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## Why India is an underachiever in Olympics

**Dr. Vijay Bahadur Singh Bisht**

### Abstract

This is a thematic article focused on India's disgraceful performance in Olympics and possible solutions for the same. Every nation aspires for greatness, supremacy and glory, and excelling in Olympic is one of the ways to achieve it. India's achievements have not remained as impressive as it could have been in Olympics. Lack of sound sports culture and infrastructure, lack of long time plan, lack of faith in indigenous coaches, poor policies for supporting and employing sports persons, lack of professional administration are some evident reasons behind India's dismal Olympic performance. Government must encourage the participation of masses in sports activities at all levels not only with aim to win medals but also with objective to improve the health status of citizens as improved health status of citizen is directly linked to the productivity of the nation. Sports should be developed as an attractive discipline so parents can get convinced to allow their kids to take sports as first choice for career. Indigenous coaches should be empowered, promoted and encouraged as they are key factor in implementing the long term plans. Employers of India's sports persons should recruit junior (raw or budding) players at entry level categories and they should be given performance based promotions. This will definitely increase the pool of talented players and it will increase the probability of winning more Olympic medals. India needs to change its approach towards sports drastically. Sports must be considered as an investment to mankind. Through sports huge population can be converted into a valuable asset for the nation. With adoption of such approach it won't be difficult for India to win good number of medals at Olympics.

**Keywords:** Olympic, potential, taskforce, professional, indigenous, performance, aspire

### Introduction

Once again our players are back from Olympic with not so encouraging medal tally despite big (but realistic) pregame expectations. Though some rays of hope were noticed in our not so surprising underachieved Rio venture but we will go down in history placed 67<sup>th</sup> in medal tally with 2 hard but brilliantly fought medals of Sindhu and Sakshi. Our best medal hopes Abhinav Bindra (Shooting) and Sania-Bopanna (Tennis Mixed Doubles) missed the medals from hand shake distance. Dipa Karmakar finishing fourth in gymnastics was a surprise celebration in Indian sports world. Vikas Krishna's defeat in quarters of boxing deprived us of at least one more bronze.

Undoubtedly India is one of the most promising world economic force with second biggest population and ample natural resources with a stable political establishment. India has everything what a nation aspires for to become a prosperous nation. But it hurts a lot when it comes to the outcome of Olympics or world championships of any major game (except cricket). Every Olympic brings big hopes but every time those hopes are crashed miserably. Tag of underachiever has become a synonym of India when sports achievements are talked about.

Freshly returned hurt from present Rio Olympic debacle our government has announced its strong commitment of winning fifty plus medals in next three Olympics. For India winning fifty Olympic medals may not be an impossible task but surely it's like moving a mountain. We have become habitual of seeing our plans failing miserably one after another. Hope commitments and plans will be converted into realities this time.

If you look at the top 10 medal winning nations of last three Olympic there is no surprise change. In Rio Olympic too top 10 in the medals table are those that are listed as 'high income' by the World Bank. So the connection between wealth and sporting performance still remains very strong. But wealth alone cannot predict medals. Health, literacy and standards of

living are all important factors too. So it's not surprising that the top 10 countries in medal standings, with the exception of China, are also in 'Very High Human Development' category in UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) [1]. India is ranked at 130 among 188 countries which is not an encouraging sign.

India is a nation full of potential to be realized. Former FIFA chief Sepp Blatter In the answer of a question in an interview, during his visit to India in 2007, expressed his concern for Indian football and called India a sleeping giant which needs to be waken up [2]. This applies to all sports as one sixth of world population resides in India. Any world level competition can't afford to overlook second largest population of the world. Population is one of the fundamental determinants of Olympic success. A large population increases the probability of producing more potential athletes as we have seen China, our neighbor and the most populous nation, is among top three medal winning nations since last three Olympics. Looking at India's medal tally and size of India's population and economy it's very disheartening to see that we are almost negligible in world sports map.

### **Why we need to excel in Olympics**

The Olympic Spirit encourages participation rather than winning but in reality however, the success of a country's athletes is held to be an important source of national prestige. Olympic medal tally reflects the potential of a nation. Since Olympic performance is closely connected with national prestige, winning a good number of Olympic medals can help us to obtain recognition internationally as well as stimulate sense of pride and patriotism in countrymen. International recognition and patriotism are extremely valuable to any government as it enhances unity, integration, peace and political stability domestically. India with its diversity, domestic issues it is facing and aspiration of India to be a superpower all has a potential solution in an improved Olympic performance. It is remarkable to notice that how whole nation had come together to celebrate and enjoy the two medals won by our girls in Rio Olympic. If two Olympic medals can do such good to our nation then imagine the outcome if we become successful in winning more Olympic medals. Besides being the carnival of human capabilities Olympic is also an advertisement of a nation's progress. So India must do anything and everything to become a successful nation at Olympics.

### **How can we get rid of the tag of underachiever?**

Various experts have suggested various solutions but nothing seems to be working. By looking at India's ranking in world of sports its quiet obvious that wealth, health, literacy and living standard are all important factors but they are not the guarantee of success. There are many countries which are way behind India in all parameters of development but still they are far more superior to India in Olympic medal tally.

A lot has been talked about providing sophisticated facilities, specialized training and coaching by foreign experts to our players. But still there are many areas which are either overlooked or not given due attention or not considered worthy of paying any attention at all. Some of such issues are highlighted here.

### **Need of Sound Sporting Culture in the Country**

When Usain Bolt was asked in Rio why his tiny Jamaica is such an athletic powerhouse, his answer was simple: the island's unique sporting culture. The key, the greatest sprinter

in history said, was Jamaica's annual school sports competition, 'Champs', which puts kids into a hardcore competitive limelight early on, playing to packed stadiums and on TV. "It is just that we have a good system," argued Bolt. "Boys and girls Champs keep producing more athletes. For years to come we will have the great athletes to win." The roots of our four-yearly national obsession over why a billion-plus India doesn't win medal lie in the fact that we just don't have a decent sporting culture or a grassroots pipeline to catch young talent in Olympic sports [3].

Absence of a sports culture at local level is one of the biggest hindrance in our way of becoming a sports power. Large Indian population belong to middle or lower middle socioeconomic status and sports is not among the priorities of their daily life routine. Today every Indian child goes to school with dream of becoming a doctor or engineer and most of the time it's their parents' forced choice on them. Parents spend money on coaching and tuition beyond their resources for this. In schools and colleges sports remains a formality. Hardly very few students think about a career in sports. Sports and physical education does not figure in the list of subjects for India's civil services exams. Why any parent should feel motivated to encourage their kids to take sports seriously?

Play ground in every colony and a stadium in every city or village is still a rare thing. Sports infrastructure at school, colleges or universities or stadiums requires a complete overhauling. If still any youngster gets interested to embrace sports then there is no availability of a coach equipped with proper coaching knowledge or technique at local level. It's necessary to have a strong sports facilitation policy at local level to search and develop the budding talent. We need to have a pool of coaches and teachers at local level equipped with contemporary coaching techniques. Government must encourage the participation of masses in sports activities at all levels not only with aim to win medals but also with objective to improve the health status of citizens as improved health status of citizen is directly linked to the productivity of the nation. Being in good health is one of the primary prerequisite for becoming a good sports person. Government must go one step further by declaring 'participation in sports in daily life' as a sort of nation's service and responsibility as it bring about positive changes in health of the participants which ultimately contributes in development of the nation. A person to the nation is just like a cell to a body. So every person (cell) is important for building of a nation (body). Former government's 'Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan' just has been replaced by 'Khelo India' aimed at spotting and nurturing the local talent and developing sports in fracture, specially at village, block and city level. Its outcomes remain to be seen.

### **Have Faith in Indigenous Coaches**

Handing over the bunch of selected players to a foreign coach one or two year prior to a major competition and then expecting miracles is just like making fool of ourselves. Why we are so obsessed for giving priority to foreign coaches over our own home grown coaches? In just concluded Rio Olympic our two medal winners P V Sindhu (Badminton) and Sakshi Malik (Wrestling) are pupils of our very own Indian coaches P. Gopichand and Kuldeep Malik. Even one of the most usually phenomenal performance, from Indian point of view, by gymnast Dipa Karmakar too was architected by our own man Bishweshwar Nandi. Not only these three but many of our former Olympic medalists including Vijendra Singh (Boxing), Sushil Kumar and Yogeshwar Dutt (Wrestling), Saina Nehwal (Badminton) also were coached by indigenous

coaches. This should be eye opener for sports policy makers and administrators. There is a difference of day and night when salary, perks and facilities provided to a foreign coaches and Indian coaches are compared. Foreign coaches are treated like VIPs as they are invited one or two year prior to major competition, on their own conditions and Indian coaches' role becomes restricted to put things in order as per the system and instructions of foreign coaches.

Our administrators must understand that it takes a period of about 10 to 15 deeply devoted years to produce an Olympic medalist and only a local coach can carry out this task devotedly and effectively. Indigenous coaches must be empowered, promoted and encouraged and enough freedom should be granted to them to make, develop system and implement long plans. If situation demands then only foreign coaches can be invited to work under indigenously developed system but not vice versa as change of coaches in short duration causes adjustment in system and philosophy which affects the players also adversely [4]. Indian coaches are not inferior in any respect but government's lack of faith in them and lack of empowerment, exposure and financial support prevent them from reaching their potential. Home grown coaches must be equipped with improved support, facilities and education and most importantly they must be given due respect and recognition from village level to national level.

#### **Need to amend policies for supporting sports persons**

What we do in India, and this includes government and private initiatives, pick up existing athletes and provide them with better training and coaching a couple of years ahead of the Olympics. This is at best a 'pad up' technique because these athletes are already well established and better facilities and training can only add gloss to their existing potential. This is what has been the purpose of target Olympic podium scheme and explains the delayed funding to Dipa Karmakar- she received funds only after she qualified for Olympics. Organizations like OGQ (Olympic Gold Quest) and JSW (JS Steel Ltd), which are doing good work in Olympic sports scene, follow a similar model.

The problem with this model is that it is reactive rather than proactive. It seeks to harness potential that is already well developed rather than trying to develop talent from grass root level. If we follow this model for Tokyo we might yet again win 6 to 8 medals but not more. This model isn't going to bring about a fundamental of Indian sport [5].

Basic fault with this policy is that after years' hard work player has to become eligible to beg his claim and has to live on the mercy of the bureaucrats or politicians. It's disgusting. There are countless players who work hard whole life on their own, ignoring all other possible better future prospects, but only very few get 'lucky' to taste ultimate success, like Abhinav Bindra, Sushil Kumar, PV Sindhu, Sakshi Malik etc., while others become forced to get lost into oblivion. Just like the race of sperms, out of thousands of aspiring players of one generation hardly one or two finishes their journey on the podium while others are destined to be forgotten.

So the policy of supporting only existing athletes needs to be amended immediately. Consistent time, energy and money must be invested at grass root level which will certainly yield dividends in long run. It is a time tested formula for a sure success. But same time full vocational support must be ensured to all chosen aspiring players as only few get chance to shine like a star. Sports is a mutually explosive event where one wins only at the cost of other. We must not make our 'not so successful' players feel sorry for them as they were there on

a mission where only very few had to finish on the Olympic podium. We must save them from getting lost in oblivion.

#### **Need to amend policies for employment of sports persons**

At the moment Indian Railway is the biggest employer of Indian sports persons. Indian Oil Corporation, ONGC, Air India and various public sector banks also employ good number of sports persons. It looks very encouraging and indeed it is so. These employers offer good job to sports persons, only when they become successful and famous and then they are made to play for them in national or inter institutional competitions. All employers want to recruit only established players. If we look at the Railway's employment advertisement for sports persons, of class three and four category posts, the application are called from sports persons who have secured a place at national level or have played at least at same level. By this search of a job for a national level player may come an end but how it is going to help the nation in winning Olympic medals?

By a small amendment in their recruitment policy our sports employers can give big boost to our hopes of winning medals in Olympics. Besides giving employment to established players, these employers must also recruit junior (raw or budding) players at entry level categories after proper screening. Their nurturing and training should be taken care of by experts and they should be given performance bound promotions. This approach will definitely increase the pool of talented players and level and quality of competition. Our selectors will have a wider base to choose players from.

#### **Need to have only professionals as sports administrators**

The irony of Indian sports is that it's run either by politicians or by bureaucrats who are there just for sake of being. Our unsuccessful Olympic journey is an obvious evidence of their bad administration of sports moreover that on many occasions they become cause of nation's embarrassment. In just concluded Rio Olympic our honorable sports minister Mr. Vijay Goel were found to 'aggressive and rude' enough to earn an official rebuke from the Rio 2016 Organising Committee. Nothing can be more embarrassing than this that a national sports minister was scolded like an unruly school boy at an international event [6].

Indian sports associations and federations are infested with politicians and retired bureaucrats. And since top level positions in most associations and federations are honorary so these people are not accountable to anyone which gives them the license to go about their work in the most unprofessional way. However, since these positions offer official perquisites such as complimentary travel, spiffy hotel accommodation, daily allowances and foreign junkets, these retirees are most unwilling to let go of them. It's definitely not an encouraging sign for Indian sports. All sports issues must be handled by professionals. In case of unavailability of professionals duties should be out sourced. If such is not done then it will be unfair to blame our players for being underachievers.

#### **Must refrain from cheating and using unfair means**

Last but not the least, ethics of fair play must be maintained at all cost. On many occasions it is noticed that many of our junior players who had performed remarkably good at junior level, failed to reflect same performance at senior level. Many players are caught using unfair means like doping, age fraud or match fixing. This brings bad name to the nation that is even worse than failing or loosing miserably.

In a latest, a study by IAAF (International Association of

Athletics Federations) expresses doubt that a good number of top athletes from India may have qualified for Rio Olympic with fake/suspect performance. A list of Indian athletes with doubtful qualifying records reportedly includes the names of triple jumper Renjith Maheswary, long jumper Ankit Sharma and sprinters Dutee Chand and Srabani Nanda. A huge difference was noticed between their qualifying performance and Rio Olympic performance. IAAF's response is awaited in this regard [7].

Winning is great thing but not everything. We must do anything to win medals but not at the cost of ethics of fair play. Our sportspersons must not become the reason of national shame by using unfair means for winning.

### **Conclusion**

Every nation aspires for greatness, supremacy and glory, and excelling in Olympic is one of the way to achieve it. So far India's achievement has not been remain as impressive as it could have been in Olympics. Certainly India is more capable of performing and achieving much better than its present level. A nation of 1.2 billion has got enough talent in sports to produce world beaters but in absence of strong sports culture, policy to spot and nurture young talent, and professional administrators making it difficult for India.

India needs to start working on a 15-20 year plan with an intense professional approach to realize its aspiration of becoming a successful nation in Olympic. Disappointed with India's pitiable performance at Rio Olympic, Prime Minister himself has already decided to set up a taskforce for next three Olympics (2020, 2024 and 2028). This is a right step in right direction. Such commitment from a Prime Minister shows that how important it is for a nation to excel at Olympics. Hope Prime Minister's this ambitious plan will yield the desired outcomes.

India needs to change its approach towards sports drastically. Sports must be considered as an investment to mankind. Time has come for India to covert its huge population into a valuable asset for the nation. With adoption of such approach towards sports it won't be difficult for India to win good number of medals at Olympics.

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