

Economic growth must be decoupled from car ownership for sustainable cities: IISc's Ashish Verma

Experts called for stronger public transport, integrated governance and demand-management policies as Indian cities struggle with congestion and rising private vehicle dependence at the ETAutoTech Electronics & Powertrain Summit 2026.





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Ashish Verma, Convenor of the Sustainable Transportation Lab at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru.

As Indian cities grapple with worsening congestion, declining livability and rapidly increasing private vehicle ownership, sustainable urban mobility will require a fundamental shift in how cities define development — by decoupling economic growth from car ownership and prioritising public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure, according to Ashish Verma, Convenor of the Sustainable Transportation Lab at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru.

Verma said Indian cities are trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of rising car ownership, expanding road infrastructure and worsening congestion, which ultimately undermines sustainability and quality of life.

He said that urban transportation must be viewed as a complex, interconnected system where every intervention — whether a metro project, flyover or road expansion — has wider impacts on travel behaviour, land use, accessibility and environmental outcomes.

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Verma argued that mobility planning in India often overlooks these interdependencies, resulting in inefficient investments such as underutilised metro systems in smaller cities or excessive road expansion in already congested corridors.

“We are trapped in a vicious cycle—more cars lead to more congestion, which leads to more roads, which again leads to more congestion,” he said.

Verma noted that since economic liberalisation in the 1990s, Indian cities have witnessed rapid growth in private vehicle ownership, leading to urban sprawl, longer commutes and greater dependence on personal mobility.

Lessons from global cities

Highlighting international examples, he said sustainable mobility depends on selecting the right transport systems based on a city’s population, density and travel demand rather than simply expanding infrastructure.

He cited Singapore and Vienna as examples of cities that have successfully reduced dependence on private vehicles through integrated public transport systems, pricing mechanisms and behavioural interventions.

“Singapore has just 120 cars per 1,000 population, yet over 80 per cent of trips are made by public transport, walking and cycling,” he noted.

These examples demonstrate that high-income economies can remain prosperous without encouraging high levels of car ownership.

Quality of life over car ownership

A key theme of the session was the distinction between improving the standard of living and enhancing quality of life.

While India aims to significantly increase per capita income over the coming decades, Verma cautioned against equating rising incomes with rising car ownership.

He pointed out that many developed cities have already reached saturation levels of vehicle ownership and are now actively trying to reduce dependence on private vehicles to improve air quality, livability and public space utilisation.

Governance and policy reforms needed

Verma also identified fragmented governance as a major barrier to sustainable mobility in India. Multiple agencies often operate independently across planning, infrastructure and transport operations, resulting in poor coordination.

He contrasted this with integrated institutions such as Transport for London and Singapore’s Land Transport Authority, which oversee mobility planning across all modes of transport.

Another challenge, he said, is the absence of effective demand-management measures in Indian cities.

While cities continue to invest in transport infrastructure, they often avoid implementing policies such as congestion pricing, parking restrictions or vehicle ownership controls that discourage excessive car use.

A people-centric mobility future

Verma called for greater investment in reliable public transport, non-motorised transport infrastructure and compact urban development to reduce travel distances and dependence on private vehicles.

“We need to decouple economic growth from car ownership if we want cities that are both prosperous and liveable,” he said.

Concluding the session, he emphasised that sustainable urban mobility will require a coordinated approach involving public transport expansion, behavioural change, policy enforcement and institutional reform to ensure cities remain economically vibrant while improving quality of life.