

CYCLE-RICKSHAWS AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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ABSTRACT: The Main transport of a huge populous city, Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, is cycle Rickshaw for which it is known as the city of Rickshaws.. Almost 12 million people live in this city. Rickshaws are growing in number because they are inexpensive and they ensure bread and butter for more than quarter million people. Rickshaws in Dhaka are constructed with bi-cycle spare parts, rugs, bamboo sticks and plastic sheets. In addition to Dhaka, Rickshaw is one of the principal means of transport in the urban areas of Bangladesh. With the improvement of road communication throughout the country, rickshaw has now found its way into rural areas as well.

As a mode of transport rickshaw was first introduced in Japan in the early twentieth century. This mode of transport became particularly popular there due to the Second World War situation, which made petrol and motorized transport scarce and expensive. Japan, however, had soon replaced rickshaw, nintaku in Japanese, with motorized vehicles and by the 1950s the cycle rickshaw had disappeared from Japan.

In the 1930 and early '40s rickshaw became popular in Indonesia, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries. Rickshaw is said to have reached Bangladesh through the port city Chittagong from Myanmar in 1919. Interestingly, rickshaw did not spread out to Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh from Chittagong. Dhaka got rickshaw from Calcutta, where it was first introduced around 1930. The new vehicle roused great curiosity among the people of Dhaka, who were traditionally used to horse carriages, palanquins and city-canal boats. Initially cycle rickshaw did not receive enthusiastic response from users.

Rickshaw and rickshaw vans (also a tricycle vehicle similar to rickshaw but with the difference that instead of passenger seats, these have a flat bed of wooden bars resting on the axle over the rear pair of wheels and they carry goods in small lots) are now fast replacing the traditional transports like horse carriages and bullock carts in the country.

CITY OF RICKSHAWS: Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, has been known as city of Rickshaws. Main transport of this populous city is cycle Rickshaw. Almost 12 million people live in this city. Rickshaws are growing in number because they are inexpensive and they ensure bread and butter for more than quarter million people. Rickshaws in Dhaka are constructed with bi-cycle spare parts, rugs, bamboo sticks and plastic sheets. It is decorated with traditional paintings. The rickshaws with their ornate decorations and imaginative hand paintings have a special place in Dhaka city's transport.

In addition to Dhaka, Rickshaw is one of the principal means of transport in the urban areas of Bangladesh. With the improvement of road communication throughout the country, rickshaw has now found its way into rural areas as well. As a mode of transport rickshaw was first introduced in Japan in the early twentieth century. This mode of transport became particularly popular there due to the Second World War situation, which made petrol and motorized transport scarce and expensive. Japan, however, had soon replaced rickshaw, nintaku in Japanese, with motorized vehicles and by the 1950s the cycle rickshaw had disappeared from Japan.

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The Dhaka city had only 37 rickshaws in 1941 and 181 rickshaws in 1947. Before 1947, Dhaka was a district town, which had a population of 62,469 only according to 1951 census. But in 1998, the city's population grew over 8 million and the number of registered rickshaws in the city was 112,572. The number of rickshaws in all other cities of Bangladesh in that year was 274,265 and in all villages 91,040. Rickshaw and rickshaw vans (also a tricycle vehicle similar to rickshaw but with the difference that instead of passenger seats, these have a flat bed of wooden bars resting on the axle over the rear pair of wheels and they carry goods in small lots) are now fast replacing the traditional transports like horse carriages and bullock carts in the country.

It is a popular guess that the total number of rickshaws in the city is at least two and a half times that of the registered ones and accordingly, the city had at least 280,000 rickshaws in 2000. Estimates based on the figures that each rickshaw is operated by two pullers in morning and evening shifts and the average number of family members of a rickshaw puller is five, suggest that the rickshaws of Dhaka city alone is a source of income for nearly three million people.

Unlike in all Southeast Asian countries, rickshaws in Bangladesh have a lasting foothold. It has established itself with dominance unmatched by other modes of transport. The predominance of rickshaw as a transport is evidenced by the fact that the percentage-wise traffic composition in Dhaka, Sylhet, Comilla and Rangpur cities are 49%, 78%, 80% and 55% respectively. Other means of transport in Dhaka are, in order of traffic, the (a) cars, jeeps, pick-ups etc. (b) baby taxi, (c) bus, (d) truck, (e) tempo and (f) bicycle. Bicycle, however, is the second in the list of predominant vehicles in cities outside Dhaka.

Fifty percent of the value added in transport sector is being contributed by rickshaws and the mode of transport provides employment and living to people engaged not only as the pullers directly but also as its manufacturers of its mainframe, the body with seat and hoods and its spare parts. A great number of people depends for the living on the decoration of rickshaw body, artwork on it and rickshaw garages.

RICKSHAW ART: The decoration of rickshaws is rickshaw art, which can vary from painted backboards and rear side panels to cut-outs appliquéd onto hoods and brass vases replete with plastic or paper flowers. In a restrictive sense it is generally applied to the painted backboard, a tin plate fixed to the lower rear of a rickshaw hiding the chain. In this sense it is also extended to include the paintings on the rear of auto rickshaws or baby taxis. Rickshaw art has been compared to traffic art in other parts of the world, such as the decorated trucks of Pakistan.

Rickshaw art is mainly an urban phenomenon and perhaps dates back to the 1950's. It shares some similarity of theme and execution with movie billboards, which may be ascribed to the fact that many rickshaw painters had either themselves painted movie billboards or had apprenticed with such painters. The art of the rickshaw painter is passed on from ustad, master, to apprentice. There is a lot of repetition, either because of the popularity of some motifs or because of the influence of the master craftsman. The paintings are executed quickly, with readymade enamel paints, which do not allow paints to be mixed. Bright primary colours are popular and the painting is flat, lacking shadows, perspective, and scale.

There are variations in rickshaw art in different towns of Bangladesh. For example, nearly eighty per cent of rickshaws in Dhaka city are decorated and most of them have animal scenes, natural scenes, and pictures of movie themes. Chittagong and Comilla areas show less enthusiasm about decorating rickshaws and the rickshaw art there contain fewer human images and have more images of flowers, birds, animals etc. Rickshaws in Sylhet, considered to be a more pious area, are rarely decorated.

Among popular themes are the Taj Mahal, movie scenes and portraits of movie stars, idyllic scenes of rural Bengal with plump hens, placid cows, coconut palms, neat huts, gentle streams. Islamic scenes such as mosques and Borak, the winged horse, are also frequently found. Because rickshaw backboards have to be painted annually, rickshaw artists often depict topical themes. In the early seventies,

scenes of fighting between muktijoddha (freedom fighters) and Pakistani soldiers were common. Increasingly common, especially on autorickshaws are scenes of futuristic cities, planes and other fast-moving forms of transport.

Rickshaw artists do not always sign their pictures. Sometimes the name of the rickshaw garage owner or rickshaw maker or mistri is noted on the plate. Sometimes artists paint under pseudonyms. Occasionally, a number of artists share the same name, and, at other times, a plate executed by an apprentice, is signed with the name of the master. It is probable that, with the increasing recognition being given to this form of folk art (a collection of rickshaw paintings has been given to the Bangladesh national museum and a non-government organization is popularizing rickshaw art) more and more artists will sign their names.

RICKSHAW: REASONS FOR TRAFFIC CONGESTION? Those who own a Mercedes or a Toyota would quickly point out that rickshaws are the reason for all the traffic congestion in the city. Get the damn things off the street and it would eradicate almost half of the traffic congestion in the city, they would say. But to be perfectly honest and to listen to both sides of the story the middle class of the society would be very quick to point out, that life is hard to imagine without rickshaws.

Whereas these non-motorized vehicles (NMVs) offer low cost private transport, emit no pollution, use renewable energy, emphasize use of labor rather than capital for mobility, and are well suited for short trips in most cities regardless of income, offering an alternative to motorized transport for many short trips. Thus, they are appropriate elements in strategies dealing with poverty alleviation, air pollution, management of traffic problems and motorization.

There is traffic congestion, which kills millions of valuable working hours everyday of the city dwellers. This considerable amount of valuable time wasted tells upon the economy of the nation. Individual loss while getting stuck in the traffic jam is directly felt with severe disgust and annoyance. Under the surface of this feeling, Bangladesh incurs much greater loss. To address it in its true perspective really entails gigantic approach. As a bid to control the traffic congestion, the authorities concerned have taken some steps such as building flyovers, building over-bridges in congested points, banning rickshaws in many important roads and increasing the number of buses in the rickshaw free roads.

In spite of taking these measures, the traffic jam continues unabated. Of all the measures taken so far, banning rickshaws in some roads seems to be a short-cut solution to the traffic control authorities. Banning rickshaws invite some other problems for the common commuters; those considered to be reasonable and call for reconsideration. The moderate income groups dominate the city and are the ones who usually use rickshaws as the common public vehicle because of comparatively lesser fare. Public buses do not have access to narrow roads and lanes. Rickshaw is preferred and this public vehicle is more convenient for shopping with heavy bags and going back home.

Again, environmental pollution poses a big issue in the city. Rickshaws are environment-friendly vehicles. The number of other vehicles like CNGs and taxis are still far below than that of the demand. This reality can in no way be ignored. Rickshaws only do not cause traffic jam. The influx of population to city, reckless driving, ignorance of traffic rules by the pedestrians as well as deliberately ignoring the rules by some passers-by, police sergeant's taking toll by halting the vehicles are also some of the main reasons for the unbearable traffic jam faced in the city. Without giving consideration to these issues, banning rickshaws only from some city roads cannot solve the traffic congestion problem.

Realities cannot be ignored; rather realities need to be given consideration. Out of thirteen crore population about one crore have flocked to the city with the hope of earning their bread. Rickshaw pulling has unfolded the opportunity of employment to this influx of migrants. Without this profession, they might have engaged themselves in many unsocial activities. These bread-earners maintain two families - one in the slums of the city and another in the village. Their unemployment will seriously affect their families and hence the society. This unskilled and semi-skilled people cannot afford to do other work. This situation has to be taken into consideration.

REHABILITATION OF RICKSHAW PULLERS!!! Sometimes at the end of the year 2004 Dhaka newspapers announced that a US\$4.5 million "rehabilitation program" was being introduced to retrain rickshaw drivers for other professions. Bangladesh Civil Societies are skeptical that the money will trickle down to those in need. At the same time, the real issue goes unaddressed: Why ban rickshaws in the first place? In fact, the "rehab" initiatives have been introduced along with a more vigorous pursuit of the rickshaw ban policy.

ACTION ALERT AGAINST THE BAN: In response to the most recent rickshaw ban in Dhaka, World Car free Network released an Action Alert. Big thanks to the hundreds of people who sent letters to World Bank and other officials. The Dec. 6, 2005 Action Alert expired on Dec. 31, and the effect of this and local Dhaka actions are now being assessed. A formal complaint is also being filed through the World Bank's official process.

While rickshaws, or bicycle taxis, have been introduced successfully in Western cities such as New York and Berlin, the World Bank has shown nothing but hostility towards rickshaws being the dominant mode of vehicular transport in Dhaka, seeing them as an impediment to their idea of development (e.g., mass motorization, fossil fuel dependence, traffic jams, dirty air, and accelerated climate change).

Pushing rickshaws off the main roads would allow motor vehicles to become the dominant mode of vehicular transport in the city. At the same time, the World Bank is pressuring the Bangladeshi government to pass a law freeing the bank of legal liability for any harm that result from its policies.

Increasing limitations on rickshaws in Dhaka are causing untold hardship to the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society, reducing the mobility of the middle class (particularly women, children, and the elderly), and contributing to air pollution and motorizations.

Meanwhile, roads that have completely banned non-motorized transport are still some of the worst affected by traffic jams.

World Car free Network, this Institute and the majority civil societies in Bangladesh and around the world, and Dhaka's many rickshaw unions are all prepared for action to save the rickshaws. If the most vulnerable members of the population are to go hungry, it will not happen without a fight. Banning rickshaws and building highways while people face starvation is nothing short of a war on the poor.

REFERENCES:

IEDS, Data Base.