

19 hours to kill an internal demon.

WhatsApp message on 12th Feb. *“Sai-300km BRM Pondicherry on March 6, game for it?”* Asked Sudu, -Exactly 8 days later I would have the Jawadhu 400KMs BRM. I replied in the affirmative to Sudu’s question on 12th Feb, *(TBH, I was just being polite)*.

Around 24th of Feb, I did become serious about Pondy 300-6th Mar; A few days ago, I abandoned my 400KM BRM at the 308KM mark with loads of pain and a bucketful of self-doubts; Incidentally, a month earlier on 23rd Jan, I aborted my Vidhuraswatha 300KM BRM through a historic, picturesque route. Memories of a struggling, cramp filled 200KM ride on 6th Feb were too fresh to be ignored.

As I started my road trip to Pondy on 5th Mar, with Manju, Anil, Vipin, Prem, Sudu, Deepu, Sagar and Kishor in 3 cars, my mind was aware of my increasing self-doubts and the dodgy left knee. Come evening at Pondy; a stiff peg (**strictly not recommended**) and loads of boy talk, eased my nerves, and perhaps aided me to a good night’s sleep.

D-Day- In the morning, went out for a small ride to the start point of the ride, with Anil, took some pics and absorbed the smells a bit more. Found an abandoned railway track- I know why I love them; sure, is my childhood connection with railways. I followed our recce ride with some bland and badly made breakfast and some plain vanilla relaxation; while Vipin, Prem and me relaxed, the rest of the gang went for a beach ride; its Pondy remember! 😊

The ride started 15 minutes late, and by now the self-doubts were distant, or were they lying low? Perhaps waiting for the right moment to strike...only time will tell. About 30 odd kms of urban route, post which we were riding through beautiful rural roads: smooth and picturesque. At CP 2 (Control Point) around the 60KM mark, the organizers arranged for a simple dinner-pulao and curd rice with a sweet and boiled eggs; finished quick, clocked my time, and opted for roadside coffee and continued my ride. About 10 Kms later met up with Manju and Sudu, who were resting by a closed roadside shop; had some ice cream and gossiped more than necessary, while Sagar, Deepu and Prem reached our impromptu roadside stop. Not surprisingly Vipin was far ahead of us. For the next 120 odd kms- Sudu, Manju and I rode together.

Grand Southern Trunk Road- AKA- Trichy-Chennai Highway. Highway riding does have its plus points- largely well-maintained tarmac and access to known eateries and coffee joints. GST towards Chennai on a Sunday pre-dawn isn’t exactly all rosy. Busses from Trichy & down south rushing towards Tambaram and Koyambedu can be disconcerting; the constant need to cast an eye behind, does nullify speed. ‘Light’ for us, was just around the corner; somewhere on the highway to Chennai, we met up with the benevolent figure of Kishor; who arranged for some jangri and mysorepak; I accepted them, with all my humbleness. We reached Padman Filter Coffee joint- CP3 @ 152+ KM mark around 2AM; We had some butter milk, a sweet (arranged by the organizers) and 20 minutes of power nap, before Sagar, Deepu and Prem came steaming in... It would be criminal not to mention, the massage that Sagar provided; it was timely, and god send.

As daybreak was around the corner, we approached Chengalpattu; mighty thanks to the good Samaritan -who provided us bananas, water, and some morale boosters- at 5:30AM; By the time, I was ready for the right turn on ECR towards Pondy, at around 7AM, our group was by and large scattered.

The terrain continued to be flat, with barely a climb; however, the heat and the need for non-stop pedaling had its own challenges. In addition, the growing humidity and heat on ECR started knocking on the door.

Self-Doubts - Sea and or open land on both sides; cross winds, increasing heat, folks queuing up at meat stalls and tempting me (being a Sunday); people say ride on ECR is romantic and cool; I, on that day in those 3-4 hours, found neither; romance or coolness. What I found was, SD (self-doubts) roaring back

into action; memories of 20th Feb, Jawadhu Hills, lashing rains on Krishnagiri highway, Sabanahhali lake at night and 23rd Jan were floating around me. Will I falter here too? Should I just stick to 200K? its better I recognize, what I am capable of and what not. What am I trying to prove and to whom? Why did I come to Pondy? What will I tell back home? Thankfully, I did not try to answer any of those questions; I just kept pedaling and kept my eyes glued to the tarmac.

Chequered flag Sooner than later, my watch showed 6KMs to the destination with an hour left. With SD, crushed and pleading for mercy, I decided to stop for a water break along with Prem. The last 6 KMs through Auroville markets with colorful garments and restaurants with foreign sounding names, was elating and frustrating; I kept wondering why the last half a kilometer is longer than usual, always? A stone small, in size and heavy, in weight was taken off my chest. Picture time, selfie time and broad smiles time. Here's wishing for many more.

