

## Bus rapid transit: Answer to Dhaka's gridlocks

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THE traffic condition of the capital has worsened over the past few years. Authorities are at their wit's end trying to devise solutions to the problem, while passengers waste useful working hours sitting inside vehicles. As a result, the city incurs huge economic and environmental losses on a daily basis. Further increase of the city's traffic in the near future is an alarming reality, for which no one is yet ready. It has become indispensable to formulate a remedy that can tackle this predicament in the long term.

Among the public transit modes, buses are considered to be highly cost-effective while being the most flexible routewise. A single-decker bus can accommodate equivalent of eight to twelve cars passengers, which not only reduces traffic but also air and sound pollution substantially. But hundreds of buses operate each day in the city, so why doesn't the condition improve? The buses that are functional in the streets of Dhaka suffer from a number of inefficiencies. Even if we disregard the flaws of the bus authorities, many a time buses become part of the already existing jams on the roads.

Imagine a scenario where bus is the only mode of transport travelling in a lane that is dedicated to buses alone. Do you think this can mitigate the detrimental effects of our traffic condition? The term used to describe the above scenario is Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. This system has been applied throughout many cities of the world and has proved effective in battling difficult transport conditions. The BRT system provides an exclusive right-of-way for buses to ensure that they are not delayed by mixed traffic congestions while offering a safe and comfortable journey.

This system was first operated in Curitiba, Brazil in 1974, and was a great success for the city's transportation network. Since then, many countries around the world have been inspired to adopt this scheme. Several Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, China, Pakistan and India have also incorporated this scheme into their policy. According to a study, bus ridership in Guangzhou, China increased by 18% within one year of the launch of the BRT in 2010. The BRT alone averages 805,000 passengers daily, making it the most used bus corridor in all of Asia.

While there are a lot of successful examples of BRT, it is not without problems. The BRT project of Delhi is admittedly an unsuccessful model. A study conducted by the Central Road Research Institute (CRRI) of India claims that the selection of the BRT corridor was not rational and the system was not well integrated with other transit modes. This resulted in very few passengers boarding and alighting per bus. Their study also shows that road crashes and fatalities have increased since the BRT was installed. To avoid such errors, proper planning is of paramount

importance. Planners and engineers must scrutinise every aspect in the design stages before commencement of such an enormous and expensive development.

In the context of Dhaka, a major concern among critics is regarding the unavailability of road space. It is thought to be impractical to furnish separate BRT lanes on the roads of our built-up city. However, the Strategic Transport Plan (STP) for Dhaka proposes to establish three BRT routes along selected corridors in the capital -- BRT Lines 1, 2 and 3. Among them, the feasibility study of BRT Line 3 is currently in progress. The route extends from Airport to Sadarghat via Kuril, Mohakhali, Ramna and Fulbaria. Numerous objections against this project have already been refuted in the study. Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA), the agency responsible for implementing the project, is highly optimistic about its outcome.

Dhaka dwellers are generally reluctant to ride on a bus unless it is an absolute necessity. Buses are extremely unreliable to the public because of overcrowding of passengers, unnecessary delays and long waiting times in the stops. The BRT scheme can be an important tool in this regard. It can be a vital incentive for the people to ride on buses more often. When mixed traffic jams are no longer an issue, adequate frequency of buses can cope with routine problems and promote more bus-made journeys.

Our city is in dire need of a breakthrough in the field of transportation planning. The BRT projects, along with supportive government policies, can become the cornerstone of a stable transportation network in Dhaka. Not only does this premise have the potential to break the curse of traffic gridlock, but also to reduce road accidents, strengthen the city's economy, and build towards a sustainable environment.

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