

# Running For Their Lives

## The Rickshaw Wallahs of Calcutta

Gruelling physical labor, next to no income, often far from family and home—these are conditions endured by thousands of rickshaw pullers on the streets of Calcutta. A telling embodiment of India's poor majority, the rickshaw has endured in a country struggling to become a modern, prosperous state.

by Brad Gillings

This is his life. Running. Torn sneakers pound against the crumbling pavement of a busy city street. His chest heaves in search of air as the suffocating stench of ripe garbage and open sewage overwhelms the nostrils. He battles trucks, bicycles, buses and taxis for space and survival as they slalom through the weaving maze of cows, goats and pedestrians.

The motorized scream of a bus threatens the runner from behind. Then, as though he was invisible, the vehicle overtakes him, spewing a cloud of black exhaust into his face. Appearing undisturbed, the runner drives forward, clutching the two narrow wooden bars that connect him to a simple metal carriage.

The man is a rickshaw puller, locally known as a *wallah*. His job: to taxi people to their destinations. This particular customer, a middle-aged woman draped in purple silk, is being ferried to market. When the two-mile journey comes to an end, he pulls the carriage to the side of the road and lowers it carefully, helping his passenger climb out. Reaching into a small purse she hands him five rupees (15 cents) and walks off without a word.

### Over one million served daily

Mohamad Israel, rickshaw wallah, spends his days on the streets of Calcutta, India's largest city. Calcutta's rickshaws continue to increase in number. There are now an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 rickshaws plying the city streets—far exceeding the

limit of 6,000 the city would ideally like to enforce—and up to 100,000 pullers employed. Every day these wallahs carry “more than one million passengers and cover more miles than Indian Airlines, 30 Boeings and Airbuses,” according to Rob Gallagher's book *The Rickshaws of Bangladesh*.

The strong demand for rickshaws exists largely because of their efficiency on streets where extreme congestion makes even walking difficult. Children and the elderly are especially dependent on this form of transportation. Rickshaws are cheaper than motorized taxis and take up less space on the road. During monsoons, they are capable of navigating the flooded streets that force other vehicles out of service. They are especially valuable during such times for emergency transportation, carrying the sick and injured to hospitals.

The design of the rickshaw has not changed since it was introduced to Calcutta by the Chinese at the turn of the century. The wheels are solid wood, and the center of gravity is too high. The wallah is forced to balance the vehicle at an uncomfortable angle, while passengers run the risk of being dumped backward into the traffic. Aware of the potential hazard, a runner must also consider that he has no brakes save his legs. Step after step on the pavement, his sore shins absorb the force of loads which may weigh up to 500 pounds.

The vast supply of rickshaw wallahs is consistently fed by an overabundance of poor who eagerly accept this harsh



A rickshaw wallah struggles to keep his place amidst heavy early morning traffic.  
[Al Schaben/JD&A]

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existence. The exertion drastically shortens the wallah's life-span to below the average 60 years for Indian males. Today, the wallahs' industry has been virtually taken over by migrant laborers, most of whom are from rural areas of neighboring states. Illiterate, unskilled and landless, they have no other means of survival.

### Far from the fields of home

Mohamad Israel's story is not unique. Like a majority of Calcutta's rickshaw wallahs, he migrated to the city from the neighboring state of Bihar.

Ten years ago, at the age of 35, Israel left his family and the fields of Bihar in desperation. His ancestors had been subsistence farmers as far back as anyone could remember. Large landowners, however, had slowly bought up most of the property. Like many others, Israel was left with nothing. He had only been able to find seasonal work a few months each year, laboring on the larger farms. The rest of the time he worked as a household servant, but still could not support his wife and four children. Scraping up enough money for one train ticket, he said goodbye to his family and set out for a city he had never seen.

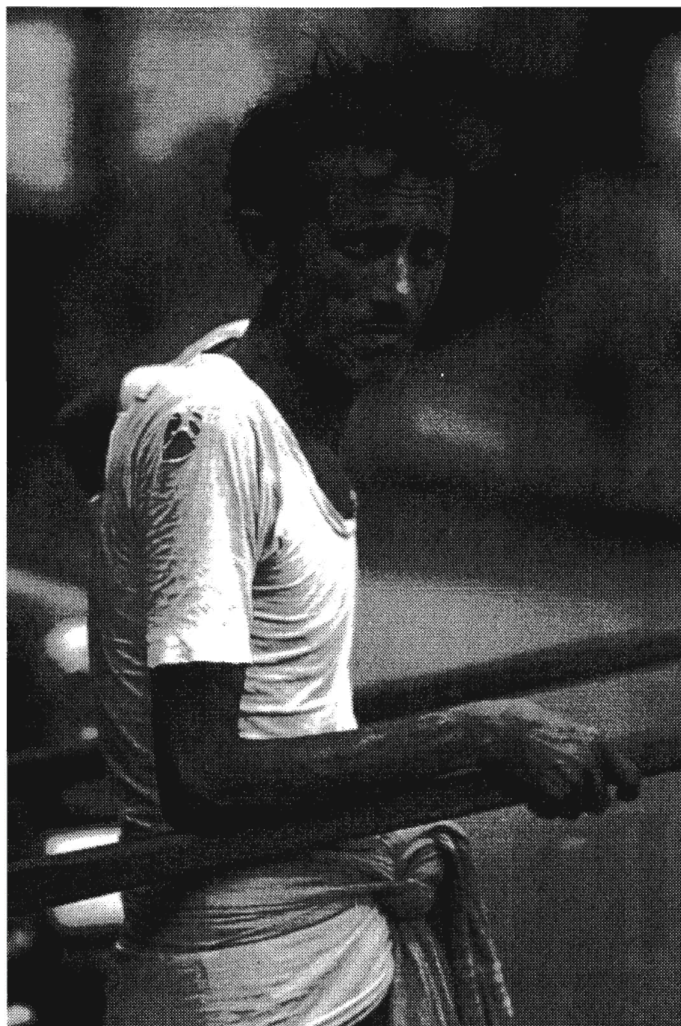
Calcutta was a place Rudyard Kipling called the "City of Dreadful Night." A young Winston Churchill, writing home to his mother, said that "he was pleased he had seen it because he would not have to see it again." According to its major daily newspaper, *The Statesman*, Calcutta "continues to show a resigned acceptance of unending misery." And here, Israel joined the ranks of thousands as yet another rickshaw wallah.

The job allows him to better support his family, but he can return to visit only twice a year. He sends home what he can manage to save of his average daily salary of 35 rupees (\$1.15).

When speaking of his family, Israel sighs and looks away. It is the closest he has come to revealing any emotion. Generally stern and businesslike, he has one sole purpose for being here. "I like it because I earn money and my children

get to eat," he says. "I don't like it when I am not earning money."

Just as his eyes remain fixed on the pavement five feet in front of him as he runs through the streets, Israel's single-minded reason for being in Calcutta seems to block out the brutality of the city around him. He claims that the pollution, congestion and strain of the work do not bother him. "You get used to it," he shrugs.



*Many rickshaw wallahs die before they are 40 years old.*  
[Al Schaben/JD&A]

### Stone pillows, concrete beds

The place Israel and his colleagues now call home is a narrow side street in central Calcutta. Each morning before dawn, rickshaws are lined up in a row along the curb. Scattered next to them, like a box of children's crayons dumped on a sidewalk, the wallahs lie sleeping, wrapped from head to toe in colorful blankets. Since it poured rain last night, some of the men took cover in a nearby cellar.

The room is jammed with limp bodies overlapping each other across a concrete floor. Directly above them a canopy of laundry is suspended from a low ceiling. Hanging heavily in the air is the odor of unbathed flesh, making it difficult to breathe.

Outside, garbage swims from the gutters into puddles in the street. Its smell mixes with that of urine and smog. The rain, however, has refreshingly dampened the stench enough to allow for the pleasure of a deep breath without choking. The reprieve will not last long, and the steadily warming sun urges the wallahs to crawl out of their rainbow cocoons to prepare for another day. Israel and about 60 others rent their rickshaws from the owner of one fleet. Each man pays the owner 13 rupees (39 cents) a day.

From a corner of the cellar the light of a small flame breaks into the darkness. Crouched on a stool, a wiry man with white hair and a solemn face is preparing tea. He serves it along with plain white bread to the early risers. Soon he is surrounded by a huddle of wallahs anxious for breakfast.

Outside, a chorus of chatter fills the air as a circus of morning rituals breaks out in the street. Water gushes from a well in the sidewalk where a group of men crowd around to bathe. As they splash water over their bodies most of it flows into a stream of sewage carrying human waste past them and into a drain five yards away.

Israel joins the group. He uses a long twig for a toothbrush, rubbing it vigorously back and forth along his gums. He scoops up some brownish water in a metal can and splashes some on his face before drinking the rest. He then wipes down his rickshaw.

Israel is meticulous. He removes the two large wagon wheels, each more than three feet in diameter, and greases the axles. The unmistakable pride with which Israel maintains his rickshaw should come as no surprise: rickshaw number 5525 is his only livelihood, and now it too is prepared for another day. One by

one, the other wallahs pick up their vehicles and trot onto the streets.

## A day in the life

Israel's first customer is a regular. An 80-year-old school principal whose roots go back to the British colonial era, she is a living remnant of the "Raj." Israel carefully helps her hunched form into the carriage and they begin their journey to school. They roll on, through a maze of small private shops selling everything and offering all services imaginable. Like moving down the dial of a radio, the high-pitched screech of Hindu music deafens and fades at various points along the way. Laughs and cries of children blend with the squawking of chickens, the whining of goats and shouts from vendors advertising their merchandise.

With each stride Israel's lean calf muscles pulse from below the line of his green *dhoti*—a large piece of cloth wrapped around the waste like a towel and tied up between the legs. He keeps his money tied in a knot at the end of a blue cloth around his waste which he tucks under a once-white shirt. Over his shoulder, he constantly totes a red and white checkered cloth to wipe away the sweat. His black hair, sprinkled with

they do?"

Israel has only one other regular client. The rest of the time he spends sitting in the same spot, waiting. Day after day, for hours on end he and five or six other wallahs sit on the same corner, a patch of gravel next to a mound of garbage where a small side road turns onto a busy street.

"It's a good spot for customers," Israel explains. Still, unlike the hot sun, which beats down on this unprotected spot without mercy, work is inconsistent. One day Israel may have 20 to 25 passengers. The next, only two or three will come his way. The wallahs pass the time chatting idly, and are constantly occupied with *khani*, a soft stick that smells like dried manure that they crush and use like chewing tobacco.

Opposite their corner, four shabby tea houses line up in a row; this is where Israel takes most of his meals. His staple is *polygram*, a yellow grain mixed with water and sugar. Tea, rice, and white, flat bread called *chapate* rounds out almost his entire diet. At seven rupees (21 cents) a meal, it is all he can afford.

## Nagging symbols of misery

On the street, a motorcycle stopping at the wallahs' corner has bumped into the back of a car. A shouting match ensues and nearly erupts into a fist fight. To avoid trouble, Israel moves his rickshaw well out of the way. His behavior is linked to his social status, for Israel stands on the bottom rung of a society still preoccupied with a rigid, albeit officially abolished, caste structure. The safest course of action is to maintain a low profile.

Rickshaw wallahs share their lowly position with Indians working on the docks, in factories and in the fields. Save perhaps for the street beggars, none are as visible as the Calcutta rickshaw pullers. Their ancient chariots remain a nagging symbol of the social problems that plague India—a nation struggling to enter the twenty-first century as a devel-

oped country.

India boasts of being one of the world's industrial giants. It possesses atomic power, a space satellite program, and engages in huge public-works programs. At the same time, half of the population lives below the poverty line in conditions little better than those endured by their ancestors. The city streets overflow with slums and beggars.

"We will get nowhere if we stop to consider the poor all the time," said a businessman in Trevor Fishlock's book *India File*. "The Americans did not wait for the poor to catch up when their country was developing, nor should we. India will only improve if we forge ahead on all fronts."

Taking the hand-pulled rickshaws off the streets of Calcutta has been a constant public concern since the end of World War II. In the 1970s, authorities launched an aggressive campaign to abolish them, and thousands of rickshaws were confiscated and burned. One police official in Calcutta's traffic department claimed that the hand-pulled rickshaw is on its way out. "This is a very crude method of transportation," he said. "It is going to be abolished. I think that after five or six years, there will be no more rickshaws here."

Perhaps this would indeed hide the depth of social misery, end the harsh lifestyle of the wallahs, and may even aid India in rolling more smoothly into modernity and greater prosperity for a small elite.

Despite all, the rickshaw has survived. A labor union organization has fought vigorously since 1932 to maintain the only means of livelihood available to the wallahs. They have been successful, clearly, but how long they will be able to stop "progress" is uncertain.

Yet, no alternative has been planned for the impact that abolishing this form of transportation would have on those who depend on rickshaws and those who pull them. Calcutta's economic woes are too overwhelming to be able to absorb more than 100,000 unemployed, unskilled, illiterate wallahs—akin to removing a scar, while opening up the wound.

There is no simple solution. Take the hand-pulled rickshaw from a man such as Israel, and he would be left with no way to support his family. What would he have? This is his life. ●



Mohamad Israel wipes his face after a long day on the streets of Calcutta. [Al Schaben/JD&A]

white, is cropped to less than half an inch. Most wallahs keep it short, otherwise lice would be difficult to avoid.

After about a mile and a half they reach the school. Crawling out of the buggy, the old woman hands him four rupees (12 cents). "He is a very honest and sincere man," she says of Israel. "The work is very hard, but what else can