
The Day When Indian Athletes Decided not to Play Safe

Mid-July 2018 when this chapter was way past its many deadlines, an exchange around Indian sport on social media became, to use mobile app language, a notification for our times. “Our” here is Indian sport - that baffling, exhilarating, frustrating, impossibly optimistic entity - and the Twitter exchange around it indicated that some straitjacketed conventions had been pulled apart. It took place just after Hima Das kicked in her afterburner across the straight in the 400m final at the IAAF World U20 Championships (also called the World Junior Championships), becoming the first Indian to win a track gold medal at a world event. After her successful semi-final run, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) had commented on a video clip of Das’s trackside interview on its Twitter handle saying.

The ruling body of Indian track and field was called a “loser” and hauled over with responses of “shame”, “disgusting”, told that they should concentrate on finding talent rather than teaching English and accused among other things of trying to ‘belittle her glory’. To such a degree of ferocity, that the AFI had to apologise on the social network service, doing so in Hindi. A rough translation of the apology read, “We merely wanted to show that Hima is fearless whether on the track or outside. Despite being from a small village, she spoke freely with the foreign media. We apologise again to those who were angry. ” Apologies, it must be pointed out, do not come easily to sports federations in India. That would mean the admission of an error and an accountability to someone other than themselves. That doesn’t happen enough – neither the governors of an Indian sport admitting errors, nor feeling the need to be accountable. While the AFI’s Hindi version of an apology sounded more sardonic than heartfelt, there was no denying that the ruling body had been stung by the very public backlash. Ten years ago, no Indian athlete, particularly one from outside cricket, would have found such a public outcry against their treatment by their sports federation. What was remarkable about the furore over Hima Das and her English fluency was that the support came from an unknown multitude. They pounced upon AFI’s condescension and turned the narrative towards a previously unexpected direction.

Rather than Hima being conscious of her English from now on (the athlete herself said she wasn’t offended and admitted her English “isn’t that good”), the people behind AFI’s social media handles were put on guard. What used to be the modus operandi around Indian athletes (those outside the cricketosphere) by those above them in the hierarchy of authority, is now off-limits. In a decade of seismic changes in Indian sport – in the breadth of competition, range of success, elite athlete management and the variety of the journalism – the involvement of the general public into an otherwise quiet world has been visible and, in many cases like Hima Das’, loudly heard. Until around the early years of the 21st century, Larger India paid attention to these athletes once every two years when either an Olympic Games or an Asian Games

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came along. They were recognised and feted by their sporting community and the media working around it, but not the masses, nor the country's business community. Other than a few engaging, and it must be emphasised English-speaking personalities – such as Indian tennis players Leander Paes, chess maestro Viswanathan Anand or the snooker and billiards men Michael Ferreira and Geet Sethi through the 1990s – the rest tended to be clumped together under a category considered uncool. The English-language press and media largely fed this general trend and while they did not have the weight of readership or viewership numbers, they controlled the attention of the corporate cash-dispensers available to sport. In a conversation over picking a cover photograph for a national news magazine, the image of Indian hockey's inspirational, inflammable Dhanraj Pillay in a resplendent turban was turned down because he looked like a 'gavaar, (a yokel) and it wouldn't go down well with the magazine's English-speaking readership.

The fact that the majority of athletes fundamentally came from either rural or working-class backgrounds and homes of scarce financial means, in many ways controlled how their lives and stories were told to the rest of India. At that time communication also travelled in a straight line – from the sport via the journalist / reporter / writer / television reporter to the reader / viewer, with the athlete's voice often found at the far end of it. The sports media until the mid-1990s was newspapers and magazines and the stories about an athlete's success or struggle could only be found there. Information about the athlete without English, at the very start came from their coaches or the officials who had a grip over the futures of both athlete and coach. The athletes who wanted to tell their own story were often considered difficult and troublesome. In a team sport like hockey it was the tempestuous Pillay or goalkeeper Ashish Ballal. Amongst individual athletes, it is hard to name anyone who spoke little English and protested against or questioned authority through the early 1990s. Michael Ferreira never held back with his English and the one exception to all rules was Prakash Padukone who led a rebellion against the Badminton Association of India in 1997. Success in individual sport could provide an athlete some attention and leverage, but it tended to be limited. The athlete as a free agent was a concept that did not exist in India and is only being recognised today. The tribe of mostly independent individual athletes was to be found in tennis, motorsport or golf - Leander Paes turned pro in 1991, Narain Karthikeyan's first racing season in the UK was in 1993, Jeev Milkha Singh set out onto the European tour in 1998. The rest of the athletes, however, stayed connected into the official super-structure that Indian sport is built around. It meant that government funding and official approval became the most basic layer of their career path. Athletes were seen, rarely did we hear them. Never mind rocking the boat, even suddenly standing up on deck was not recommended. When I entered the profession in the 1989 and worked out of then-Bombay, the earliest narrative spun out (in sports other than cricket / tennis / snooker and billiards) presented the Indian athlete as a creature of deficit.

Of means, ambition, talent and that oldest of Indian chestnuts, killer instinct. The coverage of

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Olympic sport, be it hockey with its ceaseless coach-clique dramas or athletics with its blaze-and-fade-pattern or any other sport with its narrow-misses, remained one of patronising tolerance. Wire services and newspapers fed into, and still do, with headlines that ran on a rote-cycle of 'X surges ahead' and or 'X crashes out.' It was dismissive, cliched and devoid of detail. I remembered Geet Sethi talking about his experience as part of the Indian contingent to the 1998 Asian Games. It was the first time Sethi, an urbane management graduate from Ahmedabad, travelled to a multi-discipline event and he remembers being witness to what he called the "conscious attempt to stamp out the dignity of the Indian athlete." It was carried out through an indifference to the athletes' requirements or timetables, the athlete-to-official ratio and the treatment meted out to the competitors by the officials themselves. Never mind remembering an athlete's name, Sethi got tossed a T-shirt as a throwaway 'souvenir' as the contingent's tracksuits had not arrived on time. At the first Olympics I covered as a journalist, Athens 2004, it appeared as if the media too played their own unconscious part in mocking the athlete. I was to experience first-hand what the effects of that mindset felt like to an athlete.

On the first day of the Games, Suma Shirur made the final of the 10m air rifle, only the second Indian to enter an Olympic shooting final. From a qualifying field of 44, Suma finished amongst the top eight. Anjali Bhagwat (the first Indian shooter to qualify for an Olympics in Sydney 2000, finishing seventh) suffered a shock exit from qualification in Athens. I remember Anjali sitting with her husband Mandar on the sidelines of the shooting range, after the qualification rounds, distraught. Her hands were shaking. In the Athens final, Shirur had finished eighth. What the newspapers carried the next day off wire-service reports read, "Suma finishes last." When I saw Shirur a day or so later at the hockey arena, I wanted to interview her about her experience in an Olympic final. She was furious - "Suma finishes last" was a whiplash to her spirit. To her, the media had downgraded her achievement in making an Olympic final, demeaned the effort it took to get there, and she wasn't going to waste time talking to us. As the lone representative of the media, I had no defence to offer. Not even by expressing my horrified disapproval about the headline and otherwise good intentions, so I sheepishly walked away. Close to a fortnight later, Anju Bobby George breaks her national record in the long jump final and when we stop her to chat in the mixed zone, she says, "I am sorry," she said. "Please tell everyone." Anju was the country's foremost track and field athlete, she had won India its first medal at the athletics world championship – a long jump bronze in Paris 2003, was an Asian Games gold medallist and on the biggest night of her career had gone further than she had ever done.

What was there to be sorry about? Producing a personal best? We knew what it was about and it felt miserable. It was the opposite of entitlement, the extra layer it seemed Indian athletes were instinctively made to wear - to be beholden. That they owed us something. It felt wrong. Four years later, in Beijing 2008, a wire service report flashed a piece of news that wrestler Sushil Kumar had "crashed out." The wireman was unaware of the introduction of the repechage into the Olympics for the first time. After a short break that followed his "crashing

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out” Sushil was to win three bouts in 70 minutes and India’s first medal in wrestling after 56 years. This unexpected bronze - the first time India won more than one individual medal at an Olympic Games – in hindsight, looked like the fates were involved in an unconscious act of defiance against Indian sport’s formulaic narrative. Pay attention, do your homework, the athlete said, no longer can we be considered supplicant to your story of our story. Beijing had also brought India its first Olympic individual gold, Abhinav Bindra in the 10m air rifle. Bindra’s gold was to break the barrier created by history and circumstance of what was considered possible, achievable, available in Indian sport. Every athlete from then on, found the only standard that matters to them. The media, however, has taken just a little while longer to catch up. On August 9, 2012, multiple editions of the Times of India, which should be available currently on its e-papers, treated Vikas Gowda’s performance in the final of the men’s discus at the 2012 London Olympics with this headline “Gowda ends lowly eighth” This of the first appearance by an Indian man in an Olympic athletics final in 36 years, after Sriram Singh (Montreal 1976/ 800m). Gowda was eighth out of 12 finalists, and had been deemed lowly.

On television during the London Games, an Olympic ‘expert’ referred to a national hockey player as a “joker. ” It was one of the last times that the ‘mainstream media’ to which I belong, would be able to deride a non-cricketer in such a manner and get away without a mocking rebuke. Not in the “comments” column of an online article or an angry letter to the editor via email, but be responded to directly. To the face, so to speak. It is not athletic progress alone that can be measured in Olympic cycles. An online era means that public responses towards our athletes can also be gauged in that time. During the 2016 Rio Olympics, the reaction to an off-the-cuff remark by a society columnist - “Goal of Team India at the Olympics: Rio jao. Selfies lo. Khaali haat wapaa aao. What a waste of money and opportunity. ” (Go to Rio. Take selfies. Return empty-handed.) – was proof. That an old, tired narrative drummed out often by sports’ own governors to reporters, could work no more. ****The generation of athletes that grew into a post-liberalisation India were to set out to become the first of so many things – in the top 30 in singles rankings on the WTA Tour, on the Formula One grid, on the professional squash circuit, the PGA Tour, Asian medallists in gymnastics, multiple swimming medal winners. As their careers progressed into the 21st century it was the internet and social media which ensured that the wider public knew how to reach these pioneers directly and follow their careers.

The onset of online / digital journalism, whether through formal websites, blogs, epapers, had meant that Indian sport could now be covered through forms and language unrestricted by space or time, stereotype or bias. It was how the story of sprinter Dutee Chand, forced to undergo a ‘gender test’ and then banned from competing due to high testosterone levels in her body, could be told with rigour and sensitivity. Dutee’s career was not allowed to go the way of 2006 Doha Asian Games gold medallist Pinki Pramanik, or Santhi Soundarajan who was stripped of her Doha silver medal, over issues of gender identity. In 2006, Pinki and Santhi had

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been treated as outcasts. In 2014, after Dutee was dropped from the CWG contingent for Glasgow, there were several factors that ensured her career didn't end abruptly like Pinki's or Santhi's did— there was support from the government, a Canadian team willing to fight her case at the Court of Arbitration for Sport and a journalistic community who wanted to chase the case down to its most minute details.

Dutee was given the oxygen she needed to continue her fight and the fight she needed to be able to run again. The regulations were frozen, Dutee competed at the Rio Olympics and under the revised athletics regulations, continues to be eligible to race. She was a girl from a family of weavers in Orissa. Not so long ago, she could have been another Pinki or Santhi. The balance of power between Indian athletes and officials has not changed, but the athlete today can both be seen and heard. The prime agents of change in India across the last decade go beyond merely more proactive government intervention, Corporate Social Responsibility tax-breaks, the media or the growth of the internet. The catalysts in this decade of reinvention happen to be Indian sport's new stakeholders, the unique non-profit intermediaries who have stepped in to do what the official sports federations had showed little interest in doing post-liberalisation. Organisations like Olympic Gold Quest (formed 2002), Mittal Champions Trust (2003, now defunct), GoSports Foundation (2008), Anglian Medal Hunt (2012), JSW Sport (2013) are bridge builders between the aspirational athlete, their federations and access to funding or expertise.

These organisations have also been able to add more towards the media's understanding of what it takes to be a champion. That it is not about vegetarianism, lack of killer instinct, genes, lack of ambition or too much love for government jobs. It is not as complicated as we were told earlier. Planning, Intention and Expertise – get that right and it's as simple as pie. The specialization of these organisations may be focused on talent identification, individual coaching, logistics and medical treatment / rehabilitation, but their role in bringing attention to their athletes' unique abilities and achievements has added more richness to the narrative around Indian sport. With professional advice and Twitter and Instagram at hand, the athletes can now control their story. He said, she said, they said and things moved. While Twitter was founded in 2006, Indian sport and its stars and fans began to take to the news and social networking service starting around 2009-2010. Social media broke through the single line of communication between the athlete and conventional media and became an informal, direct, authentic space to chat, which both the athlete and the fan wanted. Twitter became an easy-to-use, no-cost news and PR agency for every athlete, setting up interaction with fans, where questions could be asked, announcements made and if required, controversies stirred – in audio, video or text. Who needed the media? The stories put out by the athlete would now be their own – no mediator, coach, manager or official speaking for them. Tennis player Sania Mirza is the most followed Indian athlete (8.39 million) outside cricketers on Twitter and was one of the most prominent early users of the network amongst Indian sportspersons, joining in

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November 2009. Mahesh Bhupathi (July 2009 / 1.02m) and Narain Karthikeyan (September 2009 / 623k) had started earlier and Abhinav Bindra (December 2009 / 461k) joined up a month later.

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