

INDIA HAS STILL TO GET A GOOD GRIP ON ROAD SAFETY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Roads

At Palarivattom, Kerala | Photo Credit: Thulasi Kakkat

Last year, while inaugurating a webinar on 'Vehicle Crashes and Road Safety', organised by the MIT Art Design and Technology (ADT) University, Pune, Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari remarked that "the target is to reduce 50% of road accidents by 2025", adding that "we can achieve zero deaths due to road accidents by 2030". He said that the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had participated in a conference in Sweden in 2020 — the Third High Level Global Conference on Road Safety for Achieving Global Goals 2030' — where it was conceptualised to have zero road fatalities in India by 2030. Therefore, there was a need to expedite the task of saving lives in accidents.

Though it is essential to remain focused in this approach and be optimistic while fixing targets, the past record of road accidents and available infrastructure to deal with road safety measures in India should not be lost sight of, particularly when the enforcement of motor vehicle-related laws is primarily the responsibility of the States.

Where do we stand vis-à-vis last decade's target? In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly, after considering the alarming situation of road accidents fatalities, adopted the Global Plan for the Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020 aimed at reducing fatalities in road accidents by 50% by the year 2020, and was accepted by much of the world including India. Though a number of steps have been taken in the last decade to check road accidents, statistics published by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways show that the number of deaths in road accidents increased from 1,42,485 in 2011 to 1,51,113 in 2019. The Ministry is yet to publish its data for the year 2020, but the annual publication of the National Crime Records Bureau, titled Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India (2020) shows that 1,33,201 deaths were recorded in 2020. This reduction of accidents in 2020 was primarily due to the various lockdowns which were in force during the first wave of COVID-19, when only a limited number of motor vehicles were on the roads. However, the fatality (that is a number of deaths per 100 accidents) which was 26.9 in 2001, continued to rise from 28.63 in 2011 to 37.54 in 2020. Thus, it is evident that despite setting a target of a 50% reduction in accidental deaths, the fatalities from road accidents actually increased in the last decade.

The Supreme Court of India while hearing a petition filed by Dr. S. Rajaseekaran, an orthopaedic surgeon and then President of the Indian Orthopaedic Association (WP (Civil) No. 295 of 2012), on road safety, passed an order to constitute a 'Committee on Road Safety' under the chairmanship of Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan, which was notified by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways on May 30, 2014. The Court on November 30, 2017, issued a number of directives with regard to road safety that, inter alia, included the constitution of a State Road Safety Council, establishment of lead agency, the setting up of road safety fund, notification of a road safety action plan, the constitution of a district road safety committee, engineering improvements, the identification and rectification of black spots, the adoption of traffic calming measures, conducting road safety audits, the acquisition of road safety equipment, the establishment of trauma care centres and the inclusion of road safety education in the academic curriculum of schools. Though the Committee on Road Safety followed up every directive of the Court with States and helped in improving the overall road safety scenario, there is many a slip between the cup and the lip.

The Motor Vehicles (MV) Act of 1988 was partially amended in August 2019, and some of the amended and new sections which made traffic violations more stringent, came into effect from September 1, 2019. However, most States did not increase the corresponding compounding traffic violations fee. This increase was criticised and people protested on the pretext that the (fine) paying capacity of the average Indian was still limited. Also, only a few cases of traffic violations are contested by the accused in a court of law. Therefore, the expected impact of the deterrent provisions of the amended law could not be realised on ground.

Second, the enforcement manpower that is available is insufficient to deal with the steadily increasing volume of traffic. The automation of processes is still in its infancy and limited to large cities. The number of 'hit and run' cases may decrease if the 'Intelligent Traffic Management System' is implemented on highways and other major roads. The Bureau of Police Research and Development has suggested a formula to calculate the number of traffic policemen required in any district. It is largely based on the number of registered motor vehicles in any district. Similar ideas were suggested for traffic equipment requirements also. However, the actual enforcement staff and equipment (due to a limited road safety fund or other funds at the disposal of the police) are insufficient to effectively check traffic violations.

Third, there are inadequate funds for the rectification of black spots and the undertaking of traffic calming measures. Though more than 60% road accidents reportedly take place because of over-speeding, 'speed limit' sign boards are rarely seen or found even on State highways and major roads.

Fourth, most drivers, conductors, and other staff in transport companies (except for government corporations) do not get benefits of the organised sector. They draw a meagre salary, usually do not have a weekly off and are most often forced to work overtime. Therefore, unless their service conditions are improved, their attitude towards road safety cannot be expected to be above board.

Fifth — and perhaps the most challenging task — is to improve the driving skills of drivers and change the casual attitude of other road users towards road safety. Even today, getting a driving licence is not a difficult task. There is no standard written and rigorous practical test. Many States do not have test driving tracks. There are no institutes for refresher training if a driving licence of a person is suspended. Though the amended Motor Vehicles Act has certain provisions in this regard, they have yet to come into force.

It has been observed that about two-thirds of victims of road fatalities are two-wheeler drivers and pillion riders, but there is not enough emphasis being given to them. Though the wearing of safety headgear is mandatory, it is not enforced strictly in all States due to a lack of strong will. Even an amended provision that relates to 'Offences by Juveniles' is not enforced strictly. The Emergency Response Support System (ERSS), with its pan-India emergency response number, 112, has proved very useful in saving the lives of accident victims in the golden hour, but this scheme has not been implemented evenly across States.

The accident data collection format of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, and now a part of the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS) of the police, is quite cumbersome (it requires about 60 fields to be filled up). This process of data collection is quite time consuming but it is essential to identify the true cause of an accident and take remedial measures. Similarly, the main objective of the recent iRAD (Integrated Road Accident Database) Project, an initiative of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, funded by the World Bank, and under implementation, is to enrich the accident database and improve road safety in the country by collecting data from different stakeholders using the iRAD mobile and web application. Hopefully, the integration of these projects will bring some synergy and make the

data collection procedure more user-friendly.

A number of steps have been taken by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and States to improve the road safety scenario in the country. Lives cannot be lost at the cost of poor enforcement of traffic laws. However, unless the States and the Centre are on the same page in improving and strengthening the infrastructure of States by enabling more funds, merely and only fixing targets will not be a pragmatic approach to reduce road accident fatalities.

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