

Roadside Blues

For drivers on the roads of the capital, the Delhi Traffic Police's new-found zeal in enforcing traffic rules is creating more harassment than relief.

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

Over the last few months, drivers on Delhi roads would have noticed some unusually alert traffic cops standing just after major intersections. An innocent driver might be relieved that this is surely an indicator that the Delhi Traffic Police is finally living up to its motto "With You, For You, Always." However, the reality is, as usual, a little more complex.

Sometime ago, the Supreme Court of India appointed a Committee on Road Safety under the chairmanship of Justice K S Radhakrishnan. The committee came up with some very sensible and stringent measures to make Indian roads safer. The recommendations of the committee were clear and would go a long way in decreasing the accident rate in the country, which currently is amongst the worst in the world. According to the Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015, compiled by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 2,00,000 people lost their lives in road accidents and the estimated loss to the gross domestic product (GDP) due to road traffic crashes was about 3%. These are horrific numbers and any steps to reduce them would be more than welcome.

Among the recommendations of the committee was that some violations would result in not just a fine but also suspension of the driving licence for three months, along with other stringent penalties like imprisonment. The violations specified were speeding, jumping red lights, drunken driving, use of a mobile phone while driving and carrying persons on goods vehicles. Clearly, no one could argue with the desirability of enforcing these laws strictly. And Delhi Traffic Police, being a leader in these things, became the first in the country to implement the recommendations of the committee from 15 December 2015.

Large advertisements were placed in all major dailies informing the citizens of the recommendations and the penalties for the various offences. And lo and behold, suddenly, from January 2016, the presence of traffic policemen after the intersections increased significantly. This was especially true for two kinds of intersections—first, where the waiting time was very long, especially for people taking a right turn, and second, for those lights at junctions where there is ordinarily little traffic.

The modus operandi is fairly straightforward—about four or five policemen would wait just after such a right

turn, about 50 m from the intersection. Now, a driver who has waited for the red light to change twice or thrice before s/he can get to the signal, encounters a yellow light as soon as s/he enters the intersection to turn. The immediate response is to cross the intersection so as to (a) not block the cross-traffic and (b) to avoid being hit from behind by an impatient driver (a rear-end collision). And that is when the ever-alert Delhi police literally spring into action. One of them jumps on to the middle of the road as soon as the light turns yellow and there you are encountering a smiling, ever-helpful traffic cop right in front of you just when you thought you had saved yourself the bother of more waiting.

The subsequent interaction is rather interesting. The first thing the cop asks for, as usual, is your driving licence so that you don't run away. Then he asks you to park the car on the side of the road and come with him to his superior who is sitting on his motorcycle with a new handheld device to issue instant challans. The chief cop starts punching your licence details into the device while the other one calmly takes out a cutting of the half-page advertisement inserted by the Delhi Traffic Police in the newspapers to educate you and inform you that your licence would now be suspended for three months. You argue, "But the light was yellow when I entered the intersection." No effect. You try to beg and plead. No effect.

At this point, the "good cop, bad cop" routine takes over. The cop with the device continues with pretences of doing something important on the device while the cop who stopped you suggests that you look decent enough and can get away by "doing the needful." If you try to argue or haggle, the bad cop takes over and starts telling you the details of where you can collect your licence after three months. Images of trying to find an auto in the morning to get to the Metro station and then attempting to get into the Metro at peak hours flash before you and so you do what is logical and rational, though not necessarily ethical.

The scenario above must have been witnessed by most drivers in Delhi. However, this is not just anecdotal evidence. In response to a Right to Information (RTI) application filed by me, the Public Information Officer of the Traffic Headquarters Delhi has informed me that in the six months from 15 June 2015 to 15 December 2015, the

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number of challans for jumping a traffic signal were 118,232. However, in what would seem as a sudden burst of road responsibility, the number of corresponding challans from 15 December 2015 to 15 June 2016 were just 58% of that number, that is, 69,037! Similarly, for overspeeding, the numbers were 91,516 and 53,849, respectively, for the two half-yearly periods.

These numbers could be explained in several ways. One explanation could be that in a period of six months, drivers in Delhi have become law-abiding. Anyone who has ever driven in Delhi would immediately reject such a possibility. Furthermore, that this is not true is borne out by the other numbers. It turns out that the number of challans for all the other offences (like driving a two-wheeler without a helmet, dangerous driving, etc) has actually increased marginally in this period. Could it be that the citizens of the capital are scared of losing their licences and hence are careful of not committing such offences? Perhaps, though it seems highly unlikely since most people are not even aware of this change in the rules. Thus, it seems very likely that the real reason for this drastic drop in the challans has to do with the increased opportunities for rent-seeking as outlined above.

Like many other well-intentioned initiatives by the judiciary and indeed even by the legislature, this one too superficially seems to be working in achieving the desired results. The number of people fined for traffic offences has ostensibly decreased. However, the reality is very different as anyone on the road in Delhi would tell you. The net result of all this is an increase in rent-seeking opportunities because of increased pay-offs. As they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

Shobhit Mahajan (shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com) is with the Department of Physics and Astrophysics, University of Delhi.