

# Will Covid, IT reduce intra-city commute?

The trend towards remote work, online shopping and home delivery of food/medicines is likely to continue

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The general view till not so long ago was that travel demand would continue to grow unabated with concentration of economic activities in urban centres, improvement in modes of transportations, rural-urban migration and emergence of concentrated dwelling areas. Nobody, of course, could have known that world would change so completely in less than a year.

The future of travel demand that we contemplated in the long term has virtually fast-tracked before our eyes due to the Covid situation. The question arises whether this recent decline in intra-city travel demand due to Covid is sustainable in long run. We need to explore the trends in the pre-Covid era to find an answer.

In the pre-Covid period, a slow but steady decline in demand for travel had already started. According to the first report of the Commission on Travel Demand, May 2018, UK, "We travel substantially less today, per head of population, than we did one or two decades ago. We make 16 per cent fewer trips than 1996, travel 10 per cent fewer miles than in 2002 and spend 22 hours less travelling than we did a decade ago."

## Trends in UK & US

In the UK, between 2012 and 2016, work from home (WfH) rose by 12.35 per cent. And, data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has revealed that the number of British workers who moved into remote-working increased by nearly a quarter of a million over a decade. Similarly, there is steady rise of Americans working from home. According to American Community Survey (ACS), 5.2 per cent of workers, or eight million, in the US worked from home in 2017. That share is up from 5 per cent in 2016, and 3.3 per cent in 2000.

This decline in demand for transportation in the pre-Covid era was driven by alternatives offered by emerging technologies which are undermining the very need of transportation. Several studies have established that travel demand per capita had already started declining in the pre-



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Covid period due to large-scale adoption of technologies.

These developments, which were already under way, in a sense helped us adapt in this Covid era. Remote working, which was slowly slipping into our lives even before the Covid outbreak, has now become the preferred way of working. Realising the benefits of remote working in terms of productivity, work-life balance of employees and saving on expensive commercial space, many companies have announced ambitious plans to continue with WfH even after Covid.

TCS, for instance, plans to allow 75 per cent of its workforce to work from home by 2025. Facebook has extended its WfH policy until July 2021. Google will allow its employees to continue working from home until at least June 2021. Similar is the story across major service sector giants the world over.

The other noticeable trend is reverse migration from big cities to smaller towns. Many flats in big cities are lying vacant as more and more employees are working from their home-town. According to a report by PropTiger, an online real estate platform, real estate sales in India dropped over 70 per cent

in the April-June quarter compared with the previous year. This reverse migration is adversely impacting demand for travel in cities. The impact of these trends is visible in rider-ship in Delhi Metro, which is now just around 20 per cent of the pre-Covid period.

Covid 19 has also given a push to video conferencing, online shopping, home delivery of food, e-learning and tele-medicine, which will impact intra-city travel in a big way. Although these changes were already creeping into our lives, Covid has fast-tracked them.

Post-Covid, the pace of change may, at the most, drop to a lower gear. This is likely to result in the transportation landscape undergoing unfathomable changes in the next 10-20 years.

## Ageing population

Further, according to research led by the University of Washington and published in *Lancet*, the population of India will touch 1.6 billion in 2048 and progressively decline to 1.09 billion by 2100 primarily due to progressive drop in Total Fertility Rate (TFR).

As the population ages, the proportion of working population to total population will also fall, adversely im-

pacting the travel demand. The aged population will rely more on IT-enabled substitutes — like online shopping, home delivery of food/ medicines, virtual meetings, etc — than intra-city travel for their needs.

While this trend is likely to continue steadily, the Covid situation has given further impetus to it. In this context, it is important to assess the need of urban transportation infrastructure in a city. The Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) in a city is generally planned for a time horizon of 100 years. Considering these recent trends, the transport planners need to be careful while estimating travel demand and designing transportation systems for the future.

The future seems to be too uncertain to reasonably estimate demand for transportation in the long term. A better strategy would be to estimate demand for the medium term (15-20 years), design transport infrastructure for this demand, leaving scope for incremental addition in the capacity as per the prevailing demand trend.

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