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The Journey since 1947-V: Hockey in India's Blood

By: Sharda Ugra

Indian hockey's golden age coincided with the first decades of a young nation, creating larger-than-life men, a whirling galaxy of giants. Through the ups and downs in India's global standing in the game, it remains our sporting blood group.

In a country where cricket and cinema are now established pillars of popular culture and even global clout, how can anyone explain the compelling pull of Indian hockey? Or understand what it meant and obdurately continues to mean during these Amrit Mahotsav times? Despite attempts to erase its memory, presence, and relevance in our forever stretching and shrinking national fabric, hockey remains fundamentally central: both to independent India's origin story and its current tribulations. And not merely 75 years on, but also in the two decades leading to 1947.

It was hockey that created an Indian identity for the outside world, from being yet another nation of British colonial subjects to the land that produced a team of world-beaters and leaders. Invited on overseas tours and displaying their athletic and artistic skills to thousands and funding their travel to the bigger competition. One of the star attractions in the early decades of the modern Olympic movement, hockey also birthed India's first sporting superstar in Dhyan Chand.

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The scholar Ronojoy Sen says that when colonial India sent a hockey team sent to the 1928 Antwerp Olympics, it was “the first Asian colony of the British Empire to do so” and the first official Indian team in any sport. It preceded the cricketers (1932) and the football players (1948) in representing the Indian subcontinent at an international sporting event. If that alone was not reason for pause, the fact the team went onto win six straight Olympic gold medals until 1960 bedazzles the mind and stops the breath.

Even today conversations around Indian hockey are still suffused with breathless emotion: about lost glory, surrendered terrain, doomsday prophecy, rekindled desire. The sport now occupies a most peculiar position. The team, ranked world No. 5, pushes towards being big-title-contenders, its resources and audience central to the future of field hockey itself. For the past two decades, Indian hockey was off-centre from public notice. Too much drama, too few titles, failure to qualify for the 2008 Olympics (the nadir), individual athletes occupying the centre stage that hockey once owned. Until an Olympic medal after 42 years – bronze in Tokyo 2020 – created a rumble which went rippling back in time, echoing like the title of a Springsteen song *We are alive...*

Indian hockey's golden age coincided with the first decades of a young nation creating larger-than-life men, a whirling galaxy of giants. This was an amateur era, before professionalism, before the dark magic of money, when hockey's practitioners were making-do in the ways that they could, leaving an unmistakable timestamp on the sport. Of skills, stickwork, speed, feinting, an 'eyes at the back of the head' kind of formational play.

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The sport boomed through its heritage of excellence, drawing players from around the country for the better part of four decades. From the northern plains with stories told by grandfathers and fathers, from the Adivasi belt of the east encouraged by mission schools where heroes begat heroes, and with an osmosis of sorts in cantonment towns supporting and supported by the army. Like in Khadki outside Pune, where, “every house had a hockey player” because locals Baboo Nimal and Joe Philips (Berlin 1936) had come from the streets where passionately contested *wada* matches were held. The Pillays of Khadki sent two internationals into the world including the most famous of them, ‘greased lightning’ Dhanraj (centre-forward in Barcelona 1992, Atlanta 1996, Sydney 2000, and Athens 2004). In Bangalore, hockey “was a serious sport” played in schools, colleges and universities, in clubs through city leagues, “where cricketers came to watch.” Wherever Indian hockey players walked, crowds stood to attention.

Our hockey provided the language with which India communicated with the world, even as it went into slow fade. A World Cup victory in 1975, an Olympic gold in 1980 Moscow, bronze in the 1982 Champions Trophy were the last vestiges of an old dynasty. The barren decades that followed are popularly blamed on the advent of the AstroTurf playing surface, which leached Asian skills out of the game, and on the cricket explosion post-1983. But it is not so simple. Bad governance by indifferent administrators blindsided by the changes in their sport and the world around them was never held accountable.

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All they left behind were generations carrying history's crushing baggage. Teenagers going to junior World Cups from the eighties to the noughties were told by coaches that "crores of Indians" counted on them, they had to repay their "debt/ karz" to mother country, make Indian hockey great again, restore to it the status of world power.

Jagbir Singh (centre-forward in Seoul 1988 and Barcelona 1992) says we must accept that there is no return of the golden age. The sport once followed live though many competitions in tier-1 and -2 cities now competes with a hundred other diversions. Public attention and affection must be earned and followers created through the pursuit of success and performance. He believes that what kept hockey alive was the very same thing that made it difficult to deal with: a past that could neither be imitated nor extinguished. "Hockey couldn't be forced out of the national mind because of what had happened. Hockey has always earned millions of fans rather than millions of rupees." When India won the [2015 Hockey World League final bronze](#), it was our first international medal in 33 years.

Designer and filmmaker Bani Singh, daughter of double Olympic gold medallist Nandy Singh, says Indian hockey survives even today because it contains a resonance, like the hum of a vibration that never settles into silence. Sport is an intangible heritage on the canvas of human civilisation itself, she says. In India, it is hockey that remains tied to our identity. It is not the most prominent face anymore but is something deeper: our sporting blood group. Because of the lineage, victories, defeats, laughter, and heartbreak newly energised after Tokyo, the baton is being passed now to both men and women.

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Jagbir remembers hanging around "Dada" Dhyani Chand as a worshipful boy during the All India Dhyani Chand hockey tournament in his hometown Agra, where Jagbir's father was organising secretary. Today he is a modern, forward-thinking coach who has watched his wards grow and shine among the Tokyo medal winners.

To this day, Bani remembers double Olympic gold medallist KD Singh 'Babu's "intense, still gaze" as he turned around to meet his teammate's seven-year-old daughter.

There is a video of the final seconds of the Tokyo bronze medal match. India is defending a penalty corner against Germany. Former India captain Viren Rasquinha (midfielder, Athens 2004) is on commentary and cannot sit still. When the penalty corner is saved and the medal won, [he hugs fellow commentator Raman Bhanot](#), keeling in emotion, head on the table in front of him, words tumbling out: "incredible, incredible". He speaks about everyone having "dreamt and waited" for "more than four decades." He is himself just 42, but as a player, Rasquinha was born into the waiting.

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In the world hockey rankings today, India's men (No. 5) and women (No. 8) today are perfectly positioned to create new hockey dynasties for India. Grumbles remain: despite [the Odisha government's generous sponsorships](#) players are still not paid match fees, and women are treated like an uncomfortable adjunct to the men. A book written about the women's Tokyo 2020 campaign has been blocked from publication by the courts, due to a player protest, but who knows what official shenanigans now stay secret.

No other country in the world is as emotionally invested and well-resourced in hockey as India. Without India, the sport could morph into a boutique European club sport minus major revenues. Hockey India's boss today, Dilip Tirkey (defender at Atlanta 1996, Sydney 2000, and Athens 2004) promises the return of an [Indian domestic league for men and women](#). Jagbir notes the number of hockey academies that have arisen over the last decade, Tokyo injecting fresh oxygen. He pushes for greater professionalism among players and

the invention of a style of play that is uniquely Indian, marrying the skills of the old with the speed and physicality of the new. “If other countries could wait for three decades to counter India’s style of hockey, it’s time now to create our own style – again.”

Seventy-five years on, flowing and ebbing, rising and falling, India presents to hockey and hockey to India, the chance to re-fashion, re-invent, re-energise.

Bani is waiting. It took her seven years to make *Taangh/Longing*, a moving documentary about her father and his friends, free India’s first Olympic gold medallists from London 1948. Olympian Gurbux Singh (full back at Tokyo 1964 and Mexico 1968) told her that hockey lives in India’s “OS” (operating system), in its physiology – short stature, low centre of gravity, and flexible back and wrist. She wants to know why the sport cannot be played, like cricket, on multiple surfaces. Maybe it is too late for that, but she puts out a thought: “Because you control the money, reimagine the game.”

Seventy-five years on, flowing and ebbing, rising and falling, India presents to hockey – and hockey to India – the chance to refashion, reinvent, reenergise. Old titans have seen new ones born and hockey rings out again, Springsteen’s lines completing the story: *We are alive [...] our spirits rise/ to carry the fire and light the spark/ To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart.*

Sharda Ugra has worked in and written about Indian sport for more than three decades.