

# roop singh centenary

## 1908 - 2008

*Date of Birth: September 8, 1908. Place: Jubbulpore, India. Domicile: Sipri Bazar, Jhansi City, Country: India. Nationality: British subject by birth.*

This was how the details the identity card No. 3770, dated 25.1.1932, issued by the organisers of the Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles, read.

'The British subject by birth' is Roop Singh, the greatest hockey player India produced. His exploits, patented backhand forward passes, those stylish goals which mesmerised men – and more women — of his times were hardly recognised even when he was alive. That the nation would let his 100th birth anniversary go unnoticed, therefore, is hardly surprising. Hardly was there any mention in newspapers and television channels about the historical occasion.

Seventy-two years ago, on August 15 at the Berlin Olympics, under a blazing sun, the famed Indians failed to dazzle against Germany, wilting under the crowd pressure. Defending champions and prolific scorers, India could not net one till the 32nd minute. At this stage, the jewel from Jhansi stepped in. Forgoing for once the habit of setting up goals for others, he scored gem of a goal to break the deadlock. Observed his teammate MN Masud in his memoirs: *Roop scored it by the help of "placing" from a pass of Jaffar. India need a goal and the honour went to Roop to supply that need of his country*'.

Reinvigorated, India, led by Roop's elder brother Dhyan Chand, went on to add another seven in the next half. Thus, India went on to make first of its Olympic hat-trick. For those who mattered, the tally of goals and captaincy meant more with the result that the crucial goalscorer in Roop Singh never got the credit due to him.

This inside-left maintained a low profile and rarely interacted on tour; all apparently to show humility to his elder brother. This despite his straight-talking, famous sibling often making this clear: "Roop is a better player than me". When Dhyan Chand repeatedly said this in Ceylon, the first stop on way to the Los Angeles Olympics, reporters first refused to believe him. And then, after a few matches they heaped paeans on the younger brother.

Hardly the one to prop up someone undeserving, Dhyan Chand didn't say this for effect. At the Los Angeles Olympics one month later, Dhyan Chand's words were vindicated when the scorecard read: India's total goals: 35; Roop Singh: 15 Dhyan Chand: 11. A newspaper cutting which Roop kept in his proud custody till his death shows 12 goals against him name in one match – against the States. This is still a Olympic record – highest number of goals by a player in a match.

Unfortunately for Roop, World War II denied him a third Olympics. Thus he lost the chance to lead the team, win another gold and garner as much adulation as everyone else. Captain-obsessed India is yet to bestow a single honour or award





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*Roop Singh, surrounded by three defenders, gets set to pass the ball to his brother Dhyan Chand (left). The two brothers brought laurels to the country like no one else*

to its greatest sportsman. Our media even goes ga ga over Bradman turning 100, forgetting this poor, homebred genius.

By staying loyal to his 'state', Roop unknowingly spurned his fortune. The graduate was with Bombay Customs when the then Gwalior Maharaja Jivajirao Scindia asked the son of the soil to join his personal staff. Shortly, thereafter the maharajas lost their status as India obtained its freedom from the British.

Post Independence though things were different. Roop, who had a big family, had to take up a menial job and was condemned to a life in poverty. He even gave up the president's post of the Madhya Pradesh State Hockey Association as a favour to those who loaned him money or supported him! When he was ill, a Chennai based doctor took pity on him and offered free treatment.



May be, just may be, had he actually been a 'British subject by birth', things would be different.

Khashaba Dadasaheb Jadhav won the Olympic bronze in 1952. Government of India conferred him Arjuna award 49 years later in 2001 — 13 years after his death in neglect. If this national blot is not enough, Roop Singh's story too reminds the same. The greatest forward of all time is yet to get any award by the government of India till now.

*K. Arumugam in Hindustan Times*