

The problem of congestion in cities is a problem of cars, not rickshaws

A 12-member committee set up by a directive of the Delhi High Court has recommended that the number of e-rickshaws in Delhi should be limited to a certain number. The recommendation is another attempt to decongest the busy roads of the capital city. While the principle is sound in theory – these rickshaws are slow, they often block fast moving cars, and occupy precious space on the edges of roads. But, the idea becomes problematic when the number of cars on the roads, the population of the city that can afford to travel by private cars, and the issue of last-mile connectivity are taken into consideration.

Delhi has a population density of 20,000 people/km², and car ownership of 131 cars per 1,000 people. 42% of all daily trips in the city are made by public transport. And yet, our focus is on mobility only for those in the social strata that can afford cars. Too many of our schemes aimed at easing urban mobility in most cities are targeted at making it easier for a large number of cars to get around, instead of focusing on getting large numbers of citizens around the city. Large transport systems such as the metro face the problem of getting commuters from their homes to the metro. Transport means such as rickshaws are the bridge in such scenarios.

Rickshaws are not why the roads in so many of our cities are clogged. The roads are clogged because Indian cities, by and large, do not have reliable public transport systems and there are too many cars on the roads. Cutting trees to widen roads, building flyovers, removing rickshaws are all ways to make it easier to drive cars. Urban planning recently appears to entirely focus on making life easier for the rich few at the expense of the many poor. The sign of a safe and efficiently run city is when most of its citizens use public transport instead of private vehicles.

Given that the majority of the people in cities still use the highly inadequate public transport systems including e-rickshaws and buses, reducing them is not the answer to the congestion crisis. There is no cap on the number of cars that are allowed to ply on the roads, but regulating the number of rickshaws that are cheap and efficient for short distance travel seems to be the focus of our urban planning. This attitude must change. In order to make it easier to get around the city, urban planners must shift focus to make public transport efficient enough to reduce the number of cars on the roads.

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