

# In search of India's lost scooter racers



With a large dose of luck, I found this 1961 Lambretta Series 2 and a load of other classic scooters in the southern city of Coimbatore.

A man is standing on my toe and another has his elbow sticking in my back. I'm getting pushed around, despite hanging tightly onto the rail above my head. It's just a matter of grinning and bearing it, and hoping the conductor kicks me off at the right stop.

**M**y destination: 169b NSR Road, on the outskirts of Coimbatore. Why there? Well, I managed to find some basic details online about a certain Mr Jaila, who has his Prince Auto Garage there and he's the only guy I traced who was involved in India's scooter racing scene back in the 1970s and 80s, when there were rallies, circuit races and hillclimbs galore. Those halcyon days have never really been written about and my goal is to set that right.

What I'd read online was a report that Jaila got involved in India's racing back in 1963. Also, that during India's golden era of the

sport, Coimbatore – a city nicknamed Little Manchester because of its large textiles industry – used to be the centre of mechanical know-how. The gist being engineers who worked in local cotton mills used their skills to get four- and two-wheelers to go faster, with a synergy developing between rich car owners, scooter racers and mechanics, which subsequently led to motorsport becoming Coimbatore's claim to fame.

The bus conductor nods for me to get off, but instead of garages and suchlike, NSR Road is similar to a British high street with rows of shops selling domestic appliances, clothes and footwear. I locate 169 only to find it's a house.

A man in a shirt and tie looks like someone who speaks English. Unfortunately he's never heard of Prince Auto Garage, but he kindly takes me to a bunch of taxi drivers, one of whom mentions a workshop down a side street, not too far away. It's run by a guy who races, he says.

## Vinod

Thirty minutes later I find it. Inside are six young guys gathered around a motorbike. There are no scooters. The good news is the owner, Vinod, can speak some English. The bad news is he's never heard of Jaila, or Prince Auto Garage.





Muthu Kanakachalam owns a garage in Coimbatore and spends a good bit of his cash building up a collection of classic two-wheelers.



With more Indians now appreciating old scoots, they've gone up in price. Muthu values his 1960 Vespa at \$2500 and reckons his 1961 Lambretta is worth the same. It works out around 1600 quid.

After I've plonked myself down on a bench in Vinod's small workshop and explained my aims, he tells me his late father used to race scooters, but that was before he was even born – he doesn't have any photos or exact details. It seems that I'm taking one step forward and two back.

However, perhaps because of his late father's involvement, Vinod is keen to help. He makes a phone call. The ringo is all gobbledegook to me, but it sounds quite promising. Once he hangs up, I learn we're going to drive across this southern Indian city to meet the head of the Coimbatore Auto Sports Club: Mr V Venu Ramesh Kumar.

Another English speaker, Venu has his finger on the pulse of the city's motor racing scene, although it's disappointing to hear that he's never heard of Jiala. But then he says he knows someone who might have and after another telephone call, we all pile into Vinod's car and zip across to another part of the city.



Getting parts to renovate old scoots isn't easy in India.



Made in Italy. Imported Italian scooters are pretty rare here.

## India Enfield Fantabulus

We stop outside a workshop and I get introduced to Muthu Kumar, who turns out to be a serious collector of anything with wheels on: his yard has a couple of classic cars, about 20 motorbikes and a few lovely scooters, including a Fantabulus.

This kooky Enfield scooter is rarer than rocking-horse shit and luckily for him it's in reasonable nick, with all the key parts intact. An all-Indian creation, the Fantabulus seems to have had a short production life of just a year or so – around 1970 – hence its scarcity.

Muthu also has a collectable Lambretta '48' moped, a cute machine dating back to around 1960. However, whereas the Fantabulus looks a bit sad and in need of some work, this thing is immaculate – as are a couple of classic scooters.

There's a tidy 1961 150cc Li Series 2 Lambretta sporting shiny blue paintwork, often referred to as a Lamby following a brand name change in the 70s. Muthu tells me he bought it at the end of 2004 for just 5000 rupees – approx £70 in today's money. It was running OK, but he completely restored it – at a cost of 20,000 rupees – to its former glory, albeit with the front horn grille replaced by a pear-shaped one, simply because he prefers the look.

## Vespa and Bajaj

Muthu's eye-catching Vespa is an Italian import, one of a few 150cc VBAs that made it across to the sub-continent prior to the commencement of domestic manufacturing. As was the case with several countries, Piaggio in Italy licensed overseas production to local outfits and in India's case this tie-up was with Bajaj Auto, a company dating back to 1945.



Muthu's collection includes this Lambretta moped, which dates from the late 1950s.



The Lambretta 48 has just two gears...



... a 48cc engine and a 2.7-litre tank.