

Chapter - 7

THE POOR TRAFFIC POLICEMAN: PROBLEMS & CHALLENGES

[I] Physical Stress: It is 8 in the morning in summer. The traffic policeman has just started his duty with a fresh face and smile with energy and enthusiasm. He starts controlling the traffic by throwing signals. In the morning his movements are crisp and jerky with a wide swing starting at the shoulders and a loud whistle that is synchronized with his movements. These movements are so clear and distinct that they can be noticed by every person from all directions. This reminds you of the proud jawan of the Republic Day parade. But with the passing of time, say at 10 am, some signs of fatigue are visible on his face. Instead of the shoulder, he starts giving signals by moving his arm through the elbow only. By 12 pm he really appears exhausted with a lot of sweating and starts using only hands to convey signals and you have to look hard to understand them. Further on, he probably wishes people would understand the traffic signals only by the nodding of his head instead of arm movements. We can very well imagine what his condition would be at 2 pm in the scorching heat of summer. Sometimes in search of shade he moves a little away to one corner of the crossing and frequently you may spot him under some tree. Some smart fellows who try to jump the traffic lights, thinking there is no policeman, may get a rude surprise when he suddenly appears from under a tree.

There is nothing unusual about the above. The duty of a traffic policeman is among the few jobs that involve a lot of physical exertion and stress. I consider the traffic policeman the busiest person in any job. The reason being that impact of his absence even for a few minutes is easily noticeable at a crossing. In India, it is not at all unusual for many junior or senior officials in any government department to be absent from their job for a few hours without being noticed. Even if they give a surprise 'darshan' on their seats that does not necessarily mean they are doing some work. Even the absence of the senior-most government officer from his office for some time in any country, particularly in India, may not be noticeable. It can be seen that the minutes after traffic policeman moves away from the traffic platform a big chaos is created anywhere in India. The vehicles stand with horn locked causing a big traffic jam

behind in all directions of the crossing. Then you realize how important a person the policeman is. It is evident that the duty of a policeman is such that he is supposed to be present there every minute for full 8 duty hours. To do his exacting acrobatics for full 8 hours is a stupendous task indeed.

Many of us, who have joined the gym, know that to do physical exercise for more than 1 hour is not an easy job. That too, considering the fact that you do it with a strong motivation and in an air-conditioned environment where you have a regular supply of lime water. These traffic policemen have to work very hard in a very adverse and uncongenial environment. The canopy of four to five feet diameter of the traffic island under which he stands probably protects him from the sun only between the 11am and 1pm at a time when the sun is right above him. In the afternoon when the sun's rays fall obliquely, he hardly can maneuver his body to protect himself from the sun. The same music he has to face with rains also.

[II] The Pollution: The other major problem that this traffic policeman has to face is that of pollution. This is really a big occupational hazard. He is exposed to both air and noise pollution. In any city, air pollution is relatively more on the roads and it is the maximum on crossings because vehicles stay for a much longer period there and a large number of vehicles are reaching there from all directions. Even among the common people who are moving on the road only for a short time, the incidence of allergic lung disease by pollution have increased tremendously. We can imagine the magnitude of the problem of the traffic policeman who stays there for hours together. If you stand at some moderately busy crossing and start counting total number of the vehicles passing from all four directions in his duty hours, you will find that their number is anywhere between 1-2 lakhs or even more. The white uniform that was crisp and shining in the morning acquires thick black coating by the time he finishes his duty. Though he can wash this coating from the clothes easily, he can hardly do anything for the coating that he is accumulating on his lung surface daily due to smoke emanating from petroleum products. Studies have shown that within 5-6 years these policemen develop pollution-induced diseases. Sometimes, especially if the posting place is in the heavily polluted area, these diseases can develop much earlier. Mostly they suffer from respiratory diseases. Besides, they are also prone to have some other diseases like cardiac one, migraine, etc. All these cause significant morbidity, affecting the quality of life and also the life expectancy. The blood samples of policemen have been found to be having increased levels of toxic benzene and lead. Besides, their fertility or

reproductive outcome also gets affected and there are increased chances of cytogenetic damage to DNA and miscarriage in their wives.

These traffic policemen really need attention from the government. Because of the stressful nature of their job and constant exposure to alarmingly increasing pollution, they deserve special consideration. I do not know whether they get some suitable occupational hazard allowance/toxic allowance or not. Do they have any medical insurance for the treatment or against the various diseases that affect their health and life expectancy? Their schedule of duty hours needs to be changed and the area of posting should be changed on rotation basis from more congested to less congested areas. Though such recommendations have been made from time to time, I am not aware if they have been actually implemented. There have been news about some special arrangements like eco-friendly solar traffic booths and oxygen booth at the crossings, whether these are being used in general or were merely a sample just to make the news? As far as my city Agra is concerned, I have yet to see it.

Remember these poor policemen belong to a dept that is known for a disciplined life at work so it is not very easy for them to go on strikes, express their resentment and struggle for the removal of their grievances. Therefore it is the sole responsibility of the government to look into their problems and take a timely action.

[III] Inadequate Force and Power: In recent years, the magnitude of traffic and number of vehicles have increases fantastically. However, the number of traffic policemen has not been increased in that ratio. The traffic policemen are stretched beyond their capabilities. The paucity of adequate force is seen both in metros as well as in smaller cities. On an average their number in cities is nearly half that of the required one. A WHO study shows that there are two traffic personnel for a population of 10,000 and only 1/3 of their time is spent on enforcement. This is an important reason for deterioration in proper enforcement of the traffic rules. The law and order police that can help traffic police is already suffering from the paucity of force with a very poor average of only 126 per lakh against the recommended 222 per lakh. It has been learned that even there are vacancies for policemen; their appointments are delayed for a prolonged period just to allow the vacancies to get accumulated, making a better deal possible for the inside and outside go-betweens. Just for information, there is no paucity of force for VIPs as in Delhi alone 9000 police personnel are busy protecting 300 VIPs [30 policemen per VIP!]. If we talk of India, at present about 1 lakh police personnel are engaged in VIPs' protection.

It can be said that at least budget will not be a problem if government wishes to increase the traffic personnel. This would be clear from one example. In Delhi, on an average, 40 lakhs of people are punished for traffic violations every year and from them about 100 crore rupees is realized as fine every year [2007]. Another fact is that due to paucity of traffic personnel, out of 1000 traffic violations only one case could be intercepted for fine. Thus you can imagine how much money could be recovered from these defaulters. If this amount is utilized in the same department, this can not only allow to afford many additional traffic policemen, but also procure some other means like Patrolling vehicles or high-tech equipment like speed camera, handycam, lux meters, flashers, breathalyzers, etc, to intercept more traffic offenders.

[IV] Nuisance caused by VIPs and their Relatives, Public, Politicians, etc: Probably the rules are made only for the general public and not for the VIPs and their relatives. This may not be true in metros but in smaller cities, even the public has no fear for the traffic police. I have seen many times young boys, when asked to stop, either ignore or start abusing the policeman. The poor policemen sometimes make an unsuccessful attempt at chasing and throwing a cane towards them, but they run away making unseemly gestures. Unlike metros, they do not have adequate manpower, standby bikes and means of communication, etc. I have seen a clipping of a city in UP where the policeman was beaten by local goons when asked to stop and went unashamed just like that. Some of us may be remembering the incident of Lucknow where such elements tried to run over a DSP and he had to jump on the bonnet to save himself. This was not the end but starting of a thrilling Hindi cinema scene as these fellows continued to drive along with him in the same position in the capital city during the busiest hours for several kilometers and took him to the office of some top official just to show the extreme of their daring and nuisance value. For a long time the officer remained at the mercy of those fellows and surprisingly the fellow policemen could not chase the wrong doers and rescue the officer. For the first time I realized that the real scene may be more thrilling than a filmy one. This was too much to ignore for the government, and willingly or unwillingly it had to take action against the so-called political goons or workers. It is very unfortunate that three years after this in April 2009, a similar incident was repeated in the same city in the same way with a traffic police inspector with the only difference that this time the goons who did it were from another political party. At least now the police should realize that the rules and regulations are not meant for politicians!

Many times when the traffic police intercept such traffic offenders, immediately they start enumerating a list of influential people and threaten to the extent of getting him suspended. When the policeman refuses to oblige, they will dial some number on the mobile and ask the policeman to talk to a person, on the other side is either a local politician [who as a rule favours all his men without knowing what wrong they have done] or some officer from the same department. During the talk the policeman visibly looks embarrassed and after that he had to say to the traffic offender, 'Sir, please go'. The offender in question takes the vehicle and moves with a sarcastic smile. One can guess how demoralizing it could be for the policeman.

[V] Corruption: The present discussion would not be complete unless we refer to corruption among the traffic policemen. The corruption is so rampant in almost all departments in the country that this department cannot be immune. In the name of checking the vehicle papers many times people complain about harassment by the traffic police. The traffic policemen are so sincere that sometimes after doing their full duty, they silently work overtime at late night and in early morning hours to make money from truck drivers in the name of checking. For that they do not charge any overtime from the department. Sometimes this unauthorized checking of vehicles can cause traffic jam and accidents. Reports are there when some truck drivers have killed the traffic policemen by their truck out of a rage. Incidents are there when some truck drivers pulled the policemen into the truck's cabin and dragged him hanging on to the window, just to throw them off at some distance. These policemen allow heavy vehicles in the city in 'no entry time' that frequently cause accidents. They are known to collect money and illegal tax from local vendors, kiosks, auto rickshaws, etc. They have the 'forced privilege' to enjoy free snacks, chat or free riding on any vehicle. It is reported that the busy crossings are auctioned by the police dept.

Before going into details of corruption rampant among traffic policemen, I would like to tell a short airy-fairy tale having some relevance. After that probably you would understand better the problem of corruption in traffic police and for that matter in any other department. Once upon a time the chief reporter from the universe i.e. Shri Naarad ji, was called by Lord Vishnu to discuss some serious matter pertaining to a couple's relations. When Naaradji entered the darbar, he found Lord Vishnu visibly upset, so he asked, 'What is wrong with you sir?' Lord Vishnu replied, 'In the recent time there is a tremendous rise in the complaints by wives against their husbands that they are having some chakkar with other women. First of all, Naaradji let me know, what is this chakkar by the

way? Naaradji went close to his ear and explained about these chakkars, the 'affair business'. Prabhu got serious and said, this is not fair, it is expected after marriage husbands should be loyal to their wives and are not supposed to go for extra-marital relations. 'Do you have any data regarding the incidence about this?', Prabhu asked Naaradji. Naaradji immediately took out his laptop and after making a few clicks, he replied, 'About 50% of husbands on the earth are suffering from the disease called chakkar'. 'That means still about 50% husbands are loyal to their wives', Prabhu was a little relieved to hear this. He asked Naaradji, 'Please arrange a meeting with the loyal ones as we want to give reward to these loyal men so that we can encourage them in future, and secondly, we want to know the good reasons behind their loyalty. When the meeting with the loyal husbands started, Naaradji announced, "Dear friends, Prabhu is very happy with your loyalty and he wants to know about the inspiration or the reason behind it and you may also wish for any reward for it". After this there was an utter silence quite for some time. Hearing no reply, Naaradji again repeated the same. This time one lean and thin 'Arre O Sambha' type man came out of the crowd and politely said 'I beg your pardon, 'May I say something'. Prabhu said "Don't worry, go ahead". Then he replied 'Sir, the reason why we are loyal to our wives is very simple, we never had a single chance in our life for chakkar'. As far as reward is concerned, we all would be very grateful if you really give us a chance of such chakkar in our lives also. This time Prabhu started feeling real chakkar, giddiness and Naaradji had to help him to go to his bed. There is a long story ahead, but that part is not relevant to the present topic.

The only basic rule regarding the degree or parameter of corruption in any department or among the officers is that it is directly proportional to the opportunities available to them. This is not a rule that whenever we find an officer who is not corrupt or less corrupt, we assume that he is so by default having no opportunities. There are many officers in almost all departments, who, in spite of good opportunities, remain honest. Unfortunately their number is dwindling with time.

As far as traffic police department is concerned, I do not think that they really have wide scope for corruption in their capacity, if we compare it with other government depts. or even compared with the other cadres in police department, e.g. law and order police. If you consider the magnitude of corruption among various departments that are concerned with road traffic problems, PWD that is responsible for road construction would be far far ahead and next to it probably would be development authorities who are supposed to check encroachments or unauthorized

commercial activities. Again, I would like to make it clear, by saying so, I am not defending anyone or the traffic department, instead I am just trying to make a genuine comparison in my own way in a frank manner.

However, so far as traffic accidents are concerned, corruption is not directly related to it. Even if we remove corruption from the traffic police department, it would not cause a significant reduction in accidents [as you see in chapter 1 that 80-90% accidents occur due to human errors]. Moreover, so far as smooth traffic and accidents on roads are concerned, here I am in a mood to criticize the public more than the traffic policemen. In the city, you may blame them for the accidents, but whom you blame for the accidents occurring on highways where practically they have no role of any kind.

Are we not responsible to some extent for this corruption? Not to remind when we are caught for breaking a traffic rule, we are the first ones who promptly slide a note of Rs 50 to grease his palm just to save a fine of Rs 500. Why are we reluctant about keeping proper papers of the vehicle with us thereby giving them a chance? Why do parents offer bribe for getting a driving licence for their minor child? Obviously, we should not cleverly try to dilute or divert the issue from ourselves to others in the name of corruption. The blame should be shared by different sections of our society for different reasons.