

Written by Amanda Turner
Thursday, 08 March 2018 10:18



Aruna Reddy has vaulted her way into national fame and put gymnastics back in the spotlight in India after her historic bronze on vault last month at the Melbourne World Cup in Australia.

Despite heavy obstacles in her way, **Aruna Reddy** has vaulted into national fame and put gymnastics back in the spotlight in India after her historic bronze medal last month at the Melbourne World Cup in Australia.

"My moment of glory has finally arrived," Reddy told *The Times of India*, which reported her voice choking with emotion as she spoke from Melbourne.

Reddy, 22, has become the newest star in Indian sport since February 24, when she became the first gymnast in the nation's history to win a medal at a World Cup event, an accomplishment that even eluded her famous training partner, 2016 Olympic vault finalist **Dipa Karmakar**

. Reddy was given a hero's welcome upon her arrival in Hyderabad last Friday morning, with a cavalcade of official cars, media and well-wishers waiting to receive her at the airport.

International success has largely eluded gymnasts in India, where adequate training facilities and world-class coaches are rare, and sports like cricket, field hockey, badminton, and tennis are more popular. Reddy is only the third Indian gymnast to win a major international medal, following Karmakar and male gymnast **Ashish Kumar**, both of whom have earned medals at the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games.

In Melbourne, Reddy wrapped herself in the Indian flag for the medal ceremony to celebrate her achievement. She averaged 13.649 to win the bronze medal behind Slovenia's **Tjaša Kysslef** (13.800) and Australia's **Emily Whitehead** (13.699). She also finished seventh in the floor final, an improvement of one place from the qualification.

"This is my first international medal," Reddy said. "I don't have words to describe my feelings. It's been 13 years since I've seriously pursued a career in gymnastics and finally, I have a World

Written by Amanda Turner
Thursday, 08 March 2018 10:18

Cup medal."

With the Commonwealth Games coming up in April in Australia, the news of her historic medal sent India's media flocking to interview the Reddy family, who live in a suburb of Hyderabad, and gymnastics officials in her home state of Telangana.

"We are so happy for her," said her sister, **Pavani Reddy**. "We were confident that Aruna had it in her to make it big. We have been waiting for this moment. I am sure she will bring more laurels to the country."

Karmakar, who is still sidelined after undergoing ACL surgery last year, sent out her support.

"So proud of you Aruna!!" the world and Olympic vault finalist tweeted to Reddy. "Congratulations on your outstanding achievement!"

Indian media have devoted several stories to Reddy's late father, as well as the plight of her long-time coach, who is seriously ill and was unable to accompany her to Australia.

Reddy's first steps in sport were in karate, but her father noticed her natural flexibility and thought she might excel in gymnastics. When she was 7, her father brought her to Lal Bahadur Stadium in Hyderabad — and she hasn't looked back since.

"Every medal I will win is dedicated to my father," she said of her father, who died in 2010.

Reddy was first coached by **Swarnalatha**, **Giriraj** and **Ravinder** (in some parts of India, particularly the south, it is common for Indians to use single names only, without surnames). After Giriraj, who was Swarnalatha's husband, was killed in an accident a decade ago, Reddy began training with **Brij**

Kishore

Since 2011, she has trained in New Delhi, nearly 1,000 miles away (1,500 km) from home, alongside Karmakar under national coach

Bisweswar Nandi

Kishore remains her personal coach and usually attends training camps and international competitions with Reddy, but she was without him in Australia. While at a training camp in Uzbekistan prior to the Melbourne World Cup, illness forced Kishore to return to India, where he has been hospitalized at the Asian Institute of Gastroenterology outside Hyderabad. Kishore already struggled to make ends meet prior to his illness and blames the contract he is employed under via the Sports Authority of Telangana State (SATS). Kishore pointed out that SATS recently hired yoga instructors on full salary.

"Then why the partiality towards us?" he asked *The New Indian Express*. "This contract-based system is a menace. I do this out of interest. There are no other sources of income for me. I get paid Rs 43,000 per month (US\$660). I have been coaching for 25 years, and this is what I get. With this salary, I can barely do anything. My wife's brother is helping out with the expenses

right now."

When Kishore's plight made national news, the chairman of SATS visited him personally in the hospital with a check for ₹ 2 lakh (US\$3,000) to help alleviate his medical expenses.

"My student got a great result," said Kishore, who was presented with the check two days after Reddy's medal. "That is the reason behind why I got the check. It should not be like this."

According to its own officials, the Sports Authority of Telangana State will not hire coaches over 49 years of age on salary, only on contract. This age discrimination may be based on not wanting to contribute to retirement pensions in the near future; Kishore's wife said he will have no pension to count on.

Bureaucracy and infighting have notoriously plagued Indian gymnastics. When Russian-American coach **Vladimir Chertkov** was hired as national coach prior to the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, he frequently complained of the absurdity and incompetency that hindered the team's growth.

Bureaucracy and factionalism were once again on display after a scandal erupted over the selection of India's Commonwealth Games team that was resolved only after the intervention of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG). The FIG and the Asian Gymnastics Union (AGU) both recognize the Gymnastics Federation of India (GFI) as the governing body for gymnastics in the country, but neither the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) nor the Indian Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports recognize the GFI (or any other authority). Originally, the Indian Olympic Association held a Commonwealth Games trials in New Delhi in mid-February, but only one of the three-member selection panel had any knowledge of gymnastics. The chairman of India's Commonwealth Games gymnastics selection committee was the president of the Indian Lawn Bowling Federation.

To the exasperation of the GFI, rings and parallel bars specialist **Rakesh Patra** was left off the six-member squad to the Commonwealth Games, which takes place in April in Gold Coast, Australia. Patra, along with Kumar, is considered one of the country's only hopes for apparatus finals. The selection committee was apparently unaware of the relevance of apparatus specialists and selected the top three all-around gymnasts. Patra, who was never informed that the all-around score would be part of the selection criteria, petitioned the Delhi High Court to hear his case. Additionally, two gymnasts were put on the team who are not eligible to compete in the Commonwealth Games as they do not currently hold FIG licenses. The FIG told the IOA to respect the authority of the GFI in selecting its team for the Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, where the gymnastics competition will be held under the auspices of the FIG, per the authority of the Commonwealth Games Federation.

"While we fully recognise that it is the prerogative of the IOC to register the gymnasts for the Olympic Games and the Youth Olympic Games, this is not the case for the Commonwealth Games," the FIG informed the IOA president on February 28, according to the letter circulating in the Indian media. "The registration and selection of the Gymnasts who participate in the Commonwealth Games is the prerogative of our National Gymnastics Federation."

Written by Amanda Turner

Thursday, 08 March 2018 10:18

Following the FIG's instructions to the IOA, the GFI selected Patra and **Yogeshwar Singh** to India's Commonwealth Games team, along with Kumar. Reddy headlines the women's team along with

Pranati Nayak

and

Pranati Das

. Rhythmic gymnast

G. Meghana Reddy

, who recently began training under 2016 Greek Olympian

Varvara Filiou

, is India's lone representative to the Commonwealth Games rhythmic competition.

Aruna Reddy, who vaulted a clean piked barani and a full-twisting Tsukahara in Melbourne, holds an outside shot for a medal at the Commonwealth Games, where she will be competing with top gymnasts from not only the host country but also Canada, England and Wales.

Karmakar, who also overcame financial difficulties to reach the world-class level, became a national heroine for her bravery in attempting the extremely difficult Produnova vault (handspring double front).

Reddy said Karmakar remains an inspiration as she attempts to match her teammate's 2014 achievement by winning a medal on vault at the Commonwealth Games.

"We have been training together since 2011," Reddy said of Karmakar. "We are not rivals and can't be. We are each other's support system during training and competition time. We treat each other as sisters and are close friends. Her hard work actually inspires me. Even before leaving for [the World Cup], Dipa had motivated me by telling me to give it my best shot and not to feel the pressure."

Reddy, who said she hopes to win a medal in Karmakar's honor next month, is enjoying her own hard-fought success and recognition.

"Indian gymnastics is synonymous with Dipa, but now people will know that there's Aruna Reddy as well," she said.