

'Goa on a cycle' is a travelogue of two ordinary city strangers who come together with a dream of going to Goa on a cycle & finally accomplishing it!

This is also a scrap book that presents checklists, stages, logs and expenses incurred during the tour as a case study.

The idea of cycle touring was inspired for me after I read 'Ram Ram India' a travelogue of two British cyclists who traveled across the length of India on cycles. The first two chapters 'Two planets & a dream' & 'Greasy Hands' describe how I arrive at this idea & coincidentally meet Rishi, my partner during the tour! Then it describes the energetic inputs which shape the idea, planning, etc & eventually getting ready for the actual tour!

The first leg of the journey from Mumbai to Goa takes 6 days. The first day of the tour is described in 'On the road'. Then the tour progresses through 'Up the Ghat', 'Midway Celebrations', 'Catching up on Time', 'Black or White' & 'The Infinite Ramp'. Along with our journey I have described the land, the people, events, my thoughts, our physical conditions, the cycles & in a way also how I get to understand my partner who in way was also a complete stranger a few days before the tour.

The return leg of the tour begins in 'At Goa'. During the return leg we pass through the quiet villages along the coast where the momentum of the tour drops along with the quiet unhurried landscapes. The cycle tour takes a slightly emotional twist in 'Reddi' where we are forced to make an unexpected stopover. The journey terminates with 'The Greatest Irony' where I am faced with the irony of completing the balance journey in an overnight bus back to Mumbai. The travelogue ends with a small parah on the satisfaction of accomplishing this dream.

Rajneesh Gore



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For **Rishi**
Who reignited the flame of adventure in me...
Who let me be me...
and
To the spirit of adventure, which lies in every one of us

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About the Author

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Introduction Checklists

[A] Cycle

Service Cycle
Tyres: Nylon
Pedals
Axles
Cables (front & rear derailleur)
Gear Settings
Brakes
Brake Settings
Brake Pads (nylon)
Carrier
Small Mud Guards
Derailleur Guard
Dynamo
Reflectors (front & rear)
Water Can Carrier
Water Can
Flag
Seat Cover
Steel Rope Lock & Keys
Helmet

[B] Tool Kit (Common)

Screw Drivers
Spanners
Cycle Spanner
Hand Pump
Spare Valves
Cutter Blade
Rope
Adhesive Tape

Puncture Kit

Spanner (for removing tube)
Rubber Solution Tube
Tube Cuttings
File

Cycle Spares

Tube
Valves
Front Derailleur Cable
Rear Derailleur Cable
Brake Cables

[C] First Aid Kit (Common)

Cotton Roll
Bandage Rolls
Gauze Roll
Crape Bandage Roll
Knee cap
Band Aid Strips
Safety Pins
Medical Scissors
Blade

Medicines

Electrol
Iodex
Calendula (for wounds)
Cold Crème/ Vaseline
Crocin Tablets
Dettol
Gelucil Tablets

Vicks
Odomos

**[D] Clothing
Clothes (on the road)**

T-shirt
Cycle Shorts
Jock Strap
Brief
Hankie/Small Towel
Socks
Shoes
Watch
Cap/Helmet

Extras & Miscellaneous Items

Cotton Trousers (1)
T-shirt (1)
Spare Briefs (2)
Spare Jock Strap (1)
Spare Hankies (4)
Towel
Thermal T-shirt
Balaclava
Cotton Plugs
Mattresses for 2
Blanket/ Shawl
Torch
Plastic Bubble Wrap

[E] Sanitary Accessories

Face Wash/Soap
Shaving Crème
Shaving Brush
Shaving Blade
Body Deodorant
Brush

Paste
Comb

[F] Personal Accessories

Money
Contact Numbers
Camera
Walkman & Cassettes
Swiss Knife
Torch
Pen
Small Diary
Glasses/Specs
Glares
Papers
Maps
Diary
LAMY Pen

[G] Luggage

Small Handbag
Backpack
Waist Pouch

Rishi and I were sitting on the *diwan* in my room. My cycle lay parked in one corner. The rest of the floor was cluttered with all these items neatly arranged and sorted. I had already requested my folks not to enter the room since there was no floor space. All of these articles were to be accommodated in a small handbag, which would be tied to the carrier; the lighter stuff would be accommodated in a small backpack and a waist pouch. Even if Rishi was going to carry the toolkit, the task of packing was going to need a lot of patience. But this was just one of the tasks towards fulfilling our small dream. Mumbai to Goa on cycle! As Rishi and I set about the packing, my mind travelled back to when all of this had started.

My love affair with the cycle began as a child. Even today, I am riveted by the sight of kids cycling along a silent street on a sunny winter's morning, by their laughs and giggles as they try to keep up with each other in it, I can see my own past. The first liberating experience of riding your own vehicle, even if it's as simple as a cycle. As a youngster, cycling had always remained the most important of the many endless activities we indulged in to pass time during the vacations. The cycle had accompanied us from childhood to adolescence, sometimes even further. As we grew up, the cycling experience matured to an early morning fitness drill, a last desperate attempt to try and control a growing body from getting disproportionate. Over the years, the number of friends accompanying me on the early morning cycle sessions reduced until I was left alone with my cycle. But for me, it didn't matter; I had already formed a bond. For me, the charm of cycling was there to stay.

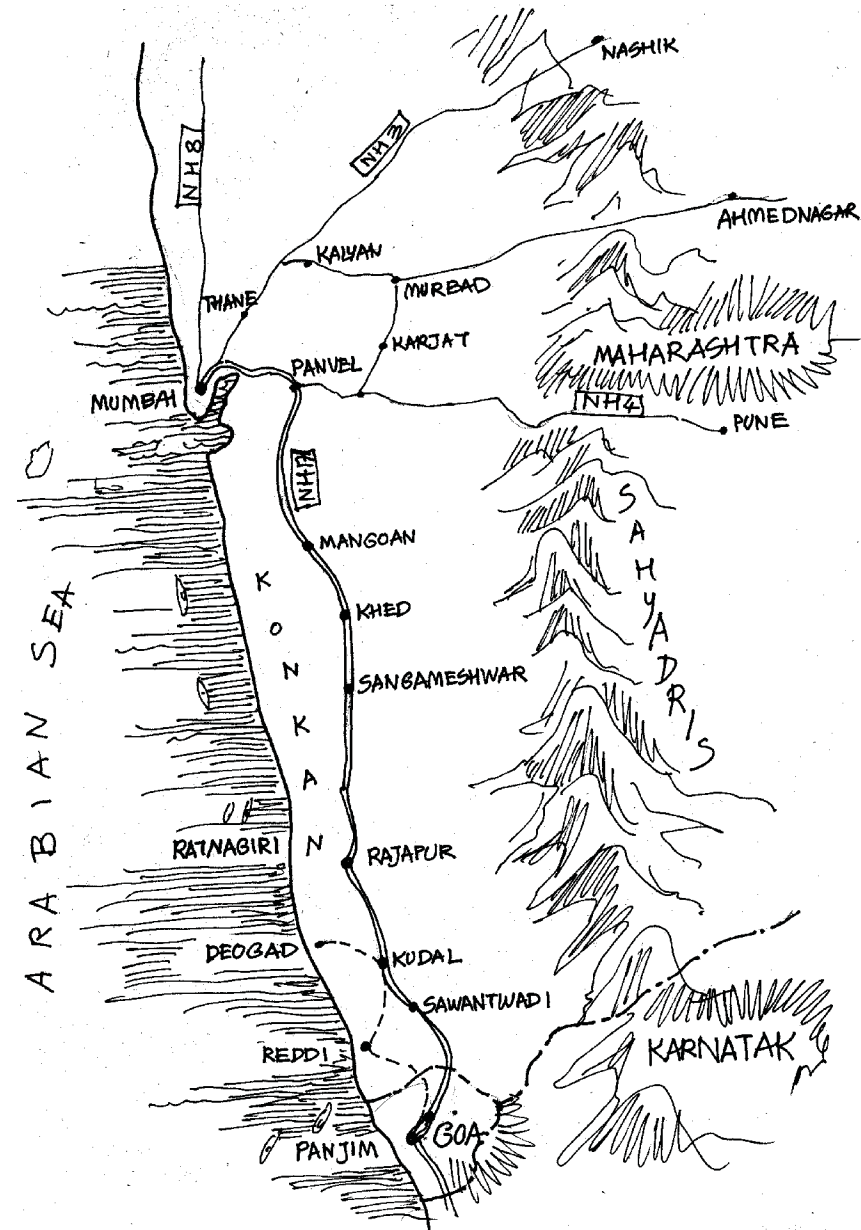
Tired with the routine cycling sessions, I wanted to try something new, spread my wings a bit. That's when I happened to read 'Ram Ram India' a travelogue by two British cyclists, Alex Thomson and Nick Rossiter, who travelled across the entire length of the Indian subcontinent from Kashmir to Kanyakumari on a cycle. It is amazing the way foreigners travel in distant lands, with wild abandon. Apart from this being just fun, it must have been so liberating. The average Indian mentality was exactly the

opposite. We generally like to stay put in one place and adventure is meant for 'crazy' people. I wanted to break free from this. There was a small lesson to be learnt in the book. I didn't want to prove anything to anyone; if at all, I wanted to satiate my craving for adventure all I had to do was let myself go! The book planted the seed.

It would have been very difficult to do something so grand, so I had to customise the cycle tour as per my specifications and limits. The idea to travel Mumbai-Goa came instinctively and needed no second thought. I knew that it was hardly anything compared to what the two British cyclists had done, but perhaps the spirit of adventure and the love for cycle touring was the same. Besides, Goa was one exotic destination that I had always dreamt of visiting!

As I looked at the map of Maharashtra, my gaze followed the two parallel lines connecting Mumbai and Goa National Highway No. 17, almost 600 km. I was familiar with the map and the highway, which passed through the picturesque region of the Konkan. Geographically speaking, the Konkan is a narrow strip of predominately coastal land sandwiched between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. This was the land of mangoes. I had my roots there and even as a child had travelled along this scenic highway many a times. I knew the potential of the two red lines representing the highway, and I smiled as I recollected the beautiful scenery. It had lots of areas that were ghats, with beautiful turns and bends set amidst a hilly terrain. Some sections passed through a canopy of trees, some had green paddy fields on either side, villages with houses made of laterite and sloping roofs, huddled together along hill slopes. Then of course there was the ever-present crest of the Sahyadris (the Western Ghats) on its east.

As I looked at the map, I just dreamt of the freedom and exhilaration I would experience when I silently pedalled along it. Previously, I had always travelled the highway in buses and cars and it had a beauty of its own, but it was always a cocooned experience. Driving down this scenic route on a cycle would mean getting an entirely new perspective. Besides,



if I compared the potential of a cycle with the distance to be covered, the scale was a bit intimidating, but that again was its beauty, its challenge and this is also where the adventure was!

The idea had taken birth; now it was time to give it shape.



Two Planets and a Dream

Coincidences shape our lives. That's what James Redfield and Carol Adrienne say in *The Celestine Prophecy*. Today when I think of how I met Rishi, that statement suddenly makes a lot of sense.

Rishi was my office colleague's husband's friend who just happened to join us on a routine office picnic. He is an avid trekker just like me and mountains fascinated both of us. During the picnic, we talked a lot about trekking in the Sahyadris. He briefly mentioned that he was into the league of cycle touring. At that time, the idea of cycling to Goa hadn't struck me yet, but because of my interest in cycling, I had made a mental note of what he had said. We parted ways after the picnic but strangely, his friendly, adventurous nature had already formed an invisible bond between us.

By the following year, I happened to read *Ram Ram India* and the idea of doing Goa on a cycle began brewing in my head. That's when I suddenly remembered Rishi. I called up my office colleague to get his contact. Coincidentally, at the same time, Rishi was trying to get in touch with me because he needed some trekking maps that he knew I had.

So we met again after a year and in no time I found myself sharing the idea with a complete stranger! I soon gathered that during the past year, even he had arrived at a similar proposition. He definitely had a lot more experience. Moreover, he knew a lot more about cycles and it was soon very obvious that I had a long way to go.

First and foremost, I had to buy a new cycle. Along with my mind, the cycle had to transcend from a heavy unyielding single speed BMX to a lean, swift ten-speed touring cycle. My existing BMX had to go. Rishi told me I would have killed myself if I had attempted Mumbai-Goa on that cycle. This was news to me! Rishi himself was the proud owner of a very battered light-weight ten-speed touring cycle. It was a custom-made version and was surprisingly fast.

Next came a joint trip to Metro Cycles in the older part of Mumbai. That visit just opened a whole new vista of cycles for me. It was a cycle

lover's heaven. It stocked mostly imported cycles fourteen-speed racers with a light weight tungsten carbide frame, fifteen-speed BMXes with tubular suspension and, of course, touring cycles. I chose a maroon-coloured, ten-speed touring cycle. It was a semi-light-weight version with steel frame and alloy rims. The nylon tyres were thin but sturdy, suitable for Indian ditches and roads! The cycle cost me a small fortune but I was in love with it.

As soon as it arrived, Rishi and I decided to take it out and test it on the roads and to let me have my first experience of cycling on the road. We did a one-day trip to Titwala, which is on the outskirts of Mumbai. By the end of the gruelling day, we had covered 140 km, and even though I could barely stand on my own feet at the end of it, I had enjoyed each and every moment of it. I'd had my first taste of adventure and I was craving for more. It was the end of the monsoon of 2000 and we scheduled the 'big one' for mid-winter, in January 2001. We had four months to practice and get in shape... especially me!

It was just a month after I re-met Rishi that I realised his friendship was opening a whole new world of adventure for me! He was a few years younger to me, with a very good physique. He had a certain jest and dynamism for living life to the fullest, which made me start admiring him. He was an easy friend and I soon found his company very addictive. The idea of cycling to Goa with him just added to the excitement. In no time, we two complete strangers had bonded into a two-man team!

We had our differences though but they only brought out the best in us. Sometimes, with arguments and a lot of boisterous verbal abuse; at other times, without any scene or protest. Our mentalities automatically governed the roles we would play in fulfilling our dream.

I am impatient and a silent nail biter. I think and worry too much about unimaginable things. That's probably why I was an architect. Planning was my profession and my favourite hobby. Thus, deciding the routes, making checklists, documenting the expenses, figuring out en route contacts and all the initial paperwork was my responsibility and I loved it.

Rishi on the other hand loathed planning but would just get excited by sensing the intensity behind it, despite barely understanding a bit of it. Nevertheless, he had the drive to push himself beyond his limits. In fact, later, I often found myself a hindrance to his drive. He had got a mind fit for an expedition and all he concentrated on was the goal and nothing else mattered. On the other hand, in the high fever of achieving goals, minor details were forgotten, backup plans were ignored and a great many things were just taken for granted. That's where I used to fill up the gaps in my own little ways.

Trekking was another common point of interest between Rishi and me. We both loved the mountains. We soon paired up as a team even on that front and headed into the mountains over weekends. Some treks were decided just a few hours before departure late Saturday night. It was as if overnight I had found a friend whom I had been waiting for to share adventure with. The Goa cycle tour was often the chief topic of discussion on these treks.

By early winter, we were both slowly gearing up for the tour. Then, suddenly, changes on the professional front hit both of us. I had to switch jobs and wrap up a fast-paced project in the next few months. Rishi got his first break in the merchant navy. He would be away for the next 10 months. The cycle tour had to wait till the next winter – an entire year. With heavy hearts, we bid each other farewell and changed gears to fight battles on our professional fronts. But we were not going to let the idea die that easily. For almost one year, Rishi and I remained apart, but in our minds, we were connected by one goal – Goa on a cycle! The subconscious mind kept the idea alive behind the usual mundane scenes of daily life. Rishi dreamt on his ship. I dreamt of it on site, in my office and at home. In all the letters that we wrote to each other, we'd reassure each other that Mumbai-Goa would happen the next winter when he returned.

I wish I could articulate how it felt to hold on to your wildest dream and pass time in silent anticipation of fulfilling it. I had told a few people about this trip. For many, it was just another one of my weird wishes or

whims whose origins would always remain obscure. Only a few people could actually comprehend the urge behind it. Rishi was one.

My preliminary estimate for this trip was ready even before Rishi decided to come back to Mumbai. Initially, it was planned for five days. Later, in a letter, Rishi mentioned a shipmate of his, Pranay Khatu. He lived at Kadvai, Sangameshwar, halfway en route, and wanted us to stay at his place when we did the tour. So I amended the estimate by extending the trip to six days. Now it would include the halt at Sangameshwar and also give me a time buffer to be able to rest well during the tour. The fifth night's stopover was scheduled at Mr. Pandit's place at Sawantwadi. He was a school friend's uncle who had come to know about our trip and had invited us to stopover en route to Goa. After reaching Goa, I had to honour one more invitation by the Salelkars, a college friend's relatives. Rishi and I had a lot of contacts in the Konkan and Goa region and would use them judiciously.

Before Rishi had left, he had handed over his cycle to me for regular use and maintenance. I had to put up with two cycles in the house since I could not risk parking them in the common cycle parking lot. This did cause much annoyance for my family, but I had no choice. I had managed to do a good job keeping the cycles in top condition. By the winter of 2001, I had wrapped up my project. Rishi also came back by the end of November that year and took possession of his cycle. The trip was now on.

Looking at the calendar, we decided to go on the tour just after New Year's Eve, in the first week of Jan 2002. By that time, Goa would be silent, empty of the New Year's crowd. Even the traffic on the highway would have reduced substantially. But prior to that, a trial was necessary. We had both been out of touch with long-distance cycling for a long time. Especially Rishi. Not that he actually needed the practice. We scheduled a two-day trial during Christmas.

The cycles were serviced, endless fine tunings were made. I had made a very rough estimate of our trial route and our timings at the various stopovers in between. Later that day, I would be shocked by its accuracy.

On day one, we had planned to cover 140 km. The route skirted along the crest of the Sahyadris, from Mumbai to Murbad via Karjat.

That morning, we left our homes at dawn. The feeling of riding a well-tuned cycle first thing in the morning and having a gut feel that the day ahead would be glorious, filled with adventure is too great to describe... and yet it's very calming!

En route from Mumbai to Panvel, we crossed the CBD Belapur node at 7:15 am, where we had the option of taking the flyover or crossing the intersection below the flyover. Here, I lagged behind. Rishi in the mean time progressed rapidly and took the flyover. I followed him but to save the effort of climbing the flyover, took the intersection below. When I didn't see Rishi at the other end, I was alarmed. I stopped and looked back towards the flyover. I could see Rishi waiting for me at the top of the flyover, almost 200 m away. Screaming wouldn't help since the traffic's din muffled my voice. So I waited patiently for His Highness to look my way. After a few moments, I noticed he was about to turn his bike around and retrace his tracks. I froze! Riding against the flow of traffic on a highway is not funny. But, thankfully, before actually executing the manoeuvre, he looked my way and saw me frantically waving my cap. When his mind finally registered my presence, he came down the ramp and then as usual we exchanged another bout of healthy unpleasantries.

At Panvel, we had a brief rest amidst the flock of tourists and travellers at the old junction where the Pune and Goa highways split.

When our appearance was juxtaposed with the rest of the crowd there, we suddenly stood out. As against their formal appearances, Rishi and I both displayed a very grubby, sporty look in tight T-shirts and pedal pushers. My imaginative mind had a vague feeling that we must either be looking vulgar or like run-away circus acrobats. This made me a bit conscious. To add to it were our gleaming cycles with their strange looking water cans. A curious eye couldn't help notice them and perhaps even admire them!

We parked our cycles next to a mad woman who was counting

nothing. Earlier that morning, I had tried to adjust the angle of my cycle stand and it had shattered to pieces as if it was glass. So my cycle had to be propped up against something else every time we stopped. We quietly ate our breakfast and made a move since the crowd got to us. We just abandoned that place to find a nicer, quieter tea stall. I looked at the road leading to Goa. A few days later, that is where we would start our most memorable cycle tour. We had waited for this for a long time and now it was happening.

We reached Karjat by 10:50 am and stopped at a *gola* cart. I was addicted to ice cream, even in its crudest forms. In remote areas, the hand made *gola* was a cheap and crude form of ice cream and I loved it just the same.

The *gola* vendor had set up his stall very strategically on a busy junction, but it had a crematorium as a backdrop and that too with an elevated view of the entire complex. Unfortunately, as we ate, a funeral party reached the place.

An old woman had passed away and there was a big crowd. I couldn't see. I didn't want to. I was on holiday and I was enjoying one of my favourite delicacies. Such things weren't supposed to happen to you on a holiday! Strangely, for a fraction, my mind was reminded of the young Buddha and his first traumatic experience of watching the old, sick and dying. I ruthlessly brushed aside the thoughts. My utterly selfish mind was not going to be affected by this! So I just looked in the other direction and ignored the existence of the crematorium and the happenings within. I didn't even see what Rishi was up to as I happily sucked on the *gola*. Even the *gola* vendor didn't look there. He had just opened shop for the day. I happened to be one of his first happy customers. He didn't want the evil vibrations from the crematorium to disrupt his business for the day. Considering his location, I couldn't help think about the irony though! Later, my craving satiated, we continued on the road to Murbad.

En route, we passed Kashele where we decided to stop for an afternoon meal after covering 95 km. We were doing very good on time,

but the sun was blazing by now and we were tired. We pulled over at a humble looking shop selling tea, *mithai* and other titbits; Ganesh Tea Stall' was its name if I remember correctly. As we settled ourselves at a table, curiosity got the better of the owner and he asked us from where we came. We said, "Mumbai". He just mechanically repeated the word 'Mumbai', and after a short pause, just closed his eyes in disbelief. We could almost see his mind accepting the information, processing it, making sense of it and then reacting. That was one reaction we will never forget.

That afternoon, we had our siesta on the outskirts of the village Kashele. Rishi and I entered a paddy field, parked our cycles and settled to rest peacefully below the shade of a palm tree.

We were both tired and Rishi instantly dozed off. All that mattered to him was that his body was tired and needed rest, so he had to sleep. Simple and clean. No complications.

I on the other hand was tired, wanted to rest but couldn't. I was so happy that the tour had finally begun that I didn't want to waste the time by just sleeping. This was my problem. I had a hyperactive mind. It never stopped thinking. It churned thoughts and feelings like cyclones and then mixed them up just for fun. The results weren't exactly pleasant. Rishi had also marked this mentality of mine and had asked me to take it easy just like he did. But it was difficult for me to accept how Rishi thought and his ability to act only on what was important, letting all else slide not worrying or thinking too much about things. I had admired him for this and wished I could master it, but then perhaps for me, the same thoughts had combined to give birth to such intense feelings that I would remember them for a long time to come.

This time, the mind's thoughts were working for the better. Here I was with nature, on the road, in the company of a good friend and I could see the mountains. This is where my heart truly belonged. Away from everything else that I am generally used to seeing. Away from the crowd, the people and the boring routines of an urban life. Here, I was free. I had waited for this for a long time and finally the reward was mine to enjoy

peace, tranquillity and adventure with a good friend. I am sure even Rishi felt the same peace, that's why he was sleeping soundly. I couldn't sleep. I wanted to savour that moment.

After the break, we were back on the road to Murbad by 3:15 pm. We passed through a few remote regions and a few bad road patches. Further up, there was this particular *ghat* with an acute hairpin. Here I dismounted from the cycle, but Rishi pulled on. I silently admired him as he did finally haul himself on his cycle by sheer brute force. Behind us came a loaded truck. At one point, Rishi steered zig-zag to get past that crucial point of ascent, failing which one must inevitably start again from the bottom. I walked up the patch and soothed my mind with the thought that this was the first time in the day when I hadn't been able to make it. But the Mumbai-Goa route had many such ascents. God alone knows how many times I would have to get off my cycle. And how many times I'd see my good friend make it painfully, yet achieve it. There is always a mixed sense of pride and dejection in something like this. Pride at the fact that at least he made it, and dejection that I sadly could not. But that's it. I had to accept the fact that those were my physical limits.

By evening, we reached Murbad. We planned to spend the night there. I was a bit low due to exhaustion and nervousness; we were far away from Mumbai. Rishi firmly believed that spending a night in a lodge was a sheer waste of money and I firmly believed that spending a cold night out on the road was absolute stupidity, especially after a long, gruelling day. I was drained out and needed a space I could call my own. I felt vulnerable. My natural craving for a secure material life had taken over. I had suddenly become very melancholy. In that gloom, I had forgotten the fact that we had finished those 140 km on time. Rishi reminded me about it. This was a good sign, he said. Though I was glad, till we found accommodation, I wouldn't feel happy. After a brief debate, I convinced Rishi that we needed to look at the option of an economical lodge. We took our chances at a local lodge called 'RK'. I inquired about a room. 150 for a night! That was fine; even Rishi agreed. My next unusual request took the man off guard. We

wanted our cycles inside the room. At first, he was confused and flatly refused. I just stood my ground and started to explain that we had come a long way on cycles and would be very grateful if he would oblige. Finally, his colleague who had seen us coming on our cycles and who seemed to be more open minded, happily permitted us to take our cycles up. My first triumph! Later, I would use this same policy to help get accommodation for us and our cycles again!

That night, we slept very peacefully. This was our first victory; the big one would follow soon! But the next day, I woke up with a heavy head and an aching body. I wondered how I would survive the big one.

We left the lodge by 8:15 am after breakfast and began our return leg of 100 km back to Mumbai via Kalyan. The 30 km long road up to Kalyan was full of pot holes. It took a lot of patience to avoid them or negotiate through them.

During the entire trial ride, I had gripped the handles very firmly as if I was sitting in a roller-coaster! That's why each and every minor vibration sent shock waves through my hands, resulting in aches and pains. I was afraid that I would not be up to the big one. As usual, Rishi had marked my folly. He advised me to grip the handles with ease so as to let the jolts be absorbed by the flexibility of my joints. That was one real good piece of advice. His other advice was to keep on waving at people or kids or just turn around and look back briefly while driving. That would avoid stiffening of the muscles. For Rishi, these things come naturally and hence he coped better. But that advice really helped me. Even I marked the difference flexibility made the next day.

By 10:00, we reached Kalyan and joined our old route from Titwala. The road where the story began of two crazy people brought together by an unusual dream of cycling to Goa. For me at least, it brought back the previous year.

At Kalyan, Rishi's cycle had a puncture. But since we were in the city, it was attended to immediately. Later, we went up to the Kalyan bifurcation on the Mumbai-Agra highway and stopped at a *dhaba*. It was

the same one where we had taken refuge from an unrelenting sun last year during Titwala. Very little had changed. The service was reassuringly slow and unpredictable. The place was unclean. The flooring was full of grease stains. I am sure the place had started as a garage.

On the highway, between the Kalyan bifurcation and Thane, my cycle reached its top speed. For a change, Rishi lagged behind. We bypassed Thane city and were soon on the road to Ghodbandar. A few minutes around noon, my rear tyre went flat. Even though we were in a town, all the cycle shops were closed for siestas and would open only by late afternoon. It meant a three-hour wait. So I asked Rishi to take out the puncture kit we were supposed to be carrying. Rishi very coolly told me that he wasn't carrying one. I thought we were prepared for the puncture since we were on trial. This was an eye opener and a small argument ensued. But since we were just 30 km away from Mumbai, I called a backup vehicle my father's car.

Soon we were heading back to Mumbai at 60 km per hour in the lap of luxury. The cycles were resting on the roof. We both conveniently declared that the trial was a success! In principle! Barring the puncture incident of course. We returned home full of anticipation and excitement for the big one but not before buying a good puncture kit!

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour Trial
December 24, 2001
Day 1: Mumbai to Murbad (via Karjat)

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	Comments
Kandivli	5:00 D	4:45 D	
Vile Parla	5:45 D	5:30 D	
CBD Belapur	7:00	7:15	
Kharghar		7:30	
Panvel	8:00	8:10 A 8:45 D	Breakfast
Chowk	10:00	9:40 A 10:15 D	
Karjat		10:50 A 11:45 D	<i>Gola</i> Break
Kashele		12:45 A 3:15 D	Ganesh Tea Stall Lunch & siesta From Kashede
		5:00 A 5:10 D	
Murbad	5:30 A	5:45 A	Distance covered: 140 km

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour Trial
December 25, 2001
Day 2: Murbad to Mumbai (via Kalyan)

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	Comments
Murbad	7:00 D	8:15 D	
Kalyan	9:00	10:05 A 10:40 D	Puncture repairs to Rishi's cycle
		11:00 A 11:30 D	Kalyan bypass on NH 4
		12:30	Trial aborted on Ghodbandar road. Tyre Puncture, Rajneesh's cycle
Mumbai	2:00 A		Distance covered: 58 km

Greasy Hands

The trial had been good and now we had a few days to go before the real thing. The tension was silent yet palpable. I had been preparing an innumerable number of checklists, keeping track of accounts and countless other details. Till now, Rishi just silently accepted all the papers and checklists that I handed over to him. Eventually, after the trial, he grudgingly took over this role. May be he thought that the right time for it had come now. The real surprise came when I found Rishi preparing his own checklist. Many of the items in his list were his own creations, which were all important and which I had not even taken into account.

The silent anticipation of such a tour cannot be described. All that paper work and planning done, finally it was just our cycles and us. We would be pushing ourselves to the limit, physically and mentally. Would all of that come together? That question bothered me constantly.

We both had our own individual mechanics attending to our cycles. Rishi's cycle's main problem was its rims. They were very old and slightly warped. They let the tyre rub against the fork near the pedal, thus causing a heavy drag. I suggested buying new rims. But it proved to be expensive, so Rishi and his mechanic cannibalised parts from one of the numerous other cycles that came in for repairs. The old rims were replaced by second-hand stainless steel rims. They were heavier but would suffice for the trip.

There was a small list of spares and other parts to be acquired from Metro, to be handed over to our respective mechanics. For that, Rishi and I made a trip to Metro one day.

Just two days of cycling during the trial had made our bums sore. So seat covers were bought for the long ride. Using Huggies was an option we both seriously considered but soon ruled out!

We also got new nylon tyres and tubes for Rishi's cycle. Later, we discovered a design flaw in the tyres, but it was too late by then. Right-side rear view mirrors had become crucial, which we had missed during the trial. They were small but very useful. 'Objects in the rear view mirror appear farther than they are'. To this statement I would also add, 'they are faster too'. After all, we would be doing at the most 20 km an hour while the average traffic on the highway would be four times faster and much heavier. Derailleur guards were also bought, just in case someone decided

to smash into the cycle at its weakest point. Rishi fitted a dynamo light on the front tyre of his cycle. He would get one for my cycle later.

The best thing he did was fit his cycle with a more efficient 14/32, 5-speed rear free wheel. The rear free wheel is composed of five concentrically arranged gears and mounted with the rear axle. The one with the smallest diameter has 14 teeth and the biggest has 32 teeth. Likewise, there are two gears mounted with the pedal axle a bigger one with 52 teeth and a smaller one with 40 teeth. The chain would pass from any one of these gears at either side. Depending on the road conditions, we would shift between these gears. On a straight, flat road, on which speed is essential, we would use the bigger gear (52) in the front and the smallest (14) at the rear. On the other hand, on ascents, we would reverse these settings by using the smaller gear (40) in the front and the biggest gear (32) at the rear. This reduced speed but increased climbing power. Now my cycle had a rear free wheel combination of 14/24, which meant that I would require more effort while ascending. Rishi's cycle with his newly fitted 32-toothed gear was going to have an easier time on ascents.

I was jealous! I argued that I needed one since I am heavier and slower on climbs. I was tired of always being overtaken when ascending. Rishi just smiled away wickedly. A free wheel with those specifications wasn't easily available and even he knew how lucky he had been in procuring it. Besides, Rishi had got it just four days before departure. Until then, I had been ignorant about the existence of such a thing. So I started my own frantic search for a similar free wheel at Metro. They had a six speed free wheel. I blindly decided to buy it after hearing the description on the phone and asked my father to fetch it. To my disappointment, it was 12/24. I had a free wheel of the same ratio already installed. So this new free wheel was of no use. I just fumed and finally accepted that I would have to rely on the existing 24-toothed gear for hauling myself and my loaded cycle up the *ghats*.

As Rishi pampered his own cycle, so did I. I had the tyres and tubes interchanged between the rear and the front to compensate for the puncture during the trial. I serviced the cycle again. Abdul, my mechanic, once again brought it in tune, except the derailleur settings the one major snag that still remained. The rear derailleur would fail to transfer the chain on the bigger gear on the rear free wheel because of a fault in the cable. Correcting this flaw became all the more crucial since it was this last gear

that I heavily rely on during ascents. If the 5th gear didn't work then I might as well forget about even attempting to climb the *ghats*. This flaw was detected just two days before departure. In spite of all attempts, Abdul couldn't mend it. So I rushed my cycle to Metro first thing in the morning. I took Rishi's and Abdul's advice of changing the entire cable assembly, installing metal gear shifters instead of the existing plastic. Somehow, that did the trick and solved the derailleur problem.

While these repairs were on, I made one of the wisest decisions for the trip. Buying cycle helmets! Rishi was making final checks for his cycle with his mechanic in the suburbs. We frantically communicated with each other on our mobile phones regarding the decision to buy new helmets. Rishi just said no when I told him the price. We argued, but for Rishi the matter was closed with an even bigger 'no'. I knew he wouldn't budge, so I finally went ahead and bought two helmets myself. During the Titwala trip, we had bought cheaper helmets. They were so flimsy, we'd hardly bothered to wear them. Here it was the other way round. They were so expensive that we had better make use of them. Later when I handed Rishi his helmet, he just went silent. I kept on telling him that this investment was wise. When the trip began, all of that guilt vanished when we did our first few kilometres on the highway.

By that afternoon, my cycle was cleared from Metro Cycles. It was now completely ready. It felt psychologically good that the 5th gear was working. The feeling of driving a perfect machine is ultimate and indescribable. Here was a simple yet powerful machine that was at its peak condition and would take us over 800 km without failing even once.

On New Year's Eve, Rishi was up late in the night accompanying a friend and his mother on a tour of Mumbai by night. I was sleeping peacefully. The next day, I started getting all of my luggage together. First aid was my responsibility. So I had the medical kit ready and later briefly talked with my uncle about wound dressings and stuff like that.

By the end of the discussion, my first aid box was substantially full. Next came three sets of clothes and accessories – a pair for the road including a pair of shorts and T-shirts. One pair of trousers and a shirt were reserved for a formal occasion. Besides these was a shawl, a big piece of plastic bubble wrap to use as a floor mat. Then the usual maps, contact addresses, LAMY pen, torch, Walkman, cassettes, a small auto-focus camera & lots of other stuff. All of this was supposed to fit into a single

medium-sized travel handbag, which would be tied on a carrier at the rear of the cycle. But, eventually, it all went into a small backpack and a small waist pouch. Generally, I was used to wearing at least a set of clothes a day. But here I was with only three changes for 14 days. Rishi always joked that I'd have to carry two suitcases at the back of my cycle if I stuck to my usual habits.

Rishi would be carrying a backpack tied to the rear carrier, a smaller backpack on his shoulders and a pouch. He was carrying the tool kit, including the puncture kit. And, yes, he was carrying only one set of clothes for 14 days apart from the usual accessories.

That evening, we met one more time at Rishi's place to practise repairing a puncture on his cycle. Rishi grumbled about using his cycle as a guinea pig. But I persisted by saying that prevention was better than cure. Then we ran a thorough check of our tool kit.

Rishi's father gave us a few tips. He advised us to reduce air pressure on descents to increase road grip and to avoid burning out the nylon brake pads. Rishi's father was being extremely cool about the entire thing. He'd had his own share of adventure in his younger days, so he understood our motivation behind such a tour. On the other hand, Rishi's mother found all of this an advanced case of insanity. She begged others to talk Rishi out of this endeavour. Rishi countered by saying that we were not immolating ourselves or committing *Sati* or something. He would be back alive as soon as the tour was done.

The reactions from my home were encouraging. In principle, they detested the idea of two cyclists alone on such a long tour, but finally both my parents knew my nature. Once I have fixed upon something in my mind, there is very little that anyone can do to stop me from doing it.

In fact I always respected them for giving me this space, without which I would have just died. Once, when we were already on the tour, my mother happened to speak to one of her friends. She proudly told her about our tour. Her friend was aghast at how she allowed such a thing. In that moment, my mother felt a bit guilty about letting me go. But it was too late then!

The puncture practice done, at peace with ourselves, we took a break after the frantic preparation of the last five days. As we added more pollution to the atmosphere, I worried about the next day's trip while Rishi remained calm. In the evening, I left Rishi's place, satisfied and happy with

all our preparation and waited for the night to pass. Rishi handed me the dynamo light, which was the last thing I needed to fit on my cycle.

What happened in the next few hours was Rishi's worst nightmare come true. I returned to my residence in Parla and had the dynamo fitted at Abdul's place by 8:00 pm. By 9:00 pm, I had finished my dinner and was settling for a good night's rest when I happened to call up Rishi's place. Nitin, his brother, came on the line and told me that Rishi's rear cycle tyre had burst without warning and had got a big hole in it. He had rushed the cycle to his mechanic. I panicked and lost my sleep. Apparently, we had not housed the tube in its housing while practising the puncture repairs. At low air pressure, it worked, but as Rishi topped the air pressure to the maximum, the tube got caught in a nasty place and finally burst, leaving a big hole in it. Fortunately, the tyre was ok. Rishi immediately changed the tube; he couldn't be sure of the derailleur settings though. So the cycle had to be rushed to the mechanic for a final check. Sadly, the mechanic was out, so Rishi waited patiently. It was 10:00 in the night. I had asked Rishi to keep me informed about the latest developments. Worst case, I told him, we would delay the trip by a day. Leave on the 3rd of Jan rather than 2nd.

At some point, the phone rang. Rishi, I thought! To my surprise, it was Anuradha, my boss. She had called to wish me luck for the trip. I thanked her and went back to sleep, almost sure that we would now be delaying our trip by a day.

Rishi finally called me at 1:00 am. He told me that he'd had to do the derailleur settings himself since his mechanic hadn't turned up. He had run a few tests and felt that his cycle was ready again. I told him that he should try and get some sleep since we were to leave in just a few hours!

On the Road

As generally happens on days of reckoning, I woke up before the alarm could wake me at 4 in the morning. Rishi and I had spoken just a few hours ago but already it seemed distant. A new day had begun! Oh! It was a very exciting feeling. It would begin soon. Our cycle tour! After a long, patient wait. I had a gut feeling that this tour was going to be good. I mean all my treks and tours have been good, but this one was going to leave deeper impressions. I had a strong gut feel whether it was because it was my first time on such a tour, I could not tell.

Two days before departure, I had been engulfed by this overwhelming sense of guilt for my actions and some weird thoughts crossed my mind. I was embarking on a strange journey, going against the flow, against the mundane definition of a holiday while the rest of the world slogged away. So focused was I that all I saw was the cycle and the road leading to Goa. Nothing else mattered. But one day, it got to me. My disturbed mind made the following notes a few days before the tour.

27 Dec 2001, 4:00 pm, Rishi's place

It feels a bit unusual. The whole world busies itself with its activities, especially men of my age group. Here are two freaks who are busy on a completely different tangent. Just a few months back, I was a part of this mundane, stereotypical world. Apart from this guilt of not being what the world expects me to be, there is this sense of freedom and detachment at the pursuit of adventure. Hey, come on, think of it, most people firmly believe that I am not normal anyway. Strange... this world! Just being a little adventurous is enough for me to not be considered normal. And in our society, anything that is not normal is not nice.

It took some time talking with a few trusted souls to put my mind at peace and focus on the tour minus the guilt factor.

I called up Rishi's place at 4:30 to see if all was well. He was taking a bath. So I resumed my activities. At 4:45, Rishi called to say he was leaving from Kandivli and would meet me at Centaur. I was having a shave then. The next one would be after 6 days at Panjim. By 5:15, I was ready to leave. A small prayer to the Gods before I set out of the house was mandatory. I

bid farewell to my mother and father who had silently tolerated and supported all my weird ideas for so long.

Baba had insisted on putting up a small red flag on my cycle. It was a good idea as it let other drivers know that something smaller was out there. In fact the last time, during the trial, he had forcibly tied a medium-sized stick to the cycle. I was just leaving and didn't argue. He had told us to tie a red-coloured cloth to it en route! It was better than having nothing, but that stick didn't even make the first 5 km. Finally, I had tied it horizontally to the cycle rod. I had religiously returned it to the corner where it rightfully belonged in the house, after the trial. Yeah, I mean I could have chucked it en route and given endless alibis. But the stick was one of those timeless items that we take for granted in the house. We used it everyday to haul up wet clothes on the clothes line for drying. I know it sounds ridiculous to have such sentimental value for such small things, but sometimes small things are important!

This morning, he didn't force me to tie that crude flag again but insisted that we get a decent flag for the cycles on the way. I agreed with him in principle and promised him that we would do something about it, which we did... well, almost!

I left my place at 5:15 am. I had some difficulty in accommodating the loaded cycle in the lift. Generally, I make the cycle stand vertically on the rear wheel. That way, I can accommodate the cycle, me and one more person. But today it had a bag strapped to its carrier, so it was a bit tricky. I was too lazy though to carry it down four floors.

Baba had advised me to take a detour via a local temple even though it was in the other direction. I did it without hesitation. I crossed the temple and took a right, joining Hanuman Road leading to the highway. It was still dark and there were very few people on the road. Hanuman Road was my local test track. The concrete road is excellent for 300 metres to test short bursts of speed. Of course, I stopped taking those after a few near-misses! But I still think of Hanuman Road as my 'runway'. I drove till the end of the road where it meets the highway, then crossed the highway and headed south till I reached the Centaur Hotel junction.

Rishi was supposed to be here but hadn't arrived yet. It was 5:25 am. I was a bit amazed because he is the one who generally arrives first. So I waited. A few rickshaws and taxis waiting for early customers gave me company. By 5:45, Rishi still hadn't shown up. My mind started imagining

things. We'd already had some excitement last night; we didn't want any more of that. This time, we had decided not to carry mobile phones to cut on weight. I had made up my mind that if this bugger didn't show up till 6:00, I would return home and go into panic mode.

At 5:50 am, I detected a strange-looking light moving very slowly but steadily towards me. It was the dynamo on his cycle. Rishi had the helmet on and was dressed in cycle shorts and his favourite body-hugging T-shirt. And, of course, he had on a pair of glasses and a Walkman. He was all geared up for the long ride and I would always associate this image with him in the future.

He was riding at a very slow pace. I thought of the moments when we wait for journeys on long-distance buses. They generally make a very grand entrance, with a lot of speed and energy, which adds to the excitement of travelling. I somehow expected Rishi to make a similar approach, full of energy. But he was clever. For him, the journey had already begun and he had just covered 15 km of it. He was conserving energy. Rishi stopped and I greeted him. Rishi admitted that he had taken his time getting there. Generally, we would take 40 min to wrap this 15 km stretch on our cycles; that day, Rishi had taken an hour. But I had forgotten that we were supposed to cover a distance of 150 km by the end of the day. There was no hurry, nor the need to expend our energies uselessly.

Rishi made a few quick checks on the straps holding his bag to the cycle and then we moved on.

We passed along the same route as during the trial. The Mumbai-Panvel route was becoming a real drag. I pass on this road quite often and there was hardly anything exciting about it. Besides, in a vehicle, these distances are covered rapidly. On a cycle, you travel at a very leisurely pace. So we passed everything in silence and peace. These were the same roads where traffic is at its frenzied best at all other times, where vehicles and pedestrians fight for every available inch. But at the time, we had all four lanes to ourselves, with very few vehicles. We were slowly leaving this crazy city behind. It was very silent and the chilly early morning breeze blew against our faces and made my eyes smart.

As we pedalled on, I noticed many school kids on their way to school. A few spotted us and pointed us out to their friends. Some turned to look back when we crossed them. A few waved and I saw Rishi waving back at them. I guess Rishi was used to this, but for me it was a new and strange

feeling, but I got used to it by the end of the tour. That look of wonder was strangely familiar. As a kid, I had always harboured an instinctive fascination towards adventure. I knew I wanted to do something similar whenever I looked at trekkers and cyclists but didn't know how nor had the company. Many years were spent in silent frustration and envy towards people who did these things. But today the roles had been reversed; now I was on the right side.

Two hours later at Panvel, we stopped for breakfast and some air for Rishi's rear tyre. The sun was up but Panvel was still waking up and we would have to wait before the cycle shops opened. Rishi and I had a breakfast of hot *vada pav* at a wayside stall. The cook was a short, plump fellow and looked well fed. Looking at us and our cycles, it didn't take long for him to initiate a dialogue. He asked us where we were bound. We proudly proclaimed, "Goa". He just gave us a wide, stupid grin and continued his work, but with the smile still carved on his face. It was very exciting to speculate what he must have been thinking. We both recollected the Kashele hotel incident during the trial.

As Rishi finished his breakfast, I checked the cycles. Rishi's tyres had a definite design flaw. Generally, we preferred tyres with an oval cross section, having lesser surface contact. Rishi's tyres had a rectangular cross section that increased the surface contact with the road and increased drag. Besides, he was on low air, which made it even worse. My cycle that had oval tyres made a maximum surface contact of say $\frac{1}{2}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " at full load. Rishi's cycle made contact of almost a full $1\frac{1}{2}$ " with the road.

The other problem was his tyre had deeper grooves; hence, small pebbles and stones remained stuck in them and slowly cut into the tyres as the load pushed them further against the road. It wouldn't be long before the small, sharp stones reached the inner tube. Punctures were imminent.

At 8:45, the first cycle shop opened for business and we were its first customers. We topped the air pressure in Rishi's cycle and commenced our journey. Just a few minutes later, Rishi noticed that there was something funny with the rear wheel. So we stopped to take a look. There was a strange looking bulge in the tyre at one spot. The inner tube was again slipping out of its housing. In the previous night's haste, the sloppy job had gone undetected. So I suggested we better go back to the cycle shop and have it checked. Again at the cycle shop, Rishi made corrections. Then he realised that the rear wheel was out of alignment. It would have to be

repaired immediately if we didn't want further trouble. That just took the wind out of our sails. I wasn't happy about the way Rishi's cycle was behaving. It would be very frustrating if we had to keep on repairing these cycles every few kilometres. Besides, the further we moved away from Mumbai, the lesser the chance of having these cycles repaired due to their complexities. In an hour, the repairs were over and the situation was under control. Even though the underlying fear remained, there was very little that we could do unless something really major happened. So after a while, even I stopped worrying about it and started enjoying the ride.

The start of the Goa Highway was familiar territory. It was a small two-lane highway with a divider of broken lines in the centre. They were the only things that differentiated the highway from the rest of the roads. These short white bands continued all the way up to Goa, twisting, turning, ever present and always maintaining the symmetry of the road. The unfortunates who undermined the importance of this dividing line paid a very heavy price. To curb the rate of accidents, both the lanes spilled over a bit on either side of their thresholds. For us cyclists, this patch would prove to be indispensable if confronted by traffic or in case of an emergency.

We soon started ascending the Karnala *ghat*. That was the first *ghat* on the road and it was comparatively small. Rishi as usual overtook me on the ascent. It had become a joke amongst us. On the flat roads, my cycle could reach amazing speeds, but it was like a loaded truck on climbs. Even worse actually. There were instances when Rishi and I used to make faces at each other when we overtook each other on the respective stretches. The way small kids do. Sometimes we overtook each other without any feelings as each was engrossed in his own world... as if we were two completely independent riders on the road.

I finished ascending five minutes after Rishi, without stopping. Oh, it felt good. Mentally, I stroked off one from the 'n' number of *ghats* to come ahead. We had our first photo session after descending, with Karnala as the backdrop. The light was in the opposite direction, but we weren't going to wait till the sun made its journey towards the western skies.

En route, we passed the toll junction where others paid a small amount for their vehicles. Being on cycles, we crossed for free!

Further down the road, I saw two public works labourers refreshing themselves at a water supply pipe that had sprung a leak. My can was almost empty and I was parched. I saw Rishi way ahead but nevertheless

decided to stop. Ah, the water felt refreshing! As I filled my can, I struck a conversation with the labourers. I told them about our destination and estimated time period. They had come across other cyclists before and said we should reach in four days, at the most five. I explained that I was on my first cycle tour and planned to finish it in six days. I liked their positive spirit. One thing I noticed was that their cycles had red flags tied to the rear. So I asked them if it was worth doing that. They said legally, as cyclists riding on the highway, we were supposed to and besides, it obviously warned the other vehicles about us. They said we could tie a red cloth on a small stick and use it as our flag. Good advice that. I should have listened to Baba. So I bid farewell to them and off I went. In the meantime, Rishi had gone way ahead and now I saw him coming back. We had an unwritten law that we would wait for each other if the other one disappeared from the rear view mirror for more than 10 min. Rishi was worried that I had disappeared for such a long time on a fairly flat stretch of road so he had back tracked. When I told him the reason, he naturally freaked out. I apologised meekly but told him that we should get red flags at the next stop. He also agreed. We rode on for the next few hours till noon and decided to take a lunch break at Pen Ramvadi Bus Stand. It really felt very unusual to be there at that hour. I was used to seeing that place only in the night during overnight bus journeys to the Konkan. Now, in the daytime, it was flooded with light and people. There were quite a few buildings in the vicinity, which I had failed to notice earlier in the darkness.

We parked our cycles outside a *Jhunka Bhakar Kendra*. Western rap music blared on the FM radio. When we entered, it was all the more unbearable. Here we were in a typical bus stand café. A young man manned the small counter. That probably explained the rap number.

Here were ordinary people who stopped over for a brief meal served by women chefs it might as well be your mother serving the food. All the items were freshly prepared for each order. Good, simple food. And on the other hand, here was this FM radio blasting away a rap number. Simply unacceptable. Maybe the young man at the counter overheard our conversation or maybe he himself sensed that there was something wrong about the music. Soon he started tuning the radio to a more acceptable station. We nicknamed that place 'The Ramvadi Pub' and the man, its DJ. Finally, our DJ settled on a Marathi song. Instantly, things fell back in their proper place and we finished our meal in peace.

I realised how much Rishi craved for spicy food. On the other hand, my agony had just begun. I have a very delicate palette and need sweets to complement the main course. Out here on the road, my kind of food was considered bland and was rarely found.

After lunch, we rested on a solitary corner of the bus stand. As usual, Rishi slept and I just lay down and closed my eyes, waiting for sleep. My mind started calculating. We had already covered 85 km and were making good time in spite of the delay in the morning. But the sun was getting a bit unacceptable. Still 70 km to be covered by the end of the day.

Finally, we left Ramvadi Bus Stand at 2:15 pm. The traffic was very lean. Our timing couldn't have been better. We had taken good advantage of the slack period after New Year's. The traffic was very disciplined, which would come as a definite shock to many! We had several instances when cars that wanted to overtake trucks delayed their manoeuvres after seeing us approach them in the opposite lane. Even if cornered, we always had our small spill-over space beyond the thresholds. Sometimes, trucks passed from behind us and we were separated only by a few inches. At first I was a bit alarmed but soon got the hang of it. In a way it was good since it avoided a traffic pileup behind us. Under such circumstances, the drivers start losing their patience quickly and then nasty things start happening. Fortunately, this rarely happened to us.

By 3:40 pm, we reached the industrial town of Nagothane and took a small break. I was tired. Then we continued to Kolad, our next stop. En route, we had to negotiate a small *ghat* section with a long ascending ramp, which I thought would be the first of the ascents on which I would have to get down and wheel my cycle along. But in spite of the fatigue, I was able to ascend it on my cycle albeit at a speed of 5 km per hour. I was just behind Rishi by a few minutes. That was again good news. At the top, we rode by a small pass and then there was a hairpin drop in the road on the other side. The descent was fast and exciting. After a gruelling climb, the descent was very rewarding and effortless. Our cycles reached their top speeds of 50 km an hour and we could hear the wind screaming past our ears. It was fun, exhilarating and dangerous. The bad part was the descents are over within no time and again there's an ascent up ahead, waiting to replace the sound of gushing winds with a deathly silence.

Kolad at 5:15 pm saw an unscheduled stop for ice cream! I looked at these wayside ice cream sellers as angels from the sky, specially descended

on this planet just to sell me ice cream. The cold, soothing stuff they sold was ambrosia for me.

We reached Mangoan, our first stop over, by 6:30 pm, just as the sun went down. We had cut off 155 km from the 600 km stretch. We were satisfied. As usual, we soon started looking for a place to spend the night. Rishi had warned me that he preferred staying at the local bus stand or in a temple rather than a lodge since he found them to be a waste of money. I had never agreed with this stand, especially after a long gruelling day. But this time, I had to give in. I was also curious to find out what he would come up with. So we decided to spend the night at a local temple just outside the local bus stand. Rishi made a few inquiries and found out that a few days back, someone had looted the temple, and so they didn't allow any strangers in its vicinity. Finally, we landed up at the local bus stand. There I found an open veranda at the back of the stand, which was hidden from the hustle and bustle in the front. Till 8:00, we loitered around and finally Rishi made his first move. He approached the depot manager, told him about our journey and asked him if we could spend the night out on the veranda. The gentleman obliged promptly. The very next moment, we were sprawled on the veranda as if it belonged to us. While Rishi fetched food, I talked to a nice, inquisitive local. He satisfied his curiosity and also warned me about thieves before leaving. I assured him that we would naturally look out for them even while we slept. The cycles were everything to us. They were our little world on wheels.

When Rishi returned, I called up home and reported our first day's progress. Baba wasn't happy about our accommodation, but I lied that the lodges were too expensive. Frankly, I agreed with him about staying indoors, but I was stuck with Rishi. Besides, we had made ourselves at home here out on this veranda, so I let it be.

It was a cold night and the veranda offered little protection. Rishi and I ate peacefully. After that, Rishi had this sudden impulse of getting a complete 'zero' haircut. The idea was disgusting so I tried to talk him out of such an obnoxious proposition but he wouldn't budge. Finally, I cursed him by declaring that he wouldn't be able to get a haircut for the next two days. By religion, I was a Hindu and that too a *Brahmin* of the priestly class. As per Hinduism, I was blessed with the powers to curse people. I wasn't exactly sure if those same norms were applicable in the 21st century but nevertheless I decided to give it my best shot. Off he went to find a barber.

It was 9:00 pm then and all the barbers in Mangoan had packed up for the day. A disappointed Rishi returned to me. The curse had worked. I smiled wickedly. In fact, my curse proved to be so powerful that the poor guy finally got his haircut only when we reached Panjim.

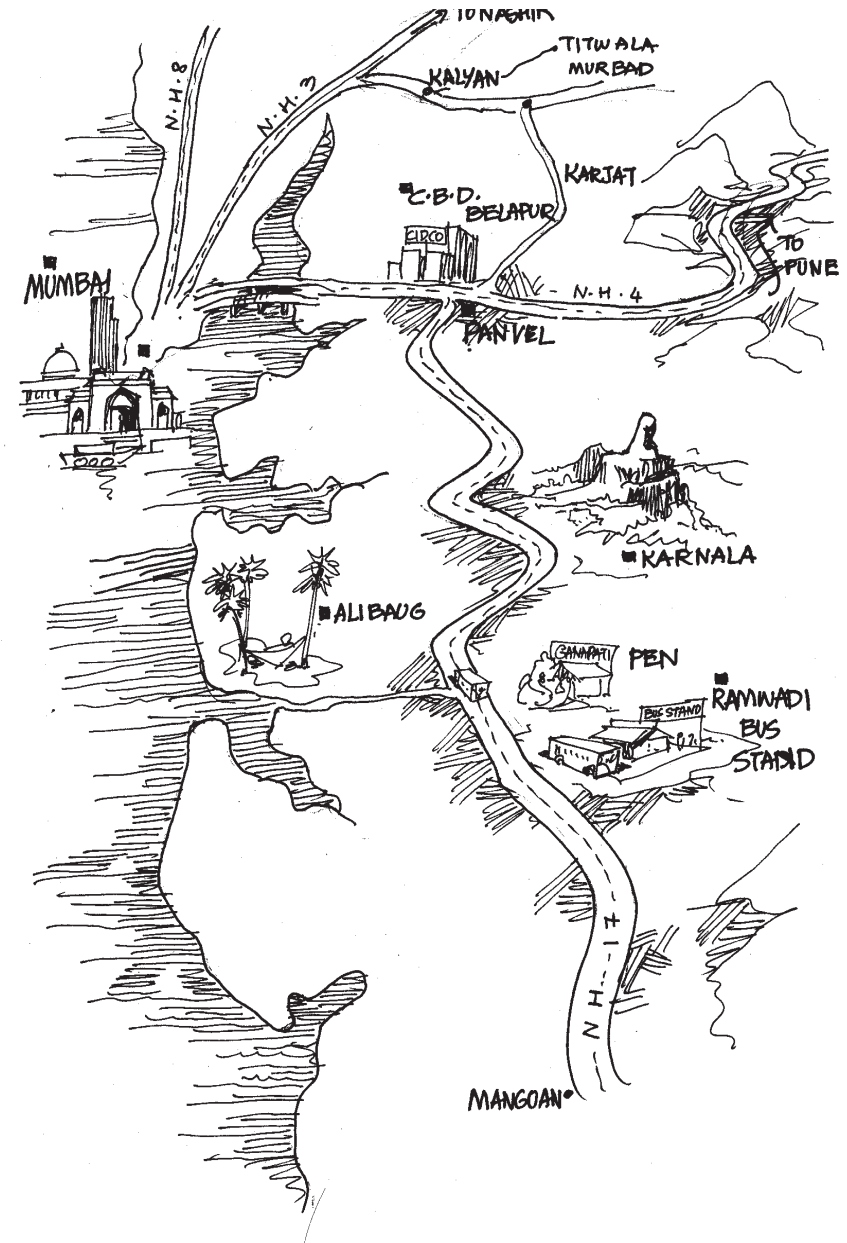
As we settled for the night, Rishi took out a bottle of whisky from one of his bags. He put a generous portion into the half-filled water can. That took me by surprise. I thought he was a social drinker like me. I asked him what he was up to, but he just gave a broad smile and carried on. I silently told my mind that this is now a different Rishi. He had now changed his ways after staying on ship for ten months. He had turned into a true sailor. Anyway, I also joined him with a few sips and after a long time, we talked about each other the beginning of a number of such conversations we would have on the tour. It really felt good talking to him like that after a long time. I had missed his company when he'd been away.

That night, I had a very alert sleep. I woke up at the slightest sound. The only time Rishi woke was when a rat was making a racket gnawing at something.

Day 1 on the road was history now. It had become a part of hazy memory.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 02, 2002
Day 1: Mumbai to Mangoan

Destination	Estimated Time		Comments
	(A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	
Kandivli	5:00 D	4:45 D	
Vile Parla	6:00	5:50 D	
CBD Belapur (Pass)	7:00		
Panvel (Pass)	8:00	8:20 A 9:40 D	Breakfast and repairs to Rishi's cycle
Karnala	9:00		
Pen	12:00	12:00 A 2:15 D	Ramvadi Bus Stand, lunch & siesta
Nagothane	3:00	3:40 A 4:00 D	Tea break
Kolad	4:00	5:00 A 5:15 D	Ice cream break
Stopover at Mangoan	6:00 A	6:30 A	Distance covered: 140 km



Up the Ghats

The next morning, I was the first one to wake up, with a slightly heavy head. It was cold at 7:30 in the morning. We brushed our teeth with the cold water of the water kiosk. Then we packed up. As per our plan, we had to depart by 7:00 everyday, but it was now obvious that it was going to be tough due to the cold. Besides, the early morning cold winds made my eyes smart and I had to constantly wipe my eyes rather than concentrate on the ride.

We put on the same clothes and left the veranda by 8:00. I just glanced back to check if we'd left anything behind. The veranda looked empty and yet peaceful, the same way we had found it the previous evening. There was no trace of our having been there last night. Rishi wanted to take a snap of us camped out there on the veranda for the record. Somehow, it just didn't happen. I regret it now. In fact, I regret many such photo opportunities, which could have been really good to recollect the trip. My memory is good... but you never know.

We had breakfast outside the stand. Rishi as usual had something hot and spicy whereas I stuck to my sweets. We were disgusted by each other's palates.

Our journey on day 2 began in the cold morning. My body was like an uncooperative cold diesel engine during startup. I longed for the sun to thaw my body. I plugged myself into my Walkman and on came Beethoven Piano Symphonies by Vladimir Ashkenazi. It was peaceful to listen to Beethoven early in the morning while riding very inspirational. Rishi preferred popular music from the latest Hindi films, *Lagaan* and *Dil Chahta Hai*. Throughout the tour, we never exchanged cassettes nor cycles. Strange, but true. We were happy in our own worlds, but the tour had clubbed us together.

Our first leg on the route was the town of Mahad, 30 km from Mangoan. The road was straight and we started picking up speed! As we neared Mahad, we started looking for spots where we could finish our

early morning ablutions. The town of Mahad has a river flowing through it. On its outskirts, a road branches out from the main highway to meet the town and skirts along the river. We left the highway and took up this bumpy road and stopped in an open field. We took turns attending nature's urgent calls and guarding each other.

Just as we were leaving, a group of school kids thronged us. It was like a small army of brats invading us. I told Rishi that their timing couldn't have been more perfect. These small devils were mounted on ordinary cycles and just couldn't keep their eyes off ours. They followed us everywhere we went, even where we decided to take a bath. One of them had the temerity to ask for a ride on our cycles. I talked my way out of it without being rude. Anyway, that bugger knew it was a long shot.

Taking a bath in the river felt very refreshing and clean, especially after riding for so long. We washed our previous day's clothes there. I wondered what Rishi was going to wear since he was carrying only a pair of clothes for the entire tour. But my friend proved to be smart. He let the washed clothes dry for a while in the sun before wearing them again. I was quick to learn. Even if it felt funny to wear the half wet clothes, they dried off in no time once we were back on the road. Hats off to Rishi's smart strategy for cycle tours. Frankly, on the road, it hardly matters.

Then we had a quick brunch at a wayside hotel and commenced the journey after losing almost two hours. We had really taken our sweet time and I was worried about Kashede *ghat* after Poladpur, the next leg. It was a long and formidable *ghat*. I had been dreading it for a long time now.

An hour later, outside Poladpur Bus Stand, we stopped for another sweet happy dose of sucrose sugarcane juice. Rishi had a glass. I had three. A fourth went into my can! The next few hours were going to see me need every ounce of energy!

The Kashede *ghat* starts ascending immediately after Poladpur. We got there by 12:45 pm, which was a bad time to climb the *ghat* on account of the heat, but the advantage was that the traffic was minimal. We both hooked up our Walkmans. Rishi engaged the 32-toothed rear gear and

started pushing rapidly ahead. This was his turf! I followed at a slow, steady pace. Soon, my body found its rhythm and my mind began to focus on the scenes, the music and the moment. These were the moments of adventure I had been seeking and now I had got them. The road snaked its way through a very scenic landscape. Once again, I noticed that the road and its markings were regularly maintained. It not only avoided accidents on its treacherous hairpins but enhanced the beauty of the road as well. The *ghat* ascends gently for over 12 km and reaches a height of 600 feet. Then it descends on the other side. The top was located on the border of Raigad and Ratnagiri district. It was a geographical threshold where flat land gave way to a hilly terrain, black cotton soil to rust soil, paddy to mango orchards! Hilly surroundings, good tree cover, changing vistas at every bend, villages on the slopes, closely clustered houses with uniform pyramidal roofs and the road itself made it a tranquil and harmonious place.

After an hour of gruelling pedal pushing, we made our first stop at a village called Dhamandevi. The village was located on a slope below a turn on the highway. We rested in the shade of a few trees next to two parked bullock carts. Here we had another round of photographs. Before leaving, Rishi went to the village to refill our water cans. A few minutes later, a very surprised Rishi told me that he had approached an old lady in a small hut asking for water. The woman promptly filled the cans and even asked him if he would like to have some tea. Rishi hadn't failed to observe her poverty and yet she had been courteous. He said he just went silent, thanked her for the water and left! I hadn't been there with Rishi but it wasn't difficult to visualise the scene! It must have been a very humbling moment and it didn't fail to move us.

After the brief rest at Dhamandevi, we decided to move on. We gave the cycles a once-over, checking for any signs of trouble and especially areas of strain on the chain, pedals, gears, derailleurs and cables. The cycles were performing well! We continued. On came the Walkman. Again, Rishi pushed ahead with me following steadily!

A bit later, when I was riding alone, I observed an overloaded truck also ascending behind me. Slowly and steadily, doing a slightly better job than me. Eventually, it started overtaking me. The truck took half a minute to overtake a 1.5 metre long cycle! Like a tortoise overtaking a snail!

I had ample time to observe the cleaner, the truck driver's assistant. As usual, he sat in the door, half inside, half out. In the time that the truck overtook me, I noticed him staring at me with this blank look and I wondered if there were any thoughts behind it. Was it just curiosity or was it just a blank stare, I couldn't make out. He kept on watching me till the truck turned at the next bend. It must have just been pure joy at discovering something on this planet that was slower than their truck. But it wasn't that triumphant a look either. There'd been no smile to reinforce that theory. It was just a typical blank stare in which the mind watches but doesn't register. Like looking into nothingness.

There were times that were very silent. Usually during a pause between two songs and no traffic. All I could hear was my thumping heart, my laboured breathing and the rhythmic sound of the cycle chain.

There were other instances that also left their mark. Moments in which my mind registered the overlapping of two completely different worlds. Me on my cycle, passing a group of labourers and, later, a school teacher teaching his pupils. Strangely, those moments were so intense that I ended up penning down my thoughts about them in my journal the next night. Even today, I am surprised that I still remember those humble incidents of realisation.

Rishi and I were perfectly synchronised! We never had to tell each other where to stop. Maybe Rishi sensed when I would run out of energy. So he always used to be there waiting for me at the right moment when I just couldn't continue. We had truly become a team. I was no match for his physical abilities, but somehow, at the right time, we always came together. At no point did I ever question the decision of only two of us embarking on such a tour. I always introduced Rishi to my friends as my trekking partner. I was mocked by many for using the word 'partner'. But that was the right

word. It was difficult to explain to a majority of my non-adventurous friends what it meant to be in the outdoors where we depended on each other for the right decisions at the right time, with the sole aim of fulfilling our dreams. Worst case scenario our lives depended on each other. There is little doubt about the extents to which we would go in case of any emergency. But sitting in a secure, cocooned environment, this is difficult for others to understand, where ordinary things are taken for granted and the perception of danger is unimaginable.

Our second stop was just a few minutes before reaching the top. By this time, we had climbed the slope and the surrounding vista of majestic mountains and valleys opened out on our left. As I neared the top, I was excited about getting to see the hill fort of Pratapgarh on the mountain range in front of me. Rishi was in the lead and I had told him to stop short of the top from where the view of the fort was the most spectacular. It was an ideal spot for photos of ourselves with the cycles. The light and visibility were also just right. When I reached that place, however, Rishi wasn't there. He had moved on to the top. When we finally regrouped at Kashede, I argued with him about missing a good photo opportunity. He claimed that it had slipped his mind. I wasn't surprised! I was baffled by Rishi's behaviour. This was not the Rishi I knew in the mountains. There he observed and appreciated everything. I knew that here the priorities were different but somewhere I thought we could attempt to have a holistic experience. Little did I know then how naïve I was and how I was fooling myself. We finished ascending the *ghat* in just two hours and with two halts. I had made it all the way up on my cycle. Even Rishi was surprised. I was satisfied with my performance.

At Kashede, we took a break after two hours of a gruelling uphill ride. Kashede was strategically located at the top of a mountain with a fantastic view on either side. Its arm like ridges rolled off into the valleys below. The highway clung to these arms, twisted, turned and fell away on either side. The road ascending from Poladpur, from where we had just come, was partially hidden, so there was no perceptible way of gauging

the altitude we had gained. But on the other side, the road descending towards Khed was visible right up to its base. We could see tiny vehicles inching their way up its slopes. We could hear the sound of their roaring engines in the valley below. Here the perception of the altitude gained was clear. For a few moments, we just kept on watching the scene. Once again, my mind started to disconnect from its immediate physical surroundings and merge with the panorama in front of me. It felt good to be there.

We then rested in the premises of a government rest house enveloped in the shade of tall trees. Then we made a move since we had to reach Khed at the end of the day. It was already 3:15 pm. and a small tea break was also due. So off we went to a *dhaba* where we joined a group of young bikers from Pune. For a moment I thought that we were going to be mocked. I was wrong. They were delighted to meet us and looked at our cycles. When they heard of our plans, they were utterly shocked. Soon, they started mocking each other that for some even this bike tour was getting a bit too much, cycles were out of the question.

We all had tea together. Contrary to my initial impression, they were a jolly and sporting crowd. They cheered us as we departed. It felt good to meet them. Before descending, we checked the brake pads and cables for wear and tear. It would be a fast ride downhill! Rishi had this special nut on his handle bar from where he could adjust his brake settings while riding. My cycle didn't have that. It was surprising that I had remained completely oblivious of this setting even though the cycle had lain in my house for the past ten months while Rishi had been away.

We had decided to tailgate each other at a safe distance as we descended. I would take the lead. The descent was very fast and thrilling with our bodies bent, taut and alert, staying in control. It was fun freewheeling all the way down, with speeds matching those of larger vehicles, banking, twisting and turning along those sharp bends with the wind tearing across our faces and its roar filling up our ears. The cycles were smooth and noiseless. Occasionally, when braking, I liked to hear the hissing sound of the disc brakes over smooth metal.

We were down in just 20 minutes; we had taken two hours to ascend the *ghat* and now it was over!

I had this habit of putting on my brakes to keep a check on speed on the steeper slopes. Rishi just hated that. For him, these slopes were like a godsend and he wanted to go full speed all the way. I was getting in his way. Besides, my cycle had these alloy rims on which nylon brakes have better friction. So for my cycle, they were like power brakes. Rishi had steel rims on which these same nylon brake pads have a lesser coefficient of friction. His brakes were thus weaker than mine. Twice, he almost rammed into me when I suddenly put on my brakes; of course, I didn't know about this till he finally overtook me, cursing along the way. From then on, Rishi always took the lead, even on descents. I soon got the message and gave him chase all the way to the base.

The straight patch after the *ghat* was also amongst the best patches on this highway. After the exhilarating and noisy descent, the straight road under a canopy of trees had a beauty of its own. Here again the highway threshold and centrelines were demarcated by a fresh coat of paint. It suddenly reinforced the importance and beauty of the road. It added to the exhilarating feeling of being free and out on the road. We both felt the same way and soon had another good photo session.

By 5:30 pm, we reached a junction that led to Khed. The town of Khed was just 3 km from this junction off the highway. "Another night to be spent in the 'warmth' of the bus stand," I thought to myself. This camping out in public spaces had started getting to me, but Rishi still had the final say on that and I hadn't reached the point of saturation where I could override him. So off we went in search of the bus stand. Khed was an old town and as we neared the older parts, the roads started getting narrower. Driving through the crowded streets after a long day on the road was irritating, especially after the crowd started closing in on us. Suddenly, after a bend, we found ourselves facing a very crowded bus stand. It had just enough space for its passengers. We wouldn't even stand a chance. Besides, we were both intimidated by the prospect of satisfying the

curiosity of so many locals. I quickly suggested the newly constructed Khed railway station as an alternative. It had just been five years since the Konkan Railway had reached Khed and the station was on the outskirts, away from the frenzied town. Rishi liked the idea; as long as it was free, he didn't mind anything.

Just as we had expected, Khed railway station was very peaceful. There we looked out for the station master to get permissions and stuff for camping out there for the night, but he wasn't around. So we took the liberty of wheeling our cycles out onto the platforms. Later, we would meet the station master just for that! Until then, we took some snaps on the platform with our 'darlings' and settled on one of the benches for the night.

But first, we called home to report our progress. I was thrilled to inform *Aai* and *Baba* of our progress up to Khed and our performance on *Kashede ghat*. *Aai* was happy and so was *Baba*. He again insisted that we crash in a lodge. Alas! I wish he could understand my dilemma.

Soon, Rishi went out to run an errand while I was given company by two young school teachers bound for their hometown, Sawantwadi, 300 km down the highway where we had scheduled our fifth day's stopover. They had seen us enter the station. They hadn't been able to contain their curiosity and had approached me as I sat alone on the bench, fiddling with my baggage. It was pleasant talking to them but I sensed a constraint in their voice. Maybe they were not sure if I would communicate with them. So I cracked a few jokes and gave a few exaggerated laughs to lighten the formal mood of the conversation. The situation improved immediately. Unfortunately, I can't recollect their names. One of them was really amazed that I was an architect and Rishi a sailor and that we did such things on pure impulse. Yes, it was an unusual combination, but it existed. I told them that our fifth night's stopover would be at Sawantwadi. They both wished me good luck and rushed to board the train, which had just arrived.

The train soon left and the few people lingering on the platform too soon disappeared. Rishi joined me in a few minutes and I told him about the two teachers. Then we started settling down for the night.

After an hour, we found ourselves confronting a railway employee. He wanted to know who we were and who had given us permission to enter the platform with the cycles. I thought it was obvious who we were and what we intended but like so many of the uniformed employees, he had trained himself to be blind to all obvious things and watch the world through a narrow mind. He harped on issues like railway premises and security as if we were intent on creating trouble on a deserted platform. We would have to have a word with the station master, he said. I gulped. I had a strong phobia of Indian bureaucracy. I didn't want to face another of its ugly faces, especially at the end of a long, gruelling day. But, in a way, we were transgressing.

Surprisingly, Rishi started showing signs of retreat. Very unusual of him. So I told him that I would like to handle this one. I argued that if we just left like that, it would imply we were guilty, which would be even more insulting. If we faced them, worst case all they would say is "go away". Finally, Rishi accepted, so we approached a busy looking station master. He was in his thirties. I asked his permission to have a few words with him. He was happy to oblige. I told him our intention to camp on the platform for the night. He asked for permissions. I told him that's why we were there, to get permission. I also mentioned that we'd tried to contact him earlier but he wasn't around.

Initially, he refused permission. But he told us that there were cheaper lodges in the town. I said we weren't interested. I bit my lip and wished that Rishi wasn't so hell bent on roughing it out. I clarified that if he had a problem with us staying for only a night then we would happily go away. What the SM said later suddenly made his stand clear to us. He said we could camp in the ticket lobby and not on the platform. The platform was under his jurisdiction and any such incident of people camping on the platform without any permits could land him in trouble. I immediately said that we would take the ticket lobby and thanked him. I shouldn't have since he was not responsible for that area, but courtesy got in the way. Imagine two unclean cyclists being courteous!

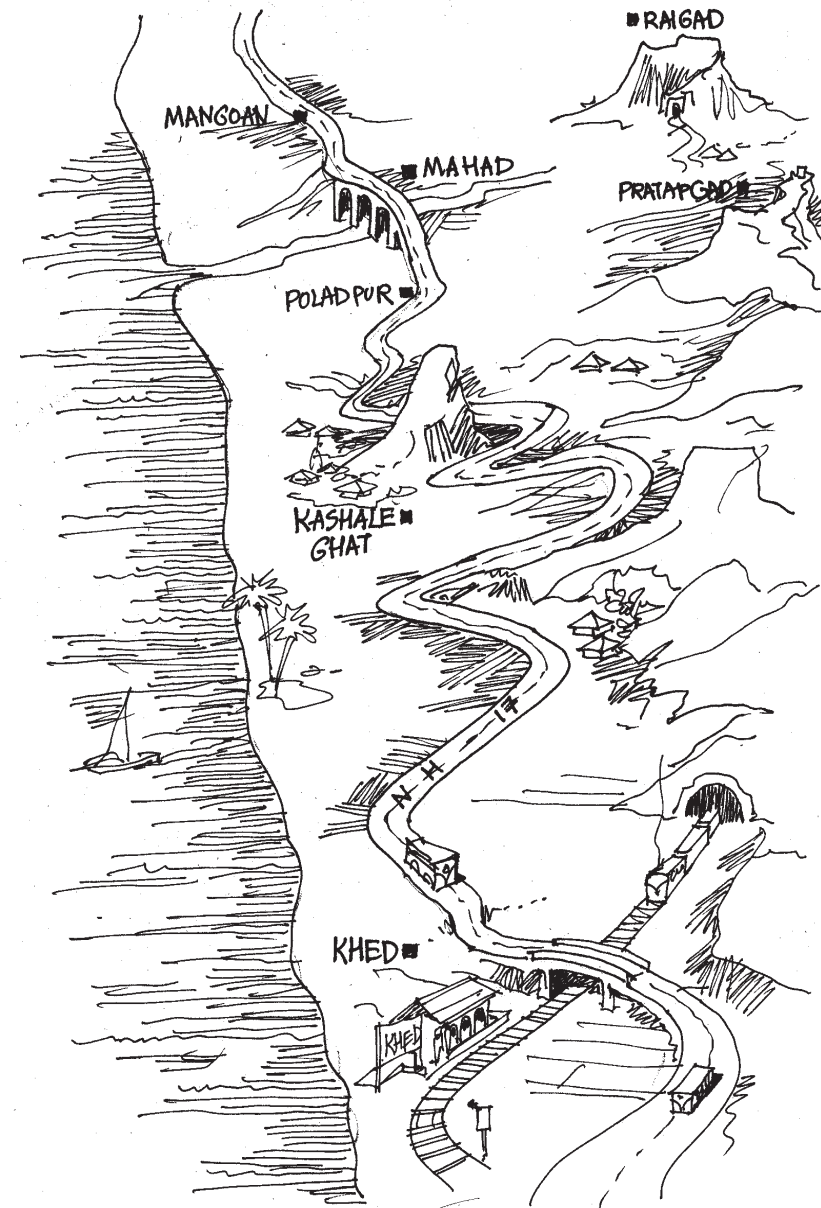
Once again, we made ourselves at home out in a public place, this time in the ticket lobby. Rishi went away briefly to get some food. I stayed back. My peace was disturbed by this small incident with the SM. When Rishi came back, I vented my feelings. I made it clear that the next time we would be staying in a lodge and not a place where we were not welcome. Even if the SM had finally given us permission to stay, his initial attitude had been quite hostile. If we had not faced him as we had, we would have been insulted and evicted. I also expressed my amazement at the way Rishi had tried to back off when we had to meet the SM. Rishi started pacifying me but I could see that he was trying to gloss over the whole thing. That made me even more angry. Earlier, we had an unwritten pact that Rishi would handle accommodation in such public places since it was his choice. He was excellent in getting what he wanted from such people. I hadn't been sure if I could do that. But somehow, after this incident, even I now felt strong enough to face the odds, not that I wanted to.

The night turned out to be very cold, with the occasional crowd for tickets for a late-night train. We covered the cycles with bubble wrap I was carrying! The cycles were a source of attraction, but now we wanted to rest. I covered my head with a shawl and saw that Rishi was already sound asleep.

My right leg had started giving me trouble and was showing the first signs of pain. It would soon get worse in the next two days.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 03, 2002
Day 2: Mangoan to Khed

Destination	Estimated Time		Comments
	(A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	
Mangoan	7:00 D	8:30 D	
Mahad	10:00	10:00 A 11:45 D	Bath
Poladpur	11:00	12:45 A	Sugarcane juice stop and break Before ascending
Kashede	12:00	1:00 D	
Kashede Ghat top	1:00	2:45 A 4:00 D	Break Descended in 20 min
Khed	5:00 A	5:45 A 78 km	Distance covered: 78 km



Midway Celebrations

We woke up at 6:00 am that morning at Khed railway station. We'd promised the station master we'd leave by 6:00 and so we did. I wasn't keen on staying there either and my sleep had been disturbed. We packed and wheeled our cycles out of the station and headed out into the cold darkness. Rishi was almost sleepwalking. Riding that early would have frozen us to death. I asked him to wait for me outside the station premises while I went to search for shelter. On the highway, a few metres away was the state transport's local bus stop. It was a cosy shed that would have easily accommodated the four of us. I just fumed. If only we had bothered to search for this place the previous evening! Anyway, we had still two hours to go and would naturally make the most of it by sleeping. I fetched Rishi and the cycles. Rishi didn't waste a single moment. Off he went back to sleep on a cold stone seat.

I couldn't sleep. It was too cold. So I waited with clattering teeth for one of the tea stalls to open. There was a dog howling in the cold dawn. I was disturbed. I knew the poor bugger must be cold. I felt a bit sad. The previous night's struggle for accommodation had also unsettled me. Its reverberations were still strong. I felt gloomy. The dog's howling made the momentary experience of homelessness palpable.

Finally, a tea stall opened. I went and had two cups of hot tea to warm up my engines. I could feel the hot tea thawing my body. The moment I entered the tea stall, I noticed this fat little pup that was the source of the racket. He was well fed all right. In fact, he could have done with a bit of dieting. I was so happy to see him. All those negative feelings just vanished after I saw him. He was playing on his own. I joined him for a while. Then, I warmed my hands with the glass of tea in my hands and held it on his head. God knows if he felt better. He was too busy with his own play. I left him. He grumbled a bit, then carried on with his play on his own. I went back to wake up Rishi. It was his turn for some tea. In the

meantime, I readied the cycles. Before departing, Rishi got a replacement for his exhausted batteries.

In front of us lay a ghat leading out of Khed to the industrial area of Lote Parshuram. Ascending the ghat first thing in the morning was a pain in the balls. Literally.

I had warned Rishi about the stench that would hit us while passing the industrial zone. It was directly from hell. I had smelt it before so I knew. On cycles, it would take us at least twenty minutes to cross that patch and I wasn't happy with the thought of inhaling that air for so long. At other times, I used to zip by that area in a few minutes in a bus. At the moment, we were panting hard, which would mean we'd take in even more of that obnoxious stuff. Luckily, it wasn't as bad when we actually crossed the area. Perhaps the cold morning winds had carried away the devil's breath to some other unfortunate place. Good for us.

At some point, we stopped; Rishi's rear tyre needed air again! Something was not right with his cycle. Suddenly, a newspaper boy approached us and asked if we wanted one. It was absurd and we wondered with what logic he had approached us. As if we had travelled 250 km on a cycle to read a newspaper! That's the last thing I would read even on a normal day anyway! Rishi was also perplexed. Anyway, we thanked him for offering us one and carried on. We let the incident go without thinking too much about it.

After crossing the industrial town, the road descended to the city of Chiplun through the Parshuram ghat. Just before the descent, alongside the road is a very nice café cum shop attached to a big house owned by a typical Maharashtrian Konkanastha Brahmin family. Apart from the usual tea and cold drinks, they sell an assortment of home-made products from the Konkan area. Fruits, lemonade, snacks, Ayurvedic medicines, some of which are really weird – imagine, bat's oil! They also sell home-made cranberry sherbet, bottled and refrigerated. And every time the preparation is just right. Sadly, through the years, the house had deteriorated from a beautiful, traditional pyramid roofed structure to a typical modern

concrete monstrosity resembling the creation of an informally trained civil contractor. Fortunately, the ambience of the space is intact.

The service here is as slow as it can get and one wonders how this place runs at all! No one welcomes you at the counter and you have to call out for someone to attend to you from the private quarters behind the shop. You should consider yourself lucky to be served. I know there's no reason to be governed by the rules of the outside world when you are comfortably cocooned in paradise, but if you intend to run a shop, the least you need is someone at the counter we weren't asking for much!

But these people belonged to my community and I knew how idiosyncratic we can get! Anyway, the fact that they had renovated the house and expanded the place suggested that it ran pretty well.

I wanted Rishi to taste the cranberry sherbet and to feel the ambience of the place. However slow it might be, I still liked it. Finally, a woman emerged from inside, served us what we ordered, took the money and immediately retreated indoors. Obviously something more important needed attention inside! Rishi liked the sherbet.

As we were about to leave, a young Brahmin boy presented himself at the counter. Cat eyes, frail body and the sacred thread running diagonally across his bare torso. He asked us if we were bound for Goa. He was smart alright. We mistook the moment to be another chance to expound on our glory. We put on our standard monologue. Yeah, we were bound for Goa and this was our third day. We have already covered 250 km in two days and plan to reach Goa in the next three days. For a moment, even I couldn't believe what I was saying. The boy remained calm and just stated with an air of superiority that it wasn't great enough considering we were driving geared cycles. He had this 'I know all, I see all' attitude. It was a slap on our faces without the physical contact. I explained to Rishi that's what we Brahmins from the Konkan were famous for. We quietly rode away under the gaze of a fair, frail body.

The descent down the Parshuram ghat was a bit bumpy. We stopped at that scenic spot that was once a highway but is now forgotten because

the highway had been re-routed. I had told Rishi about the spot and asked him to wait, so this time he did. Out came the camera and a few more additions to our photo album. The spot overlooked a river that originated from the Koyna dam and met the Arabian Sea much further on. Small, cosy villages were set in idyllic settings against the tropical landscape. Somewhere, a railway track emerged from a tunnel and went towards Chiplun. For me, time just stops at these places. I could spend hours together watching this silent scene.

Later, we passed Chiplun city and for the first time since we'd started, I spotted my beloved golawala. Rishi had already pulled over next to the cart. I had two in quick succession, as if there wasn't going to be another one for miles to come. It proved to be true. Rishi just watched me slurping. The gola is the simplest thing to make. Just thick rose-flavoured sugar syrup generously poured over a hand-pressed glob of crushed ice, supported on a stick. Hmmm! Yummy!

I noticed that our angel (the golawala) was silent. He never asked us where we were going or where we came from. Very unusual. We had met so many people who were curious about us. But this guy remained silent. Initially, I was happy. At least someone was not interested in knowing about us. What a break. But after a few minutes, his silence started making me feel uneasy. I felt like screaming into his ears and telling him about us. But he was in his own world, as if something was tormenting him. I lost my appetite for a third gola. It was really nice, I could have easily had two more. But I let it go on the second.

Rishi, my dear pal, waited patiently for me to finish. I just love to watch him watch me when I am fully engrossed in satisfying my own idiosyncrasies. Never once did he make me conscious of these habits. He accepted the situation very coolly. I loved him for that. He let me be 'me' more than I let him be 'him'. I generally become impatient when he is doing something and I just have to stand and watch.

We decided to stop at Savarde, 30 km away from Chiplun, for our mid-day break. But en route, we encountered another ghat. By this time, the sun

was overhead and the cold had vanished. The heat and exhaustion started taking its toll on me. At one point where Rishi was already waiting, I stopped. I just sat right there on the side of the road along with him. That was the beginning of many such times when I felt my body just couldn't continue anymore. Rishi was also tired but he could have easily pulled on for a few more kilometres. The sense of exhaustion was complete and very depressing. Weird thoughts started plaguing my mind. This was our third day, we hadn't even covered half the distance, yet the fatigue had started getting to me.

After I felt my body recharged with sufficient energy, we moved on. Next stop was Savarde for air and food. Initially, we had planned to digress from our route to an interesting place called Shiv Srushti at Derwan, just 2 km off the highway. But Rishi had wisely ruled out any distractions and detours. Besides, we'd just seen a bus full of school kids heading in that direction. We didn't want our cycles abused. We were abusing them enough!

We stopped for lunch at a small dhaba. Rishi relished non-veg food after a long time. I stuck to my vegetables. I am a very choosy non-veg consumer. It shouldn't be too strong, spicy or colourful. Anyway, that's another chapter. I had two glasses of sweet lassi after my meal, which made it impossible to ride for more than five minutes. We left the restaurant and spotted a nice, peaceful place just outside the village limits. It was a shady spot just off the main highway. We rested and fagged peacefully. We were given company by an occasional man on a cycle going into the village and a wood cutter busy with his work.

Rishi and I slept peacefully on the sheet of bubble wrap. I was tired. My leg had started paining even more. I had massaged it with Iodex the previous night at Khed. I did so again, hoping it'd subdue. But it persisted.

I noticed scorching sunburns on our bodies. My fair skin had started to get tanned, which I didn't need. Rishi didn't mind. After he had returned from the ship, I had noticed that he had reduced noticeably. His body had lost those athletic proportions that were once amongst his

distinct features. But now he was more rugged. Rishi had told me that his physical condition had worsened on the ship but now he was much better. His life as a sailor had started taking its toll on him, and the first casualty was his body. Next, his hair. What was once a lion's mane, a fair amount of healthy hair with a parting right in the middle, had given way to very thin strands. Of course, those were the after-growths of his 'zero' cut. Now he wasn't even happy with those minor tufts of hair. We often joked about the irony of the entire thing. Here was I, developing baldness. So I had planned to enjoy whatever number of days my beautiful hair remained, so soft and silky, even a Bollywood actress would be envious at its quality. Rishi on the other hand preferred baldness over really strong, healthy hair, which was not showing any signs of baldness. Human behaviour can be so amazing.

Back on the road by 3:30 pm for that day's last leg to Sangameshwar. I had already started lagging behind. This trend would now continue right up to Goa. Gone were the days when I used to vanish ahead of Rishi... no, not even on flat roads anymore. I was now into conserving my energies... trying to focus only on one objective Panjim.

That night's halt was scheduled at Pranay Khatu's place at Sangameshwar. His home was just 4 km off the highway in a village called Kadvai. The bifurcation on the highway was at a place called Tural. Rishi as usual had forgotten to check if he was carrying Pranay's phone number. Besides, before leaving Mumbai, Rishi had tried contacting Pranay but failed. So we were not sure if he knew when we were coming and whether he would be there for us. We were still 10 km short of Sangameshwar. I had made a plea to Rishi that if we couldn't contact Pranay, we would head straight to a lodge. He had reluctantly accepted.

At the Tural bifurcation, we refreshed ourselves with sugarcane juice. The usual ratio of consumption prevailed. One glass for Rishi as against three for me! Finally, when it was time to move, I had this wicked thought of making Rishi ditch his pal. But at that moment, I was desperate. I didn't want to do those extra 8 km, assuming his friend wasn't there. I asked Rishi if they shared a strong bond, implying that he should ditch him. Rishi then

told me that Pranay had helped Rishi during some bad days of illness in his early days of seafaring. At some point during their days together, Rishi had mentioned our then proposed Mumbai-Goa cycle trip to Pranay who had invited Rishi to stop over at their house in Sangameshwar. Rishi alone knew the consequences of ditching Pranay. If Pranay came to know that we had bypassed his place without stopping, he would feel hurt. That put the situation in the right perspective for me. Never ditch close friends.

Suddenly, I had a brilliant idea. Khatu's family ran a medical agency in Kadvai, so they must be known around that place. All we had to do was approach the nearest phone booth and ask for the Khatu family's residence number. Surely, someone was bound to know. What happened at the phone booth was a miracle. Rishi just uttered the magic word 'Khatu', and without a moment's delay, he was directly connected to the Khatu residence in Kadvai. In the next ten minutes, we were on the bumpy road leading to Kadvai. Pranay was busy playing cricket with the village kids, but he would be promptly informed.

Halfway to Kadvai came two men on motorcycles, Pranay and his friend. So we finally met each other. It must have been quite a scene. Two motorcycles escorting two cycle tourists. For the next 15 min, Rishi and Khatu talked and reminisced about their days together at sea. I just followed them silently. Surely, this was going to be a stopover to remember. From their tales, I would get a glimpse into their lives on the ship.

I was known amongst Rishi's friends on the ship for my travelogues included in my letters. Initially, when Rishi had told me about this, I had found it difficult to accept that my travelogues had been read by strangers. But Rishi had later explained that they enjoyed reading them and they brought a certain reassurance to people staying far away from home. I had eventually accepted it.

Kadvai may be remote, but half of the village men were sailors. This was more than evident by the number of new houses in the village. Traditional houses were giving way to loud concrete boxes. Khatu's new

house was no exception. But in spite of the economic progress, the people remained warm and friendly. Khatu's father was also an ex-sailor and was amongst the first of the family members to greet us. It was getting dark by the time we got there. We parked our cycles and unloaded our bags.

The polished stone flooring felt cold to the feet. But it didn't mater. The warmth in the atmosphere was more than enough to negate it. As Rishi blabbered away, I talked little and played dumb. Mentally, I was trying to adjust to the fact that tonight we were going to be treated the 'club class' way. No more cold railway platforms and bus stands. I could have cried and laughed at the same time. I would say it takes real hospitality to welcome two strangers that looked and smelt worst than truck drivers. Even Rishi's generous use of deodorants was not going to help, however hard we tried to mask it. Maybe I was exaggerating. But I always felt people thought of us that way.

I was first to take a shower, yes a shower and not a bath. The water was cold, but it washed away all the fatigue of riding for the whole day in the hot sun. It felt so ironic. Here I was taking a shower in a bathroom tiled in ceramic. It had a mixer and also an Anglo Indian potty. I had to clean the white bathroom floor of all the grime that I left behind after washing my clothes and myself. The last time we'd had a bath was at the river in Mahad the previous morning. Normally, our tropical climate demands that I take a shower twice each day, but for the tour, Rishi had warned me to go lenient on the concept of cleanliness.

I stepped out of the bathroom dressed in fresh, warm clothes that I had been saving for a moment like this. The first thoughts that crossed my mind after I stepped out of the bath was if only I was carrying talcum powder or a deodorant that would have saved these nice people from the smell of a stinking body. The surprise came when Rishi coolly used a deo after his bath, which he had been carrying all along. I could have killed him for that. I used it anyway. I then hung out my washed clothes on a clothes drying line in a terrace adjoining their living room. The terrace overlooked a beautiful old well, lined with dressed stones. It was old and a simple

example of beautiful workmanship. Alas, time was taking its toll. It was now crumbling into itself.

After Rishi had a bath, we had some hot tea. Oh! It felt so good. By this time, all of Pranay's friends had arrived at the scene to discuss a drama they were planning to stage during a local event in the village. Then of course we perfunctorily looked at some family albums. My tired eyes could barely focus on the strangers in the snaps and I grinned stupidly at my hosts who expected me to listen to their elaborate commentary.

Soon we were joined by Pranay's elder brother. He was nice, in his early 30s, and somehow I felt he was observing each and every move we made. More out of goodwill than suspicion of course! Pranay seemed a very silent and reserved person. In fact, I wondered how he got along so well with a happy-go-lucky person like Rishi. I mean, he must have surely had his own moments of mischief, but on the whole he was reserved but welcoming nevertheless.

Pranay's father was a jolly man. He occasionally cracked a few jokes amongst the group assembled there. After returning from the ship for good, he had now finally settled in his native village, running a good business. He naturally seemed more at home here. At one point, he remarked how intolerable the Gulf heat can be. Working in those conditions was just impossible. He almost shuddered at the memory of it. His dislike for that place was more than evident. But now he was back at home with his own people and he appeared at ease.

Finally, we stepped out in the late evening to party. As we left, we were greeted by Pranay's mother. The Khatus' house was just a few blocks away from the bazaar street. But we all rode on the available bikes, three on each motorcycle. Rishi was sandwiched between Pranay and me. It was still dark and I briefly struggled to make out the faces behind those friendly voices. But all that mattered was the moment. Friends getting together after a long time to party.

We made our routine phone calls to touch base. Then we headed to a narrow alley behind a closed shop. It had a crude wooden table and a

bench. That would be our bar for the night. We all made place for each other in the darkness. Rishi sat next to me. Pranay on the other side. From nowhere came chilled beer bottles and the customary chakna. As we talked, Rishi told me that even these fellows had embarked on a similar cycle tour to Raigad on ordinary cycles a few months back and that they had covered 180 km in a day, and that included many ghats. I was stunned. In comparison, we were like two rich brats touring in a Mercedes as compared to their Fiats. I thought they had bluffed, but they didn't have a reason to. Amazing.

It felt good to booze with friends that night. We were being treated as honoured guests. I saw the silhouettes of my hosts in the occasional flicker of a lighter. We made room for more friends in the weak light from somebody's wrist watch. The rest of the memories remain a blur. Rishi chatted away and I listened, making few contributions to their conversation. People thought I was tired but frankly I was just happy to be there without making my existence felt. I was floating in the goodness of the beer, the company and my thoughts. At some point, I stepped out to see the stars in the night sky. It was very late by Kadvai standards. All the shops had now closed. The hustle and bustle of the evening had given way to silent streets. Whoever lagged behind was winding up for the day. It felt so strange to stand out there alone, watching the stars in the silent night and hearing all of them talk. You appreciate things more from a distance. Voices in the dead of the night! I wanted to savour that moment.

I must have lingered out too long. I had lost sense of time. I was in my own reverie when one of Pranay's friends came out looking for me. He was also a sailor and had met Rishi somewhere earlier. Everybody called him 'Anna'. He almost banged straight into me and jolted me out of my thoughts. I tried to tell him that I was ok, had just stepped out for a leak. But he was pretty high and there was no point arguing with him. He started on this long harangue, which I listened to but didn't register.

Soon we wrapped up our session since it was 9:30 and a hot dinner awaited us at Pranay's old house. It was big and housed most of their joint

family. I naturally sat apart from the non-vegetarian majority. I am sure my gluttonous partner was enjoying each and every morsel that he was being served. The food was great. We talked a lot while eating. Pranay's elder brother kept a watchful eye on me and my dinner plate. My problem was that my appetite was nominal compared to Rishi, so it seemed to people that I ate less because I didn't like the food. In truth, my appetite had in fact started falling sharply in the past three days. I had to force-feed myself a bit more to just take away the creases from my hosts' foreheads. Rishi later told me that the sea food he was being served must have taken many hours for cleaning, sorting and cooking. I am glad it had been served to someone .as deserving as Rishi who made sure that those efforts didn't go waste.

By 10:30, I was ready to settle down for the day. We had covered just 75 km that day. So far, we were on schedule, but judging from my physical condition, delays were going to be imminent. I was very sceptical if we could make it to Rajapur, our next day's scheduled stopover. For Rishi, it didn't matter. As long as we finished the Goa tour. He said even if it took seven days, it would be ok. We were not in a race.

Rishi, Pranay and I then went back to the bazaar. We were supposed to rendezvous with 'Anna'. We waited in the now completely deserted streets with a mad woman for company. She talked away all the time. Cursed us for being there at that hour (which was right in a way). Pranay made a few cracks at her, to which she tried to reply but was soon busy in her own thoughts.

A motorcyclist passed her. Again she cursed and the motorcyclist joked about her. I felt guilty. Here was someone time had trapped and for the rest of the world she was mad. Rishi one day told me that if I thought too much, I would end up like her, trapped in time and always lost in my own thoughts. Frankly, then I already half qualify for that title, 'mad'. I felt bad for her and the way people treated her.

Later, I found myself encountering the eddies of the party with Pranay's friends. I was tired and there was hardly any place for me in their

conversations. It would be a long time before these sailors got together again for a peaceful moment like this so they just went on. I also had this sudden urge to write. For that I needed my own solace and privacy. I just declared that I had to sleep, so Pranay took me back to the house and showed me the room we were allocated. After he left, I bandaged my paining knee. Then I started writing. Pranay's youngest brother popped in and was a bit amazed to see me writing. I lied and told him I was just finishing some accounts.

Then I logged my first entry on this tour. I wrote three short pages with my LAMY. What I wrote made little sense to me in that half-dazed state. But the thoughts were intense and they needed to be recorded. Today when I read those small scribbles, it all suddenly makes a lot of sense and things start falling into their proper places.

It may seem so mindless to perform a physically gruelling task day in, day out. It's the third day on this much-awaited cycle tour of ours. My left leg has started giving way and the exhaustion is taking its toll on me. Today, after those two nights staying away from comfort and sense of security, here we are at Rishi's friend's place amidst nice people. It's amazing how people survive on Himalayan expeditions where everyone has to fend for themselves. You are on your own. Here people crumble. I would be the first one to crumble... easily.

Today, the feeling of living in a home... nice! The difference between a lodge and a home can be sensed here in the warmth that a home harbours. Human gestures can never be that simple.

I believe that for every good deed there should be something in return then that's not possible. However, I wish time and destiny wouldn't allow it. Sometimes, it's simple just to accept that some good deeds and simple gestures of kindness and understanding can never be paid back. But they are to be remembered for us to pass on to someone else who needs it but cannot repay. It could be just a simple gesture of an old lady offering a cup of tea to a complete stranger when he pops in just to ask for water.

It's so easy on long trips to make your mind believe that warmth and friendliness just come from material comforts. So tempting. The physical warmth, the pleasures of materialism can be so illusive. It lulls me into thinking that I am in safe waters. My mind can stoop so low that even the use of a simple face wash makes me believe that I am in a comfortable place.

Can't forget that bit when I was fighting this gruelling challenge of climbing the Kashede ghat. Rishi had asked me to hook up my Walkman to kill the drudgery. I remember this stretch when I was climbing through a section alone with no traffic near me. A group of labourers taking a break. They were all perched in a line on the stone barriers on the road edge. As I crossed them, they just stared at me. Everything else was as peaceful as peaceful can be. Even the air was still. It could have been a frozen image in time and here this beautiful piano music filled my ears. I mean, the juxtaposition of the two worlds was so ironic that it just struck me there. Here I was in my own world and was being watched by people

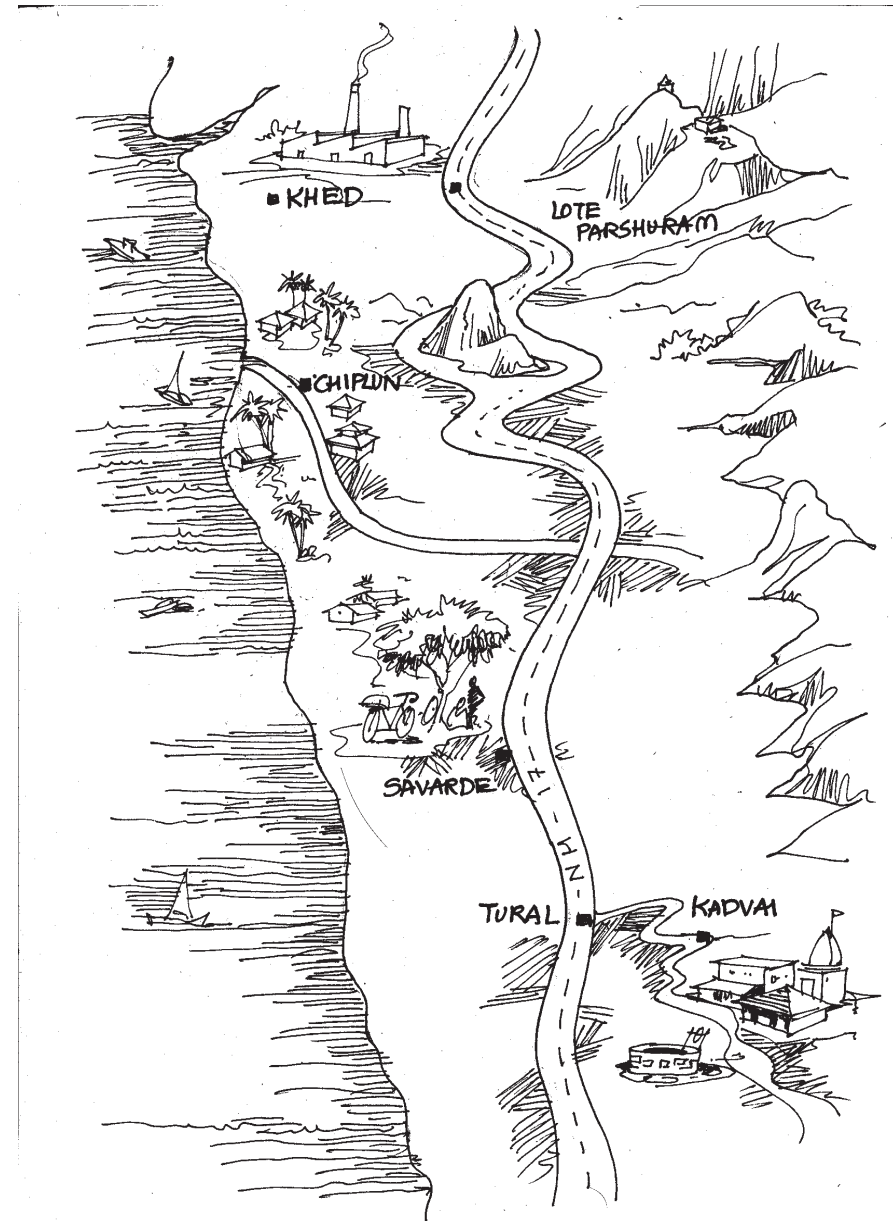
from another world. Very intense, that moment.

Similarly, there was another such silent patch. Everything was calm and for a moment even the Walkman was silent. Suddenly, I heard the voice of a school master teaching his pupils. It was so sudden, it took a moment to realise that I was passing a small school. I couldn't see it. But I could imagine it. A simple roofed structure with a veranda. In which a single teacher handles three to four classes at the same time. But out there in the middle of nowhere! I couldn't even see a village nearby.

Here I was embarked on a self-imposed tour, with glimpses from other worlds overlapping with mine.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 04, 2002
Day 3: Khed to Sangameshwar

Destination	Estimated Time	Actual Time	Comments
Khed	7:00 D	8:10 D	
Parshuram Ghat Breakfast	9:00	10:20 A 10:40 D	Kokam sherbet
Chiplun	11:00	11:30 A 11:45 D	Gola
Sawarde, Shiv Shrushti (Dervan) 4 km off highway	12:00	1:15 A 3:30 D	Lunch and siesta, Shiv Shrushti Dervan dropped
Sangameshwar	5:00	6:00 A	Kadvai (Pranay Khatu's place) Distance covered: 78 km



Catching up with Time

The early morning cold failed to hit us this time since we were sleeping in a cosy, airtight room, with all the windows and doors shut. Then, Pranay, Anna, Rishi and I headed to a nearby natural hot springs for a bath.

Sangameshwar was famous for its natural hot springs. The ones at Airole on the highway were overused. Pranay knew of another place halfway between Tural and Sangameshwar where there was a hot spring that flowed into a stream. It was just off the highway and a bit secluded. It was not directly accessible by car and we had to walk for a few minutes to reach that spot, which had protected it from the invasion of tourists. The ancient *kunds* from where the water emerged was hot enough to have boiled eggs in a few minutes. Entering it would have stewed us in a few minutes, turning us into a cannibal's delight! The bathing spot was further down where the scalding hot water had sufficiently cooled down for us to enter it without getting 'overdone'.

Rishi and I just carried towels and spare briefs. We took up a spot where the water cascaded over some stones and a natural depression formed a hot water bathtub. I was the first person to go straight into the 'tub'. The water felt so good. My knee got the hot water massage it badly needed. Rishi took a more conservative approach by sitting on a rock, cautiously pouring water over himself with the help of a mug. There was steam everywhere the water flowed and it mingled with the early morning fog. While the others finished their bath and started drying off, I remained inside the water. I just love water and what better way to enjoy it than this. I recollected what Minaz, a friend from my trekking club, said once at a hike. He also loves water, be it a pool, a pond or a waterfall. He would be the first person to strip (and I mean down to his birthday suit) and enjoy water. I liked his spirit. He'd always say, "This is nature, formalities don't matter. Being yourself is the best way to enjoy it."

Content with the experience of bathing in a natural hot spring, I got out of the water, dried up and then we all headed back to Kadvai. On the way back to Khatu's place, we had a brief tour of Kadvai village. There I saw neat old houses... beautiful. Once again I cursed myself for not bringing the camera along.

At Pranay's place, we had a filling breakfast. The Khatu had been insisting that we stay for one more day but we didn't want to break our journey. Rishi promised them that he would return later. By the time we left Kadvai, it was 9:15 am. It was a farewell worth recollecting. Khatu's family and a few neighbours had stepped out to bid us goodbye and good luck. Here was another photo opportunity that I missed because of sheer laziness. I felt sad leaving Kadvai.

Back on the road, Rishi took the lead. Going back to cycling was suddenly a sharp contrast to the grand time we'd had at the Khatu. Miraculously, my leg had healed because of the hot water massage and it felt good to pedal without the pain. But now, everything was silent and all I could hear was the familiar sound of the chain... *ghaar, ghaar, ghaar*...

By the time we passed the Sangameshwar bus stand, it was 10:00 am. We had lost a lot of time that morning. Rajapur, our next stop, was still 100 km away and the road was not easy. It seemed really distant now, but Pranay had assured us that we would make it to Rajapur by the end of the day. So now, to catch up on time, we had to make fewer halts and keep on pushing faster. Rishi said it was ok even if we made it to Lanja, 30 km short of Rajapur, by the end of the day. Anyway, we would give Rajapur a try.

Before Hatkhamba, we had to ascend the Nivli *ghat*. There the road was being re-surfaced and fine, sharp gravel covered it at some places. In some places, the road was rough and uneven. This is what we had been scared of all along. Rishi's cycle tyres were the main worry. Since our tyres made minimal surface contact with the road, we preferred a smooth road to give us stability and traction. Bumpy roads left us struggling for steady traction and exhausted us in the process. At one point, I was fed up. I had to stop. Rishi had pedalled ahead of me. Up ahead, standing on the road next to a car was a frail bodied youngster in a sleeveless T-shirt. A middle-aged woman was seated inside the car. When I regained my energy, I resumed my journey. As I passed him, he curiously asked me where we were headed. I said, "Mumbai to Goa, Day 4." A smile of amazement spread across his face. I smiled back.

At some places, a single lane was operational since the other was being worked upon. Here, Rishi and I were helped by the PWD workers who controlled the traffic by standing guard at the entrances of the single lane. At one such point, I was progressing very slowly and there was a jeep behind me. There was no spill-over space for me to let him pass. Besides, I

didn't want my rhythm to break. So I continued with the constant fear that impatience would soon take over the driver's sanity. The result would be furious honking or a nasty cut. But he was patient. He calmly tailgated me and then gave me sufficient time to move back into my lane when the one way ended. This surprised me and mentally I thanked him for being patient. Sometimes, in such one ways, traffic in the opposite lane would wait for me to finish my ascent. I was so amazed, I could have hugged the drivers. Rishi also had similar experiences. Such dignity and patience on an Indian road was worth noting.

We finally reached Hatkhamba by noon, just in time for lunch. I still hadn't digested the previous night's dinner and had a liquid lunch. Rishi had a full square meal. Frankly, seeing him eat made me happy enough. In a single sitting, he could consume three times what I ate or twice what a normal human being of his age and size eats, and yet I was fatter than him. It was unfair!

A few truckers approached our parked cycles. They started exploring our cycles, especially the gear derailleur. It unsettled me so much that I approached them and said, "Yeah, I know they are hot and irresistible, so please limit your desires to visual admiration and abstain from physical molestation. Something goes wrong and our whole trip will be spoilt." Of course, all of this was said in plain Hindi. They were smart and understood and did exactly as they were advised.

We left Hatkhamba by 1:00 pm. Up to Pali, the road passed through some really nice stretches of mango orchards, up and down the twists and turns over small hills. It is always spectacular. In a vehicle, this would be a good drive, but on cycle, it was gruelling. The afternoon sun was severe, yet we pulled on. Soon we were past Pali and on the *ghat* between Pali and Lanja.

Before Lanja was this sharp ascending hairpin where everybody has to slow down. This was where I had expected to have to dismount. But just as on Kashede *ghat*, the fear had tapped an unknown reservoir of power within me and, yes, again I did it. From then on, there were no illusions or fears regarding any of the remaining *ghats*. The worst was now over.

En route to Lanja, we both passed by this gypsy who had found a fallen wrist watch. She wanted to make a quick sale before anyone could claim it. I am sure the one who dropped it was aware of it but was in a fast moving vehicle. This woman stopped us and asked us if we wanted it. It

took some time to realise what she actually expected from us. Anyway, she was an opportunist and we were not even remotely interested. She was upset when I coldly refused. Four kilometres short of Lanja we had our first hiccup. Rishi's rear tyre had finally given way to all the punishment it had endured. Our worst fears had finally come true. I looked at the flat tyre. It was very disappointing to see the cycle that way. With a flat tyre, it could barely stand on her own two legs, I mean wheels, and had to be propped by something. The tyre looked really bad. We had serious doubts if we could make it to Goa on such badly designed tyres. It was 3:00 pm. Till then, we had been making good time. Without this incident, we would have easily done the balance 30 km to Rajapur. Rajapur again looked distant.

Rishi had to walk it up to Lanja. So now after all this, we were reduced to walking. I saw the frustration on Rishi's face. To make things better, I went ahead to locate a cycle shop, which I found 3 km up ahead. Rishi soon reached there and we had the puncture mended. As the mechanic worked on the cycle, we took a break. Rishi had some food. I thought I just missed a *golawala*. Better to think of it as an illusion rather than live with the guilt that I missed an opportunity for some ice cream. By 4:00, we were set to go. Rajapur looked feasible once again. We would now face the daunting task of finishing the 30 km to Rajapur before dark. We had our fingers crossed in hope we didn't have another puncture before Rajapur. Fortunately, we came through by the end of the day.

We both realised that outside Mumbai, the small cycle shops couldn't afford the luxury of an air compressor to fill up tyres. Here it was done the 'traditional' way, manually. It was very frustrating after being used to the air compressor.

Before leaving Lanja, I dumped my first packet of Electrol into a water can at a medical shop. Numerous other such packets would soon follow in the next few days, pumping that extra energy into me when I ran out of steam. My liquid diet had again begun. I also enquired about a knee cap. It wasn't available. Till then, I would have to stick to Iodex and a crape bandage. The problem with a crape bandage was that it's too rigid and cannot be used while pedalling. A knee cap was definitely a better option.

En route to Rajapur, the Electrol worked its wonders. I was once again in the lead. Rishi had lagged behind. At some point, the poor bugger was suddenly hungry. His stomach worked like a fuel tank without any provision for reserves. Once he is out of fuel, that's the end of him. He just

has to have food. I was carrying a packet of snacks that Pranay's mother had given us for such instances. We had strongly resisted since weight was our chief concern. Finally, we'd had to accept it to avoid hurting their feelings. Anyway, I was completely oblivious to Rishi's hunger and the fact that I was carrying the packet. Apparently, Rishi had been giving me a wild chase and hollering for me to stop. I was listening to my Walkman and couldn't hear him. Rishi hopelessly struggled to keep up with me. Finally, I stopped at some point to let him catch up. Rishi soon joined me, cursing wildly and looking half dead. He demanded food instantly and asked me to pull out the packet of snacks that I was carrying. He snatched the packet from my hands and ate as if he had never seen food in his life. His whole stance had suddenly transformed into a barbarian, as if I was running away with his mate. I had never seen him like this and was slightly alarmed but soon calmed down. I got to witness yet another facet of my friend. I let him eat peacefully and till then I walked to a nearby village to fill up the water cans.

With his hunger satiated, Rishi cooled down and we were back on the road. A few kilometres short of Rajapur, we passed through a road canopied by trees. I was in the lead and Rishi was tailgating me. A bit further, I spotted two lovely peacocks. I held up my hand to indicate to Rishi that we should stop. Then I squeezed on the brakes so hard that Rishi once again almost rammed into me. I could hear him scream from behind before I realised what I had done. I thought he had not seen the peacocks. He had. But he was more annoyed with me for stopping like that in spite of his warnings at Kashede. In all of that commotion, the peacocks were startled and flew away into the thicket.

Anyway, since we had stopped, I told Rishi about a beautiful spot up ahead just before Rajapur. It's a hairpin bend in the road. The bend is on the valley of a small hill with a stream flowing from below and it is covered with tall trees, calm and quiet. It could almost be an oversized indoor garden. When we stopped there, I looked at Rishi and eagerly expected some reaction. I was hoping he would share the solitude and calmness of that place.

Instead, I got a very ordinary, "Yeah, ok, nice, now shall we move on?" I was offended. But then it took some time for me to realise that our tastes are different.

By the time we reached Rajapur, it was dark. That day, I had decided that we would be staying in a lodge. I had made it very clear. We found one right in the old town of Rajapur, which is just 2 km off the highway.

The lodge was housed in an old structure. It had an internal courtyard with a beautiful tree, well hidden from the chaos that reigned outside. A dark, narrow passage led to our room situated at the extreme end of the building. The management there didn't have a problem with letting our cycles inside the room. Our room boy was our age but was a victim of polio. It was sad watching him limp but he was always smiling and helpful.

The room was lit by a small, dim bulb. I remembered Janshi, our native village, 35 km from where we were right now. Somehow, dimly lit rooms are something I would always associate with Janshi because it has been like that there in the evenings for years now due to power shortage. Here it was all the more gloomy because of the building's age. But it was a lot better than living on the road. Out in the cold. Rajapur was always very cold in the winter.

We tried to settle down in the dimly lit room. Rishi was not happy with it and made a fuss about it with the room boy. Finally, he had to accept it the way it was. Rishi told him to fetch us some cigarettes and soap. Now I was not happy. I had got into this habit of not troubling people with our needs and here was Rishi asking him to run an errand. When I objected, he very coolly explained that he was the room boy and running errands was a part of his job. It then struck me that we were in a lodge and not someone's house. So we might as well make use of the services. We would tip him generously! Symbiosis was indeed nice!

We cleaned up and then stepped out of the lodge into total darkness. Another power failure. As we walked in the narrow, dark streets, I started explaining to Rishi how fabulous this medieval town was. He just nodded. It was 8:30 pm. Rajapur sleeps early. We would have to wait for the morning to watch the place in action.

I had initially thought that after Mumbai-Goa, we would travel back to Rajapur and then Janshi, my village. There, Baba would have already come with our extended family for his holidays. Then we would all go back to Mumbai in the car along with the cycles. But at Sangameshwar, I found out that their trip had been delayed. I still wanted Rishi to see Janshi. It was a beautiful village. He would have loved it. I started thinking about how to make it happen. I had asked Rishi if we should book return tickets from

Rajapur back to Mumbai. That would freeze our plan to visit Janshi. It would make us commit. But that's one thing Rishi never did. As a person, he preferred being noncommittal and I wasn't satisfied with that. I wanted a commitment. This was one more aspect where we differed. Perhaps even our professions reflected this perfectly. His job as a sailor didn't demand nasty deadlines whereas mine as an architect demanded that work always be done on time. Needless to say, we both belonged to our own distinct spheres! I grudgingly accepted an open plan according to which we would decide our return plans once we reached Goa.

We had dinner at a typical *khanaval*. It was a small place I generally came to when I visited Rajapur. The food is home-made, spartan, yet delicious. It's run by two ladies. One amongst the numerous Gadgils in Rajapur. They had this outer living room/multipurpose hall with tables and benches arranged around the periphery. You just walk in, take up any empty place and wait to be served. The food is typical Maharashtrian *Brahmin* style, pure veg. This place is very popular with the people here. Rajapur held the honour of being the *taluka* headquarters with many government offices. So, naturally, most of the people who work there or come there to have their work done stop over at the Gadgils' for a simple meal.

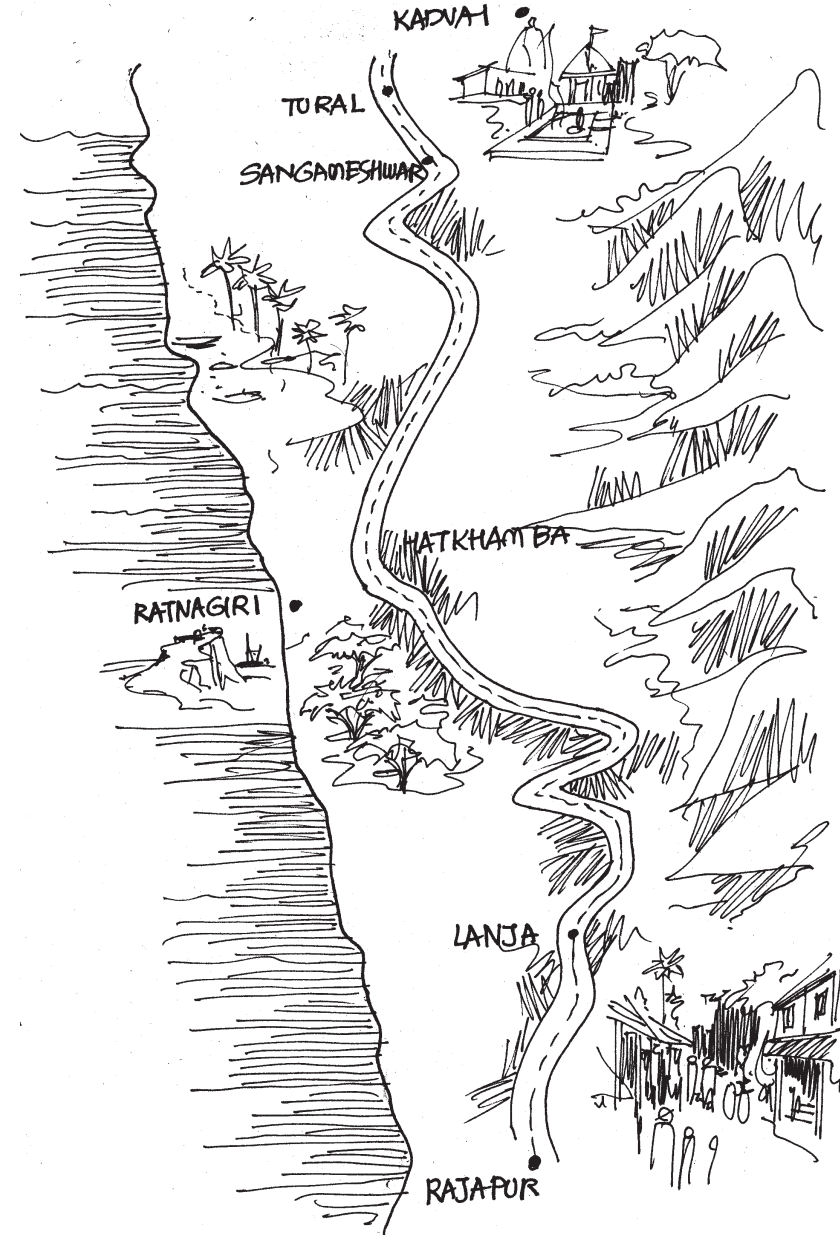
I wasn't sure if Rishi would like the place but I was keen on him experiencing it. He was all right with it. After dinner, I went to a local booth to report back home and in the meantime Rishi went to the only place in the town serving Chinese. He had some spicy noodles served with chicken. It was obvious that he had found our *Brahmin* food too bland or too small in quantity and he had remained modest about voicing his dislike. I barely tasted the Chinese he was consuming since it was too spicy. By 9:30 pm, we had another power failure. A torch came in handy. The lodge was just five minutes away from the bazaar. But I wasn't worried even in the dark streets since I knew the place. Occasionally, the harsh lights of a bus hit us as it passed by. The noise and the clatter of its glass windows reverberated in the empty, silent streets of medieval Rajapur.

That night, we again slept peacefully. I just recollected the earlier day. Earlier that day, I had been extremely sceptical about making it here at all. But once again, we had done it. Four days and 400 km from Mumbai lay behind us, 200 km of the highway remained till Goa. I was getting used to *Aai*'s familiar voice. When I told her that we were in Rajapur, she was

happy. She had been charting our progress on the map. Come to think of it, I had acquired my adventure bug from her, not my father! The previous night at Kadvai, I had expressed my fears that we may not be able to make it to Rajapur. Tonight while talking to her she asked how we did it. I had said, "Oh, we caught up on lost time." As if we were long-distance trains running behind schedule and making up for lost time en route.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 05, 2002
Day 4: Sangmeshwar to Rajapur

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	Comments
Sangameshwar Departure	7:00 D	9:15 D 10:00	Kadvai Sangameshwar (pass)
Hatkhamba	10:00 A 11:00 D	12:15 A 1:00 D	Lunch
Pali	12:00		
Lanja	2:00	3:00 A 4:00 D	Tyre puncture
Rajapur	5:00 A	6:00 A	Distance covered: 87 km



Black or White

The next day was a Sunday. It was moderately cold. Rishi's cycle was dangerously low on air. The previous day at Lanja, while repairing the puncture, we had under-filled the rear tyre to be on the safer side. The morning cold had reduced the air pressure further. Now, the low air pressure made it impossible to ride without a drag. So early that morning began the search for a cycle shop. I was glad that Rishi would finally be able to see the beautiful medieval town in daylight and in action.

Rajapur's bazaar was one of the most well preserved examples of medieval town planning. The architectural scale was compact, congested almost. All of the structures hugged each other with narrow streets running between them. Almost everyone was on foot so an occasional vehicle squeezing in through the narrow lanes looked ridiculously out of place and all the pedestrians detested it. Shops occupied the ground floor and the residences above. In totality, it was a very vibrant place. Rajapur was a very important port back in those medieval days. Today, the river is silted up and the old waterways sadly forgotten. But the town's medieval aura and beauty have remained.

Rajapur happened to be the nearest town to my remote native village Janshi, 35 km away. I had been here often and it was always a very nice experience. Weekly shopping during our stay at Janshi in the hot summer holidays was our favourite pastime. Addicted to the materialistic ways of Mumbai, this small town gave us a brief respite from living in a remote, silent village.

Rishi and I walked towards the bazaar with our helmets strapped to our heads and the luggage behind. It felt very funny. Each and every eye turned to look at us. It was very unsettling to be a major source of attraction early in the morning.

We hardly had any other choice since the only cycle shop was located at the far end of the bazaar peth. Anyway, I was glad that Rishi got to see Rajapur's medieval bazaar peth in action. As we passed the narrow streets,

a madari passed with two bears. There was nothing cute about those animals. They unwillingly obeyed his whip and made sounds of agony when ordered to perform something nature didn't expect them to.

We came out on the fringes of the bazaar. Here, commerce gradually gave way to silent residential zones, with an occasional shop or two. Finally, we found ourselves standing in front of a cycle shop a closed cycle shop. Somehow it looked promising even with its doors shut. We were there too early. The owner would come back soon is what the neighbours assured us. So we decided to have some breakfast. We headed to a small café run by a pious Moslem. It was small yet clean. As we had our breakfast, we noticed a steadily growing number of kids and youngsters accumulating where we had parked our cycles. I had to keep a constant watch on them from inside the café and paid less attention to my breakfast. Rishi was busy eating and for him at that moment, nothing else mattered. I made two trips to the cycle shop in the next few minutes, only to find it in the same state of calmness and serenity... still closed! Time could have almost forgotten this shop. Just as it had forgotten many of the medieval houses in the heart of Rajapur. By 9:00, Rishi had finished his breakfast. Suddenly, the urgency of the time loststruck him. We tried hand pumping air into the tube with our portable pump. It wasn't good enough. After a certain limit, it becomes impossible to keep on pushing more air with a hand pump. But the portable pump did manage to attract more kids and curious onlookers.

We were both tired of the crowd. Even the crowd was tired of us since we weren't doing anything except talking amongst ourselves. But these people had more patience and hung around for us to make our next move. Who knows what may happen next! Investing their patience in us was not considered time wasted. I guided Rishi and the cycles through a narrow lane that led straight to the river, out of the commotion, to wait it out. As if exiting hastily back stage after a flop show.

I once again tried my luck at the cycle shop. Still no luck. This now called for some real desperate measures. It was already 9:30 am. I asked a

group of kids who kept on following me if they had an air pump. The initial response was not good, but soon the word spread rapidly amongst those kids and someone volunteered to lend us one, for which we would have to drag the cycles to his place. So I returned to Rishi with the whole entourage of kids and off we went following this 'angel kid' who would help us. We didn't have any other choice.

As we passed along the river, we met a few people. We met this mullah who asked about us. I briefed him about our tour and told him that I belonged to the same place. He gave us his good wishes for the rest of the journey. I said goodbye and mentioned that chances were we would meet again on our way back. But I wondered if I would recognise those same people when I went back to Rajapur on my next annual visit. At the kid's place, we got the pump and it worked. I did the honours of pumping air into the cycles. By this time, we were surrounded by eight to nine kids. Fair-skinned, pious Moslems with beautifully embroidered prayer caps crowning their heads. We thanked them and left. By 9:45, we were back on the road, behind schedule by more than an hour.

We steadily climbed the long ghat leading out of Rajapur city. We passed the Hativale junction on the highway from where the road bifurcated to reach Janshi. I pointed it out to Rishi. After crossing the village of Kondae, the road started climbing and Rishi was pushing ahead. I followed at my leisurely speed. After some time, I saw Rishi standing at the side of the road, dismounted from his cycle. Obviously, Rishi had another puncture. Right here in the middle of nowhere. All I could say was, "Wow". Rishi was not amused. He was very frustrated by his cycle. We were expecting this and once again we grew worried about the condition of the tyres.

Here, far away from any town, we were on our own. Rishi looked very distraught but claimed that he was not. Maybe it was the interference in the tempo that upset him, which is understandable. So I reassured him and said that it was only a puncture and we were trained for this.

We settled ourselves on the roadside in the shade of a tree. Out came

the tool kit. Firstly, we removed the tube from the housing in the tyre. Next we filled the tube with air with our portable hand pump. There was something wrong with the valves. Then it dawned on us that the imported valves had been nicked the previous day at Lanja at the cycle shop. Fortunately, we were carrying spares and made the replacement. The change was immediate. Now we were able to easily hand pump air into the tube.

Once again, we topped up the air pressure. The next problem was detecting the puncture. It is very fine and ideally needs a dip test. But here we were carrying only half empty water cans. So like misers, we sprinkled water on the tube to detect the hole. After some minute observation, we found it. The good news was that it could be mended. The bad news was that the small pebbles in the tyre ridges had finally made their way to the tube by cutting the tyre. As we both busied ourselves with the repairs, Rishi recollected his previous experiences when in case of a problem in a group of say five people, two would work on mending it and the others would watch impatiently for them to finish, cursing each other for not taking the proper precautions. We were glad we were the only ones on this tour. Understanding amongst two people is much better than in a group. Many people in passing vehicles watched us with curiosity. A few raised their hands or gave us the thumbs up sign to indicate good luck or whatever. But most of their expressions reflected goodwill and a certain awe for what we were doing. It felt good and even we waved back at them. Frankly, that habit of returning these simple, spontaneous gestures made a profound impact on me. After the tour, when we returned to Mumbai, one morning I had stepped out on my cycle when I saw a group of school kids. Spontaneously, I felt like waving at them but then quickly realised that the tour was over and my attire no longer held that charm nor did my mind feel as euphoric. If it was Rishi, he would have waved irrespective of the situation. That was him!

We had the puncture repaired and were ready to go in an hour. The next pass was at Kharepatan. There was a small ghat after that, which is amongst the last of the ghats on the highway. So I was keen on getting over with it.

Before the ascent, Rishi filled up his water can at a phone booth.

By the time we ascended the ghat, it was 12:30 pm. We were then nearing Tarale. The sun had sapped the energy from both of us. Exhaustion had started setting in at an alarming rate. We decided to have lunch, followed by a siesta. We spotted a Rajasthani dhaba a few kilometres before Tarale. The dhaba was like any other. Unknown Hindi songs blared away on the speakers. But in all the songs, the crux remained the same – love and its various forms of sufferings... especially that of separation. Obviously, these songs catered to the truckers' mentality.

The dhaba had a big ground where trucks were parked. The whole ground had a carpet of fine powdered soil. In the monsoon, this place must be a real mess. At one side of the truck parking was an open water tank where the truckers cleaned up and washed their belongings. Next to it was a never-ending clothes line. The dhaba itself was a typical eyesore. But what mattered was the food. Sadly, to Rishi's disappointment, it was purely vegetarian. The entire setting was nice and peaceful though.

The dhaba was screened from the highway by an avenue of tall trees. In its background was Gagan Bavda, a nearby mountain top, distinctly identifiable amongst the surrounding wall of mountains. It was also one of the passes on the Western Ghats that leads from the Konkan to the Deccan Plateau two thousand feet above. I had been to that place just a few months back with a cousin. It was beautiful. It had this multi-storeyed building, an ashram, perched right on the edge of the cliff. Must be very exciting to stay there, but maybe a bit too exciting in the monsoons with heavy rains and strong winds. It felt reassuring to look at Gaganbavda from the dhaba.

Rishi ordered a paratha with a very spicy dal fry. I shared the paratha supplemented by some curds. Then we had a few glasses of buttermilk. The food was oily but good. I overate and made a convenient exception to my liquid lunch.

In the meantime, I had set out our clothes for drying in the hot sun on a pile of rubble. Let them release a few more water molecules to the atmosphere and reduce the weight we'd had to carry.

After lunch, we decided to wait it out a bit more till the heat was tolerable. My body needed rest. It was complaining. All that I hoped was to make it to Goa before I crashed totally and of course before Rishi's cycle broke down.

Rishi slept and I sat on the veranda ledge looking at Gaganbavda. As I watched, I was quickly captivated by its majesty and serenity. It was one of those numerous spots that would leave a lasting image in my mind. I could look at it for hours together and be oblivious to time and my own existence. For me, once again, time stopped here for a brief moment. My mind could feel itself merge with nature. I could feel that I was no more part of this mad world where everybody was desperately trying to carve out a niche for himself. For many of us, nature is a distant thing. But I belonged to this land. This is where I came from and this is where I would go back one day. Till then, I could keep myself busy with my karma. But there, for those few moments, I could feel what I missed in the city. I missed the solitude of resting under the shade of a beautiful mango tree. I missed the mountains and the forest. The simple people and the villages. Feeling part of nature is a very calming thing because for once you realise how small you are and even then you are important in your own little way. Here, nothing compares. I had a good time experiencing all of that. Peace and mental solitude never come that easily. That again was its enigmatic beauty.

By 2:45, it was time to leave. We passed Tarale and were soon on the 4 km straight patch. The only such straight patch on the entire highway. It was sharp contrast to the twists and turns of the Konkan.

While passing the village of Tarale, I once again noticed an interesting looking hill in its backdrop. It had a unique shape and seemed to have a big tableland on top. This hill had always captured my attention and once before, while travelling by the Konkan Railway, I had observed it closely. The tableland dropped vertically for a few feet and then sloped steeply to meet the level ground. The edge of the cliff face is made of huge boulders as if stuck on its walls. It looked remote. It would be interesting to be at its top and unravel its enigma once and for all.

As we continued in the afternoon, the sun made the silhouette of the Sahyadris stand out even more boldly. I was captivated by it. In a way, my mind was drifting and found the distraction preferable over the physical exhaustion and boredom of pedalling. The problem with that was I was losing concentration on the road and the motivation to keep on pushing till we reached our destination. I tried to show Rishi some good spots but he was completely focused on the road. He barely saw what I was pointing out. Besides, it was slowing him down. Finally, I got frustrated with his attitude of being seemingly oblivious to his surroundings and told him so. This was definitely not the Rishi I knew in the mountains. What he said next brought me back to my senses. He said very coldly that right now our aim was Goa and the immediate goal was reaching Sawantwadi. He had presented the scenario in black and white. The choice was either the lovely view that I could always see the next time I came or Goa... choose. There would be time for leisurely drives later when we reached Goa! The more I stopped, the more exhausted I would be. Forget about the delays and a ruined schedule. I had no choice. He was right. I had to keep on pushing in a more focused manner. I just accepted his advice. Yes, Rishi was right about many things he said when provoked. This is where his drive and focus to do things made all the difference.

By the time we reached Kankauli, it was 4:15. I desperately needed some sugarcane juice. On the busy highway, we looked for a stall and also kept our ears open to the familiar sound of ghungarus. Naturally, we found one outside the bus stand. I just downed my usual three glasses. Then I filled up the water can with sugar cane juice and ice. It felt very refreshing. We wrapped up in 15 minutes. There was no time to lose. Kudal was still 35 km away and our speed had dropped to a low of 12 to 15 km an hour. We had initially started with an average speed of 18 to 22 km per hour on day one. Of course, there the road was flat.

Leaving Kankauli was a real pain for me. I knew that the stretch between Kankauli and Kudal was going to be very boring. My fatigue had once again started clouding my mind. Even Beethoven couldn't help get my

bearings back to normal. So I finally gave up listening to the Walkman and just brainwashed myself into enjoying the drudgery of riding. My reserve energy soon took over. Finally, the will to do it was getting triumphant over the physical pain.

There was a marked change in the landscape after Kankauli. The land and the road started flattening out and we crossed many rivulets and canals. The highway had also started narrowing down. The tarmac strip beyond the thresholds was missing. Two vehicles just barely crossed each other. There was no room for extras and that was us. Initially, I was a bit scared when the loaded trucks passed by very close to us. If we happened to be at the wrong place where two vehicles crossed each other, we would be in a real crunch.. As there was no extra tarmac patch beyond the thresholds, the idea of suddenly moving onto dirt and unlevelled ground was daunting. The other problem was bigger vehicles travelling at high speeds produced powerful eddies of wind that made us dangerously unstable. Similar was the case when vehicles travelled in the opposite lane.

I had travelled on the highway only till Kankauli; after that was new territory. While passing Orus (now Sindhudurg Nagari), we encountered this beautiful wide stretch of road. There we caught up on time by increasing our speed. Reaching Kudal at 6:15 pm left me a bit surprised. Three kilometres before Kudal, we stopped for a very brief rest while Rishi filled up the cans. I had exhausted my sugarcane juice in the first 15 km and was on reserve. This time, I was so glad that Rishi went to have the cans filled. I just sat down on the road and rested. The sun was going down fast. Sawantwadi was still 20 km away. We were supposed to stop over at Mr. Pandit's place in Sawantwadi. Even if we had covered the last 35 km at a fast pace, there was no way we would make it to Sawantwadi before sunset. When Rishi came back, I told him that it was time to look for another lodge. We would not be making it to Sawantwadi.

A road bifurcated to Kudal from the highway. From there, it went to Panjim via Vengurla, Reddi, Terekhol and Harmal. We would take that route while returning. At that time, we took the bifurcation to enter Kudal

and found a lodge just outside the local bus stand. It was dark now. The lodge had a marriage hall on the ground floor and a bus load of people had landed there for the next day's marriage. So the whole management was busy catering to them. I waited at the reception. Soon, there was a man at the desk. Rooms were available at Rs. 250 a night and we could take our cycles in. I signed the register and before paying up came out to tell Rishi the good news. By that time, my pal had also made a few inquiries of his own. There were cheaper options available in the bazaar peth ahead. I didn't want to go through the accommodation hunting exercise all over again. I lied saying I had already committed and couldn't back out. Rishi let it go at that. Then it struck me that I had to call Mr. Pandit at Sawantwadi who had volunteered to accommodate us for a night when we passed his town. Now I wanted to tell them that we were delayed and couldn't make it.

I called him up from the reception desk and briefed him about our status. He said that we could consider coming to Sawantwadi if we didn't mind night riding for 20 km, which would take about an hour. The road was good, he said. I told him that I would have to ask my partner and would call back. Rishi naturally didn't have a problem with that. So back to the reception counter to cancel our reservation at the lodge. I had told Mr. Pandit that we would be leaving in a few minutes and to expect us at Sawantwadi bus stand in two hours. That was again assuming Rishi's cycle held up. If something went wrong, I told him we would call. The man at the reception counter coolly accepted the cancellation.

As we left, Rishi once again filled the cans for the night ride. Later, he rightfully asked me how come I was ditching the Kudal lodge and breaking my commitment. I bluffed that I had talked my way out of it. Poor Rishi. Somewhere, I had hurt him unknowingly. I had tried to bully him into going my way but it had backfired!

Riding into a silent, dark night was a novel experience. On came the dynamo and the relatively silent noise of the chain on the free wheel was replaced by a more solid version. The dynamo was making full contact with my front tyre. The light it threw was good enough. It was fun riding in the

night for a change. The whole change of events and the anticipation of night riding had jolted me out of my exhaustion. But I was a bit intimidated due to my inexperience. Rishi on the other hand had previous night riding experience. So I had asked him to stay behind me all the time, which he did for some time.

Finally, on a small ascent, he overtook me. I was annoyed. That's precisely when my chain came undone while shifting gears. The dynamo lost the friction that it needed and instantly I was enveloped by the pitch black night. I screamed for Rishi. But my dear friend had his Walkman on and there was a concert in progress between his ears. He was in no mood to be disturbed. I completely blew my lid and that disturbed me momentarily. Searching for a torch was useless. I had one in my backpack just for such incidents. But I just felt my way around the chain and placed it back where it belonged. In broad daylight, I would have seen my black, greasy hands. But out here in the cold darkness, it all blended perfectly. I continued the silent ride.

Slowly, fatigue started getting to me again. The road had really narrowed down and the risk we had taken suddenly became very obvious. Night riding on such a road wasn't funny anymore, that too after a long day! At a few places, we had traffic piling up behind us and the powerful headlights were very menacing. But in a way, the headlights gave us that extra light we needed from time to time.

Ignorance is bliss. This is the statement I generally used to reserve for Rishi. This time, however, I was the ignorant one, having been completely oblivious to the risk we had taken. I had noticed the narrow road but somehow failed to preempt the consequences. Rishi expressed his displeasure when we reached Sawantwadi. It was only then, noting the fear in Rishi's voice, that I realised the risk we had taken. But thankfully it was now over; we had crossed the patch in the night without incident!

The good part of riding in the night is that the darkness blurs away the physical perception of the distance travelled. This can have two effects. Either you underestimate the distance covered or you overestimate it. We

naturally overestimated it and were surprised when we didn't reach Sawantwadi in an hour.

Night riding on cycles was a novel experience also because in broad daylight, we used to look out for each other in the small rear view mirrors. Now, interestingly, that image was replaced by a strange looking light, which swayed as it moved at a very slow pace behind us. Rishi had this habit of switching off his dynamo (blind flying!). Sometimes I thought I lost him and used to reduce my speed to let him catch up. Then, like a divine voice though the darkness, Rishi would forbid me to stop and keep on pushing.

The other interesting observation was that the head lights of approaching vehicles blinded us completely and our dynamos were hopelessly insufficient to illuminate the highway threshold bands on our side. In such cases, we concentrated on the white bands on the centre of the road. The side effect to that was I tended to sway rather than maintain a steady straight course. If there was a vehicle behind me, that would have been the end of me. But I was counting on the fact that the road was not wide enough anyway. So the vehicle behind wouldn't overtake till the opposite lane was clear, assuming he had mercy, wasn't blinded and had patience. Mr. Pandit caught us on the highway even before we could end the search for the bus stand. We were glad that he had volunteered to escort us to his place. We were both tired. I had already surpassed all my limits that day. But I still had this social night coming up. At their house, we were welcomed by 'Chubby', Mr. Pandit's grand-nephew, a cute 10-year-old. Then there was Mrs. Pandit, warm and hospitable.

We both settled ourselves on a bench in the living room before cleaning up. This time, I insisted on hot water. Everything was just waiting for us. Even the food was ready. Fish for Rishi and vegetables for me. I could sense the disappointment in these people's voices when I said I was a veggie. The room service there was much better than at any of the lodges. Of course many people would have killed me if I'd said that out loud. But hey, come on, I was tired, exhausted and a bit deranged!

Chubby showed us around the house. At the dinner table, I barely registered what I was chatting about with my hosts. Rishi didn't have to talk. He had delicious sea food on his plate. I was hardly eating anything... when compared to Rishi I mean. After dinner, I talked a bit more with Uncle.

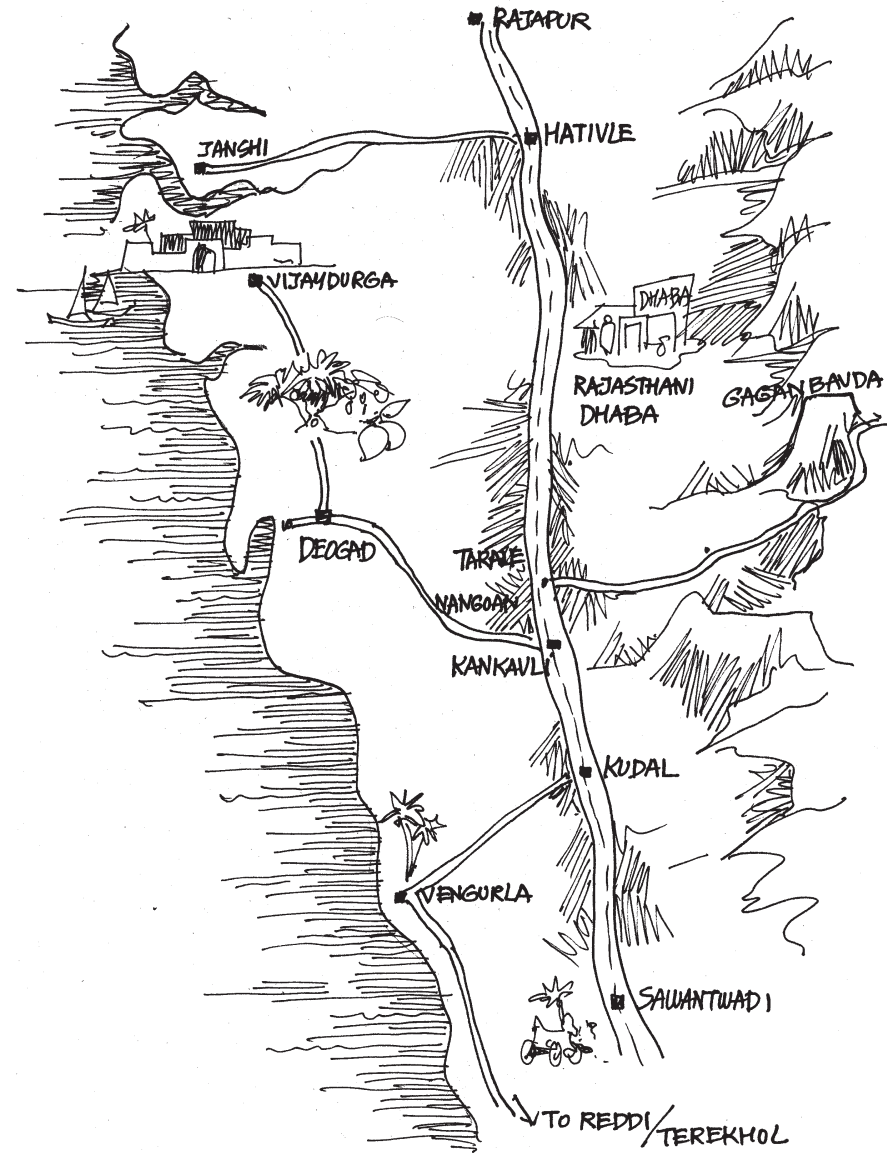
Later, they both retired for the night. Chubby insisted on taking a walk. Rishi gladly accepted. How could he miss his last cigarette for the day? Alas, I couldn't join them. I was already dead with exhaustion. Rishi later bribed Chubby with a few Cadburys. That solved my problem of not carrying the customary packet of sweets or gifts for my generous hosts.

Later that night, we were assigned a bedroom on the first floor. I carried the water cans up since Rishi always drinks water in the night. He had been using the can to have a drink or two during previous nights. The next morning, Chubby happened to smell the bottles and found the lingering smell peculiar. Fortunately, I quickly realised what had gone wrong and told him it was the Electrol I frequently use. Later, I gave Rishi a piece of my mind. Chubby would one day realise what the smell was; till then, we would be on another tour altogether.

That night, we both slept very peacefully. I groaned in the night. At some point, Rishi felt warm and put the fan on at full speed. I felt cold and made such horrible, indescribable sounds of protest that he quietly turned it off. Rishi told me all of this the next day. I myself heard Rishi groan in the night a few times. The tour was finally getting to him also. This was our last night on the road. Tomorrow, a dream would finally come to an end.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 06, 2002
Day 5: Rajapur to Sawantwadi

Destination	Estimated Time		Actual Time Comments
	(A: Arrival D: Departure)		
Rajapur	7:00 D	9:45 D	Rishi's cycle needs air
		11:10 A 11:40 D	Konda, puncture
Tarale (Pass)	10:00	1:00 A 2:45 D	Rajashthani <i>dhaba</i> Lunch & siesta, Gaganbavda
Kankauli	2:00	4:15 A 4:30 D	
Kudal	4:00	6:15 A 6:45 D	Kudal Lodge
Sawantwadi	6:00 A	8:15 A	Night ride Stoover at Mr. Pandit's house Distance covered: 90 km



The Infinite Ramp

In the morning, the enormity of the house struck us. It was really huge for three people. It was 8:00 am by the time we woke up. This was it. The last day of our wonderful tour. Now when I think about it, it is all a blur. I begin to wonder if we really covered such a sizable distance on cycle. There were so many things around us that would easily prove the occurrence of the event. The tyres had worn out, our bodies had become taut, all the veins on my hands had surfaced above the normal smooth skin, the sun had tanned our skin the tan was most obvious on our arms, half ebony and half wheatish, where our T-shirt sleeves began. Yet, today, my mind somehow finds all of it difficult to accept.

For the past five days, Rishi had worn the same clothes during the day and his second set at night. Once again, he changed over into his riding gear a tight T-shirt and his cycling shorts. I had stuck to the same routine. I had learnt a lot from him.

That morning when I woke up at Sawantwadi, I felt much better. Now only 70 km remained out of the 588 km. It was a Monday. Mr. Pandit and Mrs. Pandit were already up and had finished most of their early morning chores. Chubby's face lit up when he greeted us in the morning, as if surprised to see us awake. He was adorable. He reminded me of myself when I was small. The proportions were exactly the same! The phrase that came to mind was the same one people used when they described me 'well fed'.

We finished our ablutions followed by a hot water bath. By 9:30, we were ready for departure. Mrs. Pandit had to rush off to her office, so a quick goodbye was all we could say. She had already prepared a simple breakfast for us in advance.

At 10:00, we were set to go. Mr. Pandit had to leave for 'Banda'. Chubby had to attend school in the next few hours. I am sure he would have a lot to tell his friends in school. It would be a bit difficult for them to believe it, but maybe somewhere it would set the ball rolling for dreams to be fulfilled at a later age!

I had Rishi take a snap of ours with Chubby and his friends who had gathered to watch us. Chubby wore my helmet, but the cycles were not in the frame. It was a typical group photo, except that one boy wore a strange looking helmet, which we cannot relate to anything around.

We rode for 25 km till we crossed the state border. It was a simple check post where a policeman manned the entrance and inspected all the vehicles coming and going. He asked us where we came from as he lifted the barrier. 'Mumbai' came the answer. He remained silent and let us pass.

The most noticeable change after crossing the Goa border was the increase in the number of liquor shops all along the highway. Here we saw temples and churches with a typical Portuguese influence. Of course, we never stopped to really look at them; my partner wouldn't allow such 'distractions'.

Rishi was transforming into a different person now. I could just make wild guesses at his euphoria. I asked him why he was so ecstatic. He said he was happy that we were nearing Goa.

Our first stop for tea was at a wayside *dhaba* run by a woman who served us *samosas* and tea. She was in her 30s. Initially, she showed no interest in us, which we found unusual by then. She was busy talking to someone in Konkani, the local language. We both listened to her language and were both able to decipher what they said to each other. We both liked to hear the language and the way it was spoken. Later, she busied herself sorting vegetables. As we began to leave, out of the blue she asked Rishi about us. Her blank, mundane face slowly broke into a small smile when she heard of our journey. Even that kind of response was welcome compared to the gloom and the sluggishness I had first observed.

Here in Goa, there was no hurry to go anywhere. It was so peaceful. Rishi gave me a real insight into Goan mentality. Here, the local population had seen it all. For them, all the charm had gone. You come all the way from Mumbai on a cycle or on a camel, for them it was all the same. I found it hilarious.

Soon we were on our way to Mapusa. I had thought that there were no *ghats* anymore. I was wrong. A very long ascending ramp lay in front of us

just a few kilometres short of Mapusa. It was a big one. This is exactly what I was not prepared for. My exhaustion had returned. We must have hardly covered 35 km since morning. Initially, the long, never-ending ramp seemed harmless. As I started the ascent, I found it tough to continue. Rishi had already taken the lead and was way ahead. His energy probably came from his elation. I envied his attitude. It was as if for him the journey had just begun. For me, it was exactly the other way round. A dream was turning into a reality. I mean, it was good news. But sometimes, just to keep on dreaming is also nice. Sadly, with every single revolution of the wheel, this dream that we'd cherished for more than a year was being transformed into reality. Perhaps somewhere deep down, that dream wanted to remain a dream!

I was getting into another moody phase when this never-ending ramp confronted me. I just had to gather whatever I had. One more time. I kept telling my mind that there would be a bend up ahead that would break the monotony. I would reach the top and then it would be a drive all the way down at 60 km per hour.

The sun was beating down on us. My water can was almost empty now. Of all the gradients that I had covered, this evoked the strongest of all the emotions. Till now, I had climbed all the *ghats*. I had pushed myself and the cycle to all its possible limits. Even beyond. I was happy and proud of myself that I could do it. Yes, my speed had dropped to a ridiculous 2-4 km an hour on certain stretches, but I had finally come all the way. I had no intention of giving up on this stretch. I knew this was going to be the last test of endurance. But my body was giving me all the indications of fatigue and strain. If my body could speak, it would have screamed in pain and agony. Even my back had started paining badly now. The previous night at Sawantwadi where I grunted in the night that was my body's voice. But I told myself, "Not now. Not after all of this." I had to make the magic happen one more time. Just one more time.

On the next bend, I was expecting to reach the top. Alas, it was just another twist in the ramp. The top was still way ahead. Rishi was nowhere

in sight. Finally, I had to stop to recharge myself. I could have cried in agony. The physical pain and exhaustion had overwhelmed my mind. Here, even Rishi was not around waiting for me. One of the few instances when he had to push ahead of me. After a few minutes, I felt some energy flow back into me. I began the ascent once again, feeling a bit better. At the top, Rishi was waiting for me. It felt good to see him again. I had flown above the clouds.

The descent down the ramp was rewarding. The speed and the gushing wind made me forget all the negative thoughts that had clouded my mind. My Walkman was useless against the din of the wind.

The next two hours however were quite bad. My exhaustion was complete. I was just driving on the last scraps of energy left in my body. Even the Electrol doses failed to have any effect. Rishi had accepted the fact that I was tiring out badly with the passage of each kilometre. He started to let me pass and would give me chase for a while. Finally, at some point, even his reduced speed was faster for me. He would then overtake me. After half an hour, the distance between us increased a lot. I felt sad riding alone like that while he'd wait for me up ahead. I never stopped. I just indicated 'OK' and moved on. Instinctively, I knew that I shouldn't stop now. He would just wave at me to keep moving. In this way, we repeated the whole process over and over again till we reached Panjim.

Rishi was a solitary adventurer. He was used to travelling alone and on sheer impulse, many a time out of desperation or lack of enthusiastic company. Perhaps even I was like that, but given a choice, I would prefer company, especially if it taught me something or challenged me. It was very clear from the day we met that it would be difficult for me to accomplish something like this on my own. I saw a role model in Rishi apart from just a partner. Given a choice, I knew Rishi would push on without waiting for me to catch up. That's why I hammered it into him from the beginning that we were a two-member team and we should act accordingly. He had kept to his word and was giving me that extra moral boost that I badly needed. I knew that I was limiting him but I had no

choice. I appreciated his cooperation.

By 1:15 pm, we stopped at a *dhaba* to have some food and take a break 30 km before Panjim. We had some beer and Rishi had a good meal while I ate very little. Rishi declared that the tour was now over. I had somehow reluctantly accepted it. We were still 30 km from Panjim, but yes, in principle, it was over. Finishing those last few kilometres remained a matter of formality. Besides, I was almost dead. I just had to continue till a free grave site! Rishi took my snap there just for the record. I protested meekly but let it go.

Back on the highway, the road broadened and narrowed depending on the traffic. It was 3:00 when we stopped at an avenue of trees along the road. A marshy land full of mangroves spread on either side of the road. It was the last stop before I would make the last push. Rishi again put that on record. I was so tired I barely spoke.

The view from the bridge over the Mandovi River was a sight. Panjim city lay on the banks. Hotels and houses were strewn across the hills and the Mandovi River carried a lot of marine traffic. The near completion of the journey pumped some energy back into me. I had now taken the lead! The ramp coming down the bridge ended at a traffic island where I stopped to re-orient myself with the city. Rishi joined me soon. We fussed over the roads, directions and the hotels. I struggled with the maps of Goa. In all of that chaos, we were completely oblivious to the importance of the moment. We stood in the shade of a tree close to the bus stand. Amidst this fuss, Rishi suddenly grabbed my hand and gave me a strong handshake. For a split second, I couldn't make sense of such a spontaneous gesture.

I said, "Like, what happened now?"

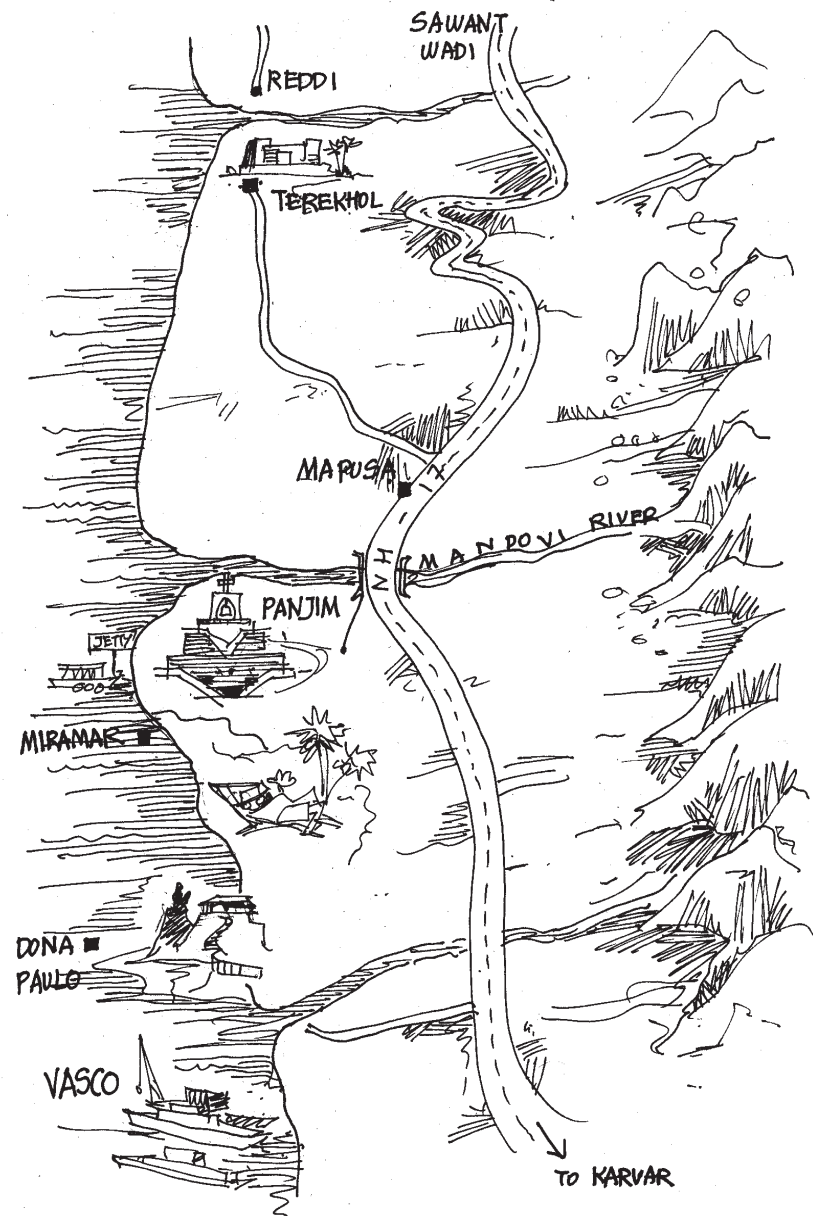
He declared, "We have reached Goa! Our dream is now a reality!"

The importance of the moment finally settled in my head and I returned his firm handshake with a firmer one. Just the way we do whenever we meet each other. We could almost crush each other's hands. I mean he could almost crush my hand. In fact, many a time he mocked me when I gave him my firmest handshake with all my might. He just loved might. But at that moment, that handshake was spontaneous and special.

For us, it was to mark the finale of the event. The cycle tour was over. 600 km and 6 days of gruelling yet good cycling remained behind us. After we found accommodation for ourselves and our cycles, it would be time to rejoice and celebrate.

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 07, 2002
Day 6: Sawantwadi to Panjim

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure)	Actual Time	Comments
Sawantwadi	8:00 D	10:00	
		11:30 A	Tea break
		12:00 D	
		1:15 A	Lunch at <i>dhaba</i> ,
Panjim	4:00 A	2:45 D	18 km before Panjim
		4:00 A	
		4:45 A	Manvin's Hotel
			Distance covered: 55 km



At Goa!

Goa! Panjim! At last!

I had heard a lot about this beautiful land. I was finally there for the first time. The pages from the Lonely Planet were unfolding in front of my eyes. Panjim was full of foreigners, as if let loose on the streets. Most of them zipped around on motorcycles. For us, though, the most important thing was finding a good place to stay. This time, Rishi made no complaints, and anyway, I doubt if the Panjim police would have let us sleep at their local bus stand.

Looking for accommodation after the cycle tour somehow charged me up. After some frustrating moments of hotel hunting and the mandatory procedure of room inspections, we finally found accommodation in Manvin's Hotel. Just before signing the register, I told the receptionist that we would take our cycles in the rooms. It set off a whole chain of arguments but they eventually gave in. Rishi and I wheeled the cycles into our rooms through the hotel's tight corridors. The room was compact and through the window, I could see the bridge on the Mandovi River from where we'd just entered Panjim. We parked our cycles near the window and started with our domestic rituals.

Later, when Rishi got the razor, I decided to have a shave. I looked into the mirror and saw a very tired face before me. My whiskers had grown long and hardened. Sunburn had really tanned my skin. My surname didn't suit me anymore. After I finished shaving, my normal look was restored but without the original colour.

Later that night, we stepped out to celebrate our little triumph and returned late in the night. We were both exhausted and just crashed. As I lay on the bed, my eyes scanned the small room and settled on the two cycles parked in the corner. Some thoughts raced across our minds. Here they were now parked in a room after having just covered a distance of 600 km without any hassles. Now both were parked next to each other, both looked very calm and serene, just like the mountains. They were a part of the dream; in fact, they were the reason the dream existed in the first place. Rishi and I had personified our cycles by giving them names. Rishi's was 'Konkan Kanya' since it was better suited for ascending and mine we called 'Deccan Queen' since she was better on straight roads. Both these

names came from popular express trains operating on different terrains.

Now we all needed a good night's rest! I happened to wake up in the middle of the night. I saw Rishi sprawled at the same place where he'd sat down earlier. He must have been busy writing something. Crumpled papers were thrown all around. Something was bothering my friend and I wondered what it was, but Rishi's mind was uncharted territory and no one had access to it.

"Namaskar," came Rishi's first word the next morning at 10:00 am. It was his way of saying good morning. By this time, even I had gotten used to it. According to Rishi, celebrations should begin once more. I said, "What?!" It was just 10:00 in the morning. By noon, we were out on the streets once again without any specific agenda. Rishi finally got his haircut. He looked obnoxious. Such beautiful hair... such a waste.

That evening, I had to tell the world about my achievement. So I popped into an internet café while Rishi satisfied another pang of hunger at a restaurant. I joined him an hour later at the restaurant. It was almost empty. In the dimly lit room, my eyes settled on Rishi sitting in a corner. Seated on another table next to him was a huge foreigner. As I walked closer, I was stunned to see Rishi's table full of empty dishes. The food consumed could have satisfied a whole army. That glutton had eaten everything and had already downed a few pegs. Who was this friend of mine? A monster!

Rishi had already established a preliminary dialogue with his neighbour. He introduced me to Brad in his broken English. Brad was a huge, jolly Canadian who had come to India for the third time. He loved the people here. It didn't take long for me to start chatting with him. Rishi was delighted by my entry; he'd been saved the task of talking in Hinglish and made it very clear that from then on, Brad was my baby. Frankly, Rishi isn't that bad, just that he thinks he cannot talk in English. Anyway, he had already told Brad about our deeds and Brad was shocked. He knew how bad Indian roads can be, but he didn't know that the ones we'd taken were the exceptions at least during those months. He said we were mad. Out of Brad's bag came a sleek, compact handy-cam and he started interviewing us. Rishi started off with a crude introduction (the typical nervousness of being on film was obvious on his face, especially since he had to speak in Hinglish). Later, it was my turn. I naturally behaved like a veteran. Soon it was time for the first drink of the day... evening. Cenzano Rosa (rose

flavoured port wine) tasted like Drakshasav, an Ayurvedic medicine. The hint of roses was missing. Anyway, I was desperate to try different options. Soon, Brad's wife joined us. She was pleasant company, just like Brad.

As we chatted, Brad told us that in Canada, cycling is fun and the hobby of many, though not his. He declared himself a very average person who likes to booze and watch TV. On the other hand, his wife did exercise and Yoga regularly. I told them that my father practised Yoga regularly too. She mentioned she was desperate to find an ashram and asked me if I knew of any. She seemed like the typical foreign tourist who is tired of her mechanical life and desperately wanted to experience spirituality and that stuff. Anyway, I was as ignorant as her, so I had to shatter her hopes by telling her the truth. Soon it was time for them to leave. We bid each other farewell! We retired to our hotel at 1:00 am; we had to check out at 8:00!

The next morning, as we departed with our cycles, it was pre-decided that we would go to Caranzalem to meet Rishi's aunt and her family, the Kharapurkars, and I would pop in at the Salelkars' in Vasco. Rishi had called the Kharapurkars the previous night and they were deeply offended when they heard that we had stayed in a hotel in Panjim. Anyway, that morning, riding on the cycle again with Panjim's early morning traffic for company felt good after relaxing for the past two days. The Kharapurkars lived at Caranzalem, close to Miramar beach, 6 km away from Panjim.

The Kharapurkars lived in a row house at the base of a small cliff, which housed a few big bungalows perched right on the edge. As we entered the house, Rishi's aunt, a very amicable lady, welcomed us in Marathi governed by a Konkani accent. For the next fifteen minutes, she just kept expressing her wonder at the fact that we had come all the way from Mumbai on a cycle. It made us wonder if we had really done it. Two days of sobering up at Panjim had wiped out everything from our memory banks (temporarily), so here after two days, we were being reminded by someone that we had done something normal people generally don't do.

We then met Priti, her daughter. A college stereotype with all the things we would generally associate with such a breed. Heavily influenced by the latest Bollywood concoctions. In fact, what struck me when we entered the house was the stereo that blasted away some

unknown Hindi number in the background (unknown to me at least). It felt as if I had just entered a video coach bus. Later I realised that these people put it on first thing every morning. What a wonderful way to start the day. The best part was that in spite of a conversation taking place, no one felt the need to reduce the volume. So there we were, screaming above the din to make ourselves audible.

The living room was littered with all the latest gadgets compulsory for a middle class family. Mobile phones, deck, video player, TV, sofas, centre tables, dusty old artificial flowers with water droplets stuck on them... the only thing missing was a computer. After breakfast, I left for Vasco. I spent a relaxed afternoon at the Salelkars' and returned to Caranzalem in the evening.

It felt good to see Rishi once again. We stepped out before dinner for a fag, phone calls and to decide our next plan of action for the return trip to Mumbai. Baba was getting anxious about me returning home. Nilima Aunty had been very persistent about us staying in Goa one more day. It had been very tempting, but we decided to move on. Two days of rest had cooled down our bodies enough for us to begin the end of the cycle tour. Rishi had proposed that we do the return trip of 600 km back to Mumbai by cycle, but I had ruled it out. At the most, I agreed to 200 km until Deogad, my uncle Sanjay Mama's village! We decided to depart from Panjim the next morning, cover 90 km on the first day and reach Rishi's uncle Kanta Mama's place at Vengurla for the night. Then we would move on for our final leg of 110 km to reach Sanjay Mama's village at Deogad. We then returned to the Kharapurkars' for dinner.

Leaving Caranzalem the next day was to mark the beginning of our return trip. Later Rishi told me that he had felt sad that day for the first time. The next 200 km ride began, but not before a quick photo session on the veranda of their house, just for the record. I promised that I would send them copies later, which I did a month after we returned from the trip.

The most ironic part of this stay in Goa was that we hardly visited any places. I at least went to Vasco. But Rishi stayed put at one place. He was not the kind of person who would appreciate the beautiful churches, temples and beaches of Goa. Besides, we both were tired and weren't up to sight seeing. I had wanted to go for a swim to one of Goa's numerous beaches. Unfortunately, even that didn't materialise. Nilima Aunty insisted a lot that we stay for one more day and see Goa, but we had already decided our

return plan. Some other time, I said, although I was a bit unhappy about having to leave. Anyway, our main objective was the cycle tour and it had been done nicely nothing else mattered. Visiting Goa as a normal tourist would have to wait.

Our next plan of action was to reach Vengurla by evening but by a different route. I had been inquiring about a road that led to Vengurla along the Goa coast. I wasn't sure of the route but had a rough idea from where we would pass. En route, we would have to cross over two creeks. We weren't even sure if there was a ferry there but decided to take our chances. One creek was before Harmal Beach. The next was at Terekhol.

By early morning, we were back on the road once again. It felt good. Tracing our route back to Panjim parallel to Miramar beach was full of silence. Here we were leaving Goa and heading back home after 10 days. But somehow, I didn't want that tour to end. I loved adventure and knew that something as memorable as this would be difficult to do again for a long time.

Six days on the road had made us bond with our cycles physically and mentally. But three days of rest had made us lose this intimate bonding with the cycle. Passing on the streets of Panjim was good once again.

While leaving Panjim, we crossed the bridge over the Mandovi River. I recollected looking at the bridge from our room in Manvin's or late in the night when the traffic would have died out completely, with just an occasional vehicle passing by. In the morning, the bridge would be loaded. Little did I realise there was another smaller bridge running parallel to the main one meant only for two wheelers. It hit me later that unlike Mumbai, there are places in India where certain bridges are only meant for two wheelers. It was a pity that we had missed it.

The climb after the Mandovi River bridge was steep but we didn't realise it because the road was wide and loaded with vehicles. The fact that we couldn't climb fast enough gave us a true sense of the slope.

Later, we stopped at a medical store. I wanted to stock up on Electrol, just in case! Sadly, they didn't stock the genuine stuff but some cheap imitation, which I ended up dumping later. Next to it was a liquor shop! While I was at the medical store, Rishi stocked up on a whole bottle of whisky. A generous peg occupied his water can. His drinking habits had started alarming me! I confronted him and he as usual told me everything was just fine. So here we were, two cyclists running on two different fuels.

This time, I wanted to avoid the long ascent before Mapusa, the one we'd encountered before reaching Panjim. The highway skirts Mapusa city, so this time for a change we passed through Mapusa, thinking there may be an internal road leading to Terekhol. But the internal road again brought us to the highway. We passed by a sugarcane juice vendor. Unlike his Maharashtrian counterparts, the ghungarus on the stall were missing. He had a crusher that operated on a small, noisy kerosene motor. We naturally stopped. It felt refreshing, especially after that pseudo Electrol. Obviously Rishi wouldn't have any, but I bitched around by offering him some, arguing that it was much better than what he was drinking at the moment. I could see his eyes turning red. The heat and the alcohol were both at play here. Which was the stronger between the two? That was debatable! I couldn't see someone so close to me behave this way. Even today, I often wonder what tormented him, but that would be very hard to decipher.

We passed the dhaba where we'd had our first drinks of celebration after entering Goa. Now we were heading in the other direction. For the rest of the world, nothing had changed, but for us, a very memorable journey was soon coming to an end, and I was slowly getting melancholy. But some of it was still left in the last 200 km. I decided that I would enjoy the remaining journey.

At some point, we took an internal road that would lead us to Terekhol via Harmal. This road passed through rural Goa. Silent and peaceful. Suddenly, two fighter planes thundered across the sky. Another unacceptable juxtaposition. As the sound died out, I again concentrated on the road and its surroundings. The houses in rural Goa captivated me. A very marked feature of all was two seats with a smooth cement finish facing each other right at the entrance. It was a common detail repeated everywhere with every conceivable nuance. The rest of the landscape reminded me of the Konkan. We went on riding for a very long time; I had lost my sense of time in those small, internal roads of Goa. Even Rishi was relaxed and was completely captivated by the surrounding vistas.

Soon we reached our first ferry crossing. It was a medley of crowds. The local population competed with foreigners. For the first time, I saw ferries that carry vehicles. But the crowd was really a mess. We generally preferred to stand at a side, but everyone wanted to be the first to get out of the ferry along with their vehicles. That should be sufficient to convey the

kind of chaos that prevailed after the docking. The barge-like ferry had a lower deck for passengers and their vehicles and a very strategic upper deck reserved for the captain. His experience and age was obvious from his wrinkled ebony skin. But he was completely detached from what happened on the lower deck and his eyes were focussed on the river and the opposite bank. All he knew was that these nice people below him wanted to travel from point A to point B, and he was the only one who could make it happen.

The water current was strong, which he had to take into account before every docking so as to properly align the floating barge with the docking ramp. It somehow reminded me of planes making a crosswind landing. It's a very tricky manoeuvre, which I knew as I had previously tried it on a simple flight simulator. We take so many things for granted. Even these small everyday things take so much skill, it's hard to comprehend.

Some foreigners made it a point to climb up to the captain's deck... just for the heck of it. Even I had felt like it but didn't gather enough confidence to do so. Rishi encouraged me but I didn't budge. My inferiority complex suppressed me.

After the first ferry crossing, we got directions for Harmal beach. It was hot that day and fortunately we didn't come across any major ghats. We did pass through the kind of road that was Rishi's dream a road running parallel to a beach, with mountains on our right. It was just indescribable. On that road, many tourists overtook us on all kinds of two wheelers. A few waved and we waved back. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and asked Rishi to pull over.

"We are going to the beach," I said.

It was 1:00 in the afternoon. I had no intentions of taking a dip but I just wanted to look at the sea. Besides, Rishi had said that later in the day when we reached Vengurla, we would go to Vengurla beach. There would be no one except us and it would be peaceful. We dragged our cycles through the sand. It reminded me of the Sunday morning cycle practice sessions when I dragged my cycle across the sand of Juhu beach. The wheels were momentarily swallowed by the sand, only to reappear as if by a miracle.

We rested on the beach for a brief moment. There were a few foreigners there. One was sleeping under the shade of a sun umbrella and had tied a kite to its pole. The wind took care of the kite. All he did was

peacefully watch the kite fly. The sight in itself was peaceful and serene. There was another group of foreigners in a shack close by. Instantly, I felt like having a chilled beer, but Rishi said that since these people were here, we would never get it cheap. We could try our luck further down the road. That swine, he was already equipped with his own stock and was denying me my rightful share. Anyway, he assured me that we were very close to Terekhol. So we left that place and continued on our journey.

Later on that route, we passed a school with children spilling out after the end of their day. Ah! And there was my saviour, my ice cream wala! He was selling crude orange ice candies. Rishi had already gone far ahead, so here I peacefully ate a few candies. Later, candy in hand, I was about to depart. A few feet ahead, a schoolboy stopped me and asked me how much the vendor had sold me the candy for. I very confidently said a rupee. He nodded approvingly and said that it was the right price. The candy man was still visible but out of earshot. He had actually sold me the candy for two rupees each. I imagine he must have thought that I would tell the truth and the school kids would harass him for being a cheat. But I had played it safe for everybody's convenience. The boys must have thought that I was smart enough not to be duped and maybe they were reassured about the candy man. The real secret remained only with me although at the price of a rupee.

Rishi was waiting for me up ahead on the road. He knew why I had stopped since he had also spotted the candy man. Once again, the wheels rolled. Amazingly, another candy man, a small boy this time, crossed our path. Naturally, I wanted another one. He had leftovers of some unknown flavour. In fact the candy hardly stuck on the stick, and half of it melted in my hands, which I licked clean. Rishi watched in silence and started chatting with the boy. He was from north Karnataka and said he was here on 'business'. He was delighted to see us and stared at our cycles. His eyes stopped on our water bottles. Rishi told him it was water. He wanted some, so Rishi gave him his bottle. He took a sip and screamed, "Soro...!" (wine) Rishi and I smiled. We all smiled and said goodbye. He was getting late to catch the school kids. I didn't want to tell him that his rival had already reached the school before him and I had bought candies from him for two rupees each!

Later on the road, we encountered a ghat just before reaching Terekhol. A brief halt later, Rishi said he had just seen a whole group of

peacocks across the road. I just missed them. Further on the descent, Rishi was behind me.

The descent could have been fast but the road was uneven, so I was playing it safe by keeping a check on the speed. Rishi in his usual gust of excitement overtook me on a curve. Unfortunately, there was loose gravel on the bend and Rishi's cycle started skidding. For a split second, my heart stopped. Finally, the first aid box would come handy, I thought, but Rishi luckily avoided the skid and was back on track. I cursed him for being careless.

Our next stop was at Terekhol to cross the creek and enter Maharashtra. Just as we were nearing the wharf, I heard a strange sound from the left. I was negotiating a right hand curve so I thought someone was coming in from the right, but when a cyclist passed me on the left, I could hardly believe it. At the wharf, we all stopped and greeted each other. He was a Swedish cyclist and was riding a beautiful racer. The bike was indescribable - Shimano gears, tyres thinner than ours. I wondered how he had made it this far. The cycle frame was so light, mostly tungsten carbide components. Unlike our bikes, which appeared cluttered, his was sleek and smart. All the cables passed inside the tubular frame, the derailleur clamp was just a button located conveniently near the brake squeezers on the handle bar! His attire was even sleeker. A shiny synthetic T-shirt, pedal pushers, a helmet, glares. Rishi as usual gave a brief hello and continued feasting his eyes on the cycle. I got busy talking to the cyclist. I discovered he was a 32-year-old Swedish cyclist and a sprinter. He was there along with his wife who was also a cyclist. They had a backup vehicle stationed somewhere along the road. He wanted to cross over into Maharashtra, so did we.

It was 2:30 and the tide was not good enough for the ferry. We would all have to wait for another one hour. Till then, we talked. This fellow wanted to do Mumbai-Goa in 20 hours. We said it's not possible even on his cycle since it was all ghats and the road is crowded in the night. Besides, he wanted to do it in May. He was fair skinned and would have roasted himself to death. He too asked about us and said he had never come across such cycles till now. We then compared cycles. We lifted his and found it was really very light. We asked him about his setup and he told us about his wife and the backup vehicle. We told him that this was a very different journey for us. It was just the satisfaction of a whim.

Seeing all three of us together, the locals thought we were all a group. They all surrounded him and bombarded him with 'hellos' and 'how do you do's'. For a few moments, someone else had stolen the show. So we let the crowd subside. The problem was he didn't want to talk to them but with us, but they wouldn't let him. They pestered him with stupid questions, without waiting for any answers, and asked for rides on the bike. Another local tourist group wanted to have a photo with his bike. They actually started snatching his bike at one point. He was greatly alarmed and requested them to take it easy. Unfortunately, they kept pestering him. I told him not to panic since their objective was a simple snap. This was only to reassure him. In fact, I found their behaviour absolutely disgusting. After the curiosity died down, we talked some more about the bikes and about each other. It never struck us that we should have taken a snap with him and his bike. Just meeting that fellow was good. I still remember his English accent, not bad though, as if mine was better.

Time dragged and the Swede soon lost patience with the pestering locals and turned back. Rishi and I then settled for some food and cool beer. But my beer hit me. We were given company by a lonely foreigner busy writing something. Rishi and I exchanged looks. After the tour, I would be like him.

Those next few hours of conversation with Rishi gave me an entirely different perspective of him. It had all actually started when he had asked if we could make it back to Mumbai on cycle. I had somehow detested the idea. That was one of the misunderstandings that prevailed for a very long time between him and me. For me, Mumbai-Goa was just that. For him, it included the return trip too. I was exhausted once more and this time mentally. I didn't want to spoil my tour by pushing myself way beyond my limits. I had drawn the line. Rishi was not happy. For him, the mind could always be manipulated by not thinking about it and just doing it. For me, unfortunately, it was the other way round. My mind and my thoughts played a major role in deciding what I am, how I am. A part of my mind always fought these shackles of my mental limitations. Rishi was there, I told myself. We had done it once, we could do it again. But my timid self warned me of my physical limitations. We had already planned to finish the 200-km trip back to Deogad, which was 1/3rd the way back to Mumbai. Anything more than that and I wasn't sure if my body would cope.

Besides this, I also realised that the tour was nearing its end. The

beautiful dream was over, it was time to wake up. Rishi would now go back on his ship and return only next year. I would go back to my routine schedule. I realised how much Rishi had meant to me. He had become a close friend, a mentor, a role model. And just by staying who he was! His silent focus had more power than I had in my words or deeds. It had hidden truths that were best kept hidden, unless they really needed to be vented. Besides, he had this immense reserve of mental energy that drove him beyond his physical limits. He knew how to let go and beyond! I had made myself a hopeless judge of character by undermining him and his abilities just because I thought I was smarter. His clear, minimalist way of thought, the power to isolate, prioritise and also to let go I liked him for that maybe because I knew that I would always struggle to achieve it. My decision of not cycling back to Mumbai reflected this fear.

Things would be a bit difficult without his company now. At that moment, I suddenly saw a whole empty year ahead of me. And without Rishi around, there wouldn't be anyone close enough to share my adventures with. I would really miss a lot of things about him. I saw a vast, empty horizon in front of me and I didn't know how I was going to cope with this emptiness. I shared these thoughts with him and he tried to cheer me up, but these realisations suddenly made me introspective and melancholy.

Rishi and I talked away and I soon realised how much I had learnt from this simple person whom I had happened to meet by a mere coincidence just the year before.

The ferry finally left at 4:30 pm. After the ferry crossing, the road sharply climbed to Usha Ispat, the only industry in the entire surrounding. The ghat was steep. I was so low, I just barely made it to the top. Rishi was happy that he had overcome the ghat. He immediately sensed my state of mind and asked me to join him in his mental flight. How I wish I could have done that.

Reddi

Usha Ispat was a serious eyesore against the serene coastal landscape. The top of a cliff overlooking the Arabian Sea wasn't exactly the ideal location for a steel plant! Rishi had tried to get a job here once upon a time. I wondered what it would have been like if I hadn't met Rishi. Apart from the fact that the tour wouldn't have materialised, I would have missed a dynamic friend who constantly challenged me. Life would have remained stagnant.

The road passing through the Usha Ispat area was a sharp contrast to the quiet houses we had left behind on the other side of the creek. Here we had people living in shacks on the roadside. Just crossing the creek had transported us from a pastoral landscape into an industrial zone. We just rode as fast as we could to get away from that place.

As we left it behind, the landscape slowly returned to normalcy and up ahead was the village of Reddi. At a speed bump, I saw Rishi pulled over on the side. I hadn't sensed trouble but Rishi's cycle had finally broken down. His front smaller gear plate had come undone due to some missing bolts. Rishi confessed that he had seen it coming out in Goa itself but had conveniently ignored it. Very typical of him. Now here he was, depressed and angry that his cycle had given way. Confronted by this unexpected problem, I tried to console a distraught Rishi that it wasn't that bad. The smaller gear disc was bolted to the bigger gear disc by three bolts. The bigger one was mounted on the axle connecting the two pedals. So at least the higher gear was intact with the chain still on it. With the fallen disc, pedalling would have been impossible without drag and constant interruptions. The other problem was that out of the three bolts, only one remained; the other two had fallen somewhere along the last 50 km. Rishi had really been careless ignoring such a thing. Something needed to be done about it, fast. Being very pessimistic and morose about the whole thing wasn't going to help.

I said, "Let's not give up that easily. All we have to do is somehow join the two gear plates."

There was a shed nearby with a truck standing next to it. Rishi went to see if he could get some help there while I started looking out for wires to tie those two discs together.

Rishi's luck was going to help him one more time. The truck driver

had exactly two bolts of the same type we were looking for. I couldn't believe it. It was too good to be true. I told Rishi that he was extremely lucky. Both the plates were bolted back in their proper places. He would no longer be able to use the smaller gear till more concrete repairs were done, but just the two discs held together firmly would suffice for the moment.

The light was fading fast and it was clear that we were not going to make it to Vengurla that day. Rishi had told me excitedly that we would have to live at Reddi 'somewhere'. That 'somewhere' made me feel a bit nervous. Mentally, I had been assaulted just a few hours back and the reverberations were still there. I wanted the assurance that we would stay in a good, clean place and not just 'somewhere'. Reddi's Ganpati *Mandir* sounded like a very good option declared Rishi. The next best option was a long shot Rishi's uncle's place, someone called Arjun *Mama*. Rishi told me that Reddi was his mother's native place and her uncle, Arjun *Mama*, lived here in their ancestral house. It came as news to me. Rishi's mother had her roots here in Reddi and this Arjun *Mama* happened to be her uncle.

Rishi had always had this dream of spending a night at a complete stranger's place. It was just another one of his unexplainable whims.

The Ganesh idol at Reddi was a known diety because of its uniqueness. People say the idol emerged from a rock face in a small hill, '*swayambhu*'. So the first stop was Reddi's Ganpati *mandir*, then accommodation. Outside the *mandir* were two women selling *pooja thalis*. While I took the *darshan*, Rishi told them about our journey. They were amazed. He also told them about his Arjun *Mama* in Reddi. It took some time for the ladies to realise whom he was talking about. But as we left, Rishi told them that if we didn't find the place, he would pop into their house. What a bold statement. I could have never been able to ask someone that. The ladies were simple and friendly. They said they would be delighted to have us as their guests.

Soon, we found Arjun *Mama*'s place. It was an old house neighbouring a temple. Arjun *Mama* was an old man. Apart from him, there were other people in the house living there as his tenants. The bad condition of the house reflected Arjun *Mama*'s poverty.

It had been four years since Rishi had last visited this place. Today he came here not only for shelter but also to look for something he had left behind during those days. An old friend. Their neighbour's daughter who

lived in their house along with her mother as tenants. Her name was Mira. Somehow, Rishi felt that Mira would be working at her house and they would meet as two good friends, separated for a long time. It wouldn't be surprising to find Mira there. Time moved very slowly in these places. From the conversations between Rishi and his uncle, I could make out that people over there knew what good friends they had been during those days. These were the places where everybody left their own unique marks in others' minds. Here, people had time for each other. Rishi's friendship with Mira had stayed in people's minds. There was enough proof of it in the people's voices.

There was a twist in this simple story though. Even poverty failed to dissolve the discrimination between 'the blessed' and 'the cursed'. Mira's family was of a lower caste than Rishi's and was kept at a distance from the higher community. Rishi had made a real friend here in such a remote place, they had spent some real quality time together under the shadow of an orthodox society. But here in Reddi, people including Arjun *Mama* viewed them as mere childhood friends and took it for granted that with age, those feelings would die away, forgotten and lost, never to be remembered again by anyone, as if it never happened. But some old memories don't die that easily. Do they?

Rishi loathed hierarchies and as usual wanted to go against the flow. After we landed up at Reddi at that odd hour, dinner was next on our agenda. Food could have been available at a few other houses where we would all belong to the same class. Rishi had other plans though. He had made up his mind that we would eat at Mira's place. In his circle, it would have been taboo. That's exactly what he wanted. After briefly meeting Arjun *Mama*, he rushed to Mira's place to meet her. She wasn't there and had moved on to the big city. Rishi had remained away from his friend for too long. Time had finally made it there before Rishi could. Nevertheless, Mira's mother was surprised and happy to see Rishi. She said she would be happy to serve us dinner. When he returned, Arjun *Mama* asked Rishi about dinner. Rishi told him that we would be eating at Mira's place. I could sense the hidden disgust in Rishi's uncle's looks. But everything was very well hidden behind a false veil of smiles and a detached acceptance.

The relation between Rishi's uncle and Mira's family was one dominated by hatred. It was only because of certain unusual circumstances that they still got to live there as tenants.

We had reached the house by 7 pm. We were tired but somehow even I

noticed that there was a certain restraint in the hospitality and that was not just because they were poor. Rishi was acting completely oblivious to the entire thing.

There was another reason why Rishi despised Arjun *Mama*. His whole family had reason to believe that this *Mama* was good for nothing. He was responsible for the downfall of their ancestral house and property in Reddi, whatever was left of it. And now since he was alone, he was the tyrant ruler of the house and his deeds were going unchecked.

It was very clear that Rishi hated most of them, hated their customs and loathed their way of thought, but maybe he still was akin to them since they were his native people. I know it's hard to distinguish between the two, but I perceived it that way. If you live in a stranger's house, you are a stranger and are accepted as a stranger. But what if you live in a house where you have acquaintances but are forced to stay as a stranger? That becomes hard to accept. Here Rishi himself happened to be a stranger; I was out of the question. I watched everything in silence. In this circle of silent hatred, I was hopelessly struggling to find myself a haven.

My perception of Reddi, one of the most beautiful villages as described by Rishi, was overshadowed by two things. First was the monochromatic night, where everything was just pitch black and dark grey as against the vibrant picturesque place that it was during the day. Secondly, my awkward position in the silent scenario that boiled beneath the surface facade.

A sudden visit from an outsider is never a bother in this area and hospitality sustains against all odds. Rishi coming to Reddi must surely have been a surprise to many there. There was this distant relative of his who lived close to his *Mama*'s house a quiet woman approaching old age, now a headmistress at a local school. She had problems seeing in the dark but had come to meet Rishi in spite of her problems. Everybody said that Rishi had changed a lot in the past four years. Four years is a long time and for me, just waiting ten months for Rishi to come back for the tour had seemed longer.

Before leaving Caranzalem, we had established contact with Rishi's Kanta *Mama* at Vengurla and had told him to expect us later that evening. Now we had to inform him about our delays. We had to step out to make the phone calls. Rishi was not happy with the idea of walking to a phone booth almost 15 min away from where we were, but I persisted. Frankly, I wanted to step out of that weird place and take a break before we headed

for dinner at Mira's place.

We both headed out into the dark night and I pestered Rishi with the questions lingering in my mind to have more clarity. I mean, we were living with these people who were kind enough to accommodate us at a strange hour, and yet here was Rishi reprimanding them for their narrow mindedness. In all of this, I was trying to fit in but found that there was no place for me. In fact, at that moment, I was so upset with Rishi for the first time that I asked him if he was drunk. I was confused and needed some explanation to stabilise myself. Rishi just told me not to think about things over which I had no control, which was true actually. All he told me was to tag along with him wherever he went.

Kanta *Mama* was a bit disappointed about our delay and so was I because Vengurla had seemed like a promising place. Rishi told them that we would visit them the next day while passing through Vengurla. I then contacted Sanjay *Mama* at Deogad. It felt good to speak to a familiar voice. I told him about my trip in brief. He was aware of it but didn't know that we had finally executed it. Although when I told him about our current location, Reddi, and that we would be reaching Deogad the next day by evening, he sounded sceptical. Sanjay *Mama* said that we still had a very long way to go, more than a 100 km. I signed off by telling him that we would try and make it. Worst case, we would spend the night en route and then come over to Deogad the day after. I promised to keep him informed about our progress. When I finally hung up, my mind was transported from the brief respite of a familiar voice back to the grim reality of Reddi.

Then we set off to Mira's place for dinner. Rishi enquired about Mira during dinner. We discovered she now worked in an office in Mumbai. Rishi took her contact number in Mumbai and said he would call her when we went back.

We ate quietly in a very small, dimly lit room with a bed, some assorted old furniture and an oversized temple housing one of the most beautiful statues of Ram that I had ever seen. It was so simple yet so lively. I can still remember it in spite of the dim light. Mira's mother had prepared simple *dal* and rice. It was a Thursday or she would have treated us (Rishi) to some local seafood. But they were very poor people. Mira's mother worked as a worker in Usha Ispat. In fact, more than half of Reddi was employed at Usha Ispat.

After dinner, I badly needed a smoke. It would soon be time to go back to sleep, but after coming here, I had observed that apart from me,

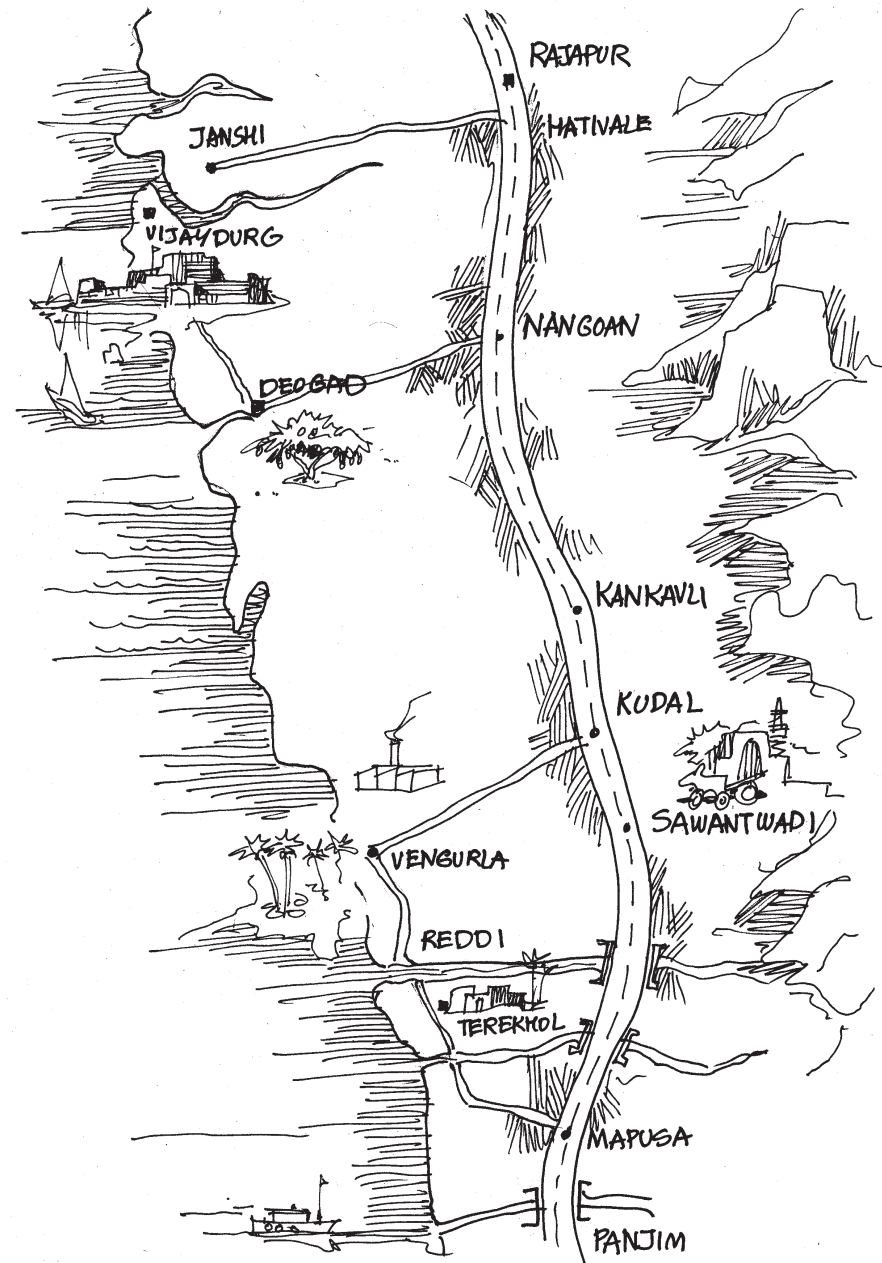
something had unsettled Rishi also. I wanted to try and help him. Besides, his asking me not to think about things too much hadn't done any good. We needed to talk more.

Next to Rishi's *mama's* place was a huge Lord Shankar temple. In front of the temple was a small open ground next to a *peepal* tree and an entrance archway. Steps led from the road above to the temple through this archway. Reddi was really a very beautiful place. But I was there at a wrong time. I couldn't understand the point when Rishi took such a stance just to prove that he was a maverick, especially now when we were given refuge by them. I argued that he was already an alien in this place and now he was trying to alienate himself further by going against the flow. What difference was it going to make, he was fighting a losing battle. But for Rishi, all battles were not meant to be won. I finally questioned him about the logic of this stopover. He didn't have an answer, there was no logic. We were just two travellers who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The only useful thing that finally precipitated out of this chaos was that Rishi got the means to re-establish contact with a long-lost friend. For me, finally, that was reason enough to have stopped at Reddi. Then on, I just put an end to all the thoughts that had flooded my mind and was in a way happy that Rishi would finally find his friend after four years.

We then evaluated our progress. We were behind schedule by 30 km. The next day, we would have to make an early start and try and make it to Deogad by the next evening. En route, we would be stopping at Vengurla to meet Kanta *Mama*.

That night, we slept in a small airtight room. The cold remained outside the old mud walls. I noticed the rafters rotting away with time. Earlier that evening, Rishi had shown me the place where they annually installed the Ganpati. It was another dimly lit room. I could just barely register the presence of a raised trunk somewhere next to a window covered with cloth.

The next day was going to be gruelling. Once more, we would face the challenge of covering 140 km in one day if we were to reach Deogad. The reward of meeting familiar, friendly people would wait for us. Oh! I was really looking forward to 'tomorrow', to when we would leave this beautiful place and its ironies behind.



Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 10, 2002
Day 1: Panjim (Caranzalem) to Reddi

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure) (Not decided)	Actual Time	Comments
Caranzalem	-	9:00 D	
Panjim (Pass)	-	9:30	
Harmal Beach	-	1:00 A 1:15 D	
Terekhol	-	2:30 A 4:30 D	Met Swedish cyclist Ferry crossing
En route to Reddi	-	5:00 A 5:30 D	Rishi's cycle breaks down
Reddi	-	6:10 A	Arjun <i>Mama's</i> place Distance covered: 70 km

Mumbai-Goa Cycle Tour
January 11, 2006
Day 2: Reddi to Deogad

Destination	Estimated Time (A: Arrival D: Departure) (Not decided)	Actual Time	Comments
Reddi	-	7:20 D	
Vengurla	-	8:50 A 9:30 D	Kanta <i>Mama</i>
Kudal	-	10:30 A 11:00 D	
Kankauli	--	1:45 A 2:15 D	Meet Harikishan Kadular
Nangaon	-	3:30 A 4:00 D	
Deogad	-	7:15 A	Sanjay <i>Mama</i> Distance covered: 130 km

The Greatest Irony

We woke up early the next morning. More than feeling the guilt of being a burden to poor strangers, I woke up with the overwhelming feeling of not belonging there and not being accepted for what we are. The previous night's gloom somehow still lingered in that small room, but the sights, smells and sounds of the early morning were promising. I just wanted to say thank you, goodbye and leave.

A bath was out of the question in the cold. Besides, I had just had one the previous evening. The rest of the folk there were already up and busy with their early morning chores. As we stepped out, the darkness had given way to a beautiful day. The old house was surrounded by tall coconut trees, dense vegetation and the old temple complex. Reddi really was a very beautiful place. I promised myself that I would return here one day. Even Rishi agreed with me.

We had to make an early start. So I checked the cycles while Rishi was being served tea. I detested the idea of being served by these strangers. But it was cold, so I finally had some tea. I was getting more and more conscious about the fact that we hadn't even bothered to get the kids there a small packet of biscuits as a small token gift. Here they were being as hospitable as they could be. I hesitated to give them an invitation to visit our place if they came to Mumbai. Finally, I let it go.

Rishi then bid farewell to his uncle after touching his feet. It may have been a hollow gesture but the fact that he did it is something that took me by surprise. Now where does this fit in? I would never know. The juxtaposition of ironies couldn't have been worse.

Later, I often wondered, why Reddi? Reddi should have been just another scenic backdrop for our tour, but the moment we became a part of its ironies, it changed the entire chemistry. This unscheduled stop suddenly proved to be a lot more than just that! Apart from my introspective realisations at Terekhol, I was suddenly confronted by intense situations out of context in relation to the tour as well as a glimpse of Rishi's personal life and his roots: the unsettling feeling of physically encroaching other people's space, especially when I knew I didn't belong

there; a glimpse into their simple lives, orthodox mentalities and social hierarchies. And to counter this was the backdrop of a stunningly beautiful village. In retrospect, Reddi was a part of the closure of that memorable tour.

We passed Shiroda on our way to Vengurla from Reddi. The road had two good *ghats* and the scenery was breathtaking. Soon we saw a bus approaching behind us. It was bound for Deogad, our last destination. We were both tempted to catch it and end the agony! But we suppressed the idea and continued with the tour. Perhaps we both didn't want to end the tour this abruptly.

We reached Vengurla in just under two hours and hunted for Rishi's Kanta *Mama*. As usual, Rishi had only a vague idea of the location but not the whole address! We found the house in a by lane of Vengurla. They had a big house shared by many. Rishi's *Mami* greeted us warmly. Here there were no ironies like the ones with which we had lived last night. Black was black, white was white. Unfortunately, Kanta *Mama* was out and was not expected to return in the next two hours. We had to leave within the hour.

Rishi's *Mami* was a kind lady. She served us breakfast and tea and was truly happy to see Rishi. Rishi's mother was a regular visitor there. *Mami* talked to Rishi about their house in Reddi, which was once a very nice place. Now thanks to Arjun *Mama*, everything was gone. Then there was his granny, now a very old woman who barely registered the people around her and experienced fits in the night. Her skin was wrinkled, she was completely blind, but nevertheless the warmth in her voice was comforting. She was conscious and aware at the time and was delighted to see Rishi. I suddenly remembered my grandmother who had passed away the previous year.

Mami was sad that we couldn't wait longer. As we left, I felt sad too. It would have been nice to spend some time with these pleasant, hospitable people. *Mami* packed some gifts for us to take back to Mumbai. We just accepted one gift since load was still our concern.

Back out, we joined the national highway at Kudal, passing on some of the roughest internal roads. The bumps were so bad that a puncture was a constant threat looming on our heads. Especially for Rishi's cycle. We

passed a school outside which a group of girls passed a comment about us. I just barely caught it and couldn't help laughing.

“Hey look, here they come straight from the moon.”

Later, on these internal roads, we would hear many more such humorous passing comments.

At Kudal, we stopped at a *dhaba*. Rishi had a breakfast of *missal* and I had *shrikhand* and *lassi*. The proprietor was a simple man. He almost reminded me of the man we had met at Kashele way back during our trial. He was curious about us, so we briefed him about the tour and he found it amazing.

From Kudal, we were back on the Mumbai-Goa highway. Only this time, we were on the return. But the road was good once again and we didn't have to concentrate on avoiding ditches or cutting down on speed. It felt good to drive on a smooth road, right up to Nangoan, the bifurcation that would lead us to Deogad by an internal road.

Back on the road, we passed Kankauli. It was a hot day and exhaustion was again slowing us down. Just before Kankauli, Rishi was in the lead and I had lagged behind. After one small bump in the road, I saw Rishi talking to an old man with a bicycle up ahead. The first thought that crossed my mind was that Rishi was helping the old man who had maybe fainted on the road. The fact was so different that it was our turn to feel stunned for a change.

The man was Harikishen Kadukar, aged 52, from Nagpur, cycle touring on the road alone! He had done Nagpur-Mumbai and Mumbai-Pune-Mahabaleshwar, a distance of over 1500 km! He later planned to reach Panjim and then return to Nagpur. He wanted directions after Panjim. He had actually underestimated the Goa road. Nagpur was on the Deccan Plateau where the terrain is plain. Here it was exactly the other way round. That's why he was a little depressed about not being able to ride on that road. We cheered him up by telling him that he had already finished 500 km and that the remaining 100 km were pretty flat. Then I advised him to take a road leading directly from Goa to Nagpur via Solapur, Pandharpur etc. He was happy to meet us and so were we.

Rishi's mind took off after meeting that guy. According to him, our

next tour should be to Kanyakumari. I almost gasped for breath. I was trying to finish this 800 km trip in a decent manner and here was my dear friend who wanted to do an 1800 km tour to the southernmost tip of India. At any rate, it was re-assuring to know that such headstrong people lived on this planet.

Kadukar was riding a revamped BMX. It had 18 gears three in the front and six in the back if I remember correctly. The fun was he was carrying his entire house with him. Tent, first aid box, tools, water, you name it he had it. The only things missing were his wife and children. Of course, we didn't venture to ask him if he was married. I am sure he wasn't. Such adventurous idiosyncrasies are unacceptable in the overwhelmingly conservative Indian society! His cycle had a small plaque in the front, which said something related to the Baha'i religion. He had actually embarked on this mission to spread the word about the Baha'i religion. He had tried to come with a few friends but they had dropped out at the last moment (nothing new about that).

Then he suddenly took the wind from our sails. He asked us the purpose of our tour. Compared with what this man was doing, suddenly our real reason of fulfilling an adventure seemed very weak. But that was a fact and there was no point in cooking something up.

He just found it unacceptable. He advised us to always remember in the future that a motto is important apart from the goal. We agreed in principle. Then it was time for some photos. We wanted the typical shot of a milestone marking our distance from the nearest town next to our cycles. The problem was the milestone had its back to the sunlight and so we were forced to stand with our backs to the sun as well. The result is more than obvious when we see the photos. I tried to argue that we were standing against the sunlight. But Mr. Kadukar was a bit too headstrong. So we let it go. We then exchanged addresses with that man and promised him that we would establish contact later. A month later, I got an email from Harikishen saying that he had reached Nagpur safely.

At Kankauli, we again stopped at the same sugarcane juice stand. He recognized us easily. In fact, he was almost delighted to see us. It had been a week now. Even I felt good in spite of the exhaustion. Before leaving, we

tried Sanjay *Mama's* number but no one picked up the phone. So we carried on. It was 2:30 by the time we departed.

The road from Kankauli to Nangoan was tiring and the prospect of riding once again on an internal road for the remaining 40 km was even more daunting. We stopped at a few places in between to rest. Earlier, I thought that only I was tiring out, but it turned out that even Rishi was slowing down. At Nangoan, we had some *nimbu* sherbet/soda and for the first time I threw away the balance sugarcane juice. I just couldn't take anything anymore. Once again, I tried to ring up my *mama*, but this time it seems the Deogad exchange was down for the n'th time.

The internal road from Nangoan to Deogad was bad. We were doing a speed of 10 km per hour. That would mean it would take us four hours to reach Deogad. We didn't have that much time. It was already 4:00 by the time we had departed from Nangoan. Finally, we got a break 25 km before Deogad where the road had been freshly resurfaced and we started catching up on lost time. Another attempt to call Sanjay *Mama* 15 km before Deogad. Still no luck. So we moved on.

We reached Deogad late in the evening by 7:15 pm. En route, we had locals flash torch beams on us as we zipped by their quiet lives. It would be a topic of discussion for many days ahead. But we were glad that it was dark by the time we reached. Sanjay *Mama's* wife, Shruti, welcomed us and asked us very sarcastically what had taken us so long. *Mama* had apparently waited for my call till 4:00 then rushed off for some work. He had given up hope on me coming there. He was in for a surprise when he came back.

That night, we slept like babies. We were both really tired and now the cycle tour had come to its end.

For the next two days, we lazed in Deogad. Rishi was warmly accepted in my circle all my friends are. Like normal tourists, we visited the Vijaydurg Fort in the next two days. We thought of crossing the creek to Janshi, then return to Mumbai via Rajapur. But Rishi ruled out the plan. He would visit the place later. We booked our return tickets to Mumbai from Deogad and would depart on 14th of January 2002.

At the Deogad depot, we hauled the cycles up on the state transport

bus carrier and tied them with ropes. I was nervous. I didn't like the idea of such expensive cycles travelling on the bus carrier in the night. But I hadn't a choice. I had already made the decision of not cycling back to Mumbai. Now there was no looking back on that one.

The return journey by bus back to Mumbai was the greatest irony that I faced on the tour. On cycles, 20 km meant a 1 to 1 ½ hr ride. Painfully slow progress as compared to the bus we were now travelling in. The spots where we had created so many memories started zipping by at mentally unacceptable speeds. As if someone was rapidly rewinding a video tape. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I joined Rishi in finishing the few leftover drinks from his water can. Soon, we both went to sleep.

It's so difficult to construct something and yet so easy to demolish it.

The bus brought us to Mumbai at the crack of dawn. A journey of 600 km that had taken us six days had been wrapped up by this bus overnight. My mind found it very hard to accept. In fact, I often wondered what would have happened if we had taken a plane back to Mumbai just after reaching Panjim. We would probably both have gone completely mad.

The bus dropped me off at Hanuman Road on the highway, my 'runway'. Rishi continued till Kandivli in the same bus. With mixed emotions, I headed home. Baba greeted me with a pat on my back. Expressing emotions was so difficult for this man, yet when he did express them, they were very special. It was good to meet my parents. I had been away from home for only 14 days, but this time coming back home with a sense of accomplishment was good!

On the other hand, Rishi entered a very quiet, sleepy house. He went to bed immediately. Later when he woke up, his mother exclaimed with amazement seeing him back. Surprisingly, the first question his father asked was, "Did Rajneesh make it?"

Many of us still have these misconceptions that being adventurous is about being rash, dangerous and unorthodox. It's a feature best viewed on the screen by a star, preferably James Bond and the type. Then you can always dream away of being in his shoes without any physical pain and risk. But over the years, I have realised that being adventurous is none of this. It's just a commitment to fulfil your desires and dreams. They may be

weird ('unique' to use more sophisticated language!) but they belong to you alone. The best part is you get to do it yourself. You don't have to dream somebody else's life to be adventurous.

For many of us, dreams will remain dreams, but sometimes all it takes is a bit of effort and the drive to fulfil them. I was glad I had made my choices wisely.



After

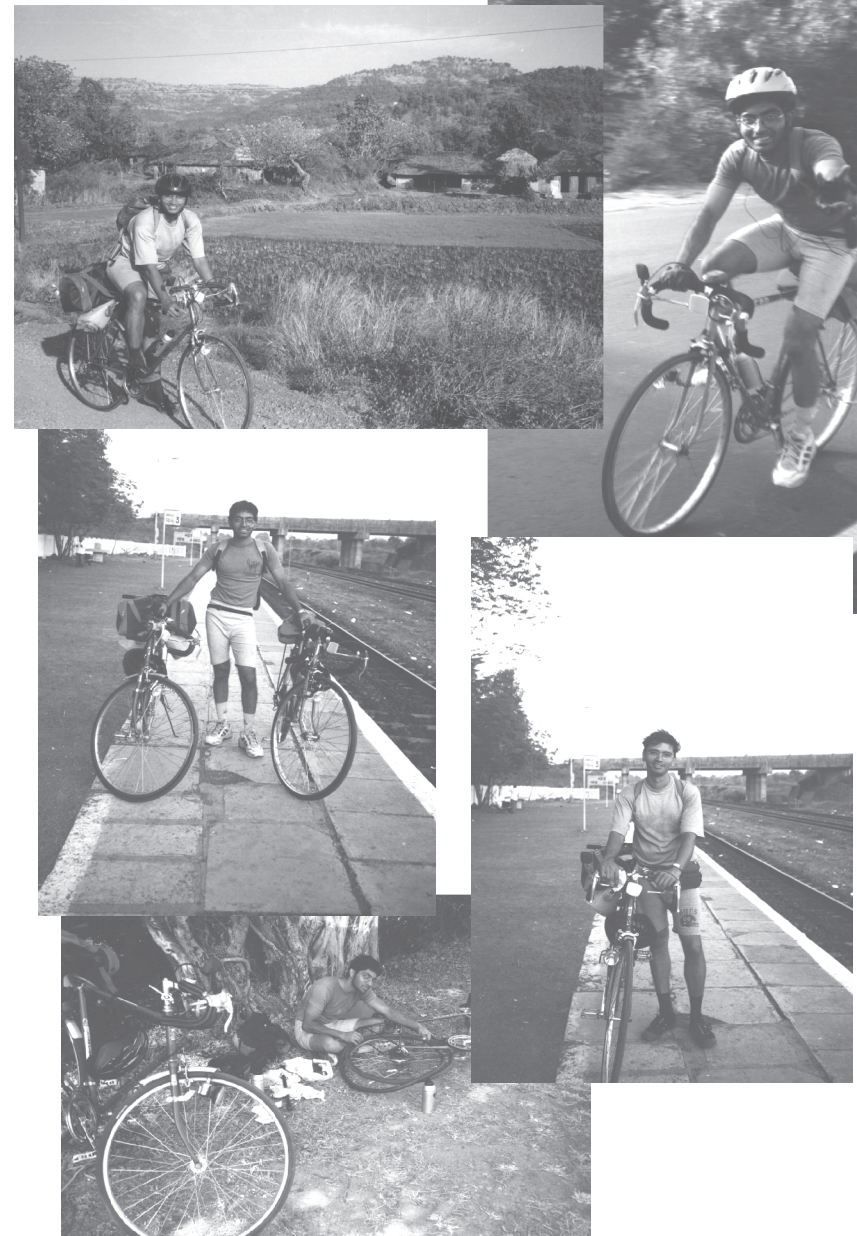
The Goa cycle tour was planned right after a very hectic project that had lasted for a year. But it was worth the wait. After the project, this cycle tour came as a deserving reward. The preparation and the actual tour were so intense and consuming, I was left with very little time and energy for anything else besides the tour. When we finally came back from Goa, I was suddenly confronted by this overwhelming sense of completion... and nothingness.

Rishi went back on his ship after the tour, only to return after another year, which added to the void. Mentally, I took a long time to get over the tour. It had a bad hangover. Partly because this travelogue took a long time to complete after the tour. Even if I tried to forget about it, all of those incidents came gushing back to inundate my mind. The completion of this travelogue gave it the final full stop, which I badly needed. Not surprisingly, for Rishi, even though the idea had originated three years ago, it was over within a few days by the end of the tour. I wish I could forget everything that easily!

Living with Rishi for 14 days on the road had brought him closer to me as a very good friend apart from just a good trek partner. His company had become an addiction. As I spoke to many of his friends, I realised that his very nature made people enjoy his company.

A few years later, Rishi and I again embarked on a small cycle tour to Kadvai, Sangameshwar, midway between Mumbai and Goa. We were both out of shape and out of practice. Somewhere, we had both foolishly hoped that this tour would revive the Mumbai-Goa experience. Three days later on the same highway, we realised our folly. The road was crowded, the October sun was merciless and our bodies would not cooperate since we both had ignored practice! Later when we returned to Mumbai, I realised that no matter how hard we tried, those moments would never return. They would be treasured memories that would always make me happy, sad and nostalgic!

— Rajneesh Gore





Goa on a Cycle

Summary of Expenses for the Tour January 2002

Goa cycle trip expenses		Amounts (In Rupees)
A Trial Run		
1	Mumbai to Murbad and back	500
2	Lodging and boarding at Murbad	150
3	Food at Murbad	100
B Pre-Trip		
1	Cycle spares from Metro	800
2	Helmets @ 600 each	1,200
3	Maintenance and servicing	1,000
C On the Road		
1	Mumbai to Goa: 6 Days @ Rs. 300/- per day (average)	1,800
2	Lodging and boarding in Goa (2 days)	700
3	Food and wine in Goa	1,200
4	Panjim to Deogad and return	600
5	Deogad to Mumbai on State Transport bus with cycles	500
6	Other miscellaneous expenses	500
Total expenses		9,050
Expenses per person		4,525

Acknowledgements

Writing this travelogue was a pleasure just like the actual tour. Transcending it beyond the pages of a daily diary would not have been possible without the help and guidance of many.

I thank my friends Yogesh, Rajesh, Ashu and Pavin who helped me review the initial drafts. Nitin, Meghana and Tanushri Shukla for their crucial inputs. Shubhayu, Harshal Mahajan and Anuradha for their advice. Rahul Chemburkar for the sketches. Sunil, Gajanan and others at Frog.

During the tour I would like to thank Abdul my mechanic for his excellent job in maintaining the cycle. I thank the Khatu's, the Pandit's, the Kharapurkar's, Arjun mama and Sanjay mama for accommodating us during the tour. I also appreciate the spontaneous gestures and acknowledgments given by all the strangers that met us during the tour.

I thank my parents, Rishi and the Naik family for their support and love.

- **Rajneesh Gore**

Glossary of Vernacular Words

Aai:	Mother
Baba:	Father
Mama:	Uncle
Mami:	Aunty
Mithai:	Sweetmeat
Sherbet:	A beverage, generally a cooler
Gola:	Ice candy
Dhaba:	a food kiosk/café along the road side, generally on highways
Chakna:	Snacks eaten with a drink
Vada pav:	Indian burger, a speciality of Bombay
Jhunka Bhakar Kendra:	A Government-backed café serving staple food of <i>jhunka</i> (vegetable) and <i>bhakar</i> (bread)
Ghat:	A road passing through a hilly terrain with hair pins and steep ascents, generally offering a panoramic view
Bollywood:	The nick name for the Indian film industry
Brahmin:	Priestly caste
Konkanastha Brahmin:	<i>Brahmins</i> from the Konkan area
Diwan:	A platform with a mattress that doubles up as a sofa and a bed
Ganesh:	The Elephant-headed God of prosperity and wisdom in the Hindu pantheon of Gods
Rikshaw:	A three-wheeled taxi
Golawala:	A gola vendor
Sati:	The act of self immolation by a widow on her husband's funeral pyre
Ayurveda:	A form of traditional Indian medicine
Kund:	Hot spring
Khanaval:	A restaurant run within a house that serves only basic meals
Taluka:	An administrative area that is a part of a district
Bazaar peth:	Central market place
Madari:	A road-side entertainer who trains animals to entertain

Mullah:	A Moslem person who is learned in or teaches the sacred law of Islam
Ashram:	A place of religious retreat
Dal:	A cooked dish made with lentils and spices
Paratha:	Flat bread with vegetable stuffing
Samosa:	A spicy snack
Ghungharu:	A belt with tiny bells tied to it
Shrikhand:	A sweet dish
Lassi:	A sweet or salty drink
Missal:	A spicy mixture of sprouted pulses and curry, garnished with onions and coriander and eaten with bread
Nimbu:	Lime

OTHER TITLES

Dancing Maidens: Foreword by Vijay Tendulkar
Strangers Ourselves – Paul Theroux’s Adventures: John Mowat
Marathi-English Dictionary: Krishna Parab
Sandy@Enigma: Rohit Ramanujam
Touch: Meena Kandasamy
Beyond the Newsroom: Oswald Pereira
The Lotus: Lakshmi Gopal
From the Sea to the Stars: Michael Merson
Songs of Freedom: K C John
So, You Mean This is Not the Real World?: John Kelly
The Receding Waves: Anita Mohandas
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Sand in My Teeth: Nandini Bahri-Dhanda
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Bright Lights, Big Buddha: Anil CS Rao
Andearth: Dickey Mayor
Beyond the Call of Voice: Asita Prabhushankar
I Have Read that Somewhere: Aswath Venkataraman
Do Not Weep, Lonely Mirror: Deepa Agarwal
Much Travelled Yarns: Joyseej Mukherjee
The Rape of News: Edited by Sunil K Poolani



Rajneesh Gore

Goa on a Cycle

Goa on a Cycle is a travelogue of two ordinary city strangers who come together with a dream of cycling from Mumbai to Goa on a cycle and finally accomplishing it.

This is also a scrap book that presents checklists, stages, logs and expenses incurred during the tour.

This travelogue is a small case study in cycle touring for the adventurous mind.



Price:
India: Rs 195
Elsewhere: US \$12

www.frogbooks.net

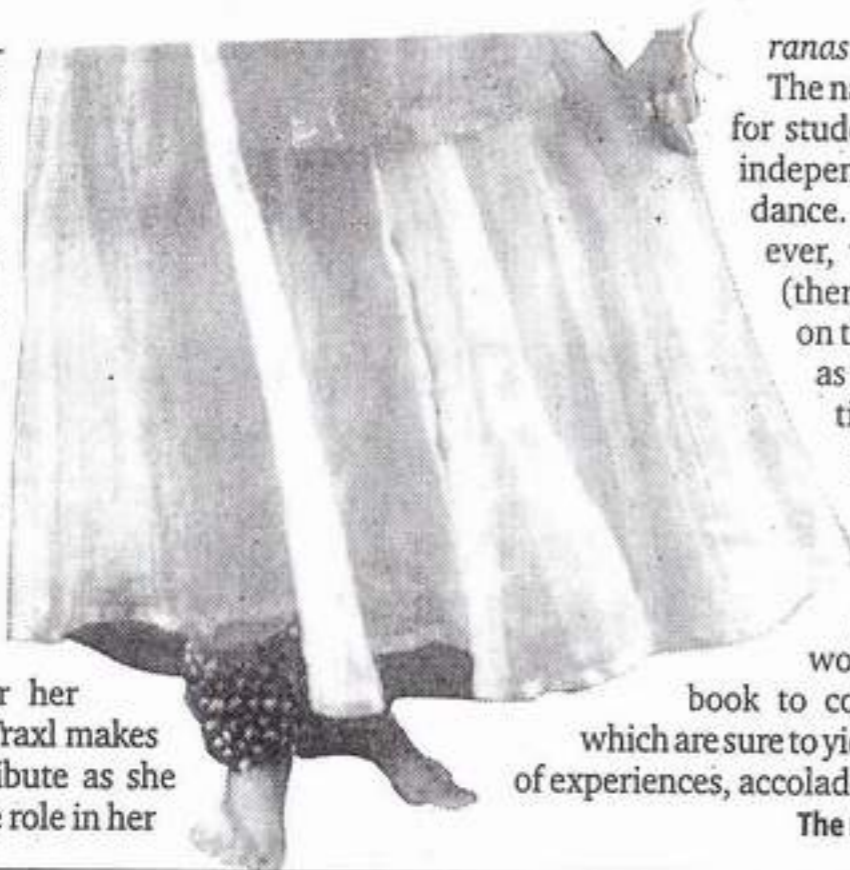
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ranas.

The narrative is interesting also for students of Indian history of independence, art, cinema and dance. One would have however, wished for more visuals (there are actually none except on the front and back covers) as well as an alert and sensitive editor. Shovana has added significantly to an as yet meagre collection of writings on dance, particularly by dancers in India. One would hope for a second book to cover her 'mature' years, which are sure to yield an even richer harvest of experiences, accolades and insights.

The reviewer is an Odissi dancer

to Aracataca by train, () of a new passenger service
Colombians hope will carry legions of literary pilgrims.

New, agentless writers to get book deals

TWO agentless authors will have novels out this fall after winning a contest sponsored by Simon & Schuster, Borders Group, Inc and the social media site Gather.com. Terry Shaw, 44, came in first for *The Way Life Should Be*, a mystery set in coastal Maine. A publishing deal was also given to the second place book, Geoffrey Edwards' *Fire Bell in the Night*, a thriller set in the antebellum South.



Cooking made simple

WESTLAND Books is coming out with a series, *Simple Cooking*, by gourmet specialist, Karen Anand. 11 books are planned in this series to meet today's needs and choices. The first three in this series were launched recently — *Simple Cooking for the Single Person*, *Simple Cooking for the Sweet Tooth* and *Simple Cooking for the Desperate Housewife*.

Agencies



I lost my country

WHEN Joshua Key enlisted for the US army, he believed in his government. In spring 2003, he was

in Ramadi, Iraq, where he saw civilians beaten, killed or maimed for little or no provocation. Returning home on leave, he knew he couldn't go back and went underground, finally seeking asylum in Canada.

The Deserter's Tale; J Key with Lawrence Hill; Roli; Rs 395; Pp 237



Essence of the hill idiom

MANJUSHREE Thapa pushes the styles of her stories to match the distinctiveness of

their content. Stories from both rural and urban Nepal as well as from the Nepali diaspora *Tilled Earth* has several compressed, poetic and evocative micro-stories that offer fleeting glimpses of small, private dramas of people caught midlife.

Tilled Earth: Stories; Manjushree Thapa; Penguin; Rs 195; Pp 196



Bombay to Goa

PART travelogue, part how-to guide and part personal scrap book — this is a recounting of a

journey on a cycle from Mumbai to Goa. Encounters with Swedish tourists, warm hospitality, caste conflicts, *dhaba* dinners — add considerable colour this unique narration, turning a physical challenge into a lesson for life.

Goa on a Cycle; Rajneesh Gore; Frog; Rs 195; Pp 196

BIZ QUIZ

- Which is the most searched word online?
- Which online community gives out The Outsourcing Excellence Awards?
- Which Indian company is being sued for allegedly infringing the James Bond copyright?



Answer these questions to win a copy of *Business the Richard Branson Way* by Des Dearlove. Email replies to shsharma@wileyindia.com by June 7.

Last week's answers:

1. Chevrolet Aveo; 2. The dynamic factor; 3. Max Factor
- Winner: Ramesh Mathur, Delhi



BIBLIOFILE

EHSAAN NOORANI



Ehsaan Noorani is a famous music composer and guitarist. He was the bass guitarist for many music directors before he started composing music.

■ *Which book are you reading at present?*

Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke.

■ *Which is your favourite place to read?*

In my bedroom.

■ *Which is your favourite bookshop?*

Strand bookshop in Mumbai and

PAPERBACKS

new releases

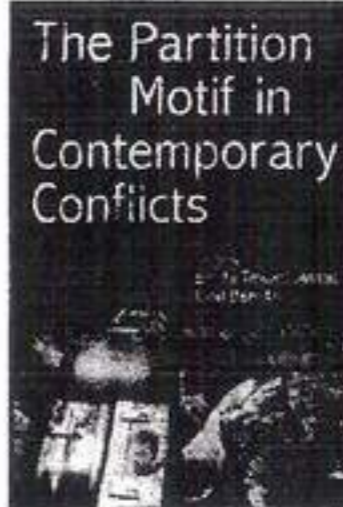


GOA ON A CYCLE
By RAJNEESH GORE
Frog Books,
Rs 195,
pp.137

Goa on a Cycle is a travelogue of two strangers who come together with a dream of cycling from Mumbai to Goa and finally live the dream. The book presents their adventures along with checklists, stages, logs and expenses incurred during the tour. As a small case study in cycle touring, the book will amaze adventurous minds.

THE PARTITION MOTIF IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS
EDITED BY SMITA TEWARI JASSAL AND EYAL BEN-ARI
Sage Publication,
Rs 480, pp.381

This book is based on the theme of Partition and traces far-reaching sociological implications for communal patterns, generational dynamics and individual lives across cultures. It talks about how societies that have experienced breaks and traumas are organised and constituted and how they use the understanding of the past for future construction. It shows how Partition was not only significant in the strict political sense, but formed the basis for long-term processes of identity, of memory and inspiration, and the very basis on which different societies were organised. With international contributors such as Eyal Ben-Ari, Alok Bhall, John Borneman, Namita Chowdhury, Ina Dietzsch, Honaida Ghanim, Nina Gren and Elia Zureik, the book will be of interest to anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, students and scholars of culture studies and also the general reader.

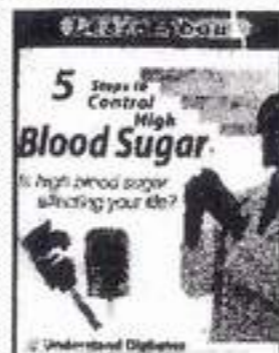


ME: A HANDBOOK OF LIFE
By RAKSHA BHARADIA
Rupa & Co.,
Rs 195,
pp.240

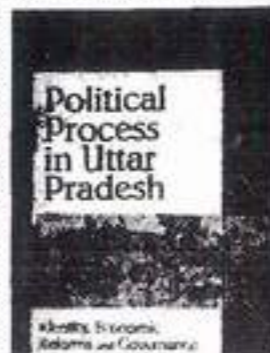
A lucid and introspective book with in-depth research and interviews with well-known personalities like writer Vikram Chandra, painter M.F. Husain, Pandit Jasraj, Mahesh Bhatt, Kiran Bedi and Zohra Sehgal. It's about knowing oneself, training one's mind and body and keeping all available resources engaged for tracing the path to success.



GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE
By JAMES G. SPETH AND PETER M. HAAS
Pearson.



5 STEPS TO CONTROL HIGH BLOOD SUGAR
By DR ANJALI ARORA
Sterling,
Rs 75,
pp.64



POLITICAL PROCESS IN UTTAR PRADESH
ED. BY SUDHA PAI
Pearson
Longman,
Rs 750,
pp.415



CHEAP
By DAVID BOSSHART
Kogan
Page,
Rs. 250,
pp.197