

Who will bell the cat?

India's preparations for its biggest-ever sporting event are embarrassing.



Delhi 2010

When is a big orange cat with black stripes, symbolic of India, not a tiger? When it's a lion, according to Lalit Bhanot, secretary-general of the Organising Committee (OC) for the Delhi 2010 Commonwealth games—for thus he describes Shera, the Games' mascot. Mr Bhanot also insists that India will be ready to host the Games, to be contested by 8,000 athletes from 71 nations in October next year. That is similarly to ignore evidence to the contrary.

India's preparations for the games are a shambles. Most visibly, 19 main sports venues are construction sites. According to a leaked report by the government's main auditor in July, work on 13 of them was badly behind schedule—with swimming, boxing, hockey and rugby sites half-finished. The main Jawaharlal Nehru stadium, built for the Asian games in 1982—India's only comparable experience of playing host to such a vast sporting event—and now being rebuilt, was never expected to stand comparison with Beijing's futuristic "Bird's Nest" stadium. But, on a visit to the site this week, it was tempting to fear it may not stand at all. The stadium's roof, to shelter 60,000 spectators, remains an aspiration. The adjoining "weightlifting auditorium" is a low-level concrete mess.

But the venues are a relatively small concern for the Commonwealth Games Federation, an anxious governing body. Its Jamaican president, Michael Fennell, wrote this month to the OC, seeking crisis talks with India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh. Mr Fennell was concerned that, with just a year to go, the committee had barely started planning to run the event. According to a leaked copy of his letter, he wanted to brief Mr Singh personally on the lack of preparations, and "seek his input in developing an appropriate recovery plan."

Such a plan might start—six years after Delhi won the games—with a serious think about transport, medical care and catering. The OC also needs to sort out ticketing. And it could use a broadcasting strategy—ideally before all the broadcasters interested in covering the event meet in Delhi next month.

Why is India, even as it demands, and gets, more respect in the world on the back of recent economic progress, making such a hash of this? It is not because it is poor. With an expected

operating budget of 16 billion rupees (\$335m), these games will be among the best financed ever. Nor is it because of another hackneyed excuse for inefficiency, India's democracy. The most politically contested issues, such as bulldozing slums to make way for the contestants' village, have largely been settled.

Rather, the OC displays many of the weaknesses of India's incompetent public sector at large. It is well staffed, with 300 employees. But almost every big decision is made by a small number of senior officials, including allegedly timorous and slothful bureaucrats, with no specialist understanding of their tasks—and who are therefore reluctant to make any decision at all.

The OC's deputy-boss, Randhir Singh, seems to have accepted this. "We now have to retrieve the games," he said this week. Specifically, he called for urgent changes to a system where: "There are 23 committees looking into the various organisational aspects of the games, but the chairmen of these committees hardly ever meet."

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