

# Sikhs' contribution to India's Pre-eminence in hockey

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Whether you agree or not, Sikhs are the insignia of Indian hockey. They are as inherent to the game as sticks are to the sport.

Sikh diaspora still sees India through the prism of hockey. They did not give up hockey in the countries they settled in. We have seen enough of them in the UK, Canada, Malaysia and Kenya teams. Only one player played in five Olympics in the world, and he (Avtar Singh) was a Sikh from Kenya.

The Sikhs' contribution to hockey in terms of players and patronage is so significant that one can momentarily overlook why faith should be a yardstick for praising a particular section of society so metamorphosed as ours.

When a 10-member jury sits to find out the best ten Sikh hockey players, the process would entail piecing together a century of history. At least some historical research in hockey before hockey becomes history! Sadly, even the Sikh's are fast becoming history in hockey. There was a surfeit of Sardars at the Olympics in the past (10 in 1964, 13 in 1968), but only a few subsequently – three in 1980, just two in 1984 and four in 1988, probably because of terrorism in Punjab.

The man who quelled that phase, super cop KPS Gill, came to rule hockey later, and in his regime Sikhs quota seemed to be fixed – five in all three Olympics (1996-2004). Whether it is intended or incidental is a matter of conjecture!

The abundance of Sardars in the 60s and 70s does not necessarily mean it's an extension of the pre-Independence days. Just a token Sikh was present in each of colonial India's three Olympic teams.

Sikhs constitute a mere one-fourth of hockey Olympians India produced (60 out of 235) till date. A mystery: No goalkeeper Olympian from the Jalandhar stable.

What are the barometers the jury, headed by four-time Olympian Leslie Claudius would employ to pick the 10 best? The selection criteria is not known. What we have is a short-list of 30 names, every second one an Olympian from the legendary Balbir Singh Sr., fearsome Prithipal Singh, ever-green Udham Singh, gentle gazelle Harbinder Singh down to Gagan Ajit Singh.

Olympic exploits (though it is harsh on post 1980 players) and post-playing career (read: coaching contribution) should be the criteria.

Olympic achievements will ensure a level playing field for those legends who toiled for hours barefoot without the comfort enjoyed by the present lot who also get to play more tournaments with a better support system. Statistics – number of goals, longevity, number of caps – matter but not beyond a point.

Two of Independent India's five Olympic gold are significant from historical perspectives – London 1948 and Tokyo 1964.

Perceived drain of talent due to partition and the return of the British to the hockey field after 40 years of self-imposed boycott posed the biggest challenge for Indian hockey in 1948.

Would India wilt or wallop was the question. But the masters were taught a majestic 4-1 lesson in the final, Balbir Singh Sr. alone scoring the first three goals. Had India succumbed that day, perhaps our hockey would have perished long since. Balbir, never a favourite with the powers-that-be, made a name for himself with his unique scoring prowess.

Twelve years later, the Asian Games and Olympics gold were in Pakistan's pocket. Was India a spent force? Skeptics started crediting India's past six Olympic victories to

Anglo-Indians and neighbourhood stars but 1964 proved them wrong. Tokyo was a unique success built solely on post-in-dependent native strength.

“Give us Joginder Singh and Shankar Laxman, we will defeat you’, said Major General Musa, Pakistan’s chief-de-mission at Tokyo. Ashwini Kumar, then Indian Hockey Federation chief, retorted: “Then you have to wage another war,” he said.

The question arises, who was Joginder Singh? Only the old times recall him, which is a pity. Winger ‘Giddi’ Joginder dazzled in Tokyo but, in the world of cold statistics, his feat perished. The same is true of Balbir Singh (Railways); his lightening strikes in the 1966 Asiad and the 1968 Olympics ensured us medals, but did not got him even an Arjuna. Pakistan hardly defeated India as long as MP Singh took penalty corners.

How many star Olympics gave something back to the game? Not many.

Big names take a beating here, though most of them got a chance. Balkrishan Singh (despite Barcelona disaster), Rajinder Singh Sr. and services Balbir Singh (for women) stand out.

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