

Macho madness on Delhi's roads

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Pick any newspaper in the morning, and one finds that unnecessary bloodshed and crime are front page national news. News about rape and road rage in the national capital is often headline news whereas news about the turbulence of commodity prices or upheavals in Parliament is in smaller print. Are these two phenomena connected? What makes this city so dangerous (literally)? It is the potent mix of the patriarchal power relationship in Indian society and being present in the capital city, the seat of political power, which results in a testosterone- and adrenaline-pushing circus that is directly correlated with the bloodshed and mayhem on Delhi roads. Driving is nothing but a reflection of the attitudes prevailing in our society.

What else explains the attitude of Delhi two-wheeler riders who often do not wear helmets or, better still, carry their helmets slung on their arm, even on main roads? It is hot and humid, granted, but the helmet is meant for one's safety, which most scooter and motorbike riders in Delhi apparently forget! It appears that the 'Papsi' drinking, muscle-showing Delhi men prefer construction helmets to normal helmets. However, these are useless in the event of an accident. It is a common sight also to observe women riders following their male role models and giving helmets a miss. Apparently, beauty wins over their concerns for safety. Perhaps it is beyond their power to ask their male 'drivers' to drive safely. Two-wheelers are notorious for weaving through traffic, but these manoeuvres can go awry. Do women realise that in the event of an accident, they will be the first ones to fall and break their heads? And we are not even talking about the children.

'Delhiites' seem to suffer from Honking Compulsive Disorder (HCD); men think and talk through their horns! The moment the traffic signal goes green, one is deafened by the sounds of cars honking impatiently. Okay, we would all like to be James Bond and zip through in a fraction of a second. But even the wealthiest in Delhi do not possess cars as sophisticated as those of Bond, nor the skill to drive them. In fact, do the majority on the road even know how to drive at all? This mindless honking is an expression of masculinity. Being macho means that you honk and show your might! One may be standing at a red light with traffic ahead, but to signal their presence, they honk! Breaking traffic rules is tantamount to an assertion of their alpha-masculinity.

More evidence of alpha masculinity on Delhi streets is the way male drivers treat policewomen. They honk and bully policewomen to let them through. Can they really do that with a policeman?

This impatience and unwillingness to stand in a queue is also reflected on Delhi roads. Delhi drivers believe that all road space is theirs and all other drivers should empty the roads so that they can pass through. (A recent RITES survey shows that private vehicles occupy 80 per cent of the road space of Delhi but carry only 30 per cent of all commuters!) When they cannot do this, they rebel! We experience their rebellion everyday in the way they break lane discipline and, moreover, do not feel the need to 'indicate' their decisions! Lanes? What are they for? Who wants to follow? We all want to be the leader — after all, it is the survival of the fittest.

Also, 'might is right'; and so they refuse to stand in a queue and instead come from another lane and honk their way into the lane of their choice. Consequently, Delhi men (and women following the men) are engaged in the constant business of breaking off and into traffic lanes. One wonders, though, whether these busier-than-busy people manage to save time by driving in this manner, because you keep bumping into the same James Bond wannabes at each traffic intersection, standing (im)patiently next to your car!

Lastly, have you seen the ubiquitous use of mobile phones while driving? It is an expression of the self-importance of 'Delhiites' — they can't switch off their cell phones, because India will stop working otherwise!

Defensive driving is the mantra taught in the West. The opposite philosophy seems to exist in Delhi. Rules do not exist, or if they do, are not implemented; and even if implemented, the offenders are not held accountable. (One of the World Bank's measures of govern-

nance is the rule of law. India's ranking falls between the 50th and 75th range. The higher the rank, the better the governance. When it comes to control of corruption, India falls further in the ranking.) At the end, this ad hoc system comes back to bite us only because bad driving leads to loss of lives and property and, at the macro level, loss of GDP.

To conclude, both regulators and people themselves need to start valuing lives. Size does *not* matter. Roads are a public good irrespective of one's socio-economic status in society. Just because one has a fancy car does not mean one can overpower others and claim the road is one's personal property. It is time we change our attitudes towards barging in wherever we want to, even into spaces where we do not belong. Perhaps, new attitudes may pervade other facets of life too, and Delhi will stop bearing the stigma of being the "rape capital" of India!

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