

# THE ARCHITECT OF THE FIRST ASIAN GAMES: ANTHONY DE MELLO

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## **Abstract:**

In 1951, the first Asian Games were organized in New Delhi, the capital of newly independent India. But the organizers of the first Asian Games faced a lot of problems. Suddenly one day Gurudutt Sondhi resigned from the post of Director of the Asian Games. As a result, the dream of organizing the first Asian Games turned into a 'phantasy'. The person who turned that phantom into reality was Anthony de Mello. De Mello was the founder member and president of the 'Board of Control for Cricket in India'. He founded the 'Cricket Club of India' in Bombay and built the 'National Sports Club of India'. When Anthony de Mello took over as the director, there was no stadium in Delhi. From there, within just ten months, he organized an international sports event involving Asian countries, which was incredible in a word. Along with this, there was a financial crisis, but de Mello was the solution. He took a loan from the National Sports Club of India to organize the Asian Games. Apart from this, he completed everything efficiently, from providing the necessary equipment for sports to build the stadium and arranging accommodation for the athletes. Finally, on March 4, 1951, New Delhi and the whole world witnessed the sports conference of Asian countries - the 'Asian Games', which is currently a very important international sports competition and is held right after the Olympics.

**Keywords:** Asian Games, Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Anthony de Mello, National Stadium, Gurudutt Sondhi.

## **Introduction:**

'I wish to congratulate you on the success of the Asian Games held here. The arrangements made for them were extraordinarily good and everything went remarkably well. You deserve full congratulations on this.' (De Mello, 1959, p. 290-291). This was the speech of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India said to Anthony de Mello, one of the architects of

the first Asian Games. To which de Mello replied, 'The Magic is yours (of our Supreme Captain) and I did my humble bit to make that magic work and be seen by Asia.'

'You have certainly made New Delhi the Capital of Asia. The Young Athletes of Asia have now all re- turned to their homes and countries. They were magnetized by your interest in them in their village, in their leisure and in the Stadium; and their guiding principle for the future will certainly be 'To play the Game in the Spirit of the Game,' as was given by you to them.' (De Mello, 1959, p. 291) Anthony de Mello took over the directorship vacated by Professor G. D. Sondhi. De Mello was an Anglo-Indian, he was born in Karachi and educated at Cambridge, Anthony de Mello was one of the most important figures in the world of sports in India since the 1920s. He was a founding member and president of the 'Board of Control for Cricket in India'. He founded the 'Cricket Club of India' in Bombay and developed the 'National Sports Club of India'. (Majumdar & Mehta, 2012, p. 162)

Even before taking charge of the Asian Games, Anthony de Mello wanted the Asian Games to be held in India. Ever since Gurudutt Sondhi had finalized the plan to form the Asian Games Federation during the London Olympics, de Mello had thought that hosting the Asian Games in India would have two advantages - on the one hand, the youth of Asian countries would be able to compete in a completely friendly competition on Indian soil. On the other hand, India's sports infrastructure, where Indian athletes could practice their sports would be improved. (De Mello, 1959, p. 275) Sitting at Wembley Stadium while watching the London Olympics held in 1948 after World War II, he thought that if Indian athletes wanted to succeed, they would have to be given much more facilities in their own country. At that time, compared to Russia and Czechoslovakia, India's sports equipment was almost prehistoric. Indian athletes did not have the opportunity to run on cinder tracks in their own country. De Mello, who oversaw various sports organizations, thought that something had to be done. (De Mello, 1959, p. 274-275)

De Mello presented his plan to the Health Minister Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and he also received support. He then conveyed his plan to organize the Asian Games to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel. The Prime Minister appreciated his proposal, and Nehru wrote a letter to Anthony de Mello. (De Mello, 1959, p. 275-276) The letter was exactly like this:

'I have read through the note prepared by Mr. de Mello on proposals for 'Nehru Stadium and Park in New Delhi and Vallabhbhai Patel Olympic Stadium' in Bombay.'

'I am entirely in favor of encouraging sports, games and athletics in India, and I think that it is very unfortunate that there is no proper stadium anywhere in the country. Indeed, there are hardly any proper running tracks.

‘Therefore, I think the Government should encourage in every way the erection of stadiums. The details should be considered by a meeting of people interested. The Health Minister can take the initiative in this matter, as suggested by Mr. de Mello. As to who should be invited to this meeting, the matter should be considered carefully to get the right people who are really interested and who will help in carrying the proposal through.

‘It seems to me that the proposals made are too ambitious. It is not very good starting on a very big scale and then not being able to keep it up. It may be, of course, that while the scheme is a big one, it can be implemented in stages. Obviously, the two places where we should concentrate to begin with are New Delhi and Bombay’.

‘I am very much opposed to naming the stadium after me. The stadium can be called the ‘National Stadium’ or some such name. It must be remembered that while the Government will look upon the scheme with great favor any substantial financial contribution is exceedingly unlikely for some time to come’.

‘I suggest, therefore, that a meeting of selected people should be held at a convenient date in New Delhi, and that the Health Minister might take steps to this end. This meeting should consider various proposals and make their own suggestions.

‘There appears to be an additional proposal about the London Branch of the National Sports Club. While I think a club of this kind in London would be desirable, I think that this should be a subsequent venture after we have done something in India itself. We cannot take on too many burdens. (De Mello, 1959, p. 276-277)

A few days later, De Mello met with Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister of India. In principle, he was more agreeable than Nehru and he was happy that the Bombay Stadium was named after him. (De Mello, 1959, p. 277) De Mello, on Nehru's suggestion, called a meeting of thirty of the country's top sportsmen in New Delhi. The meeting was held in April 1949 at the Governor General's House, New Delhi. De Mello re-explained his proposal in the presence of the Prime Minister himself and it was welcomed. (De Mello, 1959, p. 277) As per De Mello's proposal, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was elected the first president, and the National Sports Club of India was born. De Mello himself was the general secretary and there was not much time left to implement the plan. The National Stadium in New Delhi was built in 1951 and the Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium in Bombay was built in 1953. (De Mello, 1959, p. 277) Mello said, ‘I worked during these years as I always have and always will in a full-time honorary capacity. Such is my feeling for Indian sport and the young sportsmen of India that I ask no reward for what I have done greater their success. No sportsman could ask more’. (De Mello, 1959, p. 277)

Anthony de Mello arranged funds to implement his grand plan. He appealed to ten sports administrators to contribute Rs. 10,000 each and asked twenty sports patrons to contribute Rs. 5,000 each and ten thousand lifetime members to contribute Rs. 1,000 each. (De Mello, 1959, p. 278) The estimated budget for the construction of the National Stadium in Delhi and the Bombay Stadium was Rs. 30 lakh and Rs. 20 lakhs respectively. De Mello also initiated the process of taking membership. By the time the construction of the National Stadium in Delhi was completed, seven thousand people had become lifetime members and before the construction of the Vallabhbhai Stadium in Bombay, the membership had reached 10 thousand. (De Mello, 1959, p. 278)

Taking charge of the Asian Games, Anthony de Mello noticed that there were numerous influential people and sports personalities from all over India who were ready to help in organizing the Asian Games. One of them was the Indian Army Chief, General K. M. Katiyappa, who himself was a great sportsman. He helped in the construction of the Asian Games village by lending two army buildings next to the stadium. (De Mello, 1959, p. 307) But the Asian Games required not only a village but also a stadium and equipment's, which required a huge amount of money, but the financial problem was not easy to solve. Anthony D'Mello was on the one hand the Chief Executive of the National Sports Club of India and on the other hand the Chief Executive of the Asian Games. His condition was critical. He was praying that everything would be ready by March 1951. (De Mello, 1959, p. 307)

British contractors and engineers were given the task of building the national stadium and they promised to complete the construction of the stadium and swimming pool by January 1951. (De Mello, 1959, p. 307) Anthony de Mello went to England and requested a famous sporting goods dealer to supply the best quality track and sports equipment. Surprisingly, the seller agreed. The sports goods manufacturer agreed to donate a portion of its finished goods to the Asian Games, which were set aside for the Helsinki Olympics (1952). (De Mello, 1959, p. 307-308) Another problem was the filtration unit for the swimming pool, and Anthony D'Mello was the solution. He got a promise from the contracting company to deliver the goods on time. (De Mello, 1959, p. 308) The man who always acted as Anthony de Mello's right hand was S.S. Dhawan. He was himself a sports organizer and took time off from the Railways to help de Mello. He opened the Asian Game's office in their small residence in New Delhi with his wife. He did the work of stenographer, typist, accountant and clerk with great dedication and patience. (De Mello, 1959, p. 308)

The biggest problem in organizing the Asian Games was the financial crisis. Neither the Indian Olympic Association nor the Indian government was ready to help financially. In this case too, the solution was D'Mello. He requested the executive committee of the National Sports Club of India to provide a loan of one lakh rupees to the Indian Olympic Association for organizing the

Asian Games and the committee agreed. (De Mello, 1959, p. 308) As a result, the financial problem was somewhat alleviated. Then the organizers of the Asian Games felt the need for the help of L. Kapoor, the sports editor of the 'Tribune' newspaper. Later, at the personal request of the Maharaja of Patiala, the supervisors of Kapoor's newspaper agreed to prepare the report on the Asian Games. (De Mello, 1959, p. 308)

A representative organizing committee was formed to organize the Asian Games, which was divided into several sub-committees. It was a full-fledged committee under the chairmanship of the Maharaja of Patiala, Shri Yadavindra Singh. (De Mello, 1959, p. 308-309) Anthony D'Mello and his Secretary Mr. S. S. Dhawan were elected ex-officio members of all the committees and the executive committee of the national organization. (De Mello, 1959, p. 310) Many committees were formed to organize the Asian Games, but the next major step was taken at a meeting held at Patiala House, Delhi on 21 October 1950. The Maharaja himself presided over this meeting. Also present at the meeting were General K. M. Katiyappa, Pandit Hridoyanath Kunjru, Sir Shankarlal, Mr. Krishnaprasad, Mr. G.D. Sondhi, Mr. Mainul Haque and Anthony D'Mello. D'Mello's main task was to review the progress of the work. Mello reported that the Asian Games office in New Delhi was working busily, the work on the National Stadium was 7% complete and the required equipment's for the Asian Games had reached Delhi. (De Mello, 1959, p. 310) Anthony D'Mello thanked General Katiyappa for lending the military building near the National Stadium. Mello admitted that without Katiyappa's help it would have been impossible to hold the Asian Games on time, (De Mello, 1959, p. 310-311) and this also applies to the National Sports Club of India. Its help did not end with a loan of one lakh rupees; it also helped in the construction of stadiums, swimming pools and the purchase of sports equipment. (De Mello, 1959, p. 311) It was unprecedented in the history of the Olympics and Asian Games that such a major international sports competition as the Asian Games was held without any government assistance. (De Mello, 1959, p. 311)

The meeting confirmed that the countries that would join the Asian Games Federation were the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, Japan, Ceylon, Afghanistan, Iran and India. Pakistan and Iraq, which had joined the Asian Games Federation but later decided to postpone their membership. However, the opposite happened in the case of Israel and Vietnam, which were very interested in becoming members of the Asian Games Federation, but their applications were not accepted because they were not members of the International Olympic Committee. In the meeting, it was decided that efforts would be made to grant membership to these four countries as far as possible, (De Mello, 1959, p. 311) bringing the number of competing countries to 11, including Nepal and Singapore. As per the decision of the meeting, athletics, aquatics, swimming, driving, water polo, football, weightlifting, basketball, cycling and arts were selected for boys and athletics and swimming for girls. It was decided to invite the President of independent India, Rajendra Prasad, as the chief patron of the Asian Games, and Prime Minister

Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as patrons.(De Mello, 1959, p. 312)

As the Asian Games come closer, the work ethic among Indian workers is increasing. The excitement and enthusiasm increased. A lot of work had to be done in a very short time. Accommodation for 600 competitors from eleven countries was arranged in a very short time. Besides, many facilities were also provided as requested by various visitors. Organizing an international sports competition like the Asian Games in a very short time was a very difficult task for the Indian officials. The members of the various sub-committees performed and managed various tasks with great responsibility. All of them inspired themselves. (De Mello, 1959, p. 312)

The Asian Games Village was built within the military camp. Everything from shops to separate beds and books for reading in leisure was provided. In addition, excellent food and drink arrangements were made, but the Japanese did not accept the food there, they prepared their own food. Possibly Everything was done for the well-being of the competitors, so that they could give their best in their games. Entertainment of their choice was arranged every evening to make their leisure time enjoyable. No duty was levied on the sports equipments brought by foreign competitors when they entered India. In addition, half the fare was charged from them for rail travel, and cars were always ready for the competing teams. (De Mello, 1959, p. 312-313) The foundation stone of the National Stadium was laid on 19th January 1950 and within just three hundred days, a real miracle happened. On 25th January 1951, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the stadium. About thirty-five thousand people attended the event. Club President Amrit Kaur said at the event, 'Sports exist for all people-the poor and rich, high and low, young and old. Playing fields are a debt we owe to the children and youth of this country' (De Mello, 1959, p. 278)

The National Stadium was built from the Central Park in New Delhi to the opposite side of the Rashtrapati Bhavan next to the Bhavnagar Stand. A sports field was built covering an area of about forty thousand square meters. It was surrounded by embankments. The embankments were covered with seven miles of stepped concrete roads. Thirty thousand seats were built in this way. In addition, a grass field for football and athletics, a six-lane running track for running and a four and a half hundred meters of concrete cycling track were built. In addition, the entrance to the event was from the front of the Bhavnagar Stand and the necessary infrastructure was built for the use of the players. A tunnel was built under the running track and cycling track, through which direct access to the field was made. (De Mello, 1959, p. 279)

The club house on Mudra Road, New Delhi, had a card room, billiard room, ball room, three large verandas, a dining room with a capacity of 100 seats, writing room, committee room and

office room for the members and visitors. There were fourteen single rooms and five shared rooms on the first floor. There was also a wide varandah, which opened onto the beautiful grounds adjacent to the National Stadium. Swimming in the swimming pool, changing rooms in the stadium, tennis courts and other facilities were provided. The swimming pool, built on almost Olympic standards and with a seating capacity of 5,000.(De Mello, 1959, p. 279) The Indian National Stadium was almost ready to witness the Asian Games for the first time. All the publicity plans of the Asian Games organizers were successful, even though they had no previous experience in this field. About 150 journalists from all over the world were present at the Asian Games, if there was a slight flaw, it would have been reported very quickly. In this regard, a journalist from 'Sports and Pastime' wrote, 'The facilities offered to the press by regular cyclostyled bulletins and many valuable information services matched those offered at Wembley stadium during the 1948 London Olympiad'.(De Mello, 1959, p. 313)

March 4, 1951, was a glorious day in the history of Indian and Asian sports. Anthony de Mello, the chief organizer of the 1951 Asian Games, wrote about the opening ceremony of the Asian Games - 'The greatest moment in the world of Indian sports can be said to be March 4, 1951, which cannot be surpassed by any other event. It is a historic day. Why India or only India? In the world of sports in Asia - even the whole world - the day the journey of the first Asian Games began. The motto of the Olympics - Citius, Altius, Fortius, that is, speed, Excellence, power - Asia came closer to it, 'as the elder brother of Asia, India led in that outstanding sporting activity'. (Majumdar, 2018, p. 87) All the people, especially those directly involved in organizing the Asian Games, were waiting for this special day. Although the organizers faced many problems and obstacles in the beginning. But Sondhi's vision, Anthony de Mello's organizational talent, the strong support of Maharaja Yadavendra Singh of Patiala and above all the support and inspiration of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru helped solve all the problems. There is no doubt that the first Asian Games was a tremendous success. Japan won the most medals. India secured the second place and Iran came third.

Anthony de Mello, the chief organizer of the Asian Games, said, 'How quickly those eight days passed!' Though, as I write, memories of individual events come flooding back, the greatest impression is the overall one-of the fine spirit of it all, and of the certainty from first to last that our conception of an Asian meeting on a big scale had been right'. [De Mello, 1959, p. 286] Anthony de Mello said of the closing ceremony of the Asian Games, 'I have never seen so much joy and happiness as was shown during these closing ceremonies'. [De Mello, 1959, p. 289] After the idea of organizing a sports competition involving Asian countries failed twice, Gurudutt Sodhi expressed his desire to organize the Asian Games, but when Gurudutt Sodhi suddenly resigned on April 13, 1950, the plan for the Asian Games turned into a 'fantasy', Anthony de Mello turned that 'fantasy' idea into a reality. Starting from the provision of funds to the provision of sports equipment and infrastructure - he did everything responsibly. With the

support of Jawaharlal Nehru and the initiative of Gurudutt Sodhi and Anthony de Mello, the capital of India, New Delhi, organized an international sports competition called the 'Asian Games'. Although the idea of the Asian Games was the brainchild of Professor Gurudutt Sodhi, but Anthony de Mello who made it a reality.

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