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City plagued by honking habit

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When Rajesh Chauhan went to buy a car, one of the things he was very particular about was the horn. He rejected two cars because the horns weren't loud enough. "To drive in Kolkata, a loud horn is absolutely essential. With a horn not so loud, you can't wade through the traffic," he reasoned.

The first thing that Pritam Singh did when he purchased an Ambassador taxi was to get a loud horn installed. "The horns that come with Ambassadors aren't very clear. Since drivers blame the horn or lack of it for dents, I decided to install an additional one in the new vehicle," he pointed out.

When Karl Slym took over as president and managing director of General Motors India, one of the initial learnings about the country was about the horn. While the horn is the customers' least consideration elsewhere, he discovered it was vital in India. "In most countries, a horn is used only in extreme emergency or panic. Hence, the sound is muted. But in India, the device is almost an extension of the driver. It is in his psyche to sound it now and again," he said.

If India, and to an extent Pakistan, are the honking capitals of the world, Kolkata is the hellhole. Motorists here honk for all reasons, and for no reason at all. The likes of Rajesh and Pritam are there behind the wheel of the cars ahead, and the ones behind.

When cabby Ratan Shaw drives, he presses the horn every 30 seconds irrespective of whether there is a vehicle before him or not. It's an involuntary action that he shares with other taxi drivers. "Using the horn is the first thing I learnt when training to drive," he conceded. Semi-literate Ratan landed in Kolkata from his native village in Chapra district of Bihar at the age of 19 and learned to drive from cabbies in Kolkata.

But it isn't just taxi drivers that are afflicted with the honking syndrome. Even educated motorists cannot help stay off the horn. Executive Anindya Ghosh, who honks instinctively at traffic signals, spells out the reasons. "If it is green, then the intent is to urge the motorist ahead to speed up so that the light doesn't turn red when I reach the signal. And when it turns from red to green, motorists honk in unison as though those ahead have no clue that the signal has changed," he said.

Ever since his marriage a couple of months ago, Anindya has been admonished several times by his wife Paromita, who hails from Chandigarh. Chastised, he is working to overcome the penchant to blow the horn. "Now that I am sensitized to the problem, even I get irritated when someone behind honks unnecessarily. But at times, I end up honking in retaliation still," he said, acknowledging that signalling with headlights should be the norm after dark.

Reasons for honking are not always to do with traffic or even pedestrians. It can be as bizarre as an argument with a spouse or a frustrating day in office. "When I am irritated, I end up honking more. It's my son Rohan who pointed it out one day. I guess, it acts as a natural stress reliever," said businessman Abhishek Agarwal.

Sandhya Dey, a copy writer at an advertizing agency, believes women drivers are the worst victims as male drivers honk whenever they see a woman behind the wheel to draw attention. "It's crazy. Even when the car behind me is struggling to keep pace, the driver continues to honk. Initially, I would slow down and let the car pass. But there was no respite as the next car behind would be up to the same mischief," she said.

The lack of driving etiquette due to the absence of lanes and proper road signs has always plagued Kolkata. Though road signs have made an appearance in recent years, most of them except no-entry and no-parking are adhered to as there is little punitive action against the offenders.

"Now, there are no-honking signs before all major schools and hospitals. But drivers turn a blind eye to them as they know it is difficult for the police to spot the offenders in dense traffic," said a sergeant who's generally posted along the Park Street-Mullick Bazaar stretch.

With more air-conditioned cars on the roads now, most motorists are insulated from the sound outside and don't give way for other vehicles to overtake, leading to more honking.

Driving etiquette is virtually absent. Hence, one sees motorists honking threateningly at pedestrians trying to cross the road at zebra crossings. "Anywhere else in the world, the driver would get hauled up for the act. But here, they get away scot-free. Worse still, they hurl invectives at pedestrians while driving past," complained Canadian tourist Rourke Bernard, who is currently undergoing shock therapy on Kolkata's roads.

Pradeep Kakkar of social concern group PUBLIC, who has observed the psyche of motorists keenly, categorized the reasons behind the behaviour as communication, nervousness, anger and fun.

"For some, honking is a way of communication one driver's way of establishing social contact with another, seeking recognition and registering presence. Owners of new cars and taxis with multi-tone horns want be heard," he explained.

Then there are some who honk out of nervousness. "Since drivers here do not observe rules such as lane driving, there is overwhelming uncertainty about what the next car may do or what may shoot out from the next intersection," Kakkar pointed out.

At times, it is an expression of anger. Buses and taxis stop without warning or concern for other drivers, the use of indicators is virtually absent and pedestrians seem not to have any realization of the perils of walking on the carriageway. "These drivers honk out of sheer rage," he said.

"Finally, for some, honking is simply fun. You are feeling happy, so you honk, almost as if you are a kid playing with a noise-making toy. Remember the squeaking shoes?" Kakkar smiled.

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