

What Delhi Must Do Next

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Traffic in Delhi

As an initial measure to tackle pollution, the odd-even rule was a great move. Considering that short-term bans have worked in Paris and Beijing, and that the experiment was explicitly temporary, much of the English media has been unfairly critical. One study that found cars account for little of Delhi's pollution was repeatedly cited. But evidence on sources of pollution is generally not that reliable, as evident from the conflicting readings. Further, cars lead to more road building and more polluting road dust.

Even if pollution can be tackled by cleaner fuels, that does not solve the perennial problem of congestion. Without restrictions, travel time just rises. According to a study done for Bangalore by the Consortium of Traffic Engineers and Safety Trainers, the average speed on specified routes dropped from 35 kmph in 2005 to 9.2 kmph in 2014.

Severe congestion is a good enough justification to restrict driving. This should have been a plank of Delhi's December anti-pollution campaign. As a concrete follow-up measure, the Delhi government should build data records on travel times on specified routes during different days of the week, times of day, and months. This task should be outsourced to an independent agency. Using GPS and various apps, it should be feasible to ensure tamper-proof data. Then it should be possible to try out various policies, and assess if they should be implemented to substantially reduce travel time.

With regard to congestion, the Philippines experience is noteworthy. Last August, President Benigno Aquino III (“Noynoy”) announced reviving the odd-even car scheme, but withdrew it under severe criticism. To tackle congestion, the Philippines had tried odd-even road rationing before 2000 but then watered it down to the prevailing, milder, restrictions: Access to busy roads at peak times is based on the last digit of the licence plate. Yet Noynoy was also quoted as saying that “the ideal solution is to build more roads and bridges” — the standard suggestion of more infrastructure. Unfortunately, neither building roads nor providing public transport has ever been enough to tackle congestion. Despite excellent public transport, the average travel speed in London at peak time in 2000 was under 10 mph, roughly the same as with a horse and coach a century earlier.

Conventional congestion charging for entry into the main city at peak times (successfully implemented by London since 2003) can only resolve part of the problem. But in third-world cities, even in residential areas and during off-peak hours, there is substantial congestion. Road space shrinks as owners extend pavements and cement adjacent areas to park their vehicles. To tackle congestion, we need to first accept that a vehicle is not just a marvellous machine. It is also mobile land not paid for — unless parked on the owner’s premises. When we buy land, we pay for every square metre. Unfortunately, this isn’t so for a vehicle. When we buy a vehicle, we may pay a lot for registration, road tax, fuel taxes, etc.

However, most of these charges are only indirectly and imprecisely linked to the vehicle’s area, and some not at all. The root cause of congestion is that we aren’t made to pay for the precise area we occupy. There should be no such thing as free vehicle area. The best way to sustainably reduce road congestion is to charge steeply for vehicle area. If a vehicle’s area is eight square metres and the tax or levy rate is Rs 25,000 per square metre per year, then the annual tax would be Rs 2 lakh. Ideally, the vehicle-area tax should be offset by reducing existing taxes by the same amount — that is, strictly speaking, it should only be a levy, not a tax. Simultaneously, shared taxis, mini vans, etc, need to be permitted and legalised. The vehicle-area tax is a win-win policy, whose time, locally and globally, has come. Looking around Bangalore, not only are there many more cars on the road, but they are generally bigger. Such a policy is overdue. Perhaps Delhi can lead the way, and then other cities may follow.