

Left lane's not the right lane

Moving the BRT to the left lane will kill whatever potential it has left

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Critics of the 'Bus Rapid Transport' (BRT) system, or 'High Capacity Bus System' (HCBS), often project it as something that should permit all transportation to move faster on the road. But a closer look indicates that this is a system specifically designed to allow public transport to carry a larger number of people as conveniently and economically as possible. Hence, the media grouse that owners of private transport have been put to considerable inconvenience by the BRT serves to misrepresent the real intent of the system. In fact, the BRT system in Delhi goes several steps further than merely designing a dedicated corridor for buses. It also provides for pedestrian and cycle paths that are obstacle-free, well-illuminated, properly-serviced, and disabled-friendly, thus catering to the primary needs of over 80 per cent of the commuters on the road. It has allocated space for utilities, rickshaws, and vendors; made it possible for Indian companies to build modern low-floor buses at a significantly lower price than foreign manufacturers; given priority to emergency vehicles to use the bus corridors; and decreased the number of accidents on the road: Accident data indicates that since the corridor opened, there have been no fatal bicycle, motorcycle, and car crashes on this section, only pedestrians — and that is because many of them simply walk in the bus corridor.

All these advantages are now being recognised by both commuters and authorities. In April 2008, 11 labour representatives had documented that the corridor was a great boon to the vast majority of citizens, while recommending that the traffic lights be optimised and traffic discipline be maintained. A study carried out in February-May 2008 by Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System Ltd (DIMTS), indicated that in four months, throughput in the corridor had increased by 44 per cent from 94,338 to 135,458 vehicles of all types (71 per cent for cycles, 70 per cent for two-wheelers and cycle-rickshaws, 17 per cent for cars and jeeps, and a mere 9 per cent for buses — although the number of DTC buses increased by 227 per cent, from 276 to 902). A May 2008 survey by volunteers from the Centre of Science and Environment and Indian Youth Climate Network recorded that 83 per cent of all commuters supported the BRT, with major endorsement coming from bus commuters, pedestrians and cyclists, while 73 per cent of car and two-wheeler drivers felt that the project should be continued. A subsequent survey in December 2008 by seven students of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, has reinforced these findings by showing that 85 per cent of bus commuters felt that the BRT had been successful in promoting public transport, 88 per cent claimed that bus travel was quicker and 90 per cent supported the idea of implementing it in other places.

Another study around the same time, by three other IIT students of the new buses with air-cooled engines also found that the bus drivers were very pleased with their comfort and utility, although they outlined various problems for commuters: These included inadequate ventilation at the back, discomfort for standing passengers, weak wheel covers in the front, uncomfortable seats, and the lack of a bar to prevent passengers from crowding the front entrance. The first IIT student survey also found that bus commuters, spending only Rs 450 per month on transportation compared to Rs 1,200 by motorised vehicle-owners, faced problems including long-time intervals between buses, incomplete information, uncom-



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fortable bus stops, buses not stopping, ineffective traffic marshals, and little attention to safety. Forty six per cent said that bus lanes in the middle added to problems of safety (accident data for the corridor shows that 60-70 per cent of the fatalities are of pedestrians, mostly by cars and buses). However, the views differ over the road divide. Car owners want another lane for themselves 'to avoid congestion', while providing over-bridges for pedestrians 'to avoid accidents'; pedestrians and bus commuters view the 'indisciplined' driver as the biggest hazard and do not think that the BRT has been able drill 'traffic sense' in them: Which is why both want the bus stop on the side.

However, a moment's reflection will show that the bus lane on the left cannot address the serious issue of pedestrian safety. Even if the bus stop is on this side of the road for the forward journey, it will be on the other side for the return journey, forcing the commuter to cross the whole width of the road to get home. Pedestrians are at greater risk because drivers of motorised transport just do not think that those on foot have the right of way. Thus, other approaches have to be considered to address the problem. The BRT corridor attempts to do this by locating the corridor in the centre and providing bus stops right next to traffic lights and zebra crossings so that crossing the road as well as changing for other routes is easier and safer for the commuter. In addition, the central corridor has the advantage of having a separate traffic light cycle for buses so that they can pass through and turn right or left rapidly without disturbing other traffic — thus enhancing throughput and reducing risk. The pedestrian and cycle paths on the left do not then have to compete with heavy vehicles and can be better illuminated and protected. Finally, a dedicated bus corridor in the middle is the logical answer to risky driving in the motor vehicle lanes as well

as to poor drainage on the sides.

The trouble is that road-users have for so long become accustomed to the idea of a bus stop on the side and running headlong for few buses along and across roads, that it will take some time for them to realise the merits of a central system (which, curiously enough, was present in the city with the electric trams about 60 years ago). For this, three factors are of critical importance. The first is the availability of enough public buses that significantly reduce waiting and travelling time. The second is a coordinating authority that supervises, evaluates, and re-designs the system, giving priority to pedestrians over all other forms of traffic. (It is curious that while many speak glowingly of the 'disciplined' traffic in the developed countries, few refer to the fact that cars have to yield to those wishing to cross the road.) And thirdly, a well-designed system has to be well-regulated by a properly-manned force. Most commentators conveniently overlook the fact that, right from the inception of the system, the Delhi traffic police has officially 'abandoned' the BRT corridor, which is why it is presided over by poorly-trained, poorly-paid, and privately-employed 'marshals' who have no penal authority. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that private motorised traffic is constantly encroaching into bus, cycle, and pedestrian lanes with impunity, that pedestrians and cyclists have been left to look to their own safety, and that the first corridor in Delhi has been stunted at one-third of its potential. In spite of this, as the data shows, the BRT system still works. By obeying the dictates of the car lobby and confining it to the left will destroy whatever little potential is left for a democratic public transport system in the city.

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