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The Discontents of India's Drive to Host the Olympics

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Cities that have hosted the Olympics experience economic and social distress during the preparations and thereafter. Should India follow the same path? It is not sportspersons' desire but a State-capital alliance that is driving India's desire to host the 2036 Olympics, with a focus on Ahmedabad.

On 15 August 2024, to mark the 78th year of India's independence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi talked up India's plans to host the 2036 Summer Olympics. Modi described the hosting of the 2036 Olympics as India's dream.

Although such aspirations have been given plenty of mileage in the past, a potential bid has assumed **concrete form** over the past couple of years. If there were any doubts over India's intentions, they were laid to rest by the prime minister in his address to the nation. A host city is yet to be named for India's bid but Ahmedabad is widely considered to be the **favourite**.¹

The media coverage of India's campaign at the Paris Olympics was split between the exploits of its athletes and **the PR blitz orchestrated by Nita Ambani**. In a dual capacity as the founder of the Reliance Foundation and a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Nita Ambani inaugurated India House, a hospitality pavilion that was set up in partnership with the Indian Olympic Association (IOA). Speaking at the inauguration, she said, "Today we gather here at the Paris Olympic Games 2024 to open the doors to a dream. A dream that belongs to 1.4 billion Indians. A dream to bring India to the Olympics and our shared dream to bring the Olympics to India."

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Lest one missed the point, "dream" was mentioned four times in three sentences. But are the citizens of India likely to sleep easy after they wake up to the reality of an Olympics bid?

Some cautionary notes need to be struck. At present, the conversation around the Olympics bid is centred on the capacity of the Indian state and its sporting apparatus to successfully host the Games. Modi was keen to stress this point on 15 August when he argued that India's prospective Olympics bid was strengthened by the "successful" organisation of the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi.² The prime minister **reiterated this claim** earlier this week in New York, at an event organised for Indian-Americans. However, it is necessary to move beyond the question of capacity to adequately reckon with the discontents of hosting the Olympics.

The question of capacity bears the legacy of a developmentalist discourse that has been harnessed by advocates of modernisation since the 1950s. It required Third World countries to 'catch up' with advanced capitalist nations, a process that became even more widespread after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sport became a particular driver of this discourse in the 21st century when multiple major events were hosted by countries in the global South. South Africa hosted the 2010 men's FIFA World Cup; Brazil played host to the following World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics; and New Delhi held the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Mainstream reception to the hosting of these events by BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) was framed as a welcome participation in sporting spectacles, a moment where global South countries announced their "arrival" on the world stage (Cornelissen 2010; Black and Peacock 2011).

However, as examples from each of these countries show, the sporting spectacles did not lack glitz and glamour. But the economic and social distress wrought on the cities in question became an inescapable legacy.

The recent experience of hosting events like the Olympics should give the promoters of India's bid pause. However, the hype around the 2036 Games does not suggest a reflection is forthcoming.

As a matter of fact, the conversation about the bid bears striking similarities to previous grand schemes of the Modi regime. Under Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP government has displayed a predilection for staged events that are organised with much fanfare. The bid for the 2036 Olympics extends this tendency, in line with other major gambits such as demonetisation in 2016, the G20

summit in 2023, and the consecration of the Ram temple earlier in 2024. The grand plans for hosting the Olympics will call for a significant outlay of public finances, and it is by no means certain that Indian athletes and the sport-loving citizenry will be the beneficiaries of such expenditure.

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To undertake an overdue assessment, I begin with a discussion of some general issues faced by cities that have hosted the Olympics. Then I move on to an examination of the Indian state's plans for Ahmedabad, which will also involve a scrutiny of the state-capital nexus that is driving the bid for the 2036 Games.

A white elephant

The question of public spending for hosting the Olympic Games requires a discussion that brings forth recurring factors that define the experience of host cities. This is necessary because there are certain issues that have defined the conversation on the Olympics following the expansion of colour television in the 1960s. As communication satellites made intercontinental live broadcasts possible, the Olympics became one of the most popular mediated spectacles in the world (Horne and Whannel 2020). This development resulted in a major boost to the IOC's coffers.

Another landmark moment in Olympic history arrived with the hosting of the 1984 Los Angeles Games when the organising committee sourced its budget entirely from private finances. Until then, Olympic Games were predominantly reliant on the state. With the city of Los Angeles refusing to use taxpayer money, examples of huge public debt from previous Olympics were exploited to promote an enhanced role for private capital in the Olympic movement (Gruneau and Neubauer 2012).

The astronomical expenditure involved in hosting the Olympics has turned the spectacle into a deeply unappealing opportunity for a significant number of cities, especially in the global North.

Following Los Angeles 1984, the Olympics became primarily a site for the financial benefit of the IOC and its corporate sponsors while host cities were saddled with debt. The Games also triggered a major reshaping of the urban form, as a slew of infrastructural projects were required to host the grand event. Such plans came to be often justified under the umbrella of legacy, a term that remained vague by design. Private investors often got the contracts for such projects. But the change of tack in the organisation of the Olympics failed to arrest the rising debt for cities. In reality, the Olympic legacy can be neatly captured by two recurring themes: cost overruns, and dispossession and displacement of the poor.

The former is reflected in the following numbers. Ahead of the Paris Games, scholars Alexander Budzier and Bent Flyvbjerg updated their study from 2016 where they had claimed that the Olympics were an expensive affair defined by cost overruns. According to the 2024 version of the Oxford Olympics Study, the last three summer Olympics cost a grand total of \$51 billion. This amounted to a cost overrun of 185%, according to 2022 prices. At the Paris Games alone, the budget ballooned to \$8.8 billion from \$3.6 billion. The scale of this problem is worse when we consider that this study included only operational (logistics) and direct capital costs (sporting infrastructure).

The hosting of an Olympic Games requires public expenditure beyond those two categories, since most cities would have to service other infrastructural requirements such as transport in preparation for an event of this scale. For instance, hosting a smaller competition like the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi entailed a huge expansion of the Delhi Metro, and a refurbished international airport. Even scholars who initially disagreed (Preuss et al 2019) with the claims of the 2016 Oxford study have shifted their position on cost overruns over time, with recent writings pointing to a broad agreement (Preuss and Weitzmann 2023) that the Olympics are a byword for overshot budgets.

The astronomical expenditure involved in hosting the Olympics has turned the spectacle into a deeply unappealing opportunity for a significant number of cities, especially in the global North. It is ironic indeed that India is so keen to host the Summer Games at a time when the stock of the Olympics is at its lowest. In an unprecedented move, the hosts for the 2024 and the 2028 Olympics had to be announced together by the IOC in 2017. The governing body was forced to take this decision as all of Paris and Los Angeles' competitors had pulled out of the race: Budapest, Rome, Hamburg, and Boston. Rattled by the dip in enthusiasm for hosting the

Olympics, the IOC came up with a [novel offer](#) to the city of Los Angeles – an advance payment of \$1.8 billion as no other host in history had an 11-year long preparation time for the Games.

Not everyone can rely on such largesse. When Rio de Janeiro reached out to the IOC in 2017 for financial support, as debt from the hosting of the Olympics continued to rise, its request was met with a [firm refusal](#). Rising costs from a sporting event is not an unfamiliar scenario for India as the union government had spent around \$4 billion for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, [nine times over the estimated amount](#). While corruption in the organisation of the event colours its legacy, mismanagement of funds and excessive spending are certainly not anomalies restricted to India. As a matter of fact, there remains an apparent inevitability that public funds are laid to waste in the organisation of major sports events.

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Direct capital costs and logistical demands aside, cities often spend big on publicity campaigns as well. It is likely that the hosts for the 2036 Summer Olympics will be announced in 2027. If India wins the bidding right, one would expect the Modi regime to go big on a nationalist PR drive that would seriously dent the government budget. After all, the current dispensation knows how to dedicate huge amounts of public funds to [boost the Prime Minister’s image](#).

Even if one remains a votary of the Olympic bid, [the economic challenges](#) facing India demand restraint. The 2004 Athens Olympics is a pertinent example. While it is certainly a stretch to claim that the hosting of the mega-event led to the subsequent economic crisis in Greece, the astronomical outlay for the return of the Olympics to its “spiritual” home certainly placed the Greek economy in a [tight spot](#). The budget for the Games eventually doubled to [\\$11 billion](#).

Dispossession and displacement

While the cost overruns involved in hosting the Olympics can portend an economic crisis, the shocks arrive far sooner for some. For instance, [amongst the 300 households](#) that were forced to move due to the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, there were some who had already undergone this experience more than half a century ago for the 1964 Games in the Japanese capital. While such displacement certainly accelerated following the 1984 Olympics, a longer trajectory can be discerned in the reshaping of the urban form for major events.

When cities play host to grand spectacles it is also an opportunity for the state to facilitate a real estate bubble. While transformations are often clubbed as development and modernisation, such terms are synonymous with capitalist accumulation.

As sites for staging spectacles, cities undergo a process of gentrification and eviction under capitalism. In the case of the Olympics, examples of such transformation abound. When foreign visitors arrived in Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Games, they were “greeted” by slums painted with bright colours to hide the grim reality of urban poverty (Broudehoux 2015).

This is a story that is not unfamiliar to the urban poor in India. Sample the following statements.

“They (the sub-divisional magistrate and police) came at night. We were not even given a prior date, and our homes here were demolished. We were only given information about them looking to widen the roads, but we had no idea it would happen this way.” – [Rakesh Kumar Gupta, Ayodhya, 2023](#) “I can’t explain how distraught everyone was as they bulldozed the homes. People were screaming, crying, begging them to stop.” – [Savita, New Delhi, 2023](#) “I have been told to go,” he says. “They told me: disappear from Delhi and don’t come back until the Games are over.” – [Ram Prakash, New Delhi, 2010](#)

These statements document the experience of citizens who lived through the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the 2023 G20 Summit, and the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. The lasting legacies of these events remain in the violent reshaping of urban space. Each of these spectacles was formed by an understanding that the citizen’s right to the city must be limited. Not only did the Indian state promote a new capitalist aesthetic where the urban form was defined by profiteering and unfree space, but it also relied on a longer historical practice of pushing the poor away (Bhan 2009).

When cities play host to grand spectacles it is also an opportunity for the state to facilitate a real estate bubble. While transformations of this ilk are often clubbed as development and modernisation, such terms are synonymous with capitalist accumulation. It is an invitation to the rich and the powerful to claim urban space. The changes in Ayodhya over the past year shed light on this phenomenon. Many locals are already out of business while [the city welcomes film stars, hotel owners, and real estate moguls](#).

Ahmedabad's Olympic dreams

Navya Ayodhya is a continuation of experiments under the Gujarat model championed by Modi and his Hindutva acolytes. Ahmedabad is already in the throes of a similar churn. While Delhi has been the city of choice for sports events in the past, it is no surprise that Ahmedabad is the leading favourite for India's Olympic bid. The centring of Gujarat in Indian sport has been some time coming. The Indian men's cricket team already plays many of its marquee matches at the monumental Narendra Modi stadium in Ahmedabad.

Now, the adjoining [Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Sports Enclave](#) is expected to be the Olympics village for the 2036 bid. The project is supposed to cost Rs 6,000 crore for multiple sporting venues that will be spread over 300 acres. A special business entity has been set up to oversee the project: the Gujarat Olympic Planning and Infrastructure Corporation Limited (GOLYMPIC). Vehicles such as the GOLYMPIC are intended to invite private investment, a characteristic attribute of the Gujarat model.

The Sabarmati riverfront in Ahmedabad is another instructive example. Although plans for this project preceded Modi's time as Chief Minister of Gujarat, his emergence proved to be decisive for its development. As political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot (2024) describes in Gujarat under Modi, the Sabarmati riverfront project went hand in hand with the dream of making Ahmedabad "slum-free." Ipsita Chatterjee (2013) noted that slum displacement was part of the process and it led to the ghettoisation of urban space in Ahmedabad as Muslims and Hindu were "resettled" into separate neighbourhoods whereas they had lived together previously. Such harsh measures worryingly show how Ahmedabad is already exhibiting tendencies that mark out other Olympic host cities.

The aggressive displacement for the Sabarmati riverfront is also in line with the model of capitalism preferred by BJP under Modi. Land is readily made available for big corporate investment, especially thanks to the industrial policies adopted during his time as chief minister. As the academic Nikita Sud (2022) argues, "Not only has Gujarat's state gone decisively from ideas of land to the tiller to rampant land liberalisation in the post-1991 period, this state has also allowed private interests to regulate how land is used for projects of capital accumulation."

State-capital nexus

Such a situation must be music to the ears of the IOC. After all, the governing body can even rely on rich benefactors who come from the state of Gujarat. Although the Indian state remains a capable force in event management, the Olympic bid cannot rely on the political apparatus alone in the aftermath of the 1984 Games. The "success" of Los Angeles as a host gave credence to the narrative that a flourishing partnership with capital is necessary for any state that wishes to bring the spectacle home.

Ever since her nomination to the IOC in 2016, Nita Ambani's profile in the Olympic movement has grown rapidly as she has sat on various commissions. What explains her sudden elevation? While the IOC's membership has long been a home for the global elite, it was a particular change in the body's agenda and mode of operation under the current president Thomas Bach that particularly boosted Nita Ambani's importance.

Multiple parleys have already been made to push India's interest in hosting the Olympics. At the 141st IOC annual session in Mumbai in 2023, the entire membership of the governing body was welcomed at the Jio World Centre.

As described above, the lack of enthusiasm for hosting the Olympics prompted a change in the IOC's strategy. A new bidding process was adopted where one city is now asked to put a proposal forward after the approval of the IOC Future Host Commission. The membership is then called upon to either ratify or reject the bid. Brisbane became the first city to be selected through this process for the 2032 Games. The altered bid process was part of a shift in direction by the IOC that was conceptualised under the Olympic Agenda (OA) 2020.

According to recommendation 38 of the Olympic Agenda, the IOC decided to undertake a [targeted recruitment process](#). Nita Ambani particularly [met three criteria](#) under the new process: the IOC's needs in terms of skills and knowledge (broadly defined across politics, business, and sports management); geographic balance; and gender balance. The criterion that urged the IOC to correct the geographical

balance of the IOC membership is crucial in light of the reduced appeal of the Olympic Games. With fewer cities interested, the IOC requires members from countries that have not had a chance of hosting the Olympics. In Nita Ambani, it finds a wealthy interlocutor who can sell the dream. Especially when we consider Reliance’s deep involvement in Indian sport.

Multiple parleys have already been made to push India’s interest in hosting the Olympics. At the 141st IOC annual session hosted by Mumbai in 2023, the entire membership of the governing body was welcomed at the Jio World Centre. It was, of course, no surprise that the IOC meeting took place at a Reliance-owned venue. Although the IOA’s headquarters are based in New Delhi, it was the city that the Ambanis call home that played host to the moneyed IOC members.

Unlike the cities that pulled out of the bidding process in 2016 through referendums and petition campaigns, Ahmedabad and the rest of India are unlikely to get a say on the fate of the Olympics bid.

While the Indian capital has hosted an IOC session in 1983,³ last year’s meeting in Mumbai bears greater importance due to the high likelihood of a strong bid. Nita Ambani acknowledged as much when she described the hosting of the IOC session as “a significant development for India’s Olympic aspirations.” President Bach echoed her sentiment by stating that India would have a “strong case” for hosting the Olympics in 2036 if it were to follow through on its intentions.

Unlike the cities that pulled out of the bidding process in 2016 through referendums and petition campaigns, Ahmedabad and the rest of India are unlikely to get a say on the fate of the Olympics bid. India is already on the path of putting together a serious bid, and nobody should underestimate its chances of being successful. After all, (lack of) sporting accomplishments mean very little in a process where money, networking, and unseemly deals are the decisive factors (Zimbalist 2016). The IOC’s ploy to rebrand the Olympics carries weight for some.

The Modi regime is the latest dispensation that is willing to overlook the likelihood of worsening economic and social disparity, should India’s bid prove to be successful. After all, the union government’s event-led politics thrives on spectacles that are meant to awe and shock. As the literary theorist Sianne Ngai (2020) reminds us, the gimmick is the paradigmatic category of aesthetic judgment under capitalism. She writes, “For one of the gimmick’s paradigmatic instances is the overrated product one would be a sucker to buy, and thus an unsold commodity whose value cannot be realised.”

Ngai may as well have been describing the Olympics. To avoid buyer’s remorse, the BJP under Modi needs to wake up from the dream that it is keen to sell.

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Footnotes:

- 1 Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy recently pitched Hyderabad as an alternative venue for the Olympics bid but the prospect seems unlikely.
- 2 The “success” of the summit cannot be assessed without taking into account the government of India’s gentrification drives in the national capital. According to the then Minister of State for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Kaushal Kishore, there were 49 demolition drives in New Delhi between April and July 2023 as part of the preparations for the G-20 summit.
- 3 The session was supposed to herald a bid for the 1992 Olympics that were eventually held in Barcelona (Bandyopadhyay 2014).

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