

The evolution of modern locomotion

No more walking if we can; the motor vehicle takes over lives — and vitiates the air we breathe

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Treat the earth well: we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.

— Native American saying

“Walking is boring,” said a friend. “I always listen to songs when I go for a walk in the park.” That set me thinking — I realised many people have just forgotten to walk. They go for ‘walking’ for fitness, or to lose weight, or to keep their diabetes under control, or whatever. But they have forgotten to walk, you know, to just go from one place to another, or to go for a walk just to take in the surroundings.

Not so long ago, when motorcycles and cars were pretty scarce, men and women walked around as they went about doing their business — going to shops and temples, visiting friends and relatives in the neighbourhood, walking to the bus stop and railway station, using public transport only to the farther destinations.

An easy walk

In the suburban neighbourhood I grew up in, we had decent public transportation available — both a bus terminus and a train station within a radius of 1.5 km. We did not think too much of this distance; it was an easy walk. Most people relied on these for the commute to and from school and work. Youngsters were only just getting motorised two-wheelers. Our fathers until then had mostly ridden bicycles. Cars were owned by only a privileged few and my class of society was as yet



untouched by it.

For reasons now obscure to myself, I never learnt to ride a bicycle. Consequently, the move up to a motorised two-wheeler never really happened. I rode buses and trains and happily walked the rest of the time.

I migrated to the United States at the turn of the century to a god-forsaken city in the middle of nowhere with vast stretches of land around me — long roads leading out in all directions but no decent public transportation system. I had to do the unthinkable: I learnt to drive. It took me places.

Now, well-connected

A year later I moved to an old city on the east coast of the country that had well-connected buses, subways and tram systems. I used the car when I had to but the

public transport system met most of my needs. I happily shared space with university professors, government officials and sometimes even the city mayor, who all unabashedly rode the subway.

Years later I relocate to my old neighborhood in India and slam-bam, I am in for a culture shock — a road culture shock. There still are the same roads and bylanes (some of them narrowed due to encroachment), greater human density and, more importantly, more vehicles on the roads.

In a sea of too many cars and too many motorbikes and scooters, a bus or two pathetically shows up. I had expected better connectivity with more buses plying, but discovered that the bus fleet has been drastically reduced. Our once-crowded bus terminus wears a deser-

ted look even during peak hour. It is mostly the less-privileged people who ride public transport — with rickety buses and poor suspension that breaks the low back on the pothole-ridden roads.

More vehicles

The middle class has moved up a notch or two in the social ladder. All such families now have two or more motorised two-wheelers and at least one four-wheeler. People are out on the streets bickering for parking spots. Heretofore sweet-tongued neighbours turn virulent on a group of children who play cricket on the street lest a stray ball hit their prized vehicle. Children as young as ten and eleven pester their parents to let them ride the motorcycle. Parents invariably give in to these demands with a sense of pride

and accomplishment that their wards can ride too.

The members of the affluent, aspiring middle class don't walk anymore. They go for 'walking' in the park, to where they ride their scooters and motorbikes, spewing pollutants as they go. They park their vehicles haphazardly on the street outside, plug in the earphones and shut out the 'noise' of the outside world. Even the very few who do take public transport, get 'dropped off' on a motorbike at the bus stop or train station. Because time is scarce, every minute is precious and no one wants to waste time walking places.

I have reclaimed my previous *avatar*, though — I still walk around in the neighbourhood and take the bus or train to get around in the city. Neighbours give me condescending looks from their cars. Some suggest I should get myself a two-wheeler at least, to 'fly' between places. When I say I enjoy all the walking (not to say that the condition of the pavements or rather no-pavement encourages this), they tell me a vehicle will save time.

Every time you go on any major arterial route in the city, the vehicle exhaust chokes you, the noise deafens you, the heat scorches you and the innumerable vehicles clogging the roads dishearten you. But what do we care? We have to reach our place. So we merrily go around riding our motorbikes or driving our cars doing our bit to pollute. What if our children or their children inherit a poisonous planet — we will be long gone by then to care.

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