



The first motor car on the streets of Dhaka

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Before we delve into the story of the first motor car in Dhaka, it's worth exploring an earlier question: When did four-wheelers first appear on the city's roads?

Back in 1790, the Collector of Dhaka noted that a group of soldiers stationed in the city had introduced a hired horse-drawn carriage service. It was likely established to transport goods from Begunbari in Tejgaon – then an army quarters – to the main city. However, this service did not last long.

Still, by the early 19th century, Dhaka did have at least one known horse-drawn carriage. During his visit in 1824, Bishop Heber of Calcutta noted that the Naib Nazim of Dhaka used an old landau carriage drawn by four horses of Shamsuddaula.

But for a more structured public transportation system, Dhaka had to wait a bit longer. The credit for this goes largely to an Armenian businessman named Shircore, who introduced *thika gari* (rental carriages) around 1856. His business, Harmony Carriage, quickly became profitable, inspiring other local businessmen to follow suit.

By 1867, about 60 rental carriages were operating in Dhaka; by 1878 this number had grown to 300, and a decade later, it had doubled.

As with horse-drawn carriages, the introduction of motor vehicles in Dhaka followed the lead of Kolkata. According to



Nawab Salimullah's motorcade in Dhaka with Lady Curzon and Lord Curzon in 1904

PHOTO: FRITZ KAPP

Radharaman Mitra's "Kolkata Darpan", the first passenger motor vehicle appeared on the streets of Kolkata in 1896, though some accounts suggest it was 1897. That vehicle, used during British rule, was made by the French company De Dion-Bouton. The De Dion model was first introduced in Kolkata by H H Reynolds, and the first Bengali to purchase a motor vehicle was C Basak.

Naturally, this leads to a key question: When did the first motor car appear in

Dhaka?

Could it have been in 1904?

On February 18 of that year, the Viceroy Lord Curzon arrived in Dhaka with his wife, Lady Curzon. The Nawabs' garden house in Shahbagh was lavishly decorated for the occasion. To honour the visit, Nawab Khwaja Salimullah purchased several motor cars from Kolkata. In a historic photograph, Lady Curzon is seen with her hand on the steering wheel, Lord Curzon standing

beside her, and four cars parked in front of the house.

However, a slightly different account is found in the autobiography of British car dealer Montague Grahame White, "At the Wheel Ashore and Afloat: Reminiscences of Motoring, Yachting and Travel Over a Period of Forty Years".

According to him, the Nawab didn't buy the cars in haste for the Viceroy's visit. In fact, the decision came after a carefully considered plan.

In January 1903, Nawab Salimullah met Montague Grahame White. Inspired by their meeting, the Nawab decided to purchase motor vehicles. By the end of that year, three cars ordered by him had arrived at Ahsan Manzil. According to "The Motor Magazine (1943)", these included a 10-horsepower and a 15-horsepower Mors, and an 8-horsepower Renault.

As mentioned earlier, in 1904, Nawab Khwaja Salimullah showcased his newly purchased automobiles at his Shahbagh garden house. This historic moment was captured by the renowned German photographer Fritz Kapp. These early automobiles thus became silent witnesses to Dhaka's evolving history. By 1915-16, the number of cars in Bengal had exceeded 1,000. Car manufacturers began organising roadshows, distributing flyers, and launching promotions to expand the market. Over time, the fascination with automobiles spread to other parts of the region.

Govt pledges to track graft in tax admin

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The letter, signed by Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed and Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur, said, "In response to mounting pressures from an emerging external financing gap and persistently high inflation, we remain committed to near-term policy tightening."

"We will also intensify our efforts to implement critical structural reforms. Specifically, we will prioritise the full implementation of the new exchange rate regime and take decisive steps to address the shortfall in domestic revenue mobilisation."

It further said the government aims to establish a healthy, competitive financial sector regulated and supervised in line with best international practices.

Along with the letter, the government submitted a Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (MEFP) laying out the reform roadmap.

According to the MEFP, the advisory council has already approved in principle the separation of tax policy from tax administration. A new ordinance is being prepared, after which a detailed implementation roadmap will follow.

"We will intensify our efforts in FY26 to significantly raise the tax-to-GDP ratio, in line with our programme commitment," said the MEFP.

To meet the revenue target, several measures have been introduced in the FY26 budget, aimed at generating Tk 30,000 crore in additional revenue. The government also published

its Medium- and Long-Term Revenue Strategy (MLTRS) as advised by the IMF and World Bank.

"As a priority under the MLTRS, we will also establish a new tax expenditure policy framework that sets out clear rules and procedures for the approval, modification, and repeal of tax exemptions, and assign the ultimate decision-making authority to parliament – or to appropriate authorities in its absence."

SUBSIDY

The government has pledged to reduce subsidy spending to safeguard priority spending and devise a multi-pronged plan to reduce the spending to a fiscally sustainable level over the next two years.

As per one of the structural benchmark conditions, a three-year roadmap (FY26-FY28) will be adopted by September to gradually narrow the gap between electricity generation costs and selling prices through measures including tariff adjustments with protection for the vulnerable population.

According to the IMF, the per kilowatt loss in electricity rose from Tk 1.64 in FY21 to Tk 5.11 in FY24, with projections of Tk 5.27 this year.

To contain spending in FY25, several measures were taken to cut electricity generation costs, with the subsidy ceiling set at Tk 37,400 crore, agreed in December 2024.

"If the electricity subsidies' outturn is above the ceiling, we will revisit the existing electricity tariff only after other cost adjustment measures are

not sufficient to reduce subsidies," said the MEFP.

The government also plans to fully phase out the remittance subsidy during the remainder of the programme until January 2027, citing improved performance of the flexible exchange rate regime.

On export subsidies, the MEFP said, "We have already lowered export incentives for the apparel, leather and jute sectors in the FY25 budget and plan to phase them out completely in FY26."

For fertiliser, the plan is to reduce subsidies by increasing storage capacity to avoid peak-season imports, cutting other import-related costs, and raising sale prices.

BB AUTONOMY

The government must submit amendments to the Bangladesh Bank Order, including on governance, autonomy, accountability, and transparency, to the cabinet by September and issue an ordinance by December.

A task force has already been formed to prepare broader reform recommendations by December 2025.

"We intend to align BB's mandate with the modern principles of central banking, enhance its autonomy and accountability, and facilitate effective decision-making," the MEFP said.

It added that the reform agenda includes strengthening risk management at the central bank, phasing out quasi-fiscal lending schemes, and limiting monetary financing of the government.

End impunity, ensure genuine accountability

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It said, "A genuine accountability process entails the suspension of officials facing credible allegations of enforced disappearance – including those at command and leadership levels – pending the outcome of a full, independent, and impartial investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution; the preservation of evidence by the institutions who are investigating the cases of enforced disappearance; and a real coordination with the ICT and the Commission, including agreeing on the terms of real and effective cooperation that would have a result in terms of the searching of the people who are disappeared, and in terms of truth, justice and reparation."

It said, "Law enforcement institutions and military entities must serve as a model for the population in upholding the rule of law. This entails a commitment to preventing enforced disappearances, ensuring that those responsible are held accountable through justice processes, and fostering effective cooperation with the judiciary."

The Working Group also called for strong and independent oversight of investigations.

"The Working Group recommends establishing an independent oversight mechanism [with the participation of institutions, the academy, civil society and victims] to ensure that all the security forces and the army are investigating impartially and that appropriate disciplinary measures are taken against any personnel found to be involved in enforced disappearances."

It stressed the importance of ensuring fair trial standards in all judicial processes.

While acknowledging that the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) had initiated criminal proceedings related to enforced disappearances, the Working Group noted that "the number of such proceedings remains alarmingly low".

The report recommended steps to strengthen the tribunal, including holding perpetrators accountable, even those in command roles; ensuring investigations are backed by strong legal and evidentiary foundations; providing the ICT with necessary resources; and establishing mechanisms to keep victims and society informed. It stressed that victims must be guaranteed participation and regularly updated

on the progress of investigations and proceedings.

It is important to reveal and close all clandestine places of detention, and investigate and prosecute identified perpetrators of enforced disappearances, torture and other crimes committed in such places, it said.

The report also recommended legal reforms to ensure proper prosecution of rights violations.

"The Working Group also recommends foreseeing specific measures for the survivors of enforced disappearances, including access to justice and reparation, which must include legal and economic support. This is particularly relevant in view of the information received indicating that many survivors are facing criminal proceedings that have been unjustly initiated, particularly under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Act, as a form of harassment, without these investigations having any real factual basis."

The Working Group recommended reviewing cases brought against survivors of enforced disappearances, including those under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Shutdown and 'March to NBR' from today

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The platform said they are ready to sit with Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed regarding reforms and their demand for the removal of NBR Chairman Abdur Rahman Khan. To resolve the impasse, the council urged the intervention of Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus.

Meanwhile, in a press release issued by NBR Public Relations Officer Md Al-Amin Shaikh around 9:00pm, the NBR asked all officials and employees to stay in their offices and ensure services to the taxpayers.

The press release warned that officials would face disciplinary action for absence, late arrival, and leave without permission.

The council of protesters was formed last month to organise demonstrations against an ordinance that dissolved the NBR and separated tax policy from administration.

The demonstrations and a pen-down strike by officials heavily disrupted tax operations.

The fresh round of demonstrations started last week after five officials

were transferred.

In its statement, the finance ministry said that at Thursday's meeting, the authorities assured the protesters of reviewing the transfer orders.

"The NBR Reform Unity Council, the platform leading the protests, agreed to withdraw its previously announced complete shutdown and countrywide 'March to NBR' scheduled for Saturday," the statement said.

It said the meeting, chaired by the finance adviser, lasted for two and a half hours. It was attended by the finance secretary, the secretary of the Financial Institutions Division, the NBR chairman, and 16 NBR members.

It added that a follow-up meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday, at 4:00pm, aiming to discuss the Revenue Policy and Revenue Administration Ordinance, 2025, based on the finance ministry's earlier press release issued on May 25.

The government expressed optimism that consensus-based amendments to the ordinance can be finalised by July 31.

Contacted, Sehela Siddiqua, general

secretary of the council of protesters, said, "We were not informed about any developments, and we still don't have clarity on the situation."

"Our senior [NBR] members met with the authorities, and that's all we know," she added.

Echoing the same, Hasan Muhammad Tarek Rikabdar, president of the council, said he did not know anything about the decisions mentioned in the ministry statement. "We haven't had any discussions with them."

NBR WARNINGS

In its press release, the NBR said absence from office, leaving office without permission, and late arrival are against discipline.

Punitive measures will be taken as per government rules for such a breach of discipline.

It directed all to keep export and import unaffected and ensure revenue collection in the last three working days of the outgoing fiscal year.

It also said all must get permission from their office chiefs and sign in the office register book before leaving.

Technical education hit by teacher shortage

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enrolment. In 2023-24 academic year, only 69,000 students enrolled in diploma courses against 1.71 lakh seats, leaving nearly 60 percent of the seats vacant.

The downward trend has been consistent since 2020. Enrolment dropped to 77,272 in 2020-21 from 81,076 in 2019-20, further falling to 73,272 in 2021-22, and 71,553 in 2022-23. Private polytechnics dealt the harshest blow, enrolling only 30,136 students against 1.28 lakh seats last year. Even government polytechnics failed to fill the seats as only 38,644 students got admitted against a capacity of 43,500.

This is not limited to diploma courses only. At the SSC (vocational) level, out of 4.97 lakh seats, more than three lakh remained unfilled last year. HSC (Vocational) admissions reflect a similar decline.

If this pattern persists, it will be difficult for the government to achieve its goal of raising technical education enrolment to 30 percent by 2030.

Back in 2012, the government set an initial target of achieving 20 percent enrolment by 2020. At the time, only 3 percent of students enrolled in technical institutions. Though the figure rose to nearly 16 percent by 2020, the growth has since stagnated.

Experts blame it on years of neglect, inadequate investment, and the failure to modernise the system.

"Our current system produces underprepared and underpaid graduates. If we do not act

now, Bangladesh risks missing its demographic dividend," said Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), at a recent event.

He called for urgent reforms under the supervision of a high-level national taskforce, emphasising that technical education must be treated as a core development priority, not a second-tier system.

M Kaykobad, former professor at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, said, "The authorities often claim that they are working to improve the system but there is hardly any visible progress. How can students learn technical skills without good teachers and robust infrastructure?"

Frustration among students led to protests in Dhaka and several other districts in April. They pressed home a six-point demand including curriculum reforms, gradual introduction of English as the medium of instruction, establishment of a technical university, and quota in government jobs.

Talking to this newspaper, Rafiul Hasan, a third-year student at Jhenaidah Polytechnic Institute, said, "We have been told that technical education is the future, but how can we prepare for that future when our labs don't have basic equipment?"

Mashfik Islam, a student at Dhaka Polytechnic Institute, said, "We have long been demanding an updated curriculum. At the very least, the authorities should introduce English as the medium of instruction."

A recent CPD study, conducted in Panchagarh, Sunamganj, and Satkhira, found that though many technical graduates get jobs within six months of completing studies, most of them earn low wages.

Around 63 percent of respondents said they earned less than Tk 10,000 per month, while 36 percent got between Tk 15,000 and Tk 25,000. Poor infrastructure and low income were identified as key factors contributing to students' declining interest in technical education.

At a recent programme, Education Adviser Prof CR Abrar said, "There is a severe shortage of trade-related instructors and a lack of modern technologies in our institutions. Integrating technical education into the mainstream is crucial to dispel the widespread perception that it only produces low-grade technicians. This mindset must change."

BTEB Chairman Md Ruhul Amin acknowledged the challenges, attributing the drop in enrolment to pandemic-induced disruptions and financial hardship.

He also admitted that the process of teacher recruitment remains slow, often taking two to three years.

"We have recently taken steps to expedite the recruitment process. Our focus is now on improvement of teachers' training and education quality," he told The Daily Star.

In reply to a query, he said, "From the next academic year, students will have the option to choose between Bangla and English as the medium of instruction."

'Makeshift temple built on railway land'

Eviction followed due process, says foreign ministry

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Responding to India's accusation that the interim government "allowed the desecration" of a Durga temple in Dhaka's Khilkhet, Bangladesh has said it remains firmly committed to safeguarding the rights of all communities, including the protection of places of worship.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a statement last night, said Bangladesh urges all to refrain from reacting to any matter, disregarding the facts and ground realities.

At a press briefing on Thursday, India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, "The interim government in Bangladesh, instead of providing security to the temple in Khilkhet in Dhaka, projected the episode as illegal land use and allowed the desecration of the temple. This has resulted in damage to the deity before it was shifted."

"... it is the responsibility of the interim government to protect the Hindus and their properties and their religious institutions," Jaiswal said.

In response to the comments, the foreign ministry in its statement said that during last year's Durga Puja, without having prior permission, the local Hindu community installed a makeshift puja mandap on a piece of land that is owned by Bangladesh Railway.

"Regrettably, after the Puja was over in October 2024, the organisers declined to remove the makeshift mandap. Rather, they established a 'Maha Kali' [Kali idol] there. In spite of repeated reminders, they unfortunately took the initiative to make the mandap permanent," the statement said.

In December 2024, railway authorities held consultations with local community representatives, organisers of the mandap and issued a public notification asking all concerned to remove all unauthorised installations, including vendors, hundreds of shops, and political party offices illegally built on either side of the rail tracks.

Over the past months, repeated reminders to the illegal land occupiers went unheeded.

On June 24 and 25, the railway finally asked all concerned to remove all unauthorised installations, including the puja organisers, the statement said.

On June 26, following due process, the railway proceeded with the eviction.

The statement added that in the course of the eviction process, the idol of the makeshift mandap was immersed in the nearby Balu river, in due reverence, with the participation of the members of the local Hindu community.