



The bridge over the Jagbudi River during monsoon season. At the time of the disaster, the riverbed was dry. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Death on India's Highway 66

A bus veers off a bridge, fracturing lives across generations and exposing the hidden costs of India's dangerous roads

By JESSE PESTA, KRISHNA POKHAREL and PREETIKA RANA

KHED, India—Two twentysomething friends, Bawtis Fernandes and Shivam Dhanji, boarded the overnight bus to Mumbai with big dreams. They planned to get jobs on a freighter to Japan, sock away some money and return home to their sweethearts.

“We’ll roam around the world,” Mr. Fernandes told Mr. Dhanji as the blue-and-white bus rolled through the night, past coconut trees and waterfalls. He urged Mr. Dhanji to sleep. “Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

Within a few hours, one of them would be dead.

Around 3 a.m., as the two men dozed, the bus rounded a bend on National Highway 66 and approached a narrow, 80-year-old bridge across the Jagbudi River. The driver lost control, grazing the span’s

rickety guard rail.

The bus flew off the bridge and flipped in midair before landing on its roof 30 feet below. On a dry patch of riverbed, its tail-lights glowed in the mist.

Thirty-seven of the 52 people on board were dead or dying inside. Rescue remained hours away.

Tragedies like this one in March 2013 happen with an alarming frequency. The human and economic toll is vast.

Across India, home to 1.2 billion people, almost 138,000 deaths from traffic accidents were recorded that year, according to the government. The tally has risen sharply over the past decade as road travel has surged along with India’s economic growth. The World Health Organization estimates that the actual number of fa-

talities is much higher—about 231,000 each year, or roughly 600 a day.

India’s record of traffic deaths per capita is consistent with other low- and middle-income countries, which together account for 90% of all road fatalities, according to the WHO. Road deaths and injuries also weigh more heavily on developing economies than richer ones, erasing as much as 5% from gross domestic product annually, the WHO says.



For hours after the accident, passengers remained trapped in the overturned bus.

“It’s a huge cost,” said Etienne Krug, who heads the WHO’s noncommunicable-disease and injury-prevention division. “It delays economic progress.”

In India, decades of inadequate government investment have left the country’s roads in disrepair. Weak safety regulations, lax enforcement and poorly trained drivers add to the risks.

The Jagbudi River crash ripped apart families, their grief often compounded by financial hardship. In one home, three

girls had to quit school after their brother, whose earnings paid their tuition, died in the accident. A retired housekeeper lost her only son, who supported her. A teacher perished, sending her husband spiraling back toward the alcoholism that she had helped him control years before.

Police have charged the driver, Santaji Kirdat, with death by negligence, reckless driving and drunken driving. Mr. Kirdat, 39 years old, denies the charges. He said he hadn’t been drinking and disputes the police finding that his blood-alcohol level was 0.083%, above the 0.03% legal limit, and blames the accident on overloading, saying a consignment of freight stowed in the back of the bus made steering difficult.

He also blames exhaustion. Mr. Kirdat, who earned about \$5 a day, said he typically drove 30 days in a row before taking a break. On this 18-hour run, Mr. Kirdat said he and another driver, who died in the crash, switched seats every three or four hours.

Bajirao Lad, owner of Mahakali Travels, the company that operated the bus, said he doesn’t skimp on safety. “The driver would know the best about overloading of the bus, I wouldn’t know,” he said, adding that each driver is given a day’s rest after every four or five trips.

At 5 p.m. on March 18, 2013, the Mahakali night bus began its journey toward the city of Mumbai from the coastal state of Goa on the Arabian Sea. The following reconstruction of the trip, the crash and



* National Highway 66 was formerly known as National Highway 17.



A distance marker on National Highway 66 at the curve where the driver lost control. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

its aftermath is based on interviews with survivors, relatives and friends of those killed, witnesses and investigators.

Patrick Mendes, a former galley worker on a cruise ship who had just celebrated his 23rd birthday, boarded the bus at Mapusa, almost an hour into the trip. He was traveling to Mumbai to look for work. His sister, Antonesia, accompanied him. A devout Catholic, she wanted to pray for his job-hunting success at a church in India's financial capital.

Mr. Mendes occupied the window seat. His sister took the aisle.

A few rows behind them, Gauresh Parsekar, a village shopkeeper and metalworker, settled in. He was traveling to Mumbai to buy some pens, pencils and chart paper to resell in his store.

Next to him sat Sister Martina Martis, a shy nun in a habit, head of a small Catholic home for the elderly, where 18 women lived beneath leaky tile roofs.

The two seatmates didn't know each other. But they shared a familiar travel ritual: Phoning a loved one. Mr. Parsekar dialed his sister. "I'm going now," he said.

Sister Martina called a relative in Mumbai to say she would be arriving soon.

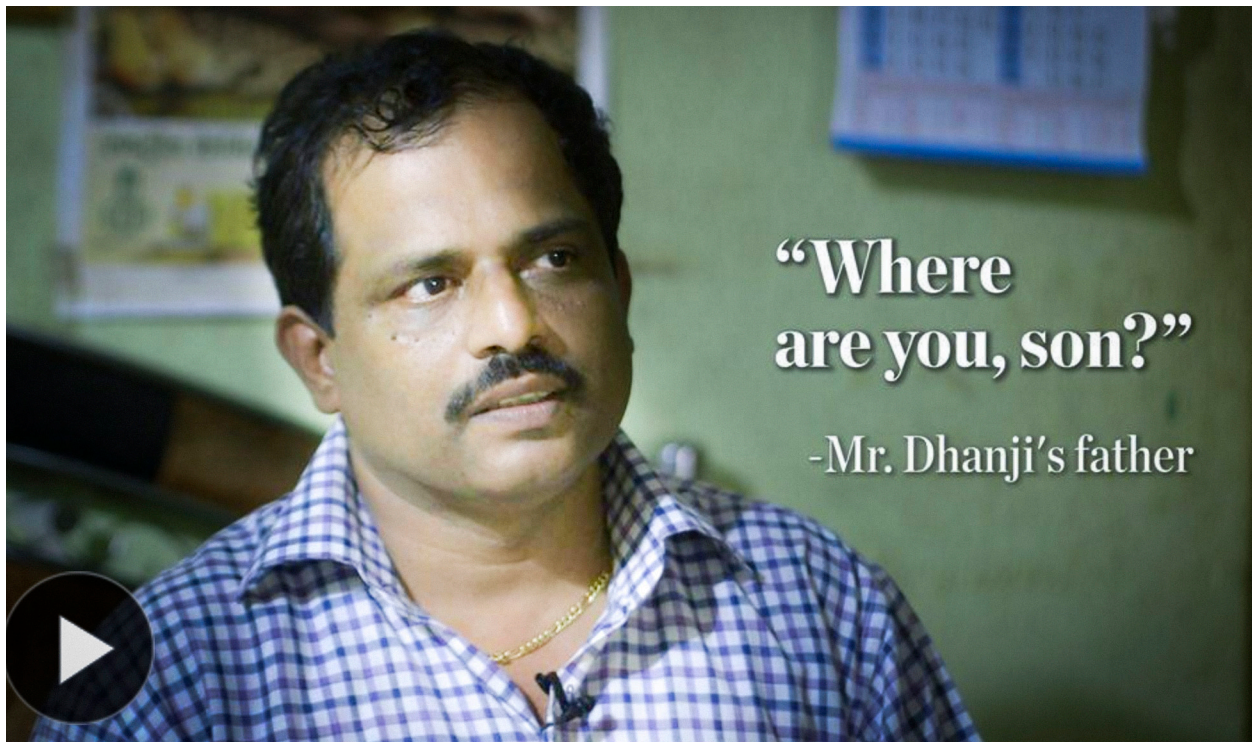
Messrs. Fernandes and Dhanji boarded around 10 p.m., several hours into the trip, and sat down in the first row of seats, behind the driver.

The two young men were quite different. Mr. Fernandes, lanky and athletic, with a military bearing and angular chin, was calm and considered by his friends to be wiser than his years. Mr. Dhanji, a compact man with a youthful face, a curly mop of hair and deep-set eyes, was known as fiery and impulsive.

They had been close ever since a chance meeting five years earlier, when they were both 18 and boarding a train to attend a merchant-marine school. They struck up a friendship and bonded over a shared love for cricket.

Until just a day before the deadly bus trip, Mr. Dhanji had no intention of traveling to Mumbai.

That day, he and Mr. Fernandes had been playing in a cricket tournament. In the evening, as they snacked on vada pav, spicy fried potato snacks, and relived



VIDEO: Shivam Dhanji's father describes receiving a confused 3 a.m. phone call from his son, pinned and badly injured under the bus.

their success on the pitch, Mr. Fernandes asked Mr. Dhanji to go to Mumbai with him, where he knew of two jobs on a cargo ship.

"You go ahead," said Mr. Dhanji, reminding his friend he was in love with his girlfriend. "I'd miss her," he said.

"C'mon, Shivam, let's go," said Mr. Fernandes, who was in a serious relationship himself. "We'll go sailing for nine months," he said, then come home and "we'll all get married."

Behind Messrs. Fernandes and Dhanji, the Mendes siblings chatted about what they would do together in Mumbai.

"I'll take you shopping," Mr. Mendes said. "Wow!" she said. "So sweet of you." She promised to take him to church with her.

Shortly before the accident, they swapped seats because Ms. Mendes felt ill and wanted some fresh air through the open window.

As the bus rumbled northward, they told each other to get some sleep. Tomorrow, Mr. Mendes said, "we won't get to rest."

Those were the last words they exchanged.

At about 3 a.m., as Mr. Kirdat sat behind the wheel, listening to pop music and

chewing tobacco to stay awake, he swept down a hill and swung the bus through the tight left curve that comes just before the bridge.

Two years before the crash, state engineers in Maharashtra had deemed that bend particularly dangerous and proposed widening both the roadway and the bridge—changes that could well have prevented the accident that was about to happen.

But the plan stalled because of problems acquiring necessary land, according to the chief engineer of India's Ministry of Road Transport and Highways.

"I'm so familiar with that road, I apply the brakes automatically," Mr. Kirdat said. But this time, he said, the brakes malfunctioned. "The bus skidded to the right," he said, and fishtailed.

He said he believes the brakes were overheated. A government examination of the bus found no mechanical failure.

As the bus slid, Ms. Mendes and her brother locked eyes. Mr. Mendes made the sign of the cross. Then the 4.6-ton vehicle slipped off the bridge, back end first, and landed on its roof.

Mr. Kirdat flew through the windshield and into the river. His first thought, he



VIDEO: The father of Bawtis Fernandes recalls his son's funeral and visits his grave.

said: "Oh my God, what did I do?"

Asleep in their homes on the banks of the river, two brothers, Mandar and Mahesh Bhandari, said they heard a tremendous crash. One called police. The other ran toward the river bank.

The men could hear cries for help in the darkness. One of the brothers fetched a man who owns a crane and roused bicycle-rickshaw drivers in the neighborhood to assist in the rescue.

Inside the bus and bleeding from the head, Mr. Dhanji phoned his father. He told a brief, confused story—then abruptly hung up.

Alarmed, his father called back. He heard screaming. This time, Mr. Dhanji, shaking off his confusion, told his father he had been in an accident.

"Where is Bawtis?" his father asked, referring to Mr. Fernandes.

Mr. Dhanji, using his phone as a flashlight, could see only that his left leg was draped over Mr. Fernandes's shoulder. "Bawtis, Bawtis!" he shouted.

Mr. Fernandes didn't reply. Hours ticked by. The first crane to arrive couldn't lift the bus alone, so another was

summoned. And then a third, from 40 kilometers (25 miles) away. Modern rescue equipment is rare in rural India.

Around dawn, rescue crews finally began lifting the bus. Ms. Mendes had spent hours trapped beside her brother, calling to him in vain.

The bus began rocking as it swayed upward, crushing her body. The pain grew so excruciating, she thought she was dying.

The cranes raised the bus a few feet. Ms. Mendes was pulled to safety, one of the last passengers to be rescued. "I could see my brother," she said. "He was lying upside down."

Doctors at a hospital a few miles away struggled to treat those pulled alive from the bus.

At a morgue, corpses lined the lawn. The list of dead would grow to include Mr. Fernandes and Mr. Mendes.

Ms. Mendes suffered four broken ribs, a fractured shoulder, fluid accumulation in her lungs, a left hand that no longer moved and partial paralysis of her face. Her physical injuries have mostly healed. Her spiritual questions took longer to answer.



VIDEO: Gauresh Parsekar reflects on having a second chance at life.

“I was thinking, ‘Being so good, so nice, why did this happen to us?’”

Today, her Catholic faith is strengthened as she dwells on her survival. “God, he heard my prayers,” she said.

Still, her brother’s death remains difficult to reconcile. “He gave me the window seat,” she said. “Sometimes it feels he took my death.”

On the first anniversary of the crash Ms. Mendes met with a fellow survivor, the shopkeeper Mr. Parsekar. He suffered severe head injuries. He remained in a coma for a month after the accident and has no memory of what happened. Ms. Mendes filled in the details for him.

Ms. Mendes invited Mr. Parsekar, who is Hindu, to the historic white chapel that has stood in her village for centuries. The two lit candles in remembrance of their fellow passengers.

Sister Martina, the nun who was sitting in the seat next to Mr. Parsekar, died in the crash. She had wanted to build a new wing, with modern bedrooms,

for residents of the old-age home in Goa where she worked. The home is run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima.

Sister Martina’s family donated to the home a financial death benefit they received after she died, to help make her dream a reality.

Across the border in the state of Maharashtra, in a poor village where Mr. Fernandes grew up, his family’s pain remains severe. Mr. Fernandes’s mother maintains her son’s bedroom nearly unchanged.

“We have kept it as it is, in his honor,” his father, Ashish Fernandes, said.



Bawtis Fernandes’ mother, Philomena Fernandes, in her home. Her son’s portrait hangs on the wall. PHOTO: SANJIT DAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A poster of St. Francis Xavier hangs on the wall beside a picture of a Yamaha motorcycle. In the middle of the floor, the suitcase from Mr. Fernandes' final trip sits open. A black necktie spills out.

His death took a financial toll on the family, which was counting on him to help them ascend the economic ladder.

His parents, who rent out a small shop stall in front of their home, had spent thousands of dollars on his schooling, hoping he would earn enough to finance his younger brother's education.

Instead, the family has had to borrow more than \$1,500 to pay for that.

Every day, Mr. Fernandes' father said, he visits the graveyard where, past an iron gate among tall weeds, is one neatly tended plot, that of his son.

"I keep remembering him all the time," his father said, as he kneeled to touch the grave marker before a monsoon rain began to fall.

Crash survivors, as well as the families of the dead, still await closure.

Their civil lawsuits against the bus company have languished in Mumbai's overburdened traffic court. Lawyers say it could be years before the Mahakali cases work through the backlog. The bus company has denied culpability.

The criminal trial of Mr. Kirdat hasn't started. He is free on bail, working in the fields and doing odd jobs in his village.

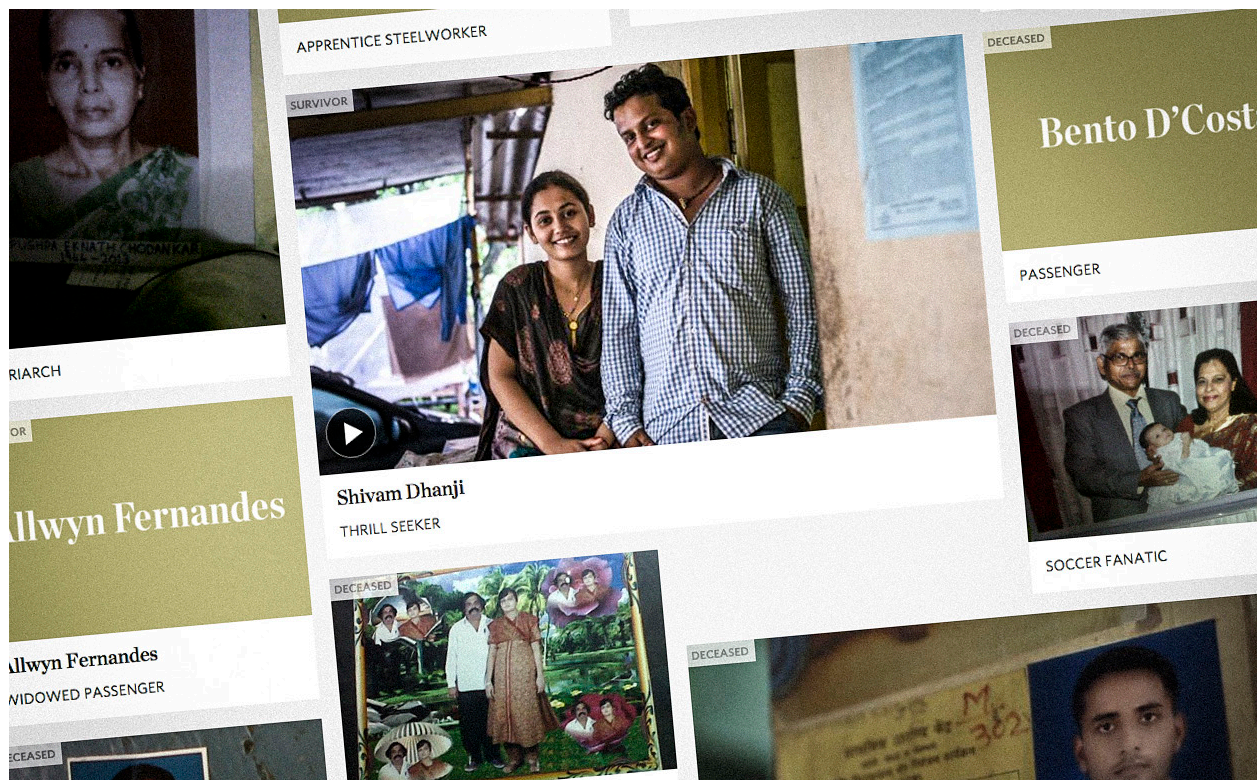
"Had I been a little more careful, all these lives wouldn't have been lost," Mr. Kirdat said, sitting in the mud-brick house he shares with 16 extended members of his family. "I still can't sleep at night."

Police said they decided not to pursue legal action against the bus company, saying that a post-accident inspection of the vehicle turned up no mechanical faults. They didn't investigate Mr. Kirdat's claims that the bus was overloaded with freight taken on by the company, because they said they weren't aware of the allegations at the time.

The stalled project to widen the road by the Jagbudi curve was eventually approved in August 2014. The government is now building a new bridge, to be finished in 2016.



At the old-age home where Sister Martina worked, the nuns used her death benefits to build a new wing of bedrooms in her honor. PHOTO: SANJIT DAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



ONLINE SIDEBAR: In an interactive sidebar, 'A Tapestry of Life,' read profiles of the 52 people aboard the bus.

Meanwhile, the old bridge is still in service and its broken guardrail has been repaired with a piece of pipe. There are now speed bumps where Mr. Kirdat lost control, but the local police chief casts doubt on how useful they are.

India's government is working on new legislation to tighten safety rules and penalize lawbreakers more severely. In the bill's current draft, for instance, the maximum fine for drunken-driving would increase to about \$300 from \$50. The bill is expected to be introduced in Parliament this year.

For Mr. Dhanji, injuries suffered in the crash left him jobless for more than 18 months. But the accident changed the course of his life.

Now he emulates his even-keeled friend, Mr. Fernandes. "I plan more," he said. "I talk the way Bawtis used to talk."

And, he married his girlfriend—making a life commitment to her that he says he wasn't really contemplating before the

crash.

One Sunday last year, the young couple eloped. It happened that way because the girl's parents disapproved of their relationship, so the two would meet on the sly. But that day, her father spotted them together.

Afraid her father would block her from seeing Mr. Dhanji ever again, his girlfriend said to him: "Marry me."

So he did.

Today, everyone is happy with the union. Reminiscing at home with his new bride as dusk fell, Mr. Dhanji said that if his friend Mr. Fernandes were still alive today, he would be "playing cricket all the time." And he, too, would have married his sweetheart.

His friend's dream "was left incomplete," Mr. Dhanji said. But as for the course of his own life, Mr. Dhanji said, "It was still in my hands."