

Operating on Three Wheels: Auto-Rickshaw Drivers of Delhi

Author(s): Dinesh Mohan and Dunu Roy

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Operating on Three Wheels

Auto-Rickshaw Drivers of Delhi

Increasingly the poor are being pushed to the edges of 'illegality' and 'invisibility'. Nothing describes this better than the plight of the auto-rickshaw drivers of Delhi who are facing a concerted attack by the administration and the media for their supposed 'venality'. Findings of a study undertaken to get a better understanding of the perspectives of both the commuter and the auto-rickshaw driver and to move towards policies that will benefit both parties.

DINESH MOHAN, DUNU ROY

There is an insidious process at work all over the country that is equating criminality with poverty. Slums, for instance, are seen as 'nurseries' of crime. 'Bad characters' inevitably live in the poorer quarters and are, as inevitably, rounded up whenever the police want to display action. Judicial pronouncements characterise them as 'pick-pockets' while eminent citizens express anxiety that if they are allowed to proliferate then there will be a wave of 'epidemics' in the city. Thus, increasingly the poor are being pushed to the edges of 'illegality' and 'invisibility'. Nothing describes this better than the plight of the auto-rickshaw drivers of Delhi who are facing the brunt of a concerted attack by the administration and media for their supposed 'venality'.

Three-wheeled scooter rickshaws (TSR) play an important role as para-transit modes in the public transport of people in most cities in India. According to official statistics 86,185 TSRs were registered in Delhi in 2001.¹ The number registered in 1996 was 80,208, and in 1999 it was 87,785. It is estimated that the population of Delhi increased by 20 per cent between 1996 and 2001, but the above statistics show that the availability of TSRs increased by only 7 per cent in the same period. In the last two years the number seems to have declined. However, newspaper reports use a much lower figure of 45,000 as the total number of TSRs in Delhi.² Therefore, it is possible that the total number of TSRs operating in Delhi has declined more than the official figures reflect.

Over the past year TSR drivers have been complaining about their working

conditions (especially lack of availability of CNG), about rise in costs of operating their vehicles and have been demanding an increase in fares. In addition, the TSR operators have been very unhappy with the requirement that they install electronic fare meters on their vehicles as this imposes an extra cost without any advantage, as the meters are not reliable and do not follow any standards.³ They have even gone on strike to make these demands but the problems persist. This is shown by the fact that commuters' complaints regarding TSR drivers find a prominent place on the city pages of newspapers and the drivers continue to voice their complaints regarding inadequate fare levels and intolerable working conditions. No one seems to be happy in the present situation.

The present study was undertaken to get a better understanding of the situation from both perspectives – the commuter and the TSR driver. The aim is to move toward development of policies that will benefit both parties and make life more liveable in Delhi.

A special form was designed in consultation with TSR owners to obtain information from TSR drivers on all aspects of their operations. This form was administered by members of Sajha Manch – an association of organisations and groups active in Delhi – and also distributed to TSR drivers for self-evaluation. A total of 274 responses were collected from different localities in the city although respondents from south Delhi dominate the sample. Surveys of bus stands and busy localities were also undertaken to understand the issues of concern to commuters. These surveys were done at six bus stands on Mall Road and four on Mehrauli-Badarpur Road.

Results

(1) Driver Characteristics

Driver age and family details are given in Figures 1 and 2. These data show that a vast majority of the drivers are below 50 years old and only 29 per cent are below 30 years old. This is reflected in the fact that 61 per cent of them have to support families of 5-8 persons. Of these, 89 per cent of the drivers live with their families in Delhi. These facts are important considerations in determining fare levels of TSRs, as most drivers have to support families and are not single persons who require a minimum wage.

(2) Vehicle Ownership and Financing

Figure 3 shows that a majority of the drivers (65 per cent) own their own vehicles and thus the responsibility of paying for the vehicle and associated loans and interest, maintenance, obtaining permits, etc, falls on them. The questionnaire revealed that most of them paid up to Rs 1,00,000 for the vehicle in the past. Those who have purchased their vehicles in the past two years have paid more than Rs 1,00,000 for the vehicle.

Most of them obtained the money from a financier or an 'agent'. None of those responding said that they had obtained the loan directly from a bank. The reason given by respondents for this was that the Delhi Finance Corporation (DFC) earlier required an FD for Rs 7,500 and an advance of Rs 11,000 by DD for giving the loan. Now it requires an FD of Rs 26,000 and a DD of Rs 16,000. In addition, Rs 10-12,000 are spent in fees given to various authorities including road tax, fitness certificate, insurance, etc. The private financier, on the other hand, demands an advance of Rs 60,000 but he makes the vehicle immediately available (as against a six-month delay in the case of DFC) along with all the relevant papers. There are two provisions to this, though. Firstly, the financier adds another Rs 60,000 to the cost of the vehicle. Secondly, if the driver-owner defaults on repayment of an instalment, the financier charges 5 per cent additional interest.

Regarding the P-4 permit required to commercially operate the vehicle, of a total of 118 responses, 35 per cent gave no data. Of those responding, 36 per cent said that they got the permit from a financier, 40 per cent from an agent, and

Figure 1: Distribution of Drivers by Age in Years

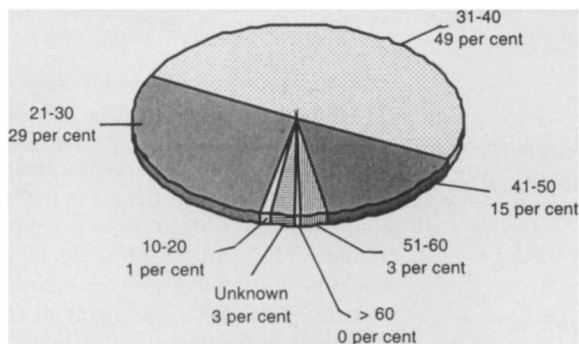
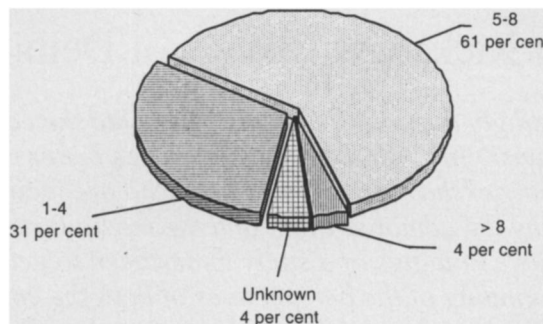


Figure 2: Distribution of Driver Family Size



only 24 per cent from other legal/semi-legal sources. Nine per cent of them paid less than Rs 1,000 for the permit, 26 per cent spent Rs 1-20,000, 38 per cent Rs 20-40,000. A third of them said they pay 10-20 per cent on loans (DFC charges 13-15 per cent) and two-thirds said that they have to pay over 20 per cent interest along with a guarantee (private financiers demand 24 per cent). Most of them also paid Rs 1,000-2,000 for the transfer fee. Even when an old vehicle is deposited with the Transport Department and the permit is renewed for a new one, the fee of Rs 1,000 is levied for renewal.

Thus the cost of owning the vehicle including the permit, etc, is much higher than the official sale price of the vehicle because of the agents and middlemen involved. Officially, at present, the chassis costs Rs 97,000 while the insurance, taxes, meter, etc, cost another Rs 10,000. But the actual price paid by the TSR owner to the financier is as much as Rs 1,80,000. These considerations need to be taken into account in estimating the fare to be charged from passengers. In addition, those drivers who have converted their engines to CNG have spent an average of Rs 30,000 in installation of the kit.

(3) Fuel and Engine Issues

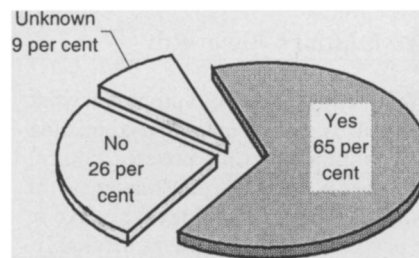
Figure 4 gives the distribution of the TSRs owned by the respondents of the questionnaire. Only 14 per cent of those polled owned TSRs which had been converted to CNG with a kit. About half each obtained their kits from Sharimaker and Bajaj. All of them spent about Rs 30,000 on the conversion.

(a) *Problems with CNG kits:* Most of the drivers said that they had technical problems with CNG kits and that maintenance was difficult and costly. They would advise others not to use TSRs with conversion

kits. Those with CNG kits have to use extra lubricating oil to keep engines running without piston seizure due to overheating. The amount of oil used by different drivers every day is shown in Figure 5. These data show that on an average about 200 ml of oil is used every day. This oil is released to the atmosphere after incomplete burning in the engine. The pollution caused by oil burning would be in addition to the emissions due to CNG combustion. This extra pollution may offset the advantages of the CNG engine. Therefore, CNG conversion kits of the design available may not be desirable and further conversions should be discouraged.

(b) *Problems with new CNG vehicles:* Most of the drivers find that it is more difficult and expensive to maintain the CNG engine as compared to the petrol engine. A third of the drivers complained of technical failures and difficulties in having vehicles repaired. Respondents stated that the head and piston in the new engine are not adequately lubricated and, therefore, an additional cooling requirement has to be provided for. Furthermore, the new drive through a chain creates frequent problems because the chain is not heavy-duty and requires constant adjustment. When the rings and chains begin wearing out, oil consumption increases to as much as 800 ml per day. Furthermore, because of the absence of trained mechanics, all repairs have to be at company garages and there are inordinate delays in these outlets. These specific technical problems faced by the drivers need to be looked into by the manufacturer and resolved. TSR drivers and owners are particularly emphatic that these should be addressed before other manufacturers enter the field. Otherwise, the popularity of CNG as a fuel will suffer and drivers would need to earn extra money due to increased maintenance costs.

Figure 3: Vehicle Ownership by Driver



(4) TSR Operation

(a) *Daily operation:* Figure 6 shows the amount drivers cover per day in km with and without passengers. The average for all the respondents amounts to about 77 km with passengers and 109 km without passengers. At least 25 per cent of the distance covered is without passengers according to this survey. This issue needs to be factored into the fare calculations also. It appears that most drivers aim to do at least 100 km per day with fare paying passengers.

Respondents state that the high degree of travel without passengers for longer journeys is because there are no TSR stands and the prevalence of No Parking signs at far-off destinations like the airport, Gurgaon, NOIDA, and Ghaziabad (which have now become part of the metropolitan conurbation). Drivers have, therefore, to return empty from these places, especially because these are also locations where *the traffic police resorts to challaning frequently*. These vehicle use statistics are reflected in the earning per day responses by the drivers, given in Figure 7. The average earning as reported is about Rs 200-250 per day.

(b) *Overcharging:* Even if one assumes that running a TSR costs a minimum of Rs 1.50 per km, the TSR driver could not be earning more than Rs 100 per day (approximately Rs 3,000 per month). This

Figure 4: TSR Distribution by Type of Engine

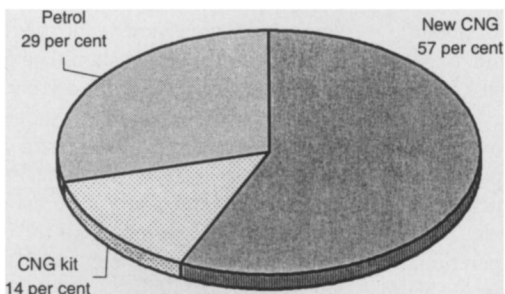


Figure 5: Mobil Oil Use Per Day by TSR in ml

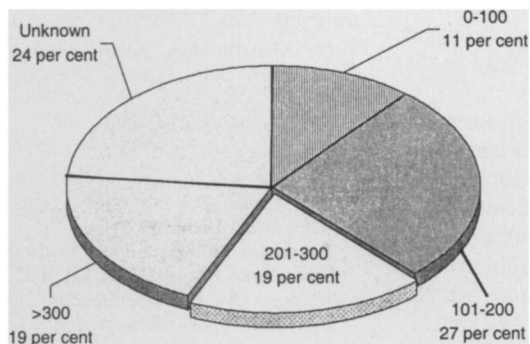


Figure 6: Vehicle Use in km Per Day

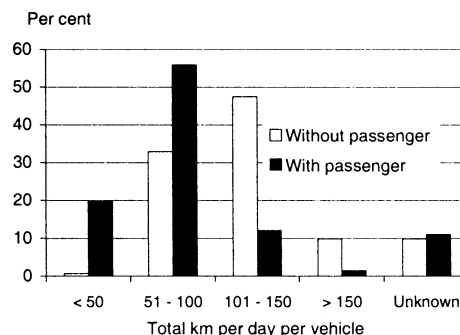
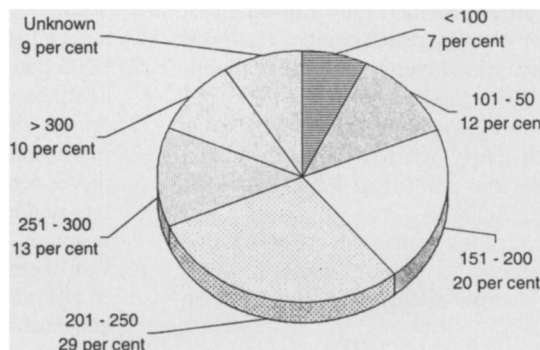


Figure 7: Income Distribution (Rs) of TSR Drivers



shows that the TSR drivers are working at close to minimum wages, and therefore it is not surprising that they resort to overcharging. As a matter of fact 72 per cent of the drivers have mentioned that the fare being unreasonable is a reason for overcharging and 95 per cent say that the fare rates are too low. Of those responding to the question on overcharging, 18 per cent admit to doing so. Similarly, 19 per cent of the drivers admit that they refuse passengers often. Approximately half of them say they refuse when they have to go home, and the other half explain their reasons for refusal being located in the time of day (late evening or night) when a drunk or aggressive passenger demands to be taken to remote destinations. It is not surprising that half the drivers say that they have had an argument with passengers and a similar number claim that passengers have tried to cheat or fight with them.

(c) *Fare meters*: All the drivers who have experience with electronic meters are very unhappy with them and find them unreliable and prone to malfunction. This is supported by evidence from at least two technical institutions that have tested these meters and found them to be erratic and sensitive to rain, temperature, electrical disturbances, and mechanical shocks.

When the meters malfunction, there is no facility where they can be speedily and efficiently repaired. Some respondents have suggested that if the meter malfunctions, it is not the TSR driver who should be held responsible, but the meter manufacturer or registered repair shop – as in the case of Bombay.

(d) *Pre-paid booths*: The drivers are not in favour of pre-paid booths, as they seem to have a great deal of problem with the operation of the same. Many respondents claimed that the booth in-charge demands an extra Rs 10 for giving them their place in the line or threatens to ‘challan’ them. Even though most of these booths have been installed at regular stands, the TSR drivers have no security at these places and there is no provision of even minimal facilities such as drinking water and toilets.

(e) *Fare structure*: There seems to be an agreement amongst the respondents that if the meter-down fare is reasonable, then the TSR will not be averse to taking passengers for short distances. 40 per cent of the drivers suggested a meter-down fare of Rs 10 and 53 per cent have indicated Rs 10-15. 91 per cent of the drivers have indicated they would like the fare to be Rs 6-10 per km after the first km. Investigators have compared the rates in Delhi to those

in the other metros and report that it is Rs 3.00 in Delhi, Rs 6.00 in Indore, Rs 7.00 in Hyderabad, Rs 8.00 in Mumbai, and Rs 8.50 in Bangalore; per kilometre fares are Rs 2.75 in Delhi, Rs.3.40 in Indore, Rs 5.80 in Hyderabad, Rs 8.00 in Mumbai, and Rs 2.50 in Bangalore. In fact, the Rs 10 meter-down fare would be a realistic option as no citizen is able to hire a TSR for less than Rs 15 at present. Thus, a de facto meter-down fare already exists.

(5) *TSRs and the Police*

93 per cent of the drivers admitted that they have been ‘challaned’ by the police. 89 per cent of the drivers claim that they have had to bribe the policemen. A majority of the ‘challans’ have to do with parking problems or problems while waiting for passengers. There is a clear need for establishment of designated parking/waiting areas for TSRs at convenient locations all over the city. A paucity of facilities and the inadequacy of the fares forces TSR drivers to struggle for their survival and this has given them the public image of being dishonest and rude. Many TSR drivers resent this image deeply and feel that their struggle to support families as decent human beings is not being

recognised by society. They have given the following table, which is representative of the cruel situation that they find themselves in:

Year	Agency Cost of TSR	Meter Down	Fare for 10 km
1995	52,000	Rs 3	Rs 23.40
1998	57,500	Re 1	Rs 33.00
2001	86,500	Re 1	Rs 27.50

Role of TSR in Urban Transport

TSRs should be preferred transportation modes as compared to personal modes of transport and should be encouraged in urban areas provided they run on LPG/CNG or 4-stroke petrol engines equipped with catalytic converters. Ample availability of TSRs (and taxis):

- Encourages public transport use as one can easily get to one's destination from the end point if in a hurry, or it is raining, etc.
- Encourages non-ownership of private vehicles as point-to-point transportation is easily available for special occasions.
- TSR/taxi drivers do not cheat when supply is abundant and fare structure is reasonable, and so passengers are not scared of hassles and arguments.

Greater use of TSRs reduces need for parking places. A private car needs a minimum of two parking places – one at home and one at the destination. Whereas, a TSR just needs one parking place in the city and if it does ten trips a day, it reduces the need for nine parking places at home and the destination.

A TSR is preferable to a car as it carries the same number of people on an average, takes one-third the parking area and one half the space while moving as a car. Since it weighs one-third of a car it wears out the road much less, has less tyre/rubber use, and uses one-third of national resources to produce it. All this reduces indirect pollution. Since TSRs have a small engine (175 cc vs 800 cc for Maruti) they pollute much less per passenger than a car if the engine is as specified earlier. Because of the small size of the engine, they can't go faster than 50 km/h, thus keeping to urban speed limits and can control others' speeds also. Because of lower speeds and lighter weights, they can't produce fatal accidents among pedestrians and bicyclists easily as compared to cars.

Therefore, TSR use should be encouraged as much as possible in Indian urban areas.

Recommendations

- (1) The fare structure needs immediate revision. A meter-down fare of about Rs 10 for the first km would be a realistic option. For subsequent km an objective formula should be devised taking into account realistic expenditures of TSR operators – high purchase price, high interest rates, increased maintenance expenses, realistic daily operation distances, empty operation, fuel costs, etc, fare revisions should be automatic and should be done every year on July 1 based on cost of living index, and latest budget recommendations. The fare should be revised automatically following fuel price changes.
- (2) CNG conversion kit use may be discontinued.
- (3) Spaces should be provided for standing and parking for TSRs at convenient places near offices, places of business, bus stands, schools, residential areas, hospitals, markets, airport, etc.
- (4) Use of electronic meters should be put in abeyance until such time that BIS standardised meters are available.

- (5) The Transport Department needs to review the licensing and inspection procedures to make them less troublesome and more efficient and the information on procedures should be made widely available to TSR drivers.
- (6) Zonal transport authorities should be empowered for supervision and certifying fitness. (At the moment fitness certificate is issued only at Burari, right at the northern periphery of the city.)
- (7) Uniforms, ID cards, etc, need to be speedily issued. [27]

For further information, contact:

Hazards Centre, 92H Pratap Market, Munirka, New Delhi 110067
26187806.
TRIPP: Main Building, Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi 110017
26858703.

Notes

- 1 *Road Accidents in Delhi 2001*, Delhi Traffic Police, New Delhi, 2002.
- 2 'Police Go Soft on Autos', Shubhajt Roy, Times News Network, July 25, 2002.
- 3 *BIS Reject Govt Plea to Set Standards*, Shubhajt Roy, Times News Network, July 23, 2002.

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