Road Safety

What is the issue?

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- In 2015, there were over 4,50,000 accidents in the country, of which nearly 1,50,000 were fatal, amounting to 410 deaths and some 1,300 injuries every day.
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- National highways and state expressways accounted for two-thirds of these deaths.
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What are some of the myths about road accidents?

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- The US, UK and Japan, where the accident rate was increasing till 1970, when a number of measures made roads safer. The improved design and technology of cars also led to a fall in accidents.
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- But in many Indian cities, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, **the accident rate has gone up two to five times in the last five years** — this must be due to the burgeoning “automobilisation” of our society.
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- A researcher from IIT Delhi is fond of challenging the mythology that penal measures by themselves lead to better safety.
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- He believes there was a paradigm shift abroad: Instead of forcing people to adapt to traffic situations, countries worked on eliminating risk factors from traffic.
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- In other words, **instead of blaming bad drivers,** the authorities treated people as “normal” and worked on reforming the system.
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- Another myth is that as countries get richer, the number of accidents decline.

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- But, an urbanised and literate state like Tamil Nadu topped the fatality rate among states in 2014, followed by Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.
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What could be done?

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- The alternative approach, such as that adopted in Sweden, is to **shift the onus for accidents from drivers to the road transport system.**
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- The system must be so designed that it accommodates the individual who has the worst protection and lowest tolerance to road violence.
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- This would obviously include the **young, elderly and physically challenged.**
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- The much-vaunted “greening” of highways in India, without proper safeguards, is actually hazardous because a speeding car can veer off and hit a tree, proving fatal.
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- Roundabouts at important intersections can greatly reduce accidents, as much of Lutyens’ Delhi should know.
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- It is a no-brainer that a reduction in traffic speed reduces accidents, so devices such as speed-breakers are essential.
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- The American Journal of Public Health points out that speed “humps” reduce the dangers to children by a half to two-thirds.
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- A 1% increase in speed leads to a 3% increase in deaths, which is why New York City has reduced the maximum speed from 50 to 40 kmph.
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- Four-lane highways are very accident-prone, which is why all traffic “calming” measures are required.
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- Simple improvements, like **bright lights at junctions, speed cameras, a police presence and making helmets compulsory** can work wonders.
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- Seat belts worn even at the rear, which is seldom done here, can lower the risk of death to occupants by upto three-quarters.

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What is the way forward?

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- The bill to amend the **Motor Vehicles Act** passed by the Lok Sabha last week, by increasing fines five-fold and even more, misses the point because **drivers aren't necessarily deterred by such fines.**
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- Instead, frequent, visible and unpredictable checks not by electronic means will help more.
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- Further, there are **no permanent safety experts in central agencies** like the National Highways Authority of India and in states.
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- However, given that drivers of vehicles on highways earn around Rs 15,000 a month, fines and other measures may indeed act as a caution.
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Source: The Indian Express

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