

Gaurav Gill in lead, Younus the big surprise

POPULAR RALLY

STAN RAYAN
KUTTIKANAM (IDUKKI)

He is the defending champion here and this is 'his country'. When Kollam's Younus Ilyas won the Popular Rally last year, it was not part of the national circuit. But now it is and there are big stars like Delhi's three-time Asian Pacific Rally champion Gaurav Gill and Bengaluru's European circuit driver Karna Kadur in the fray here.

The top names, however, have not rattled Younus. If anything, they have only inspired the 24-year-old.

Gill, the World Rally Championship-2 driver, was on top of the pack at the end of the rally's nine-stage opening day here on Saturday but the big surprise was Younus, who was in the second spot 53 seconds behind the country's best-ever



Keeping pace: Younus Ilyas was in the second spot, 53 seconds behind Gaurav Gill. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

driver.

Let down by a series of problems with his car in three of the four previous rounds of the MRF-FMSCI National championship (INRC), Younus had just hoped to nurse his Mitsubishi Cedia to the finish in the 24th Popular Rally, the final round of the Nationals.

But he surprised himself when he shocked Gill by taking the opening stage honours in the 13.5km winding

road at Mundakkayam, near here. With Autocross National champion Bikku Babu winning the second stage and Younus coming next, the Kollam driver grabbed the lead. But Gill fought his way to the fore, winning the next five stages and race to the front. Gill will now enter the rally's final day as the favourite for the title.

"I can't compare myself with Gaurav Gill, he is such a great driver, but I was cer-

tainly surprised with my performance today," Younus told *The Hindu*.

Meanwhile, Gill said that though this is a tarmac rally, he changed his mind about the tyres after the recce.

"I was not very confident with the tarmac tyres because the conditions were very rough here, so I used gravel tyres and I decided to play it safe. It was very difficult with the gravel tyres because they are not the ideal set-up," said Gill.

The rally will end with the super special stage at Kalamassery on Sunday afternoon.

Positions after day 1 (nine stages): 1. Gaurav Gill & Musa Sherif (Mahindra Adventure) 1:15:05.2s, 2. Younus Ilyas & K.N. Harish (Race Concepts) 1:15:58.7, 3. Karna Kadur & Nikhil Vittal Pai (Arka Motorsports) 1:16:33.6, 4. Sirish Chandran & A.A. Ragnekar (SC) 1:16:41.6, 5. Amitrajit Ghosh & Ashwin Naik (Mahindra Adventure) 1:17:20.8.