

Art
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Traditional artwork on trucks hauls in big business

By Kalbe Ali

KARACHI: Stuck at a merciless traffic jam in the middle of the city, have you ever looked around and let your eyes rest on a truck or a bus? If so, you must have pondered at how drivers manage to decorate every single inch of space with those vibrant colours and glittering accessories. The artistic effort that goes into the endeavour probably boggled your mind. What you may not have thought of though, is that truck and bus owners spend hundreds of thousands of rupees to decorate their vehicles. This is not just big art, but big business too.

The fad began when truckers from the NWFP and Mianwali started the trend painting and decorating each corner of their vehicles, sparing not even the wheels. The fashion has now spread to other commercial vehicles too, especially in Karachi where authorities are more lenient and let pass regulations which require one solid colour. On an average, the outer body decoration of trucks, buses and minibuses costs more than Rs 100,000 depending upon design and the material used. This is excluding the interior decoration for buses and minibuses or the woodwork on trucks.

With the simplest of colour schemes and low quality colours, bus owners spend on an average Rs 7,000 to Rs 10,000 to paint the bodies of commercial buses.

Complete body making: Outer body decoration of trucks, buses and minibuses is divided in three parts including nickel work, the painter's job and the wood and fabrication work. The complete bodybuilding of a truck along with decoration costs between Rs 150,000 to Rs 200,000 including woodwork, but the paintwork and fluorescent stickers work costs between Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 for a truck.

The general trend in the country is that one truck has three large pictures apart from other colouring on the sides, however some have extensive decoration work with reflective paint and stickers that alone cost more than Rs 20,000. Paint and sticker work is mainly done in areas like Mauripur truck stand, while the decoration work is done in Garden, Sohrab Goth, Malir and Baldia town.

"The truckers are very fond of decoration as it is the only colourful



thing in their harsh work routine," says Hasan Ali, a decoration worker in Khalil Market at new Mauripur truck stand.

"Originally truckers used to decorate their vehicles with old and colourful scarves and fake plaits (parandas) belonging to their wives or fiancés." Mr Ali says the artwork business is growing and they get about two trucks a week for decoration. Besides, all ten decoration workers and six painters at the truck stand get regular repair work and touching jobs as well.

Work on mini-buses, coaches: Normally high quality paints are used for drawing various designs and patterns on mini-buses and coaches, which increases the cost of the work compared to buses. That costs between Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 while the use of fluorescent stickers can jack up the cost to up to Rs 20,000 on one coach. The main areas for dec-

oration business for minibuses, coaches and buses are Qaddafi Chowk in Landhi, New Karachi, Orangi, Malir and Korangi. "The colours, designs and stickers patterns are generally selected by painter and the workman to express their creativity and improve their standing in the market," says Saleem Bhai, a painter at Liaquatabad market.

But owners are keen to have distinct images on their vehicles even if it costs more. Though there are no fixed rates, a painter can manage to save Rs 2,000 per average job. It takes around four days to paint a bus with the usual patterns, including a large portrait or scenery at the back and a mosaic of designs on the sides. The ratio of profit for the work on minibuses and coaches is nearly the same but due to high turnover, painters earn more on these types of jobs.

"Some of the owners say that their bus should look like a bride even if it takes eight days to complete the job," says Mr Saleem. According to the District Regional Transport Authority (DRTA) there are about 3,000 buses in Karachi and the number of minibuses and coaches is around 13,000. But an official at DRTA says actual figure is nearly the double as many vehicles are plying without documentation.

Wasteful expenditure: Some sane transporters question the logic behind spending hundreds of thousand of rupees on decoration of vehicles, saying the money could be used for some better purposes.

"Transporters should spend this money to groom themselves," says Irshad Bokhari, president Karachi Transport Ittehad, who considers spending money on decorating transport vehicles is a 'wasteful expenditure.' The use of multiple colours on vehicles is also against the law as under the law all the buses and minibuses are to be coloured in only yellow colour while coaches should be painted with blue and white. "Instead of focusing on colour schemes, transporters should spend money to keep their vehicles technically sound as many vehicles are not fit to ply on the roads and many are operating without route permits," says Rafiullah Khan, an official at the Transport and Communication Department of the City Government. The logic may be appealing. But who will quell the artist inside each bus and truck driver? And besides, some say that sticking to the plain colours would make those long city traffic jams all the more boring.