

# Redesigning our streets and cities

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# DECCAN HERALD



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We need a social life and an outdoor life for our mental and physical health. As we edge close to the third month of COVID-19 restrictions on movement, it is important to think long-term. What does this virus, which seems to be digging in for the long haul, mean to the future of outdoor life in Indian cities?

Across the globe, people are walking more, and reducing movement in cars. Public transport is shut down in many cities. Where open, there are safety constraints. The majority of people in Indian cities have always used more sustainable modes of transport. But these large numbers of walkers and cyclists have remained invisible to many of us who only see the traffic jams on roads.

In the first few weeks of the lockdown, we saw, all too briefly, a new world emerge. A world with bird song, butterflies in motion, clear skies, and stars sparkling at night. But this new world came at a terrible cost: a cost that continues to be extracted from the poorest of the poor. Hunger and desperation stalked the streets during lockdown, as people lost their jobs. Migrant workers, including just-born babies and venerable citizens in their eighties, were reduced to walking hundreds of kilometres home, several dying on the way.

We must learn from the terrible cost that this crisis has inflicted, understanding that our cities are built on the blood, sweat, tears and sufferings of the men, women and children who toil with little recompense. How can we redesign our cities to make them livable places for all its residents?

We need to creatively re-imagine our cities. An important aspect of this re-imagination is to reclaim our streets for walking and cycling. Just as the Bus Rapid Transport lanes on the Outer Ring Road reduced bus travel times, we need wider pavements, and well-protected cycle lanes to help walkers and cyclists speed past the car, moving those who have shorter distances to travel towards cheaper, healthier ways of transport.

Many cities in the world are beginning to put the necessary policies in place. Paris plans to expand its cycling lanes by 650 km, testing out temporary “pop-up” lanes to see which ones are most preferred by cyclists, eventually making those permanent. Milan is expanding pedestrian and cycling paths on 35 km of congested inner-city roads.

It's not just the wealthy cities that are working on such plans. In Bogota, the capital city of Colombia, 120 km have been closed off to motorised traffic and kept for walking and cycling – expanding a pre-existing programme called “la Ciclovía”. Mexico City is working on similar initiatives. When a city as large and congested as Mexico City, or one with crime levels as high as Bogota, can think of urban innovation, surely Bengaluru should be able to do the same.

Previous surveys find that one-third of Bengaluru's working residents walk and cycle to work, while 28% take the bus. Only 33% use cars and scooters. Bengaluru's Bicycle Mayor has asked for 193 stretches of road, especially in the areas hardest hit by COVID-19, to be cordoned off exclusively for cycling and walking. High-end cycle shops report a doubling in the number of people visiting their stores recently. At a time like this, why is Bengaluru pinning its hopes for post-COVID economic recovery on liquor stores, gyms and spas?

“Of course, we want to reopen the economy, but we think we should do it on a different basis from before,” the deputy mayor of Milan said in a recent interview. Can we not find in us the resources, creativity and imagination to do the same?

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