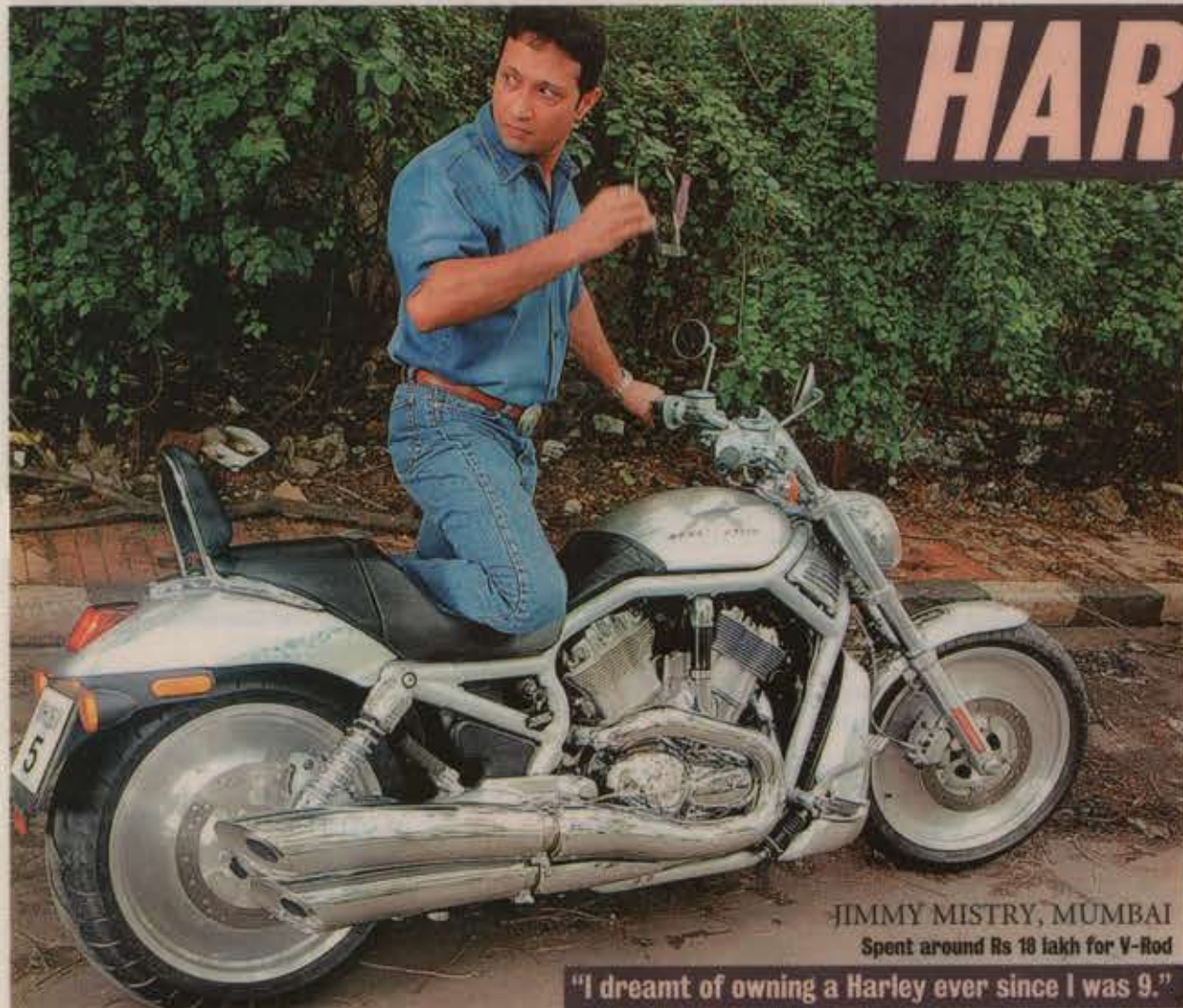


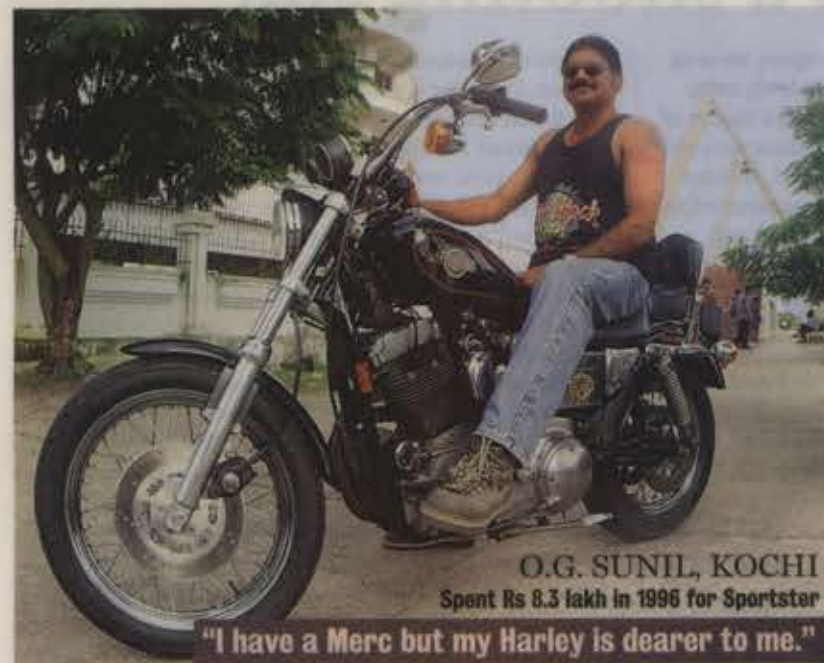
HARLEY BURLY



JIMMY MISTRY, MUMBAI
Spent around Rs 18 lakh for V-Rod

"I dreamt of owning a Harley ever since I was 9."

BINO THOMAS



O.G. SUNIL, KOCHI
Spent Rs 8.3 lakh in 1996 for Sportster

"I have a Merc but my Harley is dearer to me."

TONY DOMINIC



BISHOP SAMPATH KUMAR, BANGALORE

Has been offered Rs 4 lakh for his second-hand 1987 Sportster

"I used to pray to God that I be able to buy a Harley."

One hundred years after it was launched, the roar of Harley-Davidson continues to thrill Indian owners

By LUKOSE MATHEW/Kochi & SANGEETA JOHN/Mumbai

IF BIKING is a religion, Harley-Davidson is God. Its devotees worship the gleaming chrome and swear by the slogan 'Ride to live, Live to ride', which is etched on bikes produced by the Harley-Davidson Motor Company. It has been 100 years since the first Harley rolled out of a wooden shed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the USA and the elegant, powerful bike commands a cult following worldwide.

It is the same even in India, where

fuel-guzzling two-wheelers are frowned upon. The few Harley owners in India are intensely private about their passion. "I dreamt of owning a Harley ever since I was 9," says Jimmy Mistry, 32. The Mumbai-based architect's dream came true when he bought the magnificent V-Rod, the latest from the house of Harley-Davidson. "I have customised foot pipes, exhaust pipes and modified racing filters which make her cruise at 220 kmph," he says. The dream machine cost him around Rs 18 lakh.

It is passion that matters and not money. Four years ago Bishop Sampath Kumar of Bangalore took a loan from his provident fund—he is a

salaried employee of the church—to buy a second-hand 1987 model Harley-Davidson Sportster. "I used to pray to God that I be able to buy a Harley," he says. "It was like a child asking his father for a toy." Buyers have been offering as much as Rs 4 lakh for the bike, but the bishop is not willing to sell the only worldly possession dear to his heart. "Harley is ultimate," he says. "Its power and sound are incomparable."

Harleys are quite expensive by Indian standards. When Kochi-based O.G. Sunil, a racer-turned businessman, imported his coveted 1,200cc Harley in 1996, he had to shell out Rs 8.3 lakh. But Harley owners are least

bothered about the price, and mileage is a word most of them can't even stand. "I have a Merc but my Harley is dearer to me," says Sunil, 41. "Biking is a luxury to me these days. But I still dream about cruising all day on my Harley, with the wind in my hair and without a care in the world."

Harley is a head-turner in big cities though cheaper imitations have flooded the Indian market. "I once parked my bike in front of the Cellar pub in Bangalore and waited to see what would happen," says Sunil. "Within minutes about 50 people had gathered around, ogling at her and muttering comments. Soon, a traffic constable appeared and asked me to clear out with my Harley!" Sunil was so mad about the Harley that in 1990, when he went to Italy to watch the football World Cup, he tattooed Harley's emblem on his left shoulder.

Though William S. Harley and the three Davidson brothers (Arthur, Bill

and Walter) intended the first bike to be a racer, they opted for riding comfort soon after. Over time, it got the image of a tough-guy's bike. "It was always a cruiser bike, more suited for the highways," says Sajid Sayed, 28, who restores vintage bikes in Mumbai for a living.

Sajid vividly remembers the day he acquired his first Harley. "My friend and I were scouting for discarded bikes in Miraj, a village near Kolhapur in Maharashtra, six years ago when a young man told us that there was his grandfather's 'Haley cycle' dumped in his backyard," he says. "It turned out to be a rusty 1908 Harley lying idle for nearly 25 years!" He eventually bought the bike for Rs 2,500, spent Rs 80,000 on restoring her and sold her.

"Harley-Davidson is a statement, like a Rolex," says 30-something Sumesh Menon from Dubai. "I eat, drink and talk only Harley! My friends say I was born with the HD emblem in my soul." He owns two Harleys—Road King 1440cc (2001) and Diana Low Rider 1340cc (1999).

Harley lovers say one of the distinct features of the bike is its trademark engine roar. "You can't duplicate a Harley sound," says Jimmy. In fact, there are several things that are synonymous with the Harley, like its slogan, logo and the gleaming chrome.

Owning a Harley is like owning a part of history. The founders formed the company inspired by comedienne Ann Held, who rode a French machine on stage in Milwaukee. In 1901, they developed the first engine, and took another two years to bring out the bike. Its customers include the US Army and the police. In India, businessman Parvez Damania and actor Sanjay Dutt (he rode his own Harley in *Daud*) are among the famous Harley owners.

Despite the aura surrounding the brand, Harleys will be difficult to sell in India because Indians are still conservative in spending, says Shailesh Redij of Ultimate Auto in Mumbai, who treasures nearly all the Harley-Davidson memorabilia and accessories. The accessories, like the bike, are quite expensive. But who cares as long as it is a Harley!

With N. BHANUTEJ/Bangalore