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## EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# Above the Line: India's Road Deaths Are a Policy Failure, Not Fate

 INDIAN EXPRESS

14 July 2026

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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# Above the Line: India's Road Deaths Are a Policy Failure, Not Fate

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## THE LIFT LINE

A country that would treat 1.77 lakh deaths from any disease as a national emergency has learned to shrug at the same number on its roads, and that shrug, the belief that carnage is the price of mobility, is the deadliest policy of all.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

India recorded around 1.77 lakh road-crash deaths in 2024, one of the highest national tolls in the world, averaging close to 485 deaths a day and nearly 20 an hour. The comfortable explanation is fatalism, that a large, motorising country with crowded roads will simply have accidents. The evidence rejects that. Road deaths are the product of decisions about road design, vehicle standards, speed enforcement, trauma care and the seriousness with which the law is applied, and every one of those is a policy choice. For an aspirant, this is a rare theme that sits squarely across two papers at once: **GS2** governance and the role of Parliament and states, and **GS3** infrastructure and safety, tied together by the four Es of road safety, the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019 and India's international commitments.

**GS Paper 2:** Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors; issues arising from their design and implementation; the roles of the Union and states. **GS Paper 3:** Infrastructure, and safety in the transport sector.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019, which raised penalties, introduced Good Samaritan protections and provided for a National Road Safety Board under Section 215B, notified in September 2021; the four Es of road safety, engineering, enforcement, education and emergency care; the Brasilia Declaration of 2015 to which India is a signatory; and **Sustainable Development** (<https://ujjyari.com>).

com/terms/sustainable-development/) Goal target 3.6, which sought to halve global road deaths. For **Mains**, argue that road safety is a governance and legislative problem before it is an engineering one, and that the gap lies in enforcement and implementation rather than in the absence of law.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For decades road deaths in India were treated as accidents in the literal sense, random misfortunes rather than a preventable public-health failure. That framing shaped policy: weak enforcement, poorly designed roads, slow trauma response and a licensing and inspection system riddled with gaps were tolerated because the outcome was seen as bad luck rather than bad governance.

The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019 marked a shift in intent. It raised penalties sharply, created protections for Good Samaritans who help crash victims, tightened licensing and provided for a National Road Safety Board to advise governments on standards. Yet the toll has continued to climb, and crash severity, deaths per 100 accidents, has risen over the years, which tells the real story. The problem is no longer primarily the absence of law. It is the thin and uneven enforcement of the law that exists, the slow rollout of safe road design, and a trauma-care system that loses lives in the crucial first hour. Fatalism fills the space that implementation has left empty.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### The four Es diagnose the failure

Road safety is conventionally read through four levers, and India underperforms on each in different ways.

| THE FOUR ES    | WHAT IT MEANS                                    | WHERE INDIA FALLS SHORT                                             |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Engineering    | Safe road and vehicle design                     | Unsafe junctions, missing crash barriers, black spots left unfixed  |
| Enforcement    | Consistent policing of speed, helmets, seatbelts | Patchy, under-resourced, poorly deployed technology                 |
| Education      | Public awareness and driver training             | Weak licensing and driver-training systems                          |
| Emergency care | Rapid trauma response in the golden hour         | Slow response, thin trauma network, deaths after survivable crashes |

Over-speeding alone is linked to a large majority of deaths, a behaviour that consistent enforcement and engineering can directly address.

## Law without enforcement is a paper shield

The 2019 Act supplied the **statutory** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/statutory/>) tools. The missing element is implementation: cameras that work, penalties that are actually imposed, Good Samaritan protections that citizens know about, and a National Road Safety Board empowered and resourced to set and audit standards rather than merely advise.

## A shared Union-state responsibility

Roads, policing and trauma care straddle the Union and the states. Parliament can legislate and set standards, but enforcement, road engineering and emergency response are delivered largely by states, which makes cooperative execution, not another statute alone, the decisive variable.

### HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Replace the language of accidents with the language of systems. A crash is called an accident because it feels random, but at the level of a whole country the number of deaths is stable and predictable, which means it is being produced by a system and can be changed by changing the system. The transferable frame is the safe-systems approach: humans will always make mistakes, so roads, vehicles, speeds and post-crash care should be designed so that a mistake does not become a death. The examiner rewards the candidate who reframes fatalism as a policy choice and locates the failure in enforcement and implementation, mapping each shortfall onto the four Es and onto the Union-state division of responsibility, rather than blaming driver behaviour alone.

### THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

About 1.77 lakh road deaths a year, near 485 a day -> fatalism frames them as random accidents -> but the toll is stable and system-produced, hence preventable -> Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019 + National Road Safety Board supply the law -> gap lies in the four Es: engineering, enforcement, education, emergency care -> weak, uneven implementation across Union and states -> safe-systems design + consistent enforcement + golden-hour trauma care -> curve bends toward SDG 3.6 and Brasilia commitments

### WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Enforce the law that exists.** Scale automated speed and helmet-seatbelt enforcement and impose penalties consistently, because over-speeding drives the majority of deaths and is the fastest curve to bend.
- 2 **Empower** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/empower/>) **the National Road Safety Board.** Give the Board the **mandate** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/mandate/>) and resources to set binding safety standards, audit road design and fix black spots, so that engineering failures are corrected systematically rather

than case by case.

- 3 **Build the golden-hour system.** Strengthen the trauma-care network, ambulance response and Good Samaritan awareness, so that survivable crashes stop becoming fatalities in the first critical hour.
- 4 **Make it a Union-state mission.** Align Parliament’s standard-setting with state-level enforcement and engineering through a time-bound, target-driven plan anchored to India’s Brasilia Declaration and SDG 3.6 commitments.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about road safety, the four Es, the Motor Vehicles Act and the governance of public-health risks. This editorial converts those themes into a live argument about legislation and enforcement, which is exactly the applied, cross-paper analysis the examiner rewards over a description of the statute.

**Practice question:** “India’s road-death crisis is a failure of governance and enforcement rather than an inevitable cost of motorisation.” Critically examine with reference to the four Es and the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019. (250 words, 15 marks)

**Sources:** *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Ministry of Road Transport and Highways* (<https://morth.gov.in/>), *World Health Organization* (<https://www.who.int/>)

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

## Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/ie-road-safety-parliament-legislation-2026/>

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