

For the longest time my vocabulary in Bengali was limited to *bame*, *dane* and *ekhane*. Three little words that proved invaluable when navigating Dhaka traffic from the back of a rickshaw. “I don’t speak Bangla”, I used to joke, “I just speak rickshaw”. It was on the rickshaw, with one knee tightly pressed against the driver’s seat, that I came to know and love Dhaka: the congested *golis* of Old Dhaka, the green lanes of Dhaka University Campus, the neat residential blocks of Bashundara, and the broken, potholed roads of Rayerbazar.

It has been six years since my first rickshaw ride in Dhaka and a lot has changed in the meantime. Whereas in 2011 I could easily take a rickshaw from Bashundara to Banani, today this journey through the diplomatic area would be cut off, hindered and delayed by the numerous police checkpoints and “VIP roads” on the way. It would involve transferring between different vehicles and, possibly, between a regular rickshaw and one of the yellow-coloured community rickshaws that now ply the roads of Baridhara, Gulshan and Banani in very limited numbers.

These restrictions seem to be part of a wider effort to isolate and, ultimately, “protect” the diplomatic zone from the rest of the city, hence, creating a “comfortable” zone of withdrawal for foreign visitors like myself. It is an understandable impulse perhaps, considering last year’s terrorist attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery. Still, whenever I find myself crossing the border between Banani and Gulshan by foot these days, I cannot help but wonder: what do these restrictions actually achieve, other than putting up a pleasant illusion of order and controllability?

Security and privilege

As can be witnessed the world over, measures to hold off terrorism are seldom entirely rational or even sensible. All too often they function as an excuse for limiting civil liberties and scapegoating vulnerable communities. That security restrictions are by no means “colour blind” or class neutral, is something that I am personally reminded of whenever I visit the neighbourhood of Baridhara these days. Whereas Bangladeshi pedestrians are stopped, checked and sometimes even frisked at the entrance gate, I, as a (white) foreigner, can stride through without even attracting a second glance. While continuing my walk uninterrupted, I am typically left with the uncomfortable sensation that I have been at the receiving end of a form of favouritism that is firmly rooted in colonial history.

Considering the intimate link between security and privilege, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that poor communities seem to be paying the price for many of the restrictions that were implemented after the Holey Artisan Bakery Attack. Take, for example, the changes that the local transportation system has undergone in the diplomatic zone. Dhaka Chaka now holds a monopoly over all bus transport in the area, forcing people from all classes to use AC buses



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

RICKSHAW RESTRICTIONS PRIVILEGE FOR SOME, DISASTER FOR THE PULLER

ANNEMIEK PRINS

whether they can afford to or not. Commuting in and out of Gulshan has become increasingly difficult for slum dwellers in particular, since all boat services from Korail slum have been banned. Garment workers, day-labourers and domestic workers now have to walk for up to an hour, only to arrive at a destination that they could have reached within five minutes by boat.

There is no clear evidential base for the assumed relation between rickshaw drivers and crime, let alone terrorism. So, if not security, what is it? Is it perhaps just that we want our neighbourhoods to look orderly, developed and modern and that the informal activities of poor people somehow challenge these ideals?

To make matters worse, there has been a sharp decline in the number of rickshaws that are allowed to operate in the diplomatic zone. This imposed rickshaw ceiling has dealt some heavy, and arguably, unnecessary blows to the local rickshaw industry and the many families dependent on it.

Introducing the “yellow rickshaw”

In August 2016, a month after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, the housing

associations of Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani and Niketan introduced a new rickshaw system in their respective neighbourhoods. The total number of rickshaws in the area was reduced from an estimated 10,000 to a mere 1,230 and all vehicles were registered and licensed. These so-called “community rickshaws” have been painted bright yellow and are operated by rickshaw pullers in orange uniforms, with a photo ID card around their neck. A list of fixed fares is attached to the back of the rickshaw indicating, for example, that a journey from Banani

The rickshaw driver that facilitated my next ride on a community rickshaw was quick to express his frustration over the new system, lamenting that the daily rickshaw rent had quadrupled. He now had to pay BDT 400 for a full day, while the rent for a regular rickshaw varies between BDT 80 and 110. This amount indeed seemed exorbitant and almost impossible to collect when sticking to the conservative fare chart on the back.

Debt, financial despair and struggling businesses

On paper the new rickshaw system looks sensible enough; orderly, planned and underpinned by just the right amount of bureaucracy. This neat pretence of administrative order, however, has done the rickshaw community no favours. Jobs in slum areas like Korail have decreased drastically and many rickshaw pullers had been forced to move back to the countryside. Those who stayed were almost unanimous in their negative opinion.

The lucky few who were able to operate a community rickshaw complained about the steep increase in rent. When asked whether their income had increased as well, most of them responded negatively, explaining that the sheer scarcity of rickshaws forced them to share one vehicle among two or three operators. As a result, their working hours had decreased and their daily income now fluctuated around BDT 700.

Those who have been unable to obtain a yellow rickshaw (i.e. the overwhelming majority) are notably worse off, as their

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daily earnings have dropped to a meagre amount of BDT 300 or 400. With most of the surrounding areas being off limits to regular rickshaws, the drivers now find themselves restricted to small pockets of Mohakhali and parts of Banani that can only be accessed after paying a bribe to the traffic police. Khalil, a rickshaw puller from Sherpur, explains that he constantly has to decline passengers because he is no longer allowed to enter Banani. He might have to leave this part of town at some point, as his income is now woefully inadequate for supporting his family. The words of other rickshaw pullers echo a similar kind of despair: “We cannot eat meat anymore”, “We cannot manage our children’s education costs anymore” and “Everyone has taken out loans”.

On one of my own rickshaw rides through Banani I get to talk more extensively about the topic of debt with a rickshaw puller who introduces himself as Mohammad. He still drives a “regular” rickshaw and when I mention my research, he immediately slows down and starts to talk compellingly about the misfortune the new system has caused him. To prevent his three daughters from dropping out of school, he has recently taken out two loans of BDT 1 lakh. His meagre income makes it nearly impossible to pay back the weekly instalments of BDT 1,600. Tomorrow is another payday and his wife just called that she doesn’t have enough money to manage food today.

However, it is not only rickshaw drivers that have fallen in economic trouble. Rickshaw owners have also been hit hard by the new system. Most of the rickshaw garages in Korail are full of regular rickshaws that are not being used. One of the owners I talked to, Mohamad Shahalom, seemed completely defeated by his dwindling business. He has 100 rickshaws in total, but the overwhelming majority is rusting away

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Dizen Tudu wasn’t always a calculative person. There was a time when he could work in the field under the sweltering heat all day and still have enough energy left in him to play with his three boys at home in the evening. A little more than a year ago, he was the sole breadwinner of his family. His boys weren’t allowed to work. He would cover the extra mile alone, in order to ensure that his children could study and would not have to take any pressure. The setting of the shanty he lives in today though paints a completely different picture. The 42-year-old Santal, who was hit with a rubber bullet in his eye on November 6 last year, focuses on saving every ounce of his energy to perform the most basic tasks. “One of my eyes is gone. It does not function. The other one has deteriorated a bit. I can’t stay in the sun for more than 30 minutes. My head heats up and I need to rest,” laments Dizen, who now lives in a village nearby the mill along with his family. “Nowadays, I don’t even feel like talking. It takes too much energy and I feel tired. This is all because of the bullet that hit me. I think it has affected my brain. Have a look. You can still see the splinters on my forehead and my face,” he says while tilting his head. Dizen’s wife, Moses Tudu, has since been compelled to take charge of the family. It hasn’t been easy. “My family eats once a day. Since he can’t work, I have to travel far looking for work and then I have to come home and take care of the family as well. It’s difficult, but who else will do it?” she asks. Most of the Santals used to work as day labourers. However, according to them, ever since the attack on November 6, many locals haven’t been interested in giving them jobs, which has forced them to travel farther in a bid to earn money. Most of the Santals, as a result, have been depending upon aid that they have been receiving from the NGOs. The government, they allege, haven’t done much. Their dire situation is best described by Moses: “This is a free country and I want my freedom. We are a part of this country. Where will we go? How long will we live on the roadsides? We can’t do this for much longer. We want the government to build the houses in the place where we were in. We need to be paid for our loss.”



PHOTO: AFP

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in his garage because he only managed to get five, very expensive licenses. For, as a result of the imposed rickshaw ceiling, there is now an emergent black market for licensed rickshaws, with owners paying up to one lakh to obtain one.

Modernity at all cost?

So what could possibly justify this enormous human cost? Enhanced security for the rich? Although such a trade-off would be morally questionable in itself, it also does not seem to be grounded in truth. There is no clear evidential base for the assumed relation between rickshaw drivers and crime, let alone terrorism. So, if not security, what

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Being a foreigner I sometimes have the feeling that I am part of the “problem”, or at least part of the audience that these attempts to “look modern” seem to target. “They introduced this new rickshaw system for people like you,” remarks a rickshaw owner by the name of Zaimul. He goes on to explain that Bangladesh is now gradually becoming developed and that the authorities want modernised transport, not the rickshaw. “They think it’s shameful for people from foreign



PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKAR

On November 6 last year, these Santal people were killed and several injured in a clash between the police and the Santals at the Shahebganj sugarcane farm of the Rangpur Sugar Mills in Gobindaganj upazila over a land dispute. Dizen is one of those victims and his situation has worsened over the year. According to the Santals, they owned most of the land before the government acquired it in the 1950s. The deal though was that the land would only be used for sugarcane farming to produce raw materials for the sugar mill. Leasing it out for any other purpose would lead to the termination of the contract. Santals claim the agreement was flouted and, as a result, they erected huts on nearly hundred acres of land at the Shahebganj farm on July 1 last year. In a bid to remove the Santals, they were attacked and their houses were torched. Soon after the attack, a video of the police setting the houses in the area on fire was leaked and it went viral on the social media. Under pressure, a police sub-inspector and a constable, out of the hundreds deployed that day, were suspended and the SP of Gaibandha was subsequently transferred. As things stand now, the police are investigating the cases filed before and after the incident. In the meantime, several Santals like Dizen and Moses have been struggling to recover from wounds and are also finding it difficult to make ends meet.

countries to see how one person is pulling forth another”.

Dhaka is by no means the only city that seems keen to uphold appearances for a “foreign audience”. Delhi launched a widespread beautification campaign prior to hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010. The campaign coincided with slogans such as “Clean Delhi, Green Delhi” (sound familiar?) and aspired to transform the city into a world-class metropolis. Now, of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting a clean and beautiful city, but in the case of Delhi this came at a considerable cost. In his book “Rule by Aesthetics”, D Asher Ghertner, Associate Professor of Geography at Rutgers University, shows that many slums in the capital were bulldozed and evicted on the mere grounds that they violated the aesthetic norm of “being world-class”. In a similar vein, the traffic police tried to ban the rickshaw by arguing “that allowing cycle-rickshaws to ply on the arterial roads would certainly not contribute to the vision of making Delhi a world class city”.

So as we develop and modernise our beloved Dhaka, let us please remember that there is nothing world-class about poor and vulnerable communities not having jobs or being deprived of shelter. The anthropologist Jonathan Anjaria once remarked that there is nothing that “‘clean’ sidewalks hide better than poverty” and that is certainly something to bear in mind when we fret over whether or not our cities “look” developed enough.

And as far as the rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone is concerned; luckily it is still up for review and evaluation. Let us hope that it will grow to be more inclusive and less rigid over time. I for one would gladly give up some of my alleged security, if that means that rickshaw pullers can continue to send their children to school.

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Bimol Kisko was returning home when the gunfire began on November 6. It was around 10 or 11 in the morning, he recalls. He got shot in both legs and has been bedridden ever since. He is afraid that he is becoming too much of a burden on his family. “I feel okay when I am lying down; however, the moment I stretch my legs a bit, they give in. I have trouble bending down in the bathroom and I have to depend on my children,” says Bimol. “My children are set to give their exams soon. If I don’t pay their fees, they won’t be allowed to enter the hall. You wanted to know how we have been doing for the last one year, you can see it for yourself,” the 40-year-old adds with a very smile. Walk around the Jaipur Para and Madadpur villages, near the mill, and you will find several Bimols and Dizens. 35-year-old Asha Marma explains how the area is in dire need of medication, food and shelter. “The rains this time have made everything so much worse. We haven’t received any help from the government. And why? Is it a crime to stand up for your own land?” Hokna Morma, who was shot in his chest, talks about how he often goes to other villages and begs for rice for his family. Philimon Baske, the Vice President of the Santal’s Andolon Sangram Committee, describes the situation of the Santals living there as unimaginable. Soon after the attack on November 6, the Santals initially refused to take aid from government officials. Eventually, Minister Obaidul Quader stepped in and the Santals accepted some. However, according to Philimon, nothing else was offered. Recently though, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) of the region offered 3,000 tonnes of rice to the Santals. It’s aid that Philimon says the Santals will accept. “We will accept the aid, but we won’t stop our protest. There is a new UNO here and there are new people in the administration. They seem to be understanding. Those who were here before just shouted and threatened us,” says Philimon. The government has promised that it will solve the problems of the Santal community of Gaibandha permanently. They have promised to rehabilitate them. However, the anxiety in the region among the Santals doesn’t seem to have subsided. Kalpana Begum, whose house was the first one in the area to be put on fire on November 6, best explains the situation: “Is there any point talking to them? So many journalists have come and gone, but we still haven’t seen any kind of justice.”