



## *Play or Perish*

Normally Kantabai Gurjar was a content woman. Her two daughters were happily married, her three sons were hardworking and their wives were respectful, and their children loved their grandmother. There was enough money to feed the entire family and house them comfortably. God had been kind. But today anxiety overcame her. One of the villagers had brought a proposal of marriage for her granddaughter, Anju. And Anju's father, Shravan, Kantabai's oldest born, said they needed to consider it seriously for, 'the boy's family has thirty bighas of land and ten heads of cattle. Our princess will be a queen.'

There was a time when Kantabai would have been overjoyed at the proposal. But that was many years ago. Now, she felt unhappy. Nobody had any business suggesting that Anju should get married. In the balmy spring evening, as they sat in the courtyard after a hard day's work in the fields, the men on one side and the

women on the other, Kantabai admonished her son. 'You're being unfair. The girl isn't yet fifteen. Why are you so eager to get her married?'

Shravan cleared his throat and said, 'Now Ma, be reasonable. Fifteen isn't all that young. My sisters were fifteen when they got married. So why not Anju? And it's a good proposal.' Then he added jocularly, 'You're resisting because you don't want your favourite grandchild to go away.'

But Kantabai didn't smile at the flippancy. It was true, Anju was her favourite grandchild. She was a good girl, serious and responsible. She helped around the house, looked after the younger children, took her dadi to the temple. How could she not love the girl? But that had nothing to do with her disapproval. She remembered the conversation she had had with Anju a few days ago.

'Dadi,' said Anju, 'do you know that the Reliance Foundation people are holding a sports competition in the village? We're all going to participate, all the children.'

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'Sports? You're going to run?' Kantabai laughed.

Anju smiled but she couldn't hide the excitement in her voice. 'The Foundation people have created Community Youth Leaders. Archana Didi is one of them,' she mentioned her older sister. 'They're organizing the games. I'm confident of winning.'

The next day, Anju came home beaming and hugged her dadi tight. 'Didn't I say I'd win the race? I was the fastest girl there. Oh dadi! It was the best day of my life. All the children got to play games and run in different races. The Community Youth Leaders kept guiding us. Even the teachers came to see us play.'

Kantabai smiled. 'I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.'

'I did. But now I'm really tired. Dadi, can you give me a glass of milk please? They told us we should drink milk. Oh, and we should wash our hands properly before eating.' Anju went to wash her hands, leaving behind a thoughtful old woman.

This was something new. None of the villagers had ever seen the children of the village play any games. They all ran wild in the village after they were done with school. Or they helped their parents with farm or housework. There had never been any organized sports before. How would it all turn out? This seemed to be some sort of experiment that Reliance Foundation was conducting and Kantabai was a little apprehensive. But the fact was, she had never seen her granddaughter happier or more animated.

Now Kantabai told her son, 'Let Anju live out her childhood. She needs to play and study, not get married.'

Shravan shook his head. 'Ma, I don't know where you get all your ideas from. Don't you want my daughters to settle down? Very soon, they'll become too old for marriage. You know what they say about unwed girls, they're like a bone in the throat; you can't throw them out or keep them in.'

Kantabai didn't wish to argue any further. 'All right. But let's not be too hasty,' she said. 'Let's wait for a little more time. Just a couple of months. I'll speak to Anju, get her ready.'



Thankfully Shravan agreed to her suggestion. 'Two months, that's all.'

A few days later Anju told her grandmother, 'Dadi, tomorrow you must come to watch me. Please Dadi. You must see how fast I run.'

Kantabai laughed. 'You're becoming a regular race queen. All right, I'll come to see you.' She wondered why Anju smiled such a mysterious smile at her assent. The next day she found out.

'Your daughter,' said a team leader from Reliance Foundation, wearing a Foundation track suit and looking very smart, 'has been selected to participate in the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan competition in Agar. She'll compete against many other children from the district. She's one of our best athletes. You should be proud of her.'

Kantabai felt her chest swell with pride. But there was also a flicker of doubt. This was the first time that any girl from the family had participated in an event like this. 'I don't know. I'll have to ask her father.' She could feel Anju's hand clasping hers in a tight grip. The girl looked at her grandmother pleadingly but remained silent.

As they walked home together, Anju said, 'Dadi, please tell Papa to send me for the competition. The team leader says I can win a medal if I continue to run like this.'

'And what's she going to do with a medal?' asked Shraavan when Kantabai broached the topic with him. 'I don't think it's at all appropriate for our girls to participate in such things. You should discourage her, Ma. I don't want her to pick up any bad habits.'

'On the contrary, your daughter has learnt many new things during these sports meets,' Kantabai pointed out. 'She has started teaching the younger children about cleanliness and hygiene. The other day I overheard her tell her brother that he must study hard and go to college in the big city. The Foundation people and the team leaders are using these sports meets to teach the children good habits. We should encourage them.'

'But still...'

'Shraavan,' Kantabai interrupted her son, 'I believe the times are changing. Our daughters are going to bring honour to this family, not by marrying when you say so, but by studying hard and competing with other

children. Anju has learnt a lot in these past few weeks. Let's motivate her.' Then she saw her son's conflicted expression. 'Let's send her to Agar and see how she performs there. We'll discuss her marriage afterwards,' she coaxed.

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Nobody in the village had known about the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan until Reliance Foundation introduced it as a part of their Sports for Development initiative. The government had launched this scheme for rural children to encourage them to turn to organized sports. So why did Shraavan object to his daughter playing in them, wondered Kantabai? Perhaps his resistance would melt once he saw how well Anju was doing in the competition.

Sure enough, Anju came back with a gold medal from Agar, grinning from ear to ear. She was ecstatic at having won her first major sports competition. The team leader who accompanied her smiled and said, 'Your daughter has done your family, this village, Bhanpura, proud. You should have seen her today. She was magnificent. Now we'll train her even more, get her ready for the state level competition in Ratlam.'

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Kantabai's heart sank when she heard these words. Ratlam? That was so far away. They could not allow their girl to go all that way. Why, none of them had ever travelled beyond Agar. She had never imagined that the girl would have to go on an overnight journey.

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Shravan echoed Kantabai's thoughts. 'We're not sending Anju anywhere,' he told the team leader. 'We're happy she's won a medal but that's all. This whole business has to end here. Ratlam indeed!' he scoffed before walking away, leaving a tearful Anju behind, her delight at winning a major sports meet turning to dust.

The next day, in the evening, the Reliance Foundation member came to meet the Gurjar family. 'I'm here to tell you that we'll take full responsibility for Anju. There are some other children also who've been selected to go to Ratlam. Please, you must send her. We've asked the teacher, Tufan Singh, to accompany them. You know him. He's from Bhanpura, isn't he? You can trust him to take care of the children. This is a huge opportunity for Anju. Imagine how proud you'll be if she gets a medal.'

Shravan said, 'Sir, you don't understand. Our girls aren't allowed to leave the village unless it's for their in-laws' house. Our name will be mud if Anju goes for these games.' His tone brooked no argument.

The next day a delegation from the village came to meet Shravan. 'Bhai, we have all decided that the selected children will go to Ratlam. Reliance Foundation has generously offered to pay for Tufan Singh's expenses as escort. What more can we expect? Come Shravan, don't hold your daughter back. This is a rare opportunity for the children.'

Now Kantabai decided to intervene. 'If Tufan is going with the children, I don't have any objection. My Anju will definitely go.'

'And what about her marriage?' Shravan asked afterwards. 'What shall I tell the boy's family? Two months are almost over. We have to send them an answer now.'

Kantabai looked her son in the eye. 'It looks like your girl has a great future in sports. If she wins in Ratlam, there must be no further talk of her marriage. Anju is going to be a star. We should let her soar high.'

Kantabai was keeping vigil since eight that morning, sitting on the cot outside to wait for the bus. Where was it? Why hadn't it arrived yet? It was almost noon, it should have been here by now. How had her darling fared? And what was that sound? It sounded like drumbeats. What was going on? The sound of drums came closer and closer until it stopped right outside their house. Kantabai stepped outside and saw the Reliance Foundation team with two drum beaters followed by a minibus. A grinning Anju emerged from the bus sporting a gleaming gold medal around her neck. A garland was thrust in Kantabai's hand. 'Go on,' said the Reliance Foundation member, 'honour your granddaughter. She stood first in the race. Now she's going to represent the whole state at the National Games. Anju has done us all proud.'

Tears sprang to the old woman's eyes as she garlanded her child while the entire village gathered around to cheer their resident's victory. In that moment Kantabai resolved that she would do everything in her power to motivate her granddaughter. The child was going to be a sports star.



*Reliance Foundation's Bharat India Jodo programme is directly impacting lives of over 48,000 small and marginal farming families like Kusumben's in 500 villages across 12 states in India.*