

I AM A WOMAN – SECRETS OF PT USHA

John Samuel

It was a bright breezy Wednesday in August. Weather in Los Angeles was simply inviting. As the temperature cozily hovered around 20°C the city seemed to be waking up to the audacious dream of an Indian sprinter who had begun life running down the village dust track in coastal Kerala. There was hope in the air and a rugged rhyme in her feet. Exactly at 3.45 p.m. local time, history was in the making at Memorial Coliseum Stadium. Well – almost. Her long strides, fierce pace, the smell of earth all around her and the rhyme from the nearby sea that she had imbibed growing up on the coast – all this conspired to etch her name on the tablet of history as the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal that languid afternoon. And Pilavullakandi Thekkeparambil Usha of Payyoli fired up the track, timing a career-best 55.42 secs in the 400 m. hurdles. This despite a false start by another competitor jerking her rhythm. Still she missed the bronze by one hundredth of a second. The 20-year-old who tore down the track like a black panther, closed her eyes wiping away tears from her thick eyelashes. Before she knew the whole of India wept for her. She came home without a medal but with new recognition: *the queen of the Indian track*. Had the judges at the Olympics known that the 12-year-old village girl noticed by coach OM Nambiar at a prize-giving ceremony could not dream of the facilities sprinters elsewhere in the world took for granted, perhaps they would have given her the medal. Back home, Usha was rechristened Payyoli Express, the village and its famed daughter merging their identities into each other.

She blazed the track for 18 glorious years winning medals for India from around the world. She clinched five golds in 100 m., 200 m., 400 m., 400 m. hurdles, 4x400 relay at the 1985 Jakarta Asian Championship. At 54, with a long trail of success behind, the ace sprinter runs a coaching academy – Usha School of Athletics. In a conversation with **John Samuel**, veteran sports journalist who had covered many of her events, Usha looks back and talks about India's many possibilities in athletics.

Excerpts:

Apart from your marriage to Srinivasan in 1991, what are the other most unforgettable moments in your life?

I was allotted lane 5. At the starting blocks, on either side of me, were Judy Brown (USA) in lane 8, Nawal Moutawakal (Morocco) and Ann Louise (Sweden). I had beaten Judy in the semifinals and not known much about Nawal. I heard that Ann Louise clocked 55.23 secs in the Olympic trials, but none of them really scared me, didn't make me scamper. I was full of confidence knowing that I had come to LA beating MD Valsamma, the national champion in the trials. Timings of 56.81 secs in the heats and 55.42 in the semis at LA also made me mentally strong.

A SCENE OF ROBUST HOPE AGAINST A BLEAK BACKDROP

Ankita Anand

The afternoon bus that has started from Delhi stops for tea, and close to the shop there is a poster of a boxer. I know it won't be long before I reach Bhiwani, a bustling town in Haryana known intriguingly as Little Cuba. How an urban growth centre in the northern hinterland, home to a number of Haryana's top politicians who rode the waves of caste politics in the past, can have anything to do with Fidel Castro's socialist arcadia, the island off the coast of Florida? Rolling the question around in my mind, I go through my notes. The links show up. Bhiwani has produced the highest number of boxers representing India in the international sports meets. Of the five boxers qualified for the 2008 Summer Olympics, four were from Bhiwani. Vijender Kumar, a heavyweight boxer, won the bronze. Kavita Chahal, a woman boxer from here, won the bronze medal twice in the World Boxing Championship in the 81 kg category.

The tradition began with Captain Hawa Singh, an indomitable fighter who won the boxing gold in two successive Asian Games – 1966 and 1970. That was a time when brute instincts and raw courage were all that mattered. Indian athletes were yet to think of technology or foreign coaches. Training in another country was an exotic idea. After he walked off the ring in glory after a rewarding career, the army officer, built the boxing academy, the nursery for the long line of subsequent boxers, both men and women. Indeed, this district, about 125 km from Delhi, is closer to Cuba which boasts of two fabled boxers with three Olympic golds each. Boxing which once thrived on the island as a kind of tourist attraction, later took deep root there. Of its total haul of 73 Olympic medals, 37 were golds. Yes, Bhiwani is Little Cuba.

Jolted out of my travel into the history of this fierce sport, I find to my horror the passenger sitting next is trying to molest me. Shocked, angry, I confront the disgusting man. A frustrating but common experience for women travelling in many parts of the country. In Kavita Chahal country a woman traveller is made to feel vulnerable! Kavita, a policewoman, won the boxing gold in the two consecutive World Police Games. I think of the challenges Kavita and many other women athletes in Haryana must have had to overcome on the long road to success, defying an obsessive patriarchy that condones rape and is responsible for the state's skewed sex ratio.

My first stop in Bhiwani is Bhim Stadium at 7 next morning.

It's a scene of robust hope. Youngsters are in the middle of a practice session. Financed by the government, the local athletic hub is free and open to everyone. Nobody is turned away, a coach tells me, unless some athletes call it quits running out of steam.

CURATING THE SPORTING TALENT

Vivek Chaudhary

I once asked a friend, himself an accomplished cricketer, about the most striking impression from his first visit to India. ‘It is the only country in the world where of its top ten sports, cricket is one to nine and all the rest ten,’ he replied with a satisfied smile and no hint of sarcasm. This did not catch me entirely by surprise because we all know the behemoth that is Indian cricket; the fanatical following it enjoys across the vastness of the land and even beyond, in its neighbourhood, and amongst the diaspora. The millions of dollars its governing body earns makes it one of the richest in the world. The call to play for the Indian side is the apotheosis for any players; along with awards and sponsorships, they know they are at the centre of volumes of column inches and television time devoted to the game in the national media. I could go on but I won’t; to put it simply, cricket is a sport that has come to define India’s very national identity.

But what of sporting life beyond the boundary? This is a conundrum that has badgered Indian society and not just sports fans, particularly in recent years. It regularly rears its head every four years, around the time the Olympic Games take place and the Indian contingent representing 1.35 billion people, gets home with its tail between its legs, and criticism of the entire nation’s overall sporting pedigree (or lack of it) ringing in their ears. The world’s greatest sports festival is always considered a good barometer to gauge a nation’s sporting prowess and sadly, India always finds itself in pathetic conditions, as it has done for many years. Statistics do not lie. In the past three decades, India has won only one gold medal, which came courtesy of Abhinav Bindra in the men’s 10 metre rifle in 2008. At the last Olympics in Rio it secured two medals, one silver and one bronze. Its best ever haul came at London in 2012 when it bagged six medals. Per head of population, India is the worst performing nation in Olympic history outranked by the likes of Jamaica, Grenada and the Bahamas.

As one commentator pointed out: ‘Michael Phelps has won as many medals on his own as Team India has managed since 1900.’ Even the government meekly admitted in response to a question in the Lok Sabha on the debacle at the Rio Olympics: ‘Some of the reasons for the poor performance are a lack of professionalism and factionalism/infighting in the sports bodies and (absence of) long-term strategies by the National Sports Federations.’

Nurture rather than nature then is a cause for the nation’s failings. A closer look at some of the non-cricketing actors who have graced India’s sporting stage would certainly seem to bear this out. They have succeeded not because of the sporting mechanisms in place and the guidance of their respective national federations but despite them. Bindra is a good case in point.

INDIAN HOCKEY – FAR AWAY FROM THE CHAK DE! MOMENT

Novy Kapadia

In the colonial era, it was hockey and not cricket that gave India a distinct identity; the game became a symbol of nationalist aspirations. India won three successive Olympic golds in Amsterdam 1928, Los Angeles 1932 and Berlin 1936 playing stylish, attacking hockey. At the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, India trounced Japan 11-1 and USA 24-1 (round robin league). India first competed in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and beat the Netherlands 3-0 in the final. The playing eleven in Amsterdam reflected the diversity of the Indian culture – eight Anglo-Indians, two Muslims, Feroze Khan and Shaukat Ali, and the fabled Dhyhan Chand.

An episode in the Indian camp at the 1936 Berlin Olympics which took place in Hitlerite Germany, assumed fabulous proportions in the context of sport nationalism. India met Germany in the final on 15 August 1947. The Indian team assembled in the dressing room prior to the match. All the players reverently saluted the Tricolour of the Indian National Congress, which their Assistant Manager had taken with him to Berlin. Still a colonized country, India did not have its own national flag.

India's hockey triumphs in the 1928, 1932 and 1936 Olympics got limited media coverage and except for Dhyhan Chand, none of the players became sporting icons. In Europe people were dazzled by his mesmeric dribbling skills, and in a fitting tribute to the wizard with the stick, a statue of Dhyhan Chand was installed in Vienna. India's crisp, short passing game and dribbling flair were admired by the crowds at home and abroad. The players already being lionized by fans at home, were feted on their return from the Olympics. The victorious team from Amsterdam returned home via London. Expatriate Indians in London hailed the hockey gold medal as a source of great nationalist pride. A tea party and luncheon were organized in their honour. When the team arrived at Bombay they were welcomed by a large, cheering crowd and got a civic reception from the Mayor.

Four years later non-resident Indians in the US were swayed by the fluent victory of the Indian hockey team at Los Angeles, as it gave them a sense of status amongst the other migrant groups. No wonder the Indian community in Los Angeles after the hockey team's superb performance in the 1932 Olympics raised \$400, a considerable sum those day, to pay for the victorious squad's travels around the US and exhibit their skills. Academic Sumit Mukherjee noted in a paper, 'It was hockey, which gave India her first medal in world sports, and this was (the) sole sphere where India was invincible in her days of thralldom.'

Despite the accolades and spontaneous celebrations, in the pre-Independence era, India's three successive Olympic triumphs did not get the game the mileage it deserved.

DIPA – VAULTING TO TAKE HER PEOPLE TO NEW POSSIBILITIES

Jayanta Bhattacharya

Perfecting your athletes' skills is up to you. Protecting them when they fall is up to us,' says an ad promoting the latest foam pits, blocks and mats gymnasts need to practise. Going a step ahead, another sporting goods manufacturer projects airbags as 'the smart alternative to foam'. The bag-jump era, they claim, has arrived. Now from this ambience of sophisticated athletic technology and accessories being shopped by a largely Western clientele, switch over to Agartala, capital of the tiny Tripura state in the remote Northeast of India. The crude foam pit in the gymnasium uses discarded shock absorbers from scooters. This is where aspiring athletes train. And some of them have represented India and won medals in international meets. One of them actually participated in the 2016 Rio Olympics and finished fourth missing the bronze in the Produnova event by a mere 0.15 points. Dipa Karmakar who shot into instant fame after such a sparkling performance, the first Indian to reach this level, later met the Tripura chief minister and pleaded for a proper foam pit in the gymnasium. Nothing throws into sharper relief the stark contrast between the brand-new gyms where the contenders for Olympic medals train in Europe and America, and the Dasaratha Dev State Sports Complex on the outskirts of Agartala where the foam pit is primitive, put together with bits of junk. Surprisingly, despite such pathetically poor infrastructure, Tripura has thrown up many talented gymnasts. For the past 50 years they have successfully competed to hunt for medals. 'When we started, we had no choice but to simply practise on the hard ground, not even grass, and with a crude balancing beam in a godown,' recalls Lopamudra Chaudhuri, a former gymnast who represented India in international meets.

Though infrastructure has not improved, gymnastics has captured the imagination of an entire generation of youngsters as a route to fame overcoming the remoteness of their place. Dipa Karmakar is just as popular in Agartala as Sachin Tendulkar in Mumbai. Teenagers would not leave a sports complex or shopping mall if they knew she was coming there in a while. The public debate here now centres on the possibility of Dipa winning a medal in the Asian Games starting in Jakarta on 18 August 2018.

Dipa, going by her coach and mentor Bisheswar Nandi's account, would have missed out on her gymnastic career had she really listened to an expert's opinion. Nandi, now a legendary guru whose effort has been recognized with the Dronacharya Award, was an unknown but energetic coach in 2006, determined to groom a few outstanding gymnasts. He had just spotted three promising young girls – two older and the third one just a kid. They started training under him. A few years down the line he took them to a sports science officer visiting Agartala. The man was knowledgeable about body postures and gait analysis. He took a close look at the girls and cleared the older two. The kid, he said, had a perfect figure but would be risking herself if she pursued gymnastics, for she was flat-footed.

BADMINTON BINARY IN HYDERABAD

Nikhita Nair

An unforgettable classic, *Top Gun* casts a spell on the audience by juxtaposing the warmth and hostility in the relationship between two outstanding US Naval Aviators, played by Tom Cruise (Maverick) and Val Kilmer (Iceman). Such narratives are part of history too. After a tiff, the two legendary musicians – once close friends – John Lennon and Paul McCartney, decided to part ways after a successful long run together as part of The Beatles. It is indeed intriguing as to why two equally talented personalities get closer driven by mutual appreciation knowing the world would accept only one as the best. Maybe the definition of *best* in itself is limiting. The world of sports too has seen such camaraderie turning into cold wars. Some might say that the media blow up frivolous things just for a sensational story, a front-pager. However, it's equally true that ego and ambition constantly push a sportsperson. Unless they sense a challenge and therefore insecurity from a fellow athlete they are not worth their salt. A superb performance by another player gives them anxiety. Think of the Rafael Nadal-Roger Federer rivalry which the media savour as Fedal, or closer home, the Leander Paes-Mahesh Bhupathi rift. In football two of the all-time greats – Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have been in a dire contention for the Golden Boot.

Though not overtly unseemly or out in the open, an unstated rivalry has been going on between the two of India's greatest women badminton players – Saina Nehwal and PV Sindhu. Saina, a tough, no-nonsense and gritty fighter, is slowly moving into the sunset of an illustrious career. Born in 1990, she will be past her prime in another couple of years. She first grabbed the headlines when, as a 16-year-old she won the Philippines Open defeating Julia Wong Pei Xian of Malaysia. Entering the tournament as one of the lowest ranked player – 86th seed – for her it was a gruelling campaign to move up to the final knocking off quite a few prized contestants. From then onward there has been no looking back for this determined player. Currently ranked 10 by the Badminton World Federation, Saina has an enviable record of 376 wins against 160 losses. A former World No. 1, she has achieved what no other Indian woman has – an Olympic bronze, BWF World Championship and a Commonwealth gold. In a sport where 27 is considered the peak age, Saina, at the moment India's reigning star, is going to fade out by the time the next Summer Olympics takes place in Tokyo in 2020. Time's fell hand, as Shakespeare visualizes in a sonnet, razes down the lofty towers.

The player who has already put Saina on notice for the prize position and prominence is PV Sindhu, the upcoming star whom Saina recently defeated at the Gold Coast to win the Commonwealth Games gold. Five years her junior, Sindhu has already occupied the centre stage. Winner of the silver medal at the Rio Olympics and quite a few prestigious international tournaments, Sindhu's current BWF ranking is three. At one point she was the world's No. 2. The current phase witnessing Saina's determined effort to hold on to her ground and Sindhu's deep incursions is symptomatic of the uncertainty between two eras.

MAKING OF MEDAL WINNERS IN MAHARAJA'S PALACE

Ajay Bhardwaj

The nation walks for health and sensation' reads the epigraph at the imposing entrance of the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports in Patiala. As you walk up to the sprawling compound of the institute, the first sensation you experience is a meticulously parked railway coach bearing a royal insignia on a truncated track. What's a railway coach doing here on the campus which has nothing to do with the railways? While the names of sports heroes such as Vijendra Singh and Sushil Kumar come back to remind you that they and many others like them have been shaped to perfection by the institute, the ancient coach seems completely out of place here, an odd piece of junk caught in a time warp.

Before I can hazard a guess, Mohinder Lal, the chief coach, accompanying me, reads my mind. He takes me on a trip down memory lane. In 1942 the erstwhile King of Patiala, Maharaja Yadvinder Singh, an avid horse rider, raced a train for 20 km from Patiala to Rajpura and triumphantly galloped ahead. The railway coach was the trophy he received from the British rulers for his equestrian prowess. It became his personal coach for commuting in the pre-Independence days. The NIS campus, spread over 268 acres, is actually a palace of the erstwhile Patiala royalty. Maharaja Yadvinder Singh, occupant of Moti Bagh Palace, was the president of the Indian Olympic Association.

After the massive success of the first Asian Games in 1951, the Union sports ministry started looking for a place to set up a national sports institute. Maharaja Yadvinder Singh, who headed the organizing committee of the 1951 Asiad, led the search committee for the sports complex. One evening, over dinner with the search committee members, he mooted the idea of setting up the national sports institute in his sprawling palace compound.

The Union sports ministry lost no time in accepting the proposal and struck a deal with the Maharaja. The Maharaja, according to the agreement, would hand over his palace premises to the Union government for a modest sum of Rs 33 lakh, but with a rider. The complex could be used only for promoting sports, nothing else.

Yadvinder Singh took some time to build another grand residence nearby for his family, which is now known as the New Moti Mahal Palace. The National Sports Institute started functioning from the Old Moti Mahal Palace in 1961. A little footnote here: Yadvinder Singh was the father of the present Punjab chief minister, Amarinder Singh.

A sense of royal opulence permeates the whole compound. Designed with a mix of Mughal and Rajasthani architecture, the imposing palace evokes the grandeur of the Punjab royalty.

PUNJAB SPORTS: CAUGHT BETWEEN MILITANCY AND DRUGS

Tucked away in one corner of Punjab, Gurdaspur hardly sets your imagination on fire. Close to the border with Pakistan, the city used to hit the headlines as the hotbed of militancy in the early 80s. That apart, the place has little to recommend it. The area has no industry. It has not seen an agricultural boom either in many years. But for the last-minute intervention by the Radcliffe Commission, Gurdaspur would have gone to Pakistan.

And still, unknown to many, Gurdaspur etched its name in the sports chronicles of India within the first few years of Independence. At the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, the two gymnasts in the Indian contingent were from this place. Vir Singh, 22, and much older Khushi Ram, who was close to 37, were from Gurdaspur. They ended at the bottom in almost every category; but Gurdaspur turned into a gymnastics hub because of them. Gymnastic training centres began mushrooming all around the city. For a long time to come school children from there would steal the limelight in gymnastics at the national level.

After the Helsinki Olympics, it took India more than 50 years to stage a comeback in gymnastics at the highest level, points out Pritpal Singh, who runs a gymnastic training institute near Gurdaspur. Until the 80s, he recalls, gymnasts from this city dominated the school games at the national level. Almost every year, school children, coming from the rural and semi-urban areas of the district, would bag the national awards. Then the long spell of militancy saw Gurdaspur slide down in athletics. After more than a decade the violent campaign came to an end but the city could not regain its lost glory.

Just about 60 km away from Gurdaspur, a cluster of 40 odd villages around Mahilpur town in Hoshiarpur district has been the football nursery producing outstanding players who were part of the Indian side playing in the Olympics and other international tournaments. In 1991, the Punjab team for the under-16 national championship was completely dominated by the Mahilpur boys. Of the 11 players nine were from here. Sports historians are intrigued by the strong football tradition of this place which looks like an island of the *beautiful game* in a state overwhelmingly dominated by hockey. Football, locals say, was introduced to Mahilpur by the local Khalsa College principal, Harbhajan Singh, almost a century ago. The legendary footballer Jarnail Singh Bhullar was from here. So was Gurdev Singh who captained the Indian football side in the 1978 Asian Games. Tejinder Singh and Sukhdev Singh too were from here. Jarnail Singh's achievement alone would have been enough to put Mahilpur on the map of Asian soccer. In the 1962 Asian Games football final, the stopper playing as centre forward with six stitches in his head, Jarnail Singh headed in the match winner against South Korea. But his forays into world football had begun much earlier. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and again at the 1960 Rome, he played a leading role in the Indian campaign. Both times the medal eluded the Indians narrowly – the team finishing fourth. Among the current crop of players, Baljit Sahni, a prominent member of FC Pune, is again a Mahilpur boy. One important factor contributing to the enduring legend of Mahilpur as a major catchment area for footballers is the strong backing given by JCT Phagwara which has recruited players from this town for its once formidable football team.

NORTHEAST: FROM WHERE THE BREEZE BLOWS NOW

Arup Chatterjee

The Northeast has been in the news ever since one can remember; and mostly for the wrong reasons. Bombs going off in crowded markets, military vehicles being blown up, insurgents shot by the security forces, the slaughter of innocents in ethnic conflicts, the blood and the tears...

Mizoram or Manipur, Assam or Tripura, through the prism of India's heartland, mayhem and misery has always marked the Northeast narrative.

Not anymore. The Northeast continues to make the headlines, but now mostly for the good news; and none more uplifting than what travels from the sports arenas round the world. Instead of looking from the cupola, let's take a street-level view of the incredible transformation in progress and savour the new flavour of the 'faraway frontier'.

Naorem Babyrojisana Chanu, who had won the gold in the seven-nation boxing tournament in Serbia, easily outsmarted her challenger in the 52-kg bout at the recent Khelo India School Games in Delhi. So did Sanamacha Chanu Thokchom, another Manipuri boxer and a student of Trinity High School in Imphal. After making a mark on the camp, the two girls are back to the tough routine of daily practice under the watchful eyes of their coaches at the Khuman Lampak Sports Complex in Imphal. They have tasted success, but they know that these 'achievements' will count for nothing if they don't reach where they want to. As of now, their story lies in the future.

They have been told by their seniors and coaches that the road ahead is tough for those who have opted for the bruising, exacting sport. But, then, it's a road that has been traversed before, and by those the two girls can identify with. Babyrojisana and Sanamacha, like many other aspiring women boxers from Manipur, are inspired by the petite girl who had set out on an incredible journey from a remote sleepy hamlet to conquer the world, overcoming heavy odds on the way.

Chungneijan Merykom Hmangte or, simply, Mary Kom, continues to stun opponents and her legion of fans in equal measure. This time by becoming the first Indian woman boxer to win a Commonwealth Games gold at the Gold Coast. At 35, she is a mother of two, with bruises from innumerable bouts along a long career. Someone else would have cried 'enough', hanging up the gloves and mitts. But not 'Magnificent Mary'. Within days of winning the Commonwealth Games gold, she had in her crosshairs the next target – a world championship win in front of her countrymen.

This is the Asian Games year too, but the five-time world champion has decided to skip the continent's biggest sporting extravaganza to focus on the world meet taking place in Delhi in November.

HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY

KS Ravi Sankar

The 1936 Berlin Olympics presided over by der Führer himself, had an unsavoury air of Nazi racism. A black fleet-footed sprinter from the US, with his supple body and determined looks, tore down the track to bag four golds, and in the process demolished the myth of Aryan supremacy that Hitler held dear. Jesse Owens, who had earlier set four world records and equaled another in less than an hour, is credited with creating the ‘greatest 45 minutes ever in sport’. Well, Jesse Owens was *vintage classic* of the modern era. Now move over to our times and get dazzled by Jamaican lightning and thunder. Usain Bolt with a record haul of eight Olympic golds, is the only sprinter who won 100 m. and 200 m. titles at three Olympics in a row between 2008 and 2016. Quite appropriately he is nicknamed Lightning Bolt. Now, compared to Owens, Bolt is *recent*.

Extending the same yardstick to the post-Independence sports scene in India, Milkha Singh, Sriram Singh, TC Yohannan and PT Usha are *sepia-toned* classic, while Mary Kom, Dipa Karmakar and Sakshi Malik in their disciplines are *recent*, ruling the primetime at the moment. A comparison is not possible since every new generation has accessed better technology, nutrition, medical care, resources and accessories. The early generations of Indian hockey and football players went into the game barefoot, accounting for their studded rivals from Europe. Now an athlete’s *inner story* – pulse count, heartbeats, blood pressure, calories being burnt – everything is visible on a large screen in the gym. Owens and Bolt, Yohannan and Abhinav Bindra – they need to be benchmarked differently. The past, however, always holds a mirror to the present and offers both a prism and perspective without which it is not possible to move on.

Dejected and somewhat dispirited by India’s dismal performance at international sports meets in the recent years, one may hark back to the past: How green was my valley ... Past is always a comforting resort from the despairing present. Ah, those were the days! The golden-years portrait gallery has quite a few endearing faces. Milkha Singh blazed the track with the best athletic performance by an Indian till date, finishing a close fourth in 400 m. in the 1960 Rome Olympics. There were other icons as well. Gurbachan Singh (110 m. hurdles), Sriram Singh (800 m.), Harichand (10,000 m.), Bahadur Singh (shotput) or TC Yohannan (long jump); all of them left a mark on India’s sports scene. And there were more – Kamaljit Sandhu (400 m.), the first Indian woman to win a gold in the Asian Games, PT Usha (sprint and 400 m. hurdles), Shiny Wilson (800 m.) and towards the end of the golden era, Anju Bobby George (long jump). They enthralled us with their superb performances. They set the tracks and fields on fire at a time when facilities were only basic, support minimum and sponsorship – yet an unfamiliar word. Athletes of such class and quality have now become extinct leaving us with no choice but to go back in time to savour the past glory.

THE GURU'S WRESTLERS

Saurabh Sharma

Among the formal, Sanskritized phrases which got into our everyday vocabulary in the late 1980s, courtesy of BR Chopra's highly popular television series *Mahabharat*, was *malla yuddha*. Though the TV series went off air after a few years, its resonance persisted. So did *malla yuddha*. The gigantic Bhima, in the televised epic, wrestles Dushshashana and Jarasandha to death.

Well, the term was a throwback to a ritual from my childhood days in the small village of Tilothi near Hathras in Uttar Pradesh. On the day of Raksha Bandhan, the strong, muscular men in the village would jump into the homespun ring hoping to win a bout against a challenger. That was like a ceremony – after tying the Rakhee, jumping into the pit for a round of *kushti*. Yes, in that village it's not *malla* but more pedestrian *kushti*. For the Mughals it was *pehelwani*. If you look further back, many other wrestling traditions unfold – Greek, Roman, Turkish, Swiss, Russian and so on. A combat sport, wrestling can be brutal and at times entertaining as well.

The Czar of Russia would pay 500 francs to wrestlers to train and compete in his tournament. My uncle fought a bout or two on the day of Raksha Bandhan and would come home with a few bruises and lots of praises: '*Pappu ne pachhadd diye acche acchon ko!*' (Our boy has beaten the best of them all.)

Standing at the entrance of the famed Guru Hanuman Akhada, I know my mind is digressing. Everything I knew about wrestling is now coming back with a scintilla of emotions – the hubbub around the bouts in the village, the grappling pankratiasts in a Greek sculpture, a recent movie focusing on rural wrestling. I can already smell the soft earth that has soaked in the sweat of a thousand of bristling wrestlers. I hear the noises coming from the inside – the grunts, hurrahs and haws, and the final celebratory shabash! I go in.

Curious to know more about the world of *pehlwans*, and at the same time apprehensive of the massive, mighty men, I uncertainly ask, '*Kya andar jaa sakte hain?*' I step back for a moment.

A young wrestler sitting there probably to relax after a rough bout, his veins popping as he flexes his massive biceps, looks back at me. To me he seems to be a Greek god – immensely strong but enigmatically graceful. To my surprise, he welcomes me in an authoritative but friendly tone: '*Haanji, aao.*'

I think of the underprivileged boys mostly from rural and semiurban areas who flock here chasing their big dreams. This Akhada, which its members call the gurukul, has been the breeding ground of world-class wrestlers who have won medals for India in world athletic meets: Rajiv Tomer, Dara Singh, Satpal Singh, Sushil Kumar, Yogeshwar Dutt...

WINNERS ON THE CELLULOID

Abhishek Anicca

Close to our house in Patna there was a large ground where neighbourhood cricket matches would take place. Early on a Sunday morning, I remember, boys would gather with bats, stumps and frayed balls well past their prime. Over the years though, the field became a no-go zone for well-raised kids from middle-class homes like me. The growing crime rate in the city had an unlikely victim – the cricket ground. The Rainbow Ground, as it was called then, turned into a dumping pit for dead bodies and a hotbed for shady transactions. Fifteen years later, a grand structure came up on the ground – a swanky sports complex standing imperiously on what had been the cricket field. Patliputra Sports Complex has within its periphery a well-designed stadium with the latest facilities. This was the venue for the first women’s Kabaddi World Cup in 2012; reassuringly India won the trophy. Were there celebrations after this victory in Patna? Probably not.

Years later matches of the Pro Kabaddi League were hosted here; this is also the home stadium of the contending city team – Patna Pirates. Like in any other franchise tournaments, neither the owners nor majority of the players of the team are from Patna or Bihar. It was around 2014 or 2015 that kabaddi gained a new currency becoming a talking point in a place completely dominated by cricket. Once, when the kabaddi season was peaking, there was a buzz around town that Bollywood star Abhishek Bachchan was coming to Patna with his team Jaipur Pink Panthers. Suddenly the city was hyperactive, tension gripping every lane and bylane. Despite the narrow roads leading to the stadium, the waste piling up outside unremoved, the city was caught in the midst of an unusual excitement, an unfamiliar din. Something was happening in Patna. The city sensed the whiff of celebrities and Bollywood stars.

Whenever I look back and relive that sensation, I find a film star’s association with a *desi* sport like kabaddi a little odd, like a discrepancy has occurred, a mismatch we had not bargained for. Wherever you go, Bollywood and cricket precede you, set the stage for conversation. These are the two poles between which the entertainment industry operates. Seen closely, the two areas have coalesced to keep out the lesser sources of entertainment denying them any space.

It is not surprising then that even football, perhaps the most popular sport across the world, needs a pitch from the Bollywood actors and cricketers for its stocks to capture the fancy of the market. No doubt movie stars and cricket icons promote their football teams on television, asking people to watch the matches during every new edition of the Indian Super League. One could sense that despite the popularity and strong grassroots support for football, hockey or volleyball in quite a few states, as a country we are sold out to cricket.