

Women rallyists raring to take centre stage

RAID DE HIMALAYA All eyes will be on Chandigarh's Anu Rana and Sarah Kashyap along with Delhi's Shuchi Thakur among women rallyists during the gruelling event

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CHANDIGARH: Chandigarh's Anu Rana and Sarah Kashyap along with Delhi's Shuchi Thakur are the three ladies who can set the tone for the 10 toughest rallies in the world, on fire this season. Starting on October 8, Shuchi and Anu have been preparing for the 20th edition of this gruelling event that traverses past tortuous mountain roads, hairpin curves and dangerous drop-offs at a height of almost 4,900 metres above sea level in Kargil, Zaskar and Ladakh.

"Everything that I do in life is a means to this end - rallying. I am in top form and am confident of putting up a good show once again," Shuchi said. "I am there to compete, not for a fun drive in the hills," she added.

Indeed, Shuchi Thakur is regarded as one of the world's leading cross-country high-altitude racers among women and she has competed in the Raid 12 times. Sarah is also an accomplished rider as she was the first Indian woman to finish the Xtreme Moto Category at the Raid de Himalaya in 2015. The only other woman biker to finish the Raid Xtreme Moto has been the Austrian, Klaudia Honeder, who achieved the feat in 2006.

In the Desert Storm 2017, she added another feather in her cap by becoming the first Indian woman to complete the race, competing in the Xtreme Moto category. In the next edition of the same event, Sarah finished eighth overall in Xtreme Moto.

The Raid will be flagged off from Leh on October 8, and will finish on October 14, after covering approximately 3,000 kilometres.

BANKING ON GRIT AND EXPERIENCE

Anu has no hesitation in saying that the Raid is her favourite motorsport event. "I love the challenge of driving for long hours at high altitudes. It requires a completely different set of training and conditioning of your body," she said.

"The terrain keeps getting steeper with every turn, and you will not know when you will be racing on loose rocks or even

sand, which makes the drive tougher with a distance. For a racer like me, the terrain looks tempting, but you should never forget the limits of your car," Anu, a seasoned rallyist now after three shots already at the Raid, added.

Shuchi, who hails from Dharmsala and lives in Delhi, first competed in the Raid de Himalaya in 2005. She has been racing every year in it since then, except in 2016. This makes Shuchi the only woman in the world to have raced a 4x4 vehicle over one lakh kilometers of high-altitude dangerous roads in an extreme motorsport event.

Shuchi's commendable podium finishes include second in the T1 category at Raid 2017, first in the T2 category at Raid 2015, and second in the T2 category at Raid 2013. At the Maruti Suzuki National Autocross Championship 2016-17, she ranked first in North Zone 4-Wheel Drive category.

Shuchi, who works in the advertising industry on the creative side, tries to compete in as many events a year as possible. She has been seen in the Maruti Suzuki Desert Storm and the SJOBA Sub-Himalayan Rally as well. "Seat time is crucial in motorsports. The more time you spend behind the wheel, the better you get at your craft," she said.

In 2015, Anu finished second in the T2 category at the Raid. She bagged the Coup de Dames trophy, given to the all-women team that performs best at the Raid, in 2015 and 2016.

Anu was second in the T2 category at the Dakshin Dare 2015 too, and first in the women's category at Dakshin Dare in 2016 and 2017.

Anu, a financial consultant, will compete at the Raid with her sister Poonam Rana as navigator. The duo has won various trophies together.

The Raid de Himalaya 2018 will run its first stage on the never-before-traversed section from Lamayuru, called the moonland of Ladakh, to Photoksar. It will then go to the newly-upgraded road leading to Zaskar that was earlier a mule track. They will also take the road leading to Umba La, a high mountain pass at an elevation of 4,496 metres above sea level.

RAID ROUTE

Leg 1: Will begin from Leh, will cover the stretches of Lamayuru, Photoksar and Kargil. Night-halt at Kargil.

Leg 2: Kargil-Zaskar-Kargil. Competitors also go to Penzi La and back. Night-halt at Kargil.

Leg 3: The rally will go from Kargil from Umba La to Drass. Night-halt at Leh.

Leg 4: The rally will cross high-mountain passes. The highest mountain pass on leg 4 will be Tanglang La, at a height of 5,328 metres. Debring, Varla are part of Raid route on the final day.

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(Clockwise) Chandigarh's Anu Rana (left) with her navigator, rider Sarah Kashyap and Delhi's Shuchi Thakur (right) with her navigator.