

Sports-forward India: The real Olympic Goal

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The recently concluded Paris Olympics 2024 showcased our athletes, and we saw many excellent performances from our athletes though not all might reflect on the medal tally. Post Olympics, we need to work towards a longer term perspective leading into the Prime Minister's stated vision on Independence Day of India hosting the 2036 Olympics, and his commitment to making India a sporting nation.

Sport is a unique, universal quest, which binds us as a nation and, in many ways, as a species. It enhances national pride, builds a sense of community, impact key social indicators, and improves physical and mental health, among many other facets. India must work now on becoming a sports-forward and active nation and the everyday benefits this can have for all of us.

The Olympics 2036 is a chance for us to work in a systematic manner where every child is given an opportunity at the school level to participate in sports, and our higher education institutes give opportunities for outstanding athletes to perform at their best level, similar in many ways to how collegiate athletics in the United States churn out excellence on a regular basis. For example, UCLA's all-time Olympic medal count is 284 medals, with 141 gold medals, while Stanford University athletes on their own won 39 medals at Paris. While this of course includes students from across the world mostly on scholarships, we should take bold steps in providing a pathway for our elite athletes to use colleges to hone their craft to be Olympics champions.

Given our natural advantages and favourable demographics, a focus on making Sports and Physical Activity (SAPA) a key focus area for India can be a game-changer. Each Olympics is an opportunity to acknowledge the role SAPA has in all of our lives, and to make sure that future generations imbibe the values and enjoy the gains of active living, while also building a deeper and wider talent pool through mass participation, talent identification, and excellence across dimensions.

A sports-forward nation gives equal importance to sporting success and to participation in sport, seeing both as ways to promote and enable active living throughout our lifetimes. After all, having a sports culture in India is predicated on the chance for everyone to be a participant in sport. Greater participation, in turn, expands our talent pipeline. This makes sports excellence and active living symbiotic pursuits. This is the essence of a SAPA approach.

With its young population, India has the opportunity to be a lighthouse nation in SAPA for the rest of the world, excelling in sport, and also in creating frameworks promoting an active India – at school, at work, in transit, in urban and rural settings – and using SAPA’s soft power including through yoga and classical dance, to share a message of community, camaraderie, and social inclusion.

While our sports culture is accelerating, and our elite sports performance is improving, the equally meaningful outcomes SAPA has to offer India cannot be overlooked, along with the downstream benefits they foretell. An active population is a healthy and productive population, and a vibrant SAPA ecosystem can be a key growth sector and driver of future livelihoods and economic growth while also achieving huge benefits to the economy from reduced healthcare costs, and greater productivity of the working population. Without active measures to reduce sedentary living we face an unprecedented public health challenge.

SAPA can turn things around for India’s sports potential, and also on improving our overall health especially non-communicable diseases (NCDs). A focus on SAPA can reduce our expenditure on NCDs, which currently contribute about 66% to India’s annual mortality burden, with this proportion expected to increase. SAPA can also help with improving mental health for the population, a well established outcome of physical activity. Studies have also shown how regular SAPA promotes our growth and development and has multiple benefits for physical, mental, cognitive, and psychosocial health that undoubtedly contribute to our learning.

The ways in which SAPA can contribute to the economy are also clear cut. India has a major demographic dividend for the next several decades and is expected to be the largest contributor to the global workforce with over 95 crore individuals. The SAPA ecosystem can catalyse growth. With the Union Budget focusing on employment and skilling, an emerging sector like SAPA can drive the creation of jobs and livelihoods, as well as entrepreneurial and industrial opportunities. SAPA also has an indirect but sizeable impact on the workforce as a whole. Across sectors, the benefit of a sporting and active India and an active workforce will be felt through the impact on productivity among the working population. The benefits of this increased productivity will largely be driven by reduced absenteeism and presenteeism among India’s workforce in high-growth sectors like IT, retail, manufacturing, textiles, etc. These will be critical value additions over the next several decades.

For India to lead the way in optimizing SAPA and cementing our place in the global sports conversation, focused interventions including prioritizing sports and curriculum at school and colleges, and creating skilling opportunities across the spectrum for jobs, will be important. Also necessary will be urban and institutional design and planning frameworks that allocate 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. We are also uniquely positioned to optimize the use of technology to enhance inclusion and wider dissemination in sports participation, and this also opens the door for entrepreneurship opportunities.

Today, India is invested deeply in enabling a population that has immense potential to be a sports powerhouse, productive, active and healthy. We must ensure we have a strong legacy plan that allows universalizing of access to SAPA with a specific focus on children playing sport and SAPA creating livelihoods. There is no better way of optimizing the opportunity of an Olympics than by working towards having an active and healthy population. Without this it will be difficult to have Olympic champions across dimensions and in large numbers. India has the opportunity to be a world-leader in this movement, and creating a sporting and active India gives us all the chance to play and win together every day.

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