



Auto-rickshaws in Indian cities: Public perceptions and operational realities



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ABSTRACT

Auto-rickshaws play an important role in urban transport in India. Despite this role, auto-rickshaws and their drivers face considerable criticism from the public, the media and policy makers. There is a contentious public debate about the perceived faults of auto-rickshaws and their drivers, and the policies to address these issues in Indian cities. Our objective is to provide balance and nuance to this debate, and to enable the perspective of drivers to be more effectively considered, along with that of auto-rickshaw users and the wider travelling public, in policy-making. To this end, we critically discuss the criticism and underlying perceptions; highlight the niche role of auto-rickshaws in urban transport; and present an investigation of the realities and economics of auto-rickshaw ownership and operation.

The actual congestion, safety and air pollution impacts of auto-rickshaws are at strong variance with the criticisms and perceptions on the part of the public, media and policy makers. The realities of auto-rickshaw operation are extremely challenging, and unlikely to place the driver and his family above the poverty line, which may drive some of the actions, such as not going by the meter. Finally, we critically assess policy recommendations to address the issues related to auto-rickshaws and their drivers, and offer our own suggestions regarding open permit systems, improved access to formal sector credit, a timetable for regular fare revision and the phasing out of auto-rickshaws with two-stroke engines.

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1. Introduction

India is home to three quarters of the world's auto-rickshaws, which are three-wheeled motor vehicles that are hired to move both people and goods (Mani and Pant, 2011). These vehicles play an important role in urban transport in the country, being used for a wide range of trip purposes, often for trips that cannot be practically undertaken on other types of public transport, at considerably lower cost than would be incurred in a taxi. Despite their important role, auto-rickshaws and their drivers face considerable criticism from the public, the media and policy makers. There is a contentious public debate about the faults of auto-rickshaws, the attitudes and actions of their drivers, and the policies to address these issues. While auto-rickshaw users and the public have

understandable concerns regarding these issues, this debate does not, for the most part, take into account the perspectives of the drivers, an oversight the paper attempts to rectify. By offering this seldom-publicized perspective, we aim to provide balance and nuance to the often antagonistic public discourse on auto-rickshaws in Indian cities. Our paper is also motivated by the need for policy-making to consider and integrate the perspective of auto-rickshaw drivers in addition to that of auto-rickshaw users and the wider travelling public, for policy success.

2. Methods and materials

We first discuss the key criticisms and underlying perceptions related to auto-rickshaws and their drivers on the part of the public, the media and policy makers, as represented in the English-language press, which reflects and shapes the views of the politically influential urban middle class; public contributions to online discussion forums and online material produced by “civil society” organisations advocating on behalf of both auto-rickshaw

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drivers and users; policy documents and reports produced by various government agencies at different levels; and statements and actions on the part of policy-makers. As for the English language press and online materials, we conducted an extensive survey of items regarding various issues related to auto-rickshaws (driver behaviour, fares and fare regulation and enforcement, air pollution, safety, and traffic congestion) from 2010; in our discussion, we highlight only representative examples which reflect public, media and policy-maker criticisms and perceptions, owing to space restrictions.

We then provide a counterpoint to these criticisms and perceptions by critically discussing the role of the auto-rickshaw in urban transport in India, with particular reference to urban trip-making, air pollution, safety and congestion; and by investigating the daily realities and economics of auto-rickshaw ownership and operations from the point of view of the drivers. For our discussion of the role of auto-rickshaws in urban transport, we draw on the peer-reviewed literature, data produced by government agencies and available in the public domain, and research reports produced by non-governmental organizations. Our discussion of the realities and economics of auto-rickshaw ownership and operation is based on the findings of reports on and surveys of the auto-rickshaw sectors in Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. These surveys include, importantly, that conducted by one of us (Reynolds) in Delhi in 2009; this survey, in which 381 auto-rickshaw drivers responded, covered a wide range of issues, including demographics, working hours and daily travel, vehicle purchase, and ownership and operation (including fuel economy and consumption, maintenance practices, costs related to renting, loan repayment, fuel and oil, maintenance, revenues, and daily income), besides factors related to air pollutant emissions. While the factors related to air pollutant emissions were discussed in Reynolds et al. (2011b)¹, the demographic and socio-economic factors covered in the survey are discussed in depth in this article. Demographic and socio-economic data is also drawn from surveys carried out by urban planners and researchers interested in the governance of the auto-rickshaw sectors in Bangalore (CISTUP, 2012), Chennai (Garg et al., 2010), Delhi (Mohan and Roy, 2003), and Mumbai (Mani, 2012), and from data collected by a special committee on auto-rickshaw fare revision in Mumbai (Hakim, 2012). The data was supplemented by interviews with an auto-rickshaw advocacy group in New Delhi (Nyayabhoomi), which provided estimates of how maintenance costs change over the life of the vehicle.

Lastly, we critically discuss policy responses that have been suggested by, among others, NGOs and policy research organizations, to address the perceived problems posed by auto-rickshaws and their drivers. We conclude our paper by summarizing our key points and exploring some policy implications that flow from them, and offering our own suggestions for reconciling the interests and concerns on the part of auto-rickshaw users and drivers, the broader travelling public, and policy makers.

3. Criticisms and perceptions

The criticisms and negative perceptions of auto-rickshaws and their drivers on the part of the public are largely derived from brief interactions at the roadside when hiring an auto-rickshaw. These criticisms and perceptions coalesce around several key issues: that auto-rickshaw drivers are greedy and 'overcharge'; that their vehicles are unsafe; that auto-rickshaws are polluting and finally, that they are a major cause of congestion. As we demonstrate

below, these opinions are widely held in the public discourse, and are sometimes expressed even by those at higher levels of government. In 2011, then Delhi Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit claimed: "Autorickshaws are not a good option. They are uncomfortable and pollute [the] environment. Autorickshaw drivers are unruly and harass passengers" (The Guardian, 2010).

These perceptions are reflected in the media and the websites of civil society organisations, which advocate on issues important to the urban middle-class, such as "illegal" settlements (Bhan, 2009), street trading (Shapiro-Anjaria, 2006) and pollution (Veron, 2006). The English-language newspapers, long a marker of middle-class status, have mirrored public hostility by portraying auto-rickshaws and their drivers unfavourably. Middle class "civil society" organisations, which are free from the confines of the print media, are able to use stronger rhetoric and imagery in their campaigns.

3.1. Overcharging

Auto-rickshaws in six of India's seven largest cities are fitted with mandatory fare meters,² which are calibrated to charge a standard fare set by the local Transport Department. This entails a "flag down" payment of between INR10–25 (US\$0.16–0.40³) for the first 1–2 km, plus a flat rate of INR6–12 (US\$0.10–0.19) for every subsequent kilometre. Overcharging is considered to occur when a driver refuses to switch on the meter, or claims it is broken, and/or bargains with the passenger to fix a price. This process is illegal but widespread.

Official fare calculations typically take into account increases in fuel prices, capital costs, inflation and annual charges (for example, Bisht et al., 2010 in New Delhi; Hakim, 2012, in Mumbai), although there is no standard formula or set timetable for fare revision, which leaves the process vulnerable to disputes between unions, consumer organisations and local governments (Bhat, 2012).

Despite comprehensive fare calculations in many cities, overcharging, as defined above, persists, suggesting either the underestimation – by passengers and the authorities – of the costs incurred by drivers; and/or the overestimation of the value of their work on the part of the drivers. The media and consumer citizen groups come to the latter conclusion. The English-language newspapers use the verb "to fleece" to describe overcharging; for example:

"The state failed to acknowledge popular sentiment after citizens overwhelmingly endorsed the TOI [Times of India] campaign last year to make auto-rickshaw drivers use meters and not fleece customers by demanding exorbitant fares" (Times of India, 2013a).

"If the auto-rickshaw drivers continue to fleece the innocent people, they will keep hiring only call taxis..." (The Hindu, 2013a).

The perception of the auto-rickshaw driver as greedy also features in civil society campaigns. In 2012, the social activism website, Change India, carried a petition calling for a better system for making complaints about auto-rickshaw drivers in Bangalore. The campaign referred to Bangalore's auto-rickshaw drivers as *auto rakshasa* ("auto-demons" or "devils") and featured a poster of a horned monster sitting in an auto-rickshaw asking for more than the meter fare. The petitioners argued that overcharging is a matter of "economic justice" and implore the "concerned citizens"

² These cities are Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Bangalore. Kolkata does not have mandatory fare meters.

³ US dollar conversions calculated using the exchange rate on 7th July 2015: US \$1 = INR63.25.

¹ The discussion related to air pollutant emissions in Reynolds et al. (2011b) was based on a sub-sample of 349 observations.

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