

# Making India a sporting nation

India can compete better in the international arena if different States are developed as centres of excellence for different sports



GAUTAM BHATTACHARYA

Two econometricians, Bernard A.B. and Busse M.R., in a paper in *The Review of Economics and Statistics* (February 2004) tried to establish that “total GDP is the best predictor of the national Olympic performance”. They also claimed that host countries are “likely to win an additional 1.8% of the medals beyond what would be predicted by their GDP alone”. Since then, many studies have attempted to understand the factors that influence most the ability of a nation to win medals at the Olympics. One such work after the Rio Olympics showed that medals per hundred billion of dollars (based on purchasing power parity data of 2015) are highest in some Caribbean nations and lowest in some Asian and African nations. These results negate to a considerable extent the hypothesis that total GDP is the best predictor of the performance of a nation at the Olympics.

## Factors that determine performance

There are many factors which are important in determining the performance of a nation in various sports. **Beyond a threshold level, the average standard of living in a nation and the country's population size may be important determinants for its performance at the Olympics.** The size of total GDP is hardly important in countries like India where a sizable segment is fighting hunger. A person of poor health can never be a good sports person. In countries where there are high levels of stunted growth, malnutrition and anaemia, we cannot expect good athletes. Thus, South Asian countries and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa don't fit in the econometric models built on total GDP.

Genetic factors are also no less important. **The U.S., Australia and the Netherlands are powerhouses in swimming, but not China.** Perhaps, taller people have an advantage in swimming or basketball but height is not important in shooting or gymnastics. China excels in shooting along with the U.S. and Germany. East Asian nations do better at table tennis than Western nations. Russia, East European nations and Central Asian countries do well in amateur boxing whereas China and Central Asians countries do better in weightlifting and wrestling.

**Mobilising resources in world-class training provides an edge to sportspersons. Such infrastructure makes the U.S. the superpow-**

er in athletics and gymnastics, Germany in equestrian, and the U.K. in diving, sailing and cycling. For poor nations, creating such infrastructure is a luxury.

During colonial rule, India got some exposure to international sporting events earlier than many Asian and African nations. The Calcutta Football League, for example, is the oldest football league in Asia. Durand Cup is the oldest existing football tournament in Asia. This exposure gave India an edge over other ‘Third World’ nations in the 1950s and early 1960s. Resources in India were spread thinly across sports disciplines. As more and more nations started coming into the international sports arena, India's relative position started declining from the 1970s.

Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Singapore and Malaysia may stand below India in the medal's tally at the Asian Games, but are ahead of it at the Olympics. This is primarily because India is moderately good at many sports but not good enough to be the best at any of them. In contrast, Jamaica does well at the Olympics in sprinting and Kenya gets medals in long-distance running. They perform better than India though they are not great sporting nations. In recent years, India has shown promise in shooting, amateur boxing, wrestling, gymnastics and badminton. We need to concentrate more on sports where the physical build of an average Indian will not stand as a disadvantage.

## One State, one sport

**States need to be integrated in a bigger way in India's sports policy. Can we not develop different States as centres of excellence for different sports? People of different States have different food habits and build. It's not impossible to develop training infrastructure for different sports in different parts of the country depending on the inclination of people of that area and their habits and build. Unless we start grooming our children, who show potential, for international sports, India can hardly succeed at the Olympics. Individual talent alone cannot take us ahead. The policy of “One State, One Sport” can be a game-changer in India.**

India's best performance at the Olympics was in London (2012) where it won two silver medals and four bronzes and ranked 56th in the medal's tally. At the Rio Olympics (2016), with one silver and one bronze, India's rank came down to 67. Whatever the predictions of the econometricians, if India can find a place in the top 50 sporting nations in the medal's tally of the rescheduled Summer Olympics at Tokyo commencing on July 23, that will be good enough to boost the nation's morale.

Gautam Bhattacharya is a former civil servant