

Tribal girl becomes Asian champion

Rajitha from ASR wins gold in 4x400m relay at Asian Athletics Championships, says her dream is to win an Olympic medal

K KALYAN KRISHNA KUMAR
@ Vijayawada

Kunja Rajitha (19), a young sprinter from the remote tribal village of Ramachandrapuram in Koonavaram mandal, Alluri Sitarama Raju (ASR) district, has made headlines by winning gold in the women's 4x400m relay at the 28th Asian Athletics Championships held in Gumi, South Korea.

Her rise from poverty to the continental stage is a testament to perseverance and the trans-

formative power of opportunity. Born into a family of migrant workers who relocated from Chhattisgarh to Andhra Pradesh four decades ago, Rajitha is the youngest of six siblings. She lost her father, Mariaiah, when she was just 3-year-old, and was raised by her mother, Bhadramma, under financial constraints.

Her athletic talent came to light at Arrupe High School in Katukapalli, run by the Loyola Integrated Tribal Development Society (LITDS) in Chintoor mandal. It was here that Fr Yesu Ratnam noticed her po-

tential when she was in Class VII. "She has speed and focus. I saw a spark in her," he recalled. Encouraged by him, Rajitha began competing in school-level events, winning her first 100m race in 2016.

After school, she pursued Intermediate at CK Junior College, Mangalagiri, and later joined SAAP (Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh) in Nellore in 2018. Trained by coaches Vamsi Kiran and Krishna Mohan, she continued to excel despite challenges such as financial hardship and delay in obtaining caste certificate.

Her breakthrough came at the 2020 Khelo India School Games in Guwahati, where she won silver in the U-17 girls 400m with a timing of 57.61 seconds. The performance earned her a place in the national camp. After the closure of the Tencic Centre of Excellence in Guntur during Covid pandemic, she trained briefly under Jamaican coach Mic Russel before being picked up by the Gopi Chand's Mythri Foundation in Hyderabad.

Under the mentorship of Dronacharya awardee Nagapuri Ramesh, she continued her

training while enrolling for a B Com at SRM University-AP. She later moved to the SAI camp in Kerala, training under Jamaican coach Jerry. Her performances led to her selection in the national women's relay squad.

At the Asian Championships in Gumi, Rajitha ran alongside her teammates to secure a gold medal for India in the 4x400m relay. Speaking to TNIE over the phone from South Korea, she said, "It's a proud moment. I thank SAI for believing in me. My dream is to win an Olympic medal for India in 2028." Rajitha has represented India in

international meets twice before and has won medals in multiple national and South Indian competitions. Despite her achievements, financial difficulties remain. "We are proud of her, but she needs government support to continue her journey," said her brother Jogalah.

SRM University-AP Vice-Chancellor Prof Manoj K Arora said, "Rajitha reflects our vision of holistic student development. We are proud to support her aspirations."