

Cycle rickshaws: Victims of car mania

Next time you plan to visit Chandni Chowk, the walled city of old Delhi. -- non-polluting, non-motorised cycle rickshaws may not be there to give you a joyride. On September 6, 2006, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) informed the Delhi High Court that there would be a complete ban on cycle rickshaws in Chandni Chowk from September. The Court has earlier ordered a ban on all cycle rickshaws in the heavily congested Chandni Chowk area and asked MCD not to issue any fresh licenses. Meanwhile, the MCD has also issued an order not to allow any cycle rickshaw to ply on the arterial roads of Delhi.

The High Court appointed Committee in the Writ Petition (Civil) No. 3419/1999 (Hemraj & others vs. Commissioner of Police Delhi and others) regarding closure of cuts on roads and its improvement in the NCT of Delhi in its meeting has decided, *"All the arterial roads of Delhi in MCD area should be strictly prohibited for the plying of cycle rickshaws, on the pattern of NDMC and strict legal action should be taken by MCD under municipal bye-laws against the violators."* There are plans to introduce CNG minibuses in the Chandni Chowk area. Tenders have already been floated for operating CNG buses on various routes in the area.

The ban has come as a setback not only for the rickshaw pullers who have been serving the commuters in this area for so long, but also as a death knell for the only form of non-motorised public transport in the walled city. It is estimated that cycle rickshaw saves 10 crore motorised trips every day in India and more than 1 crore trips in Delhi alone. Officials have not even cared to assess the pollution and the public health impact of replacing such an enormous numbers of non-motorised trips with motorised trips.

The MCD as per its policy can only give license to 99,000 cycle rickshaws in the city and 89,429 licenses have already been issued. The number of unlicensed rickshaws is far greater. According to an estimate, there are more than 6 lakh passenger rickshaws and 4 lakh goods rickshaws plying in Delhi. Rickshaw pullers have appealed that the government should regulate the number of rickshaws and not impose a ban.

Pro car policies of the city planners have gone against them. City planners attach greater premium to motorisation and road building than to preserving the sustainable forms of transportation. A plan prepared by the Central Road Research Institute (CRRI) had found that cycle rickshaws are the major cause of congestion in Chandni Chowk area and waiting or parked cycle rickshaws block the carriageway and obstruct the traffic flow. The plan suggested that CNG buses can take the place of cycle rickshaws. The plan states, 'along with minibuses, fast moving vehicles like cars, two-wheelers could move (at controlled speed 30 km/hr) but not allowed to park or wait in Chandni Chowk.' A blanket ban on the movement of rickshaws is no solution to the congestion in the area. Representatives of the rickshaw puller's union say, the government is talking of monorail and buses, can these enter the narrow streets of Chandni Chowk where a cycle rickshaw can easily go.

Change mindset

After maligning cycle rickshaws as poor country cousins and blaming them for holding up motor traffic on the city roads, Indian cities have first pushed the cycle rickshaw pullers back into small alleys and by-lanes. And now even that is not being tolerated. There is no official recognition of the role they play as intermediate and sustainable public transport system in our cities that can prevent cities from turning into veritable gas chambers.

State sponsored crack down on cycle rickshaws coupled with hostile traffic conditions, middleclass disdain, and lack of infrastructure support, has deprived these zero emitters of their traditional driving space. It happened in Kolkata when the left front government in its drive to

clean up the city pulled the cycle rickshaws off the road and confined them to an immensely restricted zone. Traffic departments in Lucknow and Guwahati have also banned cycle rickshaws from most arterial routes for most days of the week to improve flow of motorised traffic. In Delhi cycle rickshaws can ply only in a few localities. This only indicates how confused the green agenda of the city planner is. The strong tradition of non-motorised transport is being squeezed out of Indian cities.

In their fight for survival the poor rickshaw pullers have failed to enlist support of the urban middle class largely because of their elitist preference for the motorised transport. Ironically, what the *Bhadraloks* and *babus* have rejected as the unnecessary relic from the past, has been grabbed eagerly by their colonial masters. During the late nineties the media was abuzz with the news that Indian cycle rickshaws have hit the roads in the town of Oxford in Britain and that the local authorities have specially enacted by-laws permitting rickshaws to operate between fixed points. It was reported then that in Oxford town, more than 40 per cent of the rickshaw pullers were women.

There is a global trend towards lightweight non-motorised transport. These are being marketed in the US and Europe as green taxis, pedicabs, PONY and so on. These are making a come back in more than 50 cities in the US, Canada, France, Germany, England, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Holland, Spain, Australia, among others. In Asia, Japan, Singapore and Indonesia are making some efforts to revive them. These are fast becoming popular among tourists as well as environmentally conscious locals.

Without assessing the merits of this transport and scope for its improvement, concerns have often been expressed at the plight of the rickshaw pullers to make a case for discouraging it. But a study conducted by the USAID along with US EPA in the late nineties on the feasibility of a cycle rickshaw upgrading project in Agra, has indicated that "Human powered transport is a wave of the future and not a vestige of past." The study concludes that cycle rickshaw could be the answer to the pollution problem in Agra. In fact today only cycle rickshaws and zero emissions vehicles are allowed to ply in the Taj Trapezium.

Rickshaws are part of the solution, not the problem

Contrary to the negative public image of the rickshaw pullers as extremely strained and worn out, trying to pull an inhuman load, there has been significant improvement in the traction technology of these vehicles that make them light weight and easy to pull -- thus relieving the puller of the extra drag. With upgraded gears, hydraulic brakes, rear end differential, comfortable seats, halogen lights, the cycle rickshaw which today covers a distance of 60 km per day on an average, can emerge as one of the most efficient non motorised transport in the cities.

Despite indigenous initiatives to improve the technology, little effort has been made to promote upgraded rickshaw. Without finding ways of promoting mass production of the upgraded vehicle for commercial use the state authorities instead had threatened to clamp excise tax on it if it was produced for commercial use. This has pushed the manufacture of cycle rickshaw to the informal sector. Improved prototypes can hit the roads only if favourable conditions are created for its wider acceptance. In the 1970s and 1980s there were two attempts by Canadians, British and Indian NGOs to improve the design and technology. Nimbarkar Agricultural Research Institute in Maharashtra drew media attention when they developed the electric cycle rickshaw. All this will get pushed to oblivion if public and political attitude towards cycle rickshaw does not change.

The public transportation plan for the city should integrate and encourage cycle rickshaws as intermediate mode of transport for short distance commuting and as feeders to other forms of transport. Policies should encourage commercialisation of improved technologies, proper

management of their routes and parking to integrate them with other modes of transport in the city. Solutions exist in making these vehicles a viable mode of transport. All it needs is political will and public support.