

A day in the life of a rickshawalla driver



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Have you ever wondered what life is like in India for the thousands of Indians that make their living on a rickshaw? Well wander no longer

Pandian is an auto-driver from Chennai, India, and he says....

" I remember how fascinated I was when we first came to this city".

My family and I had left our native village in Tanjore and come to earn a better living. It was my uncle who first introduced me to driving. You see, he was an auto-driver too. At that time, only rich people could afford autos, so my profession was a privileged one.

My route was from Central station to Theyagaraya Nagar. Autos were rare to come by those days, so I was kept busy all day long. I earned enough for myself and had extra to give my family.

Slowly, the city grew, and with it so did its problems. Petrol prices hiked up, auto parts were not easily available and maintenance became difficult and roads took a turn for the worse. People take autos when they are in a hurry, so they expect us to drive fast. I ask you 'Would you drive your Maruti Zen at 60kph over pits, trenches and speed-breakers?' Once we take them to their destination (on time), very few people thank us. Instead, they argue about the rate and call us thieves. When inflation is all around, how can the fare alone remain the same?

Then comes the question of tips. At hotels you give the guy who opens your car door and parks your car around Rs. 5. Yet when we ask for a little extra, people always grumble.

The pollution levels have tremendously increased and as we are mostly on the streets, we are greatly affected. Respiratory diseases thrive amongst us auto-drivers.

Some policemen are nice to us, but the rotten apples are there too. To these disgraceful people, we have to give a commission or 'mamul' whenever they ask us or we get booked.

Generally auto-drivers in Chennai earn about Rs. 100 a day. This is just enough for day-to-day existence. But I am now a married man with two children and many auto-drivers have bigger families. I have not taken to spirits, being a god-fearing man and having vowed to educate my children. For other auto-drivers who drink, Rs. 100 is inadequate and their families suffer terribly.

Auto licenses are hard to come by. If you fail to renew your license for around four years, you must take the test all over again. Young adults (especially those in posh cars) love to slander us. Bus drivers take pleasure in honking continuously when we are ahead of them. When I drive, I am constantly thinking of which policeman is on duty, how I can avoid the traffic and how I can satisfy my passengers. A tiresome ordeal indeed!

I have been taking this opportunity to highlight all the difficulties auto-drivers encounter. Sometimes I feel very bitter about my job but then I remember all those school children and really grateful passengers that I have taken to their destination. I then feel much better because I have been useful. I love driving, I love this city - even with all its faults ... indeed it offers a better home than most other cities. If only people would treat us as humans with

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hearts who are merely earning a living like everyone else, life would be a pleasure indeed!"