

## Kings of the road

by

*V.S. Sunder*

The prize for exclusivity easily goes to the roadways authorities. I shall substantiate the foregoing claim with evidence from one of the *model roads* in Chennai, since I am familiar with Chennai; and I am sure that the resident of Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, ..., can easily identify the analogous models in her city. Consider what used to be a lazy one-lane road called ‘Old Mahabalipuram Road’ and is now a four lane toll road, re-christened ‘Rajiv Gandhi Salai’ and often referred proudly to as the IT highway of Chennai, owing to its being liberally dotted with blue glass fronted eyesores housing offices of IT giants such as Infosys, Cognizant, Satyam, ....

No stone has been left unturned to ensure that the BMWs and Hondas - not to mention the poor relatives churned out by Hyundai and Maruti - can zip through a distance of some 20 kilometres in half an hour. But this ‘great progress’ has come with a price-tag. Consider the following illustration of what I mean:

- The stretch at the north end of this road (the end closest to the city) has a 3 foot high road divider for a continuous stretch of about 3 km.
- The only way to cross this road is at one of three foot-bridges, each of which involves negotiating about 45 steps, or to take your life in your hands, dash across the two halves of the road and hurdle the road divider mid-way (which option is taken by many people with a death-wish) in between occasional lulls in a traffic averaging 70-80 kmph (in an allegedly 40 kmph zone).
- At the busy ‘Tidel Park’ traffic signal, arguably one of the more crowded intersections of the city, there is no pedestrian crossing, and many roads can be crossed only if you can join a human sea coming out of the train station at the crossing and simply walk across even as another sea of cars and motor-cycles is honking away and trying to cross the intersection when they do have a green signal!
- God help you if you are mobility challenged (as I am), and are not as fortunate as I am to have a car to take you zipping along for anything between 0 and 3 kms, pull a U-turn, and zip along

for another 3 km in the opposite direction before you can get off this 'avenue of the gods'!

It is as if the rulers of the land have passed a decree that you only deserve to exist or need to go anywhere near this great road if you have the right sort of wheels (under a car rather than a wheelchair). Many flyovers which were built have simply done away with whatever played the role of a sidewalk, so much so that there are simply no sidewalks. To add insult to injury, on those roads in India which do have sidewalks, motorcycles regularly claim such sidewalks as their own - and the hapless pedestrian has to hop for his life.

The message to pedestrians is clear; get wheels (of the right sort), or do not use the roads. The corollary for the person on a wheelchair is even more daunting. It is downright scary when you consider the public travel options for such a physically challenged person; forget the buses, where you have to be a strapping young lad to be able to run after the bus which stops several metres past the bus stop, battle your way through hordes of similarly unfortunate people, and at the end, you might have to hang by one hand from some tenuous support, half in and half out of the bus. Or the suburban trains, where it is necessary to navigate an overbridge involving around 50 steps, or worse.

What should we do in order to have an inclusive society which recognises the rights of everybody to exist?