

Blueline article by Dunu Roy

These emails indicate the incredible degree of misinformation on which such elite groups base their 'informed' opinion.

That is why key questions are not even asked when 'answers' are presented so glibly. Why, for instance, does the traffic police have a "mandate" to collect 'hafta'? Why have the Bluelines suddenly become 'killers' (reminiscent, for those with slightly longer memories, of the late and not-so-lamented Redlines)? How would the details of ownership, registration, and speed governors reduce the accident rate - considering that the owner does not drive the bus, the registration merely specifies the sale of a vehicle, and speed governors control speed not accidents? Would penalties and sentences prevent accidents by buses, when they haven't done so for private vehicles? Has the event of "public" reporting violations directly reduced "extortion" by police and by goons? All private vehicle owners are licensed and trained drivers - has that reduced road rage? And where are the statistics that prove that because it is so hard to get a commercial license in the US the rate of accidents is lower (in fact it is higher)?

For those who would like to be better 'informed', it may be worthwhile to examine the system of having Bluelines at all.

The current road transport policy was introduced in 1972 when the Delhi Transport Undertaking was restructured into a Corporation and has been in effect since then. Under this policy, there are basically three kinds of bus services in Delhi:

- 1) Inter-city
- 2) Intra-city
- 3) All-India private tourist services

Of these, DTC operates the first two services only.

The Inter-city bus fleet is constituted by those buses owned and operated by the DTC, as private operators are not given permits to ply their buses on inter-city routes until both the state governments have agreed to it.

The Intra-city bus service is further divided into the stage carriage system and the contract carriage system.

Stage carriage system

Stage carriages are a fleet of buses, which hold a permit to stop at the stages (bus stops), on the routes they ply on. Contracts for operating these buses could be allotted to people under any of the following schemes:

- 1) Graduate scheme: unemployed graduates could operate bus services by obtaining a permit.
- 2) SC/ST scheme: permits are granted to people in the SC/ST category.

- 3) Ex-service men scheme: retired services employees are granted the permits under this category.
- 4) Suvidha scheme: under this scheme the DTC buses are being hired out for tourists, weddings, and other group travel.

Contract carriage system

Contract carriages are the fleet of buses which ply from point to point and are not allowed to stop at stages (bus stops). Owned and maintained by the private operators, they ply their buses under contract to specific organisations. They operate as chartered buses, school buses etc. Presently, also plying on Delhi roads, are mini buses, better known as RTV (Rural Transport Vehicle) or *hari bhari*, which are CNG buses with a seating capacity of 15-25 people. RTVs or *hari bhari* are owned by private operators but come under the contract carriage system.

What the above reveals is that, as early as 1971, the seeds had been sown for the gradual **privatisation** of services within the public transport system. In other words, through contractual and permit systems, most of the profitable intra-city routes were turned over to private operators while DTC ran all the inter-city routes and most of the non-profitable intra-city ones.

The Bluelines form part of the **Stage Carriage** system, and it may be worthwhile now asking why they are being represented as 'killers' as compared to the DTC or the Contract Carriage operators? The answer lies in the nature of the system itself. Since the Stage Carriage buses are required to stop at bus stops to pick up passengers, since they are running on the profitable routes and there is implicit "competition" (the favorite word of private promoters) amongst them for those passengers, and since those (and it should be remembered that they are all "private entrepreneurs") who get the contract from the government operate on certain fixed margins, they attempt to increase the rate of return (another favorite phrase with private promoters) by sub-contracting out the operation to the drivers and conductors, demanding a certain amount per trip while cutting down on all labour costs (as all good private profit-makers do). This means that most of the drivers are not regular or permanent employees, but are, in a sense, private entrepreneurs themselves because they are also trying to maximise their own rate of return after accounting for what they have to give to the owner. It is this thrust of maximisation of profits at all levels that, in fact, contributes to "shining" GDP growth.

It is this system of contractual and competitive obligations that makes the drivers cut corners, overtake each other, drive carelessly, disregard traffic rules, and consider the passengers as just so much (paying) sheep to be carried. No amount of speed regulation or inspection or training is going to work unless and until the contractual system is changed. After all, the drivers come from the same ethnic stock as drive the DTC buses - there is nothing genetically wrong with them. And if this present bunch of greatly 'informed' opinion makers think

that further contracting out to larger private players (the so-called corporatisation of public transport) is going to improve matters, then I think there is something greatly wrong with their 'opinion'.

Dunu Roy