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Walk in step

To build an inclusive, and climate-resilient India, it is time to prioritise walking and cycling, writes **SAGARMOY PHUKAN**.

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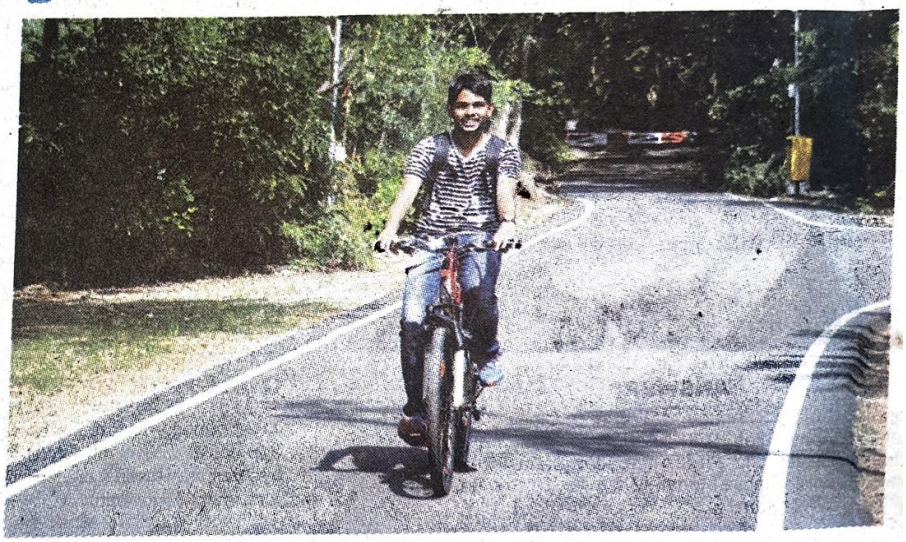

A report by *The Hindu* conveyed that 4.5 crore Indians walk to work daily. Prioritising walking and cycling in India has two-fold benefits – firstly keeping us healthy which is important as India is the diabetic centre of the world with 10 crore population suffering from it and an additional 15 crore population are in the pre-diabetic phase. Secondly, it will help in reducing our carbon emissions which is essential to achieve our Net-Zero Target by 2070.

Walking and cycling which are generally termed non-motorised transport (NMT), are green modes of transport, i.e., their carbon footprint is low, energy consumption is minimal and their local emissions are zero. Indians walk more as a norm than as a habit but cyclists and pedestrians have the highest share of traffic accidents in many cities. Studies and reports across the country have frequently shown that of the total fatalities in road crashes, pedestrians and bicyclists accounted for 60–90 per cent of all fatalities. Here, the question arises: why does urban planning in India continue to neglect the needs of pedestrians and cyclists?

Currently, less than 7 per cent of Delhi uses NMT as a primary transport system while it was 17 per cent in 1991. This is because the transport infrastructure does not support NMT but instead pushes them to the margins. From our daily experience of walking in an Indian city, we face challenges such as no footpaths, or footpaths encroached by vendors, construction debris, or parked vehicles, open manholes, etc. A recent survey I conducted in Assam highlighted a concerning trend – only 10-20 per cent of middle-class respondents used NMT, 15-20 per cent used public transport and 10-15 per cent used two-wheelers, whereas 60 per cent relied on private four-wheelers for daily commutes.

Over the last decade, government agencies, while planning for urbanisation and infrastructure development, have been favouring motor vehicle movement over NMT. For example, the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) have been intensely investing in signal-free junctions and flyovers that are aimed at solving problems posed by motorised vehicular congestion. The National Urban Transport Policy 2014 acknowledges the requirements for increasing NMT infrastructure, however, one cannot determine the extent of the success of implementing the recommendations in the country. One of the major flaws in the transport policy is the centralised method of undertaking NMT infrastructure development. The policy indicates that the Central Government would lead the construction of safe NMT infrastructure, especially at intersections and high-traffic corridors, leaving ambiguity on the development of infrastructure elsewhere.

Personal observations indicate that much of the NMT infrastructure developed until now is usually under-utilised from what was initially envisaged. An educated guess is that these are design-related problems that fail to recognise the limitations and problems faced by NMT users and the public at large. Local governments such as municipal corporations and municipality boards can design NMT infrastructure through public participation such as involving residents, urban planners, and transport experts in decision-making, monitoring, improving and reporting conditions. This can support NMT infrastructure to be usable.

Small but effective measures such as dedicated bicycle lanes, pedestrian pathways, shaded walkways, and secure bicycle parking can make a significant impact. Many of these solutions require better traffic planning rather than extensive new construction. Cities worldwide are embracing sustainable mobility, yet India remains car-centric, investing heavily in flyovers and high-speed corridors while neglecting basic pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. If we want to build a healthy, inclusive, and climate-resilient India, it is time to prioritise walking and cycling over cars.