

2017-Bicentenary of the Bicycle

WOMEN AND CYCLE IN INDIA

Joy, Mobility, Freedom and Empowerment

Bicycle and Women Collective



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Empowerment**

**By
Bicycle and Women Collective**

Ecologise Hyderabad

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Joy, Mobility, Freedom and Empowerment

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Hendee 154, 1920. The First Indian Ladies Bicycle

PREFACE

When I first talked about this book at the beginning of this year, as part of the bicentenary celebrations of the bicycle, many women responded enthusiastically. As it often happens, some of the early enthusiasts did not stay whereas other new faces have come up. So, it took all this time to gather the stories together, write some additional stuff and put it all together in the present form. Meanwhile, we published three other books on the cycle. So, as such we did not 'waste' any time.

This book is a collective effort and all the authors took time off to write these small pieces. Some of the older authors went down the memory lane as far as early 1940s! All of them had happy recollections and many were glad to have this opportunity to look back. Hema has put in a lot of work in putting the book together and in producing it. As she has done with so many of our other books, Karnika has done an excellent job of editing. I cannot thank them because it is their book also.

As we can see in the following pages, the bicycle has played an important role in women's liberation movement. As the subtitle of this little book suggests, they experienced *Joy, Mobility,*

Freedom and Empowerment' in the process. We have put together the experiences of Indian women in order of their age, beginning with the oldest amongst them.

There is the story of Deborah Herold, a tribal woman from Nicobar Island who put India on the world map of cycle racing. This is followed by a short story of a Bengali woman of 50 doing a solo ride from Calcutta to Pondicherry to fulfil her dreams of learning French and seeing the world.

While women have come a long way in acquiring cycle and liberation, there is still a long way to go. Today, only half the Indian households have bicycles and you can imagine how many of them have bicycles for the ladies. In recent years, bicycles for school girls has made a good start with many states adopting the plan with Bihar leading it. So, we have ended this book with a letter to the Chief Minister of Telangana to implement this programme in the state as this book is being published from Hyderabad. It will be a good idea to have such a programme for the whole country. We urge the women's movement in the country to take it up. That will be a concrete achievement and a good response to the bicentenary of the bicycle.

Finally, I do feel a little awkward for being a male coordinating this 'Bicycle and Women Collective'. Everybody would have preferred it to be a woman. Not that there are no competent women but there are not many and their hands are full. We are living in an environment where every activist has to stretch her limits. I have received full support from our Ecogise Group as well as all the women contributors. I hope more and newer women will come forward to carry on.

Happy riding!

Vijayendra
Hyderabad
September 15, 2017

BICYCLE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

T. Vijayendra

Bicycling and Feminism

One hundred years ago, Alice Hawkins, a suffragette, cycled around Leicester (UK), promoting the women's rights movement, causing outrage by being one of the first ladies to wear pantaloons in the city. During the fight to win the vote, the bicycle became not only a tool but also a symbol for the emancipation of women.

The American civil rights leader, Susan B Anthony, wrote in 1896:

“Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than any one thing in the world. I rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a bike. It gives her a feeling of self-reliance and independence the moment she takes her seat; and away she goes, the picture of untrammelled womanhood.”

Beatrice Grimshaw, who went on to a life of travel and adventure, describes a girlhood of Victorian propriety, in which she was: ‘the Revolting Daughter—as they called them then. I



bought a bicycle, with difficulty. I rode it unchaperoned, mile and miles beyond the limits possible to the soberly trotting horses. The world opened before me. And as soon as my twenty-first birthday dawned, I went away from home, to see what the world might have to give to daughters who revolted.'

Women gained a significant amount of independence with the invention of the bicycle. This device gave them the freedom to travel outside the home of their own power. Bicycle riding also necessitated more practical clothing for women and led to significant changes to female attire in society. One individual from the time period watching female cyclists remarked, 'It is hard to believe, that they were the same women who went out in the afternoon for the formal carriage parade.'

Women on Wheels: History

Although the bicycle was invented in 1817, it did not become popular because it had no pedals or chain. One had to drive it by kicking the ground. Around 1865, somebody in France dared to take both feet off the ground and onto the cranks for pedalling the front wheel, proving that it was possible to balance on a bike and crank at the same time, thus spawning a new boom. This was called the cranked two-wheeled velocipede. Now in this bicycle, designers increased bicycle speed by increasing the size of the front wheel to which the pedals were attached. The typical Ordinary, as these high-wheelers were known, had front wheels as large as five feet in diameter so the machine would cover more ground with each pedal revolution. It required extraordinary athleticism just to mount an Ordinary, let alone ride one, and accidents were common. Steering was difficult and even a small obstacle like a rut in the road or a large stone could send the Ordinary rider, mounted many feet above the ground, head first over the front handlebars. Indeed, learning how to ‘take a header’ safely was an essential skill.

In the late 1870s, the first so-called ‘Safety’ bicycles appeared. Safety bicycles had wheels of equal size and a chain drive that transferred power from the pedals to the rear wheel. The Safety quickly proved to be the superior design, both faster and more stable than the Ordinary, and remains the basis for bicycle design today.

The Safety, not the Ordinary, was ironically, a bicycle that ordinary people, including women, could ride. The Ordinary quickly became obsolete and the Safety bicycle helped usher in the cycling craze of the 1890s. ‘The safety bicycle fills a much-needed want for women in any station of life,’ said *The Bearings*, a cycling periodical, in October, 1894, ‘It knows no class distinction, is within reach of all, and rich and poor alike have the opportunity of enjoying this popular and healthful exercise.’

The New Woman

As cycling's popularity exploded, a new breed of woman was making her mark in the 1890s. 'The New Woman' was a term used to describe the modern woman who broke the convention by working outside of home, or eschewed the traditional role of wife and mother, or became politically active in the woman's suffrage movement and other social issues. The New Woman saw herself as the equal of men and the bicycle helped her assert herself as such.

The 1890s was the peak of the American bicycle craze and consumers were buying bicycles in large numbers. In 1897 alone, more than two million bicycles were sold in the United States, about one for every 30 inhabitants.

Cycling in the 1890s was nothing less than 'a general intoxication, an eruption of exuberance like a seismic tremor that shook the economic and social foundations of society and rattled the windows of its moral outlook.' Nowhere was this more evident than in the role of the bicycle in the changing lives of American women. Indeed, the women's movement of the 1890s and the cycling craze became inextricably intertwined.

In 1895, 800,000 bikes were built in Britain alone. A lot of those bikes were purchased by or for women. Just like the invention of the post-box (women being able to send letters without the prying eyes of their father looking over the content first? Madness!), the bicycle proved to be another leap in women not having to request permission to do normal, boring stuff.

Suddenly, a whole world full of handsome gentlemen opened up for women across the UK. 'The bicycle played a critical role in both the emancipation of women, and the subsequent expansion of the national gene pool. Young women could now travel to neighbouring villages and meet a wider circle of young men.'

Challenges

It is therefore no wonder, with all this sexual autonomy on offer, that there was reaction against women riding bicycles. In 1891, a journalist at the American paper *Sunday Herald* wrote the following: ‘I think the most vicious thing I ever saw in all my life is a woman on a bicycle—and Washington is full of them. I had thought that cigarette smoking was the worst thing a woman could do, but I have changed my mind.’

So why did people have such a problem with women cycling? Well, these ladies were cheeky enough to cycle outside, in public. Shock horror. Even if they didn’t see themselves as symbols of emancipation, their very public display of their freedoms was perceived as a challenge to the ingrained and patriarchal social order.

Traditional aspects of society pushed against these advances. The ‘New Woman’, who wore less restrictive clothing and rode a bicycle, became a satirical figure that was ridiculed in the media, particularly in the US. These women were seen to be abandoning their husbands, children, and a more traditional way of life. The relaxed clothes they wore were obviously indicative of their status as prostitutes. Obviously.

Bloomers and Bicycles

In 1893, the Woman’s Congress of the World’s Columbian Exposition revived interest in the bloomer as an aid in improving women’s health through physical exercise. Bloomers are a divided woman’s garment for the lower body like pants. Their session on women’s apparel opened with Lucy Stone, a prominent American women’s rights activist and journalist, reminiscing about the bloomer movement of the 1850s; her extolling the bloomer as the ‘cleanest, neatest, most comfortable and most sensible garment’ she had ever worn; and young women modelling different versions of the dress. The following year, Annie ‘Londonderry’ Cohen Kopchovsky, donned the bloomer during her famous bicycle trip around the world and an updated version of the bloomer soon



became the standard ‘bicycle dress’ for women during the bicycle craze of the 1890s.

Fighting Back

Now here’s the thing: no one could stop them. Women weren’t set to give up these new freedoms after finally ridding themselves of the dreaded chaperone.

Annie Londonderry was an American mother of three who decided to cycle around the world in fifteen months, setting off from Boston in 1894, carrying only a change of clothes and a pearl-handled revolver. Not only did she make full use of a woman’s new found freedom of movement, she also did a lot to change the public perception by becoming a bit of a celebrity.

Since then, there’s been no stopping ladies from pedalling. In fact, the act of cycling is still rather revolutionary. Cycling attracts women of all different shapes, sizes, backgrounds, passions and interests. You can enjoy being on your bike in a myriad of ways.

Cycling encourages women to step outside the traditional gender roles that still exist in our ‘enlightened’ world. It is not quite the move from skirts to bloomers but women who cycle are challenging the idea of femininity by partaking in a form of exercise that is male-dominated.

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HISTORY OF WOMEN AND CYCLE IN INDIA

T. Vijayendra

Almost from the beginning, that is, from 1865 onwards, when the 'Cranked two-wheeler' or the 'Penny Farthing' machine appeared, women were riding bicycles both in Europe and in America. With the arrival of the safety bicycle, it became extremely popular and by 1980s, there was a bicycle 'craze'. In 1894, Ann Londonderry went round the world in 15 months. The New Woman had arrived, with 'bloomers' - the bicycle friendly dress.

Bicycle Arrives in India

Bicycles arrived in India by 1890s. In the 1890s, British manufacturers such as BSA, Rudge and Raleigh started to export bicycles to India. According to a book authored by David Arnold and Erich DeWald, 'Cycles of Empowerment? The Bicycle and Everyday Technology in Colonial India and Vietnam', around 35,000 bicycles were imported by India in 1910. By 1940, the import amount had increased to 70,000 bicycles and in 1950s, they recorded an import of 2, 00,000 bicycles.

By this time, India as a society was changing under the influence



of several European inventions. Smaller objects had already become useful for completing everyday tasks, or for completing them more efficiently. Not only were railways churning lives around, smaller technologies like bicycles, sewing machines, and typewriters were also changing the way we worked and conducted our everyday lives.

At the end of the century, bicycle became an integral part of the Indian middle class. Not only did the bicycle make people more self-reliant but they lent the people a healthier image, one that uplifted their social status as well.

So far, bicycles had only been the thing for Indian males. Some even saw the bicycle as a tool to invigorate masculinity. Especially, Bengali men, who were often stereotyped as being more 'effeminate', started using cycling as a means to promote self-image of being independent and more virile.

For women, the bicycle also served a serious purpose. For the first time, they could explore freedom by becoming more mobile, even if it was within a limited region. Not only this, schoolgirls and female college students gained access to educational opportunities, especially in the cities. But, in the villages, cycling was initially restricted to the male populace alone. Men deliberately controlled bicycling to retain a woman's physical and social mobility.

Indian Women on Bicycles

The history of women on bicycle in India is not readily available. We have to piece it together with other parallel movements and make guesses most of the time. It is convenient to link it with women's movement in general because everywhere in the world, the cycle became symbolical with mobility and freedom, to say nothing about the joy and empowerment it entailed.

1857-1977

The women's movement is often divided in three periods: liberal feminism, radical feminism and separatist feminism. The trend that comes after does not replace the earlier ones, but gets added on and the movement as a whole becomes bigger. Thus today, we have all the three versions rubbing shoulders together, sometimes enriching and sometimes criticising each other.

Liberal feminism is often under the patronage of progressive men and progressive movement. In India, it would mean roughly from the late nineteenth century to 1977. It can be further divided into four periods: the 19th century renaissance movement, the early independence movement from 1905-1931, the radical independence movement from 1931-1947 and the post-independence energy of a newly independent country 1947-1977.

Early in the day, a few ladies cycles appeared in hill stations where European women rode them. Later, progressive men and women appeared in Calcutta, Bombay and Pune and a few ladies

cycles also began to make appearance. Parsis were particularly interested in the art of cycling. In the 1920s, three young Parsis from the Bombay Wrestling Club cycled around the world in an epic four year journey. In the Parsi community also, the older men started promoting bicycling amongst women because of their concern for reproductive problems in males. So, in Bombay, Parsi women were the first to ride the cycles.

The cycle really began to be seen everywhere from 1930 onwards. The two-wheeler soon found its way into most Indian cities. The 1929 Great Depression gave rise to a worldwide anti-colonial movement and to the appearance of the Communist and Socialist movements. A whole new generation of progressive men and women appeared on the scene and all of them were embracing the cycle as a means of mobility and freedom. The cycle imports were doubled to 70,000 cycles per year by 1940. The share of ladies bicycle rose significantly.

From early 1950s to 1990s, there was a ban on importing bicycles and Indian companies began to appear on the scene. Sen Raleigh came up near Asansol in Bengal and Tube India (TI) or BSA cycles appeared near Madras. Both were collaborations with the British bicycle manufacturing companies. Both manufactured ladies cycles from the beginning. Independence released a huge energy and there was an increase of school and college going women even in smaller cities. There was a boom in the sale of ladies cycles. Often the first cycle in a home in Western India was a ladies bicycle because both men and woman can ride on it.

1977-1990

Radical feminism in India dates from the post-emergency period up to 1990 when the new policies of liberalism, privatisation and globalisation began to hit all progressive movements. This was politically a very active period for women. They were organising rallies on dowries and other women's oppression issues. Some were active in trade movements and women's wings of political

parties also renewed their energies. Women related NGOs too proliferated and everywhere, these new women were seen on bicycles, often travelling alone in remote villages.

By this time, the Indian bicycle industry was well established with the 4 major players-BSA, Atlas, Hero and Avon, dominating the scene. All of them produced ladies cycles and experienced good growth. Almost every urban home in large parts of India had a ladies bicycle.

1990-2017

The post-1990 period up to the present in India cannot be called a separatist feminist movement, though there have been elements of it. For the bicycle movement, it meant a large number of relatively affluent women who could be on their own and who started using high-end bicycles, taking part in rallies and long adventurous bicycle trips. The dresses also changed radically. Most women cyclists have been wearing bloomers-salwar kameez, pants, and in metro cities, many wear shorts as well. In small towns, salwar kameez predominates. School going girls wearing skirts or salwar kameez on cycles can be seen everywhere in India. In the last few years, tight pants have become fashionable even in small towns.

Concluding Remarks

In the recent times, there has been a decline in cycle sights in the south and western regions of the country. The share of scooters, motorcycles and cars is increasing. This is increasing congestion on the roads and the resultant air pollution is creating health problems. This in turn is giving rise to a new pro-cycle movement. This has seen a big spurt this year partly due to the bicentenary of the bicycle. Another reason is that awareness about global warming and the end of fossil fuel era is increasing and is giving rise to a further spurt in the demand of cycles. The production has gone up to 18 million per year and two-thirds of that is still the ordinary standard or roadster cycle for men and women. The future of the cycle and women's liberation is bright.

INDIAN WOMEN ON BICYCLE In Life and in Cinema

Hema Vaishnavi

The early Indian bicycles were released in India by the Hendee Mfg Co, who also had released the Indian Ladies Roadster Model 154, a light roadster variety bicycle specially designed for the ladies. Undoubtedly, the first ladies in India to cycle were the English ladies. The royal families and the *zamindars* who were close friends with the British did cycle in their courtyards. Although the Hendee 154 was introduced on the Indian roads in 1920, the Indian takers were mostly of the upper class families-the aristocrats, the kings or the *zamindars*. For an ordinary woman of a lower class family, cycling was almost unthinkable.

Women cycled in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, where the British rule was prominent. The elites in these societies cycled to colleges. Women of upper and the lower classes were comparatively free from prejudices. It was the middle class that was hardbound by these unbridled rules of the society and it were the middle class women who struggled the most. Even though the bicycle empowered them a great deal, getting on the bicycle was a great struggle in itself.



Kids from all kinds of backgrounds have this urge and eagerness to cycle like a free bird. Usually girls who belonged to the upper-class societies had the freedom to buy bicycles of their choice, one, because they could afford them and two, because they had the freedom to ride one without any criticism from the society.

The girls belonging to the middle class families faced immense criticism, yet most young girls during the 60's and 70's braved all this and pedalled their way to emancipation. In joint families, the first daughter or the eldest one often faced the most extreme and harsh restrictions. It usually required a great deal of requesting, pleading, and convincing everyone that it's okay for a woman to cycle. When a girl finally got a bicycle, learning it was another hurdle. Some girls even had to go through some kind of misbehaviour from their own relatives on the pretext of teaching cycle lessons.

The second daughter found it rather easy to get her hands on a bicycle but she too had to go through hassles to acquire and

learn how to ride one. Getting her hands on the cycle would rather be a cake walk for the last daughter as she would be supported by her empowered sisters. She would often find herself flowing free on a bicycle at quite a young age. With or without these familial struggles, the girl child almost always had to go through various hurdles in the society.

Even about 40 years ago, in many towns and villages, even in cities to a certain extent, the idea of a woman on bicycle was a matter of jest. Many roadside Romeos often gathered at *nukkads* (village crossroads) to make fun of the girl, eve tease her, use abusive language directed towards her or just stare at her. Commuting on bicycles for a woman was nothing less than a nightmare. A woman on bicycle was looked at from a cheap angle. The situation of course has improved but nevertheless, women have faced this and it is a great deal. Some have even faced men poking sticks at them, or people driving buffaloes on to them, or harassing them while riding in parallel on motorbikes or bicycles.

Back in the day, the only agenda of the family of the girl child was to get her married. A woman on a bicycle was looked at as a masculine woman, saying 'how could a woman like her who roams the street like a man be worthy of marriage or raise kids?' Even men were wary of such empowered and confident women.

Women have gone through such great obstacles and prejudices to become empowered and liberated. Education to an extent has given the liberty of thought to girls and their fathers to adopt the bicycle on a large scale. Out of desperation, fathers who were eager to send their daughters for higher education, let the daughters get on the wheels. Even industrialization gave rise to women adopting the bicycles. In industrial cities like Jamshedpur, women of the working class first took to the bicycle, commuting to the factories and breaking norms and prejudices with each ride.

Pedalling towards Independence: Women Freedom Fighters on Bicycle

The journey of women and bicycle in India isn't complete without the stories of the brave Indian women who fought for the independence.

Women who were involved in fighting used the bicycle to interact with people, gather support and spread the spirit of the movement. Women on bicycle were looked at as powerful ladies, who had the ability to bring about awe in the eyes of the people. Back in the day, the means of communication among the freedom fighters was passing information by the word of mouth. Women on bicycle were often messengers of numerous meetings, spreading information about the on-going struggle and bringing about supporters to the said location.

The cities of Calcutta, Lahore, Lucknow, Bombay, and to some extent places in the south such as Madras and the state of Hyderabad, which were either part of the freedom struggle or the local struggles against the Nizams, saw freedom fighters use the bicycle. And the women who used the bicycle were prominent members of the struggles.

One among such women freedom fighters was Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal. Sahgal was niece to Motilal Nehru, and she was, therefore, Jawaharlal Nehru's first cousin once removed. As many others in the family, she was an active participant in India's struggle for independence. A leader in student politics during her college years, Sahgal followed her mother and sisters in brief prison terms for demonstrating against the British Raj.

In her Biographical account, 'An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life,' Manmohini Zutshi recalls moments on the bicycle. 'Manmohini was the third of four daughters born to Ladli Prasad and Lado Rani Zutshi. In 1910, after the first child was born, they moved to their own house in Allahabad. Like other progressive women of the era, Lado Rani had been encouraged

to join the 'ladies club' for companionship, discussion of public issues, and philanthropic activities. From their new home Lado Rani set up both a ladies' club and a girls' club, engaged a music teacher for her daughters, learned to ride a bicycle, and genuinely enjoyed her new experiments with personal freedom.'

In another chapter on her mother and her family, she recollects instances about her mother cycled exactly a century ago from today. 'My mother, Lado Rani Zutshi, settled in Lahore in 1917 to educate her daughters. She had a great deal of influence on me, and as I grew older I assisted her in many projects. As soon as she was settled in Lahore she joined the YWCA to continue her English and piano lessons. In the evenings she bicycled to her classes. No other Indian lady of her status in Lahore had the courage to do this. The only concession she made to society's rules was to have her own servant running behind her bicycle so that in case of accident she would not have to ask for help for a stranger; her servant would be there to help her. Fortunately for all concerned, such an occasion never arose.'

Women on Bicycle in Indian Cinema

To a great extent, Indian movies have tried to emulate the Indian society but film industry as such has had huge impact on the lives of people and influenced people in numerous ways.



With the coming of the talkies into India, films were mostly based on mythological stories or the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. After a few years of such movies, film makers started foraying into different concepts that would attract the common man. Realistic movies were started to be made by incorporating different elements of the daily lives of the rural and urban people alike. Bicycle was common to both the urban and rural set-ups.

In the beginning, the women from elite classes in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, cycled to colleges and the same started to be depicted in the Indian cinema. The bicycle was incorporated in the films to bring about a sense of relation with real life. The connect factor was brought in by the 'heroes' using the bicycles to run their daily errands but showing women on bicycles was a revolutionary concept, and people watched these movies with much awe and enthusiasm.

Women were shown to own cycles-especially the college girls as 'heroines' were seen commuting to their colleges. The first film that depicted this was *Khazanachi* of 1941, where the leading lady, Ramola Devi, is seen riding a bicycle along with her friends in the song, '*Sawan Ke Nazare Hai.*' A few other early popular songs that showed women on bicycle were *Inse Rippy Tippy Ho Gayi* from the movie, *Agra Road* of 1957, featuring Vijay Anand and Shakila; *Chale Bajaate Seeti* from *Zamana* (1957), and *Panchhi Dekhi Ye Phulwari* of *Jaldeep* (1956).

It had become a norm to show cycles in movies and that set a trend for the next few decades or so where the leading ladies of prominent movies were shown going about their business in the fancy cycles of the day. Nutan was seen on a bicycle in a bunch of movies, including *Paying Guest* of 1957, in the song '*Mana Janab Ne Pukara Nahi.*'

This trend continued and gave rise to numerous other songs featuring school girls, college girls and women of all ages riding the bicycle. The trend went on for a couple of decades or so

before they were soon replaced by motorcycles and cars. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the bicycle in the Hindi cinemas influenced other film industries to take up the bicycle as a symbol of women's liberty and empowerment.

In the south, movies with Vijayanthimala on the bicycle, often made the parts of a movie where freedom movements were depicted. The two famous songs that were written on the bicycle and also featured women on a bicycle -'Cycle Varudhu Cycle Varudhu' from the movie 'Neelavukku Neraanja Manasu' of 1958 and 'Cycle vandi' from the movie 'Chitthi.' 'Cycle Varudhu Cycle Varudhu' features Pandari Bai on the bicycle along with the lead T. R. Ramachandran, singing an elaborate praise for the cycle.

Today, a woman on bicycle is rarely seen in movies but for a couple of films. The most recent film where a woman was shown on a bicycle was *Dear Zindagi*, where Alia Bhatt plays the character of a native girl from Goa. Goa being a place where bicycles are used in abundance, for commuting, became an apt setting for the portrayal of a bicycle.

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Experiences of Women and Cycle

THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIENCE

Sarojini Dhara

It was in the early '40s that I got my hands on a bicycle. You didn't have any of these fancy bicycles for ladies back in the day. The only kind that was in use was the milkman's bicycle, the standard roadster, and everyone used it, regardless of their age or gender. While it took a few years for women to be seen with these roadsters on the roads, men on roadsters were ubiquitous.

I was born and brought up in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, and got married at the tender age of ten years. My elder sister, who was elder to me by a few years, got married at about the same age as well. I was the lucky one among the two of us, who got the chance to ride the bicycle.

My parents-in-law, who were of the modern mind-set, didn't mind me learning the bicycle. One of the boys, who was a relative, taught me how to ride the bicycle. I asked him if he could teach me and he happily obliged.

Riding the bicycle was completely forbidden for girls back in the day. One could never be seen riding a bicycle on the roads, for it would start off a rumour mill about the girl being involved in

all kinds of wrong. At the same time, it was totally acceptable for a woman or a girl to be seated on the carrier with a man riding the bicycle. What days those were!

It took me about a week or so to get the balance of the bicycle. Considering that all of us wore sarees then, I learnt how to ride the bicycle quicker than I'd anticipated. I used to ride for an hour or so in the afternoons when people didn't have the chance to see me learning how to ride. I couldn't risk being seen by people but I always looked forward to that one hour of cycling and the pure joy it filled me with. Taking charge of the handle and manoeuvring about gave me a sense of freedom and I somehow felt in-charge of things. Now, this was only possible because my parents-in-law were progressive to think that a woman should be allowed to learn things just like any man. Even they had to bow to the societal pressure and I had to stick to riding the bicycle in my veranda.

My elder sister, who got married in a different household, wasn't fortunate to experience what I could. Her parents-in-law were rather orthodox and did not like the women of the household to learn or get into anything that was questionable by the society.

On my trips to the market, I did come across this young woman in her early 20's, who used the bicycle to commute on the roads of the town. While most people in the town branded her a rebel and often called her a woman with loose moral standards, I had nothing but deep admiration for her. She not only used the bicycle to run her daily errands but she went to the nearby college using the bicycle. She was the only one who owned a bicycle in the college.

Soon after, my family and I moved base to Bombay on account of my husband's job. While my bicycle days ended with the rides in the veranda, I did long to ride the bicycle many a times.

Sarojini Dhara is a 90-year-old-woman residing in Hyderabad. She can be reached through her son, Sagar Dhara: sagdhara@gmail.com

A FRIEND FOR ALL SEASONS

Maya Sharma

My daughter Jaya's friend, Shailaja, knows the importance of cycle in my life. When she came to know about a collection of writings about women and cycle on the completion of two hundred years of its invention, she shared it with Jaya and the news reached me. I went down my memory lane back to 1948. I am 82 years old now. The sheer excitement of cycle! Loads of memories from more than 60 years ago ran an electric current under my feet.

I was number seven amongst the ten brothers and sisters of the Sharma family of Colvin Taluqdars College, Lucknow. My four older brothers asserted their exclusive right on the cycle. Hence, it was very difficult to request them for it, let alone asking them to teach but I did not give up so easily. After a lot of coaxing and persistence, I got permission to ride the cycle. I needed a teacher now.

My father was the warden of Junior Hostel of the college. Mrs. Jordan was one of his colleagues. Her sister's daughter Vinita was visiting during the December vacation. She was a keen cyclist



and had mastered the speed as well. She was the inspiration I needed to translate my wish into action. After a lot of pleading, I got the cycle from my elder brother Prem Kumar. Vinita cooperated in teaching me. We also decided on a time slot between 4 and 5 in the evening. It was as if I had found my medium. In a few hours, I got the courage to sit on the carrier and pedal. In the next two or three days, I learnt to balance the cycle without falling down or getting hurt. My brother Prem appreciated me a lot. He also advised that if want to take the cycle on the road, I will have to learn to ride the cycle by sitting on the saddle and not on the carrier. At that time I could not ride sitting on the saddle. I used to jump from the carrier on to the saddle and therefore I did not get the permission to take the cycle on the road.

When I was in class eight, I had to go to Ameenabad Park to collect my certificate for the 'Shishu' Sanskrit examination. I wanted to be accompanied by my new achievement – the cycle!-My brother said, 'You can take it on one condition. You will have to sit on the cycle from the front.' It was a tough condition but my

wish to take the cycle was stronger. So I said 'yes' and the journey began. On the Kesarbag to Nazeerabad road, there was a big crowd and my heart went pit-a-pat but I took courage and sat on the 'gents' cycle by taking my legs over the front bar. My brother was riding along and he was very pleased.

On getting good marks in the tenth class examination, I got a 'ladies cycle' as a prize. My happiness knew no bounds. Now, I had my own cycle! There were no more barriers between me and my cycle. I used to take my younger sister and friend Vidya Shah on the carrier for a ride. Whether the sun was bright and strong or whether there was a heavy downpour, I enjoyed riding my cycle in all seasons. I felt proud in running errands for my Amma and helping her.

When I went to study at I.T. College (Isabella Thoburn College), I had to climb the steep hill of Christian College Golagunj. When riding on the steep hill, the cycle used to slip back but I used to keep on climbing. Once, when I bent down to straighten my sari, one of my long plaits of hair got stuck in the back wheel. With great difficulty and with the help of a pedestrian, I had to cut it and then my cycle went forward. Even then my love for the cycle did not diminish.

Once my brother's friend's wife came to our house. I took her around on my cycle for two days and we went to Lucknow University, Chhatar Manjil, Bada Imambada and Chhota Imambada.

Cycle has been a loyal companion. It has given me confidence, balance, joy, made me active and has inspired me to do my best in whatever is entrusted in me. To this day, I work with this confidence and positive attitude. There is nothing called as 'fear' in me. Even now I feel like cycling but the fear of age puts a 'break' to that desire.

Our life is like a revolving wheel of the cycle. Within it, the experience and learning of the past, activity of the present and dreams for future amalgamate continuously. Along with pleasure, cycle gives us the confidence, balance and inspiration to reach our goals. If we draw these lessons from the cycle and take decisions about our life; then our path can become very clear.

Maya Sharma (82) lives in Delhi. She is a political scientist and teacher by training. Several years after retiring as a school teacher in 1997, she continues to teach by inspiring young and old around her to believe in themselves, stand up for their beliefs, be there for one another and not stop before the stop line, a line that moves a little farther each time, she reaches it! She can be contacted at +91-9899101404 and her daughter's email id: jaya.preeti@gmail.com

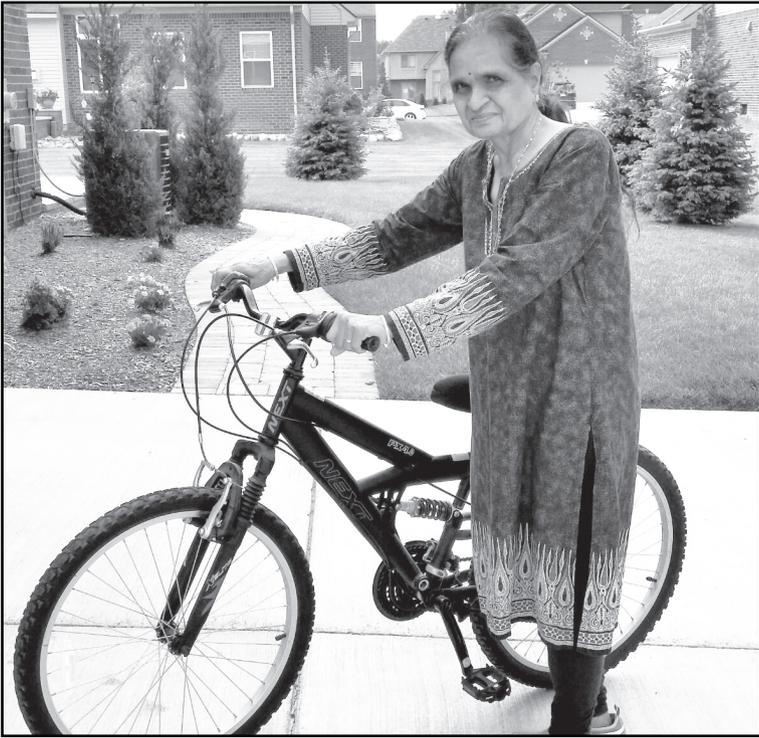
MY BICYCLE AND ME

Sujata Rao

I lived in Indore with my parents, two brothers and two sisters. We are from Karnataka and our father, T. Bheemacharya had a job in Indore and so, we became Indorians. We lived in a locality called Harsiddhi with a big maidan (playground) in front of our house.

My elder sister, Usha, and I learnt to ride a cycle at the age of around 8-10 years. Our elder brother, Raghavendra, taught us how to ride a bicycle. Once we were seated on the bicycle, he held the handle and walked with us and after some time took his hands off to let us ride on our own. We fell numerous times but in the end, we somehow learnt to ride the bicycle.

At that time, we did not own a bicycle. One could rent a bicycle for an *anna* (1/16th of a rupee) or two an hour. I remember, we used to beg our mother and ask for an *anna* or two so that we could rent one cycle for a couple of hours. *Amma* used to say ‘Where is the need to learn cycle for you girls?’ But at the time, we were possessed with the idea of learning to ride the cycle. The persistence and the *annas* from *Amma* paid off later in life.



My sister was two years elder to me but both of us were studying in the same class. Whatever we learned, we did it together. We used to go to school by the school bus until class 12. My sister got married after matric (10th class) but my brother-in-law, Shree Sureshchandra Moyde wanted her to pursue B. A. (Bachelor of Arts). So my sister studied even after getting married and finished her B. A.

In my time, which is in 1955, there were no classes for the B. A. course at the girl's college so I had to go to another college in which boys and girls studied together. I began to go to the Holkar College which was quite far from our home. First, I used to go by the city bus which I had to catch near Rajwada, which nearly cost me 6 *annas* daily. In those days even 6 *annas* seemed very expensive.

I thought of commuting by bicycle and there was a discussion at home about this. My brother-in-law, who was in Indore for some work and was home that time, heard our discussion. He bought me a ladies cycle the next day and said, "Here is your cycle, Saroj." We were all stunned and I was very happy.

Now the problem was that whether or not I would be able to ride after so many days. I gathered all my courage, took a deep breath of much needed strength and rode to college on the first day and every day for the rest of my college days. I even found a friend who learned to ride the cycle around the same time. She and I went to college together.

From 1953 to 1956, I cycled regularly. Once, on a college examination day, my friend's cycle got punctured on the way. There was a cycle shop on the road where we could rent a bicycle and pay the money later. She said I won't be able to ride a different cycle. I said I will take that and you ride my cycle. Somehow, we reached the college in time and the examination went alright.

After finishing B. A., I left the college. After a month, I felt I should do my M. A. I wanted to do it in Political Science. Since Holkar College did not have this subject, I had to go to Christian College, which was close by to Holkar. I commuted by myself. Once, on the way to college, my tyre lost air. I thought it had developed a puncture but it was due to a tear in the valve tube. At the same time, my brother's friend was passing by on the road. He stopped for me and came to a nearby cycle shop with me. He got my cycle repaired. I did not have any money, so he paid and I reached the college in time.

Once when I was going to the college, a tonga (horse-driven carriage as public transport) was coming towards me and the horse suddenly turned out of control. I saw it from a distance and got down the cycle. However, while moving the cycle to the road side, the tonga came upon me. The cycle slipped out of my hand and hit the tonga and broke down. I was frightened. A classmate

of mine was also on his way to college and he had seen me. He helped me to lift the cycle and told the tongawalla to get the cycle repaired. He put the cycle in the tonga and gave it to the cycle shop for repairs. We reached college on foot. On our way back, we got my cycle from the shop and came back home. Like this, every time something incredible happened or I met someone who helped me out. I am grateful to all of them.

I got married in 1962 and began to live in Jamshedpur. My name also changed to Sujata Rao. In Jamshedpur, I rode the cycle only once.

Recently, I visited my youngest son in America and I rode a cycle once in the garden. At that time, I was about 70 years old. Now, at 78, even though it is not possible, I still have the desire to ride a cycle.

Sujata Rao (78) grew in Indore and lives in Jamshedpur. She is a mother of three boys and grandmother of seven children. She is a Hindi author and a translator from Kannada to Hindi. She rode a Sen Raleigh ladies bicycle wearing a sari in late 50s and early 60s. She can be contacted through her daughter-in-law Ujwala at: akujwala@gmail.com

CHILDHOOD DAYS

Basanti Sahu

Innocent childhood and its lovely desires! Pleadings to fulfil those desires and the happiness one gets after getting those desires fulfilled is a feeling as though one has got all the riches of the world. Riding a cycle is also one of those desires, which in the long list of life's experiences has an important place.

My mind's flight takes me to those lanes of my childhood. Sitting on my small cycle and with friends of my age, my brothers and sisters, I was living a care-free life filled with self-confidence. It was not like the present hurriedness of life or the polluted environment that surrounds us now. We did not care about better health-just riding a cycle had a pleasure that was totally different. Every street and locality used have a cycle shop. We used to wait for hours for our turn for these cycles that were available for 10 paise per hour in the shops that rented out the cycles. The shop owner was Mahadev Chaurasia, whom we children used to call Bachhu Babu. The moment he would give us our favourite cycle, we used to feel so grand and proud as if we were riding an aeroplane and not a cycle. Sometimes '*kainchi*' (putting one leg



through below the bar in a ‘gents’ cycle) and sometimes leaving one hand off the handle, we used to try different tricks on our cycle rides.

The trouble many times was that the cycle chain would come off again and again and half the time was spent in putting it back. Sometimes, the cycle would develop a puncture and we children would drag it till the shop, thereby spending the limited money we had and wasting some time. Such events did come in way of our pleasure of riding the cycle.

Our neighbourhood uncle, ‘Chachaji’, used to put a steel ring on the ends of his *pyjamas* on his ankles so that the *pyjamas* do not get stuck in the cycle while riding. In those days, girls used to wear *lehanga* and blouse. One day, I put a ring on my *lehanga* so that the *lehanga* would not get stuck in the cycle. The moment I put my leg on the other side of the cycle, I fell down along with the cycle, bruised my hand and feet and the *lehanga* also got torn. I was sorrier for tearing the *lehanga* than for the bruises. Every day there were new stories attached to the cycle rides.

When we grew up a little, we wanted to ride a bigger cycle. Whenever we found a cycle at home, we would quietly take it out for a ride and then keep it back safely.

Since the girls were given household work, the time they'd grown up, most families insisted a ban on riding the cycle, as did mine. It then became very difficult to ask for a cycle for oneself. We had a blue coloured cycle that belonged to our younger brother which we all used to ride carefully and keep it shining clean. I used that cycle for the entire duration of my high school education. The 'two wheeler' era started. I got a chance to ride the Luna and then the Kinetic. I was a confident rider because I rode the cycle for most of my childhood years. So for many years, I rode these vehicles safely without any accidents. Today not only adults but even children have four-wheelers vehicles. Everyone has become busy.

Four-wheeler vehicles have become a demand for these times. On my way to the hospital now, I see only one or two cycles. Watching through my car window, I often think about the difference between the happiness of riding a cycle in my childhood and that of these cycle riders who are pulling their cycles in the hot sun due to compulsion. Drivers of most big vehicles curse the cycle riders because they find them so slow or that they come in front of their vehicles.

The story that began in the decade of 60s is entering the sixth decade of my life. I have decided that I will ride a cycle again. May be I will get the confidence to participate in a cycle race.

In modern times, there are a thousand channels on the television. The hope of going to the moon has come nearer. With one click, we get all the information but like all skills in life, we still have to learn to ride the cycle ourselves even if our knees get bruised. Perhaps life wants to teach us that without jumping into doing it, real things cannot be learned. It is necessary to learn to

ride a cycle in a thousand different ways in one's life so that life can move smoothly.

Dr. Basanti Sahu (61), M.S. (Obs. & Gynae.), is working with the Madhya Pradesh government since over three decades. As a young girl, she commuted to her school on foot, on her cycle or on a boat. When not practising as a doctor, she can be heard reciting old and rare poems of forgotten poets or experimenting with ingredients in the kitchen to bring out great surprises. She maintains a secret diary of her personal poetry. She can be contacted at: drbsahu@gmail.com

CYCLE, MY DEAR FRIEND

Jyoti Thacker

Cycle has been a part of my life as a dear friend in more ways than one. As a child, while trying to learn to ride the cycle to fulfil my hobby, I fell down once and got badly hurt. Seeing the scar of that accident brings a smile to my face even today. When I took an admission into college to pursue an M.A. in Economics, my hobby became a necessity. Riding on the cycle as I spoke to the winds and reaching my college in time used to fill my heart with pleasure and satisfaction.

In 1993, life took an unexpected turn and I happened to migrate to a post-war Kuwait, with my husband and two daughters. There were not many things women could do independently there. Cycling seemed out of question. I joined a group of Indian women, who used to study the Bhagwat Gita and other epics and teach young Indian children. I soon became one of the teachers. There used to be an evening class once a week in one of the homes. In every class, we used to read out anecdotes from one of these old epics, to illustrate analogies with current life and communicate some important life lessons. I used to prepare my talk some days

in advance and I found myself deriving an increasing number of analogies with the cycle, in my talks. By using the example of a cycle, it was always easy to explain to the children and yet so exact in conveying what I wanted to. I discovered there was so much to the cycle itself.

As far as I understand, cycle teaches us the art of life. Life is another name for balance. Similarly, cycle is always in control only when we keep balance. The wheels of a cycle appear to me as the cycle of life. As life means to move and evolve, cycle also moves forward only when we make an effort. It teaches us this simple formula of life and teaches us self-reliance. The simplicity of the cycle is worth understanding. With a little maintenance, it runs happily. Similarly and if we like, we can live happily with limited needs. If one gets companionship of the cycle and if they see the message it brings along with it, they can be released of the shackles as they move freely with it to just ride and ride on with it.

Jyoti Thacker (60) has lived in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, Kuwait, Hyderabad and Mumbai. She is an artist, a naturopath and a level-3 Reiki practitioner. She has adopted a variety of street animals since her childhood and has rekindled the habit in her two daughters. She is currently a student of Landscape painting at Sir J. J. School of Arts, Mumbai. She can be contacted on +919619815211

PARTNERS IN BOREDOM

Ujwala Asundi Kumar

As a teenager in the ‘middle’ with an older brother and a baby sister, I was often a misfit when it came to a friends’ group. My brother had his gang of boys who lived in the apartment blocks adjacent ours and my younger sister had her band of little buddies. Girls my age too lived in homes around ours but somehow the girls in these apartments never wanted to come out to play in the evenings. They would often invite me over to knitting or crochet sessions, accompanied by sliced cake and doll house decorations. The free spirit in me yearned for something more active and exciting.

In my younger years, I was the de-facto goal keeper, wicket keeper, boundary fielder in all the games that my brother kindly allowed me to go play with him and his friends. As we grew older, realization probably dawned on them that I was a girl and not meant to be a part of their games. Hence, I was unceremoniously dropped from all athletic or team sport events and had to settle for needlework and talk about shopping for the best craft items.

My mind cringed and I ached for an activity that would be more meaningful for me. Very soon after, my father purchased a shiny maroon-red bicycle. It was a super exciting event. All those trial sessions on a rented man-size bicycle that I'd had on my trips to my native village of Gadag, Karnataka, seemed to be finally paying off. I asked Daddy and he readily agreed to let me ride the bicycle around in our apartment's compound. Oh what a privilege it was! It meant so much that I thought nothing about hauling the bicycle up and down two floors on my shoulders every evening. We lived on the second floor.

I would get on the cycle and then would begin an endless series of conversations with the wind. I would plan the next day's activities at school when sitting plush on the saddle and manoeuvring a tricky turn. I would imagine story plots for plays that I wanted to act in. I would rehearse what to say to the school friend who had borrowed my favourite book and had forgotten to return it. My bicycle was my constant companion who listened to me without judgement or comment. The wind in my hair when I took every turn, the buzz of the chain when I sped up the pedals, the sweet but urgent sound of the bell, are all forever embedded in my memory. The sight of a bicycle now brings those memories back and a ride once in a while gets me connected back to my silent partner who never let me suffer from boredom. I was alone but never lonely, thanks to my bike buddy!

Ujwala Asundi Kumar (44) is an MBA in marketing management from Mumbai. She moved to Jamshedpur 18 years ago. Currently she works with an internet start-up-Scra2ch Media (Pronounced as scratch media) - as Head - Partnerships and Strategy. She is a mother to three daughters, a theatre enthusiast and has conducted theatre workshops for children and adults, and produced & directed stage performances. She believes in living life with a balance of enjoyment and spirituality. She can be contacted at: akujwala@gmail.com

A SIX KILOMETRE WALK

Shamala Kittane

A six kilometre walk can be so boring only when you are anxious to get to your destination. But never was destination my objective, I just enjoyed the everyday morning walk to work, the slow piling up of traffic. This was in 2004 and traffic pile up was indeed slow. The traffic in Bangalore was in its infancy stages and who knew then that it was going to grow into an ugly monster.

The mute yet wise spectators-the rain trees in the NIMHANS campus, the roadside vendors, were my muse. It would take a medium paced (and lost at random occasions) person like myself a good hour to reach office. I would have 'the walk' stories to share with friends at work right at the start of the day.

The decision to walk to work just had to be. I liked to walk and enjoyed to watch the dogs on the roads go about their 'busy'ness-either they slept or hurriedly ran to save the world.

It was my mother's suggestion that I buy a two-wheeler instead of walking to work every day to get me faster to work and back home earlier too. It wasn't a bad idea so I went and bought myself



a bike, a red Hero Buzz. I bought this on the streets of Commercial Street. I chose the rather glam location against the suggested Chikpet market (by an uncle), because it was also my first date with a colleague at work. So we bought the bike and to appear cooler to my date, I even asked the bicycle shop owner to throw in some gears on to my jazzy red bike. We pushed the bike to the nearby Cariappa Memorial Park, rode a little and worked together to put the fallen chain back onto the bike. By the end of the evening, I was in love, in love with my red bike. I'm not even sure how my date went but we parted that very evening.

The next day, my bike was the talk at the office. Everybody was appreciative of me riding and braving the traffic. Really, it wasn't half as bad as it is now to ride on a bicycle in Bangalore. They all seemed to 'oh-so-want-to' cycle down too. While it was encouraging, nobody ever did.

Bicycles are such conversation starters. Being one of the first few to ride a bicycle to an IT company, I was pretty much the talk of the town—well, only within my family circles and they all seemed to be on my side and cheered me on. I enjoyed the ride and loved the good attention. Whenever I stopped to buy something on the road, the crowd around and the vendors used to be super impressed with me and my bike. Soon, traffic in Bangalore started to become gnarly, while there were many people hopping on to the fun bike, many more were deterred by the traffic.

By now, I had several bicycle friends who had started biking around the same time as me or earlier. We were turning out to be quite a group now. A good friend in the group said I could do with a better bike and he introduced me to the world of beautiful, lightweight imported bikes. I was awed and wanted to own them all. I did not buy any for a while since there were just too many options and it was confusing for someone who thought the red bike with gears was the best buzz. I eventually decided to just walk into this popular imported bicycle shop and pick up an imported bicycle-Schwinn Mesa, my second long term companion. It was an attractive red, white and black sporty looking MTB with 8 gears and disc brakes. I now owned something precious, too precious to allow me to sleep in peace. I painted her black. It was a crude job but done with love. I was sure no one would now steal it. So, mission accomplished! Everybody else around me was in shock because it was only the second day of the bright shiny bike which was now a matte patchy black. She rode just fine nevertheless. This bike took me around-rebelled one ways and traffic signals, hopped onto footpaths, weaved through heavy traffic, swore at lousy honking car people and just made people around wonder at the sheer madness of bicycling through the ‘now infamous’ Bangalore traffic.

By this time, I was mad enough to have quit my IT job, to walk into a bicycle shop and very reluctantly ask to be a mechanic

at the shop. BOTS (Bums On The Saddle) was open to it and thus started my on-job training as a mechanic. I worked as a mechanic for close to a year. I went on to complete my understanding of bikes by learning how to build one at CAT (Centre for Appropriate Transport, Eugene, Oregon, USA). It is quite an experience to work in a shop filled with machines (lathe, vertical and horizontal drills, sanders, CAD and CAM, TIG welders) where you can build your own bike.

I returned to India and worked as a wheel builder for a while. Being a staunch engineer who liked to work in the background, I didn't explore starting a workshop of my own. If you like to build bikes and have learnt to do so, you should just start a workshop where you can handcraft beautiful bikes. I settled down to focus on my other interests of research and writing. I worked as a researcher in an organisation in Bangalore for about 11 months. Happy Earth Enterprises, for whom I built wheels, is also the amazing bicycle distributor shop where I bought the greatest steel bike in my opinion and heart-The Surly Straggler. I am a commuter, biker and will always be.

Shamala lives in Bangalore. She can be contacted at: shamalakittane@gmail.com

MY CYCLE AND ME

Aditi Joshi Sharma

There are some memories that tell us about the most beautiful times of our lives. Refreshing these memories, I, Aditi Sharma (who used to be Aditi Joshi) am going to share some experiences. When I rode the cycle, I never realised what I got out of it but today when I think about it, I feel as if those were the golden days.

My First Cycle, 1993

In those days, we lived in Khargone, a small town in the Nimar region of Madhya Pradesh. I got my first cycle when I was about eight or nine years old. My maternal cousin's cycle was specially being brought for me to use. He was several years elder to me and had used the cycle for years. He was now going to buy a new cycle and so he gave me his old one. I felt great that day. The cycle was brought in a Jeep. It was a very beautiful cycle. My Papa used to teach me how to ride it. In those days, perhaps cycles with support wheels rarely came by. After learning to ride that cycle, I used to go with my elder brother and his friends, who

already had their cycles, to do the rounds on the cycle. I had become free. I did not have to sit behind my brother. I got used to go riding on my cycle. We had a group of 5-6 people who were in the age group of 10-15 years. We all used to go on our cycles to do the rounds. Many times, I used to sit with my brother on that small cycle on the carrier seat and ride along. We used to have great fun.

My Second Cycle

When I rode my first cycle so much that it was no longer fit for repairs, I got a chance to get a brand new cycle. When I reached class four, I got a new cycle. It was an Atlas cycle. I called her 'Kadambini'. I liked that name. My Papa used to come with me till the school, with him on his scooter and me on my cycle. He did it for 3-4 months. When he was convinced that I could ride on my own, I began to ride alone to school or with my friends sometimes. All the dangerous stunts had been executed on my cycle by my brother and me. This was our favourite time pass during those days. Well, where was the time to get bored? When we used to be away during the summer vacations, we used to leave our cycles with some relatives.

Once we went to Indore to stay with my maternal uncle. There were four of us, children, and only two cycles. We used to ride the cycles taking turns. Truly, that phase of childhood was a glorious one. Like this, time and years went by.

My Third Cycle

Probably, everybody from that era will recognise the name, BSA Lady Bird-specially designed for ladies and very beautiful and attractive. This was my third cycle. I got it in my seventh standard. By that time, all my girl friends had a cycle. I used to go to the school and for my tuitions on my cycle. I also used to do some more work on my own like going to the vegetable market. Truly, like time, I also used to fly on my Lady Bird. My brother did not

borrow that cycle because of its name. Lady Bird stayed with me for a long time. I took it to Indore during 2003–04. We took it by putting it on top of a bus. Then, I was preparing for Medical Entrance Examinations and I used my cycle to go for coaching classes. I got an admission, I moved to Indore and my cycle stayed back in Khargone. That was my last cycle. By now, my mother perhaps has given it away to someone who needed it more. I never rode a cycle after that but yes, I have never felt as free with a two-wheeler or a four-wheeler as I did with my cycle.

I can definitely say that from my childhood years to when I reached college, the cycle played an important role. With my cycle, I felt independent. I was free to come and go anywhere and more than anything else, it gave me those glorious experiences that cannot be forgotten. The memories that I have with my brother and friends with the cycle are beautiful and heart-warming. My Papa, who himself is a cycle lover, taught me the maintenance of a cycle. From time to time, he taught me the rules of how to look after it and he enlightened me with the knowledge on health benefits of cycling.

I don't have a cycle today but I will definitely get one and spend some time with it with the same enthusiasm once again.

Aditi Joshi Sharma is physiotherapist with, 'Impact Physiotherapy', Bangalore. She can be contacted at: aditi.joshi1302@gmail.com or on +91 9740874883

THE PALWA SUPERFAST

Divya Palwa

5.14 am. Still a minute left for the alarm to go off but I was up. It was the first day of my new found independence after all. Anay is now two and a half years old and it is time for a fresh start. Despite my first time alone on Bangalore roads and while it was still dark, I ignited the engine of my friend's bike beaming with a big smile and armed with confidence on my riding skills. I thanked the only cycle I had in the past. If not for her, I could never have learnt to ride a bike. I rode off to my yoga training centre as my family was still in deep slumber.

I was around ten years old when I got my first cycle. We lived in a small town called Nagda in Madhya Pradesh. I accompanied my father to the nearest city, Ujjain, to buy my cycle. So excited was I that on our way back on the train, I made sure all the people seated or sleeping in my bay and the adjacent bays of my compartment, had seen this most beautiful new white bicycle.

My beautiful new bike with two extra supporting wheels was the next best thing that had happened to me after my little sister.



It just flew when on road and with it, I flew. Together we rode around the town, singing, every single day and completed several projects, like learning all the routes within the permitted limits, sneaking out to a nearby village, learning routes to houses of everyone I knew in town (even if they didn't know me, my school principal, for example). Oh, we did so much together, me and my 'Palwa Superfast.' That was her name. She had to have my surname. She was like my sister after all. She was my family member and I took care of her. I would give her a bath and

always wanted to dress her up but if only I could. She had come with extra wheels so that it became easier for me to learn to ride and get less hurt in the process. The extra wheels were taken out in matter of two weeks. I can never forget the joy I had felt when I looked back while riding, to realise that I am riding without the support of the extra wheels. I did not return home for many hours after that. For days, I would come back in the evenings with legs soiled and bloodied but with a big smile on my face. It never hurt me somehow.

I once wanted to make a house in our lawn and I had a plan. I made trips to a construction site near my father's plant, picked up one brick at a time, fastened it on to my cycle's carrier and rushed back to my lawn. I managed to pile up over a hundred bricks, I remember. I stopped when my mother berated me for piling up so many bricks in the lawn. 'But these would be just enough for the house I want to make', I thought. I constructed a house with many bedrooms and bathrooms with two to three layers of brick thickness to each of its wall. I still remember that house. One could simply jump from one room to the other.

It was hardly six months with Palwa Superfast when I was told that we were moving out of the country and that I have to let go off my white baby sister. They gave it for free to one of the helper's children. I felt those kids were very lucky for I never got a cycle again in the country I moved to.

As I write this, I can't help but wonder if my Palwa Superfast is still flying out there somewhere.

Divya lives in Bangalore. An ex-banker, she is now mostly found ruminating and enjoying the stillness of her home, practising yoga and meditation, making plans to learn languages, dance, music and owning a cycle again. A wanderer by spirit, Divya still chooses to bathe herself in fresh air when she seeks to find her centre. She can be contacted at: divya.palwa@gmail.com

BENGALURU TO HYDERABAD ON A BICYCLE

Indira Penubolu

Cycling to me has only been recently rediscovered. As a child, I used to enjoy cycling around my colony but the major chunk of cycling was in Germany. I was a 17 year old youth exchange student. Cycling was my only form of commute to work and back in the quaint hilly city of Wasserburg that lay close to the Bavarian Alps. A fancy, geared Peugeot bicycle was lent to me by my host family. Through thick and thin, rain, cold and snow, my bicycle was my best friend over all the steep climbs and ecstatic downhill.

Later, during college years in India, I used to commute through the thickest of traffic on my regular gearless Hero cycle. It was a rewarding feeling to watch so many stunned faces as I criss-crossed my way through standstill traffic. My teachers were impressed with my hard work.

Almost 10 years later, the year 2015 really redefined my stint with cycling. I bought a second-hand geared Schwinn Hybrid in January and I started to ride it around Tank Bund in Hyderabad. I used to ride a minimum of 20 km a day and then moved on to



cycling up to Tumkunta for idlis in the mornings. My first 100 came as a real surprise when I cycled to Warangal in the hot month of March, barely two and a half months after I had rediscovered my love for cycling. From then onwards, there was no looking back. I did many a 100 km rides to Narsapur, to Yadigirigutta, and even attempted but DNF (did not finish) a 200 km Brevet, an unguided unsupported ride with a time limit of 13.5 hours, to Ananthgiri hills.

The highlight of all of my cycling escapades so far was the three and a quarter days of cycling from Bengaluru to Hyderabad. There was a non-stop dose of adrenaline boost and the feat left us with a lifetime of memories. It took me a lot of practice and will power to pull this one off. The motivating factor was also to raise funds for physically disabled sports persons.

We started as early as 4.30 am from Border Security Force (BSF), Yelhanka. It was still dark. There were 60 of us including the BSF *jawans* and 4 para-cyclists and we lit up a long trail on the National Highway 7 with our front lights. We made good headway before our breakfast stop. The sun rose and the road was beautiful. We cycled in a straight line on the highway over undulating landscape. We reached Penukonda (140 km away from start) for

lunch where we were greeted with flower garlands and a thousand people from the town. After sharing pleasantries with Mrs. Paritala Ravi, the widowed politician of the Telugu Desam Party and after a long heavy lunch, we headed for our final destination of the day—Ananthapur (190 km away from start). We reached around 7 pm.

We were tired, sweaty and had just enough time for a hot shower, dinner and some rest. Next day, we started at 5 am and made our way to Kurnool covering about 150 km for the day. Many hours of cycling halts, a bit of rain and selfie breaks later, we reached Kurnool in the evening around 6.30 pm. Here, we were welcomed by the Telugu Desam Party politicians and people from the town. We made a speech about cycling, its physical and mental health benefits for both handicapped and non-handicapped people. The day ended with a satisfying dinner and a much deserved good night's sleep.

When we woke up on the third morning of our trip, our bodies were still tired and muscles were sore but our mind was set to cover the distance. After all, we had a cause and a goal. Even the Tamil/Telugu film actress, Regina Cassandra joined us on this stretch, making it four women on the ride. The cherry on the cake was when some motor bikers saw me and rode along with me and asked why I was doing this. When I told them that we were spreading the word about the numerous benefits of cycling amongst handicapped people and raising funds through this ride, some of them offered their money for the cause. That was the moment of success and I realized my goal had been truly achieved.

We crossed many rivers, lakes, farms and striking sights. We reached Jadcherla (130 km for the day) by evening and visited Kairo farms, a dairy, and had dinner there.

Our last leg from Jadcherla to Shamsahabad and into Hyderabad city was covered on the last day. It was very memorable

also because we arrived on 15th August (Independence Day) and were joined by Nara Lokesh (politician, minister and businessman in Andhra Pradesh), who also cycled with us. Our grand and successful entry was welcomed by a 3 km long human chain and ended at the NTR Bhavan opposite KBR Park.

I was tired and exhausted but I was on an adrenaline high by the end of it. When I recall, I learnt a lot in those three days. The key was to ride slowly, steadily, maximizing mileage on the down-slopes, getting good rest and massaging the sore muscles. But most of all, I learnt that hard work always pays off.

Indira lives in Hyderabad. She can be contacted at: indira.penubolu@gmail.com

PEDALLING THROUGH THE PUDDLES

Yamini Krishna

Bicycle! It conjures up several images all at once—from different times with different people, all connected by a single thread. Perhaps I should call it a chain.

I asked my sister to write down memories of her cycle. ‘I don’t think I ever rode a cycle properly. For me, Scooty was freedom. I think I didn’t get to ride a bicycle because of you. You always told Amma to see that I didn’t follow you. I think I will blame it on you’, she laughed out aloud.

That was to be my story too. The narrative would have been a little different though. Whenever I think of a bicycle, I am always reminded of a little girl following me on a tricycle and that I am busy looking back to check if she is alright. Freedom for me came attached with a tricycle.

The Hindi films of the ‘70s always had a reunion song for when the family splits, they would all reunite by singing the theme song. These songs would always play in the background of the narrative. I’ve always fancied such a song—a song for each occasion.

I had a song for my bicycle too. A song which I have to sing every time I ride. A song which, for me, verbalises the bicycle ride itself. For someone as restless as I am, cycle is a perfect companion. It keeps things moving-sort of strikes a perfect balance between pedalling and stopping. A metaphor for life.

Each time I pedal, the wind hits my face, I sing Me Zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya.. [I kept keeping up pace with life]

As a child, everybody draws the same picture-a rising sun, mountains and a river flowing from in between. I must have also drawn something similar but if I have to imagine a place, it would have to be a road, maybe I should call it a path, a path where one could walk forever. Walk into nothingness. I would prefer walking any day over anything else but I think cycles would be the only thing that would go with the walk, a non-intrusive companion. I have always shunned away from owning things. What if one wants to run away? These things would become impediments. They will have to be gotten rid of first, before one ran away. I always wonder how people travel on motorbikes and cars. It often seems that one has to carry them rather than being carried by them. Cycle is probably the only thing that dares to walk with you.

Travel time is probably the only time my body can afford stillness without feeling guilty. Each time I am on the move, I look for places that can lend me the space to pedal. I watch the wheels splashing through the water puddles and sing out aloud..har fiqr ko dhuen me udata chala gaya. [I kept blowing away all my worries in dust].

A walker who could be spotted on random roads listening to stories, what she calls research. Yamini Krishna can be contacted at: yaminkrishn@gmail.com

BEST ABROAD EXPERIENCE

As a Student with a Bike

Soujanya Mantravadi

The biking experience in Europe while I was a student there is one of my favourite memories. It was the most affordable and the best way to get a feel of the place and absorb the atmosphere.

Easter Break in Italy

It was the Easter break of the year and I kicked off a trip to Italy for a week. I was 22 and it was my first solo backpack trip abroad. I had a day in Pisa and I explored it on a rented bicycle. Biking turned out to be a great idea during the trip as I was able to observe the new place more closely without having to walk for hours. It saved me time which was important as one often has limited time at hand when travelling. To a traveller in Europe, I would recommend cycling as a way to explore most cities for they are easy to cycle around, the mode provides a decent way to discover the place and appreciate its architecture.

Velib (Freedom Bike) - My Best Friend in Paris

I would say that 'tour de France' affiliates well with France if it is



on bicycles. To me, France and Paris is all about the memories—most that I have of the evenings. Bulk of them are from my saddle-eye view through Velib.

Paris has a 700 km network of bicycle paths. Velib is a bicycle share system of Paris with the highest market penetration in the world. It is the 12th largest bike sharing project by circulation. Interestingly, all of the top 15 projects are those of Chinese cities except Velib. Velib blends well with the Parisians. I came across many riders with no compromise on their fashion, sometimes with high heels and designer suits. I copied the Parisian style and started riding in my office attire, quite comfortably. Well, nothing close to designer robes and stilettos!

It was in winter 2014 that I started my internship in the La Défense area (north-west periphery) and was living at cite universitaire (southern periphery). My workplace to home was a travel time of an hour on metro. So I worked out a way to bike from work in the evenings. Each day, I would take a different route, to get familiar with every main street in central Paris.

Paris is called ‘Ville des noctambules’ (or city of night owls). Paris definitely dazzles in the evenings. The old quarters with cobbled stone streets look so pretty, cosy cafés and bars play jazz & pop, and these Soir-de-Paris (evening in Paris) elements are

sighted better, while riding a bicycle. Riding a bike to grab a crepe and a coffee on the street, to lay down on the grass next to R. Seine with an e-reader and sometimes with nothing, to museum-stroll in Louvre or Pompidou (museum entry free for under 25 year old) was my favourite routine. All the while, a bicycle was giving me the best companionship to make it all work.

Cycling, a Gift for a Swiss Resident

Towards the end of 2014, I moved to rural Switzerland to join a research lab. I had a bicycle to move around the sparsely populated villages in the region. It was therapeutic to ride through the farms located far apart, most of the times next to River Aare and a few times through the forest. There were many sheep around the guest house where I was staying. These were some tranquil rural scenes of Switzerland that I will never forget. My bicycle gave me a chance to get the Swiss-experience that was beyond its tourism image.

I would bike from Dottingen (border town in Swiss) to Waldshut (border town in Germany) at least once a month to pick up groceries from Germany. I would stop at my will and sometimes at a local German café in that town to eat a yummy Apfelstudel. Thanks to the transit trains that allow bicycles. They rescued me and my bicycle buddy Jem, from carrying the grocery bags on our way back. This activity gave me enormous confidence and a sense of empowerment. I could bike to a neighbouring country to shop for my groceries only because my bicycle made the ride so joyful.

I moved back home in Hyderabad when I was 25. In my spare time now, I am more likely to be found relaxing in a café than on the saddle. Nevertheless, I hope to get back to a life where I can bike to fill some fresh air in my lungs and lots of joy in my heart.

Soujanya, 27, is a graduate in mechanical engineering discipline from KTH Stockholm. She is a researcher by profession and currently works at a start-up in her home town, Hyderabad.

PANCHALI OF PONDICHERRY

Hema Vaishnavi

Pondicherry, the city of bicycles, is best explored on a bicycle. If walking is perhaps the best way to get acquainted with a place, bicycle makes it memorable and joyful.

The best place to rent a bicycle is in the busy market road of Jawaharlal Nehru Street, where you can find the oldest and perhaps, the biggest bicycle shop of Pondicherry, 'Janata Bicycle Store'. Every street has at least one shop that will rent out a bicycle to you.

Once atop a bicycle, you can start exploring this intriguing city and the first thing you will notice is the sheer number of bicycles around you. Men and women of all ages, and children, pedalling away to their destination.

One could start heading towards The *Ville Blanche* or 'White Town', the French part of the town which is practically filled with bicycle stands and people buzzing about their bicycles.

The special thing about this coastal city of Pondicherry is due to the colonial rule it has a unique environment. Pondicherry gave

a kick-start to the women's liberation movement compared to the rest of the country. And this can be seen in how the bicycle has been adopted by the citizens of this unique place, especially the women.

The French grid pattern architecture and the houses might give you the impression that you are not in India, but once you look around the people and how they go about their business, will give you the same impression!

Today, when you go in to the White Town, which also has the revered Aurobindo Ashram, one can find men and women of all ages, classes on a variety of bicycles.

The Janata Bicycle Stores

Talking to one of the teachers at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education-an elderly lady aged 66, who rides to the school on her Rayleigh bicycle-says that she's always used the bicycle to commute within the city and often on long rides too. On this particular day, she's wearing her khaki shirts, which is part of the school PT uniform, as she goes about her day.

Upon asking about her precious Rayleigh which has been painted blue now, she beamed and said, 'I've been riding this bicycle for more than 25 years and I've maintained it by myself until a few years ago, but it has become difficult to do so because of my age. Nonetheless, I still use to commute every day'.

She moved to Pondicherry in 1961, and her father, along with her granduncle started a bicycle shop in Pondicherry, the Janata Bicycle Store, in August, 1961. 'My father was working in a cycle shop in Chennai, and he used the bicycle for daily commuting. My grand uncle came and started the shop in Pondicherry. We came from Chennai, because we wanted to stay in the Aurobindo Ashram. The whole family came here, and the Janata Bicycle Store is still running, run by the great grandson,' she says.

Upon probing further about the cycling days during her prime,

she recollects, 'So we were all cycling as students and even today as adults we cycle. I've been cycling since I was 13 or 14. Although we did learn how to ride before that, I got my cycle at that age, I remember I was given an Atlas bicycle specially made for girls. We have to pass a test to our instructor at the school. Once we passed the test, we were allowed to have our own bicycles. We used to go on long bike rides to see places nearby. I've done long rides to places like Gingee fort, which is about 70 kilometres from here.'

'In Pondicherry, we were the first senior ladies who were wearing shorts and cycling. I remember cycling in Mahabalipuram too. The best thing about the bicycle is it allows you to be at peace and explore the place by yourself. You go silently, stop and enjoy the place. You enjoy much more because you are not going at a break neck speed. And that's why I love my cycle.'

She laments about the condition of the city today and says, 'Cycle is the best means of transport in my opinion. But today, the sheer number of two wheelers has contributed to the pollution. We don't really need those many bikes. Unless we're time pressed. But it hardly takes ten minutes more to reach from one place to another. Even for half a kilometre, people are using bikes. You can use a bicycle instead. It's more silent and it's a beautiful companion.'

The Multicultural City

The interesting thing, however, is men and women alike are oblivious to what they are wearing. Women in sarees, salwar and shorts are ubiquitous as children zooming about on their bicycles.

The thing about Pondicherry is this picturesque scene is not restricted to just the French part of the town. Once you move out and on to the areas populated by local Tamils, you'll be surprised to find women go about their work on cycles, the preferred mode of transport. One can see bicycles of all kinds, customized to people's use, baskets and panniers made of different materials.

There are just pockets of India where one can find such liberation in the air. From a 70-year-old French woman to a 13-year-old girl from a Tamil household, everyone uses the bicycle as a means of transport. The bicycle transcends class in this southern coastal city.

As you move from vintage buildings and their unique architecture of the French Quarters, you will find yourself pedalling along the bustling Tamil Quarters as you make your way through the Goubert Market, where you can find ladies from Tamilian households carrying supply from the market or going to work on their bicycles. You will notice that the bicycle have baskets of all sizes and shapes, made from straw, bamboos, wooden baskets and the regular metal ones. And these panniers carry heavy loads, sometimes one on each side of the bicycle, at the front or at the back. Women carry groceries, students carry their bags and books too.

The Tamil Quarter sits to the West of the French Quarter. It was separated from the latter by a Grand Canal that bisected downtown Pondicherry, and still runs through the city today. As you go about you will find that the city has change noticeably from the French part, in terms of architecture, the roads are more *kaccha* and the places of worship. Yet the part that remains unique to the entire city is the bicycle.

On the way to the Auro beach and on Auroville, you will find the Tamilians and French residents riding the bicycles. Somewhere near the Kuyilappalayam Higher Secondary School in Auroville, you will notice the local children commuting by bicycle.

Panchali

Upon talking to a young girl, Panchali, who tells her story about how she's been working in households for a few years now. 'I've been riding a bicycle since I was at least ten. I used to go to school by bicycle, and I loved my bicycle. But soon after class 7 I had to

give up school as my parents could no longer afford to send me to school. And since then I've been working in households to help my out my family.

For Panchali, who's now 19, travelling by foot isn't always easy as she has to travel at least 4-5 kilometres to work in households that pay her a decent wage. And there are times when it gets dark and she doesn't feel safe going by foot. 'For the first one year that I was working I struggled a lot because I didn't have a bicycle.



Panchali (Left)
Hema (Right)

We had to sell a lot many things at home, and my bicycle was one of them,' she says.

Panchali, who was determined to buy a bicycle, worked hard for a year and saved enough money to buy bicycle on instalments. (Yes, you can buy bicycles on instalments too!)

She now rides a pink ladybird, which she calls her companion. 'I've had this bicycle for almost five years now. I know I can't go too far but I can go to places that I want to within the city and riding along the University road and going to the beach is something that I can do on my own.'

PINKY AND CHITTY

Hema Vaishnavi

In the hopes to acquire a bright future, one sends their kids to schools and different classes or tuitions. Commuting to school has become a hurdle that many people have to deal with everyday. For parents who are well off and can afford to send them to schools with bus facilities or hire autos, there is no problem. But the people who face the real dilemma are those living on the fringes of the poverty line, who have no other option but to send their kids to nearby schools and often on bicycles. And there begins the urban dilemma.

Walking isn't much of an option owing to the enormous weight of the books that they carry, and riding a bicycle on the city roads has become a nightmare for the children. The numerous potholes, the mindless traffic and the amount of pollution and noise are intimidating enough.

This is the story of Pinky and Chitty, who go to the Madapati Hanumantha Rao Girls High School, a government run school in Hyderabad. The sisters who are aged 14 and 11 years old

respectively live nearly three kilometres away from the school and the two of them either take a bus to the school or prefer to go by walk.

Chitty, who's currently studying in class 6 loves to cycle. 'Cycling is my most favourite activity, next to playing in the park,' she says. For the 11 year old year Chitty, cycling is quite the luxury and the bicycle that she uses now, is a black BSA Hercules bicycle, a bicycle designed for boys. But Chitty and her sister are only too happy to ride and they fancy the boys' models more than 'Lady Birds'.

'The first time I learnt to cycle was a couple of years ago. It was handed down to me by someone who left the apartment building. It was a boy's bicycle and I was only too happy to get my hands on a cycle after pestering my father for quite some time now.'

The father works as a watchman in an apartment building and often gets things which are handed down to the sisters. Both the sisters have had their cycles that were hand-me-downs but both of them are now wary of getting on the saddle for a seemingly huge dilemma that most urban dwellers face today.

Pinky and Chitty love their bicycle and are too happy to run errands for the house on their bicycle. Chitty, who's often asked to fetch groceries by the housewives residing in the apartment building, goes out of her way on most days to run to the nearest store, any chance to get on the bicycle.

For Chitty and Pinky, the bicycle makes them feel one among the rest of the girls. These girls who were sidelined or felt couldn't quite mingle with the girls of the colony or the apartment building, now cycle with the other girls and boys of the colony. Although the two sisters share the only bicycle they own, they wish they had one of their own, like most girls of their school.

‘I have always wanted a gear cycle of my own, the one with silver mudguards like Preeti has. Preeti always gives it to me for a ride, and I love riding it but I’ve always wanted one of my own.’ Says Pinky. Preeti is another kid who resides in the apartment building.

It was just a few months ago during Holi that Pinky and her friend went to visit a friend close to the school, which changed Pinky and Chitty’s idea of cycling.

‘It was the time of Holi, so my friend and I decided to go a classmate’s house. We wanted to surprise her. We did not tell our parents, and since it was early in the morning, we were sure there would be no traffic. It was a great ride. The roads were empty and we were even riding in the middle of the main road!’ beams Pinky with excitement.

‘So we went to her place, she was surprised to see her. She has a cycle too, a pink ‘Lady Bird’, one that my sister has always wanted. She comes on a bicycle to school every day. I wish I could do that too, but my father never allows us take our bicycles to school. So we went for a ride and decided to come back before the traffic gets heavy. My father had no idea we were out on the roads. So we went about on the free roads, and looked at the metro construction nearby. Everything was so calm and hardly anybody was around. People were just setting up their stalls outside with the Holi colours, flowers, and what not,’ she says.

It was now time for Pinky to get back home. ‘We had a great time. I knew my father would be worried about but I was far from worried about anything. The traffic was getting heavy and we had to hurry. The metro constructors were getting about their work too and the noise was just too much to bear. I had cycled for about a kilometre, if I remember correctly, and a vehicle, which was coming in the wrong direction bumped into me and I fell from my cycle. For a few minutes I didn’t quite understand what

was happening but I got up and looked at my hands, which were bruised pretty badly. I was so scared that my father would start scolding and I was petrified that he would never allow me to use my bicycle again. I went home in a tensed state only to find that my father wasn't at home.'

Pinky washed her wounds and tidied herself, and she never told her parents about the incident. But the fear of the near mishap haunts her even today. Chitty, who witnessed a friend in an accident, has similar fears but the two sisters are ever ready get on their bicycles.

For Pinky and Chitty, even if they have cycles they are unable to go out freely on the roads. The dangerous traffic, the threat of an imminent accident and the people who look at the bicycles as menace, have left these two sisters wary of bicycles even as their hearts race at the idea of pedalling without a care in the world.

DEBORAH HEROLD

Kathakali Chanda

In November 2015, twenty-one-year-old Deborah Herold (born 18 February 1995 in Aberdeen, Andaman and Nicobar Islands) became the first Indian cyclist to climb to World no. 4 in individual rankings in 500 meters time trial, according to the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), cycling's global governing body. Her achievement came after the Track Asia Cup in New Delhi in November, where she won three medals, including gold in the women's elite sprint. Herold also became the first Indian cyclist to qualify for the prestigious Track Cycling World Championships held in London in March, where only the world's top 20 cyclists made the cut.

Herold, however, wears her rapid, spirited rise lightly. Before we speak to her at the indoor velodrome at the Indira Gandhi Sports Complex in Delhi, she rushes off to fetch chairs for everyone. She's candid about her struggles in a big city, with language in particular, and admits that she's made progress from last year, when she could only gesticulate. She doesn't have much of a life outside the velodrome, except the odd outings on Sundays, but



that's alright because the cycling arena feeds her singular obsession: Speed.

On most days, Herold tries to outpace herself on the 250 meter circular timber track. In between her training sessions, she searches for more speed-in the racing games she has downloaded on her smart phone.

Herold herself didn't have cycling ambitions until some years ago. Till then, hailing from a family of meagre means, hers was a story of any other Nicobarese tribal—modest and listless. Then came the morning after Christmas, 12 years ago, when their lives turned upside down. On December 26, 2004, nine-year-old Herold and her brother, three years younger, were woken up by their mother around dawn in their Car Nicobar home. By then, the earth was writhing from a quake measuring 9 on the Richter Scale somewhere off Indonesia. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an archipelago out in the Bay of Bengal, were bearing the first brunt of the quake on Indian landmass. As furniture tumbled around them, Herold's mother lifted her children in her arms and ran out. Before she could move to safety, towering tsunami waves swallowed the northernmost region of the Nicobar islands, and, as the water pummelled in, the girl slipped from her mother's grip. Herold didn't know how to swim and no one around stopped

to give her a hand. The only thing she could think of doing was to climb the nearest tree.

That was where she remained perched for the next five days, watching the water rise and ebb. 'I was hungry and there were a lot of mosquitoes but I just hung on,' says Herold. Once the water receded, and the search parties and her parents came looking for survivors, she cried out. 'My parents had given up hope. They thought I was dead. But not me. I never felt that I would give up.'

Giving up isn't Herold's thing. She fought through the aftermath of the tsunami devastation, helping her family rebuild their lives. Her survival instincts shone through once again when she began cycling and was uprooted from Car Nicobar and brought to the national capital, a city 10 times the size of her homeland. Apart from honing her skills on her bike, Herold used her three years in Delhi to pick up a working knowledge of English and meld into the Indira Gandhi Sports Complex hostel, which houses trainees from all corners of the country.

Last October, days before she was to leave for the Taiwan Cup Track International Classic, Herold came down with dengue, and lost 5 kg in bodyweight. It made the chief national cycling coach RK Sharma, under whom Herold is training at the Delhi camp, doubt her prospects at the tournament.

But not only did Herold make it to the tournament, she even returned with five medals, including gold in the women's elite sprint category. Her performance also helped her break into the top 10 in the individual category. 'She never lets go till the finishing line, never mind even if the competitor is ahead of her right from the start. That's what makes her a champion', says Sharma.

This fearless, raring-to-go spirit manifested in Herold when she was a child. At Car Nicobar, she would get into scuffles with boys and beat them hollow, or challenge them to climb ropes hung from trees and haul herself up at lightning speed before the others. This abundance of energy saw her try out all sorts of sports-sprint

runs, long jump, what have you. She made it to a local women's football team. She also won a 5 km race, leading the runner-up by a kilometre.

Cycling wasn't really a preference and she would tinker with the bike 'aise hi [just like that]'. When the word got around of a selection camp organised by the Sports Authority of India (SAI) in Port Blair in 2009, she pedalled in. With her regular bicycle and without any training, Herold beat the trainees at SAI and was selected to represent her school at the inter-state school games in Pune in 2009.

At the national-level meet, Herold ended up 9th among 11 participants, but caught the eye of Subhendu Sengupta, the coach for Andaman and Nicobar Islands. 'I liked the way she managed to beat two national-level cyclists without proper training and equipment. I also liked her never-say-die spirit. After she lost, she told me she'll train harder and come back a winner next year,' says Sengupta. 'I recommended her, and in 2010, she was selected to join the Port Blair camp.'

That year, her family, particularly her mother who thought cycling would be a tough sport for a girl, refused to let her relocate from Car Nicobar (where her father was a temporary staff member at the Indian Air Force base) to Port Blair for training. They had also grown protective about the girl after the tsunami. Sengupta recalls that it took a year to convince them. Herold finally joined SAI, Port Blair, in 2011. In January 2012, at the Amritsar nationals, she won gold in the sub-junior category, clocking a time better than the junior champion. 'She was spotted by the national selectors and selected for the camp in Delhi. That was the beginning of the Deborah story,' says Sengupta.

In 2013, around the time Herold joined the national camp in Delhi, national cycling coach RK Sharma had just returned from Aigle, in Switzerland, with a diploma in road and track training. Armed with a training programme that, in his own words, was

decades ahead of India's, Sharma set out to chart a road map for Indian cyclists to raise their game in international competitions. His first student, Herold, made him hopeful. At the camp, she broke national records over and over again. 'The first time she rode in front of me, she improved her previous timing. And on every occasion since, she has only bettered her record,' says Sharma.

VN Singh, the assistant secretary of the Cycling Federation of India (CFI), says, 'When she first came here, she clocked around 41 seconds in the 500 metre time trial. Now she is around 36 seconds, and is the first woman cyclist in India to break the 37 second barrier in the category. In the 200 metre sprint, too, she is the national record holder. Right now, she has no competition in India.'

What makes Herold a good cyclist? Genes, for one. Herold belongs to the Nicobarese tribe that originates from the Mongoloid stock and is known to have a well-built structure, especially calf muscles that are essential for cycling. Besides, her body is endowed with fast-twitch muscles that are designed for quick contractions, enabling speed and power as opposed to slow-twitch muscles that are good for enduring long distances. These give Herold a sprinter's anatomy and power her short bursts of high-speed performances.

What propels her forth is her single-minded approach to the sport: the urge to go faster and faster, and the ability to break down the bigger picture into smaller, daily targets. On some days, the target is to cross the finishing line microseconds earlier than before; on some other days, it is to train her muscles harder, to be supple and tenacious at the same time. There are days when waking up early, going for runs, quick shower-change-dash, for races seems a chore, and the heart tells the head to give the punishing routine a miss. The very next instant though, the head is firmly in control. 'You tell yourself about the long-term goal and keep pushing,' says Herold.

The bird's eye that she is taking aim at, of course, is the

Olympics in 2020. And the road to Tokyo is a long and arduous one. The race starts in November 2018, and points earned from 10 tournaments—three world cups, one world championships and one Asian championship each year—through 24 months add up for qualifications. Only the top 27 riders will make it, nine in individual categories and 18 in team championships, and the smallest micro of microseconds will separate the podium from the exit door.

Herold got a taste of the cut-throat competition at the UCI championships in London in March, where she finished last in the 500 metre time trial, almost 4 seconds behind champion Anastasiia Voinova of Russia. That's a lot of ground to make, given that the top three were separated by less than a second.

Last year, Herold clocked her best of 11.06 seconds in the 200 metre sprint, in the Track Asia Cup in Delhi. Sharma reckons she would need to hit at least 10.7 seconds to qualify for the Olympics in that category. If she can reach 11.1 seconds by the end of 2016, he believes she will be on course. 'But for that,' says Sharma, 'she has to build her muscles, do weight and strength training. Besides, cycling is a tactical sport. She has to out-think the other rider, know when to conserve energy, when to block her opponent and when to accelerate for the final burst. Every race is different.'

Herold isn't dwelling much on her London performance. A cyclist typically hits peak form around 28 years and, at 21, she knows she still has several opportunities ahead of her. '*Nahi, nahi* [No, no],' she shakes her head vigorously when asked if a loss makes her sad. 'It makes me more determined. If I am down, I'll fight more. Only when I'm behind in a race, I get angry and I channel my anger towards pedalling even harder. If I lose, I know it's an opportunity to perform even better in the next race.' She often looks back on London for the exposure it gave her and the opportunity she got to rub shoulders with international cyclists, particularly her icon Voinova. 'It's important to see how champions conduct themselves, what they eat, how they exercise right before

the race plus learn a few lessons about focusing. International cyclists don't even talk before a race', says Herold.

Her first coach, Sengupta, says Herold's got a bit of that champion streak in her. 'She's never homesick, even though she stays away from her family for years. It's something that affects many other athletes', he says.

This March, Herold went back to Car Nicobar after two years to a hero's welcome. People poured in to meet her and she also made an appearance at the police station, where she holds the job of a sub-inspector. 'They didn't recognise me at first', she says. Has her hipster hairstyle got something to do with it? Her face melts into a smile. The diffident, young girl, who would bunk cycling practice to play football, has come a long way, says Sengupta. The radical, new haircut inspired by Colombian cyclist Fabian Hernando Puerta Zapata is just one of its many manifestations.

Herold still has many laps to go before the jury decides if she'll end up as the star of Indian cycling, or merely play a cameo. Her performance at the 2018 Asiad in Jakarta will be watched closely. If she manages to win a medal, she'll end a 67-year drought for the country, after individual bronzes won by Rohinton Noble and Netai Chand Bysack in the inaugural Delhi Asian Games in 1951.

Whatever the outcome, she has already secured a legacy for herself by bringing the distant islands of Andaman and Nicobar on the Indian sporting landscape. Impressed by Herold's performance, CFI's Singh has gone to the Islands subsequently to scout for more cycling talents, and returned with three more exciting prospects-Emerson, Arkaprava Baul and Essaw-who are being groomed in Delhi. Most of all, Herold has afforded the trio the breadth of desire to aspire to compete on the international stage. Now, that in itself is no mean feat.

This article is excerpted from Forbes India, July 8, 2016.

AND SHE NEVER LOOKED BACK

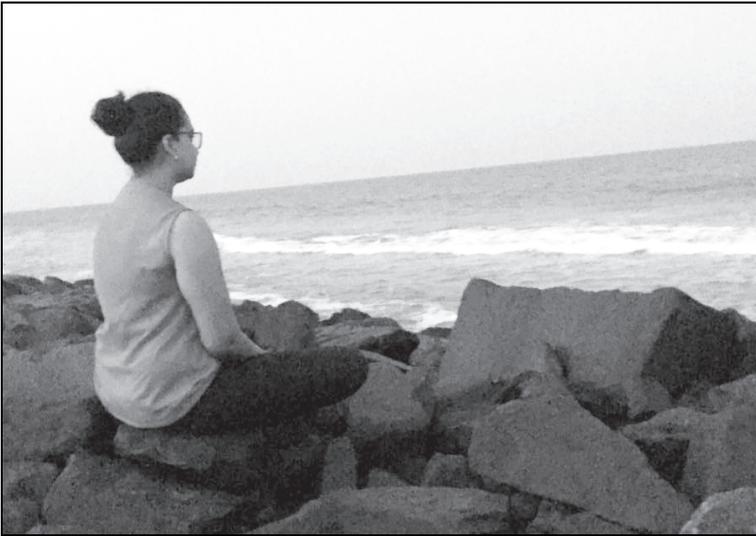
T. Vijayendra

“Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than any one thing in the world. I rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a bike. It gives her a feeling of self-reliance and independence the moment she takes her seat; and away she goes the picture of untrammelled womanhood.”

*Susan B Anthony, the American civil rights leader,
wrote in 1896*

Aloka was actually looking back. Sitting on the rock, watching the rough sea dashing on the rock below her in Pondicherry, she was wondering how she lived 25 long years in Calcutta after her marriage. At first, everything was fine (surprise! surprise!!). She was young, enjoyed playing ‘house house’, enjoyed cooking and feeding her husband and his friends, who were all in love with her, her singing Rabindra Sangeet and all that.

Then the daughter came and years just passed. Her husband got busy with his work. Aloka drifted in to animal care and dogs.



She volunteered for Blue Cross where she met Parimal, a refugee from Bangladesh. Her own grandparents were from Jessore, Bangladesh. Parimal and Aloka ‘clicked’ and got together like a house on fire. Parimal knew everything about dogs- breeds, habits, training, rescue, diseases, everything! He could even do minor surgeries. Aloka simply adored dogs and she could never get tired of taking care of them.

Things slowly changed. Her husband, at first, made fun of her. Then, he got jealous of Parimal and began to abuse Aloka. He would even get violent when he got drunk. Yes, as Aloka drifted in to her dog love, Nihar drifted into alcohol. The daughter, Shreya, who was a teenager by now, also sided with her father because she also felt neglected. Then, she also accused her and suddenly Aloka found that all her friends began to avoid her. Even her parents told her that her first duty was towards her family. And Parimal? He had his dogs and he did not need anything or anybody else.

Guilt, guilt, guilt! Aloka did not know anything else but guilt in her last years in Calcutta which had become Kolkata now. She

was friendless, lonely and miserable. Only the dogs gave her love and reassurance. Surrounded with all this guilt, Aloka could not understand what wrong did she do? She then met Viju.

Viju had come to Kolkata on his annual visit and was giving an informal talk to a group of naturalists on sustainability and equality. He also focussed on the bicycle, as 2017 was the bicentenary year of the bicycle. He said, 'from an ecological perspective, the bicycle is one of the most sustainable and affordable mode of transport. Almost anyone can afford it. It is cheaper than a smart phone! It is the transport of the future particularly when oil resources are depleting.' He also talked about the forth coming book by his groups entitled, 'Women and Cycle in India: Joy, Mobility, Freedom, Empowerment.'

After the talk, Aloka shared a taxi ride with him. She told him a little about herself and said that she did not know how to get out of her situation.

Viju: 'What do you want to do?'

Aloka: 'I want to see the world and finish my French course in Kolkata, the examination for which is due in April.'

Viju: 'Well, you can buy a bicycle, go to Chandannagar, stay with an old French lady, take care of her, do your French studies, appear in the examination and then go round the world on your bicycle. Ann Londonderry, a mother of three, did it in 1894!'

Aloka thought Viju was mad. It is so easy to talk but she had to admit that his suggestion about moving to Chandannagar was reasonable. Chandannagar, like Pondicherry near Tamilnadu, is a former French colony and is located only 35 kilometres north of Kolkata. It is a small town with a population of just 166,867 (as of 2014) and it would be easy to locate a French speaking Old lady if she did exist.

Next day she told Parimal about the talk.

Parimal, said, 'Well, you can buy a cycle to start with'.

Aloka: 'But I don't know how to cycle and I am fifty years old!'

Parimal: (in an exasperated tone) 'Oh that! You can learn it in a day! And the age of fifty is fine (laughing)-free from pimples, post menopause freedom and frolicsome. Go for it!'

These men, Aloka thought, talk so easily. Well, they went and bought the 'Lady Bird' and kept it at Blue Cross. A new thing got added in Aloka's life. She had already left her husband and was living with her parents. Aloka would be up early morning, go to school to teach the primary classes, come home, have lunch and after a brief rest, rush to Blue Cross to take her bicycle lessons. Yes, she did learn it in a day and was actually enjoying the wind on her face and the absolute freedom she felt. Yes, she would ride to Chandannagar soon.

At the end of the month, she collected her salary, bought a track suit, a helmet, a pair of good shoes and was ready for the road. She just took one extra pair of night clothes, her toilet bag, a tube of Odomos, a water bottle and she was off to Chandannagar.

She found Mademoiselle Simone, a spinster, daughter of a theosophist, in love with India and Bengali food and lived by giving French lessons. How the hell did Viju know? She readily agreed to have Aloka as a cook in lieu of lodge and board. She chatted and made Aloka talk in French, correcting her pronunciation and teaching new words all the time. It was a dream 'total immersion' programme of foreign language learning. Of course Aloka passed her examination with flying colours.

Aloka was ready for a cycle trip to Pondicherry. Chandannagar is a small town and she cycled everywhere. She also met some

cyclists, was an informal tour guide to some visiting French students who loved the idea of cycling around town with a lady who knew the town and the French language. She picked up a lot of cycling folklore and some real knowledge about the cycle-brands, prices, how to choose and so on. She was ready to replace her beloved 'Lady Bird' with the next generation of cycle.

Aloka was in touch with Viju on email. Viju was pleasantly surprised that she actually followed his advice. So few people did! Viju sent her drafts of the book, 'Women and Cycle in India: Joy, Mobility, Freedom, Empowerment'. The chapter 'Bicycle and Woman's Liberation' and chapters on experiences of Indian women on bicycle were very inspiring.

She called up Parimal and asked him to buy a Montra bicycle for her. On the next Sunday, he came cycling the new Montra and took the Lady Bird back to Kolkata. Parimal also had brought a lot of road gear. It contained a double saddle bag, which contained a good water bottle, a tiny sleeping bag and a small mosquito net. He would not take any money from her and said, 'I have been a refugee and know how it feels to leave one's home. Any little help is always welcome in such situations.' Aloka cried and cried because she knew that this was the final 'good bye' to Calcutta, to Kolkata and to her past.

... You shall leave everything you love most:
this is the arrow that the bow of exile shoots first.
You are to know the bitter taste of other's bread,
how salty it is,
and know how hard a path it is for one who goes
ascending and descending others' stairs...

Paradiso XVII (55-60)

Durante degli Alighieri or simply Dante (1265-1321)

Aloka cycled back towards Calcutta and up to Bali. She stopped for a cup of tea and for a small packet of Parle G biscuits. She called them the Indian National Biscuit and carried dozens of packets with her to feed any and every dog that she met. She knew that on the road, this was the safest food and dogs were her most reliable friends.

Her heart was heavy and eyes misty when she turned right towards Dankuni to reach the Bombay road. This was the final goodbye to Calcutta. She stopped again at Bagnan on the banks of Rupanarayan. This turn would take her away from the Gangetic plains and bring her to Medinipur district. Another break from the past.

By now, Calcutta was dimming and new experiences were occupying her mind and her heart. At the tea shop, dogs came barking because of her strange gear and her helmet. The moment she removed the helmet and started talking to the dogs, they were all wagging their tails. Then, out came the Indian National Biscuits and they were all happy and sitting down near her. Children stood gaping and she would start talking to them. The adults were also gaping but soon gave it up. The tea shop refused to take money for the tea. It was getting dark and the shop owner's wife asked her to stay overnight, which she gratefully accepted. She fell asleep immediately after food. Strange dreams came but she got up early morning, well rested and ready to start. As she cycled away, women came out of their houses to gape at this woman who was cycling alone on the highway.

This set up a pattern of her travels. She aimed at 50 kilometres a day with small breaks at 10 kilometres. At some places, she even met local bicycle clubs who asked her to give talks. Viju had given her a lot of material and so she talked about the bicentenary of the bicycle, the history of the cycle, women and bicycle, government programmes of free bicycles to high school children, China and India and so on. She had no dearth of topics and for

the audience, everything was new. With time, she improved on her skills of giving talks. By the time she reached Bhubaneswar, an important stop for cyclists, she was a seasoned cyclist.

In Bhubaneswar, she met Ajay Nanda of '22 Bikes'. 22 Bikes is an unusual cycle organisation. It takes care of all the necessities of cyclists under one roof, such as selling bicycles of all brands, accessories, repairing, servicing, bicycle-rentals, training sessions and the organising of regular bicycle tours and events. Ajay believes in forming a community and bringing together all the cycle enthusiasts in the city through interesting activities and events and that this will help in driving the concept of cycling into public life. 22 Bikes is more than just a place for bicycles. It promotes, encourages and aims to educate people on the benefits of being a cyclist. It also boasts of a library, that has around 50 percent of its books dedicated to bicycles. Aloka stayed for a week in Bhubaneswar, resting and learning a lot more about cycling and cycle clubs.

After Bhubaneswar, she was on the cycle club map and cycle clubs on the way were expecting her, felicitating her and checking her cycle for wear and tear and repairs. By the time she reached Pondicherry, there was a posse of cyclists few kilometres outside the town who accompanied her to the reception that was waiting for her. It was a big meeting in the grounds and looked like a political meeting. In fact it was more like a carnival. Stalls were set up for idly, fruits, tea, coffee, coconuts, and handicrafts and so on. All the business was done on cycles. People had come on their cycles and there was a nice cycle stand for parking. There was a photo exhibition about cycles and livelihood, about benefits of cycling and of course about the Pondicherry Cycle Club.

Aloka gave a short talk. She said: 'I am a Bengali and in love with French language, literature and people. That is, I am a Francophile. Chandannagar and Pondicherry are Mecca and

Medina for me. I am coming from Chandannagar and I hope to make Pondicherry my home.'

This she repeated in Bengali and in French amid loud cheers. She then gave a short description of her journey. She said, 'I learned cycling only 3 months ago at the age of 50!' There was first a gasp and then loud cheering from the audience. Continuing, she said, 'I thank Viju for the idea, Parimal for helping me buy my first cycle and finally I thank my cycle Lady Bird and then the present Montra. The cycle has become, after the dogs, a real friend for all seasons.'

The secretary of Pondicherry Cycling Club welcomed her and gave her Honorary Life Membership of the Club. An old gentleman asked permission to speak. He said, 'My name is Ashutosh Bandopadhyay and I am a third generation citizen of Pondicherry. Like Aloka, I am also a Francophile, more so because I am married to a French woman.' He called his wife, Claudine, on the stage and continuing, he said, 'our children are all abroad and are not going to come back. I offer our home and Aloka can stay in our daughter's room as long as she wishes with complete freedom.' His wife Claudine added in French, 'We will treat her as our own daughter. We have a big French library of books, music, videos and Aloka can use all of it and move further in her French studies.' There were loud cheers for minutes.

Tears were rolling down Aloka's cheeks. Everyone wanted her to speak again. The secretary offered her a huge handkerchief and Aloka wiped her face and blew her nose right into the mike. There was laughter in the audience and Aloka also smiled sheepishly. Claudine offered her moisturised paper napkins. Still, when Aloka rose to speak, her feet were unsteady and her voice was heavy. She finally managed to say, 'When I left Calcutta, I was homeless, lonely, friendless and miserable. I had only one friend left in Calcutta-a poor Bangladeshi refugee who was a dog lover. In the last three months, I got so much love and friendship

that I am overwhelmed. But what happened today here is so much beyond what I imagined in my wildest dreams that it has left me speechless. I will be able to thank all of Pondicherry in coming years by my deeds and not by words today.’ She broke down and there were loud cheers and clapping for a long time.

Aloka settled down in Pondicherry. She helped at home, cooking Bengali dishes and learning French cooking. She had learned some in Chandannagar also. She was active with Pondicherry cycle club, particularly in getting new women members and its programme of renting cycles to the tourists. She also prepared for her next level French examination but Ann Londonderry’s solo trip around the world in 15 months in 1894 kept on ringing in her head. She was aware that the times had changed and that for an Indian woman to get all the visas was a tough proposition. So she decided to do it step by step.

First, she decided to get all her documents in order. She got her certificates, passport, voter identity card, Aadhaar card and other such documents. Her hosts in Pondicherry and her friends in the cycling club helped her in a big way. They knew everyone in the bureaucracy. She planned to first go to France and then to the rest of Europe. First, she would do her own Tour de France and then take the next trip of doing Europe. She also applied for a fellowship for further study in French in France.

Dear Reader, Aloka is still in Pondicherry, dreaming and planning. Wish her all the luck!

FREE CYCLES FOR GIRLS IN TELANGANA

To,
The Chief Minister,
Telangana

Subject: Free cycles to school going girls.

Dear Sir,

As you are aware, many states in India have a programme to distribute free cycles for school going girls of class nine. This has enormously increased the enrolment of girls and their success in high schools and many of them went to colleges too. Independent mobility has been a powerful tool of empowerment for women. Besides that, cycle has other positive factors-it is the most efficient mode of transport, free of fossil fuels and air pollution. It also keeps the rider fit.

Before the bifurcation of the state, Andhra Pradesh too had a programme like this and many girls in Telangana region have benefited from it. To my knowledge, Telangana has yet to have such a programme. Bifurcation gives an opportunity to study the

existing programmes all over the country, learn from their experience and evolve a better programme. To our knowledge, Bihar government has the oldest and one of the best programmes. I am attaching a brief survey of the programmes in different states in India. This is incomplete and not fully updated but the idea is catching up all over the country.

I am sure Telangana government will evolve the best programme and implement it as soon as possible. This is the year of the bicentenary of the bicycle. It will be a fitting way to celebrate the year with such a programme.

With regards,

Yours Sincerely,

Enclosure: Free Cycle for Girls Programme in India

FREE CYCLES FOR GIRLS IN INDIA

India produces about 18 million cycles per year. Sixty per cent of them are the old 'Roadster' type cycles suitable for Indian villages and small towns. Some twenty five percent are bought by government under various schemes. One of the schemes that has caught the attention of public is the free cycle for poor school girls. It was first started by Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh (their election symbol is cycle) around 2003 and while it is still remembered, it did not last long. The most successful programme to date appears to be from Bihar. Below, we give a brief survey of the programmes in India, starting with Bihar.

Bihar

The Bihar programme started in 2007 and was improved with experience. Today it caters to all government school going children-both boys and girls irrespective of caste, class or religion.

In Bihar, one of India's poorest and most populous states, half of the women and a quarter of the men are illiterate, and about 90% of its 104 million inhabitants live in rural areas. Life here is particularly difficult for girls and one of the greatest hindrances to their development is the simple journey to school. For many, the



trip is long, expensive and dangerous.

The state's chief minister, Nitish Kumar, adopted a 'gender agenda' and set about redressing his state's endemic gender imbalances in an attempt to boost development in one of India's most backward states. His vision was to bring a sense of independence and purpose to his state's young women, and the flagship initiative of this agenda is the 'Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojna'-a project that gives schoolgirls 2,000 rupees to purchase a bicycle.

In the first three years of the project, results have been extremely promising: 871,000 schoolgirls have taken to the saddle as a result of the scheme. The number of girls dropping out of school has fallen and the number of girls enrolling has risen from 160,000 to 490,000.

Girls like Pinki Kumari (15), a student from the high school in Desari, previously had 14 km round trip each day. Her father, Anil Sharma, a local electrician, had wanted her to get married early. He had to give up the plan in the face of his daughter's determination to study after she got a free bicycle from the

government. Pinki now reaches school in 15 minutes, and is full of hope for her and her family's future.

One keen young cyclist echoed the opinion and aspirations of many of her schoolmates, saying, 'every morning, I look forward to going to school. When I'm older, I want to go to university.' This leap in the village girls' education and aspirations represents a quantum leap from their parents' era. Just four of the 70 schoolgirls we met have mothers who made it to the 10th grade.

Kumar succinctly sums up the initiative's aim and all it stands for. 'Nothing gives me a greater sense of fulfilment of a work well done than seeing a procession of school-bound, bicycle-riding girls. It is a statement for social forward movement, of social equality and of social empowerment.'

Andhra Pradesh

The Naidu government announced that bicycles would be given away to 1.8 lakh girls studying in Classes V-X at government-aided and Zilla Parishad schools in the state under the 'Badikostha' scheme which is aimed at bringing down the drop-out rate, increase enrolment, attendance and academic performance of girl students. The government estimated the project to cost Rs 74.92 crore.

While for OC girls below poverty line, Rs. 14.57 crore will be re-appropriated from the Rs 20 crore budget allocated for the biometric devices in schools, the expenditure with respect to Scheduled Castes (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST)/Backward Classes (BC) / Other Backward Classes (OBC) girls-students will be met with funds drawn from their respective sub-plans. 'The re-appropriation of the biometric funds (Rs. 14, 57, 44, 000) and those from the sub-plans will total Rs. 74,92,72,000,' the officials said.

According to information, the percentage of students in the state who opt out of school before Class V is about 15%. This percentage is higher at 27% in the case of girls who opt out of

school before Class X. In the case of girls hailing from the ST community, the number of drop-outs is even higher.

While the government has issued an order in July, sources in the school education commissionerate said that it would take another two or three months for implementation of the programme.

Jharkhand

Bicycle Distribution Scheme

This Scheme has been started by Jharkhand Government to encourage girl students belonging to SC, ST, Minorities, and Below-Poverty Line (BPL) families to go to schools and continue their studies. This plan was started by the state government for the following two reasons:

- (i) The distance between the school & their houses being too much, the family members have difficulties in sending their girls to school.
- (ii) After passing the middle level school, many girl students of the villages discontinue their studies due to lack of transportation facilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this plan is to stop the girl students belonging to the SC, ST, Minorities and BPL families from discontinuing their studies in high school stage due to distances between their villages and the high school.

Structure

Initially, the plan of providing bicycles free of cost to the girl students belonging to SC, ST, Minorities and BPL groups studying in class VIIIth, IXth, and Xth was started in the year 2002-2003. Later, girl students of only class VIII of the target group were benefited.

Process

In order to get the benefit of this plan, an application is to be sent through the concerned principal to the District Welfare Officer from where the bicycles are distributed.

Assam

Tarun Gogoi inaugurates free bicycle scheme for girls

Chief minister Tarun Gogoi launched a special scheme for providing free bicycles to BPL girl students studying from Class VIII to X. The state education department will distribute 1.3 lakh bicycles across the state in the next 45 days, which will cost Rs. 50 crore.

Gogoi said the scheme has been undertaken by the state government to encourage women education in the state. 'To make Assam one of the leading states of the country, more emphasis needs to be given to the education sector. Besides solving the unemployment problem, expansion of education is the key to increase the standard of living of the people,' Gogoi said at the inauguration programme.

The chief minister added that Assam is marching forward in women's education. 'Enrolment of girl students in medical, engineering and agricultural courses are going up every day,' he said.

State education minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said, 'Recent trends show that the number of girls appearing for matric examination in the state is more than that of boys. This shows that the number of girls enrolling in schools is increasing,' Sarma said.

Rajashree Bordoloi, who passed the matric examination from TC Girls' High School this year, thanked the government for the initiative. 'The bicycle will help me reach class on time. Being a student from a BPL family, getting a bicycle free of cost is a great help,' said Rajashree.

Chandigarh

Chandigarh to provide free bicycles to class XI girl students. A committee has been formed to finalise the specifications of the bicycles. The programme will cost around Rs. 9.31 lakhs.

In Conclusion

Thus many states are following up on this idea and soon most state government will take it up. There are also many NGOs and individuals who are donating the cycles to needy girls. Many innovative programmes are also coming up such as repairing old cycles and gifting them to the needy. The future looks bright both for girls and for cycles!

ABOUT ECOLOGISE HYDERABAD

Ecologise Hyderabad is part of the Ecologise movement in India which looks at the ecological crisis holistically, with a perspective of sustainability and equality. It deals with the contemporary issues of global warming, resource depletion, ecological degradation and growing inequality around the world and the local solutions of resilience in the face of this crisis.

Ecologise Hyderabad is a small group of activists concerned with the ecological crisis of the city. The aim of the group is to look at the ecological crises of the city holistically, with a perspective of sustainability and equality. Thus, it addresses several issues like water, energy, transport, waste management, home composting, terrace gardens, health, and education. The group runs several workshops to strengthen the efforts of the activists in running green programmes in different localities of the city with the help of the resources available within the city.

This year, Ecologise Hyderabad is celebrating the bicentenary of the bicycle with several events and publications. It has been involved in publishing:

1. You and Your Bicycle: A Guide to Maintaining Your Cycle
by Lavanya K and Shamala Kittane
2. Concorde Photo Stories from India: Bicycle
3. Kiki's Super Duper Explorer by T. Vijayendra

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Bicycle and Women's Liberation
History of Women and Cycle in India
Indian Women on Bicycle: In Life and in Cinema
Twelve Autobiographical Accounts of
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Cycle in Sports: Deborah Herold
Fiction: And She Never Looked Back
Telangana and Free Cycles for Girls Programmes in India



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