
Cycle Rickshaws: The Past Prevails in George Town, Chennai, India¹

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George Town is a busy yet hushed part of Chennai, one of India's biggest cities. A glance at George Town shows men in their forties, fifties and sixties riding cycle rickshaws, cycle carts and operating push-carts. This article explores the question: why is a locality in one of India's most modern cities characterized by modes of transportation that have been deemed pre-modern and of little utility? I argue that by catering to niche demand groups, the *rickshaw wallahs* persist with their trade owing to multiple ostensible reasons such as the inability to shift trades or complacency. I also argue that, in addition to this, the processes of meaning-making and space-making during action and inaction contribute to making the rickshaws indispensable to the *rickshaw wallahs* of George Town.

Keywords: George Town, Chennai, Cycle rickshaws, meaning-making, space-making.

George Town is a busy yet hushed part of Chennai, one of India's biggest cities. The key to the antiquity and elegance of the town lies in the curious case of vehicular change we witness as we are further engulfed into the heart of the town. One can hear Chennai's cars and motorbikes engage in honking contests a few hundred metres away. A glance at George Town shows men in their forties, fifties and sixties riding cycle rickshaws, cycle carts and operating push-carts. The roadsides house many a dormant rickshaws and carts as well. This makes me curious; why is a locality in one of India's most modern cities characterized by modes of transportation that have been deemed pre-modern and of little utility?

Cycle rickshaws and carts have long been viewed as 'relics of the past', 'anachronistic modes of transportation' and a non-preferable object in post-colonial India, aiming for modernisation (Hyrapiet and Greiner 2012: 409). How did these rickshaws come to be in George Town and what status do they hold now? The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) ruling party, led by M. Karunanidhi, banned and confiscated the hand-pulled rickshaws in the state of Tamil Nadu in the early 1970s. The party provided the rickshaw pullers with pedalled cycle rickshaws in return. During the 1960s and 1970s, when few buses and almost no auto rickshaws existed, cycle rickshaws were the most preferred method of transportation. In the 1980s, there were more than ten thousand cycle rickshaws in the city and more than hundred operators near Chennai Central (a major railway station in the city) alone. Now, the number of operators near Central has come down to less than thirty (Joseph 2016). Fast motor vehicles have replaced rickshaws in coping with the hustle and bustle of the city. Cycle rickshaws can only be seen in certain parts of the city now, mostly limited to areas near Chennai Central and North Madras (Joseph 2016).

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Why Rickshaws: Demand and Supply

Space and Pace

Guided by conversations with the people of George Town, I believe that space and time are of utmost significance when it comes to their choice of transport. The congested streets of George Town often bear witness to the fight between vehicles, cows and street side vendors in the occupation of space. People turn to cycle rickshaws and cycle carts to navigate these narrow roads. ‘People prefer to travel by cycle rickshaws in narrow, busy streets. This is why Sowcarpet (a locality in George Town) still has rickshaws. Moreover, we can ply on one-way roads, in both directions. An auto (rickshaw) cannot do the same, they will be fined, but we will not’, said a *rickshaw wallah* (rickshaw driver), hinting at auto rickshaws, commonly thought to be the exterminator of the demand for cycle rickshaws. People prefer auto-rickshaws, though they are priced higher than their cycle counterparts, for their speed. The time-rich go one way and the time-poor another. *Rickshaw wallahs* noted that their customers were people who were comfortable with the slow pace of the rickshaw within the fast movements of the city: school children who went by cycle rickshaws daily and senior citizens who go to nearby markets in rickshaws.

The demand for cycle rickshaws as chronicled through these engagements brings to mind similar cases of choice of mode of transport in Europe. One thinks, for example, of the informal services of privately run minivans (*furgonës*) that propped up in Albania in the 1990s; these were preferred to public services as they ran more often and reached destinations not usually served by public transport (Prato 2020). My Indian material also evokes Pardo’s description (1996: Ch. 1) of a moped-driver in Naples, who speeds through the heavy traffic, commits multiple traffic violations and gets away with it, possibly hinting at larger factors which decide a person’s choice of transport and how this choice is shaped by the particular urban contexts in which it operates.

Loss and Loss

As many respondents testified, auto rickshaws and ‘shareautos’ have replaced cycle rickshaws as the main mode of transport in George Town. It becomes important to question then how significant the impact has been on rickshaw drivers. Most *rickshaw wallahs* gain no more than two hundred to three hundred rupees in a day, as opposed to their revenue of fifty rupees per day in the 1980s (which is approximately equal to nine hundred rupees of today). They unanimously asserted the sufficiency of their revenue in the 1970s and 1980s, whilst affirming to the struggle to make ends meet today. While some *rickshaw wallahs* have taken up secondary sources of income such as catering and poster drawing, a significant number remain loyal to their profession. I identify three main reasons behind this. Firstly, they recognised that profits are less and tried to do other work, but failed. Mani,² who has been a *rickshaw wallah* for thirty years, said that he tried out acting and poster drawing for a secondary income, but ‘nothing ever works out’. Secondly, they were used to the job and there was a certain sense of complacency.

² The name has been changed.

Rajan,³ who has been in the business for thirty-five years, is physically handicapped and he said that he does the work because he cannot do anything else (*settaavalai*). Finally, some do the work because they like the work, the pace of it and the associated experiences.

Informal and Legal?

Cycle rickshaws may not be seen as modes of employment, but rather as work, to borrow from Pardo's distinction of formal and informal labour (1996: Ch. 2). As he notes, large sections of informal labourers engage in illegal or semi-legal activities, often functioning with negotiated legitimacy and the implicit concurrence of concerned authorities. George Town's cycle rickshaws, though the archetypes of informality, steer clear of this widely accepted conflation of illegality with informality. The legality of cycle rickshaws, as opposed to the illegitimacy of cycle carts, was also a recurring theme in the conversations with the rickshaw pullers of George Town. In 2016, there was a state government legislation requiring the rickshaws to be registered and given number plates along with a seal on the body of the vehicle (see Figures 1 and 2). Similar to motor vehicles, to ply a cycle rickshaw, there are two levels of licensing required: for the puller and the vehicle. In addition to this, there is a yearly check of the condition of the vehicle, in November. If the vehicle fails the test, the vehicle is confiscated and the *rickshaw wallahs* are required to pay a fine of three hundred rupees.



Image 1: The License Plate of a cycle rickshaw in George Town. Photo by the Author.

³ The name has been changed.



Image 2: Government Seal on a cycle rickshaw in George Town. Photo by the author.

The ownership of cycle rickshaws generally rests with the puller. Rickshaw owners are identifiable by the officially sanctioned number plates. So, official legislation around rickshaws facilitates the tracing of abandoned rickshaws on the roadside to its owner. Their legality and legitimacy also reflect in the predominant perception of the concurrence of authorities. The rickshaw pullers professed to having varying relationships with the police. Most were of the opinion that police do not trouble them as they are an authorised means of transport, or fine them for traffic violations. The only tussle they have is during the annual check-up in November, when the police could fine them for not having a properly functioning vehicle. Some *rickshaw wallahs*, on the other hand, spoke of the police with fear. They claimed that the police favours rickshaw pullers on partisan lines and ill-treats (violently) the others. This throws light on the absence of a welfare group for rickshaw pullers. They are not unionised, and multiple rickshaw pullers cited this as a reason behind their lack of prosperity, given that there is already less demand.

Functionality

Cycle rickshaws in George Town embody a multiplicity of meanings and are far from being conceived solely under the rubric of transportation for short distances on crowded roads. Over time, the functionality of rickshaws has undergone a sea of change. In the past, rickshaws were mainly used by rich Marwari (migrants from Rajasthan) families for their personal uses such as visiting temples and for their children to go to school. Today, these functions are fulfilled, although separately, without the added dimension of being hired for personal use. A *rickshaw wallah* remarked that in the 1970s, they were treated like how taxi drivers are treated today (Joseph 2016). Mani, a *rickshaw wallah* in George Town, narrated his experiences of having taken people to every single market in Chennai and also about how he was hired to go to film shooting sets in the 1970s. I argue that the cycle rickshaw is dynamic in two senses: one, while active and one, while dormant.

Meaning-making and space-making are indispensable in this reading of George Town's cycle rickshaws. I look at this as intertwined processes beginning from the analytical entity,

space; that is, physical space. Conceptual distinctions have been noted between space and place in anthropological and urban analyses, of which I view meaning-making as the paramount difference. When cities become more than physical spaces by assuming social meanings, related to identity issues, they become places (Prato and Pardo 2013). These meanings are constituted by various components, living and non-living, and invariably vary from city to city. In George Town, the space-making cycle rickshaws contribute to the meaning-making of the town.

Active and Dynamic

While active, it becomes dynamic due to the above-mentioned multiplicity of meanings and functionalities and the process of space-making. These vehicles assume an array of meanings in the multitudinous ways they are made use of. Apart from giving rides to three or four people in a day, cycle rickshaws also undertake monthly contracts of dropping children off to nearby schools. In their spare time, *rickshaw wallahs* also use their vehicle for carrying items such as vegetables, spare parts and water cans through the streets of George Town (See Figure 3). Rickshaws carry different items based on the streets they are situated in and the commodity the street specializes in. Rajan, one of the rickshaw drivers, also said that his rickshaw was used to transport dead bodies three times throughout his rickshaw riding career. A rickshaw also dons an active role in the process of space-making and space-snatching. They manoeuvre their way around the intense Chennai traffic and three-man-wide roads and make space for themselves. The existence of these rickshaws even today could be seen as making space in a post-colonial Chennai, striving for modernisation and aiming to remove anything that slows it down. Yet another interesting aspect is that rickshaws are generally not favoured as they add to ‘space congestion’, but it is this very congestion against which rickshaws act as a cure in the packed streets of George Town.



Image 3: A cycle rickshaw in George Town, with some of the water cans it carries. Photo by the author.

Dormant and Dynamic

The rickshaw becomes dynamic owing to the processes that constitute its dormant disposition. The bodies of these rickshaws are often populated by drawings and scribbles usually indicating a leaning towards political parties or paying homage to the party who gifted the rickshaw. Rickshaws often carry advertisements on a monthly basis as well (Shrikumar 2013). In George Town, rickshaws are often the conduits for showcasing religious affiliations of rickshaw pullers via photos or idols of deities attached to it, which is reminiscent of expressions of religiosity in primary and secondary territories (Duck and McMahan 2010, Pardo 1996). In addition to meaning-making, the usage of space during dormancy throws light on interesting processes. In George Town, I could find children sitting on rickshaws and doing homework, middle-aged people sitting on and gathering around rickshaws and engaging in socialization, and people using it for shade. The rickshaw pullers construct a sort of secondary shelter around the space of their rickshaws; one *rickshaw wallah* described himself to be ‘24/7 available for rides’ (See Figure 4). An interesting account, provided by Rajan, whose physical disability adds to his dependence on the rickshaw as per his own admission, was about how he had organised his life around the rickshaw; he dries his clothes on it, he constructs a small space around the rickshaw and undertakes bathing and brushing rituals, he refuses to be disassociated from the rickshaw and the ways in which routine activities seem to be facilitated by the rickshaw.



Figure 4: A cycle rickshaw in George Town, parked on the roadside, made into a temporary shelter.
Photo by the Author.

Although the call for modernity spelt doom for the rickshaw drivers of George Town, the cycle rickshaws continue to constitute an expression of something left behind, something that still sustains and makes its voice heard. Catering to niche demand groups, the *rickshaw wallahs* persist with their trade owing to multiple ostensible reasons such as the inability to shift trades or complacency. I have argued that, in addition to this, the processes of meaning-making and space-making during action and inaction contribute to making the rickshaws indispensable to the *rickshaw wallahs* of George Town.

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