

Cycle

Saurav Kumar Chaliha

A beautiful piece by renowned Assamese writer, Saurav Kumar Chaliha, about Germans and the town of Göttingen in Germany, as well as about the Assamese in contrast. It is about the time when he was living in Germany in the late 1950s and studying physics at the university.

The title is 'Cycle' but the actual subject of this article is 'self-respect', a cycle just happens to appear in the course of events, just now. The word 'cycle' probably reminds us of two famous movies -- Vittorio Sica's Italian film *Ladri di biciclette* (Cycle thief) and Juan Antonio Bardem's Spanish film *Muerte de un ciclista* (Death of a Cyclist). The bicycle in this article is not of the same standard, the topic associated to this cycle is pride and love for one's own land and its people – in other words, self-respect.

Recently I had a discussion with a young journalist (with him a young social scientist), among various topics the current situation in the state also came up – we agreed that one big reason for our degradation was the disappearance of our love for our own land, our total lack of self-esteem – today we are a people who has given up all the good things that were our own and who can only imitate the bad things from elsewhere like a bunch of apes. There is a group of people who say that patriotism or love for one's own land is a very narrow concept, parochial, chauvinistic (such big words), rather we should be open to the whole world, embrace the whole of humanity as brothers etc. Why don't they understand that loving the big wide world is a very good thing, '*vasudhaiva kumtumbakam*' (the whole world is our own family) is an ideal mental outlook, but all that can come only when first there is love and fraternal feelings in one's own home – charity begins at home. I should have some satisfaction, some pride, some pleasure regarding my own home, only then will I be able to share in the happiness and sorrows of my neighbours, not by neglecting or ignoring my own home, because if we do so then our dissatisfaction and sense of inferiority will keep pricking us like thorns. If we have pride in our own place then we shall be able to happily accept the outside world too as our own. No group of people worth calling a group gives up what is special or unique about them. The Bengali are always praising their great icons (like Rabindranath), they are also proud of Mother Teresa, they have other heroes too, but the photo that is always to be found in their living rooms or prayer room is that of Ramkrishna Paramhansa. Even today, the British have the slogan 'Buy British', meaning buy Japanese only if you don't find the equivalent British one. Japan seems to be a mechanical, dry land world filled with the latest scientific and technological innovations, but inside their homes the Japanese are completely Japanese, they keep their living habits and traditions alive; in the shops, markets and restaurants they might behave like the Americans, but their tea-ceremony or their drinking sake are still rooted in ancient traditions, they are still fascinated by their own people, forests, mountains, fields, clouds, snow, cherry blossoms, they preserve all these feelings with the warmth of their hearts. The Germans...And it is only because they have this self-esteem, this pride, this love for their own world, that these people can keep their heads high and speak at international platforms about universal love and brotherhood. It is

because they have this love for their country that they do not imitate others even if they imitate others – they take only the good and try to fit it in with what is their own. And love for one's land brings with it a pride about the good things that are one's own, enthusiasm, enterprise, desire to work harder, and the faith in the traditions and in the rules and regulations that enable our land to move forward in a disciplined manner. They know that the laws of their land protect their own interests, brings security and that is why in developed countries, everyone trusts in the 'rule of the law'. (This we do not have at all, because our laws shield the guilty, so not one has any faith in laws or rules, everyone tries to live the best they can by breaking rules, or by cheating – mainly because of greed, need to make money, and the complete absence of any love for the land they call their own.) One night, when I was in London, I was returning home by car with a British gentleman. He was driving quite fast but then had to stop at a traffic light which had turned red. It was quite late in the night, there was nobody to be seen anywhere, no police, no other cars. I said, 'There is nobody around, we could keep going.' The gentleman replied, 'Oh no, a rule is a rule, you know,' and kept waiting till the light turned yellow and then green. While in Germany, I once boarded a train with a German friend of mine. We were roughly of the same age; we were going to a place about half an hour away. I saw that we were the only two passengers in our cabin. I felt like smoking, I took out a cigarette and was about to light it when my friend told me, 'This is a no-smoking cabin'. In other words, smoking is prohibited in this cabin. He pointed towards a sign that was put on the wall behind me, '*Nichtraucher*' (non-smoker). I did not light my cigarette, but told him 'Yes, that is so, but still, this train will not stop anywhere before another half an hour, no train personnel will come this way, no other passengers will get on – my cigarette will be finished in 10 minutes, I might as well smoke, I really want to.' My friend looked rather surprised but thought it over (perhaps he had never encountered the Indian cheating mentality before), he then put his hand on the sign and tried to pull it; it got dislodged, he turned it over. On the other side was written, '*Raucher*' (smoker). My friend then put the sign back in its place with the side showing '*Raucher*', and told me, 'Yes, you can smoke now.' (I was a young man then, too young to be ashamed of myself or my behavior.)

After coming out of the library of Göttingen University I followed the turning of the road to reach the narrow 'Arcade' with a few shops, sitting somewhere there I would have a cup of coffee, then go into a nearby shop to look for tobacco and the tobacco-paper (that means 'mixture' and 'mixture-paper'), to reduce the expenses on cigarettes I am trying to smoke cigarettes that I roll out myself. Just next door to this is a small cycle shop, through the glass one could see a few bicycles, tricycles, bicycle pumps, wheels, saddles, and other accessories (at the back is a room that looks like a workshop, a young mechanic is seen pottering around there doing something, turning a screw, welding something, and such like), I look at the bicycles, I quite like a red bicycle with gears (I had not seen cycles with gears in Assam before), I look at the price-tag and realize that it was beyond my reach. I go away. But sometimes it starts to rain quite hard, then I am forced to stop, I stand in front of the glass-window of the shop, roll a cigarette and keep looking at the bicycle. The owner of the shop comes out (the shop does not have many customers) and stands next to me – middle aged, medium size, balding, bespectacled – "Eh, what a bad time to start raining. It won't stop in a hurry. I also wanted to go out." He starts his conversation in this manner with a few such assorted words. Later when I would stand in front of his shop, he would

come out and greet me. ‘How is it going? Hope all is well. Student?’ (Göttingen is a small university-town. Whenever they see new faces, the residents assume that they are university students.) What subject? Oh, Physics. From where are you? India? Yes, I had guessed correctly that you must be an Indian, of course I often mix up Indians and Iranians, but seeing you I had a feeling that no, you are not Iranian, what is your name, if you don’t mind? (I am Diederich, Walter Diederich) Nice to meet you – I read a little about India here and there.

In this manner, Herr Diederich asks me questions about India every now and then – Nehru-Gandhi, holy cow (*Heilige Kuh*) and monkeys – I heard that Hindus pray to them, is that true? Varanasi and the holy river Ganges (Ganges? I say, Oh, Ganga – it is not his fault, he has read the name as Ganges and has pronounced it accordingly) – Delhi and New-Delhi, what is the difference? Have I seen the Himalayas, its snow-laden peaks? The Taj Mahal in Agra? (One day he mixed things up and also asked me about the Pyramids – “Oh, I am sorry, of course the Pyramids are in Egypt.”) How are you liking your stay here? Quite a lot, I told him. He said, “I am sure you like being here, the simple people of our little town and its friendly atmosphere makes everyone happy – you probably know that the latest designs of cars are created in the research labs of this town, but our people prefer to walk – no unnecessary hurry, no crowded confusion, but there is love in the atmosphere, friendliness, life (I was reminded that in the Ratskeller (Town Hall cellar) the thoughts of the students are written: ‘There is no life outside Göttingen’ (*Extra Göttingen non est vita*). In this little pretty village enclosed with forests and plants needed for scientific research, are also industries producing optical instruments and micro-instruments that individuals have established through their own sweat and toil. One of the best theater houses ‘Deutsches Theater’. The university is more than two hundred years old¹ and can boast of several world renowned scholars and scientists, but even they behave in a most normal manner, without any affectation. Many Nobel laureates work at the university; hundreds of students come from around the world with lots of hope and enthusiasm to study here; their youth and activity keeps the city alive and throbbing with their *Joie de vivre* – very well, where do you stay?

I replied. Beyond the railway station, across the river Laine, at the other end of town – almost village but the room is cheap and also very convenient – the nearest bus stop is only about 300 metres away—from there to the Weenderstrasse in the city centre takes another half an hour – quite some time is used up – quite some money is also used up in travelling up and down – I am thinking of buying myself a monthly card.

“I suppose you cycle? (Of course.) Then why don’t you do one thing – why don’t you buy a bicycle? Our university students all move around with bikes, then you have no hassle with buses, there are also no expenses, you can wherever you wish whenever you want to, no problem with parking etc. and what more should I tell you – cycling does not cause any pollution, it is also good exercise, the body remains fit...”

¹ Göttingen University was founded in 1737 (added by the translator)

“Yes, I also think sometimes about buying a bicycle – what you say is correct – many of my acquaintances move about with bikes – but it costs a lot of money to buy a new bicycle, I cannot afford it.”

“You can make do even without a new bicycle – of course I do not sell used bicycles, but I do know some people who do, if you wish...”

“No, I do not have faith in second hand things. If I ever buy a bicycle, it will be a new one, someday.”

“Why someday? You can have one now. I can give you one at very easy instalments, you will not feel the pinch.”

I live in the world of my thoughts, sometimes I get quite fed up with his chatter, I go away hurriedly. Today also I was rather impatient, I said, “No, that will not do, how will I keep reminding myself of instalments all the time, moreover I am not sure how much longer I will stay here – no, someday when I can afford it, I will buy one.”

But Herr Diederich was insistent, said, “What is the amount you can afford? I mean, what is your upper limit?”

This time I was really annoyed, I had no interest whatsoever in continuing this discussion about bicycles, but the gentleman doesn't seem to understand, I told myself that I could stop this discussion by giving him an absurd, ridiculous answer, I replied, “Something like, say 10 marks.”

[I have seen the price tags on the bicycles in the shop – I guessed that the price of the cheapest and most ordinary model would be close to a 100 marks, the price of the more fancy ones with gears and other accessories go up quickly in steps of 50-100 marks, at that time, as far as I can remember, the exchange rate was 100 rupees for almost 88 marks, that is, 1 mark was equivalent to about 1 rupee 14 paisa (something like that).]

“Ten marks!” Herr Diederich stopped, putting his hand on his chin he looked at me, “Ten Marks?” A smile appeared on his face, he said, “Wow, you know how to be funny...”

“That was not a joke,” I answered sternly, “Ten marks. Okay, Good bye (*Auf Wiedersehen*/ Till we meet again),” I walked away giving him no chance to respond.

I was a little unhappy after getting back to my room -- did I misbehave with the gentleman? So the next day I went back to his shop (although that day I did not need to buy any tobacco). I saw that no, Herr Diederich smiled at seeing me and called out, “Hello Herr X, *Guten Tag* (Good Day), do come in.” He took me inside and made me sit down, and said, “I have thought about your proposal in the meanwhile, it can be done, I can give you a bicycle for 10 marks.”

“What? This time it looks as if it is your turn to be funny.”

“No, no, it is not a joke, I am speaking seriously. Of course we can take the whole thing to be a joke – a comedy, once in a while it is also good to play a comedy, what do you say?”

Saying this he explained to me his plan in detail. He had tried to figure out if it was actually possible to construct a bicycle with ten marks. He felt that it was not entirely impossible, he remembered that there were many old parts of many bicycles in his workshop, frame, wheels, handle, chain, break, nuts and bolts – all those things will never be put to any use, they were just lying in the rubbish heap waiting to be disposed off (he had thought he would sell them as metal) – he had more or less all that was required to construct a bicycle, perhaps he would have to buy one or two small things – yes, he thinks in all he would be able to manage within ten marks – he and Hans (his apprentice) could construct a bicycle that would work within that amount, of course it won't be a very comfortable and smooth vehicle, but "You are a young man. You do not need comfort. You will get used to it in a couple of days."

I was stunned, said, "Many thanks, Herr Diederich, really many thanks, but you must have understood, I was only joking. I had not expected that you would take so much trouble just for such a silly jest of mine."

"No, no, it is nothing like that," Herr Diederich replied in a happy tone. "The thing is like this – you see Herr X, you have come from very far away to our university, it is a matter of great joy for us, students come from all over the world to our university – these students are our welcome guests, they come and go back carrying nice memories of Göttingen, you have also come, we wish that good memories of Göttingen also remain in your mind – you are looking for a bike within ten marks, Göttingen should be able to give you that."

He continued that he had no doubt that even without this bicycle I would never forget about Göttingen, because our city is small but beautiful, its weather is good and its natural beauty is very charming, "Have I been to the outskirts of the city? With the bike you will also be able to go to those places – you will see, you will like it very much." Göttingen is singularly beautiful, many hued trees and plants, flowers and birds, gurgling brooks, wide open fields, clean air, open sky, picturesque small villages and towns, farmers huts, here and there a few schools....

All that is true, I said. I have gone a few times to the neighbouring countryside with my friends, it is really very beautiful – of course (I could not stop adding) from where I come, Guwahati, the capital of the state called Assam in India, Guwahati is also a very pretty city, actually the whole of Assam is incredibly beautiful – of course Göttingen is also pretty, but in a different way. "Yes, that must be certainly true," Herr Diederich responded, "*Das kann ich wohl glauben* (I can well believe that)," I have also read that the natural landscape of India is incomparable.

Anyway (he said) he would try to keep the cost of constructing the cycle to ten marks – but a few things will certainly need to be bought, for instance, although he could use old tyres he would need to change the tubes – perhaps the cost will cross the ten mark limit because of a certain essential thing – I hope you will consider it to be something that you bought at your own fancy – "how much more?"

"One mark."

"One mark? Of course, that is not a big deal. Whether it is ten marks or eleven does not make any difference, but what is the extra thing?"

“A very ordinary thing. I mean, the cycle will work even without it, but I do not want to give the cycle to you without it.”

“Really, what is it, please tell me?”

“You will come to know, just have some patience.”

I waited patiently. (In any case I was in no hurry.) I did not go that side for a couple of days. Then one day I went and saw that my ‘hybrid’ cycle was ready – one could not make out that it had been made out of parts from assorted places – of course as Herr Diederich had already mentioned, the bike was not much to look at, but functional, and as he had also mentioned, not too comfortable, it had a couple of small defects, two teeth of the chain-wheel had got blunted with use, so the chain got stuck there at times before freeing itself – but as he also said, for young men a couple of such little problems were not worth mentioning.

“Here then is the first bicycle of your Göttingen model – we can christen it V-I, for *Vielerlei Eins* (Many-in-one One) and this is its symbol.

Just below the handle was fixed a shiny new letter – the letter G written in the Gothic script – that was the symbol of Göttingen, it is drawn on the bodies of all the city buses, many residents stick such a G also onto their cars.

“This I did not have with me. I had to find and buy a letter G to match with this V-I bike of ours – as I told you, the cycle would have worked also without it, but when you will ride this bicycle, people will see it, your friends will see it, and ask you, from where did you buy it? Then you will be able to reply, Made in Göttingen.”

I do not know what happened to the bicycle later – whether it just broke down or I gave it away to someone or sold it, or left it somewhere on leaving Germany, I do not remember that – it is from a long time ago. But I still believe that even today people of Göttingen say, “Our Göttingen is very beautiful.” (Although the anti-culture of so-called globalization and commercialization has certainly touched the Göttingen of today). On the other hand, we have, with utter indifference, left our pretty and lovely Guwahati to transform into a soulless, loud, dirty, and ugly foul-smelling concrete jungle, today I will not be able to say as I told Herr Diederich that day “Our Guwahati is also beautiful.”

(Translated from the Assamese original with the same title by Meenaxi Barkotoki)

[Published in the *Journal for Literature and Cultural Studies*, Vol V, Issue 1, June 2018. Pp 270-281.]