Karnataka

# Bengaluru commuters know exactly what's wrong with the city, listen to them

As part of 'Brand Bengaluru' initiative commuters express willingness to give up personal cars if there are dependable mass transit options with guaranteed first and last-mile connectivity.

Traffic gridlock on September 27 | @MTF_Mobility

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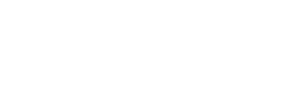
The inglorious mess of a traffic jam in Bengaluru that stranded thousands in gridlocked roads for over five hours on Wednesday, September 27 is the latest, dramatic manifestation of the city's Himalayan mobility problems. Is the State Government really serious about untangling this chaotic mess by executing what citizens have collectively proposed in response to the 'Brand Bengaluru' initiative?

The long-suffering commuters knew exactly what was wrong with the city. As part of the Karnataka government initiative, over 10,000 of them articulated their demands with much clarity. They would willingly give up their personal cars if the city had more dependable mass transit options with guaranteed first and last-mile connectivity. They wanted feeder shuttle buses and bicycle renting / sharing services, bike taxis and shared auto / cabs, adequate parking slots at bus and metro stations.

Launched in July this year, the Brand Bengaluru campaign is designed to seek citizen inputs on improving multiple systems linked to the city's governance, including mobility, green spaces, water and flood management, infrastructure, health, and water conservation. Multiple civic agencies, research institutions and domain experts are among the stakeholders.

Sifting through the public responses, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and Ramaiah Institute of Management (RIM) found a deep desire to drastically improve the city's poor walkability score. The public sought a visible upgrade of crosswalks, pedestrian crossing signages, foot-over bridges and signals with extended pedestrian-crossing times.

ORR gridlock, another proof

Wednesday's traffic gridlock on the Outer Ring Road (ORR) was another proof of decades lost in motorist-focused mobility policies that bypassed sustainable modes. After much effort by public transport campaigners, a Bus Priority Lane was erected in stretches of the ORR, only to be taken off to accommodate Metro pillars. Lakhs of commuters had to endure the consequences of a clear lack of planning and foresight.

"The big traffic jam basically showed that if the vehicle population on the road goes up by 50%, time to travel goes up more than twice your normal time. A 30-40% increase in private vehicles hitting the road leads to a more than doubling of travel time. I, myself, took 2.5 hours to travel to the Trevor show although Google Map displayed one hour. The jam showed what Bengaluru might become if we keep on adding more and more private vehicles," says V Ravichander, urbanist and member of the Brand Bengaluru committee.

No substitute to large-scale public transport

The city's road infrastructure has not kept pace with the explosive vehicular growth. "Therefore, the main message from the mega jam is that there is really no substitute for large-scale public transport adoption. Earlier the better, starting with buses, which everybody seems to be reluctant to do," he points out.

"The Wednesday jam is a hard reflection, that when you keep messing up, and not understand the holistic picture, you keep creating these situations. It was a cumulative effect. You keep ignoring these things and one day, everything accumulates and leads to this," says Dr Ashish Verma, transport engineering expert from IISc, who along with RIM, synthesized thousands of citizen inputs and anchored a stakeholder meeting to put out a report.

The agencies concerned had blamed it on weekend traffic, people returning after the bandh, Metro construction and more. "It is not that we don't see these things. We keep ignoring it, and the day it cumulatively couples with a sudden rise in demand due to more people coming out on the road, you create these extreme situations," he says. "The bottomline is you need to reduce the dependency of people to use their personal vehicles. This is also very important from the point of view of economic and disaster resilience. We are seeing these examples from across the world, in Sri Lanka, Pakistan..."

Expedite Metro, double BMTC fleet

Under the Brand Bengaluru' initiative, citizens now want a major connectivity upgrade of public transport. Inevitably, this implies a near doubling of the current BMTC fleet of about 6,300 buses so that both coverage and frequency of services, particularly at night, are improved. A key demand is also to expedite the Namma Metro project. Slow pace of construction has meant a big chunk of the road width is taken up by BMRCL, worsening congestion.

Footpaths across the city are in disarray, turning extremely dangerous to navigate in the dark and during heavy rains. Citizen proposals were specific and clear: "Repair broken pavements, clear garbage and close open drains. Build footpaths that are uniform and well-segregated, with facilities to ensure safety and comfort of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) and senior citizens."

Enduring years of indifference, activists crying out for sustainable mobility options had managed to get a few cycling lane stretches in the city. But they are either lost or motorcyclists have invaded those spaces, making a mockery of activist efforts. Citizens have now asked for uniform, well-segregated footpaths, shared bicycle services and renting options near congested streets.

Sustainability-first approach

The informed public responses indicate the expertise of even common citizens to find ways to address road congestion with a sustainability-first approach. Mobility experts are surprised that the government's thinking is still oriented towards motorists. For instance, there is this fixation with fancy projects such as Tunnel Roads that are designed to aid only private personal vehicles and not public transport.

"I think our public understands better than our agencies," notes Dr Ashish. "There is an overarching understanding that an efficient and reliable public transport is the permanent solution. What people want is a seamless travel experience end to end."

If Brand Bengaluru stands for anything, it has to be sustainable and livable Bengaluru, he says. "We have highlighted that in our report also. All interventions that realistically and holistically fit into this vision is what the government should be doing. Nothing else."

Synchronize signals, regulate construction projects

To reduce congestion, the proposals were to introduce more one-way streets, unrestricted left turns, signal synchronization, penalty for on-street parking, and to strictly enforce regulations on ongoing construction projects and maintenance. Multiple utility agencies had to take a coordinated approach for works under roadways.

At the policy level, citizens want a clear path to free footpaths of all encroachments, vendors and parked cars included. They have sought more pedestrian and cyclist-friendly roads such as Church Streets. To enhance first and last-mile connectivity, they have asked for a policy change to allow cycles on the Metro and BMTC buses.

Will the government activate the proposals?

Most recommendations are time-tested interventions that have worked well in many other cities. But will the government activate these proposals? "Initially, I was also skeptical," notes Srinivas Alavilli from the World Resources Institute (WRI), a seasoned campaigner for sustainable mobility options. "But I appreciate the fact that they made the IISc and RIM to process the responses, hold a stakeholder meeting to get expert inputs. It shows there is an intent, and that is positive," he notes.

There are no 'brand new' suggestions, Srinivas points out. "But it is a demand-driven initiative that the government has sought for, and given back to them in an actionable form by two reputed organisations. Therefore, the chances of it getting implemented are higher than general speeches."

No BBMP Council to take responsibility

However, there is a big, unaddressed elephant in the room: Who will take responsibility. Srinivas is clear that it has to be an elected Council of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). "Unless and until you have an elected BBMP Council, Mayor and elected councillors, I don't think anyone will take the responsibility. They have to hold BBMP elections now."

Ideally, he says, Brand Bengaluru inputs should have come through 225 ward committees, and not one central meeting at the IISc or here and there. "There is a time and place for central inputs, but the biggest input should come from the grassroots. When Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar held a meeting at the Vidhana Soudha, there were 200 people in the room raising individual issues," he says, clearly indicating that it is not the way to go.

Activate BMLTA, bus lanes

While activating citizen-led proposals through expert validation is critical to ensure their interest and participation, there is another big priority area: Working on mobility policies already put in place. He explains, "The big one is the Bangalore Metropolitan Land Transport Authority (BMLTA). The law has been passed, why are we not forming it? Do it. DULT (Directorate of Urban Land Transport) is ready with bus lanes. Why are we not implementing it on high density corridors?"

Passed by the previous Bommai Government, the BMLTA Act has a clear objective: To bring all public mobility services under one umbrella, including buses and Metro, and to coordinate with multiple agencies so that all mobility infrastructure and systems are seamlessly integrated. The BBMP, BMRCL, BMTC and other agencies would work together so that Bengalurueans do not endure another chaotic mega jam.

But, as Ravichander emphasizes, the city's mobility system will not see drastic improvement without ring-fencing it from the pervasive corruption. "You need motorable roads to let traffic move faster. Corruption as a malaise has left most roads unmotorable with 'lunar craters.' Even buses need good roads. You need to have a dedicated projects cell that is free from all interference and commissions."