

Going on the Gurgaon-Delhi expressway in the morning, one frequently witnesses a strange scene. The erstwhile toll plaza was removed a couple of years ago but there are still some toll booths in the left lanes to collect toll tax from commercial vehicles entering Delhi. Just after the toll barriers, the road curves. It is here that the traffic comes to a grinding halt and there is total commotion with cars moving in and out of lanes. Worse, some cabs start reversing all the way to the toll booths.

As one drives through the curve one sees several lanes being blocked by 5-6, mean looking built-like-bouncers-in-a-pub men. Each of them has a baton or a lathi in his hand and they are stopping the Uber and Ola cab drivers to ask for the toll tax which the drivers have tried to avoid. Most drivers usually pay up the Rs 100 tax plus Rs 500 fine quietly while others try to wriggle out of it by arguing. This causes the traffic to stop or inch forward for a while.

The bouncers are employed by the private agency which has won the contract to collect toll tax from the South Delhi Municipal Corporation. The contract is for a fixed sum of money and anything the agency collects above it, it keeps. The cab drivers obviously avoid paying the toll and making the extra Rs. 100/ since that is included in the fare which Uber or Ola collect from the passenger. So apart from some of the risk-averse type, they take their chances with not paying or paying Rs 600/ (Rs 100 for the toll and Rs 500 for the offence of not paying). The Uber drivers are perfect examples of the beloved *homo economicus* of the neo-classical economists. They behave in a totally rational way since they make several trips between the two cities. However, what is bizarre about the whole set up is the brazenness shown by the bouncers. They are there, right in the middle of an expressway meant for high speed transit, stopping traffic without the cops even taking notice of this patently illegal action.

But this business of taking over the functions of administration and law and order agencies by private companies or individuals is not unique to these bouncers. The bouncers might be operating totally independently though with the connivance of the authorities. In some cases, the authorities themselves hire private agencies to undertake what would be their work.

My favourite example of this sub-contracting of governance to private individuals is the case of the Municipal Corporation in my city. Stray pigs are a big nuisance in several parts of the city which are close to villages or slum clusters. The Municipal Corporation doesn't have enough pig catchers or whatever they are called. And so these pigs roam around freely on the streets and by-lanes of the city creating a health hazard.

A few years ago, a bright young bureaucrat was appointed as the administrator of the Municipal Corporation. Faced with this problem of pig proliferation, he came up with what seemed like a brilliant solution. He ordered that, in public interest, anyone capturing a stray pig in the city could keep the pig and the administration would not take any action. The

owner, if he complains would instead be fined for letting his animals roam around and be a health hazard.

The scheme worked very well- soon most of the pigs vanished from the city. The pig vigilantes caught hold of a large number of pigs while some owners started tying their pigs outside their homes or *jhuggis* to avoid their being captured and taken away. The sight of the pigs leashed and tied up like dogs and cattle seemed right out of a Bunuel film!

However, in a few weeks the pigs returned to the streets. What had happened was that the people who had captured the pigs sold some back to their owners. For the rest, they had no place to keep them or the means to feed them. Hence they were allowed to once again roam freely and fend for themselves. The net result of the scheme was only a change in ownership of the pigs!

Sub-contracting of governance to private citizens and agencies is the flavour of the day. But then, privatisation of governance is a natural corollary in these days of cow vigilantes, Christmas vigilantes, Love jihad vigilantes, anti-Romeo squads etc. The only difference is that while one has official sanction the other only benign neglect by the powers that be.

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

December 23rd, 2017