

MOVIE REVIEW

Riding Solo to the Top of the World

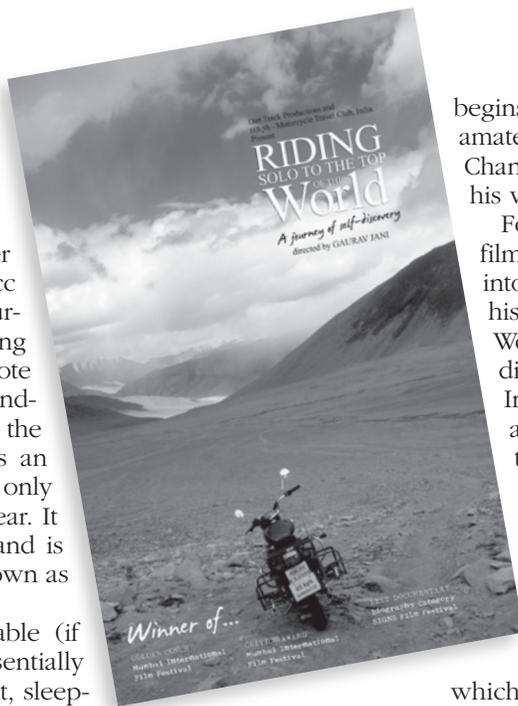
by Kate Edwards

A COUPLE OF YEARS ago, Indian filmmaker Gaurav Jani decided to ride his 350cc Royal Enfield motorcycle on a solo journey from Mumbai, India up to the Changthang Plateau of Lagakh. One of the most remote places on the planet, this arid plateau is sandwiched between the Karakoram Range to the north and the Himalayas to the south, has an average elevation of 15,000 feet, and is only accessible by road for four months of the year. It also lies very close to the Chinese border and is home to a nomadic tribe of goat herders known as the Changpa—but we will meet them later.

In order to make this trip, the personable (if sometimes rather unintelligible) Jani essentially bunged 220 pounds of gear—including tent, sleeping bag, clothes, some food, and a video camera to record the journey—to the back of his 440-pound bike and set off. (No big BMW bike, aluminum hard bags, or other high tech gadgets here—he could not afford them.) The result of this trip is the film *Riding Solo to the Top of the World*, which is a surprisingly moving and beautiful record of a life-changing journey.

The first third or so of this 94-minute documentary consists of footage Jani shot during the ride up to the plateau, which is a remarkable feat by itself in that he himself shot all the footage of himself riding. The sheer time and effort it takes for him to set up the camera high above the road, then scramble back to the bike, ride it back up the road, turn around, ride it back down through the camera's frame, then ride *back* to the camera again to pack it all away is too exhausting to contemplate. But his efforts are worth it as we watch him negotiate roadways such as the spectacular Gata Loops—a series of 21 switchbacks that ascend 2,000 feet in pretty short order, as well as the two highest mountain passes in the world. (We also learn that Indian highway officials have a great sense of humor. One sign urging drivers to slow down on a twisty mountain road reads: "Darling, I want you, but not so fast.") Additionally, all that footage helps us transition from the lush greens of the lower, more populated elevations up to the sun-bleached whites and brown of the desolate and arid mountains.

However beautiful and awe-inspiring all that footage is, up until Jani gets to Ladakh (which translates as "The Land of the Passes") his film still has the flavor of just another motorcycle travelogue—same idea, different locale. But once Jani is over the World's Highest Pass (18,634 feet), the whole tone of the film



begins to change because now this filmmaker and amateur cultural anthropologist is in the land of the Changpa, a world far different than anything he or his viewers has ever experienced.

For the next several weeks and the rest of the film, the motorcycling aspect of the trip fades into the background. It is as if Jani realizes that his little motorcycle journey to the "Top of the World" is a paltry achievement compared to the difficulties the Changpa face on a daily basis. Instead we watch as he lives with and travels among these people whose livelihood demand that they live in this forbidding and austere place. (The undercoat of the Changpa's goats gives forth the unusually soft and warm wool that goes into the making of pashmina shawls. That coat only grows on goats that live above 15,000 feet.)

Once Jani is among the Changpa, the film becomes something truly special, which is one of the reasons why it has won so many awards at film festivals from Calgary to Mumbai. As he travels among these people, their amazing—and little studied—life unfolds before us. (Because the Changthang Plateau lies practically on the Chinese border—western organizations such as *National Geographic* have been denied access to the area.) We watch as a Changpa mother shakes milk into butter by using a goat's carcass; Changpa toddlers play with baby goats; and in a particularly surreal moment, Jani teaches English to Changpa schoolchildren via a story in their battered readers about cowboys of the American West. We see a monastery inhabited by a single monk whose sole job is to care for the decades-old mummified remains of the monastery's founder; and we watch, amazed, as Jani witnesses a miracle—an event that changes the way he looks at his entire life.

To sum, *Riding Solo to the Top of the World* is one of those films that starts out as one thing, then slowly becomes something wholly unexpected and ultimately, very moving. After watching this film, this reviewer devoutly hopes that Gaurav Jani—who is also one of the founders of the Indian motorcycle travel club known as "60kph"—takes a video camera on all his travels. It will be very interesting to see where he goes to next.

Riding Solo to the Top of the World retails for \$25.95 and is available on DVD from Dirt Track Productions at www.dirttrackproductions.com. Two screenings of the film are scheduled for the U.S. On April 13–14 it will be shown at the Roxy Theater in Missoula, Montana and on May 12 it will be shown at the Atlanta Museum of High Art. For more information on other U.S. screenings, email info@dirttrackproductions.com. **FZ**