

Reclaiming Bengaluru from its road to rage

The deeper problem is a steady slide into needless, unthinking aggression.

Dalhia Mani

Bengaluru used to feel like a slice of heaven—and in many ways, it still does. A benign climate, abundant opportunities, an ease for dual-career couples, first access to entrepreneurial ideas, parks everywhere, and a culture of simple living and high thinking. Even Bengaluru's millionaires are unassuming and generous. Like all great cities, Bengaluru's finest feature remains its people. There have been countless instances when native Bengalureans have switched to my mother tongue on hearing my valiant but clumsy Kannada—a quiet kindness I've come to associate with this city.

But that grace is fading, and nowhere is this more visible than on the roads. This is not merely about potholes, unmarked speed breakers, construction debris and materials spilling onto streets, or the stray barricades dropped on a busy lane—though none of these help.

The deeper problem is a steady slide into needless, unthinking aggression.

Drivers rear-end others and insist it is not their fault; barrel down one-ways in the wrong direction while flashing abuse; double-park, blind oncoming traffic with high beams, and honk incessantly—all without the faintest sense that they are inconveniencing and endangering everyone, themselves included. Small gestures that keep a society sane—a quick thank-you for letting someone change lanes or making way for another car on a narrow street—are vanishing.

This spiral must be arrested before the city is swallowed by rage. Many factors are at play, but one structural reason stands out. It is an open secret that driving instructors often take the test on behalf of learners. The result is a city full of licensed drivers who have never actually taken a driving test, do not understand blind spots, and cannot see why parking at an intersection endangers everyone.

The most obvious fix would be to make everyone retake the written driver's test. But adding yet another bureaucratic hoop to a long-suffering city is cruel. Besides, if such an initiative were ever introduced, it would likely end with people staring helplessly at a frozen government website flashing "Server error 4690" no matter what we type, until we give up and pay a broker to "help us get the certificate"—which is exactly how we got here in the first place.

So, in true Bengaluru style, let us tackle a public problem with a private solution—by starting with ourselves. Here's a simple 15-question test to help reflect honestly on whether we might be part of the problem. A brief self test:

Have you ever—

Rear-ended someone and then argued loudly that it is their fault?

Parked more than a foot away from the kerb?

Parked within five feet of an intersection?

Double-parked?

Left the hazard lights on to justify some illegal parking activity?

Argued with a traffic police officer who is trying to fine you for something illegal that you have done?

Gone, even a foot, the wrong way on a one-way?

Changed lanes without checking your blind spot?

Driven through a red light, treating it as a friendly suggestion rather than a strict rule?

Honked more than five times in any 60-second window?

Driven at night with a full beam on a fully lit city street?

Started a roadside argument and then insisted that they speak in Hindi?

Blocked a full lane of traffic due to your actions?

Believed it is a status symbol if a child drives the family car? Paid someone to help your child pass the driving test?

Scoring:

If you have answered 'Yes' to more than four of these questions, you are a menace to society. Please relocate to a place without roads or vehicles. Society is not suitable for you.

If you have answered 'Yes' to two to four of these questions, you are part of the problem—but there is still hope. Watch a few videos on basic driving rules, take a mock written test, and return as a roadworthy human being.

All others: You have stayed true despite much aggravation and idiocy all around you. Give yourself a pat. You are one of the good guys.

(The writer is a professor of entrepreneurship at IIM Bangalore)

Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH.