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MOVING TARGETS: TRAFFIC RULES, STATE AUTHORITY, AND ROAD SAFETY IN HYDERABAD, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

That there exists a stereotypical figure of the *typical Indian driver* is a truism. Most often a working-class male body, this figure – who treats "traffic rules are mere suggestions" – has constituted a source of culturally-intimate humor and international comedy for a long time. In a sense, the chaos on the roads reveals both a citizen who 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 the emergence of more robust discussions around how to fix the problem of traffic indiscipline. With the rapid intensification of vehicle ownership, accompanied by a rising incidence of road crashes, the disobedience of traffic rules and regulations is being framed increasingly as a public health hazard. In response to this depiction, 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, little research has explored 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 road laws and the traffic such legislation intends to regulate. In this dissertation, I fill this gap.

Drawing on multi-sited, ethnographic fieldwork conducted over seventeen months in 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 particular case of the state's effort to bring about – or enforce – 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 for relaying particular dilemmas around state authority and legitimacy, conundrums around citizen responsibility, and the seductive fantasies of development, modernity, and progress.

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CHAPTER ONE

Driving Toward Development: An Introduction

On an overcast Friday afternoon in June 2017, I was walking on the busy Greenlands road towards the even busier Ameerpet crossroads in Hyderabad, when an impatient autorickshaw[1] honked loudly behind me. The autorickshaw driver was driving on the wrong side of the road, in a bid to cater to a potential customer standing by the entrance of a popular clinic. As I tried to jump out of the way, one of the determined wheels of the rickshaw almost ran over my unsuspecting foot. Instantly furious, I shouted at the autorickshaw driver. In his single-minded pursuit to cater to a prospective customer, the driver had driven far too close to my body, prompting me to twist my ankle to protect myself. As I hurled a Telugu slur in his direction, he stopped driving, turned around, glared at me, and shouted back, "Why can't you look and walk? Are your eyes on your head?" Stumped, at what seemed to me an unfair accusation, I argued, "You are driving on the wrong side, and *you* are shouting at me?" While several pedestrians stared at me curiously, two people – a hawker who was selling guavas and bananas by the side of the road and the woman who had noncommittally hailed the autorickshaw – asked me if my foot was broken. Meanwhile, the autorickshaw driver sped away – leaving his potential customer behind.

The hawker, who knew me since I was a regular customer of his, quite simply grinned at me – these street skirmishes, after all, were nothing out of the ordinary. While conflicts such as the one in which I had just been implicated were part of everyday negotiations around one's right to the road (Bedi, forthcoming; Guffin 2015b; Hiebert 1976), that it transpired while I was on my way to a meeting with Rosie and Archana, two citizen-activists in their late 20s who had recently

1. In India/South Asia, a small motor vehicle with three wheels that is used as a taxi.

founded a "road safety volunteer force," was ethnographic serendipity. I decided to narrate my "almost accident" to them, partly because I genuinely wanted to vent and partly to hear what they might say. Upon hearing the story, Rosie shook her head and agitatedly said,

> I was coming here on my scooter[2] and almost got hit by this car that jumped the red signal at Panjagutta. This is exactly why we are doing the work of road safety awareness in Hyderabad. Ninety percent of the drivers on our roads have no road sense. No wonder so many people are dying every day in road accidents. Today this autorickshaw driver almost hit you; tomorrow, he will run someone over because he is being so careless about driving on the wrong side of the road! Rules are there for people's safety, but such a simple thing, also, people here won't understand. It is the lack of education or just our mentality – I don't know! You know, 400 people die every single day in road accidents in India? About 17 people die every hour. Just imagine. And our leaders talk about this development, that development. What development? With development, roads in Hyderabad have just become…*battlefields*! So much traffic, so much chaos! (Field Notes, June 2017)

I offered the fruit-seller's explanation as somewhat of a clarification of this seemingly brazen act of defiance; perhaps the U-Turn was really too inconvenient in its location? Rosie scoffed, "Please! You are giving the autorickshaw driver too much credit. Drivers here are not innocent. They always have one thousand excuses when it comes to breaking traffic rules. It would have taken the autorickshaw driver two more minutes to take the U-Turn. It is just a mentality in our country – if we see a rule, we just have to break it. We have some allergy to rules and discipline in our country, I often think." I could not help but laugh in response. Archana started laughing, too. It was hard not to; joking about Hyderabadi driving was a culturally intimate norm of sociality in the city.

Rosie, however, did not laugh. Instead, she asked me if I had a photograph of the autorickshaw driver who had almost run over my foot. I did not. Maybe I seemed a bit confused, for she exclaimed, "You *must* get the HawkEye app. If you have this app, you can take photographs of vehicles who are breaking traffic rules and you can upload it to the app. The police will automatically send the driver a *challan*.[3] Hyderabad Police is definitely becoming more proactive

2. Moped.
3. Traffic ticket.

and innovative in trying to make people follow traffic rules." Both Rosie and Archana, I learned later, often take photographs and upload them to the app. Rosie continued, "Whenever I see someone driving on [the] wrong side or not wearing a helmet, I try to take a photo and upload it. How else will people learn to not break rules? I feel so bad for the traffic police on our roads. They stand there all day, dealing with this chaos on the road. Nobody listens to them, nobody fears them. How much can the traffic police control? There has to be fear amongst people. We all need to do our bit to reform our society."

I felt the usual sense of immediate discomfort that I do with any initiatives that aim to "make every citizen a cop" – which is quite literally the catchphrase used by the city police to promote the HawkEye app. And yet, I could sense Rosie's and Archana's genuine conviction that they were using the app for the "greater good" of road safety. Both of them – like countless others I would meet during fieldwork – were convinced that a very strict approach towards enforcing traffic rules was imperative to save motorists from their own worst instincts. But while Archana used the app, too, and – as I would learn over the next few months – quite brazenly berated people for driving on the wrong side of the road or riding on sidewalks, she seemed a bit dissatisfied with Rosie's explanation about the Indian driving mentality being allergic to rules and regulations. Instead, she insisted, "But Rosie, it is not all the fault of drivers only." Turning to me, she said,

> I agree that drivers break rules, and everyone here has a *take-light*[4] attitude but, you know what is equally important? People here don't *respect* their government. The government does not work for ordinary people. You just go out on the road and look. You will see no footpaths, no pedestrian signals, no proper signboards, no lane markings, no proper U-turns. In fact, not even proper roads! Plus, corruption everywhere and – as we all know – most government vehicles only break maximum rules on the road. In fact, government only breaks maximum laws. Then why will public respect the government? Has it been a good role model for citizens? Then why will anyone follow rules on their own? It has been seventy years since independence, but the government has not managed to win the respect of people – and that is why we are still a developing country (Field notes, June 2017).

4. "Take light" is a local phrase that means, "Take it easy."

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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 subject of international (and orientalist) tragicomedy for a long while now.[5] A simple search on YouTube for "Indian driving" reveals a plethora of video footage documenting a maverick masculinist sensibility that plays with danger – gleefully, skillfully and, sometimes, cluelessly. By extension, Indian roads are depicted as sites of rampant rule-breaking, and, very often, the all-encompassing aesthetic category of *chaos* is used to describe them. As such, scholarship on Indian streets has shown that the portrayal of the Indian road as disorderly, unruly, and "lawless" is not new but rather a long-standing classic depiction in colonial and postcolonial official and elite discourses (see Arnold 2012; Anjaria 2012; Edensor 2004). This representation of the typical Indian street has, arguably, only intensified with increasing urbanization (Baviskar 2011). As a "new India" attempts to emerge as a regional superpower, and as Indian cities aspire to a feeling of global belonging, the unruly driver is a visible and irritating reminder of the unmodern, "old India": latently, if not blatantly, insubordinate to the authority of the state *and/or* pathetically and tragically unaware of the diktats of modern civility (Arnold 2012; Kaur 2012).

While the figure of the "unruly driver" in India is not new, having circulated since the early days of motorization (Arnold 2012), the past decade has witnessed more robust discussions emerge

5. Travelogues, movies, and books depict Indian roads as anarchic, with tragicomic depictions of bikes, cars, pedestrians, and cattle running "wild." While several examples exist on the internet, one such video, titled "India Driving" on YouTube, has close to ten million views and another, titled "Incredible Indian Traffic – isn't it crazy?!" has close to a million views. A montage of clips, this second video is quite telling in its narration of Indian streets in terms of chaotic self-sustenance.

around how to fix the problem of traffic indiscipline. With rapid motorization[6] resulting in an increase in road crashes, deaths, and injuries in the country and with increasing international[7] attention on this issue in low- and middle-income countries like India, road safety has emerged as a visible and urgent social problem in the country – one that the state is seemingly committed to solve.[8] India has recorded no fewer than about 1.5 million road deaths and 5.5 million traffic injuries over the past decade – or as Rosie put it, 400 deaths a day (WHO 2018).[9] That most of these deaths are of individuals in the age group of 18-60 years old that is considered dear to the country's productive capacity – which cost the country 3-5% of the national GDP – only makes national anxieties around this issue more pronounced (Saluja 2019). Traffic indiscipline and, more broadly, urban chaos are being redefined as public health hazards. Tellingly, dramatic snapshots of chaotic – or what Govind Gopakumar (2020) calls "shabby" – road traffic often accompany statistics on death and injury and road safety reports by organizations like the United Nations.

6. According to government-issued data, the number of registered motor vehicles in India increased by over 870% from 1951 to 2018, from 306,000 to over 250 million. This includes all sorts of motorized vehicles, not just cars. Two-wheelers, in fact, constitute the largest share. (GoI 2018)

7. The United Nations declared 2010-2020 as the "Decade of Action on Road Safety," and there have been programmatic interventions by iNGOs and NGOs in low- and middle-income countries ever since. For a critical appraisal, see Lamont (2010) and Lamont and Lee (2015).

8. This is perhaps borne most from the fact that in 2019, the Indian Parliament passed several significant amendments to the legislation that governs the ownership and movement of motor vehicles in the country (see the conclusion chapter). These amendments marked the first time in 30 years that changes were made to the law. Furthermore, the National Minister of Road Transport and Highways signed the Brasilia Declaration on Road Safety in 2015, thereby pledging to reduce road deaths in the country by 50% by 2020. Whether or not these moves "actually" have consequences, my point is that there is a visible emergence of road safety as an important policy issue for the state.

9. Data regarding road crashes in India are a controversial issue. I cannot go into the details of the issues with data reporting and collecting here, for I am not an expert – neither is it particularly important for the query I am pursuing in this dissertation. The reader may want to take a look at Dandona et al. (2020), Bhalla et al. (2017) and Bhalla (2020).

Much of the state-led and middle-class discourses around this issue bring up "driving indiscipline" as the chief cause of road crashes, bringing under scrutiny driving habits in the country. "Bad" driving habits and traffic indiscipline are thus held responsible for turning streets into, as Rosie put it, *battlefields* – arenas of contestation, skirmishes, harm, injury, and death. That the founder of India's most prominent road safety NGO SaveLIFE Foundation referred to cars as "weapons" in the hands of untrained drivers is hardly a coincidence (Halarnkar 2017).

In response, state-led efforts have proliferated to reform driving habits and instill "road sense" – a popular term that is best described, perhaps, as a civil obedience to traffic rules and regulations. Thus, pushing for the creation of autonomous, self-disciplining subjects is considered imperative to the making of *good citizens* and, by extension, a *modern* and civilized nation.

Many of the efforts around reforming driving habits have been comprised of a mix of punitive and persuasive strategies for making people follow traffic rules. Along with legislative changes (see Chapter 6), awareness campaigns around road safety have intensified, and law-enforcement capacities in the country have increased – especially in major cities like Hyderabad. For instance, to borrow Rosie's words, the traffic police have become more *proactive* in problematizing driving indiscipline and rule-breaking on the roads, and innovative techniques such as the HawkEye app are evidence of this proactivity.

While it is tempting to treat the reformation of driving habits and the depiction of traffic chaos as constituting yet another middle-class effort to discipline urban spaces, the critique of the state articulated by Archana in the exchange shared earlier reveals something more fundamental about the relationship between motorists and the state. In drawing a link between obedience of traffic rules and the lack of respect people have for the political power expecting obedience, Archana points quite simply to the fragility – if not crisis – of authority and legitimacy of the state.

On one level this raises a descriptive question, namely, "Is the state *able* to command obedience by motorists?" But beyond that, the situation raises moral concerns: "Can it even *expect* obedience if it is unable to fulfill a set of other functions and, thereby, garner respect?" The chaos on the roads reveals both a citizen who flouts traffic rules and regulations, on the one hand, and a state that is unable to elicit obedience to its authority, on the other. But despite the hyper-visibility of both the road and the figure of the typical Indian driver, little research has explored how traffic regulations are implemented, how the low-level state functionaries tasked with implementing those laws address traffic management, and how drivers themselves navigate the streets, the traffic, and the laws that are meant to regulate driving. This gap in research becomes particularly salient in the context of the increasing motorization of Indian roads and the large-scale infrastructural changes brought on by urbanization.

In this dissertation, I fill this gap. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over seventeen months in the southern Indian metropolis of Hyderabad, I explore how attempts to reform driving habits are being conceptualized and implemented by state agencies like the traffic police and how these efforts resonate with motorists in the city. But instead of looking narrowly at the dyad of the traffic police and the motorist, I argue that interactions with other state agencies implicated in the regulation of driving shape the ways in which state authority is perceived and experienced in urban India. By ethnographically examining how motorists interact with the different manifestations of state power and authority – from driving licenses and speed bumps (also called "speed breakers") to the figure of the traffic police officer – I trace the emergence of certain "infrastructural aptitudes" (Lee 2015) and durable dispositions towards state authority. Analyzing how these encounters reproduce identities of *both* citizens and states, how they are validated interactionally, and how they stabilize understandings of social life can offer a means to

think about states and citizens together, without privileging the ontological primacy of either (see Glaeser 2011).

In one sense, what follows is an ethnography of an effort, an *ongoing* project of social disciplining. It captures but a moment in the unfolding of developmental idealism in a country, congealed in the particular case of the state's effort to bring about – or enforce – order on the streets. It bears mentioning that my intention is not to adjudicate whether the state has "failed" or "succeeded" in imposing its will on the people. In fact, I hope the reader realizes through the text that such a question becomes ludicrous in a context in which fixing a problem is like a game of Whac-A-Mole: each time a task is finished or a problem dealt with, yet another task or problem appears elsewhere. I unpack not whether driving behavior *actually* changes, but rather the kinds of narratives, imaginations, and expectations that constitute the relationship between state agencies and motorists in Hyderabad. What I hope to show with this approach is that, in the ongoing project of making roads safer through an explicit focus on changing driver habits, the perceived source of 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 for relaying particular dilemmas around state authority and legitimacy, conundrums around citizen responsibility, and the seductive fantasies of development, modernity, and progress.

Driving as an Ethnography of the State

> "We won't pay fines, we won't follow traffic rules, we will drive without licenses, we will drink alcohol and drive, we will argue with policemen, we will piss on the roads, we will shit on the streets, we will do whatever the hell we want – but we will have a hundred thousand opinions about what the government should do! Madam, India *really* is the most democratic country in the world."
>
> – Suri Babu, a traffic police inspector

As a field of interaction, the road cuts across many categories of citizens. It is a site for literal and figurative collisions of very diverse social worlds and of historic simmering political contestations. People from all walks of life use the road, drivers of very different classes drive on it, and multiple kinds of vehicles constitute the typical Indian street.[10] In a sense, then, the road is a snapshot of Indian democracy in all of its multiplicity and diversity, with all of its frictions and fictions. Indeed, during my fieldwork, the disorder on the roads was literally framed as a sign *democracy* in action – as in Suri Babu's quote, too. I propose that this depiction helps explain why attempts at enforcing order on the roads reveal something more general and meaningful about state-citizen relations in contemporary India. With increasing road traffic, the changing composition of the "Indian middle class," the cultural meaning of automobility, the proliferation and changing quality of road networks, and the manifestation of governmental authority in the form of new technologies of policing (speed sensors, CCTV cameras, body-worn cameras, etc.), understanding the relationship between motorists and the state becomes ever more important.

Literature on automobility in the United States shows that, with motorization in the early twentieth century, road safety, traffic indiscipline, and "chaos" began to emerge as important social problems (Packer 2008; Norton 2008; Seo 2019). In response, state agencies – especially law enforcement agencies – had to come up with different strategies for making people follow traffic rules. Legal historian Sarah Seo contends that at the heart of these efforts was a puzzle: why are otherwise *law-abiding* citizens disobeying traffic laws? (2019, 24). Official and popular discourses

10. While some scholars argue that there is an ongoing "installation" of automobility in urban India (Gopakumar 2020), I would argue that the obdurate resilience of the pedestrian, the hawker, the autorickshaw, the bicycle, and the most popular motor vehicle on Indian roads that is the two-wheeler all convey that this installation is not as unopposed or as hegemonic as it is in the United States.

that emerged in the early years of motorization in the United States blamed the seduction of speed, or what Norbert Elias calls the "decivilizing" potentials of modern technology (1995), for *making* otherwise civil Americans unruly; the motorcar – as a technology – is to blame for disrupting moral order and creating chaos, not citizens (Beckmann 2004). Thus, the blame, so to speak, was on the *machines* that were crafting reckless citizens – a far cry from the genteel civility of "loyal citizen" that America had carefully cultivated over time (Seo 2019, 29).[11]

It is precisely this presumption around the "nature" of citizens that makes the case of road safety in a postcolonial democracy like India different from the United States. The straightforward assumption of there ever having been a "law-abiding" Indian citizen is often missing from popular discourses. Instead, the seemingly ubiquitous disobedience of traffic rules is often read as *yet another* example of a larger national mindset that finds a way around laws and rules. Or, as Rosie put it, it is a *mentality* of thinking rules are meant to be broken.[12] From this perspective, the culture of driving – of which dis/obedience of traffic rules is a huge part – is read as an outcome of the ways in which people relate to rules in general (see Factor et al. 2008). That is, people's orientation towards traffic rules and regulations probably falls in line with how they relate to other kinds of rules and regulations. In news articles and everyday conversation, driving behavior is compared to how Indians (mis)behave in queues, or how they spit right under signs that say, "No Spitting," and so on.[13] In the words of Rosie, "It is almost as if Indians are allergic to rules and regulations."

11. Of course, this was a very racialized and gendered category. Black men and women drivers were – and are – subject to pathologizing and criminalizing representations. See Parker (2009) for an analysis.

12. In my conversations with motorists and state agencies in Hyderabad, it was the English word "mentality" that was used to describe what is most closely approximated by the word "mindset."

13. For a rather comprehensive list of analogies, see Borker (2015).

This diagnosis of the "Indian mentality" as being inclined towards rule-breaking has deeper roots. David Arnold (2012) shows how efforts by civil society and the state to make motorists follow the rules of the road in late colonial India often clashed with what seemed to be an insurmountable challenge: motorists seeming to reformists to be inherently incapable of self-reform and autonomous judgment. Written off as "foolish or impetuous agents of their own calamity" (133) by the British colonial officers and the English-educated civilized Indians, the rule-breaking Indian "uneducated mass" was configured as being inherently irresponsible and self-destructive, unable to discipline itself. Also meticulously documented by the British officers was the purported *joy* colonized natives expressed upon breaking traffic rules – the ultimate marker, in such accounts, of the colonial subject's infantile immaturity, or – as a report of the Madras Traffic Board put it – of the "*perverse delight* that the public experienced in disregarding traffic rules" (136). This characterization of the short-sighted and immature Indian found its way into writings on postcolonial India, too. For instance, in a travelogue about "chaotic" street life in Kolkata in 1971, British journalist George Moorhouse observed soberly that the Indian metropolis was on the brink of collapse, noting that "left to themselves Indians will take this process of dissolution forward to a truly dystopian self-destructive finale" (cited in Gopakumar 2020, 7). Not only is the colonized mind unable to reform itself, but it actually derives pleasure from being uncivilized – perhaps the greatest marker of its uncivility.

This trope, of the "self-destructive," immature Indian compulsively breaking traffic rules, can be found even today in public culture. Much of the moralizing discourse around the importance of obedience to rule and its link to modernity, civility, and, even, safety often comes from the urban elite, who tend to self-identify as the middle class or the "common man" (Kaur and Hansen 2016). But, arguably, there is no single, unified image of the rule-breaker in contemporary India.

On the one hand, there is the classed image of the subaltern uneducated masses – low-income, low-caste, periurban or rural, and almost always male – who are portrayed often as unable to exercise autonomous judgment or as possessing no capacity for disciplining their self-destructive urges (Mazzarella 2013; Chakrabarty 2007). Characterized as either the "infant" (Roy 2007) or a "pissing man," or even an "animal" (see figure 1.1), this figure is presented as one who needs to be protected from his own worst instincts.

Figure 1.1. "Wake Up! Hyderabad" road safety campaign photograph from 2007 (A). Source: Hyderabad Traffic Police. Used with permission.

As William Mazzarella (2013, 15) notes in his work on censorship in India, justifications for this paternalism are often based on an ideological loop: *because* "the uneducated masses" have been subject to the repressive subjugations of colonial rule, they are unable to handle democratic "freedoms" and should thus be protected from their own tendencies to misuse freedoms and from their own harmful unruliness. Very often, this logic is mapped onto a developmental teleology: Indians are quite simply not *mature* enough to be able to handle the independence and autonomy

that being behind the wheel afford. Statistical data on road deaths and injuries are served up to emphasize precisely this wider narrative.

At the same time, I would argue that the object of disciplining, when it comes to traffic rules, is a bit more difficult to pin down. The figure of the unruly driver, for example, is more capacious and allows for the attribution of more agency to those flouting rules, as seen in figure 1.2. In the popular internet meme depicted in this figure, the "real Indian" is not evading the speed bump, is also not wearing a helmet, and is smoking a joint. It is a perfect example of culturally-intimate humor about authentic Indian driving and popular associations with the "unruly driver" as reckless and nearly always male.. Notably, the presumed citizen being brought up in these comments around rule-breaking is not necessarily always low-income or a member of the uneducated masses. While that characterization *is* a large part of the middle-class discourse around rule-breaking (Chowdhury 2019), it is *also* financial and political elite who are viewed as disruptive and not rule-abiding. The difference, of course, is that the elites who "never follow rules" are understood as doing so out of a sense of entitlement and privilege. That people affix illegal "Government of India" stickers on their cars in order to break traffic rules without facing consequences is testimony to this sentiment (Ali 2016).

Figure 1.2. “Fake Indian / Real Indian” internet meme.
Source: The Funny Indian.

Similarly, the circulating image of the unruly driver is often also that of middle class and elite youth speeding on their motorcycles, refusing the wisdom of traffic rules and regulations – not unaware of traffic rules, necessarily, but breaking them nonetheless with cheeky joy (see figure 1.3). For instance, one journalist writing about traffic behavior in India noted that “order makes Indians unhappy. They will use any ruse to romanticize and pursue chaos.” (Joseph 2019). Relayed through humor, a mundane, everyday act like rule-breaking is sustained, reproduced, and sometimes valorized as a core feature of national identity (Billig 1995; Edensor 2004; Herzfeld 2005).

Figure 1.3. "Wake Up! Hyderabad" road safety campaign photograph from 2007 (B)
A photograph of four young men turning their motorcycles around to escape getting caught by the traffic policemen – most likely because they none of them were wearing their helmets.
Source: Hyderabad Traffic Police. Used with permission.

Irrespective of the diagnosis of rule-breaking and beyond the culturalist narrative around rule-breaking, what is more commonly held as indisputable is that the traffic indiscipline betrays a state that has no grip on its citizens. As popular writer Manu Joseph puts it, "Nations in plain sight often look better than they really are, but the Indian road lays bare the secrets of the republic. It reveals a nation where there is an overt conflict between law and enforcement, and a triumph of informality over order" (2014). Speaking to this kind of triumph, in an article in *The Hindu* titled, "Why Do We Break Rules?" Geeta Padmanabhan contends that there is a widely held and inclusive understanding in India that rules are, simply, meant to be broken, but it is possible only because "no one gets punished." In making this point about the innate mentality behind all kinds of rule-flouting, she groups traffic rules together with other kinds of conventions and rules, and argues the following:

> Rule-ignoring is inclusive. Everyone does it — class, caste, education, marital status, fitness no bar. All of us litter in public places, buy tickets in the black market, ignore stop-signs, negotiate with cops when caught, jump queues, park/drive on footpaths, or overtake on the wrong side. We smoke in the open, let our pets poop in the street and dump construction debris where people walk. We occupy public space with ramps outside homes. Is there an end to this list? *Rule-breaking is a great leveler: no one gets punished*. If you're caught red-handed by a misguided watchman or an idealistic cop, you know how to wriggle out. (Padmanabhan 2018)

In drawing a link between rule-breaking and lack of repercussions, Padmanabhan is articulating what policy literature often refers to as "weak law enforcement." In other words, the citizen is being imagined in relation to state authority. The unruly citizen is produced by the state that is unable to – either by coercion or persuasion – make it obey traffic rules. Unlike an image of the state as being iron-fisted, as with the case of censorship (Mazzarella 2013) or family planning (Tarlo 2003), traffic indiscipline actually belies the state's ability to control. This is important to note, because even in colonial discourses around traffic regulation, it was not just the driver that was imagined as inherently unruly but also the state as not improving its reach. For instance, a 1925 report on Hyderabadi traffic in *Times of India* states:

> Rules of road exist, but unfortunately, they are more honored in the breach than in the observance, and accidents, especially in crowded thoroughfares are not uncommon. Local papers have often pointed out to the authorities the necessity for more rigorous enforcements of rules, but no improvement in this direction is yet evident.

That a very similar discourse around traffic rules and the lack of their enforcement continues to exist today – almost a century after this report was written – points to how much this idea of weak law enforcement endures. As a lawyer in his 50s who lives in a gated community in the outskirts of the city memorably said to me, "Your whole dissertation can be summed up in one sentence: the chaos on the roads tells you that our citizens lack both discipline, etiquette, and common sense *and* the government is unable to make people obey its rules and regulations." His solution to this was – like Rosie's solution – to instill a sense of *fear* amongst motorists. The state appeared to be weak and, therefore, needed to flex its muscles in order for people to comply. As I will show in

Chapter 6, this widespread desire to instill a sense of fear in people led to a major increase in traffic penalties at a national scale.

But alongside this image of the state as *weak* exists a parallel narrative that the Indian state does not *inspire* obedience. My interlocutors often told me that, while Indians tend to break rules on the bus stand, the same Indians will follow rules at metro stations and malls – signifiers of private sector investment. For instance, a traffic police inspector himself told me that Indians know that if it is a *government*-controlled space, one can pay bribes or break rules and there will be no repercussions; however, if they are at a metro station or a mall, they know that they have to follow rules or face consequences. In other words, the rules in spaces that appear to have "nothing to do with the government" seem more authoritative to such people. An additional implicit understanding surfaced, that the private sector gives people benefits and, therefore, can legitimately expect obedience to rules and regulations. As a tweet posted in the wake of increased penalties pointed out, "One can't levy Scandinavian-level fines for African-level infrastructure." In other words, citizens don't perceive discipline by the state as legitimate when the state itself appears unruly to them, does not deliver in its capacity to provide, and is unable to exude an aura of authority. As a recent news article in *LiveMint* notes:

> The Delhi Metro was, and still is, the anti-matter of India. Trains arrived when the electronic board said they would, even when the time displayed was not divisible by five or 10. As the Delhi Metro was excellent at most things it did, commuters took seriously its threat of heavy fines for spitting and throwing garbage. *The system conveyed that if it can run such a good service, it also knows how to fine*… Indian roads, on the other hand, are poorly designed and managed. Most countries in plain sight look richer than they really are. Indian roads make India look much poorer than what it is. (Joseph 2019; italics added)

In shifting the onus of responsibility for indiscipline from the driver to the state, this sort of relational understanding points to the need to understand why people disobey traffic rules less in terms of mentalities or "state capacity" and more in terms of how the state *appears* to the citizen.

This is not true only with respect to middle-class perceptions of the state. In fact, as I will show in this dissertation, the critique of the state is loudest and most searing coming from those who drive on the roads the most: drivers of autorickshaws, cabs, and other commercial vehicles. In several ways, they question the legitimacy of the disciplinary function of the state.

In this dissertation, I explore these tensions around the figure of the unruly citizen and the image of the state and its legitimacy in public life. In doing so, I follow anthropologist Amahl Bishara (2015) in arguing that the mundane and unremarkable act of driving around actually constitutes a key site for the generation of political sensibilities. Along these lines, Bishara shows how the road system is an everyday site where its users come into contact with the work of the state, and, therefore, driving becomes a window through which one can examine popular conceptions of politics. As Bishara puts it, "[T]he road is a place for ranging analysis: informal, inconclusive, sharp, creative" (2015: 48). It is on the road that the citizen confronts the most visible manifestation of state power and disciplinary authority – the traffic policeman – and yet, it is on the road, too, that citizens interpret and evaluate some of the fundamental questions of the state, such as, "Is the state is able to provide services like safe, easy, comfortable and efficient modes of mobility?"

But while Bishara focuses on how political dispositions are reproduced and validated on the road, I take a more processual approach in suggesting that, in fact, as a driver, one comes into contact with the work of the state not just on the road but at several stages of one *becoming* a driver. Studying the state via driving, I contend, is necessarily multi-sited, especially so while analyzing the *implementation* of solutions to solve a social problem. For a body of practices often associated with freedom, individuality and autonomy, driving is actually very tightly regulated by state agencies, and as drivers, we interface with several functions of the state. The road is a

confluence of various manifestations of state avatars – it is at once punitive, pedagogue, and provider. Learning to drive necessitates learning traffic laws, rules, and regulations, all of which are literal manifestations of state authority. The next step of becoming a licensed driver necessitates encountering the state as an examiner. Then, actually driving on the road involves not just potential interactions with law enforcement agencies, but also a sensuous and kinesthetic understanding of the state's capacity to provide adequate infrastructure. Or perhaps we sense the law as concretized in speed bumps. All of these minute acts necessitate encounters with state power and authority, and in these seemingly disparate acts, drivers understand and interpret state legitimacy and capacity.

Thus, the profoundly mundane act of being on the road is imbued with a lens through which one can engage with the "many hands of the state" (Morgan and Orloff 2018). For motorists, the road – with all of its visibility – is a window into observing both the disciplining and the service-provisioning of the state. Probing state-citizen relations via the case of driving and the discourses and practices around it also *requires* that one pay attention to the "the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognized through their effects" (Trouillot 2001, 126). I argue that the messy and often fraught interactions embedded in these ongoing processes of reforming driving habits point to how critiques of the state form a robust part of everyday life in the city. In a sense, road safety activists might be attempting to define "good citizenship" in terms of the extent to which one is being law-abiding while on the road. By engaging in informal and often very sophisticated critiques, motorists are also performing political membership, as one of the chief characteristics of the ideal *citizen* in a democracy is one who questions the state.

What I also offer the reader is an ethnography of the state. This approach departs from conventional work on the state within political sociology. In sociological work on the state, the

visionary apparatus of the state – how the state "sees" and produces knowledge about its populations[14] – has tended to matter more than the visions of the state that get produced, reproduced, and institutionalized in everyday life by citizens. In other words, prevailing work in political sociology has tended to privilege knowledge production *by* the state at the expense of any analysis of quotidian knowledge production *about* the state. The former perspective typically treats the dynamics of power, authority, and legitimacy as functions of the monopoly over knowledge production presumed to be held by the state (Scott 1998; Flyvbjerg 1998; Holston 1989; Joyce 2003; Kligman 1998; O'Connor 2001; Emigh et al. 2015; Loveman 2014; Eyal 2006; Diamant 2001). But while the state may retain a monopoly over *legitimate* forms of knowledge production (Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage 1994), this is a far cry from possessing a monopoly over *all* such forms.

The legibility *of* the state – the way "it" is seen and engaged with – matters to its continued reproduction in society (see Auyero 2012). To what kinds of knowledges could we be privy if we paid attention to the way the state not only produces knowledge – but is itself an object of knowledge? What can we understand about state authority by examining the way people *talk* about it, react to manifestations of it, and obey/disobey it? Going beyond the "functions" of the state and how such functions are depicted in policy papers and statistical simplifications to understand its meaning in social life allows one to inspect the *relationship* between citizens and states. As Levenson and I argue (forthcoming), any political sociology of the state must take *visions of the*

14. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and, more recently, James Scott, sociological work on social control has tended to critically explore how state actors use statistical accounts, medical expertise, scientific reports, architectural plans, bureaucratic rules and guidelines, surveys, graphs, and so on" to make citizens legible and, thus, governable. Defining problems, specifying areas and targets of intervention, determining political goals, calculating resources, and other processes enabled by these "inscription devices" (Latour 1986) make possible forms of knowing and governing and, thus, disciplining. As Clemens and Cook (1999, 454) point out, state legibility transforms "the world to fit the categories."

state just as seriously as it takes the state's vision. And ethnography offers us the tools to track the disaggregated processes and manifestations of state power in order to closely inspect of the material effects of state power by exploring "the subjective dynamic that produces and reproduces the state as objects of fear and attachment, of identification or disavowal, as subjects of power, elusive, unlocatable, ever present, immensely powerful, or impotent" (Aretxaga 2003, 399). What the state *means* to its people matters to its legitimacy – whether or not they obey rules and regulations, whether or not they even think of these rules and regulations as *authoritative.*

In studying the state ethnographically, this dissertation takes seriously a relational approach and asserts that the authority and legitimacy are reproduced as ordinary citizens deal with state officials on ordinary matters (Gupta 2012; Thelen, Vetters and von Benda-Beckmann 2018). Looking beyond everyday resistance or subversion alone opens up possibilities of exploring other modes of engagement with the disciplinary state – mockery, indifference, acceptance, complicity, desire, humor, and shame. It enables us to take a closer look at practices of compromise, cooption, and negotiation that take place between states and citizens; it enables a genuine accounting for incongruities and contingencies in everyday life that constitute politics (Anjaria 2016; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Sharma and Gupta 2006). Mundane encounters between the state and citizens, I show, become generative – and surprising – sites of political comment and critique (Chu 2014; Melly 2017; Das and Poole 2004).

Hyderabad: Global Aspirations, Local Commandments

Home to around 10 million people, the city of Hyderabad[15] is a suitable site for analyzing how the issue of changing driving behavior is also enmeshed in the politics of urbanization and

15. Hyderabad is the capital of Telangana. Telangana officially became the 29th state of India bifurcated from Andhra Pradesh state on June 2, 2014. Hyderabad was the capital of an undivided Andhra

infrastructure. Built in 1591 under the Quṭb Shāhī dynasty (see Beverley 2013; Alam 1965 for a historical account), the city is spread out over an area of 650 square kilometers. Hyderabad is currently the fifth largest metropolitan city in India and has followed a path to urbanization that parallels the growth and development of other large cities in the country.

Neoliberal restructuring of the Indian economy in the 1990s, along with the pre-existing conditions of "city-centric" growth strategies in Telangana's industrial policy (Kennedy and Zerah 2008; Ramachandraiah and Bawa 2000), have catapulted the city into becoming one of the most rapidly urbanizing cities in the country. Much of this infrastructural growth has resulted from the careful cultivation of Hyderabad as a "technology hub" in the late 1990s and early 2000s, under the political leadership of N. Chandrababu Naidu (see Bunnell and Das 2010; Das 2015). From the establishment of one of India's first IT Parks and the iconic Cyber Towers as part of the HITEC City (Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy) in 1997 to the continued expansion and transformation of the northwestern part of the city (and eventual renaming as *Cyberabad*), Hyderabad city is a "classic example of a worlding city" (Das 2015, 57).[16] The area around Hyderabad has been in a state of constant acquisition and development since the mid-1990s, so much so that the infrastructural growth of the city has been faster in the peripheries than in the core (Guffin 2015b; Ramachandraiah and Prasad 2004). With Hyderabad's road traffic only increasing every year,[17] the popular proliferation of app-based cabs, and the latest addition to the

Pradesh for nearly six decades. While Hyderabad is now the official state capital for Telangana, it has also operated as the shared administrative capital of residual Andhra Pradesh for 10 years, while the new state capital is being decided.

16. I go into a little more detail about urban infrastructure in chapter 4.

17. The sheer volume of vehicles increased from about 500,000 vehicles in 1991 to about 5 million in 2019 (see Regional Transport Authority database; Cordner, Cordner, and Das 2009, 180).

urban transit landscape – the elevated metro[18] – understanding the regulation of habits in the context of urban change becomes ever more crucial. Thinking about traffic regulation and driver safety in *urban* India, then, is an attempt at decoding what Rudolf Mrázek (2018) refers to as the "language of asphalt" – a discourse of modernization and technological development that invokes loaded signifiers like "speed" and "progress" in order to think about the past, make sense of the present, and anticipate the utopian future. Taken together, the circulation of this language enables the collective envisioning of a "bolder fantasy futurism" (Ghertner 2015, 8).

Under the emergent imperatives of policies and programs geared towards the making of "smart cities" in India, the provision of slick mobility in rapidly urbanizing cities like Hyderabad has become state priority (Hoelscher 2016). The anticipation of infrastructural development catering to the influx of global capital, especially in the part of the city called Cyberabad, is shaping the imaginaries of state officials, as well as the expectations and fantasies of Hyderabadis (see figure 1.4). Since the early 2000s, there has been a more enthusiastic embrace by the state of building large road infrastructural projects – projects of road-widening, flyovers, expressways, and so on – which are being built around the idea they are inevitable responses to fix traffic congestion (Gopakumar 2020). This is certainly true of the mega infrastructure projects being built in Hyderabad, too. For instance, in the official discourses, videos, and brochures promoting the Strategic Road Development Project (SRDP), one can see the future roads being comprised of cars – cars that are driving in their lanes and navigating streets and roads that have clear traffic signs on them. A utopic vision, the street is clean, ordered, and motorists are *following traffic rules.* Traffic indiscipline is deemed woefully out of place on the literal and figurative expressways to "world-class" development and global belonging in middle-class and elite aspirations of

18. The Hyderabad Metro was inaugurated in November 2017.

development (Anand 2006; Baviskar 2011; Doherty 2017). The "unruly driver," in this reading, becomes the figure of urban disorder whose disciplining matters to the *aesthetics* of the arrival of globality (see figure 1.5).

Figure 1.4. Kukatpally, Hyderabad. One of the busiest roads in the Hyderabad, the national highway 65 passes through the city. The Red Line of the elevated metro that began operations in 2017 goes along this road.
Source: Photo by author.

Figure 1.5. Global aspirations, local commandments. All over the city, there were visual cues of how rule-breaking can lead to death and injury. Sober metal barricades along roads in the city and LED signals at traffic signals either command motorists to follow rules or, more often, impart advice - from a simple directive like "Safe Driving, Lane Driving" or "Wrong Side Driving is Dangerous" to more inspired reminders like "Driving After Whisky Is Always Risky" or "This is a Highway not a Runway."
Source: Photo by author.

In this context, one might argue that in urban cities like Hyderabad, then, disciplining driving behavior can be read not just as an epidemiological issue but also as a symptom of a long-standing desire of the state and the urban middle class to impose order and discipline on the typical Indian street and produce what Jacques Rancière (2009) calls a "community of sense," or a shared mode of aesthetic engagement, with mutually recognizable visual markers of order and disorder. As such, interrogating class-based exclusion in cities through a critical analysis of the role of the

urban middle class has been the mode in which much urban scholarship on South Asia and beyond has proceeded (see Hansen and Vervaaik 2013). The fact that much of the work on road safety and driver training is being led by English-educated, middle-class groups certainly call for this type of an analysis.

In this dissertation, I do not contend with these perspectives so much as argue that pushing beyond the narrative of the dominance of the middle class is important for really seeing the kinds of maneuvers, negotiations, and compromises made every single day on the streets of the city. It also then helps us recognize that the imposition of order in the city is not unopposed, neither is it always successful. In making a genuine attempt to understand how drivers in the city make sense of the streets, of the changing landscape of infrastructure, and of the changing modalities of state authority, I push for thinking about driving in the city as a means to acknowledge the fraught process of urban change and the critique flourishing on the roads, a critique that calls attention to state neglect, institutional disarray, and infrastructural disrepair.

Research Design and Methods

In order to understand how Hyderabadi motorists and the traffic police make sense of one another in the context of emerging public attention on driving habits, I relied on a combination of semi-structured interviews and conversations, ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interpretive analysis of news media (print and electronic) and social media. I collected qualitative data between 2016 and 2019, gathering the majority of the ethnographic and interview data over the course of three months in 2017, eight months in 2018, and three months in 2019.[19]

19. In 2016, I made many personal and social connections that shaped much of the contours of this project. However, I did not collect data systematically at that point, and I have refrained from quoting from my field notes from that time, since I had not obtained IRB permission as yet.

While the preliminary research in 2017 was conducted primarily amongst middle-class car owners and driver-workers of autorickshaws and app-based cabs, in 2018 and 2019 I was *also* able to conduct direct observations and informal interviews with Hyderabad Traffic Police, observe activities and attend road safety events at two public bus depots, and do interviews with officials at the municipal corporation and the regional transport authority. While direct observations were helpful in putting together an understanding of what my interlocutors were doing, interviews and conversations were critical to understanding what they *said* they were doing.

While this project is anchored in the two aforementioned analytic dichotomies, it also draws on data from a variety of other sites. Instead of choosing to place myself in one particular site and do an *immersive* ethnography, I decided to follow the circulation of "road safety" across several interactional contexts that go beyond the road itself – from the backs of taxicabs to the driving seats at a driving schools; from traffic signals to the sylvan training institutes for police officers; from NGO meetings to the world of extralegal brokers who arrange driver's licenses; and from meetings with transport worker union leaders to news articles and Facebook comments. As is established by now, taking a *multi-sited* ethnographic approach affords one the privilege of studying connections between different contexts and of thinking systemically (Marcus 1995). By moving across several points of encounter between motorists and the state, I became privy to the frictions, overlaps, and contradictions between different "hands" of the state (Morgan and Orloff 2018). In a way, by circulating across several office spaces and by getting a slice of each of my informants' lifeworlds, I made sense of my data much in the same manner that the drivers I studied experience the city and make sense of the "everyday state" (Fuller and Benei 2009): by weaving together disparate experiences into a (somewhat) coherent narrative of totality. If I were to extend this metaphoric exposition further, much like the drivers with whom I was spending time, I, too,

became mobile in my quest to better understand how the affects, narratives, fantasies, and representations around the mundane act of driving *travel* across different sites and, in that travelling, undergo interpretive transformations. In a sense, the contingencies of studying something devoid of a physical site also mimicked the object of my research, and in a way that often vexed me to no end: as much as I tried to discipline the design, there were always far too many moving parts.

Beyond this serendipitous methodological quirk, however, were more quotidian reasons related to safe access that determined the multi-sited form of my ethnography. It bears mentioning here that my status as a lone, young woman doing interviews with men and being in "masculine" spaces – streets, police stations, checkpoints, driving schools, transport authority, and local courts – often necessitated striking a balance between curiosity and intimacy (see Hanson and Richards 2019). In other words, I was, at times, unable to do the one thing ethnographers often pride themselves in doing: *hanging out* with their interlocutors. I had to make emergent decisions about personal safety, and, while I tried my best to not caricature my informants (see Annavarapu 2018), the fact that I even had to make difficult decisions was shaped by my gender. My ability to hang out with *some* interlocutors was also shaped by several other factors. For instance, while it was often logistically easy (although experientially tough) to hang out with traffic constables on duty at street corners or traffic signals, it was difficult to do so with drivers of app-based cabs, who worked no fewer than 12-14 hours a day. Similarly, thanks to my personal and social networks in the city, it was easy to hang out with middle-class and elite residents who owned at least one car, while it was harder to spend time with brokers at the Regional Transport Authority (licensing office), as they hold an extra-legal job that rests on secrecy. At the same time, my class, caste, and status as a researcher from the United States made certain kinds of access easier. I was not

perceived as a "threat," and this helped me make my way through the serpentine corridors of state bureaucracy. In the writing that follows, I account not just for this positionality but also for why my gaze as a clearly upper-caste/class woman shaped the ethnographic encounters that transpired.

Mirroring the conceptual distinction between citizens and state, I divided my interlocutors between "traffic police" and "drivers," although I soon realized that this delineation is little more than a line drawn in the sand, since even the traffic police personnel with whom I spent time talked about their own experiences driving in the city. Nonetheless, I tried to maintain as much of a distinction between these categories as I could throughout data collection, especially since it dictated the kinds of data collection strategies that I was able to use. I relied primarily on in-depth interviews and unstructured informal conversations with motorists, while ethnographic observations and note-taking guided most of my fieldwork amongst traffic police and other state agency actors. Amongst both drivers and traffic police, I aimed to capture as much range as possible using ethnographic tools, in order to think through the "internal comparisons" (Glaeser 2002, 13) that manifest *within* these multiple sites of analysis. In other words, I tried to capture variation not just *between* motorists and traffic but also *within* the category of both traffic police (rank and type of duty) and drivers (class, occupation, vehicle, religion, and gender), in order to account for precise self-understandings and ways of seeing the world. Consent for all of the interactions, interviews, and conversations was sought orally, and I used my business card in order to reiterate my institutional affiliation and status as a researcher. I speak both Telugu and Hindi, which are the languages most widely spoken in the city. Knowing the local languages of a research site opens up possibilities to do more engaged ethnographic research in a wide variety of contexts. I also possess an intimate knowledge of the city since I lived there in the past, which is also the

reason I have extensive personal social networks there. I was able to leverage these networks successfully to make contacts and secure introductions and interviews with my informants.

Over fifteen months, between 2017 and 2019, I conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with 56 motorists. These interviews ranged from half an hour to over an hour and twenty minutes in length; however, because I interviewed some people more than once (either in follow-ups or because interview was disrupted the first time), the number of interviews is higher, at 78. A bulk of the data, however, was a product of unstructured and informal conversations I shared with a number of motorists, which I recorded in my field notes. The shortest of these conversations took a mere twelve minutes, while the longest was forty-five minutes long. While, as an ethnographer, I had countless conversations like these that informed my thinking and analysis, I systematically draw from around 120 such interactions for this dissertation. Furthermore, I also took driving classes at a popular driving school and applied for my driver's license. The autoethnographic data from this endeavor informed not just data in chapters 3 and 4 but also changes I made to the kinds of questions and conversations I had with motorists. As a non-driver, it was imperative that I learn to drive, in order to better understand the embodied experience of the road and also to familiarize myself with the kinds of narratives that accompany one's socialization into driving. While learning to drive, I interviewed and observed six other students taking classes around the same time as me, and I interviewed the owner of the driving school, as well as three instructors there.

To collect ethnographic data on traffic policing, I spent time at three traffic police stations in three different parts of the city of Hyderabad. I had to rely on ethnographic observations and informal conversations because the policemen with whom I spent time did not have time for long interviews and were often were reluctant for me to use a recorder. I relied on memory and quick notetaking to capture precision in the interactions that transpired in these circumstances.

Sometimes, I used voice notes in which I recollected specific quotes to myself immediately after the interaction. Direct observation made for richer data since I could see policing in action, rather than the image of the police often projected to outsiders like me.

I selected the three traffic police stations with the explicit aim of capturing diversity and range (income and religious composition) in terms of the populations to which they cater. In each of these stations, I first informally interviewed the police officer in charge of the station (inspector) and then shadowed a set of willing field officers, namely, sub-inspectors, assistant sub-inspectors, police constables, and home guards. By doing this, I was able to spend time at traffic checkpoints, watch traffic enforcement unfold, and even follow the field officers to the metropolitan court – all of which yielded rich data around police-citizen encounters. I also spent extended time at two traffic police counseling centers in the city where motorists caught for certain violations[20] undergo group counseling sessions. My presence was always announced at these sessions, and – upon gaining the consent of everyone in the room – I was able to sit in on these sessions. I observed a total of 18 such sessions, each of which lasted close to an hour. On a few occasions, I also shadowed one police constable to schools and colleges in the city, where he conducted road safety workshops. In all, I observed 18 of those two-hour workshops. The traffic police also organize road safety programs at schools, colleges, and at public venues such as functional halls and sports stadia. In 2018 and 2019, I attended 12 such program events. I supplemented this data on traffic policing with interviews with two top-level police bureaucrats in the city. Further, I attended three workshops – one of which was a week-long – in which senior police officers were being taught basics of road traffic management. Two of these workshops were held at the Sardar Vallabhbhai

20. These violations include driving under the influence of alcohol, driving without a valid license, having more than a dozen unpaid tickets, or owning a vehicle driven by a juvenile driver.

National Police Academy in Hyderabad and one was at the Institute of Road Traffic Education in New Delhi. I interviewed two instructors at the Telangana State Police Academy, and I also did interviews and observations at other state agencies.

I supplement this data with interviews I conducted with members of two key non-governmental organizations and two community groups working on road safety in the city. But since the road safety circle in Hyderabad is tightly knit and very intimate, I have relied on a narrative technique used by anthropologists: I not only use pseudonyms but also rely on composite, rather than individual data to obscure any possible sensitive disclosures (see Bedi 2016b, 249; Zani 2019). This means that while I use quotes and recorded interviews, I have created *personae* so that none of the people involved are disclosed. I consider this my moral responsibility as an ethnographer since it would be impossible to maintain confidentiality otherwise.

I supplemented interview and ethnographic data with interpretive analysis of news media and social media. Studying the state ethnographically necessitates an engagement not just with how state activities and performances are represented in the news but also with how one's interlocutors make sense of these representations (Gupta 2012). Very often, the newspaper articles I collected had been shared by interlocutors either via WhatsApp[21] or Facebook, which was helpful, since I could ask my interlocutors about their thoughts on the arguments in these news accounts.

Note: In this dissertation, I use the term "Hyderabad" to refer to the "Hyderabad urban agglomeration," which comprises the core city of Hyderabad and twelve municipal districts around

21. I took part in several WhatsApp virtual groups in the city. These groups were often comprised of middle-class citizens who wanted to organize and collectivize in order to address civic issues such as the lack of footpaths in the city. I do not use any conversational data from these groups, as it would violate consent norms, but I did collect newspaper articles that were shared by the members. I analyzed the articles that were about road safety or, more generally, about road transport.

the city. However, I conducted fieldwork only amongst the Hyderabad Traffic Police and not the Cyberabad Traffic Police or Rachakonda Traffic Police, which are located in the agglomeration but are not considered part of the city proper. I do include the areas of Cyberabad and Rachakonda in terms of how motorists relate to driving in those areas, but my fieldwork amongst the traffic police was limited to the "city proper" of Hyderabad.

Chapter Overview

Much of the official and expert discourse around state provision of road safety has been focused on state-led interventions around three "E's" – Enforcement, Education, and Engineering.[22] Simply put, the discourse emphasizes a systemic approach to "fixing" the problem of road safety, by arguing for an increase in traffic law-enforcement, for the provision of driver education, and for an increased emphasis on road design and engineering. Each of these "E's," quite organically, presents a site at which citizens encounter the state in its myriad functions – as punisher, pedagogue, and provider. In each chapter, then, I take a deep dive into the narratives, imaginations, and practices that constitute these functions and explore how motorists relate to the figure of state authority through each of these functions in the city of Hyderabad. In each chapter, I will show how the discursive construction of "road safety" as a social problem is often implicated in a simultaneous process of citizens and the state both engaging each other through the registers of blame and shame.

Chapter 2 delves into the activities and practices of the state agency most *visibly* associated with road safety in the city: the traffic police department. While popular associations of traffic police with corruption and, depending on whom you ask, incompetence or heavy-handedness

22. Arguably, there is another "E" that can be added to this list: Emergency Services. However, it pertains to post-crash issues, with which I am not concerned in this dissertation.

undercut the legitimacy of the traffic police, road safety has emerged as an idiom through which the traffic police are able to assert their paternalistic capacity to care for citizens. This chapter pieces together the several ways in which the traffic police department attempts to make motorists follow traffic rules in the city for their own good. In doing so, the chapter unpacks the changing relationship between the "typical Indian traffic police officer" and the "typical Indian driver." I first show how the project of reforming driving habits is imagined by the traffic police department and how proposed solutions reveal two competing ideologies around exacting behavioral change – punitive and persuasive. The tension between these two modes, I contend, is resolved by the strategic leveraging of technological modernization and increased camera surveillance to craft an image of the traffic police as the *friendly* arm of the state. I show how, in creating road safety as a social problem to be solved collectively, the traffic police department is attempting to win the sympathy of citizens and alter the relationship between the police and motorists in Hyderabad.

Chapter 3, however, takes a different tack – one in which motorists push back against the rationality of the state (as manifested in traffic laws) through an emphasis on embodied practice. While the existence of a gap between formal rules and informal practices of driving in India seems to be generally understood, little scholarly empirical work examines *why* this gap exists and *how* people make sense of this gap. In other words, more insight is needed on the following questions: how do drivers in India make sense of discourses of traffic rules and "road safety," why do they appear to disregard them, and how do they view their own actions? Further, what matters to drivers when it comes to driving? Drawing on interviews with motorists, my observations at a driving school, and my own experience of learning to drive a car, I show how the socialization into driving engages with state authority in the form of rules, regulations, and laws. I unpack the culturally intimate phrase, "If you can drive in Hyderabad, you can drive anywhere in the world," which

came up in almost every interaction I had with motorists in the city. I argue, furthermore, that thinking about risk, safety, and pleasure in relation to what is understood as "expertise" on the road is productive for examining how people make sense of the state logic behind rules and regulations and, almost always, write them off as illogical. Juxtaposing these understandings with efforts by local NGOs to standardize and formalize driver education, I show how it is not as if motorists do not value safety or their own lives; instead, what seems to be at play is a widely held conviction that being an expert on *these* roads requires motorists to think beyond official rules and regulations.

In chapter 4, I extend this point about socialization further and explore the meaning and function of a driver's license in the city. Marking an inaugural moment in the relationship between a motorist and the regulatory power of the state, the former evaluates the latter's embodied acceptance of state authority. Through the ritual of multiple examinations and evaluations, licensing procures are supposed to ensure that citizens are suitably socialized into becoming law-abiding drivers. With increased focus of the traffic police on cracking down on driving without a valid license in the city for the sake of road safety, it becomes imperative to analyze *how* motorists get their driver's licenses. It is an open secret that the state agency in charge of issuing driver's licenses – the Regional Transport Offices (RTOs) – are hotbeds of corruption and, so, in this chapter, I investigate what happens when that process of evaluation is compromised by corruption. I show why most motorists engage an extra-legal intermediary – a broker – to procure a driver's license, and how this choice reveals pre-existing conceptions of the state. In explicating their decisions, I demonstrate how paying a bribe reveals a nominal engagement with the state.

In chapter 5, I present an ethnographic finale that emphasizes the usefulness of thinking about driving as offering the possibility of engaging with experience as a multi-dimensional

process mediated not just by sensual experience but also fantasy and imaginations of developmental projects. Drawing on anthropological work that points to how materials and conditions of infrastructure produce sensorial and affective experiences, I show how the experience of bumpy road surfaces in Hyderabad facilitates an understanding of the state as inconsistent. I show how my interlocutors – from drivers of autorickshaws to police constables – make sense of the embodied experience of driving on road surfaces in Hyderabad and, in doing so, make judgments about the state's capacity to care, its neglect, its callousness, and its responsibilities. In moving the gaze of the sociologist from how infrastructures and systems come to be to how they are experienced, how they are talked about, and how they are imagined in everyday life, I want to call attention to how ordinary Hyderabadis experience state power, authority, and provision. Through a discussion of deaths caused by potholes, speed bumps, and smooth roads, I show how the onus of road safety and the burden of responsibility oscillate between the individual and the state. In the context of the growth of mega-infrastructure projects that purport to transport Hyderabad into the league of world-class cities, I show how both the state and the citizen are configured as coming in the way of road safety.

CHAPTER TWO

Aesthetics of Authority: Friendly Police, Unruly Citizens, And the Politics of Visibility

> "The face of the government, the cops, elicit no respect, not just because of their reputation, but also because of how they look, their cheap uniforms and how they wear those uniforms…and how they sit on the roadside on plastic chairs, their large paunches like babies on their laps; and how six of them hide under flyovers[1] to pounce on motorists in the great game that is Indian daily life."
>
> – Manu Joseph (2014)

I first encountered the term "friendly policing" in my very first meeting with Mukesh Kapoor, the Commissioner of Hyderabad Police, in March 2018. After I explained my intention to study traffic regulation and driving habits in Hyderabad, he asked me if I had selected Hyderabad Traffic Police as my case study because of the "innovative techniques" being used by them. I feigned a fair bit of ignorance in order to elicit more information, and he brought up the phrase, "friendly policing." Pointing towards a set of awards on a mantelpiece behind him, he said, "Since 2015, we have adopted the principle of friendly policing, not just in this city, but all over the state. The goal is to provide uniform service delivery and a citizen-centric system, using technology solutions." Talking about how increases in the technological modernization of policing tools would enable police personnel to apprehend offenders with more efficiency and with tangible evidence, Kapoor suddenly got very animated: "But see the larger point here: technology is changing the relationship between citizens and police! Technology is the means to having more cooperation, trust, and better relations." Emphasizing the importance of the aesthetics of authority, Kapoor argued:

1. "Flyovers" are overpasses, high-level road bridges.

> We need to change the image the public has when they think of an average policeman. Right now, they think of a *lathi*[2]-wielding, uneducated, rude, pot-bellied, corrupt, and uncouth fellow who is after their money. What we need is a tech-savvy, sophisticated, and fit police force with Bluetooth speakers in their ears and sleek tabs in their hands – someone the public will *want* to obey. (Field Notes, March 2018)

Kapoor was, of course, not referring to himself as being a "*lathi*-wielding, uneducated, rude […] fellow" who needs to be disciplined. In his mid-50s, the suave Kapoor was the epitome of the quiet, sophisticated gentility typical of a police bureaucrat. As the chief of police in the city, he was, in fact, a figure of much authority and respect – but he was not the one interfacing with the citizens on a daily basis. In pointing out the image of the "average policeman," Kapoor was making an important point about how the real face of the state was the street-level police officer – the "typical Indian policeman" standing in relation to the rule-flouting, "typical Indian driver." Thus, the strategy of equipping field-level personnel with "smart objects" to make them more *appear* smart and tech-savvy has to be read in the context of efforts to make police authority more desirable, thereby inspiring obedience. But going further and explaining that friendly policing formed part of a large ideological discourse that stressed not just the disciplining of drivers but also a performance of disciplining members of their own police force, Kapoor said:

> And there is good reason for them thinking this. Many of our constables, they come from villages and so tend to act rough. People get angry, and then we have to deal with the mess. But with technological solutions, these things can be solved. We have started [using] body-worn cameras so that our staff knows we are watching them. We are also training field-level police to be *friendly* to commuters – soft-spoken and professional. Not like the uneducated, pot-bellied morons they are right now! Before we can discipline drivers, we have to discipline ourselves – in body and body language – so that public also wants to cooperate with us. (Field Notes, March 2018)

At that moment, the office assistant – brought us two small cups and a bowl of almonds on a tray and placed them on the table. Bracing myself for the thick, extremely sugary *chai* that I associated

2. A "*lathi"* is a wooden baton used for law enforcement.

with government offices, I peered into my cup. To my surprise, I found it held the lithe wellbeing of green tea.

Immediately, I made a comment about how I had half expected the "*sarkari*[3] chai." He let out a short laugh, sipped his tea, and then added, "This is also part of the changes in the police department. Along with training our field police personnel to be more sophisticated and well-mannered with commuters, I have even given strict instructions to my subordinates to switch to green tea in the police stations. Disciplining our drivers means that we need to discipline ourselves first! *Chai* is bad for health – time to get smart! Smart police, friendly police, healthy police!"

*****

In Hyderabad, traffic policing as a practice has witnessed substantial changes over the past decade. From the deployment of body cameras (called "body-worn" cameras in Hyderabad) to the use of laser speed guns and from the issuance of electronic tickets to the installation of automated number plate recognition cameras, technological modernization in traffic law enforcement is being championed as important for bringing about traffic discipline and, thus, road safety. Under the larger regime of "smart governance" in neoliberalizing cities such as Hyderabad, technological solutions have become integral to service delivery, and the Hyderabad police have been particularly proactive on this front. As such, Hyderabad's urbanization has long been associated with the aesthetics and aspirations of technological savviness.[4] It is no coincidence that the police

3. A Hindi word commonly used to denote a quality or characteristic associated with the Indian government. It is hard to describe precisely as it is a culturally intimate image.

4. The fact that an entire region of the Greater Hyderabad Metropolitan Area is called Cyberabad – which houses within it yet another region called "HITEC City" – indicates, perhaps, the city's branding as a hub for the informational technology industry.

personnel of Hyderabad Traffic Police (HTP) with whom I hung out often joked and said, "HTP stands for Hi-Tech Police." I was often taken to the Command and Control room of the traffic police department so that I could see how newer, more integrated surveillance technologies were purportedly going to propel Hyderabad into having more advanced, sophisticated traffic regulation. There was also a lot of excitement around the construction of the *new* police headquarters, where technocratic aspirations were quite literally reaching new heights. These towers will be equipped with data collection, storage, and processing facilities projected to surpass capacities in other metropolitan cities. Considering that the police are claiming to have footage from no fewer than 1.5 million CCTV cameras in the city,[5] the need for massive data processing is all too evident. The focus of the traffic police is to increase the number of traffic tickets they are able to issue, by arming traffic police with the capacity to catch more motorists than ever before. In the words of the head of IT operations in the police department, "Our constables were using a fishing rod earlier and were able to catch one fish at a time. But with technology, it is like we are giving them a net." The appeal of increasing the capacity of traffic police to enforce traffic laws – a quantitative increase in law enforcement – is premised on the idea that it will bring about greater self-discipline amongst motorists.

At the same time, many of the conversations I had with traffic police officers about technology were framed in terms of how technology is changing the image of the traffic police and how this image makeover will *inspire* obedience – or, in Mukesh Kapoor's words – will "make people want to obey." As was evident from my conversation with the police commissioner, police bureaucrats held the conviction that it was *only* through technological modernization that the traffic

5. There are conflicting reports about this number. What I ended up gathering was that the police are encouraging owners of commercial establishments and residential buildings to install surveillance cameras – from which they will be able to access footage.

police could be perceived as trustworthy and friendly. In other words, technology not only enabled a quantitative increase in law enforcement, but it was also critical to changing the *relationship* between traffic police and motorists. It, in other words, registered "something real about the performative efficacy of what one might call 'technological charisma' (Mazzarella 2010: 784). In Kapoor's articulation, we see a clear acknowledgment of the fact that technological changes in policing impacted not just how the police "know and see" their citizens – a more classic concern of interdisciplinary work on policing that borrows heavily from understandings of a surveillance state – but also how the police want to be *seen.* This, I argue, is particularly important for traffic police, who are often the most visible arm of the state in everyday life in Hyderabad.

Contrary to an imagined depersonalization or impersonalization of authority that often accompanies technological modernization, *friendly* policing can be read as more of a deliberate *personalization* of the state. In this chapter, I show how the seemingly routine act of traffic regulation provides a window into understanding how images of police authority and the unruly motorist are being shaped at a time when technological modernization of the police force is underway. I argue that friendly policing and its adoption need to be understood in terms of wider, instutionalized tensions around police-citizen relations and a sense amongst the traffic police of perceived disempowerment. By paying attention to how the police articulate their own illegitimacy, I show how the emergence of technological "fixes" are deeply embedded in broader anxieties about police legitimacy, public trust, and the politics of visibility. By delving into the strategies adopted by the traffic police to make drivers comply with traffic rules and regulations, I show how these strategies come to simultaneously complicate and reproduce the authority and legitimacy of traffic police in the city. I show how "the politics of security and order are also a politics of aesthetics encompassing practical struggles over authority and regulation of ways of

looking and knowing" (Wall and Linnemann 2014, 134). These politics are simultaneously tied to questions of performance and image management – ways of being looked at and *seen* (Mawby 2002; Wilson 2000). In examining these connections, I first trace how and why political interference results in a sense of disempowerment amongst the traffic police officers. I then draw out the kinds of strategies they have been using to consolidate their position vis-à-vis citizens. I show that, in the face of perceived disempowerment and loss of autonomy, traffic police officers in Hyderabad are attempting to reframe their narrative in public life by using *pedagogical* and *technological* strategies to their advantage. I show how the figure of the "unruly citizen" is produced, but also how there is a simultaneous production of the figure of the male traffic police officer as tech-savvy, smart, and professional, but also honest, hapless, and vexed at the hands of the "unruly citizen."

"In India, there is Politician Raj": Political Interference and its Effects on Traffic Policing

The release of Telugu movie superstar Mahesh Babu's *Bharat Ane Nenu* a couple of days after the "Malakpet incident" in April 2018 marked an important moment in broader conversations about political authority and traffic discipline. This political drama film centers on the character of Bharat, a young man who has lived in England all his life and is forced to return to Hyderabad upon his father's death. Upon his return, certain political circumstances compel him to take his late father's place as the Chief Minister of Telangana. The film portrays the initial frustration and eventual triumph of the earnest and hardworking protagonist, who is committed to reforming the city of Hyderabad he comes to appreciate and to which he grows attached, even though he is initially a skeptical outsider. In the movie, the very first issue that Bharat decides to fix as a political leader is the "unruly" traffic in Hyderabad. He comes to this decision after he tries to drive around

the city on his own and is aggravated by what he sees on the roads. We, the audience, view through his eyes a city in which nobody fears the traffic police, and everyone is breaking traffic rules on the chaotic roads. A dramatic musical score accompanies his frustration at the plight of the roads, underscoring a crucial moment when he, "the outsider," feels a sense of profound responsibility for the city he is learning to call his own.

In the very next scene, as soon as Bharat takes his place as the Chief Minister, he orders a tenfold increase in traffic violation penalties and gives the police free reign to carry out their duties. When he is making these drastic disciplinary decisions, the senior police officials who are working under him display obvious hesitation, and they tell him he is choosing a bad political strategy that might cost him the next election. This reluctance is met with a long and touching monologue from Bharat, in which he directly compares the government to a parent who must be strict with their children (the public), even if it makes them briefly unpopular. Eventually, in the film, we see the public finally begin to appreciate his vision and praise him for solving their everyday issues with traffic through his disciplinary zeal.

This film cinematically renders precisely the kinds of desires and aspirations shared by a slim but voluble middle class in Hyderabad, which vocalizes a desire for higher traffic violation penalties and the instillation of the kind of "benevolent" dictatorship often associated with Singapore (Roy and Ong 2011). The film was a big hit in terms of box office collections,[6] not just because the lead actor happens to enjoy a cult-like following amongst Telugu-speaking audiences,[7] but also because the film's story, as one reviewer put it on Eenadu TV (a Telugu news channel),

6. Close to ₹225 Crores ($3.1 million) worldwide.

7. The lead actor, Mahesh Babu, even released a few road safety campaign videos, in which he is seen urging motorists to wear helmets while capitalizing on the fact that the movie's association with traffic rules had become its claim to fame.

resonated with audiences by touching upon "everyday issues that matter to middle-class people." It hit the right notes on an issue – road traffic and driving habits – about which almost *everyone* I met during fieldwork had a vocal opinion, and with which they possessed intimate experience. The movie, in laying bare the difficulty of reforming a country in which irreverence towards law and authority pervades the social fabric, made instinctive sense as a portrayal of current-day India. The configuration of a demigod political leader who effects discipline through swift action as the only viable solution to traffic problems captured aptly the existence of fantastical desires for a "foreign-return," benevolent dictator – that is, one who understands the efficacy of tough love and who cares about citizens. The chief of the state, Bharat, works with the traffic police and *lawfully* implements radical changes in the name of the safety and security of the citizens for whom he cares. The "citizens," in turn, are grateful. Unlike other films in southern India that, as Ravi Vasudevan (2004, 78) argues, *delegitimize* the authority of the state by glorifying the dictatorial machismo of lone men who lead the reform of a morally-corrupt society by relying on the seduction of vigilante justice – most memorably in Tamil movies like *Nayakan* (1987) and *Anniyan* (2005) – *Bharat Ane Nenu* effectively *relegitimized* it. This film plays out a seductive fantasy of an imagined performative dispensation, as William Mazzarella (2013) argues in his work on censorship in India: an imagined world in which the one who holds authority and the one who obeys it occupy clearly understood positions and roles vis-à-vis each other.

This film became quite a talking point amongst the traffic police personnel with whom I spent time, and all of them laughed it off as nothing but a film, and an unrealistic one at that. But, in a way, the film does portray an important truth about Indian policing: a political leader (such as Bharat) holds an incredible amount of power in how law enforcement works on the ground. It shows how much *political will* matters to policing – that, if the political leader wants to get real

change done, they can. As Kasiram, a sub-inspector I interviewed, summed up, "You know who our real boss is? Not Commissioner Sir. Politicians. Chief Minister, MLAs, MPs…In India, it is Politician *Raj*."[8] As such, political interference in law enforcement in India is an issue about which past journalists and researchers have commented extensively (Bayley 1969; Dhillon 2005; Jauregui 2016).

But that, in *Bharat Ane Nenu*, the politician ends up *supporting* the cause of high fines was what struck my interlocutors as unrealistic. Constable Sreenu, who had often told me that he wished penalties for traffic violations were higher, laughed and said, "It was like a comedy movie. No politician will ever risk his popularity by upsetting the public with heavy fines. In fact, it is reverse: if we do our jobs effectively, they tell us to calm down and not harass public." For traffic police, the movie was an extremely unrealistic depiction of how things *actually* worked. Across the board, the drastic increase in fines was laughed off by my interlocutors, even though they were cognizant of the popularity of this demand, especially amongst the limited but outspoken urban middle class. They found it unreal because they could not believe that a politician would ever risk their re-election by taking a drastic step such as increasing penalties, unless they had the support of public for such an action.

In cities all over India, stringently enforcing traffic laws has not found much political support, as it makes the government unpopular amongst voters and puts politicians' re-elections at risk (Ameratunga, Hijar, and Norton 2006; Tetali et al. 2013). In Hyderabad, researchers have found that political commitment to enforcing traffic laws and consolidating road safety has been lacking among all the political parties competing for electoral gains (Agarwal and Tiwari 2012; also see Chapter 6). An example often brought up in these discussions was a popular controversy

8. *"Raj*" translates to reign/rule.

around the helmet rule that typified the kinds of pressures under which the police had to work. In 2008, the police had started to enforce the "helmet rule," which very strictly requires two-wheeler drivers to wear helmets while riding. The enforcement drive on this front was quite harsh, with fines being scaled up overnight and backed by the government in power. As soon as this was announced, certain political parties began to oppose this move, calling it "heavy-handedness" by the government. In the face of negative media reporting and a general "public feeling" that had taken root about the injustice being meted out by the government, the concerned politicians who had backed the police initially suddenly withdrew their support and even accused the police of corrupt collusion with a certain helmet manufacturer – their impromptu explanation for why helmets were being made mandatory. Following this, Asaduddin Owaisi, the leader of an important and popular political party that represents political interests in the Old City of Hyderabad,[9] AIMIM (the *All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen*[10]) wrote a public letter to the Chief Minister (leading a Congress[11]-majority government), in which he accused the police of being excessively violent towards Muslim youth. Owaisi alleged that police were being excessively punitive against young Muslim men under the guise of trying to effect road safety. Advocating for making helmet-wearing optional, rather than mandatory, Owaisi argued the following in a letter[12] to the then chief minister:

> I may point out here that successive governments over the last 25 years have been trying to enforce the helmet rule in the state capital. Previous Congress governments during 1978-

9. Old City refers to the original walled city of Hyderabad, located on the banks of the Musi River. In contemporary Hyderabad, this part of the city is considered to be a Muslim-majority area.

10. This translates to "All India Council for Unity of Muslims."

11. Short for "Indian National Congress," a major political party in India at both the national and regional levels.

12. A copy of this letter was given to me by a retired IPS officer after he told me about this incident.

> 82, 1989-94 and *Telugu Desam*[13] governments during 1983-89 and 1995-2004 have made vain attempts to forcibly enforce this rule. In 1989 Assembly elections, the TDP drew a blank in 13 city constituencies because of people's wrath for enforcing [the] helmet rule…Now that the polls to the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad will be due early next year and elections to a dozen municipalities are overdue, the Congress may face [a] tough time due to police excesses on the helmet rule.

Implicit in this letter is a claim that the enforcement of traffic laws has a risky link to voting patterns, as well as a veiled threat that Owaisi might not leverage his popular support as a coalition[14] leader to help Congress win the municipal elections. Since MIM is a political party that represents Muslim interests in the city and commands the political votes of a majority of the 35% of Muslims in the city, the then chief minister took this subtle hint seriously and asked the traffic police to stop enforcing the helmet rule strictly. Along with sending this letter, Owaisi's party even organized several protests[15] against the traffic police, resulting in a public delegitimization of the traffic police, especially in the Old City, where police popularity was already at its lowest due to a longer history of state and communal violence.

Owaisi, currently a member of Parliament, is still one of the most important political leaders in the city and is known even now for speaking out against any increase in traffic penalties. During interviews with Muslim autorickshaw drivers in Old City, many of them told me that they were not afraid of the police. For instance, in 2017, I asked Saleem, a forty-something autorickshaw driver, if he was worried about a rumor in the city that there might be a drastic increase in traffic penalties. He immediately responded, "Not one bit! Police can go fuck

13. Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is a political party based out of Andhra Pradesh, which was earlier a part of Telangana. See the introduction to the dissertation for a brief history of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana.

14. India is a multi-party democracy. So, governments are often formed with two or more parties that create what are called "coalition governments."

15. Similar protests have been staged in other cities in India.

themselves. This is Old City. Let's see if anyone can take any money from me. I'll make one call to my friends in MIM and the police will shiver in fear. *Jab tak hai Owaisi, fines ki aisi ki taisi*." ("As long as there is Owaisi, fines can go to hell").

The influence of political leaders on the everyday life of traffic policing was not something specific to Old City alone. During several interviews with police officers in the city, I personally witnessed them receiving phone calls from local politicians from all over the city instructing them to let "XYZ driver" off the hook in cases such as drinking-and-driving and hit-and-run. These arrangements often took the shape and form of favors – "If you let XYZ off the hook and I will make sure you get a favorable transfer or a speedy promotion." Or, "You let XYZ off the hook and I can ensure that your child gets admission into this top school." Traffic cases are often easier to wriggle out of than other serious cases and are, thus, most often the site for these informal negotiations between police officers, elites, and politicians who can influence decisions regarding transfers, promotions, suspensions, etc. – and none of this is a secret in Hyderabad.

In fact, in conversations with lower-class autorickshaw and taxi drivers, this issue of elite-politician collusion also came up often. Take, for instance, what Madan, a taxi driver in his mid-50s and a resident in a slum in the elite neighborhood of Banjara Hills had to say:

> We all know that the rich people are best friends with politicians and IPS[16] officers. Even if they murder someone on the road, politicians and their rich families and friends will get away with it. Like Salman Khan.[17] Whatever police it is – traffic or law and order – it

16. "IPS" stands for Indian Police Service, the central government service that recruits police bureaucrats like Ajay Sinha all over the country. IPS officers are the 1% of the police organization and constitute the crème de la crème of public servants.

17. One of India's biggest superstars, Salman Khan, was arrested for a hit-and-run case in September 2002. Khan allegedly ran his car over four people who were sleeping on a sidewalk in Mumbai. One of the four persons died, while the remaining three were seriously injured. Khan was supposedly drunk when this happened. In 2015, he was found guilty of this offense by the Bombay Sessions Court. However, later that year, he was acquitted by the Bombay High Court, after Khan's chauffeur turned himself in. During the trial, there was a lot of controversy around evidence being hidden and the death of a police

> ultimately protects rich people. Take the case of penalties and fines, also. Who does that benefit? Government. And who can pay those fines? Rich people. Who suffers? People like me. (Interview, September 2018)

In pointing to the hypocrisy of how politicians are often understood as being populist, Madan was calling out the latent politician-elite nexus in contemporary India while simultaneously exposing what he perceived as class bias in the call to increase penalties for traffic offenses. He was talking about "the police" as a concept that served to protect elite people, not people like him.

But the police, for their part, were highly aware of how political interference negatively impacted the way their actions were interpreted by the public at large. In conversations with senior officials in the traffic police department, I could sense their frustration about the constraint of their authority by politicians. As the police bureaucrat in charge of the traffic police department in the city, Ajay Sinha, put it:

> Politicians throw us under the bus. On the one hand, they disempower us by calling all the shots and making us look like their puppets. But, on the other hand, when any accident happens in the city and the public is angry, they immediately take sides with the public and accuse us of not doing our jobs properly. Traffic police are like punching bags in our country. Unless and until there is a distinction made between politics and policing in India, traffic police will never be respected in the country. Citizens do not understand or appreciate the fact that traffic policemen are trying to enforce laws to *save* people's lives. (Field Notes, October 2018)

In Sinha's understanding, political interference made traffic discipline and, by extension, road safety impossible goals to achieve. According to him, political interference undermined the legitimacy of traffic police in everyday life and undercut their image in day-to-day interactions. According to Srikant, a traffic constable in Old City, class was crucial in the way these interactions were shaped – but the end result was always the disempowerment of the street-level traffic police officer:

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constable who had been the prime witness in the case. Even though Khan is now free, the public secret is that he was able to buy his chauffeur's testimony.

> Poor people see us and think we are *harassing* them. They don't understand why traffic rules and regulations exist. They see us and think that we are taking away their money. They are mostly uneducated, so they don't see the link between rules and safety…Very rich people, they basically don't care about rules. They are all above it. Most rich people have criminal mentality. They will throw the money on our faces, but they will still keep breaking rules. If they commit some serious offence – like drunk and drive – they will make some calls and use their political connections and then we will get one phone call from above: "Let them go." The problem is that everyone knows this happens, but nobody knows how to stop it. (Field Notes, January 2019)

In articulating a sort of "stuck-in-the-middle" position as a traffic police officer, Srikant vocalized a latent institutional anxiety about what that role meant in the city. In pointing to the unruliness of political leadership, Sinha and Srikant were also critiquing the state as not being an impartial arbiter of discipline. Every conversation was in itself a reminder that the line between "state" and "citizen" was not quite as clear as one would imagine. Both Srikant and Sinha knew that the public perception of traffic police officers was negative and that political interference in everyday policing only made their own image in the public worse. But equally importantly, Srikant was also pointing to how poor people did not understand the value of traffic policing. This nuanced characterization of rule-flouters – the poor breaking rules out of ignorance and the elite breaking rules out of arrogance – matters to the ways in which the traffic police were conceptualizing their own positions versus that of the "unruly citizen."

With respect to the former cluster, specifically, the traffic police I interviewed tended to advocate using pedagogical tactics, which was counter-intuitive to me, since much of the popular narrative around policing depicts harsh and punitive measures being meted out to poorer citizens. But this makes more sense in light of the difficulty enforcing traffic law that stemmed from the impossibility of surveiling each and every motorist on the road – they are literal moving targets – thereby making self-disciplining become all the more essential. The idea behind using persuasion and pedagogical strategies was to elicit obedience by demonstrating the need for laws.

"Awareness is the Only Long-Term Solution": Learning to Desire Police Authority

In the face of political pushback, most traffic police personnel I met believed that any form of social reformation was pointless without an *educational* agenda – one that could do the work of changing the narrative of traffic rules and police authority in the city. In the context of increasing surveillance technologies, this made little sense to me. I assumed that, since the "eyes of the state" were increasing with the installation of more enforcement cameras around the city, disciplining of the motorist body would occur – as a Foucauldian, panopticon model of disciplinary social control would hypothesize. But the glitch in this system was that, even though the issuance of traffic tickets was increasing, making people pay up was not as easy. A conversation that transpired in February 2019, when I met with two of my interlocutors – Constable Adil and Sub-Inspector Kasiram, both middle-aged, field-level officers – is instructive in revealing *why*. At one point in the conversation, Karisam said, "People think that if fines are increased, automatically people will start driving properly. How will that happen?"

"Through enforcement? Issuing challans?" I conjectured.

"Ya, ya, but that we are doing even now," Karisam responded. "Even now, we keep issuing challans. Nowadays with all technology improvements, we are issuing *so* many challans. We have cameras at junctions, constables who click photos of rule-violators on the digicams, laser guns for speed violations, and we keep issuing challans. The problem is that the public doesn't pay them!"

At that point, Constable Adil interjected, "*Arey,* just last year we issued almost 4 million challans through non-contact and contact enforcement. This year, the amount is already more than that. But recovery is still low. We keep charge-sheeting,[18] also, but ultimately drivers will pay the pending amount only when they are physically stopped by us."

18. Charge sheets are official documents prepared by the police that act as notices for people to appear in court. Non-payment of more than fifteen challans – or more than ten in any one of the three

I asked, “But won’t they have to go to court?”

“That’s what!” Kasiram replied emphatically. “How are we going to make sure they go to court? At the end of the day, whatever technology you bring and whatever fines you raise, unless a Hyderabadi driver is caught on the road by us, he won’t pay. The mentality is like that – ‘When we are caught, we will see.’ They also know that it is impossible for us to physically catch everyone, so it all boils down to luck.”

“So, it is in an issue of manpower, you would say?” I clarified.

“Manpower is an issue, yes,” Adil responded. “Right now there is some 1 policeman for 1,500 vehicles. But that is if you consider the all traffic police personnel. A huge chunk of our manpower also do other duties – VIP duties,[19] driver duties, clerical duties…I think the actual ratio must be 1 to 2,500 vehicles or something!”

Shifting topic, Kasiram told him, “Adil *bhai*, but there is a bigger problem. The real problem is public mentality.” He explained: “Public does not cooperate with us. It is not a mature public yet. They don’t understand that we are simply doing our duty by enforcing laws, and they just don’t cooperate. They don’t understand that we are enforcing laws for their own safety. It’s a mentality problem more than manpower problem.”

“This is true!” Adil nodded in agreement. “Awareness is the only long-term solution. Without awareness of why police is important, whatever we do will appear like a crime.”

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jurisdictions in Hyderabad Metropolitan Region – results in the generation of a charge sheet by the police. In this case, the charge sheet notifies offenders to appear in court so that a judge can decide what the punishment ought to be.

19. “VIP duty” refers to duties carried out by traffic police personnel when important politicians visit the city. For security reasons, traffic police are tasked with convoy duty, clearing out traffic routes, and maintaining traffic diversions to ensure that the VIP is able to move around the city safely and efficiently. VIP duty management actually makes up a large chunk of traffic policing in the city but has become a matter of controversy of late, with ambulances being held up in traffic jams due to VIP movements.

Kasiram and Adil's analysis in this exchange of their positions as law enforcers is telling. One, they pointed to logistical constraints of staffing that, despite technological modernization, were stumbling blocks to effective law enforcement; two, they chalked it up to a certain mentality – "they don't understand that we are enforcing laws for their own safety" – held by those not quite "mature"[20] enough to appreciate the value of law enforcement; and three, they pointed to the importance, in their line of work, of the cultural project of re-framing their own position vis-à-vis citizens. Images of traffic police catching motorists with hundreds of pending tickets (which were playfully referred to as "snake challans" by the police; see figure 2.1) offer perhaps the best example of how the traffic police are able to *produce* many more tickets than before, but they are unable to extract payments or ensure compliance with law – barriers that often got chalked up to some form of public immaturity by my interlocutors.

Figure 2.1. Narayanaguda Traffic Police personnel hold up a "snake challan."
Source: Personal communication with Constable Sreenu. Used with permission.

20. A note on language: it is the English word that was used by Kasiram. The English word "mature" was used quite commonly by traffic police personnel.

In line with this wider belief that the "immature public" needs to be counseled before it can be penalized, traffic police have become very active in raising awareness about road safety through outreach. Through counseling sessions for traffic offenders, as well as road safety awareness programs and workshops in schools and colleges all over the city and curating an extremely active social media presence, the traffic police have been very active in pushing a pedagogical agenda. According to Inspector Girish, who headed the counseling programs in the city, educational programs acted as an *equalizer*, evening out the playing field before heavy fines and penalties were imposed on a reluctant public:

> Before we increase fines, people have to understand *why these fines have to be high*. They have to make that link between rules and road safety. They have to see us as the police that cares for their safety on the roads! See, at the end of the day, our country is poor, and people are mostly unaware of sophisticated things like road safety. We have to do the work of educating people, making them appreciate and want traffic rules and regulations. Without such an awareness, obviously public will think police is simply harassing them. Our goal is to educate public so much through outreach and social media that they themselves pressurize politicians to support high penalties! (Field Notes, March 2018)

Awareness-building about the benefits of using helmets, seatbelts, and other such safety devices was hardly new in schemes that emphasized the governance of habits. However, in Girish's articulation, as well as in several others of my own ethnographic encounters, what soon became apparent was that the pedagogical disposition of traffic police authority was geared towards not just an education of risk and safety on the road but also an explanation of their own position vis-à-vis the larger project of road safety. In awareness-building and educational programs, the traffic police did not simply talk about the importance of traffic rules, but they also did so as part of an effort to put forward a narrative of themselves in relationship to imagined citizens. Let me illustrate this through an ethnographic vignette from July 2018.

Police as Culture Workers

"Do all of you know why you are here?" asked Constable Arun, addressing a dimly-lit classroom comprising about seventy or so traffic offenders, mostly men. I was attending one of the daily counseling sessions the traffic police held in the city for drivers who had been caught for "serious offences"[21] such as driving without a valid license, those who had accrued more than a dozen challans for driving without wearing a helmet, "triple riding,"[22] and driving under the influence of alcohol. Nobody answered vocally enough, which inspired Arun to thunder an irritated, "Are you all mute?!"

Promptly, a loud babel of voices – along with some laughter – emerged in response to his first question. Sitting at the back of the classroom, I picked up snippets of "Drink and drive!" "No license!" and "Triple riding!"

Arun, satiated with this response, said, "All these are symptoms of one common problem: least traffic responsibility and no road sense…yes or no? Tell me, yes or no?"

Again, a collective but fragmented voice responded, "Yes sir!" A couple of young men, probably in college, started sniggering in the back and whispered mockingly, "God, who is this preacher? No sir, no sir!"

Arun, angry at the sniggering, shouted, "Who is that in the back, laughing? Is this a joke to you? You people have no road sense, and you have no respect for any good advice! One day when you have an accident, that time you will remember all these moments and regret for not taking anything seriously!"

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21. The police, in these cases, seized the vehicle of the driver and would return it only after the driver had shown proof of attendance at the counseling session, followed by appearance in court.

22. "Triple riding" is riding with more than two people on a two-wheeler and is a very common practice in Hyderabad.

Taken together, the tone of Arun's admonishment, the slightly raised dais on which he was standing, the snide remarks made by the "backbenchers," and the fact that he read aloud all the participant names off a list before starting the class reminded me of being back in school. Watching Arun stand on the dais (see figure 2.2), I could not help but think of the number of movies I had watched growing up in which pot-bellied policemen like Arun breathlessly – and unsuccessfully – chase after drivers and riders.[23]

Arun, suddenly remembering that I was in the room, smiled widely and said, "Oh, before I forget, we have with us a student from America…madam, please come here on the stage."

Not entirely unprepared for this request,[24] I went and stood on the dais, next to Arun. Curious faces stared at me, and I overheard a comment, "Is she also caught for drunk driving?" from an audience member. I could not help suppressing a smile.

Figure 2.2. A police constable at a counseling session in July 2018.
Source: Photo by author.

23. A reference to this fact of the circulating media image of the "inept Indian policeman" is also made in other work on policing in India (see Jauregui 2013).

24. In order to let the attendees know who I was, I had asked Arun to inform his audience of my presence and explain to them why I was observing the class.

Arun, implored them, "This *medam* [madam], Sneha *medam*, has come from America to do research on road safety in our city. That is why she is sitting in the counseling session. To do observation. Look at her and look at all of you! You should be inspired by her – coming all the way from America to do good for our country – and then look at yourself and be ashamed! Breaking traffic rules, putting other people's lives at risk by drinking and driving, driving without license…imagine what madam will think of our society?" He paused.

Partly embarrassed and partly intrigued (an occupational hazard of being an ethnographer) at being made the model of a "good citizen" by Arun, I walked back to my seat at the back of the classroom, very aware of the many curious stares. Teaching bad drivers to be good *citizens* was, in fact, the point of this pedagogical intervention and, for Arun, my presence apparently provided a tangible reference – *show, don't tell.*

Arun continued, lecturing the audience. "Yes, you all must be thinking police are demons, they are out to get us, fine us, take our money, punish us…but that is why we are having counseling session. To explain to you all why rules and police are important for your own safety. Why following rules, listening to police, will actually save your lives."

He singled out one audience member. "You, *abbai* [young boy] in blue shirt, that's what you and your friends think, no?"

The "young boy" he was addressing grinned, sheepishly, as all of us laughed.

Arun made a face and begin mimicking a generic "young boy" whining, "*Pareshan chestundu mama!* [The policeman is troubling us!]."

Again, the same self-aware laughter and sheepish giggles erupted from the audience. These moments of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005) were not rare in these settings – laughter was, in fact, fairly common in these counseling classes, since self-deprecating, sarcastic commentary on

"our mentality" was the mode of engaging with the issue of bad driving. It provided the kind of affective buffer within which we Hyderabadis were to understand our own indiscipline.

Arun raised his palm, looked around, and said emphatically, "This is the kind of mentality in our city. Police are enemies, helmets are enemies, licenses are enemies. Risk is best friend, alcohol is best friend, speed is best friend…with such mentality, is it surprising that so many accidents are happening?" Saying this, Arun played a video on the blank wall behind him – a four-minute-long collection of footage of road crashes that had occurred in the city. This collection of actual footage of road crashes understandably elicited audible gasps from the audience. Dramatic scenes of vehicles crashing into each other, with the moment of the crash repeated dramatically and a red arrow on the screen pointing to what were supposed to notice most. I, too, cringed several times as we watched gory clips in which helmetless bikers got mowed down by buses, trucks collided with auto-rickshaws, reducing the latter to pulp, pedestrians got crushed under the wheels of a speeding car. Blood, broken glass, mangled bodies – what Ravi Sundaram (2010, 142) calls "shock images" – were presented to induce a feeling of fear amongst those who were watching. A middle-aged woman who was attending the counseling session with her son, who had been caught drunk-driving, turned away from the direction of the screen, her eyebrows furrowed in clear anguish. As per new rules instituted in 2017, when a person is caught driving under the influence of alcohol, they must attend the counseling session *with a family member.* "Nothing works better than family shaming," I remember the officer in charge of the counseling center telling me earlier that week. "When a mother or father trashes their son for bringing them to police station," he had told me, "that trashing is remembered for life! With human rights and anti-police sentiment, we cannot do; so, this way at least the parents will do!"

While the footage itself was sobering, the background music was quite the opposite — it was a popular, upbeat Bollywood song from the eponymous movie, *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (*Yet The Heart Remains Indian*), which amounts, perhaps, to the most tangible expression of cultural intimacy in popular culture in India; the lyrics of the song amount to a sort of humorous, self-deprecating acceptance of the various quirks that make us Indian. "Try to understand us as you may, but the more you try to understand us, the more you will be shocked!" the song blared, as if to explain what we were watching on screen. The juxtaposition of road accident footage with the peppy music makes sense if one focuses on the content of the lyrics[25] — the lyrics remind the audience that these crashes are happening because we share somewhat of a cultural quirk of rule-breaking: a *mindset* or a *mentality* leading us to seemingly take pride in our callous attitude towards authority, safety, and even fellow citizens.

The video ended with a slide with the words, "Stop Rule Violation…Or Else…" Arun looked around the room, a tad triumphantly, and then proceeded to play another short video. This one featured an unconscious young man whose leg had been severed from his body and who was being held by another young man (the rider's friend, I learned later) who was covered in blood and was bawling. Immediately, a groan and several gasps were let out in the room. The images of the severed leg and the pool of blood around the leg, accompanied by the anguished cries of the man holding this injured body made a woman sitting in front of me shut her eyes with her *dupatta*.[26] Arun, inhabiting a more somber tone than before, paused the video and declared,

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25. One representative stanza from the song, written by noted lyricist Javed Akhtar, roughly translates to: "Try to understand us as you may, but the more you try to understand us, the more you will be shocked…(refrain) In our eyes, some tears and some dreams, both of which are equally ours. The heart is saddened but not broken, the bounty of hope is not forsaken. Try to understand us as you may (refrain). Some of this is a matter of compulsion, some of this is a matter of choice. We argue a lot, we fight a lot, we have many a quality that may seem strange to you. Yet the heart remains Indian, Yet the heart remains Indian…" [translation by author]..

26. A *dupatta* is a long scarf.

> This is what happens when you do dangerous driving, rash driving. This boy was just 21 years old. Gone! Dead! Can anyone bring him back? No. What about his family? His parents? Imagine how they are living! Had he worn a helmet, at least they would have saved him. But did he wear helmet? No. For the sake of hairstyle,[27] he lost his life. (Field Notes, July 2018)

He paused for effect before continuing to play the video. We could hear the pain in the friend's voice as he screamed incomprehensibly and cried inconsolably. Arun closed the video. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and the slightly boisterous group of young men in the back had also gone quiet.

Arun addressed the room. "When the police is all day *begging* you to wear helmet, follow traffic rules, not jump red light, not do rash driving, all of you feel – *Arey Baap*[28] that *mama*[29] is harassing me, troubling me, boring me!"

Everyone laughed a little.

"But, see, if you don't follow rules, you can also end up like this – dead on the road, with your family and loved ones waiting for you at home," he continued. "Then who is to blame? Police? GHMC[30]? Transport department? Or yourself? Don't see me and see an enemy – see me and see a *friend* who is trying to tell you to follow rules for your own good, ok?"

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27. It was a common complaint amongst the police that most riders in Hyderabad do not wear helmets because their hairstyles might be ruined. It is not an inconceivable reason, and it did come up in my conversations with young men and women. However, the more common reason I heard given was that it caused sensory discomfort.

28. *Arey Baap* roughly translates in feeling and sentiment to "Oh, gosh."

29. Police are often called "*mama*" in Hyderabad. "*Mama*," a kinship term, means "uncle." It is an avuncular relationship that is invoked, in which the policeman is an older filial figure who is both strict and ridiculed.

30. Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation.

Arun's use of gory material to teach drivers how and why to value the *authority* of rules and even the police was typical of the road safety sessions I attended. Since their inception in 2013, these sessions have come to symbolize and enact the pedagogical disposition of the Hyderabad Traffic Police. Along with holding regular counseling sessions for traffic offenders such as the one I attended, traffic police personnel have also been conducting awareness programs and workshops on a regular basis, at schools, in colleges, at bus depots, and in corporate offices. Apart from these "mundane events," the traffic police have also become extremely proactive in holding "grand events" at which popular film stars endorse road safety as a collective goal for which to strive. All these pedagogical and spectacular performances work towards instilling in the public what police personnel refer to as "awareness." This "awareness" included an appreciation not just of traffic rules *but also of police authority.* Here, the figure of the constable featured as a manifestation of a paternalistic and pedagogical state that was quite literally instructing its citizens to see the care behind what seemed like a punishment.

While it is indeed the case, as Ravi Sundaram argues, that the bombardment of "shock-images," combined with the "landscape of the road set up through a state of emergency where both (human) subjects and machines seem out of control" (2010, 144), are meant to tell the tale of a city in crisis, the use of such images also presented an opportunity for the traffic police to remind citizens that they were enforcing the law *for public safety* – not simply because police liked to "harass" citizens. It might be tempting to analyze *what* the police were putting up as "cautionary tales" – but it is equally important to understand *why* they were burdening themselves with the agenda of reform in the first place. In making their presence felt in schools and colleges, and in conducting "grand" road safety campaigns, the police were, I argue, working towards building up

their own image in public life – a project that gets magnified when we bring other concurrent developments in traffic policing into the conversation.

Even though Arun insisted that citizens look at him as a *friend,* the aesthetics of the counseling sessions and workshops indicated more of an unequal relationship than what one might expect to have with a friend. Arun was still a *police officer,* and the motorists in his classroom were not engaged in an equal or reciprocal dialogue, by any means. Arun's position – standing in front of the group, on the raised dais – and the fact that only he could speak indicated a certain position of authority. For most drivers, counseling sessions such as these were, in fact, part of a more drawn-out, punitive strategy – they added a layer of waiting and paperwork to drivers' lives, before they could reclaim their seized vehicles from the police. Nonetheless, in weaving a narrative around the friendliness of police, Arun was attempting to change not only the behavior of drivers but also the relationship between them.

The traffic police were also making use of the synoptic power of social media in order to earn respect vis-à-vis other state agencies. In chapter 5, I show that the neglect of roads was often brought up by citizens to question the legitimacy of the state's claim to take road safety seriously. But it was not just motorists who were critical of the municipal corporation. In fact, most of my interlocutors at the traffic police stations in which I spent time were openly critical of the municipal corporation. They also worried about how their messaging was being contradicted directly by the state of roads. For instance, Constable Kasiram, told me rather directly that "GHMC is a corrupt organization that undoes all the efforts traffic police are making towards reducing accidents." Similarly, Inspector Ganesh, who managed all the road safety awareness programming in the city, lamented that

> we can keep telling people what to do – wear helmet, wear seatbelt, do not drink and drive – but if the government [only] does not bother with providing good roads, why will people

> respect us? As traffic police, we are in a difficult spot. On the one hand, citizens don't listen. It is so hard to make people follow traffic rules. On the other hand, because the roads are so bad, if we enforce rules too strictly, people will get angry. In fact, I don't even blame them. If I were a regular citizen and not in the police, I would also get angry at the state of roads. In fact, the street outside my house in Vanasthalipuram is full of potholes. And there is such bad lighting that who knows who will fall there and break their head. But what to do, as a government officers? I can't go campaign against other government officers. The laziness and corruption in our civic bodies is making us traffic police look like buffoons talking about road safety. (Interview, April 2018)

In 2017, a separate "cell" was established within the traffic police department, devoted solely to the repair and maintenance of road surfaces and infrastructure. Called the "Engineering Cell," it was headed by Inspector Sivaram, who was well-known to all the traffic police officers with whom I spoke. Constable Sreenu, in fact, told me that "GHMC should fire all its staff and hire just Sivaram Sir – he is that good with engineering." Inspector Sivaram, in my meeting with him, showed me lots of photographs of *traffic police officers* working on repairing potholes and other minor engineering issues on the roads. Working with a team of constables and sub-inspectors, Inspector Sivaram did routine inspections of roads in several parts of the city and often tried to coordinate with GHMC[31] or HMDA[32] in getting potholes fixed, medians erected, signboards repaired, and so forth (see figure 2.3).

31. Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation.

32. Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority.

Figure 2.3. Police constables filling potholes in Secunderabad.
Source: Inspector Sivaram. Used with permission.

However, as Inspector Sivaram himself put it, very often the slow response by the urban civic bodies meant that the traffic police themselves managed to get some engineering materials together and make some small repairs. These photographs often made it to Facebook and Twitter (see, for example, figure 2.4) – a visual strategy key to the impression management being attempted by the traffic police. In this case, in repairing the potholes on the roads, the traffic police are attempting to reinforce their own position as caring agents of the state – a position standing in stark juxtaposition now with the state agency that is *supposed* to do this work but is missing from the scene. The apportioning of blame and responsibility, along with the pothole itself providing the very fodder for public relation efforts by the traffic police, point to how the synoptic power of social media was being leveraged by the traffic police to build up their image in public life.

Figure 2.4. A post from 2016, in which traffic police personnel can be seen filling potholes.
Source: Facebook page of Hyderabad Traffic Police.

This power to bolster the public image of the traffic police is important because, as noted in the Chapter 1, there is a widely held belief that the figure of the traffic police constable in India does not inspire obedience. Other than the more general understanding of traffic cops as being corrupt, from the perspective of the elite, the hapless traffic cop is not considered fearful enough (Manu Joseph's loaded quote at the start of the chapter is indicative of this sentiment). As such,

the figure constructed of street-level police officers – who are called "lower-subordinates" or constabulary (constable and home guards) – that often circulates in public culture is incompetent, inefficient, and almost comically uncivil. In popular films, traffic constables always feature as being outwitted by motorists or being greedy for receiving a bribe.

These classed images of uncivility, illiteracy, and comic inefficiency are all markers of class, caste, and rurality, which, as scholars have argued, is the enduring legacy of this colonial-era organization (Bayley 1969; Dhillon 2005; Jauregui 2016). Founded in 1861, the law governing the organization and functions of the police has seen very minimal reforms that speak to the contemporary realities of post-independent India. Under colonial rule, the higher managerial positions that comprise a slim and exclusive 1% of overall jobs – such as the one Kapoor was currently occupying – were held by the British, while street-level positions were staffed by Indians.

Under colonial rule, the function of the street-level police officer was to manage crowds and clamp down on brewing resistance, which is why they comprised an overwhelming majority – close to 90% – of the police force. This holds true, even today – 86% of the police staff is comprised of lower subordinates, while "upper subordinates" make up 13% of the police staff. In the colonial era, the street-level police officers were recruited from villages and towns all over the country and needed to possess little to no literacy. Their primary function was to act as the physical might of the police force – they were the subalterns within the police force. And, in many ways, they still remain that way in relation to their superiors. Crafting themselves as friendly, then, represents not just an attempt to discipline drivers, but also to repair their longstanding image of disempowerment, in order to elicit obedience.

From this perspective of image management, technological modernization was considered pivotal to not just to expanding the surveillance state, but also to helping counter and "fix" the

latent stereotypes associated with the forefront of the traffic police. But Mukesh Kapoor and other senior police bureaucrats also knew that this would not work unless they could successfully *discipline lower-level staff*, educating them to be soft-spoken and professional, equipping with them with technology for collecting evidence, and making them seem smart and responsible. Friendly policing has to be understood, therefore, as not just a mechanism of using technology to discipline drivers, but also *to discipline the police itself* by a) reducing graft amongst the police; and b) changing how police personnel behave with the public. There is no better example of this kind of technological discipline strategy than the use of body-worn cameras by the traffic police.

Body-Worn Cameras: Who is Watching Whom?

The introduction of body-worn cameras for traffic police in 2015 marked a pivotal moment in the launching of the larger strategy of technology-based policing reforms in Hyderabad. While body-worn cameras had been deployed amongst officers working on criminal investigations, 2015 was for the first year in which traffic police in the country had been equipped with body-worn cameras. The stated intention of this technological intervention was to reduce the incidence of corruption amongst the traffic police.[33] Combined with an increase in their salaries,[34] this tech fix was hypothesized to reduce graft amongst street-level personnel. As with any disciplinary technique, resistance and "tactics of defiance" were aplenty. I personally witnessed "arrangements" be made with a *sodawallah*, or tea-shop, owner located around the corner from a

33. Previous research has shown how a sense of economic and institutional marginalization and disempowerment within a highly hierarchized police department breeds a sense of dissatisfaction and resentment amongst the subordinate staff. Despite constables working overtime, the incomes earned by this group of staff members continue to be low, which, some scholars argue, is why constables and home guards are the most likely to accept bribes (See Quah 2008).

34. Since 2016, Traffic Police personnel of all ranks receive 30% more than their counterparts in Law and Order. I was told that the government had done made this change to disincentivize corruption.

traffic police office, who would collect bribes on behalf of the traffic police so that body-worn cameras would not record any money exchanging hands. The police, too, know that – unless a member of the public reports an issue to the police – the footage recorded all day is not viewed by anyone. Yet, it is hoped that these technological measures function as rhetorical and performative gestures that will ultimately lead to a public realization that the police are trying to discipline their own – that a few "good men" are trying to tame excess within the department.

In my conversations and interactions with drivers in Hyderabad, traffic police personnel who normally did "contact enforcement" – sub-inspectors, assistant sub-inspectors, constables, and home guards – were often associated with bribery. For instance, an angry taxi driver once referred to them as "uniformed beggars" – a telling phrase that reveals both the act of asking for spare change, as well as a certain image of pathos.

To traffic police personnel, their public image as being corrupt indicated a certain hypocrisy on the part of citizens. Several constables asked me why the petty bribery they "used to indulge in"[35] attracted so much more attention than the large-scale corruption that occurred amongst elites – politicians and businessmen. As Akbar, a traffic constable in his mid-30s, put it:

> People give bribes everywhere. We are the ones you see on the streets every day, so it is easy to see us and think of corruption. Drivers have no problem paying bribes when they want driver's licenses and when they *don't* want challans, but they will say big, big things to media about bribes and lodge complaints against us. Some hundreds and thousands of crores are being drowned in corruption. But people will point their fingers at us only. Nobody has a problem with government is eating *biryani*,[36] but everyone has a problem with a poor constable taking some *chai-paani*.[37] (Field Notes, July 2018)

35. They would, for understandable reasons, not tell me that they themselves accepted bribes.
36. "*Biryani*" refers to a local delicacy, connoting decadence.

37. Directly translating to "tea and water," "*chai-paani"* connotes petty cash.

But, more often, traffic constables resented what they perceived as a misrepresentation of the dynamics embedded in the kinds of interactions that transpired between motorists and themselves. Traffic personnel complained about how police bureaucrats who came up with schemes like "friendly policing" had no idea about the ground realities of traffic policing. According to Akbar:

> Nowadays we are being trained to say "Good morning, good afternoon," and our superiors are forcing us to be polite to motorists. Our superiors say that it is "Give respect, take respect." But people like Kapoor Sir, Sinha Sir, they have never manned a junction in their entire life. They don't know anything about how public behaves with us, how much *kirkiri*[38] they do on a regular basis. Everyone respects them (the top-level officers), so they think we will also be respected. *What respect, madam?* Nobody respects field officers like us. I have worked eight years as a constable at the busy Punjagutta junction. There was not a single day when I felt like my job was something respectful. Only abuse we would get. Public scolds us, public misbehaves with us, public just hates us. *Then how can we be friendly?* Even if we did not get respect, it is ok if public is following rules. We can be friendly. That is also not there. They want us to follow friendly policing, but they won't get results. And then they will blame us only. (Field notes, July 2018)

What I found most striking about Akbar's lament was its eerily similarity to what Mr. Sinha – the chief of traffic police – had complained about in reference to the position of police vis-à-vis political power. Both felt like "punching bags" in their own positions. Traffic personnel working the streets often readily invited me to accompany them as they went about doing "contact enforcement," so that I could witness the "unruly" manner in which the motorists behaved with them.

In this context, the introduction of body-worn cameras began to acquire a very different narrative for the traffic personnel working the streets. Fully aware of the fact that accessing the footage of the body-worn cameras was within their control and *not* in the control of the motorists they were encountering, the cameras became less about their superiors watching them and more

38. A Hyderabadi Urdu slang term, "*kirkiri"* means "to irritate, to be a pain in the ass."

about recording the behavior of commuters with whom they came in contact. These devices that were intended to prevent graft have come to function as staging spectacles that project the traffic police as vulnerable in the face of an "unruly public." While traffic police were, of course, painting a one-sided story in this use of the cameras, it was not all unfounded. It was not that uncommon to hear of scuffles between motorists and traffic police officers. Just to bring up one instance, in 2012, before the deployment of body-worn cameras, a particularly terrible incident occurred, in which a mob of angry motorists beat a home guard to the ground because he had refused to let them off the hook for a traffic violation. The police, at that time, were unable to verify what had really happened, and it was instances such as that one that made body-worn cameras desirable to the traffic police.

For instance, in late May 2018, during my fieldwork amongst traffic police in Old City, I personally witnessed an autorickshaw driver bite the finger of a constable who was trying to issue the driver a parking ticket. The autorickshaw driver got furious that the police constable had touched his vehicle, so he bit the constable's finger and called him a "uniformed thief" who was fleecing him. Soon, a crowd of people gathered. The sub-inspector who was leading the group of constables and home guards on duty managed to record the whole incident on the body-worn camera – simply by being there – and they subsequently used this video to file a case against the autorickshaw driver. But because it was Ramadan[39] and the autorickshaw driver, a Muslim, was fasting, the superior (an inspector) at the police station asked the constable to withdraw the case. "We don't want to cause any problems with Muslims during Ramadan. Everyone is angry because they haven't eaten," the Inspector explained to me.

39. Ramadan is a holy month for Muslims, during which they observe day-long fasting.

Both the constable whose finger was bitten and the sub-inspector who had recorded the incident on the body-worn camera were furious. The sub-inspector thundered:

> The body-worn camera is more like a *mirror in which the society can see how uncivilized it behaves with our constables*. They see this footage and then they feel bad for us because they finally see how *the police looks scared of public*! Does it happen in any other country? You tell me! And, yet, we are told to be "friendly police"…friendly, it seems… (Field Notes, May 2018)

But the inspector of the station, who was standing next to the bitten constable, the sub-inspector, and me as we were watching the video over and over again on the computer in the "computer room" at the dingy police station, clicked his tongue at the sub-inspector's annoyance and said:

> This is what is called "short-term thinking." You are only thinking of the bite. I am thinking of how much sympathy our police force will get when we send this video to the media. That is the whole point of us having so many cameras. Finally, we are able to show society how uncouth they are. And all this is possible only because of technology policing and friendly policing. If you had got angry and had slapped him, then we would have had no defense. Because you kept your cool, tomorrow you will be hero. *Record, don't react* – that is the best thing to do. This is the best way to build awareness – awareness how we are not the harassers but we are the harassed. (Field Notes, May 2018)

The inspector was asking the police constable in this case to be "friendly" not in terms of changing his demeanor or interactional style. Instead, he was emphasizing how technology can benefit broader traffic police strategies for soliciting the sympathy of an imagined citizen.

While the panoptic power of body-worn cameras was interpreted by some field officers as a device used by their senior-level officers to discipline them, the synoptic power (Mathiesen 1997) of potentially viral videos is what mattered to the police much more. I was told, ad nauseam, about how "finally the public will understand how the police is treated on an everyday basis on the road." Whether or not this claim is true, the possibility of spectacular virality is what was remarkable in these desires for empathy and vindication – the reliance on the potential power of the body-worn cameras amounted to a strategic declaration of helplessness at the hands of the "unruly citizen." In making such a statement, one might say that the field officers enable the collective production of

what could termed a "public transcript of police power," understood as "the decorum demanded in encounters between policer and policed, where the latter is expected to be polite, orderly, deferential, and respectful in the presence of police authority" (Wall and Linnemann 2014, 136-137). However, from my conversations with the traffic police officers, it seemed like the use of body-worn cameras was being understood also as a pedagogic tactic.

Record, Don't React: Making Visible the Unruly Citizen

In the early hours of April 17 2018, Constable Sreenu called me to ask if I had seen "the video." Sreenu, I inferred, was referring to a recording of an incident that had occurred the previous evening in the southern part of the city and had become viral overnight. By that morning, no fewer than twelve of my interlocutors in the traffic police department had already sent me this video on WhatsApp, often preceded by comments such as, "See video of woman misbehaving with Hyderabad Police!!!" or "Must watch sensational video: woman creating *hulchul*[40] with traffic police in Malakpet!" In this two-minute-long clip, one can see a woman and a man on a blue moped engaging in a heated argument with the traffic police officer on duty. The woman is clearly furious and, with each passing moment, is getting even angrier at the police officer. She is wearing a burqa and can be heard shouting at him and refusing to get off her moped, even though he keeps asking her to do so. At one point, while shouting, "*Hato*![41]" she tries to ram her moped into the police officer, who is standing in front of her vehicle, trying to stop her from escaping. The police officer is recording the whole incident on a digital camera. He hardly seems threatened by her repeated threats of, "I will run you over if you don't move!" and neither does he listen to her when she says,

40. "*Hulchul*" can be translated loosely to "hustle-bustle."

41. "*Hato*" means "move."

"Cut me a challan and put it online but don't stop me, don't you dare stop me!" While she shouts and screams, the officer keeps gesturing to his subordinates, who have also been filming the incident, to "keep recording." Passersby can also be seen taking videos and photos of the incident.

This particular video clip – to which I will refer henceforth as the "Malakpet incident" – began trending on Twitter and going viral on Facebook, and national dailies had covered the story. My informants at the Hyderabad Traffic Police could not be more pleased. The *Times of India* – the staple English newspaper in the country – ran the headline, "Video of Woman Misbehaving with Hyderabad Police Goes Viral" (2018). I could sense the glee in Sreenu's voice as he told me that I could show this clip to people in America so they could finally see the kind of ungovernable drivers with whom the traffic police in the city had to reckon on a daily basis. He bitterly complained, "Let the whole world see how our immature public treats its 'friendly police.'" His tone, indicated more of a sense of triumphant vindication than any pain of betrayal. The next day, when a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago sent me an email with a link to this particular video, I thought of Sreenu's desire for the "whole world" to see what had happened.

Eventually, I learned more about the context behind the "Malakpet incident": the traffic police had been doing routine "non-contact enforcement"[42] at the eponymous crossroads when one of the police constables on duty used his official digital camera to take a photograph of a rider who was riding a moped without wearing a helmet.[43] Upon seeing the picture of the rider being taken, the rider's wife (who was sitting behind him) lost her temper and proceeded to pick a fight with

42. "Contact enforcement" is used by the police to mean the physical issuance of a traffic ticket; "non-contact enforcement" refers to tickets issued through electronic means. In this case, traffic constables were taking photographs of those driving without a helmet.

43. This was nothing exceptional. As is protocol, traffic police stationed at different crossroads in the city take photographs of riders and drivers in order to later issue them electronic tickets, using photographic evidence.

the police officers there. She demanded that the constable delete the photograph from his camera. She furiously claimed that they were rushing to a nearby hospital and did not have time to remember to grab a helmet – and that by delaying them further, the police were doing them injustice. When the police constable refused to delete the photograph, she got furious – and what followed was captured by the police on cameras, resulting in the video that went viral. I found out later that the woman had a case filed against her following the incident, but that the case was withdrawn after she apologized to the police officers concerned.

Not everyone was convinced by this story. For instance, Kareem, a twenty-something Muslim autorickshaw driver from Old City and one of my closest interlocutors, cautioned me – the gullible researcher – not to believe the tricks of the police. In his cautionary advice to me, a more subterranean skepticism lingered: *why* did the traffic police not just cut them a challan and let them go? Why do they drag on the "drama" for so long? Why did they film (and leak) this particular incident – and not other incidents in which the *police* are harassing drivers in broad daylight and asking for bribes? Showing me a low-resolution video on his smartphone, he insisted that I see the truth of the matter, in his words. The video featured a young woman wearing a hijab and sitting at what seemed like a news desk, who chided the traffic police for publicly humiliating woman motorists in the city and "playing politics" just to gain popularity. The woman at the desk then revealed that what was not captured on police camera was that the constable had touched the arm of the woman motorist roughly and had asked for a bribe, and *that* was what had started the whole fight. The video ended with a echoed warning: "Everyone knows what the reality of this 'friendly police' is. Beware, Hyderabadis, beware."[44] Putting his phone back in his pocket, Kareem

44. This particular video did not grab any headlines in the popular Telugu and English media in the city, and I did not stumble upon it on social media – which is, perhaps, more of an indication of how social networks work online. It is hardly coincidental that I am privy to news in the English language that circulates amongst the Hindu middle class.

scoffed dismissively, "Traffic police *logaan* videographer *banre*" ("Traffic police are turning into videographers").

In August 2018, yet another video of a young Muslim woman shouting at the traffic constables who tried to book her for not wearing a helmet hit WhatsApp groups, local news channels, and even national newspapers. In this incident, too, we see a dynamic similar to the previous one: the police do not intervene. Instead, they keep recording the "hysteria" until the woman looks at one of the recording cameras and, finally, screams, "What are you looking at? This is not some *mujra*!"[45]

Both this video and the Malakpet incident video were sent by the traffic police to several local news media outlets and, as they began to trend online, got picked up by national media. On several social media interfaces to which I was sent links – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and even *Times of India*'s online portal – these videos awaited the judgment of their intended and unintended public. Apart from generating overwhelming sympathy for the police, manifested by comments such as, "Uneducated, low-class morons like her should be immediately arrested…the cop was so friendly and patient with her," or "Salute to traffic police – hardest job in the world dealing with illiterate fools!" Yet other comments made overt reference to the fact that the police were dealing with a Muslim woman. One particularly well-"liked" comment on *Times of India*'s website called the woman a "Burka[-]wielding Islamic terrorist. Send that woman to Dubai or Saudi Arabia where she won't even be allowed to fucking drive!"; another bitterly complained that "India has two kinds of laws: one for the Indians and the other for Muslims"; and one more claimed that "Hyderabad Police is scared of Muslims and even more scared of women – has a policeman no

45. "*Mujra*" refers to a musical dance performance, usually, with sensual overtones and normally performed by female courtesans for an elite male audience.

izzat?[46] Shame on our feminazi society." That none of these comments seemed out of place to me was telling; these sorts of comments were strikingly similar to what my middle- and upper-class (overwhelmingly Hindu) informants often said about (predominantly Muslim) drivers in Old City, anyway – "*Those* people make law and order impossible."

Reading these reactions alongside my conversations with the police who, indeed, felt vindicated when this video was going viral, one gets a sense of how the video recorded of this spectacle was strategic in consolidating the image of a police force that ought to – and will – generate *sympathy*. Just seeing the number of times the sub-inspector in the Malakpet incident video was keenly gesturing to his subordinates to "keep recording," one does sense a latent foreknowledge of the fact that this video was going to go viral. In this instance and in the several instances of "scuffle footage" going viral, the police seemed to anticipate vindication and sympathy. Leveraging their connections with traditional news media and their visibility on social media, the traffic police department was able to gain sympathetic mileage as a police force that was unable to enforce the law because it had to deal with its unruly citizens.

December 2018 saw yet another traffic police video go viral, this time of a drunk man hurling abuses at the traffic police. But in this case, it was a young, seemingly upper-class man wearing a tucked, official shirt and sporting a trendy coiffeur. He was stopped by the police, and a breath analyzer test they conducted revealed he was driving under the influence of alcohol. Throughout the encounter, however, the man was combative and started shouting at the police. Alleging that "not even one of you can spell 'government'" "not one of you can spell 'psychology,'" he went on to accuse the government of employing uneducated people who get a plush salary even though they cannot spell a single word right. Thus, what Kapoor had hoped

46. "*Izzat*" translates to "honor."

would get *hidden* under the façade of technology – the actual non-English speaking rurality of constables – was, in fact, *the centerpiece* of this viral video. Furthermore, the motorist in this case even took his cell phone out and challenged the police to take him to jail – all the while claiming that they would not be able to do anything to him since he was a close relative of the chief minister's daughter and would use his connection with her to punish all the police who were harassing him. Clearly inebriated, he articulated a public secret – the intertwining of police and politicians – but because the traffic police used the footage in their favor, it did more service to them than disservice.

In different ways, in this case and in the two videos involving Muslim women, what was produced was the figure of an irrational and unreasonable citizen who frustrated every effort to be reformed – and, by contrast, we also see the production of the traffic police as figures standing by, as if watching a cautionary tale unfold on its own accord. In this narrative, the calm and collected traffic police were juxtaposed with the angry, rude, uncivil commuter, in a dramatic confrontation between publicly *appropriate* composure on the part of the inspector and *unruly* anger on the part of the motorist. The fact that the motorists in the first two videos were Muslim women and in the more recent video it was a drunk man accusing the traffic police of not knowing "proper" English conjured up precisely the figures to whom the traffic police attributed the source of their illegitimacy: the politically-connected Old City residents who supposedly did not fear the traffic police and the vexing elites who often abused their political connections. In the virality of scuffle footage, as well as the traffic police's pedagogical campaigns, one might argue that "[t]he postcolonial state attributes passion (and we might add credulity) to its subjects, thereby constructing itself as 'rational'" (Das and Poole 2004, 24). However, as I hope to have shown in

this chapter, it is not just that the state is trying to come across as rational – but also that they wish to be seen as friendly and invested in the project of disciplining drivers for their own good.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the paradoxes and possibilities of strategies adopted by the traffic police to make drivers comply with traffic rules and regulations – and how these strategies come to simultaneously complicate and reproduce the authority and legitimacy of traffic police in the city of Hyderabad. In the context of the wider, nationwide turn to surveillance – most notably manifested by citizen registries and the consolidation and digitization of other forms of individual data for the more efficient delivery of services – it is tempting to turn to a story about the expansion of a "surveillance state." The fact that traffic police are slowly, but surely, moving to non-contact enforcement – that is, issuing tickets electronically, using photographs captured at a distance as evidence of infraction – and that the sheer number of cameras in the city are proliferating certainly bear witness to the rise of the panopticon, or governance at a distance. The proliferation of technocratic modes of "knowing and seeing" facilitates an increased *legibility* of citizens, rendering their bodies as "data" that is then used for smarter "governance at a distance."[47] In this process, research often points to a process of *impersonalization* and the ever-more sly invisibility of the state (see Haggerty and Ericson 2000). The increase of what is termed "non-contact enforcement" in traffic policing – of which constables taking photographs on simple digital cameras constitutes a huge part – falls under this scheme of increasing the legibility of the state through a proliferation of cameras that can do the work of issuing traffic challans.

47. This phrase is borrowed from Michele Foucault's writings on governmentality (see 1991). A long lineage of literature can be cited here. See Vanolo (2014) for a succinct summary of how "smart governance" applies to urban cities, especially in the Global South.

However, I argue that technological changes in policing shape not only how the police "know and see" their citizens – a more classic preoccupation in scholarship on policing that borrows heavily from understandings of a surveillance state – but also how the police want to be *seen.* In the context of a perceived crisis of legitimacy, traffic police personnel in Hyderabad are attempting to reframe the way in which they are seen by citizens. What was crucial in the case of traffic policing in Hyderabad was the management of the *aesthetics* of authority and the paradoxical pairing of technological modernization with friendliness. The desire of traffic police to take control of their public image stems from two main sources of perceived disempowerment: on the one hand, political interference and lack of autonomy; and on the other hand, colonial-era policing hierarchies that have contributed to a specific, negative image of the police in public life. In this chapter, I delve into why the desired visibility of the state matters and show how it is entangled in cultural, historical, and institutional relations. Furthermore, I show how ambivalence and incongruities shape the ways in which traffic police position themselves vis-à-vis motorists.

CHAPTER THREE

"Anybody Can Drive": Making Driver-Citizens

> "What is so hard about driving? It is the easiest thing in the world! Anybody can drive. All you need is a vehicle and some daring. Anyone can become full expert in driving."
>
> – Pasha, a taxi driver

> "The real problem is not with the policing or with the roads; the real problem is in the attitude. Every idiot on the road thinks he is an expert when it comes to driving. The only way out is driver education and training. People need to be taught rules and regulations but, more importantly, the value of rules and regulations."
>
> – Anand, a college lecturer

In theory, driver education is the stage at which motorists are socialized into the rules and regulations of the road. It is at this juncture that drivers' dispositions towards state authority are shaped, and "good" drivers are produced – drivers who can recognize and embody traffic laws, rules, and regulations, as well as what is considered "appropriate" driving etiquette. In other words, it is at this stage that one learns how to *play by the rules* and conduct oneself in accordance with the law. But driver education is also often the stage at which a driver learns to become a "good citizen." This has certainly been the case with driver education in several countries. Writing about the history of the rise of automobile safety in the United States, Jeremy Packer observes that driver education functioned as an "instrument of citizenship" (2008, 4). Driver education – especially at the stage of young adults learning to drive – became the vehicle for imparting ideas around civic duty, good conduct, and national responsibility. Aspiring drivers were reminded that learning to drive by the rules was in no way different from learning to *live* by the law; that is, becoming a law-

abiding driver was not just a question of safety but also of civility. Drivers were socialized into not just the practice of driving, but also the importance of the authority of rules and laws; it became the means through which self-discipline and obedience to the authority of the state were valorized as duty. As one popular driving manual put it, "One very effective way of learning what it takes to live acceptably in the modern world is by discovering these things through learning to drive" (manual cited in Packer 2008, 70). Driving was certainly made into a skill, but it also became the embodied practice of good citizenship. Similarly, Jun Zhang (2019, 165) shows how driver education has become the means for the self-cultivation of individual autonomy in China.

Discussions around road safety in India increasingly configure driver education as the root cause of unruliness on the road. From this perspective, the chaos on the street indexes the unsuccessful rule-socialization of drivers in India. Driver education, from this perspective, has to become a site for the development of a disposition to appreciate the value of rules and regulations and to become "mature enough" to desire self-discipline. This issue became particularly stark when it came to normative judgments about "good driving." The project of teaching driving through formal training and driver education was equally concerned with the inculcation of good citizenship, the value of obedience, and the desire for inducing civility. According to Vijay Sharma, a road safety trainer in the city who often held driver education classes for taxi drivers and autorickshaw drivers,

> When we familiarize people with rules and regulations, they will more likely follow it. Right now, people don't even know what the basic traffic rules and signages are – then why will they follow them? Right now, everyone thinks that he can drive – but he is not thinking about whether he is following rules or not. Everyone thinks he is an expert on driving. There is this understanding that if you can move the vehicle, and if you don't have accidents, that is more than enough. But that is not safe driving or even civilized driving. If we want to build a developed society, we need to change our attitude towards rules and regulations. We need to make people take rules seriously. For a better society overall. *It is not just about rules, it is about shaping our attitude to rules.* (Interview, February 2019)

This notion, that formal training will shape one's disposition towards rules and regulations and will ultimately produce *good citizens*, was predominant within the community of road safety activists in the city. In Vijay's articulation of why driver education was important we see the emergent link between laws and safety: safe driving was possible if one followed the laws and rules of the road. But Vijay's concerns about driver education also revealed something far more fundamental about driving habits in Hyderabad. As with Sameer saying that people believed that driving was "easy," there was palpable anxiety around driving being too *open* an activity – one that "anybody" could do.

As is also evident in the two quotes with which I started the chapter, while Pasha, a taxi driver, perceived driving as something anybody could do, Anand, a bank employee, pointed out how that "attitude" was precisely the problem. Pasha, like other taxi drivers with whom I spent time, had not been trained formally, but he often referred to himself as an "expert"[1] when it came to driving. To someone like Anand, who often volunteered with a local road safety NGO, it was precisely this kind of attitude toward driving that needed to be corrected using driver education and training. Both positions, when read together, reveal the tensions to which the road, with all its diverse inclusivity, gives rise. At stake are fundamental questions of who can drive, who ought to drive, how we ought to assess expertise and safety.

Often, laments around the poor quality of driver education in the country tend to crystallize along class lines. The figure of the low-income, (generally) male driver-worker – meaning drivers of commercial vehicles, such as autorickshaws, buses, taxicabs, and tempos, and personal chauffeurs[2] – looms large as the product of informal and "incorrect" forms of driver education in

1. He used the English word.

2. In India, it is a very common practice for elite households to employ a chauffeur. Having a chauffeur is considered to be a marker of high status. This chauffeur is often part of a larger staff of domestic servants, and a "culture of servitude" characterizes the relationship between the car owners and the drivers

the country. This is not to say that only driver-workers were associated with risky driving. To be fair, in much of the claim-making around the need to enhance driver education, road safety activists were equally invested in reforming other kinds of unruly drivers on the road. In fact, at the time that I was doing research in Hyderabad, driving under the influence of alcohol was the most sensational of risky behaviors on the road, and it was elite residents – especially young men – who were being blamed for making the roads unsafe at night. Similarly, the driver education and training of two-wheeler riders – riders of motorcycles and scooters (mopeds) – was considered urgent, since motorcycles and scooters made up more than 75% of the vehicular population on the city roads (Didyala 2016).

But the discourses about the kinds of risks taken by drivers as opposed to driver-workers were not chalked up to *ignorance.*[3] Rather, drivers breaking rules were associated with entitlement and arrogance, and with riders on two-wheelers, rule-breaking was associated with the nimbleness afforded by the vehicle itself (Lockrem 2016, 34; Qian 2015; see also Truitt 2008). With driver-workers, meanwhile, road safety activism took on a tone of paternalism that could best be explained through the lens of the reformist impulse of the middle class. Within this view, driver-workers are unruly subjects, but they are also compliant: upon proper training and education, they will be safer drivers and better citizens (Hart 2016).

(see Ray and Qayum 2011). Chauffeurs are generally expected not just to drive the car, but also to do some sundry domestic duties. Many drivers-workers I met desired a family chauffeur job because it often offered long-term job stability and a symbiotic (but deeply unequal) relationship in which drivers could take out loans from their employers. However, with the advent of app-based apps like Uber and Ola, many driver-workers left their jobs as family chauffeurs because the promise of "being your own boss," while making a comparable amount of money, was a more attractive proposition. However, in the past few years, the allure of Uber and Ola has faded, with app-based drivers going on strike and demanding more job security, higher wages, and some degree of formalization of their contracts.

3. This is a bit surprising, given that, up until 2017, there were no two-wheeler training schools or institutes anywhere in Hyderabad. Now, there are two that are run by popular automotive companies Hero Motors and Honda Motors, as part of their corporate social responsibility programs.

In this chapter, I delve into the self-understandings of different kinds of drivers and driver-workers in order to explore the following questions: how are understandings of driving expertise in Hyderabad produced, validated, and institutionalized in everyday life? Also, how do people make sense of the literal manifestations of state authority in the form of rules, regulations, and laws? By analyzing some of the dominant practices and narratives of driving in the city, I show how delving into the very meaning of "good driving" opens up a site of vibrant, interpretive conflict and negotiation. I also draw from my own experience of learning to make sense of how driving is narrated in relatively formalized settings like driving schools. This chapter argues that the ways in which driving is learned and discussed provide a clue for interpreting how drivers evaluate the legitimacy of traffic rules and regulations in relation to the cultural, material, biographical, and infrastructural conditions of driving in the city.

"Confidence *Hona*"[4]*:* The Affective Fuel of Driving in the City

When I first spoke with Srinivas in July 2017, he had been driving an autorickshaw in the city for more than a decade. An unsuccessful trader of dry fruits, he had moved to Hyderabad from Tirupati in the early 2000s. "The first thing I noticed about this city was the traffic. I went crazy. I hated it! At that time, I never thought that someday I will be driving in this mental traffic day in and day out," he told me one afternoon as we discussed his journey into what he calls "autodrivering." Srinivas had not planned on – or even dreamed of – becoming an autorickshaw driver. As with several other autorickshaw drivers I got to know in Hyderabad, it just sort of *happened.* "Nobody *aspires* to become an autorickshaw driver, no?" he grudgingly joked with me. "There is no respect for this job. But who will give an illiterate like me an office job?", Srinivas

4. "Confidence *hona*" translates to "You must have confidence."

never finished school. He remembers attending classes until the seventh grade, but after that he does not remember doing as much schooling, as he used to assist his father, who worked as a small farmer in Nellore. Having given up on farming due to bouts of drought and worsening financial burdens, left his village near Nellore, moved to Tirupati,[5] and started working for a small businessman who sourced dry fruits, sweets, and snacks for sale and distribution in the town. Srinivas tried to be entrepreneurial and launch something of his own, but – in his words – his "luck did not favor him".

And so, like many other migrants from rural areas, Srinivas moved to Hyderabad seeking stable income. After trying his hand at a couple of small businesses, one of his friends suggested he take up "autodrivering" – it was not the kind of work that would earn him respect, he was warned, but it was *chaala* easy[6] to get into, and the money was not too bad. At this point in the conversation, I asked Srinivas what he meant by "it" being easy. Was the driving easy, or was it the everyday life of being an autorickshaw driver that was easy? Neither to me, I volunteered, seemed easy. He looked confused and said that nobody had ever asked him if driving was easy. "What is hard about driving?" he asked and then continued, "You just take your car, auto, or bus or whatever out into a field, and then you just learn all the buttons and gears, and you just drive in circles and circles till all the fear goes away. That's it. Then you drive on the road. I learned to drive my auto in less than one day. Next day, I was on the road taking passengers." Perhaps my eyes widened with skepticism at that moment, as Srinivas felt the need to persuade me further:

> I *had* to learn within a day! I had no choice. When you have no choice, you should also have no fear – that is the only way. My friend had an autorickshaw. He told me I could drive it part-time till I found some way to finance my own or rent one. So, I started driving.

5. Tirupati is a bustling town in southern Andhra Pradesh, known most for a famous Hindu temple that attracts millions of devotees.

6. "*Chaala* easy" translates to "very easy."

> Initially, it was tough. But after a couple of hours, I got the hang of it. It's very simple, driving. I drove around and made some money. Ever since, I've been doing this only. Anyway, what is the big deal with driving? It is so easy. In fact, easiest thing to learn. That's why anyone and everyone who needs a job in our country – first thing they think of is becoming a driver! You don't need any (educational) degree for that. (Interview, July 2017)

Srinivas was echoing a narrative commonly heard amongst driver-workers in the city. Driving work – be it driving buses, autorickshaws, taxis, trucks, water tankers, tempos, and cycle-rickshaws or becoming chauffeurs for wealthy car owners – is often the primary source of income for lower-class men who are looking for jobs that do not require a high degree of literacy, nor specialized knowledge. Picking up a job as driver-worker also does not require any kind of high financial investment, which makes it all the more lucrative a source of (somewhat stable) income. Many of these men are migrants from nearby periurban or rural areas around the city[7] and get into the work of driving after dabbling in other unsuccessful, low-paying jobs.

In this context, learning to drive was just something these men had to learn quickly and without hesitation; it was hardly a choice. In the words of Salim, an autorickshaw driver in his early 20s who had started driving with a badge and a license just six months before our conversation, "It is like swimming – if you fall into a lake and you don't know how to swim: you do what you need to do to survive, no? Confidence *hona.*" Salim was invoking a circumstantial confidence that was all too commonly on display in the stories of driver-workers of how they approached driving. It was the affective fuel that kept the city, and the country, on the move (see Poonam 2018). Whether or not they actually learned to drive "over night" or "within a day," the

7. With the launch of app-based transit companies like Uber and Ola, driving work has become ever more visible in the city. During fieldwork, I encountered several young men who had moved from villages and taken automobile loans in order to buy a car and drive for Uber/Ola. Alternatively, they would drive for daily wages under a system in which owners of fleets of cars would employ drivers on a wage/commission basis.

fact that I encountered such stunning similarities across the driver-workers' narratives attests to a particular culture of learning to drive that exists in the city – and it intersects with material conditions of driving as labor in the city. How people come to the profession of driving matters to how they approach the act of driving.

Similarly, take the case of Narasimha, a family chauffeur, who – like several other driver-workers in the city – migrated from a nearby rural town looking for a job. Upon coming to the city, his cousin taught him how to drive and got him a job as a chauffeur for an elite family in the city. The family did not check his driver's license, nor did they ask him anything about his driving experience. His cousin had vouched for him. They just needed someone who could drive a luxury sedan, and even though Narasimha had never even seen a sedan before, he told them that he possessed tons of experience driving a car like theirs. While telling me this, he reminded me that he was desperate for a job. "I just left it all to God and inserted the keys and just somehow drove. I was so nervous, I still remember. But I remember thinking to myself that God may not care about me but surely cares about this wealthy family, so nothing will happen to me!" he joked. According to Narasimha, once he decided that he was going to be fine, he was fine.

The fact that it was often drivers belonging to a lower socio-economic status (of which driver-workers are but one group) who would laugh off driving as being somehow a complex or difficult task matters, especially in the context of wider middle-class road safety discourses in which the lower-class man is often featured as the embodiment of "unruly driving." Like Srinivas, Salim, and Narasimha, several driver-workers in Hyderabad told me that driving was easy, and that all one needed to possess were the keys to a vehicle and unhindered confidence. While this may seem like fairly unsurprising advice to give a novice, the perception of driving as something that required little beyond a willingness to put oneself "out there" has ramifications for how driving

as a social practice is imagined and experienced. While road safety activists and police agencies in the city were attempting to construct driving as something imminently dangerous and "good driving" as a product of following traffic rules and regulations, the more commonly-held perception of driving was that it was the easiest skill to learn – in other words, one that required the least literacy. Very often, men like Srinivas and Balaji did not get any form of formal training of driving, and they described their introduction to driving for work as a kind of stumbling into the field, due to a lack of other options. For Balaji, Srinivas, Salim, and Narasimha, confidence behind the wheel was not a pre-existing, individual attribute belonging to privileged, white-collar workers, but rather an emergent condition that facilitated social mobility. Thus, it functions as an affective resource – if not capital – in shaping the self-understandings of driver-workers (Sopranzetti 2017).

For instance, Narayanamma, a woman in her late 30s who had been driving an autorickshaw for twelve years, was well-known in the city as one of the four female autorickshaw drivers in the city. She cited confidence as a major factor in why men thrived on the roads, while it was difficult for women to keep driving:

> I am not saying men are better than women. Look at me, I am a woman, but I drive with no care in the world. That's how one should be. Bold, fearless and confident. Women are often told that they are not confident, that is why they become underconfident. But, if you think about it, why should it be that women are afraid or hesitant? Women give birth. What is driving in comparison to giving birth? Nothing. I train some women to drive autorickshaws, but they often just get so scared of "accidents" or "traffic" or some other excuse. Pah! Fear, fear, fear! There itself we have to tackle the problem. I tell them: *No fear, only fun! Anybody can drive.* It is easiest thing to do. Easier than cooking, if you ask me! (Field Notes, September 2018)

In invoking confidence as a resource from which one draws to navigate the city, Narayanamma was showing how the exercise of building and expressing confidence is gendered in particular ways. But in framing driving in terms of easiness and *fun* instead of *fear,* she rejected the notion of driving as dangerous. Instead, she embodied the same approach as other fellow driver-workers

regarding driving: that it was something anybody could do. Driving, in that sense, was considered to be deeply democratic – all one needed was circumstantial confidence and a set of keys.

For the road safety activists with whom I spent time, it was precisely this understanding of driving as easy and requiring little training that was the root cause of unruliness on the streets. This is not to say that road safety activists were unsympathetic to driver-workers. Most of them expressed concerns about the conditions of driving work in the city. In fact, driver fatigue – caused by long hours of driving – was often a point of discussion amongst them, too. Nonetheless, road safety activists often did point to the need to change the popular narrative about driving, for the sake of road safety. For instance, Sameer Paul, the founder of one of Hyderabad's most prominent NGOs *Street Saviors*, explained the following:

> Look, if rules are not imbibed at an early stage, it becomes very difficult to change driving habits later on. It is like with our normal education – can someone become a doctor without studying? Can someone become an engineer without studying? Driving is the same. *We need to change this idea that driving is easy*, something you don't need to study for. That is why driver education and formal training is crucial. We need to familiarize people with rules, regulations, techniques of driving. It is virtually non-existent right now. We need experts – driving experts, road safety experts – to train drivers into becoming safe, law-abiding drivers. (Field Notes, September 2018)

For Sameer and others working on road safety in the city, reforming the ways in which someone becomes a driver was critical to saving lives and reducing harm and injury on the road. Learning and enacting rules and regulations on the road becomes, from this perspective, critical to producing safe drivers. In invoking the figure of the *doctor* or the *engineer,* Sameer was deliberately invoking the figure of the expert to make a point about driving constituting a specialized form of knowledge – not something "anyone" can do or *should* do – and also requiring a certain attitude towards rules and regulations. According to him, to reform "bad driving" into "good driving," one needed to teach people how to follow traffic rules, and this teaching had to be implemented in formal settings. To this end, Sameer had even started a driving school of his own and often collaborated with other

road safety trainers who held training programs for driver-workers, as well as for employees at multinational corporations and other offices in the city. During these training programs, road safety trainers such as Sameer highlight important traffic rules and regulations, as well as important sections of the Motor Vehicle Act, and then they delve into key techniques of driving practices, driving etiquette, and defensive driving. With road safety training programs becoming more and more of a convention at schools, colleges, and multinational corporations, at a bare minimum lip service is certainly being paid to the importance of driver education. Focused on reducing the number of road crashes, Sameer was invested in making driving a specialized form of knowledge – one that requires a thorough engagement with rules, regulations, and what he called "the *science* of safe driving."

Expert Navigations: Tacit Knowledge

When I told Srinivas that I had enrolled at a driving school to learn how to drive, he scoffed, "Driving schools are a waste of time. They take lots of money, but they take *so long* to teach simple things. And anyway, how can you learn driving when someone else has the controls? Why don't you give me half the money you are giving them, and I'll teach you driving in one day flat!" According to Srinivas – and almost every other driver-worker with whom I conversed – those running driving schools did not understand the *essence* of driving – taking charge of the vehicle and learning by practice.[8]

While the driver-workers with whom I spent time thought of driving as something anybody could do, it did not mean that driver-workers did not have a sense of territoriality or ownership

8. My driving school's failure to teach me traffic rules and regulations raises a whole other issue – one that I will discuss later in this chapter.

over what they believed was their expertise – especially in relation to middle-class discourses that valorize rule-consciousness as the "right" way of driving. In fact, they often saw themselves through the register of expertise, often specifically using the English word "expert" to refer to their own driving. The drivers of autorickshaws, taxicabs, and buses I met considered their understanding of driving as *superior* to that held by people who did not drive for a living. This expertise was understood, furthermore, in terms of how much time they spent on the road.

When I first asked Srinivas if he had ever had to learn traffic rules and regulations, signages, and laws, at first he looked very confused by my question. I then explained to him that I was asking if he had ever attended any classes about rules and regulations, or if he had read any textbooks or pamphlets on this issue. He thought for a while and said that he thought someone handed him some pamphlet about traffic rules and laws a decade or so ago, when he was attending a union meeting with some fellow drivers. He certainly did not remember reading it. Perhaps my tone betrayed some sort of accusation or judgment, for he became defensive at my question. Dismissing the wisdom of such attempts at learning safe driving, he said:

> Knowing rules and regulations does not mean anything in reality. Many educated people drive on the roads – and they may know all the rules – but they aren't good drivers, they aren't safe drivers. It's all about experience. They drive – what – one or two hours a day on some days? You know how many hours I drive? Twelve hours a day, every day, every week, every month, every year. I take all kinds of passengers, to all parts of the city. Madam, *everyone thinks he can drive*. But everyone can't drive well. Driving well only comes with experience, not by driving some fancy car, knowing all rules. (Interview, July 2017)

In Srinivas's dismissal of those who drove "some fancy car, knowing all rules," his dig at the elite residents of Hyderabad was clear. Narrated through a register of scorn, this jibe was not uncommon amongst driver-workers.[9] This tension – between the apparent democratic accessibility of driving,

9. What makes this jibe at elites particularly interesting is that most of the elite and middle-class residents with whom I spoke owned expensive sedans or the latest SUVs but almost always employed a

as something anybody can do, and the critique articulated by Srinivas of "everyone think[ing] he can drive," despite not having logged hours of experience doing so – only makes sense if one takes into account class relations in the city. Pasha, a taxi driver, had, on several occasions, told me how he often found the driving of "posh people" to be quite terrible. "None of them know how to park," he often told me. This insistence on being experts in their own right could be read as a way that driver-workers assert their presence in the context of wider socio-economic marginalization and subjugation in the neoliberalizing city (Chowdhury 2019; Melly 2018; Notar 2012; Sopranzetti 2017). But it was a keen reminder of a very different understanding of expertise on, and *of*, the road (Hart 2016; Ference 2019). Srinivas and others knew how they were perceived by middle-class and elite residents and, in a way, this jibe was a way for them to "talk back."

Several other driver-workers to whom I spoke discussed driving or learning to drive in a manner that did not involve any cognitive or *a priori* familiarity with traffic rules and regulations. Instead, the process of learning was often spoken about in terms of habituating oneself to the vehicle – after which one starts driving on the road. And "driving well" translated into avoiding accidents. Since the licensing procedure is riddled with corruption (see chapter 4), the chances of receiving a serious evaluation of one's familiarity with traffic rules are often bleak. But, more importantly, knowing rules and regulations are not even considered indicative of "good driving" amongst driver-workers. For instance, when I asked Kareem, the driver of an airport taxi but previously an autorickshaw driver for over a decade, if he had ever read any handbook on driving or familiarized himself with any theory having to do with driving, he laughed loudly and replied,

> I have never even heard of any such book! How can you learn driving from a book? Rules and regulations and all that is one thing, driving well is another thing. You can know all the rules but be the worst driver. I didn't know any rule when I started driving, and I made many mistakes – but it is with mistakes only that I became a good driver. The road teaches

driver – like Balaji, Srinivas, or Salim – to drive the car around. In other words, cars marked as elite objects of conspicuous consumption are still driven by the bodies that are deemed as the "nuisance" on the road.

> you everything with practice. And, anyway, everyone knows that the most important thing when it comes to driving well is experience. *The more you drive, the more you become an expert.* (Interview, May 2018)

I pushed back, leveraging my own status as a researcher from an American university studying road safety, and asked him if he had attended any road safety training programs. Kareem admitted that he had attended a couple of sessions that were organized by the company for which he worked. But he dismissed the entire exercise a "waste" and said the following:

> These people who do some presentation and talk about road safety, rules, this and that, I just want to laugh at them. What do they know? They drive for maybe one or two hours a day and feel like they are experts. They go to some foreign countries and drive some posh motorcycles and then come and tell us all this. What use is it for me to know how one is supposed to drive? Unless one drives like we do – twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours a day – they won't know anything. (Interview, May 2018)

In leveraging embodied experience and an intimate, practical knowledge of the city – what James Scott (1998) calls "metis" – driver-workers tacitly challenged both the supremacy of "techne" – or an abstract expertise in the form rules and regulations – and the authority of "educated people" in having a say about the drivers' own expertise. Expertise was not articulated in the form of anything but habituation and was closely linked to the idea that the kind of expertise for which road safety trainer Vijay was pushing was not as valuable, for it did not come from a place of *sympathy*; that is, such bureaucrats could never know what was like to drive in the city for twelve or more hours a day. By emphasizing time spent on the road, driver-workers often pointed to expertise as an embodied quality, and that experience was pedagogic in nature; it taught one a lot. In one sense, the supremacy of rules and regulations was deemed irrelevant to driving. In this approach, learning to be a safe driver had little to do with knowing rules and regulations, and driving was imagined as being an extremely embodied activity, of which one could only become an expert by doing more often.

While driver-workers often laughed off or, at least, viewed with a dose of skepticism the idea that expert driving was something one could learn via the acquisition of rules and regulations, some of their self-understandings of being "good" drivers depended on what customers said. Sunny, a taxi driver in his 30s, told me how, in his initial days of driving, his customers would often scold him for driving roughly, or rashly. In Sunny's view, he received such admonishments because he was still getting used to the road and to the vehicle at the time. At no point did Sunny bring up knowing rules and regulations as a reason for such customer dissatisfaction. Instead, he said, "You will just feel it in your body – one feeling will come. If you are sitting, chilling, listening to music, and lost in your thoughts, that means the driver is driving well. When I see my customers not looking at their phone or looking a bit tension, I start slowing down."

Notably, app-based cabs have rating systems that customers do use to evaluate their ride, but Sunny's keen observation of his customers in order to assess his own driving made me go back and visit my field notes. This understanding of driving well – as something that one can just *know* – had, indeed, also come up in my own field notes – something to which I had not paid much attention while talking to drivers about how they had learned to drive. For instance, sometime in August 2018, I hailed an Uber to travel from Gachibowli to DD Colony – a long diagonal journey, from one corner of the city to another. As the ride started, I began to feel somewhat queasy about how the driver was driving. What I noticed was that he had his seatbelt on, which was not too common when I started fieldwork in 2018. I scribbled in my field notes a question that I had dismissed as unimportant until Sunny brought up the angle of customers: was he wearing a seatbelt because he knew he was a terrible driver?

In asking this question, I seem to have forgotten that, in wearing a seatbelt, my Uber driver was actually – in that regard – more law-abiding than most other taxi drivers. Instead, I had noted

down how I was feeling uneasy the whole ride – so much so that I did not even end up interviewing him, which I almost always did with drivers, especially during long trips. I could not quite figure out what was wrong with his driving. We were not on the expressways or cruising through empty roads, since our trip was on the busiest corridor cutting across the city, so it was not speeding. He simply displayed a certain recklessness that did not necessarily involve disobeying any rules. My negative assessment of his driving came from the gut, not from a sense of checking whether or not he was following the rules or the road. It is this inability to articulate or quantify this *style* of driving that becomes important to note, as much of the discourse around the reformation of driving habits hinges on being able to draw parallels between knowing, driving by rules and regulations, and being a good driver.

Laborious Risks

None of this is to say that driver-workers did not get in road crashes or that, by driving a lot, they were somehow immune from the risks of the road. Indeed, the reality was quite the opposite: by driving for longer hours, driver-workers were particularly vulnerable to road accidents. During my fieldwork, I heard several stories – some of which were especially tragic – of accidents that had either occurred to drivers or to their friends, who were also driver-workers. But crucially, in sharing stories of these accidents with me, they did not articulate their lack of driver education or unfamiliarity with traffic rules and regulations as being responsible for any given crash. Instead, it was either chalked up to driving fatigue, bad lighting, or simply bad luck. Sometimes "bad roads" were blamed, a topic that will be discussed in chapter 5. For instance, Sunny, an Uber driver who rammed his sedan into a divider on his way to the airport, said that the lack of lighting on the roads, combined with his own misfortune, was the reason he got lulled into

a stupor. “It was my bad luck,” he said, while simultaneously telling me that the government should have brighter lights on the road.

More tellingly, driving fatigue and the numbed muscle reflexes it caused came up most often amongst app-based taxi drivers, who often drive for around 14 hours a day, as a reason they had gotten into serious accidents on the roads. Take, for instance, the case of Narayana, an Ola driver in his 30s. Narayana had been driving for a wealthy family in the city for about a decade, but after app-based began to take off in Hyderabad, he left his job in 2017, took out a loan, and bought his own car so he could drive for Ola. In 2018, he rammed into a car in front of him after having fallen asleep at the wheel early in the morning one day. Recounting this incident to me, Narayana claimed that he used to be an *expert* at the wheel, when he was driving for the family, but that his stint at Ola had made him a much worse driver, in terms of his reflexes. He blamed the number of hours he spent driving – no fewer than 12-14 hours a day.[10] According to the Motor Transport Workers Act that regulates transport labor in the country, driving a commercial vehicle for more than eight hours a day is not permitted, and the employee can technically take the employer to court if they feel pressured to violate this regulation by working longer hours. However, because intermediaries legally regulate app-based cabs,” it is harder to enforce the eight-hour rule. Furthermore, driver-workers themselves want to drive for more consecutive hours, since if they drove for only eight hours at a stretch under the current system of incentive-based payments, they would not make a profit; the costs of diesel and their monthly loan repayments (EMIs) were too high and the income from rides too low.

10. Of late, criticism has been mounting from across the country of the app-based driving model in India, as drivers are often compelled to work up to 14 hours at a stretch every day (Dhillon 2018b; Salve and Paliath 2019).

Indeed, this financial precarity played such a role in driver-workers' lives that it was the first thing that many of the driver-workers would want to discuss when I asked them about driving. In talking about their profession, they would use the English term "risk" – driving was a *risky* profession because of the financial precarities it unleashed. Narayana was but one among several driver-workers who complained about financial risk. In their narratives, the state was indicted for deliberately allowing companies to exploit the conditions of labor experienced by driver-workers.

For instance, during a cab ride with taxi driver Pasha, I noticed that he was not wearing a seatbelt, nor did he ask me to wear a seatbelt. I asked him about it, and he shrugged and said that I should always remember to wear it when I drove on Outer Ring Road, if I was going on long trips; city traffic does not *need* seatbelts, he promptly concluded. After pausing for a bit, he added, "Actually, when you drive your own vehicle, you should wear the seatbelt. Police are catching nowadays." Pasha's rationale for wearing a seatbelt had less to do with the usefulness of the rule and more to do with what the traffic police were actively enforcing – which was true of many others in the city. But he was not convinced of its necessity and, in fact, made his lack of conviction into a critique of the state for failing to provide a context in which the seatbelt rule made sense:

> The roads are so full of traffic here! You can't even go beyond 30 kmph. If there are roads in which you are speeding, who won't wear seatbelt? *Nobody wants to die*, after all. In your America, you will also wear. First, there should be some space to drive. This whole seatbelt rule, this rule, that rule, many rules do not make that much sense here. First, government should do their job properly and clear traffic congestion. They are making so much money from people buying vehicles – so they don't want to do anything about reducing number of vehicles on the road. (Field Notes, May 2018)

In bringing up the issue of the context of the seatbelt rule in order to demonstrate to me that it did not make sense in Hyderabad, Pasha ended up articulating a critique of the state: increasing private vehicle ownership did not just clog up streets – about which the state did nothing –but it also constituted a source of revenue for the government. He said further, "I don't want to wear a seatbelt

all day long. I sit in the car for around for 12 hours. It is actually like my home. Maybe in your America, it is not as hot as it is in Hyderabad." May is a very hot month in the city, and since the car was not air-conditioned, Pasha was not making up his irritation with wearing a seatbelt. Several taxi drivers told me that the seatbelt rule should be made optional for them, not just because city roads were far too congested for it to make sense, but also because wearing a seatbelt for 12 hours was very uncomfortable. Similarly, the leader of a taxi driver union in the city, Ashfaq, said:

> How would you like to be strapped to your chair at work for so many hours? Like a dog on a leash. This is my workplace. I don't want to wear it in the city, and I will wear it when I drive on ORR or airport expressway. The police never do seatbelt-checking where they are supposed to do – because even they know that drivers will wear it on their own when they know they are going to be driving fast fast. Why enforce this rule in the city when there is no need for it? It is only for money. Nothing else. If they really cared about our safety, they would stop-ban liquor shops in the city. People drink and drive and then cabbies like me, who drive at night, are at risk. But the government won't ever do anything like that because they make money from liquor. (Interview, February 2019)

The fact that there is no way I could tell whether Ashfaq's gripe was legitimate or not, as I did not do my ethnography *as* a taxi driver. That said, what I think is important to note here is that these understandings of rules not making sense in the *Indian* context spoke not just to a commentary on people's driving, but also a consideration of the infrastructural and material realities of the city.

"Many Rules Don't Make Sense": Narratives at a Driving School

In middle class and elite circles, driving schools feature as superior to older forms of unstructured training that are considered to be informal, unsupervised, and a marker of lower-class status – the kind of training undertaken by Srinivas, Narasimha, Salim, or Narayanamma. On paper, driving schools inaugurate one's tryst with driving by facilitating a cognitive and embodied acceptance of laws, rules, and regulations. Driving school constitute key sites of socialization that programmatically make possible the (mis)recognition of state authority – in the form of rules and regulations – as natural, immutable, and given (Bourdieu 1994). Curious to know more about how

driving was discussed and normalized as an activity in a formal space, on a hot sunny morning in May 2018, I signed up for driving classes at Luxury Motor Driving School, located in the heart of the city.

Squeezed between a small *kirana*[11] shop and a beauty salon featuring large photos of popular film actresses on its door and windows, and housed in a square room of about 250 square feet, Luxury was one of the many – as one newspaper article put it – "hole-in-the-wall" driving schools one sees all around the city (KV 2019). On one side of the room, there was a small television and a couple of cotton mattresses and pillows. This portion of the room, I learned later, was the "rest space" for the instructors – young men in their early 20s – who often taught driving from 6am till 9pm. In the afternoons, some of them hung out there, watching television and/or napping. A couple of brown, floral curtains separated this space from the "office space." The "office space" was sparsely furnished with a plastic desk, two plastic chairs, an earthen pot of water, and lots of green, spiral-bound registers that graced the rickety desk. On one of the walls hung vivid paintings of traffic signs (see figure 3.1) and on another, in big bright colors, "Luxury Motor Driving School." Often, 39-year old Rajesh sat under this sign. The immensely enterprising owner and "star instructor" (in his own words) of the school, Rajesh's cellphone did not stop ringing with queries from eager and nervous learners like me.

11. A *kirana* is a very small, over-the-counter neighborhood grocery store.

Figure 3.1. Traffic signs on the wall at Luxury Motor Driving School.
Source: Photos by author.

Rajesh came to Hyderabad in 2000, at the start of the "IT Boom" in the city. He was doing his B. Com (bachelor's degree in commerce) at a local college in the nearby town of Warangal when his uncle told him about the IT revolution that was gripping the capital city of Hyderabad. He sensed an opportunity and, leaving his degree unfinished, moved to Hyderabad. As soon as he came there, he noticed how many more cars were on the streets than in his town Warangal and thought being a chauffeur could be a great transitional job for someone like him, as a way to "find his feet" in the city. He picked up driving by taking his uncle's Maruti 800[12] on the highway and driving it nonstop for 14 hours until – as he put it – he understood everything there was to understand about driving. He then became the chauffeur for an elite family in Banjara Hills, in Hyderabad. During that stint, Rajesh began to teach driving to earn extra pocket money; he taught his boss's children, his own cousins, his friends, and friends of friends. He then began to notice a raging demand for driving schools. Then, in 2009, he decided to take out a loan and start his own

12. The Maruti 800 is an iconic, middle-class small city car designed and manufactured by Maruti Suzuki. The production of Maruti Suzuki stopped in 2014, after 30 years of being India's beloved city car. Almost 3 million Maruti 800s were sold in India between 1983-2014.

driving school. Since then, the demand for driving schools has only increased even more, and now there is no looking back for Rajesh. Now, he runs several branches in the city. As he told me his story, he insisted on the importance of driving schools. Speaking about his own training as a driver, Rajesh explained, "Back then, it was still ok. Not as many vehicles, not as many people on the road, not as much risk." Contrasting how it was "back then" to the driving conditions today, he continued, "Now, there is a lot of risk on the road. So many people are driving – most of them don't even know what they are doing behind the wheel. It is very important to learn to drive in a proper manner."

As Rajesh and I were discussing the possibility of my sitting in on other people's driving lessons as part of my ethnographic research, he introduced me to Sravan, my driving instructor. Sravan was 22 years old when I met him. Upon hearing I would be shadowing him twice a week, he looked shocked. "I work 15 hours a day!" he told me. Sravan would ordinarily pick up his first client at 6am and go on working until around 9pm at night. He took lunch breaks and a short nap in the afternoon, but otherwise – as Rajesh joked – Sravan was "busier than the chief minister." Along with Sravan, Rajesh employed three other young men at this particular branch. All three were in their early 20s and had migrated to the city from nearby towns. They were working at the driving school in what they saw as temporary positions, before moving on to something less demanding and more income-generating. All three had learned to drive under Rajesh's tutelage. I would learn later that Sravan had taught driving for about a year prior to obtaining his own driver's license.[13]

I asked Rajesh when the driving theory classes would commence. Both Rajesh and Sravan were confused. "What theory?" Rajesh asked. I pointed to the signs painted on one of the walls. I

13. I will discuss this fact more in chapter 3.

wondered if my use of the English word, "theory," had led to some sort of misunderstanding, and so I clarified, "Signs, rules, laws, those things. Is there some pamphlet or book? Like a curriculum?" Rajesh laughed and shook his head. "*Arey*, nowadays everything is there in the internet, so who wants to sit and read some manual or book? You can just google and learn about rules and signages," he told me dismissively. I sensed a bit of irritation, so I refrained from asking him anything more – the ethnographer in me was intrigued, but the paying customer in me was certainly annoyed. As if to assuage me, Sravan said, "How will you learn to drive by reading? Learning will happen only on the road." In that vein, Rajesh elaborated:

> See, driving is *so easy* that even uneducated fellows like *autowallahs*[14] can do it. Reading, knowing rules… what will you do knowing all these things when you have not even sat in the car? All that just comes naturally when you drive. Sravan will teach you the basics – signals, indicating, how to brake, bumper rule, etc. You will just pick it up – *it just happens.* And anyway, there are some ten thousand rules and regulations – but why waste time knowing all those? You should know the ones that make sense here. So just focus on driving. Expert you'll become in no time. I believe that the less you read about all this the better; *if you read too much about rules and all, you will simply take tension.* You should reduce thinking and start doing![15] (Field Notes, May 2018)

I started laughing, despite myself, because I was struck by Rajesh's insistence that if I *read* too much, I would "simply take tension." This casual remark by him summed up what a lot of the driver-workers had been insisting on whenever they pressured me to learn how to drive.

At that moment, I also remembered that Sameer Paul of the *Street Saviors* NGO had told me how driving schools were "mass-manufacturing" drivers while simultaneously being equipped with neither adequate technological infrastructures nor any pedagogical finesse or expertise in

14. "*Autowallah*" means "driver" or "chauffeur," especially of an autorickshaw.

15. I must add here that underplaying the need at all for theory classes is linked to how driving schools maintain contacts with brokers at the licensing office. While getting a driver's license, in theory, requires one to pass a theory examination, due to the very real socio-economic nexus of corruption that exists between driving schools and licensing offices, the examination is often bypassed. See chapter 3 for more details.

teaching drivers basic traffic rules and regulations. Similarly, an article titled, "Believe it or Not, This Hole in the Wall is a Driving School!" argued that several driving schools in the city had not been given authorized permits, did not have trained driving teachers, and were nothing short of illegal in their operations (KV 2019). I knew that, as per the Central Motor Vehicle Rules (CMVR) that were carefully drafted in 1989, driving schools were supposed to teach theory as part of their lessons.[16] In fact, this legislation also mandated that driving schools like Luxury needed to have blackboards, charts displaying traffic signs and road maps, and a "driving instructions manual." While I could see lurid paintings of the traffic signs on two of the four walls at this school, neither Rajesh nor Sravan had given me any information about theory classes, nor any brochure or document that could be construed as a driving instructions manual.[17]

In my interviews with drivers who had gone to driving school, what became increasingly clear was that learning how to drive at driving schools did not necessarily involve gaining any more familiarity with traffic rules and regulations than informal methods of driving would entail. None of my respondents had attended a single "theory" session in which rules and regulations were discussed. The schools had not assigned any handbooks or manuals for driving. In most cases, the drivers who taught driving were themselves not formally trained and, in fact, often offered driving advice very similar to that offered by the driver-workers discussed earlier. But instead of writing these spaces off as teaching the "wrong" kind of driving and breaking the several regulatory laws around teaching driving, what if one were to take seriously their positions as driving teachers? What would one learn from that ethnographic standpoint?

16. Section 31 of the CVMR 1989.

17. Section 24 of the CVMR 1989. See subsection (vi).

If one takes the perspectives offered by Rajesh and Sravan at face value, it is clear they dismissed the necessity of a *linear* trajectory for becoming familiar with rules and regulations. Rajesh articulated an explicit pedagogical philosophy in which nascent drivers simply pick up *relevant* traffic rules and regulations *while* driving – somewhat like osmosis – which differed little from how driver-workers approached driving. This was, as I would learn, not a strange piece of advice at all to give to novices. A driver just automatically learns the rules that *need* to be known, Rajesh, too, would say. A linear route, by contrast, would involve systematically getting accustomed to certain sets of laws, rules, and regulations. Such a straightforward process involved both cognitive and embodied elements: one not just *recognized* the authority of rules and regulations, but also *enacted* them in practice, in a step-by-step process in which the driver becomes socialized into being a "good citizen" of the state or, as Joshi and I put it elsewhere, a "driver-citizen" (Annavarapu and Joshi 2019; see also Seiler 2008; Packer 2008; Zhang 2019).

Instead, Rajesh was pushing for a more circular trajectory of learning to drive – through which one would learn the rules and regulations that actually mattered. This rationale was understandable since driving is regulated by a *lot* of laws, rules, and regulations – which is often why it is so easy to break traffic rules. There are just so many of them. Sometime later, I would meet Pradeep, an instructor at the popular school, Star Driving School, who would tell me that he had never read the Motor Vehicles Act and neither did he plan to do so. His response was simple: he was not a lawyer who needed to read all those things. Due to a sophisticated system of corruption at the licensing office, most people did not *need* to familiarize themselves with traffic rules and laws, thereby reproducing the idea of discarding a linear model for rule-socialization (see chapter 4).

But, after telling me "not to take tension," Rajesh asked me a question critical to understanding the *contextual* importance of his dismissal of an in-depth familiarity with rules and regulations: "Will you be driving here or in America?" This question, which might seem innocent, was actually a loaded one.

I asked him why he was asking me that.

He explained that if I would be driving in America, I would need to learn the rules, regulations, signs, and signages properly; in India, on the other hand, it was not needed. Especially not in Hyderabad, he added.

"There are many rules – but they don't make sense," Sravan chimed in, glibly.

In the interviews I did with middle-class residents about their experiences with driving schools, they, too, told me how instructors often asked them *where* they would be driving. That Rajesh and Sravan were so confident that one did not *need* to know the "rules that don't make sense" reveals something rather fundamental and profound about how they viewed the authority of rules and regulations: as not making sense. And this idea was reproduced through their experiences of the road every day. Throughout the twenty-five days that Sravan taught me to drive, his entire focus was on simply immersing me in the thick of urban traffic, on the dauntingly crowded national highway. As a driver in these contexts, I began to see the road differently. I also began to see why Sravan felt that "some rules don't make sense."

For instance, one of the first things Sravan told me when I started to learn to drive was, "If you can drive in Hyderabad, you can drive anywhere in the world." I had heard this maxim before. In fact, almost every other driver-worker I had encountered in Hyderabad had offered this phrase to me as a succinct explanation of the road, in all of its miraculous possibilities, immediately followed by a hearty chuckle. Shared in a tone that mixed sheepish guilt with maverick pride, I

heard this popular adage confidently uttered by driver-workers time and again. When I insisted they articulate the logic behind this popular saying, driver-workers would reply that driving in Hyderabad was *so* challenging that driving anywhere else automatically felt easier. As a fifty-six-year-old senior journalist in the city ruefully put it to me, "The roads here are like an examination of your reflexes. No rules, no laws, just complete chaos. So, once you've survived *this*, your body is always prepared for the worst! I am not saying it's a good thing, but you see the logic behind that saying."

While this common aphorism was more a cheeky admission of driving culture than an earnest prescription of sorts, to some, the attitude undergirding the phrase was *precisely* the problem to be solved. In the words of Vijay, a road safety trainer in the city who often holds driver education classes for taxi drivers and autorickshaw drivers,

> The fact is that if you drive here in Hyderabad, you can drive *nowhere* in the world. Why? Because other places have goddamn traffic rules and regulations that you must follow! That is why so many people from here fail driving tests in other countries. People say this phrase as if it is a matter of pride, but that's just foolishness. There is nothing great about driving here. The fact that there aren't *more* road deaths in the country just proves that there must be a God. (Field Notes, September 2018)

To Vijay and others working on road safety in the city, it was the popular understanding of driving as something *anyone* could do that was a problem that needed to be fixed: an attitude toward driving that reproduced what they considered a rather problematic stance with respect to the authority of rules and regulations and that promoted a culture of risky driving. It normalized – if not valorized – rule-flouting and disobedience. That anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1976) noted a similar narrative about rules in Hyderabad way back in the 1970s just demonstrates the entrenched nature of the culture of driving that circumvents rules. Sometimes valorized as an admirable quality and sometimes written-off in terms of inevitability, a commonly shared understanding exists of

driving in Hyderabad as requiring a certain level of skill – an embodied *expertise* that prepared one's sensibilities for driving situations and scenarios all over the world.

While I could understand the phrase and its implications cognitively, I did not realize how it translated into action until I started taking the driving classes. On the twelfth day of my classes, I was driving on the busy NH 65 highway when I had to overtake a truck. As always, Sravan first instructed me to honk multiple times. In one of the earlier classes, I had objected to this, saying that I did not want to be a "noisy" driver, to which Sravan had responded, "It is very risky if you don't honk. How else will someone know you are behind them?" That Indian roads are one of the loudest in the world is because of the rampant use of the horn. And, in Sravan stripping the honk of its association with being a "nuisance," he reasserted me of its use for reducing risk.

On this twelfth day of class, I gave in and sounded the horn a couple of times. When the truck did not budge, Sravan asked me to accelerate and overtake the truck. I protested, saying there was not enough space on the right of the truck for me to do so safely, that there was a divider.

"Overtake from the left, then! But don't forget to use your indicator," He insisted impatiently.

Arguing back, I said, "That is not the rule. I am supposed to overtake from the right."

"There is no such rule," Sravan tartly responded. "It may be there on paper, but it is not there on the road. Everyone overtakes from the left. See! When there is space, you just go for it before someone else does."

If I had not noticed it before, I certainly noticed then that, indeed, nobody seemed to be following the "rule" around overtaking. I started to do as Sravan instructed, but before I could do so, the car from behind us overtook both our vehicle and the truck very quickly – from the left.

"This is what happens when you keep thinking of rules," Sravan sighed. And, then, as if proving his point from before, he added, "Anyway, remember one thing: driving in Hyderabad needs full concentration, you have to be full-time alert. Anyone can come from any side. There is no guarantee. Nobody follows any rules. So, you have to expect people to overtake from any side. That is why I said: if you drive in Hyderabad, you can drive anywhere in the world."

Sravan's dismissal of the overtaking rule and his subsequent reminder to me that "nobody follows any rules" makes sense if one understands the road from Sravan's perspective: some rules do not make sense, and everyone was not on the same page about rules, anyway. The heterogeneity of the traffic – including cycles, motorcycles, scooters (mopeds), buses, trucks, cycle rickshaws, pushcarts, cars, autorickshaws, tempos, commercial autorickshaws, and pedestrians – created not just a space of physical and physiological variation but also of *mental* and *interpretive* divergence. Being in traffic, in a way, meant getting used to being in a space of heightened difference, and the only way Sravan made sense of that was to advise to me be on "full alert." It almost seemed like a bit of a survival strategy to me, as if Sravan was describing a *battlefield* – which ironically was exactly how Rosie, a road safety activist, had described the state of road traffic in Hyderabad (see the introduction).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I show how the socialization into driving engages with state authority in the form of rules, regulations, and laws. I unpack the culturally intimate phrase, "If you can drive in Hyderabad, you can drive anywhere in the world," that came up in almost every interaction I had with a motorist in the city. I argue, further, that thinking about risk, safety, and pleasure in relation to what is understood as "expertise" on the road is productive for examining how the state

logic behind rules and regulations are made sense of – and, almost always, written off as illogical. Juxtaposing these understandings with efforts by local NGOs to standardize and formalize driver education, I show how it is not as if motorists do not value safety or their own lives; instead, what seems to be at play is a conviction that driving on *these* roads requires motorists to think beyond official rules and regulations.

I highlight how the wider narrative of driving as something "anybody" can do is fraught with understandings of "expertise." I first highlight how labor conditions and the biographies of driver-workers shape their self-understandings as being experts on the road – which stands at odds with how popular reformist road safety agendas portray them as the source of unruliness on the road. Their sense of expertise, I demonstrate, rests on a deeply embodied and sensuous understanding of the roads and is not based on a cognitive understanding of rules and regulations. I then show how many traffic rules are thought of as not making "sense" on Hyderabadi roads and how this shapes the pedagogy around driving, even in middle-class circles.

CHAPTER FOUR

"License Is Guaranteed": Nominal Engagements with the Corrupt State

"Licenses are for safety. No license, no driving – simple," Constable Sreenu explained during a counseling session for drivers at the Traffic Training Institute in Begumpet. "What did I say? Repeat it!" he exhorted.

In response, a bored chorus of drivers caught for driving without a valid license chimed in dimly, "No license, no driving." Sitting in the back of the room, I noticed some of the younger men giggling.

Sreenu noticed them, too, and admonished them angrily, "Hey you! What are you laughing for? You know that if you are caught without a license, and the judge is in a bad mood, then you can even go to jail?"[1] Smiling mischievously, he added, "Why do you all want the headache of running around police stations and courts?[2] Why not just follow rules and avoid all this, eh?"

Taking a dramatic look around the room, Sreenu instructed everyone to pay attention to a large screen on the raised dais. Having seen this series of actions before, I knew he was going to show us a short film. In the first scene, we see a young man, Kartik, who is voicing a great deal of excitement about his father gifting him a motorcycle for his 21st birthday. Kartik's friends tell him to get a license before he takes his motorcycle out for a joy ride. He shuts his friends down and says that he knows he is a good driver and that he does not need a license. He puts on some

1. In the past few years, the city had, on occasion, witnessed adult drivers being sent to jail for a short period of time for not bearing valid licenses.

2. More commonly than facing jail time, those who are caught by the police for driving without a valid license have their vehicles seized by the traffic police. These vehicles are then returned by the police to the drivers only upon the drivers showing proof of a) having applied for a learner's license; b) having attended this particular counseling session; and c) having paid the respective penalty at the court.

earphones and takes his motorbike out for a spin. He seems to be enjoying the wind in his hair as he drives by Hussain Saagar,[3] and he is clearly experiencing the thrill of speed. Suddenly, he sees traffic police personnel pulling over drivers and riders at a checkpoint, to take a look at their documents. Kartik panics, as he does not have a license and is not wearing a helmet. He tries to make a U-turn on the road so that he can drive away in the opposite direction. But he does not notice oncoming traffic, and a speeding bus suddenly hits him.

As we watched this scene unfold, some people in the room gasped audibly. The moment of collision is replayed in the video five times with dramatic music, and, finally, the camera zooms in on a bloody hand that is shaking. The words "No License, No Driving" appear in large red letters – and then the frame freezes.

Sreenu paused the video and looked somberly at the room and then at me, sitting in the back of the classroom. He turned on the lights and surveyed the room with authority. "See what happens when you know you are at fault, and you feel guilty and try to escape the police? Kartik knew he was making a mistake, so he tried to avoid police. Had he had a license, he could have faced the police confidently, and he could have lived happily." Shifting gears, Sreenu asked, "Anyway, why do you think we are making your life hard? Because it is for your own safety. No license means no driving – it is that simple." Shaking his head with exaggerated disappointment, he warned, "It is illegal, but more importantly it is a big danger."

A voice from the last row cheekily pointed out that it seemed more like Kartik died because he was not wearing a helmet, so how did having a license have anything to do with his death?

Sreenu, clearly irritated, snapped back, "Yes, you think I don't know that? But that is what I am saying – first basic rule is to drive with license. When you get a license, it means you are not

3. Hussain Saagar is a manufactured lake in the middle of the city. It is flanked by "Necklace Road," which is often frequented by young men and women riding mopeds and motorbikes.

danger driver. It means that you know some rules. If you are violating basic rule, then you won't follow other rules also, no?" With exaggerated emphasis, he asked the audience, "*If a person cannot even get a license, then what will he follow other rules?* Just last year, we caught 9,000 people without licenses driving on the road! Can you imagine what kind of danger we are creating as a society?"

I could not help but smile at Sreenu's invocation of *samaajam*, or "society." It reminded me of the typical debate that surfaced when it comes to road safety in India – who should be held responsible for the deaths on the roads? As I wrote these thoughts down, a middle-aged man who was sitting next to me whispered in my ear, "If you go to the RTO[4] (Regional Transport Office) to get a license, you have to pay a bribe; if you get caught by the police, you have to pay a bribe. If you don't pay a bribe, you have to sit here and suffer. If you ask me, government is the real danger!"

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When I was doing fieldwork, traffic police often told me that bringing down "no-license driving" was one of their top priorities. One obvious reason is that driving without a license is a legal offence. However, in the context of road safety discourses becoming the discursive scaffolding for making drivers desire rules and regulations, the link between legality and *safety* is one that is being pushed aggressively by state agencies in Hyderabad. In other words, the law is being made desirable. Indeed, in popular understandings and official state discourses all over the world, licensing is framed as ensuring the safety of fellow travelers and pedestrians (Lopez 2004,

4. The Regional Transport Office (also called Regional Transport Authority, RTA, at times) is similar to the Department of Motor Vehicles in the US.

100) by "producing drivers that are less likely to crash" (Mayhew 2007, 229), even though there is no consensus in epidemiological literature about the link between safety and licensing (see Christie 2001; Mayhew 2007).

Driving without a valid license, in this vein, is deemed not just as an illegal, but as an *unsafe*, practice – the assumption there being that a person without a valid license has not been evaluated or certified by the state as a "good" driver, neither has this person subjected themselves to the necessary procedures that a responsible and self-disciplining citizen would.[5] Licensing is assumed to involve both an examination and a verification of one's ability to drive competently, and it extracts a promise that one will abide by the rules of the road. It could, thus, be termed a "citizenship test" (Packer 2008): an evaluation of one's cognitive and embodied acceptance of state authority (in the form of laws, rules, and regulations) and one's allegiance to good citizenry, or, alternately, a "fence" (Takabvirwa 2010) that keeps some people in and some people out. The driving license is, in a way, the origin point of compliance with state-led regulations of driving on the road. As Sreenu, the constable from the vignette above, eloquently pointed out, it is a *fundamental* rule – or a "first basic rule" to follow.

At the same time, as revealed by the comment made to me by the middle-aged man sitting next to me at the counseling session, narratives of bribery and corruption at licensing offices often came up while I was doing fieldwork in Hyderabad. Sting operations[6] conducted by journalists or members of NGOs have, time and again, revealed bribes being given to state officials at the RTO. Whenever I talked about my research with anyone in Hyderabad, one of the first things they told

5. Availing oneself of vehicular insurance, too, is contingent, in a way, on a driver possessing a valid driving license, as it serves as certification of the driver being legally authorized.

6. See, for instance, *The News Minute* (2018c). For a more robust database documenting this issue, www.ipaidabribe.com is a useful resource.

me about is how they got their driving license – and, more often than not, the story involved some form of bribery. Growing up in India, I was hardly a stranger to stories of my family members, friends, and acquaintances[7] having obtained driving licenses without ever having gone to the licensing office or taken a test – all one needed was a *broker* (an intermediary) who would bribe the officials at the transport department. In the seventeen months I spent in Hyderabad, I met only a handful of people who had *not* paid some form of a bribe to obtain their driving license. Any trip to the licensing office entailed a firsthand experience of the "corrupt Indian state" – despite the seductive promises of transparency and objectivity in the form of technological fixes, such as CCTV cameras, that were supposed to serve up the fear of being watched. As a *Times of India* headline in 2014 bluntly stated, "Gadgets [are] No Match to Corrupt Staff at Regional Transport Authority" (*The Times of India* 2014).

Research on corruption at licensing offices often shows how the existence of bribery and corruption undercuts the very purpose of licensing (Bertrand et al. 2005, 2007). This research also finds that the presence of brokers distorts the allocation of licenses. According to most road safety activists with whom I spent time, too, corruption at licensing offices was the root cause of rule-flouting on the roads – simply, drivers were not being tested. As Sameer Paul, founder of the Street Saviors NGO, once told me, "Safety has become a complete *joke.*"

The analysis of corruption as "messing with" the intention of licensing assumes that there is a singular intention behind licensing, and it does not answer a more fundamental question: *Why* does corruption persist in licensing offices? Do drivers applying for driving licenses not care for

7. The same was also true of no fewer than four faculty members at the University of Chicago, all of whom shared with me detailed accounts of having obtained their driving licenses in India in the 1980s without ever having taken a driving test.

their own safety? Do state officials not care for drivers' safety? Is, as Sameer so confidently asserted, safety a complete joke to people?

In my several interactions with drivers across the social spectrum, that was hardly the case. Nobody was on a suicidal mission. Every single person with whom I spoke voiced genuine concern about not only their own safety but also others.' But what seemed to be a matter of contention, negotiation, and pushback was in fact the very function and meaning of a driver's license and, beyond it, the legitimacy of state authority. The stated intentions of the state, in linking the existence of driver's licenses to road safety, intersect with how people make sense of driving practices in Hyderabad.

In this chapter, I interrogate how a range of social actors – from drivers to traffic policemen to brokers – make sense of the quotidian driving license and relate it to different state practices. Following in the footsteps of anthropologists of corruption, who argue that understanding the institutionalization of corruption requires taking a closer look at how corruption is perceived and interpreted by people encountering "the state" in everyday life and public culture (Gupta 2012; Hasty 2005; Hornberger 2018), I reveal how corruption circulates as a social fact, how it shapes political imaginations and democratic practice, and, subsequently, how it continues to be reproduced and normalized. Especially in the Global South, where corruption has been rendered into a routine and ordinary occurrence – something *everyone* knows happens everywhere - it is precisely the "ordinariness" of corruption that beckons an ethnographic study of the practices of corruption in everyday life (Anjaria 2011; Gupta 1995).

I show how perceptions of the state and experiences at the licensing office structure the very meaning of driver's licenses, giving rise to multiple understandings, both competing and compatible. This meaning, I argue, matters to the legitimacy of the state as it attempts to govern

driving habits under the mandate of road safety. Indeed, the stated "intention" of the license, in terms of safety, is troubled in its circulation across several contexts. I explore why people pay a bribe for licenses and what this willingness tells us about the legitimacy of both the license and the state. Instead of taking a functional-analytical approach that evaluates what corruption does or does not do – finding, for example, that "corruption undercuts the purpose of licensing" – I take a more interpretive approach, striving to understand corruption as a window into state-citizen relations. Ultimately, I argue that the existence of a driving license is neither a validation of one's indoctrination as a law-abiding citizen nor commensurate, necessarily, with "good driving." It indicates, rather, *nominal* engagement with the state.[8]

License for Sale: How Driving Schools Sell the Promise of Mobility

The first time I heard the phrase, "License is guaranteed," was at Luxury Motor Driving School. In June 2018, I confessed to Rajesh, the owner of the school, that I was very intimidated by driving and that I had heard getting licenses had become quite difficult. In Hyderabad, an individual[9] must first obtain a "learner's license," which grants a person the right to practice driving under the supervision of a licensed driver. To obtain the "learner's license," proof of residence, proof of age, a passport-sized photo, and a medical certificate[10] must be submitted to

8. The existence of a large number of minor-age drivers – of two-wheelers, mostly – serves as the most telling example of the broken cognitive link between the experienced "right to drive" and the possession of a driving license. Between January and June 2019, the police caught more than 2,000 drivers who were under the age of 18 and driving without a license. I could not interview this population of youth under the age of 18, as per IRB restrictions.

9. Such an individual must be at least 18 years of age in order to be eligible for obtaining a license to drive what is referred to as a "light motor vehicle," which includes two-wheelers and four-wheelers for non-commercial purposes.

10. This certificate is mandatory for anyone applying for a commercial license.

the RTO – documents that render the applicant legible in the eyes of the state. These documents, along with the application form, are submitted on a day and time booked through an online, slot-booking facility. Then the applicant must take a color blindness test and a written examination with 20 multiple choice questions about road signs, traffic rules, and traffic regulations. If the applicant scores more than 12/20, a learner's license for the applicant is processed on the same day.[11] Arguably, this part of the process of obtaining a license tests one's cognitive understanding of the official laws and rules of the road. The learner's license is thus approved upon the applicant's successful demonstration of this cognitive understanding. Upon possessing the learner's license, a driver is expected to practice driving whilst being accompanied by a licensed driver. After 30 days (and within 180 days) of the issuance of the learner's license, the individual may apply for a permanent license. At that time, the applicant must (re-)submit proof of age, proof of residence, a recent passport-sized photo, and his or her temporary license. The applicant must also pass a driving test at the RTO. In Hyderabad and in most other cities in India, this test is *not* conducted in real-time traffic, but rather in an open-air facility with dedicated testing tracks.

In response to my nervous confession, Rajesh sighed and said, "Getting a license has become very tough nowadays. See, earlier, you could pay a broker and you would not even have to set on foot into the RTO and you could get license," he explained. "I myself got my license without ever taking any test," he continued. "Your parents also must have got like that.[12] Until just a few years ago, that was very normal. Nowadays, however, the government has become very strict. You have to go in person. The tests have also become very hard. Plus all kinds of CC cameras everywhere. Very strict…" Rajesh's characterization of the process of getting a driver's license

11. If an applicant fails the exam, they can reapply after a seven-day waiting period.

12. This was indeed the case.

took me by surprise. Contrary to what Rajesh was saying, in popular media and road safety forums, India was often portrayed as having very lax – and, some might add, ineffective – licensing procedures.[13]

Immediately after that, however, he added, "But *medam*, just don't take tension. See, if you go through us, your *license is guaranteed*! Definitely you will get." I assumed Rajesh was quite simply doing a sales pitch, trying to convince me that the pedagogy at the driving school produces drivers who always pass the test, but he went on, to say, "Just sign up for our 'premium' package. It includes teaching lessons, as well as broker fee and license fee. Full combo pack! What is the point of learning if you don't get a license at the end of the day? If you take our premium package, guaranteed license. Our brokers will make sure you get it. Our brokers never let any customer down."

Rajesh then flashed me a smile. It dawned on me that he was referring to making extralegal payments to ensure that, no matter how I actually did on the driver's tests, I would definitely come out the proud owner of a driver's license. In short, a broker was going to bribe officials at the licensing office to get me a driver's license.

Rajesh charged me ₹3000 ($40) for three weeks of classes and another ₹3000 ($40) for the "guaranteed license." I knew – and he knew – that the official cost of the license was ₹700 ($9).[14] The margin – ₹2300 ($31) – was going to be split between Rajesh and the broker who was

13. See Whitelocks (2016). This article, published in *The Daily Mail*, pictographically sums up the difficulty of getting a driver's licenses across different countries.

14. A ₹200 ($2.70) fee is charged for the learner's license, and a ₹500 fee ($6.70) is charged for the permanent license.

14.. The total official fees – including the fees for a learner's license – for getting a driver's license add up to at least ₹700 ($9.40). This fee can increase, depending on whether or not one is driving a commercial vehicle or applying for a license that will be valid internationally.

going to procure me a driver's license. I agreed to this, as I knew that every single person – across class lines – that I had interviewed until then had used a broker to get their license; it would be almost "inauthentic" *not* to go the broker route.

As with Rajesh telling me (and other clients I observed) that "a license is guaranteed," driving schools in the city were known to have contacts inside the RTO – intermediaries who facilitated the process of getting a license. Operating at the RTO, brokers or agents are individuals who process all transport-related paperwork, in exchange for a "fee." However, neither the brokers nor the service they provide are strictly legal. Brokers regularly bribe state officials at the RTO and often maintain long-term relationships with state officials in order to procure driving licenses, insurance certificates, or other papers related to motor vehicles. They are especially important for state officials, since they make the circulation of bribes efficient and less transparent – importantly, an official cannot be directly linked to a bribe if the cash transaction is mediated by a middle-person. Money is not exchanged overtly, but rather through these brokers. The presence of these brokering intermediaries makes it harder to clamp down on state officials who use public office for private gain (Heidenheimer 2005; Nye 2001; Rose-Ackerman 1999), since the chains of interdependency are longer and tougher to surveil (Bertrand et al. 2008; Oldenburg 1987).

Driving schools also often maintain long-term relations with these brokers, since it is a win-win situation for both of them; driving schools attract more clientele by promising their clients a "guaranteed" license, while brokers get a steady supply of clients, due to their connections to driving schools. The existence of these links between RTO and driving schools was a public secret throughout the city. While driving schools used advertisements to promote their business, they often used the phrases "All RTO Works Done Here" and "All RTA Works Undertake," (as seen in figure 4.1), implying that they had connections with brokers who could get RTO work done for

a fee. It is often understood that the brokers had their own "set-up" and could get, for instance, files passed quickly and approvals and permissions secured in much less time. They offered the services of speed and of assurance.

Figure 4.1. "Expert Motor Driving School" sign. Found on the boundary wall of a public school in Secunderabad, it exemplifies typical advertisements of driving schools in the city.
Source: Photo by author.
Note: This was not the driving school at which I spent time. I do not wish to disclose identifiable information about that school.

What Happens in the RTO Does Not Stay in the RTO: A Field Note

On a sunny day in July 2018, I approached the gates of the Regional Transport Authority (RTA) in Khairtabad with some uncertainty. I carried in my personal bag all the required documents for obtaining my learner's license, but I also held in my hand three crisp ₹500 ($6.70) notes for Shankar, my RTA "broker." A week before this day, Rajesh, my driving school instructor,

had put me in touch with Shankar, who booked me a slot for a "written test" (theory test). I did not have to do anything but show up with some money.

According to Shankar's instructions to me over the phone the previous night, I was to walk up to the second floor of the yellow building to the right of the entrance and look for Shankar, who would be wearing a light blue shirt and black pants. Shankar assured me that he would recognize me, as he had seen my profile display picture on WhatsApp. Before he hung up on our conversation, however, Shankar asked me to not tell anyone that I was using a broker.

"Nowadays, some journalists are doing sting operations," he said.

I asked if I needed to read the federal and city motor vehicle laws or traffic rules, to prepare for passing the theory test, a requirement for obtaining a learner's license.

He responded with a dry, "No need to…what is the point of paying me, then? Just bring the papers and bring yourself."

As Shankar had promised, I found him the next day on the second floor, surrounded by a group of eager men and women (three men and four women) holding photocopies of various documents in their hands – much like me – and standing in the corner of the large waiting room. Shankar, I learned later, was in his late 40s. The most memorable things about him were his bright, albeit bloodshot, eyes, which carried forth an expression of chronic irritation, a shock of dyed black hair on his head, one thick gold chain around his sweaty neck, and thick golden rings capped with precious gems adorning his fingers, which leafed deftly through the photocopies of various government documents.[15] Shankar's phone rang continuously, emitting a shrill, instrumental version of the Indian national anthem. In the midst of juggling clients on the phone and verifying

15. These documents included a photocopy of proof of education (digital academic documents of class 10th and 12th students, called Class X or XII Marksheets); an Aadhaar card (a card bearing a 12-digit, unique, identifying number issued by taking a person's biometric details, such as iris scan and fingerprints); a birth certificate, if possible; and two passport-sized photographs.

whether all of us had our documents with us, Shankar instructed us all to neatly fold the cash we had brought for him and to use a paperclip to attach it to our documents.

Two of the women in the group asked if he would reduce the price, as it was too steep for them. Mildly annoyed, he playfully accused them of taking advantage of his niceness. They pleaded some more, and he reduced the price marginally. "To get a license […] you're doing bargaining like this is some fish market. Ladies are ladies everywhere," he commented smugly, knowing full well that he had the upper hand.

We handed him our money and documents, and he asked us to follow him down the stairs and then wait for him by the "computer room." We all walked down the stairs together, and Shankar commented, "These documents have to first be signed before the exam. If you had not used my services, you would be standing in the line for two hours! Because of me, quickly-quickly you can leave and get on with your day." We watched him disappear into yet another large room full of nervous, jostling, waiting bodies standing in loosely formed queues. The maze of paperwork at a government office is paralleled only by its architecture.

Two police constables stood outside the entrance to the "computer room" where theoretical examinations are conducted. About forty people were waiting – mostly young men and women in their twenties, some older women, and a couple of older men. Some of them were sitting, engrossed in their phones, in front of the door to the testing center, while some of them were standing and talking loudly on their phones. I, too, waited by the entrance of the "computer room," along with Jaya and Shruti – the two women who had persuaded Shankar to reduce his price, albeit only slightly. Jaya was a homemaker in her mid-30s whose main reason for learning to drive was to drop her son off at school and cricket coaching every day. Shruti was a twenty-two-year old student

at a technical institute in the city who had moved to Hyderabad from a nearby small town. Both of them told me that they had connected with Shankar through their driving school's instructor.

Next to the entrance to the "computer room" hung a large, vinyl banner depicting all the traffic signs alongside their meanings. Torn and dilapidated, and lopsidedly hanging on two nails on the dusty wall to boot, half of the informational content on the banner was lost to the eye. I pointed to the banner and asked Jaya and Shruti if they knew all the traffic signs. Jaya suddenly panicked, "Wait, will we have to take the test? I thought Shankar will get us the learner's license directly." Shruti opined that perhaps we didn't have to take the test – that's what her driving school instructor had told her – so maybe Shankar was planning to take the test on our behalf?

I, too, was confused and unsure of what to expect. If I were to take the test, then what did I pay Shankar for? Just to save time and to assist me with paperwork? From the interviews I had conducted thus far, it had become clear to me that working-class drivers (autorickshaw, bus, and taxi drivers) used the services of brokers because they considered themselves ill-equipped to navigate the illegibility of the bureaucratic maze. But for an educated and internet-savvy person like me, it was not hard to book an appointment at the RTO and figure out the paperwork requirements. "Did I just get conned?" I wondered anxiously, all the while certain that I would fail the driving test, since I had not bothered to read up on the rules and laws of driving in India – an embarrassing confession at this point. During my driving lessons, my driving instructor had casually said, "Don't jump signal, don't do 'wrongside driving,'[16] wear seatbelt when on the highway," when I had asked him about rules and regulations – and this was all I knew, I suddenly realized. Signs? I had no idea how to interpret them. Much like the several drivers I interacted with during fieldwork, none of us had even googled the rules and laws pertaining to driving. My driving

16. "Wrongside driving" means driving on the wrong side of the road/driving against traffic.

instructor had told me that I would just "pick up" what rules were important by actually driving on the road – I would absorb the wisdom through practice and through a keen observation of which rules were being actively enforced by the police.

As I worried about all of this, Shankar showed up again. Jaya, Shruti, and I started asking him how we would pass this test without his help. He calmly replied that all we needed to do was enter the testing center area when our name was called out and "his people" inside would take care of us.

"What is this?!" Jaya and Shruti both immediately protested. "What is the point of paying you if I have to take the test anyway?" Jaya asked him anxiously.

Shankar, irritated, shook his head and clarified, "No, you don't have to take the test. Just go inside when they call your name. Ok?" With that, he walked away, leaving us with more questions. Jaya, in that moment, was a customer annoyed at the possibility of not making the most out of the money she had spent.

Within a couple of minutes, our names were called out, along with a few others. About eight of us stepped into a dimly-lit room. At the entrance sat a police sub-inspector who took our papers and circled a scrawl made by Shankar. I could not comprehend the scrawl. He instructed the constable next to him to take us to "Room 2." In Room 2, there were eight personal computers, four on each side of the room. Mounted on each computer monitor was a webcam. Before I could take in the room, an aged police home guard – I will call him "Ramana" – told me to sit at one of the computers and proceeded to sit down next to me. On the flickering screen was the homepage of the learner's license test. Ramana, in a soft voice, instructed me, "Keep your head straight at the computer screen. There is a webcam installed, so pretend to be clicking some keys, but don't touch the keyboard." Swiftly, he started taking the exam himself and, just out of the line of sight

of the webcam, completed the test all by himself, in under two minutes. He did not even pause to read the questions as, I realized, he knew the answers beforehand. He simply clicked on all the correct answers and swiftly completed the quiz. Once done, he instructed me, "Ok, done, go outside and collect your permit. Inspector Sir must have signed it by now." I was awestruck at the efficiency of this stealthy operation. I left the room, collected my official learner's permit, and waited for Jaya and Shruti, who emerged from the testing center a few moments after me.

As soon as the three of us regrouped, we began to laugh. We went on laughing and giggling. It was unstoppable, an instinctive response, and it felt almost necessary for resolving the affective tension of being in sly cahoots to outsmart the state – although we all knew that none of this would have been possible without the tacit permission of the state. For Shankar and Ramana, getting learner's permits for aspiring drivers like us was nothing special – it is what they did every single day of the week; it was just their job.[17] For us aspiring drivers, however, it was a first brush with the supposed disciplinary apparatus. And we had emerged victorious – we had in our hands a piece of paper signed by state authorities that claimed we were well-aware of traffic rules and regulations. More importantly, we had secured an experience of the state that validated our suspicions of its insincerity – even though we were the ones who ought to have felt guilty. But, then again, in that moment we were so much in awe of the broker-state nexus that embodied the famous Indian *jugaad* (improvisation) mentality, which could ingeniously bend rules and regulations, that our own guilt paled in comparison. We had our learner's licenses!

As I was leaving the RTO, I noticed Shankar standing near the entrance, surrounded by a new group of clients. I could see his large hands sifting through sheets of paper, his right thumb

17. Shankar, in a personal conversation with me later, said he dealt with at least 40 clients every single day. Out of the 40, half needed licenses, and the other half was a mix of people needing insurance papers, vehicle registration, and accident-related paperwork.

occasionally making its way to his tongue. That he stood right under the official, state mascot for road safety, "Mr. Rido" – a helmet-wearing traffic policeman on wheels, with a traffic light on his white shirt (see figure 4.2 below; *Deccan Chronicle* 2016) – was sheer irony.

Figure 4.2. Mr. Rido was declared the safety mascot of Telangana in 2016.
Source: *Deccan Chronicle*

Exactly one month later, Jaya, Shruti, and I met at the "practical driving test" center together. It is a large, open-air facility located in the outskirts of the city. The test, I had been told by my driving instructor, involved driving on testing tracks – a "figure 8"-shaped track and an "H"-shaped track, up an incline – and then demonstrating reversing and parking. Our appointment was for 11:00am. The three of us got to the testing premises by 10:30am. Once again, we had a broker assigned to us by our driving instructor. This broker, Sundar, took the same amount of money from us as Shankar. Sundar, however, did not sport as much gold as Shankar and was very rude to all of us. We collectively reasoned that his surly disposition must have been the result of working all day in the open, under the hot and unforgiving sun. He asked us whether we had practiced, and we all nodded. The previous day, my driving instructor had taken me to an empty field and made me do the "figure 8" shape and the "H" shape several times.

Explaining to us that the testing center was quite busy that day, so we would have to wait a little more than usual, Sundar pointed to an old white Maruti 800 that we would drive for our tests. Jaya whispered to me that she was surprised this car was even around. “Trust the government to make us drive a car that is not even manufactured anymore!” she quipped.

I asked Sundar if people failed these tests often.

He replied with a stern gaze, “Yes, yes, if you don’t drive properly, they will definitely fail you…you think it is easy to get a license?” he asked me rhetorically. Continuing flippantly, he said, “But, anyway, since you are going through me, it should be ok. Unless you completely cannot move your car – then only God can help you! Otherwise, it is a guarantee.” I wondered if the license is so easily “guaranteed” by brokers like Sundar, what, exactly, does the license actually mean?

Sundar invited us to join the group of people standing by the testing tracks so we could watch people take their tests and learn some tricks. Jaya, Shruti, and I waited, standing next to Sundar, as he sent his clients, one by one, into the testing tracks. He shouted out instructions to the drivers the whole time – “Reverse! Use the gear and pull it in reverse mode!” “What are you doing!? Go left! Not right! LEFT! LEFT! Do you know what left is, idiot?!” and, “Press the accelerator! How will the car go forward!? Press it, fool!!”

I went up to Sundar and asked him how these drivers, who were clearly unable to drive without assistance – or at least instructions – could get licenses to drive on the streets. In his usual irate manner, he broke it down for me:

> Everyone gets nervous during exams, no? It is just like that! It does not mean they can’t drive. Anyway, since when are our roads like this? Empty? This whole system is messed up. They will anyway learn to drive when they are on the roads, and those roads are not going to be like this. Everyone learns driving only when they are on the roads. License is just formality’s sake. If you don’t have it, police will catch. Earlier, there was no need to do all this drama only. So many *lakhs* and *lakhs* people got licenses without ever stepping

> foot into the RTO. I myself got license like that! Your parents also probably got their licenses without ever taking an exam. Ask them! Nowadays, Inspector Sir watches from that room and decides whether to approve license or not. It has become very strict. (Field Notes, August 2018)

Sundar's pithy analysis of how all of this was okay invoked his understanding of driving as something that was *really* learned only on the roads. This perspective, as I have shown in chapter 3, cuts to the heart of any and all conversations about road safety. While Sundar was getting sunburnt on a daily basis procuring guaranteed licenses for his clients, he, too, was well aware that his was a *nominal* engagement with the law; indeed, he was making a living off of it. I admitted to Sundar that, indeed, my parents had never taken a licensing exam. He asked me if they had ever had an accident. "No," I replied. He shrugged to suggest that he rested his case.

I looked at the building to which he had pointed while talking to me. It was a two-story white box of a building, positioned to the right of the testing tracks. The building had tinted windows on the top floor, where supposedly a police inspector sat who watched what the drivers did and decided on their legal right to drive. Jaya, who had been listening in on my exchange with Sundar, whispered, "That inspector fellow is probably watching funny videos on his phone. If our police were *so* diligent in their duty, would our country even be like this?" Shruti and I laughed. In her witticism lay a profound commentary on popular perceptions of the diligence of the state – the *lazy* Indian state, that is: not weak, but derelict.

My turn to take the test finally arrived, and Sundar impatiently pointed me to a dark blue Maruti 800 covered in scratches and dents. I sat in the very rickety car, which had no air-conditioning, and tried to tug at the shift stick. It felt too tight, and I felt immediately nervous. I had gotten used to driving a smooth sedan. As I started to do the "figure 8," I could hear Sundar barking instructions at me with his characteristic impatience. "Don't stop moving! Keep going! Why are you stopping? Did you not eat breakfast today?!" The steering wheel was very difficult

to maneuver – it was not the "power steering" to which I had become accustomed, and I was finding it hard to turn the car. I could feel my heart beat loudly, the shame of possibly failing this test beginning to loom large. I began to sweat profusely. Slowly, I managed to make the "figure 8" and then inched my way forward to the "H-shaped" track. This whole exercise began to feel surreal – as if I were on a game show. The "H-shaped" track had a small orange cones alongside the parallel lines. I entered the track and started to reverse, as I was supposed to. Suddenly, I realized I was backing into one of the conical barricades. I panicked and could not brake in time. I heard a loud thud and felt a crunch. I had toppled two of the cones. I panicked and accelerated too soon, proceeding to ram into some small shrubs that were growing alongside the track.

I was sure I had failed the test by now. But I remembered Sundar telling me that, as long as I did not stop completely and give up, he would try his hardest to get me the license. I regained my sense of balance and composure and managed to steer the car out of the track. I proceeded up the ramp, down the incline, finally, reversed and parked the car in neutral gear. My knees were weak, and my heart began to sink.

Sundar came rushing towards the car and swiftly chided me for taking so long. "I cannot believe people like you will get a license," he snapped. As I got out of the car, he pushed another nervous client of his – an older man – into the seat and yelled at him to get started on the test. He turned to me and pointed to a kiosk in the building with tinted windows. He instructed me to go there and pick up a stamped and signed confirmation of having passed the practical exam.

Bewildered, I told him that I did not understand. "What, I passed?!" I asked him, genuinely shocked at this revelation, despite having been told repeatedly that a "license is guaranteed."

He nodded, as if it were no big deal, as if people like me getting driver's licenses was a regular occurrence.

I went to the kiosk, staffed by a constable who was waiting with a bunch of white slips in his hand. He asked me for my name, handed me one slip and chuckled, "Madam, please don't drive like that on the road." He went on, "You have to do lots of practice. Inspector Sir told me to tell you that specially. Be careful on the roads, ok? Women, as such, need more practice. Especially in this kind of traffic. Anyway, here is your receipt, and you will get your license in one week. You can drive on the road without any problem now."

I could drive on the road now, but *should* I? In fact, *could* I? I nodded to the constable as sincerely as I could. I walked towards the exit – armed with the knowledge that I was now a *legal* driver. Even though I knew that I "should" be critical of how I had gotten my license, or perhaps even feel guilty for being complicit in abetting corruption, I felt immensely ecstatic. Jaya and Shruti were waiting for me sporting huge smiles on their faces, indexing similar stories of conquest and triumph.

Sundar, standing with Jaya and Shruti, shook my hand to congratulate me – as if I had worked very hard to procure this document. Smiling widely – for the first time that morning – he said, "Madam, you did very badly on the driving test – but, see, *still* I managed to get you license…₹500 ($6.70) more, please?"

I gave him the money. In a strange way, I felt more than happy to do so. In this world – in which automobility was a profoundly mundane aspiration – getting a driver's license was nevertheless such a milestone in one's life that I could hardly chide myself for suspending my ethnographic detachment. The examination may have had little to do with how or why I got the driver's license, but it still marked a rite of passage in the biography of my citizenship. The rush of adrenaline surging through my veins certainly attested to that. I *felt* the power of state authority

that day, and I felt a shamelessly cheeky pride in having outwitted a system that I knew had been programmed to be outsmarted.

Knowing that our license was "guaranteed" did not make the process of encountering state authority any less powerful an experience. I felt the adrenaline coursing through me while trying to reverse, the gaze of the inspector felt real, and the ritual of an examination was – as examinations are wont to be – nerve-wracking. Much like the testing track that was supposed to simulate the experience of driving through several potential challenges (albeit weakly simulated, given the absence of real traffic and the immense doubt it thereby cast on the authenticity of the simulation), the ritual of an examination made the license seem hard to get; somewhere, deep down, I knew that if the government official in question suddenly changed their mind, I would not get a driver's license, even though I had paid the broker. The existence of the broker, even I knew, was contingent on several factors. Furthermore, even though I was just another customer in the daily business of the brokers, I still felt like I had scammed the state – and this feeling of outwitting the system was, perhaps, the source of the joy. It also made me realize that, indeed, rules can be broken, and there are shortcuts one can take. Similar to what Julia Hornberger (2018) notes in her work on corruption in driving licensing in Johannesburg, the ritual of getting a driver's license facilitates an intimate engagement with the state and, thus, becomes a mini-tutorial in learning how seriously the state takes laws, rules, and regulations.

Licensed to Kill?

Several weeks after my experiences at the RTO, I met Sameer Paul, the founder of Street Saviors, a road safety NGO in the city. Disparaging driving schools as "mass-manufacturing unsafe drivers," he argued that the reason driving schools did not teach drivers rules and

regulations was that they benefitted from keeping people unaware so they could scare them into using brokers. Sameer's absolute dismay at what he termed the "pitiable" state of driving pedagogy in Hyderabad was why he founded his own driving school in 2016.

Unlike Rajesh, who had thousands of students enrolled, Sameer almost always had no more than six or seven. He was known to accompany his students/customers to the RTO when they needed to get their licenses – to ensure that they did *not* take the help of a broker in getting a license. If he felt like the examiner had rejected someone unfairly, he would not leave the premises until the state officials gave in and accepted someone's application. Sameer, being an ex-army officer and an Anglo-Indian passing as White, often ended up getting his way – which was often the subject of much resentment amongst other road safety activists who had a harder time making state officials listen to them.

Sameer asserted that it was people like Rajesh who created the very problem he and others like him were then "solving" – all of which, in turn, produced unsafe roads:

> Driving schools and the way they teach driving is why people use brokers – but make no mistake, it is no coincidence. If I don't teach you anything and then send you to a difficult examination, you will be desperate to pass it. And that is when you will be tempted to cheat, use a broker. If you know everything, then why will you cheat? It's all a big moneymaking conspiracy. From your driving school instructor till the Transport Minister – everyone benefits from keeping the status quo. Pay a bribe, get a license. That bloody simple. *Then, what is the link between safety, driving skills, and licenses? Nothing.* If you think about it, it is not a license to drive, it is *a license to kill*. The government is literally handing people permission to kill others on the road. Countless lives simply lost. Absolute shame! (Field Notes, August 2018)

In pointing to a systemic problem with how corruption works, Sameer was linking corrupt practices to an everyday production of unsafety. Based on information released by the state department after they filed a Right to Information Act claim, Sameer learned that more than 97%

applicants pass the examination at the licensing offices on their first try.[18] That was why Sameer and his colleague filed a Public Interest Litigation in the local court, to hold the Telangana Transport Department accountable and to mandate that they tighten licensing requirements and remove brokers from the scene. In arguing that the quantity of licenses was inversely proportionate to the quality of driving on the roads, Sameer viewed the driver's license as being an implicit endorsement by the state to kill others, by causing crashes on the road – yet another reminder of the state's indifference to the lives of the very people who do its work for it.

For Varun Guha, the founder of Streets For All, the issue was a deeply cultural one at its very core. Quoting the same statistic that Sameer had discovered through an RTI claim, Varun said that most people simply got licenses because they felt like they had to, and that corruption was making that easily possible. Skeptically, he complained, "People seem to think – or are *made* to think – that licenses are like *things* to be purchased. You know, like they are overpriced onions at a *rythu bazaar*!"[19] For Varun, corruption did more than just "distort allocation," as economists would put it. Corruption was changing the very *meaning* of a driver's license. Corruption has, in Varun's view, impacted the cultural narrative around licenses. As Varun put it,

> Due to corruption, the *very understanding of a license is wrong*. It is not a good or service to just buy and use. The government is not just withholding it like some ration or something. It is supposed to guarantee a certain standard of driving. But people don't understand that because bribes exist. They don't feel like they need to work hard to get a license – study the rules, know the laws, practice driving according to the regulations. Nothing. Everybody just simply *wants* a license…Technically, more than half the drivers on the road aren't supposed to be driving. If I stopped people on the roads and took their driving test, most of them would simply fail! (Interview, March 2019)

18. I asked my contacts at the transport department to verify this, but they did not.

19. "*Rythu bazaars*" are farmer's markets. At the time we had this conversation, onions were in the news, due to their scarcity in the market.

In pointing out that "it is not a good or service […] like some ration or something," Varun was alluding to a popular conception of the corrupt welfare state as withholding what people *deserved* to get, as oppressing the poor by withholding money, goods, and services. However, their argument was that, in the case of things like certification – as in the case of driver's licenses – corruption made it easier for *anyone* to get what they wanted, instead of making people work hard for it or show themselves to be worthy of obtaining a license. In other words, corruption removed any conditional requirement that motorists *earn* their licenses by showing state officials that they possess both cognitive and embodied knowledge of the laws of the road. As I already indicated in the introduction to the dissertation, corruption is often viewed as undercutting the very purpose of licensing, if we understand licensing as the certification of a driver's skills and competence. And that certainly becomes a valid claim, if one equates safe driving with driving according to rules and regulations.

But for both Varun and Sameer, people's motivations for paying bribes lined up with what they saw as a larger "mentality" problem in the country. According to Sameer, "Corruption is in the blood of Indians. It has become a habit." Similarly, according to Varun,

> Indians have gotten used to cheating – and being rewarded for cheating – since Day One. You know that saying, "Don't do hard work, but do smart work?" That is the mentality of every Indian. We may be divided by religion, but we are united by *jugaad*![20] How can we put in least effort and get most benefit? It is the same mentality at work with licenses. We don't want to read and familiarize ourselves with rules, laws, anything. Brokers just take advantage of this mentality. Shortcut mentality. People have to be educated on what licensing means, why it is important. The whole road safety project rests on people's awareness. Without awareness, there will be no results. (Field Notes, March 2019)

In pointing to a cultural mentality, neither Sameer nor Varun is necessarily blaming people for using brokers. They are cognizant of the fact that the state is culpable for working with the driving

20. Hindi word for "improvisation".

schools to reproduce corruption and, thus, for hindering road safety efforts. However, in exploring what corruption did, road safety activists often reduced the motivations for paying a bribe to mere greed or habit and pushed for some sort of increased "awareness." The awareness-building was, as I have shown in chapter 2, a means to make people see and interpret safety in the same way, thereby building shared consensus on safety. Both Sameer and Varun told me that making licenses difficult to get and bringing down the number of people who pass exams were critical to establishing the link between self-responsibilization and licensing. "People should feel a sense of responsibility when they get licenses," Sameer told me after we discussed my own experiences. "It should *mean* something."

However, Varun's insistence that people see licenses as something they can just "buy" did not quite resonate with my own interactions with drivers in Hyderabad. In my conversations with drivers, licenses were not necessarily the "onions at a *rythu bazaar*" for people to just buy at a premium. When I began to ask drivers why they had paid a bribe, I realized they held a varied set of motivations and assumptions about licenses, examinations, and the state itself. Most importantly, the stakes were higher than vegetable market ups and downs: there were real repercussions if one was caught driving without a driver's license, a legal offence.

In the simplest terms, bribes are paid in order to comply with the law. Bribes facilitate a nominal engagement with the state. They help procure a document one is supposed to possess at the same time that the process of getting the license subverts one of its most critical intentions, namely, certifying good citizenship on the road (Packer 2008, 11).

Trusting the Exam, but Not the Examiner: Middle-Class Motivations for Paying a Bribe

A few weeks after I obtained my license, I asked Rajesh – the owner of Luxury Motor Driving School – if it really was that difficult to get a license without a broker. What if, I asked, I had studied very hard for the examination and actually driven well? He impatiently explained to me the following:

> Why you are asking me as if you don't know what happens in India? You have become full American only, *medam*! [Laughs] See, if you don't pay the broker, you might pass the learner's test. But in the driving test, even if you drive perfectly, no guarantee. Government officials cannot be trusted. It is not like in foreign countries. Here, government fellows only want to make money. If you don't use a broker who will give them some money to give you a license, *they will find some reason to fail you*. They want the extra money, no? So why will they pass you? Plus, they know how badly people want licenses. They purposely *delay* the process if you don't pay a broker – then you will only get sick of waiting, and you will just give them some extra money so that they do faster. They know that for most people, time is precious, license is precious; some extra money is not precious. And they know that you need to get a license, because otherwise the police will harass you. So, just think of it like an investment. You pay some extra money, but you will definitely get a license, and then you can avoid any *kirkiri*[21] with police. Simple. (Field Notes, September 2018)

One could argue that Rajesh's characterization of the Indian state – as unlike "foreign countries" and as inherently untrustworthy – worked to his own benefit, since he earned money from people who distrusted the state and payed him extra fees that he then split with his broker contact at RTO. However, I find it hard to believe that Rajesh's suspicion of the state was borne only out of strategic self-interest. His suspicions, after all, were hardly out of the ordinary.

When I was doing interviews with Hyderabadis who typically self-identified as "middle class," they often told me stories about how they got their driver's licenses. All of these accounts invariably involved bribery – and always via brokers. While narrating their experiences, most people laughed sheepishly. Their descriptions were peppered with humorous commentaries – after

21. See footnote 38 on page 69.

all, placing oneself in the genre of the comical, rather than the factual or legal, enables one to talk about one's own complicity in or proximity to the act of corruption (Hornberger 2018, S142; see, also, Musaraj 2018).

Perhaps the biggest motivation for middle-class drivers to engage in bribery was the massive "time waste" that seemed to be the inevitable byproduct of not going the broker route. Kalyani, a thirty-four-year-old homemaker who was learning to drive at a driving school similar to Luxury around the same time I was also learning, summarized her motivation to pay the "extra fee" in the following way:

> See, I am also against corruption and all that, but I cannot run around the RTO a hundred times. The system is broken. If I go without a broker, there is no guarantee that I will get a license. Even if they give it to me eventually, they will make me take the test twice, or just purposely delay everything. I have a full-time job, two little kids, and no time to breathe. Where do I have the time to stand in some queue and on top of all that and risk *not even getting the damn license*? I personally know people who went without brokers, and they just failed the driving test. As it is, in government offices, unless you are someone who has political connections, it is very hard to get things done. What is the point of acting morally superior when the system is broken? Through the brokers that these driving schools maintain, license is a done deal. For just some extra money, total peace of mind. (Interview, August 2018)

On the face of it, Kalyani's desire for not wanting to "waste time" at a typical government office is not a surprising motivation for a salaried professional – and a new mother – like her.[22] Pressed for time, Kalyani's framing of "not even getting the damn license" as a *risk* showcased a perception of the state as arbitrary in its judgment of who deserved to obtain a license. For instance, by bringing up how "someone who has political connections" always gets their way, she pointed to how the enmeshment of RTO officials in relations of patrimonialism that always produced rigged results. What, then, Kalyani asked, was the point of "acting morally superior"?

22. In their own work, Bertrand et al. (2007) and Bussell (2017) find very similar motivations amongst the elite for engaging in bribery.

Kalyani's suspicions were founded on two central apprehensions that came up very often amongst middle- and upper-class Hyderabadis – from two strikingly different class positions – during fieldwork: one, that state officials at the RTO would find some reason to fail those who did not use brokers; and two, the process of getting a driver's license would take longer if one did not use a broker. As such, bribery thrived on the continued understanding of the state as one that was going to make its citizens *wait* (Auyero 2012). The rationale for paying – twice, and sometimes thrice – the amount for a driver's license was often steeped in an understanding of the state as not an objective examiner, but as *extractive* and avaricious, when it came to taking money, and callous and even lazy when it came to taking road safety seriously.

Unlike Kalyani, Pranith, who had recently moved back to Hyderabad from the US after getting a master's degree in mechanical engineering, was more ambivalent toward the question of bribery, even though he had himself used the services of a broker. Pranith's experience at the RTO was, in fact, precisely what made people like Kalyani suspicious of the state. Explaining how and why he resorted to using a broker, Pranith told me:

> I learned to drive a car when I was maybe fifteen or sixteen. But I never bothered to apply for a license because I didn't really have a car to drive and only occasionally drove my mom or my friends around in my dad's car. But very rarely, you know? Anyway, so a couple of years ago, before going to the States, I realized that I probably should have a license – just to be safe. As some ID, you know? So, I went to the RTO because, you know, I know to drive. I thought, "Why waste money on a broker?" I practiced the theory tests online, and since I know how to drive, the driving test was a breeze. But then the driving inspector said that I did something wrong. He said I didn't use indicator – I swear I had. I made a big fuss and asked them to show me footage. Because my uncle is in the police, they even obliged, but the CC cameras cannot capture anything so detailed, so it was a waste. The worst part is that in front of my own eyes, *I saw people who were doing everything wrong – but they had used brokers – so they were easily passed.* Anyway, they told me to come for a second test. This time, I went to Star Driving School and, ya, they had some agent[23] who got everything done. I mean, it's common knowledge that government officials make your life miserable until you pay a bribe, but I have experienced it firsthand! (Field Notes, August 2018)

23. Brokers are also referred to as "agents."

Pranith's experience is illustrative of precisely the kinds of experiences that fueled the misgivings Kalyani and so many others had about approaching the RTO without a broker. Both Pranith and Kalyani noted the risk tied to the uncertainty of whether or not they would actually get a driver's license. The uncertainty they highlighted was not the kind of uncertainty that any kind of examinations entail that are designed to be selective – but was borne, rather, out of a suspicion of the state and its capriciousness. That is, Pranith and Kalyani were both skeptical of the objectivity of the examiner, not of the logic of the examinations per se. While Sameer and Varun – the road safety reformers – tended to view citizens as being used to a culture of "shortcuts" or hoodwinking the system, Rajesh, Pranith and Kalyani framed the state as a trickster who enforced some laws on the road but left them with little choice when it came to paying a bribe to obtain their licenses.

The public secret of driving schools being complicit in reproducing the corrupt Indian state was not met without resistance amongst my interlocutors. This makes sense, considering that taking anti-corruption stances has, in fact, been a central concern within middle-class political mobilization efforts, especially on a national scale (Sitapati 2011; Visvanathan 2012). Standing up against corruption and bribery has been critical to the fashioning of a middle-class disposition, even in Hyderabad, with middle-class volunteer groups leading the charge in conducting sting operations at government offices. In my fieldwork, it was older men who often told me how despicable it was that youngsters used brokers. For instance, Gopal Rao, a sixty-seven-year-old man, told me how he had never paid a broker at any government office and chided younger people for doing so. "I just shame youngsters at government offices when I see them using brokers," he

told me. “I just loudly shame them. When an old man like me can stand in a queue for hours, what is their problem?”[24]

But it was precisely because availing oneself of the services of driving schools was helpful in distancing oneself from the idea of illegality that they were so popular; the “dirty work” of corruption was outsourced to people like Rajesh.[25] Take the case of Suresh, a fifty-six-year-old banker who had enrolled his daughter at a driving school. Suresh told me that paying agents a fee did not constitute as bribery and that it was just an extended service provided by the driving school: “I am not paying any official any money. So how is it a bribe? I am paying a driving school for premium service. What they do with that money is not known to me!” Efficiency constituted another justification for using driving schools to go the “broker route.” As Mukul, a young techie in the city, put it, “Who knows if the broker I would’ve found at the RTO would be trustworthy, reliable? Because these things are so dodgy, best to go via driving schools who already have a reputation of, you know, making sure customers get their licenses. I don’t know how to deal with

24. Gopal’s daughter Sailaja, however, who was listening in on our interview, immediately shot back to Gopal, after his comment, “Now that you are retired, you have the time and the energy to keep going back to the offices and running around in circles. You can’t judge people for paying brokers when the government makes it impossible to get things done any other way.” Sailaja had gotten her license recently, having used Luxury’s services, which, perhaps, explained some of her resentment towards her father’s condescension.

25. In some cases, people were surprised to know the links between driving schools, brokers, and government officers. When I revealed to my interlocutors that brokers mediated corruption at the licensing office, they were often surprised to find out that brokerage wasn’t an “actual job.” The hypervisibility of brokers contributed, in some part, to a perception that brokers were working on commission – legal and regularized. Kalyani, for instance, told me that she did not know that brokers bribed state officials on a regular basis until she read a newspaper article that came out in 2012 about rolls of money found attached to documents at an RTA in the city. Until then, she had thought that brokers provided a service much like tax accountants, managing paperwork for a fee. “‘It is so normal to hear about brokers being used that how can it be illegal?’ I wondered. But then, this is India for you,” she summarized somberly. Her husband then told her that they use brokers for everything – because brokers streamlined the process of corruption and took on the entire risk of being found out.

brokers – how much to pay, how to pay? Going through a driving school just makes it all much more streamlined…Also, I am not directly paying a bribe, so I feel good about myself!"

Bureaucracy Buffers: Driver-Workers' Relationship to Corruption

Driver-workers,[26] who belong to a lower socio-economic status, *also* relied on brokers for obtaining their licenses – albeit for different reasons and with different motivations. Unlike middle-class drivers who attended driving schools, most of the driver-workers to whom I spoke had approached a broker after getting their number from other driver-workers who had gone through the same process. For driver-workers, the use of brokers was also more recurrent, since commercial licenses have to be renewed periodically. In my interviews, I also realized that brokers charged driver-workers much less money (around ₹500, or $6.70) than they did those who approached them via driving schools, in relation to a driver-worker's daily income, this amount was still quite high.

Amongst driver-workers, motivations for using brokers differed slightly from the middle class, albeit in related ways: while elite, upper-class drivers used brokers for their own "peace of mind," lower-class drivers (especially relatively illiterate autorickshaw drivers) used brokers because they could not comprehend the paperwork required for licensing, as they were unable to "master the conventions of bureaucratic documentation" (Cody 2009), or because they did not possess the necessary documents for getting a license. Yajulu, an autorickshaw driver and treasurer of a local autorickshaw driver union who has been driving in the city for a decade and who I first

26. Defined earlier, "driver-workers" are those who drive for a living. In my research, they include drivers of public and private buses, autorickshaws, taxicabs (app-based and otherwise), and chauffeurs.

met in July 2017, was one such driver-worker. He often helped other driver-workers get in touch with brokers. According to Yajulu:

> Most autorickshaw drivers who need license or some other help with insurance papers, they don't know how all the paperwork works. Sometimes they don't have the required documents. If they have a broker, he can manage something. They are very well connected at the RTO. If they go without an agent, auto-rickshaw drivers feel like it's too risky…the officials will play with them because they are *poor, desperate, and illiterate*. (Field Notes, January 2019)

Yajulu's understanding of state officials as manipulative was not uncommon. It was an extremely common perception amongst driver-workers that the RTO is a cesspool of corruption and that the poorer you were, the more likely a greedy and unethical state official would take advantage of your *illiteracy* and desperation. In this wider context, several driver-workers I interviewed perceived brokers as indispensable to preventing a direct, unsavory encounter with the state – in effect, they acted as "bureaucracy buffers."

One could argue that *legalizing* brokers and standardizing rates would be one way to solve the maze of bureaucratic paperwork that drivers were subjected to navigating. In the initial months of fieldwork, I found myself naively convinced by this potential solution. Regularizing brokers would definitely make the process of bureaucratic translation easier for those who could not read the state. It would mimic what tax consultants do, for instance. But every time I pitched this idea to my informants in the police department, it never seemed amenable. Firstly, nobody wanted to do this, since it was precisely the promise of a bribe that ensured the complicity of government officials – "The whole system wants to be fed money, so what is their incentive for dismantling the system?" as one police worker told me. Secondly, the whole point of hiring a broker was the guarantee of a license *even if* all the paperwork and documentation was not "proper."

Take the case of Azmath, an autorickshaw driver in his 40s who moved to Hyderabad in 2004 from the nearby village of Mahboobnagar. When Azmath moved from Mahboobnagar, he

tried his hand at several informal jobs. He mopped the floors of a local restaurant, he worked as a security guard at a housing complex, and he even set up his own fruit stall, which subsequently had to close in 2016. Desperate for work, his friend suggested he drive a rented autorickshaw until something better came along. Initially, he drove without a driver's license, but one day he got caught doing so by the traffic police.

While Azmath managed to bribe them and get away, he decided after the brush with the police to apply for a driver's license and a "badge."[27] He then realized that he needed to produce proof of having studied until the eighth grade, in the form of a completion certificate or a transcript of grades. However, Azmath did not have with him any such proof because he had, in fact, not attended school beyond the fifth grade. This documentation was used, at the time, as a "minimum educational qualification" for obtaining a driver's license, commercial or otherwise.

Financial precarity had led Azmath to withdraw from school at the age of twelve, at which point he had started accompanying one of his uncles as a cleaner on an inter-state truck. Thus, seeking to obtain his license despite not having these education certifications, Azmath approached Yajulu, who he had heard of through some friends, and Yajulu put him in touch with his most trusted broker. Then, finally, the broker procured a fake certificate of completion and managed to push his file through the serpentine system of Indian bureaucracy. Azmath did not remember taking any driving tests as part of this process. As he told me the story, he eagerly clarified his personal stance on brokers:

> Everyone thinks that brokers are eating everyone's money,[28] but they are actually helping people like me get licenses. If these brokers didn't exist, most of us would not be able to get all the paperwork done. I need to make a living somehow, no? That education rule does not make any sense. If I wasn't poor, I would have also attended school. Why till eight

27. Until 2018, driving a commercial vehicle required not just a license, but also a "badge number."

28. "*Paise kha raha hai*" was the exact phrase used by Azmath. It is a commonly used Hindi phrase denoting avarice.

> class [8th grade]? I would have attended till college – like you, I would have also gone to America [laughs]. If I was so educated, why would I be driving an autorickshaw? I would do something else, something that would make me rich. (Field Notes, August 2018)

Several autorickshaw drivers like Azmath depend on brokers for "taking care" of rules that "d[o] not make sense." When I asked the Joint Transport Commissioner, the most senior bureaucrat at the RTO, why this minimum education qualification existed, he shrugged and replied, "Without basic minimum education, how can we allow people to drive? It is there for safety purpose." I took this explanation to mean that education was linked to the ability to read and understand traffic rules and regulations and decipher road signs. Nonetheless, what this official said seemed more like a citational nod to a rule whose rationalization did not make practical sense. Very often, I was often met with the impatient assurance that all rules and laws were "there for safety purpose," without hearing a clear articulation of how and why that worked. The fact that the Government of India removed the minimum educational qualification in June 2019, in order to attract more commercial drivers from low-income backgrounds to meet the increasing demands for transportation and mobility in the country, clearly points to the provisional and contingent nature of this link between formal education and safety.

In some cases, using brokers became an important mode for getting a license when one failed to qualify for one. In the case of Venkatesh, a twenty-nine-year-old man who worked as a chauffeur for Pratap Raju, a businessman in the city, he had been working as a chauffeur for his employer for about three years when I spoke with him. Before that, Venkatesh had worked as a server for a small catering business in the city where he was known to be a quick-learner and full of energy. He had barely gotten through school and had never attended college, as he had to drop out of school after his father died in order to work and earn money to support his mother and three sisters. As he put it, "Somehow, education didn't work out, and so I was happy with this catering

job." The feeling was mutual, it seems, as his boss at the catering business was very fond of Venkatesh's work ethic and connected him with Pratap Raju, a client, who was looking for a chauffeur. It would mean a higher income for Venkatesh, and his boss knew he had a large family to support. Venkatesh had learned to drive a car, but because he did not own a car or drive one regularly, he had never bothered getting a license.

While Pratap Raju immediately offered Venkatesh a job as a chauffeur, upon learning that he did not have a valid license, he insisted on Venkatesh getting one if he wanted to keep the job. With the help of Pratap's son, Venkatesh booked a slot online and went to the RTO without using a broker. He figured that since he was an expert at driving, he would be able to pass it. However, he failed the theory test required for obtaining a learner's license. The state did not "hoodwink" him; he simply did not know enough about signs and rules at that point to have passed it. Upon failing the theory test, one of his friends advised him to use a broker, as Venkatesh could not risk failing the theory test once again. He explained the urgency of the circumstances:

> I have never been good at examinations. From childhood till now. I always fail exams – that is why I am a driver, no? Else I would be some IAS officer[29] [laughs]. But I am a very good driver – ask Raju Sir! *He tells me I am one of the best drivers he has ever had*. I didn't know the answers in the theory test. I desperately needed a license and I thought that even if I take the test again, who knows if I will pass it? So, I approached a broker. Raju Sir gave me some extra money as a loan so that I could get my license once and for all – even he had used a broker to get his license, it seems! And I don't know what the broker did, but I was able to take the practical test after a month, and I got my license. I should have just paid the money before. I now tell everyone to go via a broker. (Interview, September 2018)

Here, Venkatesh framed his choice to use a broker not as being forced by a state official failing him on purpose, but rather as stemming from his own lack of familiarity with traffic rules and laws. However, in the same breath, he demonstrated confidence in his own driving and cited his employer's evaluation as being the one he valued the most. Through this conversation, Venkatesh

29. An IAS officer is a top-ranked state official often referred to as a "civil servant," a phrase that harkens back to the era of colonial governance.

did not seem apologetic or embarrassed about failing the test. As I will show in the next section, in his mind, it was simply not a judgment on his driving ability. Thus, for both drivers and driver-workers, the existence of corruption at the licensing offices rendered the process of obtaining a driver's license a nominal engagement with the state.

Nominal Obedience, Actual Resistance: Contesting Safety Narratives

While corruption and bribery at the RTO reveal – and reproduce – ideas and expectations of the state as an untrustworthy and extractive agent of power, during my interactions with drivers, I saw that, for them, obtaining a license through this specific arm of the state constituted a mode for understanding driving as an activity. On the one hand, getting a driver's license marked an iconic moment in one's life. It was an occasion. The fact that every single person to whom I spoke recalled rather accurately the moment they obtained their license points to its symbolism as a milestone, as a protective document that could finally act as insurance against law enforcement on the road. This was true of both drivers across classes and driver-workers.

On the other hand, what differed sharply was how drivers and driver-workers made sense of the salience of the document in their lives. Even though both of these sets of social actors had indulged in some form of bribery to secure their licenses, drivers often talked about getting a license in terms of freedom, autonomy, or independence. This is more in line with the kind of literatures that discuss automobility as a cultural project (Best 2006; Seiler 2008). For women drivers, getting a license was also a matter of empowerment. For instance, as soon as Jaya, Shruti, and I got our licenses, Jaya said that she could not wait to take all sorts of road trips across the country, while Shruti said that she felt like having a license made her feel like an adult. At the RTO, all three of us – Jaya, Shruti, and I – articulated a sense of collective pride that *so* many

young women were waiting for their licenses. In 2017, less than 6% of the total driver's licenses in the city were held by women and, in this context, seeing more female drivers obtain licenses signaled a political issue (Mallick 2017). The increase in this number was often accompanied by public discourses of empowerment and recognition.

More commonly, however, the driver's license was framed negatively, that is, in terms of its absence. Few people were as immediately sure of what it meant to have a driver's license as they were about what would happen if they did *not* have it. It represented a paper truth one needed to possess to avoid disciplinary action by law enforcement, specifically traffic police officers, who conducted random checks on the road.[30] The importance of the license did not exist in relationship to the interactions and practices taking place at the corrupt licensing office but, instead, in relationship to the actions of a different "hand" of the state – the traffic police. While procuring a license may seem to serve a nominal function and may seem to have "nothing to do with driving," *its absence* has real and material effects on the everyday lives of drivers because of the presence of the police. The value of a license in the hands of the driver, then, exists in relation to law enforcement by the police.

Take, for example, Ramesh, a middle-aged small businessman, who had been caught riding his Honda Activa moped/scooter[31] without a driving license in August 2017. According to Ramesh, who had been riding on the roads of Hyderabad for close to ten years, the fact that he did

30. These "paper truths" are analogous in some respects to, say, the existence of fake degrees and fake certificates in the educational system. Importantly, however, the licenses about which I am talking – such my own – differ markedly from fake degrees precisely because they are not counterfeit. To the contrary, they are legally valid, authentic documents that constitute proof that the state has permitted a said person the legal right to drive.

31. In India, the word for "moped" is "scooter."

not have a driving license did not mean anything; what mattered more, in his view, was the fact that he had no accidents in his driving history and that he followed rules:

> I have never had accident till now, even though I didn't have license until yesterday. *I always wear a helmet.* There are people who *have* licenses but drive rashly, don't wear helmet, jump red signal. But the police will catch people like me. What to do? It is my bad luck. They caught 1,200 people for no license driving on that day,[32] I heard later! The police have become very strict now. Earlier too, many years back, I got caught once, but I gave the constable a ₹50 ($0.70), and he let me go. Nowadays bribery has come down, so it has hard to get away. I tried to give the constable ₹200 ($2.70), but even that he wouldn't take! (Interview, September 2017)

Later on, Ramesh explained that the reason he wore a helmet and never ran a red light was specifically to avoid being caught by the police. Since driving without a valid license is an "invisible" offence, it is hard to know if someone actually has a license or not. It is only when someone gets caught for a different infraction – for mopeds, it is often helmetless driving – that the police ask for a driver's license. Laughing at the irony of the situation, Ramesh said to me, "If you think about it, I wanted to avoid police *kirkiri* so much that I used to follow all rules! That is why I managed for so many years." Ramesh, in pointing to his performance of law-obedient driving in order to avoid getting caught for breaking what is often called the "fundamental" rule of driving – being licensed – highlighted the utter performativity of the document. To Ramesh, a driving license was a document that had an arbitrary relationship to driving, which, in turn, had an arbitrary relationship to the state. And the agents of that state, for their part, sometimes took a bribe and let him go.

For driver-workers, however, driving was a *skill* developed through practice. As I discussed in chapter 3, most of these driver-workers thought of safety primarily in relationship to practice,

32. On August 24, 2017, the police booked more than 1,200 drivers for driving without a valid driving license. About twenty people were sent to jail (most of them released on bail), while everyone else paid a fine of ₹500 ($6.70). See *The Hans India* (2017).

skill, and experience, and not in terms of the expert authority of written rules and laws. I also argued that, precisely because driving was understood as something "anybody" could do, its potency in generating an embodied feeling of democratic inclusivity often opened up driving as a site for driver-workers to challenge social hierarchies. The maverick sensibility required for driving in Hyderabadi traffic and the knowledge one needed to possess of a plethora of routes, roads, and infrastructural connivances and conveniences were narrated as matters of pride and expertise borne out of an intimate, sensuous relationship with the city and its ways. In this view of driving as a skill, driving examinations and licenses were framed as being fundamentally *incapable* of certifying such expertise.

This view was articulated, for instance, by Yajulu (the autorickshaw driver and union leader who often set up new autorickshaw drivers with brokers), when he explained to me "We are the kinds of drivers that have *nerves of steel* to be driving in traffic like this. Nobody does any testing of knowing shortcuts or the ability of autorickshaw drivers to drive fourteen hours a day nonstop. If you take such exams, we will be top." Similarly, according to Mallesh, an autorickshaw driver who had been driving for over three decades but had never taken a driving test in his whole life:

> Whether or not you get a license depends on whether you have a broker. But whether or not you drive well depends only on you. No examination can test how one drives. It is just one…feeling. See, as a customer, in *your body you will know whether or not someone is driving well*. Will you know whether I have a license or not? No. License is separate, driving properly is separate. (Interview, October 2018)

When I traveled with Sameer and Varun – the road safety activists I discussed earlier in this chapter – it was not at all uncommon for them to point at vehicles on the road – especially cabs and autorickshaws – and rhetorically, perhaps, exclaim something to the effect of, "Who the hell gave this fellow a license?!" In this exclamation, I would often note exasperation at the severed link

between what they considered "good driving" and being a license-holder. Sameer and Varun both viewed corruption as distorting the meaning of licenses and, by extension, were arguing for these issues to be solved. Staying within the paradigm rules and laws ensuring safety, their goal was to make the system more effective. This was different from how driver-workers in the city viewed the whole concept of licensing, as just yet another nominal engagement with the state in their lives.

Discipline by Documents: The "Shortcut Mentality" of the State

In May 2018, I attended a "driving license *mela*" held in a large wedding hall in the southern part of the city. "Mela" is the Hindi word for a "festive fair." The driving license mela is a grand event organized by the traffic police, in conjunction with the transport department. Attended mostly by male youngsters attending local colleges near the location of the mela, this type of event is covered extensively by local television and newspaper media. As with other events that fell in this genre of awareness-building state spectacles, the topmost police bureaucrats, along with some state-level ministers, inaugurated the function and were presented with several bouquets and shawls, as per tradition. Following this presentation, they delivered speeches about the importance of road safety and stressed the need to be disciplined on the roads, then soliciting a "road safety pledge" in which those attending raised their arms and took a pledge to be good drivers and good citizens of the country. Despite the governmental pomp vis-à-vis the police officials, the youth present at the mela were clearly excited about the more prosaic centerpiece of this decorous affair: the quick and convenient issuance of learner's permits to drivers.

According to my interlocutors in the police department, the idea behind issuing learner's permits at these melas was to remove the figure of the broker from the equation. It was supposed that, by moving the operation of getting a learner's permit out of the bribe-ridden premises of the

transport department, into the festive context of a mela, youngsters could take the ten-minute test right there at the mela. “No broker, no waste of money,” the in-house saying went. The police, when sending posters and information to colleges nearby, had already asked youth to bring relevant identifying documents with them to the mela. All they had to do was sit down and take the test. “We want more people to have licenses,” explained Constable Althaf, while herding a raucous group of young men towards the “LL Stall,” a kiosk where one could obtain a learner’s license. “Every single day,” he continued, “we catch people driving around the city without license. It is very bad for road safety.”

At the LL Stall, I stood with Constable Althaf, Constable Praveen, another constable from the police department, and two clerks from the transport department. A couple of laptops beamed in anticipation of test-takers. There were no chairs around. As the crowd of young men gathered around the stall, Althaf started getting impatient. “Ey! Stand in line! What is this, a fish market?” he chided, while trying to make sure nobody touched the laptops at the stall. “Make line! Everybody will get LL. One by one; what is the hurry?” he snapped at the crowd. There were no fewer than a hundred young men – some of them sporting skullcaps, some of them wearing fashionable sunglasses. “Most of them are Muslim youth,” Althaf whispered to me while gesturing to a couple of particularly pushy teenagers and then adding that he would slap them. “South Zone – Old City area – is the place where people have least education and therefore no licenses,” Althaf continued to explain. “It is also here that most youth ride two-wheelers without helmets. That’s why we have organized this mela in the south part of the city. For youth like this. Else all these Romeos will roam the streets without licenses!” he added while winking at a couple of men listening in to our conversation.

For the next half an hour, I watched young men stand at the stall and take the test. Everyone behind them, standing in a crowd that circled the stall, was laughing, making fun of the test-takers when they got the answers wrong, and shouting out the answers. Althaf and Praveen kept chiding them to keep quiet, reminding them, "Driving test is a serious affair!" But their tampering efforts were of no avail. One by one, the officials handed out learner permits. After handing out about 20 permits, one of the students complained that a laptop was crashing.

The officials checked out the laptop, consulted the constables, and declared that the mela was over, due to technical difficulties, but that everyone should apply for learner's licenses at the licensing offices and not pay brokers any money. The crowd of annoyed men, some of them clutching papers, dispersed, and all of them were either grumbling about, or laughing at, the entire affair. Althaf, for his part, was demonstrably upset. "So many youth could have got licenses today. Our CP Sir (Commissioner of Police) told us to issue at least a hundred permits," he said. I asked him why they were even bothering with the test, considering it was not being done in a "serious" manner, anyway. He shook his head gravely and said, "We have to follow legal procedure, madam. Otherwise, what is the difference between us and brokers?"

Althaf and other police personnel were keen on making sure that more and more licenses were being issued. More such melas were held during the time that I was in Hyderabad. Instead of making it *hard* for people to get licenses – as has often been the advice of road safety NGOs in the city – what we see here is an effort to make it *easier* to get licenses. Althaf and his colleagues were very serious about their role in ensuring that more people had licenses. Later in the day, Althaf even told me that he felt proud of being part of a "road safety revolution" taking place in the city. He viewed his role as a police officer to be much more creative than that of his counterparts, who were in charge of daily traffic regulation and law enforcement.

But I told Althaf that road safety activists in the city are not too happy with the police making licenses more readily available to the public, especially in the absence of more standardized driver education. He sighed and said that this was the difference between educated people trying to make a change in the country and experienced people like him battling practical issues daily. “If we make it hard for people to get licenses, then people will just stop getting licenses,” Constable Althaf said. “We are an uneducated country, so we have to make everything easier for the people. You cannot expect these young kids to read rules and regulations and take exams sincerely.” Intensifying his tone, Althaf went on. “They cheat in their college exams, and they will somehow cheat here too! *Let them at least have the required documents first*. Here we don’t even have basic documents like licenses, and all you people say big-big words like ‘driver education.’”

Without the driver’s license, after all, there would be no record of the number and demographics of drivers on the road. In terms of their interest in generating a feasible record of the number and details of drivers on the road, the traffic police with whom I spoke were keen on increasing the number of licensed drivers on the road –how drivers got the licenses was of secondary importance to them. Traffic police officers were not unconcerned with or unaware of the ways in which brokers at the RTO mediated the process of getting a license, but on most occasions, they claimed that things had gotten better from how they were previously. Earlier, I was told, people did not even take an exam. This, as I have mentioned before, was true in the stories older drivers told me about how they got their licenses. Nowadays, however, one had to go through the performance of sitting in an examination room and taking the driving test. For all practical purposes, the examination organized by the traffic police in the mela described above was also

nominal – nobody *really* gave an exam. People were guessing answers, shouting out responses, and most of the times, the RTO official was quite simply handing out licenses.

On the margins of my field notes from that day, I later found a scrawl I barely recognized. It said, "Shortcut mentality." The phrase had been used by Varun Guha, the road safety activist, to refer to the mentality of drivers applying for licenses. Underneath the surface of trying to ensure more people obtained valid driving licenses was a reluctant acceptance of the fact that drivers *will* drive – the official right to do so, granted in the form of a license, notwithstanding – and that "everyone" cheats their way out of everything in the country. In providing a seemingly uncomplicated space for getting a license – the mela – what the police were doing, in a way, was making sure everyone at least had the document with them. The fundamental rule had to be met; the primary interest was the material existence of the document itself. They were turning existing drivers into *lawful* drivers – at least on paper.

Conclusion

Most existing research on corruption focuses on how corruption delays or distorts resource allocation in the form of service-delivery or welfare provision. Corruption makes it *harder* for people to obtain goods and services to which they are already entitled, thereby exacerbating social and economic inequality. However, in the case of obtaining a driver's license, one pays a bribe in order to get a document that does not provide automatic entitlement, but rather permission, the procurement of which is not supposed to be a guarantee. From a road safety perspective, the corruption of licensing procedures directly increases the possibility of road crashes, since it systematically produces drivers who have not undergone what might be loosely termed as a "quality check." The general consensus in road safety activism circles is that the tougher and more

unassailable licensing procedures in a country, the safer the roads. Pointing to the fact that India has the dubious distinction of having the most road crashes in the world, road safety experts and activists argue that corruption is hindering road safety in the country by undercutting the whole purpose of licensing, as it puts in question the legitimacy of the document. In other words, corruption makes it easier to access something that is, in theory, supposed to be hard to get, and therefore it might seem like a banal question to ask, "Why do people pay bribes to get their licenses?"

One answer to this question, on the face of it, is simple enough: namely, paying a bribe guarantees a driver's license – so why would one not pay a bribe? The motivation for paying a bribe is high. As Rajesh put it, "One-time payment, but full-time benefit." Another perspective might suggest that state officials refuse to work without receiving bribes, and, therefore, paying a bribe is the only way to get a license. Neither explanation, as I have shown, does justice to the complexity of motivations and understandings through which corruption is reproduced.

I show that corruption at RTOs persists for two primary reasons: one, licenses are understood as yet another form of documentary compulsion on the part of the state, rather than as actual certifications of a driver's training or skill; and two, brokers are seen as a form of *insurance* against a state that can never be an objective or disinterested form of authority. In the face of a perceived nominal compulsion to get a license, paying a bribe to a broker becomes a *solution* for the avaricious tendencies of the state. In other words, the quotidian flourishing of brokers and bribes facilitates a nominal engagement with a corrupt state. In this chapter, I argue that thinking through the meaning and function of licenses provides clues for understanding how state legitimacy and authority are understood by drivers in Hyderabad. The stated "intention" of the license, in terms of safety, is troubled in its circulation across several contexts. Instead of thinking

about corruption in terms of institutional failure or deviance, I argue that considering how practices and narratives of corruption provide the very interpretive terrain on which the state's purported concern for road safety is delegitimized comprises an equally important endeavor.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Road to Safety: Narratives of Neglect

"Surfaces provoke our first sensations, evoke our initial reactions, and become the stuff of our comparisons, analogies, images, and representations."

– Joseph Amato (2013, 9)

"The roads in Hyderabad can give people 'road shock,' just like what a culture shock does to an individual…I say just like we face life's ups and downs as we live for more and more years, Hyderabad roads are the same. As we navigate the city more and more, we tend to get more and more 'road-shocks.'"

– A response to "How Would You Describe the Roads of Hyderabad?" on Quora (Gurung 2018)

"Naganna's back is broken," Siraj casually remarked, while wiping the windshield of his shiny, black and yellow autorickshaw at it sat parked on a residential street. Naganna, all of fifty-seven years of age, was asleep on the side of the street next to the autorickshaw. Spread out on two newspapers, he heard Siraj's comment, opened his eyes, and smiled at me, signaling that he needed a couple of minutes before he could join Siraj and me for chai. Naganna's frail body looked exhausted, and his face was wrinkled with pain.

Alarmed, I asked Siraj, "How did this happen? I can help take him to a doctor!"

Siraj snapped back, a tad irritated, "What do you think? Driving, what else?" After a momentary pause, he continued, "You know that main road in Malakpet area? They are digging the road for some electricity line, so there's just loose gravel on the road… plus after last night's rains, that whole road is just full of potholes. Very bumpy. Our man [Naganna] drove on that road,

thud-thud-thud-thud continuously, and now his back is hurting. When you are young, body is stronger than road. When you are old, road is stronger than body!"

As I quickly noted his comments in my phone, Siraj chuckled and added, in a mixture of English and Hindi, "Road is always *raddi* (low quality), but in old age, *haddi* (bones/skeleton) is also *raddi*!"

Naganna groaned in agreement and slowly sat up. Siraj got us both some chai from a nearby café, and Naganna sipped it, eagerly. Explaining that he now felt reborn – chai does that – Siraj nodded in agreement with him. Naganna then told us that some policemen in Himayath Nagar had seized his vehicle the previous day and had only agreed to give it back to him after he paid off several fines that had accrued against his vehicle.

"How would Naganna pay ₹1400 suddenly?" Siraj chimed in.

Naganna recounted how he told the policemen that he did not have that kind of money. In response, they told him that he should have either followed traffic rules and thus avoided penalties or that he should have paid off the challans. They refused to believe him when he said that he did not get any notifications about these challans, either via SMS or regular mail. The police officers apparently argued with him for a long time. "Two hours of my work time they wasted!" Naganna bemoaned. "I could have made so much money in that time." They finally let him off, he said, when he gave them ₹200 and begged them to let him and his vehicle go. They made him promise that he would pay the pending fine as soon as possible.

At this point in Naganna's narration, Siraj burst out laughing and joked, "As if this *sadhu* (sage) will pay them a dime!" Siraj was referring to Naganna's long, white beard, which gave him a sagacious look. Perhaps he also was referring to Naganna's quiet wisdom, the byproduct of decades of experience gained while driving on the roads of the city.

Cursing the police officers, Naganna offered to drop me off at my destination in Secunderabad.

I realize that we would have had to cross the stretch of the road that had ruined his back, so I insisted, “No, no, don’t drive today! I’ll take another auto. Take rest.”

Naganna waved his hand in my face, dismissing my concern. “You think I can’t drive on Hyderabad roads? I have been driving for longer than you have been alive!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t expect the road to be that bad, so I drove fast...I didn’t see all the bumps and potholes,” he continued. “Now that I know the *haalat* (circumstance or situation) of the road, I will drive slowly. Our body is rough and tough, built for these roads. Sister, I live in Shaikpet – worst roads in all of the universe…You come from Somajiguda, Secunderabad, Jubilee Hills…posh roads you are used to,” he remarked wittily. Naganna’s comment contained a bitter acknowledgement of the fact that the quality of road surfaces and their regular maintenance and upkeep were not uniform – poorer parts of the city were often marked by road surfaces of inferior quality.

Twenty minutes later, Naganna and I were bouncing up and down in his rickety autorickshaw. The sensation of the unevenness of the road was amplified by the hollow skeleton of the autorickshaw. The chiffon *kurta*[1] I was wearing offered no traction for the slippery surface of the faux leather seat on which I sat, so I kept slipping off it. He told me that it was while driving on this stretch that he “broke” his back. I nodded, my own lower back absorbing the shock of inconsistent and arrhythmic bounces. Almost instinctively, I imagined my rattling spinal column on an X-ray machine, my vertebrae moaning and groaning with every bounce.

1. A “*kurta*” is a loose, collarless shirt worn by many people in India.

Naganna had, meanwhile, deftly hoisted his wiry body off the seat. He was almost comically crouched, his small back barely touching the seat. As I tried to hold on to the railing of the autorickshaw, I told Naganna that I felt like my bones were rattling.

"What bones are left? I feel like my insides have become *falooda*,"[2] he replied sarcastically. I imagined his bones and blood turning into the pink, slushy dessert – a far cry from my own, more medicalized vision of what was happening to our bodies.

The bumpiness abruptly came to an end. We were cruising on smooth road now. Naganna was humming a popular tune. The wind in my face reminded me why I prefered autorickshaws to cars. We both seemed to have forgotten our bumpy adventure. Just as I was about to tell Naganna this, we were swiftly, and dramatically, hoisted off our seats. We had hit a speed bump, and, as was very often the case in Hyderabad, it was unmarked and a bit too steep.

"Speed breaker or back breaker?" I joked with Naganna.

He laughed and added, "Rich people fly, even on these roads, in their posh cars. And in those cars, you don't feel these potholes or bumps. I feel that the richer you are, the less you have to *feel* the road." He paused, as if to consider his own astute analysis, before continuing. "I think I have the solution," he said. "We should make all the big people – you know, CM, MLA, MPs, commissioner, and even contractors – drive autorickshaws for two days; our roads will become smooth like fresh butter! Then they will know what state of roads we drive on. Maybe *then* they will do something about these roads. Or at least stop harassing us with challans…"

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2. "*Falooda*" is a popular, milk-based dessert in Hyderabad made out of noodles, thick cream, jelly, and fruits.

When it came to roads in Indian cities, two narratives existed alongside one another among those with whom I conversed. These narratives were not parallel so much as intersecting. On one level, the growth and development of expressways, flyovers, and road development projects were embedded in particularly *urban* imaginations and fantasies of world-classness, aspiration, circulation, and speed. As Patrick Joyce (2003) argues, free circulation and connection are key to the development of cities. However, in postcolonial contexts, anxieties around aesthetics of world-classness and global belonging also inform the building of infrastructure (Ghertner 2015; Roy and Ong 2011). For instance, in Hyderabad, the Outer Ring Road (ORR) that hugs the city in a tight embrace is an eight-lane expressway that – as one informant put it – "looks and feels like foreign" and is an imperative addition to any attempt to brand Hyderabad as a "global city."

As anthropologists have reminded us, the building of roads is a symbolic and ideological accomplishment that reproduces fantasies of capitalism and state power. The building of ORR, the PV Narasimha Rao Expressway, and the controversial Strategic Road Development Project (SRDP) can, thus, be analyzed to better understand how exclusions are built into the planning and development of road projects. In fact, when I began fieldwork in Hyderabad and tried to make connections at the urban development authority office, everyone to whom I spoke asked me to take a look at the plans for the Strategic Road Development Project – the mammoth infrastructure project that is supposed to allow for the smooth, seamless mobility of capital in Hyderabad. Typical of "spectacular infrastructures," SRDP promised black-top roads, slick expressways, and multi-level flyovers all over the city. The surface of the road was almost immaterial (pun intended) in this vision: "The most successful road surfaces are those that you cannot even feel," the government official overseeing this project told me with a smug wink.

In this vein, it is tempting to approach an analysis of road surfaces – especially the desire for *flows* – as yet another symptom of neoliberal capitalism and its demand for unimpeded circulation, its obsession with speed and seamlessness, and its aesthetic of *cleanness* (Schnapp 2003; Virilio 1977), all in the service of achieving world-class belonging and neoliberal aspirations (Chattopadhyay 2012; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Ghertner 2015). To Jeffrey Schnapp, these visions feature "a secularized version of a transcendental imaginary that once attributed frictionless high-speed travel to the gods" (2003, 8). Consistent with the ideological impetus behind an increasing emphasis on city-centric development in India, often initiated by political leaders and elites impressed with ongoing neoliberal seductive processes around the world (Bunnell and Das 2010; Das 2015), as well as the more specific promotion of Hyderabad as a "world-class knowledge hub of Information Technology and biotechnology," the idea of building roads that "you cannot even feel" has come to occupy a place of affective appeal.

At the same time, as Naganna's example clearly shows, roads are discussed as bumpy, full of potholes,[3] and in desperate need of repair. Every time I spoke to a Hyderabadi – police officers included – the issue of bad roads and the terrible experience of potholes were inevitable topics of conversation. The narration of Hyderabadi roads as not just bad, but also unsafe was equally common. In these conversations, roads were not characterized as "world-class" or spectacular infrastructures, but rather as experiential reminders of a neglectful state. Stories about "bad roads" were also ensconced in a wider commentary on corruption and political callousness towards the

3. While referring to potholes, most of my interlocutors used the Telugu word, "*goyyi*," which broadly means a "pit" but is often used to refer to potholes. This word, *goyyi*, or the Hindi word "*gaddha*," were used to denote a wide variety of road conditions – from discrete potholes and large sinkholes to continuously eroded stretches of road surfaces. Most often, my informants referred to the roads as "*kharaab*" or "*raddi*" – indicating dilapidation or spoilage by wear and tear. However, "*raddi*" means "crowded" in Telugu, and so some interlocutors also used it in reference to traffic congestion. I will indicate specific meanings in brackets, to keep confusion at bay.

health, happiness, and well-being of citizens. In all of these accounts, what was being narrativized was the *experience* of roads.

As I will show, alongside a story of dromological desires that invites an inevitable critique of the neoliberal fantasies of seamless connection and circulation exists a story in which the unevenness and bumpiness of existing road surfaces matter for reasons ranging from mundane discomfort to dramatic deaths. The desire for smooth and seamless mobility instructs us to pay attention to how road infrastructures are experienced and how this experience enables imaginations of the state. Roads, then, do not just become sites of material and symbolic exclusions and inclusions but also are, fundamentally, sites in which citizens make judgments about the state's capacity to provide and to care. As Jonathan Anjaria argues in a recent article on urban cyclists in Mumbai, analyzing the "embodied experiences of the road allows for a critique of infrastructure that does not rely on exposing an underlying social and political system, but on seeing the potential in what is immediately 'apprehensible'" (2020, 3).

In this chapter, I show how my interlocutors – ranging from drivers of autorickshaws to police constables – make sense of the embodied experience of driving on road surfaces in Hyderabad. Through a discussion of potholes, speed bumps, and smooth roads, I show how the onus of road safety oscillates between the individual and the state. In doing this, I dwell not on the politics of infrastructure in terms of how it is built. I did not spend enough time with engineers or architects or urban planners to offer a reasonably representative understanding of how state officials intervene in the material and spatial orderings of the city, or how neoliberal aspirations are concretized in mega-infrastructure projects (see Harvey and Knox 2015; Sadana 2018). But while I do not provide critical account of how "roads are planned and made by people who have subjective experiences of class and situated imaginaries of communication" (Anand 2006, 3422),

I do show how road infrastructure is experienced by a range of drivers and how that experience shapes understandings of the state. After all, feelings about, experiences of, and engagements with infrastructures – of which roads are but one example – are just as critical as an exploration of how these infrastructures come to be and the kinds of relations and socialities to which they give rise (Bedi 2016a; Larkin 2013).

Noting how Palestinians in Israel experienced road blockages, permissions, and even the physical terrain differently from Palenstinians in the West Bank, Amahl Bishara (2015) compellingly shows how traveling across and within state boundaries gives rise to political *habituses* that are not disembodied, abstract or dispassionate, as a liberal framework of political analysis might lead one to believe. Instead, thinking through the production of political *habituses* while driving necessitates an analytical reckoning with how the immediate, "sensory politics" of infrastructure (Fennell 2011), including feelings of pleasure, anger, and annoyance (Katz 1999), seamlessly blend into larger, abstract questions of one's relationship to the state as mediated by political analyses of rights, justice, fairness, territory and history. Similarly, Govind Gopakumar provokes us to think about road infrastructures as "vital elements within an active urban landscape, embedded with the power to shape how the urban commuter comes to grips with mobility in the city" (2020, 101). Following these approaches, I draw attention to how roads are experienced, imagined, and interpreted in the city of Hyderabad.

I show how Hyderabadis make sense of the world they inhabit. In moving the gaze of the sociologist from how infrastructures and systems come to be to how they are experienced, how they are talked about, and how they are imagined in everyday life, I aim to call attention to how ordinary Hyderabadis make judgments about the state's capacity to care, its neglect, its callousness, and its responsibilities. By demonstrating how road surfaces operate as a terrain on

which urban citizens in India engage (with) the state, I also pay homage to the power and possibility of ethnography. As Maura Finkelstein reminds us, "To suggest that systems and structures must somehow be explained before they can be experienced threatens the foundation of ethnography's promise: the potential to understand the world in ways it has never been understood before by engaging the impressions, experiences, and affects of our informants as critical expertise" (2019, 22).

First, I explore how road surfaces are experienced and understood by different stakeholders. I show how different kinds of road surfaces get caught up in understandings of speed and danger. In particular, I argue that both potholes and smooth roads are entangled in larger debates about individual responsibility and state neglect. Through interview and ethnographic data, I demonstrate how citizens of Hyderabad had an experience of roads as uneven that corresponded to their understandings of state power as inconsistent and contradiction-ridden. I take up the metaphor of surfaces and terrain to show how citizens come up with responses and resistances in the absence of *systemic* changes. From this, I move towards a second set of concerns of the chapter, the construction of smooth roads and spectacular roads – expressways and ring roads – as being "unsafe" and how evaluations of blame and responsibility follow from specific road accidents and crashes.

Rattled Bones, Resilient Suspicions

Spines That Opine

Nitin was a tech worker in his mid-40s who commuted for more than 30 miles every day. He lived in the commercial hub of older Hyderabad, Malakpet, with his wife and two school-going kids, but the multinational company for which he worked was located in Gachibowli, the pulsating heart of the IT enclave for which the city is famous. Nitin had been working at this company for

over a decade and was used to the commute that – on good days – took him close to an hour each way. A *pucca* Hyderabadi, Nitin had spent all his life in the city. In Nitin's narrative of the city, he drew a parallel between his growing up and the city's growing "up." Historical accounts of Hyderabad show how the city's urban growth proceeded along the existing transport infrastructures, most notably along the intersecting national highways – NH 65 and NH 44 (see Kennedy 2007). Like many others I met in the city, Nitin narrated his surprise at how erstwhile villages that were located not just in the periphery of the actual city, but also in the periphery of the imagination of the "urban" altogether had now become a thriving part of Hyderabad. In his words, "Earlier, areas like Kukatpally and Miyapur were just village that one encountered if one kept going north on the national highway. Now, almost all my friends live there! So many people have moved there, and there are so many gated communities, that it feels less like a highway and more like a crowded, congested city road."

I first met Nitin in February 2018 when an interviewee brought him up as an example of someone who was suffering from chronic pain due to the bad roads and traffic congestion in the city. While I had encountered many driver-workers who told me that they had endured severe knee pain, back problems, and piles (especially bus drivers) due to long hours of driving – hours made longer due to recurring traffic congestion – I also knew that two-wheeler riders such as Nitin bore the brunt of bad roads in a manner that was not immediately apprehensible to the driver (or commuter) of a car.

On our very first meeting at a coffee shop close to his home, Nitin showed up wearing a lumbar brace. Pointing to it, he chuckled and said, "Gayatri told me that you are doing research on Hyderabad roads. Well, I am a living example of the state of our roads." A few months before this conversation, Nitin had been diagnosed with a slipped disc. According to the doctor, Nitin's pre-

existing spinal issues were being exacerbated by the long commute and, more specifically, by the bad roads. The doctor had apparently warned Nitin of this problem a few years ago and had told him to find living arrangements closer to his workplace, to avoid exacerbating it further – but moving from Malakpet to Gachibowli was not financially viable for Nitin at the time. Since his slipped disc was quite severe, the doctor suggested that Nitin invest in an SUV and had explained that recommendation with a piece of pithy advice: "The less you can feel the road, the better your spine will be." At that point, Nitin took out a car loan and bought a Hyundai Creta, which he now drives to work every day. "Obviously, the same road feels completely different," he told me. While Nitin's back was definitely still healing and he felt the strain of the jerkiness of the ride to work, so driving the car was clearly the better option for Nitin, he nevertheless still missed the nimble movement of his motorcycle:

> Earlier, I used to squeeze in between vehicles and somehow come home soon[er]. Motorcycles are the absolute best in city traffic. You can just drive in small gullies, take fully advantage of all the shortcuts the city's narrow streets provide.[4] Now, in a big car, I cannot quickly make the kinds of turns I used to with my motorcycle. So I have to rely on a more straightforward route and, honestly, all I can do is sit in traffic. Sure, the road feels smoother, but the commute also feels so much slower. It is funny because earlier, I used to curse the roads, and now I am cursing the traffic! (Field Notes, February 2018)

4. The right to road is often a matter of intense contestation amongst road users. Depending on to whom one speaks, one may hear a different hierarchy articulated of the road in the city. For instance, while two-wheeler riders complained that the bigger the vehicle, the more power they exerted on the roads, bus drivers complained to me that it was the autorickshaws and two-wheeler motorists who squeezed in between vehicles on the road and got ahead of everyone. The hierarchy, then, depended on what factors one valued. Drivers of larger vehicles envied the nimbleness and agility enjoyed by drivers of smaller and lighter vehicles in getting ahead of incessantly congested traffic, especially during peak hours, drivers of smaller and lighter vehicles envied the fact that buses and cars were less vulnerable to road accidents and injury. In both of these perspectives, pedestrians occupied a somewhat ambiguious hierarchical position. On the one hand, they were seen as getting in the way of automobile traffic and putting themselves at risk; on the other hand, pedestrians were sympathized with as having to deal with a lack of sidewalks and convenient road infrastructures.

According to most of my interlocutors, the "city proper"[5] had three kinds of roads – "main roads," highways and expressways, and streets/"gullies" (mentioned above, for example, by Nitin). Some estimates suggest that the total road length in Hyderabad is 9,000 km (5,592 miles), of which 1,000 km are arterial roads (621 miles). The several national and state highways that converge and intersect in the city are often called "main roads" and are the arterial roads in the city; the *sandu* or *galli* were, then, the capillaries. On the one hand, the breadth and expanse of these "main roads" was a source of potential pleasure, considering their smooth and even surfaces. On the other hand, the main roads – it was often alleged – *masked* the reality of the city roads, streets, and relatively "invisible" roads in each neighborhood.

Nitin's framing of the choice of commuting as being between two mutually exclusive options – either smooth roads or less congested roads – gets at why a lot of autorickshaw drivers and two-wheeler motorists often complained about bumpy roads in their conversations with me. Of course, the vehicle one drives has an immediate link to the road surface. In that sense, Naganna's irate suggestion that those in political power ride autorickshaws to better understand how bad the roads were makes a lot of sense – the immediacy of the sensations provided by the rickety, metallic skeleton of an autorickshaw is the only "authentic" knowledge of the road that counts. But, equally importantly, riders of mopeds and motorcycles and drivers of autorickshaws relied on shortcuts – streets and gullies – that were categorically derelict in the city.

This need to take driving shortcuts was a function of increasing congestion of the main city roads and wide thoroughfares that crisscrossed the city. Nitin, for instance, talked me through his commute every day and said:

> The thrill of Hyderabad is that you can never know what a turn might lead you to. One minute you are cruising on a flat smooth road. Well, of late, on most days you are probably

5. Notably, the "city proper" does not include the two most iconic expressways in Hyderabad – the Outer Ring Road and PV Narasimha Rao Expressway.

> stuck in heavy traffic on a main road – but still, on a *smooth* road. The very next minute you might be bouncing off your seat because there are so many potholes. When I was growing up, there were few good roads, but they were always good. As the city has grown, the quality of roads has become…let's just say it is inconsistent. Some roads are first-class, some roads are worse than village roads. And it is not like only Old City roads are bad or something. I have seen enough of both Hitech City and of older Hyderabad, and it is the same story: main roads are fine, but all other roads are the worst. (Interview, February 2018)

The ambivalence displayed by Nitin's observation is important to note. This uncertainty was a dominant frame in many conversations I had with drivers about the inconsistency of road construction and their maintenance, which, then, resulted in uneven surfaces. While most of my interlocutors from the southern part of the city were often quick to point out that the quality of roads in the older parts of the city was worse than in the IT Enclave neighborhoods like Kondapur, Madhapur, Gachibowli and Kukatpally, residents who lived in those areas did not feel like their roads were any better. Residents of both the "new city" and the "old city" pointed to eroded surfaces in their respective neighborhoods as proof of state neglect. Whether or not roads in the Old City were objectively worse off than those in the IT Enclave, the similarity in *perceptions* about these roads was a continual reference to *inconsistency* as the norm.

Further, the constant invocation of bodily injury and pain with reference to bad roads was a ubiquitous trope in my interviews and conversations. Driver-workers, who spent most of their time on the road, were particularly vocal about how a sudden bump in the road could *shock* the body and how so much of this sensory engagement with unevenness depended on the kind of vehicle one was driving. Autorickshaw drivers, like Naganna, certainly *felt* – not just in terms of their "attitudes" towards the state but *really felt* – the unevenness of the roads acutely and very often related it to blatant forms of inequality.

While talking about their own suffering, many of my interlocutors pointed to how the best roads in the city were those located around the residences and workplaces of the political and

economic elite of Hyderabad. The roads that they were talking about often included Raj Bhavan Road (where the governor's house is located), Greenlands (the location of the chief minister's office), Assembly Grounds (home to the State Legislature, as well as the offices of the director general of police), and Jubilee Hills (the location of the most elite residential cluster in the city). This sensuous knowledge was most aptly described by Siraj, the middle-aged autorickshaw driver who often talked to me when I went to meet Naganna:

> Near Assembly, DGP headquarters, CM Office, Raj Bhavan, or in Jubilee Hills where all politicians, businessmen, and film stars live, have you ever seen a single pothole? Those roads are not affected, even by rain! You can even *sleep* on those roads; they are that smooth. Other roads in Hyderabad can make the bones in your body hurt. (Field Notes, January 2019)

In making claims about the smoothness or raggedness of roads, through the invocation of rattled bones and aching spines, interlocutors such as Siraj made keen observations about political life – namely, that road surfaces reflected the unevenness of political power.

Inconsistent Surfaces or Consistent Neglect?

While some of my interlocutors maintained that Hyderabad's roads were not *that* bad, several others pointed to the unevenness of repairs and spotty maintenance of the roads as proof that the experience of driving on these roads was harrowing. One interlocutor memorably compared the repairs on Hyderabad roads to the game of Whac-A-Mole. I mentioned in the introduction and in chapter 3 that the common refrain that accompanies driving in Hyderabad is, "If you can drive in Hyderabad, you can drive anywhere in the world." This tongue-in-cheek and

culturally-intimate phrase,[6] I argued, often indexed a sense of disorder and chaos that required possessing a certain expertise in order to navigate.

A similar rhetorical positioning emerged amongst my interlocutors while talking about road surfaces in the city; the saying, slightly modified, went along the lines of, "If you can drive *on these roads,* you can drive anywhere in the world." As the opening vignette of this chapter demonstrated, the ability to tackle the rugged and unpredictable terrain of the city roads was often seen as a mark of character – as with Naganna, in his late 50s, feeling a slight sense of offense at me expressing concern for his ability to drive on a bad road. Navigating potholes and bumpiness on the roads required one to possess specific expertise – although it was no secret that this was expertise one *had* to develop, in order to survive. As Serish Nanisetti, a writer and journalist in the city, wrote in a 2017 satirical article titled, "What a Hyderabadi Can Teach You About Driving":

> To drive perfectly like a Hyderabadi, you have to be a scholarly motorist. You need the mindset of Class VII student where the main trick involves memorising the potholes, manholes, pillars and their locations. And after every monsoon, you are in Class VIII and have to learn another set of potholes and manholes. Their number and location keeps changing like the last digit in multiplication table for 7 and 8. But once you are aware of the 'zone of zombies,' you quickly memorise the number and locations and voila! You can zip through the city like PacMan in the maze.

Similarly, Anand, a doctor who was in his mid-50s and lived in DD Nagar, told me, "Apart from a series of potholes, there are always shallow cracks on bridges and flyovers. Hence, a lot of expertise is needed to drive safely and carefully. Every day is a new day for me to negotiate potholes." Some others critiqued the market's solution for the problem of bad roads: vehicles for "Indian roads." As Anand put it:

> On the one hand, we have all these potholes. On the other hand, we have all these bike ads and tire ads that keep saying "made for Indian roads" – it's shameful. It is just code for "bad roads." We, as citizens, have just decided that we will have to adjust to the roads, that

6. Anthropologist Kristin Monroe (2016) chalks up a similar phrase amongst Lebanese drivers, to a "maverick sensibility" possessed by drivers.

> tires have to be made for "Indian roads," that our governments are always going to be corrupt. Typical adjustment mentality. (Interview, February 2019)

While there was an acceptance embedded in widespread expectations for roads to be bumpy – what Anand labeled an "adjustment mentality" – the hodge-podge character of the road surface betrayed, to many interlocutors, state callousness and neglect. These conversations were especially stark during monsoons, when rains often brought "Hyderabad to its [k]nees," as one particularly dramatic newspaper put it (*Sakshi Post* 2017). As Nanisetti (2017) notes in his satirical take on driving in Hyderabad, monsoons were, in fact, active protagonists in many of these narratives around road surfaces.[7] Seasonal rains brought with them refreshing relief from the dry heat of the Deccan Plateau, but they also very unapologetically revealed the surprising flimsiness of road surfaces. While the English news media referred to the state of roads after monsoons as having been "battered" or "crumbled" (see, for example, Goode 2019), Telugu news media used the more poetic "melted."[8] *Roads have crumbled or melted due to heavy rains*. The ubiquity of washed away, dilapidated, pothole-riddled, and "crumbled" surfaces right after monsoons also caused traffic snarls. For instance, according to a report by *The Times of India* (Bommala 2019), monsoons in 2019 inflicted a "rain pain" of over 3,000 potholes.

These potholes, in turn, make traffic congestion and bottlenecks a daily commuting experience. As such, heavy rains in urban cities in India often overwhelm the drainage networks and their capacities, as depicted in figure 5.1. All the metropolitan cities are frequently associated with monsoon-related traffic woes. This was no secret amongst my interlocutors in the traffic

7. In fact, when I started fieldwork in 2017, a driving school I had approached for lessons refused to teach me, upon learning about my project, saying they would rather teach me to drive when it was not monsoon season, so I could give them a positive review in my book. In a sense, the rains dictated my research design and timeline!

8. The word Telugu media used was "*karagadam*," often used to refer to melting and erosion.

police department, either. Pointing to the waterlogging and flooding of roads everywhere, even the chief of traffic police in the city told me in a conversation in 2018 that "roads become rivers" and joked that Hyderabad became Venice during the rainy season.[9] I had personally witnessed (suffered) otherwise 20-minute-long commutes stretch to two hours following a heavy bout of rain.

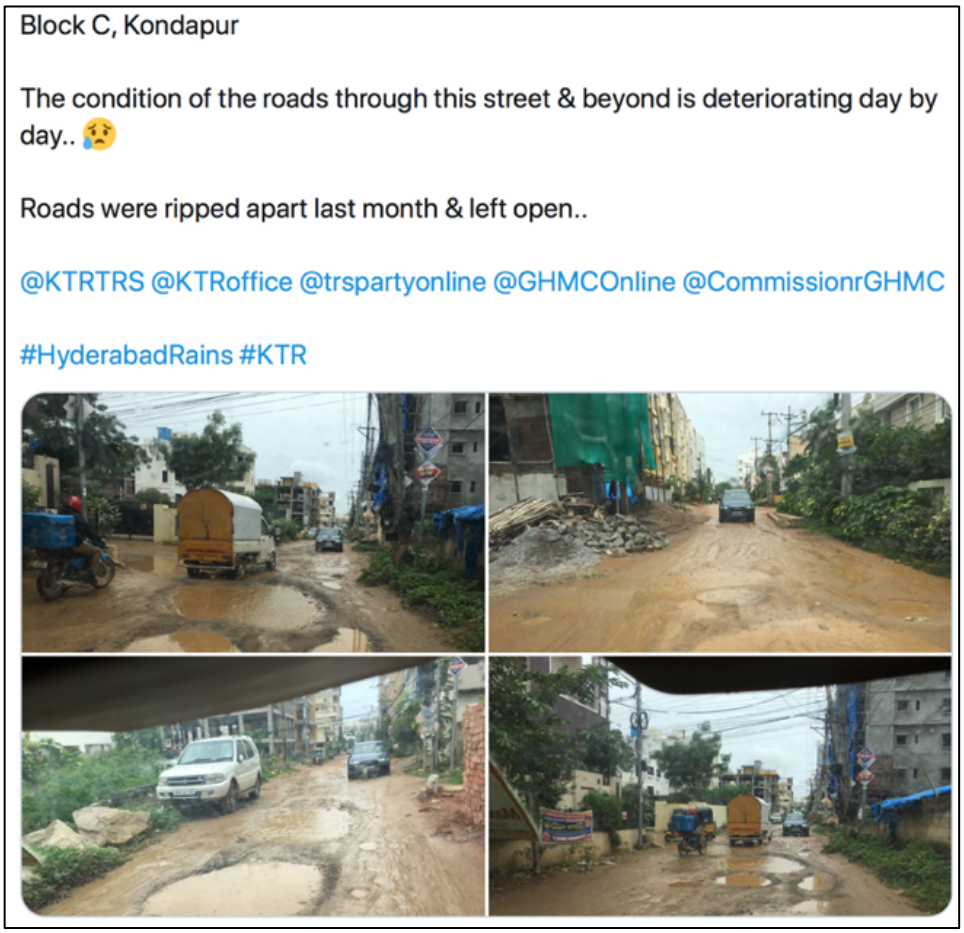

Figure 5.1. A tweet by a resident of a residential neighborhood in the IT Enclave of Hyderabad.
Source: Twitter.

9. This weather impact, as I argued in chapter 1, also became an important point of image management for the traffic police department. The Hyderabad Traffic Police page on Facebook was often used to post photographs of traffic constables standing in knee-deep water. The managerial police staff often reminded me that traffic police faced all kinds of challenges specific to the seasons, but that monsoons were the worst.

For low-income and middle-class drivers alike, the unevenness of the roads made sense when one was cognizant of the machinations of an untrustworthy state. The crumbling and melting roads revealed a treasure trove of public secrets that the surfaces of the roads had barely managed to hide. Since I spoke the language and often told my interlocutors that I had spent about a decade growing up in the city, so was not a total outsider, they tended to assume that I was aware of the "way things work here."

When I did press them for more information about these types of "public secrets," I often heard similar stories that revealed deep-seated suspicions of the state. For example, Arif, a taxi driver in his 30s, was one of the few people who spelled it out to for me. He said, "Everyone knows that contractors build roads that get damaged easily so that they can get another contract to repair the same road. Everybody gets kickbacks."

"Why would that not be taken to task by the state?" I asked him.

He swiftly responded with a simple, "Corruption." The way this "corruption" worked, according to other drivers and even middle-class residents, was that contractors would bribe political leaders and state officials to get contracts for road-laying or road maintenance. This lucid explanation circulates with startling ease amongst Hyderabadis, and local media often discussed the corruption of the nodal road-laying and maintenance agency, GHMC, which was even termed the third-most corrupt state agency in Telangana by the Anti-Corruption Bureau recently (Suares 2016).[10] For instance, just before I started doing fieldwork in the city, at least two national newspapers published stories about the "viscous web of corruption" around road-laying and maintenance in Hyderabad, in which reporters articulated what was often already known to most people – namely, that both the issuance of contracts for road-laying and maintenance *and* the

10. Ironically, the Regional Transport Office/Authority (the RTO, which I discussed in chapter 3) was declared the most corrupt state agency in Telangana.

subsequent inspections of their material quality were often implicated in corrupt practices (Goode 2016). According to the founder of a local anti-corruption NGO, irrespective of several complaints being filed by citizen-activists such as him, corrupt officials are seldom fired or punished (Mahesh 2018).

Corruption, according to this logic, caused roads to crumble all too easily, creating potholes and sinkholes that seemed to emerge out of "nowhere." And one was reminded of this while driving around the city. The actual state of the roads stood in stark contrast to the "glitzy" development of Hyderabad as a world-class city. The development and smooth operations of the much-anticipated, elevated metro-rail often became a counterpoint in discussions of road conditions. Travelling by the metro that snaked its way through the city sky afforded one the ability to (literally) rise above the eroded surfaces of the streets below. The metro felt *smooth* and seamless, while the roads remained bumpy. The juxtaposing of the city's sensory landscape in terms of mobility also became a matter of commenting on the unfinished business of development. For instance, Aravind, a businessman in his 30s and an avid biker in the city who often tweeted photographs of roads to the municipal corporation, said the following:

> As I ride my motorcycle, I get reminded of the government's failure and corruption in our country. You know, it is easy to forget – with all the glitz and glamor of [the] "Hyderabad is a global city" idea. You can sit in the metro and look at our city's skyline and feel a sense of pride. Oh, how developed! Look at our shiny metro, look at our malls, look at our HiTech City, look at our Google office, Microsoft office, this and that…But then you drive, and when your body feels those jerks on the road, you realize we still have such a long way to go. Our road to development is filled with potholes, looks like. It is no Autobahn! But, well, this is how it is. (Interview, August 2018)

In Aravind's rather vivid description of potholes in the city, one gets a sense of how the sensation of surfaces serves as a reminder that Hyderabad is still not a global city. After he and I discussed an infamous controversy involving Ivanka Trump's visit to the city and a the eventual release of a statement by KTR about the bumpiness of Hyderabad's roads (both of which I will discuss later

in this chapter), Aravind laughed and said, "Whether or not KTR [the chief minister's son] feels the bumps, every single Hyderabadi has certainly gotten used to living with it. It is a Hyderabadi way of life."

Between Potholes and Police Officers

Murderous Potholes

"Potholes kill people." These words were presented to me by Revanth, a twenty-nine-year-old Uber driver who had moved to Hyderabad from Karimnagar, a nearby town, only three months before. I first met Revanth as his passenger on an Uber ride on a Friday evening in April 2018. After spending a long evening regulating road traffic at the busy Punjagutta signal as a volunteer with the Traffic Volunteer Force,[11] I waited by the glitzy Hyderabad Central Mall as Revanth made his way toward me using the navigation services of the Uber app. As is the norm, he called me to confirm the pick-up address, and I watched his white Maruti Suzuki Dzire make an illegal U-turn to get to where I was waiting. It was ironic that, just a few minutes before, I had been standing at precisely the gap in the median where Revanth made this U-Turn, holding a placard that said in bold, black, English letters "**No U-Turn**."

As I climbed into his car, Revanth complained about the traffic on Friday evenings and insisted on taking a slightly longer route to get me to Secunderabad. Less traffic, he explained. The shortcut he had taken was a gully in a residential colony located behind Hyderabad Central. The surface of the road had completely eroded, due to heavy rains, and the uneven and silty soil on which the car moved at a snail's pace was on unabashed display. I had gotten used to the dimly-lit

11. The Traffic Volunteer Force is comprised of a community of youth in the city, led by Rosie and Archana, who assist traffic police officers in their duties once a week and often carry out road safety awareness programs in the city.

streets of Hyderabad, but as we went *thud-thud-thud* through the narrow gully, I suddenly realized that even the comfort of a car did not always prevent uneven road surfaces from making their presence felt. I grumbled about the state of the road to Revanth, who eagerly agreed. “I will be honest, madam, but roads in Hyderabad just don’t make sense,” he said. “Some roads are super first-class. Outer Ring Road is, like, foreign. But some city roads are just worse than village roads. Potholes everywhere. Same city, but different worlds.”

I mumbled in agreement, too tired to actually say anything.

“These potholes, they are a serious matter,” he said gravely. “You know, they kill people. People are dying because of potholes. Very danger.”

Intrigued by the framing of pits, or potholes, as murderers, I asked Revanth how potholes could become murderers. He solemnly relayed the following incident:

> You know, my friend’s wife had a very bad accident the other day. She fell off his scooter and hurt her head. She is still in the hospital. Very serious state. They were driving in Shaikpet, coming back from one wedding, and it was late at night. My friend was driving at normal speed only, but they did not see a huge pothole in the middle of the main road. During the day, you can see it clearly, I think. Nighttime, not enough light. Anyway, the scooter went straight into it, and my friend’s wife, she slipped. Full she fell on the road. Luckily for them, there was no truck or bus behind them. Else, she would have just died there. It is God’s generosity that she did not die. But many people keep dying because of potholes. (Field Notes, April 2018)

This was not the first time I had heard of such a story, although it was the first time that I had met someone who had a more intimate relationship to the issue. The ubiquitous potholes and *kharaab*[12] roads were everywhere but, on some days, those same potholes turned *deadly*, especially for riders of two-wheelers. When I started fieldwork in January 2018, the city was reckoning with the fact that, within a span of just 20 days, three motorized two-wheeler riders had died in road accidents

12. “*Kharaab*” means “bad.”

that were directly attributed to the existence of potholes – in the first, a pillion-rider[13] fell off the back of a motorbike and into the path of an oncoming lorry after the motorist hit a deep pothole; in the second, a motorcyclist hit the back of a bus, which braked suddenly to avoid driving over a deep pothole; and in the third, a rider of a scooter hit a divider on the road while trying to swerve to avoid a pothole. Most often, indeed, pothole-related accidents involved the pillion-riders of two-wheelers, who would fall off the back seat with the sudden jerk that invariably results when the surface of a road is interrupted.

Potholes, despite their astonishingly banal ubiquity in the city, often managed to become spectacular in the wake of specific incidents or, more to the point, accidents. In 2017, the minister of state in charge of roads and highways at the national level announced in the Indian Parliament that between 2015 and 2017 more than 9,300 persons had died, and 25,000 had been injured in "pothole related" road accidents in the country (Sandhu 2018). Similarly, in 2018, a report furnished to the Supreme Court of India suggested that more than 15,000 people had died between 2013 and 2018 due to potholes. The court called this reality "unacceptable." The figures, disturbing as they were, also caught the attention of transnational media outlets. For instance, *The Guardian* published a story on this very issue, with the headline accusingly stating, "More Deadly than Terrorism: Potholes Responsible for Killing 10 People a Day in India" (Dhillon 2018a). In Hyderabad, estimates suggest that every year, over 100 people die in the city due to pothole-related accidents.[14] Potholes, in narratives around these accidents, *caused* the deaths.

Revanth was telling me about how his friend had been left with a toddler to take care of when we approached the Greenlands road in Ameerpet and promptly found ourselves stuck in a

13 A pillion is a secondary seat for a passenger behind a motorcyclist or moped rider.

14. "Pothole-related accidents" is not an actual legal category. Rather, this figure is a "guesstimate" generated from newspaper records and police reports, in which accidents are explained in detail.

traffic jam. The cause, as was often the case on weekends in the city, was a police checkpoint that had been set up near the popular Green Park Hotel to check for drunken driving. As always, checking each and every vehicle driver translated into a traffic pile-up on a thoroughfare that was already one of the busiest in the city.

Revanth slapped his forehead and angrily complained to me, “The police in our city never manages to clear traffic jams, but always manages to create one.”

I nodded but conveyed to him what the traffic inspector in charge of this area had told me when I had met with him: “‘I know it is a pain, but drinking and driving is very dangerous, no? There are lots of bars and liquor stores here, so the police prefer to do the checking here.’” I quoted the inspector verbatim and added the catchy rationalization, “For public safety, little bit of public inconvenience.”

Revanth nodded quietly and then agreed with me. He said that he, too, often worried about his own safety at night, because drunk people don’t just kill themselves but unsuspecting others, as well. But then he added, “I am not against what they are doing, but they are always only ticketing everyone left right and center. They are not solving the problem of traffic jams and neither are they fixing the roads. They are saying this is for road safety, but not only drunk people are dangerous; even potholes are dangerous. No drunk person killed my friend’s wife. A pothole killed her. Who is responsible for that? The government only focuses on issues through which they can harass ordinary citizens.”

That Revanth was telling me this as we watched traffic police constables diligently asking drivers to blow into their handheld breath analyzers threw into sharp relief the co-existence of two modes of thinking road safety. Revanth was not against the idea that the police had to conduct drinking and driving checks; instead, he was articulating an inconsistency in the narrative of safety

articulated by the state. It is tempting to think of this offhand comment by Revanth as either a knee-jerk response to the passing of his friend's wife or as a one-off "attitude" or "opinion." However, what Revanth articulated was not an opinion unique to just him or his particular circumstance. As I indicated in the vignette with which that I started this chapter, Naganna's unwillingness to pay his tickets can also be understood as a similar critique of the state as making selective claims about care and safety. Just as potholes rupture the equanimity of the road surface, pothole-related accidents punctuate a discourse that tends to blame individual drivers for making roads unsafe. The existence of the pothole and its culpability in causing accidents render the state directly suspect in its motives for ensuring road safety.

Similarly, Pradeep, an autorickshaw driver in his 30s, extended Revanth and Naganna's annoyance at this selective and uneven experience of the state's care by arguing the following:

> Even this drinking-and-driving-checking seems like a scam to me. Police are saying it is for safety, but if you really think about it, it does not make sense. The government makes so much money because through the sale of liquor.[15] They are the ones who are encouraging people to drink. They have all these shops everywhere in the city. They make money when they give out liquor license. Then they are the ones who will catch us and fine us. My question is: Where is all this money going? Why is all this money not being used to fix the potholes? Why should I pay when I am getting no benefit? (Interview, April 2018)

In pointing out the complicity of the state in causing the very issue they were now regulating, Pradeep might sound like a conspiracy theorist. However, this image of the state as being manipulative, and extractive was not at all uncommon amongst low-income driver-workers. It was not necessarily the result of conspiratorial thinking alone, but rather, as we have noted in the previous chapter, was borne from previous engagements with a corrupt and esurient state that never quite kept the promises it made.

15. While it is a well-known fact that many states in India earn a major chunk of their revenues by imposing an excise on alcohol, this is particularly the case in Telangana, where more than half of its revenue can be attributed to excise taxes collected for liquor sales and licensing fees collected from stores and bars.

The Blame Game Begins

Fixing the blame of an accident on a pothole, however, was not that simple. From the perspective of police officials, a pothole alone seldom *caused* deaths. There were several other factors involved, from their perspective. Most of my interlocutors in the traffic police department agreed that several city roads were in a state of disrepair and that the municipal corporation was not exactly cooperative in working with the police to make roads safer. According to Inspector Srinivas, who headed the Engineering Cell of the Traffic Police Department, while potholes did cause accidents, *deaths* were often the result of motorists not wearing helmets or wearing helmets that were substandard. The wife of Revanth's friend, for instance, was not wearing a helmet on the night of her accident. Pillion-riders seldom wear helmets in the city, even though it is a rule under the Motor Vehicle Act. On the one hand, the police do not actively enforce this rule. On the other hand, the police do not enforce this rule *because,* as one constable put it, "When most riders in the city do not wear helmets, why will pillion-riders wear [it]?"

Amongst my own interlocutors, this debate of who was to blame for "pothole deaths" depended largely on the vehicle being driven at the time of the accident. Car owners, while horrified at the thought of someone falling off of a vehicle because of a pothole, agreed with the traffic police that perhaps people should wear helmets if they wanted to save their own lives. Potholes were an inconvenience to everyone and led to the wear and tear of vehicles, no matter what vehicle was being driven, but potholes almost always *killed* only two-wheeler riders and/or their passengers. However, given that over 85% of Hyderabad's vehicular population is comprised of two-wheelers – mopeds, motorcycles, and bicycles – potholes and their complicity in taking the life of a two-wheeler rider/passenger should rightfully be a matter of much public concern. While much literature on automobility discusses how the type of vehicle one is driving determines how

one *sees* the street – visuality – and makes sense of physical and social order, but when it comes to potholes, it is not the *seeing*, but the *feeling*, that matters more.

When it came to surfaces of the road, these ill-fated two-wheeler drivers were considered the most at-risk for accidents, regardless of any precautions they could potentially take. Take, for instance, this pithy analysis offered to me by Kumar, a senior journalist in the city who had worked on submitting several petitions to the government about problematic potholes in the city:

> Police say that people died because they weren't wearing helmets and that people don't value their own lives. Lies! The pothole was the *reason* they died, but instead, nicely, the police blame the dead victim's "risk-taking" mentality. How will a helmet save me if I fall off my bike and come under the wheels of a bus? Or I break my spine? Blaming individuals for not wearing helmets while the roads continue to be like this is just typical of a government that wants to take zero responsibility. (Interview, September 2018)

With the tragic recurrence of "pothole death," the issue of responsibility and blame fell back on a "state versus citizen" trope. Differences between urban civic bodies and the traffic police were put aside to determine the *cause* of the death – that is, categories were to blame, not specific circumstances. This, as one can imagine, was critical to affixing legal culpability. Pothole deaths were possible not *just* because of state neglect – in terms of not fixing roads – but also, as in the case of Revanth's friend, incidental issues like bad lighting were to blame.

When contrasting the narratives of motorists with those of traffic police officers, the issue boiled down to the following: to what official *category* does one appoint the cause of a road accident, or death? In one particular case, for instance, a young woman who was sitting behind her brother on a moped fell off the vehicle, hit her head on the divider in the road, and died instantly. The rider – her brother – told the police that he was avoiding a pothole, so he swerved suddenly, and she lost balance and fell off the bike. The police said that she should have been wearing a helmet. The rider insisted that the *fall* was caused by the pothole; the police insisted that the *death* was caused by her own negligence. In this particular case, the resolution between these

explanations was easier than in other cases because police had access to CCTV footage, which clearly showed that the rider had not, in fact, swerved to avoid a pothole (although there was a huge one in the vicinity of the incident) but rather to overtake a car ahead of them. The police charged the rider with "rash and negligent driving." However, the rider said in a television interview that the pothole was the reason he had even tried to overtake the car in the first place. The TV reporter, too, insisted, "Police say that helmets are the reason, but we citizens ask: *Why are there so many potholes that can cause deaths in the first place*? Do the lives of people who don't have cars not matter?" The popular media framing of potholes as causing deaths explains, in part, how the rhetoric of causation has been institutionalized over time. In Telugu, the phrase that captures this tenuous causal link is "*valla*," or "because of." It is *because of* potholes that this death happened.

The figure of the helmetless rider (or pillion-rider) stood squarely in the center of a chicken-and-egg conundrum of who was to blame for pothole deaths, or even traffic-related injuries. Going beyond charging the state with being corrupt, there was something more immediate and personal about pothole deaths. They exposed the moral double standards of the rhetoric around road safety. The argument was something like this: not only was the state corrupt – something *everyone* knew – but, worse, it operated hypocritically, even in the face of widespread injury and even death.

Thus, the state was not just corrupt; it was *callous* and did not *care.* While the traffic police kept referring to themselves as caring agents of the state – most notably manifested in the hashtag "#WeCare4U" that they used in all digital communication – the state of the roads was interpreted as contradicting this very message. While newspaper reports and my own interviews are rife with such quotable moments, I will put forth an excerpt from my interview with Nitin, the commuting tech worker, as a representative example:

> The pothole-ridden flyovers and over-bridges are just a reflection of the fact that the concerned authorities *do not care*. And even worse, they do not even bother to fulfill the assurances they make to citizens. They keep talking about road safety, but if they *really* cared, would they not do something about these roads? My spine had been fucked because of the bad roads. I wore a helmet every day and did my bit. But ultimately, it's the bad roads that got me. (Interview, February 2018)

Here Nitin invoked the state's responsibility *to care* and to provide, alongside making reference to the more visible and voluble story of road safety – of which wearing helmets was the most common manifestations of how citizens made sense of roads. In the case of potholes, we see how the literal ruptures on road surfaces are constructed as agents of death and injury. Potholes, as such, disrupt the narrative of the state as caring – as noted in the discussion around bumpiness – and pothole deaths and injuries, in particular, shed light on the inherent contradictions and paradoxes within the road safety narrative aimed at disciplining drivers.

Sensational Seductions of Speed: When Smooth Roads Kill

> "When potholes are there, people are falling off their scooters and dying. When potholes are not there and the roads are smooth, people are going overspeed and dying. It is simple: smooth roads or bumpy roads, death is everywhere."
>
> –Pasha, a taxi driver

When I started fieldwork in 2017, my plan was to conduct observations and interviews at the GHMC and HMDA, two urban civic bodies in charge of road construction, maintenance, and repairs. As I began to use my networks of contacts at the traffic police department to meet civil engineers who, I was told, would help me understand "everything about roads," I quickly realized that, as soon as engineers learned of the potential for my dissertation to turn into a book, they often only wanted to tell me about the much-anticipated Strategic Road Development Project (SRDP).

Announced in 2016, the SRDP is a multi-phase road development plan that aims to overhaul the road infrastructure of Hyderabad. Some of the key elements of this project include

building multi-level flyovers, grade separators, skyways, and several road extensions. Some of the engineers I met at HMDA showed me promotional videos about the SRDP. The narrative in these materials was rather straightforward – SRDP, with its infrastructural intervention, will transform the congested, narrow, and chaotic roads of the city into wide, neat, and *smooth* roads.[16] Residents of cities in India are not new to hearing these narratives of aspirational planning (Sadana 2018) or, more broadly, the "worlding" (Ong and Roy 2011) and infrastructural uplift of cities that shape, and are shaped by, the aesthetics and rhetorics of world-classness (Ghertner 2015). As such, the Outer Ring Road and the PV Narasimha Rao Expressway were brought up as examples of roads that were world-class. For instance, in a closed-door meeting about road safety I was lucky to attend in July 2018, the KTR himself (the chief minister's son) characterized the ORR and PVNR as having "such smooth roads that it feels like one is travelling in America, Germany, or Dubai."

The organic associations between the smoothness of the road, aspiration, pride, and globality were similarly articulated by some of the superintended engineers at HMDA who I met in June 2018. Every time I brought up the issue of potholes or bumpy roads resulting in deaths and injuries on "not-so-spectacular" roads of the city, the engineers I met would assure me that the people to whom I was talking were exaggerating and that people love to complain more than praise the government. As one assistant superintendent engineer at HMDA put it, "Hyderabadis only like to complain about everything. See, people don't notice smooth roads; they only notice potholes." Soon a conversation like this would pivot to SRDP and how it was going to change the way Hyderabadis felt about their city – a *worlding* of subjects would be accomplished through the sheer

16. Despite this official narrative, several criticisms of this project have surfaced in local media. Apart from protests against the project for its ecological insensitivity in certain parts of the city (most notably around the KBR Park area) and questions being raised about the financial viability of this mega-project, Gopakumar's (2020) assertions about urban governance privileging automobility over public transportation and pedestrian rights in Bengaluru apply to the development of this plan in Hyderabad, too.

force of concrete. In their gentle, but categorical, directing of my attention to SRDP, what the engineers to whom I was speaking were asking me to do was write about the possibilities and potentials of a "better future." At other times, they would point me to Outer Ring Road and the PV Narasimha Rao Expressway, to make the argument that Hyderabad had some of the smoothest roads in the country. In these articulations, the smoothness of roads was very clearly marked by a focus on flows, connectivity, progress, and development.

However, on November 23, 2019, a spectacular road accident that occurred on one of SRDP's newly inaugurated flyovers left Hyderabad absolutely stumped. A Volkswagen GT being driven by a twenty-seven-year-old businessman in the city flew off the Biodiversity Flyover in Gachibowli and landed on the busy road below. A middle-aged woman waiting at an autorickshaw stand there with her daughter died on the spot, while four other people were grievously injured. That a car *flying* off a flyover that had been inaugurated (with a lot of pomp and circumstance) just 19 days before would cause a media stir is an understatement. Compounding matters further, the Biodiversity Flyover was one of the first flyovers to be inaugurated as part of the SRDP project – the mega-infrastructure project that I had been reluctant to follow in my ethnographic work.

As soon as the accident happened, local news channels began to cover the story, and social media was reeling from the shock of the incident. The traffic police released CCTV footage from a variety of angles to various news channels – and these clips began to circulate on Twitter and Facebook. In a particularly popular clip that provides an aerial view of the S-shaped flyover, one can see a red car moving along and, suddenly, hitting the barrier along the flyover, hurtling off its edge and plummeting into the busy road below. In a clip that captures the view from nearby the autorickshaw stand where the car ultimately landed, we can see a tree collapsing under the

momentum of the red hatchback landing, a plume of dust rising, a sign board flying off its spot, and people running and scattering from the area in evident panic.

This accident caused voluble public outrage. On the one hand, the driver was accused of speeding and, thus, "driving dangerously." The police alleged that the driver was driving at 104 kmph (65 mph) as per their assessment, clearly in violation of the prescribed speed limit of the flyover, 40 kmph. The driver's status as an elite businessman who was related to the chief minister's son-in-law was also brought up to point out the brazen disregard for traffic rules. On the other hand, several road safety activists in the city pointed out that the S-shaped design of the flyover was simply not safe and that without adequate road signs it would be impossible to ensure that further accidents would not occur on the flyover. In this second mode of questioning, there was a question of the state's complicity in the accident: Why was this design even approved in the first place? It is along these two lines that the court proceedings of the case have also followed suit: while the prosecutor has argued that the driver had been speeding, the defendants have pointed to the faulty design of the flyover as the real *cause* of the accident.

I felt a sense of shock when I first heard of this news, not just because it was so unusual to hear of this kind of an accident, but also because the *same* flyover had been in the news a few days prior because of a different accident – one in which two young men who were taking selfies on the flyover were mowed down by a drunk driver and fell off the flyover, onto the road below.[17] This incident was called the "selfie accident" by most news channels. While it served as a cautionary

17.On November 11, 2019, two men in their early 20s were killed after they fell off the Biodiversity Flyover onto the road below. The victims had parked their motorcycles on the side of the flyover and were apparently taking selfies when an inebriated car-driver rammed his vehicle into them, causing them to fall off of the flyover. The driver of this car was in his late 20s and an employee at a software company in the city. It was reported in the news that the accused man was returning home from a party and that his blood alcohol content level was 223mg/100ml – seven times over the permissible limit.

tale against drinking and driving, there was a lot of speculation on social and news media sites about what the young men had been doing on the flyover to begin with. Why were these boys taking selfies and hanging out on a *flyover?*

People deciding to take selfies on the flyover was not an unusual phenomenon, however. A newspaper report suggested that, according to the local traffic police, about a hundred people stopped and took selfies on the biodiversity flyover every day, while at night, people also strolled on the flyover (Bommala 2020). Some people claimed that the view of the new Skyview building, with its bright lights, apparently made for a very "cityscape" photo backdrop, and, therefore, people were tempted to take selfies on this flyover. Some others claimed that there was *so* much hype around the SRDP project that people felt the need to take photographs – as if it were a monument built by the government. Either way, the flyover had become almost *too* popular and was eliciting too much awe – exceeding the appropriate amount of wonder that citizens were *supposed* to feel in the shadow of this massive concrete performance.

After these two accidents occurred, the flyover was shut down for inspection. It reopened in January 2020, after several changes had been made to its terrain. Rumble strips were added, the height of the crash barrier was increased, bar markings were created, several cautionary signboards were placed, speed limit markings were made bigger, side view-cutters were installed, and public announcements were scheduled for safety warnings against taking selfies, to be announced regularly. Furthermore, the flyover was subsequently closed at night – between 10:30pm and 7:30am – and police patrolling was increased. That the much-anticipated flyover under the SRDP had met this rather anticlimactic fate – from the seductions of speed and seamlessness to the rumbling of regulations – hardly needed to be overstated. When, in February 2020, another

speeding car fell off of a different flyover in the city,[18] – this time, too, the driver had lost control of the car – public comment, again, oscillated between blaming the driver for overspeeding and wondering about the imminent danger of roads that were too smooth.

In fact, while potholes framed as endangering the safety of motorists constituted a niche and emerging topic of conversation in the city, the image of the unsafe road that more commonly circulated was, ironically, that of the *smooth* road. In a sense, smooth roads and their potential for enabling speed occupied an ambivalent position amongst my interlocutors. On the one hand, smooth roads were coveted, as they did not "rattle bones" in the way pothole-ridden roads did. On the other hand, smooth roads were associated with the tendency amongst drivers to *overspeed*,[19] and, thus, were a prominent concern of the traffic police and fell squarely within the realm of state disciplining efforts. While most citizens complained of the potholes and bumpiness of the roads slowing them down, causing inconveniences, injuries, and even deaths, everyone knew that it was overspeeding that contributed to the greatest number of, and the most horrific, traffic accidents in the city.

Overspeeding also constituted the biggest road safety concern amongst traffic police officials. According to official data released by the Hyderabad Traffic Police, around half of the fatal accidents that occurred in both 2018 and 2019 were due to over-speeding.[20] Most of the time,

18. On 17 February 2020, one person was killed, and five others were injured, when the car in which they were traveling fell off of the flyover. See *Outlook* (2020).

19. "Overspeeding" was the official term used in Hyderabad – by citizens and the traffic police – to denote speeding.

20. See Hyderabad Traffic Police (2019) for this data. While Cyberabad Traffic Police and Rachakonda Traffic Police did not issue similar data, my conversations with police bureaucrats at both these departments said the same thing – that it was overspeeding that caused the most fatal accidents. Considering that the Outer Ring Road comes under the jurisdiction of both these authorities, is it not surprising that speeding causes the greatest number of fatal accidents.

in my conversations with road safety activists – and in media discourses around this issue – the factor contributing to overspeeding was understood as either a recklessness with respect to rules (especially when it comes to young men), or an ignorance of the risks of speeding and a thus a function of poor driver education in the country. "Human error" was a phrase often used to sum up the situation.

For instance, early in September 2018, I met with Srija, the Divisional Manager of the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC). While chatting about road safety and buses, she asked me if I was talking to road engineers for my project. I explained that I had tried to, but that engineers only wanted to talk to me about the expressways or the SRDP and not as much about issues with the existing roads. Srija shook her head when I brought up how most motorists complained about potholes and uneven roads. She replied,

> Actually, the smoothest of roads will have most accidents. Have you seen the smooth roads outside the city, the Outer Ring Road and all? Every single day, someone or the other dies. Why? They cannot control themselves. *The feeling of that perfect road makes everyone want to speed.* We have speed guns, and the fines are quite high, but still people overspeed on highways and expressways. Even that film star, Harikrishna, died like that.[21] Actually, speed doesn't spare anyone – car, motorcycle, bus. But with potholes, only two-wheelers are in real danger. *Sometimes I feel potholes and all are only better* – yes, vehicles have a lot of wear and tear, and it is bad for the back, but at least people drive slowly, anticipating the bumps. Till drivers are more disciplined, that risk of overspeeding will always be there. (Field Notes, September 2018)

Srija's observation about speed and danger might not appear to be particularly new – after all, who does not know that road crashes all over the world are often attributed to speeding? But, in emphasizing a sensuous interpretation of roads as *automatically* giving rise to the desire for speed,

21. A few days before our conversation, the film actor and politician Nandamuri Harikrishna died in a road crash near Anneparthi, in the Nalgonda district. According to the reports following his death, he had been driving an SUV at a high speed and without wearing a seatbelt. At some point, he lost control of the car and hit a median, and the vehicle catapulted in the air onto the other side of the road. Following Harikrishna's death, his son and film actor Junior NTR released several awareness videos around seatbelt use and driving within the speed limit.

Srija was pointing to a somewhat universal attribute of smooth roads. That she then leveraged this universality to explain how potholes might actually be better suited to the safety drivers who were not fully disciplined was what caught my attention, as this related back to questions about the making of citizens who could properly inhabit a "world class city."

Putting similar emphasis on a sensory interpretation of speeding, some of the traffic police officers with whom I spoke also pointed to the link between the tendency to push the pedal and the presence of congestion. According to Inspector Satyaprasad at the Jubilee Hills Traffic Police Station, many people tended to speed whenever they could, precisely because traffic congestion and bad roads made them "restless." That was why, he claimed, many people tended to speed at night:

> Why do people like cars and motorcycles? The whole point is to go speedly. But, see, because of a lot of traffic in the city, they are forced to go slow. Or the roads are bad and so they have to go slow. So, that makes people greedy to overspeed when they see a smooth road and no traffic. Smooth road means thrill, feel the wind in your face. So, at night, many youngsters just want to experience that thrill. People just want to experience like that because otherwise in city traffic, you can barely go above 20 or 30 kmph. But that is also the danger! This is why the most fatal accidents happen not on bad roads but on good roads – on ORR, PVNR Expressway, KBR Park road. On good roads, we need disciplined drivers! (Field Notes, March 2019)

This was a very phenomenological understanding of roads that was often missing from conversations taking place in road safety circles about speeding, which tended to frame it as either an ignorance of traffic rules and road safety or as risky behavior. What Satyaprasad was pointing to, however, was the *feeling* of the road being smooth and free of traffic – which was a luxury – leading to an almost understandable propensity to speed. But, as with Srija's perspective on roads and discipline amongst drivers, Satyaprasad, too, emphasized that, as the city began to build roads that could offer drivers a sense of speed and smoothness, drivers would be needed who were suited to the act of belonging in these cities:

> See, Hyderabad is developing fast. ORR is just the first step. The SRDP plans are all full of world-class roads. Now, with such good roads also comes great responsibility. From small town mentality, people have to start having big city mentality. Means, discipline has to be there. With better roads, speeds will be high, and so risks of accidents will be high. That is why road safety matters now, more than ever. Drivers have to follow rules. They have to understand that rules are for their benefit. Speeding is very dangerous! On our city roads, little bit here and there overspeeding or breaking traffic rules is ok. But on those expressways and big roads? One wrong move, and you might just die. (Field Notes, March 2019)

Death by Regulation: The Curious Case of Speed Bumps

During the time I spent with traffic police officers, I observed how eager they were to resort to material and infrastructural changes in their efforts to regulate driver behavior. The placement of medians, barricades, and other physical and material adjustments for guiding traffic were often put forward to senior officers as the only effective strategies for making people follow rules – especially since they felt that their efforts to either raise awareness or increase enforcement were not quite bringing the desired behavioral outcomes. Bascom Guffin (2015a) has examined precisely how traffic police authorities and urban planners in Hyderabad imagine a utopia of technological determinism – what he calls "concrete politics" – by relying on material changes to the way roads are experienced in the city. Speed bumps are a typical case in point and often came up as the "only solution" for controlling the speed of vehicles.

However, in June 2017, the central government acknowledged a more subterranean knowledge that *speed bumps* also "caused" deaths and injuries. In response to a parliamentary question that raised the issue of speed bumps, the minister of state in the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways released a public circular in which it was declared that more than 11,000 crashes[22] were caused by speed bumps in both 2014 and 2015. Due to these crashes, in each of

22. There is some confusion as to whether the figures listed in this circular refer to crashes or deaths. The reason for this confusion is that, while the main text of the note indicates that the figures in the table attached in the annexure of the circular are figures of crashes, the table itself lists the figures as "the number

these years, around 3,000 people died, and more than 9,000 people were injured. Upon the release of this report, newspapers all over the country carried headlines such as, "Speed Breakers Kill: They Cause 30 Crashes and 9 Deaths a Day" or "Speed Breakers in India Kill More People than Accidents Do in UK, Australia." Speed bumps – it is common knowledge – are meant to regulate the speed of drivers for the sake of safety. The enforcement of the speed law is realized when drivers modify their behavior in direct response to the mediation of speed bumps – they are, as Bruno Latour calls them, "sleeping policemen." Keeping that in mind, that these regulatory devices are *causing* deaths might seem like a strange idea.

The possible dangers of speed bumps were coming under the radar of local news media at the time that I started doing fieldwork. Journalists had begun to report on the ubiquity of unlawful speed bumps all over the city. The existence of 22 unmarked speed bumps on a 2 km-long (1.2 mile-long) road in the AC Guards area attracted the most attention in these reports. While the presence of 22 speed bumps on a 1.2 mile-long road was an extreme case, it was not too uncommon to see many speed bumps in residential neighborhoods. In 2019, I lived on Picket Road for three months – a one-kilometer (0.6-mile) stretch of road that had eight speed bumps.

The issue with most of these speed bumps was not just the quantity of them, but also the fact that these speed bumps are constructed hastily and in violation of the engineering codes laid down by the Indian Roads Congress. The speed bumps surveyed by local media outlets were dangerous not because they were speed bumps, but because they were either too high/steep, not accompanied by any warning or cautionary signs, or not marked by appropriate road markings. At

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of fatalities due to speed breakers." This rather careless oversight caused the national media to come up with two different versions of the same story. While some news outlets reported that "speed breakers on Indian roads kill more than 10,000 people every year" (e.g. *Quartz India* and *India Today*), others referred to there being "more than 10,000 crashes due to speed breakers" (e.g. *Times of India*, *Livemint,* and *Financial Express*). I am sticking to the latter interpretation, after consulting a journalist who assured me that annexures are often filled with mistakes that go unnoticed and that the main text is more reliable.

night, there were also not enough streetlights on city roads, making the sudden bumps on road surfaces particularly dangerous for drivers.

Several news reports have found that the concerned state authorities were flouting the procedures that supposedly needed to be followed in order to get a speed bump sanctioned on any road. Instead, residents of local colonies were often pooling their own money and either building speed bumps using their own materials or getting local traffic police staff or local civic bodies to build the speed bumps. According to Sameer Paul of *Street Saviors*, residents often bribed authorities to get speed bumps constructed in their neighborhoods, in order to circumvent the long-winded process of obtaining the required approvals and permissions to get speed bumps constructed on roads. An investigation by *The Hindu* similarly revealed that even the urban civic officials themselves were unsure of the procedures for building lawful speed bumps in the city (Devulapalli 2016). The irony behind an infrastructural artifact that was meant to make people conform to one law (not speeding) being built in violation of several other laws is certainly interesting to note.

In direct relationship to their hasty, unregulated construction, speed bumps in India have been known to be just as "backbreaking" as potholes and other road surface issues. As one newspaper put it, "Anyone who's driven on Indian roads will know this: speed bumps in the subcontinent can be damaging. Usually unmarked and terribly designed, these undulating contraptions can effortlessly rattle bones and contort car chassis" (Ghoshal 2017). In fact, even the central Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, commented, "We have speed bumps on every road, which can break your bones and damage your vehicle" (Dash 2017). During my fieldwork, Hyderabad was no exception.

Much like potholes in their sudden and abrupt appearance on the road, the speed bumps pocking most roads in Hyderabad rattled my bones on many a ride. While riding in a car, I would feel deep annoyance at being made to jump off my seat by a sudden jerk, and I once hurt my knee very badly when an autorickshaw went over a speed bump without slowing down. Similarly, whenever I would "sit pillion" on two-wheelers, I would worry about falling off the back seat. While friends familiar with my general anxiety on the roads made fun of me, this was hardly a laughing matter for road safety activists – as such experiences have turned fatal in some cases.

For instance, in June 2018, a six-year-old died under the wheels of a bus after she lost balance and fell out the door because the bus driver braked too suddenly when confronted with an unmarked speed bump (*The News Minute* 2018a). While the bus driver was held legally culpable for negligence,[23] one of the police constables who booked the case told me it was *really* the fault of the speed bump. Newspapers also reported this incident as a death *caused* by the speed bump. According to the logic of this argument, the driver could not see the speed bump because it was not marked with proper signage.

Similarly, in the town of Jagtial, located about 190 km north of Hyderabad, a TSRTC[24] bus returning from Kondaguattu in September 2018 swerved off a ghat[25] road, hurtled down 30 feet of a valley, and flipped over four times before stopping. Fifty-seven passengers of the bus died in this accident, including the driver. According to the newspaper reports and to my own conversations with employees at TSRTC in Hyderabad, the accident occurred because the driver lost control of

23. In Hyderabad, bus drivers are often held responsible for road accidents, even if the "root" cause of the accident is more complex to decipher. This happens for two reasons: one, there is a culture of blaming the bigger vehicle, of which even the bus drivers are well aware; and two, if the drivers are drivers of publicly-owned buses, the compensation is paid by the state, and so it often acts as a compromise tactic.

24. "TSRTC" stands for Telangana State Road Transport Corporation, a public sector corporation that runs transport services in Telangana.

25. Ghats are access routes in mountainous regions.

the bus after it hit a speed bump. While some newspapers pointed out that the driver had tried to take a shortcut to save time and had risked the lives of his passengers by taking them down a ghat road, the employees and drivers with whom I spoke at TSRTC immediately after this incident happened assured me that the driver was exceptionally skilled and had, in fact, been commended by TSRTC for his history of meritorious, accident-free driving just two months before the accident. His expertise and grasp on driving were not in doubt to them whatsoever. Instead, they put blame on the unmarked speed bump on the ghat road. Lingam, a bus driver in his 40s who often drove outstation trips, angrily asked me:

> What was a speed bump doing on a ghat road? Who gave permission for it to be there? Why was it there? Why was it not marked? Why was there no board [sign] near it? All these questions are not asked. Instead, people just say, "Negligent driving." I drive every day on both city roads and outside, and let me tell you this – until there is no proper signage and no proper road markings, the government does not have the authority to blame the drivers. (Field Notes, October 2018)

While smooth roads were caught up in evaluations and understandings of speed, safety, and danger, the material response to these concepts in the form of speed bumps and "sleeping policemen" were themselves wrapped up in more claims and counterclaims, including the one being posed by Lingam.

Spectacular Events, Mundane Matters

Ivanka Trump Comes to Hyderabad…

Towards the end of November 2017, the city of Hyderabad began to undergo a "makeover," as one media channel put it (Sudhir 2017). While city officials were busy preparing to roll out a metaphorical red carpet for Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, who were going to be speaking at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, the anticipation of their visit spilled over onto the streets. The fact that the prime minister of India would be inaugurating the summit, along with

the most prominent entrepreneurs and businesspersons in the IT sector in India, added to the spectacular appeal of the event. Even as much of the media buzz around the event was saturated by narratives and fantasies about entrepreneurialism, technological innovation, and foreign investment, there an equally voluble discussion took place around governmental action to address civic issues throughout the city.

In anticipation of the impending gaze of these "special guests," a flurry of projects were hurriedly instigated: large billboards bearing Ivanka's face were erected around the city (see figures 5.2 and 5.3), stray dogs were removed from street corners, homeless people were rounded up from the city's thoroughfares and shuttled off to peripheral villages and suburbs,[26] flyovers were painted with floral designs and in rainbow colors, trees along main thoroughfares were painted with bright colors, and select roads were repaired and repaved. While these aesthetic changes were being made, some of my interlocutors in the traffic police department were busy planning secure and traffic-free movement for the VIPs who were to visit. To this end, either certain roads were going to be blocked from general public usage or traffic was going to be diverted to alternative routes.

26.See Safi (2017).

Figure 5.2. Murals underway before Ivanka Trump's visit in November 2017.
Source: Mahesh. Used with permission.

Figure 5.3. Traffic police officials having a discussion in front of an Ivanka Trump mural in November 2017.
Source: Mahesh. Used with permission.

Even within this context, the figure of the "unruly driver" persisted. As such, as discussed in chapter 1 and 2, the gaze of the "foreign visitor" on the "look" of chaotic roads and traffic indiscipline informed much of the anxieties experienced by the higher-level traffic police officials at the time; in Ivanka Trump's visit, this gaze was actualized. Traffic Inspector Ganesh, who could only speak to me for a brief two minutes before rushing to yet another planning meeting about the visit, groaned, "We are trying to make everything first-class for our special guests. Now if only our drivers behave properly and don't give our country a bad name. As it is, everyone in the West thinks Indian drivers are uncivilized. If not for their safety, at least for our reputation we should drive better, no? How long we want to be inferior to developed countries?"

While several of my interlocutors shared the viewpoint that, indeed, one ought to "put one's best foot forward," the visible enthusiasm displayed by local officials in beautifying the city became the target for much political satire and culturally intimate humor. The unprecedented zeal with which road repairs and beautification were happening, and for a highly exclusive and elite event, struck the public as strikingly ironic; large sinkholes had appeared in various parts of the city just a few weeks prior to this event and of course had not been attended to with nearly as much alacrity.[27]

On my phone I began to receive numerous jokes about the beautification efforts in the form of WhatsApp and Twitter forwards from my interlocutors, family, and friends (see, for example, figure 5.4), including quips that Ivanka Trump *should* visit Hyderabad more often, for suddenly (as one interlocutor told me), "Even the roads in Old City have become smoother than roads in Dubai." A local comedian, Rajasekhar Mamidanna, made a video about this issue and said that

27. Within a span of ten days, between the end of September and early October in 2017, two large sinkholes appeared in two very busy, middle-income neighborhoods in the city – Tadbund Crossroads and Allwyn Colony Road in Kukatpally.

"the only other time I have seen a road being laid so fast was in a movie (*Sivaji*) when the path on which the hero walks is immediately transformed into a road as he passes through." Similarly, a Delhi-based journalist joked in a popular tweet, "Potholes fixed, beggars removed from Hyderabad. #Ivanka should have come to Delhi and we may have got clean air to breathe!"

Figure 5.4. A popular tweet that I was sent by an informant.
Source: Author's correspondence

While much of Ivanka Trump's visit was confined to parts of the northwest financial district and "IT" neighborhoods that were home to large multinational corporations, gated communities, international hotels, and smooth roads, she was also scheduled to visit Falaknuma Palace, a historic site (now a heritage hotel) located in the *southern* part of the city – a more low-income and derelict

part of the city, where the roads are often most visibly neglected by local officials. The official line of the government, however, was that these road repairs had nothing to do with Ivanka Trump's visit and that they were part of the regular work of the civic bodies.

Whether or not Ivanka Trump's visit was the motivating factor behind the sudden agility of road repairs in the city, many of my autorickshaw driver informants felt relieved that even some Old City roads were being repaved and painted over as part of the beautification efforts. As Asif, an autorickshaw driver in his 50s, put it:

> Many years ago, Bill Clinton came to Hyderabad, and the same *hungama* (excitement) happened. Roads repaired, streets cleaned, etc. Now Trump's daughter is coming, so suddenly the government is in full action. This is how it is. Even in Old City they have been repairing roads and painting them. Nobody normally cares about roads in this part of the city. At least this way we are getting some benefit. Even I know that government is only doing all this to impress Trump's daughter, but at least now the roads I travel on every day are better! It makes a big difference to someone like me, who drives many, many hours a day. (Field Notes, February 2018)

This kind of profoundly routine resignation was quite common amongst several of my informants about the state of the roads and how the government worked for the gaze of "special guests" and not for the benefit of its citizens. As with Asif's analysis of the situation, it was also common knowledge that there were incidental (and fleeting) benefits of the occasional obsequiousness of the state towards outsiders.

In these and other ways, state power was perceived as being *inconsistent* – both spatially and temporally. Not only were some parts of the city perceived as completely neglected by the state, but any attempt at infrastructural reformation of the city as a whole was also understood as flaky, at best. In fact, a group of citizens led by the speaker of the regional political party, Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee,[28] staged a protest against the selective repair of roads in

28. This committee is a state unit within the Indian National Congress.

the city. One placard read, “Mrs. Ivanka Trump, please come to this road,” suggesting that it was only in the anticipation of her visit that the city officials would fix the pothole-ridden roads.

While the city had been undergoing all kinds of aesthetic changes, the fact that the state of the roads became a topic of political humor and collective commentary reveals the centrality of road surfaces in everyday life. The humor generated around this entire event kept pointing to this unevenness and inconsistency – not just of road surfaces but also of state capacity. For instance, Aditya, who worked as a reporter at a local newspaper and commuted on a motorcycle every day, pointed out

> See, if the government wants to, it can do many things. In just a week, they’ve made Hyderabad look so beautiful – all for Ivanka Trump. Just imagine if the government worked like this for everyone. India is a developing country, so there is a posh India, and there is a *khataara* [junk] India. We have roads full of potholes alongside multi-level flyovers and expressways. You know our country is just a developing country when you drive – which developed country has such bumpy roads? (Interview, December 2017)

The inconsistency of the roads, in this reading, served as yet another reminder of the uneven development of a country rife with stark inequality. And, subsequently, the fact that the state worked overnight to repair the “important roads” was just further evidence that it did not work equally or consistently for everyone.

The culturally-intimate humor that emerged around the state of roads, alongside the sober, collective recognition of “this is how it is” persisted, not just *about* the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, but also *into* it. Amongst the dedicated coverage of the event, for instance, there were multiple reports about one particular exchange that took place between the head of an important IT company and a popular politician in the city. Speaking at a highly publicized launch of a local startup at the Summit, Nivruti Rai, the country head of Intel India congratulated the political leadership and the state for the transformations of the city that had been accomplished over the last decade. Drawing from her own experience riding from the airport to the venue, she praised the

city's roads and referred to them as "beautiful" and "smooth." That the drive from the airport to the Hyderabad International Convention Center, where the summit was taking place, was "beautiful" and "smooth" was perhaps not that surprising. The Outer Ring Road expressway that hugs the city in a loose circle and the thoroughfares in the IT enclave that Rai would have traversed to get to the HICC are infrastructural manifestations of precisely the vision of "world-class aspirations" that the branding of Hyderabad as an Information Technology hub has entailed in the last two decades (Das 2015). However, Rai's blanket statement about Hyderabad roads revealed a partial narrative of the city – and, more importantly, it provoked a response from the Minister of Municipal Administration and Urban Development, KT Rama Rao, one of the speakers at the same event.

According to a news report in the *Deccan Chronicle*, KT Rama Rao (KTR) responded to Rai's lavish praise by joking that a lot of audience members at this event were looking at each other in disbelief at the mention of Hyderabadi roads being beautiful and smooth (*Deccan Chronicle* 2017). As the chief minister's son and one of the most visible and popular leaders in the state, KTR is popularly associated with a youthful, cosmopolitan savvy often attributed to his training at an MBA program in New York City. In his typically outspoken style – one that sets him apart in the world of Indian politics – he candidly confessed that there were bumpy roads all over Hyderabad and that he would be happy to show Rai those roads, if she wanted to see or feel them. Addressing the audience, he proclaimed boldly,

> I am not ashamed to say that the situation of roads in Hyderabad is bad. People are living under tough conditions. I am well aware of the condition of roads and how they are posing problems to the citizens. Don't think because I have an escort, I am being guided over an elevated corridor. I also travel on the same roads and *I know how bumpy the ride is*. I know that I am not the most popular person in Hyderabad at the moment. I am not going to beat around the bush but admit that we have to improve our infrastructure. We have a long way to go. But please bear with me. We are trying and we are trying our best. We will work to get the roads better. (*The News Minute* 2017, italics added)

In the case of KTR's comment about the roads, we see an attempt at a selective reveal – which is key to the ways in which states attempt to consolidate power in public life. Admitting to an elite audience that he "knows how bumpy the ride is," KTR is able to point to a commonly known issue in the city and, through a performance of sincerity, is able to be *transparent* about the "reality" of the roads. With this admission, it may seem like he rendered pointless the elaborate infrastructural performance in the service of Ivanka's gaze pointless. While it is impossible to know what Nivruti Rai or Ivanka Trump thought of this admission, what is important to note is that, by admitting to the bumpiness of the road *and* to his own unpopularity, KTR used the moment to remind citizens that he was much like them; that he did not travel on an elevated corridor.

In making the statement that he did at the event, KTR performed not just sympathy but also *empathy*. In acknowledging the "tough conditions" under which people were living due to bad roads, KTR first sympathized with the public. Then, by talking about his own experience of the roads – "I know how bumpy the ride is" – he went a step beyond sympathy and actively empathized with the citizens. Whether or not he actually traversed the parts of the city that, say, Asif was talking about, KTR's reference to his own *experience* of bumpy roads was interesting in that it countered the popular narrative that politicians lead a privileged life; instead, he articulated his membership in a shared sensory collectivity that could *feel* the bumps on the road. At the same time, by acknowledging his own unpopularity, KTR took ownership of the bumpy roads while appealing for more patience on behalf of the public.

That this conversation was happening at a highly publicized event that had attracted the gaze of the global elite is important to note. In a few words, KTR enacted a narrative in which he articulated empathy, requested patience, if not outright sympathy, and recognized how the "ordinary Hyderabadi" inhabits the city. In a way, this defensive statement implicitly responded

to the popular image of powerful political elites in the city and their relationship to the roads of the city – rendered memorably in the vignette with Naganna and Siraj that inaugurated this chapter – as not *experiencing* the city like everyone else.

Although the summit lasted for only a few days, taken together, Ivanka Trump's visit, KTR's comment about bumpy roads, and the culturally-intimate humor critiquing the beautification of Hyderabad marked an important moment of the various collective anxieties that informed state-citizen relations in the city congealing. On the one hand, the city was preparing itself for the arrival of a tangible embodiment of a Western gaze[29] and trying to put its best foot forward; on the other hand, arguably the most popular political leader and state official was admitting that the foot was probably going to land in a pothole. The fact that the mundane issue of road surfaces snuck into the glamorous Global Entrepreneurship Summit and made a momentary mockery of the strenuous efforts being made to ready Hyderabad for Ivanka Trump's arrival points to how the experience of road surfaces shaped everyday political commentary; the fact that KTR admitted to the reality of bumpy roads in the presence of media and a multinational audience can be read, as Marco Garrido (2017) argues, as a populist tactic often used by political leaders to curry electoral favor, but it also reveals an imagined audience: the skeptical motorist riding on the bumpy roads of an unequal city.

Let us go return to Naganna, the autorickshaw driver whose discussion initiated the chapter. Naganna was a big fan of TRS and even had a large sticker of KCR (the current chief minister of Telangana and the founder of the political party TRS) on the windshield of the autorickshaw. "I will never get a ticket for this sticker – even though it blocks some of my view," he once told me

29. It is worth noting that, arguably, the imagination of there always being a Western gaze watching India is a chronic source of both resentment and pride. I have shown how this works in the case of traffic policing in chapter 2.

with a wink, quietly hinting at the allowances made by the state to the political party in charge of it. In Naganna's telling, his use of this sticker as a sign of allegiance to the political leaders was akin to insurance against the traffic police "messing with him." Indeed, Naganna was often mocked by Siraj for his steadfast refusal to pay traffic fines. The sticker Naganna had on his windshield was, actually, not that common to see in Hyderabad, which is, perhaps why Naganna believed it would work in his favor as a form of "insurance." After all, as I was reminded time and again, he had connections. The seats of his autorickshaw were also a bright pink – the official color of the party. Naganna *knew important people.*

Naganna would never vote out TRS. He told me that they were the rightful rulers of this state; they had given birth to it.[30] But despite his filial love for KCR and KTR, Naganna laughed irreverently at the story of KTR admitting that there were bad roads in the city, and he grinned widely when I said that some people were mocking KTR for sprucing up the city for Ivanka Trump. Almost fondly, he said, "Politics, that's all." When pressed further, he said to me with an air of irritation,

> When elections come, who will matter? People like me, or Trump's daughter? KCR knows that when elections come, his people will have to come into our *bastis*[31] with lots of goodies and promises. Everyone knows that a few months before the elections, we will have great roads, running water, electricity, and lots of other facilities. That is how it all works – you want something, you have to behave properly. With Ivanka, it is same. With us, also, it is same. It is all politics – that is what I am saying. Roads will magically appear and then magically disappear – just like politician's promises. That is how it is. Sometimes there is benefit, sometimes there is no benefit. Politics *anthe* [Politics, that's all]. (Field Notes, February 2018)

30. KCR had led a hunger strike and mobilized the socio-political movement of self-determination that, after decades of organizing, resulted in the central government agreeing to carve out a part of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh and declaring it the state of Telangana. While the struggle for a separate Telangana has been ongoing since the 1970s, the visible political party leading this charge was TRS which finally led its people to victory in 2014.

31. A "*basti*" is the Hindi word for slum.

Ultimately, this street secret pointed to one plausible conclusion: "Politics, that's all," in all of its temporal unevenness and consistent inconsistencies.

Superficial Engagements? Mobilizing around Smoothness

The understanding of roads as uneven and of poor quality lent itself to public resentment of the state for imposing penalties and fines. The most common type comment posted on the traffic police's Facebook page falls in line with what I would often hear in my conversations with a wide variety of drivers in the city – that the state has no issues with *taking* money from people, in the form of taxes and fines, but it failed when it came to delivering something as basic as good roads. "Why should I pay fines when the roads are so bad," Kareem, an autorickshaw driver, directly asked me during an interview. For her part, Samantha, the manager of a local boutique, told me, "First make proper roads, then nobody will mind paying fines." While is it hard to gauge what *would* happen if roads were in mint condition, the narrative conceptualization of unsatisfactory experiences of roads casting skepticism on the legitimacy of the state in collecting penalties was pervasive in my interviews and interactions with citizens. The experience of potholes, combined with the necessity of paying bribes at several state agencies, hardened suspicions of the state as ever working to the benefit of citizens. As Arif, the taxi driver who explained to me how corruption worked put it:

> But that the authorities won't get their act together and give us the roads we deserve. Are we not paying road tax? They should just give us back all that money. Pay bribes at RTO, pay bribes to police, then suffer these bad roads. On top of this, they impose penalties on people! Now I am a law-abiding citizen, and I pay my fines, bills, taxes – but, sometimes I think, why should I? When the government is not doing its duty, why should I do my duty? (Interview, March 2018)

However, while most of my interlocutors complained about the roads and about state hypocrisy, problem-solving often hit a (metaphorical) roadblock.

While the surface of the road was a concrete terrain on which an abstract concept such as "the state" was experienced, making some kind of change possible was often considered impossible. Corruption is so deep-rooted that trying to solve the issue is not easy, I was often told by many a vexed Hyderabadi. Road safety activists who shared with me their own forays into working with civic bodies would frequently shake their heads with frustration and articulate something I had heard several times before – that working with the GHMC and HMDA was absolutely impossible, as they were not at all open to working with outsiders. The hyper-secrecy of these two civic bodies was a function, they alleged, of corruption within the agency.[32]

Amid a variety of responses elicited by experiences of the road, small groups and individuals emerged to fix local road problems. Although criticized in some camps, by people who wished that more broad, systemic changes would be instigated to weed out corruption from its very roots, as only "surface-level" or "superficial," these efforts nonetheless leveraged humor, trolling, and shaming to effect real, local-level change. Specifically, in early May 2017, a group of youth used cement and concrete to repair a pothole-ridden road in a residential colony in East Marredpally, Secunderabad. Informally naming it "KTR Ivanka Trump Road," some members of this citizen's group stood with placards, as shown in figure 5.5. One of them read, "Neither Ivanka Trump came to this road nor the government repaired this road."

The everyday frustration of the residents in this area was mediated through the lens of mockery and humor, but it unmistakably also laid bare a more mundane feeling of anger at the failure of the urban civic body (GHMC) to respond to repeated complaints made by residents of this neighborhood. In a news story aired by a popular local TV channel, the news anchor

32. The fact that I found it impossible to gain regular access to GHMC and HMDA or do any kind of observational work there was, perhaps, an outcome of the general willingness of these two bodies to let in any outsiders.

commented that the roads in this part of the city were worse than "village roads" and that "KTR-Ivanka Trump road is testimony to the fact that once public swings into action, it can go to any lengths to *teach the government a lesson*" (ABN Telugu 2018).

Figure 5.5. Photos of local citizens' task force working on road repairs to "KTR Ivanka Trump Road," after the Ivanka Trump story came out.
Source: The News Minute (Goode 2018).

Local and national media covered this story, and it began to trend on social media. Indeed, it even made an appearance in the American weekly magazine, *Newsweek*, with the headline, "Ivanka Trump Has Road Named After Her in India As Locals Mock Government Neglect" (Kwong 2018). Within a few days of this story going public, GHMC responded by sending a task force to work on repairing the road – thereby becoming an example of digital "shaming" of the state working to the favor of citizens (*The News Minute* 2018b).

In buying shovels and basic road-laying material – concrete and granite stones – using their own personal savings, these citizens exemplified a political tactic called "*Gandhigiri*" (named after the iconic anti-colonial activist leader, Mahatma Gandhi), which shot to popularity in public culture in 2006, following the success of the Bollywood film *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (remade as *Shankar Dada Zindabad* in Telugu in 2007). Simply put, the film is a romantic comedy about a good-hearted gangster whose approach to solving problems changes after he familiarizes himself

with Gandhi's writings on nonviolent resistance in order to impress the woman he loves. The protagonist of the film shifts from employing "*dadagiri*" – that is, using violent coercion to get one's way – to "*Gandhigiri*," or insisting on using quirky and non-violent pressure tactics to achieve favorable outcomes. A tremendously popular film, especially amongst middle-class publics, it popularized the political efficacy of using persuasive and innovative methods to solve a wide range of issues – from romantic squabbles to corrupt practices amongst state officials.

In a way, both dadagiri and Gandhigiri involve thinking outside the ambit of formal, even recognizable, politics. Dadagiri relies on the use of threat and blackmail, whereas Gandhigiri rests not on political mobilization, social movements, or protest politics but rather on tactics of "guilt-tripping" often done by individuals in specific cases. Under the broad umbrella of "Gandhigiri," the middle class stands united not against any one particular issue but united by a sensibility. Whether or not the film does, in fact, draw from Gandhian philosophy has been a matter of discussion (see Ganesh 2006; Ghosh and Babu 2006), but as Shiv Visvanathan (2006) usefully reminds us, "From distant myth, he [Gandhi] is now part of modern folklore re-engineered in a new role as agony aunt and management consultant. He appears practical, effective, gentle and professional. He is not mystical, religious or political. This new Gandhi is a pragmatic art of life man."[33]

In the film, as in the case of KTR-Ivanka Trump Road, the motivating idea is to eschew both large-scale collective mobilization and illegal, violent, or coercive means of getting one's way in favor of implementing non-violent and *humorous* shaming techniques and mockery to draw

33. The significance is not lost to me of writing this at a time when the figure of Gandhi and everything he stood for is under threat by the spread of a right-wing ideology in India that even valorizes Gandhi's assassin. In a strange way, perhaps the figure of Gandhi as mediated through this film – inoculated by Bollywood and then memorialized by citizen activism –has a better chance of survival than Gandhi's direct legacy.

attention to a problem and to solve it. One journalist termed political tactics like this "trolling for a cause" (Nanisetti 2017). When I asked Kasiram, the police constable who had sent me several news articles pertinent to this story, about this form of protesting, he shrugged and said, "Nowadays *dharna* [striking] and all doesn't work…new-type techniques work." Similarly, and this time drawing a direct comparison with the Telugu version of *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, Kashish, a software engineer who lived in Secunderabad, said to me, "Whoever thought of naming the road 'KTR-Ivanka Trump Road' is a hero. Public won't forget for a long time. It has that kind of effect. The whole idea reminded me of *Shankardada Zindabad*. But if you ask me, it is very sad that ordinary citizens have to do such things to get the government's attention. It is their duty to provide good roads. When it comes to collecting money, they are First World, but when it comes to providing services, suddenly the government becomes Third World."

This particular incident is not the first time that "trolling" has been deployed in relation to road conditions in Hyderabad. Much like the police officials' use of social media and viral videos as discussed in chapter 1, the discussion of road surfaces in the city, too, finds its rightful place in the world of humorous shaming. Perhaps one of the most memorable such social media campaigns was launched in 2017 when a young Congress politician started a "'Pot'ography Contest," calling for submissions of the *best* photos of the *worst* potholes (see figure 5.6).

The contest emerged in the wake of a particular incident that often found its way into every conversation about roads that I had with anyone in Hyderabad: the time in 2016 that the otherwise smooth Necklace Road that hugs the engineered lake in the center of the city was marred by a ten-foot-wide sinkhole (which is the image used in the advert depicted in figure 5.6) during rush hour – revealing a leaky hollowness under the surface. Even though nobody died during the sudden and shocking emergence of the sinkhole, the incident served as a reminder that even *apparently* smooth

roads were not necessarily safe. That a sinkhole is not the same as a pothole is a matter of technicality; the larger point of the "'Pot'ography Contest" was to systematically and categorically shame, or troll, the state.

Figure 5.6. "Pot"ography contest poster circulating on Twitter.
Source: Twitter.

In other cities, too, potholes and eroded surfaces have become the terrain of jokes and humor and, at times, the canvas of artistic expressions. For instance, in 2019, a particularly derelict street in Bangalore became the site of an art installation designed by Baadal Nanjundaswamy, a local artist who "moonwalked" on the "crater" in a spacesuit in order to draw the attention of local civic officials. After this video went viral, the road was repaired by officials.

At other times, it was not humor, but a more earnest engagement with public and civic service that cohered around the surface of roads. The case of sixty-three-year-old Gangadhar Katnam, who is more popularly known as the "road doctor," is but one example. Katnam has a unique relationship to road surfaces in Hyderabad. He keeps bags of tar lumps and gravel with him

in his car at all times so that he can fill up potholes on the road as he spots them. He had, as of mid-2020, personally repaired more than 1,300 potholes. One local news channel did a special show on Katnam and commented that Katnam was "healing" roads. Driving a small hatchback that bearing the words, "Pothole Ambulance," on the back, Katnam accepts the help of one or two college students who often volunteer for him, and he drives around the city looking for potholes to cover. Using a mix of gravel and tar, he fixes potholes as a stopgap measure. While I had thought that Katnam was a local legend of some sort, in reality, few of my interlocutors even knew of him. Some people had heard of him but did not realize he was doing this work in Hyderabad. When I brought these examples up to some of road safety activists with whom I conversed, they often pointed out that, while such efforts were laudable, they were not enough to fix a broken system.

In short, these efforts – Katnam's Pothole Ambulance and KTR-Ivanka Trump road – were just skimming the surface of a complex issue. Katnam himself was quite aware of the way some people perceived his interventions. During an interview, he told me that people tell him that what he is doing is a like putting "Band-Aid on a fracture" – a superficial fix of what is often considered a deeper, systemic governance issue. "But Band-Aids also help, no?" he joked. "That's why they are in the First Aid kit! If more people put Band-Aids, maybe some bleeding will stop." On a more serious note, he added that, with his efforts, he wanted to encourage others to feel a sense of obligation towards the roads and learn to put effort into making the city and the country better and *safer.*

Conclusion

The salience of seeing the infrastructural provision of roads by the state as an ordinary right is most notably captured in Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray's (2011) observation that the political

visibility of the tripartite demand of *roti, kapda, makaan* (food, clothing, shelter) in the pre-liberalization era has now been displaced by the demand for *bijlee, sadak, paani* (electricity, road, water) (1). This, to Baviskar and Ray, is symptomatic of a slow, but steady, edging-out of the voice of the poor and the increasing sonority of the consuming, middle-class citizen in contemporary India.

In this vein, while anthropological writing on electricity provision (Chatterjee 2012; Coleman 2014) and water infrastructures (Anand 2017; Björkman 2015) in Indian cities has discussed the experience of citizenship, regimes of blame and responsibility, and the complex political negotiations that take place around urban infrastructural provision, what has not been granted as much attention is the experience of roads and the political salience of that experience. When discussed, roads are viewed as sites of exclusion and struggle over belonging. For instance, scholarship on Indian cities has pointed out how middle-class aesthetics and imaginations "from above" dominate the ordering of urban streets (Anand 2006; Gopakumar 2020; Srivastava 2014), although scholars have also reminded us that this is a process that meets continuous, and creative, resistance "from below" (Anjaria 2016; Benjamin 2008). At the same time, the surface of the road – its unevenness, bumpiness, the experience of speed – has not met with as much analytical attention. In the context of wider concerns around road safety and urban development, however, paying attention to road surfaces is hardly a choice.

In this chapter, I show how the possibility of death and injury on the road serves as an everyday site at which culpability for the state of disrepair and neglect of the roads is probed, interrogated, and even joked about. I emphasize the usefulness of thinking about driving as offering the possibility to engage with experience as a multi-dimensional process mediated not just by sensual experience but also by fantasy and imaginations of developmental projects. I show how

my interlocutors make sense of the embodied experience of road surfaces in Hyderabad and, in doing so, make judgments about the state's capacity to care, its neglect, its callousness, and its responsibilities.

In moving the gaze of the sociologist from how infrastructures and systems come to be to how they are experienced, how they are talked about, and how they are imagined in everyday life, I call attention to how ordinary Hyderabadis experience the state power, authority, and provision. Through a discussion of deaths caused by potholes, speed bumps, and smooth roads, I demonstrate how the onus of road safety and the burden of responsibility oscillate between falling on the individual and on the state. I argue that examining the experience of bumpy road surfaces in Hyderabad facilitates a deeper understanding of the state as inconsistent and that the unequal doling out of infrastructural care does not go unnoticed by those navigating the city. Instead, they become generative – and surprising – sites of political commentary and critique. In the context of the growth of mega-infrastructure projects that purport to transport Hyderabad into a league of world-class cities, I argue that the state and the citizen are configured as coming in the way of road safety and that neither is presumed to be on a moral high ground.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

> "I want to ask the government, 'Why should I pay more money in fines?' So much traffic, so many vehicles, and my back is breaking because of the bad roads. So much smoke in the air that I am sure my lungs have turned black! First the government should fix roads, solve the problem of traffic jams, and then they should be allowed to issue challan. The government only knows how to take our money, police only know how to harass public. Why they are only after [our] money? Nobody catches the politicians who swindle crores of money, nobody catches the policemen who take bribes, but just because it is easy to catch a person like me, I should pay?"
>
> – Naganna, an autorickshaw driver

Late in July 2019, the Parliament of India passed several amendments to the Motor Vehicles Act, which governs the ownership and movement of all motor vehicles in the country. In proposing modifications to sixty-three of the amendments in this act that all came into force on September 1, 2019, Nitin Gadkari, the Minister of Road Transport and Highways, pointed to increasing motorization and India's dismal record with road crashes as being the key motivations for implementing such changes, which he considered appropriate for addressing the current technological, financial, and epidemiological conditions of Indian road traffic. While the law encompassed several changes,[1] the most prominent – and controversial – piece of this legislative change in public discourse was the steep increase in penalties for traffic violations.

Under the new amendments, some of the penalties have been increased fivefold or even tenfold. Some of the most significant are penalties of ₹10,000 (up from ₹2,000) for drunken driving, ₹5,000 (up from ₹1,000) for rash driving, ₹5,000 (up from ₹500) for driving without license, ₹2,000 (up from ₹400) for over-speeding, and ₹1,000 (up from ₹100) for not wearing a

1. Please see Amit Bhatt's (2019) article for a detailed discussion of the other changes.

seat belt or helmet. The steep increases in penalties were justified as being consistent with the basic purpose of a penalty – to deter rule-breaking – and with bringing India one step closer to road safety. The increase in fines, it was argued by the transport ministry, would scare people into becoming law obedient and would, thus, reduce road crashes and ensuing deaths and injuries.

This move was also a symbolic one. It communicated a commitment on the part of the state to taking road safety seriously and to participating in a long-term reform effort of people's attitudes towards traffic laws. As with other "bold"[2] measures that are often associated with the central government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), this change was championed as indicative of precisely the kind of unflinching leadership that the country needed to build a better future for itself. The state, as Bhoomika Joshi and I argue elsewhere (2019), in leading the way towards "safer roads," took on the role of a caring parent by articulating the following narrative: we need to penalize you for your own safety. By this logic, the severity of traffic fines would make traffic rules seem less like "mere suggestions," lending more forcefulness to the enforcement of the law with the stiffer penalties attached to their violation, ultimately resulting in a safer public that would feel grateful to the state for their harshness and strictness.

At the same time, in spite of this rosy official discourse being churned out by agents of the state of fines promoting safety, much like collisions on the road, these amendments resulted in fierce clashes of opinion, particularly around the issue of the harsh increase in penalties. While the hike in fines did not face as much opposition in the Indian Parliament, it was on the streets meant to be governed by these new laws that one saw the sharp polarization of public opinion emerge.

2. BJP's political popularity has hinged on the promise of delivering bold and decisive leadership. Its leader, Prime Minister of India Narenda Modi, has been likened to a lion, especially salient in the popular slogan, "The lion returns," which was used in celebrations all across India following his return to power in 2019. His association with a lion is particularly striking considering that the long-standing animal analogy used with reference to India's growth and development has been the slow-moving elephant.

On the one hand, there was vocal support for the increase in penalties, which often regurgitated the disciplinary rationale espoused by the law. Several commentators pointed to the inefficacy of previous penalties as justification for increasing them, and most of the argumentation from this end was in agreement with the state's logic – that only fear worked in altering behavior of the *typical Indian driver*. As one national newspaper provocatively put it, these hikes in fines would finally "change the way India drives" (*The Economic Times* 2019a). Editorials and debates, especially in the English media, reminded the country that high fines were a disciplining tactic – but one the country sorely needed for the sake of public safety. Statistics proved useful in crafting the narrative of urgency – as they often do in the discursive construction of social problems.

On the other hand, there was growing opposition to the increased fines that pointed to the classed implications of pecuniary punishments.[3] The argument was simple: these fines were inappropriate for a country that is largely poor. That is, the state was out of touch with *realities on the ground.* News reports from all over the country began to demonstrate ways in which working-class drivers were being affected adversely by the fines. For instance, news broke that a truck driver in New Delhi who earned a monthly income of ₹12,000 ($160) had to pay over ₹2 lakh ($2,675) for various penalties like overloading the truck, driving without a valid license, driving without a permit or insurance, not wearing a seatbelt while driving, and so on (*The Economic Times* 2019b). Similarly, several instances surfaced in the media in which motorists lamented the amount of pending penalties as exceeding the value of the vehicle itself that they drove (Bhatnagar 2019). One implication of increasing the fines, then, was the production (or perhaps, validation) of the figure of an *esurient state* that wished to extract money from its hapless citizens. That within

3. In an article published by the Observer Research Foundation, Jha (2019) argues that, while the rupee has depreciated about ten times over the past 30 years, there has not been a corresponding rise in earnings among the poor.

the first five days of the law coming into force all over the country almost $2 million was collected by the police in just *two* states became cited widely as unequivocal evidence of its economic motives (Tanwar 2019).

Another prominent argument against the new laws was rooted, quite simply, in *skepticism about its enforcers*, the traffic police. Some alleged that graft amongst the traffic police was going to increase in response to the new penalties, as drivers would now be more likely to bribe police officials, rather than pay the hefty fines. A similar line of argument also pointed to the lack of *consistency* in policing and contended that the effects of new penalties would be more acutely felt by populations already under the lopsided police scanner, namely poorer motorists.

But an equally vocal criticism pitted one image of the state versus another; it rebuffed the punitive state by pointing to the *lack of state provision*. The argument went that the state could not, in good faith, impose high fines when its own performance, in terms of providing robust public transportation systems, good road infrastructure, adequate parking, and corruption-free and systematic training of drivers, had been so sorely lacking (see *India Today* 2019; Jha 2019). Relatedly, others criticized the state for hypocrisy. Figure 6.1 depicts a popular tweet made by a young congressional politician who charged the government, “One can’t levy Scandinavian-level fines for African-level infrastructure.”

Figure 6.1. A popular tweet critiquing high traffic fines in India.
Source: Twitter.

Within ten days of the law's implementation, and in response to growing reports of discontent with these new penalties, Youth Congress workers in New Delhi staged a particularly large protest outside Nitin Gadkari's house – a protest in which they termed these new laws a "murder of democracy" (*India Today* 2019). Some of the protestors tried to hurl motorcycles and mopeds at the police, who had put up barricades around the minister's house and were trying to control the crowd of protestors. Similar protests against the penalties began to unravel in several cities across the country. While these protests were sporadic, a more consistent skepticism grew in editorials published in newspapers and in comments posted to discussion forums on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Quora.

While time and again Nitin Gadkari released statements to clarify that the increase in penalties was *not* a revenue-generating tactic by the state, the very fact that he was prompted to continue explaining this claim pointed to a lack of conviction among the general public that the state was indeed acting in good faith. Despite his attempts to reframe the conversation by alleging

that those whose consciences were clear were not the ones protesting – implying that those who did not break rules had nothing to worry about – the criticism of the increasing penalties was loud and clear, as seen in figures 6.2 and 6.3.

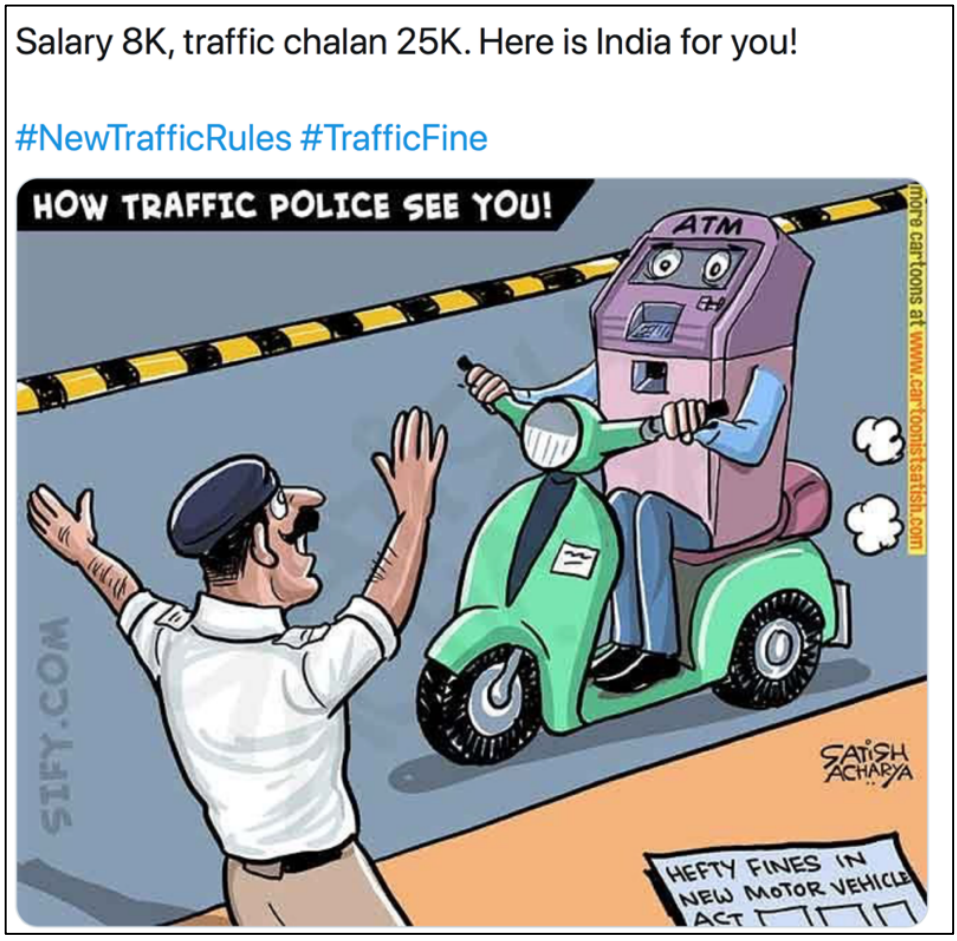

Figure 6.2. Example A of a popular tweet circulated in the wake of the new traffic penalties.
Source: Illustration by Satish Acharya shared on Twitter.

Figure 6.3. Example B of a popular tweet circulated in the wake of the new traffic penalties.
Source: Twitter.

As the unpopularity of this legislation began to gain more visibility in the media, several states began to voice skepticism about the usefulness of the new fines. Some states decided to delay (indefinitely) the implementation of the revised penalties and appointed committees to look into the validity of the new fines. Some, like West Bengal, more vehemently opposed the new penalties, claiming that they were too "harsh," and others, like Telangana, pledged to not implement the law since they did not want to "harass"[4] citizens in the name of road safety. The emerging consensus amongst the states seemed to be that the penalties were not *fair* to citizens. Even some BJP-ruled states, such as Gujarat, implemented the revised penalties, but only after

4. This was the phrasing used by K. Chandrasekhar Rao, Telangana's Chief Minister.

slashing them by 90% – thereby defeating the whole purpose of the increase in fines.[5] The whole situation was summed up pithily in an article by Jha (2019) published by the Observer Research Foundation, in which he crispy concluded that India, as always, "over-legislates and under-implements."

That states had, in fact, overwhelmingly *supported* the increase in fines when the legislation was initially being drafted and passed in Parliament (Choudhury 2019) and then decided to not implement it in their own states after seeing the popular pushback it received just goes to show how politically risky these new penalties were perceived to be. Further, the fact that the central government continued to insist that states must follow the new penalties for the sake of road safety, yet could not manage to get even the states being governed by majority-BJP leadership to do so, revealed how the issue of traffic fines put political allegiances to test.

Exasperated road safety experts lamented that the political furor around the fines had deflected attention away from the "real" issue, namely, driving habits. Meanwhile, some middle-class editorials decried the entire issue as having been "unnecessarily" politicized, saying that the whole point of the high penalties – road safety – had, once again, been forgotten. As a road safety activist from Pune, who was very much in support of the high fines, said to me over the phone, "The issue was about making people drive better. Fines were supposed to instill fear in our drivers, but look what has happened! Full confusion. Typical of India. The government starts with a noble intention, and before you know it, it becomes, you know, *political*. In this case, the focus was supposed to be driving, but it has become about *something else* altogether."

5. Since motor vehicle regulation comes under the purview of both state and central governments, although states can refuse to implement some parts of the act, they have to implement others. In the case of traffic penalties, while the penalties attached to compoundable offences were something with which individual states could tinker, non-compoundable offences (ones that involve showing up at court) would attract the fines laid down by the central government amendments.

This dissertation's central claim is that paying close attention to this *something else* is imperative to understanding state-citizen relations in contemporary India.[6] Attending to this, I suggest, is critical if we are to make sense of *how* citizens relate to state authority. In a sense, then, my data makes sense of the pushback against these fines not as a knee-jerk reaction or a product of electoral politics alone but rather as the outcome of simmering and long-standing, durable relations between citizens and the state. The twists and turns of the law's journey on the rugged terrain of Indian politics are but a reminder that the seemingly quotidian and "apolitical" act of driving is implicated in complex questions of legitimacy, justice, responsibility, morality, development, and national aspiration.

6. Some might argue that the fizzling-out of this law and the blunting of its punitive force were simply outcomes of electoral politics. That is, political leaders in various states did not want to risk their electoral popularity. That is, in fact, what happened, but it still does not quite address the core issue at play: why did political leaders in each state anticipate the unpopularity of the high fines?

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