



VANTIKA AGRAWAL } NOIDA

'Losses hurt. I have to learn to bounce back'

Vantika Agrawal, 22, found herself headed to a TV studio within hours of returning to India from Budapest. It was the wee hours and she was groggy but bouncing with joy, she says.

For a week after that, a stream of congratulatory visitors made their way to her home in Noida. She had never experienced attention like this before; to be fair, the Indian women's team had never seen success like this before.

Agrawal still remembers the night of the Olympiad gold medal win. Once they had received their medallions and shot their photos and Reels, "we realised we were famished," she says, laughing.

"It was midnight, and some of us hadn't eaten pretty much all day."

The players and coaches found a pizza place that was open and trooped in. It was their celebratory meal.

The mood had been very different the night before. The team had lost only one match in 11 rounds, against Poland. But that was one match more than they had lost in the previous Olympiad, where they had held their ground all the way to the finals and then lost to the US, losing the gold that had seemed so close, and returning with bronze.

This felt like a harbinger of loss all over again. The mood after that eighth-round defeat was sullen.

"Seeing how quiet we were, our coach (Abhijit Kunte) decided to shake things up a little," Agrawal says. "Instead of having our team meeting at the hotel, he suggested we head outdoors. It was freezing and he reminded us that we were still in the lead (it was Poland, Kazakhstan and India, at this time), so nothing was over yet. We went to bed feeling lighter."

In the next round, Agrawal, who eventually won gold for her Board 4 play, stepped things up with cold determination. She scored the only Indian win in a tough match-up with the US.

Up against the clock and a Grandmaster, she won anyway, forcing that tie into a draw.

"I looked at my teammates' boards and realised things weren't going well. I told myself: I have to do something if we want to win this match."

One of the things that stands out about Agrawal's game is her ability to play, under immense time pressure, as if she has ice in her veins.

"I've had this strength... I think I've learnt from my past mistakes," she says.

Her next goal is to be a Grandmaster in about a year. "I plan to play more open tournaments. It's a good way to get stronger," she says. She wants to learn to deal with losses better too. "Taking a loss hard means it stays in your head and can mess up your other games." She wants to be able to bounce back faster.

With her degree in Commerce done, chess is now her sole focus and priority, Agrawal says. Besides her personal goals, she has another: Like the other players, she wants to see the count of female Grandmasters go up.

"I think it could go from three to five or 10 in the next few years," she says. "We are in a good place now, and headed to an even better one."

VANTIKA AGRAWAL, 22
International Master

2435 **58**
Highest-ever Elo rating Women's world ranking

KONERU HUMPUY, 37
Grandmaster

2623
Highest-ever Elo rating

6
Women's world ranking

Humpy (left and below) was India's first-ever female Grandmaster, a feat she achieved at the age of 15. She is still India's reigning queen, sitting at #1 on the national women's charts.

Elo ratings are typically updated by the international Chess Federation (FIDE) every month.

The Women's World Rankings are compiled by FIDE.



the board up and ferociously goes on the attack. At the higher levels, where she hopes to be soon, that isn't enough, she says.

"I want to become a Grandmaster soon. I want to play more in the open section. I do believe one should never change one's style, so I need to stay aggressive and find a way of building on my game," she says.

DIVYA DESHMUKH, 18
International Master

2501
Highest-ever Elo rating

11
Women's world ranking

She speaks with admiration about how some of the male Indian Grandmasters have done this. Players such as Arjun Erigaisi, 21, and R Praggnanandhaa, 19, have made a mark while deploying distinctive styles.

"I think there is a difference between how men and women play," Deshmukh says. "I think women are more direct and go in for the kill, while the men play a more positional game. In the end, though, the results matter. The gender doesn't."

Deshmukh has been finding her voice as a woman player. In February, she called out attitudes to women in chess, in an Instagram post that drew supportive responses from fans and fellow players.

"It's a sad truth that when women play chess, [people] often overlook how good they actually are... and every irrelevant thing is focused on," she wrote, adding that she had wanted to address the issue for a while.

Right now, most of her concerns relate to her Class 12 exams. She has always tried to balance chess and life, Deshmukh says. So, even though she is currently experiencing "a chess high" unlike anything she has experienced before, she can still make room for studying, or Reels or listening to music ("anything but K-pop," she says).

"I am still not all-in when it comes to chess," is how she puts it. "There are things I want to do, dreams I want to dream, and they are not all related to the game."

Susan Ninan



Ashish Magotra

culture

Ladies in read

Anger, humour, irreverence mark the poems in a new collection of verse. Writers include a former courtesan, a 6th-century nun, and other mystics



Avudai Akkal.

Down a rabbit hole

Naively, Subramaniam says, laughing, she started out with a list of 25 names. "I thought that was adequate. I thought my work would then largely consist of selecting verses and commissioning translations."

Instead, the carefully manicured list was soon "thrown to the winds". "Every burrow I explored led to a veritable rabbit warren," Subramaniam says.

As she puts it in the preface to the book: "Women started emerging from everywhere. They blinked up, kitten-eyed, from the footnotes of familiar books. They parachuted, uninvited, into conversations. They toppled off forgotten shelves."

She ended up featuring 56 women, who occupy only a third of the anthology. Another third is dedicated to poems featuring woman protagonists, but written by men (think, Shah Abdul Latif and Kabir).

The third segment is a tapestry of "goddess poems".

"I wanted women questors, but I also wanted those female archetypes that stand radiant, at the end of the quest. From the religious canon to tribal, folk and tantric goddesses, I wanted a whiff of them all," Subramaniam says.

This last section closes with contemporary poems dedicated to female deities. These include The Mother and the Goddess of Night, by the Sri Lankan poet Aazhiyaal, dedicated to the Greek goddess Hecate. And The Kingdom of Kali, an ode on that Indian goddess by the American poet May Sarton.

"Every creation is born out of the dark. Every birth is bloody. Something gets torn. Kali is there to do her sovereign work Or else the living child will be stillborn..." Sarton writes.

The end of a quest

In all, it has taken six years to finish Wild Women.

Subramaniam let poems fall into her lap from random shelves and leap out at her from the pages of obscure books, she says.

Some seemed destined for her collection. The translation of the poem by Peero, for instance, was ready and waiting, in an unpublished work by Neeti Singh, associate professor of English at MS University, Baroda.

Singh shared her new book on Peero with Subramaniam, for feedback. "I was struck by this extraordinary tale of love, courage and spiritual alchemy that led from marketplace to monastery, brothel to dera, and blurred the boundaries between them," Subramaniam says.

Another favourite, if she had to pick, would be the one below, written about 2,500 years ago by Punnika, a slave girl and water carrier who became a nun after hearing the Buddha preach.

"Who taught you this — the ignorant to the ignorant — 'One, through water ablution, is from evil kamma set free?' In that case, they'd all go to heaven: all the frogs, turtles, serpents, crocodiles, and anything else that lives in the water..." Punnika writes.

Peero with the Sikh mystic Gulab Das. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; MEETESH TANEJA

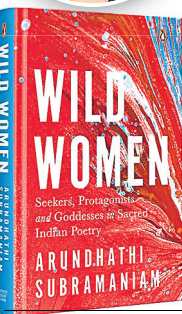
Arshia

bht.arshia@gmail.com

"Flung into the company of foolish zealots who piteously whine in piety; the qazi, the brahmin pandit goad me to read the Kalma, the Purana. They seek in the written script, my ferryman Lord, who stands outside and beyond all this. I say, says Peero, how will they lead who themselves are lost?"



READ an exclusive excerpt from Wild Women



{ THE SPORTING LIFE }

Rudraneil Sengupta

Wrestling with doubt

Sakshi Malik's new memoir is a bold look at the fear, fight that go into making a winner

Her mother Sudesh Malik worked at an anganwadi. Her father Sukhbir Malik was a government bus conductor who left home at 5 am and travelled two hours from Rohtak to Delhi, to get to work.

Sakshi Malik, as a result, was a somewhat lonely child.

She was raised largely by her grandmother, Chandravali Devi, first in the village of Mokhra in Haryana, then in Rohtak city.

She loved sports in school, so her parents took her to the local stadium nearby to enrol in training. She tried gymnastics, but didn't enjoy it; then stumbled into wrestling, which she immediately loved. It would, however, prove to be more a daunting experience than she anticipated.

This is how Malik describes her first match, as a 12-year-old novice:

"I should have been happy and excited... but I felt my stomach sink... That sense of dread heightened as my foot sank into the soft synthetic plastic mat. It peaked as I crossed the red border of the nine-metre circle that I'd have to fight inside for the next six minutes."

The fear would stay with her, surfacing before every bout. Still, by the age of 23, she became the first Indian woman to win an Olympic



medal in wrestling (bronze, at the 2016 Rio Games). Where she had been an anomaly in a time when women weren't allowed into akhadas, her medal helped drive the boom in woman wrestlers in Haryana.

What was it like to spend nearly two decades feeling that deep dread? How did she reconcile the fear with her sheer love of wrestling itself? Malik, now retired and 32, writes on her life on and off the mat, in wonderful and evocative detail, in her new autobiography, Witness (co-authored with sports journalist Jonathan Selvaraj).

It is rare for the biography of an Indian athlete to go beyond banal hagiography, but Witness does this in spades.

The reader meets Malik as she really is, in her strengths and moments of weakness, deep joys and dark places. She writes on her life as an athlete and as a woman, includes details of a terrific blowout with her parents over her marriage (to the wrestler Satyawart Kadian).

For anyone interested in the landscape of Indian sports beyond cricket and behind the scenes, the book offers an intimate look at how Indian athletes are made, their struggles, and the scarcities and uncertainties they still face. There is candid detail of the physical and psychological battles that are common to all sports and all athletes.

Witness also goes behind the scenes of the battle to bring former Wrestling Federation of India chief and former Bharatiya Janata Party MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh to justice on charges of sexual harassment, a movement that Malik helped lead, and one that has marked a vital turning point in Indian sporting history.

Above all, Witness is the incredible story of how Malik harnessed her fear and eventually used it to excel at the thing she loved. With its crowning moment in Rio, it offers a dramatic account of how far such determination can take the individual, and how lonely victory can still feel.

"I had always thought I'd feel just the purest elation when I won my medal," Malik writes, of the Rio win. "But there must have been something wrong with my brain because I felt a whole wave of other emotions. I just could not control them. I was laughing one moment and in the next burying my face in the mat and bawling."

(To reach Rudraneil Sengupta with feedback, email rudraneil@gmail.com)