

Reflections

by BOB RUPANI



More than twice the number of people die in road accidents every year in India, than Indian soldiers in 50 years of war and insurgency

I

IN THE ONGOING WINTER SESSION OF Parliament, the government plans to table the new Road Transport and Safety Bill. If passed, it will replace the existing Motor Vehicles Act of 1988.

The Modi Sarkar is introducing this bill because nearly five lakh road accidents occur in India and over 1.5 lakh people die in them annually. More than 10 lakh people in India have died in road accidents in the last 10 years and we lead the world in road crash fatalities. In 2013, almost 1.5 lakh people were killed and close to 5,00,000 were seriously injured or permanently disabled. The numbers for 2014 are believed to be much higher.

Let's compare these figures with the deaths of Indian soldiers in war. In the 1962 war with China, we lost 4000 soldiers. In the 1965 war with Pakistan, the number was 3000 and in 1971, 3900 were killed. In the 1999 Kargil war, about 530 Indian soldiers died. The insurgency in Kashmir has claimed some 50,000 lives till date. So the total deaths, due to these terrible wars and conflicts, have been about 61,430. Well over twice this number lose their lives on Indian roads every year. And nobody even takes notice.

The Modi government wants to bring down road accidents by 50 per cent in the next five years. They claim that the new bill will result in fewer road fatalities as they will streamline the process of issuing driving licenses, improve the system of catching offenders, and digital systems will be introduced for registration of vehicles, levying of fines and to check speeding. The authorities will also look at crash testing of vehicles and making safety features like airbags, anti-lock brakes, etc, compulsory in cars.

One of the key points of this bill is that it aims to make traffic fines so high that it results in fewer traffic rule violations. If a driver causes the death of a child in certain circumstances, the fine is ₹3 lakh and a minimum of seven years in jail. For a manufacturing defect in a vehicle, it's ₹5 lakh in penalty and three months in jail. Driving an unregistered vehicle will attract a fine of ₹25,000. The fines for breaking speed limits range from ₹5,000 to ₹12,500. Those driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs will be fined ₹15,000 and a jail term of up to a year. But a second offence will lead to permanent loss of the driving license and up to two years in jail. The penalty is even heavier for school bus drivers, ₹50,000 in fine and a three-year jail sentence. For not wearing a seat belt, the fine proposed is ₹5,000 and for jumping a traffic light, the first offence ₹5,000, second offence ₹10,000, and third offence More than 15,000, plus a month's license suspension, and compulsory



A new government bill aims to curb road deaths by imposing heavy fines on traffic rule violators

refresher training. Apart from the fines and imprisonment, drivers will be awarded penalty points for every traffic violation. Accumulating 12 penalty points could mean losing your driving license for a year.

This bill certainly has the right intentions, but how effective will it be? You can pass laws, but who will implement them? Raising the fines will just raise the level of corruption. Traffic cops will simply pocket more. The solution is to provide incentives to implement the law. The government should officially give the cops 30, 40 or even up to 50 per cent of the amount they collect in fines. Those collecting the maximum amounts should be given medals and promotions. If the cops officially start getting a percentage of the fine amount and also recognition for doing their jobs properly, they will stop taking bribes.

If the laws are enforced we should see an improvement in road discipline and fewer traffic offences. But we will still need to address the issue of proper driver training, road design and maintenance, correct road markings and signages, vehicle maintenance and road worthiness, etc. Cops check papers, permits etc. But in my 33 years of motoring in India, I have still to see a cop stop a vehicle to check its tyres, lights, brakes or wipers. It will not be easy. ❌

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and has edited magazines like Car & Bike International, Auto Motor and Sport (India), BBC Top Gear (India) and Auto India

@evoindiamag