



# Special Olympics Bharat **Shining Leaves**

*Let me prove  
Disability is but a matter of Perception*





*"It is not my country's duty to push me ahead.  
It is my duty to push my country ahead."*

**Major Dhyan Chand,**  
Indian Field Hockey Player and  
Olympic Gold Medallist

# Foreword



*"A huge number of our athletes have faced social discrimination of various forms, and are regarded as non-functioning members of society in various quarters. It is an obsolete thought, and an inaccurate one too. Their performance in the sporting arena prove that they are capable of great feats, strength, speed, concentration, and discipline. And I hope this opens the eyes of those on the outside and proves that we need to expand this movement further."*

*We call our Athlete 'Champions' and we mean it. Their victory over every daily challenge too is noteworthy. Covid 19 posed an unimaginable threat, confining them to their homes. To bring them back to play, we organised the National Health fest on the occasion of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, in 2022. The turnout was delightful but, many more are yet to return to play. This book, a collection of 75 stories, upholds the determination of the Athletes and the transformation that they have experienced through the power and joy of sports.*

*Persons with Intellectual Disabilities face social discrimination and are regarded as the non-functioning members of the society. It is an obsolete & inaccurate thought. Their performance in sports proves that they are capable of great feat, concentration & discipline. We too, are determined to continue to provide them with opportunities to play, re-discover and grow.*

**Dr Mallika Nadda,**  
President SO Bharat

## **A Note from the SO Bharat National Office Team**

*Every story has been updated to the year 2023, the year of compilation.*

*The team of the National office is privileged to witness and script inspiring journeys of the Athletes. We are grateful to each and every Athlete, their family members, Coaches and the Area Directors for sharing personal information so willingly and enthusiastically.*

*We truly hope that the lives of our Champions (the SO Athletes) push the reader to break mind-sets, open their hearts and feel the joy of accepting & including differences.*





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## Aaynu Sharma, Badminton (Rajasthan)

*It was a milestone achievement for Aaynu Sharma, 26 yrs old, when he was appointed as a Badminton Coach with a sports academy in Jaipur Rajasthan in 2021. He has coached special as well as mainstream players there, going everyday for 3-4 hours in the evening. At the age of 2 he was diagnosed with a learning disability, that left his parents clueless. Schools refused to give him admission. While his father was frequently transferred across different cities, his mother stayed with him at their residence. His father is an inspector in CBI and his mother, a homemaker.*

In 2012 Aaynu joined SO Bharat where his talent for Badminton was discovered and he got selected for the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in 2019 in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He won a Silver and a Bronze. Being selected for the world games boosted his confidence and his recognition in the society. He felt at ease as he spoke with strangers. Having discovered his own ability for the sport, Aaynu continued to practise and identified the academy where he would Coach. The challenge now, was how he would travel between his residence and workplace. His parents arranged a cab so that he could understand the route. Once he got familiar, he cycled back and forth, covering about 16 kms both ways, daily. Being a Coach widened his perspective. He became vocal and expressed that parents of persons with special needs must not be over-protective about them.

Aaynu also became a member of the National Athlete Input Council that brushed his communication skills and confidence further. He was uninhibited to express his opinions on a panel at the first National Youth leadership Summit in 2019. He along with his Unified Buddy, Nakul Kaushik, executed a project in Jaipur, funded by the Innovation Grant, having travelled to Singapore for a Youth summit preceding the same. Aaynu is, currently, an office bearer in the SO Bharat Board of Directors. In this role he wishes to push the urgency of employing Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities. Inclusion, he feels, comes through awareness. If awareness is lacking then how would accept what exists.

His parents firmly believe that Sports showed him the way. It made him confident and positive while providing him a life of dignity.





## Abhijith CR, Roller Skating (Kerala)

*Abhijith, the Roller Skater from Kerala, won two gold medals at the Special Olympics world summer games held in Berlin in June 2023. On his return, he was employed by Zomato (food delivery service). Sports made Abhijith dare to dream. He wanted to earn to support his mother's cancer treatment and his married sister who is going through challenges. Sports has shown him a way to re-build himself, his life and of those around him. He had long back, stopped expecting any support from his father who is struggling to overcome alcohol dependence. Special Olympics placed him on a platform that brought him recognition.*

Abhijith 22yrs old has received training at Pratheeksha (meaning HOPE) Training Centre, Thissur, Kerala (located approx. 80-90 kms from Kochi). He speaks Malayalam only, although still quite shy and speaks only to a few. He joined the Centre about 9 years back and since, has been participating in sports regularly, as is the curriculum of the Centre. The Centre houses about 60 persons at one time, against an overall strength of approx. 200 students. For about six years Abhijith was a resident at the centre owing to a disturbed past. While in a mainstream school earlier, he fell in bad company. Not being able to distinguish between socially acceptable or non-acceptable behavior, he would do as told. They would often bully him into theft. Abhijith even did so and was caught by the police a few times.

Getting admission at the Centre started a new chapter in his life. He was placed under the supervision of Sister Paulsy who has been associated with Special Olympics for over thirty years. Abhijith participated in football and roller skating, playing Unified Sports with the students of Christ College regularly. The

Centre has multiple sports facilities that has the students of the college come to play. He loves to dance as well.

The students of the Centre are offered vocational training which helps them earn a livelihood, through the network of the Centre that has developed over the years. **Abhijith did not leave any opportunity to earn; he packaged; he worked as a waiter in restaurants etc.** He wanted to earn enough to travel to and from the government hospital where his mother is receiving free treatment.

*Abhijith would practice skating, five days a week for about an hour each day under the supervision of Coach Shaji, prior to the games. According to Sister Paulsy, Abhijith's balance, and body movement have improved tremendously with regular practices. He is determined, has a vision, enjoys sports and is confident to compete. His participation in the world games placed him on a productive path. She is pleased to see a change in his attitude, he would earlier spend on himself and now, spends on his family.*





## Abhiranjan Kumar, Floorball (Jharkhand)

*Sports has given hope to Abhiranjan. At 27 yrs he has kept his struggle on, not wanting to give up until he has achieved a respectable place in the society. Sports has given a direction to his life, where his Intellectual Disability and hearing impairment threw challenges of isolation and rejections. He started to talk at the age of seven. He only had his siblings as his friends in the first few years of his life, as he was often asked to 'go away'.*

His father has a secretarial job with the police department in Ranchi, Jharkhand and his mother is a home maker and he has three sisters and one brother. His dream is to become a Coach. He is currently, a Coach Asst with SO Bharat Jharkhand and recently got a job with the NGO, Deepshikha as a School Coach.

Abhiranjan joined SO Bharat in 2015, participating in Football, Floorball & Badminton. Never interested in studies, he had always been drawn towards sports. He was part of the Unified Floor ball team at the 2017 World Winter Games Austria. Abhiranjan was recruited Captain of the team and proved his mettle in the sport, by being the highest scorer. His team won a Gold Medal. Recalling some experiences

vividly, Abhiranjan expressed that the team gained confidence by winning one of the earlier matches against a team to whom they had lost.

On his return, Mr Satbir, Asst Area Director, SO Bharat Jharkhand trained him to be Coach Assistant. According to him, Abhiranjan's physique, his positive attitude and a concern for every team member qualified him for the role. He trained Floorballers at the TATA Sports complex, in preparation of the Kazan World Winter Games 2022 (that finally got cancelled due to the pandemic).

*"I feel very proud that I am now a coach. Everyone wants to move higher in life. This is a great opportunity for me"- says Abhiranjan*

*"Yes we do require support and guidance for our health, job and money management, but we want you to have faith in us and involve us meaningfully. IT MAINTAINS OUR DIGNITY"*

**– Sahil Singh, Athlete leader  
from Lucknow, UP**



## Aditi Sabherwal, Basketballer (Delhi)

*Special Olympics, for Aditi Sabherwal, 34 yrs, is not something she joined, but it is her life. At the age of 15 she joined the movement. Cricket, the first sport she played, made her re-discover herself. At an international cricket carnival held in Bombay in 2006 she was part of the team that played against Pakistan. Being a student of Balvantrai Mehta School, she continued to participate in sports and took to Basketball. Basketball became her identity. She played passionately, dedicated herself to sharpen her individual skills whenever she could access the court in school. The sport gave her joy and positivity, with a deep sense of achievement. She was selected for the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Shanghai in 2007. The team won a Silver Medal. Aditi became an Olympics Medalist and a hero who received a joyful welcome on her return from the games.*

Sports changed her personality. The Special Olympics camps preceding the world games pushed her to speak. She was shy to speak as her speech was not smooth and that made her conscious. She feared travelling alone but that too became a thing of the past. Achieving victory at the games went beyond the basketball court. Although she could not participate again in the World Games, sports became her roadmap and she received Coaches training in Delhi. She has been a Coach Assistant helping train several athletes. At every event Aditi, standing tall, stands shoulder to shoulder coaching and fulfilling her role, happily.

Aditi was employed by a few schools, as Coach for training students with special needs, in sports. Currently she is in search of a job but

is sure that her dream is to stick to sports. Like her brother, she too wants to contribute to the family income. Having lost her father, to corona, she wants to ensure that her mother is comfortable. Simultaneously Aditi joined the National Youth Leadership Council and likes to spread the word about Special Olympics and Inclusion to new schools and colleges; she aims to sharpen her communication skills and is sure that it will enhance her confidence in public speaking, being a Youth Councilor.

*She says, "I want to tell people not to hide their children with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities. Make them join Special Olympics because it gets you freedom, makes you happy; you make friends, you stay fit and active".*



## Akshar Prajapati, Roler Skating (Gujarat)

*Akshar, 20 yrs, won a silver medal in Roller Skating at the Berlin games held in June 2023. In addition to the training by his coach, his father spent time to keep him in a habit of complying with instructions and to keep him in practice of the sport; he would place stones to create a slalom path. Akshar would often lose his balance and fall. Initially he had to be given repeated instructions. His victory is celebrated by his parents but how much of it is felt by Akshar beyond the moment of winning the medal, is uncertain.*

As a child Akshar would often fall sick. His speech is unclear as he speaks very fast. The mainstream school where he was admitted, gave up on him within three months. He was then admitted to Brahmjyoti, a special school, in Mogri Gujarat. Staying by himself kept him comfortable. He is happy within his world that essentially includes his brother, who he adores, and his parents.

Later he joined Gurukul, a special school located in Anand. 3-4 years back he started roller skating. Through the guidance of his father, his coach Rajendra Singh and mentor Jignesh Thakkar, his journey with sports led him to victory in Berlin. Roller Skating practices were regular and made him independent too. His attention and understanding improved. Beyond sports he paired with his unified buddy, Havya Thakkar, to spread awareness across several schools in Anand.

Akshar's involvement with Special Olympics has brought a noticeable change in him. He assists his Coach in training other athletes. He has started talking to strangers as well. He smiles, tries to pay attention & understand when others speak. Sports made him discover a new side of himself. Nevertheless, what the future holds for him still makes his father anxious. He waits for his son to give some indication of what he dreams to be.

*He wants to see his son, deal with his daily life which includes, counting money or even recognizing the note. His father acknowledges the change sports has brought for his son or even to them. They feel proud of Akshar, although feel that employment may not be a viable option for him.*



## Anil, Bocce (Pondicherry)

*Anil was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at a young age. He is 25 yrs old and, has a twin called, Akhil. All along he was compared with his brother. There were people who even suggested that he should be 'given away' to an orphanage. Although distressed, his mother pulled herself to not to pay heed. As a child he found it difficult to hold anything and was conscious of his posture. He experienced pain while walking and was advised special education, physiotherapy and play therapy by the physiotherapist.*

He joined Special Olympics through the Satya Special School Pondicherry in 2006. At school it was difficult for him to identify letters, read or write. Anil's sports journey started with assisted walk, soft ball, Table Tennis and bocce which he played at the State level. Sports assumes a significant place in the curriculum, considering sports as a means of advancement. He participated in a 100 mtr sprint in Anantpur and his sheer participation was a remarkable achievement.

He has been a keen participant in several non-sporting Special Olympics initiatives like the Athlete Development program, wherein he has actively participated in various workshops and virtual engagements, leading sessions for his fellow athletes. He sat on the panel at a discussion held during the Area Director's meet held in 2018 in Delhi and represented SO Bharat at the Global youth summit held during the Abu Dhabi Games held in 2019. At a Coaches

training Anil introduced 'Athlete Leadership' to the participants. According to him "Sports is not about winning or losing, it is about participation; that is where its actual power lies". He can speak four languages – English, Hindi, Telegu and Tamil.

"Anil is a great spokesperson. Amongst approx. 800 students, including those who have good communication skills, Anil stands out. He is different; he is gifted. In fact it is Anil who encouraged his mother to complete her 10th grade and then the 12th at the age of 35! It is the sports field which developed his confidence and self-esteem. Even if you are not winning, you are participating like everyone else with so many people watching you. The minute the Athletes are on the field you can see them happy and joyful. This is an emotion which neither my classroom nor the physiotherapy hall can give to them" Ms Chitra Shah, Area Director, SO Bharat Puducherry.





## Anjali Saini, Football (Delhi)

*Anjali has a natural talent for art. Be it Raakhee, Janamashtami, Ganesh Chaturthi, she deftly creates colourful pieces. Her table at home is strewn with pieces of coloured paper & decorative objects that bait her to create readily. Every piece, draws equal attention as it is different from the other, beauty being the common factor. Besides, she likes to help her mother in everything at home- be it cooking taking recipes from the net, or any other house chores.*

Clearly apart from keeping herself fit, her day lists a great number of surprises for her family. Anjali Saini, 27 yrs, is an Athlete from New Delhi with Intellectual & Multiple Disabilities. She has a twin brother who does not have a disability. Looking perfectly normal at birth, it is her delayed milestones that drew attention to a possible condition. She has hearing impairment as does her older brother who has also married a person with hearing impairment. Her father retired from the Health Department, Delhi Govt, while her mother is an aanganwadi teacher. Anjali is one of the five siblings and is an alumna of the Kulachi Hansraj Model School, New Delhi, currently pursuing second year from IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University).

She joined SO Bharat in 2015, playing football under the close guidance of Coaches Suresh and Praveen. She won a team Bronze for India in Unified Football at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 held in Abu Dhabi.

According to Coach Suresh, because of her continuous practises, she learnt to be a team member, attempting to communicate with other players and concentrating on the game. **“With a bit of individual attention, she started to grasp as she fully concentrated on the skills being taught to her. She adapts fast and is very compliant. Her strength in the game is backfoot defence. I have learnt too, and can communicate appropriately with her as well”.**

Adding to this Praveen, her Coach for the Abu Dhabi Games said, “As she started to interact with other players, she also assisted in making them learn the skills. Even when it came to herself, she ensured that she kept trying a particular skill until she got it finally. A fighter!”

*“Special Olympics gave her confidence. She met persons like herself. She has a group of friends, where she is constantly learning and feeling positive”- Anjali’s Mother. Anjali got engaged recently and looks forward to a wonderful married life.*



## Ankit Panwar, Powerlifting (Delhi)

*Ankit Panwar, is a powerlifter, diagnosed with Downs Syndrome. He participated in the Special Olympics world summer games held in Abu Dhabi in 2019 winning three silver medals. He continues with the sport that, going beyond his achievements, defines him. He wakes up early everyday to go to the gym independently, located about a km and a half from his residence. Powerlifting did not end with his medals at the world games; the games and his celebratory welcome thereafter, reinforced his passion.*

In November 1992, when he was born, recalls his father, Mr Rajendra Singh Panwar, there were no signs of a deviation. As he grew, his parents observed a delay in his milestones. He would fall sick frequently and became very weak. Ankit was diagnosed with Downs Syndrome at the age of one and a half yrs. The condition was unknown to them, his father being in police services while his mother a home-maker.

For about two years he joined a mainstream school but had to be shifted to specialised care due to inability to cope with studies at an elementary level. On joining his school, DAV in Vikaspuri, he participated in a variety of sports. He was unable to run as fast and was not interested in shot put. On his own, Ankit suggested that he wanted to try powerlifting. His Coach Suresh Kumar, trained him and he continued his practises at the gym. He got selected across all levels, stamping his journey to Abu Dhabi. Ankit participates at every sporting

event, having done so in Pratishtha too, a youth-initiated community outreach program.

According to his father, it was sports that helped him achieve where academics could not. He is weak in simple calculations. Numbers confuse him. His speech is challenged. Notwithstanding, Special Olympics gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his ability and earn recognition. The awards from the central government which followed his Abu Dhabi participation, established his identity in his community and country.

Ankit enjoys an independent living to an extent. He does not depend on any family member for his daily needs. His day-to-day routine is in place. He takes care of his food intake, being careful of having milk, fruits and nuts regularly. His parents are proud of both their sons; the elder a World Games medallist and the other a B-tech civil engineer.



## Ankush Saha, Golf (Karnataka)

*Ankush is a special athlete who plays Golf & is a distance runner, coached & mentored by his father, Lt Col BD Saha (Retired) since 2009. He was introduced to distance running in 2012 by Santhosh C. Padmanabhan, founder member, Runner's High Bangalore.*

Seeing Ankush, it is needless to say; he is particular about his fitness regime that includes yoga etc. While doing so he does not hesitate to prod his father to be regular as well. He worked as a Sports teacher with the Spastic Society Bangalore for 5 years as well.

Ankush won a Gold Medal in Golf at the Special olympics world Summer games held in Berlin Germany in 2023, a Silver medal at the World Summer Games in 2019, Abu Dhabi after having participated in a World Games for the first time in LA USA in 2015. The BMW Berlin Marathon 2022 held on 25 September 2022 was Ankush's fifth full Marathon, clocking 42.2 kms in 4 hours and 46 minutes, along side approx. 45000 runners. Ankush has been running since 2012 slowly building up to running half marathons (21.1 kms) from 2014 onwards, having run several of them before switching to running full marathon (42.2 kms) from 2017.

Ankush, was born of a difficult childbirth asphyxiated for 8 minutes and was put on resuscitation. On the fourth day of birth he suffered repeated seizures. All clinical tests led to no conclusive diagnosis, and possible damage

to his brain and other vital organs. He did not speak a word, in the absence of his father, a serving army officer at that time, for two years. As he grew his speech, mobility, etc. showed signs of slower improvement. His mother, Ms Champa Saha, attempted to comprehend his condition better and received training to be a 'Special Educator'. It was clear- her son would not react to intangible concepts like 'faster' 'slower' 'softer' 'harder'. Her vision was clear- "However my son is mentally wired, he has to grow to be proud of himself".



*Ankush is happily married to Alopa, the wedding bells having chimed in December 2022. As his parents feel proud having him be part of Special Olympics, Ankush swiftly says that he would like to take care of his parents and, that is what would make him proud.*



## Anurag Prasad, Powerlifting (Chattisgarh)

*Anurag Prasad, 32 yrs, won 3 gold and 1 silver medal at the World Games held in Berlin in June 2023. The achievement brought a smile on his face, something that eluded him. This was his opportunity to prove his mettle. Anurag is a powerlifter from Durg, Chattisgarh. His father is a retired guard and, his mother a home maker. Anurag could not speak until the age of 3 when he got a seizure and a slow mental growth was diagnosed. The seizures stopped with medication, leaving behind a learning disability.*

Until class five he went to school, an experience that brings back memories of bullying. His speech is unclear, and that made him the butt of laughter back then. He recalls how children in his class used to tell him to go away and not join them. He felt sad, dejected, and would withdraw. Once on being bullied he slapped his perpetrators and was in turn reprimanded by the school authorities on account of physical abuse. Anurag was happy when he left the school.

At a seminar held in his hometown 3-4 years back he met Mr Pramod Tiwari, Area Director of the State. Seeing his physique, he suggested that he joined the gym which was located near his house. He reached out to the gym that belongs to his student (former), Mr Sooraj. Sooraj personally trained Anurag rigorously. He has been utilizing the facility, Guru Fitness, for 4-5 years now, free of cost. As he practices there his friends cheer him and that gives him

immense joy. The sports arena provided him a window to breathe. He has participated in Powerlifting, Badminton, Bocce and Cricket.

Anurag took the guidance of Coach Mr Dilip Chaudhary, a Coach from Gujarat and associated with SO Bharat for twenty years. He specifically admired the attention Anurag pinned on his performance and his undeterred streak to win. He took care holistically, ensuring a diet of milk and oats regularly. Although fond of sweets he refrained, to keep fit for the games.

Soon after the games, Anurag was employed by his school, that had shunned him earlier for his 'misconduct'. Explicitly sharing his thoughts Anurag says that he would like to be a travel agent where he could make tickets for people to travel all over the world. He likes the uniform of the ticket collector of the Indian railways and would like to wear that too. Anurag is a member of the SO Bharat board.





## Aparimita Singh, Athletics (Maharashtra)

*Aparimita participated in Athletics in the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Abu Dhabi in 2019. The games and even the pandemic that followed, saw her emerge as a confident and hard working individual. "Her constant attempt to bring out her best, is admirable and inspiring", says Gayatri Pore, a youth & sibling leader from Mumbai.*

Aparimita was born in 1999 in Banaras, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, having little to offer in Special Needs Care. Her early months revealed a diversion from normal development and she was diagnosed with Intellectual Disability. She spoke at the age of 5. For the required support they shifted to Mumbai, Maharashtra. Remembering those days, her mother Ms Jyoti Singh said, "We did everything that anyone asked us to do, we went just anywhere, with this hope that things will look up for us; I know that my daughter's mental age is half of her chronological age, it pained me to see that she would quietly see other children go to school and then asked me "Why can't I?".

In 2015 she joined SPJ Sadhna School and Special Olympics; life began to change from there. There was positivity. Coach Rajashri Ghosalkar mentored her, beginning with understanding her, spending exclusive time with her and gradually introducing her to groups of children. Sports made an impact. Her energies were channelised to overcome developmental challenges. She grew as a good human being who is socially useful and productive. The sportsman spirit, the fighting spirit, the ability

to bounce back from adversity are some of the behavioural changes observed in her, according to her parents.

Along with the sports program, Aparimita was enrolled in visual art and craft, diamond sorting etc. After school she received, skill development training by an NGO, SOL Arc that also works around gainful employment to people with special abilities.

On her return from the World Games, she ramp-walked twice; once at a fashion show held during the Lakhme Fashion Week and then, at one organized in her school by Ms Krishna Mehta, a fashion designer. She interned with a dress designer and with the the SGL Labs (Solitaire Gemological Laboratories) in the area of data entries.

Aparimita is employed with the Amazon delivery centre in Mumbai and has seamlessly adapted to the workplace. The remuneration she earns boosts her self-esteem. She goes for swimming too, in her weekly off-days. Aparimita continues to learn, grow and inspire people.



## Avila Kane, Roller Skating (Goa)

*When Avila was born, she was diagnosed with Down Syndrome with 5% chances of her survival. Her mother who cannot hold back her tears even today, recalls the shock. Requiring blood transfusion soon after birth, a call for action on the radio drew 100 donors to save her life. Her speech was extremely restricted. However, Avila survived and did well for herself.*

Avila got her admission in a mainstream school, Fairyland School, in the 'Resource room' which just had a few students at that time. The visible improvement in Avila encouraged more children to join the school.

Sports and dance were her strong inclinations. In class 4 Avila was able to teach yoga to the students of Class 6. Her penchant to dance often saw her replicating steps from TV. She was a keen roller-skater. At Special Olympics she played football, basketball, badminton, and Athletics too.

Avila joined Special Olympics in 2012 and was coached by Gareth Vaz, who also joined the movement then. She participated in Roller Skating at the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Abu Dhabi in 2019, winning a bronze medal. Avila also participated in the Dance Sport Challenge held on the sidelines of the World Games in Abu Dhabi, and won a Silver Medal.

Avila's mother too participated in sports, Athletics and Throw ball, in school, possibly making Avila

take sports seriously. She is carefully guided through a regular exercise and sport routine at home which has also helped her to be physically fit. She looks after herself well, waking up at 5:30AM every day. Avila speaks and understand Marathi and English. She is very cheerful and friendly. She likes to reach out and help others. Being the only girl in a joint family she holds a special place in the hearts of everyone.

Avila Kane is a certified Zumba instructor and is currently conducting Zumba classes at Fairyland Primary School, Fairyland High School, Popular English High School and Government Primary School, Goa- Velha.

*"I have no words to express what Special Olympics means to us. Avila would not have reached thus far without Special Olympics that trained her in sports and provided her with a mentor. I will try that she can continue her training and help many more persons to benefit through this transformative sports experience", says her mother.*



## Champa & Amita, Unified Footballers (Bihar)

L- Champa;  
R- Amita

*Differences is not what Amisha and Champa talk about. They play football and discuss it. They were part of the Unified Football female team that participated at the Unified Cup Detroit 2022. Champa recognizes her strength to be a mid-fielder. The opportunity deepened their bond through common anxieties of travelling overseas for the first time and representing India, together.*

Amisha 19 yrs is a girl from a remote area in the state of Bihar, participating in sports and that too one which is linked more with males. She was born with Multiple disabilities that includes speech impairment with learning disability. Her father is alcohol-dependent. Her house is in an orthodox belt that has no one having gone ever for football. Amisha was often stopped from participating in sports. But, her parents supported her decisions, allowing her to play.

Her journey through sports started in 2007 when the district Coach introduced her to Athletics. She was trained in Cricket and Football too. In 2020, she participated in the SOAP Virtual Football Competition winning a Gold Medal and rising to prominence. Amisha started to take regular football training and got enrolled in Rani Laxmibai Sports Academy under Coach Sanjay Pathak.

Sandeep, Area Director SO Bharat Bihar, has personally trained her in Athletics, Cricket etc. *"The change in her is drastic. She keeps and looks fit, she is confident and has learnt the skills well.*

*In the by-lanes when she plays, people around her stop to see her play. She looks like an Athlete."*

It is at the Rani Laxmibai Sports Academy that Amisha met her unified partner (teammate without an Intellectual Disability), Champa, pursuing first year in a Bachelors degree, at that time. Champa, belongs to a family of humble means. Her father is a construction labourer. Football has been her dream. She too has battled negative comments on her choice of sport, sports clothing etc.

The preparation for the Unified Cup strengthened her focus on footballing skills. The two practice together and have also attended a few camps together. Over time she has learnt how to communicate with Amisha even though she can't speak.

Unified Sports brought the two together. According to Champa, Amisha who gave wings to her passion. Football has exposed Champa to an intellectual disability but it is something that does not have to be spelt categorically. They practice, play, discuss, learn & have fun together.



## Daksh Joshi, Cycling (Uttarakhand)

*Beginning to sit at the age of one and to walk at two and a half along with a fear for cycles, made Daksh Joshi the least contender for cycling. At the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2015, LA, USA he won a Silver and a Bronze in Cycling.*

Daksh's delayed milestones faded away in memory, the day his father held his feet in his hands and placed them on the peddle. His father wept but strengthened his resolve to ensure his son experiences all the pleasures of childhood that his older son Laksh does. His mother being a teacher made a tough decision of not sending him for normal schooling despite attempting it once. His appearance stirred fear in other students of pre-nursery, where he was older than them. His communication is restricted. In a small town, his options exhausted. Daksh's parents decided to groom and educated him at home.

Daksh and his family, staying in a quaint town of Rudrapur in Uttarakhand, searched the net for understanding Down Syndrome. His parents flexed their social life to suit Daksh but never left him from any recreational outing. He has non-vegetarian food, and his parents do not; his wishes were fulfilled.

Daksh was interested in cycling. His father, would take him to the nearest stadium. He joined Special Olympics Bharat in 2013, coached by Ms. Shashi

Rana, a coach for over 15 years. His talent identified, Daksh was on the roll. He amazed his neighbours!

Attending the camps, Daksh learnt to take care of himself and helped in the household chores. His elder brother is his greatest friend. When Laksh returns from his college he loves to watch movies with Daksh carefully selecting the motivational ones like Bhaag Milkha Bhaag, Chak De India etc. Daksh has joined a special school in NOIDA as his previous one shut down during the pandemic.

Note my words please, says Daksh's mother, "SO Bharat is a huge platform that I respect whole heartedly. I do a lot for my child as is only natural for any parent, but what Special Olympics does is remarkable- SO impacts so many Athletes. The exposure, truly brings in confidence and joy for the Athlete as well as for the families. I salute each and everyone at Special Olympics!"

Daksh swims, cycles and gyms regularly. He plays basketball and cricket too. Sports keeps him calm. From the World Games at LA he talks about the flight, food, Cycling & the awards.





## Deepanshunath Singh, Roller Skating (Delhi)

*It was when Deepanshu was 6-7 years of age, he would often climb the boundary wall and walk on its narrow width, balancing himself. He would do this, behind his mother's back, with the support of his brother Tushar, who would keep a vigil. When his mother got whiff of it, she saw him do this, but, in silent admiration. She saw a ray of hope.*

Deepanshu would often speak with his friend's mother to get him roller skates so that he could practice, since he was not sure of adequate support from home.

Ms Rekha, Deepanshu's mother, saw sports as a silver lining. The roller skates would not last too long as he would practice furiously, rolling through the lanes and by-lanes around his house. Deepanshu pitched for Figure Skating at the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2022, that sadly, got cancelled.

Deepanshu's father is a carpenter and his mother is a home maker. He finds a mentor in his Coach Mr Rohit Manchanda, who has trained him in a range of sports as well. Deepanshu is a student of the MBCN (Mata Bhagwanti Chadha Niketan) a special school, since 2013.

According to his mother a difficult birth led to anomalies that impacted his intellect. His early years had his parents taking Deepanshu frequently to the doctor. He struggled through his school years until he joined MBCN. Earlier he would often come back frustrated not being able to understand or see the board. He was often chided for not paying adequate attention. When a school advised his parents to take him to a Psychologist, their response was that 'he is not pagal (Mad). So why should he go'. But finding

no way out, they did and they finally found that their son is a 'slow learner', showing no visible signs of it.

An aching journey took them from one school to another, receiving only rejections, even from a govt school.

Deepanshu was seen in a different light as he participated in Sports. He cracked out of a shell where he had found his peace, keeping to himself, and talking only to his immediate family members. With sports came confidence and a sense of belonging. Being a team-player, he learnt to reach out to others. What he learnt here took him through a much more 'giving' attitude, through his mother's constant encouragement. Very often, Deepanshu is given the responsibility of assisting the Coach in managing the other Athletes as well.

Deepanshu also is a prominent Athlete leader, fond of music and playing the DJ. He is currently working at a Computer class center, being part of the faculty. His dream is to be able to have a Skating (including Figure Skating) stadium close to his home to encourage and train many more skaters.

*"I could not understand at all. What was happening with my son, who looked perfectly normal to me. We did not have adequate finances to support us. MBCN and Rohit Sir showed us the way." – says Rekha*



## Dhriti Anant Krishna Pandit, Table Tennis (Maharashtra)

*DHRITI ANANT KRISHNA PANDIT was very excited to play at the world stage which is the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2023. She secured a fourth position and an experience of a lifetime. According to her, "We practiced hard, entered the stadium with pride and made our country proud". Dhriti had prepared earlier for the Abu Dhabi Games but, could not qualify. The disappointment that followed was deep and long lasting. The Berlin Games brought her smile.*

Dhriti is 25 yrs old with Downs Syndrome. Her condition was diagnosed when she was in Grade 3. After the age of 18 she could not continue with her vocational center, as per their rules. Staying home made her overly dependent on her parents. Sports offered her positivity and hope.

About five years back, she joined SO Bharat playing Table Tennis while also showing an inclination towards Handball & Basketball. She was mentored by the Coach Mr SKK Balaji Kamble, associated with SO Bharat since 2005. Dhriti is very demonstrative with her emotions. Happiness and disappointment are a frequent and overt reactions, and were observed as a concern by her Coach. Being a psychologist as well, he worked on it as a result of which, over a period, she showed improvement. Continuing sports will ensure further progress.

Mr Balaji arranged with a sports club located near Dhriti's residence, for her to practice

TT regularly. She plays with the mainstream athletes as well. Dhriti had the advantage of getting trained under two coaches, including Ms Sheetal, prior to the games. She enjoys a pleasing bond with both.

According to Coach Balaji, very often schools do not see beyond a pre-set syllabus, making sports secondary; but his experience tells him that Sports is the change that we all strive for. Sports keeps Athletes fit and refines their social behavior while balancing their emotions. As in the case of Dhriti he trusts that sports brings a change which is not restricted to the sporting field.

Dhriti is an Assistant Chef at Verukscha Foundation Culnaris - Cookery Institute. She recently made it to the cover page of a business organization. Each day in her life is meaningfully occupied. Her role makes her complete food orders and enable other students to learn to cook, cut veggies and become independent.



## Dimple, Floor Hockey (Himachal)

*Accustomed to a secluded existence, to being slighted and called names is how Dimple best knew her life in the rural seclusions of Himachal Pradesh, in a district completely detached from the main city. As a child with multiple disabilities (speech and hearing) along with intellectual disabilities, Dimple was left to her lot, with minimal interaction with people around her until a survey conducted by a government program 'Community Based Rehabilitation Work' (CBRW) brought her to the forefront.*

Motivated by her Coach Anuradha Sharma who also counselled Dimple's family, Dimple joined SO Bharat in 2007. 'Why sports? "How can sports change her life!' were questions that had to be answered before her parents agreed to have her join the program, although reluctantly. Her journey through various sports trainings and competitions exposed her to a completely new world. Attending them and seeing the others in her team, she learnt the importance of personal hygiene and grooming. Never having brushed her teeth before, she got conscious of cleanliness. Scaling up in everything, from social skills to confidence to personal grooming, became apparent to her family and neighbours. She participated in Floor Hockey at the World Winter Games, South Korea, 2013 winning a gold medal.

She returned a star. A place not connected even by road now boasted of one of them flying to a foreign land to represent India, followed by all the news coverage and publicity. Her family were started to get recognition through her reference. Special Olympics gave her an identity, replacing frequent slurs ('jhalli' meaning 'dumb') with recognition & respect.

Dimple is working as an assistant at Surya Uday Charitable Trust which is also a Special Olympics Sports Center for District Kangra. She takes care of the students of Pre- Primary and Primary Section. Although she struggles to speak, her participation in sports keeps her well occupied, active, and happy, alongside her job.

*"I love Special Olympics and my son is a Champion", says*  
**Dr Bhawna M. Singh Specialist (Obstetrics & Gynecology),**  
**Lucknow UP, mother of Sahil Singh.**



## Gauri Gadgil, Swimming (Maharashtra)

*Gauri Gadgil, 33yrs, diagnosed with Down Syndrome, is an International Swimmer from Maharashtra. She participated in swimming at the Special Olympics World summer games held in Shanghai in 2007 & at the SOAP (Asia Pacific) Regional Games held in Australia in 2013, having won a silver medal in each of the two events, while winning two bronze as well, at the regional games.*

Gauri is first open sea swimmer in her category having swam 19 kms within 3 hours in the Bhagirathi River. She has participated in a run swim run event securing the 1st place, which is amongst the 85 medals which go to her credit across swimming competitions at different levels. Gauri played the main Role in a Marathi movie - yellow. She has been awarded with 4 National awards, two of which were presented to her by the honourable President of India. Gauri is a Bharatnatyam dancer.

According to her mother, Gauri became more and more independent as she continued to participate in the sports camps. Before 2007, her mother would accompany her to all of the competitions but gradually, both Gauri and her mother adjusted to her strikingly uplifted confidence, communication and independence.

In the light of the achievements talking about her challenges becomes difficult. Gauri was pre-maturely born, she was very delicate and as a feature of Down syndrome kids, she used to fall sick quite often. her mother dedicated

herself to bring out the best in her child. Giving Gauri a daily full-body massage and a sun-bath, increased and repetitive one-on-one teaching on daily activities of living became a daily practise for her mother. Gauri can read & write Marathi on her own. Reflecting on her achievements, Gauri says, "Apart from neighborhood and school friends, swimming competitions and Special Olympics camps increased my friend-circle to a great extent. I learnt sign-language. With my college admission my circle of friends widened even more. So, according to me, an inclusive world is the one where you have supporting family and loving friends".

Despite all, it is the society that continues to pose the gravest threat. Persons like her are not accepted, down to the stares, comments and unsolicited advice, all point at inclusion and accessibility is still a far cry. Although Gauri maintains that it is sports and dance that gave her an identity, that otherwise may have been restricted to that of a person with Down Syndrome.





## George Aplonia, Cycling (Kerala)

*Aplonia, from Kottayam, Kerala won two bronze medals in Cycling (1K TT; 500 TT) at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 Abu Dhabi UAE. The achievement brought her hope to re-unite with her sister and to earn.*

When she was four years old her mother who is believed to be mentally unstable had attempted to kill her while travelling outside the city. She was caught in the act, by few co-passengers and the child was handed over to an orphanage. At the orphanage she would beat up the teachers and lock them. It was not a surprise that her school was changed. In four years four schools changed.

Finally she settled in the Anugraha Kottakkapuram under the mentorship of Shilaja Chandran (who has been associated with SO Bharat as Coach since 2012). With continuous sports and extracurricular training, individual attention and 'lots of love and care' Aplonia started to settle. She has a passion for dance. Although she carries no stage fear, she stammers and feels shy to speak.

She has been associated with SO Bharat for 5 years now. Her behavior transformed. Sports steered her energy positively. Besides cycling, Aplonia has participated in Volleyball, Handball and Badminton while in Special Olympics. She does not feel shy to talk and her aggression is nearly not there.

She met her mother once, at the MR mental hospital, but promised never to meet her again. She gets her peace from her 'lady-in charge' who she considers to be her mother. She got involved with taking care of the other Athletes, also volunteering to run errands.

She was happy to be received so warmly on her return from the world games. The Panchayat, which is the local government, gave her a befitting reception too. She received cash awards from different groups and authorities that felicitated her. The District Collector of Kottayam suggested to Sister Rani Joe, SO Bharat Kerala Program Manager, that they must initiate procuring a 'fit to work' certificate for Aplonia from the DMO (District Medical Officer) which would open opportunities for her employment in future as well.

Aplonia got married soon after the games and is blessed with a baby boy. Sister Rani looks at her with wonder and amaze at how the contrasting experiences have created a true Champion in her.



## Gunocean Singh Bedi, Table Tennis (Delhi)

*June 2021 was the first time when Gunocean participated in a competition organised by Special Olympics. The virtual Cricket competition broke the silence of the lock down, plunging the athletes into a competitive mood. When the final score took Delhi to the first position, Gunocean's home came alive with loud cheer and triumph. His home was a hub for practise for three more Athletes. Seeing an improvement, through practise sessions, to such an extent in her son, Ms Damanpreet Kaur Bedi, felt like she had received a trophy.*

Gunocean, born in 2003, got his first seizure at the age of three, before which all seemed normal with his development. He could attend a mainstream school until grade 3. With his hyperactivity increasing and learning ability dropping, his parents were asked to have him join a special school. The word 'Special' that came as a shock to his parents challenged them to re-plan their lives. What followed was the many doctors they approached and a stream of schools they tried. They experienced heart-breaking moments of seeing their son being bullied.

Overwhelmed by her son's achievements, Ms Damanpreet said, "One day when my husband went to the park to give the regular medication to Gunocean, he saw his hands tied with a rope. Much younger kids than him, were thrilled when they did this. And another time, when they were aero-modelling, the model aircraft got stuck in the branch of a tree. They told Gunocean to climb the tree to bring it back, and asked him to jump from there. He pulled out the aircraft and jumped, and

*fractured his leg. Why did they do this and how could they be thrilled with it. Perhaps they did not see what we see today. What makes me happy is to see the potential in my son, which this event has brought out".*

Besides Cricket, he plays Table Tennis being coached by Mr. Ravindra Saini, Mr Satish & Mr Sanjay. Mr Bedi is the Head of the Department of IT and Training & Placement at the Guru Tegh Bahadur Institute of Technology, Delhi, Ms Bedi, is a Dietician having authored a book on 'Keto Diet' in collaboration with AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences).

Sports according to Mr Bedi, "has been a real game changer in our life. He got selected in Table Tennis wherein his performance again brought pleasant surprises to us. Now that he is participating in 3rd Preparatory Camp for SO Games to be held at Berlin, he is fully geared up to bag LAURELS for our country. In nutshell, SPORTS has changed his overall personality by 180 degree".



## Hamza Kachwala, Athletics (Maharashtra)

*Hamza feels happy as he walks into his workplace which is the State Bank of India, Mumbai. He compiles data, working comfortably on the applications he is familiar with. He received his training from the SPJ Sadhna Special School that cocooned him right since his early years. He has always been conscious about earning and supporting his family, seeing his father work hard at a private firm and his mother constantly keeping their home in order.*

Hamza was diagnosed with mild Autism at the age of 4. His parents approached the doctor when they observed that he rarely spoke and when he did, it was words and not sentences. He was introduced to Special Olympics at his school. Both the organizations together defined his onward journey. His Coach Ms Rajshree trained and mentored him in Athletics, Cricket, Football and Table Tennis. Swimming too became his sport, turning his fear of water to excelling and winning medals at various events. Ms Rajshree, his Coach, continued to explore and nurture the sporting abilities within Hamza. She has been associated with SO Bharat for over 19 years. He also showed interest and got involved in activities like, Clay Modelling, grooming skills etc.

The year 2014 came with a great milestone achieved in his journey, when he first travelled independently with the SO Bharat Maharashtra contingent for a National Camp.

While sports made him independent and confident, his ability to communicate sharpened and he cracked out of his shell speaking at events held in his school and joining Athlete leadership in his state. His virtual engagements at SO Bharat events exposed his talent to the audience from all over the country.

Seeing his personality develop with a blend of all the stimulation he received, Rajshree commented, "He is so honest, so well-informed about anything, about Covid etc. Once a long trip was offered to him but he declined as there was his sister's wedding coming up and he felt that an amount of expense can be saved."

*"Sports has given him an identity and a recognition. Hamza has changed, from a shy person to being confident and independent. There is positivity around him. He has friends from his school and he stays in touch" Mrs Sarrah Kachwala, his mother.*



## Himanshi Mittal, Softball (Punjab)

*When you enter the 'RK Coffee house' in Jalandhar, Punjab, the frescoed walls welcome you, with an extraordinary hospitality team that includes Himanshi Mittal. Himanshi, 16 yrs has cerebral palsy. Her smile and confidence would draw anyone's attention.*

Born with the condition, she also had a few medical complications early in life and had to undergo corrective surgeries. This trail caused delays in her development that left her parents to explore furiously ways of re – planning their lives. When in a mainstream school, Himanshi kept to herself. She would only see her classmate's group together leaving her all by herself. Tiffin break would push her into a lonely corner, eating alone while passively watching others sit in groups. She never complained because this is what life was for her. Due to being unable to perform in studies and also showing signs of losing confidence, her parents shifted her to a special school.

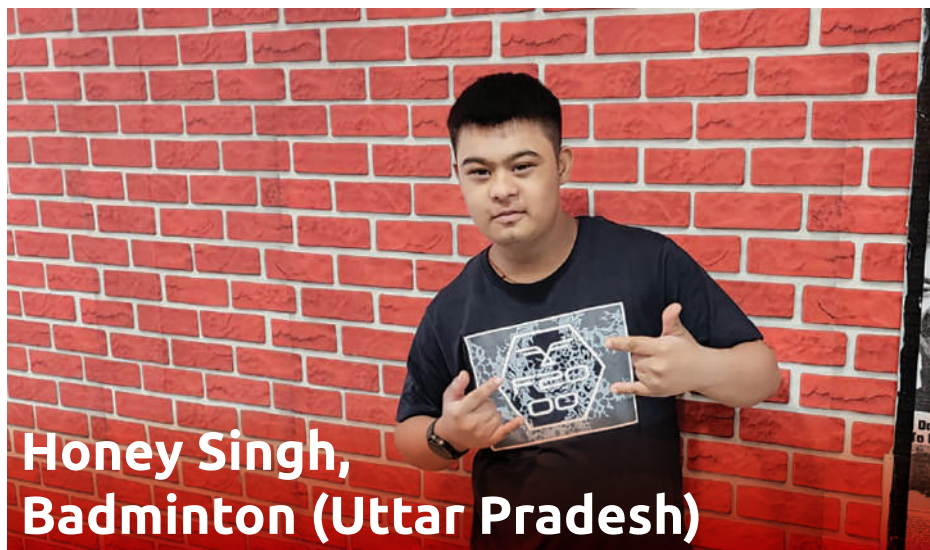
Admission in St. Joseph's convent special school Cantt road Jalandhar brought positive changes in her life. She learnt a variety of skills and was introduced to Special Olympics. She practised Softball, Baggo, & Yoga under the mentorship of her Coach, Ms Navjot Saroop. Within a short time, Himanshi started to look up to her mentor, very often overtly expressing her admiration for her.

Navjot said that it took a bit longer than expected, getting Himanshi to participate in sports. She hesitated because she felt that she would lose her balance and fall. She preferred to sit and do the activities. Constant counselling and perseverance on the part of her Coach gradually increased her sports involvement.

Early 2022 got her a job at a Café run by Ms Rekha Kashyap, National Trainer, SO Bharat. Having trained her for a while, Rekha said, "She has shown tremendous potential to assume a higher role. She works as the Front Desk manager at the café, also taking orders from the clients. It is sensitising the clients of an existing 'not so visible' disability along with co-existing abilities" Rekha is training more SO Bharat Athletes to be part of the hospitality team at the RK Café.

Ms Monica Mittal, Himanshi's mother is pleased to have her positively occupied all day. "I know she can utilise her energy positively. Sports and the café help her do so. Her reaction to everything was 'no', but now she wants to do more, to show that she can. I trust that sports has ignited that spark in her".





## Honey Singh, Badminton (Uttar Pradesh)

*Unified sports have brought Honey and Shubham together. Shubham is a passionate sportsperson playing multiple sports including Badminton and Football. Playing with Honey has brought him more opportunities to play and has also sensitized him towards differences and their acceptance. Shubham visits Honey's school regularly to train various other Athletes along with Honey. This has made the interaction between them more comfortable and natural. They have participated in various events together. Honey has made Shubham aware about Special Olympics. Honey is currently preparing for the upcoming Virtual sports competitions. He and Shubham have another reason to meet frequently.*

Honey Singh is a fun-loving Athlete from Bareilly, UP. He is often seen wearing sunglasses and dancing, to mimic the star who has the same name. He stands in stark contrast to his aunt, both of whom have Down Syndrome. While his aunt was kept back, isolated from the rest of the world, Honey continued to go out, move in the society, play sports. His aunt often was called names and was avoided by family and neighbours.

Honey was diagnosed with Downs Syndrome soon after birth. Even before the diagnosis his parents knew his condition as both are doctors. His delayed milestones established the reality, first in his movements and then in his speech and posture. His mother knew that special care for her son would be lifelong. Honey was born in 2006. Right from the beginning, he was made to join activities that would take special care of

his movements and growth. Having seen her cousin lead a life of rejection, Dr Sandhya was sure that she would not let her son have the same life.

She made him join Jeevandhara Rehabilitation Research Institute in Bareilly. He joined various activities there including Special Olympics sports. He participated in Badminton and Cricket. He is very fond of dancing too. However, it is Sports that has made him focussed, social and independent. His participation in the sports camps, his independent travel etc has made him confident. As his mother says, Sports has made him pursue physical activity like no other and keeps him occupied meaningfully through the day

Honey spends maximum time with his grandmother (paternal). He is also very fond of his teachers in school.



*Indramani, 21 yrs old, is an Athlete from Village Taraboi located in Puri, Odisha. He joined SO Bharat in 2013 and his life changed in a way that he had never imagined. The daily struggle for survival changed to sports and positive competition. His life style made him physically flexible as he helped his parents who in the agricultural fields. Being alone and isolated was a life he was familiar with. He did not go to school nor did he play.*

Hope came his way in 2013 when he was introduced to Special Olympics through OLS (Open learning system). He underwent counselling parallelly. Multiple aspects of the schooling contributed to his holistic development. Under the mentorship of his coach, Mr Kalindi, he was introduced to Handball, Volleyball, and Floorball. He played, trained, and competed, travelling all over the country for various events. He has played several times reaching the National level but, has not been able to get selected for any international event so far. Indramani joined the National Athlete input council and became active in the youth – led activities at the local level. In 2019 he along with his Unified buddy, Bibharani, participated in the Global Youth leadership Summit held on the sidelines of the Abu Dhabi World Summer Games. Following his participation, he successfully completed a project along with Bibha, under the mentorship of Mr Bibekananda and Ms Arpita Mohapatra.

*The project positioned him as a co-leader, spreading awareness about Special Olympics and*

*Inclusion across schools in the neglected and rural areas of the district.*

*The learning went both ways, while the new youth and schools gained insight into the Special Olympics movement, Indramani grew as an avid leader, shedding all inhibitions and diffidence. He has engaged across all Special Olympics activities including, young athletes, healthy athletes etc. He took everyone by surprise when at an event he spoke to a media channel with unrelenting and admirable flow. In no hushed tones did he speak about the importance of Inclusion. He enjoys music and dance and has sharpened his technical skills, enjoying making 'reels' for Instagram etc.*

*Indramani currently works in his village as a daily wager, labouring at construction sites; although his connection with Special Olympics gets stronger as he continues to spread the word about the organization to everyone at the local level, often talking about his enriching learnings from the Abu Dhabi World Games.*



## Joanna Rodrigues, Roller Skating (Maharashtra)

*Joanne Rodrigues, won an online Live cooking competition. She stood first in a competition that kept her productively engaged whilst preparing for the competition. Crowned as a 'Teen Chef' Joanne won the competition organised by Orane Kids Noida, for the second consecutive year, aging it both the times.*

Bryne and Janice Rodrigues are parents of Joanne (14 yrs) and Brydan (12 yrs), both on the Autism Spectrum. They joined SO Bharat in 2020, when the world was engulfed by the pandemic. Skating is their favourite sport which they often practise inside their house as well. Their first in-person participation came through the National Health fest where while Joanne and Brydan got screened, Bryne and Janice volunteered to assist the Thane / Mumbai (Maharashtra) team for the event.

However, their experiences have not always been 'joyful'. They went through the shock of a diagnosis not once but twice. They fought through stray and hurtful comments from people who hastily categorised their children as a 'liability' and showered them with pity- "why did God do this with you!". Drawing strength from their children, the two professionals who were at the prime of their careers, relocated themselves to India with development of Joanne and Brydan being the prime focus. They came to Mumbai and continue to work remotely. Janice continues to work remotely whereas Bryne attends to his projects majorly during the nights.

Until 2021 their children went to a Special School; Janice and Bryne were forced to withdraw the children from the Special School as they were unable to keep pace with Joanne's development due to their rigid curriculum. "Instead of struggling to correct them, we changed our perspective and attempted to view the world through the eyes of our children. Excelling in academics have never been the prime focus considering that every Child is different. More important for them is to be functionally independent- says Bryne.

After having participated in SO Bharat fitness competitions, unified dance, Fit5, Joanne also enrolled for the Communications workshop for 9 weeks. "The learnings have made a tremendous impact on them. People who called my children a liability now call them great stars and wish their own neurotypical children to also achieve similarly under our guidance" – says Janice

Joanne and Brydan continue participating in Swimming & Skating having connected with Ms Sneha Jadhav, the SO Bharat Coach



## Joginder Singh Bendi, Cricket (Delhi)

*Joginder Singh Bendi has an intellectual and a physical disability. Having been a part of Special Olympics all along, he reminisces his childhood and youth tied with Special Olympics for him, a platform that turned his disability into strength. His passion for Cricket and drive to excel made him a good batsman and left-hand spinner. His sports accolades established his excellence bringing him on the cover of the spirit magazine in 2005.*

He led the Delhi state cricket team winning a gold medal at the Special Olympics Asia Pacific cricket tournament held in Ahmedabad in 2004; he played in India's national cricket team, which participated in the Special Olympics International Cricket Cup tournament in Mumbai in 2006; His team won a bronze medal in Cricket played at the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Shanghai, China in 2007; He brought a Silver medal in friendly matches played at Dhaka, Bangladesh in March 2009; he participated in the Special Olympics International Cricket Carnival held in Delhi and won a Gold Medal.

Apart from athletics and sports, Joginder has also achieved remarkably in his professional life as well. In 2012 he worked as the front desk officer at Special Olympics Bharat having already established his identity as an athlete and a leader. Before that, he worked as an office assistant with the Special Olympics Asia Pacific Regional office that functioned out of Nizamuddin East, New Delhi, then. It was soon after that Jogi left for United States of America. He has a job and is happily married. Jogi's hard work, pleasing personality and a zeal to succeed has made him a self-sufficient grown-up adult and a role model for his fellow athletes.

*Jogi, owing to his commendable communication skills was comfortable to speak in front of the media. He was invited to the white house at a dinner hosted by The President of United states of America, George Bush.*

*"Sports is heaven for children with special needs. It provides them an opportunity to perform, and show their best. They cherish the claps, cheering, hugs, which go beyond medals. They forget the medal but they remember the warmth of acceptance and thrill of the moment"*

**Ms Anju Bhatia, parent of Prathna Bhatia, Swimmer Chandigarh**





## KA Advait, Swimming (Telangana)

*It takes only a few seconds to strike a conversation with Advait. His confidence, curiosities, politeness can take anyone by surprise.*

However, his calm demeanor hides the struggles he went through in his early childhood and those that he fights even now. Advait's mother was overwhelmed as she spoke about a difficult pregnancy, delayed milestones and an attack of Meningitis that shaped her son's early childhood. He was diagnosed with ADHD (Attention deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and Mild Mental Retardation. However, she guided Advait through his studies in a mainstream school where she herself is a teacher. He was educated in the 'Resource Room'. He could not write but was perfect with his orals. In fact Advait chants the Sanskrit Shlokas ( Vishnu Sahisra Nama) 100 verses at a go, with ease. He continued to study through the Open Education system after completing grade 8 at the Pallavi Model School, Telangana. It is here that his coach Mr Rama Rao identified his flair for aquatics. For two years he went to a Special School- Sharda Special School.

In 2016 Advait went for the first Special Olympics Camp which was held in Mumbai for Aquatics followed by attending an exclusive Aquatics training Camp in Goa in June 2017. His parents were delighted to observe his

confidence levels rising as he attended the camps and interacted with co-athletes.

When at home, Advait likes to browse the net, searching for online quiz. His favorite TV show was Kaun banega Crorepati. He plays the Key board. At Sharda Special School he has anchored programs. His latest desire is to learn driving. He drives a scooty to run errands for his mother. While doing so he has also learnt to manage money.

For the World Games he practiced swimming daily for 3 hours, never wanting his parents to be there while practicing under the guidance of coaches. Advait won a silver medal at the Special Olympics World Summer games 2019 held in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

"As parents we have learnt from Advait too: his clear thoughts, his affection", says his mother, Ms Indira K Ashok, "It is overwhelming to see him growing so confident. Earlier too we went out of our way for Advait but kept wondering whether what we were doing was right, we were unsure. Special Olympics gave us hope".



## Kalpana Mehra, Badminton (Chandigarh)

*Never having seen a passport before, Kalpana's mother held it for a while to feel what it is to have her daughter travel outside the country. Moreover, to represent India in a sporting event which none of them had even dreamt of. Kalpana participated in the Unified Badminton Championship held in Bangkok Thailand in 2019 winning a Silver Medal.*

Kalpana, 26 yrs, athlete from Chandigarh, could not walk or even talk till she was around 10 yrs. Not crying at birth and her delayed milestones made her parents take her to a doctor around the time she turned three. At the age of 5 she joined the Government Rehabilitation Institute for Intellectual Disabilities (GRIID) Sector 31 in Chandigarh. Before that she could not even judge between what was edible and what was not. She was physically carried from one spot to another.

Today when you talk to Kalpana she is the first one to ask a question. She is clear with her choices, cheers her co-Athletes, enjoys with them and loves her Coach- Sheetal Negi. Under her guidance Kalpana joined the Special Olympics sports program in 2016 and participated in Athletics, Floorball, Badminton, Basketball, Cricket, Golf (got a third position) & Netball. Sports is clearly her choice! It gives her a sense of self-esteem and joy that makes her want to participate again and again.

Dr BS Chavan, Director Principal and Prof & Head, Deptt of Psychiatry, Govt Medical College & Hospital, Chandigarh, has seen Kalpana and her family journey through the trials and

tribulations over twenty years. He admires the role played by her mother, Ms Hema Mehra, whose perseverance has impacted Kalpana more than anything else. Belonging to an extremely humble financial background Dr Chavan offered Hema a job as a care taker at the School.

Sheetal recalls how Kalpana is always ready for sports. She has combined Kalpana with Arpita Malik, her partner without ID, for the event. A passionate badminton player herself, Arpita was a befitting unified partner for Kalpana.

Sheetal plays her role of carefully mentoring Kalpana with a firm eye and a caring heart. For three years Kalpana has been playing Badminton and has also won a Gold Medal in the open Nationals. The change in Kalpana establishes the power of sports to bring about change. Participating in sports has made her confident, expressive, responsible, and punctual and these qualities booked her a spot at GRIID. She works as an attendant at GRIID, having started her job in February 2023, under the supervision of Coach Ms Sheetal Negi. She gives general and sports specific exercises and Badminton Training to School athletes.



## Kalyani, Floor Hockey (Delhi)

*Kalyani is one of the residents of the Asha Kiran Home, which is a Delhi Government run residential care facility for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. Kalyani won a Team Bronze in Floor Hockey at the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2017, held in Austria. She became a Health Messenger as well, in 2019. She was nominated out of a total of 1000 residents, most of whom have profound challenges.*

*In Aug 2009 Kalyani, 24yrs of age then, was referred to the Asha Kiran Home, Delhi, abandoned and oblivious of her early life & antecedents. She joined the home unstable and withdrawn. She could not even talk properly. She lacked self-reliance in activities of daily living and was completely dependent on the house aunties. After spending some time in Asha Kiran and with regular intervention, she improved in activities, behaviour, and communication. She learned to speak Hindi here.*

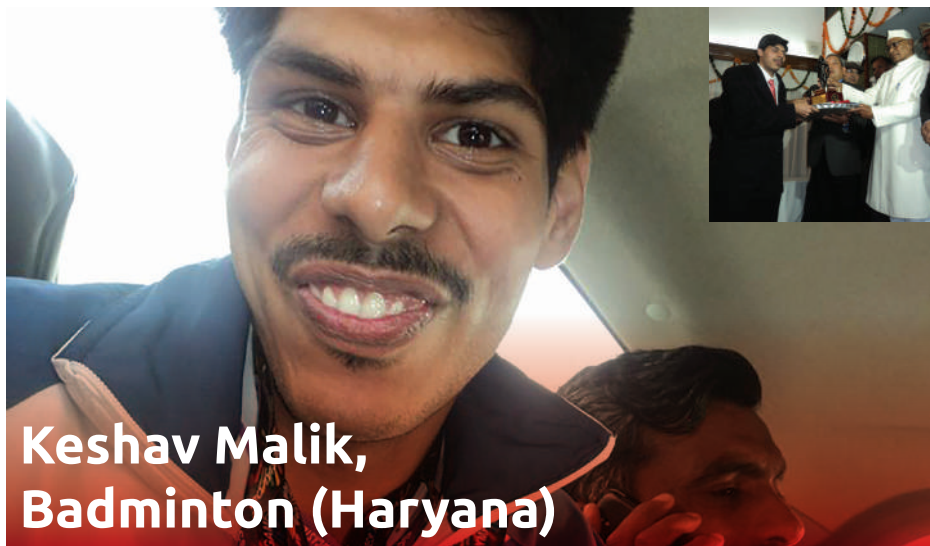
*She joined the Special Olympics Sports program and participated in, cycling, volleyball, softball, athletics, and floor ball. She pursued Floorball under the guidance of her Coach -Ms Manoj. She had a single point focus, which was, to push herself to the limit, to win. Having lost a previous opportunity of participating in the World Games in 2015, the Austria Games brought her cheer and hope.*

**"Sports has increased her confidence and has now become a part of her personality. In sports she even demonstrated leadership skills by**

**assisting her coach in team coordination". - Ms. Rachna, former Superintendent, Asha Kiran Home, Delhi .** *At the Asha Kiran Home, she started exploring other co-curricular activities like dancing, Yoga, art, and craft etc. She knows how to make different hairstyles and other grooming activities.*

*These experiences naturally and gradually developed her holistically also helping her make friendships. She teaches fellow residents if they face any problems. She resolves issues between her friends and consoles them. Kalyani's physical appearance has also improved. She is physically fit and looks young and smart.*

*Resilient to the changing situation, the pandemic made Kalyani and with few others, take the responsibility to guide the residents of the Home on the Covid Protocols. Kalyani has interned with 'Lemon Tree', which is a hotel chain in India. Kalyani's journey of growth and progress has been intriguing and can be attributed to diverse factors, the Special Olympics exposure being one of the most significant ones.*



## Keshav Malik, Badminton (Haryana)

*Microcephaly is a term that Keshav's family became familiar with when he was around 2-3 yrs of age. He was extraordinarily active but his head appeared smaller in proportion to his body. His milestones too, were delayed. He was placed in a special school. As he played with his cousins, his father observed his sporting inclination. He thought of giving it a shot. This decision of his father mapped the journey of Keshav and his family carving an identity that brings joy and pride to all.*

Keshav Malik is the first Athlete with Special needs to receive the Bhim Award in 2014, following his medal victory at the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Athens in 2011. The Bhim Award (5 lakh) is the highest sports honor given by the government of Haryana, India, for "outstanding performance in national and international competitions." He, along with two more Athletes was the first also to get employed by the Haryana State Government in 2018, in the 'exceptional sporting talent and performance' category. He is employed as a Sports Coach. Along with sporting rules, he speaks to his students about everything, from discipline to safety, respect for parents and elders and more.

When Keshav, 29 yrs, residing in Rohtak, Haryana, was 9-10 yrs old, his parents attended an event where a Special Olympics Athlete was felicitated by a local authority. His father went out of his way to identify his sport- which was Badminton. In addition to being mentored by Deepak Walia, Coach from

SO Bharat, he received Coaching outside of Special Olympics as well. He participated in the Athens Games in Badminton winning a Gold and a Silver medal.

His sports participation brought discipline in his day-to-day living. He became conscious of time and looked forward to his practise sessions. Earlier he was often heard repeating what others said, but gradually he started to reason out things himself and he became conversational. It gave him a sense of direction that kept him conscious of 'improving his game'.

*"According to me his learning comes from sports. I feel proud of him. He is truly special for us. From everything that has contributed to his personality and standing in the society, Special Olympics reigns highest. I say that because it is a platform for the most marginalised population. It can be observed in everything he does. By having him join Special Olympics, I think I, as a parent, has benefitted the most" – Mr Kultar Malik, Keshav's father.*





## Lalita Mona Uarnw, Athletics (Chattisgarh)

*Lalita 21yrs old, was quite contented. She stayed inside her hut located deep inside a village. Her facial features show a disability and to a large extent was the reason why she stayed home. She did not play like the other children; interacting only with her immediate family. Her parents and two siblings stayed focussed on the daily fight for survival by labouring, not paying much attention to her. Lalita never knew a better world.*

She joined the Ankur Special School, Korba in 2012 and was placed under the mentorship of Mr Nagesh Thakur, a Coach with SO Bharat since (approx.) 2002. Although she was unable to study, she received training in looking after herself and in keeping her surroundings clean along with skills such as diya making, painting etc.

Lalita participated in the National Championship (Athletics) held in Rajasthan in October 2016, after having participated at the district, state & national levels. She participated in Athletics securing a Fifth position in 100 mtrs and 200 mtrs, at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 in Abu Dhabi. Sports pushed her to step out. She ran and felt happy. Her interaction with others increased. She has always been calm and cheerful but now, she engaged with people her age and those 'like her'. She expressed that running makes her feel free and strong.

'The fact that she travelled out of the country and participated has changed her parent's perspective towards her. They pay attention to her needs and growth. They ensure that she goes to school regularly, **Mr Dinesh Chauhan, Program Manager SO Bharat Chattisgarh (also a Special Educator at Ankur Special School).**

Lalita continues to study and often assists the school staff in taking care of other children and practises (sports) practises daily at (location?). She dreams to be able to support her family someday.

Life for Lalita is very clear and planned. She feels cocooned at her work place and sports. How she would adjust in the larger society, if ever she must, is yet to be seen.



## Mantra Harkhani, Swimming (Gujarat)

*It would always remain an extraordinary experience when one gets to offer a cup of tea to the honorable Prime Minister of the Country. This is an opportunity availed most confidently and modestly by Mantra Jitendra Harkhani, 19 yrs, an Athlete hailing from Rajkot, Gujarat. Having won two Gold Medals in Swimming at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 Abu Dhabi, he shared his feat in a one-on-one conversation with the Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi held virtually on 25 Jan 2021, on being one of the 32 awardees of the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar 2021.*

Mantra Harkhani, born with Down's Syndrome, dreams to be world's best swimmer. He attained education from the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and works at his family store, called Mantra's Mart. The experience is training him in money transactions. Mantra is a cheerful young man, who enjoys the company of his friends, practices yoga and is fond of singing and dancing.

However his diagnosis and developing other medical complications left his parents disillusioned. Many challenges fell their way be it from the family members, who constantly compared him with other children his age, or his school where the teachers came back frequently with him not 'coping'. While his father, Mr Jitendra Harkhani, didn't hesitate to switch jobs, his mother Ms Bijal Harkhani, opened an Integrated School, engaged personally in designing a function-based curriculum for Children with Intellectual Disabilities.

His introduction to sports brought a whole new direction that felt positive. His attraction to water had his parents train him in swimming from the age of 10. He joined SO Bharat in 2014 when he participated in swimming in the district games, receiving his training under the Coach Vipul Das. It was a whole new experience. "Everything was new. Sports transformed Mantra as well as us. With each Camp, he returned a notch more confident, more independent. We hesitated to send him for his first camp because we were unsure that he would be able to look after himself. We soon learnt to shed that anxiety." – said his father.

Looking at Mantra, while his parents count their blessings, they also feel concerned with the available avenues for mainstreaming of their son and many children like him.



## Muskan Garg, Powerlifting (Haryana)

*Muskaan, 21 yrs, won a gold in deadlift, a silver each in squat and bench press and, a Bronze in a combo of three. She shares her victory with her mother without whose battle with family and friends Muskan would not have made it to the victory stand. The calm and joy on her face conceals her tribulations starting from her parents parting ways because of a child 'like Muskaan'. Family and friends who cautioned her mother not to invest too much in her as it would be futile, are today making incessant calls to express their amazement and admiration. Her mother recalled moments of struggle with people and herself to have her daughter participate in this life changing experience and heaved a sigh of relief. "Something in me kept pushing me forward against everyone's wishes. I always had faith in Sports, her teachers and Coaches"- Neena Garg, Kundali, Haryana.*

Her mother was told from family and friends that why was a girl been given a chance to participate in sports, and that too powerlifting. She was asked to teach her home chores instead. But the World Games made a tremendous difference in the perspective of her family. Her mother felt rewarded as she saw her child win for the family and for the country. The family's approach changed, they appreciated both Muskaan and her mother in continuing with this journey.

Muskaan joined SO Bharat in 2016. Every camp, made her more independent, more expressive

and happier. Her Coach, Late Mr Dayanand ensured that she practised regularly and in fact told her mother that he was sure of her victory at the games. Although there is no sporting facility nearby, she managed going to the gym, play badminton etc. While powerlifting has been her focus, she also loved participating in other sporting activities like ice skating and floorball. Without a chance at Sports through Special Olympics she may have remained isolated in her shell. Muskaan still is shy to talk as most people find it difficult to understand her speech. She however, loves to spend time with children while dreams of a future in sports.

*"I have full faith in Sports being an effective tool for bringing about Inclusion. Sports should not be only for a few; it should be for everyone"* **Mr Sukdeb Chakraboty, Coach SO Bharat West Bengal**, associated with the movement since 2010. Sukdev organises a week-long Unified Sports program every year around 3 December, in his district.



## Nallabothu Balakrishna, Badminton (Andhra Pradesh)

*Balakrishna's biggest moment is his victory at the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in LA, USA in 2015. He won one gold and two silver medals in Badminton, a sport that led him to re discover himself. He emerged as an achiever on a world stage and that changed his self-image and how others approached him.*

His early years in a mainstream school witnessed a downward graph as he started to lose interest, unable to cope with studies. He was referred as a slow learner and very often, was not included with the others. He has an intellectual disability with hearing impairment. The world around him was silent. His parents were more attentive to making ends meet by working ceaselessly in the agricultural fields.

He joined the RDT in 2013 and was placed under the mentorship of Coach B Madanmohan, a national trainer and associated with SO Bharat for 9-10 years. Badminton was his sport from the beginning and he started to receive regular training.

Balakrishna's skill in sports showed improvement and he was prepared to showcase it as well. In 2013 he joined the Special Olympics program and he got the medium he deserved. His first participation

at an international level was in the SOAP regional games held in Newcastle in 2013. He won two gold and one silver medal, opening his personal medal count. The invitational games held in Barcelona and Andorra in 2014 and 2018 increased his tally by one Silver and one gold respectively.

Balakrishna's achievements have surpassed sports. He is confident and communicates with everyone, uninhibited to convey his thoughts. He is fun-loving and makes the atmosphere light like, hiding his friends' sports guards etc. He likes to go for movies with his friends.

Balakrishna has been appointed as support staff with the Physical Education department in the 5th campus of the inclusive high school of the Rural development Trust. He got married this year and hopes to continue with sports, a platform that made him discover his abilities and lead a fulfilling life.





## Neel Yadav, Cycling (Haryana)

*Neel Yadav, SO Bharat Athlete from Haryana cycled 6 days a week, for approx. 6 and a half hours daily braving the early morning winter fog, a holiday, family guests etc. Cycling was a part of him giving him purpose, confidence, and happiness.*

Neel was placed in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) for two months following premature- birth in August 2005, with very low chances of survival. His parents observed his delayed milestones and approached a few doctors to understand the reason. He was diagnosed with a learning disability. His parents never lost hope.

Neel's father is an Income Tax officer and his mother a Govt college lecturer. Neel is a student of the Heritage School Gurgaon Haryana. In 2017 Neel's father had a chance meeting with Mr Virender Kumar, Area Director, SO Bharat- Haryana. Neel began to participate in cycling in Special Olympics. Neel's father, a cycling enthusiast, became his role-model. Neel demonstrated a potential in cycling. His father personally spent time with him, honing his cycling skills.

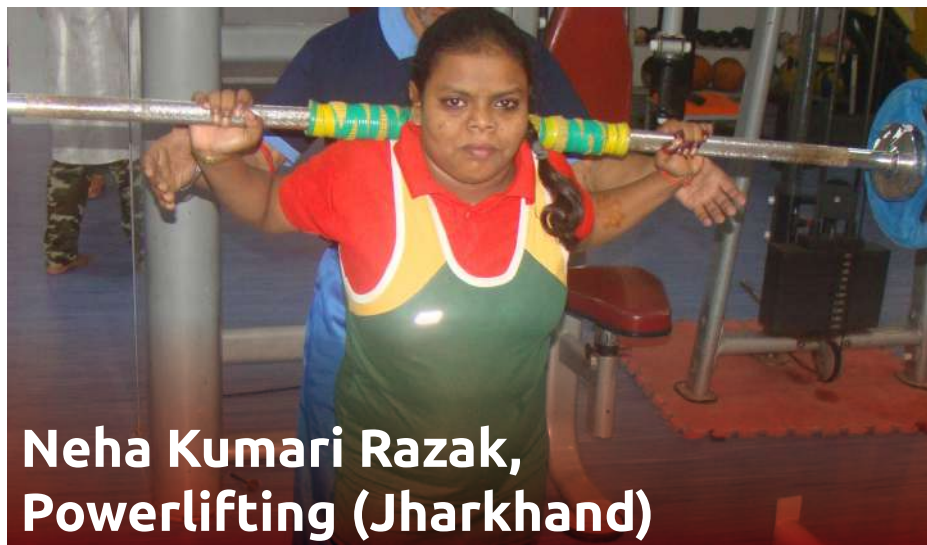
Once Neel started to paddle, there was no looking back. He won a gold medal at the SO-Haryana State Championship in March 2017 in 2 km TT (Time Trials). He participated in the Haryana State Road Cycling Championship in the U-14 category, securing a third position in the 10km TT. He clocked 18.5 minutes in the 10 km TT at the National Road Cycling Championship 2017-18. In January 2018 he came first in the Haryana State track Cycling Championship and completed 500m TT in 42 Seconds at the National Track Cycling Championship.

In January 2018 he won a Gold in 5KM TT and Silver in 10KM TT at the Special Olympics Bharat- National Cycling Championship held in Ranchi Jharkhand, but due to being below-age, he could not participate in the Abu Dhabi summer games 2019.

Since 2017 Neel would practise regularly at the Indoor Cycling Velodrome in the Indira Gandhi Stadium Delhi, coached by Mr Shrinu Kumar, growing his capacity to approx. 100km of cycling daily.

Disappointed but not having lost hope, Neel with the motivating support of his parents, continued to practise and got selected for the summer games held in Berlin in June 2023. His intensified practising regime landed him at the JRD TATA sports complex in June 2022 under the tutelage of Mr Sattbir Singh Sahota, a veteran Coach and a former International cyclist. At the World Games Neel won a Gold and a Bronze medal. At the finish line he had the biggest of smiles, saying shyly. "My father introduced me to cycling," "these medals are for him." And that is what he did as he arrived in India, falling on his father's feet.

*Mr Pawan Kumar, Neel's father, "Where he fell short in academics, he more than covered in sports. I am proud of my son. He has everything that a human being can be virtuous of. Special Olympics showed us the way".*



## Neha Kumari Razak, Powerlifting (Jharkhand)

*Neha's favourite colour is pink. Since prior to the 2019 World games she dreamt to buy a pink dress & a mobile phone; both her dreams are yet to be realised. Her family uses one mobile phone. Neha won four bronze medals at the world summer games held in Abu Dhabi in 2019.*

Born in 2002, Neha has always been overweight and inactive, never listening to anyone. Her parents approached a doctor who diagnosed her with learning disabilities. Her parents were unable to arrange for special care. Neha's family's combined monthly income is INR 9000. Her father is a daily wageer at a laundry shop and her mother a domestic help. They stay in a one-room rented accommodation, having access to a community toilet. She joined the School of Hope in 2013, prior to which she did not follow any daily routine and joined the Special Olympics Jharkhand Chapter in 2017.

Coach Mr Arun Datta, associated with Special Olympics since 2010, mentored her. He observed her to be very slow, non-compliant and lethargic. Neha trained in power lifting, Her Coach immediately scheduled weight practises for her, increasing them gradually, and planned a physical exercise regimen at the JRD TATA Sports Complex.

He parallelly worked upon her parents who escorted her everywhere. It was only at the third camp that she travelled independently to a Camp. To bring about this change her parents

were invited for Family Health Forum sessions and were frequently counselled by Mr Satbir Singh Sahota, who leads the program in the state. He and her Coach planned to shift her from a multi gym to a power gym. She feared that the weights would fall on her. She needed a 'push' constantly.

Prior to the World Games, Neha ran daily at school, monitored by Achal Gaurav (Coach Asst – SO Bharat, employed by the school). Twice a week she underwent sports – specific training. Neha's fitness improved and so did her performance in powerlifting. According to Mr Sahota, her improved performance in sports impacted her activity levels at home too. Neha loves to dance and is also a part of the school band. Her parents were happy to see her follow a nutritious diet which otherwise they could not be afford. At his last visit to her home, she prepared a cup of tea for him and, that really was a noticeable change.

*Sports provided her with a platform to discover her talent and be a winner but, with no access to any sports facilities nearby, she is pushed to abandon the path, and continue participating in activities in her special school.*



## Niren Mahendra Bhai Patel, Table Tennis (Gujarat)

*In 2002 Niren, 14 yrs, came to the Mitra Rehabilitation centre Mogri as shy, under confident and an introvert. Niren was diagnosed with mild mental retardation but managed to study in a mainstream school till the 7th grade. He had lost his mother while his father having mild ID was unable to take care of him. His brother took the responsibility to do so.*

At the Mitra Rehabilitation Centre Niren was mentored by Mr Jignesh Thakkar, SO Bharat Coach associated with SO Bharat in 2001. He observed a flair for Table Tennis, Bocce and later floor hockey. Niren played well but had a limitation owing to Asthma. Niren participated in table tennis at the SOAP Regional Games held in Australia in 2013, winning a silver each in Singles and doubles. His performance in Floor Hockey took him through three preparatory Camps held for the Austria Games 2017 He was, unfortunately, unable to go for the rest of the camps due to asthma which aggravates in colder regions.

Niren, has assumed different roles in Special Olympics. He has been a Coach Assistant who also introduced Bocce to teachers from mainstream schools. Over the years, he has participated in camps at all levels – State, National, and International. He now has no inhibitions in talking to strangers also. He is fluent in Gujarati and Hindi. The attitude of his family members also changed, when he returned from the Regional Games 2013. His

Uncle who has a school, and never gave Niren importance, invited him as a guest for an event there.

Niren has worked as an Assistant teacher at the Gurukripa Residential School, Anand, a special school, as well. He is also a member of the district board of SO Bharat Gujarat- Anand and plays a proactive role in planning events together. He has also officiated at a few camps. Few years back he lost his father while his brother who is married, left for the USA. Niren stays independently sharing the premises with his extended family.

Niren's journey through Special Olympics has made him diametrically opposite to what he was at the time of joining the organization. He has been a proactive Athlete leader, having improved dramatically in his communications. He co-anchored a press conference held during the National Health Fest in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in 2022. He is currently searching for a job clearly stating his preference for a role related with sports.



## Pallav Mehrotra, Softball (Uttar Pradesh)

*"We salute him!", said Pallav's family on his return from the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Los Angeles, USA in 2015. He won a gold medal in Softball. According to them his experiences and exposure through the Special Olympics program have contributed immensely to his recognition and acceptance.*

Pallav Mehrotra, 24 yrs, had jaundice shortly after his birth. That left him with hearing and speech impairment along with delayed milestones. His parents made every effort to make him independent choosing sports for him, observing his interest in it.

In 2008, he joined SO Bharat and participated in Athletics, Cricket, Volleyball and Softball under the mentorship of Mohd. Izaz Akhtar, a national trainer. Pallav participated in Cricket at the SOAP Regional Asia Pacific games 2013 held in Australia winning a silver medal and in the South Asia Unified Cricket tournament held in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Tragically he lost both his parents by the age of 16. Pallav joined the Asha Jyoti School, in Lucknow, which is a residential school for persons with Intellectual challenges. Covid led to a shut-down of the facility. He was placed under care of his maternal uncle and aunt who he is very fond of. He has a sister, Smriti, who he loves immensely. However, no one could have Pallav stay with them as he needs special

care. Arising out of necessity, he has settled into an independent existence. He stays in a flat surrounded by caring neighbours. Smriti and his teacher stayed with him initially to settle him and train him in the daily chores. He is swift in ordering online and paying.

Smriti calls the moment that Pallav joined Special Olympics as 'remarkable'. His participation at the events brought him recognition and acceptance, not only by his school but also by their family members. She overwhelmingly recalls how they were not invited for weddings earlier, because of Pallav. The world games, his performance, the news coverage, and the honours that followed made everyone aware & proud. They began to view him differently.

Special Olympics helped him carve a career for himself. Since 2021, he has been working as a sports coach at the Rainbow Society for Differently Abled, Lucknow. This helps him keep fit as well. The school admin feels proud that they have a world games medallist as their 'Sports Coach'.





## Papiya Murmu, Football (West Bengal)

*Papiya Murmu, 20 yrs, is a footballer from Birbhum district, West Bengal. Always seen with a smile, her expression transforms to that of focus and determination as she preps to kick-start the game. For Papiya football is inheritance. Her mother and her sisters are footballers; her sisters having played as Unified partners at national levels as well. Unified Sports is a way of life. Her's is an unusual story of inclusive sports right at the grassroots, which is a way of life. In between the National camps Papiya continues to practice furiously, scaling up her fitness and individual skill under the guidance of Mr Sukdeb Chakraborty, Coach with SO Bharat since 2010. He guides her as she practices dribbling, passing, free hand etc.*

Papiya has a learning disability that manifested in her under-performance in school. She showed lack of confidence in communicating, something that has not left her completely, even now. She has managed to clear her exams until the first year of college. Papiya belongs to a tribal family that lives in a mud settlement. The economic status of the family is very low; however, their faith in sports is strong. Her parents, despite financial restrictions, support her deeply in furthering her career in sports. Special Olympics for them is a platform that has saved her from negativity, isolation, and hopelessness. The fight for daily survival is so intense that had it not been for Special Olympics, she may have abandoned sports to join the battle.

Papiya won accolades for SO Bharat at the Special Olympics Unified Cup 2022 held

in Detroit Michigan, USA. She was the co-captain of the Unified football female team that participated in the event. The team won a Bronze. She was also part of the team that played the celebrity match, making a goal, the only one made by her team.

Papiya also participated in the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Berlin Germany in June 2023, in 7-a-side football traditional team. According to her 'there is nothing like partnership'. She enjoyed playing & interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. She continues to play under the mentorship of Mr Sukdeb, hoping to get many more opportunities to represent her district, state, or country. She wants to be an active part of an inclusive society that emerges from her passion, which is sports.



## Paramjeet, Snowshoeing (Jammu)

*Paramjeet, 24 yrs, brought a ray of hope for the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir when he attempted Snow shoeing for the Kazan World Games that finally got cancelled. If selected, he would have created history by being the first Athlete to represent Jammu and Kashmir at the Special Olympics World Winter Games. He is keeping track of the next series of events related with the Special Olympics World Winter Games, coming up in March 2025 in Turin, Italy.*

It is noteworthy though, how the Snow Shoeing did not have a passport. He resides 40 kms from the Jammu, near to the politically disturbed international border in the remote village of Chak Prema. Battling weak technology, documentation, distance, the ongoing pandemic, the persistent President of the state, Dr Ashwini Jojra and his team made it happen! The Passport office especially opened to do the needful during the lockdown and Paramjeet received his passport within hours of applying for it.

Paramjeet's father is a plumber and his mother labors in the fields. He has three siblings. Paramjeet has a learning disability and has received training at Sahyog India, which is a special school in Jammu. He started crawling at the age of 4 and was unable to stand before he turned 7. He has a speech problem as well. Seeing his younger sister walk earlier than him, got him heart breaking and insensitive remarks

from his relatives and neighbors. His parents were very often ignored at public gatherings. His growing years kept his parents on tenterhooks as he would often fall ill. They would then rush to the doctor, who too would ignore them.

To enable him secure a livelihood, Paramjeet's father has opened a small kiosk that services and washes cars.

Paramjeet was identified by the **"SAHYOG INDIA"** team in 2009, also being the year when he joined SO Bharat. His sports journey began under the mentorship of Coach, **Mr Sahil Badyal, who is a National Trainer with SO Bharat. Paramjeet has participated in Athletics, floorball, football, Bocce and Snowshoeing.** His parents are very supportive of his sports participation as they have observed a significant change in his behavior. His family members who earlier maintained a distance with him, treats him with dignity and honor.



## Patrick Gomes, Athletics (Delhi)

*For Patrick Gomes, 49yrs, speaking about his initial years with Special Olympics is like tracing the history of the movement in India.*

In 1991 he participated in Athletics held in Madras, Tamil Nadu, running 100mtr, 200mtr and 400mtr. In 1995, then a student of the Okhla Centre of Learning and Development Delhi, he was selected in football for the Special Olympics World Summer Games held at Connecticut, USA. Noel and Sanjay, his brothers, also with a learning disability, were together addressed as the 'Olympian Brothers'. His initial years with Special Olympics, is a fuzzy memory but surely became a milestone, changing his life forever. From receiving training in making candles, paper bags etc, he turned towards sports. The world games established him as an athlete and he participated in several sporting events that followed. His participation at the Football carnival in Leicestershire, England in 1998, is estimated. Sometime then he even represented SO Bharat (Formed in 2001) in Spain for a World Athletics Championship. He fondly remembers being mentored by Mr Devraj Bhadoria, the technical director of Delhi. Having participated several times in sports, Patrick swiftly moved on to get trained as a Coach.

For over 15 years he has been coaching special athletes. His training includes teaching sports

and values. Sports, according to him is important for everyone as it brings positivity, fitness, and discipline. Patrick is very conscious of his fitness as well, jogging daily for two hours covering approx. 10 kms. He is proud of his Athletic personality that gives him confidence, despite his speech challenge. He lives all by himself, in his home, surrounded by caring neighbors. Dusting and cleaning his house is part of his daily routine that too keeps him fit. Difficult situations with his family did come his way, causing him distress and dejection, something he does not like to detail out.

There may have been only few events not attended by Patrick. He is a stalwart, a testimony to the role that Special Olympics plays in shaping personalities & changing lives.

He made friends, Sanjay Seth (Jolly) being his first in Special Olympics. Sports is his life. He knows no other. Had he not been introduced to Special Olympics; he is unable to fathom what else would have been there for him. Staying alone, having lost his parents and not being in touch with his brothers, makes sports the source of positivity, energy, and smile for him.



## Prabhroop Sekhon, Swimming (Chandigarh)

*Aversed to huge crowds and loud sounds made Prabhroop Singh Sekhon, 15 yrs, an unlikely contender at the World Summer Games 2015. Sounds of revelry disinclined him to skate into the arena for practises causing much anguish to his mother, standing at the wings, waiting to cheer.*

Dreading the final day of competitions she discussed his condition with the announcers. An appeal was made to the audience to respect his auditory condition by maintaining silence. The silence that followed got Prabhroop two gold medals. "This is Special Olympics"- said Ms Duilpret Sekhon, his mother.

Prabhroop, however, was unable to comprehend his success. What the Games meant for him was friends and his Coach Gareth Jay Vaz . Going through pictures from the Games makes him very happy.

It was only when Prabhroop was 2 years of age did his parents observe delays in his milestones with nothing atypical appearing earlier. Confirmation by a doctor that their son has Autism transformed their lives completely. Mrs. Sekhon joined a course that brought her face to face with Autism and equipped her to assist her son appropriately. As suggested by a few, he was introduced to Roller Skating while also showing a keen interest in swimming.

His first experience in an SO Bharat Camp was in January 2014 at Bareilly UP. To see Prabhroop

spent time with other Athletes, have tea with them, share food with them, convinced his parents that 'something had changed in his life'. The subsequent camps he attended made him more and more independent bringing down his aversion to touch , crowd and noise.

Since then Prabhroop has gone for every World Games, even though not participating in them. "For my son, participating in sports is what counts. He may not understand 'participation' or even a 'medal' but loves to get into the pool, make new friends and travel to new places"- says Ms Sekhon.

According to his parents, Prabhroop has shown impressive progress in multiple areas, in these past 7-8 years and sports has a major contribution in this. His social & communication skills have improved, allowing him to express effectively & interact. Additionally, he has become more organized, his understanding of the rules of the game has improved. Furthermore, there has been a marked improvement in his activities of daily living (ADL), indicating greater independence and self-sufficiency.





## Prathna Bhatia, Swimming (Chandigarh)

*Prathna Bhatia won a silver medal in swimming at the Berlin Summer Games 2023. Very early in life she demonstrated a natural flair for swimming. Prathna was barely a year old when she splashed into the pool joyfully, with her father; her inspiration. Water made her happy. Her school coach would say, "She is the Milkha of Swimming".*

She did not speak until age 5. Her parents reached out to doctors and specialists when finally she was diagnosed a slow learner. Her mother, Ms Anju Bhatia tried making her join a nursery school & arranged tuition, none of which could deliver. The tutors would send Prathna back, even after being offered double the fee. Prathna and her parents were abandoned by a few family members, while few others supported them. Anju gave up her job as a journalist, to be with her daughter. She learnt objects and colour through touch. Says her mother, "She touched a bucket to understand what it is. I made her wear a red T shirt to explain the colour. I felt rewarded each time she responded to what I tried telling her. I understood her and felt confident that I would be the one to help her grow and enjoy quality life, as no one else could even understand my precious daughter".

When it was clear that academics was not for Prathna, her parents supported her in sports. Along with swimming, she cycled too. Prathna's communication has improved enormously constantly interacting with her parents. There have been several heart-breaking moments. Prathna, earlier, would be called 'Pagal' (Mad) or 'Half-minded'. Her friends were much younger age than herself. Children her age did not share common objectives, dreams,

and reactions with Prathna. Sports provided her an identity and a positive occupation.

*Prathna's social skills improved noticeably through the sports camps. Coach Sheetal mentored her during these camps. She learnt to pack her own luggage. She travelled several cities for the camps, without her parents. Before she left for the first camp, her mother was extremely worried that caused high fever. When she returned, it was as if, "she was telling me that mummy I can fly", says Anju.*

**Prathna is responsible to look after her house. In fact, she loves dancing and baking cupcakes!**

On her return from the Berlin games, she became a hero. Her family members who felt embarrassed in her company, told her to wear her 'Berlin T shirt' for a photograph with them. For Prathna it's this love and attention that brings a smile on her face.

To have children with Intellectual & developmental challenges accepted holistically, while ensuring their safety and care requires everyone's attention. Sports brings positivity but it should be regular. For her mother, the path to Inclusion is long and dreary. People need to reflect & accept diversities. After all, a fish cannot climb a tree.



## Priyanka Dewan, Roller Skating (Delhi)

*Priyanka 24 yrs old, is an Athlete from Delhi. She won three medals- Gold, Silver & Bronze, in roller skating at the SO World Summer Games 2019 Abu Dhabi. Although she contributed to the Indian Medal tally, she wonders why the label of 'Special' still sticks to her. "I don't know why do people differentiate", said she at an interview taken by BBC.*

Priyanka was born into an atmosphere of conflict and strain, as recalled by her mother, Anurita Dewan. Her delayed milestones, unclear speech left no doubt that she would require special care. Priyanka never saw her father as he was unhappy to have a girl child. He left them when she was a month old. Her parents got divorced.

Priyanka was brought up in her grandparent's (maternal) home. She attended a mainstream school till the 6th grade with frequent complaints from her teachers, of her inability to cope with studies. There was a time when Priyanka refused going to school as she felt humiliated and developed a fear for it. Students around her teased and bullied her. They commented in her slow pace of working and talking. She began to withdraw.

It was after joining the Kulachi Manovikas School New Delhi she started to regain her confidence. The school opened doors for her talents to flourish, be it cultural or sports. She was placed under the mentorship of Prabhat, Coach with SO Bharat since 2016. Under his

guidance she reached the Nationals. There was now, no looking back for her.

As Prabhat trained her alongside other athletes, few parents were surprised to see Priyanka getting trained just as the others initially. They became comfortable later. According to Prabhat Special Olympics plays a crucial role in developing the confidence, independence, communication skills and sporting skills of the Athletes. Priyanka is supported whole-heartedly by her mother, Ms Anurita Dewan, who accompanies her everywhere. Sports, has added positivity & a sense of achievement.

A learning Disability is something that Anurita does not understand. How can a child not perform well in studies but is great other areas. They look just like all the others. She is now anxious that her daughter selects a career for herself. Priyanka is focussing on learning musical instruments and is getting trained in playing the keyboard, dholak, harmonium, guitar, hoping to form her own musical group someday.



## Rachna, Swimming (Haryana)

*Rachna, the swimmer from Haryana has many feathers in her cap. She won a silver in 4X25 Free style relay, swimming at the Special Olympics world summer games held in Berlin Germany in 2023. Her first international Special Olympics event participation was at the Special Olympics Sweden Invitational Games held in Sweden in Feb 2020, she won two silver medals (111 & 222 Mtr) in speed skating.*

*"Children like my daughter deserve to be part of the mainstream society. People must break stereotypes, and expand their perception to recognize and accept something that they are not." Mr Kuldip Singh, Head Constable with the Haryana Police.*

Rachna's father calls her 'God's Gift' and still wonders about her miraculous survival through three near fatal incidences in her life. Rachna was born normal but slipped into coma for about 15-20 days with the medical team nearly giving up on her chances of survival. At age 5 she fell into a borewell 30feet deep. She had miraculously dodged a machine and landed on soft ground. She even once got caught in an electric current but managed to snap away. "My daughter is a survivor. If someone says that she cannot even walk properly how you can expect her to skate and swim and that too in competitions; that is of little significance to me".

However, he cannot deny the fact that when they were told by her first school, which was

mainstream, that she needs special care, he cried bitterly. Between not many affordable special schools nearby, he got her into one, on a subsidized fee. She took to swimming, skating, and cycling. Her father personally took interest in training her especially initially, when she resisted to get trained under any other Coach. He has played Kabaddi (Indian Local Sport) at the district level and knows that sports is discipline and passion. He recalls vividly when at the age of 10 she was leaving for a Special Olympics National Camp held in Maharashtra, how she cried but her parents never turned back to pacify her, because they thought that if they fall weak now it would affect her future. They walked on and so did she.

Rachna is very fond of her brother. For her mother she carries out all the house chores. According to her parents, sports has shown the world that children like my daughter can win and be independent. Special Olympics has provided a platform that makes the society see their abilities and change their attitude towards persons with intellectual disability.



## Ranveer Singh Saini, Golf (Haryana)

*Ranveer Saini is an Athlete with Autism and the first athlete from Special Olympics Bharat to participate at the Special Olympics Asia Pacific Golf Master's tournament in 2013, moving on to the annual tournament held at Caesars Golf Course from in Macao, several times since 2014. Ranveer positioned SO Bharat in the Golfing greens for the first time in 2013, standing sturdy with his golfing kit even now as he prepares for the Berlin 2023 games. Having won several medals, trophies and recognitions, his attention and dedication to the sport build a stronger champion in him with each passing year.*

As Ranveer squats to measure distance with precision at the golfing greens, he applies the same in his day-to-day life, something that gives him comfort and calm. At the table as he orders for his food, he is clearly the one to choose, specifying the flavour the temperature etc. and he enjoys. He is his own's greatest critique, assessing his own performance at every strike. Ranveer won a Gold in Golf at the Special Olympics World Summer Games to be held in Berlin Germany in June 2023.

At the age of 2, Ranveer was diagnosed with Autism. His diagnosis was followed by several therapies and interventions, sports being one of the meaningful paths to positivity and change. He is blessed to belong to a family where every member makes him feel an achiever. His other sporting interests are football, swimming, horse riding etc.

'Thanks to him, we are all golfers in our family', says his mother, Ms. Bhakhtawar Saini. Ms. Saini feels good about Ranveer's interest in Golf that makes it possible for him to play alone as well as it becomes an activity for the whole family to bond, including his two siblings. Being a Bhim award recipient, which is the prestigious and highest sports honour by the state govt of Haryana, establishing his entry into the Limca Book of Records.

Golf means more than a competition, going beyond medicines, therapies, and interventions. His accomplishments have defined his social habits and his independence. Despite his many achievements there are challenges that continue to exist in his day to day life, but there is no looking back; Ranveer continues to tee-off, proving the might of Sports.





## Rishabh Jain, Roller Skating (Delhi)

*Rishabh was born with a small – sized head. He underwent a surgery at 6 months; nonetheless, his milestones lagged. His family vowed 'never to let him down'. Although he appeared quite like others it was very difficult to teach him anything, his attention span was limited, at times he would get hyper active. Children in his neighbourhood would call him 'Robot' and 'Alien'. An elderly neighbour was once even heard telling his children, 'Stay away from him, Stay safe. He can harm as he is not normal'. Notwithstanding, his parents continued to make him a part of social gatherings, movies, restaurants etc. There have been moments of awkwardness which his parents admittedly tried avoiding by not taking him along.*

Sports gave hope to his parents. As Rishabh turned 8, he took to Skating, Cricket and Lawn Tennis. His inclination towards skating was observed early. An ability to balance well along with regular practises mapped his progress bringing him medals from different levels of competitions. In the words of Shruti, his sister, "Sports helps to steer his energy in the right direction. He has largely calmed. My sister and I have stood by him. We have shouted and scolded him also. He used to abruptly sit and give up. We never let him. Special Olympics has shown him a direction and has brought happiness – he represented India! For as much as we can help- Sports will remain a constant in his life".

Rishabh runs daily to build up stamina and practises skating regularly. He practises in a nearby school- DAV Pitampura and, practises inline skating at the International Skating Track.

The school is where he receives Coaching from his mentor, Prabhat Sharma, who trains other Athletes in the sport as well.

I have always seen a streak of sportsmanship in my son. But Special Olympics has enabled him to pursue it with pride, giving him a sense of achievement- and this means the world to him and to us. When we go to his school- Srijan School, the authorities look at me and say- **"Rishabh's father right?" I am recognised because of my son. This is in far contrast to earlier when I used to go to his school with in fear".**

*Rishabh participated in the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in Abu Dhabi in 2019. He won a Gold and two Bronze medals in roller skating. Cricket being his passion, he practises for four hours everyday at the Gyanti Cricket Academy, under the supervision of Coach Saurav.*



## Rithik Hukku, Cricket (Rajasthan)

*Rithik Hukku joined SO Bharat in 2004 after he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. For his treatment Rithik was taken to VIMHANS at New Delhi. Cricket interested him most and it is through the Dronacharya Academy that he got connected with Mr Satyendra Kumar who was a Special Olympics coach there. He got his first chance of playing at a national level Special Olympics camp, that too in softball. Thus started his journey through SO Bharat.*

He participated in Cricket in the SO Asia Pacific Regional Games in December 2013 held in Newcastle, Australia, followed by the three Annual Special Olympics South Asia Cricket tournaments held in Bangladesh and in India, from 2016- 2018.

Rithik demonstrated a potential for assuming leadership roles. He participated at the Youth Summit held during the World Games in LA USA in 2015 and attended the Global Youth Forum held in Baku Azerbaijan in 2018. He enjoyed playing with Dr Tim Shriver, Chairman, SOI, as his teammate at a Unified Sports experience in Baku. Rithik served in the National Athlete Input Council before becoming a member of the SOAP- Regional Athlete Input Council.

In January 2019 Rithik shifted from the city of New Delhi to Jaipur, Rajasthan to join his mother. Rithik is experienced in several and diverse areas owing to his flexible nature. He assisted his mother in her venture of Mental Healing. His cheerful and

helpful nature makes him a favorite of many youth leaders. He has completed several online courses in his constant quest of learning more, having led many online and offline leadership training sessions, emerging a passionate ambassador of SO Bharat.

Rithik is , currently, an employee of Hotel The Lalit , Jaipur, Rajasthan in the role of running a shop there.

Rithik gets his power from his mother, Ms Poonam Hukku, who has never treated him as 'special'. He is a part of everything she does. She has been his mother, mentor and friend. Sports, according to her is a blessing that has provided a platform for utilizing his energy positively, bringing him confidence and joy as he proudly shares his medal victory at 62 medals across multiple Special Olympics competitions. She gets overwhelmed as she shares him having journeyed a long way from the child who would be swift to break things apart and be restive.



## Rohan Ho, Floorball (Assam)

*Rohan, 21 yrs, joined SO Bharat in 2013. He was diagnosed with a low IQ along with speech impairment which could be attributed to a forcep delivery. Tragically his mother passed away 3 months later, leaving his father isolated in his struggle of giving Rohan quality life.*

Very often his behaviour of running away, being temperamental and even aggressive at times became unmanageable by his family members. Getting bullied by people around overwhelmed his father, who decided to bring him to the care of Ashadeep Centre of Mental Health. Rohan is also cheerful and friendly. His father was determined to strengthen these aspects of his son.

Rohan joined SO Bharat and participated in Football, Badminton, Floorball and Roller Skating. Pinku Kalita, his Coach, started to mentor him and do simple sporting drills. Rohan won a Gold medal in Badminton at the National Championship held in Mumbai from 19th - 24th July, 2014 in Doubles and a third position in Singles. Participating in sports gave him a focus and occupied him, gradually improving his behaviour.

Rohan got selected in Floorball (Traditional) and participated in the Special Olympics World Winter games held in Austria in 2017, winning a Gold medal. For Rohan's father, sports is beyond winning a medal. "Rohan is getting confident and settled. If Rohan continues Sports, his behaviour will continue to improve. This is my belief" - says his father.

Rohan and his family have shifted to Biswanath Chariali Dist- Biswanath, a district which is (approx) 240 kms from Guwahati. He is very conscious of body building and practises regularly at a nearby gym. He is passionate about Roller Skating and practises regularly. He used to earlier, skate at a sports stadium located near his house in Guwahati. He also assists his father in running his restaurant.

I won four Bronze medals in Powerlifting and came back an achiever and a star. Everyone visited my house to congratulate me. I no longer hide away like I used to do earlier. I am not lazy and have become a good host too. Sadly, Covid 19 rendered my parents jobless, but life goes on.

**—Ms Neha Kumari Razak, Powerlifter, Jharkhand**



## Rohan Sarma, Floorball (Assam)

*Strumming the Guitar, is how most of us saw Rohan at the youth leadership summit held in 2019. Before that he participated in the 5th edition of the Special Music & Art Festival 2018 held South Korea. This is for the first time that SO Bharat sent a representative at the event. Rohan played Titanic and Jingle Bells, both tutored by his guide, Jeongbae Kim, Professor Seoul Jazz Academy, at the venue in a span of 2 days.*

35 yrs old, Rohan has been part of Special Olympics since 2007, through the Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation Centre, Guwahati Assam. The delayed milestones observed in his early childhood confirmed Intellectual Disability. The situation threw a challenge for his parents of humble means. His father is a retired bank employee while his mother is a home maker. Prior to Ashadeep, his parents made him join mainstream schools, where he could cope only till the 8th grade.

At SO Bharat he has participated in Floorball and Volleyball competitions at the State and National levels under guidance of his Coach Anshuman. His family, however, was inhibited to have him travel too much due to seizures. In fact his father accompanied him even to Korea this year.

Rohan speaks Assamese fluently and a bit of Hindi as well. His exceptional forte lies in playing the guitar. Rohan has participated regularly in the Youth leadership sessions and all the National Youth leadership Summits. He has been a regular participant in the virtual sessions held during the pandemic. These sessions have improved his communication skills and confidence. Rohan assists his father in running their grocery store that specialises in 'patanjali' products and trains 5-6 students in Guitar.

*"Earlier Rohan lacked confidence, but participating in the SO Camps developed his personality, made him confident of himself, and gave him an opportunity to interact with so many persons. During sporting events too, he is often seen surrounded by other campers, playing the guitar.*

**Dr Anjana Goswami, Area Director SO Bharat Assam.**





## Rohit Raina, Floorball (Delhi)

*Many a-times Rohit has led the Special Olympics Athlete oath, he has anchored events to a great big audience without even a hint of nervousness. He has a strong opinion about fitness and does not hesitate to express that Fitness is an essential for everyone, and not just for those who are active in sports. Rohit exercises for about an hour daily, and goes for a 10-minute walk to the ground, close to his house. These are his achievements through his sporting journey in Special Olympics, which make his family proud.*

Rohit Raina is 22 years old and is an Athlete from the Delhi, carrying a passion for sports, especially Cricket. He has a learning disability, that began to show, as his growth graph slowed down. He would walk backward; his speech was described, 'imperfect', his teachers in his early schooling days complained of his aggressive behaviour wherein he would often bite his classmates and so on. After having ignored a few deflections initially, his parents started to pay attention on Rohit's milestones, getting certain that those were not coincidences.

His father, Mr Raman Raina fondly spoke about his son, "The more you love them, more do they behave well and this became my approach to help my son attain his best". Rohit stays in a joint family where each and every member supports Rohit and have contributed to make him self-reliant. Mr Raina informed his employer not to grant him a promotion beyond a point, so that his work would

never take his time away from his son he is so proud of.

Rohit on the other hand, emulates people around him, he checks the doors, water taps and lights of the house, just like his father. He is very social and is concerned about his family members, just as they are.

According to Rohit's father, what he couldn't gain in studies, he has gained through sports. He is confident. Special Olympics provided a platform to Rohit to carry out his passion, to make friends and to establish an identity as a sportsperson, in his house. When he was preparing for floorball, it is the respect that he earned which mattered. His Coach, Mr Rohit Manchanda, maintains that Rohit is very hard-working and committed to sports. Rohit plays Floorball & Table Tennis and hopes to see Cricket be part of Special Olympics World Games some day.



## Rohit Sawant, Swimming (Maharashtra)

*Rohit is a certified Zumba trainer and runs classes in Mumbai. Ms Mrunal Sawant, "A star needs the sky to shine. If my son is a star, Special Olympics is the sky", says his mother. The achievements of Rohit are many, with each validating the phenomenal sacrifices made by his mother.*

Born in May 1997, and 'normal', Rohit started to show signs of slowing down after a second accident and also a second head injury. The medication that followed had its fallout, pushing back Rohit in his years after he attained the age of 9. His condition triggered family challenges, leaving his mother alone to overcome the odds. An alumni of the JJ School of Arts, Mumbai, she decided to give up her job and felt herself plunging in a 'depressive' state. With the support of her parents she pulled herself together and decided to equip better to extend support to her son. She visited multiple religious places, completed courses in Occupational and Speech Therapy, approached people to clear a path of independence for her son. He joined SO Bharat in 2009.

As he was a hyperactive child, his mother thought that she could introduce dance & swimming to him and his training in both began. Rohit too, pushed himself to excel in both. At a competition aired on Zee TV he was honored 'Silver Wings' by the renowned actor, Mithun Chakraborty.

Rohit parallelly pursued swimming and sea swimming under the guidance of Coach Shri

Abhijit Tambe, who has been a coach with SO Bharat for the past 16 years. Along with two more students from his school, Rohit set a record for swimming non-stop for 13 hours and 12 minutes in 2014, securing a spot in the Limca Book of Records. He participated in cycling too representing Maharashtra at the national competition held in Bhopal.

Participating in the Special Olympics Dance Sport workshop held in January 2019 added another feather in his cap. Rohit won a Silver medal in 100m freestyle swimming at the Special Olympics World Summer Games Abu Dhabi 2019 and another Silver medal in the Demo Dance Challenge held during the mega event.

There has been a sea change in his life as he spends more time with his friends- the greatest being that he has friends now. Recalling the arduous journey, Mrs Sawant personally celebrates his Inclusion today. From the time when she heard nothing but complaints and bullying of her son to now when she sees him prepare to train others, she is happy and feels that perhaps every moment contributed to this success.



## Sahil Singh, Cricket (Uttar Pradesh)

*Sahil, 26 yrs, with Downs Syndrome, was invited as a self-advocate at the World Down Syndrome Day 2020 event organized by Down Syndrome International. He has been actively and articulately participating in various forums, since 2015 when he attended the 12th World Down Syndrome Congress held in Chennai, India. He moderated the 3rd India International Down Syndrome Conference held in Chandigarh in 2019. He has been a member of the National Athlete input Council having led & attended several sessions on leadership and sports. He is a sports and yoga enthusiast. He goes for jogging, cycling swimming, Badminton. He heads regularly to the Gym.*

At birth in 1997, it was expected that Sahil's speech would reach 4 words by the time he is 4 years of age. Born to doctors, his condition was clear to them on the day of his birth. The expected challenges were well known to them, triggering a significant amount of anxiety. The Crèche at the hospital where both his parents worked was quite accepting of him but, it lacked the desirable attitude.

He finally got admission at 'Crayons' located in Hauz Khas New Delhi. Sahil was their first child with Special needs. Soon, Sahil's family got re-located to Lucknow, UP and he joined Study Hall (Special wing called DOSTI), an Integrated School, joining So Bharat in 2005.

Under the mentorship of Coaches, Ms Poonam and later Mohmd Aizaz, he participated in athletics, swimming, cricket etc also, completing a certification course in Yoga. In December 2013, at the Special Olympics Asia-Pacific

Regional Games Australia he won a Silver Medal in Swimming.

Since 2021 he has been working as Assistant Teacher at Study Hall, his alma mater, for Sports and Yoga, training the mainstream and special students. At times, setting goals and teaching plans for his students poses a challenge. He takes time to understand the changes in the timetable and to reach the right class at the right time. His transition from a student to an assistant teacher in his own school required adjustment too, as his friends and classmates became his students in the school. Despite being the youngest and the only one with an intellectual disability in his school, he maintains a positive and harmonious relationship with the faculty.

Securing employment and thriving in an inclusive environment is his greatest achievement. Sports makes him dream and he dreams to open a Cricket Academy someday.



## Salmoli Chakrabarty, Swimming (West Bengal)

*At the age of eight, Salmoli entered a nearby pool out of convenience. Her mother, Mrs Saswati Chakrabarty felt that the facility being situated closely would help Salmoli spend her time productively as it would keep her physically fit too. Sports as a ladder to her development and success, was not comprehended at that juncture. The regular visits to the pool combined with professional guidance that came later, steered her path to Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 held in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Salmoli stood on the victory stand twice, for a Gold and a Bronze. The accolade brought her to feature on the cover of her school magazine.*

Due to anoxemia at birth in 2000, Salmoli suffered complications that required blood transfusion in her early years. The doctor had cautioned an extent of brain damage that became evident as she joined school. She is a slow learner and is continuing her studies through the National Open education system (NIOS). As a child she was restive, often not sitting in one place for long. She could speak but would write very little. Shifting her from a mainstream to Manovikas School in Kolkata proved beneficial as it exposed her to various activities, other than studies, including sports.

Salmoli is a single child, her father is a retired state government officer and her mother a homemaker residing in Kolkata.

She was mentored by Coaches Kaushal Pal and Manoj along with Mr. Ashim Paul, who has been associated with SO Bharat since 2006. It was

at these camps that her rapid development and a change in her personality, was felt by her parents. She became independent and settled. The World Games pronounced her success like no other event. For her parents, it made sports a field to consider in shaping her future.

Salmoli independently cycles to practice swimming every day at 4:30AM. She is building her stamina and skill in two sports, cycling and swimming. She is assisting a Coach at her school in training other students in swimming. At a play clinic located in Goshto Pal Sarani, Maidan opposite Eden Gardens, run by Special Olympics Bharat West Bengal, she assists in coaching the students in Special Olympics Young Athletes Sports.

Her dream of becoming a Sports coach is may not remain a dream but place her as a meaningful provider in the society.





*The journey of Sandeep Gulliya, 32 yrs, is as old as the organization itself; Sandeep was diagnosed with an Intellectual Disability. Before sports, he recalls, he would sit in his classroom, understanding nothing. He struggled to do so but could not. Sports mapped his future.*

Sandeep Gulliya's family came upon hard times after his father's accident that left him without a job and the responsibility of 5 children- 3 daughters and 2 sons. His biggest worry was his youngest son, Sandeep. Sandeep went to a government school but was unable to cope with studies. When 8 years old, he joined Balwant Rai Mehta School – an integrated school, in Delhi. While the low student teacher ratio helped Sandeep to cope with the academic pressures better, his obsession for sports increasingly grew with time. He joined the cricket team. Though his school mates were hesitant to take him on initially they relented on seeing his performance and dedication. The SO Bharat coaches, Mr Satender and Mr Vijay, trained and mentored him into participating at the local, state, national and international levels. He played with the Indian team at the Bangladesh Cricket Tournament 2008 (Invitational), the Cricket Carnival in Delhi in 2009, at the SOAP regional games held in 2013 in Australia and in the South Asia Unified Cricket Competition held in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2016.

Being a keen sportsman, he played other sports as well, including floor hockey, eventually

participating in the Special Olympics World Winter games held in South Korea in 2013, winning a silver medal. He received the Athlete leadership training and got trained as a Coach assistant too.

His coach MM Khurram describes Sandeep as joining as shy, quiet and introvert who would often retire to a corner after each game. Khurram is happy to see a change in him. Sandeep has been a coach at the city's renowned mainstream schools, DPS RK Puram and DPS Saket along with imparting training at the Cricket Academy Delhi.

Since two years, he has been running a 'Special Sports Academy' and a Cricket academy at the Balvantrai Mehta School that once nurtured him and introduced him to Special Olympics Bharat. The sports academy runs classes across football, basketball, cricket, table tennis & skating for 20 special students and he trains mainstream children at the cricket academy. He is in the process of opening a special school for teaching and vocation called, HOPE special school. Sandeep is happily married and is blessed with an adorable daughter, Dhanu.



## Santhosh Kumar R, Athletics (Karnataka)

*Successfully reaching the finish line amongst the first 200 out of 8128 racers in an open 10 thousand category of Marathon, in an impressive 51 minutes & 27 seconds was Santosh Kumar an Athlete from Special Olympics Bharat- Karnataka at his performance in 2008. Santosh went on to win a silver medal in 3000 meters race in the 4th place in Half Marathon at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2011 in Athens, Greece. An unbelievable feat for a young boy with 'intellectual disabilities' and that too with a fractured femur at the age of 11 that left him with little possibility of ever walking again.*

Santosh Kumar R, born 1990, fell victim to asphyxia at the time of his birth, recovering from it through an emergency medical intervention. Consequently, his speech did not develop till the age of 5. Wheezing problems and dust allergy frequently landed him in emergency care in hospitals. Unable to cope with studies beyond class 5, he was tested and diagnosed to be with an intellectual disability.

Santosh joined Ashankura, a special school, through which he joined Special Olympics. Exposure to sports attracted him. He practices for a minimum of an hour daily at the local stadium near his residence preparing to participate in the first ever Asia Pacific Regional Games 2013 in Newcastle, Australia. He was the torch bearer for team India and also participated in 3000 and 5000 m runs and completed the race despite being laid low with asthmatic attack. He has also participated in INAS Global Games in Brisbane 2019 and participated in the 5000 m and 10000 mts run and finished the course

straight after getting discharged from hospital after getting treated for convulsions.

Having observed his son, his father took the Advanced Coaches Training, Train the Trainer Program, Games Management System and the Diploma in Special Olympics from RMV University conducted by SO Bharat. He is otherwise, working as chief reservation supervisor in railways.

Santosh is now receiving employability training at SEVA in ACTION and is the athlete representative on the SOBharat- Karnataka State committee.

*To quote his father, "Santosh's achievement in Marathon has inspired me to get closely involved in Special Olympics activities and train as many athletes as possible and help them excel in their sport. I am sure that I will be able to encourage many more parents of special athletes to make a difference in their life through Special Olympics".*



## Sarita Routray, Floor Hockey (Odisha)

*Sarita was 9 years old when she joined the Centre of Special Education for Children with Multiple Disabilities of Open Learning Systems (OLS), an organization working for the rehabilitation of persons with intellectual & developmental challenges. Sarita was assessed with mild intellectual disability and hearing impairment. Initially she was admitted in Class II in a mainstream school nearby. However, she discontinued going there after a couple of years as she felt uncomfortable and lonely. She had no friends. She came back to OLS where she started learning Odissi dance, tailoring, chocolate making etc. She has given numerous stage performances in Odissi in various forums.*

Her special talent in sports was identified by the CEO of OLS and Honorary Area Director of Special Olympics Bharat-Odisha and she was sent to participate in various competitions organised by Special Olympics Bharat in different parts of the country. Her talent in sports was honed by her mentor & Coach Ms. Arpita Mohapatra, an SO Bharat National Trainer.

Sarita demonstrated cycling skills and showed her prowess in Floorball and Floor Hockey. She participated in the National Championships for both the disciplines and was selected for the World Winter Games 2017 in Floor Hockey (traditional). She won a Bronze medal.

Sarita's journey has not been free of hardships. Her father has a hearing impairment and earns a paltry sum as a house painting worker. Most of

the time, he keeps ill and is unable to go out for work to earn his livelihood. Sarita's mother has opened a small grocery store in her temporary house in a slum in Bhubaneswar to augment the family income. The slum is in a neglected area bereft of civic amenities. Sarita by dint of her determination has overcome all these hurdles and has acquired multifarious skills.

Sports has carved a path of skill and joy for her. She continues with sports. She has expanded to Roller Skating and football. She assists Ms Arpita in swimming trainings. She makes personal home visits to train in roller skating. She has gained recognition and is proud to be earning. She was a member of the selection committee formed by the state for selection trials. Her dedication and diligence has helped her emerge out of her personal and societal challenges.



## Shalu, Powerlifting (Punjab)

*Abandoned and scared, Shalu 5yr old in the year 2000, joined the All India Pingalwara Charitable Society (AIPCS) , Punjab. She could not speak. What happened before that day remains a mystery to date. No family member has ever visited the facility to enquire about her. It took a lot of patience, love , care and techniques to pull her out of the dark and distressed past. She went through a tough phase of behaviour problems where she would often hurt herself, throw a tantrum to prevent anyone from leaving her side. She wanted attention all the time attempting to speak. Her mentor and friends gradually got used to understand her through her stuttering.*

Soon after joining the AIPC Society her sporting abilities were assessed in football, basketball, floor ball, floor hockey and Powerlifting. She was shown videos of previous world games by her special educator. She was motivated and excited to participate. For 8-9 years Shalu has been consistently practising powerlifting. She prepared under the guidance of Raju Rajinder who is a Coach Assistant and, won four silver medals at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 Abu Dhabi. Raju himself had represented India at the Austria Winter Games in 2017, winning a gold medal.

Shalu has other interests too. She likes cooking and embroidering. She grooms other children and assists the society during school hours. Going frequently for the Special Olympics camps made her conscious of self-grooming and dressing. She feels proud that she can write her

name. In her free time, she memorises names of fruits, vegetables, etc. She continues to participate in games, also making other children practice sports along with herself.

"She is like a daughter to me" says **Ms Padmini Srivastava, Principal School Section, All India Pingalwara Charitable Society.** "She cares for me, for my health and gets upset when she feels that I am not being careful. When I think back I feel surprised how far she has travelled through the travesties of time. She is confident and decisive. I feel proud of her" (quote 2018).

Shalu's greatest challenge remains her speech but that too is improving with relevant interventions and with the passage of time. Her confidence pushes her to communicate and socialise uninhibited.





## Shikha Rani, Figure Skating (Himachal)

*It is surprising to see Shikha, 29 yrs of age, thread a needle, or play bocce ,skate or dance. It would have been hard to imagine her even walk straight. She was born without fingers and toes ,facial anomalies , impaired speech and having a mild intellectual disability. Born into a poor family ,they felt it best to place her under Special Care.*

Thus began her journey through Prem Ashram, a special residential school in Una , Himachal Pradesh. She joined SO Bharat there, in 2005. She participated in Bocce, Athletics and Skating. Because of her appearance, she faced a lot of challenges growing up. She was bullied at school and had severe self-image issues. She had no friends. She often longed to see her parents, something that never happened. Today, she has completed her schooling and stays with her parents sharing the burden of home chores with her mother and simultaneously enhancing her sporting skills . The Ashram faculty and the Special Olympics Coaches, combined to bring out her best. Shikha is a keen dancer, participating in cultural programs regularly.

Ravi Kumar , Coach with SO Bharat since 2004, mentored Shikha. He started her with Bocce where he observed that despite her hands being fingerless ,they did cup well enough to grip the ball. Shikha won a Gold at a Bocce Championship held in Solan, another gold in the 75m run, held in Bishop Cotton School in Shimla. She was unable to run longer distances, and that prodded her Coach to explore other options. Shikha attempted

Roller Skating. Ravi provided her extra coaching focussing on balance coordination and working on balance bars. She often fell, but learnt to stand up. In 2008 she participated at a Roller Skating training camp held in Hyderabad. She began with four wheeler skates moving her way up to the liner wheeler skates that got her to Figure Skating.

She was very sincere and diligent with her practises. Shikha secured a fourth position in Figure Skating at the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2017 held in South Korea. According to Coach Ravi Shikha and Sister Vincy , the Principal Prem Ashram, being part of sports camps improved her behaviour , making her more confident & self-reliant.

Despite her improvements, Shikha still struggles in a competitive world. Following the world games she has not been able to pursue sports. There is no sports stadium or centre within proximity and transport facilities are not there either. She still harbours a low self-image and that pulls her back from going out. Sports has made a difference but the quest for inclusion is still a long way to go.



## Shivam Verma, Football (Delhi)

*"There are so many changes that I have seen in myself since this bonding." Says Kaif. "I began with an understanding that I will be Shivam's support and the 'guiding light' so to say. But it turns out, he has been my pillar of support."*

Shivam, 19 yrs, faced medical complications at the age of 2 yrs and remained in coma for about a month. He miraculously survived, but broke into seizures after recovering, which too have ceased to occur over a period of time. However, this phase may have led to a learning disability along with weak limbs. Through regular Physiotherapy his limbs strengthened, reinforcing his otherwise weak grip and ballcatch. Simultaneously Special Olympics sports at his school MBCN, NOIDA turned him into an Athlete playing Football, Softball and Floor hockey under the mentorship of his Coach, Mr Rohit Manchanda. Shivam joined the School in 2008 and Special Olympics in 2012. Coach Rohit remembers vividly how Shivam refused to go for a National level Camp and even wept profusely to insist that he won't. He finally did not go for it. Since 2013 with Rohit gradually mentoring and counselling him and winning him over, Shivam now joins the cadre of the closest Athletes to the Coach, who assist him in organising various fitness and sporting activities in school. "Shivam, is nothing of what he was when he joined this program. The transformation is unbelievable".

Shivam recalls his visits to the park near his house where he was bullied by the rest of the children. Very often, he was told to bring his (Cricket) bat and ball but while they played, he was told to sit and watch. His sibling, Jessica Verma, intervened a few times to support her brother, and to an extent that did work. The neighbourhood is the same but the perspective towards Shivam has changed.

Shivam engaged closely with a Youth wihtout ID, Mohammad Kaif. They went on to discuss concepts, events and activities, even day to day issues like, if Shivam would get stuck in English, he would call up Kaif. In January 2020 while preparing for a Youth event, they composed a 'RAP' together.

*"There has been a tremendous change in Shivam's Social behavior. From a shy and underconfident person he has changed into someone who looks forward to meeting new people. For him there are no differences that people often talk about likecaste, creed, language"- Jessica Verma*



## Shivani, Cycling (Delhi)

*Shivani, 22 yrs, has a learning disability that was diagnosed at an early age when, her delayed milestones were observed. Her mother is still not so aware of her daughter's needs as she herself has an intellectual disability. She never got a medical diagnosis. Shivani has been in the loving care of her aunt (mother's sister) Ms Sunita Dutta since she was a little over one year.*

Shivani settled for nothing less than three gold medals in cycling at the Special Olympics World Summer games held in 2023 in Berlin Germany. The victory stands and the cheering from the crowd, the medals that clanked around her neck, all of it would be etched in her memory forever.

*Cycling for her is not a sport only, but a necessity. She travels over 40 kms one way, each day to her workplace. She cycles about 15 kms as part of this journey. She has been working with a packaging unit located in Greater NOIDA, since the past 2-3 years. However, the daily toil fails to get a frown or fatigue on her.*

She is very fond of her aunt, who she and her mother stay with. Shivani's parents separated when she was very young. The divorce was very difficult. When Shivani was a year and a half, she and her mother were left at her aunt's place, showing signs of physical abuse. Shivani may not have survived had they not been dropped at her place that day, according to her aunt. Her aunt dedicated her life to the two of them specifically Shivani, teaching and carrying for her. Shivani was restless and aggressive as a child. She completed grade 8 with difficulty but later continued her

studies through NIOS (open university). After grade 8 she joined NIPEID (National Institute for the Persons with Intellectual Disabilities) where she was diagnosed with a low IQ. She has a challenged speech.

Special Olympics came as a boon, changing her perspective. It was a silver lining to the panic and anxiety caused by the coronavirus. Rigorous practises under her coach .... Helped her compete and qualify the levels before getting selected for the Berlin games. Participating in sports has made her alert. She sets goals for herself. She wants to keep playing and to learn how to handle money. People approach her differently. She certainly misses the focussed practises prior to the world games but now looks at football as another sport to try. **Her aunt got her a football, on demand. She kicks it and gets thrilled. It makes her feel happy, although she has no friends to play with; her closet friend and confidante being her aunt, the wonder woman who keeps pushing Shivani to aim higher, while struggling with Cancer. She, along with her brother are furiously searching for a residential facility that can take care of Shivani for a secure future.**



*Shrey Kadian has been the first ever Indian to represent the Asia Pacific region as member of the Special Olympics Global Athlete leadership Council for a term of three years (2021).*

Shrey joined SO Bharat in 2008. He loves sports, in general. He has played Cricket, Cycling, softball. He is fond of painting and is quick to jump to the dance floor at the faintest sound of music.

Shrey participated in Cricket at the inaugural Asia Pacific Regional Games in 2013 with his team winning a Silver medal. He was the Vice Captain of the Soft ball team that played its inaugural round at the Special Olympics World Summer Games held in LA, USA in 2015, winning a Gold Medal.

Shrey Kadian, did not speak in the early few years of his life, a problem that may be attributed to a birth defect. His parents had no one to guide them. After placing him in a play group, there were often complaints of his aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity. Following assessment at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences he was placed in the care of Mata Bhagwanti Chaddha Niketan NOIDA. It was here that Shrey was introduced to SO Bharat.

As a child Shrey was aggressive by nature, often hurting himself and others- even passers-by. People

called him 'pagal' (hindi word for Mad). They told his mother to place him in a Mental Hospital. Why invest energy in disciplining him, as he would never improve. Family members also refrained from inviting them for get togethers. Says his mother, Ms Shalini Kadian "Even my husband asked me why I did so much for him. There were moments when I felt so alone. What others said hurt me but seeing Shrey's face would give me positive energy, & bring a smile on my face".

Shrey was the first Athlete leader to represent SO Bharat on an international platform. Alongside sports a new path lit up and Shrey re-discovered himself. He participated in several leadership forums, being the president of the first ever SO Bharat National Athlete Input Council. It is ironical that he lacked communication in his early years. Shrey is a player with the Uttar Pradesh - Softball Association, being the only Special Olympics athlete amongst the rest. Along side several online Special Olympics online courses, Shrey has been awarded a certificate for completing a six-week certification course in sports coaching, specialising in softball, under the aegis of the Sports Authority of India.





## Shubh Patel, Bocce (Gujarat)

*When Ashaben Natwarbai Patel lost her husband to Covid 19 she turned to Shubh, her son, for consolation and support. Shubh by then had been trained to run their shop named after him – 'Shubh Electricals' located in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.*

Shubh, was born without a forehead in 1998. He was born with Apert syndrome, which is a genetic disorder characterized by skeletal abnormalities. His parents, while trying to understand the unique features their son was born with, had to confront family and friends as well. One of the titles given to their son, 'demon-like' son, remains imprinted in Ashaben even today. Shubh's parents felt abandoned at that but stood by each other. No one visited the hospital to welcome the child. A few days on and his parents decided to take on the journey by themselves at times weeping and at other, determined to do the best for their son. They named him – Shubh meaning 'Auspicious'

Shubh's family is from Vijapur, Gujarat. (About 60 kms from Ahmedabad) Through finances coming from selling the land they got several corrective surgeries performed on Shubh between ages 2 and 9. They wrote to the government for support as well.

As Shubh grew and attended the special school, his unusual physical condition and abilities started to surface. His parents travelled a long distance each day to take him to school. He joined Special Olympics in 2012 and participated

in Athletics, Bocce and Table Tennis under the mentorship of his Coach, Jignesh Raval. Shubh plays Table Tennis regularly at a facility near his residence.

The neighbourhood children cheered him when he ran. They welcomed him each time he came back from a sporting event of any level. Shubh recalls going to the gym regularly with his father but that stalled with the onset of the pandemic. He began to gain confidence, socialising with everyone. He is a friend and a mentor to many children in the neighbourhood. He buys them ice-cream; he plays with them, feeds the stray dogs, feeds the birds. He is comfortable with his deformities and has learnt to move on.

*"We started to progress financially after his birth. I have attended the camps and I can see how participation in sports is important. When they win a medal, they may not even remember later, but the joy and positivity that sports brings, remains and impacts forever"- says his mother.* He has an elder brother who is currently in UK doing further studies. Shubh is a member of the Special Olympics Gandhinagar District Committee



## Siddhant Nath, Athletics (Delhi)

*Siddhant Nath joined SO Bharat in August 2014 as a sports & administrative assistant. He has been working with the Healthy Athlete Program, and Youth Activation, communicating across various levels, something that comes naturally to him. In 2022 he was nominated as a Board member.*

He has participated in Bocce and Athletics, gradually showing excellence in leadership roles as that of a Youth Ambassador at the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2011 or participating at the Singapore Youth Summit. Siddhant participated in the Asia Pacific Regional Games 2013 in 100 mtrs Athletics and 200mtrs Shotput. Siddhant went to Nepal in December 2015 for the FIFA for Hope 5-a-side Football played between India, Pakistan and Nepal, in the role of a Coach assistant.

Born with 'hydrocephalous' a condition where the head was big due to excess fluid causing pressure on the brain, delayed his milestones and learning abilities. He underwent a brain surgery at two months. In his words, he understands everything but may take longer than others in doing so. He studied at the Vasant Valley School and completed his education through NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling).

Being part of Project UNIFY, a pilot study on youth engagement initiated in 2012, he takes the lead in Youth Activation Sessions held

virtually as well as in person. He is often seen leading the sessions, participating in meetings and contributing his inputs in designing modules, research.

Siddhant's versatility can be seen through his interest in diverse activities. He enjoyed a stint in working with a high end cafeteria and also in doing a Dance course. He volunteered to teach underprivileged children at an NGO, close to his house. He is adept at playing the keyboard and is fond of listening to music.

Siddhant initially kept to himself, he was shy. Engaging through sports and youth engagement sessions has gradually turned him into a confident and a proactive participant. He has anchored events inclusively, from time to time and continues to assume higher and different roles to keep his learning and development going.

*Says Siddhant, I have a lot of dreams and what I want to say to everyone today is:*

**DON'T LIMIT ME'**



## Simran Pujara, Badminton (Chattisgarh)

*Simran Pujara is 25 yrs old and hails from Bilaspur ,Chattisgarh. Simran wants to be a Dietician, just like her mother.*

Simran welcomes everyone with a warm smile. She loves to play Badminton. Zumba and drawing keep her busy and, ofcourse a diet chart that she plans for others along with her mother. Her mother, Ms Kavita Pujara, is her role model & a friend.

Simran and her mother have spent countless moments of isolation and distress. Simran appeared like any other child at birth but in a few months demonstrated delays in her milestones- neck holding, eye contact etc. Amidst an 'allegation' of giving birth to a girl child, the fact that Simran would require special assistance, became added fodder for her family against Kavita. A neighbour's child born at the same child was constantly compared with Simran. Her diagnosis of 'Mental Retardation' was conveyed to her family and objections arose. Bilaspur had no therapists. Ms Pujara travelled several times to Nagpur (Maharashtra) to attend relevant sessions in special care.

As Simran grew, sitting alone in school during recess, eating alone, sometimes having nothing to eat (as the other students would finish her tiffin), getting pinched by the students who would call

her 'Pagal' (mad), being laughed at, having her books torn, became the life that she knew. Her mother once even approached a group of girls and invited them to her home to be 'friends' with her daughter. That didn't work. Ms Kavita visited the school frequently, speaking to a few Special Educators who although understood the situation, could do very little to help. They advised Kavita to pull Simran out of the school, Girl-Safety was another concern. Kavita was relieved to have another girl child, Dhriti who she felt would always be there to support Simran. The two sisters are the greatest of friends.

In around 2018, Simran joined SO Bharat. And from there her passion for sports started. She plays Badminton regularly in the community court. She has participated in Floorball and Bocce as well. The several online events have made her even more confident. Nevertheless, Life can never be free of challenges, says her mother. The biggest one is the trust that people lack in her. But that does not stop them from exploring and re-discovering themselves and a community that is not so resistant, after all.



## Suman, Floor Hockey (Delhi)

*Suman is 29 yrs old and is a resident of Delhi. She is seen frequently at the Special Olympics events, because according to her, if there was no Special Olympics, her life would have been drastically different. The transformation came about with her participation at the SO World Winter Games. She feared injuries or even travelling alone, she seldom spoke, in fact. The first lesson her Coach taught her was to get independent, and she complied.*

The cluttered streets of Paharganj, where she belongs echoed her victory. The community for the first time understood that sport was her achievement. It was sports that lifted her from the isolation and rejection of academics, helping her to rediscover herself and show her abilities to the world. Floor hockey, Handball, Basketball & Badminton, kept her occupied and deepened a passion that would change her journey. Suman participated in Floor Hockey at Special Olympics World Winter Games 2013 and won a bronze medal.

"When Suman failed the third time in class 5, we realized that she has special needs," says her mother, "We then admitted her to a school for intellectually disabled children, where she got the chance to get trained in sports by Special Olympics Bharat's trainers." Suman was heartbroken, as despite working very hard she was unable to get the right results.

Her father, a tailor and her mother a homemaker, struggled to meet the basic requirements of their three children. Suman did her family proud and according to them, turned out to be their shining asset – Brighter than the medal.

Following her participation at the World Games, she continued with sports and progressed to being a Coach Assistant. Having joined SO Bharat as an Athlete in 2010, it did not take her long to progress to higher levels. She represented SO Bharat at the 2015 World Games held in LA, USA as Coach Asst, for the Handball team.

Suman, currently, is a Coach at the Vast Special School, Punjabi Bagh, Delhi. She has been employed with them for the past five years. According to her, her training continues, whether from her seniors or from the Athletes. Their dexterity in handling modern day devices like the mobile is something she appreciates and learns from them. In sports she continues to keep a close watch on identifying her Athlete's skill but ensures that fitness is one area that is followed strictly by all.

*"I can't imagine life without Special Olympics. My learning was never up to the mark. We need to re-discover and Special Olympics provided me with that platform." Says Suman.*





## Sumant Kale, Cycling (Madhya Pradesh)

*Sumant Kale's fitness regime does not begin and end with an event. It is a lifestyle. Sumant participated in the 6th edition of the Run Bhopal Run event held virtually in Dec 2020. He walked as well as cycled covering over 10 kms on separate days. Run Bhopal Run is an annual flagship event of Bhopal Runners, launched for the first time in 2015 with the awe-inspiring participation of over 10,000 participants.*

He followed the Special Olympics Fit 5 program too, that made him conscious of his fitness & diet. Rohit, his Unified Partner also a Coach with SO Bharat Madhya Pradesh since 2015 followed the program and monitored the regimen for 2 weeks monitoring their progress virtually.

Sumant Kale, is an Athlete from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh now travels independently within the city on a cycle. Athletics, Badminton, Cycling and Swimming are the other sports Sumant has participated in. He participated in the Badminton National camp winning a bronze medal.

Sumant is a single child of his ever-doting parents who spend every moment to create a conducive environment for him. Their cheerful demeanour exudes joy and energy. An unfortunate accident at the time of birth left Sumant with a head injury that may have led to Intellectual challenges as well. By the age 5/6 yrs he started to speak with therapy. Sumant fell victim to reprimands from his teachers, bullying at the hands of his class mates, and all this pushed him into a space of isolation and frustration that touched the lives of his parents as well. He experienced sleeplessness. He was advised to pursue physical activities that

would exhaust him and push him to sleep. This introduced him to the world of sports.

His mother, Ms Manjari Kale, recalls his first experience in a swimming competition. He was nervous and was shivering, but she kept cheering him on. He swam and faced the challenge; and everything around him changed in a way that seemed so natural. Empowerment and self-respect embraced him. Covid 19 too, taught him to keep him active and interactive, making him comfortable with technology. Sumant received vocational training from Divyadarshika Rehabilitation Centre. At the age of 18 he joined their tea packaging that employs 27-28 persons with Intellectual Disabilities.

*"Special Olympics is a continuous platform that kept Sumant and other Athletes so busy, even during the lockdown. The frequent virtual sessions and increased interactions exposed even us to the abilities of the Athletes and of my son as well"*

– Ms Manjari Kale, Parent of Sumant Kale

*"He is a keyboard warrior and loves to type fast; he had written 'Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta' in Hindi on his computer. He loves travelling & trekking too."*

– a news coverage



## T Vishal, Powerlifting (Pondicherry)

*On 19 June 2023, the Indian contingent got the first medal, rather set of medals, at the Special Olympics World Games in Berlin, won by T Vishal in powerlifting. The 16-year-old from Puducherry, won 4 silver medals in powerlifting to put India on the leaderboard.*

To an extent Vishal carved the path of sports for himself, encouraged by his father. Vishal only really took to sport when watching the Paralympics Games. Immediately he asked his parents to find him a coach who could teach him the techniques and the essentials of the sport. Almost obsessed with it, he even scoured the Internet to find videos that would help him get better — to the point where his parents even wondered if this had become a dangerous obsession.

It was then that his father learnt about Special Olympics Bharat, and spoke to the coaches and director in the area asking if there was a way to have him join the programme. Within the home there was resistance. His mother, a school teacher pressured by her own family and profession, was unable to accept the condition of her son. Coming to terms with her son's learning disability was a reality even harder to confront, being a teacher.

"Until a few days before the Berlin Games 2023, when we discussed Vishal's results, there was often some resistance and emotion shown by her," SO Bharat Puducherry Area Director Chitra

Shah says. "We pushed her to not just embrace that but also let him come and play and enjoy sport. It would help him get better at it, as well as help him adjust socially."

Vishal has delayed development and playing sports has uplifted his own sense of identity. Lifting massive weights — far beyond the abilities of most of the population — has been key to helping him work with the world around him.

Seeing four silver medals around her son with an intellectual disability overwhelmed her, re-adjusting her perceptions and those of her family. He participated in the National Powerlifting Championship held in Uttarakhand in Aug 2023 that witnessed participation of 49 powerlifters including 3-4 special athletes. Vishal won a gold medal there.

*Under the coaching of Mr Bagyaraj he has been selected in the 58 kg category for the IPF WORLD SPECIAL OLYMPICS POWERLIFTING CHAMPIONSHIP 2023 to be held in Druskinikai, Lithuania in November 2023.*



## Tanshu, Roller Skating (Haryana)

*Tanshu, 17 years, won two Gold medals (333 and 500 Mtr) in speed skating at the Invitational Games held in Sweden in February 2020. There was a moment when he fell on the track but, continued to challenge his closest competitor. Tanshu proved everything his mother trusted him with. Her conviction and resolve to bring out the best in her son glittered at the event.*

Tanshu appeared 'normal' at birth. His delayed milestones drew attention of his parents. At the mainstream school, the teachers complained about his inability in coping with studies. Underconfident and frustrated, Tanshu would cry bitterly on his journey back from school.

Confirmed about their son's diagnosis and, with restricted support options in Ambala, his parents could foresee a long struggle ahead. Tanshu stayed home for 5-6 yrs before he joined the Vatsyala School. He took naturally to Skating and Swimming. Painting was his other talent. He won a prize in painting, presented to him by the then Governor of the State, His Excellency, Kaptaan Singh Solanki.

Tanshu faced another setback when he lost his father. Emotionally devastated, the family ran into financial difficulties as well. Coach Chandrahas Sharma from his school, his mentor, guided him in sports as well as facilitating the necessary equipment. Tanshu's fee was waived. Practising speed skating has always been expensive. Fortunately some of his well-

wishers got together for the required support. His mother runs a small tea shop to make ends meet too.

Tanshu's victory in Sweden and his changing personality is visible. His mother remembers a comment from a neighbor earlier, "He has no brain, he can't speak properly". She scoffs at it. According to her, Tanshu never spoke with anyone, now he has become so social. He follows time and discipline. He goes out independently. He is now cited as a surprise & a success story. In his special moments, he shows to his father's phot, his pictures of sports performances & medals.

Tanshu continues to practise roller skating at a temple space located close to his house. His regular practises would help him perfect balance and speed, helping him in ice speed skating that he hopes to compete in at the SO World winter games in March 2025. Special Olympics has brought us hope and a reason to smile" – Ms Rajni Bala, Tanshu's mother.



## Tiya, Young Athlete (Haryana)

*Tiya, born in 2012, practiced the Young Athletes drills regularly for the past three years, in school as it is a part of the School Calendar. She is a child with Downs Syndrome and goes to the Little Angels School Sonipat.*

Her condition impacted, both, her movements as well as her social behaviour. Her diagnosis at birth also revealed a weak heart, and her parents observed her delayed milestones with disappointment and surrender. The district did not offer much help, even in terms of know-how at that time. Her parents could feel the hesitation amongst the neighbours, to send their children to play with Tiya. As she grew, she developed other medical conditions which restricted her further, namely, Thyroid that made her gain weight further affecting her mobility. Only a few months into the school started to bring her down temperamentally, showing signs of her drawing deep into a shell and dissociating from persons around her..

The Little Angel's School brought a transformation that gradually shaped her into what she is now, offering her a platform to follow multiple therapies and drills.

The colours and the lay-out attracted Tiya to the Young Athlete kit. Her mother requested videos of the YA activities to see how to replicate them at home. She arranged home resources to ensure that Tiya did them at home. While doing the drills

at home and also regular visits to a nearby park sparked a welcome transition, that gradually allowed Tiya to follow the routine in school with her classmates. The drills pushed her activity levels and made her follow rules in a fun way.

"I recall Tiya being obese and inactive when she joined the school. Along with following a diet chart and going for therapies, the Young Athletes drills were conducted regularly. She has shown significant improvement in her mobility as well as social behaviour. She used to be very quiet earlier, now she enjoys with everyone in the playground" – Mr Sanjeev Kumar, National Trainer of Special Olympics Bharat and School Sports coordinator

During the lockdown period her activities at home included, going up and down the stairs, jumping, catching, and kicking the ball etc. Her mother planned with the rest of the family members the daily activity tasks for Tiya and Tiya continued to smile and be active.

It is heartening to see Tiya taking the initiative of greeting people around her, of teaching her mother's class 'ABCD' quite like her mother now.





## V Induprakash, Cycling (Jharkhand)

*Indu Prakash, 20 yrs, won a Gold and a Silver medal in Cycling in the World Summer Games held in 2023 in Berlin Germany. The contrast in the backdrop, between his house in Jharkhand and the colourful gaiety at the World Games struck him. This was his exposure to any location even outside his district.*

He has always cycled to run errands and help his parents in any which way possible. While his mother diligently labours to churn out four to five hundred idlis daily, through the night, to sell the next day, his father works with the Railways, in-charge of railway track maintenance, in Ranchi, Jharkhand. A small room which includes a kitchen accommodates Indu's family of four.

Indu has an Intellectual Disability which of the many ways, manifests in a challenged speech. His challenges were observed by his family when he was 3-4 yrs old. Struggling to make ends meet, his parents accepted this as their destiny, especially after their second son too, who manifested Intellectual Disability.

While he cycled to carry out tasks, Indu remained unmindful of the level of skill and fitness growing within, which is recognised in the world of sports. Having to ride a new bike brought a new ray of

hope for Indu whose first reaction was that he was now sure to win a medal for his country. He practised morning and evening covering approx. 45-50 kms daily along with visiting the gym frequently. He was mentored by his Coach, Mr Narender Hansa and Mr Satbir Singh Sahota, a veteran sportsperson, international cyclist and asst area director of SO Bharat Jharkhand.

Observing Indu closely, has already set Mr Satbir in the process of making a road map for him to cycle his way into mainstream competitions aiming for yet another Athlete with an Intellectual Disability, to be accepted and included. However, owing to Indu's background he only hopes that Indu continues to practise and does not get overwhelmed by his existing disadvantages. Induprakash's return from the World games was celebrated locally highlighting his stature in a way never done before. How far it goes to transform his life is yet to be seen.



## Vaibhav Khullar, Roller Skating (Delhi)

*Vaibhav Khullar, 12 yrs, is an athlete with Autism he started as young athlete with Special Olympics Bharat. His love for skating started when he was 8 years old since that he has been skating daily in his Bhatnagar International School Vasant Kunj School and also is getting coaching from Shrey Kadian's sports academy.*

Vaibhav behaviour challenges and hyperactivity is now channelized as skating made a very positive impact in terms of reduced motor difficulties, improvement of cognitive functioning, and emotional/behavioural adjustment. Participating in different sporting activities has helped him feel included, relieve stress or anxiety, and improve his self-esteem in the process.

Vaibhav has participated and won several medals, trophies, recognitions and certificates in various Interschool competition, online E quiz, SOB, and private Institute championships.

Vaibhav secured the first position in virtual SOB national championship of Table Tennis and Fitness Challenge. He also led one of the FIT 5 fitness sessions organized by the youth leaders. He gave a spectacular performance along with his sibling and companion, Krishna Khullar, at the National Youth leadership Summit 2022. It was a delightful combination of roller skating and passing the ball. He deftly skated on a narrow strip on the dais that had the distinguished guests seated, including the Indian Hockey player Ms Rani Rampal, during

an event preceding the departure of the Indian contingent for the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2023. While his regular sports practices go on through his parents' relentless search for exploring new sporting avenues, Special Olympics has provided him a platform to showcase his abilities, amazing and inspiring several others and helping them place their trust in sports.

Vaibhav is a Good will Ambassador for Pour la Protection des Handicapés that creates awareness about inclusion in society, Indian Book Of Record holder and Golden Star Award 2023 holder for his passion in painting and sports, SAMARTHYA GLOBAL EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2022 for special needs person in sports, Super Ability Award 2022, Global Excellence award 2022, a National collector championship 2020 for his planetary collection, to name a few of his accolades. Vaibhav Khullar was diagnosed with ASD (Autism) at the age of 2.8 years. He is happy to be a student of Bhatnagar International School Vasant Kunj and is proud to call himself an athlete of Special Olympics Bharat.



## Vibhu Aggarwal, Basketball (Chattisgarh)

*Vibhu Aggarwal, now 18 yrs, is a person with Down Syndrome, born without a palm in the left hand. He hails from Raigarh Chattisgarh.*

When Vibhu was approx. a year old, he was diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, with the doctor clearly telling his family that he will not be able to lead a normal life. Shocked by the verdict and unsupported by a city that had no special schools pushed his parents to the corner. Vibhu demonstrated delayed milestones including a delayed speech that he developed not before age 3. A roller coaster ride began for his parents, but the cheer on the face of Vibhu made them accept the situation with a determination to do anything to make him achieve his best. He studied in a mainstream school until the 7th standard after which he passed 10th through open schooling. Raigarh is a small town in Chattisgarh where people were unaware of the condition. The mainstream schools refused to admit him. He was admitted in a mainstream school for a short while but soon after getting into a brawl there, his parents decided that home was safer. His parents, Ms Shalini Agarwal & Mr. Praveen Agarwal divided the day to ensure that he followed a routine. His day had him study & take Casio and dance classes.

As Vibhu grew his talents started to surface and the list goes on. He moved with the music, felt happy when he danced, played the Casio, played Chess and since 2018 has shown an inclination towards sports, specifically, Badminton and Basketball. He secured a second position in the Virtual Special Olympics Basketball competition in 2022. He is currently playing Basketball under the mentorship of Ms Anju, the SO Bharat Coach, Mr Avichal Sharma and Mr Ravi Jain. In his free time, he helps his mother in the house chores. In 2020 he participated in the virtual dancesport competitions hosted by SO Bharat virtually. He is fond of watching TV. Based on his favourite series, he dreams of becoming a CID officer.

*"Vibhu enjoys sports and is very serious about his practises. It keeps him physically and mentally fit. He practises Badminton in a club nearby for an hour every day. We are happy that he does all his routine work independently. We are blessed to have Vibhu as our son." - says Shalini*



## Vignesh Lokeshwar Naik, Table Tennis (Karnataka)

*Vignesh Lokeshwar Naik, 21 yrs old, excitedly called his brother and mother as soon as he wore the hearing aid in Berlin. He could hear his coach now! He won two Gold medals in Table Tennis(TT) at the Berlin games 2023 and the hearing aid continued to upscale his sport achievement. Ms Sheetal Negi, the TT coach there, recalled counter shots, backhand, forward and a good spin service as his strengths. He won two gold medals in Table Tennis. Adding to his sporting experience in Berlin, he had an opportunity of meeting Ms Maria Shriver, a journalist, former first lady of California and the sibling of Dr Tim Shriver, Chairman of Special Olympics International.*

Vignesh is a student of Dayanilaya Kumta, a special residential school in Karnataka. He joined the school in 2015 , joining Special Olympics sports as well. He has multi disabilities, including learning disability , making him unable to speak or hear. At the time of joining the school he often complained of fears and negative imaginations that often caused him a headache. As a result his communication with the others was restricted. It is unclear whether his condition had anything to do with a disturbed family environment. His father, a habitual alcohol consumer, is an auto-driver and his mother runs a grocery store.

Vignesh was embraced by his school that makes sports important for each and every student, providing several options for them to select from. According to Cyril lopes, the owner of the school and a coach with SO Bharat since 2009, sports is, by far , the best platform to steer their energy positively and bring about

a change in their outlook and that of others. Vignesh , according to him, has never been particularly friendly,he likes to keep to himself and is resistant to change. The silence around him has been his life. The hearing aid too made him happy initially but, too much of sound is something he would need time to accept. Even though his parents insist that he must wear the aids , Vignesh runs to Cyril, his mentor, who understands that everyone needs to be patient for Vignesh to get accustomed to the device.

For the past six months approx. Vignesh earns a salary in exchange of assisting Coaches of a few schools in training students in Table Tennis. Each day he continues to stay in focus to train his students , unassuming of his enormous victory. The change is more pronounced in others who now welcome a world games champion and a story of inspiration that Vignesh carries wherever he goes.





## Yashika Bhat, Basketball (Delhi)

*Yashika Bhat at the age of 20yrs, is a member of the National Youth Activation Committee, a Silver Medalist in Basketball from the Abu Dhabi 2019 Games, a student of the under graduation program having a diploma from ITI that qualifies her as a Health Sanitary Officer and has done a computer course. Her mother, Ms Geeta Bhatt, marvels at her daughter's achievements, who she remembers sitting alone for hours, in silence, with no emotion, as a child.*

Yashika's parents tried to have her continue with education until grade 3 in a mainstream school, when they realised that she may require special attention. In this time Yashika's performance in school continued to remain poor. She could not read from the blackboard, could not memorise even the simplest of concepts, Maths was incomprehensible and so was her concept of time. Her mother regretfully recalled how much she would scold Yashika and get frustrated with her under-performance, not understanding the condition. Troubled, her parents approached a doctor who explained that she would be five-six years behind her chronological age and that a special school would provide her the required support.

Yashika joined the Balvant Rai School, New Delhi. after It is here that approx, 10 years back, she joined Special Olympics under the mentorship of her Coach, Mr Vijay. She played football,

basketball, Athletics etc. with immense interest and excitement. Although Yashika's speech is unclear at times, although she manages to speak confidently. She has also emceed at events in Special Olympics with different youth leaders without ID. While Yashika would often withdraw from engagements at the last moment earlier, she does not hesitate to do so now.

Yashika has attended several sports camps that have brought about a noticeable change in her, according to her mother. She has even participated in the Communications classes conducted by SO Bharat virtually, during the lock down. Special Olympics continues to provide a diverse platform of engagements to Yashika, who has become confident, she does not hesitate to speak to people, although she may need help sometime to understand questions. In her free time, she helps her mother in the house chores, especially when her mother is taking tuitions.

# Epilogue



Several years after I retired from the Indian Air Force, I received a request to take over as Chairman of Special Olympics India that was running across nine states of India. It is only natural that having an estimated population of 30 million persons with IDD in India I desired to reach out across the length and breadth of the country. In 2001 'Special Olympics Bharat' was born as a new registered Trust, accredited by SOI, and a new Constitution was written.

By 2008 SO Bharat spread to all the states covering 300 out of the then, 679 districts having access to over 1.5 million schools (SSA) where over 300,000 children with disabilities were registered.

My resolve to lead and expand the movement in India strengthened as I took a closer look at the Athletes. From an event, I recall vividly, as the whistle blew, the Athletes started to run but, in different directions! They needed guidance to stick to their tracks and when instructed, they adhered to it. At the conclusion of the event, all the Athletes went for a prize. They all felt that they had done their best and eagerly awaited recognition, which so many of them, may have experienced for the first time that day.

The joy and positivity with which they pushed themselves to reach the finish line, each having a look of a winner, inspired me.

Today, I am delighted to see how so many people are breaking-out on their own and engaging willingly with the Athletes; but I am always concerned for ALL of them. My concern is for those who are not there with us. We have a huge ground to cover in India. I have faith in the society accepting, respecting, recognizing & including our special children today & in the years ahead.

**Air Marshal (Retd) Denzil Keelor**

PVSM, KC, AVSM, Vrc

## **Mission- Special Olympics**

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.

**"Special Olympics Bharat"** is a National Sports Federation for the Development of Sports for Persons with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities, recognized by the Ministry of Sports & Youth Affairs, Government of India and the nationally accredited program of Special Olympics International, USA

**Let me win.  
But if I cannot win,  
let me be  
brave in the  
attempt.**

**— Special Olympics Athlete Oath**

