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## Hockey World Cup 2023: An Enthusiastic Novice at Bhubaneswar

By: Kalyani Raghunathan

*If you know little of hockey and you watch an international game with a group of spectators who know just as little, it is a special experience especially when you are rooting for an Indian resurgence in the game.*

When I told my parents I would be attending the men’s Hockey World Cup 2023 in Bhubaneswar, my father’s response was “But you know next to nothing about hockey!”. My hockey credentials are certainly more burnished than his, since I had also attended the 2010 World Cup in New Delhi, but I couldn’t deny the substance of his allegation. Fortunately, we were to discover that our lack of knowledge would serve more to unite than divide us from the rest of the crowd at the Kalinga Stadium, one of the two venues for the World Cup, the other being the brand new 20,000-seater Birsa Munda Stadium at Rourkela.

It would perhaps be going too far to claim that the average Bhubaneswar resident was in a state of fevered excitement, but there was certainly something in the air. Hotels were fully booked, the main streets of Bidyut Marg, Janpath and Rajpath were filled with people, and the city was decked out in its finest. This was my first visit to Odisha, but I had heard so much about Bhubaneswar’s charms that I took the avenues lined with Christmas lights-and-paper-lantern strung trees to be part of the general vibe of the city. I was corrected by our Ola driver. These were special arrangements for the World Cup, as were the multiple hoardings and illuminated signs featuring the mascot Olly, an Olive Ridley turtle jauntily preparing to hit a hockey ball that looked suspiciously like a rasagoola.

### Revival of India’s Hockey

After a long wait, it is an exciting time to be hockey enthusiast in India. For many my age or younger, for whom cricket has dominated the sporting discourse, it is the first time we have known our national teams to make a mark on the global scene. India’s initial successes, subsequent faltering and recent revival have been written about elsewhere, as in [this piece](#) by Sharda Ugra that made me catch my breath multiple times: “In India, it is hockey that remains tied to our identity. It is not the most prominent face anymore but is something deeper: our sporting blood group.”

I was born in the late 1980s, and by the time I was 10 it had been more than 15 years since India’s last Olympics gold medal. And yet for me, as I suspect is true for many others of my generation, it was well understood that India had once been the world leader in the sport. In the words Sharda Ugra so eloquently used to describe Rasquinha’s response to the men’s 2021 Olympics bronze, my generation too was “born into the waiting”.

At the end of the 2010 World Cup held at the Major Dhyan Chand stadium in New Delhi, India stood 8th of 12 countries in the World Cup. I was in the audience for the league games on 6 March 2010, where India lost 2-5 to Spain in a lacklustre performance. The only consolation for the crowd at that time was that the first match of that evening saw Pakistan lose to England by the same margin. We left the stadium unconvinced that we would ever witness a return of India’s glorious hockey past.

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The last decade or so have begun to prove us wrong. India is undergoing a significant revival in its hockey fortunes, and Odisha has placed itself in the middle of all the action. The 2023 World Cup is the second straight World Cup to be hosted by the state, and only one of several high-profile tournaments held in Odisha in recent years.



In some ways, for our work at least, the timing for our visit to the state was unfortunate. Many of the government officials we were hoping to meet in the capital were busy with World Cup preparations. In other ways, though, the timing worked very well. As one of the Block Development Officers in Keonjhar told us, World Cup fever was everywhere. Women self-help-group members in his block had recently concluded a World Cup themed rangoli competition. Gram panchayats had been allocated Rs. 20,000, a sizeable sum of money, to set up screens and project the World Cup inauguration ceremony for general viewing. Hoardings and banners were everywhere, contrasting the slightly comical Olly with the calm beneficence of former school hockey goalie and current Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, dressed in his trademark white kurta pyjama. Even the nondescript Suraj Restaurant and Bakery in Keonjhar was screening the hockey match in Rourkela to its patrons, the four of us and a beleaguered father cajoling his irritable daughter into eating lunch.

### **At the stadium**

We had planned to attend the two league matches on Day 4, our last evening in Bhubaneswar. Back in 2010, a ticket to two matches had cost Rs. 100 and my group of friends managed to buy about ten tickets one day in advance. That would be unheard of for a major

sporting event anywhere. I was amused to discover that other than tickets doubling in price in the 12 years since, nothing much else had changed. We discovered at the box office that I had mistakenly bought tickets for Day 5; the agent told us they had “just sold the last ticket”, but upon our pleading promptly produced two more for the matches starting in 15 minutes.

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Armed with our tickets, we marched to the stadium and into our respective stands. Our league matches were France versus South Africa, followed by Australia versus Argentina. I had been warned that the second was likely to be far more interesting than the first. Perhaps this memo reached others as well, as the crowds were initially sparse, building slowly as the first match unfolded. I drank it all in: the cheerleaders with their golden pompoms, the fireworks after every goal, the vastly overpriced popcorn, even the half-time dance performance by Olly, set to Pritam's catchy theme song (even if the chorus sounded suspiciously like Khaled's “C'est la vie”).

My father was right, of course. I had absolutely no idea what to make of each foul, or why certain decisions were being reviewed by a third umpire (is that even what they call them?). I couldn't appreciate the skill required to dribble the ball, or to trap the high passes...nor did I realize until I was told that Argentina vs Australia was a better game because goals were scored through “open play” and not just penalties. I was just there to enjoy the show.



I wasn't the only one who had come along for the party. At a break in proceedings, the MC tried to rouse the crowd with a resounding “Who are you supporting, Bhubaneswarrrrrr”. The young man behind me shouted “INDIAAAAA”.

His friend nudged him, “India isn't playing today”.

Consternation. “India isn't playing? Then who is? Is the green team Pakistan? Does Pakistan play hockey?”

His friend takes out his phone to look up who they had come to watch. “It's South Africa”, he says.

Sharing in a reinvention

So, yes, many of us were only there because the hockey World Cup is an event, because tickets were cheap and available and because the matches fit neatly into our schedules and lives. Not because we were knowledgeable hockey fans with a deep appreciation for the sport. Perhaps that generation has passed, perhaps the period of stagnation of the Indian hockey team combined with the dominance of

cricket has led to this. But maybe it doesn't matter. Odisha's efforts at promoting hockey may be uneven and suffused with the heavy handedness of the Indian state. These efforts may not succeed. But on that cool, beautiful evening in Bhubaneswar, it felt like I was part of something significant, part of a reinvention of our national game<sup>1</sup>.

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**Footnotes:**

**1** This article was written before the Indian team was unfortunately knocked out of the 2023 World Cup.