

TAMING THE BEAST

Some years ago -I guess the year was 2009- I remember having come across a news item in the local newspaper under the heading 'Vazhikannu'. It was about a training programme that the paper had started with the intention of inculcating in school children a social commitment to road safety. I was particularly drawn to the efforts of the AJB School in Palakkad. They took the initiative to get the drivers of public vehicles to participate in their innovative awareness campaign through rallies and street plays and to get them to take a solemn pledge at the end of the campaign that they would not drink and drive or break traffic rules or show road rage or exceed speed limits or do anything that would distract their attention while they were driving. Surely, we too can take a leaf out of their book.

Any highway code would tell you that knowing and applying traffic rules could significantly reduce road accident casualties. Cutting the number of deaths and injuries that occur on our roads every day is a responsibility we all share, whether we are pedestrians, cyclists, motorcycle riders or drivers of vehicles big or small. But, there's the rub. How many of us know the rules, let alone apply the rules? Not all that many, I suspect. More so of the guardians of law, among whom are many who cannot identify traffic offences or, if indeed they can, they turn a blind eye even to the most blatant of traffic violations. A detached observer of our roads can see how the drivers who flout the rules do so in order to find out what they can get away with, without extending the common courtesies that they owe to other road users. Again, the less said about road rage the better. Thus, what is obtaining on our roads is a free-for-all leading to mayhem. No wonder, we have the dubious distinction of holding pride of place for the carnage on our roads.

My mind harks back to my East Africa days some fifty-odd years ago and I remember how at a social get-together a trick question that was posed flummoxed every one of us. The man who asked the question was an old Africa hand and this was his question: "Can you name the most dangerous beast in Africa?" To each answer his response was a firm "No". After we had exhausted our stock of animal names and admitted defeat, he said in a deadpan voice, "An African on a bicycle" It was a fact that an African always rode hell-for-leather on his new possession. Thankfully, there weren't many African-owned cars or trucks or buses on the roads in those days. If we were to transpose that get-together to Kerala now, we can well imagine what the answer would be. There would be more than a few 'beasts' to name and tame. We are always in such a tearing hurry, aren't we?

Alcohol is exhilarating, but it can kill or maim. Speed is exhilarating, but it will kill or maim. Lane-hopping is exciting, but it gets you nowhere. One-upping the other road users might massage your ego and give momentary thrill, but again it kills. But above all, learning driving at our so-called driving schools is the surest way to be killed or maimed. Wayward driving is the curse of Kerala.

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