

An Offense and a Penalty

Traffic rule violations are as common as traffic jams in Bangalore. Sometimes, it will be an odd case of drunken driving or jumping a halt signal. However, most of the times it will be the fundamental offense of not having the correct vehicle documents while on the road.

I was watching a jammed road through one of my laboratory windows. Two traffic cops were on duty, trying to smoothen it. After about five minutes vehicles started to move. One of the two cops stopped an auto rickshaw and asked for documents. The rickshaw driver showed his driver's license, emission certificate and the vehicle's RC book. All seemed to be OK. The cop asked him to show the vehicle insurance papers. The driver did not have one. He pleaded guilty and swore that he would get it done the same day.

The cop was ready to accept a hundred rupee note and let the driver go. Suddenly, he turned to my window and saw me staring at them. He appeared to have a quick change of heart and refused his regular income. Instead, he wrote a slip for Rs 1000/-, which was the actual amount as penalty for not carrying a valid vehicle insurance certificate.

The auto rickshaw driver did not have so much to offer. He had to leave the vehicle with the cops. On his way, he turned to my window and showed his thousand-rupee slip. His face read, "Are you happy?"

Was I happy? Good heavens...I was just an onlooker.

Was I happy that 'because of me' the cop could say no to his habit and say yes to his duty?

Was I unhappy that 'because of me' the driver had to pay one thousand rupees instead of one hundred?

Was I thinking of a system in which the cop could have penalized the driver and in addition helped him to get the insurance done? A defunct penalty is as good as its effective counterpart in an ignorant, opportunistic offense.

K G Srikanta Dani

January 29th, 2008