Games people played

PARSHATHY J NATH soaks in the carnival atmosphere at the Isha Gramotsavam, as traditional sports from rural Tamil Nadu put up a great show

For a few days now, every evening, 80-year-old Nagamani from Gopichettipalayam has dashed back home after a day of looking after her goats to make it to her throw ball practice with her younger teammates. She has strong arms, a radiant toothless smile and a great throw. “Winning and losing is immaterial. We are here to have a good time,” she says at the Isha Gramotsavam held in Coimbatore. Nagamani swears she has never played ball before and, for the gramotsavam, would never have known she was so good in sports! The women find this a great break from the routine. “We want to be happy. Most of us are in our 40s and are homemakers. We wait for the evenings. Our husbands help us,”

They also act as barers.
The neighbours come to the grounds and distribute snacks. They feel like a community now.
The women have been playing for 12 years now. Nagamani was handed the second prize in the last year’s edition from Srinath Titlikar. “I did not have the idea who he was. But, then people told me he was the greatest cricket player. I was overwhelmed when he told me that I played well.” Ask her if she is deterred by her age, she smiles, “I forget everything when I am in the ground. When I play with the young team, I become a child all over again.”

The mood at the Codissia grounds is definitely upbeat. The true sportsmen of India are in the villages. But, we do not know Hindi or English and do not get the right coaches

where a couple dressed as Purvathy and Shiva dance.
The festival has helped many villages revive their traditional sports. For instance, a village called Vanavasi has given birth to many archers. But, they boys do not get the right ecosystem to nurture their talent. Like D. Karthikeyan, who has won so many medals and trophies. “My brother knew I had a spark, after seeing me perform at a summer camp. I was inspired by a temple ritual in our village, where my brothers would act as Arjuna and do archery.”

There is even a legend that the Pandavas had spent some time in Vanavasi. But, language is a big barrier for sportsmen like him. “I believe the true sportsmen of India are in the villages. But, we do not know Hindi or English and do not get the right kind of coaches. Archery should be introduced in schools.”

Volleyball players from Parnameshwaranpalayam are now professional sportsmen, thanks to this Gramotsavam. “We are all in college teams. Some of us got government jobs because of our kabaddi game. We played kabaddi as time-pass in schools. But, after we took part in the Gramotsavam, we have been trained by coaches,” says Prakash, one of the team members. Kulandhaivelu, another player, is a star in his college in the city. Tamizhcheli is an auto-driver by day and a kabaddi player by night. “We are sportsmen now. We get a lot of respect from our families and friends. We have been motivated to take this as a profession,” he says.

Results
The Women’s Devarayapuram Throwball team and Men’s Vellore Latheri Volleyball team won the first prizes.
The women’s Gobi Muruganpur dam Throwball team and Men’s Cuddalore Karunguzhi Volleyball team were the runners-up.