

Devendra Jhajharia
(men's F46 javelin throw)



in its rural areas. And this was very much evident at Rio Paralympics Games. Out of the four medalists, one belongs to the state. Deepa, who is married in village Bhainswal in Sonapat district, became the country's first woman to win medal in Paralympics.

More than half of the Indian contingent at Rio was from Haryana. Out of the 19-member squad, ten --- Amit Kumar Saroha, Dharambir Nain, Deepa Malik, Karamjyoti Dalal, Rinku Hooda, Narendra Ranbir, Virender Dhankar, Rampal Chahar, Pooja Rani and Sandeep --- were from the state and most of them hail from the rural areas.

Within the state, Sonapat contributed the maximum: Amit, Dharambir, Deepa, Narendra and Rampal who belong to the rural belt.

Across the state, para-sport has allowed hundreds of people with disabilities to take control of their lives, giving them economic freedom and respect in a society that generally looks down on the physically-challenged. The state government is also acknowledging their achievements and rewarding them with cash and jobs.

"There was a time disabled people were a burden on their families, but para-sports has changed all that. Now, the same families take pride in their achievements," said double Olympian Amit, from Bayanpur in Sonapat. Amit finished fourth at Rio and missed the bronze medal with a thin margin.

"No longer are they (disabled) dependent on their families. Rather, they are contributing to the family's income," added Amit, who is an assistant coach with the state Sports Department. Till date the state government has awarded Rs 4 crore to him for his achievements and in 2013, he was conferred the country's highest sporting honour, the Arjuna Award.

In Haryana, para-athletes have received cash awards worth Rs 20 crore for their feats at national and international events in the last five years. As maximum number of para-athletes hail from villages, the majority of the money went to the

Para revolution sweeps Haryana

Cash and job incentives are encouraging youth with disability, especially in the rural areas, to take up sport for better living

Saurabh Duggal

After Olympics, it was the turn of the para-athletes to shine for the country in the world highest sporting event--Paralympics (from September 7 to 18). Defying all odds, these athletes, full of grit and guts, crossed the mental and physical barrier to make the country proud.

India was represented by 19

para-athletes at Rio and won four medals, including two gold and silver. Mariyappan Thangavelu (men's T42 high jump) and Devendra Jhajharia (men's F46 javelin throw) won gold. Deepa Malik (women's F53 shot put) won silver, while Varun Singh Bhati (men's T42 high jump) bagged bronze.

In the last five-six years, Haryana has seen a para-revolution, especially



rural areas.

“Now, disabled people are encouraged by members of their families to pursue sports seriously,” said paralympian Girraj, secretary-general of the Haryana Paralympics Association. “The pride and money associated with para-sports have given a new lease of life to para-athletes. Now they too can take care of their needs and give a comfortable life to their family,” added Girraj.

MAKING A START

After fielding a solitary participant in the 2000 para-nationals, Haryana put together a 124-member strong contingent during the nationals this year in Panchkula, and won the overall title for the eighth consecutive time with a tally of 163 medals, including 65 gold.

The frequent state meets, coupled with cash incentives, are helping Haryana widen the base of para-athletes at the grassroots. “At the first state championship in 2007, there were only 85 participants. This year, participation rose to 1,500 athletes. The increase clearly shows more players in the state are defying the odds of disability and joining sports,” said Girraj.

The cash incentives for national and international medals are also playing a key role in widening the base. “Earlier, the cash award for

national medals was Rs 10,000, Rs 7,000 and Rs 5,000, respectively. Now, it is on a par with the able-bodied athletes at Rs 3 lakh, 2 lakh and 1 lakh. This is a big boost for para-athletes,” said Haryana Sports Department coach Amarjeet Singh, whose trainee Virender Singh competed in the Rio Olympics.

“Even in the international meets, the cash awards are on a par with abled bodied athletes. Under the same sports policy, Deepa will get a cash award of Rs 4 crore for winning silver in Rio.”

Face behind the revolution

Before 2000, there was hardly any awareness about para-sports in Haryana, and the physically challenged were left with no alternative but to

compete with able-bodied athletes. At the dawn of the new millennium, Girraj Singh of Faridabad showed the way, and today Haryana's para-athletes are a force to reckon with.

During the senior nationals at Bangalore in 2000, Girraj was the lone competitor from the state. He went on to clinch bronze in 800m at the 2002 Para-Asian Games in Busan, South Korea, and competed at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Since then, no para-team has left the shores without a player from Haryana.

In 2005, Girraj played a crucial role in forming the Haryana Paralympic Association. “Earlier, I did not have an idea about sports events for disabled athletes, so I used to compete with the general athletes. A former international athlete introduced me to para-sports,” said the 42-year-old Girraj, who is the first para-athlete to receive the Bhim Award.

In 2014, he got the Dhyan Chand Award for his contribution to para-sports. “Earlier, Maharashtra and Karnataka were the powerhouses in para-sports, but since Haryana started taking it seriously, we are the undisputed champions,” he added.

For most para-athletes, the pride of standing on their own feat is their most prized award, their medal of honour. ■

The story is being written under the aegis of Inclusive Media - UNDP Fellowship 2015.

The writer is senior sports journalist with Hindustan Times, Chandigarh



**Deepa Malik (women's
F53 shot put)**

TEN PARA-ATHLET

**Deepa Malik, 45,
(Shotput)**



Deepa, a mother of two, is an accomplished biker and swimmer before shifting to athletics. A tumour in spine, followed by three surgeries and 183 stitches, left her paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair since 1999. She is married in Sonapat.

A former national level kabaddi player had a spinal injury after she had a fall from her terrace. Completely bed ridden for two years and diagnosed with paraplegia, it took her about two years to become thoroughly mobile on her wheelchair. She hails from Rohtak.



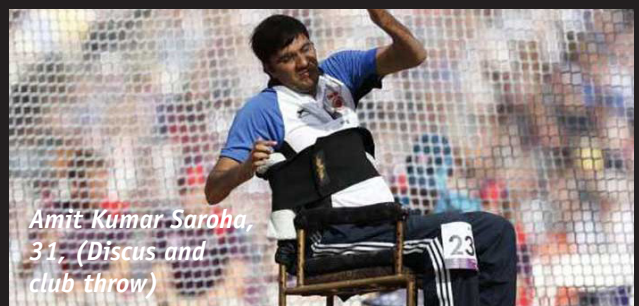
**Karamjyoti Dalal, 28,
(Discus Throw)**

**Pooja Rani, 25,
(Archery)**



She was the country's first para-athlete to compete in archery. She is diagnosed with poliomyelitis during childhood. Pooja gradually became interest in para sports, especially shooting. However, with no infrastructure available for the sport of shooting in her hometown, Pooja chose to pursue her interest in archery instead and picked up the sport in 2013. She hails from Rohtak.

The former junior national hockey player, Amit, hails from Sonapat and has one Para Asian Games gold and two silvers under his belt. A road accident at the age of 22 left him with severe spinal injuries and since then he is confined to a wheelchair.



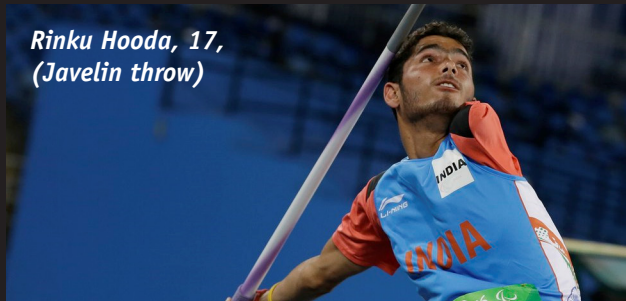
**Amit Kumar Saroha,
31, (Discus and
club throw)**



**Dharambir Nain, 27,
(Club throw)**

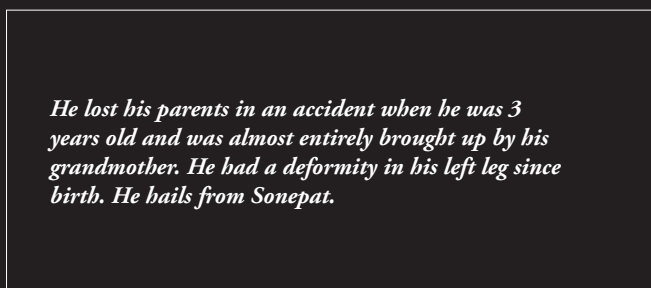
He hails from Sonapat and is just two years old in para sports. His life changed when, while attempting to dive into water, he crashed into the underlying rocks of the water body and resulting into complete paralysis below the waist.

ES FROM HARYANA



**Rinku Hooda, 17,
(Javelin throw)**

He was the youngest athlete in the Indian contingent. He lost his left arm in an accident involving a fan blade. He hails from Rohtak. He was introduced to javelin throwing by fellow Indian para athlete Amit Kumar Saroha and on Saroha's insistence he relocated to the Sports Authority of India in Sonapat for training.



**Narendra Ranbir
(Javelin Throw)**

He lost his parents in an accident when he was 3 years old and was almost entirely brought up by his grandmother. He had a deformity in his left leg since birth. He hails from Sonapat.



**Virender Dhankar, 32,
(Shotput,
Javelin Throw)**

A former international kabaddi player from Jhajjar, Virender lost his right leg in an accident in 2004. Two years back he started pursuing para sports seriously, especially shot put and javelin throw, in 2014.



**Rampal Chahar, 26,
(High Jump)**

At an age of four, Rampal met an unfortunate accident when his arm got caught in an agricultural chopper, resulting in partial below-elbow amputation of his right arm. Always a sports enthusiast, Rampal pursued sports in school and college, often training in high jump and casually competing with other able bodied athletes. He hails from Sonapat.

He damaged his hip bone permanently in a car accident. The Rohtak athlete is ranked world number two in his category. F-44 category. He is ranked second in the world in his category. He won the Olympic quota place by securing gold in an international event held in Dubai last year.



**Sandeep, 22,
(Javelin Thorw)**