



## AUTO CLASS STRUGGLE

*Car accidents are a metaphor for our life in society.*

BY SHEKHAR DESHPANDE

**T**he ordinary in India is extraordinary anywhere. That is one reason people visit India, admire it and are awed by their experience.

It is also a reason, and a major one at that, why God created Non Resident Indians.

Think of the great providence: if everything happens for a purpose, then that purpose has to be more profound than dual citizenship, joint bank accounts, tax breaks, arranged marriages or the IT revolution. What else could that be, but to rediscover the land of your birth, the one that gave you shape and molded you into a human being as something unique, different, distinct and yes, of course, very extraordinary.

When you return, your senses are

overcharged and your faculties are engaged. But deep within you there is an anthropologist who looks at things with amusement, or if you are lazy, with already formed, clear, worked over impressions of your own country.

There was such an occasion on my trip to India. On previous trips, I witnessed similar events, except from a distance. This time, the heavenly powers were trying to teach me something that is simply not available here in a culture that has created layers of symbolism and hypocritical structures to mask what is truly a genuine experience.

I have experienced accidents in this country, often very serious car accidents. They are a part of the road-ridden existence in this country. We have had tragic brushes with death, life-threatening injuries, "tissue damage," or attacks on our nervous systems. Then we have

had lawyers, hospitals, suspicious and often jealous colleagues who raise an eyebrow when they spot you wearing neck collars, etc. It takes time for a new immigrant to sink in the magical poetry of the bumper sticker "Hit Me, I Need the Money!"

Our chances of meeting death are far greater in this country, particularly in cities and around holidays when traffic is fast and furious. In fact, one way to measure the chances of mortality is the probability of death in a car accident. It is a yardstick against which other probabilities are often assessed.

Your relationships with car accidents reflect the state of happiness and indeed your place in this society. If you die from it, you are a statistic, a number that is mourned over and life goes on. If you are severely injured, you live with the lasting imprint that reality has made



on you, a living casualty of the lifestyle that is now so desired by all those who envy us. If you are mildly injured, you calculate your misery by your ability to get money for each cell and tissue and bone that is hurt, not to speak of the effort you have to go through to get the rewards. If you have not been hurt so far by car accidents, you are struggling to be a heavy weight on the health insurance system. To be or not to be has to do with how you get into car accidents. As the iconoclastic J. G. Ballard said in his novel *Crash*, our relationship to the car accidents is “a total metaphor for man’s life in today’s society.”

Let us see how this plays out in India.

During an earlier visit, I filtered my life through Ballard’s pronouncement.

Away from the real street scene for years, it was difficult to figure out a response as late one night our cabbie hit another on a flyover, with virtually no other traffic around. There was no policeman in sight and the state apparatus does not want to get involved in incidents that have few, if any, rewards. One possibility is to negotiate in “good faith,” to admit guilt and then do what you have to, make peace and move on. But both cabbies are employees. They are worried less about the passengers in the cars. They imagine in front of their eyes, the systematic questioning and/or deductions from an already miserly sum at the end of the day, the week or the month. For them, might is right! And, they demand complete loyalty from their pas-

sengers. That might sound quite a turnaround from the treatment they have feted out to you so far, but it is perfectly in keeping with the ethics of the road. One has to take sides and your side is now entirely determined by who asks for your loyalty first. As Groucho Marx once put it, the choice is clear: “either you believe me or your own eyes.” Calling faults and making judgments makes no sense because these are unproductive activities. Since this may seem like a recipe for an impasse to any reasonable person, there is that other option of bolting from the scene.

One is not looking for a reasoned solution here. This is about power and about stating, admitting or living one’s position in the social structure. Two have-nots have collided and clearly the fault lies with someone else. Often, as David Gregory Roberts describes the chilling scene in his novel, *Shantaram*, the passengers, if they look like they could afford a monetary solution, could quickly become the target of the rage, from the cab drivers, or bystanders who clearly see this as a situation to be resolved without the losers losing more.

A car accident is class struggle. Those who unify quickly and act, win. Those who sit around and watch and seek rational solutions end up losing or become further victims of some sort of retribution. Gandhigiri does not work.

It is also not a law of the jungle. The mighty are weak in muscles though they could be strong in their purses. We know of stories where drivers have been beaten to pulp and some have been dragged to hospitals where their injured victims are suffering. Cars have been treated as living persons to be beaten beyond recognition. And, we also know of stories where the arrogant and monied people have walked away from the most devastating loss of life and injury only to enjoy the next *malai kofta* and *masala* tea that evening.

In India, we do not have the structures and rituals of lawyers, courtrooms, pleas, and theaters of soft tissue injuries to go through after a car acci-



dent. We return to the glossless worthlessness of human life. Foreigners may perceive the spectacle as barbaric. But it is most basic in its practice. You get what you asked for. And if you have asked for more and got it, you ought to recognize and share it. If you asked for anything and got less, which is the lot of most in India, you get nothing.

In the United States, we mask all that reality with elaborate procedures and questions of health insurance, rectification and monetary compensation. Lazy people who have nothing to do, cannot deal with life as it comes to them; they invent complex symbols to escape from reality.

We were driving a bus some miles away from a major city in India during my last visit. In that rural area, as the driver was negotiating the curves, we were hit by a Royal Enfield, with two drunken men and a cheerful woman

riding it. No one was apparently hurt. But the anger was quick and swift. The woman must have been the prize in the middle.

The two men acted swiftly to prove that they could seek justice. First, they hurled a stone, plenty on the road, to break the driver's window. The rising anger threatened that the situation could escalate. Although the driver of the mini-bus was also a working class employee (owners rarely drive in India, one wonders why), but he enjoyed a higher place on the totem pole. He deserved their anger. No one brought up the silly question of whose fault it was. The point was to establish the fault not discover it. The road warriors threatened more damage. After a steady physical defense of the mortal body of the driver, I reached into my NRI wallet and handed out a thousand rupees to calm things down. And calm they did. Quick-

ly, the language changed, forgiveness was in the air.

This was class struggle at its best. One had to admire the high morality of those in rage against a mini bus, which by definition, represented the upper class, no matter what the facts. Their anger was not about the minibus hitting them or that it forced them to commit the error of hitting it, even if they were punch drunk. Not at all. The anger was about the very fact that the mini bus existed in the first place. It had no right to be there. It had to be in someone else's, preferably its own, territory. The bribe or the offer of thousand bucks was simply an admission that the fault rested with those who were riding the bus.

Yet, the victory on their faces was so clear and so tragic that one could buy their suffering for a cheap sum on the road. This is why the class struggle fails. It does not alleviate human suffering; it just figures out a way to pay for it.

On a purely speculative basis, this was a limited warfare of classes. If the dozen or so passengers on the mini-bus, most of them foreigners, were a part of the picture, the class divisions would have deepened. There would have to be more rewards to settle the admission of gross injustices and inequalities of the road.

On the flight back from India, the great spirits of providence showed me the latest issue of the magazine, *Outlook*. It carried statistics on Mumbai. In a city of 17.76 million, it reported, there are 19 deaths a day from traffic accidents. It is a telling number. There are almost 115 fatalities in the United States daily.

What an achievement for Mumbai, I thought! But then, as the fog of satisfaction cleared, it was obvious that the roads in Mumbai, despite their congestion, pollution and noise, choking patterns of travel, still do not offer enough opportunities for class struggle on the road, where the have-nots can settle quickly and make us, including the NRIs, pay for our crimes.

Car accidents are indeed a metaphor for our life in society. 2