

Olympics bid will turn India into a sports hub

By Amitabh Kant

India is at the cusp of becoming a sports-forward nation, a vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he announced India's candidature to be a Summer Olympics and Paralympics host nation in 2036. It is a vision that brings with it both opportunity and responsibility to make India an active, healthy, sporting and world-leading nation.

We showcased our ability and global leadership to the world at our recently concluded G20 Summit. Today, India is invested deeply in enabling a population that has immense potential to be productive, active and healthy. As a country we have the ability to host a global event like the Olympics successfully, and sustainably. Indian sportspersons have also been outstanding on the international stage. In addition to our outstanding performance at home in the Cricket World Cup where our team made the entire country proud, our performances in the Asian Games and Asian Para Games were extraordinary with hauls of over 100 medals at each of these prestigious events – a first in both cases. There are in fact many instances of sporting success in the past few months alone.

There are several reasons why an Olympics bid makes eminent sense for India in 2036, as we move towards becoming a world leader that maximizes its demographic dividend. We must imbibe the successes of what our G20 Presidency accomplished under the leadership of the Prime Minister, and also ensure we have a strong legacy plan that allows universalizing of access to sport and physical activity with a specific focus on women empowerment, youth playing sport, and persons with disabilities having the opportunity to access and use common spaces for being physically active. India emerging as one of the top sporting nations by 2047 when India turns 100 is a more than realistic goal. India now is an elite sports contender across several disciplines, and the pipeline of international talent and potential champions is sure to be sustainable and on an upward trajectory.

A strong policy framework, broad access to infrastructure, awareness around the importance of sport for children from a physical and mental health perspective,

leadership and community engagement, and also positive cognitive development is key. Equally important is awareness around needing to play a sport or finding physical activity interventions that adults can avail their entire lives. There has been an increase in focus and outcomes for prioritizing sport for development in sport and health policy, and this can be further enhanced now. Suitable amendments to the Corporate Social Responsibility framework to expand the scope of sports development initiatives and include investments in physical activity like yoga, policies around increasing open fields for participation and universalizing access to them, and putting in place guidelines to ensure safe spaces will be critical. Equally critical will be the need to address urban planning that is walking and biking friendly, has ample amounts of fields and open green spaces, and allows for safety in access and participation, including for free play, open gymnasiums and yoga spaces. Incentivizing access to existing infrastructure is another important intervention. Using technology to enhance inclusion and wider dissemination in sports participation is an area India is uniquely positioned to optimize, and we should focus on supporting such innovations as digital public goods as well as private sector initiative that enable access to sport and sport participation. Lastly, it will be important to build scalable frameworks that systematize livelihoods for sportspersons who may not have reached the international level, but can be employed in the sports and activity ecosystem as full time professionals.

If every child plays a sport, then the chances of our talent pool expanding and deepening is significant, especially if there is an exponential increase in opportunities to play sport, and the increased nature of livelihoods emanating from the sports and physical activity ecosystem. As part of hosting the Olympics it will be important to focus on the legacy planning which can enable a lasting framework for participation, the need to be a physically active nation, explore sports of the future, and create a funding pipeline for sports for development as well as the elite sports initiatives. Brisbane 2032 for example, has announced its Elevate 2042 plan which entails six key heads that include among others, creating a 'barrier free society for people with disability' a focus on the economy, jobs and innovation, and, sport, health and social inclusion. Paris 2024 is introducing a daily 30-minute exercise period in the curriculum of French primary schools, and aims to reach 4.2 million students across the country.

There are also the added dimensions of expanding India's soft power through universalizing the benefit of yoga, and further disseminating art forms such as classical dance. Further, being physically active will greatly help India counter the prevalence of non-communicable diseases. India must make sport and physical activity a national imperative, and bidding for the 2036 Olympics can act as a beacon. In terms of hosting, we have hosted the Chess Olympiad, with nearly 190 countries participating, FIFA Football Under-17 World Cups, the Men's Hockey World Cup, and several others, including our global prominence in hosting cricket events. Also, mass participation events like marathons routinely have more than 30,000 participants across the country.

Over the years we have also developed a sophisticated talent identification and support program called the Target Olympic Podium Scheme or TOPS, which supports our outstanding athletes. This is in fact is a key aspect of building a sports ecosystem-ensuring that the ultimate beneficiaries will be our sportspersons. Having outstanding athletes be supported by our ecosystem will help enhance livelihoods as well as be a source of pride for us as a nation. Already we are seeing athletes like Neeraj Chopra and PV Sindhu become huge brands, and the example of kabaddi player Pawan Sehrawat being chosen for INR 2.26 crore in the league auction is emblematic of what is possible. The G20 Presidency saw us host events in more than 220 meetings in 60 cities involving over 1.5 crore people across the country. This showcased our organizing capacity, India's position as a tourism and infrastructure powerhouse, and our ability to seamlessly accomplish complicated logistics through the year. India is poised to be the centre of the sports and physical activity universe, and the most active, healthy and premier sporting nation by 2047. Sport is a key part of India's growth story. The Government of India is committed to ensuring this happens, and that our population benefits optimally from being a sports-forward nation.

The author is the Government of India's G20 Sherpa and ex-CEO, NITI Aayog. Views are personal.