

## Six homilies on Delhi BRT

by

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By scrapping the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor in Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The irony is inescapable—a party that rode to power reflecting the aspirations of the *aam admi* should short change their interests. Much ink has been spilt debating the minutiae of the current 5.8 km corridor, its pros and cons. But this misses the point. One shoddily implemented short stretch cannot be the reason for scrapping BRT as a solution for mobility in Delhi, indeed in other Indian cities. It is like saying if a man wearing a blue shirt committed a crime then all men wearing blue shirts are criminals!

While the BRT corridor is under attack by car owning critics, the expensive, shiny toy that is the Delhi Metro can do no wrong (the DMRC website dubs it as “swanky and modern”). In fact, every city worth its salt from Kochi to Jaipur has one or wants one. It makes us feel modern much like Nehru’s ‘temples of modern India’ in the socialist era. So whether we ride the Metro or not (and most car owners do not) we feel proud to have it. It matters little whether it addresses urban mobility in a cost effective manner or not. The Metro has been effectively packaged and sold to the country as a successful engineering project, delivered on time and within budget. It showcases the can-do attitude of a resurgent India, something we can wow the world with. But wait a minute, this is about moving people not a feel good factor where India could build a white elephant quickly and competently with Japanese largesse. A “swanky and modern” BRT too can be sexy. But then who cares!

Here are six homilies Kejriwal and his colleagues may wish to consider on the future of BRT in Delhi.

### **#1. Don’t bark up the wrong tree**

If it had to choose, Delhi needs many more buses and a better managed bus system than Metro. Buses provide flexibility of routes and last mile connectivity unlike the Metro. New bus routes can be deployed quickly to respond to the fast changing geography of a rapidly expanding city. Described as a "surface subway" by

Wikipedia, *a well designed and managed* BRT combines the capacity and speed of light rail or metro with the flexibility, lower cost and simplicity of a bus system. Urban mobility solutions for Delhi need not be zero sum, that is, either BRT or Metro. But at present the focus is only on (i) moving private vehicles faster (read cars and faster moving cars) by creating signal free corridors, flyovers and elevated roads, and (ii) expanding the Metro. Buses, especially an extensive and efficient BRT system are not in the picture. This is short sighted (see homily #2) and wastefully expensive (see homily #3).

## **#2. Do not believe in mythology**

An earlier article at this site debunked five myths of Delhi traffic. Myth #2 was “more roads and flyovers will ease congestion.” Myth #4 was “Delhi Metro will solve all (public transport) problems.” But these myths persist in the minds of our *netas* and *babus* and have led to abandoning the BRT as a crucial piece of the urban mobility puzzle. It is easy to see why Delhi’s car owning elite and middle classes love the Metro—it does not compete with them for road space either being underground or elevated! The shoddily implemented 5.8 kms of the current BRT corridor on the other hand, goes through tony parts of South Delhi where it crowds out private car owners. But history is not destiny. Cars and BRT can co-exist. They do in other cities of the world (see homily #6). And they certainly can in Delhi. After all, the city has one of the world's highest proportions of road area – a fifth of its total area is paved over.

## **#3. Money saved is money earned**

A kilometre of elevated Metro costs about Rs. 100-150 crores, about ten times that of BRT. Each kilometre of underground Metro costs about thirty times as much. But Delhites do not care. After all, much of their beloved Metro has been financed with Japanese largesse and to a lesser extent with that of the central government (read a gift from the rest of India to Delhites)—of the total project cost of Rs. 70,433 crores (\$11.4 billion) for Phases I, II and III, the Government of the NCT of Delhi has contributed a princely sum of Rs. 8,683 crores (\$1.4 billion) or 12.3%! The problem is there is not enough money in donors coffers or in the central government kitty to replicate this for all Indian cities big and small.

#### **#4. Those who speak loudest are not always right**

The pen is mightier than the sword, especially if the pen is wielded by those who can emote in English print media and on television. They are the ones who drive the cars and the SUVs and feel the pinch of the current corridor as buses with sweaty masses whiz past (at least on that short stretch). So they complain the loudest. They argue the masses have been given a shiny toy to ride in. When we could not give them bread we gave them cake. So BRT be damned. But the whiners are wrong. The solution they offer to the masses is not financially sustainable (see homily #3) and will not address the problem (see Myth#4 in the earlier article).

#### **#5. One swallow does not a summer make**

5.8 kms of a poorly implemented BRT corridor cannot be used against the concept to seal its fate. The corridor became political football between an incompetent implementing agency, namely, Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System Limited (DIMTS) and Delhi government's Public Works Department (PWD). In any other system where accountability mattered, heads would have rolled. Instead the *babus* at DIMTS who gave BRT a bad name went on to plum postings. For want of a shoe nail a kingdom was lost.

#### **#6. Don't be an ostrich**

India and Indians especially our *babus* are known to be knowledge proof. The refrain always is "it can work in city X or Y but it cannot work here" "we are too different" (see Myth#6 in the earlier article). Yes, no two cities are alike as no two persons are. But world over, cities have shown how well a BRT can work. Closer home, Ahmedabad's BRT *Jan Marg* has received international and national accolades. The ostrich buries its head in the sand thinking if it cannot see its enemies they cannot either. We know what happens in that case.

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