

1951 Asian Games, New Delhi



Maharaja Yadavendra Singh requesting the president, Dr. Rajendra Prasad to declare open the first Asian Games 1951

The Second World War had ended and Asia experienced a new awakening. The collapse of colonialism generated an upsurge and thrust for freedom, friendship and fraternity among the peoples of Asia. The world was in a mess and many prominent Asian leaders who had, for years, waged a determined struggle against the colonial despots, got together among themselves to work for a new world-order based on mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. Foremost in this fight for a new world order was Jawaharlal Nehru. This time, however, the spotlight was fixed on youth—the leaders of tomorrow and what better way to symbolize the spirit of youth than sport—an activity which brings out the best in a human being, who competes, not only for the honour of his country but also for the Glory of Sport. It happened that about this time, the Asian Relations Conference took place in New Delhi. Prof. Guru Dutt Sondhi felt that this might be a good time to invoke the cooperation of other Asian leaders in the new sports venture. The response was positive and immediate and this marked the birth of the Asian Games movement which today is the greatest festival of sport next to the Olympics.

The pioneers did, however, meet with formidable obstacles but the vision of Sondhi, the organising genius of Anthony de Mello, the dogged assistance of Maharaja Yadavendra Singh of Patiala and above all, the support and inspiration from Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, helped to iron out all the problems.

By present-day standards, the first Asian Games, which lasted eight days, was a modest affair—eleven countries participated, and there were only six disciplines. All the disciplines except swimming were staged in the National Stadium, while the swimming events were held in its

adjoining pool. The total number of participants did not cross the 500 mark and yet the Opening Ceremony of that First Asiad on March 4, 1951 was a truly momentous event in sports history and the torch lighted on that day, has, over the last three decades, become a blaze of light from which the younger generation have been drawing greater and greater inspiration.

The National Stadium was packed for the occasion. The ceremony was colourful, solemn and dignified. Running through the pride of achievement, was a deep sense of awe, born of the feeling that every spectator was witnessing sports history in the making.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, India's first President performed the Opening Ceremony in the presence of a distinguished gathering which included Prime Minister Nehru and his cabinet colleagues and members of the Corps Diplomatique. A 31-gun salute was fired from the ramparts of the Purana Qila. The Prime Minister, in his message to the Asian assembly of Youth put it this way:

"Delhi And India Are Fortunate In Holding The First Asian Games. Athletic Contests Are Good For Developing Friendly Rivalry Among The Youth Of Our Nations. There Is, However, Another Aspect To These International Gatherings Of Athletes. They Bring Together The Youth Of Many Countries And Thus Help, To Some Extent In Promoting International Friendship And Cooperation. In These Days When Dark Clouds Of Conflict Hover Over Us, We Must Seize Every Opportunity To Promote Understanding And Cooperation Between Nations. It Must Be Remembered Always That These Games And Contests Should Be Carried Out In An Atmosphere Of Utmost Friendliness. Each One Must Try His Best But Each One, Whether Winner Or Loser, Must Play His Part Gracefully And Must Enter Into The Spirit Of The Games".



The Indian contingent marches past in the Opening of the First Asian Games 1951

And it was from Jawaharlal Nehru's address that the organisers of the First Asiad adopted their motto for the Games:

"Play the game, in the spirit of the game". Dr Rajendra Prasad in his message to mark the occasion, called on Asians to forge links of friendship and understanding with all nations in order to further the cause of peace. "I AM SURE", he said, "THE FIRST ASIAN GAMES WILL PROMOTE THE REALISATION OF UNDERSTANDING AND FRIENDSHIP AMONG ALL NATIONS AND WILL START A PROCESS WHICH, AS TIME PASSES, WILL GO ON CEMENTING THE FRIENDLY TIES BETWEEN THE PEOPLES OF ASIA". Fifteen Army trumpeters, resplendent in ceremonial uniform sounded a fanfare as the flags of the eleven participating Asian countries, rose to their mast-heads in the National Stadium. 40,000 spectators hand-clapped approval as 1100 white pigeons sprung from their cages fluttered around the stadium and then mingling with the thousands of multi-coloured balloons, swirled over the heads of the spectators, and then, rose steeply sky-wards. The balloons in their graceful passage from earth to sky nudged now and then by a gentle breeze spread a rainbow above the flag of the AGF—a blazing sun with 11 rings—one for each competing nation, on a field of white, symbolising peace. The march past was led by Afghanistan, whose contingent was followed by Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Malaya, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. In accordance with the Olympic tradition, India, the host country brought up the rear.

The ceremony reached its climax as Brig. Dalip Singh, an Olympian of 1924 vintage jogged into the Stadium for the lap of honour. The National Stadium emptied in deafening applause when spectators gave him a standing ovation as he held aloft the Asian Games torch, which had been lit by the sun's rays in Shahjahan's historic Red Fort, 8 km away and carried by a relay of runners to the National Stadium. With the flame kindled, Baldev Singh—the senior-most member of the Indian Athletics Team—mounted the Tribune of Honour and recited the oath on behalf of the assembled sportsmen. As he did so, the athletes of the participating countries repeated with him:

"WE SWEAR THAT WE WILL TAKE PART IN THE ASIAN GAMES, IN FAIR COMPETITION, RESPECTING THE REGULATIONS WHICH GOVERN THEM AND WITH THE DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TRUE SPIRIT OF SPORTSMANSHIP FOR THE HONOUR OF OUR COUNTRY AND THE GLORY OF SPORT".

As the Indian National Anthem echoed throughout the Stadium, a hush descended on the athletes and the spectators, who stood in silence. A few moments later the President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, left the Presidential Box and the First Asian Games got underway.