

THE DREAM RUN

I was always attracted by the hills. Trips to Nepal, Ooty, Darjeeling and Gangtok with my parents at a very young age left some unclear vision in my mind of the hills and mountains. Subsequently, at later years, trekking escapades to Sandakphu, Har-Ke-Dun etc. with my brother, sister and friends made my attraction towards mountains more pronounced. Then, my next love affair started with the bikes when I possessed my first ever Enfield Bullet Std. 350. With it came unusual mobility to move around at a relatively cheaper cost.

In short span of becoming a member of The Saturday Club Kolkata, I met two of my good friends, Indrajeet Sen and his elder brother Hero Sen, who were equally passionate about riding their Royal Enfields. They were the ones who had, by then already started a close knit association of Bullet lovers in Kolkata, called '**EASTERN BULLS**' which happens to be the only known registered club of Enfield owners in the city. Now it boasts of about 80 odd members aimed at helping each other to maintain their bikes and at the same time provide help to the members in any other way possible to solve any specific problem.

Idea of undertaking a long and grueling trip to Ladakh and back on bullets was mooted during one of our discussions in late 2005. We needed time to organize it well as we knew it required meticulous planning and above all arranging finance. In the meantime Indra (Indrajeet) being a veteran of all India tour already at a very young age of 22, got in touch with a similar organization in Chandigarh and thus made it possible for us to seek assistance during such an arduous journey. After a great deal of efforts, **Castrol India** came forward to help us out financially. Obviously, we are extremely grateful to Castrol for being such a sport and do realize nothing would have been possible without their timely help.

Schedules and logistics were drawn out and final arrangements made to start from Kolkata around early July 2006 to beat the onset of heavy monsoon. Finally the D-day arrived and we were flagged off from in front of the famous Victoria Memorial on 2nd July 2006 at around 9am by the GM of Castrol India. Initial plan was that a group of four of us would join the trip comprising **Subro Pratim Dutta, Srikant Banerjee, Indrajit Sen**, and I, **Arijit Bhattacharya**. Despite all efforts put in by our friend **Indra**, unfortunately he had to drop out at the eleventh hour because of some domestic compulsion. Even then he gave us the company by riding with us on that day till Burdwan and returned. This was a big psychological setback for us. Eventually, three of us who undertook the whole journey were my other good friends **Subro Pratim Dutta** an engineer by profession, **Srikanth Banerjee**, a businessman, and **myself**.

Our first halt after leaving Kolkata was at **Topchachi** near Dhanbad, Jharkhand. We covered around 350 KM to reach there by dusk. Despite dismal road conditions we encountered on the way we made it to **Allahabad** at 3rd July and then Kanpur covering almost 1000KM, thanks to Castrol Active 4T 20W50 which did a marvelous job and kept us in good spirit all through. At Kanpur we were met by Castrol's representative and also attended a Mechanics' meet there to learn more about the efficacy of the new formulation of **Castrol Active 4T 20W 50** oil. Then after further loss of time following two minor punctures, we drove in to **Karnal**, Haryana on July 5 and by mid day on July 6 we reached **Chandigarh** and lodged ourselves in a guest house there. So far the journey was uneventful with the exception of a few minor mishaps. At Chandigarh we

were received warmly by the members of a club called Road Survivors, formed by the local Bullet enthusiasts. We were overwhelmed by their hospitality. They also helped us in getting our bikes repaired and serviced for the next phase of our impending mountainous journey and wished us luck.

The very next day we bade them good-bye and preceded towards **Manali**, one of our prized destinations. We were delighted to find the roads to Manali were as good as any. We broke our journey in Manali for some rest and site seeing for a couple of days. We visited the famous Vashist Temple, took bath in hot spring to refresh ourselves. After two nights of rest and recharging ourselves we made our way towards **Leh**, the capital of Cold Desert- Ladakh. In between, on our way we spent a night each at **Jispa** and **Pang**, two picturesque locations at high altitude. On the way to Pang we crossed two important milestones Rothang Pass (the land of the dead) and Barlachla Pass at 4000m and 4590m respectively. What made our journey more memorable was the rugged beauty of the region, river crossings and water falls. All this hardly compensated for the miserable battered roads which took a heavy toll on our bodies and bikes. Pang was a barren place, bitterly cold and food was hardly edible, because of the nature of cooking by the locals without spices and salts. Moreover, the night was spent in a top exposed tent in freezing cold as this was the only place available for us to stay at Pang. We could hardly get a wink of sleep. The road from Pang to Ladakh at the start was much improved however.

We went through plain fields with mountains on both the sides. It stretched for miles. After the eventful sleepless night at Pang again our luck ran out. This time we had to ride through more terrible stretches to reach the second highest pass on Earth, the Tangalangla Pass at 17500ft. Our joy knew no bound but was somewhat short lived because of the lack of oxygen and seemed as the most distressful of the ride of all so far. Less air at that altitude and tired bodies due to little rest, it turned to be most unpleasant experience for us all. After conquering the TangalangLa, on the way we crossed small villages Upshi and Karu. At Karu we came across an Indian Army base. Once at Karu we breathed a sigh of relief and regained our rhythm and composure after some rest and reasonably good food. We landed at **Leh**, the capital city of **Ladakh**, at 11500ft. Leh was mild in comparison. The temperature was comfortable and pleasant. We were delighted to find Juma the so called best Enfield mechanic in Leh. We finally got our bikes thoroughly checked there. After three grueling days of rough riding we tasted some good food at Leh for a change. That very day we secured our permits from the Dm's office to visit Nubra valley and Pangong Lake which we were looking forward to for long. Next day, we left in early hours of the morning for **the highest motorable road in the World, the Khardungla Pass situated at 18380ft**. We were very lucky to encounter a small amount of snowfall, though it was very cold out there. The view was breathtaking with the snowcapped mountains all around. We had coffee at the Army canteen, took some pictures at the locations and were ready to proceed to **Nubra Valley**. Then as bad luck would have it, my bike started giving trouble. We knew that it would be rather a risk job to take my bike along to Nubra and therefore after consulting Subroda and Srikanth, we decided to quit Nubra Valley and return to Leh and got the bikes thoroughly checked by Juma again. We were explained that the valve was not working to the fullest and hence total compression was failing. Though we were little bit disheartened about not making to Nubra Valley we were very excited and exulted by conquering the Highest Motorable Road in the World, KhardungLa, which is said to be among the 10 toughest stretch of roads in the world. On the 15th we left for the renowned **Pangong Tso (lake)**, bordering China some 150km from Leh. There also we had to cross a very tough road over ChangLa (third highest Pass in the World), at 17000ft. While going to Pangong lake we unfortunately met with a small accident

though it could have been much worse. Subroda while riding down to a crossing, gone for panic braking seeing a BRO truck standing in the middle of the road. As a result, he skidded on loose sand and toppled rather badly and Srikanth, following just behind also could not control his speed hit Subroda's bike and then rammed against the BRO truck. We thanked the almighty that nobody got that hurt except a few bruises and small damages. We reached Pangong lake around 3pm on the same day. The place was awesome, a huge lake like this in the middle of the Himalayas at 14000ft surrounded by mountains. The Lake itself is 130km long of which $\frac{1}{4}$ is in India and $\frac{3}{4}$ is in Tibet. We learned from the locals that the water of the lake on our side is saline while it is sweet on the side of Tibet, China. The colour of the lake was bluish green and the colour changed at night and dawn from deep blue to orangish respectively. We spent the night at Pangong Lake. The night sky was magnificent. Brightly starlit clear sky was a sight to remember. On the 16th we returned to Leh. The road on our way back from Pangong Tso was the toughest of the whole journey considering appalling conditions of it and its inclinations. Before reaching ChangLa, we had to climb four of five steep 45 degree or more inclined passes where even 500 cc Bullet had a tough time climbing. Srikanth and myself with Std. 350cc at times had to climb down from the bike and push it up the hill on 1st gear to reduce our effort.

We stayed at Leh overnight. Next morning we decided to head back home through **Kargil** and **Drass**. Drass in Kashmir apparently is the second coldest inhabited place on Earth. On 9th January 2005, we believe it had recorded -60 degrees, yet surprisingly it was mild on that very day, so much so that to prove the point Srikanth took a bath in cold water. We were, however, disappointed having to stay the night at Drass as the food was bad to say the least and had to retire to bed hungry. From Kargil onwards we were happy to see Indian Army Jawans in full battle gear protecting our country. We also had chances to mingle with some of the Jawans. They were particularly happy to learn that we undertook this arduous journey on bikes all the way from Kolkata. The very next day on July 18th we left Drass early to go to **Patnitop**, but sadly just after leaving Drass I experienced a flat tyre because of a sharp stone cutting into it. It took us 2-3 hours to get it repaired from some 8-9 km away. While we went about trying to repair the tyre, Subroda stayed back to take some shots with his camera. We got the tyre fixed and carried on the journey. At Zozila Pass we got down from our bikes and had our license verified by Army Jawans. This place was rather unique in a way for us because it was a place from where we could watch Pakistan soldiers across the border and for this reason, as we understood it remains open from 3AM till 10.30AM only each day and after which nothing is permitted to pass.

The road was also a very narrow one. If an Army truck came along from the opposite direction we had to literally squeeze out our bodies towards the gorge at the point of crossing. Looking back this was one road which we dreaded most in our entire journey. We halted briefly at Sonmarg and enjoyed a proper lunch after quite sometime. This is a place famous for its picturesque view and greenery. As we were late in starting from Drass because of the tyre mishap, we reached Patnitop late, after passing through Srinagar. As we were running out of time we had to skip riding the Shikara on Dal Lake but, nevertheless, we got a good number of snaps of the House-boats and the famous Dal Lake itself.

On the 19th early morning we left Patnitop for a long journey towards **Chandigarh**. We had our breakfast at Udampur. There we learned we could take another shortcut to Chandigarh whereby we did not have to cross Jammu and the distance would be considerably shorter. We took the route and were very happy to find roads were free from traffic except one or two Army vehicles once in a while. After riding around 140km or so we came across the famous **Ranjit Sagar Dam**. While crossing it we were held up by local police. We were ignorant of the fact that it was

a restricted defence area and as such were caught trespassing. They insisted on our going back 140km to take the original route. After great deal of pleading and checking our ID's and baggages they let us through. We rode via Pathankot and spent the night at a Motel just outside **Jallandar**.

The ride from Patnitop to Jallandar was really a hectic one, and sudden change in climate from moderate to extreme was very painful. The next morning on July 20th as we were about to get started for Delhi, we found that Subroda's tyre had a puncture again. We got it repaired from a nearby Petrolpump and rode down traveling almost 400km from Jallandar to reach **Delhi**. We booked ourselves at Yatri Niwas next to the New Delhi station. The night was calm and cozy at the Yatri Niwas with the AC running in full flow. The next day was a rather pathetic experience for us all. It was a herculean task to book three of our bikes on board the Rajdhani, in which we had also booked ourselves. On the 22nd July we finally reached Howrah at around 2pm where friends and family met us with petrol cans to fill up the tanks and to ride back home.

This was indeed a memorably adventurous journey which all of us enjoyed thoroughly. What was remarkable was the bond friendship and commanderie exhibited by one and all to overcome worst situation.

We must take this opportunity at this juncture to thank one and all who have helped us to make it possible- **all our friends, members of EasternBulls, Saturday Club, Chandigarh Bullet Club (Road Survivors) and above all Castrol India**, who have come forward to sponsor this **5000km** trip in **20 days**, a journey of a lifetime, encompassing rugged terrains in Himalayas, capped with stunning views and some adventurous mishaps. It was indeed a Dream Run to remember a life time.

Arijit Bhattacharya