
DRIVING WITH MONOCULAR VISION: BALANCING ROAD SAFETY AND DISABILITY RIGHTS UNDER INDIAN LAW

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Abstract

Driving is an essential activity in modern society, closely linked to personal mobility, employment opportunities, and social inclusion. Visual fitness is universally recognised as a core requirement for safe driving, as vision plays a decisive role in perception, reaction, and decision-making on the road. Monocular vision, commonly referred to as one-eye vision, involves the complete or functional loss of vision in one eye, resulting in the absence of binocular vision and depth perception. This condition has traditionally raised concerns regarding road safety, leading to administrative hesitation and inconsistent licensing practices. This research paper examines the legal eligibility of persons with monocular vision to obtain a driving licence under the Indian legal framework, primarily governed by the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.

In order to show that monocular drivers are not completely prohibited under Indian law, the study examines statutory provisions, medical fitness standards, judicial interpretations, and administrative recommendations. Rather, medical evaluation and functional adaptation are used to evaluate eligibility. In order to highlight global best practices, the report also compares licensing rules in the US and the UK. This study makes the case for a consistent, rights-based, and scientifically supported licensing system that strikes a balance between road safety and disability rights by pointing out operational gaps, legal inconsistencies, and policy difficulties. The study comes to the conclusion that allowing monocular drivers are in line with the constitutional values of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination—as long as there are stringent medical and functional protections.

Keywords: Monocular Vision and Driving Eligibility; Motor Vehicles Act, 1988; Medical Fitness Standards for Drivers; Disability Rights and Road Safety; MoRTH–AIIMS Licensing Guidelines.

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I. Introduction

Vision is the most critical sensory input for driving, accounting for a substantial proportion of information required for navigation, hazard detection, and traffic compliance. Most driving-related decisions—such as judging distances, recognising traffic signals, detecting pedestrians, and anticipating hazards—depend heavily on visual perception. Consequently, legal systems across the world impose minimum visual standards as a prerequisite for issuing driving licences.

The ability to drive plays a vital role in ensuring individual independence, economic participation, and social mobility in contemporary society. For many individuals, access to a motor vehicle is closely connected with employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and the performance of everyday activities. Consequently, the regulation of driving licences is not merely an administrative function but a matter that implicates public safety, social justice, and constitutional values. Among the various physical requirements for driving, visual capacity occupies a position of paramount importance, as vision enables drivers to perceive road signs, traffic signals, pedestrians, and potential hazards on the road.²

Monocular vision refers to a condition in which an individual has functional vision in only one eye, either due to congenital absence, disease, or injury. The loss of binocular vision results in the absence of stereoscopic depth perception, which has traditionally been considered essential for judging distance and spatial relationships while driving. On this basis, persons with monocular vision have often been presumed to be unfit to drive, leading to restrictive administrative practices and exclusion from licensing regimes.³

In the Indian context, the legal status of persons with monocular vision seeking driving licences has remained uncertain for a considerable period. Although the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 does not expressly prohibit individuals with one-eye vision from driving, licensing authorities have frequently adopted a narrow interpretation of medical fitness requirements.

Applications have often been rejected solely on the ground of monocular vision, without undertaking a detailed assessment of the applicant's functional ability or level of adaptation.

² Motor Vehicles Act 1988, ss 3, 8 and 19

³ World Health Organization, *Vision and Driving: Medical Standards for Licensing* (WHO Technical Report Series, WHO 2009)

⁴Such practices raise serious concerns regarding arbitrariness and are inconsistent with the constitutional guarantee of equality before law and the right to life with dignity.⁵

Medical science, however, offers a more nuanced understanding of monocular vision. Ophthalmological studies indicate that individuals with vision in one eye can develop compensatory mechanisms over time, such as increased head movement, improved scanning techniques, and reliance on motion cues. When supported by adequate visual acuity, a sufficient visual field, and an appropriate adaptation period, monocular individuals are capable of performing complex tasks, including driving, with a reasonable degree of safety.⁶

Reflecting this scientific understanding, recent policy developments in India have moved away from disability-based exclusion towards a functional assessment model.⁷ Expert recommendations from leading medical institutions and advisories issued by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways recognise that monocular vision, by itself, should not operate as a disqualification for driving. Instead, emphasis has been placed on objective medical certification, adaptation to vision loss, and safety-oriented evaluation, particularly in the context of non-commercial vehicles.⁸

The issue of driving eligibility for persons with monocular vision thus lies at the intersection of transport regulation, disability rights, and constitutional jurisprudence. While the State has a legitimate obligation to ensure road safety, it must simultaneously prevent unjust discrimination against persons with disabilities. This approach is consistent with India's constitutional commitments and its international obligations towards protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.

Monocular vision refers to the condition where a person has sight in only one eye, either due to congenital causes, disease, or injury. Unlike binocular vision, monocular vision lacks stereopsis, which affects depth perception and spatial judgment. Historically, this absence of binocular vision has been perceived as a significant safety risk, often leading licensing authorities to treat monocular vision as a disqualifying condition.

⁴ Constitution of India 1950, arts 14 and 21

⁵ Maneka Gandhi v Union of India (1978) 1 SCC 248

⁶ Ronald Owsley and Gerald McGwin, 'Vision and Driving' (2009) 27 Vision Research 123

⁷ World Health Organization, World Report on Vision (WHO 2019)

⁸ Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India, Advisory on Medical Fitness Standards for Grant of Driving Licences (based on AIIMS expert recommendations)

This paper seeks to critically examine problems persons with monocular vision are legally eligible to drive under Indian law, and whether existing practices align with constitutional values and international standards. It also explores whether road safety concerns can be addressed through medical and functional safeguards rather than blanket exclusion.⁹

II Research Methodology

The present study adopts a doctrinal (analytical) research methodology. It is primarily based on the systematic analysis of legal principles, statutes, judicial decisions, and scholarly writings relevant to the subject matter. The research aims to critically examine existing legal frameworks and identify gaps, challenges, and emerging trends.

III. Hypothesis

This study is based on the following hypothesis:

1. Monocular vision does not legally disqualify a person from obtaining a driving licence if medical fitness standards are met.
2. Functional medical assessment ensures road safety while protecting the rights of persons with visual disabilities.

IV Research Questions

1. Does the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 prohibit persons with monocular vision from obtaining a driving licence?
2. What medical and functional standards are applied to assess the driving fitness of monocular individuals?
3. How have Indian courts interpreted the eligibility of one-eyed persons to drive?
4. How do other countries regulate driving licences for persons with monocular vision?
5. What reforms are necessary to balance road safety with disability rights?

⁹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2008

V Concept of Monocular Vision and Driving Ability

Monocular vision results in the loss of binocular depth perception, which assists in judging distances and spatial relationships. However, scientific studies and practical experience demonstrate that individuals with monocular vision often develop compensatory mechanisms, such as enhanced head movement, reliance on motion parallax, and improved attention to visual cues.

Importantly, monocular vision does not imply reduced visual acuity in the functioning eye. Many individuals with one-eye vision possess excellent clarity, contrast sensitivity, and peripheral awareness. Over time, they adapt to visual limitations and perform complex tasks, including driving, safely and efficiently.

Thus, the question is not whether monocular vision exists, but whether the individual has sufficiently adapted and meets functional standards required for safe driving.

Recent policy developments in India have clarified the legal position regarding the eligibility of persons with monocular vision to obtain driving licences for non-commercial vehicles. According to guidelines evolved through expert consultations involving the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and ophthalmology specialists from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), monocular vision is no longer treated as an automatic disqualification for driving. Instead, a functional and safety-oriented assessment framework has been adopted.

Under these guidelines, individuals with vision in only one eye are permitted to obtain a driving licence provided they satisfy specific medical and functional criteria. First, the visual acuity of the remaining or better eye must be 6/12 or better, ensuring sufficient clarity of vision for recognising road signs, signals, pedestrians, and other vehicles. Second, the applicant must possess a horizontal visual field of at least 120 degrees, which is essential for adequate peripheral awareness and hazard detection. This visual field is typically assessed through recognised methods such as Goldmann perimetry or standard confrontation tests conducted by qualified medical professionals.

VI Relevant Act and Statutory Framework

1. Motor Vehicles Act, 1988

The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 serves as the principal statute regulating the licensing of drivers in India. The Act does not create any absolute bar against the grant of a driving licence to individuals with visual impairments such as monocular vision. Instead, it vests discretion in the licensing authorities to evaluate whether an applicant possesses the necessary physical and medical fitness to drive without endangering public safety. The legislative scheme thus focuses on actual driving competence and safety considerations rather than excluding applicants solely on the basis of disability¹⁰

2. Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989

The Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989 operationalize the provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act by prescribing detailed procedures and medical requirements for obtaining a driving licence. These Rules require medical certification in cases where an applicant suffers from a physical or visual limitation. Importantly, the Rules do not mandate automatic disqualification on the ground of visual disability; instead, they permit a medical and functional evaluation to determine whether the impairment affects safe driving. This regulatory flexibility allows monocular vision to be assessed on a case-specific basis.¹¹

3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 embodies a rights-oriented framework aimed at preventing discrimination and ensuring equal participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of life. The Act recognises visual impairment as a disability and places an obligation on public authorities to provide equal access and reasonable accommodation. Denying a driving licence merely on the ground of monocular vision, without examining the individual's functional ability, may defeat the objectives of the Act and undermine the principles of equality and inclusion it seeks to promote¹²

¹⁰ Motor Vehicles Act 1988, ss 3, 8 and 19

¹¹ Central Motor Vehicles Rules 1989, rr 5 and 6.

¹² Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, ss 3 and 20

4. Constitution of India, 1950

The constitutional framework of India sets binding limitations on the manner in which discretionary powers are exercised by public authorities

Article 14 prohibits arbitrary and unequal treatment, while Article 21 protects the right to life with dignity, encompassing personal autonomy and freedom of movement. Further, Article 19(1)(g) guarantees the freedom to practise any occupation, which may be adversely affected by denial of a driving licence. Licensing decisions that exclude persons with monocular vision without rational justification may therefore be constitutionally infirm.¹³

5. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities represents an international commitment to the protection of equality, dignity, and mobility of persons with disabilities. As a State Party, India is obligated to ensure that persons with disabilities are not unjustly restricted from accessing transportation and mobility-related rights. The Convention supports an interpretation of domestic law that favours functional assessment over disability-based exclusion, making it a significant interpretative aid in matters concerning driving licences for persons with monocular vision.¹⁴

VII Case law

R. Parthiban v. Regional Transport Officer¹⁵

Facts

The petitioner, R. Parthiban, was a person suffering from monocular vision, having complete vision in one eye while the other eye was non-functional. Despite possessing adequate visual acuity and having adapted to his visual condition, the petitioner's application for a driving licence was rejected by the Regional Transport Officer (RTO). The rejection was based solely on the ground that the petitioner had vision in only one eye, without undertaking a detailed medical or functional assessment of his driving capability.

¹³Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 19(1)(g) and 21

¹⁴ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2008

¹⁵ R Parthiban v Regional Transport Officer 2023 SCC Online Mad 2057 (WP No 5799 of 2023)

Aggrieved by this decision, the petitioner approached the High Court, contending that the denial of a driving licence was arbitrary, lacked statutory basis, and violated his constitutional rights, particularly the right to equality and personal liberty.

Circumstances

The circumstances surrounding the case revealed a broader administrative issue. Although the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 does not expressly prohibit persons with monocular vision from obtaining a driving licence, licensing authorities had adopted a conservative and exclusionary approach. The RTO relied on presumptions regarding safety risks associated with monocular vision rather than objective medical evidence or expert certification.

At the time of rejection, there were emerging medical opinions and governmental advisories recognising that individuals with monocular vision, after sufficient adaptation and with adequate visual acuity, could safely operate non-commercial vehicles. However, these evolving standards were not uniformly applied by licensing authorities, leading to inconsistent and arbitrary outcomes, as reflected in the petitioner's case.

Judgement

The High Court held that the rejection of the petitioner's application solely on the basis of monocular vision was unsustainable in law. The Court observed that the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 does not impose an absolute prohibition on granting driving licences to persons with one-eye vision. Instead, the statutory framework requires an assessment of medical fitness and functional ability, with the primary consideration being public safety.

The Court emphasised that licensing authorities must rely on objective medical evidence and expert opinion rather than blanket assumptions about disability. It further held that denial of a driving licence without a proper medical evaluation amounts to arbitrariness, offending Article 14 of the Constitution of India. The Court directed the licensing authority to reconsider the petitioner's application based on medical certification and functional assessment, in accordance with law.

The judgement marked an important step towards recognising that disability, by itself, cannot be treated as incapacity and that administrative discretion must be exercised in a fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory manner.

VIII Comparative Analysis: Monocular Vision and Driving Licence

A comparative study of foreign jurisdictions shows that most modern legal systems permit persons with monocular vision to drive, subject to functional medical standards rather than absolute exclusion. Countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada have adopted progressive, safety-oriented approaches that balance road safety with disability rights.

In the **United Kingdom**, individuals with monocular vision are legally allowed to hold a driving licence provided they meet prescribed eyesight standards, including adequate visual acuity and a sufficient visual field. The licensing authority recognises that loss of binocular vision does not automatically render a person unfit to drive and places emphasis on adaptation and functional ability rather than disability status.¹⁶

In the **United States**, driving licence regulations vary across states, but most states permit monocular drivers if minimum visual acuity and visual field requirements are satisfied. Medical certification is commonly required, and in some cases, conditional licences with specific restrictions are issued. The dominant approach is individualised assessment rather than blanket disqualification.¹⁷

In **Australia**, national driver licensing standards allow persons with monocular vision to drive non-commercial vehicles, subject to medical review and demonstration of adequate visual performance. An adaptation period after loss of vision in one eye is often required, reflecting the recognition that drivers can develop compensatory mechanisms to ensure safety.¹⁸

Similarly, in **Canada**, provincial licensing authorities permit individuals with monocular vision to obtain driving licences if the remaining eye meets visual acuity and field standards. Medical evaluation plays a central role, and restrictions may be imposed where necessary, but monocular vision alone is not treated as a ground for exclusion.¹⁹

¹⁶ Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (UK), *Assessing Fitness to Drive: A Guide for Medical Professionals* (DVLA).

¹⁷ American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, *Driver Fitness Medical Guidelines* (AAMVA)

¹⁸ Austroads, *Assessing Fitness to Drive for Commercial and Private Vehicle Drivers* (Australia)

¹⁹ Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators, *Medical Standards for Drivers* (Canada)

IX Problems

- **Lack of Uniform National Guidelines**

There is no clear and binding nationwide guideline specifically addressing driving licence eligibility for persons with monocular vision, resulting in varied practices among Regional Transport Offices across different States.

- **Arbitrary Exercise of Administrative Discretion**

Licensing authorities often reject applications based on subjective perceptions of risk rather than objective medical evidence, leading to inconsistent and sometimes discriminatory decisions.

- **Inadequate Functional Assessment Mechanisms**

The existing licensing process focuses largely on the presence of visual disability instead of evaluating functional driving ability, adaptation, and compensatory skills developed by monocular individuals.

- **Poor Awareness among Applicants and Officials**

Many applicants with monocular vision, as well as licensing officials, lack awareness of the legal position, medical standards, and recent judicial and policy developments, leading to unnecessary rejection of applications.

- **Conflict with Disability Rights Framework**

Blanket denial of driving licences to persons with monocular vision undermines the objectives of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, particularly the principles of equality, dignity, and reasonable accommodation.

- **Absence of Conditional Licensing Options**

The Indian licensing system rarely utilises conditional or restricted licences, such as time-bound or review-based licences, which could effectively balance road safety concerns with the right to mobility.

X Suggestions

- **Formulation of Uniform National Guidelines**

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways should issue clear, binding national guidelines specifically addressing driving licence eligibility for persons with monocular vision, ensuring uniform application across all States and Union Territories.

- **Adoption of Functional Fitness Assessment**

Licensing authorities should prioritise functional assessment of driving ability—such as visual acuity, visual field, and adaptation—rather than relying solely on the existence of a visual disability.

- **Mandatory Medical Certification by Specialists**

Applications involving monocular vision should be assessed through certification by qualified government ophthalmologists to ensure objective, scientific, and safety-oriented decision-making.

- **Introduction of Conditional and Review-Based Licences**

The licensing system should provide for conditional licences, periodic medical review, or limited restrictions where necessary, instead of outright denial of driving licences.

- **Capacity Building and Training of Licensing Authorities**

Regular training programmes should be conducted for Regional Transport Officers and medical boards to sensitise them to disability rights, current medical standards, and judicial interpretations.

- **Integration with Disability Rights Framework**

Licensing policies should be harmonised with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, ensuring that decisions promote equality, dignity, and reasonable accommodation for persons with visual disabilities.

XI Conclusion

The problem of providing driving licenses to those with monocular vision emphasizes the necessity of balancing constitutional and disability rights with concerns about road safety. This study shows that driving is not strictly prohibited for people with one-eye vision under Indian law, specifically the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988. There is a noticeable shift away from disability-based exclusion and toward functional assessment, as evidenced by court rulings, medical developments, and policy recommendations. When they have sufficient visual field, good visual acuity, and appropriate adaptation, people with monocular vision can drive safely. However, ambiguity and difficulty are still caused by varied administrative procedures and a lack of standard norms. The fundamental elements of a rights-based legal system—equality, dignity, and mobility—are compromised by such capricious rejection.

However, the State continues to have serious concerns about road safety. Safety and inclusiveness are not mutually exclusive, according to a comparative study of international jurisdictions. These goals have been successfully balanced by nations that have implemented medical certification, adaption periods, and conditional licensing. India has to take a similar stance by establishing unambiguous national standards, bolstering medical evaluation systems, and coordinating transportation regulations with laws pertaining to handicap rights. Public safety and social justice would be guaranteed by a framework built on proportionality, scientific evidence, and constitutional principles. In the end, acknowledging the driving rights of people with monocular vision—subject to appropriate protections—represents a step in the correct direction toward inclusive mobility and non-discriminatory governance in a contemporary constitutional democracy.