

Why can't Indians give up their private car?

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Abstract – Cars seem to be central to the ambitions of most typical households as they can be considered to be the last cog in completing the machine of independence after acquiring a house. However, it has ended up creating a plethora of issues which go beyond the scope of the environment. Why is it so difficult to give up private ownership of cars, moreover why is it difficult to give up cars in India through the case study of Delhi? Does it have links to a largely unreliable public transport system? Or are there safety concerns that parents or even working women might have? As per RBI data, Indians had taken loans for procuring houses and cars throughout the pandemic year of 2020 but not personal loans (education loans in particular). However, what are the alternatives Indians have, with projections showing 60% of the world population to be living in cities by the year 2030, the problem of congestion and strained government resources only stands to multiply. As the world tries to move towards a more sustainable future, are electric vehicles really the way out? The paper analyzes three aspects of owning cars: sociological, environmental and economical with respect to how sustainable it is. The stakeholders are citizens of the metropolitan city of Delhi, however, in principle can apply itself across the wider context of cities at large.

The automobile market in India is an interesting one as a typical Indian dream is considered to be characterized by having a job, house and car. There are various associations made with cars, specifically in the Indian context it is associated with success and independence. India is presently the 4th largest vehicle market in the world. The following paper discusses the question and various issues with alternatives to car travel, urban designs and different perspectives of the question. These issues might be specific to India but these principles extend beyond the scope of the Indian nation as these issues can be emulated in various other countries too, at least in principle. The paper ends with a few recommendations to tackle the said problems.

Cars are extremely important to any economy, the Indian automobile industry contributes about 7.1% to the Indian GDP, with 37 million jobs being created because of this industry. Nitin Gadkari the Roads and Transport minister of India, had in his speech at the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers(SIAM) annual convention stated that India wanted to develop the automobile sector more and increase its contribution to the Indian GDP up to 12% and add 50 million new jobs in the sector. This indicates that the automobile industry, cars, are a big part of India's ambitions of becoming a 5 trillion dollar economy and an 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat'. The automobile sector received cumulative equity FDI inflow of about US\$ 32.84 billion between April 2000-March 2022. The Government of India expects the automobile sector to attract US\$ 8-10 billion in local and foreign investments by 2023.

Giving up cars is not necessary and is a difficult notion provided it has other sustainable alternatives, India being a Global South nation hosts a vast majority of the population. This population relies on public transport for commuting to and back from work. The public transport system of India is strained owing to various factors such as rapid urbanisation, inverse demand-to-supply relations and so on (Pucher, John, et al. 2004). All transport networks in India are under tremendous strain due to the country's explosive urban population expansion. The limited supply of infrastructure and services for transportation cannot keep up with the growing demand for travel. Particularly, public transportation has been totally overburdened. The majority of bus and train services are unsafe, unreliable, sluggish, inconvenient, and ill-coordinated. The majority of public transportation systems are also owned and run by the government, which has significantly decreased productivity and driven up expenses. Cities in India urgently need to be expanded and upgraded public transportation services. Unfortunately, little government funding and the apparent absence of any supportive regulations, such as granting buses traffic priority, put public transportation in a vulnerable position. Additionally, the lack of buses or formal methods of putting safety webs on these systems also causes them to become unsafe for women and children. Having a shortage of buses also dissuades people who are at capacity to buy personal vehicles from purchasing them. By 2001, there were over 285 million people living in cities, more than all the North American cities had combined (Office of Registrar General of India 2001). This obviously meant there would be tremendous pressure on public transport and municipal corporations which are still not equipped to handle such levels of growth, with the population still growing rapidly.

The points mentioned above link in well with the next point which is a vicious cycle of dropping productivity. Since there are so many cars in India, places such as Delhi and Mumbai are infamously known for their traffic jams and cars being parked illegally owing to no parking spaces. The problem associated with a poor BRT system in India is because of road congestion which also causes a drop in the economic productivity of the country. Case in point, India lost 1.44 lakh crores (in GDP?) from 4 cities owing to traffic congestion in 2018. 1.44 crores, incidentally, was 50% of the Budget allocation for updating India's education infrastructure in 2018. Therefore, freer roads in themselves would also bring in the lost money which can be allocated for welfare reforms. Having lesser cars also means freer roads and lesser regions dedicated to cars, 700 acres of space and 2200 acres of land in Kolkata and Delhi respectively can be allocated as green spaces instead of car parking and roads. However, it is because of a lack of funding in these two areas which encourages more individuals to find cars to be more secure, in times of medical emergencies, cars become quintessential to anyone living in India as the healthcare system of India is extremely underfunded and slow. It cannot respond to emergencies efficiently. (Wani et.al, 2013). Additionally, lack of transport during different hours or no form of schedule is a source of tension which can completely be replaced by when one is able to own a car.

There are other materialistic aspects which are extremely important socio-cultural reasons for owning cars, as per RBI data, Indians had taken loans for procuring houses and cars throughout the pandemic year of 2020 but not personal loans (education loans in particular). It is fair to conclude that the people taking loans to buy cars are probably a lot better off and at capacity to pay for education however, according to RBI statistics, only the category of student loans consistently fell throughout the first and second Covid-19 waves. "The reduction in student loans would be mostly due to travel and educational institution limitations. It's possible that many students who graduated from foreign colleges choose to postpone their coursework. This could have significantly contributed to the decline in student loan debt, according to Sabnavis (chief economist at Care Ratings). Banks had reiterated that student loans for universities came to a complete halt during the first wave. This shows how high the value of owning a car is to Indians. These student loan applications, even in FY 2022 are down by around 45% according to the State Level Bankers' Committee (SLBC) Gujarat. The same report showed a decline of 60% in education loans from pre-pandemic levels. These are major concerns which need to be addressed in a smart sustainable manner taking the economy into consideration. Additionally, women and children being sexually harassed are probably one of the biggest reasons why cars are looked at as symbols of safety and security in India as we see reports showing sexual harassment being a norm associated with public transport (Valan, 2020).

A high-quality public transportation system would undoubtedly be appreciated by everybody due to its affordability and beneficial impact on the battle against the environmental problem. But for the reasons mentioned above and a number of others, some people still own private automobiles, and this is not going to change any time soon. Fundamental structural and institutional transformation is necessary, along with effective education for Indians to enable them to make wiser and better decisions. A better public

transport system would also reduce class hierarchies as individuals from every socio-economic background would use the same means of travel, therefore, helping in bringing about social cohesion. Lesser cars on the road would also imply an increase in productivity and ease of transport. Officials operating these units must be given social training to combat and deter any unwanted acts happening in their transport units. It is a great opportunity for India to implement these as India plans to move to a completely electrically ridden automobile market by the year 2030 as it has already started rolling out electric buses, it can use the Singapore model to deter people from buying private cars by levying high taxes on them. This method is also economically viable as it would increase productivity in the long run and improve the quality of life and bring about community cohesion. Indians are nowhere near giving up their private cars but hopefully, they can be with improvements in the healthcare system of India and the public transport system of India becoming more reliable.

About the Author

Anuraj Singh has his formal training in Political Science and has a specialization in Foreign policy and economics. He has an interest in climate justice and the north-south divide