

Mum From Mumbai

Makes **\$7,597 USD** a month

[Learn How...](#)



- NEWS & FEATURES
 - ASIA UNHEDGED
 - AT TOP COLUMNISTS
 - ABOUT US
 - VIDEO
- [China](#) [Japan](#) [Koreas](#) [Southeast Asia](#) [South Asia](#) [Central Asia](#) [Middle East](#)



The Zuri Whitefield Bangalore

from **Rs. 5,475.00** Plan and Book Your Perfect Trip

[TripAdvisor](#)

[HOME](#) · [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#) · [KOLKATA'S RICKSHAW: INHUMAN, DEGRADING](#)

Kolkata's rickshaw: inhuman, degrading

BY [GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN](#) on [JANUARY 2, 2016](#) in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [INDIA](#)

Many years ago, a Soviet diplomat visiting Kolkata was appalled to see the hand-pulled rickshaw. "Man pulling man", he just could not believe that in such modern times, this anachronistic mode of transport was in use.

Once, Kolkata was the heart of renaissance, the centre of modernism and the heartland of female emancipation. Kolkata may still be all of this, but the city has not been able to bid goodbye to its woe between wheels. The rickshaw, of course, can be an awfully painful experience for its puller, hauling as he does sometimes as many as three people perched on the seat above.

In the city's heat and humidity, dirt and dust, merciless downpours and waterlogged streets, the rickshaw-puller plays the beast of burden dragging the vehicle — and the men and goods on it.



A rickshaw-puller transports a girl through a flooded street in Kolkata

Introduced in 1914 in what was then Calcutta (now Kolkata), the Second City of the Empire (after London), by extremely prosperous Chinese merchants (some of whom had made their fortunes through opium trade), the rickshaw was primarily used to transport goods.

Even in 1914, rickshaws were not new to India. They first appeared in the 1880s in the northern Indian hill resort of Shimla — after having been invented as "jin riki shaw" by Japan in the 1860s — a form of conveyance which soon became popular across Asia, particularly in China and Singapore.

Popular though the rickshaw was, nobody could deny that it involved a livelihood which was utterly degrading to a human being. And not surprisingly it disappeared from most parts of Asia, not Calcutta though. And shockingly so, because while the city has been almost obsessive about demolishing its British past, changing its own name from Calcutta to Kolkata, and that of many streets — to make them all sound Indian — an inhuman legacy of the Raj was allowed to live on!

Often depicted as an symbol of wretchedness in movies like the 1953 *Do Bigha Zameen* (A Plot of Land, where the poor protagonist-puller is forced to run at break-neck speed) and Roland Joffe's 1992 *City of Joy* (where the travails of the puller bring tears to one's eyes), but romanticized in the 1960 *Love in Simla* (where the hero pulls his sweetheart sitting on a



America's march of folly in the Middle East with Sunni Islam



Asia Times columnist and former US national security official Angelo Codevilla details US blunders in a penetrating three-part series:

"Romancing the Sunni: A US policy tragedy in three acts."

Read:

[Act I: Lifting the veil](#)

[Act II: A surge of confusion](#)

[Act: III: Reality vs. romance](#)

rickshaw, lipping a romantic number), the rickshaw on the road has attracted diametrically different opinions.

While the vehicle has been of enormous use as a means of inexpensive transport for short distances and also during Kolkata's punishing monsoon months when streets get flooded, the city's rational thinkers have been urging that the hand-pulled rickshaw be banned.

Admittedly, the West Bengal government (whose capital city is Kolkata) has been trying to get rid of the rickshaw. In 2005, the administration declared that man pulling man was a travesty of human dignity, and banned the rickshaw the following year. But the government made one mistake. It did not think about the plight of the 25,000-odd pullers. Some of them had been in the profession for over 50 years, and almost 60% were ill with tuberculosis and other lung diseases. How would they survive?

(Today there are roughly 2,500 to 3,000 pullers and close to 6,000 rickshaws. Many of them are idle for want of pullers)

So, understandably, the Calcutta High Court stayed the ban. However, the administration stopped issuing fresh licenses in 2005. But it is still to find a humane life for the pullers.

Although the government has been replacing the hand-pulled rickshaw with a battery-operated motorized version, not all pullers are happy with a transformation they feel will not be quite practical.

For example, a septuagenarian puller, Badshah Ali — who came from the eastern Indian state of Bihar and who has been pulling a rickshaw for half a century — feels that he cannot possibly get trained at "my age of 70 to operate a motorized vehicle".

The West Bengal administration has an unenviable task all right. But the question one would like to ask is, why did it have to wait all these decades to try doing away with the rickshaw? Had the move to put battery-operated vehicles on the road been thought of a couple of decades ago, Ali would have been 50, younger and more inclined to stop pulling and start stepping on the accelerator.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and The Seoul Times.

(Copyright 2015 Asia Times Holdings Limited, a duly registered Hong Kong company. All rights reserved. Please contact us about sales, syndication and republishing.)

Share this:



Related

Nirbhaya's shadow still looms over Delhi
December 16, 2015
In "Asia Times News & Features"

Who are the women redefining womanhood in India?
June 18, 2015
In "Asia Times News & Features"

Kolkata's Chinese live in stateless sorrow
October 7, 2015
In "Asia Times News & Features"

< [US among threats in new Russian security strategy](#)

[How Taiwan's presidential candidates responded to debate questions](#) >

Categories: [Asia Times News & Features](#) , [India](#) Tags: [Kolkata's inhuman and degrading rickshaws](#) , [from jin riki shaw to rickshaw](#) , [Rickshaw-pullers' plight dramatized in films Do Bigha Zameen and City of Joy](#) , [3000 rickshaw-pullers idling in Kolkata](#) , [motorized rickshaws](#)

RELATED ARTICLES



[Japan's master plan to destroy the Chinese Navy in battle](#)



[How Taiwan's presidential candidates responded to debate questions](#)

It's a new low
Now fly with fares starting from just ₹ 1352. Log on to www.golndigo.in and book now.
All inclusive lowest one way fares valid for booking made 90 days before travel date. Fares are subject to change without prior notice. TSC apply.

Latest Headlines

[Magnitude 6.4 earthquake hits off Linkou in China's Heilongjiang](#)

AT Video



[Check out AT's new video section for compelling visual takes on the people, places and things animating the Asia-Pacific region - AT Video](#)

Work for Asia Times

AT is seeking a full-time Arts & Society Editor to oversee its Fashion, Lifestyle, Sports and Travel sections. The post will include editing new best restaurant, hotels, book review and other additions. The role includes copy editing, assigning, and linking stories to the AT website. Professional journalists with social media and photo skills preferred. Terms to be discussed. Virtual post, can telecommute. Send resume and cover letter to atimes@gmail.com by Jan. 31.

Mum From Mumbai
Makes \$7,597 USD a month
[Learn How...](#)

Subscribe to our Newsletter



[US among threats in new Russian security strategy](#)



[Fireworks go ahead but Dubai hotel fire raises concerns over safety of skyscrapers](#)



[Saudi Arabia executes top Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr along with 46 others](#)



[Iran may expand missile plan amid US threat to impose fresh sanctions](#)

0 Comments

Asia Times

Login

Recommend

Share

Sort by Best



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON ASIA TIMES

US among threats in new Russian security strategy

2 comments • 4 hours ago

Reverend Dean Drone — It seems that relations between Russia and the United States have deteriorated. This troublesome state, despite ...

4 terrorists, 2 soldiers killed in clash at Indian Air Force base

7 comments • 11 hours ago

Headstrong — Er...no

WHAT'S THIS?

China says Taiwan talks could 'collapse' if framework challenged

1 comment • 3 days ago

Shavi Tüpraş — "Reasserts bottom line after disputed by presidential candidate" which, translated from Bloomberg's pidgin English ...

Microsoft failed to warn victims of Chinese email hack: former employees

2 comments • 2 days ago

known_unknowns — as much as what the title of the article says, even ms said there's no real proof that it was the chinese gov't that has ...

Subscribe

Add Disqus to your site Add Disqus Add

Privacy

Email *

Subscribe!

Recent Posts

[Japan's master plan to destroy the Chinese Navy in battle](#)

[How Taiwan's presidential candidates responded to debate questions](#)

[Kolkata's rickshaw: inhuman, degrading](#)

[US among threats in new Russian security strategy](#)

[Fireworks go ahead but Dubai hotel fire raises concerns over safety of skyscrapers](#)

Season's Greetings from Asia Times



Thanking and wishing our readers a wonderful holiday season and a prosperous new year!

AT Opinion

[Will Dubai's good times last?](#)

31 December 2015 - AT Editor

By Daniel Pipes DUBAI—At a time of civil war, anarchy, extremism, and impoverishment in the Middle E [...]



Asia Times Forum

[Our Ally Turkey](#)

views: 9, replies: , 02 Jan 2016

[Peace not possible for Israel](#)

views: 5989, replies: , 02 Jan 2016

[Gun Sales Spike Across the U.S.](#)

views: 1385, replies: , 02 Jan 2016

[Happy New Year 2016!](#)

views: 20, replies: , 01 Jan 2016

[Happy New Year 2015](#)

views: 1368, replies: , 01 Jan 2016

[The only way](#)

views: 208, replies: , 01 Jan 2016

[You cannot assimilate Muslims](#)

views: 1663, replies: , 01 Jan 2016

[Will Obama lose Afghanistan before or after he leaves office?](#)

views: 143, replies: , 01 Jan 2016

Facebook



Asia Times
Online

8 hours ago

Asia Times Online

shared a link.

4 terrorists, 2 soldiers killed in clash at Indian Air Force base

atimes.com

(From PTI) Suspected Pakistani terrorists Saturday attacked an India Air Force Base at Pathankot in Punjab, triggering an encounter in which four attackers and two Indian Air Force personnel were k...

[View on Facebook](#) · [Share](#)



Asia Times
Online

8 hours ago

Asia Times Online

shared a link.

Hurdles have to be removed for success of Indo-Pak comprehensive dialogue

atimes.com

Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, who participated in the 'Heart of Asia' conference (December 8-10) in Islamabad along with other official representatives from Central and West Asia to deba...

[View on Facebook](#) · [Share](#)



Asia Times Onl...
12,985 likes

Like Page

Share



FOLLOW AT ON TWITTER

Tweets Follow

AT Asia Times 8h
@asiatimesonline
4 terrorists, 2 soldiers killed in clash at Indian Air Force base fb.me/2L0T1GJ9a
[Show Summary](#)

AT Asia Times 8h
@asiatimesonline
Hurdles have to be removed for success of Indo-Pak comprehensive dialogue fb.me/4nae0xZMD
[Show Summary](#)

AT Asia Times 1 Jan
@asiatimesonline
Analysis: Tsai, Chu gains limited in first round of Taiwan presidential debates fb.me/LAB5YPEm
[Show Summary](#)

Tweet to @asiatimesonline

TAG CLOUD

Afghanistan **AIB** Bangladesh
China China economy
 Chinese economy Chinese stock
 market **Chinese stocks** economy
 Erdogan **fashion trends** Hong Kong
IMF **India** Iran **ISIS** Islamic
State Israel Japan Malaysia
 Myanmar **Narendra Modi** North Korea
Obama Pakistan **POC**
 Philippines **Putin** **Russia**
Saudi Arabia security **Shinzo**
Abe South China Sea **South**
China Sea dispute
 South Korea Spratlys **Syria** Taiwan
 Thailand **Turkey** US Uyghurs **Xi**
Jinping yuan

"ASIA TIMES NEWS RSS"

Japan's master plan to destroy the Chinese Navy in battle
How Taiwan's presidential candidates responded to debate questions
 Kolkata's rickshaw: inhuman, degrading
"ASIA UNHEDGED RSS"
Shanghai Composite Index ends year up nearly 10%
Shenzhen exchange says it will resume listing blue chips
Wot? China isn't the only place that has economic problems?

"CHATHAM HOUSE RULES RSS"

Norman Bailey: Putin is a Russian nationalist operating in a power vacuum
Michael Ledeen: Islamists may defeat Russia in Syria
Angelo Codevilla responds: "Russian national interest" is the wrong question

ARCHIVES

January 2016 (17)
December 2015 (589)
November 2015 (463)
October 2015 (473)
September 2015 (420)
August 2015 (453)
July 2015 (377)
June 2015 (309)
May 2015 (227)
April 2015 (310)
March 2015 (149)
February 2015 (18)