

# Public Transport in Durban: Indian Privilege versus African Empowerment —Process and Perceptions

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Public transport in South Africa has been visibly transformed since radical changes began after the first democratic general election in April 1994. This can be especially noticed in the taxi industry, which is now dominating the transport of commuters throughout the country. The opportunities in this industry are widely seen as a spontaneous facilitator in the post-apartheid state's drive towards creating an African middle-class. The quality and neatness of the vehicles and the participants' enthusiasm to aggressively compete in the market, bears testimony to the industry's thriving performance. Under such competitive conditions in a country that was divided along racial lines, the dynamics of public transport operations ought to manifest the history of racial divisions in taxi transport. This paper attempts to contextualise the need for research in this area and it retraces the history of public transport in Durban among Indians and Africans. The archival and literary research for this paper is complemented by fieldwork with commuters, residents in several Indian dominated suburbs in Durban and Indian bus and taxi owners. The interviewees formed part of a group of 255 people whose information was used for a larger project. Information from at least 50 of the 255 was used for this analysis.

## Some pertinent issues

In the course of researching the dynamics of the sprouting 'informal' businesses in the research areas, at least two significant incidents took place. Both incidents were about the passenger transport industry and the racial tension that prevailed between Indian omnibus operators and taxi operators, mainly African. Before I delve into the dynamics of Indo-African relations in the transport industry, a brief insight into the African taxi industry will help to contextualise the problem of competition between the two groups. Like the Indian entrepreneurs in the transport industry who took advantage of opportunities that were presented to them, African taxi operators

grasped at the opportunity as private transport entrepreneurs. But it came at tremendous cost to their dignity, freedom of movement and freedom of participation in the country's economy. Khosa (1990; 1991), a South African human geographer, has discussed the total repression of the African taxi industry between 1930-1976, its limited tolerance after 1976 and final acceptance of it as a means towards facilitating the creation of a conservative petty-bourgeoisie in the African townships - in order to stem the rising tide of African radicalism. Up to a point apartheid had succeeded in achieving this by subtly co-opting the South African Black Taxi Association (SABTA). The taxi industry has grown from a few dozen six-seater taxis in the 1930s to more than a hundred thousand minibuses in the 1990s (Khosa 1991:2). By 1992 the purchasing power of African taxis had grown astronomically. They were reported to be enjoying the biggest share of the taxi-bus-train commuter service, purchasing over 800 million litres of petrol and 3.5 million tyres per annum (Khosa 1992:182). Khosa largely depicts the taxi industry as 'one of the most extraordinary socio-economic phenomena in recent years' and as 'a silent revolution transforming South Africa into one of the most integrated economies' and as 'fruit of popular non-racial capitalism' (1991:2). But the industry has not been without its problems. Khosa (1991:18) acknowledges, but dismissively, the following: rank marshals overloading taxis to gain lucrative favours from drivers, raising fares without consulting the affected community, commuters having to wait long queues at ranks, taxis not serving certain parts of the townships, and taxi feuding - innocent passengers becoming victims. These problems were compounded by the interviewees' responses to the taxi services and the role played in their broader perceptions of transformation in South Africa.

Indian and Coloured taxi operators were also deemed a problem, but they were not as many in number and as big a threat to the bus owners as were the African taxi operators. Numerous media reports about tension between Indian bus owners and taxi owners in the Indian townships were reported in the press, but were never raised by the interviewees. While Indian residents saw African taxis as responsible for anti-social behaviour, Indian bus owners singled them out as a threat to their livelihoods. This created a level of tension that spilled over to Indian residents who continuously complained about the unacceptable ways of the taxi drivers—particularly their flouting of traffic rules and turning most home frontages into passenger stops, in whichever area they operated. Many had also blamed the increasing car hi-jacking<sup>1</sup> and the rise of crime in their areas to the taxi industry. They also felt strongly that this

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<sup>1</sup> Car hi-jacking occurs when the owners or drivers of vehicles are confronted by armed thieves and are asked to either hand over the keys of the vehicle or are asked to drive away with them. They are later either dropped off at a 'safe spot' or even murdered.

attempts to provide this facility for non-whites living in areas remote from railway or municipal tramway routes. During this period the municipality of Durban did not incorporate areas such as Clare Estate, Reservoir Hills and Overport, among a number of other suburbs, within its Borough, since they were under the jurisdiction of Local Administration and Health Boards. Phoenix at the time was not even conceptualised. Those who lived outside what was then Durban had to rely on the horse-drawn spring cart as their principal means of transport. Until the 1940s, it was not unusual for people from outside the Borough of Durban to do their shopping late in the evenings, sleep over in the premises of known people and other well meaning members of the Indian community and return home the next day (Camrie 1985). It is not surprising that under these conditions Indians had to respond independently of the local authority public services in order to provide more convenient modes of transport for those who lived in the peri-urban areas. The idea was initially conceptualised by an Indian named Siddhoo. After seeing a Dodge truck displayed in a local garage, Siddhoo conceived the idea that if two benches were placed lengthwise in the back of the truck it would serve as a suitable mechanically powered vehicle to transport Indian and other non-white<sup>4</sup> passengers from outside the borough of Durban. After borrowing money from a few friends and relatives the Dodge truck was purchased and the first Indian owned omnibus was in operation in 1919, carrying mainly passengers from Riverside, north of the Umgeni River, into the city centre. Whites were provided with public transport by the Municipality and preferred to patronise this service, especially since it operated only in their residential areas. Siddhoo's venture did not prove to be an immediate financial success, but the rapid increase of support over the months did pave the way for more people of Indian origin to enter the business. For instance, a man by the name of Marimuthu purchased an old army truck, adapted it to carry passengers and provided a service from Clairwood to the centre of Durban. Likewise, others of Indian origin began to invest in engine powered vehicles that were converted for public utility (Singh 1977:5).

It is from these humble beginnings that Indian owned omnibus services emerged and pioneered transport services under generally unsuitable conditions. The roads during this period were usually untarred or not serviced and went into areas that were inhabited only by non-White people. The risks and the perseverance that was shown by the bus operators had a significant spin-off for the development and extension of the Borough of Durban. Their routes serviced both the residents in the outlying areas and the businesses that fell within the Borough of Durban. In this way Indian transport operators opened up these areas for the housing of Durban's industrial workers of all races and relieved the Borough of the congestion that

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<sup>4</sup> The word is used as a convenient reference, in accordance with the literature, to people who were then not classified as 'White' or 'European'.

would phase out the Indian owned bus service that served their populations for decades. The Indian owned bus service in Indian dominated suburbs and elsewhere were viewed with a passion by many, despite their complaints against the quality of service and the residents' complacency in dealing with it. In a 'conversation' with several residents in Clare Estate a comment was once passed about the history of the omnibus service that Indians had provided: 'My family was the first to own buses in Durban. Where the hell do these Africans come from and take over this route that we built over so many years. They just park anywhere, stop anywhere and show no respect for passing traffic. When you hoot at them they just swear at you and if you try to challenge them they are sure to shoot you!' The comment was made in the context of the violence that marked the passenger service industry at that time<sup>2</sup>, particularly in the light of the murder of several Indian omnibus owners in recent years and the abrupt halt to which many had to bring their services.

There was a noticeable atmosphere of racial tension between Indian and African passenger service providers, with the former feeling a sense of increasing alienation in a climate of African economic empowerment. While Indian omnibus owners were licensed and legitimate operators, African taxis were not. Most omnibus owners nostalgically recalled their thriving past performances and spoke of the contemporary helplessness that they felt against African taxis, who, as one claimed with approval in a group interview, '...operate with a ruthless mob mentality. You try to challenge them and you're finished. They'll just gang up on you'. The comment about the history of Indian involvement in passenger service and the anti-social elements that taxis brought into Indian dominated suburbs was made several times in the field, often in racially loaded statements. The frequency and passion with which these comments were made prompted an in-depth analysis into the issue, including the history of such transport in Durban.

### **The history of Indian participation in public transport**

The history of public transport in Durban was as racially based as any other public service in South Africa. Archival documents have placed on record the nature of public transport for disadvantaged citizens who lived away from the city centre in the early 1900s. Singh (1977)<sup>3</sup> for instance reported that up to 1919 there were no

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<sup>2</sup> Between November 1997 and January 1998, two Indian omnibus owners from two prominent families who had a long history of transport services were shot and killed by Africans thought to be linked to the taxi industry.

<sup>3</sup> *Fiat Lux*, August 1997 - a magazine that was produced especially for the Indian population. It was often considered to be a propaganda instrument by co-opted members of the Apartheid regime. It has been discontinued.

characterised its early development. This gradually led to plans for the Borough to extend its jurisdiction to incorporate these areas as part of its suburban residential boundaries. It also led to a policy that was aimed at giving recognition to African residential areas where African workers could live with their families and commute to work on a daily basis through public transport.

There were two factors that led to the success and entrenchment of the Indian omnibus service providers. The buses were owner-driven and serviced by themselves, and there were no garage facilities for their vehicles, leaving the owners with no option but to park them either in their properties or on the side of the road. These were significant cost saving factors that permitted the owners to structure their fares in a way that was considerably lower than the transport that was provided, especially for Whites, by the Durban Municipality. The fares were directed at the working class population, especially Indians, and were therefore constantly aimed at keeping them at affordable rates.

The success of these initiatives eventually led, with effect from 1 August 1932, to the dissolution of the Local Administration and Health Boards in at least seven areas, incorporating them into the Borough of Durban. They included the following suburbs: Greenwood Park, Red Hill, Durban North, Sydenham, and a large portion of Mayville, Umhlatuzana and South Coast Junction (now Rossburgh). The Borough offered several other services to these populations soon after the incorporation took place.

Unlike the reliability and consistency of the buses that belonged to the Municipality, Indian owned buses, which carried between eight and twelve passengers, varied widely in the quality of their services. In the 1930s a Commission of Inquiry into Road Motor Transportation made the following observation (Singh 1977:5):

Some of the buses in operation are sound structurally and mechanically and are reasonably comfortable; but at the other end of the scale are many vehicles in a state of such decrepitude that their arrival at their destination must cause no less surprise to their drivers than relief to their passengers. But they do manage to get through even if only by good luck and with the occasional aid of a yard of wire from the farmer's fence!

Their routes up to 1930 were unregulated and without interference from any public body or the City Council. Their freedom to change routes at any time they pleased gave rise to signs such as: *'Durban to elsewhere!'*. The real effect of this was that the route of the bus for any particular trip was dependent upon where the majority of the passengers were going at a particular time. But all of this had come to an end through the introduction of the Motor Carrier Transportation Act in 1930, which imposed a

requirement of Motor Carrier Certificates that dictated and restricted the route that each bus could take. This Act also ushered in increasing discriminatory practices from the exclusively White City Council against the Indian omnibus owners. It filtered into the apartheid era when even more profound discriminatory practices were applied. The competition they provided to the Municipality led to sporadic outcries from the consumers of transport, both White and non-White. White outrage emerged through comparison of the fares they were being charged by the Municipality, as opposed to the fares that the Indian bus owners were charging for similar trips. This painted a picture of incompetence of the White City Councillors, whose management of public transport was increasingly brought into question by White consumers themselves. Apart from the comparatively higher fares they were being charged, the service was also allegedly running at huge losses. Indian commuters on the other hand opposed the enforcement of segregation in public transport and their inability to use Municipal buses that operated in White suburbs. In a propaganda campaign that aimed to counter Indians' objections to the policy of segregation, the Durban City Council and the Joint Wards Committee issued a pamphlet in 1946 that contained a picture of an Indian bus terminal calling it the '*Durban Indian Traffic Centre*'<sup>5</sup>. Immediately below was a bold caption followed by six points:

Transport ... European and Non-European:

- \* The Durban Transport Fleet comprises 203 vehicles.
- \* Included in this Fleet are 8 trolley buses and ten single deck motor buses set aside entirely for non-European use.
- \* Out of the total fleet of 203 vehicles, 8,522 seats are apportioned to Europeans and 3,110 to non-Europeans.
- \* In addition there are 211 privately owned passenger vehicles operating (under a Government licence or concession) on non-European Services. The total seating capacity of these vehicles—an Indian monopoly entirely—is 8230.
- \* From this it will be seen that the total seats provided for Europeans is 8,522, and for non-Europeans 11,340.
- \* Has the Indian any complaint in this direction?

Both the City Council and the Joint Wards Committee were clearly conflating the categories of Indians and non-Europeans as a single group. The latter was made up of

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<sup>5</sup> No file number. The pamphlet was part of a collection of archival documents from the Durban City Council, available for reference to researchers using the University of Durban-Westville's Documentation Centre.

Africans and Coloureds as well, who jointly outnumbered the Indian population in Durban. It was the strategy of these bodies to defend their segregationist policies and subtly deflect attention away from the ailing services they were providing in transport. Over time they tried to take over the routes that were covered by the Indian omnibus owners. At their Tenth Annual Provincial Conference held in Durban on 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November 1957, the Natal Indian Congress (Founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894), alleged in its Report (page 23) that:

The Council's plan to oust non-whites out of transport business is cowardly in as much as it is vicious. This move is calculated to eradicate totally any form of competition in transport services. The Council is using its arbitrary power to cover its losses in the transport section. It is well known that through the colour bar policy in transport the Council has been showing continuous losses and it is common cause that it wishes to balance the losses by removing private competition which has been and is proving gainful through administrative efficiency and perseverance. Once the Council takes over, the efficiency in non-European transport will be wanting, especially in the distant routes, and it is especially unthinkable that the Council will continue services in corrugated roads now being served.

We cannot help urging the non-European bus owners to organise themselves into a strong utility Corporation to ward off Council threats.

Numerous case histories have brought out the issue of discrimination and attempts to take over the bus services by the Council. But these efforts were not restricted to Durban only. In the neighbouring town of Pietermaritzburg and other smaller towns where Indians were providing transport for the public, similar attempts were made by White dominated Councils to take over their services. Comrie's (1985) *'Interview with Sam Chetty'* was a revealing account of how a family affected by the Group Areas Act of 1950 diverted their interests from operating a laundry to running a successful passenger transport business. From experimental beginnings in the latter venture they built up a fleet of fifty buses that serviced Indian and African dominated suburbs. The business was administered by family members who took pride in ensuring a cordial relationship with their African patrons. One sister took the role of cashier and six brothers worked as mechanics and road administrators—to minimise theft of cash from drivers and check on the quality of the roads since the Municipality did not attend to the areas that the private bus operators serviced. However, the service was ruthlessly stopped by the Pietermaritzburg Council and was sold off to a European company from outside South Africa.

In most of KwaZulu-Natal such stories of racial discrimination abound where Whites enjoyed hegemony over resources and decision making. The quest to

impose Council run passenger transport services in Indian dominated areas only abated around the latter part of the 1980s when the turmoil of anti-apartheid demonstrations forced local and national authorities to focus their attention on more volatile political issues. To date, the threat to take-over Indian omnibus services in the region did not resurface. But a totally different scenario has emerged in the post-apartheid era, with the taxi industry dominated by Africans, posing a new threat to Indian omnibus services and adding to the racially loaded dimensions of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **The rise of the African taxi industry: 1977-1998**

There is a need to understand the rise of the African taxi industry if the role of the Indian passenger transport provider has to be understood in the context of transformation in South Africa. Both racial segments have a history of humble beginnings and have demonstrated tremendous perseverance and positive inclinations towards market incentives. Passenger transport services have always proved to be a lucrative business, especially when they were individually or family owned. The information above has briefly illustrated how this activity has empowered a number of people of Indian origin once they became involved in it. Likewise it has been construed as a viable option for nascent African entrepreneurs. At a public seminar for African taxi operators in Durban on 2 April 1999<sup>6</sup>, the regional Minister for Transport in KwaZulu-Natal, Sbu Ndebele, stressed that one of the quicker routes for African economic empowerment in post-apartheid South Africa is in the passenger transport industry. It was time, he stated, that African entrepreneurs captured a sizeable slice of the market, especially since this opportunity did not exist previously.

The passenger transport industry certainly proved to become a lucrative niche for Africans wanting to take advantage over the market opportunities that the unfolding post-apartheid era had brought with it. But its roots predate this era, going back to the 1960s when the most convenient mode of public transport for Africans, especially in the rural areas was the privately owned sedan taxis, especially Valiants and Chevrolets. These cars were big and spacious and were normally packed with loads that exceeded the standard six-carrier for which they were built. The service that they provided to the African population in the rural areas was reminiscent of the situation that existed in the earlier part of this century when Indian omnibus owners first began their services. While the roads in the Indian suburban areas have been upgraded and are qualitatively different from the period when they first served the population, the roads going into most of the African villages in the rural areas are still in very poor condition. Only the main arterial roads have been carefully

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<sup>6</sup> SABC News Broadcast, 2 April 1999.



reconstructed and provide a service for most rural people only up to a point. Many still have to walk long distances for up to two hours from the drop-off point before they reach their villages.

Since Africans were not allowed permanent citizenship in South Africa during apartheid they were also not permitted to engage in licensed business activity. Hence, any public transport that they offered was not deemed legal during this period. Their motor cars provided a service in much the same way that the earliest Indian omnibuses had done. However, this almost personalised form of service changed radically when Africans entered into the transport business in greater numbers. It goes back to 1977 when the Toyota Hi-Ace, produced as a minibus, was ushered into the market. As the fight against apartheid intensified, the restrictive laws against Africans, especially the Influx Control Laws that forbid Africans from becoming permanently urban, were being relaxed. The allowances that accompanied the relaxation of these laws encouraged Africans to enter into the transport industry. The Toyota minibus grew immensely in popularity and has become the hallmark of African public transport. Africans were previously considered a risk by the banks and were not given access to credit because of this. Many who first entered the market had done so through the capital they amassed by the use of their sedans in the taxi industry. Their ownership of new vehicles was only made possible either through self-initiative or through money that was raised through private loans from relatives and friends. It was only in the latter part of the 1980s that Africans qualified for loans from the banks, but subject to the provision of acceptable collateral. Statements were made by taxi owners and traffic officials that Toyota actually facilitated the loan scheme for Africans through negotiations with the government of the 1980s because they considered South Africa to be one of the most lucrative markets in the world for their minibus. This allegedly was a condition upon which Toyota, a major employer and supplier of vehicles, would remain in South Africa. But, in an interview with the regional general manager of the company, there was an absolute denial of these claims<sup>7</sup>.

In the course of fieldwork an interesting discussion took place with a White traffic official on the rise of the African taxi industry. His view was that:

The majority of taxis that operate in KwaZulu-Natal actually belong to Indian taxi owners. The Indians have been the first to run taxis in Durban, and now they have got into the Black market. Most of them use Africans as fronts for their businesses and make them sleeping partners. They buy the vehicle on the African partner's name and then pay them a pittance. That's why you see them driving so badly on the roads and overloading so much.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, 9 April 1999.

The more they overload the more money they make for themselves. And the faster they drive on the roads the more loads they do for the day. So all the extra loads they do are for them. The owner of the vehicle just tells them to do 'x' number of loads for the day and they want so much of money for the day. But they can't stop them from doing the extra loads because they can't control this. So the taxi driver makes more money at the end of the day. That's why I think that the state should control the taxi services. In this way we will be able to keep a proper check on who's running the taxis and make sure that everybody has licences for their taxis. Too many people just buy a combi and run a service anywhere they please. Because the Indians got more money, they buy better taxis and steal away the customers from the Africans with not so nice taxis! This is what causes the violence among the taxi people.

The respective traffic official was a former member of the South African Police Force during apartheid (now South African Police Services). Their training was based rigidly along racial lines and was aimed to ensure the perpetuation of White minority rule. Intrinsic to such an ideology was an indoctrination process that made law and order officials believe in condescending generalisations of other racial categories. This was an important factor in sustaining White hegemony during apartheid. Hence the generalisations with which the traffic official spoke was not surprising, although it spurred on further investigation into the nature of the taxi industry.

There is an element of truth in the allegation that Indians are capitalising on the African transport routes. For instance, in at least three instances information did unfold to the effect that Indians were heavily involved in transporting Africans from the townships into central Durban and elsewhere. A major question that was raised in this situation was: 'How do people with such deep historical mistrusts invest such huge amounts of money in an industry that could easily fail?'

The Indian taxi owners allegedly have an innovative way of dealing with the situation. In all three cases, where information could only possibly be gained from secondary sources, Indian investors signed a formal agreement with African individuals to let them own the taxis outright after five years if they could do the following:

- bring in for instance one thousand Rand per week;
- service the taxi regularly at their own expense; and
- print their own names on the driver's door to create the impression that it is the taxi drivers' vehicle.

This scheme has apparently paid substantial dividends to such owners, who persistently refused to be interviewed<sup>8</sup>.

But Indian taxi owners disputed the allegation that Indians are the majority stakeholders in the taxi industry and various taxi associations, which had a membership that was either predominantly Indian or African. For instance, the statistics from two taxi associations, one Indian and one African, revealed its membership as predominantly one race group or the other. Ownership of vehicles was not always a disputed factor either. The African dominated association emphatically denied that Indians were purchasing taxis for operation in African dominated routes. One official responded:

I assure you, if this happens, we will make sure that that taxi is kicked out from our association. He will never be able to run on our route because we Africans have the means to do so. We don't need Indians and Whites to come and steal our business.

The Indian taxi association on the other hand felt likewise about the routes in which they operated. But the difference was that they were unable to block the African owned taxis from participation in their areas, although a measure of control (as discussed below) has been effective.

Within all the research areas there were minibuses and the larger regular buses providing public transport. There was also a diversity of drivers from the various racial groups, predominantly Africans, Coloureds and Indians but no White drivers. However, their daily operations were only a semblance of coexistence. The situation was more accurately one of perennial squabbles and physical fights over rights to the municipality designated pick up and drop off points. It developed into a scenario of almost total submission by the Indian bus drivers to the African taxi operators. A number of significant changes have occurred as a result of this situation, which has shed more light on ethnic relations and perceptions of transformation.

### **Indian buses and African taxis**

Tension among both sectors became apparent especially at bus stops, where taxi drivers felt an equal right to either pick up or drop off passengers. It had also become a frequent practice for taxi drivers to take over bus stops and bus terminals within the suburbs, exacerbating the tensions between bus owners and themselves. In busier routes and intersections the practice of taxi drivers has been to spend long periods in one spot in order to maximise their loads. This practice has been a source of

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, 9 April 1999.

tremendous annoyance to traffic and a major reason for altercations between bus and taxi drivers. Traffic either had to navigate its way very carefully through the meagre space left by poorly parked taxis or was often brought to a total halt. The public generally submissively permitted right of way to the taxis in order to avoid verbal abuse and possible physical attacks. The lawful rights of motorists were generally ignored and often the humblest of attempts to claim these rights have led to serious assaults and verbal abuse. Within the African taxi industry there has been numerous reports of rivalry between competing associations that has led to fatal attacks on one another. It had reached such an uncontrollable situation in 1998, that it led the KwaZulu-Natal Minister of Transport to a state of frustration, forcing him to publicly declare that, 'If they do not want to co-operate and if they want to keep killing themselves then there is nothing the state can do about it!'<sup>9</sup>.

Indian taxi and bus owners did not escape the wrath of the violence that has plagued the African taxi industry. A number of them fell victim to the greed and control that certain individuals and associations acquired after their rapid successes in the passenger transport industry. In several suburbs across Durban the experiences of the Indian taxi and bus operators revealed a situation of a virtual siege mentality. Their years of monopoly in the transport industry was being challenged, particularly by the African taxis which brought in people from the African townships into the middle and upper class Indian and White suburbs. The entry of the African taxis into the Indian areas still meant a clear racial demarcation of the passengers they served. African owned taxis transported African passengers while Indian owned buses served mainly Indian passengers and to a lesser extent Africans. But the taxi service gradually extended into the Indian market, when passengers were being 'pinched' from bus stops, although most Indian passengers avoided the taxis. Herein lied the seeds of a racial division between the two sectors, although the buses did not substantially lose their clientele.

A survey of Indian passengers standing at several stops produced some of the following statements about their choice of transport:

Do you think I'm mad? I would never take one of those African taxis. In no time, my watch and bag will be taken away from me! And do you know how they drive? I'm not going to be killed by those morons! They don't have any courtesy on the road.

I'll never take those taxis. It's like a death wish! They just switch over from one lane to another on the freeway, don't ever indicate when they want to stop or when they take off. They think the road is just theirs.

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<sup>9</sup> SABC news broadcast April 1999.

No thanks. The Indian buses are cheaper and safer, although they do tend to take a little long to reach town. We would have a perfect service if only the Indian buses would keep to time.

I only take the taxi when I'm late for work or have to get into town faster. Otherwise I just avoid them. Even Africans avoid them; most of them prefer taking the buses. You must see the buses in the evenings—they are full with Africans.

I have taken the taxi a few times, but they drive like maniacs! You don't feel safe the way they drive. If you complain they just tell you to get off! And you won't get any refund. That's why I rather take the bus<sup>10</sup>.

While African taxis made a rapid thrust into the Indian suburbs by providing transport for mainly the African squatters and township labourers, they have also tried to usurp the market in a totally unorganised and ruthless fashion. Initially no procedures were followed to enter into a particular suburb. To many, if they had a vehicle it was license enough to enter the transport sector. Application for a license to operate in a particular area was not made by most of the operators. Numerous reports in the media attest to this situation. On 25 October 1995, the *Post*, a weekly newspaper targeting mainly the Indian population, titled a report in the following words: 'SA's Indian driving force'. An interesting description followed:

The small but tight-knit bus industry started by Indians in the 1930s has survived apartheid, white monopolies and ferried people who were uprooted by the Group Areas Act. Now the minibus taxis, gun toting highway men and the rising price of diesel is threatening the culture of Indian owned buses .... The Indian bus, like sugar cane, curry and rice and temples, is a legacy of the 1860-indentured sugar cane labourer from India .... Mr. Pillai, also chairman of the Clairwood-Merebank Bus Owners Association, a suburban organisation representing 28 bus owners owning 66 buses, said the tradition of Indian owned buses would not die easily. 'We have inherited the culture of serving the community from our fathers and grandfathers. Operating buses is in our blood ...'.

On 20 March 1997, the *Daily News* carried the following report:

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, April 1999.

Effingham Heights sole bus operator, Mr. Amichand Ramkissoon, has hired a security company to safeguard him in his battle against 10 pirate taxi operators. Mr. Ramkissoon, who operates four buses on the Durban-Effingham route, said he had been the only provider of public transport until March 17 when 10 minibus taxis moved on to his route. 'I have been threatened with violence and this is why I have hired armed security guards to protect my buses and keep these pirate operators from working my route'.

A further report on 21 April 1997 stated that Mr. Ramkissoon had reduced his fare from R2.00 to R1.50 in order to lure passengers back to his service. But this had not worked either, despite the fact that the taxis were charging a fare of R2.20. His lack of success was not because commuters did not want his service, but because they were afraid of being attacked by the taxi drivers. Disappointingly, the Durban City Council was unable to provide him with any protection, in spite of the fact that he was the only licensed operator in the area. On several occasions, despite the security company, Mr. Ramkissoon's buses were forcibly stopped and offloaded at gunpoint by several taxis on several occasions to expropriate his load. This scare tactic broke his monopoly in the area but it did not scare him from his livelihood. However, in December 1997 one of Mr. Ramkissoon's buses was forcibly stopped by a car with three Africans, believed to be members of the pirate taxi association, and the driver, who was his son, was shot and killed instantly. Numerous other such episodes were related in the field, but with each one bringing in a specifically personal experience, highlighting the complexity of the problems between African taxi and Indian bus owners. Ethnographic data produced at least three similar stories in different routes, notwithstanding a range of other lesser-known cases. But the case study above serves to epitomise the situation of violent encounters that Indian bus owners have confronted in the passenger transport industry.

Several other Indian omnibus operators believed that they were still alive because they extricated themselves soon enough from the rapidly deteriorating routes they once serviced. The case study below for instance is an indication of how one omnibus owner survived possible attack against him.

Z.R., a fifty-three old omnibus operator ran a service with his late father from La Lucia into the centre of Durban for more than fifty years. The family had a monopoly for passenger transport in the suburb, which after the 1950 Group Areas Act, was declared for White residents only. But his passengers were mainly Africans who worked as domestic employees and as unskilled labourers in La Lucia's business centres. During the apartheid era Whites were not allowed to use his buses because of segregation policies. He inherited the business from his father and built upon it during the 1970s

when business was thriving. From two buses he expanded to a fleet of six. Each bus began work at 04h00 and finished at 20h00 from Monday to Saturday, doing at least twelve round trips per day. At the height of their business each bus brought in between R500.00 and R800.00 per day. This lucrative route supported an extended family of at least fifteen people. Two of the buses were given to two of his brothers, both of who were married with children. All three brothers were knowledgeable about repairs and did all their maintenance work by themselves. Up to 1993 the drivers they employed were of Indian origin. However the situation changed when circumstances demanded that they employ African drivers, but only as a tactic than out of necessity. The events that led to this situation were typical up to the time that research for this project was stopped.

From August 1993, African taxis started ferrying workers into La Lucia. Several others joined in and eventually formed an association, although they were not licensed to operate in the area. From this point onwards the taxis adopted an offensive attitude towards his buses. Their *modus operandi* was to race in front of the buses, deliberately cut them off at the bus stops and demand that the passengers get into the taxis and not the buses. On numerous occasions accidents took place, and the reaction was to gang up and assault the Indian bus drivers and abuse them with racial slurs. This eventually led to the employment of the African bus drivers. But the same pattern of intimidation followed. At each occasion the drivers were threatened with assault and asked to warn their owner to keep out of the route. The climax to this persistent intimidation occurred when one of Z.R.'s buses was burnt and totally destroyed. He was also personally approached and threatened with violence by the taxi operators. Thereafter he decided to negotiate with the taxi association and sell all his licences to them, thereby offering to totally withdraw his services. To his surprise they agreed to negotiate and finally paid him R60 000.00 in cash for his licenses. Thereafter Z.R. and his brothers sold off their buses individually. He then purchased a forty five seater luxury coach costing approximately one million Rand and entered into a contract with Durban's international airport. He started a service for the tourist industry, which he claims 'is less burdensome and away from the jungle behaviour of the African taxi. I am so much more comfortable now and earning enough to meet my commitments'<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview, 16 April 1999.

A similar situation prevailed in numerous other suburbs where African workers and general consumers were ferried. Another omnibus operator made a series of bizarre claims that were nonetheless confirmed by other bus owners. For instance in routes that connect to large pockets of commuters the following incidents occurred during fieldwork:

If a fleet owner had more than one bus, but ran only one in a particular route, then during a breakdown he was not allowed to replace the immobile bus with another from his fleet. If he did so, taxi drivers would stop the bus, unload the passengers into their taxis and issue a stern warning to the driver not to return. This happened despite the fact that the replacement of one bus by another was legal.

Buses in the Newlands West route were being continuously harassed by taxis from neighbouring routes that were deliberately forcing buses off the road and off-loading them into their taxis when their routes were not paying off.

Taxi drivers were forcing Indian bus owners to increase their fares because they provided 'unfair competition'. The limited number of passengers that minibuses carried did not make their trips feasible at the costs of bus fares. Hence the bus fares had to be adjusted in favour of the taxi fares.

Buses in most suburbs no longer have the sole claim to bus stops. In fact, the taxis had usurped priority over such stops when the two met simultaneously at one spot.

The taxi industry, through the use of minibuses, had increased the national fuel import bill by thirty three per cent, according to statistics released by the national Department of Transport<sup>12</sup>. The Department's recommendation was to replace the minibus taxis which have a seating limit of ten, but which are overloaded to sixteen or more, with an expanded diesel powered vehicle that can seat up to twenty two passengers. But there has been opposition from the taxis because these are apparently slower, significantly more expensive to purchase than the Toyota minibus, more expensive to maintain and will not yield the same returns because they would not do as many loads for the day. The Department's recommendation was based on figures that

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<sup>12</sup> SABC news broadcast, 19 April 1999.



will save the country enormous sums of money that are lost through import bills as well as to create a safer environment for motorists.

In responding to this situation an omnibus operator retorted:

Why do you think the Minister of Transport Mac Maharaj is resigning from his government position. The man is not even bothered to be relocated (sic) to another position in government. He knows he can't work with the African mentality that is ruling this country. He might not make a public statement about why he is resigning but this is the only conclusion I can come to. These taxis are messing up this country's roads. And if the new minister of transport is going to be an African, what is happening to education and to health in this country is going to happen to transport! There'll be no more bloody new roads after this.

The respondent in this case belonged to a family with more than a sixty-year history in the transport industry. His twenty-three year old nephew was another victim of the violence against Indian bus drivers on Friday 23 January 1998. The story that unfolds below brings out a number of issues that have been latent since the entrenchment of the squatter camps and the spate of house burglaries, car hi-jackings, assaults, and murders that have taken place in neighbouring areas.

On Friday 23 January 1998, at about 17h00, Sudheer Debba was completing his last load for the day and was less than half a kilometre away from his home. Three African youths attempted to board his bus to go into Central Durban, but were refused entry because it was his last load. They apparently read this as a racist gesture and found it an ideal excuse to attack him. The youth then sprinted to the next bus stop and shot him several times, killing him instantly. It was alleged that a passenger, described as 'an African police reservist', took out his gun and shot at the youth to try and defend the driver. He successfully aimed at one, fatally wounding him. The other two, realising that if their injured colleague remained on the road much longer, he could capitulate and reveal their identities. They therefore dragged him to the nearby squatter camp and abandoned him in a shack, but against the occupant's will, and fled. Realising the legal problems of housing a fugitive, it placed the respective squatter in a difficult position, especially since she was allegedly warned by the two youth that submission to the police would endanger her life. In the meanwhile the abandoned fugitive was bleeding profusely and did not receive any medical attention for more than three hours. By that time the Indian residents had gathered around the bus and the

body of the driver, trying to reconstruct the events that led to the shooting. Tempers began to flare when the passengers recollected the events of that afternoon to the family, friends and district people. An ambulance removed the body of the driver from the roadside more than two and half hours later. This long wait built up a level of reaction and solidarity from the Indian residents that brought them into a state of virtual readiness to engage in an ethnic war. Many came armed with guns, and a range of other lethal weapons, ready to extricate the alleged bleeding culprit from the respective shack, because by then they had all learnt about his whereabouts. But it was the army that controlled the situation, after the police had failed to do so. A number of altercations took place during those highly charged moments. The first occurred between Indian policemen and the Indian residents who, as one stated, 'wanted to impose the death penalty on the bastard because the courts are likely to set him free soon after he is jailed'. The second occurred between the African and Indian policemen, when the latter was charged by the former for being too soft on the mood of the Indians. The army was therefore forced to intervene. At the point that the army sought to remove the alleged culprit to an awaiting ambulance, the Indian residents tried to fight their way through their cordon that surrounded it. They managed to break through and apparently almost toppled the vehicle over. When the threat of teargas and more stern action from the army became apparent, the situation calmed down swiftly and the ambulance sped off. For at least another week however, there was a conspicuous reduction of African squatters walking the streets of Clare Road, especially at night.

The solidarity that this event generated among the Indian residents was visibly binding and showed an urge as one resident stated:

... to fight back in a way that will teach the squatters a lesson. They think we are afraid of them because they are in the majority. But this time we are going to fight, because we are tired of passively sitting back and letting them rob and murder us like this.

For at least three weeks there was a vigilante group that operated on an informal basis until midnight. Letters were also written to the state president and the minister of police about the incident, the rampant crime and the links it had to the squatter camps within and in the neighbouring suburbs. The victim's family called a special public meeting to discuss the above issues, but it was poorly attended. However, these were no better than knee-jerk responses to a much wider and more endemic problem. At least a month after the incident an important symbolic event was initiated by Sudheer

Debba's family. It was an occasion that provided an opportunity to take note of symbolic gestures from the Indian neighbourhood, the content of their conversations and its implied meanings. The event was particularly useful to observe Indian-African relations in a solemn but tense atmosphere, and to engage in an analysis of what was done and spoken in that time.

On Sunday 22 February 1998, the parents of Sudheer Debba held a special memorial in a very unique way. They applied to the traffic department for permission to cordon off the road on two sides of the place where their son was shot, between 17h00 and 18h15, thereby stopping the traffic from both sides. The purpose was to have a hawaan (fire ritual) on the spot where the shooting occurred, in order to redeem his soul from his untimely death and to give his parents peace of mind that the appropriate rituals were carried out for him. The extended family, friends and the entire neighbourhood attended the event. At least three officially marked police vehicles, attended by Indian policemen only, were present. It was a noticeably solemn occasion marked by sporadic racial remarks of the senseless killing, and despite a light persistent rainfall people stood by in solidarity with the family until the end of the prayer. Africans from the neighbouring squatter camp also stood by and watched with curiosity. After the prayer all the bystanders, including Africans, were offered prasadam (ritual edible offerings). Many among the latter refused to accept it, while others asked questions about meaning of the event and the offerings and openly showed their remorse at the murder. While the prayer was in progress, a regular Sunday meeting was taking place within the squatter camp, from where snippets of the discussion was carried over to the prayer gathering through its public address system. In response to the meeting a bystander, standing with a small group, remarked: 'They are saying to the people in the meeting that because of criminals in the camp, all are being branded in the same way. They are going to try and sort out all the criminals they know and kick them out of the area'. Another replied: 'Ya, but these bastards got no mercy on us. They'll say they are going to do it, but nothing will happen. The stealing and everything else will continue as before. You know on that Friday night how I nearly fucked-up the cops! If we only got hold of that bastard who shot that 'lightie' we should have killed him straightaway, and the Africans shouldn't dare to do a fuckin' thing about it! We were ready. They were lucky to have the army there. Let me tell you something, we can finish this place up in one night. Some of us should just get together and start burning down all the shacks from one side and take our revenge! We can do it!' This racially loaded remark was met by a sobering response from the victim's forty three-year

unmarried uncle: 'No, that kind of behaviour will just make things worse. You'll never enjoy killing people and destroying their things. But my spirit is broken now. I got fuck all else to live for in this country. We bought the bus for Sudheer because work was so difficult to get and we wanted to carry on our family tradition. Every weekend I used to work on his bus with him and teach him the things he didn't know. But now what's the use? I got nothing else to live for in this country—I think I'm gonna leave. My sister in Texas is calling us. My other sister's papers are already processed. But she is worried about missing her daughter and grandchildren—so she's not sure if she wants to leave this horrible country. Can you think about what pain my sister in the U.S.A. is going through right now, since she can't be with us?' Another of the bystanders contributed by saying: 'I had to sell my house in Newlands, because only Africans are buying there now. Every day clothes are being stolen from the line and every night somebody's car is either broken into or stolen. We couldn't take it anymore. I'm lucky to get my price for my house'<sup>13</sup>.

The situation depicted above demonstrated a sense of helplessness among the Indian bystanders. While one was affected by continuous cases of theft in his previous area of residence, others such as the bus owners felt stifled by continuous attacks against them. But not all cases of public transport providers among Indians had fell victim to African chauvinism. Some had worked quite ingeniously to protect their routes. The difference however was not to continue their services with buses, but instead with taxis. A ploy for their survival has been to form a taxi association and to include a few African owners for good purpose, as the case study below illustrates.

R.R., chairman of a predominantly Indian taxi association servicing a predominantly Indian suburb, once owned three buses that worked very profitably for him. By the end of 1994 he was forced to sell them off because of continuous harassment by African taxi drivers. Towards mid-1995, in his desperation to think of alternative means of self-employment, he decided to join several other Indians who were already in the taxi business and to whom he was known. He believed at this stage that big buses were intimidating to smaller vehicles such as minibus taxis because of their bigger load capacities. At the age of 48 years, he did not deem himself employable by any type of organisation, and neither was he inclined to because he was self-employed throughout his life. However, African taxis once again began interference in their routes, and it only stopped after a

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, 20 March 1998.

shoot-out which left one African driver dead. A truce was called and was facilitated and monitored by the local police. However, the Indian taxi owners immediately formed an association and limited the number of taxis in the area to those who were already operating in it. An exception was made for tactical reasons and they embarked on recruitment of two African taxi owners, who were well respected in the business, especially for the respect they commanded among other African drivers. The condition under which they were allowed to operate in their route was to act as spokespersons and negotiators during times of disagreements with other African taxi associations, while he and other Indian colleagues undertook to deal with other Indian associations during times of dispute. It also helped to create a semblance of multi-racialism within their association. In this way they were able to minimise the racial overtones of disagreements and succeeded in dealing with conflict resolutions in a positive manner. R.R. was happy that their approach was a workable and a safe and sensitive method of surviving in a hostile environment—judged especially by the success with which disputes were handled.

The responses demonstrated by the Indian taxi owners in the illustration above reflects a unique approach in dealing with a situation that requires racial sensitivity. There was a marked reduction in taxi pirating by other taxi operators when the association acquired legal status and were allowed to limit the number of operators in their route. The inclusion of the two African taxi owners played a significant role in reducing the existence of perpetual racial mistrust between Indian and African taxi operators. However expedient it might have been by the Indian drivers, the co-option of the African taxi owners was nevertheless an important stabilising mechanism in an area that could have threatened public transport provision, especially for Indians, if African taxi operators monopolised it. The views of Indian commuters, as illustrated above, are generally conservative and are based on perceptions that have been shaped by the predominance of bad driving and immoral behaviour and violence, particularly in the African taxi industry. Most Indian taxi owners are known to the suburban residents and therefore have a different measure of faith in their service. It has also been a tendency of the Indian taxi drivers to either drive the taxis themselves, employ family members or hire Indian drivers, especially for the sake of appealing to Indian commuters.

### **Residents, buses and taxis**

The impact of the taxi service in the Indian suburban areas, particularly in Clare Estate and to a lesser extent in Reservoir Hills, not only affected the commuter at the

bus stop but also numerous residents at their homes. When the African taxis first made their entry into these suburbs at about mid-1993, residents and bus operators made their discomfort about them known, but only informally. The early days of this service were restricted to the African squatters and were not frequent. By mid-1994, after the April 27 general election, their frequency into these areas increased rapidly. Their appearances in the areas started from humble beginnings of adhering to traffic regulations, avoiding stopping at bus stops and loading or off-loading the squatters as close to their shacks as possible. But this pattern was radically changed when the big numbers in which they operated appeared to give them a boost in confidence and they started ignoring the normal road courtesies. Any place, including bus stops and in front of houses, were good enough for them to carry on their trade, and any time was good enough to take-off, without the requirement of indicating.

Apart from the dangers that this pattern of driving introduced into these generally quiet and placid suburbs, a number of houses with accommodating driveways, were turned into convenient drop-off and pick-up points for the taxis. The affected residents were too petrified to challenge this practice either legally or personally, for fear of being attacked by the taxi drivers or their passengers. The rise in burglaries from homes and vehicles, motor car thefts and car hi-jackings from within people's properties, were linked by the residents to the entry of the African taxi service into their areas. After this comment was repeated several times and after listening to frequent reference to a small road off Clare Estate's main road, in which residents claimed that they were under greater siege than other residents in neighbouring roads, an examination into these claims was subsequently made. There were twenty houses on both sides of the road, which ended as a *cul de sac*. From among these houses, within a space of five months—between April and July in 1997, four people were car hi-jacked in their driveways, three cars were stolen from the properties and five houses were burgled. Of the four car hi-jackings, two of the owners were driven away with the thieves. In the third case the owner was taken into his house, beaten and gagged, while in the fourth case the person was hit unconscious and left lying in the garage. He was found by his wife more than an hour later and rushed to hospital, where he was kept for two nights. The two who were driven away during the incidents were left in the African townships of Umlazi and Kwa-Mashu respectively, but were unharmed. All three cars were stolen at night when the residents were asleep. Two of the owners who had dogs claimed that the thieves had ingenious ways of dealing with them. For instance, in one case a bitch was allegedly brought to quieten their dog while the car was being stolen, while in the other case large chunks of meat were found in the yard, containing substances that put their two dogs to sleep. Of the five houses that were burgled, two burglaries occurred during the evening between 19h00 and 20h30. One house belonged to a panel beater and the other belonged to an affluent family business. In the former case, an ailing eighty six

year old bed-ridden woman was taunted and abused by the thieves who pulled her hair and also terrorised the children of the house. The thieves threatened to do worse if they did not get cash and a gun. The owner of the house did not own a gun, but had six hundred Rand, which he gave to them. Only after pleading to the thieves for about twenty minutes, they left. In the second incident the house was attacked by four armed men, one with an AK 47 Rifle. The most senior person of the house was beaten with the gun and actually led to his safe. The thieves instructed him to open and empty it. As a businessman he was ready for such an eventuality. He had therefore loaded the safe with imitation jewellery, one thousand Rand in cash and several thousand fake U.S. dollars. The hold-up lasted for a maximum of seven minutes. The family strongly suspected a domestic worker who recently left their employ<sup>14</sup>.

All of the victims were Indians, and in all the cases besides the car thefts and burglaries that occurred late at night and where those responsible were not seen, the residents identified the culprits as Africans. Hence the responses from the interviewees was produced as a 'them and us syndrome'. Their articulation of crime in the area was embedded in racial terms because it was the only way they could see it. The trauma that two women and four children suffered in three separate incidents was still visible at the time of interviews. All of them were sedated after the incidents and had taken medication for several days before they were able to calm down. None of the cars and other property that were stolen was recovered and no arrests were made for any of these incidents. In every interview, blame was apportioned to the taxis and the kind of people they carried. One response, in a sense, covers the variations of what was said about taxis and crime in eleven interviews that were done in the small road:

The taxis are the cause of all the problems we have been experiencing recently. The people from the squatter camp line up here in the mornings and to a lesser extent during the day. Since there are such large numbers that stand there, when the taxis come their assistants have enough time to view our houses. They stop and U-turn on the blind-rise and just don't care about the risks. I've seen one once eyeing my house, he didn't see me noticing him. He then spoke to his friend standing outside the taxi while it was loading and pointed to my house. A couple of days later I was held up in my driveway and dropped off in Umlazi. Another taxi guy gave me a lift from there. Worse could have happened to me there. This was a quiet peaceful road and I am one of the oldest residents here. Even when there were only a few houses in this road these things never happened. Since the taxis started

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, September 1997.

loading here these problems started. When they stop coming here we'll be in peace again.

The statement above was made by an interviewee whose house was one door away from the corner house that was situated at the intersection of the two roads. The spot was on a dangerous blind-rise where numerous accidents occurred. There was no officially marked bus stop at this point because of the potential for accidents. In each of the responses, there was an expressed feeling of no confidence in post-apartheid South Africa. Apart from the crime levels and associated insecurity, the respondents generally felt that the country was seriously lacking in leadership and economic direction. All of the respondents felt a level of violation of their rights that engendered a high degree of rage amongst them and a feeling of resignation to lawlessness in a situation where the police force is deemed ineffective. One respondent claimed: 'The cop had the bloody nerve to tell me that "You are just another statistic now! To find your car would be impossible"'. The frustration, helplessness, a quest for vengeance and the thoughts of any place away from South Africa where there is peace and security, is what characterised most cases.

## Conclusion

Public transport that was provided by individual entrepreneurs in Durban's 'non-white' suburbs, has been historically associated with Indians. Many who have been in the industry for decades have grown to view passenger transport provision in racial terms. Since the earliest days of entering the market, the only competitor and obstacle to Indian bus services was the Durban City Council and the unprofitable bus service it ran for many years in White designated suburbs. The City Council's persistent attempts to oust Indian bus operators from the city's roads were also emulated by other Councils in the province. Their failure to achieve this lay in the route that they chose i.e. through court action. The bus owners' support from its commuters and the strong arguments that they evinced in their legal defences to remain as service providers generally won their battles against White chauvinism since 1919, filtering into the decade of the 1980s.

This situation radically changed with the emergence of the African taxi industry. Since the early 1990s, Indian bus owners were facing a totally different kind of threat to their services, in the rising taxi industry. Unlike their White counterparts, African taxi owners forcibly claimed a stake in the transport industry. Their strength lay in their numbers and the ruthless way in which they usurped numerous routes, which were once dominated by Indian omnibus owners. They appeared to be capitalising on the undeclared motto of it being an age of African empowerment and entitlement. But to conclude that the forced entry of African taxis into Indian



dominated bus routes was based on racism alone would be wrong. It would be equally problematic to suggest that this process was solely economic in that the transport sector of the region's economy provided the easiest route to facilitate African financial empowerment. The reasons are complex and would certainly include both racial and economic factors. A major factor in the transport industry is the continuous demarcation of routes along racial lines. Although there is an historical basis to this, mixed associations like the illustration given above where two African taxi owners were included in an Indian dominated association, could help to regulate, if not obliterate racially skewed perceptions of transport provision in South Africa. Such experiments, which aim to mix executive committees on racial terms and aim to protect certain sectors without room for monopolies and regulate the transport industry in more disciplined ways, could produce different perceptions of and responses to transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

The residents' exposure to crime not only came from the taxis that ran in their areas, but it also emanated from the neighbouring squatter camp, as well as unemployed individuals who idly walked through the areas with the intention of stealing. The role that transport has played shaping the perceptions of and responses to transformation in South Africa, is an enormous one and requires substantively more research to address the issue. This will have to include the problematising of verbal representation.

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