

**Taking the Taxi Home:
South Asian Immigrant Cab Drivers in New York City from 1979-1999**

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The last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed the decline of native-born taxi drivers in New York City, and a stark increase in immigrant drivers from areas such as Russia, Africa, Asia, and most of all—from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. I argue that South Asian taxicab drivers were the actors who essentially reconfigured the “old world” of the yellow cab industry in the city. Under the old taxicab industry (prior to the 1970s), cab drivers had weekly paychecks, job security, paid vacations, and other benefits. But with the advent of widespread daily leasing of taxis from 1979 onwards, cab driving became a precarious occupation for most, as drivers were classified as independent contractors and lost the work amenities of previous years.

The story of South Asian immigrant taxi drivers is also a story of how migrant communities and kinship ties formed in a new world. Cab drivers, who navigated through temporal and cultural space, were forever altered by the activism of Bhairavi Desai, a South Asian woman who founded the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NYTWA). Desai engaged in mass-based organizing to address the drivers’ primary concern of low wages. Under her leadership, the NYTWA also created a home where immigrant drivers of different backgrounds could embrace their lives beyond their work. For instance, the NYTWA held group dinners and provided members with a space in which they could exchange social and cultural news. The drivers, who were overwhelmingly male and drawn from immigrant communities, were often financially burdened, socially isolated, and unable to visit their families in the homeland. In this paper, I suggest that the NYTWA, with its family-oriented structure, may have been exactly what these men needed as they transitioned from their old world to the new.