

Queer I - Taxis

Ally Gator, Mumbai 6/11/2004

A friend of mine is conducting an interesting experiment. He's trying to gauge general public attitudes to homosexuality by going around places like Dadar market and getting reactions from people to pictures of two men who, while not in an erotic position, are clearly more than just good friends.

Some respondents are indifferent, some amused and some, like the parents of many gays, persist in identifying them as just good friends. A few, surprisingly mostly women, are censorious, saying it's not part of Indian culture. But the most unexpected reaction came from a taxi driver. He was far from disapproving. "It's God's gift," he told my friend earnestly. "They have been made that way and there's nothing wrong about it."

It was good to hear this, though the strength of his feeling was a bit surprising. Plenty of gay men would stop short at describing their sexuality as 'God's gift'. One obvious thought was that the taxi man was gay himself, but my friend, whose gaydar is pretty good, didn't get that vibe. He just seemed really sincere about it - much more so than many self-proclaimed progressive people who might say this, but really feel quite differently.

Perhaps he was just naturally a tolerant guy. But the fact that he was a taxi-driver suggests another source of his tolerance. Taxi drivers and gay men have long been on cordial terms. Taxi cabs offer a rare, relatively private space in the middle of the city: if you don't mind paying his fare and keeping it below the window, the cab driver rarely cares what you're doing. The boyfriend and I have never had problems with our hand-holding and cuddling in cabs.

Others have done more - and sometimes involved the cab-driver as well. Mumbai's cabs work round the clock, with drivers taking over in shifts and, fortuitously, night is when the newer, hence usually younger and cuter drivers take over. And since the graveyard shift is long and boring, many of them don't refuse a little sexual relief. In fact, so unsurprised are they at offers, that they may even be common. (In the suburbs, auto drivers are equally willing).

Word has spread and Mumbai's taxi-drivers are now almost a tourist attraction themselves. Another friend occasionally arranges nocturnal tours of taxis for friends from abroad. Only once did he report a driver who found this curious. Looking at him over the head of the tourist busy down below, the guy asked him in puzzlement, "*usko kya milta hai?*" (What's in it for him?) My friend contemplated explaining, in Hindi, about the pleasures of giving oral sex, but weakly decided just to wave away the question.

It's simplistic to imagine that such interactions could always breed tolerance. The opposite is equally possible, with them reinforcing stereotypes of sexually submissive and voracious gay men. Yet from what friends tell me it sounds like the actual interactions happen with such ease and lack of prejudice, perhaps reflected by that driver in Dadar, that it almost makes one wish this was a real solution. Imagine if tolerance could be taught with a few blow jobs... if nothing else, it would be so easy getting volunteers!