Disruptions and continuities in taxi driving - the case of Mumbai

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Background

Digital mobility platforms such as "Uber" – also termed transportation network companies or cab aggregators – are forms of passenger transportation that have become integral parts of the mobility landscape of cities. The policy response to these services has varied across the world, from complete abolition to integration into local transportation laws.

The global business model of Uber has been met with fierce resistance by local taxi service providers and resulted in open conflicts in cities such as Barcelona, Berlin, Paris and even stirred violence e.g. in Johannesburg. In all these cities, taxi operators feared and experienced a substantial loss of patronage. Due to the legal challenges and increased competition in almost every part of the world, the consequences have been widely reported and discussed in the media. However, the dynamics of the changing mobility landscapes in cities have been poorly understood so far, partially because they have been observed without taking into account global as well as specific local processes of urban change.

Although being a universal business model making use of similar sets of digital tools, I point towards the fact that the actual operation of these services is embedded in the local social, political and economic fabric. While being a "disruptive" business model, I argue that these services are also part of a wider process of urban change. At the same time, the operation of such services builds on pre-existing social inequalities, socio-spatial fragmentation and exploitation that are defining characteristics of the capitalistic city in both the global North and South. This PhD project aims at better understanding the nature of the apparent conflict between the "new" and "old" forms of mobility. I chose Mumbai, with its iconic black-and-yellow taxi, as a case study.

Drivers' perspectives

Since the conflict in Mumbai appears as a result of two competing modes of taxi operation – the conventional street-hailed black-and-yellow taxi and the new app-based services – part of my PhD study is exploring the overlaps and continuities of taxi driving. This aspect of the study will be discussed in this contribution.

I chose the drivers' perspective to understand how the operators of taxi services deal with the new business model and the digital platform technology. Thereby, I explore how drivers of conventional and platform-based taxi services appropriate these new elements and integrate them into their daily routines and biographies or resist and reject them.

Drivers of commercial vehicles mostly have a migrant background and belong to marginalized and discriminated groups of Mumbai's urban society. The majority of drivers is from Muslim communities or lower caste background. With a history and presence of social, economic and spatial polarization in Mumbai, the social position of taxi drivers is negotiated in the everyday practice of driving as well as in their individual biographies. Population growth, particularly in the wider metropolitan region, a shift to more polycentric urban structures and massive infrastructure expansion have further taken effect on driving practices, drivers' lives and economic practices. These wider urban conditions and changes are explored and become visible in the stories and experiences of individual drivers.

Theory and methodology

This study is based on a relational understanding of cities and urbanization, linking spatial and mobilities theory (Urry 2007). Argued with Lefebvre, driving is understood as a spatial practice that produces social space (Lefebvre 1991). I argue that, on one hand, mobilities are strategies to navigate the city and urban life: on their everyday routines, taxi drivers are making use of the many resources that cities are offering – the algorithm of the app and new business models being two of these resources. At the same time, taxi driving is a way of circumventing the uncertainties and adversities of urban life, including marginalization and discrimination that drivers are facing. On the other hand, mobilities are a substantial part of driver's biographies: labour migration and residential mobility are forms of mobility that serve as strategies to bring stability into urban existence and linearity into biographies, but also into families, communities and social networks. Thereby an important assumption of the "mobilities turn" is taken very seriously here: that mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin (Hannam et al. 2006). When mobility is understood as a strategy, then the question where, when and how to move (in the city) is as important as the question where, when and how to stop and "anchor". This study furthermore analyses how drivers organize themselves as a group and collectively appropriate urban resources, thereby taking inspiration from the works of AbdouMaliq Simone (e.g. Simone 2004).

This ongoing qualitative study is based on fieldwork in 2019 and early 2020 in Mumbai. Interviews were conducted with drivers of conventional black-and yellow-taxis (*Kaali Peelis*) and of the mobility platforms "Uber" and "Ola". Interviews were also conducted with vehicle owners and fleet managers, and with researchers, urban planners, mobility experts and representatives of the companies and authorities for transport on state and federal level.

The changing taxi sector of Mumbai

Backed by venture capital, when the mobility platforms *Uber* and *Ola* started in Mumbai in 2013, they tried to take over the taxi market by offering discounts to passengers and high *incentives* (=bonus for completing a fixed number of rides in a fixed time period) to drivers. The app-based services respond to a constantly increasing demand: with rising incomes and living standards, a growing number of commuters seeks to avoid the crowded conditions in public transport but is hesitating to acquire private cars due to shortage in parking space and notorious traffic jams. While the introduction of mobility platforms was by the far the most disruptive change in the taxi sector so far, impulses for change had occurred earlier, partially driven by authorities' initiatives to modernize and standardize an "outdated" service (Bedi 2016). Within only a few years, electronic meters and new vehicles became mandatory for taxis to operate and new air-conditioned taxis and fleet taxi operators appeared.

Fig. 5: Kaali Peelis and app-based taxis awaiting their turn at a gas station (Photo: T. Kuttler 2020)

Shaken by these drastic disruptions, taxi (and rickshaw) unions started a series of protests and strikes against the new services. However, they could not prevent that the number of app-based taxis in the city rose to almost 75,000 in 2019 and the number of metered taxis in the city shrank drastically from 48,000 in 2014 to 41,000 in 2019. However, in 2016, Uber and Ola started to raise commissions and lowered incentives for drivers, creating frustration among them (Surie 2018). This culminated in a 10-day strike in fall 2018. Since then, new regulations for the taxi sector are awaited from the state of Maharashtra (Sharma 2019).

Two different taxi spaces and logics

The conventional local taxi sector and new-app based services can be understood as two separate, competing sectors with different logics. First, they differ in terms of the spaces in which they operate and places and people they serve. *Kaali Peelis* in Mumbai are mainly organized around taxi stands that are located in neighbourhoods and at railway stations, hence operate as a feeder system for Mumbai's lifeline, the suburban railway system. Cab aggregators instead mainly operate as door-to-door service and are rarely part of a trip chain. As they are hailed via the app, journeys of an app-based cab driver are steered by the algorithm of the platform. Hence, regular place-based routines of drivers are precluded by the design of the platform.

The second difference refers to the regulation of the two taxi modes. While the conventional taxi sector in Mumbai is highly regulated – including fare fixation, operating areas and routes, vehicle licensing and driving permits – app-based taxis in the state of Maharashtra to date are subject to minimum regulation. Operating areas are not restricted; pricing is demand-driven and remuneration schemes for the self-employed drivers change frequently.

Thirdly, the customer base is different. *Kaali Peeli* drivers rely on the long-established middle classes as a customer base. Many drivers have their fixed customers and regularly scheduled rides. Although fares are fixed by a meter, drivers often negotiate fares with unknown passengers or refuse to serve particular destinations during rush hours. As a result, among middle classes and urban elites, *Kaali Peeli* drivers have gained a negative reputation as being unruly and closed to outsiders. App-based services are popular among the higher income strata and young professionals who newly arrived in Mumbai. Passengers value the reliability guaranteed by the app, the comfort of AC vehicles and minimal interaction needed with the drivers. Passenger-driver match is completely up to the current design of the platform algorithm (which is changing over time).

From this birds-eye view, the conventional taxis appear as bound to spaces and places, with operating rules and logics differing from place to place within Mumbai, restricted to a limited set of "insider" customers. To authorities and consumer organizations, the conventional taxi sector appears as being inflexible, unruly and subject to disciplinary action. (e.g. Deshpande 2017). The app-based taxi instead is the opposite of it – free-floating in space and time and flexible to respond to elaborate customer needs and changing conditions in the city.

These characteristics seem to suggest only one mid to long term conclusion – the complete replacement of the traditional taxi sector by app-based services in Mumbai. However, such predictions largely take the perspective of the drivers out of the equation, as well as the complexity of urban dynamics in Mumbai.

Shared spaces and networks

Adopting a more "mobile" understanding of the taxi sector in Mumbai by employing the drivers' perspective, the practices and imaginations of drivers that produce the social space of driving come to the fore. In doing so, the sectoral view presented above is dissolved, and the many overlaps between the different forms of taxi driving become apparent. Furthermore, the image of disruption and conflict is adjusted by highlighting the continuities of taxi driving in Mumbai.

First, different taxi operations share similar social networks. It has been found that the operations of mobility platforms are run by family and community networks, as it has been the case in the conventional taxi sector for a long time. Especially among communities that have been traditionally involved in taxi driving, often several family members are driving different forms of vehicles, including app-based taxis and *Kaali Peelis*. Switching between different forms of driving is also common, according to whatever mode offers the higher income prospects momentarily or is suitable to the personal situation. Constant switching between modes is made possible by a large informal market of rental vehicles for commercial operations and a growing availability of pre-owned cars. Especially since the mobility platforms raised commissions and lowered incentives for drivers, driving for these platforms has become less attractive; many drivers have returned to operating *Kaali Peelis* or auto rickshaws.

Secondly, I experienced that taxi drivers are often united in their distrust towards the state, the companies they work for and even the unions they are organized in. While *Kaali Peeli* drivers feel betrayed by the authorities for neglecting their demands, drivers of platform-based services often feel exploited by the platform companies they are attached to. Hence, the competition between the taxi modes rarely turns out as a conflict between drivers. Rather, interviewed drivers frequently expressed solidarity with their colleagues, acknowledging that all drivers were in the same boat eventually.

Thirdly, despite being coordinated via digital platforms, operations of app-based taxis are as much rooted in urban social space as conventional taxi operations. Frequently visited places comprise gas stations, garages, washrooms, but also places of social interaction, such as tea stalls and mosques. To make marginal gains, drivers usually negotiate special arrangements with providers of services such as car cleaning and maintenance, provision of spare car parts or handling of paperwork for licenses and permits. Such networks are based on mutual trust and are developed on the recommendations of acquaintances. These actors, places and infrastructures co-produce the space of taxi driving and do not differentiate between "old" and "new" forms of taxi modes. Furthermore, similarly to taxi

and rickshaw operations, often two drivers operate on one vehicle, which requires arrangements for shift change. In my fieldwork, I encountered several such places where vehicle owners organize and supervise the change of drivers at two time periods of the day.

Fourth, similar to *Kaali Peeli* drivers, drivers of app-based taxis try to work around the rules and norms of the "system". The driver interface only allows the drivers to get to know the destination of a ride once the passenger enters the car. Drivers react to this by calling the passenger in advance asking for the destination. This strategy is mostly exerted during rush hours: since the companies only marginally remunerate the time delay of a ride due to traffic jams, drivers seek to avoid congested routes and destinations. The companies respond to such tactics by frequently changing and tightening the rules for drivers, and compelling intermediate fleet owners to quickly lay off drivers in case of "misbehaviour".

Conclusion and Covid-19

As I outlined above, operations of both conventional taxis and app-based taxis are based on social networks and a web of institutions that are embedded in Mumbai's history and fabric. Drivers variously employ and discard new opportunities and tools at specific points in time. Similarly, drivers make use of different strategies according to their location in the city, according to daily, weekly and monthly variations. These variations are characteristic for everyday life in Mumbai, highlighting that "rhythms" are quintessential for urban life (Lefebvre 2004). Hence, drivers rarely fully embrace or reject new developments such as the platform-based technology and associated income model. Instead, they cautiously navigate through overlapping digital, social and physical spaces in order to stay in control over one's daily routines and biographies. This highlights that drivers are not passive receivers of change, but conscious actors who align their livelihood activities with social activities and personal hopes and dreams. However, drivers remain in a vulnerable position, and the ability to make conscious decisions and stay in control is constantly undermined by Uber and Ola changing the working conditions for the drivers. Hence, the platform system increasingly appears as a black box to the drivers.

In recent months, many Uber and Ola drivers were found in a depressed state. Due to shrinking incentives, those who owned their cars could not pay back their loans. They resorted to driving 14-17 hour shifts, some sleeping in their cars. Those drivers were visibly sleep-deprived and in alarming health states.

The last period of my fieldwork was completed just before a complete lockdown was imposed in Mumbai due to Covid-19. Since then, all taxi operations are stalled indefinitely, leaving drivers without any income. Those who managed left Mumbai for their places of origins. At the time of writing, the future of taxi drivers in Mumbai is completely uncertain.

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