

The walking class must protest

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By Vivek Moorthy



The pattern of urbanization taking place in India is seriously harming pedestrians. They are being displaced by road-building and widening, without safe walking space—which was meagre to begin with. Being mostly poor and illiterate, the prevailing inhabitants cannot take legal recourse.

For starters, this problem needs to be tackled nationally by imposing a steep, revenue-neutral, vehicle area levy that will drastically curb vehicle area. Related policies are required to facilitate local travel. Ideally, the vehicle area levies should be implemented globally so that new vehicles are built to economize on road area per passenger, since car manufacturing is a global activity. But like a global carbon tax, long recommended by *The Economist* magazine, this is quite unlikely.

Even at the national level, measures to curb vehicle area will not be taken either easily or quickly, if at all. Hence, massive pressure must be brought to bear upon the authorities (municipal, state and Central)

to block them from building and widening roads indiscriminately.

Certainly, growth both requires, and will result in, many more roads, at least for local travel. Long distance is, perhaps, better handled by air and rail—a separate issue. However, the expansion of road area in India, and much of the developing world, is taking place with no corresponding measures to use road area efficiently. No efforts are being made to minimize what can be called the displacement costs of road building—elimination of sidewalks or informal walking area, demolition of shops and buildings and chopping of trees.

The bustling village of Bilekahalli, where the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, campus is located, is typical, and there are many such places all over Bangalore and India. There is almost no walking area left for pedestrians. Much of the area is dug up, and the risk of injury by stepping on unstable concrete slabs, placed upon open drains, is quite high.

We are living in a regime of motorists, by motorists, for motorists; not a regime of pedestrians, by pedestrians, for pedestrians—the suffering majority. (Pedestrians can be classified to include those who partly take buses or autos and then walk).

The anti-pedestrian bias all over the world is reflected in the use of the word “traffic” to denote vehicular traffic. Incidentally, pedestrians are also traffic, the bulk of road traffic in India. The only major instance of treating them as traffic is when it comes to counting footfalls in the mall.

Trying to cross the road at present at zebra crossings on busy and important roads, hoping the vehicle will stop, is a calculated risk. Describing China, *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas Kristof wrote some time back, “In civilized countries, cars stop for people. In uncivilized ones, people stop for cars.” It would be interesting to know where India stands compared with China with respect to automotive assault—a different kind of elephant-dragon comparison, from the usual ones about gross domestic product growth and income.

The anti-pedestrian bias of urban transport policy stems from huge government spending. By its very nature, government spending is geared towards outlays and not outcomes. To facilitate the smooth flow of vehicle traffic along with pedestrians crossing the road, numerous pedestrian walkovers could have been built at much lower costs, and without the enormous disruption for years to all traffic, due to the flyovers that have been built. To paraphrase the title of journalist P. Sainath’s book on droughts, Everyone Loves a Good Flyover.

Pro-pedestrian laws need to be enacted, mandating that walkovers be placed on roads where motor traffic needs to flow fast for long stretches. Numerous deaths have occurred on the road to the new airport. Like environmental clearances, a PASS (pedestrian adequate safety and space) clearance should be made mandatory before allowing roads to be built, especially when they endanger the lives of those working and walking in the vicinity. Simultaneously, pedestrians must be barred from randomly crossing—by erecting barriers—and penalized for doing so.

It is unrealistic to expect full-fledged sidewalks to be built for most existing or new roads that have pedestrian traffic. However, at least pedestrian lanes of certain minimum width should be retained. Reducing or eliminating the pedestrian area does not ensure better vehicle traffic flow—it may lead to congestion. Some of us would gladly walk in our neighbourhoods to shop and get around. But since there is no safe area, we are instead forced to drive and add to the congestion. Hence, restricting the road area for vehicles may make vehicles move faster.

Pedestrians must organize themselves and start holding protests to get their rights recognized. After all, traffic in Bangalore has been continually disrupted for several years to build flyovers. If traffic does get disrupted by protests to enforce pedestrian rights, it is well worth it.

The thrust of this article may seem to be in sync with the views of many that the poor are being harmed by globalization and market forces. In general, I do not share those sentiments. Automotive assault on pedestrians is not due to market forces per se. Rather, it is due to the massive underpricing (indirectly) of vehicle area, and also due to the non-pricing of the collision damage impact of vehicles. Globalization in the developing world is benefiting the working class, but harming the walking class!

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