

Mere Baap Pehle Aap – Right of way

Traffic in Ahmedabad (actually anywhere in India) is a nightmare for any civilised driver.

Besides the fact that most of us are home grown / taught drivers, we also have no idea about the basic rules and regulations leave alone what signage means. The crux of the matter for us is that we know how to turn the ignition, change gears, accelerate and brake. That for a majority of us in India is the requirement of a driver.

Being allowed to drive is not our birthright. It is an enormous responsibility. Not just for the driver of a vehicle, but for all those making the act possible.

The complication arises when one sits down to define the tasks and responsibilities. Certainly in the urban Indian scenario the complications are only magnified due to other growth issues we are confronted with.

So here is a brief effort to lay out who does what and how it affects everyone else. Prioritising is also required, but here, it is almost like a chicken and egg situation.

Roads will be required even with or without vehicles, as they provide the network to make physical travel and transport possible. A road as is understood by agencies in India is mainly a tar-surfaced track. Roads need much more than just a tar-surface. They need to be properly demarcated, sign-aged, signalled, etc. These add-on's provide safety to users and guide them in properly making their way. The road surface itself must be smooth and any unevenness and loose mettle is detrimental to the passenger travelling as well as to the vehicle. Besides, loose mettle causes more damage to the road itself. If one were to generate statistics on the number of people suffering from back problems and their causes, the results would be astounding. We are not even calculating the cost of resurfacing of roads, which are outdated with every change in season.

Roads never seem to be laid out at a stretch. A bit here and a bit there. By the time they move out having “completed” the task the damage is already there. This is not only the case in urban areas but even national highways are prepared in this fashion. Tendering is a hindrance; only short stretches may be tendered out, so every few kilometres it is someone else's baby, not only for the construction but often also jurisdiction wise. Diversions are temporary and therefore may be as basic as possible. They are more often than not death traps for passer bys. Appearing suddenly out of nowhere and with sharp turns and dips involved. The only signage provided is often the dead man's skull. As a part of roadside entertainment the spellings are myriad, spelling anything but diversion.

Licensing is a farce. Possessing a license is not a great feat in India; some people even believe that it is their birthright to drive with or without one. Not many countries accept Indian driving licenses, notional or international versions. Though most of us believe that if you can drive in India you can drive anywhere in the world, the truth is far from it. Since the way licenses are procured is hardly monitored, we are no more than children at the fair trying out our luck at the bumping car ride. If you have never met with even a minor accident, then that's being blessed.

The RTO. How many of us have actually been there in person. Rules are introduced to get us all to do so, but still we all try and avoid it, why? Most of us are aware of the farce and would like to be left with our dignity of not becoming party to it. The government transport department considers this a revenue generating point. As long as they are bringing in the *moola*, no one really cares that untrained persons have vehicles and are on the roads with a license to kill.

Ideally the process of acquiring a license should be strictly monitored. In every other country except ours applying and actually earning a license is an expensive and tough proposition. The theoretical knowledge of an applicant is even more important than the capability of actually manoeuvring the vehicle. Until you pass all faculty tests you will not be given the license to drive. The flip side is that the number of vehicles on the road will be controlled, with no licence one is hardly likely to invest in a vehicle. Provisions for a good public transport have to be made to cater to the public at large.

Road engineering is a task of the local governing bodies hopefully, for which master plans are made in joint consultation with the police department in charge of traffic management. In reality the departments rarely communicate or even consult each other when it comes to ensuring good transport management and flow of traffic. The easy solution for solving congestion is widening of the roads irrespective of any other parameters that could be introduced to control the burgeoning growth of vehicles.

If lights are installed they are rarely monitored for their functioning, positioning or visibility. Stop lines and zebra crossings are practically non-existing. Dividing stones may disappear overnight to the convenience of the neighbourhood. Dividing lane lines may run straight into dead-ends, zebra crossings maybe placed where there is no other side. Bumps may arise overnight to the convenience of a select few and at deathly cost to many others. No rules and regulations are adhered to or for that matter known. There is no visible project planning, the blame game and passing the buck around is played out to the hilt.

Drivers for their part are as illiterate as the beggars who crowd at cross roads. To our surprise well to do citizens do not know the most common road language. What they know is fatalistically disregarded. The most common excuse is that it is the illiterate who disregard the simple red light and cannot read signage. Little do they realise that signage is a worldwide phenomenon and pictorial so that everyone can comprehend without being literate.

Another common problem on the road is the inch your way forward method of driving. It does not matter if it is on the wrong side, at roundabouts or the red light. The basic worldwide-accepted law of driving, The Right of Way is unknown to the Indian driver. Applying this single rule would solve much. Many a tragic accident could be avoided, simply by allowing the one coming from the drivers' right to pass first. Often while observing a jam this thought comes to mind: *mere baap pehle aap*, this simple consideration would save us all much time and we may actually get to experience the much-prided trait of Indian chivalry.