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Mobility – Development – Culture

Towards Sustainable Transport Strategies



Interview

with Anumita Roy Chowdhury

We have to protect the sustainable transport practices in India

SEF

What are the major challenges concerning transport policy in India?

Chowdhury

India is at crossroads now. Motorisation is taking off and vehicle numbers are explosive. Take the City of Delhi, the capital of India, which already has 5.6 million vehicles and is adding nearly 1,200 to 1,300 vehicles a day. The pace of motorisation is aggressive because of rising income levels, burgeoning middle class, and growing aspirations. There is increased dependence on personal vehicles.

We are very worried about this. If you come to our cities you will be able to gauge the air pollution challenge and the public health crisis. In fact, it is said that there is at least one death per hour due to air pollution related diseases in Indian cities.

We are also very worried about the impact of motorisation on our energy security. We import more than 80% of our crude oil. In the future the energy demand in the transportation sector will be primarily driven by galloping numbers of cars. For the first time in India we are talking about the combined challenge of the public health crisis, energy impact as well as climate impacts of growing numbers of vehicles. This is a challenge as well as an opportunity. We have a chance to be preventive, precautionary during the early stages of growth.

But I would also like to share with you that India has certain inherent advantages. Even though there is growing dependence on cars, the majority of Indians are still using public transport, walking and cycling. The high poverty level is also responsible for this. But overall the dominant travel practice is still sustainable. The current high share of public transport, walking and cycling are a very good baseline to begin with. If we are not careful, if we are not preventive, if we do not protect this ridership, this strength can be seriously undermined and eroded. India must avoid automobile dependence.

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Are there any policies in place that try to support these sustainable modes of transport?

Chowdhury

Yes, in fact there are two issues in this. Already a lot of people are using public transport and non-motorised transport. Even in Delhi the cars that are overcrowding our roads, meet only 14% of the daily travel requirement. This means the majority, the urban majority, is still using the bus, walking and cycling. But as I said the policy intervention is needed right now to be able to stop the steady shift of people from bus to cars. And we have to stop that.

We are optimistic because policies have begun to change. We are happy to note the changes in the policy language in India today. The National Urban Transport Policy has taken on board the very important principle that says India must plan its cities for people, not for vehicles.

The next big challenge is implementation. Let me share with you one very remarkable development in India. During the recent global recession and economic downturn India's response was very interesting. When the rest of the world was giving stimulus package to revive the car industry so that they could sell more cars, Indian government came up with a stimulus package for the bus industry. That was a very innovative approach.

In 2009 the bus stimulus package was linked with conditional reforms in the bus and transportation sector in cities. The government in India gave money to the cities to buy buses and a large number of cities invested in buses because of this policy support. But the most interesting part of this policy is that this grant to buy buses is linked with conditional reforms in the transportation sector. The national government asked the cities to form an urban transport fund, a dedicated fund, which can be used to scale up and modernise the public transport system. To be able to create that fund the cities were asked to use the travel demand management principles – to tax the car more to generate revenue for public transport system. Cities were also asked to frame a parking policy that will look at the demand side management to restrain car usage.

We are excited about these changes. But we are also a little worried. Implementing these policies are not going to be easy because we have already seen the kind of resistance that most of these policies are facing already. For instance, when Delhi tried to implement the Bus Rapid Transit System there was a massive opposition from the car owners because the Bus Rapid Transit System works on the principle of dedicated road space for buses, walkers and cyclists and equitable distribution of road space. Car owners do not like losing space to the buses. There was almost mutiny on roads in Delhi. This is the mindset that we really have to change. This is going to be very challenging in our part of the world.

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Are there any other policies in place to change the mindset of transport users besides the ones you mentioned?

Chowdhury

Not really. Right now the policies are mostly focused on making the public transport more attractive. So investment is happening in creating the metro system, modernisation of the bus fleet and scaling up the alternatives to cars.

But we have also understood that just by providing public transport, we cannot restrain the use of cars. We need disincentives as well. And that is where we are still very weak. Very recently we have done a study. We were appalled to find that almost in all cities of India the bus pays more

taxes than the car. This is wrong. In principle we should not be doing this. We have to reform the taxes and the road user charges so that the car owners are made to pay more for owning and using the car and not the bus.

Another unique challenge in Indian cities are the motor cycles. These are also personal vehicles. They are much cheaper to drive than a car as these are extremely fuel efficient. If the bus fares increase the cost of running a motorcycle gets cheaper in comparison. So immediately people shift from the bus to the motor cycle. The motor cycle is the first step towards personal vehicle. From motorcycle people graduate to cars. Indian cities will have to come up with very strong disincentives for cars.

This is doable in India because we already have the advantage of high usage of public transport. In Europe most people have already shifted to cars. But in Indian cities car owners and car users are still a minority. Therefore, we should be able to take the right decisions and implement them right now. As I said, in Delhi cars meet just 14% of the daily commuting needs. We must act before this 14% becomes 90%.

It is very important that we provide alternatives for our people. We will have to improve the glamour quotient of the bus, the public transport. We see such nice commercials for a car. But we never see enticing ads for a bus and the experience and benefits of a bus ride. But bus designs are changing now. Buses are becoming more attractive. We have to get more innovative, and more creative with the way we sell the alternatives to the car. I hope we will be able to see that transition very soon.

Profile

Anumita Roy Chowdhury is the Executive Director for Research and Advocacy of the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, India. She has a distinguished career in research, communication and advocacy on environmental issues. Over the last decade she has worked extensively to build up the policy advocacy program on clean air and sustainable mobility.



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