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# Mission Silk Road: On a cycle trail to change mindsets

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Kesava Kirupa Dinakaran with Jerry Huang from China

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**Express News Service**

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CHENNAI: Nine countries, 80 days and 4,000 km. That's what it took four kids — Kesava Kirupa Dinakaran (India), Magdalena Girasole (Germany), Jerry Huang (China) and Raghdan Al-Hennawi (Syria) — from United World Mahindra College, located 40 km away from Pune, to cover the Silk Road. They are now the youngest group to accomplish this feat. Of the four, Kesava Kirupa Dinakaran is from Chennai. "Through cycling we wanted to promote environmental sustainability. The motive was to break stereotypes between the Middle East and Central Asia and bring about cross-cultural understanding.

We interviewed the locals along the borders on the theme 'Dream'. Stories were aplenty and it was an amazing experience. We're writing stories in social media platforms to change the mindset about people living in these countries," he says.

The trip from Turkey to China along the Silk Road began on May 26 and ended on August 13. The team chose the route because it is cycle friendly, and they wanted to focus on developing countries that haven't been spoken about. On their way, they passed through Georgia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

"We cycled 110 km a day, on an average. One had to be physically fit to enjoy the trip. So, I decided to prepare by going for long-distance cycling (100 km) along the ECR on Sundays. I hit the gym and followed a diet. It was strenuous and my body would hurt when I woke up the next day. This is my first professional trip," he shares.

The 18-year-old carried a luggage of 5 kg. His bag had two shirts, two t-shirts, two jerseys, two cycling shorts and undergarments. He carried six to seven litres of water and refilled it along the journey. High-calorie snacks and cycling gears were a must. "I ate so many Snickers snack bar that I can't eat it anymore," he says.

Kesava is currently on a gap year and working on cycling projects to connect people across the world. He believes that these trips have tremendous potential in tapping unheard stories. The young cyclist has always been an unconventional kid. He always wanted to travel across countries for social causes and the betterment of humanity. Grateful to his parents for being supportive in achieving his dreams, Kesava says, "Some of the major challenges were visa permits especially among seasonal borders and the legal aspects in travelling. Money and time should never be a problem.

The estimated the costs of our trip was about \$45,000. Fortunately, our college was well-connected and we received sponsors from two Chinese companies. My next trip is from south India to north India. I hope to bring out the ethnic diversities and beauties of the country," says Kesava, who plans to pursue a course in economics and international development.

### Memories

Passing through Kazakhstan, a local had advised us to take a newly built 170-km road to China in one day. We were cautioned there would be no food or water. As we traversed through the path, there was no sign of China despite completing the distance. The roads were pitch dark and it started pouring. Luckily, a Chinese truck driver passed by and told us in sign language that the road was 220 km-long. Somehow, we managed to go hitchhiking. We passed through a village. A lady in the neighbourhood offered us some space in her house, and food because we hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

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