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CULTURE & SOCIETY

change

The Bicycle Thief

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IN THE BICYCLE appeared as a mode of transport in its present form at the end of the 19th century, almost at the same time as commercial motorcars. It remained the predominant mode of personal transport for the uppermiddle and wealthy classes in Indian cities in the first half of the 20th century. However, this share has declined since the 1960s in all cities, most notably in those which received funding and attention from experts for improvement of transport infrastructure. Still, the fact is that today the predominant modes of urban travel in Indian cities are walking, cycling and public transport.

Despite high growth rates of motorised two-wheelers and cars (15 percent and 10 percent per annum respectively) in the last two decades, car ownership in cities remains in the range of 3-13 percent of the households and two wheelers in the range of 40-50 percent. Because of its huge environmental and health benefits, provision of bicycle facilities has become mandatory in most European cities including London, Paris and Amsterdam. Cities across the world are planning and developing integrated urban transportation systems, incorporating bicycles because of advantages in safety and the quality of life. It is estimated that adequate bicycle infrastructure in Delhi would save 18 percent fuel from passenger transport. Cities like Pune, which have a high share of bicycles, could save 26 percent of the fuel consumed by passenger transport. In Mumbai, 6 percent of all trips are made by cars and 7 percent by cycles. In Delhi, cars and bicycles are each used for about 15 percent of all the trips made. And yet, no city in India has planned or implemented projects to cater to bicyclists. Delhi is a good example. Major investments have been made here for improving the transport infrastructure since the mid-1970s and yet, none of the projects until 2006 involved any development of bicycle infrastructure. The funds allocated for the transport sector in 2002-2003 were doubled in 2006-2007. However, 80 percent of the funds have been allocated for road widening schemes primarily benefiting car and motorcycle users.

The transport department of Delhi government funded the preparation of a Bicycle Master Plan for Delhi in 1998. The study showed that the existing arterial roads in Delhi could double the existing carrying capacity and achieve at least 40 percent reduction in fatal traffic accidents if the network could be developed. Today, ten years later, the city does not have even a kilometre-long bicycle corridor. The only project which has addressed the needs of bicyclists is the first High Capacity Bus System corridor currently under implementation. This corridor has 2.5m wide segregated bicycle lanes along with segregated bus lanes. However, the traffic police and some sections of the media have questioned the concept. The traffic police has objected to taking space away from cars at the expense of bicyclists because they make a very small proportion of the total trips. On the one hand, the government and the media talk ad nauseam about growing pollution and safety in the city, and yet implementations of designs, which promote zero pollution vehicles, are questioned.

Since transport is a state subject in the Indian Constitution, the central government did not have a policy or investment plan for urban transport infrastructure until 2006. A draft National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP) was introduced in 2004 and adopted in 2006. At the same time the central government introduced the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission to upgrade the crumbling infrastructure of urban areas. Under JNURM, the Government of India has identified 63 cities for providing assistance in upgrading its road infrastructure. SINCE NUTP's focus is public transport, pedestrians and bicycles, cities are modifying the earlier road expansion projects to Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and bicycle inclusive plans. BRT and bicycle inclusive plans for five cities have been approved by the central government and another five cities are at different stages of preparation.

However, it is clear that pedestrian and bicycle facilities are not the focus of these projects. There seems to be a reluctance to provide quality facility for pedestrians and bicyclists. The main motivation for preparing BRT projects is to become eligible for the grant aid offered by the central government at the earliest. Bicycles are ideal for trips shorter than 5km, which constitute the majority of the trips in cities today. For short trips, bicycles are not only faster than taking a bus or the metro, but even cars and motorcycles if we factor in congested roads. A 3m wide lane which can carry about 2,000 cars per hour can carry 6,000 bicycles per hour, thus delivering a three fold increase in capacity. The bicycle has been recognised as the greenest mode, with lowest emissions (both local and global) per trip. Given our history of neglecting the bicycle, can we really face the challenge of global warming?

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