

# ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY: ON THE WRESTLING FEDERATION OF INDIA AND REFORMS

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The [Union Sports Ministry suspending the newly elected Wrestling Federation of India \(WFI\)](#) on Sunday marks yet another twist in the [nearly year-long saga](#) afflicting Indian wrestling. In January 2023, Olympic medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, and World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat, had [accused](#) the then WFI president [Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh](#) and the coaches of the Federation of sexual harassment. The Bharatiya Janata Party parliamentarian was subsequently forced to relinquish control and was [charged by the Delhi police](#) for offences including stalking and harassment. But last Thursday, his long-term loyalist, [Sanjay Singh, was appointed the new president](#). Not only did Singh and his fellow Brij Bhushan confidants win 13 of 15 posts to which polls were held, not a single woman was chosen. The sight of Singh standing beside a heavily garlanded Brij Bhushan outside the latter's residence — which also doubled up as the WFI office — and the duo flashing the victory sign was enough indication of where the control lay. Such was the disappointment among the wrestlers that a tearful Sakshi announced her retirement while Vinesh warned that no woman will find wrestling safe in the current set-up. On Friday, Bajrang decided to return his Padma Shri award in protest.

Perhaps, it is this embarrassing turn of events that forced the government to finally act. The Ministry has also cited hasty and arbitrary decision-making on Singh's part, wherein he announced the revival of tournaments without taking into confidence the Secretary General (Prem Chand Lochab) as mandated by the WFI constitution. Lochab is one of two WFI office-bearers not considered close to Brij Bhushan. Another reason was the running of Federation affairs from "the premises controlled by former office-bearers, also the alleged premises wherein sexual harassment of players has been alleged". In a nutshell, the mess has laid bare everything that plagues sports administration in India. Even as the nation is diversifying its sporting excellence, the bureaucracy that runs sport still carries the unwelcome legacy of patronage politics. It also does not help that prominent athletes occupying positions of power are mostly deferential to the political masters who helped in their ascent. In the wrestlers' case, the Indian Olympic Association led by the legendary P.T. Usha dithered in its initial response and the athletes' commission comprising iconic sportspersons was tongue-tied. Such was Brij Bhushan's clout that a first information report was registered only after the intervention of the Chief Justice of India. There is still room to wipe the slate clean and usher in reforms. The authorities should go the whole hog.

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