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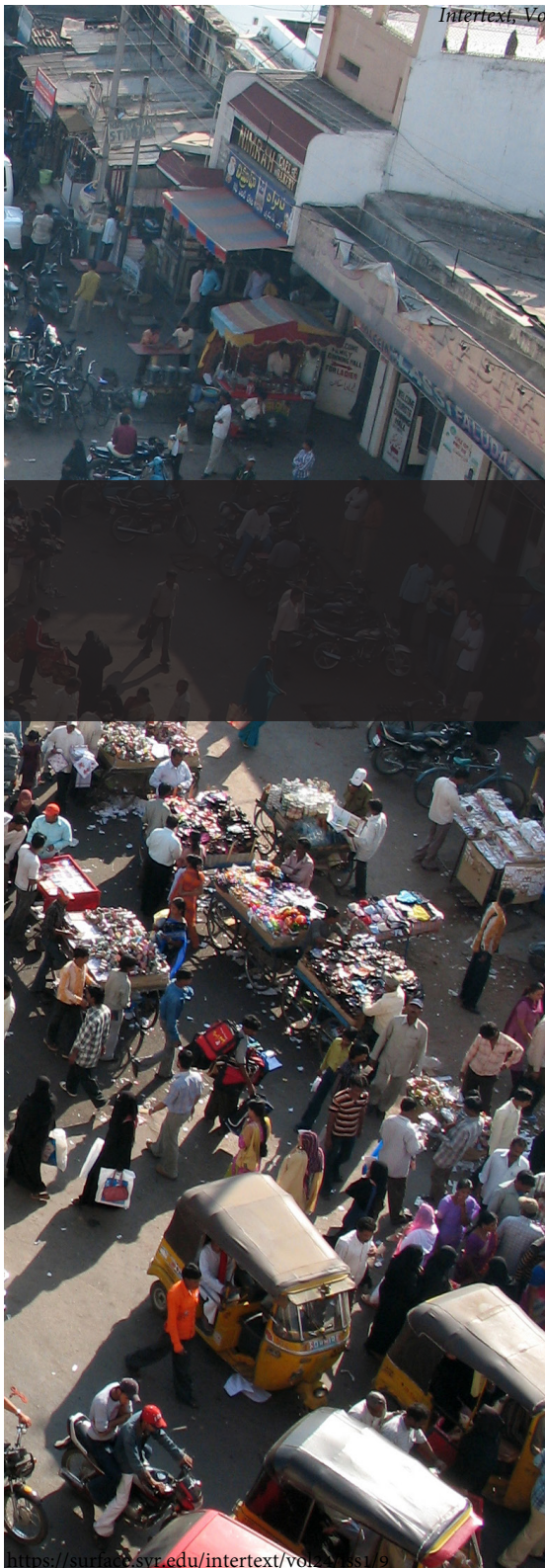
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TRAFFIC TYRANTS

Siddarth Senthilkumaran





Chennai has the perfect combination of the traditional religious population and the urban IT population. The city has as many software companies as temples. Engineers, bankers, and private business owners all converge at the Saidapet signal at around 8 a.m. Chennai’s main mode of public transport, apart from the bus, is the auto rickshaw. There is no quicker way to get from point A to point B in Chennai. These yellow, three-wheeled vehicles are the most prominent sight on the roads. While all auto rickshaws are required to have a meter, some drivers charge exorbitant rates to ignorant people. While most roads around the city have “peak hours,” meaning the traffic is extremely high for a specific time frame, Mount Road is bustling with vehicles the entire day.

Office hours are similar for all professions, and few want to get a head start on their travel. The scorching heat isn’t any help either. Frustrated and half-awake drivers make a recipe for disaster. Generally, Indian drivers are poor at following road etiquette. Lane discipline is rarely followed in this part of the world. Traffic jams are characterized by every kind of vehicle you can think of—container trucks, cars, buses, motorcycles, scooters, minivans, auto rickshaws, jeeps, even animals like cows and goats.

Harish is a young engineer who just graduated with a bachelor’s degree in engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, the most prestigious engineering college in India. While half the country is struggling to get jobs, Harish was spoiled with choices. He was a brilliant student and by the time he was a senior, job offers were pouring in. He chose Cognizant Technology Solutions, a multinational information

technology company, one of the technology titans situated in the famed Chennai IT corridor. But this means that he has to pass through almost the entire stretch of Mount Road to get to work by 8:30 a.m. This is just his second week of work and he's still getting acclimatized to his schedule. He rides a red Bajaj Pulsar, which is a common motorcycle in India. He leaves his house at around 7:30 a.m. and hopes that the traffic isn't as bad as it always is. But he is disappointed.

The traffic doesn't seem to be moving for more than a few miles. An experienced motorcycle rider, he tries to squeeze past bigger vehicles and make some progress. As he

Although motorcycles and auto rickshaws fill up most of the road, there's a considerable population of cars too. Owning a car used to be a privilege in India, but globalization and a steadily growing economy means that cars have become much more affordable. The sight of Jaguars and BMWs has become increasingly common. Madan owns the latest Jaguar—the F type. He has been taking great care of the car since it was delivered three weeks ago, and doesn't even let his ten-year-old kid touch the exterior. While he knows the car is prone to getting scratched in the heavy traffic, he also loves to show off. The sequence of people watch-



maneuvers his way through the traffic, he observes chaos all around. Auto rickshaw drivers are constantly blowing their horns while their passengers keep questioning them about how long they will have to wait. Children stranded in the traffic are crying. Young and middle-aged motorcyclists alike are trying to squeeze themselves past impossible gaps in the traffic all while making sure their toes don't get crushed. One rider asks an auto rickshaw driver to move just a little to the right so he can narrowly squeeze through. The auto rickshaw driver impatiently replies, "You're going to be stranded behind the bus anyway." The rider eventually coaxes the auto rickshaw driver and moves forward.

ing and dropping their jaws in awe makes Madan happy. He is filled with pride while going to work. He is a respected senior manager at Tata Consultancy Services, another major company in the IT corridor.

After squeezing himself past a few vehicles, Harish finds himself in some space and the traffic starts moving. He covers half a mile in no time. Then the traffic stagnates again. Harish decides to manually work his way through another portion of the traffic. He sees more frustrated auto rickshaw drivers and passengers. He notices the old, but never forgotten, Spencers Plaza to his right. It was once a popular place, but everyone now prefers the newer malls. He looks wist-

fully to his right. Then he hears a loud bump.

Madan hears the thud and says to himself, "This better not be what I think it is." He looks at his rear view mirror and sees a young motorcycle rider hastily trying to back up his motorcycle. Madan gets out of his car and walks over to the rear bumper. He sees a slight dent, accompanied by a small scratch near the nameplate. The dent is so tiny that it would be impossible to notice it from twenty feet away. Madan mumbles a few words while staring at the dent, and then he glares at Harish.

Harish hurriedly says, "I'm extremely sorry; it was purely a mistake." Madan questions, "How is it that you skipped past all the crappy cars in the traffic and decided to crash into my Jaguar?"

Harish responds, "I didn't do it deliberately; I lost my balance. I'm sorry." He glances at his watch quickly and sees that the time is 8:07 a.m.

Noticing that, Madan raises his voice, "So are you in a hurry to get somewhere now? You thought you could just crash into my car and escape?" People waiting in the traffic turn their heads towards the Jaguar. The traffic doesn't seem to be moving and for many, this is a source of entertainment during their early morning travels.

"Sir, I said that I am sorry and that I am willing to pay for damages, if any." Madan detects sarcasm at Harish's reply. Madan is furious now. He says, "I don't need your dirty money for the damages."

"Then what do you expect me to do now, Sir?" Harish's nonchalant reply further infuriates Madan. School students waiting in auto rickshaws are engrossed in the argument, and so are most of the passengers in the vicinity.

Madan unleashes a tirade of expletives at Harish, who is shocked at Madan's immature behavior. "Sir, I already said I was willing to pay for the damages. What more do you want?"

Suddenly the traffic in front of the Jaguar clears up, and the vehicles start moving. But this is the narrowest segment of the road and people behind the Jaguar can't move unless the Jaguar itself makes way. Ram, the on-looking auto rickshaw driver, intervenes in the argument. He requests Madan to stop arguing because the dent isn't that big and not worth keeping other people stranded. Madan responds angrily by pointing at the dent and saying, "Do you know how expensive this car is? Could any of you even afford this car?" Ignoring his question, Ram respectfully asks Madan to leave. Madan reluctantly walks away, but not before berating Harish and Ram again. The crowd applauds and the path clears.

Harish looks at his watch again and realizes that he has only ten minutes to get to work, which is impossible even in an empty Mount Road. He hurries to put on his helmet and get his Pulsar started. As he heads towards the tail end of Mount Road, he thinks about the situation that just happened. But Harish has been in this situation multiple times in the past. He doesn't always crash into Jaguars, but any car driver, like Madan, would give an exaggerated reaction to the slightest dent on their car. And there is usually a Ram, who attempts to break the fight and clear the traffic for the others to pass. Mount Road is home to such situations every day. Some accidents are more serious than just minor dents, but it is usually these minor dents that produce the ugly arguments.