How Mumbai’s pod taxis could reshape last-mile connectivity in India’s financial capital

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Cities are engines of economic growth and contribute to about 60 per cent of GDP in India. Mumbai metropolitan region alone accounts for about 6 per cent. Understandably, a good urban transport with last-mile connectivity is a biggest enabler for the economic growth. India, riding on the idea of strong infrastructure as a key driver, is in full throttle to bring reforms in public transportation with integrated systems and last-mile links, focusing on sustainable growth.

The financial capital of the country, Mumbai, is set to put India on the global map of integrated public transport with last-mile connectivity as it prepares to roll out pod taxis. So, Mumbai is decked up to appear bullish on the map of world's high-end financial capitals to drive the growth story and ready to sound the horn of the successful journey of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of Viksit Bharat on the global platform.

The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) is leading the charge with India’s first pod taxi project in the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), the city's bustling business district. Slated for launch in couple of years, the first phase covers an 8 km elevated corridor stretching from Bandra to Kurla, dotted with 33 stations. This network will link key spots and major office towers, while connecting impeccably with local trains and the Metro lines.

Each pod, a compact automated vehicle about 3.5 metres long, will seat five to eight passengers and zip along at 40 km per hour (mention of Speed can be avoided). A significant factor of this project is that it provides low-cost transit options for both office workers as well as visitors to the area. In addition, it will make it easier for people to get from point A to point B through this highly congested corridor, thereby reducing the amount of time spent traveling, as well as enhancing the livablility of BKC as an employment centre for commuters alike.

For Mumbaikar's, who face some of the longest commutes in the world, this represents an important change in daily life. The Mumbai Railway Vikas Corporation has stated that Mumbai's suburban rail network handles more than 7.5 million trips on a daily basis spanning approximately 450 km of track and is thus one of the world's most heavily used rail systems. In addition to this, BEST (Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) performs about 2.8 million trips each day, both of which reflect the exceptionally high level of activity in the city of Mumbai.

On the other hand, Mumbai suffers from severe traffic congestion as indicated by the TomTom Traffic Index 2024, which ranks the city as having some of the highest congestion levels among all Indian cities. The average length of time required to complete a journey of 10 km is between 20 minutes to over 1 hour depending on the time of day.

That translates into a multimillion-dollar impact to the economy from loss of productivity. In BKC, where skyscrapers house banks, stock exchanges, and corporate giants, traffic snarls already eat up precious hours for the 67,800 projected daily pod taxi users in the first year.

Small automated vehicles called driverless pod taxis are able to navigate on a designated network of elevated trackways. They run solely on electric power and require no human operator to provide the location of their destination using sophisticated GPS systems.

The ultimate objective of these driverless pods is to improve the last mile connection for BKC residents and thousands of other people who use the congested roads daily, making their journeys much better and more efficient.

In creating a new way of moving people within the BKC, safety was of the utmost

importance. Through the use of various sensors (including radar, cameras, and GPS), the pod taxis can detect any hazards or potential collision points in real-time, dramatically lowering the chance of accidents occurring.

On a long-term basis, due to their efficient use of an autonomous system as well as decreased maintenance needs compared to a conventional fleet, the overall cost of operating a fleet of pod taxis will be less expensive. Over the long run, their highly efficient autonomous systems and streamlined maintenance requirements make them more economical to operate than traditional fleet.

India won't be starting from scratch—pod taxis have a global track record. The concept took off in the US in the 1970s with the PRT system in Morgantown, West Virginia, shuttling university students efficiently. In the present day, pod taxis are being used in many different parts of the World, including Chengdu, China; Heathrow Airport (London); Eco-Village of Masdar City (United Arab Emirates); and Suncheon (South Korea) to demonstrate their versatility in all types of environments.

A new report by Research Nester recently published estimates show that the global pod taxi industry is expected to grow to $17.2 billion in 2025, reaching upwards of $65.3 billion by 2035, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18 per cent. The growth of the pod taxi industry can largely be attributed to improvements in Autonomous Vehicle Technology, congested urban areas, and people seeking Better means of Public Transportation.

What makes pods especially appealing for India is their green edge, aligning neatly with the nation's sustainability drive. Powered purely by electricity, they emit zero tailpipe pollution, helping Mumbai trim its air quality woes— the city already battles PM2.5 levels 10 times over safe limits, as flagged by the Central Pollution Control Board in 2024.

The National Electric Mobility Mission Plan targets 30 per cent electric vehicles by 2030, and pods fit right in, cutting carbon footprints while supporting the government's push for net-zero cities under the Smart Cities Mission. For a country eyeing 500 gigawatts of renewable energy by this decade's end, as pledged at COP26, this is low-hanging fruit: efficient rides that don't guzzle diesel or clog emissions.

The ruling setup at the Centre and the Fadnavis-led Maharashtra government is all in on speeding up the Mumbai pod taxi project, eyeing it as a blueprint for other cities. While it takes train commuters heading to the business center hours getting stuck in traffic jams, pods will allow for easy jumps with a real last-mile solution. With the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train gathering speed, passenger traffic will greatly increase.

A techno-economic study by MMRDA, validated by Tata Consulting Engineers, has determined that for the various topographical challenges posed by BKC's/Tyler's increasing pedestrian traffic loads, a pod system will complement the influx of high-speed railway travelers and be the best fit for the BKC location.

The Mumbai Pod Taxi Service ultimately represents not only a solution for local traffic challenges, but also a commitment to creating a comprehensive and efficient infrastructure of international connectivity within India that fosters business development and minimizes congestion. As Viksit Bharat takes shape, these quiet pods may well carry the weight of tomorrow's promise, one smooth ride at a time.

(Disclaimer- The author is SK Lohia, IRSE, Former Jt Secretary Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. Views are personal)