

Why does sport get such low priority in the media?



Young Indians should not remain content with watching sports events on television or reading about them. They must participate in sports with passion and a commitment to excel. The role of the media, both electronic and print, in promoting sports among youth, is critical, says **Alok Srivastava**. The fact that sports is given such low priority by the media is a key reason for Indian sportspersons not being able to give good account of themselves at international levels, he says

India's demography is turning young. Nearly two-thirds of India's population is below 35 years of age and over 50 per cent of the people are below the age of 25. No doubt this is an abundant human resource available, but are all stakeholders, including media, doing enough to efficiently engage them and instill a love of sports in them? Are Indian youth healthy enough, with the necessary energy and stamina, to participate actively in sports?

According to the recently released National Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4), in India, nearly one-fourth of men aged between 15 and 49 years are anaemic and around 19 per cent are overweight or obese. Among women, the situation is much worse – more than half are anaemic and nearly 21 per cent are overweight. Estimates released in 2015 by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that the prevalence of obesity among adolescents (13-18 years) has grown from 16 to 29 per cent over the past five years.

One of the major concerns is the growth of lifestyle disorders. Societal changes due to globalisation, economic reforms and removal of trade restrictions have contributed significantly to disorders in childhood and adolescence. Children, adolescents and youth, rather than engaging in outdoor sports, are now pursuing sedentary activities such as watching TV or spending time

with gadgets such as tablets and smartphones, on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and video games. They binge on junk foods too. According to an article by Manu Raj and R. Krishna Kumar in the book, *Obesity in Children & Adolescents*, every hour of sedentary activity increases the chance of obesity in adolescents and children.

No doubt, since early the 1990s, with the expansion of cable and satellite TV channels, exposure to national and international sports events has grown. Now sports events are not limited to youth of metros or big cities. Even those living in towns and villages can watch live telecasts or repeat telecasts of various sports events.

Thanks to television, in the last two or three decades, sports other than cricket, such as football, hockey, kabaddi, tennis and badminton, have seen a meteoric rise in audience and viewership among adolescents and youth. As per National Youth Readership Survey report (2010), television remains the most popular source of information for the youth, followed by newspapers. A literate youth spends an average 98 minutes daily viewing TV, 32 minutes on newspaper reading, 44 minutes reading magazines, 70 minutes surfing the Net, and 61 minutes listening to the radio.

However, while 54 per cent of the youth view television for entertainment and 22 per cent for news and current affairs, about 63 per cent read newspapers to gather

news and information on current events and only 10 per cent read for entertainment. Young Indians should not remain content with watching sports events on television or reading about them. They must participate in sports with passion and a commitment to excel.

The role of the media, both electronic and print, in promoting sports among youth, is critical. Television coverage remained confined mainly to cricket matches at the international level till 10-15 years ago, and that too of men's cricket only. Apart from this, to some extent other major sports events such as Olympics, Asian and Commonwealth Games, Football and Hockey World Cups, Tennis and Badminton Grand Slams and select international athletics' meets were covered by television channels.

In the past decade, privately sponsored and promoted leagues/tournaments for cricket, football, hockey, kabaddi and badminton are getting live coverage by some sports TV channels. However, the coverage of sports by the print media (mainly newspapers) continues to be consigned to the last couple of pages, many often disregarding local sports. Radio and TV news bulletins also relegate sports-related news to the end of the broadcast.

Such positioning seems to reflect neglect or less importance being given to sports and related topics. It reflects the importance of sports in



Illustration: Arun Ramkumar

the common man's life. As a Hindi saying goes, *Padhoge likhoge banoge nawaab, kheloge koodoge toh hoge kharaab* – if you study hard, you will excel in life, but if you spend time on games, you will waste your life. Parents often use the saying to motivate their children to focus on academics.

There is no denying that a sportsperson has a shorter 'shelf-life' than those engaged in other kinds of activity. Parents worry about how their children will sustain themselves once they pass the playing age. Most people think of sports as a hobby to be pursued or, at best, a route to a good college or job via the sports quota. No doubt, education is important for leading a good life, but focusing on a sport with the aim of excelling in it is equally praiseworthy.

The fact that sports (except for

men's cricket to an extent) is given such low priority is a key reason for Indian sportspersons not being able to give good account of themselves at international levels in spite of being a country which has the advantage of a huge youth demographic.

The media has a catalytic role to play in ensuring recognition and respect for sports in the country. Sports and related topics should be given as much importance on the front page or at the start of news bulletins, as politics, economics or crime.

Newspapers can think of dedicating one day a week for putting sports-based news on their front pages, and focusing on the topic in editorials, in order to motivate children and also parents to encourage their children to take up sports seriously. TV News channels should air discussions on sports related issues on prime time

(between 8 pm and 10 pm) at least once every week. Such small but concrete initiatives by the media will not only sensitise citizens, but also put national and state governments and policy makers on their toes, to work sincerely to improve sports facilities across the country.

Of course, the media's efforts should be suitably supported by other stakeholders. Government agencies should ensure availability of sports facilities in each district. Corporate houses can help, too, by adopting districts to provide sports facilities as part of the corporate social responsibility initiative. ■

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