

The Rickshaw and Rickshaw Painting in Dhaka City

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Abstract

The rickshaw is a human-propelled mode of transport on three wheels. Rickshaw painting is the embodiment of the rickshaw as it is seen all over its body. Dhaka City's rickshaw painting is the most enthralling representation of transport art in the world. The moving rickshaws are viewed as a roving exhibition of paintings—a mobile panorama which is seen nowhere else in the world. The rickshaws with their paintings create such a pervasive and emblematic feature of urban life in Dhaka City that it has given birth to social practices, rituals and festive events. To the general public, rickshaw painting, being colourful and stunning, is eye-catching. Its thematic pictures tell stories of Bangladesh, of everyday life, of what the rickshaw artists treasure as a kaleidoscopic view of their imagination. New rickshaws are always a blaze of colours and paintings in Dhaka City, which is rightly called the Rickshaw Capital of the World.

Invented in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century (Gallagher 1992: 27) the rickshaw (*Ricksha* in Bangla) is a human-propelled mode of transport on three wheels for carrying both people and goods. It can accommodate two persons in comfort, even a whole family, or a heap of goods with a man holding it tightly.

Rickshaw painting is an integral part of the rickshaw. Rickshaw painting is a dynamic form of urban folk art in Dhaka City. We can assign it to traditional art since it has remained in fashion for a long time and has already acquired the trait of traditionalism by the prolonged use of it. This living tradition will survive until the rickshaw is totally discarded as a form of transport under the pressure of modern technology.

The rickshaw came into use in Dhaka City in 1938 when there were only six rickshaws (Rashid 1986: 2). In 1941, Dhaka City had only 37 rickshaws. In course of time Dhaka became known as the city of rickshaws. Dhaka City is the Capital of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, located in South Asia between India and Myanmar, consists of 64 districts. The rickshaw appears in all cities, towns and suburbs of every district. Even though the geographical range of the rickshaw and rickshaw painting is the whole of Bangladesh, the most prolific and predominant

centre of the rickshaw and rickshaw painting is Dhaka City where rickshaws are now most numerous in the world. The rickshaws of Dhaka City, apart from being most decorative and dazzling, depict all the known themes of rickshaw painting. More importantly, Dhaka City represents the best specimens of rickshaw painting in Bangladesh.

Being efficient and convenient as a mode of transport for short distances and highly decorative with thematic pictures, the rickshaws have become noteworthy and eye-catching. As the rickshaw is a slow-moving vehicle, the paintings that it carries are easily visible to the onlookers who can enjoy them fairly well even in the movement. The moving rickshaws are viewed as a roving exhibition of paintings—a mobile panorama which is seen nowhere else in the world. Joanna Kirkpatrick (2003: CD ROM), an anthropologist from the United States, who studied rickshaw painting extensively, refers to these rickshaws as ‘transports of delight.’

Dhaka City’s rickshaw painting is the most enthralling representation of transport art in the world. Transport Art is a worldwide phenomenon. But no other example of transport art can aesthetically be compared with rickshaw painting in Dhaka City. It is only in Dhaka City that every part of the rickshaw is decorated.



Figure 1: A Rickshaw with its Elaborate Paintings in Dhaka City

Painted tassels, tinsel and twirling bits hang from its different parts. Painted plastic flowers sprout in the front and on the sides. Part of the aluminum sheathing and the entire rectangular plate of corrugated iron, both appearing at the rickshaw’s back, have pictures elegantly painted (**Fig. 1**). The overall effect is spectacular. It is, however, not for overall decoration but specifically for paintings that this transport art of Dhaka City has become so significant and attractive and, therefore, is more appropriately called rickshaw painting.

Rickshaw artists fall into three groups. Rickshaw artists (**Fig. 2**) of the first group paint exquisite floral motifs and pictures of movie stars on plastic sheets, rickshaw artists of the second group paint thematic pictures on plates of corrugated iron, and rickshaw artists of the third group paint birds and floral motifs. Rickshaw artists of the first and second groups, commissioned by a master rickshaw mistri, work at home, as they do not paint anything on a rickshaw body.



Figure 2: Rickshaw Artists

They deliver their paintings to the atelier of the master rickshaw mistri. The master rickshaw mistri then selects a few painted plastic sheets and one painted plate. He sizes the painted plastic sheets. His equipment is a sewing machine. He sews the painted plastic sheets. He also uses scissors and templates to cut patterns of plastic tacks. Once the plate with a thematic picture is placed above the rickshaw's bumpers and all the painted plastic sheets and patterns of plastic tacks are used to embellish the rickshaw's hood, the final product is a gorgeously decorated and painted rickshaw (**Fig. 3**).



Figure 3: Decorating the Rickshaw's Hood

The rickshaw artists transmit their knowledge and skills to the apprentices by applying the hands-on-training method. Acquisition of the required knowledge and skills by the apprentices is largely based on a teacher-pupil relationship and is mostly dependent on imitation and incorporation of gestures.

Creativity is achieved by the apprentices through enjoyment and devotion to work. The rickshaw artists usually pass on their knowledge and skills to their children and close relatives.

Alinoor, Ahmed Hussain, Alauddin Ahmed, R. K. Das and Abdul Latif were icons in rickshaw painting in the past. They are a source of inspiration to the succeeding rickshaw artists. At present Syed Ahmed Hossain, S. M. Samsu, Dherendra Chandra Das, Rafiqul Islam (**Fig. 4**), Tapan Das and Saleh Mohammed are icons in rickshaw painting. They have visualised new themes to paint thematic pictures. Consequently rickshaw painting has been enriched. They are now using better enamel paints and superior brushes. The new generation of rickshaw artists is emerging under their leadership. The rickshaw artists are proud of their heritage and creativity.



Figure 4: Rafiqul Islam

Because of the writings of foreign scholars like Rob Gallagher (1992), Joanna Kirkpatrick¹ (2003) and Henry Glassie (2000) rickshaw painting is being appreciated beyond Bangladesh. An exhibition of rickshaw painting was held at the British Museum in London in the beginning of 1988. Rickshaw panels and hoods from Dhaka City are now in the collections of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Since the 1980s foreign residents in Bangladesh and tourists have been buying thematic pictures of rickshaw painting from the rickshaw artists. The rickshaw artists are being inspired beyond measure to carry on the established tradition, and they have earned respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Thematically rickshaw painting is repetitive. On a careful study we have found a typology of rickshaw painting based on its recurring themes, which are movie stars, animal scenes, rural scenes, urban scenes, religious similes, and historical events. In other words, all images of rickshaw painting fall under these

six broad categories. Floral designs and written words are subsidiary to the recurring themes. Within each theme there are many images, and these images persist for quite a while. How long an image will last depends on its popularity or the circumstance that has influenced its depiction, or on the whim of the artist who has introduced it. We can elucidate the following typology and the following trends of rickshaw painting:

Movie Stars

Rickshaw painting began with pictures of movie stars in the 1950s. While this theme recurs, movie stars constantly change. We all know that movie stars are not lasting figures. As a particular movie becomes popular, its hero or heroine, sometimes both, will appear on rickshaws. If a movie star becomes an icon, s/he will dominate the repertoire of the rickshaw artist as long as s/he does not fall out of favour or is replaced by another icon. During our fieldwork in November 2006, we found the pictures of the same movie stars on many rickshaws. They were then the most popular movie stars. We noticed that some of them were the current superstars of Indian Hindi films. Shabnur of Bangladesh and Karina Kapur of India were very common among the movie stars appearing frequently on rickshaws in 2006. When we talked to the rickshaw pullers, we found them quite familiar with these two movie stars, and some of them were their great fans. Female movie stars are more common in rickshaw painting. In 2013 Apu Biswas, Anika Kabir, Shaina Amin, Purnima and Borsha are the most popular movie stars.

Joanna Kirkpatrick emphatically holds that rickshaw art belongs to male public culture, even though she recognises Henry Glassie's discovery of women participating in rickshaw painting in Old Dhaka (Glassie and Mahmud 2000: 31). One of the strongest arguments that Kirkpatrick puts forward in support of her assertion comes from the recurrence of images of beautiful film stars with their "huge, alluring eyes," which are meant to excite the male public values of gazing, seeing, and longing (Glassie and Mahmud 2000: 31). In fact, she has chosen this female imagery as a "fitting overall visual metaphor" for her study of the rickshaw art of Bangladesh (Glassie and Mahmud 2000:31).

Animal Scenes

Animal scenes (**Fig. 5**) are prolific in rickshaw painting. Birds or beasts are painted in different modes and postures or in combination of other scenes. Sometimes two parrots flank a flower or the Taj Mahal. Sometimes two peacocks flank the head of a lion. The animal scenes that are fascinating and frequently seen include a lion in the act of gripping a deer with its gruesome claws, a peacock confronting a placid cow with her calf, and birds flocking in colorful abundance. Huge animals in combat, such as an elephant and a tiger wrapped in a lethal embrace, are also found. In the middle of the 1990s, the rickshaw's most usual image of animals showed a pair of peacocks facing a white cow with her calf before her. There were also humorous depictions of animals such as animals performing civilised acts like marching in a traditional wedding procession. One picture, described by the artist as "The Wedding of Uncle Lion," showed the majestic lion seated in a palanquin which was being carried by two tigers. A deer was leading the wedding procession. Another deer was just behind the rear tiger-bearer. Dressed like a musician, this deer was playing a large wind instrument. A small animal, probably a rabbit, was seen in the center of the moving palanquin. Two peacocks, standing apart, were watching the wedding procession. The floor, upon which this ceremonial event was taking place, was painted in an *alpana*-like fashion with a large central lotus.



Figure 5: Animal Imagery in a Rickshaw Painting

A special feature of animal scenes is the representation of satirical animals. Satirical animals were popular with artists in Kalighat paintings of Kolkata in the mid-nineteenth century. It appears that the rickshaw artists of Dhaka began to depict animals as humans (as they are in folklore) sometime between the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975 and Major-General Ziaur Rahman's accession to presidency as a result of the coup on 21 April 1977.

Joanna Kirkpatrick (2003), who studied the rickshaw art of Bangladesh extensively, writes:

I began my first year of fieldwork in Bangladesh in September of 1975, shortly after the death of Sheikh Mujib. I was able to return to Bangladesh in the winter of 1978 for a shorter stint of fieldwork, but it was time enough to photograph and study some unusual shifts in Dhaka's ricksha art images. Two of the most notable thematic changes as compared to what I saw during my first visit were the appearance of many sorts of animal fable images, and birds—fantastically designed and feathered, often depicted in courtship poses—billing and cooing on rickshas all over the city (Kirkpatrick 2003: 7)

She (2003) further writes: “Animal fables had become common during a time of increasing Islamisation within the country” (Kirkpatrick 2003: 7). Kirkpatrick (2003) observed that Ziaur Rahman

... had begun to ally his foreign policy closer to Bangladesh's former ruler, Pakistan (a nation which was then moving toward instituting Islamic religious law as the law of the land), and away from former liberation war helper India. He also adopted public relations strategies of portraying himself in newspaper photos as a pious man in prayerful poses while he actively wooed support from Bangladesh's Islamist political elites, positioning himself to run for the presidency in the 1977 elections (Kirkpatrick 2003: 7)

The article on secularism in the preamble of the constitution of Bangladesh was abolished under pressure from Muslim fundamentalist parties. Coincidentally, rickshaw painting, “which hitherto had included riotous celebrations on painted panels of movies and movie stars, sexy women and violent men, moved into restricted modes of expression which avoided depicting human figures, substituting animals” (Kirkpatrick 2003: 7).

Joanna Kirkpatrick also noticed the complete elimination of pictures from the rickshaw painting of Dhaka City. She (2003) writes:

In the late seventies, the ruling powers in Dhaka were turning back toward emulating their former enemy Pakistan, because General Ziaur Rahman, who was then president of the country, perceived that it would benefit his hold on power to play up to the Islamic political parties and forces. Thus, an old law on the books since Pakistan days (1964) which proclaimed that people should not “paste up pictures on the back of rickshas” was re-invoked both in Dhaka and in Rajshahi by municipal authorities. (I have no information on the policy in Chittagong). This meant that “people pictures” were effectively suppressed (Kirkpatrick 2003: 8)

Even though human imagery returned in full vigour in rickshaw painting in 1983 satirical animals continued to be depicted as before. Satirical animal representation has remained popular in rickshaw painting since 1977.

Rural Scenes



Figure 6: A Rural Scene in a Rickshaw Painting

While rural scenes (**Fig. 6**) continue as a theme, different rickshaw artists visualise them in their own ways. A rural scene could be a sprawling village or simply a cluster of houses with domestic animals around, it could be thatched huts near a river or simply a river flowing with crows flying in the sky, or it could be a boat gliding through the river toward the sunset or a heap of straw in front of a

hut. In 1995, while conducting fieldwork in Dhaka, Henry Glassie (1997: 436) photographed a rickshaw seatback showing three people—the driver with a stick in his hand and two passengers—in a bullock cart on a road with a thatched village in the background. The two passengers appear to be the husband and the wife. Interestingly enough, a peacock standing nearby is watching them.

Urban Scenes

To the rural view, rickshaw artists add progressive urban images: towering buildings, crisscrossing aerial roadways, and visions of swift, mechanical transport. However, when a train thunders through the jungle or an airplane flies above a placid, thatched village, the urban scene becomes contemporaneous with the rural scene.

Religious Similes

Religious beliefs of the majority of the population are often reflected in rickshaw painting. A mosque with its ablution pool, the holy Ka'bah with a little boy praying before a Quran stand or a blessing written in Arabic are among the most favourite religious similes. For many years, the Taj Mahal has been the favourite theme of the rickshaw artist. Most of the rickshaw artists and rickshaw pullers call it a mosque, some identifying it as a particular mosque in Dhaka. On the rickshaw, the Taj Mahal stands out from a unified field of colour and rises from a pink lotus in an image that captures the syncretistic qualities of culture in Bangladesh (Glassie 1997: 430). A mosque, as the Taj Mahal is believed to be, replaces the Hindu deity upon the lotus seat. This painting was found on many rickshaws in 2006, and it recurs in 2013. One can easily find differences in its presentation. There exist different images of the Taj Mahal. Why does it persist? Henry Glassie (1997) has explained it adequately. He has written:

The Taj Mahal might be taken as a sign of general pride in the culture of the Indian subcontinent, but when I ask among the rickshaw pullers and artists, I find its connotations to be specifically religious. Some men know that the Taj Mahal is a tomb in India; they call it a “symbol of our Islamic heritage.” More men identify it as a mosque, some even specifying it as their own mosque. Their interpretation entails a symbolic reading, rather than a literal one. For them the dome and minarets mean a mosque, so that the picture becomes

capable of representing the mosque where they pray. (Glassie and Mahmud 2000: 29)

Historical Events

Rickshaw painting flows with the time, and what we see on many rickshaws often reflects past or current events, which we would like to refer to as historical events. Such events constitute a recurring theme in the sense that the rickshaw artist may be inclined to choose any event or any figure in the context of a situation that once prevailed, existed in the immediate past, or is likely to receive our attention. Here are a few examples:

1. Immediately after the emergence of Bangladesh, rickshaws portrayed battle scenes or freedom fighters in action (**Fig. 7**), scenes of air or sea combat, or the new Bangladeshi flag. A common scene on many rickshaws was a Pakistani soldier being blown up by freedom fighters hiding nearby. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's portrait was also seen on rickshaws. Alinoor, a master rickshaw artist, depicted these images more frequently than others. As time went by, these images receded into the past. However, freedom fighters in action are reappearing in view of the current political situation, especially because of the trial of war criminals of 1971.



Figure 7: Battle Scenes in a Rickshaw Painting

2. Khudiram, a Bengali hero, who was hanged by the British in 1908, appeared in rickshaw paintings in 1982.

Phulan Devi, India's bandit queen appeared in rickshaw paintings in 1987. Phulan Devi was depicted as holding an AK 47. Saddam Hussein's portrait became common in rickshaw paintings in the 1990s, for he became a hero among the urban folk after the Gulf War. In some pictures, Saddam Hussein's hands lifted in prayer in the midst of a rocket burning an arc in the air.

In 2013, as in the preceding years of the twenty-first century, we found no heroic image on rickshaws. It appears that no one worthy of depiction caught the attention of the rickshaw artist.

Floral Designs and Written Words

Floral designs and written words appear on rickshaws as general features of rickshaw decoration. Floral designs proliferate as more and more artists are involved in rickshaw painting. In 2006, we found some written words appearing on rickshaws. These written words give simple messages: *Ma* (mother), *Mayer Doa* (blessing from mother), *Allah Bharasa* (have faith in God), and *Namaj Kayem Karun* (perform your prayer). Either *Ma* or *Mayer Doa* appears almost on all rickshaws. A peacock is sometimes flanked by the word "Ma" on either side. Another message in Bangla is: "Plant trees, save the country." An ethnographer needs to watch how long these written words, especially *Ma* and *Mayer Doa*, recur on rickshaws.

Conclusion

The rickshaw and rickshaw painting characterise Dhaka City and its residents' identity. Rickshaw painting is the embodiment of the rickshaw as it is seen all over its body. As the element has been practiced and transmitted with spontaneous zeal and visceral passion, it has become an established part of this city's cultural tradition. As a key part of the urban landscape in Dhaka City, gorgeously painted rickshaws have been the subject of films and other artwork. With heroes or movie stars, birds and animals, natural imagery, creative depictions of historical events, fables, colorful floral patterns, and words of precept, rickshaw painting provides the bearers and practitioners of the element with a sense of identity and continuity. To the general public, rickshaw painting, being colourful and stunning, is alluring. Its thematic pictures tell stories of Bangladesh, of everyday life, of what the rickshaw artists treasure as a kaleidoscopic view of their imagination. The rickshaws spread colours all around



Figure 8: Rickshaws in Dhaka City

and add a notch of vibrancy to the otherwise mundane streets. The brilliance of rickshaw painting lies in its innocence and in the manifestation of imaginative power.

The rickshaws with their paintings create a pervasive and emblematic feature of urban life in Dhaka City (**Fig. 8**). In fact, the rickshaw and rickshaw painting are at the centre of many social and cultural practices, rituals and events, namely, musical performances, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, fairs, festivals, sports, and awards. Inscription of the element on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity would assure a reinforcement of the international awareness of the importance of cultural diversity and human creativity. New rickshaws are always a blaze of colours and paintings in Dhaka City, which is rightly called the Rickshaw Capital of the World.

End Notes

¹Joanna Kirkpatrick documented the evolution of Bangladesh's rickshaw painting from 1975 to 1987 fairly in depth, and thereafter she brought her study up to date until 2002, relying on her last visit in 1998 and Kevin Bubrisk's pictures and notes of 2002. Her CD-ROM on *Transports of Delight: The Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003) contains the results of her extensive study. Combining more than 1,000 brilliantly coloured photographs with video clips, music, natural sound, and text, this CD-ROM is an ethnographical study of one of the major components of Bangladesh's folk art in particular and of South Asian folk art in general. A neatly printed eight-page folder, provided with the CD-ROM, explains how the text and images can be viewed and how the music can be turned off or on as desired. Those who are interested in South Asian folklore, especially in South Asian folk art, will find this work exhilarating.

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