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Tora Agarwala

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Previously a feature writer with the Conde Nast group of publications in Mumbai, Tora Agarwala is currently a journalist with The Indian Express. She has been covering a wide range of topics including politics, culture and human interest from Assam and the other sister states of the Northeast since April 2018. Tora completed her schooling in Assam before graduating with a degree in History from St Stephen’s College, University of Delhi.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/hima-das-the-girl-who-chases-time-5267672/>

Hima Das: The girl who chases time

For most of her life, Hima Das has faced life's challenges by running. She has run in rage and joy, after brawls and victories, and as if her life depended on it. The story of a young athlete from a village in Assam who won't stop, not till she has outrun the clock.

Tora Agarwala

The Indian Express | 8th Sep, 2018.



Hima Das never cries. But last week she did. Twice. The first time, silently, and in public, while millions watched her standing on the winner's deck in Tampere, Finland, as the notes of the Indian national anthem played in the background. The second time, she bawled. This was the morning after her record-making victory, in the privacy of her hostel room.

The night before Hima had slept fitfully. When she woke up and checked her phone, she had gone viral. In this emotionally charged moment, the otherwise hardboiled Hima, picked up the phone and dialled Assam. On the other end was her coach, a nonplussed Nipon Das, who had never seen or heard her like this. "What's wrong, are you okay?" he asked, as she sobbed uncontrollably.

A few days later, Hima gave an exclusive primetime interview to Prag News, a popular local Assamese news channel, from Finland. When asked about this rare spectacle of emotion, she giggled, embarrassedly and said, "Automatic ahi gol (The tears had come spontaneously)".

Actions like crying and emotions like fear and sadness aren't typically Hima Das things. Though throwing your arms open before a camera and shouting "Mon jai", is. Speaking a language you barely know without caring that you don't, is. Taking to task boys who annoy you, or anyone else for that matter, is. And, of course, running like your life depends on it, is.

"I don't think I even understand the full meaning of athletics. Sometimes I feel I don't know even know how to run," says Hima, earphones strung around her neck, fiddling with the drawstring of her hooded grey T-shirt. It's early July and we are sitting on the stands of Guwahati's Sarusajai Stadium, the athletic tracks on which a little over a year ago Hima had landed

for her first training camp, straight from the pothaars (fields) of her village Kandhulimari in Dhing.



How does she do it then? Hima shrugs, points upwards, and says, "It's just 'god gift'." Ten days after the interview, Hima clocks 51.46 seconds at the womens' 400 m final at the IAAF World Under 20 Championship 2018, in Tampere, creating history as the first Indian woman to win a gold on track at a global event — not even two years since she started professional training.

The Dhing Express

In its history, Dhing has been in the national news on two occasions. In March, in one of its remoter villages, a 11-year-old minor girl was raped and set on fire. The next month, Dhing hit headlines again, this time in sporting circuits. The girl who had trained in its lush green rice fields had made it to the 400m womens' finals of the Commonwealth Games (CWG) in Australia's Gold Coast. She came sixth, after clocking her personal best of 51.32 seconds on an international track. The Dhing Express — as Hima soon came to be called by her swelling fan club in Assam — had arrived.

"I didn't feel bad," says Hima, "In fact, I danced a lot right after the CWG got over. My coach had told me to 'go enjoy'. So I did 'full enjoy'." In a clipping from that evening, Hima can be seen dancing with abandon outside the stadium, oblivious to the cameras that panned in on her.

Back at her village in Kandhulimari, about 200 people had gathered in the porch of her house to see her run. A projector and a screen had been set up. A traditional Assamese band with dhul and pepa had been called. Minutes before the race, the power

went off and Kandhulimari plunged into darkness. “But we had arranged for a generator, and, ultimately, we did get to see her run,” says Hima’s sister, 15-year-old Rinti. Last week, when Hima won the gold in Finland, the power played spoilsport again, and the family missed watching their Hima accept her medal.

But this is the reality of small-town Assam — an accepted fate where electricity doesn’t return for hours on end, where floods are regular, and phone networks not. The day after she won her first international gold, as media, relatives and friends milled around her house, Hima called her cousin, Joy Das, several times to speak to the family, but every time the network would drop. “There is something up with the connectivity today,” Joy says, standing at the edge of the paddy field where Hima’s father works everyday, waving around his phone, trying to catch the best angle for network. It doesn’t work.

In the small group of people that plays a role in keeping Hima connected to Assam as she travels around the world, Joy is the messenger who sets up a video call between her and her parents every other day. Hima’s father Ranjit, a farmer, who was a fast runner himself, doesn’t own a phone with those features. Jonali, her mother, doesn’t own a phone at all.



The road leading up to Hima Das’s home in Dhing, Assam.

Running like your life depends on it

Hima grew up in a joint family of 17. Among her siblings and cousins, she was the one who stood out, the one who did things differently. When she was 15, she gathered the local village women and disrupted an illicit bootlegging business by one of her neighbours. The next day, the young man involved stood in front of Hima’s house and started shouting, “No one can stop me from selling alcohol”. Hima promptly went, picked him up and gave him a few solid swipes. The boy’s family lodged an FIR against Hima’s father, who, till very recently, would appear in court for this case.

Then again, she spent most of her early teen years pestering Joy to let her play football with the guys. “Even if I wasn’t a part of the game, I’d wait behind the goal. When the ball would come near me, I’d give it one solid kick and run off before they could see me,” says Hima.

Another time, when a local girls’ football tournament was

underway at Dhing, she went to her father. “Get me to play,” she had begged him. “Yet at other times, when she was much younger, she would tell me how she would one day fly on an airplane, and maybe even visit a foreign land,” says Ranjit, “But I would tell her. For those things, Hima, you need to study well, you need to play well.”

Hima took her father’s words to heart. Later, as she raced around tracks across the world, she would discuss her timings and techniques with him. And her father would wonder to himself, how his

daughter’s dreams had suddenly become a reality. Her mother, who says she didn’t understand the sport for very long, would worry about Hima’s safety and well-being. “When she first wanted to move to Guwahati, I did not want her to go,” she says. For Jonali Das, who rarely ever moves out of her tiny village in Dhing, Guwahati is a big city, rife with gondogul (trouble).

“But I would tell Ma that she shouldn’t worry, that very few things scare me,” says Hima, “And that I could always run off, even if they did.”

Because, running, for Hima, is second nature. She ran, in a fit of rage, when in Class III, a Tata Sumo — filled with village kids — was “too full” to accommodate her on a ride to school. She ran again, this time from her mother, when she reached home the same day, hair tousled and knees bruised from the fall that had resulted from her Sumo chase. And she continued running with steadfast determination — in tracks across Assam, in coaching camps in Patiala and Sonapat, and even in the rare races where she performed so poorly that she “wanted to give up midway”.

Hima Das’s parents (Jonali and Ranjit Das) and siblings (Rinti, Barsha and Barun) at their home.



Mon Jai!’

It’s perhaps because of the Assam’s politically sensitive history, its long fight to maintain its indigenous identity, it’s desire to be noticed by the mainland, that catapults its celebrities, be it sportsmen, actors or musicians, to legend-like status. The last big athlete Assam produced was Bhogeswar Baruah, who won a gold medal in the 800-m running event of the 1966 Asian Games. National attention to this part of the country is rare, and when a Bhupen Hazarika, a Zubeen Garg or a Hima Das emerges, Assam celebrates with fanatic obsession.

Hima’s last visit to Kandhulimari, in the first week of July, lasted less than 24 hours. About 2,000 people had gathered to see her. “Everyone wanted to meet her but she gave us time,” says Pinak Jyoti Bora, one of her closest friends. Bora met Hima a couple years ago when she was appointed the game secretary by the

All Assam Student Union's Dhing chapter. It was then that she also met Palash, Bhaskar, Bidanta, Rezaul, Jitu and Nayan. Soon, the eight of them became fast friends, who in their ripped jeans and shades, would play carrom, ride around their bikes, and basically "do mojja" (have fun). "But what really brought us together was Zubeen da. We are true Zubeen premis," says Bhaskar. In Assam — urban or rural — the music of the outspoken, and often controversial, singer Zubeen Garg binds the populace in unprecedented ways. "Hima even led a bike rally for Zubeen da's movie, Mission China," adds Bhaskar.

In 2017, Hima went to meet Garg in Guwahati as part of a fan club visit. "She came to me as a fan, left as friend," says Garg, "I realised that she was a khatra bostu (dangerous thing) the day I met her." Garg, who sees himself in Hima, often gives her advice about life. Just last week, when Garg expressed in public "how Hima should eat beef for strength", it stirred up a controversy in Assam. "You think she will conquer the world on chicken soup?" Garg says, "For sport, you need to leave your jaati, dharma and bhagwan." Right before she boarded her flight to Finland, Hima met up with Garg in Delhi. The selfie they took went viral in Assam afterwards.

Even when abroad, far from the paddy fields of Dhing, thoughts of home keep Hima centred. Minutes after her victory in Finland, as the Tricolour is handed to her, so is the traditional Assamese gamusa. A panting Hima tells a reporter, pointing at the scarf around her neck, "This is my state's tradition." Her now-famous catchphrase, "Mon jai", which in Assamese, means "I feel like", is Hima's way of acknowledging her roots. "There is something nice about saying an Assamese phrase outside," says Hima, adding, "Even back when I played football in Assam, too, I would throw open my arms and maaro a mon jai after every goal."

Today, "mon jai" is a hashtag she generously uses in all her social media posts, but if you delve deeper, it is so much more. It's the name of her favourite song by her favourite Zubeen da, it's her unfailing determination in her weakest moments, it's her fearlessness and confidence, but, more importantly, it's her way of describing anything she holds dear — a pet rabbit, a picture of her parents, or the Whatsapp group with her gang of seven.

"We talk every day on the Mon Jai group about sport, music, food, but we also talk about important things. I know they have my back," says Hima. Before she enters the Asian Games in Jakarta next month, her friends, too, are planning to streak their hair blonde Hima Das style. "She keeps asking us if we have done it," says Bora. A few weeks ago Bhaskar gave it a test run. "But the colour turned out all wrong! Then I had to put Super Vasmol 33 Kesh Kala (a colouring agent) on it to get my original colour back," he says. That incident made Hima laugh herself silly.

Talking like boys, acting like boys, hanging out with boys — did tongues ever wag in the conservative village of Kandhulimari as Hima grew up? "Let's not get into that," sighs Hima, "Let's just say, my mind is different. My attitude is different. And no one understands me the way my friends do."

'I am ready, Sir'

On her last visit to Assam, Hima was felicitated by the state's Governor in Guwahati's Raj Bhavan. In this closed-door by-

invitation-only private ceremony, Hima sat next to the Governor. And as the men and women from various ministries of the government discussed her diet, her passion, style, and her in-born talent, Hima remained unusually quiet.

Or so you would think. Across the table, Hima was in the middle of a roaring non-verbal conversation of her own. She would wink surreptitiously and show the thumbs up sign, when she thought no one was watching. These signs were directed at the two men who were sitting diagonally across her: her coaches Nipon Das and Nabajit Malakar.

Later, she admits, "It's like the three of us have the same heart. Like, I can tell you right now what's going in their heads." Das and Malakar spotted Hima during a trial camp in Guwahati in January 2017. "I didn't even know her name, but I knew her as the girl who would keep calling me about hostel accommodation for new entrants to the camp," recalls Das, "I ended up saving her number as 'Trial Camp' and whenever 'Trial Camp' flashed on my phone, I knew it was that girl calling about accommodation."

But, slowly, Das couldn't help notice that there was something different about Hima. "It was the way she did her exercises, the way she ran — that energy was something else," says Das. The next month Hima competed in her first national competition, Khelo India in Gujarat. "She won the bronze medal in 100 m and clocked in a timing of 12.42 seconds," says Malakar, "We asked her to come train with us in Guwahati."

"I told them 'moi ready Sir' and I packed my bags and moved to a one-roomed rented accommodation in Guwahati," says Hima. Those were the tough days: money was a problem, spikes were a problem, the leaky roof of her tiny room was a problem. "When I came to Guwahati, I knew nothing. I didn't know how to wash clothes or cook, I was never into household chores. I hated all that. But I loved running," she says.

And that made the difference. "She was supremely dedicated. No matter what she went through the night before, she would be at the tracks every morning, on time," says Malakar. Over the past year, Das and Malakar have become Hima's strongest support system, they are the people she texts every single day, whichever part of the world she is in.

'English mari diu niki?'

During her first few games across the national sporting circuit, Hima became famous as the girl from Assam. She would wear her shades, her patchy jeans, tie her hanky around her knee — "and walk around bindaas, completely 'yo' type," says Malakar, who continues to tease Hima about that. After her first trip abroad to Bangkok, where she had gone to compete in the second Asian Youth Athletics Championships, the streak of blonde in her hair became more pronounced. "We asked her — 'What on earth have you done to your hair?'," says Malakar. To which, Hima had said, "Sir, just you wait, this will become a trend one day."

Her relationship with her coaches has been the cornerstone of Hima's discipline. Before heading into a race, Hima always gives them a rough estimate of how she will fare. "And rarely has she been off the mark," says Das. In November 2017, when Hima got

selected to train in the Senior India Camp in Patiala, Russian Olympic bronze medallist Olympian, Galina Bukharina, took over as Hima's coach. "It's true Hima still speaks to us every day about her sport, but we do not interfere with how Galina ma'am is guiding her," says Das.

Hima is very close to her "Galina ma'am" too. They communicate in English, a language that does not come naturally to her, but that's hardly a deterrent for someone like Hima. On the sidelines of athletic tracks, she interacts with reporters with disarming aplomb, her Assamese conversation is peppered with English words, and she listens to English songs even if she, by her own admission, "doesn't understand all the lyrics."

"Before a public appearance, she sometimes jokes to me 'English mari diu niki?' (Shall I wing it in English?)," says Malakar, who adds that Hima always mentions them both at every opportunity she gets. "She once told me, 'If I am going to fly, I am not going to fly alone. I am going to make you fly with me.'"

"The only thing I fear is time"

On Thursday night as Hima created history in Finland, in his small home in Assam's Morigaon district, a man name Md Shamsul Hoque shed tears of joy. "I had to keep replaying the video because I was weeping so much," he says. In 2012, Hoque was a physical education teacher at the Navodaya Vidyalaya in Nagaon. In one of the inter-school camps, which included yoga programmes, PT sessions, "lozenge" races and dodgeball, Hoque noticed a girl who would reach before practice started, sometimes even when the gates were closed. "In the ten days that followed, the girl went on to win all the races we had organised," says Hoque, who then called up the Nagaon Sports Association and informed them about Hima. "This girl can run. Invest in her," he told the authorities.

It's Hoque's intervention that got Hima into athletics, who, till then, was playing football in local tournaments around Assam. After her first national medal, Hima came back to Nagaon, and

went straight to Navodaya Vidyalaya, and strung it around Hoque's neck.

Before her Finland game, too, Hima called up Hoque, as she does all her coaches, to seek his blessings. In the race that followed — the one that got the world to sit up and take notice — every one talks about Hima's sudden burst in the last 100 m stretch where she shot ahead like a catapult. But this trend of judiciousness in the beginning followed by mad speed in the last stretch is fast becoming Hima's style. "Even in the game before the Finland one, in Guwahati, it was in the last 60 metres that she caught up and passed her opponents," says Das.

Time and again, Hima has insisted that what she cares about is timing, not medals, not laurels, not world rankings. "The only thing I fear is time. I am not running after gold medals, I am running after time. And once I get that, gold medals will run after me," she says. Currently, Hima's personal best on a domestic track for 400m is 51.13 seconds, which she clocked in Guwahati's Sarusajai Stadium in June. A few days later when we meet in the same stadium, she admits "When I am on track, I am a different person." Between the squatting on the starting block and the shot of the starting pistol, Hima hears nothing, sees nothing. "All I know is that I need to run," she says. "The people around me could be Olympian gold medalists. But I don't take tension. If I do, how will I run my race?"

Neither is she distracted by the 9,000 posters of her that dotted Guwahati on that visit. "My father once told me: 'Don't let fame get to your head. The day you do, it will be the end'," she says, adding that the posters, instead of making her feel grand and self-important, makes her feel "nervous but motivated."

At her aggressive best, and only to her closest friends, Hima is known to use an Assamese colloquialism "Phali dim" which loosely translates to "I will own it/I will conquer it". She types it out on the Mon Jai Whatsapp group before she heads into a race, she whispers it into Malakar's ear before she speaks at a public function, she says it to herself in her head before any reporter asks her for a byte in English. The magical bit about Hima Das is that right after she says it, she actually does it.

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