

## Chapter - 6

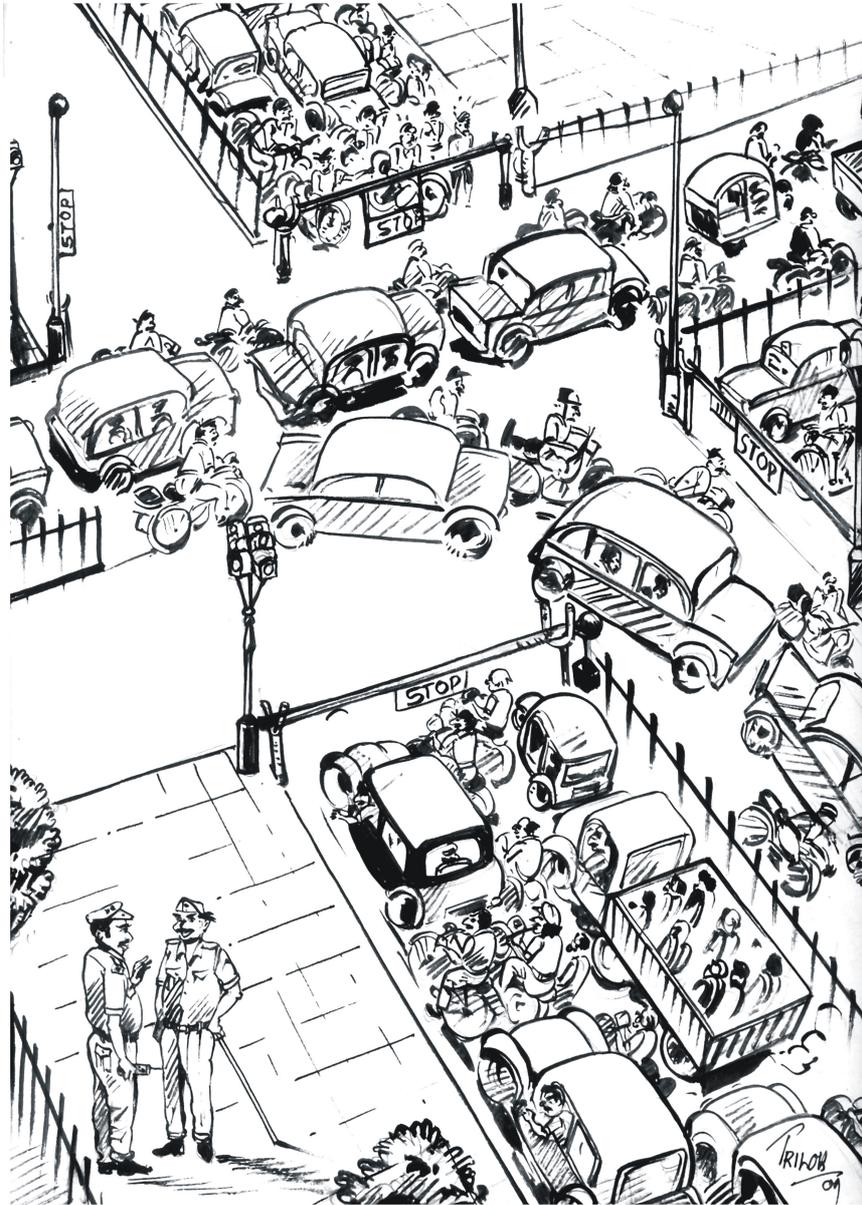
### **PUBLIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS TRAFFIC RULES IN THE CITY**

In general the road traffic constitutes four main components or pillars. These are the public or commuters on the road, vehicles on the road, the road infrastructure and lastly the authorities that regulate the traffic. We have already discussed in details road accidents and arrogance on roads. In this chapter, I will discuss the typical driving conditions in an Indian city with special reference to the public attitude towards traffic rules.

**[I] Scene at a Crossing:** Before I take you to one of the crossings in any city of India, I would like to give you a simple example. Just imagine a classroom where a strict teacher is taking a class. You would find a pin drop silence and all children would be taking a keen interest or pretending to do so. Now a peon comes to call the teacher and as soon as his/her back is turned, with a loud hurray, the children turn rowdy. In short, the scene in the class changes completely. Once they realize the teacher is coming back, within seconds they resume their seats and silence prevails as if nothing had happened.

Similar is the scene at most traffic intersections in our country. As long as the traffic policeman is present, all drivers follow rules. But if there is no traffic policeman then there is total chaos and nobody cares about the colour of the signal, they only see green. Traffic rules are considered an unnecessary burden and people do not think that traffic signals are meant for their safety. This attitude invariably causes either a jam or some accident. People are more interested in knowing whether the traffic policeman is present or not rather than the colour of the signal.

So, is there any difference in the behaviour of the school children and the public at crossings? Seemingly, not much. BUT there are big differences between the two scenes. In the case of schoolchildren, they are not mature enough to know what is good or bad for them. While on crossings the responsible persons are invariably educated and mature citizens from a civilized society. Secondly, the act committed by children is simply a question of bad discipline only and not really associated with the risk to their lives, whereas at crossings, the careless act could prove to be fatal for not only oneself but also to some other innocent commuters.



*Excellent idea Sir! These barriers have solved the problem of jumping the signals!*

On the other hand, there are some people who believe in following traffic rules and stop at red signals even if there is no traffic policeman. But very often they find themselves all alone while other vehicles are zooming past in every direction. I must admit that many a time I have felt quite foolish waiting for the signal to turn green at a deserted crossing and my wife and children telling me not to stop. It also happens that if you are patiently waiting for the green signal at an unmanned crossing, the driver behind you will constantly press his horn as if saying you are a fool to stop if there is no traffic policeman. If you still do not budge he will reverse his vehicle a little and zoom past giving you dirty looks. In this situation it is hard to pass one full minute or to wait your turn and sometimes you are also tempted to jump the red signal. This happens especially at night when the traffic policeman is off duty. There is a question that in addition to traffic signals, do we need interlocking barriers on the road, like those at railway crossings? Why not, if we don't behave?

**[II] Driving in Between Crossings:** The moment, there is a green signal, we feel it is our duty to remind the vehicle driver in front to move by constantly pressing the horn. Thus the person in front is under great stress as people behind do not tolerate delay for even a fraction of a second. You can imagine what would happen if his vehicle fails to start?

Once there is a green light, the drivers that were impatiently waiting, move as if they have been flagged off for a cross country race. They start a free style driving. Now there would be no traffic rule or need for any traffic sense till the next red light. They try their best to compensate for their very precious time that was 'wasted' at red light. There is no rule for speed limit, overtake, lane cutting, etc. Suddenly some one may cut across the road or make a U turn in front of other vehicles without giving any signal. Now once they approach the next crossing, they all become model drivers.

**[III] Our Attitude towards Other Commuters:** All citizens have equal rights for use of the roads whether they are pedestrians, rickshaw pullers or people in luxury cars. However, usually those who have a bigger or costlier vehicle feel that their right on the road is greater. Most of the motorized four or two wheeler owners think the roads are basically meant only for them and they should get priority while passing through. Especially some SUV owners [not all] have been found to be more impatient and consider pedestrians or two wheelers as some unwanted creatures on the road who are causing unnecessary hindrance and ought to be done away with. They treat their vehicle like a king's procession ['Raja ki Savari'] and expect that people should give way without any horn. Some times they press the horn not as a request but just as an announcement

and push their vehicle forward [whether or not the situation permits], assuming that people have to make way for the king of the road coming in a large luxury vehicle.

By giving repeated horns we literally force pedestrians or cyclists to drag their feet back and not to dare cross the road till our vehicle has passed. Time may come when a mother will tell the kid look beta, 'this is called a car and it is in no way less dangerous than a train, you have to cross the road only when it goes away from you'. The drivers in bigger vehicles can do this forcefully only due to the reason that the poor pedestrians or the two wheeler owners are at the receiving end as far as injuries after collision are concerned. It is a clear case of 'might is right'. By doing so, they probably remind us about the ancient civilization or 'jungleraaj' wherein those who are powerful and strong should have an upperhand.

Often there is too much criticism among commuters on roads. The two wheelers and car owners criticize each other while the pedestrians or cyclists criticize motor vehicle owners. There is a lack of regard even among the drivers of the same group. For example, one car driver often finds another car driver to have less traffic sense than him. If two people driving the same kind of vehicles cannot understand or respect each other, then how are they expected to understand the needs of other commuters like two wheelers, and pedestrians.

**[IV] Parking Sense:** Perhaps we all lack parking sense. Those who may have had it initially change seeing others. People park their vehicles haphazardly without thinking about the inconvenience caused to others. After parking their vehicles in odd positions or blocking previously parked vehicles, they suddenly disappear. Very soon there is either a traffic jam or the affected person is seen desperately looking for and cursing the responsible driver. Many a time the person who has caused the situation might be watching all the 'tamasha' from a nearby ice-cream parlour or chaat-shop but just feigns ignorance. The driver of the offending vehicle may be sleeping inside but turns a deaf ear when asked to shift the vehicle a little bit. In such situations, sometimes even a person of the coolest temperament may feel like banging into and removing the obstructing vehicle. In some colonies it is frequently observed that people don't spare even the gates of private houses. In Delhi, I have seen boards in front of several houses saying 'don't park your vehicle outside otherwise the tyre will be deflated.' This shows how big the menace of illegal parking is in our country.

**[V] Window Shopping:** A different type of Window Shopping i.e. shopping through the window of a car is very popular on Indian roads.

It is our tendency to take the vehicle as close to the shop or vendor as possible. We do not want to move on foot even a little or rather do not want to come out of the car if possible. The car owner will stop in front of the shop occupying half of the road and the memsaab or the gentleman will pull down the window and the 'window shopping' starts. They give their order to the shopkeeper and merrily enjoy music in the middle of the road and maybe some snacks too while their goods are being packed. Who cares for anyone whose way they may be blocking? The shopkeeper of course will not open his mouth due to the fear of losing his clients.

**[VI] Overtaking in City:** In our country everyone seems to be in a great hurry just like drivers of fire brigade or ambulance. Regardless of whether space and conditions permit or not, they constantly ask for a pass by blowing horns. They do not tolerate any delay and overtake in a dicey or strange fashion from any side. Quite frequently when you are preparing to give a pass to someone on your right, suddenly one more vehicle zooms past from your left side leaving you shivering. They say everything is fair in love and war and now in traffic, too. Perhaps newer technologies will invent cars with wings so that drivers addicted to speeding and overtaking can lessen their frustration in situations where they do not get a pass. Sometimes in India if the vehicle behind you does not ask for a pass, then you become suspicious and instead of thinking that he may be a patient driver, you think otherwise, that it may be following you or may be attempting to kidnap you or something like that. You purposely slow down your vehicle to allow him to overtake to remove your suspicions.

Now consider a situation when you need to overtake a vehicle ahead of you. A like-minded driver, if the situation permits would never come in your way. At any rate, usually people turn it into an ego problem, and feel insulted if somebody overtakes them as if they have been labelled as poor or lazy drivers. Sometimes if a smaller vehicle, e.g. Maruti 800 wants to get ahead of an SUV, the driver of the larger vehicle may feel extremely slighted [how dare you!] and try to run faster unnecessarily just to prove that he and his vehicle are superior. If you are in a party, having a gathering of cultured people, an expression, 'excuse me' is all that is needed to let you pass through, and that, too, with a smile! Needless to say these very people when they're on the road leave all their culture behind at home and hence the dismal situation of traffic on our roads. Disorder at home creates disorders everywhere.

**[VII] Traffic Sense and Educational Status:** Though we assume that an educated person would be more careful about traffic hazards,

the fact is that there is no such correlation. The fact that a person having a bigger or costlier vehicle only shows that he has more money and that's it. This does not necessarily mean that he would be more educated or cultured as far as understanding of traffic rules [or civic sense] is concerned. A person sitting behind the steering of a big luxury car may be a big duffer, having loads of money and zero traffic sense and, on the other hand, a person on a bicycle may be a learned one, having very good traffic manners. Policemen usually use their stick on the poor and uneducated rickshaw pullers and people in big cars who break traffic rules are spared.

**[VIII] Kissing Driving:** Some drivers literally jostle with other cars making every effort to pass through small spaces. Perhaps they are very much influenced by the auto-drivers of India and drive their cars like autorickshaws. Examination of the body of the car is diagnostic where you may find lots of dents and scratches all over it. Kissing driving is possible with four wheelers only and for two wheelers it might be risky. The condition of your car and the way you drive reflects a lot about your personality.

**[IX] Rule: The Loudest Wins the Race:** Most of the drivers are addicted to horns and believe that a constant honking of horns on the roads is essential and effective. They think that making a louder sound would help making way easier. Sometimes people blow horn in spite of knowing the fact that the vehicle ahead has no choice, e.g. on red lights or traffic jam. They just don't realize how stressful or irritating it can be for others. They do not care about prohibited zones like hospitals, schools, etc. Many times they blow horn without any obvious reason; probably it is for some statue or hoarding or for a parrot sitting on a tree. I feel blowing horn is used sometime to relieve one's own frustrations or it gives pleasure as if they get in twisting the ear of an animal [that probably has come from ancient time when people used to travel on the back of animals]. Some people install horns with piercing or abnormal sounds, with the intention of scaring those on foot. Sometimes they blow horn continuously as if it belongs to fire brigade or as that of a non-stop train passing through a station platform.

**[X] Rule: Drive away from 'door zone':** Drive at least 4 feet away from the cars to avoid any accident. The drivers or the occupants of any car or jeep may suddenly open the door and come out from the vehicles, especially from the right side without giving any signals to the follower making full chances for accidents. I remember at least 3-4 occasions where drivers as well as co-passengers opened the right side of the door and a two wheeler or a car that was coming from behind had collided.

**[XI] Rule: Owners of Bigger Vehicles are Always at Fault:**

Although either or both parties might be responsible for a traffic dispute, in India it is a norm that the bigger vehicle owners are always held responsible. Since bigger vehicles are relatively safer, persons driving smaller vehicles or pedestrians are exposed to greater risks for injuries and damage to their vehicles. No doubt, the person who is injured more seriously should get priority in sympathy, attention and care irrespective of type of vehicles. The problem arises if the owner of the bigger vehicle wants to stay there and help the victim; he faces the ire of the mob. If he flees the scene, his may be labelled as a hit-and-run case. If this phobia or frenzy can be reduced, there will be greater chances of accident victims being helped. Another advantage of vehicle owner present at the accident site is to pass on the benefit of the third party insurance to the victims.

**[XII] PUNISHMENT FOR ERRANT DRIVERS**

***[A] Punishment is Right or Wrong?***

The question is whether punishing such traffic violators is right. If right, then what punishment do they really deserve for traffic offences? The majority of Indian citizens believe that punishments are an absolute necessity for maintaining traffic rules. After going through the following points I am sure the army of the brigadier that is against punishment would be reduced to that of a corporal.

*(1) Education Programme vs Punishment:* In every city, you may have seen a number of special weeks or months dedicated to traffic awareness organized by various NGOs, clubs and the traffic police. These are basically aimed at educating the public, but they hardly have any effect on the people. Also it is a proven fact that these traffic weeks, etc. make no significant change in the attitudes and incidence of accidents. It has been found to be true worldwide that people never follow the road safety measures taught in these campaigns. There is a big difference in having knowledge and actual behaviour on the road. Yes, these campaigns may increase our knowledge, but increased knowledge rarely results in appropriate behavioural changes on the road. If we analyze ourselves in all honesty before arguing against it, we would find most of us to be pretenders or hypocrites. What we preach we do not practise. Consider the following examples. If education is really a factor in improving traffic sense, then we should expect this change uniformly in the city as well as on highways. As fatal accidents are more likely to occur on highways, one would expect drivers on highways to be more disciplined and follow rules, but it is a rare thing. It is due to the fact that the role of the traffic police is confined mainly to the city, while its role is negligible

on highways. Even in the city how is it that people appear law-abiding near crossings and become rash in between crossings? The answer is probably the same.

On the contrary, when the police start punishing, it gets results much faster. When the police personnel educate the public, no one listens, but when the same policemen are spotted issuing challans to traffic offenders, every-one behaves. What does it show? Why do you stop well behind the zebra crossing when you see a board, 'Rs 1000 fine if you cross the line'? In one of the Asian countries, an educational campaign could not increase the use of seat belts to more than 23% in five years. On the contrary, when the police enforced rigidly a fine double the previous one, the use of seatbelt increased to 98% and that, too, within 6 months. Besides, it is also a fact that most attempts at enforcing the law will not have any lasting effect unless the enforcement is continuous and spread over a period of time.

*(2) Safe roads: a Basic Right of Other Commuters Who Follow Traffic Rules:* If a person after violating traffic rules is let off easily, it certainly reduces the other people's faith in the law, who strongly believe in observing traffic rules. Is it not possible that if these offenders are not prevented from doing the mistake, they may subsequently on one of such mistakes may put also the lives of other innocent people on the roads in danger? If these people are corrected timely, it may stop them from putting innocent peoples' lives in danger as well as their own.

*(3) Traffic Violation: a Social Issue?:* It may not be out of place to discuss the problem of traffic violations as one of the many other social issues, like dowry, female feticide, domestic violence, etc. Why was there a need to make laws against such social evils? It is because education and social awareness failed to curb them and the government had to intervene by making laws. Similarly, the issue of traffic violation is related more to the attitude of society rather than lack of knowledge. It is also true that laws alone cannot completely eliminate any social evil, but only help to keep them in check. If such incidences still occurs, it does not mean that the laws are not effective, but try to imagine the situation if there are no laws at all. I believe if the law can bring about a change in majority it has enough justification for its utility. Bad habits die hard and the desired behavioural changes may be brought about only after effective law-enforcement.

So we can surmise that education alone is insufficient to change people's attitudes on the roads unless strict penalties are enforced simultaneously. Campaigns are required and should be used BUT mainly to inform the public about various laws and respective punishments for

various traffic violations [we assume that the traffic rules are told at the time of issuing driving licence]. There is little reason to waste money on big road safety campaigns or advertisements.

**[B] If yes then what punishment?**

There cannot be a single formula for all kinds of traffic violations. I strongly believe that there are two categories of traffic offences, one relates to those where the safety of the driver himself is affected only [use of seatbelt, helmet, etc] where a fine is an adequate punishment. However, if someone causes threat to the lives of other innocent people on the road, besides his own, he/she should be penalized more severely.

(1) *Fine*: What is the harm if someone pays for his bad habits? None but the concerned person has landed himself in this situation. The imposition of fine is fully justified and, in fact, this is also a part of educating the people as some people don't like to be educated free of cost and want to pay for it. Keeping record of punishment awarded is very important. This punishment should be endorsed on papers, so that a heavier penalty can be imposed subsequently. It is justified to increase the degree of punishment for subsequent offences either in the form of heavier fine or suspension of driving licence, imprisonment, etc.

(2) *Suspension of Driving Licence or Confiscation of vehicle*: This can be done if he falls into the given criteria, e.g. if driving is dangerous to the public, driving under the age of 18 years, with illegal driving licence, driving after drinking, and driving a vehicle with an objectionable history.

(3) *Imprisonment*: Imprisonment is justified only in exceptional cases. What are these exceptional cases? Sometimes the attitude of the offender is so bad and if the magistrate feels he may be a potential killer on the road, it is a good reason for imprisonment. If people do not correct their dangerous driving habits even after repeated fines and other penalties, then what is the remedy? That is why keeping a record of previous offences is very important. We should not forget that driving is a big responsibility and involves many lives. This is also a good reason to bring driving offences under criminal purview.

As for my observation, the traffic police in general are not very strict in punishing. I must say that traffic policemen take harsh decisions only after giving sufficient time to the commuters and not from day one. People take undue advantage of this or consider their leniency as signs of weakness or incompetence. Recently in the last one or two years, due to deterioration in the discipline among drivers, the police have started imposing heavy penalties [including imprisonment for a few days] for rash driving, lane cutting, drunken driving, talking on mobile phone, etc. People

might argue that this punishment [imprisonment] is too harsh, but it might some day save their life or that of some other innocent traveler on the road.

In this regard the role of the traffic police should also be clearly defined. What do we expect from the traffic police, whether to behave like a mother or as a perfect law-enforcing agency? Should it ask the commuter 'Beta helmet pahan lo, otherwise you may suffer head injury' in a way as if mother says 'Beta sweater pahan lo otherwise you will catch cold' and nothing beyond this. Instead, I hold that we should consider traffic police a perfect law-enforcing agency.

Lastly, we being the responsible citizens of India often make a big hue and cry about traffic irregularities, but often ignore rules meant for our own safety. It is not possible to place policemen in each and every corner of the city or throughout the highways to check us. Why do we have to follow traffic rules only under pressure? If we really think of ourselves as part of a civilized society, then we have to understand that we ourselves are largely responsible for most traffic related problems.

*(4) Other Measures:* There are some other remedies that may prove to be effective like:

1. Community Service: The offender is asked do community service for some days or to assist in traffic control at a crossing for some time.

2. Film Show: The Delhi traffic police make the offenders watch a 3 hrs film which is very 'effective' in putting traffic sense into them. I don't know whether it is the contents of the film or the horrible experience [sitting for 3 hours at an odd time and place against one's will] that is responsible for pushing, drilling some traffic sense into them. Earlier people used to send a 'dummy' on their behalf, but now the police have made a photo identity mandatory to make sure that the right person is present for the 'ordeal'.

*[5] Role of Media:* The problems should actively be discussed by arranging debates involving intellectuals from our society.