

A city of rickshaws: Time to change the nomenclature The Caspian Sea: Geo-strategic politics at play

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DHAKA, called a city of mosques, is also predominantly a city of rickshaws. Here we are moving ahead with almost everything conceivable in terms of speed, light, fashion, shopping malls, fast food, health clinics, architectural designs and so on. Considerable affluence in living standard and style among people is easily noticeable with more and more of them having access to the amenities of modern life. The fruits of this change and the benefits of economic development are also slowly but surely trickling down even to the countryside. But in a metropolis of shiny new cars, paved roads and neon signs the continuous and incongruous presence of cycle-rickshaw with its century old shape, size and speed provides a perfect example of paradoxical coexistence between the old and new, between speed and sloth and is a constant reminder of the actual state of our economy and what is starkly real.

If we care to look around us a little we will see that only within a span of few years there has been a perceptible change everywhere. The row boats in our rivers, for instance, have quietly disappeared. A slow and silent revolution taking place almost behind our back, has mechanized the country-boats in our riverine system, however unromantic they may now appear to be. Similar changes are also catching up with our method of cultivation. Power tillers and tractors are making their slow but sure entry in place of traditional ploughs and bullocks. In respect of surface transport, however, the poor man's taxi, the paddle or cycle rickshaw is still there only because it continues to fulfil the desire, urge and need for a privately hired transport within the means of a limited income population.

If we look and analyze the problems obtaining in Dhaka city we shall have a fairly clear view of the situation obtaining in the rest of the country. To a burgeoning number of rickshaw riders which includes office-goers, teachers, students, professional men, business class, cine-goers and the midday housewife shoppers there is no viable alternative in sight. However hopelessly out of date the rickshaws may appear the great majority's dependence on this fragile, slow-moving, manually operated transport has only increased with time. The rickshaws, for us, are still as sure as the morning cup of tea, as essential as the grocers shop and the dependence on it is almost slavish.

Nighttime Dhaka provides another curious and strange sight. A great surge of rickshaws move like so many ghost riders allover the city, in dark, without either a head or a tail light. Gone are the days when some kind of a lamp was seen hanging somewhere in the body of a rickshaw. No body bothers to follow it any longer. The pullers depend entirely on streetlights and on their imagination. Manual signaling is another weak point. The poor fellow, untrained as he is, does not know how many times or how long he has to keep his hands raised. The same pair of hands he is also using for control. Besides, at night, in dark, chances are that the hands would not be seen at all. Too much, therefore, is expected of him and only a miracle is protecting the

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ramshackle rickshaws from daily accidents with consequent loss of lives and violence. This is continuing, surprisingly, day after day, under the very nose of a benevolent society and a tolerant police.

There is a steady supply and rush of unskilled labour willing to pick up rickshaw driving as a profession. Most of them, however, are part of a floating population that has flocked to the cities in search of livelihood. Work available in the mills, factories, construction sites are not sufficient to absorb this steady stream of rural migrants. True, Bangladesh has acquired a pace in industrialization, specially in the private sector, but the biggest employer, the garment industries, engage female workers mainly. The rickshaw owners employ labourers almost on the spot without verifying

of people unwilling to give up the comforts of a rickshaw ride. Little do we consider that the distance we travel by rickshaws can easily be covered by taking a walk. People are doing it all over the world. Wherever you go you see hundreds of well dressed, apparently well off people walking in streams down the roads, sidewalks, pavements and so on. No one can distinguish a well-to-do pedestrian from a poor. People of all strata, and of all ages walking miles every day to their destinations. We can also do the same here. If this big multitude could be brought back to the pavements, we can slowly but surely take the load off the rickshaws. Side by side a crash programme can be taken and a task force formed to construct, reconstruct and widen the pavements/roads all over the

industry. Secondly, the rickshaws employ thousands of urban and rural poor for whom there is just no other work available at the moment. A single rickshaw is the source of livelihood for at least two such families in one working day.

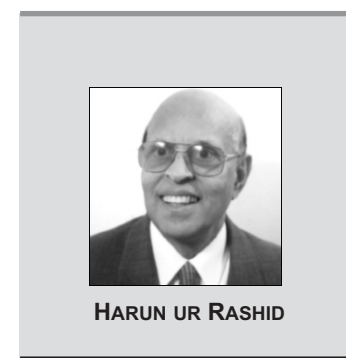
Dhaka, in the meantime, is fast becoming a motorist's nightmare and a traffic police's headache. The erratic and disorderly movements even in the spacious roads by half-trained or ignorant rickshaw-pullers are becoming a source of constant danger, jamming and irritation. Let us identify some of the main problems: (a) sheer number which is overwhelming; in fact, the rickshaws far outnumber the capacity of the police to control; (b) unroadworthy rickshaws with faulty brakes, etc.; (c) untrained pullers with little or no traffic knowledge; (d)

arrangement is followed there would be no need for shutting off some prominent city roads to rickshaws which actually creates congestion in the adjoining roads.

The most important aspect relating to the orderly movement of rickshaws in Dhaka is the training and experience of the pullers. The majority of the pullers are illiterate with poor knowledge of traffic rules. Crash courses for training them particularly with regard to signaling may be arranged by the police in co-operation with the owners. They may also be persuaded to fix rear view mirror in their rickshaws which would not cost them more than Tk 50.00 a piece. This would enable the pullers to see their hindside before turning. As it is, a majority of the accidents occur due to improper and insufficient signaling as for having faulty brakes.

One permanent solution to the street jamming, congestion and accidents, I feel, is to take the whole system underground allowing for a continuous and unhindered flow of traffic. The system is operative in almost all modern cities and capitals. The New York sub-way, the London/Moscow metro and the underground train services in Tokyo, Hong Kong and even Kolkata are working fine. A quick visit to these cities would show how traffic congestion, once notoriously present, have eased to the great relief of the travelling public and commuters. We must take cue from these places and learn to be modern. Other steps taken can be the introduction of circular railway, tram-cars, mono-rails, circled waterways and, of course, plenty of double decker buses and building flyovers.

Unless corrective measures are thought of now the crowding in the already saturated streets and roads would continue to worsen and the whole system of traffic may one day burst at the seams and collapse. We are already slow in starting. Let us act now to catch up with the rest of the world. We have proved that we are not a nation without a soul or a vision. In this country we have achieved near miraculous results in banning the use of polythene within record time. People have welcomed it and hailed it as a remarkable achievement of the government. We can go forward in dealing with the traffic problems also in the like manner and hopefully achieve the same amount of success.



HARUN UR RASHID

THE Caspian Sea is the largest land-locked sea in the world. It is mainly fed by the longest river of Europe, the Volga in Russia. Its area is about 152,239 square miles, nearly three times the size of Bangladesh. Five countries, namely Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Azerbaijan, share borders with the Caspian Sea.

The Caspian Sea is reported to have half of world's oil reserves and much can be exported through pipeline. If the Caspian Basin can be exploited for oil, the dependence on oil from the volatile Middle East region will be much lessened. This is a strategy which many countries including the US find it attractive.

The crucial issue is how to divide the Caspian Sea among the five states? Although there is a notional division of the Caspian Sea among them, there is no formal agreement among the littoral states. The division is important because share of the resources of the Caspian Sea in turn will depend on the size of the Caspian Sea for each state.

It took many years to assemble together the leaders of five countries (executive heads of state) at a meeting in the last week of last month at Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, to discuss the division of the Sea among the five littoral states. Iran is reported to have proposed that the Caspian Sea should be divided equally among five countries. Russia and others did not agree and they reportedly put forward a counter-proposal that the existing length of the border would determine the size of the division of the Sea among them.

Although the leaders failed to agree to reach an agreement on 24 April, some say that the very fact

BOTTOM LINE

It appears that each of the five countries has geo-strategic interest in exploiting the resources of the Caspian Sea. In particular Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will have to decide either to join with the US or Russia with a broader picture in mind. How their pragmatic, perhaps, opportunistic, tactics will be played out in future remains to be seen.

that five leaders met to discuss the issue is an achievement. -President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan was reportedly optimistic about the outcome in future. Turkmenistan is believed to go by the majority if that is achieved in future.

With the Russian formula, Iran appears to be the greatest loser. Iran, being a regional power, does not wish to lose its share on resources of the Caspian Sea because of the short and concave nature of its coastline with the Caspian Sea. It seems unless there is an equitable apportionment of the Caspian Sea among the five littoral states, the issue of division of the Caspian Sea is likely to remain inconclusive for a long time.

Another lurking issue appears to be the competition between Russia and US as to how to control the oil resources of the Caspian Sea. To export oil from the land-locked Caspian Sea, pipeline has to be constructed to a port in Turkey. There are two proposals: One is through Russia via Black Sea to a Turkish port and the other is through Azerbaijan, Georgia to a Turkish port. The US appears to support the latter while Russia's policy appears to exclude the US from the Caspian oil reserves.

All the Central Asian Republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kirgystan) have been recently rocked by actions of Islamic militants and the three countries on Afghanistan's northern border--Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan -- have offered to co-operate with President Bush on the war against terrorism for their own reasons.

Russia appears to be uncomfortable by the increased presence of the US in the recent months in the Central Asian Republics. Defence Secretary of the US Rumsfeld was on his way to the Central Asian region to discuss strategy of war on terrorism. The three Republics have long borders with Afghanistan and their strategic importance to the US cannot be ignored. The Central Asian Republics are the backyard of Russia and they do not naturally favour the influence of the US in the Caspian region. Furthermore there is a view that Russia's war on Chechnya was partly determined to regain Russia's strategic foothold in the region.

However it appears that Russia's President Putin is determined not to lose control of the oil resources of the Caspian Sea. Russia is reportedly going ahead to construct an oil pipeline through the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea to the Turkish port of Samsun so as to enable Russia to export oil. This pipeline has the advantage of avoiding crossing Azerbaijan and Georgia to a Turkish port and appears to be in direct competition with Washington's proposed pipeline through Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey.

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PHOTO: STAR

City of rickshaws

as to their suitability. At the end of the day they crowd the already crowded shanties and slums and huddle together. Agencies working to improve their lot are yet to make much headway. Although, they, by their sheer numbers, have contributed immensely in turning Dhaka into a mega city, yet they are still considered as outsiders and not very welcome here. Their stay in the metropolis is looked upon, at the most, as illegal and at the worst, a nuisance.

In a way, rickshaws have crippled us to an extent and pedestrians on our roads as a sight are rare indeed. In order to reestablish the habit of walking we must, of course, build more pavements, sidewalks, footpaths, lanes and by lanes and immensely improve their conditions. Walking down the streets for us is fast becoming a habit of the past. We seem to be the laziest lot

on emergency basis, to enable people to be on their feet again. In order to accommodate more and more pedestrians, there would be nothing wrong in having pavements wider than main roads wherever possible as is seen in many countries with big population.

With people reverting to walking, the rickshaws would, perforce, reduce in number and gradually disappear from sight. And I dare say with it the slum clearance would also be easier and the hawkers/small shops occupying pavements and roads would, in time, move away. As a consequence, the roads would become open, congestion-free and jamming would be eased to a great extent. Everything must be done to bring about a change in people's habits and attitudes, so that the tendency to travel leaning on someone else's shoulder should go. In almost all countries rickshaw labour has long been abolished and discarded as a degrading and inhuman profession and as ruthless exploitation of human labour. Only in Bangladesh we are still clutching on to it and at the same time watching the gradual swelling of the numbers entering the profession. The middle class in Bangladesh, which is also the voice of the nation, have deliberately kept their mouths shut and say nothing about the unsavory part of the presence of rickshaws on the roads, only because they are the selfish beneficiary of an archaic and often cruel system, which should have been done away with long time ago.

The pressure on rickshaws can be lessened by increasing the number of modern and speedy vehicles such as taxi cab, bus, minibus etc. What is taking place here is just a little different. That is, the numbers of rickshaws are increasing in much greater number than the motorized vehicles. The increase in the number is unmethodical and unplanned. Not a single rickshaw, however, fulfil the basic requirements of traffic rules and laws. Their presence on the road, therefore, is at the complete mercy of the police, who either look the other way, or allow these as a routine matter of gratis. What is required is to go to the root of the problem with courage, care, compassion and commitment rather than running away from it.

Let's first discuss and analyze some of the prominent reasons why rickshaws would dominate the Dhaka streets for many more years to come even though the ideal arrangement would have been their complete elimination and replacement by more efficient mechanical system. The rickshaws, firstly, are economical, cheap, easily pliable and simple to manufacture with minimum capital investment and are also virtually noise and pollution free and have excellent back-up service facilities in terms of repair workshops and spare parts availability. In fact, the production, repair and servicing of rickshaws provide a thriving urban based cottage

uncoordinated, unmethodical and erratic movements on roads; (e) manual signalling system and (f) absence of specific parking spaces.

The need is for a little more order on the road. A planning must be undertaken to bring about a systematic increase in all the viable alternatives which would progressively take away the load from the rickshaws and disperse those onto other means of transportation. A strong argument does exist for the abolition of rickshaws, as these are considered too dangerous and unfit in a mechanical age. But any study for the retention or elimination of rickshaws must also take into account the convenience or otherwise of the majority (not always very silent) who constitute the rickshaw travellers in Dhaka, as much as arranging for the possible alternative occupations for the quarter of a million or so of the pullers whose number is swelling with each passing day.

As long as we can't do away with the rickshaws (for the reasons analyzed above) we can at least try to ease the problems created by them. We can immediately start with controlling the number of rickshaws by a strict enforcement of the laws. At the same time, effective steps can be taken to regulate and even eliminate the chances of rickshaws falling into the hands of untrained and under-aged pullers. This can be done by supplying some kind of uniform, at owner's cost, to the pullers, who would prominently display the licence numbers on the chart. Anyone plying a rickshaw without uniform must be immediately detected and prosecuted.

Regulating the flow of traffic in the following manner can substantially reduce the chances of accidents on the roads.

The prominent city roads may first be divided into unequal lanes by small island strips. The narrower lanes can be given exclusively to rickshaw with by-lanes for both side flows of rickshaws. Mechanized vehicles would use the larger ones with a number of lanes for traffic flowing in opposite directions. This would help the police in regulating the traffic more systematically and would effectively eliminate the possibility of one kind of transport transgressing into the areas of the other. Areas demarcated by paints do not work anymore. This would also ensure maximum space utilization and reduce the chances of a car hitting a slow moving vehicle or vice versa and generate more speed on the roads. For the roads which are not spacious or broader such as the innumerable lanes and by-lanes crisscrossing the old city, the traffic movements could be slightly modified so that rickshaws may be allowed to move through the right side of the road, and the other vehicles on the left. This would bring the slow moving and speedy vehicles face to face with each other and thus eliminate the chances of hitting from back. If the above