

Celebrations and commitments

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“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does... Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.” – Nelson Mandela

If you have been reading or watching the news or if you have scrolled through your social media this last month, you would have heard of the sporting extravaganza that was the Olympics in Tokyo as also the spectacular performance by our Paralympic contingent. But did you know that this contingent was able to win more medals this year than the 12 medals won in the history of Indian Paralympic participation? At Tokyo, our para-athletes finished on the podium in five of the nine disciplines they competed in. We finished 24th in the world on the medal tally. At a time when much of the news we are confronted with, is of difficulty and crisis, the Tokyo Paralympics gave us a reason to celebrate, rejoice and pledge to take this forward.

The power of sports as an agent of change is undeniable. A blog published by the World Economic Forum hails sports as a means to “promote participation, inclusion, human values, acceptance of rules, discipline, health promotion, non-violence, tolerance, gender equality, teamwork, among others.” Through sport, we can impact individual lives as well as larger communities by changing mindsets and discriminatory norms. This is especially true for our sportspersons with disability, a community that has brought laurels to the country despite rarely receiving the accolades and attention of their non-disabled counterparts. To truly tap into the power of sports to create change, we must commit first to encouraging and supporting our para-sportspeople.

This commitment to promoting para-sports is necessarily a collective endeavour. Our performance in Tokyo was without question driven by our para-athletes’ determination and hard work. However, it has also been fuelled by an increase in awareness and funding around sports and its importance. The rise of social media and the popularity of OTT platforms have made it possible for each of us to tell stories hereto unheard of. According to an article published by the Economic Times on August 20th 2021, corporate spending on sports development and Paralympics support has seen an increase in the last four years. Khelo India, a national government initiative under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, was launched in 2018 and marks the promotion of sports among persons with disabilities as a key vertical. Even as our para-athletes focus on bettering their performance, it is the responsibility of corporates, governments and civil society organisations to create an environment conducive to and celebratory of sports.

The year 2021 has been a milestone in the trajectory of Indian para-sports. Even as we celebrate, let us pledge to further this cause. We must commit to tangible, actionable collaboration to build a conducive ecosystem around the country for sportspersons, particularly those with disability. This commitment should include:

- Research and documentation dedicated to para-sports, bridging the data gap that exists in public platforms today on performance, requirements and successes
- Inclusive media content that spotlights para-athletes, celebrating their performance and telling their stories
- Encouragement of sports in our classrooms all over the country, pushing young children to explore the opportunities that sports has to offer
- Access to scholarships, schemes and other resources for sportspersons in need of assistance

- Governance and policy decisions that treat para-athletes on par with their non-disabled counterparts
- Accessible infrastructure for sportspeople with disability
- Increasing corporate funding beyond the current Rs. 292 crores, acknowledging that sports constitutes less than 4% of annual national CSR spending according to the study published by the Economic Times. A report by FICCI further shows that rural sports & Paralympics accounted for 2% of CSR expenditure in the five years preceding 2018.

Together, let us pledge to celebrate the journeys of Manish Narwal, Pramod Bhagat, Yogesh Kathuniya and so many others who made us proud in 2021. Let us promise to tell their stories, create multimedia on parasports that are accessible, and bridge the awareness gap that exists today. Let us commit to making this just the beginning of the Great Indian Para-sport Celebration.