

IS THERE A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD FOR INDIAN SPORTSWOMEN?

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Wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and others during their protest against the Wrestling Federation of India, in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: PTI

Over a week ago, India's top wrestlers, including Olympic medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, and World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat, [staged a protest](#) against Wrestling Federation of India president [Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh](#), accusing him and coaches of the Federation of sexual harassment. [Singh was asked to step aside](#), and the Union Sports Ministry constituted a five-member oversight committee to investigate the charges. The [committee, led by the celebrated boxer M.C. Mary Kom](#), has also been tasked with managing the day-to-day affairs of the Federation until the submission of its report. The controversy has yet again brought into focus the many problems in Indian sports governance. Questions have been raised over the conduct of the newly elected Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and the Athletes' Commission, and the redressal mechanisms in place. Considering the challenges, is there a level playing field for Indian sportswomen? **Sharda Ugra** and **Deepthi Bopaiah** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **N. Sudarshan**. Edited excerpts:

How big is the pushback by the wrestlers?

Sharda Ugra: It is a revolutionary act. In the last decade and a half, there have been sporadic complaints. But in this age of television and social media, we have seen senior athletes saying, 'We're standing up for our community as a whole.' Very rarely will an athlete of Vinesh or Sakshi or Bajrang's capabilities and achievements speak out and say, 'We will not leave until the president of the Federation goes.' It's a reflection of how Indian sport has changed and [how] a lot of it has stayed the same.

Deepthi Bopaiah: I agree. Each one of them understands the responsibility of being a role model. And if you don't be the change you want to see, you're not going to see that [change] happening. So many different entities have come forward to professionalise Indian sport; we've made baby steps towards it. But something like this makes you sit back and think, 'Aren't there enough systems and processes?' So, from an athlete's side, it's brave and fantastic; you are walking the talk. But from the administration side, it makes you think, 'Why are they doing that?'

The P.T. Usha-led IOA and the Athletes' Commission dithered in their initial responses. In an era where athlete-driven governance is championed, could they have done better?

Sharda Ugra: Like Deepthi said, 'Are you walking the talk as an athlete who's in an official position?' For both P.T. Usha and Mary Kom, it took more than 24 hours to respond. The Athletes' Commission, which is supposed to be the voice of the athletes, had nothing to say. [Only] Shiva Keshavan put out a tweet. Ten athletes were unanimously elected [to the Commission]. You could ask, 'To do what? Are they just placeholders?' Now Mary Kom has been made in charge, but we've not seen any decisive action or comment on a very troublesome issue, which I'm sure she herself is very familiar with.

Deepthi Bopaiah: I'll answer this in two parts. I feel these are very early days for P.T. Usha and the Athletes' Commission. But I agree with Sharda that you need some sort of an acknowledgement when such a brave step is taken. The second part is, when redressal committees were being set up in corporate India, a lot of it was about creating awareness about the roles people occupied: Why is a particular person on a committee? Can I reach out? We still need to replicate these in Indian sports. On this issue, the turnaround time was much quicker from the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and the Sports Ministry compared to earlier times, which is good. But the part where I still have concern is, 'How do you report? Who's going to address it and what happens after that?'

There is more awareness and discussion about the seriousness of sexual assault crimes. But is the environment more conducive today to report complaints?

Deepthi Bopaiah: It depends on which section of women are doing it, and what is the support system behind them. Today, [there is] general awareness on prevention of sexual harassment, with the #MeToo movement. But in sport, these discussions are not happening enough. It's seen in smaller groups and workshops, like we do it at our foundation. While women feel more confident and more courageous in bringing up the issue, they still form a very small percentage.

Sharda Ugra: Female athletes, like women in the country, are more confident about speaking out. If they come from a slightly urban set-up, they are able to talk openly about it. The fact that these wrestlers have come out and they come from a sort of rural background will give confidence to a lot of other athletes. Recently, the case of the cyclist who had complained about the coach was a great example of SAI responding quickly. The Cycling Federation said, 'He's been here for 24 years and we've had no complaints.' That doesn't mean he didn't do anything. So, these 24 years show you the sort of change that has happened.

That these athletes staged a protest indicates the massive imbalance in power and a lack of faith in the system. How do we correct it?

Sharda Ugra: This is a classic example of the benevolence of power stepping in. Power here is the Sports Ministry, rather than there being systems and structures in place. The day-to-day operations of a majority of sports federations are run not by a professional office, but by the office of whoever is the president or secretary. That is why when there is any problem, you go straight to the top. This time, it was the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, and then the Sports Minister. In a proper structure, you would have gone to the Athletes' Commission and then to the IOA. This is why the athletes want the Wrestling Federation of India to be restructured, because the ladder that exists there has no rungs in it.

Is there any effort to sensitise those in power to the problems faced by athletes?

Deepthi Bopaiah: It's a combination of things. There is a lot of attention on sexual harassment. But in terms of the abuse of power, there's psychological abuse, neglect, not sending entries to competitions, etc. There are also [imbalances] in terms of socio-economic status and athletic ability. That's why there is an attempt to formalise the National Sports Code. But there are also

people who don't want it to happen because the sense of power goes away. And the athlete is left hanging.

Should we then expand the debate and go beyond reporting on sexual and mental harassment? Such as the lack of equal opportunities to compete, fewer stadiums with women-centric infrastructure?

Sharda Ugra: You can handle all these things together. There is an athlete-centric model of governance that India is having a problem coming to terms with. Enough competitions to take part in, better stadiums, better facilities... these are all reasonable expectations. But we also don't know how many young boys are being harassed, mentally and psychologically. You would sense that women athletes will be going through a significant degree more. If you get the coach-athlete and the official-coach-athlete equations evened out and made respectful, it would make for an enormous beginning.

Deepthi Bopaiah: The word to take away is respect. Our athletes are special. All this pride that we feel is because of their ability. Yes, others work with them, but without the athlete, there is nothing. You need to give them an environment to thrive in, like the Padukone-Draavid Centre for Sports Excellence or the JSW setup in Ballari. We're not giving athletes enough basic infrastructure and basic respect, but we expect medals every four years. The wrestling issue has shaken up the system. It is saying, 'Get it done now.'

How far are we from an ideal sports governance model?

Sharda Ugra: A good distance away. Starting out by accepting that would be great. And also not look at everything from a medal-centric view. Some of our laws are excellent, but are they being implemented? Of our federations, 85-90% are symbols of bad governance. We can be happy if it comes down to 40-50%.

Deepthi Bopaiah: This is unfortunately true. But I feel that private foundations and SAI are all working together. There is some accountability. But when you're talking about a safe environment to thrive in, there are many more aspects. Some say, 'Let's get the medals and other things can be ignored.' That approach is not appropriate. But I have seen changes in the last few years that give me hope. It's great to see athletes stand up for themselves. Having the courage to say that this is not okay and younger athletes should not face similar challenges is amazing. The ball is in the court of the administrators.

Sharda Ugra is a sports journalist with more than three decades of experience across newsrooms at The Hindu , Mid-Day , India Today and ESPNcricinfo; Deepthi Bopaiah is CEO of GoSports Foundation, a non-profit working towards the development of some of India's best Olympic and Paralympic talents

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