

Sports and Youth Affairs Minister Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore

There is no dearth of funds for sports

Indian athletes put up a stellar performance at the recent Asian Games in Indonesia, bringing home the country's best ever medal haul – 15 gold, 24 silver and 30 bronze. Leading from the front was the Sports and Youth Affairs Minister **Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore**, himself a former shooter and Olympics double trap silver medal winner. He spoke to **Ishani Duttgupta** about the government's two-pronged approach to sports – nurture top sports talent and find untapped sports stars at the grassroots. Edited excerpts:

India's medals tally at the Asian Games was a record. We did well at the Commonwealth Games, too, earlier this year. Does it help that the sports minister is an Olympian himself?

I have been through this grind myself and seen it from close quarters. The challenges that sportspersons face are best known to them. Now, as sports minister, the least that I can do is to enable them with an environment that is more conducive and help them achieve their goals. After all, they are all playing for the country. They see in me one of their compatriots. I feel rejuvenated when I connect with them, not as a coach or a trainer, but to make sure they're getting all the facilities with no bottlenecks. But they also know that they have to be very precise about what they want and the resources have to go to the people who need it the most, with no wastefulness.

There seems to be a new sense of energy among Indian sportspersons. What has changed?

We are now celebrating performance rather than just medals. On Thursday, I met long-distance runner Govindan Lakshmanan who didn't get a medal at Jakarta but definitely gave a medal-winning performance. It could be a minor technical failure but that makes

him no less a champion. We honoured him with equivalent cash of a bronze medal because athletes should know the country is there to celebrate their performance, and not only medals. Now, as a sports minister, I would like to put my energies in such cases where I know that by providing the right training and direction, we could be a few steps away from an Olympic medal. The direction set by our prime minister towards sports and sportspersons is extremely positive; after the Asian Games he personally wanted a list of athletes who had achieved their personal best (PB) at the Games, along with those who had won medals. The list is a big departure from the past with many achieving their PB in the international competition and also winning medals.

Earlier, PB would usually be achieved at home and in the global arena, their efforts would fall short. That is changing. Besides, we now have very, very young teenage athletes winning medals at the international level - there was 15-year-old shooter Anish Bhanwala winning a medal at the Common-

wealth Games and another 15-year-old, Shardul Vihan, who won silver in the shooting double trap event at the Asian Games. 16-year-old Saurabh Chaudhary became the youngest Indian to win a shooting gold in the competition history, and 18-year-old Hima Das, after winning gold at the World U20 Championships in Finland, won 3 medals at the Asian Games. You will see the graph soaring when you put the right energies to train the people at the right age at the right time and follow it up till it starts reaping benefits. We now support a very professional set-up with an elite squad of people taking care of elite athletes. Not only their own performance; the performance of their opponents is also being monitored and the right athletes are being picked as medal winners and being backed by the government. Our strategy of picking winners is working – that's why we picked Neeraj Chopra for the honour of walking with the Indian flag, and he didn't disappoint and won gold in his javelin throw event at Jakarta.

"There is need for more awareness among sportsmen and women and their families about the schemes of government at all levels"

What are some of the financial incentives that you are providing the sport men and women?

Have you heard the phrase 'catch them young and cash them old'? Well, that's our plan and we are working towards it. We have a couple of programmes that I believe will make a difference to the way we look at sports. These include

the long-term athlete development programme, for which, we will select through Khelo India school games and various other national championships happening around the year. We will pick 1,000 budding athletes every year to provide an annual scholarship of ₹5 lakh and training for 8 years. Quality coaches will be developed through a cascading community model. Star athletes covered under our Target Olympic Podium Scheme will get an enhanced monthly out of pocket expense of ₹50,000. We are also setting up a National Sports University in Manipur.

Have the budgets for nurturing sports persons gone up after you took over as sports minister?

There is need for more awareness among sportsmen and women and their families about the schemes of government at all levels. The sports ministry is there to take care of the team that takes care of Team India - senior, junior and potential. It is the responsibility of the states to create infrastructure at the grassroots level, but we support them even in that area. For the sports federations on the high priority list, we take care of the funds for training, travel, camps in India and abroad and coaches. The funds from the government of India, for customised training of star athletes, under the National Sports Development Fund, have no limits. In fact, there is no dearth of funds and we have also got on board highly trained officers who are paid at market rates. ■



Gold medal winners at the Jakarta Asian Games (from left) Jinson Johnson (men's 1,500m), Swapna Barman (women's heptathlon), Amit Panghal (men's light fly, 46-49kg, boxing) and Sarita Gayakwad, Hima Das, Vismaya and Poovamma Raju (women's 4x400m relay)