



Golden arm

Indian sportspersons showed self-belief at the Olympics to return with a record tally

India took on a golden glow at Tokyo on Saturday as Neeraj Chopra hurled the javelin to fetch the country its first Olympics gold in track and field. Neeraj's winning effort at 87.58m capped the finest ever performance by Indian sportspersons in the quadrennial global stage. India won seven medals – one gold, two silvers and four bronzes – and cumulatively edged past the previous best of six at the 2012 London Games. For a country resigned to a meagre yield or none at the Olympics since its debut in 1900, the latest edition was laden with riches. At 23, Neeraj has the world at his feet and the skies to aim for. The Indian Army man has grown in stature, and to supplant German Johannes Vetter, until now the world's best javelin thrower, was no mean task. Neeraj's golden tryst was special at many levels; it was India's maiden gold in athletics at the Olympics while Norman Pritchard had won two silvers in 1900. It was also India's second individual gold at the Games after shooter Abhinav Bindra hit bullseye at Beijing in 2008. That Neeraj had previously won golds in the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games are all pointers to a journey that is on cruise-mode while his coach Klaus Bartonietz keeps a close watch.

Neeraj's dash of magic seasoned in sweat and muscle, found mirror-images within the Indian contingent. Wrestler Bajrang Punia won bronze in the men's freestyle 65kg bout, pinning down Kazakhstan's Daulet Niyazbekov. It also bolstered India's medals' kitty that had prior contributions from Mirabai Chanu, Lovlina Borgohain, Ravi Kumar Dahiya, P.V. Sindhu and the men's hockey team. What stood out was the Indian contingent's belief that they can compete on level terms with their fancied rivals. It showed in Aditi Ashok's golfing endeavour as she came tantalisingly close to silver before a rain-marred day out at the greens undid her rhythm and the Bangalorean finished at the fourth spot. When the curtains were lowered on the latest Olympics on Sunday, the India-story was largely driven by Neeraj, hockey-renaissance and women-power while shooting proved underwhelming. Among the rest, it was status quo as the United States of America and China led the medals tally with host Japan and Great Britain following while India was placed 48th in the table. Usain Bolt's stardust was missed but Jamaica's Elaine Thompson-Herah added zest while setting a new Olympic record of 10.61 seconds in the women's 100m sprint. The pandemic delayed the Games by a year but it marches on unhindered while the fans look forward to the 2024 version at Paris.

Tightrope walk

The RBI should not undermine its own credibility by delaying steps to rein in inflation

Governor Shaktikanta Das's statement accompanying the RBI's latest policy announcement highlights the bind that monetary authorities find themselves in. While the central bank's growth supportive actions – maintaining the benchmark interest rate at a decade low, ensuring ample liquidity and an accommodative policy stance – are yet to help engender a meaningful recovery, inflation continues to disquietingly hover around the 6% upper bound of its mandated target. Governor Das acknowledged the RBI's predicament when he said: "Before the onset of the pandemic, headline inflation and inflationary expectations were well anchored at 4%, the gains from which need to be consolidated and preserved. Stability in inflation rate fosters credibility of the monetary policy framework and augurs well for anchoring inflation expectations. This, in turn, reduces uncertainty for investors... increases external competitiveness and, thus, is growth-promoting." It is this vital inflation targeting remit that the Monetary Policy Committee has temporarily set aside in the wake of COVID-19 and its brutal impact, while the central bank focuses its efforts on using all available policy tools to simultaneously preserve financial stability and support a durable economic revival. Still, the central bank's outlook for growth and inflation shows it is cognisant of the ground realities and the limits to its policy options.

Asserting that domestic economic activity has started to recover with the 'ebbing of the second wave', the MPC is hopeful of a bounce back in rural demand on the back of agricultural output remaining resilient, coupled with urban consumption recovering as the manufacturing and service sectors rebound with a lag, and as increased vaccinations help release pent-up demand. However, given that underlying conditions are still weak and the Current Situation Index of consumer confidence in its own July survey is still stuck near the all-time low polled in May, the RBI has retained its full-year GDP growth forecast at 9.5%. The fact that it has at the same time lowered the Q2, Q3 and Q4 growth projections it made just two months ago, by between 0.5 and 0.9 percentage points, belies the uncertainty in its outlook. With the monsoon rainfall deficit once again widening to minus 4% as on August 8, latest *kharif* sowing estimates revealing an almost 23% shortfall and composite PMI data for July showing a persistent contraction in business activity and continuing job losses, it is hard to see either a near-term revival in demand or an easing in inflationary pressures from cereal and edible oil prices. Admitting the price pressures, the RBI has also raised its fiscal-year inflation projection by 60 basis points to 5.7%. Also, with one of the six members of the MPC dissenting and voting against the language of the policy stance, it seems clear the central bank may sooner than later have to bite the bullet and start normalising rates if it wants to avoid undermining its own credibility by delaying steps to rein in inflation.

The looking glass of history in Afghanistan

The reason for the U.S.'s failure is no different from that of the Soviets; India too can hardly impact the ground situation



VIVEK KATJU

Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. By then Soviet forces had been in Afghanistan for over five years. They had failed to successfully combat the mujahideen groups, most of whom were based in Pakistan. The mujahideen received crucial support from the United States but the critical factor was their Pakistan base. Secure with the U.S. fully behind it, Pakistan knew that the Soviet Union would not risk crossing the Durand Line to take armed action on Pakistani territory.

In his insightful book, *The Great Game in Afghanistan: Rajiv Gandhi, General Zia and the Unending War*, Kallol Bhattacharjee records that immediately after becoming the Soviet Union's supreme leader, Mr. Gorbachev had met the Pakistani dictator in Moscow. He had warned him that "Moscow would ensure that Pakistan faces the consequences of backing the mujahideen". Zia was unfazed by the threat because he knew that the new Soviet leader was posturing.

From the USSR to the U.S.

Thirty-two years later, the wheel of history had turned. It was the United States which was bogged down in Afghanistan. For 16 years it had, despite a military surge, failed to quell the Taliban insurgency even though the group merely had the support of Pakistan. The reason for the U.S.'s failure was no different from that of the Soviets. It could not carry the war into the territory of Pakistan,

now armed with nuclear weapons; destabilising such a state would have incalculable consequences.

Now, a new U.S. leader, President Donald Trump announcing his Afghanistan policy in August 2017, said, "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond. Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with our effort in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbor [u]r criminals and terrorists (https://bit.ly/3fJgILP)." He followed this with a tweet on new year's day 2018 accusing Pakistan of "lies and deceit". For sometime, the Pakistani leadership was concerned by the mercurial Trump but then realised that his were empty threats, signs of the U.S.'s frustration. It continued with its Afghan policy as before.

A thread in these approaches

Within a year of taking over, Mr. Gorbachev was convinced that the Soviet Union's Afghan quest was futile. In February 1986 he told the Communist Party that Afghanistan had become a "bleeding wound". He now decided to prepare for the retreat of the Soviet forces. His aim was to have an orderly withdrawal. He also abandoned the idea of leaving behind a "socialist" government and sought to have a broad-based one which would include the mujahideen.

Fourteen months after warning Pakistan of serious consequences in his August 2017 policy announcement, Mr. Trump too caved in and authorised talks between U.S. diplomats and Taliban representatives in Doha. In these talks, the U.S.'s principal objective was to secure a Taliban guarantee that it would not harbour international terrorist groups in territories under its control. And, like the Soviet



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Union over three decades ago the U.S. too accepted the idea of an Afghan interim administration which included the Taliban. The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement (https://bit.ly/3xwlyFG), which Mr. Trump's successor President Joe Biden has honoured, marked the strategic defeat of the world's pre-eminent global power. It was reminiscent of the Geneva Accords of 1988 which were a strategic defeat of a then superpower, the Soviet Union. They both paved the way for the safe withdrawal of foreign forces.

From 1986 to 1988, the Soviets tried hard to put in place an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Najibullah, a forceful if brutal Afghan leader of Pashtun ethnicity, became President in 1986. He virtually abandoned communist ideology for Afghan nationalism and stressed the country's Islamic heritage. He reached out to all sections of Afghan society. The U.S. and Pakistan seemed to go along with the idea of an inclusive government as long as the final assurance of Soviet withdrawal was not gained.

The Indian initiative

Significantly, India too advocated a broad-based government and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was in the forefront in advocating it. India took active measures, including contacting the former King Zahir Shah, living in exile in Rome, to lead it. This annoyed the U.S. and Pakistan. Both wanted In-

dia to assume a non-operational position on Afghan developments and restrict its role to pressing the Soviets to leave. Once it became clear that Pakistan wanted a mujahideen government without Najibullah's participation or Zahir Shah's leadership, India decided to fully support the Najibullah government. This even before the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in February 1989.

As part of its outreach to all Afghan parties in 1987 and 1988, India was also in contact with the mujahideen. In February 1988, Rajiv Gandhi met Peter Galbraith, a staffer with the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and whom he had known from his youth. Mr. Bhattacharjee records, "To Galbraith's surprise, Rajiv said that India had reached out to all sections, including the mujahideen inside Pakistan and Afghanistan and was now assessing the entire formula for a broad-based government in Kabul". This shows that Rajiv Gandhi pursued the requirements of realpolitik: even while firmly supporting Najibullah he was not averse to acknowledge, at the highest political level, that if Indian interests demanded so, India would not hesitate to do business with any Afghan group however regressive its ideology.

India's 2021 Afghan dilemma mirrors, to an extent, the one it faced post the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. There is a major difference though. In 1989, Kabul was led by a strong Afghan leader, Najibullah, who had the capacity to hold the situation together with Soviet assistance. That was forthcoming, for while the Geneva Accords provided that neither side would help their protégés, they continued to do so. Thus, for three years, Najibullah kept the mujahideen at bay. It was with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the political unity of Kabul frayed. With that

the army fragmented, paving the way for the mujahideen to take over in April 1992. Soon enough, intra-mujahideen conflict resulted in complete instability in the country. That set the stage for the rise of the Taliban with Pakistani assistance. The internecine mujahideen hostilities, fortunately, provided India strategic opportunities to influence the ground situation in Afghanistan along with Iran and Russia. But fortune does not smile at all times.

Afghanistan today

Now, like Rajiv Gandhi in the 1986-1988 period, Indian foreign policy and security managers are advocating the formation of an inclusive government. So, ostensibly are the western powers including the U.S. The problem is that Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani is no Najibullah. His capacity to hold Kabul together is questionable. Besides, the Kabul political elite is at odds with itself and if it frays, will the Afghan National Security Forces remain united? The extent to which the U.S. will be willing to support Kabul post August 31 (the date of complete withdrawal) remains to be seen. This situation of total flux could have been easily foreseen. Equally, the need for maintaining open and direct contacts with all Afghan political parties could also have been anticipated only if pragmatic and correct strategic attitudes had guided Indian policy.

Notwithstanding all the appropriate diplomatic noises India may make, it has now no real capacity to impact the ground situation in Afghanistan. And, even if the best option for India comes to pass – the formation of an inclusive government – its absence of open contacts with the Taliban will place it at a great disadvantage.

Vivek Katju is a former diplomat

Revisit the idea of 'aging out' India's coal plants

A more nuanced analysis considering the various characteristics of individual plants would be appropriate



ASHOK SREENIVAS & MARIA CHIRAYIL

As part of the Union Budget address for 2020-21, the Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, said that the shutting down of old coal power plants, which are major contributors to emissions, will aid the achievement of India's Nationally Determined Contributions, an idea which has been endorsed by the Power Minister, R.K. Singh (https://bit.ly/3jQnQxL).

Some studies cite advantages

Some research studies have also argued in favour of it, citing the economic and the environmental benefits of shutting down coal plants older than, say, 25 years. It is argued that the availability of under-utilised newer (and presumably more efficient) coal-based capacity means that shutting down older inefficient plants would lead to improved efficiencies, reduced coal usage, and hence, cost savings.

Further, it is argued that it would be uneconomical for old plants to install pollution control equipment required to meet the

emission standards announced by the Environment Ministry, and hence it would be better to retire them. The recent order from the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) allowing Delhi's BSES distribution company to exit its concluded 25 year old power purchase agreement with the National Thermal Power Corporation Limited's Dadri-1 generating station, also lends some credence to this (https://bit.ly/3JmZQ).

Since plants older than 25 years make up around 20% of the total installed thermal capacity in the country and play a significant role in the country's power supply, decisions regarding their retirement merit finer scrutiny to see if the claimed benefits really accrue.

The benefits

How significant are the potential benefits?

While there are some old plants tied up in expensive power purchase agreements, as in the case of the CERC order, there are also several old plants, which generate at lower costs. For instance, plants such as Rihand, Singrauli (both Uttar Pradesh), and Vidhyanchal (Madhya Pradesh), are all over 30 years old and have very low generation costs of around ₹1.7/kWh, which is lower than the national average. This may be due to locational advantage rather than efficiency, as older plants are likely to be located closer to the coal



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source, reducing coal transport costs. However, this just highlights the complexity of the issue, since efficiency does not naturally translate to savings.

A savings analysis

Indeed, our analysis (https://bit.ly/3jDat3a) suggests that the total savings in generation cost from shutting down plants older than 25 years would be less than ₹5,000 crore annually, which is just 2% of the total power generation cost. These savings may not be sufficient to even pay for the fixed costs (such as debt repayment) that would have to be paid anyway, even if the plants are prematurely retired. Similarly, savings in coal consumption by replacing generation from plants older than 25 years with newer coal plants are also likely to be only in the 1%-2% range.

The argument about older plants finding it uneconomical to install pollution control equipment to meet environmental norms is a stronger one, as all coal plants should indeed reduce emis-

sions. However, even here, the argument is not black-and-white. There are some old plants that may continue to be economically viable even if they install pollution control equipment as their current fixed costs (which would increase with pollution control equipment installation) are very low. Indeed, about half the coal capacity older than 25 years has already issued tenders for pollution control equipment installation.

Risks with retirement

The question then becomes whether these limited savings are worth the risks associated with early retirement of coal plants, especially given the current trends in the country's power sector. To support the growing intermittent renewable generation in the sector, there is an increasing need for capacity that can provide flexibility, balancing, and ancillary services. Old thermal capacity, with lower fixed costs, is a prime candidate to play this role until other technologies (such as storage) can replace them at scale. Further, the capacity value of the old capacity is critical to meet instantaneous peak load, and to meet load when renewable energy is unavailable.

There is also a political economy risk, as aggressive early retirement of coal-based capacity, without detailed analyses, could result in real or perceived electricity shortage in some States, leading to

calls for investments in coal-based base-load capacity by State-owned entities. About 65 gigawatts (GW) of thermal capacity is already in the pipeline, of which about 35 GW is in various stages of construction. This is likely in excess of what the country needs, and further addition to it, driven by State political economy considerations, will lead to stranded assets and locked-in resources.

This is not to say that no old plant should be retired. However, using age as the only lever to drive these decisions is too blunt an instrument, and can prove counterproductive. Instead, a more disaggregated and nuanced analysis, considering the various technical, economic and operating characteristics of individual plants and units, while also accounting for aspects such as intermittency of renewables, growing demand, and need to meet emission norms, would be appropriate to make retirement-related decisions. Hence, it may be prudent to let old capacity fade away in due course, while focusing on such detailed analysis and weeding out the needless capacity in the pipeline, to derive long-term economic and environmental benefits.

Ashok Sreenivas and Maria Chirayil are from the Prayas (Energy Group), and work on topics which include the interlinkages of the coal-thermal and power sectors

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Tokyo and after

The historic moment of glory should be inscribed in letters of gold. The overall performance of the Indian contingent is no mean achievement in the backdrop of a raging pandemic. Unlike many other popular games, which have a committed audience to boast, athletes have to motivate themselves to do their best as hardly anyone notices and appreciates them to enhance their morale. Many who participated in the Olympics are from a rural background who have scaled greater heights with limited or inadequate infrastructure to hone their skills. Not resting on laurels, this euphoric moment should be sustained with an allocation of enhanced funds and training facilities to identify

and nurture talent. It is clear that there is no scarcity of talent.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

■ With the all-time best medals haul in Indian Olympic history, it is probably time for both the authorities and us people in India to start looking at how those who succeeded have done it rather than looking at what ails the system. Modern equipment, world-class training and a good financial support system are probably what are getting our sportspersons to be among the best in the world. Besides the medal winners, there have been quite a few near misses which only goes to show that we have a new breed of Olympians. With a little more focus in the hunt for genuine talent among our youth and training them to

be mentally tough to face competition, the next Olympics is sure to see India firmly on the path to glory.

YOGANANDH T.,
Salem, Tamil Nadu

■ Our favourable demographic profile does not seem to be yielding a proportionate performance in competitive sports. Scouting for talent and honing it in high-grade competition is needed to touch world class. This entails huge financing and drive. Governments and corporates must fund and innovate big time.

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

This is jarring

The details in the report, "Casteist abuse shameful, says women's hockey team skipper" (Inside pages, August 8), left one

shame-faced. That the family of Vandana Katariya, one of the players in India's women's hockey team at the Olympics, faced alleged casteist abuse after the Indian team lost the semi-final clash, is disgusting. Winning and losing any game is a part and parcel of sport.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

■ While on one hand we are busy celebrating the heroic achievements of some of our Tokyo Olympians, it is disturbing that a few countrymen are intent on pulling down other achievers. One must realise that it takes much sweat and sacrifice for the families concerned to overcome sarcasm, taunts and bias in ensuring that their son or daughter fetches a medal for the country. Many of us need

to learn lessons from these deeply inspiring life stories rather than demoralising or insulting some of our sporting heroes.

JYOTI KUNWAR,
Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh

■ This mushrooming of religious/casteist discrimination in the country is alarming. Yet our political leaders seem reticent and do nothing to eliminate this menace for reasons best known to them. We are in need of comprehensive laws to enable the extermination of casteism in the country.

THOMAS K.M.,
Muvattupuzha, Kerala

Hair loss

As a person who experienced severe hair loss (alopecia) from an early age, I found the article, "Some facts on hair - why it drops and how it grows" (Science

& Technology' page, August 8), to be educative. It was interesting to read that "traditional yoga exercises are seen to stimulate the growth of hair...." In my case, there was no hope and after trying traditional cures, ranging from oil concoctions to tonics, I have had to settle for a natural hair wig. I do envy the bountiful crown of hair that Olympian Neeraj Chopra has – a TV commentator says Neeraj is also known as Mowgli. I do hope that there is progress in abolishing quackery in trichology, which was also the theme of the 2012 meeting in Chennai of the Hair Research Society of India. There needs to be a breakthrough achieved in reversing hair loss.

VEDANTH BHARADWAJ,
Bangalore