

## The Needle's Eye



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The prime minister, fresh from his own memories as a state leader, appears to be trying to forge a consensus (on GST and other Reforms). That may not happen until Modi actually wins himself a Congress-mukt Bharat

# Taxiing Towards a Karmic Take-off

It has been a rather bewildering week, with things not what they seem to be. The two Rohtak sisters who beat up their molesters on a bus: did the incident really happen? The Uber cab rape allegation: should all web based taxi services be banned in India or should we strengthen our technology, our telecommunications, and our due diligence? The vicious attack on the daughter of a former Bangalore police commissioner who happens to be from Mizoram: are Indians really a peaceable non-racist people who feel threatened by 'Chinese' from the North-east and only occasionally attack African students in a Delhi metro station? And finally, the prime minister's Srinagar rally: was it really a historic election meeting attended by all peace-loving Kashmiris that proved democracy had firmly trumped terrorism?

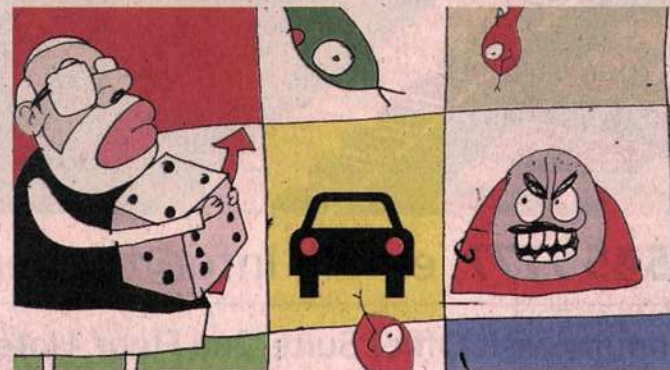
Security is very important as our bigger cities, yet to smarten, welcome hundreds of thousands of citizens from the hinterland in search of a better economic future. In the middle-class neighbourhood where I live, as ordinary homes get hemmed in by the highway, the chaotic road running parallel to it, the metro arching overhead, and a gaggle of hulking, menacing office buildings, several people have installed closed-circuit cameras. People have begun

to mistrust one another. The justice system seems to be running itself ragged keeping the floodwaters from coming in and plugging the holes in the crumbling dikes of governance. I know it does not seem that way if you are a Salman Khan or a Ramalinga Raju. If we strengthen due diligence who should we be checking out besides Uber drivers? Bus drivers and conductors? Metro train drivers and metro station attendants? All taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers, maids, chauffeurs, waiters, supermarket cashiers, toll collectors, sweepers, security guards, electricians, plumbers? Is it not better to provide vocational training and implement a proper certification process? Public-transport companies of all stripes ought to fully vet all customer-facing employees. Driving licences ought to be linked to good behaviour, with points deducted for traffic violations and for causing accidents and licences cancelled for repeat offenders. Have you ever heard or read of anybody losing their driver's licence for reckless or drunken driving?

This is not to say that a disruptive taxi app like Uber is blameless. It has proven to be controversial in several countries. It has just been sued in Portland and banned in Spain. A French promotion appeared to offer to pair customers with 'hot chick'

drivers. A senior executive was reported as saying the company would spend large sums of money in investigating journalists who were bad-mouthing it. Uber drivers have been accused of attempted rape and fondling in Washington D.C. and Chicago. It faces many taxi app competitors like Lyft, Curb, Sidecar,

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Hallo, and Flywheel. It claims it does a three-step screening process for drivers in cities like New York but that is debatable. Uber has proven to be a boon for immigrants like the young Pakistani who drove me in New York. He said he was pursuing a part-time degree at Brooklyn College and did not seem to be very conscientious about sticking to his bookings, which a sarcastic dispatcher made clear in a radio conversation I overheard. Another driver, a Tunisian, got the address for picking me up wrong. But here's the thing: in New York you can book your Uber car based on a five-star rating system; you are asked for a rating of the service and driver after every ride. The passenger can track

the car she hires by its driver's first name, rating and location on a Google map linked to the Uber app. Still, some young women prefer to hail an old-fashioned yellow cab late at night rather than book an Uber ride. So the technology is important — merely downloading an Uber app on your Indian phone is not enough; connectivity is important throughout a huge, sprawling megapolis like Delhi NCR, and this is where our telephone companies fall down. The biggest ones have appalling call-drop rates, blackout patches throughout the city, and download speeds that make boasts of 3G convenience a joke. The fact remains that if you are a woman, taking a taxi or an autorickshaw alone at night is a dark, potentially terrifying experience, a lottery. If all of us were linked through our smartphones to efficient GPS grids that helped us keep track of each other's whereabouts, life might become safer.

Urban transportation is unlikely to have been on the agenda when Prime Minister Modi met chief ministers both at a formal meeting and at a retreat earlier this past Sunday. 'Cooperative federalism' is the new phrase. We did not hear much about KARMA, the Knowledge and Reforms Management Agency which we were told might soon replace the Planning Commission.

Instead there was talk of Team India, where the prime minister and the chief ministers would meet at regular intervals. Mamata Banerjee, who did not attend the meeting, had written to Modi pointing out that there is already an Inter-State Council with its own secretariat that has been defunct. The National Development Council was reduced to a rubber stamp by the UPA regime. At Modi's meeting, the chief ministers predictably split along ideological lines, with non-BJP ruled states objecting to a wholesale overhaul of the planning process. But that is indeed what may be required, as I have said in past columns. An equitable parceling of funds lies at the heart of reforms like the Goods and Services Tax which will benefit both the states and the centre. At least the prime minister, fresh from his own memories as a state leader, appears to be trying to forge a consensus. That may not happen until Modi actually wins himself a Congress-mukt Bharat. At the moment the clock is ticking on the reforms calendar: eleven weeks to the annual budget that, for reasons that are not very clear to me, is held out as a defining event in this government's effort to refashion India.

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