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Illustration by Sorit

A people's initiative for hockey with lessons to learn from



M.S. Gill

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This April, I had a chance to visit the Kodagu hills. Fifty minutes by chopper from Bangalore, these forested hills, 2,500–4,500 feet high and with wide, shallow valleys full of paddy fields, are a southern delight. They are home to some 1.5 lakh Kodagus or Coorgis, who seem an isolated racial group in the Deccan. Most of them are tall and fair with sharp, Arabic hook-noses. Like the Scots, the Kodagus are divided into clans—there are some 800 of them. They are a proud people with a warrior history and are fond of arms and sports.

I went to Kodagu to inaugurate an amazing sports event—the Maneyapanda 2010, the XIVth edition of the Kodagus' national hockey festival. If proof were needed of their love of hockey, one only needs look at the 40 international players this people have produced, among them M.P. Ganesh, B.P. Govinda, M.M. Somaiyya, C.S. Poonacha, and the more recent Arjun Halappa. In 1997, Pandanda Kuttappa, a prominent Kodagu, decided to organise a hockey tournament for the clans. Sixty teams came then; for the edition I went to inaugurate, there were 214. The women play too, in a combined team, and married women play for the clans they have married into. Each year, families of one clan pool their resources to organise and host the tournament, which is played out over a month, with elimination matches held daily. There are food stalls and other pavilions; the men come dressed in traditional robes, the women in sarees worn in the special Coorgi style; the air is vibrant and festive.

This time, the tournament was held at an elegant bamboo stadium in Ponnampet that could accommodate 25,000 spectators. It was erected by the Maneyapanda clan. Almost everyone from the hills turned up for the inauguration, all in ceremonial dress. Entry was free. I have never seen such a sight—such a fun gathering of a happy, disciplined people. The North has much to learn from them.

The inaugural match was between an India XI team led by Dhanraj Pillay and a local Kodagu XI brimming with young talent. The Coorgis won the spirited match 2–1. I'm aware that there are three major cradles of hockey in India. The first is Punjab and the second the tribal belt of Orissa–Jharkhand. The third, clearly, is Kodagu.

The tournament itself is an amazing voluntary effort to promote hockey and produce stars. I admire the Coorgi people: they are soldiers and sportspersons. Is there a better combination one could ask for? Last year, a hockey astroturf was inaugurated in Madikeri (also known as Mercara), the headquarters of Kodagu district. The people have asked for one more, and we will find ways to provide it so that the new style of hockey can be learnt and promoted for the needs of the Indian team.

During the visit, I stayed at a coffee estate. Coffee is said to have arrived in these hills via the trading dhows of the Gulf. The story goes that a holy man returning from Mecca smuggled back six forbidden seeds. The likelier explanation is that the plantations were created by the British. Far from Delhi, it was a relief to stay in a rambling house surrounded by coffee gardens and shaded by giant trees of every variety. An ancient bougainvillea that had become a tree dripped purple. A huge cotton tree was opening its buds and sending puffballs floating down. Coconut palms and baubinsias were aplenty.

One morning, I was told an elephant had been to the nearby pond to drink. He had come all the way and slid down the steep mud slopes. I went and saw the footmarks. Later, a worried K.M. Chinnappa, president of Wildlife First, an NGO, spoke to me about the elephant herds in the Nagarhole sanctuary. He said not enough watering points were being created owing to corruption in the forest department. This was causing elephants to wander far in search of water.

There are plenty of outdoor possibilities in this scenic region. I played golf one morning with local planters over rolling hills. It was great fun. I was happy to learn that many coffee estates provide home stays, ideal for tourist families, with relaxation for the elders and plenty of outdoors for the young. Looking at the landscape, I suddenly realised why the British under Wellesley fought so hard to overcome Tipu Sultan. The land was simply too rich to be left with him. One last word: long ago, a quirky Brit in a soporific mood, perhaps after pink gins in Mercara, had directed that the Coorgis were free to carry guns without licences for, as a martial race, guns were part of their culture. I am surprised that 60 years after the British left, no Indian babu has thought of cancelling this privilege. As a Sikh, allowed a mere kirpan, I felt jealous.

(The writer is the Union sports minister.)

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