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Online mapping of MTC routes

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CHENNAI: A group of students have come together to map Chennai's bus routes and make it available online, an initiative aimed at helping commuters, particularly those new to the city.

You no longer have to go to a bus stop to find out if there is a bus available from there to a particular destination. Just log on to the Internet and type a few characters to get all the information. The online project (http://busroutes.in/chennai/) which is completely open-source, provides a virtual public transport network of the city.

"There are plans to integrate the suburban train network and share autorickshaw routes," says Arun Ganesh, a student at the National Institute of Design, who is coordinating the initiative.

"There is a need for a centralised database of public transport. Provide them better information so that they can shift to a public mode of transport with ease," he says.

A lot of data about public transportation system is available, but it is all personal. The idea behind the project is to 'crowd source' information from people who use the bus routes and make it easier to visualise and browse through all that data. Rabin Vincent, who has worked on the site, says, "The Metropolitan Transport Corporation website has stage-wise route information, but it is inaccessible to search engines and not user-friendly. Information needs to be more easily available to search engines, and by extension, to the people looking for it."

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Solutions for issues that the community faces are best dealt through open collaboration, feel the students who were involved in the mapping project; which is why the OpenStreet mapping protocol was used.

Arun Ganesh admits that five to 10 per cent of routes have errors. "The primary data from the MTC has bus stops with names such as 'tea kadai' and 'water tank.' It is difficult to map these stops. But then, the code is entirely open-source. Anybody can take it and work on it."

The way forward for the project, according to Yuvaraj Pandian, a second year engineering student, is to incorporate frequency data and multi-point routes which would give switching points from one bus to another.