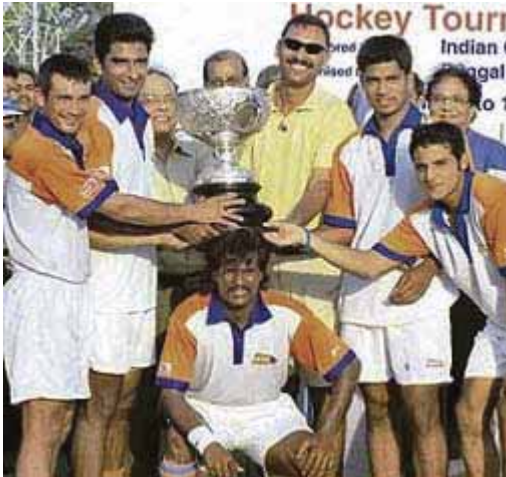


Man with the mission



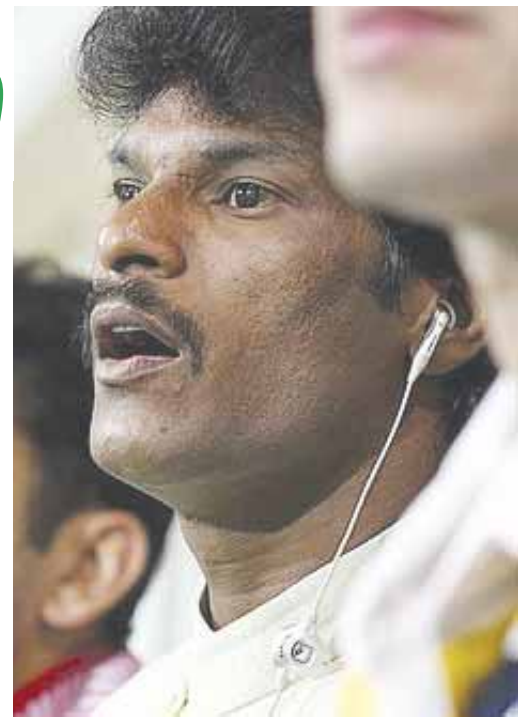
Dhanraj Pillai a mercurial center forward who has changed the face of hockey, gets candid with Deepa Mishra and shares his experiences of 16 years

Do we really lack talented hockey players in India? This is not the only question that pops up when talking of vulnerable national game. Let's rephrase the question and get it answered by the legend Dhanraj Pillai himself. Why is the status of hockey not the same that it used to be before? "Hockey in India is suffering from bad management, lack of infrastructure and also does not fulfill the financial interest of this generation and this is why even the parents do not encourage their children for this sport" answers Dhanraj. Viren Rasquina is a nice example. He played decent number of hockey tournaments at the international level and left this midway and went on to pursue MBA. "Viren played as long as he wanted to play for the country but now may be he realized that there is no great future ahead for him in the game, so he went back to studies" adds Pillai.

On asking why HPL was not as popular as IPL, he quips "SRK ne movie hockey pe banayee aur paise cricket pe lagaye" (SRK made movie on hockey but invested on cricket). He further adds, "It is impossible for hockey to beat the fame of cricket in india, BCCI is very strong compared to the organization running hockey in India and cricket has been always in news for some or the other reasons".

Dhanraj pillai is from Kirkee, a small town in Pune. "hockey is in my blood. I have grown playing hockey as my father and brothers were also in it. My brother Ramesh Pillai played hockey for several years, following him I came to Bombay when I was 17 to try my luck and then began my journey," recalls Dhanraj. He is the only Indian to play maximum number of Olympics and World cups in hockey. His most memorable moment in his journey is 1998 Asian games where he was captain, flag bearer and the highest scorer which is also unforgettable to each Indian. According to Dhanraj's personal records he has scored around 250 goals in total but Indian hockey federation has recorded only 120. "Indian hockey federation does not update the scores of the players. It is very unorganized, they should at least have data management of players records. I will soon launch my website for the purpose to keep the game organized," said grieving Dhanraj.

Grievances of the legend do not end here. He is not only the fighter on the field but has also stood against the unjust management. "I raised my voice against the minimal payment and non-luxurious accommodation for the players that were not up to the mark. We are international players and are asked to stay in cheap hotels is completely unfair to us" he precisely said. Outcome of this fight was nothing but



management along with foreign coach of India sabotages his last Olympic tournament. "I was the experienced player and was in form at centre forward position but I was only given to play for 1 min 38 seconds on the field". His biography named 'forgive me amma' came just after the unexpected loss. "I had promised my mother that India will win the Sydney Olympics that year and will get the medal but that did not happen and so Sundeep Misra named the biography 'forgive me amma'. He himself carries the story of his journey further and comparing upcoming Ganguly's retirement with his, "We strive hard to make the country proud on the field for several years. We are senior players, our juniors and countrymen look up to us because of the game we have played. We deserve a graceful retirement unlike I was subjected to the worst," complains the legend who enjoyed the most of the fame in hockey but battled for the same within management. Due to his strenuous efforts the Indian hockey team is being sponsored by Sahara India, enhancing the profile of the team.

Game has done so much for him that now it is his turn to pay back. He raised fund for his hockey academy in his own eco-friendly way by selling discarded printer cartridges to the recycling firms. Only few MNC came forward to help him with limited funds. Somehow the academy worked for four years on his own expenses. "we have rural development program under which all the rural talents will be groomed. I have many Olympians and doctors to help me to keep professional approach while carrying out the program," he informs.

"I feel very strongly for the game. It has given me name and fame worldwide. I have played honest game for years, have never let-down the country and always want the tri-colour to fly higher," his emotions evoke. "I put my heart into the game and that's why I have reached this height otherwise a boy in small town of Kirkee (near Pune) who had never ever dreamt of representing the country internationally, makes big name in hockey and had graceful journey of 16 years. One should be passionate about whatever one aspires to do, be it sport, entertainment or any other profession. Sincere efforts and hard work will always pay you.," concludes the man who lead the game with example.

deepa.r.mishra@gmail.com