

Delhi Hit-and-Run: Are Young Drivers Loose Cannons on the Roads?

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When the police extracted 21-year-old Rishabh Rawat from his Honda City in the early hours of Monday morning, [he was allegedly inebriated to a level where he couldn't stand straight without support](#). In fact, he wasn't even aware of that just minutes earlier he had mowed down three people, two of whom died and one was critically injured.

The incident is ridden with reasons for alarm, and raises questions as to whether this is an extreme case of individual carelessness or a systemic fault that fails to deter extreme behaviour of this kind. To answer this question, let us break the incident down into two aspects – the circumstances and the behaviour.

With respect to circumstances, one would assume, ideally, that any behaviour that has the potential to inflict major damage would be ceased immediately by the authorities. However, before arriving at the spot where the first individual was mowed down, Rishabh allegedly drove for 10 minutes in a highly inebriated state at a speed far above the limit, without once being impeded. One might argue, in turn, that the incident took place in the early hours of the day when the presence of enforcement agents was sparse.

[The Quint: Speeding Car Mows Down Two in Delhi](#)

Dealing with 'Risky Behaviour'

However, the relatively low volume of traffic in the early hours often encourages speeding, which demonstrates the need for even greater regulation at this time of day. The idea here is that risky behaviour such as speeding and drunken driving — which was permitted without consequences in this case and many others — are internationally recognised by organisations such as the WHO as major contributors to road crash fatalities, and must be clamped down upon with severity. In India, 64,633 people were killed in 2015 due to speeding, and thousands due to driving under the influence of substance.

These circumstances are brought about by lacunae in the existing laws with respect to road safety, which are currently in the process of being amended by the government.

An effective way of altering these circumstances would be to ensure that India's sole legislation dealing with road safety, the 1988 Motor Vehicles Act (MVA), includes strong provisions that addresses all contributing factors specified by the WHO, by way of multi-sectoral reforms.

Amending the Motor Vehicles Act

The other way of perceiving this incident would be to attribute it to a single case of extreme behaviour. In that case, however, we must examine the nature of consequences that would be faced by an individual who digresses from acceptable behaviour to such a large extent. Incidentally, this is

not the first such incident and clearly past cases, many of which were high-profile, have failed to create any deterrence.

The length of trial, during which the accused were on bail, combined with punishments such as community service, as awarded to Sanjeev Nanda, clearly show that we have a long way to go to highlight the consequences of such homicidal behaviour. Seven people died in the Alistair Pereira case and six in the Nanda case.

Perhaps this leniency could be rectified by laying down specific penalties and procedures for such cases in the MVA. The recently proposed amendments, in fact, invoke IPC provisions, which an offender must be charged with for acts causing death and injury in addition to enhanced penalties. But these amendments must be supported in a bipartisan manner and passed by Parliament.



The car that hit three pedestrians at different places in Janakpuri area of Delhi, killing two of them on June 13, 2016. (Photo: IANS)

Police and Judicial Reforms

Besides the Centre, which can strengthen the law, the onus of implementation lies with the states which must build capacity to bring this epidemic under control. Traffic policing needs to be modernised, intuitive awareness campaigns must run all year round, and the state judiciary must be sensitised to treat such cases with the seriousness they deserve.

The Rishabh Rawat case also highlights how Indian youth view their responsibility on the roads. Sanjeev Nanda, Alistair Pereira and now Rishabh have between themselves killed 15 people, at the age of 21. They were all drunk, speeding and tried to flee after mowing down several people. Just a few months ago, a young driver, four days short of turning 18, speeding in his father's Mercedes on a busy road in Delhi, killed 32-year-old Siddharth Sharma who was merely trying to cross the road.

In addition to tightening the systems that train and award licenses to young drivers, we must begin engaging with them at home and in educational institutions in a focused manner. The fact these youngsters killed people on the road, is not just their failure, but a collective one that failed to drive their responsibilities home.

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