Title: Social Life of a Bus
Nationality of Film: India
Submitted by:
Name: Govind Gopakumar
Affiliation: Concordia University
Role in the Film: Producer

People Involved in the Film
Director: Govind Gopakumar
Camera: B. R. Viswanath
Sound: Sindhu Thirumalaisamy
Editor: Chinmayi Arakali
Producer: Govind Gopakumar & Bengaluru Bus Prayanikara Vedike (Bangalore Bus Commuter Forum)

Synopsis
Film Summary
Buses in Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), a growing metropolis of 10 million people in India, are a particularly interesting location of study because of some recent challenges. Although, buses in the city shoulder a major share of people movement, mobility choices are influenced by the rapid rise in automobility, which in itself is influenced by policy priorities in favor of massive, government-subsidized, infrastructure investments (such as metro, tolled elevated roads, signal free corridors, flyovers) geared towards promoting private automobility. At the same time, the city’s public transportation agency, the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC), operates without the benefit of either government subsidies or direct citizen oversight. Against such a context, focusing on three aspects — safety, equity, and accessibility of social relations on buses, this film proposes that we pay more attention to them. Buses are our ticket to safer and more equal and sustainable cities. The production of the film was supported through a research grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, a public research agency of the Government of Canada. The film is jointly produced by the Bengaluru Bus Prayaanikara Vedike (Bangalore Bus Commuter Forum), a citizen’s platform for inclusive buses in Bengaluru.

Theoretical, conceptual framework/perspective that influenced the making of this film
This film is undergirded by a conceptual framework composed by the “intertwinement of infrastructure, informality and mobility” (McFarlane and Vasudevan 2015: 256). This framework emphasizes the quotidian politics of infrastructures and the (im)mobilities of everyday life in the operation of bus transportation. Infrastructure technologies such as water supply, transportation, energy and communication thoroughly mediate our experience of modernity. But despite the overwhelming reliance on technology, infrastructures remain deeply embedded with politics that are related to the pushes and pulls in their daily operation. The banality of operating infrastructures (driving a bus, or planning bus routes) provides a cover for all kinds of interests, (dis)alignments, and contests that become incorporated as power geometries (Graham and Marvin 2001) in their technical construction. In the Global South the politics of infrastructures is pronounced through the proliferation of informalities that pervade infrastructure service. Thus the informality of settlement patterns co-exist with informal economies of vending, bribing, and picking pockets, and the informal interactions of honking, asking directions, hollering, and groping. The “mobilities turn” in social science research provides yet another paradigm...
that attends to the rhythms and routines of mobile social exchange. One particularly productive avenue of inquiry within this turn is situational micro-mobilities that bring the sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on sociologies of everyday “little practices” into a conversation with daily movements of commuting and passengering. Such a framing provides a means to comprehend the micro-dynamics of how bus passengering is assembled and performed. For example what are the little acts women passengers use to navigate bus travel?

**Methodology that influenced your making of this film**

Following from its conceptual framing, this film was influenced by a methodological approach constituted with a combination of at least two methodologies street-side ethnography and socio-technical methods. Street ethnographies employ in-depth fieldwork to construct the reality of every-day experiences on the street as has been attempted when investigating the lives of street children, sex-workers, or street vendors. Socio-technical methods require the director to pay attention to the materiality of bus transit buses, bus stations, sign boards, handle bars, window panes, seats, steps. The technology of buses and bus systems powerfully shape the experience of bus passengering. But it is not just buses that influence the commuting experience the (changing) culture of roads, flyovers, traffic, and automobility play a part in constituting the experience of navigating the bus system in Bengaluru.

**Main ethnographic and/or social scientific "findings" or insights that you intend your film to convey/present**

A key take away from this film is context-specificity of bus transit and the experience of bus travel in the city of Bengaluru. The intertwinement of several context-specific factors such as urban growth in Bengaluru, shifts in urban political economy accompanied with shifts in requirements and expectations from modes of city travel all provide a broad canvas against which bus travel needs to be understood. But bus travel in Bengaluru is also influenced by the dynamics of social interaction in a very heterogeneous society marked by multiple fault lines of language, class, caste, gender, religion and community. Such a contextual understanding is a necessary and inseparable aspect of thinking about public transit, especially given the invaluable role of public transit for urban sustainability. A second take away from the film is its demonstration of the inherent public quality of urban infrastructure provision and management. The proliferation of issues, interests, challenges, and contestations reveal a publicity and a publicness that highlights the necessity for public interventions that are not and should not be limited to calculations of private gain or privatization. A final lesson from this film is that despite its social life, a bus comes across as an extraordinary technological vehicle. From its sign board to its exhaust fume, a bus is at once a magnet and a lens for comprehending our cities. Every time we board one of these vehicles, it is indeed a humbling thought that so much rides along on a bus with us.

**Key scholarly references**


