

Bold Initiatives towards safer roads and driver training

Indian roads have been witnessing a constant rise in the number of motor vehicles, hence, leading in making India top the chart in road accidents. With such an upsurge, the number of deaths in road fatalities also increases. During the last year more than 1.30 lac people died in road accidents. Major factors behind such road deaths include unsafe driving practices, poor maintenance of vehicles, poor road conditions, lack of awareness about the rules and regulations among the people, etc. 75% of road accidents are attributed to poor driving. In order to curb such fatalities, driver training grabs utmost importance because a well-trained driver understands the right way to drive and also ensures daily checks and routine maintenance of the vehicles.

In India, Ministry of Roads Transport and Highways (MORTH) organizes a "road safety week" every year in the month of January to create awareness on these matters among the drivers and the general public, but still the impact of this annual exercise is not at all evident. It has rather reduced to being a mere ritual since so long. Barring the annual ritual of road safety week, there is no other initiative of a considerable magnitude to address this issue. Of course there are camps organized by certain NGOs and transport trade associations like AITWA & IRU to create awareness about road safety but these are minor scattered attempts to meet the situation. All these NGOs need to make a concerted effort in all parts of the country for raising the alarm and creating a safe environment for achieving the ends of road safety goals.

In spite of various technological advancements, our country has failed to take advantage of appliances, equipments and how-to, available internationally. As we know India holds dubious distinction for highest numbers of lives lost on roads with the number of deaths touching 1.43 lacs, you will be shocked to know that India accounts for 10% of total road accidents in the world.

There is hence a need of manufacturing and using technologically advanced appliances, vehicles, traffic and parking solutions in order to prevent accidents. Also, there is a need to develop road safety solutions.

In the year 2006, Mr. Ramesh Agarwal & Mr. Rajendra Agarwal felt that "Drivers are the key Drivers of economy" to positive ends, constantly and consistently and hence a survey was conducted, the revelations of which were shocking and alarming.

For a man who had transportation business at the heart of his venture, this seemed like an unbelievably pathetic and disturbing situation. For the next few months, his thoughts only went on how to revive this class and re-establish its identity so that their work gets acknowledged by

all. He was unanimously made the national president of AITWA in 2007 and that was when he pledged to work towards the upliftment of "Drivers of our nation".

It was a very appalling issue that the driver who is at responsibility for the major section of transportation was treated so shabbily and with disrespect, despite being on road in the direst situations and gets no relief as he carries the target of "safe delivery" with him. The following statistics speak of the lives and conditions of poor drivers who are available in all terrains, be it any season or weather.

- Drivers do not get to sleep for more than 2:40 hours/day (uninterrupted).
- Drivers die at least 10 years before the normal human life span.
- About 22% of drivers remain unmarried throughout their lives.
- 26% of total trucks viz. approximately 23 lacs vehicles get halted everyday due to unavailability of truck drivers.

Over the last 27 years, Agarwal packers and Movers Ltd. (APML) has become a company of national and international repute and has enormous credentials to its name getting acknowledged in Limca book of records for being the largest movers of household goods in the country. Realizing their CSR towards the driver community, Mr. Ramesh Agarwal has set the prototype by making the first "Driver Seva Kendra" in the country. Owing to the callous elements that exist in the society, a driver cannot even afford to have an undisturbed sleep of 8 hours which is of utmost importance for a normal person. Against this, a driver falls short of even 3 hours of sleep in a day sometimes. Mr. Agarwal's idea was that the driver Seva Kendra would be a "home away from home" for the poor drivers. Not only would the Kendra preserve the ease of feeling of being at home, but, also provide all the necessary facilities in order to make the drivers' job easier.

This Driver Seva Kendra is situated at Jaipur- Kishangarh highway (NH-58) built on a sprawling 55 acres and houses a building having over 500 cots and fans for the drivers to have an uninterrupted rest. Allied facilities include barbers, large bathrooms and toilets, arrangement for parking the vehicles and all these facilities are provided free of cost. The motels/ dhabas that function there provide good and hygienic food at zero profit basis. Also available is a small retail shop where there are available commodities for needs at reasonable rates. A small "truck repair center" is also available where drivers can get their vehicles repaired at very nominal charges.

In his interview to parivahan pragati, Shri Ramesh Agarwal- Chairman and Managing worker (APML) said, "We are trying to make this profession attractive and dignified so that drivers may get back their due place in the society. It's a great challenge and we all must start working from the ground level to alleviate their tattered souls". He further added "A country having nearly 1

crore of commercial vehicles does not have even 10-15 good Drivers' Training Schools all across the country. It is a planning failure; the ripple effect of which is bound to affect the economy dearly. There must be joint efforts of the industry along with business houses, the training institutions and the government. There is an intense need to change the perception about the work of drivers within the supply chain ecosystem. The act of having double drivers in N.P vehicle will only increase the shortage of trained drivers in the industry if the matter is not taken seriously and also if no concrete decision is taken to resolve it immediately". To overcome the shortage of trained drivers, "Drivers Training" must be taken as a discipline at ITIs across the country. Any policy framed, will also take some time to get implemented and ripe the benefits and hence we need to gear up to see the beneficial results as early as possible.