

WOMEN'S
BOXING

GIRLS WITH IRON FISTS

A decade since M.C. Mary Kom put India on the world boxing map, the nation seems to have found its new boxing stars. These girls from remote corners of the country are not only winning bouts, but also hearts

By **Priyanka Sharma**

Photographs courtesy of BFI

DONNING THE MANTLE

The crowd that watched Ankushita's triumph will probably remember it as the day they witnessed the rise of India's next Mary Kom.





THE FINAL VERDICT read 4-1. But even before the bout, Ranjita Boro knew what the outcome of the last fight of the 2017 AIBA Women's Youth Boxing Championships in Guwahati would be. The mother had faith in her 17-year-old daughter, Ankushita. Much like Ranjita, the confidence could be felt in the small crowd that included father Rakesh Kumar, who travelled around 200 km from their ancestral village of Meghai Jaroni in Sonitpur district of Assam to watch the fight. For them, it was a big moment, an emotional one.

"Thank you, coach, I won because of your guidance. It wasn't an easy bout, I tried really hard. I was surprised to see the crowd's support... my family and friends have also travelled from so far to support me. It is because of my parents' sacrifices and blessings that I have reached here," Ankushita said, with teary eyes and quivering voice, before walking away with the award for the best boxer of the tournament.

For the hosts, the Ankushita Boro vs. Ekaterina Dynnik result in the 64kg category capped off the best show ever by India at the youth worlds. Already the darling of the locals, Ankushita became the toast of the nation after winning the last gold up for grabs—which made it five golds in five finals for India, besides the two bronze medals won by Neha Yadav (+81kg) and Anupama (81kg). Nitu (48kg), Jyoti Gulia (51kg), Sakshi Choudhury (54kg) and Shashi Chopra (57kg) had already emerged winners in their respective finals. India had one bronze medal from the previous edition of the event and had not won a gold since 2011.

The gold rush for India started with Nitu's thrashing of Kazakhstan's Zhazira Urakbayeva 5-0, before Gulia, Choudhury and Chopra followed it up with three back-to-back golds. There was a long wait after that bout, with five welter and heavyweight finals crammed in between. The crowd saved its energy for the last bout of the day and as Ankushita entered the ring, the noise at the Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Indoor Stadium reached a crescendo.

Up against one of the toughest boxers in the competition, Ankushita had to produce her best. After all, the Russian had tamed all with her power, speed and guile. The Assam girl, who had been laid low by chicken pox just before the tournament, however, was on a roll as she unleashed a combination of punches, allowing no room for Dynnik to make a comeback. With her silky-smooth footwork and lightning punches, Ankushita peppered Dynnik's body and face. No prizes for guessing the judges' decision.

While qualifying for next year's Youth Olympics in Ar-

gentina was a dream harboured by all these girls, only Gulia (the only one born after 1999) made the cut. While financial assistance followed for all of them, it meant much more to Ankushita, who comes from a family of farmers. Boxing Federation of India (BFI) president Ajay Singh announced a cash prize of ₹2 lakh for each of the winners, while Ankushita received around ₹20 lakh from various agencies of the state, including its government.

"Not many people in our village know about the sport or have done boxing. She started boxing in 2012, when one of her cousins, Brajen, took her for trials at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Centre in Gola-ghat. In order to spend less money on travel, she stayed at the hostel. In fact, due to our poor condition, we are staying at Ankushita's maternal grandparents' home," says Rakesh, who is a teacher on probation at the Borbil M.E. School.

"She is the eldest of our three daughters. As a kid, she was fond of dancing and won several local competitions. We always thought she might become a professional dancer, but I am happier that she is winning medals for the country. Now, her sister wants to follow in

STANDING TALL

The lanky Chopra (in blue) and Nitu (below, left) were rewarded for their quick footwork throughout the competition.

Feather (57kg):
Shashi Chopra (Ind) bt Do Hong Ngoc (Vie) 4-1

Light Fly (45-48kg):
Nitu (Ind) bt Zhazira Urakbayeva (Kaz) 5-0





EXPECT A MEDAL AT TOKYO 2020

AS M.C. MARY KOM won an unprecedented fifth Asian Boxing Championships gold medal in Vietnam, those that hope to one day follow in her footsteps were making a name for themselves at home. The girls' brilliant run at the Youth Women's World Championships in Guwahati impressed several in the fraternity, including India's elite men's and women's high-performance director, Santiago Nieva. The Argentine-origin Swede was all praise for the new breed of boxers and believes they possess all the qualities to succeed at the senior level as well. Nieva, who coached the Swedish national youth and elite teams for eight years, spoke to SI on the current state of affairs, the future prospects and Mary Kom. Excerpts:

SI: Your thoughts on the new crop of boxers and the future of Indian boxing.

SANTIAGO NIEVA: With these kind of results where five boxers are in the final with some brilliant performances, it is a tremendous boost for Indian boxing. I believe we can look forward to a bright future. These girls are well-schooled which is very important for international success. I am impressed by how they can throw very good

combinations and follow up in high rhythm at youth level bouts. This is very promising, because results are not produced overnight. This is not a magic trick. We need to have a good system and infrastructure not only at the national level, but at all levels; states and provinces, and work collectively. The Boxing Federation of India (BFI) is doing a good job, the government is investing, I am sure we will have a lot of good boxers in the near future.

SI: Which areas do you think our boxers need to improve upon?

SN: It's a bit of everything. We need to focus on the technical-tactical development of boxers. That can be done through video analysis which is not used much in India. That is a great tool we have introduced, along with strength training where we are using more modern methods rather than old school approaches. The next step would be nutrition. For a high-performance sport, the nutrition of boxers in India is not the best. We need to educate coaches and boxers in this area, which can make a difference and help them become stronger for competitions. Indian boxing is highly influenced by the European style, and I am trying to add some American style into it.

I want our boxers to go for body punches, they are a little too focussed on head-hunting. They need to work on close range and body punches, to add variation in their technical arsenal.



SI: Your thoughts on Mary Kom, who is still going strong.

SN: She is very open-minded and a brilliant boxer with huge experience. She is giving great performances with yet another medal. But I would still like to come out with some inputs on her positioning when she's in defensive and offensive situations.

SI: What do you think of the Indian male boxers?

SN: India is generally stronger in lighter weight categories. In 49kg, we have two to three boxers who wouldn't surprise me if one of them becomes an Olympic medallist in Tokyo. I am expecting a gold medal in one of the lighter weight categories at the Commonwealth Games.

—Priyanka Sharma



her footsteps. In fact, many girls in the village have shown an interest in taking up boxing; Ankushita is becoming an inspiration in the locality now,” added Ranjita, clad in a traditional Bodo dress, a red *dokhona*, for the finals. “With this money, we can now build a house of our own.”

Ankushita, who admitted that the 2015 national championship gold was the turning point in her career, is a protégé of coach Tridib Bora at the Assam Boxing Academy in Guwahati. “I want to fulfil my parents’ dream and compete at the Tokyo Olympics. I will try harder for that,” said the lanky boxer. However, the Olympics won’t feature her weight category and she may have to go a notch higher, 69kg, to qualify for the 2020 Games.

THE KIND OF impact the young champion has had on her state and home fans is remarkable. Olympian Shiva Thapa is the only boxer from Assam who had garnered such accolades from the crowd here. But who has been the inspiration for the promising star?

“My idol is Mary Kom,” said Ankushita, striking one of her favourite poses. This is a common answer from

Locals at the Sarusajai Stadium have already feted Ankushita with the title of ‘Next Mary Kom,’ owing to her ferocious attitude and the Northeast connection.

all these girls when asked about their inspiration. For the past decade, if not more, Indian women’s boxing has been all about Mary Kom, and the 34-year-old from Manipur has been shouldering the expectations of over a billion people.

But with Mary Kom in the last phase of her career, one question has been asked often—who’s next? The answer may lie in the achievements of the girls who hail from some of India’s most remote areas. “These kinds of results show India has a bright future. The boxers here have the heart and stamina, they just need to work on their technique,” says Santiago



MAKING HEADWAY

Despite a fantastic show by the Indian girls, only Gulia (left) is eligible for the 2018 Youth Olympics to be held in Argentina.

Fly (51kg):

Jyoti Gulia
bt Ekaterina
Molchanova
(Rus) 5-0

Light Welter

(64kg):
Ankushita
Boro (Ind)
bt Ekaterina
Dyannik (Rus) 4-1

Bantam

(54kg): Sakshi
Choudhary (Ind)
bt Ivy-Jane
Smith
(Eng) 3-2

Nieva, the high-performance director for both men's and women's boxing.

Interestingly, the common link between these young girls and Mary Kom is that all of them come from far-flung areas and from humble backgrounds and are armed with a massive drive to excel. Their belligerence, power and speed have been so impressive that even 'Magnificent' Mary Kom said: "These girls are very talented and smart. Some of the lighter weight categories have the potential to become the next Mary Kom, but they will have to work really hard."

BFI chief Singh added: "All these girls have incredible stories to tell. They have struggled and fought hard. In some cases, they have run away from their homes to pursue their passion. The entire country is proud of them. They are probably future Olympic medallists."

In fact, locals at the Sarusajai Stadium have already feted Ankushita with the title of 'Next Mary Kom,' owing to her ferocious attitude and the Northeast connection. Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who announced a cash prize of ₹10 lakh for the Bodo girl for making the state proud, called her "the future Mary Kom."

"Ankushita has established Assam on the world boxing map. Our main objective is to create a playing environment across the state, in the villages, tea gardens and the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys and produce more champions like Ankushita. After participating in tournaments like this, the athletes who come from remote areas can go back to their villages and tell everyone about their experience. That way we can engage more youngsters in sports," Sonowal told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED INDIA.

While Ankushita sparked a passion for boxing among youngsters in the Northeast, other medallists—from small towns in Haryana—have emerged from a patriarchal society to take sports forward, much like Rio Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik and the Phogat sisters did in wrestling.

"I had to lie to my parents to be able to train as they



were against boxing. I used to say I'm going to work on a school project at my friend's place who stayed next to the Shaheed Batun Singh Stadium in Roorkee. It was only after my state championship selection that they discovered my secret," said Gulia, who won a gold and silver medal each in invitational meets in Serbia and Turkey this year.

However, what instilled the passion for boxing in Gulia was the fame that came to a neighbourhood friend after winning a gold medal at a district level competition. Though her parents' resistance towards the sport stopped her initially, it wasn't long before she made her way. "The drive was very strong. I thought I could also win and bring some laurels for my parents and the country," the Rohtak-born boxer says, who is known for her aggressive style.

For Chopra, who hails from Hisar, Saina Nehwal's gold medal win at the 2010 Commonwealth Games paved her way into sports. She began going to a nearby stadium and started playing badminton. "It was only after I saw Mary Komdidi winning the bronze medal at the London Games that I felt so strongly about boxing. I realised then that girls can also participate and win in a combat sport like boxing," said Chopra, reminiscing about her childhood activities, and about being a naughty kid fighting with boys in her locality. Chopra has a gold and silver medal each in international meets, and feels that this year has been "life-changing" for her.

Hailing from conservative families in Dhanana, Choudhury and Nitu train under renowned coach Jagdish Singh at the famed Bhiwani Boxing Academy. "I feel proud to train at the same academy where Vijender Singh trained. Ever since I started boxing, I have dreamt of winning a medal on a big stage like him," said Choudhury, a former junior world champion in 2015 and a gold medallist at the Balkan Open in Bulgaria in October.

FOLLOWING LONG PERIODS of infighting and political turmoil, that even led to its athletes competing without the national flag, the BFI has witnessed a good turn of events recently owing to the effort of several faces including the recently appointed foreign coach for the women's youth team, Raffaele Bergamasco. Despite challenges, including the communication gap, the Italian has had a massive impact on the boxers with his unique training methods. "Indian girls are very strong and have good stamina. Even though they come from villages, their technique is good. But they were mentally not prepared for big fights. They are improving now," Bergamasco says. He added music to their training sessions, and the girls loved it.

Head coach Bhaskar Chandra Bhatt emphasised that the last six-seven months of training were crucial. "The girls were also sent for several invitational meets and it really helped boost their confidence. They have already faced the top players in several meets this year, so they

Following long periods of infighting, that even led to **national boxers competing without the national flag**, the BFI has made positive changes for the betterment of the sport.





were prepared. We have done video analysis of their opponents and were observing every player and their style of play in competitions and have trained them accordingly.”

“Normally, the training included more hours, less speed work but before competitions it was less hours and more speed. The balance of volume and intensity is important. After Bergamasco joined the girls in July, he mixed some European techniques with Indian methods and worked on specific areas based on the opponent, round or situation. The work has been more on tactics,” said the coach, adding that his next assignment will be to make the girls ready for the Youth Olympics, Youth World Championships and Youth Asian Championships.

BFI president Singh is also credited for the positive changes in the national boxing set-up, right from providing training and appointing foreign coaches to athletes’ exposure trips and competitions. When SI got in touch with him to know how he is helping change the fortunes of boxing in the country, Singh said: “The focus now is on the boxers, on the sport, the coaches and technical officials and not on politics. India has tremendous potential in boxing

and as you can see, in one year there has been a massive change and our boxers are doing really well. We are making sure that they are being trained throughout the

THE GUIDING FORCE

Italian coach Bergamasco’s (left) presence at the camp had a massive impact on the girls, who produced a string of good performances.

year and participating in every major championship in the world. AIBA (International Boxing Association) recognises that India can organise good championships.”

With no recognised federation for four years, the initial months were challenging for the new organisers as they had to start from scratch. “We made sure that the national championships were being held when they were supposed to, and selected boxers there. Now, they are training in national camps, which run for 365 days. We ensured that boxers get the best possible coaching, best infrastructure, nutrition and best international exposure.

“But there is a long way to go and we need to do well in the Asian, Commonwealth Games and the Olympics. I think we are on the right path. You can see it from the enthusiasm here and how the country will react when India succeeds in the world of boxing,” he said, adding that various programmes like upgradation of the level of coaches and referees, a cut-man course (on how to scientifically deal with cuts in the ring) were recently held, something which is a new addition to BFI’s plans. It seems a sport that was struggling to even follow its national championships calendar is now set to be the one that promises the most medals in the coming years. □