

Auto-rickshaws in Delhi: Murder by Regulation

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According to the deputy directors, transport department, Buradi, about 80,000 autos were plying on Delhi roads before March 2001. Then came the ruling of the Supreme Court of India and accordingly all autos had to be converted to CNG. Although this might fare well for the environment of Delhi, but as far as the auto-rickshaw driver is concerned this ruling has spelt despair right from the start. As an approximation, there are just over 20,000 autos currently on the road. Moreover the government has decided not to issue any new permits.

To understand this, it would be easier to go by the vehicle license numbers of autos. Initially there was DLR, then DHR, DIR, DAR, DL1R, DL1RA and DL1RB. These were the autos that were licensed before 1992. Then came DL1RC and DL1RD. According to the Supreme Court ruling, autos older than 8 years would have to be scrapped. They would be replaced by DL1RE/F. The DL1RC/D series would have to be converted to CNG.

The procedure for autos older than 8 years involves P1, P2, P3, and P4. But this does not paint a rosy picture of a Silicon Valley at every STA (State Transport Authority) office. The above mentioned are simply the names of various government files.

If our much-fooled "common man" decides to run an auto-rickshaw, he has to wait for months to do so--even after he has all his resources lined up (including the amount he needs to pay bribes). To understand the plight of this "common man", we spoke to "Shri Duttaram Choudhary", who until recently was running his own auto. His auto was too old and he had to apply for a new vehicle.

Steps 1: Getting the clearances

Three different No Objection Certificates (NOCs) are required from the traffic department. First the applicant must go to Teen Murti and clear all pending traffic "chalans" (fines). Next there is the enigmatic 5 no. authority which clears pending "chalans" concerning insurance, pollution, license, uniforms, etc. Finally the road tax clearance from the STA. All this can take from a week to even more than a month.

Step 2: A trip to Buradi, New Delhi 84

Going to one of the private "dalals" (touts) sitting outside the STA and paying him Rs.80 would get the applicant's file P1 into the government office. A P1 is a file containing the complete records of the older vehicle that is being surrendered. It includes documents relating to permit, road registration certificate, insurance clearance, the three NOCs, four photographs, etc. Once the applicant submits the P1, he gets the P2, which gives the date when he is expected to come next to have

his P1 checked. All this with the help of the “dalal” should ideally take just one day.

Step 3: Checking the P1

The P1 is checked and the information compared with the original documents of the vehicle--that were filed when the old vehicle was first cleared. The applicant should consider himself lucky if these are ever found. This can take a month or more depending on the "efficiency" of the various officers.

Step 4: Yet another trip to Buradi

Once the applicants' files have been checked, he gets a P3. That takes him to the Mundka STA with a photocopy of the P3 and his old vehicle. There his vehicle is surrendered, scrapped (even for that bribe has to be paid) and he is paid Rs.1100/- for it (incidentally the government receives around Rs. 2000/- for the scrap). A stamp saying "received" is put on the P3. Then he is told to visit the place again. All this might take a couple of weeks or so.

Step 5: Issuing a P4

A P4 is finally issued, which signifies that all paper work till P3 has been duly completed. The issue of P4 might take a month or more.

Step 6: The new auto

The applicant takes the P4 to an "authorized distributor," makes the payment for the new auto and also submits the insurance papers (having got insurance worth Rs. 1500). Getting the new vehicle could take from a day to a month depending upon how much the applicant is ready to bribe.

Step 7: Still more

The auto's meter has to be passed (Rs. 300), pollution verification done (Rs. 30), and fitness certified (Rs. 80) all at god's own land--Buradi. A file, via the private “dalals” at Buradi, is made which is similar to the P1. All this would take another 15-20 days.

As for the autos that have to be converted to CNG, it's a totally different story. They had a deadline of March 31st to obtain permission from the Supreme Court. The auto-rickshaw drivers accordingly submitted the "*Form of application for grant of permission to convert the existing from petrol fuel into CNG fuel operation with petrol tank of three litres capacity in view of the orders of the Honorable Supreme Court of India, New Delhi.*" This form would have to be attested by an approved Notary of the Government of India. Then the applicant has to take this form to an “Authorized Fitting Centre.” An advance amount would have to be paid to the AFC. The AFC will then issue a receipt that has to be submitted along with the form of application to the State Transport Authority. The STA would then give a receipt stating that all formalities have been completed and call the owner at a future date when he would be issued a special permit in accordance with the orders of the Supreme Court. Once this special permit is issued then within six months the auto-rickshaw driver would have to get the CNG kit fitted.

To find out the ground realities we decided to make a trip to the STA (State Transport Authority) at Rajpur Road. Outside the building there were some inquiry offices. A glance into the first one found this gentleman reclining on the couch. He dismissed us with a wave and a yawn. So we go to the other window where the gentleman sitting seemed to be doing nothing important again—talking on the telephone. For a change, he actually invited us inside. We told him that we wanted information on autos and he directed us to a Mr. G S Chaturvedi. Mr. Chaturvedi, however, was too high ranking an officer to know anything about anything or so his secretary told us. We were then directed to Mr. P C Chaturvedi. He was too busy lying back relaxing in his chair and told us that the information we wanted was with two gentlemen across the hall. In the next room we found Mr. Verma. Hallelujah! Mr. Verma was sitting with a few rather swarthy looking friends which would have been all right had they no grudge against Mr. P C Chaturvedi who had directed us there. So back to square one.

Since no one was inclined to talk to us, we decided to go back to the street and learn a few more things from our friends the temporarily (?!?) unemployed auto-rickshaw drivers of Delhi.

Problems were plenty. The “issue of the special permit” was not being done on some pretext or the other ranging from misplaced files to “incomplete files”—all these the responsibilities of the authorities. In many cases the auto drivers had been “chalaned” on the road for upto Rs. 5000 on the pretext of them plying without proper permission. A certain Mr. Sonu was told that although his document had been stamped by the Supreme Court and subsequently by the STA, yet he could not be issued the temporary permit because his receipt number was not in the computer. He had proceeded to file an affidavit with the Supreme Court, but was told there that all his documents had been forwarded to the STA. However, at the time we spoke to him, it had been three months since he had stopped plying his auto and although he had been making daily trips to the authority, no end seemed to be in sight. He was being told every time that some advertisement would be taken out in the newspapers, which would tell him the relevant dates.

Another interesting thing that we saw was that even those autos which were off the road, i.e., the ones older than 8 years, were still paying road tax of Rs. 93 for the period of April to June. According to sources, there were 30,000 such autos at the time of our survey. That seemed to be a colossal amount of unfair taxation. There were auto-rickshaw drivers who had been waiting for a month or more just to get their road tax clearance done.

The more we got to hear about Buradi, the more we were intrigued by it. So we took another trip. The transport department in Buradi was housed in a giant enclosure. We moved to the first of the sheds in our quest for Mr. Aggarwal who had been referred to us by an officer at the STA. He, of course, could not be found. So we moved on to a newer looking building, which according to the sign outside housed the traffic court. Inside, there were three windows opened to the auto-

rickshaw drivers for collection and handing out of papers. We were told that it was only after every several days that there would actually be more than one window open. In fact the previous day, there had been a riot and a “lathi charge” as tempers had boiled over. We found a group of auto-rickshaw drivers banging on a particular door. On inquiry we were told that that was where the auto-rickshaw drivers would have to come to find all their “lost” P2s and P3s. Suddenly the door opened a fraction. What was happening was that the man inside (a certain Mr. Satish) was procuring Rs. 200 per file which he would then proceed to declare as found!

Finally we were able to trace Mr. Aggarwal. Talking to him we found out a few more things about autos in Delhi. Auto-rickshaws required annual fitness checks (Ironically that had nothing to do fitness at all, all that was checked was the chassis no. and engine no.). Meter fitness, pollution levels were also checked once a year. An auto-rickshaw driver was required to carry nine essentials with him all the time while plying the vehicle. Those were: Registration Certificate, Driving License, Pollution Certificate, Meter Fitness Certificate, Insurance Papers, Road Tax Clearance, Badge & Helper's Certificate (in case he was running the auto-rickshaw for someone else). Surprisingly, he also had to be dressed in a prescribed uniform.

Conclusions we draw and questions we would like answered

- Why is such an elaborate system required to approve AR's, especially in the case of the P's 1-4 that one has to file for the older vehicle. When all the government is going to do is give out Rs. 1100 for the surrendered vehicle, is it really important to go through that entire procedure?
- The procedure has worked in the past only because at any given point of time there weren't too many autos awaiting license. The inefficiency is coming to light now when suddenly there are a huge number of autos needing approval. So is it that the procedure system is unnecessarily long or is it that the Supreme Court is unaware of the long procedure, that it expects all 80,000 autos to be through the process and on the road in reasonably quick time?
- One mistake that the Court seems to have made is ignoring the personal problems of the auto-rickshaw drivers. Today they are paying installments on the machines, they are paying installments on the CNG kits, they are paying “dalals”, they are paying bribes to officials and they are paying road tax, insurance, etc. They are not earning a penny while standing in queues outside government offices. Ominous warnings are being issued. The patience of these men is running out. The autos that are their means of livelihood are currently not contributing anything to their income and only drawing down their resources.
- The root of all these problems, we feel, is the government-controlled system which links the market for permits with the market for autos. The system is such that if an individual wishes to trade an auto he has to trade the permit along with it. Given the fact that no new permits are being issued, the whole

procedure becomes even more complicated. In case a person wishes to purchase an auto, he has to buy an old auto with an existing permit. This can be an auto older than 8 years, which means he will have to surrender it and then get a new auto. Or it could be a newer auto, which means he will have to get it converted to CNG. In case one wishes to sell the auto outside Delhi, it will require an additional NOC from the transport authority.

We suggest that the market for auto permits should be freed. This could be on the lines of the medallion system prevalent with cabs in New York where the drivers are allowed to trade medallions (these are licenses to ply taxis, which are fixed in number). This would not only give a freer hand to the drivers but also reduce unnecessary government interference. Also, we should free the market for the machines themselves so that the auto-rickshaw driver can sell his vehicle to anyone anywhere. He could thus obtain a competitive price for his vehicle and not necessarily sell it as scrap to the government.