

Thinking beyond Delhi's Odd-Even plan

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Today the trial of the AAP's Odd-Even plan to alleviate congestion in India's capital comes to an end. **Varun Shridhar** argues that regardless of whether it is viewed as a success, it is unlikely to prove effective in the long run. He writes that as the growing economy gives rise to more and more first-time car owners, the key to reducing congestion and air pollution lies in increased public transport patronage.



Radical, unpopular ideas gain acceptance as post-hoc responses to critical junctures – such as Delhi's environmental malaise and its impact on public health – that alter the status quo. Delhi's air is toxic enough for its people to consider the Aam Aadmi Party's Odd-Even plan, an unacceptable and politically costly idea under normal circumstances. This, however, does not mean the people, or India's cities, are ready for such interventions.

In essence, the Odd-Even plan is an effort to alleviate congestion, a key contributor of air pollution, by reducing the number of vehicles on the road. This was achieved, during the trial period in the first fortnight of January, by restricting the usage of motor vehicles on alternate days based on the last digit of their registration number being odd or even. Logically, this should have cut down regular traffic by half. But **exemptions** – for women, children, the armed forces and nearly four million motorbikes and scooters – have resulted in a more modest cut in traffic and less than desirable improvement of Delhi's air quality.



Delhi traffic jam. Credit: [Sonali Campion](#)

While a dire necessity, the intervention, if ever continued beyond the January trial, seems unlikely to prove effective in the long run. It comes at a time when cheaper fuel prices and the forces of a growing economy are more likely to spur private vehicle ownership than contain its growth. Car ownership in India has grown at unprecedented rates – according to [The Energy and Resources Institute](#), in the first decade of this century alone, more cars were bought in the country than in the forty years since independence. Economic liberalisation and growth, since the early nineties, has increased urban India's desire for mobility exerting considerable stress on the country's fixed infrastructure and the environment.

The year-on-year surge in private vehicle ownership, especially in urban India, may be understood from the failure of public transportation to keep pace with social progress. Rising salaries in a fast growing economy have increased

the demand for comfortable modes of travel, leading to a spike in vehicle ownership as mass transit more or less remains what it used to be decades earlier.

Most Indian cities have developed mature public bus networks but lack information systems that inform commuters when the next bus on a route might be expected. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is gaining popularity and is active in a few smaller cities, such as Ahmedabad and Indore, but buses continue to compete with other modes of transport for road space in the country's biggest, most populous cities, making them a less attractive option compared to private vehicles.

To increase public transport patronage, which holds key to reducing car-dependence, congestion mitigation and ultimately cleaner air, Indian cities need to urgently invest in upgrading their public bus networks. Bus services and frequency along routes are rarely published, buses bunch causing overcrowding and inconvenience, BRT and bus priority at traffic lights could attract private vehicle users with travel time savings.

Instead of solving these issues with necessary upgrades, Indian cities continue to show more interest in planning for the future with investments in capital-heavy Light Rail or Metro Rail networks. While this is no doubt essential, intelligent technology upgrades to buses could have been achieved in parallel at a fraction of the cost it takes to construct a rail network. The country even has a [tech ecosystem](#) in place to support intelligent transport systems.

There are, of course, other issues of access and social status that impact public transport patronage. While governments may not be in a position to do much about the latter, access to public transport remains a major concern today. Two problems stand out. First, public transport systems involve multiple players who may not necessarily cooperate with one another to provide commuters a seamless transfer. In the southern Indian city of Chennai, for example, the public bus network is a state transport undertaking while the suburban heavy railway and rolling stock are run by a national institution. The result is limited interaction between the two and very few transit points where commuters may switch modes without a walk of several hundred metres.

The second issue is that of land use and limiting private vehicle usage to last mile connectivity. Unlike the metro rail stations under construction now, existing modes of public transport lack parking facilities that could encourage private vehicle users to switch modes. The solution in both cases outlined here is a unified urban transit authority, like Transport for London (TfL), in Indian cities that could enable the necessary interaction and cooperation between institutions to regulate connectivity and land use.

The success of interventions such as the Odd-Even plan, and its future replacements, are constrained by decisions made in the past. The fact that Indian cities have not invested in increasing public transport patronage in the last two decades is likely to limit the difference interventions can achieve now.

For now, the only positives to draw from the Odd-Even plan trial are immediate environmental gains, however small, and a step in the direction of road pricing in the future. A growing economy will only add more first-time car owners to fill any additional road lanes paved, making road pricing and other travel demand management a necessity soon. Transit authorities and governments cannot wait for Indian cities to reach such a point, though, as gridlock comes with financial and environmental costs.

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About the Author

Varun Shridhar recently graduated from the University of Birmingham where his dissertation examined India's transportation framework and its implications for development and economic growth. Since leaving university he has worked as a consultant examining urban transport policies in India.



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