



**Biking the Western Ghats:  
The Great Malnad  
Challenge**



## Suhas Karambelkar on the thrill – and challenge – of extreme bike-racing

**T**outed as the longest off-road mountain biking challenge event in India, the Great Malnad Challenge (GMC) is a unique blend of adventure, fitness, culture, and local experience. The deceptively beautiful Malnad terrain boasts some of the most tortuous trails across the Western Ghats. Organisers say that, in cycling terms, it requires the stamina of running seven marathons to complete it.

Until I injured my ankle, I would regularly run cross-country. With any further running ruled out, I turned to the comfort of cycling, my old passion. In the early eighties, a few of us attempted to cycle from Pune to Kanyakumari and back, a distance of nearly 4,500 kilometres, which we covered at a leisurely pace over a span of 44 days. That was a feat in itself, but the GMC was an entirely different ball-game. When I first heard of the challenge, a gruelling, eight-day, 700 km trail, I was told that it was one of the toughest races in India. There was no way I could complete it, they said: the success rate was just 15-20 per cent.





## Gearing up...

My interest roused, I decided to give it my best shot. I signed up before I could change my mind, and my wife was kind enough to sponsor a fancy mountain bike. With my son's words about not getting 'swept' – i.e., getting disqualified from the race for not being able to complete the requisite kilometres each day – reverberating in my ears, I started training in right earnest.

Six months prior to the race, I rode 30 km every morning across the pot-holed roads of Bangalore. Over weekends, these rides would stretch to 70-120 km as I discovered peaceful stretches on the outskirts of the city. One of the best things I did was to ride to Nandi Hills and back, a distance of about 120 km, 15-20 times over the course of 6 months. The steep climbs and descents stood me in good stead when I encountered the Malnad terrain. As D-Day neared, I started training more vigorously, riding 30 km each morning and evening.

## D-Day Arrives

On a fine, clear day, I found myself at the starting point, surrounded by 50 fellow cyclists, including my colleague, Shaaz. This was my first competitive race, so I was a bit stressed. I was a relative novice, while most of these guys were seasoned cyclists. Did I really think I could race against them? I was getting a lot of banter from the 'veterans', which, far from being inspiring, made it more difficult to find my rhythm. But once I was on my way, the adrenalin rush took over.

We set out at around 6:30am, cycling 20-30 km to reach the starting point, where we were lined up in batches of 10 en route to covering a 50-60 km distance. Lunch was served at the end-point, after which we would meander over to the next camp.

On the first day, we covered the ~100 km distance from Mysore to Kushalnagar, but since it was on



a highway, there was no true race element to it, and I completed it fairly easily. The second day was the first real test – stretching Kushalnagar to Madikeri, and then to Kukke Subramanya, over 100 kilometres, including a tortuous climb up to Madikeri. The race portion from Sampaje to Kukke was extremely tough, with off-road stretches and extreme ups and downs.

## Shifting goal-posts

Initially, my only thought was to not disgrace myself by failing to complete the distance, or getting 'swept'. Gradually, though, the goal changed to retaining or even improving my race position as the days passed. I listened to a lot of music, which helped me traverse the long and tough terrain.

Each day, we would reach camp around 5-5:30pm, freshening up

under a waterfall or a natural spring. After cycling 100 km, this was highly invigorating, to say the least. We would then relax over tea, and gather around a campfire until dinnertime, resting our aching muscles and taking stock of the day's happenings. I would often take the opportunity to make calls, check mail (network permitting), or catch up with my fellow riders.

In most places, the organisers arranged local Malnad fare. Lunch was light – rice, vegetable korma, sambar, and buttermilk – but for dinner, we would sometimes have chicken curry. I found it amusing

that I had developed a craving for dessert, wolfing down 3-4 helpings of something that, working at a diabetes-care company, I usually avoid! Probably, my body was reacting to the sugar depletion from the extreme effort I was putting in daily.

## Deep impressions...

When I look back, what I remember most vividly is the first day of the race. The organisers had diverted us to an off-road, where we faced a path so steep, it looked like a wall. I was determined to climb it without dismounting. Having managed the challenge, I



felt a rush of adrenalin that carried me through to the end. When they tallied the timings and announced the standings that day, the chief organiser, Santosh Anand, said, 'And there is a surprise! Suhas Karambelkar, a first-timer, has come third.' This gave me the confidence to carry on.

I took the race one day at a time. Once the day's quota was over, I would console myself with the thought that it was one less day of torture to go. Once I crossed the fourth day, I felt relieved that I had fewer days and kilometres to complete than I had already achieved.

The most difficult parts were the extreme climbs, such as Kukke to Sakleshpur via Bisle Ghat – a stretch of roughly 40 km. In comparison, Nandi Hills is only an 8 km climb. Moreover, most of the stretches were part of the race section, which put enormous pressure on us.

### ...and Hanging Tight

On day seven, covering the distance between Kalasa and Sringeri, the race started just 3 km from the camp. After a steep, initial climb of almost 15 km, there was a sheer descent of almost the same length. So sharp was the descent that our cycles were in danger of flipping over. Alarming, my front

brake failed, and it became difficult to stop. Fearing an uncontrolled descent, which would culminate in a crash, or overshooting a turn into a valley, I managed to bring the bike under control with one brake. Yet, having using that one brake so heavily, it, too, started to give way. The rules dictated that we could not get support for anything in the race section, so I had to just continue. By the time I reached the end-point, I was virtually riding without brakes! At that point, the organisers had them repaired, and I was profusely thankful for having completed the day in one piece.

Despite the hot sun and the steep climbs, I enjoyed communing with nature. Malnad is ruggedly beautiful, with forests, streams, and bountiful green cover. In some sections, we rode on thickly wooded roads that were more like tracks, and sunlight didn't touch us for hours on end.

### Winning, Step by Step

Since this was a cumulative race, I had more or less known by the fourth day that I would be on the podium, unless I crashed out or got swept. All I had to do was complete the race over the last three days and not slip too much. This was easier said than done, but what is a challenge without a fight? Shaaz

helped keep up the morale by completing 100 km every day, albeit at a slower pace.

I managed to stay in the top three in those last three days – and that obviously sealed it. Crossing the finish line became a formality, but receiving the trophy was a great feeling, especially considering that this was my first attempt at a major challenge like the GMC!

Races like these are not about winning, but about endurance: hanging in there against all odds, and overcoming adversity. The lesson is that, even in the face of extreme conditions if you give it your all, you will succeed, or at the very least, will not regret 'not having given your best'.

The GMC is just the beginning of the road for me. Will I do it again? Maybe not the Great Malnad Challenge itself, but something else to keep the adrenalin flowing. In my sights is the Deccan Cliff-hanger – a 640-km race that has to be completed within 32 hours. Success means automatically qualifying for Race Across America (RAAM), the toughest endurance race in the world.



Let's see where my cycle leads me next. ■

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