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## From Firewood collection to Silver Medal: Mirabai Chanu at the Tokyo Olympics 2020

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative research tells the story of Saikhom Mirabai Chanu's journey from a tiny village in Manipur to the silver medal in the Tokyo Olympics 2020. Initially, she struggled with poverty and the daily challenges of collecting firewood. Still, her success signifies her own will and states that institutional support, such as governmental sports schemes and Manipur's strong sporting culture, played a prominent role. Besides that, her win symbolically represents how sports can become a vehicle of women's empowerment. This force can deconstruct the patriarchal society and thus, the girls continuously go upward. The article argues that Chanu's saga provides evidence that if we have determination, help, and chance, the most modest origins can give birth to remarkable journey.

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### Introduction

In the realm of Indian sports, few journeys are as powerful as that of Saikhom Mirabai Chanu. Her silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics 2020 ended India's 21-year Olympic weightlifting medal drought since Karnam Malleswari's bronze in 2000 (Nair, 2021). Born in Nongpok Kakching, Manipur, Mirabai grew up in a humble household, helping her family by collecting firewood and carrying water. Her mother first noticed her strength, which led her to weightlifting (Sharma & Leivon, 2021). Despite limited means,



Mirabai Chanu remained determined to pursue her training in weightlifting. According to her mother, Saikhom Ongbi Tombi Devi, trucks from the Etham Moirangpurrel area often passed through their village and kindly gave Mirabai a lift to Imphal. As a result, she was able to travel over 20 kilometers daily to the Khuman Lampak Sports Complex. Although transportation was a challenge, these truck drivers played a vital role in her journey. After her Olympic silver win, her family, remembering this support, honored those drivers—acknowledging that even small acts of kindness can help lift a champion to greatness (HT Correspondent, 2021). Mirabai's story is not just one of sporting excellence but of perseverance, community strength, and hope. She symbolizes the rising tide of women athletes from India's remote regions, breaking barriers and inspiring future generations with her determination and humility.

### Objectives

1. To study Mirabai Chanu's background and how her Olympic win empowers women in India.
2. To examine the role of community support and government schemes in her journey.
3. To highlight the importance of her Tokyo 2020 silver medal for Indian sports.

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore Mirabai Chanu's inspiring journey from rural hardship to Olympic success. Relying on secondary sources such as news articles, sports journals, interviews, and official records, the study conducts content analysis to examine themes related to her socio-economic background, training challenges, and community support. It also reviews relevant policy documents to assess institutional backing. Using a case study method, Chanu is portrayed as a symbol of resilience and women's empowerment. Special focus is placed on the cultural and geographic context of Manipur, offering a holistic understanding of her extraordinary achievement.

### Review of literature

Games and sports that empower women in India have been widely discussed. Pradhan (2019), in *"Games and Sports: A Gateway of Women's Empowerment in India,"* offers a comprehensive overview of how sports act as a transformative platform for women. Through case studies and analysis, the paper reveals how participation in sports helps challenge gender norms, foster leadership, and promote social inclusion and equality. Among the most compelling contemporary examples is the journey of Saikhom Mirabai Chanu. Nag (2024), in *"Mirabai Chanu: India's Olympic Medallist and Weightlifting World Champion,"* captures her incredible rise from humble beginnings in Manipur to becoming a global sporting icon. The



article effectively narrates her struggles, determination, and achievements, presenting her as a symbol of resilience, empowerment, and excellence in Indian sports. Building on this narrative, Sarkar et al. (2024) conduct a qualitative case study titled *"Lifestyle, Professional Career, and Contribution to Weightlifting: Olympian Saikhom Mirabai Chanu."* The study dives deeper into her disciplined lifestyle, commitment, and transformation into an international icon, making it a valuable resource for aspiring athletes and researchers. Furthermore, Sarkar et al. (2025) provide psychological insight in *"Analysing the sleeping behaviour and psychometric profile of Olympian Saikhom Mirabai Chanu: A case study"*, which highlights her mental strength, moderate-to-poor sleep patterns, and healthy eating habits. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of elite athlete preparation, revealing how psychological well-being and resilience contribute to top-level performance. Meanwhile, Press Trust of India (2021) reflects on Chanu's emotional comeback: *"Mirabai Chanu lifted Indian spirits with a silver at Tokyo but weightlifting faces uncertain Olympic future."* The article outlines how her silver medal not only revived Indian weightlifting but also represented national pride, especially after the disappointment at Rio 2016. Nevertheless, it also draws attention to the uncertain future of weightlifting as an Olympic sport due to ongoing global issues related to doping and governance. In another piece, Press Trust of India (2021) emphasises personal growth in *"Learned almost everything from Rio Olympics: Mirabai ahead of Tokyo Games."* Chanu candidly shares her struggles and mental health journey here, crediting her 2016 Olympic experience for shaping her into a more confident and focused athlete. Her story underscores the power of failure in building resilience and self-awareness. Satya (2021) in *"The Struggle Behind Success of Mirabai Chanu,"* narrates her journey through hardship, depression, and perseverance, ultimately culminating in her Tokyo triumph. This account reinforces how her success inspires young Indian girls to rise beyond social and economic limitations. Basu (2021) paints a vivid picture: *"From carrying firewood to clinching Olympic silver, Mirabai Chanu's story is one of immense courage."* The article traces her path from a modest, hilly village to the Olympic podium, highlighting her courage and the early influence of Kunjarani Devi, another Manipuri weightlifting legend. This narrative positions Chanu as a beacon of hope for underprivileged youth. Further recognition of her consistent excellence comes from the BBC News (2023) in *"Mirabai Chanu: Weightlifter is BBC Indian Sportswoman of the Year"*, which named Chanu the BBC Indian Sportswoman of the Year for the second time. This honour celebrates her achievements and enhances women's visibility in Indian sports, inspiring broader gender equality in athletics. The *Indian Express* (2021), in *"The Heavy Lifter,"* showcases her steady progress across global competitions—Olympics, World Championships, and Asian Games—cementing her status as one of India's most accomplished weightlifters. Her technical growth and medal-winning consistency have set



new national standards. From a broader perspective, The Financial Express (2021), in "*India at Tokyo Olympics: How India's record tally of 7 medals will impact future of sports in the country*", discusses the impact of India's record medal tally at the Tokyo Olympics. The achievements of athletes like Mirabai Chanu, Neeraj Chopra, and PV Sindhu have re-ignited national interest in sports and boosted India's global sporting ambitions. Moreover, Mirabai Chanu's growing market influence is evident in several endorsement deals. MediaInfoline (2021), in "*India's Olympic champions Mirabai Chanu & Bajrang Punia to endorse Amrutanjan's pain management range*", reports her partnership with Amrutanjan, where her recovery journey symbolises endurance, aligning with the brand's Ayurvedic identity. Similarly, Farooqui (2021) in "*Olympic medalist Mirabai Chanu signs brand endorsement deal with Amway*" highlights her collaboration with Amway, where she serves as an ambassador for the Nutrilite range, promoting wellness and fitness. Meanwhile, the Indian Weightlifting Federation (2021), "*Mirabai Chanu secures silver at Tokyo Olympics and rewrites Indian weightlifting history*", acknowledges her Tokyo silver as a landmark moment in Indian sports history. From junior competitions to the Olympic stage, Chanu's journey reflects unwavering dedication and continues to inspire the next generation of Indian athletes. BBC (2022). "*Saikhom Mirabai Chanu wins the BBC ISWOTY award*" Mirabai Chanu's recognition as the BBC Indian Sportswoman of the Year 2021 celebrates her historic Olympic silver and enduring impact on Indian sports. Her achievements and honours for other female athletes highlight the growing appreciation for women's contributions and inspire broader recognition of female excellence in traditionally male-dominated arenas. Additionally, Tula (2021), in "*NEROCA FC ropes in Mirabai Chanu as its brand ambassador*", marks a significant discussion of her role as brand ambassador for NEROCA FC, a regional football club, showcasing a powerful blend of local pride and cross-sport unity. This move highlights her influence beyond weightlifting and growing leadership in Indian sports. According to Chawla (2022), "*Mirabai Chanu's endorsement fee to rise by 25-30%*" highlights Chanu's endorsement fees rose significantly after her Commonwealth Games gold. Her appeal now spans brands like Domino's, Adidas, and various health-related sectors, making her one of India's most marketable athletes. Finally, Press Trust of India (2021) "*Amway India onboards Mirabai Chanu as brand ambassador for Amway, Nutrilite range*" highlights Amway India's partnership with Olympic silver medalist Mirabai Chanu, highlighting her growing influence as a health and fitness icon.

From the above literature review, it is clear that there has been little in-depth research focusing specifically on *From Firewood collection to Silver Medal: Mirabai Chanu at the Tokyo Olympics 2020*. Consequently, there is a genuine need to undertake such a study. This research addresses that gap by exploring unexplored dimensions of Chanu's journey. After being carried out successfully, the study is



expected to make a meaningful contribution by enriching the existing body of knowledge and offering fresh insights into the intersection of sports, gender, and social mobility in India.

### **Timeline of Mirabai's Sporting journey**

- 1. *Early Weightlifting Career:*** Mirabai Chanu's weightlifting journey began in 2009 when she secured her first national medal at the sub-junior level, demonstrating her natural talent early on (Sarkar et al., 2024). Subsequently, she stepped onto the international stage at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, where she won a silver medal in the 48kg category, marking her arrival as a promising athlete (Nag, 2024). However, her true breakthrough came in 2017 when she claimed gold at the World Weightlifting Championships in Anaheim with a total lift of 194kg—becoming the first Indian in over two decades to achieve this feat (Sarkar et al., 2024). Following this, she added another gold at the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast. Together, these milestones not only charted her steady rise in the sport but also laid a firm foundation for her Olympic success and growing international recognition.
- 2. *Rio 2016: Setback and Redemption:*** Mirabai Chanu's experience at the Rio 2016 Olympics proved to be a turning point in her career. Competing in the women's 48kg category, she failed to register a successful lift in the clean and jerk, resulting in a "Did Not Finish" (DNF) status Press Trust of India (2021). Consequently, she faced emotional turmoil, self-doubt, and depression. However, instead of giving up, she sought psychological support to rebuild her confidence. Through consistent training and mental resilience, she gradually recovered. Eventually, her hard work paid off at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, where she made a stunning comeback by winning silver—showcasing the power of perseverance and mental strength.
- 3. *Training and Transformation (2016–2020):*** Mirabai Chanu's journey from the disappointment of Rio 2016 to the silver podium at Tokyo 2020 is a powerful narrative of resilience, strategic training, and personal growth. After failing to register a single clean and jerk lift in Rio, her coach, Vijay Sharma, opted for a complete overhaul of her training (Chakraborty, 2021). Consequently, they introduced heavier lifts, corrected technical flaws, and added structured mental conditioning. This transformation soon showed results—Chanu won gold at the 2017 World Weightlifting Championships and again at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. Moreover, she trained twice in the U.S. with sports physiotherapist Dr. Aaron Horschig, who helped resolve her recurring back and shoulder issues, enhancing her performance (Chakraborty, 2021). Notably, she set a clean and jerk world record of 119kg at the 2021 Asian Championships. Additionally, psychological



techniques like video replays of past lifts boosted her confidence. Thus, her Tokyo silver was not just physical triumph but a complete mental and strategic evolution.

4. ***Road to Tokyo Olympic 2020:*** Mirabai Chanu's journey from Rio 2016's disappointment to Tokyo 2020's triumph showcases resilience and strategic planning. After failing to complete a clean and jerk lift in Rio, her comeback was slow and difficult. In 2018, she suffered a serious back injury, yet she nevertheless returned strongly, lifting 194kg at the 2019 National Championships. Soon after, she improved to 201kg at the World Championships, signaling growing confidence (Sarangi, 2021). As Tokyo approached, Chanu entered as a top contender with a declared total of 210kg. Finally, her perseverance culminated in a historic silver medal, inspiring athletes across India.
5. ***Tokyo Olympic 2020 Performance:*** On July 24, 2021, Saikhom Mirabai Chanu made history by winning a silver medal in the women's 49kg category at the Tokyo Olympics. Not only did this achievement open India's medal tally at the Games, but it also marked the country's first-ever Olympic silver in weightlifting. Chanu lifted a total of 202kg—87kg in the snatch and 115kg in the clean and jerk—finishing just behind China's Hou Zhihui, who set a record with 210kg (Peter, 2021). From the beginning, Chanu showed great form, successfully lifting 84kg and then 87kg in the snatch, keeping her in medal contention. Although she missed a bold 117kg attempt in the clean and jerk, her 115kg lift secured silver. Significantly, this medal came 21 years after Karnam Malleswari's bronze in Sydney 2000, making Chanu only the second Indian weightlifter to reach the Olympic podium (Peter, 2021). Ultimately, her Tokyo success symbolizes personal redemption and inspires aspiring athletes nationwide.

### **Government and institutional Support**

In May 2015, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports launched the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) under the National Sports Development Fund (NSDF) to support athletes with strong medal prospects for the 2016 and 2020 Olympics. The scheme prioritized sports like athletics, badminton, wrestling, boxing, archery, and shooting. Among its notable beneficiaries is Mirabai Chanu, whose journey illustrates the power of structured support. Initially, she faced significant challenges, relying on the kindness of truck drivers to reach her training center in a remote village (Laithangbam, 2021). However, after joining TOPS, she received nearly ₹2.5 crore over five years, allowing her access to elite coaching, advanced facilities, and international exposure (Laithangbam, 2021). Consequently, her career transformed dramatically, moving from hardship to Olympic success. Ultimately, her story highlights how community kindness combined with institutional backing can profoundly impact an athlete's life.

**Mirabai Chanu's Weightlifting Achievements**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Weight</b>	<b>Medal</b>
2016	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Olympics.	48 kg	---
2020	Tokyo, Japan, Olympic.	49 kg	Silver
2024	Paris, France, Olympic.	49 kg	---
2017	Anaheim, United States, World Championships.	48 kg	Gold
2019	Pattaya, Thailand, World Championships.	49 kg	---
2022	Bogotá, Colombia, World Championships.	49 kg	Silver
2024	Phuket, Thailand, IWF World Cup.	59 kg	---
2014	Incheon, South Korea, Asian Games.	48 kg	---
2023	Hangzhou, China, Asian Games.	49 kg	---
2016	Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Asian Championships.	48 kg	---
2019	Ningbo, China, Asian Championships.	49 kg	---
2021	Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Asian Championships.	49 kg	Bronze
2023	Jinju, South Korea, Asian Championships.	49 kg	---
2014	Glasgow, Scotland, Commonwealth Games.	48 kg	Silver
2018	Gold Coast, Australia, Commonwealth Games.	48 kg	Gold
2022	Birmingham, England, Commonwealth Games.	49 kg	Gold

Sources: Wikipedia, Saikhom Mirabai Chanu (2025).

**Awards and Rewards of Mirabai Chanu**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Award / Reward</b>	<b>Details</b>
National Honors	Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna (2018)	Highest sporting honor of India
National Honors	Padma Shri (2018)	Fourth highest civilian award of India
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Silver Medal Rewards	₹1 crore from BYJU'S	Private education company reward
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Silver Medal Rewards	₹50 lakh from Government of India	National recognition and reward
Tokyo 2020 Olympic	₹1 crore from Government	Appointed as Additional



Silver Medal Rewards	of Manipur	Superintendent of Police (Sports) in Manipur State Police
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Silver Medal Rewards	₹2 crore from Ministry of Railways (India)	Reward along with promotion in Northeast Frontier Railway
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Silver Medal Rewards	₹50 lakh from BCCI	Contribution from Board of Control for Cricket in India
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Silver Medal Rewards	₹40 lakh from Indian Olympic Association	National Olympic recognition
Other Rewards	₹20 lakh from Government of Manipur	For winning gold at the 2017 World Weightlifting Championships
Other Rewards	₹10 lakh from Government of Manipur	For qualifying for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics
Other Rewards	₹25 lakh from Government of Manipur	For participating in the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics
Other Honors	TOISA Weightlifter of the Year (2021)	The Times of India Sports Awards (TOISA) recognition

Sources: Wikipedia, Saikhom Mirabai Chanu (2025).

### Mirabai Chanu and the Feminist rethinking of Sport

Mirabai Chanu's journey from collecting firewood in a remote village to winning a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics can be understood through feminist sports theory. In her influential work *Feminist Theories for Sport*, Susan Birrell (2000) argues that sports are deeply intertwined with cultural ideologies of gender and power, rather than just physical competition. Traditionally, sports have reinforced masculine ideals, marginalizing female athletes. However, Chanu's success challenges these norms by increasing visibility for women in a male-dominated field and confronting structural inequalities (Birrell, 2000). Moreover, her strength and achievements subvert stereotypes confining women to domestic roles. By incorporating diverse feminist perspectives, Birrell calls for transforming how sports are perceived



and structured. Thus, Chanu's story exemplifies a shift toward more inclusive, equitable, and empowering sports for all genders, aligning with Birrell's vision of justice and diversity.

### **Findings**

1. Mirabai Chanu grew up in a poor family, helping with firewood collection and manual labor, showing early physical strength despite hardship.
2. With limited infrastructure, she often relied on truck drivers for rides to her training at Khuman Lampak.
3. Her life changed when she gained financial support from the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), allowing her to train in the USA before Tokyo 2020.
4. After a disappointing 2016 Rio Olympics, she bounced back by winning gold at the 2017 World Championships.
5. At Tokyo 2020, she made history by lifting 202 kg in the 49kg category, winning silver and ending India's 21-year Olympic weightlifting medal drought.
6. Mirabai is now a national icon, symbolizing women's empowerment and inspiring many young athletes.
7. She has received top honors like the Padma Shri and Khel Ratna, along with rewards from central and state governments.
8. Post-Olympics, she secured major endorsements, becoming brand ambassador for Amway India, NEROCA FC, Adidas, Domino's, and more.

### **Suggestion:**

1. Government authority and sports institutions should broaden their selection process to rural areas in order to discover hidden talents like Mirabai Chanu.
2. Moreover, improving grassroots infrastructure and training facilities across all districts in Manipur is essential to reduce the struggles faced by aspiring athletes.
3. In addition, there must be long-term support systems in place for training, healthcare, and career guidance to ensure athletes' holistic development.
4. Equally important, awareness programs and psychological counseling should be made available to help athletes cope with stress, pressure, and setbacks.
5. Furthermore, strict measures should be enforced to eliminate gender discrimination in sports at all levels.



6. Alongside this, initiatives to encourage female participation in sports should be strengthened by launching nationwide awareness campaigns.
7. In the long run, policies ensuring the welfare of athletes—such as pension schemes and post-retirement support—should be implemented through appropriate legislation.
8. At the same time, public-private partnerships should be reinforced to increase sponsorship and investment in athletes, particularly from the early stages of their careers.
9. Also, promoting a sports culture by integrating the stories of successful athletes into school and college curricula can inspire and educate the younger generation.
10. Recognizing achievement is vital, so athletes should be consistently awarded and celebrated for their contributions and victories.
11. Additionally, regular awareness and mentorship programs must be conducted to guide and motivate youth who aspire to pursue sports.
12. Finally, scholars and academicians are encouraged to identify gaps in this study and build on it to contribute to future research and academic progress in the field of sports development.

## Conclusion

Mirabai Chanu's story starts with collecting firewood in a remote village and ends with earning a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics 2020. This story is one of the most powerful of hope and resilience. Mirabai Chanu's 2020 Olympic medal serves as a personal triumph and a milestone celebrated by the nation, especially the underappreciated state of Manipur. It's no secret that receiving a medal comes with a deep sense of pride, but for Mirabai, the sense of pride is hovering over something much larger than that; a financial struggle, poor sport infrastructure of the country, a neoteric sports industry riddled with relentless injuries, and most importantly, the sheer wonder of a never surrendering dream. Her story is inspirational to the young girls as it shows that women, given the proper support, can achieve anything, even in a world dominated by patriarchal assumptions. It shatters the perception that women belong poised in the background. Ultimately, her story magnificently builds a strong case for the entire country.

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**Abbreviation:**

- IWF = International Weightlifting Federation
- BBC = British Broadcasting Corporation News
- TOPS = Target Olympic Podium Scheme