

News monitored for: Royal Enfield



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COVER STORY
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The Bullet

The story of Royal Enfield, and how it went from being an iconic symbol of adventure and individuality (and a bike that broke down often) to India's fastest-growing motorcycle brand

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In the old seaport of Kollam, on Kerala's west coast, there is a man known as Bullet Mani, and he claims to have a special gift. In the 1960s, when Thiruvananthapuram was still called Trivandrum and modern media had not yet supplanted fairy tales, he worked in that evergreen city with a man named Gopalan Meeri, who became his guru. It was from Meeri that he inherited his gift, and he has been using it for 40 years now, since he moved to Kollam in 1976. Few know of him and his powers, but those who do, travel miles to hear witness to them. Even as they approach, his magic begins to work. For Bullet Mani can listen to the sound of a Royal Enfield motorcycle and immediately tell you what is wrong with it.

Some 10,000km away, in a village in the Swiss Alps, lives Roland M., another man who deals in magic. His full name is kept secret by those who speak of him, for he was a UN official who absconded countries on security and now his own must be created. But when you ask long-time Enfield enthusiasts about the journey of the 115-year-old brand and its flagship bike, the Bullet—from the British-made bikes that the Indian Army rode, to making motorcycles *usula* (milliman) bike, to carving a niche for itself by appealing to rugged adventurers, to becoming India's most aspirational brand of motorcycles, as likely to be ridden on a daily commute as on a tour around India—you do not hear facts and figures, or how unreliable they can be; you hear stories of magic.

Stories about men such as Bullet Mani, whose real name is P. Thangamani, the mechanic from Kollam district, which, he estimates, has a population of just over two million and more than 60,000 Royal Enfield motorcycles. Mani accepts only Enfields at his Enfield India Auto Garage—spell with two Rs, serendipitously suggestive of the sound he hears from his beloved Bullet—and services or repairs more than 10 every day. "People from all over India—Gujarat, Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai even—come to

Every magician must have a vehicle to carry him around, so he can bedazzle and bedazzle all the neighbourhood children. And this magician's vehicle is a restored, fully customised, 1970s Royal Enfield Bullet. Called The Magician Bullet, it's fiery red, with a sidecar for all the secret things a magician may need. It came out of a workshop in Delhi called Old Delhi Motorcycles, owned by Bobbee Singh, who has been restoring Enfield bikes for 10 years.

When Roland came to Delhi looking for his magic moddle, Singh took him around on his own restored Bullet, which also has a sidecar. And as they rode past yells of "Shobhi, Shobhi" from onlookers reminded Zai and Veeri's bike in that iconic movie, he learnt that this powerful UN official was really a mythical child who needed a powerful yet fun vehicle to play in.

In the past decade, Royal Enfield has become India's fastest growing motorcycle brand. Sales have gone up by more than 50% each year since 2011; in 2014, they were higher than legendary leisure motorcycle maker Harley-Davidson's and this July, the brand sold 52,128 bikes, as many as it had in all of 2008.

None of them speak of making motorcycles in India, to being known as a *desi* (milliman) bike, to carving a niche for itself by appealing to rugged adventurers, to becoming India's most aspirational brand of motorcycles, as likely to be ridden on a daily commute as on a tour around India—you do not hear facts and figures, or how unreliable they can be; you hear stories of magic.

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COURTESY ROYAL ENFIELD

A dirt race at Royal Enfield Rider Mania 2015; and (below) Bobbee Singh with one of his custom-builds.

disdainful looks.

Then there are the customizers, for whom Enfield motorcycles are a base to create works of art that define the people who ride on them. Like Bobbee Singh, who has been mad about motorcycles since he was 10, when he would go to his neighbour's house, put grease on his face and pretend to assist him as he worked on his bike in a room with a painting of an old Triumph on the wall. He is interested only in vintage Enfields and only makes bikes for people of a certain vintage. You have to talk to him for hours, and only if he sees a shape forming out of your thoughts and dreams will he agree to build you a bike.

Japur-based Vijay Singh, for whom a summer project to build himself a bike turned into a full-fledged customization business, Rajputana Customs, is a little less finicky about his clients. And if you don't have the Rs3-5 lakh a full custom job can cost, you could call on Varlenchi Motorcycles, in Mumbai. Owner Akshay Varde's list of clients reads like the credits of a Bollywood blockbuster, but he has expanded his business to building affordable accessories and customization kits for customers on a tighter budget.

CLUB CULTURE

Once you're in Chandigarh, you're likely to walk into Manmohan Auto Stores, one of the two dealerships there, owned by 52-year-old Mannohan Singh. His grandfather and father started an Enfield dealership in Ambala back in 1957, just two years after the bike began to be assembled in India. After joining the business, in 1983, he opened two outlets in Chandigarh and one in Patiala and has seen his annual sales go from 31 bikes then to 4,000-plus bikes last year. When he sells a motorcycle to a customer he likes, he keeps in touch with them on Facebook and goes for a breakfast ride with them, perhaps sharing tips on the bike; there is nothing he doesn't know about it, he says. Billing runs in the families of many Enfield dealers.

Once you own an Enfield, you need to begin fostering a relationship with the local legendary mechanic. In Kerala, Bullet Mani is your man. In Mumbai, it's O.A. Anthony, who has been running his little garage from a by-lane in Santacruz since 1979 and has, he estimates, built the world's fastest Bullet, a 600cc modified Enfield bike—the most powerful motorcycle the company sells is the 555cc Continental GT—which, during a 2008 Royal Enfield Speed Run event, completed a quarter mile in 13.9 seconds, hitting speeds of over 130 kilometres per hour. Bengaluru has a road called Bullet Lane in Shivajinagar that has a row of mechanic shops; the story goes that when any motorcycle other than a Royal Enfield turns into the lane, it's full of

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BULLETS IN BOLLYWOOD
When Royal Enfield bikes sexed up Hindi movies.

Akshay Kumar's golden 'OG' in 'OMG - Oh My God!'
Kumar plays God, and, of course, God must ride around on a Royal Enfield. The bike he uses in the movie, with the licence plate number OM 786 printed on it, was made by customizer Akshai Varde. It was a completely customized Enfield Bullet, with a 500cc engine and a massive, 300mm rear tyre. It weighed 280kg and cost Rs10 lakh to make.

Katrina Kaif's chase vehicle in 'Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara'
In a talked-about scene from the movie that reversed traditional gender roles, Kaif's free-spirited character chases down Hrithik Roshan's character, whom she loves, on a bike after they part ways in Spain. The motorcycle was a classic 500cc Bullet, and Kaif said she loved riding it.

Kangana Ranaut's bike 'Tanu Weds Manu'
Director Aanand L. Rai wanted Tanu to have all the traits of a wild small-town girl, and one of them, he decided, was riding a Bullet. Rai had to ride the heavy vehicle through narrow streets in Kanpur, with a pillion, something he had never done since she had never ridden a Bullet before.

The Building of Legacy
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN ICON

1891 R.W. Smith and Albert Eadie take over the Towhead cycle company in Redditch, England, to form Enfield Manufacturing Co. Ltd.

1893 The Royal Enfield brand name is created.

1898 The first motorized vehicle, a quadricycle, is manufactured by Enfield.

1901 The first Royal Enfield motorcycle, with a 235cc engine, is produced.

1932 The first Bullet arrives. It's a 350cc bike, but looks quite different from the modern version.

1948 A new version of the Bullet, with rear suspension springing, is released. The current version of the 350cc Bullet is a developed version of this bike.

1955 Madras Motors gets a licence to assemble Royal Enfield bikes in India.

1970 The original Redditch-based company stops manufacturing Royal Enfield bikes, leaving Madras Motors as the sole manufacturer of the brand.

1990 Madras Motors enters into an alliance with Eicher Group and they take over the brand.

2000 Siddhartha Lal is appointed CEO of Royal Enfield and given the mandate to rescue the loss-making brand.

2005 Enfield hosts the Himalayan Odyssey, an annual ride from New Delhi to Leh, for the first time.

2013 The Royal Enfield Continental GT Cafe Racer is launched at the iconic Ace Cafe in London.

2016 The Himalayan, a bike intended to cash in on Enfield's long association with rides in the mountain range, is launched.

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The Road Ahead
The Enfield customer is knowledgeable and discerning. He is passionate about his bike, but he also knows what is wrong with it. This means Lal and his team have to constantly be on their toes when launching new vehicles. The latest offering, The Himalayan, has been criticized for its performance. And a lot of the old tropes surrounding the brand have not been completely subsumed by its recent success.

The Slump and the Boom
While the tales of derring-do of the small clique of adventurers had generated small waves of excitement about the brand, there is only so much you can do with bikes that are known to break down. By 2000, Enfield was doing so poorly as a brand that Eicher wanted to shut it down. That's when Siddhartha Lal, whose father, Vikram, had been chief executive officer of Eicher Motors, took over the dying brand and vowed to turn it around.

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