

A Tale of Three Mega-Events

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What can we learn, about either the People's Republic of China or India and about what makes the two countries similar to and different from one another, by placing recent mega-events in these two young nation-states side by side? As a China specialist who watched the Beijing Olympics from afar with great interest in 2008, spent a month in Shanghai last summer while it played host to the 2010 World Expo, and is now is nearing the end of his first stay in India, which took place in an autumn week that began right after the Commonwealth Games had ended, I've been ruminating on this question a lot lately. Here are several things that strike me as worth considering, after a week in Delhi that has included participation in an academic workshop and public events devoted to themes of urban change. In some cases, my comments bring up issues that have received a lot of attention in mainstream media coverage of the mega-events; in other instances, I push in directions that the press has not tended to go. In all cases, I am drawing upon not just my own reflections, but also on private and public conversations I have had during my brief time in Delhi, especially discussion at a stimulating October 19 Delhi Urban Platform <http://delhiurbanplatform.org/> event, which was held at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and gave me the opportunity to share a stage with Ravi Sundaram (an urban theorist and media studies scholar who is one of the initiators of the inspiring SARAI network <http://www.sarai.net/>) and former CSDS director Ashis Nandy (the globally famous and provocative political thinker).

1. Politics and the Public Sphere. A common theme in commentaries about mega-events, as well as other topics, is that discussions of Chinese and Indian politics should begin with drawing contrasts between China's hyper-efficient authoritarian model and India's unruly democratic one. There are certainly important differences to note in this regard. And there is no question that focusing on mega-events can draw our attention to those disparities, as well as to similarities beneath the surface of this general divide: e.g., in each setting, grand spectacles and other urban transformations are often accompanied by corrupt deals between officials and developers that disadvantage the ordinary people who get displaced to make way for new stadiums or shopping malls. At least equally interesting, though, is the way that a focus on mega-events suggests the need to break free of the tendency to take a democracy=elections approach to politics (something particularly strong perhaps in the U.S.), and think instead of a democracy=free-flowing public debate approach.

Here, again, corruption provides a way in. The question of who exactly will profit most from how new luxury dwellings in the Commonwealth Village are parceled out has been the subject of a lively discussion in the Indian press throughout my time in Delhi. But though there are definitely comparable issues to debate where the Shanghai Expo is concerned, there was not a similar sort of airing of concerns in the Chinese press last summer nor can we expect one after the event ends October 31. Similarly, satirical commentary about the Games has been taking place in the open in Delhi (including via a lively public display of politically pointed postcards and CWG-mocking buttons at SARAI <http://kafila.org/2010/09/24/commonwealth-postcards/>), whereas in China, it has been confined to Chinese-language Internet sites and the writings of foreigners (the wittiest Expo criticism in English coming via Access Asia weekly updates <http://www.accessasia.co.uk/weekly%20update.asp>, which among other things feature a countdown clock ticking off the time until a giant sigh of relief can be breathed about the event finally being over).

2. It's About Time. Speaking of countdown clocks, when it comes to time keeping, there are some interesting parallels to note between the 2008-2010 Indian and Chinese mega-event experiences. Countdown clocks that hit zero this year were built for the Commonwealth Games and the Shanghai Expo, for example, and Delhi's sports-themed mega-event, like Beijing's of 2008, opened with a spectacle that invoked traditions said to stretch back thousands of years — the specific phrase “5,000 years of civilization” was trotted out by the Chinese and Indian press alike — and made use of state-of-the-art technologies of display (to convey a sense of a country with a venerable past and an ability to do things in a world class manner in the present). And yet, there is a big temporal contrast worth noting. In Delhi now, the aftermath of the CWG is a time for reflection, for looking back and assessing and arguing about what transpired, including asking whether the problem-plagued event that just took place demonstrated that India is indeed ready to take its place among the most modern of nations. The fast-forward button and even play button are abandoned in favor of going into rewind and pause modes.

In China, this did not happen in 2008 with the end of the Games, nor will it when the Expo ends October 31. As soon as the Olympics were over, attention turned to things on the horizon, whether the next spectacle Zhang Yimou would stage in his role as state choreographer (the 60th birthday of the People's Republic scheduled for National Day 2009) or the Shanghai Expo (billed as not just China's first World's Fair but also an “Economic Olympics”). And the mega-event relay signaled by the move straight from the end of the Olympics to the build-up to the Expo will not conclude later this month, for though Shanghai's countdown clocks hit zero in May, the ones in Guangzhou ticking away the seconds until the start of that city's first (and China's second) Asian Games are now the focus, and reports of the Asiad torch run vie with reports of Expo attendance records in the Chinese official press. China remains, in other words, a country where the fast forward button is favored (sometimes play is allowed, but rewind and pause are not used much). This at least is the approach taken by the government, which discourages backward-looking reflection — except when it leads to, say, remembrance of humiliations past, as occurs when territorial tensions flare with Japan, or vague invocations of the glories of Confucian thoughts. (In India, too, remembrance of humiliations past is an important theme, of course, and the anxiety generated by critical pre-CWG publicity that drew attention to issues such as low cleanliness standards created anxiety here in part because of their resonance with colonial era Western disparagements of Indian culture.)

Part of the forward-focused obsession in China now is that it has become a country that is intent to show that it has not just one or two but multiple cities ready to assert claims to world-class status (or at least something close to that). After Guangzhou hosts the Asian Games, for example, a city far to the north of it is making a bid to be seen as much more than just the home of the Terra Cotta warriors. An ad in a Shanghai subway this summer, which was placed right by a video display telling riders how many hundreds of thousands of people had visited the Expo grounds that day, read simply in Chinese: Next Stop Xi'an! This was a reference to the fact that, in 2011, Xi'an will play host to a large international horticultural fair. There has also been talk of Chongqing or Chengdu, a pair of dynamic cities in the western part of China holding mega-events of their own before long. One way to understand this effort to quickly shift attention from city to city is as an effort to counteract a key weak point of China's economic boom: namely, the uneven rate at which wealth is flowing to different regions and segments of the population. The government is keen to show that, in the long run, all Chinese will be lifted by the economic tide, not just those in particularly fortunate occupational groups and regions. Making the country one of dispersed mega-events speaks to that goal—though there is a problem here in that crucial parts of the populace being left behind economically are rural dwellers, and mega-events only have very indirect connections to villages.

3. The Audiences for the Spectacle. Mega-events need to be seen as playing to local, national, and global audiences. This has become common wisdom in the era of television broadcasts and the Internet, and an examination of India's CWG and China's Olympics-Expo two-step reinforce the validity of the basic notion. It also reveals some ironies hidden within the issue of different sorts of audiences. For example, during the lead-up to the CWG and the Expo, the people most directly affected by preparations were people living in Delhi and in Shanghai. When the events actually took place, though, many Delhi residents who could leave town chose to do so, while many of the people who attended the Expo were not Shanghai locals. A small number of foreigners came to see it, but the vast majority of attendees were neither Shanghainese nor international visitors but Chinese from nearby and not-so-nearby cities and provinces, often but not always residents of urban areas.

A final point about audience worth making is that, with Chinese and Indian mega-events alike, a local vs. national vs. international division of audiences is not enough. For in both cases, it seems, though too little attention has been paid to this in at least the commentaries I have read, there is a crucial subgroup within the "international" category that is a key audience for the "re-branding" goals of mega-events: people with ancestral ties to the country who now live elsewhere. Getting "Overseas Chinese" and "Non-Resident Indians" (to employ commonly used terms for the groups I have in mind) to identify with, travel to, and invest in China and India, respectively, and to think about these countries in new ways seems a major goal of the recent spectacle in Delhi and the pageant that unfolded in Beijing's Bird's Nest stadium in 2008, after a torch run that, perhaps not coincidentally, made stops in cities such as San Francisco that are well known for having large Chinatowns. Of course, in the era of videos circulating via the Internet, there are many ways to connect with international populations with ties to specific locales without physically bringing objects like torches into distant city. A full account of the global circulation of the "India Shining" notion (whose obfuscations and Achilles heels Pankaj Mishra has dissected so skillfully http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/opinion/03mishra.html?_r=2) and of what I've called elsewhere PRC 2.0 <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/china-sees-globalizations-downside-part-ii> (an imaginary place where Confucius is treated as though he has always been venerated as a national saint rather than being decried at times as a symbol of backwardness, and where fast trains and megamalls as well as red flags and the Great Wall are given places of honor in officially produced documentaries) will need to factor in the complex question of how these visions are aimed at and rejected or accepted by international viewers with historical ties to the giant countries that stand on opposite sides of the Himalayas.

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