

## **The Evolution of Indian Hockey: From Colonial Introduction to Contemporary Resurgence**

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### **Abstract**

The history of Indian hockey can thus be narrated as the transition from a colonial implant to a consciousness of nationalist revival. Initially popularized by the British in the mid-19th century, it quickly became a favourite, and India soon became a force to reckon with in the sport by the early 20th century. This period witnessed great deeds; the Indian hockey team also won six successive Olympic gold medals between 1928 and 1956 years through players like Dhyan Chand and Balbir Singh. However, the specific features of sports declined steadily from the 1960 Indian administrative problems, the sport's shift to artificial turf, and the swift rise of cricket. After a brief revival with an Olympic top of the podium in 1980, the sport continued deteriorating until the 1990s and 2000s. Quite a few changes, including infrastructural developments, the starting of professional leagues like the Hockey India league or an emphasis on restructuring junior development, were brought during this period. Such an approach, supported with the help of corporate sponsorship and the experience of international coaches, led to the revival. The climax of this revival was the men's team winning an Olympic bronze in the Tokyo Olympic Games, their first in 41 years, and the women's team finishing fourth in the same event. However, issues like irregular funding and deficiencies of infrastructural facilities continue to snowball problems as of now, Indian hockey appears ready to scale the heights it could only dream of formerly, thanks to recent performances which have laid the solid foundation for further advancements.

### **Prologue on Hockey**

Hockey's background in India dates back to the colonial period and the struggle for India's freedom. Field hockey was once famous as the official game of not only Pakistan but several other nations, and despite enjoying great popularity in earlier years, it passed through worse times as well. British annexed this sport in the nineteenth century when it originated in army cantonments and local clubs and became popular among the masses. Hockey evolved and grew to become the only sport representing India's total supremacy during its early twentieth-century internationals.

The glory days of Indian hockey are said to have been between the year 1920s and 1960s, which was a silver eventful span of the Indian hockey team. In these decades, the Indian men's field hockey team won multiple Olympic golds, which ensured them a unique role in field hockey history. Heroes of Indian hockey were born –Dhyan Chand and Balbir Singh –Sr. These heroes portrayed the talent and passion of Indian hockey on world forums. However, by the 1980s, other sports were dominant, the political climate changed, and there were no facilities to train new riders.

After dominating the sport during the early or mid-twentieth century, Indian hockey was to endure a number of dire years on the international sporting scene. However, it also initiated attempts to restart the process that would bring this sport back to life. Subsequent to the 1980s, several reform measures were taken to enhance the governance structure, upgrade the existing infrastructure facilities, and discover raw talent at the grassroots level. Overseas tournaments started to contribute to awakening interest as the emergence of women's teams added a new dimension to Indian hockey.

Currently, Indian hockey is in a revival process, especially in the recent past,. The Indian men's and women's teams have shown reasonable performance on an international level. The existing and changing construction of Indian hockey from the British period to the resurgence of Indian hockey post-independence to the currently deteriorating phase is the particular concern of this study, and at the same time, it has exposed the character behind players and sustained phase of this particular game in India.

### **Colonial Roots and Early Development (1850s-1920s)**

Hockey was introduced in India when British people colonised India in the late 1800s. The first hockey club was established in 1885 at Calcutta (now Kolkata) and later in Bombay (Mumbai) and Punjab. It did not take long before the sport became preferred by the British soldiers and the Indian regiments after cricket. Indian hockey was effectively built up further by launching such competitions as the Aga Khan Tournament in 1896 and the Beighton Cup in 1895. It was an opportunity for local teams to participate and nurture young talent. The IHF was formed in 1925 and hence laid the foundation for the formation of the hockey organization at the national level, paving the way for India for its first Olympics appearance in 1928.

The British introduced hockey eventually in 1850, and the first ever club was formed at Calcutta in 1855[1]. The fact is that a large field for playing had been available, and the equipment was far from complex [8]. In the following couple of decades, the sport became more popular, especially in the erstwhile provinces of Bombay and Punjab, due to national championships such as the Aga Khan tournament in Bombay (Mumbai) and the Beighton Cup in Calcutta [8].

The IHF was founded in 1925, the following year after the International Hockey Federation or FIH. It represented the IHF internationally by undertaking an overseas tour for the first time in 1926, where the Indian hockey team played 21 matches, winning 18, drawing 2 and losing only one [8]. On this tour, Dhyan Chand started and rose in the ranks of one of the greatest players of all time [8].

### **Golden Era of Indian Hockey (1928-1946)**

The Olympics barrier was crossed in 1928 when Indian hockey was introduced in the Games held in Amsterdam. Jaipal Singh Munda's team, going without conceding a goal, won its first gold while it scored a total of 29 goals in the tournament. Dhyan Chand also rose to the spotlight and got 14 goals in five matches, so he was nicknamed 'Hockey Wizard' because of his excellent dribbling skills. In the following Olympics at Los Angeles in 1932, the Indian team collected gold, and the following Olympics at Berlin in 1936, also clinched gold where the figure Dhyan Chand was present as a captain. This period made India a ruler in international hockey, scoring six gold medals in the Olympics from 1928 to 1956.

Crucially, the Indian team found the net 178 times, while at the other end, they only allowed seven past them in the same period.

As for becoming a member of the FIH in 1927, IHF paved the way for the hockey squad from India to participate in the Olympics for the first time in 1928[8]. In its first attempt, India got the gold medal as the team let in only one goal while scoring 29 in five games, while the Indian Captain, Major Dhyan Chand, scored 14 goals in total. India was to go on to score a consolation Olympic hockey hat-trick by clinching two successive Olympic golds in 1932 and 1936 [8].

### **Post-Independence Success 1948 to 1960**

After independence in the year 1947 also hockey continued to be the pride of India. Gold had been achieved in the Olympics in London in 1948 in the game against Great Britain, which was nothing but the rejoicing of freedom for the Indian team. Another of the great player to play in those years was Balbir Singh Sr, who helped to add to the tally by scoring five goals in the final against the Netherlands in the event that was held in the year 1952 Helsinki Olympics. Two Olympics later the Indian arrived at the Melbourne in 1956 Olympics to clinch another gold. But here also lies the problems for Indian hockey began as competition increased internationally.

Post World War II criteria, new genius Balbir Singh Sr. succeeded in laying three consecutive Olympic golds in 1948, 1952 and 1956 [8]. This was one of the best moments in Indian hockey history as the team was on the ascendancy and had won as many nine Olympic gold medals in period spanning between 1928 and 1956[8].

### **Decline and Challenges (1960s-1980s)**

Following the 1960s India slowly lost its supremacy in field hockey and thus ended an era of a game where it was paramount. The first big upset in Indian hegemony came at the hands of Pakistan in the finals of the 1960 Rome Olympics which snapped Indian's gold medal winning spree. However, India did a comeback in 1964 Tokyo Olympics to win the gold, but there was a clear sign of erosion of Indian dominance. Their performance reduces in the following decades, winning silver at 1958 and 1962 Asian Games and bronze at 1968 Mexico Olympics that was the worst performance of India in Olympics till then.

It reached its nadir through gradient variations witnessed during the 1976 Montreal Olympics through artificial turf. What was more challenging was this playing surface: for the first time,

the India's men's team did not make the Olympic podium, coming in seventh place. These were taken to the women's team making the 1978 World Cup's seventh place as well. The men's team had won a gold medal 1980 Moscow Olympics, however, this was criticized as an upset because some of the world's best hockey-playing nations deliberately skipped the event.

He attributed the decline of Indian hockey during the seventies and eighties to a number of factors. One of the main reasons was that India was late to the change in global laws of natural grass to synthetic turf, this coupled by the fact that there were few turf based football fields in the country. Another reason was also weak management within the Indian Hockey Federation (IHF) where bureaucracy and internal politics stunted its progress and failed to bring requisite changes needed for the development of the sport. Furthermore, winning the 1983 cricket world cup made the neighbouring country (India) cuckoo eyed on cricket which overshadowed hockey in terms of popularity, media attraction and investment. All these factors contributed to some extent in halting the reign of Indian hockey in International level.

### **Resurgence (1980s)**

The progress of the team has gained momentum in the 1980s after India won the gold medal in the Moscow Olympics though there were many big teams missing the event [8]. But in following years, the team could not do as well as had been expected in the subsequent Asian Games and World Cup events.

### **Modern Resurgence in the 1990s and Early 2000s**

1980s could be termed as the dark phase for Indian hockey, but the decade of 1990 saw the initial steps to resurgence of Indian field hockey. A decided shift occurred in 2009 when IHF was disbanded because of ineffectiveness and the creation of Hockey India (HI) as the new controlling authority. This change introduced a professional, transparent and long term change in the management of the sport for both male and female teams thus boosting people's interest in hockey again.

Among all the aspects that have developed during this period, the most important one was the accelerated growth of infrastructure investments. Artificial turfs, especially in hockey-nurturing states of Punjab, Odisha and Haryana were established by the government with private sponsored funds for the creation of new age amenities. Modern facilities like the

Punjab Institute of Sports and Naval Tata Hockey Academy in Odisha named were developed to nurture raw talents which offered best of infrastructure among the sport.

The appearance of the professional leagues was also instrumental in the revitalization of the sport. From 2005, The premier hockey league PHL was started to give the domestic players to play at a higher level. While the PHL only had a short existence it provided a foundation for creation of the new entity, the HIL which was formed in 2013. Players from all over the world responded to HIL while young Indian talents came face-to-face with some of the most superior talent around the globe which gave the sport the popularity boost it needed. It echoed the success of the cricket's Indian Premier League (IPL) in all sense of taking the sport forward and providing the big stage to the players.

Since 2010s, these policies of Hockey India to develop better infrastructure, quality coaches, and scouting system started paying off. The Indian men's team found gold in the 2014 Asian Games and the 2016 Champions Trophy to immediately announce themselves on the world stage. One of the recent milestones can be stated with the victory of the men's team where they earned the bronze at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the first Olympic medal in 41 years. The women's team also recorded the best Olympics campaign by reaching the semis in Tokyo. These achievements put focus on the structural reforms, investments and the competition that has been brought into Indian hockey by the Board.

### **Success on the International Stage**

India has staged an astonishing comeback, mainly in the vibrant 2000s and the 2010s. Germany had its fair share of struggles in the two previous decades in the 1980s and 1990s, which seen them struggle in the Olympics and the World Cups but they started rising again after administrative change early in the new millennium.

i. Men's Hockey: The men's team had a brilliant performance at the 2014 Asian Games where they won India's first gold since 1998 and direct Olympics qualification in their events for the 2016 Olympics. India have shown steady improvement at the global level and in 2018 won the silver medal in Champions Trophy. The greatest achievement was achieved the next year during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics that were held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemics: the Indian men's team won a bronze medal which became the first Olympic achievement of the team since 1980. This meant victory was equally a great moment in history for Indian hockey uplifting the pride of the nation again.



ii. Women's Hockey: The women's field hockey team also revived in the recent years as well. The women's team has been in the shadow of the men's team for a long time, but there were signs of improvement, mainly after the year 2000. Their qualification for the 2016 Rio Olympics was highly regarded as a historical feat; the team was able to perform a stunning feat in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, where they only missed out on a medal by placing fourth. The comeback of the women's team has been one of the major reasons for the revival of Indian hockey, promoting prospective female talents.

### **Role of State Governments and Corporate Sponsorship**

It has however been noticed that the revival of hockey in India has largely been due to major support from state governments and corporates. As for instance, Odisha has come front and centre in India's hockey redemption story. After becoming the partners of the Indian men and the women's hockey teams in 2018, Odisha not only supported the holding of vital tournaments such as Hockey World Cup and the Hockey India League but also conducted major investments in infrastructure. Another fantastic infrastructure that is Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar is the true indication of the state's investment to provide a favorable ecosystem for the growth of hockey. The Odisha strategy provides a playbook in showing the necessity of regional government participation in functioning for development of sports facilities and identifying talents. Further, the question of corporate sponsorship remains crucial, as well as a set of other important aspects. Players and their associated organisations like Sahara India Pariwar and Odisha Mining Corporation besides the corporate world have contributed a lot in providing the much needed capital investment for better infrastructure, training and development and providing opportunities for the players to lace up international tournaments that has enriched the hockey concentration in the country.

### **Grassroots Development and Coaching**

The administrative revolution can be named as the primary cause of India's amazing ultimate rise to the stars in field hockey. The nation has fervently embraced the hope of launching various programs that seek to discover talents especially in the rural areas where hockey has a sounds foundation to draw from. Those include setting up hockey academies in several states and introducing specialized coaching system which have inherent potential to unde,score Indian hockey from other leading hockey nations; besides, these measures have given birth to feeling of hope in the players.

We cannot emphasize enough how valuable it is to have foreign coaches. In the recent past, many world famous coaches including Jose Brasa from Spain, Terry Walsh from Australia and Graham Reid from Australia have helped in the process of giving the modern technology to Indian hockey. This they have done and have especially helped the team prepare to effectively deal with the modern aggressive and high-intensity systematic hockey played on synthetic surfaces. This collective effort has undoubtedly taken Indian hockey to new high, today there is a feeling of optimism, pride pervading in to every Indian's heart.

### **Challenges and the Road Ahead**

Over the past two decades, compared to the 1980s, there is a definite improvement in Indian hockey but there are still some problems. However, the sport is still lagging behind cricket as the attention from the media, sponsorship, or general fans' interest. Some of the challenges include the lack of a clear funnel to develop talent right from the grassroots level to the elite level, particularly for the rural-talent guessing difficulty training young brains to become elite performers. Further, the HIL has not been featured since the year 2017 and there is requirement for a fresh domestic competition to force or revive the dying sport.

However, these are the problems which should not deter the future of field hockey in India. Additional infrastructure development, coaching facilities and the rising awareness of international recognition to the Indian prospectus of hockey, make it feasible for the country to gain its previous positions in the world Hockey Championship.

### **Key Figures and Legendary Players**

The most prominent legend, who will ever be written about the history of Indian hockey could be termed as 'Hockey Wizard,' is Dhyan Chand. Topics include his unrivaled skills and great control of the ball; he is still a legendary soccer player [8]. Dhyan Chand who had secured three Olympic golds helped generations of players and solidified the place of hockey as a national sport [8].

Yet another player of highly esteemed accolade was Balbir Singh Sr who went ahead in leading Indian contingent to three back to back Olympic victories in the years 1948, 1952 and another was 1956. During the post independence he played a vital role in indentifying India's supremacy in this sport [8].



Other performers are Mohammed Shahid, who was a marvelous dribbler has been part of the gold medal-winning team of Moscow Olympics 1980 [4], and Dhanraj Pillay, the Indian team captained in the nineties and year 2000 [4].

### **Challenges and Future Prospects**

However, contemporary Indian hockey has numerous problems which include lack of fund, lacking adequate facility especially in rural complexity which requires enhancement of coaches and talent scouting systems [4]. There is also an issue of using artificial turf, which has also been cited to presented some skill demanding and equipment demanding characteristic [8].

Nevertheless, the formation of Hockey India and the subsequent emergence of good performances by the national senior and junior sides in the recent past have thought the new interest on the game [4]. It has also been made easier due to the establishment of professional league known as the Hockey India League that involves players from India and other countries [4].

In the years to come, the Indian hockey team harbours hope, due to the abundance of talent and issues being taken to build solid infrastructure for the sport [15]. Hockey has every potential to regain its lost glory under the vision of government and private sectors, and dedication to quality in the Indian teams.

### **Final Thoughts**

A brief history of Indian hockey, from the Anglo-Indian and early hockey period to the present modern-day period, can be a narrative of struggle, perseverance and passion and pride of a million hearts beating for India. From the glorious 1920s through the 1950s, the game tried to evolve through the subsequent turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s and, finally, has witnessed a resurgence more recently; that is why the game holds a unique position as a symbol of national pride and identity. This has mainly been due to the tradition set by legends of the game, such as Dhyan Chand and Balbir Singh Sr.

Regarding the future prospects of Indian hockey, it may be said that this splendid past and the emerging trend of the latest achievements must be effectively utilised to take back the rightful place of Indian hockey in the world arena. This aspiration presupposes continuous funding, development of infrastructural capacities, and a hereby constant focus on the pursuit

of quality. They wish to bring Indian hockey to par with the world players so that a new generation of talents and supporters come up.

The story of the revival of field hockey in India from the period of 1980s to modern times provides a good example of how the country stands guaranteed for the process of revitalizing a sport which is inextricably linked with its history. Although it had gradually receded downwards in the 80s, the slow process of Indian hockey coming back into that phase in the 90s and 2000s can also be considered as another phase in Indian hockey's period. Milestones like the men's team winning Olympic bronze in 2021 and the women's team's good show at the Tokyo Olympics symbolise India rising again in world hockey. Despite the obstacles, the future of Indian hockey continues to be brighter primarily because of the steady investment being made across all age groups in sports development.

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