

Survival of the Fittest

1992 was an evolutionary high point in the public transport ecosystem of Delhi- a new species, Red Line buses were introduced. These buses, most of them rumoured to be owned by either senior police officers or politicians, were like the dinosaurs- they soon took over the ecosystem and emerged at the top of the food chain. Not for nothing did most of them have "Road King" written on their rears! And road kings they were- stopping anywhere on the road, driving at breakneck speeds with power horns blaring and mowing down helpless pedestrians, two-wheelers and other lowly species. Much like an animal in nature mutates under natural selection pressures, when the other animals in the primordial jungle, which Delhi roads certainly are, protested, the government conveniently changed the name from Red Line to Blue Line.

But alas, like the dinosaurs, their reign also came to an end- starting in 2008, the government decided to phase them out and finally in 2012, the last of these monsters disappeared. During their two decades life span, these creatures shared the ecosystem with other modes of public transport- the rickety DTC buses, the black and yellow ambassador taxis, the auto rickshaws and in the outlying areas, the humble cycle rickshaw. But sometime in 2002, a new kid on the block emerged- the first Delhi Metro line.

The Blue Lines were undoubtedly at the head of the food chain, but the other creatures had also carved out their own niche in the ecosystem. The autos in particular were notorious for many things- overcharging, rash driving and of course, stopping anywhere they saw a passenger. In this they obviously imitated the Red/Blue Lines. And yet, they were involved in relatively few accidents though it can be argued that they caused many more because of their erratic driving. To add to this, it was also rumoured that a large percentage of the drivers were smack addicts, though that seemed unlikely. The glazed eyes were more likely due to lack of sleep and long hours than narcotics. Nevertheless, each element of the system had a role to play in providing the much needed connectivity in the sprawling metropolis.

Then came the radio taxis. These were initially very successful since they fulfilled a niche in the consumer demand- primarily for transport to and from the airport and railway stations. Their initial success was such that a large number of private drivers took hefty loans to buy their vehicles and started working for the radio taxi companies. At first the business thrived- it was not unusual for a driver to earn, after all the expenses, more than double his previous salary.

But capitalism, like nature has its unchanging laws. Following the inexorable law of demand and supply, the lucrative pickings attracted more and more cars and soon, the drivers were struggling to make a living and repay their loans. The drivers had to work under inhuman conditions to even survive- for instance, being ever alert for the ping on their devices from

the taxi company, to grab a fare to the airport. One had to be the fastest draw to be the first to take the offer. And once again, the long and strenuous hours meant that the drivers were less than alert on the roads.

All this while, the Delhi Metro was expanding its network at a furious pace and wherever one could, one took the swanky, mostly reliable, clean and convenient Metro. This though left the problem of last mile connectivity because though DTC increased its buses, they were still not enough. Once again, a new species emerged in this landscape in the form of e-rickshaws.

These were clean, green and human alternatives to the cycle rickshaw. The Chinese versions were cheap and one didn't need any licence or registration to operate initially. What is more, charging the batteries by illegally tapping the grid was free! Much like a successful species which saturates its niche, soon the Metro stations and neighbourhood markets were flooded with these since they fulfilled a genuine need for last mile connections. Never mind that the drivers, mostly young and brash, would, like their older cousins the auto drivers, stop anywhere, turn anywhere and thereby be the cause of many accidents.

And finally came the ultimate wunderkind- the app based taxi services Uber and Ola. Like genetically modified organisms, these information technology enabled creatures have proliferated the metropolitan landscape because they provided a cheap, comfortable and convenient alternative to people who were sick of driving in the terrible traffic. Once again, thousands of old and new drivers flocked to join this bandwagon. The initial earnings were mouth-watering, what with all the generous incentives which these deep pocketed start-ups offered. The minor issue of knowing how to drive properly or indeed of having a valid driving licence was easy to take care of- the first could just be ignored since it was a problem for other people on the road while the latter could be arranged. Places like Manipur, Assam and even Mathura, till recently at least, were notorious for "generously" distributing licences. In fact, any self-respecting truck or bus driver worth his Mobil oil is known to carry several of these licences which he happily surrenders to the traffic cops who might challan him!

And so we have a situation where the Ola and Uber cabs are everywhere- parked in front of Metro stations or on the highway, and of course on the smaller roads. An obviously novice driver, one hand on the wheel and another holding a phone, one eye on the road and the other on the phone attached to the windscreen with Google Maps giving directions is now a common sight. And heaven help you if you happen to be just behind him and his Google Maps instructs him to turn- turn he will no matter what. But with the cab companies pulling back the incentives, most of them are finding it hard to meet their expenses. And they can't leave because of the loans they have taken for their vehicles.

The drivers of autos, e-rickshaws and now the app based cabs are of course performing yeomen service for the city. Working long hours in horrendous conditions, fortified with

that wonderful elixir of the oppressed everywhere in our country, *gutkha* (or now tobacco and pan masala mixed), they are the ones who make the city function. Commuting in the city, which is even now a nightmare, would be unthinkable without them. And so we need to be thankful- despite the traffic snarls caused by parking and stopping anywhere, the accidents caused by their turning suddenly.

Like nature, this ecosystem survives with different species, with different adaptations to the varying environment. And those who mourn the loss of the dinosaurs will get some solace because a smaller avatar- the Grameen Sewa vehicles are still thriving in various pockets of the city!

Shobhit Mahajan

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

Feb 4, 2017