

Toor, Johnson, Swapna Barman expected to replicate Asian Games success in AAC2019.

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Doha, April 20: Asian Games gold medallists shot putter Tajinderpal Singh Toor, middle-distance runner Jinson Johnson, heptathlete Swapna Barman and the women's 4x400m squad will headline the Indian challenge in the four-day Asian Athletics Championships, beginning at the Khalifa Stadium here on Sunday.

The 24-year-old Tajinderpal Singh Toor has been consistently going past the 19m mark for five years now and his 20.13m in the Grand Prix in Patiala in February has placed the Asian Games gold medallist as the early leader in the continent. Jinson Johnson's powerful kick has earned him a reputation and will take to the track with confidence.

Swapna Barman has ruled the roost in the heptathlon, winning gold in the 2017 Asian Athletics Championships and the Asian Games in Jakarta last year. She will look to complete a hat-trick of Asian crowns. The women's 4x400m relay team, with its focus on the IAAF World Relays next month, will want to make improvements to its time.

Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra's elbow injury and 400m hurdler Ayyasamy Dharun's stress fracture have kept them away from the competition. Long jumper S Sreeshankar, whose heel injury prevented him from competing in the Federation Cup in Patiala last month, and triple jumper Arpinder Singh are the other big guns who will miss the Asian Athletics Championships.

However, there is an opportunity for others to shine in a quality competition. Their performances will be keenly watched to see how athletes like Gavit Murali Kumar and Avinash Sable come of age. Gavit Murali Kumar and Abhishek Pal in the 5000m and Avinash Sable and Shankar Lal Swami in the steeplechase are capable athletes as is 23-year-old Mohammed Afsal, who has been picked to replace Manjit Singh in the middle-distance events.

India has roped in Davinder Singh Kang in Neeraj Chopra's place in the squad. It is hopeful that he will rediscover the big-meet temperament that made him India's first finalist in the men's javelin throw in the 2017 IAAF World Athletics Championship in London. With Shivpal Singh already throwing beyond 80m this season, they can expect a medal between them.

On Sunday, Annu Rani has the opportunity to show that she has overcome memories of a sixth-place finish in javelin event the Asian Games in Jakarta. She recorded a throw of 62.34m in the Federation Cup in Patiala last month and will expect to give the Chinese a run for their money when she steps up the runway on Sunday.

The women's 400m final will hold a lot of interest. The team's coaching staff and the runners are well aware that the season top list – where Hima Das and M R Poovamma lead a bunch nine Indians in the

top 10 in Asia – is no real indication of what to expect in the competition here. They will seek medals and then get down to working towards improving the time in the 4x400m relay.

Avinash Sable, who broke Gopal Saini's old men's 3000m steeplechase National record and then lowered it in the Federation Cup, could be up against seasoned competitors but has the potential to run a tactical race and make his maiden Asian competition memorable while Parul Chaudhary will have to come up with her best against Chinese and Japanese runners in the women's 5000m.

Gavit Murali Kumar, who finished sixth in the men's 5000m in the Asian Championships in Bhubaneswar in July 2017, and Abhishek Pal, who was Asian junior silver medallist in 2016, will have to run a smart race. Arokiya Rajiv, who has emerged India's fastest in the men's 400m this year, and Muhammad Anas will also be in action in the opening round on Sunday.