

OPINION

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

India's cities are growing at an overwhelming rate. Delhi, with a population of nearly 30 million, is the second largest city in the world today, close on the heels of Tokyo. By 2035, the city would have long surpassed Tokyo with a population of nearly 42 million. Mumbai and Bengaluru are also pegged to join the list of the biggest cities soon.

From a transportation perspective, India has about 18% of the world's population and only 2.5% of its land area, but accommodates a fleet of 210 million motor vehicles as of now. This adds to the stress. Global reports have suggested that a car is parked 95% of the time in cities worldwide, with each car taking up as much space as could be used to provide basic housing to a family. Also, a car that can carry four to five people, carries an average of 1.5 persons—portraying a prime example of suboptimal use of transportation leading to road congestion. It is imperative that we adopt more efficient ways of moving people in our cities.

Connected, well-networked public transport is an ideal alternative. However, Indian cities have traditionally viewed it as and designed it for people who cannot afford private vehicles. As a result, the quality of mass transit is often poor and any effort to upgrade is limited by the concerns of affordability.

It is fast becoming necessary to persuade personal motor vehicle users to shift to public transport to mitigate the negative impacts of road congestion, deteriorating air quality and increasing carbon emissions. Such a shift can happen only if public transport offers the conveniences that personal vehicles allow—namely, on-demand availability, door-to-door connectivity, safety and comfort.

Today's public transport systems, which follow fixed routes and schedules, can't offer such conveniences. Poor quality and shabby looking vehicles are not inviting to commuters. Inadequate capacity has led to overcrowding, making them unsafe and uncomfortable for women, senior citizens and children. Under such circumstances, a shift in preference is unlikely.

Innovative, multi-modal integration is vital to drive a change. Different modes, when appropriately combined, could offer inclusive, comfortable and frequent door-to-door services to commuters. In Bengaluru and Hyderabad, an open innovation challenge—which invited ideas from technology and service providers, mobility entrepreneurs and citizens to improve last-mile connectivity to mass transit systems—yielded smart solutions that were cost-effective, innovative and easy to integrate.

Second, cities need to increase the number of public transport vehicles significantly to ensure safe, comfortable, frequent and crowd-free commutes to all. Third, it is time for the government to widen the definition of public transport to include small buses, vans and pooled vehicles that offer on-demand services. Ongoing studies indicate that bus aggregator systems—a model that uses technology (mobile apps) to allow passengers to book seats in buses operating on routes within city limits, pay fares online and track location—have managed to pull people out of their private vehicles and bring about a modal shift.

In Delhi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Bengaluru and Hyderabad, bus aggregators have gradually managed to gain share in pockets, but not yet gained government buy-in. On the contrary, they are largely deemed as competition to the authorized public buses. Such systems could support public

transport considerably, provided regulations become friendlier towards them.

Clearly smart solutions exist, but there are major barriers in achieving these. Improvements and upgradation could be expensive unless alternative funding sources are identified. Also, governance is highly fragmented with different modes being managed by different entities which do not talk to each other. Finally, operators are often reluctant to make their data public, thereby hampering the use of apps to integrate systems.

A progressive and forward-looking approach can help us overcome such barriers. While looking for alternative financing, we could depart from our usual stance that users must pay for what they use, to a more neutral paradigm that all beneficiaries pay for what they benefit from.

To put this in perspective, it is important to understand that people who don't necessarily use public transport could also benefit from it. This includes, for instance, people who own property near metro stations and reap the benefit of high property values. Globally, beneficiary taxes are common: Colombia levies a land-value tax and France levies a tax on employers as they benefit from their employees being able to commute to work.

In India, lead transport authorities could be set up to coordinate planning and financing of public transport modes in an integrated manner. They should have legal backing and the financial muscle to ensure that their plans are adhered to. International models like the Transport for London, the Land Transport Authority of Singapore and Translink in Vancouver, are worth replicating with local adaptations. Operators should also be mandated to allow commuters access to data to plan trips.

India has a robust history of public transport, with buses being the most widely used mode in several cities. It is time now for them to be re-invented and redesigned to motivate motor vehicles users to shift. If not, we run the risk of our cities coming to a standstill.

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