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To help cities rebound from Covid-19, India must rediscover the social ballet of the streets

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The urban street has been pivotal to the COVID-19 lockdown experience. On the one hand, the 'recovered' beauty of the empty city is being captured by drone films[1] making many wish for the breathing space, clean light and blue skies they show to be sustained after the lockdown. On the other, the locked-down street has left lakhs of informal street workers without livelihoods and cut myriad supply chains. Clearly, the lockdown can only be a temporary measure. But what do we do with the street once the city starts opening up? Does the pandemic require us to reboot the street differently?

'Street' and 'road' are synonyms, except that they aren't. The street is a lived social practice; the road is a mere instrument for getting us from A to B in a vehicle. The difference is the greater 'social' content of the former. The street is a 'social' practice that takes hold in what is technically called the Right of Way (RoW), the publicly-owned channel of movement between continuous property lines that is protected by law. The car population may have tripled in twenty years from 1998 in Mumbai, but it is not easy to widen the RoW given the high value of flanking private properties. Distributing the width of the RoW across different users is almost a zero-sum game.

PAREL, MUMBAI
IMAGE CREDIT: ANUJA VORA

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For the law, the state, and engineers, urban streets are roads first and foremost - they are there only to move automobiles, people, and goods. But the street plays more roles than this

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acknowledges. First, it provides livelihoods to informal vendors who alone form an estimated 2% of the population which is over 2.5 lakh workers in Mumbai. If each supports a family of five, Mumbai’s streets alone may well feed over a million people. Second, these vendors help the overwhelming majority of the urban population access affordable food, clothing, and everyday commodities. Third, the street also offers a space of leisure and community life, especially for half of Mumbai’s population living in slums and cramped housing. And through all this, the street also keeps us oriented to the actual social and political life of the city.

These functions are central to the city process as a whole. In fact, the city would stop if the street were not to host these functions. Unfortunately, they are devalued by the now outdated car-centric modernist planning ideology that only sees the road in the street. The other pillar of this ideology is the sanctity of private property, which the modernist street is meant to serve as mere ‘infrastructure’. Because of its refusal to acknowledge the full reality of the street, we could call this the ‘design-in-denial’ approach to building and managing the street.

The state implements this approach, and the middle classes support it uncritically, both judging the actual reality of the Indian urban street as ‘chaotic’. However, that reality is a result of real pressures. Quite simply, there is no space (or land) available for the different functions that the street has historically performed till the car was invited to overtake the city and take over the street worldwide in the 20th century. On the one hand, formal private property is concentrated in the hands of a few, and therefore unaffordable to most people earning a livelihood by selling essential goods and services on the street. On the other, urban governance and planning have been unable and unwilling to acquire and allocate adequate land, space and facilities for many of these functions, including truck parking and adequate

marketplaces. Design-in-denial thus compels transgressions: not just informal vendors, even police chowkis come up on RoWs! Typically, such transgressions convert the 'public' space of the street - 'owned' by the state in theory - into something like an urban 'commons' that is open to all for extracting private benefit for survival, as long as it is not exhausted or destroyed in the process. The Indian urban street is a street only as a commons.

Expanding road, shrinking street

As a transgression of the law, 'commoning' necessarily has a precarious existence. Whether intentionally or not, the street it creates in the RoW is easily dismantled by state projects of 'rational' planning. Over the last two decades, this street has shrunk within the RoW in Mumbai as the enlarged road system has expanded the culture of what social scientists call 'automobility'. Roads have been widened, extended, elevated, and their network consolidated through flyovers, all to speed up private automobile traffic. Additionally, footpath railings, concrete medians and 'skywalks' have been built to keep pedestrians off the roads so traffic is not interrupted. Once split into slivers, the common space of the street is easily dominated and dismantled by the road.

As the car - which carries about a tenth of daily trips in Mumbai today- has expanded its claim on the RoW, two things have happened. The space for public buses (21% of work trips in the 2011 census) and non-motorised modes of transport (or NMT, which includes pedestrians and cyclists) reducing their speed, safety and functional attractiveness. This is significant functionally. Almost a third of Mumbai's population walks to work, and everyone must at least walk to the bus stop, railway station or their car.

The car also takes up more road space than its share of trips

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warrants, effectively privatising public space. Street parking makes this worse. Simultaneously, with footpaths, trees and NMT-friendly lighting sacrificed to auto-lanes, the majority of street-users, including all walkers and working-class cyclists, are compelled to risk their lives on the street. Alongside efficient use of space for mobility and the compromise of safety, the social function of the street is also getting compromised. Perhaps the worst-hit are livelihoods on the street because of a combination of other reasons, all related to the ideology of modernist planning coded into law. The power of this ideology is revealed when we consider that this continues to happen against the spirit (and often a letter) of law - the street: vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014.

On the one hand, the ‘splitting’ of the street by flyovers, medians, skywalks and railings cuts off pedestrian flows that are essential not only for informal vendors but even for formal shops. The physical shrinkage and qualitative deterioration of footpaths as well as the railings on their edge have reduced the width for vendors (though the latter sometimes also offers a new ‘infrastructure’ for vending!). Meanwhile, elite civic activism against informal vending has also led to many court-directed quasi-planning actions like the delineation of ‘hawking’ and ‘no hawking zones or construction of off-street facilities like the Dadar ‘hawker’s plazas’. These often fail, being in denial of the logic of natural markets[2].

The way ahead

The challenges and opportunities of unlocking the city must be seen in this context. Clearly, the street is key to mobility on the one hand and to livelihoods and the last mile of supply chains of essential goods for the urban majority. Will the usual policy approach of design-in-denial actively help recovery? Unlikely.

First, encouraging car travel would compromise mass mobility which is the lifeblood of the economy. In Mumbai, for instance, the average speeds of BEST buses have slowed significantly in the recent past because of congestion caused by cars whose numbers have increased because of more road space opened up by increased road length, width and improved networks. The smarter - if counterintuitive - short term response now would be to curtail car usage and sharply increase the supply of public buses and improve their speeds and frequencies by reserving exclusive lanes for them. Since buses can only carry a fraction of their passenger capacity to comply with physical distancing norms, this would be one way of increasing throughput. Encouraging cycling and pedestrian traffic by temporarily allocating more width for them is also crucial[3]. Of course, this will not be adequate, especially in Mumbai, even if the suburban trains resume with physical distancing. But anything less would be much worse. The government is bending slowly to this way of thinking[4]. However, it is still far from acknowledging the street in its fullness as a commons.

Is the street-as-commons the magic solution? Well, there are no magical solutions. However, formalising the commons vision, even if provisionally, is a practical step for the *social* recovery of the city. The poor are the city, in one sense. And street vending is estimated to contribute 11% of urban employment in India[5]. In another sense, the city at large also runs on their labour, more specifically on the self-exploitation that the economic system forces on them. The acuteness of their precarity was visible to all in the long, and terrible march migrants among them undertook weeks ago. The commoning of the public street is often the only available basis for their survival. More than the road then, the commoned street, with significant priority for public and non-motorised transport, is likely to be the more effective pathway to multi-dimensional recovery, difficult as that is going to be.

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