

Making our roads safe

The process of introducing legislation for road safety has been in the making for the past four years. The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha in 2017. If passed by the Rajya Sabha, it will be the first of its kind to extensively reform existing legislation on road safety, the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988. The Amendment Bill is robust and rectifies several systemic issues by providing for a uniform driver licensing system, protection of children and vulnerable road users, rationalising penalties, and much more.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) points out that for effective road safety management, it is imperative to have an institutionalised and sustainable data system. This includes information pertaining to drivers, such as types of licences held and a record of violation of traffic laws. The driver licensing system in India controls and filters the number and quality of drivers on the road. Currently, the procedure is largely manual, while the number of licences issued per year is over a crore. The inefficiencies of a predominantly manual system, given the scale of licences issued every year, results in lakhs of licences being issued without the prescribed checks and balances. In the absence of a central registry, often multiple licences are held by one person for different States. Low penalties for licensing offences allow erring drivers to be behind the wheel and get away with life-threatening violations.

The Bill addresses each of these challenges by introducing technology in the licensing procedure. A digitised, uniform and centralised driver licensing system will go a long way in ensuring ease of access, efficiency and transparency in the filtering process.

The Bill also proposes to introduce digitisation in the monitoring and enforcement of traffic laws. Electronic monitoring and enforcement can already be seen in practice in Kerala. The State has a 'city surveillance and traffic monitoring system', and automated traffic enforcement systems to detect traffic light violations as well as speeding. The enactment of the Bill will facilitate the replication and creation of such digitised systems for all other States.

Since 2008, in India, over 55,000 children have lost their lives in road accidents. In 2016 alone, 7% of road crash deaths were attributed to children below 18 years. The WHO asserts that using child-restraint systems in vehicles decreases the risk of death in a crash by about 70% for infants and 54-80% for small children. In the current piece of legislation, there is no provision for protection of children, and this lacuna has been addressed for the first time.

The Bill proposes to mandate the use of protective headgear by every person above the age of four driving, riding or being carried on a two-wheeler. It provides for measures to be laid down for the safety of children below the age of four. Similarly, the Bill mandates the use of safety belts and child restraints for those under 14 years and introduces a fine of 1,000 for the driver or guardian for the violation of the same.

For decades, penalties for behaviour that results in fatalities and grievous injuries have remained minimal, largely unrevised, and, consequently, have failed to deter violators. This Bill promises to rationalise these fines. For instance, the penalty for drunk driving has been increased to 10,000 for the first offence and 15,000 for the subsequent one.

For exceeding lawful speeds, the penalty has been increased to 1,000 for light motor vehicles and 2,000-4,000 for medium and heavy motor vehicles. For the non-use of helmets and seat belts, the fines have been increased from 100 to 1,000.

As a signatory to the Brasilia Declaration on Road Safety, India has committed to reducing, by

2020, the number of road crash fatalities and serious injuries by 50%. This will be impossible to achieve if the sole statute governing road safety in India, the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, is not overhauled. The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, 2017, will serve as the first and most essential step towards fulfilling this vision.

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