



PHOTO: MD. RAHAT KABIR

by pulling a rickshaw in my old age," says Rafique. "When a man fails to do anything else with his life, he goes to peddle a rickshaw. Nobody becomes a rickshaw-puller by choice. I've been peddling rickshaw in this city for the past five years, but till now, my family doesn't know about what I do here," adding in a sad voice, "If my daughter's husband knew that I'm a rickshaw puller, he might break up their marriage."

Rafique, after peddling a rickshaw for 12 hours straight, earns merely Tk 500 a day. From this, he pays Tk 100 to the *mohajon* who owns the rickshaw. Every day he also needs to pay Tk 20-40 to the police to cycle along roads where rickshaws are usually not allowed to ply. He spends around Tk 100-150 for his own food and other needs during the day. Rafique sends the rest to his wife in the village through bKash. With this money, Rafique's wife maintains herself and pays weekly installments of a loan they recently took from a local NGO to help meet family expenditures. After hard labour the whole day, he lays down in the garage to sleep—he cannot afford a rented room with his small income.

When asked how much money he earned as his highest income in a day, Rafique replies that when bus services are shut down, he made up to Tk 1300-1500. "Also, on election day, I made Tk 1500," he smiles.

According to a 2018 study by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) 'Organising the Informal Economy

# PULLING

## the weight of the world

No services in sight for the rickshaw pullers of the country

NILIMA JAHAN

Fifty-year-old rickshaw puller Rafique Miah was struggling hard to peddle his rickshaw on the uneven roads of Mirpur. Looking exhausted, bearing testimony of his daylong hard labour, sweat trickled down his face on a winter evening in January. Still, he was doing his best to move forward, all the while wiping his brow with his torn *gamcha* (towel).

Hailing from a remote village of Nilphamari, Rafique took up peddling a rickshaw only recently, at the onset of his fifties. His only son kicked him out of his own house and fresh from having spent Tk 50,000 as dowry on his daughter's wedding, Rafiq was penniless. A security guard at a private company, Rafique's son refused to take any responsibility of his parents.

Rafique came to Dhaka as millions



PHOTO: MD. RAHAT KABIR

Rickshaw pullers usually take lunch from the roadside food vans.

others have permanently, or seasonally, to make a living. He was able to manage a rickshaw rented from a *mohajon* (rickshaw trader). "It is so hard to accept that my son threw me in a situation where I have to live

Workers: A Study of Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka City', there are around 2.2 million rickshaw-pullers in the capital.

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