

Kabi: What's your name?
Kader: Kader Usman Mujawar
Kabi: Where are you from?
Kader: Maharashtra.
Kabi: Where in Maharashtra?
Kader: Karad. It's past Pune and Satara
Kabi: How many years have you been in Bombay?
Kader: I've been in Mumbai since 1969.
Kabi: And for how many years have you been driving a taxi?
Kader: About 25 years. I used to drive lorries (trucks) before.
Kabi: Why did you stop driving lorries?
Kader: After getting married, it's difficult to drive a lorry for a living. You get home late at night and can't see your kids. This way I get home in the evenings. That's why I stopped driving a lorry.
Kabi: Were you married in Bombay or somewhere else?
Kader: No, in my native place.
Kabi: So how old were you when you first moved to Bombay?
Kader: 18.
Kabi: Why did you come to Bombay?
Kader: Well, I was studying and... I heard that you can earn a lot of money in Bombay. So I ran away and came to Bombay. I started cleaning (cleanery) lorries. I didn't drive lorries at first, I cleaned. Then I got my driving license.
Kabi: So when you came and the mills were operating, did you try to find a job in a Mill?
Kader: I tried very hard. I tried in the mills and I tried the Fiat Premier factory, many different companies but I couldn't find a job anywhere.
Kabi: And what grade did you study up to?
Kader: Up to 8th grade.
Kabi: Why did you leave school? Did you fail?
Kader: No, no, I didn't fail. In 8th grade I ran away. Actually, there was my Uncle and there was another man, Actually there were three or four of young guys who ran away together.
Kabi: And who is at home in your village?
Kader: My parents have died. We are eight brothers and I have three sisters. They are their families are there.
Kabi: Do you have land in your village?
Kader: Yes, I was just in my village last week. We were dividing the land into 8 parts for all the brothers.
Kabi: So everyone must have gotten a small piece.
Kader: Yes everyone got a little bit. What can we do? Now that 60-70 bags of rice that the land produced will be divided into eight, the eight brother.. The sisters refused to take anything; they said "We don't want it."
Kabi: So how many brothers do you have in Bombay?
Kader: I'm the only one in Bombay.
Kabi: Oh! Everyone else is in the village.
Kader: Yes, everyone else is in the village. They all run businesses. One brother has a mutton shop, one brother has a chicken shop, one is a tailor. Everyone has their own business. And then they do farming. Life goes on.
Kabi: So you live in Bombay.
Kader: Yes, in Ghatkopar.
Kabi: And your wife and children all live here.
Kader: Yes, they're all here. I have three boys and a girl. My daughter is married and so is my sons. My daughter lives in the village. She is married to her maternal uncle's brother-in-law' son . She has two sons and she's been married for a 1.5 years. Everything is going well.
Kabi: How do you like Bombay now?
Kader: I feel trapped now. I can't go back to the village and farm, it won't work for me. I can't start a business there either. If you have a business and go to this market or that market get this goat get that chicken, then you're fine. But that won't work for me. I'll find a job there. I'll have to drive a car or something like that, right?
Kabi: Is this your taxi?
Kader: Yes, this is my taxi. It was my taxi. the for the marriage of my daughter, i sold it to another.....The permit is mine. But I rent it out at Rs. 300 a day.
Kabi: So you didn't find a job in the mills?
Kader: No, I couldn't find a job there.
Kabi: Didn't you know someone who could help you [find a job in the mills]?
Kader: No... I needed to know someone but I didn't.
Kabi: So you've been driving a taxi for 25 years now. When you started, how did you do it?
Kader: Well, I knew the roads because I was a lorry driver. After that, driving a taxi seemed easy! Obviously, there were a few problems along the way. At first, I didn't know all the names of the roads or the names of the buildings.
Kabi: How many years did it take for you to buy your own taxi?
Kader: It took me about... I drove someone else's taxi for 12 years. I bought this taxi around.... '95. So it's been 17 years. I bought it new, from the Premier company. That used to be the only kind of taxi, the Premier Fiat. Now there are all kinds of taxis. After four years, this taxi will be cancelled so I'll have to get another one. Santro, Zen, Alto... I'll buy one depending on how much loan debt i think I can take.
Kabi: How old are you?
Kader: Sixty-two.
Kabi: Aren't you tired?
Kader: No, not yet.
Kabi: Not yet? [laughing] How long will you drive a taxi?
Kader: We'll see... I'll drive another four or five years. I'll buy a new car, earn some money, pay the loan down some... then I'll find a driver and rent it out. Then I'll rest a little.
Kabi: So then you'll rest.
Kader: How can I rest. Giving it to a driver doesn't make me enough money to live on.
Kabi: Are you in a Union
Kader: Yes, I am in the Taximan's Union
Kabi: Does the Union do you any good?

Kader: No. What can the Union do? there are so many cars now, what can the Union do? Also the people tell so many lies, what can the Union do?

Kabi: Earlier, the RTO office said they will change the colors of the taxis.

Kader: Only the black and yellow looks good. You can tell right away that a car is a taxi.

Kabi: Before you used to see so few new taxis and now it's becoming rare to see Fiats [old taxis].

Kader: Wait for a few more years, then you will see a lot less Fiats.

Kabi: Do you prefer the Fiat or other cars?

Kader: The Fiat is a good car. It's strong.

Kabi: But passengers prefer the new cars.

Kader: Yes, now passengers have become fanciful. Passengers only want one thing: a fast car.

Kabi: It's been so many years for you in Bombay... what's changed in Bombay?

Kader: What's changed? The buildings, the road, they've built bridges [flyovers]. But there is no control over how many cars there are. There are so many cars now. There are 3 RTOs that cars pass out of. Everyday new cars are being passed out. So what will happen? The number of cars is increasing, but the number of roads is the same... there should be some space for all these cars, right? There's been some improvement because of these bridges.

Kabi: The sealink?

Kader: Yes also the sealing. the sealing has made a good difference, it's a good change. So, I'll take the Tulsi Pipe Road link, ok?

Kabi: Yes. Now there's a flyover at Tulsi Pipe. There didn't used to be one.

Kader: Right, you can reach Dadar very quickly now. Dadar market there is less traffic. Now there won't be much traffic, so we'll go to Bandra via Mahim near the Church.

Kabi: When you first came to Bombay, where did you live?

Kader: I used to live in Ghatkopar. I had a relative that lived so so I started living there.

Kabi: Do you have your own home?

Kader: Yes, I have a house in a chawl. It's a 12'x18' room. Upstairs and down.

Kabi: Does your son live with you?

Kader: No, actually... My father-in-law had five daughters, So when my second son was four years old, he went to live with them. They educated him until 12 grade. They arranged his marriage and got him married. After my father-in-law died, my son said to me that he would stay and do the farming. It's nice there. He has 2-3 water buffalo that he raised, He gets milk from them and he sells the milk to the Dairy and makes money on that, he farms the land, It's good.

Kabi: So when the big floods happened in Bombay, where were you (26 July 2006)?

Kader: For the first three days, I was in Five Gardens. I didn't eat or drink anything for three days. The Big trading community people who lived there used to give me biscuits and milk. I parked my taxi in a compound. What to do? I couldn't go anywhere. It was really terrible during that time of the floods. No phone. We didn't have a phone at the house, and I didn't have a cell phone yet. My neighbors near my house had a phone but none of the phones were working. I couldn't contact my family back home either. Now every kid has a mobile phone. Back then there was nothing like that. I couldn't ask anyone to call home either.

Kabi: Your family must have been so worried.

Kader: Yes, they were very worried.

Kabi: So when you see these big buildings, what goes through your mind? Do you think that Bombay has grown or that in this new city you don't have a place here?

Kader: Bombay has grown quite a lot. Buildings are being built, slums are being demolished. There are homes being built, there are good things happening. But people aren't doing the right thing with this growth. Someone like me will move into a building, sell the property and go live in another slum. There are people like that, too.

Kabi: So all of these new shopping malls have been built. Have you gone to a mall?

Kader: In a mall?! You need at least Rs. 15,000 to 20,000 in your pocket to be able to go in a mall.

Kabi: Are these malls for normal people or rich people?

Kader: For rich people. It's the same thing as 5-star hotels, can we go inside those? What can we buy from malls? There are clothing shops in Dadar, in Parel... if we like something, we buy cloth and have it stitched. That's better, right? That way we have a guarantee that this clothing was stitched by a tailor. There's no point in going to a mall. Rich people think "I'll buy sandals today and throw them away tomorrow." It's like the people who live in Bandra. If you have money, then you can do this. If I buy something like this for my wife, she won't even like it! Like my kids wear jeans... if I wear jeans, it doesn't work, does it? It doesn't work like that.

Kabi: Did you ever drive your taxi at night?

Kader: I used to, around '90. You can drive peacefully at night. The police won't bother you, you won't have to worry about traffic signals. By 9 or 10 P.M., we rule the road. We can drive as we please. Back then, there wasn't so much traffic at night.

Kabi: Now they've closed the dance bars, too. So there isn't as much business for taxi's at night.

Kader: Now with the dance bars closed, the gambling dens and watering holes being closed, people go out less at night. The police also put up roadblocks [nakabandi] very quickly now. Very quickly.

Kabi: It's to prevent people from drinking and driving. They check for drunk driving

Kader: If they do it, that's good. It's very good. If they use machines to test drivers, then they'll stop drinking and driving... It's all these private car-owners. No taxi driver drives after drinking. Maybe a few. If a customer says, "Here, have a drink" then that driver might drink and drive. But otherwise no taxi driver does it.

Kabi: You've been driving taxis for so many years. Can you tell me one story?

Kader: What can I tell you?

Kabi: Tell me a story about a passenger. Did any passenger run away without paying a fare?

Kader: Oh, that happens. A lot of things like that happen. One time it happened like that, there were a well-dressed man wearing a tie and he said, "We want to go to Chembur, Maitri Park." He stopped a few places on the way and then we reached Chembur. We got to Maitri Park and he went into one building. He went through the front door and he got out of the back door and got away. I waited for half-an-hour, one hour and he didn't come. So then I went to ask the watchman, "Brother, there was a man who came here some time ago". Then he asked me, "Why?". I told him I was a taxi driver; he told me "This is an everyday event. Every week one man comes in a taxi and leaves, screwing a taxi driver. You can wait here, but no one will come. We don't even know who that man is. He enters through the main entrance and exits through the back, how can we know who he is? If a man comes to the building without a car, we don't let him in the building." So he left without paying a fare of Rs. 400-450.

Kabi: 450?

Kader: He wanted to go through Dadar, through Mahim, through Bandra, then we went to Chembur. At today's rates, that fare would be

something like Rs. 900. Back then the meter ran at Rs. 9. So that's why I told you about this story. Now that you're recorded this, will you listen to it at home?

Kabi: Yes, I'll listen to it at home. Right now I've recorded 40 minutes; I will choose the best parts of this and make it into a 30 minute recording. Then I'll edit it and put it on the internet so that other people can listen to it.

Kader: Good.

Kabi: I call it "Meter Down, Stories of Black and Yellow Taxis". So far I've recorded stories from 26 drivers. I ask them about Bombay today, about driving a taxi, what stories they have, what lives they lead, where they come from, what their problems are. So what are the biggest problems today?

Kader: My problems are that there is so much traffic, that I've grown old, that I'm tired. When I talk about problems, that's it. Now that I'm old, there will be some problems, right?

Kabi: You've driven a taxi all your life and earned money.

Kader: I've earned money but I haven't managed to save. My four children were married. I had to run a home, I have a wife and kids. So whenever there's a problem, whatever I have saved it goes in that. Nothing gets saved.. So I haven't made much money like Rs. 5 – 10 lakhs (500,000 – 1 million). So I earned and lived. I educated my children.

Kabi: How far have your children studied?

Kader: One son studied up to 12th. One studied up to 10th. The third studied up to 10th, too. I told the third one to study, he said, "I can't. I don't want to study." So he went to work. Now he works as contract labor. I've taken out a taxi license and badge for him. When my hands and legs stop working, then at least he can drive the taxi. It's the end for me, but he can continue. I tell them, "It won't be good if you keep driving a taxi. Go find work instead." But where will they find work? And if an employer finds out that we're Muslim, then no one will be interested in hiring us. After hearing our last name, he'll say, "Come tomorrow." {Meaning don't come.} If one has a bad name, then we all get a bad name. Any job, a government job or anything. If someone has a connection, then he can find a job. Otherwise you don't find anything quickly. A government job, any job...

Kabi: And private companies?

Kader: Private companies don't take Muslims. If they took them in the past, that's another story.

Kabi: In the newspaper there are stories that people don't sell flats to Muslims.

Kader: People change when they find out you're Muslim. But don't tell this to anyone. Don't put this on the Internet.

Kabi: But this is the truth. This is reality.

Kader: But what will change by talking about this? Nothing will change. What can we do?

Kabi: Do your children go on the internet?

Kader: No, they don't.

Kabi: Do you have a computer at home?

Kader: No, I don't.

Kabi: Did your children go to municipal (public) schools or private schools?

Kader: Municipal schools.

Kabi: What language did they learn in?

Kader: Hindi and Marathi-medium.

Kabi: What language did you speak at home? Did you speak Urdu?

Kader: We didn't know much Urdu. Now we know some Urdu, by way of reading the Koran. Children have started reading in Urdu now. Before there was nothing like that. In the village, out of 100 houses, 2 will be Muslims. So now Hindi and Marathi are in use. Before it was just Marathi. When I went to school until the 8th class, it was Marathi medium.

Kabi: One last topic. What is your dream?

Kader: About what?

Kabi: About your life, about your children's lives, anything.

Kader: My children are all married, my children have children... what more do I want? They should work, they should earn. I'll do as much as I can.

Kabi: And what about your life?

Kader: About my life... I could live in my village, I could live in Bombay, both will work for me. Once I get a new car, then any driver can drive it. He'll pay me Rs. 200-300 everyday. That should be enough for this old man and his old lady.

Kabi: When you first came to Bombay as an 18-year-old boy, what was your wish then?

Kader: Back then I had many dreams. I wanted to find a good job, I didn't really want to get into business. but if I had something could've happened. So I found this [taxi] business. [laughing]