Decongesting our cities

India has witnessed a rapid growth in the number of motor vehicles, from a mere 5.4 million in 1981 to 210 million in 2015. This furious pace of motorisation has led to severe traffic congestion and air pollution, adversely impacting the well-being of the people, the energy security of the country, and the economic efficiency of cities.

Policies to deal with these problems have aimed at improving our public transport systems in the belief that this will enable people to shift from using personal vehicles. Public transport uses less road space, consumes less fuel and emits less pollutants on a per passenger basis. Hence, India has invested large amounts in high quality metro systems in cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi, Jaipur and Lucknow. Several other cities are either building new metros or planning to. Bus systems have also been augmented at a high cost.

Unfortunately, congestion is far from gone and pollution is only getting worse in our cities. At this juncture, it is necessary to stop and look at where we have gone wrong and understand what needs to be done to correct this situation.

Clearly, people who can afford cars and motorbikes are unwilling to compromise on the convenience of door-to-door travel, and the comfort of not having to jostle or hunt for seats in overcrowded buses or trains. If public transport could offer them these conveniences, commuting choices might just shift. After all, no one likes to drive on crowded streets and struggle to find parking at crowded destinations.

In this context, the emerging slew of shared mobility options and app-based ride providers become important. These new players have read the market well and offer the conveniences that commuters are looking for, from door-to-door services to on-demand availability. They allow commuters to travel independently or share the ride with other passengers to save costs. There are a variety of vehicle types to suit individual trips and passenger preferences, ranging from two-wheelers and three-wheelers to cars of different sizes and mini-buses.

Unfortunately, services like the app-based mini-buses do not find favour with regulators. That they are neither “stage carriages” nor “contract carriages” under the Motor Vehicles Act makes it difficult for them to secure permits. Stage carriages are those that ply along fixed routes and stop at predetermined stations to pick up and drop passengers. Contract carriages are vehicles that serve a single customer or a group of customers, to be picked and dropped between two designated places.

Unlike these vehicle types, new app-based services are flexible, the kind personal motor vehicle users are looking for to shift to more sustainable modes of transport.

There is a common belief that app-based services wean people away from public transport, and not personal motor vehicles, and so should not be allowed. This is not necessarily the case in India where bus users cannot afford anything priced higher than the bus. Metro rail users who shift to app-based services do so because last-mile connectivity to the metro is very poor and transfers between two lines are often cumbersome. Besides, during peak times, metros can get crowded.

It is for these reasons that personal motor vehicle users did not shift to metro travel to the extent anticipated, and instead shifted to app-based services.

We must aim at leapfrogging with the help of these new services rather than shunning them for old models like ‘stage’ and ‘contract’ carriages. Clearly, these services are the need of the hour;

Uber’s worldwide growth is ample evidence of this. In India, innovations that offer such services on small and medium-sized buses are even more attractive as they offer convenience and are cost-effective.

Is it time then to modify regulation to accommodate app-based services, and hence ensure that they operate in a safe and equitable manner? For example, to safeguard investments in public transport and to ensure that app-based services don’t compete with them on price, a floor price could be set for these services. This would mean that these services can charge more than a certain base price but not less.

Developments in technology have given us new services that were not possible earlier. They are serving a public purpose and people are taking to them in a big way. They hold the potential to ease our congestion and air quality challenges. The regulation must, therefore, consider embracing technology-based services for the larger benefit, rather than fighting them.

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An objective evaluation of his performance as Prime Minister is long overdue

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