

South Asia

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India's commonwealth fiasco

By Kunal Kumar Kundu

*Asia Times Online contributor **Kunal Kumar Kundu** laments the problems in the buildup to the Commonwealth Games that open in India on October 3.*

The British left the shores of India more than 60 years ago but their legacy of loot and plunder continues. Unfortunately, the sense of British discipline, having failed to influence our collective conscience also left India along with the Brits, while the Indians inherited their vice.

A country that is expected to shoulder the burden of global economic growth as one of the worst recessions since Great Depression is thought of as having come to an end, cannot even shoulder the burden of its own people.

Forty percent of the Indians are poor, a large number of our children suffer from malnutrition and stunted growth, we cannot even provide safe drinking water to a large majority, the state of our physical infrastructure is abysmal to say the least, as people die of hunger we allow foodgrains to rot - the list of embarrassment is endless.

A country that has learnt to live with deficits as a lot of valuable financial resource gets sucked away in the bottomless pit of corruption with minor developments here and there as collateral benefit, tried its hand at hosting the latest Commonwealth Games. Having become poorer by 700 billion rupees (US\$17 billion) in the process, the entire organizational effort became a breeding ground for the corrupt who's who of India.

Indeed, the story of the organization of the Commonwealth Games is symptomatic of the deep malaise afflicting our country. A lot has been talked about the corruption and blatant misuse of power in the entire process. I will not go into the details of that. Suffice it is to say that the cancer of corruption has spread far and wide in this country, thereby thinning our moral fiber. The hosting of this event finally shows that whatever has been left of the fiber has been decimated, as if by a scimitar, as there's a mad rush to share the spoils by the high and mighty.

To me, the series of events in the runup to the games reflect the biggest bane of this country - governmental apathy and our love for undertaking last moment patch-up work when there's egg (or even worse) on our face, ignoring all the relevant signals along the way. Given that a seven-year period was not enough to host the games on time (we earned the right to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games in 2003), is it any wonder that we perennially fail to achieve our five-year-plan targets?

This couldn't care less attitude is best reflected in the statement of the Delhi chief minister Sheila Dixit (a lady who I admired a lot), when she explained the collapse of a foot overbridge thus, "It was only for the ordinary spectators." A lady, who comes to power because she is voted by these "ordinary spectators" really couldn't have cared less had the ordinary spectators met violent end to their lives if the bridge would have collapsed during the games. It's a different matter altogether, that 27 workers were injured. In her eyes, these are possibly collateral damages as India aims for glory.

She even went on to state, "Such minor hitches and glitches do happen," as she tried to explain away the giving in of the false ceiling in the weightlifting arena. Even more bizarre was the comment by Lalit Bhanot, secretary general of the organizing committee. When it came to light how inhabitable the games village was, he

said, "It is not such a big issue that we should be ashamed of. Westerners have a different standard of hygiene, we have different standards." How I wish he and his family stayed in the games village which conformed to "his" standards.

And, when it seemed that India would end up facing major embarrassment (even some tiny unheard of nations are also talking about having second thoughts of coming to India), better sense prevailed and things are now being taken up on a war footing. It's a different matter altogether that it would be a touch and go affair and India's shining image has taken a lot of beating internationally.

To me, this Commonwealth Games fiasco is a god-sent opportunity to set things right. Like 1991, when India had no other option but to reform its economy with its back to the wall, this is another opportunity to finally redeem itself. For far too long have we accepted corruption and apathy as a way of life. Now that the country has faced a major embarrassment, it is time our policy makers stand up and make themselves counted and aim at clearing up the muck that has weakened the foundation of this great country.