

MONIKA BROWARCZYK

Dekho, magar pyār se – the ‘Poetry’ of Auto Rickshaw-vallahs

Abstract

The article is an attempt at description and characteristics of inscriptions decorating the auto rickshaws in Delhi. The inscriptions under scrutiny were gathered by the author during her several stays in Delhi in years 2001–2008. The work is not to be understood as representation of a quantitative sample of such inscriptions, it is rather an endeavor to represent their qualitative illustration. It analyses various inscriptions of different kinds: protective (religious invocations and spells), based on believe in fate, delivering common sense wisdom and displaying identity. The auto rickshaw inscriptions are seen here as the expression of inventiveness, revealing the awareness of the masses of creative and communicative power of words. The analysis reveals pattern in creating these inscriptions (for instance: rhyming or quoting as common practices) and their different functions corresponding with social and cultural fabric of Indian society.

The investigation on the “poetry” of rickshaw-vallahs or auto rickshaw drivers was not the intention of my visits to India, it was a “by-product” of research for my Ph.D. thesis dealing with the aspect of humour in Hindi literature. While collecting materials on the subject of my study I was constantly travelling across Delhi to its different libraries and research centres scattered all around the town. Delhi, like most metropolises, is not a friendly city for travelling in and because of the heavy traffic, transportation occupies too much of the precious time and energy of both its inhabitants and visitors.

It was a hot afternoon in Delhi and I was travelling in an auto rickshaw from one end of the town to the other. I was getting more and more irritated by the constantly growing heat, smog and noise all around and that is why it took me some time to realize that the rickshaw in which I was sitting had a richly decorated interior. It was covered from the top to the bottom with the images of the brightest star of Bollywood cinema

ever – Amitabh Bacchan. The “designer” of the rickshaw had selected different famous scenes from “Big B.” movies. Though I am not a great admirer of the actor myself, and despite the heat, smog and noise, the decoration brought a smile to my face. I found it an intriguing expression of mass creativity focused on one of the most admired icons of the popular culture. Furthermore, it provoked me to pay more attention to the expression of creativity visible in the public carriers of the city of Delhi.

Owing to my interest in language and culture I have focused on the verbal expressions, i.e. the inscriptions which decorate the back of the auto rickshaws. During my several stays in the capital of India I collected fifty seven of these slogans, the majority of which were often repeated on numerous other vehicles. Even though the material does not provide a representative quantitative sample for the auto rickshaws of the city of Delhi, because the estimated number of the three-wheelers in the capital of India is about fifty thousand; moreover, not all of the vehicles carry creative inscriptions. However, in my opinion, the inscriptions under scrutiny reflect the diversity and general characteristics of this type of public communication and may be accepted as a qualitative sample.

The term ‘creative inscriptions’ has been used to differentiate them from the inscriptions visible on all of the rickshaws, which will be referred to as obligatory. These latter ones are related to the information on general traffic and its improving safety rules, e.g.: ***Keep distance, Horn please*** and ***Stop***. Moreover, they include the data on the auto rickshaw having been converted into an environmentally friendly one (***CNG***) or on its eligibility for being used as a public means of transportation (***Under S[tate] T[ransport] A[uthority] Permit***). The obligatory inscriptions are all written in English and most of the auto rickshaws carry the inscriptions designed in the same manner, i.e. in the same fonts and with additional ornaments (e.g. the first letter in the word ***Stop*** reminds of a swan). The repetition of the informative slogans in the pre-set style may suggest that they are duplicated by, e.g., stamping or using some other moulds, which means that they function more as pictorial signs, not as the understandable order of meaningful words.

The creative inscriptions, which are the focus of the study, are mostly written in Indian languages, i.e. Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, which are the most popular languages among the inhabitants of the Indian capital. The majority of the sample gathered is written in Hindi, with a few exceptions from Urdu, Punjabi, Sanskrit and English. According to the informants the decision on the ‘design’ of the vehicle is taken either by the owner or by the driver, because the minority of the rickshaws belong to the drivers and the majority of the three-wheelers are maintained by persons who rent them to drivers for about 250 rupees per day. The “decoration” includes, apart from the above mentioned obligatory slogans and creative inscriptions, both protective and decorative tokens.

By protective tokens I mean non-verbal items, e.g. stickers with ॐ or a bow (auspicious symbols: the holy syllable and the weapon of God Rama respectively), mini-tridents (associated with Śiva) or pieces of red cloth (brought from the temples as the symbols of blessings of God or Goddess). Mini-altars, which are sometimes arranged in front of the driver’s seat on the front window, also have a protective function. Lemons with green pepper are home-made tokens of prosperity and warding off evil forces; they are

frequently hung on a string in front of the driver's seat. The bumpers are decorated with a *cappal* – a sandal which functions as an instrument of, somehow literal, beating back evil. On the other hand, apart from the auspicious 'ornamentation' with a protective function, the design may be entirely decorative, as exemplified by the above mentioned inside of the rickshaw covered with Amitabh Bacchan photos or popular stickers displaying the eyes of Aishwariya Rai, the female star of Bollywood cinema. It is worth mentioning that both of the observed purely decorative ornamentations are connected with icons of the popular culture.

The majority of the creative inscriptions are concerned with a protective function, which was also the case of the non-verbal items. They constitute the bulk of the most frequently repeated slogans. Taking into account the thoughts of J. Auboyer¹ on the main features of the Indian culture, this kind of pragmatism evoking the protection of the supramundane forces in every field of human creative activity is the determinant factor of Indian civilization.

Protective inscriptions can be divided into two categories: the first one includes religious invocations reflecting the multireligious beliefs of India and the second one contains 'spells' warding off evil forces. The most austere expressions belonging to the former group are names of God, Goddess or divine couples, e.g. *Simhvāhinī* – 'One, who rides a lion', which is an epithet of Durga, *Lord Jesus* and *Rādhāsvāmī* (Radha and Kṛṣṇa). Other rickshaw inscriptions evoke the glory or the command of the supramundane powers, e.g. *Jay Mātā jī* ('Victory to the Mother'), *Jay Śrī Rām* ('Victory to Lord Ram'), *Jay Hanumān jī kī* ('Victory to Lord Hanuman'), *Jay Bholenāth* or *Jay Bhole Śankar* ('Victory to Śiva, the Merciful Lord'). *Xudā hāfiz* or 'God be your protector', is the blessing often used as a good-bye formula by Muslims, it can also be seen on the rickshaws. Among the protective inscriptions one can also observe expressions appealing to the mercy of the divine beings, e.g.: *Mā kā āśīrvād* ('the blessing of the Mother') and *Guru kṛpā* ('the mercy of Guru'). These religious inscriptions are most frequently repeated on the three wheelers. The Sanskrit mantras are comparatively rare e.g.: *Aum namaḥ Śivaya*, *Aum namaḥ devāyanamaḥ* and *Hari aum*. The rickshaw slogans include instructions for the devoted followers for instance: *Prem se bolo jay Kṛṣṇa jī* ('Repeat with devotion victory to Lord Krishna') and humorous childish wordplay based on the rhyme: *Rādhā Kṛṣṇa bolo, phir khiṛkī kholo* ('Say Radha Krishna, then open the window'), which is an example of expressing both devotion and sense of humour. Among the religious sample gathered, the most poetic and intricate one is the proclamation of the absolute surrender to the mercy of the Goddess: *Mā mere jīvan kā sāyā hai tere ācal kī chāv mē* ('Mother, the protection of my life is in the shelter of your lap').

The second type of the protective inscriptions constitutes of the slogans focused on warding off the bad influence of the evil eye or malevolent look. These inscriptions are of predominant type, they are frequently repeated on numerous rickshaws. There is a belief that these provide the power to control, to some extent, the bad influence

¹ J. Auboyer, *Sztuka Indii*, Warszawa 1975.

of the evil eye, misfortune that can be evoked by somebody's bad intentions. In my opinion the most regularly repeated expression is: *Burī nazarvāle terā mūh kālā* or 'You looking with the evil eye shame on you'. There are several variations of this slogan, e.g. *Sāt ke phūl ikkīs kī mālā/burī nazarvāle terā mūh kālā* or 'Seven [are] flowers, twenty one [makes] a garland. /You looking with the evil eye shame on you'. In this expression a line has been added to rhyme with the initial one, creating a wordplay². On the other hand there are cases of inflaming the warning by introducing harder abuses, which also creates a humorous effect, e.g. *Burī nazarvāle tū nasbandī karā do/kar lē*, 'You looking with the evil eye sterilize yourself'. The implication is both abusive and funny, a sterilized person is no longer 'potent' to pose any danger. (The expressions appealing to both sex and physiology are often sources of humour and many jokes are based on obscenity and scatology, because humour often violates social taboos.) Besides, this particular inscription reminds the slogans in the social campaign promoting family planning, so it might be also interpreted as parody. However, there are also illustrations of the opposite approach, turning the warnings addressed to those looking with the evil eye into playful mild expressions of mirth, for instance *Burī nazarvāle terā bhī bhalā* or 'You looking with the evil eye, all the best even to you', which is a genuine parody of the initial phrase with the warning replaced by the blessing. Introducing the element of surprise, employed in this expression, is a productive humour building technique. The same scheme has been applied in the line which is in the title of my presentation: *Dekho, magar pyār se* or 'Look, but with love' which is an unexpected reversal of the obvious message, a playful warning disarming those who potentially are in a position to do harm to others. An example of a curse in a humorous disguise of a blessing is the following: 'God makes your children live long, drink your blood, call you uncle and call me papa' (*Bhagavān karē tere bacce jīē terā khūn piyē tujhe cācā kahē mujhe pāpā kahē*). Humorous effect arises from the reference to the promiscuous behavior, which is also a sort of social taboo, condemned strongly in the rigid framework of conservative Indian society.

Another group of inscriptions, comparatively of less use than the above mentioned ones, are those referring to the question of destiny or fortune, which express the 'philosophy' of the common men, i.e. the influence of the supramundane forces on their lives. These inscriptions read: 'Everyone has got his time' (*Vakt apnā apnā*) or 'Everyone has got his destiny' (*Nasīb apnā apnā*), 'You will meet your destiny' (*Milegā mukaddar*) and 'The man favoured by fate' (*Mukaddar kā sikādar*). (The latter one is a quotation from a title of a movie starring Amitabh Bacchan.) Another example of this group is a two-line comparatively sophisticated poetical phrase: 'The one who gives fortune has not made any mistake, who gets what, is a question of fate' (*Takdīr batānevāle tūne kamī na kī, kisko kyā milā hai mukaddar kī bāt hai*).

² Walter Nash in *The Language of Humour. Style and Technique in Comic Discourse* (Longman, London 1985, p. 155) describes double function of rhyming and rhythm in humorous texts as both decorative and directive. He emphasises the banality and naivety of humorous rhyming as its main feature.

While enumerating the rickshaws slogans one can not skip those referring to the common sense, expressing the observations and experiences of everyday life, for instance the statement of bitter truth: 'Money finished, friendship finished' (*Paise khatm, yārī khatm*) or 'Worship work' (*Karm kī pūjā karo*), which encourages hard work. 'The man of honour shows mercy to the poor' (*Khvaja garīb navāj*) is a plea for mercy, but 'Time does not wait for anybody' (*Samay kisī kā intazār nahī kartā*) relates to the basic existential questions. A genuine example of the practical employment of humour appears in the rhyming appeal for generosity to the clients of the rickshaw-vallahs: 'Make friends with us, not with our car./ It drives on petrol not on water' (*Dostī ham se karo, hamārī gārī se nahī / calī petrol se pānī se nahī*). The sentence revealing the harshness of everyday driving experience in the hectic traffic of Delhi i.e. 'Scabby, rabid dog and one who uses his horn too much are both same, they are recipients of hatred' (*Khujlīvālā pāgal kuttā aur zyādā harn bajānevālā donō samān hāī donō ghrṇā ke pātr hāī*). One can also find observations on the changing nature of people in the modern times as in the following quotation: 'Anger and hatred are visible on face of every person, a believe that Delhi is a place of those who have heart seems to be obsolete' (*Har insān ke cehre par gussā aur nafrat dikhī hai, dillī hai dīlvālō kī yah bāt purānī lagī hai*). A false but popular etymology of the name of Delhi in Hindi i.e. *Dillī* derives it from the word *dil* or 'heart' and bestows on Delhites the qualities of those people who are generous in their love to all people, willing to help and welcoming others i.e. those whose hearts are big. However the above mentioned quotation expresses the sad observation on the change of behavior of the contemporary dwellers of the town. On the other hand one can also find a melancholic phrase, reminding of ghazal poetry, which portrays the sad reality of life: 'I have been robbed by my own, how would the others dare./ My boat has sunk where there was little water' (*Hamē to apnō ne luṭā dūsrō ko kahā dām thā/merī kistī vahā dūbī jahā pānī kam thā*). These two lines express the sad paradox of the loved ones who might be the most eager to do harm, which causes great pain because of its being unexpected.

Last but not least, there is a category of slogans displaying one's identity, which express the need of belonging either to a certain group or in a certain place, i.e. respectively an ethnic group or a family, but also a certain region of the country or India. Of the former type are the patriotic expressions 'My great India' (*Merā bhārat mahān*) and *I love my India*. [Indian trucks travelling abroad carry the proud slogan: 'We live in the country in which the Ganges flows' (*Ham us deś ke vāsī hāī jīs mē Gangā bahī hāī*)]. The bonds with the family are underlined by naming the three-wheelers with the nicknames of children, e.g. 'The Throne of Minu/Sonu' (*Minu/Sonu kī gaddī*). However the inscriptions: 'The Lion of Punjab' (*Śer e Pājab*) and Gurjar the Hero/Warrior (*Vīr Gurjar*) refer to the regional – Punjabi and tribal – Gurjari identity. The latter one might also be interpreted as the expression of aspiring to upward social mobility, Gurjars though being a tribal community perceive themselves as the warriors.

The picture of reality is composed of details and the rickshaw inscriptions are such details in the overall picture of Indian culture. However, when we inquire into them they

reveal fascinating aspects of life in India and its cultural and social fabrics. As verbal expressions of mass creativity they exemplify sensibility to the creative and communicative power of words. Though they represent the little tradition, they personify the ancient formula describing the true meaning of Art, which should be: *Satyam, śivam, sundaram* or it should serve truth, well being and beauty; that is the reason for devising the metaphoric expression 'the poetry of rickshaw-vallahs' for the title of this paper. These rickshaw inscriptions circulate among the rickshaw 'designers'; some of them are quotations from prayers, films, songs or advertisements, while the others are unique. The popular ones, e.g. those appealing to Gods or Goddesses or warding off evil, are repeated on thousands of vehicles. Nonetheless there are examples of original, creative work, for instance: *Dekho, magar pyār se*, which can only be seen on a single three-wheeler, but can become popular with other rickshaw drivers. Some of them are short, composed of one or two words, the others have more developed forms. They establish their own little living tradition worth observing and analysing, otherwise how could we understand what the author of the following affirmative truck inscription wanted to convey: *Duniyā ka matlab I love you* or 'The world means: I love you'?