Walkability, the critical urban paradigm

THE ET editorial of 27 September 2009 quoted the WWF's *The Alternative Urban Futures Report* and raised the following question: "Is the WWF survey looking at walking as a recreational activity or as just another way of getting to work and back?" As principal author of the report, I would like to respond.

"Walkability" is about allowing the average citizen to lead his/her life in a way that walking is an important, even dominant, mode of transport. Walking for recreation may be a part of this but walkability is about a whole new way of designing a city. Public transport, for instance, works only if the last mile can be walked. Similarly, creating the space for walking is a very important way to encourage social interaction and inclusion — after all, both rich and poor can walk. In other words, walkability is not just about foot-paths and overpasses but about urban density, public transport, public spaces, social cohesion and urban 'buzz'. Each one of these is an important ingredient for a vibrant city but walkability is a paradigm that encapsulates all of them.

Any discussion of public transport in India ends up being a debate about buses and trains. Oddly, the simplest and most widely used form of public transport in India is 'walking' and its sister mode 'cycling'. A 2008 study of 30 Indian cities by Wilbur Smith Associates showed that almost 40% of all trips in urban India involved no motorised vehicles at all — 28% walked and 11% cycled. The proportion was sharply higher in smaller towns since distances were usually small and the roads less congested. However, in bigger cities, the proportion of people using conventional public transport was high, and consequently commuters walked the last mile. For instance, in cities with more than 8 million population: 22% walked all the way, 8% used cycles and 44% used public transport. This adds up to 74% of people who rely on non-motorised transport for at least part of the commute.

Not only is walking a democratic form of transportation — it clearly is ecologically

friendly, healthy, enhances social interaction and gives the city a personality. Moreover, social interaction and street life have enormous economic value as this is what makes cities dynamic and creative. This is why the cores of all the world's great cities are consciously walkable — central London, Paris, Manhattan, Singapore and so on. Yet, walkability is barely considered in Indian urban planning. Indeed, large sums are spent on 'road widening' which is a euphemism for reducing pedestrian space.

Whenever I make the case of walking in Indian cities, I am inevitably told that India is too hot for walking. This is not at all true.

Singapore is the worst place in the world to walk — it is hot and humid and gets 200 days of rain a year. Yet, people walk everywhere because the city's urban design allows for it. As we have seen, the vast majority of Indians already walk. We need to invest in infrastructure that they can use.

Note that walkability and public transport must be embedded in urban DNA as soon as possible because it is very difficult to retrospectively change urban form. Take for instance, Atlanta and Barcelona. Atlanta has a metro network of 74 km while Barcelona has one of 99 km. These may seem comparable but per capita CO$_2$ emissions for Atlanta are ten times that of Barcelona. The difference is mostly explained by Barcelona being compact while its American rival is spread out. As a result, less than 4% of Atlanta's population lives within a reasonable walking distance of a metro station compared to 60% for Barcelona. If Atlanta now tried to give its citizens the same accessibility, it would have to build 2,800 new metro stations and 3,400 km of new tracks!

All this needs a big change in urban thinking. A brand new city like Gurgaon does not have any network of sidewalks at all! In the next three decades, rapid urbanisation will make India an urban majority country. We will need to create new urban spaces to accommodate 350-400 million additional town-dwellers by expanding old cities, urbanising villages and creating brand new centres. Walkability must be the central planning paradigm for this.

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