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## The Journey since 1947-III: Can the Bicycle Come Full Circle in India?

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*The bicycle, once a symbol of India's industrialisation, is now relegated to use by the labouring classes who have to risk life and limb on India's roads. But it may make a comeback given its value for sustainable transport.*

At the 13<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Meeting of the Shareholders of the Hind Cycles Ltd in August 1953, Chairman R.D. Birla declared that it was the patriotic duty of the bicycle industry in independent India to fulfil the targets set in the First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956). In keeping with the ideas of self-reliance and nation-building that were prevalent then, Birla echoed the sentiments of several Indian industrialists when he declared that Hind Cycles was ready to manufacture “100% swadeshi cycles”. Despite the fluctuations in demand due to World War II and the high cost of small, imported components, the country looked forward to a “bicycle age”.

### The bicycle's entry into India

From the 1890s onwards, European Christian missionaries, British administrative officials, and some of their wives were the earliest to ride bicycles in India. Initially attracting attention that was laced with amusement, suspicion, and disbelief, the bicycle eventually came to be seen as an important technological tool. However, by the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the sewing machine and other industrial products of western import and origin, the bicycle was perceived as an “everyday technology”, as historian David Arnold called it, and it added a new socio-cultural dynamic to the colony.

By the 1920s, cities such as Calcutta and Bombay witnessed a great number of young men, especially Parsis and upper-caste Bengalis, enthusiastically adopting cycling not only as a sport but also as a mode of transport that enabled them to move around freely and easily.

British bicycles from well-known manufacturers such as Raleigh and BSA dominated the Indian market, and, soon, cycling tours and competitions were organised to popularise the vehicle.

### Growth after 1947

With import substitution and high tariff policies in place, the 1950s saw the Planning Commission, helmed by Jawaharlal Nehru, looking towards the bicycle manufacturers to usher in an era of industrial self-reliance alongside the heavy industries that were being promoted at the time. Hind Cycles drew upon this “nationalist” calling and the state continued its protection and assistance to the bicycle industry.



Cognisant of the huge potential offered by the Indian market, collaborations with Indian sellers, such as the Raleigh-Sen deal in 1950, came to symbolise Indo-British co-operation. Although the industrial units manufacturing small components that were crucial for bicycles were in their nascent stages, the vehicle came to be seen as a local product in function and usage.

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### **Gendered use**

The social life of this everyday technology remained highly gendered. Prejudices against young girls cycling prevented the bicycle from becoming a symbol of empowerment and liberation for Indian women as it had been for their European and American counterparts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several misconceptions about the bicycle prevailed—from it causing injury to women to it violating notions of

respectability and making women wayward. Added to this, the relatively high cost of bicycles and their unwieldy design also acted as major impediments to their adoption by women and girls.

Yet, all this did not entirely erase women from the history of cycling in India. For instance, akin to Parsi men, several Parsi women took to cycling, including at the competitive level. Cities such as Bombay and Pune witnessed these changes, and in the 1970s and 1980s, national cycling champions such as the Arethna sisters, Jasmin and Armin, took the country by storm.

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Even as women’s competitive cycling gained some traction, the lack of sustained state support, infrastructure, and encouragement to women to cycle freely in public remained key challenges. It was mostly middle-class women in India who were exposed to the bicycle though with socio-cultural limitations, while men dominated the cyclists on public roads. At the same time, Indian companies such as Janki Das Kapur’s Atlas Cycles looked towards this consumer segment as a business opportunity.



Atlas drove the image of the “modern” Indian woman able to handle the pressures and demands of traditional responsibilities as well as modern aspirations. Several of their 1970s advertisements depicted saree-clad women on bicycles as their husbands and children cheered them on, perhaps as a metaphor for the changing role envisaged for Indian women while building a modern nation.

Interestingly, in Europe and America, the bicycle had earlier ushered in reforms in the way women dressed because it was difficult to sit on bicycles in traditional long skirts. Yet, Atlas’s portrayal of Indian women in sarees easily taking to the bicycle indicated Indian manufacturers’ attempts to blend elements of the new with the old as they targeted female consumers. The most popular image of women cycling joyously in fashionable attire and enjoying their newfound freedom was captured by the Hindi song “Main Chali, Main Chali”, starring Saira Bhanu in the 1968 movie *Padosan*.

#### ‘Lower-class’ conveyance

Unfortunately, there were no corresponding policies intended to promote cycling as a desired mode of transport. As markers of a middle-class lifestyle drastically shifted with the liberalisation policies of the 1990s, the bicycle suffered a setback and became increasingly viewed as a “lower-class” conveyance. In 1994, plans were made to wind up the three-acre Worli plant of the National Bicycle Corporation of India in Bombay. The two-wheeler scooter such as the Bajaj Chetak had already captured the imagination of the middle class, while the Maruti car became the coveted item of consumption in subsequent decades. These developments also added to the declining social value of the bicycle.

Today, the bicycle has two major consumer segments—each for a very different purpose. In many regions lacking safe and affordable public transport, the ordinary labourer, chiefly male, still uses the sturdy, low-priced bicycle to get around. In the other domain, the bicycle has garnered attention among a growing number of the middle and upper-class people who use it for leisure, physical fitness, and adventure. For the second group, the bicycle ironically works in tandem with other modes of private transport—it often must be ferried to walled spaces or traffic-free zones before it can be used.

The labourer on a low income continues to contend with the chaotic and unplanned traffic on India’s roads and remains wary of injury-causing accidents. As motorised vehicles overrun India’s roads, the bicycle as an everyday form of transport for even the poor seems to be a diminishing prospect.



The bicycle has received a new lease of life in the arena of social welfare though. For instance, in the 1990s, when Pudukottai district in Tamil Nadu embarked on a total literacy mission that involved a large number of women from the poorer castes. Their commitment to learning how to cycle became an enduring example of the bicycle’s transformative potential. In the past two decades, bicycle-for-girls schemes to enhance female school enrolment in Tamil Nadu and Bihar, among other states, have received much praise and encouragement. However, analysts and administrators have expressed concern about schoolgirls not continuing to cycle after graduation or marriage because of the dangerous conditions for cyclists on roads in the haphazardly growing urban areas.

### **Return of the bicycle?**

What gives some hope now is that there are environmental and activist groups keen to promote cycling (as “active mobility”) for physical fitness and as a means of sustainable transport in the wake of climate change. As India completes its 75th year of independence, the bicycle, one hopes, will play a key role in our future ideas of mobility. But a lot will depend on proper urban planning and political will. Like everything else.

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