

Boria Majumdar

It is a historic first. At London, for the first time in the annals of the Olympics, each of the 200-plus participating nations will be represented by a mixed (men and women) team. Saudi Arabia, too, after much dilly dallying, has finally agreed to send two female athletes to London, Wodjan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhan, a judoka, and 800 meters runner Sarah Attar. The Saudi decision has helped make London 2012 the first gender equal Olympics in history.

The stat speaks for itself: 49.7% women athletes will take centre stage alongside 50.3% men in London. At Beijing, in 2008, the ratio was 42:58 in favour of men. This means there will be 5,000-plus female athletes competing in London 2012, which is a significant step forward for the Olympic movement as a whole. And the Americans are, in fact, sending more women than men in another first for the Olympic movement. The US team has 269 women and 261 men competing at London.

The symbolism of this development hasn't escaped the IOC, evident from the following statement by IOC president Jacques Rogge: "The games provide a global platform for female Olympians that inspires others to follow their example. More than four billion people, well over half of the world's population, will have access to the London Games on television, the internet or their mobile devices. About half of that audience will be women and girls,



Saina Nehwal

a gender balance few other major sporting events can hope to match. That global reach makes the games a powerful force for gender equality."

For India, London 2012 may well turn out to be a "women's Olympics". Four of India's key medal hopes are women. Deepika Kumari, the current world number one, is leading the Indian archery challenge in London while Mary Kom is a serious contender for a medal in women's boxing, which is making its debut at the games. Kom, a five-time world champion, has a real chance of winning a medal having never lost to one boxer twice in her



FAIR GAME

A heart-warming 49.7% women athletes will take centre stage alongside 50.3% men at the London 2012 Olympics, making the great games the first truly gender equal event in its history

life. There's also Sania Mirza, in good form after winning the mixed doubles crown at the French Open and making the semi-finals of the Australian Open earlier this year. In a field which boasts some of the truly high profile names in tennis, Sania has a decent chance of a medal if the draw goes her way. Finally, there's Saina Nehwal in badminton. Saina has shown great form recently and has beaten her Chinese opponents with regularity.

Besides the 'fab four' ladies of Indian Olympic sports, there's Geeta Phogat in wrestling and a host of women shooters who are more than capable of doing the country proud in London. We also cannot forget Deepika's compatriots in archery, Bombayla Devi and Chekrovolu Svuro.

We can fully comprehend the significance of growing women's involvement when we pit this development against the views of Baron Pierre De Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games. De Coubertin, firmly against women's par-



Mary Kom

icipation, had this to say on the subject before the first modern Olympics in 1896: "I do not approve of the participation of women in public competitions. In the Olympic Games, their primary role should be to crown the victors." Drawing on a case study on women's participation at the Olympic stage, it is interesting to note that in the two editions of the games in London, in 1908 and 1948 respectively, the ratio of women vis-à-vis men were 50:1 and 10:1. In 1908, a mere 37 women competed at the games with close to 2,000 male athletes, and in 1948 the number was 390 women against 3,714 men.

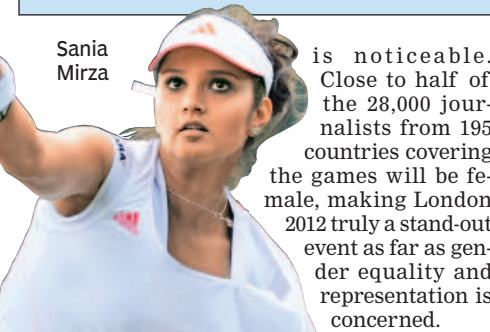
Even a decade-and-a-half earlier in Atlanta (1996), 26 of the 197 nations did not field a single female competitor; a number that has currently dwindled to one. Moving beyond the competitors, among journalists too the surge in female participation



Deepika Kumari

GROWING GRAPH

| Venue & year | Men | Women |
|--------------------|------|-------|
| Athens 1896 | 245 | 0 |
| Paris 1900 | 1206 | 19 |
| Antwerp 1920 | 2591 | 77 |
| Berlin 1936 | 3738 | 328 |
| Rome 1960 | 4736 | 610 |
| Munich 1972 | 6065 | 1058 |
| Los Angeles 1984 | 5230 | 1567 |
| Barcelona 1992 | 6659 | 2708 |
| Atlanta 1996 | 7061 | 3683 |
| Athens 2004 | 6296 | 4329 |
| Beijing 2008 | 6250 | 4746 |



Sania Mirza

is noticeable. Close to half of the 28,000 journalists from 195 countries covering the games will be female, making London 2012 truly a stand-out event as far as gender equality and representation is concerned.

INDIA'S DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES

Last year alone 24,596 homemakers committed suicide. That's 51.5% of all female victims. And it's not in-laws alone that caused them to take this drastic step

Archana Khare Ghose | TNN

On May 29, 2011, a 45-year-old homemaker in Lucknow committed suicide. The mother of two teenaged children was suffering from depression and swallowed an overdose of the same medicines she was taking for her ailment. Her family couldn't understand why she had committed suicide as there was no harassment from her in-laws — one of the commonest causes of suicide by homemakers — but her best friend knew why. The woman had struggled for an individual identity ever since her marriage, but her husband never understood what it meant. He never allowed her to engage professionally — she was a trained fashion designer and dreamt of owning a store. And thus, the homemaker became another statistic in the countless suicides in India.

According to figures released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recently, out of the total number of 1,35,585 suicides reported in 2011, that of housewives was 24,596 — 51.5% of female victims. Out of these, 43.6% were in the age group of 15-29.

While these figures are alarming, the high figures are also because in India, most women are homemakers. Publisher Ritu Menon says, "While that's an important reason, marriage in itself is not an enabling factor for suicides. It leads to a variety of stresses which can cause women to take their lives."

Family problems are the single biggest reason for all suicides, male and female, and comprise 24.3% of the total number. In the case of women, many are driven to death by harassment in-laws. The latest to hit the headlines was Nagpur resident Sonali Khaire who took the extreme step on June 18. But what is more alarming is the paradigm shift in the reasons why homemakers are taking their lives. Lack of individual iden-

tity is one of the main reasons in urban, literate India where, increasingly, parents don't differentiate between daughters and sons. Women want to be more than just someone's wife or daughter-in-law. The NCRB report notes that while social and economic causes have led most of the males to commit suicide, it's emotional and personal causes that have mainly forced women to end their lives.

Dr Jitendra Nagpal, incharge of the Institute Of Mental Health and Life Skills Promotion at Moolchand Medcity, Delhi, says that a negative self-image is a crucial issue with young women today if they are not employed. "That's because of too much glorification of the working woman. A woman who isn't employed despite being qualified, doesn't feel complete. I get cases where brilliant girls have not been allowed to work or even pursue a vocation as the family doesn't need the money. But a woman needs to keep herself engaged. Existential questions start bothering such homemakers, leading to depression.



FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS: Mamata, seen here with her husband, committed suicide in Bangalore in 2011; (below) Nandita Agarwal, a Mumbai housewife, jumped to her death on February 15, 2012, after killing her three-year-old son

That's the flagging point for an eventual suicide." Facebook posts by qualified, non-working women friends give a poignant insight into this dilemma. Asked "Are you a working woman or a housewife?" one says, "I'm a full-time working housewife. I work 24 hours a day..."

According to the report, it was Madhya Pradesh that logged the highest figure of homemaker suicides — 29.3%. Though the reasons for this are not clear, the state's former chief secretary Nirjala Buch, who is engaged with the Bhopal-based Centre for Women's Development Studies, says, "The status of being a homemaker or a working woman must be making a difference in the way they see themselves. It's true that a working woman derives more satisfaction from her life despite being burdened by work both at home and office."

The fact that unfulfilled desires lead to depression, which eventually translates into suicide, is not a cause for concern in India beyond the metros. And that's why it would take a long while for people to understand that the educated women in their family need more than just a decent home to keep them happy.

archana.khare@timesgroup.com

Now save the purple frog

Jayashree Nandi | TNN

Earlier this month when the United Nations declared the Western Ghats a World Heritage site, it stirred huge excitement among naturalists and conservationists. But critically endangered creatures like the nasikabatrachus — the purple frog that looks rather unglamorous when compared to India's flagship species, the tiger — are fighting their own battle for survival in the Ghats.

The significance of the Western Ghats is very different from any other tourism site in India where crowds flock in packed jeep safaris. It is a region with a potential to discover unknown species and is home to many lesser known, fast-disappearing species like nasikabatrachus, which is believed to have lived with the dinosaurs 300 million years ago. But does the heritage tag ensure adequate cover for the region? Naturalists and activists working in the Ghats fear that the tag may just remain a fancy inscription on signboards with no power to fight the powerful mining, power and industry lobbies. They say it's completely up to the Indian government to save the Ghats for posterity.

Western Ghats is the first global 'cluster' of natural sites to be declared world heritage. Environmentalists believe the government should use this opportunity to set an example for other important biodiversity clusters. "The first thing that the government of India needs to ensure is connectivity in the Ghats that has been disturbed by mini hydel projects and road projects. Its conservation has to be comparable to other famous sites like the Grand Canyon," says Jagdish Krishnaswamy of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment.

Many feel the government campaigned persistently to get the heritage tag for Western Ghats but did hardly anything on the ground to stop habitat fragmentation. Hundreds of mini hydel projects in various hill streams were cleared despite the evidence of its negative impact on water flow. A recent report by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel exposed how deforestation for timber in catchments areas, river valley projects and plantations had drastically reduced the capacity of hill streams. Mini hydel projects have also led to continuous stretches of rivers drying up irreparably. Most mining leases in Goa are located

The Western Ghats is a world heritage site now. But real preservation efforts still need to kick in. Can the recognition protect endangered species found only in this patch of green?

Siddappa Setty



Vivek Ramachandran



Environmentalists fear the heritage tag may remain just an inscription and not do much to protect rare species like the lion-tailed macaque (left)

ommended to the committee to defer declaring the Western Ghats a heritage site. It suggested instead that the Indian government should follow the recommendations made recently by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) in its report. The report, however, has not been accepted by many state governments because it recommends restriction of infrastructure projects, including mining, in eco-sensitive areas.

S D Biju, noted amphibian biologist who discovered the purple frog in Kerala, says the Ghats deserves a special conservation plan. "The Indian subcontinent's prolonged isolation in its geological history is thought to be responsible for the uniqueness seen in the Western Ghats' biotic assemblages. During the isolation period of this landmass the fauna and flora were believed to have undergone diversification forming life forms unique to the region. The Western Ghats contains a lot of relict species," he says, adding that many species in the Ghats may be going extinct even before being discovered.

The plus-size market in India, though in a very nascent stage, is worth almost Rs 11,000 crore and growing. Big, it seems, is also bringing in bigger bucks

Archana Khare Ghose | TNN

Early last month, when full-figured models walked a New York runway, it was not their size that surprised the industry watchers. The fact that they were sashaying down for the Full Figured Fashion Week in clothes by top international haute couture names like Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren and Michael Kors was the surprising bit. After all, high-end designers are known not to associate themselves with plus-size customers, as easily and as openly.

Fashion industry's global love affair with anorexic models is well known and India is no exception. As David Abraham of the design duo Abraham & Thakore puts it, "Our obsession with size

Fat market for full figures

© Aristide Economopoulos/Star Ledger/Corbis

zero is an imported one." No wonder an A-list fashion show for the plus-sized doesn't cease to astonish. It may be a long while before India hosts its own Full Figured Fashion Week but it is not ruled out. Hemant Sagar of the Indo-French designer duo of Lecoanet Hemant says, "Fashion in India is an entertainment, so it could happen. A fashion show is a trade event backed by a commercial reality. If a designer thinks he can dress big sizes off the rack, it would make sense. It's a specialised market in many countries."

'Market' is the operative word here. Those in the trade — designers or mass market retailers — cannot ignore the fact that the reality in India, as in the US, is far removed from the ramp. An overwhelming majority of people are not size zero. In fact, quite a few are plus size (plus XL). Delhi-based designer Anuradha Ram-



BOUNTIFUL A model walks the ramp for the first designer to showcase plus-size creations at the Olympus Fashion Week in New York in 2005. The plus-size now makes up almost 8-10% of India's clothing market

am says that about 30-40% of her customers are plus size. "Re-sizing is a very important component of the industry," she adds.

With aspirations attaining global levels in a post-liberalisation India, it's a segment whose need to turn out in style is as compelling as that of the size zero. According to management consultancy firm Technopak, the plus size market in India, though in a very nascent stage, is worth almost Rs 11,000 crore and is on an upward trajectory with an estimated growth rate of 25% per annum. According to internal estimates of e-tailer Jabong.com, plus size makes up 8-10% of India's clothing market with a ratio of 60:40 in favour of women.

Quite a few mass market retailers had smelt this opportunity long back even though the market continues to remain largely untapped. According

to a Technopak analysis, the demand for fashionable plus-size apparel in India has accelerated and quite a few players like aLL (by Pantaloons), Mustard and Revolution, are competing in the RTW (ready-to-wear) plus-size opportunity. Other well-known private retail brands in the category include Plus S, X'Mex, Gia by Westside and Just Your Size, for both men and women.

The potential of the segment is not lost on e-commerce websites either. As Manu Kumar Jain, MD, Jabong.com, says, "There are not enough plus size brands in the country. It's a huge market opportunity waiting to be tapped."

The fact that the awareness of this plus size opportunity is trickling beyond the apparel retail stores, designer brands and e-tailors is evident in niche stores coming up in cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chandigarh and Jaipur. This is the market that sisters Neelam and Meenakshi Gupta had hoped to draw on when they launched their plus size store Damayanti in Jaipur in 2008. "Clothes for plus-size women don't pay attention to style and just flatten out the smaller sizes. We wanted to change that as even within this segment, body types vary." The attention to style paid off for the sisters and they now have a fixed clientele.

The economics of plus size seems to be slowly opening up great opportunities for people across the country.