

Road Rage and Democratic Values

Recently it was reported that a woman driver who had the temerity not to allow a car to overtake her; at the first instance the vehicle behind her was able to overtake hers, its driver stopped right in front to her, blocking her way, and he and his companions got out and shot her. Unbelievable? In fact, this kind of incident is becoming only too common; soon, it won't be news. A similar incident happened some years ago. A man asked another to move his vehicle so that he could take his own vehicle out. Hardly a crime, one would have thought. Yet, he was brutally and deliberately run over by the person who apparently felt so 'affronted' at having been asked to move his vehicle. In yet another case, an old man asked a private bus driver not to use the road in front of his house as it was a private path and not a bus route. Next day, the bus driver lay in wait for the man to come out of his house and drove full speed at him, mowing him down. If one person had committed all these acts, he or she would certainly have been called insane. But such insanity today seems to be rampant in our society. Road rage—such a picturesque term—is one manifestation of the state of society in this country. The gradual loss of self-control in the people, the growing contempt for the rule of law, the replacement of debate and discussion with animal aggression and quick fixes, the erosions of tolerance at all levels, and the growing assertion of selfishness, and total lack of consideration for others. There is also the glorification of violence and a sniggering contempt for patience and discipline.

These symptoms of a society in transition—some would say, a society in the process of disintegration—are evident everywhere and in all fields of life today. There are no heroes today, only anti-heroes. People speak with pride of their children who are able to hold their own against their peers by the might of their fists. It does not matter if they win in the cause of right or wrong; what matters is that they should win. Parents are not ready to admit that their children are, or can even remotely be, in the wrong, anyway right and wrong are so relative, is the fashionable line of thought. Truth, indeed, may be relative, but every truth is not so. And when we speak of right and wrong. It is ethical conduct that is indicated, not some abstract truth. But the erosion of values has gone deep, indeed. Money and what it can buy have assumed an importance they never had before. To an extent, we may blame it all on 'globalization' and its consequences; disparities in income, lost jobs, lack of employment opportunities, and the despair of seeing a few lord it over the world, so to speak, because of the rupees in their possession while so many others lack the basic necessities of life. Frustration can be a terrible feeling quite capable of blurring the difference between right and wrong, instigating one to burst out in blind rage, especially in uncongenial circumstances—scorching wither, uncontrolled crowds, and so on. But it is not just the poor and unemployed who indulge in this

aggressive and uncontrolled rage on the roads; it is more often than not the so-called educated and well off or the rich spoilt brat, here is where a frightening contempt for the law is shown, a shaming inconsideration for a fellow human being is manifested.

More and more people are interpreting democracy to mean unlimited freedom, without realizing that such freedom is just not possible, indeed not desirable, in a civilized society; one's freedom is bound to be restricted when it comes into conflict with the needs of a fellow human being. Freedom is dependent on not harming another individual's well being. Democracy calls for tolerance of another's views even if one disagrees with them. Democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character; rational conduct, an intelligent understanding of public affairs, independent judgment, tolerance and unselfish devotion to public interest. Democracy, as J. Bryce has observed, assumes civic capacity on the part of its citizens, and this capacity involves, self-control and conscience. But democracy has within itself the seeds of dissolution and decay, if the balance between rights and duties, individual freedom and the freedom of a fellow being, and self-interest and consideration for others is not maintained and there is a tilt towards selfishness and power-seeking for personal interest alone. Today, we witness an politician or the bureaucrat, the security personnel or the corporate executive. This arrogance seeps into anyone who comes close to a position of power. The minute a person comes close to a position of power, he or she wields the invested authority ruthlessly on the weaker.

An ordinary person taking a photograph of another person assumes a powerful personality. The innocuous camera becomes a veritable instrument of authority in the photographers' hands. "Turn your head, smile, . . . not so widely, you fool. . . . Hey, stand still. . . ." The sense of power he or she seems to enjoy, even, even if momentarily, seems heady. Give a Maruti 800- what to say of more powerful and expensive vehicles to teenagers, and they at once become demons, uncaring about anything or anybody lying between them and the speed they can work up. The slightest obstruction, and expletives are the least one can expect. A more aggressive type, and the driver sees red and has no compunction about physically overcoming the obstruction. The blue line bus on Delhi's roads has at its steering wheel the kind of bully who finds a sadistic enjoyment in crowning a smaller vehicle, a cyclist or pedestrian against the divider or the railings on the pavement. Road rage is a manifestation of the lost balance in democratic values in this society of ours. It shows that the citizens of this country lack that civic capacity essential for a successful democracy. Where the strong suppress the weak, human-made laws lose their efficacy, and the jungle law takes over.

