



MOVING PICTURES

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Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and David J Williams

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Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh

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KUNTALA PILGRIMAGE: ROAD TO THE RICKSHAWS

Long before we actually went to live in Bangladesh, the country was on my mind, as part of my imagination. Like millions of Bengali Indians, Bangladesh is part of my identity and consciousness too, but I had little knowledge of this fact as a child growing up in a small town in West Bengal, India. I had little awareness of this neighbouring country, till I heard my father weep, listening to a strange voice coming from the transistor lying near his head. It was a mid-summer school holiday in 1971, and I was embarking on a mid-day nap, half-awake, half-asleep, when I awoke to the muffled sounds of sobbing of my father. Similar to many other Bengalis who had to leave their homes due to the partition, he too was keenly listening to the many repeat plays of that inspiring voice of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the liberation war of Bangladesh. What deep-seated emotion compelled him to cry for the home he had to leave over three decades ago was beyond my understanding at that time, but this singular incident at once made Bangladesh a part of my perception. Bangladesh entered my soul; I realized that I indeed cannot escape the truth of its existence, the reality of my own roots, and my own certain and increasing desire to engage with it.

Over the years I had built up an imagined country in my head, spiced up by a couple of short trips, and thus, when David took up a job in Dhaka in 2000, I was overjoyed to at last get a chance to spend some time there. It was a lifetime experience too; gems of encounters such as the pilgrimage



to my Grandfather's home in a wet-green village in Barisal churned passions and sentiments that I never knew existed in me. It is a pilgrimage because he left this home and fields in a huff at partition hoping for all bustle to settle down soon, but was never to go back there, and I was the first member in the family to touch base. Visit to that college near the Karnaphuli river in Chittagong where my father, a young postgraduate from the Calcutta University, went to teach economics to local village students with my heavily pregnant mother. Ma used to say that the walk from the bus-stand to the village seemed interminable to her at the time and indeed, it still was, to us, travelling in an air-conditioned car from Dhaka but held up on the way by an elephant and a broken down bus. Visit to the smoke-filled Chittagong ship-wrecking yards, which David described as 'technological hell', where thousands of men dissect and disassemble every part of old ships brought from all over. As we lived on, we learnt to love the country and its peoples, and began to see things with the lens of 'insiders'.

Whatever one's first or later reactions are to Bangladesh, the ubiquitous rickshaws cannot but attract the attention of any new visitor to the country; and we too loved them at first sight. I also come from small-town India where rickshaws are still the primary mode of conveyance. Part of my growing-up education was my father teaching me, a mere five year old, how to hail a rickshaw: 'say, "ei rickshaw bhara jabe?"', and then if he says yes, he will also ask "where will you go, Khuki?". Then you say 'Mincipal Gut' school; remember, do not say 'Municipal Girls' school because they won't understand you...' and there I was, for eleven years of school and for many more years later in life, I took a rickshaw to my school and elsewhere, alone and without any difficulty whatsoever.

Yet, the rickshaws of Bangladesh are not like anything I had seen before; we Bengalis from the two sides of the border share many things: our appearance, language, history, culture and food being just a few of them, but just across the border the Indian rickshaws are plain and ordinary, whereas those in Bangladesh, even the ones in remote and rural areas, come alive in their decorated and colourful appearance. Similar to Calcutta, whose rickshaws gave us the 'City of Joy' but are seen as symbols of backwardness, rickshaws in Dhaka are also viewed by the officials as a traffic nuisance in a globalized metropolitan city. The rickety machines are seen as jamming up the roads of Dhaka and slowing down its traffic, thus pulling it towards a colonial past when the nation wants to move ahead at a fast pace. Yet, beautifully painted and brilliantly decorated, rickshaws are indeed one of the defining features of Dhaka; turning the 'city of mosques' into a 'city of rickshaws'. Whilst to many elite Bangladeshis, rickshaws are ho-hum, for an outsider the gaudy, glittering machines are fascinating. Spending a few years in Dhaka, we found ourselves loving and documenting the rickshaws, which soon turned into more than just a fascination as we began studying the social and cultural milieu that has given rise to this art and the literature that has been written about it.

APPROACHING RICKSHAW ART

Investigating rickshaw art, however, is not just because they are dazzling or even because there are so many rickshaws all around us in Bangladesh. Rickshaws of Bangladesh are indeed an enormous industry – if not in terms of capital accumulation then certainly for the sheer number of people involved – and also an effective mirror reflecting the socio-cultural milieu in the rural and urban parts of the country. For us, however, looking more closely at the passing rickshaw on city streets represents a deeper engagement with the context that gave rise to this exciting and diverse form of subaltern art and with the many individuals involved in this trade. We use the term ‘moving’ in the title of this book in all three possible senses: in a physical, in a metaphorical, and in a figurative sense. Pictures painted on the rickshaws and their tin panels are not fully confined within that space: they are never static, always going somewhere or waiting to go, giving us a glimpse of the busy urban folk life. Some of these pictures are rooted in the history or culture, representing life experiences of the artists or the desires of the rickshaw owners, and the fact of the numbers and labour involved moves the heart of the observer. The pictures and their meanings, above all, are fluid and in a flux, changing along with their contexts, the artists and their intentions.

Not surprisingly, rickshaw art has been studied extensively, within Bangladesh, and by scholars mainly from the USA and Japan with brief appearances elsewhere. Our joint effort, of which this book is a product, thus follows along if not a road then a well-defined track of an increasing level of inquiry on rickshaw art. As noted, writing this book originated from our prolonged fascination with the art and



the artists but led to the generation of a legitimate concern in the sociology of the subject as much as its aesthetics. However, this book differs from its predecessors in our approach to and interpretation of this art, its placement in the socio-cultural context, and the inclusion of the art on the auto-rickshaws (baby-taxis) which have now disappeared – indeed there are signs of decay and neglect creeping into the rickshaws. The now banned two-stroke ‘baby taxis’ have been replaced by largely unadorned CNG-fuelled four-stroke machines (as in New Delhi), resulting in the loss of this particular type of artists’ ‘canvas’ or space of expression. In a few years’ time, the rickshaw art may well become extinct unless it finds yet another ‘space’ of expression.

In this book, we see rickshaw art as one manifestation of a long tradition of art and craft in Bengal as well as one that is rooted in the contemporary and in the daily life, as a subaltern form of art, and finally, as an expression of the artists’ imaginations embedded in their experience of urban life, often as first or second generation rural immigrants seeking ‘a better life’ in Dhaka city. Consequently, we read the art more in its context that has produced it rather than as a curiosity standing in isolation.

For this purpose, we peeped into the lives and minds of the people involved in the art and decorative sections of the rickshaw industry; spoke with the owners who are part patrons of the art, dipped into the visions of the artists, and mingled with rickshaw-wallahs and the passengers. For us, the artistic work on cycle rickshaws and the auto-rickshaws or baby taxis that no longer exist in decorated forms, has arisen from the Bangladeshi social and cultural milieus: a special blend of Islamic, rural and Bengali artistic traditions, combined with pure personal pleasure achieved through decoration of a ‘working space.’ We attempt to give cross-cultural interpretations of the images based on our knowledge of Bangladeshi

socio-cultural milieu. Thus, the focus of our book is on placing the art in the overall background of Bangladeshi socio-cultural traditions and to examine how the images represent history, culture, economy and society in the contemporary urban context.

The illustrations that interface with the text are mostly to do with cycle rickshaws as these are as a rule highly decorated and consequently widely discussed; those of the paintings on auto-rickshaws have not been excluded although they no longer exist on the streets. The photographs of rickshaw art were taken opportunistically mostly on the streets of Dhaka and elsewhere, but also in the workshops and artists’ homes. They were predominantly taken on a film camera (Canon EOS) but occasionally with a digital device. We sometimes chased the rickshaw in another vehicle and stopped it if possible for a photograph. Sometimes, in fact quite often, as we got caught up in one of the infamous traffic jams in Dhaka city, one would jump out of the car or auto-rickshaw and grab a shot. If it was in the summer and we happened to be in an air-conditioned car, the lens almost immediately fogged over in the high humidity – a number of photographs were spoiled in this way.





BANGLADESH AND ITS RICKSHAWS

Most of Bangladesh is a flat, watery place on the Tropic of Cancer in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, lying on the floodplains of the many distributaries at the confluence of three great rivers that drain the Himalayas – the Ganga (Ganges), the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers – as they enter the Bay of Bengal. At about 60,000 square kilometres, the delta is twice the size of that formed by the Mississippi and three times the size of the Nile delta. An innumerable number of river channels criss-cross the land, at once the life-blood and the bane of the country due to their shifting courses, eroding banks and the annual floods they bring in. According to James Novak¹, an expert of the modern history of Bangladesh, it is in this tropical lushness, 'in the heart of river deltas, in this climatic, geographical, riverine, cultural, and linguistic complex, that one finds Bangladesh' (1994: 16). Bangladesh, with a population of ~ 130 million, is about the same size as England and Wales (pop ~ 50 million) or two-third the size of state of Victoria, Australia (pop ~ 4.5 million). The most populated country in the world and one of the poorest (with a per capita GDP of ~ US\$365), Bangladesh is also largely rural and Muslim. The country hosts a large number of donor/development agencies that pour in billions of dollars every year to improve the lives of its poor people, bringing in also many foreigners or 'expats', the 'consultants' advising on developmental work. Many of these men and women are better known for riding their four-wheel drive Mitsubishi Pajeros on their hardship posting, further clogging up Dhaka's streets and the slow-moving traffic. However, some of them also leave the upper class residential quarters of the city in search of and to immerse themselves in that climatic, geographical, riverine, cultural and linguistic complex that Novak describes as being the 'true Bangladesh'.

For nine months of the year, the climate of Bangladesh is either hot and humid, or not so hot but very wet and flooded, even ravaged at times by cyclones; the other three months provide a brief respite of a pleasant and dry winter. The land itself is undoubtedly a product of the rivers; the soil being replenished every year by the enormous amounts of silt brought down with their waters from the Himalayas and other mountain ranges. Much of this land area is actually very wet, full of water bodies of various sorts, meaning that it is continually being silted and its river systems are gradually being choked, the waterways still remain the vital arteries of the country. If one flies over the country during the monsoon months between July and September, almost the entire land seems to be covered by a thin film of water. It is thus no wonder that for many years, water-soaking jute crop – the 'golden fibre' – was the main earner of foreign exchange needed for financing imports. Jute and the rich agricultural harvests also brought visitors from Dundee, Scotland, and traders from other parts of Europe, who brought not only their capital and trading skills but also European modes of thinking and Christianity, and set up educational institutions and churches in the urban areas.

The innumerable small and large rivers that cut through the country from north to south make travel from one place to another a long-winded affair dependent on ferries and their timetables. Heavily dependent on foreign aid with bureaucratic corruption reaching a high level, the country is virtually run by the donors' agenda imported along with their four-wheel drives. Therefore, roads and bridges have been uppermost with rural micro-finance for women on the recent development agenda; the nearly 5 kilometres long – but quiet for lack of traffic – bridge over the seasonally turbulent Jamuna River being a symbolic of that obsession with modernity. Boats of a multitude of sorts still play the major role in moving people and goods in the countryside as do the cycle rickshaws and rickshaw-vans in the cities and towns.

Today's Bangladesh is formed by the predominantly Muslim-inhabited part of undivided Bengal that was cut-off as the eastern outlier of Pakistan from its Hindu counterpart as a result of the partition of India in 1947. This political separation meant not only a slow but sure exodus of people across the border or the sudden truncation of the parts of economic systems such as the jute industry, but also the intended severing of cultural roots grown over many years, including the language Bangla (Bengali) which most people speak. The exceedingly traumatic partition was followed by an entire series of socio-political events in which the distinctively different cultural and intellectual tradition of the Bangladeshi part of Pakistan came to the fore, leading first to the Bhasha Andolan, the language movement, to re-assert the rightful place of Bengali in attributing a national identity as the language for the people as against the Urdu imposed from the western part of Pakistan, and the eventual bloody liberation war and the birth of the new nation in 1971. Although it eventually adopted Islam as its 'state religion', Bangladesh remains a country with a much more moderate form of it to which a discernible local flavour added by the language Bangla and above all its thriving art and culture that originate from the folk life. James Novak comments on the intimacy of the modern Bengali literatures from Bangladesh and West Bengal, which is now in India, and attributes it to the British rule that created the English-educated Bengali elite that nourished from the cultural roots stemming from Calcutta. In his view, this sourcing of intellectual energy from the predominantly Hindu part of Bengal perhaps introduced a modern secularism; in place of religion as the binding factor came the idea of love of land – 'amar sonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobasi' (My golden Bengal, I love you) or even the pining for the elusive 'rupasi Bangla' (the gorgeous Bengal) in 'seeing the face of Bengal' – the language, and culture in the modern nationalist sense. According to Novak² (p. 141), 'All Bangladeshis have a split-level mind. On one level they are Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Christian; but on a deeper,

less rational, repressed level they are Bangladeshi – in a sense that harks back to the pre-Aryan period, before Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist thought frames existed. At this second level, their historic memory is a barely articulate tribal throwback to traditional nationalist loyalties of language and soil, as well as to the natural religion of the rivers, the moon, the sun, and the gram devatas (village deities). Every nation has such deep wellsprings. But in Bangladesh the well has been called up in this century as never before. It still has not been given full expression'. It may be possible that the street art form that the thousands of rickshaws transport around every day is a part of this delightful expression.

Although the social history of Bangladesh begins in, and is synonymous with, its villages, and the 'urban centres had failed to attract people of the village partly for cultural reasons and partly for lack of employment opportunities'³, Dhaka has always been a prosperous and primate city. This prosperity was due to a flourishing commerce, mainly carried out by boats on the innumerable rivers that acted as waterways accessing remote villages, of textiles such as its famous muslin but also products made of shells and bamboo and agricultural produce such as jute. The richness of the village economy and commerce attracted many European traders who contributed significantly to the melange of cultures in Dhaka. The capital of Bengal was shifted first to Mughalabad by Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan in 1717 AD and then to Calcutta by the British East India Company after it defeated the young Nawab Sirajuddullah at the Battle of Plassey. The long-awaited nationhood after 1971 meant that Dhaka became, once again, a capital city, leading to urban growth which was initially rather compact with narrow streets. In the past 40 years all Asian cities have experienced massive growth from rural migration, but for Dhaka the population explosion has been unprecedented in the world. This urban

expansion and growth is characterized by extreme congestion, requiring modes of transport that would be suitably cheap, labour-intensive and not high-tech. The cycle rickshaws proved to be just that. They were drawn in the streets by the hundreds of thousands of rural migrants who moved into the city without a lot of skills in search of a better future inflating its population. The teeming city that began its journey as an eastern outpost of the Mughal empire, city is now the eighteenth largest city in the world, eleventh among the Asian metropolises. Dhaka's population has grown from less than 500,000 in 1963 to nearly 13 million and as new residential areas were added to the northern part of the city for its rising middle classes, main roads, particularly the one to the airport, exclude rickshaws from their space. Thus, Dhaka presents a picture of diversity and contrasts; whereas the older parts of Dhaka are extremely narrow with buildings that are often buckling down under the pressure of their age, the newer central parts that surround it are jammed with Japanese models of cars, auto-rickshaws and buses all jostling with each other.

Still, rickshaws have remained a major mode of urban transport on both sides of the border, and their continued existence is closely linked to the heavy rural-urban migration that has taken place in the last four or five decades. The demand for cheap transport, which is satisfied by the low capital-cost rickshaw and a low-cost pedaller or puller mostly from new urban arrivals, has been such that there are many more unlicensed rickshaws than those registered.

The flat terrain of Bangladesh is eminently suitable for bicycles. What is unusual is that rather than using a bicycle personally, the people prefer to go by cycle-rickshaw, whereas across the border in the other part of Bengal, one has to watch out, when walking, for the hordes of bicycles. It is hard to



explain the phenomenon of rickshaw-rides by just the existence of the urban bhadrak culture in Bengal; Calcutta for example has had its own fair share of the babus but rickshaws do not dominate the cityscape there. The delightful eccentricity of the highly decorated rickshaws compared to those across the border into Indian part of Bengal is almost entirely a unique feature of the urban cultural landscape. This concentration of rickshaw art in Bangladesh encourages us to trace its identity, the people involved in the art and the industry, and its connections with the place which has a long and vivid history of artisans, and a context that is changing.



THE RICKSHAWS OF DHAKA (AND ELSEWHERE)

The Japanese invented the jin riki sha, or 'man-powered car', back in 1867, when a trio in Tokyo drew inspiration from the horse and carriage. Others credit the concept to Jonathon Goble, a Baptist minister who was an American missionary in Yokohama. He is said to have devised the rickshaw when the health of his wife deteriorated and she was unable to walk. Modest as the rickshaw may be, it was an improvement over sedan chairs and within a decade, Japan had nearly 200,000 on its streets, and it exported the technology throughout Asia.

Whilst Japan did not persist with the rickshaws, elsewhere rickshaws are ubiquitous in almost all Asian cities and towns surveyed insightfully in the enjoyable book by Tony Wheeler and Richard l'Anson⁴. Each Asian country has added its special and distinctive spice to the designs and the riders of the rickshaws; those of urban Bangladesh are the glittering exceptions as they are the most numerous, brightly coloured, intricately adorned of them all. Across the border, a few kilometers away, the rickshaws on the Indian side are plain tin boxes and functional objects, whereas those of Bangladesh are literally 'vehicles of artistic expression'. This is because of the extensive use of decorative art forms, paintings on panels and on any vacant space on the vehicles that transcend the ornamental designs in to artistic conceptualizations, making the rickshaw a moving space of aesthetic expression for the onlookers to enjoy at no cost at all. The rickshaws paintings reveal a vitality and appreciation of life that rise beyond the apparent poverty and tell us of their aspirations, loves and spirits. The art is rooted in the folk traditions of undivided Bengal, but also in an Islamic culture that has taken a singu-

lar expression in present-day Bangladeshi identity. At the same time, the art is primarily urban-based and contemporary, giving rise to questions of cultural continuity and relocation over space and time, rather than complete transformation.

On a local scale travel was, until about 1950, mainly by boat or over shorter distances by foot or by horse-drawn carriages, palanquins and city canal boats⁵. The rivers and waterways were the highways and roads of Bangladesh; only relatively recently has a modern road infrastructure been put in place mostly as a result of foreign aid projects. Water transport still plays an important role in ferrying people and cars and goods across the broader reaches south of Dhaka and in carrying bulk materials the length of the country. Detailed descriptions of the workings of inland waterways, the regional speciality of boats and their designs, as well as their specific uses have been beautifully described in the book, *The Country Boats of Bangladesh*.⁶

The first cycle-rickshaws came to Bangladesh (then East Bengal) from Calcutta in the 1930s but apparently not to Dhaka, but to a town just to the south (Narayanganj) and another, Mymensingh, well to the north, arriving in the capital, Dhaka in 1938. The import of rickshaws is attributed to jute exporting sahibs residing in Dhaka or as rumour has it a local landlord introduced the rickshaw for the women of his family. According to another view, put forth by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, rickshaws became popular in Indonesia, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, and reached Bangladesh through Chittagong in the south-eastern corner of the country adjacent to Myanmar in 1919, although they did not spread to Dhaka and other cities from there. Although the new vehicle aroused much curiosity among the Dhaka residents, it was not enthusiastically and quickly received.



Till 1941, Dhaka had only 37 rickshaws, and when the country became partitioned, there were only 181 of them.

After partition, Dhaka became the provincial capital for East Pakistan triggering rapid growth. It was then that cycle-rickshaws, being cheap to maintain, swiftly replaced the horse-drawn carriage as public transport. Licenses were imposed by the municipalities in the 1940s, the licenses being a copy of the old British regulations for hand-pulled rickshaws (carts) – sometimes called the Hackney Carriage Act. The regulations state that the equipment must be in good condition, itemizing for example the spokes of the wheels but omitting any mention of brakes as the hand-carts didn't have any! In many rural areas, a combined version of rickshaw and van – called the rickshaw-van too – is used to carry 8 to 10 people at once. These have a flat bed of wooden bars resting on the axle instead of passenger seats and can double as goods carriers. In lesser cities and towns, the dominance of the rickshaw is far greater; According to Banglapaedia, the authoritative publication of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 78% of Sylhet's and 80% of Comilla's traffic is rickshaw-borne, whereas only 49% of Dhaka's traffic chooses to use the rickshaws, not surprising given that the country's wealth is concentrated in this city.

The auto-rickshaws or baby-taxis as they are known appeared in Dhaka in the early 1980s. Their advantages in terms of transit times compared to cycle rickshaws were obvious; however, these three wheelers were powered by highly polluting 2-stroke motorcycle engines and with their increasing numbers, exhaust emissions, became a great public nuisance.

In no other country except Bangladesh do rickshaws play such an important role in urban transportation; rickshaws dominated the traffic throughout Dhaka till about five years ago when the city authorities earnestly began to clean up some of its major streets of slow-moving traffic such as rickshaws and polluting ones such as the two-stroke three-wheelers of baby-taxis that have now reincarnated as green-coloured 'Chianjis'⁷ The Lonely Planet book, *Chasing Rickshaws*, observed that one in every three takas (one Australian dollar fetches about 45 takas which is roughly the daily earning of many people in the country) spent on transport goes to rickshaw business, which is twice as big as Biman Bangladesh, the national airline. Wheeler and l'Anson feel (p. 54): 'Dhaka is not only the capital of Bangladesh but also the world's cycle-rickshaw capital...Major traffic junctions during the rush hour are not the only places in Dhaka where a glut of rickshaws can bring movement to a halt. In narrow back alleys, often barely wide enough for two rickshaws to pass, it only takes a minor mishap or the untimely arrival of a four-wheeled intruder for movement to grind to a halt. Within seconds a third, a fourth, a tenth, a twentieth rickshaw will join the melee and within minutes a string of stationary rickshaws will be lined up as far as the eye can see in both directions'. Yet, it has been suggested by not only the government officials but the urban experts as well that the future of these brightly decorated rickshaws as modes of transportation in Dhaka is bleak. They are blamed for holding up the traffic and for keeping Dhaka tied to its pre-modern past. It now seems almost certain that in the future more and more rickshaws will in fact be pushed into the narrower lanes of old Dhaka, in the side-streets of upper class residential neighbourhoods, and to the far less important regional towns and rural areas. The decay in the standard of decoration can already be discerned.



Rickshaws, believes Islam, in Dhaka's swanky art magazine Jamini⁸, are to Dhaka what Jeepneys are to Manila and Tuktuks are to Bangkok, 'eccentric forms of public transport that add colour and a certain anachronistic flavour to the city traffic. But the similarities end there, for rickshaws are manually driven, slow, and featherweight vehicles that look more like some medieval contraption than a modern-day transport.' The 'plates' behind the rickshaws, the rickshaw backboards, are of more recent origin, beginning in 1950s as a means of covering the naked visibility of the chain and the iron frame. Since then, rickshaws have been carrying two-thirds of Dhaka's burden of passengers, without a significant number of major accidents. The labyrinthine lanes and bye-lanes of old Dhaka, the flat surface on which the city spread, and above all the millions of unskilled poor migrants from the villages constantly fed the rickshaw industry. A recent case study of how the rickshaw-wallahs live in chronic poverty pointed out that although it is an unsustainable livelihood, meaning that the initial welfare or benefit tapers off with length of involvement in the activity mainly due to ill-health, it is indeed a route of modest upward mobility for the extremely poor rural people coming to the city for work⁹.

Exactly how many rickshaws are there in Dhaka today? Islam supposes there might be close to 100,000 rickshaws plying on Dhaka streets on any given day, whereas Gallagher¹⁰ puts the figure at 300,000, and Lasnier¹¹ puts the figure at 500,000. Gallagher's is still the most detailed research on the rickshaw industry of Bangladesh, building up on the previous research done by Rashid¹² and Masum¹³, and adding a completeness to their work. Gallagher estimated that rickshaws accounted for 34 per cent of total value-added in transport, and about 4.5 per cent of the national workforce depended on this sector for subsistence. The industry of rickshaw making, decorating and painting, running and controlling reveal intricate and complex organising structures extending into a range of sec-

tions of the society. In spite of various efforts by the government to control the numbers of rickshaws, their numbers have in fact grown since then. The 'rickshaw question' has been addressed in many ways; by banning them from the main roads, by trying to make separate lanes for them on the major arterial roads, and by trying to regulate the number of illegal rickshaws by either periodic inspections of licenses or by not issuing them at all. There are always a large number of unregistered rickshaws plying on Dhaka streets and the reality of true numbers is much more than the official figures suggest. Gallagher explains (p. 2): 'Why are the official statistics so inaccurate? The main reason stems from a government policy, practised in most towns of Bangladesh, of limiting the number of rickshaw licenses issued each year. The aim is to hold down rickshaw numbers, and thereby limit traffic congestion. However, the policy has never succeeded. Rickshaw numbers have gone on increasing as the demand for them has grown, and as official licenses were unavailable, black markets sprang up to provide counterfeit licenses instead. Hence official statistics bear no relation to reality, and in some places there are no statistics at all.' His estimate for the country-wide total was 700,000 in 1988, and even with their conservative estimates, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics concluded that in 1985-86 rickshaws contributed 34% of the total value-added by the transport sector in the country, higher even than country boats (29%), another iconic symbol of rural Bangladesh. In Dhaka, there are more rickshaws than any other forms of transport, accounting for more than half of the city's vehicles, 70% of its passengers, and 43% of its total passenger miles. Even without the goods carried by rickshaws, this is nearly double the output of London's underground railway.

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