

## **Rapacity of a soulless city:**

Driving back from work, I pass through one of the most congested and of course polluted parts of Delhi: the Azad market-Old Rohtak Road intersection. Every day, I take about 10 minutes to pass through the 2 kilometre stretch, packed with traffic of all kinds. Cars, busses, trucks, two wheelers, three wheelers, rickshaws, hand carts and of course bullock carts. Every day, there is a traffic jam at or around this intersection. Sitting in this jam, I wonder about why there is a perpetual bottleneck when the road is wide and there is one way traffic.

The traffic jam typically results in a backing up of traffic for about 2-3 kilometres. On an average if one takes 5 meters per vehicle, this is an astonishing 2000 vehicles crawling or idling on a two lane road. Imagine the amount of pollution and wastage of fuel that this phenomenon causes everyday, almost at all times during the day.

The reason is not the density of traffic, since if there is no bottleneck the overall density of traffic should not cause any stoppage, only a slower speed. The reason, as anyone familiar with the traffic in this city is really a blatant disregard of the rules and law. Some shopkeeper is unloading a truck and hence one lane is blocked. Or a truck is trying to enter into a one way street the wrong way, causing a jam. Or some shopkeeper has parked his car and hence blocked a lane. All this so that one individual can get a small benefit, since after all the gain in not going around and entering the one way street is about saving of a minute or half a kilometre! But this is only one example of rapacity in this metropolis.

Near my house, almost every single neighbour has blatantly flouted rules and extended their house. This is done either by bribing the DDA personnel or using your bureaucratic connections. A neighbour who is a serving senior CBI officer has constructed a whole floor! It can be argued that this flouting of rules is really not hurting anyone. Maybe, but since so many people are doing it, the overall public space for parks, trees and just plain walking is reduced.

But what about scarce common goods like road space or even water. My colony gets half an hour of water every morning. The water pressure is such that only tanks on the ground or underground can get filled and water has to be pumped to the overhead tanks. Now many people in my neighbourhood have installed booster pumps directly on the water line. This has ensured that everyone gets less water and I get even lesser. When I complained to the water authorities, I was told to go and install one on my line too!

A taxi company near my house has blocked the whole pavement by parking its cars. The net result is that pedestrians have to now walk that stretch on the road, with constant danger of being run down by either blue line buses or hypersonic teenagers in their Marutis. The biggest danger is to children and older people whose reflexes are slower. When I complained to the beat constable posted there, I was told in no uncertain terms ( by the owner!) that I could do what I wanted, the cars will continue to be parked there. My complaint to the SHO was also ignored.

SO here we are: not just naked transgression of the law of the land but this at direct cost to fellow citizens. Thousands of litres of precious fuel being wasted because one shop-keeper does not want to walk a hundred yards to his car. Enormous quantities of pollutants being added to the air because one scooterist does not want to drive an extra half a kilometre. Or me losing out on water because everyone is sucking water from the water line. Or pavements grabbed by taxi companies.

To ask the question as to why the law enforcement agencies turn a blind eye to all these acts is futile. But what is more disturbing is the fact that all of us become party to these actions. Why is it that all the neighbours cannot get together to fight the people who install booster pumps? Instead, we actually imitate them and do precisely the same things. Of course one hears a lot of complaints in sitting rooms about other people's offences, but this is mostly out of envy and not out of anger and a sense of being wronged.

The fact of the matter is that the dominant characteristic of this city is rapacity. The word which is most apt is the Hindi word "*nocho*" or grab. Grab land, grab water, grab road space, anything which you can do to increase your well being. If others suffer, tough. How this is qualitatively better than what happens in the heartland of Bihar is not very clear to me. The only difference being that the law breakers there are probably not as suave as in the capital. ( After all, my neighbour who has grabbed the whole park in front of the house is a retired senior civil servant!) There too, the ordinary citizen is a moot spectator and the law enforcement agencies are in cohort with the criminals. It is the same here. Anyone who can grab anything, does it. And if you have any problems, well too bad. In this fiftieth year of our independence, we may not be developed, but all of us have at least the freedom to grab and loot away the country. We are really vultures digging at the remains of this city. In 1739, Nadir Shah ransacked Delhi, massacring 50,000 people and destroying the city. In 1998, we do not need a Nadir Shah, thank you; we are quite competently doing the job ourselves.