Wearing rear seat belt set to become mandatory: Gadkari

Penalty decided; notification will be issued in next 2–3 days, he says

DHRUVAKSH SAHA
New Delhi, 6 September

Days after a car accident killed former Tata group chairman Cyrus Mistry, Union Minister for Road Transport & Highways Nitin Gadkari on Tuesday announced the central government would now make it mandatory for all travellers in a car to wear a seat belt. He said a penalty has already been decided for defaulters, regardless of whether they are in the front or rear seat.

The minister was speaking at the 'India@75 — Past, Present and Future' conclave organised by *Business Standard* in New Delhi.

> **'BUCKLE UP', SAY SAFETY EXPERTS; CALL FOR BETTER SEATBELT NORMS**
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He said: "The notification for the rear seat belt mandate will be issued in the coming two-three days."

"Road safety is the only field where I tried my best but could not succeed," he said, lamenting that there remains a problem in the mindset and lack of will to adhere to motor vehicle rules.

Though Gadkari did not specify the quantum of fine on defaulters, he said seat belts, just like the installation of airbags for all passengers, would be mandatory for all categories of cars. India ranks the highest in the world in terms of road accidents.

Nitin Gadkari, minister for road transport & highways, at a conclave organised by *Business Standard* in New Delhi

PLAN OF ACTION

▶ Will mandate alarm–beeping feature in all vehicles if rear–seat passenger is not wearing seatbelt

▶ To treble annual toll revenues to ₹1.4 trn by 2024	▶ To open NHAI InvIT to retail investors, with an offer of 7–8% minimum returns	▶ To build electricity–based mass rapid transport network, procure 50,000 electric buses

Gadkari...

Though Mistry was in the rear seat of the ill-fated Mercedes SUV, according to police, he wasn't wearing a seat belt at the time of the accident on Sunday. In 2021, around 500,000 road accidents occurred in the country, killing 150,000 people. Previously, the minister pointed out how faulty detailed project reports (DPRs) for national highways have played a big part in compromising road safety.

Business Standard earlier reported that the government has mandated training for all consultants preparing DPRs, in view of poor road design leading to several accidents.

Gadkari mentioned that a whopping 60 per cent of casualties emanating from road mishaps were of people in the 18-34-year age group, and highlighted that road accidents and Covid-19 collectively delivered a 3 per cent hit on the country's economy. About growth of the roads sector in the country, the Union minister said annual toll revenue shall increase to ₹1.4 trillion by 2024, from ₹40,000 crore currently. The Centre is currently in full swing to expand the national highway network from 140,000 km to 200,000 km.

Gadkari said he is opening the roads sector for retail investors. The government is prioritising retail investments in highway infrastructure, followed by domestic investors and foreign investors, he noted. The minister said the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) will now look at extensively monetising highway projects via InvIT and toll-operate-transfer, and also find ways to make these projects accessible to retail investors.

Gadkari's ministry is planning to build a satellite-based tolling system that can help eradicate the need for toll plazas. Already the transition from physical payment of toll to FasTAG, a digital medium, has brought down pass-through duration at toll plazas to an average of 25 seconds.

He also stressed the need for a mass rapid transport system because of excessive four-wheelers on roads, especially in urban areas. "This should be the highest priority of the government," he added.

"It is my dream to make an electricity-based public transport system in India," Gadkari said. Among his many ambitious plans, one is to establish a "skybus" service from Dhaula Kuan in Delhi to Manesar in Haryana. Gadkari said a plan to introduce 50,000 electric buses on national highways is in the works. Recently, his ministry also exhorted private players to build electric vehicle (EV) charging stations on a public-private-partnership basis to provide a conducive environment for the expansion of the EV market in India. There are currently 5,000 electric buses plying in the country, he noted. The road transport and highways minister also said that there is a need for overhauling the current logistics landscape of the country, as India's logistics costs are much higher than developed nations. He said the cost of transportation using waterways is 10 per cent of that through roads.

But Gadkari conceded that climate change-related impacts are leading to severe mishaps, such as floods and drying up of rivers, and they may eventually hurt the prospects of inland waterways projects, which is a flagship scheme of the Centre. "River connectivity should become flood prevention projects. Water is not a problem, planning is," he added.

Nasal vaccine...

The development, he tweeted, would further provide a boost to "our collective fight" against the pandemic.

Krishna Ella, chairman and MD, Bharat Biotech, called iNCOVACC "a global game changer" in the intra-nasal vaccine technology and delivery systems. "Despite the lack of demand for Covid-19 vaccines, we continued product development in intra-nasal vaccines to ensure that we are well prepared with platform technologies for future infectious diseases...iNCOVACC has been designed for efficient distribution and easy administration," he said.

Sources in Bharat Biotech said there would be no scalability issue with the intra-nasal vaccine, which is based on the viral vector platform. The company's Covid-19 vaccine Covaxin (inactivated virus vaccine) had issues about fast scaling up due to low yields.

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