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### **‘Roads to Motorisation’:**

#### **Governance, Transit and City Life in Colonial Delhi, 1880-1930**

***Abstract:** Twentieth century colonial cities were the harbingers of a different world in terms of the socio-cultural landscape. In this context, the story of urban space took a turn to amass various technological and ‘modern’ aspects. The inception of motor transportation and a renewed attention towards roads formed a major part of this capricious world. The works on transportation in the colonial context, to a larger extent, focus on the railways and rarely do they consider other forms of commuting which occupied a major portion in the lives of the city populace’s daily interactions. The municipal experiences, in the context of transportation, are rendered inconsequential in the histories of the colonial cities. The local urban movements, of goods and people, integrating a sense of mobility and its rules are often overlooked even though they shaped an urban subject’s life in the metropolis. These mobile technologies marked architectural, technological modification, as well as perception changes in minds of the urban residents, who were active participants in this process. Thence, technology ought not to be restricted to a technical narrative and the way it interacted with its environs formed an important aspect of its evolution. This paper attempts to chart the story of urban transportation and aims to construct a narrative around the ‘urban perception’ of the city occupants, by looking at the way in which the ‘roads and motorisation’ impacted the lives in British Delhi.*

#### **Introduction**

Road transport, apart from railways, has been on the margins of historical works. The spheres of city planning and improvement were deeply affected by comfort and economic value of travelling by roads. The idea of a modern city could only be shaped, if this component was handled skilfully. The potential of transportation was seen as a huge one, with the local authorities and private firms being a major part of this enterprise. The public transport

manifested itself in the forms of trams and buses from the late nineteenth century in colonial Delhi, alongside the persistence of older modes of travel like *tongas*<sup>1</sup>. The motor driven vehicles came to occupy the public sphere, most significantly, from 1920s. As all these vehicles competed for space, causing traffic and accidents, control over them came under the aegis of local administration.

Before beginning this topic, it becomes essential to briefly look at the contributions made by some recent works. The studies on technologies, apart from the narratives of grand engineering marvels like rails, have found a renewed focus in popular histories of the ‘everyday’ technologies along with their role in social spaces. Scholars like David Arnold and Erich DeWald have pointed towards the advantages of moving beyond existing themes by framing the study of daily technological engagements in order to comprehend the “social life of things” (Arnold and DeWald 2012, 2). Arnold, extended this understanding in his attempt to historically conceptualise traffic (Arnold 2012) and looked at the ‘everyday technologies’ (Arnold 2013, 3-4) in the Indian colonial context. He raised some fundamental questions on the historical literature, which needed to be addressed, i.e. “how and why did these machines come in the sphere of general use? ..... How did they become a part of a new way of thinking- about class, race, gender..., politics and society?”

In another study, historian Ravi Ahuja stated that a uniformity in the case of technological developments and a social disinterest regarding the same are “assumed” (Ahuja 2009, 3) and there seemed to be a disregard in acknowledging different opinions and requirements. As a result, the “concepts like ‘public works’ or ‘infrastructure’ ..... are still used as if they had no history and no specific social context” (Ahuja 2009, 3). Ahuja’s study focused on the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, and offered some important conceptual basis and clarifications for a further inquiry. The questions asked in this paper are slightly different from those put forth by the above-mentioned scholars, yet this paper draws an inspiration from their works.

In this process, a case study of British Delhi serves as a crucial example to understand the dimensions of transport ‘service’. An attempt is made to trace road transportation within a colonial city, its history and the larger interactions with the colonial populace, both official and non-official. Along with the daily engagements in the public space, bringing out some ‘ordinary eventful’ moments which defined the newly emerging dynamics of the city. In order to move

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<sup>1</sup> *Tonga* is a light horse-drawn two-wheeled vehicle used in India.

further there are certain precedents which form the determining factors in this study. The foremost being “Why Delhi?” and not any other city. The answer lies in the fact that it is one of the most documented cities in historical literature and hardly any topic has been left unexplored in the studies on it. An array of celebrated historians, like Narayani Gupta (Gupta 1981) and Margrit Pernau (Pernau 2006), have traced its story from the Mughal, late Mughal to the colonial times. The recent trends on environment (Sharan 2014) and space (Legg 2007) have also influenced works on Delhi.

This comprehensive literature on the city spared me from looking at the same old stories, whilst giving a detailed picture of its past and offered an opportunity to think of a different approach. Delhi city forms an ideal subject for the time period between 1880-1930, which required to engage with an urban space undergoing transformation and was influenced by the twentieth century developments taking place across the colonial domains. Second, its emergence as a ‘commercial centre’ with the coming of railway during 1867 (Gupta 1981, 42) and an increased demography<sup>2</sup> meant that the stories of the ‘municipality-public engagements’ could be found in the administrative reports and mass-media of the times. Third, the announcement of Delhi as a capital, in 1911, aggravated these processes. A renewed attention towards the ‘city space’ by the colonial officials and subjects, with a different kind of interaction emerged. History of mobility within Delhi, then becomes an important case in point and by tracing the different forms of landed transit within the city, their history can also be retrieved. The idea is to understand the overall use and perception of these new mechanical modes. The most crucial question amongst all of this remains centred around the transportation for what and for whom? The next section looks at the various forms of road transport, their brief history and interaction with the city people.

### **Early Modes of Transport in Delhi**

The movement of people encompassed both public and private forms of mobility. Since not all populace could be classified under a single category, the experiences of different sections need to be looked at in their particular social contexts. Passenger mobility embodied a pivotal role amongst all the movements within a colonial domain as it could impart knowledge regarding the evolving public interactions. Passenger could be crudely defined as a commuter or a traveller of a public or a private vehicle. The term passenger further entailed a wide variety of

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<sup>2</sup> In Delhi the 1881 census recorded a total population of 317,802 in contrast to 298,247 in 1868. *A gazetteer of Delhi 1883-1884*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 36.

people based on their economic position, social status, gender etc., which determined the mode they ended up using. What uses a mode of mobility provided for each individual or people of similar positioning then became a basic drive of their reality in the colonial urban space. Apart from passenger's experiences, certain things were intended for facilitating the governance and for the private providers of transport. Then whose intentions got much more voiced? Was it the government, the local bodies, the people or the private players? Who got to shape the direction of mobility in Delhi? Moreover, passengers, operator's and officials were not the only people involved, there were group of people who drove non-mechanised vehicles. How did they perceive mobility? Did they feel a sense of competitiveness with the newer modes of transport like motor vehicles? These are the questions briefly addressed here and in the following sections.

Most areas had some form of transit prior to motorisation, these were often human and animal driven carriers. Delhi was likewise marred with different types of palanquins, tongas, bullock-carts, and various sorts of non-motorised carriers.<sup>3</sup> The coming of trams and later on motorisation made additions to the already existing transport fabric of the city, and there were other non-mechanised forms which continued to strive with increased longevity amidst competition. Eventually, only those non-mechanised vehicles remained which could offer benefits like cheaper fares and access to remote lanes besides the motor vehicles. To begin with, the mechanical forms of public commuting, the foremost initiative came in the form of tram system. The Indian Tramway Act of 1886, had ordered the introduction of trams in the local municipal areas.<sup>4</sup> In colonial cities like Delhi this meant coming of the horse driven trams which were utilised for waste removal from 1888.<sup>5</sup> It was only from 1900, when the debates around electricity commenced that the launch of electric trams came to be seen an advantageous operation.<sup>6</sup> The trams in Delhi were a commercial enterprise of the 'Delhi Electric Supply and Traction Co.' (DESTC) with concessions provided for the land use and collection of 'track rent' for coverage of road damage and utilisation of road space by the Delhi Municipal Committee (DMC) from 1906 in form of a contract.<sup>7</sup> In 1906 tram was seen as a most advanced

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<sup>3</sup> Maheshwar Dayal, '*Dilli Jo Ek Sheher Tha*' (*Remembering Delhi*), Delhi: Hindi Akadami, 2013, 326-34 (for detailed description of traditional modes of commuting present in the city).

<sup>4</sup> *The Indian Tramway Act 1886*, South Asia Archive (hereafter SAA) (Taylor & Francis Collection).

<sup>5</sup> Madho Pershad, *The History of Delhi Municipality 1863-1921*, Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1921, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Commissioner's File, No. 122, 1902, Vol-1, DSA.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

form of vehicle to be launched in the city and a lot of expectations were drawn on its working.<sup>8</sup> This initial enthusiasm soon faded to the background when other technologies started to mark the sphere of transport. After 1930s, operating trams became a cumbersome job for the DESTC and the DMC. The discussions around a mobility system most required by Delhi emerged and the authorities started to contemplate a move towards better forms of transportation. The trams were not completely discarded and the main problem of responsibility regarding maintenance of trams remained a bone of contention. DESTC wanted a revocation of the earlier contract, while the DMC was in no position to take the responsibility due to a stated lack of the financial resources.<sup>9</sup> The struggle continued till 1939, when the municipality finally called for a “boycott” of the tramcars on the issue of high prices being charged by the company and asked people to stop using trams. The request made by DMC was reported as a lost cause, since a news mentioned that passengers were seen using trams with each coach carrying at least three-four people.<sup>10</sup>

The above newspaper report though reflected quiet a contrasting view of trams than the one depicted in Ahmed Ali’s novel ‘Twilight in Delhi’.<sup>11</sup> Ali wrote this novel by 1939, and it was first published in 1940. The novel described the period between 1911-1919. In this story, the protagonist was shown as someone critical of the innovations introduced in the city, for him the surroundings had turned unpleasant due to the colonial altercations. This attitude was reflected from his description of trams as an unpleasant experience, causing a “grating noise” and creating a “dreary” environment.<sup>12</sup> He mentioned that trams “plied throughout the day though very few people used them.”<sup>13</sup> This novel can be understood in terms of ‘nostalgia’ literature which Pernau mentioned in the context of the Urdu works on Delhi (Pernau 2015). Pernau’s definition of nostalgia as situated in the past which lacked connection from the present was the same way this narrative was weaved in Ahmed’s novel. There was a sense of selective perception where, for the protagonist, tram was not a symbol of modernity rather it represented the lost world and the 1857 defeat. The author did reflect on the way in which the ‘newer generation’ were using this vehicle, but there were people like Mir Nihal (the protagonist)

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<sup>8</sup> *The Times of India* (hereafter TOI), 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1906, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *TOI*, 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1938, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *TOI*, 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1939, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, New York: New Directions Publishing, 1994 (Reprint).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

whose world had turned upside down. Then what did the technology and modernity mean to people like him, or was it just a kind of selective cognisance which delved constantly in the past and tried to ignore the present. The use of tram cannot be completely negated though, as seen from the power tussle between DMC and DESTC in 1930s, it was still used by the people in spite of a ban showed that as a transit system it did cater to a certain portion of the city populace. The advancements in transport sector saw an inception of another phase of challenges marked by the launch of motoring.

### **Dawn of Motor Vehicles**

A few years later, alongside trams came the era of ‘motorization’ which transcended all the other transit systems. Intizar Husain in his memoir on Delhi wrote that “by the time of next *darbar* (1911) convened, the motor car will dazzle everyone and *Darbar* would be known as the *Darbar* of the motor cars.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to state that motor vehicle “gained such popularity after the court of George V and ran at such a speed that it left royal and majestic ride, the elephant and its gold and silver *amari* (canopied seat) far behind.”<sup>15</sup> The commencement of motor transport was marked by usage of cars, motorbikes, buses, etc. In 1906, writing to the Western India’s Motor Union, Lord Curzon had claimed that India would offer a favourable environment for the launch of motor vehicles in the coming decades.<sup>16</sup> His observation turned to reality from 1915, with the official introduction of the motor vehicles for administrative purposes. In 1919, 5000 officials and 4000 motor vehicles were reported from all over India. Apart from the administrative use vehicles were employed for commercial purposes.<sup>17</sup> By 1920, the scene of public transport came to be marked by major technical transformations. In Delhi this was manifested in the rise of motoring, there was a reported increase in numbers of ‘registered cars’ from 400 to 2000 between 1920 to 1921. The discussion on direction of motoring began to focus on advancing the usage of motor vehicles in a popular realm for transport of passengers and goods.<sup>18</sup> A newspaper report declared that motor business was well

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<sup>14</sup> Intizar Husain, *Once There Was A City Named Dilli*, translated by Ghazala Jamil and Faiz Ullah, New Delhi: YODA Press, 2017, 232.

<sup>15</sup> Husain, *Once There Was A City Named Dilli*, 236-36.

<sup>16</sup> *TOI*, 1st Nov, 1904, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *TOI*, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 1920, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *TOI*, 16<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1921, 27.

established in Delhi with areas like Kashmiri Gate and Mori Gate serving as centre for various motor-commercial establishments and repair shops.<sup>19</sup>

The talks about motor vehicles might have started from 1907, but their real public engagement began from 1921. During 1921 even a few people being curious about the motor transport was seen as an achievement for the motor companies. Although, it took a long time for motor vehicles, especially cars, to travel the distance in order to reach the common masses. The motor vehicles like the cars of Princes and Rajas served as fancy displays for a majority of people.<sup>20</sup> The people maintained a stance of curiosity for the unknown and knowledge related to the technical details, even though the 'prices' of cars became a point surprise for them.<sup>21</sup> Further, American cars were reported to have gathered more market than the British ones post the world war, but the British manufacturers were ahead in the small car sales. The motorisation of Delhi, still was not seamless with deterrents like lack of fuel, taxes, exorbitant prices of vehicles and their maintenance expenses, thus, limiting a wider use initially.<sup>22</sup> Cars during this period of 1920s were more of a status symbol, and not a popular mode of mobility within the city.

Simultaneously, motor transportation was used for the dispensation and gathering of information. A newspaper report stated that the "progress in north" could be measured by the fact that many towns had adopted motor services in their postal departments, these included Delhi, Agra, Meerut, Lahore, Lucknow, Cawnpore, etc.<sup>23</sup> Amidst all these developments, there was another form of motor experience which reached to the masses, i.e. the motor bus. It was probably the most widely utilised motorised carrier. Though the prices of the tickets were not recorded, but the fact that the buses were often jam-packed indicated that they formed a popular medium of mobility within and without the city. Within Delhi, it was stated that various 'bus services' connected major areas like Civil Lines, Railway Station, Cantonment, old and the new city. The buses were quoted as "well filled" which showed that as a mode of local transport they fared well.<sup>24</sup> Motor buses connected the city to surrounding areas through routes like Delhi to Meerut and Gurgaon, and were described as "stuffed with people who sit, cling on anywhere

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>20</sup> *TOI*, 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1921, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> *TOI*, 16<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1921, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 27.

they can.”<sup>25</sup> Although the prices of petrol continued to be a hindrance and the local authorities and the companies involved in the city transport system sought ways to develop an “efficient system of connectivity, with the lowest possible costs.”<sup>26</sup> In the year 1935 the tramway company also sought to turn towards this more popular transport form and introduced a ‘venture’ in the form of “trackless trams” for a “more economical working”. Trolley bus was initiated in order to overcome the losses from tramway service in Delhi and it was seen as a viable “solution to the..... difficulty of obtaining speed in narrow congested streets, where the traffic is regulated to a great extent by the slow-moving bullock carts.” The electric buses were deemed as a better option than the petrol ones, due to the soaring prices of the latter. Thought the petrol ones ran successfully to forge a link between the old part and new part of the city.<sup>27</sup>

Buses, from 1920, served as solutions to enhance connectivity of the city. The main places like the railway station, Old Delhi, New Delhi, suburbs like *Sadar* and Karol Bagh, and other commercial areas became the focus of motor bus operations as stated earlier. Yet, the aspect of control was not totally lost in these cases, especially, inside the New Delhi area. In the case of New Delhi Motor Service which operated an office going bus on the Raisina-Secretariat route required the staff travelling through to carry brass passes in order to travel in the bus. Travelling without the pass was seen as a serious matter which was to be scrutinised.<sup>28</sup> This particular bus only plied according to a fixed time, i.e. 8:30 a.m.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, constant surveillance of office workers movement within New Delhi was clearly defined by the colonial authorities.<sup>30</sup> It reflected on the controlling devices of the government, at the same time revealed problems which existed in such a measure and the ways people juggled around the administrative apparatus. Despite this the passes gave a sense of control to the authorities over the movement of people.

The mobility in Delhi meant different things to different groups. There were people for whom the change was dreadful and represented a symbol of the lost world, there was the office going crowd for whom the experiences varied from buses to trams, and cars remained a distant dream

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> *TOI*, 16<sup>th</sup> Sep, 1933, B23.

<sup>27</sup> *TOI*, 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1935, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Proceedings (legislative), April 1920, No., 4, NAI.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

for most. The officials and people who could afford cars saw their mobility being restricted by the lack of regulation as will be discussed in next section. In face of this chaos, organisation heralded by DMC became a need of the hour.

### Governance Issues

The benefits of the motorisation were soon equalled to the problems it induced in the public space. Traffic and accidents emerged as the two major issues that the DMC had to deal with in order to maintain a coherent environment. Also, there was an increase in their responsibilities in the sphere of road maintenance with regulation of different transport forms. DMC had to undertake repairs, extend and maintain the roads, regulate fares of the public transport, license and control the accidents, etc. These responsibilities were reflected through incidents taking place within the city. The first important task which was DMC's major concern was 'road maintenance'. It was a tough job, due to narrowness of some streets and the use of iron wheels by *tongas* and carts, which remained an efficient mode of transportation for access to numerous areas. In the process roads incurred quite a few damages. In 1930s, experiments were undertaken to introduce rubber-tyres for bullock carts instead of iron tyres which damaged the roads. It was seen as a rewarding investment which could reap profits in the long term and the cost of road maintenance would be considerably reduced. To forward their use, the financial sub-committee even agreed to grant tax exemptions for the vehicles who switched to rubber tyres and cooperated with the DMC.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the increasing number of vehicles in the city, in addition, caused problems related to traffic and accidents. The phenomenon of traffic was seen as a culmination of all sorts of reasons, from bad roads to certain activities like processions, public gatherings etc. In face of these problems an efficient management was deemed as necessary evil. The discussions on introducing road signs came to forefront and in 1896 an initiative to forward the use of signboards was contemplated by DMC, but meagre finances interfered with the progress on this matter.<sup>32</sup> The matter was again taken up in 1936 and the secretary of Automobile Association of Northern India was requested to give suggestions on the issue by DMC.<sup>33</sup> The year of 1935 recorded a total of 219 accidents in the Delhi city territory, majority of them were a result of warding off collision with another vehicle. Moreover, there was an increasing resentment

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<sup>31</sup> *TOI*, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1935, 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Municipal Committee of Delhi Proceedings 1896-1897*, Commissioner's File, DSA.

<sup>33</sup> *TOI*, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1932.

voiced against the huge number of tongas which dotted the streets and became synonymous with the expression on bad driving. Another reason for accidents was quoted as an inability of many drivers to comprehend signals and give correct ones.<sup>34</sup> Although the officials boasted of “keep left” notice boards as widely displayed on the roads of Delhi, they did acknowledge the chaotic conditions which existed on the traffic front of the city.<sup>35</sup> The problems of jaywalkers, control of vehicles near schools and lack of space present on footpaths for walkers due to presence of “hawkers, beggars and rubbish”, only added to the problems.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, “hootists” or drivers, especially the commercial vehicle drivers, who used loud horns to attract the passengers became an additional source of hassle.<sup>37</sup> This inconvenience was sought to be removed by the creation of silence zones<sup>38</sup>, yet the problems remained far from being resolved.

Meanwhile, with a large share of criticism being directed towards *tongas*, they voiced their own set of concerns in the changing realm of transportation. Amongst the older forms they had continued to make their presence felt in the city space. Their existence alongside motor vehicles, in the years post 1930s, reinforced the fact that as a mode of mobility they still had some use. *Tongas* were seen suitable for traversing the narrow lanes of Old Delhi and they continued working by accommodating passengers and carrying commercial goods. The changes in their circumstances became apparent from 1930s. In 1936, three thousand *tongawallahs*<sup>39</sup> staged a strike to raise their voice against the unfair treatment meted to them by the DMC.<sup>40</sup> They saw themselves at a disadvantageous position as compared to the bus operators and other commercial vehicle drivers. The strike on their part served as a method to remind the DMC of their importance, since the commercial activity around the Old Delhi area faced a considerable loss because of their actions. The goods were stranded in the railway shed and were not allowed to be moved as the *tonga* drivers blocked the way and burned a few buses.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Delhi Administration Report 1935-36*, 23, SAA.

<sup>35</sup> *TOI*, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1931, 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *TOI*, 14<sup>th</sup> Sep, 1940, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> A term used for *tonga* drivers.

<sup>40</sup> *TOI*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1936, 4.

<sup>41</sup> *TOI*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1936, 5.

Thus, each city portrayed its own set of problems when it came to motoring. In Delhi it was the question of capital's reputation and a reflection of government's prestige which constantly juggled with the reality of things. This indirectly pressurised the municipal authority to keep the city's space up to the mark. There were internal competitive feelings between the old and new parts of Delhi which surfaced during this period. The lack of funding and means caused inadequacies in the tasks they performed, as was resounded in most of the newspaper and administrative reports. Municipal authorities on the whole were to deal with and learn from innumerable changes taking place within the city space. The help from associations was only limited to the interests of sections they patronised, but for the local authorities the priorities were different. They had to look over each aspect from the safety point of the urban dwellers, keep decent roads, implement rules and regulations, ensure security of passengers, and control the wayward practices.

### **Conclusion**

Colonial city life in Delhi was tremendously transformed by the introduction of motorisation. City people, as seen through this paper, were different groups who came to occupy the urban expanse and their encounters with the different transport forms generated an interactive environment where the voices of bus operators, tram company and *tongawallas* came to be heard. The competitive tendencies against motor transport were revealed on two instances: first, when the *tonga* drivers protested and second, when the tram operators launched electric buses. The municipal administration, in this situation, tried to work as a balancing authority and a source of regulation. Albeit, the nature of public-private formation of this service made it difficult for the DMC to control the divergent tendencies. The obstacles surfaced, time and again, in the form of accidents, traffics, disagreements, etc., thus, management of transport and related issues became a task for the municipality. In spite of these drawbacks' motorisation gave a new meaning to being urban and became a driving force for the betterment of roads, infrastructure and increased safety. The experience and perceptions related to diverse forms of mobility created a social space with an active participation from most people residing in the city in some form or another. There were feelings of nostalgia, indifference, scrutiny, liability, convenience, negligence, threat and competition which accompanied the motor vehicle in Delhi from late nineteenth and twentieth century. Hence, transport as a service formed an important part of the city life and its social environment, without transport there could be no story of the life in a colonial city.

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