

October , 2006

Gift of the Cab

It's been about a hundred years since the taxicab came into service. Looking at the genus in Delhi (species Ambassador) and in Mumbai (species Fiat), they seem unchanged. Our generic taxis are worthy museum pieces. In vain did I recently beg a Mumbai cabbie to part with a door handle that unhinged from the relic as I exited, but he spurned my entreaties for the souvenir.

Bollywood meanwhile has rejoined celebration of the cabbie with a film titled Taxi No. 9211 following Dev Anand's Taxi Driver. They add to a body of work that includes Martin Scorsese's acclaimed Taxi Driver, Luc Besson's suspenseful Taxi (remade in Hindi as Dhoom), and the documentary Taxi Dreams.

The word taxi originated from the Greek taxideyo, meaning to travel. Although the first metered taxicab was built by the German Gottlieb Daimler in 1897, it was only a decade later, when New Yorker Henry Allen imported French cabs to the Big Apple in good numbers and painted them yellow (because it was the color most easily seen from a distance), that the saga of the modern taxi began.

In the century since, taxis have evolved all over the world, except in India. From the automobile itself, to add-ons like two-way radios in the late 1940s to GPS in the late 1990s, taxis are unrecognizable from what they were. Mexico City, Cairo, Beijing and other peer cities have moved up in the taxicab styles. Even the majestic Austin FX4, the London Taxi that had an unparalleled 40-year run, has changed. But the crates of India wobble on.

Some of this is because we treat cabbies shabbily, making the profession unremunerative and unattractive. But outside India, desi cabbies are famously common and popular. They are one of our big manpower exports, not as hip as engineers or doctors perhaps, but certainly as visible.

Cab driving is often a poor Indian or African immigrant's first job. There is a wonderful scene in the movie *The Terminal* in which Tom Hanks, playing a fresh-off-the-plane foreigner, jumps into a New York cab and asks the immigrant driver when he came to the U.S. "On Tuesday," the cabbie replies gruffly.

South Asians form a significant percentage of cabbies in North America, particularly in New York City (35 per cent). In fact, in NYC, kinship between Indian and Pakistani cabbies, typically Punjabis from either side of the border, is greater than between Pakistani and Bangladeshi cabbies (despite their common religion). There is no greater heart-warming -- or ear-reddening -- conversation than two cabbies in NYC exchanging greetings in coarse Punjabi.

Mohinder Singh came to Washington DC area from Delhi in 1974 forsaking a degree in science and a career as a teacher. After three decades in the cab business, he is now a regular call-up on the Hill, where his clientele includes Senators and Congressmen who often page for his Lincoln Town Car when they need a ride.

At 56, wearing oxford shirts, khakis and armed with a Bluetoothed Blackberry, he could be one of them. They treat him that way. When his mother-in-law died recently, he received a card from Howard Dean, the Democratic leader. When *The Hill* magazine profiled him, law-makers were only too glad to offer testimonials.

Many desi cabbies in America have fine qualifications, but like driving cabs. They pull in \$ 150-\$200 a day, helped by generous tips, ten per cent being customary. They can afford to turn over the automobiles. They live in good homes. I don't know about India taking off, but outside India, some Indians are happy just taxi-ing.