

Low-cost & less polluting, Kolkata autos turn new leaf

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KOLKATA: With battery-operated and CNG-powered autorickshaws staging a debut in the city, nearly one in every five new autorickshaws that hit the streets in 2024 are less polluting for the environment, while being more sustainable for operators. The development, though modest in terms of absolute numbers, marks a significant policy shift towards zero-emission vehicles.

So far this year, a total of 844 autos have been replaced for having crossed the 15-year limit on commercial vehicles. Of these, 33 were battery-operated and 132 CNG-powered.

Although charging facilities are still at a rudimentary stage in the city, a certain section of auto operators — despite initial reluctance — are finding the blue-coloured e-autos a lucrative proposition in

the long run because of low operating costs, said an officer of the Public Vehicles Department, which acts as the Regional Transport Office for the city's core area. "As a result, e-autos are being preferred," he added.

Most of the city's nearly 24,000-strong fleet of autos are LPG-powered. The ubiquitous three-wheelers are the second-most popular mode of intra-city transport, after buses, with its number of daily users surpassing the total number of train users combined.

The transition to cleaner fuel began in 2008, when Calcutta High Court banned two-stroke petrol autos, mandating their replacement with four-stroke LPG ones.

This move significantly improved air quality, as many petrol autos were running on adulterated fuel (kata tel). At that time, LPG was the only readily available clean fuel.

Kolkata uniquely allows only autos, not e-rickshaws, as three-wheelers. When 15-year-old autos were scrapped, operators were offered three fuel options: LPG, CNG, and electric. While LPG and CNG were popular choices due to better availability, the lack of sufficient electric charging infrastructure initially deterred many from opting for electric autos.

However, operators have now learned that electric autos can be charged at home within five to six hours, offering significant annual savings despite higher capital costs. An LPG auto costs Rs 2.3 lakh, whereas an electric auto costs nearly Rs 3.9 lakh.

There are other benefits, too. "Electric engines are nearly zero-maintenance with minimal moving parts, making the battery the most substantial maintenance item, needing a replacement every three to four years. Moreover, electric autos have a longer operating life, compared to LPG or CNG autos," said Prabir Basu, an automobile engineering expert.

Auto operators, who made the switch, also seemed to agree. "We are yet to understand the economic benefits of the autos," said Gour Das, who bought a blue auto for the Behala-Rashbehari route. "But our operating costs have come down significantly — from Rs 3,500 to Rs 200 a day."

A survey, conducted by the SwitchOn Foundation, found that 3 of 5 auto operators were willing to shift to electric autos, indicating a growing acceptance and recognition of the long-term benefits of electric vehicles in Kolkata.



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BY Shashikesh Roy 21 Sept 2024 12:07 AM



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COOCH BEHAR: North Bengal National Transport Corporation chairman Partha Pratim Roy on Friday flagged off a rocket bus service from Cooch Behar to Kolkata; two non AC buses from Cooch Behar to Kolkata along with two CNG buses from Cooch Behar to Siliguri departing from Cooch Behar Central Bus Terminus. Before Durga Puja, additional services will be launched by the North Bengal National Transport Corporation (NBSTC). The services will be running on the Cooch Behar-Kolkata; Cooch Behar-Siliguri and Siliguri-Kolkata routes. The NBSTC also has plans to reward employees who have rendered commendable service.

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NBSTC chairman Roy said: "The AC rocket bus will depart from Cooch Behar for Kolkata on Monday and Friday. It will depart from Kolkata for Cooch Behar on Tuesday and Saturday. It will run twice a week. Earlier, two CNG buses used to run and now two more were launched."

Roy said that in the financial year 2023-24, a total of 42 buses were launched by the NBSTC. Out of these, 31 buses were flagged off by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee a few days ago. At the same time, 6 non-AC rocket buses, 3 AC rocket buses and 3 CNG buses will also be launched soon.

Two rocket buses and two CNG buses will be inaugurated from Siliguri Junction on October 1. The chairman said that people should not face any problem in commuting. During Durga Puja many tourists visit this region and local residents working outside also return home. "Both locals and tourists should not face any difficulties in commuting. We have launched additional bus services keeping this in mind."

He also mentioned that over the past two years, NBSTC staff who have delivered exemplary work have been recognized and rewarded.

"This year too we will reward them. A total of 38 people will be rewarded. Out of these, there are 18 drivers, 13 contractors, 4 mechanics and 4 checking staff. Everyone will be given cash awards and certificates of appreciation," added the chairman.