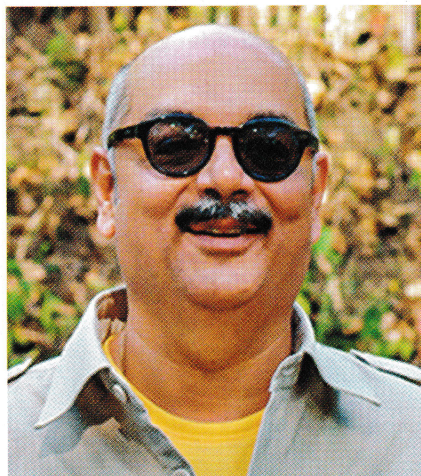


S ometime back I had written about how the police need to reintroduce fear of law and deal firmly with those who flout all traffic rules fearlessly. In August this year, traffic head constable Vilas Shinde stopped a young biker in Mumbai as he was riding without a helmet and a licence. The youngster called his brother who arrived at the spot and mercilessly beat the constable with a stick. The severely injured Shinde was admitted to hospital where he later died. Shinde's death caused a huge uproar, and parts of Mumbai city even shut down for his funeral. Top politicians and police officials met the victim's family and offered their sympathies. Compensation was also announced and the culprits arrested and put behind bars. But no minister or government official said that "attacks on the police will not be tolerated, and anyone who attacks a policeman will be dealt with in the fiercest manner possible". The state police chief Satish Mathur issued a warning that those taking the law into their own hands would be dealt with severely. But the police commissioner of Mumbai city did not make any strong statement or send out a message that you cannot mess with law enforcers and get away. Instead joint police commissioner (traffic) Milind Bharambe in a circular to his department said, "Traffic police will penalise offenders only in the presence of city police and avoid taking action on their own." This is truly shocking and unacceptable. In effect what you are saying to offenders is — our traffic police are scared that if we catch you for committing any offence, you will attack us. So we will not be stopping you, unless we are accompanied by the city police.

Everybody knows the city police force is understaffed, and a large number of them are wastefully occupied in providing security to incompetent politicians and various film stars and businessmen. And now the joint police commissioner (traffic) wants them to provide security to his people. If the police feel unsafe on our streets, then what about ordinary people like us? In fact, the policemen's wives are also fearful about sending their men out to do their duty, and many of them went to our politicians seeking security for them. But no party came out and said our political workers will assist the traffic



Bob Rupani

bob@overdrive.co.in

Traffic offenders rule in Mumbai because traffic cops are scared to stop and catch them

police. No one said don't you dare lift a hand on them or you will be severely punished. When they have to score political points, party workers are only too happy to go around beating up innocent people and damaging public and private property. But when it's time to stand by our traffic police, the response has been disappointing to say the least.

All this has completely demoralised the lower rung policemen who are the foot soldiers facing such attacks. Many of them have apparently taken to the WhatsApp platform to vent their frustrations at lack of support and action from their superiors and politicians. A leading newspaper recently published this WhatsApp message sent by a traffic constable: "Senior IPS officers sit in their air-conditioned cabins and offer tea and biscuits to politicians who abuse and even attack policemen." And even as I write this, offenders continue to attack the police on an almost daily basis.

In such a sad situation, what should actually happen is that the police commissioner, joint commissioner etc. should come out and state in no

uncertain terms that "nobody can lift their hands on the police and get away easily". The chief minister should also speak up strongly for the police and issue immediate orders to arm the traffic police with handguns. He should also make public announcements authorising the police to use the guns if attacked.

Unfortunately, none of this has happened, and now even in a city like Mumbai, there is no fear of law. As a result, more and more traffic offenders are going unpunished. Reports show that in January this year, some 2.5 lakh motorists were booked for traffic offences in Mumbai. The figure for September is in the region of 70,000, a drastic drop. From my daily experience of driving in the city, we should easily be catching and punishing well over 5 lakh traffic offenders every month. Tragically, instead of

increasing the number of traffic offenders punished, our traffic police are letting most of them getaway scot-free. If this continues, the chaos and anarchy on our streets will cross all limits and result in more accidents, deaths, injuries and cases of road rage.

In a recent development, the Mumbai Police launched the CCTV challan system, with 4,717 CCTV cameras that will keep a watch on Mumbai's streets. At the launch event, Mumbai police commissioner Datta Padsalgikar supposedly said, "There is no need for you to look for a traffic constable at a junction before breaking traffic rules. Our cameras will click you in the act." Apparently, if the traffic cops monitoring the camera feed see a traffic offense being committed, they will note the registration number, get the owner's vehicle registration details from RTO records, and then forward the e-challan to the offender's cell phone via SMS. Mentioned in this SMS will be a link to the traffic police website where the fine can be paid using debit and credit cards. Will this help? Hopefully it will. But 'fear of law' will not happen without boots on the ground. 