

Long Live the Rickshaw

WHERE does the word "rickshaw" come from? Why do pullers stand up in the pedals and lean backwards to get the vehicle going? When did the first rickshaws hit the streets of Dhaka? The answers to these and any other queries you may have about the three-wheeled wonder are to be found in the newly-released Bible of rickshawphilia, "The Rickshaws of Bangladesh," published by University Press Limited.

of Sutrapur and a Marwari gentleman from Wari. From these humble beginnings, the number of rickshaws in Bangladesh in 1988 stood at 700,000. We blame traffic jams and accidents on them, we deride them as cheap and instruments of degradation, but they are the nearest thing we have to public transport. One point Gallagher makes in his book is that the main necessity for rickshaws is not that they provide employ-

ment to so many; it is their cost-effectiveness per passenger mile. We all prefer to take rickshaw rather than a scooter if the distance makes it viable. As for traffic jams, as the author correctly points out, a rickshaw takes up much less space than a car. Nor are rickshaws a major cause of mishaps; they account for 10% of road deaths while representing half of all vehicles on the street. Bus users and pedestrians are at much higher risk. Who hasn't yelled at a rickshaw puller who defies the rules (both of the traffic department and of physics, it seems sometimes)? This attitude to regulations stems from the background of rickshaw pullers. Most are migrants from the village and are either illiterate or semi-literate. Of course it's dangerous to believe generalizations: I once had a rickshaw puller who could read English. Gallagher delves into the social lives of those involved in the rickshaw industry: pullers, mistris, painters. This makes some of the most captivating reading in the book. One only wishes for more on rickshaw art and the artists.

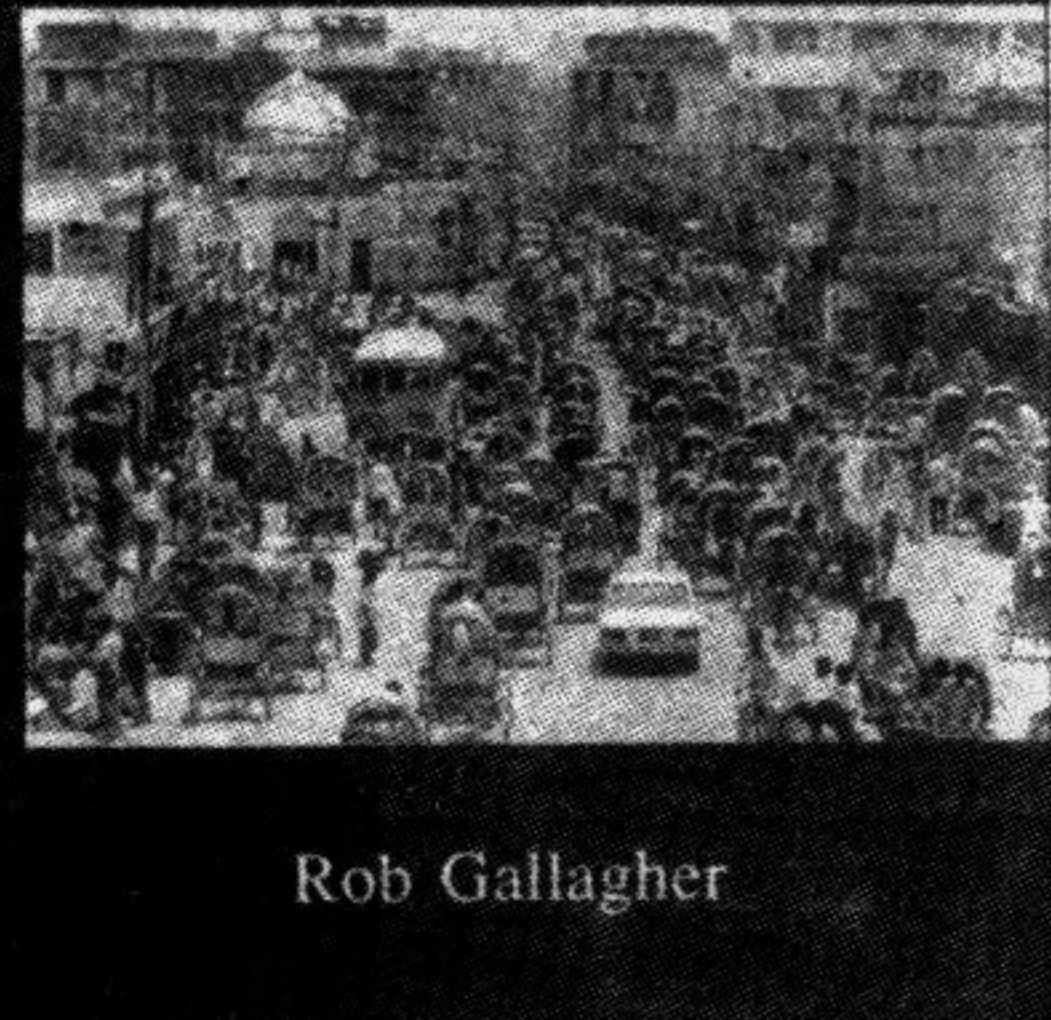
BOOK REVIEW

The Rickshaws of Bangladesh
by Rob Gallagher

Published by University Press Limited
Pages: 683 Price Tk 360.00

Reviewed by S Bari

The Rickshaws of Bangladesh



Rob Gallagher

Author Rob Gallagher has been in the country for nearly ten years, or long enough to become fascinated with this most endearing yet irritating overgrown tricycle. With the energy of a man possessed he has dug into history, economics, urban transport theory, credit opportunities and sociology. His substantial tome (683 pages) looks to be the ultimate in reference for students of transportation methods in developing countries; the layman will delight in the wealth of surprising facts. For example, did you know that "rickshaw" is a derivative of the Japanese term "jin riki sha," meaning man-powered vehicle? I bet not; the didn't have that in "Oshin." And the reason the rider leans back on the pedals is because of faulty design: the gears are constructed in such a way as to make this the only way to start the rickshaw. That explains why rickshaw pullers will always weave through traffic, slow down, do a 360 degree turn-anything but come to a complete halt. Though rickshaws have been around conceptually for a while now (Louis XIV had a "chaise roulante," in which he was pushed around), the first rickshaws came to Dhaka in 1938, brought in by a zamindar

of the transport sector. Well over a million people are employed in the rickshaw industry. Not only do they need better roads, they require better design. Gallagher has a selection of erstwhile suggestions for the improvement of the rickshaw among his illustrations; many of them are quite humorous. However, the sad fact is that better design for the rickshaw has never really taken off, for a number of reasons. According to Gallagher, owners are interested in profits, not in better working conditions and an easier rickshaw to pull. What doesn't help is our tendency as a nation to leave things as they are: if it's working, why fix it. The same tendency has demonstrated itself in our transport laws: legislation addressed to rickshaws has remained nearly unchanged since British times. Gallagher's book is not merely a quaint, coffee table conversation maker. "The Rickshaws of Bangladesh" calls for real change, the sooner the better, to preserve a mode of transportation that meets a need and to which a viable alternative has yet to be found. It appeals to anyone who has road along a Dhanmondi road in the springtime, in love, and in a rickshaw.

ment to so many; it is their cost-effectiveness per passenger mile. We all prefer to take rickshaw rather than a scooter if the distance makes it viable. As for traffic jams, as the author correctly points out, a rickshaw takes up much less space than a car. Nor are rickshaws a major cause of mishaps; they account for 10% of road deaths while representing half of all vehicles on the street. Bus users and pedestrians are at much higher risk. Who hasn't yelled at a rickshaw puller who defies the rules (both of the traffic department and of physics, it seems sometimes)? This attitude to regulations stems from the background of rickshaw pullers. Most are migrants from the village and are either illiterate or semi-literate. Of course it's dangerous to believe generalizations: I once had a rickshaw puller who could read English. Gallagher delves into the social lives of those involved in the rickshaw industry: pullers, mistris, painters. This makes some of the most captivating reading in the book. One only wishes for more on rickshaw art and the artists.

Reflections

It Feels Good to Come Home

by Arshad-uz Zaman

On a misty January morning I returned to Dhaka after an absence of eight months. The airport formalities were smooth and I noticed no change. As usual the luggage took far too long to arrive and thanks to the green channel the passage outside went without hindrance. Due to a misunderstanding with my chauffeur, I ended up hiring a baby-taxi, which I rather preferred for it brought me near carth, whose smell is so satisfying. As I rode along the VVIP road, nicely carpeted, I noticed welcoming signs and other decorations of SAARC countries, whose Heads of State were to have met. The SAARC signs looked sad, a festival abandoned at the last moment. Bengalis, an impatient people, have everything short and so they have invented six seasons rather than the western four. Bangladesh winter has unique features like hazy days unlike the rest of the year. The noticeable difference between a nomad and a settled person — and a Bengali is a settled person par excellence — is that a settled person pays a lot of attention to his palate. Bengali is an authentic gourmet and for each season there is distinctive item of food. Now is the height of the "pitha" season — those delicious home made cakes of a hundred varieties and how much more tasty than western cakes! Returning home in winter is to return to "pitha". Holiday picnic has developed into another unique institution of Bangladesh. Roaming through the streets of Dhaka, I find other signs of SAARC preparations — promise unfulfilled. I find less congestion on the roads and traffic is moving more smoothly, although I am unable to find the reason. There are tiny processions here and there but they are nothing compared to what the city of Dhaka often goes through. Even the half-day Hartal was a

friends, specially since our trip together in my home district Bagerhat, where I introduced them to the holy crocodiles of Khan Jahan Ali's Dargah, and by supreme luck, a Royal Bengal Tiger in the Sundarban, as we admired him from our speedboat. During that relaxed trip through the Sundarban, I had told Sir Colin about a casual conversation with his deputy regarding the disposal of the furniture of several buildings of the High Commission once they moved to Baridhara. I had in mind the University of Science and Technology, Chittagong, the brain child of my good friend National Prof of Medicine Dr Nurul Islam, who had involved me with the project right from the beginning. Coming home this time I find that the furniture is now at the institution in Chittagong. Thank you, Sir Colin! I have conflicting reports about the state of our economy. For some there are little signs that economy has started picking up but for most industrialist friends, economy is as stagnant as ever. The faces in the shops tend to support the former view. Poor Bangladesh TV, it seems to have died a natural death. After eight months I notice qualitative change. The Star TV and its channels from Hong Kong including the overwhelming Indian channel, with its popular film songs and movies, seem to have wiped out poor BTV. Coming home is of course coming to my Editor and friend of several decades S M Ali. In fact homecoming began with him. From the noisy surroundings of Bangladesh Times crossing, I found him in the peaceful surrounding of Dhanmondi. Dhanmondi, the first satellite town of Dhaka, with its anglers and walkers and lakeside lovers, with its lovely trees bending down on the lakes, its one story villas, has changed very little although here and there a

multi-storied building intrude on the scene. My friend took me to lunch to a Chinese restaurant where they exchanged greetings in Chinese. It feels good to come home. "সবার স্বাগত ক্রমে এই ঘর সিন্ধি নদীটির তীরে এই বাংলা" (Come again to the banks of this river, where the rice grain covered stairs meet, to this Bengal). The writer is retired Ambassador and Assistant Secretary-General, OIC.

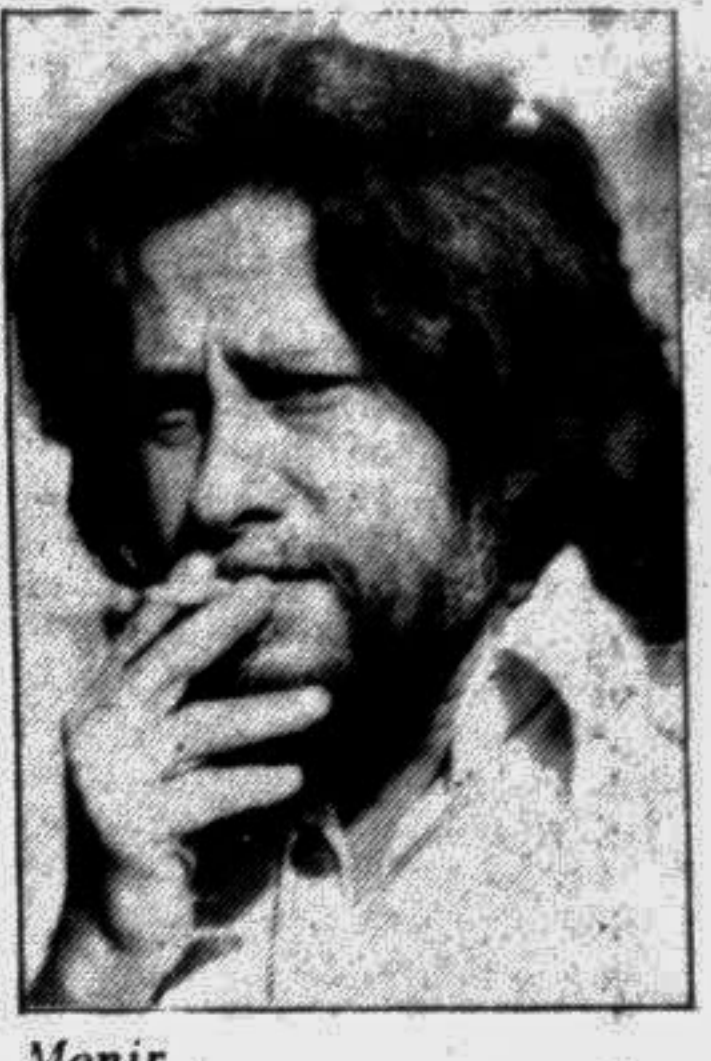
An Encounter with Monir

AS my wife and myself came out of the Prado Museum in Madrid, we recognised Monir — the intangible artist with the wild crop of luxuriant hair, deep observant eyes and a quite vibrancy which only the true artists are blessed with. The encounter with Monir was a memorable experience. He is now the well known graphic artist of Spain with the heart and mind profoundly birthed by the golden silts of his birthplace, Chandpur. He lives and work in an apartment only 15 minutes walk from the Prado Museum. One day his graphics would probably be hanging on the priceless walls of many famous museums of modern art. Monir would then become a legend — ever after. During his life-time, he would most probably remain in Spain; yet never for once leaving the shores of Sonar Bangla in his mind or heart. He has been in Spain, Madrid to be specific, since 1969, 23 years from today; but he remained so much a Bengali. His graphic works fully bear this out. His motherland is his trap of love as depicted in his 1977 etching with a famous quotation from Tagore on life in the Delta — of profusion of life in the midst of mighty rivers. He etched out the broken contours of the land ravaged by nature — yet life flourishes there in great abundance. It appeared to us that inspite of remaining so far away, he still pined for his native Chandpur where two mighty rivers meet and the place so typically depicts our land — the trap of love. And, like the people of his native riverine country, Monir is basically such a simple creature. He met us in a totally unceremonious manner and with in moments, the sheer warmth and intimacy of his personality engulfed us completely. We met him for the first time but he made us feel that we knew him for decades. There was nothing unknown about him. Without any hesitation he said simply: "Throughout my life, I was a bad student, passed my matriculation examination with great difficulty; but I loved painting, that is what I did at

Chandpur and later on, at Dhaka Arts College. Since 1969, I am here in Madrid and at all times I am an artist — perhaps all the while from the day I was born in 1943." His achievements during the last 23 years of sojourn in Spain have been tremendous. Monir participated in 5 Biennales and 13 International Art Exhibitions as well as 18 solo, expositions, mostly in Europe. So far he has earned 12 international awards and the 7th National Award of

artistic bonds have been evolved through the renounced Bengali artist — Monir. Monir's graphics reflect the deepest human emotions and feelings which may not possess any human proportions. His works, such as God of Pleasure, Nature of Creation, or Deep Zone are manifestations of the artist's perception through colours and contours of certain vital aspects of life which are profoundly subjective; yet the viewers are left spellbound since the art pen-

Spain or North Africa. The appeal is so universal. Same is true of Time and Tide, another brilliant piece of endless life. His mix of colour is absolutely superb, as I perceived in the Nature's Song or Change of Times; while Gone with the Winds has been etched from deepest to faintest blue depicting nature and life in motion yet in harmony. I asked Monir how his individual pieces of graphics are initiated: does he conceive the image in its entirety, although-



Monir



Two works by Monir

in an outline where the shades, the strokes or dots etc, come through as waves of creation — sometimes in frenzy and at other times sedate and reflective? "No, nothing like that," he told me. What he does, for example, put a red dot at a prime location, follow it up with few bold strokes of black on the lower edges. This is the beginning through an artistic inspiration and then it gradually evolves, not in a frenzy but over hours and days. In the solitude of his basement studio, the shades come, from light to the lightest; while the faintest touches and minute details are the last to be added. Ultimately what happens is an elevation of the human soul, up above the gray plains riddled with black contours of bold construction. This was now Signos De Elevacion, 1984.

in an outline where the shades, the strokes or dots etc, come through as waves of creation — sometimes in frenzy and at other times sedate and reflective? "No, nothing like that," he told me. What he does, for example, put a red dot at a prime location, follow it up with few bold strokes of black on the lower edges. This is the beginning through an artistic inspiration and then it gradually evolves, not in a frenzy but over hours and days. In the solitude of his basement studio, the shades come, from light to the lightest; while the faintest touches and minute details are the last to be added. Ultimately what happens is an elevation of the human soul, up above the gray plains riddled with black contours of bold construction. This was now Signos De Elevacion, 1984.

came about. Monir ended by saying: "It is abstraction, not the serene and balanced interpretation of nature, as you might have seen at Prado Museum."

Abstraction no doubt; yet I could discern the high degree of artistic simplicity in the restraints as well as sparing use of colour and lines. To comprehend beyond the obvious, to bring out the deep renderings from the inner reaches of the heart and the conscience lead to the fulfillment of a life full of artistic accomplishments — that is Monir, I felt. Each of his etchings is a poetry that touches the best of what is in Man. We could have spent not hours but days admiring Monir; unfortunately, time was short — we could not stay any longer.

It was late afternoon, a crisp cool October sunset could be glimpsed on top of the Prado Museum as we walked towards Monir's apartment. We talked for several hours late into the night. His petite Spanish wife was present and his ten month old son was sitting right on top of the dining table where we were all seated. They were all so friendly and that was truly the charm of the encounter.

We saw the neat and very simple life-style of a late 20th century artist of the world after two decades of creative achievement. I felt so proud. He is one of us. We both love the same Hilsa fish bought at the Chandpur steamer ghat.

A painter with a Penchant for Romantic Leanings

by Fayza Haq



Songs of Life
Two stems — one holding a leaf, symbolising a tree, and therefore, a tree — were depicted on the circles of blue and black, representing land. The subtle use of black on the

top and bottom of the picture lent perfection to the composition. The artist's "Expectation-2" depicted a woman in yellow and burnt-sienna, white and black, along with white were used to depict the woman, the subject. She was portrayed as standing desolately by herself, on a semi-circle of bottle-green; while green, orange and brown completed the outer semi-circle of the same piece of land. The sky was shown as bars of black, yellow, pink and white — the colours gently blending into each other. A curl of fine white was included in the sky, to symbolise hope. In "Ekattorer Dingleuc-5" the painter had brought in figures in an impressionistic manner, and the artist had experimented with textures and hues with perfection. The five figures, representing people of all ages and sexes, were held up against a background of soft pink and orange. They sky, a semi-circle of turquoise blue, mixed with white, held an opal moon. These were carefully juxtaposed with black, orange and pink as well as black hues to represent clouds. The moon was brought in to symbolise hope for the future, while the



Songs of Nature
extensive use of red, was there to depict the fear of the army in '71. The same theme was brought in Ibrahim's "Ekattorer Dingleuc-7". This

represented the fear of destruction in the country during that time again. Despite the use of a splash of black and red, to represent the terror in the hearts of the people, there was, an inclusion of a large patch of soothing pale blue, white, and blue. This stood for hope, that people had in their hearts and mind for the future. In the depiction of nature, the artist had held up the psychology of the people of the country at that time.

As a contrast to the two paintings mentioned earlier, in "Sensitive Moments", the artist had depicted the emotion charged moments of a man proposing, and a woman disposing. The human figures were in an impressionistic form of shades of burnt-sienna, carefully touched with white at the bottom. Ibrahim has brought in his idyllic and optimistic concept of nature in the background. This included careful use of black at the four corners of the composition. The sky, meanwhile, had soft orange, with deft white texture work on the paint. Meanwhile "the green, green grass of home" were depicted with soft and dark, carefully composed circles and swirls of sap and verdian green.

Despite having the usual problem that the average artist faces, in the country, Ibrahim said that he would adhere to his oil paintings and not turn back to commercial work, which he had abandoned eighteen years ago.

Narayanganj Club

Continued from page 9



phones were introduced, a song recording session was held here in the club. Famous singers like Abbasuddin, Hafiz Chowdhury, Faruqi Biquar, took part in the recording sessions. But this could not be continued for a long time. After the devastation of war in 1971, it took a lot to restore the club's heritage. Today, as always, the club is a real competition for Dhaka Club, Chittagong Club, Barisal Club, Khulna Club and others. The centenary celebration programmes started December 4, with the opening of "Paradise Cables Tennis Tournament". The month-long programmes included, snooker, debate, recitation, theatre, children's competition.

The Journey of Mr B

Continued from page 9

only dulls and benumbs him? It needs mentioning here that experiences, hitherto gathered by Mr B with regard to scenes and images of non-conventional words and deeds, have now created for him a state of purgatorial cold storage, but, of course, not without lending perspectives to him. The question, well then, is this: "after such experiences, how could Mr B do something extraordinarily radical so as to make him tellingly different from the common, average run of the Bengalis?" His urge like an auto speed off to an imperative which now asserts itself more obviously than Profroek's tie-pin: "I must be different." While his wife keeps beeping about his behaviour, Mr B unceremoniously keeps embarking on possible catch-all actions in an attempt to be non-conventional, and the realisation that history singles them out as heroes who can only perform non-conventional acts continues to inspire him. Yes, he keeps trying out. While being an old formula,

does not enable him to earn accolades which Mr B so feverishly pines for. Then, he starts walking angularly, but it also does not work, for so many lame men limp that way. Afterwards, he chooses to sleep without closing his eyes, but this phenomenon is not unusual if one cares to look at the style of politics pursued by many in this part of the world. The thought, now, even more obstinately grips him as to how he could do things unusual. How? How? After beavering away at various means for quite sometime, Mr B feels that he is now affected by a chemistry of the Baudelairean languor and the Kierkegaardian sickness unto death. But, the light breaks out soon, even if momentarily. It is the servant, Mr B's servant, who makes a point. "Sir, you look bothered!" says the servant. Mr B speaks a bit reluctantly, "I won't do something unusual. To remain usual is boring me." Very simple! Stop responding to nature's call, for everyone does it! Mr B springs up in joy and gives a

Asians Cross

Continued from page 9

tries to provide basic community services as a necessary step towards greater government responsibility in this area. WHO suggests that special emphasis be given to day-care and similar programmes which would help families to care for their elderly. Nothing that old age in itself does not demand specialised care. WHO recommends that primary health care workers already in the community should simply be given additional training to recognise and deal with common problems experienced by the elderly. Majority of the elderly are not disabled. Nor are they entirely dependent on others. Institutional services should be provided, in as "homely" an environment as possible to preserve the autonomy of the aged to the greatest extent possible. — Depthwise Asia

tries to provide basic community services as a necessary step towards greater government responsibility in this area. WHO suggests that special emphasis be given to day-care and similar programmes which would help families to care for their elderly. Nothing that old age in itself does not demand specialised care. WHO recommends that primary health care workers already in the community should simply be given additional training to recognise and deal with common problems experienced by the elderly. Majority of the elderly are not disabled. Nor are they entirely dependent on others. Institutional services should be provided, in as "homely" an environment as possible to preserve the autonomy of the aged to the greatest extent possible. — Depthwise Asia