



Road Safety in India: Impact of the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 in Maharashtra

Context

In the bustling streets of India, road safety is a pressing concern. With approximately 1.68 lakh lives lost and over 4.4 lakh people injured in road traffic crashes in 2022 alone, the country faces a significant public health and economic challenge. India also claims the top position in road fatalities, accounting for 11% of the global share.

The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 (MVAA 2019) was introduced with the aim to transform India's road safety landscape. With new introductions such as modernized approaches to traffic monitoring and safety measures, as well as stricter penalties for traffic violations, and various levels of digitization, there is a pressing need to understand both the potential benefits the Act may usher in, as well as the readiness of States to implement them.

P4i's approach

To understand the important components of the MVAA 2019, Partnerships for Impact (P4i) conducted a study in Maharashtra to assess the status of its implementation and compliance. The methodology includes a rapid literature review and analysis using the PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal/Administrative, and Environmental) and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) frameworks. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the MVAA 2019 and its impact on the state of Maharashtra. Additionally, the study assesses the Act's effectiveness in enhancing road safety through the Safe Systems approach and examine its public health implications before, during, and after accidents. The literature varied across 200+ government reports, civil society publications, and media articles as sources.

Key findings

Evolution and Amendments of the Motor Vehicles Act

The Motor Vehicle Act has seen two successive changes – the 1939 act was amended in both 1988 and 2019, to account for the challenges that accompanied urbanization and rising traffic, as well as challenges in limited compensation and inadequate safety measures. The 2019 Amendment specifically aimed to create new provisions for pedestrian and child safety, vehicle recalls, and accountability for road contractors.

Identifying the Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats of MVAA 2019

Strengths

Strengthened penalties and digital transformation: Higher fines for traffic offences promote responsible driving behaviour, and digitizing license issuance procedures increases efficiency and transparency.

Stricter vehicle fitness rules: Emphasis on modern safety features like ABS and airbags, with provisions for vehicle recall are introduced with an aim to make manufacturers more vigilant

Expedited emergency response: Focus on cashless treatment and health interventions may reduce time between crashes and medical intervention.

Weaknesses

Perceived as encroachment on state rights: The Act is seen as overstepping state authority, creating tension between centralized regulations and state autonomy

Lack of public awareness and behaviour change: Insufficient focus on awareness and behaviour nudges may act as an impediment against change, community participation and road safety campaigns are needed at the grassroots levels.

Post-crash care and gender-specific gaps: Lack of focus on increasing availability of equipped ambulances, and lack of safety measures for women and vulnerable road users.

Opportunities

Infrastructure enhancement: Improving traffic management systems, road design, and maintenance can reduce congestion and accidents, ensuring safer and more efficient travel for all road users.

Public awareness and education: Enhancing road safety education in schools and involving local authorities can foster a culture of safety from a young age, reducing accidents and promoting responsible behaviour.

Learn from global approaches: Incorporating Vision Zero and Safe Systems principles into the MVAA 2019 can promote a comprehensive road safety strategy, targeting zero fatalities and serious injuries.

Threats

Effectiveness of the laws: There are concerns that stringent laws alone may not significantly reduce fatalities without proper enforcement, public awareness, and supporting infrastructure.

Faulty layouts and diverse traffic patterns: Poorly designed national highways and varying traffic patterns, especially in rural areas, can hinder the implementation of effective road safety measures.

Public objection: Perceptions of VIPs avoiding penalties and resistance to increased fines could undermine compliance and enforcement efforts.

Maharashtra in focus

The Act positively impacted user safety precautions, with a study reporting increased seatbelt and helmet usage and reduced overloading violations, especially on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway.

Maharashtra excelled in establishing localized joint action committees, and planning and funding efforts, demonstrating a commitment to road safety that can serve as a model for other states.

Furthermore, Maharashtra's deployment of technology-based safety initiatives aligned well with MVAA 2019's emphasis on leveraging digital advancements for road safety

However, the state's hesitance to implement high fines and other state-specific issues highlight the need to account for socio-political factors in states before the rollout of national policies, and to strategically communicate the Act's impact across party lines.

Key takeaways

From these findings, new road traffic norms are ushering in approaches beyond individual behaviours. The MVAA 2019 allows an opportunity to leverage the collective power of designers, builders, operators, and users to enhance road safety in India.

Modern road design and technology are taking center stage, with features like crash barriers, roundabouts, and real-time monitoring systems creating a safer environment for road users.

Finally, introducing the provisions to include local communities and civic bodies might foster a sense of ownership, contributing to a safer road network for everyone.