

News » National

Young, special, on the ball and ripping apart the net in Spain

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On July 13, eighteen tribal girls representing the Yuwa India team were placed third among 10 teams playing for the Gasteiz Cup in Victoria Gasteiz in Spain. Photo: Anumeha Yadav

Two weeks ago a group of teenage girls from a village on the outskirts of Ranchi in Jharkhand achieved something that sportspersons with the best facilities and support in cities often aspire for but don't always succeed.

On July 13, the 18 tribal girls representing Yuwa India under-14 all-girls team were placed third among 10 teams playing for the Gasteiz Cup in Victoria Gasteiz in Spain. The girls — a majority of whom played outside their village in Ormanjhi for the first time — were placed third after two wins, two losses, and one draw against international teams. Earlier during the Donosti Cup, Spain's biggest football tournament, the girls made it to quarter finals from among 36 international teams.

The young footballers wearing red and white sarees and sneakers, with plastic flowers adorning their hair and around their wrists, were ecstatic as they won the third prize in Gasteiz, Spain that Saturday night.

"We had carried sarna sarees in our bags and some flowers too. When they announced our names we ran into the dressing room and took just five minutes to get dressed in our sarees, then we came out and accepted the prize and then we danced," grinned Rinky Kumari, 13, the team's captain back in Ormanjhi. "Yuwa yuwa hum hai yuwa, sab se juda; gendwa ko maarei, netwa ko phaade, mil ke bolo Jai Yuwa (We are young, so special; we are on the ball, we attack the net; all hail Yuwa)," the team breaks into chorus before practice on Thursday afternoon.

"They were cheered everywhere they went. They would break into song and dance always even doing the jhumar (traditional dance) with a team from Spain at San Sebastian. The only time I saw them nervous was the first game," recounted Sandeep Chhetri Yuwa's secretary and the team unofficial cheering songs writer.

At the afternoon session at Yuwa's centre at Hutup village, the older girls break into giggles when their peers' Spain tour is mentioned. "They saw the sea!" the group exclaims. "They told us there was lots of meat, chicken, even pigs' meat. There was bread, butter, jam. People there bathe in the sea," Preeti Kumari, 9, sums up the buzz among the children in Hutup since the girls' return.

Shivani Toppo, 12, who has played football since Franz Gastler, a 30-year old American founded Yuwa-India in this Jharkhand village in 2009 and was among two girls from Yuwa who had toured with India's under-14 team in Sri Lanka last year, explains her interest in the game. "It keeps me healthy. If I stay home I do not feel good. Also, Franz sir got all of us to go to good schools. He helped my family pay the school fee and now the school has waived the fee off," says the team's second defender.

Shivani's family lives in a kutchra house in Hutup not far from the football field. On her way home after the two hour practice session everyday neighbours would pass rude remarks, Shivani recalls. "They would say, why do you walk around in half-pants like boys. They would tell my parents that Franz will sell your daughter. My father died last year but I remember he would tell me that I should give it back to these people. So the only way so I told them I eat that my parents cook for me before playing. I take nothing that is yours."

“She must study and sports make her happy. She helps me out lift dung and clean utensils every morning before she goes to schools,” said Shivani’s mother Jhari Devi who supports the family working as a daily wage labourer in a plastics factory at Hudup since her husband died last year. “If she has to play football, she obviously has to wear these clothes,” says Shivani’s grandfather Dukhan Pahan.

In the three weeks the girls were on tour, 40 new children have joined Yuwa’s practice session besides the 220 who are already regular. Yuwa-India’s Executive Director Franz Gastler who had first come to Jharkhand four years back to teach in villages, sounds excited about the team’s achievements but at the same time is concerned.

“We applied for land on a long-term lease because the land we play on is disappearing from right under our feet as land prospectors come in and buy up the land and put brick walls around it. Right now our proposal is sitting with the Sports Secretary, we do not know what will happen,” says Gastler.

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