

It's Not Just Sport: Delhi and the Olympic Torch Relay

Boria Majumdar (La Trobe University, Melbourne)

Nalin Mehta (La Trobe University, Melbourne)

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Abstract:

This paper literally follows the Indian leg of the Olympic flame relay in Delhi and focuses on how the relay personifies intercultural encounters, conflict, and negotiation. Focusing on the harmonious, sometimes perilous encounters with the officials, protesters, and discourses, a context is created for understanding the significance for the Olympic movement and what it really means to peoples across the world. Through intensive interviews and ethnographic research, this paper draws attention to a different sense of "Olympism" and "the Olympic Movement", which goes against the demands and prerogatives of today's conventional understanding of the Olympic sports industry.

Key words:

Olympics; Torch relay; Delhi; Olympic movement.

This looks more like a warzone and not something to with sports or the Olympics. The Olympic movement is supposed to be about the people.

NDTV reporter covering Delhi Flame Relay¹

We could have provided you a more "spectacular" protest today if security arrangements were little more relaxed than 17,000 police personnel, including commandos, on their toes. China has once again proved that with its military power it can even turn the central heart of the capital of a free and democratic country like India into a military zone, throw the city's roads into gridlock. Even if for a few hours

Tenzin Tsundue, Tibetan activist and writer²

Seven levels of security checkpoints, 21,000 security personnel, the heart of India's capital almost at a standstill, an attempt to storm the Le Meridien -- a hotel turned into a fortress and the site where the Olympic torch was kept since its arrival from Islamabad at 1.10 am on the night of 16 April -- and finally a series of peaceful, synchronized democratic protests by Tibetans and human rights groups from 8 a.m. in the morning across the country. The Indian leg of the Olympic torch relay was in all senses extraordinary. For the record, international legs of the Olympic torch relay have often been mired in controversy. While some say that the 2008 edition of the international torch relay has witnessed unprecedented turmoil the world over, Olympic history demonstrates otherwise. While the situation in Islamabad and Delhi was unusual in that the relays weren't open to the public and only invitees were allowed to attend, this too was not without precedent.

The only other time that sections of the torch relay have been completely closed to the public was during the flame-lighting ceremony at ancient Olympia for the 1984 Los Angeles Games. In 1984, at the flame-lighting ceremony in Olympia, armed Greek troops had closed off the sanctuary, refusing entry to either the Greek public or hundreds of demonstrators who had vowed not to let the Americans have the flame. They were protesting the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee's decision to sell the rights to be a torchbearer, a decision that many Greeks saw as an insult to Greek national sovereignty. The traditional public relay and key ceremonies in Greece, as John Macaloon points out, were cancelled. The Olympic priestess lit the flame in spite of death threats. The Americans took the flame out by helicopter to the Athens airport and left immediately for the safe haven of their own shores.³

Such protests lay at the very core of what is widely understood as 'Olympism'. As the popular saying goes in Olympic academic circles, "Take sports out of the Olympics and you still have the movement to fall back on". While this is certainly an exaggeration, it is time to accept that the Olympics or the torch relay was never only about sportspeople. The relay is not restricted to countries that win the most number of medals or those that have the best sports facilities for its athletes. Rather, it is meant as a mechanism to include the mass support in the poorest of countries, men and women who will hardly ever make it to an Olympic sports contest. That is why, traditionally, attendance at the Olympic torch relay is free. While Olympic sports competitions are prohibitively expensive, enthusiasts don't need tickets to attend the relay. For countries that can't dream of hosting the games in view of the escalating costs, the torch relay remains the second best alternative. It is this aspect of Olympism and the Olympic movement that makes the world's biggest sports spectacle relevant for us in India. The flame, unlike the torch, can never be commercialized and is one of the most powerful modern peace symbols. The meanings attached to it belong neither to the IOC nor to local organizing committees. Rather, it

has emerged as an enduring symbol of global harmony and mobilization, a fact evident on the streets of Delhi on 17 April 2008.

Before every summer games for the last 25 years, the Olympics have provided a forum for issues of international concern, the dispossessed and the marginalized using the glare of public spotlight to focus world attention on to their causes. While Seoul highlighted the Korea crisis, Barcelona brought to light ethnic differences within Spanish society. Atlanta drew world attention to the race issue in the US and Sydney highlighted the Aboriginal crisis Down Under. When Cathy Freeman lit the flame at the Sydney Games in 2000 much more than a sporting ritual was performed. It had immense symbolism for the tensions at the heart of modern Australian society, more so when she later wrapped herself in the Aboriginal flag in full view of the world's cameras. Similarly, when the Tibetans organized a parallel relay in Delhi on 17 April 2008, the Tibet crisis became the cynosure of international attention.

Delhi's Diplomatic Dilemma

Prior to the Indian leg of the torch relay, there was considerable debate on whether New Delhi would allow Tibetan protesters to carry on with their demonstrations. With the Left Front West Bengal and Kerala governments adopting a hardline approach towards such protests, the issue had assumed added significance. The Left Front government in West Bengal went so far as to ban Tibetan protests ahead of the torch's arrival in India.⁴ At one level, this was simply a case of the Left's repeated support for positions taken by the Chinese Communist Party. With the Left also a crucial partner of the Congress-led Congress coalition government in Delhi, such an approach by a powerful partner in the alliance reduced the maneuvering space for the Central government. But at another level the prospect of widely publicized Tibetan protests also created apprehensions in New Delhi about their diplomatic impact on ongoing boundary disputes with

China. At the same time, the world's largest democracy could not be seen to be muffling dissent, even if this dissent was opposed by those who are advocating a closer strategic engagement with China.

Caught in a bind, the Congress, therefore, hedged its bets. On the one hand, the Congress government in Arunachal Pradesh followed its Left counterparts in West Bengal to ban Tibetan protests in Tawang, a key border district that is central to the boundary dispute with China and one which was invaded by Chinese troops in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. The Tawang Superintendent of Police imposed the punitive Section 144 of the Indian Penal code on his district to prevent rallies of any kind and then pointedly told reporters that this had been done on directions from the Central government. The Tawang ban came just four days after police personnel had been forced to fire tear gas shells at a 2000-strong gathering of protesters in Tawang, home to a 15th century monastery, the oldest and the most revered outside Tibet. The firing led to strong protests by lamas at the monastery and reacting to news of a ban on further demonstrations a local lama was quoted as saying, "If this is true, its is a whiplash in general to the people of the Himalayan region and elsewhere."⁵

The reportage of the unrest among thousands of Tibetan exiles, many of whom had been born and brought up in India after their parents migrated in the 1950s, was now emerging as a serious concern for internal security officials in New Delhi. This had assumed added urgency after some Tibetan protesters managed to break the heavy security cordon outside the Chinese embassy in New Delhi's diplomatic enclave of Chanakyapuri and scaled its walls to register their concerns. Two concerns played on their minds: It was one thing to ban protests in a remote outpost of India, quite another to ban protests per se, that too in the national capital which would play host to the Olympic torch. Secondly, the government was acutely aware of the strategic conclusions that Beijing would draw from New Delhi's handling of the Tibetan protests.⁶ So they

decided on a two-pronged approach. The protests would go on elsewhere in India – in any case it would have been impossible to police a wider ban -- but the protesters would not be allowed anywhere near the Olympic torch itself. Everyone, therefore, could save face.

Allowing the protests in Delhi and elsewhere also provided a subtle mechanism for protesting against the million square metres of Chinese occupation in the disputed Aksai Chin region⁷ and China's reported illegal intrusions into Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.⁸ It was New Delhi's way of remonstrating against the Chinese decision to call the Indian Ambassador, Nirupama Rao, at 2 am in the morning in Beijing, threatening her with dire consequences over India's failure to check alleged Tibetan attacks on the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. It was a delicate balancing act: allow the Tibetans their fundamental right to protest in full public view but guard against a diplomatic incident by ensuring that the torch relay itself, guarded by Chinese commandoes, is not disrupted. This please-all strategy was not, however, one that endeared itself to those that advocated a hardline Indian response to China on the border talks. From their point of view any concession to Chinese opinion was a sign of weakness. *The Indian Express* summed up the views of New Delhi's foreign policy hawks a day after the unprecedented security arrangements for the torch relay:

A day after the might of the Indian Republic was applied to ensure the safe passage of the Olympic torch through New Delhi, it is time for sober reflection. This over-reaction was incongruous with India's democratic credentials, and it has also put on India a striking handicap in bilateral relations.... Of late, China has been moving the goalposts on border issues that had been taken to be settled... the repercussions will be felt in foreign policy. In these weeks, China has seen the ease with which it could have the Indian vice president's long scheduled meeting with the Dalai Lama cancelled — or compel India's envoy in Beijing to show up at the foreign office in the middle of the night. Tenor in foreign policy creates its own momentum. India will have to reckon with it.⁹

The diplomatic impact of New Delhi's double-edged response to the flame relay is open to question but one thing is certain; the price tag was the excessive security and the huge

inconvenience caused to Delhi's residents on the day of the ritual, which left a bitter taste with many.

Policing the Tibetans

Police is a state subject in India's federal structure of governance. Each of the 28 states has its own police force administered by the Home Ministries of individual elected state governments. Delhi, though, is different. Even though it is a full-fledged state with its own state government, by virtue of being the national capital its police force is administered directly by the Union Home Ministry, which is also responsible for all internal security duties across the country. Once the decision was taken to quarantine the Olympic torch from the Tibetan protestors the Ministry swung into action. It announced an unprecedented security clampdown for the torch relay, of the kind that Delhi witnesses once every year on Republic Day when the central parts of the city are sealed off completely to all traffic to facilitate the annual military parade to celebrate the Indian Republic. The Chinese Ambassador to India personally met the city police chief Y.S. Dadwal at the police headquarters, a total of 21, 000 security personnel were specially deployed across the city, central paramilitary forces and commandoes were requisitioned and the rally route was curtailed from the planned 9 km to 2.7 km. As a senior ministry official said, "It will be like Republic Day. NSG commandoes are likely to take control of all the high-rises along the venue and keep a watch from the rooftops. The venue will be sealed from all sides." Cameras, except for those with accredited journalists, were not to be allowed anywhere near the event and entry for spectators would only be by select invitations. In addition, several quick reaction teams were also formed to thwart self-immolation bids by protestors and nine companies of paramilitary forces were deployed around the Chinese embassy.¹⁰ *The Times*

of India summed up the massive security buildup in a telling full-page banner headline: “It’s a fortress out there.”¹¹

Despite this huge presence, on April 15, a day before the torch arrived in Delhi, Tibetan protestors demonstrated their organizational skills by lighting a replica of the Olympic torch at an under-construction Metro station just a kilometer away from the Rashtrapati Bhawan (President’s House) in central Delhi. They called it the ‘Tibetan Independence Torch Relay’. In the heart of Delhi’s most secure zone, a short walk away from Parliament and the Central Secretariat they came in quietly in auto-rickshaws, hiding their banners and flags under their clothes before suddenly unfurling them before thousands of armed policemen deployed for just such an eventuality. They wanted to walk towards India Gate – memorial to Indian war-dead -- to hold a protest vigil but as the policemen tried to snuff out the Tibetan flame, the flames caught the clothes of a woman protestor. They were quickly put out and the protestors led away in police trucks but it had been a powerful demonstration of what could happen when the Olympic flame actually came to town.

Jittery now at the prospects, on the same day the Union Home Ministry convened a high level meeting to review the security arrangements. This was monitored at the highest levels of the government. National Security advisor MK Narayanan, whose duties include keeping track of the national nuclear arsenal, personally took stock the security measures for the relay. At the meeting were Indian Olympic Association officials, representatives from the Intelligence bureau, the Delhi Police and the Union Home Minister of State for Home, Shakeel Ahmad who told reporters, “It is our responsibility [to ensure safe passage for the torch].”¹²

One measure of how seriously the government was taking the relay was the fact that even the Delhi Metro was asked to close services to all stations in the vicinity of the torch for the day.

The Olympic torch had now turned into an issue of national importance, diplomatic gamesmanship, and civic inconvenience. As such, between April 14-18 it became the lead story on the front-page of virtually every national newspaper. All the Delhi-based national newspapers also had special pages devoted entirely to advice the citizens on the torch relay route and how to avoid the resultant traffic congestions.¹³ Even the UN advised all its staff in India to avoid any movement in the relay route due to safety reasons and to reschedule or postpone planned meetings in the area.¹⁴

A Mini-Tibet in Delhi: following the agitators

It was an incredible experience. Following the Tibetan protesters from Gandhi's resting place at Rajghat to Jantar Mantar¹⁵ in the scorching Delhi heat, trying to make sense of most of their slogans, was to go back into an older, idealistic world where agitations and public dissent of this kind still had meaning. It was to be reminded of the simple idealism of agitational politics, of the most basic principles of civil action, where the participants were aware that they were marginal but found power and agency in simply making themselves heard.

For us, the experience of the relay had begun on the night of 16 April when we watched Tenzing Tsundue, a noted activist and leader of the Free Tibet movement, on *Times Now*.¹⁶ Soon after the show, Tsundue, we were later informed, was dropped off at an unknown location with the police desperate to detain him. The *Times Now* driver, Amjad, who ferried him to his hideout and who was with us the following day, took us to the secret location at the stroke of dawn. It was cloak and dagger stuff – a trip that led us to a hideout where 200 or more Tibetans were busy planning an assault on the flame. A group of senior Tibetan leaders were in attendance and were keen to ensure that 17 April 2008 turned into a day of international impact for their cause. Knowing full well that the police would outnumber them, they were planning guerilla attacks on

the flame on its way out of the Meridian on Janpath Road and on its way to India Gate. That such meticulous planning resulted in little tangible gain in the end is a different matter altogether. The police clampdown on central Delhi put paid to all such plans but to be here was to see the cold determination of these protestors – the steely look in their eyes, the idealism in their venture and the vociferous arguments over tactics. While these Tibetans were determined to make a mark and weren't averse to violence, others, who had already made Jantar Mantar their home were single-minded in their determination in trying to keep things peaceful. For them non-violent protest was the way to capture world attention and hence life size cut-outs of Mahatma Gandhi that were juxtaposed with those of the Dalai Lama at the forefront of most protest rallies.

For these and thousands of other Tibetans who had arrived in Delhi the night before, things got underway in the wee hours of the morning of 17 April with an assembly at Rajghat. This was a giant venture that needed planning and coordination on national scale – from the strategic to the mundane. When we reached at 7.30 am, we saw groups of men and women bracing themselves for the day's events by writing out posters or painting placards. Some were busy packing pouches of water and food, while others, who had traveled thousands of miles to be part of the movement, were busy catching up on a quick hours sleep. Young Tibetan girls and boys, mostly students in leading Delhi colleges, wrapped themselves in 'Free Tibet' flags and were busy distributing 'Free Tibet' T shirts to anyone who wanted to join in. Members of the Tibetan Parliament-in -Exile, key organizers of the rally, were busy putting final touches to preparations for the protest march. "We wanted the Dalai Lama to be visible alongside Mahatma Gandhi for both are messiahs for global peace",¹⁷ was their reasoned answer to our query on why most posters had the Tibetan leader sharing stage with the man who the Indian state calls the father of the nation.

Just as the clock struck 10 am, there arrived at Rajghat a slew of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious preachers for joint prayers in solidarity with Tibetans at Gandhi's Samadhi. It was surreal, a motley mix of preachers from varied religious backgrounds coming together to pray for a cause of real global significance. It was good event management to be sure but none but the most cold-hearted cynic could afford not to be moved by the solemnity of it all and fail to observe the fact that the global appeal of contemporary sport had made it possible. With the prayers over, the Tibetans lit their own parallel flame. This was different in shape to the Olympic torch and was more in the nature of a *diya* [traditional earthen lamp] that was subsequently placed inside a round frame. They had been told that only a 'non-official' torch of this kind would pass official muster. As chants of "Karuna ki jyoti amar rahe" [May the torch of tenderness live forever] and "Shanti ki jyoti Amar Rahe" [May the torch of peace live forever], shattered the silence, assembled leaders from all major religious groupings joined in carrying the flame out of Rajghat. This was the point at which the huge police contingent, men and women who did everything possible to co-operate till now, began to visibly look a tad jittery until the rally leaders assured them that the march would be kept peaceful. So powerful was the group dynamic that some security men too were caught up in the emotionalism of the moment, a couple of those standing nearest to the protestors with tears in their eyes.

Once out of Rajghat, the rally began its 4 km long march to Jantar Mantar, the site, which the Tibetans had made home for the day. Thousands of Tibetans from Varanasi, Mcleodgunj, Bangalore and Dharamshala had already assembled at Jantar Mantar the night before, carrying with them bare minimum supplies. The location was not unsurprising. Jantar Mantar after all is the permanent protestors' corner in Delhi. For years it has been the site where dispossessed and the marginalized of India come to present their woes before the national media, hoping for higher visibility with the powers that be. And so the Tibetans came, jostling for space in this parliament

of the oppressed, alongside stalls set up by the Bhopal gas tragedy victims, the Vishwa Dalit Parishad [World Council of Dalits], the Foundation for Common Man: Justice for Natihari and even the Group 4-Securicor Mazdoor Union, asking for better wages.

But this was a day primarily for the Tibetans. As hundreds of specially deployed policemen watched from the sidelines and scores of reporters took notes, the entire panoply of anti-Chinese dissent was on display in a tent city that had come up virtually overnight on one of the side lines leading up to Jantar Mantar. At its entry point, someone had prominently placed a huge poster on the windshield of a parked car: 'Just raped in Tibet'. It summed up the mood and to enter the tent city was to enter a virtual marketplace of oppression. The centre-piece was a day-long funeral service to those who died at the hands of the Chinese conducted by specially brought in monks. As their chants and gongs filled the air, the observer could see a whole range of stalls – representatives of the banned Falung Gong, posters showcasing the pictures of those dead and missing and pictures of torture and death at the hands of Chinese troops. The posters were telling: "Shame on you China", "Where are you UNO", and even one depicting the Chinese President as an incarnation of Dracula. Policemen and intelligence sleuths in plainclothes mingled with the protestors although none tried to intervene.

This was where the bulk of the protest groups took residence for most of the afternoon, once the 4 km-distance from Rajghat had been covered, for a day long ritual of songs, chants and slogans. With hundreds of local students joining hands, Jantar Mantar was turned into a mini-Tibet, the adjoining alleyways and streets leading up to the now virtually deserted Janpath Road, Cannaught Place now choc-a-block with activists sporting 'Free Tibet' t-shirts and head bands. Their one point demand: China open its doors to envoys of the Dalai Lama. Their slogans shouted out in Hindi, mixed their animosity with China to chants of friendship with India: "gali-gali mei shor hai, Hu Jintao hatyara hai" [every street rings, Hu jintao is a killer], "azadi sab ko

pyara hai” [freedom is beloved by all], “North Pole South Pole, Bharat hamara saath do [India, support us].

How spontaneous was this agitation and what had gone into its planning? Our interviews with nearly hundred of the protestors provide a clear picture. One of the agitators had been arrested two weeks earlier for breaking into the Chinese embassy. His story summed up the story of this gathering. Born of Tibetan refugee parents in Mysore, Karnataka, he was a farmer who had been camping in Delhi for 45 days. He was a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress but he said that initially “it all happened suddenly” once the Tibetans realized that they could use the Olympic torch to showcase their cause. He had come down to Delhi because “it was the national capital” and it was important to magnify protests here.¹⁸ The Tibetan protestors saw this is an unparalleled opportunity to put pressure on the Chinese government, using the oxygen of publicity, because for the national and international media, their story now had immediacy. This was also the argument given by Dhondup Dorji, Vice President, Tibetan Youth Congress. Appearing on a special half-an-hour live programme called ‘Torch of Protest’ on *Times Now*, he argued that this was the first time that the electronic media had given support to their cause. “Normally we have support from the print media only,” he opined.¹⁹ He had a point. On the same programme, television viewers saw two young Tibetan college students from Mumbai breaking from their prepared speeches to suddenly ask Dorji on how he will motivate the Tibetan youth after this event. The young questioners had been rustled to the live satellite link by the channel’s reporters to show their national coverage of the protests but this was a spontaneous question, one that reflected the internal dilemmas of the Tibetan movement on how to sustain momentum. Sitting in the Delhi studio, Dorji answered on the live satellite link: “Tibetan youth have a moral responsibility to keep up the struggle. We must dedicate our lives to Tibet.”²⁰ It was an extraordinary moment; it was like listening to an inner-party discussion forum. The Tibetan

Youth Congress on that day had a national platform to reach out to its own cadres on national television and to disseminate internal messages that would normally have passed through the usual hierarchies of leadership. This was direct communication and it came at a time when protests had also simultaneously broken out in Bangalore, Mumbai, McLeodganj and Dharamsala.

By early afternoon, when the Tibetans had once again resumed their peaceful march after a gap of almost three hours, the scene of action had shifted to the stretch between Raisina Hill and India gate, the venue for the official Olympic torch relay. This was when the cost of the protest to the ordinary Delhi commuter came home to us most forcefully. The five minute drive from Jantar Mantar to India Gate turned into a 90 minute walk with the police having closed all access roads and all vehicular traffic. As we pleaded with the first police access point on Copernicus Road, we could hear the desperate pleas of a middle-aged man whose mother-in-law had suffered an accident near Safdarjang but who was stuck on this side of town with the police clampdown. "What do I do?" he pleaded, "How do I get there? Will you let me through?" The policemen were sympathetic but their orders were clear. These roads were off-limits. "Try another route" was the advice to the distraught man. As for us, we were by now late for the function, after having taking numerous diversions to reach the venue and despite possessing all the necessary invites and IOA advisories the policemen on duty has the same answer: "Sorry, the road is now closed." So we put on our best humble faces, protested about us being academics writing on the torch relay, one of us invited to be a torchbearer and finally dropped a thousand names before the wall of resistance reluctantly melted. We could still hear the man with the injured mother-in-law arguing his case with another group of police guards as we entered but there seemed little chance. We were entering on foot. With his car, he had no chance. A policeman was explaining a long circuitous alternative route to him as we crossed the barricade.

Even on foot, only a handful of select invitees were allowed inside and lined up across the entire relay route stretching for 2.7 km and manned by 3000 plus security personnel. With the sponsors cheering groups performing their customary song and dance numbers with not a soul in sight, it seemed a superficial act in comparison to the intensity of the protests of the morning.

Declared Randhir Singh, Secretary General of the IOA:

We have done everything possible to ensure the torch relay goes through peacefully. We did not intend it to be a closed one but there isn't much we could do. We would have loved the public to come and be part of this historic occasion in keeping with established Olympic tradition. But the situation is such that one blemish might lead to violence. Our national pride and international standing was at stake.²¹

And so it was. At exactly 4.40 pm Kunjarani Devi, India's legendary woman weightlifter, kickstarted the carefully orchestrated flame relay. 70 sportsmen and celebrities including one of us were involved and as the official run began, the tension in the air was palpable. The IOA and the government were determined to get through the days events as soon as possible. Within 50 minutes the flame had traveled the distance from Raisina Hill to India Gate, escorted by Chinese commandoes. Finally, when Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi lit the cauldron, Suresh Kalmadi, President of the IOA, looked justly relieved. As one NDTV reporter on the spot summed up, however, in a live report: "Who saw it [the torch], certainly not the people of Delhi."²² It was a far cry from 1964 when the Olympic torch first appeared in Delhi en route to the Tokyo Olympics. On that occasion:

Shoppers in Connaught Place and Janpath stopped whatever they were doing and rushed to cheer the relay, managed by smart Japanese in dark suits and neat white gloves. The flame rested for the night at New Delhi's town Hall before being given a ceremonial send-off the following day on its flight to Tokyo. No security problems those days, no fears of protests and demonstrations.²³

In 1964, the Tibetan refugees were still fresh in India but India had just suffered a humiliating military defeat at the hands of the People's Army. China was still firmly in the Russian camp in the Cold War – the military clashes between the two on the Ussuri river were still five years away and Kissinger's path-breaking trip to Beijing even further in the future. China remained firmly isolated from the international stage and Tibetan protests in New Delhi would have received little traction. As such, the high-velocity protests in 2008 were as much a reflection of the changed international power balance and the new weight of international opinion against the Chinese leadership in the year of the Beijing games as a reflection of the organizing capacities of Tibetan groups.

As the troubled flame left Indian shores for Bangkok and then onto Canberra, Osaka and Seoul, a stock taking of the tumultuous events surrounding the flame in Delhi helped drive home the truth that the Olympic movement is not simply a sports movement. Rather, it is a movement that champions sport as a medium for inter-cultural communication and peaceful democratic exchange. In fact, it could be successfully argued following the Delhi leg of the international torch relay that the Olympic ideology promoted by the IOC since its creation is henceforth no longer founded on the unity of sport and culture alone, as extolled by de Coubertin at the beginning of the twentieth century, but completed - for the twenty-first century - by concerns for human rights. This development within Olympic ideology, it can be suggested, is not only a sign of the times, but also a positive legacy of the modern Olympic Games.

Delhi and Its Aftermath

When questioned on the impact of the international torch relay 2008, Jim Yardley of the *New York Times*, reporting from Beijing, had this to say:

I do think China miscalculated the depth of passionate protest not just about Tibet but also other issues. It is rare that China oversees an international event outside its own borders, particularly one that is politically charged. This shows that even as China is accusing the West of failing to understand China, China also still has a lot to learn about the West.²⁴

The Tibetan protests around the Olympic torch in India highlighted the potential for a high-visibility event like the Olympics to be used as a vehicle for political mobilization.

But China is not the only country to be wary of such mobilization. With Delhi all set to host the commonwealth Games in 2010, IOA President Suresh Kalmadi justified the tight security in the capital on 17 April arguing that “We're hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010, what if some nations want to boycott it citing our rights violation record in Kashmir?” Kalmadi had hit upon the raw nerves that the protests had ignited in world capitals, especially those with unpleasant histories to be fearful of. It can be suggested that India might soon find itself confronted with unpleasant questions over issues of human rights violation in Kashmir ahead of the forthcoming 2010 Commonwealth Games. As Rohit Mahajan writes in *Outlook*:

Kalmadi wasn't speaking up for the world's downtrodden. He was merely cautioning those fanning the flames of trouble for the torch's truncated run in Delhi. His message: keep it quiet, for India has skeletons of its own in its cupboard. All of our rights groups, at home and abroad, agree—India's record on human rights is deplorable.²⁵

Also, with the Commonwealth Games village built by demolishing slums on the Yamuna riverbed and with the displaced slum dwellers not properly catered for, Delhi 2010 is a sure site for protests from civil rights groups and NGOs. While some are of the opinion that such protests will hinder Games preparations, a counter view is that only because of the Commonwealth Games will the poor and the displaced get a chance to be heard. To go a step further, more than the medals won or records broken, such actions using the sporting stage make major international sports events like the Olympics what they are: events that do much to promote inter-cultural communication and understanding. As Steve MCarthy, founder and Chairman and CEO of Além International Management Inc., the leading transnational provider of operational services for the Olympic Flame Relay suggests, “The Olympics torch relay affords an opportunity to individuals or groups to pronounce and promote a political or social statement because the relay commands a lot of global media coverage. In other words, people don't attack the Flame or what it stands for, they consider using it as a low cost vehicle to get their messages out.”²⁶

At the time of writing, news has just broken out that China has renewed and held the first round of negotiations with envoys of the Dalai Lama, in one of the most interesting developments of our times. In trying to put this radical turn around in context, Jim Yardley states, “Under increasing pressure from Europe and elsewhere, the Chinese government announced Friday (25 April) that it would meet with envoys of the Dalai Lama, an unexpected shift that comes as Tibetan unrest has threatened to cast a pall over the Olympic Games in August.”²⁷ This development, made possible wholly by the global symbolism of the Olympic flame, once again helps underscore the potential of this global peace movement, often unknowingly passed off as a simple sports competition.

NOTES

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- ¹ Suprita Das reporting on Delhi leg of Olympic flame relay on NDTV 24x7. Television broadcast, April 17, 2008
- ² Tenzin Tsundue, 'Helping Hand, some Muscle: Torch Made India Gate Forbidden City', *The Indian Express* (New Delhi: April 18, 2008).
- ³ John Macaloon, *Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*, Routledge, Forthcoming.
- ⁴ Pradeep Thakur, 'Tibetan Protests Banned in Arunachal', *The Times of India*, (New Delhi: April 16, 2008)
- ⁵ Pradeep Thakur, 'Tibetan Protests Banned in Arunachal', *The Times of India*, (New Delhi: April 16, 2008).
- ⁶ The protest ban in Arunachal and the heavy security was scathingly critiqued as a sign of Indian weakness before Beijing by many media publications. See, for instance, 'Torching the Lines', *The Indian Express* (New Delhi: April 18, 2008).
- ⁷ Aksai Chin is a region located at the juncture of China, Pakistan and India. One of the main causes of the Sino-Indian of 1962 was India's discovery of a road China had built through the region, which India considers its territory. It has been under Chinese control ever since.
- ⁸ Both Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are under Indian control but claimed by China. The Indian and the Chinese Armies observe a Line of Actual control on the disputed borders but through 2007-2008 the Indian press has reported more than a hundred intrusions by the Chinese Army. Many of these intrusions are a result of poor demarcation of the line in the mountainous terrain. The Indian Army Chief, Gen Deepak Kapoor cited this as the reason when questioned about the reported intrusions in March 2008 and refuted talks of any illegal offensive actions by the Chinese Army. Times Now report, broadcast March 2008.
- ⁹ 'Torching the Lines: India's Lack of Self-Esteem in Duplicating China's Over-reaction Carries Huge Costs', *The Indian Express* (New Delhi: April 18, 2008).
- ¹⁰ Rahul Tripathi, 'It's a Fortress Out there', *The Times of India* (New Delhi: April 16, 2008).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² 'Foolproof Security for the Torch Relay', *The Hindu* (New Delhi: April 16, 2008)
- ¹³ See for instance the saturation full-page coverage of *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi: April 16, 2008). Its entire metro page was devoted to this issue.
- ¹⁴ This advisory was issued by UN Security officers on April 11, 2008
- ¹⁵ Jantar Mantar is a seventeenth century observatory situated near Cannought Place in New Delhi.
- ¹⁶ Times Now is India's most popular 24-hour English news channel. It is owned by Bennett and Coleman company which also runs *The Times of India*.
- ¹⁷ Personal interview at Rajghat on 17 April 2008.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Pasang Tsering, Tibetan protestor, New Delhi, April 18, 2008.
- ¹⁹ Dhondup, Dorji, Vice President, Tibetan Youth Congress, 'Torch of Protest, Times Now special, broadcast on April 17, 2008.
- ²⁰ Ibid
- ²¹ Interview with Randhir Singh, 17 April 2008.
- ²² Anusuya Mathur, report on NDTV 24xt, broadcast on April 17, 2008
- ²³ K. Datta, 'Keep Politics Away from Sports: Protests, Boycotts Only Affect the Athletes', *The Times of India* (New Delhi: April 16, 2008).
- ²⁴ Interview with Jim Yardley, 27 April 2008.
- ²⁵ Rohit Mahajan, "Ah The Human Race", in *Outlook*, 28 April 2008.
- ²⁶ Quoted in John Macaloon, *Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*.
- ²⁷ Jim Yardley, "China Says It Is Ready to Meet Dalai Lama Envoys", in *New York Times*, 26 April 2008.

Boria Majumdar:

Senior Research Fellow, La Trobe University, Melbourne

Nalin Mehta:

Honorary Fellow, Department of Politics, La Trobe University, Melbourne