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Indian Gymnast

Taken by the Editorial Board

YT: Making history as the first Indian female gymnast to qualify for the Olympics was a monumental achievement. What were your thoughts as you prepared for such a prestigious event, and how did it feel to represent your country on such a grand stage?

DK: When I qualified for the Olympics, it was the most precious moment of my life. Every athlete dreams of participating in the Olympics. After 52 years of waiting for an Indian gymnast to qualify, this achievement was truly a historic moment for me. It was not an easy journey. I had to face numerous challenges in every aspect—whether it was training in the gymnasium, handling the equipment, or overcoming injuries.

I came from a background where people did not even know about me. I chose this sport, which I believe most people were unfamiliar with at the time.

As a woman, we all can relate to the fact that achieving anything comes with its own unique set of challenges. In today's world, being a female athlete often means facing additional hurdles. But challenges are essential—they shape us and push us toward a successful career.

As a woman, I may look delicate, but I can confidently say that women have to face and overcome more obstacles. Earlier, society believed that girls could not achieve certain things, but now, people think differently. Mindsets regarding girls and women have changed significantly.

This time, when you win at the Paris Olympics, the victory will be celebrated equally—50:50 per cent, both men and women recognized equally. This shift in mindset is proof that people now believe in the immense potential of girls and women.

YT: Your mentor, Bishweshwar Nandi, has played a significant role in your career. Can you describe the nature of your relationship with him and the specific ways he has influenced your development as an athlete? What are some memorable lessons or experiences you've shared that have shaped your approach to gymnastics?

DK: We have a father-daughter relationship because I learned so much from him. If I had to look up to someone in my life and choose a role model, both aspects—his teachings and his support—are equally important to me. He gave me invaluable lessons, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

I have to say that my journey has been filled with experiences. I was a champion, but I always looked up to him. Initially, I did not get many opportunities, but when I started working with him, he said something that stayed with me: 'We did not have perfect facilities at that time. We did not have good physios or doctors. But what I had was a coach.'

He used to tell me, 'Son, Whatever you have, do not complain about what is missing. Instead, make the most of what you do have.' That philosophy changed my perspective completely. Complaining about what you lack is a waste of time. Instead, we should utilize what we have to its fullest potential.

Since that day, I have realized that the passion of the government and the coaches is to win medals for the country and give it a unique identity in the world of sports. I have seen many foreign coaches being brought in after the Olympics, but I often wonder: when Indian coaches train athletes for decades and help them qualify for the Olympics after 52 years, why do not they receive the same trust and recognition?

Whatever I am today, it is because of my coach. I have fallen, fought, and risen again because of his guidance. If I had not have such a coach, I might have ended up doing something completely different—perhaps playing badminton or pursuing something else entirely. But because of him, I found my true path, and for that, I am forever grateful.

YT: Reflecting on your experiences at the 2016 Rio Olympics, what were some key takeaways that shaped your perspective on competition and personal achievement?

DK: See, after Rio Olympics, life has changed a lot. I did not know Tripura, I only knew Tripura. Then I performed in a world that I did not know in India. People knew that. There were many changes in my life. My whole life has changed. But yes, I learned something from that. This is not just my hard work, it is our hard work. My coach. I am proud to be a part of this movement. When I go out, people say that I am like the women of the country. When people say that, I am proud to be a part of this movement. I am proud to have made this movement known to the world. If we have a good subject in our heart, we will definitely succeed. You can never be patient.

YT: In your opinion, what changes have you seen in the perception of gymnastics within India due to your achievements? How do you think your success has contributed to encouraging more young people, especially girls, to take up the sport?

DK: The last five years were incredibly challenging for me. I had to undergo two surgeries, face multiple injuries, and deal with everything that came with it. Despite these setbacks, I managed to compete in three to four World Cups. It was a massive challenge, both physically and mentally.

At that time, I was in a 'do or die' situation. Being over 30 years old, the pressure was immense—not just in sports but also from societal expectations, like the constant pressure of marriage. I didn't know whether I would get married or not, and honestly, I did not know all the answers. But one thing was crystal clear to me: my goal.

The most important thing for me was to win a medal for my country. That was my only focus, and I decided to think about everything else only after achieving it. I knew I had to prove myself, not just for me but for everyone who believed in me.

In every competition, there were people who doubted me, people who said things to discourage me. There were even times during training when nothing seemed to go right. But when I stepped

onto the competition ground, everything changed. Winning a gold medal was the most joyous moment of my life.

The best part was proving those who doubted me wrong. The same people who used to criticize me were now congratulating me. That, for me, was the biggest gift. It showed the power of staying positive, no matter what others said.

I have always believed in focusing on my goals. People will always have opinions, but as women, if we lose sight of our goals, it is easy to fall into negativity or depression. My journey taught me that no matter what others say, we must keep moving forward, focused on our dreams.

YT: Growing up in Agartala, how did your environment and culture influence your journey into gymnastics? Can you share any specific experiences from your childhood that played a role in shaping your determination and passion for the sport?

DK: I am very stubborn, and I have always been this way. As a sportsperson, this stubbornness became one of my defining traits. When I was 25 years old and actively competing in sports, I often felt like I was not progressing enough.

I remember once saying, 'I have done this for just 30 bucks,' and they told me, 'You can beat me with this.' But for me, it wasn't about the money or external validation—it was about self- satisfaction.

Until I can fully satisfy myself with my performance and efforts, I refuse to quit or give up on anything. That inner drive and determination to prove myself to myself are what keep me going.

YT: What are your thoughts on the current state of gymnastics in India? How do you perceive the development of the sport, and where do you see it heading in the coming years?

DK: I believe sports have developed significantly, especially in recent years. However, there is still room for improvement, particularly in addressing certain challenges faced by athletes and coaches. I want to encourage coaches to work towards solving these problems because the more participants we have, the better the competition will become.

Preparing for the Olympics should not be a short-term effort of just two to three months. To achieve success, we need consistent preparation for at least one to two years. With only three years left until the next Olympics, it is essential to start working now, set clear targets, and remain focused. By doing so, we can ensure progress, not just for individual athletes but for our country as a whole.

Women's sports, in particular, need more attention and encouragement. If we continue to invest in and support women's sports, it will not only contribute to our country's growth but also strengthen our sports culture. Women's participation and success in sports are crucial for taking our nation to greater heights.

YT: Can you share a particularly memorable interaction with a fan or a young athlete who was inspired by your journey? How did that encounter affect you personally?

DK: There have been many memorable interactions, but one that stands out was during the Rio Olympics when I returned to Mumbai. I received a call from Amitabh Bachchan sir, who said he wanted to meet me. I was a bit late due to some delays caused by traffic, and I felt bad because he is such a respected figure. It was important for me to be on time.

When he called me again to reassure me that it was okay, it felt very kind and understanding of him. Meeting him was a truly special moment for me. He was so positive and encouraging. His words left a lasting impression.

This interaction meant a lot to me, as he is someone I have admired greatly. It was one of those moments that reminded me how far I had come.

When I see children now getting inspired by the Olympics, it makes me proud. At least my performance has helped change some people's mindsets. It has also brought more attention and recognition to gymnastics in our country, which is a significant achievement in itself.

YT: Have you engaged in any collaborations or partnerships aimed at promoting gymnastics or sports more broadly? Can you discuss any projects that you believe have made a positive impact?

DK: I have not done many collaborations yet, but I believe there is immense potential to create impactful initiatives. For example, if we introduce a dedicated period for physical activities in every school, it would significantly benefit students. It would help keep their bodies healthy, improve fitness, and make them mentally stronger.

Sports and education can go hand in hand. I believe that if every school could allocate time for such classes, even for just a week, it would make a big difference. It would also inspire India to adopt a healthier and more active lifestyle.

Our youth represents the new generation of ideas and innovation. However, nowadays, we see a growing problem with depression, even among young kids. To combat this, regular exercise and physical activities are essential. Whether we are 60, 70, or 80 years old, staying physically active keeps us healthy. If we exercise regularly, not only will we stay fit, but our entire country will benefit from a healthier and more productive population.

YT: In your opinion, what changes have you seen in the perception of gymnastics within India due to your achievements? How do you think your success has contributed to encouraging more young people, especially girls, to take up the sport?

DK: If I say this, it might sound wrong, but there has been a lot of change. Many centers have opened, and more people have gotten involved. The number of children participating has also increased, especially because gymnastics, which was once less known, is now gaining more recognition.

I believe that if we keep striving to win more medals for our country, we will raise the popularity of gymnastics just like sports such as badminton and table tennis have gained prominence. I have complete faith that gymnastics will continue to grow in popularity and success.

YT: As a prominent figure in Indian sports, how do you feel about the admiration that students from St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, have for you? What specific advice would you give them about pursuing their passions and overcoming challenges in their own journeys, whether in sports or other fields?

DK: I would like to tell every student: never give up in life, especially on yourself. No matter what anyone says, you should never lose faith in your own abilities. If you believe in yourself and stay determined, you will ultimately succeed in life. Hard work always pays off, no matter how tough the journey may seem.

I remember visiting your college last year for a function, and it was a memorable experience. I want all the students there—and everywhere else—to work hard and stay focused on their goals. With dedication and perseverance, I am confident they will achieve great success in life.