

Sunrise Again for Indian Hockey?

Nikhilesh Bhattacharya

India's hockey performance, men's and women's, at Tokyo is remarkable in significant ways and may well be a portent of things to come. It's a fitting celebration of the life of Keshav Dutt, hockey veteran who died just before the Olympic play began.

The Tokyo Olympics has finally come and gone, fetching India its biggest haul of medals—one gold, two silver and four bronze—from a single edition of the Games. While the wisdom of organising the Olympics while the world struggled to contain the waves of a pandemic is questionable, few will disagree that Tokyo 2020, held a year later than originally scheduled in these topsy-turvy times, proved to be particularly good for Indian hockey, which accounted for one of the bronze medals. In fact, a case can be made for Indian hockey performance this time as being its most significant ever in the Olympic Games. Those who would consider that a mad assertion, especially in the light of the eight Olympic men's hockey gold medals won by India in the past, may be asked to consider the following facts.

One, the India women's team came agonisingly close to matching the bronze medal-winning feat of the men's team in Tokyo. Never before have India Women played in a medal-decider at the Olympics and so the combined results of the men and women's teams in Tokyo was arguably the best ever. Two, the men's team won an Olympic medal after nine Olympic Games and 41 years. The last medal, a gold in the widely boycotted Moscow Olympics in 1980, came before the Cold War had ended, when none of the current national team players were born even. Three, leaving aside the Moscow gold, this is India's first Olympic medal in the era of the Astroturf, when field hockey shifted from grass to artificial surface. Today, hockey is a truly global sport with the International Hockey Federation (FIH) counting 137 national associations among its members. Simply to qualify for the Olympics as one of 12 teams is hard, leave aside winning medals. Therefore, whichever way we look at it, Tokyo 2020 marks a new beginning for Indian hockey.

It is a pity that Keshav Datt, a two-time Olympic champion from India's golden past, did not live to see the performances of the current national teams. Datt died of age-related complications in his adopted city of Kolkata on July 7, nearly a month before India Men beat Germany and India Women lost to Great Britain in the bronze medal playoffs in Tokyo. He was 95. Datt would have been keenly aware of the import of their achievements because he was someone who understood the challenges of starting anew, from his experiences on and off the field. Brought up in a Brahmin family in pre-Independence Lahore, Datt found himself adrift after Partition and ended up starting a new life at the other end of the subcontinent, in the city then called Calcutta. As part of independent India's first hockey teams, Datt and his teammates had the challenging task of continuing the legacy of British India, which had won three successive Olympic gold in the inter-war years. In effect, the new nation-state was asked to replicate the feats of an erstwhile colony that had a bigger pool of players while holding off the challenge of Pakistan, with which it had to share the resources. Given the context, it is quite remarkable that between 1948 and 1956 independent India managed

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to match British India's hat trick of Olympic gold medals before Pakistan caught up with them in Rome. Datt made part of that journey with the national teams, never missing a match in their Olympic campaigns in London 1948 and Helsinki 1952. He was the vice-captain in Helsinki and missed the next Olympics in Melbourne in 1956 only because he could not wrangle leave from his employers in the tea industry.

Like many of his contemporaries who played the game on grass, Datt also understood how the shift to artificial surface had irreversibly changed hockey. He was very clear in his views about how and why Indian hockey had lost its way in the 1970s. "The real decline came following the changing of rules and Astroturf," Datt had said in 2013, alluding to the introduction of artificial surface before the 1976 Montreal Olympics where India had finished sixth, their worst ever Olympics showing at the time. "Instead of accepting Astroturf, India was initially (busy) criticising it. India was not the only country, a lot of other hockey-playing countries were also not in favour of changing the rules, like bully(-off) and things like that. And stick work... India was very good at that and we produced some first-class dribblers, like K.D. Singh Babu. But with Astroturf, there was not much room for a lot of stick work. It (resulted in) a more direct type of hockey. And Astroturf is too fast. India had a problem and they still have problems with Astroturf." Datt was well into his eighties by then, but his mind was sharp and his reasoning sound. It would have gladdened his heart to see the attacking flair and defensive qualities of Manpreet Singh and Rani Rampal's teams on Astroturf at Tokyo.

What were the factors behind India's success in Tokyo? For one, the fitness levels of the players have improved out of sight. "The speed and stamina displayed by both the India men and women when running back to turn over possession, for example, was something I had never seen before," commented former India goalkeeper and coach Mir Ranjan Negi. A number of possible reasons are given for the improvement: large support staff complete with coaches for different skills, a scientific adviser, video analyst, physiotherapist and masseur accompanying the senior national teams; better rehabilitation programmes, increased government grant for preparatory and training camps and for import of expertise (for example, the support staff of the men's and women's teams include members from Australia, South Africa and the Netherlands). "I feel the senior teams are given all the facilities required to compete at the elite level," Negi said. Hockey writer and founder of the Delhi-based NGO, Hockey Citizen Group, K. Arumugam, noted the importance of large core group of players maintained by Hockey India for men and women's senior as well as junior teams.

What might be the significance of Indian hockey's success at Tokyo 2020? Arumugam believes winning a medal was crucial. "Hockey was losing its mass appeal. At least two generations had not seen the national team win any medal at the Olympics or the World Cup. The game was losing its identity in India. The performances in Tokyo have helped Indian hockey get its identity back."

However, Arumugam urges caution. "This is not the revival of Indian hockey. It is only a stepping stone towards it." The crying need, Negi and Arumugam concur, is for attention to be paid to the grassroots. However, while Negi would like the government, both at the centre and in the states, to take a more proactive role, Arumugam thinks the real problem lies elsewhere. "Hockey in India remains a sport driven by state money. The real lacuna is in the absence of corporate contribution and I will leave it to others to research the cause of that," said Arumugam. Unless Corporate India steps in helps hockey broaden its base in the country, Tokyo 2020 will remain a false dawn.