

Article Title: “Wanted: Safe road home — Road accidents kill 380 persons a day, lawmakers must address the carnage on our streets”

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In most societies, a phenomenon that kills 380 persons every single day would be classified as the gravest of public emergencies. Measures to control the problem would be sought and implemented on an urgent basis. And lawmakers would face massive public pressure to ensure that they do not delay in resolving such a crisis.

Yet, the unfolding spectre of road accidents in India has been a curious exception to these expectations. And as we celebrate Road Safety Week in our country from January 10-16th, it is imperative that we reassess our prioritisation of this issue.

There can be no denying that the problem we face is a serious one. Just in 2014, close to 1.5 lakh lives were lost and another 5 lakh people were injured in road accidents. Our lack of road safety is a problem that affects every section of our society, whether it be the tragic death of Union minister Gopinath Munde after a car accident in 2014, or the equally tragic loss of life and livelihood that is inflicted upon hundreds each day as they make their way to work, college or home.

Apart from the human cost, our economy also suffers – the erstwhile Planning Commission had calculated that as much as 3% of our GDP is lost annually due to road mishaps.

The people’s representatives in Parliament or the government have not been ignorant of the problem either. Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of road safety in a ‘Mann ki Baat’ address in 2015. Just days ago, Union minister for road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari announced that the government will spend Rs 11,000 crore over the next five years to improve road infrastructure and reduce the incidence of road accidents.

And last month, I was part of a group of 50 MPs, from both Houses of Parliament and cutting across party lines, who wrote to the prime minister, urging the government to expedite the introduction of a strong road-safety legislation.

Yet, it is obvious that much more can be achieved. A starting point would be to ask whether the Road Safety Week itself is contributing any meaningful solutions to the problem.

One could be forgiven for getting the impression that the Road Safety Week has, more often than not, been celebratory in its demeanour. This is reflected in the nature of activities that are usually planned for the week, such as the distribution of promotional material like cloth banners, posters and pamphlets and the organisation of a series of drawing, painting and quizzing competitions.

In fact, the National Safety Council's promotional material for the Road Safety Week states, "It is heartening that more and more Members/ Patrons are joining the RSW celebrations". It is indeed rather strange that we seem to be able to 'celebrate' road safety when our record of trying to achieve it has been so dismal.

To be sure, the good intentions behind the organisation of the Road Safety Week cannot be disputed. And it is certainly appropriate to have a designated period of time if we as a society can use it to engage in remembrance of road accident victims, and focussed discussion of the systemic policy gaps that the road transport sector in India suffers from.

But that should not stop us from taking a hard look at whether the current form of the Road Safety Week is having a beneficial impact. We should ask ourselves how much distributing road safety leaflets, flowers and chocolates to road users or conducting painting and drawing competitions helps in making our roads a safer place at the end of the week.

And we should ask ourselves whether we cannot do something more ambitious, more significant to deal with a problem as severe as this.

That brings us to a striking feature of the Indian road transport sector – the absence of a comprehensive legal framework for road safety. The 27 years of observing Road Safety Weeks have only seen road accident deaths increase 300% in that time.

Incidentally, 27 years is also how long it has been since the enactment of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 – India's sole legislation to govern road transport. It is high time that we recognise the need for having an updated legislative framework that can account for the significant developments that have occurred in road transport in the last almost three decades.

Such a legislation already exists – the long-pending Road Transport and Safety Bill. It is high time that we urge the government to introduce this bill in Parliament during the upcoming budget session. We must now look beyond commemorative activities such as the Road Safety Week, and focus on more long-term interventions.

Indeed, the best way to honour the many victims of road accidents would be to demonstrate that we did not fail to learn our lessons from their suffering.