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Figure 1 Synoptic view from front of ricksha. Dhaka, February 1982.

The title of this article is prompted by my desire to think about the painted cycle ricksha (or pedicab) of Bangladesh as a master symbol of theatrical culture display in the streets.¹ I have therefore used "culture" instead of "cultural" theater to indicate the holistic scope of this symbol, as opposed to the particularity that the adjective "cultural" implies. To borrow a term from Szombati-Fabian and Fabian (1976), the Bangladesh ricksha is a "totalizing symbol," for the exegesis of its forms, functions, and decoration must incorporate a layering of central values and their contradictions within it. Conceivably, the painted decora-

tions of Pakistani and Afghan trucks, of the Djakarta *becak*, or of other modes of decorated transport in the Third World, where most of these phenomena are occurring, might also figure in a similar analysis. It is to be hoped that the scholarship recently being done on these manifestations will soon provide a basis for comparison and the production of new insights about vernacular transport signs and symbols² (Blanc 1976; Claridge 1977; Müller 1976; Purdy 1975; Rich 1980).

After presenting the necessary background material, I shall undertake a discussion of ricksha art in terms of Barthesian semiotics, ending with a consideration of theatricality as an aspect of the overall signification of the ricksha (see Barthes 1967, 1972a and b; Burns 1972; Eco 1976; Fried 1980; Kirby 1982; Krysinski 1982).

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The Ricksha

Synoptically, the cycle ricksha (Figure 1) is a conveyance for people (or things) which consists of a passenger seat with back- and armrests, a platform for the feet below the seat, the whole mounted upon a frame supported by three bicycle wheels; a driver's saddle and handlebars; and requisite cycle machinery to propel the vehicle by the force of the driver's pumping legs. An umbrellalike hood is attached near the armrests. It pulls up and over the passenger or, collapsing like an umbrella, pushes down behind the passenger seat.

Ricksha painters locate decorative elements on the following areas: the frame undercarriage; the upholstery of the passenger seat; the area behind the passenger's legs (above the footboard and below the seat); on the footboard; on the curved rear end of the vehicle; and on the separately prepared rectangular picture hanging below the rear between the two wheels. Abstract florals and/or geometrics cover the frame and often intersperse between figural areas, and figural (or figurative) matter fills the upholstered seat-back area and the rectangular picture behind. Figurals may also appear on the rear of the ricksha above the wheels. Little shieldlike doodads attached above the wheels at the rear may also be painted with figural, abstract, or combined designs as well as adverts, such as the name of the shop where the vehicle was decorated or made.

Designs on the hood are usually abstract/floral or geometrics, often rows of medallions combining, say, a full rose inside a star and crescent. The rear panels of the hood, less frequently, may also show a full-length human portrait of a culture hero such as a movie star or, to cite a rare one, the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Hood ornamentations, sewn appliqué made by men using foot-pedal sewing machines, are formed of colored and glittery plastic materials. Artwork on footboards consists usually of nailhead designs, geometric and/or curvilinear.

Decoration

As this article mainly addresses itself to the figurative paintings on the rickshas, some pertinent sociological aspects of their decoration should be considered. First, ricksha art is made by ordinary people, not elites, for ordinary audiences. As a Bangladesh writer put it,

They [the paintings] have no chance to be exhibited in a hall and they do not get any recognition, but for the common people they are Picasso, Dali, Zainul Abedin.³ [Chaudhuri 1979:43; translated from the Bengali]

The art is of the street and the bazaar. It is not produced for consumption as separate from the vehicles whose decoration it serves.⁴ (One does observe advertising on rickshas here and there, but minimally in relation to the whole.)

Second, the paintings are art. That is, they are made by people who consider themselves engaged in an aesthetic activity involving cycle rickshas. They usually sign their work, and they may be specialists in ricksha painting⁵ (Figures 2 and 3). They create expressive, figurative representations on the surfaces of the vehicle. Some of the decoration is abstractly ornamental, often repetitive, pattern which fills in certain marginal spaces; much of it is deliberately representational and deliberately selected as to thematic material.

Third, the motif vocabulary of ricksha art has been strongly affected by the technological modernization process occurring in the Third World in general, and in South Asia in particular, since the closing decades of the nineteenth century but especially in the early twentieth century. Motifs include specific technical fascinations such as airplanes, steamships, trains, motor cars, trucks, and buses—recently even vans.⁶ One finds, as well, commercial lettering of various styles giving the names of ricksha shop owners, and features of framing motifs and context juxtapositions which may stem from those of chromolith art.⁷ The latter became popular in South Asia by the turn of the century. (By the 1930s, for example, chromolithography had driven out the Kalighat school of folk art produced by artists at the Calcutta Kalighat temple; see W. C. Archer 1971.)

While ricksha artists responded to the impact of modernization, their work did not spring full blown from the head of the Muse of Science and Industry. Indeed, there is evidence to support the notion that this art is closely related to, if not directly descended from, nineteenth-century manifestations of ritual and popular arts in Bengal. To mention a major folk source first, scroll painting was practiced by various artisan castes among both Bengalis and tribals of Bengal, some of whom were known as *paṭas*, or makers of *paṭ* (painted scrolls). These were unrolled and displayed while the artist recited secular or sacred texts or songs (see Bhattacharjee 1980; Dutta 1932, 1933; Mitra 1953). It is known that in the past fifty years or so, the *paṭas* have been drifting out of their *paṭ* occupations because of political forces (Muslim-Hindu antipathies) as well as competition from the movies.

Besides a background in traditional *paṭ* art, ricksha art shows affinities in some subject matter to the "Company Art" of the British Indian period (18th–19th centuries; see M. Archer 1977; Welch 1978). Post-Moghul art in India was strongly affected by the broad circulation in the market of British picture books that



Figure 2 Abdul Latif, painter, holds a painted panel for a seat back, showing animal fable-type matter popular at this period. Dhaka, February 1978.

Figure 3 Famous painter of rickshas, R. K. Das, in his studio. Movie poster inspirations appear on the wall. Dhaka, February 1982.



emphasized a “natural history” approach to elements in the daily life of India, such as caste occupations, modes of transport, dancing girls or courtesans alone or with patrons, glamorous architecture, flora and fauna. Another popular technique was glass painting, which tended to specialize in beautiful ladies or gods and goddesses. And finally, another form which genetically precedes the ricksha paintings is the Kalighat art of the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century in Bengal. In common with *paṭ* scrolls, Kalighat art featured gods and goddesses. In common with glass paintings (and the later ricksha pictures) it also depicted courtesans and contemporary secular concerns, such as the famous Tarakeshwar murder case (see W. C. Archer 1971; Morinis 1982).

Appreciated by the *ordinari lok* (as one artist put it in half-English, half-Bengali), the paintings are ignored or rarely noticed by the gentry (*bhadralok*). The gentry consider the paintings vulgar; for them “art” means “fine art,” such as the paintings of the late Zainul Abedin. Whereas the term for fine artist in Bengali is *silpacharya*, Sanskrit for “a master of Art,” ricksha artists are referred to or call themselves *mistri* (craftsman), or *artist* or *penṭar*, Bengalizing the English terms.

The artist’s work is constructed according to certain stylistic conventions of form and subject matter, models of which are found in mass-produced media—film magazines or posters, children’s books, and calendars both Bengali and Western. The paintings have also displayed significant responsiveness to current events that stimulate public consciousness.

Painted Themes, Perennial and Topical



The artists do not simply copy the various sources of their subject matter; the material they adapt is reorganized to suit their medium. There are two main locations of pictures on the vehicle: on the upholstered seat-back and on the rectangular-shaped piece of thin metal sheeting which is attached to the rear bottom edge of the back of the vehicle, between the two rear wheels. This picture is the main ornament on the rear; the seat-back painting, the main attraction from the frontal view. Artists work with brushes and oil or enamel paints. (There are several other decorative crafts involved in the makeup of a ricksha, but they are not considered here.)

It is important to note that not all the rickshas in any large town are decorated. I estimate that about thirty percent remain quite plain. Indeed, whether or not to decorate is an issue caught up in the crossfires of tension between political factions of secularists and Islamites, a point I shall return to.

The question of thematic material must now be addressed. The themes are usually selected by the ricksha owners, not the drivers who are young, strong, but poor men from the villages. They barely earn enough to feed themselves, much less a family.⁸ Ricksha owners, or *maliks* (Figure 4), discuss their

Figure 4 Mohammad, driver, holds handlebars of his ricksha. He is also a *malik*, as owner of this one vehicle. The heavily decorated hood is in fully opened "up" position. Note medallions and filmy curtains. Dhaka, February 1982.

Figure 5 Atrocity scene: ► mutilated victims (faintly visible) in upper left quarter of picture. Dhaka, 1972. Photograph by Geraldine Forbes.

decoration program for a new ricksha, or the redecoration of an old one, with the artists. Occasionally a *malik* will simply suggest that the artist choose the images; or he will hand him a movie poster and ask that it be used as a model. He may ask for a jungle scene, a city scene, a village scene, a Taj Mahal, a people picture, and so on. These themes are categories for which the artists I interviewed used descriptive terms in Bengali.⁹ Themes of seeming perennial interest, whose deployment may vary over time, include country animals in a village setting; village houses near pond or river; country boats; beautiful women; various kinds of traditional and modern transport; fantastic cityscapes with contrasting storeyed buildings and more traditional architecture. Cityscapes may include shining elevated roadways backed by towering waterfalls in the distance.

Topical interests are especially visible in relation to political swings within the country. The horrendous impact of the liberation war with Pakistan (1971–1972) and the establishment of the independent country of Bangladesh was first evident in the warfare and atrocity paintings (Figure 5). These depicted Pakistani soldiers bayoneting men and women and ripping off the clothes of women before the eyes of their fallen male relatives. Juxtaposed within some atrocity paintings of the crime was also the punishment, the revenge on the Paki soldiers by the Bengali freedom fighters. (Artists referred to this thematic material as *mukti jodha* or *mukti bahini*, "freedom fighter images.") After the access to national leadership (1972) of the hero of liberation, Mujib ur Rahman, the municipality of Dhaka city, the capital, banned the painting of atrocity scenes. By 1975 few of them could be found except in Old Dhaka. Moreover, interest in the theme had died out, to be replaced by the perennial themes noted above, including beautiful women portrayed as temptresses or victims (Figures 6 and 7). Artists were also beginning to favor the jungle scene (*jungal sin*), or animals leering and snarling at each other across a body of water (Figure 8), an image that forms a perfect metaphor for the state of human relations in an economy of extreme scarcity, where people must suffer the harshness of routine conflict over the most basic resources for survival. I call it the "waterhole scene"



(see Bertocci 1977 on envy and the image of limited good in Bangladesh).

In the Pakistan period (pre-1971), so some of my informants report, beautiful women images were taboo on rickshas, a situation which was reversed during the civil secularism in force after the accession of Mujib in 1972.¹⁰ After his assassination in 1975, official policies began to favor friendship with Pakistan and more Islamic postures in the body politic. By 1976, therefore, images of beautiful women had begun to be more rare, while those remaining were subject to attack from iconophobes bent on scratching out the faces (Figure 9). By 1978 human images had disappeared from the ricksha paintings in Dhaka, prohibited by the municipal authorities. This period marked the peak of a swing toward public Islamic Pieties and political Islamicization¹¹ (Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13).

In response, artists painted more varied "animal fable" (Figures 12 and 14) images—animals dressed and behaving like people in both comical or sinister action. There was also a surge of Islamic themes: images of Taj Mahals or mosques, Al Burak (see Figure 10), or scenes from Aladdin-type movies (see Figure 11). The craze of this time, however, was exotic bird images—fantastically feathered creatures flapping and bowing in multiples or executing *pas de deux* in the moonlight (Figure 13). Indeed, the painters had succeeded, by the proliferation of lovebirds all over town, in suggesting one of their heartfelt preoccupations, erotic love, without transgressing the taboo on human figures. Their other favorite obsession, violence, was expressed in many of the animal fable images (see, e.g., Figure 12).

This last interest, somewhat on the wane in the 1970s, emerged again in the cinema-inspired images of the 1980s. One could see about town the heads of pet movie stars like Razzak and Bobita in the same frame, he with bandaged brow dripping blood, she insouciant under the English picture hat.

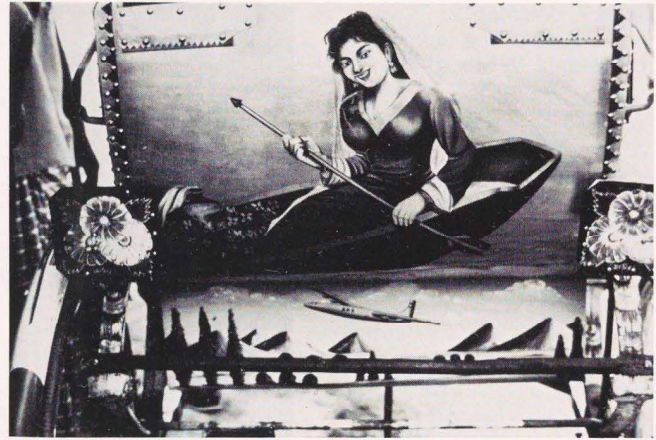


Figure 6 Woman as temptress. Rajshahi, Winter 1976.

Previously portrayed only as temptresses or victims, female images in 1982 posed the innovation of female dominance: for example, Sultana Daku in black, nail-studded mask, blue skin-tight jumpsuit, and black leather boots, brandishing guns; a heroine with decorously veiled hair (not face) thrusting forward an upraised sword; or another holding crossed daggers in her hands. A daring example of womanly swagger and cool shows the modernistically coiffed heroine lighting a cigarette, while behind her a man fires a pistol and an oncoming train hurtles toward the edge of a broken trestle. These recent painted examples of female dominance, I suggest, are further significations of the male erotic impulse, which, forced into suppression much of the time by the seclusion and the sacredness, amounting to taboo, of women not related to the male by kinship, erupt as the reverse of male sadistic eroticism. Just as, psychologically, every "crime" must have its punishment, so the ambivalent fear of and desire for erotically and socially suppressed women finds its danger-woman imagery in the films and paintings. (One is reminded of the famous Mummy Wata of West African popular art, another type of potent danger-woman; see Szombati-Fabian and Fabian, 1976; Salmons 1977.)

The return to popularity of movie material showing *manuser citra*, or people pictures, some time after 1978, which seems to have been the peak of Islamicization after the death of Mujib, was the result of the basically secularistic policies of the next national leader, General (then President) Zia ur Rahman (in power 1975–1981). Despite great political pressure from the Islamite factions, for example, Zia resisted the renaming of Bangladesh as "The Islamic Republic of Bangladesh." As was the case under his predecessor, Mujib, artists did not stint in representing sexy women and men in scenes from currently popular Bangladeshi or Indian films (Figures 15, 16, and 17).

Figure 7 Woman as victim; rural scene below it. Rajshahi, Winter 1976.

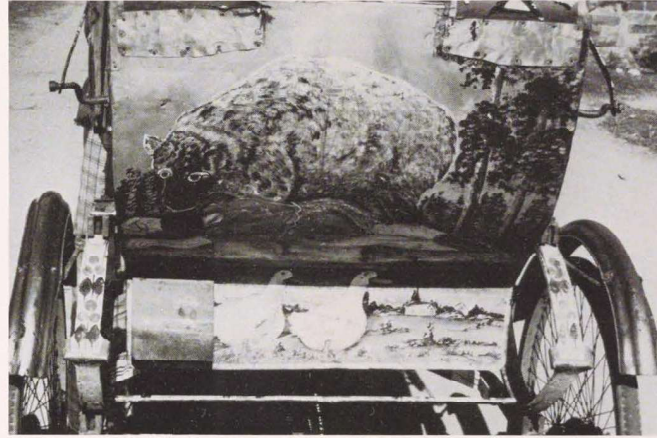


Figure 8 "Waterhole scene" (*jangler sin*) is more realistic in style in 1976; in 1982, it is less realistic, more stereotypic and fantastic—but still somewhat popular.



Figure 9 During the Islamicization period, human faces in painting were often scratched out. Below is a scene of air transport, very popular at this time. Rajshahi, Winter 1976.

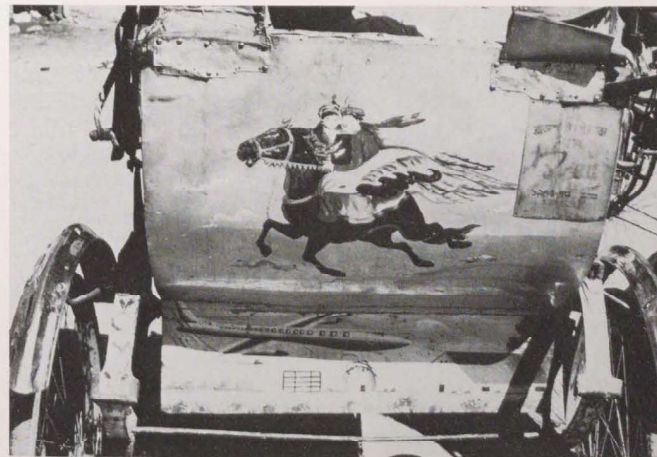


Figure 10 Al Burak. Dhaka, February 1978. This motif was popular at the time, whereas it was not seen in photographs taken in 1972, 1976, or 1982.

Figure 11 Photographed during height of political Islamicization, February 1978. Women, normally banned as subject matter, are seen here as *paris* (angels) with Genie. From a movie.

Figure 12 Animal fable by Abdul Latif. Dhaka, February 1978.

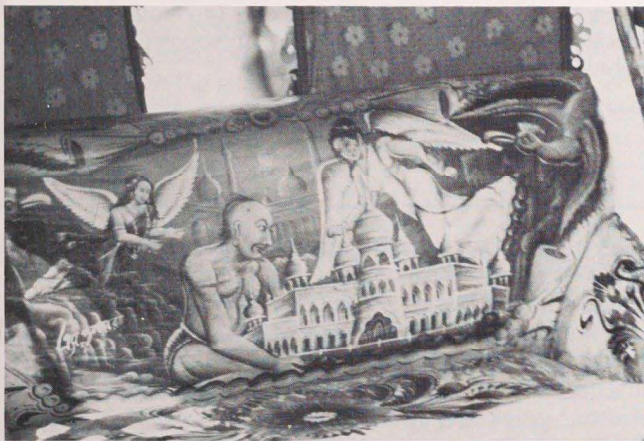
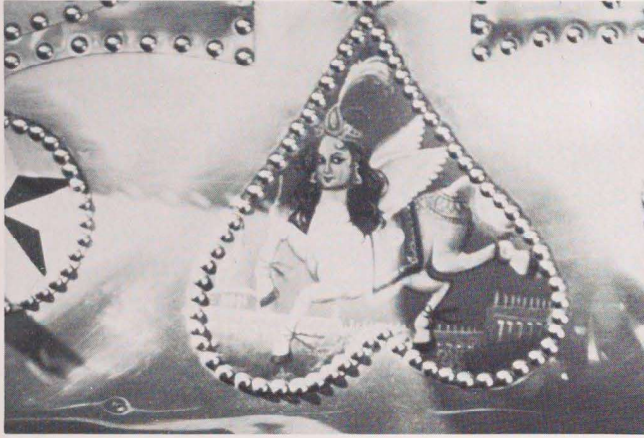


Figure 13 Overdetermination of bird motifs at a time when pictures of people (*manusher sin*) were banned—the most popular figurative material in Dhaka in this period. Dhaka, February 1978.





Figure 14 Animal fable-type. This kind of subject was rare in 1975–1976 but significant in 1978. Rajshahi, Winter 1976.



Figure 15 The rear rectangular picture. The material is from movies, with woman as temptress, man boggled. Dhaka, February 1982.

Signification in the Ricksha Paintings

Semiotic interpretation of this vernacular art enables the ethnologist to take account of the duality implicit in ethnographic and ethnological discourse. The distinction between emics and etics can be located in the discourses about signifiers and signifieds; that is, it was possible to elicit a short list of native terms for subject matter in the paintings, just as it was also possible to record the views of artists and owners about the imagery. It is when one attempts the more general and also more abstract task of writing about the significations in the art that, following Barthes, one moves away from the emics/etics dichotomy. Inferences about signification place one in the realm of privileged interpretation available to the analyst who has access to a large fund of information about the culture and its history which is not available to native informants, yet which is also not recognized as universal discourse. Moreover, this material is embodied in “experience-distant” language, to quote Geertz (1977:481–482) quoting Kohut. Such discourse is alien to both producers and consumers of the art, for the most part. Yet, since there is no universally accepted methodology of the interpretive task, it cannot be placed under the rubric of etics. It is something else. Having paid this homage to ethnoscience, and suggesting that Geertz’s “thick description” is analogous to the concept in semiotics of signification (at least as Barthes used it), I will produce some exam-

ples of the signification-generating process in respect to ricksha art.

Let me turn first to some remarks made by an insightful Bengali writer who interviewed artists and others about their works. In reviewing the multivarious imagery and its colorfulness, Chaudhuri says in the *Robbar* article: *Ja jibone chai, tai party chai* (1979:45). That is, “whatever the owner or the artist might want in life, he wants a party!”¹² Chaudhuri (*ibid.*, p. 44) summed up the broadest inference from the paintings similarly to the way I did, independently, after a field visit in 1978:¹³ that the images are expressions of the common man’s *icche puran*, literally “old desires,” or what I called his “heart’s desires” (Kirkpatrick 1980, 1981, 1982a and b).

Chaudhuri’s process of exegesis was privileged from his position as a native speaker and an intellectual in Bangladesh; mine is privileged or biased somewhat differently through amplified access to the data from such areas as history, political economy, sociology, and anthropology, discourses unavailable to common people (*chhoto lok*) or Bengali intellectuals alike in the ways that they are available to me. My working with significations went something like this: “Why are birds so popular these days?” I asked some artists in 1978. “Well, they seem inoffensive enough,” was the reply. Or “They are the newest trend,” said another. What these two statements are



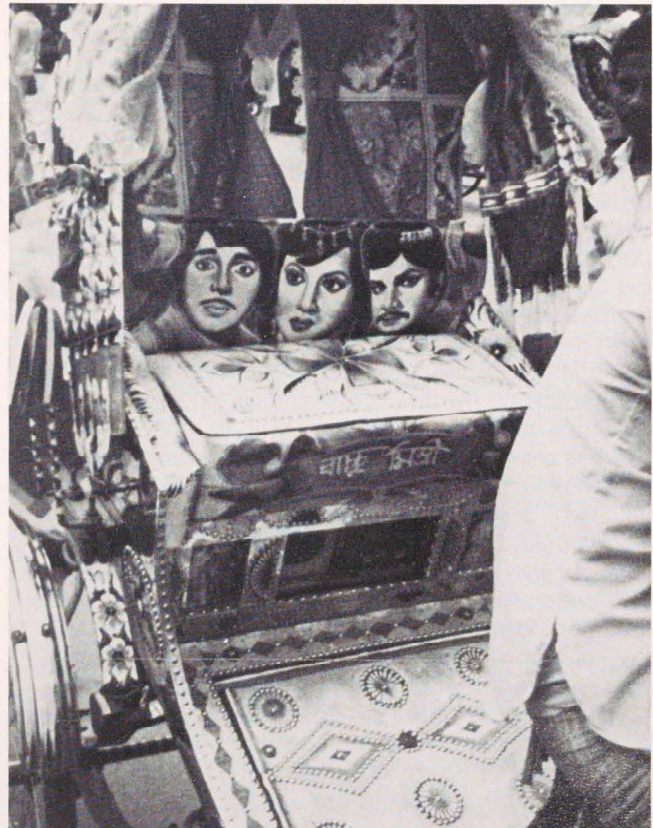
Figure 16 Such intimate scenes rarely appear except on seat backs. Material from movies. Note transistor radio inserted below the seat. This is a “disco ricksha.” The woman is portrayed as temptress, the man as victim. Dhaka, February 1982.

also saying is, “They are safe” and “We like new things.” Where does one go from this? One can search the history of the animal fable and realize that it is implicitly political: it embodies cultural criticism or the officially unsayable. And in South Asia the history of erotic significations of the bird-pair as image in the arts is long, as is the history of the river image, which represents flawed life, *samsara*, the struggle to appease our desires (e.g., the waterhole scenes).

So, one thinks about birds billing and cooing on rickshas at a time when human images are forbidden; one thinks about animals-dressed-as-people about to whip a prisoner animal in a courtroom where the lion is judge. Or one muses about animals, depicted as animals not people, snarling at each other across a river-body of water or attacking each other in it, and the significations come into focus.

Indeed, the images which figure most ambivalently in the society, depending on political conditions—that is, images representing eroticism and sadistic violence—are summoned from the male cultural nexus: in Barthes’ term (1967), the *doxa* of males. In this value set, virtuous women are not supposed to be seen in public unveiled or uncovered, not supposed to be either erotic or violent (although they must be sexual, and therefore taboo, in order to fulfill their principal social functions of rearing children and serving men). As already noted, when Islamicization dominated public policy in Dhaka, the erotic and violent images of human beings were suppressed, only to

Figure 17 Elaborate décor. Material from movies. “Disco ricksha.” Note nailhead work on footboard. Dhaka, February 1982.



surface in disguise, masked as lovebirds or animal fables.

As Yeats wrote, “Virtue is theatrical . . . the wearing of a mask.” Thus, the imagery of “officially safe” fantasies, like golden Bengal (Figures 18 and 19), waterhole scenes (see Figure 8), and scenic cityscapes, persists over time as content in the paintings. The noticeable shifts in themes occur around the suppression, or expression, of “officially taboo” imagery of sex and human violence, apparent or disguised.

The Ricksha as Totalizing Sign/Symbol and Theatricality

The previous discussion serves to introduce the question of theatricality in relation to the decoration of the Bangladesh ricksha. As the black-and-white illustrations intimate (only color reproductions could fully bear out the point), the ricksha can be a gorgeous wonder to behold. It is Eco's overcoding (1976) with a vengeance. The painted ricksha collates within and upon its form a myriad of culturally significant signs and symbols that sum up major values within the popular culture, while perversely, perhaps, summoning up some basic contradictions as well. In a sense, the decorated ricksha is a materialized myth, for like myth it not only embodies some fundamental contradictions but appears to resolve them as well. Yet the contradictions remain, causing shifts in some of the ricksha's shining apparel from time to time.

What are these fundamental values conglomerated on the ricksha? One might say, at bottom they are the values of desire—of love of the land or *sonar Bangladesh* (golden Bangladesh): rural landscapes; love of one's village origins and the homestead: cows and thatched houses; love of river life: country boats; love of modern excitement: fast trains, cars, buses, trucks, planes, elaborate modernistic city structures with elevated highways; love of the male struggle over resources: waterhole scenes; love of violence: atrocity scenes, animal fable torture scenes, dinosaur battles; love of Islam: Al Burak, Taj Mahal scenes, crescents and stars, and the absence of decoration

... the *blank* ricksha (roughly, thirty percent of any flock of rickshas seen on any busy street).

If there is a difference in content between the rear *chobi* (picture) and the picture on the seat back, it is most likely to bear out a distinction important in the culture, that between outside and inside. In this case, the distinction translates into that between outer world and inner feelings. Thus, at least in 1982, sexy movie star images were more often found inside the rick on the seat backs (see Figure 16) and less so on the main rear picture, where, instead, one finds such images as bird scenes, village scenes, waterhole scenes, Taj Mahals. Some rickshas show the same picture on both seat back and the rear *chobi*, but then both tend not to involve the risqué.

Finally, additional decorations of the doodad sort, such as brightly colored plastic flowers in little brass vases between the handlebars and plastic streamers, plus touches of gold and silver here and there and tinselly, lacy effects on the hood, make of the gorgeous rickshas something of a traveling boudoir (see Figure 4), a little nest for bazaar cruisers in the twilight hours, just going around enjoying the sights and sounds of the city. (When two ride in a ricksha, they are tightly squeezed together in the smallish seats.)

While not all the painted rickshas are marvels of rococo splendor, about seventy percent are theatrical in the ensemble of visual displays. Such overcoding of their decorative elements could not be accounted for better than by Barthes, who wrote once that "Theatricality is theater-minus-text . . ." (1972b:26). It is ironic

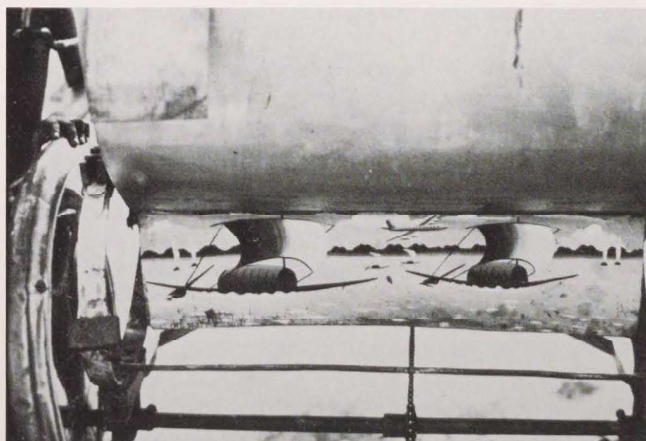


Figure 18 Country boats, airplane. This subject virtually vanished by 1982, except on the city-village-city motor taxis. Rajshahi, Winter 1976.



Figure 19 Nineteen-eighties version of scenic countryside, usually found on 3-wheel elongated motor taxis which ply between villages and city. Above the picture, a checked garment of a rider is visible. Dhaka, February 1982.

that his concept of theatricality as a "density of signs," as "informational polyphony," and of theater as a "cybernetic machine" (1972b:261–262) is possibly more applicable to these rickshas than to the dramatic texts Barthes was writing about (see, e.g., Krynski 1982:4).¹⁴ In short, the visual effects of painted rickshas on the streets of large towns such as Dhaka or Chittagong blatantly stand out from the drabness of their settings, creating an analogous distinction between themselves and spectators or audience. As in Michael Fried's thesis (1980) on absorption and theatricality in art, the ricksha as its decorations and *in* its functions theatrically installs a gap between spectator and object. In a culture where the public expression of the desire in men's hearts is normatively taboo, the painted ricksha theatrically violates the taboo without implicating the spectator who, because of the extremism of imagery, can either ignore or be amused by it. Nor is the rider in one implicated either. Snugly set into the seat, with the hood pulled forward so that one's form is recessed into dimness, one cannot see one's own ricksha, only the back of the toiling driver. Meanwhile, the rider enjoys an excellent view of the other rickshas, if inclined to look at them. Theatricality, as it were, here proposes the opposite to the process Barthes referred to as *naturalization* in his *Mythologies*—mystification—and that is precisely what overcoding of extremist imagery performs as a flaunting of certain deeply felt values which oppose official values. Theatricality implies innocence in enjoyment.

To conclude, in a setting like Bangladesh, where public display of appetitive temptations and sensuality are strongly discouraged by cultural beliefs and social values, and in towns where the streetscapes present a drabness, a dusty asceticism of eyes and skin (those interfaces between outside and inside), and a grinding poverty of means, the gaily colored, image-laden ricksha "flares forth" (like Kenneth Burke's *nova*: 1966:242), a theatrical spectacle of values both public and private, outside and inside. In a culture where the official ideology is antitheater,¹⁵ the painted ricksha is a set of moving pictures in the streets which, unlike the movies, people need not pay to see.

Notes

- 1 Fieldwork was conducted in Bangladesh, in September 1975–August 1976, winter 1978, and winter 1982. My grateful acknowledgment of assistance with translating from the Bengali to my friend and colleague in culture criticism, Mrs. Jahanara Begam.
- 2 By "vernacular" I mean artifacts whose technologies are not entirely embedded in the industrial manufacturing nexus, and which require significant inputs of handicraft techniques and materials. Like other common terms, "folk" and "popular," it is somewhat imprecise. Our typologies do not necessarily fit the cross-cultural data, nor are there always emic terms to employ usefully.
- 3 The late Zainul Abedin was Bangladesh's most famous fine artist, many of whose paintings have passed into international collections.
- 4 In 1982 I noticed that seat upholstery was being sold separately, already painted, all pieces assembled into one roll. Dhaka shops that specialized in the fabric used for seat covers, awnings, etc., stocked a few such "kits" and also sold the painted seat-back pieces as single items.
- 5 Occupational specialization in ricksha painting had increased in frequency between 1975 and 1982 in upcountry Rajshahi, and it had already been well established in the capital, Dhaka, by the mid-1970s.
- 6 The earliest sign of this sort of popular painting that I have been able to locate in the literature is found in Hsu (1948). While doing fieldwork in Kuming, in southern China, in the early 1940s, Hsu found that local craftsmen engaged to decorate the new mansions of the rich had painted "modern buildings similar to those . . . seen in Shanghai or Hongkong during the 19th century, or modern means of transportation—the train, the steamer, and the aeroplane" (p. 38). He goes on to mention one particular painting which juxtaposed different modes of transport within one plane in the same crazy way one can observe in some ricksha paintings, where one sees trains about to collide, and so on (p. 38). The house owners' motives also appear to be similar to those of the ricksha owners, as "attempts to enhance the owner's prestige" (p. 39). It may be worth noting also that the location of such pictures was as part of the large entryways and gates into the family compound, an area that represents the margins between outside and inside, in this case, between the Chinese family and the ambiguous European influences symbolized by modern technology.
- 7 Both extravagant framing effects, found in many ricksha paintings (and which will figure in another paper I am working on), and a style of juxtaposing images within the same frame may be inspired by procedures which became conventions in chromolithography. Such framing effects are not used in movie posters, but the juxtapositions and cramming of material within one frame are still de rigueur in India and Bangladesh movie posters and cinema hoardings, as they also are in Thailand. See Warren 1983; Marzio 1979.
- 8 In 1976, the year of my first fieldwork in Bangladesh, a ricksha driver earned the equivalent of about \$1.25 per day, with \$1.00 going to the owner. Most drivers are young; one sees very few old men among them, for the work is very hard. In 1976 a ricksha fully equipped cost about \$200; today the cost would be more than double that amount (see Borders 1976).
- 9 E.g., *jungaler sin*, *shaharer sin*, *garamer sin*, *Taj Mahal*, *manusher sin*.
- 10 It has been difficult to ascertain precisely when people started decorating rickshas in Bangladesh. O. H. K. Spate (1954:290) says that in India in 1950 cycle production included "an unusually high proportion of tricycles, mainly for the 'trishaw,' or pedal-bike-cum-side-car, which is replacing the man-pulled rickshaw in some towns."

- 11 It may be worth noting that vital data reported recently by Chowdhury and Langsten (1983) lend support to a thesis asserting the relation between social stress and Islamicization, because infant and adult mortality, and in- and outmigration in a rural area (Companiganj) peaked during both 1975–1976 and 1978. The former was a year of famine, the latter, of serious drought. Moreover, in times of serious stress on mortality, male rates are higher than female. Such a finding puzzles demographers, and anthropologists have some theories about it. In any case, as the religion of Islam is maintained and promoted largely within the custody, social circles, and social practice of men in Bangladesh, one is tempted to infer a significant association between a surge in public piety-political Islamicization and vital threats to males within the sociocultural ecosystem.
- 12 Many English words have found a home in Bengali, including the word "party," which has also been adopted by Hindi. In the streets of Third World countries one finds the craze for the new and gimmicky. In 1982 the password was "disco" (pronounced "dishco"). Anything new, such as the Mickey Mouse watch one shopman showed me, was "disco." A "disco ricksha" was one which had inserted into the board below the seat a transistor radio. One ricksha had the word, in roman letters, "DISCO" written within the design over that same area, although it did not sport a radio. An informant said that radio-rickshas had been popular before the war with Pakistan but that they had not staged a comeback until recently (in the 1980s, most probably). Videotapes smuggled from India with American disco programs on them were passed around in the city, and it seems that "all the bazaar knew" about the latest foreign (*phoren*) thrills.
- 13 Rickshas are decorated not only to attract fares but to enhance the social status of their owners. Moreover, what I consistently saw in the streets was that people wanting to hire a ricksha would signal the one closest to them on the street, bargain with the driver over the fare, and either take it or bargain with the next man who drove up. The appearance of the ricksha does serve to attract tourist riders, however. A few well-off people own their own ricksha. It may have been such a private vehicle that I saw painted with two full-length pictures of Tagore on the rear of the hood (the part that hangs down behind the seat) and a scene of baby Krishna robbing the butter pots on the *chobi*. Indeed, 1982 was the first time I saw Hindu imagery on ricksha paintings in Dhaka.
- 14 Following Barthes further, it is tempting to say that the cycle ricksha at times resembles his view of Brecht's theater, whose role is to "show that the world is an object to be deciphered (this is a theater of the signifier)." At other politically safer times for the artist, art settles into a more conventional theatricality, which transmits "a positive message," i.e., a theater of the signified (Barthes 1972b:263). In the latter instance, the ricksha art more blatantly emphasizes the cinematic affiliations.
- 15 Theater as such has a long history in India, from classical Sanskrit drama to contemporary *jatra* (and other similar forms), of outdoor theater, and also in Bengal as Western-influenced indoor plays since the nineteenth century. In Bangladesh, there are theater groups which put on amateur plays, in private and indoors for the most part. Meanwhile, village *jatras* have declined since the inception of East Pakistan (1947) and then Bangladesh (1971). The official culture, the *doxa*, does not foster folk and popular theater and actively discourages it in the rural areas where it used to flourish. See Alamgir Kabir (1979) for influence of *jatra* on early Dhaka films and audiences.

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