

This happens only in India (Published in The Economic Times, July 2016)

The first day of the month of *Saawan* in the Hindu calendar is considered to be particularly auspicious and joyous. It is the beginning of the rainy season which provides the lifeline to most of the cow belt while also providing much needed respite from the blistering heat- the season immortalized in countless folk and Bollywood songs. However, if one is a commuter in Delhi, one dreads this time of the year. This is *Kanwar* season- and the already choked roads of Delhi will be even more chaotic now for a month.

I grew up in a sleepy small town on the outskirts of Delhi. The town was called Gurgaon, not the steel-glass, futuristic, suburbia of today but a small town where everyone knew everyone else and life was basically semi-rural with pretensions of urbanity owing to its proximity to the metropolis. Entertainment consisted of taking a walk in the local Sadar Bazaar or the Company Bagh and for the well to do, a Sunday excursion to Connaught Place in the Capital.

We had a house on the road which came from Delhi and went to Jaipur and beyond- there was no expressway or even a bypass then. In the months of July-August one would come across an exhausted villager, carrying a bamboo pole with two pitchers of water on each end. The traveler would look extremely exhausted, typically traveling bare feet, with huge ulcers on his feet. And yes, there were no women doing this. One would watch this with curiosity and was told that these are people who, because some wish of theirs had been fulfilled, are carrying the holy water of Ganga from Hardwar to a Shiva temple, somewhere in Rajasthan. The important thing was that the pitchers did not touch the ground till they reach their destination and the water is offered to the Shiva Linga at the temple. The travelers, called *Kanwaris* (from the word *Kanwar* for the pitcher they carry) were watched with a mixture of awe and pity but no particular reverence.

A couple of years ago, newspapers reported that Hardwar was expecting some 25 Lakh *Kanwaris*. Almost a mini-Kumbha Mela! Not only is their number more, the character of the people, their appearance also seems to have undergone a tremendous change. Gone is the dhoti clad rustic villager trudging along silently- instead we now have boisterous youngsters, wearing walking shoes, headbands with appropriate religious slogans, red T-shirts with pictures of Shiva printed and various other accessories. The accessories, like the reversing horns (made in China no doubt) in some vehicles which have a synthetic voice saying Jai Mata Di, are of the kind which one gets when technology meets small town India. In fact, the other day I spotted a sign on a sports shop claiming, “Kanwar Kit available here”!

What has also happened in the last few years is the official and non-official welcome that these pilgrims are accorded in the cities. In Delhi, one finds tents, makeshift toilets and baths at various places for the *Kanwaris* to rest, enjoy 120 decibel music blaring from massive speakers and partake lavish *bhandaras*. Typically, these tents are run by local organizations and are adorned with large banners carrying pictures of a local politician. Lately though, in an example of “Sarv Dharam Sambhav”, most of the camps are organized by the government.

Whether it is the sheer strength in numbers or the changing socio-economic profile of the pilgrims, the *Kanwaris* now are very aggressive. It is a bizzare sight to see hundreds of saffron clad youngsters swinging a baseball bat as they strut down the road! They just walk wherever they feel like, cross roads where it suits their fancy leading frequently to accidents. Hence the administration posts policemen on the route to stop the traffic and make way for these men of faith. No matter that half a lane is anyway reserved for them. The resulting chaos on the roads is unbelievable. In the crowded areas near Azaad Market for instance, where even ordinarily traffic is a mess, this creates traffic holdups which last for hours. And this through the day and night and for at least two weeks! The amount of time and fuel wastage can only be imagined.

And god forbid if any of these *Kanwaris* gets hurt in an accident on the road. All hell breaks loose, with these religious folk going on a rampage, burning busses and shops and bringing traffic to a standstill. The police of course, dare not touch them. Sensibly, the entire National Highway from Delhi to Haridwar is closed for 15 days to allow these guys free access. Never mind if the thousands of people who need to go on this highway have to take a huge detour.

The tremendous growth in the numbers of *Kanwaris* and their changing character is something which sociologists would no doubt attempt to explain. Whether it is the Ram Janam Bhoomi movement in the early nineties that caused this or the increased tendency to exhibit one's religiosity or even an easy access to technology, I am not sure. Most of them are young and appear to be unemployed or certainly under employed. Incredibly, this bunch of lumpenised folk in red T-shirts and headbands, armed with hockey sticks and baseball bats, hold the whole region to ransom for over 15 days. And the administration not only watches this benignly but also actively facilitates it. Like they say, "It happens only in India!"

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