

FREE PARKING IS NOT YOUR RIGHT

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

It's a given that our streets now have more vehicles than people. And parking these cars, bikes and even trucks anywhere — main roads, residential areas and sidewalks — is considered a right by most Indians. A right assumed like every other: throwing trash anywhere, defecating in public, encroaching footpaths... the list can go on.

While a few Indian cities are inching towards formulating parking management policies, many are yet to take the matter seriously. Many argue that paid parking is unnecessary when, in fact, there are several reasons why free parking is detrimental for all — the city, pedestrians and even motorists.

Donald Shoup, a professor in the Department of Urban Planning at UCLA in the U.S., has extensively researched parking, transportation, public finance, and land economics. The author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*, Shoup recommends that cities should charge fair market prices for on-street parking, spend the revenue to benefit the metered areas, and remove off-street parking requirements (shoupdogg.com). In a 2014 piece in *Vox*, Shoup argues, among other things, that 'a parking spot, unlike things we normally consider to be public goods, is finite'. We pay for everything else about our cars — the car itself, the gas, the tires, the insurance. Why should parking be different, he asks.

I agree. In a country that encourages buying private vehicles and does not do enough for public transport, people who invest in private vehicles must be ready to pay for its use. In countries like Singapore, for instance, the process and cost of purchasing a personal vehicle are designed to discourage car buying. A great way to push traffic towards public transport and keep the city greener.

The Centre for Science and Environment's recent analysis of pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown mobility trends in New Delhi reveals that the city isn't ready for the post-lockdown traffic rebound. Also, it is not prepared for the right actions that need to be taken to cut down the volume of traffic or even implement parking management rules. This is bound to be the case across cities.

In Chennai, while the plaza at Pondy Bazaar has been effective in encouraging cyclists and pedestrians, the promised robotic multi-level car park is yet to be launched. So, much to the annoyance of residents, haphazard parking on adjoining roads and footpaths continues to be the norm. However, in other prime areas such as Besant Nagar, Nungambakkam Purasawalkam and Anna Nagar, the Corporation is looking at increasing the number of smart parking slots to 12,000. Premium smart parking spaces on Khader Nawaz Khan Road with a fee of 40 an hour and along certain stretches in Anna Nagar for 20 an hour are being planned. Their launch and implementation, however, is something we need to check out.

On a recent trip to Bengaluru, it was refreshing to see parking meters installed — and working — in several localities. People who park in 'no parking' zones have their cars and bikes towed away in minutes. As per reports, smart parking systems are planned for the entire city.

These systems, if implemented well, have a series of benefits. A structured parking plan saves motorists time and fuel spent in cruising for a slot — a common sight at Chennai's beaches and shopping districts that adds to vehicular congestion. As stated in the *Vox* article, "In many urban areas with high parking demand, when we subsidise cost and freeze its apparent price at zero,

there are many more people who want it than spots available. Without meters to stimulate turnover, people tend to take spots and hold on to them all day. As a result, we waste our time cruising, looking for scarce open space.”

Other than these measures, what we need is a drive that discourages the use of cars. This can be done only after a safe, people-friendly and gender-neutral public transport system is created. Simply making cars expensive or increasing fuel costs doesn't work without giving people a convenient alternative. The recently announced train from Bengaluru airport to the city has been welcomed by all, but issues about timings and intermodal transport remain. Other questions remain unanswered — how safe will the option be for women and the elderly during non-peak hours? Are the platforms wheelchair-friendly?

As we limp back to a post-Covid world in 2021, here's hoping for roads that have more people than cars and cities that welcome humans rather than concrete monsters.

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