

## The Path of the Paralympics

The Paralympics are an international sporting event for players with disability. They began in 1948 with the Paraplegic Games, where soldiers injured in World War II participated. The first Paralympics was held in 1960. The Paralympics is hosted at the same venue as the Olympics. Players are classified on the basis of their disability and compete across ten categories. The Tokyo Paralympics 2020 saw the participation of 4500 athletes from more than 160 countries.

India's tryst with the Paralympics began in 1968 and we won our first gold medal in 1972 for swimming. Counting the latest Tokyo Games of 2021, we have had a total of 31 medals come our way.

While it is important to celebrate these achievements, we also need to question these performances to see if they are the result of the Paralympic movement in India. Government policies, growing support from the media, and encouragement from the average citizen have all contributed to India's rapid improvement in Paralympic performance. That said, to take it to the next step, we need private institutions to come forward and provide a more supportive environment to our Paralympic athletes.

In some other parts of the world, public programs are conducted to spread awareness about the Paralympics. Para-athletes are provided facilities on par with their Olympian counterparts. Government policies are framed on the basis of equality. In India, the status of our para-athletes is rather discouraging.

Across our country, the differences between our Olympians and our Paralympians are quite stark. While Olympians automatically receive acceptance and recognition in society, this is something that takes far more time for most Paralympians. In an effort to be sensitive, people often create barriers in the path of para-athletes. Intentionally or unintentionally, people ascertain that athletes with disability cannot perform certain actions or complete certain tasks on their own. While they think they are helping, they are only actually making them more vulnerable. Para-athletes thus begin to doubt their own capabilities.

There is a lot of progressive development happening around our country today. At this moment in time, especially in the context of our performance in Tokyo, I would like to see every Indian come together and contribute to the progress of our para-athletes. The acceptance and encouragement that currently exists only in urban areas needs to spread to our villages as well. Spreading awareness in rural areas is especially important since most of our para-athletes hail from small towns and villages. It is important to spread information amongst average citizens about the disability community. Only if we spread awareness and enable sensitivity within the larger society, our para-athletes will be able to transcend the social bias that they currently face. Only then will this lead to showcasing of their talents to the maximum. It is this future that we must all work towards...together.

*Ankur Dhama is a 2018 Arjuna Awardee, an Asian Para Games medalist and the recipient of the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award in 2016. He is currently a member of the International Paralympic Committee.*