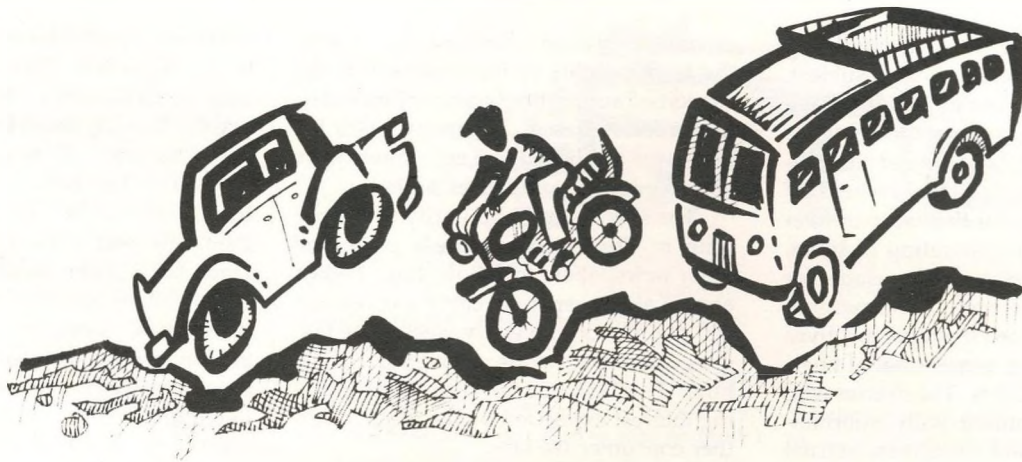


Checks and Balances

Making Transportation Systems Accountable



Mr. A on his moped is edged off a city road by Mr. B in his truck. Mr. A finds himself navigating a mega pothole and loses his balance, sustaining injuries from his fall. Can Mr. A take the city corporation to the court for neglecting its primary duty in keeping city roads navigable and safe? Is road maintenance a mandatory function of government?

And like Mr. A, what of countless others, who've suffered damage or injury due to unmarked road dividers made invisible by oncoming headlights, due to poorly illuminated streets, stray animals, malfunctioning traffic signals etc? What of pedestrians who've hurt themselves negotiating dangerous carriageways because footpaths are simply unusable? As consumers of a service or amenity provided by the city corporation to which they pay taxes, do they not have a right to safe roads and freedom of mobility?

In its present form, the consumer protection act does not allow recourse to consumer courts for instances such as these. But if the consumer awakening implies that providers of a service/amenity or product must be accountable for quality to its consumers or purchasers, then surely there is scope to widen the purview of COPRA.

If we must adopt western models of urban development, we must also incorporate the checks and balances that most western societies accept in consensus.

Take public transport, for example. Like most metros in industrialised countries, Indian cities urgently need to give primacy to public transport systems. So far, there is no coherent policy on transportation and traffic in this country, especially as far as the consumer is concerned.

Our cities, 12 of which accommodate 40 per cent of all the vehicles in the country, merely move from one crisis to another, and the crucial importance of traffic and transportation management in the development of urban areas is underplayed or ignored.

So, instead of keeping the pedestrian, the cyclist and the user of public transport as the cornerstones of traffic policy, the government is recklessly and unrestrictedly encouraging millions of cars, and worse, two wheelers on our roads each year.

By 2000 A.D., we will have 30 cities with a million-plus population. In some of them, it is still not too late to learn from the experience of other cities and give prime importance to non-congesting transportation systems, that is : pedestrians,

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public buses and cyclists.

Any upwardly mobile citizen's first dream is, understandably, to acquire a vehicle for personal mobility (most middle and upper class people believe that public transport is what others must use). But, as western countries discover to their chagrin, personal mobility taken to an extreme means reduced mobility for all. Too many private vehicles, quite simply, choke up roads. When individual freedom becomes collectively damaging, it has to be restricted.

But will the newly awakened consumer, bold and confident of her/his rights, agree to restrictions on personal freedom? Here we turn to the other face of consumer issues. The same consumer who may justifiably demand city government which is accountable to tax paying citizens must also accept that his rights as a consumer are incumbent upon the larger interests of society, whether in transportation or in anything else.

The Indian consumer movement will come of age only when it is generally accepted that both providers and consumers of a good or service are reciprocally accountable. ■

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