

POINT BLANK

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This year's BBMP budget made a token mention of the need to encourage "rural sports" by developing the Palike's vacant lands as playgrounds. But the money earmarked for this grand plan was a paltry Rs 2 crore. This token allocation is proof enough of a blatant apathy to sports.

Permissions are given to open schools without any space for playgrounds. Students of many schools depend on nearby public grounds that are often in bad shape. Besides, the public grounds are almost always crowded with people playing just one game, cricket. Masses find exclusive sports clubs unaffordable.



REETH ABRAHAM
Veteran athlete, South Asian Games champ

Sports is the last priority here. It (the government) keeps giving permission to schools on 30'X40' or 60'X40' sites with no scope for a playground at all. A ground should be the basic infrastructure, without which sports activities become zero. To build a strong foundation, sports should be made a compulsory subject in schools.



K NANDA KUMAR
Gen Secy, Karnataka Volleyball Association

The concrete jungle has no open spaces. Even in schools, there are no outdoor games. Civic amenity sites are compromised for monetary benefits. Nobody with concern and a vision for sports is getting into the sports departments. Officials don't even have the basic knowledge of sports. They just complete their tenure and go.



R RAJAN
Former Indian basketball captain

Earlier, planned layouts had some place set aside for playgrounds. But today, many private layouts on the city's outskirts have no such facility. Many government schools and colleges have grounds which could be upgraded through private partnerships and made available to the general public after school hours.



BALAJI NARASIMHAN
Former Indian football goalkeeper

The best players have all emerged from poor backgrounds. Only skill and talent helped them. But the trend today is different. Football academies are unaffordable. Even Rs 2,000 a month is a lot for them. The kits and shoes cost a lot. Academy founders don't realise that they themselves came from such backgrounds.

Vanishing Playgrounds

No ground for sporting glory

With civic amenity sites earmarked for playgrounds and other amenities wantonly encroached upon, the city's sports buffs find no avenue to build a robust sports culture from the grassroots. Olympic dreams die young here for a reason.

India's grand Rio Olympic ambitions could fetch nothing beyond Sindhu's silver and Sakshi's bronze. Like most Indians, as Bengalureans wondered what went wrong, the reasons lay there tellingly across the City: Playgrounds, encroached and in deep decay; layouts without an inch of sporting space; hyper-expensive clubs and an urban planning system, clueless and apathetic.

Indeed, a cosmetic course correction could be seen in pockets. But beyond those grounds in the heart of the City, dedicated, affordable and well-equipped sports facilities remain a pipedream for lakhs of children. Realty projects have invaded every nook and corner, making a mockery of planned development.

Civic amenity sites, earmarked for playgrounds and other allied facilities, are wan-

tonly encroached. Land sharks, in collusion with politicians, BDA and BBMP insiders have perfected the art of fabricating documents to claim ownership of these sites. Their designs clearly go beyond lakes and drains.

Former national Hepthathlon champion, Reeth Abraham draws attention to the pathetic state of sports infrastructure, both in the neighborhoods and those run by sports bodies. If BBMP grounds do not have the capacity to build a sporting culture, established venues such as the Kanteerava stadium are in dire need of an upgrade.

Sports, last priority

"Sports is the last priority here," Abraham notes with immense regret. "It (government) keeps giving permission to schools on 30X40 sq ft or 60X40 sq ft sites with no scope



for a playground at all. A ground should be the basic infrastructure, without which sports activities become zero," she explains.

To build a strong foundation, sports have to be made a compulsory subject in schools, reasons the acclaimed athlete.

"Grade every child in sports, build the infrastructure required in all schools by partnering with corporate," suggests Abraham.

But in a system where open spaces are thrown wide open to the games played by land sharks, this is a tough task.

"Earlier, the planned layouts had some place set aside for playgrounds. But today, many private layouts on the city's outskirts have no such facility," laments former Basketball captain Rajan.

Yet, Rajan is optimistic. He feels the playgrounds in gov-

ernment schools and colleges, though ill-maintained, could be upgraded through private partnerships. "After school hours, these could be made available to the general public. Today, land is scarce and this option can work well," he feels.

However, football, dubbed the "poor man's game," does not require fancy infrastructure. As former Indian goalkeeper, Balaji Narasimhan explains, all it needs is a level ground big enough to accommodate seven-a-side or even five-a-side teams.

Skills nurtured no more

Bengaluru was once known for its football greats who rose from the grassroots and often made it to famed clubs and even the national team. "Before, it used to be about skills nurtured through playing in makeshift grounds in neighbourhoods and slums," Narasimhan recalls.

These grounds too have disappeared thanks to overcrowding in slums and takeover by realty players. Narasimhan seeks a revival of this once cherished football culture. But it can happen only if camps and trials are conducted in poor neighborhoods.

Skilled slum children do queue up to enter the academies, even if they are unaffordable. "But they lack confidence and don't get selected in trials. Their torn shoes cannot compete with the Nike's. This culture should change, for the best of our footballers and academy founders had humble origins." If BDA and other planning authorities had stuck to the rules, Bengaluru could have had a well structured network of sporting arenas. But as Reeth Abraham reiterates, "even a small club house with a swimming pool and a few badminton and tennis courts is not happening."

Funding apathy

The only priority for everyone, she says, "is to build houses and sell them and make money. Sports facilities are the last thing they have in mind." BBMP, in its budget this year, did make a token mention of the need to encourage sports. The proposal was to promote "rural sports" by developing the Palike's vacant lands as playgrounds.

The objective was clear: To give BBMP school and college students training and encouragement. But the money earmarked for this grand plan was a paltry Rs 2 crore. This token allocation is proof enough of a blatant apathy to sports. A sense of urgency to create a robust grassroots-level community of well-trained youngsters ready to get to the next level is clearly missing. If Rio was a disaster, Tokyo 2020 offers no hope!

Rasheed Kappan



In search of that elusive sports arena

Sneha Nayak is an eighth standard student who likes to play games such as kho-kho, football and badminton. She would love to be able to play every evening, but homework keeps her indoors. The few times she does step out for a game of badminton, she has to play on the streets. "We try to play on the road but the vehicles disturb us. We have no choice because there are no playgrounds near my house" is her lament.

Schools give too much importance to academics and hardly ever encourage sports, notes Sadhish Kumar, a class 10 student in the city. "We don't have a playground on the school premises so we go to a public ground nearby. There are no basketball courts or nets for playing throwball or badminton."

These public grounds are often crowded. "There is a goalpost for football, but even that is taken over by people playing cricket," Kumar points out.

Aadya Sharma, a sports writer, attributes his interest in cricket and football to the facilities and encouragement he received in school. "It is important for children to get that kind of support at an early stage," he says.

In his hometown in Delhi, playgrounds are easy to find but not so in Bengaluru. Explains Sharma, "Here I go to sports are-

nas but they are quite expensive and therefore, inaccessible to many."

Expensive play areas

If the group is large enough, the hourly rate for booking these spaces is moderate although the play area is often inadequate. Divya Mary Abraham travels from Indiranagar to Whitefield to play football. "The field is not of standard size. It's about as big as a basketball court but it has grass so we go there," she says. Finding a suitable court to play basketball is more challenging. "There are few courts in the city. So they are crowded in the evenings on weekdays and on weekends too."

Lathish Pillai and his colleagues go to a public ground near their office for a game of cricket during lunch break. Pointing at the practice nets for cricket on one side of the ground, he says, "This is the only sport for which training is easily available."

In Pillai's opinion, middleclass families in India do not encourage sports because of the lack of financial security in the profession. "Unless there is some provision from the government, even I would not encourage my child to go into the field."

Olympic dreams are far away for Shashikala, who cannot find a place for her six-year-old son to play. "Where we live in Ulsoor,

there are no playgrounds nearby. There are nothing but apartment complexes around."

Sachin Sanjaykumar, a marketing professional, was once a district-level cricket player. Talking about the shrinking open spaces in the city, he observes: "Though Bengaluru is slightly better than other cities, increasing population is turning it into

a concrete jungle." Most playgrounds eventually turn into garbage dumps. "They are not maintained well with weeds growing all over the place," he points out.

Rays of hope

All hope is not lost though. A playground beside Shivajinagar bus stand, popularly known as

Chota Maidan, is being developed by the local corporator, R Vasanth Kumar. Over the past two-and-a-half months, the ground was flattened with road-rollers, weeds were removed and the place cleaned up.

Soon a basketball court will be part of the ground. "Children from all the four wards nearby come here to play. Most families

in this area are from low-income groups, so it is very beneficial for them," says M S Sufiyan, secretary of the local Residents' Welfare Association (RWA).

They recently conducted a cricket tournament and a 400-metre race at the upgraded ground.

Meghana Choukkar

LATHISH PILLAI
Private firm executive

The state government should develop these public grounds and create proper courts for sports such as basketball and tennis.

SADHISH KUMAR
Class 10 student

We have to play on the streets. The public grounds are overcrowded with people playing only cricket and nothing else.

AADYA SHARMA
Sports writer

Besides cricket and football, facilities for other sports such as tennis are not well developed or are too expensive for school-children.

DIVYA MARY ABRAHAM
Education consultant

I would definitely prefer public grounds that don't charge for playing. But the ones available now are overcrowded and unorganised besides not having proper courts.