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Hosting the Commonwealth Games: Will it boost India's Soft Power?

By Ajaya Kumar Das

Synopsis

India's decision to host the Commonwealth Games seems to have become less popular in the country for its reported organisational failures in the run-up to the Games. Staging the Games will not help much to advance its soft power.

Commentary

WHY DID India decide to host the Commonwealth Games, due to be held in New Delhi in October this year? Was it a desire for notice and recognition of its organisational skills, sporting achievements, hospitality, cultural (heritage), future ambitions, and, above all, its modern side? The answer is not simple. But the end result is not very pleasant: what the world will take note of is a new India that falls short of its soft power potential. The political utility of the Games seems to have somewhat been lost even before it begins with the revelations of organisational chaos and corruption in preparation for the Games.

A Successful Host?

The Commonwealth Games is the third largest international multi-sport event in terms of both popular and geopolitical appeal -- after the Olympics and the Asian Games. Having successfully hosted the Asiad in 1951 and 1982, New Delhi's decision is quite understandable: it wants to increase its chances of hosting the Olympics in the future. But there have been highly publicised reports about delays in completing venues, poor-quality construction works, massive corruption charges and cost overruns. The Queen's Baton Relay which is akin to the Olympics Torch Relay is also not free from scandals. With incompetent execution, corrupt preparation, and missing collective responsibility, questions are being raised about India's credibility to organise such mega international multi-sport events successfully which will take place in less than two months from now.

India might in the end overcome the organisational deficiencies and regain some prestige, but the spate of problems does not suggest that India could measure up to the level of South Africa which successfully hosted the FIFA World Cup recently, let alone the Beijing Olympics.

Sporting Prowess

In terms of sporting prowess, India's past performances do not suggest that it will dominate the 19th Commonwealth Games the way China did in the recent Olympics. It is also highly unlikely that being the host

nation will bring any advantage to its own participants owing to the poor sports infrastructure in India. This has not changed much in the last seven years since India won the rights to host the Games.

Also in the past Asiads, the achievements of Indian athletes had paled in comparison to such sporting powerhouses as China, Japan and South Korea. In the Olympics, India's record has been even more dismal. In the Beijing Olympics, it managed to get only a single gold medal.

India's ultimate sporting skills will however be judged upon how it performs in the Asiads and the Olympics rather than the Commonwealth Games which has a relatively smaller profile. Cricket, the most popular sport in India, is neither a part of the Commonwealth Games nor the Olympics. The popularity of cricket among Commonwealth nations is also very limited compared to soccer. Besides hockey which is in decline, there are few sports in which Indian athletes sparkle, mainly due to the lack of a serious sports culture in the country.

In spite of successfully staging the Asiads in 1951 and 1982, India has also failed to advance sports awareness unlike its Asian compatriots -- China, Japan and South Korea -- who have effectively translated their economic growth into sporting prowess. Thus by hosting the Olympics, Japan and China -- in 1964 and in 2008 respectively -- not only heralded their emergence as sports powerhouses, but, most importantly, as world powers. Despite 60 per cent of its population being under the youthful age of 25, India falls short of its own sporting potential.

Soft power

Some recent polls might suggest that the Beijing Olympics failed to advance China's positive image in the world. But China has certainly sold its charm on two factors: successfully staging the Games and winning the highest number of gold medals. With its organisational efficacy, the opening ceremony of the recent Beijing Olympics was the perfect platform for China to showcase its future potential as a superpower.

India seems to be hoping that a successful Commonwealth Games will help it compete with China for soft power influence, which China will showcase again when it hosts the next Asian Games -- just a month after the Commonwealth sports meet in India. But the attempts by India's political elite on this occasion to showcase the rise of a new India cannot also hide the fact of a staggering deficiency in its social and physical infrastructure. These are indeed signs of India's core problem: poor governance. If India continues to fall short on its domestic political values, its soft power will always be volatile.

As the athletes, officials and tourists flock in the thousands to its capital, India could advance its attractiveness by drawing attention to its other strengths ranging from its free society, diversity, traditional culture and Bollywood to IT knowledge, entrepreneurship and a growing economy. But the growth of its soft power depends on whether the liberal and pluralist democracy could govern effectively, and bring prosperity and happiness to its society as a whole.

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