

# Urban mobilities and the cycle rickshaw

G O P A S A M A N T A

IT is difficult to imagine Indian streets without rickshaws. Three major types of rickshaws – hand-pulled, cycle and auto – remain an indispensable form of mobility in Indian cities. Yet, planners and policy makers continue to see rickshaws as a nuisance on city streets, seeking to either control their number or ban them altogether. Commonly, in the process of city planning, two major arguments are often advanced. The first is that the rickshaw is slow, thereby hampering traffic and creating congestion. The second argument made is that the rickshaw is an uncivi-

lized form of mobility that does not fit with the image of ‘smart’, modern, ‘global’ cities. Nevertheless, despite all the efforts made by the city governments, the rickshaw – suspended between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ – persists as a subversive form of mobility in 21st century cities and maintains a significant presence in debates over urban transport and urban informal economies in India.

Cycle rickshaws comprise what scholar Deborah Breen terms a ‘constellation of mobility’, functioning doubly as a form of mobility and trans-

port as well as a vehicle for the mobility of livelihoods (as they are often seasonal).<sup>1</sup> Different aspects of urban mobility such as transport, migration and livelihoods converge in the rickshaw sector, giving a distinct character to city streets in India. According to a study conducted in 2000 by Anil K. Rajvanshi, close to two million cycle rickshaws ply the Indian street, carrying at least 6-8 billion passenger kilometres every year.<sup>2</sup> Although an updated estimate is unavailable, empirical research in many Indian cities has shown that the number continues to grow rapidly.<sup>3</sup>

The total number of people (including family members of rickshaw pullers) who are dependent on rickshaws as a major source of livelihood comprise a considerable proportion of urban poor in India. Many of the men employed as rickshaw pullers are recent migrants to cities from rural areas, often leaving their families behind in the villages. They sometimes do not return to their villages for months at a time, but send regular remittances to their families to survive on that meagre income. Consequently, urban centres house enclaves of rickshaw pullers who live, eat and sleep in shanties. A considerable number of rickshaw pullers also spend the night on the city's footpaths or on roadside open verandas of old buildings.

1. Deborah Breen, 'Constellations of Mobility and the Politics of Environment: Preliminary Considerations of the Shipbreaking Industry in Bangladesh', *Transfers* 1(3), 2011, pp. 24-43.

2. Anil K. Rajvanshi, 'Cycle Rickshaws as a Sustainable Transport System for Developing Countries', *Human Power* (49), Winter 1999-2000, pp. 15-18.

3. Gopa Samanta and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, 'Urban Informal Sector as a Mirror of Rural-urban Interaction: Focus on the Rickshaw Pullers, Burdwan, India', *Oriental Geographer* 48(2), 2004, 11-30. See also, Rajendra Ravi, *The Saga of Rickshaw: Identity, Struggle and Claims*. VAK Publications, New Delhi, 2006.

Rickshaw pulling is part of a bazaar economy,<sup>4</sup> whose contribution to the economy of Indian cities is significant. In the 1960s and 1970s, informal workers were seen as unproductive to urban economies because informal labour was not considered to be conducive to economic development.<sup>5</sup> However, recent empirical literature increasingly understands informal work as dynamic and efficient, responding successfully to changing cycles of demand in the economy and contributing significantly to income and output.<sup>6</sup>

Rickshaw pullers are the poorest of the poor even among the various informal workers in the urban economy, not only in India but throughout the developing world. Their contribution as a collective body of labour to the Indian economy is massive, though there is no record whatsoever of this value. Rickshaws are also one of the largest sources of employment in Indian urban centres, employing millions of people. Besides a huge number of rickshaw pullers, various *mistries* (repairmen), owners, body-makers, shop keepers selling cycle parts and offering quick hand pumping facilities, tea stall owners and many others are involved in the rickshaw sector. Estimating their number is even more difficult than estimating the numbers of rickshaws or their contribution to the economy.

Most middle class commentators are perplexed by just who are rickshaw pullers? Do they have a right to

4. The term 'bazaar economy' was first used by C. Geertz (1963) to define informal economy.

5. D. Mazumdar, *The Urban Informal Sector*. World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 211, Washington, 1975.

6. P. Bhattacharya, 'The Role of the Informal Sector in Structure Transformation: Some Indian Evidence', *Journal of International Development* 8(1), 1996, pp. 59-74.

be on city streets? The most common answer for the first question would be the 'poor,' but we do not have any record about who they are or where they have come from. Drawing from a field survey that I conducted in different cities in West Bengal, it is clear that they are in most cases the poorest of the poor, representing rural migrants from the backward regions in the state. In Kolkata metro, they are mostly migrants from either Bihar or Bangladesh. In Burdwan, a small city in the heart of West Bengal, rickshaw pullers are not from the immediate rural surroundings (a three-cropped agricultural region offering jobs year round). Usually they are from the rural parts of Bankura, Puruliya, Murshidabad and other backward districts of the state. Most of the people interviewed stated that they entered this occupation as no other alternative was available. They also represent the most 'unwelcome people' to the urban middle class, which sees them as intruders into the city and its streets.

Even though urban policy makers and middle class residents disdain their presence in city streets, rickshaws are of great importance in providing intra-urban transport in small and medium cities like Burdwan that are not served by organized public transport such as city buses and shuttle auto rickshaws. Cycle rickshaws have remained an effective and popular mode of urban mobility in the cities of India since the Chinese immigrants introduced them to Kolkata in 1900.

Rickshaw pulling as an occupation gained popularity in Indian towns and cities after World War II.<sup>7</sup> Though

7. A. Kumar, 'Intermediate Transport and Rickshaw drivers in Urban India: Towards a Policy Framework', Paper presented at the National Seminar on Patterns of Urban Social Change in India, 6-9 April 1989, B.H.U., Department of Geography, Varanasi.

there are both hand-pulled and cycle rickshaws for carrying passengers in Kolkata, cycle rickshaws are the only effective non-motorized vehicles for intra-city movement in Burdwan. Their popularity in Indian cities can be explained both historically and economically. Besides meeting the increasing demand for an effective means of intra-urban mobility, rickshaws have flourished in Indian cities because of the migration of rural populations without significant education and capital into cities in search of jobs, for whom rickshaw pulling is the best available option due to its ease of entry.<sup>8</sup>

Burdwan approximates most medium sized cities in India with a population of around three lakh. The city lacks a developed public transport system and, therefore, residents have to depend either on their own vehicle or on rickshaws for mobility within the city. In this old city, rickshaws now occupy the roads that were meant for palanquins. Seventy-two per cent of its labour force is in the tertiary sector, comprising various services, trade and transport. The transport sector alone employs nearly 10 per cent of total workers, with informal transport workers like the rickshaw pullers forming a majority of this workforce. A limited percentage of transport workers may be employed in organized sectors such as the railways, but a large section is employed in private road transport and its poor cousin, the rickshaw pulling trade.

Rickshaws and rickshaw pullers are common to a majority of streets in Burdwan, providing a major mode of transport within a densely built up

centuries-old urban fabric. Roads are narrow and now compressed by concrete buildings on both sides and open drains, leaving no footpath for pedestrians. In this congested environment, rickshaws remain the best transport choice. While 'advanced' modes of transport have grown in importance for transportation in and out of Burdwan, non-motorized vehicles continue to provide affordable mobility within the urban centre.

Across India, traffic planners and politicians view rickshaw pullers as 'dispensable' in their efforts towards urban modernization, as in the case of Calcutta during the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Currently, there is an effort to remove rickshaws from city streets in India. Rickshaw pullers have in recent years given rise to an important public debate implicitly involving the lives, livelihoods and futures of a sizeable population group that is among the poorest and most exploited in metro cities in India.

Although not comparable to metro cities like Delhi, Burdwan too is witnessing similar efforts to control the proliferation of rickshaws. Since 1996, the city government has stopped issuing fresh licenses to control the number of rickshaws. However, in reality, the number continues to increase and is four to five times higher than the registered numbers account for, and the pullers have created a subversive niche of their own workplaces and residences in different parts of the city, away from the main streets where surveillance is more stringent in nature.

The number of rickshaw pullers is huge: there are at least two drivers per rickshaw (although there is no official record to capture the actual

number as most of them run rickshaws without a license). The hiring of rickshaws is available on the basis of a six-hour shift, thus making two shifts a day for two drivers (because of its labour intensive nature, very few people can manage two shifts a day). There is also a section of rickshaw pullers who commute along with their rickshaws (which are registered in gram panchayats of peripheral rural areas of Burdwan city) and operate in the relatively underserved new extensions of the city. Their presence in the city core area is prohibited where there is regular policing. Thus the rickshaws as well as the rickshaw pullers occupy an increasing portion of the city's streets and informal economy.

The number of rickshaws registered with the gram panchayat as well as unregistered rickshaws have increased markedly in order to fill the vacuum created by the city government's 'no entry' policy for legal rickshaws and increasing demand for public transport to facilitate intra-city mobility. Because of a clear division of zones between registered and unregistered rickshaws and because they functioned (until recently) under the common umbrella of the CPIM, relations between registered and non-registered rickshaws, legal and illegal, in the streets of Burdwan have by and large been peaceful.

Although it is normally assumed that the number of unregistered rickshaws has increased automatically, a deeper understanding of the situation does not support this claim. Registered rickshaws are organized under a union to protect their interest. Simultaneously, political mobilization backs unregistered rickshaws in the city. The increasing flow of people into urban informal activities like rickshaw pulling is purely a political economic

8. Madhu Purnima Kishwar, 'Urban Informal Sector: The Need for a Bottom-up Agenda of Economic Reforms – Case Study of Cycle Rickshaw and Street Vendors in Delhi', *Urban Poverty Report*, Oxford University Press New Delhi, 2009.

9. J. Sen, 'The Left Front and the 'Unintended City': Is a Civilized Transition Possible?' *Economic and Political Weekly* 31(45-46), 1996, pp. 2977-79.

process, in order to enrich the vote banks of politicians. Rickshaw pullers are often used to populate political rallies. Although they are disinterested in politics, drivers are often forced to join rallies because their survival in the rickshaw-pulling sector is dependant on local political power, given the illegality of their trade. Drivers also make regular contributions to party funds or to local politicians in order to maintain a livelihood. Thus, there is a significant circulation of money, not only in the form of remittances around rickshaw driving but also as personal payment to local political contacts, which sometimes go to party coffers.

In spite of the introduction of town bus service in the early 1990s, the rickshaw remains an increasingly important mode of transportation in Burdwan city. Buses ply only on some wider roads and serve a limited part of the city along main roads, whereas rickshaws are a more flexible mode of transport and suitable to even narrow roads in small and old cities like Burdwan. Although rickshaws look more like a medieval contraption than a modern day form of transport<sup>10</sup> and remain powerful symbols of a feudal past,<sup>11</sup> this non-motorized vehicle is preferred by citizens due to its ease of use and proximity to points of departure such as homes. A users' perception survey done in five cities in West Bengal conducted in 2011 by the author indicates that the use of rickshaws is highly gendered. The mobility of women (who often do not own their personal vehicles) in small cities is highly dependent on rickshaws. The user response survey also reveals that men usually opt for 'no rickshaws in the city' whereas women and elderly

10. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and David Williams, *Moving Pictures: Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh*. Mapin Publishing, New Delhi, 2010.

11. J. Sen. 1996, p. 2977, op cit.

people highly value their role in intra-urban mobility.

Rickshaws also play a big role in the lives of women commuters who trust fixed rickshaw pullers to pick them up on time at transit points (central bus stand and railway station) for their work destinations. Similarly, women depend on some rickshaw pullers even for their children's drop to and pick up from schools. This questions mainstream policies of transport and mobility where women and elderly people remain marginal in making choices about intra-urban mobility, policies that are largely controlled by male policy makers. The rickshaw itself is a marginal form of mobility and the users are also marginal to decision making as far as transport policies are concerned.

Indian cities are currently competing to be 'global cities' and an 'engine of growth' where non-motorized vehicles like rickshaws have no place. In the name of 'greater common good', The National Urban Transport Policy of the Government of India illustrates this trend, stating that 'with increasing urban sprawl and rising income levels, non-motorized transport has lost its importance. Further, non-motorized modes are also exposed to greater risk of accidents as they share a common right of way with motorized vehicles.'<sup>12</sup> The policy also states that the government will give priority to the construction of cycle tracks and pedestrian paths in all cities under the auspices of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) in order to enhance safety and the use of non-motorized modes. However, in reality, the major investment of the JNNURM is directed to the construction of

12. Government of India, National Urban Transport Policy, 2006. Accessed from [www.urbanindia.nic.in/policies/transportpolicy.pdf](http://www.urbanindia.nic.in/policies/transportpolicy.pdf)

flyovers in order to ease the mobility of private transport, especially cars.

Although there is provision for non-motorized transport in a few cities, the experience is that many such cycle tracks and pedestrian paths are not used as initially envisaged. This is because these facilities are poorly designed and do not fully recognize the limitations and problems faced by cyclists or pedestrians. Thus, despite the supposed accommodation of multiple modes of transport, roads continue to be made exclusively for motorized transit. The cost of travel has therefore considerably increased and has made access to livelihoods far more difficult, especially for the poor.

In the proximate future, it is difficult to imagine our city streets without rickshaws. Nevertheless, while there is reference to cycle and pedestrian pathways in the transport policy as forms of non-motorized transport, rickshaws remain invisible to transport planners. Though pushed out from large metro cities and especially from main transport corridors, the study of cities such as Burdwan illustrates how these modes of livelihood and transport are not extinguished but rather relocated to marginal spaces within cities that are underserved by public transport and distant from main transport corridors that are dominated by Bus Rapid Transport and cars.

The contribution of rickshaws to urban mobility is undercounted, contributing to its continued invisibility in future transport policies for cities. Hopefully, the present study based on small cities such as Burdwan, will serve as a useful reminder that despite the excitement about BRTs, metrorail systems and flyovers, rickshaws remain an important and viable source of transport and livelihood and deserve a central role in debates about the future of transport in Indian cities.