

## Going places

The world may be in the grip of a slowdown but not India, going by the number of golf courses coming up around the country. The high-end 'designer' developments are on hold but small budget projects are swimming against the prevailing economic tide. And it's indigenous course architects who are leading the way.

Sharad Kohli



**Building the game:**

(Clockwise from top left) Sidhra, in Jammu, part of which has been reclaimed from the banks of the Tawi river; the Gaekwad Baroda G.C., with the palace in the background; the layout at 'Prestige Golfshire', outside Bangalore; natural beauty at Pahalgam, a nine-hole layout being converted to 18.

**There's a championship golf** course coming up in Mumbai, even as work is underway on converting a nine-hole layout in Jharkhand into a full-length 18 holes. So, golf's strong up north, and is doing very well thank you down south. Now, the west and east of the country are looking to play catch up.

There's no doubt, however, that golf is facing a funds crunch. "As with most projects during the recession, this one is on a tight budget," says Ranjit Nanda of the aforementioned Golmuri expansion project. Nanda runs Ranjit Nanda & Associates, a course architecture, consultancy and construction firm that has built up a strong track record in course renovation.

Going back a few years, India could boast of probably a handful of quality layouts (those that had hosted an Asian Tour event), among them Delhi Golf Club, Royal Calcutta G.C., Classic Golf Resort and DLF Golf and Country Club (both Gur-gaon), Jaypee Greens Golf Resort (Greater Noida) and Aamby Valley Golf Course (Lonavala). To that list, you can add Kensville G.C. (Ahmedabad), Oxford Golf & Country Club (Pune) and Boulder Hills Golf and Country Club (Hyderabad). Today, there are golf courses in parts of the country that had never seen a divot before. The challenge, now, is to introduce the game to a greater number of people-building more courses is, clearly, the way forward.

A more-than-promising start has been made out west. Thanks to the honest endeavors of Col. (Retd.) K.D. Bagga, Gujarat has become a golfing hotspot, and is leading the way in golf course development in India. Bagga's courses in and around Ahmedabad have made the resourceful Gujaratis disciples of the game. "They are level headed, cool and calculating. They are made for golf," says Bagga of Gujarati folk.

Kensville Golf & Country Club and Gulmohar Greens Golf & Country Club are two reasons why golf has, almost overnight, caught the fancy of Amdavadis from all walks of life (housewives and businessmen, boys and girls). Kensville, near Nal-sarovar, is an 18-hole championship layout, and Gulmohar, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, a nine-hole golf course with a driving range, chipping area, state-of-the-art academy, and a bistro.

With the opening of these facilities, the number of people now teeing it up in Gujarat is estimated to be between 800 and 1,000 (of which 100 would be regulars). And these numbers are growing. "Gujarat is the new golfing destination," says Alpesh Parikh, Managing Director of Gulmohar Greens. And in the pipeline is a nine-hole facility at Shantigram, on the Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar road, which will also have a driving range and academy. It is expected to be ready for play in April 2010, and will be part of an all-inclusive township. Meanwhile, the Golden Bear is also looking to leave his mark in Gujarat-on the cards is a Jack Nicklaus 'signature', 30 km outside Ahmedabad.

Bagga's Golf Management Group is a set up that is engaged in the design, planning, construction, management, and super-intendence of golf courses. Bagga's passion for the game, and his desire to see it become an "accessible and affordable" pas-time, has taken him to all corners of the country. Currently, he is building an 18-hole championship public golf course (7335 yards) in Sidhra, Jammu.

A myth that Bagga fervently sought to dispel when he started out in course design and construction was that golf courses cost the 'earth' to build. The layout in Sidhra will cost Rs. 16 crore, while the golf course at Maneri Golf Village, which will be part of a resort and township, will cost Rs. 12 crore.

Incidentally, work on the links-like layout in Jammu started in September 2007 and the course is expected to be complete by March/April 2010. The challenge here, says Bagga, was to reclaim land from the banks of the Tawi river, an area of 60 acres that was nothing but boulders. "It is the most challenging site to develop a golf course, but

worth it for the breathtaking vistas," says Bagga about his Sidhra project. "The site required engineering skills and imaginative crafting of design to use the forest land without disturbing the jungle. It also involved enormous filling with intelligent shifting of soil to avoid erosion."

Another Bagga project on the anvil is the 18-hole (7240 yards) championship layout in scenic Sindhudurg (Maneri), on the Maharashtra-Goa border. The golf course here, looking out over the Arabian Sea, promises stunning views and a bigger elevation challenge than his Forest Hills design in Chandigarh-it will have a gradient difference of 95 meters.

Bagga feels that because of availability of land (or lack, thereof) and the spiraling costs of real estate, shorter courses will become the norm. A golf course, he emphasizes, doesn't necessarily have to be of 18 holes. "It doesn't even have to be nine holes; one can have six holes, and play them three times over for 18.

"And maintaining a nine-hole course is less expensive. An 18-hole course takes up more land, and more water too. We face a resource crunch, in terms of land and water, and so it's important to use these resources intelligently." Also in the construction stage, in Bagga's portfolio, are nine-hole facilities in Dombivli, Mumbai (an executive layout set along a creek, giving it a linky feel), Rajnagar, Ghaziabad (par-3 executive course with range), Indore ('boutique' golf course) and Bata Nagar, Kolkata (executive course on the banks of the Hubli river).

All these are part of real estate projects, which says as much about how golf has become a 'luxury brand' that talks the 'good life', as it does about the fact that standalone golf courses are no longer seen as profitable ventures. Today, a golf course has to be part of a bigger development (a township, or a resort) to survive. Hopefully, more home owners on the golf course will mean more people taking up the game!

**Nanda is another home grown** architect who's attempting to make the game as much within reach of the local populace as possible. "Golf's base in the country needs to be broadened, and the game made more accessible. Every city should develop driving ranges and affordable public golf courses," stresses Nanda.



Headed for a makeover is the Golmuri Course in Jamshedpur, which, along with the Beldih Course, hosts the TATA Open on the PGTI (the two courses are, incidentally, seven km apart). This was, initially, a nine-hole 'repeat' layout. "The new area provided by the Tinplate Company (owners of the surrounding land) was originally a fly ash/slag dumping ground," explains Nanda. "In order to fit a championship 18 holes (and independent driving range), the site required routing of holes that meant crossing two roads.

**Eastern promise:**  
Work in progress at Golmuri, Ranjit Nanda's redesign project in Jamshedpur.

"The land available for the old nine holes is also being used to make the new 18 but the holes and routing are completely new... It was, therefore, a very challenging site." The new enlarged course will measure 7000 yards (approx.) from the back tees, and will have a par of 71. Construction began in November 2008, and work is likely to be complete by the end of the year (though that would, Nanda adds, depend on the severity of the monsoons, and, also, on how much work can be completed before the rains arrive).

Once open for play, "brand new" Golmuri will join Royal Calcutta G.C., Tollygunge Club, Digboi G.C. and Shillong G.C. in the East's roster of full-length courses. But Golmuri is not Nanda's only expansion plan. Operating on a "low budget", work got under way in 2007 to convert the nine-hole short course in picturesque Pahalgam (Kashmir) into a "quality" 18-hole layout. Nanda is hoping the golf course will bring golfers and tourists back to the Valley.

"After a detailed study of the site and surrounding area, (it was felt that) there was a need to add more land to the available course so that it could realize its full potential," says Nanda. "The project had to be started from scratch. With the new course routing, you can get an almost 360-degree uninterrupted view of the surrounding snow-clad mountains, and also a stunning view of six holes from the new clubhouse," he adds.



#### Heaven on earth?

The hilly terrain near Sindhudurg, where Col. K.D. Bagga is designing a course which will have "leaping holes".

Just as in Golmuri, Nanda is using the 'old' nine alongside acquired land to make a 'new' 18. "Both (Golmuri and Pahalgam) have been relaid virtually from scratch as the old holes did not work in the new masterplans and routing. It's almost like build-ing new courses."

Pahalgam's course-par 71, 7100 yards-will be ready for play in autumn this year. So, a Bagga design in Jammu and a Nanda remodel in Kashmir. Add the unimaginably beautiful Royal Springs G.C. and equally eye-catching Gulmarg G.C. (which Nanda has renovated), and there are plenty of rupees to be made through golf tourism in India's northernmost state. So long as politics doesn't play spoilsport.

Nanda is also building an 18-hole layout with a backdrop which few courses in India can beat for its magnificence. The Gaekwad Baroda G.C. will be a traditional layout around the renowned Gaekwad Baroda Palace in the heart of Vadodara. The objective here, says Nanda, was to create a "classic course that has a view of the majestic palace from every hole.

"The palace grounds have large old tamarind trees that add to the grand scale of the course and property." For creating the 'Gaekwad', Nanda says no funds were spared-already, 10 holes are primed for play.

There's even better news for the west. Phil Ryan's Pacific Coast Design-designers of Eagleton and Oxford, who also reno-vated Bangalore G.C. earlier in the decade-have a championship course coming up in Navi Mumbai. Kharghar, construction of which got under way in mid 2008 (it is expected to be ready in 2010), will be an 18-hole layout (7059 yards) with a training academy. It will, says Ryan, be the "premier golf teaching and playing venue" in Mumbai. Kharghar should be a welcome addi-tion to India's rapidly-growing list of quality golf fields.

The Mumbai golf course isn't Pacific Coast Design's only initiative in the development stage. In a recent international tender process, they successfully bid to build an 18-hole public course (7300 yards) on the south-western outskirts of Delhi, in Dwarka. This Delhi Development Authority project, sited near the international airport, will also have an academy which will have six short golf holes integrated with the driving range. Construction commences later in the year, and is expected to be complete in 18 months.

Australia's Pacific Coast Design has also designed Clover Green, a real estate golf development 40 minutes' drive from Bangalore. Work on the 18-hole course started in August 2007, and

was finished in March this year.

Also coming up in proximity to the Garden City, on the Nandi Hills state highway, is the high-status 'Prestige Golfshire'. This is the odd one out, a big-budget (Rs. 100 crore) golf enterprise, but one which is being built to rigorous environmental standards. Construction on the golf-cum-residential project began in January 2008, and is likely to be complete by June 2010.

Located in the foothills of Nandi Hills (which form a pretty backdrop to the property), and adjoined by the 71-acre Karehalli lake, a round at Prestige promises to be a scenic affair. The rolling 7000-yard, par 72 championship golf course, a PGA Design Consulting (U.K.) design, is part of a 275-acre luxury real estate development (including hotel, convention center, spa, and 225 "super luxury" golf mansions).

Meanwhile, work on a 27-hole facility in Coimbatore has already begun. Kovai Hills, set in lush environs, will have an 18-hole championship course and a nine-hole par-three executive course, designed by David Hemstock (of Hemstock Associates, U.K.). The golf, including a range and academy, will be the centerpiece of a self-sustained community and SEZ. The developers of Kovai Hills, RAKINDO, have three other projects in the south currently in the design and planning stage.

Swan Golf Designs of England is coming up with golf courses in the south-in Mysore (18 holes, with driving range and academy), Bidar, Karnataka (27 holes, including nine for beginners, also with range and academy) and Mangalore (18 holes, "a lovely links," according to SGD's Howard Swan; this will, incidentally, be a government project)-and three in Uttaranchal.

Among other ongoing projects are a couple of short courses in Mohali (Punjab) and Jaipur. Rishi Narain Golf Management's 'golf projects development' arm has built Emaar MGF Mohali Hills, a nine-hole executive layout "primarily for Emaar MGF property owners". This has a whopping 25,000 sq. ft. clubhouse, and has been designed "for novices and amateurs alike". Opened in January 2009, Mohali Hills has reciprocal playing rights with Chandigarh Golf Club. Cambay Golf Resort, in Jamdoli (on the Jaipur-Agra road, 20 minutes from Jaipur), is also a nine-hole 'boutique' course, and is opening this month.

Not surprisingly, the slowdown has hit the big-name and big-money projects hardest, among them a Jack Nicklaus design coming up outside Bangalore (developers, RIRC), a Nick Faldo layout in Greater Noida (Ansal API), and a Greg Norman design in Noida (Unitech).

So, despite a global slump, and notwithstanding the fact that it's the real estate groups (now closely associated with the game in India) that have come off worst in this meltdown, golf course development overall hasn't been too badly affected, a heartening sign for the future of the sport in the country.

And if there's a message in this, it is that course architects and developers are better off keeping their feet on the ground. Hopefully, the efforts of Bagga and Nanda will inspire a host of locals to get into this exciting and challenging trade.

**Kensville golf and Country Club**



**Golf & Gujarat:**

Bunkers fringe one of the greens at Kensville G&CC. (Below) Jeev Milkha Singh with Col. K.D. Bagga (left) and Sameer Sinha (right).

## Jeev lends his name

**Jeev Milkha Singh sees himself as a** golf course designer in a few years from now. Another first for Indian golf, perhaps? Con-sidering the number of courses he's played on, inspiration shouldn't be a problem. In the meantime, he's quite happy endors-ing golf courses.

Kensville Golf and Country Club, about 40 km outside Ahmedabad, carries the Jeev Milkha Singh signature. Like most new courses coming up around the country, this is a real estate project but the promoters, Millennium Park Holdings Private Lim-ited, do not want to dilute the golfing bit. The 7340-yard, par 72 layout is the centerpiece, and it is only now, when the golf course is up and running, that the real estate part will kick in.

Asked why he didn't sign up with Jack Nicklaus or Arnold Palmer or Greg Norman, Sameer Sinha, the young and dynamic driving force behind the project, was quite matter of fact about his choice. "We wanted an Indian golfer to be associated with our course and the way Jeev is playing, we zeroed in on him.

Besides, there has to be brand recognition with the client base. How many people know Jack Nicklaus or Greg Norman? On the other hand, everybody who would eventually live or play here would know Jeev. So to us it made complete business sense to go with Jeev."



The golfing superstar inaugurated the course and the plush 50-room accommodation-which has a 'Jeev Milkha Singh' suite-amidst much fanfare in January this year. After being chaperoned around the tract by Col. (Retd.) K.D. Bagga, the de-signer and the man whose single-minded persistence helped the golf course see the light of day, Singh felt the golf course was straight after his own heart. "I like courses that make you think, and are difficult but rewarding.

This is a tough, challenging layout with the water, wind and quite a few doglegs."

Being a golfer himself, Inder Talwar, one of the three Kenya-based NRIs involved with the project, thought up the tried-and-tested golf course-cum-real estate combination back in 2000 but it took a while putting the 670 acres of land together. Once complete, there are going to be villas of different sizes and cluster housing. Kensville, strategically located not far from an in-dustrial belt, also has planned a commercial center, schools, hospitals, and a Kerala Ayurveda Village. "We are looking at a self-sufficient community here," says Talwar.

Bagga, who has put his stamp on courses across the country, holds 'earthy' views when it comes to designing. "I don't like to disturb nature and I prefer to use locals as much as possible. This also helps golf courses last longer and be commercially viable," he says. Kensville was put together in Rs. 8.5 crore-most 'big name' international player-designers would charge about half that much just as signing fees.

Local villagers were pressed into service to give shape to the golf course as Bagga plotted his way through the rough thorny terrain. Many of them continue to be employed there. "For one year I pitched a tent under a tree near the present clubhouse. I'm really not into cakes and sandwiches, I'm more of a channa man," says the desi designer.

Among the new crop of trees, Bagga has also planted mangoes, pomegranate, guava and a variety of berries along the fairways. The fruits of his labor are there for all to see.

**Prabhdev Singh**



**Bird's eye view**

The golf course at Oxford G&CC presents a pretty picture, from the air and on the ground.

**Oxford Golf and Country Club**

**A new stunner**

**Till recently the toss-up for the** most spectacular golf course in the country was between Royal Springs on the outskirts of Srinagar and Aamby Valley in Lonavala, about halfway between Mumbai and Pune. Both golf courses are set up amongst hills with stunning surroundings and backdrops.

There's now a new entrant. Carved out in a somewhat similar terrain, the Oxford Golf and Country Club is not very far from Aamby Valley with the same Sahyadri Hills encircling it from three sides. Designer Phil Ryan throws modesty out of the window when he declares, "Simply put, Oxford is the future of golf in India. It is the best golf course in India." While the jury is out on that one, Oxford does present a very pretty picture. The lush green strips of the golf course stand out against the stark landscape, with the large white sand bunkers adding a touch of their own on this 7020-yard, par 72 layout.



The signature hole here is the par-five fourth, measuring 563 yards. What sets it apart is the 30-meter climb to the tee. Not a good idea to lose your ball off the tee on this one. In fact, the fourth tee is the highest point of the golf course-it is 84 meters above the 14th, which forms the floor. That gives an idea of the elevation changes on the golf course.



It helps when the man backing such a project is a keen golfer. Anil Seolekar is a former captain of the Pune Golf Club and a council member of the Indian Golf Union. Located just off the Pune-Mumbai expressway and easily accessible from Pune, the golf course occupies about 200 acres of the 1,000 acre development. "When Anil and I first walked the site, it was a rocky, barren piece of land where no agriculture could exist, with several quarry pits dotted around the floor. However, the potential was obvious and once we had permission to get water from the river about five km away, we had a project on our hands," re-calls Ryan. Pacific Coast Design broke ground in February 2007 and the last bits were put in place in March this year.

**Rock n' roll:**  
The unique topography of the layout at Boulder Hills, near Hyderabad.

The project also includes a university and a township with 300 villas and four apartment towers. The resort will have a 150-room hotel, spa, and conference facilities. The floodlit golf academy is being managed by Srixon and is headed by Clive Bardsley, a master professional from Australia.

"As the sun sets in the late afternoon over the valley and you are playing your last shots, you could be anywhere in the world... you really need to see it to believe it," says Ryan. We get the picture.

**Prabhdev Singh**

### **Boulder Hills golf and Country Club** **Boulder at heart**

**Golf courses, especially modern** ones, are often products of radical visualization and imagination. Confronted with a hill, literally made of rock and peppered with boulders, Peter Harradine took upon himself the task of sculpting a golf course.

It took a lot of work. At an altitude of 2100 feet, the hill out of which the newly opened Boulder Hills Golf and Country Club in Hyderabad has been carved, did not yield easily.

Apparently, close to 300,000 tonnes of rock were removed from the site before the lush green Bermuda could be planted on the fairways. In the end, Harradine's vision has been vindicated, prompting the Swiss designer to say, "This will be one of the most photographed golf courses in the world. You can count on it."



Standing on the second tee, one of the 12 elevated tees, looking down on the undulating layout, Boulder Hills defies stereo-type, convention and gravity. Boulders, some of them as large as houses and often precariously balanced on each other, line the fairways. The Golconda fort looms in the distance. On one hole, vertical stone walls encircle a valley green, while on another an imposing umbrella shaped monolith, sitting pretty on a more modest rock, casts a long shadow on the green. Seven large lakes create a striking picture.



Located in the middle of Hyderabad's IT hub, flanked by Wipro and Infosys, and promoted by Emaar MGF, Boulder Hills is easily accessible and Hyderabad's clement climes keep it playable most of the year. At 7228 yards, with an impressive driving range and a 15,000 sq. ft. practice putting green (the largest in the country), the course covers approximately 170 acres. Golf carts are mandatory because the undulations are too severe for most golfers, and there are no caddies.

#### **New & improved:**

The KGA in Bangalore (above), and the BPGC in Mumbai, both of which have recently been renovated.

The course can get daunting from the championship tees-the 18th hole measures 655 yards from the tips. Gaganjeet Bhullar, who played Boulder Hills after his

triumph at the British Open Qualifier recently, says, "It's a beautiful layout. It looks easier than it is. When the wind is up and with tight pin positions, the boulders come into play and it can be quite a challenge." Five sets of tees allow the amateur to choose a length which suits his or her game and ability. "It's a spectacular course with the large sandstone boulders as the standout feature. Even the clubhouse is very nice with its infinity pool," says former pro and golf consultant Rishi Narain.

The realty is a given. Boulder Hills is part of the sprawling 531-acre Emaar Hills township which already has 115 villas. The township, work on which is expected to finish by the end of 2010, will also have an IT park and an SEZ.

Boulder Hills is open to all, at least to those who don't mind paying the steep green fee of Rs. 5,000 on weekends and Rs. 3,000 on weekdays.

**Meraj Shah**

## **Not just a facelift**

**After being mauled by a rampaging Tiger Woods in 2000, the Augusta National committee**

approved an addition of over 300 yards to the course, moved tees and increased bunker sizes. The reactive measures, which were derided by many as being destructive to the course's inherent character, were defended by then Augusta National Chairman Hootie Johnson, who, in a statement, simply said, "Our objective is to keep this golf course current."

Be it evolution in equipment technology or advances in course maintenance, golf courses are increasingly under pressure to remain, at the same time, classic and topical in design. "It's a challenging proposition for the golf course designer. With the old courses, inadequate water drainage is a major problem which often necessitates a renovation. Also, there is a pressing need to be environmentally friendly," says Ranjit Nanda, who's leading the renovation surge with major restructuring projects in Gulmarg and Pahalgam in Kashmir, and in Mumbai (Willingdon Sports Club and the Bombay Presidency Golf Club).

Howard Swan of Swan Golf Designs, who recently completed an extensive renovation of the Karnataka Golf Association course in Bangaluru, says, "The golf course is arguably a club's biggest asset and needs to be maintained, not just regularly in the sense of routine greenkeeping, but in the sense of continuous evolution—a continuous development of its natural structure. Failure to do so results in a deteriorating product, a less attractive one to player, club, owner and operator alike."

The golf course in Gulmarg, one of the oldest in the country, has a spectacular natural setting and layout. With an already short playing season (barely five to six months in a year), there was a need to improve the drainage. In order to do this, six new lakes have been created keeping course strategy in mind. A new driving range has also been added. Three old holes that were not part of the current 18 have been incorporated in the golf academy.

Another natural feature that has been revived is the wildflowers. Over the past three years, seeds were collected and sowed over an area of 40 acres on the course, including many of the hillsides and non-playing areas, to provide for stunning off-site views, and also to make the golfer feel as though the course has been carved out of a natural flowering meadow. The Gulmarg G.C. is expected to reopen in autumn this year.

Another old and established course, the BPGC in the Mumbai suburbs, was built on an expansive black cotton soil base that resulted in surface cracks when dry, and which was soggy and unplayable when wet. It also did not have the length or challenge required of a contemporary championship layout. Besides, it faced a major drainage problem during the heavy monsoon rains, which meant it was virtually closed for play through those months.

To counter these problems, the level of the existing grade of the course has been raised and catchment lakes created. The fairways, which were planted with a mix of cow grass and other weeds, have been replanted with Bermuda grass, while the haryali variant of the Bermuda on the tees and greens has been replaced with an imported Paspalum. The course, with seven new water bodies, is expected to be ready by November 2009.

Another short but challenging course in Mumbai, the Willingdon Sports Club, has been completely reshaped to enable total surface run off during the monsoon period and prevent waterlogging. New greens, bunkers and hazards have been designed, and extensive landscape planting carried out to give the course a unique parkland character.

Last but equally significant has been the renovation of the KGA in Bangalore. All 18 greens have been rebuilt with new fairways, bunkering and tees. All playing surfaces have been regrassed, fairways raised and a state-of-the-art irrigation system installed. A comprehensive drainage system has also been put into place to ensure quick recovery from the heavy rainfall which the region experiences. The renovation has entailed the enlargement and reconstruction of the course's water bodies, which will act as hazards as well as reservoirs. Nine holes have been opened for play and the course is expected to be fully operational by the end of 2009.

**Meraj Shah**

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