

IS INDIA READY TO HOST THE OLYMPICS GAMES?

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Illuminated Olympic rings in front of the Rainbow Bridge and the Tokyo Tower in Tokyo in 2020, one year before the Olympics Games were held in the city. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The Prime Minister recently said that [India aspires to host the 2036 Olympic Games](#). This has been a dream for successive governments and sports officials. Hosting the Olympics would not only underscore India's importance as a sporting nation, but also enable it to assert its geopolitical power and showcase development. But is India ready to host the Olympics?

Manisha Malhotra and **Norris Pritam** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Uthra Ganesan**. Edited excerpts:

What does hosting an Olympics entail? Why is it a prestige issue for nations to host the Games?

Manisha Malhotra: The Olympics is the pinnacle of sport. It showcases not only your nation to the world, but also soft power. Essentially, for 16 days, the whole world talks about your country. It is a huge honour. But the magnitude of it brings to the forefront not only the good but also the bad. So, hosting the Olympics becomes a double-edged sword. Even for seasoned countries which have hosted multiple Olympics, there are challenges. We saw what happened when Beijing hosted the 2008 Games... there was a lot of pushback and negative publicity.

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Norris Pritam: The Olympics is also a political statement. India is a global power and [its prestige] will go up manifold if it hosts the Games. Manisha talked about Beijing. But I think once the Games start, people forget these things; only the legacy of the Games remains.

What are the non-negotiables to make an Olympics successful?

Norris Pritam: The Games are the property of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and are given to the National Olympic Committees (NOC). The first non-negotiable is a strong NOC, which talks in unison. You cannot be bidding for the Games and have three parallel tracks in the NOC. The government comes later. Of course, the NOC cannot work without the government, but the Games are actually given to the NOC, which is the Indian Olympic Association here.

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The second is a legacy. What are we going to offer to the people in the years to come? The

people's participation, the social structure, and whether we can build infrastructure or not — this is a complete package. It's not just about winning or losing. A country may win the bid to host the Games and yet may not win several gold medals. But if they host the Games well, it's good. So, [this involves] the NOC's relations with the IOC, the government, and the Opposition.

Manisha Malhotra: Cohesion is the first, and I think that's where India will struggle. We are united, but we don't know how to work with one another well. The NOC is at the centre of the Olympics and it has to be governed above board and efficiently.

Hosting the Games involves different cogs in the wheel — culture, heritage, hospitality, infrastructure, finance, government, and sports bodies — which have to work in cohesion. In Paris (where the Olympics will take place in 2024), the culture departments are working with the museums. Every local garden has some Olympics history and event happening. There are lanes and roads being earmarked just for the Olympics. There is deep cleaning. Whether this is because of the bed bugs or whether they are just trying to get things ready, everybody is working at a frenetic pace.

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I asked a Parisian whether the city is ready to host the Games. She said, 'Whether we're ready or not, our people are so proud and united about the Games that we will make it happen. And even if we are not ready, we will make sure that the Games are a success.' That tells a lot about that society. During the Commonwealth Games in India (2010), there were many challenges. Every small challenge was highlighted and almost blown out of proportion. Doing this takes away from the joy of hosting the Games. So, I am not sure if we will be able to galvanise everyone for an event like this.

Will India be ready to host the Games in 2036? Is 13 years enough time to get everything in order?

Norris Pritam: Thirteen years is not a long time. Even if you want to bid for the Games, you have to start working from now to make yourself presentable to bid for the Games. Whether India is ready right now is not the right question to ask because, let's admit it, we are not ready. It also depends on which city hosts the Games. You need to have a top-class village for the Games. It cannot be done on a political level or at the city level. You have to have specialists — marketing specialists, who can think 13 years ahead, engineers, scientists, roads, bridges, everything. We have to start from now even if we want to bid. Fortunately, the IOC has now changed the rules a bit. Instead of just one city, you can host the Games in a twin city or in two regions or even in two countries in the same region.

Manisha Malhotra: Even Paris today is not ready. But Paris will be ready in 2024. Regarding the city, that's a huge challenge because of the political landscape and how India views sports, how each State views sports. We need to shortlist cities and hire feasibility consultants who can give unbiased and unpolitical reports about which city could host the Games best.

If we just focus on the sporting aspect, the biggest issue is governance. Indian sport is governed poorly. Federations are in a disarray, barring one or two. They don't know how to develop their own talent. They keep relying on basic government funds. They are not proactive.

Then there are larger social issues such as doping. All this needs to be tackled. I think India's biggest rival for 2036 would be Budapest. If you look at where Budapest is in terms of sports and hosting a big event and its facilities, an Ahmedabad or Delhi or Chennai or Mumbai will not even be in the same stratosphere.

Norris Pritam: During the Atlanta Games (1996), we were busy sitting at the main stadium, which was beautiful, covering the Games. But because of security concerns, we couldn't roam around the stadium. The morning after the closing ceremony, we decided to go to the stadium and take some pictures. But half the stadium had already been dismantled because a baseball season was starting there. That's the kind of thinking you need. Here, after the 1982 Asian Games, the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium (Delhi) was shut for years and it became an expensive junk yard. I think some of the props are still lying there. You cannot say I have got the Games, now the Games are over, thank you, goodbye. If you get the bid, what are you going to do with structures on which you spent \$30 billion-\$40 billion, five-10 years down the line?

If we focus on India's rank in the global sporting order, should India host the Games? Can we be confident of at least being in the top 15 nations, medal-wise, by 2036?

Norris Pritam: Earlier I wasn't confident but after the Asian Games success I have hope. The reason is that people like Manisha and companies like JSW have transformed Indian sport. Look at Neeraj Chopra. Somebody asked me, 'Where does he stay?' I said he is an NRI. I have hope because of facilities, medical facilities, and the exposure abroad. If Avinash Sable had been running only command and services meets, I don't think he would have run such gallant races. He is a world class runner because of these facilities, which were not given earlier. Indians can do well. Somebody has to nurture them and provide support and exposure at the right time.

Manisha Malhotra: I don't mean to be the buzz kill here, but look at facts: India won three medals in Beijing (2008), six in London (2012), and seven in Tokyo (2021). Even if India wins 14 medals in 2036, that still does not place the country in the top 15. We need to develop sports in which multiple medals can be won. Cycling, athletics, swimming, rowing, kayak-canoeing — these are five sports where, barring athletics now a little bit, India is non-existent. So, this is going to be the key. How quickly are we going to be able to develop these so that India wins medals? I don't think you are going to be able to do that in 13 years. A 20-year horizon would be more realistic.

And I don't know why you should even be in the top 15. In India, one gold medalist gets much more recognition than even 100 don't get from China or the U.S. So, I don't think the top 15 should be much of a benchmark. But yes, we would have to be competitive across events. And at least be in every final there is.

The IOC is big on temporary structures and reusing stadiums. Given that, and the fact that Indian authorities are fond of building huge venues, how do you think India should develop facilities if it wins the bid?

Manisha Malhotra: Temporary movable structures are the way to go. I don't think anyone can afford to build big stadia any more.

Norris Pritam: In India we are fond of saying 'world's largest' or 'Asia's biggest' or 'first time in India.' We should get over this mentality. We should be technically superb, that's it. Temporary structures can be built, and after the Games, they can be used for communities. A Sports Minister once said the Nehru Stadium should be locked, otherwise the track will get spoiled. Finally, without anyone running, the track got spoiled. Maybe, if people had run on it, it would have had more life. We should have workable stadiums or venues.

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Manisha Malhotra is the Head of Sports Excellence and Scouting with JSW Sports; Norris Pritam is a journalist with over three decades of experience in covering multi-discipline

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