

# Gill in lead

**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 Gaurav Gill and Bengaluru's European circuit driver Karna Kadur in the fray.

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

Gill 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 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.