

Does size matter: India's 'right' to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games

By Dr. John Bruni

India is the Commonwealth of Nation's biggest member. But does this mean that having the world's second largest population (1.1 billion), the world's fifth largest number of billionaires (49), and a sustained growth rate of over 7% per annum since 1997, qualify India to host a major international sporting event like the Commonwealth Games?

If one were to say that population size and economic production are the only variables to be considered – then perhaps.

But India is not just a fast growing economy. Much of the country's growth has been achieved on a ramshackle social system riddled by class, caste, linguistic and sectarian discrimination and division; frightening levels of official corruption (as a major power, India is considered 88th most corrupt country out of 159 states listed); and with parts of the country active war-zones (India has a number of ongoing, multi-decadal insurgencies and violent political and religious struggles which absorb much of the country's 1.3 million-strong regular armed forces). India is also confronting Pakistan over Kashmir and countering Pakistani efforts at undermining India's fragile internal security and the nuclear balance of power on the subcontinent.

Unlike that other emerging great power, the People's Republic of China, India has no 'top-down' culture of governance.

Priding itself on being the world's largest democracy, India's governing elite spends a great deal of time ruminating over how best to keep the existing system in place. But economic activity alone will not sustain modern India as a locus of strategic power although to date, this has been a relatively successful strategy. In spite of its obvious flaws as a modern state, India has succeeded in depicting itself internationally as a rival of China on both the high seas and in nuclear weaponry. The country even has a space program. But India also has 41.6 percent of its population living below the poverty line. That amounts to some 450 million people – roughly the population of the European Union. And while the economic reforms of the late 1990s raised many out of poverty, there are no carefully organised and monitored programs imposed on the 28 Indian states and 7 union territories by the federal government to elevate the remainder of the impoverished into relative comfort and safety. In fact, owing to the government's endemic corruption both at the political and civil service levels, much of the money earmarked for nation building often ends up in the pockets of those proclaiming to protect and help the poor. The fatalistic culture among Hindus and Muslims allows the disadvantaged to accept their lowly status with quiet dignity which belies their great suffering.

What the West sees is a country with a big population and wealth being generated. Strip this back, look deep into India's history, and it becomes clear that India has never been an egalitarian society. That what we are seeing isn't India developing as a state, but instead a ruling elite securing its own wealth and safety on the back of its poor. The India we see and choose to engage with is the India of 'haves', not the India of the 'have nots'. Which then leads us back to the central question: did India deserve the right to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games?

It will cost India approximately US\$7 billion dollars for specially designed infrastructure to host a two-week international sporting festival – the idea seems absurd to the point of bad taste. It will be the most expensive Commonwealth Games ever. Considering the very real social problems of India and that country's ongoing security concerns, what were those in charge of the Commonwealth Games Federation thinking when they announced that India would host the 2010 Games?

Unlike cricket which is a unifying sport on the subcontinent, cutting across class, caste and religion – where even the most extreme fundamentalist can agree to the game's broad appeal – the sports of the Commonwealth Games have appeal only among the Indian elite, who are eager to reinforce the image that India has 'made it' as an accepted global power.

Australian and other Commonwealth athletes planning to partake in the 2010

Games have witnessed the international controversy surrounding the athlete's village and the overall infrastructure of the venues.

Then there is the ever-present threat posed by a range of separatist, fundamentalist and revolutionary movements eager to disrupt this event.

As a measure of India's resolve to make sure that the Games are safe, some 200,000 police, paramilitaries and regular military personnel have been engaged to lock Delhi down.

The problem with this, however, is that such a massive redeployment of security personnel has opened up holes within India's overall national security framework where ongoing counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations will, at least temporarily, be undermanned. Such gaps are dangerous in that they almost invite jihadists, Hindu fundamentalists and separatists to mobilise their forces against the Indian government. It is the making of a 'perfect security storm.'

But for the athletes that's not all. They also have to contend with the possibility of an outbreak of various diseases as a consequence of poor standards of Indian hygiene.

Yet in spite of all the negativity, the Games might well pass without serious incident. Let us hope this is the case. But let us not be under any illusion. India is not in the league of a first-world developed nation. There are

many risks associated with the staging of these Games. In the end, should anything go wrong, the blame should rest with those organisers in London and Delhi who failed to look at the big picture from the very beginning.



Indian Security image:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/11/india-security-service>

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