CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The present research is an in-depth study on the socio-economic conditions of auto drivers in Dindigul. In this chapter, the researcher presents a detailed summary of findings and constructive suggestions for the development of socio-economic conditions of auto drivers in Dindigul.

SUMMARY

Limited access to formal sources of credit is a major issue which has had multiple ill effects on the autorickshaw sector in Dindigul. One of major consequences has been the hyper-inflation of autorickshaw fares. The banks’ documentation procedures are not favourable for the poor who want to enter this sector for a livelihood. This has resulted in the rise of private financers, who have captured the sector. This has resulted in a majority of the autorickshaw drivers in Dindigul driving autos on rental basis.

As the study revealed, a staggering 71 per cent of autorickshaw drivers are driving rented autos. They not only have to earn their livelihood but also help the owners repay their loans. The drivers have to pay a daily rent of Rs 150 to Rs 200 i.e. Rs 4,500 to Rs 6,000 per month to their seths. This has a direct
impact on the autorickshaw fare which puts the passengers at the receiving end of their fury and frustration.

A majority of the autorickshaw drivers enter the profession at an early age and come from the lower economic strata of the society. The study revealed that most of them are school dropouts. Most come from a poor family background and the lack of opportunities lead these youth to opt for autorickshaw driving. As the study revealed, Dindigul autorickshaw drivers are mostly married (83 per cent) and have an average family size of five members. This indicates a high dependency ratio. Put simply, it indicates that the autorickshaw drivers take up the responsibility of a typical Indian family at a relatively early stage and that too in a demanding metro city where the cost of living is scaling upward daily.

Most of the autorickshaw drivers' family incomes range between Rs 6,000 to Rs 12,000 per month. Of this segment, 36 per cent have family income ranging from Rs 9,000 to Rs 12,000 while another 37 per cent have family incomes ranging from Rs 6,000 to Rs 9,000. Furthermore, 59 per cent of the drivers are in debt with dues ranging from Rs 15,000 to Rs 50,000. Generally, they borrow it from friends and neighbours at an interest rate that sometimes goes up to 30 per cent. This is far higher than the rate of interest of a bank loan. However, the repayment works out in an informal
way. less education, and the financial burden on the autorickshaw drivers could possibly be some of the reasons for their unruly behaviour with their passengers.

According to the study, 80 per cent of the autorickshaw drivers belong to the age group of 26-40. This indicates that the autorickshaw drivers are giving their prime age to this sector i.e. they want to maximise their returns. However, in stark contrast, the IT sector does not limit the aspirations of its employees and provides them with training and opportunities to improve their reach & potential. Taking this into consideration, the autorickshaw drivers also need to be looked upon as an aspiring group with a huge potential to generate revenue for the economy. Investment in this sector will prove to be greatly rewarding to the economy.

There is no social security in the autorickshaw driving profession. Though they are a major transporter of commuters in the city, the drivers do not have any form of insurance or social security. A majority of the drivers cannot afford insurance for themselves or their families. A negligible portion (0.2 per cent) of the drivers has pension plans. The only reason many of them join unions is due to the provision of informal insurance. An autorickshaw driver's future after the age of 40 or 50 is unpredictable. All they have to depend on is their savings. This
leads the drivers to aggressively look out for maximum earnings from autorickshaw driving.

The autorickshaw sector does not provide any incentives to the drivers to generate additional income. All that they can earn is the fare for plying passengers. It is an established fact that the fare set by the government is not adequately compensatory. The end result is that passengers constantly haggle with drivers over the fare charged – a great inconvenience to all parties involved.

Per day, the autorickshaw drivers spend around 8-10 hours on job (93.00 per cent), which includes 4-6 hours of waiting for passengers to hire them. A majority of the autorickshaw drivers said that they travel at an average speed of 30-40 kmph and cover a distance of 80-100 Km per day. Through this they are able to earn a net income of around 6000-8000 which is excluding the expenditure on autorickshaw.

A majority of 52 per cent of the drivers said that they charge Rs 20 per kilometre. The autorickshaw drivers are accused of overcharging by 95 per cent of the passengers. Refuting the drivers’ claims that passengers do not ask for the meter, 97 per cent of the passengers confirmed that they want the autorickshaws to ply by the meter. However, the autorickshaw drivers claim that they do not use the meter
Dindigul autorickshaw drivers are accused of rash driving and over speeding. However, the fact is that the maximum speed for an autorickshaw is 50 kmph. Taking the traffic speed in the city into consideration, which moves at 18-25 kmph at peak hours, it is most often not possible for the autorickshaw drivers to ply at their top speed or over take other vehicles. From the study it was found that autorickshaw drivers ply within a speed limit of 30-40 kmph. However, the passengers are of the opinion that the drivers mostly drive rashly and violate traffic rules.

The study found that though the autorickshaw drivers shied away from admitting to drinking alcohol, but a majority of the autorickshaw drivers accepted that they consume tobacco in their leisure time while waiting for passengers. Smoking and alcohol intake coupled with job stress (pollution, noise & vibration of vehicle) may be acting as detrimental factors to their health. Back pains and aural disorders are extremely common and push the drivers out of the profession at a relatively early age of the late-forties.

Sixty eight per cent of the drivers have been driving autorickshaws for past 3-10 years. Only 23 per cent of the drivers have been driving for the past 10-15 years. Fifty six per cent of them took up driving because they did not find any other jobs. However, Dindigul has a majority of unskilled drivers. Driving an
autorickshaw requires a four-wheeler license. However, only a negligible 24 per cent of the drivers have learnt driving from a driving school. Rest of the 76 per cent of the drivers learnt driving with help of friends and relatives. The presence of such a vast majority of informally trained drivers explains the reason for perception of autorickshaw drivers as reckless drivers. However, 77 per cent of the autorickshaw drivers think that they are skilled drivers contrary to 41 per cent of the passengers accusing them of rash driving and violating traffic rules.

Autorickshaw driving is still looked upon as a menial occupation. It is not recognised as a profession which gives lucrative earning for people who take up driving. The autorickshaw drivers are not considered as professionals who can demand their due. They are still seen as belonging to the lower strata of workers. Their sense of entrepreneurship is completely dismissed as an autorickshaw owner-cum-driver is considered to belong to a lower social stratum when compared with a taxi driver who is not even an owner. However, the truth of the matter is that autorickshaw drivers actually belong to the aspiring and upwardly mobile lower middle class looking for social recognition & better living standards. They are desperate to wriggle out of their image which has shrunk with the size of their vehicle.
Dindigul autorickshaw drivers earn a monthly net income of Rs 6,000 to Rs 8,000 against factory workers who earn around Rs 4,500. This indicates that they have a greater ability to invest in social security schemes than the factory workers. Private players could take up this opportunity to initiate social security schemes specially designed for the autorickshaw drivers. If even a meagre amount of Rs 100 per month is collected for social security schemes, it adds up to a whopping value of Rs 20 million per year52.

52 Considering there are about 1,00,000 drivers working in the Dindigul autorickshaw sector, each paying an insurance premium of Rs. 100 per month, this cumulates into an annual insurance premium collection of Rs 20,000,000.

A majority (54.62 per cent) of them said they slept in their free hours, while another 47.94 per cent said they watched TV or listened to the radio.

SUGGESTIONS

The autorickshaw sector is regulated by the government. The permit system which was in the hands of the government has done more damage to the sector than good. Discrepancies in the permit system have led to corruption and unnecessary sky rocketing in the price of the permit resulting in a few private financers controlling the autorickshaw sector in the city. This has blocked the entry of
the poor entrepreneurial youth who could have otherwise benefited from this sector by taking up the profession. Ultimately, the public bears the brunt of such mismanagement. Of-late the government seems to have realised its mistake and has taken the corrective steps of contemplating abolishing the permit system for passenger autorickshaws.

Most of the autorickshaw drivers are in their youth. This means that they are trainable. There are lots of complaints on their driving skills and general customer behaviour. This is due to the lack of training. Training programs could be initiated to train them in driving skills and soft skills. Corporates, as part of their CSR initiatives, or NGOs could take up training the drivers which could help in solving the existing issues in the longer run.

However, the state government still has the reign of fixing the fare. It should understand that it has done enough harm to this sector by trying to control it. The fares have not been revised after 2007. The current fare which is Rs 14 for first 2 kilometres of a trip and Rs 6 for every subsequent km is not accepted by the autorickshaw drivers or their unions. They are not heeding to the state government and have taken the liberty of charging their own fares. In the absence of a fixed fare, the passengers stand at huge loss of time and money. Since the state government hasn't been proactive in updating the fares, the autorickshaw drivers have
taken this as an excuse to overcharge the passengers blaming the state government for not doing its job on time. The passengers, oblivious of the due amount they should pay for an autorickshaw trip, end up on the losing front.

Considering these facts, it is high time the state government lets go of its responsibility of fixing the fare for the autorickshaw sector. Deregulation is the force which actually leads to greater market specialisation by encouraging small autorickshaw companies and private individuals who are currently denied entrepreneurial freedom to provide transport services. Moreover, lifting entry controls should be expected to increase employment opportunities for some urban residents, particularly among low-income and minority populations in which unemployment is the highest. The state government can bring in corporates and cooperatives to start company models to organise the functioning of the sector. With multiple players operating in the market, deregulation will lead to market competition which will help to increase efficiency and improve the quality of services as the service provider will set their own fare.

Currently autorickshaws are the sole service providers for short distance trips in the city. There is almost no competition in this segment. Shared autos are seen as a potential competitor for the autorickshaw drivers as they have a designated seating
capacity of 5+1. Yet, there are only 200 Shared autos in Dindigul. This could perhaps be attributed to the higher price of a shared autorickshaw permit that is Rs 625 inclusive of service charge.

Instead of limiting the seating capacity, the autorickshaws should be allowed to carry a large number of passengers as is done in smaller cities. If a seating limit has to be necessarily imposed, then the manufacturing companies are the ones who should be made responsible for deciding the same based on the safety concerns.

Same is the case for Maxi cabs. The government has put restrictions on Tata Magic to provide short distance trips. They are allowed to only ply as taxis. However, they are illegally operating as shared autos by paying fines of around Rs 5,000 per month to the RTOs.

In the absence of any competitors the autorickshaw drivers have become arrogant. The government should take appropriate steps to curb this trend. It should allow more types of vehicles to ply in the short trip segment. It should also allow the 3+1 autorickshaws to ply as shared autos instead of wasting time waiting for passengers or riding dead kilometres at the cost of high fuel consumption. This will allow the autorickshaws to focus on the quality of service and just fare. Thus, a mix of exclusive-ride and shared-ride autorickshaws seems to be the best solution.
This lack of credit acts as a major roadblock against them as the banks' documentation process requires residence proof and proof of their ability to repay the loan. Hence, in the eyes of the bank these people are not credit worthy. So majority of the drivers end up driving autos on rent rather than becoming owner-cum-drivers which could have a direct impact on fixing the fare. The government should take steps to ease the process of access to credit. Another option is that manufacturers can be encouraged to sell autorickshaws directly to the drivers through micro-payment systems.

Autorickshaw stands can be designated by the government. If corporates are allowed to foray into the sector, then the autorickshaw stands can be distributed between companies through a tender process wherein, if a company wants to expand or close down, it can buy /sell the autorickshaw stand from/to other companies. Also a parking charge can also be instituted to induce efficiency in the system. This way the drivers will think twice before deciding to take time off work and as an added benefit the use of private transport will do down.

Since a majority of the drivers are married and support a family, they overcharge to provide for the basic security that is required by individuals. The government can step in to formulate partnerships with private insurers to provide vehicle and health
insurance along with other benefits that keep the autorickshaw drivers driven and satisfied.

The study shows that only 22 per cent of the drivers have been trained in driving schools. Majority of them are self-trained or trained by their friends and relatives. This is a major concern since autorickshaw driving in Dindigul requires four wheeler licenses.

Since the autorickshaws play in large numbers and are a very important mode of transport in the city, the government should adhere to stringent rules in checking the driving skills of the drivers. It should collaborate with driving schools and make training mandatory by allowing only drivers trained by recognised driving schools to operate on the roads.

CONCLUSION

Autorickshaws are one of the largest movers of commuters in Dindigul city. They are second only to bus services, transporting around 0.5 million commuters daily. The sector serves as a safety net for the uneducated and unemployed providing a lucrative income to thousands of poor youths who join this profession to support their families. However, Dindigul’s autorickshaw sector is plagued with the problem of inaccessibility to formal sources of credit and the state government’s ineptitude in recognising the key role that autorickshaws play in the integrated transport system of the city. This has compelled the autorickshaw drivers to struggle
for their rights. In the aftermath, they are accused of overcharging, rash driving and being ill-tempered. When studied closely, the current scenario is the result of decades of negligent socio-economic and policy factors governing this sector.
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