

COMMUNAL UBER IN DELHI, TRAFFIC-JAMMED ETHICS

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Uber in Delhi does not run quite the same way as uber in say, a city like Los Angeles.

The San Francisco-based creators designed the ever more popular app to streamline the process of joining ride-seeker to ride-provider utilizing the technology of GPS. In California, ride-seeking client enters address into the uber app and within seconds, a map appears crawling with minute images of ant-like cars swarming a honey jar. Within minutes, one of these cars is on its way, GPS seamlessly guiding it to the client's location-enabled smartphone or a specific address. The car arrives, the client enters and then the driver sets off to her desired destination, utilizing one of several apps which efficiently analyze traffic conditions to determine the best route. Upon arrival, the customer exits the car and the ride is charged to her credit card, a cashless transaction involving the bare minimum of driver-rider interaction. One individualized automaton bobbing through a sterile universe of self-proficient consumer-workers.

In Delhi, however, it is quite the inverse situation, and not just because you have the option to pay with cash. Firstly, attempting to open the uber app is a hit-or-miss affair (same applies to Ola, the Indian version of this taxi service masquerading as a tech company, but for brevity's sake, let's just stick to uber and remember it's a catch-all term for all "ride-sharing" apps). It may open. It may not. It may still think that you're on your last ride completed six days ago. Who knows? Then, if it doesn't open, the network will doubtlessly be slow so it can take upward of twenty minutes to enter the pick-up address and your destination. Once a car is on its way, the driver will invariably call and ask you where you are and how to get there. This is very befuddling because it belies the point of GPS which should in fact guide him to you. If you're a barely-Hindi-speaking person like myself, you must grab the nearest Hindi-speaker who will spend no less than

four minutes giving detailed instructions about your location. Sometimes when you're in a strange place, this kind good Samaritan is actually a complete stranger whom you just collared and then shoved your cell phone in his/her face gesticulating with panicked gestures. On a good day, the driver will just call one time. On a bad day, the driver may call up to six times to actually find you.

By this stage, you are already late.

Once you enter the car, the driver asks if he can start the trip and you say, please, any time is the right time. On a good day, the GPS or rather the network that supports the GPS is working. On a bad day, the driver asks you where you are going because unfortunately, Madame, GPS nahi chal raha hai (and/or the driver is not well-versed in map-reading). But you have no idea. Besides, GPS was made for countries that use street numbers and named roads but in India, addresses are given in relation to landmarks (near the Kamal Cinema, opposite the Bikaneerwallah, behind the temple). GPS does not speak the language of the people everywhere and besides, is it really possible to fully map a city as frenetic and kinetic as Delhi with its vast population and mushrooming settlements and sidewalk businesses?

You phone the person you are going to meet and she spends ten minutes explaining to the driver how to get there (turn right at the flower stall, look for Delhi Public School). This is the start of an exciting adventure as your intrepid driver begins his heroic attempt to take you from Point A to Point B. You sit in awe, staggered by the sheer amount of energy that is necessary to navigate such traffic-clogged roads teeming with all forms of life: over twenty-five million people live here but so do long-haired pigs, wild, jewel-coloured peacocks, knock-kneed goats, hefty buffalo, hump-backed bulls, cows sometimes all dressed up in marigold necklaces, the occasional painted elephant or testy camel, mischievous monkeys also known as baboons in other countries, squirrels also known as chipmunks on American cartoons, shiny-feathered cockerels and a large member of the deer/buck family known in Hindi as the neelgai.

If Cairo is the city of stray cats, Delhi is no doubt the city of [Zen dogs](#). The skies are relatively less crowded although still filled with crows, red-eyed pigeons, hawks, kites, green parrots etc. Ideally, you would travel by helicopter but that is beyond your budget so you try not to have a panic attack as the time ticks by and you wish you were in the ladies' car on the gendered metro. But alas, there is no metro station where you have to go today, otherwise you would have sidestepped Ethical Problem #1 by reducing your carbon footprint by taking the train. Now, you're being environmentally incorrect.

Why didn't you take a three-wheeled, green and yellow tin can coffin also known as a tuk tuk/autorickshaw whose daredevil drivers spend all day breathing in the thick air of the world's most polluted city. They scoot through traffic faster than cars sometimes because they defy the laws of physics, squeezing into and between any sliver of an opening.

You have been told that autowallahs are scum of the earth cheats who spend all their ill-gotten earnings whoring and drinking. But this may be another Upper Middle Class Urban Gospel that justifies the pittance you traditionally pay them. Yes, you! You, a kind of leftie, liberal, progressive sort who is all about greater income equality and lifting up the downtrodden but yup, you can't bear being taken for a ride so you spend infinite amounts of time and energy bargaining with autowallahs over a ten rupee price difference, only to feel victorious when you get the right price... but also that gnawing feeling of guilt...

Is the correct "local" price, the ethical price? An autowallah won't move for less than thirty rupees, even if the distance is less than two kilometres (the official government-determined rate is 25 rupees for 0 – 2 kms) but he will take you a dozen kilometres for eighty or ninety (your Hindi bargaining skills are ace!). It doesn't add up, especially when you consider the time they lose when you don't know where you are going. Which is most of the time.

So that's why you are of the minority opinion that autowallahs and uber drivers are heroes! They do everything possible to get you to your destination. True, some of them are grumpy (wouldn't you be if you had to sit and breathe in smog all day long whilst stuck in traffic?). Far, far worse, some of them are rapists and would-be sexual molesters. But many of them are very professional and once you're in their vehicle, they will go to extreme lengths to get you to your destination as you blindly traipse around Delhi's myriad colonies and enclaves and their labyrinth of idiosyncratically-numbered blocks. They do not get discouraged, asking directions of scootie drivers carrying whole families or sleepy chowkidars, manning booms and ostensibly protecting various buildings.

Sometimes this process takes a very long time so the driver has to exit the car and walk a few metres away and relieve himself into a convenient nala. On one 16km journey, you count more than twenty people relieving themselves. Although not a single woman. Only men seem to feel the compulsion to urinate in public or women just have much stronger bladders or is it that misogynistic society would frown upon women whipping out their privates? Sometimes the driver may stop to ask a urinating man for directions. This is not very entertaining. The man's back stiffens and you have to wait for him to finish his business, shake his member, zip himself up and then turn to bark some directions.

Uber in Delhi is a very communal affair. Many people are involved in assisting you to get from Point A to Point B. In other words, it takes a village, none of this bloodless, robotic technology-assisted car ride.

It's all very interesting intellectually-speaking but by the way, you are now very, very, very late! But thankfully, you have finally found your way out of Vasant Vihar and are headed towards Nelson Mandela Marg. Phew!

You consider shooting yourself when the car slows to a halt and you realize this is not a car park, it's yet another traffic jam. You decide against suicide. Better to jump out of the car and hop bonnet to bonnet, leap over motorcyclists and then what...take a snooze in the back of that bullock cart over there. Then, all the beggar children with their matted hair and the desperate, sinewy men panhandling plastic dogs and rose bouquets will come and poke you. In the car you can keep the window up but in an auto or a bullock cart, they will lean in to tap you, to try and make you look into their eyes so it's that much more difficult to pretend not to see them.

But Upper Middle Class Urban Gospel #2 allows you to sidestep Ethical Problem #2 – to give to beggars or not – because the answer is clearly don't give, at least to you – the potential giver – but who knows what the beggar thinks. But you have read Rohinton Mistry's amazing novel, *A Fine Balance*, and know all about the beggar mafias which sometimes go so far as to mutilate children to make them more effective beggars, an act so diabolical it makes your skin burn. Giving money only feeds the beast. It won't help solve the overarching structural problem of endemic poverty and increasing income inequality...Or is that just a convenient tale told by those – you! - who can afford to close their windows, seal themselves inside their own air-conditioned world? You ask the driver to turn on the radio. Best to stop thinking about this. Okay but can you give food instead? You search for the packet of biscuits you were supposed to buy for just such an occasion. Instead you find three pairs of sparkly new earrings you could not resist buying at the mall.

You're so beyond late now!

And you're well and truly stuck in this traffic jam, sticky as wet tar. You decide to surf the inter webs on your phone. Is there network? Yes! In luck. You read a headline, "[Growth in India has blown us away: Uber.](#)" Uber is in a fierce competition with Ola for market share but they are bolshi, confident that India will continue to be their oyster. But then another article, "[Uber, Ola losing sheen in India as driver incomes fall.](#)"

Oh Jelly Beans! Why? Now here I am stuck and it all comes tumbling down on my head, the [California lawsuit](#) – Uber drivers who want the company to treat them as employees so they get benefits and have some security and stability, not just independent contractors free-floating on the inconsistent tides of supply and demand. But if uber hires drivers as employees, they would have to admit they are not just a tech company but a taxi service provider and become subject to the same type of regulation that raises taxi cab fares. The GPS may function better or worse in different cities but the global consensus of taxi drivers – in London, Los Angeles, Johannesburg and New Delhi – is that Uber and its army of so-called part-time/flexi-time “independent contractors” is undermining their ability to make a full-time living. Uber follows the classic logic of neoliberalism – omit all extraneous costs (decent wages) so that supply of drivers is exactly proportional to demand of riders. But that is a hard balance to strike in the so-called “sharing economy” that has none of the advantages of a communal village because risk is not so much as shared but shoved on to the “independent contractor” who

bears the cost of buying his own vehicle, paying for his own insurance etc. but gets the benefit of using uber's app...hmmm...

...Ethical Problem #3....

On the bright side, consumers benefit because of Uber's low overhead costs. It means you pay far less than you do for a taxi. Yippee hooray?

Your phone rings. "I'm so sorry, I'm still stuck in traffic...yes, so very late...sorry," you begin, and then you just realize that although you have been physically inert, trapped here in the backseat, there has been a lot of mental exertion and, "I'm so sorry, I am so exhausted. Let's reschedule." No, it's better to go and have a foot massage or maybe a manicure. You can't think about all of this anymore. You should go to the mall and buy some shiny earrings. And please don't contemplate how much the workers who made them were paid or not paid! Don't ask if they work in a safe environment or have proper health insurance. Just be glad this uber ride is so damn cheap. Now you can go and spend the money you have saved by not paying the higher sum you would have paid a taxi driver on something that will make you happy, like a pair of glittery gold hoops.

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