



PHOTO: ATATUR RAHMAN JEWEL

JOURNEY BY TRAIN... SITTING ON A BUCKET

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For years now, the Bangladesh railway has been suffering constant losses. In the 2016-2017 fiscal year, the net loss of this vital public transport system was more than Tk 180 million. In the beginning of the month, the anti-corruption commission (ACC) also identified 10 sectors within the railway involved in corruption. In fact, there are allegations that employees at almost every stage of the railway authorities are involved in irregularities and malpractice, the ACC team having detected such corruption after investigating for nearly a year.

One such irregularity came to light recently. If you have ever been on the Dewanganj-Dhaka route, you may know that it is one of the busiest train routes in the country. A total of four intercity trains ply this route every day, transporting more than 10,000 passengers on a daily basis, although these have combined sitting arrangements for only around 3,500 passengers.

While the railway does sell 'standing' tickets worth Tk 190 for people who aren't able to book a seat, many no longer buy these. Railway staff have started a racket by renting plastic chairs, stools, and even buckets as seats for around Tk 200. This price increases up to Tk 500 based on demand, especially during Eid and other long holidays.

A visit to the Mymensingh railway station shows that in every bogie of these intercity trains, between 10 to 15 people sitting on plastic chairs, stools, and upturned buckets. The empty space between bogies are also filled with such temporary seating arrangements. However, these crowd the canteen bogie the most—at least 50 passengers travel from Jamalpur to Dhaka this way.

Although a case of petty corruption, if we assume that on an average 100 passengers pay around Tk 200 for such seats on the four intercity trains, the railway staff are illicitly making approximately Tk 80,000 a day, and so more than Tk 2,000,000 every month (after deducting the days on which

the trains don't run). The railway is losing out on this monthly revenue on this one route alone. The money is instead going into the pockets of the government railway police (GRPs), canteen staff, and the train attendants.

"Half of the passengers coming to Dhaka use this method, because it means they do not have to go through the hassle of buying standing tickets waiting in long lines. Rather, the staff search for passengers like us to rent out chairs and buckets. You will see them bargaining at stations like Jamalpur, Mymensingh, Melandoho, Islampur or Tarakandi. Who will not take this offer instead of buying standing tickets?" asks Monir Hossain, a passenger who come to Dhaka thrice a month for buying goods for his welding shop.

Rafiqul Islam, another passenger, who was sitting on an upturned bucket, says that the staff are clever. "After reaching Kamalapur, the passengers need to show their tickets. But most of the time, the trains slow down a little before reaching the station, and we get down there. After that, the staff keeps these [gesturing to the stools and buckets] in the canteen bogie," says Islam. "Also, when the trains stop at the airport station, a large number of sitting passengers get down there, and the staff collect their tickets and distribute among those who rented chairs and stools from them so that they can show the tickets at the Kamalapur

station," he claims.

Star Weekend asked a train attendant of an intercity train on this route, who admits on condition of anonymity that such practices have been taking place for long. "Since the canteen staff don't get a fixed salary, but rather a commission on their sales, they usually get involved in such scams," he says.

But, the passengers allege that not only the canteen staff but also the train attendants and the GRP jointly divide the money among them at the end of the day. "How has it been taking place for so long? It has been possible because they are united and it is a syndicate," says Akhter Ul Islam, a regular passenger on this route.

Star Weekend spoke to Jamalpur station superintendent Md Shahabuddin who says he is aware of such irregularities. But, according to him, this is quite a small matter. "When the canteen manager takes lease of the canteen bogies, there are some unofficial issues in their contract. This is one of those—that they can rent some seats to the passengers to earn some extra money. When passengers go to eat something, they might give some extra taka for the seats," he says.

When asked why there are buckets and stools in the train bogies, he says that the passengers are equally responsible for such malpractice. "They don't buy tickets from the counters. Rather they wait for the attendant to come to them to rent such seating options. This is why, the staff can take advantage of renting those to them," he says.

"If there is a monitoring system and the higher authorities allow us more manpower to look into it, and create a system where people cannot enter the platform without buying tickets from the counter, such malpractice can be uprooted easily," he adds.

On the other hand, the officer-in-charge of Mymensingh GRP, Md Mosharraf Hossain denies the allegations of the involvement of GRPs in such crimes. "These were basically done by the canteen staff. We often conduct raids to warn them and seize the chairs and stools. Now they have started renting buckets. But when we wanted to seize the buckets, they argue that the buckets are essential for their everyday work. This is why we cannot seize those. But we are aware of everything and actions are also taken in time," he assures.

Aminul Islam is the Mymensingh correspondent of The Daily Star.



The staff search for passengers to rent out chairs and buckets.

PHOTO: AMINUL ISLAM