

## The players of Gangpur: Hockey India's youngest unit

### Scores at national event

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Junior women's team won the title, took best player trophy.

Written by [Mihir Vasavda](#) | Mumbai | Published on: May 11, 2015 3:36 am

The first time 16-year-old Rinki Kujur stepped onto an artificial turf was a little over 18 months ago. Till then her playground was the rocky field in her village outside Rourkela. That was where she spent most of her evenings, running barefoot with a locally made bamboo hockey stick in hand, chasing a hand-rolled polythene waste ball.

A year older than Rinki, Pratap Lakra, from a neighbouring village, too was far removed from the scientific and technological leaps of the modern game.

But they did dream big.

Last week, Rinki, a striker of Hockey Gangpur, was adjudged best player in the junior women's national championships. Hockey Gangpur's Pratap, a 17-year-old defender, was one of the standout performers in junior and senior men's nationals.

One of Hockey India's youngest affiliates, Hockey Gangpur was set up only in September 2013. Stunning all, it clinched the junior men's and women's Division B titles at the recent national championships while finishing a credible fourth in the senior men's category.

"It's just the beginning... A sign of things to come," says the unit's vice-president and team coach Lazrus Barla, an Olympian himself.

Northern Odisha's Rourkela and Sundergarh, the birth place of former India captain Dilip Tirkey, have long been India's hockey hubs, producing dozens of World Cup players and Olympians. Of late, their numbers had been falling though, with tribal players from the state not seen at National Stadium in New Delhi. Birendra Lakra was the only player from the region to be an India regular in the last five years.

Rinki and Pratap's performances at the national championships may have ended that drought, while also asserting Hockey Gangpur's status as one of the fast-emerging nurseries of the game in the country.

A rarity in Indian sports, Hockey Gangpur has been formed and is run completely by former players. Tirkey, now a BJD MP, is its president, Ignace Tirkey is one of the vice-presidents while Prabodh Tirkey and William Xalco are joint secretaries. India women's players Jyoti Sunita Kullu (vice-president) and Subadhra Pradhan (joint secretary) are also closely involved in running the association.

Explaining what led to the setting up of the independent body, Barla, one of the founding members of Hockey Gangpur, says, "There was a lot of untapped talent in Sundergarh and Rourkela. The representation of players from this region too was decreasing rapidly. At one point, three or four players in the starting eleven of the national team used to be from these regions. All of us (former players) know the region's real potential. So we decided to join hands and form this unit with the one-point agenda of giving tribal players a platform to showcase their skills."

The former players then set about travelling to remote villages looking for talented youngsters, a process that took them nearly six months.

Still, they were unable to form a senior women's team, and Barla is hopeful it will be assembled before next year's national championships.

Strong and sturdy with a clinical defence, Hockey Gangpur teams showcase the strengths of players from the area.

While the seniors missed a podium finish after losing to Air India in the third place playoff, the junior men and women teams were unstoppable en route to clinching Division B titles.

Had they won these titles a decade ago, laughs Barla, the teams would have been rewarded with a goat. The old tribal ritual, born mostly out of poverty, has now been discontinued. So now, adds Barla, "They'll get some token prize money instead."

Hockey Gangpur is on course to change other things.

"We want to replace sticks made of bamboo and provide all players proper facilities. We want to show them the path to turf stadium. We want to provide them all we can."