

Story Brief

Dutee Chand, the Asian Games medal-winning sprinter is the first Indian sportsperson to acknowledge publicly about being in a same-sex relationship. The story was first broken by me for The Indian Express. I also travelled to Bhubaneswar, where she is based, to do an in-depth interview with her.

The fact that an Indian athlete spoke about being in the same-sex relationship made news worldwide and was picked up and followed up by multiple Indian and foreign publications and news channels around the world. The stories related to Dutee Chand and her partner were trending on social media even though the general elections were happening.Â

FIRST STORY

Dutee Chand says she's in same-sex relationship with soulmate

Dutee Chand, the 100 m record holder and winner of two silver medals at the 2018 Asian Games, is the first Indian sports star to acknowledge being in a same-sex relationship.



Busy preparing for Tokyo Games next year, says Dutee. (Express Archive)

India's fastest woman has said she has found a soulmate, a girl from her hometown whom she has known for a few years. Dutee Chand, the 100 m record holder and winner of two silver medals at the 2018 Asian Games, is the first Indian sports star to acknowledge being in a same-sex relationship. Chand, 23, did not identify her partner because she does not want her to become "the centre of undue attention".

The sprinter is currently training hard to qualify for the World Championships and the Tokyo Olympics next year, so any plans of formalising the relationship have been put off for later.

The Day After: **Hope everyone continues to support me... good to know there's acceptance**

"I have found someone who is my soulmate. I believe everyone should have the freedom to be with whoever they decide they want to be with. I have always supported the rights of those who want to be in a same-sex relationship. It is an individual person's choice. Currently, my focus is on the World Championships and the Olympic Games but in the future I would like to settle down with her," Dutee told The Sunday Express.

She said she had gathered the courage to speak out for the rights of the LGBT community, and about her own same-sex relationship after the Supreme Court's historic decision to decriminalise Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code last year.

"I have always believed that everyone should have the freedom to love. There is no greater emotion than love and it should not be denied. The Supreme Court of India has also struck down the old law. I believe nobody has the right to judge me as an athlete because of my decision to be with who I want. It is a personal decision, which should be respected. I will continue to strive to win medals for India at international meets," Dutee said.

Though India does not recognise LGBT marriages, there is no law that prohibits a symbolic same-sex union. In September last year, the Supreme Court read down the 158-year-old British-era law that criminalised same-sex relations between consenting adults in private, and punished them with jail terms.

"The sexual orientation of each individual in the society must be protected on an even platform for the right to privacy and the protection of sexual orientation lie at the core of the fundamental rights guaranteed by Article 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution," the five-judge Bench ruled.

Dutee said it had been her dream to find someone who would be her partner for life. "I wanted to be with someone who will encourage me to continue being a sportsperson. I have been a sprinter for the past 10 years and I will perhaps continue to run for the next five to seven years. I travel around the world to compete. It is not easy. Mujhe kisi ka sahara bhi chahiye (I need someone who will support me on the personal front)," she said.

The sprinter who was born in Chaka Gopalpur, a village of weavers in Odisha's Jajpur district, has been a torchbearer in the fight for the eligibility of female athletes in track and field events. Dutee had successfully moved the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne against the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) rules on hyperandrogenism, which put a cap on the testosterone levels of women athletes who wanted to compete in track and field events.

SECOND STORY

First thought world won't allow a girl to be with a girl. But she said, if we want we can make it work: Dutee Chand

After becoming the first Indian sportsperson to talk about being in a same-sex relationship, Dutee Chand opens up about dealing with the dilemma of coming out and the reaction of her family and well-wishers since



Asian Games medallist Dutee Chand opens up about dealing with the dilemma of coming out.

Last week Dutee Chand became the first Indian sportsperson to openly talk about being in a same-sex relationship. Since then she has received a wave of support on social media which has put her at ease. In an interview to [The Indian Express](#), the Asian Games medallist and national record holder, talks about how the relationship grew stronger with time, how it was difficult to be single, about a previous heartbreak with a boy and how she dealt with the dilemma of whether to acknowledge the same-sex relationship or not. Excerpts:

Over the past week since you spoke about being in a same-sex relationship are you overwhelmed by the reactions on social media around the world?

I have been getting hundreds of phone calls since last Sunday when the news first broke. For me being in a same-sex relationship, meant you like someone of your choice, want to be with this person for the rest of your life and be in love with the person. I knew it would make news, but didn't realise the extent to which people would discuss it, tweet about it and want to talk to me about it. I just saw a positive comment by Twinkle Khanna a while back. You had informed me about Ellen (DeGeneres) tweeting about it and Viren Rasquinha writing in support. I feel I made the right decision to talk about being in a same-sex relationship.

You have been thinking a lot about whether or not you should talk about being in a same-sex relationship. What were the reasons?

For the past one month I was under a lot of mental strain because my elder sister was constantly telling me that she would tell everyone about my relationship with another woman. But after talking about it, I have experienced great relief. I feel like I have won back my freedom. I have been able to concentrate again on my training. After all the support I got, I realised that the world has changed and is ready to accept the fact that a girl can be in love with another girl. I was worried if people will turn against me or talk ill about me or blame me in some way. But thankfully everything has been positive. I am on so many Whatsapp groups and on them everyone has been supporting my decision to talk about being in a same-sex relationship.



The relationship started in 2017. But the fact is that we have hardly been able to stay together in the same place.

How did being under mental stress affect your training?

It did because my mind was disturbed. My coach Ramesh sir asked me why are you so glum these days. You just came back from a meet where you won a medal (200 metres bronze at Asian championships) and broke a national record in the 100 metres but you don't seem to be happy. I wanted to talk to my coach about what I was going through but I was a little worried about what he would say. He is like a father to me. First I told him that I had a fight with my family but didn't give him the details. He told me 'everyone at some point has a fight or some misunderstanding with their family. So focus on the Asian Championships now'. After winning a medal, I usually take sweets when I return to celebrate. But this time after returning from the Asian Championships I did not. I was not in a good mood, I stayed aloof. I was constantly worried what would happen if my sister started talking to the world. A few days after I returned to Hyderabad where I train, I told my coach about my sister blackmailing me. Sir told me not to worry. I decided to come to Bhubaneswar and visit my village for a short break.

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How much courage did you get from the fact that the Supreme Court had struck down section 377, which decriminalised same-sex relations between consenting adults?

Yes, it did put me at ease when I knew that there was no law which barred two women from being together or being in a relationship in India. I first called Payoshni madam (gender researcher and rights activist) to check if there was any issue if I was with a woman. She told me there was a rule but not anymore. I also did check with a few of my relatives about it.

When did the relationship begin?

It started in 2017. But the fact is that we have hardly been able to stay together in the same place. She stays in my village and I am most of the time training in Hyderabad or travelling for competitions. Sometimes when I come on a break to Bhubaneswar, I am able to meet her for a day or two. But then I need to return to my training base. So in a way it has been a long-distance relationship.

Could you talk about the early days of your relationship with the woman you are in love with?

Towards the end of 2017 I had fractured my hand and decided to come to Bhubaneswar as I could not train in Hyderabad. I took a two-month break. I wanted someone to help me and also to be around because of the fracture. I asked my mother to come from the village and stay with me but she said she could not because she had to look after the cow. My sisters could not come too because they had exams. Then I called her and asked her if she could come. She is from my village and I knew her. She said she will ask her mother and let me know. Her mother told her to travel to Bhubaneswar to stay with me. Her elder brother also came along for support as she would be staying away from the village for a while. She helped me a lot when I was recovering from the fracture.



I knew that it would be difficult for me to find a soulmate or partner in life. I told her about my situation and she seemed to understand.

What were some of the early conversations the both of you had. How did you get to know each other better?

It was during that time when she stayed with me in Bhubaneswar that I told her about my life. About how from a young age I stayed in the hostel and away from my village and how it involves a lot of travelling. I also told her how when I win medals there is a lot of joy and people appreciate it but the difficult part is when you are training. Because nobody sees the effort needed to win medal. The sacrifices needed. I have hardly been able to attend any festivals in Orissa because I am either training or participating in competitions. She seemed to have understood my lifestyle. After two months she left for the village but we continued to keep in touch over the phone. But at that point we never thought that we would be together.

So what made you feel that she was special?

In 2018 just before the Asian Games, she conducted a puja in my village for me... for me to do well at the Asian Games. My parents also did a puja so that I would win medals, but she on her own also did one. That is when I realised that she did really care for me. I told her at that time that if I have someone like you to support me and be with me, it will help me do much better in the future. She did tell me then that she would like to be with me, but we were not sure. I thought maybe it could work. I had also spoken to her earlier about how I was initially banned in 2014 because of high but naturally occurring levels of testosterone. After that, though, I won the case and could run again and win medals. I knew that it would be difficult for me to find a soulmate or partner in life. I told her about my situation and she seemed to understand.

Did you take the first step when it came to proposing?

After the puja in 2018, I did start to like her a lot. But I was not sure what her feelings for me were. Moreover, I didn't want to take the first step because I am a star and a celebrity and if I tell her I like her, she could feel the pressure to say 'yes'. I didn't want that to happen. So I didn't say anything. I was waiting for her to express her love for me. Earlier this year on Valentine's Day she proposed to me. I was in Hyderabad. She typed out a Whatsapp message saying there is a matter of the heart which I wanted to tell you about. I asked her what it was about and she said she was in love with me. My first reaction frankly was that 'this won't be possible because the world won't accept or allow a girl to be with a girl'. But she told me, if we want we can make it work. She told me not to worry about what the world will say. I told her then you tell your family and see what they say. 'Get their permission first and if that happens we can be together'. She told her parents and she managed to convince them. Her mother then called me and spoke to me. And from that day our relationship has blossomed.

How did your parents react when you told them about your same-sex relationship?

There was a big puja in our house earlier this year. By then we had taken a decision about wanting to be together. So I told my mother that she and I like each other. I asked my mother if she is 'ok' with it. My mother was worried about what people in the village and outside would say. I told her don't worry, I will handle it. My mother told me, it is your choice and I won't stand in the way but don't do anything which will show our family in bad light. I had my mother's support. But now I don't know what my elder sister Saraswati has told her. Now, my mother does not seem to be supporting me.

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What did you tell your partner when your sister was threatening to spill the beans on your relationship?

I had a feeling that it was only a matter of time before my sister told the world about it. So a few days back, I told my partner to move out of the village. I sent my car and driver and she shifted to a relative's place. She is a little worried about how she will return to the village. But I told her not to worry. I have a lot of goodwill in my village. People will accept us.

Were you in a relationship before this or is this the first time you have been in love?

In 2009, I was in Class 8 and in the hostel. At that time a boy had proposed to me. I was in a relationship with him. But in 2014, when I was banned because of the testosterone rules, which existed back then and people started saying that she is a boy and not a girl, it affected our relationship. He came and told me, 'I have been reading about all this in the newspapers, what is the truth?' I told him back then that there is nothing to hide and I have naturally high levels of testosterone. So he told me in the future how can we be together then. Will we be able to have children? My family will also be upset. I told him it is upto you. If you want to be in a relationship with me or not, is your call. Slowly he started avoiding in me after that. I got the message. But from that time onwards I have been very lonely. So when I found her, it was lovely. Everyone needs to be with someone. This is the choice I have made and it has made me very happy.



I know people will talk and I can't stop anybody from talking. I can either think about what people will say or I can focus on my track and field career and continue to win medals for India.

Did you know that there is more acceptance of same-sex relationships in certain countries abroad and did you read about it or talk to anyone about it?

I was not aware of how it was abroad. But I did make enquiries with people I knew. The first time I asked Payoshni madam about whether a girl can be with a girl, I made it sound like it was a general question and not related to me. I told her I was asking for a friend. She told me that in certain countries it is allowed but not in India. (This was before the SC struck down section 377). I was just trying to get an idea. But she did tell me that Caster Semanya married a woman. I went online and searched for the news and found it. It was good to read that in some countries a woman could get married to a woman.

THIRD STORY

Soulmate proposed on Valentine's Day: Dutee Chand

In her first detailed interview after opening up about being in a same-sex relationship to The Sunday Express last weekend, Dutee spoke about the delight of receiving overwhelming support for her announcement.



'Knew it would make news, didn't realise extent': Dutee Chand (Express photo)

Star sprinter Dutee Chand has sweet recollection of a special WhatsApp message she received from her partner, a girl from her home town she has known for over two years, this Valentine's Day.

"I was in Hyderabad. She sent me a WhatsApp message saying there is a matter of the heart, which I wanted to tell you about. I asked her what it was, and she said she was in love with me. So she proposed to me on Valentine's Day," Dutee, 23, told The Sunday Express after a training session at the Kalinga Stadium here on Saturday.

The two had grown close towards the end of 2017 when Dutee, who was nursing a wrist injury, had moved from her training base in Hyderabad to Bhubaneswar. Her partner too, moved to the state

capital from her village, Chaka Gopalpur, to help the star athlete with household chores.

Dutee Chand Interview: I first thought, world won't allow a girl to be with a girl. But she said, if we want we can make it work

The national 100 m record holder said that while she had developed feelings for her “soulmate”, she didn’t want to make the first proclamation of love.

“Before last year’s Asian Games, she had done a puja for me. That was when I started to like her a lot. But I was not sure about her feelings for me. Moreover, I didn’t want to take the first step since I am a star and a celebrity and if I tell her I love her, she could feel the pressure to say yes. I was waiting for her to express her love for me,” Dutee said.

In her first detailed interview after opening up about being in a same-sex relationship to The Sunday Express last weekend, Dutee spoke about the delight of receiving overwhelming support for her announcement.



Athletics Federation of India banned Dutee Chand in 2014 under this policy but she challenged AFI's decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sports. (Source: File)

“I have been getting hundreds of phone calls. I knew it would make news, but didn’t realise the extent to which people would discuss it, tweet about it, and want to talk to me about it. I just saw a positive comment by (actress and writer) Twinkle Khanna. You had informed me about (American talk show host) Ellen (DeGeneres) tweeting about me, and (former India hockey captain) Viren Rasquinha writing (in [The Indian Express](#)) in my support,” she told this correspondent.

DeGeneres, a global gay rights icon with a staggering 77.7 million followers on Twitter, tweeted on Tuesday: “She’s the 100 m record holder and the first openly gay sportsperson in India. I guess she knows a thing or two about being first. I’m so proud of her.”

Dutee came out first to The Sunday Express on May 19. Rasquinha wrote in this paper on May 23 about his “immense pride” at Dutee’s announcement, a “watershed moment in Indian sport”.

Dutee also spoke about a past relationship with a boy. Back in 2014, she said, the boy she had been seeing for five years, had walked away from her after she was banned under the hyperandrogenism guidelines, which put a cap on the testosterone level of female athletes. She had struggled to deal with the break-up, Dutee said.

“In 2009, I was in Class 8 and I was in the (sports) hostel. At that time a boy had proposed to me. I was in a relationship with him for five years. But in 2014 when I was banned because of the testosterone rules, which existed back then and people started saying that ‘she is a boy and not a girl’, it affected our relationship. Slowly he started avoiding me. I got the message. But from that time onwards I have been very lonely,” Dutee said.

Over the past month, Dutee’s elder sister Saraswati, whom she has fallen out with, has been threatening to tell people about her same-sex relationship. The constant blackmail affected her track-and-field career. But her coach, N Ramesh, and a few fellow athletes stood by her.

“Yes, my mind was disturbed. My coach Ramesh is like a father to me. I told my coach about the blackmailing. Sir told me not to worry,” she said.

Other sprinters too, have been supportive. “In 2018, some of the athletes I train with knew about it. I had started wearing a ring. Around the time of the Asian Games last year, my partner and I had exchanged rings. It was not an official ceremony or anything. We just went to a temple and did puja and we exchanged rings. So some athletes saw the ring and asked me why I am wearing the ring and I told them about it. I didn’t tell too many people, but I told some of the sprinters,” Dutee said.