

The Rickshaws of Kolkata



Hand-pulled rickshaws first appeared in Kolkata, India, a century ago, and about 6,000 of them still roll through the streets today. Most men who pull them are poor, aging **migrants** from the countryside. Their vehicles are not being made any more, and as the parts wear out, they cannot be replaced. Thus, the rickshaw is nearing its end in Kolkata.

Rickshaws are an important form of transportation in this city of nearly 15 million people. They are cheap and convenient. Poor and middle-class residents rely on rickshaws to move through narrow lanes in areas of the central city not served by public transportation. Families often pay a rickshaw to take their children to and from school.

Rickshaws also provide delivery service for hotels, shops, and homes around the city, carting everything from food for 500 wedding guests to live chickens. Ladies on shopping trips depend on rickshaws to wait while they make several stops before returning home. Some people even use a rickshaw instead of an ambulance.

But rickshaw pullers live in extreme **poverty**. Most of them are homeless. Some sleep in a *dera*, a rickshaw garage; others simply live in their rickshaws or on the street. They work for more than 12 hours **at a stretch**, earning about 100 rupees (\$2.50) a day. Their top priority is paying the rent on their vehicles, then buying food and shelter. They also have to bribe the city police who enforce rickshaw laws. Any extra money goes to their families back home.

For the last 10 years, the government has been trying to get rid of the rickshaws. City **authorities** say they want to modernize Kolkata's image. They also want to reduce traffic

congestion: "We must be fair to the cars and buses that are **crawling** because of the rickshaws," one city official said.

What will the rickshaw pullers do for work in the future? Most are 40 to 60 years old and have no job skills. Local authorities have talked about programs to retrain the pullers. They could drive auto-rickshaws, work in parking lots, or make traditional crafts. However, nothing has been done to start these programs, and rickshaw pullers are understandably very worried about their future. "I'll try anything, even learning a new job, if it will help my family," one puller said.

