

## **Wrestlers' struggle for justice: Will it endure!**

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Published as the front page story in 'The Indian Express' on May 23, 2023, Vinesh Phogat in her write up titled 'Like many girls, I had to suffer silently all these years because of this man (Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh)' has made a remarkable statement. She states, "Now there is no fear. The only fear we have is that we may have to quit wrestling. We believe we have five years more in the sport but who knows what the future holds for us after these protests. We also know our lives could be at risk because we have taken on not only Brij Bhushan but other powerful forces, too, but I don't fear death." On the path of struggle for justice, women wrestlers finally overcome instincts of fear and greed. In this sense, there is a need to seriously consider their struggle.

In the write up, Phogat states that they approached various government/administrative bodies – Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), Sports Ministry, Indian Olympic Association (IOA), Sports Authority of India (SAI), Oversight Committee, Delhi Police etc. - against the charges of longstanding sexual harassment by WFI President Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. But no one took proper action by taking their complaint seriously. In order to get justice, they were forced to enter the social domain and decide to begin a direct struggle. Sakshi Malik, Bajrang Punia and many other wrestlers who were victims of sexual harassment showed solidarity with the decision. The Supreme Court ordered the Delhi Police to register an FIR. It is clear from the write up that the wrestlers had to go through a long drawn self-struggle before arriving at the decision of a direct struggle.

In today's authoritarian/fundamentalist political-social environment, winning over fear and greed would be considered a great achievement. Right from the beginning, the ruling establishment and its troll army have been trying to break the morale of women wrestlers in various ways. The attitude of the Delhi Police has been oppressive towards them. Perhaps it is the result of the strength born from their long self-struggle that they have all ultimately triumphed over fear and greed. They have even overcome the fear of their life. There is also the 'greed' of career – which every sports person earns through hard work and dedication. As mentioned in the write up, Phogat has given up on her future career. Obviously, the other struggling wrestlers too have done this.

It may be noted that the twin instincts of fear and greed were deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche during colonial rule. Due to this specific phenomenon, the country remained in a state of colonial subordination for about three centuries. India's freedom struggle was also a struggle to establish a fearlessness and abstinence/contentment in the Indian mind by cutting the very instincts of fear and greed. Gandhi tried with utmost devotion to infuse this goal into the spirit of the freedom struggle. However, most of the leaders/intellectuals who followed his leadership had allegiance either half-way with Gandhi's effort, or not at all.

With the attainment of independence, we physically and ideologically murdered Gandhi, the one who dared to teach the lesson of fearlessness and abstinence. Only four decades after independence, the doors of the country were thrown open to welcome neo-imperialism. The twin instincts of fear and greed have pervaded the Indian psyche more rapidly and deeply than perhaps even during the colonial period. The present version of RSS/BJP, which is operating with the sole intention of capturing power and maintaining it for a long time, is playing a leading role in instilling fear of the power in peoples' minds and making them utterly obsessed with greed. But the non-BJP ruling elite also play the same role

in their power domains. For a just system, it is necessary to cut the noose of this fear and greed. If even a couple of citizens do this, then it should be welcomed. The women wrestlers have done this.

The attitude of the institutions and individuals who have been assigned the duty of delivering justice so far do not inspire confidence that Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh will be put on trial or arrested. However, for damage control, at the most he may be asked to resign from the post of WFI president. The recent complaint of some BJP leaders to their own government for allowing the case to go on for a long time is not because of their concern for the cause i.e. justice for the wrestlers, but due to their worry of political profit and loss. In fact, the government has given Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh a long time so that he could influence the evidence and witnesses in his favor. The minor complainant has already withdrawn her allegations against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh absolving him from POCSO. She has recorded a fresh statement. The reporting (appeared in the 'Indian Express' itself) of the meeting held on June 7 between the Sports Minister and representatives of the wrestlers does not even mention the main demand of the wrestlers - the immediate arrest of Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. As a result of this meeting the representatives of the wrestlers have agreed to postpone the struggle till June 15. Supporters of the struggle have high hope that it will not happen in compromise.

Any way, let us come to the point. When 'good' people sitting in the justice delivering institutions advise wrestlers that Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh is like their father; that he might have touched them with a paternal attitude, the clear message is that the '*sanskari* sexual tormentor' is beyond complaint and punishment! Otherwise, these people know very well that if Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh was the master of 'father-like' personality, he would have resigned from the post of president as soon as the allegations were leveled against him by the seven women wrestlers, including a minor.

It can be said that wrestlers should not be discouraged or disheartened in their struggle for justice against sexual harassment. They should not act in haste while continuing their struggle. They are not powerless on their path of struggle for justice. The power they have acquired - conquering fear and greed - has catapulted them into a greater role. They, in fact, should strengthen this moral position. Going by the details of the FIRs registered by the Delhi Police on the orders of the Supreme Court, it appears that more women may have suffered sexual harassment at the hands of Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, both inside and outside the wrestling association. Such women, who remained silent for some reasons, by watching this direct struggle of seven women wrestlers, may have nursed the hope of getting justice.

The sports fraternity, to which the struggling wrestlers first appealed for their support, might have questioned the coward sitting inside them to some extent, despite their silence. The citizens who came out in their support at Jantar Mantar might have gone back with some lessons in fearlessness and not falling prey to greed at the cost of self-respect. Citizens, especially women, who are watching this struggle from their homes or workplaces, may have gained some courage. This is no less of a big victory for the wrestlers for achieving the meaning of life. They don't need to shed their medals in the Ganges or go on fast unto death in despair, but they need to set further goals.

It will be necessary for them to make their own decisions as before, while giving due respect to their supporters and advisors. Their supporters and advisors should also understand this. Especially those who want to be successful and to stay ahead by pushing the wrestlers back. Since the political discourse has reached a bottom low in the country, it is obvious to accuse the wrestlers of political self interest as the motive behind their resistance. The usual job of character assassination of players, throwing mud on them, imprisoning their struggle in casteist or regional colours will also continue till the decision is taken.

Some established players, former and current, will continue to preach that sports and politics should not be mixed. The wrestlers should continue their struggle with the identity of a citizen and respected sportsperson of the country without getting involved in all this. For that the address of Jantar Mantar is not mandatory. All strength and courage to them.

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*(The author associated with the socialist movement is a former teacher of Delhi University and a former fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)*