

[X](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#)

(http:

OPED (/CATEGORY/OPED)

One-track mind

To address road safety in Nepal, we need to mind the gaps

- Puspa Raj Pant (/author/ puspa+raj+pant)

65 [f](#) [t](#)

SHARES



Jan 27, 2019-

Multiple road accidents, occurring almost every hour and in almost every part of the country, have been gradually drawing media attention in recent weeks. Supplementing these news reports by traditional forms of media, social media discussions have also addressed the topic. However, while the issue has gained much-needed attention in the general public, some online media often promote dialogue without paying adequate care to the potential consequences or effects on the audience.

Most of the reports around road crashes employ number-counting approaches to describe these incidents—summarising them in terms of deaths and severe injuries only.

This promotes the narrative that road crash incidents are isolated events rather than an emerging cause of death of economically active people. This frame tends to overlook the impacts on human resources, health services and financial resources of the country.

In fact, an incident of road crash is a product of a series of intermediate factors shaped by humans, vehicles physical environments, and socio-economic atmosphere, among others. Ensuring road safety doesn't follow the same models as the prevention of pathogenic diseases, where blocking any one from the three factors, agent, host and environment, can stop the progression of a disease. Instead, it requires all three factors in ideal conditions. For example, a perfect road or a brand new car cannot save people if the driver lacks proficiency.

Authors or journalists have the opportunity to affect the ways in which these stories are told. In doing so, they hold the potential to help shift public behaviour and attitudes, influence policy and, ultimately, contribute towards saving lives. Here, I demonstrate the complexity of road safety by briefly addressing a few gaps in current approaches to and engagements with road safety.

Questioning sources

The first gap deals with linguistics. Although 'crash' and 'accident' hold similar meanings in the Nepali language, the terms suggest that these incidents are 'mishaps'—which leaves little space to think about predictability, prevention, and response. Further, the vehicles involved in crashes are commonly labelled as 'ill-fated', which may not always be the case.

Another gap lies in the fact that the true magnitude of the problem is always missed out in news reports. This might be a product of Nepali media's heavy reliance on government statistics (as opposed to press releases from human rights agencies). In Nepal, the primary people collecting statistics for road crash or road injuries are traffic police officers. It is an open secret that traffic police systems do not have the human or technical resources to record each and every instance of widespread road crash. Almost every report citing police records underreport the true magnitude. For example, The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated 4,622 deaths for the year 2016/17; and another Global Burden of Diseases Study estimates it to be 6,765. Often, we are reporting only a half or a third of the real burden in Nepali media.

By not scrutinising these numbers, we run the risk of assigning lower priority to accidents—and, more importantly, downplaying the magnitude of the issue. Furthermore, accidents often lead to a significant number of road injuries that, on some occasions, require several months of hospitalisation. Deaths tolls often rise in the process of recovery, weeks after accidents occur. But reported 'death counts' do not include the toll of these injuries and the long-lasting effects that injuries have on the health and socioeconomic well-being of victims.

What's more, there is a tendency to focus on the metropolis while over 90 percent of all deaths due to road crashes occur outside Kathmandu Valley. Most of these reports cite sources from the Metropolitan Traffic Division rather than from the Traffic Police Directorate at Naxal. By relying too heavily on statistics by the Metropolitan Traffic Division, we run the risk of providing a false account of the available law enforcement measures to address road crashes on a national level.

The measures employed by traffic police differ greatly outside the valley. By highlighting the discrepancies in resources and preventive measures between metropolitan centres and rural districts, we could do more to tackle the systemic issues that continue to shape the lack of road safety in Nepal.

Between law and apathy

In conjunction with this point, it is also worth echoing the concerns of many commentators by highlighting the gap in law enforcement. Although the Vehicle Transport Management Act and its various regulations and directives have articulated the roles and responsibilities of those who have been employed to build and audit the status of roads, fitness of vehicles and issuance of a driving license, legislation is rarely enforced. Disproportionately, a higher number of people are killed on the roads outside Kathmandu and yet, over half of all traffic police are employed within the valley.

Not to mention, the numbers of traffic police officers have remained the same in the past decade, while the number of vehicles in the country have increased by 500 percent.

This brings us to yet another gap: political commitment—the ultimate place of parking our grievances. The continued failure to ensure road safety in the country is largely due to the lack of political will. In the past, we relayed blames to the political instability, frequent changes in the government, and the social upheaval. Now, we need to remind our governmental counterparts that they have no excuse of limiting their commitment towards such a pressing—and in many cases, avoidable—issue.

In this context, it is also appropriate to address our approaches to advocacy. Most of our advocacy efforts revolve around thinking about drivers and traffic police—who are both blamed heavily for these incidents. While it is important to encourage drivers and traffic police to undergo rigorous training, it is also pertinent that we shift our focus to other stakeholders as well.

We often overlook the importance of educating peers on the correct uses of standard motorcycle helmets by motorcyclists and pillion riders, including children. We have under prioritised the importance of investing in high-visibility equipment for cyclists or pedestrians during the dark. We haven't discussed ways to engage the media to dig out the causes of a crash beyond police statements. We rarely discuss the limited number of technicians employed by the government's Department of Transport Management to test the roadworthiness or fitness of millions of vehicles. We haven't talked about how many drivers might have eyesight problems or mental health problems. These issues also deserve recognition.

In the past 25 years, we have already lost 100,000 fellow citizens due to road crashes-one million of whom are left with disabilities. In this pivotal juncture, it is important to address and identify the gaps in our current approaches and frames of thinking.

Pant, PhD, is Research Fellow of Nepal Injury Research Centre, University of the West of England Bristol. Twitter @Puspa_RPant.

Published: 27-01-2019 07:28

Like 65

[The Kathmandu Post \(/\)](#) > [Oped \(/category/oped\)](#) > [.puspa Raj Pant \(/author/puspa+raj+pant\)](#)

NEXT STORY



(/news/2019-01-27/the-power-innenglish.html)

The power in 'Nenglish'
(/news/2019-01-27/the-power-innenglish.html) >

Tags: [Road Accident \(/Tag/Road+Accident\)](#) [Opinion \(/Tag/Opinion\)](#)

User's Feedback

Click here for your comments

Comment via Facebook

0 Comments

Sort by **Oldest**



Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

Don't have facebook account? Use this form to comment