

[Editorial](#)

Category : [May 1996](#)

Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 1996

## Editorial

### Traffic as Epistemology

the Editor

NATIONS ARE DEFINED, IN PRACTICAL REALITY, NOT BY THEIR FINANCIAL CLOUT OR MILITARY STRENGTH, NOT BY CULTURAL HERITAGE OR NATURAL RESOURCES, NOR EVEN BY THEIR POLITICAL SYSTEM AND HISTORY. THEY ARE DEFINED BY THEIR TRAFFIC. SHOW ME A NATION'S ROADS, AND I'LL SHOW YOU ITS VERY SOUL.

Think about it for a minute. Germany has the Autobahn, where not-so-poorish engineers in highly-engineered Porches ply the wide lanes at 200km/hour. Americans are limited to 100km/hour, but they make up for that since they are conceived, born, live, work and all-too-often die in their cars (and in Southern California die for their cars), which are outfitted with exotic toys like hydraulics, TVs, fax machines, cellular phones and computer maps that show where the stars live. Singapore has no roads, having reinvented the notion. Instead, with its miles and miles of very narrow parks and lush gardens through which cars are permitted to pass, it has raised driving from progress to epiphany, reminding us that destiny is more than destination (except you could get caned for entering a restricted zone without a permit). China has

something like a road, but it is used for tractors and trucks, bicycles and such, since there are only 256 cars in the entire country. Which brings us to India--ah, India, where roads are not a way to get from here to there. Roads are here and there. Roads are slept on, walked on, spat on in India. Roads are used to store and winnow the rice crop, to dry acres of red chilis, to milk the family cow. Roads serve as temporary shops. Not only is every type of transportation found on every road, but every kind of living thing. Goats and ducks are shepherded in front of screeching busses. Elephants stop dutifully at the red lights and water buffalo meander aimlessly and fearlessly. While life in America is lived inside the car and not much else exists on the street, in India it's all on the outside. Bikes and lorries fight for their place. Pedestrians--using a NASA-developed form of Doppler-based sonar software that allows them, without looking back, to "see" vehicles approaching from behind--step gracefully aside exactly 10 nanoseconds before being run over.

There are no traffic rules of the ordinary kind one finds elsewhere. Signs forbidding littering? Forget it! Fines for jaywalking? Are you kidding? No street people? Au contraire, everyone is a street person. Speed limits? Who would enforce them? When our plane landed in Goa a few weeks back, there was actually a road crossing the runway, and traffic had halted behind a railroad-like barrier to let the aircraft land! It's a lawless land, India's highways, where each one makes up her or his own rules.

But wait! In the absence of man-made laws there must be some cosmic principles guiding one billion human beings in their urgency to turn cars into carnage. Indeed, guidelines

exist, but like guarded secrets of yoga, they are known only by the initiated. They have never been consolidated, interpreted and codified. Now, for the first time in history, we reveal these arcane rules to our readers with the certain knowledge that lives will be saved by this disclosure, based on our recent survival sojourn in India in collaboration with Rajiv Pant (Betul), a Mensa member, computer whiz and engineering student who lives in Paoli, Pennsylvania, and can be found on the Web at <http://www.rajiv.org/ii/>

## Rules of the Road, Indian Style

Traveling on Indian roads is an almost hallucinatory potion of sound, spectacle and experience. It is frequently heart-rending, sometimes hilarious, frequently exhilarating, always unforgettable--and extremely dangerous. Most Indian road users observe a version of the Bharat Highway Code based on Rickshawsutra, a disputed Sanskrit text summarizing ten regulations (vidhi) of the road and also referred to as the road warriors' rules of engagement.

### VIDHI I:

The assumption of immortality is required of all travelers. If death frightens you, stay home. India has the world's original mass transit system, which is hereby defined as "mass rules the road." If you are bigger, you have the right of way, no matter what other conditions prevail. However, in the case of accidents this rule is reversed, and the driver of the larger vehicle involved in any collision is, a priori, guilty and may be summarily beaten by passers-by, lest the short arm of the law fail to exact his due punishment.

## VIDHI II:

Indian traffic, like Indian society, is structured on a strict caste system. The following precedence must be accorded at all times. In descending order, give way to: cows, elephants, heavy trucks, buses, official cars, camels, light lorries, buffalo, jeeps, ox-carts, private cars, motorcycles, scooters, auto-rickshaws, pigs, pedal rickshaws, goats, bicycles (goods-carrying), handcarts, bicycles (passenger-carrying), dogs and pedestrians. 1992 Addendum: The above is superceded when any one of the above is ahead of another and both are traveling in the same direction. The vehicle in front is allowed any and every movement. Those behind must submit appropriately.

## VIDHI III:

All wheeled vehicles shall be driven in accordance with the maxim: to slow is to falter, to brake is to fail, to stop is defeat. This is the Indian drivers' mantra. In observance of this rule three things shall be required of every licensed driver: a good horn, good brakes and good luck.

## VIDHI IV:

Cars (class II,4,b): Use of a horn (also known as the sonic fender or aural amulet) is manditory. Drivers caught neglecting a horn for more than a minute will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

1. Short bursts (urgent) indicate supplication, e.g., in clearing dogs, rickshaws and pedestrians from path. Even if they can see you clearly, others will not acknowledge your presence unless you blare, at least a bit.

2. Long bellows (desperate) denote supremacy, e.g., to oncoming truck: "I am going too fast to stop, so unless you slow down we shall both die."

3. Single blast (casual) means: "I have just seen someone out of India's 870 million whom I recognise," or "There is a bird in the road (which at this speed could go through my windscreen)" or "I have not blown my horn for two minutes." Trucks and buses (class IV,2,a): All horn signals have the same meaning, viz: "I am at the helm of a 12.5-ton juggernaut, am tired, late to my destination, unafraid of death and have no intention of stopping, even if I could. Do what you think is prudent."

4. Incessant din indicates either A.) Cautious, professional chauffeur is approaching, or B.) Driver is napping for a few minutes with his head on the horn to clear the road ahead. Vidhi IV remains subject to the provision of Order of Precedence in Vidhi II above.

#### VIDHI V:

Never stop for an accident, except to pummel victims as outlined in Vidhi I. As you drive past the mangled mountain of metal, show compassion by thinking to yourself, "That's karma," or in the case of a big collision, "That's truckma." All maneuvers, use of horn and evasive action shall be left until the last possible moment to assure an uninterrupted flow of automotive-induced adrenaline.

#### VIDHI VI:

1. Speed: It is the responsibility of each village and community to control the velocity of vehicles. Since signs are ineffectual and traffic will move at the fastest speed possible, this is done by a well-planned program of road negligence whereby an 80km/hour roadway is assiduously maintained once every twenty-five years and a 40km/hour thoroughfare is never subjected to repairs. 2. Roundabouts: India recognizes no roundabouts. Ostensible traffic islands in the middle of crossroads have no traffic management function. Any other impression should be ignored. 3. Rapid transit: A known oxymoron.

#### VIDHI VII:

1. Rights of way: Traffic entering a road from the left has priority. So has traffic from the right, and also traffic in the middle. 2. Lane discipline: Vehicles are permitted half of the roadway. White lines, when provided, are used to center your vehicle on the road, so your half is taken precisely out of the middle. When similarly aligned on-coming vehicles approach, do not relent your position until the last minute, lest they deem you a feckless road warrior and drive you mercilessly into the nearest paddy field.

#### VIDHI VIII

While God is omnipresent in India, seatbelts are omniabsent, though one, located in Puna, was justly described as "uncomfortable to sit on." Therefore, car occupants shall wear garlands of marigolds. These must be kept fastened at all times. Upon arrival at one's destination, a moment of grateful prayer is compulsory--a large donation to one's favorite temple is optional.

## VIDHI IX:

Overtaking is mandatory. Every moving vehicle is required to overtake every other moving vehicle, irrespective of whether it has just overtaken you or whether you are in a rush or not (stories of drivers who were not in a hurry still circulate in remote villages). Overtaking should only be undertaken in suitable conditions, such as in the face of oncoming traffic, on blind bends, at junctions and in the middle of villages/city centres. No more than two inches should be allowed between your vehicle and the one you are passing--and two millimeters in the case of 3-wheelers or pedestrians. When two lorries are engaged in passing a passenger car simultaneously, other vehicles are advised to wait for a narrow bridge or roadside accident to begin passing procedures. Corollary Rule: If one car is ahead of another, it shall, by deftly swerving across any number of lanes, make a responsible effort to keep others, even ambulances, from passing, preserving thereby the ancient tradition that no one gets around an Indian.

## VIDHI X:

1. Passenger Limits: No more than eight passengers shall occupy a single-seated motorscooter, and commuters hanging or sitting outside of a bus or train shall in no instance exceed double the number of seats provided inside the vehicle. 2. Maximum Weight: No vehicle shall be loaded beyond the ability of its axels to carry the weight at least 100 meters before failing. 3. Miscellaneous Requirements: Highways of four lanes or more, if ever built, are required to cross a one-lane bridge or pass through a congested hamlet every ten miles. Traffic enforcement officers shall have no fewer than 10 hours of college-level Chaos Theory and animal husbandry. 4. Exception: The state of Gujarat is hereby exempted from all humorous insult and innuendo, being the only place in India

with really good roads.

Traffic thus reveals India's very soul, which is kaleidoscopic, courageous and able to survive just about anything. She is intense, complex beyond comprehension, and a little bit wild. She is as nimble, gregarious, intuitively fluid and unselfconscious as her teeming highway hoards. She loves liberty more than law and daily risks the higher road of trust in the unruly spiritual process while others ply the safer byways of control.