

# Breaking the cycle/rickshaw

*"Police in Bangladesh have begun a campaign to remove unlicensed cycle rickshaws from the capital, Dhaka. The authorities say the long-term aim is to halve the city's estimated 400,000 cycle rickshaws... Recently the government announced that it wanted to make the major roads of Dhaka off-limits to rickshaws—they are accused of slowing down traffic speeds. Traffic police are now deployed at every junction to ensure that the law is maintained... But trying to stop a rickshaw wallah from plying his trade in Dhaka is a bit like trying to stop a mosquito from coming into your house. They will always find a way."*

SHAER REAZ

Thus, reads an article published on BBC News World Edition by the BBC Reporter in Dhaka, Alastair Lawson. It paints a bleak picture of the people at the helm of Dhaka's 'lowest' form of transport—the cycle rickshaw. Considering the propensity of articles that cover a local topic for an international audience to go viral, this particular story stayed hidden in the crevices of the internet even during the ruckus that followed the banning of rickshaws across three major thoroughfares in Dhaka last week. That's because the piece, currently housed on an archived page of the BBC website, is dated

income of one of the poorest groups in Dhaka's socio-economic spread—the play continues, with the same actors, similar dialogues and no FIN in sight. Only the frequent scape-goats, the rickshaw-pullers, remain.

The last time rickshaw licenses were handed out at Suhrawardy Udyan in 1986, the numbers seemed manageable enough for the government to stop handing out licenses from then on. 79,554 rickshaws were licensed (58,714 in Dhaka South) and for all intents and purposes, that is the official number of legal rickshaws plying Dhaka's streets to this day, 33 years later.

will most likely involve heavy-handed policing action instead of meaningful rehabilitation or licensing.

As the March 2019 report titled "A Study of Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka City" by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies states, more than 91 percent of rickshaw pullers surveyed reported routine harassment by law enforcement including instances of physical assault, dehumanisation and physical damage to the rickshaws, the cost of which is ultimately born by the rickshaw pullers themselves. 42 percent of survey respondents also claimed they have faced temporary confinement at the hands of the police, with an overwhelming majority claiming they were only let go after paying bribes to their captors.

Transport experts and urban planners at the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) seem to hold the view that the rickshaw is an unnecessary component of Dhaka's urban dynamics, and a chief contributor to the steady decline in average traffic speeds as documented over the past two decades.

"No other megacity in the world can survive solely on a door-to-door informal transport service rather than proper public transport, as we do in Dhaka. Residents in Tokyo, which has a population density that is close to ours, have to take the metro or the public buses, whatever the weather or the physical condition of the commuter. A megacity like Dhaka must move towards that system," says Dhrubo Alam, a transport strategist and urban dynamics expert.

"Only in Dhaka will you see a person leaving their home and expecting a mode of transport ready to take them right to their destination while paying a higher ticket price per kilometer than any other mode of transport," he adds.

The rickshaw's role in supplanting Dhakaites' tendency to walk for short trips is what the DTCA seems to be fighting against. Their recent efforts at fixing the traffic problem includes plans of improving walkability—by uprooting illegally placed hawker stands, fixing up and widening the footpaths, creating a pedestrian friendly environment that encourages people to skip the rickshaw ride and put on their walking shoes.

However, since Dhaka South Mayor Syed Khokon took office, the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC)—which includes the heavy traffic areas of Dhaka College, New Market and Nilkhet—has seen very few drives against street hawkers. It's also a recurring problem—despite major drives by mobile courts in the past (under different mayoral leadership) against these illegal shops, they've kept propping up time and again. No effort has



ILLUSTRATION: MASUDA KHAN JUTI

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In 17 years, the op-eds, news pieces and features covering the issue still carry the same tone and largely describe the same situations. The resilient-but-poor rickshaw-puller; the helpless urban planner who has surely not considered every available option before suggesting yet another rickshaw ban; the easily-bribed traffic cops who seem to have finally taken a tough stance (for the next two weeks at least); the romantics who decry the declining art form of the rickshaw; the concerned human rights defenders who can't come to terms with the loss of

Unofficial estimates put the actual number of Dhaka's rickshaws close to 1.1 million, with rickshaw-pullers numbering higher at nearly 1.5 million.

A recent BUET study reported that, at present, there are 28 organisations controlling the illegal rickshaw business in Dhaka, including the Dhaka Division Rickshaw and Van Owners' Association, Metropolitan Rickshaw Owners League, Muktijoddha Samannay Parishad and Bangladesh Rickshaw and Van Owners Federation, among others. The government has hinted at taking stern action on illegal rickshaw licensing, but