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Complex in design, complicated in capacity, the city's Hebbal Flyover was never planned for the next 50 years



Rasheed Kappan, MAR 25 2022, 22:42 IST | UPDATED: MAR 26 2022, 04:26 IST



Traffic chaos at Hebbal flyover. Credit: DH File Photo

Complex in design, complicated in capacity, the city's Hebbal Flyover was never planned for the next 50 years. Majestic in looks, imposing in façade, the K R Puram cable-stayed bridge did not foresee the impending, explosive traffic growth. Architects of the Jayadeva Flyover had no clue that one day, a Metro line will cross its path.

These are just three of a long list of road infrastructure projects hurriedly planned without vision, executed in haste and destined for demolition or costly alteration. Massive amounts of taxpayers' money go down the drain, as long-term planning, sustainable design based on sound, well-researched traffic studies are bypassed in a blink.

Traffic surge

Opened for traffic on May 29, 2003, exactly five years before the Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) was operationalised, the Hebbal Flyover designers should have anticipated the surge in vehicular numbers. Not for the next 10 years, but at least for another half a century. Failure to do so was a definite trigger for extreme congestion.

Nineteen years later, the State and the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) have realised that a multi-modal commute option is the only way out of the mess. They have engaged the Rail India Technical and Economic Service (RITES) to prepare a master plan to cater to the traffic projected for 2051, by integrating the Metro and suburban train lines.

But a structural redesign and capacity enhancement will prove to be inadequate within the next five years, warns traffic and transportation expert Ashish Verma from the Indian Institute of Science. "Even if you consider only the airport-bound vehicles, the opening of the KIA's second terminal T2 will increase the traffic substantially," he points out.

Structural flaws

Post-pandemic, private vehicular ownership has surged in the city, triggering further congestion. Besides, the Hebbal Flyover's structural flaw as a bottleneck will not go away in a hurry.

Ashish explains: "Before the tollway opened, the road was only three lanes wide each direction. The tollway added another three lanes. That meant vehicles on six lanes each direction approaching the Flyover at high speed. This is a classic bottleneck situation."

Retrofitting an already existing infrastructure has always been problematic, and Hebbal Flyover is no different. Since the project was limited in its vision, the fast-paced growth of KIA as India's third busiest airport with 35 million annual passengers, and the emergence of North Bengaluru as a development hub, quickly made the structure's capacity below par.

Efforts to widen the stretch with additional ramps had only a limited impact since the rising vehicular numbers quickly filled up the space. So, as Ashish reiterates, further capacity enhancement will only work in the short-term.

Alternate routes

One possible way out could be to shift a section of the airport-bound traffic to the alternative road through Thanisandra. This diversion would have to rely on smart sensing of traffic. "They could explore the possibility of another alternate road, and focus on completing the Airport Metro line and augment the suburban rail's airport corridor."

But sticking to flyovers as a solution to ease commute is itself a flawed idea, as sustainable mobility analyst Sathya Sankaran points out. "We still don't know how to channelise and reroute as a solution. The 50-year vision should be not to have cars at all," he contends.

The long-term vision should focus more on public transport and less on flyovers that aid motorised, private transport. "Instead, we are trying to remove whatever little progress we have made on bus priority lanes. Double the bus fleet, improve access for pedestrians, cyclists and non-motorised transport. These have to be done in double quick time."

Multi-modal integration

At locations where flyovers and bridges are seen as inevitable, lack of prior planning has left multi-modal integration extremely cumbersome. The Airport Metro was originally aligned closer to the alternate road to KIA but shifted to Hebbal subsequently, creating fresh problems.

The Jayadeva interchange, built 17 years ago by the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) at a cost of Rs 21 crore, was demolished to make way for a multi-level structure integrating both metro rail lines and roadway. This structure will also house a metro station on the yellow line.

Mobility experts are convinced that the demolition could have been entirely avoided if the Metro alignments were decided years in advance. But that is a lesson not learnt in a hurry.