



The *Rajah Gaadi* returns with its classic design

The resplendent royal ride is back. Enfield's Classic 650 is more handsome and faster but not as sweet a ride as its smaller sibling

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When I was in my 20s in the 1990s, the Royal Enfield Bullet 350 was considered the *raja gaadi* (king's carriage), especially the black and chrome Machismo variant. No other company made a motorcycle with a higher cubic capacity.

The Machismo, in spite of its infuriating idiosyncrasies—oil leaks, false neutrals, vicious back kicks—had undeniable road presence. Dripping with chrome and emitting its signature “*dhak dhak*” exhaust note like a heartbeat, this Royal Enfield was the most majestic motorcycle until the last years of the analogue era. From the *doodhwalla* to the college dude and from the family man with four onboard to the foreigner riding in the Himalaya to find himself, the Bullet was a fusion of form and function.

I bought the Machismo in 1998 because I had to ride from Pune to Mumbai and back every weekend

and there was simply no other motorcycle that felt stable on the highway, had a generous seat, and could comfortably cruise at 70kmph. In the five years that followed I did road trips with that motorcycle from Mumbai to Delhi, Ladakh and Kashmir.

Since then, the motorcycle market has transformed. The influx of higher cubic capacity motorcycles, cruisers and adventure motorcycles, including those from the revitalised Royal Enfield, meant that the Bullet 350 sank to the lower echelons of the motorcycle hierarchy. In 2019, when I first rode the Royal Enfield Himalayan and the Royal Enfield Interceptor, I remember thinking that both, though delightful, were such a deviation from that classic Royal Enfield design DNA.

My 1998 Royal Enfield Machismo still drew design cues from post-WWII Royal Enfield models, for example the teardrop-shaped tank, the generous curvaceous fenders and the bulbous triangular side panels—form factors that have graced most RE motorcycles from the end of the Second World War to the Kargil War.

The immediate thought that followed was how wonderful the Interceptor's 650cc twin-cylinder engine would have been to power my good-looking Royal Enfield Machismo on all those long-distance highway adventures I'd had.

The answer to that wishful thinking is the Royal Enfield's Classic 650. With its launch, the company has reclaimed the “Rajah Gaadi” moniker and pinned it firmly to a motorcycle worthy of the endearment. Straight off the bat, I must acknowledge how gorgeous this motorcycle looks. Straight on, from the side or

from the rear, it is attractive from every angle.

The moment I laid eyes on the black and chrome variant, it brought on a sentimental

sense of *déjà vu*. A tug at the heartstrings and a sense of familiarity, and I was fleetingly transported back to Madhu Scooters, Pune, in August 1998 where I had first set eyes upon the black and chrome Royal Enfield Bullet Machismo 350. I have a sneaky suspicion that this is exactly the kind of emotion that Royal Enfield is hoping the Classic 650 will evoke. And not just from men. I suspect that women fond of motorcycling will also be rendered weak at the knees by the Classic 650.

The Classic 350 remains the company's best-selling motorcycle thanks to its retro design, smooth riding experience and the new J-series 350cc engine. With the Classic 650, Royal Enfield has shoehorned the smooth 650cc engine into a motorcycle



whose form has origins far back in the vintage British motorcycle era. The headlight nacelle (with a LED headlight and the signature tiger lights), the beautifully shaped fuel tank, the arched rear bumper, the retro single seat, the rear headlight and the bulbous triangular side panels all take inspiration from Royal Enfield motorcycles of the past.

There are modern touches—the USB-C charging port under the left switch pod, and RE's tripper navigation display along with a digital trip meter.

The fit and finish is fantastic with dollops of chrome on the flagship variant and a fabulous paint finish on the non-chrome variants. The attention to detail—especially the nicely kerned throttle body cov-

ers, the chromed switchgear and mirror stalks, and the big levers—is extravagant for a motorcycle priced at just ₹3.5 lakh.

So what is it like to ride? Sadly, this motorcycle's rear suspension set up is the same as the RE Shotgun 650 with 90mm of travel and is rather stiff.

This motorcycle just doesn't have that supple, much-admired shock-absorbing

feel of the Classic 350 and the new Bullet 350. While this is not much of a bother on butter smooth roads, on broken roads there will be some rude shocks. However, this 243kg motorcycle is well balanced and was sweet and easy to ride on the twisty roads around Coonoor in the Nilgiris. Even when I went around steep hair-pin bends at single-digit speed, it did not feel ungainly. The seating position is relaxed and familiar because the handlebar, seat and footpeg triangle is nearly the same as the Classic 350.

This motorcycle corners very well; inspiring enough confidence for footpeg scraping lean angles. The 650cc engine, which I am well accustomed to by now, still manages to bring a smile to the face on a smooth road where the throttle can be whacked open. It will easily hold 140kmph on the fast, smooth expressways cropping up all over India.

Back in Coonoor, crossing over some sadistic speed breakers sent a jolt up my spine—something that wouldn't have happened with the Classic 350. The rear brake is a bit overenthusiastic with its ABS coming into play a tad too early and sending the rear wheel into a slight skitter during hard braking around a corner.

On the other hand, the front brake needs four fingers of pressure rather than just two for hard stops.

The Classic 650 is available in four colours: Vallam Red and Bruntingthorpe Blue at ₹3.37 lakh; Teal with a colour-matched frame, centre stand and side stand at ₹3.41 lakh; and Black Chrome at ₹3.50 lakh (all prices ex-showroom).

With this pricing, the Classic 650 sits bang in the middle of Royal Enfield's 650cc motorcycle range. It is cheaper than the Shotgun and the Super Meteor, but more expensive than the Interceptor and the Continental GT.

Would I buy it? Without a second thought, it has my heart. I will just have to avoid bumpy roads when I am out with it.

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