

## Fix the pothole problem

Three years ago, when Dadarao Bilhore lost his son, Prakash, to a road crash caused by a pothole in Mumbai, he decided that it was time to take matters into his own hands. He visited local authorities and urged them to repair the potholes. He received condolences and assurances, but things haven't changed. On July 11, a 45-year-old man was crushed to death by a passing truck when he fell into a pothole in Kalyan, Mumbai. This is just one among the [many recent deaths caused by potholes](#) in the city. In 2016, potholes claimed six lives every day in India. The numbers could be higher as dozens of pothole-related deaths go unaccounted because crash reporting protocols vary from State to State.

According to official statistics, potholes claimed 11,836 lives and left 36,421 persons injured in India from 2013 to 2016. A State-wise analysis of data pertaining to road crashes due to potholes reveals that Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have maintained a fairly consistent record of being among the top four in road crashes, injuries and deaths due to faulty roads, particularly potholes. Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha and West Bengal feature regularly among the top 10 States in the same category.

### Pinning blame

Every year, pothole-related deaths make it to the headlines especially during the monsoon season. The irony of the situation is that instead of booking cases against contractors or engineers for shoddy maintenance of roads, police reports often blame the victims or drivers for 'death due to negligence'. Negligence on the part of road owners or maintenance authorities is rarely brought to book.

### BBMP seeks help from citizens to identify potholes

The Indian Road Congress has prescribed over 100 sets of guidelines to ensure standardised road construction, maintenance and management, including guidelines for repairing potholes. The challenge lies in ensuring that these guidelines are implemented. The absence of a unified statute or law on road construction, engineering and maintenance makes it nearly impossible to ensure that these guidelines are implemented.

The existing legislation for road safety, the Motor Vehicles Act, has no provisions to ensure accountability of road authorities for defects in the engineering, design and maintenance of roads. Thankfully, the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, 2017, which seeks to strengthen the Act, has attempted to address the issue of liability for road defects. For any road crash injury or death caused by defective road design and engineering, the designated authority responsible to construct and maintain the road is to be penalised with a sum capped at 1 lakh. The Bill directs that safety standards be prescribed by the Central government. Unfortunately, road contractors and engineers will still not be held criminally liable for causing deaths and injuries, which organisations like the SaveLIFE Foundation have been demanding. But a fine, even if it is a small amount, is a step in the right direction.

Potholes are usually caused by the presence of heavy traffic and water on roads. Several studies conducted in cities such as Chandigarh and Mumbai point to the lack of a proper drainage system and weak proportioning of aggregates for road construction as major reasons for pothole formation. Therefore, it becomes necessary to ensure the use of standardised methodology and good quality material when constructing roads. There also needs to be regular maintenance and an effective system to ensure accountability. There is a need to incorporate the Safe System Approach in all aspects of road design, engineering and construction. This approach takes into

account the possibility of human error and ensures that the surrounding environment and infrastructure are designed to save lives.

A multisectoral issue

Road safety is a multisectoral issue. At a policy level, the first step is to create an enabling framework that weaves in different progressive aspects across stakeholder sectors under one legislation. The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, 2017 aims to rectify several systemic issues by providing a uniform driver licensing system, protecting children and vulnerable road users, rationalising penalties and creating a system of accountability in the construction of roads. The Bill was sent to the Rajya Sabha last Monsoon Session; a year later, it still awaits passage. The Bill is not a panacea for all problems, but it is the first step towards ensuring that no deaths are caused by road crashes.

*Piyush Tewari is founder and CEO, SaveLIFE Foundation*

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