

**A**fter reading harrowing accounts of the atrocities on Delhi's cycle rickshaw pullers and owners in MANUSHI (Issues 125,126,134 & 135); I wish to share with your readers similar traps set for the autorickshaw sector by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. The situation is likely to be the same in other states of India. Autorickshaw-wallas in Medak district where I work, say that Chandrababu Naidu lost the elections because he introduced the rule that no autorickshaws should be allowed on national highways. Given the geography of the area, it is not possible to go anywhere unless you cross the national highway. This ban implies that the highways are meant only for moneyed people with big cars and heavy vehicles. Does the Government expect low income citizens, especially those from rural areas to simply disappear?

My experience of this rural area has included some interesting encounters with owners of autorickshaws, pick-up vans, tractors and even bullock cart drivers. I must say that the last vehicle has proven the most useful and the least bothersome, since no bureaucratic permissions are required to own it. Unfortunately, the bullock cart is not the answer to the problems of the many jobless young and elderly rural men, who need some means to generate an income.

I have often been approached by young men in the villages for loans to buy them an autorickshaw, so they could make a living by using it as a transport vehicle. Initially, I bought them used vehicles but found that the cost of repairs needed for these vehicles was more than what was earned from driving them. The people to be transported in these areas do not have much cash and so they have to load 10-15 people into an autorickshaw to cover the petrol/diesel costs and to make some profit for their sustenance. Later I bought a

new petrol driven pick-up van and finally last year a new diesel driven autorickshaw, which earns upto Rs. 200 - 300 per day.

But what fills me with anger is the way the Road Transport Officers (RTOs) as well as the police treat these young, mostly illiterate, men, penalizing them for the smallest of offences, because they are vulnerable, with meager earnings on which to support large families.



The example of Ashok, son of Pandu, is illustrative of the harassment poor autorickshaw drivers face at the hands of officialdom. I purchased a new autorickshaw for Ashok in August 2004. It cost more than a lakh of rupees. In order to make a living and repay the capital, Ashok needed to start plying his vehicle at the earliest. As RTOs are notorious for taking a long time to process documents and people like Ashok and Pandu, being illiterate, find it difficult to complete the formalities required, they decided to approach an agent who helps prepare the documents for the RTO at Sangareddy. He, of course, charges a fee for his assistance. After buying the vehicle, Maruti, the local agent who helps with documentation, did all the paper work and submitted it to the RTO office in Sangareddy.

## Readers' Forum

When Ashok's vehicle papers reached the RTO's office at Zahirabad, where they were to be processed, the official in-charge was least interested in processing the files. Since the papers (permit, vehicle number plate, driving license, etc.) were taking too long, Ashok started driving the vehicle with the provisional papers provided to him by Maruti. Yet, the local RTO inspector one day fined Ashok a hefty sum of Rs. 4,000 and confiscated his vehicle. Pandu went and immediately paid the cash for the *challan* at the head office, entailing travel of at least 100 km, from Zahirabad to Sangareddy and back, to the bank and to get the *challan* and submit it to the RTO.

This officer-in-charge did not sign the *challan*, but asked Pandu to come again to pick up the papers which he would have to submit at the police station in Zahirabad, 50 km from Sangareddy in order to get back the autorickshaw.

When I heard of all this I immediately telephoned Mr. Reddy, an officer of the same department whom I knew personally, so that the matter could be expedited. He was, as usual, very polite to me and asked me to send Pandu the next day to pick up the papers. He insisted that he had cleaned up the system and allowed no agents to operate in his office and Pandu should not have given the papers to touts like Maruti. I was sceptical about his assurances as the evidence was that Pandu had run around and yet had been unable to get his work done. So I went with Pandu to the RTO office in Sangareddy and quietly observed what was happening in the office. Needless to say, Mr. Reddy was rude

to Pandu accusing him of making needless complaints and saying that he had lots of other work to do. It was obvious that the disorganized state of affairs in the RTO office as well as the disregard for the predicament of people like Pandu, are responsible for the endless delays and make it impossible for people like Ashok to abide by the law.

Subsequently, I also made it a point to go and meet the inspection officer at the Zahirabad office. When I asked him why he had not given Ashok one chance before fining him a devastating sum of Rs. 4,000, he told me that his bosses had made it mandatory for him to collect lakhs of

rupees every day by way of fines. So RTOs collect huge fines from all the big trucks and other vehicles that cross the border.

Let me add the latest incident regarding this autorickshaw: Mahendar, the boy who is driving the autorickshaw these days, came to me early one morning, informing me that the police constable in Kohir police station tried forcing Mahendar to take him around during the night without even paying for the diesel. When Mahendar tried to resist this demand saying that he was not feeling well, had fever and had already driven the concerned police officer through the night on an

earlier occasion, the policeman confiscated his steppney. He was also threatened that his autorickshaw would be confiscated. When I went to the police station the next morning and asked the Assistant Sub-Inspector on what legal basis they were demanding this sort of service from the autorickshaw-wallas and threatened to report it to the higher officials, they quietly returned the steppney. They responded in this manner only because I am well educated and well connected. The question remains, how are ordinary citizens without "connections" to resist such tyranny?

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