

Gill's Arjuna Gives Hope to Motorsport Fraternity

But there is an understanding that the recognition will not alter the landscape on its own

Abhishek Takle

Gaurav Gill's nomination for the Arjuna Award may not kick Indian motorsport into a higher gear overnight but officials, administrators and members of the fraternity are hoping the long-overdue recognition can help pull the discipline into the mainstream.

The Indian rally ace was on the list of 19 sportspersons nominated for one of the country's top sporting honours, it emerged last week.

After being snubbed for the last three years, Gill is set to become the first motorsport athlete to win the award.

"This is a big development for Indian motorsport," said J Prithviraj, the President of the Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India (FMSCI), India's motorsports body which nominated Gill. "It will do wonders for us and the sport and encourage all the talented drivers to go even higher as they know that the government will recognise his or her efforts.

"It will motivate younger kids to take up the sport too, follow in the footsteps of Narain Karthikeyan and Gill and others who have excelled on the world stage for so many years."

Indian motorsport has always occupied its own little niche. Far from its practitioners being considered for national honours, simply winning official recognition of the discipline — dismissed as an adventure pursuit or entertainment — has been a challenge.

The FMSCI itself only regained recognition as a national sports federation in 2015, two years after India held its last Formula One race at Greater Noida's Buddh International Circuit.

JK Tyres' head of motorsport and FMSCI council member Sanjay Sharma says the body has been battling to win Indian racers some form of sporting recognition since Narain Karthikeyan, who was incidentally awarded the Padma Shri some years ago, became the first Indian to race in Formula One in 2005.

"We've been fighting this battle for a very long time," said Sharma.

"There's a whole lot of time which has been wasted trying to explain the levels of the sport, how over the years it has evolved in this country.

"This is a huge victory for the

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GAURAV GILL

sport itself."

Gill has won the Indian National Rally Championship (INRC) a whopping six times and the Asia Pacific Rally Championship (APRC) thrice.

Last year, he competed in the World Rally Championship's WRC2 category driving in four rallies and is set to take part in three more WRC2 events in 2019.

Gill — like Dakar finishers CS Santosh and KP Aravind, or young F1 hopefuls Jehan Daruvala and Arjun Maini — is one among a group of Indian racers racing internationally.

While that pool has grown, Indian motorsport still lags the European motor-racing heartland when it comes to infrastructure, the quality of equipment, level of competition and most importantly opportunities for the country's brightest young racing talent to progress up the motorsport ladder.

The recognition bestowed by the Arjuna Award will not on its own drastically alter the landscape.

But, it sets a precedent that paves the way for other motor racing athletes in the future to win similar recognition which could then build momentum behind a grassroots change as the sport emerges from its niche.

"I don't think one award will give it momentum," said businessman Gautam Singhania, who sits on the World Motor Sport Council (WMSC) of the FIA, the governing body for global motorsport.

"To give it momentum at the grassroots level, a whole series of other things are being done which we hope to



see results with.

"(But it's) a clear, clear, clear signal that we are now getting noticed."

Vicky Chandhok, past president of the FMSCI, who battled plenty of red tape while bringing Formula One to India, said the long-overdue recognition from the Arjuna Award offered the body the platform to grow awareness about the sport.

"The Arjuna Award for me, more than the recipient of it, is the acceptance of the government that motorsport is actually a sport," said Chandhok, who is vice president of the Madras Motor Sports Club, a member of the FMSCI governing council and also the president of the APRC.

"It's now for the FMSCI to leverage Gaurav Gill as the recipient to pro-

mote the sport within the government circles."

Gill, meanwhile, said his winning the Arjuna Award could finally pave the way for much-needed sponsorship money to start flowing into the sport, which would raise the level of professionalism, while also giving aspiring racers hope that there's a career to be made in motorsport.

"People in the press and people like you will now start writing about it and you will make people more aware," he said.

"If you make them understand what it's all about, then you'll gain popularity and with popularity it will become more commercial and more commercial means more sponsors and more money in the sport."