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## Recent developments in rugby: An Indian perspective

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### Abstract

Rugby is a fast-growing sport in India as some Indian sporting clubs are beginning to embrace the game. The governing body is the Indian Rugby Football Union. Rugby is now looking beyond its strongholds to emerging locations across the world and prominent on that map is India. Rugby sport has a bright future in India and would soon lead at the global level too.

**Keywords:** Rugby, Indian rugby football union, rugby sevens, south Asia rugby tournament, try series

### Introduction

Rugby is still a minor sport in India. However, it is a fast-growing sport as some Indian sporting clubs are beginning to embrace the game. Rugby is the second most popular winter sport after association football in India, which itself trails greatly in popularity to cricket and field hockey. India's World Rugby Rankings is rated 77th in the rugby playing nations as of May 2016. The IRFU has 24,010 registered players, 7,160 of whom are female. This is their highest ranking ever. India is the current Division 3 South-Central titleholder in the Asia Rugby Championship. The governing body is the Indian Rugby Football Union (IRFU) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### Historical Overview

#### Origin

India, like many other countries, had a few forms of folk football. Most of these have died out, but a Manipuri game, Yubi Lakpi, is still played in the East of India. Most Manipuris are quite adamant that the modern world 'stole' the idea from them and made it into rugby. This game, Yubi Lakpi, which has been around for centuries, is so like rugby, which evolved a great deal later, that it must be more than a coincidence. However, traditional football games can be found in many parts of the world, e.g. marn grook in Australia, cuju in China, and calcio Fiorentino in Italy, and Levine provides no documentary or material evidence of its antiquity.

#### Evolution

Like other sports founded in England and brought to India during the British Raj such as cricket, rugby has a long history in India. The earliest trace of Rugby Football in India dates to a scratch match or two played in Calcutta and Madras during the visit of H.M.S. Galatea in 1871. The teak goal posts used on the Calcutta Match were afterward used by the C.F.C. up to at least 1886. The first recorded match was played on Christmas Day 1872, at CFC in Calcutta, it was played between England and a combined team of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. The game caught on and had to be repeated within the week. The game was now established. In January 1873, officers were appointed, and the Club Rolls gave a total of 137 members. The Club colours were chosen as red and white, broad stripes. From then on, rugby in India lingered on at an extremely low key. Part of the reason for this was that the British preferred to play apart from their colonial subjects, leading to a low take-up by the local population. Another reason was the climate, which meant that games would frequently have to be played in the evenings or early morning, which meant that it was not too popular with the colonists themselves.

At its lowest ebb, in the 1980s, the Indian RFU was being run out of the Irish Consulate at the Royal Bombay Yacht Club's chambers. However, a successful campaign in the 1990s put the game back on its feet. Indian delegates were amongst those who went to the centenary congress of the International Rugby Football Board in 1986. There are 57,000 registered

players in the country and India is ranked 65th out of 96 nations in the IRB (International Rugby Board) world rankings.

The home of rugby in India is Kolkata. On Christmas Day 1872, a game of rugby, between 20 players representing England on the one side and 20 representing Scotland, Ireland, and Wales on the other, was played in Calcutta. The match was such a success that it was repeated a week later the game of rugby had reached India.

These lovers of rugby wanted to form a club in the area and the aforementioned matches were the agents that led to the formation of the Calcutta Football Club in January 1873. The Calcutta Club joined the Rugby Football Union in 1874. Despite the Indian climate not being entirely suitable for playing rugby, the club prospered during that first year. However, when the free bar had to be discontinued, the membership took an appreciable drop. Other sports, such as tennis and polo, which were more suited to the local climate, were making inroads into the numbers of players available. In 1877 the game declined and almost died out, leaving behind a full coffer. The wise G.A.J. Rothney, who had been acting as Captain, Hon. Secretary and Treasurer of the Club at that time, proposed that the funds should be devoted to the purchase of a cup of Indian workmanship to be offered to the Rugby Football Union- the parent body of the game worldwide. The withdrawal of these monies was done in the form of silver coins which were then melted to craft the exquisite Calcutta Cup. The members decided to disband but keen to perpetuate the name of the club, they withdrew the club's funds from the bank; which were in Silver Rupees, had them melted down and made into a cup which they presented to the RFU in 1878, with the provision that it should be competed for annually. The cup is of Indian workmanship, approximately 18 inches (45 cm) high, the body is finely engraved with three king cobras forming the handles. The domed lid is surmounted by an elephant which is, it is said, copied from the Viceroy's stock and is complete with a howdah. The inscription on the Cup's wooden base reads: THE CALCUTTA CUP. This historical legacy has not been universally well-received, in fact, Sean Smith, whose book *The Union Game: A Rugby History* accompanied the BBC TV series of the same name, has said of it that:

"It speaks volumes for the traditions of class prejudice in England and Scotland that the two countries play each year for a trophy made in the Raj."

In 1884 Calcutta Cricket and Football Club (CC&FC) again set up a rugby section and in 1890 set up an inter-club trophy, the Calcutta Rugby Union Challenge Cup, promptly christened the Calcutta Cup. The cup is held by Jungle Crows who beat CC&FC. The second division trophy was won by Calcutta Cricket and Football Club Panthers.

### Modern Day Rugby in India

The All India and South Asia Rugby Tournament is an amateur league competition for rugby union football clubs in India. The competition has been played since 1924. In 2016, 12 teams took part in the tournament and Army Red were the champions. For the first time women will be participating in the Rugby XV's, there were 6 teams.

India is an active participant in the Commonwealth Sevens, and the 2010 Commonwealth Games, held in Delhi featured the sport. India national rugby team and India women's

national rugby sevens team. In June 2019, the Indian women registered their first victory in only their third-ever international match, when they defeated Singapore in the 2019 Asia Rugby Women's Championship. Team member Sweety Kumari, who was in excellent form during the tournament was declared as the 'International Young Player of The Year'.

### India's Position in World Rugby Today

The Webb Ellis Trophy, aka the Rugby World Cup, 2019, has climbed an active volcano in the Philippines, perched on the Great Wall of China, and posed against the backdrop of the Taj Mahal. On a two-year tour ahead of the 2019 rugby World Cup in Japan, the trophy's choice of formerly fringe destinations is a pointer to how the sport sees its future. Rugby is now looking beyond its strongholds to emerging locations across the world and prominent on that map is India. The numbers thrown up by a Nielsen survey conducted by World Rugby (WR), which it is basing its plans on, are eye-opening: the sport has 25.7 million fans in India alone. World Rugby CEO Brett Gosper senses the disbelief and explains. "That number includes those who are interested or very interested in rugby so those are the two top boxes, that's how we evaluate," he tells ESPN. "It's also quite a big playing population, around 80,000 regular players and last year Get into Rugby (GIR) had 1,60,000 participants so that's a quarter of a million people touching the ball each year now in India, 40 percent of them women." India, he emphasizes, is one of the world body's key strategic markets, earmarked for super-growth with China, USA, Germany, Brazil. Gosper believes the primary hitch in people taking to rugby in this part of the world is the sport's lack of visibility. It is something WR is planning to address through discussions with broadcasters so that international tournaments, to start with, are beamed live. "A World Cup comes only once every four years so people in India need to see top-flight rugby in other ways and that's something we're going to try and work out, whether through platforms or specific bundling deals with other parts of the rugby game, to ensure there's high visibility. There's also the added thrust on setting up more interesting national competitions," he says. "We see the potential for enormous growth for Rugby in India" - Gosper CEO of World Rugby, Brett Gosper talks about the efforts being made to increase the popularity of Rugby in India

Rahul Bose, the Bollywood actor who has played for India, echoes that sentiment. "I'm not going to dress it up. All of this is a recognition of India's potential both as a player base and as a fan base. It is often a conundrum, which comes first -- TV or the money, sponsors, or the performance. But unless you get on to television, your sport is never going to reach the next level in terms of size and clout. So, all of us are working on finding the format that will work, bringing it on TV, the form and structure of that, how successful that will be. It should all be there in the next 18-22 months."

One thing the sport is seen to have done, in several countries, infuses a sense of socio-economic betterment among disadvantaged sections, says Gosper: "We've seen a reduction in crime rates in quite a few regions across the world once the kids have been introduced to rugby, so there are great life lessons for the local population as well. In India, we have seen a huge growth in the women's game. We are dealing with vast populations, so we need local knowledge to ensure that we are pushing the right buttons. We are in consultation with people from the film fraternity and all walks of life in India who are rugby players or fans themselves to ensure we

make the maximum impact and draw people who are not normally interested in rugby. You need that when you go into new markets." The Webb Ellis Cup is greeted by thousands of students at Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in Bhubaneswar as part of the Rugby World Cup 2019 Trophy Tour in India.

### Indian Rugby and Women

In India, rugby helps women find a level playing field. Indian women are ready to scrum down, try new grounds. The facts bear out his assertion. The Indian women's team has come a long way since their international debut in 2009. In February 2017, they won five out of six matches at the Asian Rugby Sevens in Laos to return home with a silver medal. Six out of 12 members of that team were from one of India's poorest and backward states, Odisha. Once the preserve of elite big-city clubs, rugby in India is now stronger in Tier 2 & 3 regions where the youth see it to escape poverty and its attendant dogmas and archaic traditions. Meerarani Hembram, fly-half in the national side, was not so long-ago selling metal scrap in her village; rugby got her a ticket out and, eventually, to the national side. She picked the sport, she had told ESPN last year, because it empowered her. "It's a way of telling ourselves that nothing is beyond us."

How the India women's rugby captain got stronger for a longer game? As the Indian women's rugby team begins its journey in the 15-a-side format of the game, captain Vahbiz Bharucha explains her fitness routine and how she adapted to the long game. On a regular weekday, Vahbiz Bharucha spends three hours in training. Her most intense superset includes 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, 100-star jumps, and 100 burpees — at her best, she completes this set in 15 minutes. She fits the definition of a fitness freak. But for the 25-year-old, working out is not about chiselling her body for cosmetic effect. These exercises are elementary in dealing with the brutality and charm of her contact sport. Standing at five-foot-four and weighing 82 kgs, Bharucha is one of the physical anchors of the Indian team that ventured for the first time into the 15-a-side format of rugby in June. Before this, the Indian team had only competed internationally in Rugby Sevens.

"The main difference is that there is more running in Sevens and more contact in the 15s," Bharucha explains. "It's a shock at first." At the Bombay Gymkhana, where the team had a training camp ahead of its first 15s rugby tournament — a tri-nation event with the Philippines and hosts Singapore — the squad encountered tackling pads and a scrum machine to prepare their bodies for constant contact. For example, Bharucha explains, if their two-hour training at camps for Rugby Sevens had 90 minutes of play and 30 minutes of contact work, it is the exact opposite for the 15s prep. And as a forward, Bharucha plays a vital role in the brutal scrum where power in shoulders and feet takes precedence. However, Bharucha has nine years of international experience and knows the physical demands of her sport well. It also helps that she is a practicing physiotherapist.

"Rugby is very diverse, with strength being the dominant requirement," she says. "I do heavy weight training. Olympic lifting has helped me quite a lot in my strength and speed. [I do the] clean and press, clean and jerk, split press — it's also helped me strengthen my legs." "The new [obsession for] functional training, I do that as well. Every strength-building exercise is great if your core is strong. I do core exercises every day. My warm-up comprises of core work, so either I do it in the morning with my speed and agility work, or I do it in the gym before strength sessions. I warm up with core

work, so I'm able to perform the rest." Along with Olympic lifts, her gym session comprises squats, deadlifts and box jump for explosiveness, and the shoulder press, bench press, frog stand, and even handstands (albeit against a wall) to condition her shoulders — all of which help her to push during a scrum.

A key difference in the Rugby Sevens and the 15s format is game time — Sevens lasts only 14 minutes while 15s is a game of 80 minutes. As a personal physio during her day job, Bharucha's work involves a lot of travel all over her native Pune. And she utilizes that commute time to work on her endurance. "I cycle to places, so that helps me a lot with my endurance," she says. "I don't just cycle to save fuel; it's also really good for training. Every day, I'd probably cycle about 40 km on average." Even with that base of conditioning, Bharucha and fellow Punekar Neha Pardeshi sought to up the tempo with the 15s tournament insight. "We train together and did some really bad hill training to build our endurance," smiles Pardeshi. "We went to Parvati Hill. It is a 60-degree incline with steps. We ran up that, four times, in 45 minutes." While more players mean more tackles, the 15s game is not just about lasting the physicality for 80 minutes to gain a yard at a time. There are opportunities where gaps widen, and a long sprint is in order, so agility is also important. The risk of working extensively with heavyweights means power is gained at the loss of speed. But Bharucha's approach is to build herself up to deal with all specifics needed for the format. "For agility, I do a lot of speed training with shuttle runs, for about 45 minutes," she explains. "I cover short distance sprints — about 10-15 metres. I work on acceleration and make sure to keep the speed up in that short distance because it is extremely specific to my sport. There are not many times on the field that I will have to run 100m. Usually, it is between 50 to 60m. I also do ladder drills. That's what my morning session comprises of." Bharucha trains six times a week, splitting her training into 90-minute sessions in the morning and evening, respectively. She works on her speed, strength, endurance, and core every day. Though self-motivated and highly dedicated now, Bharucha did need a stern reminder for slacking off on her fitness. She was dropped from the team for a tournament in Sri Lanka in 2016. But the omission only spurred her on to work her way back into the team. "That was a very good wake-up call for me," Bharucha says. "At the time, I was focusing too much on my work and didn't give too much time to rugby. I ended up gaining ten kgs and was completely off all kinds of training. But once I was dropped, I put my motorcycle aside and brought out my bicycle because I knew I needed to work hard on this."

It was not just her motorcycle that she had to forgo. The biggest sacrifice was to starve her carb cravings. "I'm a bread lover, sugar lover, cake lover — all kinds of sins," she says. "The challenge for a foodie like me was the food intake. My mom gave me a challenge — 'Come onto my diet for a month, and you see the change.' So, I started eating only home-cooked food. I eat everything in moderation. It was all about just managing my meals." The diet sorted, Bharucha returned to her fitness routine and broke back into the Indian team. At the 15s camp, she is touted as one of the fittest players in the team. Rugby fit. "You need the light feet. You need strength. You have to train for impact and stability," she says. "So, we do everything from power-lifting to agility, up to ten repetitions. Sometimes we get into a handstand, and we need to stay there to work our shoulders and sit on the medicine ball to work the core." For nine years in Rugby Sevens,

Bharucha made use of her positional sense and tackling ability to compensate for a relative lack of pace. It has held her in good stead so far. But now that the women's team has started competing in 15-a-side, Bharucha can truly come into her element<sup>[2]</sup>.

So, Christmas Day 1872, Calcutta witnessed a strange spectacle, the first official rugby match of the country was played on that day between England and a combined team of Scotland, Welsh and Ireland. 144 years later, on 21 September 2016, rugby in India reached another milestone and the Calcutta Cricket & Football Club (CCFC) witnessed the first ever official women's XV's Rugby match in the country (there have been women's Rugby 7s match before in the country). It was not a single match but a tournament of national level. The inaugural version of the All India Women's Rugby XV's Tournament was part of the 83rd All India and South Asia Rugby Tournament. The women version of the game attracted 6 teams from different parts of the country. They were placed in two pools A & B. The teams in each pool played each other in a round robin format. There were 4 points for a win, 2 for a draw and 0 for a loss. For 4 or more tries a team gets 1 extra point. Also, if the margin of victory between the teams is less or equal to 7, the losing team gets a bonus point. In Pool A Odisha emerged the topper with Jungle Crows and Young Rugby Club (YRC) finishing second and third, respectively. In Pool B Delhi took the top post followed by CCFC and Bihar. In the plate (3rd & 4th place match) Jungle Crows defeated CCFC 20 – 0 to finish third. In the bowl (5th & 6th place match) Bihar defeated YRC 5 – 0 to clinch the 5th place. In the finals Odisha beat Delhi 20 – 0 to be crowned the first ever women rugby XV's champion of the country. It was not just a victory for a single team but a victory for rugby and of women power. The inaugural women's rugby XV's nationals coincided with the 83rd edition of the men's National and South Asian Tournament. Although rugby, has never been among the popular sports of India but it does have a long and illustrious history spanning for almost a century and half. It may sound strange, that since 1879 England and Scotland lock horns in the rugby field for the Calcutta Cup and since 1881 the rugby clubs of Calcutta battle out for the Other Calcutta Cup. 12 teams participated in the 83rd National and South Asia Rugby Tournament, held at the Calcutta Cricket & Football Club (CCFC), from 17 – 24 September 2016. The tournament was played in a knockout format with 11 matches deciding the champion. The 6 losing teams in the first round played for the loser's plate. In the first match rank number 1 team Bombay Gymkhana beat Mumbai Magicians to move to the semi-finals. In the other two matches of the first day CCFC beat Bangalore RFC and Delhi Hurricanes beat Sargent Institute of Kolkata Police. The two winners made it to the next round. In the first match of the second day Army Red (rank 1) beat Delhi Lions (Rank 12) to make it to the semi-finals. In the other two matches of the day Jungle Crows beat Bhubaneswar RFC and Maharashtra State Police (MSP) beat Young Rugby Club (YRC). The two winners made it to the next round. In the next round Delhi Hurricanes beat CCFC to meet Bombay Gymkhana in the semis and in the other second round match Jungle Crows defeated MSP to meet Army Red in the semis. Delhi Hurricanes beat Bombay Gymkhana in the semis to enter the finals and Army Red beat Jungle Crows in the other semi. The six losing teams of the first round Delhi Lions, Bangalore RFC, Sergeants Institute, YRC, Bhubaneswar RFC and Delhi Lions played for the loser plate with Delhi Lions emerging the winner. The final between Delhi Hurricanes and Army Red was a grand affair.

Lt Gen Praveen Bakshi, Army Commander Eastern Command, who was one of the chief guests. Also present was Will Glen wright, World Rugby's Asia, and Oceania General Manager. But the star attraction was Rahul Bose, former India rugby player, who is more known for his exploits on the silver screen. Before the match, the army band played, and Rahul Bose was introduced to the players just before the start of the match. With the crowd cheering crowd, it was rugby at its best. Although the Army emerged victorious with a score line of 18 – 5 it was a much closer contested match, than the score line indicate. Again, like the women edition here also rugby was the winner. Rahul Bose during the prize distribution emphasized on the growth of Rugby in India, in the recent years. He said "From 17,000 we now have 57,000 playing rugby. And in the next five years we are confident 5,00,000 players taking up rugby as a profession. And then like so many Leagues around the world, we will also have a rugby league here in the country." He also added "Our efforts are bearing fruits. For the first time we had the women's rugby nationals. We have gone to the tribal belts of Odisha and Maharashtra and people are getting interested." Finally, it was time to hand over the trophies. The fair play trophy went to Sergeants Institute. Delhi Lions bagged the loser's plate and Delhi Hurricanes the runner's trophy. The Army Red received the glittering champions trophy, which has been in use since 1926<sup>[3]</sup>.

### India's Progress in Rugby during past Few Years

World Rugby has been keeping a finger on India's progress in the sport over the past couple of years. Rugby India laid out its plans and vision four years ago, the conditions sought were spelled out. National coach Nasser Hussain, who led that representation, says the terms were straightforward. "We requested the World Body for a commitment of funds over some time rather than on an annual basis and didn't want to be restricted by short-term results or KPIs. I think that has paid off."

**Table 1:** Rugby in India - By the Numbers

	2015	2018 (as on May 31)
Total players	35,000	75,000+
Male players	23,000	45,000+
Female players	12,000	30,000+
Competitive clubs	75	175+
Schools involved	200	550+
National events	10	20
International events	2	5

### Problems and Prospects

Of course, funds are also part of the problem. But it is not quite the most insurmountable one, suggests Bose. More international tournaments for the teams will require more money and greater the number of teams, be it the U-17, U-19, the more the outlay needed. "It's a good time to ask sponsors to deepen their commitment. The energy we expend going into the future on how we foster the game must be looked at very calmly and energetically. We need financial support from the world body, but more than that once we have an initiative, they can help with international sponsor relationships which will depend on what ideas we come up with."

It helps that there is a familiar face at the helm of the sport's Asian body. Asian Rugby president Aga Hussain - Nasser's father - says that the gains for Asia from rugby can be extrapolated to India too. The Under-18 Asian Championships

later this year will be hosted in Bhubaneswar and there is also a proposal to place a bid for next year's Division 3, 15-a-side before the Asian Council. "Across West-dominated sport, Asia can no longer be ignored," he says, "World bodies are looking at growth centers - take the U-17 football World Cup India hosted for instance." Plans are aggressively afoot, Hussain adds, to aggregate the three major rugby events, World Cup, Six Nations, and Champions Trophy so that broadcasters can be brought on board and a steady stream of quality tournaments supplied. For Indian sports fans who binge-watch on everything from cricket and tennis to WWE, this well may be a good starting point.

### Lessons Learnt by India

India could take a lesson from the sport's origin. The legend goes that during a football match, schoolboy William Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran with it, giving birth to rugby. In India's rugby story, the ball has been picked up, now it just needs to be run with for a winner.

In 2020, Rugby India, the national governing body for the sport, is launching a tournament online, named Try Series, starting from May 11, 2020, to May 24, 2020. The virtual rugby event features 32 teams from across the nation, 80 matches spread over 14 days on TRY Series. Teams' advance will be based on voting from rugby followers, fans, sports lovers, etc., the side getting most total votes is the winner. Nasser Hussain, ex-India player and Rugby India CEO, explained: "During these lockdown days since no rugby can be played on the field, we have created a virtual online tournament for the rugby community. It is called the Try Series." Try is part of rugby terminology. The tournament was run on Rugby India's social media platforms, something fun and a way to keep the rugby fraternity engaged, apart from the healthy rivalry alive. Teams taking part in this online event have names like the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), Bombay Gymkhana, Bangalore Rugby Club, BRFC, CCFC Reds, Kolkata Jungle Crows, Delhi Hurricanes, Kolkata Jungle Crows. Rugby Bihar etc. Mumbai-based NGO, Magician Foundation (India), involved with empowering people from difficult backgrounds with rugby skills, is among the listed. The Rugby India CEO also informed: "The 32 squads in this event are actual sides who play rugby." According to him, no distinction about this being men or women tournament is made, to attract maximum participation. There is no mention of player names or players format (seven-a-side or 15-a-side), for the same reason. The idea is to build a fan base for every side. According to the rules, TRY Series will only have home matches and are to be played indoors from the comfort of one's home. Fans can vote for their favourite team @Rugbyindia to help them win. Voting was open for each match only for 24 hours.

### Conclusion

The Prime Minister will launch the first-ever Khelo India University Games in Cuttack (Odisha) on February 22, 2020. The Khelo India University Games are being launched by the Government of India in association with the Government of Odisha. It is an aspirational competition for India's youngsters with the objective of helping them find the balance between sport and education. It is the largest ever competition held at the university level in India and will have about 3500 athletes from over 150 universities across the country taking part in it. There will be a total of 17 sports namely archery, athletics, boxing, fencing, judo, swimming, weightlifting, wrestling, badminton, basketball, football,

hockey, table tennis, tennis, volleyball, rugby, and kabaddi. The Khelo India programme has been introduced to revive the sports culture in India at the grass-root level by building a strong framework for all sports played in our country. It also aims to establish India as a great sporting nation. It is implemented by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. Under the scheme, the talented players identified in priority sports disciplines at various levels (by the High-Powered Committee) will be provided annual financial assistance of INR 5 lakh per annum for 8 years. So, Rugby sport has a bright future in India and would soon lead at the global level too.

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