

Such is the chaos that one notices on the Chandigarh roads

CHANDIGARH: ROAD SENSE AND

NONSENSE

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

MANY years ago the road going past Safdarjung airport in New Delhi towards the Kutb Minar was christened "the murder mile" by an enterprising journalist. The reason was simple enough. The road was narrow, the traffic heavy and the mess was compounded by a railway crossing near the airport that remained closed for long periods. Impatient motorists often banged into each other in their hurry to be the first ones across.

If one was looking for "a murder city", Chandigarh would just walk away with the prize. In this cannibal town an accidentless day is as rare as a meatless one. As the rich Indian has got used to the sight of poverty around him, so has the Chandigarh citizen to his daily quota of accidents. Buses in head-on collision, a scooterist knocked down by a passing brick-laden truck, a cyclist run over and abandoned by some spoilt unlicensed son of one of the many privileged that infest this city — these are sights so common that they evoke no emotions.

Why should this happen in India's most modern city — a city that has a perfectly designed, rectangular grid, with roads that run as straight as an arrow? The reasons are simple enough. Motion and speed have been European pursuits, not Indian. We admire the passive and the immobile that sit and contemplate in an effort to comprehend and understand, though I sometimes suspect that this is just making a virtue of laziness. The Europeans like to move, to explore, to know. Tennyson,

the English poet, described their philosophy well: To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

Motion and speed have, therefore, always been European pursuits. It is they who invented the motor car, the aeroplane, the jet engine and the rocket, in their bid to give mortal man the feet of god Mercury. They succeeded only too well. Witness puny man's flight to the moon and the stars! We in India have never been happy with these speed machines. Our preference always was for the God-given two feet with which each individual trudges his happy way from pilgrim centre to pilgrim centre — his shoes, if he owns any, slung from a stick behind his shoulder. Our greatest invention in the field of motion has been the bullock cart — that, too, not so much as an instrument of speed as to provide carrying capacity.

The motor car was an imposition on India's lassitude. It came in the first decade of this century. We were horrified at its reckless speed. But we managed to contain it. Our answer to it was no roads in the countryside and narrow lanes and bazars in the cities. While in Europe they built autobahns as early as the thirties to speed this monster about the land, we tried our best to hem it in with tongas, bullock-carts, hawkers, and re-

bellious pedestrians who were deaf to the loudest of motor horns. Witness how the decibels have gone up over the decades. It used to be a gentlemanly rubber bulb horn; now one is hit by a banshy wail not of this world.

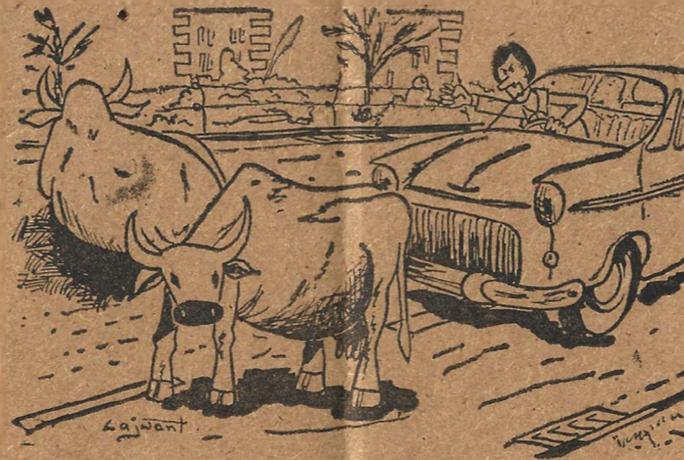
After partition we added the cycle rickshaw to India's war against the motor car. But if, as sometimes happened, all these weapons failed, we always had a secret surprise for this disturber of our ways. The holy cows emerging suddenly out of a lane, or a bunch of prancing buffaloes beaten on to the G.T. Road by a village boy anxious to get home, could be guaranteed to ensure that the infernal machine crashed into the nearest tree. No one felt guilty if such a thing happened, for the motor car had no business to be in India.

So far the battle has been drawn. While India has failed to get rid of the car, the car too has failed to master India as it has the West.

Chandigarh changed all that. For the first time a European was brought in to build a new city, not for the Indian people but the car. Corbousier laid out straight roads, crossing each other at right angles. In doing so he presumed a European requirement based on the car as the pivot of civilisation. He also — error of errors — presumed in us a European's knowledge of the laws that go-

vern the running of this dangerous machine on roads that could give it as much speed as it was capable of. Corbousier worshipped the straight line. We love the cur-

ved one. Sometimes even a crooked one! Corbousier could not know that, while in the West rigorous training is needed before a licence to drive is granted, in India it is deliver-



Could this be the ultimate answer to the devil-may-care attitude of the road-users in Chandigarh ?

ed at the house to the rich and the privileged. Even the poor peasant wanting to become a truck driver can buy it at a price. It is sufficient if one knows how to change gears and set the car on its reckless course.

In the West, having invented this "bhoot" they teach their people from childhood how to handle it. In India we are like the chimpanzee left playing with a hand grenade. Ask any citizen of Chandigarh what the car mirror is for. To powder one's nose or to twirl one's moustache will be the universal answer. Has any Chandigarh citizen heard of the rule of the right of way on which poor Corbu based his entire road scheme? Not in the least. In fact our rule is the very opposite of his. Our rule is: The road you are on becomes the main road by the very fact of your being on it. Therefore, press on regardless of consequences.

Given our rule, the Chandigarh roads, straight and cutting each other at right angles, with natural blind corners, become a murder weapon of devilish efficiency. People come tearing down "their" roads firm in the conviction that they have right of way, never mind whether they are in an inner lane or on a main road. Since everyone does the same, it becomes a fascinating but deadly game of Russian roulette. It then becomes a

matter of mathematical chance as to when and how, and who, will be killed or maimed.

The Chandigarh road system does it with brutal impartiality to rich and poor, young and old. Given the quality of the roads and our ways, this is inevitable. Not all the police checking, not all the exhortations in a safety week can change it.

Unlike the South Indian, the North Indian has a basic contempt for law and orderly living. He is always looking for an opportunity to get away with it. In this case the situation is made worse by the fact that he is not aware that there is any such thing as laws of the road. I have motored in England and have survived but here in Chandigarh I risk my life every day. I find a fundamental difference in our attitudes.

In the West every one knows, and rigidly follows the highway code. People there drive fast and drive without the intense concentration that we put into our driving, for the simple reason that you know how the other fellow is going to behave. Ours, on the other hand, is a world full of surprises. A chap may come tearing out of a lane, another may turn up in front of you, a third may run you over if you happen to be standing by the roadside.

In Europe as long as you follow the rules, you may hit

or kill anybody, for the fault then is his. In India you may do anything as long as you can get away with it, first from the site, then from the law. The sad fact is that more often than not people succeed in doing both.

If Corbu had known our ways better, he would have built a city of crooked narrow lanes and peopled it with all the tongas, rickshaws and bullock carts that he could find. He would have let into it all the holy cows that he could find so that they might amble about, acting as natural speed breakers. On the contrary, he tried to give us a European quality of living in the poor sad plains of India. He gave us straight, empty roads and forbade the cow entry into his dream city. And so the curse of the cow is upon us.

We will continue to murder each other on these sunbaked open roads, without reason, without purpose. The answer lies in India's genius and India's ways. Let the sacred cow into Chandigarh, I say, for it is her right, and our need. A new bylaw should be made requiring every house owner to keep a cow. He should be further required to ensure that it wandered about free as the wind all day on the nearest roads.

The Americans recently celebrated Sun Day to know and honour that sustainer of life on earth. We in Chandigarh should celebrate Cow Day, for if my suggestion is followed, this noble beast will in the truest sense become the sustainer and preserver of life in this city.