

Obama, the Beijing Olympics and education

Neither money nor infrastructure do the trick in even the richest countries, says Dinesh Mohan

I wonder how many of our politicians and industry stalwarts heard the Barack Obama acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in USA. If they did, then many of the so-called "liberals" must have cringed at his prescriptions for the state's role in promoting a just and equitable society. His speech brought tears to the thousands of his cheering listeners and it is worth quoting some remarks at length.

"We measure the strength of our economy not by the number of billionaires we have or the profits of the Fortune 500, but by whether someone with a good idea can take a risk and start a new business, or whether the waitress who lives on tips can take a day off to look after a sick kid without losing her job... Ours is a promise that says government cannot solve all our problems, but what it should do is that which we cannot do for ourselves — protect us from harm and provide every child a decent education; keep our water clean and our toys safe; invest in new schools and new roads and new science and technology... It should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who's willing to work... Now is the time to finally meet our moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education, because it will take nothing less to compete in the global economy... If you commit to serving your community or your country, we will make sure you can afford a college education... Now is the time to finally keep the promise of affordable, accessible health care for every single American... Now is the time to help families with paid sick days and better family leave, because nobody in America should have to choose between keeping their jobs and caring for a sick child or ailing parent."

It is not important whether he will be able to do any of this, or what he said on foreign policy or outsourcing. What is important is that these words came from a presidential candidate of a mainstream political party operating in arguably the most capitalist society in the



THE REAL MEDAL TALLY

	Medals per million population	Per capita income \$
1 Bahamas	6.0	14,920
2 Jamaica	4.1	3,480
3 Iceland	3.2	50,580
4 Slovenia	2.5	18,890
5 Australia	2.2	35,990
6 Cuba	2.1	1,170
7 New Zealand	2.1	27,250
8 Norway	2.1	66,530
9 Armenia	2.0	5,150
10 Belarus	2.0	3,380

world. As he was ending his speech, recent discussions on our performance in the Beijing Olympics came to mind.

We have exulted in the fact that we got the maximum medals ever. Almost all the commentators are now demanding more expenditure on sports facilities and training. But, obviously, Obama does not think that just the availability of money and infrastructure does the trick even in the richest nation on earth. For an individual to reach the peak of outstanding performance in his/her activity of passion, three conditions are necessary: Discovery of inert talent early, an unwavering zeal and persistence to excel, and then support and training by outstanding people who believe in you. Presently, we are only focusing on the last aspect. This will not get us very far. It is worth examining the results of the Beijing Olympics to understand some of this.

The performance of a nation as a society can only be judged by its achievements as a proportion of its population. If we divide the number of medals won by each country by its population, we get surprising results. The top 10 do not include any large countries. Bahamas and Iceland have very small populations of one third of a million each. Of these

are randomly distributed in the population of a country, then the discovery of the best individuals at an early age will be possible only if all children get an equal chance in similar schools. After discovery, the children must get an opportunity to pursue their passion with some minimal facilities and encouragement. And then in their teens and young adulthood they must get the opportunity to fulfil their ambitions with good training and availability of fair competition.

None of the above will be possible as long as quality of school education is hugely unequal and most children don't even go to a half-way decent school. More than two-thirds of our gene pool is left out of the selection process. In this situation we will find it very hard to compete internationally whether it is in science, literature or sports. There will always be exceptions like our medal winners in a very large population, but that is no way to ensure excellence in any field of endeavour.

In most of the countries that did well in the Olympics, a vast majority of the children go to similar schools with similar facilities. Even in the USA, 90 per cent of the children use the neighbourhood state schooling system. No system can perform well if its management is much more powerful than its users. It is the same with schools. If the parents of all the children are poorer than the teachers, then there is no way the teachers can be expected to perform. Every school must have some children whose parents are socially more powerful than its management to keep the system on its toes. This is the main reason why the rich and the poor have to be mixed in the education system.

Lastly, our educational institutions have to become places where young people discover any possible talent they might possess, not just academic scholarship. Currently, we include music or sports in the school curriculum for "all round development" of the students. This cannot be the main reason. Schools must include all areas of human endeavour as a part of their activities because different human beings have different skills and interests and they must be given a chance to discover their own talent and interest. If we do this more, students would leave school as achievers with pride and not failures in the academic rat race. Then we might even win more medals in the Olympics.

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10, only five are considered rich countries. Out of 87 countries getting medals, 24 managed to get more than 1 per million, 42 got between 0.1 and 1, and the rest less than 0.1. USA managed 0.4, UK got 0.8, France got 0.7, Russia got 0.5, China got 0.08 and India came at the bottom of the list at 0.003. The top three medal winners, USA, China and Russia get the huge tally partly because of their large populations.

These data tell us that while money does play a role it is not a sufficient criterion. If one plots medals per capita vs per capita income of the nations, there seems to be a weak trend that richer nations do somewhat better but the correlation is very weak ($R^2 = 0.08$). However, a vast majority of countries doing well have average literacy rates of 15-24 year olds which are greater than 80 per cent and infant mortality rates of less than 40 per 1,000 live births even if their incomes are not very high, showing that public health and equal access to schooling are important determinants. India lags behind most countries on these counts. Even the relatively-worse performance of the USA compared to other rich nations may be explained by this.

This should not surprise us. If genes