let her know what was going on and she called the cops. Unfortunately, the cops were not being able to find me—Pathao though, had my location and was in a position to help the police, but they didn't have any system in place to do so."

By the time Pathao's customer care had reached back to him, the rider and his goons were long gone. According to Syed, Pathao has allegedly banned the rider in question from their platform - but refused to launch any legal action because the biker wasn't an "employee" of Pathao.

Besides, allegations of sexual harassment, demanding tips and extra fare, ill-treatment with the passengers in shared rides are also not uncommon. In its home country, USA, Uber was fined a total of USD 8.9 million for allowing 57 drivers with criminal records to drive for the company.

On the other hand, physical safety of the driver partners and passengers from accidents, has also come up as a major concern. Motorbike drivers are seen violating the traffic rules extensively which significantly increase the risk of accidents. Mir Rezaul Alam, additional commissioner (traffic) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police comments, "Every vehicle is required to stop before the zebra crossing at intersections but motorcyclists often ignore this rule and cross the intersection. They violate laws and drive on the footpaths. It's really difficult to control them." According to the traffic division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, motorbikes were the most-fined category of vehicles during the 10-day long traffic week that started from August 5, 2018. In total they gave tickets to 83,000 vehicles, and motorbikes alone saw 44,000 cases against them.

Ride sharing companies have still not

Continued to page 5