

A relatively cost free ten-point plan for improving road safety

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ROADS: It is well-known that our roads have become increasingly unsafe over the years. As far as I know, no serious attempt is being made to correct this trend. A recent study conducted by a team headed by Prof. Amal Kumara of the University of Moratuwa and published as a booklet titled "Analysis of road accidents in Sri Lanka" reveals some disturbing facts regarding road accidents. They are highlighted in a single paragraph of the Executive Summary which reads as follows:

"Statistically there are over a thousand road accidents recorded per week with five to six people being killed everyday. This means about 2000 people are killed yearly while 3,000 are critically injured and another 12,000 suffer minor injuries. This means one in 250 families suffers personal injury or death due to a road accident every year".

The study has set out a very detailed analysis and made important suggestions and recommendations towards improving safety. These are, for the most part practical and commendable. The purpose of this note however, is to introduce a short term, low cost set of workable recommendations to improve safety. In making these suggestions, the whole road environment and its perception by its users has been taken into account.

No parking on pavements

Pavements are for pedestrians to walk on. Therefore, the parking of vehicles on pavements should be prohibited and this rule strictly enforced. It is not uncommon to find pedestrians walking on the road because of obstructions on the pavement. The constructing of bollards on pavements to prevent parking should be prohibited as it results in further hindrance to the pedestrian.

Pedestrian crossing rules

The rule states that a vehicle should approach a crossing at a "speed that will enable it to stop". By implication, the driver should be preparing to stop and therefore, the sounding a horn at a crossing should be considered a serious offence, and motorists taken to task for doing so. The road environment close to a crossing is meant to be one which has slow moving traffic and fast moving pedestrians as they walk briskly across within the lines of the crossing. Accordingly, there



REQUIREMENT: Addressing road safety, need of the hour

should be no stopping on pedestrian crossings by motorists or pedestrians. Needless to say, parking on a pedestrian crossing is a serious offence.

No animals on the road

The roads are for traffic and not for animals. (According to the Motor Traffic Act, pedestrians are also traffic). Our roads are used by dogs, cats, cows, goats and in some areas, by pigs. It is not uncommon to see serious accidents occur as a result of a motorist trying to avoid running over a dog or a cat. They are a very serious hazard. Steps should be taken to see that no animal is allowed on the road unless it is on a leash. If necessary, local authority laws/by-laws should be formulated for this purpose but it is a must.

Mandatory for motorcycle riders

The motorcycle is meant for only two persons. There is an argument

that in these days of economic hardships, children could be allowed be taken on the motorcycle to save costs. This is not tenable because carrying more than two on a motor cycle upsets the balance and endangers the safety of those on the vehicle as well as that of other road users. The study quoted above revealed that the vehicle that was involved most in road accidents in 2002 was the motorcycle.

Bicycles for a single rider

Doubling as it is called, is an offence. The factors relating to balance quoted above apply to the bicycle too. The objective, it must be remembered is the safety of all road users. Skills and economic reasons have no place here. Safety is enhanced only by the observation of road rules.

Strict rules for buses

The figures in the analysis quoted above show that next to the motor cycle the next most frequent accidents are caused by buses (498

in 2002). Bus lanes should be clearly indicated and adhered to. Speeding is already an offence and only needs enforcement. However, the question of overtaking involves other factors such as the competitive nature of the bus services. It is suggested that since there is a move to introduce timetables for all services, this question too be studied along with it.

No soliciting by bus conductors

In terms of the Motor Traffic Act, soliciting for passengers is an offence but as we all have observed, it goes on unchecked and unpunished. Again arguments are raised that it is a result of the competition. Going back to CTB days, it was customary to display destination boards in front, at the back and also on the side facing passengers at a halt. This eliminated the need to inquire or be told of the destination. Secondly, as in other countries, booklets could be made avail-

able to the public at a nominal price which indicate route numbers, details of routes, frequencies, times etc. Apart from soliciting being an offence, it is (together with the way the conductors act to take passengers in) an unseemly phenomenon. It also increases the frequency of stopping buses between halts to pick up passengers - a dangerous obstruction to traffic.

Strict observance of silence zones

It is well-known that the area around hospitals, maternity homes etc. are silence zones and there are signs which indicate this to motorists. However, it is unfortunate that these are not observed and the noise in these places is often annoying to passers by. One could only imagine what effects the cacophony of sound may be having on the sick and the suffering. The police should act to enforce silence as required by law and take offenders to task. It should also be men-

tioned that if some observe the rules and others do not, it could result in accidents in silence zones.

Functioning of all signs and signals

It is not uncommon to find ambiguous signs such as "No parking from 12 a.m. to 7 p.m." The sign is probably meant to signify 12 noon to 7 p.m. Steps should be taken to see that signs are visible and accurate. Similarly, markings on the road such as lane markings and particularly, pedestrian crossings should be always clearly shown.

No parking on 'wrong side' of the road

A vehicle should not be parked facing oncoming traffic. This is because it obstructs traffic when parking as well as when pulling out. Delays to both oncoming traffic when crossing over to merge are added to the delay in merging. Besides all this, it is dangerous. It is a very easily identifiable offence and therefore the police should have no difficulty in enforcing it strictly.

I am aware that the suggestions made above are not comprehensive and complete solutions but at least they are, in my opinion, steps in the right direction. However, none of these should be implemented or imposed without first making the public aware. Publicity and awareness of rules and regulations should always precede implementation and enforcement. I would go a step further and have a period during which offenders are warned before and a date set for the commencement of prosecution for offences. The policy should be to appeal first to the good sense of people before "using a stick".

Panel discussions on TV and radio, newspaper articles, publicity through local authorities etc. are a must.

Also, professionals should be engaged to draw up programmes on safety, good driving, etc.

A panel discussion on the findings in "The analysis of road accidents in Sri Lanka" chaired by Prof. Amal Kumara (who is also the Chairman of the National Transport Commission) would be a good start with the participation of the Police, Motor Traffic Department, Transport authorities and Commuter Societies.

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