

Make it reign

India's women chess players are resetting the board. A recent team gold at the Chess Olympiad has shown what is possible. The next shift to watch for: more female Grandmasters (India only has three). How else are the pieces moving? Take a look

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Bhagyashree Thipsay remembers gazing with wonder at the stalls filled with chess books, set up as part of the 1980 Malta Olympiad. She was 19 at the time and had taken her first-ever plane ride to the island country in southern Europe. This was in an era before computer engines and databases, when players travelled to tournaments with more chess books than clothes. In India, printed chess material was hard to come by. The occasional Informator, which curated games from the major tournaments, was one's window to this world. A five-time national champion, Thipsay, now 63, would go on to compete as part of the Indian women's team at eight other Olympiads through the '80s and early '90s. India was far from medal-reckoning then. Getting the federation and ministry to approve the travel was often a feat in itself. "We were never sure whether we were going or not... Once we reached the Olympiad, it was a different world. To see names like Kasparov, Korchnoi and Karpov, who we had only read about, in real life, was amazing. We took pictures with them. Back then, the USSR and East European nations dominated women's chess. As Indian players, we were more like outsiders looking in." The journey from "outsiders" to terminators, winning gold at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest weeks ago, in a historic first for India, has taken a few decades. Before we get to how this happened, it's worth a look back. It was the Khadilkar sisters — Vasanti, Jayashree and Rohini — who made the first moves in women's chess in India. They emerged in the 1970s, won the first 10 women's national championships, and demanded to compete alongside men. Koneru Humpy then took things more than a few notches up, becoming India's first female Grandmaster at 15, and rising to be one of the world's strongest female players. — alongside three other Indians: Divya Deshmukh, 18; Harika Dronavalli, 33; and Vaishali R, 23. It was a team of Dronavalli, Vaishali, Deshmukh, Vantika Agrawal, 22, and Tania Sachdev, 38, that beat the mighty Kazakhstan to claim gold in Budapest. Deshmukh's stellar 9.5 / 11 saw her move up to the position of World No 11. Vaishali, who became only India's third female Grandmaster last year, sees more of her peers reaching this milestone too. "I think it's nice to have this healthy rivalry going," she says. "We're pushing each other, trying to do better. It's a good thing." Agrawal, for instance, has given herself roughly a year to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, the world is sitting up and taking notice. In January, former World No 8 Judit Polgar of Hungary, considered the greatest female chess player of all time, held

a training camp with a group of Indian players in Budapest. "As a kid, I had heard of the Khadilkar sisters," says Polgar, 48. "When I held my masterclass training camp for the Indian girls, I was pleasantly surprised by their ambitious attitude, dedication and the appreciation they showed for the opportunity to work with me. They were self-confident but also aware of how much more they have to work for bigger success. Now, at this Olympiad, the Indian girls have shown that they absolutely belong to the top of women's chess." Access to world-class training has helped, of course. Both Vaishali and Agrawal are mentees of the WestBridge Anand Chess Academy (WACA) training programme run by five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand, the man who kickstarted the revolution in Indian chess. "Even during the Olympiad I didn't want to miss classes," Agrawal says. "We had one session on previous Olympiad games... The more you learn, the more you realise how much more there is to learn. I absolutely enjoy the process." For this group of female players to get this far, it has also taken the sacrifice of parents. Mothers in particular have put their lives and careers on hold to accompany daughters to tournaments. If Divya Deshmukh's mother Namratha Deshmukh, a doctor, left her practice to travel with her, Vantika Agrawal's mother Sangeeta Agrawal quit her career as a chartered accountant and Vaishali's mother Nagalakshmi is an ever-constant presence, criss-crossing the world with both her Grandmaster children (the other, of course, being the 19-year-old R Praggnanandhaa). That kind of support "can make an important difference especially up to the teenage years," Polgar says. What's next? Well, two years before Budapest, at the last Olympiad, in Chennai, Indian women showed how close they were to winning gold when they held the sole lead going into the final round, before losing to the US and ultimately taking home bronze. If the Budapest win is to have a lasting impact, steps will need to follow. There has to be more money, more tournaments, more sponsorships and greater visibility for the women's game in India. The All India Chess Federation will need to step up efforts to identify talent early on, and capture the attention of parents. Building a quality player takes time, and parents should be able to believe that setting aside a career for their daughter to pursue chess can be worthwhile. India could do with a good second rung of women players too. "This is something we need to develop," Thipsay says. The current crop understands there is still work to be done. For Deshmukh, who emerged a showstopper at the Olympiad, the next goal is to get stronger. "I need to compete more in the open section to be able to show what I'm truly made of... I imagine the next few years will be crucial. What's important is where we go from here," she says.



BHAGYASHREE THIPSAY, 63
Woman International Master
2280
Highest-ever Elo rating

Thipsay (above and right) is a five-time national champion. She participated in nine Olympiads, as part of the Indian women's team, in the 1980s and 1990s.



HARIKA DRONAVALLI, 33
Grandmaster
2525
Highest-ever Elo rating
14
Women's world ranking

Harika Dronavalli is one of only three female Grandmasters in India. She was part of the team that beat the mighty Kazakhstan to claim gold in Budapest.

The Elo rating algorithm — named for its creator, American physicist Arpad Elo (1903-1992) — is used to rank the relative skills of players in zero-sum games. Players with a higher Elo rating have a higher probability of winning a game.

{ **VAISHALI R** } CHENNAI

'Nice to have a team that helps you on tough days'

Vaishali R, 23, had two wins at the Budapest Olympiad: she helped the Indian women's team earn its historic gold, and she finally warmed up to her selfie camera. "We began making Reels after the World Team Championship silver in 2021. I'm not really much of a Reels person but I guess once we started shooting them after the Olympiad, it was fun," she says. Growing up in Chennai, Vaishali and her younger sibling R Praggnanandhaa won a number of age-group tournaments together. Their first major international win together was at the Asian Schools Chess Championship in Sri Lanka in 2013. Vaishali won the Under-12 girls title; her brother had a first-place finish in the Under-8 boys. Last month, they were together on a podium again, sharing a slice of history as the Indian open and women's teams won Olympiad golds for the first time ever. Vaishali was part of India's bronze-winning 2022 Olympiad women's side too. They made it to the finals before losing to the US, so "we didn't feel like celebrating the bronze back then; it felt more like a missed gold,"

she says. This time, on Board 2, Vaishali had to switch strategy midway through the tournament. "I went in wanting to give it my best, and at some point I started to strike, for example against Georgia. I had a lot of games with Black but it didn't really matter to me because I was just winning on Board 2." Then came her losses against Poland and the US. "After that my thing was to not spoil it for the team. It was clear by then that (team members) Divya and Vantika were scoring wins, so I just had to play safe and make draws. In a team tournament, you learn to put the collective interest before your own." Another team member, Harika Dronavalli, 33, was having a tough tournament herself, but found time to comfort her. "She noticed that I was upset and came over to me, took me on a walk and tried to motivate me and cheer me up. It's nice to have a team member help you process your emotions on tough days. I guess it's only possible in team events," Vaishali says. "Both Harika and Tania (fellow team



VAISHALI R, 23
Grandmaster
2506
Highest-ever Elo rating
15
Women's world ranking

member Tania Sachdev, 38) have a lot of experience playing these events. They bring perspective." Vaishali became only India's third female Grandmaster last year (Dronavalli and Koneru Humpy are the other two), but she is certain that will now change. Divya Deshmukh has already raced ahead of her in the rankings this year ("which I see as a spur to

stay motivated"). "I suppose we are on the right path and I'm hoping this gold medal will inspire many more girls to take up chess professionally and work hard at it," she says. "I can't wait for Divya and Vantika to get their Grandmaster titles too."

Susan Ninan

PHOTOS: HT ARCHIVES, FIDE



THROW-BACK: Watch as Rachel Lopez talks to 16-year-old Vaishali R about what it takes to be a chess genius

{ **DIVYA DESHMUKH** } NAGPUR

'There are so many things I want to do'

"I'm absolutely horrible at openings," says Divya Deshmukh, 18. She was one of the stars of the historic Chess Olympiad triumph by India's women's team last month. This clearly hasn't gone to her head. If anything, she has an unusually keen understanding of where she stands. Deshmukh scored an incredible 9.5 / 11 points at the Olympiad in Budapest, winning the individual gold medal on the third board. In doing so, she played a huge role in helping India win its unexpected team gold. Earlier this year, the Nagpur girl won the women's under-20 world championship. She was also India's women's chess champion in 2022 and the Asian women's chess champion in 2023. Her performance at the Olympiad moved her all the way up to No 2 in the Indian women's rankings (veteran Koneru Humpy is at No 1) and to the No 11 spot worldwide. But ask her what she wants to do next and she returns to her openings. "I need to add some more to my repertoire," she says. Deshmukh doesn't talk about how, once she has the opening out of the way, she sets

