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## In India, sport is divorced from play

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Always innovating The needs of vulnerable children rarely receive top billing M perisasamy

*An elitist mindset is robbing children of their fundamental right to open spaces where they can run for fun*

In going well beyond the 100-member mark the Indian team to Rio has hopefully made a decisive break from the times when only a few Indian sportspersons qualified for the Olympics. This achievement can be made to look even more impressive by comparisons with carefully chosen countries.

But we cannot get away from the fact that India's presence in the largest sporting show in the world remains marginal for a country that accounts for a sixth of humanity. And if we take those with realistic medal prospects into account, the picture gets even dimmer.

Many a rainy evening can be spent listing the causes for this sporting inadequacy, ranging from the absence of adequate infrastructure to sporting bodies that have concerns other than sport.

But one reason that does not always get the attention it deserves is an urban environment that militates against the development of a variety of sportspersons.

### Grabbing game

It is not that this environment is against the creation of sporting icons, particularly economically successful ones.

The urban adulation for Sachin Tendulkar is but one example of this larger reality. But the adulation for those who succeed does not extend to support for sport in general. Urban India is thus left in the obviously contradictory position of longing for sporting heroes without giving children the opportunity to play.

Pressure on the opportunity to play comes from multiple sources beginning with the competition for open spaces.

As real estate prices shoot through the roof there is a spurt in the number of those who see playgrounds as real estate waiting to be exploited. Urban regulations are supposed to stand up against these pressures. But in the mess that is usually associated with the governance of our cities this does not always happen.

Even when an open space is protected there are other pressures on it. It may not be politically correct to say so, but there is in reality a huge intergenerational battle for these spaces. In this battle the adults are clearly at an advantage. They are both the petitioners and the policymakers.

This generates a tendency to convert open urban spaces into parks with jogging tracks for young adults and seating spaces for the elderly. Children are typically not encouraged to enter, and if they do they are certainly not allowed to treat it as a playground.

The playgrounds that survive this onslaught then come up against the combination of adulation for sporting heroes and the typically Indian preoccupation with the family. Individual urban families are keen to see their children as sporting heroes. As they measure sporting success in economic terms, they prefer to concentrate on the game that earns the greatest income, cricket. All other sports tend to fall by the wayside.

In this environment where the primary concern is economic, the families would ideally like to see their children become sporting stars without having to go through the dirt and grime of actually playing the game.

This desire is met by coaching camps that supposedly teach children the techniques of cricket, without spending too much time on the fun of playing the game. In this middle class urban mind, sport is effectively divorced from play.

### Generation gap

The divergence between children being allowed to play and children being coached in a game brings its own pressures into the demand for open space.

When cricket camps take over open space they inevitably restrict the access of others to that playground. And as the fees charged in such camps are often outrageously high, they act as an effective barrier against giving a large number of less privileged children the opportunity to play.

Not surprisingly, these attempts to produce champions, while restricting the opportunity to play has had, at best, limited success. Even this success is, more often than not, from smaller towns that have not fully developed the urban Indian mindset.

Faced with the paucity of sporting stars, governments tend to, as is their wont, make up for the absence of recognised talent by pouring in more financial resources. Cash prizes are awarded to any successful sportsperson, making them stars overnight. In an effort to make more such stars, money is also poured into creating sporting infrastructure, including indoor stadiums. And most of this infrastructure comes up in areas that were once playgrounds.

Indian cities are pouring in more financial resources, both public and private, into sport. But there must remain some doubt about how successful they can be as long as they see sport as an economic activity rather than one that may just have something to do with play.

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