

Making the Paralympics count

This is a chance to improve the conditions for the disabled pursuing sports and to refresh the way we view disability



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August 30 was a big day for India at the Paralympics. The country won five medals, including two gold, bettering the Rio 2016 contingent's haul in just a day. Indians with disabilities, like all Indians, are proud of these achievements. This presents an opportunity moment to reflect on how we can make the Paralympics truly count for India.

The Paralympics is a unique opportunity to empower the disabled. It offers everyone the chance to watch disabled bodies in action and to find commonality with them in the shared desire for national success. Sustained media attention ensures that athletes with disabilities capture the public imagination in an unprecedented way.

Discourse around the disabled

In India, persons with disabilities find it extraordinarily difficult to live a life of equal productivity and dignity as their able-bodied counterparts. The discourse around their status as *Divyang* – persons with divine bodies – fuels their alienation. Instead of viewing the disabled as ordinary individuals who require additional support to meet their unique needs, this language places them on a different pedestal and presents them as being endowed with supernatural powers. Rather than engaging with them in meaningful, constructive ways, many people either make a person's disability their focal point, stripping away their multi-layered identity, or ignore their additional challenges altogether. Stereotypes and unfounded biases about the disabled's incompetence, inability to make informed choices and asexuality, among others, are still alive and kicking.

It is no surprise, then, that engaging in recreational activities like sports is rarely on the minds of disabled people. Even those disabled persons who wish to undertake such activities face formidable obstacles. Mainstream schools, parks, colleges and swimming pools do not provide a conducive environment for them. Arguments about complications and causing inconvenience to others are commonly made to deny access. As a blind person myself, I remember being turned down by a swimming pool in Delhi when I approached them with a wish to pursue swimming classes. The reason? They had received complaints from female swimmers about unsolicited contact in the pool and felt

that having a blind person in the pool could get them into trouble. One doesn't have to be a Paralympian to enjoy the benefits of sports. Recreational sports can help build identity, confidence and a healthy relationship with one's own body. This is what many disabled people miss out on.

Disabled people with more ambitious sporting aspirations often enter into exploitative coaching relationships and navigate a complicated and unfriendly sports governance framework. This state of affairs is particularly troubling as Section 30 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, requires appropriate governments and sporting authorities to take measures to improve access to meaningful sporting opportunities for the disabled. These include redesigning infrastructural facilities and providing multi-sensory essentials and features in all sporting activities to make them more accessible.

For India, the success in these Paralympics will be truly meaningful only if it prompts introspection and reorientation. At the systemic level, this has to cover governance reforms in the Paralympic Committee of India. The Committee is now headed by a medal-winning former Paralympian, Deepa Malik. The Union Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs brought parity to the cash rewards structure for medal-winning Paralympians placing them on equal footing with their able-bodied counterparts at the Olympics. These are steps in the right direction.

An opportunity for everyone

To deliver the value of sport more inclusively, satellite television providers and sports broadcasters must take steps that enable the disabled to watch and participate in sporting activities. Further, pictures of the Paralympics in electronic media and on social media must be accompanied by image descriptions for the visually challenged. At the individual level, everyone can view athletes with disabilities in a holistic sense while also acknowledging their additional challenges and striving to create more opportunities for the disabled people in our lives so they can participate in all walks of life.

It is easy to admire the courage of our para-athletes from afar. It is much harder to use these Games as an opportunity to do our bit to change things, to ensure that we are regularly surrounded by such competent and driven disabled people who are given the additional support they need to thrive. With intent, resolve and action, we can make the Paralympics count for India not just on the medal table but in the everyday.

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