



## Autoethnography Of Bicycling: Reflections From The Field Experiences Of Cycling And Randonneuring In Hyderabad, India

B. Vinod Kumar

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad, Email <iambvinodk@gmail.com>

### KEYWORDS

Sport autoethnography, Reflectivity, field experience, Cycling culture, Randonneuring in India

### ABSTRACT

The essay utilises autoethnography while adopting an explorative research strategy. The PhD thesis project on randonneuring served as the inspiration for the paper. The article details the complete process in a chronological way. It is a reflection on the fieldwork experiences. The fieldwork was carried out between August 2015 and October 2018 in Hyderabad, India. It is divided into three stages. The paper presents a detailed descriptive account of how the researcher was moving through different stages of the study. In stage 1, I describe how I stepped into the cycling world. This stage is marked by learning about the cycle and getting acquainted with the city's cycling community. This includes more of commuting and leisure riding. In stage 2, I participate in local races and venture into longer rides and eventually become a randonneur, i.e., further improving my skills, training and gauging my fitness level. In Stage 3, I have participated in the randonneuring events as a randonneur completing the Super Randonneur series (i.e., 200, 300, 400 and 600kms rides). The article provides specific anecdotes to build a better context for understanding the subjective experience of the cycling culture.

### Introduction

The essay is a section of a doctoral thesis that addresses one of the main goals in comprehending India's expanding long-distance riding culture. The auto ethnography method was used to achieve the goal, which was to comprehend cycling at several levels and highlight intricate circumstances. An autoethnographic narrative of cycling and randonneuring in Hyderabad, India, is presented in the essay. The paper demonstrates how using an autoethnographic narrative as a qualitative tool to supplement other ethnographic resources, particularly when studying sporting activities, can be beneficial. Before getting to the autoethnographic account, the next part discusses the experience's conceptual application.

### Anthropology and Experience

The concept of experience has been discussed by Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner through the well-known edited work titled "*The Anthropology of Experience*", published in 1986. Victor W. Turner attempts an etymology of the term "experience" in his book *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) and presents that it has derived from the Indo-European base \*per-, which means "to, attempt, venture, risk". The Greek *perao* relates the experience to "I pass through," with implications of rites of passage. In Greek and Latin, experience is linked with *peril*, *pirate*, and *ex-per-iment*." (Victor and Edward 1986:35).

Turner took inspiration from the German thinker Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and his understanding of the concept of an experience, *Erlebnis*, also known as “lived through.” He wrote that “*reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience.*” (Dilthey in Turner and Bruner 1986:4) Bruner clarifies that experience is not confined to sense data or cognition or “*the diluted juice of reason*” but includes feelings and expectations. Further points that lived experience comes to us “*as thought and desire, as word and image, (and forms) the primary reality*”. It is unclear what he meant by the terms “consciousness” and “reality”, which are some of the most researched and debated topics in the last three decades in various research fields.

To Dilthey, the relationship between the experience and its expressions is dialogical, i.e., mutual dependence. In Bruner's words, “*experience structures expressions and expressions structure expressions.*” In understanding and expressing the experience, culture plays a significant role. Dilthey says, “*our knowledge of what is given in experience is extended through the interpretation of the objectification of life, and their interpretations, in turn, are only made possible by plumbing the depths of subjective experience.*” (Turner and Bruner, 1986:6) We can see that the core of knowledge is genuinely in understanding subjective experience. And articulating one's experience needs a memory bank of words, which is purely limited to the exposure of the previous literature. Some expressions, i.e., work in the form of texts, define and illuminate inner experience by enriching and clarifying human experience.

Geertz held a significant view that “experience is never simply ‘mere experience’ but is always ‘an experience’, that is, an ‘*interpretive replay [of an event] as we recollect it to ourselves and recount it to others*” (Throop 2003:226).

## Experience and Knowing

‘Experience’ is one of the foundational concepts in building knowledge, which is often taken for granted and remains largely unquestioned. Even though it is used widely, it is somewhat surprising to see the lack of conceptual clarity. It is significant to look at the concept of experience “*not only as a central area of investigation but also as the ground upon which all later speculation, description and explanation are erected.*” (Throop 2003:220) Victor W. Turner, in his essay on experience, points out that “*anthropology is most deeply rooted in the social and subjective experience of the inquirer. Everything is brought to the test of self; everything observed is learned ultimately on his [or her] pulses.*” (Victor & Edward, 1986:33) The future is always uncharted territory. Research demands one to be a sceptic and ask questions. So, how and where to start the enquiry? The normal tendency is to have no doubts about existence and take everything for granted. To put it in Victor W. Turner's words, “*we dolefully conclude, jettison present joy or abandon the sensitive exploration of what we perceive to be unprecedented developments in mutual human understanding and relational forms.*” (Victor & Edward 1986:33)

The section presents the arguments and examines the views on experience, which is the most fundamental aspect of life. I think a primary conceptual limitation with the term ‘experience’ prevents a deeper understanding of the fullness of the social and cultural processes.

It is illuminating to wonder about the mental states, reality, and existence. So, it seems logical to start from the beginning. Thomas Nagel's book titled *What Does It All Mean?* (1987) pays attention to an essential question through a dedicated chapter on “*How do we know anything?*”. He asks a series of fundamental questions and tries to present all the arguments one can think of. In his words,

*whatever you believe-whether it's about the sun, moon, and stars...history, science, other people, even the existence of your body is based on your experiences and thoughts, feelings and sense impressions... Everything else is farther away from you than your inner experiences and thoughts, and reaches you only through them...the only experience you can actually have are your own.* (Nagel 1987:8)

In a similar line of thought as Throop's understanding of the human experience, the experience becomes "the ground". Therefore, experience becomes one of the critical concepts moving forward. In this context, self-reflection and self-awareness play a significant role in considering the nature of the field of study. Reflection is a powerful way to enhance understanding. I have presented and reflected upon my own experiences and thoughts, which are the most authentic and reliable sources of information.

Even though it is a very well-known fact, unlike science, I mean scientific observation, life does not happen in a lab, and the instrument is the human body; in other words, the human body as an agency, which is undoubtedly the most complicated instrument which requires far more attention than it is typically given. In the case of randonneuring, a deeper understanding of the body is necessary. Understanding one's own physical and mental capabilities, what are their limits? Is there any limit? Who puts them? If one is willing to go even deeper, we can ask ourselves, "What is it to be a human being?" "What is possible and what is not possible?" All these questions arise.

It is necessary to note the difference between knowing by words, i.e., intellectually and knowing by experience, i.e., experientially.

### **The reality, experience and expression.**

Another critical problem that various authors in the Anthropology of experience try to emphasise is distinguishing the terms used to articulate the concepts associated with the experience. The paradoxes present in this sphere are dealt with in *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*, where the authors note that "*anthropological knowledge is embodied in words, and yet social experience-such as fieldwork-lies beyond language*" (Hastrup & Hervik 1994:1).

One of the most significant aspects of the anthropology of experience is of making a "critical distinction between reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated)." And it is crucial to recognise the "*inevitable gaps between reality, experience, and expressions, and the tension among them*" (Victor & Edward 1986:7). The expressions of one or the other form cannot be taken as equivalent to reality but employ several different forms of expressions to advance our understanding of reality, the experience and the expression.

We may then engage at different levels, and some of the authors have confined themselves to certain levels; for example, Dilthey makes a "*distinction between mere "experience" and "an experience": the former is received by consciousness, it is an individual experience, the temporal flow; the latter is the intersubjective articulation of experience, which has a beginning and an ending and thus becomes transformed into an expression.*" (Victor & Edward 1986:6)

### **Experience and Observation**

A critical distinction can be made between the concepts of experience and observation. The latter implies describing someone else's action from outside as a spectator to an event. Whereas "an experience is more personal," as one not only engages in activity but shapes it. The criteria for distinction is that "the communication of experience tends to be self-referential." (Victor & Edward 1986:5).

Observation is a great tool where the objects of study have no internal action. It only helps to record the activity from outside. For example, if the researcher were using only observation to research randonneuring, they would see people riding their bicycles through a pre-determined route for hours together with necessary breaks to refuel and rest. The researcher would never have an understanding or an insight into what does it happen to the body when one rides, ranging from 200kms to 600kms, what a randonneur goes through emotionally, how they feel at varying distance in the blazing sun, in

the heavy rains, in bone biting cold weather, while climbing mountains, in descending them and while riding in pitch dark nights with a sleep deficit.

Given the nature of randonneuring, observing a sport like randonneuring is nearly impossible as the riders are always moving. Those mind-boggling distances, not in groups like what is known in professional bicycle races as a 'peloton' but in the numbers of two or mostly riding solo.

Even the much revered "participant-observation" by anthropologists cannot be employed when the researcher himself is mostly riding solo or at the maximum, riding with another rider for few kilometres and meeting few other riders at the checkpoints or the refuelling points. It is even more challenging for the researcher to observe others while he/she must understand and dig deep to find motivation and complete these extremely exhausting events with uncertain weather conditions and situations. John MacAloon, in addition to his theoretical contribution to the study of sport, strongly advocated the ethnographers experience the concrete and particular social reality for themselves and refrain from "fetishisation of theory in the academy" (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018:172). There is a need to move further down to understand the experience of such events. Therefore, experiential ethnography is justified in this context. Even Kala Poewe rightly points out that experiential ethnography is "*a natural consequence of the method of participant-observation*" (Poewe 1996:177).

A noteworthy contribution comes from C. Jason Throop (2003), who reviews the works of various scholars such as Joan Scott, David Scott, Robert Desjarlais, and Cheryle Matingly, who share a dissatisfactory view on the usage of the concept of experience. He further situates the significant works of anthropologists Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz in the critical dialogue on experience. Throop suggests a complementary model of experience which is 'phenomenologically' grounded while organising the experience temporally by taking key insights from scholars of various traditions. He attempts to lay the groundwork for using the concept of experience in anthropological theory by drawing on the writings of William James, Edmund Husserl, and Alfred Schutz. He presents it as the fact that there are "*significant differences between the way the world appears to our consciousness when we are fully engaged in an activity and the way it appears to us when we subject it to reflection and retrospective analysis.*" (Jackson, 1996 quoted in Throop 2003:235) The statements clearly suggest reflection and retrospection of the experience has value and adds more to discourse on the experience of the activity undertaken.

### **Individual experience as the unit of analysis**

Individuals are the smallest units in the social fabric. Everything starts at an individual level and then slowly diffuses into the groups in a number of different ways based on the times in which they live, the situations and the context. We cannot change the world without changing ourselves first. The limiting factor with experience is that "we can only experience our own life, what is received by our own consciousness." When we cannot even comprehend our own experiences, understanding others' experiences seems to be further away from our understanding. Even though incomplete, we can share experiences with certain censors or represses or with varied capacities of awareness and articulation based on the situations. So Dilthey (1976:230 quoted in Victor and Edward 1986:5) tries to get around this limitation by saying that "*we transcend the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting expressions.*" Which may constitute representations, performances, objectification, texts and many more or, as Bruner (1986:5) puts it, as "*Expressions that are presented to us by the cultures we study; they are what is given in social life. Expressions are encapsulations of the experience of others*", or as Turner (1982:17 quoted in Victor and Edward 1986:5) wrote, they are "*the crystallised secretions of one's living human experience.*"

The understanding of human-related subject matter is not restricted to anthropology alone. Dilthey presents that "when we experience human states, give expressions to them, and understand these expressions." It is necessary to ask what are the human states Dilthey is speaking about. How many

states of experience are there? And are these states accessible to each one of the human beings? These seem to be fundamental questions one needs to consider before getting further. Hence, we get into the ontological aspects, which deal with the nature of things and epistemological elements, which seek to know how and what we know.

Throop weights using different methodologies, giving access to pre-reflective, a real-time unfolding of the social activities and reflective varieties of experience.

### *Stage 1: The Beginning of the cycling Journey (August 2015 – June 2016)*

It goes without saying that it's important to familiarise yourself with the various components of a cycle as well as cycling terminology. Understanding the language and ideas used in the cycling industry requires continuous interaction, which is a process of learning. It's crucial to comprehend how important distance is to the cycling discourse as a whole. As a result, the article pays enough attention to the distance, which influences a number of decisions in the field.

#### *Getting into the world of cycles and buying the "Bike".*

Before taking up the study, I had little experience and knowledge of riding a geared bicycle. I visited Hyderabad Bicycling Club (HBC), a public store that Greater Hyderabad Municipality Corporation (GHMC) set up to encourage bicycling in Hyderabad city. It is a rental facility. I used the facility to understand more about a geared bicycle and went for rides not above 10kms as the bicycles were not in good condition. My thought process was, "even if the bicycle broke in between, I could walk back to the facility". After a few rides and knowing what was necessary for riding, I decided to buy a geared bicycle. I kept a fair budget of thirty thousand rupees. I reached that budget after talking to close acquaintances and online window shopping. All the extra fittings (bottle cages, lights etc.) and cycling wear (cycling shorts, helmet etc.) were primary and essential for bicycling.

After settling into the doctoral programme and beginning my coursework, I made the decision to purchase a bicycle from a bike shop on the advice of the physical education trainer/coach. He trained me for more than four years at the university so that I could compete in several local and national running competitions. He also has a cycling background and rides a geared bicycle. I visited *The Bike Affair* (TBA from here on out), a bike shop that opened in 2010. TBA is a renowned bicycle retailer situated four kilometres from my residence. When I went to TBA and asked about the bikes (the terms "bike" and "bicycle" are used synonymously), I was shocked to learn that the beginning price was 30,000 rupees and went up from there. I realised right away that I needed to update my budget. The bicycles were beautiful, enticing, and attractive on the outside. At the same time, I was perplexed, surprised, and inquisitive. The world of cycles and cycling continues to astound me even after all these years. I was questioned extensively regarding the objective, the landscape, and the projected riding distance. Then I realised that I needed a lot more clarity on a number of issues that I had not previously thought about. I was only beginning to scrape the surface at the time, little did I know.

There are several bikes designed considering each one of the factors. I was shown the fundamental differences and the basic typology with their names very appropriate (see Figures 1, 2 and 3), i.e., a) The Road bike: meant for riding on good roads, having thin tyres and lightweight. b) The Mountain bike: is meant for off-road biking, with wider tyres, suspension and on a heavier scale, and c) The Hybrid bike: is an in-between meant for roads but can handle off-road routes as well, with moderate wide tyres and weight. As I said before, this is a very basic typology. It goes deeper and deeper if one is willing to dive into it with various permutations and combinations regarding the group set and the materials used in the bike.

Learning about them, I understood that I need more time and exposure to make an informed decision. I visited another bike store: Yellow Jersey, to see what kind of bikes they had to offer and

compare the prices. I could not find more options, and maybe I had already decided to buy a bike I saw in the TBA. After sleeping over it for a few days, browsing some websites and watching videos about cycling, I went to the store. I decided to buy a hybrid bicycle because of its flexibility in terms of usage, i.e., both for transport and to improve my fitness. Considering my budget, it was the closest, even though on the upper side. One of the factors which propelled me was that TBA staff members were cyclists themselves; therefore, it made it even more sensible to go to them.

Understanding the purchasing process requires knowledge of the economic conditions. In the world of recreational cycling, it is common to purchase a bike while lying about the price. The bikers frequently admit and humorously emphasise that the true cost of the bicycles is kept a secret from their families and only disclosed to cyclists. I felt compelled to make the same decision and opted not to disclose my original purchase expenses. Under the guise of having to pay for other necessities like university fees, room rent, etc., I had to borrow money from my father. They'd be stunned, and they'd have a lot of questions. I decided not to bring up the subject at that time. I had to first persuade myself that everything was worthwhile. I told my parents about the bike and its cost after a few long rides and some clarity on my study project. Since the bicycle cost more than two months' value of my father's earnings, the response was to be expected. They accepted my argument that it was all worth the investment. These narratives are crucial because they reveal the mentalities, attitudes towards money, and socialisation processes of lower middle-class households. It explains the circumstances around my bicycle purchase and experiences it led to later on.

Typically, the owner takes us to the adult section when we go to the general bicycle shop. We look at the existing bicycles and try them out in the store. After selecting the bicycle, they fix the bell and the cycle stand. It would hardly take 1-2hrs for the entire process. I bought two bicycles in the past. They were used for commuting inside the campus within a radius of 5kms. Each of them cost me around three thousand rupees. I had to buy the second cycle because the first one was stolen. It took so much effort to convince my parents to get another one with the promise of being more responsible and cautious towards my cycle. The fear of losing the bicycle had made me buy a lock and a steel chain to tie it to a pole to ensure more safety.

However, purchasing this kind of bike was a different experience altogether. Even after a few months of research, talking to close acquaintances, and all the input from the TBA staff, it still took an entire day to buy the bike. It was the most expensive thing I have ever bought in my life. The thought that I have evaporated two and half months of my father's salary in a single day makes me think about justifying the purchase even more. The TBA members have convinced me to go for a better bike than what I was getting in my budget. Thinking long term, I opted for quality clothing and accessories, which made me spend close to fifty thousand even after a 10% discount. I thought of it as an investment rather than an expense being optimistic about the possibilities it might add to my life in general.

It will make much more sense if one understands the gear bicycles' essential parts. The changes in each of them can only be understood after a riding experience, and one can truly appreciate the bike research and aesthetic. It is more of a qualitative aspect of the bike. Therefore, I will throw some light on it before I move ahead. The bike can be broken into three major parts (see Figure 4): 1) The frame, 2) the wheels, and 3) Group set. The frame gives strength. It is the skeleton of the bike. The bicycle companies majorly work on designing the frame. Steel, alloy and carbon are the materials used in most bikes. The wheel consists of hubs, spokes and a rim. The tire is mounted onto the rim so that it encases the tube. The tires provide the friction necessary for moving the bike forward on the riding surface. The group set is a closed circuit that propels the bike and brings it to a stop. It consists of the crank, chainrings (front cogs), cassette (rear cogs), chain, brakes, derailleurs and shifters. There is a group set hierarchy (see figure 5). The price is the result of the change in the materials used and the combination of the components. It

is generally observed that a decrease in the weight of any components will increase the price.

I finalised a hybrid bike (see Figure 3) having a Claris group set (8x3 gearing: 8 in the back and 3 in the front known as eight-speed). The basic level group set from the Shimano brand. The number of rear chain wheels (sprockets) on the cassette indicates the speed, which may range mostly between 7 and 11. I understood what customisation truly meant for the first time in my life. The frame size, stem length, seat height and so on are adjusted according to my height, arm length and leg length, respectively. Taking into consideration every minute detail and after every minor adjustment, I was told to go for a test ride. Even though I was riding a regular bicycle for more than five years, I never paid the necessary attention to some of these basic adjustments, even as simple as saddle height, which could make such a big difference in riding. It was way more comfortable than I expected; there was ease in riding with the least effort. To my surprise, I never imagined that cycles could move that fast. All the above said is just the basic level adjustments.

Apart from that, there is something called “bike fit”, which goes even deeper into many technicalities of the riding style, sitting postures, weight distribution, fitness level etc.—going through this entire buying process somehow felt justified for the money I spent. The accessories necessary for the rides are attached to the bike, such as the bottle cages, front and rear lights, a strap to hold the bicycle handpump and a saddle pouch to hold the tool kit in an emergency. The tool kit consists of three small levers that help open the tyre, small rubber patches to cover the punctures, and a mini tool that helps open the screws in case minor corrections are required. The cyclo-computer was fixed to show the basic metrics of speed, average speed, trip distance and overall distance. I was excited and interested to see all of these on a bicycle. It was almost like a motorbike but completely human-powered and of course, without any fuel. The fact that I was going to be independent made me even more satisfied with the purchase.

#### *First ride/ race on Independence Day, 2015- 50Km race.*

On 15th August 2015, just after a week of buying the bike, I registered for a 50km ride cum race. The event had all kinds of participants, from beginners to highly skilled riders. It also has a competitive segment, with a cash prize for the top finishers. These kinds of fitness-related events have become a norm in cities worldwide. The best part of these kinds of rides is the support and being amidst a bigger group of cyclists, which gives a sense of security that is most necessary for beginners like me.

#### *Learning about the gears*

Knowing when and how to change gears might seem simple, but it ends up a little complicated in the learning phase. Throughout the week, I was getting familiar with the gears and their combinations. Fellow riders identify most bikes in terms the number of gears (sprockets) they have at the rear wheel, usually ranging between 7 to 11; hence referred have 7speed to 11 speed, respectively. Cyclists who ride road bikes ignore the front chain rings as they have only two chainrings. But for beginners, it is a little confusing in the starting. Both mountain and hybrid bikes have three chainrings on the front; therefore, more options and combinations are available. My bike had eight gears on the back and three chain rings in the front, 8X3=21; some refer to them as 21 speed. I was advised by the cyclists (TBA staff) to use the combination of chain ring 1(smallest) with 1,2,3 gear, chain ring 2(mid) with 4,5,6 gears and chain ring 3(largest) with 6,7 & 8 gears. Cautioned to avoid cross-chaining (the extreme gear combinations), chain ring 1 with 7,8 and chain ring 3 with 1,2,3 gear as there are more chances of damage to the chain.

So, what do gears actually do? They allow controlling the cadence (revolutions of the crank per minute) while climbing or descending. In other words, they help maintain relatively steady pedalling and reduce the effort to find a comfortable pace, especially on the climbs. With some practice, I slowly got the feel of the gears and learnt not to shift gears while pedalling too hard as it is hard to shift; therefore, anticipating the right gear combination well before a climb is essential for a smooth transition. It was

also advised not to shift gears when the bike is stationary. All this information helped me to be more cautious and, at the same time, be more efficient with the bicycle.

### **The First 50km ride cum race: An Anchor of experience.**

#### *The preparation!*

Within a week after purchasing the bike, I signed up for a 50km ride cum race event. I had not ridden more than 10km before that, but I was sure that 50km was doable without much practice. I suppose that was coming from the understanding of my body, my energy and my fitness which is rooted in all the athletic training and my active involvement in various sporting activities in the past. The past running activities have acted as an anchor of experience for taking decisions relative to that kind of experience. Therefore, what I refer to as an “anchor of experience” plays a pivotal role in the decisions making process to take up activities that otherwise lack prior experience.

A day before the event, I collected the race kit, including a Bib and a T-shirt, at the Hyderabad Bicycling Club (HBC) situated at Gachibowli, 10km from my residence. I have taken care of the nutrition, the necessary rest and the bike set-up. With a little bit of anxiousness woke up. I dressed up in cycling attire and rode to the start point. I was a few minutes late. I saw a big group of riders passing in the opposite way.

#### *The ride*

For the first few kilometres, I cruised past many riders pedalling hard. The cyclo-computer was showing speeds over and above 30km/hr. I was learning on the go and trying to understand the responsiveness of the bike and my body more and more with each pedal. I tested the highest gear combination, i.e., 3(front) X 8(rear) on a downhill, as there was no traffic and the cyclo-computer flashed a 48km/hr speed. That felt like flying. From what biologists found out, there seems to be a chemical basis for every experience, and in those terms, it is called an adrenaline rush, a kind of “high” state of mind. In standard terms, this kind of experience is a little hard to explain as it brings in a mixture of feelings, some of which can be articulated and some I feel can only be experienced; no amount of articulation can do justice. There was excitement, thrill, fear, a sense of freedom, anxiety and many more and all at once. Even though it lasted just a couple of minutes, these indescribable moments are registered deep in the memory to be remembered and savoured. I never imagined that cycles would reach that kind of speed.

The race/ride is a to-and-from course, meaning that participants must travel 25 kilometres before turning around. At the turning point, there was a checkpoint. I averaged above 25 km/hr throughout the first 25 km, which I completed in 50 odd minutes. My legs were in severe pain and the second half was challenging. The last 25 kilometres, or the return trip from the check point, took almost one and a half hours to bicycle. I finished the course in 2hrs 20mins. After completing the ride, there was a mixed sensation of accomplishment, success, and contentment. They further sparked a desire to increase my speed and inspired me to go farther without putting too much stress on my body. So training hard is the obvious solution. In simple terms, it entails spending more time biking, honing my riding skills, and building up my physique, particularly my legs and core. Experiences of this nature can either create or destroy new behaviours. As was already noted, this ride/race served as a “anchor of experience” for all the cycling-related pursuits I eventually engaged in during my cycling journey.

#### *Initial rides: commute and leisure rides*

I took part in the rides that Hyderabad Bicycling Club (HBC) and The Bike Affair (TBA) organised during the subsequent few months. Frequent rides were organised by the TBA. There were three main types of rides available for various rider groups. TBA was offering Saturday rides, which normally cover distances between 25 and 40 km at speeds around 20 kilometres per hour, for novice and leisure riders. The Saturday rides are typically designed to visit the city’s well-known attractions, like Golconda Fort,



Charminar, Gandipet Lake, Ameenpur Lake, etc., in order to draw in more participants and make the journey entertaining. They pause frequently and move slowly. Sunday rides for dedicated riders and fitness buffs typically exceed 50 km at speeds over 25 km/hr. They are thought of as practise rides. These non-stop rides are largely restricted to the National Highways. For riders who wished to enjoy riding at night, there were also night rides offered during the week. Riding at night is a completely different experience, especially in the suburbs of the city where there is no traffic, little pollution, and cold weather.

Social media, primarily Facebook and WhatsApp, are used to communicate about the rides with all the necessary details. The rides have a meetup point, where most riders start the ride, and few riders join somewhere in the route. Every ride is unique; the riders change, the environment, and the pace changes. Therefore, the experience, with all the topography and geography registering within the riders. With every ride, the efficient use of the gears increased and the balance ingrained into the body slowly becomes second nature with almost no thought or effort required to carry that action. The sense of direction also improved with time.

As the rides increased, the rapport with the cycling community and the TBA staff was built. Attending necessary “Do It Yourself” (DIY) workshops with fellow riders to learn how to fix the punctures and other minor adjustments that one may encounter during the rides helped in becoming a little more independent and confident going for long-distance rides. The initial fear of becoming stranded alone in some far away, unknown place has slowly withered away with the knowledge of handling the bike, attending the workshops and knowing the areas with the growing number of rides.

### *Stage 2: Randonneuring and racing (July 2016 - October 2017)*

Randonneuring is a long-distance cycling sport. It has its roots in France. It entails finishing rides of varying lengths in a set amount of time while abiding by established rules and checkpoints. A cyclist who completes four brevets of increasing distances—200 km, 300 km, 400 km, and 600 km—in the course of a single season is known as a Super Randonneur. In the world of randonneuring, it is recognised as a significant accomplishment.

#### *My first brevet: becoming a ‘Randonneur’*

In the initial ride phase, the longest ride was around 150kms, which acted as a base for stepping up to the challenges of the longer distances. With all the initial rides, I was confident enough to attempt my first 200km brevet (randonneuring event). Stage 2 began with the randonneuring event with all observations, note-making and various ride metrics in place. I have started using the Strava Application, which is used to record various metrics like the distance, time, elevation, speed etc. of the rides. The fellow riders suggested it. It is one of the most used applications by cyclists around the world. It is a go-to application for any cyclist to track personal rides and helps keep a tab on activities related to cycling and other cyclists.

I completed my first brevet, the longest ride of my life. It was not as challenging as I imagined it to be because of the pleasant weather on the day. It was drizzling during the first half of the ride, and the tailwind helped in the second half, which reduced the effort I needed to put in. The ride’s most challenging as well as the best part was riding the Ananthagiri hill without stepping down. The elevation profile of the hill was one of the most discussed aspects of the event (see Figures 5 and 6). The event is titled “Heaven and Hell”, and the hill represents the “hell” part of the ride, which comes after 110kms of riding. For most of the first 130-odd kilometres, I rode with fellow riders, but after that, I ended up riding alone. I misjudged a turn and had to ride an extra 15 kms. Because of the slight detour, I had to put some extra effort into reaching the last but one checkpoint on time; otherwise, it would have been a comfortable ride. I finished the ride with 10 minutes to spare-elapsed time at 13:20:21 (see Figure 5). The cut-off was 13:30mins for finishing the ride; otherwise, it would have been considered a “Late Finish”.

I was awestruck by the landscapes near Kotepally lake and Ananthagiri hills. The experience was much more enriching than just riding a bicycle for 215 kms. After the ride, I realised that I could do much better with some more training. My body, especially my legs and back, are still adapting to long-distance cycling. I felt the need to buy a road bike, considering the possibility of how it could enhance the efficient use of my energy with reduced effort and an increase in speed, which could further help in some spare time to interact with fellow riders and focus little more on the surroundings in the field.

After the successful completion of the 200Km brevet in 2016, I became a “Randonneur”. It acted as one of the indicators of gauging the cyclists riding experience, which adds certain respect and credibility to the cyclist in the cycling community. As mentioned, to improve my overall fitness, I started training with help from a physical education teacher and attended yoga sessions at the university for increasing flexibility and recovery from the hard training. The cycling training schedule for week included four cycling workouts and two strengthening sessions. Among the four, one was hill repeats. I used Strava App to record and observe the progress of my training.

### *Brevet populaire*

*Hyderabad Randonneurs Club* organised a 109km ride known as “The Pearl Ride” while the training was taking place. The term “brevet populaire” refers to these rides. Cycling clubs all over the world organise these rides to increase their awareness and entice cyclists to sign up for brevets.

This was an excellent opportunity to see the results of two weeks of training, the workouts’ effect and to time my 100 km ride. My target was to achieve 25 km/hr average speed and complete the race within 4:30 mins (see Figures 7 and 8). Cycling jersey was one of the key attractions to participating in the ride. I did not have a proper cycling jersey, as they seemed expensive. I picked up the ride kit in a cafe the day before the ride. The commute to pick up the kit helped me understand that the weather was humid; hence hydrated pretty well for the ride. It is always hard to sleep the night before any big event because of the excitement and the anxiety. I woke up around 2 a.m., with a bike check and nutrition in place, and rode to the starting point, i.e., Indian School of Business (ISB), Gachibowli, which was 6km from my residence. It worked as a good warm-up for the ride. The ride attracted a considerably big group of cyclists from the city.

I started riding with a bigger bunch of riders and slowly caught up with the first bunch of riders. We reached the first checkpoint, which was around 30kms. They provided fruit juice, and we fueled up and continued riding. I could not keep up with the two riders riding ahead of me. There was a heavy headwind until the second checkpoint. I started feeling hungry, so I had some bananas and dates provided at the checkpoint. I filled up my water bottles and mixed some electoral powder.

I rode alone from there to the endpoint, following the cue sheet. My navigation skills improved with the rides but were still not entirely up to the mark. I made a minor misjudgement at the third checkpoint but realised it pretty soon and went back on track. I finished 6th overall. Even though it was not a race, it built some confidence to gauge my fitness levels with other riders. I did not reach my targets, but I was pretty close. I could see a significant improvement in my riding. The average speed shot up, and I was much more comfortable holding certain positions (aero position) on the bike for longer periods. All this was visible within two weeks of following the training schedule given by my university coach. I finished the ride surprisingly with much fuel left in my body. The ride gave me satisfaction and boosted my confidence.

Even though I was on a hybrid bike and the first bunch of riders were on road bikes, I could keep up with them for a significant time and distance. Some of the acquainted riders acknowledged my effort, and some expressed how they were surprised to see me finishing the ride that fast. The point here is to understand how the human psyche plays out in certain situations, and these circumstances, in a way,

reveal more about ourselves than the outside world. These again influence one to take certain decisions in life, which have unknown consequences. It is often observed that the consistency and improvement of any cyclist are highly respected and appreciated by the cycling community.

### *Racing*

In addition to riding my bike for transportation, recreation, training, and randonneuring, I took part in a few local races organised by The Bike Affair (TBA). Below is a summary of the various races.

TBA mass starts race 1 [16th October 2016]- 50km in the non-road bike category. I secured the second position, finishing the race at 1:33:06 with an average speed of 30.9km/hr.

TBA mass starts race 2 [10th December 2016]- 50km in the non-road bike category. It was the same route as race 1; therefore, many factors were constant, which helped in understanding the improvement. I secured the first position in my category, finishing the race in 1:28:37 with an average speed of 32.3km/hr. I had improved the timing by 5mins.

Decathlon MTB race [Dec 04th 2016]- 10km. It was a first-time experience racing with the MTB. It was hard to balance bicycle in the off-road sections, hence had to walk a couple of times. Surprisingly, I secured 8th place with a timing of 23:22. TBA sponsored the mountain bike to participate in the race.

### *Upgrades: a level up*

Considering some of the non-riding conditions such as rain, roads, time and so on, many cyclists look towards indoor trainers to keep up the physical activity. In a similar thought process, I bought a basic cycling indoor trainer. The trainers are engineered so that the bicycle easily fits into the trainer and somewhat gives a road-like experience. The resistance and others parameters are adjustable to the needs of the riders. The advantage is that they are convenient and help build consistency in training, irrespective of the weather and other limiting factors.

One of the major upgrades for a cyclist is using cleats. Cleats are an attachment to a cyclist's shoe. It clips onto the bike's pedals. It helps the riders apply the force and give better bike control. It feels like the bike is attached to our legs and therefore becomes an extension of our body. It takes a few rides to get used to cleats. Almost every cyclist might have experienced a "cleat fall". A cleat fall happens when the cyclist forgets to unclip the cleat from the pedal at the end of the ride, which leads to the loss of balance and fall. It is a funny experience. Cleat falls do not hurt because they are slow and happen when the bike is stationary. They happen until unclipping becomes second nature to a cyclist. I switched to cleats and experienced three cleat falls. I had practised clipping and unclipping cleats hundreds of times on the trainer before I ventured out. I trained well with cleats on the hybrid bike.

The most significant upgrade is the road bike. It's a complete game-changer. It's much lighter and faster, with higher gearing options and better geometry. Adding all that and cleated pedals felt a super boost. Apart from that, I got speed, cadence sensors, a heart rate monitor and a fitness tracker, which is used to project all the data in one place and have a better measurement; even though all these seem expensive for my income bracket but felt worth the experience.

All the above is done keeping in mind the brevets I had to complete to finish the Super Randonneur series (i.e., 200, 300, 400 and 600kms). The period before the actual event(s) is generally referred to as 'base building' or 'base miles' or 'preparatory period' in the fitness or sports world. A strong base mileage helps prevent injuries and improves recovery rate, i.e., faster recovery from exhaustive long rides. Table 1 presents the overall cycling activity data during the period of fieldwork. Before July 2016, i.e., in the initial stage, the data was not recorded but could have certainly done more than 2,000kms. The cycling

mileage comes to around 10,000 kms overall in all the stages.

The cumulative experiences of the past played a significant role in taking decisions, which helped me to take up the challenge or even think of attempting to achieve the title of a ‘Super Randonneur’.

### *Stage 3: Becoming a Super Randonneur (November 2017 – February 2018)*

The annual calendar of Randonneuring is from November to October. This is known as a Randonneuring season. There are Twelve Brevets scheduled by Hyderabad Randonneurs for the 2017-18 season (see Table 2). The brevets are planned in such a way that the riders can scale up step by step to finish the Super Randonneur series. A three-week gap is maintained between the brevets for recovery and preparation. There are no brevets scheduled in the months of May and June, keeping in view the high temperatures of the region. In fact, even the 200km brevet in April is a night brevet. The field work has been carried out for the entire 2017-18 season.

I have participated as a rider in some brevets and volunteered in others (see table 2). Both experiences are quite different from one another. Being a rider/randonneur requires much more preparation: both physically and mentally. The experience is much deeper and more intense. As the distance increases, one has to dig deeper and deeper into one self to find strength, motivation and meaning to complete the brevet.

#### *300km BRM - 25th Nov 2017*

It is the second brevet of the season. The event’s name is “*Tour of Neelagiri*” (see Figure 9). Most of the riders who are aiming to become super randonneurs for the season have started with a 200km brevet which was organised on 04th Nov 2017. In the 200km brevet, 63 riders participated, out of which 57 successfully completed the ride while four riders finished late, i.e., out of the cut-off time, and two riders could not finish the brevet. The 300km brevet saw most of the 200km brevet riders and a few riders from other clubs. The riders need to complete the 300km brevet in 20hrs 00mins.

There were five check points in the brevet. There are two types of check points. One is manual check point i.e., a person or volunteer(s) in charge of the check point. The other is an auto check point, where the rider is expected to take a proof that may be a ATM slip, or a Photograph with the place and time. Four of them were manual check points.

The start point was GVR Convention Centre, Manneguda. The start time was 16:00. A total number of 60 participants registered for the 300km brevet. A joyful and enthusiastic atmosphere with all happy faces, joking around and introducing one another. We took our respective brevet cards, filled out the consent forms, and got our bike check and stamping done on the brevet card. It is mandatory to have the bib no attached to the bike.

The first century was mostly on the National Highway 65 (NH-65) towards Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh. I was being extremely cautious and vary of the trucks and buses and kept my self to the extreme left of the road through out. Had very few interactions with the fellow riders. In the second century I happened to meet a seasoned randonneur and got company for most part of the ride. We had discussions about a variety of issues as we rode through the night on the dark remote village roads. We sort of cooperated and took shorter pauses. Surprisingly, we outpaced everyone else by arriving at the final checkpoint at 263 kilometres mark. We pedalled at similar speeds. The last 30 plus I could not keep up with my fellow rider. Slowly I lost sight of my fellow rider. I kept pedalling hard. Slowly I picked up some speed as the weather was cool and thought of finishing before the temperatures rose. I enjoyed the last 20-odd kilometres of the ride as the roads were in very good condition, the weather was pleasant, and there was not much elevation. Riding through the thick morning fog is one of the unique cycling experiences.

I reached the finishing point at 8:21 a.m. There was a sense of relief and accomplishment. The volunteer who was present at the end point congratulated me and took my brevet card, and asked whether I wanted a medal, and I promptly said “yes” and paid the required amount in cash (which was mandatory and was informed to all the riders through an e-mail). I learnt that my fellow rider reached the finish point a few minutes before me. I saw him leaving in his car. We exchanged wishes for finishing the ride. He left the place as he was in a hurry to get back to his home. Slowly the riders started finishing their ride. We started taking photographs with our fellow riders with the “I finished 300km” banner in the background. Most of them looked tired but happy to accomplish what they had started. Out of the 60 participants, 55 successfully completed the ride, and five did not finish (DNF). It took me a total of 16hrs 19mins. To complete the 300km with a moving time, i.e., the time on the saddle is 13hrs 25mins and resting time of 2hrs 53mins. As I was riding without taking much rest throughout the night, I could not stop myself from taking a nap under a tree until more riders finished their ride.

#### *400km BRM - 16th Dec 2017*

It is the third brevet of the season. The event’s name is the “Hyderabad-Nizamabad-Armoor” ride (see Figure 10). The 400km brevet is planned on the National Highway 44 (NH 44) except for a small portion that moves out to Nizamabad. Most of the riders who are aiming to become super randonneurs for the season are halfway completing a 200km and a 300km brevet in the past six weeks. The riders need to finish the 400km brevet in 27hrs 00mins in order to be qualified.

I rested well in anticipation of the amount of physical exertion and took care of the nutrition. The start point was St. Martins College, Kompally, Secunderabad and the brevet start time was 16:00hrs. The atmosphere was completely different from that of other brevet starting points because of the college and students. There was a fairly large group of students who were taking short interviews of the riders. It was a lively evening.

The ride responsible and the volunteer team greeted everyone and took care of the pre-ride formalities (brevet cards, filling the consent forms, bike check, stamping and timing). The plan was to hydrate every few kilometres, take a small break after riding for every 25km and refill the bottles wherever possible. I and my fellow rider used the drafting technique (a formation used in cycling to save energy and resistance from the air). We implemented the plan pretty well until the first checkpoint. The terrain was rolling. Especially the stretch after 123kms was even more fun. We caught up to some of the fellow riders. We were touching 50kmph speeds. The roads were in good condition with not-so-heavy traffic on the NH 44.

Just 4kms into the ride after 142 km check point, there was a puncture to the co-riders rear wheel. Our puncture workshops (conducted by TBA so that riders can solve small troubles such as punctures) came in handy. Using our puncture kit (which includes a spare tube, levers, rubber patches, gum, a small piece of rough paper and, of course, an air pump), we solved the issue. The temperatures were getting colder than expected, and it also helped us to be awake to ride through the night. I experienced moderate pain in my lower back and slight stiffness in the upper back, neck and shoulders. I did some stretching to loosen up the tightness. At the 260 km check point, I evaluated my situation. I had 10hrs left to cover 160kms with the blazing sun on top with no tree cover as it was open National Highway and with all the ascent. All these calculations with the fear of losing any extra time on any unfortunate breakdown of the bike. Hence, I dropped the idea of riding together with others and started pedalling away.

There were 50kms of ride left to finish the brevet. Gradually, it became harder and harder to ride. At times I wondered whether the air pressure in the wheels was low because of the heaviness I was feeling in my legs. I realised it was because of the headwinds and also my cumulated effect of riding for the last 20 odd hours without proper sleep. There was numbness at some places, pain in some, and it was becoming uncomfortable sitting on the saddle. It is hard to explain in words the exact state of my mind and my body.

It was a mixture of feelings. I was unable to sit on the saddle for long. Neither was I able to get out of the saddle and ride, i.e., the dancing technique or the out-of-the-saddle technique. The dancing technique gives power, but it feels like the thighs are burning from inside just after a few seconds into that position. It was literally hell. I was unable to maintain any position for a longer time. Therefore, regularly I was switching between them. The transition between the positions is both painful and relieving at the same time.

The thoughts of quitting the ride kept arising. I was struggling to justify the situation I put myself into. I just kept telling myself that “it is almost over” and pushing myself to the finish line. In these kinds of moments, I felt like there was no need to suffer this much, depriving my sleep and jeopardising my health. During the last few kilometres, there was a number of moments where I thought of not participating in any other brevet and quitting randonneuring for life.

The speed drastically came down as I was struggling and trying, not thinking of anything else in the world but just to finish the ride. I am in one of the most uncomfortable states in my life. It is uncharted territory, and I have never been in that state. It’s a mixture of feelings, physical pain at a number of different places, mental and physical exhaustion and many indescribable experiences. I felt that I was most vulnerable in that state at every level. It is hard to even think properly. While I came closer and closer, those thoughts slowly disappeared.

In the end, I survived the longest ride of my life. Finished the formalities of getting the stamp, timing noted and returning the brevet card. The timing on the card was 16:50, which means I have finished 407kms in 24hrs 50mins with close to 2hrs 10mins to spare. The cut-off or the closing time was 19:00hrs.

As I entered the college ground, I forgot all the pain and suffering found myself experiencing a great sense of accomplishment and joy. I greeted the college members and congratulated my fellow riders. We were felicitated by the college principal with a shawl for completing the 400km ride. It felt really nice. It was the first time in my life I received a felicitation. It was a symbolic gesture on the part of the college principal to recognise and appreciate the effort of the riders.

I congratulated all the finishers. Out of the 48 participants, 44 successfully completed the ride, and four did not finish (DNF). It took me a total of 24hrs 50mins. To complete the 400km with a moving time, i.e., the time on the saddle 17hrs 15mins and resting time of 8hrs.

The discussion immediately shifted to the next brevet that is 600kms. I was wondering about the difficulty and the pain one has to endure, while the experienced riders or the Super Randonneurs who have already finished riding those distances were encouraging others. I was questioning and doubting myself whether I would be able to complete a 600kms ride. From that state of mind, it seemed impossible just having experienced the suffering while riding the last 50kms of the 400kms brevet and imagining there would be 200kms more left to complete the 600kms brevet. I was sure that the 600kms brevet would be far harder than 400kms. At the same time, it was exciting that I would be known as a Super Randonneur for the rest of my life. In order to achieve that, I must train and equip myself in a better way to tackle that challenge. I had 19 days to prepare for the 600kms brevet.

### *Preparation for 600km brevet*

Having suffered the last few kilometres of the 400km brevet, I had doubts on whether I could complete the 600km brevet in 40hrs. Recovery from the 400kms ride took close to 3 days to walk with no pain in my legs and a little more than a week to completely recover. While I was wondering what kind of training would help to tackle the 600km challenge, I started strength workouts especially focusing on core muscles, lower back and quadriceps. Fortunately, I found that there was a festive 500 ride, i.e., a few riders took up the challenge of riding 500kms in between Christmas and New Year’s Eve. That seemed perfect for my training.

All the logistics were well planned. We had a support car to carry our luggage and supplements. We booked the rooms for stay at the destinations for day one and day two. We formed a 7-member group who were willing to take part in this challenge/ adventure/ intense training. There were two super randonneurs (who have done 200, 300, 400 and 600 brevets) in the group, two randonneurs (who have done a number of 200 brevets) and two young, experienced cyclists who have done a number of century rides before. The group was fairly young, with the youngest being 15 and the oldest being around 35 years of age.

Everything went well according to the plan. On day 1, we started from Hyderabad on first light to Nagarjuna Sagar, covering 138 kms by lunchtime. We took proper rest for the rest of the day. On day 2, we rode from Nagarjuna Sagar to Srisailam, covering 180 kms with major climbing sections on the second half of the day. On day 3, we rode from Srisailam to Hyderabad, taking a different route, covering 200 kms. We covered a total distance of 518kms with the toughest climbs of my life. The tour acted as a much necessary training ride, which simultaneously built physical strength and gave me enormous confidence to participate in the 600 BRM. In anticipation of the event, thinking of sleep deprivation for two nights and the volume of riding, I took care of the nutrition and rest.

#### *600Km BRM - 06th Jan 2018*

It is the fourth brevet of the season. The event name is “The Two States” ride (see Figure 11). It is kept that way because the ride covers two states, i.e., Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The 600km brevet is planned on the National Highway 44 (NH 44) towards Bangalore. This brevet would be the final brevet for riders who have completed 200km, 300km and 400km brevets and attain the Super Randonneur title for the season. The riders need to finish the 600km brevet in 40hrs 00mins in order to be qualified.

The start point was Decathlon, Shamshabad, Telangana. The brevet start time was 16:00hrs. Most of the riders are familiar with each other as they have ridden the previous brevets together. Some of their family and friends joined them to cheer them at the starting point.

I started the 600km ride with the group. The roads were good, and the weather was pleasant. Slowly picked up some speed and moved to the front of the group. Having ridden in the middle or at the back in the previous brevets, this time, I decided to ride with one of the experienced Super Randonneurs and seasoned riders just to know how they ride. They maintained a good average speed. They were occasionally using the technique of drafting in order to use their energy efficiently. The first thing I noticed was that my fellow riders were not taking many breaks in between the checkpoints. They are drinking and snacking while riding. We covered 123 kms in 4hrs 17mins. I think that is one of the fastest centuries I have done. The average speed was close to 30km/hr. I sensed some pain in my feet due to cleats and uneasiness for some reason in my stomach. Slowly we three separated. I was behind and could see their red taillights slowly moving away and then disappearing.

Around 450 kms there was some trouble with the Strava app on which I was recording the activity. This being the longest ride of my life and also much necessary for the research, it became very important to have the record. It often seems very necessary to record the activity and post it in cycle groups or just to keep it for self-evaluation. This gives a sense of accomplishment, external validation, appreciation, respect from the peers and all the others while motivating me to continue doing the activity and at the same time inspiring others to do the same. One of volunteers helped the app to work and resume my activity. That gave me a big relief.

The last 70kms of the ride was the hardest part of my entire cycling journey. I was just counting every passing kilometre, and it felt like eternal torture. The saddle soars were becoming unbearable at one end. At the same time, the toughest and trickiest part was to conquer the sleep. I had to take more than four breaks in the next 40kms due to sleep and saddle soars.

It is hard to explain the different kinds of pains. It is painful to sit on the saddle for more than 5mins; at the same time, it is painful to ride in the “out of the saddle” style, which I could only hold for a few seconds. Within those few seconds, the quadriceps or the muscles in the front part of the thighs feels like they are burning from inside. The transition is between these two is even more painful, but I had no option but to shift between the two every 5 to 6mins. In addition to all the pains, there is sleep deprivation. I had to take multiple naps in the span of 40kms in the bus stop shelters. I got some company for the last 30kms.

We reached the endpoint at 05:30hrs when the day was breaking. After 37hrs and 30 mins of being on the road, the journey came to an end. There were few riders and volunteers who congratulated us. We finished the formalities of handing over the brevet card and took some pictures. As I mentioned earlier, age and other factors get defied in randonneuring and here was the perfect example; among the three of us who finished the ride together, one of the riders revealed that he was 56 years old. Where in myself 26 years old and other rider being 28 years old could not keep up with him.

As everyone was exhausted and sleep-deprived most of them chose to rest a bit in their cars and then leave to their respective residences. Few riders took help from their family or friends to drive them back. The last hour saw the most riders finishing the ride. We exchanged congratulatory remarks. Most of them had completed the Super Randonneur series in the present season and have achieved the SR title. Some first time and others added one more to their series of achievements. I had to ride a 200km brevet to officially become a Super Randonneur.

#### *200Km BRM - 11th Feb 2018 (Volunteer ride)*

As the name suggests, a volunteer brevet ride (see Figure 12) is an opportunity for the volunteers to ride the same route as they cannot ride the route while volunteering for the brevet. The start point was St. Martins Engineering College, the same as the 400km brevet start point. We reached the starting point before 06:00hrs. There were six riders. It was a different atmosphere as there were fewer riders and not much hustle. This time I knew every one of them. All of us started the ride around 06:20hrs.

There were three automated check points. It was relatively easy ride after all the riding in the last three months. We reached the college at 18:20hrs which was 12hrs from the time have started. The moving time or the saddle time was 08hrs 03mins. It was the fastest brevet ever done by me. By completing a 200km brevet volunteer ride, I have officially completed the Super Randonneur Series and became a “Super Randonneur”. On that note, everyone congratulated me, and that felt quite an achievement.

#### *Super Randonneur title*

Completing the ‘Super Randonneur’ series, I became part of the hundred odd ‘Super Randonneurs’ list from the Hyderabad Randonneurs club. The identity of ‘Super Randonneur’ signifies a different kind of riding experience to the cycling community. The ‘SR’ title sticks to the name for ever. I am now introduced has as an ‘SR’ to the cycling community. It brings some authenticity and respect to the riders in the cycling community. The SR title also sparks some immediate connection between Randonneurs and Super Randonneurs. The SR title has made me an insider and helped further in research in contacting other Super Randonneurs in conducting interviews.

### **Observations and discussion.**

One interesting fact about riding in Hyderabad is its geographical position. It is on a plateau, that means when one moves away from Hyderabad, the altitude starts dropping gradually, and while coming towards the city, the altitude steadily increases. The long U-shaped elevation is clearly visible from the elevation profiles of the brevets (see Figures 9, 10, 11, 12). It is a similar case with almost all the brevets



conducted in Hyderabad. Therefore, Hyderabad provides a different experience compared to any other brevets in the country. The first half of the brevets are easy to ride, whereas the second half needs a lot of effort to complete the brevet.

The riders are generally suggested to ride in a group or at least in two's during the night time. Normally there will be riding partners whose riding speed matches. After an hour-long of silent riding, we took a short break. That section was pitch dark. The experience of riding in the pitch dark with only a small beam of light that can show only a few meters ahead is unexplainable. The silence, the pleasantness and the rhythm of the pedalling. It felt like a trance. I had never experienced it before. It was like a dream, and the time just flew. I thought to myself that these are the kind of experiences that might be one of the reasons which bring the riders back to participating in the brevets.

Riding at night has its own advantages as well as its disadvantages. The advantages would be no heat, less traffic hence less pollution, and less exhausting mentally when the long climbs are not visible. Disadvantages are majorly related to safety, with a higher risk of accidents on the National highways and visibility of the riders.

One common observation is that most of the riders and especially the experienced riders are generous, willing to help, give advice and caution the new riders. They often offer to pay for the lunch, dinner or any drinks and also lend the tubes, lubes, air pump and any other necessary tools without any hesitation.

It is very common in randonneuring to come across people who break most of the assumptions which naturally forms about the riders at first glance. For example, the general perception is that people who ride long distances such as 200km to even 1200km brevets are male riders who are extremely fit and young may be in their twenties with nothing else to do but train hard and participate in this kind of events but the facts are quite contrary to all that I just said. Most often, the riders are middle-aged men; almost all of them are working professionals having families and not so fit physically compared to the mainstream sports persons.

During the long rides, it always helps and lifts the mood whenever the rider comes across a fellow rider or the organiser, or any familiar face. The organisers, being randonneurs themselves and having experienced this, makes sure they are present at the right places to give that much necessary boost. The night was breaking. It always seems like magic in the sky during the sunrise and sunset. The atmosphere just brings some pleasant feeling, and the sceneries just get 1000times better in these times. All the visuals captured in our memories, especially during these kinds of moments, makes the ride even more worthy.

Randonneuring gives new perspectives to life. It makes one notice things that otherwise go unnoticed in life. It throws light on the deeper dimensions of ourselves. It touches our core. It makes us ask questions starting with 'why,' and those are the questions hardest to find answers for. These are life-changing questions that make people find themselves. One starts to appreciate simple and normal things which are taken for granted.

Another major aspect in randonneuring or cycling, in general, are cycling outfits and gear, which are attention grabbers: the flashing lights, skin-tight clothing and other fancy gear, including the bikes themselves. Whether on-road or at any pitstops, people tend to get drawn. Riders are sometimes stared at and get a number of questions.

The term endurance in these kinds of endurance activities is kept for a reason. What do we endure? We endure pain. Pain tolerance is a significant aspect of these endurance activities, and one must train for longer durations to help the body get to certain pain tolerance levels. The topic of pain is discussed in length by Jean E. Jackson in the chapter 'Pain: Pain and Bodies' in the book titled '*A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and embodiment*'. Jean points out that pain can be "*both an aspect of*

*mind (experience) and brain (produced by neurological structures and processes); pain illustrates some of the problems associated with mind-body dualism.*" (2011:371)-

It may seem paradoxical, but people seek pain of a certain kind; they find meaning in it. There are many popular phrases about pain and growth, especially in the world of sport, such as "no pain, no gain". Lance Armstrong, the most famous cyclist in the world, describes his view on bike racing and pain in his book, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*, "Cycling is so hard, the suffering is so intense, that it's absolutely cleansing...after a six-hour ride at a high pain threshold, you feel at peace...I didn't do it (long rides) for pleasure. I did it for pain. (Summing up he says) Pain is temporary. It may last for a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside, and something else will take its place. If I quit; however, it lasts forever" (Armstrong & Jenkins, 2000:38).

During the initial stages, the riders endure much pain because the learning curve is very steep in the beginning. Especially the last few kilometres of every ride in the initial stages of cycling are always harder. Apart from the muscle sours, which are inevitable and necessary for growth and improvement, there are pains that may become injuries when neglected. These unattended may even turn into chronic pain and do permanent damage. The pains shift during the course of riding. One needs proper guidance or support to overcome these pains.

Every season brings a new set of challenges to the riders in its own way. Through experience, one understands which climate is best suited for them. For example, winter is the hardest in my case, as my body doesn't do well in a cold environment. And for some, it may be summer. The rainy season is the most dangerous as the roads are not conducive to riding. The group rides are cancelled when it rains. During one of my workout schedules, wanting not to miss any workout ventured out to finish the exercise in the rain. Even though I was extra cautious, I pushed hard in the last stretch as I was about to finish the workout. The visibility was low, and I could not control the bike in that heavy rain; the brakes failed, and the bike skidded on the road. I had severely injured my left knee and scratches were all over the left side of my body. The helmet and the gloves took some damage. It took me more than two weeks to recover from that fall. The whole schedule went off track, but I could maintain my fitness through other minor exercises and nutrition in control.

During the preparatory period, I experienced pain in the outer part of the knees and immediately consulted the physical education teacher; with a proper focus on strengthening specific supporting muscles, I could get rid of the pain. Then the pain in the lower back and glutes started coming up during the longer rides, focusing on strengthening those muscle groups helped. As mentioned earlier, it takes long periods for the body to adapt to endure sitting for long periods on the saddle. All the places where there is contact with the bicycle become numb such as the palms on the handlebar, glutes on the saddle and the feet on the pedal. Every cyclist finds a unique way of adapting to these pains. The saddle sours are an inevitable part of the longer rides. The most common ways riders try to overcome them are by getting a comfortable saddle, wearing appropriate clothing and using creams to lessen the impact.

There is a fundamental change in how one thinks or understands when one moves into an uncomfortable or challenging situation. These endurance activities give the riders an array of options and provide the best environment to explore the possibilities. Even though the body constantly reacts to our environment, it only comes to one's awareness when it reaches certain levels of apparent signs. Similarly, there comes the point when one asks questions about life that never popped up in the normal movement of life. Everything comes into question, which is otherwise taken for granted or paid little to no attention. It is generally said that it is more of mental than physical suffering, which one must overcome as the riding distances increase. This is because the mind always seeks pleasure over pain. In the fight or flight option, it always chooses the latter, and it is necessary to fight that constant thought of overcoming the resistance from the mind while moving to unknown territories, experiences and states of mind.

## Final remarks

The goal of autoethnography, a research methodology, is to deeply examine one's own experiences and observations in order to provide revelations that advance social understanding. In this autoethnography, I consider how my experiences as a biker have influenced how I see the world.

Exploring cycling culture, comprehending the value of long-distance cycling, promoting healthy lives, and investigating alternate leisure pursuits are just a few of the implications of studying randonneuring in India. It is possible to classify randonneuring as a lifestyle sport. It places a strong emphasis on independence and self-reliance. It places a focus on cultivating personal fulfilment and joy through long-distance riding.

A cyclist may want to pursue becoming a Super Randonneur for a number of reasons. Here are some potential explanations: personal challenge, sense of achievement, exploration and adventure, community and camaraderie.

## Bibliography

- Armstrong, L., & Jenkins, S. (2000). *It's Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*. New York: Putnam.
- Audax Club Parisien Randonneur. (n.d.). Retrieved 2017, from *Audax Club Parisien*: <<http://www.audax-club-parisien.com/EN/323%20-%20Schedule%20of%20BRM%20Worldwide.html>>
- Besnier, N., Brownell, S., & Carter, T. F. (2018). *The anthropology of sport : bodies, borders, biopolitics*. California, United States of America: University of California Press.
- Blanchard, K. (1995). *The anthropology of sport: an introduction*- A rev. ed. Westport: Bergin and Garvey.
- Bunte, H. (2015). "Randonneurship - a Modern Cycling Construction". In P. Cox (Ed.), *Cycling Cultures* (pp. 152-173). United Kingdom: University of Chester Press.
- Cox, P. (2015). "Cycling Cultures and Social Theory". In P. Cox (Ed.), *Cycling Cultures* (pp. 14-42). United Kingdom: University of Chester Press.
- Cox, P. (2015). "Introduction: Why Cycling Clutures?" In P. Cox (Ed.), *Cycling Cultures* (pp. 1-13). United Kingdom: University of Chester Press.
- Hastrup, K., & Hervik, P. (Eds.). (1994). *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nagel, T. (1987). *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*. New York : Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, J. E. (2011). "Pain and Bodies". In F. E. Mascia-lees, *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment* (pp. 370-387). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Pal, S. (2019, August 2). "Pune Mirror: Shifting Gears". Retrieved from *Pune mirror: India times*: <<https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/others/sunday-read/shifting-gears/articleshow/65641668.cms>>
- Poewe, K. (1996). "Writing Culture and Writing Fieldwork : The Proliferation of Experimental and Experiential Ethnographies". *Ethnos*, 61(3-4), 177-206.
- Sands, R. R. (1999). *Anthropology, sport and culture*. (R. R. sands, Ed.) Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Sands, R. R. (2002). *Sport Ethnography*. United States of America: Human Kinetics.
- Shyam, M. G. (2019, January 6). "Outrigger: The Architect." Retrieved from *Shyam Gopan* website: <<https://shyamgopan.com/2019/01/06/the-architect/>>
- Throop, C. J. (2003). "Articulating experience". *Anthropological Theory*, 3(2), 219-241.
- Victor, T. W., & Edward, B. M. (Eds.). (1986). *The Anthropology of Experience*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Vivanco, L. A. (2013). *Reconsidering the Bicycle: An Anthropological Perspective on a New (Old) Thing*. New york and London: Routledge.

## Tables

Table 1: Strava data showing cycling activity during the fieldwork

| Year               | 2016(from July-Dec) | 2017    | 2018    |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Distance (km)      | 3147.8              | 3,879.0 | 2,418.1 |
| Time (HH:MM)       | 147:40              | 184:22  | 119:44  |
| Elevation Gain (m) | 15,973              | 25,286  | 14,802  |
| Rides              | 183                 | 298     | 169     |

Table 2: Hyderabad Randonneurs Club Participation and results for the season 2017 – 2018

| #  | Date                    | Brevet | Researcher as                | Completed | DNF | LF | Total |
|----|-------------------------|--------|------------------------------|-----------|-----|----|-------|
| 1  | 04-Nov-2017             | 200km  | (Volunteer)                  | 57        | 2   | 4  | 63    |
| 2  | 25-Nov-2017             | 300km  | (Rider)                      | 55        | 5   | -  | 60    |
| 3  | 16-Dec-2017             | 400km  | (Rider)                      | 44        | 4   | -  | 48    |
| 4  | 06-Jan-2018             | 600km  | (Rider)                      | 35        | 8   | 2  | 45    |
| 5  | 26-Jan-2018             | 1000km | (Volunteer)                  | 30        | 4   | -  | 34    |
| 6  | 18-Feb-2018-11-Feb-2018 | 200km  | (Volunteer) Volunteer rider) | 80        | 7   | 3  | 90    |
| 7  | 28-Apr-2018             | 200km  | (Volunteer)                  | 46        | 9   | 1  | 56    |
| 8  | 07-July-2018            | 200km  | (Volunteer)                  | 44        | 6   | 2  | 52    |
| 9  | 28-July-2018            | 300km  | (Volunteer)                  | 27        | 8   | -  | 35    |
| 10 | 01-Sept-2018            | 400km  | (Volunteer)                  | 27        | 3   | -  | 30    |
| 11 | 22-Sept-2018            | 600km  | (Volunteer)                  | 18        | 13  | -  | 31    |
| 12 | 19-Oct-2018             | 1000km | (Volunteer)                  | 16        | 6   | -  | 22    |

Note: DNF= Did Not Finish, LF= Late Finish

## Pictures



Figure 1 Road Bike, Courtesy: Merida and TBA.



Figure 2 Mountain Bike (MTB), Courtesy: Merida and TBA.



Figure 3 Hybrid Bike, Courtesy: Merida and TBA.



Figure 4 Components of a bike, Courtesy: Merida and TBA.

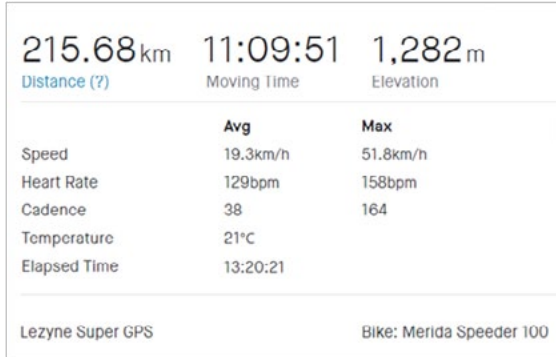


Figure 5: 200 BRM overview, Courtesy: Strava.

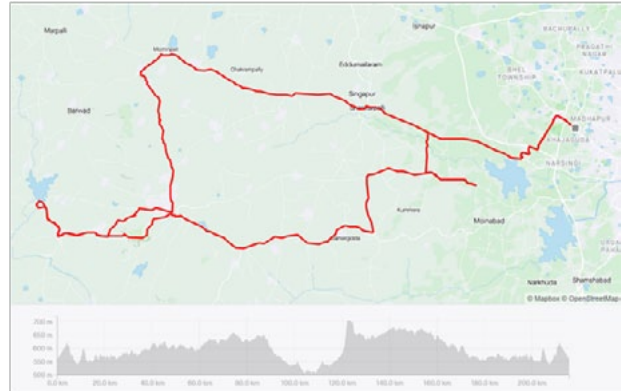


Figure 6: 200km BRM map and elevation profile, Courtesy: Strava.

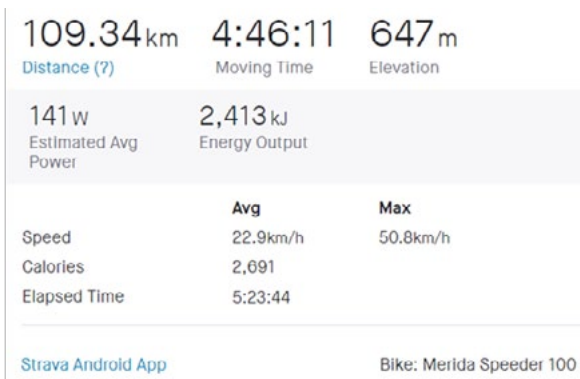


Figure 7: The pearl ride- overview, Courtesy: Strava.

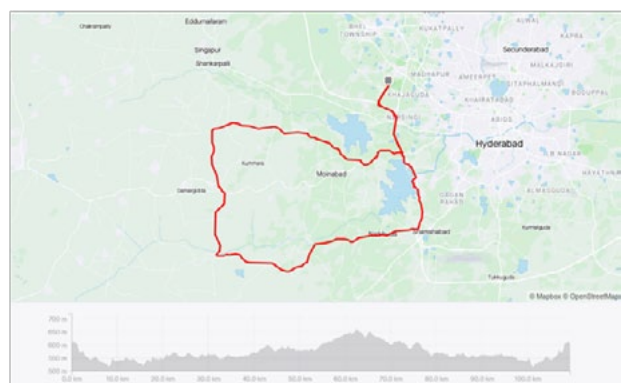


Figure 8 The pearl ride- map & elevation profile, Courtesy: Strava.



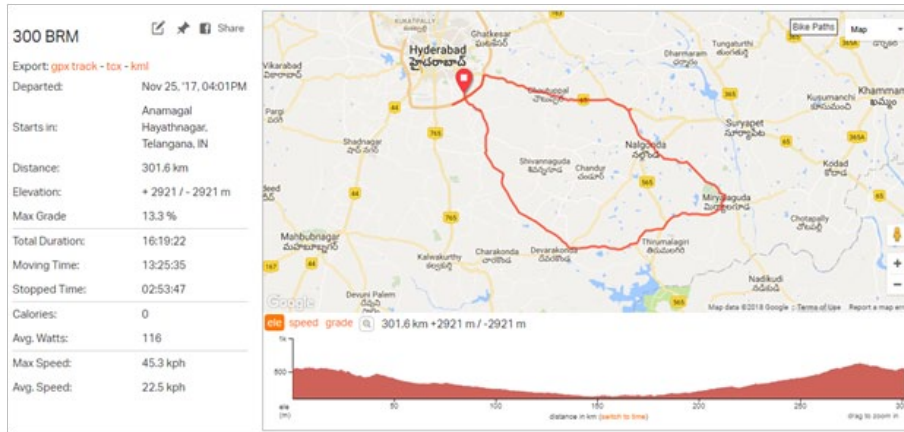


Figure 9: showing the ride details and the route map with the elevation of the 300km BRM.

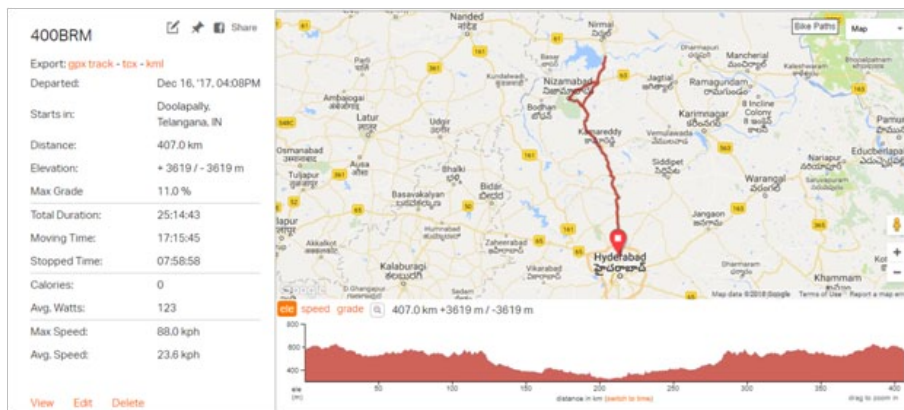


Figure 10: showing the ride details and the route map with an elevation of the 400km BRM.

\*Max speed is showing wrong due to some technical error.

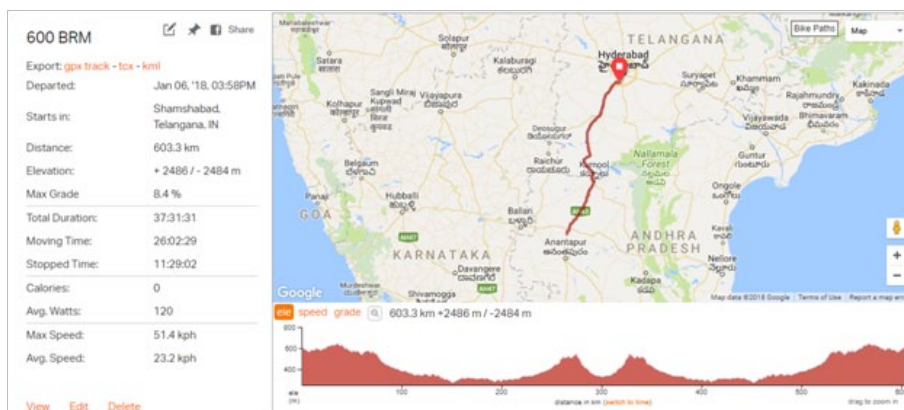


Figure 11: showing the ride details and the route map with an elevation of the 600km BRM.

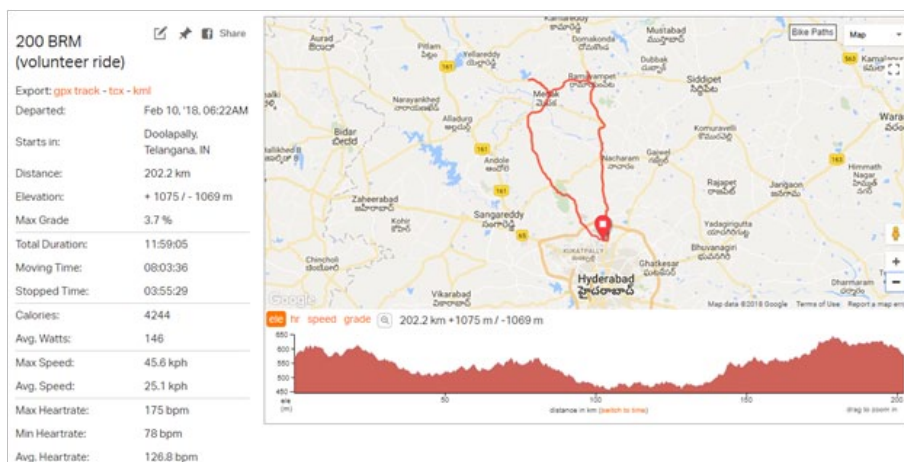


Figure 12: showing the ride details and the route map with an elevation of the 200km BRM.