

# **Saina Nehwal to spearhead strongest ever Indian squad at World Championship**

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**New Delhi:** Led by London Olympics bronze medallist Saina Nehwal, India will be fielding its strongest ever squad at the 2013 BWF World Championship to be played in Gungzhou, China from August 5-11.

Women's doubles combination of Jwala Gutta and Ashwini Ponnappa had ended India's 28-year-old medal drought at the World Championship by winning the bronze medal in 2011. Though they would not be seen in action in China, all eyes will be trained on world number three Saina to record her maiden podium finish in the tournament.

"Though Saina is obviously our best bet at the World Championship, this will be the first time that India would have two representatives in each of the five categories at the world championship and that is proof of how well our players are performing at the international circuit," Badminton Association of India (BAI) President Dr. Akhilesh Das Gupta said in a statement.



At the World Championship, there are no qualification rounds and only shuttlers inside the top 50 world rankings are eligible to participate and Dr. Das Gupta said the largest-ever contingent is a proof that India is fast becoming a superpower in the game.

"The members of the Indian squad are training hard for the championship and I have no doubt that all of them will make the country proud with their performance," the BAI President added.

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India's best medal hopes - Saina and Malaysian GP gold medallist P V Sindhu - would open their campaign with a bye and have received a decent draw in the women's singles event.

As per the draw, Saina will face her first real challenge in the competition only at the quarterfinal stage where she is likely to meet either eighth seed Minatsu Mitani of Japan or 13th seed Bae Yeon Ju of Korea.

Saina's first real brush with a Chinese opponent would come only in the semifinals where Olympic gold medallist Li Xuerui is likely to be waiting for her.

"I don't want to think too far ahead and will like to take things one match at a time. I had been working very hard for the last few weeks and I hope to be at my best in China," said Saina, who reached the quarterfinals of the last three editions.

In the bottom half of the draw, Asian junior champion Sindhu will have to overcome defending champion Yihan Wang of China in the pre-quarterfinals if she has to entertain any hope of a medal.

Chief national coach Pullela Gopichand said, "It is very heartening to see pool of youngsters being part of the contingent and the way they are playing, I am confident of a good show in Guangzhou."

"I am also expecting some good results from the men's singles and doubles players," Gopichand added.

Among other stars, 13th seed P Kashyap would look to cement his place in the pre-quarterfinals of the men's singles event where he is likely to meet sixth seed

Yun Hu of Hong Kong. Kashyap's compatriot Ajay Jayaram will have a tough opener against Wing Ki Wong of Hong Kong and if the Mumbai lad manages to overcome the world number 12, he could go a lot further in the competition.

In the doubles section, last edition's bronze medallist Ashwini Ponnappa would be teaming up with Pradnya Gadre and it would be interesting to see how they perform in their first major championship.

In the mixed doubles category, three pairs from India had made the grade. However, the mixed doubles pair of Jwala Gutta and V Diyu withdrew from the Championship.

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