

हरियाणा की आवाज़



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Volume II Issue II

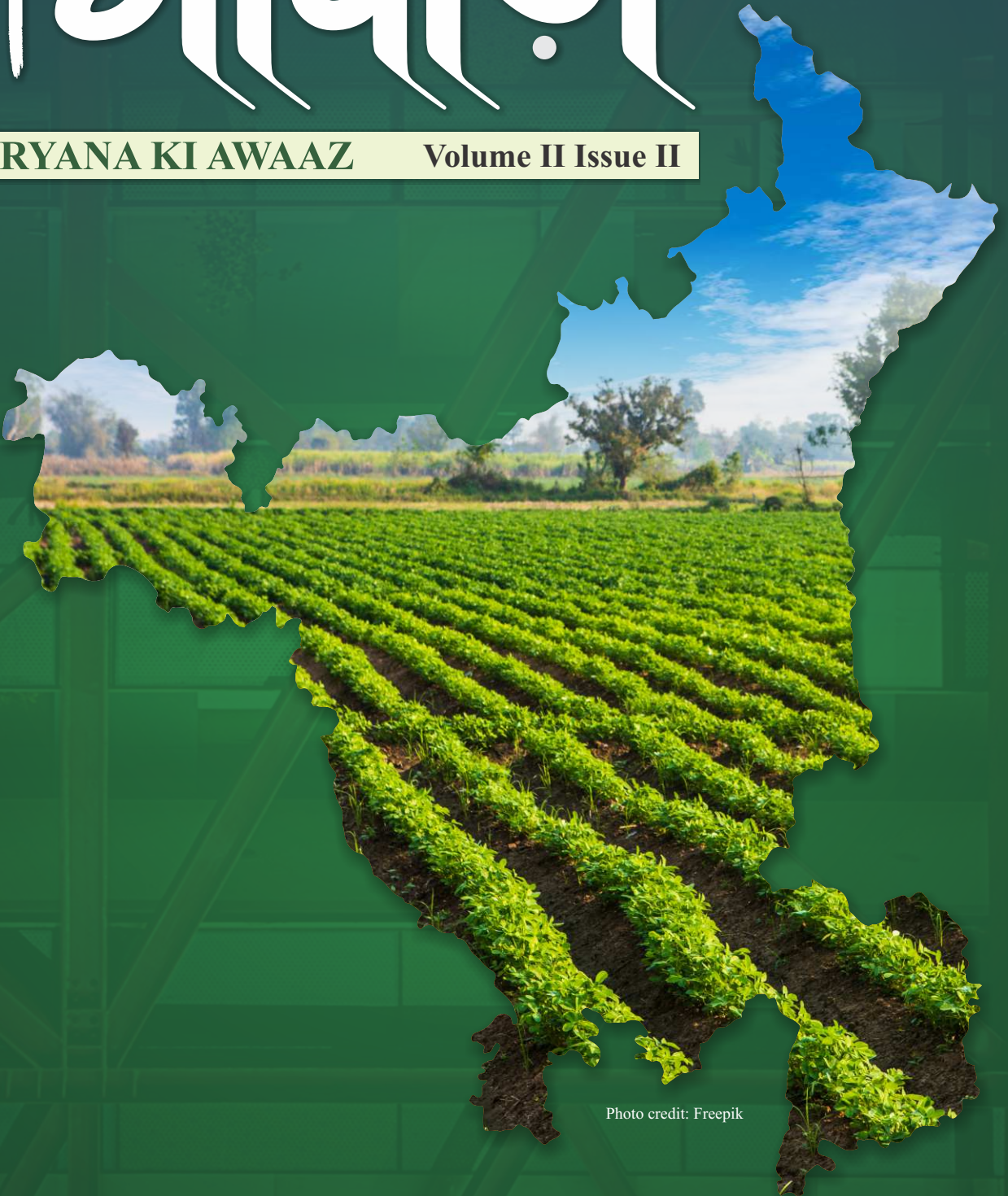


Photo credit: Freepik

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We would also like to acknowledge and extend our appreciation to our respondent - **Mrs Pritam Siwach**- for sharing her time and experiences with us.





**To,
Redefining and Reclaiming the Story of Haryana**



Prachy Hooda

Curator

There is always a stereotypical understanding of Haryana: rustic, rural (read: *dehati*), highly patriarchal and violent towards women. This had led to a very one-sided, homogenous representation of the region and its people, that lacks not just the nuances and complexities of its socio-cultural fabric, but a complete lack of interest and engagement by various stakeholders, in varied capacities (including mass media and academia alike), to acknowledge the depths of and differences in people's lived experiences.

My own experiences in “progressive” university spaces made me first-hand realise the “casual” stereotyping that those coming from the region face, mostly in the form of “jokes” (which aren't humorous) and even passing remarks like “*You don't look Haryanvi*” or that “*You don't speak like Haryanvis*”. This is also partly affected by the caricature-ish depiction of Haryanvis in Bollywood, where actors try to speak a language that is nowhere close to the different dialects spoken in Haryana. In this vast pool of poor projection of what is commonly considered Haryanvi (only by those who are not from the region), recent work by a few actors, social media content creators as well as young academics feels like a breath of fresh air, precisely because it consciously aims to challenge these stereotypes and carve out a space for grassroots voices.

In this backdrop, this monthly issue *Haryana Ki Awaaz* is a small step to counter this over-simplistic view of the region and its people by providing a platform to the people of Haryana, from all walks of life, to share their stories and lived experiences. It is aimed to project them as the active agents that they have always been but have never been given enough acknowledgement for. Each issue will focus on different facets of the socio-cultural fabric of Haryana as well as its diverse social groups.

I am thankful to the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies (IDEAS) at O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU) for its support in conceptualising this initiative.





Volume II

Born to Play: The Sports Stories of Haryana

Issue II: Pritam Siwach Special

This issue is unlike our usual ones. Typically, each edition of *Haryana Ki Awaaz* carries three impact stories around a shared theme. But this one is different and intentionally so. It focuses on one story, and one story only. That of *the* Pritam Siwach - hockey player, former Indian captain, mentor, coach, Arjuna awardee and more.

Anyone even remotely familiar with the hockey scene, in Haryana or across the country, does not require an introduction to her. She has been a formidable presence on the field and an equally powerful force off it, mentoring generations of players over the decades. She has shaped the sport in Haryana and contributed immensely to the national game. This issue is dedicated to her.

The idea for this special edition germinated from my own admiration of Ms Siwach's journey. I had followed her story from a distance for quite some time, and this issue finally gave me the much-needed reason to reach out. I can't focus enough on how grounded and humble and welcoming she is - and that made this issue feel exciting, and in many ways, more special.

It also stands at a particular place in this volume. The previous issue looked at women in the 1970s who defied all odds to play sports when most around them didn't even think of it as an option. The coming issues will explore the world of younger athletes, those who grew up in a Haryana where sports is now a celebrated part of the culture. This issue sits in between. Pritam Siwach belongs to a generation that built the (temporal) bridge - rooted in the struggles of the past, and now shaping the dreams and game of the present generation.

A note of caution here, and one I feel is important to underline. Dedicating an entire issue to one person does not in any way mean that some stories are more important than others. That has never been the lens of *Haryana Ki Awaaz*. The very foundation of this initiative rests on the belief that all stories, especially those that seem mundane and are often invisibilised, carry immense meaning and weight and need to be documented and told. This issue, while singular in focus, adheres to that same clarity of thought.

This is, simply, a story we needed to tell - of a woman who didn't just play hockey, but helped define it.



Courtesy: <https://pritamsiwachhockey.org>

Pritam Siwach

It was an evening in mid-August that Ms Siwach asked me to come to the Sports Authority of India (SAI), Sonipat, for an interaction. I had reached out to her a week before, hoping to meet her at her hockey academy near ITI Chowk, but the timing wasn't working out as she also trains hockey players at SAI.

So finally, SAI was decided. I reached there a little later in the evening – a day when the senior players were resting and the field was all open only to the younger/junior players: it was quite a lot of them, roughly 40 and it was one of the many batches that she trains. She was doing many things at once: giving commands to younger coaches and players on how to arrange and train the players, managing logistics of an international tour that some of the young players were visiting, and on top of all that, talking to me.

I started by asking her how her journey began. Ms Siwach was born in Jharsa village of Gurgaon, Haryana. She studied in the village's government school where students played different games like kho-kho, kabaddi, hockey (even though there wasn't a proper playing ground). The school had a good group of girls who played hockey: well-built, swift and proper physique. The PTI was initially hesitant to allow Siwach to play with the others because she wasn't as “good” and was also much heavier. She was sent away a couple of times until she finally brought her grandmother to do some *sifarish* – dadi went and scolded, asked for a hockey stick to be given to her granddaughter too (“that she will play on the sides”). And that is how her hockey journey began. She was in sixth standard then. She wasn't much keen on academics, recalls that she would often look outside the window at others playing, drawing the ire of teachers.

I asked if back in those days her parents and family members were fine with her getting into sports. Initially, it was seen more as a solution for her being lazy, chubby and not doing much work. Going to the school playground was more about making her active and fitter.

Her father was an inspector in the transport department, and her brother, Virender Kumar, was a wrestler who went on to win a silver in the Commonwealth Games in 1995. He was the first in the family to be involved in a sport. Her brother was more apprehensive about her joining sports as he believed that a lot of his time and energy would go into taking care of her, an argument that others in the family never agreed with.

Once she started playing, there was no looking back. She kept getting better and gradually started periodically visiting Gurgaon with other players for training. Since

they would get a fixed amount from family, they had to manage commute and other things. At times, the allowance would get all spent on some eatable, then then having to hitchhike with fellow villagers.

With time, most of her teammates got married; she resisted societal pressure and taunts. She even visited families of some of her teammates, requesting them not to marry them off. During that time, a girl from her village played at the national level, further fueling her ambition to play for the country. She would closely follow her ways, the India team tracksuit and shoes she wore, and tried to emulate it all.

When she was in ninth standard, she got selected for the national camp. It was a completely new setting for her – from her broken hockey stick, old shoes – the coach there helped her get into a contract with a renowned company.

It was also the same time when her elder sister was married and there were discussions to have her married simultaneously. She requested for a few more years (with also threats of running away). Very soon, she got selected for the junior India team too. It was 1991-92, and she got awarded the Best Player in the tournament, held in Malaysia. The villagers felicitated her on her return. She was merely 17 (in twelfth standard) when she got multiple government job offers. Since she did not want to leave her hometown, she joined the Indian Railways in Delhi.

After the job, she was again asked to get married that she again resisted. Then at the early age of 22-23, she won the Arjuna Award. It was at this period that she got married. She had been playing in the national team for 8 years and her husband too was a hockey player who was working in the Railways. Her husband, Kuldeep Siwach, was himself very recognised. After marriage, it was a very novel choice that Mr. Kuldeep made. He decided to quit playing so that Ms. Pritam could continue. He decided to take care of the family while she further pursued the game.



In 2000, they had their first child, Yashdeep, who now is a successful national-level hockey player. After a year of giving birth, Ms. Pritam got back into training and playing. Her husband was the one who trained her and helped her to regain fitness. She reduced her weight from 74 to 54 kgs in merely 4 months. Her son was 4 months old when she went to Bangalore for the camp. She went on to play the Commonwealth Games held in England where the Indian team won a gold medal in 2000. Her mother-in-law was especially cooperative and helped in taking care of the child. Her husband transferred from Delhi to Sonipat to better take care of the family. The Siwachs then had a daughter in 2007, Kanika, and Ms. Pritam continued to play even after that, also playing in Olympic qualifiers.

Between 2002 to 2007 was the time when she took up coaching with the aim of contributing to girls' hockey in Sonipat. She started her academy near Kalupur Chungi, Rohtak Road in 2004. She didn't want younger girls to face the problems she did during her journey. From her academy, more than 40 girls have gone on to play at the international level; around 70-80 players have bagged government jobs. Her academy was the first that was only for girls. Even now, she trains only those boys whose sisters train with her, *“koi behen hai toh le aa, fir train karungi”*.

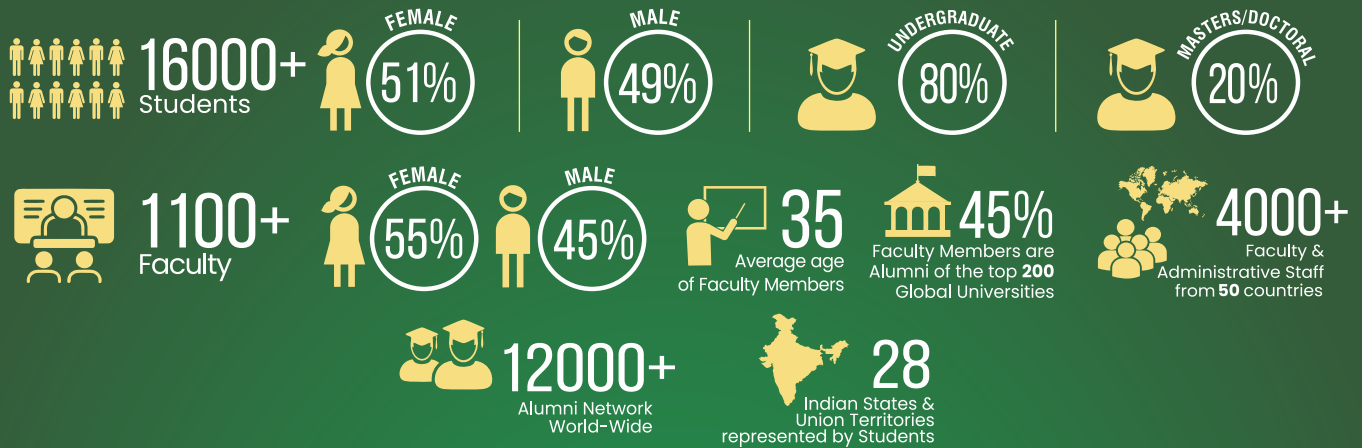
She won the Dronacharya Award in 2021. It was when her academy defeated the SAI team in Khelo India, twice, that she was asked to train at SAI too.

Hockey runs in the family – now Yashdeep and Kanika have been playing in the national team and doing great.

After achieving so much, there is one thing that Ms. Pritam still wishes and looks forward to – for her players to finish at the podium in the Olympics.



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