

16 Cycling for Livelihood in Nepal

Seeking Justice on Two Wheels

Tara Lal Shrestha and Bidhya Shrestha

Introduction

Rapid urbanization is a recent phenomenon in Nepal. In 2021, about 66% of Nepal's population lived in government-designated urban areas (NSO, 2023). However, urban planning is not paying due attention to transportation, especially the dimensions of equity and justice in the mobility of low-income residents. Instead, transportation planning in Kathmandu and many other major cities generally caters to the elite class through building and widening of roads specifically for cars and motorcycles. Subaltern people's need for better facilities for bicycling, which they use to carry out their daily livelihood, is largely ignored. This has prevented the adoption of active transportation infrastructure to support bicycling that is suitable and affordable for those pursuing livelihood activities.

Active transportation such as bicycling has been promoted in both developed and developing countries for reducing emissions from burning fossil fuel and for health benefits (Wood and Roelich, 2019; Lyons, 2020; Adetoyinbo et al., 2022). However, there are still questions about the provision of adequate and equitable infrastructure for this purpose. In developing countries like Nepal, policymakers and planners race to catch up with cities in developed countries by supporting the car culture of the elite class. This has created air and noise pollution and reduced the capacity of cities to support the daily livelihood activities of the subaltern cyclists and other residents.

Studies on active and equitable transportation in cities in developing countries are scarce (Dadashova et al., 2023). To help fill this gap, this chapter shows that people who depend on bicycling for livelihoods face injustice in three ways: exposure to the health risks from air pollution; accidents caused by cars and motorcycles; and, lack of equity in the allocation of resources for the infrastructure (e.g., bike lanes and paths).

As this study deals with inequities in achieving and protecting livelihoods, it can be placed within the framework of 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Allier, 2003) in an urban context. This concept has been mainly applied in rural context in struggles over the livelihood of the natural resource-dependent people. But this study focuses on the concerns, voices, and activism of these people in improving their condition and in putting pressure on the urban planning system for improvement of infrastructure they require. While the impact of such activism has been minimal so far, these struggles demonstrate the growing agency of these populations.

The study identified four types of riders whose members depend on bicycles for their livelihoods: (i) those who use bicycles for going to the office/workplace, (ii) those who use bicycle for door-to-door hawking, (iii) those who use bicycles to deliver food/goods, and (iv) those who, known as *kawadiwala*, collect reusable waste items. These people are poor and belong mostly to marginalized, displaced, or recent migrant populations from the villages of Nepal and India.

The study uses qualitative research methods to examine the livelihood-driven cyclists, their concerns in terms of risks to which they are exposed, and their agency to influence the transportation planning process in Kathmandu. It draws significantly on the experience of the first author who bicycled across Nepal conducting meetings with diverse cyclists and cycling organization members to support advocacy for Nepal's National Bicycle Act. We also conducted eight focus group discussions and 16 key informant interviews with a diversity of cyclists in the above four categories.

Growing Dominance of Car Culture in Kathmandu

Until 1953, in Kathmandu, porters carried bicycles and cars from Bhimphedi crossing Chandragiri hills (Manandhar, 2013; p. 178; Dahal, 2023; Sindhu, 2023). The very first cars were for the king and the ruling class.

Starting in the early 1960s, bicycle culture bloomed in Kathmandu and roads were mainly used for walking and cycling. Government offices, banks, schools, and colleges offered dedicated bicycle parking spaces. Most households had at least one bicycle (Gautam, 2012). With its gentle inclines, beautiful scenery, and convenient distances between key locations across the Valley, Kathmandu has been an ideal cycling city for both commerce and recreation (Subedi, 2023).

Bicycle culture started to change and gave way to car culture starting in the 1980s (Bhattarai, 2018). Now motor vehicles dominate congested roads in Kathmandu making cycling unsafe (Rai, 2011). As such, the bicycling culture has declined significantly and this form of two wheelers has largely become a vehicle for a poor person's mobility (Khanal, 2021). Since the 1990s, the number of motor vehicles has grown at the rate of 12%–13% annually. In 1991, 13.1% of households owned a car; this increased to 30.2% in 2011, whereas cycling declined from 6.6 to 1.5% in that period. In 2021 among 542,892 households in the Kathmandu Valley, 55,271 households (10.2%) had a car, jeep, or van; 263,069 households (48.6%) had a motorcycle/scooter while only 62,494 households (11.5%) had a bicycle.

With the rise of a middle class, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of motorcycles in Kathmandu. According to latest updated data of the Department of Transport Management, out of 3.22 million vehicles registered in Nepal, 78% (2.53 million) are motorcycles and nearly 40% of these ply on the streets of Kathmandu Valley (Wagle, 2021). Because of their fast movements across lanes, motorcycles are prone to accidents and also cause accidents for cyclists.

Dr. Prahlad Yonzon, a renowned conservationist, was killed in October 2011 at Balkhu Ring Road while cycling. Cycling advocates submitted a petition in April 2012 gifting a bicycle to Prime Minister Dr. Baburam Bhattarai and requested him

to enact a Bicycle Act. Despite this public support, no such Act was passed and road safety for the cyclists has become even more precarious since. In 2021–2022, 140 cyclists lost their lives and 1,174 were severely injured in road accidents: most of these occurred in urbanized Kathmandu. (Sharma, 2023). In the absence of adequate bicycle infrastructure, regulations, and policies, cyclists face growing risks to their lives (Acharya, 2022; Shrestha & Shrestha, 2022).

Because of a growing pressure from cyclists to address these hazards, Lalitpur Metropolitan City in Kathmandu created shared bicycle lanes. But advocates continue to question the safety of cyclists on the streets of Kathmandu; there are no dedicated bike lanes, and some painted lines in the narrow roadways do not provide sufficient protection (Wagle, 2021).

Cycling and Livelihoods

Many working-class people in Kathmandu use bicycles for their transportation and livelihood activities. In contrast to the latest modern bicycles used by recreational riders, these livelihood-driven cyclists use the older traditional cycles – generally called *budho cycle* (old and cheap).

Cycling for Work: A Diverse Community in Green Mobility

Until the 1980s, both high and low-wage office workers used bicycles to commute. This was because of road safety, relatively lower air pollution and minimal auto traffic. Now, while most middle-class people prefer private motor vehicles, there are still many people of different professions who use bicycles for their daily commuting and livelihood activities. A few high-level job holders also still prefer bicycles due to their physical, mental, and environmental benefits.

Chitra Bahadur Pun, an entrepreneur, said, “I pedal to the office, save at least 50 liters of petrol and reduce at least 100 kg of carbon per month.”¹ Jot Narayan Patel pedals 20 kilometers every day from Bhaktapur to Singha Darbar office for fun, exercise and environmental justice. Punam Thulung, a student studying at St. Xavier’s College is a dedicated bicycle-lover. After she completed her Bachelor of Management, she began to commute to work on her bicycle. She wishes others would follow her example. “If the road is safer, thousands of girls like me would be on the streets,” she said.² These types of white-collar cyclists tend to use safety measures (helmet, lock, lights, neon/reflective clothing) and follow traffic signals (Haupt, 2021).

Other lower-income workers use bicycles while commuting to work in Kathmandu to save time and money. They are not aware or, more likely, cannot afford safety gear. Dhani Lal Gupta, a worker in the waste picking and segregating sector, prefers cycling to avoid disturbing passengers on public buses with his dirty work clothes. Cycling also saves him his transportation cost. Mina Tamang, the leader of a group of street cleaners, says, “Even if we take a bath, people can still smell us when we use public bus, so we use active commuting.”³ There are also many regular cyclists from the disabled community because buses, which are their primary means of mobility aren’t well-equipped for those with disabilities. Many of

these are activist cyclists who are playing leading roles to unite the heterogeneous ‘cycling-for-livelihood communities’ around the cause of mobility justice, including the building of effective and safe bike paths and lanes and improving traffic safety regulations.

Door-to-Door Vending: Continuing a Tradition of Microenterprise

Door-to-door vending has become one of the key means of livelihood for the urban poor in Kathmandu Valley. This informal sector is an important source of earning livelihood for a large number of poor people, who sell varieties of goods door-to-door. They use bicycles for vending vegetables, fruits, clothes, dry foods, and goods. They pull their fully loaded cycles door-to-door in groups in Kathmandu and ride them home when they finish their vending. They tend to be low-income temporary migrants from Tarai in southern Nepal and India.

Gautam Yadav is one of such hawkers who arrives at the central Kalimati vegetable market every day at 4 am. He does not have time to cook or eat in his room. Instead, he eats in low-cost hotels and rushes to sell vegetables from house to house. Then he begins his second trip from Balkhu wholesale vending fruits door-to-door. Yadav said, “It is not our wish to endure the pollution from dawn to dusk. It is a compulsion.” Some hawkers also move around the city with their bicycles asking residents if they need help in repairing pressure cookers and gas stoves and selling pots and utensils. This hawking job requires a relatively low upfront investment for the bicycle and associated equipment (about NRs 2,000–5,000 or \$15–38) but earns about NRs 1,100–1,700 (\$8.5 to 13) per day (Regmi, 2017: 35). Accordingly, poor people can afford to follow this bicycle-dependent occupation (Figure 16.1).

The first author interviewed more than three dozen hawkers around Kalimati and Balkhu with the help of the second author. Almost all of hawkers consulted for the study said that they have no access to public toilet, proper resting place, and



Figure 16.1 A peddler's bicycle loaded with household goods.

Photo credit: Vijay Ratna Shakya.

drinking water facilities. They have to go to hotels to buy water or carry water from their rooms. Some of them said that most hotels do not allow them to use the toilet. Nirwal Yadav and Ashok Yadav, originally from India who have been hawking in Kathmandu, said “this city is getting more crowded and polluted but we must push bicycle for living as there is nobody to help us.”^{4,5}

These hawkers face a range of risks, including unsafe roads and city police who prohibit them from selling goods in many public places. Recently, under the directive of Mayor Balen Shah, the Kathmandu Municipality police have confiscated hundreds of bicycles from street vendors. Mass protest did not stop the decision of the municipality which has adopted the policy such that bicycles cannot move on motor vehicle roads and yet has not constructed dedicated bike lanes (Pharak Nepal, 2022). The municipality equates getting rid of hawkers and street food vendors with making the city “clean.” The municipality’s decision has drawn a lot of criticism but they have made little to no impact (Ghimire, 2023).

Delivery-Cyclists: Adding New Green Mobility Stories in Kathmandu

Gyan Shrestha from eastern Nepal has sold potato chips with the help of *budho cycles* to different shops, in *choks* (cross-roads) and alleys for years. However, pedaling for food delivery is a new phenomenon in Kathmandu. During and after the pandemic, many college students and jobless youths used low-cost bicycles for delivery in the gig economy. As the fuel price rose, many motorcyclists involved in food delivery switched to bicycling. Hundreds of cyclists have appeared on the streets in Kathmandu for food delivery in the past three years. Firms such as Foodmandu and Pathao hired dozens of cyclists for short-distance food delivery. There are about 600 cyclists registered in Pathao for food delivery (Acharya, 2023). Bhojdeals has recently hired 40 cyclists for food delivery. While most cycle delivery workers are male, Pathao has also hired a few female cyclists.

One of the bicyclists from Pathao, Sunil Lama, used to have a motor scooter. He used to earn \$8–10 USD per day, which would be exhausted by the daily fuel cost. He sold his scooter and bought an e-bicycle. “Now, I save all money that I earn,” he said.⁶ After switching to an e-bicycle, he was receiving more than ten orders and earning almost double than before. While the income is good, these delivery staff face peak hour pressure and must navigate in polluted, congested, and unsafe streets. Suraj Lama observes that carrying a big box bag on his back and pedaling in Kathmandu is not easy. He said, “streets are either in disrepair or congested and are full of dirt and dust. The motor vehicles on the other hand speed by recklessly.” Indeed, a young delivery Pathao cyclist Bhim Bahadur Tamang was killed in a road accident in August 2023.⁷

The gig economy has bloomed in Kathmandu and cyclists have revolutionized the takeaway delivery occupation but without assuring safety or security for its riders. They have taken this occupation as an economic necessity – rather than choice – to survive in Kathmandu.

Kawadiwala: The Hidden Recycling Heroes

Approximately 800,000 kilos of waste are produced every day in Kathmandu Valley. Despite a large number of waste recycling firms, tons of recyclable waste are disposed of in landfills. The waste collection processing, and resale work of the *kawadi* is therefore a major source of livelihood for vulnerable populations in Kathmandu Valley. There are more than 700 *kawadi* goods collection centers and 10,000 *kawadiwalas* who collect and resell reusable or recyclable materials in Kathmandu (Nepal Live, 2018). Most *kawadiwalas* rely on bicycles to collect and transport waste.

In the words of Janu Dangol, the representative of *Sar Saphai Jagaran* (a waste management union), *kawadiwalas* work in solid waste landfill sites as informal waste collectors, segregators, *pheryas* (scrap buyers), cleaners, and in related activities. Despite having low levels of formal education and coming from disadvantaged ethnic and caste backgrounds, they provide essential services for society without any safety or security. Rather than honoring them, they are stereotyped with the term *khates*⁸ (derogatory word for homeless ragpickers). In the words of Shanti Tamang, the Chairperson of Sarsaphai Jagaran, “Everyone wants their surroundings clean but they still disrespect *kawadiwalas* and cleaners” (SASAJA, 2022). The *kawadiwalas* vocalize this trauma whenever they get a chance to speak. Sanjaya Shah, a representative of *kawadiwalas*, spoke from the stage on a truck in King’s Way Kathmandu, celebrating World Bicycle Day 2022. “We are tirelessly cleaning your city, your discarded dirt and dust, and make your city shine but you call us *khate*!,” he said. In front of the mayors of the metropolitan cities of Kathmandu Valley, Shah further said, “We *kawadiwalas*, recycling heroes, manage 30% of the waste of Kathmandu” (Tamang, 2022). The *kawadiwalas* roam the city on their bicycles collecting recyclable waste but they are not recognized as essential workers (KhaliSisi, 2023). They pedal for livelihood, not for lifestyle (Serkhel, 2022). They call their bicycle ‘the best motor of *majdurs* (laborers)’ and continue to clean Kathmandu day after day.

Sukhal Paswan, 40, a Dalit from Bara district in the Tarai, for instance, lives with his five family members in Kathmandu. Despite losing his right hand 25 years ago, he is the primary provider for his five-member family. Being a migrant Dalit in a Kathmandu metropolis, he is not able to make a ‘disability card’, which would have allowed him to get a social security.

Despite their critical role in the management of the city’s waste, the problems of *Kawadi* and their reliance on *budho cycles* are not addressed or protected by local or regional policymakers and planners.⁹

Green Mobility Movement: Act and Activism

Mobile street vendors contribute in critical ways to a sustainable urban supply chain management. The number of such vendors in Kathmandu is large – about 10,000 (Ojha, 2020). The number of buyers of goods from these vendors is also large. In such context, Pitamber Sharma, a planning expert, said “these vendors, who use bicycle, should not be displaced but managed, and they should be given



Figure 16.2 Solidarity among cyclists – Recreational riders and livelihood bicyclists rally in Lalitpur to demand passage of the Bicycle Act.

Photo credit: Vijay Ratna Shakya.

justice.” The Local Government Operation Act (2017) secures the rights of the local government to manage the local market (pp. 11–12). But neither the central nor the local government is visibly working for the benefit of street vendors. They are compelled to continue in their line of work despite the risks to their lives in order to support their families. Apart from life risks from unsafe roads, they are constantly exposed to air pollution. Such problems discourage other people from choosing active transportation like bicycles: but low-wage and marginalized social groups do not have this choice. City planning that emphasizes motorized transportation has little regard for low-income residents (Figure 16.2).

Nepal does have various regulations and policies to manage urban transportation. These include the Transportation Management Act (1993), Road Standards (1998), Transportation Policy (2001), Rural Road Standards (2012), Urban Road Standards (2014), and Provincial Transport Master Plan (2019). But nearly all of these policies favor car culture or motorized vehicles. The electrification of the transport system as per commitment of UNFCCC (Dec 2020) to decarbonize is a hollow promise. Between 2011 and 2016, Nepal’s road-transport CO₂ emissions increased by 113% (Maharjan, 2021). Because of the excise duty and tax earned from cars, government is actively promoting car culture.

Local governments’ plans like Vision 2035 & Beyond of Kathmandu Valley (2015–2035) have incorporated some provisions of bicycle and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure despite the dominance of motor-centric vision. As part of recent social mobilization, the Cycle Culture Movement coordinated a camp in Dhulikhel on 12–14 March 2023, where participants from diverse fields and policy levels identified five prioritized areas of intervention: (1) the need for Bicycle Act to guarantee cyclist rights and protections, (2) improved bicycle infrastructure, (3) bicycle education from school level, (4) solidarity among bicycle activists and communities, and (5) need of

national alliance of bicycle organizations. Together these steps are intended to revive Nepal's bicycle culture. Unfortunately, the majority of participants represented were mountain bike riders – generally from the elite socio-economic class who bicycle mainly for recreation and health. The absence of livelihood-driven cyclists was just noted in the discussion without any substantial reference to their plight.

Conclusion

Although cycling is a crucial element of sustainable transportation (Parkin, 2012), high traffic congestion and pollution in Kathmandu are undermining the health and safety of people who cycle for daily livelihood. At the same time, the contribution of these people to make urban centers like Kathmandu a livable city has not been recognized by the state. They have been excluded and disconnected from policy formulation and are denied fairness and justice. The city planning authorities have not invested in developing infrastructure these people require. Even though they have been contributing to keeping the city clean and livable, there is no proportionate investment in the facilities to protect their health and support their livelihood. The plans and actions of the government are, so far, elite and motor vehicle-centric. The development of Kathmandu has become, as Arundhati Roy writes about globalization more generally, "...like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness" (cited in Bunting, 2001). It is a "slow violence" not viewed as violence at all (Nixon, 2011: 2).

Environmental justice demands a different model of urban development. As this study has shown, people who cycle for livelihood are key contributors to the sustainability, vitality, and equity of Kathmandu's urban environment. Accordingly, the unmet needs for safe and healthy transportation for these largely ignored informal sector workers and livelihood cyclers should be incorporated in government's policies and programs for a fair and just city.

Notes

- 1 Interviewed on April 8, 2023.
- 2 Interviewed July 21, 2023.
- 3 FGD & KII in Sanyukta Sarsaphai Jagaran office in Teku.
- 4 Interviewed on September 17, 2023 in Kalimati.
- 5 Interviewed on September 21, 2023 in Babarmahal.
- 6 Interviewed on March 22, 2023.
- 7 Source: SSP of Nepal Police Sanjeev Sharma (August 16, 2023).
- 8 Interview in SASAJA office in Teku on July 15, 2023.
- 9 Interview and FGD in Babarmahal on 10 June 2023.

References

- Acharya, A. (2023). Cyclists in Strike after Pathao Reduced Delivery Rate. *Ekagaj*, July 9. <https://ekagaj.com/article/society/145337/>
- Acharya, S. (2022). Pedaling as an Act of Rebellion. *The Record*, February 25. <https://www.recordnepal.com/pedaling-as-an-act-of-rebellion>

- Adetoyinbo, A., et al. (2022). *Technology, Transport, Sustainability: The Undefined Prospects of Lagos Ride*. CEMRI.
- Bhattarai, S. (2018). No City for Cyclists. *Nepali Times*, May 12. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/no-city-for-cyclists>
- Bunting, M. (2001). Dam Buster Fiction Review. *The Guardian*, July 27. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jul/28/fiction.arundhatiroy>
- Dadashova, B., et al. (2023). Equitable Active Transport. *Transport and Environment*, 119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2023.103737>
- Dahal, A. (2023). History of Classic Cars in Nepal. *Nepal Database*, April 27. <https://www.nepaldatabase.com/history-of-classic-cars-in-nepal>
- Gautam, S. (2012). Pedaling for Prosperity. *Nepali Times*, October 5–11. http://archive.nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=19700#.Wu_BkO-FO70
- Ghimire, R. (2023). Mobile Street Vendors in Kathmandu – the Local Govt Terrorizes them. *Onlinekhabar*, August 4. <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/mobile-street-vendors-kathmandu.html>
- Haupt, A. (2021). Health Benefits of Biking to Work. *Verywellfit*, July 19. <https://www.verywellfit.com/health-benefits-of-biking-to-work-5191939>
- KhaaliSisi. (2023). Our Contribution. *KhaaliSisi.com*, July 31. https://www.khaalisisi.com/contributions_new
- Khanal, P. (2021). The Rise and Fall of the Kathmandu Valley's Cycling Culture. *The Record*, June 7. <https://www.recordnepal.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-kathmandu-valleys-cycling-culture>
- Lyons, G. (2020). Walking as a Service – Does It Have Legs? *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 137, 271–284.
- Maharjan, S. (2021). Nepal's Pathways to Decarbonizing the Transport System. *Blog News*, December 13. <https://100re-map.net/nepals-pathways-to-decarbonizing-the-transport-system/>
- Manandhar, T. N. (2013). *Kathmandu...Then and Now*. TN-ND Lumanti Guthi, translated from Nepalbhasha by Razen Manandhar.
- Martinez-Allier, J. (2003). *The Environmentalism of Poor. A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*. Edward Elgar Publication.
- NepalLive. (2018). Billions Rupees Go Out of Nepal with Kawadi. *Nepal Live*, August 27. <https://nepallive.com/story/30869>
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press. https://www.google.com.np/books/edition/Slow_Violence_and_the_Environmentalism_o/bTVbUTOsoC8C?hl=ne&gbpv=1
- NSO, National Statistics Office. (2023). *National Population and Housing Census 2021 National Report*. NSO.
- Ojha, A. (2020). Street Vendors Decry Kathmandu City Office Crackdown on their Businesses. *The Kathmandu Post*, September 18.
- Parking, J., ed. (2012). *Cycling and Sustainability*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. <https://books.google.com.np/books?>
- Pharak Nepal. (2022). Bicycle Lane Should Not Be Constructed Haphazardly. *Pharak Nepal*, June 3. <https://faraknepal.com/bicycle-lanes-should-not-be-built-in-hachuwa-mayor-balen-shah>
- Rai, B. (2011). Cyclists and the City. *Nepali Times*, November 18–24. http://archive.nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=18714#.Wu_AcO-FO70
- Regmi, T. B. (2017). A Study of Indian Hawkers in Kathmandu District. Master of Arts in Central Department of Rural Development, Tribhuvan University, MA Thesis. https://opac.tucl.edu.np/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=83831&query_desc=au%3A%22Regmi%2C%20Trailokya%20Bikram%22

- SASAJA. (2022). *Samyukta Safai Jagaran*. Teku Kathmandu, Mayalbari.
- Serkhel, S. (2022). Cycling for Livelihood, Not Lifestyle. Blogs, *Woarchitect*, June 15. <https://www.woarchitect.com/cycling-for-livelihood-not-lifestyle>
- Sharma, S. (2023). Cyclists' Current Road Accident Data Presented in the Workshop organized after Tundhikehl to Dhulikhel Bicycle Mass Rally on May 20.
- Shrestha, T. L. and Shrestha, B. (2022). Attitude Towards Bicycle Infrastructure in Nepal with Reference to Hetauda City. *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 5(3), 275–282. <https://www.opastpublishers.com>
- Sindhu, K. D. (2023). *Roads to the Valley*. Notion Press.
- Subedi, A. (2023). Keynote in Cycle Culture in Painting Workshop in Nepal Tourism Board on 30 September. <https://arthadabali.com/2023/10/05/49772>
- Tamang, P. (2022). Cycle Rally (Patan-Darbarmarga) CCM. *YouTube*, June 9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEfHTn0FmJ8>
- Wagle, A. (2021). Motorcycle City. *The Kathmandu Post*, April 26. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/04/26/motorcycle-city>
- Wood, N., and Roelich, K. (2019). Tensions, Capabilities, and Justice in Climate Change Mitigation of Fossil Fuels. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 52, 114–122.