

Ban on rickshaw: How logical is it?



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

WHAT is the most readily available transport in the megacity of Dhaka? Without batting an eye, anyone would say that it is the

rickshaw. Rickshaws are so common in the country that if anyone steps outside their home, one or more rickshaws, with their little silver tinkling bells, will appear within a minute or so.

In Dhaka, the popularity of rickshaws far exceeds that of all other modes of transport. Rickshaws mostly ply on lanes and narrow roads. The size of the middle-class is expanding and so is the number of passengers using rickshaws. As a result, rickshaws have emerged as one of the most common and popular modes of transport for the people of Dhaka.

One of the reasons why rickshaws are so convenient for the city dwellers is that Dhaka is not a walkable city. Footpaths are occupied by hawkers and are often strewn with garbage, making it extremely hard for people to use the footpaths which should ideally be free to use for pedestrians. Moreover, people here do not have the habit of walking—even more so when they have to walk quite a bit carrying some luggage. Then there is the lack of adequate public transport. Anyone who commutes to work or school on a day-to-day basis knows just how hard it is for public transport users to catch the bus on a busy morning or afternoon. These are just some of the many reasons why rickshaws are so popular.

Rickshaws have a long history in Bangladesh. They have even carved out

a space for themselves in Bangladesh's tradition. According to Banglapedia, Dhaka city had only 37 rickshaws in 1941 and 181 in 1947. Before 1947, Dhaka was a district town, which had a population of 62,469 only, according to the 1951 census. But now, the situation is beyond one's imagination. According to unofficial and conservative estimates, for more than 1.5 crore people, there are now more than one million rickshaws in Dhaka.

Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. It is also one of the most polluted cities. There are few things that portray Dhaka in a good light around the world. But rickshaws are a source of pride for us. Dhaka is in the Guinness Book of World Records for the most cycle rickshaws in one city. This was revealed in the Guinness Book of World Records of 2015 under the title "Most cycle rickshaws in one city" in the chapter "Urban Transport".

Recently, the two city corporations in Dhaka decided to ban rickshaws on three major thoroughfares in an effort to address the problem of traffic congestion. These routes are: Progoti Sarani from Kuril to Sayedabad via Rampura and Khilgaon; Mirpur Road from Gabtoli to Azimpur via Asad Gate; and Elephant Road from Science Laboratory Intersection to Shahbagh Intersection.

This sudden decision of the authorities has raised hue and cry among the people. Are rickshaws one of the key reasons for traffic congestion in Dhaka?

Let's have a look at some statistics. Firstly, for more than 1.5 crore people, there are around 8,000 public buses and 283,617 private cars in Dhaka. These cars are one of the main reasons behind traffic congestion in the capital



PHOTO: WONDERLANE/FICKR

because private cars oftentimes carry only one passenger but take up 2.5 times more space than a rickshaw. Moreover, a private car occupies a lot of space when it is parked on the streets while rickshaws remain on the move most of the time. At least 3.5 million trips are made on Dhaka streets a day with rickshaws accounting for 40 percent of them.

Secondly, rickshaws are one of the biggest sources of employment in Bangladesh. Every year a huge number of people join the labour market but there are not enough jobs for all of them. The situation is worse for those who are illiterate or do not have adequate educational qualifications for better paying jobs. For these people rickshaws are one of the most readily available jobs as it does not require any deposit, investment, lobbying or previous experience. Although pulling a rickshaw all day long is backbreaking, people choose it as their profession

because of a regular flow of income and because they have full liberty over their working hours and routes.

This sudden decision by the city corporations to ban rickshaws on the said routes may turn out to be a nightmare for some rickshaw-pullers as a section of them may end up losing their jobs. If the outright banning of rickshaws—stemming from our tendency to opt for a ban to address any problem—continues on a wider scale, it could spell disaster for the livelihoods of many. The decision to ban rickshaws may seem trivial, but its implications are multidimensional.

Rickshaws are not a single industry; rather there are 41 other related industries which employ a good number of people. Apart from rickshaw-pullers and their families, there are repair workers (*mistry*), owners, makers, shopkeepers (selling rickshaw parts, spare parts and other materials), and many others who

survive on the rickshaw business. Many housemaids living in the city's slums are married to rickshaw-pullers. If rickshaw-pullers end up losing their job and leaving Dhaka, then there might be a crisis of domestic workers too.

Thirdly, burning fossil fuel is one of the key factors behind global warming. Globally, scientists and activists are putting emphasis on non-motorised vehicles and electric vehicles. But it seems that Bangladesh, one of the worst victims of climate change, is heading in the reverse direction. By placing a ban, we seem to be discouraging the use of environment-friendly modes of transport like rickshaws. Rickshaws don't emit harmful carbon dioxide or carbon monoxide into the air.

Yes, it is true that non-motorised vehicles slow down the speed of motorised vehicles. But is banning the former the way to address the problem of traffic congestion? If we keep driving out rickshaws without providing any viable substitute, it will only increase the sufferings of the people and certainly spike up people's transport expenditures too.

To some people, the use of rickshaws is a symbol of poverty and to others, it is the best mode of transport for commuting. For some, it creates nuisance in the streets, clogging up traffic in the city, while for others, it is the only source of livelihood.

Rickshaw-pullers have no muscle power. They neither have a voice in society nor a platform where they can protest policy decisions that affect them adversely. Perhaps, that's why it's easy for the authorities to take such decisions on a whim—because no one will protest.

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Kushner's \$50-billion irony of the century



TASNEEM TAYEB

JARED Kushner, the US president's senior adviser and son-in-law, recently unveiled in Manama an economic proposal to settle the

decades-long Israel-Palestine conflict. He billed it as the "opportunity of the century".

The Manama Workshop aimed at disclosing a USD 50 billion plan for "a vision to empower the Palestinian people to build a prosperous and vibrant Palestinian society," the same Palestinians who have been enduring Israeli occupation for the last five decades.

Given that the United States, under the current administration, has acknowledged the disputed territory of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and ratified Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, this move by Kushner is nothing short of ironic.

The United States has done very little over the last five decades to contain Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, with the number of illegal Israeli settlers in Palestinian territories only increasing over time. Just after the Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and Palestine in 1993, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank was a little more than 116,000. Today, that number stands at a staggering 622,670. And the US has done nothing to condemn the persecution of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis.

Amidst all the pomp and glamour of the workshop at a Four Seasons in Bahrain, what was strikingly, but not surprisingly, missing was a delegation

from Palestine, or from Israel for that matter. Not that the Palestinians were not invited; in fact, they had been invited to join the workshop, which they were right in declining. The Palestinians had shunned the proposal, while Israel was not invited to send a delegate to create a balance.

The Palestinians were widely criticised by the United States for boycotting the Manama conference. According to Kushner, the Palestinian decision to boycott the workshop was "hysterical and erratic and not terribly constructive." And the Israelis did not miss the chance to goad the Palestinians by referring to the oft-quoted phrase by Israel's former Foreign Minister Abba Eban: "The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

The Palestinians, of course, had legitimate reasons for boycotting the workshop. For one, the United States, despite all its talk about prosperity, has cut almost all of its aid to Palestine, leaving them alone to fend for themselves. For 2019, the United Nations and the Palestinians had to appeal to the world community for humanitarian aid worth USD 350 million, since the US had cut almost all of the USD 500 million it used to provide to the Palestinians in aid every year. Regarding the decrease in funds, Jamie McGoldrick, UN's humanitarian coordinator in Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem, said, "We will be able to assist fewer people this year, 1.4 million people are being targeted as opposed to 1.9 million last year."

Earlier in 2018, the United States had pledged USD 385 million in aid to UNRWA, the UN agency that provides relief for Palestinian refugees. However, the US only provided the first installment of USD 60 million, before



White House senior adviser Jared Kushner speaks at the "Peace to Prosperity" conference in Manama, Bahrain, June 25, 2019. PHOTO: AFP

pulling the plug on it, in August. And while Jared Kushner asked the delegates in attendance in Manama to "imagine a bustling tourist centre in Gaza and the West Bank... Imagine people and goods flowing securely throughout the region as people become more prosperous," the question remains, amidst increasing encroachment of Palestinian lands by the Israelis, what is going to be the actual size and shape of Gaza and the West Bank in Kushner's fantasy story?

Amidst an existential crisis both metaphorical and real, how can the Palestinians be part of a dialogue that does not address the most basic of their needs—of statehood, identity, and survival? Jared Kushner, rather brusquely, has

already swept aside the Arab-League-endorsed "Arab Peace Initiative" that aims to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. In an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera, Kushner said, "I think we all have to recognise that if there ever is a deal, it's not going to be along the lines of the Arab peace initiative. It will be somewhere between the Arab peace initiative and between the Israeli position."

Before the workshop even began, in a show of blatant disregard for the concerns of the Palestinians, Kushner said, "They don't have a great track record of getting a deal done. I'll keep doing it the way that we want to do it." With Kushner already having decided that the US will do things the way they want to, what was even the

point for the Palestinians to attend the workshop? Just to be silent spectators perhaps?

The Palestinians are right in their concern about the sincerity of the United States to address their plight. The plan to usher in economic prosperity for the Palestinians did not, on a single instance, refer to the Israeli occupation of their lands.

And most importantly, the plan does in no way outline where the USD 50 billion fund is going to come from and how. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayeh has raised questions about the source of the funds that Kushner talks about: "It is just simply a theoretical piece of work calling for USD 50bn... We don't know where this money is going to come from but we know that the economic problem in Palestine has to do with all the Israeli measures."

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the Kushner plan is the decoupling of the economic plan of the peace initiative from its political blueprint, since without the political plan, it would be very difficult for the stakeholders to see the actual vision of the US for the region, if there is one. And with snap elections coming up in Israel in September 2019, Trump's political vision is unlikely to be unveiled anytime before late fall or even winter.

In short, the proposal unveiled at the Manama workshop does very little for the Palestinians. And given the Trump administration's cozy relationship with Israel, the possibility of Palestinians reaching their ultimate goal of having a free state and a safe abode for their people looks as bleak as ever.

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QUOTABLE Quote

MARGARET THATCHER
(1925-2013)
Former British Prime Minister

I always cheer up immensely if an attack is particularly wounding because I think, well, if they attack one personally, it means they have not a single political argument left.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Bouncy tune
- 5 Book makeup
- 10 Brainstorms
- 12 Defeatist's words
- 13 Drunken spree
- 14 "The Flash" character
- 15 Darling of baseball
- 16 Expressionless
- 18 "The Joy Luck Club" author
- 20 Try out
- 21 Physics bit
- 23 Dr.'s field
- 24 Ready to pick
- 26 Band boosters
- 28 In favor of
- 29 Postmark part

DOWN

- 1 Fall sign
- 2 Figure of speech
- 3 Comic Bruce
- 4 Playground game
- 5 Print unit
- 6 Corrosive stuff

31 Caribou's kin

32 Naval destroyer, in slang

36 Campaign loser

39 Long time

40 Hot spot

41 Roof feature

43 Marisa of "My Cousin Vinny"

44 News item

45 Forgo frugality

46 Fine study

7 Service station sight

8 Packs away

9 Doped up

11 Drugged

17 Brian of rock

19 Phone bug

22 Afternoon show

24 Desk type

25 Annoying

27 Belongs

28 Fanquets

30 - standstill

33 Spelunker

34 Hollywood worker

35 High homes

37 Hot spot

38 Senator Harry

42 Gardner of film

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

PANAMA AFAFAR
OPENUP MICE
PETITE PLED
LIFE AREAS
ERA HOMERUN
GEL OWE IDA
TEENS EGO
REELIN
STIR INTOTO
HANG SCENIC
EDGY THREAT

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

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