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Pre-Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Last days of the rickshaw

Rickshaws of Kolkata

rickshaw: a two-wheeled wooden cart, pulled by a person on foot, usually used in the narrow streets of busy town centres

Kolkata (previously known as Calcutta) is the famous capital of West Bengal in India and the home of nearly 15 million people. The trafﬁc jams and engine fumes begin early in the morning with long lines of private cars, public buses, taxis, three-wheeled scooters and pedicabs. There aren’t many alternatives. You can catch a train through the city or take the underground but sooner or later you have to go on foot and walking in Kolkata is a dangerous activity. As the drivers race towards pedestrians, they blow their horns. The sound never stops from morning to night.

So when I crossed a small road on my ﬁrst day in the city, I was surprised because I heard a bell – not a horn. It was a tiny man pulling a rickshaw. He stopped and picked up two children from the front door of their house and then, with great strength, pulled them to school. For many people, the rickshaw is a symbol of Kolkata and they have many advantages. When the trafﬁc is bad, rickshaws ﬁnd a way through the trafﬁc. If you miss your bus and there aren’t any taxis, you can always ﬁnd a rickshaw in Kolkata. Rickshaws are also very popular with local shoppers. The driver takes you from your house to the market and waits for you. Then he loads all your purchases, drops you off outside your home and helps you unload. No other type of public transport offers this kind of service.

You also see lots more people getting on and off rickshaws during the monsoon season. That’s the period from June to September when Kolkata gets heavy rainfall. Sometimes it rains for 48 hours without a break. In the older parts of the city, the roads ﬂood. The water can rise as high as people’s waists in the worst part. When it’s this bad, anything with an engine is useless. But the rickshaw drivers never stop working, even with water all around them.

But not everyone thinks rickshaws are a good thing. Some local ofﬁcials and politicians want to ban rickshaws on ‘humanitarian grounds’. They believe it is wrong for one man to pull another person when there is modern transport in the city. However, there is a problem with this plan. Many of the rickshaw drivers come from the countryside with no job and no qualiﬁcations. The only job they can ﬁnd in Kolkata is pulling a rickshaw. If the city bans rickshaws, these men won’t have a job or income. So for the moment, the people of Kolkata still go by rickshaw.

fumes (n) /fjuːmz/ smoke and gases from an engine

scooter (n) /ˈskuːtə(r)/ a small motorbike

pedicab(n) /ˈpedekæb/ a type of taxi with no engine. The driver cycles.

monsoon(n) /ˌmɒnˈsuːn/ period from June to September with lots of rain

flood(v) /flʌd/ when water covers an area (e.g. a floor, road, city)

ban(v) /bæn/ to stop or make illegal

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