Restoring Pedestrian Accessibility in Indian Cities

By Madhav G. Badami

- Traffic accidents are a major cause of death in low-income countries
- India’s urban transport policy focuses on continuous road building and ignores the long-term impacts of more roads, preferred modes of transportation, and lack of pedestrian access
- To reduce traffic fatalities, an integrated and sustainable urban transport policy must restore pedestrian accessibility, and minimize dependence on motor vehicles

Traffic Fatalities in India

In India, road traffic deaths have increased from 15,000 in 1971 to 93,000 in 2004. Deaths of pedestrians and cyclists account for 50 and 67% of numbers, motorcycle and car users for 25% and 5%, respectively. The World Health Organization projects traffic accidents to be the fifth leading cause of death in the world by 2030.

Challenges to Urban Transport in India

Urban transport policy focuses on road building. To improve traffic, India’s urban transport policy concentrates on road infrastructure development and transport system management. The policy also advocates technological measures to mitigate the impacts on congestion and air pollution of motor vehicle use per vehicle-kilometer.

More roads encourage people to buy and use motor vehicles. Constructing more roads, while ignoring infrastructure and facilities for pedestrians, may improve traffic flows and ease congestion in the short term. However, international experience shows that having more roads induces the need to own motor vehicles and use them more often.

Most people prefer to walk or cycle. In India, a majority of people does not own motor vehicles and prefers to walk or cycle. Building pedestrian infrastructure and facilities would encourage these modes of transportation and help curb the rapid growth of motor vehicle activity in cities.

Lack of pedestrian access increases motor vehicle use and energy consumption. Lack of pedestrian infrastructure and facilities compels people, including the poor, elderly, and young, to rely on motor vehicles even for short trips. Consequently, increased usage of motor vehicles for most urban trips exacerbates congestion, raises emission levels, and consumes more energy.

Developing an Integrated and Sustainable Approach to Urban Transport

Addressing different modes of transportation. In India, an integrated and sustainable approach to urban transport is called to address multiple impacts, cater to different modes of transportation, and meet the needs of pedestrians. This entails a range of interlocking actions (see figure) augmented with effective coordination across different functions, geographic and time scales, and agencies and different actors.

An integrated and sustainable urban transport policy can increase pedestrian accessibility and reduce dependence on motor vehicles. Pedestrian accessibility can be the foundation of a sustainable urban transport policy in India, along with quality public transit, pricing of motor vehicle use, and land use–transport integration. The policy would minimize the need for and curb the increasing use of motor vehicles. This, in turn, would allow all modes of transportation, including motor vehicles, to operate more efficiently. It would also enhance effectiveness of mass transit, mitigate the negative impacts of urban transport, and promote social justice on the roads.

For further information
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