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## Lap of faith



**Srinivasa Ramanujam**



Alisha Abdullah and her students at the Irungattukottai race track Photo: R. Ravindran.



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## Get set to watch biker girls zip through the city as Chennai-based racer Alisha Abdullah puts together India's first women racing team. SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM reports

The sun is beating down on the race track at Irungattukottai.

The heat is sweltering as we make our way to it, but there are 27 young women — all strapped up —

and ready to race each other. Alisha Abdullah is leading the pack. She's a popular name in racing circuits — accelerating into territory predominantly dominated by men — but this is a different challenge. Even for her. She is, in her own words, “searching for more Alishas”. In course of time, over many laps and weeks of practice, she hopes to form India's first women racing team.

**Turn to page 12**

### 'Exciting times ahead'

Vicky Chandhok of the Madras Motor Sports Club (MMSC) is ecstatic seeing the burgeoning interest in racing among girls. “It's a new beginning and our job at the MMSC is to give them all the support they can get. I am hoping we find the next Alisha here,” he says.

Vicky, who had a short, informal chat with the girls, was happy to see their enthusiasm.

“They have that nervous energy; they're excited but they are nervous too, perhaps because it has so far been a male-dominated sport.

Some of them were not up to speed about flag communication, and I've asked them to work on it. For, when you're racing, the only way to communicate with the officials and support staff is through flags. Also, safety is a big issue and we always stress on its importance."

He hopes that the hunt yields many future champions. "My father used to tell me that you are as successful as the next successor you train. I had my day in the sun; when my son proved to be better than me; I was so happy. The minute your wards are starting to learn, you know you've achieved something."

Alisha's hunt for future women racers, he hopes, will become a movement across the country. "It's a fabulous age to catch them and put them into racing... We're in for exciting times."

### **From page 1**

Soundari A. is known as Sindy in the racing circuit. With her gear on, you might *actually* mistake her for a boy — petite, wiry and fidgety most of the time. But she's married and has a baby who's just a few months old. Even as Sauraj Ryan ("it was a combination of my husband's name and mine") is gurgling in his cradle, somewhere in Royapuram, his mother is busy manoeuvring the difficult curves at the Irungattukottai race track on a bike almost twice her size.

It started when she rode a friend's bike back in Royapuram. "I took to it immediately... I knew I had some kind of attachment to bikes," she says.

When she went to college, she chose Shri Andal Azhagar College — quite far away from her home — for just one reason. "I could ride to college," she says. Arriving on an F2, Soundari was quite the toast of her college.

She's grown since then — having married a biker she met on the very same Irungattukottai track where she's now competing with several other young women for a place on the team.

Pratheebha Pandiyan, a Fine Arts student from **Stella Maris College**, is one of them. Growing up, she'd always hang out with her brother, Vignesh, and his friends... they were mad about bikes and racing. "I'd always roam with them and talk about the latest machines in the market," she recalls.

A casual conversation led to her trying to ride a bike one day, and since then, there has been no stopping Pratheebha. She wanted to get into it full-time, but her parents were against it, stating that it was an expensive sport. She eventually managed to raise money from family and friends; when she heard Alisha speak on a morning show on Tamil television, she was hooked. "I have to reduce my timing and speed up," she says, strapping on her helmet and giving us a thumbs-up sign, before heading off to the start point of the practice race.

That's where she'll meet Alisha, who is all set to take her 'students' on a practice lap. It has been a busy morning for Alisha — talking to the select lot on the intricacies and pressures involved in the sport. "I was always racing with the boys," she tells us, "there was no women's category then, but I didn't give up. I ask these girls to free their mind of all thoughts on the track — not to

think of boyfriends or family problems. You need to be mentally and physically fit to do well in a race. And, none of these girls have professional racing backgrounds — we make them racers here.”

For Alisha, it wasn't easy zeroing in on these 27 girls... it was an exercise that took her to many colleges and required her to interact with hundreds of young women. “I met several girls. We shortlisted them based on a basic criteria; now, we're trying to get the cream among them.”

Bangalore-based Ramya S., a second-year Commerce student, hopes to be one of them. Though she has been riding a bike for a while now, it was only recently that she learnt about the women's racing movement and the Alisha Abdullah Academy. “I get strange and surprised looks all the time when I say I'm a biker,” she says. Ask her about being in a male-dominated sport, and she says, “I'd like to be the fastest woman on earth.”

She has competition though. Not just from Chennai, but from Olesya Valaynkani Dias, who has come all the way from Kuwait, and moved lock, stock and barrel for a couple of months to the city for this training programme.

Olesya has vivid memories of her father, Salvador Dias, making her sit on the fuel tank of his Royal Enfield when he would ride like a king on the streets of Goa. “He would tell me, ‘Someday, you'll be riding this, kid.’ I used to always watch him in awe.”

She completed schooling and enrolled in an electronic music production course, but her passion for bike racing was what she wanted to pursue. “I wasn't getting enough opportunities and that was holding me back,” she recalls, “when I heard about this hunt, I was very excited and wanted to come to Chennai.”

It took her a while to convince her father; but once she did, there was no looking back. With adequate training and practice, she hopes to make it to the team.

If she does, she will soon be racing with the girls and then take on the men — that's part of Alisha's plan. She has help from TVS Racing and MRF, who're on board helping them with the gear and bikes. “In my team, I want all the girls to be neck and neck and fight for the finish,” says the racer, who, interestingly, will be leading the National Car Racing championship with 27 men next month. “I want them to compete with men on the track.”

The pride is evident on her face, as a couple of the students give her tough competition on the race track. She says, “The girls told me that I make their dreams come true. If Alisha can do it, every girl out there can too.”

***I ask these girls to free their mind of all thoughts on the track - not to think of boyfriends or family problems***