

Food at the touch of a button: what does it mean for city planning?

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Our infrastructural issues are closely tied in with the food delivery systems we are choosing



Until four years or so ago, ordering in food meant fulfilling the following tasks: leafing through flyers of various shapes and sizes that came in the postbox (usually menus of pizza chains or Chinese restaurants), calling up the nearest eatery with your order, getting the exact change ready and then waiting for a good 40 minutes for the door bell to ring. This drill of the not-so-distant past has now become a memory tinged with nostalgia, indicating just how quickly a section of the Indian middle-class has adapted to app-based food delivery services, almost as though they've always existed. It is not just about birthdays, or match days, or one of those days when we don't want to cook. Ordering in is pretty much par for the course on most days. And so you will find, at any given eatery, whether the local chaat-wala or a bistro, a group of people sitting around in identical t-shirts, carrying delivery bags, ready to carry off that idli-sambhar or malai kulfi to a hungry customer a few kilometres away. It really doesn't matter how small your order is — a commercial even features a diabetes patient sneaking in a single gulab jamun — you can have it delivered to your door. It can be a glass of juice, or an ice-cream (with a refund if it melts, apparently), a cup of coffee. You essentially do not need to ever get off your couch to lay your hands on food; you can stare at your app, at the videogame-like image of the bike on its way to bring you your dinner. New mobility The convenience of this service can certainly not be denied, especially with our long work hours and traffic

snarls and the rise of nuclear families, where no grandparent is waiting to fry plates of steaming bajjis for the kids. But while we know that problems of parking, traffic and pollution are stressing people and making them turn to home-delivery, what we do not talk about enough is the manner in which these very infrastructural issues are closely tied in with the food delivery systems we are choosing. What does this new pattern of mobility mean for city planning and infrastructure? Do we, for instance, think about the parking needs of these delivery bikes? An average middle-class Indian household may have anything between two and six people, with one or more cars and two wheelers; but the floating population visiting the house every day is much higher — from the early morning milk and newspaper delivery, to couriers, parcels, domestic help, the evening weekly magazine, the flower lady. These visitors' bikes are parked outside the houses on the pavements, as in the rest of the city, seemingly disconnected from the households they service. Around dinner time, one evening, I casually observed an apartment complex of 60 flats for about half an hour. I counted four delivery boys, in this time-frame. Thirty minutes of riding around, and five minutes of occupying a portion of a public road doesn't appear that scary. But multiply this by 10 such apartments in a one-kilometre radius, and you have a problem.



Delivery bikes parked outside a fast food chain in Mumbai. | Photo Credit: Meena Kadri/ Wiki Commons

The burgeoning line-up of vehicles at the source of the food is a whole new phenomenon: we now have small eateries that have suddenly trebled and quadrupled their volume of deliveries. And when the infrastructure for these vehicles is not yet in place, entire sections of footpaths, and stretches of road, are taken over by the delivery bikes. While the responsibility of providing parking is not just on the shop owner, it is certainly not being borne by the companies providing the service, or by the state. On the other hand, newly constructed pavements and cycle tracks are bearing the burden, at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists. The increasing number of bikes also add to traffic, pollution and fuel consumption. This isn't stirring worries or ideas on how to make the entire process more eco-friendly. The concept of 'local' has been transformed because distance is no longer a limit for home-delivery. People are no longer restricted to neighbourhood restaurants, and so delivery bikes cut across the city, like ingredients cutting across the world. Food is available frozen year-round: you can order a mango milkshake online in November and still get it at your doorstep. Walking to the neighbourhood juice shop for this summer special might soon become a distant memory. **Stay local** How does all this influence traffic planning? A huge new section of people, who are not taking regular routes to work, school or entertainment, are now on the move on already overburdened streets. Without understanding this new traffic volume and planning for alternatives, this convenient and efficient system of food delivery just adds to the chaos. Food delivery systems such as Deliveroo in the U.K., for instance, primarily deliver on bicycles. With cycle lanes and systems in place, the model works mostly on non-motorised transport, and working as a cyclist-delivery person is also considered a way to make some money and get fit. In some countries, electric bikes have been launched for pizza delivery. Quite unsurprisingly, news of Deliveroo reportedly launching in India has no mention of bicycling or of the vast cycling infrastructure that makes it work in Europe. Nor are conversations about sustainability, traffic congestion and planning part of this new trend. When transport planners are advocating building cycle lanes, cycle sharing systems (Bengaluru even recently got its first 'bicycle mayor'), cycle tracks are instead being used as parking spots for motorbikes. From the customer perspective too, a judicious use of these services could mean a more efficient system. Food from anywhere can sound exciting, but being 'restricted' to a narrower radius for delivery may not be such a bad thing. It could help make the system more efficient, sustainable, and the food would be fresher too. But instead, commercials casually encourage orders from far-flung places, and multiple deliveries to the same house from different individuals. This sort of promotion creates an impression that people can be reckless with their orders, ordering rotis in one and sabji in the next, or juice from a restaurant 3 km away. We forget the easier, lower carbon-footprint alternative that may be

available in the form of a shop at a walkable distance, serving juice in a glass, with no straws, napkins, plastic covers, and no fuss. Just fresher juice, cleaner air, and more order on the roads. First published by [The Hindu](#)