
TRAFFIC RULES AND ROAD SAFETY: NATIONAL CHALLENGES AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Road traffic injuries are one of the top causes of early death and disability around the world. India makes up a large share of global fatalities, even with recent changes in laws and court actions. This paper looks closely at the challenges India faces in improving road safety. It examines how laws and courts can hold people accountable and considers international examples from countries like Sweden, Japan, and Germany, which have lowered their accident rates. By comparing India's weaknesses with these successful models, the study points out both gaps and chances for improvement. The paper concludes with recommendations that focus on stronger enforcement, technology-based monitoring, and necessary reforms, treating road safety as an essential part of the constitutional right to life.¹

¹ (WHO 2023; World Bank 2020; Supreme Court of India, *Umri Pooph Pratappur* 2025).

Introduction

Road safety has become a major issue for governance and public health in the twenty-first century. The World Health Organization estimates that over 1.19 million people die each year in road traffic accidents around the world. Tens of millions more suffer injuries that need medical care (WHO 2023, p. 5). India's situation is particularly alarming. In 2018, the country reported about 149,000 deaths, which is roughly 11% of the world's total, even though it has only about 2% of all global motor vehicles (Bhatt 2019). These figures mean that a fatality occurs roughly every three to four minutes, highlighting the seriousness of the crisis.

The economic impact is also significant. The World Bank estimates that India loses nearly 3% of its GDP each year because of road crashes (World Bank 2020, p. 21). Most victims are in the 18 to 45 age group, which means that traffic deaths directly affect the nation's workforce. This paper looks at these national issues in the wider international context.²

Legal and Regulatory Framework in India

The main law that governs road safety in India is the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 (MVA). Seeing the shortcomings of the previous framework, Parliament passed the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 (MVAA). This law greatly increased penalties for violations, required the recall of faulty vehicles, and established a Motor Vehicle Accident Fund to compensate victims (Bhatt 2019, p. 3).

One important part of the law was holding the government accountable for roads that are poorly designed or maintained. Contractors or authorities that do not keep infrastructure safe can face penalties of up to ₹1,00,000 (approximately USD 1,500). The MVAA also suggested creating a National Road Safety Board. This board would develop policies, advise governments, and establish vehicle safety standards.

However, the challenge is in putting the law into practice. Enforcement is not consistent across states. Some local governments are hesitant to adopt the higher penalties. Additionally, corruption and a lack of resources weaken the law's effect. Without steady enforcement, even the best laws do not work well.³

² (WHO 2023; Bhatt 2019; World Bank 2020)

³ (Motor Vehicles Act 1988; Motor Vehicles Amendment Act 2019; Bhatt 2019).

National Challenges in Road Safety

Despite recent reforms, India still faces a unique set of challenges:

1. *High Fatality Burden*: India accounts for over 10% of global road deaths. The fatality rate per 100,000 people has been increasing, reaching nearly 19 per 100,000 by 2013 (WHO 2023, p. 8).
2. *Vulnerable Road Users*: More than half of the road deaths in India involve pedestrians, cyclists, and two-wheeler riders, who do not have enough protective infrastructure (World Bank 2020, p. 17).
3. *Infrastructure Deficiencies*: Poor design, lack of median barriers, insufficient lighting, and inadequate maintenance create ongoing risks. The Supreme Court in *S. Rajaseekaran v. Union of India* (2018) reported 3,597 deaths caused by potholes in 2017 alone.
4. *Weak Enforcement*: Traffic policing suffers from corruption, a lack of training, and the absence of modern monitoring technology.
5. *Institutional Gaps*: Responsibilities for road safety are split among various ministries and agencies, resulting in poor coordination and little accountability.

These challenges show that road safety in India is not just about individual carelessness but reflects a failure in governance.⁴

Judicial Interventions and Case Laws

The Indian judiciary has increasingly recognized road safety as part of the right to life under Article 21.

1. *Umri Pooph Pratappur v. MP Road Development Corp. (2025)*: The Supreme Court ruled that the right to safe, usable roads is part of the fundamental right to life. It stated that even if road maintenance is contracted out, the state is still ultimately responsible.

⁴ (WHO 2023; World Bank 2020; *S. Rajaseekaran v. Union of India* 2018)

2. *S. Rajaseekaran v. Union of India (2018)*: The Court acknowledged pothole-related deaths and ordered states to improve road maintenance, noting that neglecting roads directly threatens lives.
3. *SaveLIFE Foundation v. Union of India (2016)*: The Court set guidelines to protect “Good Samaritans” who help accident victims from harassment by police or hospitals. This was a significant step in improving responses after crashes.

These cases show the judiciary’s proactive approach in treating road safety as a state responsibility, not just an administrative option.⁵

International Perspectives and Best Practices

Comparative experiences provide models that India can follow:

1. *Sweden, Vision Zero*: Adopted in 1997, Vision Zero is based on the idea that no human life should be lost in road traffic. Sweden redesigned roads by adding roundabouts, barriers, and lower speed limits in urban areas. As a result, fatalities dropped by more than half in two decades, even with an increase in traffic volume (RoadSafetySweden 2020).
2. *Germany, Licensing and Enforcement*: Germany’s licensing system is one of the strictest in the world. It requires extensive training and high fees. Along with strong enforcement of speed limits and drunk-driving laws, Germany has one of the lowest fatality rates per 100,000 population in Europe (WHO 2023, p. 24).
3. *Japan, Pedestrian Priority*: Japan integrates urban design with safety by prioritizing pedestrians through wide sidewalks, pedestrian-only zones, and strict rules in school zones. This cultural and legal framework leads to one of the lowest road fatality rates in the world.

These examples show that broad strategies, which combine laws, engineering, and cultural changes, can greatly reduce fatalities.⁶

⁵ (Umri Pooph Pratappur 2025; *S. Rajaseekaran* 2018; *SaveLIFE Foundation* 2016)

⁶ (RoadSafetySweden 2020; WHO 2023)

Comparative Analysis: India and Global Lessons

The situation in India is very different from practices in other countries. Sweden's Vision Zero focuses on holding road designers accountable, while India often blames individual drivers too much. Germany spends a lot on driver training before issuing licenses, while in India, people can often get licenses with little or no testing. Japan prioritizes pedestrians, but in India, urban design leaves pedestrians to manage busy traffic without safe crossings.

To learn from other countries, India needs to adjust its approach. For instance, the principles of Vision Zero could be included in infrastructure planning, but costs and scale pose challenges. Stricter licensing based on Germany's model could improve driver behavior, but it would require reducing corruption at regional transport offices.⁷

Technological and Policy Innovations

Emerging innovations can significantly improve enforcement and safety.

1. *AI-based Surveillance:* Automated cameras and AI systems can detect violations like red-light jumping, speeding, and helmet non-compliance in real time.
2. *Smart Infrastructure:* Intelligent traffic signals that adjust to congestion patterns and dedicated lanes for vulnerable road users can reduce conflict points.
3. *Insurance-linked Penalties:* Connecting traffic violations to higher insurance premiums, as some European countries do, creates a financial disincentive for repeated offenses.
4. *Public Participation:* Mobile apps can enable citizens to report potholes or traffic violations, fostering community accountability.

These strategies would modernize India's approach and bring it closer to international standards.⁸

⁷ (RoadSafetySweden 2020; WHO 2023; World Bank 2020)

⁸ (World Bank 2020; WHO 2023)

Recommendations

1. *Strengthen Enforcement:* Adopt nationwide electronic monitoring and eliminate discretion-based enforcement to reduce corruption.
2. *Infrastructure Investment:* Focus on safe design, such as barriers, roundabouts, and pedestrian bridges in both urban and rural areas.
3. *Licensing Reform:* Implement rigorous, standardized testing with mandatory driver education.
4. *Public Education:* Run mass campaigns on the dangers of speeding, drunk driving, and mobile phone usage.
5. *Post-crash Care:* Expand trauma centers and ensure full implementation of Good Samaritan protections.
6. *Institutional Leadership:* Empower the National Road Safety Board to coordinate strategies across different sectors.

Conclusion

India's road safety crisis shows deep governance issues, cultural attitudes, and problems with infrastructure. However, as examples from other countries demonstrate, road deaths are not unavoidable; they can be prevented with the right laws, enforcement, and design. By integrating road safety into the right to life as stated in the constitution, strengthening institutional capacity, and learning from global best practices, India can make real progress toward the UN goal of cutting road fatalities in half by 2030. Achieving this will require political will, proper resource allocation, and a societal understanding that no human life should be seen as expendable on the nation's roads.⁹

⁹ (WHO 2023; Supreme Court of India 2025; World Bank 2020)

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