

# DEADLY BILLBOARDS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON BILLBOARDS AND THEIR REGULATION

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Incidents of giant outdoor billboards crashing and becoming death traps are no longer an exception in urban environments. Tragedies such as [the deaths of three workers, in Coimbatore](#) last week, after they were crushed by the falling steel frames of a hoarding under replacement, are no rarity. Authorities lost no time in declaring that the billboard was illegal, offering no explanation on how it stood there. Ironically, it was in April that the [Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Rules 2023](#) were notified, with terms for the licensing of hoardings, banners and placards. Amid concerns that billboards would mushroom in cities, the Minister for Municipal Administration had explicitly said the rules were notified to ensure that unauthorised billboards are not allowed. Reports from at least two decades show the failure of many municipal corporations in curbing unlicensed hoardings. Occasional corrective actions have most often been the result of the intervention of the judiciary or triggered by fatal accidents. A case in point is that of Tamil Nadu and its capital Chennai, where thousands of unauthorised hoardings were removed on the directions of the Supreme Court in 2008, revealing hidden green landscapes and urban skylines.

Unfortunately, this action was not sustained. Among the first violators were political parties, with many leaders encouraging their larger-than-life projections on flex banners and illuminated cut-outs. Considerable outrage was triggered in Chennai in 2019, when a young woman scooterist lost her life in a road accident after she was hit by a banner put up by a political party. With lucrative outdoor advertising rights being cornered by politically influential individuals and cartels, there is little administrative will to enforce legal and all-weather structural stability requirements. A lack of manpower in municipalities to enumerate unlicensed hoardings, periodically inspect authorised billboards, and act against unstable or illegal ones, also contributes to accidents. It is of concern that the judiciary, which calls for a regulation of billboards, often passes orders restraining authorities from removing unauthorised ones. Violators deserve stringent punishment; in the case of deaths, it would be appropriate to slap graver charges, blacklist and recover compensation from them, and also prosecute complicit officials. International studies have pointed to billboards being dangerous distractions on roads as they affect a driver's response time, vehicle lateral control and situational awareness. Accidents caused by such distractions must be documented in the annual Road Accidents in India report. This could help devise better policies on billboards and the outdoor advertising market, globally poised to grow to \$67.8 billion in 2023.

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