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Let's add up the medals: The 'Olympics' where India is shining

It's the Olympiad where young math whizzes have been doing the nation proud, managing the country's best-ever performance at the event, since it began in 1959

Shruti Sonal (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-shruti-sonal-479264476>) | Aug 8, 2024, 20:26 IST
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The winning team at International Math Olympiad 2024

At 14 when most teens are either worrying about board exams or developing crushes, Delhi's Arjun Gupta had a decision to make: Follow his passion for maths or stick to conventional classroom learning. "What they taught us in school was so much about getting the right answers, rote learning the formulas, and scoring good marks. It bored me," says Gupta, now 17. As a result, he shifted to an open school from class 9, and focused all his energies on preparing for the Olympiad.

The risk has paid off. Gupta is one of the six members of the Indian contingent at this year's International Math Olympiad (IMO) that bagged the fourth position overall, the country's best-ever performance at the event, since it began in 1959. The US beat China to take the top spot.

There were also a host of individual medals, including four golds, one silver and one honourable mention. These come on the heels of a great haul by India's four-women team at the European Girls Mathematics Olympiad (EGMO) in April, with all participants bagging individual medals.

Far from being a stroke of luck, the medals have been a couple of years in the making. Mentorship by former medalists, offline camps run by premier institutes, and a growing online community of enthusiasts who share tips and resources, have all been crucial.



Offline camps exclusively for female participants, as well as mentorship by former medalists, has pushed the number of participants recently

Rohan Goyal, the 21-year-old who is headed to the prestigious MIT for a PhD in mathematics, says that when he started preparing for Olympiads in class 9, the only resources he had were online forums like Quora.

To help other aspirants, he started giving online classes during the pandemic. Three years ago, things became more formalised, after two Olympiad-enthusiasts-turned-entrepreneurs — Deepit Purkayastha, co-founder of InShorts, and Swarnima Bhattacharya, co-founder of Thea — came on-board to provide logistical and financial help.

That's how the Sophie Fellowship was born, which included a free mentoring program from medalists. "A number of Indians had been getting individual medals at IMO and EGMO since 2019, but as a team, we still had work to do and mental barriers to cross," Goyal says.

Changing the fortunes of the women's team was a more uphill task. During the period 2000–2021, overall female contestants were only 9.2% of the total 11,950 contestants. In terms of gold medalists, the gap is even more stark. From 1959 to 2021, there were 43 female gold medal winners as compared to 1,295 males. Till 2020, India did not even have enough participants to send a team for the EGMO.

To create a pool of talent, national women-only training camps were introduced at the Chennai Mathematical Institute (CMI) in 2021. In the first camp, only five candidates turned up for selections, says former Math Olympian and mentor Rohinee Joshi, but the numbers have gone up each year since then. "Now we have a very competitive pool and getting into the team has become very difficult," she adds.

Solving Olympiad problems can take hours, days or even weeks. Part of the mentorship is to inculcate this love for the process, not destination

Ashani Dasgupta, mentor

Mentorship can make a whole world of a difference to an Olympian's journey. Gunjan Agarwal, who developed an interest in the world as a fourth-grader, was full of doubts when she was not able to solve any of the problems in her first EGMO in 2021 and scored a zero. "I really thought that

it's not worth it anymore. But a lot of senior Olympians told me to keep trying," says the 17-year old. What followed were a string of medals: a bronze in 2022, and silvers in 2023 and 2024.

Academies too have sprung up across the country, aiming to foster talent from a young age. Kolkata-based Cheenta Academy for Olympiad and Research, run by Ashani Dasgupta, a PhD holder in mathematics from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is one of them. Unlike thousands of coaching institutes for IIT-JEE and NEET, the model for Olympiad training is quite different, says Dasgupta.

"You cannot solve Olympiad problems just by applying one formula. Sometimes, a solution takes hours, days and even weeks. Part of the mentorship is to inculcate this love for the process, not the destination," he says, adding that a growing number of aspirants come from tier-two and tier-three cities.



Gunjan Agarwal, 17, says mentorship helped her bounce back from a dismal performance at her first international event, and followed it up with a string of medals

Earlier, while a large number of class 11 students were told to stop appearing for Olympiads and focus on entrance exams, many colleges now offer direct admissions to medalists. Joshi was offered a seat by IIT-Bombay without appearing for JEE, while Goyal made it to CMI. Agarwal has already secured a seat at Cambridge for higher studies, and says her Olympiad experience helped.

Interestingly, one of the most-talked about results from this year's IMO is that achieved by a non-human. Google Deepmind's new AI systems solved four out of six problems, winning the equivalent of a silver medal for the first time. "Olympiads is all about thinking out of the box, creative problem solving, and observing patterns. It shows that rote learning can't be the way forward in a world where we compete with AI," says Gupta.

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