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## SIKHS, SARIS, AND CYCLES

### A CYCLOPHILE'S PASSAGE THROUGH INDIA

On which side of an Indian cow should a cyclist pass? Where does a bicycle belong in a pandemonium of lumbering trucks, speeding motorscooters and plodding rickshaws? Once I could have answered these questions, for I had lived in India where, to my husband's horror, I cycled regularly in Calcutta traffic.

When an opportunity came this year for my family to spend the summer in India, our college-aged daughter wished to "do" the whole country, from its southernmost tip, where it meets the Indian Ocean, to the Himalayas, where it touches the sky in the north. We decided to "do" it the romantic way -- by train and bus.

Happiest on a bicycle, I hoped to insert some cycling into this Odyssey. In order to travel "light," I left behind the folding bicycle which I generally take on trips. According to the guide book, I could rent bicycles in some Indian cities. The promise of instant bicycles -- no transportation or storage problems -- outweighed the advantages of bringing mine.

#### Cycling Without a Bicycle

For most of our journey I cycled vicariously without a bicycle. Wherever we went, cyclists and their bicycles claimed

my attention. My family humored me in this unorthodox form of sightseeing. They waited patiently while I photographed not tombs and temples, like a normal tourist, but the bicycles parked at their gates. This specialized view of one of the world's most ancient civilizations was, of course, a narrow one, but the more I indulged in it, the more addicted I became. Where, but in India, is one regaled by such extraordinary bicycle scenes: vendors with entire "shops" on their bicycles; cycling husbands toting wives and children perched around them; bicycle "trucks" carrying lumber, oil drums, sacks of rice, crates of eggs, stacks of furniture or cages of parakeets? Where else does one see bicycle "school buses" overflowing with children?

Sadly I noticed the popularity of mopeds and motorscooters in Indian cities. Bicycles, however, prevailed in towns and rural areas. They are still so commonplace in India that a political party has chosen a bicycle for its logo.

I looked at a poster bearing the bicycle emblem. Its design seemed particularly cogent. Its spoked wheels recalled a long tradition of symbolical wheels in Indian culture: chariot wheels of gods and heroes in Hindu temple sculpture, wheels of time and life in Buddhist art, Gandhi's beloved spinning wheel, and the summation of all such wheels in the stylized one on the national flag of India. Whether chosen by accident or instinct, the bicycle logo belonged to this venerable line.

I could tell the status and origin of cyclists from their appearance. I observed Sikh business men in their turbans, trim beards and flapping trousers; Punjabi office workers in tight

fitting pants and long flowing shirts; laborers in lungis, the Indian sarong. Upper-class school boys clad in flannel trousers, shirts and ties contrasted with their contemporaries in tattered shorts and T-shirts. Liberated Indian women in saris sped by on mopeds, but only school girls rode bicycles. Drivers of mopeds and motorscooters religiously wore heavy helmets, but their passengers, often women and children, wore none. Once I saw a group of Indian cyclists in racing outfits. Otherwise, few Indians, except for children, ride for sport.

Indian bicycles seemed unchanged from my earlier days. Now, as then, they retain the classic look of their forefathers introduced in British times: sturdy one-speed machines, equipped with front brakes only, touring handlebars, a broad saddle, mudguards and a two-sided chain guard. Most bicycles have a U-shaped kickstand whose base goes on the ground under the back wheel. When parked, bicycles stand firmly upright on their own. Painted black and weighing over 35 pounds, Indian bicycles look as heavy as they are. Hardly aerodynamic, they nevertheless give a superbly comfortable ride.

In keeping with its proud policy of economic self-sufficiency, India manufactures all its own bicycles; none are imported. The names "Hero," "Hercules," and "Phillips" appeared most frequently, followed by "Raleigh" (Indian made), "Gramo," "Avon", and "Shaka," to name a few others. I was told by a bicycle store owner that about 4,000 "Hero" bicycles are produced daily in India for home consumption and export. Bicycles are currently priced between rupees 600 and 1000 (about \$60-\$100), depending on the reputation of the model.

My daughter longed to bring an Indian bicycle home with us to New York. Instead, we settled for a few of the intriguing accessories that could be easily carried: brightly colored oil-cloth covers that can be snapped around bicycle frame tubes, and water-proof saddle covers in a variety of shiny designs. One of these was stuffed like a cushion. We resisted buying the heavier items: chromed side-view mirrors, bicycle bells, and headlights. We succumbed to buying an Indian bicycle lock, a circular padlock that is screwed permanently to the back stays of a bicycle so that its shaft can encircle the rim of the back wheel. The key stays in the lock when the bicycle is in use. It is removed only when the lock is closed. Securing a bicycle is easy: simply trigger the lock and remove the key. I was surprised that this lock was considered sufficient protection against thieves, but Indians whom I questioned only laughed at my doubts.

#### Cycling With a Bicycle

It wasn't until we reached Kashmir, the northernmost state of India, that I finally rode a bicycle. This remote region on the western side of the Himalayas contains one of the most beautiful valleys in the world, the "Vale of Kahsmir." Long popular as a trekker's paradise, it is ideal cycling country. The valley floor, a flat expanse of fields and lakes is ringed with terraced and wooded hills. Ancient towns, mosques, temples, and sacred springs are scattered throughout the valley. Cyclists can pedal from one attraction to another in day-long "loops" or on longer expeditions, camping or staying at tourist lodges. The climate

is temperate, the roads are well maintained, and the scenery of this "Switzerland of the East" is enchanting at every turn.

While our daughter went into the higher Himalayas for a week, my husband and I stayed in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. Most tourists stay in houseboats on the lakes and water ways that surround the city. We preferred a hotel with a view over the lakes, a choice that was especially convenient for cycling. Three bicycle rental stands only a few streets away supplied tourists with bicycles for a mere "rupees six" (less than fifty cents) per day.

My husband accompanied me on a day's excursion to see two of the famous Moghul gardens that are located on the edge of the lake nearest Srinagar. Setting out after breakfast, we followed the shore road. Its stately poplars shaded us from the morning sun. Frequently we stopped to enjoy the view: the still lake in front with the tree-lined shores ahead and the silhouettes of hills and mountains in the distance all around.

The Moghul gardens are masterpieces of landscape architecture. Laid out by Indian princes over four hundred years ago, the gardens descend on slopes that have been terraced into lawns and flower beds. Water cascades from one formal pool to another, from the top of the garden to the lake itself. We wandered among the flowers and stretched out on lawns under the dense foliage of lofty trees.

Heading home the way we had come, we reached Srinagar as the sun was setting behind the city. The lake was busy with shikaras, Kashmir's gondolas, plying between the houseboats and the shore. We paused one last time to watch the darkening landscape

brighten with the shimmering lights of the city.

On another outing we agreed to meet at a bridge on the other side of the lake. I was to cycle ahead while my husband, who preferred to walk, followed on foot. I made my way through dense traffic until I came to the edge of the city. A stretch of smooth, quiet road ran through a tapestry of rice fields studded with groves of fruit and nut trees. The fields were a brilliant green, some on low terraces, stretching to hills of a deeper hue. Narrow canals wandered like footpaths through the trees while families of ducks preened on their banks.

On reaching the appointed bridge, I was struck once again by Kashmir's natural beauty. "Our" lake lay on one side. On the other was an adjoining one, equally large, rimmed with terraced fields. Nearby, a weather-worn houseboat was moored in a water meadow of lotus flowers. They stood high-necked on their stems, their broad circular leaf-pads floating beneath them. While I sketched the scene before me, a young Kashmiri woman came over to watch. Laughing, she commented in broken English on my efforts. In a while my husband joined me. We hired a shikara to take us home in luxury, bicycle and all. Lounging like pashas on deep cushions, we were softly paddled across the lake.

Other days I explored Srinagar itself. I would cycle lazily down narrow streets that wound between ancient two and three-storeyed houses. Their exposed timber work gave them a look of Elizabethan England. Humped bridges spanned canals where dugouts idled laden with colorful vegetables neatly stacked on their decks. I listened to cocks crowing in the neighborhood and

children chanting their lessons. Wandering on, I would find my way "by ear", until I rejoined the traffic of the central districts.

India's traffic is heavy, but safe. I attributed the lack of accidents to the local automobile horns that give frequent piercing warnings. Formerly, Indian horns were of the squeeze-bulb variety, whose braying was characteristic of Indian traffic. Now, the newer horns have lost all vestiges of that organic warmth. They no longer wheeze their messages, but shriek them fiercely.

In time I learned to muffle mentally the sounds of the horns around me. I came to appreciate how effective they were in signaling the location of the vehicle behind me, whether to the right or left, and how close. I learned that drivers were not persecuting me personally, but communicating their presence to the traffic in general. Only India's street cattle seemed serenely oblivious to their calls.

#### Thoughts from Home

From Kashmir we returned to New York at the cruel speed of airplanes. As I resumed my accustomed cycling, I experienced cycling "culture shock." My Japanese Raleigh felt underweight and capricious. I missed India's many bicycles and the feeling of being accepted by motorists. Too often I had to turn my head to check the traffic lurking behind. Instead of those undeniable warnings from Indian horns, I heard the squeal of car brakes making sudden stops. When I wanted to park, I had to find a suitable support for my bicycle and struggle to bind bike and post together with my unwieldy American U-lock.

My daughter dressed her ten-speed Panasonic in the Indian accoutrements we had brought back. The oil-cloth covers gave it a comical rather than decorative aspect and the simple Indian lock looked too vulnerable to deter the sophisticated thieves of our city. Nevertheless, I gazed wistfully at this bicycle in its exotic finery. Momentarily I saw again the streets of India -- a colorful, noisy world where bicycles still play a vital and varied role. I thought of the bicycle emblem on the political poster. A party with a bicycle for its logo might be a good one. I cast a silent vote in its favor.