

“Dear sisters and brothers,

I am pleased to inaugurate this International Webinar on Promoting Cycling in Post-Covid World and share my thoughts with all of you. The theme of this webinar is not only timely but quite important too as there is a need for collective global efforts to make this planet greener and safer.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken and stirred the world like nothing else in recent decades. An increasingly consumerist-driven and fast-paced world has been stopped in its tracks. The pandemic has drastically affected the lifestyle as well as the outlook of everybody and brought unprecedented changes in our lives.

The pandemic has changed the way we live, buy, utilize our time and commute. Restrictions in many cities across the world have resulted in a reduction of motorized traffic and an increase in people choosing to walk or ride bicycles to avoid crowded public transport and follow health authorities’ advice for physical distancing.

Dear sisters and brothers,

As you all are aware, cycling is a healthy, low-cost exercise that can be enjoyed by people of all ages-- from young children to older adults. It is good for the environment. Riding a bicycle regularly is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of health problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle. Cycling promotes both physical and mental health.

Rising income levels, absence of safe cycling infrastructure, and increased affordability of motorized vehicles (especially two-wheelers) are the major factors that have led to a decline in the use of bicycles. Specifically, in cities, short-distance trips which can be undertaken by bicycles, are now being made by cars and two-wheelers.

Ironically, the pandemic has provided us with a rare opportunity to promote the use of cycling and integrate this non-polluting mode of commuting into the urban transport system. This is the time for urban planners and policymakers to have a re-look at their plans and policies and earmark exclusive cycling tracks.

I am told that many urban cycling networks have seen a surge in traffic in Europe, China and the USA. In fact, several major cities have already seized that momentum to advance their urban sustainability agenda.

There is a huge potential for promoting cycling in India and I am glad that the Government of India is trying to remove barriers to encourage cycling culture in cities across India.

Cycling is, and has been, a major mode of mobility in India. Traffic surveys show that cycle trips account for more than 15% of trips in most towns, and even in a large city such as Delhi, cycling accounts for over 10% of trips in the city. This is largely because bicycles play a major role in enabling the livelihoods of the urban poor by providing a cost-effective transport option.

Cycling provides several benefits in the form of zero dependence on energy sources, zero pollution, and improved health. Additionally, bicycles can provide critical support to the urban and rural poor who do not have access to the basic mobility.

In the wake of the pandemic, the humble cycle is emerging as a viable solution not only because it would keep people away from crowded public transport but also because it would help us retain some environmental gains made during the lockdown.

Large-scale substitution of motorized private transport by cycling can reduce noise pollution, improve road safety and will also help in addressing the increasing energy import bill.

A recent study estimated that use of bicycles in place of two-and four-wheelers for short-distance trips in India can result in an annual benefit of USD 24.3 billion. However, the absence of a cycling ecosystem is preventing it from becoming the preferred mobility solution for all sections of society

Therefore, there is an imperative need to promote cycling by providing the necessary cycling infrastructure.

I am told that many bicycle enthusiasts are taking to cycling to ward off the loneliness and claustrophobia that came with the Covid lockdown. I am happy to learn that there has been a 300-600 percent spike in the sale of cycles since strict lockdowns were lifted in the country.

As workplaces start reopening, some are choosing cycles to avoid public transport, while others are using them to improve fitness levels. People are now environment conscious and they know cycling leaves zero carbon footprint.

As most of the urban trips are less than five kilometers, this is the right time to promote Non-Motorized Transport as it requires low cost, less human resource and is scalable and environment-friendly. We need to transform cycling as a healthy option rather than a notion that it is a poor man's vehicle. We need to create a mass movement in this regard with rigorous awareness campaigns and regular promotional events to encourage cycling.

Our responses to the COVID-19 crisis are already showing how the new normal can be more resilient, inclusive and sustainable. We have to ensure that the post-COVID world is greener and more resilient. We have to transform our cities into liveable and breathable cities.

Under the Smart Cities Mission, 100 Smart Cities are required to develop cycling infrastructure. This is going to provide a boost to cycling in India.

Cycles4Change Challenge:

I am also happy to note that 'Cycles4Change Challenge',

an initiative of the Smart Cities Mission, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, in partnership with Fit India Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission has been launched to inspire and support Indian cities to quickly implement cycling-friendly initiatives. They will be encouraged to create extensive cycling-networks using low-cost methods like pop-up cycle lanes, non-motorised zones and set up community-led cycle rental schemes.

The Challenge aims to inspire a nation-wide transformation with an ambitious vision of creating over 10,000 kilometres of attractive cycling infrastructure and adding 100 million new cycles to our cities and to make cycles accessible to every citizen. I am happy that 107 cities—including all 100 Smart Cities— from across the country have registered for the Challenge and are set to create a cycling revolution.

I feel that cities should plan city-wide bicycle-sharing schemes, implement Public Bike Sharing systems near transit stations, bus stops and other public spaces, create a mechanism for the carbon credit system to benefit cyclists and promote E Bicycles.

Let us all be prepared to ward off any pandemic threat in the future by increasing our immunity and making healthy lifestyle choices now. Let us build a safer, cleaner and healthier world.
