

From Niketan to Mohakhali: A Rickshaw Odyssey

SOHANA MANZOOR

For the three years that I lived in Niketan, Gulshan, I commuted to my workplace in Mohakhali by rickshaw. Each day was an adventure then; indeed, an odyssey of sorts through a narrow, winding route that Niketan denizens knew by heart. I did not have a car, and the lanes (too narrow to be called streets) were in terrible shape. On rainy days, they virtually turned into puddles and ditches. The rickshaw-puller's job was to veer through those potholes in such a way that the passengers were not ejected from their seats. It was impossible to just sit on a rickshaw and not flinch or frown.

One day, I woke up especially early because I had invigilation duty at the university where I worked then. It was a Friday morning in winter, and the loudspeaker of some picnic-going crowd was blaring: “*Porayna chokher polok/ Dekhe tar rooper jholok!*” (I can't help staring at her/ because she's so gorgeous!)

I flagged and climbed into a rickshaw, gritting my teeth for the 20-minute rollercoaster ride to Mohakhali. The rickshaw-puller was obviously mesmerized by the song. He looked longingly at two large buses with colourful banners that stood ready to depart. He started humming along in an off-tune voice, “*Ami gyan harabo, naki moray jabo...*” (Shall I faint, or shall I die?) I blanched as I looked at his rope-like limbs and oil-slicked hair. He was a young fellow in his early twenties, but the sound emitting from his throat was more like a squeaky adolescent. “Hey, look where you're going!” I snapped. “You don't have to look at the bus and sing that horrendous song. Or else other people will faint before you do.”

The rickshaw-puller looked back at me sheepishly and said with a shy smile, “You're right, of course, apa. My sister says the same thing.”



We stopped at Niketan Gate, one of the points of entry into our neighbourhood. It was a large two-part iron gate, with one part usually swung open for traffic, the other closed. Today, however, even that opening was blocked. A large bullock stood immobile at the half-open gate that led into the narrow back-streets winding their way to Mohakhali bazaar. “*Yaa Ali! Yaa Ali!*” Several people were yelling at the top of their voices, beseeching our long-suffering caliph for strength; the accent on the second syllable of his name suggesting that the task was immensely strenuous. My rickshaw-puller and I gaped in

wonder at the sable beast that was the size of a mini-mountain. It was accompanied by two herdsman, a young lad of about fourteen, and an imperious-looking man with a Saudi turban on his head, no doubt the owner of the beast. Everyone (except the owner) was pressing the stubborn animal forward, trying to get him through the gate. The giant stood with its muzzle turned sideways and its tail swishing this way and that; it was unperturbed and acted as if it was being pestered by mere insects. It had clearly come all this way—why was it now refusing to move? Suddenly, we heard a

sharp cry, and gasped as our gaze fell on the man who was bringing up the rear. A dark semi-liquid ooze clung to his shirt, and he spewed maledictions, cursing the bullock to its seventh generation. Relieved of its burden, the bullock finally moved— as if nothing had happened at all. The surrounding crowd also dispersed, and we resumed our journey.

Immediately after it crossed Niketan gate, my rickshaw turned right into a narrow lane full of shops. A little boy sat on a stool in a barbershop, his face distorted into a toothless grimace. Clearly, he didn't want to be there but had been brought in by his father who stood next to him as his head was being shaved. I felt sorry for the poor chap and wondered what brought them there so early on a Friday morning, and also why he was getting his head shaved in winter. The rickshaw at this point was moving very slowly. There was a long line of rickshaws and vans here even this early in the morning. After all, this was the only way rickshaws could reach Mohakhali and Gulshan since they were not allowed on the main road.

Suddenly, I heard a startled shout behind me. I twisted my neck to look through the opening at the back of my rickshaw. O Lord, what a crowd! A serpentine queue of rickshaws and rickshaw-vans had formed behind us. A young man standing on a van was shouting with raised hands. But while he was the source of the hubbub, the cause lay elsewhere. He was looking upward at an opened window of a house. It was one of those unruly dwellings that seem to sprout by the roadside without rhyme or reason, and without boundary walls, their doors opening right onto the street. The man in question was dripping wet and I gathered that someone had just thrown water out of that window—not an untypical occurrence in

back alleys of Dhaka!

Immediately, people from other vehicles began to hurl obscenities. This too was not untypical! Thankfully though, the line of rickshaws started moving once again; the hooting and jeering around us slowly subsided. What a spectacle! I sighed and closed my eyes for a few seconds. When I opened them, I caught a glimpse of a strange-looking bird that sat on a grimy yellow wall on the other side of the narrow street. It was small and had red and black stripes. It hopped, sprinted, and then flew away before I could take a good look, disappearing among the trees in front of a discoloured and dilapidated old house.

The house took my breath away. Where did it appear from? I had travelled this road very often; how come I had never noticed it before? It was a two-storied structure, the kind you see in old Dhaka. Moss and creepers had colonized its cracked and crumbling walls. The traffic had now slowed to a halt again, so the rickshaw-puller stopped right in front of the house. The grove fronting the house was so natural, unassuming and inviting that our best-kept gardens of Gulshan could not compete with it. I looked at the rusty little gate and the enclosed copse wistfully as the rickshaw-puller dragged us on toward the busy Mohakhali street known by the WASA water tank that towers above it. I had a full day of work ahead. But even if my days were not so hectic, would I have stopped to take a good look at the rusty moss-covered gate and the overgrown garden? We Dhaka-dwellers have become too cynically urbane and have little time to reminisce or dream even though it can still surprise us—every now and then!

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MUSINGS

Paradise Lost-Dhaka in the 1950s and 60s

FAKRUL ALAM



The 50s Sadarghat riverfront

Memory always plays tricks on us in old age and nostalgia makes the past appear perennially serene then. Once upon a time, we tend to feel at a later stage of life, everything was peaceful and stress-free. And then, as theology forewarned us all, came the fall, for we inexplicably exiled ourselves from paradise through our own self-destructive imaginings and craving for forbidden knowledge.

And so when I think of the Dhaka of my childhood, I keep thinking of how beautiful and unspoiled it all was, and how we all have ruined it totally in the last forty or so years. True, the monsoons would make the drains flood and stink, but the rain pouring down would wash away the detritus and unpleasant stuff from them soon enough. True, we lacked many of the creature comforts without which life seems unlivable nowadays, but did we ever miss them then? No, in that prelapsarian world nothing bad stayed stuck in the cityscape and we loved its good things forever and forever, no matter how rudimentary the municipal services were, or how basic or bare the furnishings of our homes were at that time.

The other day a friend forwarded a link to me about Dhaka in the 1960s that made me think that in this case at least memory did not play a trick on me. The link led me to a posting on Dhaka by Pantha Rahman Reza made on 29 July, 2016 (*Global Voices*-<https://globalvoices.org>). But before I go to Reza's posting let me quote the information posted in *Global Voices* by its staff about itself: “We are a borderless, largely volunteer community of more than 1400 writers, analysts, online media experts, and translators” dedicated to promoting

“understanding and friendship across borders.”

Pantha's posting is really a photo-essay about Dhaka in the 1960s and is titled “Old Photos Bring Back Sweet Memories of Bangladesh's Capital Dhaka”. What Pantha has done in his piece is feature the work of the British aid worker Roger Gwynn who came to Dhaka in the 1960s as a volunteer for Service Civil International and who seemed to have photographed extensively the life of ordinary people in East Pakistan then. The photos are amateurish work I would say, but that not much art is needed for anyone interested in representing everyday life faithfully is clearly obvious in this case; Gwyn has captured well for us a Dhaka that is fascinating, if only to those of us who were growing up in the city at that time, and are in a state of perpetual grief now about its contemporary dreadfulness.

Look at the photograph of Topkhana Road, for example, framed by trees that have now disappeared. Viewing the slow-paced traffic and the sauntering pedestrians sharing the street with some bicycles and a few three- and four wheelers, one can only be bemused by the contrast between the unhurried pace of life in Dhaka then and the frantic, crowded city street scene that we are bound to view every time we cross this street in our time. And look at the open spaces in front of Victoria Park, Saderghat that Gwynn has framed. Even on a hartal day now, would we able to glimpse old Dhaka so sparsely populated, and as unspoiled and uncluttered as is the scene the British photographer has managed to freeze in time? And behold *thela gari* pullers next to their handcarts in front of the photos of



Nawabpur in the 50s

COURTESY: WAQAR KHAN ARCHIVES

New Market. Why is the street all but barren of life? Where is the hustle and bustle one associates with the New Market ambience these days? Where is the throng that make movement of anyone, pedestrian or not, impossible at times now? Surely, the solitary microbus in the street would barely disturb the silence of such a street even at its noisiest then, whereas now one's hearing would be bothered by a cacophony of sounds, whether emitting from cantankerous car drivers in all types of vehicles, struggling all day across the chaotic, crowded street that you have to cross in considerable confusion most times of the day.

Gwynn's Dhaka is truly, magically safe, if we juxtapose it now with the images cluttering our mind of the contemporary cityscape. Behold for example the photo of children in old Dhaka peering intently at a bioscope from different positions, as if they didn't even need to see through its eye to view the world of magic, and as if they would all see through it at the same time. Can you imagine children now on the streets of old Dhaka doing anything similar? We did so whenever we could, but parents now would certainly shoo away their offsprings from such activity in the city's unsafe streets at any time of the day.

Look at the two rare images of Sadarghat's riverfront and Nawabpur Road from an even earlier—1950s—Dhaka supplied for this piece by the indefatigable hispotrian and archivist of Dhaka photographs and artworks Waqar A. Khan. Can you imagine a Sadarghat and Nawabpur Road so full of empty spaces and so sparsely polulated in our time?

As L. P. Hartley once said— the past

is a foreign country. For sure, no passport will ever transmit me to the safe, quite pleasant, and mostly quiet Dhaka of the sixties that we can glimpse in Roger Gwynn's photos. I know, too, that the “sweet memories” of this Dhaka can only be revived only through such images retrieved from archives or from memory's caverns. But a city-dweller all my life, and one who has had the good fortune of being on streets of some of the world's largest cities, I truly hope to see before my time is out a Dhaka where pedestrians and citizens, young or old, can walk with relative safety and in relative silence most of the day. Our children will never again peer at bioscopes they can access in the city's street that will take them to some enchanted land in some holiday afternoon, but surely Dhaka's streets will offer them in a not too distant future, magical attractions through video consoles and play stations, accessible in amusement parks scattered all over the city; surely there they will be able to peer into distant galaxies where their parents can take them whenever possible. The past will always be the past, but perhaps we can come out of the horrific, chaotic Dhaka we are seemingly doomed to inhabit forever at present. Certainly, we can hope that this megacity of ours will be redeemed by our city fathers/mothers and leaders so that it can be, if not paradise regained, a place where citizens can feel secure and experience pleasant scenes and quiet moments every day, and not be harried and handicapped by persistent urban nightmares in their waking moments.

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POETRY

You Said

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Notun Bazar was burning, burning!
Shops, stores, woodpiles
Piled up iron, timber, mosques and temples
Notun Bazar was burning, burning!

Parrot cages, copies of Rabindranath's collected works, sweet-meat shops
Maps old documents all aflame
Just as bees swarm out of hives buzzing,
Flushed out with smoke from a fire
All of us flushed out by flames
All of us swarming and fleeing the city like bees
Scattering here, there, everywhere
Hugging her newly-born babe in her bosom a bewildered mother
Fleeing like a singed forest deer
In the distance bullets whizzing past, ransacking army jeeps hogging roads. Shrieks
And screams filling streets. The two of us
Stunned into silence. Trembling, we embracing each other somehow.
You saying:
“Save me, save from this fire lit by barbarians
Hide me in the fold of your eyes
In the depth of your heart or within your ribcage
Suck me in an instant
In kiss after kiss.”

Notun Bazar was burning, burning
Flames here there everywhere
Lead bullets zinging past us hail fire falling
You had said
“Save me”!
But hapless me not able to say even that!



Shamsur Rahman 1929-2006