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Nothing romantic about it

by Dinesh Mohan

UNLEASHING the Potential of Urban Growth is one of the most positive documents released by a UN agency. It documents most cogently the issues concerning urbanisation in this century. It is quite clear now that urban growth in India will accelerate and our large cities will grow larger for some time to come. This is a given and the report recommends we start looking at urban growth positively, plan for it, and make sure our lives become healthier, safer and happier.

Not soon after its release, the IPCC report on climate change warns us that unless the correct policies are put in place, now it will be almost impossible to prevent temperatures from rising by 2 degrees C over the next 50 years. The IPCC report says CO2 emissions from motorised travel will have to be reduced if we have to survive this century. The report on urban growth gives us some pointers. "Public transport must take priority over private cars for democracy and the public good to prevail," it says.

These reports come at the right time because the Government of India last year announced a National Urban Transport Policy and put in place the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission to provide financial and operational teeth for the implementation of the transport policy. The issue is whether the 'right' policies will actually get implemented.

Innovation

As a part of this process, the Government of India has agreed to fund the introduction of the Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), also called the High Capacity Bus System (HCBS), in Pune, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and a few other cities. The BRTS is a relatively new concept in public transport that allows buses to run on dedicated lanes where no other vehicles are allowed to enter.

In most situations the bus lanes are placed at the centre of the road and the bus platform height is the same as that of the bus floor. The concept was initially pioneered by Jaime Lerner when he was the Mayor of Curitiba in Brazil. In justifying his project, he said, "A comprehensive bus system – which would help remove thousands of cars from the streets – can be set up for the same cost as constructing a flyover, which often only serves to shift a traffic jam from one point to another."

The BRT's introduction was a runaway success and innovations followed. The idea spread through South America and got copied in all continents. This is one of the few instances where an innovation from the developing world has caught the imagination of transport planners in the developed world.

From Beijing to Bogota, from Tehran to Toronto, dozens of cities have it or are in the process of building the system. Despite the worldwide success of the BRT, there are

MAIL TODAY

many in India who think it is a hare-brained idea of some romantics.

The idea of introducing dedicated central bus lanes in the Capital was first mooted about ten years ago and the then government had some feasibility reports done for two corridors. But the idea didn't get very far largely because of resistance within the government.

After governments and officials changed, the idea resurfaced and the DTC invited national and international experts for a workshop in 2002 to discuss public transport options. They recommended that Delhi initiate the construction of BRT corridors immediately. The people who had to take the decision were not convinced and so a committee with the then chief secretary as chair was constituted to discuss sustainable transport options. Six months later, this committee recommended that work on six BRT corridors be started in 2004.

After detailed studies, an international workshop of experts was convened in December 2005 to examine the proposed designs. It is only after all this that construction of the first corridor started in October 2006. Though Delhi was one of the first cities to consider the BRT, now it will rank among the latecomers!

One of the most commonly asked questions about the BRT central bus lane concept is, "how will people cross the road?" The concept is not new. Most tram systems in Europe and the one in Kolkata run in the centre of the road. The fact is that for every round trip by bus today, you have to cross the road twice. At every bus stop, half the people boarding the bus and half the people leaving it have to cross the road because homes and businesses are evenly distributed on both sides of the road.

Fatalities

Today, they have to run across because no arrangements have been made for commuters to cross the road and some get killed in the process. In the BRT system, bus stations are made at traffic signals and commuters can only exit at the zebra crossing and cross the road only when they get the green signal. When stations are mid-block, special arrangements are made either with underpasses or bridges or special pedestrian lights. Wherever this has been done, traffic fatalities reduce by 70-90 per cent.

The second concern is that car movement will get restricted. The facts are actually the opposite. A typical corridor in Delhi at present consists of three traffic lanes used by all motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians because footpaths are almost non-existent. A three-lane road should allow about 6,000 cars per hour, but in Indian cities the average is less than 4,000, and a three lane road operates like one with less than two lanes.

In the re-allocated space, pedestrians get 2-2.5 metres of smooth footpath, bicyclists also get 2-2.5 metres of segregated lane and motor vehicles get at least 6.75 m (or clear two lanes) all through (and three lanes at junctions), and then the bus lane is in the centre. This way, car drivers will not be obstructed by buses every 600-800m on the left, nor will they have bicyclists darting around them.

Car travel will become smoother and safer than today. With buses in the centre, you will not have horrible bus congestion on the left at crossings, and bus travel will get predictable. Our experience shows that with such an arrangement in place, the pace of the mobility of people can double from 20,000 persons per hour to about 40,000 per hour on the same road space.

Mobility

So the BRT is not about big buses, but about a system that increases the mobility of people without increasing road space. The road renovation process provides a safe bicycle path so that children and others can bicycle safely to school and other destinations.

The BRT corridor planned for Delhi will be the first urban corridor in the country where a person in a wheelchair will be able to use the footpath all the way to the bus platform and then enter a bus at the same level. This is why the disabled community always gives whole-hearted support to the BRT.

The system can be constantly upgraded with changing technology and urban form. This is why mayors all over the world are introducing the system. Even on narrow roads they are making car lanes one way to accommodate the bus lane. In the busy entertainment and shopping centres of cities with narrow streets, they allow only buses to go through now. This has revitalised these centres also because the level of noise and pollution goes down.

If we have to cope with our growing cities, we must start designing, innovating and building our own BRT systems. There's nothing hare-brained about it.

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