

RECOGNISING ALTRUISM: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON REWARDING GOOD SAMARITANS WHO SAVE LIVES OF ROAD ACCIDENT VICTIMS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Roads

The [initiative of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways](#) to award Good Samaritans who save lives of road accident victims with a cash prize is a welcome attempt to reduce India's staggering annual death toll from mishaps. Ranking third among 20 nations that have the highest number of accidents, India fares far worse on an important metric — cases to fatalities ratio — compared to the U.S. and Japan, which have more recorded crashes but fewer deaths. During 2020, even with severely disrupted mobility due to COVID-19, [National Crime Records Bureau data](#) show 1,33,715 lives were lost in 1,20,716 cases attributed to negligence relating to road accidents. Under the Motor Vehicles law, a Good Samaritan voluntarily helps an accident victim with no expectation of payment or reward, and has no legal obligation to record his involvement or aid the investigation in the case. In spite of an entire chapter being added to the Motor Vehicles Act last year to sensitise police forces and hospitals on this, altruism is affected by the perception of harassment and legal complications. The Ministry's latest move seeks to overcome reticence by rewarding socially minded individuals who offer immediate assistance and rush a victim with certain kinds of injuries to hospital, with 5,000 and a certificate of recognition for saving a life. State governments are responsible for the plan, with the Centre providing an initial grant, but the Union Transport Ministry will give its own award of 1 lakh each to the 10 best Good Samaritans in a year.

Achieving a reduction in mortality on India's largely lawless roads warrants determined action on several factors, beginning with scientific road design and standards, and zero tolerance enforcement. It was only on September 3 that the Centre notified the long-pending National Road Safety Board, with a mandate to formulate standards on, among other things, safety and trauma management, to build capacity among traffic police, and put crash investigation on a scientific footing. Yet, on enforcement, State police forces generally appear to favour a populist approach of least engagement; regional transport bureaucracies — compared by Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari in 2015 to looting Chambal dacoits — can also benefit from a shake-up. As a steadily motorising country, the goal must be to reduce accidents and the ratio of deaths and injuries to cases. The Good Samaritan plan can work well if District Committees tasked with awarding these individuals readily recognise their contribution, aided by the police, hospitals and RTOs. Many more people will continue to be impelled by sheer altruism to help road users involved in a crash, and governments should get bureaucratic barriers out of their way.

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