



Portrait of Guru Dutt Sondhi.

Source: *The Olympic Council of Asia* website at <http://tinyurl.com/jvdfnas>.

Guru Dutt Sondhi

Indian IOC Member and Visionary of Asian Integration through Sport

By Stefan Huebner

To this day, the Olympic Games have never taken place in South Asia. One of the reasons, in addition to exploding costs, is the International Olympic Committee's (IOC's) lack of trust in Indian organizing capabilities. For example, the chairman of the organizing committee of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi was arrested for corruption.¹ Doubts concerning Indian reliability have quite a long tradition, going back to the first regional events hosted there: the Western Asiatic Games (New Delhi and Patiala, 1934) and the First Asian Games (New Delhi, 1951).²

Focusing on such negative perceptions leaves out the highly important contribution of Indian sports officials to the emergence of intra-Asian sports relations. Guru Dutt Sondhi (1890-1966) was the central figure in the founding of both the Western Asiatic Games and the Asian Games. Each time he proved to be a visionary of Asian cooperation and integration, first during British colonialism and later during decolonization and the Cold War.

Studying and discussing Sondhi's life is valuable, since it sheds light on various major events that affected the course of the twentieth century. Sondhi was a member of the small British-educated Indian elite during colonialism and affected by the "white man's burden"—the claim that colonialism served not to exploit, but to "uplift" and "civilize" colonized peoples. He *agreed* about the need for a "modernization" process in India, which included promoting sport, but *disagreed* about colonialism and favored Indian self-government. As a consequence, he also advocated Asian cooperation and integration as a means to resist Western predominance and to give India back a leading role in world affairs. Studying and discussing his activities as a sports organizer, therefore, tells us much about the impact of British colonialism on India. Moreover, it shows how the white man's burden was appropriated by Indians, and affected decolonization and Asian cooperation.

Sondhi's main occupation was that of a university professor, not of a professional sports official. He studied first in India at the Government College (now Government College University) in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab during British colonialism; after independence, the city became part of Pakistan. Following that, during the early 1910s, he continued his studies at the University of Cambridge's Trinity College. Sondhi eventually became a professor of economics and political science at Punjab University in Lahore and later returned to the Government College to serve as its principal. One has to assume that his British education had a strong impact on his career as a sports official. During his studies, he was a successful hockey player and runner. While engaging in Western sports was very common at British schools, it was not at all so in India. Most Indians who took up sports during the 1910s and 1920s belonged, like Sondhi, to the very small British-educated upper and middle class.

Sondhi's career as a sports official began in 1924, when he became secretary of the Punjab Olympic Association. The founding in India of provincial Olympic associations and of a national one, the Indian Olympic Association was the outcome of a design drafted by the American Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and its Indian supporters. American YMCA physical education directors such as John H. Gray, the son of American missionaries in India, had already, before the outbreak of the First World War, attempted to create a national sports event in India to promote amateur sports. Due to the war, this could not be realized, but another successful attempt was made in the early 1920s. The American YMCA was very important in Indian sports in the 1910s and 1920s, since its American physical education directors were well-trained experts who normally had studied physical education and sometimes also medicine and related subjects. As is quite well-known, both basketball and volleyball had been invented at the International YMCA College in Springfield, Massachusetts. Amateur sports were perceived by the YMCA as an important tool to improve public health and encourage Christian character-building based on norms and values such as fair play, self-control, competition, and selection of athletes based on competence instead of family ties or skin color. YMCA promotion of these values was a response to fears among Protestant social reformers that urbanization and industrialization in the US had resulted in a physical degeneration of American Protestants and, because of greater anonymity in cities, a boom in vices.



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1920 Indian Olympic Delegation
Left to right, top row: Randhir Shindes, Purma Bannerjee, Kumar Navale, Phadeppa Chaugule. Middle row: Sohrab Bhoot, A. H. A. Fyzee. Seated: Sadashiv Datar, Kaikadi.
Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/h2q4ncv>.

Since India was one of the countries in which the highest number of non-Christians lived, it had become an important target of the American YMCA's foreign activities, including its amateur sports program. In 1920, when the Olympic Games took place again, those scheduled to be held in Berlin in 1916 had been aborted because of the First World War, the YMCA and the IOC decided to cooperate in the creation of national and regional sports events in non-Western regions. One of the results was that the already-planned national games for India became a reality thanks to the YMCA in 1924. The event is now called the National Games of India. These games served to select and train athletes for the Olympic Games and for regional sports events in Asia. More generally, the games were seen as an instrument to make Indians familiar with Western sports and to promote participation and the hosting of meetings on the provincial and lower levels. In 1920, the IOC also appointed Dorab Tata, a very influential British-educated Indian industrialist, as an IOC member. Tata closely cooperated with the American YMCA, and Indian teams started to participate in the Olympic Games, developments that were accompanied by the founding of the already-mentioned Olympic associations.

Sondhi's early career as a sports official is important, because it shows his appropriation of the white man's burden. The leadership transfer in sports affairs from Americans to Indians and the resulting attempts of Indians to "uplift" India through sport were, after all, related to the more general question of Indian self-government and the end of British colonialism, which nationalists increasingly demanded following the First World War. The American YMCA had, for a variety of reasons, started to train Indian students as professional physical educators and was willing to grant them, if sufficiently trained, leadership positions. However, Sondhi was no YMCA trainee. Instead, YMCA physical education directors such as John Gray identified him as a protégé of Bhupinder Singh, the Maharaja of Patiala, a princely state that after India's independence was eventually integrated into the Punjab. This judgment was not wrong, since Sondhi's plans very much depended on the Maharaja's financial contributions. Other sources of funding were scarce, since governmental interest was very limited and TV broadcasting rights, another major source of income today, obviously did not yet exist. The main problem was that the YMCA and Tata had serious doubts concerning the Indian princes' interest in promoting low-cost amateur sports for masses of people. This perception was encouraged by various quarrels between princes, who very often were interested in upper-class sports and supported professional athletes or teams as a means to gain prestige and entertain themselves. Such doubts on the side of the YMCA nevertheless did not prevent Sondhi from becoming Secretary of the Indian Olympic Association in 1927, when the officeholder, YMCA Physical Education Director Arthur G. Noehren, returned to the United States. The following year, the Maharaja succeeded Tata as its President.

Sondhi now had the chance to prove—or not to prove—that he was willing and able to handle India's involvement in the Olympic movement, including the founding of a regional Asian sports event. The last point was important, since such events corresponded to pan-Asian aspirations that



Portrait of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala.
Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/zk3ulfx>.



India's 1936 field hockey team, captained by hockey wizard Dhyan Chand (standing second from left), was the gold medal winner at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics.

Source: Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/zsfh6r4>.

had emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of Western colonialism. Very often, pan-Asian ideas were based on claims of Asian commonalities such as common ethnicity, culture, history, and an opponent or enemy in the form of the West. In the case of the YMCA, the situation had been slightly different, since its officials also identified Asian commonalities, but mostly in the sense of Asians being united in their need for American religious advice and scientific expertise. Regional Asian sports events—the YMCA had already founded one in East and Southeast Asia—therefore corresponded to the perception of Western amateur sport as a rational and healthy leisure practice and a means for character-building that should be encouraged among “backward” Asians. However, if a regional Asian sports event was organized by *Asians* instead of Westerners, their supposed common ethnicity could be touted as representing a common struggle against colonialism and related claims that Asians were not ready for self-government.

The Western Asiatic Games, which Sondhi founded in 1934, mirror such pan-Asian aspirations. For several years after he became secretary of the Indian Olympic Association, Sondhi seems not to have done anything noteworthy. However, in 1932, he attended his first IOC meeting, having succeeded Tata as India's IOC member—an office that is normally held for a lifetime. Soon after he attended the meeting, Sondhi started to invite a large number of countries and colonies situated between the Suez and the Straits of Malacca to India. At first, he received no answer, but eventually small teams from Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ceylon arrived, while two Iranian diplomats represented their country as delegates. All in all, the first Western Asiatic Games comprised two days of competitions in both athletics (track and field) and hockey in New Delhi, and two days of swimming in Patiala (though only one foreign swimmer, a Palestinian, arrived in time to participate against the Indian competition).

Fewer than 100 athletes participated in the event. In addition to the logistical problems, the games also proved to be a financial disaster, since Sondhi's budget plan failed completely. The scarcity of funding, Sondhi never having—in contrast to the YMCA officials—been trained in physical education and organizational matters, and his full-time work as a professor certainly caused him problems. Despite the problems, the event was a contribution to the more general intensification of Asian cooperation since the end of the First World War, which criticized Western colonialism and can be seen as an important step toward decolonization. Sondhi thus demonstrated that he was a visionary of Asian integration, self-government, and sportive “modernization.” He took away the white man's burden from Westerners and tried to “uplift” Asia without colonial interference, though with a focus on India as the leading power. Sondhi also focused on “Olympism”—the IOC's secular sports ideology—instead of the YMCA's Christian interpretation, since this reduced religious resistance and facilitated Asian cooperation. It was another demonstration how he, as a member of the Indian elite, appropriated elements of the white man's burden.

The organizational deficits nevertheless meant that many of Sondhi's colleagues in India and abroad had doubts concerning his ability to put his vision into practice, meaning that not much



happened for a while. A second Western Asiatic Games could not be held in 1938 or 1939. Problems in Afghanistan and the Arab Revolt in Palestine prevented these two member countries from hosting the games, while the Indian Olympic Association argued against organizing the second meeting in India. Sondhi, moreover, had ceased to be the Indian Olympic Association's secretary in 1939, depriving the potential games of a key driving force. After the outbreak of the Second World War in September that year, which made the hosting of an event impossible, the idea remained dormant until early 1945. Sondhi then started to argue for a second Western Asiatic Games, but massive changes in the international situation meant that he quickly adjusted his vision of Asia peacefully growing together and Asians being educated through amateur sport.

When the most destructive war in human history had ended, large-scale decolonization and a boom in Indian visions of Asian regional integration followed. Sometimes, such as the case with the 1947 Partition of India, the power transfer from colonizers to colonized occurred without war—massive violence between Pakistanis and Indians notwithstanding.³ In contrast, other decolonization processes were characterized by wars for independence, which lasted for years in colonies like Indonesia (1945–1949) and Indochina (1946–1954). Civil wars such as in China (1945–1949), the suppression of Communist movements in various places, the first conflict between newly founded Israel and its Arab neighbors (1948), and big international wars such as the Korean War (1950–1953) were further demonstrations that the end of the Second World War hardly brought peace to Asia. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister, was a prominent advocate for a more peaceful, egalitarian, and interdependent world order. While he did not support the formation of a third "power bloc" in the Cold War, such a world order necessitated Asian regional integration, meaning that the Nehru Administration welcomed Sondhi's new vision of an Asian regional sports event. Political events such as the Asian Relations Conference, held in New Delhi in 1947 shortly before India's independence, had encouraged Sondhi to found an event that should now include *all* Asian countries, not only those of West and South Asia. A journalist for *The Times of India* summed this up on Sondhi's death:

It was Mr. Sondhi who conceived the idea of the Asian games . . . The Prime Minister, Mr. Nehru, supported the idea, and it was due mainly to Mr. Sondhi's untiring efforts that the Asian Games Federation was formed in 1949 and the first Asian Games were held two years later in New Delhi.⁴

The preparations for the new event, the Asian Games, turned into another disaster for Sondhi. His time schedule was unrealistic, East and Southeast Asians—mistrustful of Indian organizing competence—initially attempted to host the first event in Shanghai (prevented by the Chinese Civil

1942 Indian Olympic Association Managing Committee. President Maharaja of Patiala is seated in the center of the front row, and Guru Dutt Sondhi is the last seated on the right of the front row.

Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/jreqboq>.



The Governor of Bombay speaks at the 1950 Indian National Games while The Maharaja of Patiala holds the umbrella. Guru Dutt Sondhi is standing left of the Naval captain.
Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/h4ack2a>.

War), and infrastructure construction in New Delhi took significantly longer than expected. Sondhi eventually gave up his position as head organizer and limited himself to the office of Secretary of the Asian Games Federation. The event itself, which was then organized by another Indian sports official, took place in March 1951 and was attended by eleven Asian countries and some observers from Communist China. Reminiscent of the Western Asiatic Games, it was marred by various organizational deficits and financial problems. The first Asian Games therefore illustrated that India was insufficiently prepared to realize the event within the time frame Sondhi had envisioned.

Despite all these problems, the hosting of the first Asian Games—taking place between the Asian Relations Conference of 1947 and the Asia-Africa Conference, hosted in the Indonesian city of Bandung in 1955—communicated the message of peaceful regional integration during a very militant time. Among others, a Japanese team took part, illustrating the country’s reintegration into transnational and international organizations and networks. Another important point is that several teams had female members, which emphasized the emancipation of Asian women. Finally, despite all their problems and deficits, the first Asian Games were relevant in terms of developing a basic sports infrastructure in New Delhi, including a stadium. Designated the “National Stadium” (now Dhyani Chand National Stadium), the building contributed to India’s postcolonial nation-building process and represented a limited catching up with more “developed” countries.

Sondhi remained a visionary for the rest of his life: low-cost amateur sports open to everybody should serve as a democratic means for citizenship training, character-building, and encouraging fitness. As a consequence, he criticized the intentions of other Asian sports officials to include more expensive disciplines such as yachting in the event. Sondhi also advocated against intentions to host the Asian Games in a spectacular way that was aimed at showing seemingly rapid and successful development processes through large-scale construction campaigns, since poor or small Asian countries should also have the option of applying to host an event.

Encouraging internationalism and peaceful Asian cooperation remained his central desire. At an Asian Games Federation meeting in October 1957, he was still affected by the “Sputnik Shock” that



Indian athletes marching through the National Stadium during the opening ceremony of the First Asian Games, held in New Delhi, India.
Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/zuw2nnj>.

about three weeks earlier had made people aware that missiles could not only transport satellites into space but also nuclear warheads to other continents. He evoked the image of an Asia characterized by its strong spiritualism—a regularly invoked image since the nineteenth century serving as a countermodel to the image of a scientifically and technologically superior West—by declaring amateur sports norms and values to be a modern form of spirituality. After a paean to Mohandas K. “Mahatma” Gandhi’s and Jawaharlal Nehru’s love of peace, he warned his audience, “Soul force is the only power that can control and subjugate nuclear force.”⁵ Sondhi also thought about options for how to discourage strong nationalism at events such as the Asian Games and the Olympic Games, which was, among other causes, deliberately encouraged by the governments of newly independent countries.

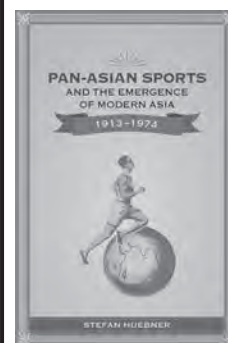
Sondhi also struggled for the enforcement of nondiscrimination against Asian Games Federation member countries, which was inspired by his internationalist and egalitarian thinking. When the Indonesian organizers of the 1962 Fourth Asian Games did not invite member countries Taiwan and Israel to participate, claiming that these two countries were American puppets and hostile to Indonesia and its allies, Sondhi was the only openly critical delegate in the Asian Games Federation. After a few days, the situation became quite radicalized, as a mob of angry Indonesians started searching for him and in the process damaged the Indian embassy. Sondhi then fled Indonesia and told a *Straits Times* reporter, “I was provided with police escorts ever since the controversy fired up. There were guards even at my hotel . . . Well, I am not bitter. What’s past is past.”⁶ Through the IOC he later punished the Indonesian organizers by banning Indonesia from the Olympic movement. It is debatable if this decision was appropriate or too harsh, but Sondhi had shown his determination to enforce the goal of peaceful Asian integration and penalize all activities that undermined it.

Taken all together, Sondhi’s career as a sports official was strongly influenced first by British colonialism in India, when he took away the white man’s burden from the colonizers and began “uplifting” India through sport. Later, his career was affected by the age of decolonization that followed the Second World War, when it became easier to promote Asian cooperation as a means to challenge Asia’s marginalization. What make him a person worthy of our attention and discussion are his creativity and humanness, which defined his vision of sports-based social improvement and peaceful Asian integration. For Sondhi, the founding of the Western Asiatic Games and the Asian Games meant creating a countersignal first to the division of Asia due to colonialism and later to the very militant situation during the 1940s and early 1950s. In terms of character-building and public health, he also provided important impulses through his cooperation with Indian princes, the YMCA, the IOC, and the government of independent India. Despite a series of setbacks, he did not give up his struggle for realizing his vision, which emphasized his determination. Via the Asian Games, he indeed influenced Asian and Indian sports up to the present day. However, since he was a strong advocate of amateurism and low costs, one has to wonder, how would he have reacted to the increasing commercialization and professionalization of international sports since the 1980s? ■

NOTES

1. For information about the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, see Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta, *Sellotape Legacy: Delhi and the Commonwealth Games* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010); and for more general information on India and the Olympic movement, see Majumdar and Mehta’s *India and the Olympics* (London: Routledge, 2009).
2. If not otherwise stated, the text is based on Stefan Huebner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016).
3. During World War II, there was some sporadic violence between the British and Indians.
4. “Sondhi Dies in Sleep,” *Times of India*, November 21, 1966.
5. See The Organizing Committee for the 3rd Asian Games, *3rd Asian Games Bulletin* No. 5, Tokyo, 1957, 7. The comment might appear slightly eccentric, but (although this played no role in 1957) it should be mentioned that China tested its first nuclear bomb during the Tokyo Olympic Games (1964), which certainly led to other statements similar to Sondhi’s. On the test, see Paul Droubie, “Phoenix Arisen: Japan as Peaceful Internationalist at the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 16 (2011): 2309–2322.
6. “Mr. Sondhi: ‘I Had to Get out Fast,’” *The Straits Times*, September 4, 1962.

STEFAN HUEBNER is a Historian of colonialism, modernization, and development policy. Currently, he is a Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore. He was awarded fellowships and scholarships at Harvard University, the Woodrow Wilson Center, and the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC. His book, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974*, was published by NUS Press. Huebner’s PhD research at Jacobs University Bremen (Germany) covered the impact of regional Asian sports events established by the American YMCA on the “Western Civilizing Mission,” pan-Asian and nationalist sentiments, and modernization and development processes in seven Asian countries.



Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974

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PAPERBACK

The history of regional sporting events in twentieth-century Asia yields insights into Western and Asian perspectives on what defines modern Asia, and can be read as a staging of power relations in Asia and between Asia and the West. The Far Eastern Championship Games began in 1913 and were succeeded after the Pacific War by the Asian Games. Missionary groups and colonial administrations viewed sporting success not only as a triumph of physical strength and endurance but also of moral education and social reform. Sporting competitions were to shape a “new Asian man” and later a “new Asian woman” by promoting internationalism, egalitarianism, and economic progress, all serving to direct a “rising” Asia toward modernity. Over time, exactly what constituted a “rising” Asia underwent remarkable changes, ranging from the YMCA’s promotion of muscular Christianity, democratization, and the social gospel in the US-colonized Philippines to Iranian visions of recreating the Great Persian Empire.

Based on a vast range of archival materials spanning sixty years and three continents, Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974 describes how pan-Asian sporting events helped shape anticolonial sentiments, Asian nationalism, and pan-Asian aspirations in places as diverse as Japan and Iran, and across the span of countries lying between them.

Source: *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* page on *The University of Chicago Press Books* website (distributing for National University of Singapore Press) at <http://tinyurl.com/zx8hdbg>.