

Crime Pays

Posted on

It happens every day. There you are, in your car, pulled up in a queue of vehicles at a junction. You're waiting to turn right into a main road, which is full of traffic. The driver at the head of your queue is waiting patiently for a break in the traffic, or for some polite person to stop and let him across. All nice and orderly, if a bit slow. But then some cowboy behind you gets tired of waiting. Pulling his Hi-Ace out of the queue, he hammers up the outside lane with tyres squealing, comes up beside the leader and tries to push his way through the stream of main road traffic by force. At first, he only partially succeeds; he manages to bludgeon through the outside lane, but the drivers on the inside lane see him coming and bunch their cars up together, making it impossible for him to get through. Now he's stuck. He's also brought the traffic on the inside lane of the main road to a halt, so they're stuck too, and in consequence your queue can't move forward either. Meanwhile, vehicles are tailing back behind him on the outside lane of your road. They want to turn left, but they can't go anywhere because Mister Hi-Ass is blocking them with his van. So everybody's stuck, horns are blaring, and tempers are rising along with the heat.

From the kerb, a policeman idly watches the scene. Finally, some merciful soul stops and lets the Hi-Ace through. Off it goes, belching black smoke, home free. But the other people on the main road, after having been stuck for several minutes, are in no mood to wait and let the rest of the queue go by. They surge forward, blocking the gap created by Mr Hi-Ass. He has made it, but you and the rest of the drivers in your queue are still stuck. That's what you get for being a good citizen.


Ask yourself: what exactly has happened here? You, and the other drivers in your queue, have behaved as you are supposed to, with respect for the Highway Code and consideration for other users of the road. What was your reward? Delay, aggravation, frustration. Hi-Ass, on the other hand, has broken at least three traffic regulations and inconvenienced literally hundreds of people, and not only does he get away scot-free, he actually manages to get about his business faster than the rest of us. He has discovered the secret of success in modern Sri Lanka: it pays to be a pig.

The way traffic moves on the streets of a nation tells you a lot about the local culture. In Singapore, they drive like automatons. In Britain individual drivers fit

themselves into the traffic with a minimum of fuss and bother; there's a place for everyone and everyone is in their place. In Bombay and Delhi the chaotic swarm of rickshaws, trishaws, luxury cars, giant buses and heaven knows what else, all fighting desperately for road space, creates a kind of a paradigm of overpopulation, an illustration of India's vast undisciplined plurality. In Sri Lanka, the prevailing ethic on the streets appears to be: play to win, Jack, and to hell with the rules. It doesn't take much perspicacity to realize that the rest of our society is based on precisely the same convention.

You don't agree? Perhaps a few more examples will convince you. Where shall I start? What about the business sector? Let's talk about those characters who have built vast personal fortunes out of unprofitable businesses. How did they do it? Simple. They took huge bank loans on the pretext of financing said businesses, diverted much of the money into their own personal accounts at home and abroad, let the businesses crash and cited the limitation of directors' liability to keep from repaying the loans. How could they get away with it? By using part of the money to buy influence and convince the official watchdogs to look the other way, that's how. Are they ever prosecuted for fraud? Is their subsequent creditworthiness ever called into question? Forget it. The money they have stolen makes them untouchably powerful. It has bought them into the upper echelons of society, from where they exert a corrupting influence that seeps downwards like black ink through blotting paper, tainting everyone it touches. As for the bankers who lent them so much money with no more collateral than the word of some sleazy politician, were they ever called to task? Were they hell. They still occupy their luxurious offices on the top floors of Fort skyscrapers, still happily giving away honest depositors' money to crooks.

And why not? They have learned an important lesson: in Sri Lanka, the system is set up to favour the wicked. Take any government office where licenses and permits are distributed. In places like this the official channels are invariably so clotted and convoluted that the only way to get anything done is to short-circuit them entirely by means of a judiciously-disbursed bribe. It's like driving: do the right thing and you could end up stuck in the traffic all day, or all year; do the wrong thing and you're home free.



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And while on the subject of motoring, what about the wonderful diesel subsidy? Officially, it's supposed to be there to help keep prices of foodstuffs and other essential items low. In fact, what it does is encourage every Tom, Dick and Harry to run a filthy, smoke- belching, road-hogging diesel-powered vehicle in place of a relatively clean and civilized petrol-drinking one. And how is the diesel subsidy financed? By inflating the price of petrol, that's how. Social responsibility just doesn't pay.

I could go on and on, taking examples from every condition and walk of life, but I won't bother. You've probably worked it all out for yourself anyway. You may even, like the man in the Hi-Ace, be taking advantage of your superior insight to play out the rest of us. If you are one of those crooks and you've read this far, I've got just one more thing to say to you, and it is this: when you prosper at the expense of the rest of society, you destroy your own children's future. Because it is they who will inherit the filthy mess you have made, the corrupt and degenerate nation you have created, and they will curse your name for it. Now stop reading my article, pig, I don't write for the likes of you.

For the rest of us who would like to see Mother Lanka pull herself out of the pigsty, a look at why our society encourages criminal behavior may prove instructive. I'm

no expert, but I have done a little thinking on the subject and I have been able to isolate three main causes. There may be others, but let's talk about these three for a start. Law without enforcement. Sri Lankans are bricks for legislation. Whenever some new piece of chicanery is brought to light, calls for 'stricter laws to prevent abuses' resound throughout the land. Certainly there are some areas, such as excise duty evasion and children's rights, where the law needs to be equipped with sharper teeth, but the fact is that most of the laws we have are strict enough already. The real problem is that they are enforced inequitably, or not at all. Everyone says the police force is inefficient, but that is only part of the story. From auditors who wink at creative accounting to shop-keepers who serve queue-jumpers out of order, we seem to suffer from a lack of will to punish when punishment is due. That speaks well for our compassion, but very poorly for our understanding of the principle of cause and effect, because we have failed to realize that punishment is not meted out as revenge but as a disincentive for others to follow the example of the transgressor. So the guilty go unpunished, and their numbers increase.

Unworkable systems and procedures. Few organizations and institutions in this country are set up simply to do the jobs they are supposed to. In most workplaces. (public sector and private sector alike) the official systems and procedures are often intended to reinforce the power and prestige of the management, to confuse and discourage outsiders, to give jobs to the largest possible number of people, or to accomplish some other purpose quite unrelated to the task in hand. Systems like these are pretty useless for getting the real job done, so the only way to achieve anything is to subvert them through corruption or sweep them aside by force. The frustration engendered by unworkable systems and procedures can turn a saint to crime.

All-pervasive subsidies. As the world's development bankers have long since found out, subsidy begets knavery. After all, what is a subsidy but a means whereby someone can obtain something without paying a fair price for it? As long as the subsidy is only available to those for whom it is intended, everything works fine; but the only way to ensure that is to hedge the subsidy around with restrictions and red tape until even legitimate beneficiaries cannot take advantage of it. In fact, the more safeguards you have, the easier you make it for the rich and powerful to avail themselves of subsidies intended for the under-privileged, because subsidies are administered by bureaucrats. The poor and lowly are rarely good at following the official procedures so dear to the hearts of bureaucrats. Corrupt fat cats, on the

other hand, have dozens of ways to fiddle the system and make themselves eligible as beneficiaries. So the more subsidies you have, the more corruption you promote- and Sri Lanka, as we know, is the Land of A Thousand Subsidies.

But while addressing these three causes will undoubtedly make a difference, the real problem lies much deeper than that. In his Republic, the Greek philosopher Plato argues that justice is better than injustice for practical reasons, so that the just man does better all round, and comes to a happier end, than the unjust. However, a close inspection of Plato's arguments shows that they only apply to a society which works properly-one, that is, in which people cooperate with one another for the greater good of all. But if this is so, then the converse also holds-that in a society which does not function properly, the unjust thrive at the expense of the just.

You don't have to be a Greek philosopher to conclude that Sri Lanka no longer functions as a society of individuals cooperating with one another for their mutual benefit. Our nation is split along numerous fault-lines: ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic, educational. So it is no wonder that crime and corruption pay, and that the wicked prosper in four-wheel drive heaven. They will go on doing so until we throw out the broken, useless fragments of our past, and start working to build a workable new society in the image of the future.