

My Driving Master

A Story of Everyday Trespasses

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Driving Master

“Lal, Suhail Lal”, he said, when I asked him his name at the end of my first driving lesson. It almost seemed like the classic ‘Bond, James Bond’!

Frankly, I wasn't impressed with him. In fact, I was going to wait for a couple of sessions before I would complain to the manager of the driving school and ask him to change my driving master.

Lal hails from a village in Uttar Pradesh. As a Bombayite (now Mumbaiite), I have my suspicions and scepticisms about UPites, *bhaiyyas*, as they are commonly known. People from Mumbai despise the *bhaiyyas*, even though all of ‘us’ travel together with ‘them’ in the luggage compartments of Mumbai’s local trains and discuss BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) politics, and the price of milk and vegetables. Yes, we tolerate all kinds of people in Mumbai (though we have started to become intolerant and are now confused about who is actually a Mumbaiite and who is not); we accept outsiders in our fold. But we are generally intolerant of the *bhaiyyas* and (more so) the Biharis, even though it is the *bhaiyyas* who have given us our *bhel puri* and *pani puri* culture! However, as my favourite author Theodore Zeldin says in his book *An Intimate History of Humanity*, “Toleration is never enough. You have to get inside people’s minds to understand them”.

Lal seems an offensive guy. But gradually I begin to know him, and laugh and talk with him everyday; he appears less offensive, and more like a cunning rat who has his strategies very clearly in place. He knows how to dodge the manager, how to deal with his students. He is clearly able to assess which student is hopeless, and which one is more likely to grasp the ropes and carry on driving. And he has very carefully examined and rationalised in his mind the fluid boundaries between legality and illegality, and he knows which of these he can trespass, and when.

Learning to Drive a Car (and in the Process, Learning about Trespassing, Lane Cutting and Getting by Laws and Lawlessness Everyday)

A few days after I have grasped the basics, I am very eager to drive over one of the city’s famous flyovers. This is the ultimate dream of all driving novices!

“*Nahin* (No), you are not allowed to drive there as a learner with this driving school”, Lal

tells me decisively, adding, "As a learner from this branch of the school, you cannot drive beyond a certain geographical limit because thereafter there are severe traffic jams, and in case you get nervous and are unable to start the car in time during the jam, you will cause hazard to the public. Traffic cops get irritated with this and have issued strict instructions telling us not to allow students from this branch of the school to drive beyond a certain point".

I have no choice but to comply. When you don't know what to do, simply follow the rules.

A few days later, Lal and I were driving in familiar by-lanes. He started talking to me. "Yesterday, the boss instructed me to take this car and go over to the other branch of the school for some delivery and pick-up. I told the boss that the *havaladar* (chief constable) would take my licence if he sees me in this car going past the area which we are not allowed to trespass. Boss told me, '*Beta, tu jaa* (Son, you go)'. So I went, taking the route of that famous flyover. There was no problem. But when I was coming back, just at the start of the flyover, the cop caught me and asked me to hand over my licence to him. I smiled. He said, '*Kya hua?* (What happened)?' I laughed and said, '*Aaj tum yeh licence mere paas se le rahe ho. Kal tumhi isko wapas doge* (Today you are taking this licence away from me. Tomorrow you will be the one to return it back to me)'. The cop was furious. I didn't care. I just drove off. The next day, the same cop came and gave my licence back to me, apologising to my boss".

Later, Lal explained the process to me. The driving school and the traffic police have a "good relationship and understanding" between them. Each new officer gets acquainted with the school and knows how the relationship works (or 'operates, you can say). "The boss is adept at maintaining this level of public relations with the Traffic Police Department because, after all, it is a matter of his business. I have no details of how far their relations go, but at least I am certain that these relations have been there for long. After all, this is a very reputed school and even the children of police officers come to this school to take driving lessons".

Driving and Conversations Continue...

Days passed, and I made progress. Lal had many stories to tell me from years of accumulated experiences. One day he regaled me with a choice account. "I never lose my temper with the *havaldars*. In fact, I rarely lose my temper. But there was one occasion when I could not hold myself back. A senior inspector's daughter enrolled for lessons. I was to train her. We would go in areas forbidden by jurisdiction for the school and drive there (obviously, because she was the senior man's daughter). One day, a cop from the department stopped the car as we were driving in the forbidden area. He warned us not to come in there, and then let us go off. I did not pay heed to his words. Again we ventured into that same area on that very day. This time he not only stopped the car, but asked me to step out. Then he held me by my collar and said, '*Ek baar bola to samajh mein nahi aata hai tumko? Licence le loon kya* (Don't you understand when I have already warned you once? Should I take away your licence)?"

"I got angry because he had held me by my collar. I shouted back at him, '*Tumko malum nahi hai yeh kaun hai warna tum is tarah se bartaav nahi karta. Yeh tumhare baap ki beti hai!* (You don't know who she is and hence you are behaving like this with me. She is your father's daughter)!" In the meanwhile, the *beti* (daughter) had already phoned her father on her mobile. Her father asked her to stay right there with me, assuring her that he was coming to the site immediately. In no time, he was there, and as soon as the cop saw his senior, he went wet in

his trousers. The senior inspector told the cop, 'She is my daughter and he is her teacher'. Then he turned towards both of us and said, 'You continue driving in this area for as long as you want. In fact, you should be around in this area for the rest of the tutorials. Let me see who attempts to stop you!'"

One day, I was telling Lal about my visits to Delhi and how I had not liked that city much. He responded that no city was bad in itself. Rather, one's 'good' or 'bad' experience depends on one's ability to adjust with people there. Gradually, Lal started talking about the Mumbai locals (mainly the Maharashtrians) and how these people are puny and cannot perform physical labour. I began to understand a little bit about a *bhaiyya's* contempt and prejudice against the Marathi *manus* (man).

The next day we continued with the same discussion. Lal started talking about *havalgars*. I know he hates them and considers them to be leeches. He said calmly, with a sense of detachment, "Look at these *havalgars*. *Haraam ki khate hain* (they survive on illegal gains)! They go to the market places and start ransacking the stalls of the hawkers, showing off their authority. The poor stall owner will keep pleading, '*Sahib, sahib* (Sir, sir)', but they won't care two hoots. The *havalgars* will then round up the hawkers and put them all in a van, saying that higher authorities have called for them. At one point, they will stop the van and start asking the poor hawkers and vendors, 'Give us whatever you have, hundred rupees, twenty-five bucks, anything, and we will let you go!' The poor hawker gives everything he has earned in the day. These leeches will die for the ten bucks from the hawker. *Haraam ki khate hain, saale!* (Rascals, they earn illegally)!"

Lal stopped for a while and took out a packet of *paan masala*, tucked a wad of it into his lower jaw. I was thinking over his words. He continued, "Have you ever seen the way these cops evict the hawkers? They will come and beat these poor guys up. They will throw the goods around and completely destroy the stalls".

Porous Authorities and Legalities: Lal's Tricks and Tactics!

During my last few driving sessions, Lal spoke of how he deals with the authorities in the driving school. "Too many students these days. But the school is constantly taking in more and more students. *Aaj subah, maine manager se baat ki* (This morning, I spoke with the manager). I told him that I want to quit this job. The manager asked me, '*Beta*, what will you do if you leave?' I told the manager that I was interested in acquiring a job as a driver for a company or an executive".

I was a trifle surprised and said to Lal, "Sir, will you really leave this job and drive for a private company?" "No", he replied coolly, continuing, "Do you think I am going to leave this job? I am illiterate. What more can I do? The idea is to give a *hool* (scary threat) to the manager. He will feel intimidated and will ease your duties for some days. He will not assign any more students to me. In this way, every once in a while, you must issue a *hool* to the manager. *Is tarah, woh shaant ho jata hai, thanda ho jata hai* (In this way, he quiets down and cools off). Sometimes it is good to give *hool* to the manager, and sometimes it helps to go directly to the *seth* (boss). You have to know who to approach and when".

So, while the boss has the higher authority, like the senior police officer who has the beat constables and the *havalgars* at his command, he is at times helpless before his very employees!

On the last day of my driving session, Lal asked me to drive into the by-lanes of Nagpada, amidst the congested slums and the crowded streets. At one point, he asked me to halt the car and trotted off to a *paan* shop. After a while, he came back and instructed me to drive past. "Did you want to have tea?" he asked me. "No, I am fine. But why do you ask? Are you treating me?" I replied. He laughed and said, "You know, that *paan* shop belongs to my wife's brother. He was asking about our having tea, but I refused for both of us. He has been wanting a driving licence for sometime. Now you know what happens when the favours are for the wife's brother...I dodged him for some days. He kept pestering me. But you know how I like to dodge people, don't you? So I kept him waiting. Finally, I decided to settle matters with him today".

"So", I asked curiously, "Will you ask him to enrol in school and have him take driving lessons?"

"No, no!" he replied, disgusted at my naiveté. "You think he will leave his *dhanda* (business) and take lessons? I have asked him to pay me Rs. 1,000, and then I will get him a licence. Now you see, I know the guys in the licence office. I will pay them Rs. 500 and have a licence made for him. But the problem in my brother-in-law's case is that he needs to show a legal electricity bill so that the license can be made. Now, he lives in the squatter settlements and they have illegal electric connections. So I will have to have a false electricity bill made. No problem! Only Rs. 200! In five days' time, I shall have a driving licence ready for him. Had it been someone else, I would have asked for Rs. 2,000...What do you think young motorbike owners do? Do they start taking lessons? No way! They will just bribe the cops and have a learner's licence made for a month, and then get a *pukka* (proper) licence made".

We drove on for a while and then, when the time was up, I went to the manager of the school to sign papers for the driving test the next day.

A few days later, I got my driving licence. I did not have any driving exam. I simply went to the relevant office with several other learners. All of us signed some papers and that was it! No driving exam, just the predictable anxieties which let us experience some tension. Some people were happy to be let off so easily. Some of us were unhappy. We were expecting to be tested. But Lal had already told me, "It all depends on the officer's mood. You may be let off without an exam, or he may just ask you to drive around the compound. At the end of it, you are just concerned with getting your licence, isn't it?" He had already advised me on how to keep practicing after the training was over. "If you continue in this manner, you will soon become confident!"

Everyday Trespasses: Questions about Law and Force

The 'Everyday' is of utmost interest to me, and its diversity is ceaselessly exciting. And it is people like Lal who make up the diversity of the Everyday. As I narrate Lal in these words, I am mulling over the very notion, concept and practice of 'law'. So, what is a law? I don't know! What does enforcement of law mean? I am not sure about this either. I don't even know what constitutes the legal, and what becomes illegal. All I understood from my driving master was the use of 'force', which itself is blind to the illegal and the legal alike, and in equal measure.

And people like Lal have a great deal to teach: how to detect the porosity of legalities and how the domain of the authorities can be trespassed.