NICKELED & DIMED

TRENDING

URBAN MOBILITY IN INDIA

CNES
Centre for New Economics Studies

A CHOPPY ROAD AHEAD

SUDARSHAN RSA AND MUKUNDAN ALEXANDER

Indian cities have always had mobility issues. Public transport is disturbingly inadequate, traffic jams are frequent and intense, and air pollution levels are distressingly high. The pandemic brought all of this to a screeching halt. But it also brought with it new behaviours, preferences and challenges. Now, as the pandemic uncomfortably recedes, we trace how the complications it leaves behind might further exacerbate the problems of urban mobility, and identify the biggest challenges faced by the government.

Urban Mobility and the Pandemic
In the past few decades, India has strongly felt the need to improve its urban mobility landscape. The country's transport demand grew eight-fold between 1980 and 2018—the most for any Asian economy, coinciding with the country's breakneck march to urbanization and economic growth. Combined with notoriously poor planning and a long list of infrastructural inefficiencies, this has also resulted in Indian cities consistently dominating global congestion rankings. In addition, Swiss firm IQAir reports that 22 of the 30 most polluted cities in the world are in India. At least on the congestion front, the pandemic represented what looked to be a temporary reprieve. Through successive, intense lockdowns, platforms like Google and Apple reported predictably meteoric drops in community mobility indices—leading to widely celebrated declines in traffic jams, air pollution and roadside deaths. On the demand side, it became obvious that innovation in communication and collaboration technologies could help organizations and people dramatically decrease their need for mobility without disproportionate consequences for productivity.

Public Transport during the Pandemic
On the supply side, the pandemic and associated lockdowns meant deep financial troubles for public transport operators. The additional investments that had to be made to comply with the newly introduced regulations and norms, such as the mandate of periodic sanitization of the vehicles operated, meant higher fixed and operating costs for operators. On the demand side, a lack of primary public transportation services (trains, metros, buses) meant that those who predominantly availed them —largely women, school-going children, and economically underprivileged citizens—had to either turn to other alternatives or reduce commuting altogether.

The Recovery Post the Second Wave
The relaxation of regulations and the gradual increase in economic and social activities following the second wave has allowed for a recovery in supply and demand for public transportation. Travel demand predictions indicate a return to 2018 levels to be likely by 2024. However, this recovery is slowed by a few stumbling blocks. Social distancing norms and the sentiments they have inspired—negatively affecting the carrying capacity of all forms of public transport—have led to decreased revenues and even a fall in the number of vehicles operated. Furthermore, recent and persistent increases in fuel prices have severely affected the financial viability of both running and availing public transportation. As a result, unless larger stimulus packages or efforts to mitigate even more fuel price increases are introduced, the prospect of a healthy recovery seems remote.

The Shift to Private Transport
Even as the lockdown concluded in early 2021, cities in India reported declines in ridership in public transportation reaching as high as 75%. There are widespread fears that certain segments of the population, forced to acquire private vehicles during the pandemic, have permanently turned away from public transport. In general, much of the evidence suggests a significant commuter churn from public to private modes of transportation.

Urban Freight and E-Commerce
The biggest behavioural shift engendered by the pandemic, however, is to urban freight. Food and grocery delivery apps have gone from strength to strength.The pandemic leaves behind a private transport beast in the form of e-commerce and food and grocery delivery operators, who increase demand for mobility and make things even worse.
Dated Executive Response

It is useful to break down the all-pervasive threat we have laid out here in terms of a few broad challenges the government faces. First, it must stem the bleeding from public transport by addressing both supply and demand-side concerns. Second, the government must identify ways of effectively managing the churn that has already taken place—laying out a roadmap for dealing with congestion for private retail and commercial operators. Third, the government must craft an overarching sustainable mobility strategy that looks beyond just the issues of motorized transportation and incentivizes the use of non-motorized forms of transportation like bicycling and walking.

THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

BY TANVEE SHEHRAWAT

AUKUS, a trilateral security agreement between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, has pushed the Indo-Pacific into foreign policy circles and the mainstream media. Understanding the strategic ramifications of the deal is central to navigating the politics of maritime security in the region. The world's economic "centre" has long since shifted towards the Asian continent, owing to the economic prowess of production giants, China and India. A flourishing economic landscape invites foreign investments and leads to multiple external stakeholders wanting a seat at the table. AUKUS has sent shockwaves in the region, as it threatens to drastically change the existing status-quo in the region, which is undeniably occupied by China's naval prowess. The security assurance of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" was propounded by Japan in 2016 to protect free navigation rights in the region. The pretext states that global commons may be under threat due to the fortified occupation of an openly revisionist China.

SEA LINKS, A THREATENED HEGEMONY, AND BALANCE

Global commons, or resources that are available to all nations, do not fall under any form of national jurisdiction. With globalisation and the diversification of global supply chains, the oceans are of immense value as a global commons and public good. In a world where self-interest drives pre-eminent political actors, this creates a vacuum that nations seek to address in the form of multilateral or international agreements. Such agreements often reflect the need to balance a particular actor in the arena or simply serve as a means to display one's relative power. AUKUS is an excellent example of this, and it is meant to balance the presence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the question arises whether there is a need to balance a country in its home continent?

THE RELEVANCE OF THE REGION

60 percent of the global trade value transported through oceans passes through the Indo-Pacific, making a free and open navigation of utmost economic and strategic importance.
However, it isn't just trading links that have attracted this attention; the volatile situation in the South China Sea also houses a series of territorial disputes, coupled with the weight that India has as a rising power with an apparent geographical advantage in the Indian Ocean. Often referred to as Asia's maritime underbelly, the Indo-Pacific became a unitary geopolitical construct due to its enormous economic opportunities and security challenges. Geography and politics alone may seem insular to a larger world arena, but the geopolitics of a region can be of tremendous influence beyond international borders and continents.
Another example of the massive economic relevance of the region is the Strait of Malacca, between Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, which links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean via the South China Sea. The strait is the shortest sea route between the Persian Gulf and Asian markets, making it the most heavily travelled shipping channel globally. If this strait is made vulnerable from Chinese presence, it could seriously fracture global supply chains and energy lines.

THE WAY FORWARD- WHAT DOES THE INDO-PACIFIC PROMISE?

Following the pandemic, the realisation that non-traditional security threats require cooperation among national actors has been subverted. Instead of moving towards cooperation, the world order seems to move farther away from it. An arms race appears to be unfolding in the Indo-Pacific, which calls for alarm. The threat of predatory economics is a valid one, but China is an unreliable actor, and controlling it is a laborious exercise with little scope of success. The United States appears to be demonising China, and under the pretext of balancing or countering it, it is actively pushing for the militarisation of an already volatile regional dynamic. Besides this, pacts such as the AUKUS are also actively attempting to incite a reaction from China. It won't be pleasant to poke the panda in an attempt to tame it. A more comprehensive strategy grounded in cooperative negotiation still has potential but with indirect confrontation interactions in the region continue to heat up, with no end in sight.

COP26: ASSESSING CLIMATE ACTION
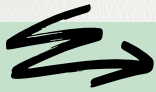
BY ASISH SINGH

Five years after the historic Paris Agreement was adopted, countries returned to COP26 2021 to update their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The COP26 summit is bringing parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to discuss roadmaps to achieve complete decarbonization by mid-century and to ensure a clean environment for all.

Climate action is at the top of the agenda at Glasgow. One broader theme is reaching net zero. We have technologies across multiple sectors that can bring emissions to zero. A transportation system running on electricity or hydrogen can also bring sectoral emissions to absolute zero. As of November 6th, 2021, 150 countries accounting for 80.7 percent of global emissions have submitted a new or updated NDC. Before Paris, global greenhouse gas emissions were estimated to reach 60 gigatons CO_2-equivalent by 2030: north of double what they ought to be to limit warming to 1.5° C. The first round of NDCs filled approximately 10 percent of that gap, and preliminary calculations suggest that the current round is on track to fill another 10 percent. With India's and other recent national pledges, 90 percent of global GDP is now covered by net zero pledges, up from only about 30 percent over a year ago. However, we are not en route to achieving the near-term target of halving global emissions by 2030.

At least 65 countries have pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Factoring in both the NDCs, additional 2030 pledges from South Korea and China, the net-zero targets, warming could be limited to 2.1° C. Despite that it exceeds the Paris Agreement's upper limit, it is concrete progress from 2015, when warming was on track to breach even 3° C mark.
As of now, we are well on the road to breaching the 1.5° mark. As per the IPCC's Report 2021, human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. Evidence of observed changes in extremes such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts, and tropical cyclones, and, in particular, their attribution to human influence, has strengthened since the fifth assessment report (2014). These weather events are projected to worsen if net zero is not adhered to.

India has officially joined the net-zero pledge club. The 2070 target set by Prime Minister Modi on November 1 presents a reasonable yet challenging net-zero timeline for one of the world's fastest-developing economies. Although India is the third highest emitter of greenhouse gases, it also houses 17% of the world's population. In per capita emissions then, it is less than half the global average: well below top emitters. When we consider historic records, India is responsible for less than 5% of cumulative CO_2 emissions. The US and China account for 20% and 11% respectively.

COP26 has marked a seismic shift in international climate politics. Less than a decade ago, the proposal of reaching net zero emissions was a concept mostly echoed in scientific chambers and scoffed at by most politicians. In COP26 however, we saw India, Russia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Australia walking out with net zero commitments. This is indeed positive, given that the world has already warmed 1.1° C above pre-industrial levels, with the seven warmest years just in the last decade. However, these commitments are contingent on international financial assistance which must materialise.

Going forward, electrifying the transport and construction sectors, industries like cement and steel production, should all be subject to decarbonizing the grid through coal phaseout and increasing the share of renewable sources in energy generation. The launch of the Green Grids Initiative – One Sun One World One Grid (GGI-OSOWOG)—primarily pushed for by India at the COP26—aspires to improve the viability of solar power. It also encapsulates India's imperative of addressing multiple important goals.

Although some progress has been made, much remains to be done. A net zero date will not convey the full story of an economy's climate action. Climate financing needs to be directed more at adaptation than mitigation to create a shock absorber for developing, small and island states to buckle up against the near-term peaking of emissions.

HOW INDIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM SHELTERS ECO-CASTEISM

BY RIYOSHA SHARMA

Indian environmentalism is categorised by popular grassroot movements like the Chipko movement of the 1970s and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, often spearheaded by tribals, farmers and indigenous people living in direct harmony with the environment. It is the environmentalism of the indigenous - yet, Indian environmentalism is far from inclusive of communities that need it the most.

NEW TRADITIONALIST IDEOLOGY

Movements like the Chipko movement present locals resisting industrialisation to protect their habitats and surroundings, which is widely misconstrued as originating from the new traditionalist ideology. The new traditionalist ideology places the responsibility of ecological degradation exclusively on colonialism, development and modernity. It draws a sharp dichotomy between the traditional Indian lifestyle, believed to be environmentally sensitive, harmonious and far less exploitative than today, and the modern lifestyle, characterised by drastic changes in social, ecological and economic relationships due to colonialism and economic development. With autonomous and self-sustaining villages and conservationist communities, pre-colonial practices are viewed to have been perfectly balanced.

New traditionalist environmentalism romanticises ancient Hindu scriptures and practices, associating them exclusively with sustainable living and conveniently overlooking how the same scriptures make the environment inaccessible to a large proportion of society. Access to common resources like forests, water and land is regulated on the basis of caste, especially in rural areas, restricting lower-castes' right to natural resources. Yet the Hindu traditions are valorised as sustainable, eco-friendly and righteous. Even the UN Secretary General's Report 'Harmony with Nature' (2010) one-siddly praises Vedic philosophy, saying that it 'has always emphasized the human connection with nature…

It is also worth reiterating how the idea of precolonial autonomous and self-sufficient villages is central to the new traditionalist philosophy. In this aspect, Gandhi's own conception of sustainability and self-sufficiency has been often a central part of Indian environmentalism, and so has Nehru's. But it is disheartening to note how the ideologies of important Dalit and anti-caste leaders have been majorly left out of our ecological discourse. Where Gandhi's beliefs about the ecologically non-exploitative, sustainable, village swaraj have been hailed and reworked, Ambedkar's concerns about the exploitation of Dalits and exclusion from access to natural resources in villages has failed to gain ground as an important facet of environmentalism. In fact, if seen from an ecological lens, his legacy is especially relevant to the environmental justice movement. The Mahad Satyagrah of 1927, for one, was a historical movement against caste-oppression undertaken by Dr. Ambedkar and 2500 others, demonstrating Dalits' equal right to public water by drinking from the common Chavdar Tank. While it is celebrated as an important anti-caste movement, its significance as an environmental justice movement for equal access to water is usually overlooked.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The casually casteist ideology also reflects in the practical implications of the undertaken environmental movements. Most environmental movements do not even acknowledge structural caste issues as environmental issues. UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 aims towards reduction of inequality within and between nations. Its target is to 'empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status' by 2030 – and it does not specifically include caste as a category. Dalit activists from the Asia Dalit Rights Forum view this lack of international recognition as a 'critical lapse'. Formal acknowledgement of caste as a factor responsible for poverty, inequality and environmental injustice is the first step towards tackling it.

CONCLUSION

It would not be exaggeration to say that environmentalism cannot be imagined in isolation of caste. In fact, the exclusion of Dalits and lower-caste communities functions on the very ideas of pollution, dirt and purity, making them inextricably linked with the environment. Indian environmentalism is not only incomplete but outrightly casteist if it strives for sustainable development with the framework of the caste hierarchy.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, MILITARY IMPUNITY, AND WOMEN RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF KASHMIR – II

KUNAN-POSHPORA

BY SABAHAT ALI WANI

GENDER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In the case of military occupation, sexual violence has always been an immediate weapon used by the state to humiliate, dehumanize, and coerce entire communities into submission. But, this humiliation and dehumanization is gendered, as, on the one hand, men may also experience sexual violence; it is, however, not the same as women's experiences because 'sexual violence against women has been common across conflict zones, if not unavoidable' (Christine Chinkin, 1994, as cited in, Alliya Anjum, 2018). To some extent, the incidents of sexual violence against Kashmiri women are reported and documented but the same cannot be said for the Kashmiri men, transgender community, and other sexual minorities. For the transgender community, it is the complete negation and erasure of their experienced violence and abuse and, for Kashmiri men, Alliya Anjum (2018) comments, 'instances of male sexual violence in Kashmir, however, are not as well-documented as those of violence against women, owing to heightened stigma and shame'.

MILITARY IMPUNITY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE
ARMED FORCES (JAMMU AND KASHMIR) SPECIAL POWERS ACT

The degree of special powers given to the armed forces under AFSPA raises critical questions on its nature and the accountability of the armed forces in J&K. According to the report of Amnesty International (2015) on the 'Failures in accountability for human rights violations by security force personnel in Jammu and Kashmir', the problem with the definition of the so-called 'disturbed area' is that it allows the armed forces to declare themselves as officers in the line of duty at all times in any region of J&K, even if it involves grave human rights violations as those acts are also considered to be 'service-related acts and not criminal offences'. It is also crucial to note how the language of this Act is instructive as it empowers the armed forces to use force against any individual, even if it results in that person's death (Haley Duschinski, 2010) and that too, without any accountability.

RAPE IN KASHMIR BY INDIAN SECURITY FORCES AND MILITANT GROUPS

According to the report of Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, Kashmiri women were raped by the Indian security forces right after 1990 and a huge number of cases were not reported and, if reported, the personnel involved were never prosecuted. The report also sheds light on the culture of impunity by documenting the reported cases of rape of Kashmiri women and the injustice that followed. Rape cases include: Kunan Poshpora mass rape, Rape in Shopian, Rape in Haran, Rape in Gurihakhar and also, the attacks on Kashmiri women by the militant groups to threaten them that 'severe action would be taken against them if they didn't maintain purdah'. There are also the cases of abductions and rape of Kashmiri women by the militants but most of the time these acts are defined as forced marriages in the Kashmiri society and 'gives some indication of the social ostracism suffered by rape victims and code of silence, and fear, that prevents people from openly condemning such abuses by militant groups' (Asia Watch and Physicians of Human Rights).

WOMEN RESISTANCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Nitasha Kaul (2018) comments that many scholars have tried to understand the relationship between sexual violence and women resistance, mostly in post-colonial militarized societies. Some of these scholars (P. Jeffery and A. Basu, N.A. Khan etc.) have tried to explore the complex relationship of women leaders like Asiya Andrabi and other militant women activists with feminism and religion in Kashmir.

Drawing upon the intersection of identities in conflict zones, Alliya Anjum (2018) states that women are targeted and raped because of their gender and also their ethnic, racial, or national identity but one should understand that women issues in these zones are not to be considered 'secondary' to the community's political goals. Women in conflict zones are active recipients of abuse and violence; their security should be given utmost priority and not treated as a 'later on' concern. Kashmiri women are not the battlefields upon which the flag of masculine nationalism and abusive religious orthodoxy should be erected.

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