

## **When We Were Champions: Nation Building, Hockey and the Anglo-Indian Community of Calcutta**

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Men's field hockey was the first team sport in which India, then still a British colony, became world champions when they won gold in the ninth Olympic Games held in Amsterdam in 1928. The triumph was the start of a remarkable sequence: the hockey team of British India won the next two Olympics and, when the Games resumed in 1948 after the end of the Second World War, the newly independent states of India and Pakistan added six more gold medals in six Olympics. The Indian subcontinent's gold-winning run in Olympic hockey lasted more than four decades from 1928, coming to an end in Munich in 1972 when West Germany won the Olympic hockey tournament. Given sport is increasingly seen as a site where national identity is forged and reaffirmed, it is surprising how little academic writing has focused on hockey in India and its possible connection with nationalism. The absence intrigued me when I worked as a sports journalist in Calcutta after completing my university education in English literature. Did it have something to do with the emergence of cricket as the biggest spectator sport in India in the last four decades? Or was it because the connection between hockey and nationalism in India has always been complicated by the large presence of Anglo-Indians, i.e. people with European ancestry on the paternal side, in the pre-Independence hockey teams? These are some of the questions I seek to explore in my doctoral thesis, which aims to re-excavate a part of India's past that is mostly forgotten.

Between 1928 and 1936, the British India hockey team toured Europe thrice in connection with the Olympic Games. On two of these occasions the Olympics were held on the Continent—in Amsterdam in 1928 and in Berlin in 1936; the 1932 Games were held in Los Angeles but the team played a number of invitation matches on the Continent on its way back to India. All three tours also included a visit to England, though only in 1928 did the team play any matches there. The Sylff Research Abroad (SRA) grant allowed me to retrace a part of that journey by visiting the UK in May-August 2015 and looking for documents and reports related to the British India hockey tours of the inter-War years.

Under SRA, I was a visiting fellow at The Hockey Museum in Woking, Surrey with its Curator, Mr Mike Smith, as my academic supervisor. The International hockey federation (FIH) recently entrusted the Museum with the responsibility of preserving hockey's history. At the Museum, apart from looking up references to the British India hockey team of the 1920s and 1930s in contemporary magazines and books written later, I could also consult the original Minutes books of the Hockey Association of England from the period in question. The Minutes books are an invaluable resource in trying to understand why hockey authorities in England, where modern hockey was born, and other constituent parts of Great Britain stayed away from Olympic hockey between 1928 and 1936, coincidentally the period when British India emerged as a major force in world hockey. The most popular Indian explanation for England's refusal to take part on Olympic hockey in that period, that the Colonial rulers were afraid of losing to the ones they ruled over, is not entirely true, as I found out during my research in the UK.

Being a visiting fellow at The Hockey Museum also allowed me access to a number of people with abiding interest in hockey and its history and I had fruitful discussions with veteran senior journalist Patrick Rowley, hockey writer Dil Bahra and Mr Smith himself.

In the UK, the other resource that I made full use of was the India Office Records and Private Papers section of the British Library. The section has a vast collection of government and private documents relating to British rule in India. My interest lay in documents connected with sports administration in colonial India and government policy regarding the Anglo-Indians, a community that could be considered neither Indian nor fully European. My most interesting find at the British Library was a Legal, Political and Judicial file detailing the role played by the British Government in helping India join the Olympic Movement in the 1920s. The evidence makes it clear that it is naïve to see India's participation in the Olympics as a direct consequence, or expression, of national aspirations.

Leads found in The Hockey Museum and the British Library took me to the Dockland Campus of the University of East London, which houses the archives of the British Olympic Association (BOA). Between 1988 and 1994, the BOA office was flooded a number of times and a portion of its library and archives was either destroyed or damaged. However, I did find documents that yielded new information or corroborated some of my findings from other sources.

Another grant, from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), allowed me to spend some time in Lausanne, Switzerland, looking through the IOC archives at the Olympic

Studies Centre for material from the inter-War years connected to hockey and India. I focused on the correspondence between the IOC on one hand and on the other, the National Olympic Committees of Great Britain and India and the International hockey federation. I also consulted files related to the Olympics of 1928, 1932 and 1936 and minutes of each IOC Congress and IOC Session from that period to trace the journey of hockey in the Olympics.

While in Lausanne, I also visited the FIH headquarters where I made my biggest 'discovery'—I found two bound volumes containing the minutes of all FIH meetings starting from the very first one held on January 7, 1924 to 1953. No one at FIH was aware that these minutes books existed. A translation of the minutes, which are in French, will provide me with the bare bones of the story of hockey's development in the inter-War years.

I am confident that the information collected during my research abroad will greatly enhance my doctoral thesis which seeks to show how a colonial state and an amateur game came to each other's aid at a crucial moment in their respective histories and how Anglo-Indians, a liminal group caught between the rulers and the ruled, played an important role in this enterprise. It is important to get this history right because there are lessons to be learnt from it not only for India but for the whole world.