

The bicycle of my dreams



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I got my first bicycle in 1960 when I was about 10 years old. More accurately, Ashok, my older brother, and I got our first shared bicycle at that time. It's a story that sticks in my mind, and also of some other family members. Our other older brothers – Prakash, Kailash and Subhash – already had a cycle each. I don't know how much of a blessing it was for Subhash to have a bicycle, as he often had to lug his two younger brothers, Ashok and me, on his cycle all the way to our school (St. Xavier's, Jaipur) in the evenings for a swim!

Well, Ashok and I wanted our own 'wheels' – with them would come freedom to roam and grown-up status.

The problem was money. My father, an IAS officer, was living in Ajmer as Member, Revenue Board, while the rest of the family was in Jaipur because the children liked the Jaipur schools and did not want to move Ajmer. One income, a large family (I have seven siblings), and two home establishments together with travel costs between Jaipur and Ajmer for Daddy – there just was not the spare money to buy another new bicycle, which I think used to cost over Rs. 100 at that time.

But we were in luck.

Abhijit Dasgupta, one of our friends at school and also a neighbour, had a bicycle, and he too had older brothers. As I remember it, the older brothers were moving up the cycle chain, and Abhijit would inherit one of their machines. Or maybe his parents were getting him a new one, as he was outgrowing his cycle, which had smaller wheels suitable for younger boys, who could not reach the pedals of a full-size bicycle. For us, the reason why Abhijit was getting a new cycle did not matter. What was important was that his parents were considering selling a used bicycle that we knew was in good working condition.

We wanted it very badly. But it was no sure deal. They were considering selling, and Mummy was considering buying. Price, of course, was important, but negotiations had to be undertaken delicately since we were dealing with friends and neighbours. I don't remember the details of this consideration process, but in the end, the deal went through. The price, I think, was Rs. 35.

Ashok and I had a to-be-shared used, small-sized bicycle.

The joy! The thrill! The excitement! It is hard to imagine it today but it was real, and not just for the two of us, but for the whole family. We had done it: our family was the proud owner of four bicycles! How many families could boast of that? And the fact that the family owned a car did not seem to matter. It certainly did not matter to Ashok and me because what good was a car for us if we wanted to go on our own meet our friends or for sports in the evening?

It was inevitable that we would outgrow that cycle. How long it could serve two growing boys? And, so we went on to get bigger, normal-sized cycles – one each. For the next ten years or so, cycles remained a key ingredient of our lives, but the thrill of that first cycle was never to be repeated.

We used our cycles extensively, and it seemed as if they were a part of us. We would go to school in the morning. Along the way, it was normal to meet and fall in rhythm with other boys who were also going to our school, and we would chat away all the way. Coming back, a group of boys living in the same direction would set out together, dropping off from the crowd one by one as their homes approached.

In the summer, it used to be so fiercely hot that we could not make it back home from school without stopping on the way to drink some cold water from a *piao* (small hut set up to provide water) and splash it on our faces and heads. The water was free as the *piaos* had been set up by some wealthy person or group other as a community service. And, to the water, they had added the essence of *kewra* (an extract from a locally grown flower) – delicious! The *piaos*, which still thrive in Jaipur today, had no tumblers or cups. Instead, to drink the water, you had to cup your hand, hold it close to your lips, and drink in the naturally cold, naturally flavoured water as the *piao wali* (lady tending the *piao*) poured it out to you from a metal *lota*.

Along with the pleasure came responsibility. When Satish, the youngest of the family, was old enough to enter school, it became my responsibility to take him to school as a passenger on my cycle. He used to sit ahead of me on the main frame of the cycle, so it was easy for us to keep talking to each other. Our school bags used to be either hung from the front or stacked behind us on the spring-loaded carrier, which used to hold things in place. In the evenings, particularly in the summers, Ashok often used his cycle to drop our older sister Manmohini where she wanted to go; instead of returning home, he would wander off to a nearby friend's place, and pick her up later to return home together. Being older, she would sit behind him on the carrier, instead of the front main frame.

Epilogue

Today, my son, now about 17 years old, has a bicycle that is so much fancier than what we ever had in my youth. It has multiple gears and is very light – and costs a fortune compared to what we paid in 1960, even after you take account of price inflation over the years. Happily, he also goes farther with it than we ever did. Last year, with his friends, he went on a 100 km roundtrip in a day – much more than we could have even imagined in 1960. And, now my wife is also thinking of buying a bicycle. As for me, perhaps my bicycle dreams have already been fulfilled!❖

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