

Unfixing the City

Rickshaw Mobilities, Modernities and Urban Change in Dhaka

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and is the result of my own work. It has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished with quotation marks or indentation, and all sources of information have been specifically acknowledged.

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Date

Abstract

This thesis takes the everyday, working lives of cycle-rickshaw drivers and their excursions through an increasingly dense and congested urban landscape as a point of departure for exploring the dynamics of urbanisation and change in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I argue that the working lives of rickshaw pullers represent a non-territorially fixed way of being in the city and highlight those urban experiences and relations that cannot be pinned down to the geographical location of the city or the neighbourhood. I show that rickshaw drivers' journeys unfold in open-ended and unstructured ways and have traditionally lacked fixed points of arrival and departure. Similarly, their labour trajectories are often multi-local and span both city and countryside. The urban presence of rickshaw drivers therefore cannot be definitively tied to one particular urban habitat. Instead, their lives are caught up in the antagonistic tension between urban extension and implosion that characterises processes of urbanisation. The fact that the cycle-rickshaw itself is often seen as antithetical to a modern urban future, and is shrouded in temporal ambiguity, further reinforces this unfixed urban presence. Local urban policies have long aimed to "fix" this "rootless" group of people by tying them down to one particular neighbourhood, mode of employment or location. I seek to explicitly break with this sedentarist and residentialist framing, by presenting the city – rather than its people – as an inherently unfixed phenomenon. This thesis thus forms a deliberate effort to break with the tendency to interpret the city primarily as a place, home or habitat and the normative notions of stability and rootedness that inevitably lurk behind such an approach. Instead, I highlight the many ways in which the diffuse realities of work, movement and human activity that animate growing metropolitan areas like Dhaka do not gravitate towards a certain fixity or stability.

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List of Abbreviations

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies	BILS
Bangladesh Institute of Planners	BIP
Bangladesh National Party	BNP
Bangladesh Road and Transport Authority	BRTA
Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology	BUET
Motorised rickshaw that runs on “Compressed Natural Gas”	CNG
Dhaka City Corporation	DCC
Dacca Improvement Trust	DIT
Dhaka Integrated Transport Study	DITS
Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Project	DMAIUDP
Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan	DMDP
Dhaka North City Corporation	DNCC
Dhaka South City Corporation	DSCC
Dhaka Urban Transport Project	DUTP
Economist Intelligence Unit	EIU
Japan International Cooperation Agency	JICA
Motorised Transport	MT
Non-Motorised Transport	NMT
<i>Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha</i> (Capital Development Authority)	RAJUK
Revised Strategic Transport Plan	RSTP
United Nations Development Programme	UNDP
Work for Better Bangladesh	WBB

A Note on Transliteration

There are various ways to transliterate Bengali words and phrases and the way in which the language is presented in the Roman alphabet differs vastly among scholars working on Bengal. The formal system of transliteration relies on an elaborate arsenal of diacritic signs that allows for cross-comparison with other South Asian languages, yet does not necessarily provide the unfamiliar reader with a good sense of how certain words are pronounced. Because this thesis is situated within social anthropology rather than linguistics, I have adopted an approach to transliteration that adheres closely to the way in which Bengali words are pronounced in Dhaka and Bangladesh. This has inevitably led to a certain degree of simplification, considering that there are many sounds in Bengali that cannot be differentiated between when using the Roman alphabet. For clarity I have also included the Bengali version and spelling of the different words in the glossary – in addition to providing an English translation. I have made the following decisions with regards to transliteration:

- I have transliterated the inherent vowel for অ as ‘o’ instead of ‘a’. I have incidentally made an exception when the spelling of a certain word was particularly well-established. For instance: I write *upazila* instead of *upozila* and *char* instead of *chor*.
- I have transliterated both ই / ি and ঐ / ী as ‘i’ instead of ‘ee’.
- I have transliterated both চ and ছ as ‘ch’, avoiding the use of ‘chh’.
- I have transliterated শ, ষ and স all as ‘s’ instead of ‘sh’.
- I have transliterated ভ as ‘bh’ instead of ‘v’.
- I have transliterated জ alternately as ‘j’ or ‘z’, depending on which version of the word was more common. For instance: I use *bazar* instead of *bajar*, and *zamindar* instead of *jamindar*.
- In the case of terms that are also known in English, such as *purdah* and *salwar kameez*, I have adhered to English spelling.
- For place names I have used the same spelling as is used on Google Maps.

Glossary of Bengali Terms

Term used in text	English translation	Bengali spelling
<i>apa</i>	sister	আপা
<i>bame</i>	left	বামে
<i>Bangla</i>	Bengali	বাংলা
<i>bari</i>	family home; ancestral home; village home	বাড়ি
<i>bosta</i>	sack (of goods); load	বস্তা
<i>bazar</i>	market	বাজার
<i>beribadh</i>	embankment	বেড়িবাঁধ
<i>baire</i>	outside	বাইরে
<i>bhitore</i>	inside	ভিতরে
<i>bidesi</i>	foreigner	বিদেশী
<i>bosti</i>	slum; informal settlement	বস্তি
<i>cha</i>	tea	চা
<i>chaka ghurle taka</i>	money as the wheels turn around	চাকা ঘুরলে টাকা
<i>chakri</i>	salaried job	চাকরি
<i>char</i>	sandbank; temporary island in the river	চর
<i>chowk</i>	square	চৌক
<i>dane</i>	right	ডানে
<i>ekhane</i>	here	এখানে
<i>elaka</i>	area	এলাকা
<i>gamcha</i>	a checkered, cotton towel or cloth	গামছা
<i>ghor</i>	room; house; home	ঘর
<i>ghore phera</i>	return home; back to home	ঘরে ফেরা
<i>ghus</i>	bribe money	ঘুষ
<i>goli</i>	lane; by lane; narrow street	গলি

<i>janjot</i>	traffic jam	যানজট
<i>kacha</i>	unpaved; provisional; raw;	কাঁচা
<i>kaj</i>	work	কাজ
<i>katha</i>	an embroidered sheet	কাঁথা
<i>khelar math</i>	playing field	খেলার মাঠ
<i>krishi</i>	agriculture	কৃষি
<i>lakh</i>	one hundred thousand	লক্ষ
<i>leguna</i>	converted mini truck with capacity for 11-14 persons	লেগুনা
<i>lungi</i>	sarong worn by men	লুঙ্গি
<i>malik</i>	owner	মালিক
<i>mastan</i>	neighbourhood strongman	মাস্তান
<i>mela</i>	folk fair; festival	মেলা
<i>mistri</i>	maker; mechanic	মিস্ত্রি
<i>mohalla</i>	indigenous neighbourhood	মহল্লা
<i>morh</i>	corner; roundabout	মোড়
<i>nama</i>	down; below	নামা
<i>nij sadhin kaj</i>	independent work	নিজ সাধীন কাজ
<i>nirapod</i>	safe	নিরাপদ
<i>nirupay</i>	helpless	নিরুপায়
<i>nogod poysa</i>	instant cash	নগদ পয়সা
<i>obhab</i>	lack; scarcity	অভাব
<i>omanobik</i>	inhumane	অমানবিক
<i>orna</i>	a shawl-like scarf; part of a woman's <i>salwar kameez</i>	ওড়না
<i>paka</i>	ripe; seasoned; paved; permanent	পাকা
<i>pitha</i>	a type of sweet, jaggery cake	পিঠা
<i>potho-bosti</i>	footpath slum	পথ বস্তি

<i>pardah</i>	literally “curtain”; refers to a set of religious and cultural practices, including veiling, aimed at withdrawing the female body from public view	পরদা
<i>rajniti</i>	politics	রাজনীতি
<i>sadhinota</i>	independence	স্বাধীনতা
<i>salwar kameez</i>	an outfit worn by women, consisting of a (loose) pair of trousers, a long shirt or tunic and an <i>orna</i>	সালোয়ার কামিজ
<i>santi</i>	peaceful; quiet	শান্তি
<i>somossa</i>	problem	সমস্যা
<i>sokti</i>	energy; strength; power	শক্তি
<i>sromik</i>	worker; labourer	শ্রমিক
<i>taka</i>	Bangladeshi currency; as in “Bangladeshi Taka” (BDT)	টাকা
<i>thana</i>	police station	থানা
<i>unnayan</i>	development	উন্নয়ন
<i>upazila</i>	sub-district	উপজিলা
<i>uthan</i>	courtyard	উঠান
<i>walla</i>	driver; seller; provisioner of services	ওয়াল্লা
<i>zamindar</i>	feudal landlord	জামিনদার
<i>zila</i>	district	জিলা

Map of Dhaka City



Figure 1: Location and administrative boundaries of Dhaka city. Source: Swapan et al. (2017, 2).

The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline [...] By the same token every city is beautiful to me (from outside its borders), just as all talk of particular languages' having greater or lesser value is to me unacceptable.

~ Walter Benjamin (1999, 458)

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2017, just before I was about to leave on fieldwork to Dhaka for the second time, I watched a Belgian travel programme¹ that focused on the capital of Bangladesh. While on his Qatar Airways flight to Dhaka, the TV host told the audience what they could expect: “Bangladesh is one of the poorest, most densely populated countries in the world and ranks at the top of all the wrong lists”². He warned of the capital city Dhaka in particular: “According to The Economist it has been the second most unliveable city in the world for three years in a row now”³. He jokingly added that he had not dared to travel to the most unliveable city in the world, namely Damascus in Syria. I was well aware of the particular study the TV presenter was citing. In fact, references to its unfavourable assessment of Dhaka had popped up regularly on my Facebook timeline ever since I first visited the city in 2011. What the TV host forgot to mention, however, was that these yearly liveability rankings – carried out by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) – focused on the experiences of expats rather than citizens and had been designed to help companies and embassies decide on their “hardship allowances”⁴. The rankings themselves relied on a number of indicators, such as “stability” and “infrastructure”, that had been picked and rated exclusively by a team of unknown “in-house expert country analysts” (EIU 2011). Despite these clear limitations, the epithet of “second least liveable city in the world” had stuck with Dhaka. During a local conference on transport that I attended during my fieldwork, the vice chancellor of the host university started his welcome address with this particular piece of information and every year the outcomes of the EIU rankings made the headlines of Bangladeshi newspapers. The all-too-familiar trope of Dhaka as a barely liveable city, desperately in need of fixing, was also constantly reinforced throughout the travel programme I watched. In fact, the episode barely touched upon the lives of people in Dhaka and, instead, presented the viewer with a range of instant images that

¹ Reizen Waes, “Bangladesh.” Presented by Tom Waes. Produced by “De Mensen”. VRT Eén, February 5, 2017.

² Translated from Dutch by the author.

³ Every year the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranks approximately 140 cities in terms of their respective liveability. Dhaka has consistently been ranked as one of the “Least Liveable Cities in the World”, although it slid from second to third place in the 2019 rankings. See: “EIU Liveability Index: Dhaka Improves a Little, Now Ranks 3rd Worst”, *The Daily Star*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/liveable-city-index-2019-dhaka-now-3rd-worst-capital-eiu-1795360>.

⁴ Julianna Rozek, Billie Giles-Corti and Lucy Gunn, “The World’s ‘Most Liveable City’ Title Isn’t a Measure of the Things Most of Us Actually Care About”, *The Conversation*, August 15, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/the-worlds-most-liveable-city-title-isnt-a-measure-of-the-things-most-of-us-actually-care-about-101525>.

underscored the city's supposed unliveability: relentless traffic congestion, the dark and polluted water of the Buriganga river and the improvised shacks and huts that clustered next to a railway track. "Only two hours in Dhaka, and we are already exhausted", the TV host lamented after his first taste of Dhaka traffic.

When I first came to Dhaka for an internship in 2011 my own attitudes towards the city resembled those of the TV host. Together with my international housemates I would commiserate over the horrors of Dhaka traffic and, jokingly, we would pride ourselves on living in one of the world's least liveable cities – oblivious to the enormous amount of privilege that was implied in such jokes. Over time and throughout various (fieldwork) visits to Bangladesh, however, I became increasingly wary and suspicious of narratives and imaginaries that insisted on Dhaka's unliveability. Not only did I witness first-hand how efforts to make (parts of) the city more liveable for "expats" like myself negatively affected the beggars, street vendors and rickshaw pullers that worked in these areas⁵, but the off-hand dismissal of Dhaka as "unliveable" also seemed to preclude any meaningful exploration into the ways in which millions of people actually strived to make a life worth living in and beyond this large metropolis. This framing of Dhaka as a barely liveable city, moreover, fed into the kind of developmentalist narrative of "Third World" urbanisation that has long reduced growing megacities in South Asia and Africa to dystopian whirlpools of congestion, pollution, slums and overcrowding (Robinson 2002; Zeiderman 2008; Roy 2011a).

Looking back now at my first fieldwork experiences in Dhaka, I am struck by how much of my own research ideas and framings were informed by similar tropes or "itineraries of recognition" (Roy 2011a, 225). During my Master's studies I had conducted fieldwork in Dhaka's largest – and most researched – slum settlement, focusing on people's perceptions and experiences of the health risks that their direct living environment brought along. My PhD research, moreover, had initially set out to focus on rickshaw drivers' experiences of traffic congestion. Having experienced hours upon hours of Dhaka traffic jam myself, I wondered how the sensory and experiential reality of congestion – the honking, dust and fumes of traffic – mediated the extent to which cycle-rickshaw drivers felt "at home" in the city. Soon after starting my fieldwork, however, I realised that this line of enquiry was built around the inherently "sedentarist" (Malkki 1992) assumption that rickshaw drivers approached the city as

⁵ I wrote a newspaper article on this topic for the *The Daily Star*: "Rickshaw Restrictions: Privilege for Some, Disaster for the Puller", November 10, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/rickshaw-restrictions-1488862>.

a potential home, whereas in reality most of them approached the city first and foremost, not as a place to live, but as a place to *make* a living. Or to quote Saidur⁶, a rickshaw puller whom I interviewed at the courtyard (“*uthan*”) of his rural homestead in Shibchar, as he was making preparations to travel back to the capital city the following day: “There is income in Dhaka city, so to Dhaka city I go”. This is not to say that Saidur liked Dhaka. In fact, as we sat down to talk in the protective shade of some coconut palms, he admitted that the environment in the countryside was far more *santi* (“peaceful, quiet”):

The countryside is good. There are trees, there are rivers [...] in the village the weather is good. Dhaka city is densely populated, there are lots of buildings, lots of private cars, black smoke, different poisonous fumes. It’s a place that destroys your health... there are different diseases [...] In the countryside you can feel a breeze on your face, a nice breeze, there is the river. What else? It is peaceful⁷.

At the end of the day, however, it was not issues of comfort or health that mattered most to Saidur, who succinctly wrapped up his comparison with the following statement which he continued to reiterate throughout the interview: “In Dhaka the income is good, in the countryside the income is bad”. Dhaka may indeed, as the Belgian TV host pointed out, be an exhausting and unhealthy city, but focusing too narrowly on such seemingly intrinsic qualities of the urban landscape can easily blind us to the ways in which people like Saidur *work* the city and somehow *make it work* for themselves; not as a place to live, but as an avenue for making a living.

* * * * *

During my first visit to Bangladesh in 2011 a friend told me that the capital of Dhaka had 14 million people by night and 16 million by day. This discrepancy, he explained, was due to the enormous number of people who worked in the city, but did not actually live there. Almost a decade later, Dhaka is approaching a night-time population of 20 million (UN DESA 2018). The explanatory power of such demographic figures, as Champion and Hugo (2004, 3) have rightly pointed out, is limited, considering that

⁶ Throughout this thesis, all names of rickshaw drivers have been changed by the author to ensure confidentiality. When citing ward commissioners and local policy makers I have avoided using names at all, as the use of pseudonyms could easily lead to confusion in such instances. I have refrained from anonymising the names of well-known public figures or activists who explicitly wished to be credited with their own words.

⁷ Semi-structured interview, Shibchar, February 2, 2016.

“[t]here is no longer any clear dividing line between town and countryside for individual settlements or their inhabitants: indeed, many people reside in one but work in the other”⁸. Such observations clearly resonate with the context of Dhaka and, in particular, with its population of rickshaw pullers – many of whom do not have a permanent home in the city⁹. It also suggests that the diffuse realities of work, movement and human activity need to play a much more central role in our understanding of the urban realm. Hence, the question arises what it means to approach the city as an avenue for making a living, rather than a place to live. How can we take work, effort, activity as a point of departure for understanding urban life?

I would argue that, at a minimum, such an approach needs to resist the tendency to separate or isolate the urban landscape from people’s embodied and imaginative efforts to fashion a life worth living for themselves, which is ultimately what liveability rankings do. For the type of ratings that have Dhaka dangling at the bottom of global hierarchies of cityness imply that the urban experience can be captured and understood through a static set of external qualities. They present us with passive signifiers of a reified urban landscape that is in and of itself already (un)liveable. At the same time, the discourse of liveability creates a mandate for intervention, as it brings “into focus specific characteristics of cities and their amenities, making them coherent with broader narratives and potential objects of policy interventions” (McArthur and Robin 2019, 1716). The problem with this approach is not only that it privileges and prioritises the comfort and consumption preferences of certain groups of urban dwellers over the access of others (see Hamraie 2018; McArthur and Robin 2019), but also that it over-emphasises the placeness of cities. Indeed, annual liveability rankings work to stabilise and fix the city as a coherent and bounded entity that can be compared and contrasted with other cities.

This thesis is the result of a deliberate effort to break with the tendency to approach the city primarily as a place, home or habitat and the normative notions of comfort, stability and rootedness that inevitably lurk behind such an approach. I argue that the everyday, working lives of rickshaw cyclers represent a non-territorially

⁸ A similar point has been made by Martinotti (1994), who describes the changing equilibria between urban populations and urban territories and distinguishes four different urban populations, namely *inhabitants*, *commuters* or *workers*, *space users* (shoppers, tourists etc.) and *metropolitan businessmen*.

⁹ The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) recently conducted a survey among 200 rickshaw pullers and found that although 94 percent of their respondents were married, only 45 percent of them rented a room in the city with their family. What’s more, over 80 percent of the people interviewed would spend some time (8 days on average) at their rural home every six months, with the majority of them (66 percent) traveling home at least once every three months (Karim and Salam 2019).

fixed¹⁰ way of being in the city, and highlight those urban experiences and relations that are not reducible to the built form (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 363) or the geographical location of the city. The life projects of rickshaw drivers transcend the boundaries of the urban and the fact that most of them live multi-local lives across city and countryside makes it impossible to definitively pin down their urban presence to a certain habitat or neighbourhood. As a result of this punctuated and temporary urban presence, rickshaw pullers are often represented as part of Bangladesh's so-called "rootless population", a category that lumps together rural-urban migrants who have been driven to the city because they are "vagrant, displaced, landless or [...] exposed to the risk of total economic deprivation" (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2014, 16). In this dissertation, however, I seek to break with the sedentarist and residentialist logic that underscores such narratives of rootlessness by presenting the city itself rather than a certain portion of its population as inherently unfixated.

This attempt to de-emphasise the placeness of the city, by deliberately taking the messy and diffuse realities of work, movement and human activity as a point of departure, should not be interpreted as a move towards Marc Augé's (1995) category of the "non-place". It is by no means my intention to present the city or the metropolis as a variation of the non-place, stripped from its meaningful and anthropological qualities by the elusive and detached movements of those who only temporarily dwell within its confines. For although Dhaka unmistakably functions as a place of transit rather than permanent residence for most rickshaw drivers, their urban comings and goings suggest effort, work and engagement rather than detachment. Indeed, scholarly attempts to challenge sedentarist and residentialist conceptions of cities have too often swung the theoretical pendulum in the exact opposite direction by putting too much emphasis on flows (Castells 1996), transience (Martinotti 1999), ephemeral encounters (Augé 1995; Crang 2002) and fluidity (Bauman 2003). None of these characterisations, however, adequately captures the congested urban reality of growing, urban conglomerates like Dhaka, let alone the slow, tiresome and interrupted forms of urban movement that rickshaw drivers engage in on a daily basis.

Efforts to deterritorialise the urban realm, although laudable to the extent that they pose a powerful challenge to the idea of the static and/or bounded city, thus run

¹⁰ My choice of words here is inspired by AbdouMaliq Simone (2010, 10) and his description of seemingly marginal, wasted, or carceral spaces as enacting an urban platform "for a non-territorially fixed sense of being in place that short-circuits the efforts of governments to make certain urban residents always feel 'out of place'".

the risk of somehow equating deterritorialisation with detachment. Narratives that underscore the liquid and ephemeral qualities of urban life, in particular, easily fall into the sedentarist pitfall of assuming that the fluidification of urban life somehow erodes meaning. Hence, they perpetuate the idea that true meaning resides in places rather than in actions and/or relations and therefore requires some form of “rootedness”. Likewise, Castells (1999, 296) argues that “in the whole history of humankind, most people live, work, and construct their meaning around places”. Castells (1999, 296) contrasts these meaningful, place-based activities, with the abstract realm of electronic flows and corporate networks¹¹. The dematerialised flows that are associated with the information age and metropolitan interconnectedness, however, have little in common with the ever-thickening tissue of interlacing trails that characterises the hustle-bustle of a city like Dhaka. Here is a city that extends its presence far beyond its administrative boundaries and that is brimming with movement, but that resists smooth metaphors of flux and fluidity. The movements that animate and extend metropolitan Dhaka into space are, instead, best captured by Simone’s (2010, 2) characterisation of urban movement as “the motion of work, of how urban work gets done”.

This dissertation sets out to show how the working lives of cycle-rickshaw drivers represent a non-territorially fixed mode of being in the city. In doing so, I seek to highlight the inherently unfixed nature of urban life, whilst refraining from an analytical framework that implicitly equates deterritorialisation with detachment or “disembedding” (Giddens 1990). In other words, I do not want to suggest that rickshaw drivers represent a population that is only loosely connected to the city, thereby insinuating that they do not really belong there. Instead, I will focus on the work and effort that rickshaw drivers put into the intra- and extra-urban flows that help constitute metropolitan Dhaka. By putting the embodied activities of people making a living at the heart of these far-from-frictionless urban flows, I hope to contribute to a nuanced and grounded understanding of urban movement that stays clear from: “both ‘sedentarist’ approaches in the social sciences that treat place, stability, and dwelling as a natural steady-state, and ‘deterritorialized’ approaches that posit a new ‘grand narrative’ of mobility, fluidity or liquidity as a pervasive condition of postmodernity or globalization” (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006, 5). Considering that I very much share the apprehension of mobility scholars, such as Cresswell (2006), Kaufmann (2002) and

¹¹ To be fair, Castells (1999, 297) does allow some room for the interpenetration of what he denotes as the “space of places” and the “space of flows” and he does not see the latter as completely devoid of meaning-making activities.

Sheller and Urry (2006), who have rightfully preached caution against an uncritical embrace of everything fluid, nomadic and mobile, the question arises why I have nonetheless chosen an approach that sets out to *unfix* the city. In other words, how is “unfixing” the city different from “deterritorialising”, “detaching” or “disembedding” the city? And, importantly, what does “*fixing* the city” actually mean?

Harvey (2001, 23) has offered a helpful definition of what “fixing” generally implies, namely the “idea that something (a thing, a problem, a craving) can be pinned down and secured”¹². Liveability rankings provide an apt example in this case, considering that they clearly project certain problems and/or ideals onto a seemingly coherent and bounded urban terrain, hence isolating cities from the broader global processes that effectively shape qualities such as “infrastructure” and “stability”. Fixing, as I see it, then applies to those narratives and policies that approach the city as something that can be managed, solved or tied down by making “precise identifications of space, problems, or populations” (Simone 2010, 11). This is an inherently political act that ultimately works towards the naturalisation of links between people, places and problems. An example of this is the fact that elite perceptions in Bangladesh tend to frame the countryside as the “rightful home of the poor”, a narrative that is exacerbated by forging close associations between urban poverty and negative images of crime and squalor (Banks, Roy and Hulme 2011, 499). It is exactly such naturalising narratives – often steeped in discourses of (up)rootedness – that lay at the heart of “metaphysical sedentarism” and the territorial order it perpetuates (Malkki 1992). Ingold’s (2008) description of “enclosure” also hints at the perpetuation of a similarly static, territorial order. The process of enclosure essentially turns “the pathways along which life is lived into boundaries within which life is contained” (Ingold 2008, 1796). The result is a “landlocked view, as though everything of significance in the world we inhabit could be pinned down to the surface of the earth” (Ingold 2005, 507).

This thesis seeks to flesh out the tensions between such fixing tendencies and the inherently unfixed mode of being in the city that characterises the working lives of cycle-rickshaw drivers. My aim in underlining these unfixed dimensions of urban life is twofold. On the one hand, I want to draw attention to the incessant circulation of people, vehicles, things, money and images that animate and give shape to metropolitan areas like Dhaka and to the work and effort that goes into the constitution

¹² Harvey (2001, 25) has applied this notion of “fixing” to the “geographical dynamics of capitalism”. Specifically, he has drawn attention to the fact that the mobility of capital relies on certain “spatial fixes”.

of these “flows”. At the same time, however, I want to denaturalise the intuitive linkages that are forged between people, things, territories and urban habitats.

Roy (2011a) has shown that the tendency to naturalise such linkages is still very much alive within urbanism, especially when it comes to the representation of growing megacities in the “global South”¹³. Roy (2011a, 225) argues that the specific habitat of the “slum” – often either portrayed as an epitome of abject misery or in terms of its “alchemic ability” – is still the most common itinerary through which we recognise and make sense of such megacities. Importantly, it is not just through blockbuster films like “Slumdog Millionaire” that the slum has come to function as a stand-in or metonym for the megacity, but also through urban scholarship. In fact, Roy (2011a, 231) contends that even so-called “subaltern approaches” run the risk of offering a predominantly topological approach to the lives of the urban poor, by folding their variegated economic, political and class struggles neatly into the habitat of the slum. The lives of rickshaw drivers, however, do not necessarily show a synchronisation between people’s “claims to habitation and livelihood” (Roy 2011a, 227) and therefore resist such connotations. In placing their mobile and unfixed ways of making a living at the centre of this dissertation, I thus seek to contribute to an understanding of urban poverty and inequality that “transcend[s] territorial location” and moves beyond the stereotyped habitat of the slum (Roy 2011a, 232). In doing so, I ultimately want to challenge the idea that there are certain default urban spaces where urban in- and exclusions can be studied, considering that these mechanisms clearly transcend both territorial and city boundaries. This becomes particularly clear when looking at Dhaka’s rickshaw industry.

The Unfixities of Dhaka’s Rickshaw Industry

Throughout this introduction I have reiterated that the working lives of rickshaw drivers represent a non-territorially fixed way of being in the city. To some extent, this

¹³ I am somewhat reluctantly using the term “global South” here, agreeing with Dimiter Toskov that it implies geographic determinism and is both descriptively inaccurate and homogenising. Throughout this dissertation I will use the phrase when I am citing or paraphrasing other authors who employ this term. In my own characterisations I will try to be more specific about the geographical regions and/or categories I am talking about. See: Dimiter Toskov, “The ‘Global South’ is a Terrible Term. Don’t Use It!”, *Research Design Matters*, November 6, 2018, <http://re-design.dimiter.eu/?p=969>.

characterisation can also be extended to Dhaka's fleet of cycle-rickshaws and the rickshaw industry in general. As we will see, these "unfixities" have everything to do with the fact that the rickshaw industry has long played an ambiguous and contested role in the constitution of the various metabolic flows that hold together metropolitan Dhaka. The cycle-rickshaw itself is often blamed for the city's soaring traffic congestion and talk of banning and replacing the vehicle started almost immediately after it was first introduced to Dhaka in 1938. The story goes that the rickshaw was imported from Kolkata by a Bengali *zamindar* ("feudal landlord") and a *Marwari* gentleman¹⁴ who each purchased six rickshaws (Huq-Hussain and Habiba 2013, 85). These newly imported tricycles had been modelled after the hand-pulled rickshaw that made its advance in Japan around 1870 (Gallagher 1992, 27). In fact, the word for rickshaw is derived from the Japanese phrase *jin riki sha*, which literally means "man-powered vehicle" (Huq-Hussain and Habiba 2012, 85). These man-powered carts helped produce a revolution in mobility for millions of people in Asia and inspired a great variety of comparable vehicles, including the cycle-rickshaw, trishaw, pedicab, cyclo, *becak* and auto-rickshaw (Steele 2013, 56). Yet although rickshaws have long served as the back-bone of Asia's urban transport system, they are "almost universally disliked by city authorities" (Gallagher 1992, 25). As a result, the urban future of the rickshaw has long been an uncertain one, as becomes evident from the fact that, in Dhaka, the vehicle has weathered calls for its banishment since 1944¹⁵.

In many ways, this uncertain future has coincided with an urban presence that is both indeterminate and unfixed. For instance, no one knows exactly how many rickshaws, let alone drivers, are operating in the crowded and rapidly growing capital of Bangladesh. Hardly any official licenses have been handed out since the 1980s and estimates fluctuate between 500,000 and 1.1 million (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 9; Hasan and Dávila 2018, 247). The first rickshaw licenses were introduced in 1944 at a time when the total number of rickshaws in Dhaka amounted to a mere hundred (Huq-Hussain and Habiba 2013, 85). The first restrictions on issuing rickshaw licenses followed shortly thereafter and were implemented from the early 1950s onwards (Hasan 2013, 19). In 1979 Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) stopped providing licenses to rickshaws altogether and the number of officially licensed rickshaws was capped at

¹⁴ The Marwaris were a caste of Hindu merchants, bankers, and moneylenders.

¹⁵ In 1944, when Bangladesh was still part of larger British India, a Government Committee recommended that the cycle-rickshaw should be replaced by a motorised variation of the vehicle (Hasan 2013, 19).

79,554 (Hasan 2013, 27). Some additional licenses were released in 1986 as part of a general amnesty, raising the number of licensed rickshaws and rickshaw-vans to 90,000 (Gallagher 1992, 93). During my fieldwork, moreover, a number of housing associations in Dhaka succeeded in launching a neighbourhood based rickshaw system in the city's "diplomatic zone" and, as a result, 1,230 special rickshaw licenses were handed out (see chapter 4). Dhaka's Urban Planning Department stipulates that the current number of registered rickshaws approximates 100,000 (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 9). This is less than a tenth of the 1.1 million of rickshaws that, according to the most recent estimates¹⁶, are operating in Dhaka city. Neither of these figures, however, necessarily correspond with the number of rickshaw drivers in the city, as different men tend to take shifts driving the same vehicle. What's more, in the dry winter months quite a few rickshaw carts are left unused as temporary drivers move back to the countryside to look after the different crops that need tending to. The summer rains, on the other hand, instigate a small exodus from the countryside to the city as fields are submerged in water and opportunities for piecemeal agricultural work run dry.

These rural-urban comings and goings are to some extent accommodated by the space of the rickshaw garage. Rickshaw garages are improvised, half-open storage spaces where rickshaw drivers either rent or park their vehicles; it is where repair work takes place and where drivers socialise and play cards after work. In addition, the garage functions as a makeshift hostel for rickshaw drivers who do not have a permanent place to stay in the city. The space of the rickshaw garage itself, moreover, bears testimony to a similar lack of territorial permanence. Its physical structure is rudimentary – indeed, some garages consist of nothing more than a collection of rickshaws on an open playing field – and its location is far from fixed. Rickshaw owners or *maliks* rely on the availability of large, unused plots of land for running their businesses and typically secure access to these spaces through temporary lease constructions. This means that when the landowner decides to use the land for a different purpose (most likely, real-estate development) the rickshaw owner will need to move his business elsewhere, often to the peripheral and outer edges of the city where there is still an abundance of wasteland. Or to put it more accurately: they move their businesses *with-* rather than *to* the periphery, considering that the city itself is continuously extending its presence outwards.

¹⁶ Shaer Reaz, "Breaking the Cycle/Rickshaw", *The Daily Star*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/city/news/breaking-the-cyclerickshaw-1773448>.



Figure 2: Rickshaw garage in Rayerbazar with real estate development going on in the background.

These garage relocations and the pendular rural-urban movements of rickshaw drivers themselves reflect the multi-dimensional and multi-directional nature of urbanisation, a process that in and of itself robs the city of its fixity and boundedness. The indeterminacy of urban populations and habitats that inevitably coincides with urbanisation, however, is not seldom presented as a problem that needs to be fixed,

especially when this indeterminacy is associated with- and projected onto poorer populations such as beggars, street vendors and rickshaw pullers. In the context of Bangladesh, this becomes evident from programmes like “*Ghore Phera*” (literally “returning home”), which was launched in 1999 to encourage slum dwellers of Dhaka city to return to their villages by offering them loans to pursue other income generating activities (Ghafur 2006; Mohit 2018; Rashid 2009). The idea of a “return home” unmistakably implies that certain categories of people have somehow been uprooted from their natural place in the order of things. However, it is important to note that these programmes are framed around issues of labour as much as residence. Indeed, the notion of a “rootless population” (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2014, 16-17), as it is used in Bangladesh, refers to a group of people that not only leads a migratory lifestyle, but that has also been uprooted from certain fixed trajectories of labour, notably agricultural labour¹⁷. The image of a “rootless population” thus evokes the idea of a population that not only needs to “return home”, but that also needs to return to a more stable form of employment.

The working lives of rickshaw *wallas*¹⁸ complicate the idea of such a straightforward return to residential and occupational stability. Not only do most rickshaw pullers lead multi-local lives across city and countryside, but their efforts to make a living also often consist of multiple labour trajectories and diversions that either succeed, intersect or overlap with one another. Rickshaw labour thus poses a challenge to the idea that there are certain fixed trajectories of employment that are “appropriate” for the rural-urban poor, whether it be agricultural labour, factory work or the small-scale entrepreneurship that is encouraged by NGOs and microfinance institutions in Bangladesh. In fact, more often than not, the working lives of rickshaw drivers oscillate between a variety of economic strategies that cannot be reduced to a single avenue of employment. What makes the rickshaw industry nonetheless a familiar constant in the lives of many rural-urban migrants, is that it offers something to fall back on when other labour projects fail or prove to be unsustainable due to low wages, river bank erosion, flooding or lost investments. Indeed, the rickshaw garages that can be found throughout Dhaka provide an accessible avenue for work that requires few formal skills, no investment capital and allows rural-urban migrants to

¹⁷ In fact, “rootless” populations are defined as people who have no land for cultivation or who have lost their land and/or rural homesteads due to river erosion or political, economic or social reasons (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2014, 17).

¹⁸ The suffix *walla* is used to indicate someone who is involved in a specific business or associated with a specific duty or task. For instance, the word *cha walla* refers to a vendor who sells tea or “*cha*”.

come and go according to their needs and wishes. The rickshaw itself, moreover, can be rented on a per diem basis and the only real requirement for prospective rickshaw pullers to gain access to a vehicle is that they have a neighbour or family member who can introduce and vouch for them with a rickshaw owner. Rickshaw labour thus allows for a certain degree of flexibility, enabling rickshaw cyclers to make money “as the wheels turn around” (“*chaka ghurle taka*”).

The mobilities of rickshaw drivers are characterised by a similar open-endedness and indeterminacy; rickshaw journeys rarely unfold as a linear trajectory from one exact location to another and are always subject to negotiation. Routes unfold, wind and change according to new information solicited by customers, other road users, and the wider socio-material landscape. This inherently unstructured way of traversing the city, however, is increasingly thwarted by policy interventions that try to confine and tie rickshaw mobilities to certain roads and neighbourhoods. In particular, the implementation of so-called VIP roads, or “Non-Motorised Transport (NMT)-free zones”, has curbed, curtailed and cut off rickshaw journeys. By making major roads and intersections off limits to rickshaws and other forms of non-motorised transport, these kinds of interventions have effectively “redefined the role of NMT as a feeder service to motorized transit and as a means for neighbourhood circulation only” (Buliung, Shimi and Mitra 2015, 163). Such planning interventions, aimed at regularising and ultimately fixing rickshaw movements, are part of a wider urban agenda to formalise urban spaces and, as such, cannot be disconnected from the ways in which the urban future of Dhaka is imagined and mapped out. This brings me to the last dimension of unfixity that I want to highlight here, namely the level of uncertainty that surrounds the future of the rickshaw.

The rickshaw has long been framed as a vehicle without a future. In fact, Gallagher (1992, 91) has observed that restrictive policies have prevented “any discussion about the rickshaw’s future”. Despite the persistent assumption that the rickshaw will “soon” be a vehicle of the past, the tricycle continues to ply the roads of Dhaka in substantial numbers. What’s more, the fact that the electric or battery-run rickshaw has made a steady, albeit contested, advance in Bangladesh, shows that the vehicle itself also continues to evolve and change. The extent to which such changes are recognised, encouraged and projected into the future, however, relies very much on the way in which certain temporal politics play out in Dhaka. What I mean by this, is that the potential role of the rickshaw as an agent of change is intimately tied to the

ways in which politicians, planners and visionaries try to map out and fix trajectories of urban change and modernisation. There is thus a need to contextualise the urban presence of both the rickshaw and that of rickshaw drivers as part of wider dynamics of urban change and to take into account the narratives and politics that surround urban development and future-making in Dhaka. In other words, there is also a distinctly temporal dimension to the (un)fixing of cities that has to do with the ways in which trajectories of urban change are mapped out, represented and contested.

What I will underscore in this thesis is that the various unfixities of Dhaka's rickshaw industry sit uncomfortably with formal plans and representations of the city. The mobilities, migrations and labour trajectories of rickshaw drivers all pose a challenge to the sedentarist tendencies that continue to haunt both practices and imaginaries of urban planning. The rickshaw industry highlights that "at the heart of city life is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things to interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them" (Simone 2010, 3). At the same time, I want to be careful not to overstate this element of spontaneous defiance, considering that forms of mobility and informal dynamism are all too often naively interpreted as a form of resistance against a static formal system¹⁹. The assumption that underscores such interpretations is that formal systems themselves are stable and coherent configurations and consistent in their attempts to plan and fix the city. Scholars working in South Asia, however, have gone to considerable lengths to show the myriad ways in which the state itself encourages, profits off and encompasses forms of informality (Anjaria 2011; Ghertner 2011; Roy 2009). Indeed, the Bangladeshi context suggests that constellations of power often work simultaneously to fix and unfix the city, considering that urban governance is very much embedded in networks of clientelism and state-party patronage. In the next section, I will shed some light on this broader context of urban governance and the history of urban development in Dhaka.

¹⁹ I will further substantiate and illustrate this point in chapter 2.

Fixing Dhaka City: Residential Neighbourhoods, Masterplans and Development

The reputation of Dhaka as an “unliveable” city, in dire need of fixing, significantly predates the liveability rankings of the Economist Intelligence Unit and can be traced back to colonial times. In fact, in 1868 the British civil surgeon James Wise reported the following: “As no steps were taken to remove the filth from the city, it is year by year accumulating in the midst of the people and poisoning the atmosphere on all sides” (Ahmed 2010 [1986], 180). This vivid description of the city’s unsanitary living conditions was prompted by the steady trend of decline that Dhaka had witnessed after the British East India Company took control over Bengal in 1757. In an attempt to counter this trend, civil surgeons like Wise increasingly started to call for drastic sanitary reform. In what follows, I take a closer look at such efforts to improve, plan and fix the city, while also paying attention to the way in which Dhaka has changed and developed over the years.

Mohallas and Residential Neighbourhoods

The capital of Bangladesh is nested on the banks of the Buriganga river, one of the many watercourses that find their way to the Bay of Bengal through low-lying and deltaic Bangladesh. Although the history of the city is said to date back all the way to the seventh century, Dhaka gained its reputation as the capital of the Bengal region after the Mughals seized power in 1610 (Ahmed 2010, 12). These Turko-Mongol rulers renamed Dhaka “Jahangirnagar”, after the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, and under their rule the city changed rapidly. Many hallmark buildings were constructed and the city’s infrastructure expanded swiftly with the development of *bazars*, streets and bridges. Gradually, the city matured into a wealthy and cosmopolitan hub that hosted many different religious and ethnic communities, including Europeans, Armenians, Mughals, Pathans, Turanis, Marwaris and other up-country Hindus. Or to cite the words of the Portuguese monk Sebastian Manrique, who visited Dhaka in 1640: “Many strange nations resort to this City on account of its vast trade and commerce in great variety of commodities, which are produced in profusion in the rich and fertile lands of this region” (Ahmed 2010, 14). The steady influx of people transformed Dhaka into a bona

fide metropolis, with an estimated population of 900,000 during the peak of Mughal rule at the turn of the eighteenth century (Ahmed 2010, 15).

Dhaka lost its prominence as capital of the region when the British East India Company took control over Bengal in 1757 and shifted the political, administrative, and military power to Kolkata²⁰. The city entered a period of economic decline and witnessed a tremendous decrease in population and territory (Hossain 2008, 10; Khondker 2009, 133). Indeed, Ahmed (2010, 149) observes that by the 1830s Dhaka had been reduced to “a noble ruin, with its overgrown Mughal palaces, gateways, bridges, tombs and mosques”. When the British East India Company took over Dhaka’s civil administration in 1765, the city still had an estimated population of 450,000. However, by 1838 the population of the city and its suburbs had dropped to a meagre 68,610 inhabitants (Ahmed 2010, 16).

From 1858 onwards, when the British East India Company was dissolved and the Crown assumed direct control over the region, Dhaka began to slowly rise from this condition of decline (Hossain 2008, 11). In 1864 the first local administration, the Dhaka Municipality, was established and put in charge of urban development (Ahmed 2010, 171). They had a daunting task ahead of them, considering that the steady deterioration of the city during the preceding decades had brought about significant health hazards. Dhaka city was full of unoccupied and decaying houses, stagnant pools of water and patches of jungle. Dulai Khal, the main canal and once an important avenue for trade and transportation, “had degenerated into a pestilent channel” (Ahmed 2010, 150). Drinking water was unsafe and polluted, most houses lacked a proper drainage system and mosquitoes were breeding in the different puddles, ditches and marshes. As a consequence, “[c]holera, dysentery, typhoid, small-pox, malaria and the maladies of poverty took a heavy toll each year” (Ahmed 2010, 150).

It was in this context that civil surgeons like James Wise made their appearance. These men saw themselves as “guardians of public health” and lashed out against the way in which “amateur civil servant and municipal commissioners” had dealt with matters of public health reform in Indian towns (Ahmed 2010, 179). The civil surgeon who left perhaps the biggest imprint on Dhaka’s urban landscape was Henry Cutcliffe. Inspired by the sanitary reforms that were carried out in nineteenth-century European

²⁰ It should be noted, that Dhaka already started to lose some of its significance when the provincial capital of Bengal was shifted to Murshidabad in 1717 (Hossain 2008, 10). According to Khondker (2009, 133), however, this did not “result in an immediate decline of Dhaka as the city remained the headquarters of the Mughal army and navy in Eastern Bengal”.

cities, Cutcliffe wanted to disperse the crowds of the city and to replace Dhaka's slums with suburbs. His "radical engineering approach to the city" proposed "[b]road transverse streets", in order to divide "the city into rectangular blocks, of convenient size for conservancy purposes" (Ahmed 2010, 185). Although his scheme was not adopted in its entirety, it nonetheless came to function as a model for town improvement in Dhaka (Ahmed 2010, 186). Indeed, the first "residential neighbourhoods" that were developed in Dhaka neatly resembled the rectangular city quarters that Cutcliffe believed to be necessary for a sanitary and well-ventilated town. This outlook on urban planning, however, took little account of the urban landscape that had developed more or less organically in the course of the preceding centuries.

The common settlement pattern that predated colonial urban planning was that of the *mohalla*. These indigenous neighbourhoods, which can be found throughout the South Asian region, either centred around distinct gentry houses or were based on caste, lineage and professional allegiance (Mowla 2016, 4). The *mohallas* not only had their own form of social and political organisation, but were also characterised by a distinct spatial pattern. Typical urban features were: the *chowk* (square), *morh* (corner or roundabout), *bazar* (market), *goli* (lane or by lane) and *uthan* (courtyard). Most of these spaces blurred public-private distinctions and allowed for the commingling of commercial, ceremonial and residential functions. The *chowk*, for instance, fulfilled a central social function within the neighbourhood and typically consisted of a market, school and place of worship (Mowla 2016, 3). The so-called *morh*, which could either be a small roundabout or a mere bend in the road, provided another type of common meeting ground (Mowla 1997, 263). In addition, each *mohalla* had a specialised *bazar* street, a line of shops that formed the heart of the area's commercial and craft activities. However, whereas the latter was organised in a linear fashion, the *mohalla* itself was not. The neighbourhood consisted of convoluted streets, cul-de-sacs and narrow *golis* that led to people's residences (Mowla 2016, 3). The houses themselves clustered around an *uthan* or courtyard, which made it possible to extend "household and social activities to the outdoors" (Mowla 2016, 1).

The distinct spatial logic of the *mohalla*, which blurs the boundaries between public, commercial and domestic functions, can still be observed in parts of Old Dhaka. The newer extensions of Dhaka, however, have all been modelled after the example of the purposely planned residential neighbourhood. The earliest example of this approach dates back to the 1880s when the "Wari" and "Gandaria" neighbourhoods

were developed. Whereas the old *mohallas* had constituted a mix of commercial and residential functions, Wari and Gandaria were designed as orderly and legible residential areas, characterised by a grid pattern of roads (Nilufar and Khan 2016, 81). They provided a home to local elites and native civilians who were associated with the district administrations and court (Mowla 2016, 13). The colonial administrators, as was common throughout British India, had their own city quarters. In Dhaka, these so-called “Civil Lines” were established close to the Buriganga river side and marked by court houses, administrative buildings, churches and colleges (Mowla 2016, 13). These different colonial interventions in the urban landscape thus highlighted a desire for segregation, compartmentalisation and functional zoning.

Post-Colonial Urban Planning Practices

The colonial attitude towards urban planning continued to influence Dhaka’s urban landscape long after the British had left and the province of East-Bengal became part of larger Pakistan²¹. In fact, Nilufar and Khan (2016, 81) have argued that many of the planned residential areas that were developed after the Partition of British India in 1947 still expressed an “aura of Western suburbia, modernity and status” and essentially combined the model of the colonial Civil Lines with that of the British Garden City. Indeed, all the different neighbourhoods that were developed by the city’s newly-founded planning authority, the Dacca Improvement Trust (DIT), were informed by functional zoning practices and built according to a grid pattern of roads similar to that of Wari and Gandaria. This was particularly true for most of the exclusive, upper-class residential neighbourhoods that were developed in the period between Partition and independence, such as Gulshan, Banani, Uttara and Baridhara (Nilufar and Khan 2016, 81).

To some extent these concerted efforts at neighbourhood planning were made possible by the institution of the Town Improvement Act in 1953. Prior to that, planning efforts were overseen by a sub-committee that had been launched in 1948 by

²¹ When British colonial rule came to an end in 1947, the geopolitical landscape of South Asia changed drastically. Decolonisation coincided with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into Muslim-based Pakistan and constitutionally secular India. This historic event incited extensive inter-communal violence in both countries and prompted unanticipated and multiple waves of displacement, as millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims made their way to the country that best suited their religious background. The Partition had a profound impact on the province of Bengal, which was also divided in two. West-Bengal and Kolkata became part of India and Dhaka was declared the capital of East Pakistan, which was separated by more than 1,000 miles from West Pakistan (contemporary Pakistan).

the East-Pakistani government to guide the expansion of Dhaka (Kabir and Parolin 2012, 13). During British colonial rule, the efforts of civil surgeons like James Wise and Henry Cutcliffe notwithstanding, attempts at urban development had taken place on a largely ad hoc and piecemeal basis (Khan and Swapan 2013, 186). The Town Improvement Act laid the foundation for a more coordinated approach to urban planning and paved the way for the establishment of the Dacca Improvement Trust (DIT) in 1956. The DIT not only oversaw the development of the aforementioned residential areas, but also initiated the first master plan project for Dhaka in 1959. The master plan approach only really gained traction in wider South Asia after Partition, yet had its roots firmly in the British town planning tradition that was born out of a quest to pragmatise utopian blueprints for the ideal city, such as the “Garden City” (Khan and Swapan 2013, 184).

One of the most influential thinkers within this blueprint tradition, Patrick Geddes, was responsible for what is perhaps best described as an embryonic master plan for Dhaka city. Geddes (1917) himself described his plan, which put much emphasis on ameliorative change and organic city growth, as a “diagnostic survey” and no real attempts were made to formally implement his suggestions. However, he did lay out the groundwork for a master plan approach that would influence planning practices in Dhaka for years to come. This top-down and expert-driven form of urban planning gained momentum in South Asia in the 1960s, at a time when the same approach was increasingly being criticised in Europe for its undemocratic nature (Khan and Swapan 2013, 186). This critique also applied to Dhaka’s first official master plan, drafted in 1959, which left little room for the aspirations and demands of actual citizens (Swapan 2016, 201). What made things even less democratic, was that the master plans for cities like Mumbai, Dhaka and Karachi were almost invariably designed by Western consultancy firms (Khan and Swapan 2013, 186). For instance, Dhaka’s 1959 master plan was designed by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane, a group of London-based architects and town-planning consultants (Iqbal 2013, 48).

Swapan (2016, 204) has observed that the post-colonial planning agenda in Bangladesh has largely been donor driven, with almost all master plans and major development projects having either been partially or fully funded by international aid agencies. To give just a few examples: the “Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Project” (DMAIUDP) was carried out by the expatriate Shankland Cox Partnership firm in 1981 with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank; the

“Greater Dhaka Protection Project” was initiated in 1991 and funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA); the “Dhaka Integrated Transport Study” (DITS) was carried out between 1991-1993 under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and the “Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan” (DMDP) was administered by the expatriate group Mott Macdonald²² and partly funded by UNDP²³. Donors such as JICA, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, moreover, also play an increasingly important role in financing high-profile megaprojects such as the Jamuna Bridge Project and the anticipated Dhaka Metro Rail.

The involvement of foreign donors in Bangladeshi urban planning and development projects is part of a wider, post-independence trend towards NGOisation. The influx of foreign consultants, experts and aid workers took a flight after Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. The bloodstained Liberation War and ensuing humanitarian crisis had left a considerable part of the population in poverty, while Bangladesh’s first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib, who had led the struggle for independence, inherited a country in economic chaos (Hussain 2014, 4). The Mujib government initially pursued a socialist agenda, characterised by the nationalisation of industries, yet became increasingly dependent upon foreign aid for its survival. Aid revenue grew massively after independence, as “[t]housands of foreign consultants, volunteers and diplomats descended on Bangladesh” (Hussain 2014, 4). This form of aid dependency intensified even further during the fifteen years of military rule that followed the assassination of Sheikh Mujib in 1975.

The two consecutive military dictatorships of General Zia (1975-1981) and General Ershad (1981-1990) brought an end to the nationalisation of industries, banks and companies that Sheikh Mujib had set in motion. Instead, the country entered a period of privatisation, export-oriented growth and donor driven development that continues till this day (Van Schendel 2009, 194). The increased reliance on foreign funding did not only prompt economic liberalisation, but also encouraged the growth of local NGOs, which were seen as the preferred channel for international development assistance (Rahman 2006, 454). Today, Bangladesh enjoys one of the highest concentrations of NGO activity in the world and, together, these organisations are responsible for offering a wide range of services that are fundamental to people’s every

²² In association with Culpin Planning and different local agencies.

²³ Many of these plans and projects have been discussed in greater detail by Kabir and Parolin (2012).

day survival, including access to credit, education, health and sanitation (Rahman 2006, 454; Devine 2003, 229).

The fact that international donors and local NGOs have long interfered and intervened in the provision of public services has resulted in a form of governance that relies on “mediated sovereignty” (Hussain 2014, 3). The role that international donors continue to play in drafting urban policies for Dhaka, suggests that this applies to urban governance as well. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is a considerable gap between the plans and policies that are designed with the help of foreign donors and the way in which urban governance actually unfolds. Indeed, much of what is carried out under the banner of urban planning constitutes a breach with one or more of the of plans and policies that have been drafted over the years. For instance, many of the elevated expressways that have been built in recent years are not in compliance with the so-called Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP), which outlines the road and transportation developments that will ideally be carried out in Dhaka before 2035²⁴. What’s more, the administrative body that superseded the DIT in 1987 – namely RAJUK – has been repeatedly criticised for enabling construction works that violate regulations (Akter 2007; Sabet and Tazreen 2015). As a result, there is a significant disjunction between urban plans and their implementation. Attempts at functional zoning, for instance, have been thwarted by the violation of rules that stipulate land use, building height and the number of dwelling units per plot (Hafiz et al. 2016, 59). Consequently, there are very few residential neighbourhoods in Dhaka that are actually strictly residential.

This discrepancy between urban planning visions and urban planning practices is reflective of the workings of the Bangladeshi party-state. Suykens (2017, 188) has argued that this particular state-form “straddles military-civilian, autocratic-democratic and presidential-parliamentary boundaries”. This is certainly true for the Bangladeshi state, which has relied on a very strong overlap between party and government ever since the country returned to a parliamentary democracy in 1991. Over the past three decades, political rule has alternated between the two main political parties, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League²⁵, which

²⁴ Shohel Mamun, “Are Flyovers Really the Solution?”, October 25, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2017/10/25/flyovers-put-city-bind/>.

²⁵ Between 2007 and 2008 Bangladesh was briefly led by a military-backed caretaker government, which put the chairwomen of both political parties, Khaleda Zia (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina (Awami League), in jail on corruption charges (Suykens 2017, 208).

have both strived towards a monopoly of power during their alternating terms of office. The Awami League has been in power since 2008 and under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib, the party has managed to achieve near-autocratic control over the country. Within this context, the state itself is increasingly being held together through networks of party-patronage. Suykens (2018, 432) explains how the Bangladeshi party-state branches out in a number of auxiliary organisations, such as student wings, worker's associations and trade unions, that all pursue their own moneyed interests in the shade of the Awami League ruling party. These dynamics also extend to the rickshaw industry. Indeed, the ceiling on rickshaw licenses that was installed in the 1980s, has prompted certain "trade unions" with close affiliations to the ruling party to start selling unofficial licenses (Hasan 2013; Suykens 2018). The fact that the interests of different auxiliary branches do not always align with each other or with official state policies thus opens up a gap between certain plans or policies and the implementation thereof.

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Throughout the rest of this thesis it will become clear that the broader context of urban governance, including colonial-style urban planning, donor driven development and state-party patronage, has a profound impact on the workings of the rickshaw industry. For instance, the trend towards functional zoning and colonial-style residential neighbourhoods has also implicitly been a trend towards car-oriented planning (Imon 2016, 183). Whereas the rickshaw fits in perfectly amidst the narrow *golis* of the old town, most rickshaw pullers are now increasingly navigating a landscape that was – sometimes deliberately – not designed for them. Nothing shows this more clearly than the "Dhaka Urban Transport Project" (DUTP), which was carried out between 1996 and 2005. The DUTP – a clear example of donor driven urban development – was funded by the World Bank and suggested the implementation of a "Non-Motorised Transport-free Arterial Network"²⁶. The idea was that such a network would not only alleviate traffic congestion, but also enable the separation of fast, motorised traffic and slow-moving, non-motorised traffic (World Bank 2007). To achieve this separation of

²⁶ This suggestion was based on an earlier assessment of Dhaka traffic under the UNDP-funded "Dhaka Integrated Transport Study" (DITS) (World Bank 2007, 1-2).

modes, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) initiated a “Phased Implementation Plan” in 2002, which proposed the phased withdrawal of rickshaws from eleven major roads, constituting a total of 120 kilometres (Bari and Efroymson 2005; Buliung, Shima and Mitra 2004; Hasan 2013; Hasan and Dávila 2018; Rahman, D’Este and Bunker 2009; STP 2005). The plan essentially instituted a one-sided rickshaw ban on major roads and was vehemently criticised for its negative impact on rickshaw passengers and drivers (see Bari and Efroymson 2005; HDRC 2004). Although the World Bank (2007) eventually withdrew its support and rated the outcome of the project as “moderately unsatisfactory”, the DUTP paved the way for years of rickshaw restrictions to come. Indeed, the DCC has continued to haphazardly ban the rickshaw from an increasing number of designated “VIP roads”. The most recent round of restrictions was implemented in 2019, as per direction of the mayor of South Dhaka²⁷. Although these radical interventions in the urban transport system are not necessarily in line with one particular plan, they unmistakably constitute an attempt to *fix* the city. What will become clear throughout the rest of this thesis, however, is that such interventions often do not work towards a definitive “spatial fix”. For instance, the powerful special interests of the various “labour unions” that are in the business of selling unofficial rickshaw licenses, make it difficult to definitively ban rickshaws from certain areas. Rickshaw policies are thus very much a reflection of the wider context of urban governance and planning in Bangladesh, which has been profoundly shaped by the colonial legacy of urban modernity, donor driven development and networks of state-party patronage.

Dissertation Outline

This thesis looks at the tension between the ambiguous and often contradictory efforts that are undertaken by planners and politicians to fix the city, and the inherently unfixed mode of being in the city that characterises the working lives of cycle-rickshaw drivers. My understanding of fixing is inspired by the work of Simone (2010, 11) and refers to those narratives and policies that approach the city as something that can be

²⁷ Abdullah Alif, “Rickshaw Ban: Rickshaw Pullers Continue Protest, Block Dhaka Streets”, *Dhaka Tribune*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/07/09/rickshaw-ban-rickshaw-pullers-continue-protest-block-rampura-road>.

managed, solved or tied down by making “precise identifications of space, problems, or populations”. The line of argument that I will further substantiate throughout this thesis is that the journeys and efforts of rickshaw drivers, as well as the spaces, politics and relations that enable/produce them, add a measure of unfixity, uncertainty and multi-directionality to urban spaces and their futures. In the different chapters of this dissertation, I will highlight the various unfixities that characterise Dhaka’s rickshaw industry, by focusing respectively on rickshaw journeys, rickshaw labour, the rickshaw garage and the electric rickshaw. These four ethnographic angles each open up different fields of analysis and represent different scales and registers of urbanisation, namely: mobilities, informal labour, rural-urban migration and urban change.

My ethnographic analysis starts off with **Chapter 4**, which focuses on the open-ended nature of rickshaw journeys and the attempts that have been made to fix, fragment and formalise these. The chapter zooms in on the formal rickshaw system that was recently implemented in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone, and shows how formalisation is enacted through processes of enclosure and exception. **Chapter 5** examines the reality of rickshaw labour and what it is that draws rickshaw drivers to this particular form of wageless work. The chapter pushes back against the idea that rickshaw drivers have been uprooted from certain fixed trajectories of labour, notably agricultural labour, and underscores that rickshaw drivers’ efforts to make a living oscillate between a variety of economic strategies and cannot be pinned down to one single avenue of employment. **Chapter 6** takes the peripheral space of the rickshaw garage as a point of departure for examining the multi-directional nature of urbanisation. The chapter highlights the tension between urban concentration and extension and seeks to blur the boundaries of what can be considered urban. It does so by focusing on the rural-urban linkages that are created and enabled by the rickshaw garage. **Chapter 7** moves away from the territorial unfixities of the rickshaw industry and takes a closer look at the temporal ambiguity that surrounds the presence and the future of the rickshaw. Taking the recent development of the electric rickshaw as a point of departure, the chapter shows that the extent to which certain urban elements or innovations are incorporated into the urban future relies on how certain temporal politics play out.

These four main, empirical chapters all underscore the argument that the working lives of rickshaw drivers constitute a way of being in the city that is neither territorially nor temporally fixed. **Chapter 2** lays the theoretical groundwork for this

line of argument and shows that the analysis of cities has been somewhat torn between “sedentarist” and “deterritorialised” approaches (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006, 5). My own call for an approach that sets out the unfixed city should be understood as an effort to strike a balance between these two extremes. **Chapter 3** takes the “sedentarist” legacy of urban anthropology as a point of departure for reflecting on the methodological implications of researching a topic that is not necessarily tied to one particular territorial field. Finally, in **Chapter 8**, I bring together the different scales and thematic angles of my research, whilst trying to find an answer to the question that has long haunted urban citizens, planners and scholars alike, namely: “Does the rickshaw have a future?” This very question, as we will see throughout this thesis, encapsulates many of the uncertainties and unfixities that surround the presence of the rickshaw in Dhaka.

2. Theorising Urban Flows: Beyond the City as a Habitat

This theoretical chapter further explores the conceptual question that I outlined in the beginning of the introduction, namely: What does it mean to approach the city as an avenue for making a living, rather than a place to live? In theorising this question, I seek to explicitly move beyond residentialist and sedentarist approaches to urban life. Martinotti (1994) has rightly pointed out that the experiences of commuters, workers and visitors are too often side-lined in analyses of urban realities. In addition, residentialism also opens the door to normative liveability narratives. This is especially true for growing metropolitan cities in lower-income countries, which often find themselves at the bottom of global rankings and are commonly represented as unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy habitats. Indeed, Roy (2011a, 224) has argued that such megacities have become metonyms for underdevelopment, a narrative that is reinforced by the allure of the slum as a representational trope in writing, reporting and filming about these cities.

This observation is echoed by Arabindoo (2011, 639) who maintains that, under the guise of setting a manifesto for a radical twenty-first-century urbanism, slums have become the predominant frame through which “cities of the global South are perceived, understood, mapped and created”. Gilbert (2007, 697) blames this trend on the resurfacing of the word “slum” in international development discourses, warning that “[t]he new millennium has seen the return of the word ‘slum’ with all of its inglorious associations”. He attributes this renewed popularity of the slum discourse to the “Cities Without Slums” campaign that was launched by UN-Habitat around the turn of the millennium (Gilbert 2007, 679). In a way, this campaign elevated the slum to a symbol of all that is wrong with mass-urbanisation, thereby morphing the complexities of urban poverty into a recognisable image and distinct habitat.

It is not just journalism, international development agencies and popular movies¹ that have reduced growing cities and their problems to the instant image of the slum. In fact, similar tropes have (re)surfaced in academic writing. For instance,

¹ Gilbert (2007, 698) asks whether it is “wholly unconnected that [...] Oscar winning films, [like] *Cidade de Deus* and *Tsotsi*, have been based in ‘slums’?”. Similarly, Roy (2011) refers to the blockbuster movie *Slumdog Millionaire* as an example of the ways in which the slum has become a representational trope.

Watts (2005, 189) states that the slum “constitutes the defining feature of contemporary African metropolises”. His assessment of African cities is partly inspired by the work of Davis (2006, 19), who has predicted that the twenty-first-century will see the advent of a “planet of slums”:

Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay. Indeed, the one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Catal Hayuk in Anatolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years ago.

Although such contemplations are undoubtedly born out of a genuine concern for people’s living conditions, they promote an oversimplified and sensationalist view of what it is like to live in an informal or auto-constructed neighbourhood. Narratives like these transform the slum into a microcosm of the apocalyptic city of the future (Zeiderman 2008) – that is, a place that somehow embodies all the big problems of the twenty-first-century: pollution, overcrowding and inadequate shelter. This is not to imply that waste-management and the provision of housing are not indeed crucial problems that cities need to address, but merely to point to the danger that lies in fixing and tying certain problems to particular territories and communities.

In his critique on slum discourses, Gilbert (2007, 703) elaborates further on the risk of using a category that inevitably conflates communities with habitats, pointing out that the word “slum” is almost never used to only refer to conditions of shelter. Instead, it confuses “the physical problem of poor-quality housing with the characteristics of the people living there” (Gilbert 2007, 710). This not only leads to negative stereotyping and the flattening of local hierarchies and diversity, but also lends credence to slum clearance programmes that are, strictly speaking, also working towards “Cities Without Slums” (Gilbert 2007, 710). The insistence on the slum as a representational trope, moreover, also misguides our understanding of the cities that are typically associated with their presence and proliferation. These associative links are far from neutral, considering that neighbourhoods in Europe and North America are hardly ever described as slums, even though “[t]he human destitution in many U.S. cities is now too well documented for anyone to pretend that slum life is to be found elsewhere and not here” (Nuttall and Mbembe 2005, 195). Robinson (2002, 531), attributes this double standard in urbanism to the fact that many of the cities that are

located in what was once called the “Third World” have historically been the focus of development studies. As a result, there is a tendency to interpret these cities solely through the “lens of developmentalism, an approach which broadly understands these places to be lacking in the qualities of city-ness” (Robinson 2002, 531).

Biases like these perpetuate hierarchical notions of city-ness and effectively disqualify certain metropolitan areas from the realm urban modernity, a concept which “has strong roots in a limited range of European cities” (Robinson 2004, 18). Nuttall and Mbembe (2005) have pushed back against such forms of developmentalism by showcasing African cities as centres of metropolitan modernity and by refusing to adopt the “recognisable frame” of the slum for making sense of a place like Johannesburg. They argue that:

If indeed the slum is the master trope of African metropolitanism, how then can we account for the rich suburbs of Lagos, Nigeria, and Abidjan, Ivory Coast, the property boom in the rich neighbourhoods of Douala, Cameroon, or the rate at which the old is making way for the new in Maputo, Mozambique, with architectural styles ranging from medieval Portuguese (heavily beamed ceilings, archways, tiles) to nouveau colonial?²

(Nuttall and Mbembe 2005, 194)

Slum discourses, however, do not only feed into reductionist representations of African and South Asian metropolises, but also strip the lives of the people who actually live or spend time in informal settlements of their multidimensionality. Too often their life projects and struggles are also reduced to the stereotyped habitat of the slum.

In the introduction of this thesis I cited Saidur, a rickshaw puller who explained why he kept returning to the capital city – leaving behind a relatively comfortable house in the countryside to spend his days driving a rickshaw amidst the “poisonous fumes” of Dhaka traffic and his nights at a shared and provisory sleeping space. I emphasised that for Saidur, and many others like him, the capital city represented first and foremost a place of work. Or in his own words: “There is income in Dhaka city, so to Dhaka city I go”. Jackman (2017) observed a similar, pragmatic orientation among the people he conducted fieldwork with; a group of scavengers, beggars and labourers who occupied a so-called *potho-bosti* (“footpath slum”) near one of Dhaka’s largest

² This rhetorical question is aimed towards Michael Watts (2005), who critiqued an earlier article by Mbembe and Nuttall (2004).

markets. Footpath dwellers are often framed as a particularly destitute and rootless group of people, not in the least because their makeshift dwellings at the roadside are in an even more vulnerable condition than the tin-shed houses that can be found in more established *bostis* or slums. Jackman (2017, 174), however, pushes back against this characterisation and argues that “one way in which the situation is often understood by those living there is in terms of having *lower* or *no costs*”. He goes on to quote one of the occupants of the footpath-slum, a guy who works as a scavenger. The man explains that people like him do not like to spend their money on housing in Dhaka, but instead try to accumulate sufficient capital to buy a house or piece of land in the countryside. Jackman (2017, 174) therefore suggests that people “working as beggars, labourers, scavengers, maids and sex workers” are deliberately sacrificing a degree of security and comfort in order to be able to channel resources elsewhere. In other words, for them too, the city is first and foremost a place to *make a living*.

Examples like these clearly show why it does not make sense to frame the dynamics of urban poverty solely through the sedentarist and residentialist logic that underscores slum discourses. This is not to suggest that there is no merit in ethnographic studies that have been conducted in informal settlements. On the contrary, in the specific context of Bangladesh, such studies have contributed greatly to a more diversified understanding of urban poverty by focusing on a broad range of topics, including the spatial production of informal settlements (Bertuzzo 2016; Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012), the negotiation of access to drinking water, electricity and public space (Hossain 2012; Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012), the role of violent intermediaries in brokering access to such resources (Khan 2000), the contestation of property regimes and landownership (Suykens 2015), and the intersections between poverty and women’s reproductive health (Rashid 2007a).

However, whereas informal settlements offer a fairly logical methodological point of departure for studying urban poverty, there lies a certain representational danger in taking the “slum” as an epistemological or theoretical starting point. For, if we do so, we might just overlook the myriad ways in which urban poverty exceeds the experience of residing or being in a certain place. Indeed, Arabindoo (2011, 643) argues that “[if] ‘slum as theory’ is to be more than an intellectual playground for academics, it is crucial that scholars abandon the ‘spatial fix’ that most studies on slums are limited to”. Arabindoo (2011, 643) goes on to suggest that we need to be mindful of the ways in which the social relations of the urban poor “criss-cross an intricate set

of connections and flows stretching across multiple physical spaces". I argue that one way to move beyond this "spatial fix" is to take people's work, efforts and movements rather than their habitats as a point of departure for understanding urban exclusions and vulnerabilities. Before theorising this approach in further detail, I will first address attention to the ways in which (urban) anthropology, over the years and decades, has struggled with abandoning its "spatial fix".

Neighbourhood Studies and Urban Anthropology

It is not difficult to appreciate why slums are such popular sites for urban ethnographic fieldwork when taking into account that, for many years, the mainstay of urban anthropology was the neighbourhood study. Such studies tended to focus on "a specific area of a city, more often than not treated as a bounded entity" (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 14). This retreat into the more-or-less static neighbourhood, whether it be the "ghetto", the "ethnic enclave" or the "slum", is somewhat paradoxical considering that it was actually the reality of movement and rural-urban migration that drew anthropologists to the city in the first place. Jaffe and De Koning (2016, 8) have described these initial explorations of the urban as follows: "[a]gainst the background of massive rural-to-urban migration in the global South, anthropologists began to follow their 'peasant' interlocutors as they moved to the cities, studying how these migrants coped in new urban environments". However, somewhere in the early stages of the discipline urban anthropology seems to have taken a "particularistic turn" (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 14). Indeed, upon arriving in the city, anthropologists quickly turned their attention to the type of small-scale, integrated communities that resembled the villages they had traditionally studied. In a way, they brought the method of ethnographic research to the city, but failed to contemplate explicitly on the urban realm itself. Or, in the words of Richard Fox (1972, 218), one of the earliest critics of this approach: "[m]any studies take the urban environment as a given, a mere location, a site selected for small-scale investigation". Hannerz (1980, 3) has similarly argued that urban anthropology has long been used as a container term for "all studies where the city is the locus rather than the focus".

In the 1920s and 1930s the Chicago School of Sociology laid out the groundwork for urban anthropology and the type of community and neighbourhood studies that

would become its hallmark. The sociologist Robert Park (1952, 15) encouraged his students to employ the ethnographic methods that had been pioneered by anthropologists to study the “the customs, beliefs, social practices, and general conceptions of life prevalent in Little Italy on the lower North Side in Chicago” as well as “the more sophisticated folkways of the inhabitants of Greenwich Village and the neighbourhood of Washington Square, New York”. This new approach resulted in classics such as “The Gang” (Trasher 1927), “The Ghetto” (Wirth 1928) and “The Gold Coast and the Slum” (Zorbaugh 1929).

Another influential publication was Whyte’s (1943) “Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum”. Whyte’s work was somewhat “antagonistically related” to the output of other Chicago School scholars (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 25). His contemporaries, especially Louis Wirth, typically insisted that the neighbourhoods and slums where migrants had settled were inherently disorganised. Whyte, on the other hand, saw the “slum” as an organised community (Andersson 2014, 89). His analysis thus broke with the common assumption that poor, urban communities lacked the strong, integrative ties that characterised rural life (Jaffe and De Koning 2016, 9). At the same time, his approach also paved the way for the perception that ethnic enclaves, ghettos and slums were best understood as “close-knit ‘urban villages’ characterized by strong local ties” and gave impetus to the community studies that dominated much of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (Jaffe and De Koning 2016, 9). This trend can also be partly attributed to the work of Robert Redfield, whose “folk-urban continuum” also provided credibility to “research that sought to locate ‘villages in the city’” (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 19).

The parochialism that characterised this burgeoning body of neighbourhood studies was not necessarily in line with the original ethos of the Chicago School (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 17). Whereas later studies fixated on the specificities and peculiarities of social life in the self-contained neighbourhood, the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s had been outward-looking in scope and sought to theorise, in the words of Robert Park, the “generic and universal aspects of the city and its life” (cited in Jones and Rodgers 2016, 15-16). Sopranzetti (2019, 115) has similarly reflected on this change in focus and points out that the transition from the city as an object of study to the city as a mere research location coincided with an epistemological shift towards more static configurations of the urban. He argues that whereas the Chicago School’s research emerged to “deal with the peril of circulation – of humans, commodities, and

lifestyles” it ended up investigating “the city as a sum of spaces and groups” (Sopranzetti 2019, 116). Hence, what Jones and Rodgers (2016, 17) have described as the “particularistic turn” was to some extent also a sedentarist turn. In a way, what happened was that urban researchers started to project their research problems and questions onto neatly confined territories, thereby implicitly assuming a “metonymic correspondence” between the different scales of urban life (Sopranzetti 2019, 116). This microcosmic tendency is exemplified perfectly in the following remark by Oscar Lewis, who argued that: “[a]ny generalizations about the nature of social life in the city must be based on careful studies of these smaller universes rather than on a priori statements about the city as a whole” (cited in Jones and Rodgers 2016, 21).

Whereas the neighbourhood studies that had their roots in the Chicago School tradition gravitated towards the same stable and coherent building blocks that had inspired strands of structural-functionalism, the so-called “Copperbelt studies” that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s moved away from the ostensible stable structures of kinship, ritual, and magic. These studies were conducted under the auspices of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in British Central Africa and associated with the work of Max Gluckman, Albert Epstein and Clyde Mitchell. The first director of the Institute, Godfrey Wilson, and his wife Monica Wilson, decided to focus on emerging mining towns and, in particular, to study the forces of “disequilibrium” that were fuelling upheaval and change in Central Africa (Hannerz 1980, 124). One major force of disequilibrium was “the introduction of an urban-based industrial economy into a rural society of simple agriculture” and the process of “detrribalisation” this set in motion (Hannerz 1980, 124). People like Max Gluckman importantly argued that detribalisation, far from being completed as the migrant entered the town, “was an on-and-off phenomenon” (Hannerz 1980, 141). Hence, contrary to the Chicago School, the Copperbelt studies “ceased to consider cities as ecological islands but rather analysed them as nodes in the often two-way circulation between the mining towns and their outer territories” (Sopranzetti 2019, 116).

Copperbelt researchers, however, struggled to methodologically give shape to this reality of circulation and rural-urban embeddedness. External factors such as political and economic structures were often treated as a given and social events were explored in relative isolation as researchers zoomed in on “a local field of social relations” (Hannerz 1980, 145). This not only resulted in an approach that was intensely particularistic (Jones and Rodgers 2016, 19), but once again, as Sopranzetti

(2019, 116) points out, these ethnographic investigations ignored the operators and mechanisms of circulation that had been central to the constitution of the social fields that formed the objects of their studies.

These microscopic approaches to urban life and the degree of (spatial) isolation that they assumed and/or required, were definitively challenged by the surge of political economy perspectives in the 1970s and 1980s (Jaffe and De Koning 2016, 11). The Copperbelt studies, in particular, were criticised for insufficiently taking capitalist and colonial structures into account, especially considering that the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute itself was embedded in the colonial system (Hannerz 1980, 123). This sensitivity to power structures also inspired the “spatial turn” in urban anthropology, which was informed by the works of Foucault, Lefebvre and De Certeau, and sparked an interest in the power dynamics that permeated the production of space (Jaffe and De Koning 2016, 11). What’s more, the increased awareness of globalisation and international flows in the late 1990s and early 2000s once and for all shattered the myth of the city as an isolated, ecological island (Sopranzetti 2019, 117).

Despite these developments and changed perspectives, urban anthropology never really grew out of the habit of starting research from a specific spatial or social locale – such as a neighbourhood, market, square or subculture – before showing its connections and relations to other scales (Sopranzetti 2019, 117). The continued popularity of slum-based research in regions such as South Asia, Latin America and Africa is a case in point. In an attempt to break with this persistent tendency Sopranzetti (2019, 123) has advocated for an urban anthropology that looks at the myriad ways in which circulation constitutes the city. Citing his own work on motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok as an example, he argues that a focus on mobile urban subjects provides an entry point into a study of the city that works on multiple scales: that of the individual body, the street corner, the neighbourhood, the city itself, the myriads of villages from where people travelled to the city, and that of wider political-economic transformation (Sopranzetti 2019, 117). The question thus arises whether a focus on mobile urban subjects can help push urban anthropology beyond the sedentarism, residentialism and particularism that has haunted the discipline since its inception?

Beyond a “Sedentarist Metaphysics”

The fact that ethnographic studies of cities have often departed from certain neighbourhoods, places and locales is indicative of what Malkki (1992, 31) has described as the sedentarist tendency to segment “the world into prismatic, mutually exclusive units”. Although Malkki (1992) is referring specifically to the territorial order of nation-states, her argument rings true on a broader level as well. Indeed, Malkki (1992) argues that the segmentation of the world into nation-states and the constant discursive reinforcement of this order is an epitome of a deeply metaphysical form of sedentarism. Specifically, she takes issue with the “commonsense ideas of soils, roots and territory” that surface in everyday language as well as scholarly work (Malkki 1992, 26). Anthropology in particular has been complicit in perpetuating these common sense ideas, considering that “[t]he idea of culture carries with it an expectation of roots, of a stable, territorialized existence” (Clifford 1988, 338). This commitment to “space-culture isomorphism” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 34; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 462) has significantly contributed to the “sinking [of] ‘peoples’ and ‘cultures’ into ‘national soils’” (Malkki 1992, 31). It is due to such sedentarising tendencies, Malkki (1992) argues, that displacement is perceived as both anomalous and threatening to the “natural” order of nation-states. Whereas her work focuses on refugees in particular the idea of a “sedentarist metaphysics” speaks to the wider fact that mobile people are often thought of in ways “that assume the moral and logical primacy of fixity in space and place” (Cresswell 2006, 26).

Metaphysical sedentarism does not just refer to the propensity to focus on “rooting rather than travel” (Clifford 1988, 338), but also coincides with the “the pathologization of uprootedness” (Malkki 1992, 32). This pathologisation becomes visible when looking at the ways in which early urban anthropologists and sociologists conceptualised the relation between mobility and urbanity. Before the abovementioned “particularistic turn” (Jones and Rodgers 2016) led to a surge of neighbourhood studies, mobility had been at the centre of how Chicago School scholars understood the world (Cresswell 2006, 18). This focus on mobility is most explicit in the work of Nels Anderson (1923), who – in contrast to many of his colleagues – did not seek out a “slum” or “ethnic enclave” to conduct his research, but instead drew on his own experience of living as a hobo and a homeless person. Anderson saw urban life as inherently mobile and argued that the city was “more mobile, mobility being a

characteristic of its life just as stability is characteristic of rural life” (cited in Cresswell 2006, 18). This mobile nature of city life was not seldom brought in relation to disorder and the breakdown of communal ties, as becomes evident from the following quote by Ernest Burgess (2008 [1925], 76):

The mobility of city life, with its increase in the number and intensity of stimulations, tends inevitably to confuse and to demoralize the person. [...] Where mobility is the greatest, and where in consequence primary controls break down completely, as in the zone of deterioration in the modern city, there develop areas of demoralization, of promiscuity, and of vice.

Mobility is thus contrasted with a normative notion of stability that seems to envelop both rurality and morality. This line of argument is underpinned by the sedentarist idea that a community naturally needs to be tied to a certain territory in order to be able to function as an integrative and moral social unit.

Within urban contexts such forms of sedentarism often coincide with residentialism, that is: the tendency to interpret urban spaces largely through the rubric of residential patterns (Martinotti 1994). The result is that residence becomes reified as the only form of urban engagement and citizenship. This bias is substantiated by narratives that assume urban immigrants to be only loosely connected to the city. Richard Fox (1972, 224), in his otherwise legitimate critique on the particularism of “slum studies”, for instance, argues that “[t]o see the city through recently detribalized peoples or newly arrived peasants is extremely difficult”. He goes on to claim that that these “urban nomads and ghetto men” participate only minimally in the city, considering that “[r]esidentially, economically, and politically, they are often strangers to the city” (Fox 1972, 224). Ferguson (1990) has detected a very similar type of “conventional wisdom” in the early Copperbelt studies. He argues that nearly all overview narrations of Copperbelt labour history propagate a master narrative that assumes a kind of linear progression from an “undeveloped early state of attachment to rural communities – ‘migrant labour’ – toward a more complete, developed state that approximates the condition of modern Western working classes – ‘permanent urbanization’” (Ferguson 1990, 386). Hence, there is an expectation that the reality of rural-urban labour migration will eventually give way to permanent urban residence or “permanent urbanisation”.

Sedentarist and residentialist strands of thinking have never been confined to academia alone. On the contrary, the tendency within the social sciences to treat mobility either as a threat to- or as a temporary irregularity in an otherwise stable universe was very much a reflection of the wider world (Cresswell 2006, 38). Whereas anthropologists tried to metaphorically root and tie their research populations to certain locales, states, municipalities and institutions often sought to do so in rather more literal ways. Indeed, James Scott (1998) starts his seminal work on modern statehood with the question of why it is that “the state has always seemed to be the enemy of ‘people who move around’”. He argues that efforts to permanently settle and sedentarise mobile groups, such as nomads, pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, runaway slaves, and serfs, have long been part of the way in which states exercise their power (Scott 1998, 1). Scott (1998, 2) interprets such sedentarising tendencies as the “state’s attempt to make a society legible” and sees this embrace of legibility reflected in a number of modern state projects, ranging from the redevelopment of Paris under Baron Haussman, to high-modernist urban planning fiascos such as Chandigarh and Brasília, to compulsory villagisation in Tanzania.

Such synchronised attempts at legibilisation and sedentarisation were also part and parcel of forms of colonial urban planning. Indeed, Jaffe and De Koning (2016, 122) describe how many colonial Indian cities were “planned and developed in a broadly dualist fashion, with a ‘White Town’ dominated by colonial elites, and an indigenous ‘Black Town’”³. In Dhaka, as we have seen in the introduction, the British also created their own city quarters, namely the so-called “Civil Lines” (Mowla 2016, 13). Such radical and hostile planning interventions by colonial rulers inevitably had consequences for people’s mobility. Kaviraj (1997, 87) for instance describes how the boundary between different city quarters in Kolkata was maintained:

The boundary between the two cities, European and native, was clearly etched into the minds of the inhabitants, though there had to be a constant flow of people across it, since the relatively small British population needed the constant service of an enormous range of serving people to support their opulent lifestyle. Evidently the colonial administration also felt that the racial-colonial division must be given a materialised form, so Indians were legally barred from walking on the notorious Red Road.

³ See Kaviraj (1997), King (2007 [1976]) and Mitchell (1991) for an elaborate exploration of the impact of colonial planning on the urban environments of respectively Kolkata, Delhi and Cairo.

Efforts to “make urban geography transparently legible” (Scott 1998, 55), however, do not always coincide with such outward restrictions on mobility, but can also affect people’s movements in more insidious ways – by dispersing or controlling urban crowds, for instance. This becomes clear in Holston’s (1989, 105) monograph on Brasília, which describes how the modernist design of the city, known for its empty spaces and absence of squares and markets, resulted in an urban landscape that, according to inhabitants “lacked crowds” and “the bustle of street life”.

Scott’s (1998) idea of legibility has been highly influential in shaping the scholarly imagination of how states and cities interact with mobile populations and has placed sedentarising tendencies at the heart of (urban) governance. Smart and Smart (2017, 441), for instance, echo Scott (1998) in contending that “[i]mmobilizing processes are key parts of the social engineering efforts of ‘high modernist’ states”. Considering this conceptual intertwinement of legibilising and immobilising processes, it is unsurprising that Scott’s (1998) framework is frequently invoked by scholars working on urban mobility (see Adey 2010; Monroe 2016; Sopranzetti 2019). This is especially true for research projects that focus on mobile groups of people in the urban informal economy, such as street vendors or motorcycle taxi drivers (see Huang, Xue and Wang 2019; Meneses-Reyes 2013; Sopranzetti 2019). For instance, in his work on street vendors in Mexico City, Meneses-Reyes (2013) argues that “being mobile” is an important strategy that unlicensed, informal vendors employ to escape the control of the state. Sopranzetti (2019) envisions a similar relation between mobility, informality and the state. He shows how motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, by making themselves invisible in the anonymous urban crowd, were able to challenge the state’s “ability to hold and read its own territory” during a series of protests and blockades (Sopranzetti 2019, 122). Urban ethnographies like these thus underscore the often antagonistic relationship between the state and “people who move around” (Scott 1998, 1)

This merging of the mobile/informal and the sedentary/formal undoubtedly makes sense in a number of ethnographic contexts, yet can easily lead to oversimplification on a theoretical level. Too often intuitive oppositions are drawn between the mapped and legible spaces of the formal city and the vernacular, improvised and, ultimately, “kinetic” qualities of informal urbanism. Mehrotra (2010, xii), for example, describes the informal or “kinetic city” as “a fluid and dynamic city that is mobile and temporal”. This in contrast to the static city, which “aspires to erase the local and recodify it in a written formal order” (Mehrotra 2010, xii). Varley (2013,

12-13) has critically argued that such characterisations perpetuate a false binary between the permanence and fixity of the formal city and the dynamism and emergent nature of the informal city. Narratives that insist too strongly on the “organic”, “nomadic”, “rhizome-like” or “kinetic” qualities of the informal city (Varley 2013, 12-13), naively equate mobility with resistance and transgression. Cresswell (2006, ix) has convincingly challenged such conceptual connotations, arguing that:

Clearly, though, there are forms of mobility that are neither transgressive nor resistant—the flows of the transnational business community and of the capital that travels with them are examples of this. It is clear that there are also examples of resistance that involve not moving, staying put, resisting dominant flows and motions.

This tendency to overstate the transgressive qualities of mobility can be seen as an example of “nomadic metaphysics” (Cresswell 2006). Cresswell (2006, 50) employs this term to describe what happens when sedentarist narratives, which ultimately paint mobility as a threat, are inverted and transformed into a discourse that celebrates mobility as a form of resistance. As we will see in the next section, this “nomadic metaphysics”, comes with its own epistemological pitfalls, hence complicating the idea that a focus on mobility somehow provides us with a neat antidote to sedentarist and residentialist approaches to the city.

Metanarratives and Metaphors of Mobility

Cresswell (2006) attributes the rise and popularity of what he describes as “nomadic thought” to the reality of speed, mobility and interconnectedness that characterises our contemporary, globalising world. Kaufmann (2002, 11) has similarly argued that the perceived compression of space and time has favoured perspectives that insist on the fluidification and “disappearance of social and spatial structures and the territories that are associated with them”. This particular theoretical leaning has resulted in a whole new academic lexicon that revolves predominantly around movement, as becomes evident from terms like liquidity (Bauman 2013), immediacy (Tomlinson 2007) and dromology (Virilio 1986 [1977]). This preoccupation with notions of accelerated living has also permeated the imagery of modern city life – recurrently

characterised in terms of its ephemeral character – as is epitomised by phrases such as “non-places” (Augé 1995) and “the city of illusion” (Boyer 1993). Cresswell (2010, 27) argues that urban spaces that signify mobility, such as boulevards or railway stations, have in many ways become iconic of the modern city. This is exemplified by the work of Virilio (1986, 5), who describes the city as nothing but a stopover, “a point on the synoptic path of a trajectory”. Sennett (1994, 18) similarly argues that “[n]avigating the geography of modern society requires very little physical effort, hence engagement: indeed, as roads become straightened and regularised, the voyager need account less and less for the people and the buildings on the street in order to move”. This keen interest in the way mobility has changed the world is also reflected on a more epistemological and philosophical level. Indeed, Cresswell (2006, 46) argues that mobility has become the foundation for anti-essentialism, antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism.

The surge of “nomadic thought” is the result of scholarly efforts to once and for all move beyond static, rooted and essentialist conceptions of culture, identity, landscape and knowledge. Cresswell (2006, 46) sees this embrace of nomadic ontology reflected in a number of foundational texts, ranging from De Certeau’s work on the “pedestrian” to Said’s examination of the “exile”. The work of Nigel Thrift (2008) perhaps most clearly outlines what it means on an epistemological level to take movement as a *leitmotif* for understanding the world. In his work on non-representational theory, Thrift (2008, 2) proposes a “geography of what happens” and advocates for a focus on what is present in experience and movement. Whereas Thrift (2008, 5) rightfully addresses the myriad ways in which “human life is based on and in movement”, a “nomadic metaphysics” tends to go one step further.

Cresswell (2006, 46-47) argues that within a nomadic framework mobility is typically perceived as a form of “resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline” and linked to subaltern forms of power. The clearest example of this is provided by Deleuze and Guattari’s ([1987] 2010) treatise on nomadology and the “war machine”, in which they draw a philosophical distinction between the organising logic of the state and that of the so-called “war machine”. The war machine is not dedicated to the production of war in any real sense of the word, but instead signals a domain of “exteriority to the state” (Hoffman 2011, 7). Or in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (2010, 4): “[a]s for the war machine in itself, it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from

elsewhere". The war machine then does not challenge the state per se, but its organising logic. Whereas the first operates according to a clear set of codes, rules, hierarchies and roles that support its internal consistency and coherence, the second operates in a "rhizomatic" way – "it makes and breaks connections at any point along its network" (Hoffman 2011, 9) – and is characterised by flexibility and contingency.

This contrast between static and nomadic forms of organisation⁴ overlaps with the distinction that Deleuze and Guattari (2010, 5) draw between "striated space" and "smooth space". They explain this opposition via an analogy with the games "Chess" and "Go":

[T]he space is not at all the same: in chess, it is a question of arranging a closed space for oneself, thus of going from one point to another, of occupying the maximum number of squares with the minimum number of pieces. In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival. The 'smooth' space of Go, as against the 'striated' space of chess.

The "smooth space" of Go is also the space of the nomad. It is, in the words of Cresswell (2006, 50) "a horizontal space that resists and threatens the vertical striations of power". In addition, the metaphor of "smooth space" is also used to create a tension between the patterns, processes, models and theories that have long characterised Western philosophy and more open-ended strands of thought that resist such fixities. Indeed, we are invited to think of the theorist as someone who travels and journeys without fixed points of arrival and departure (Hannam 2009, 104; Urry 2000, 204). The contradistinction between striated and smooth spaces thus offers a provocative starting point for thinking about different logics of power, organising, thinking and subjectivity. At the same time, this epistemological embrace of nomadism has been criticised for being overtly "abstract and universalizing in its allocation of meaning to mobility" (Cresswell 2006, 54). For as soon as the philosophical notion of the nomad is

⁴ It should be noted that this distinction is not as rigid as it may seem. Indeed, Engebriksen (2017, 45) explains that although the nomad is "'a war machine' against the state (classification, fixation and stability), [she] always has elements of the state inherent in her being".

brought in connection with mobile people of flesh and blood it loses some of its explanatory power⁵.

The nomad of Deleuze and Guattari (2010) is an explicitly philosophical and self-referential term that was never meant to represent real-life human beings. Nonetheless, the work of Deleuze and Guattari has been criticised for rooting its image of the nomad in “extremely dubious colonial accounts of nomads in Africa and elsewhere” (Cresswell 2006, 54). Ghambou (2001) has argued that Deleuze and Guattari’s (2010) nomadology has taken the myth of the nomad and made it “prosper under the unsubstantiated terms of transgression, subversion, and mobility” (cited in Finzsch 2020, 30). The nomad, however, is not the only mobile figure that has somehow come to function as an archetype and symbol of a certain “break from earlier, more confined, spaces and times” (Cresswell 2006, 56). For instance, Salazar (2017) also recognises the exile, the pilgrim, the tourist, the pedestrian and the flâneur as key figures that have shaped our imagination of both mobility and modernity.

When studying mobility, this representational dimension is never far away. In fact, David Delaney (1999) has pointed out that “human mobility implicates both physical bodies moving through material landscapes *and* categorical figures moving through representational spaces” (cited in Cresswell 2006, 4). These categorical figures, moreover, are often used as “conceptual shorthand in contemporary scholarly debates, allowing social theorists to relate broad-scale phenomena to the human condition” (Salazar 2017, 9). Barker and Lindquist (2009, 37) similarly argue that such “key figures” allow scholars to comment on a particular historical moment and “the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms – processes of commodification, class formation, globalisation, religious change, and political conflict”. Mobile figures and metaphors often seem to do exactly that: they are employed to capture a certain sense of transformation and change. Indeed, words like mobility, flux, flow, and dynamism have come to stress the “importance of *becoming* at the expense of the already achieved” (Cresswell 2006, 47).

Thus far we have seen how mobile metaphors are used to signify a sense of simmering resistance against the existing, ostensibly static order. Mobile tropes, however, are also often employed to narrate tales of progress, freedom and modernity. What lies at the heart of both of these narratives, is the idea of mobility as a force of

⁵ Miller (1998, 177) has famously asked: “What, if anything, does this project of nomadology have to do with real and ‘actual’ nomads?”

change. Whereas places, neighbourhoods or territories are often invoked as containers of culture and identity, mobile figures and metaphors thus run the risk of being essentialised as containers of change. Too often mobile tropes are used as far-from-perfect place holders for large-scale transformations, such as modernity and globalisation. In fact, as Cresswell (2010, 21) has pointed out, “some of the foundational narratives of modernity have been constructed around the brute fact of moving”.

This tendency to express certain epochal changes through the idiom of mobility, becomes very clear in the case of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, famously coined by the French poet Baudelaire and later popularised as an object of scholarly attention by Walter Benjamin, represents the detached (male) urban stroller who anonymously wanders through the crowds of the city whilst observing the urban spectacle of commodification. Over time, this archetypical mobile figure has come to embody a number of impactful transformations that are associated with the advent of modernity, such as urbanisation, industrialisation, commodification and alienation. In fact, Ferguson (1994, 38) describes how the *flâneur* ultimately came to signal the idea of modernity as a condition of detachment. This element of “[a]esthetic and physic distance” (Ferguson 1994, 38), which is reinforced by the fact that the *flâneur* is by definition a figure in movement, continues to inform notions of urban modernity. This becomes clear, for example, from Sennett’s (1994, 18) insistence that “[n]avigating the geography of modern society requires very little physical effort”. Such a characterisation, however, does not take into account that the advent of urban modernity has also led to an increasing density and vastness of urban landscapes and to the “intensification of human habitats, the concentration of places in space, and the unification of condensed temporal flows” (Sheller and Urry 2000, 742).

Like Deleuze and Guattari’s (2010) figure of the “nomad”, the trope of the *flâneur* has been criticised for its sexism⁶ and eurocentrism. Indeed, Anjaria (2012), Edensor (1998) and Gandhi (2011) have all argued that the *flâneur* espouses an image of urban modernity that does not resonate with the Indian and South Asian context. Gandhi (2011, 210) points out that far from being the locus of impersonal and detached interactions, the Indian street is a place that involves “involuntary intimacy and exchange, a total immersion of seeing and doing in which one could not, like the

⁶ Feminist scholars have pointed out that the “alienated gaze” of the *flâneur* almost always seems to belong to men (Wolff 1985; Massey 1991) and does not speak to the experiences of those groups of people who are turned into objects of surveillance by the urban crowd (Jaffe and De Koning 2016, 44).

Parisian flâneur, forget oneself". Anjaria (2012, 25), moreover, argues that the impossibility of effortless movement – that is, the impossibility of navigating the street with “very little physical effort” – has inspired a measure of “anxiety over whether [Indian cities] are full participants in world modernity”.

The example of the flâneur thus highlights what happens when mobile metaphors and figures are naively employed to capture larger-than-life processes of change and transformation. It shows how easy metaphors of mobility inspire an image of change that is both decontextualised and dehistoricised. Considering that mobility almost always blurs representational and material dimensions, the question thus arises how we can theorise and make sense of urban movements, circulation and flows without reinforcing the sort of metaphors and metanarratives of mobility that have been used to capture and essentialise experiences of change, modernity and transformation that are far from universal.

Mobility and/as Making a Living

Throughout this theoretical section I have explored what it means to move beyond the city as “a sum of spaces and groups” (Sopranzetti 2019, 116) and to break with the forms of sedentarism, residentialism and particularism that have long haunted urban anthropology. As I explained in the introduction, my aim in underlining modes of being in the city that are “non-territorially fixed” is, on the one hand, to draw attention to the incessant circulation of people, vehicles, things, money and images that give shape to metropolitan areas like Dhaka, whilst also denaturalising the intuitive linkages that are forged between people, things, territories and urban habitats. Not in the least, because growing South Asian cities, as Roy (2011a, 225) has pointed out, are still too often “worlded through the icon of the slum”. The result of such forms of “urban orientalism” (Angotti 2012) is that marginalisation, poverty and inequality come to be associated with certain spaces and cities rather than with the larger processes that shape them. In addition, a focus on slums or distinct neighbourhoods also tends to encourage a microcosmic approach to the city that does not necessarily take account of the “fractal geometries of metropolitan habitation” (Roy 2011a, 233). Contrary to the walled cities of the past, the realm of the metropolis cannot be pinned down to one particular territory, but gains shape through “the ‘concrete’ networks of exchange and interaction

that increasingly bind non-contiguous urban spaces together within the differential unity of a global economy” (Cunningham 2005, 13). The question therefore arises how we can attend to this non-contiguous urban reality without losing ourselves in the flows of circulation.

A very similar question has been posed by scholars of globalisation. In fact, Anna Tsing (2000) has warned against the slippery nature of global flows. She argues that in their attempts to move away from “analyses of ‘cultures’ as autonomous, self-generating, and bounded entities” anthropologists have bought into a form of globalism that thrives off the notion of circulation (Tsing 2000, 339). Whereas a focus on circulation importantly shows us “the movement of people, things, ideas, or institutions”, it does not, according to Tsing (2000, 337), “show us how this movement depends on defining tracks and grounds or scales and units of agency”. She attributes this blind spot to the fact that scholars tend to focus on the object in flow rather than the “social conditions that allow or encourage that flow” (Tsing 2000, 337). To put it metaphorically, an obsessive focus on the “water moving” has blinded people to the “channels” that facilitate these flows (Tsing 2000, 337). In a similar fashion, mobility scholars have argued that it is impossible to study mobilities without paying sufficient attention to their moorings (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006).

Within anthropology, attentiveness to such channels, conduits and moorings has resulted in a burgeoning literature on roads and infrastructure (Anand 2015; Appel, Anand and Gupta 2015; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2012; Larkin 2013). This particular strand of scholarship has deliberately and self-reflexively broken with the tenets of “space-culture isomorphism” that initially made it hard for our disciplinary ancestors to “find roads interesting as sites for their emergent anthropology” (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 462). Anthropologists working on infrastructure have shown that roads are by no means non-places – stripped of their anthropological qualities by incessant movement – but have “social significance, cultural dimensions and relations to reveal” (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 462).

Scholarship on infrastructure has also resulted in a careful exploration of the ways in which flows and mobilities are configured, produced and governed by state and non-state actors. The materiality of infrastructure in particular, has opened up new ways of looking at the presences, absences and forebodings of the state. Infrastructural projects often function as “significant symbols of state power, modernity, and progress” (Yazıcı 2013, 518) and can generate a sense of enchantment through

powerful promises of “speed, political integration and economic connectivity” (Harvey and Knox 2012, 521). At the same time, roads also make visible the limitations of the “human power to govern, regulate, and control” (Anand 2015, 310). This unstable but powerful relation between governance and infrastructure has been aptly summarised by Appel, Anand and Gupta (2015, para 4), who contend that “the material and political lives of infrastructure reveal fragile relations between people, things, and the institutions (both public and private) that seek to govern them”.

This focus on the intersections between circulation, channels and configurations of power has also been explored within urban contexts, particularly by scholars who position themselves within the framework of “urban political ecology” (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006). The conceptual approach of urban political ecology places circulation at the heart of its conception of the city, which is understood as an “urban metabolism”. Swyngedouw (2006, 21) explicates that cities are “constituted through dense networks of interwoven socio-ecological processes that are simultaneously human, physical, discursive, cultural, material, and organic”. Urban political ecology thus brings together social and material processes by looking at the ways in which “circulatory conduits of water, foodstuffs, cars, fumes, money, labour, etc., move in and out of the city, transform the city, and produce the urban as a continuously changing socio-ecological landscape” (Swyngedouw 2006, 21). To account for the workings of power and the particular moorings of these socio-natural flows, urban political ecology scholars have paid ample attention to the networked infrastructures that enable these flows (Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver 2014).

This attentiveness to infrastructure and urban flows helpfully opens up our conception of the urban. The fact that infrastructures are inherently networked makes it almost impossible to study them from a sedentarist or residentialist perspective. Hence, the emphasis that urban political ecology puts on the “conceptual and material systems that organise flows of capital, labor, information, and power” (Rademacher 2015, 141) allows for a vision of the urban that is no longer tied to the geographical location of the city itself. As such, there are strong resonances between urban political ecology and Lefebvre’s (2003 [1970]) notion of “planetary urbanisation”. Lefebvre (2003, 1) obliterates sedentarist, residentialist and particularist notions of the city by provocatively positing that “[s]ociety has been completely urbanized”. His analysis contends that older forms of the city are bound to “burst” apart and lose their coherence as agriculture is increasingly absorbed by processes of industrialisation.

Lefebvre, then, understands urbanisation primarily as a tension between implosion and explosion. Together these historical processes have resulted in “the tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means, and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space” (Lefebvre 2003, 14).

This particular vision of the urban as an almost “infinite connectivity between concentrated city zones and their hinterlands” builds on historical-materialist notions of capitalist expansion (Rademacher 2015, 141). In fact, urban political ecology studies tend to work with a definition of power that is derived from Marxist analyses of capital accumulation (Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver 2014, 498). In linking processes of capitalist expansion explicitly to material infrastructures, such studies call to mind Harvey’s (2001) notion of the “spatial fix”. According to Harvey (2001, 25), capitalism has “to fix space (in immovable structures of transport and communication nets, as well as in built environments of factories, roads, houses, water supplies, and other physical infrastructures) in order to overcome space (achieve a liberty of movement through low transport and communication costs)”. Within this particular framework, infrastructure thus represents a direct extension of the logic of capital.

The question can be posed to what extent this close-knitted relationship between power, capital and infrastructure can be assumed to be universal. In fact, Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver (2014) have been critical of the tendency to treat physical infrastructure as a direct reflection of how the state and capital regulate mobilities and flows. Their work, which focuses on African metropolitan contexts, draws attention to configurations of power that are diffuse and relational rather than cemented in material technologies and artefacts (Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver 2014, 510). As a result, access or centrality is not just determined by the distribution of physical infrastructure, but, more crucially, by the distribution of social connections. Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver (2013, 507) therefore advocate for a shift away from technocratic and, ultimately, western-centric understandings of infrastructure to a recognition of what Simone (2004) has described as “people as infrastructure”.

The observation that an examination of physical infrastructures “provides only for a partial understanding of the city and how it operates” (Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver 2014, 506) also rings true in the South Asian context. On the one hand, infrastructural mega-projects in South Asia unmistakably function as compelling

symbolic representations of state power (Anand 2006; Follman 2015; Graham 2018; Siemiatycki 2006). On the other hand, it would be misguided to interpret these infrastructures simply as a reflection, extension or conduit of state power. Particularly, when taking into account that the everyday use of urban infrastructures in many South Asian cities is characterised by a degree of “spatial potentiality” that separates form from function (Gandhi and Hoek 2012, 6). This spatial potentiality becomes manifest in the remarkably diverse ways in which civic spaces, such as parks, markets and roadsides, are used and inhabited (Gandhi and Hoek 2012, 6). Anjaria (2012, 23) evocatively describes this blurring of functions as follows: “On most streets in urban India people are walking, but they are also working, cooking, talking, eating, sleeping, reading or simply hanging out. People brush their teeth, wash their face, chop vegetables and clean dishes”.

It is tempting to frame this spatial potentiality as a token of informality; that is, as the absence, negligence or inadequacy of the state. However, if we take seriously the intervention by Lawhon, Ernstson and Silver (2014), we cannot assume that a lack of legibility automatically equals unruliness or reflects the limits of governance. Instead, we need to first pay attention to how power works. In the specific context of Bangladesh, the workings of power are intimately connected to the distribution of relationships. For instance, in his work on foot-path dwellers in Dhaka, Jackman (2017) shows how important it is for his interlocutors to be able to live “in the shade” or “under the protection” of people more powerful. It is the access to such forms of patronage rather than to physical shelter that allows people to establish an urban presence. Moreover, as we have seen in the introduction, the Bangladeshi party-state branches out in a number of auxiliary organisations, such as student organisations and trade unions, that all pursue their own moneyed interests “in the shade” of the Awami League (Suykens 2018, 432). The fact that these interests do not always align with official policies inevitably opens up a gap between state plans or policies and the implementation thereof.

What becomes clear from the above examples, is that in those contexts where (state) power depends on the successful distribution of relationships rather than resources or services, we cannot simply assume a straightforward connection between the urban metabolic flows that animate and extend the city outward and the physical and institutional infrastructures, channels and moorings that make them (im)possible. Simone’s (2004) concept of “people as infrastructure” offers a solution in this regard,

in the sense that it directs our attention to the modes of engagement, everyday politics, interaction and work that keep the city going. The idea that human infrastructure is at the heart of how the urban metabolism is (re)produced, helpfully shifts our attention away from certain physical moorings, and puts effort, work and activity at the centre of urban mobilities and flows.

In enabling this shift, the work of Simone (2004; 2010) shows a certain resonance with more phenomenological or experiential approaches to movement (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Ingold 2004; Spinney 2006; Vergunst, and Árnason 2012; Vergunst 2017). These studies on journeying, walking and cycling have effectively challenged the imagery of frictionless flows by underscoring how movement is grounded in embodied activity. In what follows I will similarly pay attention to this actuality of movement. However, at the same time, this thesis is not necessarily about the embodied act of rickshaw cycling, pulling or pedalling, but about people's mobile efforts to make a living. In other words, it is about "the motion of work, of how urban work gets done" (Simone 2010, 2).

In the remainder of this thesis I take this convergence between mobility and making a living as my explicit point of departure for making sense of multi-scalar and multi-directional processes of urbanisation. In doing so, I seek to underscore that, contrary to the slippery flows of global capital, mobile efforts to make a living do not need a "spatial fix" (Harvey 2001). They are already grounded in practice, embodied experience, as well as economic and kinship relations. Indeed, for many of the mobile subjects that I introduced throughout this theoretical section, ranging from nomads and hoboes to motorcycle taxi drivers and street vendors, mobility and travel is almost inseparable from making a living. Breaking up this relation between mobility and work or effort paves the way for an approach to urban circulation that overstates flow and "under-analyzes the work that it takes to keep social entities, such as cities, together" (Sopranozetti 2019, 123). The point of convergence between mobility and making a living therefore offers an appropriate starting point for moving beyond a sedentarist, residentialist and particularist notion of the city, without immediately giving in to the slippery idiom of mobility, liquidity and modernity. Yet before I can turn my attention to these empirical realities of work and movement, I need to address the methodological implications of the sedentarist bias that has long shaped urban anthropology.

3. Methods: Unfixing Ethnographic Fieldwork

This dissertation is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2018, divided into two periods of five and six months respectively. Prior to embarking on my PhD research, I lived and spent time in Dhaka twice before; once in 2011 while participating in an internship with a local NGO for four months and again in 2012 when conducting six months of ethnographic fieldwork for my Master's thesis. When looking back now at the one-and-a-half-years I spent doing fieldwork in Dhaka, I am struck by how much of this experience was shaped by implicit assumptions about ethnographic fieldwork that (urban) anthropology has long perpetuated. Indeed, my first fieldwork stint in Dhaka closely resembled the type of neighbourhood study that urban anthropologists and ethnographers grew so fond of over the years. I conducted research in Korail *bosti*, an informal settlement that very much resembled the sort of bounded community that seemed appropriate for anthropological research. The neighbourhood was conveniently located on a peninsula and its community was quite literally closed-off from the rest of the city; indeed, Korail was separated by a wall from the adjacent road and residential neighbourhood. This strong sense of social-spatial enclosure often made me feel like I was literally stepping in- and out of "my field". This element of discreteness was further reinforced by a clearly delineated research topic (people's health experiences) and a methodological approach that I would now characterise as extremely particularistic. Never once did it occur to me that it might be relevant to visit events, places and/or talk to people outside of Korail.

My PhD fieldwork could not have been more different from the neighbourhood study I conducted in Korail and was inherently fragmented and unfixed. Instead of focusing on one specific *locale*, I ended up exploring many different areas and edges of Dhaka in search of rickshaw garages and workshops. The majority of my fieldwork consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews and informal group conversations at these rickshaw garages, but I also kept a diary of the rickshaw trips I took, sat down with local ward commissioners and labour unionists, met with architects and policy makers, visited events such as the "Dhaka Smart City Week", read up on local transport policies and undertook three short field trips to a rural village in Shibchar. Whereas during my Master's research I had diligently worked towards narrowing down my research topic, during my PhD fieldwork I often felt like my research was spiralling out of control. The rickshaw mobilities that I tried to understand and "pin down" seemed

to intersect with so many different currents of “informal urbanisation” (Roy 2009) that it felt like I was studying a fractal pattern rather than a certain spatial or occupational community. Indeed, I often struggled to explicate my methodological choices to myself. Why exactly had I decided to schedule an interview with an architect to talk about the history of urban development in Old Dhaka? And why did I spend a whole morning reading up on the Padma Bridge mega-project after observing some of the drastic changes it brought about in the Shibchar countryside? Intuitively I felt that all these different aspects were relevant to my research, but I could not quite specify how. The distinct feeling that stayed with me throughout my fieldwork, was that there was a notable discrepancy between what I was doing and what “ethnographic research” was supposed to be like.

It was only when preparing a lecture on urban ethnographic research methods for undergraduate students almost a year after I had returned from fieldwork, that I realised how common my experience was. When reading up on the subject I saw the same sense of inadequacy and ambiguity that had coloured my own fieldwork experience reflected in the methodological musings of other urban anthropologists. More importantly, I began to understand where this feeling came from. The following excerpt from Gupta and Ferguson (1997b, 4) is insightful in this regard and worth citing in its entirety:

On the one hand, anthropology appears determined to give up its old ideas of territorially fixed communities and stable, localized cultures, and to apprehend an interconnected world in which people, objects, and ideas are rapidly shifting and refuse to stay in place. At the same time, though, in a defensive response to challenges to its ‘turf’ from other disciplines, anthropology has come to lean more heavily than ever on a methodological commitment to spend long periods in one localized setting. What are we to do with a discipline that loudly rejects received ideas of ‘the local’, even while ever more firmly insisting on a method that takes it for granted?

The dilemma or schism that Gupta and Ferguson (1997b) outline, lies at the heart of how urban anthropology has evolved over the decades. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the discipline has long struggled to move beyond the confines of the neighbourhood study and give shape methodologically to the multi-scalar dimensions of urban life. In his monograph on the design of Brasília, Holston (1989) comments explicitly on this methodological struggle. He describes how difficult it was for him to

identify appropriate units of analysis, considering that his research project ultimately tried to make sense of the utopian underpinnings of modernist urban planning. Holston (1989, 10) argues that this problem was further compounded “by the conventional framing of ethnographic studies in units that are spatially and temporarily isolated”. The diffuse nature of his own research topic, however, resulted in a more fragmented field of analysis that included discourses, statements, texts, plans, models and drawings.

This mismatch between methodological conventions and analytical objectives also shaped my own research experience and often left me with the nagging sense that a proper anthropological research would consist of “deep hanging out” at one particular rickshaw garage and not, as I was doing, visiting a plethora of different rickshaw garages throughout the city and its outskirts. Ferguson’s (1999) reflections on his fieldwork in a Copperbelt mining town helped me to make sense of my own discomfort. Ferguson (1999, 18) contrasted his “apartment-dwelling days” in a mine-run neighbourhood with a previous fieldwork stint in Lesotho and reflected that the former “did little to produce the sense of membership in a community that I had acquired in my yearlong stay in a village in my previous research in Lesotho”. He did not merely attribute this difference to the contrast between rural and urban areas, but to the different analytical aims that set both studies apart. Ferguson (1999, 21) elaborated that his “analytic object here is neither a spatial community (the town of Kitwe) nor an occupational category (the lives of mineworkers), but a mode of conceptualising, narrating, and experiencing socioeconomic change and its encounter with a confounding process of economic decline”.

Throughout my fieldwork I similarly had to come to terms with the fact that my research project was not so much about the lives of rickshaw drivers as about the wider processes of informal urbanisation they found themselves caught up in. I realised that I ultimately wanted to make sense of the dynamics of urban inequality and access in growing metropolitan areas. The fact that I explicitly took mobility rather than spatiality as a point of departure for doing so, moreover, required me to frequently “shift between different scales” (Sopranzetti 2019, 118). In what follows, I will outline how the different methods I used throughout my research intersected with the different scalar dimensions of urbanisation.

Traffic and Rickshaw Mobilities

The research proposal that I had prepared before going on fieldwork focused primarily on the embodied and experiential dimension of traffic congestion and movement. My initial plan had been to further unpack the urban reality of traffic congestion from the perspective of cycle-rickshaw drivers. Consequently, one of the methods that I relied on during the first months of my research, was keeping a “rickshaw diary” of all the trips I made as a passenger. I took notes of a hundred rickshaw journeys, focusing on sensory input, the ways in which drivers navigated traffic and decided upon their routes, interactions with other road users and negotiations over the price. These diary entries provided me with a better sense of how rickshaw journeys unfold and opened my eyes to the degree of mutual consultation that was involved in getting from one point to another. I also occasionally asked drivers to attach my GoPro camera to their steering handle. Although I did not systematically analyse this GoPro footage, the video material helped me to understand how rickshaw mobilities differed across areas and neighbourhoods depending on various aspects, such as road quality, the intensity of congestion, geographical location (central or peripheral), the number of available passengers, the extent of socio-economic segregation and the prevalence of VIP roads.

As my research progressed, the sensory aspect of rickshaw movement somewhat faded to the background; mostly because I struggled to give shape methodologically to this focus. It seemed difficult, if not impossible, to bridge the inevitable gap between my own sensory experience as a passenger and the way in which rickshaw drivers experienced Dhaka traffic, considering that they were often quite literally putting their health and safety on the line to work a job that was both physically demanding and hazardous. During interviews, I tried to further probe rickshaw drivers about this sensory and experiential dimension of navigating traffic. They were usually quick to affirm that it was indeed a tiresome, painful and frustrating experience, but – at the same time – often did not elaborate much. Instead, they seemed much more interested in discussing the growing number of rickshaw restrictions and their problems with the traffic police. Over time, I came to realise that whereas for me traffic congestion was one of the most frustrating and exhausting aspects of everyday life in Dhaka, for most rickshaw drivers it was just one of the many different problems they faced in their lives. Indeed, for them the prospect of eventually losing their strength and health due to the arduous nature of the work, seemed to be more

debilitating than traffic jam itself. Throughout this thesis I therefore predominantly analyse the embodied dimension of navigating traffic in relation to wider economic anxieties and struggles.

The Rickshaw Garage

The main “field nodes” of my research were “rickshaw garages”. Over the course of my fieldwork period, I visited approximately seventy-five of these garages, together with my local research assistant and interpreter Yasin. On the one hand, we engaged in informal (group) discussions with rickshaw drivers, owners and makers to get an overview of the industry as a whole and the semi-legal space in which it operates. On the other hand, we conducted semi-structured interviews with individual rickshaw drivers that revolved around their experiences in traffic, work histories and reasons to move to the city. Since I first started doing ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka for my Master’s thesis, I have taken regular and intensive language classes in Bengali or *Bangla*. I continued to do so throughout my PhD fieldwork and towards the end of my research I was comfortable doing most of the interviewing by myself. Even in this later stage, however, I relied on Yasin’s invaluable support for understanding the nuances of people’s answers and deciphering their regional accents. Being accompanied by a male research assistant, moreover, helped legitimise my presence in what was otherwise a predominantly male space. Initially, I frequently brought my tape recorder along to record interviews, but due to the crowded and noisy setting of the rickshaw garage audio recordings were not always useful. We therefore grew into the habit of sitting down after each interview or garage visit to write down as much of the conversations as we could, based on the keywords and quotes I had jotted down.

I am not the first researcher to single out the rickshaw garage as an important research site (see Hoque et al. 2009; Hasan 2013; Karim and Salam 2019) and there are different reasons for doing so. First, the rickshaw garage offers a relatively secluded space, away from the curious bystanders that would inevitably gather whenever I spoke with rickshaw drivers on the street. Secondly, it is a common place for rickshaw drivers to take a nap, hang out, have their meal or play cards after finishing their shift. Especially in the (late) afternoon, it would be busy with rickshaw drivers returning for lunch and either ending or starting their shift. Throughout our research, Yasin and I

discovered that if we turned up at a garage after lunch, we would usually have no difficulty finding one or more of the men wanting to sit down with us. In addition, we also conducted (short) interviews with rickshaw owners, garage managers¹ or rickshaws mechanics. Usually, at least one of these people would be present at the garage to talk with us about issues such as licensing, the overall organisation of the rickshaw industry and urban development in the area. Most of the garages we visited provided some sort of provisional, free-of-cost accommodation for drivers as well. Often there would be an attic over the storage space where rickshaw drivers could sleep, although in some garages, the men simply slept on one of the flat-backed rickshaw carts or “vans” that were stored in the same space. In certain parts of Dhaka, notably the old town, it was more common for rickshaw drivers to stay at a nearby informal hostel or so-called “mess”. These crowded sleeping spaces were popular among all sorts of rural-urban labourers, including rickshaw drivers, van-drivers, porters and day-labourers. In areas of Dhaka where this type of mess accommodation was common, we would alternate between visiting rickshaw garages and mess spaces.



Figure 3: A rickshaw garage in Rayerbazar with an elevated bamboo platform functioning as a sleeping space.

¹ Rickshaw owners sometimes, but not always, hire a garage manager to keep track of the rickshaw rent and administration.

It is important to note that not all rickshaw drivers sleep and stay at the rickshaw garage or in group accommodation. Recently, the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) conducted a survey among 200 rickshaw pullers and found that 45 percent of them rented a room in the city with their family (Karim and Salam 2019, 39). This form of urban residence, often in one of Dhaka's informal settlements, however, does not necessarily equal permanent settlement. Indeed, throughout my research I spoke to several rickshaw pullers who had sent their wives and families back to the countryside amidst increasing housing costs and living expenditures. The BILS study, moreover, detailed that 71 percent of the rickshaw pullers questioned still had their permanent home in the countryside (Karim and Salam 2019, 38). Throughout my research I found these rural-urban linkages to be extremely common, with many rickshaw drivers reporting that they travelled back to their villages frequently to visit their families or engage in agricultural labour. Similarly, the BILS found that 80 percent of the people interviewed 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 and Salam 2019, 46). Even long-time rickshaw drivers who had raised their families in Dhaka, however, spent time and hung out at the rickshaw garage, which was usually located in the same informal- or peripheral neighbourhood as where they lived. Some of these more settled rickshaw drivers possessed their own rickshaw, but the vast majority of rickshaw pullers did not. Begum and Sen (2005) found that only 13 percent of the rickshaw drivers they surveyed owned their own vehicle². The BILS reported an even lower percentage of rickshaw ownership and detailed that 96 percent of their informants rented their vehicle (Karim and Salam 2019, 51). All of this goes to show that the rickshaw garage plays a vital role within the larger rickshaw sector and the lives of rickshaw drivers.

The various rickshaw garages that I visited together with Yasin were located all across Dhaka city and its fringes. Initially, we started our research in Old Dhaka, which long served as the heart of the city's rickshaw industry. Till this day, the area is home to numerous rickshaw (work)shops, specialised in rickshaw art, assembling and painting rickshaws and the production of individual vehicle parts. Yasin lived and worked in Old Dhaka as well, which provided us with an easy entry point into the research. Gradually, however, our research trips started to branch out to other areas

² This study was based on a sample of 402 current rickshaw pullers and 98 former rickshaw drivers.

of the city. Although Old Dhaka still had its share of rickshaw garages, we quickly discovered that the lack of empty land had pushed most of the industry towards the peripheral belt of the city. We therefore started visiting garages in these fringe areas of Dhaka, including Keraniganj, Kamrangirchar and Shonir Akhra, and came to realise that experiences of mobility, traffic, labour and urbanisation differed significantly from what we found in Old Dhaka. In order to account for this variety we ended up dividing our research activities over three areas: 1) the historic and densely populated area of Old Dhaka, which is characterised by narrow alleys, bazars, mixed land-use and severe traffic congestion, 2) the posh and purposively planned residential neighbourhoods of Dhaka's diplomatic zone, and 3) the unplanned, peripheral edges of the city, which included neighbourhoods that had either recently become part of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) or would be annexed in the future. The area where I lived myself, Rayerbazar, also fell into this third category and – in many ways – helped me apprehend how the city and its peripheries were transforming. I lived in one of the newly built flats that were drastically changing the look and feel of the area, in addition to pushing up the land- and housing prices. From my balcony I could still spot numerous rickshaw garages, but throughout my fieldwork period I witnessed many of them relocate to the outer edges of the neighbourhood.

In the end, each of these areas brought something unique to this research. Rickshaw mobilities in Old Dhaka were very much shaped by congestion and the hustle-bustle of commerce and trade that was prompted by the area's many footpath markets and bazars. The peripheral areas, on the other hand, were characterised by poor infrastructural conditions and the fact that electric or battery-run rickshaws were tolerated/condoned by the local traffic police. The diplomatic zone, which consisted of three upper-class residential neighbourhoods – Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara, was the area with the widest roads, smoothest asphalt and highest number of VIP roads and rickshaws restrictions. In recent years the security in the area had been tightened, with far-reaching consequences for the local rickshaw system. The trigger for this trend towards securitisation was the murder of an Italian national in September 2015, which was followed by a deadly terrorist attack at the so-called “Holey Artisan Bakery” café six months later³. Much of this unfolded during my fieldwork period and I witnessed

³ On the 28th of September 2015 an Italian national by the name of Cesare Tavella, a 50-year-old NGO worker for ICCO, was shot and killed in Gulshan by three gunmen on a motorcycle during his afternoon jog. The murder was later claimed by the Islamic State (IS). A few months later, on the 2nd of July 2016, gunmen stormed the “Holey Artisan Bakery” café; a cosmopolitan eating establishment in Gulshan. After a 10-hour siege, Bangladeshi special forces freed the building, but

many of these changes, which also affected the area where my language school was located, from up close. Although there were virtually no rickshaw garages in the diplomatic zone itself, Yasin and I paid frequent visits to the nearest informal settlement: Korail *bosti* – the same place where I had conducted research for my Master’s thesis. What I gained from focusing on a variety of areas this time, rather than one specific locale, is that it helped me understand how rickshaw mobilities and labour trajectories intersected with wider trends of urban development and change.



Figure 4: Map of Dhaka city, highlighting the main fieldwork areas of this research. Major slum locations are indicated by brown shadings. Map source: OpenStreetMap contributors; slum locations taken from Gruebner et al. (2014); map tiles by Stamen Design.

by that time already 20 hostages, predominantly of foreign nationality, had been killed. This attack was also claimed by IS.

Fieldtrips to the Countryside

In the course of my fieldwork I undertook three short field trips to the countryside of Madaripur of 1-3 days each. In retrospect, my research would probably have benefitted from a more extended period of fieldwork in the Bangladeshi countryside, but I struggled to arrange the logistics and carve out sufficient time for such an undertaking. In the end, I paid three consecutive visits to the village where Yasin's family lived, which was located 50 km south of Dhaka in the *upazila* or sub-district of Shibchar. The area was heavily affected by river bank erosion and in between the different visits, part of the village collapsed into the river. The prevalence of river erosion and land loss made that quite a few of the local men had tried their luck as rickshaw pullers in Dhaka at least once in their lives. During our field excursions we interviewed men who had returned to the countryside for various reasons: to retire, to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha⁴, to spend time with their families or to engage in cropping and farming. Conducting these interviews was useful but somewhat challenging due to the fact that my presence in the village would prompt a constant trail of curious bystanders.

Nonetheless, my visits to Shibchar, although short in nature, provided me with a number of important insights. They helped me to appreciate the variety of reasons that prompted rickshaw drivers to return to the countryside and to get a better sense of the type of seasonal, agricultural labour they engaged in back home. These visits also opened my eyes to the devastating impact of river bank erosion and helped me understand how rural areas like Shibchar were caught up in wider processes of urbanisation and globalisation. For instance, I was struck by the extent to which local developments were overshadowed by the construction of the nearby Padma bridge and highway, which was supposed to bring jobs to the area and facilitate an easy and hassle-free commute into Dhaka city. This prestigious mega-project coincided with different large-scale construction works in the area and meant that many people had to resettle and/or sell (parts of) their land. Everyday life in Shibchar, however, was not only profoundly shaped by processes of urbanisation but also by international migration. Many of the homesteads or houses I visited had empty rooms that belonged to relatives that had either left to Dhaka or to the Gulf states as labour migrants. If anything, my short stay in what was ultimately a tiny village opened my eyes to the

⁴ Eid-ul-Azha ('Feast of the Sacrifice') is one of the two official Islamic holidays celebrated worldwide each year.

forms of “rural cosmopolitanism” (Gardner and Osella 2003; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003) that were engendered by the web of rural-urban/local-global connections that branched out from this place.



Figure 5: The countryside near Shibchar.

I look back on my trips to Shibchar as a pilot study that could potentially be further extended in the future. One of the limitations of my current research is that it focuses almost exclusively on men and their work. Extended research in rural areas could help to shed light on the ways in which the rural-urban comings and goings and labour projects of rickshaw drivers are embedded in wider kin networks and “joint portfolios” of farming, business and migration (Narayan et al. 2009, 285). Gaibazzi (2015), moreover, has rightly pointed out that migration trajectories are often enabled by certain “people staying put”. This is no different for rural-urban mobilities of rickshaw pullers and women tend to play an important role in this. Although there are of course women who end up pursuing urban labour projects of their own, be it in the garment industry or as housemaids, cooks or street vendors⁵, there are also many wives of

⁵ Indeed, during my Master’s research in Korail *bosti* I frequently spoke to women who were married to rickshaw drivers.

rickshaw drivers who stay put or have been sent back home amidst increasing housing costs. The existing literature (see Akram and Karim 2004; Rashid 2013; Schulz 2013) on the gendered expectations, norms and risks that rural women have to navigate when their husbands engage in labour elsewhere – whether in Dhaka, the Gulf States or other rural areas – suggests that the mobile labour trajectories of men have profound effects on the lives and movements of women as well. When reading this thesis it is therefore important to bear in mind that it makes sense of the family-providing and income-generating activities of rickshaw drivers from *their* perspective only and is not necessarily based on the experiences of the wives and relatives who stay behind and rely on the income that is wired back to the countryside.

Politics, Policies and Discourses

The last scale or dimension of my research relates to the politics and policies that affect rickshaw drivers. The urban presence of the rickshaw has long been a contested one. This is reflected in both transport policies and the ways in which urban politics play out. What's more, rickshaws are often made part of wider narratives on urban modernity and change (see Rahman, D'Este and Bunker 2009; Samanta and Roy 2013; Steele 2013) and their ostensible "backwardness" has been exploited to legitimise rickshaw restrictions. In order to get a sense of these wider narratives on urban development and modernity in Dhaka, I carried out 27 semi-structured interviews with local ward councillors, transport experts, architects, labour unionists and transport activists, in addition to familiarising myself with relevant policy documents on transport and urban planning in Dhaka. The idea to interview ward commissioners originated after Yasin and I accidentally ran into a local councillor near a rickshaw garage in Kamrangirchar. The commissioner was overseeing the construction of a new road and proudly shared his ambitions for the area with us. We scheduled a follow-up interview, which turned out to be very insightful, and eventually ended up conducting another twenty-or-so interviews with ward commissioners all over Dhaka.

Dhaka City Corporation has a total of 129 wards that are divided over Dhaka North City Corporation (54) and Dhaka South City Corporation (75), which both have their own mayor and administration. As elected officials, ward commissioners are responsible for a number of municipal duties, such as overseeing infrastructural

development, mosquito control, water- and electricity supply, waste management and arbitrating local disputes. Although their activities and responsibilities were often restricted to the neighbourhood level, the ward commissioners I spoke to often had a keen sense of what was going on in terms of urban development in Dhaka. Whereas urban plans and transportation policies would offer blueprints for change, ward councillors had a grasp of the kind of change that was actually being negotiated on the ground. They were well-informed about the plans and visions of both mayors and, considering that the overwhelming majority of them belonged to the ruling party⁶, they were keen to explicate the Awami League development agenda.

My collaboration with the local NGO “Work for Better Bangladesh” (WBB) offered me a second window into the dynamics of urban change in Dhaka. WBB is involved in different strands of urban activism and has done a lot of advocacy work on non-motorised transport. When the first VIP roads and rickshaw bans were introduced in Dhaka in 2005, WBB mobilised a movement to push back against these restrictions and, over the years, they have fought repeatedly against the anti-rickshaw bias in policies and media coverage. During my fieldwork I lived in one of the WBB guest apartments and I was allowed to use their office space as well. All of this provided me with a sense of community and I gladly tagged along to relevant conferences and activities, such as the “car-free day” and “smart city week”, which helped me to get in touch with urban planners and architects. WBB has a broad network of planners, transport experts, environmental activists, architects and academics, and throughout my fieldwork I had informal chats with many of these people. In the end, all these different contacts, interviews and informal conversations provided me with a much broader understanding of the processes, politics, policies and discourses that shape urban development and discourses of modernity in Dhaka.

Positionality and Power Dynamics

The different research interactions I had in traffic, at the rickshaw garage and with politicians were not only shaped by the methodological choices outlined above, but

⁶ According to reporting by *New Age Bangladesh* the most recent ward elections “were marred by low turnout and allegations of widespread rigging and muscle flexing by ruling Awami League in and around the polling centres” (“Dhaka south city ward 31 polls results suspended”, February 4, 2020, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/98581/dhaka-south-city-ward-31-polls-results-suspended>).

also by my own positionality as a researcher. That is, by my own position within a wider “grid of power relations” (Sultana 2007, 376). Naturally, these structured positions, including gender, race and class, only offer a partial explanation of the ways in which the identity of a researcher influences method, interpretation and knowledge production. Moser (2008) has rightly pointed out that personality is perhaps as much of a factor as positionality in determining these dynamics. Personally, I often felt that being extraverted and confrontation avoidant were aspects of my identity that played a much bigger role in shaping research relations than, for instance, my gender. Nonetheless, I think that it is of vital importance to reflect on the ways in which we, as researchers, find ourselves caught up in wider power dynamics. Not to somehow “measure” the effect of our identity against the “outcome” of our research, which seems to be a form of positivism in disguise, but to acknowledge that our research practices are part of a wider tangle of hierarchies that we might end up inadvertently perpetuating. In what follows I will respectively pay attention to two important structural dimensions of my fieldwork, namely the gendered organisation of urban space in Dhaka and the trend towards NGOisation that has significantly shaped research fields and practices in Bangladesh.

Gender and Conducting Fieldwork “Outside”

The aspect of my identity that perhaps stands out the most is the fact that, as a woman, I conducted research among an occupational group that almost exclusively consisted of men. Although significant, I do not want to essentialise such gender differences, which is what happens when – in positionality sections – gender is simply treated as either a catalyst or an obstacle for pursuing certain research topics. The problem with such simplified or static descriptions of gender relations is that they can easily feed into culturalist or orientalist narratives about the places where we conduct our fieldwork. Moreover, in the case of my own research, I found it nearly impossible to disentangle gender from the various ways in which race and class relations shaped my interactions with rickshaw drivers. Indeed, my experiences resonate with the way in which Heron (2007) has described the subjectivities and experiences of female, Canadian development workers. She explains how it was almost impossible for her and her research participants “to extricate gender from whiteness” (Heron 2007, 94). Moreover, even when they did make this distinction, it was apparent that their “stories

about being women in sub-Saharan Africa [were] really about being white women” (Heron 2007, 94). This is true for my own research context as well and it therefore feels misleading to reflect on gender as a discrete aspect of my identity that can somehow be separated from structures of whiteness. However, there is one gendered aspect of my research that I would like to highlight here, namely the fact that the experience of urban spaces in Dhaka has very much been shaped by structures of gender. This, I feel, is relevant not only because I myself had to navigate this gendered urban landscape, but also because rickshaw drivers have long played an important role in enabling women to do so.

The fact that urban space in Dhaka is structured according to a distinctly gendered logic will escape no-one who traverses the capital city of Bangladesh, considering that men are significantly overrepresented on the streets. One of the reasons for this is the spatial-social distinction between *ghore* (“home”) and *bhaire* (“outside”). Whereas the first denotes a space of kin, the latter is characterised by the intermingling of “different kinds of people” and considered a potentially threatening space to women. To ward off unwanted looks and attention, most women practice some form of *purdah* when going out of the house. *Purdah* literally means curtain and refers to a set of religious and cultural South Asian practices aimed at withdrawing the female body from public view (Kabeer 2000; Mandelbaum 1988; Papanek 1973; Schulz 2013). Although observing *purdah* often includes practices of veiling, it can also refer to women simply lowering their eyes or deploying “inner modesty”. Indeed, Kabeer (2000, 91) has shown that many female garment workers adhered to the idea of “the *purdah* of the mind”; that is, the “view that by her modest deportment, lowered eyes, sombre mien and covered head, ‘every woman carried her *purdah* with her’”. These different expressions of *purdah* speak to the variety of ways in which Bangladeshi women navigate the gendered urban landscape of Dhaka.

Throughout my research I learnt to do the same, although not necessarily out of a sense of piety or modesty. Rather, I drew and elaborated upon a repertoire of tactics that had developed over the years, long before I made my way to Bangladesh, as I learnt to cope with forms of street-level sexism at home. In the specific context of Dhaka, I dealt with unwanted looks, remarks and interactions in a variety of ways. I wore a *salwar kameez* or other loose garments when leaving the house. I sought out the company of other women on the bus. I avoided eye contact when walking the streets by myself. And whenever I was waiting for someone at a busy bus station or market for

an extended period of time, I looked for a tea stand or little shop where I could bide my time and have a chat with the owner. Although I learnt how to confidently navigate Dhaka by myself, I never quite developed the savvy and fiery attitude that some of my female Bangladeshi friends displayed. “You have to save your anger for the road,” one of them advised me after I shared my frustration about having been approached and followed by the same guy on the bus for two days in a row. However, what often bothered me about such interactions was their ambiguity; I could never quite tell – at least not immediately – whether men were just extremely eager to talk with me because I stood out as a White foreigner, or whether their behaviour bordered on harassment. This again speaks to the difficulties of extricating gender from whiteness (Heron 2007, 94). Indeed, the fact that I was a White *bidesi* (foreigner) not only solicited a form of attention and curiosity that was only partly prompted by my gender, but also mitigated some of the risks that other women faced. For, regardless of where I went, there were always people who saw it as their duty to look out for me and offer me assistance.

Whereas race and nationality were important factors that impinged on my own ability to navigate gendered spatial norms, the movements of Bangladeshi women are also significantly shaped by dimensions of class, age and marital status. For instance, the fact that many female garment workers subscribe to the idea of observing “*purdah* of the mind” (Kabeer 2000, 91) cannot be disconnected from their economic and class positions. Their class background not only helps to explain their motivations for leaving the home and entering the labour market (Kabeer 2000, 100), but also impacts the way in which they navigate Dhaka’s urban landscape. In fact, garment workers are well known for jointly walking to work each morning to save transportation costs. By contrast, rickshaw transport has long been the preferred mode of transport for middle-class women. In fact, rickshaw drivers have traditionally played an important role in allowing middle-class women to navigate “outside spaces” in relative safety, seclusion and privacy (Hasan 2013; Huq-Hussain and Habiba 2013). Huq-Hussain and Habiba (2013, 85) describe how after the introduction of rickshaws in 1944, women in Dhaka “used this vehicle mainly for occasional social visits but under strict *purdah*”. They go on to describe that the “rickshaw was wrapped with a long cloth so that the passenger could not be seen by those outside” and that “the rickshaw pullers were also well trusted” (Huq-Hussain and Habiba 2013, 85-86). Although rickshaws are no longer sealed off by a curtain to accommodate the privacy of female passengers, it is still

considered to be a relatively safe and comfortable mode of door-to-door transport for middle-class women. The rickshaw provides an intermediate space between “home” and “outside” and allows women to partially retreat from the unwanted looks and remarks that they would have to navigate when walking or taking the bus.

Throughout my research I also came to experience the rickshaw garage as an in-between space that blurred the boundaries between “home” and “outside”. Whereas on the street I would feel a certain level of anxiety and often attracted a crowd of people, this was not the case for the rickshaw garage. Most garages were half-open and dimly lit spaces that were not very visible from the street. Inside, rickshaw pullers and mechanics were calmly going about their business and casually dropped in and out of our conversation. Although this was unmistakably a “male space”, I was not confronted with the same provocative performance of masculinity that often made me feel uncomfortable on the streets. The conversations I had at the garage resembled the amiable chats I had with rickshaw drivers in traffic and the fact that I was a woman often seemed to matter less than the fact that I was a White foreigner. Indeed, the extent to which this second aspect of my identity opened doors to different spaces and institutions cannot be understated and speaks to the uncomfortable structures of White privilege that are still very much in place in many post-colonial contexts.

Before moving on to address these wider power dynamics, let me conclude this discussion on gender by underlining that gender relations, in fieldwork as in the rest of our lives, gain shape and are performed differently across different contexts. It is noteworthy that I was made most aware of my gender, not during my visits to different rickshaw garages, but during my fieldtrips to the countryside. While visiting the countryside of Shibchar I was constantly reminded by other women how unusual it was that I had travelled to Bangladesh all by myself and I was questioned incessantly about whether I was married and had children. In many ways, I had less in common with some of these women than with the rickshaw drivers who, like me, were used to leading relatively mobile lives. At the same time, I did feel that wider societal norms would make extensive “hanging out” at rickshaw garages somewhat inappropriate. Similarly, it had been a conscious decision to work with a male research assistant and Yasin’s company unmistakably helped to legitimise my presence in these spaces. Not just because he was a man, but also because his role as a research assistant underscored the fact that I was there in the capacity of a researcher. The fact that rickshaw drivers and slum dwellers are often disproportionately targeted by NGO and

academic research made that they understood my role as a researcher quite well. However, as we will see in the next section, this NGOised research setting came with its own problematic power dynamics.

NGOisation of Research Relations

During a visit to a rickshaw garage in Lalbagh⁷ I was made painfully aware of the extent to which rickshaw drivers and other slum dwellers had been familiarised with academic research. It was the first time that Yasin and I paid a visit to this particular area of Dhaka and we found many of the rickshaw drivers in considerable consternation. The police *thana* had just withdrawn their tacit support for the unofficial license system that sanctioned the presence of electric rickshaws in the area and many local rickshaw *wallas* were suddenly no longer able to operate a battery-run rickshaw. We were chatting with a rickshaw *malik* and a couple of local rickshaw pullers, when a somewhat older rickshaw driver interjected our conversation to express his dismay at the fact that many different researchers had come to visit their area. “Different people come here to get information, but for us everything stays the same”, he remarked angrily. Although it was not uncommon for rickshaw drivers to challenge me on the purpose and usefulness of my research, the bitterness of the man took me by surprise. When confronted with questions about the benefits of my research, I usually explained that I was a student writing a book on the rickshaw industry and urban development in Dhaka city and that I hoped to share some of my insights with relevant local parties. Although many of my interlocuters had probably hoped for a more tangible output, this explanation was always accepted as satisfactory and the majority of my interviewees seemed eager for the opportunity to discuss some of the injustices they faced on a daily basis. The agitated older driver we met in Lalbagh, however, merely kept reiterating that our research would make no difference to them.

This unpleasant encounter took me back to a conversation I had with a woman in Korail slum, when I was conducting fieldwork for my Master’s degree. Together with my interpreter I had been chatting with a garment worker⁸, who complained about the frequent visits she used to receive from NGO researchers in the past. She lamented that these researchers would regularly enter her house and that she even had to answer

⁷ Informal group discussion, Lalbagh, August 28, 2017.

⁸ Semi-structured interview, Korail, November 12, 2012.

questions when she was feeling sick. During her research in another slum area of Dhaka, Rashid (2007b) similarly observed that many of her interlocuters were used to finding themselves at the receiving end of a variety of research projects. She recalls an incident that reflects some of the expectations she encountered among her informants:

Early on in the fieldwork, a woman with whom I was walking said, “Apa [sister], we see you wandering about all the time, but where is your tape recorder, and why don’t you ask some questions about what we eat? Our household size . . . ? Where is your list of questions?” (Rashid 2007b, 373-374).

The fact that the rural and urban poor in Bangladesh are well accustomed to researchers and NGO fieldworkers paying impromptu home visits and asking questions about a wide variety of topics, ranging from demographic characteristics to reproductive health, should be interpreted as part of the wider post-colonial trend towards NGOisation that I described in the introduction. The significant growth of the NGO-sector in post-independent Bangladesh has had a considerable impact on the wider political context in which social science research takes place. On the one hand, NGOisation has led to a situation wherein NGOs and international donors such as the World Bank and IMF have increasingly taken over certain functions of the state (Hussain 2014). On the other hand, NGOisation has coincided with the depoliticisation of social resistance, as the focus of local NGOs was gradually shifted away from fostering community activism and social mobilisation towards service delivery programs (Rahman 2006, 454). Consequently, the NGO sector in Bangladesh is increasingly functioning as an instrument of normalising power and “the fortune and future of the Bangladeshi elite has become intricately tied up with development aid and planning” (Bhuiyan, Faraizi and McAllister 2004, 194). It is also important to note that the NGO sector in Bangladesh, which continues to rely on foreign funding and neo-colonial structures of development, has long been tied to a “system in which advantage and disadvantage were patterned by race” (White 2002, 409).

This larger trend towards NGOisation has not only affected modes of social resistance in Bangladesh, but has also directly impacted social science research. For instance, it can be tempting for university professors to take up additional work as an NGO consultant, considering that the salaries at (public) universities are often just enough to cover the costs of minimal living standards in Dhaka (Karim 2001, 97). NGO work, on the other hand, comes with considerable privileges, such as access to better

housing, healthcare, private schooling for children, and cars (Karim 2001, 97). NGOs are also an important job provider for college graduates, who are often employed as fieldworkers in impoverished areas (Karim 2001, 96). The fact that NGOs are among the most important producers of social science research in Bangladesh has exposed poor people to a distinct set of research practices. Moreover, it has also resulted in a type of research dynamic that is very much classed, as poor and working-class people are expected to volunteer their time and information to educated, middle-class researchers who are ostensibly in the business of helping them. Such expectations of wilful compliance are arguably even stronger when the researcher in question is a White foreigner.

Throughout my different fieldwork experiences in Dhaka, I grew increasingly uncomfortable about the ease with which researchers, including myself, obtained access to the lives and homes of poor people. Part of this discomfort stemmed from knowing that my research benefitted significantly from the authority of my class, nation, colour and education, which somehow “made it ‘natural’ that I should be the analyst of other people’s lives” (White 2002, 409). These experiences also led me to see ethnographic fieldwork in a different light. Specifically, it made me aware of the burden that ethnographic research often imposes upon participants, whom we are expected to befriend and spend lots of time with. The extent to which certain groups are expected to make themselves available and accessible to research are inevitably shaped by power dynamics, as is evident from the fact that anthropology has long been in the business of studying down rather than up. Moreover, whereas it is more or less accepted that we respect the agendas, time and privacy of the professionals and “experts” we interview, marginalised people are often expected to happily share their lives and sorrows with us to enrich our ethnographies. Throughout my fieldwork I have tried to be sensitive of these unbalances. During interviews I made sure to regularly check whether my conversation partner was busy or had to return to work. Moreover, instead of barraging people with a list of questions, I tried to stay open to what people themselves wanted to disclose. Indeed, I found that many rickshaw drivers were eager to share some of their deep-felt frustrations about the injustices they faced.

Although I often felt trapped in existing power dynamics and the developmentalist context that inevitably shaped my research, I never grew convinced that researchers would do better “to withdraw completely from research that might place them in territory to which they have no social claim, or that might put in question

their credentials for social representation” (Kobayashi 1994, 74). In fact, I believe that withdrawal can easily amount to silencing, considering that many people lack the time, resources or platforms to make their grievances known to a larger audience. This became clear to me when visiting a number of garages in Korail slum, after a new set of rickshaw restrictions had been implemented in the nearby diplomatic zone. People would start talking about the significant problems this had brought almost as soon as I set foot in the garage and a few of them point-blank asked me if I could write about their situation. I have tried to respond to such requests as best as I could; I published an article in one of Dhaka’s main newspapers⁹ and I presented my work during a dedicated seminar on rickshaws that WBB had organised for relevant stakeholders¹⁰. I hope that this thesis will also offer glimpses of the indignation that many rickshaw drivers passionately tried to get across in our conversations. In fact, some of these grievances form the explicit focus of the next chapter.

⁹ Annemiek Prins, “Rickshaw Restrictions: Privilege for Some, Disaster for the Puller”, *The Daily Star*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/rickshaw-restrictions-1488862>.

¹⁰ “The Rickshaw Industry: A Human Rights Perspective”, Research Seminar WBB Trust, Dhaka, January 8, 2018.

4. Rickshaw Journeys: Formalisation and Fixing in Dhaka's Diplomatic Zone

"The rickshaw is very important for slum dwellers". Arif's¹ voice is strident. He makes no attempt to hide his agitation as he narrates the changes and complications he has witnessed as a cycle-rickshaw driver and slum dweller in Dhaka. "If we have no rickshaws in Dhaka city we fall into trouble. But nowadays there are many roads in Dhaka where the rickshaw is no longer allowed". Arif currently stays in Korail *bosti*, which is arguably the largest slum settlement in Dhaka. The area is characterised by bustling markets, numerous pharmaceutical shops, small NGO schools and clinics, lively tea stalls that blur the lines between shop and street, narrow alleyways that become all-too-narrow when a fire breaks out, and metres upon metres of corrugated iron. Korail is separated by garbage and water from the expensive high-rises that tower over Dhaka's exclusive diplomatic neighbourhood. We are having our chat at the half-dark rickshaw garage from where Arif rents his vehicle on a daily basis. In the background, the sound of repair work – the constant clattering of metal on metal that reverberates as spokes are being straightened and readjusted to the wheel – merges with the chatter of other rickshaw drivers who are taking their afternoon rest on a wooden platform that serves as makeshift hostel and sleeping place.

Arif is thirty years old and has stayed at- and worked from- this particular garage since he first came to Dhaka at the age of fourteen. He was introduced to the rickshaw industry by some friends and neighbours from his home village in Mymensingh, to where he returns with regular intervals. His wife and two-and-a-half-year-old son still live in the countryside, but opportunities for work there are scarce. Arif explains that he used to be involved in rice cropping back home, but struggled to find work on a daily basis due to circumstances such as heavy rainfall and floods. "For every day of work in the countryside you have to wait perhaps ten days," he exclaims emphatically. Despite the fact that work and income are not available on a continuous basis in the countryside, Arif is currently considering to temporarily move back home. The reason behind his decision is that recent changes in the local transport and rickshaw system have significantly complicated and curtailed his daily journeys as a

¹ Semi-structured interview, Korail, November 11, 2017.

rickshaw driver. In the past, Arif used to travel all over the city, southwards in the direction of Old Dhaka, and onwards from there, to peripheral areas like Shonir Akhra and Duniya. Whereas now, he simply moves back and forth down the same stretch of road every day: a journey of approximately one kilometre.

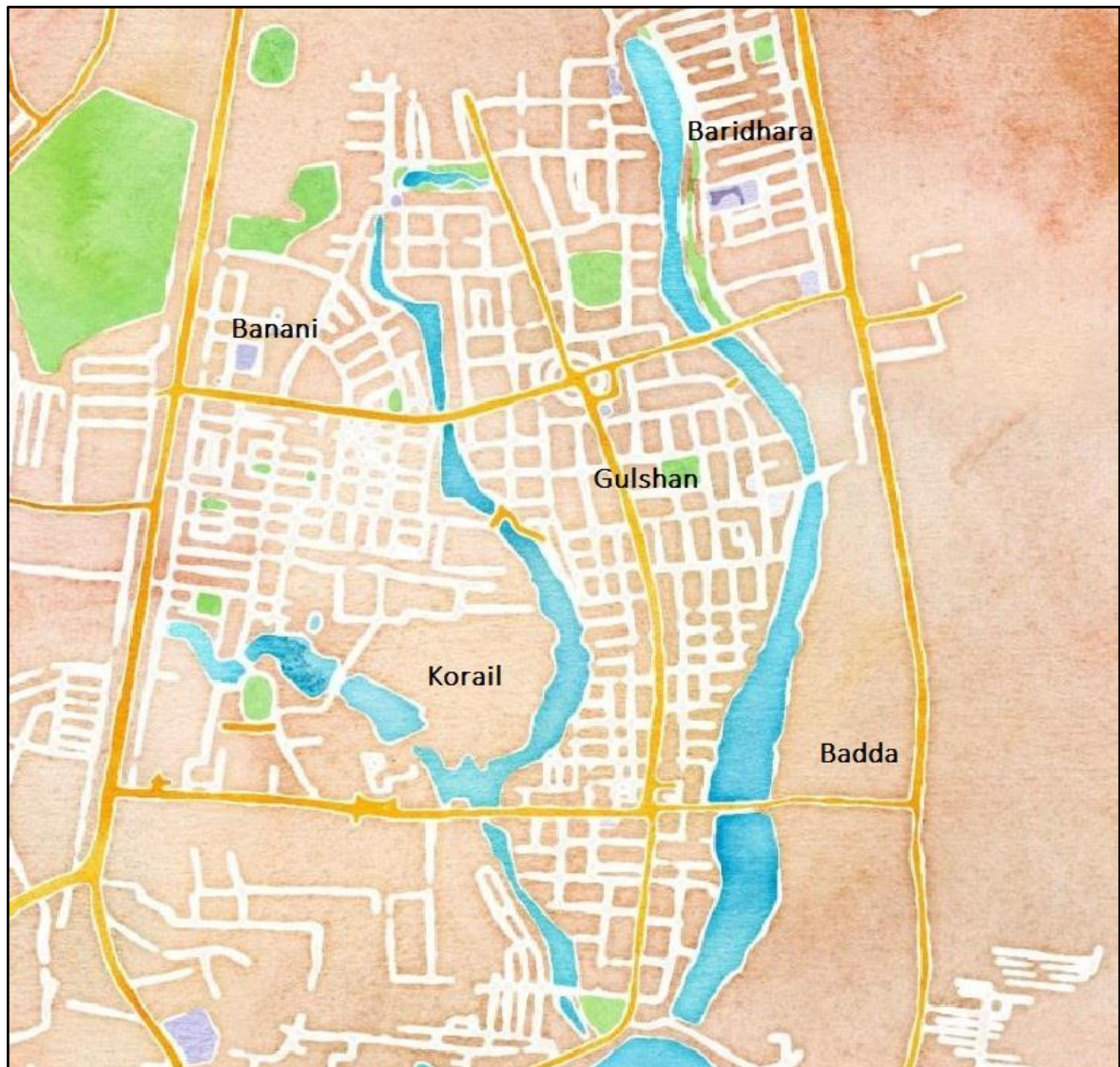


Figure 6: Map of Dhaka's diplomatic zone, with upscale neighbourhoods Gulshan, Baridhara and Banani. Korail slum is separated from Gulshan by Banani Lake. Map source: OpenStreetMap contributors; map tiles by Stamen Design.

What explains this drastic decrease in action radius? How come that, whereas in the past Arif's journeys were not restricted to certain areas or routes, they are now increasingly tied to one particular road? There are two important developments that have played a role in this. The first one has to do with the increased implementation of Non-Motorised Transport (NMT)-free zones, or VIP roads. When Arif first came to Dhaka in 2001, there were only two VIP roads in the area. Now, sixteen years later,

Korail *bosti* is closed in by four VIP roads, all within a distance of two kilometres. Buliung, Shimi and Mitra (2015, 163) have argued that the implementation of VIP roads has effectively “redefined the role of NMT as a feeder service to motorised transit and as a means for neighbourhood circulation only.” This redefinition of the role of rickshaw transport plays into the second factor that has contributed to the mobility constraints that Arif is currently facing. The idea that rickshaw journeys can somehow be tied or restricted to certain neighbourhoods was recently put to the test in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone, which borders Korail *bosti*. In 2016, an exclusively neighbourhood-based rickshaw system was introduced in the upscale residential neighbourhoods of Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Niketan. Under this new system only a very limited number of properly licensed and colour-coded rickshaws have been allowed access to the area. Like many other rickshaw drivers in the vicinity, Arif did not manage to get a licensed rickshaw, which is why most of his journeys are now tied to the same stretch of road. They start from the nearest VIP road in the area and end at “Gate number 5”, a police check post that marks the border with Banani.

In this chapter, I explore how the implementation of this closed-off, neighbourhood-based rickshaw system has changed and reconfigured rickshaw mobilities in and around Dhaka’s diplomatic zone. The implementation of this system was triggered by two consecutive terrorist attacks – both directed at foreign nationals – that took place in Gulshan in 2015 and 2016. The attacks left the international community in considerable fear and prompted a variety of security measures which significantly affected transportation and mobility in the area. As part of these measures, the local rickshaw system was effectively transformed into a formalised, area-based system. This coincided with a number of changes, including the introduction of a formal license system, a fixed fare chart and the designation of a limited number of registered “community-rickshaws” to clearly demarcated areas.

By zooming in on this distinct moment of formalisation, I seek to further examine the idea of formalisation as *fixing*. Both Guyer (2004, 155) and Ferguson (2007, 72) have described formalisation as the fixing of social and economic arrangements through documents and conventional quantitative measures. Drawing on the work of Weber, Guyer (2004, 155) elaborates that “[a]n official paper fixes a relationship, usually among several different value scales”. These value scales include the identity of the parties involved, timing, the quality of the goods or services delivered and their monetary value. The area-based rickshaw system that was

introduced in Dhaka's diplomatic zone has similarly coincided with a number of bureaucratic interventions that seek to fix both economic and social arrangements, such as the fare per distance and the identity of the rickshaw puller. At the same time, the new system has also fixed certain spatial relations. The police check points that mark the different entry points into the diplomatic zone have inserted fixed point of departure and arrival into otherwise open-ended and unstructured rickshaw journeys. Moreover, the fact that each neighbourhood in the diplomatic zone now has its own ceiling on rickshaw licenses, has effectively tied certain rickshaws to certain areas.

The abovementioned changes all seem to suggest an embrace of what Malkki (1992) has described as a "sedentarist metaphysics". However, in teasing out the relationship between formalisation, fixing and mobilities, I want to be careful not to reify dichotomies and conflation between the stable-static-formal and mobile-dynamic-informal. In other words, although the changes that I discuss in this chapter unmistakably show a trend towards the fixing of open-ended forms of movement, I do not want to interpret these changes solely through the idiom of legibility, hence assuming an inherent antagonism between formal constellations of power and "people who move around" (Scott 1998, 1). In her work on formalisation, Guyer (2004, 158) leaves open the question of the systematicity of the "formal sector" and points out that formalisation might not result in the experience of an "enduring generalizable principle". Too often, however, this lack of systematicity or endurance is simply interpreted as a token of informality; that is, as the absence or incompleteness of processes of formalisation and not as a feature of it. For instance, Ferguson (2007, 72) argues that formalisation is undermined by the "vernacular logic of practice that undermines and mistrusts [...] reduction and fixity"². This observation echoes the idea that "static modes of power" are ultimately challenged by spontaneous and dynamic forms of informality. As I have shown in my theoretical chapter, such narratives are often intuitively linked to metaphors of mobility and can easily feed into a "nomadic metaphysics" (Cresswell 2006).

In what follows, I argue that the many ways in which rickshaw mobilities seem to undermine fixity cannot be simply interpreted as a form of spontaneous resistance against state-imposed processes of legibility. For such an interpretation assumes that configurations of state power naturally work towards legibility and fixity, whereas this is clearly not always the case. In fact, Roy (2005, 149) has pointed out that much of

² In fact, Guyer (2004, 155) herself also recognises a certain "recalcitrance to this kind of reductionism and fixity".

what is intuitively ascribed to the domain of informality, in reality, reflects the way in which state-affiliated actors construct and reconstruct “categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy”. This strategic distribution of (il)legitimacy is also visible in the case of Dhaka’s diplomatic zone, where the distribution of a limited number of rickshaw licenses has prompted many rickshaw drivers to try and enter the area illegally. Moreover, the implemented license ceiling has opened up a lucrative space for corruptive and exploitative practices by state-affiliated actors. I argue that such practices, far from signalling the absence or incompleteness of processes of formalisation, highlight how formalisation works – namely, through tandem processes of enclosure and exception. This chapter further elucidates these processes of enclosure and exception by looking at the ways in which rickshaw mobilities in an around Dhaka’s diplomatic have been reconfigured. However, before delving into the analysis of this relationship between formalisation, fixing and mobility, I will elaborate on what I mean when I claim that rickshaw journeys have typically represented an unfixed and open-ended mode of navigating the city.

Rickshaw Rides: Transport, Wayfaring or Hustling?

People and objects do not flow. They bump awkwardly along creating pathways as they go. They grate against each other, dodge, stop and go, negotiate obstacles, back-track and move off in new directions propelled by different intersecting logics.

(Knowles 2011, 138)

The above citation by Caroline Knowles (2011) perfectly sums up the experience of Dhaka traffic. Indeed, one of the phrases I would often hear repeated whenever I was awkwardly bumping my way through Dhaka traffic, was: *chap den* (“make way, give pressure”). Ticket collectors would shout it at the passengers in the bus, while hanging out of the door opening and trying to help/push more people into an already overcrowded vehicle. Rickshaw drivers would yell it at each other, while manoeuvring their three-wheelers into impossible angles in an attempt to get a few meters ahead. Dhaka traffic often seemed to function solely by the virtue of rapid gestures and quick verbal or aural exchanges between drivers and their honking vehicles. These constant

interactions and negotiations over limited road-space constituted a recurring theme throughout the rickshaw diary I kept. This becomes clear from the following excerpt, which documents a journey of approximately half an hour that covered two kilometres³:

I cross Satmasjid Road by foot and, after zigzagging through rows of cars and rickshaws, I approach a rickshaw driver on the other side. He wears a *gamcha* tied around his head and his rickshaw seems to be relatively new; the seat, frame and hood are all beautifully decorated with colourful shapes and drawings. The traffic jam on Satmasjid Road is severe and we grind to a halt almost immediately after starting our journey. It is a particularly hot day and the driver offers to fold out the hood of the rickshaw to create a bit of shade. "*Lagbe na, ami onek lomba*" ("There is no need, I am too tall"), I protest, knowing that I will continuously bump my head if the hood is unfolded. The driver bursts out in laughter and repeats my words, "*onek lomba*" ("very tall"), to the driver behind us, who joins in on the laughter. Since we are not moving, the driver gets off his rickshaw. Other rickshaw pullers are hovering over their seat in a standing position in an attempt to look beyond the traffic jam, which consists of rickshaws, CNG's⁴, private cars, buses, *legunas* and the occasional motorbike.

Every now and then we move a few metres forward, but on several occasions we are cut off by a car taking up the space in front of us. I contemplate continuing my journey by foot, but every time I decide to hop off the rickshaw we start moving again. The driver points to the other side of the road and seems to be looking for a different route. On the first occasion that presents itself he crosses the road to the right and turns into a street which runs parallel to the main road. He is not the only one. Many rickshaws, *legunas* and cars are trying to enter the side street, soon creating a new stretch of traffic jam. We get gridlocked at the next intersection and the driver looks to his left to assess whether the main road has cleared. On the left side of Satmasjid Road traffic seems to be moving again and we join the queue of vehicles that tries to cross the road. Things are moving slowly and the rickshaw driver yells out to one of his colleagues in the front of the queue. Eventually, we manage to bypass a line of vehicles and we wriggle our way onto the left side of the road.

After waiting out the last bit of traffic jam, we are all the sudden facing an open stretch of road. As engines start roaring again, the driver gets into a standing position and, leaning forward, starts pedalling. We gain momentum and are moving quickly now. When we have almost reached my destination, I check my phone for the exact address. I share the address with the rickshaw driver, who explains that he has to ask around. I start to move down from the rickshaw with the intention to walk the last bit, but the driver summons me to

³ Rickshaw journey, Dhanmondi, November 30, 2015.

⁴ A CNG is a motorised three-wheeler or baby-taxi that runs on CNG (Compressed Natural Gas).

stay seated. “*Jiggas korte hobe*” (“I have to ask around”), he repeats and starts to approach some of the security guards who linger at the entrance gates of nearby flats and office buildings. It turns out that we have to take a narrow, connector road and within minutes we reach my destination. We have not determined the price of the fare in advance and because of the duration of the journey I decide to give the driver 70 *taka*⁵, instead of the 40-50 *taka* I would normally pay for the trip. Somewhat surprised, he accepts my money.

The above example shows that rickshaw journeys unfold in an all but straightforward manner. Neither the duration nor the route can be determined in advance, as both depend on the obscure logic of traffic congestion. In general, rickshaw journeys constitute a highly improvised and inherently open-ended mode of traveling. The fare of the ride can be negotiated in advance but, especially in the case of short-distance trips, passengers often just hop on to the rickshaw without setting a price. Within a certain neighbourhood or area there is usually a common frame of reference as to what the fare for a particular trip should be, although this is in no way regulated. For example, I would normally pay 20 *taka* for the rickshaw journey from my house to the nearest bus stop. However, on days when the narrow streets in my neighbourhood were completely waterlogged due to heavy rainfall this “standard” price was instantly revised, as rickshaw drivers would have to plough through knee-deep, waist-deep puddles of water. The volatility of traffic flows and conditions thus poses a significant challenge to any attempt to fix the rickshaw fare per distance and suggests that, under such circumstances, the predictability of formalisation might indeed be “a very sharp double-edged sword” (Guyer 2004, 156).

Because rickshaw fares are inherently negotiable, the moment of the actual transaction is characterised by a certain measure of ambiguity. This becomes evident from the following account of a relatively short rickshaw journey of 1.2 kilometres⁶:

Upon leaving Meena Bazar (a local supermarket), I immediately cross eyes with a rickshaw driver. He is dropping off another passenger and gives me a questioning look. I wait for the other passenger to pay, before boarding the rickshaw and disclosing my destination: the nearest bus stand “Kakuli”. Earlier that day it had rained quite a bit and the driver still carries a sheet of plastic tucked between the two iron rods that are attached to his handlebar. The plastic can be tied to the hood of the rickshaw to protect the passenger – not the driver – from the rain showers that frequently turn Dhaka’s roads into rivers. It is fairly

⁵ 100 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) equals 0,91 GBP.

⁶ Rickshaw journey, Banani, October 13, 2015.

crowded and the driver is ringing his bell incessantly, while moving at a rapid pace. Shortly, we are speeding through the middle of the road, in between two lanes of slowly moving cars – all radiating heat.

We reach our destination quickly and the driver lines up in a queue of empty rickshaws waiting for passengers. I take out my wallet and realise that I do not have the exact amount on me, only a note of 50 taka. “*Bhangti hobe?*” (“Do you have change?”) I ask the driver, but he shakes his head. I continue to pretend-search my bag and after a while the driver changes his position on “not having cash” and offers me a note of 10 taka. Knowing that the fare should be half the price, I start to protest: “*Chollis taka to onek besi, ami protidin bis taka dei*” (“40 taka is too much, I pay 20 taka everyday”). The driver shakes his head sadly and makes a gesture as if to say “but there was so much traffic”. Next to us, another driver is observing the whole scene with amusement and I include him in the conversation: “Do you have change?”. He searches his shirt pocket, but shakes his head in reply. “*Kothay theke esechen?*” (“Where did you come from?”), he wants to know. I tell him the street number, but by now an old lady in a ragged sari who looks like she has been begging has also joined our conversation. “*Aro taka den*” (“Give her back more change”), she tells the driver. I decide to settle for a fare of 30 taka and plead with the driver: “*Bis taka den*” (“Please give me [back] twenty taka”). He agrees and magically produces the change that had been lacking thus far. I pay and give the lady a couple of 2 taka notes before I leave for the bus.

The above examples show that the inherently variable and unstable nature of rickshaw fares always leaves room for negotiation⁷, a process which is not seldom mediated through the interference of bystanders. This also becomes clear in the example of Rubel⁸: a part-time rickshaw puller, part-time writer who saw himself forced to start driving a rickshaw after losing his business a year earlier. When asked whether he sometimes faced problems with passengers, Rubel answered affirmatively: “Yes, many passengers do not behave nicely or politely. They neglect us and look down upon the job. They even call us *tui*⁹”. Rubel emphasised that the rickshaw fare, in particular, tended to be a point of disagreement: “*Maximum lok raga-ragi koren*” (“Many people get angry”). He recalled an incident that happened the day before when he drove two passengers from the Sadarghat boat terminal in Old Dhaka to Newmarket. Their journey covered a distance of five kilometres and led through a particularly congested

⁷ It should be noted that the negotiations that I had with rickshaw drivers were often shaped by my identity as a foreigner. Especially in the diplomatic zone, where most of the international community lives, I would frequently be expected to pay double the amount of the normal fare.

⁸ Semi-structured interview, Lalkutir, December 30, 2015.

⁹ In Bengali the word *tui* denotes a very informal version of the second-person pronoun and is usually reserved for children or very close friends. When used to address strangers, the term *tui* has a derogatory connotation and is often used to deliberately underscore the other person’s lower or inferior status.

part of town. Rubel and his passengers had agreed on a fare of 100 taka, but upon reaching their destination the passengers asked him to continue in the direction of Azimpur, a nearby neighbourhood. This meant that Rubel had to cross and navigate a very crowded junction, which is often a cumbersome and time-consuming exercise. Rubel elaborated that the normal fare for this last bit of the journey – from New Market to Azimpur – would usually amount to 20 taka and went on to divulge how his customers had refused to top up the original fare. It was only after some bystanders interfered in their discussion that they had changed their mind. “Many rickshaw drivers suffer mentally from their passengers,” Rubel concluded his story.

What becomes clear throughout these different stories and observations is that rickshaw journeys do not entail an isolated, two-sided affair between driver and passenger. Instead, they are tangled up in the everyday relationships and interactions that constitute Dhaka traffic. Negotiations and contestations over the fare of the trip are not the only aspects of the rickshaw journey that gains shape amidst a multitude of social relations and direct engagements. In fact, the same can be said of the decision-making process that shapes rickshaw routes. Rickshaw itineraries are not pre-planned but unfold in mutual consultation between the driver and the passenger and in constant interaction with the wider social-material landscape. Reaching one’s destination can be a tentative exercise, which does not only rely on traffic and road conditions, but also on the successful sharing of information between drivers, passengers, local shopkeepers, security guards and other road users.

I witnessed a striking example of such sharing of information during a rickshaw journey to my house in Rayerbazar¹⁰, which is a maze of narrow, potholed streets and bustling markets. I had told the rickshaw driver that my destination was the Rayerbazar Community Centre, which was the clearest landmark near my house. However, when approaching the Centre, the driver kept on pedalling towards it, whereas we needed to take a right turn towards my house. Before I could intervene, two men who recognised me as one of the few foreigners in the area, started waving and shouting directions at the rickshaw driver from a small grocery shop at the corner of the street, telling him to take a right turn. This example also hints at the complications of making your destination known. When I first visited Dhaka in 2011, I often made the mistake of simply providing rickshaw drivers with a road number or

¹⁰ Rickshaw journey, Rayerbazar, November 25, 2015.

address. At the time, I neither had the geographical knowledge, nor the language skills to guide drivers in the right direction and, more than once, we would end up driving around aimlessly for quite some time before I realised that neither I nor the driver knew where we were going. Unsurprisingly, the first words in Bengali I learnt were *bame* (“left”), *dane* (“right”) and *ekhane* (“here”) and I quickly grew into the habit of providing drivers with a landmark or bus stand, rather than an address.

My own experiences of learning to find my way in Dhaka, to some extent, mirrored those of rickshaw drivers. Many rickshaw pullers were newcomers to the city themselves when they first started driving a rickshaw and had initially struggled to find their way. During an informal group discussion at a mess in Old Dhaka, Yasin and I asked a group of four men what they remembered from the first time they drove a rickshaw in Dhaka city¹¹. While adding to- and interjecting each other, they summarised the experience: “We did not know where to go”, “We did not know where places were”, “We did not know what the price should be”. Most of them had come from Shirajganj and had received some (informal) training from an experienced rickshaw driver after arriving in Dhaka. The senior drivers had shown them how to use the brakes and how to make a signal when taking a turn or bypassing a large bus. “But didn’t you get lost in the beginning?” I asked the group of men, which was gradually developing into a small crowd. The answer was affirmative: “Yes, but we would just ask people for the right location”. In fact, passengers were often their most important teachers during this initial stage. During another group discussion at a different garage¹², one of the rickshaw drivers explained that he had simply learnt by seeing and doing. In the beginning this was difficult because he did not know the roads. However, the passengers would help him with directions and taught him what the fare should be for a particular distance. These examples do not only underscore the open-ended nature of rickshaw journeys, but also make it clear that reaching a certain destination is not considered to be the sole responsibility of the rickshaw driver, but a joint effort that requires consultation and interaction.

The question arises how to conceptually make sense of rickshaw journeys and their non-scripted, open-ended and co-constructed nature. Knowles (2011, 138) highlights the improvised nature of journeys by describing them as “open unfolding possibilities that sometimes move in unpredictable directions”. In doing so, she draws

¹¹ Informal group discussion, Lalkutir, December 28, 2015.

¹² Semi-structured group discussion, Lalkutir, December 19, 2015.

on the work of Ingold (2007; 2011) who makes sense of movement by distinguishing between wayfaring and transport. Whereas transport implies the rationalised and destination-oriented movement from one point to another, the path of the wayfarer has no beginning or end, but rather “wends hither and thither, and may even pause here and there before moving on” (Ingold 2007, 81). Hence, whereas transport is tied to specific locations and fixed points of departure and arrival, the path of the wayfarer lacks such predetermined points of rest (Ingold 2007, 84). What is interesting here, is that rickshaw journeys display a certain tension between wayfaring and transport. On the one hand, rickshaw drivers unmistakably engage in practices of transport; their movements are destination-oriented and very much part of wider economic regimes of value. However, at the same time, rickshaw journeys rarely unfold as a linear trajectory from one exact location to the other. Routes unfold, wind and change according to new information solicited by customers, other road users, and the landscape itself. These social-material aspects of the urban landscape, moreover, might incite rickshaw drivers to momentarily pause or interrupt their journey, as they ask for directions, exchange information with other road users, manoeuvre between potholes and puddles, and navigate the material density constituted by the voluminous presence of vehicles and people.

This tension between wayfaring and transport is something that resurfaces throughout this chapter, which goes on to explain how rickshaw journeys are increasingly fragmented, fixed and compartmentalised due to processes of formalisation. In a sense, this process resembles what Ingold (2011, 145) has described as the “logic of inversion”. Inversion denotes a transition from inhabiting the environment to occupying space and from wayfaring to transport. In other words, inversion “turns the pathways along which life is lived into boundaries within which it is enclosed” (Ingold 2011, 145). I will return to this aspect of enclosure when discussing the specific changes that are affecting rickshaw mobilities in- and around Dhaka’s diplomatic zone. For now, however, I would like to foreground one more key aspect that characterises the movements of rickshaw drivers, namely “work”. In order to account for this convergence between mobility and making a living, which lies at the heart of this dissertation, it is helpful to add a third conceptual category to my analysis of the rickshaw journey, namely: “hustling”. The term hustling (Di Nunzio 2012; Thieme 2018) is usually employed to analyse the economic and spatial survival strategies of people operating within the urban informal economy, but is also useful in

that it suggests an element of restless movement. This restlessness can either be productive, in the sense that it can be associated with the creative search for opportunities, or degenerative, in the sense that tightening restrictions often force people to keep moving.

The experience of restless movement was a recurring theme throughout the interviews I conducted with rickshaw drivers and illuminates that, whereas rickshaw journeys are indeed often unfixed, this does not mean that they are unrestricted or even unregulated. On the contrary, part of the reason why rickshaw drivers lack predetermined or fixed points of departure or arrival is because they are often denied a place to stop and park their vehicle. One sentence that I heard repeated again and again throughout my research was: “*Sob somoy running thakte hobe*” (“We have to keep on driving”). A rickshaw driver by the name of Asif¹³ summarised this predicament as follows: “We cannot stand still, not even for one minute”. I had just introduced myself to Asif and was making an attempt to explain the topic of my research to him. However, when I mentioned the word *janjot* (“traffic jam”), Asif interrupted me and immediately started to express his frustration about being shouted at- and chased away by shopkeepers and street vendors all day long. Asif worked predominantly in Old Dhaka, where most of the sidewalks and roadsides were occupied by small shops and stands. He imitated how the shop keepers would shout at him whenever he tried to slow down to let his passengers get off: “*Hey bara-bara*” (“Move on, go away”).

Not only shop keepers would chase- and hurry rickshaw drivers away; the (traffic) police often did the same. Rahat¹⁴, a thirty-two-year-old rickshaw driver from Mymensingh, explained that the police often bothered him when he tried to let his passengers get off: “They ask ‘Why do you stop here?’ and demand 50 or 100 taka. If you don’t give the money, they will puncture your tyres. We have to keep going all the time”. Rahat concluded that the police thought that rickshaw drivers were *nirupay* (“helpless”) and could therefore easily demand money from them. Stories of the police puncturing tyres, taking away the seat of the rickshaw, turning the rickshaw upside down, or confiscating the entire vehicle were common and surfaced in almost all of the interviews I conducted. This exploitative behaviour by the police was, to some extent, enabled by the fact that there were no official, designated rickshaw lanes or parking spots for rickshaw drivers. For instance, I asked another rickshaw driver by the name

¹³ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

¹⁴ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 8, 2017.

of Kamil¹⁵, whether there were any designated spots where he could wait for passengers. He answered that “parking was allowed nowhere” and that “they had to keep on moving continuously”.

Hence, whereas the wayfarer may momentarily pause to catch her breath, and whereas transport ends at a fixed point of destination, rickshaw drivers are sometimes denied both. In many ways their movements through traffic thus reflect their economic hustle for money and opportunities. Their mobilities are characterised on the one hand by creative and resilient modes of way finding, whilst at the same time exhibiting the kind of restless momentum that inevitably accumulates when people are denied a place to rest. It is tempting to interpret the illegible, unstructured and unfixed movements of rickshaw drivers as indicative of the “vernacular logic of practice” that, according to Ferguson (2007, 72), undermines formal organisations of space. And indeed, for those working in the informal sector, mobility can be a tactic to escape or undermine the control of formal actors, such as the police. This becomes clear from Meneses-Reyes’ (2013) work on street vendors in Mexico City, which shows that for unauthorised vendors, being mobile is a way of avoiding and challenging regulations. However, it would be somewhat of a stretch to frame the restless movements of rickshaw drivers in a similar light. For them “constantly being on the move” does not necessarily seem to be a deliberate strategy, avoidance tactic or way to manoeuvre around existing regulations. Rather, it is the direct outcome of the existing regulatory framework, which has not accommodated for official rickshaw parking places and therefore gives the police the mandate to actively deny them a place to park or stop. Examples like these thus nuance theoretical confluences between unfixed movement and resistance and complicate the idea that the former automatically constitutes a mode of contesting “the territorialization of urban space” (Cresswell 2006, 47). However, this does not change the fact that the recent decade has seen concerted efforts to fix and territorialise rickshaw mobilities in Dhaka.

¹⁵ Semi-structured interview, Korail, September 22, 2017.

“Cutting the Chain”: VIP Roads and Disrupted Rickshaw Journeys

“I just go one-by-one-road”, Khadim¹⁶ explained. Every now and again, the quick cadence of his to-the-point sentences in Bangla was interrupted by improvised sequences in English, like “one-by-one-road”. “Like this, I go around the whole city. There is not one place in Dhaka I do not know. I have been driving a rickshaw since my childhood years”. Khadim came to Dhaka more than forty years ago, shortly after Bangladesh gained its long-awaited, bloodstained independence from Pakistan in 1971. This was well before the city acquired its notorious reputation as the “traffic capital of the world”¹⁷, at a time when the now sought-after plots of the diplomatic zone consisted of no more than ponds and paddy fields. Even Old Dhaka, where Khadim currently resides, was not as crowded and gridlocked back then. These days Khadim is no longer able to work for a full day. Instead, he usually leaves the rickshaw garage after lunch. From there, he travels the entire city; going from one road to another, depending on where his passengers need to go.

The open-ended and unstructured way of traversing the city that Khadim described is becoming more and more challenging, as rickshaw drivers find their journeys increasingly curtailed and cut off 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 *borolokder gari* (“rich people’s vehicles”). This sense of infrastructural injustice also transpired in the narratives of other (senior) rickshaw drivers. Nafees¹⁸, for example, complained that he often had to take a detour these days, moving around the city in an all but straightforward manner. Due to the increasing number of VIP roads, he barely left Old Dhaka anymore. It had become too difficult to pass major junctions, like Farmgate and Bangla Motor, which constituted the gateway to the northern, more recently established parts of Dhaka. The implementation of VIP roads had thus forced rickshaw drivers to fold their journeys into increasingly smaller

¹⁶ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

¹⁷ The image of Dhaka as the “traffic capital of the world” is often evoked in both local and international newspaper articles and headings. See for example: “Welcome to the Traffic Capital of the World” (Michael Hobbes, *The New Statesman*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/07/welcome-traffic-capital-world>) and “Carpooling to Help Beat Dhaka's World Beating Traffic Jams” (Amit Jain, *The Daily Star*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/perspective/carpooling-help-beat-dhakas-world-beating-traffic-jams-1348366>).

¹⁸ Informal interview, Keranigonc, August 14, 2017.

pockets of the city, making it impossible for them to actually adapt their journeys to the demands and movements of their passengers.

The effect that the growing number of VIP roads had on people's journeys was aptly described as "cutting the chain" by one of the transport activists¹⁹ I interviewed. While describing the negative impact of such policies on the journeys and travel time of older passengers in particular, he mentioned a specific wave of rickshaw bans that focused on intersections:

[This happened] in 2011, 2010 or 2011. And it was actually one kind of conspiracy, like if they just cut the chain... If they cut the chain then rickshaws would reduce automatically. Like, if you want to travel from Rayerbazar to Lalmatia, or if you want to go to Dhanmondi Lake but Satmasjid Road does not allow rickshaws then you cannot. So, automatically they reduced the number of rickshaws.

This second round of rickshaw bans was initiated by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, whereas the first set of rickshaw restrictions happened around 2004/2005 and was informed by the World Bank funded "Dhaka Urban Transport Project 1996-2005 (DUTP)". As I explained in the introductory chapter, the implementation of these first VIP roads resulted in protests and severe criticism from civil advocacy groups, both in terms of the adverse impact it had on the employment conditions of rickshaw pullers and the fact that it did not bring about a significant decrease in traffic congestion (HDRC 2004; Bari and Efrogmson 2005; World Bank 2007)²⁰.

In their project performance assessment, the World Bank (2007) admitted that the implemented rickshaw bans had led to employment displacement among rickshaw drivers. The report also conceded that the dramatic increase of buses and minibuses on NMT-free corridors had reduced the impact that the exclusion of rickshaws was supposed to achieve, namely relieving traffic congestion. Despite the negative evaluation of these first VIP roads, a new round of rickshaw bans was initiated in 2011 and in the summer of 2019 a special committee – led by Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sayeed Khokon – dictated that three more major roads would be made off-limits

¹⁹ Semi-structured interview, January 16, 2018.

²⁰ See the work of Hasan (2013) for an in-depth overview of the ways in which rickshaw passengers have been affected by the implementation of VIP roads.

to rickshaws²¹. Whereas this policy of “cutting up the chain” has affected rickshaw journeys all over Dhaka city, the diplomatic zone has arguably seen the most advanced version of this policy, as becomes clear from the different changes that have unfolded with regard to rickshaw transport in this area.

In 2011, at the time of the second wave of rickshaw restrictions, I myself was living in the diplomatic zone while participating in an internship in Dhaka. I had never heard of a VIP road back then, but I still remember the first time I was confronted with one. From one day to the other, my rickshaw journeys from Banani to Gulshan were cut in two, as rickshaw drivers refused to continue their journey beyond the VIP road in question. Now, whenever I wanted to travel from my home in Banani to the neighbouring area of Gulshan, I had to get off at Kemal Atatürk Avenue, cross the NMT-free corridor by foot, and board a different rickshaw on the other side. Four years later, when I started my PhD research, I was surprised to learn that people’s rickshaw journeys through the diplomatic zone had become even more fragmented. In the aftermath of the murder of the Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella, all the entrance roads to Gulshan had been closed off by security check points and rickshaws specifically were not allowed to pass these check posts.

In 2017, when I returned to Dhaka for the second stretch of my PhD fieldwork, these interrupted and discontinuous journeys had made way for a more or less closed-off circuit of rickshaw journeys, with only a limited number of licensed rickshaws being allowed access to the area. This new system was implemented a month after the terrorist attack at the “Holey Artisan Bakery” café and had been initiated by the private housing associations of Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani and Niketan²² to enhance security in the area. The total number of rickshaws in these neighbourhoods was reduced from an estimated 10,000 to a mere 1,230²³ and all vehicles were properly registered. The introduction of these so-called “community rickshaws” went hand in hand with a trend towards standardisation: the colourful decorations that typically adorn the hood of the rickshaw made way for a homogeneous yellow colour code and the rickshaw pullers themselves now all had to wear orange uniforms and a photo ID card around their neck.

²¹ Abdullah Alif, “Rickshaw Ban: Rickshaw Pullers Continue Protest, Block Dhaka Streets”, *Dhaka Tribune*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/07/09/rickshaw-ban-rickshaw-pullers-continue-protest-block-rampura-road>.

²² See also: Shohel Mamun, “Diplomatic Zone Gets Special Rickshaws, Buses”, *Dhaka Tribune*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2016/08/10/diplomatic-zone-gets-special-rickshaws-buses>.

²³ During a visit to the Banani Housing association on 22-09-2017 I was informed that Banani had 560 licensed rickshaws, Gulshan 470, Baridhara 100 and Niketan 100. This included a total of 230 licenses for handicapped pullers.

In addition, there was a list of fixed fares attached to the back of the rickshaw that indicated, for example, that a journey from Banani Market to United Hospital should cost no more than 40 taka²⁴.

Hence, what we see here is a shift from the mere fragmentation of rickshaw journeys to the increased fixing and formalisation of rickshaw mobilities. Indeed, the implementation of the local licensing system has coincided with an attempt to fix certain aspects of the economic relationship between customers and rickshaw drivers, such as the price per distance, the identity of the rickshaw puller and the number of available rickshaws in the area. At the same time, rickshaw mobilities themselves have also been territorialised and fixed. For rickshaw journeys have increasingly been tied to certain roads and neighbourhoods. To traverse Dhaka in the way that Khadim described at the beginning of this section, namely by simply going from one road to another, is no longer a possibility for rickshaw pullers who are driving a licensed, yellow rickshaw. Instead they are restricted to the four residential neighbourhoods that have issued licenses for these so-called “community rickshaws”. The different entrance points into the area are now marked by neat, long lines of yellow rickshaws, with drivers queuing up to offer their services to the influx of rickshaw passengers coming in from the other side of the check post. On the opposite side of this “border”, regular or so-called *Bangla* rickshaw drivers have seen their journeys come to a halt, while their passengers are forced to cross the check point by foot. As a consequence of the new system, the journeys of regular rickshaws have been restricted to small pockets of neighbouring localities. Kamil²⁵, a local rickshaw puller who was still operating a *Bangla* rickshaw, explained that the high number of VIP roads made it almost impossible to access different parts of Dhaka. He complained that he now spent most of his day turning down prospective passengers, telling them: “*Na, jete pari na*” (“No, I cannot go [there]”).

This trend towards the fixing of rickshaw mobilities is not unique to Dhaka or Bangladesh. In fact, Gallagher (1992, 65) describes how Jakarta has experimented with a similar policy of restricting cycle-taxis – locally referred to as *becaks* – to circumscribed neighbourhoods. These restrictions were part of a wider attempt to fully

²⁴ This price is based on a picture of the fare chart that I took on 15-08-2017. The described journey from Banani Super Market to United Hospital is 2.4 kilometres.

²⁵ Semi-structured interview, Korail, September 22, 2017.

eliminate the *becak* from Jakarta²⁶. In 1970, the manufacture of new *becaks* was prohibited and existing *becaks* were “given different colours and restricted to a particular colour zone” (Gallagher 1992, 67). These restrictions resemble local policies in Dhaka that aim to reinvent the rickshaw as a “means for neighbourhood circulation only” (Buliung, Shimi and Mitra 2015, 163). For instance, the “Dhaka Structure Plan (2016-2035)” suggests that rickshaws should be encouraged to “serve local neighbourhood demands and to provide feeder services from the neighbourhoods to the main line rapid transit stops” (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 26). The same sentiment was expressed in conversations I had with local ward councillors all over Dhaka. The councillor of one of the wards in northern Dhaka²⁷, a well-spoken man and seasoned local leader, was of the opinion that the rickshaw was still needed in Dhaka city, considering that “the development of the city was not completed yet”. However, he did think that the government should decrease their numbers and not allow them to operate on the main roads. “Like in Gulshan and Banani”, he added. One of Dhaka’s female ward commissioners²⁸ echoed a similar view²⁹:

It would not be a good idea to ban the rickshaw. Regular people need the rickshaw. Most people in Dhaka are poor and middle class, so it is easy transport for them. But the government should make a fixed area for a fixed number of rickshaws. Every area should have 30-35 rickshaws and the drivers should wear a uniform and an ID card. They have to make it a bound system. Like, one rickshaw can go from Farmgate to Tejgaon, but not to different parts.

Hence, many policy makers and local politicians in Dhaka envision a future for the rickshaw that resembles the closed-off, formalised, community system that has been introduced in the diplomatic zone. The question, however, arises where this desire for a *bounded* system comes from and how this boundedness is maintained.

²⁶ Gallagher (1992, 67) reports that the authorities in Jakarta never fully succeeded in eliminating the *becak*, as cycle-taxis continue to operate in the suburbs of the city. Moreover, Governor Anies Baswedan has recently vouched to lift the decades long ban on pedicabs in Jakarta (Adi Renaldi, “Comeback Soon: The Governor is Planning to Lift Decades-Long Ban on Pedicabs, and None of Us is Psyched”, *Vice*, October 10, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/gyekyy/jakartas-notorious-becak-may-be-making-a-comeback-soon.)

²⁷ Semi-structured interview, DNCC ward commissioner, November 22, 2017.

²⁸ There are 43 reserved women councillor posts in DSCC and DNCC. The women members that are elected for these reserved posts represent three wards each and have to collaborate with the elected councillors of the individual wards, which tend to be exclusively male. Female candidates often lack the finances and muscle power to compete for these regular posts and women members that end up in reserved seats are often ignored by their male colleagues and lack any meaningful decision making power. See: Helemul Alam and Mathews Chiran, “Despite Predicaments, They Carry On: Women Councillor Candidates for Reserved Seats Share Their Struggles, Aspirations with Star”, *The Daily Star*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/despote-predicaments-they-carry-1857010>.

²⁹ Semi-structured interview, DNCC ward commissioner, December 5, 2017.

In the next section I will address this question by looking explicitly at socio-spatial processes of “enclosure” (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). Considering that formalisation, especially in the context of Bangladesh, is almost always a fragmentary process that results in “plural formalities” (Guyer 2004, 158) or “islands of formalisation” (Ferguson 2007, 72), the question inevitably arises how boundaries between the formal and informal are created and maintained. Thus far we have seen that processes of formalisation in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone have contributed to the fixing of rickshaw mobilities. That is, we have seen how rickshaw journeys have been tied to specific areas and how VIP roads and police check posts have created fixed points of departure and arrival. However, if we want to understand how “islands of formalisation” are carved out, we should not only look at processes of fixing but also at the logic of enclosure that undergirds such efforts.

Enclosure, (Im)mobilities and Difference

The previous section has shown how the role of the rickshaw in Dhaka traffic is increasingly reinterpreted and reimagined as a neighbourhood service: a transportation service that should ideally be confined to a more or less closed-off circuit. The new rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone represents the ultimate incarnation of this popular logic. Its popularity notwithstanding, I still came across one local councillor who was not at all in favour of the new rickshaw system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this particular ward commissioner was based in one of the localities that *bordered* the diplomatic zone. Even before getting the chance to speak with the councillor himself, his personal secretary who was handling our request for an interview, volunteered his own views on the matter, proclaiming that “students, passengers and rickshaw pullers suffer because of this [community-based] system”. His boss³⁰ later went on to elaborate that many of the children in his constituency went to school in Banani and now had to make use of three different rickshaws to reach school. The citizens of his ward regularly complained to him about the situation, but there was little he could do, considering that the new system had been initiated by

³⁰ Semi-structured interview, DNCC ward commissioner, December 4, 2017.

private housing associations rather than the City Corporation. He assessed the situation as follows:

Now the system is completely *elaka* [area] based. Those with a plate from Banani can only drive a rickshaw in Banani, they do not go to [this area]. There should be one plate for twenty wards so that rickshaws can go to all of these different wards.

Hence, although the ward councillor criticised the scale of the system, he did not necessarily challenge the insular logic that underpinned it. In fact, later on in the conversation, he pondered whether the government should not just separate the diplomatic zone from the rest of the city, as it was anyways “not necessary to maintain a rickshaw system there”.

This image of a wholly separate diplomatic zone, isolated and disconnected from the rest of the city, is not too far detached from what is happening in reality. In fact, the new rickshaw system seems to be part of a wider attempt to fix and harden the boundaries of the area, making it more difficult for “outsiders” to enter. In 2014 the area was officially declared a “beggar free zone”³¹ and since the “Holey Artisan Bakery Attack” took place in 2016 fewer and fewer street vendors and *cha-wallas* are allowed to operate in the area. That these measures are just as much about beautification as they are about security becomes evident from the fact that local bus companies have made way for a fleet of exclusively air-conditioned buses that operate only in the tristate area of Gulshan, Banani, and Baridhara³². The bus system is characterised by a similar insular logic as the rickshaw system, as it is no longer possible to take a direct bus to a destination outside of the diplomatic zone.

It is not just the bus- and rickshaw system that has undergone significant changes under the guise of security. In an attempt to further isolate the area from its surroundings, cheap boat services from- and to the neighbouring slum area of Korail have also been banned. As a result, garment workers, day labourers and domestic workers who work in the diplomatic zone have been forced to take a lengthy detour by

³¹ Naomi Hossain, “Are We Middle Income Yet?”, *Dhaka Tribune*, December 1, 2014, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/long-form/2014/12/01/are-we-middle-income-yet/>.

³² Shohel Mamun, “Dhaka Chaka for Diplomatic Zone”, *Dhaka Tribune*, August 11, 2016, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/08/10/diplomatic-zone-get-10-buses>.

foot³³. For instance, a young rickshaw driver from Korail³⁴ told me that his wife now had to walk for over an hour to reach the garment factory where she worked, whereas in the past it would have taken her five to ten minutes to cross the lake by boat. Changes like these highlight the desire to transform the diplomatic zone into a clearly demarcated area, with an increasingly narrow conception of the people, activities and vehicles that belong there. Hence, what is ultimately being “fixed” and formalised here, is not only a certain spatial-economic arrangement, but also the social boundary between the diplomatic zone and the rest of the city.

The fact that the implementation of the community rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone is intimately linked to efforts to isolate and insulate the area hints at a certain tension between mobility and enclosure. Cunningham and Heyman (2004, 295) have coined this oppositional pair to explore relationships of differentiation across space. Enclosure, for them, is an ongoing political process aimed at classifying people and places in such a way as to create a seemingly natural link between particular territories and particular groups of people (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 294). What makes this a useful term for understanding the formalisation of rickshaw mobilities, is that it suggests the fixing of people and their mobilities, without immediately assuming a reified distinction between the formal-static and the informal-kinetic. Whereas the notion of the formal easily evokes an image of a more or less permanent social-spatial-economic arrangement, the notion of enclosure helpfully addresses attention to the inherently unfinished process of working towards such fixities. Or as Cunningham and Heyman (2004, 293) have argued: “[e]nclosure usefully transforms the assumption that people and things have homes, locations, or places into an open question about how sets of people and things and their ‘proper’ locations are defined, internalized, and enforced”.

I would argue that the question of how sets of people and things and their “proper” locations are defined, internalised and enforced offers an important framework for understanding processes of formalisation and their fragmentation. Such processes, however, are hardly ever analysed from the perspective of mobilities and their enclosures. A notable exception is the work of Meneses-Reyes (2013) on street vendors in Mexico City, which focuses on the mobility outcomes of formalisation and

³³ In the absence of a functioning boat service, some inhabitants of Korail have also started to cross the lake on make-shift plastic rafts. See: Rifat Islam Esha, “Security for the Rich Costs the Poor”, *Dhaka Tribune*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/10/26/security-rich-costs-poor>.

³⁴ Informal conversation, Korail, August, 2017.

licensing practices. Meneses-Reyes (2013, 338) argues that the distribution of licenses among street vendors has resulted in a “particular dichotomy of mobile/immobile ways of ‘being’ on the streets”. Whereas those who have successfully applied for a license have acquired a fixed vending spot in the city, vendors without a license need to stay in motion in order to avoid the police. Meneses-Reyes (2013, 347) further builds on this contrast by concluding that the acquisition of a license has resulted in a form of immobility that “seems to embody hope and stability”. Hence, whereas the mobility of unauthorised vendors is associated with defying regulations, the spatial-economic fixity that comes with formalisation is interpreted as a form of occupational stability.

The experiences of cycle-rickshaw drivers in Dhaka do not overlap so neatly with this “dichotomy of mobile/immobile ways of ‘being’ on the streets” (Meneses-Reyes 2013, 338). Although the newly implemented, formal rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone has unmistakably granted more legitimacy to the presence of (licensed) rickshaw drivers in the area, this element of spatial-economic fixity has not necessarily foreshadowed occupational stability. Nor has it diminished rickshaw drivers’ “hustle” or “pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity” (Thieme 2018, 537). This makes sense if we look at processes of formalisation, not only through the lens of “fixing”, but also through the lens of enclosure. For the notion of enclosure addresses explicit attention to the processes of restriction and limitation that enable the creation of certain configurations of fixity. Or in the words of Ingold (2011, 145), enclosure “turns the pathways along which life is lived into boundaries within which it is enclosed”.

This element of restriction does not only affect the mobilities of rickshaw drivers, who – even if they have obtained a license – are still confined to one particular area, but also influences their economic opportunities. In fact, the very limited distribution of licenses can in and of itself be seen as a manifestation of enclosure that has affected both rickshaw pullers and rickshaw *maliks*. In the next section, I will explain how these rickshaw licenses were distributed among rickshaw owners in the area, but for now it suffices to say that most rickshaw *maliks* only have a very limited number of licensed community rickshaws available for rent. In Korail slum, I spoke to a rickshaw owner by the name of Mahfuz³⁵, who had a total of twenty rickshaws, but only managed to get two community rickshaw licenses. The first license was granted

³⁵ Semi-structured interview, Korail, August 15, 2017.

to him by Dhaka North City Corporation and the second one was sold to him by another *malik* at the exorbitant price of 90,000 taka³⁶. The other rickshaw owner had only obtained one license for his fifty rickshaws and had therefore decided to quit his dwindling business altogether. He sold his one community license to Mahfuz, who took out a loan to acquire the valuable permit. Both of Mahfuz's rickshaws were now shared among three drivers each, who divided their time between operating a yellow-coloured, community rickshaw and a regular, *Bangla* rickshaw. Another important reason why most rickshaw drivers would share these community rickshaws, was that the rickshaw rent had quadrupled under the new system. Whereas renting a regular rickshaw would usually cost around 80-100 taka per day, the rent of a community rickshaw amounted to 400 taka. Due to this increase in rent, community rickshaw drivers have not necessarily benefited financially from the decrease in competition that the implemented license ceiling should theoretically achieve. This also explains why most rickshaw drivers continue to negotiate their prices and are not necessarily sticking to the conservative fare chart that is attached to the back of the rickshaw³⁷.

The above examples illuminate why a certain degree of spatial-economic fixity should not be equated with occupational stability. Nor should this fixity necessarily be associated with a sense of legal protection. For the air of legitimacy that surrounds the community rickshaw system has not changed rickshaw drivers' vulnerable position vis-à-vis the police. If anything, processes of enclosure in the diplomatic zone have gone hand in hand with a heightened police presence and the emergence of new hybrids between the police and private security companies. An apt example of this is the so-called community police force, which consists of men that have been hired from private security companies to assist with traffic management and micro-level crime control. For rickshaw drivers this means confronting yet another force that could potentially influence and interrupt their journeys: a new actor that needs to be bribed and negotiated with. This is also the case for community rickshaw drivers, despite the fact that they are legally permitted to operate in the area. Imran³⁸, a rickshaw driver from Sherpur, for example, recalled an incident where he had to pay 50 taka *ghus* ("bribe money") for driving around with his orange uniform open. Imran complained that it was too hot to drive around in this synthetic, fluorescent garment, but according to the

³⁶ This is approximately 820 GBP.

³⁷ "Special Rickshaws Flout Fare Chart with Impunity", *The Independent*, August 28, 2016, <http://theindependentbd.com/arcprint/details/57800/2016-08-28>

³⁸ Semi-structured interview, Beltolla (Korail), September 22, 2017.

rules of the new system he is obliged to wear it at all times³⁹. Formalisation has thus opened up new avenues for exploitation, as it has brought along new rules and restrictions that can be sanctioned and penalised. What's more, it has naturalised this new system of rights and risks as the "normal and proper consequences of territorial rules" (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 294).

Whereas the new rickshaw system has engendered both stabilising and destabilising effects for rickshaw pullers who drive a licensed, community rickshaw, there is no subtle balance of rights and risks for those who still operate a regular rickshaw⁴⁰. With the diplomatic zone off limits, their movements have mostly been restricted to small pockets of neighbouring localities, resulting in a steep decrease in income. At the same time the new system has resulted in displacement, as many rickshaw drivers have left to different parts of town. For instance, in front of Dhaka University I ran into Shahid⁴¹, a rickshaw driver who recognised me from my previous field research in Korail slum. Shahid used to work in the diplomatic zone as well, but because he had not obtained access to a licensed rickshaw he had exchanged his garage in Korail for one in Old Dhaka. Not everyone, however, was able or willing to relocate. At a garage space near the edge of Korail slum, I got to talk to a middle-aged rickshaw driver⁴², who clarified why moving could be difficult. His teeth were red from chewing betel nut leaves and he lacked the skinny and agile physique of most rickshaw drivers. What's more, contrary to many of his colleagues, he did not sleep at a rickshaw garage. Instead, he rented a room in Korail for himself and his family. "It is mostly bachelors who move to Old Dhaka", he explained. For settled drivers like himself the situation was more difficult. His children went to school in the area and, in addition, he simply did not have the money to relocate his entire family to a different part of town. He owned a rickshaw himself and had set his hopes on one day obtaining a license for his vehicle. In the meantime, he worked as a day-labourer, carrying and emptying baskets full of mud and stones for the many road construction and upgrading projects that were carried out in the diplomatic zone.

³⁹ Indeed, the local ward councillor, Mofizur Rahman, has been quoted saying that "no rickshaw-driver can operate in this area without the uniform and ID cards" ("Special Rickshaws Flout Fare Chart with Impunity", *The Independent*, August 28, 2016, <http://theindependentbd.com/arcprint/details/57800/2016-08-28>.)

⁴⁰ It is usually the rickshaw owner who decides which rickshaw pullers can register to drive one of the "community rickshaws", as there is only limited scope for applying.

⁴¹ Informal conversation, Old Dhaka, August 2, 2017.

⁴² Informal conversation, Beltolla (Korail), August 15, 2017.



Figure 7: Yellow community rickshaw with fare chart attached to the back.

Arif⁴³, who I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, was a bit more flexible in terms of moving. His wife and son still lived in the countryside of Mymensingh, while he himself stayed at a garage in Korail. Nonetheless, he was hesitant to relocate to a different part of town – and not just because he would miss the smooth roads of New Dhaka. The problem was that he did not have friends or relatives in other parts of Dhaka and it was exactly this kind of social capital that was pivotal in gaining access to a garage. Recently, Arif had explored some garages in Badda, a nearby neighbourhood, but because he did not know any rickshaw owners or drivers in that area who could vouch for him, he did not succeed. Frustrated with the meagre 300 taka he currently earned on a daily basis, Arif had decided to return to the countryside for a couple of weeks to do some rice cropping.

The experiences of unlicensed rickshaw drivers show that formalisation, in this particular instance, has not definitively led to one specific mobility outcome, as was the case for the street vendors with whom Meneses-Reyes (2013) conducted his research. Instead, what the above examples show is that rickshaw journeys and mobilities are

⁴³ Semi-structured interview, Korail slum, November 27th, 2017. Informal conversation, Banani, January 20th, 2018.

not just being uprooted as a consequence of the new, formalised system, but that they are also increasingly restricted, suspended and aborted. It highlights that the control of mobility, as Salter (2013, 10) has pointed out, is not just about the facilitation or incarceration of specific groups, but also about “all the non-cases of mobility, those who are stopped before they start”. The incapacitating aspects of the new rickshaw system became very clear during a group conversation⁴⁴ at a garage next to the polluted lake that separates Korail slum from the diplomatic zone. The owner of the garage paid 7,000 taka every month to store his rickshaws at a garbage ridden patch of land next to the lake. The group of curious bystanders that had assembled at the garage were all vehemently opposed to the new system. “*Hajare, hajare lok bekar hoye geche*” (“Thousands of people have become jobless”), the rickshaw owner exclaimed. He had witnessed his fleet of rickshaws shrink from twenty vehicles to a mere two. “Poor people like to eat *pitha*, but now they cannot buy roadside *pitha* anymore”, another man shouted out with a good sense of drama. He was responding to the story of a female street vendor, who was no longer allowed to sell her sweet, jaggery cakes (“*pithas*”) on the streets of the diplomatic zone.

The most unexpected story came from a young, skinny rickshaw driver who had purchased six rickshaws just three months prior to the introduction of the new system. In order to make the purchase he had taken out a substantial loan of 60,000 taka; roughly four times the monthly income of a rickshaw driver. He had received the loan from one of the many NGOs that provided credit to slum dwellers. Like so many of these microcredit schemes, the organisation had a generous, almost lax, attitude when it came to handing out loans and a very strict and inflexible policy when it came to collecting interest. “Some rickshaw owners have fled the area, and left their business and rickshaws behind” a bystander interjected. He went on to explain that these rickshaw owners were leaving the area in order to escape the burden of debt. The young rickshaw driver we were chatting with had decided to stay in Korail rather than to run away. However, he had been forced to sell his six new rickshaws after the community rickshaw system was implemented. Selling the vehicles had come at a considerable financial loss and he was struggling to pay back his weekly instalments from his earnings as a rickshaw driver. “So, what do you do?” Yasin asked him. With a shrug the young man answered: “I cannot pay back the loan, so I am forced to pay it

⁴⁴ Semi-structured group discussion, Beltolla (Korail), November 29, 2017.

back by stealing”. When Yasin and I looked at him with a mix of shock and surprise, he added: “I am just telling you this honestly. I only steal things from rich people”. At the time of our conversation, he still had to pay back 10,000 taka. In an attempt to cut back on living costs and rent he had sent his wife and family back to the countryside.

Throughout this section, I have shown that the trend towards formalisation in the diplomatic zone has triggered a tangle of (im)mobility-related experiences that challenge and suspend a neat “dichotomy of mobile/immobile ways of ‘being’ on the streets” (Meneses-Reyes 2013, 338). These experiences vary from remigration to the countryside or relocation within the city, to the mundane interruptions and detours that are prompted by security check posts and encounters with the police. In addition, there are the non-cases of mobility: the experience of hoping, waiting and trying to get a license and the aborted journeys and projects of those who do not succeed. All of these instances of (im)mobility are intimately related to people’s wider life projects and cannot be separated from their everyday *hustle* for work and money. As we have seen, this hustle for work and money has not been diminished by the conditions of relative spatial-economic fixity that formalisation has brought about. Indeed, whereas on the surface the new rickshaw system seems to be indicative of a commitment to regularise and stabilise rickshaw mobilities, the underlying logic is that of enclosure. What is rendered legible here are not necessarily certain spatial or economic relations, but social differences. The new rickshaw system should therefore be seen as part of a wider effort to close off the diplomatic zone and to naturalise associations between certain categories of people, places and activities. In the final section of this chapter, I will analyse how this process of enclosure is shaped by the “ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized” (Roy 2009, 80).

The Strategic Distribution of (Il)legitimacy

Thus far I have shown that the regulatory processes that coincide with formalisation in the diplomatic zone have by no means produced a clear-cut dichotomy between immobile/static and mobile/kinetic ways of being in the street. Whereas, on the one hand, the new rickshaw system has unmistakably fixed the mobilities of licensed rickshaw drivers, we have also seen that those rickshaw pullers often alternate

between driving a community rickshaw and a regular rickshaw. What's more, whereas Meneses-Reyes (2013) found that for unlicensed street vendors "staying in motion" was a way of resisting permanent displacement, the mobility outcomes for unauthorised rickshaw drivers have been way more varied than that. This does not mean, however, that there have been no attempts to defy or by-pass processes of enclosure, as becomes clear from the fact that, during my fieldwork, I still frequently spotted regular rickshaws in certain pockets of the diplomatic zone. In fact, some rickshaw owners had even painted the hoods of their regular rickshaws yellow in order to escape police attention.

All of this resembles Ferguson's (2007, 72) observation that processes of formalisation tend to be contorted by a certain "vernacular logic of practice that undermines and mistrusts [...] reduction and fixity". However, the idea that certain practices and mobilities actively challenge the fixity of formalisation, seems to imply a logic of exteriority. In other words: this vernacular logic of practice ostensibly derives its propelling force from *outside* the formal. In what follows I challenge this presumption of exteriority by highlighting how attempts to bypass enclosure are often the direct result of the strategic ways in which (il)legitimacy is distributed by state-affiliated actors. Cunningham and Heyman (2004, 294) have argued that enclosure, rather than representing a permanent material boundary, is an ongoing political process that requires policing and coincides with "differences in seriousness versus laxness of surveillance". Such differences in surveillance can also be observed within the diplomatic zone, especially when comparing the situation in Banani with the rest of the tristate area. Whereas diplomatic neighbourhoods like Gulshan and Baridhara were characterised by a homogenous, yellow-hooded fleet of community rickshaws, the rickshaws in Banani still showed a striking level of diversity. At the time of my fieldwork, it was not only possible to spot battery-run rickshaws in Banani – even though electric rickshaws were not allowed anywhere in Dhaka city – but there was also still a large number of regular, Bangla rickshaws operating in the area. This thus suggests a certain laxness in terms of surveillance.

While on our way from Banani to Korail one day, Yasin and I struck up a conversation with the rickshaw *walla* who was driving us around in a regular rickshaw⁴⁵. Curiously, we asked him how this was still possible in the area. The driver

⁴⁵ Informal conversation, Banani, November 11, 2017.

explained that he paid 100 taka *ghus* to the traffic police every day to enter Banani. This bribe money, however, was no guarantee against further police interference. While steadily cycling forward, turning his head every now and then to address us directly, the rickshaw driver elaborated that fifteen to twenty rickshaws were confiscated by the police every day. The seized vehicles were kept at an empty playing field next to the police station and could be bought back by the owner or driver of the vehicle. “This is a source of income for the police station”, the driver concluded, taking me slightly aback with his blunt assessment of the situation. But then again, these kinds of arrangements were often an open secret. Without any hesitation, the driver gave us the name of the higher-up police sergeant who was running this lucrative scheme and distributed the money among his officers. Before dropping us off at our destination, and while bumping over the poorly paved roads of Korail, the rickshaw driver left us with another curious remark. He described how some “middle men” were luring people with disabilities from the countryside to the city. There was a special quota of rickshaw licenses reserved for disabled pullers and their family members and this had created a new, dubious business opportunity.

The above example highlights, what Gallagher (1992, 72) already predicted decades ago, namely, that “[i]mposing an artificial ceiling on rickshaw licenses is a certain recipe for corruption”. As I mentioned before, the imposition of such a license ceiling can, in and of itself, be seen as a practice of enclosure. What’s more, the introduction of a license system can contribute to the institutionalisation of inequalities that existed informally before, hence alluding to the fact that “formalization can be a moment when inequality is deepened” (Roy 2005, 153). In the case of Dhaka’s, this becomes abundantly clear from the way in which rickshaw licenses have been distributed. I was told more about this process by Ghazi⁴⁶, a member of the local “association for rickshaw owners”. Yasin and I had met Ghazi coincidentally, as was the case for most of our encounters in Korail. While chatting about the new rickshaw system at a cosy tea stall next to the main road one of the other customers – an elderly lady who had just entertained us by singing a song about the rickshaw – offered to introduce us to an influential rickshaw owner. We followed her to an open space, which was shared and used as a garage by three different rickshaw *maliks*. She introduced us to Ghazi, an imposing man with a voluminous black beard, who led the

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview, Beltolla (Korail), August 15, 2017.

way to a tin shed office space next to the garage. The gigantic office table and comfortable office chair stood in shrill contrast with the makeshift conditions of the rest of the office. There was a huge, green banner attached to one of walls, which read “Gulshan, Banani, Niketan Society - Rickshaw Malik Association”.

Without much encouragement, Ghazi started to talk about the number of rickshaw licenses that was assigned to each of these neighbourhoods. He explained that the intention of the City Corporation had been to distribute the licenses proportionately among the different rickshaw owners in the area. The idea was that a rickshaw owner with, for example, hundred rickshaws would get ten licenses and an owner with twenty vehicles two. That it did not work out like this in reality became evident from the fact that Ghazi himself was granted eight licenses, even though he only owned fifteen rickshaws in total. He was quick to admit that the distribution of licenses did not work out so favourably for most rickshaw *maliks*. When asked whether he thought that the community rickshaw system had been an improvement, he answered with an unequivocal “no”. Ghazi did not have to worry about his own business, yet he witnessed how other *maliks* struggled to keep their businesses afloat. He knew of different owners who only got five licenses, even though they had a fleet of over a hundred rickshaws. Ghazi divulged that many could no longer get by; the rickshaw rent they collected on a daily basis no longer covered the costs of their children’s education and the rent of the rickshaw garage. He pointed at a small tea stall that bordered the open space of the garage and explained that the owner used to be a rickshaw *malik*, but had been forced to exchange his dwindling rickshaw business for a modest tea shop.

Mahfuz⁴⁷, who I introduced in the previous section, had also suffered significantly under the new system. When I asked him how it was possible that some *maliks* had received considerably more licenses than others, he explained that those with the right political connections had ended up with the lion’s share of the available licenses. Mahfuz mentioned that the president of the aforementioned “rickshaw owner association” had received as much as twenty-seven permits, despite the fact that he only had thirty rickshaws in total. Although Mahfuz himself had only managed to get two licenses, he was still holding on to his rickshaw business for the moment. His perseverance, however, came at a considerable cost. Not only did he take out a substantial loan in order to be able to buy a license from another owner, he also

⁴⁷ Semi-structured interview, Korail, August 15, 2017.

frequently had to buy back his rickshaws from the police. Mahfuz explained that some of the drivers without a community rickshaw still tried to enter Banani, at the risk of being confronted by the police. When one of these rickshaws was seized, he would split the total fine (600 taka) with the driver in question. On the day we met him, Mahfuz had been particularly unlucky, as three of his rickshaws had been taken by the police.

Despite the risk of police confiscation, many drivers continued to enter Banani with a regular rickshaw. The fact that Banani was located directly next to Korail slum, where most of the rickshaw garages in the area were situated, made this particular neighbourhood more accessible for regular rickshaws. During a visit to the Banani Housing Association⁴⁸, one of the employees explained to me that the “gate” between Korail and Banani was not surveilled properly. He attributed this to the fact that they relied solely on community police forces to enforce the boundary between both areas. Indeed, I myself had also noticed that the enforcement at this particular check post was more lax than when, for example, entering Baridhara; a particularly posh part of the diplomatic zone. Contrary to the check point between Banani and Korail, the Baridhara entrance gate resembled a bona fide border. In order to enter the area, one had to pass different police posts and on several occasions I witnessed how people – although never White *bidesis* like myself – were searched and frisked before being allowed into the area. This “successful” attempt at near-total enclosure, however, did not necessarily reflect the power of government actors, but rather that of the local Housing Society, which represented the interests of its wealthy members. The Baridhara Housing Society had faced backlash in the past for trying to prohibit local rickshaw drivers from wearing a *lungi* (“sarong”), insisting they wore trousers instead⁴⁹. Although this particular rule was never enforced, there were many other regulations that set the area apart from the rest of the city. For instance, the ostensibly public park next to Baridhara was only accessible for residents and, in addition, it had become increasingly difficult for non-residents to even pass through the area⁵⁰. Hence, enclosure in this particular case was driven by non-state actors.

The above example highlights the porous edges of formalisation “where official practice mixes with the semi-official and the latter with the unofficial” (Mitchell 2006

⁴⁸ Visit Banani Housing Association, September 22, 2017.

⁴⁹ Suliman Niloy, “HC rules after ‘Lungi March’”, *Bdnews24*, April 16, 2013, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/04/16/hc-rules-after-lungi-march>.

⁵⁰ Abdul Matin, “The People’s Republic of Baridhara?”, *Dhaka Tribune*, June 6, 2013, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2013/06/06/the-peoples-republic-of-baridhara>.

[1999], 174). The fact that processes of formalisation, fixing and enclosure are not per definition driven by state actors, implies that informalisation cannot be simply interpreted as a form of subversion or resistance against the state. This is important to bear in mind when making sense of the transgressive movements of drivers entering Banani with their regular, unauthorised rickshaws. It is all too tempting to interpret these practices as inherently informal; that is, as an exterior threat to logic of legibility that ostensibly undergirds processes of formalisation. However, whereas on an ideological level processes of formalisation are unmistakably about carving out a distinctive formal domain, in reality there are always “porous edges” where the official, semi-official and unofficial blend into each other (Mitchell 2006, 174). This means that enclosure and exception are often part of the very same processes of formalisation.

Roy (2005) makes a similar argument by drawing on the work of Agamben (1998) and what he has described as “the paradox of sovereignty”. This paradox lies in the fact that “the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (Agamben 1998, 15). Roy (2005, 149) applies this notion of sovereignty to the context of urban governance and planning and emphasises that “the planning and legal apparatus of the state has the power to determine when to enact this suspension, to determine what is informal and what is not, and to determine which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear”. The power of the state thus not only becomes manifest through the enforcement of what is considered legal, but is also “reproduced through the capacity to construct and reconstruct categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy” (Roy 2005, 149). This obscure process of strategically shifting the lines between what is legitimate and illegitimate becomes visible when looking at the overall rickshaw licensing system in Dhaka.

As I explained in the introductory chapter, the rickshaw license system in Dhaka has not been updated since the 1980s, with the result that the majority of rickshaws is plying the roads “illegally”. In fact, throughout my research, many Dhakaites have tried to temper my indignation about some of the injustices that rickshaw drivers face, by pointing out that many rickshaws are operating illegally in Dhaka city. This narrative of criminalisation is nourished by local newspaper articles⁵¹ that frequently blame these “illegal” rickshaws for the city’s endemic traffic congestion. Despite the

⁵¹ See for example: Rezaul Hoque, “Illegal rickshaws dominate Dhaka streets”, *Bdnews24*, 21 October 2014, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/10/21/illegal-rickshaws-dominate-dhaka-streets>.

And: Shahed Shafiq, “Rickshaws Continue to Grow in Numbers Thanks to Trade Unions”, *Dhaka Tribune*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2017/11/04/rickshaws-grow-numbers-trade-unions>.

ostensibly illegal presence of hundreds and thousands of rickshaws⁵², it is difficult to find a rickshaw within the jurisdiction of Dhaka City Corporation that does not have a metal license plate attached to the back. The original DCC licenses, referred to as *blue books*, were handed out before the license ceiling was imposed and are relatively rare to find. In fact, the majority of the license plates are unofficial ones that are issued by a variety of unions and owner associations (see also Suykens 2018). These unofficial licenses successfully ward off the traffic police and have to be replaced by the rickshaw owner every three to six months.

Often the rickshaw's wooden "body" displays more than one license. Some have faded colours that indicate that the license has expired a long time ago, whereas more recent plates add their bright shades of blue and green to the colourful mishmash of painted landscapes and film stars that decorate the back of many rickshaws. In numerous areas of Dhaka, moreover, it is common for rickshaws to have two different types of licenses: one to satisfy the police, and the other to keep potential thieves at bay. The second category of licenses are distributed by powerful syndicates, masking as rickshaw owner federations, and are intended as a precaution against theft. When I brought up these rather dubious, protective "licenses" to a rickshaw owner by the name of Masum⁵³, he laughed in surprise. "Oh you know about that as well?" he reacted. Earlier in our conversation he had been a bit reluctant to answer my curious questions about the ownership of the big open field that he was using as a garage and whether he had to pay rent. I tried to press him a bit more on the subject of the licenses, asking him: "Do these licenses really prevent rickshaws from getting stolen?" Masum responded that it still happened, but less. He continued to explain that when a rickshaw with a protective plate got stolen, it was "easier to buy it back". The phone number of most rickshaw owners is painted to the back of the vehicle and rickshaw theft is usually followed by a phone call from an extortionist offering to sell the stolen rickshaw back.

⁵² According to the Dhaka Structure Plan there are at least 500,000 rickshaws operating in Dhaka, of which roughly 100,000 are licensed (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 9).

⁵³ Informal conversation, Tejgoan, November 15, 2017.

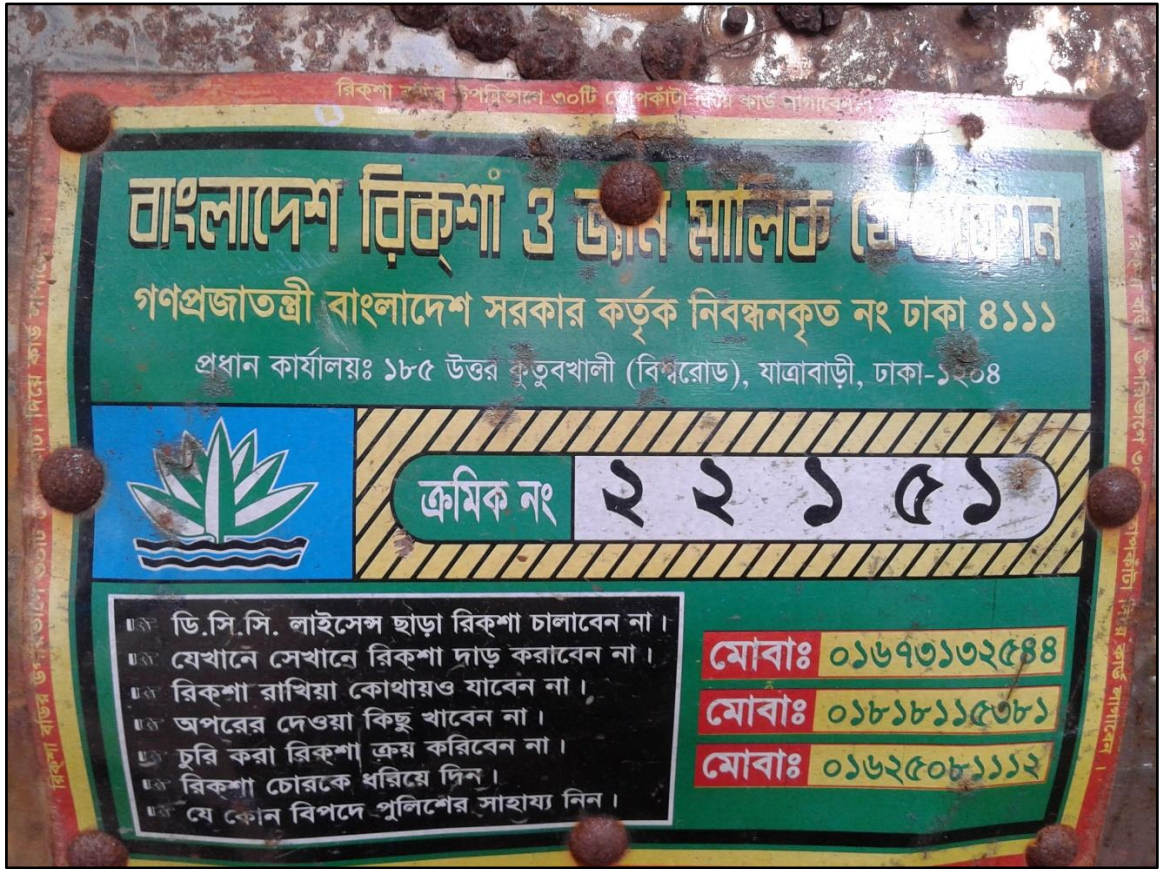


Figure 8: An unofficial rickshaw license plate, with various driving instructions at the bottom-left.

Regardless of the particular purpose that a license is supposed to serve, all of these unauthorised plates are characterised by a curated, officialised appearance and include emblems, registration numbers, dates, contact details and sometimes even a list of rules that rickshaw drivers are supposed to follow (“do not just park your rickshaw here and there”). What’s more, they often include direct references to the Awami League. Licenses of the “Bangladesh Rickshaw and Van Malik Federation”, for example, include their organisation’s government registration number. The “Bangladesh Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League” is even more explicit in their attempts to legitimise their license plates. These license plates stipulate that although the rickshaw does not have a valid license, the traffic police should not seize it, “as a court case is petitioned by the association seeking temporary right for its movement on the Dhaka road” (Hasan 2013, 254).

During an interview at the office of the “Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League”, the general secretary of the organisation, Insur Ali⁵⁴, also emphasised the “legal” character of their license plates. Insur Ali was a particularly powerful actor within the rickshaw

⁵⁴ Semi-structured interview, December 1, 2017.

industry and his name frequently popped up in newspaper articles on the city's outdated license system. He claimed that his association was "more legal" than other so-called unions that were similarly making money by distributing unauthorised licenses. Insur Ali showed us a heavy file bulging with letters that he had exchanged with the Government on the topic of licensing. He explained that the "Rickshaw-Van Workers' League" had requested the Government in 2005 to issue 43,000 additional licenses. The proposition was that their union would then go on to distribute the plates and make sure that the Government would get its share in taxes. They initially reached an agreement, but in the end the process was stalled – according to Insur Ali, because of the interference of an opposing official. As to the reason why the licenses were never issued, Insur Ali explained: "The official number of licenses is 86,000. These licenses are most wanted and valuable. If the number increases, these original licenses will decrease in value". His assessment resonates with Gallagher's (1992, 96) observation that "the real reason for restricting licenses is not traffic control, nor humanitarian concern for the pullers, but the opportunity it creates for making money".

The above examples highlight that the legal vacuum that has resulted from the license ceiling, has not only created ample space for making money, but is also characterised by a certain degree of negotiation with the state. In fact, the alleged unions and "owner associations" that hand out unauthorised licenses were commonly understood to be "political associations". A rickshaw owner by the name of Waheed⁵⁵, who proudly boasted that all his licenses had been issued by Dhaka City Corporation, explained: "Some rickshaw owners get their licenses illegally from political associations. These political groups get help from the Ministry, because they are part of the political body of the ruling party". This certainly seemed to be the case for Insur Ali's union, which functioned as the *de facto* labour wing of the Awami League. This became abundantly clear at a rally of the "Workers' League" that I was invited to. The event was staged in front of the Awami League political office, where the "Rickshaw-Van Workers' League" also held residence. The audience of rickshaw drivers were treated to a variety of agitated speeches – shouted through a megaphone at high volume – that lauded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her endless efforts to make Dhaka "developed"⁵⁶. This is in line with Suykens' (2018, 427) observation that "[t]he

⁵⁵ Informal conversation, Lalbagh, October 16, 2017.

⁵⁶ Rickshaw-Van Workers' League rally, December 12, 2017.

holders of these unofficial licenses are not simply permitted to function, or allowed to operate in the face of state weakness; they are fully dependent on state patronage”.

These mechanisms of patronage and the unequal opportunities that are created through the production of (il)legitimacy are also visible in the case of the diplomatic zone. Indeed, as I have stated before, the process of formalisation in the diplomatic zone is characterised by enclosure on the one hand and by exception on the other. This aspect of exception becomes manifest in the strategic and simultaneous sanctioning and condoning of practices that have been rendered “illegitimate” under the new system, such as regular rickshaws entering Banani. The income generating opportunities that have emerged as a result of this narrowing conception of legitimacy coincide with new and creative practices of licensing. One example of such licensing practices relates to the electric rickshaws that circulate in Banani, despite the fact that Dhaka’s High Court has officially declared a ban on battery-run rickshaws. In fact, Insur Ali and his affiliates have been instrumental in protesting and criminalising the movements of these battery-run rickshaws. Nonetheless, the fast, electric rickshaws can still be found in certain neighbourhoods and pockets of the city, including Banani.

During a group discussion in Korail⁵⁷, Yasin and I got to talk to a rickshaw owner who had been hit hard by the new rickshaw system and was now trying to upgrade some of his *Bangla* rickshaws to electric ones. Most electric rickshaws are created by simply adding a battery-system to a regular rickshaw and by replacing the spokes of regular wheels with more solid ones. The rickshaw *malik* we ended up talking to was in the process of replacing the spokes of a wheel when we walked onto the premises of his garage. During the conversation that followed, we discussed the somewhat surprising surge of electric rickshaws in Banani. The owner explained that there was a special “token system” in place that allowed electric rickshaws into the area. He had to pay 300 taka per week for a token. “Do you have to pay to the police *thana* (“station”)”, I asked him. “No, not to the *thana*, but to one of their committees”. “So, some sort of *rajniti* (“political”) organisation?” I inferred. The rickshaw owner answered affirmatively, while making a telling gesture over his shoulder to indicate corruption. A bystander clarified: “The police *thana* receives money, but not directly”.

When we returned to the same garage a few weeks later, the son of one of the owners told us about yet another curious “token system” that had seen the light of day

⁵⁷ Semi-structured group discussion, Beltolla (Korail), November 29, 2017.

since the community rickshaw system was introduced. I had heard rumours before that some youths of the local student wing of Awami League had introduced a token system that would allow rickshaw drivers to enter Banani without a community rickshaw. The son of the owner, who also operated a rickshaw himself, confirmed the story but clarified that different youth *leagues* were involved and that the system had only been in place for three days. It was shut down by the traffic police, who had rounded up 250 of these pseudo-authorised rickshaws at the playing field next to the police station. He himself had paid 800 taka for a token, only to lose his rickshaw to the police three days later. “Is it not possible to buy back your rickshaw?” I asked him, but he was not sure. He already tried to get his rickshaw back several times, but had not succeeded so far. This story is thus indicative of the pervasive level of uncertainty and ambiguity that emerges when conflicting parties, all with their own political connections, engage in the constant shifting and blurring of the lines between what can be considered illegitimate, semi-legitimate and legitimate. The licensing practices discussed in this section clearly exemplify this constant shifting and highlight the dialectic tension between enclosure and exception that characterises the process of formalisation in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone.



Figure 9: Rickshaws confiscated by the police, as seen next to the Banani police station.

Conclusion

On one of my last days in Dhaka, I paid a visit to the playing field next to the Banani police station, where all the confiscated rickshaws were kept. The vehicles on the playing field, rusting away without being used, made for a depressing sight. In a way, it seemed to represent the enormous loss of livelihood that was instigated by the new rickshaw system. But what does that ultimately tell us about formalisation? Do these confiscated rickshaws hint at the definitive completion of processes of enclosure? Is this the materialisation of the desire to grant the rickshaw a restricted, but proper and fixed role within Dhaka's urban landscape; the role of a feeder service operating exclusively on a neighbourhood level?

In this chapter I have explored the distinct moment of formalisation that has ultimately led to the confiscation of the rickshaws in the above picture. In doing so, I have tried to emphasise the porous and fragmented nature of processes of formalisation. In line with Guyer (2004) and Ferguson (2007) I have interpreted formalisation as an exercise in "fixing" particular social, economic and even spatial arrangements. At the same time, I have been careful not to overstate these fixities. It can be tempting to consider the formal domain as a more or less static or permanent configuration, but such an approach does not take sufficient account of the "porous edges" of the formal (Mitchell 2006). In this chapter I have therefore analysed formalisation, not as an "enduring generalizable principle" (Guyer 2004, 158), but as a tentative effort that gains shape through simultaneous processes of fixing, enclosure and exception.

In the first half of this chapter I have substantiated the claim that the new rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone constitutes a trend towards the fixing and territorialisation of rickshaw journeys. The community rickshaw system has effectively tied rickshaws to specific roads, routes and neighbourhoods, and has created fixed points of departure and arrival. This trend is in line with wider policies, such as the implementation of VIP roads, which have increasingly led to the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of rickshaw journeys and what used to be an open-ended and unstructured way of traversing the city. In addition, the rickshaw system in the diplomatic zone has fixed certain social-economic aspects, such as the fare per distance and the identity of the rickshaw puller. This spatial-economic fixity, however, has not necessarily led to occupational stability. Nor has it sorted out a clear

dichotomy of mobile versus static ways of being in the street, hence complicating intuitive connotations of the stable-static-formal and the mobile-dynamic-informal.

Throughout the second half of this chapter I have argued that whereas on the surface the new rickshaw system seems to be indicative of a commitment to regularise and stabilise rickshaw mobilities, the underlying logic is that of enclosure. This becomes clear from the fact that the new rickshaw system has helped to significantly harden the boundary between the diplomatic zone and the rest of the city. All of this suggests that processes of formalisation are not only geared towards creating order, legibility and fixity, but also work through processes of restriction and limitation that enable the creation of certain configurations of fixity. These mechanisms of enclosure do not only become visible when looking at the reconfiguration of rickshaw mobilities, but also undergird the institution of license ceilings.

In the last section of this chapter we have seen that these processes of enclosure work in tandem with processes of exception. This was exemplified by the fact that unauthorised rickshaws continued to enter Banani; transgressions that regularly resulted in the confiscation of rickshaws. However, this was not always the end of the story and often these vehicles were simply bought back. I have therefore argued that these ventures into the diplomatic zone should not be interpreted as a sign of exogenous resistance; as an expression of the untameable mobility and dynamism that is often associated with the informal sphere. Instead, these intrusions signify that enclosure and exception are different sides of the same coin and that formalisation is characterised by the strategic distribution of (il)legitimacy. In the specific context of the diplomatic zone this has led to a situation where the implementation of a system of tightening rules has created a lucrative sphere that allows for state-affiliated actors to strategically sanction or condone the increasing number of rickshaw practices and mobilities that have been deemed illegitimate under the new system. I agree with Suykens (2018) that this is an illustration, not of state withdrawal or failed formalisation, but of the Bangladesh party-state *at work*. In that sense, the field of confiscated rickshaws in Banani does not symbolise a standstill or the final sealing off of boundaries. These confiscated rickshaws are an asset that the traffic police can decide to liquefy at any moment and therefore hint at the simultaneity of processes of enclosure and exception.

5. Rickshaw Labour: Unstable Work or a Stable Site of Return?

Rubel¹ clears his throat a few times, before he starts to sing. He is sitting in a crossed-legged position, his checkered *lungi* tucked under his knees. He just finished his customary after-work bath, his dark hair still wet, and has exchanged the towel around his neck for a neat, somewhat formal looking shirt. Yasin and I have been invited to sit down on an embroidered *katha*². We find ourselves at the second floor, more of an attic really, of the mess where Rubel stays with fifty to hundred-and-twenty other rickshaw drivers, porters and day labourers. Most of them are rural-urban migrants and their numbers fluctuate according to the seasons; during the dry, winter months the mess is relatively empty, whereas the summer rains tend to instigate a small exodus from the countryside to the city. Half-empty duffel bags are dangling from a line next to wall, just under the low-hanging roof. It is impossible to stand up straight in the room and the wooden floorboards, separated by narrow strips of space, bend slightly when walking across them. The floor also serves as a communal sleeping space and some men have curled up for an afternoon nap. In a clear voice and with a hint of melancholy, invoking the sound of Bengali folk singers, Rubel starts to sing: “I tell a truthful story. I drive a rickshaw in Dhaka”. The song goes on to narrate his journeys through Old Dhaka:

“As I go from Sadarghat to Kagojitola,
I sing rhythmically and ring my bell loudly.
When I go to Gaucia and Newmarket,
The people affectionately offer me banana and bread.
I spend my days happily and I sleep comfortably at night.”

After introducing the bustle of the Sadarghat boat terminal and the shopping crowds of New Market and Gaucia, Rubel leads us along the second-hand motor repair shops of Dholaikhal and the quiet, residential streets of Wari, where “people don’t bargain over the fare” and where he “salutes the traffic police”. Rubel’s self-written song paints an idyllic picture of the work and life of rickshaw *wallas* and of Dhaka traffic in general; a space where police officers, passengers and rickshaw drivers apparently get along

¹ Visit rickshaw mess Lalkutir, August 12, 2017.

² A *katha* is an embroidered piece of fabric, typically used as a bed cover or blanket.

amiably. This “truthful story”, however, does not necessarily resonate with Rubel’s life. That he is by no means the proud and content rickshaw driver from the song becomes clear when Yasin suggests that he should upload his song on YouTube. “No, I cannot do that”, Rubel protests, “I drive a rickshaw *secretly*”.

I got to know Rubel at this same mess in 2015³. He stood out among the other rickshaw drivers as a self-proclaimed writer and poet. When I asked him if I could take notes of the conversation, he responded by presenting himself as a fellow writer, reassuring us that “he would write about us as well”. With a good sense of drama, Rubel started to talk about his life. He explained that he looked thin and sick now, due to all the hard work, but that he used to be very handsome and strong before starting this job. He described himself as “being educated”, employing the typical narrative through which class differences are expressed in Bangladesh. In fact, his background and education had almost prevented him from being able to rent a rickshaw. The rickshaw *malik* whom Rubel had initially approached, would simply not believe that someone who looked and dressed like Rubel really had the intention of becoming a rickshaw driver and suspected him to be a prospective rickshaw thief.

Although Rubel’s life as a part-time writer, part-time rickshaw driver is in no way representative for the rickshaw community as a whole, many of the experiences he touched upon during that first conversation were typical. For example, the arduous nature of the job made it impossible for him to drive a rickshaw continuously for more than one hour and compelled him to make regular stops at one of Dhaka’s many tea stalls for some bread or bananas. The experience of social neglect and shame, meanwhile made him hesitant to disclose his profession to his extended family and prompted him to “drive a rickshaw *secretly*”. Even the reason for taking up this job in the first place was significant. Rubel’s reasoning echoed an explanation that I had heard before many times: “I was *nirupay* (“helpless”)”. He had suffered some financial misfortunes, and started driving a rickshaw to compensate for the loss of his business. Entrepreneurial failure, as well as lost investments, were recurrent biographical themes throughout the interviews that I conducted and seemed to contribute to the sense of helplessness that was voiced by Rubel and other rickshaw drivers. “We are bound to do this job”, was almost the default answer whenever I asked drivers about their motives for joining the rickshaw industry. Yet at the same time this was never the

³ Semi-structured interview, Lalkutir, December 30, 2015.

whole story. For rickshaw labour was also considered to hold a significant advantage over other accessible jobs, such as low paid factory work or day-labouring, which often entailed either waiting for work or waiting for money. Indeed, the rickshaw pullers I spoke with throughout my fieldwork consistently stressed that the work brought them “instant cash” (*nogod poysa*), “independence” (*nij sadhin*) and allowed them to “earn money as the wheels turn around” (*chaka ghurle taka*).

In this chapter I analyse the multi-layered narratives through which cycle-rickshaw pullers make sense of their strenuous labour. The work experiences of rickshaw drivers blur intuitive distinctions between stable wage labour and precarious self-employment and suspend a straightforward definition of what “good” or “decent” work constitutes. What’s more, their efforts to make a living make it difficult to approach work itself as a clearly demarcated category and often consist of multiple labour trajectories and diversions that either succeed, intersect or overlap with one another. Rubel, for instance, combines his work as a rickshaw driver with a piece-rate job for a life insurance company that consists of going door-to-door to solicit new customers⁴. Indeed, as we will see in this chapter, the labour trajectories of rickshaw drivers show that the boundary between wage work and “nonwage, self-employed, homebased, piece-rate, and contract work” is thin, porous and frequently traversed (Gidwani and Maringanti 2016, 122). Throughout this chapter I therefore approach rickshaw labour as part of a wider tangle of – failed, ongoing, interrupted, seasonal, improvised and family-wide – efforts to make a living.

In making sense of rickshaw labour, I join efforts to push our understanding of work and work-related vulnerabilities beyond the “fetishism of the wage” (Denning 2010, 80). Denning (2010) has convincingly argued that wage labour and the employment contract are too often used as the default analytical starting point for interpreting people’s efforts and struggles to make a living. This has not only resulted in a number of misleading binaries, such as formal/informal, waged work/self-employment, and market/non-market, but also continues to misguide our understanding of life under capitalism (Denning 2010; Narotzky 2018), urban poverty (Das and Randeria 2015), class politics (Millar 2008; Gidwani and Maringanti 2016), decent work (Munck 2013; Barchiesi 2016), and precarious work (Munck 2013; Scully 2016; Millar 2017). Moreover, historians have long pointed out that that the scholarly

⁴ It should be noted that this specific type of work is not necessarily within reach for rickshaw pullers without a higher education.

obsession with the wage-worker does not make sense in the South Asian or Bengali context, where this group comprises a rather small percentage of the working population and is overshadowed by far more prominent forms of labour, including “tenancy, bondedness, sharecropping, domestic labour, family production, etc.” (Van Schendel 2006, 231).

Experiences of work and work-related vulnerabilities are bound to differ across historical moments, geographic sites, and social positions (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Nonetheless, labour precarity is often conceptualised in relation to post-Fordist capitalism and the dismantling of full-time, life-long employment under neoliberal regimes (Millar 2017, 3). Yet for many low-income workers outside of Europe and North-America, this kind of stability – or the promise thereof (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012) – has never been part of their employment experiences in the first place. Moving beyond such a “Northern bias” (Munck 2013; Scully 2016; Millar 2017), among other things, requires finding new vocabularies and imaginaries to make sense of work-related vulnerabilities. It also requires challenging intuitive distinctions between the fixities of formal employment and the uncertainties of the informal sector. In the previous chapter we have seen that attempts to add an element of spatial-economic fixity to the unstructured and open-ended journeys of rickshaw drivers have not necessarily resulted in occupational stability. In this chapter, I will further complicate connotations of fixity and stability, as well as the normative notions of decency and productiveness that usually lurk behind such fusions.

In what follows, I focus on what it is that draws people like Rubel to the rickshaw industry, despite the obvious disadvantages of the work. I argue that rickshaw labour, although far from offering a secure or stable mode of employment, guarantees a relatively stable site of return amidst ecological, financial and entrepreneurial emergencies and allows rickshaw drivers to hold together a number of highly tentative projects for the future. To make sense of such inherently-unstable-but-always-available forms of work I draw on the work of Catharine Malabou (2000; 2009) and her notion of *plasticity*. The meaning of plasticity is twofold: on the one hand it indicates a degree of malleability, of being susceptible to changes of form, whereas on the other hand it also denotes having the power to mould, or having the power to bestow form (Malabou 2000, 203). Plasticity stands in contrast with flexibility, which refers to a negative, almost infinite ability “to receive form or impression, to be able to fold

oneself, to take the fold, not to give it” (Malabou 2009, 12)⁵. It is precisely this negative flexibility that we saw at work in the previous chapter. For the rickshaw bans and restrictions that were implemented in the diplomatic zone forced rickshaw drivers to fold their journeys into increasingly smaller pockets of the city and ultimately impinged on their ability to mould their own life projects. As we will see in this chapter, it is this element of *plasticity* that draws rickshaw drivers to the job in the first place. Moreover, it is also what they stand to lose through processes of formalisation. Throughout this chapter I argue that the work-related vulnerabilities that result from rickshaw restrictions are therefore best understood, not as a tension between stable employment and unstable work, but as a tension between (oppressive) flexibility and (enabling) plasticity. Before discussing the experiences of rickshaw drivers themselves, I will elaborate a bit more on the framing of rickshaw labour.

Inhumane Work: “One Person Pulling Forth Another”

“It is a very tedious job and bone breaking work for men. But when people get no other alternative, their first choice is to pick up the handle of the rickshaw.”

Razequzzaman Ratan is trying to make sense of the ambivalences of rickshaw labour. In his capacity as the leader of the “Socialist Party of Bangladesh” he has participated in numerous protests and fought against the implementation of rickshaw restrictions. At the same time, he considers rickshaw labour to be a particularly strenuous form of work that, although a necessity, does not naturally warrant a future.

“So many people say it is *omanobik*. Would you say it is inhumane?” I ask him, deliberately using a term I have heard before.

“There are many aspects... It is bone-breaking work first [and] it has no social reputation. They suffer in various ways. First by the police. Then by local hooligans or *mastans*. Then by passengers and the garage owners. In dry season or wet season, rainy season or hot season, they are always under the heat of the sun or rain. Without protection they protect the passengers. They have no

⁵ Recently, the notion of plasticity has been taken up by urban scholars (see Knowles 2017; Simone 2016; Von Wissel 2016) to make sense of the unexpected, unintended and speculative ways in which configurations of life and matter gain shape in the city. Millar (2018, 132), moreover, has creatively used this term to challenge the dualist framework of the formal/informal and to highlight the form-giving potential of informal labour. Although unaware of Millar’s (2018) interpretation of plasticity when first drafting this chapter, my approach shows some similarity to hers in the sense that I also use the term to make sense of informal constellations of labour. My argument, however, focuses not so much on the *form* of labour and economic practices, but on the *agency* of workers. Specifically, I use the term *plasticity* to analyse how the work experiences of rickshaw drivers are caught between force and freedom; between having to adapt to external vulnerabilities and being able to mould the city and its opportunities according to their own needs.

protection, but they will always try to protect their passengers... So, it is sometimes inhumane or *omanobik*...”

The most important question for Razequzzaman Ratan, however, is not whether the work is inhumane. Instead, he concludes his reflection with another probe: “But why do people come to such arduous jobs?”⁶

With his last probe Mr. Razequzzaman Ratan neatly summarises the line of enquiry that informs this chapter. Before I try to answer this question, however, I want to further unpack the notion of “inhumane work” which is often evoked in relation to rickshaw labour. Although I met many people throughout my research who loved and cherished their rickshaw rides as an inherently Bangladeshi experience, I also frequently spoke to friends and acquaintances who felt ambivalent about the arduous work that rickshaw drivers had to engage in. This sense of discomfort about being driven around by a fellow human being was expressed perhaps most succinctly by an architect and environmental activist I spoke with. “When I am on the rickshaw I cannot just lean back and feel comfortable”⁷, he admitted while spreading out his arms to mimic the blasé attitude of passengers who occupy the rickshaw as if it were their personal palanquin. Despite the fact that he was an avid environmentalist, my conversation partner very much disagreed with fellow activists who presented the rickshaw as a green and sustainable mode of transport. “The story of the rickshaw is not a success story, it is a story of deprivation, forced labour and un-wellness”, he insisted, as he went on to paint a picture of the inhumane circumstances that characterise the job, including the exposure to pollution and the hazardous nature of the work. He was careful not to promote a full ban on rickshaws, yet remained sceptical of the opportunities that the rickshaw industry and Dhaka itself have to offer to rural-urban migrants. In a fast-paced monologue, and while I was struggling to jot down his words as accurately as possible, the well-spoken environmental activist shared some of his key concerns over the city’s rapid urbanisation:

Dhaka is like a mother with her arms wide open, she welcomes everyone. If you have lost your land, you can come to the city. [...] Dhaka has become completely overburdened. The average speed is now 7 km/h and the city has become unbearable and unliveable. We have to connect the situation of rickshaw pullers to this bigger picture. Why are we not exploring employment opportunities for

⁶ Semi-structured interview, January 17, 2018.

⁷ Informal conversation, December 11, 2017.

them outside of Dhaka? Rickshaw pullers may have good earnings, but what about their way of living? They left the paradise of the village, only for cash. Only for the incentive of cash, they sacrificed their childhood. They need some kind of employment, but this is relative and we should take social and environmental health into account.

The architect concluded his evocative commentary with the observation that we should not deprive rickshaw drivers of their source of employment, but that we should also not lean back and be comfortable as they drive us around.

This element of discomfort is not difficult to relate to. I often felt a pang of guilt whenever I was seated under the protective hood of the rickshaw, while the rickshaw driver was making his way through the pouring rain with nothing but a flimsy plastic bag on his head to protect him. Pedalling a cycle-rickshaw with two, sometimes three passengers in the back unmistakably constitutes a very strenuous form of physical labour. The design of the rickshaw makes it almost impossible to gather enough force to propel the vehicle forward whilst sitting down and rickshaw drivers therefore typically navigate the dense urban landscape of Dhaka from a standing position, leaning heavily on their hands and handlebar. Consequently, driving a rickshaw on a daily basis makes people's muscles, joints, hands, waist, chest and back ache and often results in a physique that holds the middle ground between athletic and undernourished. This condition of physical hardship is further exacerbated by the uneven pavement of local roads, many of which have been opened up repeatedly to unclog drains and fix underlying water pipes. These patchy, bumpy roads make the wheels of the rickshaw rattle and complicate any attempt to move in a straightforward manner. Add to this the cacophony of horns that accompanies the hours spent stuck in traffic; the suffocating dust from nearby brick factories that hovers over the city in the dry winter months; and the heavy rainfall that transforms the streets into knee-deep, waist-deep puddles of stagnant water during the monsoon and it becomes clear that driving a rickshaw is a demanding job to say the least.

It is this strenuous nature of rickshaw labour that gives credence and legitimacy to narratives that depict this form of work as *omanobik* ("inhumane"). However, although concerns about the working conditions of rickshaw drivers are very much warranted, it should be noted that the notion of "inhumane work" is also often employed to justify the restriction of rickshaw movements. In a reader's letter to the popular English newspaper *The Daily Star*, a concerned citizen of Dhaka for example

wrote: “I am sure we all can see that it is absolutely ‘inhuman’ to have another human being pull us this way with such difficulty and pain”⁸. The author went on to argue that “we should think of a better way for them to earn a living which is more humane and more dignified”, before arriving at his inevitable conclusion that immediate steps should be taken to “to ‘eliminate’ rickshaws in ‘quick phases’ from Dhaka metropolitan area”. Hence, what we see here is that concerns about the working conditions of rickshaw pullers are used to substantiate the argument that the rickshaw should be eliminated.



Figure 10: A rickshaw driver navigating a flooded street in Old Dhaka.

A similar line of argument was put forward by a local ward commissioner⁹ I spoke to. He commented that it would be better for Dhaka if the rickshaw would be banned from the city completely, in order to decrease traffic jam. He would rather see rickshaw pullers take up a job in the ready-made garment industry, or one of the other emerging industries that are “very beneficial and important to the country”. With a hint of

⁸ Mohamad Rahat, *The Daily Star*, April 10, 2008, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-31503>.

⁹ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, October 16, 2017.

embarrassment he added: “Except for Bangladesh, there are no other countries that have rickshaws. It is inhumane that one person is pulling forth another human being”. According to Babul¹⁰, a garage owner with approximately 175 cycle-rickshaws, this sense of embarrassment was the main reason behind the rickshaw restrictions in the diplomatic zone. Babul’s own business was hit hard by the new rickshaw system and he tried to make sense of these new measures as follows:

The authorities feel that Bangladesh is now becoming developed and modernised. They want modernised transport, not the rickshaw. People from foreign countries, like the people living in Gulshan and Banani, can see one person pulling forth someone else. They [the authorities] think it is shameful for our country.

What we see in the above quotations, is that the ostensibly shameful imagery of “one man pulling another” is somehow linked to the perception and framing of Bangladesh as a nation. This discursive connection was made even more explicit by Insur Ali¹¹, whom I introduced in the previous chapter as the general secretary of the “Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League”. While discussing the future of the rickshaw in Dhaka, Insur Ali praised the prime minister for her concern for the rickshaw community. He contended that “without Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina” the rickshaw would have been banned long ago. At the same time, however, he emphasised that the prime minister would ideally like to liberate rickshaw drivers from their strenuous labour, as it is “inhumane for one person to be pulling the other”. In line with the ideology and political vision of her father Sheikh Mujib, who stood at the birth of Bangladesh’s independence and served as the country’s first president, it has been Sheikh Hasina’s wish to free Bangladesh of these kind of difficult jobs. Or at least, that was how Insur Ali narrated the story. He concluded that “Bangladesh is an independent country and this [one man pulling another] does not suit an independent country”. Hence, here the image of the struggling rickshaw driver is brought into direct connection with Bangladesh’s efforts to define itself as a nation.

Bangladesh is not the only country where the presence and the image of the rickshaw has proven to be a source of anxiety when it comes to national self-perception. Indeed, the negative perception of rickshaw labour as a form of “inhumane

¹⁰ Semi-structured interview, Badda, October 14, 2017.

¹¹ Semi-structured interview, December 1, 2017.

work” has been a recurring trope in countries with a history of rickshaws, such as Indonesia, Singapore and India. In fact, the narrative that surrounds the hand-pulled rickshaw in Kolkata is strikingly similar to the public discourse in Bangladesh. For instance, the former chief minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee¹² argued that “[i]n the 21st century it is not right for a human being to pull another human being” and insisted that the profession was inhumane and inappropriate because hand-pulled rickshaws were “seen in no other city in the world” (Hyrapiet and Greiner 2012, 417). Hyrapiet and Greiner (2012, 417) argue that such narratives revolve around the idea that “rickshaws and rickshaw *wallahs* mark the city as an urban Other and constitute unacceptable reminders of an antimodern past”. The idea that the rickshaw somehow hints at an antimodern past also inspired rickshaw restrictions in Jakarta. Indeed, the Jakarta Directorate of Development considered the so-called *becak* to be “inefficient, incompatible with other traffic, and inhumane” (Rimmer 1986, 164). Rimmer (1986, 164) attributes the Directorate’s efforts to eliminate the *becak* to the fact that “pedalling was considered to be a humiliating occupation which created an ‘image of underdevelopment’”.

The above examples clearly show that the notion of “inhumane work” is not a neutral category, but is often used to construct a narrative that legitimises restricting or banning the rickshaw. Or, as one rickshaw activist¹³ somewhat cynically remarked:

But what our policy makers are doing... They don’t want the rickshaw actually. Because policy makers, the maximum people who make policy and who are upper class, they all are private car owners. So what are they doing? They don’t want the rickshaw. For this reason they say rickshaw pulling is *omanobik* (“inhumane”). They only have one cause.

It is debatable whether the notion of “inhumane work” has been consciously adopted by policymakers to protect their own class interests. However, it is clear that the category has been used as political currency in the discussion over rickshaw restrictions. Moreover, the concept of “inhumane work” is part of a wider narrative that is fraught with assumptions about what it means to develop into a “modern” city or country – no longer associated with the “image of underdevelopment”. Such

¹² Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is a veteran leader of the CPI(M) or the “Communist Party of India (Marxist)” and served as chief minister of West-Bengal from 2000 to 2011. Despite his communist roots, his leadership and administration is associated with the cultivation of foreign investments and the expropriation of farm lands (Hyrapiet and Greiner 2012, 417).

¹³ Semi-structured interview, January 9, 2018.

perceptions of what “development” or “modernity” should look like have been shaped profoundly by the experience of colonialism, which is a topic that I will discuss in greater depth in chapter 7.

Throughout this section we have seen that the notion of “inhumane work”, although often rooted in legitimate concerns over the working conditions of rickshaw drivers, is a slippery category to say the least. Indeed, the above examples underscore that normative conceptions of what constitutes (in)humane work and can easily be mobilised to justify rickshaw restrictions. This resonates with Munck’s (2013, 758) observation that “decent work” is not necessarily an innocent term, especially when applied in postcolonial contexts, where it has often helped to substantiate the idea that “waged work could tame the recalcitrant multitudes”. Barchiesi (2016, 877) has similarly argued that in South Africa the emphasis on dignified work “provided an ethical cover to what, for African workers, were by and large extremely exploitative and oppressive employment conditions”. This “ethical” imperative was premised on the racist idea that the “African” needed to be elevated “out of the alleged stagnation, barbarism, and inhumanity associated [...] with being black” (Barchiesi 2016, 891).

The colonial administration in British India was similarly obsessed with elevating workers from what they perceived to be a stagnant agrarian economy. Indeed, Chandavarkar (2008, 123) observes that the colonial discourse about labour was very much underpinned by anxieties over whether or not it would be possible to unmoor workers from the ostensibly stable and immutable structures of village life and if these workers could be controlled successfully once they had been “set free”. There was a strong sense that it would be almost as difficult to pin these workers down to “their ‘contracts’ and obligations as it was to recruit them in the first place” (Chandavarkar 2008, 124). It was assumed that these “peasant workers” would engage in a “restless search for casual and temporary employment wherever it may be found” and would lack “commitment to the industrial setting” (Chandavarkar 1998, 26). Such colonial anxieties have not only shaped the parameters of what is considered proper or decent work, but have also cast a cloud of suspicion over the activities of in-between and unfixed categories of workers. That these anxieties have survived colonialism becomes evident from the way in which “rootless groups of people”, including rickshaw drivers, are often portrayed in Bangladesh, and the emphasis that is put on productiveness within this framing.

Unproductive Labour and “Proper” Avenues of Employment

“How did you feel when you first drove a rickshaw?” I asked Saiful¹⁴. He had just finished his lunch break and would soon be getting ready for his second shift of the day. Yasin and I were talking with him at the side of a relatively quiet road in Bangshal, a neighbourhood that historically served as the vibrant heart of Dhaka’s rickshaw industry. There were still a lot rickshaw workshops to be found in this area, each of them specialised in fabricating a different part of the rickshaw; from the colourful decorations that adorn the hood of the rickshaw, to the tiniest mechanic parts. Most rickshaw garages, however, had relocated to the periphery of Dhaka and the storage space from where Saiful used to rent his vehicle was recently demolished. In the absence of a more secluded place to conduct our interview, we occupied a push cart next to the road to sit on. “*Prothom to kharapi lagche*” (“at first I felt very bad”), Saiful answered my question. He went on to explain that people in his village would laugh and look down at him for taking up this profession.

It was not the first time that a rickshaw driver mentioned the social stigma attached to work. Many men had told me that they carried out their job “secretly”, without informing their extended family or hometown neighbours. For example, one senior driver had urged me not to take any pictures during our conversation, afraid that someone would find out his real profession¹⁵. Another rickshaw puller mentioned that he only worked in the peripheral areas of the city, such as Jatrabari and Kamrangirchar, in order to avoid running into someone he knew¹⁶. The story that left the greatest impression on me was by Bilal¹⁷, who had been driving a rickshaw since he was fourteen years old, and told Yasin and me that he was no longer in contact with his three children. His profession had been a source of shame for his family-in-law, especially after his wife’s brother had done rather well for himself. He remembered a visit to his brother-in-law’s house, where he was asked by other guests about his profession: “I spoke honestly and told them I was a rickshaw driver, but my in-laws insulted me”. He went on to explain that they did not offer him any fish or meat as a way to insult him and that his in-laws were now taking care of his children.

¹⁴ Semi-structured interview, Bangshal, February 17, 2016.

¹⁵ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

¹⁶ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangnichor, August 2, 2017.

¹⁷ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 30, 2017.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I often came across negative attitudes and opinions regarding rickshaw drivers, such as: “they waste their money gambling”, “they do not provide for their families” and “they all have multiple wives”. The last remark was usually presented to me as a juicy bit of gossip. For instance, during an interview with a ward commissioner¹⁸ in one of the peripheral areas of Dhaka, his personal assistant at some point blurted out that “most rickshaw drivers have two families”. We were seated in the spacious reception room for visitors at the councillor’s home office, with an array of fruits and snacks in front of us. Having completed most of our interview questions, Yasin and I were chatting informally with the councillor and his assistant. Upon hearing our stories about the city’s rickshaw industry, the assistant told us in a conspiratory voice that rickshaw drivers often have two families. Before I could respond, the commissioner himself interjected. “No, no”, he countered, “This is not correct. It depends on the person. Actually, among all classes of people you will find men with two families. It is not just rickshaw pullers. This happens *khub kom* (“very rarely”)”. He rather earnestly concluded: “I am the councillor, I should talk truthfully”. Overall, however, the commissioner’s attitude towards the presence of the rickshaw was rather ambivalent. When I asked him whether he thought the rickshaw should stay in Dhaka city, he responded:

It’s a problem (“*somossa*”). Having rickshaws in Dhaka is not good for the city dwellers. We have the tendency to use the rickshaw for a short distance. It is not good for our health. It makes us lazy. It is better for Bangladesh if the rickshaw pullers work the fields in the countryside. Our development depends on agriculture. It will be beneficial for Bangladesh if they go back to agriculture. Them driving a rickshaw is not beneficial to Bangladesh.

The idea that driving a rickshaw is ultimately a form of labour that is not beneficial for the country or Dhaka, was also voiced by another senior and respected ward councillor¹⁹ of Old Dhaka. Yasin and I had been invited to his comfortable home in one of the oldest residential neighbourhoods of Dhaka, where he lived with his entire extended family – as is customary in Bangladesh. While our conversation partner carefully outlined his vision for Dhaka and the rickshaw, his wife was preparing an extravagant home cooked meal for us in the kitchen – both of them going out of their

¹⁸ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, October 26, 2017.

¹⁹ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, November 4, 2017.

way to extend their hospitality. The ward commissioner appreciated that there was still a need for the rickshaw in Dhaka, especially in the old town with its narrow streets and alleyways that are not always easily accessible to other forms of traffic. He went on to explicate that there is a category of people that simply cannot move without the rickshaw, such as schoolchildren, patients, the elderly and people with disabilities. However, at the same time, he considered the rickshaw, and especially the *lakhs* of “illegal”, unlicensed rickshaws, “the biggest problem in Dhaka city”. He linked their presence to the city’s incessant traffic jam: “Because of the rickshaw we cannot walk. Because of the rickshaw we don’t get [enough] space. There is a lack of space (“space-er *obhab*”)”. Moreover, the ward councillor worried about the low quality of life of rickshaw drivers: “They are poor people. Poor rickshaw *wallas*. They cannot get by. They get married two or three times, in different places, and they have many children”. In his opinion, the government should subsidise rickshaw drivers in order for them to be able to break with this lifestyle and take up a different profession, for example, as manufacturers in the cottage industry. I asked the councillor whether he thought these men should live in the city or the countryside after quitting their jobs as rickshaw drivers. “In the rural areas”, he answered adamantly, repeating the word “rural” several times.

The belief that rickshaw drivers should somehow “return to the countryside” was perhaps most vociferously expressed by a commissioner²⁰ who was proud to represent a ward that had only recently been annexed to Dhaka City Corporation. He was full of bold ideas about how to improve this improvised city neighbourhood in-the-making, which was separated from the rest of Dhaka by a garbage-filled stream of the Buriganga river. In his vision for the future, however, there was not much space for the rickshaw. Not only did he dislike the idea of one man pulling forth two passengers, he also thought the rickshaw industry was in a way detrimental to the development of the country. His concern centred around Bangladesh’s rural areas in particular. “When you look at the countryside...” The councillor turned to Yasin: “Where is your home village? Madaripur? In your Madaripur nobody is cultivating the fields anymore. They all spend their time in Dhaka”. He went on to elaborate that nobody worked the land anymore because all labourers had left to work in the capital. “*Gramer lok nei*” (“there are no village people”), he concluded, exaggerating, arguing that it would be better if

²⁰ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, September 7, 2017.

rickshaw drivers would return to their home villages to help rejuvenate the country's agriculture sector.

Although the view that rickshaw pullers and other poor rural-urban migrants should return to the countryside to work the fields was by no means shared by all the politicians and policy influencers I spoke to, it is unmistakably part of Bangladesh's political agenda, as becomes evident from programmes like "*Ghore Phera*" (literally "return home"). The Ghore Phera programme was first launched in 1999, when the government started introducing a number of town-housing schemes²¹ to encourage slum dwellers to return to their villages with incentives such as loans, basic housing and a common pond for fishing (Rashid 2009, 577). The project was funded by the Bangladesh *Krishi* (Agriculture) Bank and stimulated slum dwellers to return "home" by offering them loans to pursue income generating activities (Mohit 2018, 16). Ghafur (2006, 58) has summarised some of the core assumptions of the Ghore Phera programme, including the idea that if rickshaw-, van-, and push-cart drivers would return to their rural homes this would "improve the city's traffic congestion". In addition, the project worked under the supposition that such a "return [to] home" would reduce labour shortages in the villages and would contribute "to enhance productivity in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors" (Ghafur 2006, 58). In 2012, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina explicitly mentioned the programme in her address to the nation, pledging to resume the Ghore Phera scheme after it had been suspended under the previous administration, in order to rehabilitate "the rootless people"²². This in spite of the fact that the programme was not necessarily evaluated positively and did not succeed in prompting slum dwellers to definitively return to the countryside (Ghafur 2006, 58; Mohit 2018, 16)

The narrative of rootlessness that lies at the heart of demands for rickshaw drivers to "return home" also seems to inform accusations that rickshaw drivers "have multiple wives, in different places" Moreover, Ghafur (2006, 58) has shown that this discourse is explicitly linked to notions of productiveness. As we have seen from the above examples, rickshaw labour is frequently contrasted with- and measured against forms of work that are considered to be "more beneficial" to Bangladesh, such as work in the textile industry, cottage industry or agricultural sector. The idea that driving a

²¹ Other programmes were the "Asrayan Project" (the Shelter Project) and "Adarsha Gram Prokalpo" (the Ideal Village Project) (Rashid 2009, 577).

²² "Full text of prime minister's address to nation", *The Daily Star*, January 6, 2012, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-217233>.

rickshaw is not really a productive form of labour also shines through in offhand remarks about rickshaw pullers “wasting” a lot of the money they earn. This very topic came up during a particularly hot day in August when I was chatting with a group of rickshaw drivers about their daily earnings at a garage space in Korail²³. Zaman, a surprisingly good-humoured, one-armed rickshaw puller, had just remarked that it was very difficult to work hard and earn sufficient money on a hot, sweltering summer day like that, when the teenage son of the garage owner joined in on the conversation. He offered that, although rickshaw drivers generally earn good money, they tend to waste part of it on cigarettes, betel leaves and drugs. The drivers in the garage, however, immediately started to protest, and countered his narrative by pointing out that they inevitably had to spend some of their money on the road, considering that the work is physically very demanding and that they needed to stop regularly to buy a banana or piece of bread to keep their energy levels up. In addition, there was of course a double standard at work here, for as a rickshaw mechanic succinctly pointed out during a similar group discussion²⁴: “When rich people drink alcohol, use drugs and waste money nobody cares, but when a small percentage of rickshaw drivers does so all of them face criticism and neglect”.

Throughout this section we have seen that rickshaw labour is shrouded in a moralistic discourse of rootlessness and unproductiveness. Jackman (2017) has shown that a very similar narrative is projected onto the lives and activities of footpath dwellers, a group of urban dwellers that is not only considered “rootless” but also “floating”. Such mobile metaphors underscore the idea that these groups of people have been “disconnected from the social-moral base that a home village (*bari*) represents in Bangladeshi society” (Jackman 2017, 189). Jackman (2017, 190), however, found that most of his interlocutors, including beggars, still retained close links to their *bari*. Ghafur (2006) has similarly shown that the notion of rootlessness, as employed by the Ghore Phera scheme, is both inaccurate and misleading. Indeed, many of the people that were targeted by this project still had a house, homestead or piece of land in the countryside (Ghafur 2006, 58). The notion of rootlessness thus perpetuates the same myth of “stable village life” that has long been peddled by classic anthropologists and colonial administrators alike (Chandavarkar 2008, 123; Gardner and Osella 2003, vii). What’s more it also echoes the anxiety of colonial industrialists

²³ Informal group discussion, Korail, August 7, 2017.

²⁴ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

who were afraid that “peasant labourers” once elevated from the “immutable” structures of rural life, would be difficult to pin down again (Chandavarkar 2008, 124). Rickshaw drivers and other ostensibly rootless people thus represent “a source of indeterminacy in the social order” (Gidwani and Maringanti 2016, 118). Indeed, their mobile, multi-local and unfixed labour projects seem to pose a threat to what are considered more “proper” avenues of work, such as the industrial or agricultural sector. In the next section we will see how rickshaw drivers themselves compare their wageless work with these other modes of employment.

The Rickshaw Industry as a Stable Site of Return

Informal or wageless work has long been interpreted as a situation of lack and/or exclusion (Denning 2010, 80): as a residual form of work that had “not yet been absorbed” by the formal sector but eventually would (Pettinger 2019)²⁵. Such an understanding of wageless work does not only overlook the variety of ways in which the formal sector profits off workers – i.e. in their capacity of consumers, rent payers, interest providers (Narotzky 2018, 41) – but also glosses over the fact that people are not “permanently quarantined within the informal economy” but often move between wage labour and self-employment (Samson 2015, 815; Gidwani and Maringanti 2016, 122). Gidwani and Maringanti (2016, 122) have rightly pointed out that “the boundary between wage workers in formal capitalist production and those in nonwage, self-employed, homebased, piece-rate, and contract work, among other forms of enterprise and livelihood generation” is thin and porous, with labourers frequently traversing the lines between these categories. Their research focuses on scrap workers in Bholakpur, a former industrial neighbourhood in Hyderabad which hosts a number of waste retrieval and processing operations. Gidwani and Maringati (2016, 122) describe how variegated the life projects of these scrap workers are:

At times, they borrow money as advance payments from grinding units and enter into long-term employment agreements whereby the monthly salaries go

²⁵ Denning (2010, 79) attributes this bias to the fact that classic Marxist readings of labour leave little conceptual room for the activities of people conducting wageless or informal work, other than the residual categories of the “reserve army of labour” and the “lumpenproletariat”. Pettinger (2019), moreover, shows that early modernisation discourses of organisations such as ILO have similarly turned informal work into a residual category by assuming that economic development would eventually get rid of informal work.

to service their debts. At other times, they oscillate between working on a piece-rate basis and daily wages—at all times striving to retain a degree of autonomy to advance their own business activities.

The unstructured and often irregular ways in which rickshaw drivers accumulate their income similarly oscillate between a variety of economic strategies that cannot be simply reduced to a single avenue of employment. Moreover, their employment strategies often focus on both city and countryside, hence complicating the idea of people “returning home” to their villages.

I first realised that most rickshaw drivers lived their lives betwixt and between countryside and city when Yasin and I visited a mess in Old Dhaka²⁶ during the first months of my fieldwork. A flight of cold, stone stairs led us to the first floor of a dilapidated colonial building – officially a heritage site – that had been appropriated by a local *mastan* who rented out the space to labourers. The biting smell of fried chili immediately hit my throat as we entered a dark, mouldy and largely unfurnished room. At the far end of the room, close to the window, a woman was tending to a gigantic cooking pot. We had strategically planned our impromptu visit around lunch time, when most rickshaw drivers would be taking a break to load up on rice and energy. Inside we were welcomed amiably by a group of men who sat chatting and smoking in the corner. After we had been urged to sit down, their friendly banter continued – one of the men jokingly shouted at their rather stoic cook that they would find her a new husband. The woman in the kitchen, dressed in a comfortable *salwar kameez*, provided them with three meals a day. In total the men paid 150 taka per day for food and lodging and another 100 taka to rent a rickshaw. All fees were charged on a per diem basis, as almost none of them stayed in Dhaka for months in a row.

At the time of our visit approximately twenty-five to thirty men were sleeping in the room where we were sitting. The rickshaw drivers explained that it was relatively quiet at the moment, as many of their colleagues and fellow lodgers had travelled back home to help out in the countryside. During the dry winter months many different crops – rice, cauliflower, peanuts, carrot, lentil – required tending to and there would be a steady demand for day labourers. The rainy season with its relentless monsoons, on the contrary, would put much of the agricultural land under water, prompting labourers like themselves to try their luck in the city. “How often do you go

²⁶ Informal group discussion, Lalkutir, December 5, 2015.

back to the countryside”, I asked the men, while all of us were taking turns sipping cold Pepsi from the only available cup. The men explained that it would be common for them to return home after six weeks of work in the city and to stay with their wives and families in the village for approximately two weeks, hence giving evidence of a profoundly multi-local lifestyle.

The driving force behind this multi-local lifestyle, as I would find out throughout my research, was *obhab* (“scarcity”). For poor rural-urban migrants *obhab* was a defining characteristic of life in the countryside, which could be attributed to a number of factors, such as low wages, a lack of year-round employment and river bank erosion. During a more structured focus group discussion at the same dilapidated hostel in Old Dhaka²⁷, I talked with the occupants about their decisions to leave the countryside, at least temporarily, and to take up a job as a rickshaw driver. In a clear and calm voice, a rickshaw driver by the name of Jiyad started to explain their situation: “At present the living costs in Bangladesh are too high. If I did a different job, I would not be able to maintain my family”. He added the Bengali word *to* for emphasis, underlining that his choice to operate a rickshaw for a living was mostly a negative one. “I would prefer to do a different job. I would rather work the fields in the countryside, but the salary is 300 taka [per day]. With 300 taka I cannot run my family”. Fahim, who entertained the idea of leaving Bangladesh altogether to try his luck as a labourer in one of the Gulf States, further elaborated: “When you earn 500 taka or more it is possible to maintain your family”. He went on to specify that driving a rickshaw for a full day could earn them as much as 700 or 800 taka.

Because pulling a rickshaw from morning till night could be a very demanding exercise, some rickshaw drivers chose to work only one shift per day; either starting in the early morning and working till midday or starting after lunch and working till late at night²⁸. I asked the men at the mess whether they usually worked the entire day, but it immediately became clear that there was no straightforward answer to this question. “*Sorirer upore nirbhor kora*” (“it depends on your body”), one of the men interjected. Jiyad added that it all depended on the needs of their families: “We have to maintain our families and this causes tension”. He himself had his mother, son and wife to take care of in the countryside. The men taking part in our focus group discussion all agreed that especially rickshaw drivers with a relatively large family had to work long days.

²⁷ Semi-structured focus group discussion, Lalkutir, September 9, 2017.

²⁸ Rickshaw garages have different fees depending on whether people rent their vehicle for a full- or a half- day.

Moreover, there were other, more irregular, factors that increased the demand for money and work: relatives falling ill, children enrolling in after-school coaching or floods destroying homes and property. To meet these different needs the men maintained a constant flow of remittances to the countryside, using the popular mobile banking services of *bKash*. According to them, the amount that they transferred back home like this approximated 3,000 taka per month.



Figure 11: Rickshaw mess and heritage site in Old Dhaka.

From the above examples it becomes clear that the need to provide for their families is one of the most pressing reasons for rickshaw drivers to engage in this particular type of work. However, against the steady backdrop of financial scarcity, often more distinct vulnerabilities materialised that further exacerbated the need to (temporarily) take up a job as a rickshaw driver. Just as an increase in family costs prompted rickshaw drivers to work more hours, coming to Dhaka in the first place was often similarly triggered by financial fluctuations, if not tragedies. More often than not these financial hardships were the direct result of social and ecological vulnerabilities. The occupants of the informal hostel in Old Dhaka, for example, almost all came from the Northern, riverine

part of Bangladesh where land provides all but a stable source of income due to the widespread prevalence of river bank erosion. Many of them lived on so-called *chars*; sandbanks in the middle of the river that disappear and re-emerge as the river shifts its course. A rickshaw driver by the name of Abdul²⁹, elaborated on the unpredictability of living with- and near one of Bangladesh's enormous rivers. Initially he had lost his land to river erosion, but after seven years the land had reappeared as a *char* in the middle of the river. However, his newly gained land was still unsuitable for cropping, because the soil consisted still entirely out of loose sand. People's life projects in the countryside were not only complicated by the prevalence of river bank erosion, but also by the frequent occurrence of floods and heavy rainfall. Fahim, for instance, mentioned that he had tried to start a small farming business back home. He had taken out a substantial loan from an NGO to cultivate some potatoes, chilis and lentils. However, as a consequence of heavy rainfall his crops had all washed away, thereby pulling the plug on his business plans.

These kinds of economic set-backs, often exacerbated by the prospect of having to pay back lost investments, were common themes in the lives of the rickshaw drivers I spoke to. In fact, the decision to start driving a rickshaw cannot be isolated from the variety of other economic strategies that people pursued, such as attempts to acquire land, start a small business or migrate abroad. That driving a rickshaw not only complemented more irregular forms of work – especially seasonal, agricultural labour – but also formed an avenue of refuge when other labour projects failed becomes clear from the following two examples:

*Hakim*³⁰ had just started to work as a rickshaw driver when we ran into him at a rickshaw garage in the periphery of the city. He was dressed in a checkered lungi and a dark blue shirt and his posture seemed to be atypical for a rickshaw driver, considering that he was not particularly skinny. Hakim had started this job only seventeen days ago and worked maximum six or seven hours per day. He disliked the work and the fatigue and body pain it brought along. This was not to say, however, that his previous jobs had necessarily been easier, considering that he had worked as migrant labourer for years. First, he had spent three years in Dubai working as a construction worker and, after that, a year in Singapore. However, he had been unable to renew his work visa after making a return visit to Bangladesh to see his family. His next immigration attempt was aimed at Malaysia but, in the process of making this happen, he had

²⁹ Semi-structured focus group discussion, Lalkutir, September 9, 2017.

³⁰ Semi-structured interview at Kamrangnichor (August 2, 2017).

lost 6 *lakh* taka to an immigration broker who was supposed to help him with a ticket and visa. This enormous financial loss and the fact that he needed money urgently had been the reason for taking up a job as a rickshaw driver, which proved to be relatively easy. He had run a small business in the nearby area of Lalbagh in the past and through his old contacts he was able to gain access to a rickshaw garage. When we asked why he had opted for this particular job, Hakim emphasised that he could not afford to “wait for money” and needed *nogod poysa* (instant cash) every day.

Hence, for Hakim (temporarily) driving a rickshaw was a way of coping with a condition of precarity that was prompted by volatile external circumstances, a history of temporary and fragile labour projects and an immediate financial emergency. A rather similar culmination of events prompted Jamal, who resided in the same peripheral area as Hakim, to start driving a rickshaw:

*Jamal*³¹ had tried out different jobs throughout his life. He first came to Dhaka in 2004 to sell fish at one of the city’s wholesale markets, leaving behind his home village in the deltaic, coastal area of Satkhira. In 2008 he fell into trouble, as the growing number of *hartals*³², exploding petrol bombs and street fires that heralded Bangladesh’s national elections made it increasingly impossible to operate a business in Dhaka city. The political mayhem resulted in deliveries being held up and fresh fish going bad. Jamal decided to change strategies and started working as a vendor, selling cheap jewellery and cosmetics on the streets of Dhaka for over a year.

The political turmoil persisted and after a while Jamal saw himself forced to move back to the countryside altogether. For some time he could not bring himself to work at all. His lost investments and failed entrepreneurial attempts had left him broke and depressed. With time, however, Jamal managed to pull himself back together and he now ran a salmon farm in his home village, albeit with ups and downs. Just a few months ago the heavy monsoon rains and ensuing floods had dealt him another blow by damaging part of his fish stock. To make up for his losses, he had decided to spend four months in Dhaka to earn some extra cash as a cycle-rickshaw driver. His brother, a former rickshaw puller himself who now worked in Malaysia, had introduced Jamal to the garage from where he rented his rickshaw on a daily basis. Feeling ashamed about his temporary job, he spent his days avoiding the parts of the city where he might run into distant relatives or acquaintances, and his nights at the makeshift attic above the garage where he slept in the company of twenty-five or so other rural-urban migrants.

³¹ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, August 2, 2017.

³² The term *hartal* refers to a general strike or shutdown and, in the context of Bangladesh, is usually orchestrated by one of the country’s political (opposition) parties.

The stories of Hakim and Jamal were by no means exceptional. In fact, there were all kind of emergencies – personal, political, financial, ecological – that pushed people towards the rickshaw industry. These emergencies ranged from the all-too-familiar tragedies of river bank erosion, floods and landlessness in the countryside to historical catastrophes, such as famines, cyclones and war, to personal adversities and losses, as becomes clear from the following biographical snippets:

*Zubair*³³ came to Dhaka as early as 1968; three years before the Bangladesh Independence War would engulf the country in nine months of bloodshed. He ran a small eatery in Rampura – selling tea and rice – until the Pakistani army pitched camp in front of his shop and started demanding food for free. He retreated to the countryside and after Bangladesh had gained independence from Pakistan he returned to Dhaka to find his shop in ashes. For a while he worked as a cook in another restaurant, but gradually his lungs started to fail him as a result of working near smoke and fire all day long. His doctor urged him to quit and he started driving a rickshaw.

*Khadim*³⁴ arrived in Dhaka shortly after the Liberation War, accompanied by his sister's husband who ran a kerosene and petrol business in the city. In addition, he purchased eight rickshaws to rent out, but quit again after four of them were stolen. His brother-in-law's business also gradually dwindled as more and more people started to rely on gas instead of oil for cooking and Khadim decided to take up a job as a rickshaw driver instead.

*Bilal*³⁵ moved to the capital city at the time of the 1974 famine, when he was only three years old. His parents had died of starvation and his older brothers and sisters, five in total, had decided to try their luck in the city. There was no money to put him through school and Bilal saw himself no other choice than to start driving a rickshaw at the age of fourteen.

*Sadiq*³⁶ came to Dhaka to escape the burden of a loan that he could not pay back. He had used the money, approximately 1.5 *lakh*, to start a poultry farm, but a large number of fowl died as the result of a virus infection. To pay back the investment he owed, Sadiq decided to hide out in Dhaka with his family and started pulling a rickshaw.

*Ajmul*³⁷ came to Dhaka fifteen years ago and initially worked as a street vendor; selling cold, orange juice at a popular junction near Lalbagh. Hawkers like him,

³³ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, February 5, 2016.

³⁴ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

³⁵ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 30, 2017.

³⁶ Semi-structured interview, Bangshal, February 17, 2016.

³⁷ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 27, 2016.

however, were increasingly banned and chased away from this particular road and he gave up his business to start driving a rickshaw.

*Raihan*³⁸ came to Dhaka three years ago, with the hope of eventually travelling onward to Italy. He spent 8.5 *lakh* on an immigration broker who was supposed to arrange his trip to Europe, but after waiting for eleven months he realised that he had wasted his money on a journey that was not going to happen. With the help of a rickshaw mechanic he eventually bought a battery run rickshaw, which he now operates twenty-five days per month.

All these different stories highlight the accessibility and availability of rickshaw labour; the rickshaw industry features here as a place that people turn to when other labour projects fail or have proven to be unsustainable. Moreover, it is also a place of continual return for agricultural labourers who are dependent on the seasons for their livelihood and who do not have access to year-round employment in the countryside. Or, in the words of Khadim: “Every day of work [in the countryside] is followed by five days without work. How can you maintain your family in this way?” The fact that driving a rickshaw requires little prior training and no financial assets makes the rickshaw industry an accessible safeguard to fall back on in times of scarcity and crisis. This accessibility is further compounded by the fact that one can simply rent a rickshaw on a daily basis, without having to commit to long-term obligations.

Kathleen Millar (2014) paints a strikingly similar picture of *Jardim Garmacho*, a garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro where she conducted ethnographic research with waste collectors, or so-called *catadores*. Her interlocuters unmistakably experienced the garbage dump as a source of risk and suffering, but at the same time the dump was a familiar constant in the lives of many *catadores*. It functioned as one of the most stable sources of income in their lives, as becomes clear from the following depiction:

Trucks unload at the dump twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, allowing *catadores* to work day and night or to not work at all for several days or weeks. Access to the dump is relatively unimpeded, enabling *catadores* to leave Jardim Gramacho for stretches of time without concern that they will lose their right to work in this place (Millar 2014, 39).

Millar (2014, 39) argues that the fact that *catadores* can decide when and how much to work enables them to contend with insecurities in other dimensions of their lives. The

³⁸ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

dump emerges as a stable refuge amidst the moments of crisis that tend to coincide with life in poverty, such as the sudden death of a loved one or someone's house burning down in a fire (Millar 2014, 45). Millar (2014, 45) argues that it is exactly these kinds of tragedies, as well as less-tragic emergencies such as buses breaking down or the police invading the *favelas*, that make it difficult for *catadores* to commit to the regularity of formal employment. This does not mean, however, that formal employment is not an aspirational benchmark for many of these garbage collectors. In fact, Millar (2014, 42) describes how her interlocutors were especially keen to obtain a worker ID: a document that guaranteed a minimum wage and benefits and, at the same time, held important symbolic value through its association with "proper" employment.

In the first half of this chapter we have seen that rickshaw labour is also often contrasted with more respectable or "proper" avenues of employment, such as agricultural labour or industrial work. Rickshaw drivers themselves, however, were often sceptical about the prospects of lifting themselves out of poverty while working in a factory or as an agricultural labourer. Whereas agricultural work was considered an unsustainable avenue of work due to its seasonal nature and lack of year-round employment, industrial work was regarded as both inflexible and poorly paid. The contrast between factory work and driving a rickshaw was perhaps best explained by Jamila³⁹, one of the very few female rickshaw drivers in Dhaka. Jamila worked and lived in Kamrangirchar; one of the fringe areas of Dhaka where electric rickshaws are still allowed/condoned. She was a divorced single mum and like many of her male colleagues, Jamila was the rice-winner of her family. She used to work in a shoe factory to provide for her two children, but now proudly operated a battery-run rickshaw; wearing a sporty cap over her colourful headscarf. Jamila explained her decision to change professions as follows:

In the past I used to work in a factory. At the factory they paid me 1,100 taka per week, about 4,000 taka per four weeks. But 4,000 taka per month is not enough. My rent is 3,000 Taka per month [...] It takes a lot of effort. You have a "time-to-time duty" from the moment you wake up. I could not give time to my children. I have one son and one daughter. Then I thought: "What can be done?" I was used to work like a man, because I agreed to face hard work for my children's future. [...] Then I thought: I will drive a rickshaw.

³⁹ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, January 16, 2018.

During a focus group discussion with a group of male rickshaw drivers, very similar remarks were made. Faisal⁴⁰, for example, complained that “working for wages” (“*betone chakri kore*”)⁴¹ was 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 “the money came in as the wheels turn around” (“*chaka ghurle taka*”), without there being any need to “wait for money”. Hence, there is a strong sense that the fixities of industrial wage labour would not allow for sufficient wriggle room to actually confront and deal with the reality of poverty.

This does not mean that rickshaw drivers were somehow principally opposed to waged employment. However, the jobs that they considered stable or desirable, namely so-called “government jobs”, were often out of reach. In Bangladesh, working at a public institution – similar to the worker ID jobs that Millar (2014) writes about – is associated with lifelong employment, pensions and other benefits. What’s more, even low-level salaried jobs are considered to be a gateway to becoming middle class (Kibria 1995, 296). Rickshaw drivers, however, were always quick to point out that one needed *ghus* (“bribe money”) in order to be able to land a government job. Kibria (1995, 301) also alludes to this point in her work among Bangladeshi garment workers, as she described how one woman told her “that she was saving her wages to pay the bribe that was necessary for her husband to get a salaried government job”. These commonplace practices of bribery made it so that even for rickshaw drivers who had gone through secondary college education, finding a “government job” was difficult. This also becomes clear in the story of Ravi⁴², a young, unmarried rickshaw driver who had just completed his secondary school certificate when Yasin and I met him at a rickshaw garage. Ravi had arrived in Dhaka only five days earlier. He drove a rickshaw irregularly and only came to Dhaka when he needed some extra cash – to buy a mobile phone or to cover his education costs, for instance. Despite his educational degree Ravi was rather pessimistic about his opportunities for landing a good job. He had tried to

⁴⁰ Semi-structured focus group discussion, Rayerbazar, September 9, 2017.

⁴¹ In the Bangladeshi context the word *chakri* (“job”) stands in contrast with the word *kaj* (“work”), which is used to refer to a number of time-consuming activities ranging from informal work or agricultural tasks, to household chores and other (social) obligations (see Zaman 1992, 3). In contrast, the word *chakri* denotes generating a regular salary through formal employment (Banks 2013, 105; Samanta 2016, 174; Zaman 1992, 3).

⁴² Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

join the police, but this turned out to be a rather costly affair; to enter the police force he needed to pay 9 *lakh* taka in bribe money and Ravi could only manage 7 *lakh*.

Throughout this section we have seen that many of the strategies that rickshaw drivers pursue to wriggle their way out of poverty, from attempts to obtain a government job to efforts to start a business, acquire land or migrate abroad, are in fact very costly and prompt them to take out loans. Amid these bold and often risky attempts to be upwardly mobile, the rickshaw industry functions as a familiar constant. It provides something of a safeguard when other efforts fail or when loans inevitably need to be paid back. Not unlike the garbage dump that Millar (2014) writes about, the rickshaw industry functions as a stable site of return. This, however, is not to say that driving a rickshaw is in and of itself a stable job. For, the degree of stability that the rickshaw industry offers derives solely from its accessibility and availability and has little to do with the extension of workers' rights or legal protection. There are two factors in particular that help constitute the rickshaw industry as a stable site of return and that set rickshaw labour apart from other low-skilled jobs, namely: the availability of "instant cash" and the fact that people can drive a rickshaw "according to their own wishes". In the next section, I will further unpack this notion of independent work ("*nije sadhin kaj*"), thereby employing Catharine Malabou's (2009) idea of plasticity to make sense of the ways in which the work experiences of rickshaw drivers are caught between force and freedom.

Between Force and Freedom

The element of independence that many rickshaw drivers attributed to their work was seldom celebrated as a truly liberating experience. In fact, most rickshaw drivers were hesitant to label any aspect of their job as even remotely positive. The default answer whenever I asked rickshaw pullers about the beneficial aspects of their work, was that they were "bound to do this job"; an answer that seems to leave little room for agency or autonomy. Yet at the same time the characterisation of *nij sadhin kaj* ("independent work") was a recurring trope throughout the conversations I had⁴³. The following

⁴³ The work of Hyrapiet (2012, 40) shows that hand-pulled rickshaw *wallas* in Kolkata made sense of their work using almost identical terms.

excerpt from our interview with Zubair⁴⁴ is exemplary of both the reluctance that many rickshaw drivers felt when asked about the “positive” aspects of the work and the way in which they appraised the independence that coincided with the job. Zubair was a somewhat older rickshaw puller who started his own rickshaw business eight years ago and now only drove a rickshaw occasionally. He carefully weighed his words while reflecting on the nature of job he has done for fifteen years: “It is not good that we cannot get a different job. But although the work it not good, we have some independence (*sadhinota*). We can get a bit more money than we would earn at a factory”. He went on to elaborate that when he doesn’t feel well or when his body is aching, he can decide to take some rest; an advantage that sets the rickshaw industry apart from other low skilled work. For, as Zubair explained: “When you do a salaried job (*chakri*) you have to stay the entire day from eight in the morning till eight in the evening”. As a rickshaw driver, on the other hand, his work week was significantly less predictable. He would work either four, five or six days a week depending on his health and energy levels. The paradox that lies at the heart of this account is that, although driving a rickshaw can be viewed as liberating when compared to the rigidity of factory work, the notion of freedom appears to be rather modest in scope when it is explained mainly as the opportunity to take a day off when you feel sick or when your body has to recover from all the hard work you do. Hence, the question arises what notions like independence, freedom or autonomy mean when placed in a work context that is characterised by risk, health hazards and fatigue.

The rickshaw industry is by no means the only informal avenue of work that is arduous and – at times – hazardous in nature. The distinct risks and vulnerabilities that coincide with informal work are well documented. At the same time, anthropologists have also observed that “autonomy”, “freedom” and “independence” are recurring themes when looking at the work experiences of people in the informal sector. Millar (2014, 35), for example, depicts the *Jardim Gramacho* garbage dump as a place that “affords [garbage workers] greater autonomy in their everyday lives”. Monroe (2014) similarly tries to make sense of the way in which experiences of freedom and opportunity become manifest in an otherwise precarious context by focusing on Syrian delivery workers in Beirut. She describes these delivery workers as people who rush through traffic on small scooters without much protection and at great risk of bodily

⁴⁴ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, February 5, 2016.

harm, but who nonetheless “conjure up the kinds of real and imagined notions of freedom that have long been associated with automobility” (Monroe 2014, 84). Sopranzetti (2017) reflects even more explicitly on the experience of freedom in his article on motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok. He argues that by mobilising the principle of freedom “self-employed and precarious workers *make sense* of and *make do* with political-economic, social, and conceptual shifts taking place around them by casting themselves as successful migrants, entrepreneurial subjects, and autonomous urban dwellers” (Sopranzetti 2017, 69). Sopranzetti (2017, 71) points out that such ethnographic accounts of freedom often sit uncomfortably alongside the “abstract, absolute, and universal conception of Freedom—with a capital f” that usually employed theoretical discourses on labour and precarity.

The notion of (individual) freedom is far from value-neutral and often steeped in liberal moral values and capitalist rhetoric. It is therefore unsurprising that political economy scholars have critically explored “the role of freedom as a way to accept and often push for deregularisation, flexibilisation of labor, and precarity” (Sopranzetti 2017, 70). Scholars like Nikolas Rose have argued that under the auspices of such neoliberal policies people are increasingly “*obliged* to be free” rather than “free to choose” (Sopranzetti 2017, 71). However, Sopranzetti (2017, 71) rightfully points out that, although such a structural approach may be useful when looking at the way in which capitalism shapes certain subjectivities, it tends to gloss over “the aspirational, affective, and personal dimensions of adopting freedom as an organising principle that sustains conscious decisions to accept new forms of precarity, or stubborn refusals”. He therefore calls for scholars to readdress their attention to “the contextual understandings of freedom that we encounter in our ethnographic engagements” – or in other words: to “*freedom with a small f*” (Sopranzetti 2017, 71).

Sopranzetti’s (2017) plea for a more ethnographic approach to freedom and independence is sound and well taken. However, the question remains how to make sense of those paradoxical ethnographic situations in which the experience of independence overlaps with the experience of lacking agency and control, without framing the first simply as an antidote to the latter, that is, as a way of reclaiming control. For the degree of independence that rickshaw drivers recognised in their working lives, does not seem to be an attempt to consciously or subversively reclaim a degree of sovereignty over their lives. Rather, the independent nature of the work allowed rickshaw drivers to take a rest whenever their arduous job took too much of a

physical toll and enabled them to work longer hours whenever their family was struggling to make ends meet. Their experience of independence is thus part of a tiresome balancing act that rickshaw drivers perform as they stretch their physical capacities to the limit in order to earn just enough money to get by.

The inherent tension between attending to one's physical needs on the one hand and earning enough money on the other was perhaps put into words most evocatively by Rifat⁴⁵, who aptly compared his physical labour with the effort expenditure of mechanical forms of transport. Rifat explained that whereas buses or cars rely on fuel to keep going, rickshaw drivers have to eat regularly to keep their energy levels up. This means that they often end up immediately spending part of the money they earn at roadside tea stalls to buy energy-rich food such as bananas and bread. The fact that rickshaw drivers' capacity to carry out their jobs is very much dependent on their physical health, energy and strength, not only affects the number of hours they work per day or the number of days they work per month, but also the extent to which they can carry on with their job as they grow older. Rifat, for instance, could not make any estimates as to how much longer he would continue to work as a rickshaw driver. His plan was to eventually buy a piece of land outside of Dhaka, but he had no idea when he would have saved sufficient money to do so. His efforts to save money were thwarted by the fact that there were always unforeseen costs, such as buying new clothes or covering health care expenses, which depleted his monthly savings. Rifat, moreover, explained that although he was healthy enough now and had no problem with working long days, he had no idea what would happen in the future.

This uncertainty about how much one can earn and save, is not just the inevitable downside of being self-employed, but also alludes to the fact that the experience of independence is proportional to people's bodily capacities and strength. For although in theory rickshaw drivers enjoy the freedom to choose when and how long they want to work, the scope of this freedom is significantly curbed by their physical conditions. This ambivalence also lies at the heart of the phrase *chaka ghurle taka* ("earning money as the wheels turn around") that rickshaw drivers often used when describing the positive aspects of the work. This notion also came to the fore during an animated conversation with two rickshaw drivers, Salman and Wasi, who stayed at a garage in Kamrangirchar⁴⁶. When Yasin and I asked both men why they had

⁴⁵ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 8, 2017.

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 7, 2017.

chosen this profession, Wasi explained that driving a rickshaw enabled him to “earn money as the wheels turned around”. At the same time, he recognised that this potentially infinite flow of cash was very much dependent on the strength of the individual rickshaw puller and his body. Salman further underscored this point by explaining that his decision to work for either a full- or a half- day was very much contingent on his health: on some days he would be able to work full-time, whereas on other days he suffered from headache or fever and only worked for half a day. A somewhat younger rickshaw driver joined in on the conversation as well: “When my family is in need (*obhab*), I work the entire day”. Salman reiterated that the advantage of earning “instant cash” (*nogod poysa*) was that they could immediately respond to family emergencies. For instance, whenever his mother gets sick, he is able to send her money immediately, without having to wait for a pay day. Examples like these speak to the fact that, although the instant availability of cash grants rickshaw drivers a degree of independence in dealing with family and financial obligations in their lives, this freedom is also to some extent premised on rickshaw drivers stretching their physical capacities to the limit.



Figure 12: A rickshaw driver navigating a flooded street in Old Dhaka, as seen from behind.

Many of the rickshaw drivers I spoke to complained about the physical toll their job took. Rubel⁴⁷, who I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, for instance lamented how his physique had changed since he started driving a rickshaw. He had watched himself getting skinnier and skinnier to the point where he now looked sick. He went on to explain that he often suffered from “weakness” when he was working and that he needed to take a rest and some food every other hour. The fact that Rubel was still quite new to the job and not accustomed to physical labour, did not necessarily make his story stand out. Some of the more seasoned rickshaw drivers who stayed at the same mess, complemented his story by singling out “energy loss”, “shoulder pain” and “a lack of joint fluids” as common side-effects of the work. Moreover, the city’s environment further added to these health risks.

Rickshaw drivers not only feared getting into accidents while navigating Dhaka’s crowded traffic jams, but also described how the incessant noise of honking cars and buses continued to ring in their ears long after they had gone to bed. The clouds of dust that plagued Dhaka during the dry winter months got into their eyes and mouth, clogged their nose and throat, and caused frequent headaches. Moreover, many men took paracetamol on a daily basis, because their joints, knees, shoulders and wrists hurt from working in a standing position most of the day. Some of the drivers I spoke to underlined these stories of hardship by showing me the hardened calluses on their hands, their skinny calves and legs or the darkened skin on their arms that had turned leathery from too much exposure to sun and weather. All these factors together made it nearly impossible to “drive a rickshaw continuously”, as many rickshaw drivers had pointed out.

Driving a rickshaw for hours or days in a row was especially challenging for older rickshaw pullers like Khadim⁴⁸. Some years ago, Khadim had retired from the hard work as a rickshaw driver and had moved back to the countryside. However, he saw himself forced to return to Dhaka three years ago when his eldest son died. Their family had been partly dependent on his son’s income as a tailor and after he died Khadim inadvertently became the sole rice-winner again. He needed money to cover the education costs of his younger son and to pay for his daughter’s wedding. In addition, he ended up paying a substantial amount of *ghus* to land his daughter a job at a family planning clinic at a government hospital. He had managed all of this by driving

⁴⁷ Semi-structured interview, Lalkutir, December 30, 2015.

⁴⁸ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

a rickshaw and whilst earning money as the wheels turned around, but did so at a certain cost. Khadim curtly summarised the toll that driving a rickshaw for over forty years had taken on his body: “Your health is put to sleep” (“*sastho suye jay*”). What’s more, for older rickshaw drivers like himself the fact that the “money comes in as the wheels turn around” increasingly became a drawback. This was particularly clear in the case of Abul⁴⁹, a rickshaw driver who was too old to remember his exact age. He told us that he now barely earned 100 taka per day. Customers would simply not get onto his rickshaw (“*lok uthben na*”), because they (justifiably) feared that he would move very slowly.

The above examples all highlight how rickshaw drivers disregard and mould their own bodies to meet the financial demands of their families. At first sight, their situation seems to be indicative of a certain degree of flexibility, which Catherine Malabou (2009, 12) has aptly described as receiving a form or impression; as the ability “to fold oneself, to take the fold”. Malabou (2009, 45) also observes that that flexibility is often treated as a synonym of employability or “the possibility of instantly adapting productive apparatus and labor to the evolution of demand” (Malabou 2009, 45). To some extent, this is exactly what rickshaw drivers are doing. On a physical level, they are constantly pushing themselves to the limit; adapting their bodily capacities to reach a certain level of productivity. At the same time, I would argue that this willingness to adapt should not be viewed as a solely reactive expression of survivalism. For, although there is unmistakably an undercurrent of desperation to rickshaw drivers’ monumental efforts to improvise a living, these efforts cannot be simply reduced to restless improvisation.

I borrow this imagery of restless or permanent improvisation from Degani (2018), who has approached the improvisational character of the informal economy in urban Tanzania through the aesthetical framework of *zaniness*. Drawing on the work of Ngai (2012), he highlights the incessant activity that characterises both informal activity in urban Tanzania and *zany* comedy⁵⁰. Degani (2018, 477) portrays such frantic and incessant modes of improvisation as something impotent and reactive that is form-obliterating rather than form-giving. In the previous chapter I similarly highlighted the frantic and restless character of rickshaw drivers’ movements, as they improvised their

⁴⁹ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, October 2, 2017.

⁵⁰ *Zaniness* refers to an aesthetic category and form of humour that has its roots in the *commedia dell’arte* tradition. Mr. Bean and Charlie Chaplin are both examples of *zany* figures. Degani (2018, 474), moreover, contends that East African popular culture has developed its own version of the *zany* aesthetic and the trickster figure.

way through Dhaka traffic amid tightening restrictions. However, I do not want to frame their labour entirely as a reactive act of improvisation, thereby locking their everyday hustle for money in an unescapable present. Throughout this chapter we have seen that rickshaw drivers are, in many ways, trying to actively shape the course of their future. The rickshaw industry functions as a stable site of return when some of these efforts, such as starting a business or migrating abroad, fail and enables them to push back against such hardships. And although it can undoubtedly be difficult to save money, many rickshaw drivers still succeed in accumulating enough money to send their children to school. This is not just improvisation; these are concerted efforts to wriggle one's way out of poverty.

The idea of flexibility therefore does not do justice entirely to rickshaw drivers' readiness to stretch their physical capacities to the limit. Rather, it seems to me that rickshaw drivers are consciously, albeit reluctantly, accepting certain punches in life in order to be able to resist others. They are giving up a certain degree of bodily autonomy to create some wriggle room in other dimensions of their lives. Hence, independence here does not feature as the extension of unrestrained individual volition, nor should it be confused with the liberal notion of the "sovereign, independent, self-reliant individual" (Millar 2014, 35). Instead, this balancing act seems to resemble Malabou's (2009, 12) notion of plasticity⁵¹ – the ability of both giving and taking shape:

To be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode. Indeed, what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius.

Whereas flexibility hints at the obliteration of form, plasticity allows for the possibility of resisting certain imprints or even erasing them. This does not mean that the decision to drive a rickshaw is in and of itself a conscious act of resistance – a characterisation that is sometimes used to make sense of people's retreat into wageless labour. However, it has become clear throughout this chapter that the rickshaw industry does have an enabling dimension as well that allows rickshaw drivers to undo some of the blows they have suffered through life. Their painful yet persistent efforts to "earn

⁵¹ The philosopher Malabou (2000) initially used the term plasticity to make sense of Hegelian notions of temporality. In later work, however, she engages explicitly with the neuroscientific idea of brain plasticity to make sense of agency under neoliberalism (Malabou 2009).

money as the wheels turn around” embody the precarious tension between taking the fold and bestowing form; between (oppressive) flexibility and (enabling) plasticity.

Flexibilisation and Precarity

Before concluding this chapter, I want to return to the question of what notions of precarity and flexibilisation mean in contexts like these, where stable wage labour is not the point of departure. Both terms have often been used in tandem to make sense of post-Fordist labour configurations and to describe trends of casualisation and the demise of stable wage employment. Scully (2016, 161) has pointed out that that such an approach⁵² inevitably assumes a non-precarious past defined by “stable employment, welfare provisions and other features of Northern countries’ histories which are virtually unknown in the history of Southern countries”. What’s more, by taking formal wage labour as a point of departure it is also implied that forms of informal and wageless work are always already inherently precarious. This can easily blind us to the ways in which politics and distinct policy efforts intervene in *making* informal work precarious. Indeed, many of the vulnerabilities that rickshaw drivers face are not the result of limited access to waged employment or the dismantling of workers’ rights and securities, but of certain urban agendas and priorities that infringe upon their right- and access to the city, as is the case with the implementation of VIP roads. What’s more, the example of the “community rickshaw system” which was discussed in the previous chapter, shows that attempts at formalisation and fixing can actually very well achieve the opposite of what they are often thought to realise, namely a decrease in income security.

The distinct modes of flexibilisation that affect rickshaw drivers become manifest through mechanisms of both employment displacement – as a result of rickshaw restrictions – and debt accumulation. As we have seen throughout this chapter, loans are a common emergency fund and source of investment capital for rickshaw drivers. Whether it is to start a business, buy a rickshaw, finance a wedding, migrate abroad, buy a piece of land or bribe an official to land a “government job”. Indeed, we have seen that the prospect of having to pay back loans is one of the reasons

⁵² He is referring specifically to the work of Guy Standing (2011).

why people turn to the rickshaw industry in the first place. These loans are predominantly provided by NGOs or Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) (see also Karim and Salam 2019, 37)⁵³. The premise of such organisations, which follow the example of the Nobel-prize winning microfinance organisation “Grameen Bank”⁵⁴, is that they provide the poor with access to credit and enable them to become “entrepreneurs”. The rickshaw drivers I spoke to throughout my research, however, explained that there were many MFIs that handed out loans for all kinds of purposes, even when people were not in the position to pay them back. What’s more, Kar (2013) has shown that MFIs are often instrumental in incorporating the poor in processes of financialisation and Banerjee and Jackson (2017) argue that microfinance actually leads to increasing levels of indebtedness among already impoverished communities. They found that economic vulnerabilities were exacerbated as a result of taking out loans in the name of entrepreneurship, because no income generating opportunities were created (Banerjee and Jackson 2017, 85).

Throughout my research I often spoke to rickshaw drivers for whom debt was a severely debilitating factor in their lives. This was also the case for Raihan⁵⁵, who had wanted to migrate to Italy, but saw his plans aborted after losing 8.5 *lakh* to an immigration broker. With the help of a rickshaw *mistri* (“maker” or “mechanic”) in Kamrangirchar he had bought a battery-run rickshaw for 35,000 taka, which he was now operating with varying degrees of success. For this relatively large investment, he had borrowed money from a microfinance NGO. However, the weekly instalments he had to pay back made it difficult to sustain his family. It did not help that his battery-rickshaw had been confiscated twice already by the police. Electric rickshaws were officially not allowed in the area⁵⁶ and both times the police had kept his vehicle for fifteen days. As a result, Raihan had been unable to pay back his weekly instalment of 2,200 taka. I asked him what the NGO had done when he could not pay. Raihan explained that the debt collector had taken his TV and other valuables and had locked his home so that he was no longer able to enter. Only after paying the money he owed, he got back the key to his tin shed room.

⁵³ The BILS study found that 53.5 percent of the interviewed rickshaw pullers had a loan at the time of the survey. In 85.8 percent of the cases these loans were handed out by NGOs or similar organisations (Karim and Salam 2019, 37).

⁵⁴ Bangladesh’s home grown “Grameen Bank” was formally established in 1983 and the first organisation to offer collateral-free microcredit to the poor. The Bank was based on early experiments with providing small low-interest loans by founder Dr Muhammad Yunus and focused on rural (“*gram*”) areas.

⁵⁵ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

⁵⁶ In the next chapter I will pay closer attention to the contested role of the electric rickshaw in fringe areas of Dhaka such as Kamrangirchar.

Rickshaw restrictions – such as the ban on electric rickshaws – and processes of financialisation thus work together to intensify work-related vulnerabilities. A similar trend was visible in the diplomatic zone, after the new rickshaw system had been implemented. “*Ekhon sobar rin ache*. Now everyone is in debt!” one vocal rickshaw puller exclaimed during an informal group discussion at a garage near the diplomatic zone⁵⁷. In the wake of the newly implemented system, several of the rickshaw drivers present had taken out additional loans from local NGOs to cover their children’s education fees, unforeseen medical costs, or to simply supplement their dwindling income. As a result, they now struggled to pay back their weekly instalments. Whereas under normal circumstances rickshaw labour would allow them to “earn money as the wheels turn around”, this careful financial balancing act had been tipped in the wrong direction and rendered them vulnerable to processes of financialisation.

In a way, the restrictions that were discussed in the previous chapter have thus ultimately exposed rickshaw pullers to a form of negative flexibility that requires them to adapt in ways that do not necessarily offer them the opportunity to push back, as they fold their journeys into small pockets of the city and spiral into debt. These rickshaw restrictions have turned the careful balancing act between “taking the fold” and “bestowing form” into a form of oppressive flexibility. Contrary to post-Fordist changes in Europe and North America, this form of flexibilisation does not necessarily deprive rickshaw drivers of a stable, secure or decent job, as none of the men I spoke with perceived their work along those terms. However, it has thrown a proverbial stick in the wheels that have kept them going for so long.

Conclusion

I started this chapter with the story of Rubel, the rickshaw driver cum singer-songwriter I met at a mess in Old Dhaka. Rubel’s ambitions differed significantly from those of other rickshaw pullers I spoke with. For instance, he hoped to publish a book or two in advance of the popular *boi mela* (“book fair”) that was coming up in February. At the same time, his story was quite typical in the sense that it highlighted what drove most rickshaw *wallas* to start pulling a rickshaw in the first place. As was the case for

⁵⁷ Semi-structured interview, Badda, October 14, 2017.

so many others, the rickshaw industry had been something to fall back on for Rubel at a time of personal and financial crisis.

In this chapter I have argued that rickshaw labour offers a relatively “stable site of return” when other labour projects fail or prove to be unsustainable. In doing so, I have tried to move beyond intuitive distinctions between stable wage labour and precarious self-employment; between the fixities of formal employment and the uncertainties of the informal sector. Moreover, by focusing on the contradictions and complexities that characterise the inherently-unstable-but-always-available form of work that constitutes rickshaw labour I have tried to complicate the normative notions of productiveness and inhumane work that are frequently projected onto rickshaw work. I have shown that rickshaw labour provides rickshaw drivers with access to instant cash when more capital-intensive labour projects fail or when they have to cope with instances of ecological crisis. This is not to imply that rickshaw labour comes with an infinite ability to “earn money as the wheels turn around”. We have seen that these wheels inevitably stop or slow down when drivers get sick or become older. I have therefore offered that this fragile balancing act is best understood as a tension between (enabling) plasticity and (oppressive) flexibility (Malabou 2000; 2009).

In drawing on the work of Malabou (2000; 2009) I have attempted to diversify the vocabularies and imaginaries through which we typically make sense of work-related vulnerabilities. Such narratives not only often fall prey to what has been described as “wage fetishism” (Denning 2010, 80; Van Schendel 2006, 232), but also frequently evoke some kind of “sedentarist metaphysics” (Malkki 1992). Whether it is by conflating agricultural labour with social-moral rootedness, as seems to be the case with the Ghore Phera programme, or by mistaking the fixities of wage labour for a form of occupational stability, as often happens in scholarly and political discussions around precarious work. Throughout this chapter we have seen that rickshaw drivers themselves are sceptical about the stability that waged work has to offer. The low-skilled jobs that are typically available to them involve “waiting for money” and do not offer sufficient income or wriggle room to respond to ecological, financial or family emergencies. What’s more, the idea that “rootless” rural-urban workers need to be tied down to one particular place and occupation, glosses over the fact that poor families often engage in multiple, multi-local labour projects (see also Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor 2009, 285). This inevitably undermines the idea that poor urban workers can simply be enticed to “return to the countryside” in order to engage in more productive

or “beneficial” forms of work. In the following chapter, I will further complicate the notion of such a straightforward return to residential and occupational stability, by focusing on the rural-urban comings and goings of rickshaw drivers and the various ways in which this blurs the boundaries of the urban.

6. Peripherally Urban: Rickshaw Garages and Rural-Urban Entanglements

Looking out over *Rayerbazar* from the balcony of the ten-story office-cum-apartment-building where I live, I can count hundreds of colourful rickshaw hoods. Just a block away an enormous open field serves as a rickshaw garage for over two hundred cycle-rickshaws. The field itself is surrounded by the monotonous grey of tin shed rooftops, interrupted every now and then by taller, *paka*¹ buildings, some of which are still under construction. When squeezing my eyes and looking even further westwards I can vaguely distinguish the patches of green and open space that border a side stream of the nearby Buriganga river and signal the outskirts of the city.

The building where I live is one of the many high-rise buildings that are rapidly changing – developing, some would say – the neighbourhood of *Rayerbazar*. The building did not exist yet when I first visited the area in 2010. Nor was the adjacent road covered by the smooth layer of asphalt that now allows rickshaw drivers to increase their speed, offering a welcome relief from the patchy, potholed roads that characterise the rest of neighbourhood. The majority of roads are still as narrow as they were a decade ago though, and the growing number of apartments, people and cars in the area has subjected many of the cramped lanes to gridlock and traffic jam. In order to create space for the burgeoning number of high-rises, slum settlements and rickshaw garages in the area are increasingly pushed towards the outer edges of the city. The large garage that I can spot from my window will have shrunk to a quarter of its original size by the end of my fieldwork and the small, provisional rickshaw space next door will eventually be vacated in its entirety to make way for a new development project.

Many of the local rickshaw owners that I got to talk to throughout my research could testify to such relocations. Amir², for instance, had to leave his previous garage, next to the local mosque, because the landowner wanted to construct a high-rise building. He now ran a garage at the outskirts of *Rayerbazar*. He could lease the space where he currently stayed for another three years, until his new landlord decided to construct an apartment building there as well. “It is good for our country, so it is good for me as well”, Amir declared matter-of-factly, when I asked him what he thought about the developments in the neighbourhood. He had lived and worked in this area for over

¹ The word *paka* means ripe, seasoned, paved or permanent and is used in opposition to the word *kaca*, which is often employed to describe the unpaved roads and provisional housing that characterizes informal settlements.

² Semi-structured interview, *Rayerbazar*, August 8, 2017.

thirty years and could tell me exactly what land uses had preceded the construction of the apartment building where I stayed now: “It used to be a *pukur* (“pond”), then it became a garage, then a fire broke out and it turned into a slum, then it became a CNG garage”. He clarified that the peripheral parts of Rayerbazar used to consist almost entirely of swamplands and ponds that had been gradually filled up with rubbish and mud. This inherently improvised mode of urban becoming resembles Caldeira’s (2017, 5) description of “peripheral urbanisation”, which involves “spaces that are never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated upon”.



Figure 13: Aerial view over a rickshaw garage in Rayerbazar, as seen from my apartment.

In this chapter I turn my attention to the outskirts and outsides of Dhaka city, to explore how the rickshaw industry finds itself caught up in peripheral processes of urban becoming. As becomes clear from the above example, such peripheral spaces are not necessarily a stable point of reference, considering that they are often spaces in movement. The different garage relocations in Rayerbazar suggest a constantly shifting periphery that is pushed outwards as more finite forms of urban development take

over. Peripheral spaces like Rayerbazar, however, are often not only spaces of exclusion but also of access, as is epitomised by the inherently transitory space of the rickshaw garage. Despite the fact that the rickshaw garage itself is increasingly pushed away from the city, it nonetheless plays a vital role in enabling rickshaw drivers to enter the urban informal economy. This dialectic tension between access and exclusion not only affects rickshaw drivers' everyday excursions into the city but also their migratory trajectories. Rifat³, one of the rickshaw drivers I met at the abovementioned garage of Amir, for instance, had no idea whether his future would be in Dhaka or in the countryside. Rifat had travelled to Dhaka ten years ago due to the lack of agricultural work and overall scarcity (*obhab*) in his home district Jessore. His plan was to eventually buy a piece of land outside Dhaka, but he had not been able to earn enough money yet. He hoped that in the end his stay in the capital would turn out to be a temporary one and emphasised that he had only moved to the city to fill his stomach ("*pet-er jonno*"). His story mirrored the migratory trajectories of many rickshaw drivers; it lacked fixed points of departure and arrival and seemed to be suspended in between city and countryside.

In chapter 2 I have shown that the discipline of urban anthropology has long struggled to make sense of the unfixed and temporary forms of urban engagement that Rifat's story alludes to. Initially, the discipline was very much geared towards epistemological and methodological modes of sedentarism, residentialism and particularism. Correspondingly, rural-urban labour migration was often viewed as a temporary stage that would eventually give way to permanent urban residence or "permanent urbanisation" (Ferguson 1990, 386). Our contemporary "urban moment" is frequently framed and interpreted along strikingly similar lines. The "World Urbanization Prospects" of UN-Habitat eagerly predict how ever-increasing percentages of the world population are living in cities, but leave very little room for the open-ended migratory trajectories of rickshaw drivers like Rifat. Indeed, such statistics typically fail to acknowledge that there is no "clear dividing line between town and countryside for individual settlements or their inhabitants: indeed, many people reside in one but work in the other" (Champion and Hugo 2004, 3). What's more, this assumption of an unidirectional rural to urban transition is at odds with the fact that in the South Asian region "movement, both within rural areas and between

³ Semi-structured interview at a garage in Rayerbazar (August 8, 2017).

villages, towns and cities has always been, and continues to be, a central feature of life within the subcontinent” (Gardner and Osella 2003, vi). The question thus arises how we can incorporate this reality of unfixed movements into our understanding of growing cities.

In what follows, I explore what “the urban” looks like from the outsides and outskirts of the city, by focusing on the rural-urban comings and goings of rickshaw drivers that pass through- and extend from- the peripheral areas of Dhaka. In doing so, I follow Simone’s (2010, 40) definitions of periphery, which denotes a space that has never been “brought fully under the auspices of the logic and development trajectories that characterise a center, and therefore embodies an instability that is always potentially destabilising of that center”. Simone (2010, 51) recognises the peri-urban interface as an important manifestation of the periphery, yet also stresses that the term carries weight beyond its topological and territorial meaning. The notion of periphery not only refers to the transitory space in between rural and urban, but also relates to the wider political, economic and hierarchical relations that characterise the dynamic tension between urban centres and their hinterlands. Moreover, the periphery is a space that is characterised by a certain opacity that makes it difficult to establish exactly what is “coming and going” (Simone 2010, 54). It is this opacity that I want to illustrate and underline in this chapter, thereby complicating understandings of urbanisation that envision a “unilinear rural-to-urban ‘transition’” (Brenner 2018, 574). Moreover, I intend to question not only the direction in which urban processes unfold, but also the location where these processes take place and can be studied. For the fact that most rickshaw drivers lead multi-local lives across city and countryside suggests that the dynamics of urbanisation extend well beyond the confines of the actual city.

The opacity of the periphery, with its multi-directional comings and goings, blurs the boundaries of what can be considered urban. In analysing how rickshaw mobilities and the migratory trajectories of rickshaw drivers reflect and contribute to this blurring of rural-urban boundaries I take my inspiration from recent scholarship in urban geography (notably Brenner and Schmid 2015; Brenner 2018; Schmid 2018) that has sought to reanimate Lefebvre’s ([1970] 2003) idea of the urban as a “planetary manifestation” in an attempt to challenge rural/urban binaries and “methodological cityism” (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015). This sensitivity to the ways in which the urban transcends the entity of the city challenges “conventional assumptions about the

appropriate 'sites' of urban theorizing" (Brenner 2018, 575) and opens up the possibility of studying urban processes from the vantage point of rural or peripheral areas. In this chapter I will further explore the critical potential of such a decentering approach. In doing so, I draw creative inspiration from Piot's (1999) analysis of "village modernity" among the Kabre in Togo. In his monograph, Piot (1999) convincingly shows that the Kabre, despite their relatively "remote" living conditions, have long been part of the same global processes of modernity that are typically associated with a Western urban context. Hence, where Piot (1999) uncovers and locates the global in the "remote", I seek to explicitly locate the urban in the "peripheral".

I will approach the notion of periphery from three different vantage points. Firstly, I will explore what peripherality means from a mobilities perspective. In other words, I ask what rickshaw mobilities can tell us about the processes of implosion and explosion (Lefebvre 2003, 14) that have brought urban centres, suburbs, peripheries and rural hinterlands into the same orbit of urbanisation. Rickshaw mobilities differ significantly from one area to the other and the varied ways in which rickshaw drivers navigate both material and political circumstances shed light on how peripherality and centrality become manifest as urban realities. Secondly, I will examine how the space of the rickshaw garage is intertwined with the periphery and highlights the mechanisms of access and exclusion that shape processes of urbanisation. Thirdly, I will analyse the periphery as a zone of rural-urban entanglements by focusing on rickshaw drivers' connections with the countryside. Specifically, I will examine the different trajectories and temporalities of rural return. In doing so, I seek to unravel what the multi-local lives of rickshaw drivers can tell us about the multi-directional process of urbanisation and the variety of spaces and mobilities it produces within and beyond the boundaries of the city. The structure of this chapter mirrors my analytical shift of focus towards the periphery, as I will start from the centre of Dhaka and trace the movements of rickshaw drivers back towards the outskirts and outsides of the city.

Navigating Centrality and Peripherality

Many of the rickshaw garages that I visited throughout my research were located at- and pushed towards the outskirts of the city or so-called peri-urban interface, which consisted of areas such as Rayerbazar, Jatrabari, Shonir Akhra, Kamrangirchar and

Keraniganj. My frequent visits to these fringe areas of Dhaka made it abundantly clear to me that it was impossible to definitively mark the boundaries of the city. Some of the areas I visited, like Kamrangirchar, still looked distinctly peripheral – entering the neighbourhood involved crossing a gigantic garbage landfill by bridge – but had in fact recently been made part of Dhaka City Corporation, an annexation that sparked excitement over potential improvements in infrastructure and anxieties over tightening regulations. Other areas, like Shonir Akhra, were still officially located outside of Dhaka city, but when travelling there it would be impossible to tell at what point exactly one had exited the city. The neighbourhood of Keraniganj, on the other hand, was clearly separated from the rest of Dhaka by the Buriganga river, but nonetheless provided an apt example of the way in which suburban sprawl encroaches upon agricultural lands. In fact, whenever I took a bus through Keraniganj, travelling southwards in the direction of the Padma River, I was struck by the number of real-estate signs that sprouted up from empty paddy fields to advertise the construction of new apartment buildings. The completion of the long-awaited bridge over the Padma River was expected to extend the influence of Dhaka even further into the countryside and was shrouded in promises of quick and hassle-free railway commutes into the capital city.

Fringe areas like Kamrangirchar, Shonir Akhra and Keraniganj all highlight that the urban extends well beyond the limits of the city, an observation that resonates with Lefebvre's (2003) assessment of "the urban" as a planetary manifestation that can no longer be pinpointed to the entity of the city. As I described in chapter 2, the work of Lefebvre (2003, 14) is an attempt to make sense of the historical processes of implosion and explosion that have resulted in "the tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means, and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space". This characterisation of urbanisation speaks to a dialectical tension between inward and outward movement; between concentration and dispersal; between centrality and peripherality. Neither centrality nor peripherality should therefore be understood as straightforward spatial qualifications. Rather, peripherality resembles how Harms et al. (2014, 364) have defined "remoteness"; namely, as something that "may be physically distant or contiguous, real or imagined, material or primarily symbolic".

In what follows, I will compare specific areas in and around Dhaka to illustrate how (relative) centrality and peripherality become manifest in the experience and organisation of rickshaw mobilities. First, I will pay attention to the diplomatic zone and Old Dhaka, areas that can both lay claim to a certain centrality, albeit in very different ways. Secondly, I will focus on neighbourhoods such as Shonir Akhra, Keraniganj and Kamrangirchar, which can all be described as peri-urban on both a geographical and administrative level. I thus ask what rickshaw mobilities can tell us about the material and political process of becoming-but-not-yet-being-part-of the city. In order to understand this process, it is important to not only look at the fringes of the city, but to also pay attention to areas that are already unmistakably part of the city. For, if we agree with Simone (2010, 40) that peripheries are areas that have not yet been “brought fully under the auspices of the logic and development trajectories that characterize a center”, the question inevitably arises what this centrist logic looks like exactly.

From Gulshan to Gulistan: Navigating Different Modes of Centrality

Dhaka’s diplomatic zone is not technically part of “Central Dhaka”, but is nonetheless perceived as a centre of sorts, considering that it is the most prestigious and expensive area of the capital city. The area is home to embassies, five-star restaurants, extravagant mansions and exclusive recreation clubs, and is characterised by an abundance of green and open spaces that are linked up by unswerving and strikingly unpolluted roads. As I explained in chapter 4, the diplomatic zone consists of the neighbourhoods of Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara. These three upscale residential neighbourhoods are still relatively young and were designed as planned model towns in the 1960s. The area’s wide streets have been laid out in a rectangular grid pattern and were aptly described as water-like (“*panir moto*”) by a local rickshaw mechanic I spoke with⁴. To get a sense of what it meant to navigate these water-like roads I went on a rickshaw ride with Sujon, a rickshaw driver whom I frequently ran into during my observational walks through the neighbourhood. Before hopping onto the rickshaw, Sujon helped me to attach my GoPro camera to the handlebar of his rickshaw, tearing off a part of his old *gamcha* to firmly tie the camera to the frame.

⁴ Focus group discussion, Korail, November 11, 2017.

We start our journey⁵ where we usually meet; in front of Hotel Lake Castle. Sujon and his friend Biplob spend a substantial part of their day waiting for passengers here. Most of the time they are the only two rickshaw drivers parked alongside the street. The rest of the men loitering in the shade of the trees are security guards or drivers waiting next to the parked cars of their employers. The name of the hotel refers to the half-empty pond at the park on the opposite side of the road; a green and quiet place where young couples hope to find a few square meters of privacy and where local residents walk around the lake without being approached by the street vendors, stray dogs and beggars that so assertively inhabit most other parks and public spaces in Dhaka. We pass by the entrance of the park, which is entirely fenced off. On both sides the road is marked by parked cars and a neat stretch of pavement, which is about ten inches higher than the road itself.

Sujon tells me that his day has been quiet so far. It is afternoon and he has had only one passenger. There is not a lot of work in Gulshan at the moment. Since the murder of the Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella, two months ago, many foreign customers have exchanged the rickshaw for the seclusion of a private car. During an earlier conversation with Sujon and Biplob, both had lamented the lack of *bidesi* passengers⁶. Most rickshaw drivers in the area invest actively in their relationships with foreigners: they give out their phone number, offer their services on a long-term basis, and make an effort to remember the places their customers visit. When I ran into Biplob and Sujon for the first time, Biplob recognised me from a previous visit, two years ago. Not only did he remember my address (“Road 67, *na?*”), he also specifically recalled the coffee place I used to visit (“Northend Coffee, close to the American Embassy”). Both men had tried to reassure me that the “security for *bidesis* was very good now” and that I would not have a problem passing one of the many security check posts that had been erected at the different entrance roads that were leading into Gulshan.

Just one block away from the park, Sujon and I pass one of the checkpoints. Empty rickshaws are lined up next to the road block, waiting for prospective passengers to cross from the other side. Sujon zigzags between the three road barriers that have been established on both sides of the road. “Police Check Post”, one of the signs reads. In the middle, positioned next to a protective parasol, a traffic police officer is monitoring the influx of vehicles. While one car after the other effortlessly passes the check post, a rickshaw driver stops in front of the road block to let his passengers get off. The two men cross the blockade by foot, while their driver turns around and queues up behind the other rickshaws that are waiting in line. We cross a few housing blocks, consisting mostly of expensive residential flats. Gradually, however, more roadside shops and street vendors start to pop up and we are leaving behind the part of the

⁵ Rickshaw ride, recorded with GoPro, November 23, 2015.

⁶ Informal conversation, Gulshan, November 4, 2015.

diplomatic zone that is characterised mostly by residential land use. Although the area was designed primarily as a residential zone, commercial activities have intensified over the years, especially alongside the main roads⁷.

After a detour through the neighbouring area of Banani, we reach the commercial heart of the area: the Gulshan 2 circle. Sujon steers his rickshaw onto the VIP road that leads to the roundabout and is officially off-limits to non-motorised transport. We overtake a row of cars that are double parked in front of a shopping mall. The road itself has been subject to a beautification project. There is an elevated stretch of pavement in the middle of the road, adorned with trees and bushes, that makes it impossible for vehicles (and more difficult for pedestrians) to simply cross the street wherever they want. We reach the roundabout and Sujon manoeuvres his rickshaw past the row of cars that is waiting for the traffic officer to give them the signal to go. The roundabout itself is surrounded by ten- or fifteen storey buildings that host a number of offices and expensive restaurants.

After crossing the roundabout we make our way to another police check point; the entrance gate to “Baridhara Residential Area”. The police officers are wearing bulletproof vests over their military uniforms and all of them carry a rifle over their shoulders. One of them is stopping motorcyclists to check their papers. Again, we pass without any problems. The entrance sign reminds us that it is illegal to exploit property for commercial purposes in this area. Yet another sign stipulates that “honking is not allowed”. On our left we pass a lush, green park that can only be accessed from inside the residential area. Tall palm trees tower over the road on both sides and we continue our way past the luxurious mansions, foreign embassies and expat clubs that can be found everywhere in these quiet residential pockets of the diplomatic zone.

Since my rickshaw journey with Sujon in 2015, the diplomatic zone has become even more regulated. Uneven pavement has been smoothed out, an increasing number of roads have been adopted for beautification⁸ and hawkers and beggars are now almost entirely absent from the sidewalks of the residential areas. Moreover, as I have described in chapter 4, only a limited number of registered “community rickshaws” are currently allowed to operate in the diplomatic zone. However, it is not just the degree of regulation and the number of check points and VIP roads that rickshaw drivers have to navigate that sets the area apart from the rest of Dhaka. The low population density and the fact that many residents have access to a private car, make it so that passengers are not always abundantly available.

⁷ See Nancy (2016, 97) for an analysis of this trend towards commercialisation in Gulshan.

⁸ Seventy out of a of total 147 roads in the Gulshan residential area have been adopted by individuals and companies that strive to keep the roads clean (“Community Participation will make Dhaka City Liveable”, *The Daily Star*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/community-participation-will-make-dhaka-city-liveable-1378123>).



Figure 14: Crossing a check post between Gulshan and Banani, GoPro footage.

On the other hand, the area's socio-economic status does grant rickshaw drivers the leeway to ask for higher fares, especially from foreign customers. The diplomatic zone thus derives its centrality first and foremost from a concentration of money and wealth. This, in turn, translates into (private) investments towards the beautification and development of roads, public spaces and property. The affluence of the social elites that work and reside in this part of town can easily be converted into the political pressure that is required to put amenities and regulations in place. For instance, the management of certain public spaces, such as the Gulshan Lake Park, has fallen into the hands of local housing associations⁹ that have accumulated funds from private donors to widen and pave the walkways, re-excavate the lake for retention of water, construct a bridge over the lake and set up benches throughout the park. As I explained in chapter 4, these same housing societies have also initiated the community-based rickshaw system that was implemented after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.

It can be tempting to reify the ongoing project of legibility that characterises the infrastructural landscape of the diplomatic zone as *the* default development logic of the “urban centre”. In reality, however, there is no such singular development trajectory. Instead, we are faced with different manifestations of centrality, density and

⁹ The website of the Gulshan Society describes how the Society entered into an agreement with RAJUK in 2007 to manage the Lake Park and to provide a better environment for outdoor exercise and recreational facilities (<http://www.gulshansociety.com/past-activities/>).

concentratedness. For instance, whereas the diplomatic zone is mostly characterised by a concentration of wealth and affluence, the historic city centre of Old Dhaka is characterised first and foremost by the physical concentration of people and the bustle of their entrepreneurial activities. The roads in this part of town, far from being adopted for beautification, are occupied by the street vendors that are so notably absent from the streets of Gulshan.

During an interview with a ward commissioner in Old Dhaka the congestion and centrality of this particular part of town came up. The councillor was stationed in Gulistan¹⁰, which is home to a great number of bustling markets and the city's largest bus terminal, and considered his ward to be the "capital of Dhaka". At the same time, he lamented the congestion that resulted from this centrality. "Such a difficult matter... It is so difficult when there are so many people", he summarised his attempts to improve the area. He went on to elaborate that there were not only many important buildings located in Gulistan, such as the Awami League Party office, two national stadiums and the country's largest mosque, but also "so many intersections, so many vehicles, so many vendors and so many markets". He had repeatedly tried to evict the area's largest hawker markets to accommodate a freer flow of traffic, but the vendors and their little stands would usually reappear on the footpaths after a few weeks¹¹.

Congestion manifests in different ways throughout Dhaka. For instance, traffic jams in the diplomatic zone consist mostly of private cars and SUVs – especially on the main roads that have been rid of non-motorised transport. In the narrow streets of Old Dhaka, on the other hand, congestion materialises as pedestrians compete with rickshaws, battered buses, motorcycles, loaded rickshaw-vans, minivans and hand pulled carts over limited road space. Especially the southern part of Old Dhaka, stretching from the Gulistan bus station to the Sadarghat boat terminal, sometimes almost seemed impenetrable, as becomes evident from the following observation of a rickshaw journey down Nawabpur Road¹²:

After a two-hour journey in an overheated bus, I get off at the Gulistan bus terminal. The roads are occupied by a chaotic variety of different vehicles and large buses that block my sight, making it almost impossible to cross the road. In an attempt to get away from the hectic bustle of the bus station and the

¹⁰ Informal conversation, DSCC ward commissioner, October 25, 2017.

¹¹ Street vendors usually operate under the protections and patronage of local *mastans*, who offer them access to vending sites in exchange for bribes (Etzold 2016, 4).

¹² Rickshaw journey, Gulistan to Victoria Park, November 14, 2015.

hawker market that seems to spill onto the main road where vendors are displaying baskets full of shoes, I pass under the flyover in front of me and enter Nawabpur Road. I approach a rickshaw driver, who agrees to bring me to Victoria Park for 40 taka. We get stuck in traffic almost immediately. The road is too narrow for buses to pass and we find ourselves surrounded by rickshaws, motorcycles, rickshaw-vans and cars. Just ahead of us a minivan is carrying a load of water bottles. Both sides of the road are occupied by small shops that are selling shoes, t-shirts, *lungis*, electronics, ventilators and all kinds of other goods that need to be transported here through a maze of narrow alleyways. On the pavements, street vendors are selling sugar cane juice, water melon, coconut water, *phuchka* and tea. An inextricable tangle of electricity cables is dangling heavily in front of the different signage boards that give each shop its distinct identity.

The traffic ahead of us does not seem to be moving at all. I get up from the rickshaw seat and try to look past the vehicles in front of us, while the rickshaw driver gets off and wriggles the rickshaw a few inches ahead by pulling the handlebar. He turns to me to point out the obvious: “jam”. We listlessly wait in the searing heat for what feels like half an hour, before traffic starts to move again. The driver tries to manoeuvre his rickshaw past the other vehicles that are slowly but noisily starting to move again, but a car manages to just get ahead of us. The traffic on the other side of the road is still in standstill. In the middle of the chaos a traffic police officer is manually trying to rearrange and streamline the flow of traffic; he is pulling one rickshaw after the other past the deadlock of traffic into a side street to create some more space. We continue our journey and after we have crossed a busy intersection the road widens and we find ourselves surrounded by large buses again.

Traveling from my house in Rayerbazar to the southern part of Old Dhaka, a distance of approximately nine kilometres, usually took me between two and three hours and I would oftentimes spend the last leg of my journey stuck on a rickshaw somewhere amidst the maze of narrow *golis* that characterises the old town. Due to the incessant congestion in this part of town, I initially assumed it would not make for a very popular area of work for rickshaw drivers. To my surprise, however, rickshaw drivers would sometimes list very congested places like Chowkbazar¹³ or Gulistan¹⁴ as preferable locations to work, because of the abundance of passengers that could be found there. When discussing the congestion in Old Dhaka with a group of rickshaw drivers¹⁵ who all lived close to the Sadarghat boat terminal, in the southern part of the old town, the

¹³ Informal group discussion, Kamrangirchar, January 19, 2016.

¹⁴ Informal group discussion, Poraspur, January 20, 2016.

¹⁵ Informal group discussion, Lalkutir, December 9, 2015.

differences between Old and New Dhaka came up. The congestion in their own part of town, with its many, often unregulated intersections was unmistakably perceived as a challenge by the men. At the same time, they felt that congestion was a problem everywhere in Dhaka, except perhaps for the newer parts. One of them further nuanced this assessment by pointing out that there were also less passengers in New Dhaka, hence underlining the undeniable advantage that the old town offered in this aspect.



Figure 15: Traffic jam in Old Dhaka, Kazi Alauddin Road.

Another positive side-effect of the congestion that plagued the streets of Old Dhaka had to do with the many *bazars*, workshops, warehouses and little shops that were located in this area. Although most rickshaw drivers used their vehicles to offer transportation services to passengers, I also got to talk to some drivers that used their rickshaw to carry *bosta*; sacks of goods that needed to be distributed in the area. For instance, Masud¹⁶, a rickshaw driver from Lalbagh, which had been a central location in Dhaka as early as the seventeenth century, was in the habit of starting his working days before sunrise. From six o'clock onward he would drive back and forth between wholesale markets such as Karwanbazar and Sadarghat to distribute potatoes, onions and other raw materials to small shops in the area. He needed to complete this work before eight

¹⁶ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 27, 2016.

o'clock when rickshaws would no longer be permitted on the VIP roads that connect wholesale markets like Karwanbazar to the labyrinth of alleys that is Old Dhaka.

The mobilities of rickshaw drivers in Old Dhaka and the diplomatic zone, as well as the infrastructural landscapes of both of these neighbourhoods, present us with rather different expressions of centrality. The experience of driving a rickshaw in the diplomatic zone is characterised by high fares, the presence of foreign and elite passengers, good quality roads and continued infrastructural investments. At the same time, however, rickshaw drivers have to navigate police check points, an increasing number of VIP roads and tightening rickshaw restrictions. The historic neighbourhood of Old Dhaka, on the other hand, is characterised by narrow alleys rather than VIP roads. The variegated mix of land uses and road functions in this part of town results in vendors, pedestrians and vehicles of different speeds and sizes competing over limited road space. This concentration of people, activities and vehicles, however, not only results in congestion but also in the availability of passengers and work. What these two examples show is that there are different ways in which urban centres can be central, as becomes manifest in the different expressions of density and prominence described above. Leaving the bustle of Old Dhaka behind, I will now turn to the peri-urban areas from where most rickshaw drivers start their daily journeys.

Entering and Leaving the City: Navigating Modes of Peripherality

Thus far I have primarily zoomed in on the process of what Lefebvre (2003, 14) has described as “implosion”: “the tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means, and thought)”. In the previous section we have seen how this urban reality of “tremendous concentration” shapes rickshaw mobilities. In what follows, however, I will deliberately focus on processes of explosion or “the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space” (Lefebvre 2003, 14). In the context of metropolitan Dhaka, the projection of peripheries into space coincides with the gradual encroachment of agricultural lands and the filling up of ponds and wetlands for construction purposes. This extension outwards is not merely the outcome of an organic process of city growth, but also includes mechanisms of exclusion that push certain activities, (waste) materials and industries away from the urban centres. However, peripheral areas do not only accommodate the processes of explosion that emanate away from the urban

centre, but also constitute places from where people, goods and vehicles enter the city. Simone (2010, 51) brings together these oppositional forces in his definition of the peri-urban interface, which he characterises as: 1) a repository for inward migrants, 2) the point where agricultural production enters the city, 3) a territory to which certain environmental costs have been exported, and 4) a place from where “tentative, residual, or nascent links to both city and rural areas are maintained and intersect”.

My house in Dhaka was located in an area where all these different dynamics come together. As I described in the introduction of this chapter, I could more or less distinguish the literal outskirts of the city from the rooftop of my building. These outer limits were marked by the so-called *beribadh* or embankment road which stretched from Gabtoli in the north of Dhaka to the Sadarghat boat terminal in the south; running parallel to the Buriganga River and crossing the south-western fringes of the city. The embankment road had been constructed to protect the city from the whims of the Buriganga River after Dhaka had been struck by a catastrophic flood in 1988. Its construction had made it possible to develop the floodplains and swamplands that stretched across the western fringes of the city. Waterbodies and ponds had been filled up with mud and rubbish and evolved into the kind of improvised suburban spaces that tend to attract urban newcomers and informal workshops, including rickshaw garages. Rayerbazar, the vicinity where I lived, had also developed and my apartment building was located at a critical fault line in the area. It marked the division between *bhitore* (“inside”) and *nama* or *nice* (“down”, “below”); between the “old”, more or less established part of the neighbourhood and the “new”, low-lying parts of Rayerbazar that only started developing after the embankment had been built. In fact, when walking westwards in the direction of the *beribadh* road, more permanent structures would eventually make way for the improvised tin shed dwellings and rickshaw garages that were increasingly pushed towards the outer edges of the city.

On the various occasions when I used the *beribadh* road to travel to Old Dhaka, I would get a glimpse of the sort of activities and spaces that were either pushed towards the periphery or simply had no permanent place in the city (yet). The road passed alongside large open rickshaw garages, workshops where bedposts and other wooden furniture parts were made and sanded, brick factories shrouded in red dust, metres upon metres of bamboo logs needed for nearby construction works and dumping landfills full of garbage. The pavement of the road was uneven and damaged and resulted in a journey that was far from comfortable. The bumps and cracks in the

road made the passengers of the battered buses and easy-bikes that operated on this route cling tightly to their seats. I often travelled by easy-bike, a half-open, electric minivan that was not as crowded as most buses, but that did expose passengers to the poignant smell of garbage and the incessant dust that swirled up from the nearby brick factories, furniture shops and construction sites. Like many female travellers, I would usually hide behind my *orna* to protect my nose, mouth and eyes from the fumes and dust that hovered over the road. The *beribadh* road quite literally marked the outskirts of the city and its peripheral location produced its own specific tangle of traffic related experiences. The following account, based on GoPro footage¹⁷, gives an impression of the rickshaw journeys that unfold in these peri-urban outskirts of the city:

Yasin and I are on our way from Old Dhaka to Kamrangirchar; an area that used to exist as a relatively isolated *char* or island in the Buriganga River, but that is increasingly being enveloped by Dhaka city. We are gradually leaving the markets and little grocery shops of Lalbagh behind us, while our driver is repeatedly ringing his bell to alert the shoppers strolling in front of us. The wheels of the rickshaw rattle and shake as we pass a stretch of asphalt that is no longer effectively concealing the underlying layer of gravel. The road inclines slightly as we get nearer to the embankment road and we are swiftly overtaken by an electric-rickshaw that quickly disappears out of sight. Empty rickshaws and easy-bikes have been parked on both sides of the road and before turning on to the Sadarghat-Gabtolli road we pass an even larger improvised parking space for CNG's and *legunas*.

The road itself is relatively empty; its sides covered in sand that spills over onto the pavement from the verges of the road. Our view opens up, as fewer and fewer permanent structures and multiple storey buildings block our sight. We pass by improvised tin shed shacks that function as furniture workshops, market stands or little shops. There are trees next to the road and many open patches of land that are occupied by rows of bricks, logs of wood, long rods of iron and piles of sand and gravel needed for construction works. Other stretches of land are used as impromptu garage spaces and accommodate all sorts of vehicles: rickshaws, *legunas*, trucks and even the beautifully decorated *tomtom garis* ("horse carriages") that operate in Old Dhaka for touristic purposes. Our sight diminishes slightly as we move past a brick factory and a large garbage landfill that collapses into the pool of stagnant water that separates Dhaka from Kamrangirchar. The dust from the bricks mixes with the smoke that circles up from the smouldering piles of garbage and hovers over the road.

Our driver keeps a steady pace for most of the journey. We slow down a bit as a large bus overtakes us to let off some passengers, but there is no need to

¹⁷ Rickshaw journey, Lalbagh to Kamrangirchar, February 10, 2016.

come to a full stop. In fact, we do not pass any traffic lights, traffic police officers or traffic jams during our ten-minute journey down *beribadh* road. Many of the other vehicles occupying the road space – trucks, rickshaw-vans, regular rickshaws – are transporting either goods or garbage. The different rickshaw-vans that we pass are loaded with a variety of goods: from coconuts, bananas and sacks of potatoes to large sheets of corrugated iron. Sometimes their load is stacked up to two meters high: packaged clothes and shoes, large sacks of pots and pans, piles of boxes and heaps of rags, tied together and on their way to be recycled. Another distinctive feature of traffic here are the electric rickshaws that are overtaking us on occasion while sounding their nasal, alarm-like horns. Like us, they have sufficient space ahead of them to accelerate.

The above excerpt describes a rather modest flow of traffic that is hardly interrupted by either traffic restrictions or congestion. This continuity of movement, however, is premised on certain weather conditions. In fact, when I took a rickshaw journey along the same route¹⁸ on a particularly rainy day, the driver had difficulty dragging his vehicle through the mud and I could barely maintain my balance. Indeed, one of the reasons why rickshaw drivers would be reluctant to drive a rickshaw in the quiet, peripheral areas of the city was that the roads in these places were often either *kaca* (“unpaved”) or of poor quality. These poorly paved, waterlogged and potholed roads not only underlined the fact that wealth was concentrated elsewhere, but also made the administrative limits of the urban centre visible. Indeed, one of the reasons why it was attractive for peripheral neighbourhoods to become part of Dhaka City Corporation was that this annexation often foreshadowed infrastructural investments and developments.

The administrative boundaries of Dhaka City Corporation could also pose an obstacle for rickshaw drivers who tried to enter the city from the peri-urban belt that surrounded Dhaka. This was the case for two rickshaw drivers who I met at a garage in Shonir Akhra¹⁹. Neither of them was allowed to enter Dhaka City, because both of them drove an unlicensed rickshaw. As I explained in chapter 4, all rickshaws that operate within the confines of Dhaka City Corporation can be recognised by the metal license plate that is attached to the back of the rickshaw. This plate either represented an original license that was given out by Dhaka City Corporation before the 1980s or one of the unofficial, temporary licenses that were sold by a variety of “unions” and

¹⁸ Rickshaw journey, Dhaka University to Kamrangirchar, August 2, 2017.

¹⁹ Informal interview, Shonir Akhra, January 20, 2016.

“owner associations”. However, in areas that had not yet been incorporated as part of Dhaka City Corporation, such as Keraniganj and Shonir Akhra, I would sometimes encounter rickshaws that did not have a license registration number at all.

Entering Dhaka City Corporation with one of these unlicensed rickshaws meant risking a fine or confiscation of the rickshaw. Despite these risks, the two rickshaw drivers I met in Shonir Akhra still admitted to regularly entering the city with their unlicensed rickshaws. Although it was safer and less congested in Shonir Akhra, the income in their own area was also significantly less than in Dhaka city. Whereas both men estimated that they earned somewhere between 250 and 300 taka in Shonir Akhra, their colleagues in Dhaka city could earn at least twice as much for a full day of work. Moreover, less congestion also meant fewer people. Working in their own area therefore often entailed waiting for passengers. In addition, the poor quality of the pavement resulted in severe body pain and hindered their movements considerably; often they would have to get off the rickshaw to pull the vehicle forward manually and in times of rain different parts the area would flood entirely due to waterlogging.



Figure 16: Traffic on beribadh road, GoPro footage.

The above example shows that entering Dhaka from the outskirts of the city not only meant access to higher fares, more passengers and paved roads, but also implied entering the sphere of influence and control of Dhaka City Corporation. This becomes even clearer when looking at the situation of electric rickshaws in Dhaka, which were

exiled to the fringes of the city in 2014. In that year, the High Court ordered that all so-called engine rickshaws were prohibited from operating within Dhaka City Corporation²⁰. In fact, one of the reasons why rickshaw drivers would sometimes decide to work in the peripheral areas of the city, in spite of all the aforementioned disadvantages, was the fact that the battery-run rickshaw was still allowed in many of these places. When talking to yet another group of rickshaw pullers in Shonir Akhra²¹ the electric rickshaw was brought up as an example of the way in which the Government could improve their situation. The men summed up their predicament as follows: either the Government should develop the roads in their area or they should (officially) allow battery-rickshaws to enter Dhaka City Corporation. In doing so, they unintentionally but concisely pinpointed what set Shonir Akhra apart from Dhaka-proper, namely the conditions of the roads and the opportunity to drive an electric rickshaw.

The restrictions that were imposed on the presence of the electric rickshaw in Dhaka City Corporation show some similarities with the process of formalisation that was set in motion in Dhaka's diplomatic zone with the introduction the "community rickshaw system". Both cases highlight a politics of enclosure (Cunningham and Heyman 2004), aimed at setting a certain area apart from its surroundings. In chapter 4, I argued that such processes of enclosure do not necessarily result in a clear boundary between the exterior and interior of the formal sphere. Although processes of enclosure may be finite on an ideological level, they are often deliberately incomplete in effect, leaving space for political figures and other state-affiliated actors to accumulate wealth and further extend their networks of state-sanctioned patronage. In Dhaka, this is exemplified by the way in which both unofficial rickshaw licenses and street vending sites are allocated (see Suykens 2018; Etzold 2016). A similar logic of exception can be witnessed in relation to the presence of the electric rickshaw. Although officially banned from Dhaka City Corporation, the battery-run rickshaw can still be found operating away from the main roads in many peripheral pockets of Dhaka, such as Rayerbazar, Wireless Gate, Hazaribagh and Jatrabari. Hence, concurring processes of enclosure and exception not only blur the boundaries between the interior and exterior of the formal sphere, but also between the interior and exterior of the city.

²⁰ This order also applied to Chittagong, the second largest city in Bangladesh. See: "HC 'no' to battery-run rickshaw", *Bdnews24.com*, July 3, 2014, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/07/03/hc-no-to-battery-run-rickshaw>.

²¹ Informal group conversation, Shonir Akhra, January 20, 2016.

This blurring of boundaries between the interior and exterior of the city becomes clear in the case of Kamrangirchar. This area was incorporated as part of Dhaka City Corporation in 2015: an annexation that coincided with the anticipation of better roads but that also suspended the future of the electric rickshaw in uncertainty. Many owners in the area had upgraded their rickshaws with batteries over the years, but now that the vicinity was part of Dhaka City Corporation these hybrid rickshaws had effectively become “illegal”. During my second stretch of fieldwork in 2017, the presence of the electric rickshaw in Kamrangirchar was the subject of a heated struggle between different local actors – something I discovered over several, subsequent visits to one of the garages in the area. On my first visit I spoke to Tariq²², a rickshaw driver who had arrived in Dhaka in 2011 and now lived with his family in Kamrangirchar. In 2015 he took out a loan from a local NGO to buy a battery-run rickshaw and he was now paying back his debt in instalments of 2100 taka per week. Tariq was explaining that he paid 1000 taka per month for an (unofficial) license for his electric rickshaw, when our conversation was interrupted by a visibly agitated man entering the garage space. The man was shouting into his phone at a pace that made it impossible for me to follow what exactly was going on. Towards the end of our interview, after the situation in the garage had calmed down a bit, Tariq explained that the other rickshaw driver had been on the phone with the police after they had seized his (electric) rickshaw. “*Ek tarikh theke onek jhamela hoy*. Since the first of this month there is a lot of trouble”, he further elaborated.

Before the first of that particular August there had been an unspoken agreement between the rickshaw community and the local police *thana*, which held that rickshaw owners would pay a monthly amount of 1000 taka to a middle man, who would then issue out licenses and broker a deal with the traffic police. The latter would, in turn, leave the electric rickshaws be²³. This month, however, something had gone wrong and the police had confiscated one rickshaw after the other. Tariq’s assessment of the situation was that the middle man had not properly paid off the local police station, hence effectively rendering his license worthless. During a second visit to the same garage²⁴ a few months later, the manager of the place further filled in the details of

²² Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, August 26, 2016.

²³ These kind of arrangements with the police are somewhat of an “open secret” in Dhaka, as becomes evident from the fact that local newspapers also report on this. See: Md Esaraf Hossain, “Motorised Rickshaws Rule Roads”, *The Daily Sun*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/401287/2019/06/22/Motorised-rickshaws-rule-roads>.

²⁴ Informal conversation, Kamrangirchar, January 13, 2018.

Tariq's story. By that time the situation had returned to "normal" and the battery-run rickshaws were no longer appropriated by the police. According to the manager, the problems in the area had started because a certain political organisation or *league* had wanted to get involved in the business of selling unofficial licenses, but found themselves cut off. Consequently, they had put pressure on the police *thana* to actually enforce the rules of Dhaka City Corporation and to fight the "illegal" presence of the electric rickshaws on the streets. The manager went on to explain that the different political figures and middlemen had eventually reached an agreement that benefitted them all and the situation in Kamrangirchar had returned to business as usual.

Like with most things that happen in the shadow of the law, it is difficult to be certain how the aforementioned agreement between the rickshaw owners, the police *thana*, middlemen and political affiliates was reached exactly and for what specific reason. However, what the Kamrangirchar example clearly shows is that the area's incorporation into Dhaka City Corporation not only implied entering a certain regulatory framework and having to comply with a new set of rules, but also meant exposure to a distinct logic of exception that coincided with the implementation of these rules. In chapter 4, I argued that such exceptions do not merely signal the absence or withdrawal of the state or municipality, but are in fact a manifestation of how power is exercised, namely through the strategic distribution of (il)legitimacy. It is worth repeating Suykens (2018, 427) here, who assessed the situation of unofficial rickshaw licensing practices in Dhaka as follows: "The holders of these unofficial licenses are not simply permitted to function, or allowed to operate in the face of state weakness; they are fully dependent on state patronage".

Hence, whereas poorly paved or potholed roads literally epitomise the absence or neglect of the municipality, the presence of the electric rickshaw cannot be as easily interpreted as a sign of the withdrawal, indifference or laxness of administrative actors. Instead their presence could also indicate that there is a certain logic of exception at work that operates in a *transversal* way (see Caldeira 2017, 7) with more official manifestations of urban regulation. The result is that not only the formal sphere but also the urban centre loses its fixity and coherence. For, the logic of exception that is perpetuated through the selling and sanctioning of unofficial licenses allows for electric rickshaws to re-enter the city, after officially having been expelled to the periphery through mechanisms of enclosure. Hence, what has officially been rendered "out" is unofficially re-invited "in". The case of the electric rickshaw thus underscores

the fact that peripheral areas are not just places where the administrative limits of the city become visible, but also places where these limits become blurred as expressions of urban governance lose the semblance of coherence and the insides and outsides of the city are inverted.

The Rickshaw Garage: Making Centrality from the Periphery

Thus far, this chapter has mostly dealt with the ways in which rickshaw drivers navigate and deal with the material and regulatory landscapes of both central and peripheral areas in Dhaka. The example of the electric rickshaw, however, shows that the rickshaw industry is also clearly an agent of change in shaping this urban landscape and its infrastructural constellations. Indeed, the different changes and upgrades that have been made to the electric rickshaw, which I will outline in greater detail in the next chapter, all bear testimony to the unlikely, and sometimes unwanted, improvisations that materialise when “practitioners of space mobilise themselves in order to make ends meet with what is at hand” (Von Wissel 2016, 15). Caldeira (2017, 5) has argued that such modes of auto-construction are the hallmark of “peripheral urbanisation” and signal a mode of spatial production that involves “spaces that are never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated upon”.

Von Wissel (2016) takes this perspective on auto-construction one step further, by not only looking at the spaces that people produce through improvisation and bricolage, but also at the connections they make. Hence, he advocates a perspective on infrastructure that addresses attention to how people *do* infrastructure instead of focusing merely on the spatial and material production of infrastructure. Von Wissel (2016, 19) argues that it is through “infrastructural practices” that “dwellers of peri-urban conditions (and beyond) *make centrality* by making connections”. In what follows, I will bring the perspectives of Caldeira (2017) and Von Wissel (2016) together in analysing the rickshaw garage both as a product of peripheral urbanisation and as a catalyst for certain infrastructural practices. First, I will analyse the space of the rickshaw garage as an example of the modes of improvisation and auto-construction that characterise spatial production in peripheral areas. Next, I will focus on the ways in which the garage allows rural-urban migrants to “make centrality by making connections” (Von Wissel 2016, 19). Moreover, throughout this section, I will argue

that these monumental efforts to make centrality can only be fully understood when put in juxtaposition with the urban processes that are pushing rickshaw garages and rickshaw drivers towards the periphery of the city.

Throughout my fieldwork I have visited rickshaw garages of all shapes and sizes: from cramped, dark tin shed storage spaces with a handful of rickshaws to large open fields with up to two-hundred vehicles. Although most rickshaw garages are built as large, half-open, tin shed shacks, I have also been to garages that simply consisted of a collection of rickshaws being stored in the open air, be it on a playing field, under an elevated expressway or at the side of the road or river bank. More established garages would usually contain an indoor or partly enclosed storage space which also functioned as a repair workshop and a makeshift attic, consisting of wooden floor planks, that provided a very basic sleeping place for rickshaw drivers. On occasion, there would be a small kitchen or cooking space as well.

The rickshaw garage certainly fits Caldeira's (2017) description of a space that is "never quite done". In fact, the rudimentary form of the average rickshaw garage, presages the possibility of having to shift or relocate elsewhere. Moreover, as becomes clear from the examples that I listed above, in some instances the garage does not even mark a distinct space to begin with but simply overlaps with other urban forms and functions, such as a playing field or road. This spatial and temporal indistinctiveness mirrors the in-between character of the periphery, where the desire to "fix" things, or "to make precise identifications of space, problems, or populations" (Simone 2010, 11) is met with a challenging indeterminacy. In fact, the rickshaw garage is a prime example of a space that is *unfixed*. For the garage often not only constitutes an improvised space, a bricolage of sheets of corrugated iron, bamboo poles and wooden floor planks; it is also an inherently temporary space that is not permanently tied to a specific location. The looming and very real possibility of having to relocate elsewhere imposes limits on the extent to which processes of auto-construction would be set in motion, because auto-construction is ultimately an expression of people's efforts to upgrade their living environment one step at the time. It consists of "long-term processes of incompleteness and continuous improvement" (Caldeira 2017, 5) and thus builds on the expectation of remaining somewhere for a longer amount of time.

I first became aware of the relative normalcy of garage relocations, when visiting a rickshaw maker and garage owner known by the name of Iqbal²⁵. Iqbal was a fairly famous rickshaw maker in Old Dhaka and the walls of his garage were covered in pictures and newspaper articles featuring rickshaws that he had designed. One of the newspaper clippings showed a rickshaw that Iqbal had built, beautifully decorated with hand painted rickshaw art, being paraded in front of an international audience at the Cricket World Cup. His workshop also had a visitors' book where numerous foreign visitors before me had left their messages; some had even gone as far as to order a rickshaw from Iqbal to bring back to their home countries.

Iqbal himself was a skilled rickshaw maker who prided himself not only on the beautiful decorations that adorned his vehicles, but also on the fact that his rickshaws were easy to operate and comfortable to sit on. His workshop was located in Bangshal, an area of Dhaka that is known as the heart of the rickshaw and bicycle industry. The narrow streets are home to little studios where rickshaw art is sold and produced; workshops where the hood, body and frame of the rickshaw are built, painted and assembled; and a variety of shops dealing in all the little parts and screws that go into making a rickshaw. Iqbal had lived in this part of town his whole life and grew up in a time when becoming a rickshaw maker was still considered to be a respectable, even prestigious job. However, the demand for rickshaws had declined over the years and Iqbal now ran a garage next to his work as a rickshaw maker and mechanic. Up until fifteen to twenty years ago Bangshal had been host to many rickshaw garages, but today Iqbal's garage was one of the two or three garages still left in the area. He explained the decline as follows²⁶: "To build a garage you need empty (*khali*) space, but that is difficult to find in Old Dhaka. It is impossible to stay somewhere permanently. If you find an open space, you can make a garage, but these spaces are also needed for constructing high-rises".

Iqbal himself had experienced this increasing scarcity of space first hand. In fact, the garage where we first met him had been demolished a month after our visit in order to make way for the construction of a high-rise building. When we met again during my second stretch of fieldwork, one and a half years later, he was running a small workshop from the ground floor of a building. However, he was only able to store six rickshaws there, which he rented out to older rickshaw drivers he had known and been

²⁵ Informal conversation, Bangshal, January 10, 2016.

²⁶ Semi-structured interview, Bangshal, September 18, 2017.

friends with for a long time. He compared his situation to that of a cattle farmer: “If you have many rickshaws you need a large, open space. The same as with cows. If you have cows, you need to make a shed. It is impossible to take care of the cows without a shed”. Hence, aptly summarising why so many rickshaw garages were increasingly forced to shift to the fringes of the city.

Rayerbazar, the area where I lived during the bulk of my fieldwork, was one of these fringe areas of the city that had always hosted a large number of rickshaw garages. To give an indication, during a short walk of approximately one kilometre, whilst exploring the neighbourhood behind my house, I counted sixteen different rickshaw garages along the route²⁷. The majority of these garages were located in the part of Rayerbazar that had only started developing after the *beribadh* road was constructed. Prior to these embankment works, prompted by the flood of 1988 that had submerged eighty-five percent of the city in water²⁸, the flood plains of the Buriganga river had reached as far as my house. Older residents could still remember how, during the Pakistani period, people used to take their bath at the site that was now marked by my apartment building, and how, during the Liberation War of 1971, the adjacent swamps were infamously used by the Pakistani Army to get rid of the bodies of murdered intellectuals.

In a classic example of auto-construction, these swamplands had all gradually been filled up with rubble and mud to accommodate the expanding population of Dhaka. Yet, this cadence of auto-construction and improvisation was increasingly disrupted by the presence of real estate developers who had moved in to construct high-rise apartment buildings in the area. As I mentioned in the introduction, I myself was living in one of these newly constructed flats, which had been built on a patch of land that had gone through a fairly typical lifecycle; it had upgraded from pond to informal settlement, to CNG garage and, eventually, to ten-storey apartment building. The rickshaw garage next door still bore testament to these previous land uses. It consisted of an open space, surrounded by a few tin shed shacks, and on most days a handful of rickshaw drivers could be found playing cards or smoking cigarettes on a makeshift platform of wooden pallets next to the road. By the end of my fieldwork, however, the garage and rickshaw drivers had been forced to relocate elsewhere.

²⁷ Observational walk, Rayerbazar, October 9, 2017.

²⁸ See Huq and Alam (2003, 121) for a detailed account of the effects of the 1988 flood.



Figure 17: Rickshaw decorations on display, as seen at Iqbal's workshop.

Such shifts in location, which usually implied moving westwards towards the embankment, were a recurring theme throughout the conversations I had with different rickshaw owners in the area. During a visit to the “Hakim Mistri Garage”²⁹, which was located some hundred meters away from the *beribadh* road, the son of the garage owner told us of the different relocations he had witnessed in the thirty years that his father had been a *malik*. They were initially based near the Chata Mosque, close to the local *bazar*. Next, they had moved about four-hundred meters northwest to an

²⁹ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

area called Premtola, where they had stayed for ten years. Finally, three months ago, they had moved even further westwards after the landowner had decided to build a high-rise building at the site of their previous garage. The land they currently occupied had been leased to them for a duration of two years, after which they would likely have to relocate again.

Such temporary lease-constructions were very common, considering that most rickshaw garages were constructed on empty plots of land, owned by other people and destined for other purposes. Mustafa³⁰, another local garage owner who had relocated to the Premtola area six months ago, explained that most of the land in Rayerbazar was privately owned by a powerful local family that had subdivided the area among the six sons of the family. Mustafa paid 20,000 taka per month to the local landowner of Premtola to store his twenty-three rickshaws and rickshaw-vans on a field that he shared with another *malik*. In one or two months, however, he would have to temporarily park his vehicles at the roadside, because of the annual *mela* (“fair”) that would be hosted at the site of his garage. Moreover, the landowner had a plan to eventually construct an apartment building at that very same spot, so before long he would be packing up his business again.

Throughout these different stories of relocation and removal, the rickshaw garage emerges as a “prolific in-between space” (Simone 2010, 11). Simone (2010, 11) further elaborates on this classification, by pointing out that such “seemingly marginal, wasted, or carceral spaces *become* something more in-between” (*italics added*). In other words: in-betweenness is a process of becoming, not merely a zone between one territory and another. Similarly, rickshaw garages are not just located in the peripheral areas of Dhaka, but they actually *move with* the periphery. That is, they move away from the “established city” as areas like Rayerbazar are increasingly co-opted through processes of development and citification. In fact, it is difficult to imagine the improvised space of the rickshaw garage, after having gone through different cycles of auto-construction, eventually evolving into a fixed feature of the urban landscape. For, its formation and function are very much dependent on certain characteristics that are inherently peripheral, namely large, open stretches of wasteland that have been temporarily left unused by their owners, but will be exploited for other purposes as soon as the city extends and increases their value.

³⁰ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

The rickshaw garage, as a space, is thus inherently unfixed; “always pushing, always under threat” (Simone 2010, 11). At the same time, however, the rickshaw garage is characterised by a certain plasticity. The improvised nature of these garages not only makes moving relatively easy, but most rickshaw owners also seemed to be able to shift locations without losing access to the urban economy. In chapter 5, drawing on the work of Malabou (2009), I described plasticity as a type of agency that is characterised by the tension between taking and bestowing form; between rolling with the punches and resisting certain imprints. At first sight, the rickshaw garage seems to be solely an example of form-obliteration; not only is its physical form characterised by a certain spatial and material indistinctiveness, as becomes clear from the fact that a road or playing field can also constitute a garage, but its owners are also quite literally pushed away towards the edges of the city. However, although relatively undefined as a physical piece of infrastructure, the garage plays a vital role in allowing rickshaw drivers to *do* infrastructure, to “*make centrality* by making connections” (Von Wissel 2016, 19). It is this form giving potential, this ability to “act as a platform for a nonterritorially fixed sense of being in place” (Simone 2010, 11), that I will turn to now.

For many rural-urban migrants coming to Dhaka, the rickshaw garage functions as a first point of arrival. One of the observations that has stayed with me throughout my fieldwork was the following – somewhat offhand – remark by a lower government employee³¹, who summarised Bangladesh’s trend of rural-urban migration as follows: “When people go home for Eid, they come back [to Dhaka] with ten more people from their village”. Although the comment was obviously an exaggeration, part of a longer lament about the lack of agricultural labourers in the countryside, it did sum up, quite accurately, the entry-mechanism into the rickshaw industry. Rickshaw drivers from the countryside would usually end up at a certain garage through their (rural) acquaintances and relatives. The importance of these connections became clear during a conversation with Ravi³², a college student who had, since the age of twelve, used his school holidays to travel to the city and drive a rickshaw. Ravi lived and studied in Nilphamari, a district in the far northern corner of Bangladesh, and had initially started driving a rickshaw in the city of Sylhet. He told us how he had made a stopover in Dhaka during his first journey from Nilphamari to Sylhet, a journey that amounted to approximately 450-500 kilometres in total. Somewhat surprised I asked him why he

³¹ Informal conversation, DNCC ward office, November 22, 2017.

³² Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

had not just decided to drive a rickshaw in Dhaka and spared himself the last 200 kilometres to Sylhet, which is significantly farther away. Ravi explained that it had been easier for him to find work in Sylhet, because he knew people there. Eventually, however, he had gotten to know some men in Dhaka as well who had helped him to find a garage in the capital.

Not knowing people in the rickshaw industry could be a very real obstacle in obtaining access to a garage. The example of Rubel³³, the writer-cum-rickshaw driver who I introduced at the beginning of chapter 5, bears repeating here. Rubel had entered the rickshaw industry after losing an “office job” and essentially hitting rock bottom. His education and higher socio-economic status, however, had made it difficult to convince a rickshaw *malik* to rent out a vehicle to him. The different rickshaw owners were suspicious of his middle-class appearance and suspected that he might, in fact, be a rickshaw thief in disguise. Eventually, another rickshaw driver had stood up for him and Rubel had further persuaded the owner by providing some of his valuables as collateral security. Arif³⁴ had faced similar problems when he tried to shift rickshaw garages from Korail slum to Badda, after the new rickshaw restrictions in the diplomatic zone had made it increasingly difficult for him to make a living in the direct vicinity of his garage. Whereas Arif had found his current garage in Korail through friends from his village in Mymensingh, there was no one who could vouch for him in Badda and, as a result, he had not been able to obtain access to the garage.

This entry mechanism into the garage, namely through association with other rickshaw drivers, was also described by several of the garage owners I spoke to. Mithun³⁵, who ran a rickshaw garage in Jatrabari, for instance, explained that he would not just allow anyone to hire a rickshaw from his garage. We had been discussing the risk of rickshaw theft and Mithun clarified how he made sure that he could trust the people he worked with: “For this reason, we don’t take drivers without any guaranty, or without any acquaintances (*porichito lok chara*), or when somebody comes here and I don’t know them”. He preferred to recruit rickshaw drivers who either lived in the direct vicinity or came to Dhaka with other rickshaw drivers he knew. Another rickshaw *malik* by the name of Faruk³⁶, also expressed his reluctance to rent out his rickshaws to *oporichito lok* (“unknown people”). He reasoned that a stranger could

³³ Semi-structured interview, Lalkutir, December 30, 2015.

³⁴ Semi-structured interview, Korail, November 27, 2017.

³⁵ Semi-structured interview, Jatrabari, February 22, 2016.

³⁶ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 30, 2017.

easily be a thief and therefore only recruited people who had been introduced to him by other rickshaw drivers. Hence, most rickshaw *wallas* would end up at a certain garage, because an elder brother or neighbour from their home village had introduced them to the owner. Etzold (2016, 177) has observed a similar trend among street vendors working in Dhaka; he argues that their decision to “migrate and the access to accommodation and working opportunities often depends on the kinship relations between migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants”. Moreover, according to Etzold (2016, 177), this form of *translocal*, social capital is an important factor in explaining “why and when people migrate to the city, where they settle within the city, where and what kind of work they can obtain, and to which vending site the street vendors can get access”.

To gain access to the rickshaw industry rural-urban migrants thus rely on translocal networks that span city and countryside. The rickshaw garage functions as an important node within these networks, essentially operating as a gateway between village and city and compounding a sense of being in place that is no longer “territorially fixed” (Simone 2010, 11). The garage is not only a space where existing networks are reinforced and elaborated, but also functions as a platform for entering and gaining access to the city. As I have explained in previous chapters, there are hardly any requirements for starting a job as a rickshaw driver, apart from knowing someone who can introduce you to a rickshaw owner. Most drivers only spent one day practising their driving skills before surrendering themselves to the turmoil of Dhaka traffic, relying on the knowledge of passengers for the route and the fare. This accessibility precludes the necessity for making long-term investments or commitments to the job. In fact, some drivers, like the eighteen-year-old Ravi³⁷, only showed up in Dhaka for the two main Eid holidays to earn some extra cash. Others came to Dhaka only during the rainy season, when there was not much work to do in the countryside. Such ad hoc ventures into the city are enabled by the way in which the garage functions and the fact that rickshaw drivers can rent a vehicle on a daily or half-daily basis.

The rickshaw garage not only accommodates the specific temporality and seasonality of rickshaw labour but, as I have shown in the previous chapter, also functions as a relatively “stable site of return” amidst financial, entrepreneurial or agricultural losses. The fact that new rickshaw drivers are often in need of *nogod poysa*,

³⁷ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

or instant cash, complicate narratives that represent rickshaw owners as unnecessary middlemen and the rental system as obsolete. When it comes to improving the situation of rickshaw pullers, a popular solution that is often offered – one that both India and Bangladesh have experimented with³⁸ – is the idea of granting ownership to the rickshaw puller himself (Gallagher 1992, 591). This idea of “giving the rickshaw to the puller”, although appealing at first sight, glosses over the important infrastructural role that the garage and the rickshaw owners play in brokering access to the urban informal economy. The story of Mithun³⁹ is illuminating in this aspect. Although Mithun is now a garage owner himself, he initially started off as a rickshaw driver after losing his land due to river bank erosion. He had tried to look for other business opportunities in Dhaka, but it had turned out to be impossible to start a small shop or business without any investment capital. Hiring a rickshaw, on the other hand, required neither capital nor skills and had granted Mithun easy access to the urban informal economy.

The rickshaw rental system thus allowed rickshaw drivers to start a job in the city without taking enormous financial risks. Rickshaw owners, moreover, often actively contributed to the mitigation of financial risks; they would usually allow rickshaw drivers to sleep at the garage for free and it was not uncommon for them to hand out loans to rickshaw pullers in times of need (see also Begum and Sen 2005, 20). Faruk⁴⁰ mentioned that, although he did not make a habit of giving out loans, he would make an exception when rickshaw drivers fell in trouble, for instance, because a family member had fallen ill and needed money for medicine. Certain risks, such as the rickshaw being stolen or confiscated by the police, moreover, were shared equally among the owner and the puller, with both of them covering fifty percent of the costs.

One of the rickshaw drivers I spoke to in Rayerbazar⁴¹ mentioned that the risk of theft was an important reason why he was reluctant to buy his own rickshaw, despite the fact that he had been doing this work for over sixteen years and had saved up enough money. He reasoned that whereas his garage owner was a well-known figure in the neighbourhood and part of a larger community of rickshaw *maliks*, individual rickshaw owners often lacked such protective networks and stood a higher risk of being singled out by criminal syndicates. Nonetheless, there were many rickshaw

³⁸ Gallagher (1992, 591) mentions that in the late 1970s several states in India passed a law that restricted rickshaw ownership to genuine pullers. In Dhaka, the temporary, martial law government passed similar measures in 1982, stipulating that owners could not possess more than 3 rickshaws.

³⁹ Semi-structured, Jatrabari, February 22, 2016.

⁴⁰ Semi-structured interview, August 30, 2017.

⁴¹ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 1, 2017.

drivers who did eventually take the risk of buying their own rickshaw. Even they, however, would still be dependent on the garage owners and their networks for storage space. Moreover, the fact that some rickshaw drivers eventually become rickshaw owners as well does not diminish the role of the rickshaw garage in offering urban access to rural newcomers and allowing them to “make centrality by making connections” (Von Wissel 2016, 19).

Throughout this section we have seen that the rickshaw garage is not merely located peripherally, but actually *moves with* the periphery as the city extends and pushes its boundaries further outward. The material and spatial unfixity of the garage mirrors this perpetual process of peripheral becoming that is premised on repeated relocations. However, despite its distinctly peripheral outlook and dependence on peripheral resources, such as large plots of unused wasteland, the rickshaw garage also functions as a catalyst for infrastructural practices that are aimed at “making centrality”. Its nodal function in rural-urban networks allows people to broker access to rickshaws, work and the city as a whole. As such, the rickshaw garage shares some core characteristics of what Doug Saunders (2010) has described as “arrival cities”. Saunders (2010, 19-20) has coined the term “arrival cities” to make sense of “ex-villager enclaves on the periphery of the city” and argues that such neighbourhoods can be viewed as an “urban establishment platform” or “entry mechanism” into the urban economy. The functioning of the arrival city, according to Saunders (2010, 11), is inextricably linked to the maintenance of translocal networks that connect village to arrival city to established city. It gives urban newcomers a “place to push themselves, and their children, further into the centre, into acceptability, into connectedness” (Saunders 2010, 11).

In this section the rickshaw garage has similarly emerged as a place that fosters connectedness and allows rickshaw drivers to make centrality. However, the question arises as to what extent their entry into the rickshaw industry actually signals a meaningful form of urban arrival, for, as we have seen, there are also mechanisms at work that push the rickshaw industry towards the outskirts and outsides of the city. As a result, it is often impossible to tell whether rickshaw drivers are actually arriving in the city and intend to have their families join them or whether they are primarily focused on returning to their home village as soon as they have the chance. In the last section, I will therefore focus, not on the mechanisms of arrival that the rickshaw garage enables, but on the dynamics of *return* that also play an important role in the

lives of rickshaw drivers. I will start the next section with an ethnographic account of one of my fieldwork visits to a Madaripur village, in an attempt to actively shift the focus of this chapter away from Dhaka and its outskirts to the countryside of Bangladesh.

Rural Returns: The Back and Forth of Urbanisation

If you want to experience the raw edge of the great migration, to see the first, formative steps in a movement that is transferring a third of humanity from the village to the city, you're more likely to find it by joining the tides moving in the other direction, on trains and boats and mini buses, back to the village at harvest time.

(Saunders 2010, 38)

My ears had to get accustomed to the playful chirping of the birds. The noisy, cacophonous city where I had woken up that morning suddenly did not seem to exist anymore. I had exchanged Dhaka, with its high-rises and half-finished apartment buildings, for the low-lying countryside of Madaripur, one of the 64 districts or *zila* into which Bangladesh is subdivided. Everywhere I looked, I was surrounded by different shades of green, tempered here and there by the layer of dust that inevitably settles on leaves and grasses during the dry months of winter. A pleasant breeze carried over the tangy smell of garlic and coriander. In the background, the always-hungry river was pushing and shoving itself against the river bank; widening its presence and swallowing chunks of clay.

I was visiting Yasin's home village in Shibchar, which is located approximately sixty kilometers southwest of Dhaka. While wandering across the village, following the narrow, crisscrossing footpaths that run between the rice fields to connect different clusters of tin shed houses, it was easy to forget that one of Bangladesh's most prestigious development projects was being carried out nearby: the construction of the long-awaited Padma Bridge. The gigantic concrete pillars and construction platforms that stretched all across the width of the seemingly shoreless Padma River hinted at a future in which Dhaka and Madaripur would be inextricably linked. The near-empty asphalt road that Yasin and I had travelled on on our way to the village served as a foreboding of this connectedness. Clearly, this brand-new stretch of four-lane road had

not been designed to accommodate the electric rickshaw-van that our driver had operated at an alarming speed. Upon completion of the bridge, the road would function as a direct express highway to the capital city. On the other side of the river, towards Dhaka, real-estate signs were already sprouting up from empty paddy fields to promise prospective apartment dwellers that these valuable plots would soon be part of the satellite “South Dhaka Model Town”.

These manifestations of sheer infrastructural ambition faded to the background when walking around the village. Yasin explained that the houses closest to the river were often not connected to the electricity grid due to the looming risk of river bank erosion. The river had shifted its course since my last visit, claiming substantial chunks of land. We passed a palm tree that was quietly but fatally leaning forward; waiting to collapse into the river. Further down the road was a makeshift encampment for evacuees that had lost their land and were waiting to be relocated. Sometimes the land would reappear in the middle of the river as a *char* and parts of the village had been rebuilt amid the catkin grasslands that held the soil of these young islands together. However, the frequency of illegal dredging practices made it increasingly less likely for these sandbanks to emerge from the river. In past years, it has become a lucrative business to dredge the river for sand and sediment that could be used for infrastructural projects⁴². Such illegal sand lifting practices further exacerbated the already existing risk of riverbank erosion.

Partly due to the widespread prevalence of river bank erosion, many of Yasin’s neighbours had at some point in their lives tried their luck as rickshaw drivers. In the course of three different visits to Shibchar⁴³ I got to talk to a variety of local men, all of whom had been involved with the rickshaw industry to different extents. Some of them used to work as rickshaw drivers but had retired or moved back to the countryside. Others only worked in Dhaka during the rainy season and spent most of the year working the fields. Yet a third group of rickshaw drivers travelled back to the countryside every two months to visit their wives and families in the village. Saidur⁴⁴, who I cited in the introduction of this thesis, belonged to this latter category. We ran into him during one of my visits to the village, as he was preparing himself to travel back to Dhaka, albeit somewhat reluctantly. “What else can I do?” he pondered aloud,

⁴² Adil Sakhawat, “Dredging Erodes Padma Riverbank in Munshiganj”, *The Dhaka Tribune*, August 27, 2014, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2014/08/27/dredging-erodes-padma-riverbank-in-munshiganj>.

⁴³ These field visits took place on the 11-02-2016, 05-09-2017 and from 30-10-2017 till 01-11-2017.

⁴⁴ Semi-structured interview, Shibchar, February 11, 2016.

“there is no income here and I have to eat”. If it were up to him, he would not return to Dhaka the next day. The clean air, the coconut trees, the cool breeze from the nearby river: in many aspects he considered life in the village to be preferable over the dusty roads of Dhaka. But, as Saidur summarised his predicament: “In Dhaka city there is income, so to Dhaka city I go”.

Saidur was by no means a newcomer to Dhaka city. He had his roots in Shibchar, but was born and raised near Jatrabari. The piece of land that once belonged to his family had been swallowed by the river a long time ago. His wife and three children used to live with him in Dhaka, but had returned to Shibchar three years ago. The living costs in the city had increased during recent years, and the small tin shed houses where people like Saidur lived increasingly had to make way for a hungry real estate sector. “Poor people cannot stay in Dhaka”, Saidur explained. “They are destroying the tin shed houses, and constructing high-rise buildings everywhere”. To save costs, his wife and children had exchanged their small *ghor* (room) in the city for a more comfortable tin shed house in Shibchar and Saidur had moved into mess accommodation. He shared a space with other rickshaw drivers and day labourers, some of them from nearby villages, who all relied on such transitory spaces to accommodate their multi-local lifestyle.

* * * * *

Whereas the previous section presented the rickshaw garage as an “urban establishment platform” or entry mechanism into the city, the story of Saidur and his family actually highlights the reverse, namely that the garage, or in this specific case the mess, can also function as a site of urban withdrawal rather than arrival. Saidur describes a trajectory that reverses the direction of rural-urban migration. His is not a story of tentative urban arrival, but of gradual retreat, enabled by the same kind of transitory spaces that facilitate entrance. The same characteristics that make the garage or mess an accessible space, such as the fact that rent can be paid on a daily basis, also make it easily egressible. The question therefore arises what such outward movements, away from the city, can tell us about the processes of urbanisation. I started this section with a remark by Saunders (2010, 38), who argues that return journeys to the countryside expose the “raw edge of the great migration” and enable us “to see the first, formative steps in a movement that is transferring a third of

humanity from the village to the city”. Biographies of people like Saidur, however, seem to challenge the direction and definitiveness of this “great migration”. Moreover, the idea of a great migration, or a massive population transferral from village to city, is inevitably premised on a rural-urban distinction that might not be easily discerned in reality. In fact, largescale infrastructural projects, such as the construction of the Padma Bridge, underscore the fact that the urban extends far beyond the boundaries of the actual city and is not just something that rural people travel towards, but also something that travels to them.

In what follows, I seek to move beyond fixed categories of departure and arrival, thereby complicating understandings of urbanisation that envision a “unilinear rural-to-urban ‘transition’” (Brenner 2018, 574). The story of Saidur and his family underscores that rural-urban migration is not the unidirectional trajectory it is sometimes assumed to be, but instead involves a variety of migrations and movements both *to* and *from* the city. Not only does the above example draw attention to the inevitable return visits that coincide with a migratory lifestyle, it also hints at the fact that relative newcomers to the city are often on the brink of being “out” again. Saidur’s remark that “poor people cannot stay in Dhaka” points to the exclusionary mechanisms that push poorer residents towards the outsides and outskirts of the city. The increase of rent and living expenses and the steady encroachment of real estate developers are among the more insidious mechanisms of exclusion that are at work in Dhaka city.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, there are also more deliberate attempts to instigate a “return to the countryside”, as is exemplified by the Ghore Phera programme which encourages slum dwellers to return to their villages by offering them loans to pursue income-generating activities in the countryside (Mohit 2018, 16). Policies and micro-credit schemes that explicitly facilitate such a “return home” for rickshaw drivers seem to be aimed at somehow “fixing” their role and place in the national economy of Bangladesh, thereby overlooking the circuitous and multidirectional dimension of rural-urban migrations. Moreover, the idea of a “return home” implies that rickshaw drivers have somehow been uprooted from their natural place in the order of things. In an attempt to challenge this “sedentarist bias” and to diversify the image of what “returning home” entails, I will now present three different biographical excerpts that highlight different temporalities of return.

Returning Regularly

We met Kadir⁴⁵ in Shibchar during one of the last days of Eid-ul-Azha, the Islamic Festival of Sacrifice. He had joined the tide of urban dwellers who travel back to their home villages during the main religious festivals, leaving the capital city pleasantly uncongested. Although Kadir spent most of the year in mess accommodation in Dhaka, he still engaged in some agricultural chores at home. He had managed to sell two bulls just prior to the Eid Festival. Around this time of the year most Muslim families in the country would be looking for a strong and beautiful bull to sacrifice and Kadir had raised his cattle specifically for this purpose. “What other work do you do here?” I asked. “Here, like I said, I don’t have farming land. I am jobless here. At home... I am jobless”. Two years ago Kadir and his family had lost their land to the nearby river. “*E je eta nodi, dekhen*. Over there, there is the river, look” he gestured vividly in the direction of the water. “All my land is in the river”.

It was long before Kadir lost his land to the river, more than thirty years ago, that he first started coming to Dhaka. Indeed, the small piece of land had never been enough to support his family or to cover his children’s education costs. Kadir had initially started out at a rickshaw garage in Old Dhaka – still young at the time and still able to “drive a rickshaw continuously”. However, a year and a half ago a neighbour had tipped him off that he could make better money as a *rickshaw-van* (“cycle cart”) puller. He had taken the advice to heart and had relocated to Shonir Akhra, from where he entered Dhaka with a rickshaw-van every morning to deliver goods. He carried his load of approximately forty kilos to the many electronic shops that were located down Nawabpur road, in Old Dhaka. The work was heavier than driving around a regular passenger-rickshaw, but he usually could earn a daily salary of 800/900 taka in only three to four trips.

Now that he was getting older and weaker Kadir needed to take a break from his strenuous work more often than before and he spent around three to four months per year in the countryside. The fact that he had no income in the countryside meant that he often had to take out a loan from relatives and neighbours during his time back home. “Don’t you want to take your family with you to the city?” I asked. “It’s not possible, the living costs are too high”, Kadir answered decisively. His daughter had

⁴⁵ Semi-structured interview, Shibchar, September 5, 2017.

joined the group of curious bystanders who were listening in on our conversation, but shyly retreated to the edge of the circle when her father tried to engage her in the conversation. Whenever he was in Dhaka, Kadir maintained contact with his children over the phone. One of his sons, not more than eighteen years old, worked as a labourer for a construction company in Kuwait at the moment. It had cost a fortune, 8 *lakh* in total, to send him abroad, but it was not clear when this investment would start paying off. His son needed to pay back the loan for the travel and visa first, before he could start making money. “If it goes well, if his income is well, he will stay for five years. If the income is little, he will stay for two extra years”, Kadir explained. Only when his son started earning sufficient money, Kadir could start thinking about returning to the countryside on a permanent basis. Until that rather uncertain point in time, he would continue to leave for Dhaka, even though the city was far from a comfortable place to live and work for a 55-year-old man.

Returning Seasonally

“Onno kaj o korchhi, abar majhe majhe rickshaw-o chalcchi”. “I do other work as well, but I also drive a rickshaw occasionally”. For fifteen years Dipu⁴⁶ had been driving a rickshaw on and off. We met him in Shibchar during the winter season. The dry winter months had left many rickshaw garages in Dhaka relatively empty, as rickshaw *wallas* returned to the countryside to cultivate rice, potato, mustard seeds, cauliflower and other winter vegetables. Dipu himself spent most of the year in the countryside. He would only turn to Dhaka during the months of heavy rainfall in the summer that made it nearly impossible to engage in any farming. In the past, Dipu had lived in Dhaka permanently, together with his brother and parents. However, after getting married and starting his own family, he had found it increasingly impossible to keep up with the costs of living expenses and rent in the city. He now worked as a day labourer throughout the year, cultivating other people’s land. In addition, Dipu drove an easy-bike every now and then to complement his income from agricultural work. In most rural areas, electric three-wheelers, ranging from easy-bikes to battery-run rickshaws and rickshaw-vans, played an important role in connecting small villages to larger district towns and markets. However, in 2015 these vehicles had officially been banned

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview, Shibchar, February 11, 2016.

from highways⁴⁷, making it even less lucrative to operate an easy-bike. We asked Dipu which of his three jobs provided him with the most income. He explained that although driving a rickshaw was the most gainful form of employment, it was also the hardest job. What's more, Dipu vehemently disliked the hectic turmoil of Dhaka traffic jam and therefore limited his presence in the capital city to three months a year during the rainy season.



Figure 18: Women are separating jute fibers as jute sticks are drying next to the footpath, as seen in the Shibchar countryside.

Returning More-Or-Less Permanently

Our second visit to Shibchar took place during the rainy season. Much of the agricultural land had been submerged under water and we needed a boat to travel from one cluster of houses to the other. Next to the meandering pathways, women and children were washing and separating jute fibers, after the stalks had been left to soak and decompose in the water for three weeks. Bundles of jute sticks had been arranged vertically alongside the footpaths and the wet jute fibers were draped down like

⁴⁷ Shahin Akhter and Zaman Monir, "Three-wheelers Back on Highways Defying Ban", *NewAge Bangladesh*, July 5, 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/45201/three-wheelers-back-on-highways-defying-ban>.

curtains across people's compounds. With the jute harvest almost over, there was not much work to do and most day labourers were waiting for the *Aman*⁴⁸ harvest season to start. Yasin and I met with two day labourers⁴⁹ – uncle and cousin – who had both worked as rickshaw drivers in the past. “So there is not a lot of work at the moment?”, I inquired after we had exchanged a few pleasantries. “None, there is *no* work” Aminul replied with emphasis. Both he and his 64-year-old uncle, Ghulam, had stayed at a mess in Rayerbazar in the past. We were told that there was a time, some twenty years ago, when up to thirty of the local men had worked as rickshaw pullers in Dhaka city. Aminul and Ghulam recalled how they used to send their earnings home via their neighbours before *bKash* had made it possible to wire back money by mobile phone.

Seven years ago Aminul had decided to return to Shibchar more or less permanently. Throughout our conversation he emphasised several times that it was much safer (*nirapod*) in the countryside. He had quit pedaling a rickshaw mainly because of the risks of accidents that came with the job and was not too keen to travel back to Dhaka anytime soon. “*Jara parbe, tara rickshaw chalabe*. Those who can, will drive a rickshaw”, Ghulam interjected. Aminul's much older uncle had returned to the countryside three years ago. In the course of twenty-five years Ghulam had seen his energy (*sokti*) and income decline to the point where his daily earnings as a rickshaw puller were less than the 300 taka he could make as a day labourer in the countryside. In a way, his life had come full circle, considering that he had also started his working life as an agricultural labourer. In the colloquial accent of the region, Ghulam stressed that the income he earned at the time – a meagre 20 taka per day – had been far from sufficient (“*pusai na*”). When the disastrous flood of 1988 hit the area and washed away all of the crops, Ghulam had decided to try his luck in Dhaka. Over the years he had managed to sustain his family by working as a rickshaw driver, but he had not saved up enough money to retire or start a small business. Ghulam did have a little bit of land of his own – approximately one-third of an acre – but still needed to plough and weed the land of others to accumulate sufficient income. Moreover, the frequency of riverbank erosion in the area made it so that owning a small piece of land was far from a stable safeguard for the future.

* * * * *

⁴⁸ Aman is one of the three varieties of rice that are grown in Bangladesh. The other two are *Boro* and *Aus*.

⁴⁹ Semi-structured interview, September 5, 2017.

These different stories of rural return bear testimony to personal experiences of risk and hard work, broader experiences of ageing and the loss of physical strength, and the overall increase in urban living costs. It is this mix of personal preferences, age and wider economic conditions that prompts rickshaw drivers to either regularly, seasonally or permanently return to their home villages. However, just as the city is by no means a site of definitive arrival, the countryside is by no means a site of definitive return. In fact, it is worth repeating the story of Khadim⁵⁰, the senior rickshaw driver who thought he had retired from pulling a rickshaw for good (see chapter 5). After years of hard work, he had moved back to the countryside, where he relied on the income that his eldest son earned as a tailor. Tragically, his son had died and Khadim once again returned to Dhaka to (secretly) work as a rickshaw puller. However, it is not just personal tragedies like these, but also the ecological vulnerabilities that arise from living near and with- Bangladesh's ever-expanding rivers that make the countryside an inherently unstable site of return. These stories of rural return thus once again underline that the working lives of rickshaw drivers represent a "nonterritorially fixed sense of being in place" (Simone 2010, 11). Moreover, they highlight that experiences of exit and return are just as much part of urbanisation as stories of arrival. Paying attention to such open-ended and multi-directional comings and goings is instrumental in understanding how urban life is caught up in the tension between implosion and explosion that Lefebvre (2003) has recognised as the key feature of urbanisation.

Conclusion

I started this chapter at the rooftop of my building, looking out in the direction of the outskirts of the city. Analytically I have tried to do the same; I have turned to the periphery of Dhaka in an attempt to grasp the dialectical tension between inward and outward movement, between concentration and dispersal, and between implosion and explosion. My purpose has been to underline the murkiness and opacity of the periphery as an antidote to popular narratives that tend to frame our contemporary moment of "mass-urbanisation" as a unidirectional shift from countryside to city. Such narratives not only fall prey to "methodological cityism" (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015), but also perpetuate a "sedentarist bias" (Malkki 1995) by assuming that

⁵⁰ Semi-structured interview, Lalbagh, January 30, 2016.

populations can be pinned down as *either* rural *or* urban. My point of departure has been that continuous movement “makes it impossible to clearly identify just what is ‘coming and going’” (Simone 2010, 54). More specifically, I have asked what the multi-scalar comings and goings of rickshaw drivers can tell us about processes of urban becoming in Dhaka.

First, I have analysed how both centrality and peripherality take shape as an everyday lived experience for rickshaw drivers as they navigate different infrastructural landscapes of Dhaka. In doing so, I have tried to highlight the distinct and different set of experiences that sets the periphery apart from the urban centre. I have argued that centrality ultimately becomes manifest through different expressions of density and prominence that are associated with characteristics such as congestion, regulation, higher prices, better roads and more passengers. Peripherality, on the other hand, is associated with poor road quality and the pervasive and permitted presence of the electric rickshaw. I have argued that, entering the city from these more peripheral areas, means not only entering a certain regulatory framework and having to comply with a new set of rules, but also exposure to a distinct logic of exception. In other words, the material and political process of becoming-but-not-yet-being-part of the city that characterises many peripheral areas not only coincides with the anticipation of better roads and access to the city, but also brings about new actors, regulations and exceptions to contend with. This logic of exception becomes manifest through the ways in which urban elements that have officially been rendered “out” and expelled to the periphery, such as the electric rickshaw, are unofficially re-invited “in”. The result is that the boundaries between the interior and exterior of the city are becoming blurred.

In the second section of this chapter, I have analysed how the space and function of the rickshaw garage further contributes to this blurring of boundaries, thereby underscoring the nodal function of the garage as a space that is positioned in between city and countryside. I have argued that the rickshaw garage is not only a distinctly peripheral space that is dependent on the availability of empty waste land, but also plays an instrumental role in allowing people “to make centrality by making connections” (Von Wissel 2016, 19). The translocal networks that are forged and reinforced at the rickshaw garage are of great importance when it comes to enabling rickshaw drivers’ access to the urban informal economy.

In the last section of this chapter, I have juxtaposed this story of access and arrival with the mechanisms of exit and retreat that the rickshaw garage also makes possible. I have emphasised this experience of exit and return as one that is just as much part of urbanisation as stories of arrival. The exclusionary processes of urban development that push slum settlements and rickshaw garages towards the outsides of the city, reveal that rickshaw drivers are often on the brink of being “out” again. Hence, I have sought to temper grand narratives of “urban arrival” and “great migration” by focusing on experiences and temporalities of return.

By concentrating on the opaque comings and goings of rickshaw drivers and the lack of fixed points of departure and arrival, I have underlined the multidirectional nature of urbanisation. However, when zooming in on this inherent murkiness of periphery, the city not only loses its boundaries, but also, to some extent, the semblance of coherence that urban planners, visionaries and politicians often perpetuate in their versions of the city. The question that I will turn to in the final chapter of this thesis, therefore has to do with the ways in which such future visions for Dhaka relate to the tentative and inherently unfixated futures and trajectories that rickshaw drivers envision for themselves.

7. The Future of the Rickshaw: Urban Modernity and the Politics of Newness

“The government wants to create a ‘Digital Bangladesh’, so why don’t they allow the *auto* (electric rickshaw)? The pedal rickshaw is not digital...” In an indignant voice and while hammering the rim of a rickshaw wheel into shape, Junaid¹ talks us through the different injustices that he sees inflicted upon the rickshaw community. His appearance resembles that of a scholar rather than a rickshaw mechanic. He is wearing a neat, white shirt and a pair of spectacles and, on several occasions, he takes on the topic of class relations in Bangladesh with an impeccable sense of rhetoric. In the above quote, Junaid is referring somewhat creatively to “Digital Bangladesh”, the slogan that the Awami League has coined to underline their promise to digitalise governance as part of a wider agenda to develop and modernise the country². The link between the electric rickshaw and the improvement of ICT infrastructure might seem somewhat far-fetched, but the general gist of Junaid’s argument is clear: Why has the electric rickshaw, clearly an example of technological improvement, no place in plans to modernise and develop Bangladesh?

Junaid himself has more than an inkling as to why the Government is reluctant to promote or even tolerate the electric rickshaw: “[They] think it takes up too much electricity”. The garage in Kamrangirchar where Junaid works is home to at least forty battery-run rickshaws (or as he refers to them, *autos*), which all need to be charged overnight. It takes six hours before a battery is fully charged, after which the rickshaw can be operated for five to seven hours in a row, depending on the voltage of the battery. Junaid ponders aloud why the Government cannot just charge them a higher, commercial rate for the use of electricity instead of banning the electric rickshaw from the city altogether. Ever since their area has been annexed by Dhaka City Corporation, local rickshaw drivers are dependent on the whims of the nearest police *thana* for permission to drive an electric vehicle. According to Junaid, the distribution of official

¹ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

² Islam and Grönlund (2011, 107) observe that although the “Digital Bangladesh” agenda is officially about “developing human resources to be ready for the 21st century, connecting the citizens, automating government administration and services to the citizens, and making the private sector more productive and competitive through the use of ICTs” it became somewhat of a buzzword after Awami League was elected into power in 2009. In fact, the slogan “has been frequently used by the ruling party for any development initiative in relation to Information and Communication Technologies” (Islam and Grönlund 2011, 108).

licenses for battery rickshaws is long overdue, especially because this form of work is also accessible to elderly and disabled drivers. In fact, there are even a handful of women operating a battery rickshaw in Kamrangirchar. “But doesn’t the electric rickshaw cause more accidents?” I ask him, regurgitating an argument that I have often heard repeated. “*Na, bhul korechen*. No, it is a mistake, it is a lie” Junaid counters adamantly, while adding that most electric rickshaws now have hydraulic brakes to make them safer. “Accidents happen to all vehicles. *Hondas*³, trucks and buses cause many accidents”. For Junaid the stigma that surrounds the electric rickshaw ultimately comes down to the following: “Sometimes actions are tolerated when carried out by educated people, but when poor people do the same it is not considered to be good”.

* * * * *

The example of the electric rickshaw highlights, if not a double standard, then at least a certain paradox. On the one hand the emergence of this new form of transport and the way in which it has changed the experience of speed, mobility and work hints at a degree of innovation, social change and dynamism that is usually associated with modernity. Yet, despite the fact that the battery-run rickshaw is clearly an example of technological experimentation, invention and upgrading, the vehicle has by no means been welcomed as a “modern” substitute for the regular pedal rickshaw, which is “often seen as inefficient and backward; an impediment to progress; and inconsistent with a modern urban image” (Rahman, D’Este and Bunker 2009, 1). In fact, as we have seen in the previous chapter, electric rickshaws are actively banned from the confines of Dhaka City Corporation and their drivers constantly have to renegotiate their access to the city. Just recently, the mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation, Sayeed Khokon, vowed to “remove illegal rickshaws, battery-powered rickshaws [and] illegal *Laguna* to ease congestion and make the pavements suitable to walk on”⁴. Hence, the example of the electric rickshaw lays bare some of the incongruities and contradictions that lie at the heart of experiences of urban modernity. Indeed, the question can be posed why certain examples of urban innovation and technological advancement – Dhaka’s long-

³ The brand name “Honda” is sometimes used to refer to private cars in general.

⁴ “Rickshaws Banned from Key Dhaka Roads”, *Bdnews24.com*, July 3, 2019, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2019/07/03/rickshaws-banned-from-key-dhaka-roads>

awaited metro-rail for example⁵ – are eagerly anticipated and welcomed, whereas others – such as the battery-run rickshaw – are disregarded and divested of any association with modernity?

In this chapter I seek to make sense of the aforementioned paradox, aptly summarised by Junaid in the first two sentences of this introduction, by approaching urban modernity as a realm that is characterised by a certain “politics of newness”. Whereas Highmore (2005, 12) has provocatively described modernity as “the ad hoc montage of the old rubbing shoulders with the new”, I want to go one step further and argue that modernity gains shape through the very act of drawing a temporal distinction between the “old” and the “new”. I argue that modernity cannot simply be conflated with newness, but instead constitutes a domain wherein epochal distinctions between pastness and newness are articulated, mobilised and politicised to herald the advent of “new times” and to privilege certain directions of change over others. I thus seek to address attention to the ways in which certain urban forms and features are either in- or excluded from imaginations of the urban future. Moreover, I suggest that such in- and exclusions are ultimately mobilised through a “politics of newness” to create the kind of “epochal break” that lies at the heart of experiences of modernity (see Fabian 1983; Osborne 1995; Pels 2015).

Within the context of Dhaka, the rickshaw serves as an appropriate point of departure for exploring such epochal and temporal dimensions of urban in- and exclusion, not in the least because its future has been a highly unlikely one for decades. In many ways, the restrictive policies that have been discussed throughout this dissertation have prevented “any discussion about the rickshaw’s future” (Gallagher 1992, 91). Despite the persistent assumption that the rickshaw will “soon” be a vehicle of the past, the tri-cycle continues to ply the roads of Dhaka in substantial numbers. What’s more, the example of the electric rickshaw shows that the vehicle itself also continues to evolve and change. The extent to which such changes are recognised, encouraged and/or projected into the future, however, relies very much on the way in which temporal politics play out in Dhaka. In other words: the potential role of the rickshaw as an agent of change is intimately tied to the ways in which politicians, planners and visionaries try to map out and fix trajectories of urban change and modernisation.

⁵ Tawfique Ali, “Metro Rail System to Ease Dhaka’s Traffic Gridlock”, *The Daily Star*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/dhaka-metro-rail-service-ease-city-traffic-gridlock-1660585>

In making sense of the ways in which this politics of newness plays out and shapes projects of future-making in Dhaka, I take inspiration from the scholarly literature on (post)colonialism that has long sought to challenge the futurism and linear, progressivist notions of time that continue to animate notions of modernity (see for example Bhabha 2004; Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 2005; Datta 2019; Fabian 1983; Pels 2015; Robinson 2013). These postcolonial⁶ perspectives have all grappled with ways to step away from conceptions of temporality that envision, in the words of Homi Bhabha (2004, 6), some “dead hand of history that tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary”. Not in the least, because this linear, sequential perspective on history has paved the way for the “epochal timescape of tradition and modernity” (Pels 2015, 779) that has helped to legitimise imperial conquest, civilising missions and developmentalist interventions alike. Consequently, there is a need to bring “the critique of time to the centre of the modernity/ coloniality debate” (Vázquez 2009, 110). In what follows, I seek to contribute to this debate by making visible the politics and contestations of newness that are disguised by notions of gradual progression and linear temporality.

This chapter thus takes a much broader, and slightly more speculative, approach than the previous ones, zooming out from the everyday lived realities of rickshaw drivers to make sense of the wider narratives and politics that surround urban development and future-making in Dhaka. Moreover, whereas the previous chapters have highlighted how the working lives of rickshaw pullers represent a non-territorially fixed way of being in the city, this chapter explicitly addresses attention to the temporal logic that underscores attempts at “fixing the city”. In what follows, I will first show how the urban presence of the rickshaw relates to wider politics of newness. Next, I will look at the ways in which projects of epoch- and future-making play out in practices, politics and discourses of urban development in Dhaka. Lastly, I will return to the contested presence of the electric rickshaw and use this example as a starting point for examining how futures and possibilities for change are either enabled or disabled. I am thus interested in the question of how “modern temporal classifications of the future work and for whom” (Pels 2015, 783).

⁶ I am aware of the fact that the term *postcolonial* itself seems to reinforce a linear mode of temporality. However, I agree with Bhabha (2004, 6) that the meaning of terms like *postcolonial* and *postmodern* “does not lie in the popular use of the prefix “post” to indicate “sequentiality” but in their signaling of certain epistemological “limits”.

The Future and/of the Rickshaw

Throughout my research I was often asked, by curious friends and urban planning professionals alike, to speculate about whether or not the rickshaw had a future in Dhaka. I always found this question nearly impossible to answer. Not just because there weren't any reliable statistics on how the number of rickshaws had fluctuated over the years, but also because this was hardly an open-ended question to begin with. Indeed, the rickshaw has been actively denied a future for quite some time. Noteworthy in this regard is a study that was carried out in 1968 by two American consultants in Dhaka, which "predicted" that "by 1990 all non-motorized vehicles aside from bicycles would be eliminated" (Gallagher 1992, 91). Needless to say, this prediction did not come to pass. Still today it is almost impossible to imagine Dhaka's streets – or take a picture of them, for that matter – without the rickshaw. The vehicle, moreover, continues to be responsible for 38.3 percent of all the trips that are made in the capital city on a daily basis (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 2)⁷. This schism between the rickshaw's ostensible pastness on the one hand and its contentious but continued presence and evolvment on the other, makes the question about its future all the more difficult to answer.

The question also arises to what extent we, as urban anthropologists and scholars, should engage and participate in such speculations over the urban future. Should we aspire to comment authoritatively on the futures of the cities we study, even when we know that urban change often unfolds in unprecedented and unexpected ways? Indeed, Harvey (2003, 17) cautions that "the issue of how to see the city and how to represent it during phases of intense change is a daunting challenge". Despite the vastness of this challenge, our contemporary urban moment has inspired all sorts of predictions and futurisms. The sense that the future itself is inevitably urban has gained such a strong foothold within academia and beyond that it has sparked a variety of "foreboding declarations" (Brenner and Schmid 2014, 1). In addition, it has brought along a whole industry of scholars, architects, designers, politicians, planners, engineers, futurists and consultants who are willing to envision, plan and build this urban future, which is believed to unfold predominantly in Africa and Asia⁸. As urban

⁷ To provide some contrast, only 5.1 percent of these daily trips are attributed to the car (RAJUK 2015, chap. 5, 2)

⁸ The most recent revision of the World Urbanization Prospects by UN DESA (2018) states that "the overall growth of the world's population could add another 2.5 billion people to urban areas by 2050, with close to 90 percent of this increase taking place in Asia and Africa".

researchers and scholars we are also increasingly invited to participate in these speculations, whether it is to join in the optimism over “smart cities”⁹ or to warn against dystopian manifestations of “Third World urbanisation”. The uncomfortable linkages between colonialism, linear temporality and modernity, however, make the urban future a rather delicate category of analysis.

The danger that lurks behind such foreboding declarations for the urban future is that they can easily end up reifying some kind of epochal break with the past; hence, giving in to “futurism”. Pels (2015, 781-782) has described futurism as the “classification of an epoch in terms of a prediction of progress”. The concept of modernity provides an apt example of this. Osborne (1995, 12) describes how the notion of modernity has gradually changed from “a simple addition in a linear sequence of chronological time” to an epoch that no longer references a distinct past but opposes pastness in general. He draws on the work of the historian Koselleck, who has outlined the semantic transformation of the notion of *neue Zeit* (“new times”) into *Neuzeit* (“modernity”). Whereas the first denotes an experience of newness that is value-neutral and sequential, the second refers to an epoch and makes “a qualitative claim about the newness of the times” (Osborne 1995, 10). This qualitative distinction between newness and pastness has paved the way for linear notions of progress and development which, in turn, are “inextricably linked to the history of European colonialism, and as such bound up with the politics of a shifting set of spatial relations” (Osborne 1995, 13).

Robinson (2013) has shown that urban scholarship, through its privileging of the city as a site of newness, has also been complicit in reifying such epochal distinctions. She observes that the uncritical conflation of notions such as urbanity, modernity and newness can lead to an imagination of cities that is ridden with “developmental hierarchies, a strong sense of teleology and expectations of innovation” (Robinson 2013, 660). She goes on to argue that the tendency to portray cities “as cultural objects valorised for their capacity for novelty” breeds the sort of theory-building that is mostly focused on what is new, distinctive and exceptional (Robinson 2013, 659). One way to counter such assumptions of newness, is to put a spotlight on the temporal politics that shape the political, material and discursive articulation of newness. For the forms of newness that are associated with the city,

⁹ The “smart city framework” tries to address growing urbanisation challenges through the deployment of high-tech ICT infrastructure and the creative use of digital technologies.

including the current preoccupation with “smart and fast” urbanism (Datta 2017), do not simply emerge out of the gradual progression of history. These forms of newness are actively discovered, contrasted with a certain past and mobilised to foretell a specific urban future. This articulation of newness is thus ultimately a dialectical process that relies on particular things, ideas and practices being relegated to the past.

The example of the rickshaw shows that this is not necessarily an insidious or organic process. Instead, throughout the past century, different policies and practices have actively worked to make the rickshaw outdated. Talk of banning and replacing the rickshaw started as early as 1944¹⁰ and the first restrictions on issuing rickshaw licenses were implemented from the early 1950s onward (Hasan 2013, 19). Moreover, as I explained in chapter 4, Dhaka City Corporation started to ban the rickshaw from major roads and intersections since the early 2000s. These different rickshaw restrictions all cultivate the impression that the rickshaw will “soon” be a vehicle of the past. This idea also sometimes surfaced in discussions I had with transport officials in Dhaka. For instance, when I ran into a member of Dhaka’s transport department at an event to celebrate Non-Motorised Transport¹¹, he asked me whether I had any suggestions on how to rehabilitate rickshaw drivers into different professions, as this would enable them to “phase out” the rickshaw. Similarly, the Mayor of DNCC, Md Atiqul Islam, recently claimed that “all of Dhaka will be ‘rickshaw-free’ within two years”, when asked about a new round of rickshaw bans by *The Economist*¹². What’s more, even those who have stepped up to protest and denounce the imposition of such rickshaw bans often anticipate a future point in time when the rickshaw will no longer be a necessary part of the city’s transport system. For instance, the vice president of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) argued, while speaking out against the latest rickshaw bans, that “[t]he importance of rickshaws would have been reduced automatically if [a] plan had been taken for pedestrian-friendly footpaths, required number of zebra crossings and transport”¹³.

The longstanding assumption that the rickshaw is destined to become a vehicle of the past sooner or later is in line with the fate that rickshaws have faced in other

¹⁰ In 1944, when Bangladesh was still part of larger British India, a government committee recommended that the auto-rickshaw should replace the cycle rickshaw (Hasan 2013, 19).

¹¹ Informal conversation, Dhaka Car-Free Day, November 10, 2017.

¹² “Three Wheels v Four. Bangladesh’s Biggest City Plans to Ban Cycle Rickshaws”, *The Economist*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/11/07/bangladeshs-biggest-city-plans-to-ban-cycle-rickshaws>.

¹³ Bilkis Irani, “Demand to Lift Ban on Rickshaws”, *Dhaka Tribune*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/event/2019/07/12/demand-to-lift-ban-on-rickshaws>.

(South) Asian cities. In both Karachi and Bangkok, the cycle-rickshaw or pedicab was banned in the early 1960s and replaced by faster-paced, motorised three-wheelers (Hook and Replogle 1996, 74; Replogle 1991, 13). Jakarta departed with the cycle-rickshaw in 1988 when over one-third of the city's total rickshaw fleet, approximately 40,000 carts or *becaks*, was dumped into the Java Sea to function as a breakwater and artificial reef (Cervero 2000, 39). Such decisions to ban the rickshaw are almost always shrouded in teleological narratives of modernity, development and progress. In fact, when the Governor of Jakarta recently considered to re-introduce the *becak* to the city's streets¹⁴, one member of the Jakarta Legislative Council described the proposal as "moving backwards"¹⁵. Moreover, when the municipal government first started discussing the *becak* ban in the 1970s, they claimed that the vehicle was a sign of "underdevelopment" and needed to be eliminated "because it conflicted with its policy of making Jakarta 'beautiful and orderly'" (Rimmer 1986, 164).

An almost identical argument was used by the traffic police in Delhi forty years later. The police in Delhi had filed an affidavit because they opposed the plan to lift a set of rickshaw restrictions that had been implemented in 2006. The statement read that "allowing cycle-rickshaws to ply on the Capital's arterial roads will come in the way of the efforts to make Delhi a world class city"¹⁶. Examples like these resonate with Hyrapiet and Greiner's (2012, 417) observation that "rickshaws and rickshaw *wallahs* mark the city as an urban Other and constitute unacceptable reminders of an antimodern past". In chapter 5, I have shown that discussions in Dhaka similarly juxtapose the image of the "outdated" rickshaw with the image of Bangladesh as a modern nation. This sentiment is perhaps best summed up by the following citation of the late Dr. Mohammad Rahmatullah, a former transport director at the United Nations, who argued that: "Dhaka can never be a modern city if rickshaws are not eliminated from main roads. The sooner Bangladesh realises this, the better"¹⁷. The rickshaw is thus not only frequently presented as a relic of the past, but also as an obstacle for achieving a certain future. The question therefore arises what this modern urban

¹⁴ "Anies Plans to Return 'Becak' to Jakarta Streets", *The Jakarta Post*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/01/15/anies-plans-to-return-becak-to-jakarta-streets.html>.

¹⁵ Adi Renaldi, "Jakarta's Notorious Becak May Be Making a Comeback Soon. The Governor is Planning to Lift Decades-Long Ban on Pedicabs, and None of Us is Psyched", *Vice.com*, October 10, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/gvekyy/jakartas-notorious-becak-may-be-making-a-comeback-soon.

¹⁶ "Police Pulled Up for Seeking Removal of Rickshaws Pullers on Snobbish Grounds", *The Hindu*, December 8, 2009, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/Police-pulled-up-for-seeking-removal-of-rickshaws-pullers-on-snobbish-grounds/article16852226.ece>.

¹⁷ "Dhaka's Rickshaw Art Fades in Motor Age", *The Independent*, March 6, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/dhakas-rickshaw-art-fades-in-motor-age-2233967.html>.

future looks like that the rickshaw is ostensibly holding back. I will further address this question by exploring the wider context of urban development in Dhaka and the various efforts that have been made to visualise the urban future by creating a material and meaningful break with both the past and the existing urban landscape. The next section therefore deals with what Datta (2019, 394) has described as “futuring” or “the discursive, political and material practice of anticipatory action taken in the context of an unfolding dialectic between past, present and future time”.

Future-Making and Urban Development in Dhaka

October 2017, a group of eighty or so people has gathered to form a human chain in front of an archaeological heritage site in Khamarbari. This colonial style building was constructed in 1909 to house the Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute and served as the oldest research laboratory in the country. The ochre red walls are lined with white friezes and balustrades, and divided up by shallow arches and pilasters. Large, draping construction curtains are currently withdrawing the façade of the building from sight. Four days ago, Dhaka’s Public Works Department started demolishing the structure, with the intention of erecting a high-rise building in its place. The exterior of the building is still standing, but the roof has already been turned to rubble; iron rods and chunks of bricks are dangling from the gaping opening above the second floor. To protest the ongoing destruction of the site, a group of architects and activists, including myself¹⁸, is posing with huge printed banners in front of the monumental building. Different prominent architects and environmental activists take turns delivering a series of speeches to emphasise the importance of “history, heritage and tradition” and to lament the onset of “big development” in Dhaka. “We want development that ensures protection against heritage destruction”, one of the banners fittingly reads.

The friction that surrounds the preservation of heritage sites in Dhaka is telling of the current trend of urban development in the city, which seems to be geared towards radical newness. In fact, Hossain (2013, 374) has observed how “[t]he city in short span of time has transformed, the landscape now dominated by new developments and an array of real-estate advertisements offering lucrative land and housing deals”. The most striking example of this trend is “Purbachal New Town”, a satellite town that has

¹⁸ Khamarbari protest, October 30, 2017.

been publicised by Dhaka's Urban Development Department as the country's first "smart city-to be". Although the project is still ongoing, the design champions a form of newness that borders on the virtual. The new suburb of Dhaka will be characterised by modern amenities, high quality of living, an iconic 142-storey tower building, a stadium that is connected to Dhaka's future metro rail and a strict security system¹⁹.

During an exhibition for Dhaka's "Smart City Week" I came across another example of this privileging of the new. The foyer of the conference centre was filled with scale models and installations that envisioned "smart" solutions for Dhaka city and I was particularly surprised by the submission of Dhaka's Urban Planning Department, RAJUK. The RAJUK model consisted of repetitive blocks of identical high-rises that clustered around small patches of green. It was impossible to tell from first sight what area of Dhaka the model was supposed to represent, as it lacked distinctive neighbourhood features. A display of pictures offered further clarification. They showed the cramped but vibrant streets of Bangshal; an area in Old Dhaka that is known for its narrow streets and overhanging buildings. Two of the representatives guarding the stand explained to me that the idea was to demolish all the old structures which, according to them, constituted unsanitary and risky living conditions, in order to make way for the towering high-rises that the scale model displayed²⁰.

The desire to get rid of existing urban forms, functions and features in order to start afresh has a longstanding tradition within urban planning. It runs through examples of colonial urban planning (see Bigon 2009) and the work of modernists like Haussmann, Le Corbusier and Robert Moses. In Dhaka, such visions for radical urban renewal are often aimed at the congested streets and dilapidated buildings of Old Dhaka. For instance, one of RAJUK's directors and planners, Md. Ashraful Islam, expressed that "[r]esidents in the old part of Dhaka city can attain a modern urban life through implementation of urban renewal"²¹. He envisioned this urban renewal to take shape after the urban examples of Japan and Singapore, and suggested that a 2.2-acre area in Bangshal with 77 structures and 316 dwelling units could be rearranged to "accommodate eight 24-storey buildings with 768 apartments ensuring wide road, car parking facility, commercial spaces, community centre and mosques". Hence, the

¹⁹ "Purbachal to Be First Smart City by 2018", *The Dhaka Tribune*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2016/12/02/purbachal-first-smart-city-2018>.

²⁰ Visit to "Smart City Week", November 29, 2017.

²¹ "Redesign of Old Dhaka the Way Out", *The Daily Star*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/redesigning-old-dhaka-the-way-1476553>.

achievement of modernity, fashioned after the examples of Japan and Singapore, is explicitly linked to the erasure of the existing urban fabric and presented as something that requires a radically new urban form.



Figure 19: Partially demolished heritage site and century-old laboratory building in Khamarbari.

Throughout my fieldwork I had many lengthy conversations about the developments and plans for Old Dhaka with the architect Taimur Islam²², who was one of the most vocal voices against the destruction of architectural heritage sites in Dhaka. “The future of Old Dhaka seems to be one of twenty-story buildings”, he remarked during one of our afternoon chats at his office. Taimur Islam had helped organise the protest against the demolition of the Khamarbari heritage site and that of other landmark buildings in Old Dhaka. The ochre-red building had been torn down shortly after our protest and many of the historic structures in the overcrowded old town faced a similar fate. The architect explained that the influx of people and commerce in the decades after Bangladesh’s independence, coupled by a lack of oversight, had turned Old Dhaka into something “worse than a concrete jungle, with no space left”. He empathised with the

²² Semi-structured interview, January 18, 2018.

fact that for many residents preserving the heritage value of the old town was not necessarily their first priority, but at the same time he worked hard to counter narratives that saw full-blown demolition of the old city quarters as the only way forward. Taimur assessed the situation as follows:

We have two possibilities. Either we look at the positive assets that Old Dhaka has to offer and work from there. Or, we let the situation degenerate, let this trend continue and we will have nothing left. And we will not have to worry about heritage either. It will all be high-rises like Hong Kong.

This trend towards “visible development”, as my conversation partner described the second option, was already materialising throughout Old Dhaka. Yet not in the structured and all-encompassing way that the RAJUK urban renewal model suggested. In fact, the proposed pilot project that was to turn the Bangshal neighbourhood into a collection of high-rises had been postponed due to a lack of local support²³. Nonetheless, glassy high-rise buildings were popping up all over Old Dhaka and inevitably overshadowed some of the older Mughal structures. This trend towards high-rise construction, much like elsewhere in Dhaka, coincided with a high frequency in building and safety regulation violations²⁴ and happened in a way that was incremental, rather than planned. Ahsan (2016, 9) has observed that the “majority of high-rise residential buildings in Dhaka are not planned” and have been built “disregarding building codes set by the RAJUK”. To be sure, RAJUK has been repeatedly criticised for enabling construction works that violate regulations and turning a blind eye on land-grabbing practices by influential political actors (Akter 2007; Sabet and Tazreen 2015). This trend towards high-rise construction is thus indicative of what Roy (2009) has described as “informality from above”. Nonetheless, these towering buildings continue to feature as powerful symbols for urban development in Dhaka.

On the one hand, the mushrooming of commercial and residential high-rises is the direct result of unchecked private real-estate development. On the other hand, it also reflects back the imagery of urban modernity that the government espouses in their plans. High-rises are a vital part of the plans to redevelop Old Dhaka, the design

²³ Sohel Mahamud, “RAJUK’s Old Dhaka Dev Project Postponed”, *The Daily Asian Age*, October 15, 2017, <https://dailiasianage.com/news/90354/rajuks-old-dhaka-dev-project-postponed>.

²⁴ Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, “High-rises in the Capital: Concern over Sloppy Fire Safety Measures”, *The Daily Star*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/dhaka-fire-high-rises-the-capital-concern-over-sloppy-fire-safety-measures-1722313>.

for the Purbachal New Town and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's promise to accommodate all of the city's slum dwellers in 20-storied buildings²⁵. This trend is hardly unique for Dhaka, but can be witnessed in many Asian countries. Ong (2011, 209) even goes as far as to proclaim a "skyscraper megalomania of Asian cities". She argues that this trend is "never only about attracting foreign investments, but fundamentally also about an intense political desire for world recognition" (Ong 2011, 209). Similarly, Kundu (2013, 123) writes about the way in which "[i]ntricate networks of villages, agricultural fields and water bodies" on the outskirts of Kolkata have given way – albeit not entirely – "to dense, concrete high-rise apartments, steel and glass malls, large offices, convention halls, international and local hotel chains".

This tension between newly constructed high-rises and the various land-uses that preceded their construction is thus a recurring trope throughout the Asian region. It may be tempting, especially in light of the aforementioned example of heritage preservation in Dhaka, to interpret this tension as a mere clash between the old and the new. Yet I want to be careful not to perpetuate a superficial image of newness as a mere aesthetic expression of what certain buildings look like. It is too easy to simply use the image of a shiny, towering building as a stand-in for everything new. Nor is it fair to shroud heritage preservation, which often relies on a variety of new and digital technologies, in a mist of nostalgia. However, that does not mean that the aforementioned examples of urban renewal are not projects of newness. Newness becomes manifest in these cases, not as some aesthetic or material attribute of high-rise buildings, but in the political desire to create a clear break with the existing urban fabric.

Creating a Break with the Past

The abovementioned manifestations, projections and images of urban renewal all, to some extent, espouse a "tabula rasa" approach to urban planning. The enabling of unbridled private real-estate development relies on the demolition of slum settlements²⁶. The construction of the Purbachal New Town and other so-called

²⁵ In 2018, the Prime Minister vowed that "[t]here would be no slums in the city; rather, 20-storied buildings would be constructed for slum dwellers where they would live by paying rent on daily, weekly or monthly basis". See: "There Would be No Slums in the Capital: PM", *The Daily Star*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/city/multi-storey-buildings-replace-city-slums-pm-sheikh-hasina-1622947>.

²⁶ The clearing of government or private land for "development" purposes is a major threat that looms over Dhaka's slum settlements (Architects Without Frontiers 2012, 4).

satellite towns jeopardises the preservation of arable land and flood zones and coincides with the dispossession of existing communities (Haque 2012, 12). The urban renewal vision for Old Dhaka that RAJUK has put forward propagates the erasure of existing neighbourhoods²⁷. In fact, Ahmed (2017, 243) has pointed out that many new urban extensions in post-colonial Dhaka have been “developed as a tabula-rasa concept for elite neighbourhoods”. In order to grasp the politics that underscore this production of newness, we need to look at the ways in which this break with the existing urban landscape has been mobilised politically in the name of a certain future.

Harvey (2003, 1) has argued that the creation of a “radical break with the past”, through acts and representations of “creative destruction”, constitutes one of the core myths of modernity. He elaborates that this imagined break “is supposedly of such an order as to make it possible to see the world as a tabula rasa upon which the new can be inscribed without reference to the past- or, if the past gets in the way, through its obliteration”. This destruction is always an inherently political act but can either be of “the gentle and democratic, or the revolutionary, traumatic, and authoritarian kind” (Harvey 2003, 1). The example that Harvey (2003) provides is that of the massive urban renewal scheme of Baron Haussmann, which erased much of the medieval centre of Paris. Harvey (2003, 10) interprets this form of urban renewal in temporal terms, arguing that Haussmann sought to “build a myth of a radical break around himself and the Emperor” and “to show that what went before was irrelevant”. Datta (2017, 10) similarly argues, citing the examples of Brasília and Chandigarh, that in postcolonial contexts “the trope of ‘modern cities’ was reinforced to make a break from colonial planning and its associated social injustices”. Such tropes of rupture not only reflect a certain impatience with already existing manifestations of urbanism, but also highlight how spatial interventions, either real or promised, are instrumental in creating a temporal, epochal break that can be mobilised politically to distance oneself from one’s predecessors.

In the context of Bangladesh, development has become one of the main narratives through which the ruling party, Awami League, tries to distance itself from previous governments and the BNP opposition party. In the wake of the 2018 election, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina encouraged the electorate to support her by promising them: “If you want to see massive development activities, then there should be the

²⁷ “Redesign of Old Dhaka the Way Out”, *The Daily Star*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/redesigning-old-dhaka-the-way-1476553>.

continuation of the government”²⁸. A similar rhetoric is used in the party’s election manifesto, which is titled “Bangladesh on the March to Prosperity” and chronicles how the Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, has paved the way to socio-economic development and has heralded a “new dawn” for the nation (Bangladesh Awami League Election Manifesto 2018, 10-12). In line with their aspirations of development, modernisation and prosperity, the ruling party has also vowed to elevate Bangladesh to the status of a “developed country” by 2041, as part of the so-called “Vision 2041”²⁹. This pledge to bring socio-economic development and GDP growth to the country has gone hand in hand with the construction of numerous ambitious mega-projects, such as the Padma Bridge, the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, the Dhaka Metro Rail and the Payra Seaport, aimed at facilitating energy, connections and speed³⁰.

This commitment to a “new dawn” that definitively breaks with the image of underdevelopment, which has haunted Bangladesh since its inception, is made visible through high profile and high investment mega-projects and has earned Sheikh Hasina considerable (international) praise. The Prime Minister has been lauded for attracting foreign investments and for lifting Bangladesh from a “basket case to a middle-income country”³¹. However, it should be noted that this ostensible march towards prosperity has taken an increasingly anti-democratic course over time. In fact, a Dhaka University law professor succinctly summarised Awami League’s style of governance as “development minus democracy”³². The last few years, although characterised by a seven percent annual GDP growth rate, have not only witnessed an increase in income inequality³³ but also saw forced disappearances (International Federations of Human Rights 2019, 7), the indiscriminate arrests of opposition members³⁴ and the

²⁸ “Prime Minister Hasina Urges People to Reelect Awami League for Continued Development, Peace’, *The Daily Sun*, February 26, 2017, <https://daily-sun.com/post/208473/Awami-League-wants-to-homes-for-all-reelect-us-Hasina-urges>.

²⁹ “Bangladesh to Become Higher Middle-Income Country Soon: PM’, *The Daily Star*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/bangladesh-become-higher-middle-income-country-soon-prime-minister-1711357>.

³⁰ “10 Mega Projects: Five Pick Up Pace, Finally”, *The Daily Star*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/news/10-mega-projects-five-pick-pace-finally-1774909>.

³¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudury, “How Sheikh Hasina Changed Bangladesh from a Basket Case to a Middle Income Country”, *The Economic Times*, January 20, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/how-sheikh-hasina-changed-bangladesh-from-a-basket-case-to-a-middle-income-country/articleshow/67603020.cms>.

³² Saif Khalid and Saqib Sarker, “Ten Years of Sheikh Hasina: ‘Development Minus Democracy’”, *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/ten-years-sheikh-hasina-development-democracy-181228093827764.html>.

³³ The Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016-2017 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) found the country’s income inequality to be at an all-time high. See: Rejaul Karim Byron and Sohel Parvez, “Inequality at All-Time High”, *The Daily Star*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/inequality-all-time-high-1745569>.

³⁴ “‘Creating Panic’ - Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics”, *Human Rights Watch*, December 22, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/22/creating-panic/bangladesh-election-crackdown-political-opponents-and-critics>.

curtailment of academic and press freedom³⁵. This style of governance shows a striking resemblance with the brand of “authoritarian developmentalism” that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has unleashed (Mehta 2010). It also reverberates with the Rwandan context, where economic growth and visible urban development have served to justify authoritarian political practices (Finn 2018, 208). The common thread that links these different examples is the legitimisation of anti-democratic politics through narratives, practices and visual signs of development.



Figure 20: Rickshaw drivers have gathered for the rally of the “Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League”.

The persistence and potency of this development narrative, as employed by Bangladesh’s Awami League, became particularly clear to me during the 39th anniversary of the so-called “National Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League”³⁶. As I explained in chapter 4, this so-called labour union is essentially an informal branch of the Awami League and reflects the entrenchment of the “Bangladesh party-state” (see Suykens 2018). I had been invited to deliver a speech at the event by the general secretary of the union, with whom I had conducted an interview a week earlier. On the day of the anniversary, the wide street in front of the party office had been turned into

³⁵ The implementation of the so-called Digital Security Act 2018, in particular, has led to the criminalisation of dissent. See: “Bangladesh: New Digital Security Act is an Attack on Freedom of Expression”, *Amnesty International*, November 11, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/bangladesh-new-digital-security-act-attack-freedom-expression>.

³⁶ Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League rally, December 12, 2017.

a stage and groups of rickshaw drivers had gathered from all over the country with large banners; mobilised by local political leaders and lured to the capital city with the promise of free biriyani. The metallic sound of megaphones blurred with the honking of nearby buses and the bustling background noise of Old Dhaka. Expecting a trade-union styled assembly, I had prepared a speech that stressed the unequal nature of development in Dhaka city, juxtaposing the construction of new, elevated expressways with the increasing restrictions that rickshaw drivers faced on many roads. I soon found out, however, that the other invited speakers, a mix of “*Sromik League*”³⁷ members and politicians, were mostly on a mission to promote the Awami League in the wake of the upcoming elections. One Member of Parliament, dressed in the typical Mujib coat³⁸, made an effort to aim his message directly at me. He switched to English midway through his address to emphasise that it was “only for Sheikh Hasina that Dhaka had become developed” and that the city had amounted to very little before she rose to power. Switching back to Bangla, he led the audience of rickshaw drivers into a lukewarm chant: *Ki chan?* (“What do you want?”), *Unnayan!* (“Development!”).

The materialisation of development in Dhaka has taken different shapes and forms, as new beautification projects, satellite towns, shopping malls and elite neighbourhoods see the light of day. One distinct example that often features as a source of political achievement, however, is the “elevated expressway”. In fact, Kabir (2014, 33) has remarked that political leaders and city officials in Dhaka city have developed a particular vision of the flyover as something “that would speed autos to their destination, bypassing the monstrous traffic jams that clogged the major intersections”. Again, Dhaka is not unique in this sense. Graham (2018, 527) has argued, drawing specifically on the case of Mumbai, that development and planning elites across many of the “burgeoning megacities of the Global South work powerfully to fetishise elevated highways or flyovers as part of their efforts at ‘worlding’ their cities”. The largescale construction of elevated expressways does not only reflect the political longing for “a striking aesthetic of mobile and modern life” (Graham 2018, 528), but also echoes the desire to create a break with what is already there. Flyovers not only cut up existing neighbourhoods, but also aim to short-cut or bypass the (traffic) problems that exist at the city’s ground level. Datta (2017, 6) has framed such

³⁷ *Sromik* means worker.

³⁸ A waistcoat styled after the coat that Sheikh Mujib, Bangladesh’s first Prime Minister and Sheikh Hasina’s father, used to wear.

efforts to circumvent “the challenges of actually existing urbanism in megacities” as a characteristic of “fast urbanism”; that is, the attempt to leapfrog cities into a modern and sustainable urban future.

This resonates with the Bangladeshi context, where the continued construction of new flyovers is part of Sheikh Hasina’s promise “to upgrade Dhaka to a modern, beautiful and hassle-free city”³⁹. Ever since the Prime Minister made this pledge in 2009 at least five more flyovers, spanning more than 25 kilometres in total, have been added to the two existing ones. This in spite of the fact that many of these flyovers are not in compliance with the so-called Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP), which outlines the road and transportation developments that will ideally be carried out in Dhaka before 2035⁴⁰. Local engineers and planners, moreover, have become increasingly vocal in criticising the amount of money that has been funnelled into these mega-projects, considering that there is no evidence that elevated expressways actually contribute to the overall decrease of traffic congestion⁴¹. However, none of this diminishes the symbolic role that these infrastructural edifices play in communicating promises of a hassle-free and developed urban future.

Throughout my fieldwork, local politicians – in addition to valuing more modest improvements to their neighbourhoods, such as paved roads, street lights or a new playing field – would often point to flyovers as signs of the city’s trend towards increased development. When I asked a ward commissioner⁴² in Old Dhaka what developments he would like to see in the city, he explained that the government was already gradually developing Dhaka city: “They already built so many flyovers and they started the process to build a Metro Rail. They increased the number of highways by extending the width of the road.” His faith in the ongoing development of Dhaka city was shared by one of the other DSCC commissioners⁴³, with whom I conducted an interview on the opening day of the new, but slightly controversial⁴⁴ Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover. Like most of the local ward commissioners, my conversation partner

³⁹ “PM Pledges Easy Communications”, *The Daily Star*, December 29, 2009, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-119693>.

⁴⁰ Shohel Mamun, “Are Flyovers Really the Solution?”, October 25, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2017/10/25/flyovers-put-city-bind/>.

⁴¹ Obaidur Masum, “Experts Question Spending Money on Flyovers as Traffic Snarls Continue in Dhaka”, *Bdnews24.com*, November 11, 2017, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/11/11/experts-question-spending-money-on-flyovers-as-traffic-snarls-continue-in-dhaka>.

⁴² Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, November 11, 2017.

⁴³ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, October 26, 2017.

⁴⁴ The construction of the flyover was controversial because it was in contradiction with the Revised Strategic Transport Plan and conflicted with the proposed route for Dhaka’s Metro Rail. See: Syed Mansur Hashim, “A Controversial Flyover”, *The Daily Star*, November 10, 2015, <https://www.thedailystar.net/op-ed/politics/controversial-flyover-170170>.

had attended the festive inauguration ceremony for the new expressway and he had returned with a considerable amount of hope for the future of Dhaka: “There are so many plans for developing Dhaka city. If Awami League gets re-elected, Bangladesh will change a lot”.

Some weeks later, I discussed the opening ceremony with a DNCC ward commissioner, who keenly expressed his enthusiasm for the project. I asked him if he thought that Dhaka city needed many flyovers. “*Flyover na thakle, puro Dhaka bondho hocche*” (“Without flyovers the whole of Dhaka would close down”), he replied impassionedly. He explained that the newly built elevated expressway had transformed the half-an-hour journey from his house to Kakrail into a five-minute trip. Close to his office another huge flyover was being built. It was just one of the many infrastructural projects that were happening in his neighbourhood, which had seen a boost in development activity ever since the prestigious, nearby Hatirjheel Lake beautification project had been completed. The lake with its curved bridges and all-round pedestrian walkway was entirely closed in by wide, newly paved expressways and had not only attracted evening strollers but also new real estate. Whereas the area had previously been home to various slum settlements, it now witnessed the influx of hotels, restaurants and private universities. The councillor enthusiastically summed up the extent of this change: “Before Hatirjheel was one of the most polluted and congested areas, now it is the most beautiful area in Dhaka. If you go there in the evening, you will understand how Dhaka city is developing”.

This sense of pride at witnessing some of these infrastructural and urban developments unfold was not just something that transpired in conversations with local politicians. In fact, I was surprised to discover that many of the rickshaw garage owners who lived in my neighbourhood spoke very positively about the changes that were affecting Rayerbazar at the hands of private real-estate developers. “*He, khub sundor developed hoyeche*” (“Yes, it has developed very beautifully”)⁴⁵, one of them remarked when I noted that the area had changed a lot over the past few years. Yasin and I were visiting a large, open air garage at the outskirts of Rayerbazar and the talkative, younger brother of the rickshaw owner was commenting on the different changes that had ensued as a result of the latest development trend. He explained that the house rent had increased from 1500 taka per month to 2500-3000 taka and suggested that they might have to relocate to the other side of the river at some point.

⁴⁵ Informal conversation, Rayerbazar, August 1, 2017.

None of this, however, seemed to diminish his favourable view of the developments and changes in the area.

I noticed a similar discrepancy when chatting to Amir, another rickshaw owner in the area⁴⁶. As I explained in the previous chapter, Amir had been forced to relocate his garage, because the landowner was planning on constructing a high-rise building. However, when I asked him what he thought of the developments in the area he replied: “It is good. It is good for our country, so it is good for me”. Nasiruddin⁴⁷, the owner of another nearby garage, responded similarly to the same question, explaining that, although it was difficult for him to take down his garage and move it to a different place where the rent might be higher, he was happy about this trend towards development. Another rickshaw owner by the name of Faruk⁴⁸ also felt that the changes that Rayerbazar had undergone since it started developing in 2001 reflected positively on Bangladesh as a country, whilst at the same admitting to the difficulties of having to move an entire rickshaw garage.

These different examples not only underline the political potency of promises of development, but also show that there is a considerable schism between the future that is envisioned for the neighbourhood, the city and the country and the here and now of people’s everyday urban realities. Ghertner (2011, 292) has made a similar observation in relation to the slum demolitions that have taken place in Delhi as part of a wider urban agenda to make the city “world-class”. He presents a conversation with one of the city’s slum dwellers that makes this aforementioned schism abundantly clear. The woman in question is vehemently opposed to the demolition of the slum where she is based, yet nonetheless envisions a future for Delhi that has no slums, elaborating that: “Delhi will be a beautiful city, totally neat and clean. All the slums will be removed and there will only be rich people” (Ghertner 2011, 292). I would argue here that such spatio-temporal incongruities and inconsistencies, which posit a city of tomorrow that has barely any roots in the city of today, are the inevitable result of political attempts to leapfrog cities into an idealised state of development and forms of urban development that rely on the “creative destruction” of the existing urban landscape. In the context of Dhaka, as we have seen throughout this section, high-rises, flyovers and beautification projects – often presented and interpreted as forebears of

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 8, 2017.

⁴⁷ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 8, 2017.

⁴⁸ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 30, 2017.

a hassle-free and developed urban future – have been instrumental in visualising the epochal break that allows for such spatio-temporal incongruities and inconsistencies. What's more, this schism between the city of today and the city of tomorrow is further reinforced by tendencies to conflate the latter with a certain elsewhere, whether it is Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing or Tokyo.

The Future is Elsewhere

The tendency to project the urban future onto a certain elsewhere, derives from “assumptions that some cities might be ‘first’ and others follow” (Robinson 2013, 661). Such hierarchical notions of city-ness are reinforced by global (liveability) rankings that differentially map notions of progress onto the “world of cities”. This propensity to spatialise what is temporal is deeply embedded in notions of modernity and has historically been fuelled by strands of social evolutionism. Fabian (1983, 17) argues that social evolutionism has helped spatialise the temporal idea of progress by mapping its different stages onto different, coterminous peoples and societies. Narratives on urban modernity often perpetuate a strikingly similar logic by treating modernity as an intrinsic quality that different cities possess to different degrees (Highmore 2005, 13). Today the foci of such practices of spatialisation are infinitely more diverse than they were at the time of social evolutionism and Western colonialism. Indeed, the “modern” is projected onto cities ranging from New York and Paris to Singapore, Shanghai and Dubai. The fact that new configurations of modernity emerge as “new social subjects redefine the sites of the enunciation of the ‘modern’” (Osborne 1995:16), however, does not cancel out the hierarchical teleology that permeates the concept of modernity. We are still dealing with a mechanism that consists of the “projection of certain people’s presents as other people’s futures” (Osborne 1995, 17). That this tendency to differentiate temporally between cities that “embody the future” and those that are merely “catching up” is still very much alive, becomes clear from the examples that follow.

Throughout my research, Asian cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore often featured in narratives around Dhaka’s urban future. In fact, the Bangladesh High Commissioner to Singapore, Md Mustafizur Rahman, recently stated that “Bangladesh

views Singapore as a key development model to emulate”⁴⁹. This “Singapore model” is not only used as a mould for the country’s economic development, but also referenced in discussions on urban planning. For instance, earlier in this chapter, I mentioned how one of RAJUK’s directors proposed a renewal scheme for Old Dhaka that was fashioned after the urban examples of “Japan and Singapore”⁵⁰. The DSCC Mayor, Sayeed Khokon, has similarly pushed for a form of urban redevelopment that mirrors the example of these two countries: “We like to re-develop old Dhaka. Once Singapore, Tokyo cities were like our old Dhaka. We like to follow the ways they had followed to build those cities. We like to write new stories with the old Dhaka”⁵¹. The architect and heritage activist who I cited before⁵², although less enthusiastic about this vision for Old Dhaka, also recognised the influence of (South) East Asian examples such as Seoul, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, and attributed the preference for high-rise development and drastic urban renewal to the “urban development model that was given to policy makers”.

It is difficult to definitively pin down how urban policy ideas travel from one city to another and what it is exactly that is being emulated in such instances of transnational cross-fertilisation. In fact, Jacobs (2012, 414) has rightfully pointed out that urban policy “is not a preformed, well-bounded and immutable thing that moves through time and space”. Instead, “transnational urbanisms operate in rather sticky, history-laden contexts that shape what goes where and how, as well as in what form they materialize” (Jacobs 2012, 414). Therefore, in focusing on the allusions and references to cities like Singapore, I do not want to imply that planners in Dhaka follow a mere copy-paste approach to urban development. Nor do I want to deny the ways in which local urban visionaries and architects, of which there are plenty in Bangladesh, draw on ideas from elsewhere to fashion unique plans and designs of their own. However, I am interested in the ways in which such off-hand references to foreign cities have wrought themselves into the wider, political narrative on urban modernity. Not in the least because several of the ward commissioners I spoke to – especially those based in the older, Southern parts of the city – made explicit reference to Singapore

⁴⁹ Narendra Aggarwal, “Bangladesh, Singapore Share Good Ties: As Bangladesh's Economy Improves, Singapore Businesses Have Much to Gain from these Robust Diplomatic Relations”, *The Business Times*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/hub-projects/bangladesh-national-day/bangladesh-singapore-share-good-ties>.

⁵⁰ “Redesign of Old Dhaka the Way Out”, *The Daily Star*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/redesigning-old-dhaka-the-way-1476553>.

⁵¹ “Old Dhaka Will Be Singapore: Mayor Sayed Khokon”, *Barta24.com*, May 18, 2019, <https://en.barta24.com/details/National/36753/old-dhaka>.

⁵² Semi-structured interview, January 18, 2018.

when discussing some of the prestigious plans and projects that were materialising in their neighbourhoods.

Most councillors I interviewed throughout my research had a fairly pragmatic approach to urban development, as it was their job to coordinate efforts towards drinking water provision, the maintenance of roads, mosquito control and the implementation of street lighting. At the same time, their work would often intersect with the ambitious plans that the Mayor or Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself envisioned for the future of Dhaka. Such plans included the idea to give a facelift to all the nineteen parks and twelve playgrounds within the jurisdiction of DSCC⁵³, the anticipated beautification of the Buriganga riverfront⁵⁴ and the abovementioned urban renewal proposal for the Bangshal area. The latter was mentioned almost instantly as an example by one of the ward commissioners I spoke to⁵⁵, after I had explained that I was interested in learning more about the development of Dhaka. The commissioner picked up a recent newspaper from his desk and showed me an article that stressed the need for radical change in Old Dhaka. He narrated how the idea of the Bangshal pilot project had evolved:

The Mayor visited Singapore and Malaysia and they used to have many old buildings there, but at present not anymore. They demolished all the old buildings and created high-rises and a planned city with a residential area, a business district... and the communication system is also planned. They have made the city planned and new. [...] The Mayor visited these countries and was impressed and wants to create a similar housing system in Dhaka.

In his own ward most development efforts were channelled towards the implementation of ICT-based government services that would help to digitalise bureaucracy. This pilot project, according to the ward councillor, was also inspired by the technological advancement of countries like Japan, China and Singapore: “These countries are technologically developed. The Mayor believes that it is possible to develop Dhaka in the same way”.

Throughout my research I encountered more of such “origin stories” that traced specific planning ideas for Dhaka to foreign visits that either the Mayor or the Prime

⁵³ “DSCC to Open 31 Parks, Play-grounds Next June”, *Banglanews24.com*, August 10, 2017, <https://www.banglanews24.com/national/article/62911/DSCC-to-open-31-parks-play-grounds-next-June>.

⁵⁴ “DSCC Takes on Mega Project to Clean up Buriganga”, *Dhaka Tribune*, November 12, 2016, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/11/12/mega-project-beautification-buriganga>.

⁵⁵ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, October 18, 2017.

Minister had allegedly made. For instance, another DSCC ward councillor⁵⁶ mentioned the plan to develop a nearby *khelar math* (“playing field”) into a proper *shishu park* (“amusement park for children”). The sandy field was currently being used as an impromptu rickshaw garage and cricket playground, but the Mayor had plans to upgrade the field as part of his mission to redesign all the parks and playgrounds under his jurisdiction. The commissioner elaborated: “The Mayor visited Singapore and saw a nice *shishu park* there. He wants to make the *khelar math* exactly like this”. However, the plan had not materialised yet due to the objections of local *mastans*. These neighbourhood strongmen benefitted financially from illegally renting out the field as a rickshaw garage. The councillor himself, moreover, had a somewhat more modest take on what urban development entailed: “When I say ‘development’, I mean taking care of the roads, people’s drinking water, waste management, lamp posts and mosquito control”.

His colleague councillor from Kamrangirchar⁵⁷ had a considerably more ambitious take on his duties as a ward commissioner. “If the Government helps me, I will make [the ward] like Singapore”, he declared proudly. Yasin and I had run into the councillor by accident, while looking for a rickshaw garage that we had visited two years earlier. We met at one of the embankments of the peninsular neighbourhood and, after exchanging a few pleasantries, the councillor had almost immediately disclosed his ambitious plan to redesign the riverfront after the image of Singapore. During an interview at his office a few weeks later, I asked him what he liked so much about Singapore. He replied that the city looked very beautiful and that everything was developed: “The river bank looks very planned and beautiful with different lights”. He further elaborated that the plan to refurbish the Buriganga’s water front had started with a visit of the Prime Minister to China. “She visited a city that was located at the bank of a river and thought of a plan for Dhaka”. The ward commissioner clarified: “Our city is also situated at the bank of a river, so we can make it like a Chinese city”. His story thus clearly highlights how certain fragmentary images from elsewhere, in this case both China and Singapore, are morphed into a vision for what Dhaka can become in the future.

Dhaka is not the only growing city where aspirations for the future frequently draw on the imagery of foreign cities. Ghertner (2011, 289) has shown how efforts to

⁵⁶ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, October 12, 2017.

⁵⁷ Semi-structured interview, DSCC ward commissioner, September 7, 2017.

transform, clean up and beautify Delhi rely on “an idealized vision of the world-class city gleaned from refracted images and circulating models of other world-class cities”. Similarly, De Boeck (2011) illustrates how political promises to modernise and transform Kinshasa into “the mirror of Africa” have been inspired by the aesthetic landscape of Dubai. According to De Boeck (2011, 274):

Kinshasha is again looking into the mirror of modernity to fashion itself, but this time the mirror no longer reflects the earlier versions of Belgian colonialist modernity, but instead it longs to capture the aura of Dubai and other hot spots of the new urban Global South.

In Mumbai, on the other hand, political elites long to transform the city into “another Shanghai” (Anand 2006, 3422; Prakash 2008, 181; Mehrotra 2008, 215; Roy 2011b, 264). Such allusions to cities like Singapore, Dubai and Shanghai are indicative of what Ong (2011) has described as a circuit of inter-referencing. These inter-referencing practices, whereby urban actors measure their innovations “against those of more impressive centers in the emerging Asian region”, have raised an “inter-Asian horizon of metropolitan and global aspirations” (Ong 2011, 17, 4).

In many ways, these newly emerging Asiansapes (McCann, Roy and Ward 2013, 585) have changed transnational inter-urban dynamics. For one, it has destabilised the hierarchical North-South divide that has long dictated urban policy agendas in Southern countries. In addition, McCann, Roy and Ward (2013, 585) have pointed out that we are dealing with mass dreams rather than imposed visions here. Yet these mass dreams still imply a singular, aesthetic idea of urban modernity that prompts certain city dwellers and planners to anxiously question “whether they are full participants in world modernity” (Anjaria 2012, 25). Anjaria (2012, 27) has argued that in India the potential to become a modern city is very much tied to the “ability to emulate urban landscapes elsewhere”, notably those of Singapore, Dubai and Shanghai. Such anxieties are fuelled by the same linear notion of progress that lies at heart of modernity and built on the assumption that the world can be divided into cities that are already “modern” and those that are still “catching up”. Although it is true that the mass dreams that morph fragments of cities like Singapore, Dubai and Shanghai into an instant image of urban modernity are very much deterritorialised, there are still real political-economic relations in place that make it so that urban politicians in Singapore are not necessarily contemplating how to emulate Dhaka. What’s more, these mass

dreams are not seldom packaged by international consultancy entities that have long played their part in shaping the policies and futures of “developing” cities⁵⁸ (Bunnell and Das 2010; Roy 2011b).

Whereas in Mumbai it was the McKinsey consultancy firm that first sowed the imaginative seeds for the so-called “Shanghai model” (Roy 2011b, 264), in Dhaka the World Bank has recently latched on to a similar narrative. Their newly developed strategic vision for the eastward expansion of Dhaka city, titled “Toward Great Dhaka: A New Urban Development Paradigm Eastward”, draws heavily on the Shanghai example (Bird et al. 2018). In a blog post that summarises the report, the authors emphasise: “As we marvel today at the progress made by Shanghai, we look forward to seeing a world-class Dhaka tomorrow”⁵⁹. The picture of Dhaka that is displayed above the article further underscores the urgency of this mission, with its caption declaring that “[t]ime is running out to transform Dhaka into a world-class city”. Dhaka’s urban future thus emerges as a tale that has already been foretold by other cities. Taking into account this tendency to conflate (and confuse) the future of Dhaka with the idealised landscape of a certain urban elsewhere, it is hardly surprising that urban plans and projects that create a radical break with the existing city, such as blocks of high rises, flyovers and the Purbachal Smart City, are the ones that are framed as signs of newness and progress. However, as I have shown before, this lack of continuation between the city of today and the city of tomorrow may also lead to certain disjunctures as many urban dwellers continue to inhabit and live through spaces and circumstances that have no official place in future visions for Dhaka. To further illustrate this point, I will now turn to the specific example of the (electric) rickshaw.

Contestations of Newness and Change

In the introduction of this chapter I defined urban modernity as a realm that is characterised by a certain politics of newness, which gains shape as epochal distinctions between pastness and newness are articulated, mobilised and politicised

⁵⁸ For instance, in the context of Dhaka all master plans and influential urban planning documents are “either partially or fully funded by international aid agencies such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)” (Swapan 2016, 204).

⁵⁹ Qimiao Fan, Martin Rama, Yue Li and Joe Qian, “Toward Great Dhaka: Seize the golden opportunity”, *World Bank Blogs*, August 3, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/toward-great-dhaka-seize-golden-opportunity>.

to herald the advent of “new times” and to privilege certain directions of change over others. In the previous section I have drawn attention to this politicisation of newness by focusing on the political potency of narratives and images that suggest that Dhaka can leapfrog into a modern urban future (not seldom associated with a certain elsewhere). The epochal break that such “leapfrogging” (see Datta 2017) requires is premised on the possibility of somehow erasing or bypassing the existing urban landscape in order to allow for new urban forms. However, the fact that the same sort of high-rise apartment buildings, prestigious convention centres, flyovers and “smart city” neighbourhoods are being imagined and built in cities ranging from Kinshasa to Mumbai, suggests that there is nothing inherently novel about these urban forms. Rather, it is their ability to create a radical and visible break with the urban here and now that grant these urban features an air newness. In other words, newness is not the inevitable result of chronology or progression. Instead, elements of novelty have to be actively mobilised and put to work to constitute the kind of epochal break that is associated with modernity.

Thus far I have predominantly paid attention to the ways in which professional future-makers, such as politicians and planners, mobilise certain ideas and images to constitute an epochal break with the urban here and now. Naturally, such professionals do not hold sole ownership over the future. Indeed, if we want to denaturalise the idea of history as gradual progression, it is vital to pay attention to the ways in which people push back against such linear projections of the future. A good example are the heritage activists who are trying to redefine what modernity means by advocating for a form of development that “ensures protection against heritage destruction”. Similarly, the framing of the rickshaw as a vehicle that obstructs the advent of new and modern times has not been without pushback. Indeed, the advocacy work that has been done to change the reputation and image of the rickshaw highlights that distinctions between what is considered outdated or innovative can be creatively redrawn and subverted to imagine a different urban future.

The idea that the rickshaw, through its continued presence in Dhaka city, is somehow obstructing the constitutive epochal break that is associated with modernity, has not been readily accepted by all groups in Bangladesh society. In fact, Work for Better Bangladesh Trust (WBB), the NGO and advocacy group that hosted me throughout my fieldwork, has been influential in unsettling some of the intuitive associations that have been forged between the rickshaw and its ostensible

backwardness. Shovan⁶⁰, now a vocal rickshaw activist, told me how his own perception of the rickshaw had changed after he started working for WBB as a volunteer:

“At that time, I also disliked the rickshaw. I thought the rickshaw was the main cause of traffic congestion. I also thought like this, because the maximum of newspapers that write this kind of news”.

It was over time that Shovan developed a soft spot for the rickshaw. First, from what he described as a “human rights point of view”, as he started to recognise rickshaw drivers’ “right to earn”. Yet increasingly he became convinced of the importance of the rickshaw for Dhaka city as a whole. In an attempt to change the common, negative perception of the tri-cycle, he began writing letters to different newspapers in Bangladesh to underscore the rickshaw’s positive contribution to the economy and the environment. His persistent advocacy work eventually led to the Guinness Book of Records recognising Dhaka as the city with the largest number of cycle rickshaws in the world. Initially his efforts and arguments, however, had not necessarily gained much traction.

“At first it was a little bit tough... Actually, everybody thought our concept was wrong. Planners, transport planners, urban planners: everyone said that the rickshaw was the main cause of traffic congestion”.

“So where did this idea come from?” I probed.

“Actually, we have some wrong idea that modernisation means electricity or more energy consumption”.

Shovan went on to explain that, before WBB started their advocacy work on rickshaws in the early 2000s, there used to be a very strong pro-car bias among media companies, policymakers and consultants. He attributed this bias partly to the fact that most of the consultants that had been brought in to write master plans and urban policies were from abroad⁶¹.

“They have no rickshaw related knowledge, they have no proper knowledge,” he emphasised, adding that these American and European consultants all preferred the car.

Until this day Shovan was rather cynical about the role that donor organisations such as the Asian Development Bank, JICA and the World Bank played in shaping transport policies in Dhaka.

“They say they work against climate change, so why they don’t invest in the rickshaw? [...] Why don’t they invest one single coin for these issues? They invest in rickshaw removal, rickshaw bans⁶², rickshaw drivers’ rehabilitation.

⁶⁰ Semi-structured interview, January 9, 2018.

⁶¹ Swapan (2016, 204) and Hasan (2013, 19) have made similar remarks in relation to the influential role that foreign consultants and organisations play in shaping urban policies in Dhaka.

⁶² Shovan is referring to fact that the plan to implement NMT-free corridors was initially conceived under the World Bank-led “Dhaka Urban Transport Project”.

The rickshaw is positive for climate change, so why don't they make the rickshaw an example?"

Instead of replicating the modernisation trajectory of other countries, Shovan wanted local planners to focus on the unique setting of Dhaka.

"All syllabuses come from Europe and America and we think this is the standard. So this is a wrong condition, a wrong concept. Now we need to teach our students, our new planners Dhaka city life, Dhaka culture, Dhaka religion".

Shovan considered the rickshaw to be very much part of this emancipatory project. He envisioned a future where, as a result of rickshaw-based planning, "the whole of Dhaka would be a green city".

The above example not only highlights efforts to change the public narrative from the rickshaw as "a congestion creator" to the rickshaw as "a green vehicle for the future", but also shows that hegemonic practices of futuring can be turned around and subverted. Shovan is creatively drawing on the discourse of green and eco-friendly transport that has been adopted by international donor organisations such as the World Bank, to argue that the rickshaw is a vehicle rather than an obstacle for achieving a modern urban future.

Maruf Hossain⁶³, a senior transport expert with WBB, further elaborated on these conscious efforts to change the narrative around rickshaws. He explained that rickshaw bans had initially been interpreted as a mere problem for rickshaw drivers and not as a problem that affected the general public and the city at large; a perception they had tried to change. Maruf specifically recalled a prominent press conference in 2004 that had been held in the aftermath of six days of back-to-back demonstrations. Together with eighteen other environmental and rights-based organisations, WBB⁶⁴ had protested against the DCC proposal, which was part of the World Bank-sponsored "Dhaka Urban Transport Plan", to phase-out rickshaws from eleven major roads (see chapter 4). Maruf summarised the gist of the press conference as follows:

At that time journalists also argued "Why do you want to save the rickshaw? People's income is increasing and motorisation is increasing in Dhaka city so the rickshaw will be removed automatically". Then we argued that it is fuel-free and environment-friendly and that cars are not public transport and take up much space. And day by day, we were just increasing knowledge among the stakeholders.

⁶³ Semi-structured interview, January 16, 2018.

⁶⁴ These different organisations were all part of the so-called "Roads for People" platform.

The press conference and civil society backlash eventually prompted the World Bank to withdraw its support for rickshaw bans. However, the damage was already done and “[t]ransport planning in Dhaka continued to focus on expanding the role of MT and reducing support of NMT” (Buliung, Shimi and Mitra 2005, 163). This becomes abundantly clear from the fact that a new round of VIP roads was implemented as recent as July 2019⁶⁵.

Since the aforementioned press conference in 2004, local media outlets have significantly diversified their narrative on rickshaws. In the aftermath of the recently imposed rickshaw bans, two of the country’s leading English-published newspapers, the Daily Star⁶⁶ and the Dhaka Tribune⁶⁷, both printed critical opinion pieces that questioned the logic behind these restrictions. Their commentary reiterated many of the points that WBB had been trying to get across since the first VIP roads were implemented in Dhaka. Both articles not only stressed the importance of the rickshaw as a vital source of employment for the rural-urban poor, but also underlined the fact that, in a city where opportunities for walking and public transport are not always safe and comfortable (especially for women), many city dwellers continue to rely on the rickshaw as a mode of transport. What’s more, both authors pointed to the potential of the rickshaw as an eco-friendly and zero-emission form of transport, with Daily Star reporter Mohammad Al-Masum Molla explicitly labelling the bans as an indicator that Bangladesh was “heading in the reverse direction” as far as the climate crisis is concerned.

This diversification of the public narrative on rickshaws thus shows that practices of futuring constitute a realm of contestation. The above examples show that distinctions between what is considered outdated or innovative can be creatively redrawn and subverted to imagine a different urban future. In a way, these efforts to imbue the rickshaw with a “green” and “eco-friendly” potential have thus made it possible to conceive of the vehicle as a way of moving forward rather than backward and of envisioning a modern epoch of a different kind. The example of the rickshaw, however, also shows that the experience of newness and progress is not necessarily premised on technological changes or inventions. This becomes clear in the case of the

⁶⁵ Mizanur Rahman, “3 Major Routes to Ban Rickshaws from Sunday”, Mizanur Rahman, *Dhaka Tribune*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/07/06/3-major-routes-to-ban-rickshaws-from-sunday>.

⁶⁶ Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, “Ban on Rickshaw: How Logical Is It?”, *The Daily Star*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/politics/news/ban-rickshaw-how-logical-it-1767535>.

⁶⁷ Faria Iffat Mim, “What Will Banning Rickshaws Achieve?”, *Dhaka Tribune*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2019/07/09/what-will-banning-rickshaws-achieve>.

electric rickshaw which, despite its unmistakable novelty, has remained largely un-mobilised as a sign of progressive, forward movement into the future. I argue that paying attention to such un-mobilised or not-yet-mobilised expressions of novelty is instrumental in denaturalising hegemonic ideas of history as a continuous and self-propelled flow of inevitable progression. In this last section, I will present the electric rickshaw as an example of an un-mobilised expression of newness. In doing so, I seek to underscore that the extent to which certain inventions, adaptations or innovations are recognised and accepted as a foreboding of a new (urban) epoch are also subject to what I have described as the “politics of newness”.

Technological Progress, the Electric Rickshaw and Conditions for Change

I started this chapter with the words of the rickshaw mechanic Junaid, who was amazed that the government was proud to promote a “Digital Bangladesh” but reluctant to accommodate the electric rickshaw. I myself was also surprised at the overwhelming lack of enthusiasm for the battery-run rickshaw, especially considering that pedalling a regular rickshaw was often framed as a form of “inhumane work”. This is not to say that driving an electric rickshaw is necessarily comfortable. Raihan⁶⁸, who had been introduced to the rickshaw industry by Junaid, explained that his hands did often hurt from operating the brakes. Moreover, because many of the roads in the peripheral parts of town were poorly paved, the rickshaw would usually start to rattle and shake as soon as it gained momentum. Keeping control of the vehicle was therefore a painful and uncomfortable exercise. Still, operating a battery-run rickshaw was considered significantly less arduous than operating a regular rickshaw. Junaid pointed out that the availability of the electric rickshaw was of particular importance to older and weaker drivers, for whom it was no longer an advantage that they “earned money as the wheels turned around”. There were also other, less pressing reasons for operating a battery-run rickshaw. For instance, I spoke with one rickshaw driver⁶⁹ who had temporarily switched to an electric rickshaw because of the summer heat. Although he now earned less money than usual, driving a battery rickshaw was far more comfortable than pedalling a regular rickshaw in the searing heat. The rickshaw *walla* explained that his daily income currently fluctuated around 700 taka. His daily

⁶⁸ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

⁶⁹ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 1, 2017.

rickshaw rent was 300 taka; three times the amount he paid for a regular rickshaw. He struggled to further increase his income, considering that he was only allowed to operate his rickshaw away from the main roads. Such restrictions were a common complaint among rickshaw drivers and many of them stressed that if the government wanted to improve their situation, they should allow the battery-rickshaw to operate in Dhaka City Corporation. And, as to Junaid's point, such a move would actually be in line with the government's own political messaging, which puts a strong emphasis on technological progress and modernity. The question thus arises why the electric rickshaw is not seen as a potential way forward. In order to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the relation between technology, progress and change.

The idea that progress into the future is propelled by a succession of technological and scientific inventions is a persistent one that continues to shape notions of development and modernity. This in spite of the fact that such an understanding of progress has long been debunked as a form of technological determinism (Wyatt 2008; Bijker 2010). Regardless, there are many major development agencies, such as the World Bank, that champion tropes like "ICT for Development" and continue to "display an unconditional trust in the power of Western technology and scientific knowledge to trigger development" (Cherlet 2014, 773). The assumption that development can ultimately be brought about by some kind of "technological fix" (Cherlet 2014, 780) also lies at the heart of techno-utopian "smart city imaginaries" (Wiig 2015; Bina, Inch and Pereira 2019). The construction of the Purbachal New Town and Awami League's adamant promise to create a "Digital Bangladesh" suggest that a similar techno-utopianism has also gained foothold in Bangladesh.

Inherent to such techno-utopian projects is the tendency to obscure the politics that determine wider agendas for change. Buzzwords such as "the digital revolution" and "smart-city development" contribute to a narrative that renders "technology opaque and beyond political intervention and control" (Wyatt 2008, 176). Wyatt (2008, 175) has pointed out that technological determinism, although no longer a credible academic framework for looking at change, continues to disguise the politics, preferences and interests of those who seek "to promote a particular direction of change". Hence, if we want to reach a fuller and more complex understanding of the in- and exclusions of urban modernity, we need to look not only at the spatio-temporal mechanisms that influence the extent to which certain people, livelihoods and

movements continue to have a place in the city of tomorrow, but also at the ways in which directions for change are either enabled or cut off.

Throughout my fieldwork I often wondered why no real efforts have been made to upgrade the design of the rickshaw, which is such that most rickshaw drivers need to get into a standing position to gain sufficient momentum for their vehicle. Unsurprisingly, this way of driving a rickshaw results in sore joints and many of the rickshaw drivers I spoke to complained specifically of pain in their knees and hands. Fred Willkie (1986, 19), a Canadian cycle-engineer who spent six months in Bangladesh to work on an improved version of the rickshaw, remarked that the Bangladesh tricycle – despite being significantly heavier – had been largely modelled after a one-gear bicycle. With a keen eye for detail, Willkie (1986, 19) sums up the negative consequences of the current rickshaw design:

The vehicle is grossly over-gearred. It wears down the synovial tissue in the wallah's joints, and strains his heart and back. The frame is so flexible that it consumes much of the wallah's propulsive effort in twisting up. There is only one rod brake on the front wheel, so the wallah has to depend on evasive actions in traffic. If the brake is applied too hard, it can stop the front wheel only, and the moving payload snaps the front fork off, right above the crown. A tricycle rickshaw is not a bicycle: a bicycle is built so that the front fork will turn in the direction the bicycle leans. This means that whenever the rickshaw's rear wheels go over an uneven surface, its bicycle fork turns out of the line of travel and has to be muscled back.

The solutions that are needed to improve the design of the rickshaw have long been clear. In fact, Willkie was part of a project of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) that offered a number of improvements. These included suggestions to: 1) add a second gear, 2) lower the centre of gravity, 3) decrease the weight of the rickshaw body, and 4) improve the suspension system with rubber pads (Saito 1993, 290). The fact that none of these suggestions have seen any follow-up can be contributed to a number of factors that have been astutely identified by Saha, Goswami and Ehsan (2011, 20). First, there is little incentive for rickshaw owners and mechanics to actually redesign the vehicles they build and rent out as long as the group of rickshaw pullers that relies on them remains vast and un-unionised. Secondly, no donors have stepped forward to fund the mass-production of an improved rickshaw model. Lastly, there is no government legislation that stipulates a certain standard to

which rickshaws should adhere. To this I might add that the consistent framing of the rickshaw as a vehicle that will “soon be part of the past” also puts a brake on attempts to change and improve its design.



Figure 21: An electric rickshaw that consists of a steel body and frame from China.

The above example thus clearly highlights that innovation, far from being an organic or even self-propelled process, is as much a political as a technological endeavour. The emergence of the electric rickshaw in Dhaka further underscores this point. The electric or battery-run rickshaw made its first appearance in Dhaka in 2009, when a few regular rickshaws were upgraded through the simple addition of a battery. The different changes that had been made to these first, rather dangerous hybrids were explained to me by the manager of a rickshaw garage in Kamrangirchar, while he showed me the different rickshaw variations in his garage⁷⁰. First, he explicated, the regular bicycle brakes had been replaced with hydraulic brakes. Subsequently, rickshaw mechanics had started using bigger and stronger spokes and heavier wheels.

⁷⁰ Informal conversation, Kamrangirchar, January 13, 2018.

Eventually, the body and seat of the rickshaw had also been made bigger and heftier and some of the newest models consisted of a steel body and frame that had been imported from China. The manager showed me one of those newer models, which only resembled the “traditional rickshaw” through its sheer volume of colourful decorations. The hood was square and consisted of steel rather than bamboo stakes. The body and frame were made out of one piece and, whereas the improvised electric rickshaw still had a bike seat and pedals, the newer model enabled the rickshaw driver to sit on a pillowed little bench. The manager added that, in the nearby countryside of Madaripur, there were also some variations of this model that had a sheet of plexiglass in front of the steering handle.

None of the described changes or adaptations to the rickshaw had happened in a particularly planned or orchestrated way. In fact, most of the advancements that the Kamrangirchar garage manager described had been implemented after the High Court ruled in favour of banning the electric rickshaw from Dhaka City Corporation in 2015⁷¹. However, as I described in the previous chapter, the battery-run rickshaw continued to operate on local backroads and in many of the city’s peripheral areas⁷². In some of these areas, such as Kamrangirchar, negotiations between rickshaw owners, the local traffic police and local *mastans* had led to an informal license system. The Kamrangirchar garage manager showed me the license – a laminated placard attached to the back of the rickshaw – that represented this unsanctioned agreement between the relevant parties. In my own neighbourhood, Rayerbazar, the extent to which local rickshaw owners were able to rent out electric rickshaws depended on the political connections of both the *malik* himself and those of the land owner. The first explanation I came across when trying to dig a bit deeper into the ways in which electric rickshaws in the area were being sanctioned and licensed came from a rickshaw manager⁷³ who was running a garage next to the neighbourhood’s largest playing field. He disclosed that the local association of rickshaw owners had struck an agreement with two nearby police stations, Lalbagh and Chowkbazar *thana*, to allow for battery-run rickshaws to operate on the local streets away from the main road. Members of the owners’ associations paid 500 taka per rickshaw per month to appease the traffic police. In turn,

⁷¹ “HC Bans Battery-Run Rickshaw”, *The Daily Star*, March 8, 2015, <https://www.thedailystar.net/hc-bans-battery-run-rickshaw-31617>.

⁷² Faisal Mahmud, “Battery-Run Rickshaws Flout Court Ban by Plying in Dhaka pockets”, *The Independent*, July 26, 2019, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/209049>.

⁷³ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 1, 2017.

the police refrained from reprimanding rickshaw drivers who had a customised license plate attached to the back of their electric vehicle. Despite this tacit arrangement with the police, there were still plenty of rickshaw owners in the area who chose not to rent out battery-run rickshaws. For instance, when I asked Amir⁷⁴, who had only recently moved his garage to the area, why he did not have any electric rickshaws, he responded: “*Ami notun to!* (I am new here!)”. He added that he lacked the right connections to arrange a license and that he disliked the fact that the battery-run rickshaw was officially not allowed. His status as a relative newcomer to the area also meant that he paid a relatively high price for the land he occupied with his garage, almost five times the amount he had paid for the parcel he previously rented. However, it were not only the connections of the individual *malik* that mattered. When I spoke with Mustafa⁷⁵, another rickshaw owner in the area, he mentioned that only garage owners on the other side of the playing field were in a position to buy access to electricity. He himself could not arrange the electricity supply that a battery-run business would require because he rented his land from a different land owner. It was the land owner, Mustafa explained, who ultimately needed to broker an agreement with local political leaders.

Such political negotiations, contestations and disagreements had accompanied the electric rickshaw almost since its first appearance in Dhaka. In 2009, when the battery-run rickshaw made its advance into the capital city, Dhaka City Corporation had initially allowed for a total of 7,000 electric rickshaws to operate in Dhaka⁷⁶. The license system they proposed to put in place, however, never materialised because the Ministry did not approve of the policy. What’s more, the presence of the battery-run rickshaw increasingly fuelled disputes and discontent. Whereas the companies that imported the parts for the electric rickshaw, as well as some local engineers⁷⁷, underlined the environmental potential of the vehicle as well as its contribution to local transportation needs, members of the Bangladesh Road and Transport Authority (BRTA) complained about electricity pilferage and safety risks. In 2011, as a result of growing pressures, the government decided to ban the import and assembly of the

⁷⁴ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 8, 2017.

⁷⁵ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

⁷⁶ Tawfique Ali, “Electric Rickshaws Run out of Steam”, *The Daily Star*, May 30, 2011, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-187825>.

⁷⁷ For instance, BUET Civil Engineer Shamsul Hoque underscored the positive aspects of the electric rickshaw, whilst also advocating for regulations to prevent electricity pilferage. See: Tawfique Ali, “Electric Rickshaws Run out of Steam”, *The Daily Star*, May 30, 2011, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-187825>.

vehicles. In 2013, however, the Dhaka Tribune reported that, in spite of promises by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police to seize all battery-run vehicles, electric rickshaws continued to run in parts of Mirpur and Uttara – allegedly under the patronage of certain owner associations with close ties to the ruling party, such as the *Sromik* or Worker’s League⁷⁸.



Figure 22: Unofficial license card for electric rickshaws.

To be sure, rickshaw owner associations have played a rather ambivalent role throughout the saga of the electric rickshaw. Although local *malik* societies continue to be instrumental in brokering deals with the police, the “National Rickshaw-Van Sromik League” seems to have had a change of heart with regard to the electric rickshaw and is now actively using their political leverage to advocate against the vehicle’s presence in Dhaka. In fact, when I interviewed general secretary Insur Ali in 2017⁷⁹, he proclaimed that he would support an upcoming protest against the electric rickshaw next month. He decried the battery-run rickshaw to be “harmful for city dwellers” and lamented not only the illegal use of electricity, but also the fact that some vehicles did not have proper brakes and therefore put their passengers at risk of accidents. “*Onek*

⁷⁸ Abu Hayat Mahmud, “Battery-Run Rickshaws Ply in City Flouting Ban”, *The Dhaka Tribune*, September 21, 2013, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2013/09/21/battery-run-rickshaws-ply-in-city-flouting-ban>.

⁷⁹ Semi-structured interview, December 1, 2017.

jatri mara geche. Many passengers have died”, he added hyperbolically. The president of the association, who was also taking part in our conversation, further elaborated: “The electric rickshaw is increasing day by day and the regular rickshaw is decreasing due to a lack of pullers”. Insur Ali reiterated this point during a conference hosted by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) where he argued that the electric rickshaw jeopardised the “survival of the pedal-run rickshaw-pullers”⁸⁰. It should be noted that “National Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League” has a vested interest in the continued existence of the pedal run rickshaw, considering that they are one of the key players when it comes to selling non-official licenses (see chapter 4 and Suykens 2018, 429). This also helps to explain why the Rickshaw Workers’ League has recently sided squarely with Mayor Sayeed Khokon when he announced his latest plans to take action against all “illegal and battery-run rickshaws” across Dhaka⁸¹.

This politicisation of both the presence and the future of the electric rickshaw is not unique to Dhaka. Although the 2015 High Court ruling that definitively banned the battery rickshaw from Dhaka City Corporation applied specifically to Dhaka and Chittagong⁸², the vehicle has also faced backlash in other cities across Bangladesh. In fact, during an interview with Ratan Razequzzaman⁸³, leader of the Bangladesh Socialist Party, he mentioned that they had mobilised a huge movement to protect the battery-run rickshaw in Barisal:

We were fighting to save the battery driving rickshaw. The city corporation tried to overthrow the rickshaw outside of the city. And they banned and arrested some rickshaw pullers and 200 rickshaws were kept by the city [...] We made a powerful movement and after sixteen days of protesting we brought back the rickshaw.

Their victory, however, had been a temporary one. In October 2019, the Barisal City Corporation and Barisal Metropolitan Police imposed a partial ban on the battery rickshaw by outlawing them from five of the city’s major roads. The decision, which was supposed to smoothen traffic and enhance road safety, evoked a hunger strike with

⁸⁰ Kamrul Hasan, “94% Rickshaw-Pullers Suffer from Health Complications”, *The Dhaka Tribune*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/06/27/94-rickshaw-pullers-suffer-from-health-complications>.

⁸¹ Mehedi Al Amin, “DSCC Mayor Announces Drives Against Illegal, Electric Rickshaws”, *The Dhaka Tribune*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/07/14/dscc-mayor-mobile-court-drives-on-illegal-and-electric-rickshaws>.

⁸² “HC Bans Battery-Run Rickshaw”, *The Daily Star*, March 8, 2015, <https://www.thedailystar.net/hc-bans-battery-run-rickshaw-31617>.

⁸³ Semi-structured, January 17, 2018.

protestors blaming the Barisal Metropolitan Police for confiscating batteries from over five hundred vehicles⁸⁴.

What unites these countrywide and ongoing disputes over the presence of the battery-run rickshaw is that the same arguments seem to resurface again and again, as the electric rickshaw is blamed for either being too risky or for taking up too much of the electricity supply. However, it should be noted that risks and costs are inherent to any form of innovation and that a variation of these two arguments could also easily be applied to other forms of transport⁸⁵. When I discussed the matter with Maruf Hossain of WBB⁸⁶, he pointed at the various inconsistencies in the line of argument that is usually applied, noting that there had not been any study conducted to actually assess the extent to which the battery-run rickshaw had caused traffic accidents. He added that the vehicle seemed to be operating successfully in a number of cities throughout Bangladesh:

If you go to the rest of the cities, you can see thousands of rickshaws and easy-bikes run by electricity. So if we think it is risky in Dhaka, why do we consider it in Mymensingh, why do we consider it in North Bengal, why do we consider it in other cities? If it is risky, then everywhere it is risky.

The argument of (illegal) electricity usage also did not make much sense to Maruf, as he reasoned that the air coolers, escalators and refrigerators that Bangladesh imported from abroad also came with a significant electricity demand and that the government could step in to regulate its proper provision. Maruf went on to argue that the reluctance to reserve a portion of the city's electricity supply for the electric rickshaw seemed to contradict one of the arguments that is usually employed to call for a ban on the regular, pedal rickshaw: "They said that it is an inhumane occupation. But if you want to make it a human friendly occupation, why don't you give just two unit of electricity per night?" He added that the government could also easily instruct BUET or one of the country's other engineering departments to design a safer model of the battery-run rickshaw.

⁸⁴ "Battery-Run Rickshaw Drivers on Hunger Strike in Barishal", *The Daily Star*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/battery-run-rickshaw-drivers-hunger-strike-barishal-1808566>.

⁸⁵ For instance, there has been considerable public outcry over the frequency of bus accidents in Bangladesh, with a deadly bus accident in 2018 sparking mass student protests. Thus far, however, no one has suggested yet to ban buses from Dhaka city based on their perceived safety risks.

⁸⁶ Semi-structured interview, January 16, 2018.

The example of the electric rickshaw shows that trajectories of technological innovation are by no means self-propelled projects of progress. The fact that imperfections in the design of both the regular and the electric rickshaws are met with a call for banning rather than improving the vehicle, shows that innovation is a highly political project that privileges certain directions of change over others. What we have seen in relation to the electric rickshaw is that its potential for change is actively thwarted. To some extent, this obstructionism is indicative of the ways in which wider networks of party patronage stall change in Bangladesh, considering that the ruling party is very much reliant on the support of a number of informal branches and workers' leagues that all have their own vested interests that need be accommodated. Throughout this chapter, however, I have shown that these everyday politics intersect with larger temporal politics over the future of Dhaka. Specifically, I have argued that narratives of modernity and development are used to legitimise certain changes to the urban landscape and to delegitimise others. Hence, whereas flyovers continue to assert themselves as symbols of progress, even when they violate existing urban plans, the electric rickshaw has largely been left un-mobilised to tell stories of change and, instead, has been incorporated as part of the same narratives that have long sought to relegate the rickshaw to the past. However, amidst such wider politics of newness, there are always undercurrents of (social) change that seep through the cracks in more insidious and unexpected ways. It is these non-epochal forms of change that I will turn to now.

Non-Epochal Forms of Change

“One day I saw Sonia *apa* drive a rickshaw and I thought to myself: if women can drive a rickshaw, *I* will drive a rickshaw. Then I will face no more hardship”.

~ Jamila (female rickshaw puller)⁸⁷

The fact that the electric rickshaw has not been identified as an agent of change, does not mean that it has not brought about change. Indeed, the electric rickshaw has managed to attract a number of people to the industry that would not normally be inclined to drive a rickshaw, such as women and people with disabilities. Towards the end of my research there were a handful of women operating an electric rickshaw in

⁸⁷ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, January 18, 2018.

Kamrangirchar. I spoke with two of these women, Sonia and Jamila⁸⁸, during the very last week of my fieldwork. Sonia had been the first woman to start driving a battery-run rickshaw in Dhaka city. She had gained prior experience driving a rickshaw-van in the countryside and, with some help from an uncle, she had been able to convince a rickshaw *malik* to provide her with a rickshaw. Two years later, Jamila had followed Sonia's example, after coming to the conclusion that her work at a shoe factory did not generate enough income to properly look after her two children. Ever since she got divorced, Jamila had been the sole rice-winner of her family and driving a rickshaw not only provided her with a better income, but also enabled her to spend more time with her children.

In the course of our conversation, Sonia and Jamila took turns explaining that, although initially not all passengers were happy to be driven around by a woman, the public perception had changed in their favour. "*Sob passenger uthben na. Not all passengers get on (the rickshaw),*" Sonia stressed, while adding that some people were afraid that a female driver might cause more accidents. Jamila, however, was quick to point out that there were also many passengers, especially women, who empathised with them and deliberately singled them out as their drivers. "*E kaj-ta amra onek doya pacchi. We receive a lot of blessings during this work,*" Jamila elaborated. She went on to explain that many of her female passengers had extended their prayers to her. Moreover, she had also found a way to deal with passengers who thought it was not honourable for a woman to drive a rickshaw:

Yes, some people talk like this. But I make them understand... I tell them, look, please give me another job that will allow me to maintain my family in the same way. If you have another job like this, please give it to me and I will do it so that people will no longer dishonour me. But then they say: "No I cannot give you a job like this" [...] and they understand.

Jamila spoke fondly of her work and dreamed of getting her own battery-run rickshaw one day. She wanted to provide training to other poor women like herself and teach them how to drive a rickshaw. The inherent precariousness of such plans, however, became evident from the fact that Sonia had just lost her second rickshaw to thieves a week earlier. After her first rickshaw got stolen, she had received help from the newspaper *Prothom Alo*. They had bought a new rickshaw for her and Sonia had paid

⁸⁸ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, January 18, 2018.

back the entire loan in instalments, only to find herself in the same situation again. Far from highlighting the sort of definitive progress that is typically believed to constitute epochal change, the stories of Jamila and Sonia thus alert us to the modest but real forms of change that are harnessed by those for whom the future has always been an inherently uncertain horizon.



Figure 23: A female rickshaw puller in Kamrangirchar.

Another example of such non-epochal, tentative forms of change that happen amidst the ordinary and extraordinary struggles of everyday life was provided by Zaman. He was among the increasing number of disabled rickshaw pullers that were operating a battery-run rickshaw in the diplomatic zone. As I explained in chapter 4, there was a special quota of rickshaw licenses reserved for disabled pullers and their family members under the new rickshaw system. Zaman⁸⁹ had not yet been able to acquire access to one of these licensed rickshaws, but nonetheless operated his electric rickshaw in the diplomatic zone, whilst hoping that the police would turn a blind eye.

⁸⁹ Semi-structured interview, Korail, August 7, 2017.

His story highlighted the physical relief that switching to an electric rickshaw could bring:

At the age of eight Zaman found himself caught up in a traffic accident that would cost him his left arm and damage one of his legs for good. Even before the accident, the odds of pursuing a sustainable career had been against him. Zaman was born in a slum settlement in Moghbazar and imagined a life for himself that resembled that of his father, who had worked as a rickshaw driver his entire life. Despite this less-than-cheerful prospect Zaman came across as a strikingly good-humoured man. Yasin and I first ran into him when looking for a rickshaw ride to Korail slum. We had been turned down by a number of other rickshaw drivers, who all seemed to prefer a less peripheral destination, when we spotted Zaman waving eagerly at us from down the road. He was happy to drop us off at one of the rickshaw garages in Korail and chatted animatedly throughout the ten-minute journey. The narrow and unpaved roads of the slum area are almost impossible to navigate by rickshaw and Yasin and I offered to get off the rickshaw as soon as we reached the edge of Korail. Zaman, however, objected and one-handedly stirred his battery-run rickshaw over the bumps in the roads in order to drop us off at the garage from where he himself rented his vehicle.

Zaman introduced us to his *malik*, wife and colleagues – many of whom also suffered from various disabilities – and told us a bit more about his own employment history. He started working as a child, but because of his disability he had predominantly been involved in begging. After some time, he found himself a job as a waste collector, which involved picking up garbage whilst driving a so-called “dustbin rickshaw”. After that, he had worked as a street vendor and five years ago he had exchanged his business for a rickshaw. Initially he drove a pedal rickshaw, but recently he had upgraded his regular rickshaw to a battery-run rickshaw. When I asked Zaman about the experience of driving a pedal rickshaw with one arm, he admitted that it had been very difficult. He used to lean very heavily on his right arm and hand and would often not be able to sleep at night because of the pain. His childhood accident, moreover, had also permanently damaged his leg and knee, which made the job even harder.

Zaman was very happy to drive a battery-run rickshaw these days, although the new restrictions in the diplomatic zone had significantly thwarted his work. Even though the new community rickshaw system had reserved a special number of licenses specifically for disabled pullers, the distribution of these licenses – like that of all rickshaw permits – had been steeped in corruption. Zaman told us he had lost 25,000 taka to a broker who, after registering him as a disabled puller, had sold his license to someone else. Zaman, who owned two rickshaws himself, nonetheless hoped that he would eventually be able to obtain a yellow rickshaw to rent out to another driver. For the time being, he continued to operate his unlicensed battery-run rickshaw in the

shadows of the law, seeking out those parts of the diplomatic zone where the traffic police would turn a blind eye.

Zaman's story thus hints at a form of tentative change that does not necessarily herald a radically different future. Although the electric rickshaw has made his job significantly easier, it does not undo the existing relations of inequality that make him vulnerable to the cons and swindles of predatory middlemen.

In this chapter, we have seen that the electric rickshaw offers a way for people who lack the physical strength to nonetheless earn money as the wheels turn around. The question, however, can be posed to what extent the electric rickshaw institutes a radical form of change in the lives of people and allows them to definitively pull away from conditions of scarcity and hardship. The examples of Zaman and Sonia make clear that the positive changes that the electric rickshaw brings about still very much unfold amidst the wider vulnerabilities of the rickshaw industry. The insecurities and uncertainties that surround the illegitimate presence of the battery-run has made the issuing of licenses even more dependent on the whims of predatory middlemen, local *mastans* and police officers than is the case with the regular rickshaw. Buying or driving an electric rickshaw, moreover, is more expensive and therefore economically more risky than operating or purchasing a regular rickshaw. Indeed, it is worth repeating the story of Raihan⁹⁰ here (see chapter 5). Raihan had purchased a battery-run rickshaw after losing a substantial sum of money to an immigration broker. However, due to the shifting agreements between local strongmen, the police and local rickshaw owners, his rickshaw had already been confiscated several times, with the result that he could no longer pay back his weekly debt payments. The fact that Sonia's rickshaw had already been stolen twice similarly highlights that access to an electric rickshaw does not necessarily undo the vulnerabilities that surround rickshaw labour.

Throughout my research I often wondered how a life of navigating pervasive economic vulnerabilities affected people's outlook on the future. Indeed, it struck me that most rickshaw drivers were reluctant to speculate about their future. When asked about their future plans, they would usually emphasise that they simply did not know if and when they would be able to stop pulling a rickshaw. Jamila was somewhat of an exception in this regard. She was one of the few people I interviewed who spoke about the future with a relative degree confidence. When I asked her if she expected to drive

⁹⁰ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

a rickshaw her entire life, she outlined her plan for the future: “Not my whole life. When my sons grow older, they will work to put food on the table”. She imagined that after her sons were old enough to earn money, she would stay at home and do some tailoring work from there – sewing bags and other items of clothing. “After eight or ten years I will buy a piece of land somewhere and build a house together with my children,” she wrapped up her plan. Most rickshaw drivers I spoke with had difficulty imagining such a fixed point in time when they would be able to retire and/or move back to the countryside to start a small business. Indeed, throughout this thesis we have seen multiple examples of rickshaw drivers who thought they had moved back to the countryside for good, only to find themselves in a position which compelled them to take up a job as a rickshaw puller once again; either because of business losses, as was the case for Jamal⁹¹, or because other income earning family members had fallen away, as was the situation for Khadim⁹². Even the eighteen-year old Ravi⁹³ who had completed secondary education and had his life still ahead of him, was not particularly confident about being able to land a different job. Instead, he underscored that most “skilled” jobs could only be acquired by paying a substantial sum of bribe money.

This tentative attitude towards the future, born out of a lifetime of economic uncertainty, also transpired in the conversations I had with rickshaw drivers over the future of the rickshaw itself. Whereas I myself was very much enthused by the advocacy work that was being done to change the public perception surrounding the rickshaw, these discursive and political struggles over what the future should hold or look like did not necessarily seem to resonate with the experiences of rickshaw pullers. Although most of the drivers I spoke with were angry over the rickshaw restrictions that were being implemented, many of them did not have very strong opinions about the future of the rickshaw as a mode of transport. This became clear when I shared the content of a newspaper article with a group of rickshaw pullers in Shonir Akhra⁹⁴. The article cited several politicians and planners and argued that the rickshaw needed to be phased out from Dhaka city because it constituted an “inhumane” form of work⁹⁵. Insur Ali of the “Rickshaw-Van Workers’ League” was quoted arguing that the

⁹¹ Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, August 2, 2017.

⁹² Semi-structured interview, Kamrangirchar, September 23, 2017.

⁹³ Semi-structured interview, Rayerbazar, August 21, 2017.

⁹⁴ Informal group discussion, Shonir Akhra, January 20, 2016.

⁹⁵ “Comprehensive plan needed to phase out rickshaws: Experts ‘Rickshaw pulling an inhuman work’”, *The Daily Sun*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.daily-sun.com/arcprint/details/98520/2015/12/12/Comprehensive-plan-needed-to-phase-out-rickshaws:-Experts/2015-12-12>.

government should “distribute CNG-run auto rickshaws among the rickshaw owners as well as the rickshaw pullers through cooperatives”. When I asked the group of rickshaw pullers what they thought of such plans to phase out the rickshaw, they answered that this would only be possible if the government provided them with another job that earned them at least 15,000 taka per month to provide for their families. For them the rickshaw, like Dhaka city, represented primarily an avenue for making a living. The rickshaw was neither an “inhumane” remainder from the past, nor a sustainable vehicle for the future: it was simply something they needed now to keep on going forward.

Conclusion

I started this chapter with the provocative question that was posed by rickshaw mechanic Junaid: “The government wants to create a ‘Digital Bangladesh’, so why don’t they allow the *auto* (electric rickshaw)? The pedal rickshaw is not digital...” Throughout this chapter I have tried to unpack this question by focusing on what I have described as a “politics of newness”. Hence, whereas the previous chapters dealt explicitly with non-territorially fixed ways of being in the city, this chapter has somewhat broadened the scope of this enquiry by looking at issues of temporality. However, I would argue that a focus on time, change and future-making also helps to unfix the city, by drawing attention away from the static and spatial features of the city. More importantly, it allows us to gain a fuller understanding of urban exclusion, by alerting us to the mechanisms that deny certain activities, materials and technologies not just a place in the city, but also a place in the urban future. Such temporal forms of urban exclusion, which provided the focus for this last ethnographic chapter, thus relate to the question of how “modern temporal classifications of the future work and for whom” (Pels 2015, 783). Moreover, this also connects to the broader question of how “imaginations of the future drive contemporary urbanism” (Datta 2019, 396).

In Dhaka, as in many other postcolonial cities, such imaginations of the urban future are intimately tied to notions of modernity. In this chapter we have seen that modernity is first and foremost an epochal notion that gains shape through the qualitative distinction between pastness and newness, whilst feeding into linear notions of progress (Osborne 1995, 10). It is therefore unsurprising that postcolonial

scholars have increasingly placed the critique of time at the centre of the modernity and coloniality debate (Chakrabarty 2000; Datta 2019; Vázquez 2009). Moreover, we have seen that such teleologies of progress and expectations of novelty also significantly shape notions of cityness (Robinson 2013). Indeed, city-rankings and the emphasis that is placed on “global”, “smart” and “world-class” cities help perpetuate an urban world order wherein certain cities are believed to represent the future of others. This world order relies on the spatialisation of modernity, which is treated both as a temporal stage and as an intrinsic quality that different cities possess to different degrees (Highmore 2005, 13).

In an attempt to move beyond such hierarchical notions of cityness, I have tried to make the temporal politics and contestations visible that are disguised by linear and progressivist notions of modernity. I have argued that modernity is reproduced through a politics of newness that relies on the creation of an epochal rupture with the past and the selective foregrounding of certain images and realities to herald the advent of new times. I have suggested that the rickshaw is an example of an urban feature that is actively made outdated and excluded from imaginations of the urban future. For, as we have seen, the cycle-rickshaw has frequently been framed as a hindrance for achieving a modern urban future. This is not only the case for Bangladesh, but also for countries like India and Indonesia that have similarly experimented with ways to get rid of the rickshaw.

To gain a deeper understanding of how this modern urban future is envisioned, I have placed the example of the rickshaw within the wider context of urban development in Dhaka. Through a variety of examples, ranging from plans to demolish Old Dhaka to the frenetic construction of elevated expressways, I have shown that this modern urban future becomes manifest through discursive, political and spatial articulations of “a radical break with the past” (Harvey 2003). It is often those urban plans and projects that create a radical break with the existing city, such as towering high-rises and the “Purbachal Smart City”, that are framed as signs of newness, progress and development. Moreover, frequent references to cities like Shanghai and Singapore seem to suggest that there is a more or less fixed trajectory of urban modernity that Dhaka can simply aim and plan towards.

Throughout this chapter, I have not only highlighted how politicians and planners try to fix trajectories of urban change, but I have also paid attention to ways in which hegemonic practices of futuring are subverted and turned around to imagine

a different kind of epochal break. This becomes clear from the ways in which transport activists have changed the public perception around the rickshaw by underscoring its eco-friendly, zero-emission and sustainable potential. Hence, they are mobilising the rickshaw to foretell a very different kind of urban future. Paying attention to such contestations of newness and the creative and subversive ways in which certain images are repackaged is one way to demystify notions of gradual and inevitable progression. Another way is to focus on those expressions of novelty that have been left unmobilised to foretell stories of epochal change. Indeed, the example of the electric rickshaw, which is only viewed in terms of certain risks and costs, shows that innovation is not an organic or even self-propelled technological process, but is intimately related to political exercises in future-making.

In the very last section of this chapter I have moved away from discursive and political contestations over the urban future, by focusing on the non-epochal forms of change that the electric rickshaw has brought about in the lives of people. We have seen that the electric rickshaw allows people who have difficulty to keep the wheels of the rickshaw going, such as older, disabled or female drivers, to nonetheless earn money as the wheels turn around. This form of change, however, unfolds amidst the wider vulnerabilities of the rickshaw industry and does not presage definitive progress. Yet the example of the electric rickshaw does hint at 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.

8. Conclusion: To Keep the Wheels Turning

“Does the rickshaw have a future in Dhaka?” After having explored many of the restrictions and interventions that actively work to make the rickshaw outdated, this question still stands. Yet even after almost completing a dissertation on the topic, I still feel uncomfortable answering this question. On the one hand, I am aware of the many politicians, consultants and writers before me, who have been more than a little premature in their assessment that the rickshaw would “soon” be a vehicle of the past. The two consultants who, in 1968, predicted that all non-motorised transport would be eliminated by 1990 are a case in point (Gallagher 1992, 91). I also recognise that there is an ethical and political need to resist the logic of inevitability and the linear, progressivist notion of change that drives such assumptions. At the same time, I am hesitant to fully endorse the rickshaw as the “green vehicle for the future”. The main reason for this is that such grand narratives of change hardly seem to resonate with the experiences of rickshaw drivers themselves. Indeed, almost all rickshaw drivers I spoke with seemed to hope – sometimes against all odds – that their children would be able to pursue a different career and life. Their articulations of the future were more nuanced and tentative than those of policy makers and activists. They did not celebrate the rickshaw as a uniquely green form of transport, nor did they join in narratives that called to liberate rickshaw drivers from “inhumane” forms of work. Whenever I confronted rickshaw drivers with such narratives, they often simply remarked that if the government wanted to ban rickshaws, they should provide them with another job that earned them the same amount of money. For them the rickshaw was only a vehicle for change insofar as it enabled them to earn more money and garner greater economic wriggle-room than other jobs could offer. It represented a way to keep going, to push ahead, not an end in itself.

Most of this thesis has focused on such practices of pushing ahead. Rickshaw drivers not only push themselves ahead through traffic – something that requires them to literally put their weight in – but also constantly have to propel themselves forward economically as they try to make a living for themselves and their families. Indeed, people’s physical efforts to keep the wheels of the rickshaw going constitute both a mobility practice and an economic practice, considering that rickshaw pullers earn “money as the wheels turn around” (*chaka ghurle taka*). The question arises of what these physical, mobile and economic practices of pushing ahead and pulling forward

can ultimately teach us about wider trajectories of urban change? Where do these efforts to keep the wheels of the rickshaw going intersect with attempts to move the city forward and what does that teach us about approaching urban futures? In the end, the question that begs an answer is not whether the rickshaw has a future in Dhaka, but how to engage with such questions without perpetuating the same linear teleologies of progress, modernity and development that have long haunted urban scholars and planners alike. How do we weigh in on important discussions about the urban futures of the cities we study without promoting futurisms? And how do we make sure that our speculations are sufficiently grounded in the everyday lives and struggles of those people for whom the city does not represent a canvas for the future but rather an avenue for making a living and pushing ahead?

I ended the last chapter by underlining that rickshaw drivers were often reluctant to speculate about their future and about where they would be or what they would do once they grew older. Indeed, for most of them it was unclear whether or when they would be able to quit pulling a rickshaw and move back to the countryside. In a way, their propelling force was not some fixed point in the future that they worked towards, but a dissatisfaction with the conditions of the present. This may seem like a negative or disaffected attitude towards the future. However, the philosopher Ernst Bloch (1976 [1962], 6) reminds us that dissatisfaction and hope share the same teleological content. Whereas dissatisfaction restlessly impels its own lack, the non-possession of itself, hope restlessly propels its own attraction, the possibility of possessing itself (Bloch 1976, 6). Slochower (1972, 113) helps to further clarify that hope is premised on the “perpetual dissatisfaction with the temporal present and any fixed point”. Herein lies a lesson for urban scholars as well. Namely, that if we want to break away from linear teleologies of modernity and evolutionary hierarchies of city-ness and start imagining alternative urban futures, we need to begin with the not-yet fulfilled needs that animate the “urban now” (Robinson 2013).

Throughout this thesis we have seen that the most important form of dissatisfaction that propels rickshaw drivers forward and to the city is *obhab* or “lack”. Their motive force thus derives from the not-yet fulfilled needs of the temporal present. What imaginations and articulations of urban futures often do, however, is that they simply project people’s “perpetual dissatisfaction with the temporal present” onto the spaces and surfaces of the city. Liveability rankings are a case in point. They avert attention away from the histories, power structures and global economic relations that

shape our “temporal present” and all that is restlessly impelling its own lack, by pinning problems such as pollution, poverty and unsafety down to certain cities and territories. Hence, they fix or tie down the city by making “precise identifications of space, problems, or populations” (Simone 2010, 11). That such territorialising tendencies have profound implications for how urban futures are imagined, also becomes clear from the fact that the imagery of the “slum” is frequently mobilised as a foreboding of a dystopian urban future, characterised by “Third World” urbanisation (Nuttall and Mbembe 2005; Robinson 2002; Roy 2011b; Zeiderman 2008).

In this dissertation I have tried to *unfix* the city. That is, I have attempted to move beyond the city as habitat, a notion that has inspired liveability rankings, slum narratives and neighbourhood studies alike. Throughout the different chapters of this thesis I have argued that the working lives of rickshaw pullers in Dhaka represent a non-territorially fixed way of being in the city. This becomes manifest in their journeys to- and through- the city and in their multi-local labour trajectories. By focusing on these “unfixities” I have tried to challenge the sedentarism (Malkki 1992), residentialism (Martinotti 1994), and methodological cityism (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015) that continues to inform popular understandings of twenty-first century urbanisation. Indeed, contemporary narratives of urbanisation, as perpetuated by organisations such as UN-Habitat (Champion and Hugo 2004), often work under the same assumption as early urban anthropologists, namely, that rural-urban labour migration will eventually give way to permanent urban residence (Ferguson 1990). In this thesis, however, I have argued that urbanisation is a multi-directional process that extends well beyond the boundaries of the actual city.

By unfixing the city I have tried to contribute to an understanding of the urban that transcends the territorial location of the city, but remains grounded in the efforts, work and engagements of people. In doing so, I have not only tried to open up our imagination of what and where cities are, but also of what they can become. In many ways, non-territorially fixed ways of being in the city complicate place-based urban proposals and roadmaps for the future. In the case of rickshaw drivers, for instance, we have seen that urban solutions, such as efforts to transform rickshaw transport into a means for “neighbourhood circulation only” (Buliung, Shimi and Mitra 2015) and resettlement schemes like Ghore Phera, were significantly thwarted by the unfixities of the rickshaw industry. Moreover, even well-intended economic solutions such as the idea to grant the “rickshaw to the puller” (Gallagher 1992) are, to some extent,

underpinned by the sedentarist assumption that people will ultimately stay in the city. However, if we want to open up our imagination of what the urban can become, we need to rid our analyses of the assumption that the diffuse realities of work, movement and human activity that animate growing metropolitan areas like Dhaka gravitate towards a certain fixity or stability. Throughout the first three chapters of this dissertation, in addition to introducing the specific urban context of Dhaka, I have grounded this approach in theoretical and methodological literature. The rest of the thesis provided ethnographic evidence of such non-territorially fixed ways of being in the city and focused respectively on rickshaw journeys, rickshaw labour, the rickshaw garage and the electric rickshaw. These four remaining chapters are worth summarising in greater detail here, as they carry the argument of this thesis.

Chapter 4 revolved around attempts to fix, fragment and formalise rickshaw journeys. Most of these developments were relatively recent and formed a significant obstacle to the open-ended and unstructured way of traversing the city that has long characterised rickshaw journeys. Indeed, I have shown that rickshaw journeys seldom unfold as a linear trajectory from one exact location to another and are always subject to negotiation. Routes wind and change according to new information solicited by passengers, other road users, and the wider socio-material landscape. However, the implementation of VIP roads is making it increasingly impossible for rickshaw drivers to pursue their journeys by simply going “one-by-one-road”. The formalised, neighbourhood-based rickshaw system that was implemented in the diplomatic zone, moreover, has not only fragmented but also fixed rickshaw journeys. Under the implemented system certain social and economic aspects, such as the price per distance, the identity of the rickshaw puller and the number of available rickshaws in the area, have all been fixed. In addition, police check posts now function as more-or-less fixed points of departure and arrival and rickshaw journeys themselves have been tied to specific neighbourhoods and roads. Although this new rickshaw system thus unmistakably provides an example of what Guyer (2004) and Ferguson (2007) have described as “formalisation as fixing”, I have been careful not to overstate these fixities. Instead, I have argued that what on the surface appears to be an effort to regularise and stabilise rickshaw journeys, is in fact an attempt at enclosure. This is reflected not only in wider attempts to insulate the diplomatic zone, but also in the instalment of an area-based license ceiling. The fact that unlicensed rickshaws continued to enter certain

pockets of the diplomatic zone, moreover, showed that these practices of enclosure were undergirded by a logic of exception. This chapter has thus shown that formalisation, in this particular instance, far from sorting out an “enduring generalizable principle” (Guyer 2004, 158), gained shape through simultaneous processes of fixing, enclosure and exception.

Chapter 5 focused on rickshaw labour and what it is that draws people to the rickshaw industry. Although most rickshaw drivers expressed that they “had no other option” than to take up this strenuous form of work, they had often tried other options throughout their working lives. Indeed, their lifelong efforts to make a living for themselves and their families oscillated between a variety of economic strategies that could not easily be pinned down to one single avenue of employment. We have also seen that these other economic strategies were often either less lucrative or financially more risky than pulling a rickshaw. Agricultural day labouring did not offer year-round employment and entailed waiting for work. Self-dependent forms of farming were thwarted by conditions of landlessness, riverbank erosion and floods. Low-skilled wage labour and factory work was poorly paid, inflexible and involved waiting for money. And long-term economic strategies such as buying land, starting a business, migrating abroad or landing a government job were often cost-intensive and financially risky. The rickshaw industry, on the other hand, offered a relatively stable site of return when these other labour projects failed or proved to be unsustainable. It provided an accessible avenue for work that required little formal skills, no investment capital and allowed rural-urban migrants to come and go according to their needs and wishes. Indeed, the rickshaw drivers I interviewed all emphasised the independence of the work, the fact that it offered instant cash and allowed them to make money “as the wheels turn around”. The relative appeal of the rickshaw industry thus lies in the fact that it does not definitively tie people to a certain place, wage, contract or loan agreement. The reality of rickshaw labour complicates calls for the rehabilitation of rickshaw drivers into more “humane”, “productive” or “beneficial” professions. What’s more, it challenges intuitive comparisons between stable wage employment and precarious self-employment, and between the fixities of the formal sector and the uncertainties of wageless work. I have argued that rickshaw labour and the vulnerabilities that coincide with the work are best understood in terms of a tension not between stable employment and unstable work, but between (oppressive)

flexibility and (enabling) plasticity (Malabou 2000; 2009). Consequently, what rickshaw drivers stand to lose from rickshaw restrictions is not a stable job, but a stable site of return.

Chapter 6 explored how peripheral spaces, such as the rickshaw garage, facilitate rural-urban comings and goings. The unfixity of both the form and location of the rickshaw garage reflects the territorial impermanence of the periphery itself, which continuously changes and shifts as the city extends outward. Indeed, throughout this chapter it became clear that the periphery is not merely a zone between one territory and another, but a process that blurs the physical and administrative boundaries between the interior and exterior of the city. This was exemplified most clearly by the tandem processes of enclosure and exception that shape the presence of the electric rickshaw in peripheral pockets of Dhaka. This blurring of boundaries makes it impossible “to clearly identify just what is ‘coming and going’” (Simone 2010, 54) and shows that the periphery gains shape through processes of both access and exclusion. The rickshaw garage reflects this indeterminacy as well: like the periphery, it is a space of both exit and entrance. On the one hand, frequent garage relocations reflect the exclusionary processes of urban development that push certain settlements and people to the outsides of the city. These same exclusionary processes make it so that rickshaw drivers themselves are often on the brink of being “out” again, as became clear from the fact that many of them had decided to move their families back to the countryside due to increasing urban living costs. On the other hand, the function of the rickshaw garage also highlights mechanisms of urban entrance. Indeed, we have seen that the garage plays an instrumental role in granting people access to the urban informal economy by allowing them “to make centrality by making connections” (Von Wissel 2016, 19). The same characteristics that make the garage easy to access, such as the fact that rent can be paid on a daily basis, however, also make it easy to exit, hence, accommodating different trajectories of rural return. The pendular rural-urban movements of rickshaw drivers thus highlight the multi-dimensional and multi-directional nature of urbanisation and rob the city of its fixity and boundedness.

Chapter 7 paid specific attention to the temporal unfixities that characterise the presence of the rickshaw in Dhaka. The rickshaw has long been framed as an urban feature that will “soon” be part of the past, but it has nonetheless persisted and evolved

over the years. This becomes especially clear from the development of the electric rickshaw. Even though the electric rickshaw has brought about significant change in the lives of especially older, disabled or female rickshaw pullers, it has not been viewed as a potential agent of change for the future. Instead, it has been actively banned from Dhaka city. The extent to which certain expressions of novelty and technological change are recognised, encouraged or projected into the future depends on the way in which temporal politics play out. The example of the electric rickshaw shows that innovation, far from being an organic or even self-propelled technological process, is intimately tied to the ways in which politicians, planners and visionaries try to map out and fix trajectories of change and modernisation. We have seen that, in the context of Dhaka, such visions for a modern urban future become manifest through discursive, political and spatial articulations of an “epochal break with the past”. What really create a radical break with the existing city are urban plans and project, such as blocks of high rises, elevated flyovers and the “Purbachal Smart City”, framed as signs of newness, progress and development. Moreover, frequent references to cities like Shanghai imply that there is a more or less fixed trajectory towards urban modernity that Dhaka can simply emulate. In order to move beyond such linear and progressivist notions of urban modernity, I argue, we need to pay attention to the “politics of newness”. This form of temporal politics gains shape as epochal distinctions between pastness and newness are articulated, mobilised and politicised to herald the advent of “new times” and to privilege certain directions of change over others. The case of the electric rickshaw provides an example of how directions of change are actively cut off and obstructed. At the same time, we have seen that the electric rickshaw, although excluded from roadmaps to the future, does fuel insidious, non-epochal forms of change. I have argued that paying attention to such tentative forms of change and not-yet-mobilised expressions of novelty helps to denaturalise hegemonic ideas of history as a continuous and self-propelled flow of gradual and inevitable progress.

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Throughout the chapters of this thesis I have paid attention to the temporal and spatial unfixities that become manifest in the working lives of rickshaw drivers, in an attempt to highlight those aspects of urban life that do not gravitate towards fixity or stability. I have also shown how policies and politics intervene in these unstable urban realities,

focusing on attempts to fix the city by making “precise identifications of space, problems, or populations” (Simone 2010, 11). At the same time, I have argued that constellations of power often work simultaneously to fix and unfix the city, considering that urban governance in Bangladesh is very much embedded in networks of clientelism and state-party patronage. This becomes clear from the distribution of rickshaw licenses, the surveillance of the diplomatic zone and the persistent presence of the electric rickshaw in certain pockets of the city: examples that all highlight the strategic distribution of (il)legitimacy by state-affiliated actors. Accordingly, there is an epistemological danger in assuming that formal systems are stable and coherent configurations that are consistent in their attempts to plan and fix the city. Similarly, it is a mistake to assume that only state-affiliated actors can engage in these efforts. Indeed, some of the most “successful” attempts at formalisation, legibilisation and beautification in Dhaka were made by the housing associations of the diplomatic zone. By emphasising that state-power does not necessarily work through a logic of legibility, I have tried to push back against the idea that the lack of legibility that characterises large, brimming, expectant cities like Dhaka is somehow indicative of an untameable spontaneity that resists attempts at governance. Instead, I would argue that this lack of legibility is indicative of configurations of power that do not necessarily work towards a definitive “spatial fix”. The need to unfix the city thus also applies to the power configurations that ostensibly hold it together and tie it down.

Speculations for the Future

The different chapters of this dissertation have all underscored the argument that the working lives of rickshaw drivers constitute a way of being in the city that is neither territorially nor temporally fixed. The question that remains is how these unfixities may shape our approach to the urban future, beyond highlighting its uncertainty. However, before I turn to the questions of the urban future and the future of the rickshaw, let me suggest a few directions for future research. In the introduction of this thesis, I wrote that I wanted to challenge the idea that there are certain default urban spaces where urban exclusion can be studied. My first research project in Dhaka focused on a major slum settlement and I have by no means been the only scholar to seek out the slum as an obvious place for urban ethnographic research in Dhaka

(Bertuzzo 2016, Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012; Hossain 2012; Khan 2000; Rashid 2007). Whereas such slum and neighbourhood studies help to highlight the inequalities of access to housing, infrastructure and health, it is also important to attend to how the dynamics of urban exclusion transcend the boundaries of the slum and the city. Paying attention to urban mobilities is one way to move our understanding of poverty and inequality in growing South Asian cities beyond the “spatial fix” of the slum (Arabindoo 2011, 643), not least because mobilities always connect multiple scales of the urban (Sopranzetti 2019, 117). Indeed, throughout this thesis we have seen how rickshaw mobilities connect the everyday realities of traffic to rural-urban trajectories of labour and wider contestations over Dhaka’s urban future. In addition, a focus on mobility and circulation can help to challenge the directionality of urbanisation. Cities like Dhaka are often solely represented through the lens of mass-urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration and there is a need to further explore the importance of urban-to-rural flows. For instance, what are the experiences of women who have been sent back to the countryside due to increasing urban living costs, while their husbands continue to work in Dhaka? More generally, we need to pay greater attention to the extension of urban realities beyond the boundaries of the city. Although urban anthropology has come a long way in abandoning its “spatial fix”, and no longer approaches the urban context as a mere research location, we still need to broaden our view of what this “urban context” is and where it can be found. This question thus provides an interesting methodological and epistemological challenge for future urban ethnographic research.

As to the future of the rickshaw: without being too eager to predict its course, let me briefly address some of the factors that may play a role in this. First, the continued presence of the rickshaw in Dhaka will inevitably depend on the popularity of other transportation services. Since I started my research, companies like Uber and Pathao have advanced into Dhaka city and are increasingly changing the transportation sector by offering (motorcycle) taxi services. The long-awaited metro-rail can similarly be expected to change commuting behaviour. However, it remains to be seen to what extent these services will diminish the importance of the rickshaw in providing more ad-hoc and short-distance journeys. In cities elsewhere in Bangladesh, short distance trips are also increasingly provided by easy-bikes or electric rickshaws. Although these forms of transport are officially prohibited in Dhaka city, we have seen that many rickshaw drivers are happy to switch to an electric rickshaw if granted the opportunity.

Hence, restrictions notwithstanding, there seems to be at least a potential future wherein the cycle rickshaw gradually makes way for an electric version of itself.

Other factors that may determine the future of the rickshaw are wage increases in the countryside and opportunities for international migration. I have spoken to rickshaw owners who claimed that the number of rickshaw drivers in their garage was declining due to these trends. At the same time, we have seen that neither migration nor agricultural labour offers a particularly secure or definitive avenue of employment. Indeed, both failed migration efforts and ecological emergencies in the countryside were among the reasons why people continued to (re)turn to the rickshaw industry. Finally, the ongoing implementation of VIP roads is also bound to shape the future of the rickshaw, considering that these restrictions have unmistakably led to employment displacement (HDRC 2004; Bari and Efrogmson 2005; World Bank 2007). However, if there is one thing to take away from the saga of the rickshaw in Dhaka, it is that the rickshaw has persisted against all odds and despite restrictions for a long time now. The idea that the rickshaw will inevitably become a relic of the past, is therefore both premature and unsupported by the facts.

The question also arises whether the rickshaw *should* have future in Dhaka. It is not difficult to make this case, considering that the rickshaw provides a non-polluting form of door-to-door transport that is indispensable to school-going children, women, senior citizens and people with disabilities. Policies however seem to be increasingly aimed at cutting up this form of door-to-door transport, in order to transform it into a means for neighbourhood circulation only. Such policies not only disregard the needs of passengers and the open-ended logic of rickshaw journeys, they also inevitably lead to employment displacement among rickshaw drivers. It is often suggested that this negative effect could be counteracted by rehabilitating rickshaw drivers into different jobs. This suggestion, however, derives from a gross misunderstanding of what it is that draws rickshaw pullers to this form of work in the first place. Throughout this thesis we have seen that many men turn to the rickshaw industry, precisely because other avenues of employment fail or prove to be unsustainable. Moreover, the fact that rehabilitation or resettlement plans, such as Ghore Phera, usually involve some kind of micro-credit scheme should be a further cause for concern. Indeed, we have seen that such loans do not necessarily lead to lasting entrepreneurial success, but often render poor people vulnerable to processes of financialisation, debt accumulation and lost investments (Banerjee and Jackson 2017). What is important to bear in mind is that

rickshaw restrictions do not necessarily rob people of a job; they rob people of a “stable site of return” amidst financial, entrepreneurial and ecological vulnerabilities. Many of these vulnerabilities, moreover, are bound to intensify in the near future, due to the climate crisis. The rickshaw industry has long helped poor people to cope with these vulnerabilities and that – in and of itself – should be a sufficient reason to keep the wheels of the rickshaw going, at least for the foreseeable future.

None of this is necessarily an endorsement of the rickshaw as a “green vehicle for the future”. In fact, it is my hope that there will come a point in time when rickshaw drivers no longer have to rely on such backbreaking forms of work. I am also wary of the fact that declarations of sustainable urban futures increasingly harbour the same kind of linear teleology as do notions of modernity. There may lie a political potency in such messaging, but I think we should resist the appeal to leapfrog into the future. So, how should we approach the urban future? One potential starting point might be to focus on the painful yet dedicated practices through which real-life people push themselves ahead. In this thesis we have seen that such practices do not necessarily work towards a fixed point in the future. Rather they pull away from certain undesirable conditions in the present. If we want to divest the urban future of hollow prophecies of progress, we need to pay closer attention to the momentum that gains shape as people propel themselves away from scarcity. I would argue that highlighting this momentum is far more important than providing a roadmap for the urban future. What’s more, the unfixed and diffuse efforts through which rickshaw drivers push themselves ahead and make a living provide us with a poignant reminder that we should not naively project the temporal dialectic of dissatisfaction and hope onto the spaces and territories of the city. Rather, we should start our speculations for the urban future by looking at the ways in which urban dwellers, day in, day out, “keep the wheels turning”.

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