Beyond the Call of Duty: As India celebrates 77th Republic Day, Ladakh Scouts out there to make a difference in ice hockey

Ladakh Scouts play by the name “Army” in the Khelo India Winter Games and have been a big force to reckon with over the years

Leh (Ladakh) is the dwelling place for top ice hockey players from the country but the Ladakh Scouts now want to take it beyond the mountainous terrain in their bid to popularize the sport

Leh (Ladakh), January 26: There is an ice hockey revolution going on in the country to be sure, with Ladakh Scouts, a specialized mountain infantry regiment of the Indian Army, being at the forefront of it. As India celebrates its 77th Republic Day, there is no better time than this to highlight their exemplary work in the field of ice hockey.

The first leg of the sixth edition of the 2026 Khelo India Winter Games (KIWG) is underway in Leh (Ladakh) with ice hockey and ice skating on display, and once again, Army, Ladakh Scouts’ representatives in the Games, are proving to be indomitable in the event. Army will play surprise entrants Chandigarh in the men’s final on Republic Day on Monday.

But actually, it’s their performance and efforts off the ice rink that matters a lot more, transcending a mere win or even a gold medal which they have won on multiple occasions in the Khelo India Winter Games. It's their desire to popularise ice hockey in India, to take it beyond the snowy, icy and mountainous Leh (Ladakh), into the plains and coasts.

While there is no accurate record per se, word has it that the Ladakh Scouts started playing ice hockey in the late 1970s. There was no real surface or equipment; they did it just for fun. It was only in the late 1980s, that they got a bit serious about the sport as they made natural ice rinks and imported expensive equipment (it may be noted that today ice hockey gear per player can cost up to Rs 4 lakh). In 2000, they were raised as a full infantry and with that increased their efforts and seriousness in ice hockey.

Right now, in India there are just two Olympic-size artificial ice rinks, one in Dehradun and one in Leh (at the indoor Nawang Dorjay Stobdan Stadium). “To make ice hockey truly a popular sport, we need more such rinks all over the country. For now, the sport is largely confined to Leh (Ladakh). We need to spread the sport to the other corners of the country and that’s only how we can help the sport grow,” Captain Parth Jagtap, part of the Army team playing in the 2026 KIWG, said.

Captain Jagtap, who was honoured with Distinguished Award for Outstanding Sports and Academic Achievements last year in Mumbai, also hailed Khelo India’s efforts over the years. “The involvement of Khelo India has helped in many ways. There is much more awareness about ice hockey through the media coverage.

Also, the awareness about what all needs to be done to truly make it a popular sport in the country,” he said.

The construction of an ice rink can be a very expensive affair. Just a basic rink can cost up to Rs 15 crore or so. An indoor stadium, not a big one but that can seat up to 5,000 spectators, can cost up to Rs 40-50 crore. These are big amounts, and need corporate backing. Once the likes of Reliance, Adani, Tata decide to pitch in, the ice hockey landscape can quicky change in India, can spread beyond Leh (Ladakh).

And Ladakh Scouts’ representatives reportedly have floated this idea about the involvement of the corporate houses. Soldiers are there to keep the borders safe but sometimes they take certain responsibilities upon themselves, they otherwise no business with: they go beyond the call of duty.

Ice hockey is a great example. Last year, Ladakh Scouts’ last-minute funding for the national women’s team went a long way: the Indian women national team secured its first ever bronze at the IIHF Women’s Asia Cup in the United Arab Emirates.

These are clear-cut indications, Ladakh Scouts, nicknamed Snow Leopards or Snow Warriors, mean business. They are hopeful their efforts sooner rather than later will take them to making India a recognisable face in the global ice hockey landscape.