



Last Christmas season my family and I fled tourist-invaded Goa for some peace and quiet. Little did we realize, despite friendly advice, that our destination, Sri Lanka, was also one of those holiday favourites that gets flooded at Christmas time. Along the five days that we were on the island, in addition to experiencing the incredible beauty of the country, we were also forced to spend much of our time in traffic jams, whether in the capital city Colombo, in Kandy, home of the famous Temple of the Tooth, or on the roads between these two cities.

I had been to the island-state some years prior to this family holiday, and I am sure that the country I witnessed was entirely different in terms of the amount of traffic that one experienced. If anything, my journeys then were experiences of smooth flows from one destination to another. It appears that the end of the decades-long civil war may have released extra income into the economy creating the kind of spurt in traffic that one witnessed on my last trip.

Yet, despite the fact that we spent a good amount of time in traffic jams our experience of traffic in Sri Lanka was not the same as that in India, and/or Goa. A traffic jam in India is an occasion for tons of honking and attempts by individuals to cut through the traffic jam by getting onto the opposite lane and charging to the head of the line. Others follow the lead of the first offender which ensures that within a matter of minutes the jam has been complicated beyond imagining and that instead of two lanes, one has multiple lanes, tempers rise and what could have been resolved within a shorter time takes forever to be repaired.

In the course of the short stay in Sri Lanka my experiences of traffic jams were anything but similar. To begin with traffic jams were the result not of indiscipline, but because of the usual reason for the phenomena, too much traffic on small lanes. Rather than cut across lanes and try to short circuit the system people waited patiently for the traffic to move. It took us a couple of minutes to realize that our experience of the first jam in Sri Lanka was different from what we encountered in India. There was no honking! So strange was the situation that we could just not contain ourselves, and kept repeating this fact, over and over again, to ourselves, and then when we returned home to every one we met.



How can this difference between the road experience in India and Sri Lanka be explained? Divining Reasons for the state of traffic

While in Sri Lanka I did notice that there were clear signs, at least in Colombo, indicating that lane discipline had to be maintained at all time, and the presence of traffic police at regular intervals. Speaking with the driver of the cab we employed we got the sense that the police are invariably on hand to take any offender to task. Responding to our queries he also suggested that it was unlikely that the police would accept bribes from offenders.

In the course of our journey, as we grew close to our driver, he shared much with us about his country. What I would like to focus on, as I try and resolve this question of the traffic discipline in Sri Lanka, is his narratives about the State. He spoke about the health care system that offered free, reliable and dependable service to all Sri Lankans. Trying to build a pattern from all that I had heard from him, I realized that in Sri Lanka the people were assured of an ever present state that was reliable, and dependable. I doubt that the same could be said about India.

In India, one knows that one cannot rely on the state to maintain the law. The infrastructure of the state is invariably seen as tools to enrich those who gain access to public office. The enforcement of the law is not uniform. Any one in Goa will acknowledge that if one has connections to the officer's superiors one can get away not only without a fine, but after having insulted the traffic officer. In other words, in India one knows that the state will not look after you, nor will it work to create a level playing ground. You have to look out for yourself in a dog eat dog world. In other words, it is not rules that help you get ahead in India, but the violation of rules, and muscling in on a scene gives you more than waiting patiently in line. The absence of a traffic etiquette in India is therefore the result of a failed state.

In sum, it seems that if there is a difference between traffic behavior in Sri Lanka and India, the reason can be pinned down to the fact that at least at the level of the average citizen, the Sri Lankan state is seen to be a neutral arbiter of rules that are taken seriously, while in India, one knows that the state has abandoned its role and made way for the so-called laws of the jungle to take root.



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