

Mobilizing the millennium city: class, road safety, and citizen planning in urban India

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This paper investigates the role of collective action in addressing the challenges of mobility and transportation infrastructure in the case of Gurgaon, India, also known as the “millennium city”. With pedestrian fatality rates higher than that of Mumbai, Gurgaon has been openly criticized by its residents for failing to address the needs of pedestrians and the vast majority of its population, such as migrant workers, who cannot afford private, motorized transportation.

Once a collection of villages on the outskirts of Delhi, Gurgaon has become an urban jungle of highways and flyovers, with a population exceeding that of most major US cities. The bulk of this urbanization has taken place over a few short decades, in the absence of state sponsored planning intervention or master-plans. The city's steroidal growth was made possible by the efforts of private real estate corporations and builders, as well as policies in the 1990s that repealed land laws and opened up markets to foreign direct investment.

While the private sector has rushed to build hundreds of modern, gated communities, high-rises, and office parks, and dozens of multinational corporations have taken up residence in these spaces, the connections and circulation within this pixelated, built environment remains a significant challenge. Between Gurgaon's private development model and its fledgling government, it is not entirely clear who is or who should be responsible for solving the road problem.

In the midst of this confusion, the social context of Gurgaon has thrown together a distinct mixture of middle class activists with corporate and international experience,

who have begun to tackle the ways in which residents think about the roads and sidewalks of the city in urban India. This has spurred a cyclist and pedestrian empowerment movement, called Raahgiri, that has gained traction in other cities across the country. While transportation infrastructure is at once a technical issue, and deals with urban capacity and provision of basic goods and services, in Gurgaon, as in other cities, the issue of mobility highlights the changing nature and vision of citizens as participants in urban planning. Furthermore, Raahgiri draws on perceptions and popular imaginaries of the modern, livable city in other parts of the world, raising questions of applicability and the role of social and cultural norms in shaping how we move around the city.

First, the paper provides a brief history of Gurgaon's urban boom, followed by an articulation of the current challenges to road infrastructure provision and safety. Second, the paper delves into the unique circumstances of Gurgaon's middle-class activism, and how it has created a space for movements, such as Raahgiri, to emerge. Branded as a “take back the streets” campaign, Raahgiri closes down traffic for several hours each week on a designated road to all but cyclists and pedestrians. Raahgiri seeks to generate social awareness in order to eventually change public policy and planning on the issue of non-motorized transport. I situate this within discourse on urban collective action, for example, Baviskar's (2009) notion of “bourgeois environmentalism,” and recent scholarship on the rise of middle class participatory planning in Delhi.

Using interviews with activists, transportation planners, and local residents, including low income residents such as migrants, and urban villagers, I unpack the everyday cultural, ideological, and logistical challenges to traveling around the city. I argue, in line with Raahgiri's founders, that contrary to the cultural or class argument that stigmatizes walking and cycling among the more elite in Indian society, in recent years safety has become the predominant concern and impediment to activities such as walking and cycling across class and income divides. While movements such as Raahgiri and car-free day raise awareness of these safety issues and galvanize support from their participants, they tend to target and attract an affluent set of followers, even though the primary benefactors of increased pedestrian safety are



lower income migrants and villagers. For most residents, opting to walk or cycle is not a lifestyle choice, but a necessity. The paper concludes with observations, recommendations, and next steps for research, road safety awareness, and action.