

Perception of The Local Drivers Towards The Transition in Choice of Transportation in Guwahati City

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Abstract

As a resident in Guwahati, it is difficult to remember the last time I waited for an auto on the street or booked a cab by calling a local cab agency. Our thanks to the cab aggregators in India like Uber who have completely changed the way we book a cab. They have made the best utilization of technology, increase in the number of Smartphone users and rise in data usage. In other words, they have revolutionized the cab industry. Yet on August 11, a hostile situation took place in Guwahati where the Uber cabbies were assaulted by the Auto drivers to which they retaliated back. The Auto rickshaws which are a much older form of public transportation and play an important role in the city. While the auto-rickshaw industry in Guwahati is complex and rife with tension currently because of several clashes and tough competition with Uber, it has clear opportunities for improvements and some changes are already being made. So this study attempts to elucidate on the perspective of these cabbies and auto rickshaw owners in light of the conflict of August 11 and how they perceive this change in transportation from Auto to currently popular Uber in light of the reported conflict. Throughout this study I did a qualitative analysis of the perspective of the local drivers earning their livelihood through driving in Guwahati city in the post-incident scenario.

Key Words

Uber, Auto, Transportation, Qualitative analysis, Guwahati

Introduction

City transportation is an important pillar for quality of life of citizens in a city. A well-knit and coordinated system of transport plays an important role in the sustained economic growth of a country. With the increasing facilities provided by new and improved transportation services, there are also some hiccups along the way. New online transportation systems are making life of people incredibly easy; travelling from one place to other with just a click on the cell phone. However, perhaps that is not only requirement for people of Guwahati. Despite all the facilities the online transportation system like Uber provides, some conflict occurs from time to time among Uber drivers and other people. In cities all over India an ugly war is being fought by Auto-rickshaw owners against a new form of competition from Uber and other ride-sharing services. These newcomers' methods aren't news anymore: through a mobile application customers can find and reserve vehicles in their immediate area in minutes. Everywhere these services are shaking up the Auto business and are being met with heavy resistance. Historically vehicles like Auto have fought for their place in the urban transportation spectrum by staging strikes and paralyzing cities like London and Paris, leaving hordes of passengers stranded. But the taxi industry's resistance to the rise of Uber and similar services is a futile attempt to put the brakes on innovation (Bouquet & Renault, 2014)

The basic working model of all these taxi calling apps is almost same. They connect us to a taxi available nearest to the place we are at. The digital tools of education like iPads or video conferencing are gaining traction in middle to high-income groups in Guwahati city. Almost all countries have the UberX¹ service but only India has a cheaper version in uberGO². And there is a subtle difference in the operational model between India and the US. While in India only a driver with a commercial driver's license and commercial insurance can enlist, in the US, anybody with a personal vehicle can become an Uber driver provided he has a driver's license and insurance.

The City Of Guwahati

Guwahati is known to be the largest city in all North-east. Lying

in the bank of Brahmaputra and surrounded by hills in three sides makes the city one of the best places to live in. It boasts of vibrant blend of modern cosmopolitan culture with historical sensitivity docketed at its foothold. The metropolis city of Guwahati located in the lower Assam encompasses an area of 216km² and also is the headquarter of Kamrup³ metro district. Guwahati derived its name from "Guwa" areca nut in local language (Goalparia⁴ and Rajbonshi⁵) and "Haat" meaning market. The city has a comparatively high quality of life. A 2006 survey ranked Guwahati 17th among all the large and medium-sized Indian cities. The city provides competitive residential and working environments with beautiful landscapes, pleasant climate, modern shopping areas, modern apartments and bungalows, and considerably developed social infrastructure. A centrally funded four-lane, ambitious East-West Corridor will pass through Guwahati and connect all the state capitals of Northeast India. Completion of the project will boost the vital upliftment of the whole region.

City-life here is full of glamour and is very fascinating. There are magnificent multi storied buildings, broad roads, shopping malls, multiplexes, electric light, etc. and there are mills, factories and industries too. All these dazzle the eyes of newcomers to the city. Here, there is novelty in everything. The dress of the people is different, the habits are different, and there is difference in manners and speech also. Even the daily routine of life is different. People spend their evening in a park, a library, a shopping mall, or a cinema hall. From time to time circus, dramatic parties and exhibitions visit the city and provide diversion to the people. Then there are football, tennis and cricket matches, public meetings, speeches by eminent persons, etc. so there is an increased demand for urban travel, along with the unprecedented growth in private motor vehicles. As a result there has been an increasing focus on developing and promoting safe and environmentally friendly mode of transport.

Means of Transportation in The City

Public transport is the predominant mode of motorized local travel in cities. As a developing city Guwahati also has different modes

of transportation; both public and private. Public transportation include bus, tempo etc. and private transportation include Auto-Rickshaw, Rickshaw and online transportation services, like Uber, Ola⁶, Green Cab⁷ etc. In the recent years, the transport system of India is going through a major shift. This change could be subjected to the rising chains of online transportation, which claims to provide us comfort, safety as well as its very accessible. The preference people give to Uber above traditional taxis (Cramer & Kruger, 2016), it was attributed to three factors, 1) Uber’s more efficient driver-passenger matching technology; 2) the larger scale of Uber than taxi companies; 3) inefficient taxi regulations; and 4) Uber’s flexible labor supply model and surge pricing more closely match supply with demand throughout the day. In Guwahati, we can easily see Uber making an impression on the commuters, which is understandable. Uber services are rising in the chain of priority. Uber is an online transportation network, who have expanded its business in more than 35 countries all over the world is now established its business in Guwahati since last year. For passengers its reliable, comfortable and comparatively cheap mode of transportation.

On the other hand, Autos were used as more popular mode of transport since a long time before Uber. Auto rickshaw is three-wheeler vehicle for hire that does not have doors and is generally characterized by a small cabin for the driver in the front and a seat for passengers in the rear. Generally it is painted in yellow, green or black color and has a black, yellow or green canopy on the top, but designs vary considerably from place to place. In Mumbai and other metropolitan cities, ‘autos’ or ‘rickshaws’ as they are popularly known have regulated metered fares. A recent law prohibits auto rickshaw drivers from charging more than the specified fare, or charging night-fare before midnight, and also prohibits the driver from refusing to go to a particular location. However, used of metered fare is still not popular in Guwahati; as most of the Autos just use the meter as a mere decoration.

In Guwahati, a large number of people is earning their livelihood through driving of Auto, Uber. With the increasing rate of unemployment, driving a private transportation vehicle seems like a descent way to earn the livelihood for people. Monthly average income of an Auto driver or Uber cabbie is 15000 more or less. That is the reason why we can’t overlook the perspective of those drivers for whom transportation is a source to earn their livelihood. Also, because they are the ones directly influenced by this progression, we need to take a look at their point of view. This paper is an attempt to understand how those people, who earn their livelihood as full time drivers, by driving an Auto or an Uber, perceive these change in the mode of transportation and how they feel about this particular shift; as it is obvious that there is a change in preference of transportation due to many reasons, like comfort, safety, convenience etc. Through my research, I would like to focus on how the Auto drivers and cabbies perceive and feel about

the transition in the mode of transport from Autos to Ubers. The main objectives of the study would be;

1. To understand the perception about the shift in choice in transportation mode among Auto drivers and Uber drivers of Guwahati.
2. To interpret the feelings associated with this transition in choice of transportation Among auto drivers and Uber drivers.
3. To narrate the clash near Railway Station among Uber drivers, Auto drivers and hostellers from the local driver’s point of

view.

Details Of The Field Work

In order to answer the questions described above and to address the larger social, interpersonal issues related to the shift in transportation mode in Guwahati, I focused my study on the Uber and Auto drivers, and attempted to understand their perceptions about the progression of local commute from Auto to online transports, like Uber and how the drivers who earn their daily wages through these vehicles, feel about that. The sample was selected with accidental sampling; the sample which is accessible to me and economically convenient. The study was conducted through semi structured interview technique. Apart from that, I also used secondary data analysis with public documents like newspaper, articles and internet based data like from social media, as Facebook. The sample size was 10 auto drivers and 10 Uber drivers. The final sample included were the participants who were willing to participate in the study. Most of them backed away or denied of participating when I mentioned it was a research out of fear. “I don’t really know what happened that day, I don’t remember”, “It was not a big deal, media made it sound bigger than it really was”; normally the drivers reply. Those who agreed to participate made it clear that they don’t want their name published. The interview was in-depth and included both close and open ended questions. For most part, it was an oral interview, because as soon as I took out my pen and paper, the participants would become self-conscious and cutting the conversation short. So, I used to come home and write down the whole interviews from my memory.

Figure 1: SUMMERY OF FILELD WORK

Time Period	Location	Data Collection Activities	Research Questions
2 months Nov 2016- Dec 2016	Guwahati	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interview and observe Auto Drivers •Interview and observe Uber Drivers •Collection of media representation about the conflict between Uber, Auto and hostellers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •How the Auto drivers and cabbies perceive the transition in the mode of transport from Autos to Ubers? •How the Auto drivers and cabbies feel about the transition in the mode of transport from Autos to Ubers? •How the Auto drivers and cabbies perceive the clash near Railway Station among Uber drivers, Auto drivers and hostellers?

Role of The Researcher

As the researcher I had several roles in this study. The first and foremost important role was as an M.Phil. research student pursuing my studies. I had a great interest in the topic; I was determined to conduct a study that was a valuable contribution to the literature and also beneficial to educators. To do so, I was dedicated to follow the accepted educational, social, and ethical processes and standards. I was trying to create a quality study that produced authentic evidence of the local driver's perceptions of the transition in the transportation choice. The second role I had was as a regular commuter of private transportation including both Uber and Auto, I regularly travelled for my classes and I preferred a private vehicle over a bus. Thus, there might be some biases in terms of personal experiences as a student, as a regular commuter that may have influenced the findings of this study. I utilized the qualitative method of analysis for this study. Qualitative research relies on the researcher engaging in self-awareness and reflexivity throughout the research process. According to Creswell (2009), it is crucial that in the process of the qualitative study, researchers concentrate on details and meanings that are expressed by the participants, rather than focusing on details and meanings that the researcher himself/herself wants to express.

The Clash with Uber Cabbies

The clash first started as a minor disagreement between Uber drivers and auto drivers over the cabbies parking their car allegedly in an Auto stand near Guwahati Railway Station on the afternoon of Aug 11, 2016. Trouble first began with a group of auto rickshaw drivers and cabbies getting into a heated argument over the latter parking their cars in places 'designated' for auto parking near the Guwahati railway station late last night. Following that ruckus, the student of nearby boy's hostel came out to intervene. Later that night as it was reported by the media, Uber drivers and students got into a clash leading to a damage of almost 40 Uber cabs. So the clash started first between Uber and Auto drivers got extended to the college campus and brought Uber taxi service in the Assam capital to a partial halt. A group of students also allegedly manhandled two woman constables in the incident.

"The Superintendent of MNDP Hostel has told me that it were the cabbies who provoked the boarders by pelting stones, that prompted some of our boys to jump over the hostel gate to allegedly beat up some of the drivers and also damage some cabs, It was clash between the auto drivers and cabbies which unnecessarily got extended to our campus."

Cotton College principal Nirada Devi told in an interview with The Indian Express on Aug 12, 2016. She also added, disciplinary action would be definitely taken against the students found coming out of the hostel campus and indulging in violence. Police meanwhile have received at four least four FIRs, while one FIR was filed by the Uber and Ola drivers against the students, a group of TV reporters in their FIR alleged that while several of them were assaulted by the students, several camera and other equipment were also damaged. A third FIR was filed by two women constables (Veerangana⁸) complaining that a group of Cotton College students had manhandled them and their driver and damaged their vehicle.

The clash between Cotton College boarders and drivers of Uber and Ola taxis is unseemly and should never have happened. Had this been the first such clash with outside groups, one might have

looked for different solutions. But according to reports, there have been several recent incidents where Cotton College boarders have been involved in conflicts with outside elements.

The Sentinel reported on Aug 17, 2016 after the incident, which puts the incident in a different light. It portrays the attack on Uber cabbies as a joint venture by the Auto drivers and hostellers. As the hostellers had some kind of attachment with the nearby Auto stand they were helping them in the fight. One Auto driver explained how the Uber drivers were equally at fault and how media is exaggerating the story.

Madam the Uber drivers exactly knew they were not supposed to wait in the auto stand. They were warned many times before. But still when they were parked there, they were asked to move, and they replied very rudely; so things got ugly. And when the fuss was loud enough to reach the hostel, the students also joined. So everyone is equally guilty.

Although one of the auto drivers agreed that the Uber cabbies didn't attack first.

The Auto drivers called out the hostellers and together they smashed the Uber cabs. They were all angry. After that obviously the Uber cabbies attacked back. It was not a very big incident. These things happen from time to time.

Some of the drivers didn't have detailed idea about the incident, or it was more or less similar to the one in the newspaper. They were not affected by the incident, so they expressed least interest in the seriousness of the issue. However according to the students, reporters asked for bribe saying they would not telecast the news if they are paid. Even in one of the news channel, a talk show was organized which was hosted by one of the journalist of the channel about the incident and it was noticed that only two students were invited and they were not at all given the chance to speak out. Whereas the journalist was seen snatching one of the Cotton Colleges' Professor by his collar (Hazarika, 2016)

Transition From Auto To Uber

Cab rides are routine for some, and luxury for others. Cab rides entail conversations between consumers and the service providers. Of the 684 million phone users in India, 205 million smartphone users are now changing the way cabs are the booked while 'on the move' in India, and we are analyzing that trend to share some exciting True Insights on how you call-a-cab in India. When it comes to call traffic for the new wave of ride-sharing, app-based services like Ola Cabs and Uber were the undisputed leaders by numbers of calls. Uber users received 13.6 million calls from the company, and called the company 25.4 million times – which totaled 39 million calls. Uber's prices are cheaper than those of normal taxis and change according to supply and demand. But that is not why Uber is successful. It is succeeding because it is responding to customers' needs and offering a unique and innovative experience. While taxi companies are on the defensive, Uber continues to innovate. It recently announced that it will soon offer trips in helicopters; multi-modal transportation Uber style. Investors took notice: the company has an estimated value of \$17 billion after a massive influx of funds in June.

In recent years, auto rickshaws have been a topic of endless controversy in India. Proponents maintain that they are a vital mode of transport in Indian cities, providing low-cost mobility and connecting travelers to mass transit and even directly to their destinations. The auto-rickshaw sector provides a livelihood for some of India's poorest citizens. On the other hand, the vehicles

are responsible for high levels of CO2 emissions and can be unsafe.

Since last two years, Uber services were introduced in Guwahati, the tech-savvy residents quickly got habituated to the convenient "one click booking of cab". They preferred having the cab come to pick them from their home rather than standing on the street waiting for an auto. The cab fare is also determined by meter; so even though it's escalated during peak hours, it seemed justifiable to

Perspective of Auto Drivers

Uber, Ola and the likes are trying to sell themselves as even cheaper than auto rickshaws, in addition to the convenience of getting an air-conditioned cab within minutes of tapping your phone. But are they really? The Auto drivers were the popular choice of private transportation before the online transportation came along. There are other services available which are not as efficient or fast like Uber. So it is safe to say that emergence of Uber is bound to have some impact on the livelihood earning of the Auto Drivers. Groups like the Centre for Sustainable Transport in India are calling for the overall restructuring and reform of the auto rickshaw sector. A coordinated effort to make the business safer, healthier and more financially secure for drivers would reduce accidents and improve customer service. This could include initiatives like driver education, regulated working hours, stricter emissions standards, micro-financing opportunities and insurance policies.

I am not affected by the change after Uber became popular. Not everybody uses Uber, for some people Auto will always be preferable and more convenient.

One old Auto driver reported, he didn't seem to be worried about this transition. Although there are many others who had different opinion than this one.

Yes, my income has gone down definitely since Uber came along. But Autos have been here for such a long time. These app based transportation won't last long. They will run out of business like Pristine or Prime cab.

Another Auto driver said to me with a smile on his face. That got me thinking, may be the Auto Drivers are not really threatened by Uber. Because they know they will not be overpowered by the million-dollar industry. One Auto driver almost angrily told me Madam, before two years, you were also one of the regular commuters of Auto. You didn't have problem back then. Now suddenly because you have other options, all are suddenly pointing out Uber is better than Autos. We hear about incidents in Delhi, Bangalore committed by Uber drivers. No matter what you say, Auto drivers still have dignity, and not like some new impulsive drivers with a luxury car.

I understood his frustration, so I kept quiet. Uber, and the other ride hailing services like it, may only be a few years old, but in many places they're having a disastrous effect on the local taxi industry (Stenovc, 2016). Any business facing new competition will do its best to keep its existing customers from straying. In regulated industries, like the taxi business, some of those efforts will involve pressuring politicians and regulators to keep competitors out of the market. In France, that opposition has turned violent and even resulted in the arrests of two Uber managers (Wallsten, 2015).

Through The Eyes of Uber Cabbies

Long waits, rude drivers, uncomfortable vehicles, and lack of route transparency: the shortcomings of traditional taxis are exactly why the new car-sharing services are prospering. Uber founder

Travis Kalanick, 37, has said that the idea for his company was born in Paris when he couldn't find a cab, an experience that seems all too typical.

Of course, it's true that since Uber came to Guwahati people don't prefer autos; but that's their choice. Uber is preferred because it's safer than autos. Even many auto drivers are becoming Uber drivers.

A young 29 year old Uber driver reported. On the internet negative comments about taxis abound. "Drivers should be serving customers, not law-makers," is one of the usual complaints. Until now taxi companies seem to be ignoring the simple solutions that customers want (Bouquet & Renault, 2014).

Auto drivers are known to be very rude with customers along with their high fare. Uber offers convenience at a lower price which is affordable to everyone. Most of my passengers are young, who needs a ride late night to get home safe. They don't trust autos.

Another cabbie who drives in night time reported to me. Perhaps the biggest threat to the auto drivers doesn't come from the massive surge in competition, but from the fact that the Uber experience is actually pretty good.

What makes Uber different than Auto and other services is its professionalism. Uber's cabs are generally cleaner and well maintained than others. Uber drivers are generally more professional and polite. Auto drivers in Guwahati are known to be rude and demanding about high fare. They are adamant in attitude which is why customers prefer us.

Another Uber cabbie explained about the increasing popularity of Uber. All you need is a smartphone and the Uber app. Press a button, and a car will pick you up. You don't even need to go to an ATM – it just charges your Debit card or Paytm wallet. If I compare that to an auto service, unless I get an auto from the street, I need to wait a long time. If I am in a hurry to get to my class or home, this can be immeasurably challenging.

Attempt to Co-Exist

During the interviews I conducted with the drivers, all of them admitted that there is no personal enmity among them and as long as they don't overstep on each other's territory. I can't point out that one service is better than the other; they both have pros and cons.

There are many people in Guwahati, who still prefers travelling by Auto. Even though Uber has stolen many previous passengers of auto, they are definitely not out of business. The main reasons are reliability and trust of auto for people who have been travelling in auto for a long time. Also people, who are not used to smart phone use, find it better to travel by auto than to go through the complicated process. So if half of the people prefer Uber, the other half are comfortable with auto. It will take a long time for Uber services to completely replace Autos in India. However people in Urban India, who belong primarily to the middle and upper middle class sections are thinking twice before purchasing cars and are relying more on cabs. But if Uber increase the prices or start charging normal rates, people will shift back to driving their own vehicles or purchasing their own cars.

In reality, both Uber and auto have failed to acquire a loyal customer base. Customer acquisitions have become tough indeed even for high valued cab aggregators like Uber. No matter how innovative they are, people will run after discounts. That's why Uber Drivers are running behind incentives and cab aggregators are busy achieving targets set by their investors. Whether all these challenges will allow the Auto drivers to evolve as the next big thing or not is something we will have to wait and watch out for. For

the local auto drivers that are entrenched in Guwahati, they present a very real and present threat. Uber is poaching both customers and drivers, and will continue to do so until Uber is stopped legislatively, or with the incumbents offering a service that rivals Uber in experience. In the defense of the auto industry, they've wised onto this and have collaborated to work on applications that compete with Uber, such as Ola auto⁹. But at the same time, for the drivers of autos, Uber presents a great opportunity to break from the bureaucracy of auto services and local authorities, and to greatly reduce the cost of doing business. This means more money in the pockets of drivers. In the current system, there are no training or education requirements for autorickshaw drivers. While this allows for employment to be open to a wide portion of the population, it can often prove to be a problem with passenger relations and levels of service. A training program could help with overcharging, refusals, tampered meters, driver's behaviour and driver-passenger tension.

Conclusion

As I have mentioned above, customer acquisitions have become tough indeed even for high valued cab aggregators like Ola and Uber. No matter how innovative they are, people will run after discounts. There is no denying that cab aggregators have solved the problem of commuting and availability of cabs. But in the process of solving problems, they have created new issues as well. Cases of misbehaving drivers, drivers cancelling booking or rash driving to reach their daily target for extra incentives have increased.

This city is changing fast, with new technologies, increasingly expensive and congested transportation systems, and new consumer expectations. This is maybe too fast for the Auto industry, which would prefer more stability. Now it has launched a crusade to defend its interests and prevent reform of an outdated, often monopolistic and over-regulated system. Auto drivers are complaining about Uber's "illegal" activities, saying their drivers don't have official permits and can't charge by the kilometer since they don't have meters. This is a perfect example of industry players being prisoners of an old way of thinking and entrenched in the defence of an aging system. With innovative thinking, auto rickshaws can be "the transport of the future"; and, in fact, may be a crucial part of tomorrow's transportation systems in Indian cities. As it was emphasized, door-to-door service is necessary to shift motorists to public transit. Banning auto rickshaws will only contribute to the rising tide of car dependence in cities like Guwahati. On the contrary, an improved auto rickshaw sector can be a key element of a comprehensive transport system that presents a viable alternative to driving.

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