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MOVING PICTURES

Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh


PLAZA

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and David J Williams

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Mapin Publishing

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The road to rickshaws

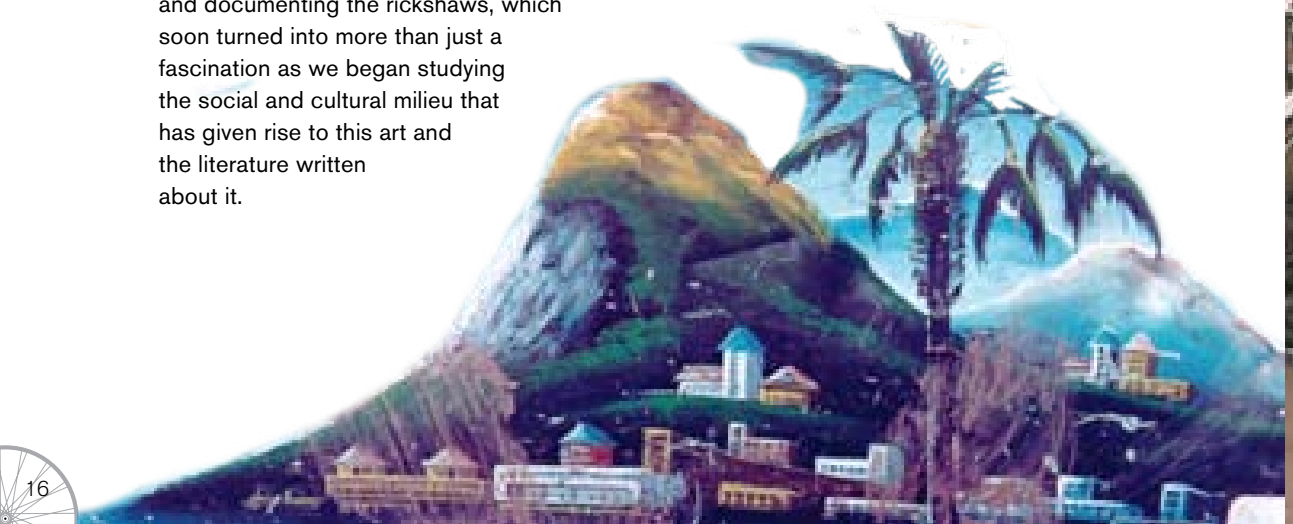
Long before we actually went to live in Bangladesh, the country was part of my imagination. Like millions of Bengali Indians, Bangladesh is part of my identity and consciousness, but I had little knowledge of this fact as a child growing up in a small town in West Bengal, India. I had little awareness of this neighbouring country, till I heard my father weep, listening to a strange voice coming from the transistor. It was a mid-summer school holiday in 1971, and I was about to take a midday nap, half-awake, half-asleep, when I awoke to the muffled sounds of my father's sobbing. Similar to many other Bengalis who had to leave their homes due to the Partition, he was also keenly listening to the many repeat plays of the inspiring voice of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the liberation war of Bangladesh. What deep-seated emotion compelled him to cry for the home he had had to leave over three decades ago was beyond my understanding at that time, but this singular incident at once made Bangladesh a part of my perception. Bangladesh entered my soul; I realized that I could not escape the truth of its existence, the reality of my own roots, and my own certain and increasing desire to engage with this country.

Over the years, I had built up an imagined country in my mind, spiced up by a couple of short trips. When David took up a job in Dhaka in 2000, I was overjoyed to at last get a chance to spend some time there. It was the experience of a lifetime; encounters such as the pilgrimage to my grandfather's home in a wet-green village in Barisal churned passions within me that I never knew existed. It was a pilgrimage because he left his home and fields at Partition, hoping for all bustle to settle down soon, but was never to go back there, and I was the first member in the family to revisit it. I also visited the college near Karnaphuli River in Chittagong where my father, a young postgraduate from Calcutta University, went – with my heavily pregnant mother – to teach economics to local village students. Ma used to say that the walk from the bus-stand to the village seemed interminable to her at the time and indeed, it seemed so even to us, travelling in an air-conditioned car from Dhaka, but held up on the way by an elephant and a broken down bus. We saw the smoke-filled Chittagong ship-wrecking yards, which David described as 'technological hell'. As we stayed on, we learnt to love the country and its people, and began to see things through the lens of 'insiders'.

Whatever one's reactions are to Bangladesh, the ubiquitous rickshaws cannot but attract the attention of any new visitor to the country; and we too loved them at first sight. I come from small-town India, where rickshaws are still the primary mode of conveyance. Part of my growing-up education was my father teaching me, a mere five-year-old, how to hail a rickshaw: 'Say, "*Ei rickshaw bhara jabe*?", and then if he says yes, he will also ask "Where will you go, Khuki?" Then you say "*Mincipal Gut*" school; remember, do not say "Municipal Girls" school because he won't understand you...' and there I was, for eleven years of school and for many more years later in life, taking a rickshaw to my school and elsewhere, alone and without any difficulty whatsoever.

Yet, the rickshaws of Bangladesh were not like anything I had seen before. Bengalis from both sides of the border share many things: our appearance, language, history, culture and food. But just across the border, Indian rickshaws are plain and ordinary, whereas those in Bangladesh,

even the ones in remote and rural areas, come alive in their decorated and colourful appearance. Similar to Kolkata, whose rickshaws gave us Lapierre's *The City of Joy* but are seen as symbols of backwardness, rickshaws in Dhaka are also viewed by the officials as a traffic nuisance in a metropolitan city. The rickety machines are seen as jamming up the roads of Dhaka and slowing down its traffic, thus pulling it towards a colonial past when the nation wants to move ahead at a fast pace. Yet, beautifully painted and brilliantly decorated, rickshaws are indeed one of the defining features of Dhaka, turning the 'city of mosques' into a 'city of rickshaws'. For an outsider the gaudy, glittering machines are fascinating. Spending a few years in Dhaka, we found ourselves loving and documenting the rickshaws, which soon turned into more than just a fascination as we began studying the social and cultural milieu that has given rise to this art and the literature written about it.

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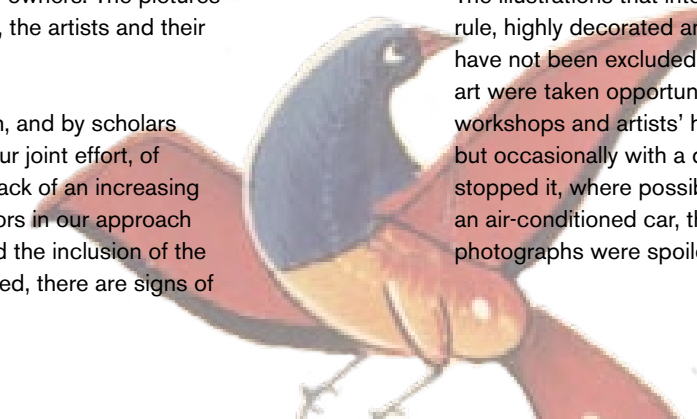
Approaching rickshaw art

The rickshaws of Bangladesh are indeed an enormous industry – if not in terms of capital accumulation, then certainly for the sheer number of people involved – and are also an effective mirror reflecting the socio-cultural milieu in the rural and urban parts of the country. However, looking more closely at the passing rickshaw on city streets represents a deeper engagement with the context that gave rise to this exciting and diverse form of subaltern art and with the many individuals involved in this trade. We use the term 'moving' in the title of this book in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Pictures painted on the rickshaws and their tin panels are not fully confined within that space: they are never static, always going somewhere or waiting to go, giving us a glimpse of busy urban folk life. Some of these pictures are rooted in history or culture, some representing life experiences of the artists or even the desires of the rickshaw owners. The pictures and their meanings, above all, are in a flux, changing along with their contexts, the artists and their intentions.

Not surprisingly, rickshaw art has been studied extensively, within Bangladesh, and by scholars mainly from the USA and Japan, making only brief appearances elsewhere. Our joint effort, of which this book is a product, follows along if not a road then a well-defined track of an increasing level of inquiry on rickshaw art. However, this book differs from its predecessors in our approach to and interpretation of this art, its placement in the socio-cultural context, and the inclusion of the art on the auto-rickshaws or 'baby-taxis' which have now disappeared – indeed, there are signs of decay and neglect creeping even into the rickshaws. The two-stroke 'baby-taxis', now banned, have been replaced by largely unadorned CNG-fuelled four-stroke machines (as in New Delhi in India), resulting in the loss of this particular type of artists' canvas. In a few years' time, rickshaw art may well become extinct unless it finds yet another space of expression.

In this book, we see rickshaw art in light of the *context* that has produced it, rather than as a curiosity standing in isolation. For this purpose, we spoke with the owners who are also patrons of the art, dipped into the visions of the artists, and mingled with rickshaw-wallahs and passengers. For us, the artistic work on cycle rickshaws and auto-rickshaws or baby-taxis that no longer exist in decorated forms, has arisen from a special blend of Islamic, rural and Bengali artistic traditions, combined with the pure personal pleasure achieved from the decoration of a 'working space'.

The illustrations that interface with the text are mostly to do with cycle rickshaws as these are, as a rule, highly decorated and consequently widely discussed; those of the paintings on auto-rickshaws have not been excluded although they no longer exist on the streets. The photographs of rickshaw art were taken opportunistically mostly on the streets of Dhaka and elsewhere, and also in the workshops and artists' homes. They were predominantly taken on a film camera (Canon EOS), but occasionally with a digital device. We sometimes chased the rickshaw in another vehicle and stopped it, where possible, for a photograph. If it was in the summer and we happened to be in an air-conditioned car, the lens almost immediately fogged over in the high humidity – a number of photographs were spoiled in this way.

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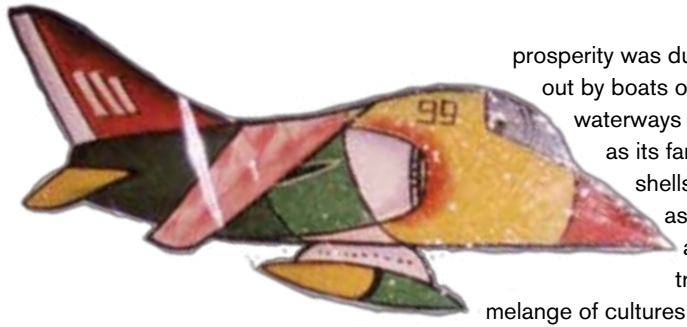
Bangladesh and its rickshaws

The most populated country in the world (about 140 million) and one of the poorest (with a per capita GDP of approximately US$365), Bangladesh is also largely rural and Muslim. Today's Bangladesh is formed by the predominantly Muslim-inhabited part of undivided Bengal that was cut-off as the eastern outlier of Pakistan from its Hindu counterpart as a result of the partition of India in 1947. This political separation meant not only a slow exodus of people across the border and the sudden truncation of the parts of economic systems such as the jute industry, but also the intended severing of cultural roots grown over many years, including the language, Bangla (Bengali), which most people speak. The Partition was followed by a series of socio-political events in which the distinctively different cultural and intellectual tradition of the Bangladeshi part of Pakistan came to the fore, leading first to the Bhasha Andolan, the language movement, to reassert the rightful place of Bengali in attributing a national identity as the language for the people as against the Urdu imposed from the western part of Pakistan, and eventually to the liberation war and the birth of the new nation in 1971. Although Bangladesh eventually adopted Islam as its state religion, it was in a much more moderate form, with a discernible local flavour added by the language Bangla and, above all, by its thriving art and culture that originates from folk life.

Although the social history of Bangladesh begins in, and is synonymous with its villages, and the 'urban centres had failed to attract people of the village partly for cultural reasons and partly for lack of employment opportunities' (Islam 1992, 12–13), Dhaka has always been a prosperous city. This



prosperity was due to a flourishing commerce, mainly carried out by boats on the innumerable rivers that acted as waterways accessing remote villages, of textiles such as its famous muslin but also products made of shells and bamboo and agricultural produce such as jute. The richness of the village economy and commerce attracted many European traders who contributed significantly to the melange of cultures in Dhaka. The capital of Bengal was shifted first to Murshidabad by Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan in 1717 CE, and then to Kolkata by the British East India Company after it defeated the young Nawab Sirajuddullah at the Battle of Plassey. The long-awaited nationhood after 1971 meant that Dhaka became, once again, a capital city, leading to urban growth.

In the past forty years all Asian cities have experienced massive growth from rural migration, but Dhaka's population explosion has been unprecedented. The urban expansion and growth are characterized by extreme congestion, requiring modes of transport that would be suitably cheap, labour-intensive and not high-tech. Cycle rickshaws proved to be just that. They were drawn in the streets by the hundreds of thousands of rural migrants who moved into the city without many skills, in search of a better future. The teeming city that began its journey as an eastern outpost of the Mughal Empire is now the eighteenth largest city in the world, eleventh among the Asian metropolises. Dhaka's population has grown from less than 500,000 in 1963 to nearly 12 million at present and, as new residential areas were added to the northern part of the city for its rising middle classes, main roads, particularly the one to the airport, exclude rickshaws from their space. Dhaka presents a picture of diversity and contrasts: the older parts of Dhaka are extremely narrow, with buildings often buckling down under the pressure of their age; the newer central parts that surround it are jammed with Japanese cars, auto-rickshaws and buses, all jostling with each other.

However, rickshaws have remained the major mode of urban transport on both sides of the border, and their continued existence is closely linked to the heavy rural-urban migration that has taken place in the last four or five decades. The demand for cheap transport, which is satisfied by the inexpensive rickshaw and pedaller or puller, has been such that there are many more unlicensed rickshaws than registered.

The flat terrain of Bangladesh is eminently suitable for bicycles. What is unusual is that rather than cycling themselves, people prefer to commute by cycle rickshaws. The delightful eccentricity of the highly decorated rickshaws, compared to those across the border, is almost entirely a unique feature of Dhaka's cultural landscape.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The rickshaws of Dhaka (and elsewhere)

The Japanese invented the *jin riki sha*, or 'man-powered car' in 1867, when a trio in Tokyo drew inspiration from the horse and carriage. Others credit the concept to Jonathon Goble, a Baptist minister who was an American missionary in Yokohama. He is said to have devised the rickshaw when the health of his wife deteriorated and she was unable to walk. Modest as the rickshaw may be, it was an improvement over sedan chairs and within a decade, Japan had nearly 200,000 on its streets. Soon the technology spread throughout Asia.

Whilst Japan did not persist with the rickshaws, elsewhere rickshaws became ubiquitous. Each Asian country added its distinctive characteristic to the designs and the riders of the rickshaws; those of urban Bangladesh are glittering exceptions as they are the most numerous, brightly coloured and intricately adorned of them all. The extensive use of decorative art forms make the rickshaw a moving space of aesthetic expression for onlookers to enjoy at no cost at all. The paintings reveal a vitality and appreciation of life that rise beyond apparent poverty and tell us of the artists' aspirations, loves and spirit.

The first cycle rickshaws came to Bangladesh (then East Bengal) from Calcutta in the 1930s, apparently not to Dhaka, but to a town just to the south (Narayanganj) and another, Mymensingh, well to the north, arriving in the capital in 1938. The import of rickshaws is attributed to jute exporting sahibs residing in Dhaka or to a local landlord importing one for the women of his family.

According to another view, rickshaws became popular in Indonesia, Singapore and other South-east Asian countries, and reached Bangladesh through Chittagong in 1919, although they did not spread to Dhaka and other cities from there. The new vehicle aroused much curiosity among the residents of Dhaka, but was not enthusiastically received. According to Banglapedia, Dhaka had only 37 rickshaws in 1941, and when the country was partitioned, there were only 181.

After the Partition, Dhaka experienced rapid urban growth as the provincial capital for East Pakistan. It was then that cycle rickshaws, relatively cheap to maintain, swiftly replaced the horse-drawn carriage as public transport. Licenses were imposed by the municipalities in the 1940s, the licenses being a copy of the old British regulations for hand-pulled rickshaws (carts) – sometimes called the Hackney Carriage Act. The regulations state that the equipment must be in good condition, itemizing for example the spokes of the wheels but omitting any mention of brakes, as hand-carts didn't have any! In many rural areas, a combined version of rickshaw and van – called the rickshaw-van – came into use and could seat 10 people. These have a flat bed of wooden bars resting on the axle instead of passenger seats and can double as goods carriers.

Auto-rickshaws or baby-taxis appeared in Dhaka only in the early 1980s. Their advantages in terms of transit times compared to cycle rickshaws were obvious; however, these three-wheelers were powered by highly polluting two-stroke motorcycle engines and with their increasing numbers, exhaust emissions became a great public nuisance.

In no other country except Bangladesh do rickshaws play such an important role in urban transportation; rickshaws dominated the traffic throughout Dhaka till about five years ago, when the city authorities earnestly began to clean up some of its major streets of slow-moving traffic such as rickshaws and polluting ones such as baby-taxis, which have now reincarnated as green-coloured '*chianji*s'. The Lonely Planet book, *Chasing Rickshaws*, observed that one in every three *taka*s (one Australian dollar fetches about 45 *taka*s, which is roughly the daily earning of many people in the country) spent on transport goes to the rickshaw business, which is twice as big as Biman Bangladesh, the national airline. It now seems almost certain that in the future more and more rickshaws will in fact be pushed into the narrower lanes of old Dhaka, to the side-streets of upper-class residential neighbourhoods, and to the far less important regional towns and rural areas. The resulting decline in the standard of decoration can already be discerned.

Rickshaws, notes Islam, in Dhaka's swanky art magazine *Jamini* are to Dhaka what Jeepneys are to Manila and Tuktuks are to Bangkok, 'eccentric forms of public transport that add colour and a certain anachronistic flavour to the city traffic.' But the similarities end there, for rickshaws are manually driven, slow, and featherweight vehicles that look more like some medieval contraption than a modern-day transport (Islam 2003, 57).

Exactly how many rickshaws are there in Dhaka today? Somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000 suggest different estimates. Gallagher estimated that rickshaws accounted for 34 per cent of the total value added in transport, and about 4.5 per cent of the national workforce depended on this sector for subsistence.

The industry of rickshaw-making, decorating and painting, and of running and controlling them, reveals intricate and complex organizing structures extending into a range of sections of society. In spite of repeated efforts by the government to control it, the number of rickshaws has in fact grown. The 'rickshaw question' has been addressed in many ways; by banning them from the main roads, by trying to make separate lanes for them on the major arterial roads, and by trying to regulate the number of illegal rickshaws either by periodic inspections of licenses or by not issuing them at all. There are always a large number of unregistered rickshaws plying on Dhaka streets and the reality of true numbers is much more than the official figures suggest.

The making of a cycle rickshaw

The design of rickshaws can vary from country to country but the basics remain more or less the same. The technology – constructed from the old-fashioned bicycle – has remained much the same. A singular feature of the Dhaka carriage is that the seat slants forwards, making it an ejector seat in the real sense of the term. It is not unusual to see a novice puller – probably on his first day or so – trying to negotiate a difficult path through the crowds and fast-moving Mercedes or Toyota cars, catapulting his passengers out on to the road – a potentially serious event for the car driver, as retribution from onlookers can be swift and violent.

The essential decoration of the rickshaw is carried out where the rickshaws are assembled and maintained, on the edges of the rickshaw *busti*s. These are ramshackle shops carrying materials and spare parts, or workshops where the canopy trimmings are sewn up. Here the frame is painted by a *mistri,* a craftsperson, an artisan or a workman. The *mistri,* usually a man but not always so, might be a young apprentice learning the ropes of trade from an older expert. Other decorations to the frame are attached here. Various appliqué decorations are sometimes fixed to the canopy. The handle bars have tassels and even little brass urns. The main painting on the backplate is done in the artist's workshop, usually away from the tin and plastic slums, in more substantial dwellings, as are the rear canopy curtains, seats and seatbacks, if they are to be painted. The hood can be decorated separately as it can be detached from the vehicle.

The technology of the auto-rickshaws is less interesting, consisting as it does of a three-wheeled vehicle driven by a 100cc engine with a permanent soft canopy or hood,

manufactured by the Indian Bajaj company. The transmission technology can be traced to the Italian Piaggio scooter manufacturer.

Art mistris

There is a continuum of artistic capabilities within the rickshaw painters' fraternity. Undoubtedly, some are relatively untrained decorators and painters with little artistic imagination or at the earliest stages of their skills-building apprenticeship. But there are many that one can admire. Strangely though, the artists often refer to themselves as 'art *mistri*s'.

A survey conducted in 1994 by Osman and Islam, found 224 shops selling rickshaw paintings by 98 artists and 34 body painters in 52 locations in Dhaka city. Another survey lists 83 rickshaw and auto-rickshaw painters working in the late 1990s (Lasnier 1999). It is doubtful that these many painters are now active; the banning of the two-stroke auto-rickshaws and their usually unadorned replacements, plus the increasing restrictions as to where cycle rickshaws can ply their trade has ensured this.

About half the rickshaw painters are migrants from different areas of Bangladesh and about one-third of them are illiterate. Whilst most of them came directly into the profession, with a few years' apprenticeship under a master-teacher, some have been in other jobs before beginning to paint for or on rickshaws. Most of them work on the profession on a full-time basis. Prominent amongst the painters are RK Das (Raj Kumar Das) who heads a family of painters consisting of three sons (PK, SK and S Das) and two nephews (K and PC Das) and erstwhile students, Ahmed (Syed Ahmed Hussain) and Alinoor (Mohammed Noor Ali). Although the art is carried over generationally, it is also passed on to the apprentice by the master-trainer. The masculine world of rickshaw artists indeed has few exceptions; Alauddin, one of the oldest painters and a respected artist, introduced his young daughter Afroza Banu as part of his studio of artists. The rickshaw painters also rely on commissions, on sales when trading the art plates through antique shops in the up-market suburb of Gulshan, which is frequented by many foreigners working on aid or development projects, as well as by the diplomatic community. Many rickshaw artists are also small-scale entrepreneurs; Golam Rasul, originally from Comilla, is a versatile person, an artist as well as a rickshaw body-maker. Then there are the likes of Sushil De, Syed Samsu and Salauddin, perhaps slightly lesser known but responsible for major designs on the backplates and rexine seat covers. Works by artists like Ahmed and Alinoor, identified by their signatures either in English or in Bangla, can still be seen travelling the Dhaka roads. Strangely, though signed, the artists do not consider their work to be copyrighted and are not perturbed by others copying their themes. They themselves use posters and commercial advertising illustrations for their own purposes of simulation – creating an artistic free market where everything goes.

Artists at home

Visiting Ahmed at his home in old Dhaka we are introduced to his beautiful wife and a bed-ridden child suffering from a devastating disease – he has already lost two children to the same illness caused by marrying within the close family. They live on the ground floor of a three-storey house, which they share with another family occupying the other two floors. Their part of the house is small, consisting of one bedroom, one bed-sitting room, shared cooking and shower/toilet areas and a small space to paint in. Ahmed has recently moved there from a yet smaller house in the same lane, Shia *gali*, the lane for Shias, a minority group in Muslim Dhaka, where he has lived all his life. Although his personal life is full of sorrow, Ahmed has turned one corner of the house – the landing of a staircase – into his studio. His wife proudly showed us his paintings, turned into a calendar by the German embassy, and the many letters from his various patrons all over the world. Still a young man proud of his achievements, Ahmed told us the stories of his visit to Japan where he was invited for the rickshaw art exhibition organized by the Fukuoka Museum. He still cherishes that experience and wishes to see many more countries; when he learnt we were from Australia, he insisted that we send him photos of Australian landmarks. He showed us his painting of an imaginary harbour bridge with trains rushing past busy office-goers and tourists alike with sailboats cruising under the bridge.

Sushil lives a rickshaw-ride away in the old Hindu part of Dhaka, Sankharibazar, yet another of the shadowy shanties of the modern metropolis. The entrance to his house is through a dark tunnel – a result of generation after generation living and building upon one single piece of land.

His cramped nook in a three-storey terraced house is shared with many members of his joint family. The bricks threaten to crumble, and the maze of electric cables seem menacing. Sushil paints in a dingy ground-floor room connected by a narrow, pitch black passageway to the rear, and by a dimly lit struggling staircase to the upper levels. His wife lives in a top floor room which opens out on to the traditional flat rooftop or terrace, a place where most women in Old Dhaka spend their lives: gossiping, looking out to the busy narrow road below or just getting a bit of the soft and fading daylight on their skin. Some women of this Hindu community, like Sushil's widowed aunt, have been as much behind the purdah as their Muslim sisters. Sushil has no children, which causes him great sorrow from which he finds solace in painting: '*Amar kachhe eti sudhu rojgarer rasta noy*' (for me this art is not only a means of income). However, Sushil works on rexine sheets, whereas Ahmed paints on tin plates; their art and their patrons as different as the raw material they use.

The artists balance a loyalty to their rural traditions with a fascination for Western art. The rural sensitivities allow a delicate and even feminine expression balanced by the surrealistic poetic imagination rich in lyricism that is revealed in images, objects, forms and abstract elements. However, in being profane and belonging to the streets, rickshaw art creates another Dhaka – a utopian and mystic city of million rural immigrants and the city of moving pictures. Together, the likes of Ahmed and Sushil offer a successful attempt on the part of a large, well-connected, talented artists and rickshaw owners who actually circumvent the conventional art that is valued as interior design. However, their art is not a one-dimensional articulation of criticism as a counter to 'Art', but a quoting of other voices in the manner of a dialogue, articulating values in a language that can be heard, a meaningful bid for self-determination by unseen thousands who continue to practise ingenious in their survival techniques.

Tracing rickshaw art

The term 'rickshaw art' can be used to mean different things to different people. In a restricted sense, it can mean only the painted tin plate at the back of the rickshaw that is used to cover the chain and the gear. In this sense, the term also applies to the paintings behind auto-rickshaws or baby-taxis. In the broad sense, it would include all decorations on the body of the rickshaw; starting from the plastic pieces on the hood, to the cut-outs and appliqués, paintings on the body itself, paintings on the iron frame, the brass vases complete with plastic flowers and the designs made on the tin sheets by perforating them.

Rickshaw art has attracted the attention of the students of Dhaka's Charukala Institute. Rahman (1992) feels that rickshaw art descended from a long-standing tradition of folk art in Bangladesh, which drew upon the two waves of classical tradition, the Ajanta and Tibetan ones, that merged with local forms. As urbanization spread and artisans and peasants relocated into cities, rural folk art turned into urban folk art. Often the art reflected contemporary social realities. This gave rise to a form that sustained the uneducated classes or vernacular tastes, as against the increasing influence of the Western styles introduced by the Europeans on to the local elite. In addition, with rural traditions of decorating and embellishing everyday objects as a means of self-expression and self-actualization, many artists, cut off from their rural roots, found their joy in decorating this new object of daily living.

Banglapedia too notes rickshaw art as an urban folk phenomenon, but stresses that it shares similarity of theme and execution with movie billboards. Initially, the tin plate covering the chain and frame must have been covered by some stylized designs of flowers, leaves and creepers. Artists following Islam painted mosques, forts, *buraq* and *dul dul* horses, and Hindu artists painted pictures of goddesses such as Kali and Durga. The 1960s in Pakistan were the most flourishing period in terms of painting the faces of film stars in action scenes; these stars came from the entire subcontinent, including some Indian heroes, although Indian movies had some difficulty getting across the border. Images on rickshaw paintings turned the liberation war of Bangladesh into a social commentary by explicitly depicting the tortures being inflicted by the Pakistani Army. The plight of rural women in the hands of the army was most vividly depicted at that time in rickshaw paintings. After the Dhaka Municipality imposed a ban on painting these scenes 'for the sake of decency', there began a rush of painting scenes from Indian and Pakistani films, rural scenery, animals, foreign heroes such as Bruce Lee or Tarzan, and political leaders. During the last ten years or so, the influence of television has become evident in the subjects of the paintings and one can now see the odd helicopter or even a satellite.

Appreciating the vehicles of expression

Transport art is a not an uncommon phenomenon; books have been written about the decorated trucks of Afghanistan (Claridge 1977) and Pakistan (Rich 1980), the jeepneys of Manila (Torres 1970), and the buses of St Lucia in the West Indies (Grava 1986). This decoration of vehicles is equivalent to the illustration of books, which exists as though in a reciprocal relation to the text; the beautiful rickshaws making up for all the dirt, congestion and crowd through which the frail frames are pedalled along by equally frail men. We appreciate a painting for its intrinsic merit, not for its utility, and certainly not because it has made the canvas more interesting. This pure ornamentation against functionality or utility, invests to it a new charm, as colour bestows upon the flower a new loveliness (Dresser 1977, B2).

The highly ornamented rickshaws make an immediate impact on foreigners travelling to Bangladesh and they take back with them a photographic kaleidoscope. The Government is aware and takes advantage of this visual impact. A colourful rickshaw now stands within the recently revamped Zia International Airport. The commercial value is also exploited by traders in some of the up-market shops of Dhaka that have now moved away from selling brass *hookah*s to tin panels painted with rickshaw art, some duly signed by the artist. The Alliance Française in Dhaka has held at least two exhibitions of rickshaw art; the first reflecting a complete and painstaking cataloguing and documentation and the more innovative one as a workshop of rickshaw painters with 'contemporary artists' in order to mutually share techniques, visions and perceptions. Rickshaw art has appeared in the local cultural magazine, *Jamini*, and been the

subject of at least three Master's level theses from the Art Institute of Dhaka University. The Australian and German embassies in Dhaka also have wall-to-wall paintings by rickshaw painters.

Bangladeshi scholars, however, continue to argue over whether this is an 'urban popular' or 'folk art' form or 'pop art' or even 'modern folk art'. This debate also reflects quandary over some of the themes of rickshaw art, especially those in which animals are shown as doing human activities, perhaps 'saying the unsayable' – thus making it a political statement. The hunch among even the staunchest elite is that each rickshaw artist subjectively interprets the basic brush-strokes that artists of earlier times had used, although many would not be willing to attribute individuality. However, their main issue has been whether to call this an art form at all.

Whilst this debate continues within the country, outside Bangladesh the work has been exhibited as 'traffic art' – in the Museum of Mankind by the ethnography department of the British Museum, and in the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan, in 1994. Old posters made by the British Museum still adorn the walls of some craft stores but the event has been largely forgotten in Bangladesh. The Fukuoka event on the other hand has left a longer-lasting impression in that it involved the artists themselves who still reminisce about the impact Japan has had on them. A quote from Ahmed, in Fukuoka Art museum's introductory work, *Rickshaw Painting* (1994, 3), recognizes that 'some of the colourful and energetic paintings are the direct expressions of people's hope, joy, anger and sorrow; and some are allegorical expressions'. It also acknowledges that 'Rickshaw painting was born out of actual living experiences' and again was a 'direct aesthetic expressions of citizens' that has not received due attention by art museums. Japanese tourists now regularly come to Bangladesh, and

part of their (and other tourists') memento fodder is formed by the rickshaw art panels from antique stores. To them rickshaw art is the 'daughter of modernism', a product of contemporary urban life (Tsuzuki 1994).

It is interesting that, whereas the main thrust of the internal debate is whether to describe this as art or not, the outside debate has been more on how to interpret it, seeing it often as an artistic expression of the impossible aspirations of humans driven primarily by extreme poverty.

A more personal appreciation of Bangladeshi rickshaw art, 'feast of eyes and mind', has been put forth by Joanna Kirkpatrick (2001), an anthropologist and a long-time visitor to Dhaka, particularly during the heydays of the 1980s. Her interest in the *Transports of Delight* and their art stems from the interpretation of the art as being 'about male desires in their major forms: for sex, competitive power and wealth, for one's village home, for the blessings of religious devotion, for new things, and occasionally – as at the very beginning of Bangladesh in 1971 – for solidarity and identity with one's 'Sonar Bangladesh' (Golden Bengal), the emerging nation celebrating its Bengali language and tradition. Kirkpatrick also interprets these images as suggesting frustrated desire, expressed as irony in some pictures in which animals, behaving like people, satirize the foibles of men.

Henry Glassie (1997) devoted a full chapter to rickshaw art in his book, placing for the first time, the art firmly in the context of the cultural tradition of the country. It also gave a historical understanding of the art form, discussed its regional variations, and above all, explored the lives of those who are hands-on in this industry. He put rickshaw art at par with innumerable other folk

and contemporary practices of aesthetic depiction, and explained it as a fusion of use and beauty, making it worthless to discuss where utility diminishes and decoration expands and seeks human spirit: 'Surface ornament is symmetrical and coherent. The order of detail on the decorative surface is perfected geometrically, as the form of the object is perfected geometrically – they cohere – and then the ornament reaches toward the pictorial. In the recent West and for centuries in Islam, artists have been satisfied by arrangements of shapes and colours, but in Bangladesh, in a context conditioned by the pictorial drift of Hinduism, artists, both Muslims and Hindus, do not stop at non-objective ornament. They press toward reference, imaging, if abstractly and geometrically, things out of this world' (Glassie 1997). This statement brings out the essence of rickshaw art through its deep understanding of the complex mix of religious influences represented in Bangladeshi society and culture. Moreover, the collective experience of a certain kind of life, the outlook and imagination embedded in facets and norms of livelihood, and the unique imagination in rickshaw art were thus recognized as having a distinctive root and a specific context, and an aesthetic value that puts this art at par with any other forms of arts and artistic expressions. Indeed, rural Bangladesh has not only a range of interdependent and interdisciplinary crafts practised by skilled artisans, but a distinguished tradition of decorating the simplest and the most mundane objects of daily life, objects such as the *nakshi kantha*, the *sara*, or the *ghata*.

Whose art is it anyway?

Contrary to the great acceptance of its great commercial and livelihood value, rickshaw art is not universally loved in Bangladesh. There is a distinct strand of thought which even resents the obsession with rickshaw art, often by the visitors to the country. This often comes from modern intellectuals for whom art education means institutionalized training, and who make a binary division between fine art and commercial art, embodied by gallery art and street art.

Bangladesh has a well-established fine art tradition illuminated by noted artists such as Jainul Abedin, whose works have been appreciated and discussed all over the world. The Art Institute spawns out students trained through institutional courses of the Dhaka University. Many of these artists, having undergone a rigorous process of learning and doing and passed out from colleges or having earned degrees, tend to refuse to see rickshaw art as having any aesthetic value. The binary that gets created in the process is that of calendar/bazaar art versus fine art, the former being inferior and cheap due to the mass scale of consumption. It would seem that rickshaw art threatens or intrudes into academic middle-class proclivities, forcing people for the sake of security to demean it into being cheap. By going into the most public of public spaces, the streets, it resists the custodianship of the galleries and the intellectual assessment of the art critics. Consequently, rickshaw art remains fluid in meaning and resists appropriation by cultural gatekeepers who also attach values to the places where 'proper' art can exist. In its use of the public space, crucial in understanding its spatial and cultural politics and in locating it in places other than where art 'belongs', rickshaw art redefines art and the legitimization of it.

Rickshaw art nourishes primarily the poorer sections of urban society – those who pull the rickshaws or those who are related to the industry in one way or the other. Those who ride in the rickshaws are not amongst the better off classes either, and are often women and children travelling short distances from one residential suburb to another. The art is, however, seen everyday by millions of people on Dhaka streets, raising its aesthetic value as a form of expression far above decoration, to one of popular, if not subaltern, art. One might ask how much of the visual pleasure of rickshaw art is actually *experienced* by the powerful sections of the society. The answer to this is difficult to give; when a rickshaw-wallah replies: '*sundar lage*' (because 'it is beautiful') to why he selects the most colourful rickshaw while renting, it denotes a depth of feeling that is often not accustomed to verbalization and eloquence. It thus becomes a force by itself; a power that goes far beyond words. Thus, '*sundar lage*' is to be carefully read and interpreted because this is the street where the art created by the artist is mediating between this public world and the many and diverse private worlds of all those involved in the rickshaw art industry: the artist, of course, but

also the owner ordering and paying for the plates, the decorator *mistri* arranging the sequins and making the patterns with round holes on the tin, the body-maker who has never thought of changing his technology, and all those helpers and assistants and trainees who are learning every day, integrating themselves into this art and carrying on a great heritage.

The Rickshaw-wallahs

The rickshaw-wallah can be considered to be the poorest of the poor in Asian countries and particularly so, in the Bangladeshi milieu. Bangladesh is no exception to the stream of rural migrants that sustain the cheap labour- intensive transports such as rickshaws. The typical rickshaw-wallah is probably young, between 21 and 30, married, having more than four children. The sprawling slums (*busti*s) covering up to 30–50 hectares which dot Dhaka city house most of these new migrants for whom finding a rickshaw to pull on a contract basis provides a major means of subsistence. A 2005 study (Shams 2005) showed that the average monthly income of Dhaka rickshaw-wallahs varies between 1000 and 3500 Takas per month. Small houses lining the banks of a water body close to posh housing colonies also accommodate rickshaw-wallahs as well as other kinds of cheap labour servicing the flourishing city economy. An enormous number of people survive on the rickshaw industry; for example every day at lunchtime the lanes behind the British Council come

alive with at least two thousand people assembling there with their tin boxes full of rice and curry for the rickshaw-wallahs. According to Professor Nazrul Islam (1996), this is only a tiny part of an intricate 'food chain' that spreads its tentacles across the city. 'Unoccupied' sections of Argagaon, an area in Dhaka which contains several government departments, housed thousands of cheerful people in a shanty town or *busti* but after a couple of murders and an abduction of one of the locals (who was released a couple of hours later), the *busti* was bulldozed the following week without any regard to the inhabitants. The *busti*s also housed rickshaw building workshops and repair facilities, while also providing basic decoration facilities.

Rickshaw owners

The person who pays for the artwork is the rickshaw owner, making him the chief and ultimate patron of this art. He is the one who orders something that has caught his fancy on another vehicle or even on a book or a calendar. However, this is not always true; often artists have a free choice in determining what they wish to paint – on either tin plate or Rexene, according to their material of specialization. While some owners think they call the shots – and some certainly do – artists often question their understanding of art. Thus, often, once the price is agreed upon, the artist has a more or less complete license. The decoration may cost the owner 20 to 25 per cent of the cost of the rickshaw.

Why does the owner spend this kind of money in decorating the rickshaw? This is the most difficult query to answer as nearly 80 per cent of all rickshaws in Dhaka are decorated. The tradition probably began with herders decorating their animals, and continues in owners decorating their vehicles. As one owner puts it: '(a well-decorated rickshaw is) a beautiful thing – it's a good thing to have'.

The union of rickshaw owners, however, has increasingly lost clout as the government bans the rickety vehicles from entering one major street after the other. Haji Gafur Mian belongs to the older part of Dhaka, where it is impossible to move around in 'modern' transport such as a car. Gafur Mian's father also owned some rickshaws but he has expanded the business to many times the original size and now owns nearly twenty rickshaws. Gafur said that if things go the same way, two different Dhakas will eventually be created. The modern, new Dhaka of the shiny Mercedes Benz and wide streets, and the older Dhaka of narrow and congested lanes. Gafur thought that rickshaws, however, will survive in Dhaka, if only out of the sheer necessity of transportation in the older parts of the city, and along the minor lanes and by-lanes.

Themes in rickshaw art

Rickshaws on the streets of Bangladesh, represent the people to themselves and introduce Bangladesh to visitors. The subjects depicted by artists vary widely from quasi-religious themes – the Taj Mahal is a favourite as is the Star Mosque in Dhaka – as well as government buildings and monuments, to those dead in the liberation war, sailboats and quiet steamers, splendid peacocks and armed heroes. Iconic landmarks, which the artists have never been to except perhaps in their imagination, as well as reproductions of rural peace and urban progress mingle with advertisements of movie posters and figments of a gothic and Bangladeshi worldview.

Some may look like movie posters but they are a pastiche of florid females and gun-toting moustachioed men taken from a range of film promotions. As well as roadside advertisements, the images are frequently drawn from posters which hang for sale at odd locations in central Dhaka. Bridges are popular, with the Jamuna Bridge featuring prominently. The larger world is not commonly represented by people or by bodies, but, in the Muslim manner, by objects, buildings, structures such as the Tower Bridge in London, or the Sydney Opera House with the Harbour Bridge in the background. Often the key distinction is not between religions, but between the rural and urban contexts.

Rural scenes are the favourite subjects: peasants ploughing or harvesting against a serene landscape, or a riverside view with coconut palms lining up the water's edge and country boats

sailing past – as though the painter could smell the fresh raindrops on the mud and the ripe paddy fields from afar. The world of fantasy intermingles with reality; the luxury car in front of the hut or the flying helicopter about to descend in the backyard. Boats, a part of rural transport, as well as the election symbol of one major political party, are much loved. Elegantly striped Royal Bengal Tigers are also a recurrent feature; the tiger, however, appears not as a violent and dangerous beast; often, it is reproduced as a motherly figure, the tigress idly sitting with the two cubs nestling against her. Here the tiger transcends its beastly nature and becomes part of the mythical world of Bonbibi who protects mangrove workers from the tiger demon and Dakkhin Roy, the lady of the forest. In many paintings, animals seem to be part of civilized life; they are in the city, wearing clothes or using mobile phones whilst walking on the street. They may even form a musical band playing with an assortment of drums, bugles and flutes, while more animals listen intently with apparent enjoyment.

One outstanding feature in many aspects of rickshaw art is their geometrical symmetry, apparent in paintings, in decoration or ornamentation. Mirror images on the two opposing sides on the back of a rickshaw or the two sides of the baby-taxis' back, repeat identical forms in series, or integrate parts into a symmetrical unity achieved by a mastery of command over the technique. To some researchers, this reflects the quick and practical skills of artisans who approach decoration as they approach the creation of form: 'On the rickshaw, ancillary ornament is created in the artisan's style. Tacks are studded, appliqué is snipped, and the armrests are painted in shapes that assemble geometrically, most often toward the floral. The style peaks on the Comilla rickshaw when back panels carry a bilaterally symmetrical, tripartite composition achieved by two mirrored forms flanking a central form, itself symmetrical. Two birds flank a flower or the Taj Mahal. Two peacocks flank the


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head of a lion. In the artisan's style, a pattern is laid out geometrically on a single plane and then detailed toward representation'.

Many paintings represent women in various ways, in part or in full – as modern, sunglass-wearing, cleavage-revealing and winking in film-starry fashion, or as lifelike drawings in striking colours and poses. Islamic art restricts itself to decorative motifs; so the portrayal of women emphasises the more moderate nature of Bangladesh, heavily influenced as it is by India. Kirkpatrick (1984) sees the images of voluptuous and beautiful women as both the cynosure of all imagery and also the visual metaphors of the unobtainable. The naked women that featured in Italian Renaissance art filled a similar purpose for some of the Catholic cardinals. But again, the representations of women can also be read as resistance to the domination of upper-class control over art and its appreciation by lower class people, the rickshaw artists and connoisseurs of art. The voluptuous women being an important part of this 'low' art form also re-assert the essentially feminine in rickshaw art. Above all, these images of luscious women re-affirm a specific Bangladeshi identity, as against the strict religious imposition from Pakistan.

Where do the rickshaw artists go?

When they end their careers, and many of them indeed do so, where do the rickshaw artists go? What do they do when they find the market so down that they are forced to quit?

Naba Kumar De, a young Hindu man, one of the several artists from the Shankharibazar area, got a much-coveted job of guarding the French Embassy through his acquaintance with Mme Lasnier. Yet, he says that his fingers itch to paint, especially on weekends, especially when he sees his friend Sushil using his bold brush strokes on the yellow rexine, gradually making out feminine faces in bright pink, wearing dark glasses and winking through them. At the same time he feels more secure in the job that has been able to support his family including his wife, children and old parents. When two young contemporary artists held a workshop in the French Embassy with rickshaw artists, Naba was one of the most engrossed spectators, stealing time away from his post at the gate to make sense of the proceedings within.

Alauddin has now started a small truck transport business, which he claims looks after his small family adequately, better than his rickshaw art business. Though he pines for the freedom to express himself that the art gave him, Alauddin felt that, as the market was drying up, it was better for him to switch to a more stable, income-earning business.

Bahar has been painting saris for the last few years instead of painting tin panels with which he started his artist career. He now rents the entire second floor of a rather dingy building in old Dhaka, where he employs and trains a few juniors. The transition was not accomplished smoothly because around the same time his illiterate wife, who was taken abroad by relatives for a short visit, was held back as a domestic help, causing enormous grief and difficulties for him.

Words and Dhakai pun

The people of Dhaka were at one time well-known for their sense of humour, often reflecting a quick-wit charm in creating new words. Dhaka always has a special word for the most ordinary things in life; for example you never hail a rickshaw as 'hey rickshaw' but say, 'hey, *khali*', the term '*khali*' standing for 'empty', meaning 'to hire'. Consequently, new words are being created every day. The latest addition is 'chianji', standing for CNG. The quintessential figure is that of a sharp-tongued and quick-witted Dhaka man, the 'Dhakai *kutti'*, a personification of that quirky sense of humour. In rickshaw art too, that sense of the absurd comes through, as each object gets its special name in the artists' parlance. Thus, the seat of the rickshaw becomes '*chandi*', literally the 'moon-holder', and the reclining back rest becomes a '*dhyalna*' (the place to slouch), the footboard is '*padani*' (urn for the foot), but the riser behind it is '*patti*' (the card), the border at the edge is '*dip*' (an onomatopoeic word implying a fall). This *dip* is often marked with intricate designs made by perforations on the tin, called by the artists '*topkada'*. The designs made on the body of the rickshaw are *phulpatti* (flowers and leaves), which are often copied from *nomuna*s (samples) from picture postcards, calendars, photos in books or other printed material.

Regional variation in rickshaw art

There are many variations of the cycle rickshaw itself all over Bangladesh, although the essential rickshaw technology is basically the same; mostly, these variations concern the design of the carriage. Similarly, rickshaw art also varies from place to place, across the country – in themes and in sophistication of expression, in expertise, in colours and in representations. Generally, rickshaws in the smaller cities and towns tend to be less bright, though the decorations on vehicles – including the rickety rickshaw vans – are ubiquitous. The images of the Taj Mahal, Islamic motifs and idyllic rural scenes are generally more numerous in small cities, whereas in Dhaka, faces of movie stars are common. Banglapedia notes about the regional variations in rickshaw art in Bangladesh: 'There are variations in rickshaw art in different towns of Bangladesh. For example, nearly eighty per cent of rickshaws in Dhaka city are decorated and most of them have animal scenes, natural scenes, and pictures of movie themes.' In contrast, Chittagong shows less enthusiasm about decorating rickshaws, and the rickshaw art there contains fewer human faces and more images of flowers, birds and animals. The variations are rooted again in localized cultural traditions. For example, rickshaws in the Sylhet area in the northeast, considered to be a more devoutly Muslim area, are rarely decorated. Consequent to the greater numbers of patrons as well as artists in the main city, rickshaw art has flourished best in Dhaka, although it has its regional expressions in smaller cities.


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Assessing rickshaw art

Two noted Bangladeshi intellectuals, Professors Sirajul Islam and Muntassir Mamoon, feel that this is 'social art' in a national context wherein decoration is an essential part of life. Every peasant home is well-decorated with meandering lines of rice-powder that creates flowery *alpana*s; a utilitarian object like a *kantha* (a light cover used to keep warm in winter) is turned into an object of art through embroidery. It is not surprising therefore, that the rickshaw-owners to whom the rickshaw is an asset, a means of income-generation, would want to decorate the vehicles. Making functional objects more attractive by using human imagination and artistry is a part of Bengali life. In a conversation, Professor Mamoon observed that 'for us, it is an instinct, we see it in every aspect of life, all the time; but we may not carefully notice it. For the foreign tourists coming with an exotic view of the country, the surprise of rickshaw art makes it an object of curiosity – an eccentricity of a poor society, or at best an "urban folk" form of art.' In another conversation, Professor Islam commented that the post-1971 rickshaw art presented a more complete picture of social reality. This reality reflected the subaltern feelings and concepts in a sharp and intense way. 'After independence, how did we choose to express the concept of "nationhood"? We did this in many ways; for example in verbal forms through writings in columns in newspapers, in physical forms through memorial buildings and iconic sites, and through using the rickshaws as moving vehicles of passing expressions.'

Rickshaw art makes us confront head on the ultimate question, 'What kind of a city do people want to live in?' In Dhaka, is it the monolithic structures made of concrete and glass that dwarf human beings, or the crumbling brick-upon-brick labyrinths of Shankharibazaar, or the tin-plastic town of Mirpur that sets the tone for the daily lives of urbanites? Painting the rickshaws is the creative impetus of people to decorate their environment, making it beautiful, and giving us a glimpse of what the city should or could look like. Through their painting, the rickshaw artists are making a place for themselves in the rapidly changing and modernizing city that wants to leave behind every trace of and connection to its past. The rickshaws and their artists make a claim to their right to the city, offering their art as a valuable and necessary part of its social and cultural life. Rickshaw art represents a powerful desire of the artists to speak to the elites and others in new terms and from different perspectives. It is, thus, at once a dialogue with and a critique of formal art that is practised in galleries and studios. Its practice in everyday public spaces reinforces and subtly revises the mental maps of city-dwellers, and makes rickshaw art a transparent one that in turn helps to make the city legible and familiar.

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