Indian urban transport policy falls short

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The importance of an efficient and effective urban transport system is immense due to its effect on the wellbeing of citizens and economic productivity in any urban area. In the United States, for example, the annual economic cost of urban traffic congestion is estimated to be between 40 billion and 225 billion dollars, while in the United Kingdom the figure stands at 10-30 billion dollars. In India, problems related to urban transport have grown as cities expand in size and density, placing transportation on top of the policy agenda. Thus far improvements in urban transport have failed to keep pace with this growth.

What next

The National Urban Transport (NUT) policy is an important step towards improving urban transport. Research and development, which are vital for creative solutions to the mixed traffic in Indian cities, promise opportunities for investment and capacity building in the private sector. However, these will be missed unless local governments and the national government push for comprehensive social, political, institutional and technical interventions.

Analysis

The NUT policy of the Ministry of Urban Development emphasises a well-integrated transport system. Among other things, it calls for:

- establishment of Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities;
- independent regulatory bodies;
- public plus non-motorised modes of transport;
- better traffic management and increased safety;
- sustainable and cleaner technologies; and
- effective transport legislation.

The policy comprehensively covers urban transport issues, but it has thus far been inadequately implemented.

Shortcomings

Weaknesses of the policy and urban transport can be seen at all levels.

Connectivity constraints

Impact

- Without the political resolution of jurisdictional boundaries, Unified Transport Authorities will fail to improve urban transport.
- The car market in India will continue to expand over the longer term, despite its adverse impact on traffic conditions.
- India's vast infrastructure needs offer investment opportunities, especially at the local government level.
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For new projects, it does not emphasise the immediate need for interconnectivity and multi-modal integration:

- Single-mode, capital-intensive projects such as the Delhi Metro are still unable to reach large city expanses, as seen in the recurrent problem of last mile connectivity.

- In Ahmedabad (Gujarat), the Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS) is a success but it still carries a fraction of bus commuters in the city, most of whom travel by regular buses that have a larger network.

Management weaknesses

Overall improvements in the management of traffic are yet to gain momentum in the existing system:

- Bus technologies including vehicles, ticketing, timekeeping and safety have seen few upgrades over the years. More recently, the introduction of new buses and stricter regulations for private operators has resulted in a slight improvement in the bus service, but their higher tariffs limit their affordability.

- The expressways built between Delhi and its satellite towns are meant primarily for cars to travel fast within the Delhi metropolitan area, but their increased numbers only add to the congestion of the mixed traffic of city streets.

Modernising traditional transport?

Other modes of transportation -- such as auto rickshaws, taxis, cycle rickshaws and personal two-wheelers -- receive scant attention in the NUT policy, even though they are currently indispensable modes of transport:

- The Delhi government promoted innovations such as battery- or solar-powered rickshaws and subsidies to manufacturers but has failed to follow through.

- Some improvements can be seen in Delhi's auto rickshaws that now run on compressed natural gas and will soon be retrofitted with GPS devices.

Nonetheless, improved auto rickshaw services have been implemented in other cities through programmes such G-auto in Ahmedabad and Rajkot (Gujarat) and Easy Auto in Patna (Bihar) and Bengaluru (Karnataka). The Delhi government is also exploring safer alternatives to three-wheelers. Economical radio taxis, for example, are used for longer distances in Delhi, while in Mumbai they are also used for travelling shorter distances.

Motorised two-wheelers such as scooters and motorcycles constitute 60-70% of registered vehicles in most cities and are growing at a much faster rate than cars. They provide a cheap, personalised mode of transport that is well suited for the mixed traffic in Indian cities. Yet these are hardly mentioned in the policy, even though they provide opportunities for improvement, for example by conversion to electric or solar power.

Inadequate innovation

Currently there is no opening for introducing innovative techniques to deal with transport problems in Indian cities. The policy focuses on introducing stand-alone technologies such as the metro, monorail or light rail or physically segregating traffic, as in the case with the Delhi BRTS.
Research and development cells might be needed to resolve traffic problems by, for example:

- raising public awareness and changing misconceptions about transportation modes and traffic behaviour; and

- effectively marketing, branding and communicating public transport projects in order to make them more successful.

The success of public relations can be seen in the public approval that has been generated and sustained for the Delhi Metro (see INDIA: Metro offers lessons for infrastructure plans - June 13, 2012).

Organisational weaknesses

Organisational issues include problems related to the creation of Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities, as integration will be difficult to bring about without them. Yet the policy does not mention how a plethora of local, state and national transport agencies with their own agendas and power struggles can be brought under a single dominion. Similarly, attempts at introducing new management and enforcement techniques fail due to bureaucratic delays and lack of training programmes and personnel.

Moreover, there are no institutional safeguards currently in place to protect public transport projects from political interference by private interests. In Delhi, although the BRTS has improved transit for bus users, non-motorised vehicles and pedestrians, it has been strongly opposed by car owners for limiting their use of road space and their political opposition has resulted in it now being in a state of limbo.

Capital misallocation?

According to the NUT policy, the investment required in public/mass transport systems stood at around 435,380 crore rupees (80.1 billion dollars) in 2008. However, the allocation of funds is heavily skewed towards capital-intensive mass transit and roads, with only 13% going towards other areas such as traffic improvements and road safety, non-motorised traffic management, urban transport planning and operation data and terminals.

Moreover, a comprehensive plan for generating investment in urban transport infrastructure is absent (see INDIA: Infrastructure financing plans face key hurdles - October 25, 2011). The National Urban Renewal Mission is the main body that provides financial support to improvements in urban infrastructure and helps city and state governments in forming and implementing development plans. However, these funds may be insufficient since the entire financing needs have to be met with taxes on fuel, land and individual income, and private sector investment.

Outlook

The working group on Urban Transport published its recommendations for the 12th five-year plan (2012-17) in January 2013 and has tried to include most of the above issues in their recommendations. Yet the recommendations may be not be adopted and implemented in the plan.

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