



—Apoorva Salkade.DNA

Cruise control

To control drunk driving, be very, very strict

Dinesh Mohan

Another late-night party ended in a gruesome crash in Bandra, Mumbai, last week. A Toyota Corolla with six young people aged 18 to 21 ran over labourers sleeping at a work-site in the early hours of the morning. A newspaper reported that "the shocking case of rash driving stunned the city." Various experts and celebrities were upset about different aspects: that there were labourers sleeping on the sidewalk, the rich and the famous get away with "murder", punishment for such offences is not severe enough, the youth of today have an immoral lifestyle, the nouveau riche don't know how to behave, and so on.

The problem is that every few months some such 'news breaking' event takes place, we contribute our bytes, the media expresses its indignation and we carry on. What we get upset about isn't restricted to Indian cities. All cities in the world have spoilt brats, most have the rich and the famous, including the nouveau riche, and most have bars and cocktails parties.

The main issue at hand is that these kids were driving while under the influence of alcohol. And societies where drinking and driving has been controlled do not take the issue as lightly as we do. We glamorise drinking day after day on Page 3. There is no serious allusion to this problem in our movies, TV serials or other mass media. Police departments have not made this a major issue either. This, when scientific studies from Delhi and Bangalore show that over 35 percent of serious crashes have alcohol involvement.

The situation was similar in most industrialised countries in the 1970s. Then they started tak-

ing action. Sharp declines in crash deaths involving alcohol-impaired drivers began to be recorded in the early 1990s, mainly due to improved laws and enhanced enforcement supported by public awareness, which was brought about by citizens' concern. The declines included about 50 per cent in the UK, 28 per cent

Tough measures

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in the Netherlands, 28 per cent in Canada, 32 per cent in Australia, 39 per cent in France, 37 per cent in Germany, and 26 per cent in the US. But it has not been easy.

A number of countries found a strong link between levels of enforcement (especially random and roadside breath tests) and alcohol related fatalities. According to the World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention published by the World Health Organisation, increasing drivers' perception of the risk of being detected is the most effective means of deterring drinking and driving. The use of sustained and intensive random breath testing is the most effective means of reducing injuries resulting from alcohol impairment. This means that at least one in 10 drivers must be tested every year; enforcement must be unpredictable in terms of time and place, and highly visible night after night. This must be accompanied by publicity aimed at making people more alert to the risk of detection, arrest and its consequences, making drinking and

driving less publicly acceptable, and raising the acceptability of enforcement activities.

Unless this is done in a sustained manner, effectiveness drops. Studies from the UK show that when the number of breath tests increased, alcohol-related fatalities dropped and vice versa. It is essential to convince impaired people not to drive in the first place. This is where sobriety checkpoints, where every single driver is given a breath test, make a difference. "They're probably the most effective deterrence strategy we can apply," says James Fell of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.

To start with, the Indian police will have to jettison its antiquated methods and policies. It is reported that the youth involved in the Mumbai crash were given blood and urine tests. Modern non-invasive breathalysers give blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) on the spot with the same accuracy and are being used all over the world. Well designed patrolling routines and random breath testing road blocks have to be set up every night and all over the city. Devices are being developed to noninvasively measure drivers' BAC, like an infrared light that scan the dermis layer of the skin. We can require vehicle manufacturers to install such devices in vehicles as soon as they are commercially available. This will prevent drivers from being able to start their vehicles if their BAC is over the limit.

Complaining about the immorality of the offenders is not enough. We must adopt policies that will deter drinking and driving by action on the ground.

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