

## As Loud as it gets on the roads

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The car windows were vibrating as if they would break. And my ear drum felt as if it would be punctured because of the sound. The sonic boom was not because of an SU-30 taking off from Palam airport but from a *Dak Kanvad* on the highway. Though I had been stuck in the traffic jam for over an hour, it was just my luck that now I was right next to one of these.

For years, the *kanvad* was carried by the devout from the Ganga to their villages on foot. The pilgrimage, as all pilgrimages, was a physically testing one. The idea presumably being that the religious merit gained is directly proportional to the physical hardship faced by the pilgrim. I recall as a child seeing a lone *kanvad yatri* hobbling along the road evoking a mixture of awe, pity and reverence.

*Dak Kanvad*, for the uninitiated is a recent invention. The idea in this is not to punish oneself, but instead make the pilgrimage a celebration. It starts typically with a bunch of youngsters, who obviously have little else to do, "requesting" donations from the neighbourhood for bringing the *kanvad*. Next, a truck is ornately decorated to look like a *jhanki* like the one usually taken out on Dusshera day. On the sides of the truck are huge banners advertising the destination as well as the mug shots of the prominent donors. A sound system with gargantuan speakers is placed at the top and back of the truck to ensure that all and sundry can gain some residual religious merit. Interestingly, recent years have seen a new class of professionals oddly called DJ Sound. No birthday party, wedding or even a *satsang* is complete without hiring one.

The truck serves as a resting place for the youngsters who are carrying the *kanvad*. The idea is that the *kanvad* is carried in a relay with each person running with it for a short distance before passing it to the next one and then hopping on to the accompanying motorbike to take the "baton" after some time. A couple of people would be on another motorcycle clearing the way. This they do by blowing a whistle and if need be, by not so gently using a baseball bat or a hockey stick.

It is estimated that about 30-40 lakh people undertake this pilgrimage every year. As an internet meme puts it, "Our girls (from Haryana) are bringing medals while all that our boys can do is bring *kanwads*"!

Needless to say this enthusiastic religiosity causes mayhem on the roads. The month of *Sawan* is traditionally a cause for celebration since it is when the earth rejuvenates. Not for hapless commuters like me though. For us it brings hours of sitting in traffic with loud devotional songs (set to tunes of popular film songs) blaring from a *Dak Kanwad*.

But as with everything, this too has a silver lining. A friend of mine whose brother is in the police told me that the cops are normally relieved at this time. The reason is simple- petty crime comes down drastically presumably because most of the offenders are too busy getting the *kanwads*!

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