

DEADLY ROADS IN INDIA

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Roads

The *Road Accidents in India* report of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways for 2017 comes as a disappointment. By reiterating poorly performing policies and programmes, it has failed to signal the quantum shift necessary to reduce death and disability on the roads. It expresses concern at the large number of people who die every year and the thousands who are crippled in accidents, but the remedies it highlights are weak, incremental and unlikely to bring about a transformation. The lack of progress in reducing traffic injuries is glaring, given that the Supreme Court is seized of the issue and has been issuing periodic directions in a public interest petition with the assistance of the Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan Committee constituted by the Centre. Little has been done to fulfil what the Road Transport Ministry promises: that the Centre and the States will work to improve safety as a joint responsibility, although enforcement of rules is a State issue. That nothing much has changed is reflected by the death of 1,47,913 people in accidents in 2017. To claim a 1.9% reduction over the previous year is statistically insignificant, more so when the data on the rate of people who die per 100 accidents show no decline. Even more shocking is the finding that green commuters — cyclists/pedestrians — now face greater danger on India's roads, with a rise in fatalities for these categories of users of 37% and 29% over 2016, respectively.

Road safety data is a contested area in India. The figures of death and injury from accidents are viewed as an underestimate by scholars; the Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Programme at IIT Delhi, for instance, estimates that cumulatively, road traffic injuries recorded by the police are underestimated by a factor of 20, and those that need hospitalisation by a factor of four. If this is correct, the number of people who suffered injuries in 2017 far exceeds the 4,70,975 reported by the Ministry. It is welcome that greater attention is being paid to the design and safety standards of vehicles, but such professionalism should extend to public infrastructure: the design of roads, their quality and maintenance, and the safety of public transport, among others. The Centre has watered down the national bus body standards code in spite of a commitment given to the Supreme Court, by requiring only self-certification by the builders. Relaxing this long-delayed safety feature endangers thousands of passengers. There is little chance of the NDA government, now in the last year of its tenure, making a paradigm shift. Valuable time has been lost in creating institutions for road safety with a legal mandate, starting with an effective national agency. The Road Safety Councils at the all-India and State levels have simply not been able to change the dismal record, and the police forces lack the training and motivation for professional enforcement. The urgent need is to fix accountability in government.

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