

ROAD ACCIDENTS

Synopsis: Road transport in India is very popular for various reasons, but the conditions of the Indian roads are very poor and deplorable. The rate of road-accidents and fatality in the country is very high. Pressure on roads has been on increase and the number of vehicles is increasing by leaps and bounds. But there has not been matching increase in outlay for the roads in Five Year Plans. Rather it has declined. Lack of road-sense has further complicated the matters. Driving licenses are given on illegal gratifications to the authorities and traffic rules and regulations are thrown to the winds. Overloading is one of the major factors of road-accidents and deaths. The condition of the vehicles is hardly found road-worthy. The unmanned railway level-crossing further add to the chaos and confusion. The multiplicity of authorities and utter lack of coordination among them is another great source of worry. Drug-abuse and addiction by drivers is another major cause of accidents. The very increasing use of mobile phones has posed a new challenge to road-safety. Immediate and effective steps should be taken to check the ever increasing number of road-accidents and deaths. Some very hard decisions in the matter are the need of the hour.

Roads in India are a popular means of both passenger and goods movement. Travel by road provides a lot of flexibility, convenience, speed and reliability, particularly at short distances in cities and towns. Therefore, it is the most preferred medium of transport. But Indian roads in cities, towns and those connecting them have been in a very poor condition. Their development and maintenance have not kept pace with the growth in vehicular population. Consequently, there are accidents, serious injuries and deaths all around. Indian roads are red with human blood. The rate of road accidents and resulting loss in man and material in India is one of the highest.

The neglect of Indian roads is pathetic. In the first Plan the outlay was 6.9 percent of total expenditure which declined to 3 per cent by the Eighth Plan. The neglect and poor maintenance of Indian roads have made the road-travel very hazardous. About 60,000 lives are lost every year in road accidents. This fatality rate is 25 times that of the U.S.A. The pressure on roads is increasing abnormally and nothing effective and urgent is being done by the concerned authorities. During the year 1951-1994 traffic growth in the country was estimated to be 8-10 per cent on an average. Country's vehicle strength went up from 3 lakh in 1951 to 253 lakh in 1994. It would double to 540 lakh by the turn of the century. The number of vehicles in Delhi alone was 27.67 lakh in 1996. It is

more than the combined vehicle strength of three other metropolitan cities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The road length in Delhi during this period increased only to 27,000 km. from 10,000 km. The situation in other cities and towns is no better, in some cases still worse.

The writing on the wall is in bold and clear letters. The lack of road sense by the drivers and other users of the road have further complicated the matters. It is an open secret that people get drivers licenses without knowing proper driving or the knowledge of the traffic rules. Lane-discipline is missing; road-safety measures are thrown to the winds; drivers, particularly the youth zig-zag on the roads and the traffic police remains a silent spectator. Red-light is often jumped particularly in the early and late hours of the day. Over-speeding and violating the prescribed limit are also there in abundance. There is hardly any round-about discipline. The motorists often do not acknowledge that the vehicles on the right should be allowed to move first. The tendency to overtake is also responsible for many road accidents. Moreover, there are about 40 vehicles of different style both slow and fast moving which hamper the smooth flow of traffic.

Over-loading of passengers and goods is very common which is one of the main factors of accidents and deaths on the road. City buses are the worst offenders in this respect. They are always overcrowded and overloaded. In towns and villages also people can be seen sitting on the roof-tops of the buses. A full family of wife and husband with their 2-3 children riding a two-wheeler is not an uncommon scene in towns and cities in utter disregard of the rules of road-safety. Consequently, there are heavy casualties and the authorities are sleeping over the problem oblivious of the urgency of the matter.

Like the roads, the condition of the vehicles is also a source of great worry. They are very old, rickety and unworthy of use and still they are running on the Indian road to the great danger of users and others. It is estimated that 50 per cent of the vehicles on the roads are not road-worthy. Indian tendency to flog the dead horse is quite obvious. Overloading and plying of substandard vehicles cause the rapid deterioration of roads besides accidents which may prove fatal. Then there are un-manned level-crossings across the railway lines. Hundreds of people in India die in such accidents.

All these factors have made driving on Indian roads a nightmare. Newspapers are red with the daily reports of fatal road accidents. There is no cooperation and coordination between various agencies and authorities concerned with the control and regulation of road traffic construction and maintenance of roads and those granting licenses to the drivers and registration to the vehicles. The roads in the cities are often owned and looked after by

multiple agencies, that makes the confusion worse confounded. For example in Delhi, besides Transport Authority and traffic police there are Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), Public works Department and the National Highway Organization.

The latter four are mainly responsible for the construction of the roads and their proper maintenance. The quality of the roads is sub-standard. They are often full of potholes, rough and uneven stretches. In rainy season their conditions becomes the worst. The lack of proper road-light, signs etc. also contribute their portion of the road hazard. The pavements on both sides of the road are not free from encroachments. There are shops, khokas, dhabas, workshops etc. on the pavements meant for pedestrians. The repair shops park their vehicles right on the road space. Poor road and street-drainage further add to the problem of accident.

Addiction and drug-abuse is another area of concern. Many a time an accident takes place because the driver is a drug addict. The drivers of many types of vehicles are found driving after taking drugs or alcohol. These drivers can be addicted to one or more drugs. They are in a state of intoxication while driving. Most of the drivers belong to poor middle class or lower sections of the sections of the society. They are engaged in driving trucks, buses, three-wheelers, tempos etc. and are often overworked. To overcome their fatigue they often take intoxicants and then drive and cause accidents. Intoxication leads to the clouding of perception and errors in judgement. This leads to overtaking, reckless driving etc. and then to ultimate accidents. There are accidents, road-accidents, and hit and run cases because of the abuse of drugs. In any cases public transport drivers are found regular users of drugs. They drive buses and Lorries and are drug addicts or alcoholics at the same time. Drivers often have ready cash as they are paid on daily basis and so it makes far easier to have access to alcohol or drugs.

The increased use of mobile phones is also a factor which poses a challenge to road safety. The elite and rich drivers often use their mobile phones while being on the move in their cars. This results in accident and crashes. These phones have added further to the already worsening situation of road deaths and accidents. Driving and using the mobile phone simultaneously may cause loss of control of the vehicle or concentration needed in safe and sane driving.

To prevent these accidents, it is imperative that effective long and short term measures are immediately taken. Road safety should be a compulsory school subject. Roads should be properly maintained and looked after. There

should be multi-lane roads wherever necessary. There should be separate tracks for slow moving vehicles from those of fast and very fast moving vehicles. There should be an effective check on speed of the vehicles. Radar guns can be used to check the speed. Violation of traffic rules should be strictly dealt with streamlined. Those driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol should be given exemplary punishment and their licenses cancelled. There should be heavy fines as well besides imprisonment. Road tax should be increased as a measure to reduce vehicle population on the roads. People should be encouraged to use public transport system can also pool cars so as to avoid road congestion. There should be very strict rules in regard to issue of driving licences and registration of vehicles. Above all, there should be proper awareness among the masses about road safety, observation of traffic rules and the proper use of the roads and national highways.