

A boom that is actually a bane: India's car chaos

By GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

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India is in the middle of a car boom. Good for some. But bad for most, who call this chaos. At the latest count, there were a staggering 123 models, manufactured by 30 companies. Each model comes with several variations. One of the latest is Tata's Nano, which for just about \$2,000, has been steadily replacing two-wheelers, still worsening the traffic congestion.

Despite the recession, the country's appetite for cars seems insatiable, an insatiability that is the key factor in the urban traffic mess. Tacitly encouraging this is the government that benefits with each car manufacturer setting up shop on Indian soil. There are allegations of huge kickbacks. Some employees of a car manufacturer, whose car factory is located on the outskirts of Chennai, allege that a few of their top bosses have feathered their nests back home in South Korea. Sadly, in an overpopulated and poverty stricken nation like India, where most people cannot have one decent meal in a day, let alone even dream of buying a car, the conveyance of choice should be mass public transport, not individual private vehicles.

But over the years, public transportation has been grossly neglected. Kolkata has an underground rapid system, but that runs only on a single north-south corridor. Chennai, Mumbai and Bangalore have only now begun to toy with the idea of an underground metro. New Delhi's metro began plying only a few years ago, and hopefully a good network would be in place soon. Admittedly, it is world class, and the man who made this possible is Sreedharan, who took up the assignment on condition that there would be no political interference.

It needs very little intelligence or imagination to understand that given the kind of road space that most Indian cities have — mostly way below 20 per cent compared to the desired 33 per cent — the best way to move people is a well-heeled public transport scheme that will include buses and trains. After all, a single bus can carry many more commuters than what a lot many more cars put together can. The kind of road space saved is mindboggling.

In India, the vehicle population — two and four wheelers — began to rise in the 1990s with economic reforms, better salaries and more ambitious dreams. Indians equated the ownership of a private vehicle with higher social status, and not just convenience.

In Delhi, a thousand cars are added to the road fleet every day. The owners concerned are usually delirious having either got their first car or added to an existing one. Some families have three or four or even five cars each. So, chaos is understandably unimaginable, and the metro is yet to make a significant dent. Bangalore will need millions of dollars to fight its traffic snarls by building flyovers and freeways, and upgrading roads. A slightly rational thinking can help the administration understand that the money can be better used to build a rapid rail system and improve the public bus service. For this, the roads have to be decongested. We have to have more buses, not more cars or two-wheelers.

London imposed a congestion tax on private cars, and this cut down vehicles entering the city center. Manhattan has such prohibitive parking fees that car owners think a hundred times before driving in there. In Singapore, it is more expensive to get a car license than to buy a new vehicle! These have greatly discouraged private car use, saved on gas, cut down pollution and lessened human misery.

Obviously, the solutions in India are not easy. But a host of ways are available to make roads less crowded and more safe. Most cities have rivers and canals that can be used as excellent waterways: many such schemes are gathering dust.

Underground transportation is taking off at an irritatingly slow motion. Not many use Chennai's flying overhead rail because the stations are filthy, the approaches to them filthier and are not interlinked to other forms of transport, like buses. Most of them do not even have parking spaces.

In the final analysis, it is clear that there is no political will to better India's public transport system.

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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once termed Indian cities "living hells".

They continue to be so, or more precisely, turning even more hellish with cars, cars and cars everywhere.

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