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From Tehelka Magazine, Vol 5, Issue 14, Dated April 12, 2008

OPINION *change*

A Driving Factor

Carpooling is a big step towards resolving India's transport crisis, writes **SAMIR NAZARETH**

IN INDIA, it is quite common to see the ubiquitous autorickshaw keep pace with more powerful vehicles, not because the autorickshaw driver is a speed demon but because the other vehicles do not have the opportunity to floor the accelerator in our bumperto- bumper traffic. As a result, vehicles are unable to run at optimum levels, cannot burn fuel efficiently and add massively to air pollution. The total global carbon emission from the transportation sector is an estimated 17 percent, a figure that will only grow with more vehicles on the road. Though "clean cars" and "hybrids" could alleviate the problem, unfortunately, they are unaffordable to most and are not marketed with the same vengeance as regular cars. Though a small minority of environmentally- conscious people the world over have taken to riding bicycles, they are being edged off the road as governments do nothing to ensure their rights.

Critical Mass is an interesting response to this problem. It is a movement of bicyclists who come together in cities around the world, including Mumbai, in what they called "organised coincidences", drawing attention to the lack of facilities for cyclists. Initially, *Critical Mass* was considered a "civic problem" but is now recognised as a part of city culture and a voice of reason in the midst of burgeoning transportation problems in cities. Although events like *Critical Mass* are important ways to make the majority listen to the minority, the need for effective ways to alleviate the transportation crisis (and its associated environmental and health concerns) has never been more urgent. Take Mumbai. The city has a lot going for it and everyone wants to turn it into a Singapore or a Shanghai. Yet BEST buses crawl at 12 kmph during peak hours.

Ashok Datar, a transport expert from the Mumbai Environment and Social Network (MESN), observes that though the city's population has grown 1.8 percent annually since 1981, the car and two-wheeler population has surged 5.5 percent and 18 percent respectively. So, what is the solution? Do we, like Singapore, levy a fee of 150 percent of the cost of a car on the owners? Or do we follow London's example, where cars entering the business district are charged a large "congestion fee"?

A 2005 paper presented by VP Jain points out that in Mumbai, buses account for 59 percent of all trips but they use only 5 percent of the road capacity. In a workshop on Transport Demand Management, organised by MESN in 2006, it was observed that Mumbai's car occupancy rate is only 1.8 persons per car, which
means the city's car population of five lakh has over a million empty seats every day. Raising occupancy to 2.5 would dramatically reduce the number of cars on the road, which in turn would lower carbon emissions.

It was this under-utilisation of cars that Joshua D'souza, a resident of Mumbai, noticed while in college in the 1990s. After several discussions with car owners at petrol pumps, he came up with the idea of an SMS based carpool system that would reduce traffic congestion and pollution. His novel business idea, *Koolpool*, saw fruition in 2005 when he found seed capital. The concept is similar to a pre-paid phone subscription: it involves an entry fee and a prepaid account. Pool charges get instantly transferred on receiving a confirmation that a pool is taking place.

Registered *Koolpool* users are divided into 'givers' (those who have seats to spare) and 'seekers' (those who need a ride). Each member buys points, which are then credited or debited according to whether a ride is given or taken, and can be redeemed for petrol at HPCL petrol pumps — 500 points is worth Rs 400 in petrol. Members find their pool partners online through the website *www.mykoolpool.com*. They fill in their commute information and a list of members travelling on the same route pops up. On the road, members can send a text message to Koolpool stating their status and route number and they get a return text with a list of other members on the same route. For safety reasons, member's mobile numbers are never directly used and each SMS is routed through the Koolpool system. Joshua calculates that if 20,000 people in 7 metros picked up one person each, 140,000 cars would be off the road. Assuming cars travel 30 km and have an emission rate of 2.5 kg per litre on an average day, this would result in a reduction of 200 million MT of CO_2 per year!

Joshua plans to implement *Koolpool* in the Pune Infosys campus and other campuses across India and take his idea to South Africa and Canada as well. Recently, India has seen a spate of internet- based carpool systems. Apart from *Koolpool*, there's *www.carpool.in, www.indimoto. com, www.carpoolworld.com, www.carsalesindia.com and www.indieeyewitness. com*. It is difficult to determine the success of all these ventures but it is a big step in the right direction. There is no silver bullet. It is only a confluence of government and citizen initiatives like these that will tide us over our current transportation crisis.

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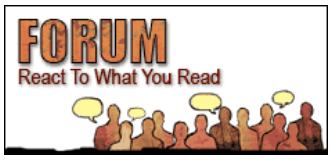

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