

Give them hockey sticks

by M. S. GILL

After a long time I had occasion on Monday to see women at play. The occasion was the final of the National Women's Hockey Championship at Chandigarh. The spectacle was something of a revelation for me.

Many years ago we used to enjoy watching the women students of Government College, Ludhiana, participate in the annual College sports. Shy and extremely self-conscious, the few that dared to take part came in baggy salwars and knee-length kurtas. The results can be imagined. If I were to say that they did not exactly break world records, I would not be guilty of exaggeration.

The hockey match in Chandigarh on Monday was from another world. It might have been a match in West Germany or England. The girls — strapping amazons, some of them — were dressed in the smartest of briefs. They exuded self-confidence, and had the bold

looks of people who can face the world. The chunni-tugging, self-conscious girls of my college days seemed a dream from the past. The girls at Chandigarh might have been the East German national team.

A SURPRISE

They played as robustly, and with as much stamina. I am quite sure that the Punjab women's team could beat any respectable boys' college of the State, and if the boys were to get rough, they would be in for a surprise or two. These girls can crack a knee, or shin-bone as well as the best of Punjab full-backs. If I were ever playing against them, I would make sure I did not tackle from the wrong side.

The quality of hockey, too, was a surprise. Having off and on seen a lot of tepid second-rate stuff doled out by men's teams, it was a pleasure to see the girls play hockey. I was personally

shocked when girls took to cricket. I thought it was really going too far. But having seen what they have achieved in hockey, I am willing to let them have a go at cricket also. Maybe, they will teach the men's team a thing or two in fast bowling.

Another surprise was the large and extremely well-disciplined crowd. In our days we went to watch the girls, and not the sport. This crowd had obviously come to watch hockey. There were no cat-calls, no shouts, no hooting. They followed the game closely, and appreciatively. It was just another good hockey match.

LARGE NUMBERS

I think the Chandigarh crowds deserve a proper hockey stadium. It was not fair to the very large numbers that had come to make them fall over each other and crane their necks in order to see the match. Punjab, as

the cradle of hockey, deserves a separate hockey stadium in its capital. This will also prevent vandalism on the cricket ground.

A couple of years ago I wrote a paper comparing the economic progress of West and East Punjab. The paper was widely noticed. Among the reasons that I gave for the far greater progress of East Punjab was its much greater freedom from social constraints. Watching the hockey match on Monday, I could understand a bit more of why West Punjab has lagged so far behind.

Last month I found a curious item in one of the newspapers. The Pakistan authorities had very daringly allowed their women to take part in sports dressed in salwar kameez. Even more daringly, they had ordered that while no men would be able to see women at play, the girls could be allowed to watch the National Athletic Championship of Pakistan!