

Why it's imperative for Road Safety Bill to go through in Budget session

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On April 17, a bus carrying 40 passengers plunged into a gorge in Odisha, killing at least 25 people and injuring over 11. This comes just weeks after a horrific incident in February, when a bus crashed into a river in Gujarat, killing 41 people. Neither incident made news beyond the day of the crash as such incidents have become a common occurrence in our country.

An analysis by SaveLIFE Foundation reveals that every year, there are more than 500 mass casualty road crashes in India, in which thousands perish. While the statistics of deaths and injuries are alarming, it's worth understanding the economic impact of road crashes on the Indian economy.



And not just because the majority age group affected by road crashes here is also the most economically productive age group: the 15 to 45 age group.

According to a 2014 Planning Commission report, road crashes lead to an annual economic loss equivalent to 3% of India's GDP. At 2015-16 GDP figures, this amounts to a massive loss of Rs 4 lakh crore each year. This is a mammoth figure, but hardly surprising given that annually road crashes not just kill 1.4 lakh people and maim three times more, they also cause significant property losses, infrastructure damage and pose a huge burden on already stretched healthcare, police and judicial systems, and loss of livelihood for thousands of families.

According to the International Road Assessment Programme (iRAP), in terms of economic productivity alone, every road crash death in India costs the country 70 times the GDP per capita, and every serious injury costs 17 times the GDP per capita. At 2014-15 figures of GDP per capita published by the World Bank, the total loss of economic productivity stands at over \$22 billion, or Rs 1.5 lakh crore, each year.

So, how far can an amount equal to 3% of GDP take us? Rs 4 lakh crore equals one-fifth of the total budget allocated for 2016-17. Ironically, this amount is seven times the entire budget of the ministry of road transport and highways, and 11 times that of the ministry of health and family welfare. The amount would be more than sufficient for funding several crucial ministries in the government.

Two of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's most ambitious schemes — the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, to fund which a new cess has been introduced, and the 100 Smart Cities Mission — can together be funded 20 times over each year for Rs 4 lakh crore. The figure is also five times the annual budget for India's planned food security programme, which, according to the ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution, stands delayed due to budgetary constraints, forcing millions to go hungry.

It is a no-brainer that comprehensively addressing road crashes will not only prevent the unimaginable emotional trauma that lakhs of families must suffer each year, but it will also lead to significant economic benefits as outlined. While successive governments have continued to focus on poverty alleviation as a key agenda item, they have more or less been oblivious to the fact that road crashes directly contribute to poverty in India each day by snatching away breadwinners from poor families and pushing them into dire circumstances instantly. Controlling the problem will help India address this crucial development indicator as well.

The good news is that some headway has been made towards finding a solution to the problem. The recently issued government guidelines, provided force of law by the Supreme Court through a recent judgment, will by itself save thousands of lives each year, otherwise lost due to delayed emergency care. But there will be a more lasting effect if the overall framework in which road safety can be sustained.

From overhauling the system that issues driving licences to poorly trained drivers, to addressing corruption and capacity constraints in enforcement, to ensuring minimum safety standards in road engineering and vehicle design, to enabling consistent data collection nationwide — these are all urgently needed reforms.

The government has taken a step forward by drafting a comprehensive Road Safety Bill but has been unable to introduce it in Parliament so far. Why the hold-up? With the second part of the Budget session of Parliament underway, perhaps the conversation on Indian economy and our Budget should include the introduction and passage of the Road Safety Bill. This way, the long road to implementation of such a reform can begin sooner than later.