

Urban Planning & Socio-economic Aspects Of The Proposed Coastal Road

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In a city without any formal mechanisms for public participation, planning objectives are rarely determined collectively, social consequences of plans and projects – especially to vulnerable groups – are rarely evaluated, and public resources are frequently mis-allocated. Large infrastructure projects are often proposed without a comprehensive understanding of the needs and priorities of the city's inhabitants, for objectives that are vague and have more to do with power and prestige as opposed to social needs and priorities. The Coastal Road project (CRP) is classic example of such a process, a project that is likely to be *counterproductive* from the perspective of transport planning, *wasteful* from the perspective of financial resources, and *disruptive* from the perspective of the environment and livelihoods.

There are two versions of the CRP that are available in the public domain, the 2011 JTC version, and the 2015 DPR version. The basic assumptions and objectives for both versions are identical. In what follows, the CRP will be evaluated along the following lines:

- (A) The transport aims and traffic assumptions of the project
- (B) Its claims of being a public good with “societal benefits”
- (C) Opportunity costs of the project
- (D) Inequities inherent in the CRP
- (E) Externalities, or the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the project

A) Aims and Assumptions

1) The CRP is justified as an attempt to de-congest the city's traffic and improve mobility along the Western corridor. The JTC version as well as the DPR version claims that the Coastal Road will “take away” traffic from the internal roads, and therefore reduce congestion. The assumption is that car ownership is a variable independent of road space availability – the DPR there-

fore estimates an average 2% increase in private automobiles over the next 20 years *irrespective* of policy interventions.

But this cannot be serious. Every transport planner understands very well that increasing road space generates traffic, and that the best way to tackle congestion is to make private transport expensive and inconvenient. The fact is that the Coastal Road project is based on a mindset that consciously aims at *promoting* automobile use.

But Mumbai cannot sustain car ownership beyond current levels, and arresting or even reversing the rapid growth of automobiles has to be the thrust of policy and planning. Already, while the annual growth in car ownership is about 6.4% (up from 5.5 lakh private four wheelers in 2010 to 7.2 lakh in 2014) public vehicles have increased only at 0.9% annually. The increase in fuel consumption in Mumbai has increased, as a result, by 12.4% annually, a dangerous trend in a rapidly warming planet.

The absence of a comprehensive parking policy is further evidence of the approach that aims at promoting private transport at public expense. It is already scandalous that parking space in a city with some of the highest real estate prices is given away for almost nothing.

A high density city like Mumbai requires steep parking charges to restrict car sale and use, provided the concern is efficient mobility rather than subsidizing motorists. A square meter of residential space in Mumbai may easily cost up to 50 times the same area of off-street parking space, making it a gift to car owners. This incentive encourages car use, in turn increasing traffic congestion and economic and social costs. Yet one hardly finds planners complaining about market distortions due to parking policy.

While cities around the world impose heavy parking charges to manage vehicle demand and generate millions in revenue each year, in Mumbai, on-street parking is given away as charity.

Transport planning ought to be concerned with the movement of people, not vehicles. The CRP is designed exclusively for moving privately owned vehicles. The DPR makes this clear when it states that the project is “primarily for cars”

While the CRP in its most generous projections is estimated to move 300,000 persons per day, an improved bus system (with a BRTS on *existing* roads) can provide an additional 800,000 trips per day, while implementation of the MUTP III (two additional tracks on the suburban rail sys-

tem) can increase passenger trips by 660,000. Other measures like car pooling can both reduce congestion as well as increase passenger trips by 100,000 persons. Apart from being easier to implement, and less polluting, these alternatives together will cost less than 60% of the CRP. What these numbers - provided by a non-profit think tank - suggest is that the coastal road is a terrible choice for moving people comfortably and efficiently.

In other words, the Rs. 12,000 crore transport infrastructure cannot be justified on grounds of transport efficiency. The Coastal Road will almost certainly *worsen* traffic congestion and concomitant environmental pollution, and it is obvious that the project proponents understand this very well.

B) Public Good or Private Amenity?

Mega projects in the city almost always create net benefits for some people and costs for others – and therefore have a heavy burden of proof to bear in terms of their overall benefit to society as a whole.

The CRP has been argued as a public good – the Detailed Project Report (DPR) shows that though financially non-viable, the Coastal Road will have “societal benefits” as it will reduce vehicle operating costs, travel times, accidents and environmental pollution.

This argument is highly misleading for two reasons. First, it fails to account for the externalities of the project, and does not consider and evaluate the negative consequences of the project which are more significant than the gains.

The CRP will result in the disruption of neighbourhoods and loss of livelihoods of coastal communities, it will result in an increase in pollution due to growth in traffic, it will impose costs on the city in terms of increased parking requirements, it will have incalculable local and larger environmental impacts, and so forth.

Secondly, the project will expend public resources to serve roughly 1% of the city's privileged residents. The CRP is, for that reason, not a public good – such as mass transit or social housing – but exclusive facility built by public money. In other words, it is welfare for the wealthy.

Some have argued that the project will have other benefits like the creation of “green open spaces,” reduction of “health hazards” due to reduction in pollution. The problem, however, is

that there are already quite a few intensively used natural open spaces along the coast that will be built over by the project, to be replaced with promenades and parks along the highway.

Moreover, *access* to public spaces and *proximity* to residential areas are crucial to the functioning of waterfront recreational areas. An eight lane highway with uninhibited traffic is quite different from a marine drive or carter road where pedestrians can prevail over cars. The only way these new reclaimed promenades can be accessed will be through underpasses across 50-60 metres of road, making them highly un-attractive. Already, the poor use of the promenade in Bandra Reclamation shows the ineffectiveness of such projects. Access to the sea that is now available to thousands of visitors will also be cut off due to a sea wall, providing fine views to motorists but a massive barrier to residents.

Furthermore, the efforts to “beautify” and “landscape” the coast are an attempt transform many of the productive functions of the coast into leisure and recreational functions, to suit the lifestyle needs of middle and upper income groups, and render them unusable for the livelihood needs of coastal communities. As the city is re-organised for the tourism, leisure and entertainment sectors, productive uses and communities that depend on them are pushed out from the city core to be replaced by monumental waterfronts, recreation zones and tourist attractions.

Another argument is that the 12,000 crore highway can be used to run a BRTS. The BRTS on the coastal road is almost a joke – employment of a BRTS must aim at reducing car use and shifting people to buses for a quicker, cheaper and more sustainable mobility. A BRTS typically helps relieve congestion through modal shifts on *existing* arteries. Moreover, being on the edge of the city, the catchment area for the BRTS system on the CRP will be quite limited. The DPR version of the CRP also proposes multi-level car parking facilities with the naïve assumption that people will drive (with a good deal of suffering on the connectors) to the Road, park their cars and take a bus!

C) Opportunity Costs

It is important to ask what is the *opportunity cost* of this project? In other words, what has been foregone as a result of this choice to build a Rs. 12,000 crore road for motorists? The city is overwhelmingly in need of public spending for the improvement of living conditions (slum improvement), sanitation and drainage, basic services, public transport, healthcare and educa-

tion, among others. All of these are opportunities lost, and all of these are ignored because they are redistributive measures. What is the cost of ignoring these choices? None of the reports justifying the projects make any such assessment. Only two alternatives are presented – build the CRP or do nothing. There are many good alternatives to facilitate the mobility of millions of commuters along the Western corridor that are more *efficient*, more *economical* and more *sustainable*. The CRP is *not* one of them.

Floods in 2005 resulted in the death of 546 people, but despite being ever more vulnerable to flooding, the new drainage system lies incomplete, under construction for almost 20 years. The CRP will increase the risk of floods due to massive reclamation of mangroves and wetlands, and hard construction along the coast. How much will it cost to *not* build a robust storm water system?

According to the 2011 Census, 1.13 million households (42.6%) in Mumbai live in what a Government report termed “housing poverty,” living in “unacceptable physical and social conditions.” 72% of households in the city live in single room accommodations or without any exclusive room. Mumbai's primary health system is highly deficient with a requirement of at least 199 new health centres as per National Urban Health Mission (NUHM) norms. How much will it cost to *not* improve living conditions in the city and improve its health infrastructure?

D) Socio-spatial Inequities

The CPR cannot be financed by toll collections simply because it will have restricted use (being a car only project). Toll collections will barely pay for maintenance, lighting and security – notwithstanding the projections of the DPR. If tolls are increased to the Bandra Worli Sea-link levels (Rs. 10/km), usage will drop. This means that public money will finance the project.

The question is why should millions of city dwellers spend their taxes on giving motorists a good ride around the city, while *they* suffer a congested and creaky public transport system?

And even if the project is financed based on the 'users pay' principle, the consequence is an exclusive, two-tier system where the privileged enjoy improved, but costly infrastructure while the the poor have to make do with low quality facilities. This sort of development mechanism also serves to price the poor out of infrastructure, further shrinking the minuscule public realm in the city.

Someone has argued that reclamation of 500 Ha is justified since the value of reclaimed land is about the same as the cost of reclaiming. But even if this were true, the problem is that the cost of reclamation is socialized, whereas the benefit of reclamation is privatized. This is, in other words a strikingly socialist idea, except that the values are upside down.

E) Externalities

In addition to its narrowly targeted benefits and irrationally high public investment, the CRP will have incalculable social and environmental costs. These costs will be borne by others: the disruption of neighbourhoods and livelihoods of coastal communities as costs borne almost entirely by the poor, environmental impacts and pollution costs by current and future residents, the need for more parking facilities and infrastructure as costs to the city.

Livelihoods of more than 35,000 people depend on fishing, a large number of who inhabit the western coast of the city. The CRP will in some cases put an end to fishing activity. In addition to direct impacts, fishing as a whole will be affected due to reclamation and construction. Similarly, destruction of mangroves will make the city more vulnerable to floods, as has been pointed out by the DPR itself.

Rather Ingeniously, it has been suggested that the road will prevent erosion of the coast and protect the city from sea-level rise due to climate change. Obviously, both of these – coastal erosion and sea level rise – are a *consequence* of projects like the Coastal Road, so if they are concerns, the least we can do is not build them. Furthermore, both of these ought to be tackled independently and one wonders why a highway has to accompany a sea wall and erosion protection structures.

In Conclusion

One of the arguments used to justify the CRP is that it will help improve the “quality of life” in the city. Quality of life is obviously a nebulous phrase that can mean anything from 'a place that is cleansed of the poor and undesirables' to an 'approach that seeks to improve the standard of living of all, especially the less well off.' To use the definition of Enrique Pennalossa, the ex-mayor of Bagota, quality of life is in fact a function of the city's public sphere, not a function of private luxury. We must use public resources to build good quality, high capacity, affordable mass transit infrastructure, where all benefit from efficiency, comfort and convenience. The artificial link that is being drawn between car ownership and quality of life is mistaken as well

as dangerous, since apart from devouring land space for roads and parking, cars are also notorious for guzzling oil and warming the planet. As the American urbanist Jane Jacobs put it quite succinctly, if the city does not restrict the automobile, the automobile will eventually erode the city.

Finally, I urge the commission to not succumb to the fallacy of moderation – the 2011 version or any other attempt to “realign” the CR to arrive at a “middle ground” or to find a “moderate” version by assuming that both the “no coastal road” position and the “DPR position” are extremes, will in fact be a classic false compromise. The project, irrespective of its version or alignment, is *fundamentally* mistaken, and therefore we need alternatives to the Coastal Road, not alternatives of the Coastal Road.