

Trouble on the streets

Many Asian countries have built up economies worth speaking of. The ones that create jobs and alternatives. When we provide decent employment, we will not have to get rid of the rickshaw. The puller will only be too happy to pack up, go home and earn an income without such degrading and strenuous labour.

FARID BAKHT

THE London Observer summed it up neatly: Rickshaw pullers walk out! Rickshaw pullers went off the roads last Saturday as a response to the Dhaka City authorities' seizure of 'unlicensed' rickshaws. The Bangladesh Rickshaw-Van Owners and Employees' Action Council enforced a dawn-to-dusk strike. Technically, it was a success with over 90 percent on strike. In the battle for 'hearts and minds', the council made a mistake by calling the strike on the first day of Ramadan. Lower middle class office workers and women who normally rely on the rickshaw were badly affected as they attempted to return home for 'iftar', to break their fast. Two days earlier would have been smarter.

The strike had an impact however. After a two-year suspension, the Dhaka City Corporation agreed to meet one demand and will issue licences at the rate of 1,000 a day till the end of the year. That works out at just over 70,000 and probably less if the expected hartals take place. If they

not renege on their promise then, in total, 150,000 rickshaws will legally ply the streets. What about the other 250,000 rickshaws? They have been sacrificed, along with thousands employed in workshops, and restaurants. This would mean more than a 1000 crore taka being cut out of the rural-urban economy every year.

Shady deals

This is not an old-fashioned battle between business and unions. The rickshaw owners are at the forefront of the struggle, using the pullers as foot soldiers. Strangely, one of the owners' association asked that new licences be distributed via them, rather than directly to individual vehicle owners. Cynics might ask if this smacks of an attempt to make some side money. A lot of money. If each licence were to have, say, a street value of Tk. 1,000, then there would have been a Tk. 6 crore cake to distribute among some enterprising people. The City Corporation has declined to take this route but it would be interesting to see how responsible the Ward Commissioners now behave.

Prejudice and the



private car

Solely blaming rickshaws for traffic congestion is not credible anymore. It fails to explain the never-ending jams on the so-called VIP roads where only motorised vehicles are allowed. A haphazardly expanding city with no regard to 'master plans' is to blame. So is the setting up of shopping plazas and office blocks with no or minimal parking space. People spilling on to the streets from the side force traffic to the right.

A complete lack of strategic planning is the real villain.

Every year, nearly 25,000 cars hit the capital's roads. How long before we reach one million cars? Kolkata in West Bengal recently marked the arrival of its millionth car. Roads only cover 6 percent of their city. We have 8 percent. They seem to be coping better than us. Our government is rushing to inaugurate its first flyover this November. We are so keen, we are not prepared to wait for the right number of shock absorbers to be installed. In the meantime, Kolkata has constructed over a dozen flyovers, an underground metro system, bypass roads and more.

Nearly all Asian cities once had non-motorised transport. From Shanghai to Singapore, Bangkok to Saigon, Delhi to Rangoon. Now pedals and cycles are disappearing

as countries motorise their economies. Our leaders want to join the club too. They feel embarrassed when they have to accompany a foreign dignitary from the airport. VIP roads have been created to hide them but you cannot miss the rickshaw. Poverty hits you immediately you set out of ZIA airport.

The rickshaw is the symbol of our backwardness. If you cannot get the real thing (getting rid of poverty), why not accept its substitute -- the appearance of 'modernity'. So we attack the symptoms, not the underlying causes. Always looking for the shortcut. In January, the city will be hosting a motley crew of South Asian leaders in a SAARC summit. So the city is in the midst of a 'beautification' scheme. Have you noticed the flowerbeds and trees being planted? The journey along the VIP roads is being choreographed, like the catwalk in a fashion show.

Who do we think we are going to fool?

Middle class follies

Recently, I read an article headlined "Ah! Rickshaw free city". It gasped with awe at the empty streets during the rickshaw strike. One interviewee apparently could walk ten minutes to her boutique. Normally the availability of rickshaws was too tempting and made her lazy. She would walk more often if there were no rickshaws around. Sure thing. I can imagine her walking in the monsoon rain or in the 100-degree heat of an April day. I can see her refusing the use of a rickshaw during the flood. Have we forgotten the rickshaw puller was the only thing getting through in August, either pedalling the tricycle or rowing a boat, ferrying passengers through sewage-ridden waters. People do not walk because there aren't enough pavements or safe pedestrian crossings. They don't like being forced onto the streets, dodging the traffic.

Some of the people rejoicing at 'rickshaw-free' days probably cannot wait for the arrival of the 'hartal season'. These 'holidays' conveniently called on a Saturday or Thursday become one long weekend. For the majority of Dhaka's citizens (the poor, the slum dwellers and businessmen), hartals are a curse. Where are they going to recover the lost income from that day?

Many middle class people do understand this. But others within this group are too busy shopping to notice the city beyond the mall. Perhaps this same bunch is cheering the 'beautification' too. This city will only be beautiful if we make the slums liveable. With proper drainage, sanitation, clean drinking water and properly staffed health and education centres.

Jobs before beauty

The recent impetus for the anti-rickshaw drive came from two sources. It was "Traffic Week" and they had to be seen to be doing something decisive. Moreover, a World Bank mission had been in town to check on their flawed Dhaka Urban Transport Project. They showed their displeasure at the slow progress in withdrawing the rickshaws from the main thoroughfares. They have grudgingly 'extended the deadline' for our authorities to carry out the attack on the rickshaws. They may have to revise their calculations if the show of strength continues this winter.

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Our current vision is to see a minority of middle-class consumers in 'rickshaw-free' roads jam-packed with cars crawling their way to shopping malls, along boulevards lined with flower-beds. Is this meant to be 'beautification'?

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The science of scare tactics

JONATHAN ALTER

IT'S Fright Night in the 2004 presidential campaign. Halloween comes early. President Bush says you'll be taxed into poverty, then blown up by a terrorist if you vote for John Kerry, while Kerry says that voting for Bush means retiring on cat food, if you survive a back-alley abortion, and being drafted to fight in the Middle East. To me, it's all fair game. There's no use wringing your hands over attack politics. This is what politicians were put on earth to doraize the stakes and stigmatise the other guy. But it's the job of the news media and what one Bush aide dismissively calls the "reality-based community" to parse the claims and connect them to how each man might actually govern. Just repeating that "both sides are using scare tactics" doesn't tell us which ones are closer to the mark.

All year long, the president's campaign has revolved around Scary Kerry. For starters, Bush says average Americans would get hit with tax increases if Kerry wins. Fat chance. During the second debate, Kerry looked spookily into the camera and offered what amounted to a read-my-lips pledge not to raise taxes on the middle class (a moment he may come to regret). Even the rich are probably safe. Kerry's plan to pay for his health-care programme by repealing the tax cuts for those earning more than \$200,000 is likely to have problems in a Republican Congress that remains under the thumb of wealthy interests.

Bush's major assault is on Kerry's ability to defend us from terrorism. On this score, the president is how to put this delicately?-- lying. He keeps saying on the stump that Kerry won't hit terrorists until they hit us and would apply a "global test" before intervening. This is a clear and deliberate misrepresentation of what Kerry actually said. Bush goes on to argue that Kerry voted to disarm the military. In fact, both CIA Director Porter Goss and Vice President Dick Cheney supported even deeper cuts in intelligence and weapons systems at the end of the Cold War. The irony of Bush's "wolf ad" (featuring pictures of scary wolves as the announcer talks about Kerry's weakness on defense) is that it's the president who has a wolf problem. The greatest single consequence of the botched war in Iraq is that the next time trouble arises somewhere in the world, our allies won't believe US intelligence about an "imminent threat." With a toxic combination of arrogance and incompetence, Bush has become the boy who cried wolf.

Kerry's scare tactics against Bush are more justified but less effective. For 40 years, Democrats have raised fears about Social Security at election time. The claims were so bogus (Republicans mostly wanted sensible reforms) that even straight news

reporters began referring to Democrats' "demagoguing" Social Security. This year Kerry is actually right that Bush's plan to privatise a portion of Social Security would eventually lead to at least a trillion-dollar shortfall and huge benefit cuts. But fewer people are listening, which means that Democrats, too, are paying the price for crying wolf. Fortunately, Bush probably wouldn't be able to do much to Social Security. Once the public recognises that letting younger workers invest their retirement benefits in the stock market means hurting Grandma and Grandpa (under the system, today's workers fund today's elderly), the Bush plan will die.

The stakes are higher on abortion, where the staleness of the Democrats' argument is also hurting them. After years of dire warnings by women's groups, the right to choose is truly on the line this time. With at least three

Supreme Court justices expected to retire in the next four years, Roe v. Wade could well be reversed if Bush is re-elected (depending, in part, on the Senate elections). If Roe goes down, more than 30 states are expected to outlaw abortion.

As for the prospect of a military draft, Bush is correct when he says he has no plans for conscription; it is unnecessary for Iraq. But he has yet to explain what he'll do about an army that is by all accounts overstretched and putting severe strains on the guard and reserves. And the world could change abruptly (by, say, a single assassin's bullet in Pakistan); a second war of the same size would require a draft.

The shorthand that Bush is relying on to win is that he will protect America and Kerry won't. This may work politically, but it is simply untrue. Does anyone seriously believe Kerry wouldn't fight al Qaeda? As for

Homeland Security, Kerry could hardly do worse. Bush sold out to the chemical industry so chemical plants are largely unprotected. He failed to follow through on cargo security so ports are unsecured. Compare Bush to a real wartime leader like Franklin D. Roosevelt. When FDR ordered that 50,000 combat aircraft be built in five months, he was told it was impossible. He made it happen. When Bush, by contrast, was told it would take five years after 9/11 to consolidate terrorist watch lists and replace the FBI's primitive computers, he shrugged and sat on his hands. The job remains undone. Now that's frightening.

Jonathan Alter is a senior writer for Newsweek.

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