

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | P.T. USHA

'India should learn from Russia's doping scandal'

The former sprint queen on coaching, 'Khelo India', sports administration, and steps that can be taken to raise the profile of Indian athletics

P.K. AJITH KUMAR

She may have run her last race in 1999, but P.T. Usha remains India's best known track-and-field athlete. She missed an Olympic medal by one hundredth of a second at the 1984 Summer Olympics, won five gold medals at the Asian Championship in 1985, and single-handedly lifted India's overall standing at the Asian Games in 1986.

It has been nearly 35 years since you finished a close fourth in the women's 400 m hurdles at the Los Angeles Olympics. No Indian has come close to winning an Olympic medal in track and field since. When do you see this happening?

■ In 2024. I think javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra has a good chance of winning a medal at the Paris Olympics. He is the most talented athlete we have at the moment. He has progressed well, has an excellent coach in Uwe Hohn, and gets enough international exposure.

What do you think of Hima Das, the first Indian woman to win a gold medal at a World (Under-20) athletics meet?

■ She is a promising sprinter. She has improved her timing greatly. Let us see how she fares over the next year or so.

The second edition of the 'Khelo India' Youth Games concluded at Pune a few days ago. Your thoughts on this initiative by the Union government?

■ 'Khelo' Games is certainly a good idea. I am happy to see that the government is

trying to do something to improve sports at the grassroots level and that lots of money is being spent on it.

But I feel there are several areas that need to be fine-tuned. There is too much bureaucracy. They still want to 'assess' somebody like Jisna Mathew, my ward who has already competed at the Olympics and won multiple medals in international meets. In Pune, the Kerala team had to wait for eight hours after their arrival at the railway station before they were provided accommodation. Such things shouldn't happen at a prestigious meet like 'Khelo India'.

That takes us to the issue of sports administration in the country.

■ There are several issues. For one thing, I would like to see some new faces in all sports associations. Often you have the same people controlling a sport. They may change their designations or they may be controlling affairs from behind the curtain even when they don't have any role officially.

What about the role of the Sports Authority of India (SAI)?

■ The SAI has done some good things, but it could do a lot more, especially with the kind of machinery and infrastructure it has. I would like to see more people who have a background in sports or are passionate about sports in key roles in the SAI.

Kerala is a powerhouse in Indian sport, despite its relatively small size and population. Besides athletics, it is doing well in football, volleyball, basketball and now cricket (it played in the Ranji Trophy semifinals for the first time in history).

■ Kerala is doing well because here the kids are encouraged to compete in sports, both by parents and teachers in schools. Sport is well-run at educational institutions and clubs. Look at the way the State school athletics meet is organised. Most of our international athletes, including me, have come out of it. It is a huge event, and is covered extensively by the media. It is the Olympics of our schoolchildren.

Which are the other States that are doing a good job of promoting sport?

■ Haryana is now showing a lot of interest. Andhra, Telangana and Tamil Nadu are also encouraging their athletes. In States like Maharashtra, you will find excellent infrastructure for multiple sports.

But I am not amused by the tendency of the States to compete with one another in announcing cash prizes for a medal-winner at international meets. In our time, we ran our races to win medals, not to get crores of rupees from the government.

■ That is true, sadly. I have seen many talented athletes quitting sports as soon as they land a job. There should be a rule that somebody who is given a job under the sports quota should not be confirmed if they don't compete for a specific number of years. There are also several cases of superior officers not giving time for athletes to do sports. I have seen one of my wards suffer because she is forced to do office work in her prime years as an athlete.

In India it appears that for many, the main aim of playing a sport is to get a government job.



K. RAGESH

You started the Usha School of Athletics in 2002 with the aim of winning India an Olympic medal.

■ That is still what I am aiming for. I want to give

an athlete whatever is required to be an Olympic champion: facilities, a synthetic track, scientific training, proper diet and international exposure. If I had all that, I could have certainly won an Olympic medal.

My school has already produced quality athletes like Tintu Luka and Jisna. But I have had to mould them. I am still waiting for a gifted, natural athlete, someone like me. I am quite hopeful about one of the youngest girls at the academy right now, though.

I am proud that my school has already contributed hugely to Indian athletics. We have won 67 international medals, besides 456 in national championships, 17 at inter-university meets as well as 499 at the State level. For a 16-year-old academy, that is an excellent record, I feel. I don't think anybody else other than the SAI has had as much success.

You have had to turn to crowdfunding for your school this past year.

■ I am glad that we did; we need something like ₹60 lakh per year to run the school. It is so overwhelming to see that so many people from all over the world have contributed. We had to look at that option because of the needless controversy I was dragged into about the non-selection of athlete P.U. Chithra for the World cham-

6 In our time, we ran our races to win medals, not to get crores of rupees from the government.

ionship a year ago. I was painted the villainess of the drama, without even checking the facts; I was only the observer for the Central government. Just about anyone, without the faintest idea about athletics, could appear on television channel and call me names. Could anything be more ridiculous than the suggestion that I was jealous of Chithra? It is a little sad to reflect that many people don't know the contribution I made to Indian sport, against brave odds and often all alone for such a long time. If they did, they wouldn't have put black oil on the signpost of the road named after me in Kochi. But it would not have been easy for them to destroy everything named in my honour: there is one in China, there are sports institutions in north India, and the coaching centre in Thiruvananthapuram.

Not that I hadn't been treated badly before. People from my own home town had hurled stones at my house alleging that I didn't give my best at the Seoul Olympics in 1988.

How much has Indian athletics changed since you began running as a schoolgirl 40 years ago?

■ On the positive side, we now have synthetic tracks all over the country. Before I made my Olympic debut at Moscow in 1980, I hadn't seen a single one in my life. Another big change is that the competition used to be lot more fair for women. The sex verification rules were a lot simpler. I am not sure if some of the female athletes today would have been able to compete in my time. And yes, doping wasn't this big an issue then. There

were stray incidents, like the one involving a male Indian athlete; his urine test said that he was pregnant (his sample was apparently swapped with that of a female nurse).

For the last few years, India is among the top offending countries listed by the World Anti-Doping Agency.

■ That is a matter of shame. We should learn our lessons from Russia, whose athletes have been banned by the world athletics body. It is disappointing to find that we continue to have most of our coaches from the former Soviet Union. I had protested against the appointment of Yuri Ogorodnik, who had trained many of those who were caught for doping, but he was still welcomed back to India. Why can't we get coaches from countries that have cleaner reputations? I also wonder why our athletes are sent to European countries for training in winter.

What do you think should be done to raise the profile of Indian athletics?

■ You have to take our meets to people, with quality television coverage. We certainly could do with more publicity. When you compete in places like Europe, you get to perform in front of packed stands. Here, our athletes are greeted by empty stadia.

Maybe athletics could also do with a professional league in India, about which there had been some talk but nothing has happened.

■ Yes, that is something we need. Look at what it has done to football and kabaddi.

SINGLE FILE

Flawed political move

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's formal entry into the Congress is more likely to hurt than help the party's poll prospects

MOHAMMED AYOUB



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's appointment as All India Congress Committee General Secretary for Uttar Pradesh East is a flawed move that could hurt the Congress in the forthcoming general election, for several reasons.

First, her appointment will give ammunition to the Bharatiya Janata Party to reinforce the idea among potential voters that the "dynasty" desires to perpetuate its control over the "family-owned" organisation that is the Congress Party. This is especially because, like her brother and the Congress President, Rahul Gandhi, Ms. Vadra lacks experience and seniority within the party as well as broader political engagement. Indian voters, who are more politically savvy than they are given credit for, could thus be expected to be further turned off by the dynasty's dominance of the Congress.

Second, she carries negative baggage owing to her husband Robert Vadra's alleged involvement in land scams. Whether true or not, most people believe he is guilty of engaging in shady deals because he felt immune from legal action as the son-in-law of the dynasty. His negative image has rubbed off on Ms. Vadra and this can tarnish the party's image in an election year.

Third, eastern U.P., which is supposed to be Ms. Vadra's turf in the run-up to the elections, is a political minefield for the Congress. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is highly invested in the region given that his constituency, Varanasi, is located here. The constituency of the State Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, which is Gorakhpur, is also in eastern U.P. Further, both the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have strong bases of support here, especially among the Backward Castes, Dalits and Muslims — a significant portion of the overall electorate of the region.

The Congress's performance in eastern U.P. has been dismal in past elections. Given that the SP and the BSP seem to have decided to have no truck with the Congress in the run up to the general election, they will perceive the Congress's attempt to poach their territory, adversely. Without a seat-sharing arrangement with the SP-BSP alliance, the party is likely to fare badly in 2019. That could further sully Ms. Vadra's image as a political organiser, dooming prospects of her future leadership.

Further, in the unlikely event that the Congress under Ms. Vadra garners a reasonable share of the anti-BJP vote in eastern U.P., it will increase the BJP's prospects of returning to power since the anti-BJP vote will be divided between the SP-BSP combine on the one hand and the Congress on the other. This will defeat the major goal of the Congress, which is to deny the BJP another term at the Centre. Either way the Congress's prospects of coming to power at the Centre at the head of an anti-BJP coalition will be frustrated.

Thus, Ms. Vadra's elevation within the party is likely to backfire as far as Congress's electoral prospects are concerned. Rahul Gandhi and his advisers should have objectively evaluated the downside of this decision before taking the plunge.

The writer is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University



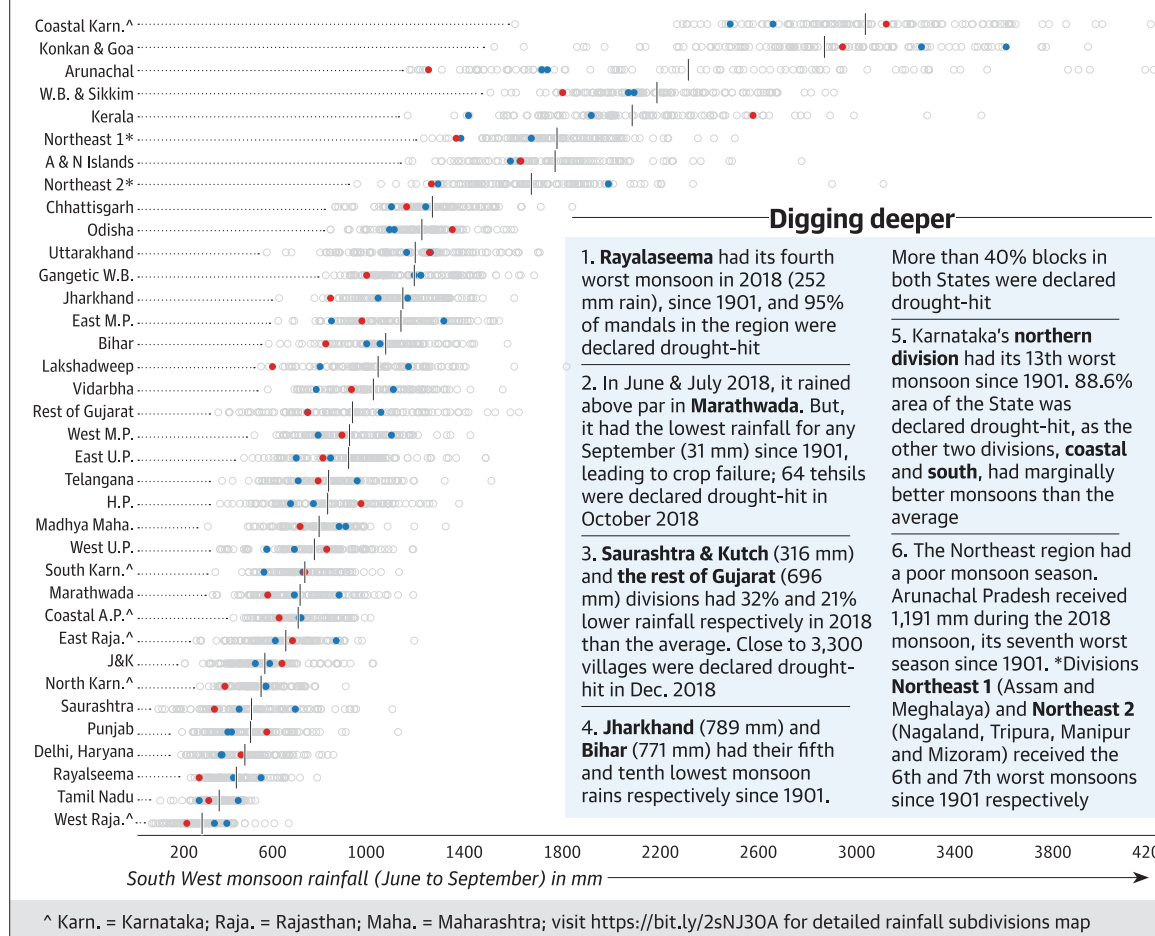
DATA POINT

Drought-hit

Of the 36 meteorological divisions in India, 25 received less rain during the South West monsoon in 2018 than the average precipitation in the last 118 years. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

There is wide variation in the average rainfall across geographical divisions. The graphic compares South West Monsoon rainfall data for all divisions historically to find where their measures for 2016, 2017 and 2018 are placed.

Graph explained | The rainfall for each division is plotted in a row. Each circle represents the rainfall in a year. The years 1901 to 2015 are in grey (○); 2016 & 2017 are in blue (●); and 2018 in red (●). The dash (|) denotes the average rainfall of each division.



FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 30, 1969

Army aid sought to maintain order in A.P.

Army was called in to-night [January 29] in Andhra Pradesh to help the civil authorities in the maintenance of law and order in strategic places like Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Warangal, Guntur, Khammam, Kothagudem and Kodad following violent demonstrations in some of these places. Army units had started moving and would be reaching the strategic points before dawn tomorrow [January 30], it was officially stated here [Hyderabad] to-night [January 29]. Earlier in the day the Chief Minister, Mr. K. Brahmamanda Reddi, expressed his distress at the "acts of hooliganism" and said the Government would deal with the situation firmly to restore normalcy and maintain law and order. He appealed to the young men and women of the State "with their innate idealism and dynamism" to rise to the occasion of this juncture, and "play a positive role in bringing about complete integration." Earlier to-day, orders under Section 144 Cr. P. C. were promulgated in three major towns of the State — Guntur, Vijayawada and Warangal. Police opened fire in Kodad, a small Telangana border village on Hyderabad-Vijayawada trunk road, to-day to chase away some lorry loads of people from Vijayawada who attempted to enter the village allegedly to cause destruction, after lathi charge had failed to send them away.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 30, 1919

Aeroplane Pleasure Flights Arranged at Calcutta.

Messrs. Spalding and Company of Calcutta are now registering applications for accommodation for pleasure flights by aeroplane round Calcutta at charges of Rs. 50 for adults and Rs. 25 for children. The aeroplane which the company expect will arrive about the end of March and is one of the largest machines constructed and is equipped with four Royce engines aggregating about 1200 horse power and giving a speed of 120 miles per hour. An "Empire" representative who made enquiries says that the company hope to start shortly a daily service from Calcutta to Darjeeling and an aerodrome and landing ground on a space of 100 acres is now being prepared at Dum Dum from which flights will commence. It is calculated that the journey from Calcutta to Darjeeling will be made in 3 hours and fares when service starts will be about Rs. 80 for each passenger. Passengers will be carried from Calcutta to Siliguri in larger planes of the service and from Siliguri to Darjeeling in smaller planes.

CONCEPTUAL

Unfunded liabilities

FINANCE

This refers to any future debt obligation for which no proper provision has been made in the present. A company that promises to pay pension to its employees in the future, for instance, will generally have to set aside sufficient funds in the present in order to be able to fund its future obligation. While companies and governments are mandated by law to show unfunded liabilities as a liability on their balance sheets, accounting tricks may be used to hide the true size of such liability. It is believed that the actual debt load of many governments in the developed world could be many times higher if unfunded liabilities were properly taken into account.

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