Car-pooling is an idea in need of regulatory intervention

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An enabling policy framework could open up a new market, spawn apps for it, encourage mass adoption and decongest cities

India is moving forward and the people of the country are moving more than ever before. In January 2019 alone, a mind-boggling 1.6 million plus new vehicles were registered with various regional transport departments across India, averaging close to 51,000 per day. The national daily average in 2018 was close to 55,000. Congestion happens when everyone takes out their vehicles around the same time towards the same destination. Car-pooling can contribute to get multitudes of private vehicles off the road during peak hours by simply reducing duplication. It is neither a new idea, nor a path-breaking transport reform, but a concept that every citizen and government would enthusiastically support.

Car-pooling can be defined as "a group of people who travel together, especially to work or school, usually in a different or same member's private car each day". It is environmentally conscious, socially relevant and economically sustainable. Its benefits are evident, but how come we as urban dwellers have not embraced it in adequate numbers? We do not hear of mass adoptions in any city or success stories and continue to complain about congestion, traffic and pollution in the same breath. Simple as car-pooling may sound as an urban solution, it is yet to become a necessary feature of urban life.

In December 2016, a report of a committee on Taxi Policy Guidelines to Promote Urban Mobility, constituted by the ministry of road transport and highways, took recognition of the need for a national-level policy intervention to promote shared mobility via private vehicle ownership to reduce congestion and pollution in urban agglomerations. A NITI Aayog report, Transforming India's Mobility (September 2018), supported car-pooling as a concept to be encouraged. Privately-owned vehicles display inherently low asset utilization, often as low as 5%, including the lower utilization of seats in the two-five-seat category of cars. While India innovates on policies encouraging multimodal transport, better last mile access, enhanced affordability and the democratisation of how people move, something needs to be done about making the best use of private cars.

All developed jurisdictions in the world keep tabs on rising congestion, travel time and pollution, the wastage of fuel, and other factors. Peer-to-peer car-pooling is permitted in the US, Singapore, Brazil, Mexico, UK, South Africa, Australia, France and Germany, among other countries. In the US, the 2012 Highway Act sets standards for "carpools, and real-time ridesharing projects". In India, while the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, does not specifically restrict car-pooling, it remains in the grey zone when enabled by a third party and when money is involved. Cost-sharing may be perceived as legitimate, but the authorities on ground may possibly interpret the law otherwise.

In our view, car-pooling can succeed in India if it is backed by an enabling regulatory environment. The need of the hour is a national-level framework that is adopted by all states, or at least by the most congested cities, such as Gurugram, Bengaluru, Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, etc. A car-pooling policy framed with necessary checks and balances that address concerns about safety, security, background checks, tracking etc., and one that has provisions to prevent misuse and ensure that taxi operators do not suffer would be the right approach to look at this. Such a policy could offer a fabulous opportunity for technology-based start-ups to not only compete for users in a new market, but also trigger mass adoption of the concept.

While the "what" of the idea seems clear, when it comes to the "how" of it, regulatory challenges kick in. Regulators would examine it from a safety, security and transport rules standpoint. For a technology-aided model to work, it would not only have to offer a platform for those interested in a car-pool to connect with one another, but also get regulatory support. Regulatory interventions could possibly stipulate a set of conditions for the operation of a car pool. For example, the person offering car-pool service should not offer more than four rides per day; the ride being offered shall be incidental to the person's use of the car, and shall be on a fixed route with clarity on the pick-up time, date and location.

The charge levied should ideally not exceed the cost incurred for a given ride, and no passenger should be solicited on a road, etc. It is also recommended that if it is not a free service, then such services be offered only through accredited app-based technology providers operating through a digital platform registered with the ministry of road transport and highways, or a state transport department. Such a provider should offer services digitally that connect providers with seekers, and maintain the spirit of car- pooling activity by preventing any form of misuse and ensuring transparency and privacy. Such a service may collect a small transaction fee for enabling and maintaining such services, which would be governed by a national policy framework for car-pooling.

This an opportune time to design sustainable and inclusive transport systems in urban India. The use of technology and big data could assist greatly in mapping travel patterns and needs, engaging citizens, and improving the quality and efficiency of transport solutions. Car-pooling offers a simple solution to congestion for which a national policy would move us towards the ease of mobility as a core component of the Ease of Living that a New India aspires for.