

## THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE



## ARTS etc

## Staying in the Picture

Remembering the National Award-winning actor Surekha Sikri, who passed away on Friday

Gaurav Bhatt

WHEN TOKYO WAS awarded the Olympics in 2013, film buffs across the world were least surprised. They had seen it coming since 1988.

More than three decades ago, *Akira* — the influential science-fiction animation film by Japanese artist Katsuhiro Otomo — had predicted that the 2020 Olympic Games would take place in Neo-Tokyo, the film's reimagination of the Japanese capital. The Olympic grounds in the movie house military bases. And Akira, the titular, telekinetic child, is imprisoned in a cryogenic chamber below the Olympic Stadium, the site of the film's climax.

In *Akira*, the Olympics are crucial to Neo-Tokyo as a symbol of recovery from the nuclear trauma of "World War III". Otomo was alluding to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II and Japan rebounding with the 1964 Olympic Games. But by tapping into the zeitgeist and presenting a vision of the future, Otomo foresaw a lot more. He has repeatedly stated that *Akira* was a product of his deep fascination with manga comics since his childhood and his homage to postwar Japan — "a tragedy depicting people destroying the world's balance amid this era that I wanted to recreate".

In a 2019 video interview with publisher Kodansha, Otomo, now 67, said, "Looking at the world now, I wonder how it wound up like this... Looking at issues like wars/conflicts and organised crime, I can feel the world slowly fall out of balance, and I hope we can improve on that." A scene from the film shows a countdown clock at "147 days until The Games", with a message: "With everyone's effort, let's make this a success." Underneath the sign, there is a graffiti — "*Chuushi da chuushi!*" — "Just cancel it!". The frame made the rounds during the COVID-19 outbreak in Japan just before the original opening date of the Olympics last year. "Just Cancel It" was the top trend on Japanese Twitter and has since become a rallying cry against the Olympic Games, scheduled to begin on July 23.

Did Otomo really predict the future through *Akira*? Nozomu Sasaki, who voiced the antagonist Tetsuo Shima in the film, wants to know, too. "That is what I would like to ask him myself!" Sasaki says in an email interview. "Now it has become almost impossible to talk about *Akira* without mentioning some striking similarities between the film and what is happening in the real world."

Even before the pandemic, *Akira*'s dystopia resonated with the world. Prominent themes of the film include attacks on press freedom, religious extremism, bureaucratic corruption, police brutality, the struggle between haves and have-nots and anti-government demonstrations. "Whether it is a coincidence or not, I think these predictions come from the vision, skill, and creativity of Mr Otomo," says the 54-year-old Sasaki, who debuted in *Akira* and has since gone on to voice characters from popular anime series such as *Naruto* (1999-2014), *Death Note* (2006-07) and *Monster* (2004-05). "That makes *Akira* all the more profound."



Think of your favourite sci-fi film and know that it owes a debt to *Akira*. Each element of the film — from the neon-lit imagery, the moody, experimental soundtrack to the signature jacket and bike of protagonist Shotaro Kaneda — has become a fixture in cyberpunk iconoclasm. Inspired by Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (1982), Otomo's *Akira* manga ran from 1982 to 1990, spanning over 2,000 pages and laying the foundation for the animated adaptation and all future sci-fi blockbusters.

*Akira*'s influence can be seen all over The Wachowskis' 1999 magnum opus *The Matrix*. Rian Johnson (writer-director, *Looper*, 2012) and, more recently, the Duffer Brothers (executive producers, *Stranger Things*, 2016-) have listed it as an inspiration, too. Film critic Roger Ebert wrote of *Akira*: "The animation was state of the art, the vision was bleak, the tone was a radical departure for American audiences raised to equate animation with cute animals and fairy tales." Musicians Michael Jackson and Kanye West made mu-

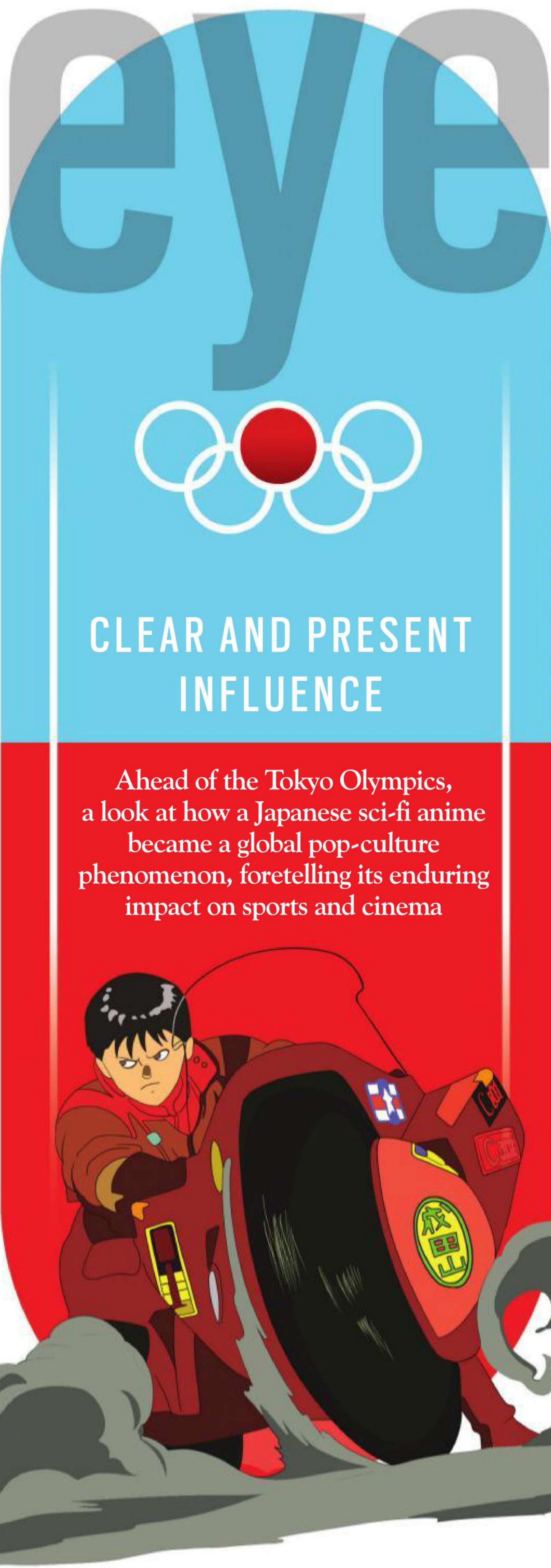


## ORAL HISTORY

Nozomu Sasaki, who was the voice of the antagonist, Tetsuo Shima, in *Akira*

sic videos based on sequences from the movie; the latter has also based his clothing line on *Akira* and calls the film his "biggest creative inspiration". "One of the main reasons for the worldwide success of *Akira* is that the original author supervised and directed it himself. Otomo took the time to embody his images and ideas into the film, meticulously composing details the way he wanted to. In my view, he was trying to make a visual world, more than just a Japanese anime movie. This is a work where a first-class creator used his abilities and energies to the fullest to visualise what he had in his mind, without any flattery to the viewers," says Sasaki.

*Akira* hit American shores when *Hanna-Barbera* reruns reigned supreme and the Disney Renaissance — spearheaded by *The Little Mermaid* (1989) — was still a year away. Internet lore has it that *Star Wars* creator George Lucas and director Steven Spielberg declined to distribute the film in America owing to its limited appeal. Spielberg later featured the *Akira* motorcycle in 2018's *Ready Player One*.



## CRYSTAL GAZING

In the run-up to Tokyo 2020, the graffiti "*Chuushi da chuushi!*" became a rallying cry to postpone the Games because of the pandemic

*Akira* used cel animation, which means over 160,000 frames of the film were hand-drawn by animators on thin plastic sheets. A majority of the film takes place at night, something animators avoided at the time due to increased colour requirements. *Akira* featured a record 327 shades of colour, with 50 shades specifically created for the film. Also unusual at the time was pre-scoring, which means the



1976 Olympics and was released to coincide with the 1977 World Cup win.

Though real-life triumphs dried up, Japan's love for volleyball anime hasn't subsided. Haruichi Furudate, who played volleyball as a middle blocker, created the manga-turned-

dialogue for *Akira* were recorded first and the art added later. This helped synchronise the mouths with the words and negate the "puppeting" effect in old cartoons.

In December 2020, a 4K restoration of *Akira* was released, completing the saga's journey from paperback to VHS to laser discs to VCDs/DVDs and now Blu-ray. A live-action adaptation, however, is a frontier unconquered. Warner Bros beat rivals Sony Pictures for the rights in 2002, but the project has not taken off since. Leonardo DiCaprio has been attached as a producer for ages. Christopher Nolan and Oscar-winner Jordan Peele were once rumoured to helm the project. *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) director Taika Waititi was finally signed before it was put on hold in 2019.

A large section of fans believe *Akira*'s vision and art simply cannot be replicated in live action. "It's unlike any other anime. Quite a number of productions have been influenced by this masterpiece, but no one seems to have caught up with it. The film transcends the

anime *Haikyu!!* (2012-20). The Japan volleyball league is a frequent collaborator and players appear in the show regularly. Yuji Nishida — national team member and one of Japan's most exciting prospects — revealed in an interview with *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine that moments in the show hit too close to home.

It's not just volleyball. In a 2016 study, researchers at University of Tsukuba noted that *Hono no Tokyujū: Dodge Danpei* (1991-92) popularised dodgeball in Japan to the point that it became a national competition. *Yawara!* (1989-92), the story of a young judoka training for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics was conceptualised after judo was picked to be an Olympic sport at the actual Barcelona Olympics. Each episode ended with a countdown to the Games. Basketball anime *SLAM DUNK* (1993-96) resulted in the significant increase in the number of junior high-school boys and girls playing basketball.

Baseball, by far, has been the muse for the majority of sports anime. The stranglehold was briefly broken in the 1990s when artists turned to football. Between 1991 and 1994, six football-themed shows hit TV, coinciding with the launch of the Japanese professional football league (J-League) in 1993.

With the Olympics back in town, the organisers, understandably, are tapping into the profound catalogue of anime. Last March, a satellite carrying figures from the sci-fi anime *Mobile Suit Gundam* was launched to celebrate the Olympics. The mascots Miraitowa and Someity sport signature anime designs. Characters from *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto* and *Astro Boy* are seen wearing national jerseys and are being used as Tokyo Olympic ambassadors. The Olympic Museum hosted the "Sports x Manga" exhibition last year, calling the art-form "a perfect tool to understand the evolution of sport in post-War Japan."

## BOOKS

- Review of Kaushik Basu's *Policymaker's Journal: From New Delhi to Washington DC*
- Review of Ambai's *A Red-necked Green Bird*



## PACKING A PUNCH

ANIME THAT CONTINUE TO INSPIRE

## CAPTAIN SUBASA (1981-)



The bid to emulate protagonist Tsubasa Ozora resulted in Japan becoming the land of gifted midfielders. But the reach of the series, written and illustrated by Yoichi Takahashi, wasn't limited to Japan. It is known by the names of *Flash Kicker* in the US and India, *Captain Majed* in the Middle East, *Super Campeones* in South America and *Oliver and Benji* in Spain. Those inspired to take up football after watching Tsubasa's exploits include stars such as Spain's Andres Iniesta and Fernando Torres, Italian Alessandro del Piero, Chile's Alexis Sanchez and Colombian James Rodriguez.

## NARUTO (1999-2014)



Written and illustrated by Masashi Kishimoto, the saga of the young ninja training in mystical arts and surpassing peers resonates with four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka. In an interview with lifestyle website *Highsnobility*, the Japanese tennis player said, "Just watching as an outsider and seeing all the work that he put in, was really cool when I was younger. He was an outcast, and then he proved himself to people, and we started believing in him." Other fans include NFL stars LJ Collier and Mike Daniels.

## DRAGON BALL (1984-2018)



This smash-hit franchise, produced by Toei Animation and featuring the extraterrestrial species Saiyans, has infiltrated NBA locker rooms. De'Aaron Fox of Sacramento Kings frequently takes the court sporting Dragon Ball Z-themed basketball shoes. Los Angeles Lakers rookie Lonzo Ball released a rap song titled *Super Saiyan*, while Rudy Gobert, Karl-Anthony Towns and Jordan Bell have talked about the show's influence on them. American sprinter Noah Lyles, who will compete in 200m at Tokyo, often celebrates with the "spirit bomb", the signature move of DBZ protagonist Goku.

genre with its creativity," says Sasaki.



*Akira*'s influence extends beyond art and spills over on turfs and tracks. It has spawned biker clubs around the world and motorsports has used the imagery to drum up interest before races in Japan. In 2018, before the Suzuka GP, Red Bull F1 team released a poster paying homage to *Akira*.

Expectedly, *Akira* was part of Olympic celebrations, too. In 2017, videos emerged of a projection-mapping display at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building or Tocho. The installation featured scenes of Kaneda cruising the streets of Neo-Tokyo on his bike, with videos of real-life Tokyo spliced in. Earlier this year, Japanese magazine *Shukan Bunshun* revealed a scrapped proposal for the opening ceremony, reportedly by award-winning choreographer Mikiko. She had also put together Japan's segment at the Rio 2016 closing ceremony, where then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had turned up as Nintendo mascot Mario.



In May, with Japan in the grip of a fourth COVID-19 wave, a survey run by *The Asahi Shimbun* newspaper found that 83 per cent of people wanted the Olympics to be postponed or scrapped. A petition with 350,000 signatures seeking cancellation was handed to the Tokyo governor. The national doctors' union aired their concerns over the Games becoming a super-spreader event. On July 23, as the Games begin, it will be in empty stadiums, as a renewed threat of the virus has forced Tokyo into a state of emergency, that will run throughout the Games.

Sasaki isn't sure he'll be watching the event. "I have loved watching the Games, but probably not now, during this public health emergency," he says. But unlike the ambiguous conclusion to *Akira*, Sasaki ends the conversation on a hopeful note. "Having said that, I definitely believe that sports has the power to entertain, inspire and unify people even amid the challenging times."

## GUTS AND GLORY

The relationship between anime and Olympics sports in Japan

Gaurav Bhatt

FROM 1964 TO 2021, the relationship between Olympic Games and anime has come full circle. Four years after the 1968 "TV Olympics" in Tokyo — called so for being the first to broadcast the action live to the world — the first sports anime *Kyojin no hoshi* began airing adventures of a baseball aspirant.

Since then, sports anime has become a

major subgenre of Japanese animation. There's manga and anime dedicated across the board — mainstream sports such as baseball, football, tennis; niche ones like table tennis, gymnastics and wheelchair basketball, and even activities such as *shogi* (chess), mahjong and fishing.

As opposed to their Western counterparts, these stories revolve around the moral code of Bushido, depicting sport as a test of human values and spirit. The descriptor for sports

anime is *supo-kon* — a contraction of "sports" and "*konjo*" (guts). And there can't be a better example of *supo-kon* than volleyball anime.

At the 1964 Games in Tokyo, Japanese women won the inaugural volleyball gold medal and caught the world's eye. The historic triumph came two years after they beat the mighty Soviet Union at the World Championships. Thus began a dynasty. Between 1962 and 1977, the team won six world titles — including two Olympic gold and not counting two silver medals. Anime and manga were there to capitalise on each high.

Two volleyball mangas — *Attack No.1* (1969-71) and *Ace wo Nerae* (1973-80) — featured all-female cast of spikers looking to make it to the top. As on-court success increased the popularity of women's sports, sports manga brought numbers to women demographics. *Attack on Tomorrow* (1977) was created as a tribute to the volleyball gold medalists at the