

Cover Story



Suneeta Kaul

Team **KLOUD9**

Suneeta Kaul is a journalist, having started her career with The Economic Times in New Delhi. She has worked with several publications in various cities since then, and has also done a stint in the corporate world. Keenly interested in current events, she is a champion of social justice, equality and human rights, besides being a gender and street animal welfare activist.

INDIAN SPORTSWOMEN

Inspiring and encouraging students to dream big



On March 26, 2023, something spectacular happened – Nikhat Zareen, the very famous Indian boxer, won her second IBA Women's World Boxing Championships gold medal at the KD Jadhav Indoor Hall in New Delhi. The 26-year-old defeated Thi Tham Nguyen of Vietnam in the 50kg final via a unanimous decision (5-0) to defend her title.

Wait, there's more.

Nitu Ghanghas (48kg category), Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) and Saweety Boora (81kg) also bagged the gold medal in their respective categories in the same tournament, doing the nation proud. This is a moment that India will remember forever. Four Indian boxers winning gold is an achievement that is sure to leave a deep imprint on the psyche of the nation, particularly young women, teenagers and students, who can take inspiration from these achievers who have brought so much glory to India.

The significance of this momentous occasion needs to be underlined further. Most of these young women hail from humble backgrounds. Ghanghas is from Dhanana village of Haryana's Bhiwani



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Indian boxer Nikhat Zareen. Photo credit: The Tribune, India



Indian boxer Nitu Ghanghas. Photo credit: Google India



sportswomen before them who blazed a trail, and convinced a nation of doubters that sports is for women as well. Today's students may not be familiar with the name P T Usha, but she is one of India's earliest sports personalities who made us proud globally. That's not to say that there were not sportswomen before her. But Usha is widely considered to be India's first sports icon, who was an inspiration to people across the length and breadth of the country, cutting across gender, generation and class.

district. Her father took a loan of Rs 6 lakh so that his daughter could train properly to become a professional boxer. The father-daughter duo would travel 40 km on a scooter every day to reach the training academy.

Borgohain hails from the Golaghat district of Assam; her father has a small business, and her family went through a lot of hardship to support her. Boora comes from rural Hissar in Haryana. Her father is a farmer. Zareen hails from Nizamabad in Telengana. The point is that these young women did not have it easy in life. They struggled hard, worked hard, led a disciplined life and made themselves mentally tough.

Indian sportswomen through the ages

While these are the latest heroes of the nation, there have been other

A track and field athlete, Usha notched up five medals in the 1986 Asian Games, including four golds. Fondly called the Payyoli Express (she was born in Payyoli, in the Kozhikode district of



Indian boxer Saweety Boora. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Kerala), Usha remained the queen of track and field events for almost two decades.

Several sportswomen followed. To name just a handful, we had Bachendri Pal, who climbed the Mount Everest in 1984, becoming the first Indian woman to do so, Ashwini Nachappa, the sprint queen of the 1980s, Anju Bobby George, who made history when she won the bronze medal in Long Jump at the 2003 World Championships in Athletics in Paris, Jyotirmoyee Sikdar, who won two gold medals and a silver medal in the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games, Krishna Poonia, the first Indian woman to win a gold medal in track and field events of Commonwealth Games (2010), Geeta Rani, the weightlifter who won the gold medal in the women's +75 kg category at the Commonwealth Games, 2006, and many more.

Indian women cricketers

Then there is the inspiring story of Indian women cricketers, who have battled long and hard against the entrenched mindsets in the country that men's cricket is what really matters, women's cricket is just an indulgence. Fighting for recognition,



Queen of Indian track and field P.T.Usha. Image source: Wikipedia



A track and field athlete, P T Usha notched up five medals in the 1986 Asian Games, including four golds. Fondly called the Payyoli Express (she was born in Payyoli, in the Kozhikode district of Kerala), Usha remained the queen of track and field events for almost two decades.



Indian mountaineer Bachendri Pal. Image source: Google India

Indian women cricketers make history, lift the maiden Women's U_19 T20 World Cup in 2023



Indian women cricketers have reached the ODI World Cup final on two occasions. India won the silver medal in the 2022 Commonwealth Games (women's cricket). Significantly, India has won all the editions of Women's Asia Cup, except the 2018 edition.

for sponsors, for equality, for dignity, many women cricketers have excelled in their field, making a cricket-crazy nation very happy.

Incidentally, the Indian women's cricket team made its Test debut in 1976 against the West Indies, and its One Day International debut in the 1978 World Cup,

which it hosted. The T20 debut was made in 2006 against England. Indian women cricketers have reached the ODI World Cup final on two occasions, losing to Australia by 98 runs in 2005, and losing to England by nine runs in 2017. India won the silver medal in the 2022 Commonwealth Games (women's cricket).



Indian women's cricket team after defeating Barbados by 100 runs in the Commonwealth Games of 2022



Significantly, India has won all the editions of Women's Asia Cup, except the 2018 edition. Some of the most notable personalities of Indian women's cricket are Diana Edulji, who made her debut in 1976, and ended her career with 63 Test, and 46 ODI wickets, and also became the first Indian woman to be appointed to the selection panel of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI); Mithali Raj, often hailed as one of the greatest women cricketers of the world, being the highest run-scorer in WODIs (Women's One Day International), with a 23-year career behind her (she has retired now); Jhulan Goswami, one of the top-five fastest female bowlers in world cricket, having 255 wickets to her credit; Anjum Chopra, cricketer-

turned-broadcaster, and a recipient of the Arjuna Award in 2007; Smriti Mandhana, the stylish batswoman who has won the International Woman Cricketer of the Year awards at CEAT International Cricket Awards, 2019; Harmanpreet Kaur, the current captain of the women's cricket team, and a recipient of the Arjuna Award; and many others.

Tennis, Sania Mirza, and everything in between

Tennis superwoman Sania Mirza is another beacon of Indian sport who has inspired and encouraged countless youngsters, particularly girls, to take up sports and never give in to the notion that sports

means boys. It is not just the numerous titles and awards she has won that are inspirational -- her entire journey as a sportswoman representing India in international tennis is the stuff legends are made of.

A former doubles world number one, she has won six major titles -- three in women's doubles and three in mixed doubles. She is the highest-ranked Indian female player ever, and became world number 27 in 2007. Throughout her career, Mirza has established herself as one of the most known, highest-paid, and influential athletes of India. She is single-handedly responsible for young women taking up tennis, with countless young girls looking up to her. Such has been her influence in the sphere



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of sports that India's current top singles pro, Ankita Raina, has said several times that it was Mirza who inspired her to pick up the tennis racquet. Wrestler Vinesh Phogat, herself a celebrity, has thanked Mirza for teaching an entire generation of young Indian girls how to dream, adding she was one of them. Cricketer Mandhana has called her an inspiration for many to pick up a sport and champion it.

Saina Nehwal and P V Sindhu – shuttlers par excellence

Mirza's fellow Hyderabad, and badminton great, Saina Nehwal, has also been a very influential personality, and an inspiration to youngsters

everywhere in India. In 2015, Nehwal became the first Indian female player to be ranked as number one in world rankings. She has achieved several milestones in badminton for India, being the only Indian to have won at least one medal in every BWF major individual event, namely the Olympics, the BWF World Championships, and the BWF World Junior Championships. She is also the first Indian badminton player to have won an Olympic medal. Nehwal is instrumental in many young girls taking up badminton.

Another shuttler, P V Sindhu, is someone who many young people in India look up to. Along with Nehwal, she has raised the

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stature of badminton in the country, and encouraged girls to take up the sport. One of India's most successful sportspersons, Sindhu has won medals in various tournaments, such as the Olympics, and on the BWF circuit, including a gold at the 2019 World Championships. She is the first and only Indian to become



Indian badminton players P V Sindhu and Saina Nehwal.
Photo credit: Google India

the badminton world champion and only the second individual athlete from India to win two consecutive medals at the Olympic Games.

In April 2017, she rose to a career-high world ranking of number two. Sindhu has also made it to the Forbes list of Highest-Paid Female Athletes four times -- in 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022. A recipient of the Arjuna Award, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award, the Padma Shri, and the Padma Bhushan, Sindhu has done it all.

Wrestling their way up

Indian sportswomen have, in fact, left no sport untouched. Even wrestling, long considered taboo for women, has seen Indian women blaze a trail of glory. Wrestlers such as Geeta Phogat,



Indian wrestler Sakshi Malik.
Photo credit: Google India



Indian wrestler Vinesh Phogat.
Photo credit: Google India



Sakshi Malik won the bronze medal in the 58 kg category in the 2016 Summer Olympics, becoming the first Indian female wrestler to win a medal at the Olympics. She also won the gold medal at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games.



Indian wrestler Geeta Phogat.
Photo credit: Google India

Vinesh Phogat, and, of course, Sakshi Malik, have brought accolades to the country. Malik, a freestyle wrestler, won the bronze medal in the 58 kg category in the 2016 Summer Olympics, becoming the first Indian female wrestler to win a medal at the Olympics. Along with other accolades, she also won the gold medal at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

Mary Kom, the trailblazer

And who can forget Mary Kom, the trailblazer who paved the way for Zareen and other boxers? Hailing from Kagathei, a small village in Manipur, Kom boxed her way to glory, convincing her own father, and countless parents in India, that it was okay for young girls to take up boxing. The only woman to win the World Amateur Boxing Championship six times, and the only boxer (male or female) to win eight World Championship medals, Magnificent Mary, became the first Indian female boxer to win a gold medal in the Asian Games in 2014 at Incheon, South Korea, and is the first Indian female boxer to win gold at the Commonwealth Games (2018). She is also the only boxer to become Asian Amateur Boxing Champion for a

record six times. There are many other Indian sportswomen who have dared to dream, and achieved their goals in the face of all odds. Some of the most defining moments of Indian sport are marked by the achievements of its female sports icons. There's so much students can learn from them – dedication to the chosen path, never giving up, self-belief, sacrificing something to make it big in life, and so forth, are lessons that youngsters can imbibe from these wonder women. More power to India's sportswomen! ■



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Indian boxer Mary Kom.
Photo credit: Google India