

The curious case of bus routes in Dhaka

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Dhaka is probably one of the very few megacities in the world without any proper design or guideline for the operation and expansion of its public transport system. Few others can be named such as Lagos, Karachi or Kinshasa, but none of them have a population density of between 43,000 to 50,000 people per square kilometer. Between 1991 and 2001, the megacity's population of over 16 million had an average annual growth rate of 4.08 percent, which outpaced the country's annual growth rate of 1.3 percent by a wide margin. If the current rate of population growth continues, Dhaka will exceed Beijing in size by 2025, with a projected population of 22.9 million, says the United Nations. If the city wants to survive the juggernauts called 'development' and 'urbanisation', it must make a proper plan for its transportation system, and not only on paper, but in reality, too.

The city suffers from critical and deteriorated traffic congestion despite low level of motorisation, largely due to the absolute lack of roads, deficient road network configuration, and inefficient traffic management. In 2017, The World Bank calculated that the average travel speed is 6.4 km per hour in the city and BUET's Accident Research Institute estimated the annual loss due to traffic congestion to be between Tk 20,000 crore and Tk 55,000 crore.

The existing public transport system—bus transit operations in particular—obviously cannot fulfill the travel demands of the city. The fact that commuters are dependent on a variety of motorised and non-motorised paratransit systems like auto-rickshaws, tempos, minivans, and rickshaws proves that buses are generally considered unreliable, unsafe, and time

consuming to reach their destination.

To begin with, there just are not enough buses serving all the corners of the city. There are in total 366 bus routes in Dhaka. One may falsely assume that the city is crisscrossed by bus routes, and that our buses are serving the users well, but that is not true at all. There are unnecessarily overlapping routes for the sole purpose of profit maximisation and operational advantages. The routes with the highest numbers of buses are Motijheel to Uttara, Motijheel to Mohammadpur, Motijheel to Mirpur-10, and Motijheel to Kalyanpur. Almost all these buses also cross Gulistan and Shahbagh and Science Lab. These points and areas in the city have proved to be lucrative for the operators, and so regardless of the route, the operators always try to pass these locations.

The only other route with a high number of buses is Jatrabari to the airport, via Bashabo and Badda. Too many buses frequenting overlapping routes make those modes congested. Meanwhile, other areas of the city remain underserved.

BUT HOW DO THE SAME ROUTES KEEP GETTING BUS PERMITS?

The answer lies in the process of getting bus permits. According to the Dhaka Transport Co-ordination Authority Act, 2012, this is the body with the mandate to propose, plan, approve, implement, and regulate lanes and routes for different transit modes, introduce bus route franchise, and determine fares, etc. In areas outside of DTCA's jurisdiction, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority is given the responsibility for proposing, planning, approving and implementing an integrated route. In addition, the BRTA is also given the power to regulate and put a ceiling on the number of public transports in any area with prior permission from the

government.

But in reality, neither body decides such things. It is a body called the Regional Transport Committee (RTC), formed under the direction of the Motor Vehicle Ordinance, 1983 (Revised) that approves and issues route permits for the Dhaka city and its vicinity.

The committee is chaired by the commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, and has 21 members in total, including four high officials from the traffic police and four high officials from BRTA. There is only one DTCA representative—the additional executive director of DTCA, who serves as vice-chairman of the committee. The other committee members are all members of transport owner and workers associations.

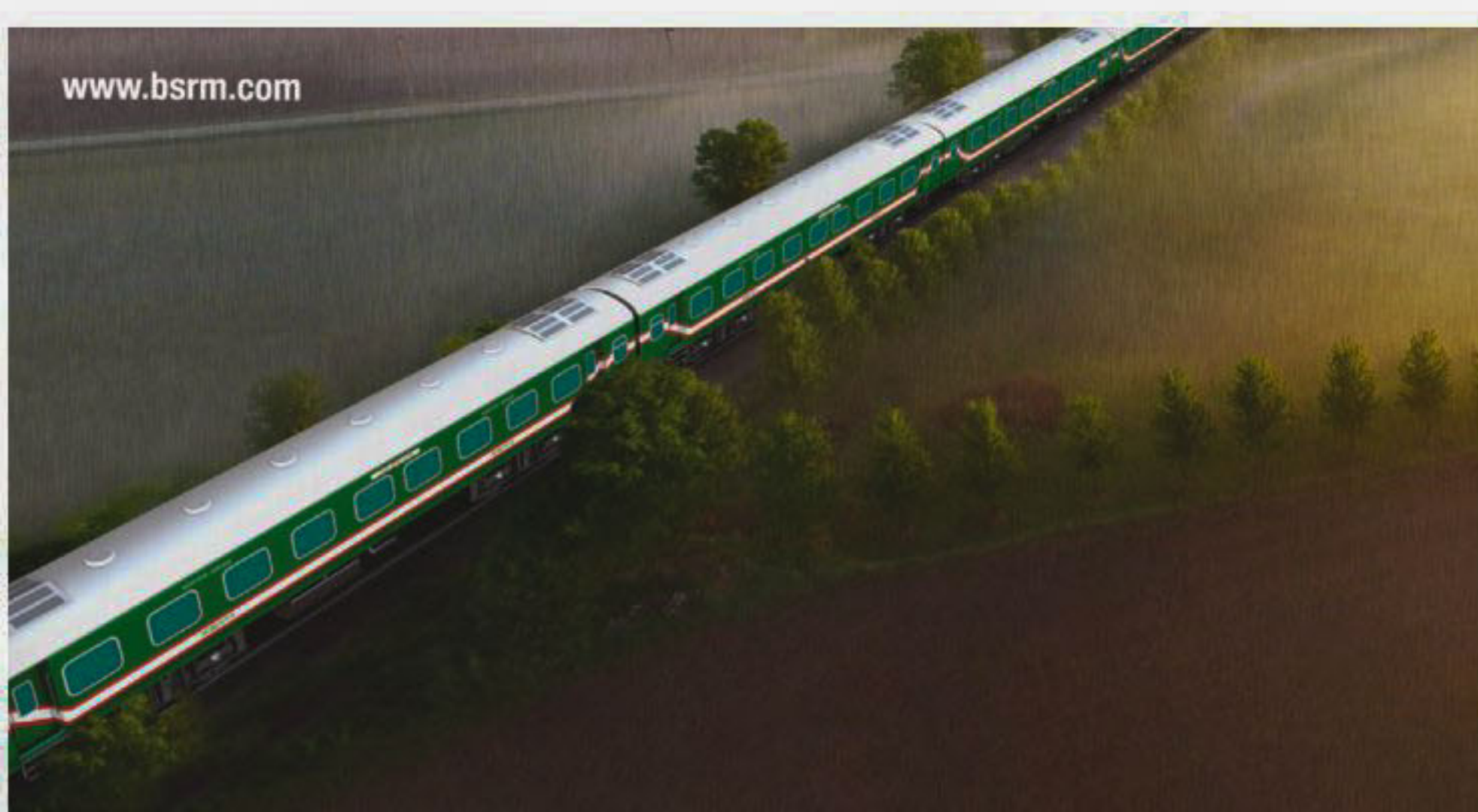
When bus owners and operators want to launch a new bus, they first have to apply to the committee for a route permit. The RTC then consults the Deputy Police Commissioner (Traffic) of the relevant area and instructs a subcommittee (of the same body) to assess the application. This subcommittee too has only one DTCA representative. There are also three representatives of BRTA and the traffic police each. Though mandated, neither DTCA nor BRTA has any specialised wing or division for traffic demand assessment or proposing a bus route on the basis of demand. They simply lack the technical expertise and there is a dearth of experts and officials. As a result, a route is mostly checked, assessed and recommended by the traffic division of DMP. It is not the task of the traffic police to determine the optimum route or the number of public transports in a city. In an ideal scenario, DMP would have only taken steps against the violators and prevented irregularities on streets.

Therefore, these assessments are not made based off any study—for example, the maximum number of buses or minibuses for a specific route allowed by the RTC on a specific route, is just an arbitrary number coming from experience and common sense, and is a policy decision backed by data.

Transport Expert Lloyd Wright from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy stated in his study in 2003, "Effective public transit is central to development. For the vast majority of developing city residents, public transit is the only practical means to access employment, education and public services, especially when such services are beyond the viable distance of walking or cycling." This could not be any truer for a megacity like Dhaka where most residents lack accessibility and may not be able to afford the Mass Rapid Transit even when it comes into operation. The Revised Strategic Transport Plan of 2015 stated that, even with all the other developments in the transport sector, buses will cater to about 40 percent of total trips in 2035. This is the highest among all travel modes.

Regrettably, the present practice is that the companies propose routes with only financial gains in mind, rather than thinking of the public's needs. Hence most buses run on the north-south routes, there are only five or six main bus corridors, and no proper planning for the routes. Unless the current ongoing system changes and a new plan for the bus service in Dhaka is proposed and implemented by proper authorities, sufferings will continue.

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