

I'm in awe when I read about cycling treks in the upper reaches of the Himalayas or across the deserts of North Africa, but cities, too, can provide the cyclist with sportive thrills and exotic scenery. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, makes that case as strongly as any place I've ever been on two wheels. Although I am a seasoned cyclist from the streets of New York, cycling in Dhaka's traffic during a recent stay there was decidedly a new adventure. And then some...

TWO WHEELS AGAINST THREE

A New York City Cyclist in
Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1993-1994
By Mary Frances Dunham

Situated in the heart of Bangladesh, Dhaka sits on the banks of one of countless rivers that criss-cross the plains of the Ganges delta. The city stretches from a riverside "Old City" inherited from Moghul times to new residential suburbs in the north with broad avenues and large villas that out-Hollywood Hollywood. In between lies a modern business district flanked by an area of stately buildings and verdant parks laid out in the 19th century for administrative and university use.

Over the past twenty years Dhaka's population has increased seven fold, approaching eight million without a proportionate increase in land area. Although roadways have been enlarged and new ones inserted, they fail to keep up with the

city's ever-burgeoning traffic. "Dhakaites" must struggle not only for space in which to live but for a piece of roadway on which to travel.

Few people care to bicycle in Dhaka. Rather, tricyclists, the "pullers" of pedaled rickshaws, were my fellow competitors for road space. With over 200,000 of them on the streets, Dhaka's rickshaws often consume more than half of the city's central streets, resembling the packed bicycle traffic of Chinese cities. Motorists claim that rickshaws delay traffic, and politicians point to the backward image they project, but they remain a convenient and affordable means of door-to-door transport for non-car-owners.

Built to carry two people on a padded

bench, rickshaws can carry as many as six adult men, stacked like circus acrobats, or they can tote freight weighing almost half a ton. When a rickshaw cyclist gets up momentum, he tends to speed, often missing collisions by half a hair in order to weave ahead through traffic or to keep up with heavier and faster vehicles swirling around a traffic circle. After falling once from a rickshaw that made a sudden swerve, I preferred travelling on the seat of my two-wheeler.

The variety of Dhaka's traffic and its intricate circulation patterns need to be seen to be fully appreciated. Ox-drawn carts, horse-drawn carriages and hand-pushed carts mingle with a multitude of fast-moving vehicles. As well as rickshaws, "baby-taxis" (three-wheeled scooter-cabs) compete for road space with cars, trucks and a variety of buses (ranging from "tempos," three-wheeled scooter buses, to lumbering double-deckers).

Traffic "Jahms"

Differing in size and maneuverability, individual road-users follow paths of their own choosing, snaking around each other as they try to maintain their respective speeds, and moving fearlessly against the current when they find it necessary. Traffic "jahms," complete standstills, occur frequently due to congestion, sometimes so acute that the hubs of neighboring vehicles interlock.

To add to the stress of frequent close encounters, Dhaka's traffic resounds with brassy horns, nagging beeps and ear-searing whistles such as I have only heard there. One kind of noise supplements another in pressuring neighboring street-



PHOTO BY MARY FRANCES DUNHAM

out of the way. Ticket collectors hanging on the outside of buses cry out the names of their destinations in rapid repetitions much like Mozart's "Figaro! Figaro! FEE-garo!" refrain. The siren of an ambulance trapped somewhere in the melee may be heard wailing helplessly for a clear path. Only the ting-a-ling of rickshaw bells adds a gentle obligato to this nerve-grating concert.

I generally cycled on the edge of Dhaka's tangled traffic, staying as alert to irregular traffic behavior as I try to do in New York. This strategy, however, was fraught with its own adventures. I had to circumvent the overflow from sidewalks: pedestrians loitering or on the move, some with heavy loads on their heads, or vendors with their wares spread out on the ground and congregations of rickshaws and baby-taxis waiting for fares near entrances to markets and public buildings. At times I preferred to ride in the wake of trucks and buses that use central lanes rather than deal with complications on roadsides.

Surrealistic Art Galleries

Paintings on the backs of rickshaws provide a gratuitous art gallery, entertaining traffic-weary eyes with intriguing scenes. Proudly signed by the artists who specialize in this work, no two paintings are alike. Some depict a Bangladeshi countryside with thatch-roofed houses clustered against bright green paddy fields, or a local river scene with shapely wooden boats plying silently along. Other views have been taken somewhat surrealistically from postcards or calendars: London Bridge, the Sidney Opera House, the Tower of Pisa, even an expressway snaking towards Los Angeles. In many paintings, curvaceous heroines, macho heroes and threatening villains—usually the stars of local films—stare out provocatively at the traffic behind.

I enjoyed meeting up with Dhaka's "coaches," pedal-driven school buses comprised of small box compartments in which up to a dozen children in immaculate uniforms ride like royalty. The affiliation of each "coach" is painted around the opening at the rear: "Little Flowers School Coach," "Blooming Buds Preparatory School," "Scholastica Coach" (this in Gothic lettering), "Tik-Tok Elementary School," etc. Peering from side windows, children would point and laugh at the strange lady on an odd, two-wheeled bike.



PHOTO BY MARY FRANCES DUNHAM

The streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh (above) are packed with rickshaws. Over 200,000 of these three-wheelers carry people and freight around the city, providing a convenient option for non-car owners but threatening any semblance of order on the streets. Below left, New York cyclist Mary Frances Dunham attracts attention.

As a foreigner and especially as a woman, an elderly one at that, I was conspicuous in traffic, a unique sight and source of amusement if not perplexity to surrounding vehiculists. Traditionally, Bangladeshi women, even in old age, travel in the seclusion of an enclosed vehicle, usually accompanied by a family member or friend.

As I cycled along, rickshaw men and sidewalk spectators loved to call out my presence for all the world to take note: "Nani! Nani! (Grandma! Grandma!)" "Babaribap! (Wow!)"

I was glad to have a folding bike. In central Dhaka where I mostly worked, the sidewalks were too crowded to park even my child-sized model. Before entering a building, I would fold my bike and carry it with me. Onlookers fascinated by the process would gather around. Children shouted "Bangiyе geche! (It has broken!)." Once there were many as fifty men watching and commenting on the marvels of a collapsible bike.

Now, back in New York, I miss Dhaka's absorbing traffic life and peculiar challenges. I almost miss its raucous music. No one in New York calls out "Nani! Nani!" or stops in admiration to watch my bike unfold. Yes, it is comforting to be among bicyclists again, but fearsome to share streets with a majority of cars.

If nothing else, Dhaka's rickshaws prove how much can be done with human-powered transportation.

However, I have to agree in part with Dhaka's rickshaw critics. The overwhelming quantity of these spatially inefficient vehicles discourages efforts to improve the city's overcrowded and dilapidated buses and leaves little room for bicycles. As cars proliferate in Dhaka (inevitably, so it seems), I suspect rickshaws will be forced to yield their current hegemony. I will be interested, then, to see how Dhaka will balance its transportation policies. Sensibly, I hope, in order to include improved transit facilities and, of course, incentives for bicycling.



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On the Cover: Cycling out of Winter and into Spring in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Photo courtesy of Cycle Colorado.