

Who Decides Women's Mobility? Political Drivers of Free Bus Travel Schemes in India

Mahathi Gandhi, *Research Scholar, Public Policy, Department of Public Administration, Graduate School of Public Administration, Seoul National University, South Korea*

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, several Indian state governments have introduced fare-free public bus travel schemes for women. These schemes have attracted considerable scholarly and public debate, with critics dismissing them as electoral populism and proponents arguing for their transformative social consequences. This article examines the emergence and design of these policies, analyzing the interplay of electoral politics, welfare state logic, and gender-sensitive governance that drives their adoption. While political competition often acts as the immediate catalyst for these schemes, the central argument advanced here is that their significance lies in their capacity to transform women's everyday mobility, economic participation, and access to public life. Drawing on comparative state-level analysis and existing empirical literature on gender and mobility, transport equity, welfare politics, and electoral behavior in India, the article demonstrates that free bus travel schemes, however politically motivated, constitute meaningful interventions in the gendered geography of public space. Their long-term effectiveness depends on fiscal sustainability, infrastructural improvements, and a political commitment that extends beyond the electoral cycle.

Keywords: Women's Mobility; Public Transport Policy; Welfare Politics; Gender and Governance; Electoral Politics

Introduction

The issue of women's access to public space, and the burden that this access places on women, has become a key battleground in India's federal arena. During the period 2019–24, at least five major Indian states introduced, or significantly enhanced fare-free public transport policies dedicated to women, marking a new era in the dynamics of gender, welfare and electoral politics. The Mahalakshmi Scheme (Telangana), the Shakti Scheme (Karnataka), women's transport concession (Tamil Nadu), free bus travel policy (Delhi) and changing welfare commitments (Andhra Pradesh) evolving welfare commitments together represent a wave of policy innovation whose causes and consequences remain inadequately theorized.

These schemes diffused rapidly across states with varying economic capacities and political orientations, and this cannot be explained by any one variable. Each scheme was initiated in a specific electoral setting, often before or after a state election, which has resulted in many commentators classifying them with cash transfers and loan waivers as electoral freebies, short-term inducements to secure women's votes without fundamentally transforming the structural conditions of their lives (Wyatt, 2013; Vijayabaskar, M., & Wyatt, A, 2013). This

critique, although not entirely without merit, underestimates the social consequences that may be generated even by politically motivated mobility interventions.

The transport policy literature has long understood public transport as a domain in which gender differences in access, safety and affordability produce systematically unequal outcomes (Turner, 2000). Women in India have a higher dependency on public bus systems, less likely to own and operate personal motor vehicles and are more vulnerable to affordability constraints that limit frequency of travel (Tiwari, 2024). The gendered geography of Indian cities and towns is one where women's access to employment, education and public services is mediated by the cost, safety and reliability of bus travel in ways that do not apply with equal force to men.

Transport policy scholarship has increasingly engaged with the concept of mobility justice—the argument that the right to move through public space without structural impediment is a dimension of social citizenship and not merely a logistical convenience (Lucas, 2012; Sheller, 2018). From this perspective, fare-free travel for women is not simply a subsidy: it is a reconfiguration of the terms on which women may legitimately occupy and move through public space. The removal of a financial barrier does not automatically resolve questions of safety, harassment, or infrastructural adequacy, but it does shift a meaningful constraint, particularly for lower-income women whose mobility is most tightly rationed by cost.

This article does not treat political motivation and genuine policy significance as mutually exclusive. Governments frequently pursue welfare interventions that serve electoral purposes and generate real distributional consequences simultaneously (Mani, 2007). The analysis here takes seriously both the political economy of scheme adoption and the social consequences that mobility interventions may produce for women across economic, educational, and civic dimensions of life.

Mobility as a gendered public policy issue

The relationship between gender and mobility has received sustained attention in feminist geography and transport studies, yet it has rarely been positioned at the center of welfare state analysis in the Indian context. Mobility—the capacity to move through space with regularity, safety, and affordability—is not a neutral technical condition but a social achievement distributed unequally across gender, class, caste, and geography (Massey, 1996; Hanson, 2010). For women in South Asia, the question of how, when, where, and at what cost they may travel is shaped by a confluence of patriarchal household norms, infrastructural deficits, economic dependency, and the gendered construction of public space as a site of risk (Phadke S. K., 2011; Phadke S. , 2013).

Transport research has always demonstrated that women and men have very different patterns of mobility. Women are more likely to make shorter trips with multiple stops, combining employment trips with caregiving responsibilities, a phenomenon often referred to as 'trip-chaining'. They are therefore more dependent on flexible and affordable public transport systems than on single-destination commuting infrastructure (Law, 1999; Cresswell & Uteng, 2016). In the Indian urban setting, this implies that women depend disproportionately on bus

networks, which in most states are the main mode of motorised public transport available to low- and middle-income populations (Pani, 2024; Singh, 2005). Women are systematically under-represented among motorbike and private car users, partly due to patterns of asset ownership and partly due to social norms which limit or discourage the operation of personal motorised vehicles by women.

The connection between mobility and employment is particularly critical where female labour force participation rates are already hampered by structural barriers. Research in different developing country contexts indicates that transport access plays an important role in enabling women to take advantage of employment opportunities, especially in urban and peri-urban labour markets with a large spatial distance between residential neighbourhoods and employment zones (Lei, 2019; Balachandran, 2024). For women workers at the bottom end of the wage scale, the cost of daily commuting constitutes a large part of income, and where the cost is prohibitive it is an effective mechanism of exclusion from the formal labour market. However, interventions that reduce travel costs can expand the effective geographic radius in which women search for and hold jobs.

Educational access exhibits analogous dynamics. Evidence on enrolment and attendance in India shows that the rates of participation of girls at secondary and post-secondary levels are sensitive to distance and cost of travel to educational institutions, especially in rural and semi-urban contexts where schools and colleges are not uniformly distributed (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). This relationship is not just a matter of physical distance: bus fare cost, where applicable, is a financial barrier that households may ration by prioritising boys' educational mobility over girls. Free or subsidised transport has been shown in several studies to improve school attendance for girls, to decrease dropout rates at the transition to secondary school and to increase post-secondary enrolment, all with longer-term consequences for women's economic autonomy and social participation.

Access to public services such as healthcare, government offices, courts, markets, cultural institutions-are also organise around borders of mobility. Women's access to antenatal care, reproductive health services and emergency medical treatment is partly a function of whether they can afford and independently organise transport to reach facilities (Gabrysch & Campbell, 2009; WHO, 2019). In this sense, mobility is not simply an economic or educational issue, but one of health justice with direct consequences for maternal and child wellbeing outcomes. Similarly, access to government services, legal redress, and civic participation relies on the ability to be physically present at locations which may require bus travel.

The concept of mobility justice offers a useful analytic frame for understanding these interconnections (Sheller, 2018). Mobility justice considers the right to move in public space a facet of democratic citizenship, rather than a market good to be allocated according to ability to pay. From this perspective, transport inequity is not just inefficiency but injustice: when women's mobility is restricted by cost, patriarchal norms, or infrastructural inadequacy, they are denied a form of civic participation that is more readily available to men. The feminist transport literature has extended this argument to encompass the gendered experience of public transport itself, such as the frequent harassment of women on buses and

transit hubs, the transport infrastructure that does not take account of women's needs for safety, and the invisibility of care-work journeys in transport planning models (Dunckel-Graglia, 2013; Tiwari, 2024)

In this sense, mobility functions simultaneously as a social issue (structuring access to relationships, participation in community life and culture), a welfare issue (mediating access to employment, education and public services) and a citizenship issue (determining how far women can exercise their democratic rights and inhabit public space on an equal footing). It is this threefold significance that renders transport policy a site of considerable feminist political consequence and provides the normative basis for assessing free bus travel schemes as more than mere electoral gestures.

The rise of free bus travel schemes across Indian states

The spread of free or high subsidised bus travel schemes for women across Indian states is a unique development in subnational welfare policy. There have been isolated precedents, but since 2019, there has been a marked acceleration in the number, geographic spread and political salience of these initiatives. The schemes differ in design, fiscal structure and implementation quality, but the logic behind them is the same: the removal or reduction of the financial barrier to women's use of state-operated bus networks.

The Mahalakshmi Scheme of the Telangana government, implemented by the Indian National Congress following its electoral victory in 2023, provides free travel on all state operated Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) buses to women across the state. The scheme was first announced as a pre-poll promise in the 2023 state assembly elections campaign, with the Congress party making it a flagship of its welfare scheme, including farm loan waiver promises and cash transfer schemes targeted at women (The Hindu, 2023). The scheme, on its implementation, had high ridership with TSRTC saying that the daily female passenger counts have seen significant increases in the months after the launch (TOI, 2023). There was no mistaking the political origin of the scheme: it was one element of a 'six guarantees' bundle intended to set apart the Congress offer from that of the incumbent administration. But its implementation has been relatively consistent, and early ridership data suggest a real change in behaviour rather than symbolic adoption.

Similarly, the Shakti Scheme in Karnataka was launched by the Congress government of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in June 2023, following an electoral promise made during the May 2023 state assembly election campaign. The scheme offers free travel for women on all Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) and associated state bus services on an extensive network. Within weeks of its launch, the scheme was reported to have benefited several million women passengers daily, with KSRTC reporting a dramatic increase in female ridership (The Indian Express, 2023). The scheme also gave rise to an early public debate on fiscal sustainability, and the state government put the annual cost of the scheme at about Rs. 4689.09 crores to compensate KSRTC for loss of revenue (The Indian Express, 2023). Critics in the state's fiscal and policy community questioned the long-term burden on already-strained state transport corporation finances, while proponents argued that increased ridership

volumes would generate operational efficiencies and that the welfare benefits justified the expenditure (Deccan Herald, 2023). The Shakti Scheme caught national attention not just for its scale but also because the Congress government in Karnataka pitched it as a model of gender-sensitive governance and not just an electoral concession.

Tamil Nadu has a history of women's transport concessions than either Telangana or Karnataka. The state has been providing fare concessions to women on state bus services for several years now, but the coverage and implementation have varied across divisions of the transport corporation. The policy was significantly broadened under Chief Minister M. K. Stalin's DMK government, aligning with the party's long-standing focus on social welfare provision as a legitimating strategy. Tamil Nadu's approach is unique in that it has been developed more incrementally over time, rather than being presented as a single, dramatic pre-election announcement. This has perhaps led to a somewhat smoother fiscal integration, although the finances of the transport corporations are still tight. The Tamil Nadu initiative has also involved targeted investments in safety infrastructure at bus terminals—lighting, police presence, women-only waiting areas—that address some of the non-cost barriers to women's use of buses (MoRTH, 2022).

Delhi's free bus travel scheme for women, launched in 2019 under the Aam Aadmi Party government of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, was one of the first major urban free transit initiatives for women in India and received significant national and international media coverage (The New Indian Express, 2019; Jamba, 2025). All the buses of Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) and cluster scheme buses running in the capital are part of the scheme. The implementation coincided with a period of intense political competition in Delhi between the AAP, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress and was clearly calibrated to consolidate the AAP's position among female voters ahead of the 2020 Delhi Legislative Assembly elections. Post-implementation surveys and ridership data showed large increases in women's bus use, especially among younger women and women from lower income households (Jamba, 2025). Delhi's scheme is also significant because it lies in a dense urban context with a reasonably developed public transport network – including the Metro – which means that the bus scheme operates within a wider multi-modal accessibility environment, which is qualitatively different from the predominantly bus-dependent transport ecosystems of less-urbanised states.

Andhra Pradesh is a somewhat different case. Successive YSR Congress and Telugu Desam Party governments have swung between rival welfare commitments, with women's transport concessions as part of larger welfare packages but not yet reaching the comprehensive free-travel model seen in Telangana or Karnataka. However, political competition between the two major parties in Andhra Pradesh has provided strong incentives for welfare policy escalation, and women's mobility has been part of the electoral platforms of both major parties. The 2024 Andhra Pradesh elections have re-centred attention on women's transport as a welfare issue with both major parties promising subsidised or free bus travel as part of their campaign platforms (INM, 2023). The delay in Andhra Pradesh in assembling a comprehensive scheme is symptomatic of both fiscal constraints, with the state under considerable debt pressure, and

of the peculiar political dynamics of a state where welfare competition is intense, but implementation capacity is limited.

Comparing of these schemes across states reveals several common structural features with important variations. All five cases share the central design feature of eliminating or reducing the fare burden borne by women on state-operated bus services. All arose or intensified in competitive electoral contexts. Yet they do differ in their geographic scope (statewide vs. urban), their fiscal structure (direct subsidy to transport corporations vs. reimbursement of fare revenue), their associated safety measures and the degree to which they are integrated within broader gender policy frameworks. There are also differences in the political parties that have introduced the schemes. These include the Congress party in Telangana and Karnataka, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the AAP in Delhi and a more contested field in Andhra Pradesh. This cross-party diffusion is itself significant: it indicates that women's transport concessions have entered the mainstream of competitive welfare politics across partisan lines, rather than being the exclusive property of any single ideological tradition.

Political drivers behind women's free mobility

The political drivers behind these schemes of free bus travel for women in India operate at several levels: the electoral incentive to mobilise women as a discrete and increasingly autonomous voting constituency, the logic of welfare state competition that has intensified in India's federal political economy, and the larger politics of everyday governance in which visible interventions in quotidian life produce political legitimacy. Each of these mechanisms is relevant to understand why transport became a vehicle for women-targeted welfare policy in this particular period of time.

Women as an electoral constituency in India have undergone a major transformation over the last two decades. The Election Commission of India data shows a dramatic increase in female voter turnout with the gap between male and female turnout shrinking substantially in state assembly elections in most parts of the country and in several states, women voting at equal or higher rates than men (Deshpande A. , 2011; PIB, 2024). More significantly, studies of Indian voting behaviour have shown an increasing trend of women voting according to their own preferences rather than those of the male members of the household, a trend that is part of a wider process of female political assertion associated with self-help group mobilisation, increased female literacy, and exposure to media and political information (Ban & Rao, 2008; Iyer, 2012). The upshot is that women are a mobilisable constituency rather than a reliably captured demographic through the preferences of male household members.

The growing competitiveness of Indian state elections has increased the political salience of women as voters. In places where elections are won by margins of just a few percentage points, the ability to swing even a small share of women's votes can be the difference between victory and defeat. In response, political parties have developed increasingly sophisticated analyses of gender-disaggregated voting patterns and have sought to design welfare schemes that create durable identification between female voters and particular parties or governments (Kailash, 2017; Vaishnav, 2019). There are several characteristics of

free bus travel that make it especially attractive as an electoral welfare tool. It is visible and experienced (used by women on a daily basis), it creates a clear link between policy makers and beneficiaries (the party that introduces the scheme is linked to every fare-free journey) and it is difficult for a successor government to abolish without generating immediate and visible deprivation for a large female constituency.

The electoral incentives are played out in the structural context of the competitive dynamic of India's federal welfare state. This has led to a competition over welfare provisioning as a mechanism of electoral differentiation amongst India's states since the 1990s, what some scholars have termed a 'competitive populism' or welfare state escalation dynamic (Keefer, 2009; Wyatt, 2013). In this competitive welfare landscape, cash transfers, farm loan waivers, free electricity, subsidised food and now free public transport have been introduced successively and routinised. When one large state within a regional competitive space launches a popular welfare scheme, especially one with high female visibility, such as Shakti or Mahalakshmi, it puts pressure on neighbouring states and opposition parties to match or exceed the vote commitment, irrespective of their previous policy positions. This mimetic competitive dynamic is mirrored in the cross-party diffusion of women's transport concessions documented in earlier section.

Transport has been a very visible welfare benefit in this competition for several reasons. In contrast, cash transfers can be incorporated into household budgets in ways that favour male-controlled expenditure, whereas free bus travel is a benefit that is specifically available to women: it can only be used by women on buses, and its use can be seen by the traveller and household. This specificity limits the likelihood of benefit capture by male household members that affects some other forms of women-targeted welfare (Duflo, 2012). Moreover, bus travel is a daily experience for a very large number of women, and thus the benefit is experienced repeatedly, far more often than an annual cash transfer, leading to sustained political salience. The experiential regularity of fare-free travel establishes conditions for a durable political relationship between the providing government and its female beneficiaries.

An analytical lens for understanding scheme adoption is the politics of everyday life. Political legitimacy scholars have argued that in competitive democracies, governments have increasingly sought to establish their authority through interventions in the quotidian texture of citizens' lives, rather than through grand developmental or ideological projects (Robinson, 2008; Saha, 2009; Mitra, 2017). Transport is, by its very nature, an everyday experience. For women who travel to work, take children to school, go to hospitals or government offices or visit markets, the bus is a daily encounter with public infrastructure. A government that makes this encounter free is one that embeds its presence in the daily rhythm of women's lives in a way that is difficult to ignore or forget. This logic of everyday governance is part of the explanation for why transport has provided such fertile terrain for welfare politicisation, even relative to other interventions that may be larger but less temporally salient in economic terms.

Yet even with the recognition of the causal primacy of political competition, it would be reductive to see it as the entire explanation for free bus travel schemes. Electoral incentives help to explain why governments adopt these policies at times, but not the design, quality of

implementation or distributional consequences of the schemes. Whether a scheme is statewide or urban-only, whether it comprises express and inter-city services or just local buses, whether it comes with safety investments or is launched in isolation, whether it is fiscally structured in ways that incentivise transport corporations to maintain service quality—these are governance decisions that political incentives alone cannot explain. These reflect the administrative capacity of state governments, the influence of transport policy technocrats, the political salience of women's safety as a distinct policy issue, and the extent to which gender equity is institutionalised as a value within state planning processes (Rai, 2008). Political competition accounts for the adoption of policies, but not for the full significance of these schemes: to grasp that, one must look at their consequences.

Beyond freebies: The transformative potential of women's mobility

The opposition parties, fiscal conservatives and some academic commentators characterise free bus travel schemes as electoral 'freebies'. The implicit assumption that welfare benefits that do not alter the underlying structure of economic or social relations are equivalent to bribes, buying votes but failing to bring about any lasting change (Bhagwati & Panagariya, 2013). At least three reasons make this framing analytically inadequate. It first adopts a standard for women-oriented transport policy that is rarely applied to other forms of public expenditure – roads, agricultural subsidies, industrial incentives – that are also political calculations. Second, it does not reflect the empirical evidence of what happens when women's transport costs are cut. Third, and most fundamentally, it treats mobility as a consumption good, rather than a structural condition of social participation. The evidence reviewed here suggests that free bus travel, irrespective of the political motivation, may have effects that outlast and extend beyond any one electoral cycle.

The economic aspect of mobility is perhaps the most easily quantifiable. “Bus fare is a recurring expense competing with other consumption needs for women in low- and middle-income households. Where transport costs take up a large part of potential wage income, they act as a participation tax on entry into the labour market. Research on interventions to reduce transport costs in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa suggests that lowering the cost of mobility increases the distance women are willing to travel to find work and the distance they are willing to work from home (World Bank, 2010; Gertler, 2016). This is particularly the case in the Indian setting, where women's labour force participation rates are the lowest in the world and have been declining over much of the last two decades, despite economic growth (Papola & Sahu, 2012; Mehrotra & Parida, 2017). Although still in its early stages, the Shakti Scheme in Karnataka has shown promising results with increased female ridership on routes linking residential areas to commercial and industrial employment zones, consistent with increased access to labour markets (Hindu, 2024).

The educational effects may be more enduring than the employment effects. In contexts where the cost of daily bus travel to a college or secondary school represents a meaningful financial burden – especially for girls from lower-income households – fare-free travel removes a variable that may be used by household decision-makers to justify girls' withdrawal from education. Research on conditional cash transfer schemes in India has

shown that financial incentives have a small but statistically significant impact on girls' enrolment and attendance at secondary school (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017); reductions in transport costs operate through a similar process, but have the added benefit of being non-stigmatising and not requiring household compliance with behavioural conditions. The educational progression from free transport to long-run economic independence is slow-moving – effects may not be observable in outcome data for five to ten years after scheme implementation – but it is plausibly impactful for the cohort of young women who begin secondary and post-secondary education in states where free travel is now available.

The household bargaining dimension of mobility deserves specific attention. Women's freedom of movement in Indian households is often negotiated with male family members such as fathers, husbands or brothers who may impose restrictions based on safety concerns, social norms, financial calculations or patriarchal prerogative (Deshpande & Palshikar, 2008; Phadke S. K., 2011). Historically, the financial cost of travel has been a rationale for such restrictions: a household unable to afford bus fares for all members may prioritise the mobility of male members, reinforcing existing gender hierarchies in access to the outside world. Removing the financial barrier removes one lever of household gatekeeping. It doesn't erase patriarchal norms overnight, but it shifts the balance of arguments that women have when they want to travel on their own. A woman who can show that her travel does not cost anything is in a better position to deflect financial-based challenges to her mobility than one who must negotiate the distribution of limited travel funds.

The dimension of mobility as citizenship and public space is less easily reduced to measurable outcomes, but no less important. Feminist geographers have documented in detail how women's access to public space in Indian cities is shaped by risk, harassment and the normative assumption that an unaccompanied female presence in public requires justification (Phadke S. , 2013; Dunckel-Graglia, 2013). The bus is one of the main modes of travel for women in Indian cities and towns, and the means by which they travel between the domestic space and the sites of employment, education, healthcare and civic life. Women's increased use of buses means women's increased presence in public space, and women's presence normalises female occupation of public transit environments and perhaps transforms social expectations about women's right to independent mobility. This is a structural effect, operating through accumulated social practice rather than through direct policy mandate, but one which mobility scholars have identified as consequential in contexts where fare reductions have been sustained over time.

The democratic participation implications are also worth noting. Access to polling stations, government offices, political meetings and civil society organisations is in part a function of transport access, especially for women in peri-urban and rural contexts where such facilities may require bus journeys. Studies of women's political participation in India have identified access to transport as one of the structural factors that determine whether women can convert formal political rights – the vote, the right to stand for election, the right to access legal remedies – into actual political participation (Rai, 2008; Iyer, 2012). Free bus travel does not in itself change the political landscape, but it removes one of the practical obstacles which mediate between formal rights and their exercise.

It is important not to overstate the transformative potential of transport subsidy alone. Free bus travel cannot compensate for shortcomings in bus networks in underserved areas, the persistent occurrence of sexual harassment on public transportation, a lack of suitable terminal infrastructure, or household gender relations that restrict women's mobility through non-monetary channels (Lucas, 2012). In these parts of India, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, the frequency of buses and the network coverage are not enough to meet the needs of regular, flexible mobility required for jobs and education. A free ride on a bus that runs twice a day is worth much less than affordable access to a frequent, reliable service. The transformative potential of these schemes thus depends on concomitant investments in service quality, safety and infrastructure – investments that the political calculus of welfare competition does not automatically produce. The danger is that the free-fare announcement, in its political visibility, may substitute for the harder and more expensive work of building adequate public transit systems.

Conclusion

The introduction of free bus travel schemes for women in Indian states opens a variety of analytical frames. In electoral politics terms, these schemes are competitive populism in action. They are policy innovations introduced by parties at times of electoral vulnerability to consolidate women's votes. This reading is correct, up to a point. Each scheme considered here is clearly marked with the stamp of electoral calculation in its timing, design and political communication. To stop with this observation, however, is to confuse the genesis of a policy with its consequences.

What this article has argued is that free bus travel schemes, however politically motivated, constitute meaningful interventions in the gendered structure of mobility in India. They do this on multiple dimensions at once. By eliminating the financial hurdle to bus use they increase the realistic geographic extent within which women can search for work, go to school, receive public services, and engage in civic life. They render the presence of women on public buses more frequent and quotidian. They contribute to the slow normalisation of female mobility in public space. They make a modest adjustment to the domestic negotiation dynamics that constrain women's autonomous access to the world outside the home, by removing a financial rationale for household gatekeeping of women's movement. And by incorporating the experience of independent mobility into women's everyday lives, they may produce longer-term changes in women's expectations and demands for their right to occupy public space.

The political drivers outlined increasing female voter turnout, the competitive logic of India's federal welfare state, and the politics of everyday governance, explain why transport became the vehicle of this wave of welfare provision in this period. They do not work out the social significance of the results. The political and social consequences are not zero-sum. A scheme adopted for electoral reasons can at the same time create distributional effects that matter independently of the electoral calculations that led to it. Indeed, there are many examples of programs in the history of welfare state development elsewhere which were of pragmatic or self-interested political origin but had significant longer term social consequences.

Who decides women's mobility? The answer to the question posed in the article: —is, currently, a contested one. These schemes are created by political actors who have the authority to change them or terminate them. They are implemented by the transport operators with varying degrees of operational commitment. In many settings, the informal veto power of male household members over women's independent travel remains in force. Social norms that regulate women's proper presence in public space continue to be active constraints. And yet: millions of women who now daily travel on Karnataka's KSRTC buses, Telangana's TSRTC services, Delhi's DTC fleet and Tamil Nadu's extensive state network without paying a fare now have a pragmatic decision to make that was previously mediated by financial dependency. The change is partial, conditional, reversible—but it is real.

For these schemes to transform from electoral instruments to durable frameworks of gender justice, certain conditions need to be met. Fiscal sustainability requires sufficient budget allocation to pay transport corporations adequately or revenue models which allow the maintenance of quality of service without cross-subsidisation through operational cuts. Financial concessions must be matched by investment in safety; it makes little sense to dismantle financial barriers to bus use if the bus environment remains hostile to women through harassment, poor lighting or insufficient female staff. Services need to be reliable and have sufficient network coverage to enable the kind of routine multi-destination travel that women's work and care responsibilities entail. Political commitment must be more than an electoral cycle: schemes vulnerable to reversal by successor governments create mobility precarity, not mobility rights.

The free bus travel schemes reviewed in this article mark an important, if flawed, development in the governance of women's public life in India. They reflect a political consciousness that women's mobility is a governance issue, not merely a private or market issue. The work that remains is to build on that recognition to make transport systems truly gender-responsive in their design, safety, reliability and coverage. Whether women's mobility is determined, will depend on whether the political momentum which created these schemes can be translated into the institutional commitments that sustain them.

REFERENCES

1. Balachandran, A. &. (2024). Transportation, employment and gender norms: Evidence from Indian cities. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 16(6), 100060.
2. Ban, R. &., & Rao. (2008). Tokenism or agency? The impact of women's reservations on village democracies in South India. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 56(3), 501-530.
3. Bhagwati, J. &., & Panagariya. (2013). Why growth matters: How economic growth in India reduced poverty and the lessons for other developing countries. *PublicAffairs*.
4. Cresswell, T. &., & Uteng, &. (2016). Gendered mobilities: towards a holistic understanding. In *Gendered mobilities*, (pp. 1-12). Routledge.
5. Deccan Herald. (2023, June 12). Free bus travel for women laudable. Retrieved from Deccan Herald: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/editorial/free-bus-travel-for-women-laudable-1226977.html>
6. Deshpande, A. (2011). The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India.

- 7.Deshpande, R. &, &Palshikar. (2008). Occupational mobility: How much does caste matter. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 61-70.
- 8.Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), 1051-1079.
- 9.Dunckel-Graglia, A. (2013). Women-only transportation: How “pink” public transportation changes public perception of women’s mobility. *Journal of Public Transportation*, 16(2), 85-105.
- 10.Gabrysch, S. &, & Campbell, &. (2009). Still too far to walk: literature review of the determinants of delivery service use. *BMC pregnancy and childbirth*, 9(1), 34.
- 11.Gertler, P. J.-N. (2016). Road quality, local economic activity, and welfare: Evidence from Indonesia's highways.
- 12.Hanson, S. (2010). Gender and mobility: new approaches for informing sustainability. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17(1), 5-23.
- 13.Hindu, T. (2024, December 12). Shakti scheme boosts bus ridership by 23.17 lakh passengers daily in Karnataka. Retrieved from The Hindu: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/shakti-scheme-boosts-bus-ridership-by-2317-lakh-passengers-daily-in-karnataka/article68973833.ece>
- 14.INM. (2023, May 29). Free bus rides for women, unemployment stipend in TDP’s manifesto for 2024 AP polls. Retrieved from The News Minute: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/andhra-pradesh/free-bus-rides-women-unemployment-stipend-tdp-s-manifesto-2024-ap-polls-177788>
- 15.Iyer, L. M. (2012). The power of political voice: women's political representation and crime in India. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4(4), 165-193.
- 16.Jamba, H. K. (2025). Fare free bus travel scheme for women: Lessons from Delhi. *WORLD RESOURCES*.
- 17.Kailash, K. K. (2017). Why regional parties? Clientelism, elites, and the Indian party system. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 55(4), 565–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2017.1374619>.
- 18.Keefer, P. &. (2009). When do legislators pass on pork? The role of political parties in determining legislator effort. *American political Science review*, 103(1), 99-112.
- 19.Law, R. (1999). Beyond ‘women and transport’: towards new geographies of gender and daily mobility. *Progress in human geography*, 23(4), 567-588.
- 20.Lei, L. D. (2019). The impact of transportation infrastructure on women's employment in India. *Feminist economics*, 25(4), 94-125.
- 21.Lucas, K. (2012). Transport and social exclusion: Where are we now. *Transport policy*, 20, 105-113.
- 22.Mani, A. &. (2007). Democracy, visibility and public good provision. *Journal of Development economics*, 83(2), 506-529.
- 23.Massey, D. (1996). Politicising space and place. *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 112(2), 117-123.
- 24.Mehrotra, S. &, &Parida. (2017). Why is the labour force participation of women declining in India? *World Development*, 98, 360-380.
- 25.Mitra, S. K. (2017). *Politics in India: structure, process and policy*. Routledge.
- 26.MoRTH. (2022). Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. (2022). Annual report 2021–2022. Government of India.
- 27.Muralidharan, K. &, & Prakash. (2017). Cycling to school: Increasing secondary school enrollment for girls in India. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 9(3), 321-350.
- 28.Pani, A. M. (2024). Travel behaviour in the developing world: challenges and opportunities. In *Handbook of Travel Behaviour* (pp. 479-504).
- 29.Papola, T. S., & Sahu. (2012). *Growth and structure of employment in India*. Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, New Delhi.

30. Phadke, S. (2013). Unfriendly bodies, hostile cities: Reflections on loitering and gendered public space. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50-59.
31. Phadke, S. K. (2011). *Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets*. Penguin Books India.
32. PIB. (2024, FEB 09). Retrieved from <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2005189®=48&lang=2>
33. Rai, S. M. (2008). *The gender politics of development: essays in hope and despair*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
34. Robinson, A. (2008). The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7(1), 114-119.
35. Saha, S. C. (2009). The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World.
36. Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility justice: The politics of movement in an age of extremes*. Verso Books.
37. Singh, S. K. (2005). Review of urban transportation in India. *Journal of public transportation*, 8(1), 79-97.
38. The Hindu. (2023, Oct 20). The Hindu. Retrieved from Congress will implement six guarantees to provide support to every family of Telangana: Rahul Gandhi: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/congress-will-implement-six-guarantees-to-provide-support-to-every-family-of-telangana-after-coming-to-power-rahul-gandhi/article67443261.ece>
39. The Indian Express. (2023, June 15). Karnataka's new scheme for women: A bus ride to equality. Retrieved from The Indian Express: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/karnataka-new-scheme-for-women-a-bus-ride-to-equality-8665089/>
40. The Indian Express. (2023, June 19). Shakti scheme for free bus travel: A look at the finances of Karnataka transport bodies. Retrieved from The Indian Express: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/shakti-scheme-free-bus-travel-finances-karnataka-transport-8671672/>
41. The New Indian Express. (2019, Oct 29). Delhi government's free bus ride for women brings smiles. Retrieved from The New Indian Express: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/delhi/2019/Oct/29/delhi-governments-free-bus-ride-for-women-brings-smiles-2054333.html>
42. Tiwari, R. G. (2024). Gender issues in the public transport system of India: Critical review. *SDGs in the Asia and Pacific Region*, 797-814.
43. TOI. (2023, Dec 20). The Times of India. Retrieved from Three-crore women travelled free in Telangana after Launch of Mahalakshmi Scheme: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/three-crore-women-travelled-free-in-telangana-after-launch-of-mahalakshmi-scheme/articleshow/106161286.cms>
44. Turner, J. &. (2000). Gender and time poverty: the neglected social policy implications of gendered time, transport and travel. *Time & Society*, 9(1), 129-136.
45. Vaishnav, M. &. (2019). The dawn of India's fourth party system. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.
46. Vijayabaskar, M., & Wyatt, A. (2013). Economic change, politics and caste: The case of the Kongu Nadu MunnetraKazhagam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 103-111.
47. WHO, W. H. (2019). Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2017: estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division.
48. World Bank. (2010). *Making Transport Work for Women and Men: Tools for Task Teams*. © World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/12555> License: CC BY 3.0.
49. Wyatt, A. (2013). Combining clientelist and programmatic politics in Tamil Nadu, South India. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 51(1), 27-55.