

Moving Targets: traffic rules, state authority and road safety in Hyderabad, India

That there exists a stereotypical figure of the *typical Indian driver* is a truism. Most often a working-class male body, this figure that treats “traffic rules are mere suggestions” has been the source of culturally intimate humor and international comedy for a long while now. In a sense, the chaos on the roads reveals – both – a citizen that flouts traffic rules and regulations and a state that is unable to elicit obedience to its authority. At the same time, the past decade has witnessed more robust discussions around how to fix the problem of traffic indiscipline. With rapid intensification in vehicle ownership accompanied by a rising incidence of road crashes, the disobedience of traffic rules and regulations is being increasingly framed as a public health hazard. In response to this, state agencies and local NGOs in the country have been attempting to make people obey traffic rules and regulations using a variety of legislative, persuasive, and infrastructural strategies. And yet, there has been little research on how these strategies are implemented, how the low-level state functionaries tasked with implementing these strategies address traffic management, and how drivers themselves navigate both the laws and the traffic it is supposed to regulate. In this dissertation, I plug this gap.

Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted over seventeen months the southern Indian metropolis of Hyderabad, I explore how efforts at reforming driving habits are being conceptualized and implemented by state agencies like the traffic police, and how these attempts resonate with motorists. What follows, in a sense, is an ethnography of an effort, an *ongoing* project of social disciplining. It captures but a moment in the unfolding of developmental idealism in the country congealed in the case of bringing about – or enforcing – order on the streets. My intention is not to adjudicate whether the state has “failed” or “succeeded” in imposing its will on the people. Instead of unpacking whether or not driving behavior *actually* changes, I probe the

kinds of narratives, imaginations, and expectations that constitute the relationship between state agencies and motorists in Hyderabad. By ethnographically examining the way motorists interact with the different manifestations of state power and authority – from driving licenses to speedbumps to the figure of the traffic policeman – I trace the emergence of certain “infrastructural aptitudes” and durable dispositions towards rules and regulations in the world’s largest democracy. By analyzing how mundane encounters reproduce identities of *both* citizens and states, how they are validated interactionally, and how they stabilize understandings of social life, I take a relational approach to studying state-citizen relations without privileging the ontological primacy of either. I argue that the perceived source of the unruliness on the road is itself a *moving target* – both the state and citizen are co-producing each other as the *real* problem that needs to be fixed. Ultimately, I show how road safety has become an idiom in relaying the dilemmas around state authority and legitimacy, conundrums around citizen responsibility, and the seductive fantasies of development, modernity and progress.