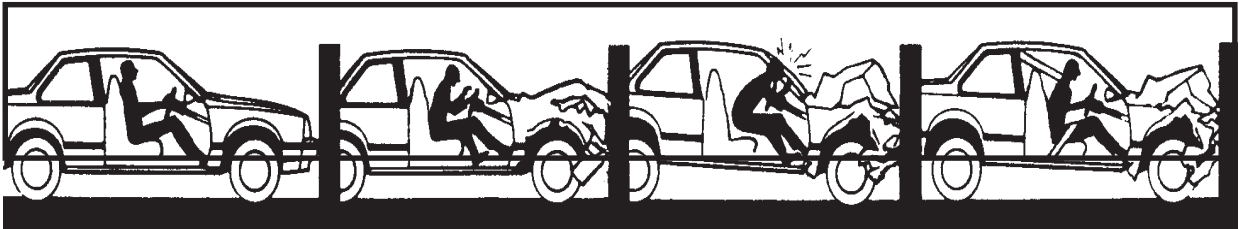


Death by Oversight

Plea For Road Safety

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How does it feel to be told that if only your car had seat belts fitted to it, your twenty-six year old son and twenty-two year old daughter-in-law would be alive today? What would you do if you were told this? Would you bow down in acceptance before the Hindu priest when he said that it could not be otherwise, because it was destined to be so? It was destined that this couple, who had been married but nine months, would be out on the road between Alwar and Delhi, at that exact moment near ten at night. It was fated that the government, in its wisdom, called a narrow stretch of road, running through villages, a national highway and then forgot to enforce the minimum traffic rules on it. It was ordained that the tractors, that fitted themselves with trolleys and plied on that road, would have no warning tail lights. It followed that the car would collide with one such tractor trolley, in the dark, and the youngsters would die. And, of course, it was pre-ordained that the government of our country would be wiser than any other. It would, therefore, not legislate that cars be fitted with seat belts as a necessary safety measure. It might be obligatory to wear seat belts in the

other countries, which have wider, better regulated and lane divided highways, so what? They did not believe in

destiny. They were not wise like us. How could our government have made seat belts compulsory, for if it had, would not my son and daughter have had them in their car and lived, when they were destined to die?

She had the classic steering wheel injury, the doctor told me, he had been thrown forward with the impact, breaking his cervical vertebrae, and damaging his vibrant brain. Both could have escaped with minor injuries if only the car had seat belts. Such an ordinary thing separating life from death, a pair of seat belts! How much do they cost? A mere two percent of the cost of a car, if that. But why should we bother about safety devices. We believe in destiny, do we not? The government may, in its wisdom, do away with car headlights next. After all, if tractors dragging long deadly trolleys can ply without tail lights, why not cars without headlights. That would be true democracy, Indian style.

Do you want me to tell you what it feels like to be asked to excuse a callous administration for its

negligence of road safety, because it was fated that my young and beloved son and daughter would die? No, forget it. I do not want to burden you with my grief. Let me ask you a question instead. If you were an administrator and it were your children who had died, because you did not have the sense or concern to ensure that cars be fitted with seat belts, how would you feel? Would you be able to live in peace, with the cliché that whatever will be, will be? The administrators are, after all, men and women of flesh and blood, even if they appear as faceless beings to us. They, too, must have children of their own. If I was an administrator, would I ever forgive myself, if my children were crushed to death on a highway, where I allowed tractors, trucks, bullock carts and cars to ply in the same lane, day and night, without safety devices or warning lights? How can I be expected to forgive the faceless men then. But for the moment, just tell me this, I have to know. How would you feel if you were told that, even though your young son and daughter had died because of a callous traffic administration, you must not grieve because it was destined to be so? □