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India's Long Game – Empowering Olympians and the Path to a 2036 Summer Olympics

05/08/2024 By Souhardya De

"The 'Run for Rio' in Delhi" by the Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

On 26 July, the Parade of Nations at the incredibly controversial inaugural ceremony of the Olympics in Paris saw the presence of a 117-member strong contingent representing India – the world's biggest democracy with an estimated population of over 1.4 billion people. Unsurprisingly for sports enthusiasts, the Indian representation at the 2024 Games is not merely two short of its 119-member delegation at the Tokyo edition. It is also relatively understaffed when assessed against delegations from countries like the United States, Australia, and China, who have sent 593, 460 and 388-member strong delegations to the French capital respectively. Financial incentives and the National Sports

Development Fund have already seen cuts in the interim budget – a move which has faced criticism. This is despite an overall hike in the budget of over 537,000 USD, with the Sports Authority of India and the ministry's flagship *Khelo India* programme bagging a major chunk of the allocations.

What, then, restricts the Indian contingent's representation and performance at the Games? For one, critics have variously raised concerns about the financial and infrastructural hurdles faced by athletes competing at international sporting events. This is despite the fact that Indian cricketers are among the highest paid in the world, with the cricketing board of India earning a lion's share of revenues from the International Cricket Council (ICC) at around 38.4 percent, or 230 million USD annually. Public enthusiasm is primarily to blame. The craze for cricket tournaments in the nation results in the public and private sectors prioritising global cricket events in the country. India hosts the annual Indian Premier League (IPL) tournament supported by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) which leads lucrative league table rankings, second only to the American NFL. India has also hosted several major tournaments, such as the ICC Cricket World Cups. The lack of such opportunities in Olympic sporting events and the government's sole emphasis on *Khelo India* – a domestic event – means athletes usually lack the international exposure their Chinese or American counterparts have had in the past.

The last time India hosted a comprehensive international sporting event was the Commonwealth Games of 2010, followed by the South Asian Games of 2016. This, coupled with the lack of world-class infrastructure for the games, makes many athletes – such as the 2024 delegation with Tokyo gold-medallist Neeraj Chopra – opt for state-funded exorbitantly expensive pre-Olympic trainings abroad. Others specialising in niche domains, such as the fencing superstar Bhavani Devi, relocate overseas to continue their specialised training for Olympic-scale events. Even Manu Bhaker, India's first sportsperson to win successive medals in the ongoing 2024 Games in Paris, was funded by the government to pursue training in Germany and Switzerland. Due to much of the allocation for the Olympics going into individual training for specific athletes overseas, the scope for expanding the strength of the contingent is automatically lowered.

This becomes particularly relevant in light of Prime Minister Modi's expression of interest in India's bid to host the 2036 Olympics. Indeed, International Olympic Committee (IOC) member Nita Ambani's recent announcement in Paris, supporting India's bid, has further reinforced a shared interest in conducting the Games there. While the National Democratic Alliance-led Government at the centre has certainly prioritised both infrastructure and capacity-building among sportspersons from under-represented regions and communities – pushing for increased allocations for the sports ministry and financial support for individual athletes – hosting an Olympic-level event in the country requires several considerations.

Firstly, diversification of investment in infrastructural development needs to be adopted. In the last two years, for instance, much of the focus has been on the renovation of cricket stadia ahead of the ODI World Cup in 2023. Meanwhile, the government push for a public-private partnership model in extra-cricket infrastructural upgrade has been mostly restricted to projects under the *Khelo India* pipeline. There has been a visible, although rudimentary, emphasis on the expansion of training facilities and regional talent scouting centres. Two of the notable recent extra-cricket proposals have included the National Investment Pipeline-facilitated Sports City development project in Visakhapatnam and the proposal for development of a new FIFA-standard football stadium in the state of Kerala. Of the approximately 100 sports facilities fulfilling international standards in India, over 25 are active cricket grounds. Further investment in the planning and development of multipurpose venues – like the project in Visakhapatnam and training centres of international standard – is seen as not only helping establish the country as a strong contender for the 2026 bid, but also reducing the otherwise exorbitant overseas training costs associated with individual sportspersons. Building domestic infrastructure has the potential to help mitigate the costs associated with participation per head, and a just distribution of the funds allocated for the Games would enable larger contingents in the upcoming editions.

"Regular upkeep and proper maintenance of the multipurpose sporting venues must be prioritised"

Secondly, regular upkeep and proper maintenance of the multipurpose sporting venues must be prioritised. In their reports, both PwC and the European Business and Technology Centre have been critical of the underutilisation that existing multipurpose arenas such as the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi continue to suffer from. The recent action plan by the NITI Aayog – the government's think tank – focusses on the monetisation of sports assets, that includes the utilisation for extra-sports purposes, thereby enhancing sustainable revenue generation. While this is a much-needed step in line with the framework followed by many of the world's leading sports giants, attracting a greater number of comprehensive international sporting events, youth games, sport-specific world championships, and international league tournaments also needs to be a policy priority. This is especially important ahead of 2036 as it would make events of international magnitude accessible to a wide range of emerging Indian sportspersons and offer the global community a glimpse of what Indian sporting facilities have to offer, prior to hosting a fully-fledged edition of the Olympics. India's bid for the Youth Olympics in conjunction with infrastructural upgrades and bids for other major sporting events such as the 2026 Commonwealth Games and 2030 Asian Games are a step in the right direction.

Previous editions of the Olympics have shown that the highest percentage of the allocated funds go into the development of non-sports

infrastructure to help enable the games. At Sochi (2014), the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) estimated this amounted to over 85% of its total Olympic budget. Similarly, in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, over half the allocation went into logistics ahead of the grand show. Paris' edition, with its 10 billion USD budget, has featured as the lowest expenditure in the Games in the recent past. While this initially comes across as somewhat surprising, CNBC, in a detailed report, sums the reason up as clever utilisation of *existing infrastructure.*

"A 2036 Olympics in India might not be a distant dream"

As such, for India, in its run up to 2036, it becomes critical to ensure a threefold policy approach is in place – *invest* in upgrades and development of international-standard sports facilities utilising a public-private partnership model, *manage* existing facilities and ensure athletes are able to train to an international standard domestically, and *attract* a range of comprehensive extra-Olympic events such as the Asian and the Commonwealth Games to cultivate a sporting culture beyond cricket. A 2036 Olympics in India might not be a distant dream. It is vital, however, for India to capitalise on an expanding support base for Olympic-like events in the country and utilise the right opportunities to ensure it is well-prepared to host an event of such magnitude. The return on investment made by host countries in the lead up to the Games has often been subject to questions and criticism. Through policy measures that guarantee maintenance and effective re-utilisation in 2036 of sporting facilities developed to empower sportspersons today, India needs to adequately prepare for the way ahead. The 2024 French model with maximum utilisation of the existing infrastructure and minimal exclusive public investment in the Games might present a desirable prototype that India looks to put to test in 2036.

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