

Braving the odds!

Surmounting challenges has almost become second nature for Guwahati-based Green Valleys Travels Pvt Ltd CMD Pulak Goswami, who also owns a successful Super Division soccer club.

Story and Photography Suhrid Barua





Green Valley Travels Pvt Ltd CMD Pulak Goswami.



Every day, Green Valley operates ten buses from Guwahati to Lakhimpur. At most times, the occupancy is more than eighty percent on this route.

Green Valley Travels Pvt Ltd, part of the Rs 150 crore Green Valley Group of Companies, stands out tall among many others in the Assamese luxury bus space. The Green Valley Group of Companies have a workforce of 800. The annual turnover of Green Valley Travels is Rs.10 crore

On a daily basis, Green Valley operates 45 of its 66 luxury buses on 25 routes. It has 12 AC buses equipped with air suspensions. 'Passenger comfort is key for us. Therefore, besides the AC buses, 18 of our non AC buses also have air suspensions,' he intimated.

Though Green Valley Travels commands a strong brand recall in Assam in so far as buses are concerned. But competition lurks elsewhere. 'Our biggest concern is Railways. They are very efficient and we need to be wary of them,' Goswami admits.

He cited an example of how the Railways are luring away potential bus passengers on routes in upper Assam where Green Valley have been doing exceedingly well. 'See, a Guwahati-Dimapur bus journey (distance of 290 kms) takes about nine to ten hours while a train journey takes just about five hours. Ever since the Jan Shatabdi service started on the Guwahati-Dimapur route in 2002, it has been steadily eating into our passenger load. We used to ply four buses to Dimapur not too long ago. But, now, we have discontinued all our buses on these routes,'

The cosy interiors of a Green Valley bus.



Goswami explains.

Proliferation of Railways is not just confined to Dimapur alone. 'There was a time when we used to operate fifteen buses on the Guwahati-Jorhat, Guwahati-Dibrugarh, Guwahati-Tinsukia routes. But, we now run only five buses, because bus passengers prefer to travel by Railways,' he says.

But there is a silver lining among the discouraging upper Assam clouds. Green Valley plys ten buses daily to Lakhimpur and six to Itanagar (capital of neighbouring state Arunachal Pradesh). These routes fetch good passenger load. 'These two routes have panned out well for us. Occu-

On a daily basis, Green Valley operates 45 luxury buses on 25 routes.





Each of Green Valley's AC buses are equipped with air-suspension.



The fare structure, which has not been revised since December, 2004, is source of frustration for Green Valley.



Green Valley CMD Pulak Goswami feels that the Railways with its efficient service is posing a huge threat to its operations in Upper Assam.

pancy on these routes is invariably more than 80 percent,' he observes.

Occupancy levels on other routes, unaffected by the onslaught of the railways can also rise to 100 percent during festivals and special occasions. 'Occupancy, traditionally at about 80 percent, goes up to 100 percent during Durga puja, Diwali, Magh Bihu, Rongali Bihu,' he says.

POOR REMUNERATION

Goswami may be happy with the high levels of occupancy. But, it is the abysmally low, government-determined fare structure which leaves a bad taste in his mouth. 'In Assam, the fare structure of commercial vehicles has not been revised since December 21, 2004. During that year, the fare per km was Re.0.6 and the price of diesel, back then was Rs 21.66. This has since gone up to Rs 38.5. Given this, we find it difficult to sustain ourselves and are asking the government to give us a 70 percent hike in luxury bus fares as also a 50 percent hike for normal buses,' Goswami cribbed. Even the rising prices of greases, tyres and spares are not making things easier for transporters.

Goswami drew an interesting insight of how the cost of a bus has increased manifold but the bus fare has not risen in the same proportion. 'In the 1980s, the cost of a bus was Rs. 3 lakh and the fare per

passenger on the Guwahati-Tinsukia (distance 491 kms) route was Rs. 80. Today, the cost of a bus is Rs.20 lakh while the fare per passenger is Rs. 330, so the cost of a bus has increased by 700 percent while the bus fare has only gone up by hardly 300 percent,' he elaborates. The disparity in the pricing of bus fares between bigger and smaller urban centres also represents another gripe.

'The 140-km Pune-Mumbai Volvo service attracts an average fare of Rs. 200, while we charge a passenger Rs. 380 for a Guwahati-Duliajan route (distance of 523 kms). So, the fare on the Pune-Mumbai route is Rs.1.5 per km while in Assam, a meager Re. 0.6 per km.'

Goswami calls spade a spade when he said that it is next to impossible for a new bus player to succeed in the prevailing conditions. 'No new player can survive in the bus space in Assam. A new bus cost Rs. 20 lakh. The daily collection would be something around Rs. 2,000-2,500 and if a bus runs into accident for no fault of their driver, costs can mount and problems multiply. We at Green Valley can somehow handle these issues, but a new player would find them back-breaking,' he adds.

In a bid to diversify from the poorly remunerating public transport business, Green Valley has also been providing 50-seater school buses to lead-

ing institutions in the state. 'We supply school buses to Don Bosco, Maharishi Vidya Mandir, Army School Kendriya Vidyalaya, Khanapara and Noonmati, TCS,' Goswami remarks.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Green Valley has made a name for itself not just by dint of sheer operational efficiency, but also on account of a strong social conscience. 'We have been in the market for over thirty years now. As you know, flooding is a big problem in Assam. It is during the course of such calamities that we operate our buses to ferry customers from point to point despite knowing that certain road stretches would have snapped,' says Pulak Goswami, CMD Green Valley Travels Pvt Ltd.

Goswami flashes a broad smile when the talk veers towards the Green Valley Sports Club, a prominent GSA Super Division club that finished fifth last season. What's more, his team has two Nigerians in its roster.

'I have passion for sports and Green Valley Sports Club is close to my heart. I spend Rs. 20 lakh annually on GVSC. The football club is giving me no profit but I have generated a lot of goodwill through it,' opined Goswami, who is also the president of the Assam Basketball Association and is also former Guwahati Sports Association (GSA) president. ■

