

When the unelected set the agenda

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February 22, 2017 00:06 IST

Updated:

February 22, 2017 00:24 IST

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Sometimes, it seems that to understand our complex society, all that we need to do is to understand our behaviour at traffic lights. Every day, I see countless people on bikes and cars driving through red lights. Earlier, I used to get upset that these people were blatantly flouting a rule that many others were following, more so when they did it right in front of indifferent traffic police. Now I realise that while this might be just another instance of rule-breaking that seems to be an essential definition of being Indian, at a deeper level it is also reflective of a far greater problem confronting our society.

Rules and individual agency

Following rules is very easy, and at the same time also difficult. Following a rule has at least two components: one, the action corresponding to the rule, and the other our interpretation of the intention of that rule.

So to follow the simple rule, “Stop at a red light”, is to follow the physical action of stopping the vehicle but it is also to accept the intention or reason behind this rule. Typically, we are expected to follow the action corresponding to a rule and not worry about the intention.

Most times, when motorists jump a signal, they are not breaking a rule per se as much as interpreting it in terms of its original intention. They recognise that there is no traffic in front of them and then act based on their decision that red lights are not meant to be followed when there is no traffic. They are acting as independent decision-makers who feel that their judgment of the situation overrides rules set by a society or government. But there are also some who jump signals because they feel they are not bound by any social norms.

This ambiguity of what it is to follow a rule is really the source of many conflicts in our society today. Should we blindly follow social norms, or should we be independent interpreters of the rules of society? Sometimes it may seem that our individual decision is better than the social norm. Some might suggest that it is useless to wait for two minutes at a signal when there is no traffic at all on the roads. How should we act in such cases? Does the social norm, even when not appropriate in a particular context, always supersede rational individual decision? Or is it better to have a thinking citizenship, one that refuses to blindly follow rules without interpreting them to see what really suits the context? But the chaos that results when each of us interprets social rules is what leads to traffic jams every single day in every corner of our cities and towns!

It is also this same attitude of individual interpretations of social norms that drives much of the conflicts in India today, including the problem of corruption. I am referring in particular to the conflicts largely understood to be based on identity politics: for example, [the attack on Sanjay Leela Bhansali](#) in connection with his film *Padmavati*, the

[debate on jallikattu](#), and the actions of the self-appointed protectors of religions, traditions and the nation. Identity politics is really not that different from the problem of dealing with traffic signals.

Identity is primarily about rules and how we follow these rules. Identities such as gender, caste and religion are largely decided by the norms of a larger society, and most times, socialisation is nothing but learning how to follow these norms. So how we behave according to our gender, or our religious and caste identities, is influenced by a set of social rules, some explicit and many implicit. Living in society is then largely a matter of following these rules, stopping at the 'social red lights' as required.

But since identity is intensely personal, we also repeatedly jump the social red light. We break social rules constantly and in doing so assert our own individual decision-making capacity. Choosing our own identity — how we see ourselves — is one of the most cherished autonomies that we have. However, this autonomy is what is being challenged today by small groups who take on the authority of defining what our identities should be.

The erosion of autonomy

Today, it is not easy to belong to anything since our belongingness is constantly challenged by others. If you thought that being an Indian was a simple matter, then think again, for protesting against the policies of a ruling government, questioning the cynical use of the national anthem in movie halls or even thinking that there are actually decent ordinary people in Pakistan are all reasons for your identity as an Indian to be questioned. We are slowly losing our autonomy to define ourselves, to define who we are and who we want to be seen as.

In the recent jallikattu case, the claims and counterclaims were not as much about bulls as it was about the identity of being Tamil. People who wrote in support of the ban on jallikattu were labelled as anti-Tamil. Movie stars, among others, who supported jallikattu repeatedly invoked jallikattu as embodying the essence of being Tamil. This was indeed a new public definition of being a Tamil.

In all these cases, small groups are defining the rules of what an identity is. Instead of the state or the larger society which earlier did this task, it is increasingly smaller vocal groups that have anointed themselves as judge and enforcers of identity. This is exactly like having a group of people standing at signal lights waiting to catch those who jump the signals.

We have come to this point only because those who are supposed to do the job of creating meaningful social rules have abdicated their responsibility. Just like the lack of traffic police leads to individuals who suddenly decide to regulate traffic, so too the lack of political leaders leads to small groups taking over the task of regulating society.

This is a consequence of the nature of democratic politics. Representative politics is a system where we voluntarily give away our autonomy to politicians. Voting for somebody is to voluntarily give a "power of attorney" to that individual to speak and govern on our behalf. We gift the politicians the right to govern us in the hope that they will do the right thing by us. Alas, this is a hope that is no longer possible in democracies around the world and in India.

Democracy is the contract by which we voluntarily agree to follow the rules created by a group of people whom we elect. The other direction of the contract is that the politicians not only make rules that benefit the citizens but also communicate the intention behind those rules in clear terms. When these intentions are left ambiguous, social conflicts arise since individuals and groups interpret the intentions behind rules to suit their interests, leading to the failure of the democratic contract.

One of the first signs that the system has failed is when the unelected start dictating the society with their definition of what social rules mean instead of democratically negotiating these rules. They then run through society like they run through signal lights while the rest of us sit and watch helplessly waiting for the lights to change.

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