Unfixing the City: Rickshaw Mobilities, Modernities and Urban Change in Dhaka

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It is almost impossible to imagine the streets of Dhaka without the colourful shape of the cycle-rickshaw. Or without the hundreds of thousands of drivers who operate the rickshaw across the dense and congested streets of Bangladesh's capital city. Despite this overwhelming presence, the vehicle is strikingly absent from plans, policies, and visions for the urban future of Dhaka. This thesis tries to make sense of this discrepancy and examines how the mobilities and employment projects of cycle-rickshaw drivers unfold amidst efforts to ban and restrict the presence of the rickshaw in Dhaka. This work received the 2021 New Voices Award from the Mobile Lives Forum.

Research participants

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Figure 1: Traffic in Old Dhaka (photo taken by the author)

1. What is your research topic? What thesis are you defending?

Annemiek Prins – The capital of Bangladesh is often framed and presented in terms of mobility. While some travellers have cynically dubbed Dhaka "the traffic capital of the world" [1] , others have described the city in slightly more affectionate terms as "the rickshaw

capital of the world" [2]. Often a certain degree of overlap is assumed between these two characteristics, as the large number of cycle-rickshaws in Dhaka is frequently blamed for the city's traffic congestion. My PhD thesis explores the contested role of the cycle-rickshaw in Dhaka traffic, which has increasingly been subjected to restrictive policy measures and fuels distinct debates and anxieties over the urban future of Dhaka.

Ever since Bangladesh became independent in 1971, the country has witnessed rapid urbanization. With an estimated population of more than 22 million people, the capital, Dhaka, is currently one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world [3]. The city's ever-increasing density has transformed (road)space into a scarce and contested urban asset, while also kindling debates over which and whose movements can be considered appropriate for a "modern metropolis in the making". As is the case for other post-colonial cities [4], the crowded and congested streets of Dhaka are perceived as an obstacle to achieving a "modern" or world-class urban future. Indeed, the capital of Bangladesh is frequently represented as a city that should somehow emulate and "catch up" with other Asian metropolitan centres, such as Singapore and Shanghai [5]. The cycle-rickshaw, which is associated with a degree of "backwardness", finds itself at the heart of such spatial and ideological disputes and is increasingly banned from major roads and intersections.

Despite such restrictions, the rickshaw continues to play a vital role in the circulation of Dhaka traffic. At the time of my research, the rickshaw was responsible for 38 per cent of all the trips [6] that were made in Dhaka city on a daily basis [7]. Moreover, the vehicle itself also continues to evolve and change. Over the past decade and a half, the electric or battery-run rickshaw has made a steady, albeit contested, advance in Bangladesh. This trend has started attracting people with disabilities – and even a few women – to the sector, underscoring the important role that the rickshaw industry has long played as an avenue of accessible labour. Rural-urban migrants in particular have long relied on the availability of rickshaw labour.

In my PhD thesis, I examine how the journeys and labour projects of cycle-rickshaw drivers unfold amidst ever-tightening restrictions. I show that their lives and mobilities pose a critical challenge to the neat, spatial order of things that many policymakers would like to impose upon Dhaka under the pretext of urban modernity.

2. If your thesis/dissertation involves empirical research, what does this consist of?

Annemiek Prins – Rickshaw mobilities connect different scales and dimensions of urbanisation, ranging from the everyday realities of traffic to rural-urban patterns of labour migration to wider dynamics of urban change. My methodological approach reflects these different dimensions and is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh.

With the exception of a few short field trips to the countryside of Bangladesh, my PhD research was based in and around Dhaka city. To get a better sense of the different frictions and restrictions that characterise Dhaka traffic I spent the first months of my research keeping a "rickshaw diary". I took notes of all the rickshaw trips I made and carried out structured observations on the rickshaw itself, sometimes aided by a GoPro camera.

I also engaged in semi-structured interviews with local politicians, urban planners, architects, labour unionists and activists to gain a better understanding of the processes, politics and policies that shape urban development and discourses of modernity in Dhaka.
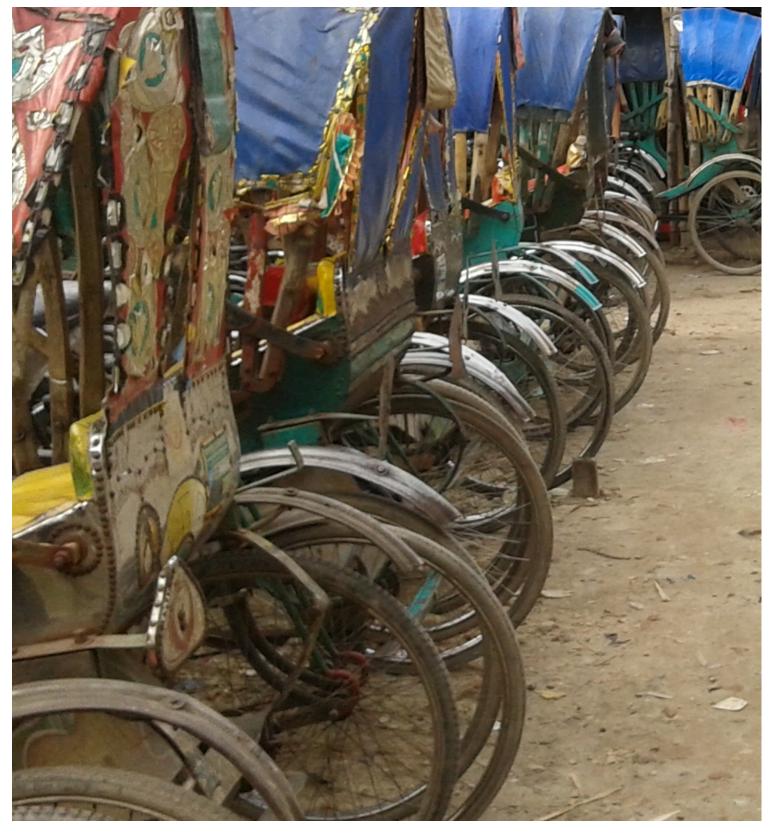
Figure 2: Rickshaw garage in Dhaka (photo taken by the author)

The bulk of my fieldwork was spent at so-called rickshaw garages. Rickshaw garages are improvised, half-open storage spaces where rickshaw drivers either rent or park their vehicles. These spaces also function as makeshift hostels for drivers who only temporarily reside in Dhaka. Throughout my research, I visited approximately seventy-five of these rickshaw garages. With the help of Yasin Kazi, who accompanied me as a research assistant, I engaged in informal (group) discussions with rickshaw drivers and garage owners. The purpose of these conversations was to form an overview of the rickshaw industry and the semi-legal space in which it operates. In addition, we carried out semi-structured interviews with individual rickshaw drivers that revolved around their experiences in traffic, work histories and reasons for moving to the city.

3. What are the main findings?

Annemiek Prins – My thesis places an emphasis on the many ways in which the lives and journeys of rickshaw drivers resist fixity and territorialization. By this I mean that rickshaw mobilities and labour trajectories highlight those urban experiences and economic strategies that cannot be easily pinned down to one particular location or neighbourhood. And yet, efforts to formalise and regularise Dhaka's urban landscape and transport system often aim to do exactly that.

Rickshaw mobilities represent an unstructured and open-ended form of traversing the city. In my thesis, I show that rickshaw journeys rarely unfold as a linear trajectory from one exact location to another, but are always subject to negotiation. Neither the fare, route nor destination is definitively fixed in advance and navigation through traffic gains shape in mutual consultation between rickshaw drivers and passengers. This open-ended way of navigating the city is increasingly thwarted by policy interventions that try to confine and tie rickshaw mobilities to certain roads and neighbourhoods. This is particularly true for the implementation of Non-Motorised Transport (NMT)-free roads, where rickshaws are not allowed. These so-called "VIP Roads" break up rickshaw journeys and have essentially created fixed points where drivers are forced to terminate their journeys. In addition, several upscale neighbourhoods in Dhaka have also experimented with capping and fixing the number of rickshaws that are allowed to operate in their vicinity.

Such policies hint at forms of infrastructural injustice. For example, while the policy of NMT-free corridors was presented as a way of separating motorised from non-motorised traffic, its implementation has essentially resulted in a one-sided ban on rickshaws on several major roads. This point was also underscored by Khadim, an older rickshaw driver I interviewed during my research. Khadim explained that he was used to traversing the entire city by simply going "one-by-one road". Nowadays, however, he finds his journeys increasingly cut short by VIP Roads. Or as Khadim himself explained: "All vehicles can use all roads, but our rickshaw is not allowed on VIP roads. Yet private cars can go everywhere legally…" He was visibly frustrated about this double standard and pondered out loud why the rickshaw was not allowed on the same roads as "rich people's vehicles".

It is not just rickshaw mobilities that are characterised by a degree of open-endedness, the same is true for the migration trajectories of rickshaw drivers. Most rickshaw drivers live multi-local lives across city and countryside and frequently take the bus back to their home villages [8]. These rural-urban comings and goings are made possible by the way in which the rickshaw industry functions. Rickshaw labour requires no starting capital, provides workers with access to "instant cash" and is easily accessible due to the fact that the vehicle can be rented on a daily basis. This makes it easy to combine this form of work with seasonal agricultural labour, and also explains why driving a rickshaw is often preferred over forms of low-skilled wage labour.

A rickshaw puller by the name of Faisal, for example, explained that "working for wages" ("betone chakri kore") was simply not worth the effort. Not only did waged work come with the risk of facing abuse by a superior, salaries were also often simply insufficient. He emphasised that they needed "instant cash" ("nogod poysa"), echoing a common refrain among rickshaw drivers. In fact, one perceived advantage of driving a rickshaw was that it allowed workers to "earn money as the wheels turn around" ("chaka ghurle taka"), without there being any need to "wait for money" [9].

In addition, workers would also frequently turn to the rickshaw industry when other, more cost-intensive labour projects failed – such as starting a business, acquiring land or migrating abroad. Stories of failed business attempts and lost investments were a recurring theme throughout my research. There was the story of Jamal, a fish farmer who had started pulling a rickshaw after losing his fish stock to excessive flooding. And that of Fahim, who had lost his crops to heavy rainfall. Khadim, whom I mentioned before, used to run his own rickshaw business until four of them were stolen. Ajmul had worked as a street vendor, selling fresh orange juice at a busy traffic junction, until hawking was banned from the area where he had his little stand. Sadiq had come to Dhaka to escape the burden of a loan that he could not pay back, while Hakim started driving a rickshaw to recuperate from the financial losses he had incurred while trying to migrate to Malaysia to work in the construction industry.

Far from representing a fixed job, rickshaw labour thus constitutes an avenue of economic endurance that workers move in and out of while trying to hold together different life projects. This also significantly complicates the calls for "rehabilitation" that often permeate discussions on rickshaw labour. The idea behind such proposals is that it will become possible to ban or seriously decrease the number of cycle-rickshaws once drivers have been successfully rehabilitated into different professions. Policy discussions on the rickshaw are thus often animated by the desire to grant both the rickshaw and its drivers a more fixed, clear-cut, and "appropriate" role within Dhaka's urban landscape and economy.

4. What is your contribution to theoretical and policy debates?

Annemiek Prins – In my PhD thesis I have highlighted that the journeys and multi-local lives of cycle-rickshaw drivers make it almost impossible to definitively fix, pin down or map their urban presence onto certain spaces, neighbourhoods or even the city itself. On a theoretical level, I have tried to challenge the sedentarist and residentialist notions of the city that continue to shape urban ethnographic scholarship. Urban anthropology, for instance, has often started its inquiries from specific neighbourhoods. Cities in the global South, moreover, continue to be framed and represented "through the icon of the slum" [10]. This focus on habitation averts attention away from the fact that for many poor rural-urban migrants the city does not represent a place to live, but an avenue for making a living. Moreover, these efforts to make a living often transcend the boundaries of the actual city. In my thesis, I therefore argue that we need to take people's work, efforts and movements rather than their habitats as a point of departure for understanding urban exclusions and vulnerabilities.

In doing so, I have also tried to complicate place-based urban proposals and roadmaps for the future. In the case of rickshaw drivers, for instance, potential urban solutions often focus on tying them down to certain places or occupational trajectories. Examples of such interventions include plans to turn rickshaw transport into a mode for "neighbourhood circulation only" [11] and microfinance and resettlement schemes that try to entice rural-urban migrants to return to the countryside to start a business over there [12]. Moreover, calls for rehabilitation almost always seem to envision a return to occupational and residential stability. This disregards the fact that the rural-urban poor in Bangladesh have long relied on movement and the pursuit of multiple labour projects to cope with economic and ecological vulnerabilities. Such mobilities are also shaped by the movements of Bangladesh's shifting rivers. The fact that climate change and largescale sand extraction continue to aggravate river erosion and land loss in Bangladesh, makes it likely that such flexible and mobile labour strategies will garner even more importance in the future.

5. What questions have arisen from your research that could be addressed in the future?

Annemiek Prins – One specific trend that merits further attention, is the rapid advance of the electric rickshaw in Bangladesh. This trend toward electric forms of transportation predominantly plays out away from the capital city, in the countryside and district towns. While the battery-run rickshaw is prohibited in Dhaka city, the vehicle can still be found in many peripheral pockets of the city, away from the main roads. In these areas, the presence of the electric rickshaw is condoned and sanctioned through tacit agreements between the police station and rickshaw owners, who pay money for a special "token" to local syndicates and middlemen. However, due to shifting power dynamics, this token is not always a successful safeguard against rickshaws being confiscated or fines. This criminalization of the electric rickshaw also extends to other cities, such as Barisal and Khulna, where local authorities have tried to ban the vehicle.

Figure 3: Example of an electric rickshaw (photo taken by the author)

These trends seem counterintuitive considering that many countries are currently trying to increase their share of electric transport. In many ways, the contested advance of the battery-run rickshaw, therefore, raises questions about the dynamics of urban change itself. It clearly highlights the politicization of the urban future and demonstrates that change is not a self-propelled process, stirred by technological innovation, but takes shape as certain visions for the future are privileged over others. Indeed, while enormous investments are made to provide Dhaka with numerous flyovers, a new metro rail, and many other prestigious infrastructure projects that are all expected to contribute to a world-class urban future, the electric rickshaw is more often presented as posing a potential

burden to the electricity grid. Such double standards prompt discussions on how "modern temporal classifications of the future work and for whom" [13].

Ultimately, the case of the electric rickshaw reminds us of an important question that we should ask ourselves when making sense of projects of urban future-making. Do these projects accelerate or put a brake on the mechanisms that enable poor people to propel themselves forward? Indeed, roadmaps of the urban future are meaningless when they are not informed by an understanding of how ordinary people are pushing ahead amidst the vulnerabilities of the here and now.

Download the full thesis

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Notes

1 Hobbes, Michael. 2014. "Welcome to the Traffic Capital of the World." The New Statesman, July 3.
https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/07/welcome-traffic-capital-world

2 Mwiza Birungi, Martha. 2018. "Dhaka: The World's Rickshaw Capital", The New Times, June 10.
https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/dhaka-worlds-rickshaw-capital

3 According to the World Population Review (https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities), which bases its estimates on the UN's World Urbanization Prospects.

4 VSee for instance Anjaria's reflections on Indian cities: Anjaria, Jonathan Shapiro. 2012. "Is there a Culture of the Indian Street?" Seminar 636: 21-27.

5 Such allusions to other, "modern" Asian cities also permeate discussions on the banning of motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City: Jamme, Huê-Tâm 2022. "The Future of Mobility in the World's Capital of Scooters." Mobile Lives Forum, February 24.
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6 Including walking.

7 Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK). 2015. "Dhaka Structure Plan (2016-2035), Draft." Prepared under the City Region Development Project (CRDP) for the Ministry of Housing and Public Works.

8 The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) found that 80 percent of rickshaw pullers would spend some time – eight days on average – at their rural home every six months, with 66 percent of them traveling home at least once every three months: Karim, Rezaul Md. and Khandoker Abdus Salam. 2019. "Organising the Informal Economy Workers: A Study of Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka City." Prepared under the "Decent Work Inclusive Growth and Employment" Project for the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS.

9 See also: Prins, Annemiek. 2021. "Earning Money as the Wheels Turn Around: Cycle-Rickshaw Drivers and Experiences of Wageless Work in Dhaka." In Beyond the Wage: Ordinary Work in Diverse Economies, edited by William Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol, and Philippa Williams, 187-210. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

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(Main illustration Biswarup Ganguly – CC by-SA)

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

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1 https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mobilithese/2020/08/31/second-edition-new-voices-prize-13422