The Flow of Urban Life – a podcast by KONE – Transcript
Episode 1: How mega city Mumbai keeps people moving

Ashwini Bhide [00:00:02]
Once we start operating and we analyze the commuter behaviour to different means, then if the system or the women commuters demand some want facilities, some want special services, then all of them would be taken into account.

And we want to ensure that this is a very, very gender inclusive transport and there is a direct link between the women workforce participation rate and safe transport.

Denise Wall [00:00:35]
Wherever you are in the world, there's a good chance that you're one of the 4.4 billion people living in a city.

Sam Kingsley [00:00:42]
And even that number is set to grow massively by the middle of this century.

Denise Wall [00:00:46]
Join us on a journey to understand the changing way we live, work, learn and even play in cities.

Sam Kingsley [00:00:53]
We're going to explore how we can make sure that our urban environments serve all kinds of people at all stages of life, today and in the future.

Female announcer [00:01:05]
The next stop is the flow of urban life.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:11]
I'm Sam Kingsley.

Denise Wall [00:01:14]
And I'm Denise Wall.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:15]
Denise, how would you describe your commute this morning?

Denise Wall [00:01:17]
Well, it was beautiful because there was a lot of snow. But you would never guess that despite all of the snow, everything works here in Finland during the winter. The trains work, the trams work. I took the metro, which was nice and safe and warm and cosy.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:31]
Ah, very wise. And I'm guessing it wasn't all that crowded either.

Denise Wall [00:01:34]

No, not particularly, really.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:36]
Because our guest today is someone whose job it is to keep people moving in one of the largest cities in the world: Mumbai, in India. Ashwini Bhide is the city's additional municipal commissioner and she's led some of Mumbai's most ambitious and complex infrastructure projects from highways to rail, to metro, to airport – and we're going to talk to her about just how you can keep twenty million people smoothly on the move and whether you can. And also about how she sees the future of mobility in what really is one of the world's true mega cities.

Denise Wall [00:02:10]
That's right.

Sam Kingsley [00:02:12]
Ashwini Bhide, Mumbai has a mind-boggling 20 million residents. Could you tell us a little bit to start with about the different groups who call the city home?

Ashwini Bhide [00:02:22]
This is a city which is the administrative capital of the state government here and it is the financial capital of India. It is one of the most important employment centers, and that's why this city is known for its diversity. About 50 to 55% of the population live in slums on the one hand and, on the other hand, economically the high strata, people from that strata also consider Mumbai as a home. And as administrator especially involved in urban infrastructure sector and in the process of improving the city's infrastructure, we have to deal with this social and economic arrangement which is there.

Denise Wall [00:03:13]
All right, thank you so much and that, I think, paints a very vivid picture of what Mumbai is like in terms of the very diverse groups who inhabit the city. You have responsibility for a wide range of various areas. How do you really keep such a huge and diverse population on the move? What do you see as your biggest challenges there, and what do you think you need to prioritize?

Ashwini Bhide [00:03:41]
About 150 years back, Mumbai got its first transport backbone in the form of a suburban railway system, and the city developed around that system. But what happened over a period of time, there were other land parcels which were locked in some other manner because of the legal issues or the ownership issues. They got converted into new commercial centers or central business districts.

So, the old way of transport is now no longer adequate for the city population to move from one place to another and that is where another mode of mass rapid transit system was needed. And that is being constructed or brought in the city in the form of a metro network. It is definitely challenging to set up a new system in a fully developed city, which is a vibrant financial center. So during construction, we cannot disturb the pace of the city. And we have

to basically ensure that the city moves on while the new projects or the new infrastructure is being laid down.

Sam Kingsley [00:04:57]
How do you work out which of the many different needs of the populations are the ones that you prioritize and go for first when creating a project like this? So, how do you ensure that these huge infrastructure projects will make a difference to the lives of as broad a section of the population as possible?

Ashwini Bhide [00:05:23]
The current transit system is so overwhelmed, and it is so overcrowded that though it is very efficient, the quality of travel is not very good. It is not very comfortable to travel in this system and sometimes it is unsafe also, because when the trains get overcrowded, people tend to fall out. When the new infrastructure is laid down, it is ensured that people commute in a very safe, comfortable and efficient manner. In addition to that, the city's congestion goes down, the pollution goes down, the efficiency increases.

The transit corridors create more opportunities to have transit-oriented development, and that is why it gives impetus to the new business centers, the new community places. One impact it does make is that during construction, people get displaced. Because in Mumbai, because of the scarcity of land, there are multiple elements on a single piece of land. So even if it is meant for a particular objective, people squat on those lands as they need space for housing. They get properly rehabilitated, so there is a scheme for them and the proper housing, along with other amenities, is provided to these people as part of the rehabilitation scheme. So that is again another advantage I would say which brings a lot of benefits to people in the city.

Sam Kingsley [00:06:57]
How easy is it to make the case to the residents of Mumbai that, hey, we need this, it's going to cause a lot of disruption while we are constructing it, but the end results are very much needed? Is that something that is a challenge?

Ashwini Bhide [00:07:12]
So, this has always been a challenge. While starting these infrastructure projects and convincing people for their cooperation, and especially a project like the underground metro which has the highest level of disruption, I would say, because the metro project has stations every one kilometer.

And in the project which we are doing, it's a 33-kilometer-long underground metro with 26 undergrounds. And my experience has been people used to oppose it earlier, but as we keep on communicating with them, engaging with them in a very transparent manner, showing them what exactly we are doing, and what kind of trouble they have to take up but what efforts we are making to minimize their trouble or minimize their difficulties.

And that is where we kind of win their hearts, and people did cooperate with us despite all these difficulties. And one more thing just to take that transparency narrative forward, we kept on giving information about the project continuously. In such a situation, because this

is a project which will go on for 5-6 years, we got activated on social media, created our social media networks, and kept on giving this information even before people sought this information from us. And then I think that basically connected us very closely with common people.

Denise Wall [00:09:02]
I'd like to ask you about other kinds of digital tools and solutions to help amass data and understand the movement of people and to possibly predict where there might be issues or problems that might arise.

Ashwini Bhide [00:09:17]
Lots of data would be received through our automatic fare collection system, our video cameras, so we would use data analytics, we would use video analytics to understand the commuter behaviour, commuter demand and commuter aspirations and then improve our services accordingly. So the app would definitely be there, which would help commuters book their journeys, plan their travels, and not only the metro travel but even they can plan for their last mile connectivity by incorporating the other modes of connecting travel.

As part of my job in municipal corporation, I was leading the COVID war room team for Mumbai. We set up a central war room and started collecting this data, then collected to various other platforms of Government of India, the COVID platform, where the testing data was getting uploaded. With the help of our volunteers, who are experts in AI, we did lots of projections. So, what kind of facilities would be required, say, 15 days down the line, a month down the line, two months down the line. And we were fully prepared for that.

And that is why Mumbai was always ahead of the curve, and despite having such huge population density and such huge population in slums, we were managing things much better than any other city – even globally.

Sam Kingsley [00:10:54]
One thing I wanted to ask you was about designing a system that suits the needs of the local population. So, for instance, one thing that I've heard about in the past with metro systems in India is that a lot of the women, for instance, would rather use elevators than escalators because there's a risk on an escalator that the sari might get caught in it.

Ashwini Bhide [00:11:22]
Women's safety and comfort has always been an issue, especially in India's transport systems, which are overcrowded. So we have 24/7 video surveillance, the stations are extremely well-lit, there are no such dark corners or areas where the women's safety could be an issue. And secondly even lifts are provided with cameras and the information is easily available. Plus, there will be physical security guards and the comfort of women, especially through escalators, through lifts, through toilets, diaper changing facilities for the kids.

And the station designs are such, this is an underground system, so obviously you can't have very open stations, but they are designed in such a way that the safety factor is enhanced. And this is fully taken into account., and once we start operating and we analyze the commuter behavior through different means, then if the system or the women commuters

demand some more facilities, some more special services, then all of them would be taken into account, and we want to ensure that this is a very, very gender-inclusive transport. And there is a direct link between the women's workforce participation rate and safe transport.

We are also exploring whether we can use video analytics to understand how many women commuters are there. And then through proper surveys, periodic surveys, proper questionnaires, sharing them with the women commuters, we would definitely try to capture their aspirations and their expectations from this new age transport system, and we would like to incorporate all those features in our operations.

Denise Wall [00:13:41]
It's very interesting to hear about that sort of co-creation or co-designing the system for your users and with your users. And I'm wondering, Ashwini, about if we project our minds into the future, what do you imagine it would be like to move around Mumbai in 10 or 20 years' time? And I'm especially interested in what you think will be very different, and what you think might be pretty much the same as it is today.

Ashwini Bhide [00:14:12]
So, the problem in Mumbai is despite so many people travelling on suburban transport systems, they don't get the last-mile connectivity to suburban systems. So, when I looked in the future that's, say, 10 years down the line, 15 years down the line, the entire metro network of about 360 kilometres would get completed. So, if we look at, say, 2040, then I can see that, and there is an estimation of it, also through proper studies, that more than 10 million people would travel on the metro rail. So, that is the complete additional capacity which will be created in this metropolitan region.

Then another thing is in the metro the stations are just one kilometer apart from each other, so you don't need to take another mode of transport for your last-mile connectivity, you can just walk. And if more people are going to take walking trips after they get down from the suburban system or metro system, then the city's pedestrian infrastructure will happen, and that will be improved, and that will give more opportunity to have more open spaces, more liveability, more walkability. This new age transport would lead more transit-oriented development in a different way. Maybe more, I would say, densification would happen around metro stations. That would change the nature of the city completely. And some of the areas of the city, especially the southern part, which is the heritage area, which today is not at all connected by a public transport system – that will get completely revived.

Mumbai is known for its vibrant spirit, its resilience, and if it is complemented by this kind of an infrastructure, which would add to its liveability, then I think Mumbai will be one of the most coveted cities in the world. That's the kind of future I could see for this city.

Sam Kingsley [00:16:27]
One sort of subtext to what you're saying there about becoming more liveable and reducing the number of private cars, is, of course also making it a more sustainable place to live and one thing that really strikes me hearing these numbers that you're talking about, is just the scale of people moving around in Mumbai, and it's one of the largest cities in the world so there obviously aren't that many other places like Mumbai. Is there any other place like

Mumbai? So, as a decision maker, where do you look to, either elsewhere in India or abroad, for inspiration and lessons? Have there been particular examples of things that you've thought you would like to try and adopt for Mumbai?

Ashwini Bhide [00:17:13]
I think Delhi is something which we are trying to learn from, especially in the metro sphere. Because Delhi was much ahead of Mumbai to set up a metro network. One of the reasons, of course, was they never had a public transport system which was there in Mumbai. And that's why they built a completely new-age public transport system. And that is a very, very good learning and guiding kind of experience for us. We learnt a lot from them.

Then we turned to many global cities which have been at some point in time very congested with very tight structures there, and they're living the same kind of situation in the past, so cities like London, cities like Barcelona, cities like Paris and even Singapore, Bhopal. All of them provide great learnings to us, especially many European cities with their heritage past and heritage structures, they have negotiated with those challenges.

But I must say that now we ourselves have learned so much in our own city, and we have kind of faced problems which were very unique to our city. So, while dealing with those problems, even though we took help from many experts in the world, those problems were very, very unique to our city, and the solutions were also very unique to our city.

So, we ourselves have started, you know, sharing case studies now which could be useful to other cities. But by and large, many cities in the world have already set up very beautiful and very, very comprehensive kinds of transport systems, and there is a lot to learn from them for us, which we have been doing.

Sam Kingsley [00:19:12]
I want to sort of take a bit of a broader look here; I mean, when you took the reins in your role in the municipal corporation, obviously, we've talked about the enormous scale of the challenges that you were facing. What was going through your mind when you started in this role, knowing that the decisions you make have the power to impact the lives of so many millions of people?

Ashwini Bhide [00:19:36]
When I took over this, it was absolutely overwhelming to begin with because there are multiple things I had to deal with. But one positive thing which was there is that I have been working in Mumbai for the past 15 years now in the urban infrastructure sphere. Even a few years back, in some other capacity, I was working in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority when I got an opportunity to implement various other broad infrastructure projects, which were also equally challenging.

And the two projects which I am now dealing with, that is the underground metro and the coastal road. They are, of course far bigger in size than what I dealt with in my previous postings, but the lessons learned then I could apply them more effectively during the implementation of these two projects and I could build very, very competent teams who could help me deliver these projects.

So this is a bit overwhelming, especially the diversity of the work which I have to do in a municipal corporation, and as an implementing agency of infrastructure projects, because municipal corporation apart from implementing infrastructure projects, I have been with other departments like education, fire safety, IT department, open spaces and gardens in BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation). So this is challenging, but it is equally interesting and exciting.

Denise Wall [00:21:13]
As a female leader with such a significant and large and broad portfolio, Ashwini, do you feel that there's been any role model that you've looked to in terms of your remit to make Mumbai a city that is liveable, even more liveable than it is and more attractive than it is, and to really promote equity for all of its diverse inhabitants?

Ashwini Bhide [00:21:40]
We have a role and place in this generally male-dominated system and world. When I actually got an opportunity to work in Mumbai as an Indian Administrative Service Officer, I thought that it's a big opportunity for me to bring changes in the city. And I'm quite mindful of the fact that whatever new changes which come up, they should be equitably distributed.

Everybody in the city should be able to take advantage of it because being a member of the women community, I always thought that there are some certain groups which are less advantageous in terms of getting benefit from a particular facility, because those facilities are not made or not created keeping them in mind. Of course, over a period of time now, the policies have also changed; inclusivity has become more equitable, it has become some kind of necessity which every member of administration needs to follow. Whether people are sensitive about it or not, but by way of rules, by way of policies, they have to consider that. And as a woman member of administration, I think it is my duty to be more sensitive to these issues of inclusivity and equitability.

So we try our best, there are different ways of ensuring equitability by having those kinds of infrastructures and systems which ensure that. And there will be different schemes and programs also which will generate more awareness among common citizens, among administrators, and it is ensured that every nook and corner of the city and every new infrastructure which we are building is accessible to all genders, including the physically challenged or differently-abled people.

Sam Kingsley [00:23:56]
What a great and inspiring note to end on. Ashwini Bhide, thank you so much for talking to us. We will now let you get back to your rather packed schedule in Mumbai. But thank you very much.

Denise Wall [00:24:09]
Thanks so much for making the time.

Ashwini Bhide [00:24:11]
Thank you so much.

Denise Wall [00:24:013]
The Flow of Urban Life is a podcast that looks at how we live and move in urban landscapes.

Sam Kingsley [00:24:19]
We sit down with people at the forefront of making the world's cities better and more sustainable places to live.

Denise Wall [00:24:25]
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Sam Kingsley [00:24:33]
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