

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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DRIVERS DOZING OFF IS CONSIDERED NORMAL IN INDIA. BUT WOULD WE ACCEPT PILOTS FALLING ASLEEP AND CRASHING PLANES?

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A few years back, our government said the number of annual road fatalities would halve by 2020, which it has now revised to 2025. But if you go through several of the shocking reports I have seen in the last few months, it's obvious that this is unlikely to happen anytime soon.

According to the data the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has accumulated since 2014, almost 83 per cent of road accident deaths in our country happen due to overspeeding or dangerous and rash driving. In another

survey supported by an automobile manufacturer where some 1,561 drivers were interviewed, it was found that 95 per cent of them did not know half the rules! And 65 per cent of them admitted to driving on the wrong side of the road. And as per the Transport Research Wing (TRW) of the road transport ministry, the second biggest reason for fatal accidents on our national highways in 2019, was wrong side driving! The number one cause was overspeeding, and number three was drunk driving! Despite this, how often you have seen anyone being fined on our national highways for wrong side driving, over speeding or even drunken driving? Yes, drivers are largely free to do as they please on our highways.

One other report says over 1.5 lakh people died in road accidents in India in 2019. Of these, 16 per cent deaths were due to not wearing seatbelts and a whopping 30 per cent because of not wearing helmets! The other figures are equally crazy. The number of deaths due to use of mobile phones while driving was 4,945 and because of hit and run 29,354. Jumping traffic lights led to 1,797 death and potholes another 2,140. What is absolutely shocking though is that 44,358 accidents were caused by those driving without a license! It's insane and with all this going on, how will road fatalities become half by 2025? In my view, it's impossible for this to happen, without the law coming down very heavily on each and every traffic offender. At present for every person punished or fined for a traffic offence, thousands go unpunished.

Those who hit and run do it with impunity. If a truck or bus driver runs over a biker or even crushes dozens of pedestrians, he simply abandons the vehicle and flees, or pretends like he is bystander who is trying to help the very victims he has killed or injured. And he is soon back behind the wheel, with the police case being closed as the "driver is absconding". As long as all this keeps occurring and drivers have no fear of law, I am afraid the number of road fatalities is not going to come down. It can only increase.

What's also completely bizarre are the explanations or causes for some of the accidents and deaths. How often have you read, "Bus falls in a gorge, killing

20 and injuring 18. The driver, who had dozed off, also sustained some injuries"? Or "the vehicle went out of the driver's control and crashed into an oncoming vehicle". It's as if it's taken for granted that drivers will doze off and vehicles will go out of control. The attitude of most people to this is that it's normal and it happens. No, it's not normal. In my view a driver has no business to be driving if he is feeling drowsy. And vehicles only go out of control if the driver is not properly trained or is extremely rash and undisciplined. Would anybody accept "the pilot dozed off", as the reason for a plane crash? So why is it acceptable here?

It must be said that our road users and commuters also do some very senseless things. There was this recent newspaper report that a woman died in an accident as her husband who was riding the bike, got on a video call with his children, as a result of which he crashed! The husband later said that his children were calling to inquire when their parents would reach home. The husband did reach home, but minus his wife, just because he did not stop and pull over to answer the call. And this is something you see all the time, people animatedly talking on their phones, or looking into it, or typing, all while riding or driving. It's something I fail to understand. If it's so urgent, why can't they simply stop and attend to their mobiles? There is also this growing, but distracting and dangerous new trend, of shooting videos for social media while driving or riding.

A few weeks ago, I came across a news item that was shattering. In fact I still cannot get over it. A 13 year old girl was traveling with her mother on an intercity bus in Madhya Pradesh and they were sitting on the right side, behind the driver. The child had some motion sickness and stuck her head out of the window to vomit. Right at that very moment a speeding truck coming from the opposite side passed so close, that it hit and beheaded her! I have never heard of such an awful road accident before. But what later took place is an everyday occurrence, "The truck driver abandoned the vehicle and fled and the police are looking for him", said Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Seema Alawa! 