

Dead Man Walking

Pedestrians have ceased to have a place in urban transport plans in India.

The national crime records bureau's latest compilation of figures shows that close to 1.15 lakh people were killed in 4.18 lakh road accidents in India in 2007, the latest year for which data is available. This was the second highest number of road casualties in the world, just a little less than in China. Estimates for 2008 suggest that with close to 1.3 lakh deaths, India has now topped this unfortunate global list in road accidents, which account for about 10% of the world's total. Two out of three road fatalities, especially in the urban areas, are of pedestrians.

This is surely an unacceptable situation, not only because of the senseless loss of human life, but more so because these deaths are almost all easily avoidable. For starters, due to poor schooling and monitoring, there is callousness in the way vehicles are driven on the roads. But more significantly, these fatalities are a result of a deep flaw in the way our cities and roads are planned, built and operated. Urban areas in India have grown haphazardly, without proper municipal or government oversight which has led to unmanageable demands on civic services and urban infrastructure. This almost always leads to denial of services and resources to the poor and the cornering of resources by the rich, whether these are water, electricity or roads. On the roads, the portrait of our class-divided city is most starkly visible.

Urban transport policy in India has been skewed in favour of one class of road users – car owners. Even in the urban agglomeration of Delhi, which has the maximum number, cars transport only one in five road users while they hog three-fourths of the road space. The rapid rise in urban populations combined with the growing wealth of the urban rich has led to a massive increase in private vehicles. This has further added to traffic congestion, with average vehicle speeds in Delhi and Mumbai hovering around 16 km per hour. The average traffic speed in Indian cities is 22 km per hour. To address this problem urban agencies have scampered to widen roads and build grade separators (flyovers), which has been likened to a strategy of loosening one's belt to cure obesity. Parallel to this obsession with cars, public transport in urban areas has been neglected for very long. The recent policy changes to favour buses and metro rail transport are not sufficient to meet the challenge of ensuring equal opportunity for mobility for all citizens of our cities.

Today, large swathes of our city roads have lost their footpaths to widening, pedestrian crossings are reduced and there is no disincentive to stop car users from bullying pedestrians and pushing them off the roads through aggressive driving, parking on footpaths and breaking traffic signals. The stress on improving the mobility of only one class of transport – cars – by widening roads, building flyovers and reducing access to them by non-motorised vehicles implies the snatching away of common urban resources for the use of only one, small, class of citizens. As Madhav G Badami argues in an article elsewhere in this issue, this amounts not only to enclosing public urban space for exclusive use of automobiles, it also amounts to stealing time from the poor and giving it to the rich – since the attempt is to quicken one form of urban transport used overwhelmingly by the rich, over other forms used largely by the poor. An overwhelmingly large number of the poor and middle class residents travel in the city in a combination of walking and public transport.

Such a situation is unsustainable. Apart from the daily massacre on our roads, it also leads to other well-identified problems like pollution and its concomitant effect on health. Further, it makes our cities increasingly divided as people find it difficult, if not impossible, to travel from one part to the other. But it will not be easy to break the hegemony of cars on urban space. There are the deeply encrusted class privileges which will make the rich keep pushing for a greater encroachment on urban public space for wider roads. Any plan that tries to rationally allocate road space among different users will be opposed, obstructed and all resources of class-power will be deployed to reverse such planning. This was amply displayed in Delhi when car owners used everything in their power – particularly the media – to stop the introduction of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, which provides dedicated lanes for buses, cyclists, pedestrians and cars. Such was the force of opposition from the car owners that the project was stopped midway.

Historians of capitalism may see those killed in road accidents as victims of a class struggle, which hides itself behind proximate causes like poor driving and bad roads. As these columns had stated earlier (EPW, 4 April 2009), for those of us who live in these cities, it surely is an intense political struggle to define our city either as barricaded zones of class power or as democratic spaces of equal opportunity.