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Sohna Chowk Paradigm

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Turning left from the Jaipur highway at Rajiv Chowk in Gurgaon you get to the Alwar road, the old road to Jaipur. With much of the traffic now using National Highway 8, the new road to Jaipur, you would imagine there would be little traffic on the old road. Not so. The old road too is chock-a-block with traffic. I was recently stuck at the Sohna Chowk crossing, about 20 km down this road, in what i am tempted to call the mother of all traffic jams. However, there was nothing unique about the traffic jam. It is a daily occurrence here as in hundreds of other crossings around the country. As we waited helplessly and interminably, contemplating the noisy, dirty, energetic world around us, it struck me that in many ways Sohna Chowk is quite representative of India's chaotic path to prosperity.

Why were all the vehicles passing through this place? There is nothing special about Sohna, except for the hot springs in a temple frequented by religious tourists. That there would be some traffic transporting goods and people between the towns and the hinterland of this road is quite understandable. But why the huge container platforms, long vehicles and endless line of trucks overloaded with Aravali rocks? Why do they pass through the narrow winding roads leading to this gridlocked chowk?

The reason is simple. By taking these untolled side roads never designed to carry such loads, these commercial vehicles save thousands of rupees by way of tolls. Corners are cut to save some private costs, but the economic costs to society are huge. On a rough reckoning, at least 1,800 vehicles pass through Sohna Chowk every weekday from about 10 a.m. till 6 p.m., each one stuck for at least half an hour. Back of the envelope calculations translate that to 2,43,000 hours of extra travel time per year. Imagine the money value of that time, not to mention the additional fuel cost of idling engines and the corresponding pollution cost.

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These economic and environmental costs could be easily avoided through proper regulation, and enforcement of existing laws. But that is a pipe dream. There are no traffic police to regulate Sohna Chowk traffic, as they are not there in many other choke points in towns and cities around the country. Taxpayers pay for the police, but you have to wonder what services the public get in return. However, this is not just about traffic management. Lack of concern that allows the police to stay away from managing traffic at Sohna Chowk is visible wherever the government is expected to serve the public. Visit any government hospital, railway station, property registration office or any public office and you will see the impatient, contemptuous attitude towards the public. Indeed, this is one of the cultural attributes of India's underdevelopment. Hopefully, as development proceeds the public will count for something more.

Not everything is negative about the Sohna Chowk paradigm. Those long vehicles and container trucks are there because Haryana is emerging as a major automobile manufacturing belt even as India emerges as a leading global player in this industry, and Sohna is in the middle of it. This is the chaotic but very real substance of India's high growth story. Also, traffic jams may cease in another year or so. Not because traffic will go away or the police will manage it but because India has recognised that a large part of the growth story is about sound infrastructure, especially good roads. Under a progressive Hooda government, Haryana is being crisscrossed with excellent roads. A part of the Alwar road is being six-laned, the rest four-laned, at a very hectic pace. This is in stark contrast to neighbouring UP, where highway projects have languished under several governments. Sooner or later, a flyover will replace the chaotic roundabout at Sohna Chowk.

Like railroads in America in the 19th century, roads in India are now one of the major catalysts of high growth. In Sohna's hinterland, as in other parts of India, road development is spawning a wide range of new economic activities and urban settlements. Price of land has doubled and doubled again in recent years. Ordinary farmers have become crorepatris overnight. A part of their new wealth is being spent on huge mansions springing up in the middle of mustard fields, new cars and other forms of conspicuous consumption. Another part is being spent on agriculture especially tubewell irrigation. This may boost crop production, but is also driving down the water table. What will happen tomorrow nobody knows, but let's enjoy the party today. A third part is being invested in off-farm activities: trading, brick kilns, urban property, etc.

All this is happening in and around Sohna, transforming this old pilgrim centre into a new growth centre. Sohna Chowk is the

hub of this new rural economy with all its dynamism and chaos, hustling and energy, rising prosperity and declining water tables. That is development Indian style.

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