

Delhi Metro Reopens: How To Make Public Transport Safe Post-COVID?

Delhi and some other cities like Bengaluru have resumed metro rail services. But are all precautions in place?

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COVID-19 has definitely put the brakes on public transport. With physical distancing being the norm, many people who can afford to, are likely to avoid it, at least for a few more months.

But public means of transport such as the bus and metro will continue to be an efficient and affordable mode of transport for most commuters. Therefore, there is an urgent need to revamp and restructure the services with safety and sanity checks.

Alongside technology, and rules and regulations (distancing, sanitisation, etc.), one critical aspect in the post-COVID world would be **behavioural change**. Each person, including commuters and operators, has a singular role to play in ensuring social safety.

Metro Rail Restarts: How To Balance Travel & Public Health Safety?

As Delhi restarted its metro rail services with COVID-related guidelines and practices in place on Monday, 7 September, other cities like Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Chennai followed suit – even as COVID ‘hotspots’ like Mumbai decided to put off reopening its metro services – until conditions are more conducive.

With the COVID-19 pandemic raging on, managing huge metro stations and crowds is bound to be challenging. Bearing this in mind, the Delhi metro has staggered the reopening of its services. As of 7 September, only the Yellow Line (Samaypur Badli to HUDA City Centre) of the Delhi Metro will operate in a staggered fashion. According to DMRC officials, the rest of the Delhi metro lines would also be made operational over the next five days.

Anuj Dayal, Executive Director, Corporate Communications, DMRC, told *India Today*: “By 12 September, other lines will also resume services with safety measures in place to check the spread of COVID-19 in the metro premises.”

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) has already issued safety instructions which include:

- contactless and cashless transactions (no token, only smart card)
- no entry without mask
- thermal screening
- metal detectors for distant screening
- increasing halt time by 30 seconds to avoid chaos
- markings at the platform to ensure physical distancing
- in-vehicle temperature – 26 degrees
- alternate seat occupancy
- disinfecting the coaches after each trip

While the use of the Aarogya Setu app has not yet been mandated, it is being encouraged by the DMRC.

In addition to the above, restricting passengers at the entrance (number of passengers/hour) can avoid crowding at the station.

To discourage large numbers of passengers, DMRC has kept the parking lot closed. But private vehicles are safer compared to public transport or intermediate public transport modes for last-mile in the current situation.

Though frequent sanitisation of lifts is enforced, appointing lift men (one inside the lift and another outside on every floor), who would be the only people allowed to touch the lift buttons, and installing ‘touch-less’ elevator travel apps such as the one being developed by [Otis](#) could be a good practice.

High-risk passengers such as those above 60 years of age and with co-morbidities, as defined by the World Health Organization, should be restricted from using public transport, especially the metro (due to the enclosed environment).

A preliminary questionnaire check / surveys for a couple of weeks initially could help spread awareness.

The Real Challenge & ‘Solution’? Behavioural Change

Some of the safety measures for buses include intelligent transport system (ITS) to enable contactless payments (smart cards), vehicle-tracking system and passenger-information system (with details such as the actual time of arrival, bus route, destinations, etc), pre-booking of trips and seats, and live vehicle tracking via apps (similar to inter-city travel).

The live-tracking of buses will help passengers reach the bus-stop just minutes before the bus, thus, avoiding crowding at the stop. With a little planning, the ‘one-bus-at-a-time’ norm can be complied with to avoid crowding.

Further, queue discipline, entry from the front door and exit from the rear will help streamline the operations.

The challenge—as well as the solution—is public behaviour and understanding. Behavioural change however, might take some time to kick in.

As mandated by the government, the bus has to be disinfected before and after each trip. Further, an all-purpose disinfection spray, which can safely sanitise passengers, can be used (with the government permission and guidelines), before commuters enter the bus. The rule of front-door-entry will ensure this sanitisation. Individual sanitisation of hands after people sit down and get down from the bus is something public should proactively practise.

On-board rules should disallow standing passengers and those without masks. Foldable partitions could be installed between connecting seats to reduce contact. Apart from ‘book-your-seat’, filling the seats from the last seat could avoid chaos. Prominent display of rules and safety measures on buses and bus-stops will build greater awareness. The drivers and the conductors have to be trained for strict rule adherence. Most importantly, we the people have to be careful and responsible for our own safety.

Financial Challenges Of Staggered Public Transport Reopening

Enforcing these measures is bound to be a costly affair. A longer waiting time for public transport will increase the trip-time and reduce the number of trips per day. Optimising the frequency of services may help, at least initially. To compensate for revenue loss, public transport officials should look at advertisements.

Given the market situation, sanitisers and sanitisation service providers could be potential clients.

To begin with, high-demand routes should be prioritised.

Mass awareness about the safety measures initiated by state-transport bodies will give people confidence to use public transport again.

All of this might appear tedious, time-consuming and costly, but it’s the only way to keep us safe. Undoubtedly, we will have to do our bit—to bring our cities back to life in a more sustainable manner.

*(The author works in the area of Environment and the Ecosystem at CSTEP, a research-based think tank. This is an opinion piece, and the views expressed are the author’s own. **The Quint** neither endorses nor is responsible for them.)*