Revamping Buses for Better Transport

What is the issue?

With increased congestion on roads in India's major cities, there has to be relook at India's policy on promoting buses a key public transport means.

Why are mobility plans significant for cities?

- When cities fail at mobility, it results in congestion, lost productivity, worsening pollution and a terrible quality of life.
- India's big cities have all these attributes, and 14 of them were in the list of the 15 most polluted cities worldwide last year.
- Congestion in the four biggest metros causes annual economic losses of over $22 billion.
- This was highlighted by the NITI Aayog in its Transforming Mobility report.
- In big cities, new roads are not possible, and no new land is available.
- But they must prepare to serve more and more people who arrive each year.
- In such case, successful plans build better mobility.

What are the limitations?

- **Number of buses** - Indian cities need to add several thousand buses more, and not just spend heavily on Metro rail.
- There are over 1.7 million buses in India, about 10% of them operated by governments.
- Individual cities do not have enough of them to provide a good service, and the gap is filled mostly by unregulated intermediates, such as vans.
- **Comfort** - The buses operated by governments are not properly designed, are uncomfortable and badly maintained.
- Government corporations do a less appreciable job when it comes to using technology.

- **Use** - Buses have an image problem in the society.
- There lies an aspiration among people to progress from a bicycle to a scooter, then to a four-wheeler.

- **Information** - One of the key barriers to taking a bus is not getting information about the service.
- Bus corporations deprive themselves too, of revenue, by failing to act on this.

- Cities such as London and Singapore have systems to tell passengers where the next bus is on a route and predict its arrival at a stop in real time.
- Such a system is not available for even the biggest metro cities in India, something the Smart City mission could have addressed.

What could be done?

- London, for instance, is a city with an iconic bus system that integrates famously with its equally popular 'tube' system (as the Metro is known there).
- In India, buses need an image makeover and cities need several thousand more buses, of good design and build quality.
- They need to use contact-less fare payments using suitable cards, since buying tickets is also a barrier.
- Buses also need support to move faster through city traffic, using policy tools such as congestion pricing for cars.
- E.g., London discourages the use of cars through a congestion charge within a defined area.
- The London congestion charge immediately cut traffic in the demarcated area by 20%, helped speed up buses and improved revenues.
- The biggest reform that the U.K. experience teaches is integration.
- Bringing traffic authorities, road engineers and transport operators under the same umbrella helped eliminate planning and operational problems.
- Indian cities have unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities to do that; they must be brought to life and given mandatory targets.
- The goal should be a stipulated higher share of travel by public transport, walking and cycling.
- Importantly, this should be evaluated through periodic surveys of customer satisfaction.

Source: The Hindu

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