

The Road To Safety

Good governance is key to making traffic conditions risk-free and convenient for people

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The week is being marked as Road Safety Week. Ironically, India is the world leader in traffic-related deaths – 1.05 lakh in 2007, going by the WHO's Global Status Report on Road Safety, 2009. This number rose to 1.33 lakh in 2010, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. True, India is better off than some other nations: estimated road traffic deaths per 100,000 population were 16.7 in 2007 while the average number for low-income countries was 21.9, middle-income countries was 19.5 and high-income countries was 10.3. Also, 85% of the victims were male and 75% within the age group 15-49. And the total number of road accidents was high, at 4.3 lakh in 2010.

Why is the situation so bad? The main reason is lack of governance on Indian roads. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development defines weak governance as governments that are either unwilling or unable to assume their responsibilities. In the case of Delhi, this argument may be viewed as a stretch given recent policies undertaken by the government, including introduction of the use of Facebook by Delhi traffic police, increased police presence, proposals to prosecute drivers caught drunk etc. But none of this is enough.

Rather, good governance should be defined to include efficient planning; transparent laws and their implementation; planned roads taking into

account the behavioural patterns of users and traffic flows; consistent width of lanes; working traffic lights with sensible signalling; properly trained drivers; and monitoring by well-trained, well-informed and well-mannered police.

Poor governance has led to formation of traffic-related habits that are hard to change. For instance, many drivers do not drive in a lane nor signal their intention to change lanes. First, do clearly marked lanes even exist? Second, have these drivers been trained to change lanes in a safe manner? Evidence from a paper published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics (2007) shows that

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using an agent to get a licence is encouraged in Delhi and it is possible to get a licence without taking a driving test. People pick up driving skills later.

Even assuming people are formally trained to drive, does the training manual go into details about, say, changing lanes? The Oregon (US) Driver Manual 2010-11 says, "Before you start to pass, be sure you have enough room to complete the manoeuvre. If you have to cut back into your lane too soon,



Stop, look and especially listen

you risk sideswiping the vehicle you are passing." Ill-trained drivers, however, think driving just involves rotating the steering wheel and honking to manoeuvre a way through traffic. Even with driving classes, training manuals need details. For example, Delhi traffic police's list of road signs on its website is woefully inadequate. And how many of us are even aware of the website? A related point is that most trainers are themselves ill-trained.

The 2009 WHO study shows India receives a low 2.0 score on laws related to drink-driving, motorcycles and helmets – the irony is that 21% of road accident deaths involve two-wheelers. Clearly, policing is a joke. At major intersections, traffic police merely stop people from crossing red lights. There is need to mark lanes for particular directions at every conceivable

point, teach people how to drive properly and penalise them if they don't follow directions. But just penalties or the mere presence of police on the roads are not deterrent enough.

As for crumbling infrastructure, road lights often do not work and traffic lights, symbols or road directions are often hidden behind trees or posters. A crucial point that the authorities miss is that urban planning in India is inefficient. A common feature seen in both Delhi and Bangalore – the worst cities in terms of share of traffic-related deaths in India – is that they have built stretches of roads with flyovers but forgotten to build infrastructure for pedestrians. This, despite the fact that 9.1% of road accident deaths involve pedestrians. Yes, some places have subways – which are often dark or flooded – and overbridges along a

stretch. But these are limited in number or unenticing. Habits are hard to change when the assumption is that existing infrastructure is crumbling.

Government intervention – that is, good governance – is the key to combating the menace of chaotic road traffic. People, for instance, will always try to beat a red light because they want to reach their destinations faster, not thinking about its negative impact on society. So, policy-makers need to recognise that time is a resource constraint and road planning must address the issue of making optimal use of time spent on the road.

Public policy including road planning must reflect ground realities taking into account users' behavioural patterns. Lanes need to be sensibly marked, and road signs, speed limits and traffic lights placed everywhere, including neighbourhoods. In fact, people need to get into the habit of expecting good, sensible infrastructure and planning. Moreover, there is need to systematically train people, both users and the police, in laws and regulations. A carrot-and-stick policy should be used to encourage good behaviour in both motorists and pedestrians. Information about laws and rules pertaining to driving and related issues should be made available at accessible sites and people made aware of this. Finally, the government must operationalise these policies. That will mark a true transition point for road traffic in India.

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