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As Royal Enfield sets its sights on EU and US markets, will the Indian company revitalise the vintage UK brand?

- **Royal Enfield motorbikes went defunct in home country but continued in India**
- **CEO Siddhartha Lal wants to bring the brand back to the West but competition is tight**
- **Ability to combine modern expectations with vintage style key to success, experts say**

Indian motorcycle company Royal Enfield is setting its sights on European and US markets. If it can pull off the move, it will be a rare example of a heritage brand that went out of fashion in its original market, only to come back to life decades later. How Royal Enfield will leverage the brand's UK legacy could determine whether the non-Indian motorcycle market embraces it.

The Royal Enfield motorcycle was a brand name created by the Enfield Cycle Company in the United Kingdom in 1901. Examples of Royal Enfield motorbikes such as the Royal Enfield Bullet – first produced in 1931 – are permanently etched into all bikers' cultural consciousnesses. Yet, while the brand was incredibly successful in the United Kingdom in the first half of the 20th century, the company started to struggle in the second half of the century and closed up shop in 1971.

Over in India, however, Royal Enfield has continued to be a success story. In 1952 a newly independent India imported 500 Royal Enfield Bullets for military use. The company soon formed an Indian subsidiary through a merger with Madras Motors. While Royal Enfield's UK company hit hard times, its Indian counterpart went from strength to strength, selling more than 650,000 motorcycles in the country last year.

The brand's current success is in no small part due to Eicher Motors CEO [Siddhartha Lal](#), who decided to channel funds into revitalising the Royal Enfield brand in 2004 by tapping into a youthful market that would appreciate the Bullet's retro aesthetic and affordability. Now, Lal has set his sights on the EU and US markets. "I could be great in India and Brazil and Thailand and Africa," he told [Bloomberg](#). "But if I'm not in Europe and America, then I'm not a global brand."

When reintroducing a brand to a region that has seen its dissolution, the key question is whether the market will re-embrace it. [Martin Schwimmer](#), a partner at Leason Ellis, considers that a brand owner has to evaluate the "residual goodwill" of the marks in that region. If you can enter (or re-enter) a market using a recognisable name, "the brand opens the door for you as something other than an upstart". He adds that, especially in markets where consumer trust is important – and the reliability of a motorcycle is likely to count as one – instilling trust in a userbase "is the minimum that a trademark could do".

While the Royal Enfield brand has built up an impressive fanbase in India, Indian brand experts are sceptical of how it will successfully establish itself in the European Union and the United States again. "In the United Kingdom, there has been a downward trend for these iconic brands pushing them to bankruptcy," explains [Shailendra Bhandare](#), a partner at Khaitan & Co. "At the same time, Japanese brands have brought in a lot of affordability to two wheelers, which further affected these iconic brands." Bhandare points to the dwindling success of Norton Motorcycles, leading to it being bought out by the Indian [TVS Group](#) this year.

There are also doubts about whether the Royal Enfield brand would work outside the context of the Indian market. "India is a bike market," says [Disha Dewan](#), an associate at RK Dewan & Co. "The Bullet did well in India because it was positioned as a bike for farmers, agriculturists, villagers and basically as a vehicle for transport for passengers." By comparison, Western markets view motorcycles as a luxury item or one geared towards cult images such as the Hell's Angels, she says.

The ability to leverage nostalgia has therefore only been a small part of Royal Enfield's success in India, with Lal instead marketing the bikes as a sturdy transport option for a younger generation. "It's not merely about older people feeling nostalgic about old brands but the recent trend has been of a new generation acknowledging the value of vintage looks," [Bhandare](#) says. "Lal saw the potential in a vintage brand and developed it with modern technology, but also invested in antique bike-part stores named VINTAGE."

To succeed in the Western market, then, Lal cannot rely solely on the strength of the vintage brand. "One of the keys to Enfield's success is Eicher working on modernising the bikes with new technology while retaining the vintage look," argues [Bhandare](#). The establishment of an R&D centre in the United Kingdom will keep British roots in the brand while also making the motorcycles as fuel-efficient as comparative modern models. "From a long-term perspective, the key to success is how Enfield tackles future emission norms," Bhandare reflects.

Charting Royal Enfield's success back in its original market will therefore be a balancing act of demonstrating a visual and ideological link to the vintage brand, while bringing engineering practices in line with modern competitors. If the company can succeed at that, it will be a great example of how to revitalise a heritage brand.

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