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## **Exploring poverty-transport linkages: Mobility practices of the urban poor in Ahmedabad (India)**

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The research aims to explore through a specific city case-study why the poor in developing countries make (or create) their travel and mobility choices and how these choices are influenced by urban transport planning and governance.

### **Background**



Photo: Carlos F. Pardo

Urban poverty is a gripping issue in the rapidly urbanizing developing world which generates considerable debate about the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs. Poverty consists of many interlocked aspects and one such aspect is transport, which determines the crucial links between the other important aspects, such as housing and labour markets. However, transport and poverty linkages in developing cities are largely neglected both in transport studies and in development studies. The social and political approaches of viewing transportation as economy-generating activity overrides other human development concerns (like poverty).

There has been a rapid growth in ownership and use of private motor vehicles in the developing cities along with increasing household incomes and escalating industrial-commercial activities in the city regions. Traditional 'compact' cities in developing world are beginning to become more dispersed with

growing private motor vehicle use, whereas the majority of investments in the transport infrastructure facilitate motor vehicle use. The poor are generally dependent on public and human-powered transport modes which are constantly being degraded with the proliferation of private vehicle usage. Inadequate transport provision coupled with lack of accessibility and mobility affect the urban poor disproportionately compared to others in the city leading to deprivation and increasing vulnerability.

### **Introduction**

One of the crucial aspects of urban poverty in India and elsewhere in the developing world is the role the transport system plays in preventing or enabling the poor to access resources which are crucial for their daily activities. Transport-based mobility can be seen as negotiating choices and weighing options between residential mobility (moving residences over time) and labour market mobility (changing job). Relatively little is known about how the urban poor negotiate the complexities of their daily lives in relation to their mobility (and travel) choices viz. existing transport systems, land use structure and the planning policies.

This research intends to contribute to the discourse of inclusive urban transport in developing countries where increasing transport-related investments and policy regimes are promising many changes in the existing urban transport systems. This research attempts to address the gap in the academic discourse by building on linkages between poverty and transport issues supported by primary evidences from the city of Ahmedabad in India. Ahmedabad is one of the largest and rapidly growing cities with continuing investments in urban infrastructure. Ahmedabad has also built a 'successful model of Indian BRT'. Ahmedabad city can be viewed

as splintered between on the one hand the aspirations of global outlook and increasing capital investments in the real estate and infrastructure sectors while on the other hand deprived areas are proliferating. Ahmedabad presents as an interesting case for this research because of the dynamics of its poverty, including threats of displacement, coupled with rapid growth and innovative urban projects. This city provides a strong, unique yet comparable context in which contextualise the mobility practices of the poor and to discuss possible poverty and transport linkages. The practices of the poor will be viewed and analysed in the context of the continuing infrastructure improvement efforts by the city government.

Most of the academic literature related to mobility of the poor details 'what' their practices are as these studies are concerned with 'how' to improve the access levels for the poor. Whilst these studies are concerned with the 'travel behaviour of the poor' they do not necessarily link instances and characteristics of living in poverty, such as being in an informal job or housing market, with mobility practices. It is important to ask 'why' the poor make certain choices and how these choices are influenced by their own efforts to deal with poverty. Answering 'why' requires a research scope able to consider the contextual depths of limited mobility and the household strategies to overcome transport-related mobility deficits.

## Research Questions

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1. What are the travel and mobility-related choices of the urban poor and why do they make these choices?
  - a) What factors influence the choices and how?
  - b) To what extent do these choices 'build the capabilities' of the poor?
  - c) How do the processes of urban development and transport planning in a city affect the travel and mobility choices of the poor?

The main research question is about the travel and mobility choices of the poor and it has potential to contribute to the larger thematic discussion on poverty-transport linkages. The main question is supported by three inter-

related sub-questions focusing on influences, end-results and planning context of the city.

## Methodology

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This study has adopted an inductive research strategy based around 'building theory' following the data analysis. In the first instance, this study intends to unpack the 'mobility of the poor' as contextualised phenomena rooted in the space-time of everyday life. Further this study will also engage with the choices and attitudes of the poor involving transport. The research takes a mixed methods approach involving individual interviewing, quantitative household surveys and key-informants interviews along with secondary documentary and data-sets analysis. The qualitative components highlight the 'mobility choices' or long term decisions related to residential location, employment locations, vehicle ownership and mode to work, including the strategies to cope with deprivation and the constraints of mobility. Quantitative surveys will be used to test the claims arising from the qualitative analysis. The short-term decisions referred to as 'travel choices' - frequency of travel for various purposes, mode, destination, route and time of day of trip - will be captured in detail in the quantitative household surveys.

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