

National rally championship runs into trouble

The Indian National Rally Championship (INRC), that is already running on a near-empty tank, received a further blow with the postponement, a euphemism for cancellation, of the second round of the 2008 series scheduled for July 16-18 at Nashik.

Speaking to IANS, chief organiser of the Nashik Rally, Ashwin Pandit, said: 'All I can say at this moment is that the event has been postponed to September. I cannot go into the reasons for the postponement, but hopefully, we will get a date in September.'

Apparently, the prospective sponsors of the Nashik Rally could not be guaranteed television coverage leading to their pullout at the last minute.

In the past couple of years, the INRC has failed to run the full course with postponement and subsequent cancellation of rounds. Also, JK Tyre's non-participation left the field open for the cash-rich Team MRF whose drivers swept all before them.

This season, seven rounds were scheduled, beginning with Rally of Karnataka in Mysore last month, followed by events at Nashik, [Bangalore](#) (K-1000), Kochi, Goa, Chandigarh and Chennai. By the looks of it, there is a question mark over Goa who last year backed out while [Chennai](#) figures in the INRC list after a gap of nearly a decade and it is still to be known who would organise the event.

The INRC has also been plagued by lack of sponsors, amateurish organisation and near-absence of television coverage that in the first place attracts corporate support. Mounting costs in the wake of ever-changing regulations and also fuel and tyre prices, have deterred newcomers.

No doubt, several events, especially in Karnataka, have been attracting over 30 entries, but a majority of these are in the subsidised Rally Star Cup class that is essentially for newcomers. The number of participants in the other categories, the 1400cc, 1600cc and N+, has rarely touched double figures even when MRF entered a five-car team spread across different classes.

A cross-section of private entries or privateers in motor sport parlance, that IANS spoke to, averred that they spend a minimum of Rs.60,000 per round, not counting expenses towards spares and repairs. This is in addition to the cost of purchase of a new or second hand vehicle.

Even granting that motor sport is indeed an expensive past time, the INRC scenario is getting increasingly bleak at a time when the 2008 season witnessed the launch of two teams, the Red Rooster Racing from Bangalore (two cars) and Winspeed from [Hyderabad](#) (three cars).

Internationally, MRF has been participating with some success in the Asia Pacific Rally Championship with a three-car combo and Coimbatore's six times INRC title holder Naren Kumar doing the World Rally Championship (production class) fully backed by Sidvin CoreTech, the Bangalore-based software company.

Incidentally, Sidvin had agreed in principle to take over title sponsorship of the INRC, but the word is that they are yet to formally sign a contract. The transfer of power by world body FIA to Federation of Motor Sports Club of India (FMSCI) from rival Motorsports Association of India (MAI) has put the deal on hold for the moment.

Sidvin had supported the Rally of Karnataka that was successfully conducted in Mysore. In fact, the sponsors flew in a specialist television crew from New Zealand to film the event, complete with onboard cameras. However, the telecast schedule is still not known.

'Although the 2008 INRC is basically a calendar drawn up by the MAI, we still want it to go ahead as scheduled. In fact, we would like to add a few more rounds,' Vicky Chandhok, the former FMSCI president and currently a committee member, said last week in a chat with IANS.

With the postponement of Nashik round and its fate hanging in balance, the onus is on the FMSCI to revive the sagging INRC series that only a decade ago was vibrant with competition and excitement, thanks in the main to the intense, and often bitter, rivalry between MRF and JK teams.

The rot set in with JK pulling out of INRC and also the exit of traditional venues like Hyderabad, Coimbatore and Chennai due to a combination of factors ranging from internal politics to lack of sponsorship.

Thus, the INRC that with meticulous planning and marketing could have been offered as an excellent platform for the growing number of car manufacturers in India to showcase their products by way of sponsorship or factory-supported teams, has all but lost its way in a maze of complex issues that is a story in itself.

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