

BATTERY-RUN RICKSHAWS

Local mechanics rev up the road, now govt needs to catch up

Battery-run rickshaws are an inexpensive and efficient transportation solution invented by local mechanics. Now, the authorities must regulate these vehicles, as the lack of driver training and licensing and the unregulated number of vehicles on the road pose serious safety risks



TAHIRA SHAMSI UTSA

Amid the worldwide development of electric vehicles, which is changing the traffic landscape away from fossil fuels, Bangladeshi mechanics brought their humble version of an e-vehicle to the road: a battery-run rickshaw -- awkwardly wired, with visible battery units slinging on the back.

The mechanics have done their job in shanty factories, backyard garages and home yard workshops, providing the solution for a nation to move faster and cheaper.

Now it is up to the authorities to make the rudimentary three-wheeler auto-rickshaws safer and more sustainable.

The process of formalisation of the improvised technology has an official name -- "regularisation".

But what if the regularisation is delayed? What if we simply continue to turn a blind eye to battery-run auto-rickshaws flooding the streets?

Then, these faster-than-manual rickshaws would continue to contribute to more than 15



their future with his earnings.

In contrast, Mustafiz Rahman in Nilkhet area of the capital toils with his old pedal rickshaw.

Rahman said that passengers now prefer battery rickshaws because they are faster than pedal ones. When hiring, many passengers look for battery-run rickshaws as they offer a slightly wider seating arrangement and can carry more than two passengers without burdening the puller.

"Although we exert more effort with pedal rickshaws, auto rickshaws generate more income," Rahman gave his verdict. "I am also considering switching to an auto soon."

Rashid Ahmed, a rickshaw mechanic for 15 years, now focuses on battery rickshaws due to the changing demand.

"Pedal rickshaws are no longer profitable. People are always in a hurry and prefer the speed and convenience of auto-rickshaws," he said. "These vehicles require less effort, travel faster, the batteries are inexpensive and they can carry more passengers."

According to a study by the Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN), battery-powered rickshaws across the country consume 659MW of electricity daily, which accounts for 2.5 percent of the country's total installed capacity.

These three-wheelers, the cheapest mode of transportation due to their low energy costs, serve around 2.5 crore people daily for short-distance commutes.

The study showed that the auto-rickshaws contribute nearly Tk 97,625 crore to the national economy annually, including Tk 7,500 crore from manufacturing, Tk 8,000 crore from the battery market and Tk 82,125 crore from commuting, servicing and charging services.

Hasan Mehedi, CEO of CLEAN, said these vehicles were invented by local people, not the authorities.

"The locals recognised the need for mobility,

so they built these vehicles independently. Now, it is up to the authorities to decide how they will be regulated and operated," he added.

Referring to their study, Mehedi said that 80 percent of the internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles in Bangladesh consume fuel inefficiently, with only 20 percent efficiency rate.

In contrast, auto-rickshaws operate at 75-80 percent efficiency. Thus, a battery-run rickshaw costs Tk 1.50 per kilometre.

A PATH OUT OF RURAL POVERTY

Twenty-five-year-old Elias Amin's journey from Sirajganj to the streets of Old Dhaka was not simple and linear.

After leaving school in sixth grade due to poverty, Elias faced the harsh reality that confronts many rural youths, the choice between farming and urban migration.

"When my father passed away five years ago, I became responsible for my mother and sister overnight," Elias recalled, adjusting his facemask during a brief break between rides.

Hoque recommended evaluating the capacity of urban roads and determining how much traffic they can accommodate before considering the introduction of any additional forms of transportation.

Terming auto-rickshaws as technological progress, Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said: "We should recognise and appreciate it."

"E-rickshaws have a positive impact on employment. It reduces travel time and saves resources," he added.

Addressing the involvement of people

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He also said that based on scientific planning, there must be sustainable use of transportation by considering these vehicles as feeders for buses.

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