



## Reclaiming the Bus: Campaign for **Free**, **Safe**, and **Reliable** Bus-based Public Transport in Delhi

### Public Statement and List of Demands

As the 'Unlock 1.0' period begins, it is being hoped that life in the cities will slowly return to 'normal'. Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns had brought the urban life at standstill. The movement of people outside their neighborhoods had nearly stopped. With the disruption in routine life, the mobility needs of the people living in the city region have also changed. It is proving difficult for many people, especially those without access to personal vehicles, to move from one part of the city to another. As Delhi, one of the worst-hit regions in India so far, 'unlocks' itself, it is high time for the government to urgently carry out long-pending reforms so that everyone can move freely, safely, and conveniently in these difficult times.

Even before the COVID, buses operated by DTC, DIMTS, and private operators carried millions of passengers every day. Though Delhi Metro has become a cultural symbol of mobility in Delhi and the megacity is now a global leader in terms of flyovers and wide roads filled with cars and motorcycles, buses are still the most popular mode of transport in Delhi irrespective of gender, age, location, and occupation. For example, according to the latest available data from the Census of India (2011), more than 25 percent of work trips in Delhi are bus-based while more than one-third of trips are non-motorized. Even with their relatively small role in urban mobility, cars not only have disproportionate control over road space but they also command the perception and imagination of planners and politicians alike. It is shameful that the legacy of car-oriented planning continues unabated despite the mounting evidence of its central role in increasing socioeconomic divide, bringing down the quality of the ambient environment, and aggravating climate crisis.

Meanwhile, Delhi has earned a bad reputation for the hazardous levels of pollution in the environment. Despite the widespread recognition of the need to bring fundamental changes, the decision-makers have resorted to cosmetic measures such as air-purifying towers rather than taking steps to bring down emissions more systematically. Commitments to address the global climate crisis, ambient air pollution and noise pollution seem meaningless as urban transport planning in Delhi continues to be dominated by the development of harmful and exclusionary infrastructure such as flyovers and road widening projects which only provide for the demands of automobile users, encourage toxic emissions, and lower the quality of urban life for one and all.

It has hardly skipped anyone's notice how the urban environment, especially the ambient air and river water, became clean merely in a couple of weeks that followed after the first phase of national lockdown. The sudden drop in vehicular emissions has been a major factor contributing to this. One wonders how beautiful, healthy, and safe our cities can be if the automobiles are kept off the road. This will not only sustain the reduction in emissions but also lower the number of severe road traffic crashes and deaths. Since the risks of COVID-19 are found to be higher in polluted air, it is even more important to plan for a radical reduction in the number of automobiles *right now*.

However, over the last few weeks, cars and motorized two-wheelers have already begun to regain their control over road space. With the bus transport services running at half of their capacity, people who are strictly dependent on buses are facing extreme difficulties in accessing essentials. This has exposed the urban mobility divide created by a transport system that focuses on rapid vehicular mobility rather than ensuring accessibility for all. It seems as if those having access to the personal automobile have the right to be mobile while others without access to the personal vehicle do not. It is important to point out that a bus-based public transport system integrated with a properly designed system for non-motorized transport is the only sustainable alternative for Indian cities. If the measures to ensure equal access to mobility are not put in place, this divide will only grow sharper with COVID-related lockdown restrictions being eased.

As we collectively grapple with public health concerns, we need to resist the idea that traveling on the bus would be unsafe during COVID. Providing safe public transport during and after the Covid-19 is necessary to fight the extreme divide in people's ability to move. The crisis demands a thought-out response from state transport officials and operators. Not only the people who are solely dependent on bus transport (notoriously called 'captive riders' in the urban planning dictum) but the urban population, in general, will benefit from a publicly shared strategy for running and improving the bus-based public transport services in the upcoming months.

To ensure equitable access to safe urban mobility during and after the pandemic, we state and demand the following:

**1. Bus services must be considered essential services.**

BBPT should be recognized as an essential service. Bus is a vehicle for exercising the right to accessibility which is an essential component of the broader right to the city. To make sure that 'accessibility for all' doesn't remain a distant dream, the necessary fleet of vehicles, workers, and dedicated space for depot and workshops must be assembled.

Decades of fiscal squeezing has restricted proper maintenance and up-gradation of bus infrastructure. Most critically, there is a huge gap between the required number of buses and current fleet size which is only getting wider as many buses in the existing fleet are getting past their prime. Therefore, more buses must be procured to bring the total effective fleet size to 15,000 and put into operation as soon as possible. A timeline for the same must be publicly announced. The shelving of older buses and the induction of new buses should be done in a phase-wise manner.

Demand for public transport in many areas in Delhi is for frequent, low-capacity buses to reduce the waiting time. Therefore, bus operators should aim to achieve a proper mix of vehicles of different seating capacities in their fleet.

All bus stops must have well-designed shelter, lighting, seating, toilets (especially for women, transgender, and physically disabled people), facility to get sanitary napkins, designated space for street vendors, and clear information on major destinations connected from a particular stop.

Following the lead of London, Paris, New York, and other 'global' cities, car-free initiatives must be planned extensively for a variety of public spaces and streets across Delhi. The planned monopoly of personal automobiles must end and the road space created by public money should be equitably distributed with safe rights of way for pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transport users.

## **2. Bus workers must be considered essential workers.**

If the bus service is an essential public service to run the city, the workers actually running the service must be considered essential workers and the state government and bus operator should take responsibility for their well-being.

Any increase in the bus fleet should be used as an opportunity to generate more meaningful employment, especially for women. There should be an arrangement to ensure gender and caste justice in fresh staff recruitments and illogical restrictions on the recruitment of women as bus drivers should be done away with.

While workers take a life-threatening risk to run the service during COVID, their concerns must be addressed by the management on a priority basis. Workers who are at greater risk of infection (such as the employees aged above 50-55 years) should be able to avail of work-from-home or paid leave. Additionally, there should be put up some temporary barriers to safeguard the driver and the conductor while on-board with other riders.

There cannot be any compromise over the safety norms and transparency in regular testing and provision of safety kit to staff. Learning from the case of BEST workers, DTC and DIMTS should adopt a COVID policy to assess the fleet and worker requirements on a daily/weekly basis, minimize the work hours of its staff in line with the assessment, and organize the work in smaller shifts for each worker.

## **3. Services should be made free, for all.**

Bus services of DTC and DIMTS are already free for women passengers in Delhi. We acknowledge that a major argument in favor of this policy was affirmative action addressing gender injustices in urban mobility. We have no intention to argue against the case but we contend that mobility injustices are multidimensional and remedial actions must be holistic. Socially and economically marginalized people and vulnerable road users have historically been victims of mobility and environmental injustices, though the gender-related mobility injustices are fundamentally

different. As we stated earlier, public transport is a vehicle for mobility justice and public welfare at large. Thereby, we demand that public transport be made *free for all*.

To explain our position further, we argue that bus-based public transport is the most efficient and ecologically sound method of moving people within an urban region. By making public transport services freely available, we would effectively disincentivize the use of personal automobiles (especially for medium to long-distance urban trips) and bring more people to choose the bus as their preferred mode.

We also argue that the political economy of bus-based public transport must consider the bus users as citizens rather than as consumers. Following that logic, it is the responsibility of the welfare state to act in the best interest of the most marginalized social groups and make arrangements for universalizing access to public transport. Not only this, but the government must also plan for generating and sustaining a wider demand for bus-based public transport which is why *free* public transport makes sense.

#### **4. Safety should be paramount.**

As the available data on road traffic fatalities suggests, bus-based public transport is by and large safe from severe road crashes. Necessary actions to ensure the onboard safety of female passengers must be urgently taken. Though marshals have been appointed on buses, their effectiveness should be analyzed.

Physical distancing should be practiced by running buses at half capacity with no rider standing. Protective gear/masks must be mandatory to get on-board for collective protection against infection. Crowding at any point in the journey must be prevented. AC buses should either not be used for passenger operations or be run without air-conditioning and with doors wide open. To ensure that buses are safe for the workers as well as the users, all buses must be disinfected after completing a round trip.

#### **5. A bus should be one's reliable companion in the city.**

Despite the shortcomings and hardships, commuters love the bus. Reasons may vary but what is certain is that the bus is still the trusted mode of transport for a vast majority. This love affair will continue only if the operators and governing bodies bring urgent improvements to bring down the waiting time, reduce the variability in the schedule, minimize the breakdowns, provide separate bus lane for a more seamless movement of buses, and set up official channels for communicating with bus users as equal stakeholders in planning and running of buses.

**Sustainable Urban Mobility Network (SUM Net) India**  
and  
**Institute for Democracy and Sustainability, Delhi**

**\*\*Please endorse the statement here: [www.sumnet.in/delhi-bus-campaign/endorsement](http://www.sumnet.in/delhi-bus-campaign/endorsement)\*\***

**Statement endorsed by:**

1. National Alliance of People's Movement
2. Delhi Solidarity Group
3. National Bicyclists' Union
4. National Domestic Workers' Union
5. Urban Woman Workers' Union (Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union)
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