

The Saga of the Sticker

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The ways of the bureaucracy have always been hard to understand. From filling of forms in triplicate to providing the same irrelevant information again and again- the sole purpose of the bureaucrat seems to be to gain some sadistic pleasure by seeing ordinary citizens go through as much rigmarole as possible. The private sector on the other hand is supposed to be efficient in providing quick and efficient services. However, this is not always true- the tale below is a tale of public-private partnership and an example of the law of unintended consequences.

Sometime ago, the Supreme Court ordered the mandatory use of High Security Registration Plates (HSRP) on all vehicles. The logic was impeccable- these tamper-proof plates were supposed to deter vehicle thefts. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) also chipped in by mandating the use of color coded stickers to be affixed on windshields of four wheelers to indicate the type of fuel used.

The Transport departments of each state then appointed private agencies to provide the number plates and stickers. Sometime in 2018, I registered on the website, uploaded the documents and made the payment and got a receipt with an appointment time for getting the HSRP fixed. So far, pretty seamless and efficient.

At the appointed time, I went to the office for getting them fixed. The scene at the office of the private company was one of total pandemonium. There was a long queue of people on the road waiting to enter the office which was a 10x15 feet room with half of it taken up by a caged partition (of the kind behind which Bank tellers sit) behind which two people sat dispensing the much coveted items.

As I reached the room, it was clear that things were not quite alright- someone was complaining of getting the wrong number on the plates while another person was given

number plates for a motorcycle when he had a tractor! I thanked my stars that I got my number plate and that too of the right kind with the correct registration number.

This was 2 years ago. Then a few months ago, at the prodding of the Supreme Court, the transport department decided to start imposing a hefty fine on cars without the HSRPs and stickers. Now since I was never given a sticker in the first instance, I decided that I need to get one.

So I went back to the trusted website to register and pay etc. But this time the website was down for several days, presumably because of the heavy rush of prospective applicants. So I thought of going to the office- except now it was COVID time and one was scared of crowds.

The scene at the office was even more chaotic than the last time I was there- there was a longer line and complete disorder with people pushing each other to get ahead. And very few were wearing masks. Not wishing to expose myself, I returned home and decided to write to the Transport Commissioner about my predicament.

I sent the mail and to my pleasant surprise received a reply within hours- the mail had been forwarded to the private company handling the distribution for necessary action. And action there was since the next day the website was up. Once again, I paid up and got an appointment to collect the stickers.

The scene at the company office when I went to collect the stickers was pretty much the same. In any case, not seeing an option, I stood, masked and all, not in the line but besides it, with some physical distancing. The line would not move for about 20 minutes. Then, as usually happens in a queue, a Good Samaritan went up ahead to see what the matter was. Apparently, there was only one counter and the printer printing the stickers was misbehaving. The person at the head of the line informed our Samaritan that he had been in line for over 5 hours before reaching the counter.

When I timidly asked an officious looking person standing near the door whether it won't be more efficient to just collect the papers and print the stickers in one shot and distribute them outside instead of asking everyone to come into the dinghy and crowded office, he told me to mind my own business. I was baffled since this was precisely my business!

At this point, I quit- but I did take photos of the scene at the office, more to reassure myself that it was hopeless. I then wrote a mail again to the Transport commissioner, copying the Chief Minister's office. After reminding them of their constant barrage of messages to the public regarding mask discipline and social distancing, I asked them if there was an alternative to going to the office. And of course, I attached the photographs to prove my point.

Once again, this worked- a few days later, I got a call from the head office of the private company and the person assured me that the stickers would be delivered to my place. And they were subsequently.

This whole episode to me highlights several important aspects of how things work. Let us start with the decision to force stickers. The stickers, as far as I can make out only indicate whether the car is petrol or diesel. How this is useful in the fight against air pollution is something which remains mysterious. Nevertheless, let us assume that there is some hidden benefits in color coding which the learned judges see but ordinary folks don't. Was it really that urgent that it couldn't wait until the public health situation had normalized? By forcing people to take enormous risks to avoid fines, what precisely was gained ? A diktat by the court and its subsequent implementation by the faceless bureaucracy had forced a situation which could lead to a major health calamity. A clear demonstration of the law of unintended consequences if ever there was one- or in this case, collateral damage.

Then there is the issue of implementation of this order-it should have been clear to anyone who could multiply and divide that given the number of vehicles without stickers (all the vehicles from before 2019), allowing only one company having one small office in a city with upwards of 10 lakh four wheelers would be disastrous. And yet, it seems no one thought about this.

The other thing which comes through is that the bureaucracy is possibly getting more sensitive to complaints from the public- though it can be argued that this is only when they themselves don't have to do anything except pass the buck in this case to the private company! The private company, being a monopoly, couldn't be bothered about its service and the inconvenience to the ordinary citizen except when it is goaded by the officials in the government.

The queues to get the HSRP and stickers continue. And everyone is happy- the court that its orders are being followed; the traffic policemen who have now another reason to harass commuters and extort; the bureaucracy which can point proudly to the number of HSRPs distributed and of course the private company laughing all the way to the bank. All except people like the poor Uber driver who has to forgo his daily earnings and stand in a queue for hours in decidedly unhealthy conditions. But then, as the patriotic gentleman reminded me when we were in the bank queue during demonetization- when our soldiers are fighting on Siachen (or was it Pangong?), why should we be cribbing about a little hardship of a few hours? Maybe this too was a small contribution to the larger goal of character building and instilling patriotic values in our citizens!

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