

OPINION

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

Delhi is gridlocked not just by its ever-expanding fleet of cars. Here, mobility is also a victim of too many authorities.

Be it waterlogged streets, diversion of traffic, maintenance of pavements and roads, streamlining para-transit transport or improving last-mile connectivity, fixing accountability has never been simple in the national capital.

Multiple agencies — the municipalities, the Delhi government and the ministries of the Union government — control and manage roads, pedestrian facilities, different modes of transport, traffic management, street lights, parking and numerous regulatory functions.

For perspective: In the multi-agency consultation on decongesting Delhi that followed Hindustan Times' 'Unclog Delhi' campaign in 2014, the then minister of urban affairs, Venkaiah Naidu, got all stakeholders on board. There were 19 agencies on the panel.

To remedy this, the same high-powered panel recommended that the Delhi Urban Mass Transit Authority (DUMTA) be formed to effectively plan, manage and monitor operations and integration of transportation and traffic management in the city. For setting this up, the panel set a two-year timeline.

Even earlier, the National Transport Policy suggested setting up of a Unified Transport Authority for Delhi.

In 2010, Sheila Dikshit's cabinet cleared the proposal but it got stuck in administrative tangles.

In 2015, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) put it on its 70-point election agenda. But it seems, for now, all plans for ending multiplicity of authorities have been subsumed into the party's larger demand for full statehood.

Without resolving the sticky issue of statehood, Delhi cannot get traffic police, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the five municipal agencies in the city, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) and the Delhi government agencies to report to the same boss, or even ensure a single source of funding for them.

But as the director of city planning at Transport for London (TfL), Alex Williams said, change need not happen overnight. "You don't need to integrate all agencies at one go. You pick up five, merge them into one unit and see how it goes," said Williams, who was in the capital last week for a consultation on the city's next master plan.

"But you need to get the most powerful decision-maker to take the lead. In London's case, it was the prime minister," Williams said.

Set up in 2000 under the mayor of London, TfL — which had started out more like a consortium — manages all modes of public transport, including the Tube (Metro), buses, rail, trams, river services, intercity coaches, taxis and private hires, and cycles. It also looks after London's road network, traffic lights, and regulates congestion charges and low-emission zones.

“At least 40% of passengers are using our buses for free. But, we have an integrated-first policy under which we cross-subsidise. This means, the profits earned from our Tube service are used to run the buses,” Williams said.

TfL ensures multi-modal interchange options between the bus, the Tube and other rail services and is now working the recently launched “Walking Action Plan” into all mobility initiatives.

It provides replacement bus service in case of a Tube shutdown. Its congestion tax to discourage private vehicles from entering its central district is effective even after 16 years because London provides a well-integrated web of public transport for those who have chucked their cars.

As long as the issue of institutional integration remains a political hot potato, an umbrella organisation with jurisdictional powers and legal backing such as TfL will elude Delhi. But that should not stop the Centre and the state to agree on setting up a working group for coordination among agencies on key mobility issues. They could also get independent experts on board.

At the same time, there is a case for empowering bodies such as the Unified Urban Traffic and Transportation Infrastructure Planning Cell, set up in 2008, “to evaluate and approve projects, form policy, especially regarding land use and transport integration and act as the repository of knowledge on traffic and transportation”, a report by the Union ministry of housing and urban affairs stated.

Also, building in-house capacity will only help. As the Decongesting Delhi report pointed out, right now, the agencies dealing with transportation are focused more on administrative issues.

For technical issues, they depend on consultants and do not even have the expertise to evaluate the reports and plans prepared by these private entities. Ensuring urban mobility takes more than just civil engineering and patchwork in silos.

To meet its many challenges, Delhi must tap diverse expertise while streamlining the command structure.

First Published: Feb 25, 2019 00:34 IST

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