



360° on a bicycle

ANOOB BABANI

October 15, 1923 was yet another mellow Monday morning in Bombay, but the city's central district of Grant Road was ablaze with blaring music. The erstwhile Bombay Weightlifting Club had organised a send-off for six of its young members – Adi B Hakim, Gustad G Hathiram, Jal P Bapasola, Keki D Pochkhanawala, Nariman B Kapadia and Rustom B Bhungara – all of them Parsis in their 20s and readying for their cycling expedition around the world, a first such feat by Indians.

What had inspired them to undertake this seemingly-impossible journey? "It was a public lecture at Bombay's Oval Maidan in 1920 by a French man who had walked from Europe to India," reminisces 75-year-old Rohinton Bhungara. Rohinton is foggy about the name of the world-walker, who eventually died of malaria in Assam, on his way to South-East Asia. Says Jasmine Marshall, granddaughter of Adi Hakim, "There was an extraordinary zeal of adventure in my granddad. 'Nothing is impossible', he would often tell me."

The first
Adi, Jal and Rustom pedalled 71,000 km over four-and-a-half years – at times in 60°C, for days without food and some days without water, across pirate-infested territories and in swamp lands, through dense jungles and "up 6,600 ft amongst the terrible solitudes of the Alps", avoiding the sea and traversing over most difficult routes, where no cyclists had been before. "We

Between 1923 and 1933, 10 Indians in their early-to-mid-20s – all of them Parsis and from Mumbai – undertook cycling expeditions around the world. Seven of them, in three different journeys, succeeded in their pursuit

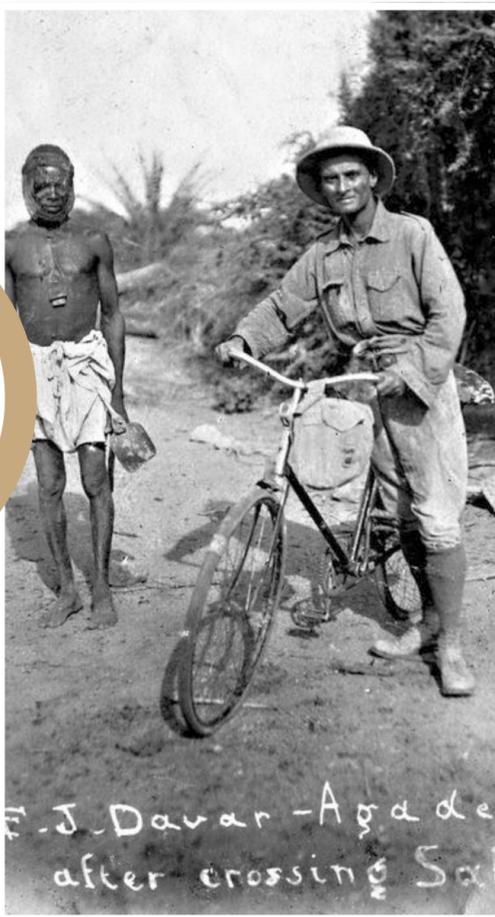


wanted to know the world more intimately and to acquaint the world with India and Indians," they noted years later.

Not all six completed the ride, though. Nariman returned home from Tehran "for personal reasons" after giving "us company for 5,000 miles", and Gustad de-

cidated to make the US his home. Disheartened by this, Gustad's close buddy, Keki sailed home from New York.

On their expedition, the cyclists pedalled through Punjab and Baluchistan, crossing Prospect Point in Ziarat, 11,000 feet above sea level and in snow,



reaching Iran and then Baghdad. Braving sandstorms, parched throats, temperatures over 57°C and saved from imminent death by Bedouins, they set a record by crossing the 956-km Mesopotamian desert from Baghdad to Aleppo in Syria, in 23 days.

They sailed to Italy, rode over the Alps, across Europe, finally reaching Britain. Three weeks later, they sailed to New York. The threesome cycled 8,400 km across the East to West Coast over five months and boarded S S Tenyo Maru to Japan, a leisurely cruise after months of grilling rides.

Continuing their journeys, they reached the 'Hermit Kingdom' of Korea – the first bikers to do so – and on to Manchuria and China. On their last leg, they cycled through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, North Eastern India, Calcutta and Southern India, returning to Bombay on March 18, 1928. They recalled being "surrounded by people who had come to receive us... and garlanded till we were buried in flowers" and hoped that their city would welcome "Scouter F J Davar, who is shortly due in Bombay on the conclusion of a similar enterprise."

Going solo

Framroze Davar, 30, was to return home only in 1931. His was a far more adventurous, lengthier, and in-part, solitary journey for "rational curiosity", beginning in January 1924, and totalling 1,10,000 km, 52 countries and five continents. The 30-year old did not compress his account in a single volume, as it could be "a book of geography gone mad". He chronicled his arduous ride over the Andes Mountains in *Cycling Over Roof Of The World* (1929), risky passage through Sahara in *Across The Sahara* (1937) and crossing of the Amazon in *The Amazon in Reality and Romance* (1960).

He had cycled more than 5,000 km entirely on his own, for 11 months! In Vienna, he met Gustav Sztavjanik, his cycling mate for the next seven years. The duo cycled through Western and Eastern Europe, rode over the Alps and Mont Blanc mountain, pedalled through parts of erstwhile Soviet Union, Baltic countries, Poland, and Scandinavia, including Lapland, and returned to France 18 months later, to sail to Algiers in Africa. They tortured themselves

Cycling chronicles (clockwise from top left) Kharas trio in New York, Framroze Davar after crossing Sahara, Hakim Trio back in Bombay in 1928, and Kharas trio in Bombay at the start of their journey •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

through the Sahara, counting 156 camel skeletons along the way, surviving eight sandstorms, and a malaria attack. After cycling through Africa for another six months, they boarded a ship from Dakar to Rio de Janeiro, to take on their next big challenge, riding over the mighty Andes. Six months and 2,700 km later, they reached Argentina from Brazil, and scaled the Andes up to a height of 5,200m.

America was a relief. They got back to their saddles, cycling from the East to West Coast, lecturing and meeting dignitaries, including President Herbert Hoover and tycoon Henry Ford, before sailing to Japan. They sailed to Shanghai, cycled through Hong Kong, Singapore, Sumatra, Burma, Calcutta and Bombay on March 22, 1931.

The last lot

Luck and the exciting accounts

tracks; we were snow-bound in northern Iran; and were suspected as British spies in eastern Turkey," they wrote in *Peddalling Through the Afghan Wilds* (1935).

Keki, Rustom and Rutton cycled through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Britain, France, Spain, Switzerland and Italy. They sailed to Alexandria and pedalled "twenty-one months across Africa, from Cairo to Cape Town, a distance of 12,000 miles (nearly 20,000 km). We were fortuitously saved oftener than we can recall."

In 1937, the trio sailed from South Africa to Argentina and cruised through South and Central America until they reached Mexico and rode into USA from Texas. They spent a year cycling through the 'New World' and touching the borders of Canada. From USA, they sailed to Japan



tempted yet one more – and the last – group of cyclists, Keki J Kharas, Rustom D Ghandhi and Rutton D Shroff. "We were all thoroughly and hopelessly afflicted with wanderlust," they wrote in *Across The Highways Of The World* (1939). Setting off from Bombay in 1933, they cycled through central and northern India, Punjab, Kashmir, Multan and Baluchistan (then a part of India).

"In Afghanistan, we were marooned in the desert for three successive days and nights without either food or water and traversed on camel and donkey

and cycled across Japan, China, Australia, Singapore and Burma, before reaching Bombay on January 29, 1942. In slightly less than nine years, Kharas, Ghandhi and Shroff had traversed 84,000 km, spanning five continents.

Our Saddles, Our Butts, Their World is a photo exhibition of the cyclists, to be held in Reel-sonHeels, India's First-ever International Festival of Films on Running, December 1 and 2, 2018 at Ravindra Bhavan, Margao, Goa, curated by former Mumbai-based journalist and now avid cyclist, Anoop Babani

TAIL LIGHT

More dialogue, less suspicion

Why are we obsessed with motor transport in over-populated cities? Why don't our governments move to fix problems before the tipping point arrives?



Students raise slogans During a protest over the recent traffic accidents that killed a boy and a girl, in Dhaka, Bangladesh • MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN



ANNIE ZAIDI

Can't say I wasn't warned. Friends who'd been to Dhaka before told me not to make elaborate plans; the traffic wouldn't allow me to get around much.

I'd thought, but traffic is pretty bad everywhere. Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru... How much worse could Dhaka's traffic be? Well, let's just say that it lived up to its reputation.

I was participating in the Dhaka Literature Festival and discovered that the tiniest commute required a few hours of traffic time. It took an hour to drive a stretch that one could walk in 20 minutes. When the car did move, it didn't move smoothly. Other writers, especially those who were not used to the chaos of the Subcontinent, were made nervous by

the jerky, forward-sideways style of progress. Coming from India, I knew there was little danger at those speeds.

However, speeds are not always so slow and there is always some danger. Dhaka discovered this in recent months, after an accident led to a major political confrontation. The city was brought to a standstill by teenagers, after two school students were killed through rash driving and several were injured.

Accidents are a major cause of death in South Asia. India reportedly witnesses 400 fatalities every day, and road accidents are one of the top 10 causes of death in the country. But in Dhaka, something else was brewing. Students weren't just protesting the deaths of two kids. They were also reacting to everything else that's wrong on the road. Nobody observes any rules; there's no

lane discipline. There aren't enough state-owned buses. Private transporters, many of them politically connected, don't train drivers properly. Most bus and car drivers are very poorly paid and have no job security. Many of them don't even have licences.

Children were trying to shame the police into doing

The sensible thing would be to create dedicated cycle and cycle rickshaw lanes to streamline flow

their job. They turned out in school uniforms and set up 'check points' where they checked licences, scolded traffic violators, demanded that the traffic cops take action. Soon, the movement got bigger. University students joined the protests and

now the government became anxious. College students tend to be more politically aware.

Perhaps, the government was afraid that opposition parties would capitalise on the student agitation – and there is a lot to be agitated about – or perhaps the leadership just didn't know what to do with their demonstration of anger. The outcome, anyway, was the police aggression. Some 'clashes' were reported, but some of the violence was allegedly caused by youths affiliated with the ruling party. Photos and videos of the attacks were a further embarrassment for the government.

Again, instead of engaging or promising appropriate action, the state tried to stifle all criticism. Photographer Shahidul Alam

was arrested and charged with making 'provocative comments' after he shared a video on Facebook and talked to *Al Jazeera* about the reasons for the protests. He's out on bail now, but the charges haven't been withdrawn.

All that time I was stuck in that infamous traffic, I chafed. Why are we obsessed with motor transport in over-populated cities? Why don't our governments move to fix problems before the tipping point arrives? Why don't we incentivise cheap, eco-friendly modes of transport like bicycles? Someone cribbed about cycle rickshaws slowing down Dhaka's traffic, but that isn't true. The sensible thing would be to create dedicated cycle and cycle rickshaw lanes to streamline flow, and to make sure that students and the poor don't get hurt.

All it would take is for the leadership to be open to dialogue, to not panic in the face of criticism, to not suspect people's motives. They elected you, after all. Didn't they?

The author is a writer of essays, stories, poems and scripts for stage and screen

COMMUTER KNOW-HOW

Dhaka is known to be the world's Rickshaw Capital, with more than 8,00,000 rickshaw pullers in the city.



A royal dilemma

Roshan Remani Saseendran, Thiruvananthapuram: I am a die-hard fan of Royal Enfield. I want to buy a 500cc model.

For the average Royal Enfield enthusiast, there can be no other choice, as there is nothing else in the market that offers the same retro feel, both in terms of the design and performance. However, before you settle for the 500, give the new 650s a try. They are highly impressive motorcycles that offer performance, handling and quality levels much higher than anything we have seen from the company to date. The Royal Enfield Interceptor 650 and Continental GT 650 have just been launched and are offered at an incredibly competitive price, starting at

₹2.5 lakh (ex-showroom, Delhi).

BMW clarifies on warranty

Vishesh, Ahmedabad: I have booked a BMW G 310 GS and the dealership tells me that there will be no warranty if my engine fails before 2,000km. What is the official statement about this from the company? This is my first bike.

We have connected with BMW Motorrad regarding this and the company has said that this is not accurate. A company representative will reach out to you to help sort this out.

Hormazd Sorabjee is the Editor of Autocar India. Mail your feedback and queries to roadshow@thehindu.co.in

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