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The Pleasures of Cycling

By: Sujeet Kumar

Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria rides alongside cyclists to see how people's cycling experiences reflect their views of city streets and infrastructure. Their stories are invaluable for creating a better cycle infrastructure and present a counterintuitive challenge to established narratives.

Most of us have cycled at some point. I used to with my friends, from Jawaharlal Nehru University to India Gate and various other spots around Delhi. Those weekend rides allowed us to explore hidden routes, face challenges like encounters with stray dogs, and learn how to avoid them, all while bypassing traffic by taking narrow lanes. Over time, as my friends moved on to different places, I continued to hold on to my cycle, using it mainly for short rides under 20 kilometers. Each ride was tinged by the fear of accidents involving motorised vehicles. What kept me motivated was fellow cyclists: some pedalling to work and others riding for adventure.

Cycling clearly holds a broader significance in shaping human life than its place in policymakers' prescriptions for congestion-free cities and eco-friendly transportation.

Over the last few years, the benefits of cycling have been noted by policymakers. Cycling has minimal environmental impact, promotes physical well-being, occupies little space, and is economically beneficial in terms of lower user costs and public infrastructure expenses (Pucher & Buehler, 2017). Several countries have highlighted the importance of building cycle-friendly infrastructure. India has talked about implementing a bicycle sharing system, but not yet shown much success (Verma, Harsha, & Subramanian, 2021).

Few of us though would want to use a cycle as the primary means of mobility throughout our lives. This is because of several factors, including a low social status associated with cycling in India, increased accident risks, and poor air quality.

Cycling though holds a broader significance in shaping human life than its place in policymakers' prescriptions for congestion-free cities and eco-friendly transportation. That is the subject of Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria's *Mumbai on Two Wheels: Cycling, Urban Space, and Sustainable Mobility*, which explores how people's cycling experiences reflect their views of city streets and infrastructure. He enquires, "What do people do with bicycles?" He rides alongside food delivery workers, sits with cycle mechanics, and joins long-distance city riders to experience Mumbai's roads and the lived experience of cyclists first hand. His insights come from bicycle activists, commuters, event organizers, planners, technicians, shop owners, transportation planners, architects, and manufacturers. Through these interactions, he learns from diverse groups, gaining a deeper understanding of the city and its infrastructure. He finds that the "bicycle can be a tool to get from one place to others, to make money, or to remake oneself – sometime all at once."

All the cyclists have varied objectives and circumstances, but all of them bring crucial insights to understand the lived experience of cyclists in the city. Those who cycle for adventure or recreation, unsurprisingly, come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. For them, cycling represents freedom, health, and personal identity. For those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, cycling is a practical and affordable alternative. But with poor cycling infrastructure, the risks are similar for both groups.

Planning professionals and advocates need to pay closer attention to ordinary people who cycle for transportation or for work, or who choose to cycle for recreation.

While everyone's experience is unique, their stories about overcoming challenges in cycling are invaluable for creating a better cycle infrastructure and promoting a more sustainable and equitable urban environment. Reflecting on the ways in which people interact with bicycles bridges the gaps in the class status. It challenges the notion that bicycles solely function as class symbols, as often perceived from a top-down perspective. Instead, people's everyday practices with bicycles present a counterintuitive challenge to established narratives, a phenomenon Anjaria describes as "immanent possibility and reveals the potential bicycle future."

Many cyclists could afford motorcycles or taxis, yet they often choose to cycle to be part of specific social groups within the city. Some deliberately choose to cycle because it offers a lifestyle that is more enjoyable, healthier, and less constrained. The surprising part is that these groups of cyclists are not "waiting for the infrastructure to come" instead they have created "virtual tracks"- a form of

infrastructure created through intuitive, and at times, collective practices.

We learn how cycling in a group can provide an added sense of security on the road. When traffic is heavy and vehicles are bumper-to-bumper, the likelihood of accidents decreases. Additionally, fellow cyclists can help identify small patches or obstacles on the road that may make it difficult to navigate, ensuring a smoother and safer ride.

Anjaria's enquiry questions the assumptions behind sustainable transportation planning - such as the belief that planners fully understand urban mobility needs, that cycling is primarily a recreational activity, or that infrastructure alone can promote cycling. His approach goes beyond existing work (Murthy & Sur, 2023; Hull & O'Holleran, 2014) that focuses on what government structures are in place to make cycling safer and how much space is allotted for bicycles. He also challenges the assumption that Western cycling policies can be applied universally, emphasising the need for context-specific solutions.

To make cycling a practical and eco-friendly option in cities, we must change our thinking and view roads as shared spaces, not just for cars and other motorized vehicles.

Anjaria argues that planning professionals and advocates need to pay closer attention to ordinary people who cycle for transportation or for work, or who choose to cycle for recreation. Unlike many urban researchers, he avoids criticizing car-centric planning and instead proposes prioritising cyclists' needs in transportation planning, potentially leading to co-created city infrastructure. Those who cycle in Mumbai know “the city, its streets and its traffic” and prioritizing their idea can help progressive transportation planner.

Undoubtedly, cycling offers a unique perspective to comprehend a city's infrastructure, helps the environment, and promotes health and fitness. However, infrastructure plays a crucial role in ensuring individuals can choose a safe mode of transportation on the road. The statistics are sobering. The fatality risk per kilometre for cyclists is over twice that for motorcyclists, and about 40 times more than car occupants in Indian cities (Goel, 2023). Between 2014 and 2019, bicycle and pedestrian fatalities rose more sharply than those in motorised vehicles. (Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, 2019).

These numbers highlight the urgent need for safer cycling infrastructure, such as dedicated lanes, improved road design, and better traffic management. Anjaria agrees that “physically separated lanes can also make cycling conditions more inclusive for people of all ages and abilities.” However, infrastructure alone is not enough. Motorists, motorcyclists, and public transport operators need to respect cyclists' rights as fellow road users. To make cycling a practical and eco-friendly option in cities, we must change our thinking and view roads as shared spaces, not just for cars and other motorized vehicles.

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