

## STUDY ON CONNECTING URBAN TRANSPORTATION THROUGH SMALL BUSES IN TAMIL NADU

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### Abstract

*The recently introduced small buses in the Chennai metropolitan areas are expected not only to decongest the overcrowded routes but also to help improve the transport connectivity of interior parts. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, J Jayalalithaa for the first time has introduced 50 small buses in Chennai urban area on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, and managed by Chennai Metropolitan Transport Corporation (CMTC). Though mini bus scheme is a successful one in rural areas of other districts in Tamil Nadu, this is the first time that Chennai Municipal Corporation receives small (mini) bus service. Small buses are expected to serve interior parts and narrow lanes thereby connecting adjacent major bus stations, railway stations, commercial centres, educational institutions and main markets.*

**Keywords:** *Mini buses, Chennai Metropolitan Transport Corporation, semi-urban, public transport, rural segments, private players*

Small buses would reach areas that are one km away from railway station and half a km away from bus stands. These buses will cover the areas where the MTC buses could not access to offer service. Small buses are considered as economically affordable as they are categorized as ordinary and not as deluxe or express services. Mini bus scheme was launched in Tamil Nadu in the year 1996 with an intention of strengthening rural transportation connecting wide range of regions including tribal areas and remote habitations. After noticing the success of mini bus service in Tamil Nadu the neighboring Karnataka state went in for launching mini bus service (*gramina saarige*) mainly in rural areas (S Rajendran, Karnataka - Mini Buses for Villages, *EPW*, August 30, 2003, Pp3627-9). The mini buses are not only plying into remote and narrow roads but also helping to transport commuters and help to transport agriculture products. Since then efforts were made to introduce mini buses within the urban and semi-urban peripherals as feeder service. In fact share auto, another concept for interior service was introduced and doing well within the urban limits in many towns and the recently launched small buses will give competition to share autos in municipal corporation limits.

Tamil Nadu is one of the well-connected states by state owned public transport buses with well laid roads. Tier two towns also do have bus service even during odd hours. Nevertheless there are remote areas in rural segments and narrow unconnected habitations where small bus will be effective in serving the purpose. Initially in 1996 mini buses were allowed to operate mainly by the private players in rural areas. In 1999 the scheme was modified and allowed for a total distance of 20 kms with an overlapping distance of 4 kms on the scheduled routes. Currently as per the records of transport department 4175 mini buses are plying across 11 zones and in Chennai (city limits) in the state (Table 1).

A cursory look at the distribution of mini buses across various regions shows that regions which are predominantly rural base like Thirunelveli, Villupuram, Madurai, Thanjavur and Trichy do have high concentration of mini buses. This clearly demonstrates that mini buses are main source of transport in hinterland of the state. Urban agglomerations like Chennai north and south zones do have less concentration of mini buses. It is observed that while share autos are ideal transport mode in narrow roads in urban areas, mini buses are opt for rural areas. At the same time while share autos have been permitted to operate without any deviation on the scheduled routes (normally within short distance), mini buses have to deviate 4 kms of 20 scheduled kms.

**Table 1 Zone wise Distribution of minibuses in Tamil Nadu in 2013**

SI No	Transport Zones	No. of mini buses	Percentage
1	Chennai north	62	1.49
2	Chennai south	112	2.68
3	Villupuram	549	13.15
4	Salem	318	7.62
5	Trichy	453	10.85
6	Thanjavur	489	11.71
7	Coimbatore	366	8.77
8	Erode	358	8.58
9	Madurai	485	11.62
10	Virdhunagar	267	6.40
11	Thirunelveli	666	15.95
12	Chennai City	50 <sup>1</sup>	1.20
Total		4175	100

Source: Department of Road Transport, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, 2013.

Strikingly, while the state government-run buses<sup>2</sup> dominate in long route services (22053 buses) including rural, semi-urban and urban areas, private operators have only 8060 buses. On the other hand with regard to mini buses except the recently introduced 50 buses in Chennai, all 4125 mini buses are operated by private players in rural areas. Between 2006 and 2013 around 100 mini buses are registered every year in Tamil Nadu adding more fleet services to rural population. This shows that the state government is encouraging only private players in operating the mini buses and it is welcomed by masses. So far there are no private operators of mini buses in corporation (urban) limits in the state.

#### **Impact of Mini Buses**

Mini buses have been regarded as savior of rural masses in the state. The unskilled workers, who commute from rural areas to urban areas, find mini buses useful. School children especially during peak hours attending schools in urban areas appreciate and welcome with cheers that mini bus are much convenient. Farmers who bring their farm

<sup>1</sup> These 50 buses were introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 in Chennai municipal corporation

<sup>2</sup> In Tamil Nadu there are four types of public bus transport operations such as town service, mofussil service, express service and small bus service.

produce to urban markets also highly appreciative of mini buses. Similarly mini buses help the farmers to bring critical inputs like fertilizers, seeds and pesticides from the urban areas. Office goers from rural habitations use mini buses to catch the connecting buses/trains en-route. People who reside in remote areas use mini buses for visiting hospitals and to buy medicines. Thus mini buses have been revolutionizing and transforming in rural areas.

Small buses, which have been recently introduced in Chennai corporation limit will help commuters to catch the connecting buses to other destinations; expected to reach nearby railway stations and will help go to offices. More importantly small buses are preferred as they stop in desired spots conveniently, albeit they have scheduled bus stops. Small (mini) buses are manufactured to carry 27 passengers, with an emergency exit, which are alternative and convenient mode of transport to share autos, maxi cabs and passenger vans. Small bus routes have six stages between both ends and a minimum of Rs 5 and to a maximum of Rs 9 is collected as ticket charges and these buses are not allowed to serve in late nights. There are no freebies like free bus pass and concessional travel tickets in small buses unlike in other bus transport services. Since the foot boards in these buses are fabricated to low level unlike larger buses, aged, physically challenged and children can easily get onto the small buses.

Getting buses from major suburbs to other parts of the city is a nightmare especially for aged, women and school children particularly during peak hours of morning and evening. This is extremely difficult for people who reside in the newly added areas of the Chennai Municipal Corporation. Major and crowded suburbs in the city like Chrompet, Velacherry, Guindy, Vadapalani and Moolakadai are now covered by small bus service. At present 26 selected interior parts of Chennai routes are connected by small bus fleet service. Three to five small buses are operated in each route depending upon the traffic requirements at a frequency of 15 to 30 minutes. After the successful operation of mini bus scheme both in rural and urban areas, the government of Tamil Nadu is planning to bring out a New Mini Bus Policy by formulating a State-wide Comprehensive Area Scheme. The Anna University's urban planning department did a detailed study two years ago on the commuting patterns in various parts of the Chennai city for introducing small buses. Nevertheless, depending upon the local demands and commuting patterns some changes on the recommendation of the above study have been made to introduce the small buses.

Small bus routes like Maduravayol - Valasaravakkam will cover as many as eight highly populated and congested habitations including educational institutions. People in these areas would immensely benefit from small bus service connectivity. In the same line Guindy - Velacherry small bus route will give passenger access to metro railway station (in Velacherry) besides covering six interior and densely populated habitations. Similarly another important route Chrompet - Medavakkam will cover as many as 10 localities and

cater to many schools and colleges. Within a week's time of the introduction of small buses, on an average an impressive 580 passengers travelled in a bus on a single day.

The present government decided at policy level to introduce 100 small buses in the city way back in 2012. But due to administration delay only now it could introduce 50 percent of the originally scheduled buses of 200. To meet out the rapid increased in population and transport requirement, the second master plan of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority envisaged increasing the public transportation to over 70 percent in 2026.

Traveling during peak hours is a Himalayan task in the Chennai city. The offices goers, school children, college students and public have no option but to go for foot board travel in buses. Consequently many times over crowded passengers fell from the buses and succumb to injuries. This is a common issue during festive and rainy seasons. To meet out the growing demand railways on its part has introduced many services including suburb electric trains and metro rails. Metro rail project was conceived in 2007 with an estimated budget of Rs 14600 crores and approved in 2009 and trial run was made only on 6.11.2013. This project connects 45.1 kms and by 2016 it is expected that 7.74 lakh people will travel in metro rail service. It is alleged that this transport facility connects major destinations including main roads like Chennai central railway station to airport, which already have suburban electric train facility. By June-July 2014 the elevated corridor of the metro rail will be thrown open for the service, if everything is in perfect order and each train has a seating capacity of 176 and 1100 standees.

Safe travel and pedestrian crossing in Chennai city is a nightmare. Due to narrow roads, encroachments and haphazard driving accidents are increasing at faster rate. Between 1999 and 2012 according to state crime records bureau, roads accidents in Chennai have doubled from 5000 to more than 9600. Perhaps the small bus service will ease the situation to a large extent. Due to various limiting factors, against the 5000 required fleet services under MTC only 3600 buses operate on the arterial roads in the Chennai Corporation limits, which is less than 50 percent of requirement. This demand supply gap will widen in coming years as the city population grows faster. Due to encroachment of pavements and platforms, it is hardy possible to move ahead on the narrow but busy roads in the city (S Rajendran, Declining Foot Paths and Plight of Pedestrians, *Dinamani*, 26.12.2012, Chennai). Hence small bus service would provide some relief and the state government is planning to introduce another 50 small buses by the year end. Meanwhile there have been allegations and revelations that the party symbol - two leaf - of the ruling AIADMK has been painted for political mileage on all the newly introduced small buses. An activist filed public interest litigation against this in the Madras high court.

The sustainable service of small bus in the corporation area depends upon the economic viability. Actually there has been serious concern over the financial position of the Tamil Nadu Road Transport Corporation and in fact the state government has directed

various public sector undertakings to deposit their fund in the transport corporation for its sustenance from financial crisis. As a tokenism the state government is generous on issuing free bus passes to school children and senior citizens and certain categories of underprivileged, which cause huge exchequer to the transport corporation<sup>3</sup>. Poor maintenance of buses, accidents and negligence are also cited as reasons for incurring loss. Increasing fuel price is another factor for increasing the ticket fare<sup>4</sup>. Under these circumstances it is the government's responsibility to improve the financial position of Transport Corporation. A slew of measures like restructuring and revenue generation through advertisement have been initiated in the transportation sector. This year alone Rs. 28.13 crores has been generated from advertisements, Rs 4.67 crores from highways eateries and Rs 44.21 lakhs from parcel service from the transport corporation. Depending upon the successes of the 50 small buses another batch of 50 will be introduced during December 2013.

Public transportation particularly in urban areas needs to be strengthened to reduce pollution and to provide vast network of service to workforce. Unfortunately, due to various factors, contrary to conventional thinking of providing better public transport service, it is in bad shape. Foot paths and roads became unusable; poor maintenance of buses; inadequate buses; low efficiency and operating of outdated buses have all contribute for the poor service. Consequently individuals own more than one vehicle, which poses a serious problem for parking and vehicle pollution. Therefore, in major cities like Delhi pooling of passengers by private operates is in practice. Perhaps the mini bus service would come as handy to the urban residents. Keeping the 2014 Parliamentary elections in mind, perhaps the present government may shortly launch mini bus scheme in other major Municipal Corporations like Coimbatore, Madurai and Trichy.

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<sup>3</sup> Earlier free bus pass facility was introduced in town buses and now this has been extended to other buses as well.

<sup>4</sup> Though the state government hiked the ticket fare a year ago, still it is well below the fares of neighboring states like Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.