



Motorcycle racing in India is moving into top gear with young racers and new private teams pumping up the adrenaline, says AARTI DUA



Sarath Kumar (right) became the first Indian racer and Ramji Govindarajan's (left) Ten10 Racing, the first private Indian racing team to compete at the MotoGP this year

Speeding ahead

For 19-year-old biker Sarath Kumar, it was a thrilling moment he had dreamt about for years. He was revving his bike on the starting line in the entry level 125cc category at the MotoGP in Portugal. All day he had been watching in awe as monster bikes screamed at full throttle around the twisty tracks.

Who would have imagined even a

year ago that an Indian racer would be speeding onto the MotoGP—the two-wheeler equivalent of Formula One racing for cars. But these are heady times for motorcycle racing in India—and the scenario is changing at blistering speed.

Sarath made his two-wheel debut as part of the WTR-Ten10 Racing team, the first private Indian team at the MotoGP. It's a collaboration between the Italian WTR-San Marino team and

Bangalore-based Ramji Govindarajan's Ten10 Racing. "I used to dream of the MotoGP but I never thought I'd be there one day," says Sarath.

But he wasn't the only one waving the Indian flag out there.

There's another Indian team putting rubber to the tarmac—Mahindra Racing. It's promoted by Mahindra 2 Wheelers, and it's the first Indian motorcycle manufacturer to



Racers Marcel Schrotter and Danny Webb are setting a cracking pace for Mahindra Racing

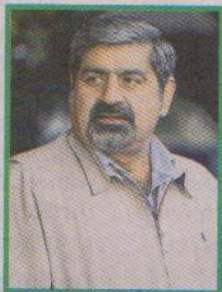
have a factory team at the MotoGP.

Mahindra's going into high throttle on the circuit in double-quick time. It has hired foreign racers Marcel Schrotter and Danny Webb to don its red and silver livery and it's setting a cracking pace. Schrotter and Webb both won points — for the second time — at Czechoslovakia, and Schrotter even broke into the top 10 in the Netherlands.

Clearly, the adrenaline is pumping high for motorcycle racing. "Suddenly, there's been a huge growth in the sport," says Vicky Chandok, president, Federation of Motor Sports of India (FMSCI).

Adds Mufaddal Choonia, team principal, Mahindra Racing: "Just as F1's popularity zoomed after an Indian team entered the grid, MotoGP's popularity too is zooming because of the Indian connection."

The action's also revving up on motorcycle tracks at home. More racers are driving onto the grid and new private racing teams are racing to the start line. To match this burgeoning



interest, more racing events have sprung up.

Cut to Chennai. Last month the Madras Motor Sports Club hosted one leg of the Petronas FIM Asia Road Racing Championship (ARRC). It was the third year that India hosted the race, also known as the Asian GP. Now, the FMSCI is talking to the sport's global governing body, the Federation Internationale de Motocyclisme (FIM), to bring MotoGP to India at the new Formula One track in Greater Noida, which opens in October.

But the country's young racers are already trying to make a splash on foreign shores. Last week, Ranchi's Sumit Lucas Toppo competed in the second round of the

Two Indian teams are burning rubber at the highest level of global two-wheeler racing for the first time

2011 Honda Asia Cup of Road Racing in Japan. And in 2010, racer B. Balavijay's Moto-Rev India grabbed the third spot in the team event of the FIM ARRC.

Motorcycle racing is moving into high gear despite the amazing constraints that it faces. India has only two tracks, the Madras Motor Sports

Track and Kari Motor Speedway in Coimbatore. More crucially, the sport requires endlessly deep pockets — and sponsors are scarce. Experts say a rider needs a couple of crores a year to race at the MotoGP 125cc. And a team needs Rs 40 lakh to compete in the FIM ARRC.

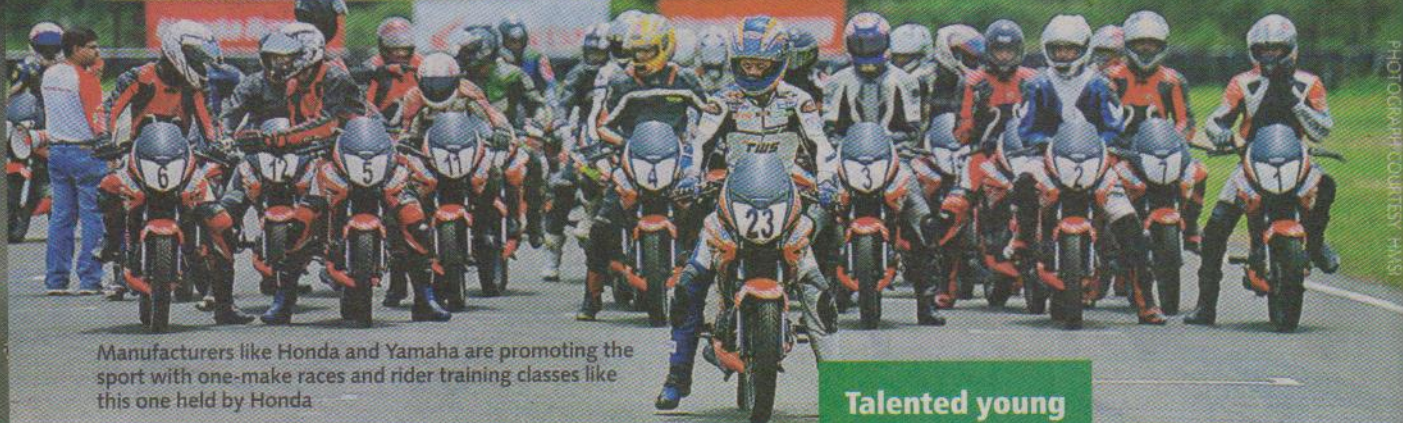
Nevertheless, the sport's growing by 30 per cent, reckons Chandok. This year's national motorcycle racing championship got 200 entries against



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY MAHINDRA RACING



One leg of the premier FIM Asian Road Racing Championship was held in Chennai last month; the action's revving up, says the Indian motorsports federation's Vicky Chandok (inset)



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY HANSI

Manufacturers like Honda and Yamaha are promoting the sport with one-make races and rider training classes like this one held by Honda.

120 last year. "We're now getting participants from even Mizoram and Luc-know," says Amit Arora, chairman, Two-Wheeler Racing Commission, FMSCI.

Also, categories like drag racing, motocross and supercross have revved up. The FMSCI launched the National Drag Racing Championship this year (Here, two motorcycles race each other. After several rounds the one that records the fastest time of all is the winner). Then, there's the National Supercross Championship — it's about bikers doing high jumps on temporary dirt tracks in a stadium — that's attracting huge crowds too. "With big bikes easily available, many privateers [racers not backed by a team] are entering the sport," says A.Senthil Kumar, who manages TVS Racing, the country's sole factory-owned team.

Global tracks

The decibel level's the highest at the MotoGP. How did two Indian teams suddenly power their way onto the world grid? For the two-year-old Ten10 Racing, the opportunity arose when

WTR came scouting for a partner — because of Europe's economic crisis. Team principal Govindarajan says: "It was a long shot for an Indian team to be at the MotoGP. But I saw it as a strategic opportunity."

Ten10 had to get sponsors to field an Indian racer. The man of the moment was Chennai-based Sarath, who's been making a mark since his debut in 2008. "It was tough but I learnt a lot," says Sarath. Govindarajan is disappointed that Sarath could only participate in three rounds — he only qualified to race in one round — because money ran out. But he's confident that "it will be easier to approach the market next year".

Meanwhile, Mahindra & Mahindra is revving up as it wants to establish its Mahindra 2 Wheelers brand at high speed. "The MotoGP is the best platform for us because we can showcase our brand and also our product development skills," says Choonia.

Talented young Indian riders are struggling to break into the international circuit but the competition is tough

now available here. And, manufacturers and racing teams are promoting the sport.

Take Yamaha and Honda, which are zooming ahead with their single-make races, where bikers ride the same model. The Honda MMSC

One-Make and Yamaha MMSC One-Make Championships began with a few races in 2008. Last year, they became full-fledged championships. "We're getting more youngsters into the sport," says Prabhu Nagaraj, deputy general manager, customer service, Honda Motorcycles and Scooters India. It has also just launched a Racing Training School, where MotoGP racers from Japan train Indian bikers.

Yamaha too has conducted riding clinics since 2009. Moreover, from this year, it will send its Indian One-Make winners to the Yamaha Asean Cup. And the FMSCI has just got a Euro 100,000 grant from FIM to train Indian bikers.

Lap by lap

Numerous factors are spurring the sport's growth. For one, high-performance superbikes are

Indian racers like eight-time national champion K. Rajini (far left) and upcoming racer M. Gautham are keen to compete on the global circuit

On the podium

But it's the riders who are eager to speedily make their mark. Two such are 20-year-olds Toppo and M. Gautham from Chennai, who're racing in the 2011 Honda Asia Cup. Toppo entered racing three years ago though he began riding at 13. After winning his debut Honda One-Make Stunner class, he came second in the national championship last year. Now, he's hoping to compete at the Malaysian Super Series (MSS) next year. "I want to take it step by step, mov-



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ing to the MotoGP eventually," he says.

Meanwhile, Gautham, who began racing at 11, became the youngest Indian to compete at the MSS last year and even had a podium finish in one round. But standards are higher in Asia, he admits. "We don't have facilities here," he says. So this year, he trained in the US with world champion Kenny Roberts. "I want to win the Asian GP and then move to a European series," he says.

Gautham and Toppo are following riders like Dilip Rogger, Preetham Dev Moses and eight-time national champion K. Rajini, who began racing in Asia in the mid-2000s. Rogger, 28, was the first Indian to race abroad, winning the novice class Malaysian National Championship in 2004. He's participated in the Asian GP and German nationals since then. Or take Rajini, 31, the first Indian to win the 150cc MSS in 2006, who's raced in the Asian GP too.

"The sport is growing but we're way behind Europe," says Rogger. That's because international bikers start young and have access to better infrastructure. For Indians, funding is a huge constraint. "Even after my MSS win, I couldn't get sponsors," says Rajini. He's still aiming for the MotoGP.

The supercross racers

High-thrills supercross racing is drawing crowds with racers like national champion C.S. Santhosh (top) and Zain Khan (above right) speeding along



too are dreaming big. Take two-time national supercross champion C. S. Santhosh, 27, of TVS Racing. He rode in the Asian supercross championship last year. Now he's headed to Sri Lanka. "I want to be number one in Asia," he says.

Or take upcoming racers like Veer Patel and Zain Khan. Khan, 17, entered motocross at five because his father was a racer. "It's my passion. My aim is the world championship but that's a long way off," says Khan. Last year's national champion Veer Patel from Vadodara also started racing at 13 because of his father. Since 2007, he's been training under American champion Donnie Hansen. "More people are coming to watch supercross today," says Patel.

Team spirit

The private teams are boosting the sport. New teams like Thunderbolt and techie Anil Kumar S.'s Apex Racing, entered the grid this year. Apex has also started a racing academy.

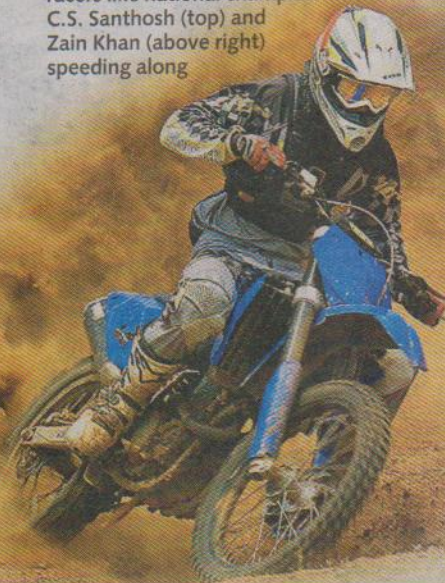
Meanwhile, Moto-Rev's been sweeping titles since its 2009 launch. It even came third in the Asian GP team event with its Japanese riders. Funding's tough but team founder Balavijay is keen to take Indian racing to the world stage. "It's no point racing in India alone. We showed that an Indian team can take on international

teams. But money plays a big role," he says. Ten10's Govindarajan too says: "Racing is on an upward trend. That's why we got into it as a business."

For now, all eyes are on the Noida track opening up to motorcycle racing. Once that happens, the sport's followers are sure it will take off in a big way.

Of course, the road will be bumpy. Arora admits that "motorsports in India has just been born". "We can see the growth prospects but it will take time. We can't create a champion like Valentino Rossi overnight." But the race is definitely on. ◆

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