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100 and counting: Mumbai's taxis complete a grand century

PTI / Rajendra Aklekar / Wednesday, October 27, 2010 3:04 IST

The Mumbai has turned hundred. Motorised cabs replaced the horse-driven Victoria or buggies in 1911 and since then there has been no looking back. The very first cabs were the Dodge, Chevrolet and Plymouth models.

The good old Premier Padminis that are now rattling their way out have been there for 40 years.

The first motor car appeared on the city's streets in 1901 and it was around the late 1910s that preparations for the first motorised taxi began. The cab was introduced in 1911, according to official city records, documenting the city's road transport.

"Those days were different. There were no crowds, no one used to speed and no one was in a hurry. The roads were wide and there were no traffic jams. There were different cabs — big ones and small ones. The fare of small ones was about six annas and the big ones, taken by the rich, about 10 annas," city historian Deepak Rao said.

Today, refusal to ply and jacked up fares top the list of complaints, followed by drivers' rude behaviour, charging excess luggage fare, use of fake tariff cards and taking longer routes to reach a destination, according to the traffic police.

It's a habit that will die hard, yet the humble black and yellow Premier Padminis have a life of their own and are a part of Mumbai's identity.

"The Premier Padmini is comparatively a new entrant, around the late 1960s or early 1970s. The earlier cabs were of different models. There are still 17,000 of the Padminis left in Mumbai and they will be phased out over five years," AL Quadros, president of Mumbai Taximen's Union, said.

City transport history documents show that in 1956 Premier Auto tied up with Fiat to manufacture the Fiat and around 1970, Premier Padmini became the Mumbai taxi. There is no clarity on when the black and yellow colours were painted on cabs, but experts say that it started soon after Independence.

"The Mumbai taxi has been an inseparable part of Mumbai and has always been in sync with the city's ups and downs. The present state of the taxis is bad and it is up to the government or the taxi community to restore them to their original glory," said Arun Tikekar, a city historian and writer.

The taxi has been romanticised in films and books too. It has made an appearance in Bollywood in Dev Anand's 1950s hit Taxi Driver or Amitabh Bachchan's Khuddar, Mahesh Bhatt's Sadak and the latest, Taxi No 9211 with John Abraham and Nana Patekar. "Which other city has such famous taxis on which Bollywood film themes are woven around?" asks Quadros.

Taxis are the common man's Ferrari, they are irreplaceable

The old black and yellow cabs are a boon to thousands and are like a landmark in public transportation. This makes them special and thus irreplaceable. Although, the cabs are irreplaceable in South Mumbai, in the suburbs, we have to depend on auto-rickshaws.

I can't forget the day when I got a chance to see the Bandra-Worli sea link on one of the moving heritages of Mumbai, that is the Premier Padmini taxi of Mumbai. It was awesome to take a ride with friends. There may be a number of new cars but for those cannot afford their own vehicle, taxis rule the roost. They are the common man's Ferrari.

Pavan Sahu, Bandra

They are very much part of the Mumbai experience

Taxis are a more convenient way of travelling if you can afford it. A train will be practical in terms of saving time, but in a taxi you have your own space. I feel paralysed every time a taxi strike is called.

They are a lifeline for me. I have noticed that drivers get away with anything, as cutting lanes and they do it so slyly and effectively — one has no choice but to appreciate that.

I once hailed a cab late at night and was scared. The driver put me at ease, by saying, 'I won't do anything to you madam' in a very jovial way. I have many such taxi memories — they are a part of the Mumbai experience.

Shalvi Mangaokar, Prabhadevi

The cabs are a lifeline for many commuters

The Fiat cabs are an integral part of the city. I'm sure that a majority of Mumbaikars for whom the black and yellow cabs are like a lifeline while commuting in South Mumbai will agree. They are as important a mode of travel as local trains in the city. Earlier, the cabs used to be the preferred mode of transport for foreigners too. Now they have been replaced by Meru and Cool Cabs.

In my experience, the city's cab drivers have always been honest. I remember the time that I left back my wallet in a cab. I was pleasantly surprised when the driver came looking for me, to return my wallet.

Ravish Khapra, Vile Parle

Need to upgrade the taxis for a comfortable ride

The old Fiat cars are synonymous with black and yellow taxis in the city, but you need to upgrade them. The new taxis, like WagonRs, are more fuel efficient as well as peppy. So, for the environment and commuters' comfort, the new fleet has to replace the old one.

Public transport is the preferred mode of transport. I either travel by taxi or train as they are faster. I have fond memories of the time when we were trying to hail an auto on my husband's birthday, and it suddenly started to rain heavily. Luckily, a taxi came to our rescue and we ended up having an unexpected, long romantic ride before a nice candle-lit dinner.

Aarti Samant, Lower Parel

Love the entertaining ride in the taxi with a baaja

We might have to replace the old models of taxis with modern ones, but we will always have fond memories of the vintage cars of Mumbai. The taxi is the most convenient way to commute. No matter where you are, you can get into a cab and reach the required destination comfortably.

Taxi drivers have made the system very unique and something you can relate with all things Mumbai. However, these days their attitude towards commuters has changed. Hailing a cab is tedious. I recall the days when I would insist on a baaja (music system) cab as it would be the easiest way to pass time while travelling.

Namita Jadhav, Mahim

Expert view

It's very hard to replace taxis in Mumbai as we are all dependent on them. We use them to get around town comfortably and conveniently. Hailing a cab and getting the driver to agree to take you to your destination may not be easy but no one can deny the importance of taxis in the city.

Taxis made an appearance on Mumbai's roads when the population was on the rise and there was a demand for a comfortable mode of travel.

The yellow and black colours are synonymous with the Mumbai taxi. Even if your taxis may not be up to international safety standards, people in the city have a strong emotional connect with them.

Taxi drivers have over the years provided excellent service, with their honesty and politeness, which can't be seen in any other part of the country.

New taxis will replace the old, as people seek improvements where safety and comfort are concerned. But taxis are an indispensable part of the public transport system.

Renuka Kriplani, editor, Autocar show

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