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**M**otorsport is traditionally considered a male bastion. There are very few female drivers in the world competing at the top level and fewer still who are actually winning races. Forget racing, stereotypes exist that women are not even competent drivers. Hence, the formation of an all-women racing team in India is nothing short of a milestone. Formed earlier this year, Ahura Racing has the distinction of being India's first all-women racing team competing at the top level, and what's more, the women comprising the team come from diverse backgrounds. Some are students, some working professionals, and for most, it is their first taste of professional racing.

The team made its debut in the National Racing Championship in July when they competed at the Kari Motor Speedway in Coimbatore. Two more races followed before they brought their season to a close at the Buddh International Circuit recently. And while their inaugural season has not given the team any wins or podiums, the team is clear about the end goal. Sarosh Hatariya, the founder of the team and former national champion, says, "My goal is clear - to have a female racer not just competing but winning against the men." Sarosh's inspiration for the team was his mother Uma Hatariya, who used to race in 1986-87. "I grew up watching

her race and figured this new generation needed similar role models," he tells us.

The team, comprising six drivers (and six reserves), was selected after a massive talent hunt in the first half of the year. Bengaluru-based Mrinalini Singh recounts, "I got to know about this talent hunt that was selecting female drivers for the national championship and I tried my luck there. That's how it began, and I would say we are still a work in progress." The girls all come from different backgrounds with no prior experience in racing. Lea Daran lives in California and was merely visiting her grandparents in India when she tried out for the team and got selected. "I'm just happy because this meant I could spend more time in India than just the two-three weeks I usually do," the 22-year-old tells us. Some are working hard to balance their racing with studies and work life. Mrinalini, an IT professional, says, "Till now, I have been able to balance, so I wish that continues. But yes, it's a challenge. Thankfully, my company has been very supportive. My manager and my seniors are quite supportive and they help me manage work and days off."

Most of the girls are cautious about their new career for now.

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- Megha KS, who is a final-year engineering student

When questioned if they'd be willing to let go of their other professions in favour of racing, if their racing career takes off, Lea responds, "I haven't really thought about it. I could because I'd get to stay in India and I have a lot of friends here and this feels great. I'm sure my parents will be supportive."

Family support is something the girls have been lucky to have. Diana Pundole of Pune, who calls herself an avid racer, explains, "I work in my family-owned store back in Pune and I'm lucky my family is supportive. I didn't even know about this opportunity. My brother found out about it and told me, 'You have to go!' There's nothing better I can do than racing and they know it.

When I'm disappointed about a result, they encourage me and keep me motivated."

Twenty-year-old Shrivani Pruthvi is one of the youngest members of the team. Unlike others, the third year medical student had some prior background in racing as her father is a former rally driver. But she hardly has any experience of professional racing, having started only this year. She argues that at least in the racing community the gender divide is diminishing. "We haven't faced any discrimination. Everybody is damn supportive in the racing world. I don't think that stereotype exists anymore that women are not good drivers and are not supportive to race. We do get looks from people when they see a woman in the car but we take it as a look of amusement and wonder and nothing negative," she says.

But their performances in the inaugural season have led some to wonder if the team is just a gimmick and many question if they will ever be able to perform as well as other professionals. Megha KS, who is a final-year engineering student, says, "When everyone hears this tag - India's first all-women racing team - they think it's a gimmick to seek attention. But that's not the case. They don't know how much pressure we face to make sure we perform and it does not remain a gimmick. We aren't looking for attention. Our aim is to perform, fight the boys and get some podiums."