

# Herald Cafe

## BORN TO RACE: Meet the women rewriting Goa's motorsports map

Against the roar of engines and the dust of the track, women rise—defying norms, mastering machines, and claiming their place in the world of motorsports. Bani Dabholkar and Ashrafi Gaikwad are redefining what it means to lead

Swati Suryawanshi

**BANI DABHOLKAR**

At just 19, Bani Dabholkar from Chapora is redefining what it means to chase dreams—with dust in her face and fire in her heart. A student at St. Xavier's College, Mapusa, Bani is making waves as one of the most promising young talents in India's off-road racing circuit.

**From hobby to passion**  
Bani's journey began just two years ago, thanks to encouragement from fellow riders and friends—Yoshva Lobo, Mario Fernandes, and Swapnil Korgaonkar. What started as a weekend hobby soon became a serious pursuit. Her first bike, a Hero Xpulse 200 4V, was a gift from her father. Without access to professional tracks, she trained on hilltops, off-road paths, and open fields around her village. "I didn't have fancy tracks," she says. "I just rode wherever I could—and I learned something new every time."

**Turning point at Valpoi Dirt Arena**  
Her recent milestone came at the Valpoi Dirt Arena Time Trial on April 27. Known for its tough terrain and optical challenges, the track tested every rider's skill and focus. During one of the most difficult sections, Bani's handlebar locked, causing her to crash. "It was a heart-stopping moment," she recalls. "But I had to keep going. I checked the bike quickly and got back on." Her determination paid off—despite the fall, she regained her rhythm and went on to finish in first place, proving both her technical skills and mental toughness.

**A record of consistency**  
Bani's achievements are impressive. She has clinched first place in the Goa Time Trial in both 2024 and 2025. Other notable finishes include third place at the MRF National Rally Championship in Chikmagalur and the Goa Dirt Race in Valpoi, fourth place in Nashik, and fifth in Kolhapur. Her progress reflects her ability to learn, adapt, and push through under pressure.



**ASHRAFI GAIKWAD**

Ashrafi Gaikwad is blazing across India's toughest dirt tracks, driven by passion, supported by family, and fuelled by an unshakable mindset. With multiple podium finishes to her name, she's emerging as one of the standout figures in Indian motorsports.

**Humble beginnings**  
Her journey began not with a race-ready machine, but a stock Hyundai i10—no modifications, just sheer willpower. While others arrived with customised cars, Ashrafi proved that determination could beat horsepower. Today, she's celebrated across Goa and beyond as the Fastest Goan Lady Driver.

**Dominating the Dirt Prix Circuit**  
In just four years, she has evolved from underdog to title-winner, collecting over a dozen podiums in FMSCI-sanctioned events. At Dirt Prix 9 in Chikmagalur, she took home three titles, winner of the Ladies Open Class, winner of the Diesel Open Class and the first runner-up of the Street Stock Petrol Open Class. Earlier at Dirt Prix 8 in Mangalore, she placed first runner-up in the Ladies Open Class.

**Rising through the ranks**  
Her momentum peaked at the 2025 Athoor round in Karnataka, where she secured double golds, winner of the Ladies Class and Fastest Lady Driver and winner of Stock Class. Her racing milestones continue to grow. She has been the first runner-up at the Dirt 5 (2022), All Goa Motorsport's Association, Goan Fastest Lady Driver (2023), INAC and Pro Ladies (2023), INAC and was awarded as the winner and the Fastest Goan Lady Driver (2024), Dirt 6, Goa.

**Preparation, focus, and family support**  
Her race routine includes carefully walking the track and mentally locking in. "Don't panic. Don't overthink. Just focus." Her husband, a motocross champion, is both her coach and strongest supporter. Fellow racers like Athul Thomas and Aeman Ahmed have also played vital roles in her journey.



FLEX THOSE MUSCLES



PHOTO COMPETITION HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED FOR WATER CONSERVATION

### SWIPE RIGHT

#### Kangana Ranaut deletes Modi-Trump tweet after BJP advice



Actor-turned-AMP Kangana Ranaut has publicly retracted a controversial tweet comparing PM Narendra Modi to US President Donald Trump. She commented on Trump's remarks urging Apple CEO Tim Cook not to move product manufacturing to India. In the

now-deleted post, Kangana questioned Trump's motives, writing: "What could be the reason for this love loss? He is American President, but the world's most loved leader is Indian Prime Minister. Trump's second term, but our PM's third. Trump is an alpha male, but our PM is the father of all alpha males." In a follow-up tweet, she wrote: "Respected national president Shri @JPNadda ji called and asked me to delete the tweet. I regret posting that very personal opinion of mine. As per instructions, I immediately deleted it from Instagram as well."



Nitanishi Goel, a 17-year-old actress, known for 'Laapataa Ladies', made history as the youngest Indian actor on the Cannes 2025 red carpet, wearing a custom black and gold embroidered gown by Jade by Monica and Karishma with intricate Kasab embroidery and delicate macramé on sheer fabric

## MARIO'S WORLD IN OLD DAMÃO

Vivek Meneses

Usegad remains the way of life in Daman – to us, for centuries, always Damão – at the very tip of the ancient Aparanta, where the Konkani coastline spills into Gujarat. Here, the erstwhile Estado da India managed to defend twinned sea-facing fortresses – then called Grande and Pequeno, now Moti and Nani – from the 16th century right until 1961, and while there have been dramatic demographic changes since then some precious things have remained as they should. For me, top of the list is that delicious unhurriedness we once knew so well in India's smallest state, in simpler times of greater contentedness. No one can or wants to turn back the clock, but what I experienced among the Damanenses earlier this month was an interesting glimpse into alternative ways of being and belonging, with lots of relevance to Goa.

I went up for the advent of Mario de Miranda's centenary, because our great artist was born there on May 2, 1926, and his sister Fatima Miranda Figueiredo alerted me to an interesting commemorative event planned for an intimately personal geography: at the tiny 1896 chapel built by Mario's maternal grandfather, just around the corner from the (now demolished) house where his mother delivered him into the world. All this is Nani

Daman, very close to the lovely little fortaleza that also encompasses the church of Nossa Senhora do Mar where the artist-to-be was baptized. Criss-crossing to Moti Daman that evening and in the days that followed – there is a nice pedestrian bridge across the river that separates the two fort walls – I was delighted to encounter an unexpectedly outstanding art and architecture, and became thoroughly charmed by the sincerity, style and enthusiasm by which the Damanenses continue to celebrate their intricate, in-between cultural heritage, at once remarkably similar but distinctly different from Goa. Today, we tend to relegate Daman to afterthought, just another insignificant former colonial enclave lumped in with Diu, Silvassa, and etcetera. But that was historically never the case, and at various times this superbly located entrepôt was actually the mainstay of the old Estado. Here's what the terrific historian Amar Farooqui

writes in an invaluable 2016 essay about the all-important opium trade, once the mainstay of the British Raj: "Indo-Portuguese business groups were key players in developing a network of trade that encompassed western and central India, Bombay (now Mumbai), Daman, Diu, Goa, Sind, Macau and Canton [and the] long association of Indo-Portuguese traders with the sea-borne commerce of the West Coast, combined with the



Inside the old fortress at Nani Daman

links they had with the Portuguese at Macau who aided in smuggling the drug into China, gave them a distinct advantage. The traders of the Portuguese settlements in Konkani and Gujarat thus opened up new opportunities for the economies of the

landlocked princely states of the Malwa plateau." Farooqui says "it was the Indo-Portuguese traders on the West Coast of India who acquired large stakes in the growth of the Malwa opium trade. Being closer to the areas of production, they could pocket larger profits. The Indo-Portuguese traders of the West Coast virtually pioneered large-scale exports of Malwa opium to China in partnership with the Gujarat and Bombay traders at one end and the Macau Portuguese at the other. A leading role was played in this by Rogério de Faria, a native-born Indo-Portuguese merchant of Goa [who] was king of the Malwa opium sea-borne trade at the turn of the [19th] century. He was part of a group of Indo-Portuguese entrepreneurs who procured Malwa opium from Rajasthani and Gujarati suppliers for onward shipment to Macau. The Indo-Portuguese traders had set up their base at Bombay and/or Daman rather than at Goa since the capital of the Estado da India was situated at too great a distance from the main Malwa supply networks." That is how, for significant periods in history, "Daman was the economic pivot of the Portuguese colonial empire in Asia". For me at first encounter, the art, architecture, and cultural expressions of the Damanenses immediately represented a challenge to our longstanding effort in Goa to resist the term "Indo-Portuguese" – which has been remarkably successful, to the point it is now widely accepted the classification is misleading and inaccurate. Here is just one illustrative example, from the perceptive Coimbra-based architect and academic Walter Rossa in 2022: "at least with regard to architectural and urban heritage, it can be confidently stated that it is, in fact, Goan. Ambiguous, Eurocentric

and even Manichean expressions such as "Indo-Portuguese" should be definitely abandoned." But if that is the case, what do we say about Daman and its artistic, architectural and cultural marvels – like the utterly glorious 17th century Church of the Holy Rosary – where the base idiom is unmistakably Gujarati, and the presence of Africa, coastal Islam and the Parsis is similarly evident in unfamiliar ways? Akin but not alike, for starters it is clearly, most definitely not Goan. I spent pleasant days pondering this conundrum before, during and after the centenary, where I was lucky to meet the organizer Silvana Pereira, an impressive one-woman heritage movement, and recently retired civil servant who made it possible for me to properly experience the surviving – I might even say thriving – Damanenses community spirit via the Feast of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios on May 4th, in a lovely little turn-of-the-17th-century church (which Mario has depicted, in perhaps his only artwork of his beloved birthplace) packed with parishioners in their Sunday best, including several who had flown down specially from the UK (where some 90% of the original locals have migrated via the Portuguese passport route). I loved the spirited choir, led by Belino Mendonca and Noel Gama on their guitars, along with 73-year-old Ninette Rosario and 79-year-old Marcelina Guedes – lifelong parishioners all – and especially appreciated how well they sang the hymns of their ancestors, the Lusophone repertoire almost lost in Goa, which survives very well in this much tinier citadel of the long-gone order. I could almost feel history flicker alive, and then it was straight back into Mario's world.