



worried about what the neighbours would say when they heard that Rukma was training for sports and preparing for tournaments. Her brother was angry that his sister was wearing a tracksuit or a t-shirt and shorts.

Ranjit Singh visited their home and spent time with Rukma's family. He reassured them and said, "Girls have the potential and calibre to shine in sports, the same way as boys do. They should be allowed to showcase their talents." By giving girls opportunities to excel in sports, he hoped to empower them to gain respect in society, have a voice in family decisions and weed out social evils like child marriage and dowry.

Finally, Rukma's father allowed her to play as she promised it would not impact her studies. Seeing his sister's progress in sports, Rukma's brother also started feeling a sense of pride in her achievements. When she was selected to participate in a district-level tournament, her brother gave her tips on beating her opponents. When she returned with the trophy, he flaunted her achievement with pride.

Palana village has now become a hub of sports. Rukma Dudi and her peers who have excelled in sports have set an example for other girls. They have taken it upon themselves to go and convince the parents of other girls to allow them to participate in sports. Girls are now making full use of the opportunities given to them.

"We Too Can Play"

Fifteen-year-old Rukma Dudi, a student of Government Senior Secondary School in Palana village of Bikaner district loved joining her friends to play but would soon be called in by her mother to help with household chores. She was a child bride, betrothed at the age of 11. Her father had negotiated for the in-laws to wait till she completed school before joining her marital home.

When the school sports coach, Ranjit Singh asked her if she would like to train for games like handball, despite a deep desire to say 'yes', she told him that her family would never consent. He assured her that he would convince them.

Rukma was fascinated by the thought of being a sports player and hoped her parents would relent. They were

“ Seeing me participate in state events, other parents started sending their daughters to play. It became normal to see girls play in sports grounds. Grandmothers too were converted. Previously, many elders had voiced their concern that no one would marry the girls if this became a trend. They felt at best if girls had to play, they should be assigned separate playgrounds. But seeing how neighbouring villages were admiring the progressive change in Palana, they stopped resisting. ”

15-year-old Rukma Dudi
Palana village, Bikaner district, Rajasthan

