



# Road Safety: A Journey That Must Be Taken

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That road crashes kill hundreds of thousands each year in India is known. That most of them are preventable, is not news either. Yet, India continues to remain the global leader in this epidemic that kills over 400 people each day.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently released the Global Status Report on Road Safety, 2015 (GSR). Although the report acknowledges that globally the number of road traffic deaths has plateaued since 2007, the picture remains alarming for India. Beyond statistics, the report exposes yet again the dismal road safety standards in the country, especially the lack of a comprehensive framework for road safety.

According to the GSR, 2,07,551 people were killed in road crashes in India in 2014. This is 46% more than the figures reported by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) for the same period. This anomaly exists because the WHO's definition of road crash deaths - "any death which occurs within 30 days as a result of injuries sustained due to a road crash" - is not followed uniformly across India.

The collection of accurate, robust and reliable data that captures the context and extent of any problem is the first and foremost step in addressing it. A National Trauma Registry based on the internationally accepted definition of road crash deaths would help capture the gravity of the problem in its entirety. But this too remains on the back burner like most other aspects of emergency care in India.

The GSR has evaluated country specific legislations based on five risk factors: enforcing speed limits, prevention of drunk driving, safety of children, use of seat belts and use of helmets.

Disturbingly, the current Indian law does not meet the requirements for four out of five of these factors. The report also identified a set of seven international standards that are accepted as "basic minimum standards" for vehicle manufacturing and Indian vehicles met only two of seven of these. These findings are hardly shocking as road traffic in India is still governed by a nearly three decade old law, The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.

While India is increasingly aspiring to make its presence felt in the international economic order, its road safety record is particularly dismal when compared to the other emerging markets. For instance, among the BRICS nations, Russia meets all seven vehicle safety standards, and has best practices in place for three out of the five risk factors.

Even Brazil, with one-sixth of India's population and nearly half of India's GDP, addresses 4 four risk factors satisfactorily and meets five out of seven vehicle safety standards.

These shocking trends, if not addressed immediately, will continue to remain grave stumbling blocks to India's economic and infrastructural aspirations. India has the second longest road network in the world, and the government has recently announced the ambitious target of building 30 km of highways every day. On an average, one person is killed on every 2 km of National Highways in India every year. If we go ahead with our fixation towards highway construction targets, without simultaneously addressing road safety concerns, it could mean a loss of 15 more lives every day solely on our National Highways.

We, as a nation, are continuously paying a heavy price for road crashes in terms of lives lost, burden of long term injuries and pressure on health care services. While central minister Nitin Gadkari has repeatedly promised a strong road safety law and other systemic reforms, the Government has not moved much on these commitments. Based on the recommendations of an expert group headed by Former Union Transport Secretary, Shri S. Sundar, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had drafted a comprehensive road safety law more than a year ago, but it has so far failed to

enact and implement the much needed legislation.

Also, while the ministry issued guidelines this year for the protection of Good Samaritans who come forward to help road accident victims, no efforts have been made to spread awareness about the same. As a result, a vast majority of Indians are still ignorant about their rights as Good Samaritans, and thus still hesitate to perform the basic duty of helping road accident victims, leading to thousands of preventable deaths.

Mr. Gadkari has recently promised again to introduce the Bill in the winter session of the Parliament. It's high time that the government fulfils its commitment made to citizens by addressing existing policy gaps in road safety, supported by sustained enforcement, and public awareness.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi travels globally to build a positive image for India, the government must get its act together and address the falling reputation of the country on road safety. With renewed attention towards this issue in the new Sustainable Development Goals, the international community is sending us a strong message. Are Indian policy makers listening?

*(G.K. Pillai is the former Union Home Secretary and Piyush Tewari is the Founder and CEO of SaveLIFE Foundation.)*

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