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Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh

Mapin Publishing

The road to rickshaws

Long before we actually went to live in Bangladesh, the country was part of my imagination. Like millions of Bengali Indians, Bangladesh is part of my identity and consciousness, but I had little knowledge of this fact as a child growing up in a small town in West Bengal, India. I had little awareness of this neighbouring country, till I heard my father weep, listening to a strange voice coming from the transistor. It was a mid-summer school holiday in 1971, and I was about to take a midday nap, half-awake, half-asleep, when I awoke to the muffled sounds of my father's sobbing. Similar to many other Bengalis who had to leave their homes due to the Partition, he was also keenly listening to the many repeat plays of the inspiring voice of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the liberation war of Bangladesh. What deep-seated emotion compelled him to cry for the home he had had to leave over three decades ago was beyond my understanding at that time, but this singular incident at once made Bangladesh a part of my perception. Bangladesh entered my soul; I realized that I could not escape the truth of its existence, the reality of my own roots, and my own certain and increasing desire to engage with this country.

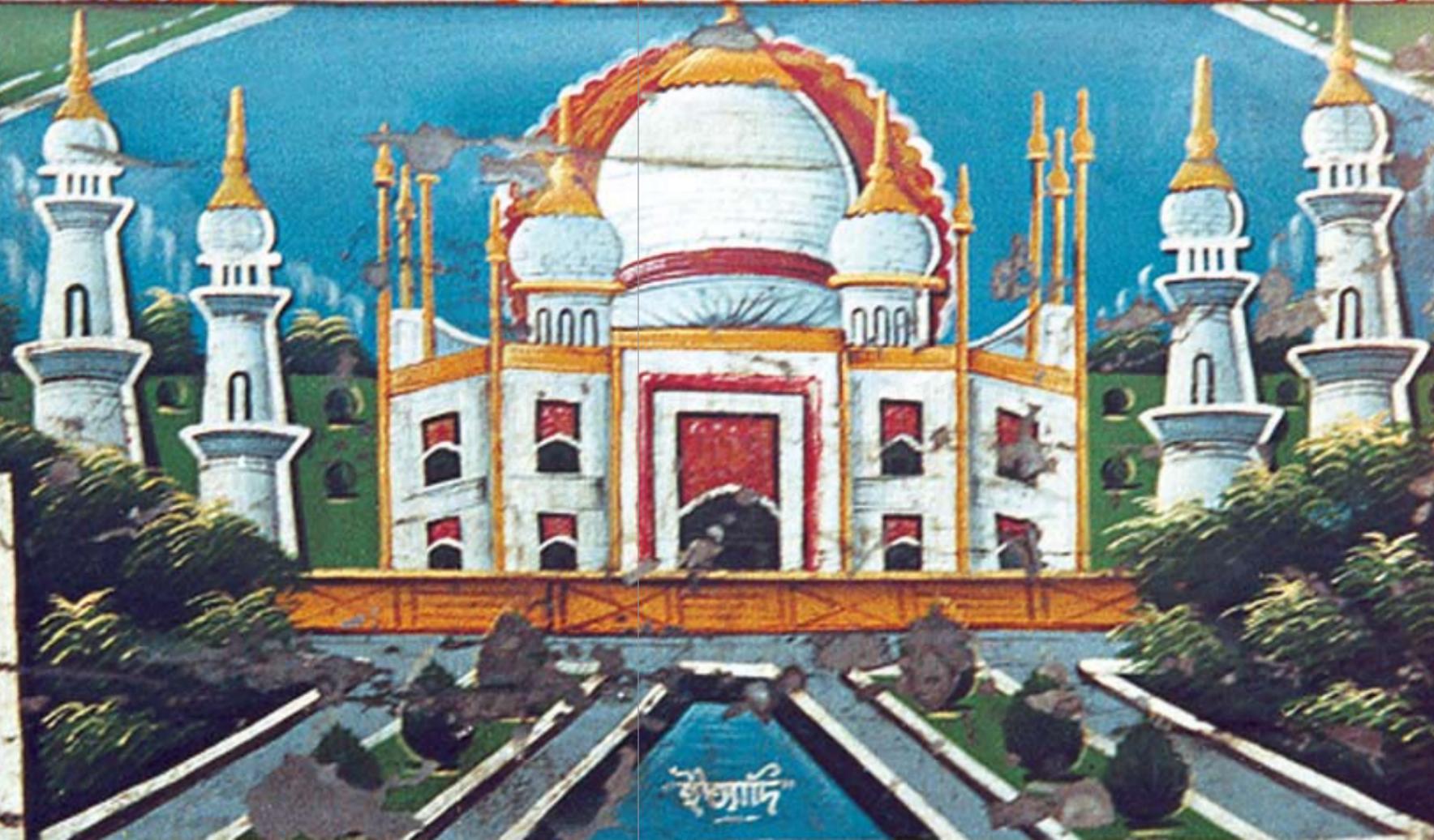
Over the years, I had built up an imagined Bangladesh in my mind, spiced up by a couple of short trips. When David took up a job in Dhaka in 2000, I was overjoyed to at last get a chance to spend some time there. It was the experience of a lifetime; encounters such as the pilgrimage to my grandfather's home in a wet-green village in Barisal churned passions within me that I never knew existed. It was a pilgrimage because he left his home and fields at Partition, hoping for all

bustle to settle down soon, but was never to go back there, and I was the first member in the family to revisit it. I also visited the college near Karnaphuli River in Chittagong where my father, a young postgraduate from Calcutta University, went – with my heavily pregnant mother – to teach economics to local village students. Ma used to say that the walk from the bus-stand to the village seemed interminable to her at the time and indeed, it seemed so even to us, travelling in an air-conditioned car from Dhaka, but held up on the way by an elephant and a broken down bus. We saw the smoke-filled Chittagong ship-wrecking yards, which David described as 'technological hell'. As we stayed on, we learnt to love the country and its people, and began to see things through the lens of 'insiders'.

Whatever one's reactions are to Bangladesh, the ubiquitous rickshaws cannot but attract the attention of any new visitor to the country; and we too loved them at first sight. I come from small-town India, where rickshaws are still the primary mode of conveyance. Part of my growing-up education was my father teaching me, a mere five-year-old, how to hail a rickshaw: 'Say, "*Ei rickshaw bhara jabe?*"', and then if he says yes, he will also ask "Where will you go, Khuki?" Then you say "*Mincipal Gut*" school; remember, do not say "Municipal Girls" school because he won't understand you...' and there I was, for eleven years of school and for many more years later in life, taking a rickshaw to my school and elsewhere, alone and without any difficulty whatsoever.

Yet, the rickshaws of Bangladesh were not like anything I had seen before. Bengalis from both sides of the border share many things: our appearance, language, history, culture and food. But just across the border, Indian rickshaws are plain and ordinary, whereas those in Bangladesh,

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