

Road to international airport, or a veritable highway to hell?

Pedestrians have to scamper across, avoiding speeding vehicles

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BANGALORE: Manjula (58) has sold fruits by the side of Bellary Road (National Highway No.7) for 18 years. She now talks of the other side of the road as if it were a different town: "People like me cannot cross the road carrying our goods and have to rely on autorickshaws to just get us across."

She witnesses accidents at the Vidyanagar crossing every day. Not surprising, since the continuous stream of vehicles touches speeds of up to 150 kmph.

The Vidyanagar cross is among three key intersections on the road to the new Bengaluru International Airport (BIA) that has turned overnight into a death trap, say the traffic police. The University of Agricultural Sciences and Chikkajala Cross share this dubious distinction.

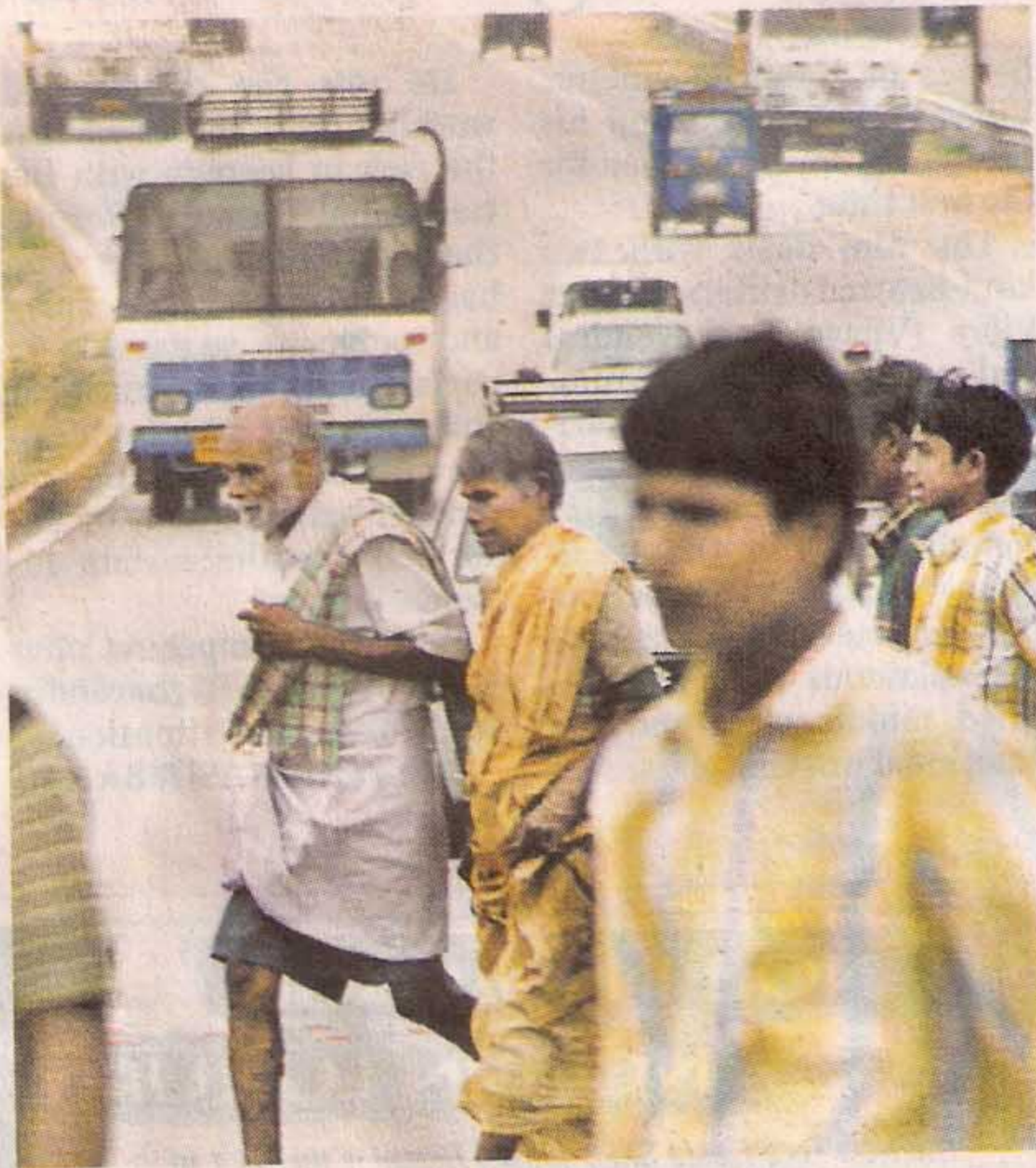
The police records reveal a staggering loss of life within just the first five weeks of the grand inauguration of the BIAL in Devanahalli: 17 people have been killed and 36 injured in 66 accidents.

This translates to one person killed every two days — and all this on the 19-km stretch between Yelahanka and the airport.

No fewer than 550 motorists have been penalised for speeding.

More signals

Authorities are now scrambling to address the collateral damage of the much hyped



WALKING INTO A DEATHTRAP: Pedestrians trying to cross the Bellary Road near Vidyanagar in Bangalore. — PHOTO: K. GOPINATHAN

- 17 killed, 36 injured in five weeks on Bellary Road since the inauguration of international airport
- Environmentalists say infrastructural lapses violate the National Urban Transport Policy

"signal-free" road. The traffic police have asked for three more signals to add to the existing five, five pelican lights and 40 blinkers, to be installed within a month.

"The signal-free concept is not feasible unless there is proper infrastructure for pedestrians, with skywalks and underpasses," Praveen Sood,

Additional Commissioner of Police (Traffic and Security), told *The Hindu*.

"We have been raising this issue in every meeting, but not enough is being done," he said.

The city traffic police placed front page advertisements in newspapers urging motorists to stick to the speed

limit of 80 kmph. Most of the accidents occur between 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. Complicating the problem of speeding cars is the absence of streetlights on large stretches of the highway, according to the police.

Negotiating the traffic has become a daily ordeal for residents. For 13-year-old Komala, just getting to school at Chikkajala Cross involves the risky task of crossing a very busy part of National Highway.

Pedestrians overlooked

In the rush to ensure connectivity to the airport, the needs of pedestrians and residents of the area have been all but overlooked, said Mr. Sood.

He attributed this apathy to the involvement of multiple agencies including the National Highways Authority of India and the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike.

While the BBMP maintains that the highway beyond Hebbal is not within its jurisdiction, National Highways Authority of India sources say proposals for underpasses have been made, but not yet been approved by the Centre. However, barricades, medians and streetlights are being erected now.

This infrastructural oversight violates the National Urban Transport Policy which places the rights of people above motorists.

Leo Saldanha of the Environment Support Group wants criminal liability to be fixed on the authorities. "This should be planned before such a road is opened."