

# THE NIGHT SHIFT

NISHA, THE TAXI DRIVER

Voice Over

Audio Montage 1

English News Anchor speaks

Male politician: I believe that if my sister or daughter goes out in the night on New Year's Eve with men other than her father or husband, then I can't expect her to be treated with respect by people.

Male politician: Every one has a 'Lakshman Rekha' drawn around them. If anyone crosses that Rekha, then they are bound to land in danger.

Voice Over

Nisha: You know people have that fear sometimes. Hence, they keep saying that I should not drive in the night. But, the problem is, I love driving in the night! It is a breeze to drive in the night, no cops to worry about, no traffic lights; you can zip across the city.

Voice Over

Nisha: I used to work in a security firm earlier. Once, I met a lady cab driver who was dropping a passenger off at my workplace. Till that day, I had no idea that there were women cab drivers. I always felt driving was not for women. I took down the details about the cab agency and went to my supervisor and convinced him to give me only night shifts for two months because I wanted to learn something new. He agreed so I started learning how to drive, without even mentioning this to my mother.

Voice Over

Nisha: When I finally got my license, I told my mother. But she would not agree to let me drive. She would just not budge. I even got a few lady drivers and friends to come and convince her. We had to work really hard at convincing her. Finally she agreed and allowed me to take up the driver's job.

But then, my mother's brother started creating problems. He would incessantly criticise my mother for allowing me to drive. He said our family does not allow women to drive. My mother tried reasoning with him, but I felt like I had to step in. I told him that this is my life, this is my problem. I told him I won't do anything to give my mother a bad name. So there will be no problem.

Kunal: But was that just this uncle or did other members of your family oppose your decision as well?

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Nisha: All the male members of the family. (Laughs) Because I was the only woman in the family to drive. Their daughters and sisters were all wearing the veil, so they wanted me to do the same.

Voice Over

Nisha: My father used to be driver. He died in a car accident, while driving. From that day, my mother has been so scared of vehicles that she still does not allow my brother to buy a bike.

Kunal: So your mother's objection stemmed from this fear, primarily?

Nisha: It was this fear, yes. But now she is not scared. In fact, she rides in my car with me a lot. She has conquered her fear. But she still worries about the night, so she keeps telling me to not drive in the night. But I love driving in the night!

Voice Over

Ambient conversation with Nisha and her colleagues.

Voice Over

Nisha and her colleagues: At the counter for prepaid taxis, they ask passengers if they are okay with a woman driver. This has to stop. This must end. They should not be asking such questions. Do they ask people if they are okay with a male driver? Because of such questions when customers come to us, especially men, they look at us in a cheap way and ask what are the extra 'facilities' we are giving them?

Some passengers also come and question us about why the people at the counter ask such questions. They say, "Are you any different from male drivers?" In fact, many of them even say that world over, things are changing for women, but is India still so regressive that it thinks women can't drive? They ask us this. Mostly, visitors from other countries ask such questions. In fact, they are shocked at this discrimination.

When a solo male passenger is given this choice, he starts having bad thoughts about us.

Voice Over

Nisha: You know how people would earlier say that women can't drive and only men can be good drivers? Even now, 99 per cent of the customers feel this way. They get scared, especially the women passengers. When they see that we are going to drive them, they refuse. Just because they can't drive, they think other women also can't drive well.

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Kunal: So, you are always waiting in this food court?

Nisha: Yes, till we get a fare.

Kunal: But isn't there a waiting room or a designated place for drivers to rest and wait or use restrooms?

Nisha: Leave alone a waiting room, we would be thankful even if we just get some respect around here. (Her friend laughs)

Look, these tables belong to the food court. If they have customers, they evict us. Then, we sit there (points in one direction), but if we chat or laugh there, the airport officials come and tell us to leave. Then, there (points in another direction), where the security stands, if we sit there then the Taj Hotel's security comes to evict us.

Kunal: So, where are you supposed to sit?

Nisha: We are not supposed to sit. They say, you stand and wait if you want or leave. Or occupy a quiet corner somewhere. If you don't, they call the cops to throw us out.

## Voice Over

Background conversation plays out between a passenger, a male cabbie and Nisha and her friend.

Nisha: When we get a big ride, let us say worth Rs 500 or more, from the airport counter, even before the passengers can come to our cabs, the male drivers intercept them mid-way. Then, they try and convince passengers that women drivers are neither safe nor reliable. They say we are not 'good' women. It happens right here, in front of us.

Once they plant the seed of doubt in the minds of passengers, the passengers feel like it is a risk to sit in our cars. This is all because the male drivers feel so jealous that us, women, are getting such big-ticket rides and they aren't. That's why they try so hard to mislead the passengers that the passengers go back to the airport and cancel their rides with us.

If you want, you can try this yourself and you'll see that you will want to cancel our cab too.

Kunal: Do people actually cancel your cabs?

Nisha: Lots of them do!

Nisha's friend: Then our supervisor often pleads with them and tells them that we are safe and very reliable drivers. But, once there is doubt in their minds, it is very

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difficult for us to change their mindset. Even if you ferry them for free, they won't come.

Voice Over

Nisha's friend: Yes. We even tried offering free rides to passengers! (Laughs). We agreed to pay them if they didn't like our driving.

Voice Over

Nisha: Much before Ola and Uber entered the market, there used to be Meru and Tab Cabs and the like. They used to compete with us fiercely.

Kunal: But, amidst the competition, did they ever behave badly with you?

Nisha: Yes, plenty of times. Whenever they saw one of our cars going, they would deliberately overtake our cars and cut through very rashly. Then, they would often abuse us while we would be driving past. They wouldn't even care that one shouldn't abuse a woman.

But, that's where we drew the line. Whenever they would abuse, we would lose it. Why should we listen to their abuses? We are here, trying to earn a living by driving a car. We aren't committing a crime that we must bear their abuses. We can't bear a man abusing us. So, if a male driver abuses us, we stop his car in the middle of the road and thrash them. We make it a point that we thrash him in a way that he remembers it for life. That is the one rule we follow -- we will not bear someone abusing us.

Kunal: So, how does this work? If a lady driver has such an altercation, what happens next?

Nisha: The issue is resolved right there and then. If she has the confidence, she will thrash the driver herself. If she doesn't, she will call us and then we all gather there to teach him a lesson.

What do we do? If we must survive in their field, we must become like them. They won't let us survive if they think we are docile and delicate. That's the problem.

Kunal: Do you feel like you have to project a sense of, what is conventionally considered, masculine traits to them?

Nisha: Absolutely. We are not scared anymore. In fact, even the cops say that we are fearless, and we don't fear anyone anymore. (laughs)

Voice Over

Nisha: This guy, he would always travel in our cabs. This one time, he came out of the airport and he was drunk. As soon as he sat in the cab, he started asking me

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about my family. Generally, when passengers ask us such details, we are happy to tell them. While we were talking, he asked me something very inappropriate. He said, I'll do this and that. I told him one thing straight: I have a very big weapon with me at this point, one that you can't imagine. I have the steering wheel with me. I don't care, I'll crash into a wall or something and I will surely die but I will ensure you die, too. I am not scared of dying.

It's only then that he backed off and apologised. He's never taken lady-driven cabs after that.

Kunal: Do you think being in this profession has changed you?

Nisha: Immensely. Earlier, I was not allowed to step out without a burkha. But, now, I am so carefree. The other thing is, I did not know what it was to abuse. But, now, abuses, rough talking, I can do it all so easily. That's why I say, this profession is good but also bad. It can transform people but it can also ruin them in some ways. Earlier, I used to be so shy that I would never talk to anyone apart from my close ones. But now, I can talk to anyone who comes my way. Now, I can't stop talking!

Sometimes, I still can't wrap my head around just how much I have changed in these last few years!

Voice Over

Nisha: Look, earlier, I used to have really long hair and now, I have a boy cut. I faced a lot of flak from the male members of the family for this. They blamed my mother for my transformation and criticised her a lot. But my mother told them that this is her life and she gets to decide what she wants to do. My mother doesn't tell us how we must live or who we must pay heed to. She tells my brother and me to live our lives the way we want to, but just ensure that the family's reputation is never tarnished. If my mother backs me, I don't care about anyone else in the world.

Voice Over

Nisha: I told my maternal uncle that if you truly care for us, then you should have supported us when we really needed it. When I wanted to get married, none of these uncles supported us. I didn't have a father so we needed their support. But, they didn't support my mother. So, I couldn't get married. That's when I decided that I will never marry.

When we really needed it, they didn't help us. They didn't support my mother. Now, when I am living on my own terms, we don't need their backing. They lost the right to interfere in my life when they decided to not back me when I needed them to. That's why, I don't care about them anymore. My mother doesn't have a problem with the way I am living my life.

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Nisha: Yes, this profession has created these problems for me. Before I came into this, I used to only wear long-sleeved dresses with my head covered at all times. I led a very different life then.

Kunal: And you once mentioned what your name meant.

Nisha: Yes, my name is Hayatunnisha. Hayaat is Life and Nisha means in the Night.  
(Laughs)

*This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.*