

# PEOPLE VERSUS CARS: RETHINKING PAKISTAN'S URBAN MOBILITY



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## Setting the Stage

Mobility in simple terms refers to the ability to be mobile. Urban Mobility therefore, is the ability of the society in urban areas to travel between two separate locations or points. This mobility could be for various reasons including employment, education, leisure etc. while bringing into use any different forms of transport or mobility services.

Later this year, Brazil's city of Curitiba will be celebrating the golden jubilee of the initiation its first ever Bus Rapid Transit system. This was not just a landmark achievement for Curitiba or Brazil. Instead, this was also the first time in the world that any city was introducing a BRT system for urban public transport under the leadership of its mayor Jaime Lerner. Lerner envisioned a high-density population settlement around the BRT route with significant employment opportunities close to the public transport network while ensuring that areas of city not serviced by the BRT had efficient and dense feeder routes available to connect with BRT and create an integrated public transport network in the city. Lerner rightly deserves the credit for metronising the bus transport system in cities i.e. high capacity, high speed and high frequency road transport service for the public.

Since then, approximately 200 cities have introduced BRT public transport systems of different types, sizes and operating mechanisms<sup>1</sup>. This includes a handful of Pakistan's urban cities as well where in the past decade some portion of the cities have been provided with a BRT public transport system and a limited feeder route system. Mobility though remains a significant challenge for a large proportion of the people in Pakistan even today raising a big question mark over the target of city designs and policies in Pakistan: The People or Cars?

## Smart Cities and Mobility

The 20th and 21st century have seen the world grow and develop at an exponential rate, seeing an increase in migration to urban centers while also the development of many smaller towns, villages etc. into urban hubs. The rapid urbanization, with continues to further increase, brings new challenges as the United Nations expects as much as 66% of the world's population to be living in urban areas by 2050, a 12 percentage points increase from 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Yin et al. (2015) highlights the rise in challenges faced by rapid urbanization and the need for understanding the concept of smart cities better to deal with the issues associated with increased urbanization. Yin et al. (2015) identify the use of ICT driven strategies with help of city centric research and development to adapt an adequate strategy with the purpose of improving the quality of life available to the residents within a city. Smart cities are often referred to as digital cities as well due to the effective digitization of a city for improved networking, and use of data to improve the access of information to public, enhance resource utilization, environmental conditions, and socio-economic indicators. Silva et al. (2018) state that smart cities are in fact an efficient application of Internet of Things (IoT) to find innovative ideas and ways for better handling of rapid urbanization while limiting the possible adverse impact of environment, maintaining citizen lifestyles and continuing effective governance of cities.

Batty et al. (2012) further explain what constitutes a smart city by identifying seven major components along with defining the difference between a smart city and a city otherwise. Batty et al. (2012) states that a smart city is the integration of ICT into the traditional infrastructure and set up of cities through coordinated use of latest digital technologies. Among the seven major components of a smart city, Batty et al. (2012) holds transport among the prominent components. With continuously increasing urbanization, it is essential to plan smart cities not for today but for the future. Batty et al. (2012) identify that transportation in today's world is hampered in cities by congestion resulting time and fuel wastage. In a smart city for the future, however, this must be changed by eliminating congestion through introduction of new sustainable transport modes integrated with each other and hence able to generate adequate revenues for the city administration. Batty et al. (2012) highlight the efforts of few cities such as Stockholm in Sweden where dynamically priced congestion charges are being used to manage congestion which have reduced inner city traffic by 25% and hence emissions by 14%. Consequently, improving mobility services in a city are a key component for the smart cities of the future.

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<sup>1</sup>www.brtdata.org

<sup>2</sup> World Urbanization Prospects: the 2014 revision. By United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

## Pakistan's Mobility Dilemma

Haque & Nayab (2020) emphasize on the need to see cities not just as a place of residence but in terms of the economic opportunity they provide. Haque and Nayab (2020) term cities as the engines of growth. Cities, if designed properly, have the potential to invigorate significant economic activity by exploiting the opportunities stored in them. However, Haque & Nayab (2020) further argue is possible only if the cities are designed adequately. Vertical development, high density residence, street economy and efficient mobility services are just a few of the factors that can contribute to igniting economic growth through cities. The concept explained hereof, is on the same terms as of smart cities talked above earlier though with a more economic lens than just a demographic angle.

Hadi (2020) argues that people move to cities in order to pursue better opportunities including education, employment, or just a better living standard. The urban spaces, therefore, are built with the aim of provision of maximum services in limited amount of space. This is possible only through the key components of cities as expressed by Haque & Nayab (2020) essential for exploring the economic potential of cities.

In order to effectively utilize city resources, city designs are supposed to limit the need of mobility while city authorities' focuses on developing integrated mobility services in the city to facilitate residents' movements. Pakistan's cities, however, under bureaucratic controls have gone in an opposite direction to the rest of the world.

At the time when the world is practicing urban regeneration; a concept of rezoning and redesigning cities to increase population density singular areas and provision of employment, education, leisure and other essential services nearby; cities in Pakistan continue to spread horizontally. The urban sprawl or the horizontal expansion of cities in the country has resulted in taking over land marked for agricultural purposes and now being used to develop housing societies to house the rapidly urbanizing population in two story bungalow houses.

Hadi (2020) identifies four basic forms of mobility: walking, cycling, public transport, personal vehicles. He argues that under current urban sprawl, walking is an infeasible activity as most of the destinations are not in walkable distances for the majority of public while the activity itself is harmful and dangerous due to the onslaught of high speed vehicles and consequent environmental pollution. Bicycling has also been excluded among mobility options for the city population of Pakistan due to the absence of cycle lanes despite continued expansion of road network in the major cities. Public transport is unavailable, inaccessible and limited to only a few areas in the handful cities in the country. As a result, the public is forced to resort to car ownership and use for travelling in urban centers of the country. Secondly, with continued expansion of the urban centers, travel times and distances have increased while provision of a well-integrated public transport network has become an impossible task for the city authorities.

Moreover, cities in Pakistan continue to encourage use of personal vehicles for intra-city mobility. Construction of signal-free corridors, flyovers and underpasses to facilitate high speed no stop travel of vehicles in cities is a repeated admission of cars being the priority of mobility policy in the cities which lack any adequate alternate mobility means. Khan (2021) notes that the opportunity cost of flyovers is high while they do not always solve congestion issues, and in some cases add to road congestion as more cars start using the route due to

removal of signal stoppage. Furthermore, the construction of flyovers has severe environmental impacts as well that continue to remain ignored in Pakistan where the decision makers and city authorities seem to have a clear flyover obsession.

Besides, no parking charges are another subsidy given to the car owners with huge economic costs forgone to facilitate the small proportion of population. In a country with just six percent car ownership, the car centric policy focus is rather deplorable to say the least.

While the focus of policies seems to be cars and not the people, owning a vehicle in Pakistan has been turned into yet another seemingly unattainable wish for the common people of the country. Qadir et al. (2024) note that the country's automobile industry has not evolved in over half a century and lags at least two to three decades behind the world in terms of technological adoption. The vehicles available in the Pakistan automobile market are high cost poor quality vehicle lacking the features of a modern car while car delivery delays, price fluctuations and black market premium are some of the common features of the industry in Pakistan.

Qadir (2024) further explains the weak institutional set up and the proliferation of clientele groups facilitated state's compromise on industry beneficial policies that could have contributed to long term economic growth and instead allowed flourishing of rent seekers in the industry. At a time when the world has moved towards developing a global value chain of the automobile industry, Pakistan's localization focus has restricted its entry into the GVC on account of poor technological capabilities and low production volumes among others.

## **PIDE on Mobility**

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) over the years has provided extensive insights regarding the pertaining issues of urban mobility in Pakistan and the possible way forward. Before anything else, PIDE emphasizes over a complete shift of urban transport policy focus from car centric to a people centric model. In order to achieve this, the city administrations require a complete rethink of the urban mobility and transport policy.

Haque & Rizwan (2020) press upon the need to recognize that urban mobility is a lot more beyond just cars, and an effective transport policy for the urban areas must focus on all forms of mobility including walking and cycling. Haque & Rizwan (2020) argue that the focus of transport policy for urban centers must be proactive instead of reactive and thus planning for the future. This will require an efficient use of ICT tools and data to forecast future trends and evolutions of city development. A well-integrated public transport system is the backbone of an urban transport policy, limiting use of private vehicles and developing a transit-oriented transport network.

They also further explain the importance of differentiating among road types such as expressways, arteries, collectors and local streets while identifying and constructing the correct road type as per the need. Road categorization is an essential traffic management strategy along with efficient monitoring and violation tracking, which is not possible without employing the required technological tools.

In addition to developing an urban transport policy, (Khawaja et al., 2023) underscore the importance of developing a parking policy for the cities as well. Free parking is a subsidy to car owners while a social cost for the society encouraging use of personal vehicles for intra-city travel. Consequently, Khawaja et al. (2023) present a conceptual model for developing a parking policy in Islamabad Capital Territory along with introduction of alternate mobility means with public transport being the top priority. Adoption of these strategies shall go a long way on better traffic management and congestion mitigation in the country. The model presented by Khawaja et al. (2023) is a data-based financially self-sufficient model that along with helping manage congestion in the city will also facilitate significant revenue generation for the city administration.

It is important to understand that Khawaja et al. (2023) or PIDE in general, have not criticized the use of personal vehicles for mobility in the city, however, the key message from the study is to not subsidize the use of city resources for a single group, especially when they form less than a tenth of the country's entire population. Instead, a fair charge for use of common spaces in form of parking fee will enable an efficient use of public spaces along with curbing congestion and managing traffic.

In actuality, PIDE has continually put emphasis on the need for policy reforms in the automobile industry to make the automobiles attainable for the general public. Qadir et al. (2024) suggest deep reform in the automobile industry in order to increase competition within the industry and encouraging firms to enhance production for meeting the local demand for vehicles as well as targeting export markets by improving firm competitiveness, product quality and achieving economies of scale to compete on prices as well.

Developing an efficient automobile industry and market in the country that allows a larger proportion of population to purchase and own vehicles is essential while promoting the use of public transport through provision of a well-integrated transit oriented system in cities and enforcing a parking policy. After all, all forms of mobility are important for cities.



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