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Road safety in India could end up in a mess

13 February 2015

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Greater pool of domain experts needed to save lives

Fatal drive Motor vehicle crashes are responsible for a large number of deaths in India. N. Bashkaran

Soon after the present Government was formed, its Union Rural Development Minister, Gopinath Munde lost his life in a car crash in Delhi. Within a few days, Road Transport, Highways and Shipping Minister Nitin Gadkari said, “In a month’s time, we will redraft the Motor Vehicle Amendment Bill in sync with six advanced nations – US, Canada, Singapore, Japan, Germany and the UK – and thereafter will introduce it in Parliament.”

Never too late

This was welcome news as two Government reports dealing with road safety had been lying on the shelves of the Ministry for years. The first, Report of The Committee on Road Safety and Traffic Management, was submitted in February 2007. The second, Review of the Motor Vehicles Act 1988, followed in January 2011. Both committees were chaired by S Sundar, former Secretary, Ministry of Surface Transport. The first report suggested the establishment of a National Road Safety and Traffic Management Board and an accompanying Bill was proposed for the same. The second made major amendments to the existing Motor Vehicles Act 1988 and introduced international best practices suitable for India.

It appeared that Gadkari had given his ministry a very short window of one month because of the existence of these reports and draft Bills. However, the promised Bill did not materialise and instead a brand new Draft: Road Transport and Safety Bill 2014 was uploaded on the Ministry’s website in September.

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Expert opinion

This new draft has laws picked up from all over the place and is full of flaws as a result. It confuses the role of research and standard making agencies with those involved in day-to-day licensing and policing agencies. If not corrected, the road safety situation in India will end up in a real mess. One of the reasons why it has been impossible to set evidence-based road and vehicle safety standards in India is that the Government does not have domain experts with technical knowledge of issues at hand along with information about international developments. The experts for each standard must be employed by an independent safety agency separate from policing responsibilities.

For example, the Ministry set up eight committees to consider motor vehicle safety test standards for the proposed Bharat New Vehicle Safety Assessment Programme. Almost 70 per cent of the members come from the vehicle industry and the rest from testing agencies. There are no members from research or academic institutions or agencies representing public interest.

It is not surprising then that these committees are attempting to reduce the velocities at which vehicles are tested internationally and dilute the requirements of the pedestrian impact tests. The arguments being offered are that vehicles on Indian roads travel at lower speeds than those in Europe. The fact is that the probability of fatality of seatbelt restrained occupants is low at impact speeds of less than 50 kmph but increases dramatically for small incremental speeds after that. If a large number of occupants are being killed in motor vehicle crashes in India, a significant number must be at high speeds. These are the people we need to save. It will take sometime before we are able to regulate speeds with more efficiency on our intercity roads. So, we should adopt the most stringent international motor vehicle impact standards in India.

Collateral damage

We also know that a large proportion of road crash victims are pedestrians and bicyclists, much higher than the US. It stands to reason then that the first standards to be made mandatory in India should be for pedestrian impact and these should be more stringent than those in the West. This has become even more important now because Swedish researchers under Johan Strandroth have shown that cars with higher pedestrian safety ratings reduce injuries in the real world.

The Ministry's expectation that enactment of the new Bill would save 200,000 lives in the next 5 years is wishful thinking. It is unlikely to happen unless the pool of expertise within the Government and academic institutions increases dramatically in the next few years. A National Road Safety and Traffic Management Board must be set up apart from the activities demanded by the Motor Vehicles Act.

In addition, there would be a need to establish and fund about two dozen interdisciplinary research centres in academic institutions to help and aid the proposed Board. The proposed Bill must be redrafted before it is introduced in Parliament to ensure that we bring professional expertise into the system. Just depending on goodwill and 'common sense' won't do.

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(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated February 13, 2015)