



A handful of wooden-wheeled, one-horsepower taxis known as tongas still ply the streets of Delhi.
PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Delhi's Horse-Drawn Taxi Drivers Don't Have Long Faces

With low fares and beloved steeds,
they can still hack it; Mr. Kumar's new ride

By JESSE PESTA and KARAN DEEP SINGH

NEW DELHI—A few years ago, Ravi Kumar made a big bet on the future: He sold his horse-drawn taxi and started driving an electric rickshaw instead.

“The times were changing,” he says.

Today, he's going old school and switching back.

Here, in the chaotic lanes and bazaars of Delhi's old city, customers aren't ready to say nay to horse-drawn taxis quite yet.

Known as tongas, a handful of these wooden-wheeled, one-horsepower anachronisms still ply the streets in several parts of town.

So earlier this year, Mr. Kumar, 36 years old, paid a visit to a third-generation carriage maker in Delhi who still makes

a living—if only barely, he grumbles—building tongas to order.

In India, where the modern and ancient collide all day long, tongas manage to stay relevant thanks to simple economics. In an intensely price-sensitive market, they're cheaper to ride than the bicycle rickshaws.

Tongas are a more familiar sight in smaller cities and towns, although in decades past, Delhi had thousands of its own. Now they operate in just a few spots in the capital city, one of which is Sadar Bazaar, a wholesale market. One weekend recently, passengers gathered at a jam-packed traffic circle, waiting to catch a ride from the dozen or so tongas that still run there.

An empty tonga pulls in and Amreek



There are enough tongas still running to keep a farrier busy in the middle of Delhi. Here a tonga horse gets new shoes. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Singh clammers up to claim the high, front seat by the driver. Up here, he says, “You can feel the air.”



Ram Chandra and Rajdhani

Mr. Singh, a bangle merchant who sells from a pushcart, is spending the day stocking up in the

bazaars. He snaps open his case, stuffed with neatly aligned, sparkling bangles.

His tonga driver, Ram Chandra, takes off, picks up speed and starts shouting at pedestrians ahead. “Dare you! Dare you to cross!”

The breeze ruffles his passengers’ hair. One traveler, a regular customer, idly asks Mr. Chandra: Did you get the shoe replaced?

“Yes, I got it replaced today,” Mr. Chandra says.

They’re talking about a horseshoe, of course.

Mr. Chandra’s horse, Rajdhani, clip-clops down the street, past the Krishna Clarified Butter Store. “Rajdhani is my son and I take care of him like one—feeding him, massaging him,” Mr. Chandra says. He named his horse after the Rajdhani Express, one of India’s fast trains (which isn’t all that fast).

The tongas will pick up as many as five or six fares at a time. Riders hop on and off along the way. The cost is 10 rupees a person, or about 18 cents, more if you want to transport goods.

New Delhi is two cities in one: the “old” Delhi of tangled lanes and chaos, and “new” Delhi with its colonial British architecture and arrow-straight boulevards. Tongas stick to the old areas, where bicycle rickshaws, motorized rickshaws, cars, goats, scooters, banana vendors, suitcase vendors, and porters pushing wooden handcarts compete for street space.

One porter walks down the street carrying boxes of “Legs Beautician” brand foot massagers on his head. Another porter carries a stack of shiny, metal rat traps on his head.



Mohammad Yusuf, a third-generation carriage builder, makes wooden tongas in Delhi. He is the builder of Ravi Kumar's tonga. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Three women climb aboard a tonga. They're in old Delhi to shop for fabrics and decorations for the wedding and party shop they run.

A toy seller hails another one, and haggles over the price because he is traveling with unwieldy bundles of children's toys—Best Friends Teddy Bears, Dolphin Flower Pots.

He wants to pay 150 rupees, or about \$2.50. The tonga driver wants 200 rupees.

"There are many other tonga drivers here," the customer warns.

Finally the men come to terms on the price, only to start fighting because now the tonga driver is throwing heavier parcels on top of fragile ones. "You're throwing that as if it doesn't cost anything!" the passenger says.

Meanwhile, just down the street, a horse is being shod. And Mr. Kumar—the tonga-buyer—is questioning the quality of the service.

"Last time you put an old shoe. Put a new

one this time," Mr. Kumar says to the man doing the work. He and a friend, the owner of the horse, inspect several horse-shoes before settling on one.

Mr. Kumar's next stop: To check out his new tonga, which is almost ready for delivery. Down an alley and past a man welding together restaurant chairs, he finds Mohammad Yusuf, the carriage maker, sitting in the shade and carving a leaf design into a wood panel that will be part of his next creation.

Mr. Yusuf says tonga building is an art. As an example, he notes how tough it is to build a wooden wheel that is perfectly round, as opposed to egg shaped or lumpy.

"Nobody else but a seasoned carriage maker can do it," he says.

Nearby, several tonga drivers discuss a horse fair they plan to attend on Delhi's outskirts. One of the men mentions that his previous horse bit off his finger.

He holds up his hand. "Here, here," he says, showing where his finger used to be.



Three women hop on a tonga in the Sadar Bazaar marketplace in Delhi, where they're shopping for fabrics and decorations for the wedding shop they run in another part of town. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Kumar says he, too, plans to visit the horse fair. He needs to buy an animal to power his new tonga. He conducts a walkaround inspection of his new ride, and eyeballs the woodwork.

"It meets my approval," he says.

The tonga will set him back about 35,000 rupees, or roughly \$600. When it's done, he says, he plans to paint it pink.

The first time around, Mr. Kumar drove a tonga for almost two decades, before selling it a few years back and putting what he now considers misplaced optimism in the

electric rickshaws. At that time, the battery-powered three-wheelers were being heavily promoted as a way to cut down on Delhi's air pollution.

But ultimately he decided to give that up. Too many police hassles, he says.

Tongas have history on their side, Mr. Kumar says. He points out that in the Mahabharata, the Indian epic, the god Krishna travels in horse carriages. Krishna doesn't take electric rickshaws.

"People in the neighborhood say the tongas are coming back," Mr. Kumar says.