

People Power

Perils of Autocentricity

Our urban population is growing dramatically. According to 2001 census, 285 million Indians lived in cities and towns, more than the American population. The residents of large metropolitan areas of Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi now exceed 10 million each; Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad exceed 5 million each. And 35 other metropolitan areas have more than a million residents – almost twice as many as in 1991. Projections show that our urban population would grow to about 473 million in 2021, and 820 million by 2051. Even at current levels of urbanization, our cities are getting paralysed, and urban transport has become a nightmare.

However, urbanization cannot be wished away. What is more, big cities will continue to attract investments, technology and jobs. Several studies show that there is a clustering effect which makes economic and technological sense to concentrate certain industries and services in a great city or region. Automobile sector is a good example. Despite some dispersion in recent years, the bulk of US auto industry is located in Detroit. Similarly, Chennai stole a march over other cities, and emerged as the auto industry capital of India. The increasing concentration software sector in Silicon Valley or Bangalore shows that such a clustering effect attracts even the otherwise foot-loose service industries.

Such rapid urbanization and prosperity predictably led to dramatic growth in the number of motor vehicles on roads. There are now over 80 million vehicles in India, and 7 million are added every year. About 70% of all vehicles are two-wheelers and over 12% are cars, while buses account for only 1% and goods vehicles about 5%. Public transport still accounts for a sizeable share of urban trips: 30% in cities between 1 and 2 million population, 42% in 2-5 million population cities, and 63% in over 5 million cities (Sreedharan 2003). Those averages conceal huge variations. For instance, Public transport in Hyderabad City accounts for only 37% market share. But even where public transport exists, it is generally inefficient, slow, underfunded, poorly managed, uncoordinated (between rail and bus, for instance), and unreliable. Predictably, more people are depending on private transport, congesting and polluting our cities. Traffic is crawling, and it now takes about two hours each way for the poor and middle class commuters in big cities to travel between home and work. Dignity, health, peace of mind, and life and limb are in jeopardy.

Short-sighted public policies have aggravated this urban transport crisis. As John Pucher et al in an excellent 2005 paper point out, lack of rational planning and land-use controls resulted in rampant sprawled development extending rapidly in all directions in most cities. This has greatly increased the number and length of trips for most Indians, forcing increasing reliance on motorized transport. Deliberate regulations to encourage several commercial centers meant that there cannot be efficient or viable public transport links. Low-density, sprawled decentralization typically generates travel needs which cannot be met by public

transport, leading to rapid growth of private transport, and the consequent congestion, pollution and transport paralysis. Wider roads and flyovers only lead to more private vehicles and greater congestion.

The poor are particularly badly hit by this skewed development. Longer distances and greater traffic hazards make it virtually impossible for them to walk or ride bicycle. Growth of slums and ghettos in appalling living conditions is a direct consequence of the transport crisis resulting from irrational development. Our roads are unfriendly to pedestrians, bicycle riders and public transport. Excise reduction, low interest loans, low motor vehicle tax (as opposed to 2000 Euros in Europe and \$ 5000 in China), precedence to cars over buses and people in traffic regulation, and poor parking regulation actively encourage private transport and discourage public transport. Not surprisingly, the fastest growth in oil consumption (8.3mt of petrol and 39.7mt of HSD in 2004/5) is in autofuel sector

As Stephen Goddard (Economist, Nov.13, 2001) perceptively points out, this road to aut centrality in the US has led to overuse of the motor vehicle and is erasing the very mobility that highway building sought to achieve, while causing freeways to crumble beyond the resources of government to repair. Sadly, India is following the US model of aut centrality, instead of planning, designing and running first-rate public transport systems in our cities. Given our huge concentrations of population and phenomenal commuter traffic, our cities are ideally suited for well-designed public transport systems, and sensible urban land-use.

All is not lost yet. Recent initiatives in several major cities are encouraging, if insufficient. The draft National Urban Transport Policy (2005) of GOI is a sensible document reconciling the growth of automobile industry with rational urban transport choices. Huge investment in public transport carriers and infrastructure, a common transport authority for rail, road and other mass transport systems, rational land use policies, higher taxes on private transport with revenues flowing to public transport, greater competition in management, effective regulation to enforce standards, and active discouragement of private vehicles in city hubs are all eminently feasible and vital for balanced growth of our economy and cities.

It does not cost much. Back of the envelope calculations indicate that about Rs.5000 crore capital investment and annual subsidies of Rs.1000 crore would make vast difference by transforming our bus transport in all the 42 major cities of India. That is equivalent to about 30 kms of new metro rail, and ten days' of power subsidy in all states respectively! Can we summon the political will and professional competence to make our cities livable and prosperous?

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