

Public Transport Now!

Session-1 of the Webinar Series under

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

June 23 | 11 AM - 1 PM

The poster features a bus icon and silhouettes of people. The main title is 'RECLAIMING THE BUS' in large, bold letters. Below it, it says 'A CAMPAIGN FOR FREE, SAFE & RELIABLE BUS TRANSPORT'. The event title is 'PUBLIC TRANSPORT NOW!' followed by the date and time 'June 23 | 11 AM - 1 PM'. A registration link is provided: 'Registrations open (Link in Description)'. The text describes the event as a discussion on 'Public Transport Now! Re-energizing the demand for better bus services. The discussion will focus on the political economy of providing bus transport as public service in Delhi.' It lists three speakers: Dr. Kalpana Viswanath (Co-founder and CEO, Safetipin), Prof. Geetam Tiwari (Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Program (TRIPP), IIT Delhi), and Evita Das (Researcher, Indo-Global Social Service Society). The moderator is Nishant (Member, Sustainable Urban Mobility Network (SUM Net) India). At the bottom, it states the event marks the launch of the 'Reclaiming The Bus' campaign and provides a link: sumnet.in/delhi-bus-campaign. Logos for SUM Net India and @ReclaimBus are also present.

A Brief Summary of Discussions

Welcome note by Rajendra Ravi

- People across the globe are demanding car-free cities, car-free roads for better movement of public transport, and even free public transport. Today, the discussion is on making public transport free for all and also safe and reliable for users. We are launching this campaign 'Reclaiming the Bus' today which demands free, safe and reliable bus-based public transport in Delhi.

Presentations

[Prof. Geetam Tiwari, Dr. Kalpana Viswanath, and Evita Das; Session Moderator: Nishant]

Nishant

Delhi has developed infrastructure that supports the movement of cars rather than buses. These days when we talk about buses, it is often said that the bus is an archaic means of transport and very few people use it. However, when we look at the data, we find that bus ridership in Delhi has actually increased and it is still 1.5 times more than the daily average ridership of Delhi metro. When we asked people if they liked riding buses, they said that they preferred buses but the bus system in Delhi needs several improvements. Therefore, this campaign is not just inspired by a nostalgic romance for the buses. Also, our purpose in promoting buses is not *bourgeoise environmentalism* but we rather want to fight for buses as a part of making cities more liveable- by making its air cleaner, reducing the noise. Buses make the city sustainable, easily accessible, and equal for all.

The bus is an important medium to provide the basic amenities to everyone and that's why it must be accessible for all. This is the reason we are demanding that the buses should be fare-free, safely accessible, high-frequency, and so on. One important aspect is the demand for the fare-free ride in buses. As a welfare state, it is the responsibility of the government to make plans and policies in favor of the people. The bus ride in Delhi has been made free for women which is a praiseworthy step. Can we think of universalizing this? People ask where is the demand for this. As far as our campaign has reached in Delhi, we have seen a powerful demand for this.

Another issue is safety on the buses. When we talk about reclaiming the bus, we received feedback from many woman groups that bus stops must have adequate public toilets, sanitary pad vending machines, proper lighting, etc. Thus, the idea of safety is not limited to reducing road accidents but it also came to include many other aspects. We must envision safety in a new form. The design of the bus must be universally accessible and the infrastructure for other complementary modes like bicycles or pedestrians must be integrated with that of buses.

We must also ensure a reliable bus system. High waiting time on bus stops discourages the potential riders. Another issue is that the lanes for buses are crowded by other vehicles and the bus riders face congestion caused by cars etc. That's why we need separate lanes for buses. One of the bus corridors (BRT) was made in Delhi but it was dismantled in a very unwise way. We need to begin talking about that as well.

Prof. Geetam Tiwari

I thank SUM Net for raising this very important issue through the campaign they have launched.

We have seen in various cities of India that the bus infrastructure hasn't seen much improvement. In the time of the pandemic, we also need to relook at this issue. Some people have said that people would avoid using buses now. However, I don't find this easy to believe. As we talk about the pandemic, we need to check this in a larger time frame, not just of weeks or even months but years. We know that **even if a bus carries 10-15 people, it is more space-efficient and less polluting than cars.**

We can see in the graph that most of the people traveling for work are either traveling as pedestrians or using a bicycle. Among motor vehicles, the bus is one of the most popular modes. We also see that more women than men depend on buses for commuting.

We can see that the number of vehicles on roads has reduced in the past three months. The job opportunities for the informal sector have been impacted by the lockdown. As travel depends on employment, we are going to see the change in travel patterns with the change in informal sector employment. The formal sector is also linked to the informal sector. Until the formal sector remains closed, the informal sector like street vending and transport will not be able to open.

In past pandemics also, we have seen that the uncertainty, fear, and infection do not last for long and the normal traveling resumes soon. As the informal employees do not have many options, they will start going to work as soon as the sector opens up.

The captive bus users have no alternative to buses. That's why buses, pedestrians, and bicycles must receive the attention of the government. **The demand for public transport is not going to reduce and the focus must be brought back to the bus from private vehicles.** Recently, Amitabh Kant, the CEO of NITI Aayog said that there are 22 vehicles per 1000 people in India and they plan to take it to 125 vehicles per 1000 people. We need to keep an eye on such statements and in light of these statements, the need for public transport increases manifold.

In the Informal sector, 75% of people do not own private vehicles. There are 60% bus users who are captive and the remaining 40% have vehicles. If we do not improve the bus system, this 40% will shift to other modes. Also, what can we do for captive riders? As Nishant pointed out, buses need to be made reliable. Also, given the recent fear of the pandemic, we need to manage the crowding in buses. We also need to improve the environment for bicycles. Right now, we lack separate lanes for buses and bicycles. **Encouraging bicycles may reduce crowding in buses.**

Now, one of the demands is for fare-free bus transport. Who will benefit from free buses? The low-income groups who use buses more are going to benefit. The low-income groups spend 20-30% of their income on transport. It is said that if more than 10% of income is spent on transport, the other needs are compromised. Also, when the buses are made free, it becomes easier for the unemployed to search for the work. People often raise the question of financial viability as DTC is running a loss of around 1750 crores in 2018-19. But if we consider buses as a public service, this loss is not much. Delhi govt has proposed funding for buses. **The loss incurred does not matter much as long as we consider it a public service.**

As the economy will restart, the demand for walking trips and bicycle trips will increase and we should prepare for them not just in the short-term but also in the long-term. We need to plan on how to make the city bicycle-friendly. Many workers have migrated to their villages recently but sooner or later the distress migration to urban areas will happen. We need to prepare in advance for that. Right now, we do not have much crowding of cars and other motor vehicles on roads. This opportunity can be used to create lanes for bicycles or buses on an experimental basis, be it temporary.

We need to demand the bus to be kept in the 'infrastructure' category rather than in the 'service' category. To reduce its dependency on intermitted relief from govt, the bus operating agencies need more adequate budget allocation and must be considered an essential institution.

We need a tax waiver and the creation of the State Transport Fund. We need to build dedicated corridors for the bus which can ensure reliable, timely, and convenient buses. We need to build a convenient infrastructure for pedestrian and bicycle riders in integration with bus infra. Thank You.

Nishant: Thank You, Prof. Geetam. As we could see in your presentation that the demand is present and so are the technological and financial capabilities to meet the demand. What is certainly lacking is the political will and outlook of policymakers.

Dr. Kalpana Viswanath

First of all, we need to view the reclaiming of public transport as a part of reclaiming public spaces. Also, as Geetam said we need to see Buses as infrastructure.

The workforce participation of women in Delhi is much less than the national average. As Geetam said, the use of buses by women is more than men. Another aspect is the sexual harassment of women in public spaces which discourages them from going out. Not only women faced sexual harassment inside public transport, but also while waiting for public transport. About 30% of women walk and 35% of women do not travel. This immobility is also a major concern. 14% of women use buses. So, the bus has a lower mode share. When we see the mobility pattern of men, they go to work or shopping and come directly back home. While, mobility pattern of women includes multiple trips to schools of kids, shopping, etc but their trips are shorter.

The planning of transport is majorly according to the needs of men. We need to plan a women-friendly transport system. When we plan the city for women, it automatically becomes friendly for kids, the disabled, and the elderly.

Women-only transport has higher crowds and higher reports of sexual harassment when they travel in general coaches/vehicles. Also, the planners consider the creation of women-only coaches as their only responsibility towards women.

We need to focus on making cycling an option for women. We need to make it safe for women- from sexual harassment as well as road safety. We also need to ensure last-mile connectivity. We suggested 'request stop', a program for women to be able to stop buses at night at any place and not just at the bus stops.

We need to build a proper walking infrastructure. Right now, our walking infrastructure has been encroached by constructions and businesses but also by street vendors as the vendors do not have separate space.

To change the patriarchal nature of public transport, we need to ensure more women's participation in Committees, Institutions. We also saw that there were no women drivers in DTC despite them being high in preference. The reason given was lack of driving license, toilets for female staff, etc. We need gender training and safety committees to encourage women participation in all institutions and the workforce.

The initiative to make bus ride free for women had much positive impact on lives for women. Many surveys indicated that many women who could not use buses earlier could do so now. Making bus free for all is a radical demand but it is a necessary demand, especially in the post-COVID era.

There are 8 parameters on which we check the safety, which we call safety audits. It includes lighting, walks path openness, visibility by people. We have seen that CCTV does not improve safety for women. Rather natural visibility and active streets ensure safety. We conducted safety audits of bus systems and Delhi metro (500m around metro stations), We conducted the same in Bengaluru as well and shared the same with officials.

As Geetam has said that bus is going to regain importance in the coming time with unlocking. The whole world is moving away from cars and campaigns like this can help India doing the same.

Nishant: Thank you, Dr. Kalpana. You made very important points and added some critical demands for breaking patriarchy in the transport system of Delhi as well in other cities.

Evita Das

Whenever we talk about public transport, we talk about new users. We need to talk about existing users. First of all, we need to talk about who does the city belongs to? As a large population lives in slums etc. Housing is not being considered with travel to employment destination. The govt makes claims that many free housings remain unoccupied. But it must be noted that the areas where these houses have been built are transport desert.

The government has talked about social distancing in public transport but it has ignored the relocated population in the resettlement colonies. If these people miss one bus, the next bus comes after a very long time and thus their daily wage earnings suffer. So, it is really hard for them to practice social distancing in public transport.

It has also become very expensive to travel to essential places like banks, health centers given the lack of public transport in COVID.

As part of Atma Nirbhar Abhiyan the vacant houses are to be converted into affordable rental housing but the distance of vacant houses is not being considered. Instead of adding more and more houses to the rental market, the govt should use existing informal rental markets.

In the case of daily wagers and labor, the housing location of labor is not considered. They are not giving any travel allowance or HRA. In such cases, their housing and transport become their responsibility that adds heavily to their financial and logistic burdens.

Our findings suggest that the informal workers have not been given any cash transfer except 5000 rupees to the construction worker. The stimulus economic package lacks any cash transfer. Only ration is being provided but the cash is still to be availed through loans. So, it is still difficult for workers to pay for travel to work.

We need to know where the houses under PM housing schemes are built? The NUTP talked about sustainability but not equity.

Nishant: Thank you, Evita. When we talk about transport, often we talk about it in isolation. You presented it very well how transportation is integrated into other welfare proposals of the city like housing. This campaign will discuss how to build a dialogue between 'Reclaiming the Bus' and other welfare campaigns such as for jobs and livelihoods, housing, universal basic income, etc.

Q&A and Open Discussion

1. Anita Kapoor, Coordinates *Shahari Mahila Kamgaar Union*

I would like to share some experiences of women in the time of COVID. Transport and employment are connected issues for women. Most wage laborers and domestic workers use a bus for transport. Right now, only 10 women are being allowed to board the bus and they have to wait for hours to take a bus. They are being charged 4-5 times more in other motor vehicles. Their workload has increased due to more sanitation and cleaning because of COVID. The free bus ride has also not benefitted them much as the money they save is spent on household expenses only rather than for their nutrition requirements etc. The transport needs to be improved for the poor working class. The use of public transport by the poor section of society has contributed to an environment-friendly society. We need to discuss how to demand more buses from the government and whatever we gather from grassroots experiences of people need to be shared so that we can shape our campaign.

Nishant: We are making a video series on the testimonial of the bus users. The first episode of this series was shared with various people and platforms and we received positive feedback on this. We are also in dialogue with climate action groups like extinction rebellion, Fridays for Future, etc., Teachers Against Climate Change.

2. Neetu Mahar:

- a. There should be low-floor buses for old people;
- b. There should be a facility of the announcement of the upcoming bus stops;
- c. We have to stand at the bus stop under the heat of the sun sometimes for more than two hours to get the bus. Sometimes we have to come back home and lose income.
- d. Employers are not calling for work just because we will travel on the bus and will catch the virus. It is causing serious troubles.

3. Ruchi Varma: Suggestion- It would be good if the campaign also aligns with SDGs. Target 11.2 is specifically for public transport. They are many other goals that directly or indirectly align with the campaign.

Nishant: Neetu talked about the long waiting hours at bus stops as only 10 people are being allowed to board the bus. We have demanded 15 thousand more buses at the earliest so that waiting time is reduced. Also, we need comfortable and less-crowded buses even after the COVID subsidies.

[Speakers responding to a question on how to change the view of governments on providing free public transport and make it a right]

Kalpna: All laws look at the demand to free public transport as welfare or protection, rather than a right. We can pressurize the government to make the programs accordingly.

Evita: To add on, my experience in Delhi elections where transport is an election issue, it is considered as a "something being provided". Also, the finance takes central stage. There are legalities where housing and transport are seen holistically. But what we lack is probably political will. We consider the marginalized only in terms of their basic needs but their other desires like love, right to aesthetics, etc. are conveniently ignored.

Nishant: Yes, I absolutely agree with you. That is the reason the core demand of the campaign is fare-free transport which not only liberates from financial burdens but also brings freedom to enjoy the city better.

[Responding to a question on lack of disabled-friendly bus infrastructure]

Prof Geetam: The demand for buses will increase post-COVID. In our demand to bring more buses, we need to **demand universally accessible buses only**, be it for women, elderly, kids, or physically disabled. Our demand is not just for free buses but also for inclusive buses and other bus-related systems like bus stops, infrastructure. The government is inclined towards cars, but we need to keep our voices loud and sustained enough so that our demands are heard.

Nishant: Thank you everyone for raising such important points. Now, moving towards the conclusion of the webinar, I welcome Rajendra Ravi to talk about how this campaign will be taken forward.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Rajendra Ravi: As our mode of communication with government officials has become digital, a digital divide has become more visible. We had to shift to the digital campaign.

Avikal: We are running the campaign digitally right now. Please like our Facebook page and follow our Twitter handle. We have also created a survey form that I request all of you to fill. We also have a video series on grassroots issues faced by people using a bus or other means of transport. You can share your experiences regarding the bus by sending a video to us.

Rajendra Ravi: The construction of infrastructure of the city is done with the public money and the poorest pay for it. As Delhi is the capital of India and a role model for many other cities, the voices raised here disperse to the corners of the country. We must, therefore, demand a sustainable and people-friendly city and public transport.

Link to the video:

<https://www.facebook.com/institutefordemocracysustainability/videos/542391456457527>

[End of the webinar]

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<https://rb.gy/ynxjma>

To support the campaign or to join hands, please write to us at idsinitiative@gmail.com

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