Free Rides for Women - Delhi

Why in news?

The Aam Aadmi Party-led Delhi government has proposed to make travel by buses and metro rail free for all women in about 3 months.

What is the rationale?

- The National Capital Region is among the most unsafe urban regions for women worldwide.
- In this backdrop, the free rides measure is meant to encourage more women to use public transport.
- This is because the government reckons public transport as the safest mode of transport for women.
- Free rides is expected to increase the use of public transport by women as metro rides have become rather expensive after May 2017.

What are the concerns with the proposal?

- **Relevance** - A larger proportion of female travellers on the metro are actually the women who can afford to pay the full fare.
- On the other hand, women who should ideally benefit from free rides might still not use the metro or the buses.
- This is simply because such modes of transport do not connect their place of residence and place of work.
- Domestic helps who walk 2-6 km daily fall in this category.
- **Discrimination** - Besides, asymmetric pricing benefits tend to be socially divisive as it woulddiscriminateagainst poor men and boys.
- **Economy** - The Delhi government has not explained how it will compensate the two services.
- It is speculated that the measure would cost the Delhi government around Rs 700 crore on an annual basis.
- The Delhi Transport Corporation has seen its working losses rise from around Rs 940 crore in 2013-14 to Rs 1,750 crore in 2018-19.
- On the other hand, the Delhi metro, it raised fares after a long gap of 8 years to much controversy.
- Its operating ratio is in danger of being skewed again if a large segment of its passengers travels free.

What could be done?

- Discounted fares for certain classes of commuters, including students and seniors could be introduced.
- This, along with, daily and weekly cap on fares might encourage greater use of buses and metros.
- That requires widespread adoption of smart payment cards that are valid across various modes of public transport.
- Cities such as London and Sydney are among the many that have such a system in place.
- E.g. the Oyster cardis valid for travel through all 6 zones of London and has a daily cap of £12.80
- Likewise, the Opal card in Sydney comes with a daily cap of A$15.80 and weekly cap of A$63.20. On Sundays, the maximum fare is A$2.70.
- For the Delhi's poor, particularly those living in crowded slums and narrow lanes, public transport is some 15-20 minutes walking distance from their homes.
- So, the government could do well to start free e-rickshaw rides for women and children and thus address both their safety and local commute concerns.
- Besides, the real demands in light of the safety concerns are enlightened education campaigns and a heightened investment on security and vigilance.
- Instead of subsidies, the government can augment Delhi's bus service in terms of quantity and security.
- It can work with the central government to train the police force in gender sensitivity to make the national capital safer for women in overall terms.

Source: Business Line, Business Standard

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