

MISSIONARY BIKER

Cars have swallowed many Indian cities whole.
What can one woman do?

By Mary Frances Dunham

My bicycle with its small wheels and foldable frame attracts attention wherever I use it, but never more than on a recent trip to some of South Asia's most car-infested cities. People gathered to watch me fold my bike before taking it into shops and offices. They would wait for my exit to see how the bike unfolds and to ask how such small wheels could "work," where the bicycle was made and how much it cost. While answering their questions, I slipped in comments on the preferability of bicycles to cars for city transportation.

"See," I said, "even a woman of my advanced years chooses motor-free travel."

My husband was scheduled to attend meetings in cities where, as it happened, we had lived 30 years ago: Dhaka (seven years as residents), Calcutta (two years as residents), and New Delhi (short visits). At that time bicycles were numerous, but on a return visit to these cities in 1985, I saw how motor scooters and private cars had replaced bicycles with a vengeance. Calcutta's downtown traffic was so congested at times that pedestrians climbed over the tops of cars in order to cross a street. Buses were so loaded that only divine intervention, as our Calcutta friends remarked, kept them upright.

Local friends in all three cities begged me to use their chauffeur-driven cars or to take taxis rather than venture on my bicycle into the traffic mayhem and the diesel-fumed air. They themselves always used cars for even walkable distances. A Calcutta businessman told me that occasionally he took the subway, but only to get from his office to his golf club. I assured our friends that no conditions for bicycling in their cities could be worse than conditions in my own city, New York — although I had to admit that New York has more traffic lights and less livestock than Calcutta.

I introduced myself to present-day Indian traffic in New Delhi, our first stop. Reminding myself to "drive" on the left, I set out from our hotel in the heart of the city's commercial district. I watched how others entered the flow of traffic at the propitious moment, taking advantage of brief intervals between avalanches of motor scooters, cars, trucks and buses.

At first I cycled near the curb, following slow traffic, men with pushcarts and cyclists carrying heavy loads. I soon learned to expect the unexpected even more than in New York. Trucks hooting raucously cut me off and bicycles going the wrong way appeared suddenly from around corners.

I had to edge around pedestrians who walked on the road to escape congestion on the sidewalk. In spite of their generous breadth, New Delhi's sidewalks overflowed with occupants: vendors of all sorts, some with carts, some with their goods spread out on the pavement, shoe and luggage repairmen, children playing jacks with pebbles, circles of men playing cards, idlers at shrines built into sidewalk trees, and corrals of parked motor vehicles. Although pedestrians using the road obstructed me, I understood their predicament.

Eventually I could ride at a good clip along the city's main avenues, but I never mastered its circular intersections. Planned in the style of Washington, D.C., New Delhi blossoms with landscaped traffic circles, some the size of the one at the Arch of Triumph in Paris. As many as six avenues radiate from a single circle. This layout pleases the eye, but is treacherous for a newcomer such as myself.

I watched these circles in awe as the *conoscenti* wove deftly in and out of each other's way. They jockeyed for position, honking furiously before spiraling off at just the right angle for entering the avenue they wanted. Meanwhile, I resorted to walking my bicycle on the high-curbed sidewalks around the outside of the circles.

It was easy to become disoriented in these circles. More than once I traveled completely around one before I realized that I was back at the avenue where I had entered. Usually avenue names were written on concrete signposts in Roman letters as well as in Hindi, but if a post were missing, I would have to find an avenue that was marked in order to get my bearings. One time I rode down an unmarked avenue that I thought was taking me in the right direction, only to find myself a long way from where I expected to be, no thanks to the subtle angles of New Delhi's stylish radials.

Of course, the best time to cycle in

any city is when traffic is light. In the early morning before the business day began, I found New Delhi's avenues almost empty. They stretched peacefully ahead in long tree-lined vistas softened by a misty light. Over low walls flanking the sidewalks I could see dignified bungalows resting in their gardens. I wished that such pleasant roads for cycling could be free from the droves of vehicles that daily turned them into hectic expressways.

The attention my bicycle attracted as I went about New Delhi gave me the idea that I might be newsworthy. Perhaps I could spread the pro-bike gospel that I was eager to preach. I considered approaching an Indian newspaper about doing an article — "AMERICAN VISITOR PROMOTES BICYCLE TRANSPORTATION," for instance.

The novelty of a "Madam" (as I was frequently addressed) trundling a folded bike under her arm gained me entrance to the Hindustan Times building. I was shown to the "Reporters' Room" where I unfolded my bike and asked if anyone was interested in doing an article about it. A young reporter motioned me to a chair in front of his desk, but he seemed so shy that I wondered how I would explain my mission.

I produced some bicycle advocacy literature that I had brought with me: the latest issue of Pro Bike News (the Bicycle Federation of America's newsletter), the current issue of City Cyclist (Transportation Alternative's newsletter, which happened to contain an article on folding bicycles), and Marcia Lowe's pamphlet, "Alternatives to the Automobile: Transportation for Livable Cities," published by the Worldwatch Institute. The reporter accepted the literature gratefully, managed to ask me a few questions, and arranged to have me photographed riding my bicycle. He told me to watch for the evening edition of the paper due on the streets within a few hours.

"FOLDING BIKE!" (note the exclamation point), appeared on page three of that day's evening news, accompanied on the same page by such fetching pieces as "HOUSEMAID MURDERED," "BODY FOUND," and "DRIVING LICENSE RACKET SMASHED." The staff at our hotel made a gratifying fuss over me and the

next day a man on the street stopped to say he recognized me from the picture in the paper. I took these occasions to elaborate on the message of my mission.

Actually, there were others in the city concerned about the harm that traffic congestion was causing. In front of the Hindustan Times building an electric signboard flashed slogans in letters a foot high: "POLLUTION KILLS HEALTH," "SPEED THRILLS BUT KILLS," "MAKE OUR BEAUTIFUL CITY ACCIDENT FREE," "OBSERVE LAND DISCIPLINE," and many other exhortations having to do with pollution and safety. Gasoline stations in the city sported large signs that said "CONSERVE PETROL FOR INDEPENDENCE FROM FOREIGN FUEL." I thought how shamefully New York lags behind in this kind of spirit.

Encouraged by my success in New Delhi, I set about making news in Calcutta, our next stop. I chose The Statesman, also a national paper. In the "Reporters Room" a young reporter graciously listened to me, glanced at my literature, which now included the Times article, and duly arranged for a photograph.

If an article came out, I never saw it. I comforted myself with the assumption that at least the reporter, the photographer, an aged elevator operator, a sleepy receptionist and an officious doorman had all been impressed with the fact that an American *memsahib*, as I was called in Calcutta, was riding around their city on a bicycle in spite of the traffic conditions that had reduced local cyclists to a trickle.

Meanwhile, the family with whom we were staying contacted a woman journalist who was genuinely interested in the potential of my bicycle, especially for upper-class city children who, she said, had to be driven to school by car for lack of suitable public transport. She interviewed me at length and a photographer took pictures, in color, no less.

A few weeks later the magazine section of The Telegraph contained an article called "THE MAGIC BIKE," illustrated with two large photos. The only other article on the same page was about the ancient monuments of Iraq that were threatened by the impending war in that region.

I would have pushed my luck with the press in Dhaka, our last stop, but within a few days of our arrival, political demonstrations turned into city-wide riots. While cycling around the city in the days before curfews were imposed, I saw that Dhaka needed my words of pro-bike wisdom no less than New Delhi and Calcutta, but I was sure that the local papers had more immediate concerns. We ourselves became intent on finding a

way back to New Delhi in time to catch our flight home.

Although it was sad for me to see the beauty of South Asian cities marred by the noise, fumes and jostling of car traffic, I could think of no other way that these cities could maintain the modernity they craved. I considered how we in America fail to diminish the number of cars in our own cities. How could I expect Indians, who only recently became more able to have private cars, to give them up?

However, in reviewing my little mission, I decided it had served a purpose. I thought of the hundreds of people who had seen me riding contentedly in local traffic, proving that bicycle transportation was still feasible. I remembered the

many Indians and Bangladeshis who listened patiently to my pro-bike arguments. Although the car owners among them felt that they needed their own cars, they had, nevertheless, acknowledged that the quantity of cars in their cities should somehow be reduced. I felt encouraged by their understanding, by the two newspaper articles about me, and by those sensible signboards in New Delhi. These were hopeful indications that South Asians might find a way to combat motor vehicle congestion sooner rather than too late. ○

Mary Frances Dunham specializes in the folk music and literature of Bangladesh. Currently she devotes her time to the work of Transportation Alternatives, New York City's oldest and largest bicycle advocacy group. She has been a Bikenational member for nine years.

Evening News

Monday Nov. 12 1990

Folding bike!

Evening News Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Nov. 12 — An ideal vehicle for travelling short distances on the congested urban roads has been developed by a Taiwan-born naturalised American inventor, Mr David Hon. The vehicle is a portable bicycle which can be folded and is known as the Dahon.

The cycle is less cumbersome than ordinary bicycles and can be easily carried about as it weighs a mere 32 pounds. The wheels of the bicycle are only 16 inches in diameter and it has three gears.

The cycle is useful for ladies in particular as it has been developed in a ladies' style. The safety factor of the bike is also substantially higher than that of normal cycles as it has a very low centre of gravity.

The cycle is being promoted by a New York-based group called Transportation Alternatives (TA). A member of TA, Ms Mary Frances Dunham, told *Evening News* this morning that the bike was a very viable mode of travel for short distances. She added that the TA believed in non-motorized means of travel in public transportation and that the Dahon helped in cutting down on pollution caused by the fuel used in motorized vehicles. Other than being a very healthful daily means of travelling, the bike would also offer a simple solution to the problem of traffic congestion which

afflict major cities.

About 5,000 such bikes have already been manufactured. Each cycle costs \$270 (about Rs 4,900).

Other than the USA, this type of bikes have already gained acceptance in



Ms Mary Frances Dunham giving a demonstration of the Dahon bike here this morning.

— Pic. H. C. Tiwari

Europe and are used regularly in France and Germany. An even lighter and smaller bike is being used in Sweden, according to Ms Dunham, and it folds like an umbrella and instead of the chain that is found on normal cycles it has a rubber-plastic chain.

On the whole the Dahon would be welcome addition to the Delhi roads, as it offers solutions to some of the more basic problems of the

Austerity march

Evening News Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Nov 12 — second phase of the Tapo Yastirity march) organised Brahma Vidya Centre and ti Novotthana Pratishthan al other bodies will start at the H Mandir here this afternoon. Th is to be undertaken under the g of Swami Bhoomananda Tirth first phase of the Yatra had been ched on November 3.

The participants in the yatra the aim of going to South B meet the Prime Minister in his The objective of the yatra is to ate spirituo-austere power and in the people, especially the Minister, the Council of Ministers other persons manning seats of

M. L. Bhargava dead

NEW DELHI, Nov. 12 (P Death occurred here today of L. Bhargava, a former Principal formation Officer of the Government of India.

Mr Bhargava, who was 77, w ing for some time. Mr Bhargava funeral will take place at 1130 H

House

Evening News Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Nov. 12 — 50-year-old maid servant of a character of the Nizamuddin in South District was fo strangled in her house yesterday where she was staying al DCP (South District) Ne Kumar said this morning, maid servant, Aisha alias Ma

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On The Cover:

Brightly colored group of riders on the Tour of the Swan River Valley in Montana. Photo by Greg Siple.

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Individual membership costs \$22 yearly, and includes a subscription to *BikeReport*, *The Cyclists' Yellow Pages*, and discounts on Bikecentennial maps and products. Bikecentennial is also a leader in advocacy and educational programs for bicyclists, and publishes *Bicycle Forum*, a national magazine for bicycling professionals and advocates. A yearly subscription to *Bicycle Forum* is available from Bikecentennial for \$20.00 and includes four quarterly issues.

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