

The signals are ominous

Apart from imposing stiffer penalties for offenders, the government should educate the people on road discipline

The importance of the Supreme Court's suggestion to the attorney general on enhanced penalties for rash and drink driving cannot be exaggerated. In 2015 about 150,000 died in road accidents in India. Add to that the number of people maimed because of such accidents, and the cost to society and the government, already huge for many other reasons such as natural calamities, becomes even greater. This does not entirely include the cost that's borne by the affected families, which have to pay year after year for the treatment of the injured. And if the injured happens to be the earning member of the family, the loss that accrues, material and psychological, is incalculable.

At present, Section 304A of the Indian Penal Code covers the offences referred to in the court and anyone found guilty is jailed for two years. This, the court said, is inadequate. The Union Cabinet has approved the Motor Vehicle (Amendment) Bill, 2016, providing for hefty penalties for violating road-safety rules. The fine for driving without licence goes up 10 times to ₹5,000 while the penalty for drink driving increases fivefold to ₹10,000. The government must push for an early passage of the Bill. This is the legislative aspect of the matter. Next comes implementation. For a person living in, say, Delhi, road indiscipline of the meanest order is visible every day. Drivers disobey the red-light signal once they sense there is no policeman keeping a watch on them, they do not stick to the driving lanes they should be in, stopping at zebra crossings is something that's virtually laughed at except when people drive in the VVIP areas, etc. The punishment for these offences is so small that people do not think twice before flouting the rules in this regard. Strangely, two-wheeler riders are found to be more undisciplined. And it is seldom that offenders are apprehended before an accident has taken place.

This is not to say that all blame for any accident lies with the vehicles concerned. Pedestrians too do not score a success in matters of road rules. In this respect the ministry of surface transport, in association with the police and transport ministries in all states, could start an awareness campaign to educate people on various aspects of traffic rules. If this is followed through sincerely, the results will be more durable.