



The Impending Traffic & Environment Chaos

Srinivas Hebbar

Indian cities are in a monumental traffic mess and those who administer them don't seem to care. India is building more and cheaper cars, more flyovers, more highways and freeways. Meanwhile, public transport remains a neglected area. Road space for use by pedestrians is getting squeezed. Pollution is relentlessly on the rise. Greenhouse gases are contributing to the global meltdown.

Why are we doing this? For greater comfort? Just look at the long, desolate lines of cars piled during morning and evening peak hours. In cities like Mumbai, the peak hour is now several hours, both morning and evening.

Infrastructure can never cope with the increasing number of automobiles. London, far ahead of any Indian city in its capacity to provide infrastructure, has finally had to introduce a congestion tax. Singapore's restrictions on vehicles is well known. The cost of getting a car registered is more than the cost of the car.



Source: UDRI

Let alone penalizing automobile owners, city administrators in India actually pamper them. Take, for instance, parking. Car owners think nothing of leaving their cars on the streets instead of providing space for them in the housing societies where they live. There was the much publicised incident last year when residents of the upscale Malabar Hill area of Mumbai assaulted policemen for hauling off their vehicles parked on the street. In this affluent part of the city, residents are known to own as many as three cars—of which, one is used to drop and pick up the children from school.

And look at the pathetic efforts of even a premier Indian city like Mumbai to cope with its growing traffic pains. The signs are everywhere in the city: Potholed roads, disappearing pavements, bus shelters dismantled, to make more room for pavements, which in turn have been narrowed to make more room for traffic.

And we want to make more and cheaper cars, cars costing as little as Rs 100,000. China's pea soup air is a striking pointer to where India is headed if it ignores the warnings. According to a study by the Tata Energy Research Institute, New Delhi, suspended particulate matter in India's air would rise from 17 million tonnes in 1997 to 52 million tonnes in 2047—a 300 per cent rise.

In spite of, the evidence piling up to warn of impending chaos on the streets, grave implications for public health and lowering of quality of life, there is no urgency among civic and government authorities to tackle the snowballing traffic menace.

The blatant disregard for the public good is demonstrated by the government's bias for diesel. Diesel, as is well known, is more polluting than petrol, releasing over 20 times more particulate matter into the air. But diesel, because of a lower tax as compared to petrol, costs about 35 per cent less. This was done as a concession to public

transport, with buses using diesel engines. But increasingly car owners have converted to diesel, despite the higher cost of the engine, since they can expect to recover the investment in a diesel engine, in few years and subsequently make a substantial gain in fuel cost. The net result is an incentive to pollute the air.

To begin with, over the years India has become the world's leading market for two-wheelers. From scooters to motorcycles, to motorized cycles, known locally as 'scooties' or mopeds, Indian towns and cities have been a ready market for two-wheelers because of the poor public transport. In cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, even those who could barely afford these vehicles, bought them with bank loans because of the hopelessly undependable public transport.

Annual car sales in India crossed the one million mark in 2006, and growing at a rate of 18 per cent. With an expanding and more prosperous middle class, there is no looking back. Even as two-wheelers continue to proliferate on the roads, the buyers comprising young people in college or in their first jobs, automobile sales have shot up among the higher income groups and the growing number of families with double incomes. Over 6 million two-wheelers are being sold annually in the country.

One offshoot of this widening constituency of car and two-wheeler owners is that, they have influenced government policy. Public transport has been neglected. Thousands of crores of rupees are being spent on building flyovers and freeways—money which should rightfully have gone into public transport.

The vehicular population in the last four decades in Mumbai has increased from 150,000 in 1971 to 1.29 million in 2001. In the same period, road space has not even doubled. A bulk of these vehicles would be private passenger cars, which are steadily hogging road space. A taxi strike

showed how skewed road usage has become. With over 50,000 registered taxis off the roads because of the strike, traffic moved smoothly and quickly. By that token, if the number of private vehicles on the road is even halved, the roads would look near empty! Hence the obvious solution to Mumbai's transport problems is to make serious efforts to decongest the roads. Which, simply put, means fewer passenger cars.

The plan to quadruple the railway tracks between the suburbs of Borivli and Virar in Mumbai have been on the drawing board for years, despite the extreme hardship faced by people, living in these areas between beyond Borivli. The instances of people falling off impossibly crowded trains and getting killed are all too common. All that the government has done is to advise people not to travel on the roofs of the trains, ignoring the fact that people are forced to resort to such extreme measures to reach their places of work.

Even after the extra tracks have been laid, there is no sign of urgency. The new railway tracks were to be operational in May, but well into September passenger trains are not running on them because the trial runs have not been done.

The automobile lobby in India has grown strong over the years, with the Government of India itself having a controlling stake in the country's largest car maker, Maruti Udyog Limited. Subsequently, India has become a global hub for the automobile ancillary industry

Inevitably, the central and state governments have begun to look at the automobile industry with a new perspective, considering their role in the state and national economy, their employment potential and the buyers of their products, the growing middle class. There is now a new urgency to widen roads and build flyovers, freeways and pedestrian subways. In the last several decades governments and city administrators have never shown the same urgency to improve road infrastructure. The

new awareness about roads is obviously to make life easier for car users and ease the congestion on the roads. In the absence of adequate public transport, the end result would be to encourage more people to switch to automobiles and clog the roads again.

And least of all, let us not forget the power of the auto manufacturers' lobby. In his essay, included in the anthology, *The Future of Knowledge & Culture*, edited by Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy, C. Douglas Lummis, who taught political science at Tsuda Juku College, near Tokya, and is the author of several books, writes, "This expansion of highway construction did not come about as a result of the fair operation of the free market. To cite an example that has become legendary, in 1938 the city of Los Angeles had the world's largest streetcar system. General Motors (GM), in combination with Standard Oil and Firestone Tire, bought it, shut it down and tore out the tracks. Los Angeles was reconstructed as the world's premier automobile metropolis. Natural outcomes of such reconstruction were the drive-in restaurants, the drive-in movie, the hot-rod, the three-car garage, the seventeen-car accident, the traffic jam and smog—all broadcast lovingly to the world via Hollywood. Today, two-thirds of the land space of Hollywood is devoted to the operation and storage of cars. GM and its associates went on to buy up rail and streetcar lines all over the US and close them down in order to make place for its product."

This may not happen in India with hundreds of millions of poor people completely dependent on public transport but it won't be for lack of trying by the car lobbies. And let us not discount the power of these lobbies. The Automobile Association of India has even objected to a congestion tax, which is already being collected in some cities, as in London, on the grounds that people are forced to use cars in the absence of adequate public transport.

Lummis goes on to add: "But if the automobile

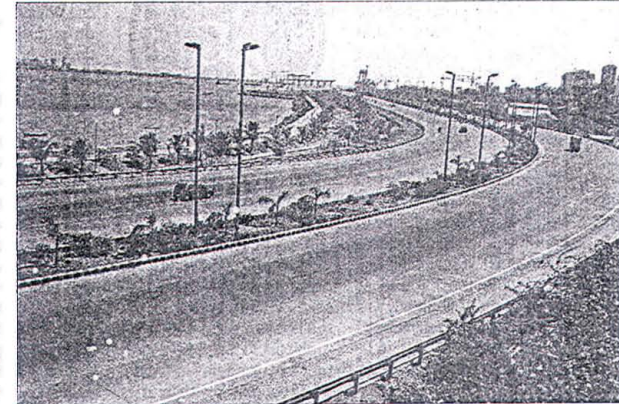
Roads may go SEZ way

ZEENAT NAZIR
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

IT'S not just Special Economic Zones that are facing the heat when it comes to issues of land acquisition. India's ambitious road expansion plans are also threatening to get derailed, with government agencies unable to facilitate speedy acquisition of land for projects being undertaken by the private sector.

For most developers undertaking such projects through the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) route, the delays in acquiring land have translated into acute time and cost overruns. "All our current road development projects have been delayed by at least six months to a year, since land has not been acquired on time. Consequently, costs have escalated by 7-8 per cent, raising questions about viability," says Rajiv Mundhra, director of Simplex Infrastructures, which is currently undertaking four projects across the country.

The Delhi-Gurgaon expressway is another case in point. Setbacks in land acquisition have been one of the key reasons leading to a reschedule in the project completion date, from 2005 to 2007. The project, which has also been redesigned, has seen an upward revision in cost, from Rs 555 crores earlier, to Rs 750 crores now. Another case is that of the Meerut-Muzaffarnagar highway. Though the project



ROAD BLOCKS

- Land acquisition problems creating delays in most road projects countrywide
- Time overruns ranging from an average 6 months to 2 years
- Delays causing cost escalation of 7-8 per cent
- Earlier, proposed MCA for acquiring 80 per cent land before awarding contract
- New proposal in MCA to bring it down to 50 per cent

was awarded in late 2005, barely 10 per cent of the land has been handed over so far.

Says Rafi Khan, general manager of D S Constructions, "In the case of Delhi-Gurgaon expressway, acquiring small pockets of land was a big issue. On other stretches, removing encroachments was a cause of con-

cern."

While industry members have been demanding that project-awarding agencies like the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) or the Public Works Department (PWD) acquire 80-100 per cent of land before awarding the contract, a new proposal in the soon-to-be unveiled Model Concession Agreement (MCA) goes the other way. The new proposal calls for a downward revision in land to be acquired before awarding a contract, from 80 per cent earlier, to 50 per cent.

"We have decided to keep the ceiling at 50 per cent, since a developer would typically not need more land than that to place his equipment and start construction

work. Moreover, it will help us in awarding contracts faster. The balance land would be acquired as the project goes ahead," explains Secretary, Department of Road Transport and highways, Vijay Singh.

Industry members, however, are not too enthusiastic about the new move. Says Mundhra, "At least 60-70 per cent of the land should be acquired at the time of awarding the contract, and an assurance must be

given that the balance is acquired three to four months thereafter." Agrees Khan, "We would prefer that the project awarding authority acquire 80-100 per cent beforehand," adding that the MCA's proposed 50 per cent acquisition would be acceptable only if the agency in question undertakes to acquire the remaining land in a stipulated time-frame.

Experts like Rohit Modi, Chief Executive (Roads and Bridges) Developmental projects at Larsen and Toubro share a different perspective. "It's not a question of 80 per cent or 50 per cent land acquisition. The real problem is that what is being promised while awarding contracts is not being delivered. That needs to be addressed, foremost."

manufacturers destroyed the rail and streetcar lines, they did not build the highways to replace them. Imagine how expensive the automobile would be if manufacturers had to build and maintain the roads their commodity operates on. But, with the exception of a few toll roads, it is governments that pay."

Does that strike a chord somewhere? When Mumbai Urban Transport Project-1 was implemented by Mumbai Rail Vikas Corporation, a

surcharge of Re. 1 per ticket was collected on each second class ticket and Rs. 2 on first class tickets. The levy was to help pay back the World Bank loan of Rs 13 billion, which constituted half the total cost of Rs 26 billion of MUDP-1. With several plans on the drawing board under MUDP, there is a move to raise the surcharge to Rs. 2.

A similar logic is not extended to cars. Private cars rarely pay a toll or surcharge to cover the cost of construction of flyovers. BEST buses mostly use

the road below. Even if one were to argue that the bus-using public enjoys the benefit of the flyovers, because of consequent decongestion of the roads, car owners ought to pay in proportion to the space they occupy on the roads. Passenger cars in Mumbai have an occupancy of 1.75 in contrast to the 4 it should be. The technology is now available to introduce smart cards, which car drivers can swipe each time they use a flyover, without having to stop the vehicle.

There is a counter argument to the smart card, which is that many car users would use the road below to avoid the toll. Obviously, the solution is to levy a toll on any private vehicle that uses the stretch of road, since the benefit of the flyover accrues to all road users. Those traveling by BEST buses can be waived the levy as an incentive to people to use public transport.

But as of now there is no move to penalize car owners, which is relentlessly adding to traffic congestion. Again, take the matter of parking. About 300 cars are being added to the city each day. Licences are being issued as a matter of right, with no thought given to the city's capacity to absorb these vehicles. As a result, cars are parked in any space available, all over the city's roads. The traffic police have ensured that there no parking law violations only on arterial roads. Everywhere else, including on important double carriageway, 8-lane roads, cars are parked all along. There are cars parked on pavements and even in front of bus stops. There are complaints against BEST drivers that they halt the buses on the middle of the road and not close to the pavement. But bus drivers have a valid grievance, of very often not finding space to halt the buses in the designated areas. The space is taken by private cars, taxis and auto rickshaws.

Parking lot space is precious and is in severe short supply. There is brave talk of building multistoried parking lots or creating underground space. But if

a commercially viable rate is charged for these spaces, there is sure to be an outcry from car users, who might quite likely shun these new facilities. For that very reason, even in prime locations like Nariman Point in Mumbai, which is a perpetual parking nightmare, a stiff increase in parking charges doesn't go beyond airing of views in the media.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has recently hiked parking charges after much debate and dilly-dallying. But even after the hikes, the rates, ostensibly stiff, in reality don't reflect market reality. For instance, in Zone A, which comprises prime commercial locations such as Nariman Point and the Churchgate area, the parking charge is Rs 130 for 10 hours. If you take a 5-day week that works out to about Rs. 3000 for a full month. Apart from the fact that it is a piffling sum for high net worth individuals functioning out of these areas, there is the ground reality that for Rs. 3000 a month one can hardly buy table space at Nariman Point. And this is, after the increase in parking charges, which draw all round protests from car owners.

A Times of India report quotes a Joint Commissioner of Police, justifying the increase, saying, "A person today can park the huge Innova for Rs. 26 near Hilton Towers on Marine Drive and carry out business from there." Even after the increase that is more than feasible. That's how the government pampers the small but rapidly growing automobile-owning class at the cost of the overwhelming majority of 88 per cent of the Mumbai's population which uses public transport, which pays a surcharge for improved train facilities, which still travels to work dangerously hanging out of trains, with often fatal consequences. This is not to talk of the pollution, which everyone suffers in every city and town in India, the billions of man hours lost because of slow moving traffic and clogged roads, the immeasurable loss in quality of life for every man, woman and child.

First Of New Local Trains Financed By World Bank Roll Out, 21 Services Added On W.Rly

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: The first new-age local train funded by the World Bank has finally been inducted into the Western Railway (WR) network, setting the stage for a gradual increase in frequency of services.

The first of the 157 rakes being manufactured under the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP-I) was flagged off on Monday by Railway Board chairman K C Jena. The event marks a huge technological shift in transport given the superior features of these new coaches, which will enhance commuter comfort.

With the new train added to the fleet, WR in one stroke has added 21 new up and down services every day. With this, WR's daily services on the suburban route has gone up from 1,067 to 1,088 per day. Interestingly, none of the 21 new services will start from Churchgate. They will all originate from Dadar, Andheri and Borivali for Vasai, Bhayendar and Virar to cater to the rising population in the far-off suburbs (see box).

Two more of the new generation trains — which means 40 additional services — will be added to the WR fleet within a month. The Central Rail-

way (CR), despite being the larger network, will get its first new local only after three months.

From now on, 3-4 new trains are likely to be inducted every month; in all, 157 new trains are to be introduced on WR and CR by 2009-end. This could mean adding over 3,000 services once all these trains join the fleet. Jena, the top boss in Indian Railways, made it clear that neither WR nor CR would discontinue running the existing 202 trains in a hurry.

"We do need to discard old rakes, but it does not mean they are unsafe by any means. It (the phase-out) will be done only when there are enough services to give commuters a comfortable ride," he said. The demand for additional

TRAVEL IN THE NEW AGE

PHOTO: HEMANT SHINDEKAR



RIDE TO THE FUTURE: Commuters in the distant suburbs beyond Borivali will immediately benefit from the addition of new services on the Dadar-Virar route

services in suburbs is so high that discarding old rakes immediately is not possible, he added.

Jena said the induction of new trains is a programme that would gather momentum with each month.

"Commissioning the first train always takes lot of time because of the testing and trials involved. But now that the new train has undergone thor-

ough technical validation, production and induction should be faster," he said.

A K Jhingron, general manager of WR, was quick to add that German engineering major Siemens would now manufacture most of the train components at its Nashik factory, cutting down on the lead time for assembly at the rail factory in Chennai.

Jhingron also dispelled

doubts on the staff's readiness to drive the new trains which are technologically far superior to the existing model and is run predominantly by software.

"We have sent 107 senior and junior level personnel to train at the Siemens factory in Germany. They are now training the rest of their colleagues back in Mumbai," said Jhingron.



HIGH-TECH FEATURES

- High-quality air spring suspension for a jerk-free ride.
- GPS-based audio-visual passenger information system in every coach.
- Improved ventilation, larger windows.
- Improved illumination for better visibility.
- Coach interiors of stainless steel with polycarbonate seats.
- Re-generative braking to save 30% power costing Rs 3.5 lakh per year.
- Wide-glass drivers cab with central monitor and software controls.

THE LOGISTICS

- Existing fleet size on Mumbai's suburban railway network: 202.
- Number of new trains to be added in the next two-three years: 157.
- Induction of new trains: 3-4 every month, two each to WR and CR.
- By March 2008: 10-12 new trains for Western and Central Rly.
- Existing services: Central Railway 1256, Western Railway 1067.
- Services proposed to be added with induction of each new train: 20 up and down services

Source: Hindustan Times

TIME-TABLE OF 21 SERVICES STARTING TUESDAY		
Destination	Services	Timing
Dadar-Virar	3	7.02am, 10.32am, 4.52 pm.
Andheri-Virar	1	12.52 pm
Andheri-Vasai	2	5.06 am, 9.57 pm.
Andheri-Bhayendar	1	3pm
Andheri-Borivali	1	5.38 pm.
Borivali-Bhayendar	1	8.55 pm
Borivali-Vasai	1	6.53 pm
Borivali-Virar	1	8.13 pm.
Virar-Borivali	2	7.47 am, 6.04 pm
Virar-Andheri	3	11.49 am, 1.50 pm, 8.45 pm.
Vasai-Borivali	1	7.34pm
Vasai-Dadar	1	6.01 am.
Vasai-Andheri	1	11.02 pm
Bhayendar-Dadar	2	9.38 am, 3.52 pm.

Even the most elementary measures to ease the pains of commuting are endlessly postponed. Take, for instance, the rapid bus transit system, which calls for a dedicated bus corridor. BEST General Manager Uttam Khobragade told Hindustan Times in November 2006. "Special bus lanes will be a reality in Mumbai from December 15. It will be a New Year's gift to residents of Thane and Mumbai. We assure that our buses will offer the comfort of a car and one can forget traffic hassles..."

It will soon be a full year since the BEST General Manager made the promise of introducing

dedicated bus lanes in a month, but the bus lanes are nowhere on the horizon. Forget the promise of introducing buses that measure up to cars in comfort—the traveling public is hardened enough not to ask for the moon. But, at the minimum, a dedicated bus corridor? It has become a bureaucratic practice to make promises regarding the future, and renege on them without explanation. Or, rather, the standard excuse is trotted out for gross extension of the deadline: shops have to be relocated along the route for road-widening or work has been delayed by the monsoon. The plan for dedicated bus lanes is apparently detailed enough for BEST to assert

that buses will run at 8 to ten minute intervals and that the fare for a 3 km distance would be Rs 13 for non-air conditioned buses. Yet, the actual initiation of the corridor is off by at least over a year.

Similar nonsensical claims are routinely made regarding other transportation plans for Mumbai. At regular intervals reports appear in the newspapers with headlines such as "New SV Road: Bandra to Borivli in 50 minutes" and "Colaba to Ghatkopar in 20 minutes by 2011," the latter promise made by MMRDA. If an assurance regarding dedicated bus lanes made a year ago is already in limbo how much store can be laid by something promised for distant 2011?

All this I mention here to emphasise the point that there is no sense of urgency in improving public transport. Those who have switched to automobiles and two-wheelers can legitimately argue that they have done so, because of the acute discomfort and delays that the use of public transport in India entails. That this is happening, is borne out by figures. Both the Central and Western Railways that run suburban services in Mumbai have shown a fall in passengers. For instance, the card tickets sold per day at Churchgate station has fallen from 23,458 tickets in 2001-02 to 20,091 in 2005-06.. The number of season tickets sold per day has marginally gone up from 3,362 to 3,489 in the same period. It is not very different on Central Railway, where the passenger traffic has gone up from 2.7 million in 2001-02 to just 3 million a day in 2005-06. This cannot be explained away as resulting from the dispersal of businesses to new areas like the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Andheri East, since there has been no decline in the number of businesses in the Central Business District. The suburbs have only served to absorb the

A BAD TRACK RECORD

Devraj Dasgupta | TNN

Mumbai: More than 65 lakh people use Mumbai's suburban railway network every day; the public transport system on the road (BEST buses) caters to around 44 lakh. But all the railway agencies together spent only about Rs 400 crore on the network last financial year, which was only about a third of the Rs 1200 crore that the agencies looking after Mumbai's roads spent in the same time.

Officials say this comparison may be too simplistic but, nevertheless, agree that this still serves to highlight the spending imbalance. Add the eight-year delays in implementing railway projects (like the quadrupling of the Borivli-Virar stretch) and you start to understand why 5000 people fight for space, adequate for less than half the number, on trains during peak hours.

Western Railway, for instance, has spent roughly Rs 50 crore over the last year in adding to train capacity and passenger amenities. Central Railway has spent a little more than WR last year. And the Mumbai Rail Vikas Corporation (MRVC), the major investor on behalf of Indian Railways, spent close to Rs 281 crore in 2006-'07. So, all the railway agencies together spent about Rs 400 crore on infrastructure work last financial year.

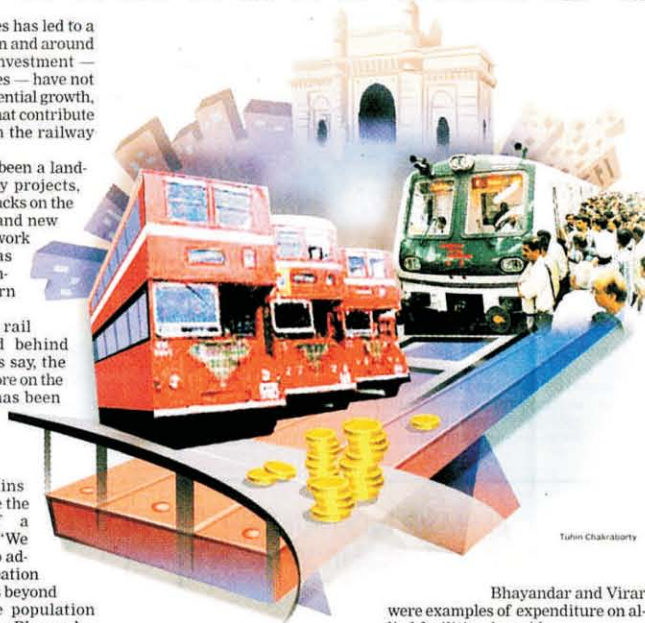
The massive expansion in em-

ployment opportunities has led to a population explosion in and around the city but railway investment — and addition to services — have not experienced that exponential growth, leading to conditions that contribute to 3,000-plus deaths on the railway tracks every year.

Although 2007 has been a landmark year for railway projects, thanks to additional tracks on the Borivli-Virar stretch and new trains, the backlog of work of the last decade has come to haunt both Central Railway and Western Railway.

Both key road and rail projects have lagged behind schedule but, officials say, the crunch has been felt more on the tracks because that has been Mumbai's lifeline.

WR Mumbai divisional railway manager Satya Prakash admitted trains alone could not handle the transport needs of a 1.4-crore-strong city. "We are giving due focus to additional trains and creation of facilities in stations beyond Borivli to match the population growth. But is the Mira-Bhayandar corporation creating enough roads or running enough buses?" he questioned.



New platforms and subways at Borivli.

Bhayandar and Virar were examples of expenditure on allied facilities, he said.

"Work on foot-overbridges is going on at Vasai, Bhayandar, Dahisar and Mira Road. But no amount of

DON'T COMPARE

- Mumbai population: 1.4 crore
- Daily train commuters: 65 lakh
- Daily BEST commuters: 44 lakh
- Money spent on railways in 2006-'07: Rs 400 crore (approximately)
- Money spent by BMC, BEST and MMRDA on roads: Rs 1200 crore (approximately)

work will be enough if everybody jumps on to the trains," he added.

The growth in commuters was rendering railway work inadequate, CR Mumbai divisional railway manager J N Lal said.

"Besides, there is no metro or mono rail to complement suburban trains in Mumbai," he said.

But the investment by road-monitoring agencies points to a major imbalance. Only the BMC's road budget, for instance, is Rs 602 crore. MMRDA spent over Rs 600 crore in the last two years on work on roads, MMRDA chief (transportation) P K Murthy said.

Add the Rs 157 crore that BEST is spending (to procure 644 new buses) and you can see the railway investment on Mumbai in proper perspective.

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Road users lent rail protesters helping hand

Sunando Sarkar & Viju B | TNN

Mumbai: Help came from unexpected quarters on Monday to ensure the success of the railway agitation.

Scores of motorists and motorcyclists — who were travelling to the city from Dahisar and beyond — voluntarily gave people, inconvenienced by the agitation, free lifts to Borivli from where the latter could take trains.

Several organisations, including the Democratic Youth Federation of India and the Pravaas Adhikar Andolan Samiti, called for a boycott of train services between Dahisar and Virar on Monday to press for a Churchgate-Virar local every five minutes in both directions. Many voluntarily stayed away from trains, making prior arrangements for alternative transport, but there were



A senior journalist, staying in Mira Road and working with a leading Hindi daily in Fort, was one of the commuters "blessed with" this unexpected help on the highway on Monday

many who did not know about the agitation before they arrived at the

station on Monday morning.

Most of them were requested not to take the train by demonstrators; some were coerced into not availing of the service, reports said.

All these people — thousands of them — somehow managed to reach the Mumbai-Ahmedabad National Highway but then found themselves without any transport.

It was here that the good-Samaritan motorists came in handy, offering free rides to stranded railway commuters.

A senior journalist, staying in Mira Road and working with a leading Hindi daily in Fort, was one of the commuters "blessed with" this unexpected help on the highway.

"A Ford Ikon came up and asked us where we were going. The man behind the wheels then told us he could drop four of us to Borivli as he

was going in the same direction. He made it clear that he was not going to ask for money as he felt the boycott of trains was for a cause," the journalist said.

"We were overwhelmed. He did not even give his name as he said he did not want any publicity," he added on Tuesday.

Mira Road resident Iqbal Hussein was another stranded commuter who would have missed work had it not been for the highway helpers; he was offered a lift by a motorcyclist.

"The biker saw me standing by the highway, approached me and then said he would give me a lift to the National Park gates at Borivli. From there to Borivli railway station was barely a 10-minute walk," Hussein added. His benefactor, he said, was travelling to Worli.

Naigaon resident and college lecturer Sweta Lagoo was one of those who helped people out on Monday. This teacher in a Malad college was travelling to work with her husband when she saw a huge crowd on the highway.

"We were not comfortable with giving complete strangers a lift but the sight of so many stranded people helped us make up our mind," she recounted on Tuesday.

"We approached a young couple as we felt it would be safer, asked them where they were going and then offered them a ride," she said.

"But I also made it clear that the free ride would be only till Borivli as the purview of the boycott ended there," she said. "It was all for a cause," she added.

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new offices coming up. What the figures show is that those who have given up on the railways to provide a modicum of service have switched to BEST buses or, more likely, have bought cars or motorcycles.

Meanwhile, over the years there has been a striking increase in the number of flyovers, that now dot the city. Mumbai has 42 flyover, most of them having been built over the last decade. Another 40 are in the pipeline. Though 88 per cent of Mumbai's commuters travel by train or bus, there has been no improvement worth mentioning in these two services. Meanwhile, flyovers have added significantly to the comfort level for car users. Clearly, the message that the government is sending down is that it is more sensitive to the needs of car owners than to the overwhelming majority of those using public transport. With a growing and increasingly affluent middle class, it is inevitable that more families will switch to automobiles, with or without a Rs. 100,000 car rolling out of the Tata factory.

These are not just straws in the wind, rather a veritable tidal wave of information threatening the way we live. No government can remain complacent in the face of the nightmare of clogged traffic, pollution, billions of man-hours lost in traffic jams, criminal waste of national resources in terms of investment in private transport, the rising import bill on crude oil and the losses caused by damage to the health of citizens. And finally the prospects of global warming, whose full consequences will be known only in the future.

The single most urgent issue of our times is the dire need to strengthen public transport, and get people to leave their cars at home. For that to happen, public transport has to be made far more dependable and comfortable than it is now.

Connecting with the future of travel



Even as Mumbaiers await the six-minute drive from Bandra to Worli, the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) is making speedy progress on the ambitious Rs1300-crore Bandra Worli Sea Link project. According to official estimates, work on the sea link, an engineering marvel and the country's first sea link route, is over 35 per cent complete and is expected to be over by April 2008. With the MSRDC hiring a 5,990-tonne floating barge crane from a Singapore-based company to expedite work, it is clear that it is leaving no stone unturned to meet the stipulated deadline. It is paying a whopping Rs12 crore for the crane for a period of two months. Once complete, the sea link will help commuters cut short the travel time between Bandra and Worli, of course at Rs30 for a one-way drive. But then, time has a premium



■ (Clockwise from Top) 1) A bird's eye view of the under-construction Bandra Worli Sea Link 2) The under-construction Bandra Worli Sea Link 3) A truss weighing 1250 MT places concrete spans on the sea link 4) Workers strike a pose in front of their work of labour 5) Construction workers prepare concrete sections



OPEN SPACE AND PLAYGROUNDS

There has been rampant dereliction of plots meant for public amenities. Ideological differences were forgotten and enemies became friends if a profit was to be made. A case in point is a plot in Dahisar that was reserved for a playground. It belonged to former Shiv Sena mayor Hareeshwar Patil's family. Patil later quit the Sena with Narayan Rane to join the Congress but the ruling combine ensured that the plot was derelicted to benefit Patil. The BMC, however, did not show similar enthusiasm in acquiring plots, getting only five out of the 48 plots meant to be acquired in the last five years.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The Sena-BJP combine has promised that parks and playgrounds will not be used for any other purpose but for which they are meant. It has also promised to upgrade parks and playgrounds with facilities for gymnasiums and jogging tracks. But it needs to make sure that plots reserved for recreation, parks and playgrounds are not derelicted and open space given to private clubs are made accessible to the public. In a city with only 0.3 acre of open space for every 1,000 residents, it must resist the temptation to give out open space to more clubs. Besides protecting parks and playgrounds, the ruling party must ensure that pedestrians have the first right to footpaths.



SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

This is one sector where the BMC can claim some success. Visible garbage in community bins on arterial roads have all but disappeared. The major beaches at Juhu and Girgaum are cleaned regularly. Drains in several areas have been covered to combat the mosquito menace; it is another matter that most of them cannot be cleaned, because of faulty planning and construction.

THE ROAD AHEAD

This department is a goldmine for contractors and corporators as contracts are issued, reissued and extensions provided endlessly. The administration has drawn up the Clean Mumbai Project but the BMC must ensure that the bylaws are successfully implemented. Plans have been drawn up to develop a scientific landfill site on the 140-acre salt-pan land at Kanjurmarg, besides redesigning of the Deonar and Mulund dumps. The BMC must ensure this is done within deadline. Door-to-door clearance of garbage will take off in a big way across the city from March when compactors and garbage trucks will be introduced along with the Global Positioning System to monitor the movement of trucks. The BMC must ensure that the mechanised sweeping of roads is resumed. Hydrants will have to be restored.

Past imperfect, future tense

The Sena-BJP board, which barely managed to spend 50% of the BMC's annual budget the last 5 years, got another term last week. TOI does some crystal-gazing after looking at its past performance in 5 key sectors



ROADS

The improvement of roads began in earnest only after the media raised a stink on their state. A public interest litigation filed in Bombay High Court also forced the BMC to stay on its toes when it came to maintenance of roads. The administration set up the N V Merani Committee to recommend ways to lay better roads a couple of years back. The suggestions are out but no one can say they have been followed faithfully.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The BMC has taken up 58 km of roads for concretisation at a cost of Rs 327 crore and 178 kms of asphalt-covered roads for improvement at a cost of Rs 239 crore. The BMC administration claims that the roads are being improved in accordance with the M V Merani Committee's recommendations. Problem is that D N Road, already redone according to those suggestions (or so the BMC claimed), threw up potholes last monsoon. An independent audit of roads show a lack of supervision is seriously compromising the quality of work and the ruling combine may find it difficult to ensure that roads last longer than their five-year tenure despite the continual digging by the 16 utility agencies. Additional municipal commissioner Srikanth Singh said some time back there were at least 10 new roads needing digging to attend to water leakages. The BMC recently recruited around 4,500 engineers. But this will not solve the problem. The Merani Committee recommended a blue-book with regular training workshops.

— Clara Lewis | TNN



SEWERAGE AND STORM WATER DRAINAGE

The city is being dug up for a slew of projects, from the Rs-1,200-crore augmentation of storm-water drains to the Rs-5,000-crore Sewage Disposal Project (Phase II), post-26/7. But before that, despite being in power for two successive terms, the saffron combine did not consider drains a priority area. It used to be a given that the city would be immobilised for at least three days every monsoon.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The floods, in retrospect, have been a boon for the city; they have opened a floodgate of infrastructure projects as well as purses for the city. Various committees recommended the augmentation of the city's storm-water drainage system since 1974 to prevent flooding but all suggestions were ignored till 26/7. A lot of work has been done on the Mithi but the Sena-BJP combine must ensure that all the rivers that flow through the city — the Mithi, the Oshiwara and the Poisar — are widened, deepened and the surrounding area beautified as both funds and a desire to do the work now exist. Removal of encroachments remains a vexing issue and the BMC must ensure that the state government supports it in removing obstructions. A better co-ordination with the MMRDA is a prerequisite for the augmentation of drains along arterial roads.



WATER SUPPLY

The Mumbai III-A project, nearing completion, will augment water supply by 355 million litres daily. The Middle Vaitarna Project, awaiting the final approval of the Central environment ministry, was planned in the 1990s and got another look only after 26/7. But no new water-supply project has been planned after that. The ruling combine failed to ensure that the annual budget of around Rs 5 crore, to implement anti-leakage and anti-piracy measures, was used.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The saffron combine has promised to plug leakage of water. The loss due to leakage and piracy is estimated at 30 per cent of the total water supply (3,200 million litres daily). There were at least 30 locations across the city, where leaking pipes had not been attended to for over a month despite repeated complaints from citizens, only this January. The BMC must also make restrain corporators from providing illegal connections. The BMC has proposed water charges and tamper-proof water meters and it is important that implementation is not delayed. It is estimated that Mumbai's population will grow annually by an average of 2.32% between 2006 and 2020.