

Public Transport - Tamil Nadu Case

What is the issue?

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- After nearly seven years, bus fares were recently hiked steeply in Tamil Nadu.

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- At this juncture, an analysis if our public transport policies are consistent with good economics and the concept of green mobility is necessary.

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How significant is Public Bus Network in Tamil Nadu?

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- As one of the most urbanised States, Tamil Nadu provides reliable access to its remotest towns by government-run buses.

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- Significantly, out of the 1.5 lakh state owned buses that ply for public transport all over India, Tamil Nadu alone operates a network of around 22,500 buses.

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- There are concerns about a lack lustre safety record.

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- However, the sheer number of busses talks for its significance, especially in the State's economy.

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- It is also a major employer with more than 1.5 lakh employees.

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What are the concerns?

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- Lack of expansion, modernisation and acquisition of new technologies to

adapt to a changing market has plagued the system.

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- More strikingly, Tamil Nadu government has no organised feeder service for many local train stations, which affects both bus and train revenues.

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- Additionally, erratic managerial practices and the massive political interference in the affairs of the bus corporations are major concerns.

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- Notably, rest of India's bus system also has been falling apart for the same reasons although their extent of coverage has been far lower in comparison.

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What are the challenges?

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- **Commuter Preference** - Personal cars and two-wheelers have kept pace with global trends, adding features of comfort and convenience.

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- This has ushered in a commuter migration away from buses towards more comfortable personal modes.

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- This notably has come with pressures to address a plethora of traffic related woes, necessitating investment in better roads and flyovers.

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- The result of the above is huge losses in State transport corporations.

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- The government primarily finance it through fare hikes.

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- **Financial** - The difficulty in creating modern bus networks is often attributed to weak revenue streams from low fares.

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- If finances are the only trouble, the "carbon emissions mitigation route"

could have been used to raise funds, especially since the Paris climate accord.

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- Also, to enhance finances, National Urban Transport Policy was formulated in 2006, which talks about differential pricing for buses.

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- This should have ideally led to a rapid expansion of differentiated bus systems, by opening up services like WiFi and air-conditioning in select buses.

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- But rather than mere finances, traditional state transport systems seem to find differentiated fleets and other innovative business practices too challenging.

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What is desired?

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- **Technology** - App-based aggregator taxi companies have usurped considerable ground in the transport sector in India.

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- Bus networks should start adopting options like GPS tagging for enabling commuter tracking and other smart ticketing facilities.

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- GPS tagging will enable commuters to track buses, thereby reducing waiting time, which will consequently enhance bus reliability and patronage.

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- A validated real-time passenger information (RTPI) technology for public transport has already been developed.

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- Incorporating such initiatives, for ushering in operable models for schemes like Smart Card Ticketing, are needed.

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- **Augmentation** - A severe supply shortage in buses calls for further augmentation.

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- It is forecasted that an additional 4.6 lakh buses were needed to achieve 50% of all urban transport trips by public modes by 2031.

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- This is crucial to meet the national commitments on climate change and controlling air pollution.

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- **Policy Changes** - A law mandating the expansion of bus fleets in major cities by using tax funds and a congestion charge on cars could help.

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- Also, schemes for regulated small-bus/share-auto type enterprises to develop should be formulated to enhance shared commuting.

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- In all, public transport should be viewed beyond profitability, as a public good with an optimum operating tariff.

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Source: The Hindu

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