

GROWING THE GAME: GOLF FINDS GLORY IN INDIA

Golf's centuries in history can never be complete without the mention of India. Royal Calcutta established in 1829 is the second oldest course in the world after St Andrews in Scotland and so India became the bastion of game for the East. The gateway to golf in Asia.

Today golf is rewriting that history. Indian players are putting themselves and the sport on the global dais. India is set to be among countries that promise to resurrect the game as it suffers a decline in Europe and United States. The young are taking to it and the demographics in India can indeed contribute to producing a few world-class players. For every sport, that's really what's needed – a few icons. A few success stories. Some inspiration to spark the fire. And luckily the news on that front is good.

India's pool of golfers is growing and making an international mark. Anirban Lahiri surged in his world rankings this year taking the Indian flag to the PGA Championship, The British Open while fellow countryman Shiv Kapur finished in the top 25 at the US Open – all signals of solid sportsmanship and great talent. For those of us who have been crying hoarse about finding our own Tiger Woods, our own icons to help push the game, will only be too pleased to see the performances of young players like Lahiri, Gaganjeet Bhullar, Chikkarangappa and Rashid Khan. The latter two, were fostered by a foundation that gave them golf clubs because they didn't have access or the funds to play the game. This is the real story of Indian golf. It's not elite. It's not pretentious. It's about below-30 fire-in-their-belly golfers. These will be our icons. Bhullar, a recipient of the Arjuna Award got global accolades and he could thank the Indian Railways for it. Bhullar was born in Kapurthala in Punjab which is famous for the Rail Coach Factory (RCF). He grew up playing on the golf course within the premises as his parents, also sports people were deputed to RCF. He was India's number one amateur in 2004 and 2006 and was part of the Indian team that won the silver medal at the 2006 Asian Games. Today he rubs shoulders with Rory McIlroy and other global golfers.

The ladies are not far behind. The Ladies Amateurs started in 1906 at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club but has come a long and difficult way since. It's great to report that women's game has been nurtured and all the initial struggle about this 'gentlemen only ladies forbidden' thought process is now a matter of the past. Today India's young professional golfers are playing on the European Tour while there has been good progress on the number of women playing as amateurs in the country's various clubs.

The government is showing keenness to promote golf and sport tourism. The Professional Golf Tour of India, The Indian Golf Union and even the Women's Golf Association of India are teeing off new efforts to get the game on the fairway. With the new government there is additional impetus to golf as some special programs are getting underway to promote the sport and tourism around it. Golf's a wholesome game as it lends itself to not just a beautiful walk and play in the lap of nature but also allows for travel, family holidays, new picturesque

destinations and plenty of togetherness. Indian government is finally taking note of the sport's ability to appeal to people and make them travel from one part of the world to other. While for years people have journeyed to the mecca of golf Scotland, now there is the desire among golf addicts to explore courses of India, China and the far east. And for them there is plenty on offer. The Delhi Golf Club in the heart of the capital nurtures some of the best holes in the immediate vicinity of domes and Mughal structures not less than 500 to 1000 years old. Global golfers are often left agape at the historic trivia and presence of such remarkable structures. At the other end of the spectrum are courses like DLF Golf Club in Gurgaon, Royal Springs in Kashmir or undulating short-course in Kodaikanal or even the very pristine but challenging course at Aamby Valley, Pune. India now can confidently and conclusively offer some great golf holidays.

Turn back time. To think that the Americans got their golf few decades after India, and the Chinese had its tryst with the sport only a few years ago. India has done well to rise from days when gutta percha made the golf ball to the new age of titaniums that rule fairways. Much has indeed changed from the years when the Indian Armed Forces fostered the leftover British legacy of the game to grow it and spread it to the public at large. Now the efforts restored to promote the sport from within the government and by independent bodies and corporations is something that needs to gather further momentum.

As a business journalist I have interviewed over three hundred global and Indian executives on what they learn from the game. Now the time has come for golf to be lifted to its next phase. A lot of that will be driven by the government as it explores new ways to promote the sport, see how new technology and ideas are helping popularise it and just what kind of new environment friendly efforts are improving the cost-benefit analysis for the game.

There are endless possibilities in the growth of the sport. I am certain golf's future will pick the country as a demographic play. And that the promise of numbers will bring global names, sponsors, technology, innovation and attention to the sport in the country. Like in any idea, business will have to remain at the central of its growth. And hopefully it will.

(**Shaili Chopra** is an Indian writer and business journalist. The business editor of *Tehelka*, she was also the Senior Editor and Lead Female Anchor at *ET Now*. A graduate of The Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, Ms. Chopra was awarded the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Business Journalism at the Indian Express RNG Awards 2012 and also has a golf column *Column Tee Off with Shaili Chopra* on *DNA*. She is also an author of **The Big Connect** - a book on the effects of Social Media on politics.)