
Public Transport: The Bus and the Car

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In almost every major city in India, the initial conversation when people meet is about traffic congestion, transport delays, bad road manners and near misses. The proverbial British weather is perhaps the nearest comparison. Indeed, the traffic chaos in cities is such that it has almost destroyed evening life: people are reluctant to travel between 7 pm and 9 pm since the probability is they will just be caught in a jam, neither here nor there. The present situation has been gradually building up and exacerbated over the last decade. Urban planners have been warning of the impending crisis, but no one took them seriously.

Those who are capable of taking decisions in this regard are primarily administrators and politicians; but their horizon is short: the former operates at best on a three-year tenure and the latter look for a five-year election possibility. Expert view is often treated as academic, lacking in pragmatism. The recent announcement of a one-lakh-rupee Nano car has raised several issues ranging from India's technological pride and a new deal for India's rising middle-class to fears of more congestion, environmental degradation and the negation of the very concept of public transport. Since the dust and din of Nano are slowly settling down, it is time to take stock of the relative places of public transport in general, buses and cars in the cause of improving the quality of urban life.

The Public Transport Scenario

During the decades which immediately followed Independence, the thrust mainly was on providing public transport in rural areas. It was rightly felt that mobility was an indicator of civilization and the fruits of development cannot be spread unless people are able to move from village to town or another village for schools, hospitals and markets. Improved mobility was expected to enable greater social interaction and coming together of communities. Indeed, a massive effort was made by nationalizing bus transport and operating bus services as a social responsibility, even if such services were uneconomical in themselves. Although the government departments which were to regulate bus operations lacked the required expertise in planning and evaluation of operational efficiency and adequacy, the state transport undertakings were able to make up by professionalizing their managerial cadres, establishing maintenance and repairing facilities and by and large responding to public demand.

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With all their bureaucratic and non-commercial origins, during the 1960s and the 1970s, state transport undertakings did an excellent job. They defined their corporate mission as wherever there is a road there is a bus, provided job security, paid reasonably good salaries in a sector which saw the greatest exploitation of labour. Indeed, rural India was waking up and, so to say, started moving. The progress of states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in the political and social awakening has much to do with transport services offered by the public sector.

In major cities, public transport has either been operated by government departments or by public sector. There were trams alongwith buses in Mumbai and Chennai even in the early years of Independence – and in Kolkata there are still trams, albeit as a poor relation. In the second or third order cities, public transport was taken for granted. The distances, it was generally assumed, could be covered either on foot or by cycle. There were a few buses, however, indifferently operated. The situation started changing rapidly since the 1980s because of several seemingly unrelated developments occurring at the same time. Urban incomes were rising and so were the expectations of a better quality of life. In every walk of life, people were willing to pay more for better services or products. Scooters and an assortment of two-wheelers started coming into the market in increasing numbers and at rates within reach of the middle-class. Time, as a component of work, was becoming important, and commuters were reluctant to wait for a bus which may or may not arrive.

The state transport undertakings which undertook the responsibility for urban public transport started losing the support they enjoyed hitherto in capital funding. There was growing feeling in the government that transport can be run as a business, unlike education or health. This affected renewal of fleet, let alone putting more buses in urban areas. At the same time, unrequited social costs of concessional travel to students etc. and operation of services to outlying localities further made nonsense of whatever economics such operations earlier had. And those who matter in the society were not patronizing public transport, due to which public transport lost a lobby. It is said that democracies respond to pressures and not to needs. Public transport could not put the required pressure and started losing to private vehicles, the supply of which was rapidly increasing.

Adequacy, punctuality and accessibility, the *raison d'être* of public transport, were becoming conspicuous by their absence. Travel by public buses became increasingly undignified. Even those who knew that two-wheeler driving was unsafe, preferred it for convenience, saving of time and punctuality. There was no concerted attempt to improve matters. Anyone who lived longer in a city, stretched his or her means and acquired a two-wheeler. A sub-optimal public transport created its own sub-optimal clientele – the undemanding and the helpless. Rather perversely, it was being justified that public transport was for the poor, who cannot own their

own transport. The basic concept that public transport is the legs of a community and is for all took the back seat. Like many other schemes for the poor, in trying to serve the poor, the service itself became so poor that even the poor did not want it!

The two-wheelers and an assortment of low capacity four wheelers started invading the shrinking road space at the expense of public transport. The main virtue of public transport is that it has a greater carrying capacity and economizes road space up to ten to fifteen times. This virtue remained unrecognized and unfulfilled. Alongwith public transport, the pedestrian, who is the basic commuter, was finding no place on the road, with sidewalks either encroached or sacrificed for road-widening. But that is a different story, even more poignant. The European model, which established and recognized that public transport in cities is a primary responsibility of city government, has never had a chance in India. Indeed, bus was considered a nuisance and roads were being expanded to accommodate more and more privatized, low-capacity vehicles. The cause of public transport went by default.

Why Bus is Important?

Urban public transport is operated by buses, trams and metros, in that order. Metros are highly capital intensive and indeed walk on the stomach of a poor country. Trams were introduced by the British in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. They were unwisely abandoned in Mumbai and Chennai and are tolerated with great reluctance in Kolkata. The ostensible reason for the disappearance and decline of trams is that they obstruct other modes of transport. That a tram car carrying more than 100 passengers obstructs other modes which carry less numbers is a travesty legitimized only in India. The few who travel by smaller modes of travel felt that the many who travel by tram were obstructing them, and the few won their case! Instead of finding ways to resurrect trams, as has been done in Europe, we have dumped them in two cities and are doing worse than dumping in the third.

The point is that those using trams have no capacity to put pressure, without which even an imperfect democracy would not respond. This is not to argue that Indian cities do not need private transport but to secure a balance in which each mode complements the other and ensure a seamless door-to-door journey. Urban transport should be treated as a network of high- to low-capacity modes of conveyance. Modal choice should be tempered by priority for mass transport. In poorer economies, bus is the vehicle of mass transport.

Bus is a versatile and cheap mode of public transport. It, of course, carries less number of passengers than either metro or tram, but can penetrate into almost every urban street Its decline has been due to lack

of appreciation of its relevance in poorer societies. It is appropriate here to cite the case of the most favoured city in India: Delhi. Even during the early 1990s, the government could not give Rs 100 crores to Delhi Transport Corporation for augmentation and renewal of its fleet, but could commit an investment of Rs 1,000 crores for a metro. Now, of course, the cost ballooned into Rs 20,000 crores or more. Delhi Transport Corporation, which, for all its sins, is way above the privately operated, utterly unsafe and poorly-run red or blue buses, still goes abegging for much needed capital investment. Thus, the most appropriate mode of urban public transport is neglected for all wrong reasons.

Construction and Manufacture of Buses

The unattractiveness of urban bus systems is not confined to their pricing or operations. The root is elsewhere. The Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company (Telco) – now renamed Tata Motors - along with Ashok Leyland Ltd., has been the major manufacturer of trucks in the country. But there is something which the public still do not know: The buses manufactured by these companies are in fact trucks, on which boxes made by another manufacturer are fitted to make an apology of a bus! This is the reason why suspension systems (meant for goods) cannot be improved for human travel. Chassis height being high, access is forbidding for women, children and the old. Drivers have no control over exit and entry in the absence of pneumatically controlled doors. It is well-known that seven out of ten accidents in bus transport occur while exiting and entering.

There is hardly any attempt to introduce the proper low-floor, safe and custom-designed buses even now. The stock excuse has been that India cannot afford! The Volvo bus, which is constructed as a passenger vehicle, and not as a truck on which body is mounted, has quickly asserted itself in long distance operation and is in some way competing with the Railways. A similar attempt should be made for urban travel so that the bus is built for convenience, accessibility and comfort. The Tatas could have been the champions of public transport in India and much of the developing world. Instead, by bringing out Indica, they joined the car bandwagon. The house which could have saved the cities from environmental degradation and promoted safe, comfortable and attractive public transport has gone brazenly commercial and yet claims a social conscience!

The introduction of small diesel cars has further soured the urban scene. Diesel is a fuel which is artificially priced low so that it can be used for bulk transport of goods, etc. across longer distances. There are studies which indicate that when diesel vehicles are run at low speeds, as they indeed are on urban roads, the carbon emissions are more lethal and carcinogenic. Cheaper fuel coupled with longer mileages made diesel cars more attractive and added to further congestion on urban roads. In the absence of any public policy prohibiting use of diesel for private travel, more

and more manufacturers are likely to flock into the diesel car market. A diesel Nano could be the last straw. It is time some public policy initiatives were taken in this regard - and soon.

Let us put Dignity into Public Transport

Mr Ratan Tata is obviously not moved by hapless urban passengers flocking into his half-baked, unsuitable and uncomfortable buses. He has suddenly woken up by the plight of a scooterist, traveling on it with his entire family! Most scooterists have once been bus passengers and moved out because buses, as manufactured in India, have treated human beings like cattle. There are innumerable studies which revealed that two-wheeler users and their families strongly felt that the twice-a-day commutation between work and home is best served by public transport. Offering the scooterist a Nano is like saying that those who cannot afford bread can eat cake! While India may not introduce draconian measures such as those in Singapore for owning cars, good public transport for structured travel is in the interests of all. Week-end outings, family holidays and non-routine travel should be left to private modes of conveyance and public transport should have the chance to compete on its merits.

In a poor country, status is often measured by the way one travels. It is said that if we know how anyone travels, we can place that person on the status/rich-poor scale. Yet, given the will we can combine dignity, comfort and convenience with travel in public transport. Mumbai is still perhaps the only city which doesn't look down on those traveling by public transport, although the scene is changing fast even there. Europe has long realized that public transport preserves the city-centres and doesn't trample on the beauty of their exquisite architecture. In an Asian setting, Singapore has demonstrated it. For them public transport is not only a service to public but a measure of their culture - indeed the effectiveness of urban governance. The mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, is an ardent promoter of public transport and is constantly upgrading the city's status as one of world's best cities by an uncompromising commitment to public transport. South American cities, notably Curitiba and Bogotá, and now Santiago, are redefining public transport - and rediscovering the bus.

Public service should live up to certain acceptable standards of quality, comfort and safety before it could gain public patronage. There are of course costs involved, but the people and their quality of life must come first. If we destroy public transport we shall be condemned to re-invent it - but at a huge price in terms of environmental degradation, loss of time, traffic jams and the denial of the joys of urban living. To repeat, public transport is the legs of a city, and if these legs are cut we need crutches - and the crutches are cars. An ugly sight, indeed.