

Title: Breaking Boundaries, Inspiring Millions - Mithali Raj

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Abstract:

Mithali Raj is the former captain of the Indian Women's Cricket Team. She has pioneered the path of many Indian women cricketers. She had tremendous interest in the game to the extent that she went to a boys camp every morning for practice. She went past a myriad of hurdles along her journey to reach the national camp. At that time, the women's team was given scant respect and was ignored by the administrators. Mithali Raj was the one who changed the perception of women's cricket in India. She fought for the rights and resources of the team, be it match practice, food, or training equipment. She turned out to be one of the greats of the game, but what stood out more was her leadership. She fought for what she believed in, even though she was discriminated against. She pursued her dreams by overcoming every hindrance in her way. She made the Indian Women's Cricket team a force to be reckoned with and led the team to the finals of the 2017 World Cup. She is a revolutionary figure in Indian sports and will remain an inspiration to each and every one of us.

Key Words:

Tenacious, Composed, Adroit, Strategic, Rebellious.

Introduction:

“Cricket is not gender biased. It isn't that men's cricket is different and women's is a different one.” Mithali Raj was a remarkable woman who revolutionised women's cricket in India. She was the former captain of the Indian Women's Cricket team, and inspired millions with not only her batting prowess, but also her leadership. Her rebellious, indomitable spirit and incessant efforts as an advocate for gender equality in cricket have transformed not only women's cricket, but the Indian sports industry for good. While battling discrimination and systemic neglect, she never

stopped chasing her dreams. She led the team to two World Cup finals, putting India firmly in the upper echelon of women's cricket and propelled the team to global prominence. She was instrumental in paving a new path for young girls with cricketing aspirations and is the inspiration behind many of Indian cricket's current women superstars.

Mithali Raj was born on December 3rd 1982, in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, before moving to southern India, spending her early years in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. During her storied twenty-three cricketing career, she won multiple awards, including the Arjuna Award, Padma Shri, and Khel Ratna. These awards were a testament to her tremendous skill, perseverance and contribution to Indian sport. (Joshi)

Discussion:

She started her expedition in the sport at the tender age of ten. In fact, it was her father who initiated her love for the sport, trying to reform her habit of sleeping in late. She was sent with her brother to an exclusive boys' camp. Usually, she sat on the sidelines, outside the boundary, and finished her schoolwork, while also playing a few cricketing strokes when she got the opportunity. The coach was astounded by her exquisite technique, and suggested she train under Sampath Kumar, a coach of two age-group teams of Hyderabad. (Shashank and Patwardhan)

With a new coach and ambience, she toiled day in and day out, put in the hard yards and practised for six hours every single day, starting as early as 4a.m.. She practised in the narrow school corridors and made sure the ball never touched the walls to work on intricately placing her shots. Moreover, Sampath introduced her to new, unique drills to instill a proper technique in her game. Sampath's strict and stringent tutelage made Mithali the player she became, unleashing her full potential. Her grandparents tried to discourage her from playing cricket, as it was a predominantly male sport, but she still pressed on, overcame all hurdles, and exhibited profound commitment and unparalleled dedication towards the sport. She sacrificed her academic and personal pursuits to chase her true dream despite facing societal pushbacks. (Patwardhan and Shashank)

At the mere age of 16, she joined the national camp, expecting a new experience filled with learning and joy. However, more setbacks awaited her. Being the youngest in the camp and having replaced a popular player, she was bullied by some of her teammates. In addition, no member of

the women's team received adequate nutrition and facilities, especially in comparison to the men's team. This was the main struggle that the women's team faced. They barely had any practice matches with other international teams to get ready for big tournaments such as the Asia Cup and the prestigious World Cup. On account of this prejudice, Mithali relentlessly retaliated against the cricket board of the nation. She fought for more rights and better facilities and care, and to be treated equally on par with the men's team. (Patwardhan)

When the time came to play internationally, she debuted for the Indian team at the young age of 17 and hit a masterful century against Ireland in her first match, firmly announcing her arrival in international cricket. She continued her fine run of form and was soon appointed as captain of the team. (Shashank)

In her rebellion against gender inequality, there was an incident where she was asked about her favourite male cricketer. She countered by asking the reporter if he had asked a male cricketer about their favourite female cricketer. She was steadfast in her fight to abolish gender bias in the game, hoping to make an identity for the Indian Women's Cricket Team. Even after leading the team to their first ever World Cup final, neither the facilities nor the training program saw much improvement. Hence, after a few years, she decided to leave the team and go back home. After a few months the team was going to participate in the World Cup, but they knew that they couldn't do it without Mithali. Raj came back not only to represent her nation on the big stage again, but with hope that there would be change in the perception of the Indian women's cricket team. (Patwardhan and Ghosh)

She took the team to another World Cup final, where they unfortunately fell just short in a close battle with England. Even though they fell at the final hurdle of the World Cup, it was a defining performance by the team. Through their grit, resilience, and unwavering dedication, they gained respect and an identity across the world, which eventually led to the Indian Cricket Board giving them the facilities and incentives they deserved. (Patwardhan)

Conclusion:

Mithali Raj is an inspiration to all Indians and was the face of the Indian Women Cricket team for a long time. Her actions have positively influenced women's cricket in India. She has paved a path for young girls with dreams to represent the nation in the sporting arena. Moreover, her efforts were instrumental in the BCCI declaring pay parity for all women and men players of the Indian National Cricket Team. She single-handedly changed the perspective of women's cricket in the country while giving herself and the team a strong identity.

Mithali was a trailblazer. She is the figure that India needed to promote women's sport in the nation. Now, many female athletes of the country in a myriad of sports have won medals at World Championships and Olympics, such as P.V Sindhu in badminton, Mirabai Chanu in Weightlifting, and Lovlina Borgohain in boxing. In 2023, a structured league was put in place for women's cricket, now known as the Women's Premier League. Because of her resilience and fighting spirit, women in sports now have a respectable identity and the nation is reaching new heights in the field of sport.

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