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Q16

How is efficient and affordable urban mass transport key to the rapid economic development in India?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · GS I · 15 marks · Women, Population and Urbanisation

Role of women and women's organization, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues, urbanization, their problems and their remedies.

Core demand of the question

- Show how efficient urban mass transport supports rapid economic development in India
- Show how affordable urban mass transport supports that development

Revision summary

Indian growth clusters in cities that need daily movement of workers and goods.

Efficiency is frequency, integration, and time saved on metro, bus, and suburban rail.

Affordability is fares, passes, and safe last-mile so the poor and women can reach jobs.

NUTP 2006, metro projects, AMRUT, FAME, and **PM e-Bus Sewa** are the policy stack.

Housing near stations stops cheap tickets being eaten by rent.

One UMTA, one ticket, and a full bus fleet turn transport into development infrastructure.

Introduction

Indian cities make a large and growing share of GDP, but congestion, long commutes, and costly private vehicles waste time and lock the poor out of jobs. Efficient and affordable buses, metro, and suburban rail are therefore not a civic extra; they are how labour, firms, and markets actually meet.

Body

Why cities need mass transport for growth

- **Rapid economic development in India is urban:** factories, services, ports, and start-ups cluster in city-regions from Delhi-NCR and Mumbai to Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad.
- When workers cannot cross the city in a reliable hour, firms face a smaller labour pool and households face a smaller job set; GDP growth then leaks into traffic.
- The National Urban Transport Policy (2006) already said people, not vehicles, should move; JNNURM, AMRUT, Smart Cities, and metro funding are the later purse for that idea.
- Logistics for retail and small industry also need predictable streets; buses and rail free road space for freight that cannot shift to metro.

Efficiency: speed, reliability, and network

- Efficiency means high throughput, clock-face frequency, and integration of metro, bus, suburban rail, and walking, not a single shining corridor.

- Delhi Metro, Mumbai suburban railway, Kolkata's older metro, and new systems in Bengaluru and Hyderabad show that rail can move lakhs of workers to offices and industrial estates.
- Ahmedabad BRTS (Janmarg), city bus reform, and Kochi Water Metro show that efficiency is a network of modes, including water where the map allows.
- Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities, common mobility cards, and last-mile e-rickshaws cut the "three-change" penalty that kills ridership.
- **Time saved is money:** lower fuel import, fewer accident losses, and higher female labour participation when the trip is predictable.

Affordability: who can ride

- Affordable fares, monthly passes, and concessional student and worker tickets decide whether the maid, the apprentice, and the first-generation graduate can reach the growth job.
- If metro is priced only for the middle class, the poor stay on unsafe roofs of buses or walk, and the city splits into two labour markets.
- FAME and **PM e-Bus Sewa** aim to cut operating cost and pollution so that cheap frequent buses remain viable without only raising fares.
- Transit-oriented development and rental housing near stations, as many metro policies now sketch, keep housing cost from wiping out cheap tickets.
- Women's safety on buses and last-mile lights is part of affordability in time and dignity, not only in rupees; it raises the effective labour supply.

Links to rapid development

- Agglomeration economies work only if people can agglomerate daily; mass transport is the pipe of that agglomeration.
- Lower household spending on two-wheelers and fuel frees income for education and local demand, which is development from the demand side.
- Climate co-benefits (less PM2.5 and carbon) protect health productivity, which NITI and finance commissions increasingly treat as growth infrastructure.
- Ports and industrial corridors fail if the city behind them is jammed; suburban rail to JNPT-side nodes or Chennai's industrial south is a growth tool.

Gaps that still tax growth

- Many million-plus cities still run thin bus fleets; para-transit is unregulated; metro islands do not meet the bus.
- Land for depots and tracks is fought; the **15th Finance Commission** urban grants and state budgets must treat buses as seriously as metro viaducts.
- Without street redesign, "efficient" rail dumps passengers into unsafe footpaths, which is not efficiency.

Way forward for policy

- Build a bus-metro-suburban triangle first; use congestion charging and parking price only after a cheap public option exists.
- Create city UMTA with one timetable and one ticket; publish minutes of delay as a growth statistic.
- Keep fares progressive through passes and employer-shift subsidies, and place PMAY-U and rental housing on the same corridors.

Flow diagram

Efficient metro bus rail -> Larger labour pool
Affordable fares passes -> Inclusion of poor women
Larger labour pool -> Faster urban GDP
Inclusion of poor women -> Faster urban GDP
NUTP metro AMRUT e-bus -> Efficient metro bus rail
NUTP metro AMRUT e-bus -> Affordable fares passes

Conclusion

Efficient mass transport widens the daily labour market and cuts the congestion tax on firms. Affordable mass transport lets the poor and women enter that market. Together they turn India's cities from jammed costs into engines of rapid development, if buses, rail, and housing sit on one map.

Facts & figures

National Urban Transport Policy, 2006

Union policy that put moving people ahead of moving cars in city planning.

Delhi Metro / Mumbai suburban

High-volume rail systems that show how agglomeration labour actually commutes.

Janmarg BRTS, Ahmedabad

Bus rapid transit example of efficient surface mass transport.

PM e-Bus Sewa

Central support for electric city buses to keep public supply frequent and cleaner.

FAME scheme

Faster Adoption of Electric Vehicles support that includes public and shared e-mobility.