

ARTICLE

# Man-making and World-making on Two Wheels: Indian ‘Globe Cyclists’ in the Interwar Years

Harald Fischer-Tiné<sup>1</sup> and Souvik Naha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chair of History of the Modern World, ETH Zurich, Switzerland and <sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer in Imperial and Post-colonial History, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

**Corresponding author:** Harald Fischer-Tiné; Email: [harald.fischertine@gess.ethz.ch](mailto:harald.fischertine@gess.ethz.ch)

## Abstract

Around 20 cyclists from India embarked on long and arduous intercontinental journeys between 1923 and 1942 individually or in groups. Many of these ‘globe cyclists’, as they were often referred to by the Indian press, later wrote media articles and longer travelogues about their expeditions. This article examines the narratives of these long-distance cycling expeditions to argue that these journeys can illuminate new histories of the bicycle’s socio-cultural impact beyond the West, the self-fashioning of Indian cyclotourists as an example of complicit masculinity, and world tours as a novel form of anti-imperial counter-mobility. It does so by drawing on several historiographical subfields that have hitherto rarely been mobilized together, namely the histories of sports, masculinity, colonialism and decolonization, tourism, and (everyday) technology. The article focuses *pars pro toto* on the tours of Adi Hakim, Jal Bapasola, and Rustom Bhumgara (1923–1928) and Ramnath Biswas (1931–1940) that were strongly over-determined by the contexts of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and decolonisation, while nationalist masculinity represented another recurring trope.

Around twenty cyclists from India embarked on long and arduous intercontinental journeys between 1923 and 1942 individually or in groups.<sup>1</sup> The riders frequently received considerable media attention while en route and enthusiastic receptions when they arrived back home (see Figure 1). Many of these ‘globe cyclists’, as they were often referred to by the Indian press, later wrote media articles and longer travelogues about their expeditions.<sup>2</sup> Some of these found wide readership and inspired generations of South Asian cyclists and globetrotters. This article examines the narratives of these long-distance cycling expeditions to argue that these journeys can

---

The authors wish to thank Claire Blaser, Manikarnika Dutta, Maria Framke, Navina Gupta, Robert Kramm, Mukesh Kumar, Monique Ligtenberg, Duncan MacIntyre, Margrit Pernau, Bernhard Schär, Olaf Stieglitz, Naima Tiné, Elena Valdameri, and Carey Watt, who have read earlier drafts of this article and made valuable suggestions for its improvement.

<sup>1</sup>Noteworthy long-distance journeys by Indians include the planned world tour of four cyclists from Calcutta known as the ‘Gay Wheelers’ (*The Civil and Military Gazette*, 28 January 1927, 12). They left their hometown in December 1926, but only one of them, Bimal Mukherjee, completed the entire journey more than a decade later and wrote a book in Bengali about his adventures. Two further expeditions by Parsis also deserve to be mentioned. Framroze J. Davar, a journalist and Chief Scoutmaster from Bombay spent seven years in the saddle on his world tour (1924–31). He visited fifty-two countries and covered 110,000 kilometres and published two books about his cycling adventures: F.J. Davar, *Cycling over the Roof of the World* (New York: J.G. Zeidler, 1929) and F.J. Davar, *Across the Sahara* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1937). Finally, another Parsi team comprising three riders (Kaikee J. Karas, Rustam D. Gandhi, and Rutton D. Shroff) left Bombay in April 1933 and returned to their home city almost exactly nine years later after covering 84,000 kilometres on five continents. See also Anoop Babani and Savia Viegas, *The Bicycle Diaries: Indian Cyclists and their Incredible Journeys around the World* (Carmona, Goa: Saxtti Books, 2021), 59–132, 148.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, *The Indian at Home and Abroad* 1, no. 6 (1927): 13.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.



**Figure 1.** The three remaining members of Adi Hakim's expedition with their bicycles are received by an enthusiastic crowd in Bombay in March 1928 after four and a half years on the road. Note the quasi-military Scout outfit of the riders! (Source: Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, n.p.)

illuminate new histories of the bicycle's socio-cultural impact beyond the west, the self-fashioning of Indian cyclotourists as an example of complicit masculinity, and world tours as a novel form of anti-imperial counter-mobility. It does so by drawing on several historiographical subfields that have hitherto rarely been mobilized together, namely the histories of sports, masculinity, colonialism and decolonization, tourism, and (everyday) technology.

Our account will focus *pars pro toto* on the tours of Adi Hakim, Jal Bapasola, and Rustom Bhumgara, who took their trip as a team from October 1923 to March 1928, and Ramnath Biswas, who made three separate world excursions of about two years each, between 1931 and 1940. The first group was chosen for two reasons: they pioneered the new trend, and their co-authored travelogue provides rich insights; and all three riders were Parsis, the South Asian ethno-religious group that was disproportionally over-represented in extreme distance cycling endeavours.<sup>3</sup> Our second case study examines the journeys of the left leaning Bengali Ramnath Biswas. Apart from the fact that he was an incredibly inventive writer, as a Bengali, Biswas represents the second most prolific community of South Asian globe cyclists. Furthermore, due to his contacts with anti-colonial organizations and radical revolutionary beliefs, his writings provide an interesting contrast to the moderately patriotic Parsi group. Long-distance tours by other Indian cyclists during the same period will be occasionally referenced to round off the picture.

These sportive exploits took place in the two decades before the end of British rule in 1947, which was a time of intense anti-colonial agitation in India. As a result, both the riders' own writings as well as media reports in India and abroad on their tours were strongly over-determined by the contexts of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and decolonization, with nationalist masculinity

<sup>3</sup>Babani and Viega, *The Bicycle Diaries*, *passim*.

representing another recurring trope. The cyclists themselves, as well as the Indian press and several political leaders who commented on their remarkable feats, hailed them as living proof of Indian manliness and fortitude. The *Indian National Herald* celebrated the return of Adi Hakim's team in March 1928 by emphasizing that the 'heroes of the day' had 'brilliantly served their country', demonstrating that 'India [was] as capable as other countries of producing young men of adventurous spirit'.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, nationalist leader and future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru expressed the hope that the globe cyclists would inspire the young men of India to 'do great deeds'.<sup>5</sup> Such statements acquired a particular anti-colonial connotation considering that South Asians were denied the supposedly 'male' qualities of physical prowess, courage, self-reliance and persistence that the globe cyclists embodied. This denial was a keystone of the powerful colonial stereotypes and discourses legitimizing British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, scholars have explored the topic of recovering Indian masculinities in the context of Indian nationalism during the early twentieth century through the practice of various sports and physical activities ranging from football to wrestling and scouting. Yet, they have largely overlooked the appropriation of the bicycle as a tool in the service of Indian nationalism and anti-colonialism more broadly.<sup>7</sup> This is surprising since the quasi-political instrumentalization of the bicycle by patriotic South Asians as a liberating tool of masculine self-empowerment and autonomy fits in well with the wider history of the bicycle. Especially during the peak years of the bicycle boom in Europe and North America in the 1890s and early 1900s, the 'intensely modern object that accelerated personal mobility' played an emancipatory role that extended to the field of politics, continuing into the interwar years.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Swedish Democratic Workers' Party was known to encourage the cycling community in a social advocacy role and to promote their idea of democracy and sociability.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Parti Communiste Français tried to exploit the working-class passion for cycling by presenting the cycle-commuting labourer as the ideal French worker.<sup>10</sup> In Italy, cycling arguably stimulated a sense of mass participation in the nation and acted as a context for making nationalist claims about the country's position in the hierarchy of European nations.<sup>11</sup> This article examines this well-established connection between

<sup>4</sup>'Heroes of the Day', *Indian National Herald*, 18 March 1928, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Facsimile reproduction of Nehru's handwritten preface in Adi Hakim, Jal Bapasola, and Rustom Bhumgara, *With Cyclists Around the World* (Bombay: Adi B. Hakim, 1931), n.p. For the most recent edition see: Adi Hakim, Jal Bapasola, and Rustom Bhumgara, *With Cyclists Around the World* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>These discourses will be discussed in detail below; the relevant literature is listed in footnotes 66–70.

<sup>7</sup>The only brief references that the role of cycling for the history of Indian anti-colonial nationalism might be a topic worthwhile pursuing are made in David Arnold's ground-breaking writings on the spread of the bicycle in South Asia. David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), 82–4; and David Arnold and Erich DeWald, 'Cycles of Empowerment? The Bicycle and Everyday Technology in Colonial India and Vietnam', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 4 (2012): 981. Paul Smethurst's short excursion on cycling in colonial South and Southeast Asia seems to be largely based on the findings of Arnold and a couple of other authors. Paul Smethurst, *The Bicycle: Towards a Global History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 125–31. The only book engaging with the globe cyclist at length is the work of two Goanese cycling enthusiasts and amateur historians that is very well-researched and marvellously illustrated, but largely descriptive and anecdotal account. Babani and Viega, *The Bicycle Diaries*. Nupur Bandyopadhyay's recent article on Ramnath Biswas' (one of our protagonists) tours through Africa and North America is concerned with neither the sportive or physical aspect of his journey nor with the gender dimension, and therefore has few overlaps with our approach. See Nupur Bandyopadhyay, 'A Journey to Justice: Transnational Civil Rights and Ramnath Biswas, an Indian Globetrotter from Bengal, 1938–40', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2022): 739–57.

<sup>8</sup>Nathan Cardon, 'Cycling on the Color Line: Race Technology and Bicycle Mobilities in the Early Jim Crow South, 1887–1905', *Technology and Culture* 62, no. 4 (2021): 973.

<sup>9</sup>Patrick Hegarty Morrish, 'Architects in Enjoyment: Fun and Politics in the Swedish Cycling Experience, 1918–39', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 39, no. 7 (2022): 707–26.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Hurcombe, 'Hammer and Cycle: Communism's Cycling Counterculture in Interwar France', *French Politics, Culture & Society* 39, no. 3 (2021): 100–22.

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Cardoza, '“Making Italians”? Cycling and National Identity in Italy: 1900–1950', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 354–77.

nationalism, politics, physical prowess, and sport in an extra-European context by surveying the experiences of selected Indian globe cyclists.

Whereas the first part of the article provides an overview of the bicycle's co-option into projects of self-empowerment more generally, the second part examines the man-making dimension of the long-distance bicycle expeditions by South Asians in the interbellum. Our study of the close relationship between globetrotting on two wheels and masculinity builds on the attribution of endurance and risk-taking as quintessential traits of such tours in the literature on western cyclotourism in the interwar years.<sup>12</sup> One of the key arguments in this scholarship is the suggestion that endurance feats such as the strenuous cycling adventures of the Australian Hubert Opperman reinvigorated and reassured a nation insecure about their physical and moral conditions.<sup>13</sup> In this context, we make several important claims. Modifying the existing historical account of bicycles as a tool of western techno-modernity, we argue that the vehicles were no longer primarily associated with modernization and colonial oppression in the 1920s and 1930s. In this period, i.e., more than three decades after their introduction to the Indian subcontinent as mass products, they were instrumentalized by South Asians for political purposes.<sup>14</sup> Our two case studies aim to draw attention to the contradictions in this appropriation of the bicycle as a tool of self-empowerment and especially the use of extreme long-distance tours by patriotic Indians as proof of Indian masculinity, contending that it often involved the uncritical reproduction of established imperial tropes and images. Using a concept coined by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, we suggest that the self-fashioning of the Indian riders can be understood as an example of a 'complicit masculinity', which, though not openly accepting the norms of the hegemonic (imperial) variety of masculinity, 'yet, through practice . . . helped sustain' it.<sup>15</sup>

The third part focuses on our protagonists' attempts at 'world-making' and advances a set of arguments in conversation with the historiography of travel and mobility. We argue that the global journeys facilitated by this affordable means of locomotion represented an entirely novel form of non-labour related movements by colonized Asians. The study of the selected Indian travelogues provides an opportunity to reassess a general argument made in the literature on European cycling that the machine offered more flexibility and independence of travelling and greater sensory experience of the route than trains and cars.<sup>16</sup> Echoing a phrase coined by Gijs Mom,<sup>17</sup> we propose the label 'touristic anti-imperialism' for this particular form of mobility that prefigured some political aspects of non-western leisure travelling during the age of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike established acceptable forms of non-western elite movement by Indian princes, students, and businessmen, the racialized imperial world order saw the unhindered mobility of 'subaltern' colonial subjects during the heyday of anti-colonial agitation in the west as potentially

<sup>12</sup>Martin Emanuel, 'Seeking Adventure and Authenticity: Swedish Bicycle Touring in Europe during the Interwar Period', *Journal of Tourism History* 9, no. 1 (2017): 44-69.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel Oakman, 'The Human Motor: Hubert Opperman and Endurance Cycling in Interwar Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 214-33.

<sup>14</sup>For a brief discussion of the bicycle as an 'old' western transport technology that was recycled and invested with new meanings in other parts of the world, see also David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 45-8. A similar argument is made by Tiina Männistö-Funk, 'Introduction: The Historical Production of the Invisible and Visible Bicycle', in *Invisible Bicycle: Parallel Histories and Different Timelines*, ed. Tiina Männistö-Funk and Timo Myllyntaus (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1-20.

<sup>15</sup>J.W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 29; see also R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 79; and R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-59.

<sup>16</sup>Emanuel, 'Seeking Adventure and Authenticity'.

<sup>17</sup>The concept of 'touristic imperialism' was introduced in a slightly different context in Gijs Mom, *Atlantic Automobility: Emergence and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 112, 154-61.

<sup>18</sup>See Tim Edensor and Uma Kothari, 'Consuming Colonial Imaginaries and Forging Postcolonial Networks: On the Road with Indian Travellers in the 1950s', *Mobilities* 13, no. 5 (2018): 702-16.



disturbing and dangerous.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in the interwar years, western states, empires, and settler colonies intensified their attempts to curb or at least channel such mobilities through stricter migration laws, border regimes and identification practices.<sup>20</sup> Recent research has demonstrated that British India was no exception in this regard.<sup>21</sup> The highly individualistic form of mobility enabled by the bicycle (and the allegedly close and ‘authentic’ experience of the regions in which one travelled) was particularly hard to control. Inspired by a concept developed by cultural geographers Derek H. Alderman and Joshua Inwood, we would like to propose that the touristic anti-imperialism expressed in the global bicycle tours of colonial subjects from British India can be interpreted as a ‘countermobility’ of sorts.<sup>22</sup> The Indian globe cyclists were fully aware of the ubiquitous restrictions and harassments they would encounter and their protracted journeys therefore arguably constituted a form of ‘movement as anti-imperial praxis’.<sup>23</sup> Their writings can be retrospectively categorized as a counter-hegemonic project of promoting a progressive identity politics and reclaiming selfhood.<sup>24</sup> We need to emphasize here, too, that this anti-imperial strategy was not an entirely unproblematic form of ‘writing back’, fraught as it was with tensions and contradictions. As we shall presently see, the use of condescending language or stereotypical images when describing certain populations in Africa and Asia as backward or ‘uncivilized’ partly undermined the political agenda of the South Asian globe cyclists.

This article draws to a large extent on the accounts of its protagonists. The Parsi expedition led by Adi Hakim initially comprised six members when it left Bombay on 15 October 1923, equipped, amongst other things, with ‘a complete camera outfit, a doctor’s dispensary on a miniature scale [and] an enormous number of maps and charts of all imaginable countries’.<sup>25</sup> They completed their 70,000 kilometres *tour du monde* through twenty-seven countries in four years, five months and five days (see itinerary in Figure 2). From Bombay, they rode north to Delhi and then continued their journey through the mountainous terrain of Baluchistan further into Persia and Iraq. About half a year later, the group separated in Damascus due to personal tensions and eventually only three riders completed the journey. As their route was ‘deliberately planned to include the most difficult overland desert journey’, they subsequently passed through the Syrian Desert and Sinai Peninsula.<sup>26</sup> From Port Said, they took a ferry to Brindisi and then traversed Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Next, they crossed the Channel and stayed for several months in the United Kingdom, especially

<sup>19</sup>We use the term here in a broader, relational sense: the Indian globe cyclists (particularly the members of the Parsi expedition) were certainly not low-class in the same way as Indian peasants, rank-and-file soldiers or pauper pilgrims, but they did not belong to the elites, whose mobility was accepted by the imperial regime.

<sup>20</sup>Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 310–32. Although dealing with a slightly earlier period, the work of Valeska Huber is also relevant in this context: Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a more recent general account see Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

<sup>21</sup>For the history of mobility regulation in late colonial India see, for instance, Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Radhika Singha, ‘The Great War and a “Proper Passport” for the Colony: Border-crossing in British India c. 1882–1922’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 3 (2013): 289–319.

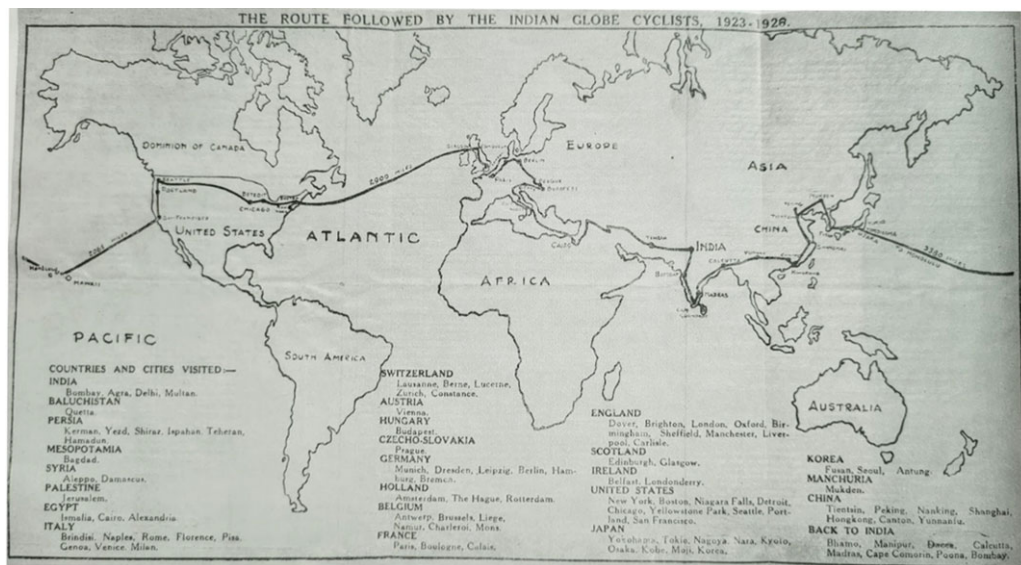
<sup>22</sup>For this concept see Derek H. Alderman and Joshua Inwood, ‘Mobility as Antiracism Work: The “Hard Driving” of NASCAR’s Wendell Scott’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 3 (2016): 597.

<sup>23</sup>Alderman and Inwood instead use the concept of ‘movement as anti-racist practice’ which does not quite fit in this case, as the last section of the article will demonstrate. See Alderman and Inwood, ‘Mobility as Antiracism Work’, 597.

<sup>24</sup>See, for an in-depth discussion of reclaiming selfhood through travel, Richard S. Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>25</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 9.

<sup>26</sup>H.D. Darukhanawala, *Parsis and Sports and Kindred Subjects: Compiled under the Guidance of Two Well-known Members of the Parsi Community Etc.* (Bombay: H.D. Darukhanawala, 1935), 374.



**Figure 2.** Map of the route covered and list of the countries visited by the three Parsi cyclists - Hakim, Bapasola and Bhungara - during their world tour from October 1923 to March 1928. (Source: Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, n.p.)

in London, where they were hosted by members of the local Parsi community.<sup>27</sup> From Ireland, they boarded an ocean liner to New York and spent the next few months criss-crossing the United States. From San Francisco, they reached Japan by boat via Hawaii, and from there, they eventually returned to their home country passing through Korea, China, French Indochina, Siam, Burma, and Ceylon.

Ramnath Biswas was a clerk at the Singapore port in 1931 when he started out on a journey that took him to Malaya, Siam, Indochina, China, Korea, Japan, Canada, the Philippines, and Indonesia, before returning to Singapore in 1933. In 1935-37, he embarked on a second trip, travelling in Burma, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, and Britain. In 1938, he made a third trip to Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, North and South Rhodesia, East Africa, South Africa, the US and Canada, concluding his journey in 1940 (see Figure 3).

The three Parsi riders penned a 430-page travelogue in English, describing every single stage of their journey in minute detail. It needs to be emphasized that Hakim, Bapasola, and Bhungara depict their journey largely as a collective experience. Their entire account presents their adventures in the saddle and their perception of various parts of the world as an almost monolithic narrative and there is surprisingly little space for individual nuances and viewpoints. Ramnath Biswas tended to prioritize making political statements and comments on the particular social and cultural constellations he encountered en route before narrating his own personal experiences. A prolific writer, he published thirty-nine travelogues and novels in Bengali and English as well as a 'Lonely Planet' guide of sorts, with practical tips for non-elite Indian globetrotters on a shoestring budget, who planned to travel abroad by bike or on foot.<sup>28</sup> Alongside this, he wrote articles in the popular Calcutta daily *Anandabazar Patrika* and the periodicals *Prabartak* and *Desh*.<sup>29</sup> His Bengali publications, in particular, provide rare non-elite accounts of South Asian

<sup>27</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 200.

<sup>28</sup>R.N. Biswas, *Tour Round the World with No Money* (Calcutta: D.N. Prasad, 1936).

<sup>29</sup>Shyamsundar Basu, *Ramnath Prithibi* (The World of Ramnath) (Calcutta: De Book Store, 1997).

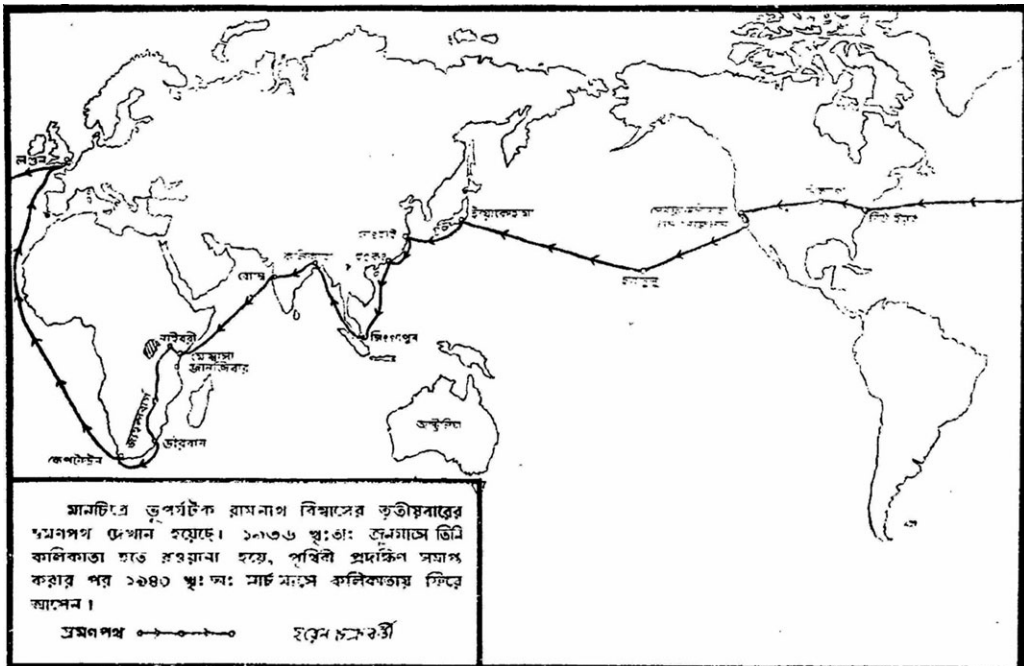


Figure 3. Map of the routes covered during Ramnath Biswas's second and third expeditions undertaken between 1936 and 1940. Note that unlike the Parsis Biswas has chosen an Asia-centred and not a Eurocentric map. (Source: Ramnath Biswas, *Ajker America* (America Today) (Parjatak Prakashana Bhawan, 1945), n.p.)

travel experiences, as they were written to translate the world to a vernacular readership that came, like himself, mostly from a humble educational background.<sup>30</sup>

### The bicycle and the quest for self-empowerment

Historians of Europe and North America have persuasively argued that the bicycle emerged as a 'machine of empowerment' and even as a symbol of modernity itself during the era of the short-lived cycling craze from the 1890s to the early 1900s.<sup>31</sup> From an elite activity, cycling soon became part of male upper class and upper middle class forms of 'respectable recreation' between the late 1860s and early 1890s.<sup>32</sup> Canadian scholar Glen Norcliffe has shown how bourgeois men developed various forms of 'a decidedly masculine cycling ethos' during these years.<sup>33</sup> Precepts

<sup>30</sup>Biswas withdrew from high school and referred to himself as someone 'not properly educated': Biswas, *Tour Round the World with No Money*, ii-iii.

<sup>31</sup>For bicycles becoming emblematic of modernity in the late nineteenth century, see Ruth Oldenziel, 'Whose Modernism, Whose Speed? Designing Mobility for the Future, 1880s-1945', in *Being Modern: The Cultural Impact of Science in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Bud et al. (London: UCL Press, 2018), 274-89.

<sup>32</sup>Neil Carter, *Cycling and the British: A Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 13-28; Anne-Katrin Ebert, *Radelnde Nationen: Die Geschichte des Fahrrads in Deutschland und den Niederlanden bis 1940* (Frankfurt-New York: Campus, 2010), 31-54; Philippe Gaboriau, 'Les trois âges du vélo en France', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire* 29, no. 1 (1991): 17-21; and Richard Holt, 'The Bicycle, the Bourgeoisie and the Discovery of Rural France, 1880-1914', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 2 no. 2 (1985): 127-39.

<sup>33</sup>Glen Norcliffe, *Critical Geographies of Cycling: History, Political Economy and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 170. See also Philipp G. Mackintosh and Glen Norcliffe, 'Men, Women and the Bicycle: Gender and Social Geography of Cycling in the Late-nineteenth Century', in *Cycling and Society*, ed. Dave Horton, Paul Rosen, and Peter Cox (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 157-61.

regarding the appropriate attire, posture, and riding behaviour were all part of this code.<sup>34</sup> Once the dangerous 'ordinary bike' was increasingly ousted by the so-called safety bike (i.e. a bicycle with pneumatic tyres and two wheels of exactly the same size) in the 1890s, the new sport gained a much wider popularity.<sup>35</sup> As Dutch sociologist Harry Oosterhuis has aptly observed, the 'two-wheeled freedom machine' was fostering 'self-autonomy'.<sup>36</sup> The first societal group to realize this were 'progressive' women in western countries. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the pushbike came to be widely considered an 'empowerment machine' for female riders and it was increasingly identified with bloomer-wearing suffragists.<sup>37</sup> When bicycles became more affordable shortly thereafter, they performed a similar liberating function for both male and female members of the working classes, who were now also sharing the privilege of spatial mobility, enjoying, for example, recreational weekend trips to the countryside.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly for our case study, adopting the new vehicle blurred not only gender and social but also racial boundaries. In the American South, for instance, an aspiring segment of African Americans embraced the bicycle as an important element of their wider strategy to challenge the assumptions underlying Jim Crow legislation. In the early 1900s, cycling became a key component of their ostentatious self-fashioning as modern and respectable middle-class men.<sup>39</sup>

While the bicycle was thus increasingly adopted by emancipated women and 'marginal men', the 'hegemonic masculine' image of cycling did not disappear. Indeed, it was further reinforced in Europe, and the Americas, when professional cycling competitions and particularly extreme long-distance racing became spectacles celebrating a new ideal of a decidedly modern masculinity.<sup>40</sup> This new masculine ideal was crucially defined by speed, an obsession with records and the performance of almost superhuman feats, driven by typical working-class values of endurance and stubborn unwillingness to accept physical limitations and boundaries.<sup>41</sup> The rising popularity of professional road cycling, and particularly the emergence of the national multi-stage races such as the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia in the 1900s, led to a marginalization of female riders in Europe. Although they had played a significant role in track racing competitions during the previous decade, the sport became at least partly 're-masculinized' through the media-driven invention of a new all-male hero, the

<sup>34</sup>Harry Oosterhuis, 'Cycling, Modernity and National Culture', *Social History* 41, no. 3 (2017): 238.

<sup>35</sup>Smethurst, *The Bicycle*, 41-57; David V. Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 245-54.

<sup>36</sup>Harry Oosterhuis, 'Entrenched Habit or Fringe Mode: Comparing National Bicycle Policies, Cultures and Histories', in *Invisible Bicycle*, ed. Männistö-Funk and Myllyntaus, 75.

<sup>37</sup>Kat Jungnickel, *Bikes & Bloomers: Victorian Women and their Extraordinary Cycle Wear* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020); Beata Kiersnowska, 'Female Cycling and the Discourse of Moral Panic in Late Victorian Britain', *Atlantis* 41, no. 2 (2019): 85-104; Anne Katrin-Ebert, 'Liberating Technologies? Of Bicycles, Balance and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Icon* 16 (2010): 25-52; Christopher Thompson and Fiona Ratkoff, 'Un troisième sexe? Les bourgeoises et la bicyclette dans la France fin de siècle', *Le Mouvement Social* 192, no. 3 (2000): 9. Research on women's cycling in non-western parts of the world is still in its infancy, but see Alon Raab, 'Wheels of Fire: Women Cycling in the Middle East', in *Routledge Companion to Cycling*, ed. Glen Norcliffe et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 396-8.

<sup>38</sup>See, for instance, Tiina Männistö-Funk, 'Gendered Practices in Finnish Cycling, 1890-1939', *Icon* 16 (2010): 53-73; and Rüdiger Rabenstein, *Radspport und Gesellschaft: Ihre sozialgeschichtlichen Zusammenhänge in der Zeit von 1867 bis 1914* (Munich and Zurich: Weidmann, 1996), 178-97.

<sup>39</sup>Nathan Cardon, 'Global Mass Culture, Mobile Subjectivities, and the South Landscape: The Bicycle in the New South, 1887-1920', *Journal of American Studies* 56, no. 5 (2022): 756. See also Cardon, 'Cycling on the Color Line'; and Andrew Ritchie, 'League of American Wheelmen, Major Taylor and the Color Question in the United States in the 1890s', *Culture, Sport and Society* 6, nos. 2-3 (2003): 13-43.

<sup>40</sup>Herlihy, *The Bicycle*, 254. For an interesting analysis of the spread of bicycle racing and long-distance touring to South America see Matthew Brown, 'Cycling in South America, 1880-1920', *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 48, no. 1 (2021): 287-325; on Australia see Georgine Clarsen, 'Pedaling Power: Bicycles Subjectivities and Landscapes in a Settler Colonial Society', *Mobilities* 10 no. 5 (2015): 706-25.

<sup>41</sup>Philippe Gaboriau, 'The Tour de France and Cycling's Belle Epoque', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 14 (2003): 57-9; Julie Gaucher, 'Cyclisme et modèle(s) de virilité dans la littérature française (1903-1939): l'exemple de la course des Six Jours et du Tour de France', *Contemporary French Civilization* 39, no. 1 (2014): 75-91; See also Hans Bonde, 'Masculine Movements: Sport and Masculinity in Denmark at the Turn of Century', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 21, no. 2 (1996): 63-89.



*géant de la route* (a.k.a. *le roi de la pédale*).<sup>42</sup> French journalist Henri Desgrange can serve as a prime example of this new thinking. He founded the Tour de France acting upon the idea that cycling could foster a masculinity embedded in the ideologies of progress, modernization, and national identity.<sup>43</sup>

The bond between bicycles and masculinity was additionally strengthened by the popularity of adventurous long-distance cyclotourism and especially attempts to cycle around the world. The British-American Thomas Stevens (1854-1935) from San Francisco was the first to circle the globe in its entirety on a bicycle in 1885-87.<sup>44</sup> His successful books, describing his adventures with bad roads, harsh climates, wild animals, and reckless 'natives' in graphic detail, stimulated many young men from Europe and North America to undertake similar expeditions in the two decades that followed. Thus, roughly between 1885 and 1905, world tours on bicycle became tremendously fashionable and the respective travelogues developed into a distinct and commercially successful literary genre.<sup>45</sup>

In the context of this study, it is relevant to emphasize that these expeditions and the writings they inspired had a quasi-imperial quality about them. The Englishman M. Kemp made one of the earliest attempts to demonstrate Anglo-Saxon physical prowess and stamina to 'native' onlookers when he traversed the Indian subcontinent on a 'bone shaker'<sup>46</sup> in 1870.<sup>47</sup> As historian Duncan Jamieson contends, Thomas Stevens, too, 'vaunted [his] superiority to the uncivilized, benighted natives in the wilds of Eastern Europe and Asia'.<sup>48</sup> Stevens rejoiced in his description of his adventures on the Great Trunk Road that in India a 'Sahib was still a Sahib'. According to him, the subcontinent was a particularly attractive destination for white adventurers on two wheels, partly because of the high quality of the roads, but also due to the submissiveness and the 'refreshing absence of the spirit of obtrusion' among the Indian populace.<sup>49</sup>

These early globetrotters also pioneered what would soon become a standard ingredient in most subsequent journey reports by western world cyclists: the visual self-representation (either on a photograph or a drawing) of the heroic rider with his machine in quasi-imperial poses involving 'natives' in sharply contrasted exotic garb. The photograph reproduced in British cyclotourist John F. Fraser's travelogue *Round the World on a Wheel* about his adventures in Burma (see Figure 4) illustrates this very well. Revealingly, during their world tour in 1896-97 that

<sup>42</sup>Jacques Calvet, *Le mythe des géants de la route* (Grenoble: PUG, 1981); Thomas Bauer and Tony Froissart, 'Cycling, Mass Media and Business: Serialization of *Le Roi de la pédale* (1925) by Paul Cartoux and Henri Decoin', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, nos. 11-12 (2015): 1456-71; Christopher S. Thompson: *The Tour de France: A Cultural History. Updated with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 95-124. Roger Gilles, *Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska University Press, 2018), 250-54.

<sup>43</sup>Rebecca Wines, 'Henri Desgrange, Cycling, and Modern Masculinities', in *Pour le Sport: Physical Culture in French and Francophone Literature*, ed. Roxanna Curto and Rebecca Wines (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 97-120.

<sup>44</sup>Thomas Stevens, *Around the World on a Bicycle: From San Francisco to Teheran. With illustrations* (London: Sampson Low & Co, 1887); and Thomas Stevens, *Around the World on a Bicycle: From Teheran to Yokohama. With illustrations* (London: Sampson Low & Co, 1888).

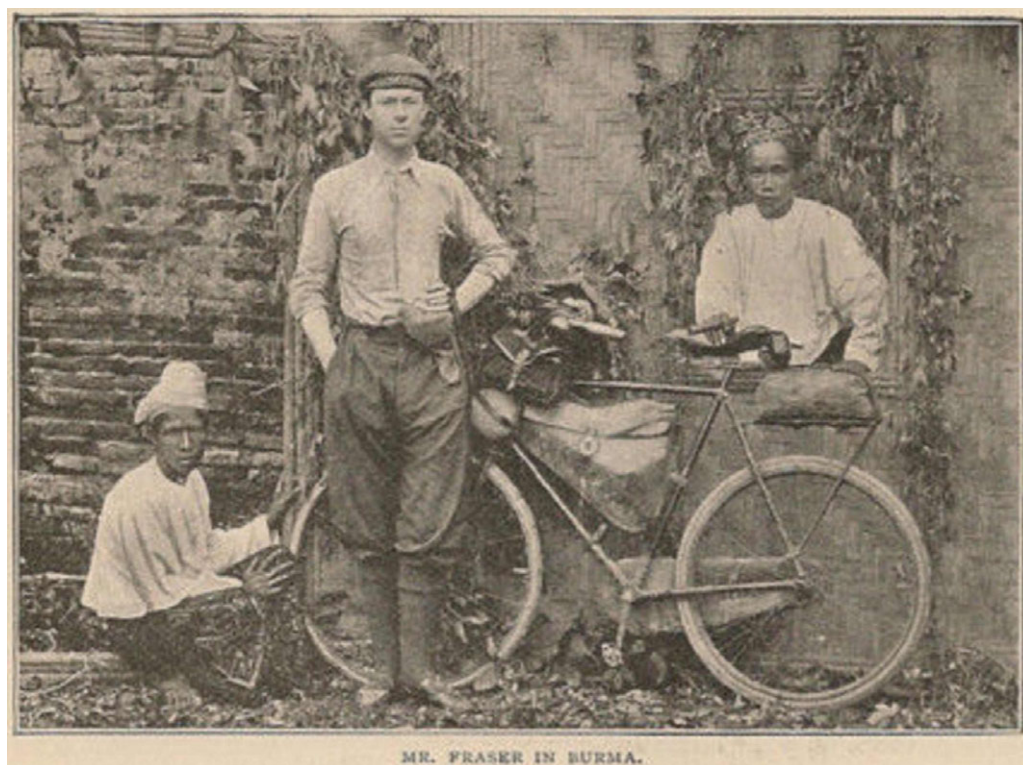
<sup>45</sup>Lars Amenda, 'Mit dem Fahrrad um die Welt. Rad-Fernreisen um 1900', in *Das Fahrrad. Ausstellungskatalog zur Ausstellung im Museum der Arbeit*, ed. Mario Bäumer (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2014), 112-15. For typical contemporary examples see Anonymous, 'A Remarkable Bicycle Tour', *The Scientific American* 68, no. 6 (1893): 91; and John F. Fraser, *Round the World on a Wheel: Being the Narrative of a Bicycle Ride of Nineteen Thousand Two Hundred Miles through Seventeen Countries and three Continents etc.* (London: Methuen & Co. 1899). For an extensive discussion of the 'imperial' marketing strategies of early western globe cyclists see also Michael Homberg, *Reporter-Streifzüge: Metropolitane Nachrichtenkultur und die Wahrnehmung der Welt 1870-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 205-17.

<sup>46</sup>The 'bone shaker' or velocipede was one of the earliest avatars of the bicycle without a chain. See Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History*, 73-155.

<sup>47</sup>L. Baudry de Saunier, *Histoire Générale de la Véloipédie. Contenant plus de 150 Gravures etc.* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1891), 106. For the depiction of another quasi-imperial bicycle tour through India by a British couple, see William Hunter Workman and Fanny Workman, *Through Town and Jungle: Fourteen Thousand Miles Awheel Among the Temples and People of the Indian Plain* (London: T. Fischer-Unwin, 1904).

<sup>48</sup>Duncan Jamieson, 'In Quest of Adventures', in *Routledge Companion to Cycling*, 381.

<sup>49</sup>Stevens, *Around the World on a Bicycle: From Teheran to Yokohama*, 287.



**Figure 4.** Embodying imperial masculinity: A photographic depiction of Scottish cyclist John F. Fraser and his 'safety bike' in Burma from his book on his around the world tour 1896-97. (Source: Alamy)

coincided with the empire-wide celebrations of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, Fraser and his two companions acquired the status of imperial heroes and were greeted with enthusiastic cheering by the local European community in Calcutta, the capital of British India, and honoured with a banquet organized by government officials.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, then, the extreme global cycling ventures undertaken predominantly by western men around the turn of the twentieth century provide powerful examples of the mutually constitutive relationship between tourism and western imperialism that recent work in the historiographical subfield concerned with the history of leisure related mobility has emphasized.<sup>51</sup>

Even before it had fully acquired this ideological baggage, the bicycle was exported on a large scale to non-western regions of the globe. Especially for British manufacturers, the Empire in general and British India in particular soon became important outlets.<sup>52</sup> As early as 1886, a

<sup>50</sup>Fraser, *Round the World on a Wheel*, 263. On the quasi-imperial attitude of Victorian globetrotters more generally, see Amy Miller, *The Globetrotter: Victorian Excursions in India, China and Japan* (London: The British Library, 2019), 95-123.

<sup>51</sup>Denis Linehan, Ian D. Clark, and Philip F. Xie, ed., *Colonialism, Tourism and Place: Global Transformations in Tourist Destinations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020); and Shelley Baranowski et al., 'Tourism and Empire', *Journal of Tourism History* 7, nos. 1-2 (2015): 100-30. See also John M. MacKenzie, 'Empires of Travel: British Guide Books and Cultural Imperialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries', in *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*, ed. John K. Walton (Clevedon: Channel View Productions, 2005), 19-38; Stephanie Malia Hom, 'Empires of Tourism: Travel and Rhetoric in Italian Colonial Libya and Albania, 1911-1943', *Journal of Tourism History* 4, no. 3 (2012): 281-300; Patrick Young, 'Tourism, Empire and Aftermath in French North Africa', *Journal of Tourism History* 10, no. 2 (2018): 183-200.

<sup>52</sup>Roger Lloyd-Rose and M. J. Lewis, *Raleigh and the British Bicycle Industry: An Economic and Business History, 1870-1960* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 55; and Andrew Millward, 'Factors Contributing to the Sustained Success of the UK Cycle Industry 1870-1939' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1999), 246, 416, 438.

London company produced and advertised 'ordinary' bicycles that were especially designed 'to meet the requirements of Indian and colonial cyclists'.<sup>53</sup> The two-wheeler was perceived in India and other colonies as a symbol of modernity and it was soon closely associated with imperial power.<sup>54</sup> The widespread association of bicycles with colonial oppression had emerged because — particularly between 1890 and 1920 — the fashionable avant-garde vehicle was conspicuously used by key agents of imperial power and exploitation. Amongst others, plantation overseers, missionaries, and colonial administrators, but also the colonial armies, police forces and postal services, made frequent usage of the two-wheeled 'tool of empire'.<sup>55</sup>

It was precisely for this reason that the bicycle tended to divide colonized societies: it was either scornfully rejected or enthusiastically embraced by the 'natives', depending on their respective position *vis-à-vis* the colonial rulers and western modernity at large. Thus, many ethnic Chinese living in the Dutch East Indies would perform their modernity and cosmopolitanism by having their pictures taken in a photo studio with a (borrowed) bicycle.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, a great many Indonesian youths in the Dutch colony and middle-class Vietnamese in French Indochina gladly embraced the bicycle and bicycle races 'as a vehicle for showing bravado' to their self-proclaimed colonial masters.<sup>57</sup>

In India, initially, it was almost exclusively Indian princes or members of the small but affluent South Asian comprador class who embraced the two-wheeler.<sup>58</sup> The conflation of the bicycle with cutting-edge modernity eventually began to wane in colonial Asia in the 1920s, when the imperial and missionary establishment quickly replaced pushbikes with motorcycles and cars.<sup>59</sup> It was at this juncture that South Asians of humbler social backgrounds not only began to adopt the bicycle in more significant numbers, but also to instil it with new social and political meanings. The appropriation of the bicycle by the lower middle and working classes in India began in earnest after the end of the First World War, when an average of 70,000 bicycles per year was imported into the country.<sup>60</sup> In 1938, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, the annual import figures peaked at 170,000.<sup>61</sup> By the 1930s, bicycles were commonly used in anti-colonial demonstrations.<sup>62</sup> This trend was to some extent facilitated by the fact that British bikes gradually lost market shares to the cheaper products from the United States and Japan as the twentieth century progressed.<sup>63</sup> Especially, Japanese entrepreneurs tried to carve out a niche for their products in the South Asian market with rather aggressive means, thus contributing to a significant price drop.<sup>64</sup> Taken together, these developments help explain why the 'liberating technology' of the bicycle could be appropriated by

<sup>53</sup>Supplement to *The Colonies and India*, 12 March 1886, 2.

<sup>54</sup>Chandak Sengoopta, *The Rays before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 271-2; and Smethurst, *The Bicycle*, 106.

<sup>55</sup>Cf., for instance, W.S. Burke, *Cycling in Bengal: A Guide to Practical Tours* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1898), 2-3. Edmund C. Cox, *My Thirty Years in India* (London: Miss & Boons Ltd., 1909), 238; and *The Illustrated War News*, 8 August 1916, 27. The phrase 'tool of empire' is borrowed from Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>56</sup>Karen Strassler, 'Cosmopolitan Visions: Ethnic Chinese and the Photographic Imagining of Indonesia in the Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial Periods', *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 419.

<sup>57</sup>Kees van Dijk, 'Pedal Power in Southeast Asia', in *Lost Times and Untold Tales from the Malay World*, ed. Jan van der Putten and Mary Kilcline Cody (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 280. See also Arnold and DeWald, 'Cycles of Empowerment', 982.

<sup>58</sup>'The Future of the Bicycle in India', *Cycling*, 16 January 1904, 6; and 'Spreading in India', *Cycling*, 18 February 1899, 106.

<sup>59</sup>As early as 1922, a Christian missionary in India observed that 'the pushbike . . . has or should soon become a castaway'. See W. J. Hatch, *Twenty Thousand Miles on a Motorcycle in S. India* (Mysore: W. M. Press, 1922), 3.

<sup>60</sup>Arnold and DeWald, 'Cycles of Empowerment?', 974.

<sup>61</sup>*Report on the Indian Tariffs Board on the Bicycles Industry* (Bombay: The Government Printing Press, 1946), 18.

<sup>62</sup>Smethurst, *The Bicycle*, 139.

<sup>63</sup>David Arnold, 'The Problem of Traffic: The Street-life of Modernity in Late-colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 125; Lloyd-Rose and Lewis, *Raleigh and the British Bicycle Industry*, 110.

<sup>64</sup>Millward, 'Factors Contributing to the Sustained Success', 250, 412.

patriotically inclined young Indian men as a tool of masculine self-empowerment without provoking accusations of ‘colonial complicity’ by their compatriots.<sup>65</sup> This leads us to the next section that examines how these ‘grand tours’ provided Indian globe cyclists opportunities to build and demonstrate their masculinity.

### Man-making: the South Asian globe cyclists on the road

Over the past three decades, a copious body of historical research has explored how the British rulers of South Asia deployed colonial discourses of ‘effeminacy’ to cement their position of power. They targeted educated elite groups that posed a threat to British claims to power in South Asia. The Bengalis, especially, formed part of such potentially ‘perilous’ communities and were consequently dubbed ‘effeminate’ or ‘degenerate’.<sup>66</sup> The story of the Parsis is slightly more complex. Many Parsi intellectuals derived a certain sense of ethnic superiority from their western orientalist representation as Aryans. Nonetheless, in their community, too, anxieties around perceived effeminacy and racial degradation came up in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

In a reaction to the discursive manoeuvre by the imperial authorities of denying manliness and hence the right to leadership and responsibility to select groups of Indian men, important currents of Indian (proto-)nationalism took on the shape of a ‘man-making mission’ during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> This was partly expressed in the revival of traditional Indian sports and martial arts such as wrestling,<sup>69</sup> and partly through the appropriation of typically English pastimes such as football and cricket with the goal of beating the masters at their own game.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the new interest in training Indian bodies also found expression in the warm reception of modern western schemes of physical education and physical culture. Such programmes were increasingly on offer in India by the 1900s and widely disseminated, among others, by the Boy Scouts and the popular Indian branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).<sup>71</sup> The cyclists in the focus of this study were socialized in precisely these emerging sporting milieus. During their tour around the world, the three Parsi riders would mostly wear Scout uniforms and

<sup>65</sup>Ebert, ‘Liberating Technologies?’.

<sup>66</sup>Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 296-304; Paul Dimeo, ‘Colonial Bodies, Colonial Sport: Martial Punjabis, Effeminate Bengalis and the Development of Indian Football’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 19, no. 2 (2002): 72-90; Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, ‘The Effeminate and the Masculine: Nationalism and the Concept of Race in Colonial Bengal’, in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 282-303; John Rosselli, ‘The Self-image of Effiteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Bengal’, *Past & Present* 6, no. 1 (1980): 121-48.

<sup>67</sup>Rashna Darius Nicholson, ‘Corporeality, Aryanism, Race: The Theatre and Social Reform of the Parsis of Western India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 618.

<sup>68</sup>Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!: Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 43-74; Abhijit Gupta, ‘Cultures of the Body in Colonial Bengal: The Career of Gobor Guha’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 12 (2012): 1687-1700; Arafaat Valiani, ‘Physical Training, Ethical Discipline, and Creative Violence: Zones of Self-Mastery in the Hindu Nationalist Movement’, *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2010): 73-99.

<sup>69</sup>See Joseph S. Alter, ‘Physical Education, Sport and the Intersection and Articulation of “Modernities”: The Hanuman Vyayam Prasarak Mandal’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 9 (2007): 1156-7; Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>70</sup>Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (London: Picador, 2022), chap. 1 and 2; Ronojoy Sen, *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), chap. 2 and 4.

<sup>71</sup>See Harald Fischer-Tiné, *The YMCA in Late Colonial India: Modernization, Philanthropy and American Softpower in South Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 81-108; Patricia Vertinsky and Aishwarya Ramachandran, ‘The “Y” Goes to India: Springfield College, Muscular Missionaries, and the Transnational Circulation of Physical Culture Practices’, *Journal of Sport History* 46, no. 3 (2019): 363-79.





**Figure 5.** Rambling revolutionary: Ramnath Biswas in the 1930s. (Source: R.N. Biswas, *Round the World Without Money*, 1936, n.p.).

often stay at local YMCAs, be it in Zurich, Chicago, or Shanghai (see Figures 5 and 7).<sup>72</sup> Unsurprisingly, YMCA branches in the UK, the United States, China, Korea and other places were also instrumental in helping them organize lectures and magic lantern slide shows, in which the globe cyclists from Bombay presented their adventures to crowds numbering occasionally several thousand people.<sup>73</sup>

The Parsi community was particularly inclined to physical exercises of all types and adopted western sports from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This enthusiasm grew stronger after eugenicist writings in the early twentieth century triggered debates on their alleged 'racial degeneration'.<sup>74</sup> Several Parsi intellectuals and reformers took inspiration from the conspicuous

<sup>72</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 167, 236, 281.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 282. For the role of the YMCA as a global promoter of sports and physical education see Harald Fischer-Tiné, Stefan Huebner, and Ian Tyrrell: 'Introduction. The Rise and Growth of a Global "Moral Empire": The YMCA and YWCA during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in *Spreading Protestant Modernity: Global Perspectives on the Work of the YMCA and the YWCA, 1889 – 1970*, ed. Idem (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 1–36.

<sup>74</sup>Nicholson, 'Corporeality, Aryanism, Race', 628–32; and Tanya M. Luhmann, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 25. For a detailed exposition of the Eugenic

cult of the body in the 1900s and 1910s. The Parsi cyclists are a perfect example of this trend. Adi Hakim and his mates shared a ‘passion for body building’.<sup>75</sup> They were all members of the Bombay Weightlifting Club and had close contacts with both the Boy Scouts in Bombay and the local YMCA. Their eagerness to demonstrate their masculine qualities and physical prowess through an extreme bike tour should also not come as a surprise. Parsis were among the earliest groups in Indian society who had taken an interest in the bicycle as a potential means to improve the health of their community.<sup>76</sup>

The Bengali Ramnath Biswas likewise belonged to an ethnic and social group whose collective ‘quest for manhood’ was particularly pronounced and even generated extensive discussion on racial improvement.<sup>77</sup> Born in 1894, Biswas grew up in an atmosphere of anti-colonial political dissent among educated, middle-class Bengalis.<sup>78</sup> As a member of the Anushilan Samiti in the 1910s, he was linked to the nationalist attempt at recuperating beleaguered Indian masculinities through physical upgrading.<sup>79</sup> Founded in 1902, the Anushilan Samiti was a militant Bengali organization responsible for bomb blasts and armed attacks on imperial officials. The colonial authorities considered its members ‘terrorists’.<sup>80</sup> The secret revolutionary society nurtured a cult of masculinity and had developed a strict training regime including body-building and martial arts with a view to prepare allegedly ‘effeminate’ Bengali youths to overthrow their colonial oppressors.<sup>81</sup> It seems plausible to speculate that Biswas was thus at least to some extent influenced by the nationalist pedagogy of a disciplined and masculinized body that was perceived by many South Asian reformers and activists as the key locus of nation-building. Eventually, Biswas became a member of another revolutionary association Jugantar in Bengal and the Free Bengal Brigade in Singapore that had given him the responsibility to circulate sensitive information in the guise of a traveller. He lost his job when the police came to know that he harboured nationalists and donated to the revolutionary cause, which, in turn, prompted him to start a life in travelling the world.<sup>82</sup>

The Indian cyclotourists would use every opportunity to link the account of their manly courage and physical prowess with their anti-colonial political agenda. Biswas, for instance, dedicated one of his books on Africa ‘to those gallant Indian workers who fought against the colour-bar in South Africa under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi’.<sup>83</sup> If his travelogues can be trusted, he met several protagonists of the Indian nationalist movement during his journeys. In his books he mentions that he spent hours, sometimes days, talking politics with diasporic revolutionaries like Raja Mahendra Pratap in Japan and Ajit Singh in Germany. He also claimed to have met one of Subhas Bose’s associates in a hotel on Harrison Street in Calcutta in 1940 and

---

argument see also Sapur Faredun Desai, *Parsis and Eugenics* (Bombay: Mody Printing Press, 1940). For an account of the sports craze of Parsis more generally see Darukhanawala, *Parsis and Sports*.

<sup>75</sup>Babani and Viegas, *The Bicycle Diaries*, 27.

<sup>76</sup>‘Cycling in India’, *Madras Weekly Mail*, 18 August 1888, 9–10. See also Darukhanawala, *Parsis and Sports*, 372–82; and Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, 84.

<sup>77</sup>Subho Basu and Sikata Banerjee, ‘The Quest for Manhood: Masculine Hinduism and Nation in Bengal’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26, no. 3 (2006): 476–90; Projit Bihari Mukharji, *Brown Skins, White Coats: Race Science in India, 1920–66* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

<sup>78</sup>See Rajat Kanta Ray, ‘Moderates, Extremists, and Revolutionaries: Bengal, 1900–1908’, in *Congress and Indians Nationalism*, ed. Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 62–89.

<sup>79</sup>Abhishek Basu, ‘Performing Other-Wise: “Death Defying China” as seen by Ramnath Biswas’, *China Report* 43, no. 4 (2007): 487.

<sup>80</sup>The most detailed accounts are provided in Joseph McQuade, *A Genealogy of Terrorism: Colonial Law and the Origins of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>81</sup>Joseph McQuade, ‘Terrorism and Anti-terrorism in Colonial India’, in *Routledge Handbook of the History of Colonialism in South Asia*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Maria Framke (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 243–5; Michael Silvestri, *Policing ‘Bengali Terrorism’ in India and the World: Britain and the World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 25–36.

<sup>82</sup>Basu, *Ramnath Prithibi*, 22.

<sup>83</sup>Biswas, *Africa in Pictures*, 2.

given him directions about the route to Afghanistan, facilitating Bose's famous escape from house arrest.<sup>84</sup> In his writings, however, he also frequently expressed his disenchantment with the mainstream of the Indian freedom struggle and its leadership.<sup>85</sup> A holistic reading of Biswas' books suggests that his criticism of bourgeois nationalism grew stronger after 1942, the year of the failed Quit India Movement, when left-wing internationalist rhetoric replaced the nationalist overtones in his writings. In fact, most of Biswas' publications stand testimony to his faith in global revolutionary socialism and anti-imperialism: 'All imperial powers are on their deathbed', he wrote, adding, 'British, French, Portuguese, Dutch and American imperialists will die together'.<sup>86</sup> The bicycle certainly enabled him to experience and understand the world and compare various social and political systems, helping him form and express his political opinions. Adi Hakim and his co-authors show a more straightforward patriotism and an unqualified support for the political agenda of the Indian National Congress (INC). They describe their feeling of pride after completing the four-and-a-half-year journey as follows:

Were we happy? Yes, you bet, we sure were. But not because we succeeded in putting an extra feather in our cap; not because we craved for applause; not because we wanted to win a fair dame after the conclusion of our tour [ . . . ], but we felt proud we did our wee bit for Mother India, whose illustrious name we carried into the nooks and corners of the world, where we showed sons of Mother India were as able, as enterprising, as courageous as the children of any other nation in the world.<sup>87</sup>

This example effectively deploys the influential discursive trope of a disciplined, serving masculinity, the manliness of loyal 'sons', performing service on behalf of their 'mother', that was widespread during the great nationalist campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s (see Figure 6).<sup>88</sup> Not surprisingly, several leaders of the Indian national movement returned the favour and praised the globe cyclists' patriotic service. The prominent Hindu reformer and nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928), for instance, willingly contributed to the Parsis' autograph collection.<sup>89</sup> As stated in the introduction, Nehru even wrote a short preface to the Parsi travelogue, in which he praised the courage of the young cyclists and presented them as role models that would hopefully 'fire the imagination' of Indian young men.<sup>90</sup> One of the Parsi globe riders indeed actively supported the Indian freedom struggle after his return: Rustom J. Bhumgara became an INC worker and was appointed as general officer, commanding the Congress volunteers.<sup>91</sup> He took part in several

<sup>84</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak* (An Indian Globetrotter in France) (Calcutta: D.M. Library, 1952), 53.

<sup>85</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan* (Revolutionary Balkan) (Calcutta: Mitralaya, n.d.), 56.

<sup>86</sup>Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak*, 74.

<sup>87</sup>Hakim, et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 422.

<sup>88</sup>For a discussion of the mother metaphor in the context of anti-colonial Indian nationalism see Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India', *Imago Mundi* 53 (2001): 97-114; and Charu Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: "Bharat Mata", "Matri Bhasha" and "Gau Mata"', *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 45 (2001): 4291-9.

<sup>89</sup>As one of their most cherished trophies, the Parsi expedition brought back a collection of autographs by prominent personalities ranging from Shah Reza Pahlavi of Persia and German ex-chancellor Friedrich Ebert to Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius IX. Interestingly, collecting autographs was practiced by most subsequent Indian globe cyclists including Ramnath Biswas. (Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan*, 51.) The collected autographs served as important identification documents and proof of intention to travel, which could be produced to the police or immigration offices or even to the public for winning trust. See Biswas, *Round the World Without Money*, 8-9.

<sup>90</sup>Facsimile reproduction of Nehru's handwritten preface in Hakim, et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, n.p.

<sup>91</sup>The Congress volunteers (or Hindustani Seva Dal) was the paramilitary volunteer wing of the INC. It was founded in 1924 with a view to orchestrate the mass campaigns. See Ali Raza and Franziska Roy, 'Paramilitary Organisations in Interwar India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 675-80.



**Figure 6.** ‘Dash and daring in the service of Mother India’: the cover photo of the Parsis’ travel account shows the three riders shortly before their return to Bombay and illustrates their penchant for masculine self-fashioning. (Source: Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, n.p.)

Satyagraha (passive resistance) campaigns in the late 1920s and early 1930s and spent several months in Yerawada Jail near Pune at the same time as Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>92</sup>

In slight tension with their overall anti-imperial stance, however, the Parsi riders’ travelogue suggests that they were apparently heavily inspired by the popular accounts of the Victorian and Edwardian gentlemanly extreme cyclists from the west.<sup>93</sup> The stereotypical stories of insurmountable passes, extreme climatic conditions, attacks by wild animals and/or encounters with ‘savage’ natives – arguably calculated to raise their position on the masculinity scale – aligned with the valiant ideals claimed by their Euro-American counterparts. The conquest of an undomesticated and hostile nature by sheer willpower, for instance, was a firmly established trope in the earlier quasi-imperial travel accounts. This tendency of highlighting manly heroism and the impulsive penetration of untouched territory was echoed in the travelogues of the South Asian cyclotourists, suggesting an astonishing degree of intertextuality between ‘imperial’ and ‘anti-imperial’ travel writing. Thus, for instance, the Parsi riders proudly mention how they ‘entered the thickets of a tropical jungle’ in Annam completely unarmed, fully knowing that it ‘harbour[ed], tigers, wild elephants, wild buffaloes and wild deer’.<sup>94</sup> They express relief to have left the Siamese

<sup>92</sup>Babani and Viegas, *The Bicycle Diaries*, 56.

<sup>93</sup>Duncan R. Jamieson, *The Self-propelled Voyager: How the Cycle Revolutionized Travel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>94</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 376.



Kingdom – ‘a territory thickly infested with wild animals and snakes and populated by a semi-savage people’.<sup>95</sup> An even more drastic example of this trope can be gathered from the following excerpt, in which the Parsis describe their crossing of the Syrian Desert:

For all we knew, death in its most horrible form might claim us as its victim [ . . . ]. What was there to guide us through 617 miles of these barren wastes, where no cyclist ever rode his machine [ . . . ]? What was there to relieve the monotony of our journey, save the skeleton of some unfortunate victim, who had attempted too much, bleaching in the desert sun, exciting at once our sympathy and a gruesome interest.<sup>96</sup>

Ramnath Biswas, too, deployed this kind of rhetoric, albeit less frequently than the Parsis. Thus, the experienced traveller warns the readers of his globetrotter manual, not to sleep under trees, as ‘big snakes . . . will simply fall from the tree like a rope, tie you up, smash your bones first, and then swallow your lump’.<sup>97</sup> In a newspaper interview published in 1935, the revolutionary globetrotter, by contrast, highlighted the dangers emanating not from wild animals, but from ‘savage’ locals: ‘China is the most dangerous country in the world, in my opinion. . . . After having escaped from a house in Indo-China, where the husband and wife were sharpening their swords prior to killing me, I was captured by bandits in the interior of China’.<sup>98</sup>

A similar propensity to masculine bragging surfaces also in the recurrent stories revolving around the interest they supposedly created among local women they encountered on the road. Thus, in their chapter on Britain, Hakim and his co-authors underscore that their ‘female admirers were many and very inquisitive to know everything’ about them. According to their account, ‘English girls’ would ‘flock’ to them as if they ‘were some renowned celebrities’, even ‘jostling with one another to secure [their] autographs’.<sup>99</sup> They likewise perceive the United States as a country promising sexual adventure – New York, in particular, as a ‘bewitching’ temptress, with ‘violent gusts of wind that lift up the skirts’.<sup>100</sup> A passage in their account on the brief stint in Bangkok is even more explicit. They introduce a young woman they met at a dinner party as follows: ‘Her name was Peggy, a beautiful blonde, who was always in the forefront and to whose company we owe the pep put into what could otherwise have been a dull time’.<sup>101</sup> The active soliciting of flirtatious adventures was not limited to western women. Describing their travels in China, they mention that ‘a little distance away from Shanghai, we shaved our beard [ . . . ] as we knew at Shanghai we would have to present ourselves before many a fair dame, who would scarcely appreciate the bushy growth of our countenance’.<sup>102</sup> Islamic regions, such as Persia, where ‘women very seldom move out without their purdah or veil’, presented a challenge.<sup>103</sup> Their travelogue subsequently describes in great detail that they nevertheless developed sophisticated flirtation techniques to overcome this difficulty.<sup>104</sup>

One would be tempted to conclude, then, that through the reproduction of motives and narratives that had been integral to imperial (cyclotourist) self-fashioning, some of the Indian

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>97</sup>Biswas, *Round the World Without Money*, 20.

<sup>98</sup>*News Chronicle*, 7 April 1935, 3.

<sup>99</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 203. Cf. also Babani and Savia Viegas, *The Bicycle Diaries*, 25.

<sup>100</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 213.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.* As a trophy of sorts, their travelogue contains a photograph of ‘Peggy’ showing a very young woman in a typical 1920s ‘flapper’ outfit. According to the caption, Peggy ‘took French leave from school’ to see the group off, when they left Bangkok.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 79. The travelogue also contains a photo showing the cyclists bathing naked in a creek in Persia. The caption reads ‘Beg your pardon, ladies!’

riders adopted elements of what was considered the ‘hegemonic’ form of masculinity, even at the risk of compromising their rigid anti-imperial outlook. Arguably, this tendency was reinforced by another feature that Biswas and the Parsis shared: they all had undergone training in British-led military units. The three Parsis were members of the second Battalion of the Bombay Pioneers, while Biswas was one of the selected few Bengalis, who were enlisted in the famous 49<sup>th</sup> Bengali Regiment.<sup>105</sup> This regiment, better known as the ‘Bangali Paltan’, was stationed in Mesopotamia during the First World War and its aftermath (1916–20).<sup>106</sup> Biswas often displayed an ostentatiously rebellious or revolutionary masculinity, repeatedly brandishing his ethos of a man liberated from the need to placate one’s superior or the tethers of social obligations. ‘I am a man of the road and I will walk freely, why should I fear?’, he remarked in one of his books.<sup>107</sup> Biswas used his empathy for the oppressed as a manifesto throughout his body of writings. His tirade against bondage and inequity was a natural extension of his involvement in Indian revolutionary nationalism. Although he inherited no political power from this association, his travelogues remain as affective registers of his soldier citizen persona. In all the narratives about his interactions with European left-leaning students and politicians, he portrayed himself as an active insurgent in opposition to the indecisive self-proclaimed radicals. This continuous performance of political subversion differentiated Biswas’ masculinity ideal at least partly from the ‘complicit’ one cultivated by the Hakim group. With its ‘emphasis on fearlessness, physical prowess, and individual initiative’, it was very close to the kind of revolutionary manhood propagated by some contemporary Indian diasporic revolutionaries in the United States ‘to contest a concerted imperial campaign to emasculate them’.<sup>108</sup>

However, Biswas also deployed more conventional tropes to show off his male prowess. In his Balkan travelogue, he discusses the plight of his two European companions en route to Sofia, who thought him unfit to cycle along the mountainous terrain but were exhausted sooner and stopped for rest several times.<sup>109</sup> On reaching Sofia, he came down with high fever for two days. In his words, he took care of himself and nursed himself to strength with a strict diet of quinine and milk.<sup>110</sup> According to his own accounts, Biswas also demonstrated his courage and toughness in open physical conflicts more than once. Thus, he mentions that in England, he got into fights when he saw Indian seamen heckling women,<sup>111</sup> and while in South Africa, he got repeatedly involved in fierce punch-ups with Boers who had racially abused him.<sup>112</sup> Biswas kept reminding his readers about his moral courage and age-defying physical strength, not as bluntly as the Parsi group but nevertheless with noticeable pride in his masculinity.

Finances were a major hurdle to globetrotting, and the way these cyclotourists obtained funding for their tours, also reveals their inventiveness and strong resolve. Hakim and his friends raised funds from local Parsi dignitaries and saved money staying with them, for example, for as long as twenty-five days in the Zoroastrian House in London.<sup>113</sup> They received free tyres and inner tubes from the Irish-based, but globally operating Dunlop company.<sup>114</sup> Their meagre budget was regularly topped up through the sale of specially produced postcards with their picture and

<sup>105</sup> ‘Indian Soldiers are Cycling the World’, *The Tacoma Daily Ledger*, 6 April 1925, 3.

<sup>106</sup> Bandyopadhyay, ‘A Journey to Justice’, 746. On the Bangali Paltan see also Ashok Nath, ‘The 49<sup>th</sup>: A Bengali Infantry Regiment in the Great War’, in *The British Indian Army: Virtue and Necessity*, ed. R. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publication, 2014), 65–76.

<sup>107</sup> Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan*, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Kornel Chang, ‘Mobilizing Revolutionary Manhood: Race, Gender, and Resistance in the Pacific Northwest Borderlands’, in *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements across the Pacific*, ed. Moon-Ho Jung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 73, 83.

<sup>109</sup> Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan*, 33.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Bandyopadhyay, ‘A Journey to Justice’, 746.

<sup>113</sup> Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 314.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

autographs.<sup>115</sup> The global media attention their ride also garnered presumably helped them. By the time the group reached India's new capital Delhi, Reuters had spread the word about the world tour, which was followed by international headlines.<sup>116</sup> During the course of their journey, they also developed additional strategies to earn money on the road. As indicated earlier, all six Parsis were members of a weightlifting club in Bombay. They exploited their training to regularly perform feats of physical strength, calculated to attract a paying audience. In the Persian city of Shiraz, for example, they offered 'a sort of variety entertainment, where one of [them] heaved a stone on his chest and had it broken on chest with big hammers.'<sup>117</sup> Occasionally, they also organized fake boxing fights among themselves to entertain their changing global audience and afterwards collected money to further build up their travel budget. In some countries, especially in the United States, Korea, and China, the three globetrotters earned money by giving lantern-slide lectures about their journey, which were usually co-organized by the local YMCAs.<sup>118</sup> (Figure 7)

Biswas collected donations from the people of the places he visited. He presented them with a printed flyer about his cycling expeditions and the need for money, which they read and sometimes offered voluntary donation. In a Parisian restaurant, some of the patrons paid him twenty Francs for filling in a questionnaire about India and for his observations on the condition of Indians under British rule.<sup>119</sup> In South Africa, he received an honorarium for speaking on the radio.<sup>120</sup> When his bicycle was stolen in Mukden, China, the manager of the Dunlop company supplied him with a new bicycle and spare parts.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, his contemporary Bimal Mukherjee, who travelled the world from 1926 to 1937, earned his passage by working odd jobs as photographer, sailor, maritime pilot, fisherman, dairy farmer, schoolteacher, and giving travel talks in schools and colleges.<sup>122</sup>

As different as the cyclists' strategies to secure funding for their global rides might have been, their self-reliance must have boosted their sense of 'male' autonomy.<sup>123</sup> Autonomy and self-reliance are also the leitmotifs in the frequent passages in the travelogues describing in great detail the ways in which the riders managed to repair their machines on a regular basis all by themselves, even if they did not have the necessary spare parts.<sup>124</sup> Their constant emphasis on their survival skills is quite similar to the acknowledged tendency of other travellers from marginalized nations such as Ireland whose mettle was a way of expressing pride in their culture.<sup>125</sup> The risks and uncertainties of a long journey came across as expected and constitutive elements of the riding

<sup>115</sup>*Northern Daily Mail*, 27 November 1923, 4.

<sup>116</sup>See, for example, *ibid.* and *The Halifax Courier and Guardian*, 27 November 1923, 8; *The Manchester Guardian*, 22 August 1924, 14; *South China Morning Post*, 30 August 1924, 13; *Oakland Tribune*, 21 December 1924, 35; *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore, MD), 1 January 1925, 7; *The Tacoma Daily Ledger*, 6 April 1925, 3; *The Times Recorder* (Zanesville, OH), 6 October 1925, 12; *The China Press*, June 16 1926, A1 and A2; *The Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), 2 June 1927, 7; *The Times of India*, 3 March 1928, 15; *The Indian National Herald*, 18 March 1928, 2 and *The Times of India*, 26 March 1928, 15. There were also lengthy reports in vernacular newspapers, especially in Korea and Japan.

<sup>117</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 88.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 282. For the global expansion of the YMCA in the early twentieth century and its role in (indirectly) supporting anti-colonial movements in Asia through sports and physical education see Harald Fischer-Tiné, Stefan Huebner and Ian Tyrrell ed., *Spreading Protestant Modernity: Global Perspectives on the Social Work of the YMCA and YWCA* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

<sup>119</sup>Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak*, 68.

<sup>120</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Ajker America*, 5.

<sup>121</sup>'Indian Cyclist Returns', *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, 16 November 1932, 256.

<sup>122</sup>Bimal Mukherjee, *Duchakay Duniya* (The World on Two Wheels) (Calcutta: Swarnakshar, 1998).

<sup>123</sup>Unsurprisingly, the Indians shared the trope of self-reliance with western, imperial adventurers. See Christopher Potter, 'The Imperial Trip: Self-reliance in Colonial Motorcycling Expeditions: A Comparative Study', *Studies in Travel Writing* 17, no. 4 (2013): 350-67.

<sup>124</sup>See, for instance, Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 60; Biswas, *Maranbijayi Chin* (Death-defying China) (Calcutta: Bhattacharya Sons Ltd, 1941), 39.

<sup>125</sup>See José Laners, "'We Are a Different People": Life Writing, Representation, and the Travellers', *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 29.



**Figure 7.** Demonstration of pan-Asian solidarity? —The Indian globe cyclists Hakim, Bhungara and Bapasola are welcomed by Chinese YMCA members in Shanghai (July 1926).

expedition, while frequent references to these obstacles in the travelogues also served to heighten the celebration of the authors' masculine qualities.

### World-making: coping with inequities

The most fascinating aspect of the cyclotourists' travelogues is their implicit claim to deliver an accurate and realistic account of the cultures, societies, and political realities they encountered on their journey. Such claims certainly benefitted from the running trope that bicycle touring allowed for a particularly 'unfiltered' and 'authentic' travel experience of the respective tourist destination and was in this respect superior to any other form of recreational travel.<sup>126</sup> In his travelogue of France, Biswas claimed to have observed Europe more keenly than any Indian political leader, and gained unique and incontrovertible insights.<sup>127</sup> Most importantly, travelling on a bicycle allowed him to fraternize with the lower classes. He considered upper class people hypocrites who hid behind masks of culture and were bereft of empathy for the poor.<sup>128</sup> On other occasions, he criticized 'rich' Indian travellers to Britain for falsely representing their experiences in the country and interactions with local people.<sup>129</sup> Much like the Parsis, who complained that 'usually the

<sup>126</sup>Brian Griffin, 'The Tourist Gaze: Cycling Tourists' Impression of Victorian and Edwardian Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (2017): 288. See also Emanuel, 'Seeking Adventure and Authenticity'.

<sup>127</sup>Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak*, 33.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.



notions of an Easterner of the West are warped and distorted',<sup>130</sup> Biswas was convinced that educated and intelligent Indian travellers in particular unreasonably glorified Europe.<sup>131</sup>

In the vein of the imperial cyclotourists of the previous generation, the Indians sometimes depicted foreign countries and their inhabitants through certain superficial and pre-existing clichés and stereotypes. The same authors, however, showed a remarkable nuance and sophistication in interpreting the various forms of inequality and oppression they encountered on their tours. The persistent analysis of social and racial hierarchies in the accounts of both Biswas and the less overtly political Parsi group must be seen in the context of their anti-colonial agenda and their broader social and political engagement in general. Three topics recur in the Indian globe cyclists' travelogues: first, the general perception of racial hierarchies and everyday racism and strategies to resist or subvert them; second, the experience of racialized border regimes and mobility control; and third, the solidarity shown with the struggle of global South Asian diasporas.

Biswas claims that his dark skin and his passport, identifying him as a 'British-Indian subject', determined the ways in which the world looked at him.<sup>132</sup> His travelogues contain numerous sketches relating to his harassment by the common people and government officials owing to his race and nationality. He experienced several racist encounters in the Netherlands; on one instance white patrons in a restaurant let out a collective cry of annoyance seeing him enter the premises.<sup>133</sup> In Belgium, a man attacked him without provocation when he was waiting for food at a restaurant, and people including small children repeatedly called him 'blackie'.<sup>134</sup> In the United States, people would not sit next to him on a bench, and waiters would ask him to leave so that white customers did not avoid the restaurant.<sup>135</sup> Beyond the pale of western countries, in Iraq, the police suspected him to be a habitual criminal and searched his hotel room.<sup>136</sup> The Korean police refused to believe that the 250 Yen found on his person was legitimately earned in the country and had him watched.<sup>137</sup> Biswas explained these harassments as a combination of the local people's racist aggression and their suspicion of non-elite tourists, especially those who relied on bicycles or walked, as potential vagrants or criminals.

Arguably, the degrading perception of the Indian riders might indeed have been reinforced through their means of locomotion. Recent scholarship agrees that by the 1930s, the bicycle, the erstwhile symbol of bourgeois wealth and respectability, was widely perceived as a 'subaltern vehicle' in the age of incipient mass motorization in the west.<sup>138</sup> Thus, in his globetrotter manual, Biswas cautions his readers that imperial authorities and consulates were suspicious of South Asian travellers 'on foot or on cycle' and that they hence should dress and behave inconspicuously in order to avoid an arrest under the Vagrancy Law. According to him this had to do with the officials' anxieties that these highly individualized subaltern forms of mobility might facilitate espionage: as a cyclist or a pedestrian you could ride or 'walk from village to village, you talk with every person, you enjoy full liberty, therefore you serve the spying purpose better than any ordinary spy'.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>130</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 132.

<sup>131</sup>Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan*, 1.

<sup>132</sup>Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak*, 16.

<sup>133</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Paschim Yurop Bhraman* (Travels in Western Europe) (Calcutta: Parjatak Prakashana Bhawan, n.d.), 35-6.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, 59, 65.

<sup>135</sup>Biswas, *Ajker America*, 12, 177.

<sup>136</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Beduiner Deshe* (In the Land of the Bedouins) (Calcutta: Presidency Library, 1959), 3.

<sup>137</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Dwichakre Korea Bhraman* (Korea on Two Wheels), (Calcutta: Parjatak Prakashana Bhawan, 1942), 40.

<sup>138</sup>Nathaniel D. Wood, 'Vagabond Tourism and a Non-colonial European Gaze: Kazimierz Nowak's Bicycle Journey across Africa, 1931-1936', *Journal of Tourism History* 14, no. 3 (2022): 291-314. See also Oosterhuis, 'Entrenched Habit or Fringe Mode', 78-84; Emanuel, 'Seeking Adventure and Authenticity', 65-7; Erika Hanna, 'Seeing Like a Cyclist: Visibility and Mobility in Modern Dublin, c. 1930-1980', *Urban History* 42, no. 2 (2015): 73-89.

<sup>139</sup>Biswas, *Tour Round the World Without Money*, 5.

Biswas did not have an image problem in relatively less mechanized countries like Iraq. Reminiscing about his interactions in Khanaqin, he writes that the local people admired him as a globe cyclist.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, the Parsi riders reflected with some amusement on becoming a subject of curiosity as they travelled north of Mandalay, where the local people seemed to be amazed at their ability to maintain balance on two wheels.<sup>141</sup> However, in his account of his sojourn in South Africa in 1939, Biswas mentions with a palpable degree of bitterness that in Cape Town he was 'known by the name of a "cool world cycle tourist" and not an Indian traveller'.<sup>142</sup> He paints an exceedingly sinister picture of the country on the verge of the introduction of the Apartheid regulations, complaining that the 'much hated colour-bar' heavily constrained his mobility. He was denied entry into Transvaal on grounds of being an 'Asiatic'. Likewise, he observes that in Johannesburg, the Indians had 'to move like thieves' because they were expected to 'quit the foot-path in order to allow passage for a European'.<sup>143</sup> Intriguingly, Biswas maintains that this flagrant discrimination was part of the everyday experience of non-white travellers all over the world and not restricted to the notoriously racist regime in South Africa:

Colour-bar prevails not only on the shore but on the sea also. [ . . . ] A European will not like the idea of having the company of an Asiatic or a Negro on board a ship. They will by no means share the same cabin with us. It is not true to say that this kind of hatred exists in [South] Africa only — but it does exist in many other countries of the West also. Those of us who have taken a trip to England know it very well, but they will never give out the truth for publication.<sup>144</sup>

Border-crossing – visa application, passport control and the compulsory exchange of currency in particular – made the existing racialized hierarchies even more visible. Biswas had to experience this already during his first journey, when the Canadian immigration authorities refused him permission to land in Vancouver in October 1932. They detained him for weeks in solitary confinement as, in the words of a local newspaper, 'a guest of the immigration department'.<sup>145</sup> He was forced to take a Japan-bound ship on his release. The Japanese authorities refused him a visa and compelled him to return to Shanghai. When he travelled to Philippines from China, the Philippine authorities refused him entry and redirected him to the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia). He was harassed so much in the Dutch colony that he had to leave after ten days and prematurely conclude his first global trip.<sup>146</sup> Even in France, the country he admired for its liberalism, the police would detain him and take him in custody for hours without a clear reason on several occasions.<sup>147</sup> While stamping his passport for entry to the Netherlands, the customs officer refused to let him sit and moved the chair out of his reach.<sup>148</sup> In contrast, the celebrated English traveller Patrick Leigh Fermor, who traversed Europe on foot between 1933 and 1939, writes that in Romania, 'the yawning official stamped [his] passport without a single glance at [his] stuff', while his stolen passport was 'trustingly issued in Munich'.<sup>149</sup> Fermor's travelogues evince no concern about any political impediment to his mobility or border-crossing, which was arguably

<sup>140</sup>Biswas, *Beduiner Deshe*, 8.

<sup>141</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 393–4.

<sup>142</sup>Biswas, *Africa in Pictures*, 28.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup>'Cyclist Thwarted: Hindu Youth Wheels around the World', *Vancouver Sun*, 29 September 1932, 7.

<sup>146</sup>Biswas recounts this experience in *Prashanta Mahasagarer Ashanti* (The Trouble in the Pacific) (s.l.: Sri Atul Gupta, 1945). See also 'Cyclist Cycles in Circle', *The China Press*, 2 November 1932, 13; and 'Indian Cyclist Returns', *The North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, 16 November 1932, 256.

<sup>147</sup>Biswas, *Francey Bharatiya Bhuparjatak*, 44.

<sup>148</sup>Biswas, *Paschim Yurop Bhraman*, 3.

<sup>149</sup>Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987), 83; Patrick Leigh Fermor, *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos* (London: John Murray, 2013), 67.

afforded by his British citizenship and whiteness. A comparison between these experiences testifies to the national ontologies of mobility and surveillance of travellers in the interwar years, demonstrating the increased hardening of borders as a technology of articulating national and racial identity.

The three Parsis, too, had their share of harassment. They arrived in New York in 1925, one year after the Johnson-Reed Act severely limited all immigration to the United States.<sup>150</sup> They were surprised by the 'strictness and jealousy' with which the new laws were enforced. They were allowed to enter the country but complained that aliens with a dark complexion had to experience a degrading 'searching examination'.<sup>151</sup> Towards the end of their journey, they were treated even worse in Southeast Asia. French Indochina put them through humiliating procedures because of their nationality, which seemed to turn them automatically into coolies for the 'autocratic French officials'.<sup>152</sup> They gave fingerprints, were confined for a few days, and freed after paying a ridiculously high poll-tax — a requirement that did not apply to European travellers. In their travelogue, the three Parsis regard the bigotry of the French imperial regime much worse than the most shocking forms of racist discrimination they had encountered in the United States:

The immigration rules are designed with a devilish ingenuity to keep Indo-China free from Indian and Chinese immigrants. Directly the Indian enters the Saigon port, his passport is confiscated and he is marched into a lock-up [...] Then follows a terrible ordeal of filling up forms wherein the Indian is subjected to a searching cross-examination. The immigrant, no matter what his social status and position are, is asked to furnish fingerprints of all five fingers. As if this were not enough, a heavy poll tax is levied for the terrible offence the Indian has committed of having been born an Indian. [...] When we recollected how the Indian Army saved France at the most critical period of her national existence and how their immigration rules now placed us in the category of criminals, our blood boiled.<sup>153</sup>

Considering the ubiquity of racial prejudice, intimidation, and discriminatory practices that turned the cross-border mobility of people of colour into a persistent ordeal, the act of traveling itself emerges as a form of resistance. By crossing borders over several years against all these odds and subsequently writing about their experiences, Biswas and the Parsi group made claims to the same privilege of unimpeded mobility enjoyed by white travellers. It is noteworthy that they frequently self-identified as 'tourists'. This term had come to denote the idea of effortless individual mobility for leisure purposes by the interwar years. When sharing their traveling experiences, they repeatedly identified themselves as part of this imagined global community of cosmopolitan leisure travellers. Indeed, through their continuing counter-mobility, they ultimately made a powerful claim to be treated on par with 'the European tourist [who] goes about free'.<sup>154</sup>

Looking at the world as tourists, the globe cyclists destabilized existing power relations by reversing the usual (white, male) tourist gaze on the exotic destination. Paul Smethurst has correctly observed that '[b]icycle mobility occupies some of the same physical and theoretical space as flânerie'.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, turning colonial clichés and prejudices upside down by sharing the impressionistic observations of the cycling *flâneur* was an effective way of demystifying assertions to western racial and/or civilizational superiority. The Parsis' description of their first days on the European continent offers a particularly potent illustration of this discursive strategy. Much in the

<sup>150</sup>See Mae M. Ngai, 'The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924', *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 67–92.

<sup>151</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists around the World*, 375.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>153</sup>*Ibid.*, 377–78.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>155</sup>Smethurst, *The Bicycle*, 77.

same way that backwardness, dirt, and disease are invoked in countless travel narratives describing the arrival of western voyagers in Calcutta or Bombay, the Parsi group remembers their initial impression of Europe:

Our journey from Brindisi to Naples was very instructive [a]s [...] it totally destroyed the high opinion we held about European countries in general. The roads were bad, houses awful and the people dirty. Little urchins ran about the streets as if they were nobody's children. They wore tattered clothes that bore blots and patches of grease, dirt soot, mud and everything and wherefrom a stench of the most unbearable type ensued. [...] In the course of our 8,000 miles tour we had come across poverty-stricken villages and districts, but nowhere could we see the appalling filth and slovenliness, which greeted us as we first set our foot on the continent. We do not think a laundry business could succeed in this part of the world.<sup>156</sup>

Both the Parsi narrative as well as Biswas' travelogues place a lot of emphasis on depicting the inner workings of social and racial hierarchies in the countries they visited. This is particularly obvious in the case of the United States, where racism was by no means restricted to the discriminating border regime on Ellis Island. Hakim and his co-authors observe that 'the colour prejudice is deep-seated in the heart of the average citizen of the United States', but they immediately reassure their readers that during the several months of their sojourn in that country they themselves, being 'fair-skinned Indians', had never been 'recipients of such unpleasant attention'. 'Indians with darker complexion', by contrast, were frequently 'mistaken as darkies and subjected to sub-human treatment'.<sup>157</sup> The way in which the Parsi globe cyclists are eager to emphasize that they possessed a light complexion could be interpreted as evidence of the tacit acceptance of the colour-coded taxonomies undergirding social hierarchies in the United States and providing the *raison d'être* of the imperial world order.<sup>158</sup> Yet, at the same time, recent research has pointed to the existence of pre- and extra-colonial traditions of 'colourism' in South Asia and it could perhaps more appropriately be read as a convergence of co-existing systems of differentiation.<sup>159</sup> The flair for status distinctions and particularly for hierarchies based on the alleged dichotomy between purity and defilement that loomed large in the Parsi globe cyclists' worldview is also corroborated by the description of another encounter in the United States. While in Chicago, they stayed with a group of Indian students, who provided them with long missed Indian food for almost two weeks.<sup>160</sup> Hakim and his co-authors explain to their readers that:

Many of these students came down to Cicago (sic) for study in dentistry or some other craft. Like ourselves they are faced with the problem of balancing their budgets. Consequently they manage to earn their living working as clerks and in some cases we were grieved to learn as dishwashers and waiters in fashionable hotels. It is true that 'honour and shame from no condition rise', but we just could not help feeling sorry that nationals from our country did not occupy better positions.<sup>161</sup>

On the one hand, the authors pay lip service to the ideal of dignity and social equality, irrespective of one's occupation, but on the other hand, their uneasiness with accepting that respectable

<sup>156</sup>Hakim et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 132.

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>158</sup>See Deborah Gabriel, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora* (London: Imani Media, 2007).

<sup>159</sup>See Nina Kullrich, *Skin Colour Politics: Whiteness and Beauty in India* (Berlin: J. B. Metzler, 2022), 51-92.

<sup>160</sup>Hakim, et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 236.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid.* [commas are absent in the original text]



educated men carried out supposedly 'defiling' activities such as washing dishes that would be performed in India exclusively by members of the lowest social strata, is obvious.

The internalization of not only South Asian notions of social hierarchies and entitlements, but also the outright racist prejudices and tropes characteristic of the imperial world order becomes evident in the descriptions of supposedly 'uncivilized' regions and peoples in the travel accounts. As Subho Basu has shown, nineteenth-century Bengali authors of geography textbooks viewed Asian and African countries through a racial lens, partly informed by European writers such as J.F. Blumenbach and J.C. Prichard.<sup>162</sup> Their selective appropriation and idiosyncratic interpretation of the idiom of western race science allowed them to challenge white supremacy, all the while reproducing 'racialised discourses about the relationship between physical appearance of local populations and their level of civilization'.<sup>163</sup> This observation fits in well with the travelogues under purview. We have already seen a sample of this in the Parsis' account of the Italian *Mezzogiorno* and its inhabitants, and they had similarly unflattering comments to make about the population of rural China. Hakim and his co-authors not only attested a complete 'absence of hospitality' to Chinese peasants, they also somewhat sweepingly attributed 'superstition, ignorance and suspicion of the foreigners' to the average 'Chinaman'.<sup>164</sup> In a similar vein, they described their host in one of the Persian towns, a Borah merchant, as someone 'by racial habits fitted to be a cold calculator of tangible gains'.<sup>165</sup>

Biswas' description of African and Asian populations was ambivalent, not least because he loved to fashion himself as a deracinated socialist. In an attempt at demonstrating his receptive and broadminded politics, he actively sought the company of 'oppressed' and 'progressive' people, saying the oppressed had no national identity and the progressive transcended the reductive notion of national and community belonging.<sup>166</sup> He reiterated his close association with these two categories of people across the world in several of his books, including in the preface to his Japan travelogue in which he fondly remembered his interactions with Japanese revolutionaries in 1931 and dedicated the book to them.<sup>167</sup> Contradicting his own identification with Indian nationalism, he sometimes even eschewed the idea of a homeland. In his own view, his self-identification as a destitute with no kinship helped him impartially observe the home and the abroad.<sup>168</sup> This notwithstanding, a sense of superiority plainly shines through in some of his writings on Africa. On the one hand, he deplores the European oppression of black Africans and criticizes all Indians in South Africa who were complicit in racist discrimination.<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, however, his writings on Africa contain many passages describing sub-Saharan Africans as primitive, openly doubting their intelligence. He repeatedly appoints himself as a sort of benevolent guardian and liberator for the Blacks who supposedly had no conception of education or civil rights.<sup>170</sup> The most drastic example of Biswas' 'South-South-racism', however, is a small picture book in English on his tour through East and South Africa. The voyeuristic and ridiculing ways, in which African

<sup>162</sup>Subho Basu, 'The Dialectics of Resistance: Colonial Geography, Bengali Literati and the Racial Mapping of Indian Identity', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 no. 1 (2010): 68-74.

<sup>163</sup>*Ibid.*, 79. Along similar lines, Luzia Savary has shown that sensationalist travel reports showcasing African or Polynesian 'savage otherness' were popular in Hindi periodicals in early twentieth century. Luzia Savary, *Evolution Race and Public Spheres in India: Vernacular Concepts and Sciences* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 52-74.

<sup>164</sup>Hakim, et al., *With Cyclists Around the World*, 303.

<sup>165</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>166</sup>Biswas, *Bidrohi Balkan*, 22.

<sup>167</sup>Ramnath Biswas, *Jujutsu Japan* (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1945).

<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>169</sup>See Ramnath Biswas, *Negro Jatir Nutan Jiban* (New Life of the Negroes) (Calcutta: D.M. Library, 1949), 36; *Duranta Dakshin Africa* (Restless South Africa) (Calcutta: Satyanarayan Bhattacharya, 1949), 31.

<sup>170</sup>Biswas, *Negro Jatir Nutan Jiban*, 140. See also Bandyopadhyay, 'A Journey to Justice', 747.

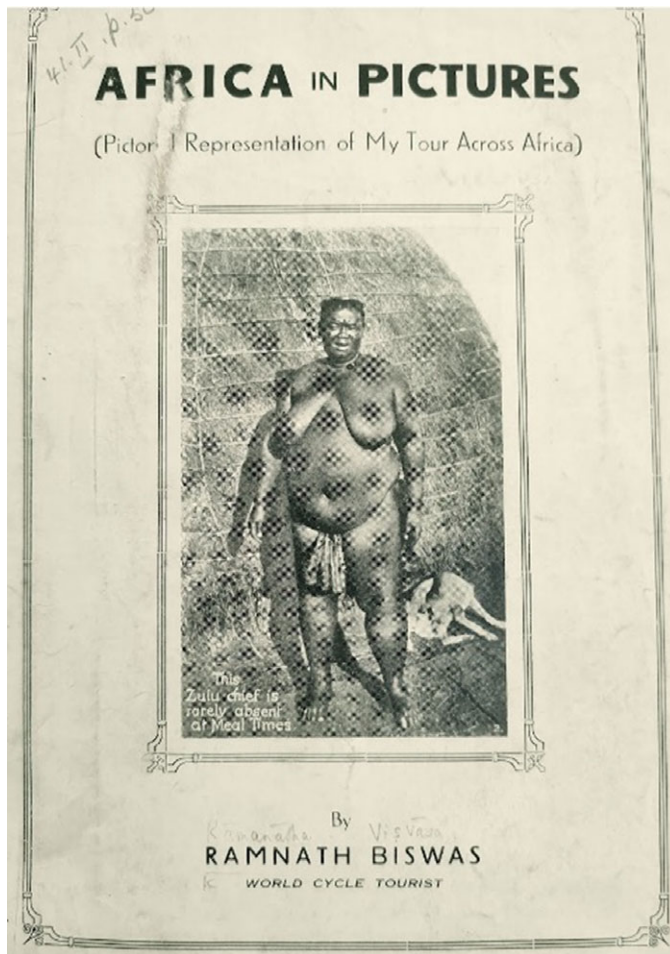


Figure 8. Cover of Ramnath Biswas' Africa booklet (1940)

villagers are represented in this volume both in visual and textual form, is puzzling. The racist overtones are already apparent on the cover illustration that Biswas chose for his publication (see Figure 8). In a manner reminiscent of the posters and postcards advertising human zoos in Europe or the *National Geographic* magazine's sensationalized depiction of tribal people as noble savages in the first half of the twentieth century, the cover shows a corpulent African person in front of a thatched hut.<sup>171</sup> Favourably looking at contemporary western standards of bodily proportions as ideal, Biswas introduces the person with a cynical caption that reads: 'This Zulu chief is rarely absent at meal times.'<sup>172</sup> The Chief is presented as a glutton and conceivably indolent and inefficient in serving his people in a challenging environment. As Sabrina Strings has persuasively demonstrated, this kind of 'fat-phobia' has been integral to European racist ideologies since the Renaissance.<sup>173</sup> The picture may seem repugnant in today's standard, but it is an important document that not only strengthens our argument regarding Biswas' ambivalent stance on racism

<sup>171</sup>See David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Catherine Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>172</sup>Biswas, *Africa in Pictures*, 1.

<sup>173</sup>Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press 2019).

in a way that a mere textual discussion could not, but also elucidates the broader phenomenon that even politically conscious non-western elites widely accepted the tropes and aesthetic norms that were at the heart of the European discourse of civilizational decline in the non-west.<sup>174</sup>

The other illustrations in Biswas' booklet continue to reduce Africa to a set of well-established imperial clichés, especially through pictures of wild animals and scantily-clad 'natives'. On a page that claims to show the 'true nature of men and women of Africa proper', Biswas places a photograph of five young, bare-breasted African women. In the caption, he illuminates his readers that African 'women like very much to put on fancy or grotesque dress', and that they 'are not cannibals [b]ut they do not like to come into contact with the civilized world'.<sup>175</sup> The choice of such an optic, resulting in dismissive representations of the local population, may strike one as disturbing in a volume dedicated to the 'gallant fighters against the colour-bar' and edited by an ardent champion of Afro-Asian solidarity.<sup>176</sup>

Biswas was not the only Indian rider to recycle elements from the textual and visual repertoire of the gentlemanly globe cyclists of the late nineteenth century. Framroze Davar, the Parsi Scoutmaster, who crossed Africa in the late 1920s together with his Czech fellow rider Gustav Sztavjanik during his world tour, had his photograph taken wearing a khaki uniform and a pith helmet (see Figure 9). His pose with a villager from sub-Saharan Africa reminds the reader of the imperial self-fashioning of Victorian long-distance cycling pioneers like John Fraser (see Figure 3). Davar's depictions of the local customs in sub-Saharan Africa follow a similarly imperial narrative. He describes the 'bamboula dance' of a 'half-clothed young woman' in a West African village in a very negative and hyper-sexualized light, to the point of shocking his readers with the observation that 'the savage dance culminated in the most depraved gesticulations of her hand and body' at the sight of which the crowd allegedly 'joined in the dance roaring like maddened beasts'.<sup>177</sup> The tendency to ridicule the social life and behaviour of Africans on account of its unfamiliarity and non-conformity to ideals practiced in the personal social circles of these tourists is a recurrent trope in their writings.

### Conclusion: a bumpy ride to autonomy?

Our study of the travels and tribulations of South Asian globe cyclists has offered strong evidence for the fact that the bicycle did not only serve as an 'empowerment machine' for western first wave feminists and the European working classes but was also successfully appropriated by lower middle class 'colonial subjects' from British India to make political claims. As we have seen, however, the decolonial potential of the bicycle could only fully unfold during the interwar years, when the two-wheeler was no longer closely associated with either western techno-modernity or with colonial officialdom. This observation reinforces the point made by several STS scholars, namely that everyday technologies are 'effectively co-constructed by their users' and, as such, they can 'become repurposed in often-unexpected ways'.<sup>178</sup> Most importantly, they tend to take on a life of their own, once they spread to diverse cultural, social, and political settings. The analysis of the Indian cyclotourists thus broadens the global history of cycling, while at the same time restoring the bicycle to South Asia's social, political and gender history.

It has likewise become obvious that the close interrelation between cycling in general and extreme long-distance cyclotourism in particular with notions of masculinity and male autonomy

<sup>174</sup>See also Sebastian Conrad, 'Globalizing the Beautiful Body: Eugen Sandow, Bodybuilding, and the Ideal of Muscular Manliness at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of World History* 21 no. 1 (2021): 95-125.

<sup>175</sup>Biswas, *Africa in Pictures*, 8.

<sup>176</sup>For the seminal role of Africa and Afro-Asian solidarity in Indian anti-colonial imaginaries more generally see also Antoinette Burton, *Africa in the Indian Imagination: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>177</sup>Davar, *Across the Sahara*, 110.

<sup>178</sup>Peter Cox, 'Theorizing Cycling', in *Routledge Companion to Cycling*, 19.



**Figure 9.** South-South racism? Indian globe cyclist Framroze J. Davar poses as quasi-imperial explorer with a West African villager after his Sahara crossing (August 1926).

remained crucial for the emancipatory project of the patriotic Indian globe cyclists. In their attempt to falsify imperial theories about the alleged softness and effeminacy of Indian men, they resorted to the well-rehearsed repertoire of imperially tinged heroism and adventure. In that sense, the travelogues of the South Asian globetrotters can be read as perfect examples of a ‘complicit masculinity’ that apes existing forms of hegemonic masculinity with a view to reach wider acceptance and thus increase their political leverage. Ultimately, to repeat the observation made by US historian Kornel Chang in a similar context, their self-empowerment had ‘the contradictory effect of reproducing the operative logic of colonial masculinity, of tightening the links between gender, nation, and empire’.<sup>179</sup>

The third important point that we were trying to make refers to the place of these South Asian long-distance cyclists in the wider history of mobility and tourism. We have suggested that their protracted journeys across the globe represented a new form of countermobility that may be tagged ‘touristic anti-imperialism’. The globe cyclists’ performative and subversive act of continuously crossing borders despite the constant harassment and racist abuse, their adamant insisting on being accepted as ‘tourists’ and their outspoken commentaries made in press interviews and their travelogues on the inequities of the imperial world order and especially of global border-regimes, clearly constitute forms of anti-imperial practice.

<sup>179</sup>Chang, ‘Mobilizing Revolutionary Manhood’, 83.



While acknowledging the courage, determination and dexterity of the historical actors whose travels and agendas we have analysed, we are hesitant to uncritically celebrate them as ‘quintessential heroes’ or one-dimensionally cast them as ‘intensely conscious civil right advocate[s] promoting equality and social justice’, as other authors have done.<sup>180</sup> Our probing has shown that while undeniably contributing to debunking the injustice of a racialized imperial world order, the self-fashioning of the South Asian globe cyclists under study was also characterized by tensions and contradictions. Their fight against the doctrines and practices of white supremacy could well go in tandem with the adoption of somewhat problematic discourses about certain groups and communities. In spite of their keen critique of western racist practices, the Indian globe cyclists’ travel narratives also demonstrate what might be described as ‘South-South racism’. While constantly emphasizing international anti-colonial solidarities, the South Asian cyclo-tourists sometimes adopted the cultural and racial postulates that marginalized ethnic or social groups as ‘uncivilized’ and inferior. This hybrid world-view – an assemblage of colonial and indigenous epistemologies – was a result of the ways in which these resisting subjects internalized imperial and modernist modes of travel. We have seen that this peculiar form of ‘civilizationism’ was based on a racial world-mapping, relegating, for instance, African rural populations to a lower scale of development, thus reproducing and strengthening the Euro-imperial tropes of cultural ‘othering’. The historical trajectories, spatial ramifications, and social impacts of such non-western adoptions of racialized worldviews and practices would be a rewarding future topic for global historians to explore in greater depth.

---

<sup>180</sup>Babani and Viegas, *The Bicycle Diaries*, 5; and Bandyopadhyay, ‘A Journey to Justice’, 757.