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# These childhood friends are cycling from Kanyakumari to Khardung La

*On bamboo bikes and sheer will power*

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Sumeet Paringe remembers watching in awe as his friend Prisiliya Madan's father prepared for a cycling holiday in Sri Lanka. Sumeet lived down the street from them in the Mumbai suburb of Panvel and the whole neighbourhood had been abuzz about this incredible imminent journey. "We had never known anyone travelling internationally on a bicycle," says Sumeet. "He was a hero to us all. They were travelling on a very tight budget and the only major expense was the flight to and from Colombo. It was inspirational for us young people in the neighbourhood."

That memory has been a driving force for buddies Prisiliya (22) and Sumeet (26) ever since. It made them venture out on their bicycles on long solo trips across the country. And this week, the duo will set out on an epic journey of their own. Starting from Kanyakumari, the southern-most tip of the Indian mainland, on 14 July, they will ride their bicycles all the way through to Khardung La Pass, one of the northern-most points of the country. They will pedal through more than 4,200km of Indian cities, towns and countryside over 63 days. What's more? They're doing it on bamboo bikes.

## Wait, what?

Bamboo has a tensile strength — if treated right, it can exceed that of carbon fibre, aluminium and even steel. It can also withstand more pressure than a block of concrete while the plant's natural fibre reduces vibrations from the bike making the ride more comfortable.

Sumeet and Prisiliya will be testing the viability of these bamboo bikes, but this trip promises to be so much more.. While they have a route mapped and memorised, they are going about this old school – no satellite

navigation or even physical maps for that matter. “We will rely only on our sense of direction and the guidance of strangers,” says Prisiliya. And they are fully prepared to get lost and often take routes that might not be the quickest and most direct. “When you ask for directions, you are relying on someone else’s idea of the best route. I have had instances in the past where I took a well-meaning passer-by’s directions only to turn a 125km trip in to a gruelling 175km one,” adds Sumeet.



“I remember when I was planning my first solo trip, my mom was not alright with me going at all,” says Sumeet.

Still, the charm of this low-tech way of travelling is not lost on either of them. In a hydrocarbons-powered world, Sumeet and Prisiliya cherish the idea of reaching a destination on their own steam. “You really feel every incline in the road in your thighs as you pedal, every breeze on your back that propels you forward when you are too tired to pedal. You have the time to appreciate every view as you ride along and the freedom to choose your route and stop off anywhere your heart desires to share a cup of tea with a complete stranger,” says Sumeet.

To her and Sumeet this trip is more than just the realisation of a lifelong dream to cycle across India. They intend to channel people’s fascination with their journey and their bamboo bicycles to draw attention to and raise money for female education in India, a cause that is very dear to them both. They have dubbed their trip ‘Cyclist for Change’ and are collaborating with the Godrej Group and IIMPACT, a non-governmental organisation that helps educate girls in rural India. Everyone is pitching in however they can. While the Godrej Group has supplied them with the sustainable bamboo bike frames they have developed, IIMPACT will ensure the money raised reaches young girls around the country most in need of help. “The end goal is to raise 5 million rupees so 1,500 girls across India can receive a good education and a fair chance at life,” explains Prisiliya.

### **Learnings from the road**

Planning on taking a cycling trip of your own? Prisiliya and Sumeet offer up some advice:

#### **Indian motorists aren’t always very kind to cyclists**

“There is no concept of being considerate and sharing the road. A strong draft from an 18-wheeler speeding by or a slight bump from a passenger vehicle is potentially lethal to a cyclist. And motorists do not seem to grasp that,” says Sumeet. “But this is just one drawback.”

## The positives of seeing India on a bicycle far outweigh the negative

“After a long day of riding, I had just set up camp in Dras, a little town 150km east of the state capital of Srinagar. The town is in a valley surrounded by the Himalayas and that makes the sky seem lower somehow. I felt like I could reach up and pass my hand through the deep blue tapestry of the sky studded with sparkly stars. It was magical,” says Sumeet while recounting his solo trip to Siachen.

### People are curious, but also generous

“When I was riding from Panvel to Kanyakumari earlier this year, people’s first reaction to a girl riding by herself was one of disbelief. They can’t believe an Indian girl has set out by herself on a bicycle. They assume I am a foreigner because I guess they think of cycling trips as a western eccentricity,” she says. People often assume she is a runaway from home. “They ask me whether my parents know I am doing this or what I am running away from,” she laughs. While on her trip Prisiliya maintained an [online journal](#). “Complete strangers were following my blog and when they read that I was in their part of the country, they would offer to come and meet me for some coffee or a meal. Others would offer to put me up for a night.. I ended up staying with 18 families that I had not known before this trip,” she says.

**Click through for images of their past trips:**

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Contribute to Prisiliya and Sumeet’s campaign via the crowdfunding page [here](#)



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