METERPODU
– A work in progress

Once upon a time, auto-rickshaws in the city had functioning meters, so the legend goes.

Asking auto-drivers to turn on that boxy contraption today is like committing a small crime. The unrevised, State-fixed fare is blatantly unfair to these men (only a few of them these days) in khaki. But pay the arbitrary sum they demand and, chances are that it won't be fair to you in the long run. What gives?

A tech-savvy NRI, recently returned to his home town, decided to do something about this. Crowd-sourcing, a form of distributed problem solving, could be the answer. "I figured that the only way to get some parity is if a whole bunch of us decided that we were only going to pay Rs. x and not Rs. y that the drivers demanded," says Ananthanarayanan K. Subramanian (Anantha, for short).

He explains the psychology behind the crowd-sourcing tool *Meterpodu*. "So let's say an autodriver demands Rs. 50 to go from T' Nagar to Saidapet from 10 consecutive commuters. Each of them refuses and counter-quotes a sum of Rs. 40. The 11th commuter is likely to be quoted a fare of Rs. 40, since the driver doesn't want to price himself out of the market."

Anantha teamed up with a friend, Mayur Narasimhan, and designed a system to collect fare data, process the numbers, and provide commuters useful information. If you key in two locations, the system looks up Google Maps and calculates the distance between them. It arrives at the official fare based on the fare chart. The driver may not take the same route, but this a good enough approximation.

What users actually pay on the ground is very different, of course. "Users can contribute these fares for various routes logging in via Twitter, Facebook or Gmail," says Mayur. Their input goes into a data base that computes the average fare. Now, with that number in hand, every user can hope to drive a decent bargain with any auto-driver in the city.

How is Meterpodu faring?

The new tool got good press. "A lot of people began polling the system to find out fares," says Anantha. "The fare formula the system uses is dated circa 2007, which is when the government last revised fares. So it will quote average fares that are a lot less than what is being demanded on the roads." The number can only lead to angst that the auto-drivers aren't plying according to the government-set fares, says Mayur.

Meterpodu enjoyed an initial wave of popularity. Nobody likes to be fleeced and the auto-driver is a convenient villain in a farce of a transport system. "We don't have anything against auto-drivers," Anantha hastens to clarify. "Most of them rent the rickshaws they drive and are forced to do what they do because their owners squeeze them."

The lull that came later is harder to explain. While Meterpodu costs commuters nothing, everyone stands to gain once it reaches its potential. Yet, few contribute fares. Usually, crowd-sourcing involves some form of gratification, but here the user gets no instant reward.

Still, is that the hold-up? "May be it is our mistake that we haven't stressed it enough, but the whole point is for folks to contribute fares to the system and build up a database of fares," says a bemused Anantha. So, right now, the system is missing a vital piece.

To make **Meterpodu** an effective tool, the first order of business would be to drive more fare contributions into the system. There are tweaks in the works. Currently, it is a smartphone application, but its creators plan to release an SMS-based version for non-smartphones users.

Thanks to technology, and individual initiative, we have a handy tool to set fair prices for routes all over the city. Collectively, we may be able to resolve an issue that had us haggling and hand-wringing in the past.

– Vijaysree Venkatraman

Keep Meterpodu ticking

1. Go to www.meterpodu.in. It has a very straightforward interface.
2. Look up fares for your destination. If the government fare comes up, it means no user has contributed a fare for that route yet. Otherwise, you get an average fare as well. And that is your bargaining chip.
3. If you are a Facebook user or a Gmail user, *Meterpodu* lets you submit fares. The credentialing is necessary to prevent random submissions from people or bots.
4. You can also query @meterpodu, or contribute to it, via your Twitter account.
5. *Meterpodu* lets you look up fares for free. But if you never contribute fares, there may be precious little to draw from at some point.

HOPE FOR HERITAGE ACT

with INTACH in 1999 and then by the CMDA and INTACH in 2002. The second time was when the Justice Padmanabhan Committee was put together by the High Court in connection with a case on outdoor hoardings. The report of that Committee, of which INTACH was also a member, formed the basis of the 2010 judgement referred to above which resulted in the formation of the HCC.

Even before that, INTACH had drawn up its own list for the City's municipal limits. What needs now to be looked at is a fine tuning of these lists into one comprehensive list and then identifying heritage buildings in Greater Chennai and elsewhere in the State.

The decision to include the entire State within the ambit of the proposed Heritage Commission is commendable. So far, the heritage movement has been fairly dormant in most towns of the State, resulting in large-scale desecration and wrecking of heritage sites which are not protected by the Archaeological Survey of India. It is imperative that the legislation constituting the Commission is passed at the earliest. What is even more important is that the Commission should work quickly in getting its list of heritage sites together and ensuring that the list is notified with the passage of a Heritage Act. Only then can we have some legal protection for heritage buildings and sites.

Readers of *Madras Musings* need hardly be reminded that the draft of a Heritage Act, at least for the city of Madras, was completed as far back as 1999 and had it been adopted then we would not be a city minus buildings such as *Gandhi Illam*, *Capper House*, the erstwhile Madras Club building on Express Estates, and *Government House*. Chepauk Palace may not have been consumed by fire. And *Bharat Insurance Building* would not be facing an uncertain future. However, with Queen Mary's College being threatened in 2003, the draft regulations were quietly forgotten. Since then there have been attempts at revival in fits and starts but nothing concrete has emerged. All this despite the fact that there is a groundswell of public opinion in favour of a Heritage Act. What is needed is quick action.

An Old Boy's advice

developing their intellectual, communication, teamwork, leadership and enquiry skills with an ability and work ethic to apply their theoretical knowledge to solving practical problems.

● Use new technology to make best use of student and lecturer contact time to explain rather than dictating notes.

● Run the college on business principles of efficiency, effectiveness, and investing to save, so surpluses can be generated to invest in improving equipment or buildings to improve student experience.

● Know which courses cover their cost, so efficiencies can be made.

● Ensure all lecturers have a teaching qualification.

● Explore introducing subjects like Finance, Law, Banking, Pharmacy and Pharmacology which have links with existing subjects like Commerce and Chemistry.

● Improve student employability by considering teaching subjects like Mandarin, Portuguese, and presentational skills. Also set up an Advisory Management Board for each subject with outside experts and employers who can advise on how students can meet employers' needs.

In all this I am talking with 17 years' experience in higher education in the UK, including seven years as Chairman of Birmingham City University which has 23,000 students.