

Chapter - 1

INTRODUCTION

In our routine life every one of us has to come on the road almost daily with some or other purpose. In other words, you cannot avoid road traffic howsoever big you may be in your status in the country. You may make a cozy paradise for you and your family, but you can't escape the menace of road traffic. The second peculiarity about road traffic is that on the roads all are equal. In other words, the road is a great leveller. Thus you are forced to pass through a system on roads where there are several categories of other road users, having different attitudes towards road safety or traffic rules. You have to mix up and compromise with all other categories of road users. Even if you have the best intention to follow safe driving, you may be the victim of other's rash driving or rage.

Today a significant portion of our time is spent on roads. So, the advantages of travel in our life cannot be overemphasized. However, the price we are paying for it is extremely high. A decade ago, we used to be worried only about one aspect of traffic hazards i.e. accidents, but now this subject of road traffic is something far beyond road accidents. There are no signs of control over deaths due to accidents. In addition, many new and equally hazardous problems have come up in recent times like pollution, alarming traffic congestion, arrogance on roads, and the like. All these are going from bad to worse at a break-neck speed.

Unfortunately, a majority of road accidents involve young males who may be somebody's son or husband. Do you remember any incidence when you have gone to console a family that has lost a young member in such an accident? We may be very tactful and vocal in offering consolation, but in such a situation we all find ourselves at a loss for words. We become speechless when we see small kids and wife of the deceased or parents of a young man sitting by the side of the dead body. How does one console a wife whose life and dreams have just been shattered? What about the small kids playing by her side who have no inkling of the tragedy that has befallen them. Had this been a natural death of a person who has finished his or her responsibilities, you find some words to start a conversation. But on the occasion of such a tragic and young death, you don't know what to say and from where to start. You even

avoid making eye contact with the family and dependants. In fact, you yourself are not able to come to terms with the tragedy. The news comes so suddenly that you have never thought in your wildest dreams about it. You may have met him or talked to him the other day. How could this have happened? Slowly information trickles in and you may come to know that your close one was alive for quite some time at the accident site lying in a pool of blood, but succumbed to his injuries for want of timely medical aid. You also realize that his wife is not aware of any Will, insurance policy and other documents about assets or savings of the deceased making you realize the financial problems she is going to face, besides the severe emotional trauma. Do I need to give some examples of such tragic accidents that have made the life of many families miserable? I don't think so. Just stretch your memory a little and every one of us must be remembering a few such tragic cases amongst our friends, neighbours or family circles. On an average every minute one serious accident is occurring and every five minutes a person is dying owing to road accidents in India. It is an alarming, nerve-racking and mind-boggling scenario. Road accidents are amongst the most important hazards being faced by modern society. India, presumably, is the worse hit.

If we consider other problems pertaining to road traffic, we see that traffic congestion and pollution come probably next to accidents and we cannot afford to ignore this menace anymore. Both these problems have common denominators i.e. volcanic expansion of vehicles and a severely lagging road infrastructure. During the last 20 years pollution has increased eight-fold in our country. According to a report in 2007, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has confirmed that air pollution in India causes 5,27,700 premature deaths a year. Similarly, during the last 60 years the number of vehicles in India has increased from 3.5 lakhs (1950) to 12 crore (2009) i.e. 335 TIMES while the roads have grown only 8 times. This yawning gap is responsible for the severe traffic congestion on our roads. In India, on an average we lose 2-3 hours per week due to traffic jams. If we talk in monetary terms, in a single metro city, each year on an average fuel worth 100 crore rupees is wasted owing to traffic jams, without the need to calculate it for the whole country. The existing roads, instead of being widened with the demands of constantly increasing traffic load, are being narrowed owing to unauthorized encroachments. Chaotic traffic scenes are common everywhere. Often, there is a blame game going on between the public and the authorities. People complain that the concerned authorities are not taking it seriously while the authorities maintain that it is the people who do not follow traffic rules. Sometimes traffic



*It has eased the traffic congestion greatly.
But, sir, it looks like we have to start
planning flyovers over these flyovers soon...*

is so chaotic that even the most sincere efforts by the traffic police are thwarted. Poor as well as haphazard town planning, without regard to the growth rate of vehicles, population, commercial development of that particular city, is further aggravating the sinking infrastructure.

Aggressive behaviour and deteriorating road manners among drivers is another serious aspect of road traffic. News about commuters beating up or brutally killing someone on the road out of rage is not uncommon these days. Traffic etiquettes are deteriorating very fast to an alarmingly low level. Aggression on roads has now become a subculture in India. One of the indirect but significant problems among road users is that of an increased incidence of diseases like diabetes and cardiac problems. Too much dependence on vehicles leading to physical inactivity is one of the main contributory factors. A few decades ago, we were known mainly for the communicable diseases. While that problem still persists, we are now making new records in terms of morbidity and mortality in non-communicable diseases also. The volcanic expansion of vehicles and resulting CO₂ production also has a direct impact on global warming with long-term serious consequences. As far as tackling the issue of global warming is concerned, not to speak of the public, even the attitude of the most developed countries has remained confined to 'formal table talks'.

So far as dealing with road traffic hazards is concerned, the governments as well as Indian citizens are showing utter apathy. At present this grave problem is receiving much less attention than it deserves. Whatever measures are being taken, are going well behind schedule. Will it be true to say that Indians getting rich means India is also getting rich? Certainly not. On one hand, it is the rich and desperate people who are responsible for the volcanic expansion in the number of vehicles in the country, while on the other hand, there is government machinery that is responsible for providing and maintaining the infrastructure for smooth road traffic in the country. I believe the country's economy is not keeping pace with that of its people with the result it is unable to provide timely and adequate infrastructure. Another possibility could be that the country might be having adequate funds but traffic hazards and good infrastructure are not accorded priority. The fact that prosperity is more evident from the insides of our houses, but we fail to find a corresponding richness on the road also supports the same theory.

There might be so many 'serious discussions' in conferences or meetings going on at government and NGO levels from time to time. People come to such meetings bubbling with knowledge that really impresses the gathering and the media, but in spite of all the brain-

storming sessions of these 'successful meetings', no actual results are obtained. Thus road traffic continues to remain in its dismal condition.

The above facts are sufficient to prove that it is as alarming a situation on the roads as an earthquake or a tsunami. If we do not tackle it on a war footing right now, considering it a man-made disaster, it will be too late to mend fences. Justice delayed is justice denied. Now the question is, what should be done or what should be our priorities? In fact, the problem is extremely complex and there is no easy and single solution to it. Attempting to improve traffic conditions is really like opening the Pandora's Box. The first and foremost thing is to look at the problem with a wide vision. There are three or four main components of road traffic i.e. the road itself, the commuters on the road, the vehicles and the agencies and authorities that regulate traffic and build road infrastructure. We should consider the traffic problem from all these angles to fully comprehend it. Unless we know the real situation or the root cause of a disease, we cannot treat it completely and whatever measures are taken, will only prove to be symptomatic or temporary and not curative. Traffic problems are seen in two different areas of the country, one is the highway and the other is inside the city. So far as highways are concerned, accidents seem to be the main problem and spending money on better infrastructure along with increasing awareness amongst commuters would solve the problem to a large extent. However, inside the city in addition to accidents, there are several other traffic-related problems (mentioned above) making the situation complex where there does not seem to be a simple and straightforward solution. In cities, unlike highways, money alone will not solve the problem, no matter how much of it is pumped in. Instead, it would call for a strong political will and bureaucratic action.

Last but not the least, we, the conscious citizens, often make a lot of hue and cry about chaotic traffic conditions, but when it comes to observing rules, they are always meant for others? What should we call ourselves, hypocrites or something else? Why do we tend to follow traffic rules only when asked to do so, or under pressure of law? If we really think ourselves as part of a civilized society, then why do we not understand that our role really matters a lot. If we are honestly and sincerely committed to safe driving or following traffic rules meant for our safety, we would be able to reduce the traffic-related burden to a great extent.

The forecast: A time will come when road traffic will decide as to who will rule India. The issues of poverty, education, social upliftment, communal harmony, reservation, etc. are no more fancy or catchy words now. In fact, every year, at the time of budget or elections or with every five year plan, we are seeing the same issues being highlighted with

no actual change. Instead of 'roti, kapda aur makaan,' the new slogan that would probably work is 'bijli, paani aur yatayat'.(power, water and traffic) The reason is that these three things are the most desired civic amenities of our daily life. I believe the government, in its schemes, should give priority to such issues that affect everyone in the country whether urban or rural, rich or poor, high or low, of any religion or creed. In fact, road traffic hazards should be made part of an aggressive national programme like those against tuberculosis, AIDS or polio.