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ECO-LOGIC

Cars Are Not Sacred Cows

Delhi's roads are faced with a fundamental problem which all Indian cities are likely to encounter: the phenomenal increase in private vehicles, writes *Ashish Kothari*

AN important event passed off quietly in the third week of July, was reported very scantily in the press, and did not evoke much public reaction. Though negligible compared to the mega-stories we are all used to in every morning's newspaper, the event was nevertheless of significance to the ranging debates on development planning and environment.

In a bid to widen the road for the heavy rush hour around Connaught Place in Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) started cutting huge jamun trees on Tolstoy Marg. Six trees had already been felled when local residents and passers-by alerted the press and some citizens' organisations. One local family complained to the police and even approached the court, only to be frustrated in its efforts when the NDMC displayed an authority letter from the concerned agencies. There followed a bit of public outcry, some sustained publicity by one newspaper, a series of meetings between NDMC officials and members of citizens' groups, and an enquiry by the Development Commissioner.

In a stunning revelation, the latter found that permission had been given to cut only seven trees on this road, and 36 in all on several roads; the NDMC had taken this to mean that 36 trees could be cut on Tolstoy Marg alone! By the time the operation was stayed, 12 trees had been felled. It is not clear whether the rest will be saved or not, for that decision will depend on a series of complex exercises determining the traffic flow on this stretch, and alternative ways of managing this flow.

That, indeed, is the crux of the matter: the road-side trees and green areas in cities are facing insensitive traffic planning. In a letter subsequent to the above episode, the environmental action group Kalpavriksh suggested to the NDMC some tentative alternatives to the Tolstoy Marg expansion, as also some long-term steps to avoid future such incidences. The suggestions for long-term action related to primarily two basic steps: greater emphasis on public transportation than on private vehicles; and greater involvement of the urban public in decision-making and implementation.

Delhi's traffic is faced with a fundamental problem which all Indian cities are likely to encounter: the phenomenal increase in private vehicles, including four- and two-wheelers. Nearly one lakh new vehicles get added to Delhi every year, and there has been no attempt by the government to check this runaway growth in private vehicles, perhaps because they are supposed to be the symbol of 'progress,' or perhaps because those who use them are the powerful and influential people of Delhi. And so, every once in a while traffic experts decide that this road or that has too much congestion, and will either need widening, or a flyover to divert the pressure. And who loses out? Roadside trees,

hawkers plying their wares, pedestrians who are left without sidewalks, cyclists who lose their de facto cycle lanes, and residents of road-side colonies, who suddenly find themselves without any buffer between polluted roads and themselves.

The ideal city is one in which daily movement (eg. between workplace and home, or between market and home) is minimised; by that parameter, Delhi is one of the worst in the world. With a heavy concentration of offices in a few areas, and residential colonies spread far and wide, people have to commute very long distances. Attempts to decongest office and commercial sites, including to the 'satellite' towns around Delhi, have so far not been very successful.

But even if better planning achieved a reduction in the daily movement of people, there would obviously still be a need for transportation at a

in the same road space than can automobiles and two-wheelers. Even though buses would appear to spew out much more smoke, the amount of pollution caused per person transported is much less than by private vehicles. Comparisons between railways and private vehicles are even more striking. This is, therefore, the most significant reason behind Delhi's constant drive to build new roads, widen existing roads, and build flyovers...and yet not control traffic jams and congestion. Such measures are like treating brain tumour by taking aspirin; the headache may go away, but not the disease.

Such superficial treatment pervades other problems also, eg. the attempt to control vehicular pollution by ensuring that each individual vehicle conforms to specified standards. There are just too many vehicles, so that even if every one were to individually

With more private autovehicles, there needs to be a much greater level of regulation. There should be roads and areas which are restricted to only public transport, one-way systems, areas reserved for pedestrians (the Delhi Administration's experiment with pedestrianising Connaught Place was never followed up), compulsory car pooling (starting with government officers themselves), extra road tax, and so on.

There also needs to be a much greater encouragement to cycles. Silent, non-polluting, quick, inexpensive, easily maintainable—cycles are possibly the most efficient mode of transport ever invented, except walking! Unfortunately, Delhi is a horror story for cyclists, who are forever in danger of getting knocked down by a Redline bus, or poisoned by vehicular fumes. Tens of thousands of commuters in Delhi still use this mode of transport, but as conditions worsen, they will decrease, thus adding to the pressure on public transport or increasing the number of private autovehicles. Urgently needed are a much greater number of cycle lanes, special signals at crossings for cyclists, and regulations which give cyclists the right of way. Also, in the long run, educational and publicity drives which give the cycle the exalted status it richly deserves, rather than being condemned to being the despised cousin of autovehicles.

All this will come, of course, only if there is adequate public pressure on the civic authorities. This is precisely why events like the Tolstoy Marg one are important. What they do is send signals to the powers-that-be that they can no longer take decisions in isolation, and that there are people ready to react and

act if wrong decisions are taken. In other words, politicians and bureaucrats have to get the idea that they are accountable to the public.

But rather than wait for public reaction after starting work, it would be far more efficient (and less embarrassing!) if officials were to conduct their work in a more transparent manner. For all decisions regarding tree-felling, for instance, the concerned authorities should consult local residents, as also well-known environmental groups. In many cases, this may even bring up alternative traffic management solutions. A couple of years back, a road-widening plan of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi was exposed by Kalpavriksh as unnecessary, flawed, and phenomenally destructive as several hundred trees would have had to be cut. Some local mobilisation, press publicity, and suggestions for alternative plans helped to stall the move. One only wishes that the NDMC had publicised their plans for Tolstoy Marg before starting operations; perhaps 12 precious lives would have been saved.

—The author teaches at the Indian Institute of Public Administration



Photograph by HEMANT MEHTA

■ Nearly one lakh new vehicles add to the chaos on Delhi roads every year

mass scale. This can be achieved by either encouraging and building public transportation systems (railways, buses, trams, underground), or by encouraging private modes of transport. Over the last few decades, the civic authorities in Delhi have obviously favoured the latter. This is evident from the data on the rise of various classes of vehicles, over the last 25 years, presented in table. Overall, the number of vehicles has become 10 times, at the rate of about 80,000 every year!

Private vehicles clearly predominate. Two-wheelers account for about two-thirds of the total, and cars/jeeps about 20 per cent. Buses are only one per cent of the total. A recent report by a high-level committee, chaired by the Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests, and consisting of senior officials of several Delhi and Central Government agencies, observed that the boom in vehicular population is "attributed to the geographical distribution of Delhi besides poor mass transport system and inadequate utilisation of ring railways."

This is a matter of great environmental and social concern. A bus can transport several times more people

follow the standards, the combined effect would face exceed the permissible levels of ambient air pollution.

The solution lies in a mix of measures. A much greater stress on public transportation is urgently needed in Delhi. While the much-publicised underground and overhead mass rapid transport systems could be taken up in the long run, a more immediate solution would be the rationalisation of the bus and ring railway systems. Currently, the latter is hardly used, as railway stations are not well-connected to the common bus routes. The Mudrika bus route, circling Delhi, was a very innovative idea; a similar step is needed regarding surface railways. Simultaneously, of course, the bus system can do with a lot of improvement, not just in terms of frequency (where it has already shown progress), but also in terms of service (where the behaviour of drivers and conductors could do with a lot of change!). With this, since it is significantly cheaper, public transportation would entice a lot of people to abandon their private vehicles for daily commuting. Such is already the experience with dozens of cities in other countries.