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NURTURING WORLD CLASS SPORTSPERSONS - ROLES, STRATEGIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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Sports & Games at the heart of India's Culture

There is no gain-saying the fact that India is a nation that goes ecstatic over anything that has to do with sports. The answer to this is not hard to discern considering that the history of sports in India goes back into the Vedic past. Physical culture as a whole was largely fuelled by religious rights in ancient India. As the mantra in the Atharvaveda goes, 'Duty is in my right hand and the fruits of victory in my left'. This is almost similar to the ideals of the Olympic Oath : 'For the honour of my country and the glory of sports'. A close look at the origin of some of the sporting activities in the world will show that games like badminton probably originated in India as a grown-up's version of a very old children's game known in England as 'Battledore and Shuttlecock', the battledore being a paddle and the shuttlecock a small feather cock now, normally called a 'bird'. Chess originated from Shatranj and even 'snakes and ladders' and playing cards have typically Indian origins and it was from here that the games spread so far off lands where they were modified or modernized. India came on the international stage in a big way winning Men's Field Hockey Gold at the Olympics six consecutive times between 1928-1956 accounting for more than half of India's historical total of 26 Olympic Medals. At various times, India hosted world class events in sports starting from the Asian games in New Delhi in 1951 and then in 1982. Besides, hosting the World Cup Cricket in 1987 and 1996 and again in 2011 besides organizing the first Indian Grand Prix Formula One Motor Race at the GautamBuddh International Motor Racing Circuit in 2011. It also co-hosted the 2003 Afro-Asian Games, the 2010 Hockey World Cup and organized with tremendous success, for the first time the XIX Commonwealth Games in New Delhi in 2010. Major international sporting events are annually held in India which include the Chennai Open Tennis, Mumbai Marathon, Delhi Half Marathon and the Indian Masters in Tennis. This is the reputation that India has acquired over the last many decades as a world class hub for the promotion of sports and games. The subject of this paper is to lay emphasis on the dichotomy that exists between what is professed and what is practiced and the ways and means of addressing this peculiarity and finding the appropriate roles, strategies and responsibilities towards the nurturing of world-class sportspersons and the overall grooming of Indians in physical recreational sports and games.

The bitter truth

There is hardly any doubt about India's position as the most populous democracy on the face of the earth. It has the world's second largest population, a few tens of millions less than China's and an economy which is the fastest growing and by 2012 World Bank data, pegged at US \$ 1.842 trillion, the tenth largest in the world. The size of India's population, its economic growth curve etc. are ample reasons for us to debate about the country's abysmal record in world sports. In terms of the disparity between population size and medals won, there is no worse Olympic performer than India. It is definitely a matter of serious concern that a country of more than 1.2 billion people can only collect roughly an average of less than one medal per Games.

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Though, without a single gold medal, the London 2012 Olympics was India's most memorable and successful to date. We finished with two silver and four bronze medals. In terms of statistics and ratio this works out to one medal for every 200 million people, the most deplorable ratio of all competing nations at London. In comparison, China has an enviable medal : people ratio of one medal for every 15.5 million people (for a total of 87 Olympic medals). For USA this works out to one medal for every 3 million people. With an annual GDP of US \$ 1.842 trillion, India's medals tally is comparatively far lower than that of countries with economies of comparable size. For instance, Russia with a marginally larger than India's GDP won 82 medals at the London Olympics. If the medal tally is adjusted to its population and size of the economy, India's ranking is poorer than many BRIC economies not to talk of North Korea's and even that of Trinidad and Tobago. This also brings us to the question of the urgent need for a complete revamp of the national sports policy and the crying need for reforms at various places to bring about the best in our sports and games at the global level. It would definitely be wrong to say that India does not produce good sportspersons, be it men or women. Of course, Cricket is high on the list followed by Lawn-Tennis, Badminton, Football and Hockey. The country is absolutely cricket-crazy and is a soccer-maniac. There is no doubt that India has abundant talent but at the same time, underperforms on the world's stage. Probably, one of the big problems of India not being able to produce good sportspersons is obsession with cricket. No doubt, India has made itself prominent in the world with continual success in cricket and this has kind of acted as a hindrance to the progress of other sports. More money is flowing into cricket with the number of sponsors lined up to provide support while other sports don't get the financial support they badly need. Most parents want their children to become cricketers for obvious reasons that there's money and fame in it. The thought of the inability of sportspersons to gather medals in Olympics, Commonwealth Games and World meets occurs only once in four years, that too hardly for a couple of weeks or so when the print and electronic media are covering the events. After that, people are busy with their obsessive distraction with cricket and even Lawn-tennis and football.

The need of the hour

These observations bring us to the sixty-four dollar question of how we approach the entire problem of nurturing world class sportspersons. What should be our role, responsibilities and strategies? For a country like India the focus should be on nurturing the huge pool of talents in our possession. Olympian AbhinavBindra would say, 'India needs to do a lot for sports.' He believes that we have an abundance of talent that needs to be nurtured right from the young age and we also need to have world-class infrastructure besides, world-class coaching and training right from the young age. He was comparing the achievements of China as an example of how investing in sports translates into Olympics victories. It has been observed and quite rightly, that Indians are basically poor as well as weakened by poor infrastructure and poor governance which impacts on everything right from public health to education to opportunities for growth and advancement. An expert on sports confessed how rich countries tend to perform so well in the Olympics largely boosted by far better access to sports infrastructure, by "talent magnetism" and other factors. Though, India's population is more than 1.2 billion, the percentage of population participating in sports is very low. This is mainly because of poor childhood health, physical isolation for want of effective transportation from home to the training centres in big cities. To add to this, is the tragedy of the idea of representing one's country not exciting or enthusing millions who find it really difficult to have two square meals a day. However, the income of a country cannot always be the dominant factor in deciding whether it can perform or underperform in world sports and games. Some poorer countries in Asia and even Europe and Africa are known to top the lists in many sports and games. Some of the poorest countries in Africa like Kenya, Ethiopia produce some of the best long-distance runners. What is needed is sympathy and concern of the Government

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and parents in becoming pro-active and taking initiative in the right spirit. Encouragement should begin right from the kindergarten level. Then the government can take over and put in place a proper system for nurturing, grooming and training of children, teens, young adults and adults in various sports and games. Children should be exposed to a variety of outdoor games and physical recreation activities right from school level. The syllabus should have specific hours allotted for sports and games every day. Children from the poorer background should be provided with nutritious mid-day meals and the proper training in nurturing the skills. Even, we should be thinking in terms of scholarships and stipends and rich cash-awards for those bringing glory to the country at the global level which in turn would encourage a lot of young people to seriously take up sports not only as a vocation but an avocation too.

Wales as a Role Model

One can say with confidence that even in such dismal situations India still has reasons to be optimistic about. At the London Olympics it secured the highest ever medal tally and sent, probably the biggest contingent ever, at least in Athletics. Some 83 of them. We are so very hopeful that the contingent would increase along with the medals when we travel to Rio for the Olympics next year. It goes without saying there will be millions of youngsters back home in India all ready to try and emulate these sportspersons and one can only hope that the country can soon see the likes of Milkha Singh and P.T. Usha. Delving into the need for resurrecting Indian sports as a whole and addressing the acute problem of producing world class sportspersons I would venture to take a leaf from the history of sports in Wales. I am impressed with their focus on a strategy that involves, the child, the parents, the community and all stake-holders in giving sports the focus it ought to have. They are not limiting sports any longer to increasing the rate of sports participation nor to a gradual increase in the number of elite medals won, but firmly committing to the aspiration that Wales can achieve bigger, better outcomes by stretching herself. As a consequence, they have focused on every child, without exception, getting hooked on sport for life and to establish Wales as a nation of champions. This would require radical thinking around how sport is planned, offered and promoted. They feel its appeal needs to be wider, deeper and capable of sustaining interest and passion in the child right through to adulthood. Recognizing that sport has a unique ability to bring people together and promote a sense of belonging the approach is toward a family concept involving players, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, volunteers and coaches with support and encouragement unlocking a whole world of potential and at the same time imparting a sense of worth. Communities can become strong, safe and healthy environments, provided sport and games are seen and celebrated as unifying factors. If sport is to truly engage the widest possible audience and sustain their involvement through life it is absolutely essential that there is a clear pathway offering a wide diversity and appealing opportunities. There is urgent need to heighten awareness of people's life-cycles, perceived and actual barriers like child poverty and the growing competition from other forms of leisure to be factored in. As Professor Laura McAllister, Chair, Sports Wales, critically observed: "we need to better understand the issues and be more proactive in the steps we take to addressing the very things that stand in the way of us achieving our ambitions." Adding, "we can all rise to the challenge, if we are all prepared to be ambitious in our approach, to embrace change, take bold decisions and to truly collaborate" and, this can become a reality.

The ideal Strategy

As we contemplate on the urgency of a road-map that would help India to nurture world class sportspersons may I succinctly lay bare the core of the role, responsibility and strategy involved in this gargantuan enterprise for a country of 1.2 billion people. We must accept at the beginning that heroes don't appear out of thin air. Heroism is an art and not an accident and heroes should be nurtured. The ancient

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Greeks had strong belief on three pillars of success: Skill, Strength and Compassion. These are three essential requirements for the child. Children are born with natural potentials. Skill has to be developed and passed on from parents to the children, from teachers to the students, from trainers to the trained. Heroism is not bravery but being competent. Human beings are endowed with tremendous source of endurance, speed, strength, flexibility, balance, coordination etc. Many people do not realize until it is nurtured and unleashed. Untrained individuals have the natural ability of running, jumping and throwing but nurtured and trained individuals store energy to win competitions and bring laurels for the country. I would hazard to suggest the following strategies towards achieving our avowed objectives of grooming world-class sportspersons:

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| 1. General awareness campaign | 15. Away-home training programme |
| 2. Motivational technique | 16. Funds and sponsorship |
| 3. Induction procedure | 17. Mock competition programme |
| 4. Talent pooling | 18. Marketing the talents |
| 5. Talent Identification | 19. Channelizing for long-term job |
| 6. Talent categorisation(ordinary/ elite) | 20. High goal setting |
| 7. Scientific and systematic training | 21. Planning of programme at micro and macro- |
| 8. Exposure | levels |
| 9. Psychological training aspects | 22. Strategic programme to drive away monotony |
| 10. Dietary conditions | 23. Strategic plans to overcome defeats |
| 11. Emotions, stress, anxiety management. | 24. Strategic plans to chase victory |
| 12. Role of Yoga | 25. Periodic analysis of performance, both self and |
| 13. High-altitude training | goal-oriented. |
| 14. Adaptability | |

Starting from the grass-roots

No policy on sports will succeed unless it takes into account all stake-holders. Strategies and priorities need to be placed where they should belong. Early experiences of sport are very important. We know from experience that children's own experiences are of various kinds. We need to work on them. The role of teachers, supported by the community clubs and local authorities is fundamental. The community plays a big role and to make sport effective in India it has to start in the countryside. India lives in her 650,000 villages. The rural population need to be factored in any innovation and reform in sport. Village children need to be provided with nutritious mid-day meals and be exposed to the rudiments of physical culture and outdoor recreational activities as part of their school curriculum. We need to play increasingly dominant roles in harnessing young talent, developing future leaders and providing quality facilities for our communities, be it rural, semi-urban, urban or metropolitan. Investing in community clubs where quality, varied and sustainable provision becomes the norm, has to be a key focus in our thinking and strategizing. To bring all these priorities to life, better communication between stake-holders and closer, effective collaboration is paramount. A blanket approach to sports is not going to deliver the transformational change we need to achieve significant increase in the participation rates. 'Catch'em young' is the rallying cry everywhere. We must create new catchment areas to tap the young talents right from primary school to high school. We need to develop much wider, more attractive offers through "more informal and recreational opportunities, capable of engaging children, young people and young adults of all abilities and successfully attracting people to rejoin the world of sport", observed Professor Laura McAllister, Chief, Sport Wales, and quite rightly. A typical challenge will be to arrest the decline in the number of young

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girls and women taking part in sport. Rural sport, especially Rural Olympics, need to be encouraged. In India rural talents are easy to find. Girls from rural Imphal have been known to excel in Boxing and Weight-lifting. Girls from the interior of Jharkhand have brought laurels for India in Archery and Shooting as well as Hockey. Young talents from rural Bengal have brought the gold in swimming and water-polo at the Asiad and in other international meets. Kho-Kho and Kabaddi rural sports have brought dynamism in the world of sports and games in India. Grooming young talents from villages and cities have paid rich dividends in both Volleyball and Basketball, while in Soccer it has always been those budding talents from the interior of India who have shot to fame. In Cricket, these days we hear of sensation from the interiors of Jharkhand, Maharashtra and other far off places. So, investment in budding talents at the grass-roots community level yield rich dividends in the future.

Taking a responsible role

With this approach I can easily define what could be the ideal role and responsibility for a nation. We need to work as team members and individual professionals committed, driven and guided by a team character and culture. The principles and actions mentioned above allow us to identify, support and develop sportspersons to take on the heat of competitive sports and beat the world's best. We are also called upon to develop world-class infrastructures if we are to develop world-class sportspersons and evolve the highest possible quality in the training environment and support services through emulative excellence, team-work, innovation and professionalism. It is then that we would produce on the world stage the likes of Usain Bolt, Tiger Woods, Floyd Mayweather, Rafael Nadal, Lionel Messi, Le Bron James and Mo Farah. This paper is no wishful thinking but a blue-print for a proactive thrust towards India becoming a hub of not only world-class sports and games but the very cradle of world-class sportspersons.