

Commentary

India's Fourth Place Performance

By: Anil Shrivastava 'Musafir'



From the time of Milkha Singh, also known as the Flying Sikh, India is used to finishing in the fourth place in the Olympics games. The same story is repeated in 2024 Paris games too. From aspirations of hitting the double digits in medals for the first time, it's become a fraught journey laden with near-misses by the finest of margins.

Fourth-place finishes were once a source of much inspiration in India's sporting pantheon. Milkha Singh's path-breaking 400m run in the 1960 Rome Olympics or for that matter P.T. Usha, who would miss out on a medal in 400m hurdles only by one hundredth of a second at the 1984 Los Angeles Games? At the Tokyo Games, golfer Aditi Ashok finished fourth after seeing her lead vanish on the fourth and final day.

Those were the days when India was a nascent republic still trying to build its nation. Now 77 years later, India still finishes mostly in the fourth place in the games it participates. Overall, India has won 41 medals at the Olympics to date. This is shocking since India is the most populous country in the world. More than 400 million people in India belong to either rich or middle class category with an average household income of 123,700 U.S. dollars. So, the popular notion that India does poorly in sports because its people are poor and lack nutrition doesn't apply in this case.

The main reason why India performs poorly in sports is that that is not their priority with the exception of a few states like Punjab and Haryana. By the way, most of the Indian athletes come from those two states only. From childhood parents' focus is on excellence in education which alone can secure a good livelihood for a child in the future. It's a matter of survival in India. According to Frontline magazine, more than 35 students die by suicide in India every day. In such an environment sports cannot be a priority.

Of late, many Indian parents' focus has shifted to Bollywood dancing. Especially girls are required to emulate Bollywood stars' moves and perform in family and social functions. That also makes them highly marketable and desirable for arranged marriage.

Indian school systems don't have dedicated sports teams or sports clubs like the western countries do. Sports is not encouraged there and the colleges don't offer sports scholarships. College sports is almost non-existent as the focus is mainly on education.

So, there is no need to shed tears for India's performance in Olympics. As a silver lining at Paris now, the last few of our sporting stars hope to give India's gutted fans something to cheer about. Hopefully, after a series of blows spread over 12 days, it will be a happy ending.

To sum it up, the Paris Games have become more memorable for the hopeful victories that didn't materialize than the actual wins. So, please don't cry for India. Eat, drink and be happy!