

Sleepless in Delhi

- How does it feel driving the auto-*rickscha*?
- Auto is a difficult vehicle. It makes all kinds of noises all the time. It is all right for young drivers, not for old ones like me. Do you know people can die driving the auto? And then you have smoke all around you. I like it when passengers ask to be taken to open spaces...
- This cough of yours... Is it due to pollution?
- I don't know, really. Perhaps it is God's punishment! The only thing I know is that when I inhale the smoke, I shrink down to the bones.
- What would be your age?
- Can't say. Perhaps fifty. All I can tell you is that I was in class 5 in '62. And I joined school when I was eight...
I calculate. He should not be more than forty. Does it mean that all his years of fatigue have accumulated in his age?
- What is a good day for you?
As I say this I feel water welling up in my mouth. Fresh green leaves washed in rain, moist air, semi-wet paths – everything comes to life.
- I don't know what's a good day. I feel lucky the day I get two meals.
This is my first lesson. Although we live in the same city, we live in different weather zones. In the weather zones of food and hunger, of home and homelessness...
- Would you recount an interesting incident from your life?
- What of my life? There isn't anything that I can recall.
- You said yesterday that you lived in this auto.
- Yes, although my licence mentions a Connaught Place shop as my residence. But I do not sleep there. I always sleep in the auto. I eat at *dhabas*. I stop on the roadside to take a bath every 10 to 15 days. That is a holiday for me. I wash my clothes, dry them in the sun and when they are dry, I wear them and hit the road again.
- What is it like sleeping in the auto?
- You can't really sleep in an auto. I sleep for two to three hours. I am not able to straighten my back, can't even turn over.
- Do you feel like sleeping in a park? Or, simply on the road?
- No, I can't abandon my auto just like that.
- In that case you must be feeling sleepy all the time?
- My body has been awake for such a long time that I cannot sleep for long. And even if I get a sound sleep on an occasional night, the police comes... they wake me up and tell me to go sleep elsewhere. Such nights are difficult. I have to wander from one place to another...
- Do you pick up passengers at night?
- If somebody comes and I have the strength, I do.

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Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2000
The text was written in 1994