

BUS RIDE TO EQUALITY, THE WHEELS OF CHANGE IN KARNATAKA

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“The labelling of the policy as a ‘freebie’ mischaracterises the measure and overlooks the socio-political framework where it operates” | Photo Credit: K. MURALI KUMAR

“Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast-feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea, discuss love, cricket and the latest blockbuster.” In the book, *Why Loiter?*, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade remind us that this imagined city is far remote to the known Indian reality. Most public spaces in India are traditionally occupied by men. Be it public streets, railway stations, markets, shops, or long queues, women are often either absent or in the minority. Why is this so? One part of the reason is the traditional gender roles which require women to engage in household work. The other part has to do with concerns of safety or simply the impression that so-called public spaces are unwelcome to women. The Shakti scheme launched by the Congress government in Karnataka seeks to change this.

Under this scheme, where women can travel for free on State buses, the aim is to make transport more accessible and safer for women. Removing even small cost barriers can have a big impact. This is especially the case for women who do not earn and who are financially dependent on their spouses for transport costs. But it is also beneficial to working women. It makes working outside the home more attractive. They save on the commute, making it more viable for women to seek out work. In this way the policy helps challenge gender stereotypes that women belong to the household.

There are also benefits to all women regardless of whether they use buses or not. Public spaces often become more women-friendly if more women are using it. The Shakti scheme brings women into public life and makes public space ‘less male’. There are many steps needed to shape cities along the vision Phadke, Khan, and Ranade outline. The Shakti scheme is one such step. As its name suggests, it empowers women to claim and reclaim public spaces. We have seen daily wage labourers, sanitation workers and house maids availing the scheme, in turn demonstrating how a well-thought-out policy can be truly empowering for womenfolk. Like several welfare schemes for women, this policy too has feminist politics to it.

Similar schemes in other States have proved to be successful. In 2019, the Government of Delhi

initiated a policy of enabling free travel for women passengers in government buses. In 2021, the Governments of Punjab and Tamil Nadu introduced a similar policy. The initial response from Karnataka indicates that it is working. In the initial three days, around 98,58,518 women availed the scheme.

Despite the popularity with women and its principled rationale, critics frequently raise two objections. The first is rooted on the ground that the policy is a 'freebie' or government handout which is not even targeted towards those who need it. The second objection is that the policy is discriminatory. However, neither stands up to scrutiny.

The labelling of the policy as a 'freebie' mischaracterises the measure and overlooks the socio-political framework where it operates. First, there are several State-funded goods that are free of cost. Public schools educate children free of cost. Public hospitals treat patients free of cost. Public parks are free of cost. Most of the roads which private vehicles drive on are free of cost. Of course, none of these things is literally for free. They are paid out of taxpayer money. But if taxpayers are paying for schools, hospitals, parks, and roads, then why not pay for bus travel as well? Why should a free use of a bus be a "freebie" but the free use of a road not? It turns out that there is no good answer.

The reason why governments pay for schools, hospitals or the like is that taxpayer funding achieves better and fairer outcomes than private payment. The Shakti scheme aims for a fairer outcome of more gender equal public spaces. Only free bus travel achieves this outcome.

If this is the key objective of the scheme, then it is irrelevant that the scheme also includes women who can afford travel. The benefit does not lie alone in the direct effect, but in what economists would call "positive externalities".

Other critics have focused on the idea that it is discriminatory to have tickets for men and not for women. Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, including sex. It is true that prices are set at different rates for men than for women. However, not every case of differential treatment is wrongful discrimination. We often treat men and women differently. Special scholarships exist for female students to encourage and support women who seek out education. There are women-specific employment and livelihood programmes initiated by the State. There are already seats reserved for women in various means of public transport.

The reason behind these measures is that, very often, we need to confront the realities of a deeply patriarchal society. The Shakti scheme is a direct response to this. It challenges the maleness of public spaces. The framers of India's Constitution were aware of these necessities. This is why they included Article 15(3) which allows the state to make special provisions for women and children. The overarching nature of 'special provision' allows the state to include measures that range from free bus travel to reservation for women in employment, education or politics. The Shakti scheme squarely falls within this category. Legal challenges to similar schemes in other regions such as Delhi have failed due to the same reason. As the Supreme Court held in the case of P.B Vijayakumar: "The insertion of clause (3) of Article 15 in relation to women is a recognition of the fact that for centuries, women of this country have been socially and economically handicapped. As a result, they are unable to participate in the socio-economic activities of the nation on a footing of equality."

None of this is to say that free bus rides for women are enough. Concerns about sexual harassment, women-friendly infrastructure, and the like remain. But the scheme is a step in the right direction in guaranteeing equal citizenship of women. Hopefully, one day, the scheme will no longer be necessary because women, just like men, can loiter in the street and equally share our public spaces.

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