



Maximum neglect

The Mumbai stampede was preventable; pedestrian access must be ensured in all cities

Mumbai's ghastly suburban railway stampede, in which 23 people died after being crushed on a narrow staircase, was the inevitable consequence of prolonged neglect of urban public transport in India. The financial capital depends mainly on the 300 km suburban system, which has some of the highest passenger densities for any city railway in the world. Yet, it has no single accountable manager. It is unthinkable for a modern railway system to continue with business as usual when about 3,500 people die on its tracks in a year. But Mumbai goes on. Over the past two decades, policy attention has tilted towards road projects, with just token appreciation of the challenges faced by public transport users. The Elphinstone Road station stampede should lead to a course correction and re-ordering of mass transport in all cities. Augmenting the creaking and broken infrastructure at suburban stations should be a high priority, and with good management practices, this can be achieved speedily. Creating canopies to shield passengers, such as those crowding the staircase to escape the rain in Mumbai, putting in escalators and lifts, and providing exits on both sides of train coaches towards the street level wherever feasible, will facilitate movement. These are inexpensive, off-the-shelf solutions. Railway Minister Piyush Goyal has called for a quick survey of the suburban stations to identify areas of concern, but this is something that should have been done without waiting for a disaster, and it must now be extended to all cities.

Reforming archaic transport planning and management for urban India remains the still bigger challenge. Mumbai's geography produces a distinct north-south commuting pattern from the periphery, since the business district is located at the peninsular southern end. A sound transport demand management strategy would consider mapping travel patterns, and shifting some institutions to areas in the wider Mumbai Metropolitan Region where infrastructure, including housing, and amenities can be planned in advance. The latest carnage is evidence of the failure of civic policy to factor in the need for pedestrian access, and it applies not just to stations but to the wider city. The number of private vehicles and taxis has grown in Mumbai by four and six times, respectively, over the past two decades, leading to lobbying for wider roads and more flyovers, while mass mobility systems and facilities for walkers and cycle-users have not received similar attention. Skewed policies cannot help. The immediate requirement to end civic bedlam is to remove physical and policy bottlenecks: clear pathways inside and adjoining railway stations of obstacles, install escalators, create multiple entry and exit points, and put in place an organised feeder transport network to stations and bus termini. The families of the dead and the injured should be given exemplary compensation, to reinforce the accountability of the railway administration.

Back to paper

A State-wide voter paper trail may silence the EVM's critics, but is a regressive step

The Election Commission's decision to deploy the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail system for all the constituencies in the Gujarat Assembly elections is questionable. This will be the first time VVPAT will be used on a State-wide basis. A costly but useful complement to the Electronic Voting Machine, it allows the voter to verify her vote after registering it on the EVM, and the paper trail allows for an audit of the election results by the EC in a select and randomised number of constituencies. The implementation of VVPAT was to have been undertaken by the EC in a phased manner, but this blanket use appears to have been expedited after a series of unwarranted attacks on EVMs by some political parties and scaremongers. The EC had sought to allay concerns and confront allegations of voter fraud by running through the administrative and technological safeguards instituted to keep EVMs and the voting process tamper-proof. It had also challenged political parties to a hackathon to see if, with these safeguards in place, EVMs could be manipulated. The representatives of only two political parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Nationalist Congress Party, bothered to turn up. It is unfortunate that parties have found it worthwhile to cry wolf but refuse to meaningfully engage with the EC when challenged to do so. The introduction of VVPAT and the audit process should allay some of the doubts raised by EVM naysayers – but this is a costly process and should not become the norm going forward.

Meanwhile, it would be wise for the EC to rapidly transit to third-generation, tamper-proof machines, which must be thoroughly tested and vetted by experts before deployment. The EC's use of a standalone, non-networked machine that runs on a single programmed microchip shows that India's simple but effective EVMs were ahead of the curve compared to the alternatives used elsewhere in the world. Many advanced democracies used networked EVMs, which raised the question of remote manipulation through viruses and malware, compelling many of them to revert to paper ballots. The EC has so far demonstrated that the voting process is robust and its machines are continually upgraded to meet possible challenges, but there are other concerns regarding the use of technology that it must be aware of. For example, Russian cyber-hacking, using techniques such as spear-phishing of election officials and related manipulation of voter data, has been suspected in some jurisdictions abroad. The EC's move in late 2015 to avoid the linking of the voter identity card with the Aadhaar number in order to avoid the trap of linkages with big data, thus becoming susceptible to digital manipulation, was thus a wise decision. It must continue to keep its processes decentralised and accountable.

A question of responsibility

Mumbai cannot cope, let alone be true to its dreams, unless the confusion of multiple authorities is sorted out



SACHIN KALBAG

On September 29, soon after the horrific stampede at Mumbai's Elphinstone Road railway bridge, that led to the death of 23 people, two groups of policemen came to the accident spot. One was from Mumbai Police, and the other represented the Government Railway Police (GRP). Instead of coordinating their investigation effort, the two groups argued – over jurisdiction.

Whose call?

As this newspaper reported, "GRP personnel said that while the FOB (foot overbridge) was from the railway station, it was built on BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) land and so it was the responsibility of the city police. Mumbai Police personnel, on the other hand, said that since the bridge was used by railway passengers, the responsibility lay with the railway police only. Personnel from both forces were seen taking measurements on the bridge to decide the area of jurisdiction."

Technically, Mumbai Police are responsible for preventing and detecting crime within city limits. The GRP is a police organisation under the State government in all States, and responsible for the prevention and detection of crime on railway property, including in trains. It liaises with local police forces where railway lines and stations are located.

The jurisdiction incident is symptomatic of all that is wrong with Mumbai's infrastructure – there are far too many agencies, and no one is willing to take re-



responsibility when a tragedy takes place.

To be sure, accountability and multiplicity of agencies is just one of the many issues that dog Mumbai's development, planned and unplanned. One could argue that this is the case with pretty much any city in India, and the quarrel over jurisdiction, shameful as it is, could have taken place anywhere in the country.

Not just any other city

But Mumbai is unique primarily because of its status among India's mega cities. It is easily the nation's commercial hub, is home to more than 20 million people in its extended Mumbai Metropolitan Region, and it is far more diverse in its cultural inclusion than most other metros. Put simply, India needs Mumbai to prosper – yet the city has been struggling to maintain its civic stride for a long while now.

It aims to be included among the world's leading cities, and yet, Mumbai does not even have the most conducive environment for businesses or people to thrive. Its public transport, though widespread and connected, is well beyond saturation point (the Elphinstone stampede was a calamity

waiting to happen in a rail network that ferries nearly eight million passengers daily); the city's roads make the moon's surface look like a German autobahn; commercial rentals are higher than in Los Angeles, forcing entrepreneurs to set up businesses elsewhere; Internet connectivity, so vital for any city's progress, has improved over the years but it is nowhere near world standards. Even its Development Plan 2034, a municipal vision statement to transform Mumbai into a "global city", betrays so many logistical inefficiencies and unrealistic ambitions that it underwent several revisions since 2014. Almost all of the projects are yet to take off after it was cleared by the BMC in August this year, because the Maharashtra government is yet to approve it.

There could be several explanations for Mumbai's faltering and stuttering growth over the last three or four decades, but the primary reason is not too difficult to isolate: a lack of political will. Although Mumbai is Maharashtra's capital, much of the city's development discourse has gone through various iterations on who should be the city's boss.

In most cities around the world,

the mayor has been reduced to a figurehead, while the real powers lie with the municipal commissioner, who is appointed by the State government. The BMC commissioner is, in effect, Mumbai's CEO. The powerful standing committee, comprising elected representatives, can frame policies, draft by-laws, and sanction the city's budget. But the person to oversee and implement everything is the commissioner. Besides, a large majority of the State's elected legislators visit Mumbai only during legislative assembly and council sessions, and have no stake in the city's progress.

As a direct and indirect result of this ambiguity, much like the jurisdiction embarrassment after the stampede, accountability for the city's roads too is diffuse. There are at least five agencies that handle roads in Mumbai – the BMC, the State Public Works Department, the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation, and in some cases even the Slum Rehabilitation Authority.

Civic apathy

It is another matter that Mumbaiers themselves are so self-absorbed in their day-to-day struggle that they find holding politicians accountable a lost cause. Less than half the city's voters turn up at polling booths during the General and State elections, and the voting percentage during municipal polls is even more abysmal. After the terror attack on the city on November 26, 2008, there were widespread calls for a change of guard in the State. Yet, less than 45% of Mumbai's voters turned up on election day in 2009. It is a vicious cycle of apathy and indifference that is seemingly impossible to cut through. Rent-seeking, therefore,

continues unabated without citizens questioning it, and in many cases, actively participating in it.

There are clichéd terms that the city uses to bring out the helpful nature of its inhabitants when a catastrophe strikes. The most abused one is "the spirit of Mumbai". This spirit, a matter of pride earlier, has become the city's shame because it is a mere fig leaf for citizens' lack of involvement in the political process and their utter disregard for holding public servants accountable. It is, of course, true that the city survives, albeit on the brink, mostly due to the enterprise of its individual residents and their sheer capacity for resilience amidst under par services. As a matter of fact, Mumbai carries on not because of political and bureaucratic support, but in spite of it.

However, a city that aspires to be true to its people, let alone be world class, cannot survive on spirit alone; it will eventually break down. That breaking point is nearing fast, and the sooner Maharashtra's and Delhi's lawmakers wake up to it, the better.

It is doable

It is not that Mumbai's problems are insurmountable. Despite its lack of geographical space, the city has the capacity to provide for public services that are often taken for granted in both developing and developed countries. There are right-thinking and forward-looking organisations that have come forward with feasible plans to assist the authorities to make Mumbai a liveable place.

But then we go back to the old question of who will implement these plans and who will be held accountable. It is this question that needs to be answered first. The rest will fall in line.

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Babuji, my guide

Recalling Lal Bahadur Shastri's vision for a prosperous, self-reliant India



SUNIL SHASTRI

When writing about my revered father, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of India, the affectionate word "Babuji" is what comes to my mind, the term we used to address him. He was a great and most popular Prime Minister and also a great father.

I still remember the days when I hardly got an opportunity to see him or even talk to him. On some days, the most we could do was to peep through the door and say bye to him before leaving for school. He would be deeply engrossed in his files and the moment he heard us, would lower his spectacles, look up and smile. This would satisfy the three of us, Anil, Ashok and me.

Once, two weeks had passed and I had not spoken to him even once. I was annoyed and decided to remain awake till he returned. He was stunned to see me waiting for him and told me that I looked very angry. As I didn't reply, he ran his fingers through my hair.

"Babuji, what type of father you are?" I asked him. "You never bother to ask how we are or about

our studies." He sat down and with great love and emotion said, "Sunil, you are an intelligent boy. You should also realise that the people of this country have put the great responsibility of the Prime Ministership on my shoulders. As the head of the nation, my family is not only limited to you children but also the whole country is my bigger family... I am sure, Sunil, you will appreciate my feelings and would not feel hurt anymore. I love you and will love you always."

A rural focus

Lal Bahadur Shastri believed that the country could only progress economically if planners had a clear concept of rural development in the context of growing unemployment. He believed that the rural economy should be given top priority to stem the flow of youth into cities looking for jobs. That vocational education was key to this was his strong belief.

The making of a new India should be the aim and goal of everyone, and in 1964 he said, "In the long run, the economic condition of the country will improve only if we plan the economy in a rational and scientific manner. We are in the midst of preparing our fourth Five Year Plan. Agriculture is bound to get high priority. Industry is equally important and the combination of industry and agriculture alone will take the country out of the morass we are in and



present a cheering picture before our people." He had visualised that along with the Industrial Revolution, it was the Green Revolution combined with the White Revolution which could raise the economic standard of people.

Toning up administration

He also believed that the efficiency and integrity of the administration was important to get policies and programmes implemented in the right spirit. He felt that extensive reforms of the administration were essential if the task of economic development and social reconstruction was to be accomplished. The administrative system was to be made an effective instrument of economic change, and it was Shastriji who constituted the Administrative Reform Commission. I feel this step proved to be a milestone in ensuring economic development.

He felt agriculture and unemployment should be looked into with seriousness. While addressing the Associated Chambers of

Commerce and Industry of India in Calcutta in December 1964, he touched upon the subject of increasing foreign exchange reserves, expansion in industrial production and stagnation in agricultural output. He was concerned about agricultural growth and said, "First and foremost, the efforts to increase agricultural production on a steady, long-term basis deserve the highest priority. I have not the slightest doubt that our agricultural production can be substantially stepped up." It is this confidence that has helped the country claim a "surplus in food grains".

Not only me but everyone in the country believes that Lal Bahadur Shastri was in true words the "Janak" of the Green Revolution.

I came across this quotation on Babuji's table, where he used to work: "O Nanak, remain a small one as small as grass. Other plants will whither away, but the grass will remain ever green."

I must have read these lines many times but was unable to understand what it meant. One day, I managed to stop him and ask him to explain it to me. "Sunil, a beautiful flower attracts everyone for some time and the moment it loses its fragrance, people discard it without any feelings. But green grass remains green throughout the year. I have always tried to remain like grass and never desired to be a beautiful flower. My aim in

life is to provide happiness and enable a harmonious atmosphere for everyone forever."

On hearing this, I requested him to tell me something inspiring.

His prompt reply: "Your motto should be, 'be an edifice and not the structure; the structure can fall, but the edifice remains'."

I never knew that Babuji would leave us so early. Though he is not there physically, these lines have been a great source of inspiration.

Babuji also felt that if administrative reforms were vital, then educational reforms were also the need of the hour. Shastriji's expectations from India's youth was the same which he expected from me; that the youth should act as a strong foundation on which a prosperous and strong India could stand. He said, "The completion of education marks a turning point in the life of every individual. Naturally every individual is anxious to get suitable employment. Opportunity for employment is being created increasingly as our development plans are implemented."

I would like to conclude by saying that the slogan he coined, "Jai Jawan Jai Kisan", is even more relevant today; economic development and employment generation should be the guiding force in our planning for the future.

Sunil Shastri is a former Minister from Uttar Pradesh and a former Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

After Elphinstone

The stampede at Mumbai's Elphinstone Road railway station, which killed 23 people and injured many more, raises questions.

These questions are not only about the infrastructure but also about discipline, pride and care in using facilities such as foot overbridges. Raising questions about the need for bullet trains when local train services cannot be handled properly is inappropriate. Local/metro services and the bullet train are different entities which is evident in the infrastructure, technology and security used. Instead, the authorities should improve the infrastructure of local services in order to make them more commuter-friendly.

VRINDA RAJVANSHI,
New Delhi

■ True to the adage any stick is good enough to beat someone with, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray has opted to seize the

opportunity afforded by the unfortunate stampede to launch a vigorous protest against the bullet train project, besides holding migrants partly responsible for the tragedy ("Will not allow bullet train: MNS chief", October 1). It was peak hour, there was rain and there was also a huge crowd. The Shiv Sena's mouthpiece, Saamana's view that the existing infrastructure should be upgraded before launching the bullet train is well-reasoned.

K.D. VISWANATHAN,
Coimbatore

A Governor for T.N.

The appointment of a full-time Governor, though over due, is to be welcomed ("Banwarilal Purohit is new Governor of Tamil Nadu", October 1). The political scenario is still unsettled and there are ample reasons to question the bonafides of the present AIADMK government which clearly lacks the requisite majority to govern.

It is unfortunate that the legitimacy of the government is decided based on the whims and caprice of a Governor under the guise of exercising discretionary powers. The political turmoil would not have come to such a situation had the Governor directed the government to seek a confidence vote earlier. That would have settled matters and helped the State concentrate on issues concerning the common man.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Speaking his mind

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley describing Yashwant Sinha as an 80-year-old job applicant, after Mr. Sinha's criticism of the government's economic policy, is unbecomingly politically, socially or individually. Voters rejected Mr. Jaitley's "application" for the "job of an MP". He was defeated even in the midst of a spectacular win by the BJP and most of its

candidates in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The way the episode has been handled is another example of intolerance to any form of dissent.

P.R.V. RAJA,
Pandalam, Kerala

■ Mr. Sinha must be complimented for expressing his bold opinions about his own government. In a democracy, everyone has the right to analyse and criticise the policies of the government. It is a fact that growth has faltered and unorganised labour, agriculturists, small industries and small traders are struggling. Mr. Sinha's words should therefore be construed as healthy criticism rather than a voice of dissent. Where are "Acche Din"?

ARHINAV RAGHAV,
Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh

Bicycle lessons

The article, "The vanishing art of riding a bicycle" (Open Page, October 1), reminded me of a

commercial by the Petroleum Conservation Research Association, where a father and son are in their car at a traffic signal and with the ignition on. The son tells his father that when he grows up, he will own a cycle repair shop as looking at the way people are wasting fuel, there won't be any left for the next generation. He feels people would end up using bicycles again. Riding a bicycle teaches one that in life you need to have balance.

T.S. KARTHIK,
Chennai

Culture's ambassador

The passing away of actor Tom Alter is a great loss not just to the world of theatre and cinema but also to the Urdu world too ("Life" page – "Blue-eyed desi" Tom Alter

is dead", October 1). He played a stellar role in bringing the language to the people and keeping it alive through poetry and theatre. His casting as Maulana Azad was especially brilliant and always drew packed houses. One remembers with fondness and admiration his impromptu admonition of the audience when someone's mobile phone rang in the middle of his dialogue.

It is indeed sad that his talent was wasted by the mainstream Hindi film industry. Alter was a shining example of how India transcends ascribed identities and belongs to all, irrespective of race or creed.

FIROZ AHMAD,
New Delhi

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In "Furious four" – the set of photographs that accompanied the story titled "Search for a highly potent anti-scorpion venom" (Sept. 29, 2017) – the snake in the first photograph was erroneously labelled as the "Spectacled cobra (*Naja naja*)."

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