

# Green is the road ahead

*Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy*

*Nov 18*

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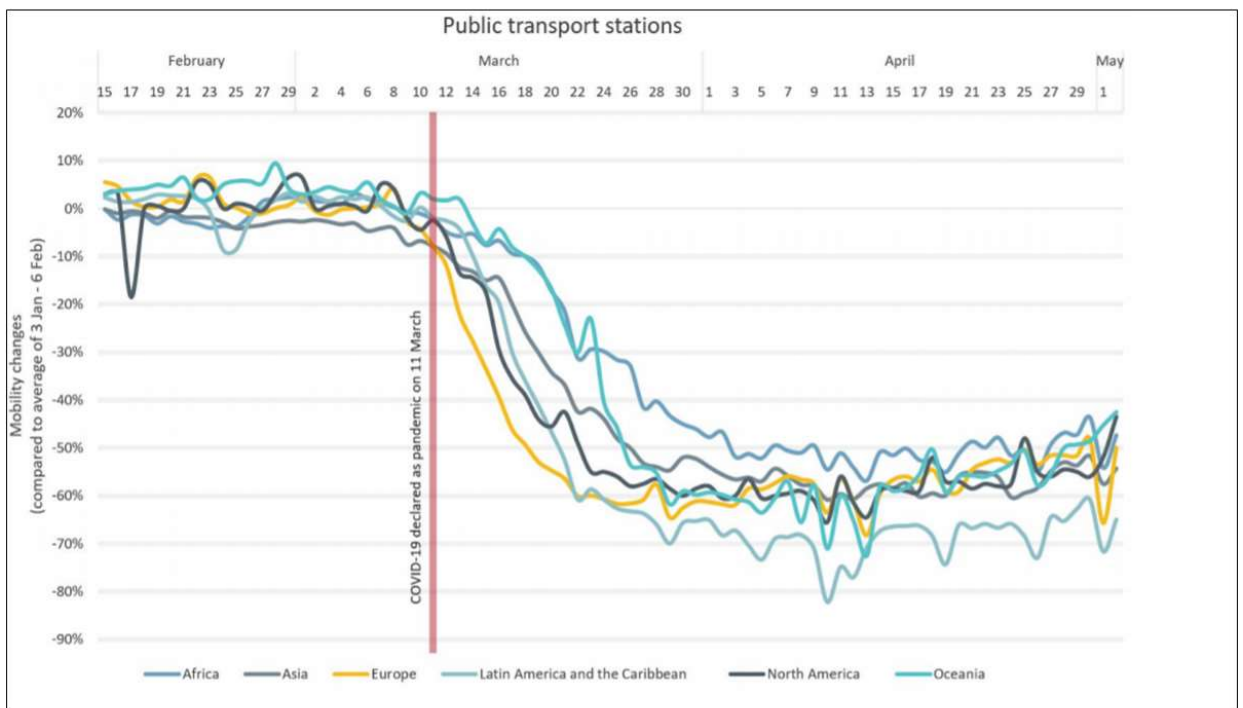
With cities gradually exiting from COVID-19 restrictions and economic activities resuming, travel in cities has also resumed. However, in view of the contagion risks that public transport (PT) might pose, our travel patterns are undergoing a sea change. The new 'normal' in terms of travel is being redefined by factors, such as vehicle ownership, distance to the destination, accessibility to PT, work-from-home policies of organisations, online classes for students, temporary relocation to native places, and government travel guidelines. The present scenario provides an opportunity to leverage these behavioural changes to achieve sustainable transport.



## Early impact on public transport

Globally, road traffic dropped by almost 50% by end of March 2020 compared to the average traffic in 2019 (IEA, 2020). Expectedly, the PT sector has witnessed a major decline in ridership, as it is a challenge to maintain adequate physical distance in buses, metros, and trains. The graph below highlights the early impact of the pandemic on PT across cities and countries.

In India, during the strict lockdown (March — May), the PT ridership dropped by around 90%, with 81% bus operators forced to shut down business completely. This caused not only significant financial losses to the operators but also impacted the livelihood of dependent employees, reliability of services, and future scope of investment in new PT technologies.



Public transport ridership status during the pandemic (Source)

## Rise in ridership

The current PT ridership statistics of major Indian cities reveal a steady rise in ridership. For example, in Bengaluru, according to BMTC, the daily ridership, which had dipped to around 10,000 during the lockdown period, jumped to almost 10 lakh passengers in June and July — a 100-fold increase. In Mumbai too, PT ridership is increasing gradually — the daily ridership in BEST buses

towards the end of August increased by around 41,000 compared to the lockdown period, to touch 16 lakh passengers.

Nevertheless, commuters will continue to be wary because of the high transmission rate of the virus. Not all PT modes might see their ridership reverting to pre-COVID levels, as people get accustomed to new alternatives — such as personal vehicles (car, two-wheeler, and bicycle), walking — to PT.

### **Moving forward**

Given the current changes in mobility patterns and challenges for PT and service providers, we need to think of long-term sustainable transport solutions such as restructuring of PT planning and operations to include contactless payment options, real-time tracking of vehicles, provision of on-demand services, flexible route planning subject to changes in demand, hassle-free transfer points, etc.

As cities are opening up metro and bus services, it is also essential to ensure first- and last-mile connectivity for commuters. An efficient multimodal integration system should be in place to ensure seamless and safe travel for commuters through public transport. All metro stations, major bus stops, and other transport hubs should have parking facilities, proper walkways, feeder service facilities, timetable of integrated services, pre-booking counters, integrated real-time tracking system, and basic shopping amenities.

One of the positive environmental impacts of this pandemic has been a significant mode shift towards non-motorised transport (NMT) such as cycling and walking in London, Milan, Brussels, Paris, Auckland, and many cities across the world. Providing adequate infrastructure facilities to the users is now the government's responsibility. Priority lanes, pothole-free footpaths, signal priority, parking lots at major bus stops/hubs/metro stations, etc., are all fundamental necessities for NMT users. Many countries, including India, have already started planning along these lines to encourage NMT users.

With the work-from-home culture being widely adopted during the lockdown, the overall travel demand by commuters has decreased significantly. To build on this encouraging trend, 'work-near-home' as a new initiative should be explored where unoccupied buildings, hotel rooms, and idle properties in residential areas can be used as co-working spaces. Such an initiative would reduce long-distance travel, encouraging employees to take up NMT for their work trips.

That said, with different transport agencies imposing different travel regulations, inter-modal commute could turn out to be a nightmare. Therefore, a common nodal agency, which would standardise rules for hassle-free commute, would be beneficial. The pandemic has, indeed, offered an unprecedented opportunity to shift to a more sustainable way of living. Let us go green.

About the author:

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