

OLYMPIC MOVEMENT AS A TOOL OF SPORTS DIPLOMACY: EXAMINING INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Sport has become a recognised instrument of statecraft, yet the precise channels through which it converts athletic activity into diplomatic advantage remain unevenly theorised. This paper examines the Olympic Movement as a vehicle of sports diplomacy and asks how far participation in it has enlarged India's soft power. Working from Joseph Nye's account of attraction and the more recent scholarship on sports diplomacy, the study advances a three-stage analytical model linking Olympic engagement to diplomatic mechanisms and, in turn, to soft-power outcomes. The method is interpretive: a qualitative content analysis of policy documents, official communications and media framing produced between 2008 and 2025, read alongside India's competitive record. Findings are mixed. Athlete-led moments Abhinav Bindra in 2008, Neeraj Chopra in 2020 generate genuine attraction and a sense of arrival, and the proposed 2036 Ahmedabad bid functions chiefly as a status signal rather than a medal calculation. Against this, the country's strongest sporting asset, cricket, sits largely outside the Olympic system, so the Olympic route to influence works as a supplement to, not a substitute for, India's established cultural diplomacy. The analysis also flags a persistent attribution problem: warm perception rarely translates cleanly into negotiated outcomes. Olympic sport, the paper argues, is best read as a slow, reputational form of Indian soft power whose returns are real but diffuse.

Keywords: Sports diplomacy¹; Soft power²; Olympic Movement³; India⁴; Public diplomacy⁵; International relations⁶.

1. INTRODUCTION

Games and statecraft have kept company for a long time. The ancient Olympic truce paused wars so that athletes could travel; modern states have used stadiums to project ambition, soothe rivalries, and occasionally to fight by other means. What has changed is the vocabulary [2]. Where an earlier generation of officials spoke loosely of prestige, scholars and foreign ministries now speak of soft power and of sports diplomacy as a measurable arm of public diplomacy. The Olympic Movement the International Olympic Committee, the national committees, the federations and the four-yearly spectacle itself sits at the center of this shift. It is one of the few transnational

institutions that commands near-universal recognition, reaches audiences that conventional diplomacy cannot, and confers a kind of membership that small and large states like covet[3]. India's relationship with this Movement is peculiar, and that is what makes it worth studying. For a country so often described as a rising power, its Olympic record was, for decades, thin. Eight hockey golds between 1928 and 1980 told one story; the long medal drought that followed told another [7]. The individual breakthrough came late Abhinav Bindra's shooting gold in Beijing in 2008 and the steepest improvement is very recent. Meanwhile India's soft-power reputation was built almost entirely elsewhere: in cinema, in cuisine, in the global appeal of yoga, in a vast and visible diaspora, and above all in cricket, a sport the Olympic system ignored for nearly a century.

This paper takes that tension as its starting point. It asks a deceptively simple question: *does engagement with the Olympic Movement actually add to India's soft power, and if so, through which mechanisms?* The question matters now because India is no longer a passive participant [9]. The Target Olympic Podium Scheme, the Khelo India program, the hosting of the 2022 Chess Olympiad, and most conspicuously the letter of intent to host the 2036 Summer Games in Ahmedabad all signal a deliberate turn toward sport as foreign-policy resource. Whether the returns justify the framing is the empirical puzzle that follows. The contribution is twofold. First, the paper offers a compact analytical model that separates Olympic inputs from the diplomatic mechanisms they activate and the outcomes they may, or may not, produce a separation that much of the celebratory commentary collapses [10]. Second, it applies that model to a single, instructive case and resists the temptation to overclaim. Soft power is notoriously hard to trace to results; an honest account has to live with that uncertainty rather than write around it.

2. SOFT POWER, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE PLACE OF SPORT

2.1 SOFT POWER AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Joseph Nye introduced soft power to name something blunt instruments could not capture: the ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A state's culture, its political values and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policy do diplomatic work precisely because others find them appealing. The idea has been enormously influential and almost heavily criticized [9]. Three objections recur. Attraction is hard to measure; it is harder still to attribute any specific outcome to it; and the resources that generate it a film industry, a religious tradition, a sporting culture are rarely under direct government control. Ian Hall's study of Indian public diplomacy makes the last point sharply: New Delhi has often tried to claim soft-power assets it does not command, with results that fall short of the rhetoric. These criticisms are not fatal, but they discipline the analysis. If soft power is real yet diffuse, then the right test is not whether a medal produced a treaty it almost never will but whether engagement plausibly shifts perception, opens relationships, or raises a state's standing among the peers whose recognition it seeks. That weaker, more defensible standard is the one used here [6].

2.2 SPORTS DIPLOMACY AS A FIELD

The study of sport and diplomacy has matured from anecdote into something closer to theory. Stuart Murray distinguishes between the diplomacy of sport the conduct of relations by sporting bodies such as the IOC, which negotiate, recognise members and mediate disputes much as states do and international sports diplomacy, in which governments harness sport for their own ends. Aaron Beacom positions the Olympic Movement as a set

of “new mediators” operating alongside, and sometimes ahead of, formal diplomacy [8]. The mega-event literature, particularly the work of Grix and Houlihan, shows how hosting has become a calculated soft-power strategy for emerging states keen to announce themselves to the world. A note of caution runs through the best of this scholarship. Brannagan and Giulianotti’s study of Qatar coined the useful term soft disempowerment to describe how a sporting bid meant to attract can instead invite scrutiny and reputational damage [9]. Manzenreiter, writing on Beijing 2008, doubted whether spectacle reliably converts into durable influence at all. The lesson for any single-country study is to hold both possibilities open: sport can build a state’s image, and it can just as easily expose it.

2.3 AN ANALYTICAL MODEL

Figure 1 sets out the framework that organises the rest of the paper. It reads left to right. Olympic engagement athletic performance, hosting bids, and a place inside the Movement’s governance supply the raw inputs [5]. These activate diplomatic mechanisms: the projection of a national image, the building of relationships through convening and contact, and advocacy on norms and agendas. The mechanisms, where conditions are favourable, yield soft-power outcomes: attraction, credibility and status, and a measure of influence over how international questions are framed. A dashed feedback loop captures the reputational dividend that justifies further investment success on the field makes the next bid easier to sell at home and abroad [6].

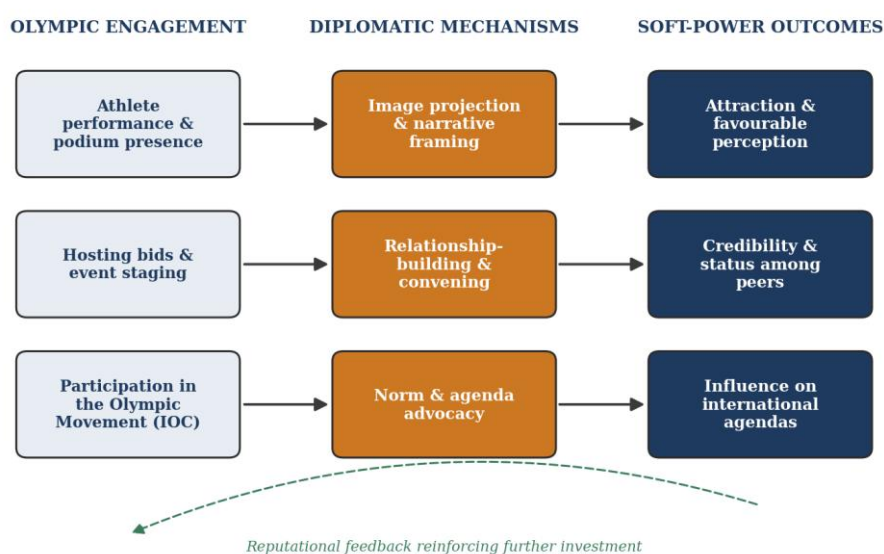


Figure 1: From Olympic engagement to soft power an analytical pathway

Source: Author’s construction, drawing on Nye (2004), Murray (2018) and Grix & Houlihan (2014).

3. DATA AND METHOD

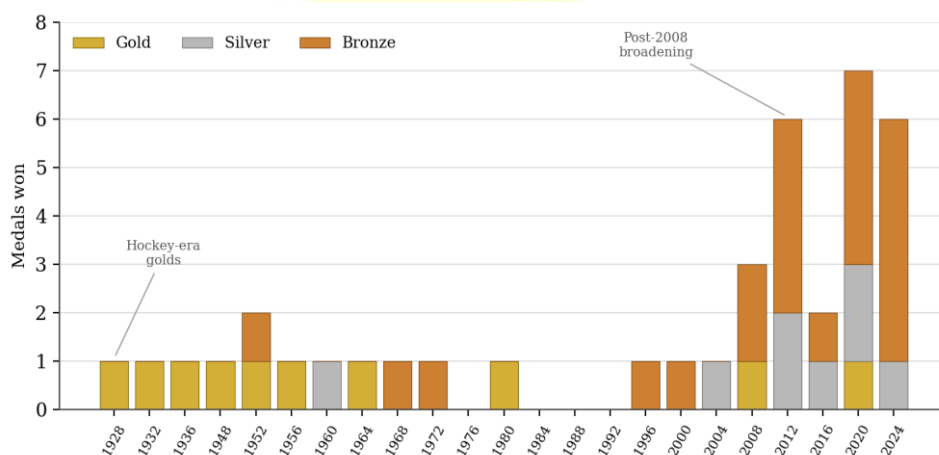
The design is a single-country, interpretive case study with embedded sub-cases. India is chosen not because it is typical but because it is revealing: a state with rising material weight, a celebrated soft-power profile built outside the Olympic system, and a recent, deliberate pivot toward Olympic sport. Cases of this kind are valuable precisely where theory and empirics sit in tension [7]. Three bodies of material were read. The first is documentary: the National Sports Policy, the guidelines of the Khelo India and Target Olympic Podium

schemes, statements by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, and communications from the Indian Olympic Association and the IOC concerning the 2036 process. The second is the competitive record itself, compiled from official Olympic results across the Summer Games. The third is framing: how government and national media presented marquee results and bids. The window runs from 2008, the year of India's first individual gold, to mid-2025 [11]. Analysis followed a qualitative content-analysis procedure. A coding frame of four mechanisms image projection, relationship-building, agenda advocacy, and status signalling was applied to the documentary and framing material, and the salience of each was scored on a simple three-point scale (Table 4) [15]. The coding is interpretive and the scores illustrative; they are meant to organise judgement, not to simulate precision the data cannot support. *That caveat is deliberate.* Attribution in soft-power research is weak by nature, and a method that pretended otherwise would mislead.

4. INDIA'S OLYMPIC ENGAGEMENT: FINDINGS

4.1 THE TRAJECTORY AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE PODIUM

India's Olympic history divides cleanly into three phases, and the medal record in Figure 2 shows them at a glance. The first is the hockey era, when a single team supplied almost all of the country's gold and a recurring image of dominance [16]. The second is a long plateau from the 1970s to the 2000s, when medals arrived singly, if at all, and the gap between national ambition and Olympic return widened. The third is the broadening since 2008 more medals, across more disciplines, won by individuals whose stories travelled.



Source: Compiled by the author from official Olympic results.

Figure 2: India's Summer Olympic medal tally by Games, 1928–2024

Two moments did disproportionate diplomatic work. Bindra's shooting gold in 2008 ended a wait that had become a national preoccupation; the framing at home and abroad was less about marksmanship than about a country finally claiming an individual Olympic title [16]. Neeraj Chopra's javelin gold in Tokyo in 2020 carried even more, because athletics is the symbolic heart of the Games and because the win came as India was actively cultivating its great-power image. Paris 2024 confirmed the breadth without adding a gold six medals, and Manu Bhaker becoming the first Indian woman to win two at one Games. Table 1 places the recent results in context [19].

Table 1: Selected Indian Summer Olympic results and their diplomatic framing

Year	Host city	Medals (G/S/B)	Notable result and how it was framed
1952	Helsinki	1 / 0 / 1	K. D. Jadhav's wrestling bronze first individual medal for independent India; read as proof of self-standing capability.
1980	Moscow	1 / 0 / 0	Final hockey gold; later mythologised as the close of an era rather than a beginning.
2008	Beijing	1 / 0 / 2	Bindra's shooting gold a long-awaited "first", framed nationally as arrival.
2020	Tokyo	1 / 2 / 4	Chopra's athletics gold and a record haul; cast as a marker of a rising India.
2024	Paris	0 / 1 / 5	Breadth without gold; Bhaker's double bronze framed around gender and aspiration.

Source: Author's compilation from official results and contemporaneous government and media communications.

4.2 INSTRUMENTS AND MECHANISMS

Performance is only one input. India deploys a wider set of instruments, summarised in Table 2, each working through a different mechanism [18]. Athlete diplomacy converts individual success into image; hosting bids signal status; sport-for-development outreach in the neighbourhood builds relationships; and a more assertive presence inside the Movement's governance lets New Delhi advocate on the questions it cares about.

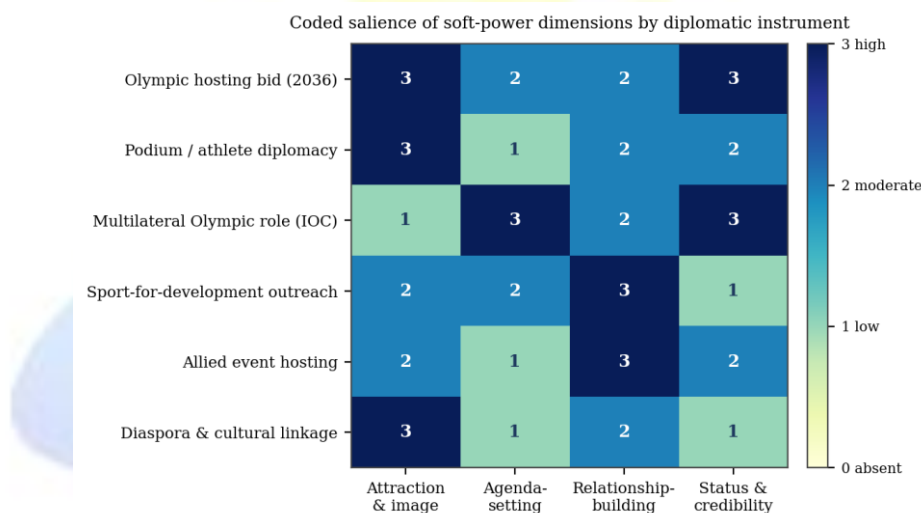
Table 2: Instruments of Indian Olympic sports diplomacy

Instrument	Mechanism	Illustrative deployment
Podium / athlete diplomacy	Image projection; attraction	National celebration of Bindra (2008) and Chopra (2020) as embodiments of a capable, modern India.
Olympic hosting bid	Status signalling	Letter of intent for the 2036 Summer Games, with Ahmedabad as the proposed host city.
Allied event hosting	Relationship-building; image	2022 Chess Olympiad at Mahabalipuram; bidding for and staging continental and youth events.
Sport-for-development outreach	Relationship-building	Coaching, training-facility cooperation and capacity support extended to South Asian and African partners.
Multilateral Olympic role	Agenda advocacy; status	More active participation by the Indian Olympic Association and engagement with the IOC reform process.

Source: Author's synthesis of policy documents and official communications, 2008–2025.

4.3 SALIENCE ACROSS INSTRUMENTS

Reading the documentary record through the coding frame produces the pattern in Figure 3. Hosting bids and the multilateral role score highest on status and agenda-setting, which is unsurprising: a bid is, almost by definition, a claim to standing. Athlete diplomacy and diaspora linkage cluster on attraction and image but contribute little to agenda-setting [2]. Sport-for-development outreach is the clearest relationship-builder, though it does least for status. No single instrument covers all four dimensions evidence that India's Olympic diplomacy is a portfolio rather than a single lever [9].



Source: Author's coding of policy and media material; scores are interpretive (0 = absent, 3 = high).

Figure 3: Coded salience of soft-power dimensions by diplomatic instrument

Table 4: Coding frame and aggregate salience

Mechanism	Indicators coded	Aggregate salience
Image projection	Celebratory framing of athletes; national-identity language; visual symbolism	High
Relationship-building	Bilateral sport cooperation; training and coaching support; event partnerships	Moderate
Agenda advocacy	Statements within the Movement; positions on reform and inclusion	Moderate
Status signalling	Bid language; "arrival" and "rising power" framing; comparison with peers	High

Source: Author's qualitative content analysis.

4.4 THE 2036 BID AS A STATUS SIGNAL

The decision to pursue the 2036 Games deserves separate treatment, because its logic is mostly diplomatic. Hosting is expensive and its sporting payoff is uncertain; what a bid reliably purchases is attention and the appearance of belonging in a small club of states that can stage the world's largest peacetime event [6]. For India the timing is pointed. The bid arrives as the country presses a broader claim to a permanent Security

Council seat, to leadership of the global South and successful Games would supply a visible, repeatable proof of organisational capacity. The risk, well documented elsewhere, is the soft-disempowerment trap: the same global gaze that a host invites can settle on domestic problems it would rather keep offstage.

4.5 COMPARATIVE POSITIONING

India's approach looks distinctive only when set beside comparable states. Table 3 sketches the contrast. China treated Beijing 2008 as a coming-out and backed it with a state-directed medal machine; Brazil used Rio 2016 to claim emerging-power status, with mixed reputational results; India is attempting something later and more gradual, leaning on individual athletes and a future bid rather than on a single transformative Games [7]. The comparison underlines a point easy to miss: there is no single model, and the returns to each depend heavily on what the rest of the world already believes about the host.

Table 3: Comparative Olympic soft-power profiles of selected emerging powers

State	Signature move	Strategy	Reputational result
China	Beijing 2008 (and 2022)	State-directed performance plus mega-event spectacle	Strong image gains; contested on rights scrutiny
Brazil	Rio 2016	Single transformative Games as arrival statement	Mixed; cost and delivery questions dominated coverage
India	Chopra 2020; 2036 bid	Athlete-led attraction plus a forward hosting claim	Rising and broadly positive; still early and diffuse

Source: Author's comparative synthesis from secondary literature.

5. DISCUSSION

Pulling the findings together, the picture is encouraging but qualified. Olympic engagement clearly does some of the work the framework predicts. Athlete successes generate genuine attraction; bids and a more active governance role raise India's standing among peers; outreach builds relationships in the neighbourhood. Yet four tensions keep the verdict modest [14]. The first is what might be called the cricket paradox. India's most powerful sporting export sits, for almost all of the period studied, outside the Olympic system – cricket returns to the Games only at Los Angeles 2028. The sport that most reliably attracts global audiences to India is therefore the one the Olympic route cannot claim. Olympic soft power, on this evidence, supplements India's cultural diplomacy; it does not anchor it. The second is the attribution problem, already flagged in the method. Warm perception is visible; its conversion into negotiated advantage is not. A javelin gold may make a foreign public think better of India without changing a single vote in a multilateral forum. Honest analysis records the perception and declines to invent the consequence. The third tension runs between the international and the domestic. Much of India's Olympic investment is aimed inward at national pride, at the legitimacy of the state as a provider of opportunity, at the political value of a winning team. These domestic returns are real and may even be the primary motive, which complicates any reading of the spending as foreign policy first [16].

The fourth is the autonomy of the Movement itself. The IOC is not an arm of any government; its insistence on its own prerogatives, its handling of boycotts, and its control over recognition all limit how far a state can bend Olympic engagement to national ends. India can use the Movement, but only on terms it does not set.

6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Three limits should be stated plainly. The study is interpretive, and its salience scores are judgements rather than measurements; a different coder might weigh the same material differently. It is also a single case, which buys depth at the cost of generalisability the Indian pattern need not travel. And it relies on documentary and framing evidence rather than on direct measures of foreign perception [1]. Each limit points to useful work ahead: cross-national comparison on a common coding frame, survey-based tests of whether Olympic moments actually move opinion abroad, and longitudinal study of whether the 2036 process delivers the standing it is meant to signal.

7. CONCLUSION

The Olympic Movement gives India a real, if limited, instrument of soft power. Individual triumphs attract; a hosting bid signals ambition; a more confident presence inside the Movement lends standing. But the instrument is slow, its effects are diffuse, and its most spectacular results resist neat translation into diplomatic gains [11]. The honest conclusion is neither the breathless one nor the dismissive one. Olympic sport is becoming a recognisable thread in India's wider soft-power fabric secondary to cricket and culture, dependent on an institution New Delhi cannot command, and valuable precisely because the recognition it confers cannot be bought outright. Whether the 2036 bid converts that thread into something sturdier is the question the next decade will answer.

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