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The CWG: What Comes Next?

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The Commonwealth Games are over and the crooks are starting to run. The investigating agencies are after them. As the authorities chase the money trail and do their hard accounting, it's time for us to do some soft accounting. Who are the winners and losers of these Games, and what will be the fallout?

The biggest winners, of course, are all the sports women and men who won medals, especially our own. With a tally of over a hundred medals, including 37 golds, they catapulted India into second place. For a country with India's poor track record, this was indeed a dramatic achievement. Whether the rest of India will now follow Haryana in taking sports more seriously we shall have to wait and see.

The other big winners are our security forces, though this has scarcely been noticed. From traffic management to crowd management to the successful prevention of any terrorist attacks, theirs was indeed a remarkable achievement. The successful defence against persistent cyber attacks was particularly impressive, and this did get wide coverage. Cyberspace is the new terrain of war in the 21st century, with China a major player in the field. It is heartening to see that we have the capacity to defend ourselves in this terrain.

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I guess the residents of Delhi are winners too, with their vastly expanded metro system and everything else. No other city in the world has ever got such a vastly expanded metro system in such a short time. E Sreedharan and his team have once again delivered. However, the new airport is operating well below its intended capacity. Much of the new road infrastructure looks shoddy, incomplete and unplanned. And the traffic jams are back.

On the other side, the biggest loser is India the nation. Over the past few decades, India has raised itself to the high table of the comity of nations. Brand India is much envied and much sought after in the global market place. All Indians have contributed to the building of this brand. Now, a small bunch of carpetbaggers has virtually destroyed that brand in the space of a few months by its negligence, sheer incompetence and malfeasance. It has humiliated us in front of the whole world as a country that just couldn't get its act together. It has made us the laughing stock of the world by announcing that the toilets in the Games Village were filthy because our standards of hygiene are different. Worst of all, it has demonstrated that India is a country of rampant corruption. The value of this loss of India's reputation is incalculable. It goes far beyond the thousands of crores that have reportedly been stashed away.

That brings us to the other big loser, the taxpaying public. As an advertisement of the tax authorities reminded us during the Games, it is the taxpayer who has paid for the bulk of all the infrastructure, the Games budget and all other expenses associated with it. So if there has been malfeasance, if services and products have been grossly overpriced or if their quality has been compromised, then it is you and i, the taxpaying public, who have been effectively duped.

Now these investigations are underway to find out who stole how much money. Will anything come of it? There are two opposite views doing the rounds both in the streets of Delhi and on the cocktail circuit. The cynical view is that nothing will happen. Corruption is now an integral part of the Indian reality and Indians have learned to live with it. Moreover, there are so many agencies involved and there are so many who have been on the take that it will be impossible to nail the guilty. Public memory will soon fade, and after that, the inquiries too will quietly fade away. This view cites our history. The 2G scandal is only the latest in a long series of episodes where public outcry leads to an inquiry, the inquiry goes on, the public moves on and all is forgotten.

Then there is the other view that this time it is different. The corruption has been so rampant and brazen that it has crossed a tipping point. A generally tolerant public is too angry to forgive and forget this time. The media too has sensed this public mood and will not let go easily. Nor will the parties of the opposition. The ruling party has two options. It can follow the usual whitewashing course, and possibly pay a heavy price in future elections. Or it can seriously go after the crooks, including possibly a few of its own, and for that sacrifice earn a great deal of public popularity. That wouldn't hurt in the next elections. Is

this the turning point to a new politics of transparency and performance, or is it just wishful thinking? We shall have to wait and see.

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