

Chapter - 11

THE STORY OF PEDESTRIAN

[I] DEFINITION:

They vote, they contribute to revenue, they have equal rights on the road and equal right to government's budget for infrastructure, but what they get in return is thick smoke, splashes of mud and a threat to their lives. In the current stark socio-economic realities of India pedestrians, cyclists and other slow-moving non-motorized vehicles cannot be eliminated from the urban landscape.

[II] FACTS & PROBLEMS:

Pedestrian: The Most neglected road users: The government appears least concerned about pedestrians. All investment on town-planning and road infrastructure policies is basically focused on motor vehicles only. Any widening of roads is done at the cost of footpaths, pavements and service lanes, thereby eliminating the pedestrians' lane. As soon as the road is widened, it is filled up with various vehicles and the people on foot have hardly any space to walk on the road. Whatever pavements are left is occupied by illegal vendors, hawkers, sign boards, parked vehicles, squatters, ad infinitum. Pedestrians are forced to come on the road and share it with motorized vehicles. Their problems do not end here as the motor vehicle drivers look upon them as unwanted visitors in a function. Whenever a motor vehicle passes, it is the duty of the pedestrian to make way and a person walking on the road is hardly treated any better than an animal in the street. Some pedestrians who are brave enough can manage to walk, but the majority are forced to retreat to the footpath already ruined by motor vehicles.

In some commercial areas, frequently one has to zig-zag one's way by jumping over some shoe rack, underneath some paintings, through hanging night gowns and lingerie on the pavements. This experience is in no way less adventurous than that of the 'trekking through the dense forests of the Amazon'.

Pedestrians: The most disciplined road users: Unlike most drivers, they have patience and never show arrogance on the road. We have never heard of a case of pedestrian rage. Then why do these people become arrogant while sitting behind a wheel? Reasons probably could be: when

one is on foot he/she cannot proceed beyond his/her physical capacity for a long time. While the driver of a motor vehicle just has to press the accelerator a little to get the desired speed. Drivers feel safe as after any untoward incident they can easily run away from the scene. While for a pedestrian it is not always easy to move away from a crowded place.

Pedestrians: The Most vulnerable road users: People on foot are the most vulnerable to road traffic injuries. In case of accidents involving pedestrians and motorists, it is mostly the pedestrians who suffer. In cities, out of the total deaths caused by accidents, about 25% occur among pedestrians while on highways this proportion is about 35%. Pedestrians have two modes of injury. One is a direct impact on the body and second being run over by the same and other passing vehicles. The higher the opportunities for speeding on the roads the more are the chances of pedestrians' deaths in accidents. But this is of hardly any concern for owners of rich swanky cars, who just want to enjoy life in a top gear. If a speeding vehicle loses control in a congested or thickly populated area, pedestrians are the main sufferers.

Every one of us is an obligatory pedestrian: We all may own vehicles, but sometimes somewhere in our daily routine, we have to be pedestrians. For example, to catch a bus to work, walking from the parking area to office or market, for a morning walk, etc.

Pedestrian: Helpless but not necessarily poor: On the road they are helpless or at the mercy of vehicle drivers, but that does not mean that they all belong to a lower strata or cannot afford a vehicle. In fact, pedestrians come from all classes of socio-economic strata. When there is a long frustrating and suffocating traffic jam you sometimes wish you were on foot and could cross the jam and then take a bus home. It is indeed an irony that for many people, walking is the only means to commute even for very long distances.

[III] WHAT TO DO FOR PEDESTRIANS

[A] What to do as drivers:

(1) Respect pedestrians: Please don't drive your vehicle like a train, otherwise the mother would say to kid "look child, this is called a car but in no way it is different from a train, you have to cross the road only when it goes away from you". We should respect the rights of pedestrians and should allow them to cross the road at ease. In fact, the 'pedestrians' hand of request' should be given the same respect as that of a traffic policeman.

I would like to share my experience here during my first visit to Europe just to compare it with Delhi. In Lucerne, Switzerland, we were trying to cross the road. Having experienced Delhi traffic we were waiting to cross a road and were a little apprehensive. Seeing our confusion and fear, vehicles from both directions stopped and waited patiently till we crossed the road. Instead of staring at us [as happens in India] the drivers were smiling on our unnecessary panic and clumsiness. Later in other countries, we observed that even without the presence of a zebra crossing; drivers usually stopped their vehicles if they found someone waiting to cross the road.

(2) Don't Splash: On Indian roads water-logging is very common, especially during the monsoon. Some insensitive drivers just zoom past and splash muddy, dirty water on people standing, walking on roads, with no regrets whatsoever. I recall an incident when I was going to drop my daughter to school. A small boy who was just a few yards away from the school gate was badly splashed with mud by another car ahead of us. The poor child was so upset that he just stood there, not knowing whether to go back home or enter the school in such a condition. I could guess he neither had time to go back to home and change the uniform nor was he in a position to go to school in the same dirty uniform. I saw him standing there for quite some time in the rear view mirror and really felt very sorry for his predicament.

(3) The poor should be suitably compensated for: When we become part of an incident causing a financial burden to some poor commuters on road, e.g. rickshaw-pullers, labourers, cyclists or pedestrians, etc, we should always try to suitably compensate for them.

I remember an incident about 15 years ago when a rickshaw-puller suddenly took a U turn in front of my car and its rear wheel was badly damaged. He argued and asked me for compensation. I explained to him that it was his fault, so he should not expect anything from me. The poor man pulled his rickshaw off the road. Later I saw him pulling his rickshaw away from me on two wheels. Later, when I reached home and analyzed the incident as a whole, I realized that I had really made a mistake. Such people hardly earn Rs 50-60 a day. The repair of his rickshaw must have consumed his whole earning of the day. What saving he would have taken home? Since these people earn daily wages, I wondered whether his family had meals that evening or not. I began thinking whether the rickshaw belonged to him or he took it on rent. In that case he must have been scolded by his employer. Was he able to do his work the next day, and so on. On the contrary, I could easily have spared Rs 100 which would have helped him greatly. As far as that minor accident was concerned, we both never intended to harm anybody. I realized that

we should not go always with the logic, sometimes it is better to listen to your heart. Such people do not have any addresses, so that you cannot trace them later on to compensate or rectify your regret. We should not invite the curse of the poorest of the poor.

(4) Do not force non-motorized riders unnecessarily to slow down: For an example, if a rickshaw-puller is trying to get some priority at some point on the road, please don't discourage him on the only ground that a motorized vehicle has priority/right on the road. Just imagine after sweating a lot he has attained that speed and if you force him to stop, he has to again pedal hard to get the same speed and momentum. On the contrary, for motorized vehicle owners it is just a matter of pressing the accelerator for a second. So don't thrust yourself upon the poor rickshaw-pullers or cyclists unnecessarily.

One can find a difference between old cars on roads and new ones. When an old car is in the first lane on the highway, drivers of new cars honk to force it to the second lane as if the first lane belongs to them only.

[B] What the authorities should do:

Proper provision should be made to encourage walking and cycling. It should provide some convenient space for waiting and pedestrian crossings at short distances. They are relatively poor and not able to convey their voice to the policy-makers. If no investment can be made for them, at least the existing footpaths and pavements should not be compromised. If we do not provide proper facilities for walking, more and more people would be inclined to drive causing more traffic congestion.

[C] What to do as pedestrians:

(1) Pedestrians should realize that in the present scenario of haphazard traffic in India, they have to take due precautions for their own safety.

(2) Have patience while crossing a road. Sometimes at the same points on the road where you never had to wait more than a minute, it may require 10 minutes. So don't get impatient, instead cross only when the situation permits.

(3) Always try to make eye contact with the driver.

(4) Try to cross in an area of the road where drivers from both the directions can see you.

(5) Remember that reverse lane driving is very common, so rule out any vehicle coming from the wrong side.

(6) Please don't leave walking as walking plays an important role in good health.

[IV] ELDERLY PEDESTRIANS

In India 6.5% of total population belongs to older age group i.e. above 60 yrs. This is going to increase with time as life expectancy in India is increasing. Because of their physical condition, poor eyesight, prevailing chaotic traffic conditions, older people frequently prefer walking instead of driving vehicles.

Their physical limitations: They take more time to cross the road. Their reflexes are slow thus taking more time both for starting and stopping during the walk. This is mainly due to health problems like arthritis, poor vision, dementia where accurate decision-making is diminished. They may be having some problems like Parkinson's disease where there is tremulousness in the body or their gait is unsteady and one can take only small steps. A brisk walk may make them breathless as they frequently have some chest disease. An oncoming driver might anticipate that the pedestrian would have crossed the road by the time he reaches that point, but it may not be always the case for the elderly.

Effects of Injury: (1) Their tolerance to physical impact is very low. Even a collision with a bicycle can cause a fracture as their bones are fragile.

(2) Healing power in tissues is poor and wounds and fractures take longer to heal.

(3) Tolerance to any surgical procedure especially if done in emergency situations is also low.

(4) They cannot afford prolonged recumbency. The reason is that, besides the injured system or fracture the other systems or organs frequently starts getting affected. For example, if an elderly person is bed-ridden for fracture in leg, he is very prone to develop pneumonitis, intractable bed sore, cardiac or cerebro-vascular strokes, etc. It is not uncommon that an old person having a fracture may not die actually of fracture but due to some other secondary complications just mentioned.

Their Practical Problems: (1) They have no constant source of income and frequently survive on pension and interests on deposits. (2) They are frequently denied the benefits of medical insurance. (3) Most of them live in isolation.

What do they expect: That you consider or imagine them to be your parents who are crossing the road. If you start respecting them on road, then certainly others would follow you and in return your own parents somewhere would be given the same courtesy by some other persons. One indirect point that I would like to mention here, in spite

of the fact that these older people have so many problems, they are forced to live in isolation. There may be different reasons, being left alone by their children, children settled elsewhere, etc. Thus for even small daily needs, billing, medicine, etc they have no other options but to go out on roads whether or not their health permits it. I am basically hinting at the willful ignorance of the parents by their children who are actually capable of supporting them. I don't think there could be a bigger slap on the so-called 'modern or advanced society of India' where the government has been compelled to put a law in favour of old parents against their children to remind them of their duty forcefully through a bill called 'a maintenance and welfare of parents and senior citizens bill 2007'. Perhaps this small poem would better explain about their plight.

SOMEBODY'S MOTHER

Mary Dow Brine (1816-1913)

The woman was old and ragged and gray
And bent with the chill of the Winter's day.

The street was wet with a recent snow
And the woman's feet were aged and slow.

She stood at the crossing and waited long,
Alone, uncared for, amid the throng

Of human beings who passed her by
Nor heeded the glance of her anxious eyes.

Down the street, with laughter and shout,
Glad in the freedom of "school let out,"

Came the boys like a flock of sheep,
Hailing the snow piled white and deep.

Past the woman so old and gray
Hastened the children on their way.

Nor offered a helping hand to her
So meek, so timid, afraid to stir

Lest the carriage wheels or the horses' feet
Should crowd her down in the slippery street.

At last came one of the merry troop,
The gayest laddie of all the group;
He paused beside her and whispered low,
"I'll help you cross, if you wish to go."

Her aged hand on his strong young arm
She placed, and so, without hurt or harm,

He guided the trembling feet along,
Proud that his own were firm and strong.

Then back again to his friends he went,
His young heart happy and well content.

"She's somebody's mother, boys, you know,
For all she's aged and poor and slow,

"And I hope some fellow will lend a hand
To help my mother, you understand,

"If ever she's poor and old and gray,
When her own dear boy is far away."

And "somebody's mother" bowed low her head
In her home that night, and the prayer she said

Was "God be kind to the noble boy,
Who is somebody's son, and pride and joy!"

[V] CHILDREN AS PEDESTRIAN:

Children are more vulnerable and the least predictable pedestrians on roads as they often act impulsively on road without checking the traffic. Besides, their short stature limits them from seeing the traffic on road completely or to be seen by others.

1. Our children are tomorrow's drivers. Remember, if we do not respect other people's rights on the road and instead create a hostile environment on road, they will do the same. If children are allowed to grow in such an environment where there is no respect for pedestrians, they would feel that these four-wheeler owners have special powers. In future once they come behind the steering wheel, they will feel that now they have got the same special power on roads and would behave in the same manner.
2. Drivers should take extra care outside schools, near bus stops and parks and playgrounds.
3. While backing up the car always ensure that there is no one behind it before start and use horn for that. For this rely more on the rear window rather than mirrors.
4. While shopping or walking keep an eye on your children by holding their hand firmly.