



Ensuring road safety

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(Mains GS 2 : Government Policies and Interventions for Development in various sectors and Issues arising out of their Design and Implementation.)

Context:

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had participated in Third High Level Global Conference on **Road Safety for Achieving Global Goals 2030** held in Sweden in 2020 where it was conceptualised to have zero road fatalities in India by 2030.

High fatalities:

- In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly, after considering the alarming situation of road accidents fatalities, adopted the Global Plan for the Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020 aimed at reducing fatalities in road accidents by 50% by the year 2020, and was accepted by much of the world including India.
- Though a number of steps have been taken in the last decade to check road accidents, statistics published by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways show that the number of deaths in road accidents increased from 1,42,485 in 2011 to 1,51,113 in 2019.
- The annual publication of the National Crime Records Bureau, titled Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India (2020) shows that 1,33,201 deaths were recorded in 2020.

- This reduction of accidents in 2020 was primarily due to the various lockdowns which were in force during the first wave of COVID-19, when only a limited number of motor vehicles were on the roads.
- Thus, it is evident that despite setting a target of a 50% reduction in accidental deaths, the fatalities from road accidents actually increased in the last decade.

Court's directives:

- The Supreme Court of India while hearing a petition on road safety, passed an order to constitute a '**Committee on Road Safety**' under the chairmanship of Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan, which was notified by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways on May 30, 2014.
- The Court on November 30, 2017, issued a number of directives with regard to road safety that, inter alia, included the constitution of a State Road Safety Council, establishment of lead agency.
- The court further directed for the setting up of road safety fund, notification of a road safety action plan, the constitution of a district road safety committee, engineering improvements, the identification and rectification of black spots, the adoption of traffic calming measures, conducting road safety audits, the acquisition of road safety equipment, the establishment of trauma care centres and the inclusion of road safety education in the academic curriculum of schools.
- Though the Committee on Road Safety followed up every directive of the Court with States and helped in improving the overall road safety scenario, there is much a slip between the cup and the lip.

Traffic violations:

- The Motor Vehicles (MV) Act of 1988 was partially amended in August 2019, and some of the amended and new sections which made traffic violations more stringent, came into effect from September 1, 2019.
- However, most States did not increase the corresponding compounding traffic violations fee. This increase was criticised and people protested on the pretext that the (fine) paying capacity of the average Indian was still limited.
- Also, only a few cases of traffic violations are contested by the accused in a court of law. Therefore, the expected impact of the deterrent provisions of the amended law could not be realised on ground.

Enforcement manpower:

- The enforcement manpower that is available is insufficient to deal with the steadily increasing volume of traffic and the automation of processes is still in its infancy and limited to large cities.

- The number of 'hit and run' cases may decrease if the 'Intelligent Traffic Management System' is implemented on highways and other major roads.
- The Bureau of Police Research and Development has suggested a formula to calculate the number of traffic policemen required in any district which is largely based on the number of registered motor vehicles in any district.
- However, the actual enforcement staff and equipment (due to a limited road safety fund or other funds at the disposal of the police) are insufficient to effectively check traffic violations.

Inadequate funds :

- There are inadequate funds for the rectification of black spots and the undertaking of traffic calming measures.
- Though more than 60% road accidents reportedly take place because of over-speeding, 'speed limit' sign boards are rarely seen or found even on State highways and major roads.
- Most drivers, conductors, and other staff in transport companies (except for government corporations) do not get benefits of the organised sector as they draw a meagre salary, usually do not have a weekly off and are most often forced to work overtime.
- Therefore, unless their service conditions are improved, their attitude towards road safety cannot be expected to be above board.

Change the casual attitude:

- The most challenging task is to improve the driving skills of drivers and change the casual attitude of other road users towards road safety.
- Even today, getting a driving licence is not a difficult task and many States do not have test driving tracks. There are no institutes for refresher training if a driving licence of a person is suspended.
- Though the amended Motor Vehicles Act has certain provisions in this regard, they have yet to come into force.

Not enough emphasis:

- It has been observed that about two-thirds of victims of road fatalities are two-wheeler drivers and pillion riders, but there is not enough emphasis being given to them.
- Though the wearing of safety headgear is mandatory, it is not enforced strictly in all States due to a lack of strong will.
- The Emergency Response Support System (ERSS), with its pan-India emergency response number, 112, has proved very useful in saving the lives of accident victims in the golden hour, but this scheme has not been implemented evenly across States.

Better data collection:

- The accident data collection format of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, and now a part of the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS) of the police, is quite cumbersome.
- This process of data collection is quite time consuming but it is essential to identify the true cause of an accident and take remedial measures.
- Similarly, the main objective of the recent iRAD (Integrated Road Accident Database) Project, an initiative of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, funded by the World Bank, and under implementation, is to enrich the accident database and improve road safety in the country by collecting data from different stakeholders using the iRAD mobile and web application.
- Hopefully, the integration of these projects will bring some synergy and make the data collection procedure more user-friendly.

Conclusion:

- A number of steps have been taken by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and States to improve the road safety scenario in the country.
- However, unless the States and the Centre are on the same page in improving and strengthening the infrastructure of States by enabling more funds, merely and only fixing targets will not be a pragmatic approach to reduce road accident fatalities.