

'ACCHHE DIN' FOR INDIAN HOCKEY, ARE THEY ROUND THE CORNER?

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There was a time when India were the undisputed kings of hockey in the world. Those days there was no World Cup. No Champions Trophy. Competitive hockey at the international level was only played during the Olympic Games. And at the continental level, the Asian Games was the only arena where power houses in the sub-continent showcased their prowess.

Dhyan Chand, the legend the world talks about even today, was the most dazzling among the Indian hockey stars.

India had very little opposition till the partition of the country and emergence of Pakistan. After gaining independence, most finals were India-Pakistan affairs with teams like Australia, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium, the powerhouses of today, getting trounced by the Indians. Pakistan provided some resistance.

India had players of great talent till the early seventies with the likes of Prithipal Singh, Balbir Singh, Ajitpal Singh, Harbinder Singh, Ashok Kumar (the son of Dhyan Chand), M.P.Ganesh and Pargat Singh dominating the international arena.

The national team's downswing began in the 1968 Olympics when Australia beat India 2-1 in the semifinals. And despite India winning the 1975 World Cup defeating Pakistan 2-1 in the final, no major triumph has been registered by the team except the gold medal at the 1980 truncated Olympics in Moscow in which most of the top sides did not participate. The slide continued with India getting routed by teams like Australia, Germany, Netherland and even Belgium on a regular basis.

However, India's latest four-match tour of Australia, in which the team was trounced 0-4 in the first match, has regenerated hope that 'acchhe din' for Indian hockey may be round the corner. It has brought a ray of hope into the hearts of most followers of the game.

No one was surprised when Australia, infusing new blood into their team ahead of the Champions Trophy in Bhubaneswar, rolled over India without much of resistance in the four-match series opener. They were without three of their top players but the juniors were equally good and gave the Indians little room. Followers of the game were pleasantly surprised when India downed the hockeyroos 2-1 in the second encounter and edged them out again 1-0 in the third engagement.

The icing on the cake was India's 3-1 victory in the final match with striker Akashdeep Singh scoring a brace. The 3-1 series win was an unbelievable act. And it happened after a long time.

"It came as a pleasant surprise. I also couldn't believe that our team won the series so convincingly," said former Olympian and hockey legend Dilip Tirkey.

"I hope they continue to play in the same vein when the Champions Trophy starts here," he said.

Hockey experts feel that defeating Australia on their own soil would do wonders to the confidence of the players. This team, led by the mercurial pivot Sardar Singh, has come as a different side altogether compared to those of the past. It doesn't appear to have a defeatist mentality and doesn't give up easily.

It will, however, be known when the Champions Trophy starts in Bhubaneswar's Kalinga Stadium on December 6.

India played well in the Asian Games in Incheon where, despite losing to Pakistan in the league stages, they beat them in the final to win the gold. Of the players in the present line up, Sardar definitely leads from the front while others like goalkeeper P R Sreejesh with his amazing skills, strikers Akashdeep Singh, S.V.Sunil and defenders V.R.Raghunath and Rupinderpal Singh have inspired confidence.

The victory in Australia has come in for praise by icons of other sports like former cricket captain Anil Kumble who has asked the Virat Kohli-led Indian team down under to take a leaf out of the men's hockey team's brilliant show as they confront the kangaroos in a four test series, starting the same week as the Champions Trophy.

The performance of the Indian junior hockey team in the just concluded Sultan Johar Cup in Malaysia where they overcame a tough Great Britain 2-1 in the final has also infused more hope in the future of hockey in this country. The team began with a loss as well getting beaten by Great Britain 0-2 in its second tie. But they recorded handsome wins against New Zealand (2-1), Pakistan (6-0), Malaysia (4-2) and Australia (6-2) before playing the final.

In the latest edition of the Champions Trophy--- where India's best finish has been a bronze medal in 1982, the home team has been bracketed with Germany, The Netherlands and Argentina in Group-B. Australia, Pakistan, Belgium and England have been clubbed together in Group-A. The matches will be played on round-robin basis and all the eight teams play the quarterfinals on the basis of their standing in the group.

If the odd cricket test and ODIs, which involve only two teams, played at Cuttack's Barabati Stadium are kept aside, the Champions Trophy hockey tournament is the biggest international sporting event ever hosted in Odisha. I have no idea how many sports enthusiasts remember this. Because the expected euphoria over such an event is not much in evidence. Not even in the media.

The media is still busy with the performances of Rohit Sharma and others in the just concluded one-day series against Sri Lanka and the upcoming tour of the cricket team to Australia. Besides, more space on the sports pages are eaten up by developments concerning the BCCI and its leadership.

One expects that the Champions Trophy would get more attention than what it deserves and has received so far.

(Mr. Das is a senior journalist based in Bhubaneswar)