

# THE HINDU

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EXPLORING SPACES

## Motorcycle Chang-pa

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Gaurav Jani's "Riding Solo", an endearing movie on the Chang-pas of Ladakh, makes a journey of self-discovery.



**One-man unit: Gaurav Jani on location for his next documentary. Photo: Sanjeev Sharma**

EVERYDAY, you kick-start a bike, engage the gear and set off to work. What could be more ordinary than that? But, if you would only have it that way, the same road can take you beyond the office to places that are not even on a map. And the same 100cc put-putter that so monotonously and faithfully takes you to office and back, can take you to wide open spaces that bring you face to face with yourself or even take you out of yourself. If only you would have it that way.

### A way of life

Of course, not many want to or even need to. But for others like Gaurav Jani, it is a way of life they wouldn't want to give up for anything in the world. Gaurav, one of the most seasoned travellers on a bike I know, has travelled to some of the remotest corners of this country on his bike. He is also the founder-member of one of most respected biking communities in India, 60KPH (see [www.60kph.com](http://www.60kph.com)). Riding, he says, gives him a better insight into India

and its peoples. One such vision, of a band of nomadic people, the Chang-pas of the Changthang plateau in Ladakh, is taking him places.

The movie he made of his 5,000-km ride to the Changthang plateau, "Riding Solo to the Top of the World", has just won two awards at the recently concluded Mumbai International Film Festival, 2006 (MIFF): The Golden Conch Award for the Best Documentary Film/ Video and the National Critics' Choice award. A stupendous achievement when you consider the fact that his was a one-man film unit, his equipment restricted to a digital movie camera as the bike had to carry other essentials and spares for survival in the wilderness.

Perhaps the real surprise here is that the jury are able to appreciate offbeat movies like "Riding Solo". K. Hariharan, Director, L.V. Prasad Film and TV Academy, Chennai, who was the chairman of the jury at MIFF, says that the film was refreshingly different. It contains a "spontaneous way of looking at the world around", yet managing to remain "controlled and disciplined". As a director, he says, Gaurav lets the environment shape his personality, reflecting an inner harmony.

Conceptually, the movie is very simple. As he says at the beginning, Gaurav plans to ride to the Changthang plateau in Ladakh, an inhospitable terrain spread over 30,000 square kilometres at an average altitude of 15,000 feet between the Himalayas and the Karakoram range that is accessible by road only for four months in a year. Yet, it is home to the Chang-pas, nomadic herdsman whose lives seem to have strange resonance with Gaurav's own. With no specific plan, he plans to live with them briefly and film whatever strikes him. Basically, go there and take it from there.

### Shifting emphasis

But, "going there" is not so simple. 2,000 kilometres of some of the toughest roads in the country at altitudes that go sometimes to 18,000 feet, where often there is not even enough oxygen in the air for the fuel in the bike to burn. Inevitably, the movie begins as an adventure trip, glorifying the ride as an act of daring. All that changes once he starts living with the Chang-pas and he realises how hard their life is. In the face of simple courage such as theirs, he realises, his ride is nothing. The Chang-pas too, especially Tsewang, a Chang-pa who refuses to give up the only life he knows in a society that is also changing, accept him as one of their own, once they realise that he was there not to study them but share and experience their way of life. They call him the "motorcycle Chang-pa". The experience changes Gaurav and the movie is as much about the ride and the Chang-pas as it is about that transformation. And the message is simple: Sometimes, you have to get out of your obsession with your self to discover yourself.

Gaurav manages to make his weaknesses his strength: the lack of "proper" infrastructure and equipment actually make the movie appealing in its directness and simplicity. There is something appealing about the way in which one man narrates, with simple images and words, how an experience transformed him. There is one particular moment of epiphany in the movie that is magical. It looks like it's going to be a year of drought in Changthang and the Chang-pas have assembled to pray for rains. After three days of prayer, the winds quicken, the sky becomes overcast and it pours. As he says in the movie, "Have I just witnessed a miracle of faith or is it just coincidence? ... I feel the thrilling touch of God's poetry and for a while I am in faith. Long after everyone's left I sit outside the courtyard thinking about the

amazing events that had just transpired. I feel a deep sense of peace as I sit in contemplation. When I get up, I am no longer a foreigner in Changthang..."

The Chang-pas, a people at home with themselves and their world. That is the "lesson" Gaurav brings away with him. That we may choose to wander but can't always be lost. That we can't be foreigners forever. Not in Changthang and not in our own cities and our selves.

**Riding Solo to the Top of the World**, Editing: Sankalp Meshram, Music: Ved Nair, Sound Mixing: Dwarak Warriar, Camera, Sound and Direction: Gaurav Jani, Project Co-ordinator: Rajiv Menon, Executive Producer: P.T. Giridhar Rao for Dirtrack Productions, 2005.

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