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## Cycle chalao, ladki bachao

Last updated on: July 27, 2016 12:41 IST

**"When you educate a girl, you educate a family."**

**"I want every girl child in India to go to school. We hope that our cycling expedition creates a buzz."**

**Two young cyclists, Sumeet Paringe and Prisiliya Madan, have embarked on a cycling tour across India to garner support for a cause that is close to their heart -- education for the girl child.**

Their love for cycling is the bond that has cemented the friendship between Sumeet Paringe, 26, and Prisiliya Madan, 22. Fortunate enough to have supportive parents backing their dreams, these two youngsters have set out on a mission to cycle from Kanyakumari to Khardung La to raise funds for the girl child. They hope to raise Rs 50 lakhs in order to support the education of 1,500 girls for a year.

Sumeet and Prisiliya's friendship dates back to their childhood when they would go trekking and cycling together. Little did they realise then that, one day, they'd set out on a cycle journey that would cover more than 4,400 km.

Their journey started on July 14 from Kanyakumari and they expect to cover 11 states in 70 days, riding their bicycles all the way through to the Khardung La Pass, one of the northern-most points of the country. They plan to cover the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

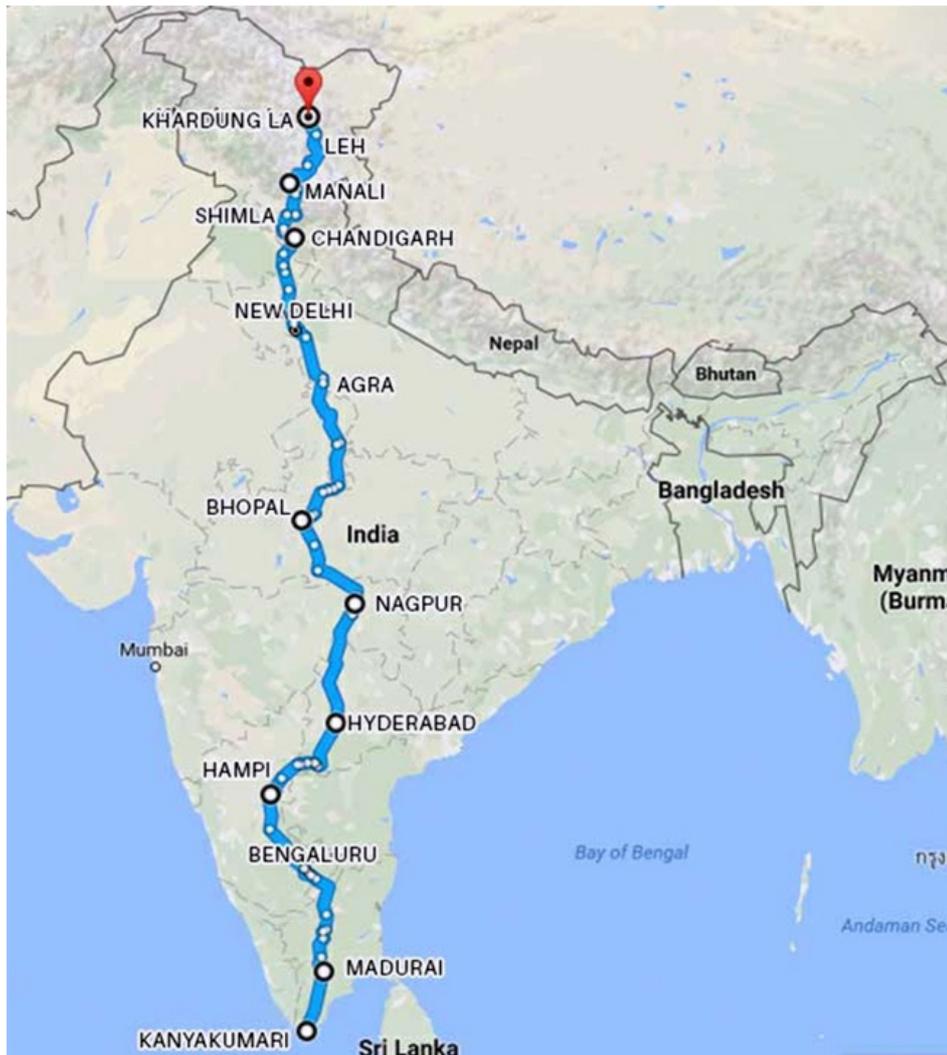


IMAGE: The route. Photograph: Kind courtesy [www.fueladream.com](http://www.fueladream.com)

### Cyclists for Change

Sumeet Paringe is a cycling enthusiast and he has cycled to India's highest motorable road (18,380 ft) at Khardung La, Ladakh, from Panvel near Mumbai in September 2014.

Prisiliya has cycled from Panvel to Kanyakumari, the southern most tip of India, covering a distance of 1,800 km in January

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2016, on a solo trip.

To Sumeet and Prisiliya, their latest adventure is much more than realising their lifelong dream to cycle across India -- this time, it is the cause that matters more. "When you educate a girl, you educate a family", says Sumeet, an engineer by profession.

Prisiliya, who has completed her masters in computer science, feels she is fortunate to have been able to complete her studies. Her parents have always encouraged her to live her dreams. But not every girl child in the county is as lucky. They were shocked when they saw the statistics about girl child education in the country. That's when they decided to do something about it.

"My father is a cyclist and a trekker. He has been very supportive and encouraging," says Prisiliya.

"The statistics on girl child education is scary," she adds. "We had the freedom to live our lives and study, but what about other girls in the country? I want every girl child in India to go to school and I hope that our cycling expedition creates a buzz in society."

Helping them with their cause are the Godrej Group (the people behind the bamboo-framed bicycles that they are using on this trip) and IMPACT, a non-government organisation that helps educate girls in rural India.



**IMAGE:** Sumeet and Prisiliya pose for a selfie after they reach Karnataka. Photograph: Kind courtesy Sumeet Paringe and Prisiliya Madan

#### The actual cycles

The duo have set out on an epic journey and their mode of transport is something out of the ordinary. They have chosen to cover the distance on bamboo bicycles. "These bikes are really smooth and the vibration is lesser than the regular ones," say Sumeet and Prisiliya, who have already covered over 500 km of their journey.

"We ride on a daily basis. Our day starts early and we ride from 7 am to 9 am. We halt for breakfast and ride till noon before breaking for lunch. We are currently in south India. We were expecting to ride in cool weather as it rains here during this time of the year. But we're riding in almost 35 to 40 degree heat, so we avoid riding in the afternoon. Also, it can get extremely tiring riding in the heat, so we need to take breaks," says Sumeet.

Safety is a primary concerns and one, says Prisiliya, they are not taking lightly. The duo make sure they ride on the passage (*this is a lane on side of the road earmarked for cyclists*). They also use safety jackets and helmets.

"When driving on highways, we need to be careful as vehicles zoom past us," adds Prisiliya. "We stop cycling at 6 pm in the evening as it gets dark."



**IMAGE: The cycling enthusiasts at Kanyakumari. Photograph: Kind courtesy Sumeet Paringe and Prisiliya Madan.**

#### **Bumps on the road**

The duo has packed light for the journey. "We're just carrying 17 kg on our backs, which is easy to manage. In the past, I have carried 25 kg on a bicycle journey."

But they are still getting used to the food served at the roadside food joints in south India.

"Almost every place serves *sambhar* and rice," laughs Sumeet. "So that's what we are having for most of our meals. But we are looking forward to varied food options in the north and north-east."

#### **Memories**

Sumeet and Prisiliya enjoy watching young children going to school as they ride past them on their cycles. It brings a smile on their faces as it reminds them of their cause. "We get off our bikes and shake hands with these kids. We take photos with them," says Sumeet. "If anyone is interested, we tell them about our mission too."

Given the language barriers, communicating with the locals in the interiors has proved to be a challenge, but they hope to reach out to more people on their journey. "People are curious about our mission but all we can give them is basic information. People at the grassroots don't actually understand the severity of the issue," he mourns.

Cycling together has often got them curious stares. After all, it is not every day that villagers bump into a boy and a girl riding on bamboo bikes.

Sumeet says the children are the most curious. "They are fascinated by our cycles," he grins. "They always have plenty of questions about them."

The journey has also introduced them to helpful strangers.

"There was a time in Madurai when we were riding in the scorching heat at 2 pm. We stopped at a roadside stall to quench our thirst. We had a glass of buttermilk each but when we offered to pay, the vendor refused to take money. I think he saw that we were tired and was only too happy to help," says Prisiliya.

#### **Funds raised**

Till date, the duo has managed to raise Rs 12,61,575. They still have 69 days to go before they complete their trip.

If you'd like help, do log into [www.fueladream.com](http://www.fueladream.com).

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