



Running toward freedom

Racing against her neighbors brings a young woman's freedom into perspective.

By HERSH SINGH

Running with a Matka, an earthen clay pot, on her head, Megha Rati finished second during her home village's annual sports festival.

Megha, 18, goes out every day to bring back water for her family in a Matka on her head. She says it gives her and two of her friends an excuse to get out of the house and wander around the village.

"[The festival] gives the women an opportunity to come out and be together," Megha said.

She's been helping her family out with household work since she was 10 years old, which is true for almost every girl in the village.

Megha walks a block every day to fetch water from her cousin's house, as her neighborhood does not have a water supply.

"The hard part is getting back to the house because of the weight of the Matka on my neck," Megha said.

The Matka can weigh from 22 to 30 pounds.

Her 8-year-old niece Dakshita clings to her side whenever Megha leaves the house. She said with a smile her niece loves spending time with her, since their houses are right next to each other.

She returns to her parents' house before lunch to help her mother with cooking. Megha spends most of her afternoons in a beauty parlor where she is training to become a beautician. She spends the rest of her time studying, as she is in her final year of high school and wants to pursue her studies further in college.

Megha and 12 of her friends love the bus rides to the government school in Kaithal. School gives them an opportunity to get out of the village and interact with the world. They rarely miss a school day. This was the first time Megha participated in the sports festival because she's usually busy with school work and household tasks.

"It wasn't always like this," Megha said, referring to her parents' agreement to let her participate in the festival. "Parents didn't trust their daughters enough to send them to school in the beginning. Parents were also afraid that other boys might misbehave around their daughters. With time and patience, people are changing now. They now believe and trust their daughters."

Megha added that she wants these events to happen more often, as they help families understand how they're robbing the daughters of their freedom. ✱



When love breaks social stigma

A young woman faces a dilemma between choice and tradition.

By MANISHA SHAKUNTALA

Manisha married her husband Parveen last year after secretly seeing him for five years. Her family did not accept the marriage because her mother and Parveen's mother are from the same clan (Gotra) "Dhull." This makes them siblings in society's eyes. Under Article 21 of the "Right to Life and Personal Liberty" in the Indian Constitution, an adult citizen in India has the fundamental right to choose their life partner. But while a love marriage is not a crime in India, it is also not culturally acceptable.

Manisha was faced with a choice: marry the man she loves, or maintain honor in her family. Her family was not ready to accept her relationship, so she could not choose both. Because Parveen is an orphan, she felt she is the whole world to him. After they were married in a court, they took shelter at a "SAFE Home," a government-initiated program that protects couples who opt for inter-caste or love marriages for 15 days. If couples do not get protection, they may be subject to honor killings by their families.

"We have taken the risk to marry who we want," Manisha said, "but it is society that needs to change." ✱