

## End disparity for Paralympians

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 21 September 2016 04:43

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**By Sidharth Mishra**



Let me begin with the disclaimer that this week's Notebook doesn't intend to be a thesis on the able-bodied and disabled sportspersons of the country. A sportsperson plays for the team and the flag s/he represents. Inside the sporting arena, they are like the soldiers in the battlefield, giving their sweat and blood for their flag and their paltan (team). The difference between them is perpetuated by those who look for commerce from the sports; be it in the name of increasing brand equity of a product or of a personality. Last week I received an interesting comment from a university contemporary, now on a senior position in the bureaucracy.

He wrote that we sent a delegation of 117 sportsmen to the Rio Olympics and they returned with two medals. "There was widespread media coverage. There was no shortage of sponsors. Why, even Sachin (Tendulkar) was on call! Compare that with the Rio Paralympics. We sent a delegation of 19. That's right - nineteen. They've already bagged four medals! No media coverage. No sponsors. And god knows where Sachin is," he expressed his angst.

Knowing fully well that eyebrows will be raised on his comments, he explained his angst, saying, "No this isn't about able versus disabled. But it's still worth relating. It's not too late. Come on Maruti Suzuki - give them each a car because BMW won't! And what about those Khel Ratna Awards! And cash prizes! Wake up India. Add your voice, so that those who ought to, wake up. Our Paralympics team deserve the best too."

Paralympians indeed deserve the best. More than the prizes, their stories need to be told to the world. Such inspirational stuff in the real world is difficult to come across. Take the case of Deepa Malik. A note circulated among the ex-servicemen internet groups said, "Spinal tumor, 31 surgeries, 183 stitches, and paralysed legs below the waist did not deter her will. The mother of two & accomplished swimmer, adventure biker, javelin thrower has 54 gold medals at the national level, and 13 at international levels! Holds Asian record for javelin throw and world championship silver medals for shotput and discus throw! An Arjuna awardee, she swam across Yamuna against the current, covered 3000 kms from Chennai to Delhi, scaled nine high altitude motorable passes in Ladakh. Nothing is impossible for this iron lady."

The content of the message indeed was inspiring enough to get one goose pimples. When Malik returned home, she had the 200 people from her village to receive her. "They say women are not encouraged to take up sports in Haryana. I don't know about that. When I came back from Rio, 200 people from my village, the entire Khap came to receive me. They gifted me a gada (mace) for making the village proud," Malik was quoted in a television programme.

The fact that in a state with adverse sex ratio, men coming out to felicitate a woman for her achievements reflects the kind of potential Deepa possesses to be a game changer in the social arena. Her prowess could be used not only for promoting sports but also in inspiring greater respect for women. But then the question arises, where are the sponsors to take up the cudgels for them?

Forget the sponsors, their deeds could not be watched in India as none in the country decided

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to bid for the television rights. Star Sports, which was the official Indian broadcaster of the Rio Olympics, did not bid for the rights of the Paralympics. Neither did any of the other Indian sports channel, not even public broadcaster Doordarshan Sports.

The little we know of their deeds is through the reports which have come after the influx of medals. There is this beautiful story about the sports academy in Rajasthan where the Paralympian are trained. It's about Ripu Daman Singh, the Hanumangarh-based coach in Rajasthan, who trained Deepa and also Devendra Jhajharia, who has won a second gold in javelin at Rio 2016. The man's dedication to his wards indeed makes for an extraordinary tale. But he is a sad man despite the achievements of his wards. While Ripu Daman has been given the Dronacharya award for training the disabled, his wards are yet to get the top most recognition for their achievements.

An Olympic medallist directly qualifies for the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award during an Olympic year but if the Union Sports Minister Vijay Goel is to be believed, there is no such policy in place for the Paralympians. Did those who formulate the policy not think that our "divyangs" could actually possess god-like qualities, as they profess the word connotes. There are at least four from Rio 2016 Paralympics -- Mariyappan Thangavelu (gold in men's T42 High Jump), Varun Bhati (bronze in men's T42 High Jump), Deepa Malik (silver in women's shot put F53 event), and javelin thrower Devendra Jhajharia, who are waiting to hear from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to be declared Khel Ratna.

If the government decides to have a policy on conferring utmost honour to the Paralympians, it can be assured that the corporate world too would eventually follow with their bucks. The Haryana government, for now, has done well to announce a cash award of Rs 4 crore and a government job for Deepa Malik. This is at par with the award given by the state government to Olympics medal winner Sakshi Malik, who won a bronze in wrestling at Rio.

In fact, Union Sports Minister Vijay Goel could take a tip from his Haryana counterpart Anil Vij and end the disparity between the Olympians and the Paralympians. If the government can afford 18 officials to visit Rio for a contingent of 19 athletes, it can surely pick the buck for meeting the wages of a Khel Ratna awardee.

A pertinent gesture from the Narendra Modi government could go a long way in establishing his credentials as a benefactor of the disabled than just issuing an honorific like "divyangs". As the saying goes, hollow words mean little. And in this case, the words could actually sound very hollow.

(Sidharth Mishra is Consulting Editor, Millennium Post)