

Mithali Raj

When BCCI announced equal match fees for men and women last year, the former India captain called it a huge step in the right direction. "We were not able to sustain ourselves money. Even when we were national players, most of the financial help we got was from our parents," she said.



The Netherlands' Ajax women's football team won the league title for the first time in five years, in May. The club declined a public celebration, citing the men's team's poor season. GETTY IMAGES

{ LEVELLING UP } WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Prodigies, big wins can help move the needle

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Separated by continents, three recent events are changing the football story.

In May, the Netherlands' Ajax women's football team, which won the league title for the first time in five years, turned down the Amsterdam mayor's invitation to celebrate their victory with the usual balcony ceremony at the town square. "The lack of a celebratory mood around Ajax in general, which is linked to the performance of the men's team this season, plays its part," the club said. Ajax's men's team, a record 36-time winners of the Dutch league, finished third last season. So celebrations would be muted, "which would not be good for the image of women's football".

Early in June, the Kerala Blasters Football Club paused the women's team activities because it was facing a financial crunch arising from a fine imposed on the club after the men's team walked out of an Indian Super League semi-final.

And on June 14, Fatma Samoura the first woman secretary-general in FIFA (and the first Black, the first Muslim and the first non-European in that role) announced that she was stepping down. Even seven years into the job, the highest-profile woman working in the world football was still struggling to break out of FIFA's president Gianni Infantino's shadow.

Gender bias is deep in sport, perhaps because it has run unchecked for so long.

In 1896 Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, said: "No matter how toughened a sportsman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks."

Even 23 years ago, when a Wimbledon champion from the 1980s, on a private visit to Kolkata, was asked by HT about women players earning less at Grand Slams, he had

a tone-deaf reply: "How about them working as much?"

So, what needs to change for gender parity to be a reality?

The arrival of a prodigy helps. Seven perfect 10s from Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci at the 1976 Olympics helped the sport shift from the balletic form into an acrobatic one. It also popularised women's artistic gymnastics around the world and made it a rare sport where women are paid more than men.

With 23 Grand Slam titles, including one during which she was two months pregnant, Serena Williams, and older sister Venus, have helped change perceptions about women in sport. Ditto the Phogat sisters, who have won multiple medals at world championships, Commonwealth and Asian Games and helped forge a path where wrestling became a career and, through government jobs and awards for international podium finishes, a life-changing opportunity for women.

Doing well in a high-profile event helps too. Women's cricket in India experienced a surge in popularity after the Mithali Raj-led team played the 2017 50-over World Cup final, and the one captained by Harmanpreet Kaur made the title round in the 2020 T20 World Cup.

More women coaches can bridge gender disparity too. What is common to former cricketer Deep Dasgupta, and tennis players Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic? They learnt the ropes under Sunita Sharma, Judy Murray and Jelena Gencic respectively.

In 2014, Murray appointed former world No. 1 Amelie Mauresmo as coach saying he looked up to her. Exactly how odd this was in elite tennis can be gauged by only two men's top-100 players having women coaches in 2019. And there were only five in the top-100 women then who had a woman as their main coach.

So, what needs to change most is our mindset.

Men questioning the disparity and being partners in driving change can help. Because, as Megan Rapinoe, who fought the good fight for equal share of earnings among the men's and women's football teams in the US, said: "A collective bargaining agreement is just words on paper... It's the enforcement on both sides that actually makes that happen."

{ NEW INNINGS... } OR LEAGUES APART?

Can the women's IPL help ease disparity in cricket?

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In March, 15 years after the Indian Premier League transformed the fortunes of male cricketers, India finally inaugurated a Women's Premier League (WPL). "The Women's Premier League is a game-changer," said BCCI secretary Jay Shah. "By establishing a professional league exclusively for women's cricket, BCCI has created more opportunities for female players to compete at a higher level, gain exposure, and develop their game. This has helped in identifying and nurturing young talent which will ultimately strengthen women's cricket in India."

It's a five-team tournament, but competitors already have had a head start. The Women's Big Bash League in Australia is almost a decade old. The Women's Hundred in England has been around since 2021.

The delay is not surprising. Women's cricket came under the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) in 2006. The Women's Cricket Association of India (WCAI), which handled affairs until then, was poorly funded, badly run and largely ignored. Sponsorship for matches of the women's team were sought on a series-by-series basis even as their male counterparts starred in high-profile television ads and struck lucrative commercial deals.

Even under BCCI's management, things have been slow to change. Pay parity – an equal match fee for centrally contracted men and women players – was announced only in October 2022, after the women's team made the final of the 2017 ODI World Cup and the 2020 T20 World Cup in Australia.

For India's young girls, with a talent for

WPL IS BEING PITCHED AS A GAME-CHANGER, BUT THE INAUGURAL SEASON WAS CONFINED TO A THREE-WEEK WINDOW IN ONE CITY, MUMBAI. AND THE INDIAN WOMEN'S TEAM HASN'T PLAYED A GAME SINCE FEBRUARY

the game and a dream to play on a bigger platform, WPL will certainly help. One of the obstacles facing women pursuing sport, especially in smaller towns and villages, is the fear that it can't make for a lucrative career. But more than 10 million new viewers tuned in to watch the final of the inaugural WPL edition between Mumbai Indians and Delhi Capitals on JioCinema. The platform claims that it is the highest viewership for any women's event in the world.

"WPL has also had a positive impact on the perception of women's cricket, encouraging greater interest and participation from fans, sponsors, and media," Shah says. "This increased visibility and investment will lead to improved infrastructure, better training facilities, and enhanced support systems for women cricketers across the globe. It has empowered female athletes and paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable sporting culture in India."

Much needs to happen before that dream comes true. The inaugural season of the tournament was confined to a three-week window in one city, Mumbai. The Indian women's team hasn't played a game since February. In contrast, the men's team is in action almost all year.

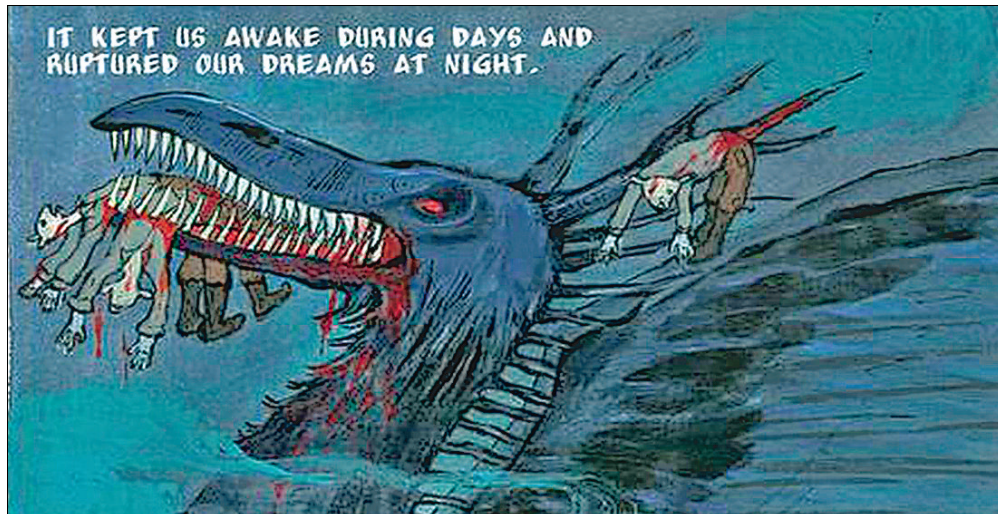
Shah says BCCI intends to find a separate window for the tournament from next season. "WPL will shift to home and away," he says. "This means that fans across India will be able to witness it. The feeling of playing home matches in front of thousands of cheering fans is different."

The women know that already. They've experienced it abroad and can't wait to feel the same thrill in their own country.

culture

Drawing from emptiness

A new graphic anthology, *Famine Tales*, recasts stories of scarcity from centuries ago, using traditional art forms and contemporary comics. It's a reminder that the threat is still with us



(From above)
Art work by
Aratrika
Choudhury,
Argha Manna
and Deb-
kumar Mitra;
and Sekhar
Mukherjee.

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What does hunger feel like? How does a nation "run out of food"?

A new graphic anthology, *Famine Tales*, uses exquisite art to trace famines that occurred in India and in Britain in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, through five stories and two sets of storytellers: traditional patachitra artists, and contemporary comic ones.

The stories trace the struggles of an impoverished hunter's wife, in a retelling of a 16th-century oral narrative in Bengali.

In *Rebel Captain Pouch*, we learn of the Midlands Rising of 1607, and a rebel leader who carried an enigmatic leather pouch said to contain enough material to defend all his

troops against the king's forces. (When he was captured and sentenced to death, everyone learnt that all it had contained was a piece of mouldy cheese.)

There is a fictionalised retelling of the travels of the English merchant Peter Mundy, who witnessed suffering and death in Gujarat during the Deccan Famine of 1630-32.

Famine in Shakespeare-Land traces one of the worst food shortages in the history of Renaissance England. And there is a chapter on the Great Bengal Famine of 1770, a product of failed crops and a smallpox epidemic compounded by the policies and cruelty of the region's colonial British rulers, which claimed over 10 million lives across Bengal and Bihar over two years.

The 177-page book, published by Jadavpur University Press in January, is co-edited by Ayesha Mukherjee, a professor of English literature at the University of Exeter; and Abhijit Gupta, a professor of English; Sujit Kumar Mandal, a professor of comparative literature, and Shrutakirti Dutta, a research associate, all three at Jadavpur University.

The book features narrative poems by the late patachitra artist Dukhshyam, and art by Jahanara, Lutfa, Rabbani, Rahim, Rahman, Rehana and Ushaira (all of whom go by the last name Chitrakar), and comic artists Trinankur Banerjee, Aratrika Choudhury, Argha Manna, Debkumar Mitra, Sekhar Mukherjee and Sarbajit Sen.

It's an anthology because the tales are drawn from the online database *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain, 1550-1800*, a project led by Mukherjee and funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. That database draws from contemporary chronicles, plays, oral narratives, periodicals and pamphlets, as well as official correspondence, speeches and letters, gathered from across India, England and Bangladesh.

In the book, as in the traditional format, each patachitra scroll unfolds alongside the narrative.

"Overall, what readers will get a sense of is how certain political mistakes have been repeated over and over," Mukherjee says. "The repetitions of the same crisis over time, despite industrial and scientific progress, makes these stories particularly resonant. Because food security is an ongoing, cyclical problem that requires constant alertness."

{ THE SPORTING LIFE }

Rudraneil Sengupta



Who are the champions?

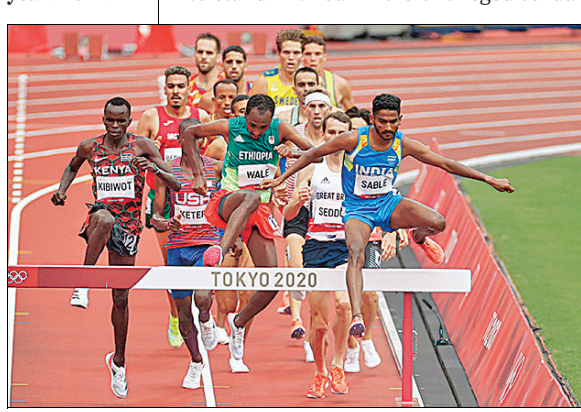
Javelin throw, steeplechase, shot put, long jump, boxing — ahead of the Asian Games, meet India's most likely medallists

The Asian Games are now just weeks away (they'll be held in Hangzhou, China, from September 23 to October 8). Our best athletes have moved on from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (eventually held in July-August 2021) to the next Olympic cycle, ahead of which the Asian Games offers good last-mile perspective.

Instead of the usual four-year cycle, the Asian Games are being held after a gap of five years, a long time in sport, making it all the more important for countries to use it to assess where they stand.

India will not, of course, overtake the big four in Asian sport — China, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia — any time soon. But some countries that finished above India in the medals tally in 2018, such as Uzbekistan and Iran (India came in eighth), are likely to find themselves below India this time.

This, despite the fact that some of India's finest wrestlers — including guaranteed medallists at the Asian level Vinesh Phogat and Bajrang Punia — may not be in China, having sacrificed this phase of their careers to stand with survivors of alleged sexual



HT Illustration:
Malay Karmakar

Alex Morgan

After the US women's national football team won \$24 million in an equal pay settlement last year, former co-captain Morgan told *The New York Times*: "It was just extremely motivating to see organisations and employers admit their wrongdoing, and us forcing their hand in making it right."



The Indian squad celebrates making it into the Women's World Cup final, in 2017. Despite the eventual loss, to England, this would be a turning point for the game in India. Women players became household names, viewers tuned in across the country. Match time and infrastructure still vary wildly, but equal match fees for centrally contracted players were announced in October 2022.

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