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Ahmedabad BRTS first phase may hit the road by June

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After a delay of about eight months, the first phase of the much-talked-about Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), which was to commence operation in October 2008, is now likely to start in June 2009 as work is progressing at a faster pace in the financial capital of Gujarat.

The fears expressed in various quarters were mainly due to the escalated costs unlike the traffic mess the experimental project created in the national capital, New Delhi, in recent times.

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) had earlier cancelled the tenders it had invited for its ambitious BRTS project, saying contractors were demanding high rates to run buses. The Municipal Commissioner, Mr I. P. Gautam, had said that the contractors had quoted between Rs 65 and Rs 72 per km to run public transport buses in the proposed system, but the rates were unacceptable and needed revision. So, tenders were invited afresh.

The high rates, if accepted, could have made the BRTS project economically non-viable as that would lead to higher fares, forcing people to opt for the existing Ahmedabad Municipal Transport Service (AMTS) buses which would be considerably cheaper, officials said.

Predictably, the AMC was anxious to ensure that there was no significant difference in the fares of AMTS and BRTS services. Only 9 per cent of the city's population uses the AMTS bus service at present, causing vehicle pressure on roads.

Until now, BRTS has been implemented in 34 cities across countries such as the US, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, China, Japan and Thailand, with varying degrees of success.

To begin with, the Centre had approved BRTS in Ahmedabad, Pune, Nagpur and Indore, in 2005 and added Bhopal and Jaipur thereafter. The main feature of a BRTS is to have dedicated bus lanes operating separately from all other traffic modes. These buses will be specially-designed, high-speed, low-floor vehicles.

Grant from Centre

The new service is also expected to create passageway for passengers, bus stops and bus interchanges, just like a metro. This would allow the new buses to operate at a high level of reliability, given that only professional motorists would be allowed on this designated busway.

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For this purpose, a special purpose vehicle (SPV) was formed to implement the first, 50-km-long, phase of the project, involving an investment of Rs 500 crore.

The civic body (AMC) would get a grant from the Centre, equivalent of 35 per cent of the project cost from the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), 15 per cent from the State Government and the rest through internal accruals or debts.

AMC had made a budgetary provision of Rs 100 crore in 2007. The project comprises creating a 155-km long two-way corridor for 70-seat buses to ply after widening the existing circular and

some arterial roads crisscrossing the city, removing encroachments from some areas along the way.

Easing congestion

While the pros and cons of BRTS are being debated in Ahmedabad, Mr Gautam is optimistic that the project would modernise this city in more ways than one, mainly by introducing the new-age commuting. It would ease traffic congestion, particularly in rush hours, and streamline problems such as parking of vehicles, easy movement of pedestrians and movement of cyclists. Critics, however, say the total cost of the entire project could go as high as Rs 2,000 crore, excluding the cost of buses.

As per BRTS estimates, 75,000 passengers are likely to use this bus service daily. If they are charged Rs 10 per trip, it would take some 30 years to recover only the principal and interest, excluding the costs of fuel, salaries and maintenance. Sky bus would have been a better proposition, they say.

Second, BRTS has been planned only for the AMC's municipal limits, while Greater Ahmedabad has already moved beyond the new main artery of Sardar Patel Ring Road.

Third, while BRTS in other countries serves mainly towns with less than one million population, Ahmedabad already has a five-million-strong population.

Commuters would have to cross heavy traffic every time to catch a BRTS bus. But given the pace of developmental works and the enthusiasm of the common man about the dream project, the BRTS may, after all, become yet another feather in Ahmedabad's cap.