



Sellotape Legacy

DELHI & THE
COMMONWEALTH
GAMES

Boria Majumdar • Nalin Mehta

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*For the little one who opens his eyes with this book – may he go on to love
the city it chronicles*

—Nalin Mehta

For Sharmistha and Bnatul – the two controlling influences of my life

—Boria Majumdar

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1 | FEAR AND THE CITY

CHASING THE COMMONWEALTH MIRAGE

It began in an auto-rickshaw. Abhinav Bindra had just ended eighty years of pointless national hand-wringing; Akhil Kumar, he of the magnificent dropping hands, had recently dazzled the country with that special Schwag-like small-town chutzpah that is defining new India; and Vijender Singh had shown the world that Indian bees carried a sting as well. In the cruel way of Delhi – too self-important and smug in our discussion on sport and the Indian character – we barely noticed the driver as we got into the auto. The two of us had, after all, just released our book, *Olympics: The India Story*. It was our first book together and to us, at least, there was a poetic melody in the unexpected delights of Beijing; and to our lesser selves, perhaps, there was the prospect of greater book sales.

It was oh-so-promising; a glimmer, finally, to light up what had largely been a dismal and soul-crunching story. Suresh Kalmadi had been on stage at the book launch in Delhi and he had used it to paint his own particular version of Indian sport. Now, as the auto slowly crawled under half-complete flyovers and roads dug up ostensibly for the looming Commonwealth Games, something he had said that day kept coming back into the conversation. ‘A new dawn’, ‘Rs 767 crore for training’, ‘never before in our history’, ‘we will change everything’. It was the evening of the no-confidence vote on the Indo-US nuclear deal but the Member of Parliament from Pune, taking a break from the Lok Sabha, was at our book launch, facing the cynical arc lights of Delhi’s sporting press and preening about a new tomorrow. This was his other self, as the chairman of the Commonwealth Games Organizing Committee. A galaxy of forgotten Olympians badgered him with uncomfortable questions, all of which were diplomatically answered with a smile and a nod by the suave Randhir Singh, the other top honcho of Indian sport.

We had been fairly content then, happy with our little launch. It fit the corporate definition of what constitutes such an event in Delhi – just enough names to gather journalists, just enough discussion and back-slapping before the drinks begin, just enough to make small news items that everyone but the authors forgets. Everybody goes home happy. Now we were dissecting the speech again, talking of lonely athletes and powerful babus, the Games and Delhi, sports and nationalism.

It was then that he burst in, ‘*Sab bakwaas hai*’ [This is all nonsense]. The auto-driver had been listening. ‘*Barah din ke liye hazaron perh kaat diye inhone. Barah din ke liye, saab*’ [They have cut thousands of trees for twelve days].¹ We were crossing Siri Fort and his arm swung in a disgusted arc as the words came out in staccato. He was angry, he wanted to have his say and he knew his stuff in the way that only those who are truly affected know. The statistics rolled off his tongue, mixed with incantations to *maa-behen* in glorious Benarasi Hindi. What he was saying was not new; it had been culled from a public sphere created by a vibrant media that has hungrily analysed most aspects of the Games. It was his passion that bowled us over. He had hit upon a cardinal truth about sporting events: they are rarely about sport in itself. They are about cities and nations and their place in the world. Sport is about athletic achievement but, at its heart, it is also about what it means and does to people, to societies. That is why we love it, or hate it so – but can never ignore it. The auto-driver was showing us a street-side view of the Games in a manner that textbooks rarely capture. It underscored to us why a detailed story of the Delhi Games must be written.

The Cambridge historian Christopher Bailey, writing in the 1980s, described similar epiphanies on Indian streets:

In this poor society, some forms of political and social knowledge were remarkably diffused: apparently uneducated people would come up to one in the bazaar to discourse on the demerits of Baroness Thatcher or Mr Gorbachev, while educated people in east and south-east Asia, let alone Britain, seemed to struggle to understand anything of the external world.²

It is precisely this tendency that Amartya Sen noticed and developed into his 'argumentative Indian' thesis. The auto-driver was now giving us our Christopher Bailey moment and it was this moment – for twelve days, he had said – that crystallized the path that has led to this book.

The newspapers had long since been moaning about the delays in setting up the Commonwealth Games infrastructure – daily after national daily had published special reports on its alleged mismanagement and the increasingly difficult race the organizers were running with deadlines. A week or so after our exchange with the auto-driver, the *Hindustan Times*, for instance, flatly declared: 'What is actually needed for it [CWG 2010] to materialize without our embarrassing ourselves is a miracle.'³ The reporters' verdict was based on an extensive survey of the construction sites. But the success or failure of an endeavour is one thing. We wanted to go into the heart of the matter. We wanted to ask the big questions that journalists – prisoners of the exigencies of their medium – sometimes don't have the luxury of asking. Why are we hosting the Games? Who benefits from it? Who pays? Who gains? Who loses? Where does Delhi 2010 stand in the larger history of sport? And, yes, whose city is this after all? These are the questions that this book answers.

The story of the Commonwealth Games holds up a mirror in which we see a reflection of contemporary India. There is a telling story that exemplifies much of this. In the early summer of 2009, as India's political parties jostled with each other in a bruising battle for the throne in Delhi, the capital's newspapers were suddenly flooded with a curious slew of full-page advertisements extolling the Congress for its developmental work for the Commonwealth Games. The advertisements were put out at a time when the idea of Dr Manmohan Singh storming back to power with such a decisive mandate was still a daring dream, even for the staunchest of Congress supporters. At such a time, the crores being spent on Games-related infrastructure in Delhi clearly had its political uses. The advertisements did not specify the issuing authority, but unashamedly used the peg of the Games to praise Dr Manmohan Singh and Sheila Dikshit, chief minister of Delhi, 'regarding the [related] development works carried out in the capital, like, twenty-four flyovers, seventy-five aerobridges

airport, 1285 km of better roads, 5,000 low floor buses, etc (sic).⁴ An angry Election Commission issued strictures for violation of the poll code – even going so far as to threaten officials who had cleared it to pay from their own pockets. The Delhi government denied any hand in the affair. The matter eventually blew away, a forgotten sidelight from a historic election that will be remembered for much else.⁵ As it turned out, the organizing committee of the Commonwealth Games had issued the politically loaded advertisements on its own accord. Its office bearers ‘profusely apologized’⁶ to the EC but not before the Commission summoned the Union sports secretary to ‘define the linkage between the ministry and the Commonwealth Games organizing committee’.⁷ The case of the Commonwealth advertisements in the middle of the 2009 general election campaign was instructive because it offered a window into what the Games are really all about – politics, plain and simple.

The Commonwealth Games have been dismissed by many as a posthumous celebration of a long-forgotten Empire. Others have mistakenly played up their potential to revive Indian sport, offering rosy visions of an assembly line of Indian sportsmen and women turning us, overnight, into the next China. This is all just window dressing. At their heart, the Commonwealth Games are about the politics of development and the raging ambitions of a rising India that so animate the middle classes and many decision makers in this country. Fuelled by the unrelenting fear of global ridicule that so drives our weak egos – and by the colour of money – politicians, bureaucrats and India’s sports czars have taken the citizens of Delhi on a ride that will change their city forever. Notions of a fragile national pride are inherent in this debate. India must show its best face, we are told. Delhi has been dug up, bamboos have been brought in from the North East to hide its poor, and the organizers have had a free run on many things.

This book is the story of the politics of these Games. It is the story of the money that has been spent on it and how it has been spent. Delhi is changing and this is a book about the city, about the idea of First World development and the work around the Commonwealth Games that has been such an important subtext

in Sheila Dikshit stomping back as chief minister for a historic third consecutive term. We want to state our position clearly: the reshaping of Delhi is surely welcome and the Games have provided the trigger that was needed. We have few sympathies with some of the *jhola-walas* who see eternal bliss in notions of struggle and poverty. Our concern is with the manner in which much of this work has been driven, the priorities which have shaped it – and they have not always been driven by only altruistic desires – the people who have shaped it and the direction in which the Games are taking Delhi and India.

Over the past few years of non-stop construction, virtually each one of Delhi's fourteen million denizens has been touched by the Games in one way or the other, but never before has the entire saga of the Games been revealed in its entirety.

GLOBAL CITY, GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS

Throughout history, rulers have sought to build their cities in their own image. If Lutyens's New Delhi was a metaphor for the might of the British Empire, Nehru held up Le Corbusier's spanking new city of Chandigarh to reflect the new rationality and the planning ethos of the Nehruvian state.⁸ In the same vein, many of Delhi's current ruling elites see the Commonwealth Games as an opportunity to refashion Delhi into what they call a 'global city', one that will adequately reflect India's ever-increasing power and prestige in the world order. The notion of projecting the capital city as a shining beacon of India's global power play has always been at the heart of Delhi's bid for the Commonwealth Games. It explains why the rest of the political class, and not just the sporting netas, bought in to the idea of the Games. National pride is on a premium in post-liberalization India, more so in India's capital. Internal documents of the organizing committee made available to us are unambiguous on the 'bidding rationale' of Delhi 2010:

These Games will showcase New Delhi, the capital of India, to the world and promote it as a global city of an emerging economic power. These Games will act as a medium for the development of the country. New sports venues will be built, existing venues will be modernized and a range of

infrastructure projects such as a comprehensive roads programme and a new metro system will be initiated. The 2010 Games in Delhi will provide a unique sponsorship opportunity for the Commonwealth Games movement within Asia, particularly South Asia, which is fast becoming a focus region for investments.⁹

Delhi wants to do a Beijing, albeit on a smaller scale. One of the key missions of the organizing committee is to project India as 'an economic superpower'¹⁰ and in late 2006, its officials made a presentation to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Describing this presentation, the organizing committee's official newsletter listed six points in a slide entitled 'Impact of hosting the Games'. Only one made a cursory reference to sport. The rest of the listed aims, laid down in those pre-global recession days, are self-explanatory: 'enhance the image and stature of India', 'project Delhi as a global destination', 'act as a catalyst for sustained development of infrastructure', 'add to the prevailing upbeat mood in the Indian economy' and 'create opportunities for trade, business and investment for Delhi and India'.¹¹ It could have been written by the Ministry of Tourism or Commerce. The writer noted, almost as an afterthought, that the prime minister also wanted India to win more medals than ever. Sure, but those would only be the icing on the cake.

The tale of Delhi's ambition comes through in virtually every Games document one touches. The original Delhi bid, submitted to the Commonwealth secretariat, was designed virtually like a tourism brochure, with pious statements of commitment sitting easily with the language of hyperbole:

One of the world's oldest living cities ... conquerors have fallen in love with it, marauders have plundered it and kings and princes have pampered it. A city that has held its own – in the past and even today in the 21st century. Where age-old monuments rub shoulders with modern chrome-and-glass skyscrapers. Where mouse-clicks enticingly co-exist with horse-cart clips ... Delhi today leads the country's progress, charting out new vistas in globalisation and economic growth for this mammoth country of over one billion ... Where huge, landscaped gardens created by emperors of yore suddenly give way to air-conditioned, glitzy shopping malls.¹²

It is this new India of shopping malls and flyovers that the organizers want to propagate. Even the Games logo is a case in point. Inspired by the Gandhian charka, its official explanation goes: 'spiralling upwards, it depicts the growth of India into a proud, vibrant nation, her billion people coming together to fulfil their true destinies. India's journey from tradition to modernity, her economic transformation into a superpower ... reaching out to the world and leading the way ...'¹³

The Games are about Brand India. As Suresh Kalmadi, the chairman of the organizing committee puts it, 'We are now living in a world that is increasingly global. We are always wired and connected to the rest of the world. Our comparisons are no longer with the past or with just our neighbours, but with the best in the world.'¹⁴ Nothing symbolizes India's deepest-felt desires and pretensions better than this.

**'MANY THINGS WERE NOT FACTORED IN BEFORE':
COUNT THE MONEY, BE AFRAID**

So, how much will the Commonwealth Games cost us? That is the first big question that this book grapples with. It is not an easy question to answer because the work is spread across diverse sectors and the money is being spent by a bewildering morass of multiple agencies. To enter the story of the Commonwealth Games is to enter into a labyrinth of overlapping controls – Ministry of Sports, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Tourism, Government of Delhi, Planning Commission, New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), Sports Authority of India (SAI), Delhi Development Authority (DDA), and so on. There are several high-level committees to coordinate their work,¹⁵ but like it often happens in government, many things remain unclear to the very end.¹⁶ The result is that even many among those involved in organizing the Games do not have the full financial picture in front of them, with each government agency pursuing its own targets.

When we first started looking for the Games' bill, we thought Olympic Bhawan would have all the answers. The brand-new headquarters of the Indian Olympic Association and the original home

of the Games' organizing committee – before it shifted to its even swankier new office opposite Jantar Mantar – is a recent addition to Delhi's Qutub Enclave. Nestled amid private hospitals and corporate offices, the skyscraper looks like a metaphor for the self-image of the Delhi Games – modern, efficient, organized. Standing outside its gates, a visitor would not blink if told that this white building, with its Manhattan air, was the home of an IBM or a Microsoft. Once inside, however, Olympic Bhawan has the smell of Gurgaon, the new hick town which has one eye trained on New York but is implanted surgically in the confusing reality of Delhi. In Olympic Bhawan you have the interiors of a fast-moving corporate office – orange walls, slick colour-coordinated decorations – juxtaposed with a staff that often moves to the rhythms of a moribund government office.

When we first walked into its precincts in mid-2008, the entry was from the basement. It was one of the few parts of the building that was really ready. As we lounged around, talking to our contacts, someone pointed to the high-profile foreign consultant, sitting with his laptop on a makeshift table in the corner. He didn't notice us, totally absorbed in his computer in a very harried sort of way, but he seemed horribly out of place. Around us, the room was full of the revered names of Indian sportsdom, their corners littered with favour-seekers – out-of-luck former athletes, wannabe managers, contractors – in the time-honoured manner of Indian sport. Someone brought in cups of tea, and sounds of construction hammered in from every pore of the building as labourers raced against time to complete their work. It seemed like an apt picture of the external reality of the Games: a whole lot of gloss, a great deal of confusion, and some *Casablanca*-style figures working like mad to make it work.

That was then. The next time we went in, the basement was no longer the entry, and many of the floors were functional. A kindly official had promised us the financial documents. We strolled through the corridors, walking past nameplates of ex-generals, high-profile bureaucrats and sporting politicians. There is nothing secret about these documents, but it was something of a minor triumph to get our hands on them. Access to information in Olympic Bhawan – as indeed in NDCC Tower – is often a function of access to power. Compounding the apparent

veil of opaqueness is the fact that the organizing committee has in the past refused to impart information under the Right to Information Act, arguing in the Delhi High Court that the RTI does not apply to it. This is especially jarring when parliamentary records on the Commonwealth Games are available at the click of a mouse button, a legacy of the delightful digitization of those records that was started by the late Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, Pramod Mahajan.

The financing of the Commonwealth Games has been the subject of parliamentary questioning since 2004 and it took us just twenty minutes to download the entire details from the parliamentary website after a month of running around in circles to find the organizing committee's records. Juxtapose these two realities together and a curious dichotomy emerges. The organizing committee's slickly prepared plan, its annual reports and its budgets are prepared using best-practice templates taken from consultants who have worked on similar events the world over. If you had only these documents – with their nice diagrams, futuristic timelines and jazzy graphs – to rely on, you would think that the Commonwealth Games are the most well-organized event ever. Compare these with actual performance data submitted by various ministries and you enter the reality of India, with too many overlapping ministries, huge cost overruns and estimations going crazily haywire. The organizing committee is a clearing house, but, on its own, it is only responsible for the twelve days of the event itself. It does not control the rest – the flyovers, the airport, the roads, the stadiums – and with so many stakeholders, counting the money is a tricky terrain.

Parliamentary records show that at the time of government approval for the Games, the Games budget estimate had been only Rs 617.5 crore.¹⁷ This was a very preliminary original estimate and the Vajpayee government agreed to fund any future shortfalls between revenue and expenditure.¹⁸ It was a virtual blank cheque. By March 2003, when Delhi submitted its official bid, the cost estimates had tripled to Rs 1895.3 crore.¹⁹ As Sunil Dutt, the sports minister at the time, told the Lok Sabha in 2004, everybody knew that these were only early projections that could only go up later.²⁰ What is shocking is just how much they went up. Table 1.1 charts how the budgets have kept rising, sector by sector, ever since.

Table 1.1: Commonwealth Games Estimated Costs (2003–09) (Figures in INR Crore)²¹

Year	Operating Expense (OC)	Infrastructure	Publicity in Melbourne (Bollywood show)	Security/ Services	Pune Cth. Youth Games	Athletes	Others/ Overlays	Broadcasting	TOTAL
Dec. 2002	399.05	218.5							617.55
Mar. 2003	655.5	1085		154.8					1895.3
Dec. 2005	896.04	3376.4							4272.44
Nov. 2006	767	2669	29	264	110	300			4139
Aug. 2007	767	2707	29	264	110	661			4538
Dec. 2008	1628	4109.77	29	277	351.48†	678	400	463	7936.2
July 2009	1628	9764	29	277	351.48	678**	405*	463	13595.48
Final 2009 -incl. Delhi Govt. infrastructure cost estimate	1628	67181.55	29	277	351.48	678		463	70608

For **, † see footnote 21.

Note: 2006 figures were estimated by GoI with a variation of 10–25 per cent under various heads.²² In last row, column on infrastructure, we have added estimated official cost of Games Village (Rs 631.55 crore) to Delhi government infrastructure cost estimate of Rs 66,550 crore.

By 2005, the estimated costs had shot up by more than six times from the original figure. By 2008, the minister of sports was estimating a figure of over Rs 7,000 crore and in 2009, the comptroller and auditor general provided a calculation of about Rs 13,000 crore. This was more than twenty times the original cost estimate and even this figure did not include spending by many agencies (See Table 1.1).²³ If you were running a company, such sharp cost overruns would, in most cases, be seen as management failure. But this is only half the story.

In early 2009, we were discussing these rocketing estimates with a senior Delhi government official when he dropped a bombshell. We had met about something else over lunch on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The Games came up in passing and he listened to our calculations before calmly pointing out: 'The total Games spending on city infrastructure is Rs 65,550 crore.' It didn't square at all with any of the other financial data. But he was way up in Delhi's power circle and clearly knew what he was talking about. So we asked him for a detailed breakdown and there it was in fine print: Rs 65,550 crore clearly marked in an internal Delhi government note on what it calls 'Commonwealth Games-related work'. The state government subsequently published these figures officially²⁴ and when clubbed together with other costs, they pushed the total amount to more than Rs 70,000 crore.

Our problem was that between 2003 and 2009, this estimate on infrastructure spending calculated by Sheila Dikshit's government did not figure in any of the data submitted by successive sports ministers in Parliament or in the internal records of the organizing committee that were made available to us. This new information, passed on by the office of Delhi's chief secretary, had us completely flummoxed. Why was it invisible?

A close analysis of the financial data reveals that the Games infrastructure budgets submitted in Parliament between 2003 and 2008 had only listed a little over Rs 1,300 crore (for building civic infrastructure) against the Delhi government's name. This was the amount that the Delhi government said it needed extra funding for, asking the Planning Commission²⁵ for a grant. This was the amount