

Mini media research:  
example of the state as target or mediator of a social movement:

## **Cycle Rickshaws in Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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March 24, 2005

In Dhaka, a city of more than ten million inhabitants, there is a transport crisis, and conflict around solutions has given birth to a social movement. Long trip times caused by snarled and slow-moving traffic has an adverse effect on the economy, and the urban transport system contributes greatly to air pollution levels in Dhaka, which are among the highest in the world.

The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC – the city government), on September 1, 2002, banned two stroke auto-rickshaws, one of the city’s largest contributors to air pollution, but there was “little respite from traffic jams as gaggles of rickshaws captured the roads.” The new space created by the auto-rickshaw ban together with recent flooding in rural areas led to an “increase in the number of [cycle] rickshaws ... as many farm workers migrated to Dhaka in search of livelihood” (United News of Bangladesh 2002). The ban on two-stroke auto-rickshaws has greatly improved air quality in Dhaka, but their replacement by slow-moving cycle rickshaws has aggravated the traffic problem. Today only some 80,000 of the nearly half million of Dhaka’s rickshaws are licensed, which makes them one of the first targets for the government in their attempts to address the traffic issue (Herald Sun 2004).

### **The State**

The DCC, backed by the World Bank, has planned to eliminate cycle rickshaws from eight major roads, comprising a total of 120 kilometers, in order to make way for faster-moving motorized transport, both public and private, and creating separate routes for slow-moving non-motorized vehicles such as rickshaws. Also planned are improvements to the road networks and public transport system, and the creation of alternative employment opportunity for rickshaw pullers.

The state, under pressure from its funder, the World Bank, claims to represent the general public, who, according to Agence France Presse (2002), supports their moves, “provided the government fulfill promises to introduce more city buses”. They are acting to improve immediate problems such as the economy and traffic, while maintaining the favor of the people, with elections scheduled for 2006. The World Bank wants to improve urban transport infrastructure in keeping with its goal to improve quality of life in developing countries.

## **Claimants**

Rickshaw pullers themselves are the principal claimants in the movement. There are many active unions such as the Rickshaw Sramik League. Naturally, they act in their own self-interest, because their work is their livelihood, and most lack the skills for other employment in the city. But through various NGOs such as Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB), attention is being called to the merits of non-motorized transport, which rickshaw pullers can believe in, rally around, and use to argue their case:

By supporting non-motorized vehicles and public transport, we will see a reduction in air pollution, noise pollution, and reliance on imported fuel and expensive imported vehicles. (WBB Trust 2005)

The World Carfree Network (WCN), based in Prague, has worked in unison with WBB, and promotes alternatives to car dependence, including alternative modes such as cycling, walking and public transport. They claim that “increasing limitations on rickshaws in Dhaka [would reduce] mobility of the middle class (particularly women, children, and the elderly) [and contribute to] air pollution and motorisation”, and go so far as to claim that “banning rickshaws and building highways while people face starvation is nothing short of a war on the poor.” (World Carfree Network 2004)

The Institute for Transportation & Development Policy (ITDP), promotes environmentally sustainable and equitable transportation policies and projects worldwide. Their programs support the Development of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), the Human Powered Vehicle (HPV) Industry, Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) Safety and Planning, and Transport and Land Use Governance.

One might suppose that passengers of rickshaws are quite supportive of the rickshaw movement. Possessing no other form of transportation, they are otherwise forced to walk.

... rickshaw-pullers enforced a complete strike from dawn to dusk to protest a stringent government action. Coming out of home at daybreak, office-goers and schoolchildren saw the city roads almost empty, save private cars and buses...Anguished at heart, people started trudging towards their destinations. (United News of Bangladesh 2004)

There is also evidence of category formation, with the rickshaw pullers and their passengers being the ‘common people’ vs. the ‘VIP’ motorists:

“Where will we ply if all roads are meant for VIPs?” one rickshawalla asked.  
(United News of Bangladesh 2001)

With Dhaka considered ‘rickshaw capital of the world,’ it is safe to say that the pedal-powered three-wheel taxi has also become a cultural symbol revered by its common people.

### **Demonstration and Negotiation**

Their massive numbers give rickshaw pullers the power to create havoc in Dhaka with very little or no planning. Rallying together in Dhaka can amount to simply joining the slowly moving mass of other rickshaws, within which word can spread about new developments and plans via word of mouth extremely quickly.

One might wonder whether this power has made some rickshaw pullers more concerned and aware of local politics in general. During research for this paper, hundreds of articles were found relating to protests and demonstrations in Dhaka – unrelated to the rickshaw conflict – in which “a large number of rickshaws could be seen plying” (Qadir 2005). Granted, higher numbers of potential passengers associated with large demonstrations means that there is a financial incentive for rickshaw pullers, but their plight and their solidarity with other movements may have made them a sort of ‘voice for the poor’ in Dhaka. At recent demonstrations this solidarity has been returned:

Most public transportation was kept off the streets except for tricycle rickshaws that strikers allowed to operate... (Hossain 2005)

Buses, trucks and cars were off the roads. Many people walked to work or hired rickshaws, which the protesters did not block. (Hossain 2002)

**Demands of rickshaw pullers include:**

announcement of last date for renewal of rickshaw-van ownership license, stopping seizure of rickshaw-vans until renewal of license as well as creating alternative employment opportunity, withdrawal of the ban on plying of rickshaws and vans on 10 important roads, and providing driving license to the rickshaw-pullers.  
(United News of Bangladesh 2004)

The World Bank has responded to at least one of these demands with the creation of a 4.5 million dollar rehabilitation program to help rickshaw pullers find new jobs, and pressuring the Dhaka government:

The World Bank has cautioned with withdrawal of financial support ... if the authorities continue banning rickshaws without ensuring mitigation measures for the affected rickshaw-pullers.

[...]

"We are concerned as these disadvantaged rickshaw-pullers are very poor; they need jobs and rehabilitation. We can't support the second phase of ban on rickshaws on artery roads without having appropriate social safety net," [said] Guang Z. Chen of the World Bank. (United News of Bangladesh 2005)

The WCN responded to the rickshaw ban which went into affect on December 17, 2004, by issuing an Action Alert, to which hundreds of people responded by sending letters expressing their support for cycle rickshaws to the World Bank. The ITDP has also been busy negotiating with the World Bank

by filing a formal complaint, urging the World Bank to comply with its own transportation policy, "Cities on the Move" (2001). The institute's staff held several meetings with senior World Bank officials in Washington, DC... (WCN 2005)

On March 2, 2005, WCN claimed victory, stating in their press release that "the World Bank has officially ended its longtime support for prohibitions of cycle rickshaws on Dhaka's main roads", but in the following three weeks, there is no press coverage, and no official statement to be found on the World Bank's website. Only a gloomy article entitled "Bangladesh Rickshaw Drivers in Cycle of Despair", in which

Rickshaw pullers say they also face problems due to a government drive to ease Dhaka's torturous traffic jams by banning rickshaws on many streets. (Ahmed 2005)

And so the struggle continues for Dhaka's rickshaw pullers, and the Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB), the city agency which is seeking a solution to Dhaka's traffic woes. They now face "diametrical pressure from the government and the World Bank" (Rahman 2004). The success of the rickshaw movement is that it has made the plan to ban rickshaws

a political issue which has thrown it into uncertainty. Both the DCC and the communication ministry have objected to the implementation of the rickshaw-ban as the government fears the step could make it unpopular and create a negative impact in the national elections scheduled for 2006 (Rahman 2004).

## **Newspaper and Magazine Articles**

### Agence France Presse

- 2002 “Chaos in Bangladesh as thousands of rickshaw, taxi drivers strike”, *Agence France Presse*, January 31, 2002

### Ahmed, Anis

- 2005 “Bangladesh Rickshaw Drivers In Cycle Of Despair”, *Reuters*, March 15, 2005.

### Herald Sun

- 2004 “Work’s No Shaw Thing”, *Herald Sun (Melbourne, Australia)*, October 18, 2004

### Hossain, Farid

- 2002 “General strike hits Bangladesh, police break up protesters in capital”, *Associated Press*, January 9, 2002  
2005 “Dozens Injured In Clashes During Anti-Government In Bangladesh”, *Associated Press*, February 5, 2005.

### Qadir, Nadeem

- 2005 “Sporadic Violence Reported During Latest Bangladesh Strike”, *Indian news agency PTI*, February 14, 2005.

### United News of Bangladesh

- 2001 “Rickshaw Clash”, *United News of Bangladesh*, August 7, 2001  
2002 “City Traffic”, *United News of Bangladesh*, September 2, 2002  
2004 “Lead Rickshaw Strike”, *United News of Bangladesh*, October 16, 2004  
2005 “World Bank – Rickshaws”, *United News of Bangladesh*, February 10, 2005

## **Government & NGO Publications**

### World Bank

- 2004 “FAQ – Dhaka Urban Transport Project”, *worldbank.org*, December 13, 2004  
2005 “Dhaka Urban Transport”, *worldbank.org*, last updated March 17, 2005

### Work for a Better Bangladesh

- 2005 “Roads for People”, *wbbtrust.org*, taken from internet site March 17, 2005

### World Carfree Network

- 2004 “Save Dhaka’s Rickshaws”, *worldcarfree.net*, taken from internet site March 17, 2005  
2005 “Campaigners Achieve a Victory in Effort to Save Dhaka’s Rickshaws”, *worldcarfree.net*, March 2, 2005