

Road Safety: A Critical Issue Requiring Government Attention

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ABSTRACT.

Traffic problems aren't something to take lightly anymore, not when we have been proclaimed as the nation with the most traffic accidents. In India, it matters little if the Union government 'recognizes' a problem, the record on implementing anything is poor. A lot of this is because the suggested measures are so outlandish and ambitious that implementing them is almost impossibility. The arms of the Indian States end up becoming impotent due to neglect or decayed due to corruption. This study will succinctly examine the problem of road traffic accidents.

Keywords; Critical issues, Road accidents, etc

INTRODUCTION

India has the highest road traffic accident rate worldwide with over 140,000 deaths annually, beating even China. Every hour, nearly 14 lives are lost due to road accidents in India. More than 40 % of the deaths are caused by trucks and two-wheelers. Most accidents occur in the afternoons and during peak hours (especially in the evening) considered an 'unsafe' or dangerous time to be on the road. In 67% of these accidents there is head injury. Most people do not wear seat belts or those on two wheelers do not wear a helmet -though it is compulsory in many states of the country. Our traffic conditions are chaotic, the rules are broken all the time and we have no traffic sense. All this reflects in the number of fatal accidents that occur in India. Road traffic accidents have come down in most western countries due to strict adherence to traffic rules and stringent penalties. Out of the estimated 1.4 million serious road accidents/ collisions occurring annually in India, hardly 0.4 million are recorded. Many road traffic deaths in rural areas are not recorded. Accidents which result in late deaths after the discharge from hospital, due to the effects of morbidity also are not recorded.

HERE ARE SOME HORRIFYING STATISTICS ABOUT INDIA:

- Road accidents last year – more than 130,000 dead set to increase, to jump to 150,000 (per annum) by 2015.
- 10 percent of the (million-plus) fatal accidents in the world happen in India.
- India has just 1 percent of the world's vehicles, but accounts for 10 percent of the world's road accidents.
- We lose 3 percent of our GDP per annum due to road accidents.
- 70 percent of road accidents take away the main wage earner.
- Mortality rate per 10,000 vehicles is 14 (less than two for developed countries).

In 1989, India established its "Rules of the Road Regulation" to set standards for drivers of vehicles, including three- and four-wheelers. The country has 15 different classifications of vehicles that include the omnibus, which is built to carry more than six passengers, and motor cars, which are vehicles other than transport vehicles, omnibuses, tractors, road-rollers, motorcycles or invalid carriages. India also has many traffic laws. 'Although basic laws for road safety exists in India, their enforcement is extremely weak. Enforcement of wearing of seat belts for passengers of cars scored 2 out of a scale of 10.

According to the Indian figures by the Road Safety Cell of the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, there were 3.9 lakh accidents in 2000; 78,911 were killed and 3, 99,265 injured. Low and middle income countries face the brunt of 90% of fatal road accidents, according to the WHO mortality statistics. Poor road planning and inadequate protection to pedestrians and cyclists cause road mishaps, besides human error. In India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2006 figures), Tamil Nadu Accounted for 14% of all accidents and Maharashtra accounted for 12.4%. These two States have the maximum accidents in the country.

Road accidents: a major killer in India.

Currently motor vehicle accidents rank ninth in the list of mass killers of human lives worldwide. The number of people killed in road traffic crashes each year is estimated at almost 1.2 million, while the number injured could be as high as 50 million. In India, over 80,000 persons die in the traffic crashes annually, over 1.2 million are injured seriously and about 300000 disabled permanently.

Every hour, 40 budding youth under the age of 25 lose their lives in road accidents worldwide. 1.2 million people die in traffic accidents every year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), road accidents happen to be the second most important cause of death for 5 - 29 year olds. Analysts say that by 2020 road deaths will become the third highest claimer of human lives.

A COMPARISON WITH THE WEST

A traffic offense in developed countries could mean your license being impounded for life. Insurance companies also act tough. Insurance premiums triple for those who have been involved in a serious traffic offense. The more accidents you are involved in, the more your premium increases. In India we do not even have a national database to record all accidents so we cannot know a person's accident history. Rash drivers in the US can be charged with misdemeanour (one year jail term), felony charges, vehicular manslaughter and vehicular homicide. These crimes carry severe punishment and it gets progressively more severe with each offense. If a driver kills, the license is taken away and the driver can be banned from driving in that country.

Driving Offenses in India

Riding without the seat belt being fastened can incur a Rs.100 fine. India has over 30 other driving-related offenses that carry a fine of Rs. 100, such as making a U-turn during outlawed hours, failing to slow down in an intersection, reversing without paying attention, driving in the center of the road and driving against one way traffic. A law against driving dangerously or hastily carries a maximum fine of Rs. 1,000 and up to six months incarceration.

CAUSES OF ROAD ACCIDENTS ARE:

Driving under the influence of alcohol, for which there are law enforcement rules in place. Drunk driving is a major cause of accidents in India. On the bright side, however, India is becoming stricter about blood alcohol limits.

- Safety studies have found that a majority of accidents occur either due to the driver's error or due to the negligence of the safety norms.
- The bottlenecks causing acute traffic congestion which spurs people on to break traffic rules.
- Scarse respect for the traffic regulations and immature reckless speeding.
- Road encroachment by vendors: this reduces the effective width of the road.
- The policemen in India concentrate too little attention on those flouting traffic rules when driving, and the bulk of their time on catching people who are unable to produce their licence for perusal or outstation vehicles etc.
- Drivers' fault has been determined to be the single most important factor responsible for accidents.

- India still hasn't implemented the advanced technological methods of law enforcement when it comes to traffic regulation. But here there is a ray of light in the fact that the situation is improving rapidly, in this respect.
- The tendency to disobey rules is dependent on opportunity. The large population and paucity of space on Indian roads and at traffic junctions, etc. only aggravates the situation.
- Indian administration has limited resources and larger targets to meet in comparison with other countries. It poses a relatively much heavier burden on the shoulders of the law enforcement agencies. Poor road quality and road maintenance.
- Lack of adequate roadways is thought of as a major reason. Besides, the worst accidents happen on highways. Lack of discipline gets magnified at high speed on a fast moving road. Although it must be mentioned here that evidence from the countries with better highways and roads suggests that building more roads does not ease traffic congestion; it just brings more cars/ vehicles on the road.
- Two wheelers leave the body exposed to much injury in case of an accident. Approximately '44% of deaths are of those on two-wheelers' – The Nano could probably help in these cases.
- Low conviction rates could be one of the major problems
- Most countries have a multi-disciplinary approach to traffic planning and road design. It is done by psychologists, engineers, doctors, sociologists and vehicle experts. In India, traffic is still a civil engineering issue.
- Infrastructural loop holes as well as vehicle manufacturers are to blame to some extent. Proper safety measures (like safety equipment including air bags, etc.) are not implemented in vehicles designed for Indian roads, although present in vehicles abroad.
- Actions like dangerous overtaking, lane cutting, jumping of signals, erratic parking, not using dim headlights are major causes.

HOW IS OUR GOVERNMENT TACKLING THE ROAD ACCIDENT PROBLEM?

The government is planning to make safety features on cars and speed governors compulsory on heavy vehicles, besides other measures. The Government must enforce stricter road rules in India and also provide adequate infrastructure to safeguard its citizens.

TRAFFIC RULES AND FINES

India's law against driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs carries a maximum penalty of Rs. 2,000 and a maximum imprisonment of six months. India has a law against playing music while driving that carries a fine of Rs. 1,000. The fine for using a cell phone while driving is Rs. 1,000, and the laws against using colored lights and outfitting windows with tinted shading carry fines of Rs. 100.

LAW ENFORCEMENT STATISTICS CONCERNING THE PROBLEM.

• Motorcycle helmet law enforcement also scored 2 out of 10. Enforcement of DUI (Driving Under the influence of Intoxication) law (0.03g/dL) scored 3 out of 10. Speed limit laws are existent; however data regarding their enforcement was not available. Child restraint laws are not existent in India. This can be possible only by strict enforcement of laws by the Government.

• In India, the number of RTA(Road Traffic Accident) fatalities has been growing at nearly 8% per year and shows no signs of falling. The results suggest that, in India, road safety laws need to be made more comprehensive while enforcement should be strengthened.' 85 % of the victims of these fatalities are men in the age group 20-50 years. Majority of these men are the bread- winners for their families.

Perhaps one of the prime reasons for poor driving sense is the ease with which a person may obtain a license in India. This is an easily remediable cause of traffic problems and in turn the high number of traffic accidents. A report of a person trying to obtain a licence in Singapore in 2008, which is contained in brief below, will act as a great eye-opener.

In Singapore, it takes

- (i) 6-7 months for a working adult to get his driving license (plus Singapore Dollar 1500 in total) attending 2 classes (1hr 40 min each) per weekend without failing in any of them (which is rare) and without failing in the first driving test attempt (which is also rare)
- (ii) 4 months for a working adult to get his riding license (plus SGD 900) attending 2 classes (1hr each) per weekend and without failing in the first riding test attempt (which is also rare).

In India it takes one morning jog and an evening stroll across the licensing office to get either a driving license or a riding license or both.

In Singapore, during a riding test, if a motor cyclist keeps his/her right foot down on the ground even once, even if it be for balance, he is immediately failed and s/he has to retake the test.

- (i) If the speed limit of the road is crossed even once, it is a case of immediate failure and s/he has to retake the test.
- (ii) 2 contacts with the kerb during parallel parking or vertical parking will lead to a failure of the test.

SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS FOR PREVENTING TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS ARE:

1. Separate lane for cyclist and two wheelers.
2. Enforcing Lane driving for Buses and other heavy vehicles
3. Enhancing capacity of the Public Transport System.
4. Willingness to enforce rule of law.
5. Confiscating the licenses of offenders.
6. Apart from power steering and power brakes in our vehicles, we need road sense and an attitude adjustment.
7. Traffic accidents can be minimised.
 - * if we plan our journey and start early. Driving in a hurry leads to accidents.
 - * if people driving the vehicles bear in mind that driving is not an adventure sport.
 - * if you keep your vehicle road worthy.
8. Police felt in 2010 that the traffic violations in the City of Mumbai would decrease considerably if the fines were tripled.

DOCUMENTATION

India has seven laws governing the proper documents needed while driving. The offenses for allowing a vehicle to be driven by someone who does not have a license and for driving without valid insurance carry a maximum penalty of 1,000 rupees. These charges also carry the possibility of three months imprisonment. Violators who are guilty of driving without a valid permit risk up to Rs. 5,000 in fines, with the minimum fines being Rs. 2,000. If a driver is found driving without valid license, the maximum penalty is Rs. 500, with the possibility of up to three months imprisonment.

LAW COMMISSION MADE MULTIPLE AND DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'Consultation Paper' on 'Legal Reforms To Combat Road Accidents' by The 18th Law Commission (which was constituted for a period of three years from 1st September, 2006 by Order No. A.45012/1/2006-Admn.III (LA) dated the 16th October, 2006, issued by the Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, Department of Legal Affairs, New Delhi) made many valuable reformative contributions.

CONCLUSION

13 people die in our country every hour due to RTAs. Road traffic accidents kill more than 120 lakh people and injure more than 50 Crore people worldwide every year. Everyday about 6600 deaths and 3300 serious injuries occur due to RTAs. The global annual cost due to RTAs is a whopping 2,30,000 million US dollars. The number of road accidents in India is 3 times higher than that prevailing in developed countries. Perhaps in the long run the only solution is the steady decrease in road traffic with car pooling options, etc. Private

mode of transport in long run is unsustainable. It may be good for companies like Tata, Mahindra, Maruti, Honda, Suzuki or GM, etc., but it's bad for the economy, environment and safety. MRTS or at least Public Transport Systems are the only sustainable and safe alternative. Considering that more people die in road accidents in India than anywhere else in the world, including China, there is dire need for the people of India to wake up and take proactive steps towards minimizing the accidents happening in our daily life. We have to come together as a nation to formulate a 'Safe Driving Policy'. After all is said and done, it must be remembered that, 'Driving is a privilege, not a right'.

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