

PGPEX
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(Don't) Horn OK Please!!



The Problem

BEEP-BEEEEP!! BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEEEP!! If you have ever traveled by road in India, this sound will most probably haunt your nightmares. There is simply no escaping the omnipresent sound of vehicles honking on Indian streets. Honking exacerbates the frustration faced by daily travellers in the country. Not only is the incessant sound of honking plain annoying, but it is also linked to increased stress levels and road rage.

Habitual honking is a quintessential Indian habit, with almost no parallel anywhere across the world. An interesting anecdote that my father shared with me really underlines this phenomenon. A German colleague was travelling with him in Mumbai, when the colleague's cell phone rang. The person at the other end asked, "Where are you?" In reply the colleague simply rolled down the window of the car and held his phone there for a couple of seconds. Instantly the person on the other line said, "Oh, you are in India!!"

Where does this need to constantly honk arise from? What possible joy does it provide? What purpose could it serve? I think the underlying reason for the impatience, and the accompanying need to honk, is the belief that, "My time is more valuable than yours." There is an unwavering certainty in the irrational thought that honking will cause the traffic in front to disappear. When

vehicles are waiting at a traffic light, the second the light turns from red to green, drivers start instinctively honking. The reflex action is almost Pavlovian in nature.

Academic Research

As you can imagine, honking is quite an issue in India. Lots of blogs and articles have been written about this subject. Surprisingly, however, there is little academic research done on the causes or solutions to this problem. Hence, the solutions offered below are based on my thoughts and understanding of behavioural economics.

Possible Solutions

There are a few ways to approach this problem. The *first* would involve increasing the number of "no honking zones" and applying strict fines for flouting the norms. The "no honking zones" in India are generally placed near hospitals and schools. However, the adherence to these rules is sporadic at best and there would be no fair method to assign newer places to the "no honking zone".

The *second* method would be to increase the awareness and educate the population on the impact of honking on noise pollution, and its consequent impact on the overall health of the populace. Polio, for example, has been eliminated through systematic campaigns to increase awareness, with the famous

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“Do boondh” (two drops) campaign. Print and television commercials can be used along with enlisting the help of motor training schools to spread the message. This method is unlikely to produce results in the near future (if at all) due to the long gestation period required for a critical mass of drivers to be educated on the impact of honking.

The *third* approach would be to offer visual cues or nudges to the drivers by placing posters of babies covering their ears or putting their finger over their lips (as if to say, “Shhhhh”). This is likely to have a greater impact on drivers than the current “no honking zone” signs. However, it would be difficult to cover enough of the country with these posters.

The *final* method would involve encouraging automobile manufacturers to develop vehicles that have only a limited number of honks available. Once, the driver runs out of honks, she can approach the manufacturer and have the honks replenished, for a nominal fee. The vehicles would be fitted with a meter on the dashboard that would inform the driver of the number of honks available. The meter would also calculate the rupee equivalent of each honk. For example, there are 100 honks remaining and each honk costs you ten paisa (a hundred paisa equals to one rupee), so you have 10 rupees remaining. The next time you honk, the meter will read 99 honks and 9.90 rupees remaining. As human beings are especially sensitive to watching money leave their possession, drivers are likely to be more frugal with their usage of the horn. Loss aversion will

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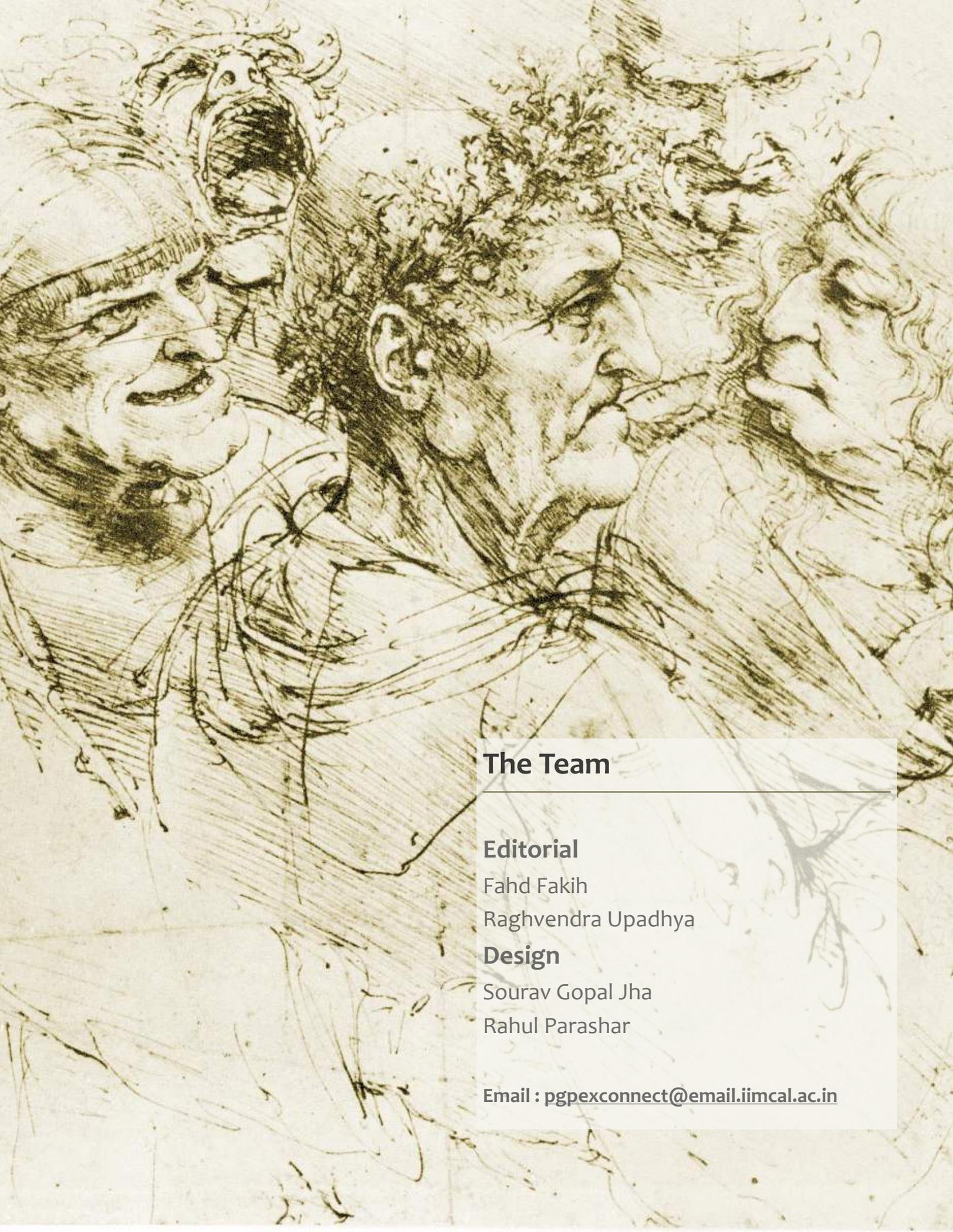
form a powerful deterrent to honking. Additionally, by limiting the amount of honks that can be replenished in a vehicle in one refill, the drivers will be forced to make small payments on a regular basis. Making continuous micro-payments

is likely to weigh on the mind of the vehicle owner and provide further disincentive to honk. This initiative will, however, require the Government of India to pass a regulation that will

compel all vehicle manufacturers in India to have this meter installed in their cars.

Fahd Fakih is a student of PGPEX batch 8 with almost six years of experience in the management consulting industry





The Team

Editorial

Fahd Fakih

Raghvendra Upadhyia

Design

Sourav Gopal Jha

Rahul Parashar

Email : pgpexconnect@email.iimcal.ac.in