

## Indian Olympians



লেখকঃ Aswin Garimella  
 যোগাযোগঃ aswin.garimella@gmail.com  
 পরিচিতিঃ Aswin Garimella is currently a graduate student, pursuing his doctoral degree in organic chemistry from the University of Missouri. He has participated in several essay writing and oratorical contests and won prizes in his hometown, Chennai, India, and has interests in current affairs, history, literature and chemistry. His favorite activities are reading, browsing and traveling.

When summer Olympics 2008 started in Beijing on the 8th day of 8th month of 8th year of the millennium, there was a lot of expectations and excitement when people uttered the names of Michael Phelps, Wie Yang, and Usain 'lightning' Bolt and few hundred others all over the world. For a country that is fast becoming an economic soft super power, India was expected to showcase its talents in the world's playground. India, too, had hopes of winning medals in individual events like shooting, wrestling, tennis, and badminton. At the end of the Olympics, Abhinav Bindra became the first Indian to get the gold medal in men's 10m air-rifle shooting competition in individual events. Wrestler Sushil Kumar and boxer Vijender Singh won bronze medals in their respective categories. Indians, indeed, are proud and happy that they got their first gold medal in individual events at the Olympics. "The three medal winners were accorded a rapturous welcome back home which included rides on elephants, public rallies and handsome cash awards," notes the AFP.

Joyful celebrations aside, the question that resurfaces after every Olympics is why India has not been able to show a better performance with many medals in the Olympic events.

### ***Cause and Effect***

In a recent paper, Anirudh Krishna and Eric Haglund, two academics at the Duke University in the United States, has observed that the lack of information and social mobility, along with poverty, malnutrition, coupled with lack of interest in other sports are the reasons for the performance of Indians in Olympics. Other analysts point to poorly maintained and underfunded state sports academies, low private sponsorship, initiation and investment in sports, lack of support from media, especially TV, for inspiring young ones to consider sports as career, lack of popularity of legends of Indian sports other than cricket to propel Indians to take up their sport as a profession, as the reasons. The cynicism that had ensued because of failed expectations of the performance of socialistic government and self-centered politicians is hard to remove from the minds of people, which may be an important reason for the non-commitment of masses in sports, despite having a large talent pool. Some, frustrated with these

kinds of results, go the extreme way and suggest diverging attention from cricket and banning news media that use the sports column as 'cricket column' and so on. There are two facets to this problem. One is the lack of active involvement of government, the politicians and authorities concerned to dramatically improve the sporting facilities in India, and the other one is the lack of active participation of young talents and their parents in encouraging them to take up their passionate sport as a career.

### ***Sports Circle and Money***

Let's face it. We need money to run a sports agency and groom talent. More the money, better the facility, greater the number of talents, tougher the competition, better the candidates for the Olympics, greater the chances of winning medals, greater the attention from media and people, greater the chances of getting sponsorship for that sport from then on, and eventually money gets pumped in from private and government sponsors, and the "Khel Chakra" or sports circle starts again.

### ***Private Sponsorship***

P T Usha, India's former ace sprinter, who runs an athletic school to train young girls in Kerala, India, pitches for corporate sponsorship for additional funds to the promising athletes in the country. Rajdeep Sardesai, editor-in-chief of national news network CNN-IBN, suggests that each IPL sponsors should take up the task of grooming talents in certain individual sports which are promising for India in Olympics. He has a point. "India's annual federal sports budget of 280 million dollars is less than half of the 724 million dollars eight franchises paid for owning cricket teams in the Indian Premier League," notes the AFP. Without private sponsorship, it is very difficult for a sporting team or individual to participate in the Olympics; for example, Indian shooting officials were on the verge of pulling the team out of the Beijing Olympics before private sponsors stepped in. But in a socialistic country like India, which had opened up its market only 16 years ago, the active involvement of corporate sector in promoting sports and other amenities are at infancy. The Mittal Champions Trust is an example of private sponsorship in India.

### ***Collective Responsibility***

#### ***Active Participation of Government and Politicians:***

It is the individual and the collective responsibility that can make democracy work well for the greater good. The collective responsibility should come from administrators, politicians and decision makers at the head of the governance. Abhinav Bindra echoes this belief. He says, "System is the problem. People responsible need to have vision." "I hope my bronze changes the profile of the sport in the country as there is no dearth of talent," the wrestler Sushil Kumar told reporters after grabbing the medal in the men's

freestyle (66kg) category in Beijing. “There’s no shortage of talent in India. It’s us, the administrators, to be blamed for India’s poor record in the international arena,” Uma Bharti, Sports Minister for India in 2002, was quoted as saying by Associated Press. “We set aside a pittance for sports. Once this attitude changes, Indian sports will take a big leap.” This coming out of a sports minister is testimony to the kind of sporting talent we have in India and the kind of facility that has been provided to them. India should have a system where a person can take up his favorite sport as his profession and feel proud about it and can have a good quality of life with it. In the small city of Bhiwani, Haryana, boxing is a passionate sport; despite meagre facilities by the Sports Authority of India (SAI), 4 out of 5 boxers of Indian Olympic squad have come from it. The Olympic bronze medal winner of 2008 was one of them – a wonderful example of committed individuals coming together and making it big in the Olympics.

There are a lot of improvements to be made in SAI; however, the programs offered by SAI currently are not all that bad. SAI is the body that has regional centers all over India distributed evenly. Abhinav Bindra says that it is possible for an aspiring shooter from a middle class to make it big in the Olympic arena from the current Indian sports system with some little hurdles they can overcome. Lots of social awareness programs have been initiated by the government. National integration for youth is one such program which brings in youths from various parts of the country and encourages them to explore each other’s culture, language and tradition. National sports talent context is a program under SAI to identify and nurture talents from 8-14 yrs of age. Annually Rs. 30-40 crores out of SAI’s total budget are being spent for improving sporting conditions in India. Around Rs. 152.15 crores have been allotted for the sports academy of India for improving and assisting sports in India this year (2008-2009). Recently, the Ministry of Sports has started a scheme named PANCHYAT YUVA KRIDA AUR KHEL ABHIYAN (PYKKA) for exploring and grooming sport talents at the panchayats, which are the lowest levels of governance hierarchy. It is greatly hoped that the allotted funds will be used for the said purposes and the programs and schemes will bring forth effective results.

### ***Individual Responsibility***

Abhinav Bindra says, “We need more resources to provide world-class facilities to athletes. But unless we don’t get results from our athletes, it’s difficult to expect sponsors to support our cause” – thus emphasizing on the fact that responsibility should be individual and as well as collective. “The aspiring athletes should also be given necessary international exposure so that they can fine-tune themselves, get international experience and judge where they stand and what they lack,” says P. T. Usha. “If we want to get to double digits, we need to target 2016 and start working from today. For the usual comments about how India underperforms, it is very simple.

We don't have any sports structure whatsoever. So the fact that we are even winning a couple of medals is phenomenal. It is time we all joined hands and tried and changed this acceptance of mediocrity. I think we should all be positive and actually offer solutions since it is pretty obvious we all know the problems." says Abhinav Bindra. We Indians cannot point our fingers towards politicians and administrators and wash our hands off. Improving sports facility alone cannot help. Improving the center's involvement and the states' funding towards sports shall not suffice. Interest needs to be generated. Pride needs to be associated. A recent Newsweek article focuses on the reason why China considers winning medals more important than anything else, and attributes it to the pride they associate with it, and as a means of overcoming the perceived humility and opinion the Westerners have on them. This has a profound effect on the performance of Chinese athletes. Talents need to be groomed. Those privileged and more informed parents need to inculcate sport as a culture in their kids. Private TV media should include programs that can inspire millions of youth in the country to take up sports other than cricket as a career. A reality show about a sporting star might be a good start, as suggested by one of my colleagues.

### ***Sports in Main Curriculum***

A better informed individual always performs better. Analysts point out that "Greater wealth and informed individuals will help a country to put itself on the Olympic medal podium." Sports need to be included in the curriculum. Zafar Iqbal, ad-hoc selection committee member, feels that hockey should be included in academic curriculum so that more youngsters can take up the game and a culture of sports can be created. He says, "Sports should be included in the main curriculum of the universities and schools. Even if we look at the European countries, we see most of the participants are students and we should also have a culture of hockey in the colleges and educational institutes." Incentives and more scholarships should be awarded to students who accomplish and excel in sports. Indian universities do have such programs, but lacks greater awareness and effective participation.

### ***Yes, We Can***

Sport analysts point out the fact that India has been able to win considerable medals in Asian and Commonwealth Games, but somehow lacks the ability to convert those into Olympic medals, whereas countries like Australia and Iran were able to do that with ease. To give you an example, India have won 52 medals in the 2002 Commonwealth Games, whereas Australia has won 144 medals. Australia was able to convert those medals into Olympic medals numbering 107 (combined), whereas India won only one bronze medal in Sydney 2000 and one silver medal in Athens 2004. Changing gears from a competition like Asian and Commonwealth games to a competition like

Olympics requires lots of training and investment. An encouraging move has been made by the Steel magnate, Lakshmi Niwas Mittal, in the right direction to overcome this lack. He has setup the Mittal Champions Trust, to promote excellence in Indian sports, by acting as a support system that the champions need to excel. Their aim is to see that India wins many medals in the London 2012 Olympics. Given the abundance of talents here, a few more of such trusts won't hurt.

### ***Naïve Suggestions***

According to the legend of Mahabharata, Arjuna was the greatest archer the world has ever produced, and Bheema the greatest wrestler. Wrestling and archery were favorite sports for Indians, in ancient times and until recently, before the British introduced cricket to us. May be, that is the reason why Indians have time and again proved their might in shooting and wrestling. Training our athletes who naturally has inclination towards those sports because of their upbringing and culture would only ease the efforts. In this way, the lack of interest quotient could be avoided. There is precedence for what was being said; China initially decided to focus on sporting events like gymnastics, table tennis and diving in which it had traditionally done well, and which have been part of their history and culture and have built their success around it.

The social, economical and political outlook needs to be changed. The initiative should come from the political side. The central government should enormously support the state governments which actively participate in the well-being and overall health of their state citizens, so that they would take up competitive sports as their career. Corporate sponsorship will follow suit, to develop the raw talents of sporting individuals. For a country that still has 456 million people, 41.6% of its population (2005 World Bank report), living below the new international poverty line of \$1.25 (PPP) per day, it becomes very difficult for individuals to focus more on sport than on their daily wages. So, the onus is increasingly on the welfare government to provide basic needs for the uplift of sports in India. Some of the suggestions to the government from my humble understanding of the problem and my search for answers are to (a) look into traditional sports and encourage them, (b) identify areas like Bhiwani and provide world class facilities, (c) regularly conduct international sporting events to improve quality of Indian sportsmanship, (d) use media to enlighten masses about the good programs in sports and sports scholarships offered in universities, (e) convene a committee of committed individuals to oversee the process of equal distribution of money allotted by SAI (benefiting the lowest level as it is intended to), (f) include sports as part of the curriculum in higher education, and (g) encourage industrialists to adopt a sport and the talented individuals.

This is by no means an easy process and it requires great planning and a long time. Individuals and parents, on the other hand, should encourage sporting talents. For those who are less privileged and less informed, but more gifted in terms of talent in sports, other privileged individuals should be involved in their grooming and uplifting of their sporting career.

What we don't want is happening currently in India. Just as Abhinav Bindra has won the gold medal, most of the state governments have started announcing incentives for him [5]. Not that I am against the celebration and honoring of the great achievement, but Abhinav Bindra's case is different. He is a millionaire and CEO of a tech company. He is more privileged (fortunately for us) than most other talents in the country, and hence pouring the tax-payers' money into developing the infrastructure and system of sports would be a greater honor for Abhinav, than would be giving him a mere incentive for that achievement. Adding to that, is the fact that countless endorsements and associations have come by way of Abhinav Bindra [6], but other participants and medal winners have not been that lucky to get so many endorsements – a problem that is quintessential to a country which is at crossroads with socialism and individualism.

### ***Wish and Hope***

One of my friends wishes to see a parallel of cricket in other sports. Indians generally have a great passion for cricket, and it reached its pinnacle when India won the world cup in 1983. Gone are those days, where cricketers would take up regular jobs and play; cricket has now become a great rewarding career for many. Many informed parents do encourage their kids to take up cricket as a professional career. This would hopefully be replicated in sports like shooting and boxing, where the events of Abhinav Bindra winning the gold medal and Vijendra securing bronze, respectively, should similarly become decisive ones in turning the attention of media and individuals and ignite a passion for such sports.

Given that the population of youth in India is around 45% of the total population, the adolescents (10-19 yrs of age), around 22.8%, and the number of persons below the age of 35, around 75%, India is in a great position to utilize this abundance of youth to make a mark in world sports than any other country. India has just begun its gold medal tally in individual events. Let us wish and hope that we do much better in the next Olympics and in many more to come.

*The author Aswin Garimella thanks Ujjal Sarkar and Mita Das for inviting and inspiring him to write this article for the online magazine Palki 5.*

## **References**

1. <http://www.epw.org.in/epw/uploads/articles/12432.pdf>
2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/25/india.olympicgames2008>
3. <http://yas.nic.in/yasroot/schemes/PYKKAMIS.pdf>
4. <http://www.marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2008/08/why-does-india.html>
5. <http://punekar.in/site/2008/08/13/pmc-announces-rs-15-lakh-cash-award-for-abhinav-bindra/>
6. <http://www.business-standard.com/india/storypage.php?autono=331168>