

SHOULD PUBLIC TRANSPORT BE MADE FREE?**Background:**

- ▶▶ The Delhi government's proposal to offer free rides to women on the metro and buses, which it argued would enhance safety, was among the biggest talking points in the recent past.
- ▶▶ Time and again social/religious groups, businesses, governments and other institutions have offered free goods for something or other.
- ▶▶ But public transport is a service designed to address mass mobility needs. Mostly cheap, affordable or almost free, such systems around the world are heavily subsidised to enable users across socio-economic groups to benefit.
- ▶▶ Free transport is provided in Tallinn (the Estonian capital), Dunkirk (France), Torshavn (Faroe Islands), central area of Kuala Lumpur and China, to name a few.
- ▶▶ In India, bus rapid transit in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, was also offered free for three months after its launch to attract users.
- ▶▶ However, whether free rides will address safety concerns, however, has been debated.
- ▶▶ A major question still remains unanswered – is an intention without clear strategy good or it might lead to other complexities?
- ▶▶ In this case “cost-saving” by female riders would become a by-product of gender safety whereas the former should have been the objective behind this decision.

Gender and Affordability:

- ▶▶ Safety at public places, pay gap, skewed sex ratio, lower rate of working women, etc, are social evils that have impacted females for long.
- ▶▶ But safety is a qualitative issue that extends beyond one's metro or bus journey and is not directly dependent on affordability.
- ▶▶ In fact, it begins from the time one leaves home to access a bus or the metro and continues until the destination is reached.
- ▶▶ It persists in the vicinity of bus stops or metro stations, journey time, interchange between modes and getting off bus or metro to access destination.
- ▶▶ Well, to argue that it will bring more women to metro or bus, only time and fact check can say that.

Who Uses Public Transport?

- ▶▶ Users can be broadly classified in two categories:
 1. Captive bus or metro users who cannot afford private transport
 2. Non-captive people who prefer comfort over saving money on public transport and afford private commuting
- ▶▶ There are people on the borderline who may tend to shift on either side. The metro, in this context, remains relatively costly.

A Delusional Target Section:

- ▶▶ But, here, the target section remains largely delusional. There are two reasons why this can be said.
- ▶▶ Women, it is argued, would shift from other modes for safety purposes and that 33 per cent metro user are women. There are no proper studies to back the claims as tickets are not gender-specific.
- ▶▶ Further, the assumption that women will shift from other mode is a bit buoyed up.
- ▶▶ One of the biggest determinants of a trip is the distance. Considerable sections of women from marginal income group prefer to work in close vicinity that won't be covered by the proposed scheme.
- ▶▶ Their access to livelihood is mostly dependent on walk or by intermediate modes as rickshaws and intermediate public transport (IPT), which again is a considerably costly option for them.
- ▶▶ Now for the women who travel far for work: They are either already public transport users or choose not to use public transport due to comfort.

So, this basically brings down to two facts:

1. Women won't shift from private transport because they are not captive public transport users. They choose comfort and time over affordable public transport
2. Women using IPT modes are generally short distance trip makers, who again will remain unaffected by the proposed scheme.

Between the Metro and Bus:

- ▶▶ While much has been debated over the declining ridership of metro from 27 lakh to 25 lakh, it shouldn't be ignored that ridership of DTC also declined from 43 lakh in 2013-14 to 35 lakh in 2015-16 to 30 lakh in 2017-18.
- ▶▶ If high fare is the reason behind DMRC's ridership decline, what could probably be the reason of decline in DTC's ridership? Is it availability?
- ▶▶ According to a CSE report "Waiting for the bus", if the decline in DTC fleet remains same, the entire fleet will get nearly phased out by 2025.

- ▶▶ The story on DTC's fleet inadequacy dates back to July 1998, when the Supreme Court had directed the state government to augment fleet size from 5,000-10,000 by April 2001. Nineteen years after, DTC still stands at a fleet size of 3,951 buses.
- ▶▶ Again, free transport is needed but not on cost of letting an existing system phase out with time. Intention without target might lead to other complexities and in this case the target, which is low social strata, might entirely miss out the opportunity. To understand this, kindly ask your house helps, if they use metro or bus daily?

It's Time We Look Beyond and Understand:

- ▶▶ Why the fleet of DTC buses is continuously decreasing? Considering lower cost of operating buses, why can't the process of acquiring announced 3,000 fleet on roads be escalated, after-all to address the demand, DTC needs capacity for the same.
- ▶▶ Metro remains packed during peak hours at present with 27 lakh daily commuters. The projected ridership for Phase-III of the Delhi Metro is 40 lakhs upon completion. With Phase-III about to be completed, will this ridership get achieved in time with the existing service parameters? Is Delhi prepared to address this?
- ▶▶ If the mobility concern is for women belonging to lower economic groups, why not introduce monthly travel-card/mobility-token that enables direct benefit to them.
- ▶▶ And if the concern is safety, then it is high time Delhi looks into the magnanimous issue as a focused objective.
- ▶▶ Meanwhile as we await the proposals on the same let me summarise my thought. Why not invest at right priority now, so that we can get a free public transport in future, and this time without a scheme.

Source- Down To Earth