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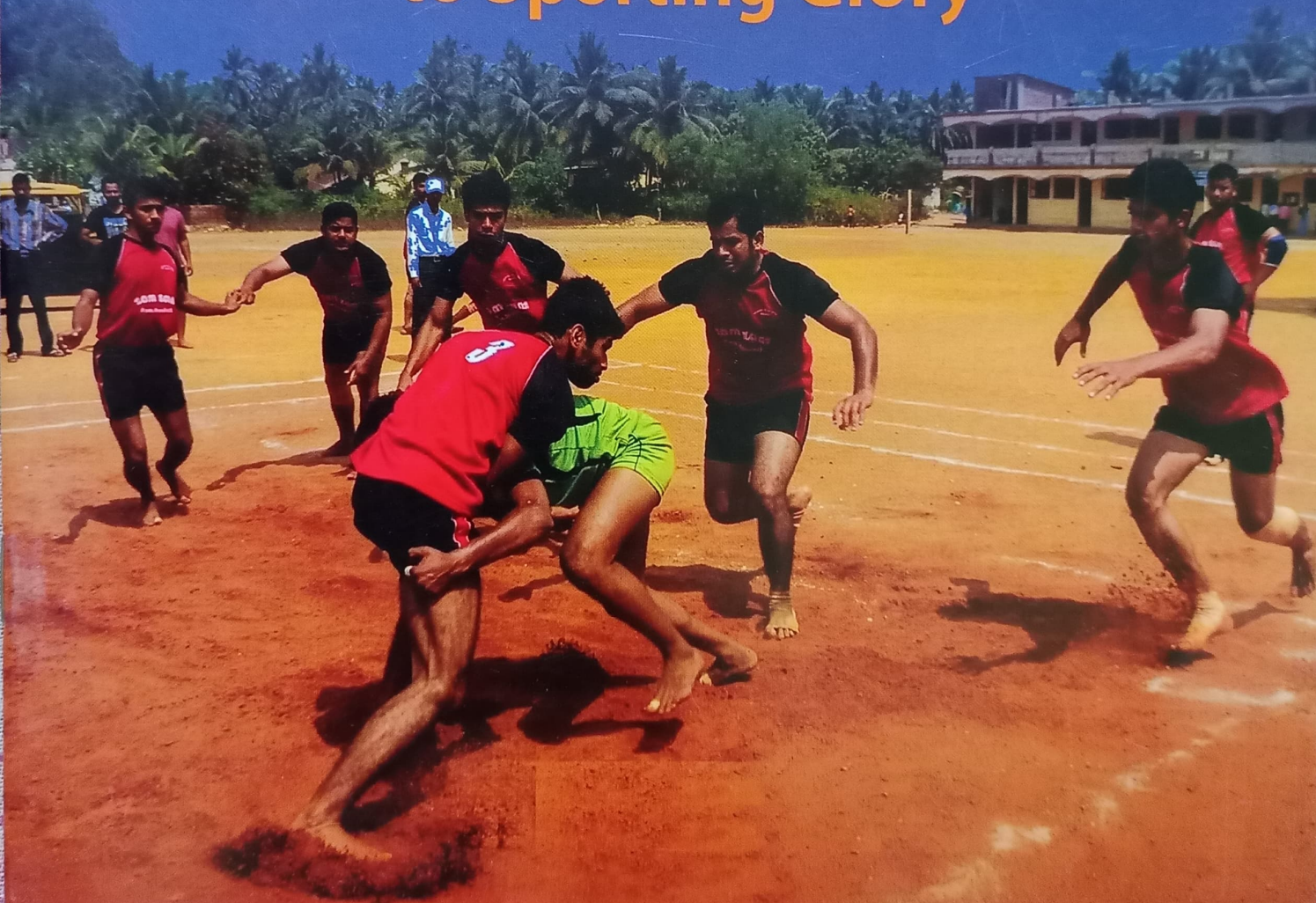
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Kurukshetra

A RURAL DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY SINCE 1952

From Mud Grounds to Sporting Glory



**Rural Sports
Powering
India @ 2047**

**Khelo
Bharat Niti
2025**

**Sports
Careers for
Rural Youth**

**Rural India's
Para Athlete
Champions**

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Rural Sports Powering India@2047

Rural sports form the backbone of India's sporting excellence and are central to the vision of building a *Viksit Bharat* by 2047. Government initiatives such as the National Sports Governance Act, *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025* and Khelo India have created structured pathways from village-level play to elite competition. Expanded infrastructure, scientific talent identification through *KIRTI* (Khelo India Rising Talent Identification), and year-round competitions are strengthening grassroots and indigenous sports.

Rakesh Thapliyal

Dedicated Khelo India Centres and State Centres of Excellence are bridging rural talent with high-performance training and global exposure. Together, these reforms position rural sports as a strategic driver of national pride, youth empowerment and India's aspiration to rank among the world's top sporting nations.

Introduction

Rural sports in India today represent the pulse and promise of country's ambition to emerge among the world's top five nations in the next two decades.

From village fields and mud *akharas* to global podiums, rural India continues to supply the grit, discipline and resilience that define Indian sporting excellence. Under the sports-passionate leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, the Government of India has placed sports—especially rural sports—at the centre of the national development agenda aligned with *Vision 2047*.

This renewed focus is reflected in a comprehensive policy and institutional framework that includes the National Sports Governance Act, *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025*, Khelo India schemes, *Panchayat Yuva Krida aur Khel Abhiyan (PYKKA)*, *Sansad Khel Mahotsav*, and *Asmita*



Leagues. Together, these initiatives aim to transform grassroots sports into a structured pathway leading from villages to international arenas, ensuring that rural talent becomes a pillar of a developed India.

Rural Roots of India's Sporting Strength

India's global strengths in sports such as hockey, wrestling, boxing, athletics and archery are deeply rooted in rural soil. The soul of Indian sports beats in rural India. The majority of elite athletes in these disciplines continue to emerge from remote villages, where adversity cultivates mental toughness and physical endurance.

Recognising this potential early on, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) launched the Special Area Games (SAG) Scheme to find and train sports talent from remote corners of the country. Under this initiative, SAI coaches travelled to far-flung villages and difficult terrains across Rajasthan, the North-Eastern States, Jammu & Kashmir, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. They identified promising archers, fencers, cyclists and athletes, provided them systematic training and exposure, and enabled many to achieve international success. The SAG experience firmly established that rural India possesses vast, untapped sporting capital.

Expanding Opportunity through Investment and Mindset Change

In recent years, sports budgets have increased significantly, enabling year-round training and competitions at ward, panchayat, block, district and state

levels. This financial commitment is accompanied by a decisive shift in mindset.

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recently underlined that over the past decade, both government and society have undergone a fundamental change in their approach to sports. Sports policy is now athlete-centric, prioritising talent identification, scientific training, nutrition and transparent selection. Reforms such as the National Sports Governance Act and *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025* are designed to ensure transparency, nurture genuine talent and enable young athletes to balance sports with education.

Vision 2047: A Clear Sporting Roadmap

Articulating the government's long-term vision, Union Minister for Youth Affairs and Sports Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya outlined a bold roadmap for Indian sports. The objective is to rank among the top ten medal-winning nations at the Olympic Games 2036, and to enter the global top five within the following decade. This ambition has the Prime Minister's approval and is backed by institutional reforms and sustained investment.

India's successful bid to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad, along with its aspiration to host the 2036 Olympics, is expected to provide a powerful platform for showcasing rural and indigenous sports such as Yogasana, Kabaddi, Kho-Kho and Mallakhamb. These events will not only enhance global visibility but also create aspirational pathways for rural youth.

Reviving Indigenous and Tribal Games

Beyond mainstream disciplines, indigenous martial arts and traditional games—Thang-Ta, Gatka and Kalaripayattu—are being promoted under Khelo India's component for the Promotion of Rural Indigenous & Tribal Games. All recognised indigenous games now feature in Khelo India competitions and receive targeted support for infrastructure, equipment, coaching, training and athlete scholarships.

While sports remain a State subject, States and Union Territories play the lead role in developing both modern and traditional disciplines. The Centre complements these efforts by bridging resource gaps, setting standards and providing policy direction.

Khelo India: The Grassroots Powerhouse

At the heart of India's sports revival lies the Khelo India Games, which function as a national platform

for identifying and nurturing young talent from both rural and urban areas. These games connect village-level participation with elite performance by providing coaching facilities, sports science support and financial assistance. The emphasis is on long-term athlete development, while preserving India's rural and cultural sporting heritage.

Inclusivity is a defining feature of Khelo India. Special focus on girls, tribal youth and underprivileged athletes has expanded participation and created a broad-based talent pipeline aligned with Vision 2047.

The Ministry's Annual Khelo India Calendar ensures year-round engagement through a diverse range of competitions, including Youth Games, University Games, Winter Games, Para Games, Beach Games, North-East Games, Tribal Games and Water Sports Festivals.

Khelo India Centres and State Centres of Excellence

To institutionalise grassroot development, more than 1,000 Khelo India Centres (KICs) and Khelo India State Centres of Excellence (KISCEs) have been established across 750 districts.

Khelo India Centres upgrade existing rural and semi-urban facilities such as schools, panchayat grounds and SAI extensions—into training hubs offering basic to intermediate coaching in region-specific sports. These centres promote community participation and local ownership of sports development.

Khelo India State Centres of Excellence, on the other hand, strengthen top-level state facilities with advanced coaching, sports science, nutrition, medical support and residential training. Together, KICs and KISCEs form a seamless bridge from village playgrounds to elite national and international competition.

Scientific Talent Identification: KIRTI

The Khelo India Rising Talent Identification (KIRTI) programme introduces a scientific approach to spotting talent at an early age, particularly in rural, tribal and semi-urban areas. Through school and village-level drives, children are assessed on parameters such as speed, endurance, strength, agility and sport-specific skills. Identified talent is channelled into KICs and KISCEs for sustained development, ensuring that potential is nurtured systematically rather than lost due to lack of opportunity.

Panchayat Participation

The Panchayat Yuva Krida aur Khel Abhiyan (PYKKA) focuses on strengthening sports infrastructure at village and block levels. It supports the provision of equipment, organisation of annual competitions from block to state levels, operational costs and honorariums for volunteer thereby helping revive a vibrant rural sports culture.

Parliamentary Participation

Complementing these efforts is the *Sansad Khel Mahotsav*, a Member of Parliament-led initiative promoting fitness and sports at the grassroots. Events are organised from village to parliamentary constituency levels with support from the Khelo India. Union Minister for youth affairs & Sports, Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya, across various regions have underscored the government's commitment to inspiring communities through direct engagement and public participation.

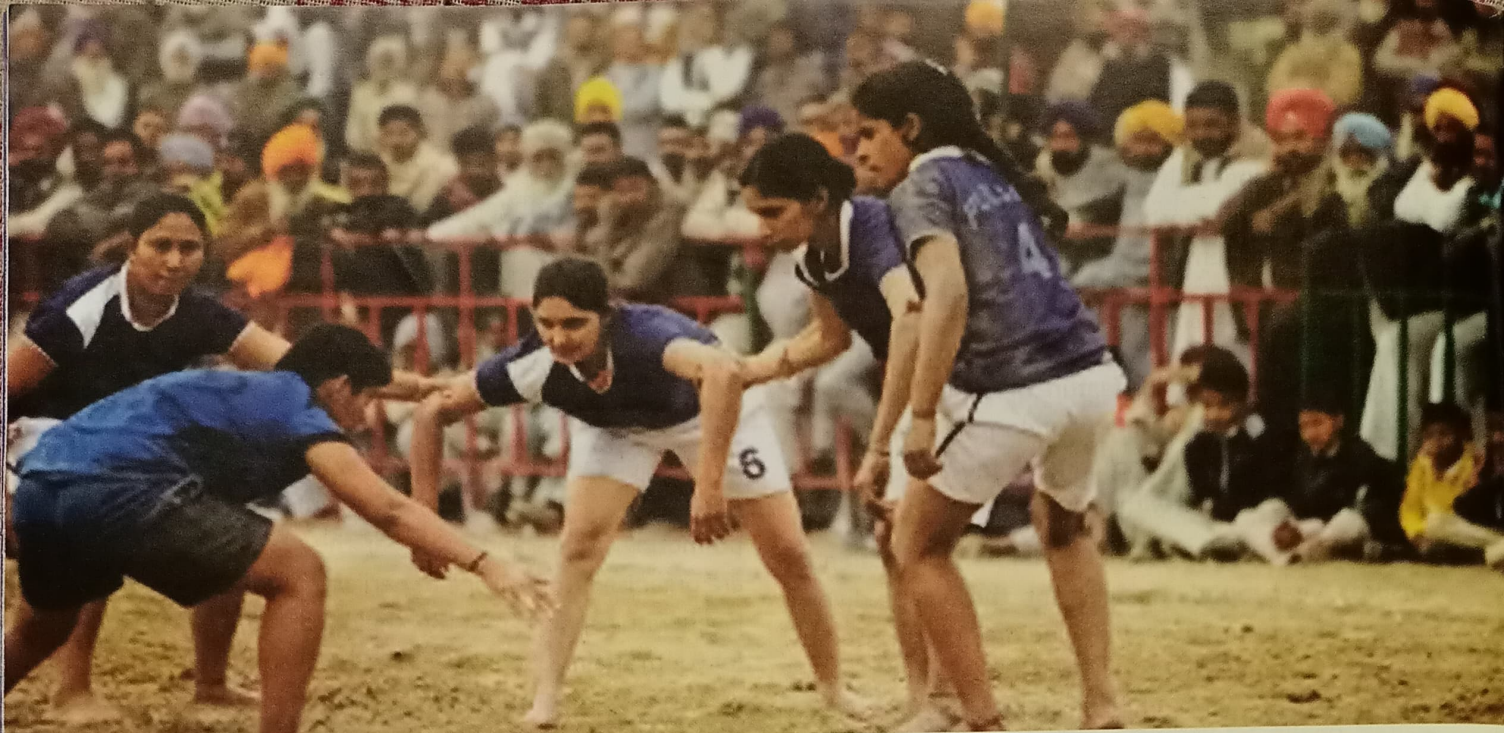
Governance and Accountability

In his address at the Sports Governance Conclave held on January 9, 2026 at the Veer Savarkar Sports Complex in Ahmedabad, Dr. Mandaviya set clear, non-negotiable goals for Indian sports governance. Addressing representatives of National Sports Federations, State Associations and the Indian Olympic Association, he emphasised medal targets at the Olympics, consistent improvement at the Asian Games 2026, and effective preparation for hosting the Commonwealth Games 2030.

Describing the present phase as the "Golden Period of Indian Sports", the Minister stressed the need for enhanced accountability, governance reforms and long-term strategic planning. Sports Federations were directed to prepare short, medium, and long-term roadmaps—spanning one, three, five, and ten years - with athlete welfare, performance excellence, and national pride as the guiding principles.

Conclusion

Rural sports in India stand at a historic inflection point. Backed by political will, robust policy reforms, increased investment and community participation, village-born talent is being given structured pathways to national and global success. While significant progress has been made, the journey continues. With sustained focus and effective implementation, rural India's vast reservoir of sporting talent is poised to give wings to the nation's aspiration of becoming a truly Viksit Bharat by 2047. ■



Rural Talent: The Bedrock of Indian Sports

Nearly 80 per cent of India's sportspersons come from rural areas, making villages the backbone of Indian sports. Athletes from rural background like Manu Bhaker, Lovlina Borgohain, Sakshi Malik, Mary Kom and Vandana Katariya have brought Olympic and international success across shooting, boxing, wrestling and hockey. Despite abundant rural talent, the key challenge remains access to modern coaching and infrastructure aligned with global standards. Government initiatives such as the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and Khelo India are providing structured support, training and stipends to elite and grassroots athletes.

Satyenadr Pal Singh

D

espite rapid urbanisation, India thrives in its villages. Nearly 80 per cent of India's sportspersons still come from rural areas, making villages the true backbone of Indian sports. The most prominent example of this strength is javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra. Hailing from Khandra village near Panipat in Haryana, Neeraj has become the biggest inspiration for Indian athletes by winning gold at the Tokyo Olympics 2020 and silver at the Paris Olympics 2024 in javelin throw, besides clinching gold medals at

the World Athletics Championships, Asian Games and Commonwealth Games.

Out of the total ten Olympic gold medals won by India so far, eight have come in hockey, while the remaining two in individual events were secured by shooter Abhinav Bindra (Beijing 2008) and javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra. Despite hardships and limited facilities, athletes from rural backgrounds often display a stronger determination to outshine their urban counterparts. After being unable to secure any gold at the Paris Olympics, India has now set an ambitious

The author is a senior sports journalist. Email: satyendrapalsingh0507@gmail.com

target of winning 12 gold medals and a total of 30–35 medals while bidding to host the Olympics 2036.

Except for cricket and football, the Olympic Games remain the most significant platform to assess sporting excellence globally. While legendary Indian cricketers such as Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli hail from urban cities, rural talent is increasingly making its mark in cricket as well. Fourteen-year-old Vaibhav Suryavanshi from Tajpur village in Samastipur, Bihar has captured global attention with his batting exploits. Even before making their professional debut, franchises have invested significantly in young rural players.

In the Indian Premier League (IPL), franchises have acquired rural talents such as Prashantveer, a left-arm spin all-rounder from Gujipur village, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, and Kartik Sharma, a wicketkeeper-batsman from Behra village, Bharatpur, Rajasthan. Leagues inspired by the IPL—such as the Hockey India League, Pro Kabaddi League, Kho Kho League, and Premier Badminton League—have similarly showcased an abundance of rural talent. Playing alongside and against world-class athletes in these leagues enables young players to gain confidence, adapt to high-pressure environments, and accelerate their transition to international competition.

Barring cricket, most sports bodies and athletes in India depend largely on government support and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) for training and infrastructure. To enhance Olympic and Paralympic performance, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports launched the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) in September 2014 and revamped in April 2018. The revamped scheme introduced a dedicated technical support team to manage elite athletes. Under TOPS, selected Olympic and Paralympic prospects receive comprehensive support, including foreign training, international exposure, equipment, coaching camps and a monthly stipend of ₹50,000. The objective is to optimise preparation for medal-winning performances.

Presently, TOPS supports 98 core group athletes across 13 sports (including men's and women's hockey teams) and 165 development group athletes across 12 sports. With this support, rural athletes like Neeraj Chopra and shooter Manu Bhaker have already secured Olympic medals. Looking ahead to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, Neeraj, Manu Bhaker and Tokyo 2020 bronze medallist boxer Lovlina Borgohain from Baromukhiya village in Assam's Golaghat district remain prime medal contenders and have been retained in the TOPS core programme.



The Government is undertaking major reforms in sports: Prime Minister

While inaugurating the 72nd National Volleyball Tournament in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh on January 04, 2026, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi stated that initiatives such as TOPS are transforming Indian sports by strengthening infrastructure, improving financing mechanisms and providing global exposure to young athletes. Over the past decade, India has hosted more than 20 major international events, including the FIFA U-17 World Cup, Hockey World Cup and major chess tournaments. India is set to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and is bidding for the 2036 Olympics. Reforms such as the National Sports Governance Bill and *Khelo Bharat Niti* 2025 aim to enhance transparency and provide youth with opportunities to progress simultaneously in sports and education. The government has significantly increased the sports budget, shifting India's model to a player-centric approach focused on talent identification, scientific training, nutrition and transparent selection.

PROFILES OF RURAL ICONS



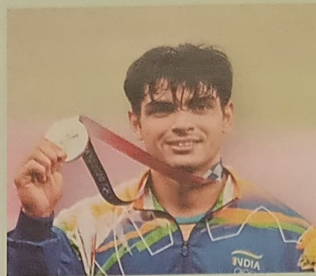
Manu Bhaker

Born in Goriya village, Jhajjar district, Haryana, 22-year-old Manu Bhaker made history at the Paris 2024 Olympics by winning two bronze medals in 10m air pistol (individual and mixed team). She is part of the TOPS core group for the 2028 Olympics and has multiple World Cup and Commonwealth Games gold medals to her credit.



Pritam Siwach

From Jharsa village near Gurugram, Pritam played a key role in India's gold medal victory in women's hockey at the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. Post-retirement, she established the Pritam Siwach Hockey Academy in Sonipat, nurturing several Olympians.



Neeraj Chopra

Born in a joint farming family in Khandra village near Panipat, Neeraj Chopra discovered javelin throw almost by chance. Encouraged by his family, he went on to win Olympic gold at Tokyo 2020 with a throw of 87.58 metres, becoming the first Indian track-and-field athlete to win an Olympic medal. He later became world champion at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest. Despite a silver medal at Paris 2024, he recorded a personal-best throw of 89.45 metres. His focus now is the 2027 World Championships and the Olympics 2028.



MC Mary Kom

Hailing from a poor family in Kangathei village, Manipur, Mary Kom won Olympic bronze in London 2012, multiple world championships and Asian Games medals. She is a recipient of Padma awards and the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna.



Bhaichung Bhutia

From Tinkitam village in Sikkim, Bhutia played 84 internationals for India, scoring 27 goals. Known as the "Sikkim Sniper," he became one of India's most celebrated footballers and a recipient of the *Arjuna Award* and *Padma Shri*.

Even as foreign coaches dominate hockey, boxing, wrestling, shooting, weightlifting, badminton, their India counterparts need to factor in global shift. Sports bodies too need to sync with private academies. India's sporting journey clearly demonstrates that rural India remains its strongest reservoir of talent. With sustained policy support, quality coaching and infrastructure, these villages will continue to produce champions who carry the Tricolour to global glory. ■



After being identified, rural talent is scientifically trained at SAI centres and National Centres of Excellence (NCoEs), where athletes receive expert coaching. Complementing this is the Khelo India programme, which plays a transformative role by promoting grassroots participation, identifying young talent, building infrastructure and organising competitions from school to university levels. Through initiatives such as the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG), University Games (KIUG) and Winter Games (KIWG), the programme has institutionalised annual national competitions where youth represent their states and universities.

Several iconic Indian athletes emerged from villages: footballer Bhaichung Bhutia, Olympic bronze medallist boxer MC Mary Kom, wrestler Sakshi Malik, shooter Manu Bhaker, former Indian women's hockey captain Suraj Lata Devi, and striker Pritam Siwach, who produced Olympians like Neha Goyal, Sharmila and Nisha Warsi. Post-Independence hockey legends such as Udham Singh, Ajit Pal Singh, and recent Olympic bronze-winning captains Manpreet Singh (Meethapur, Jalandhar) and Harmanpreet Singh (Timmowal, Amritsar) all hail from villages. Jalandhar's Sansarpur village is famously known as the nursery of Indian hockey.

Women's hockey icons Rani Rampal from Shahabad Markanda and Vandana Katariya from Roshanabad village near Haridwar exemplify rural excellence. Vandana holds the record for the most international appearances (320) and goals (158) in Indian women's hockey and became the first Indian woman to score an Olympic hat-trick at Tokyo 2020. Rani Rampal has played 254 international matches and scored 120 goals, earning the *Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna*, *Arjuna Award* and *Padma Shri*. In men's hockey, Dilip Tirkey from Saunamara village in Odisha's Sundargarh district holds the record for the most international appearances (412).

All eight Olympic medals won by India in wrestling have been secured by wrestlers from rural backgrounds, including Khashaba Jadhav, Sushil Kumar, Ravi Dahiya, Yogeshwar Dutt, Bajrang Punia, Aman Sehrawat and Sakshi Malik.

While rural India abounds in talent, the key challenge lies in ensuring access to quality coaching and modern infrastructure. Many domestic coaches lag behind global advancements, making foreign coaches prevalent across sports such as hockey, boxing, wrestling, shooting, weightlifting and badminton. India must invest in upgrading coaching capabilities and strengthening sports federations and private academies. ■



Rural Women Redefining India's Sporting Glory

India's sporting resurgence is no longer shaped only by elite urban academies or metropolitan stadiums. It is unfolding across village playgrounds, tribal belts, farming communities, and small-town training centres, driven by rural women whose discipline, courage, and perseverance are transforming the nation's sporting landscape. For decades, girls from rural India faced deep-rooted social conservatism, financial hardship, and limited access to infrastructure. Today, many of them stand as Olympic medallists, Arjuna Award recipients, Asian champions, and national icons. Their journeys signify not only sporting success but also profound social change.

From Odisha's hockey heartland and Haryana's wrestling *akharas* to Maharashtra's athletics tracks and Manipur's weightlifting halls, rural India has emerged as a decisive force in women's sports. This transformation has not occurred by chance. It is the outcome of a growing ecosystem built around visionary government programmes such as Khelo India, ASMITA (Achieving Sports Milestone by Inspiring Women Through Action), and KIRTI (Khelo India Rising Talent Identification), reinforced by state sports policies and district-level training infrastructure.

Together, these initiatives are ensuring that sporting opportunity reaches rural girls at their doorstep.

A Rapidly Expanding Rural Sports Ecosystem

The scale of this transformation is reflected in measurable outcomes. More than 1,000 Khelo India Centres now operate across rural and semi-urban India, bringing coaching, equipment, nutrition support, and competitive exposure closer to villages. Women's participation in organised sports has increased more than threefold since 2017. During 2024–25 alone, over 53,000 women athletes participated in ASMITA leagues

Stories That Inspire a Generation

The journeys of individual athletes illustrate how opportunity and determination intersect. From Sundergarh's tribal village of Lulkidhi, **Deep Grace Ekka** rose from barefoot play on mud grounds to become one of India's most respected hockey defenders and an *Arjuna Award* recipient.

Born in Kalsi village, Uttar Pradesh, **Mahima Choudhary** overcame social and financial barriers to represent India internationally and lead the national

Hockey team to success in the inaugural FIH Hockey 5s Asia Cup.

Vaishnavi Phalke, a farmer's daughter from Satara, progressed through government sports academies to join the senior women's hockey squad. From Nongpok Kakching, Manipur, **Mirabai Chanu** lifted India's first Tokyo Olympics medal in weightlifting, inspiring an entire region to embrace strength sports.

across the country. What was once seen as a privilege reserved for a few is increasingly becoming a right accessible to rural girls.

These initiatives have altered both access and aspiration. Rural families that once viewed sports as a distraction are now recognising it as a pathway to education, employment, recognition, and empowerment. Scholarships, hostels, and structured competitions have reduced financial barriers and encouraged sustained participation.

Khelo India: Building the Foundation from Villages Up

The Khelo India programme, instituted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, is the cornerstone of India's grassroots sports strategy. Designed to build a strong sporting ecosystem from the village level upward, it focuses on expanding participation, identifying talent early, and providing structured support—particularly to girls and women from rural and under-served communities.

A key strength of Khelo India lies in systematic talent identification. Through school- and community-level scouting and zonal talent committees, the programme identifies promising athletes even in remote regions. Once selected, athletes are placed on structured development pathways that combine training, competition, and monitoring.

Infrastructure development is another critical pillar. Khelo India supports the creation and upgradation of sports facilities across districts, including playgrounds, synthetic tracks, indoor halls, shooting ranges, and multi-purpose complexes. Hundreds of Khelo India Centres are being established to ensure that rural athletes no longer need to migrate early to cities for quality training.

Equally important is coaching development. Community coaching programmes and engagement of trained coaches—including former athletes—ensure regular technical guidance at the grassroots. Identified athletes receive annual scholarships to support coaching, equipment, nutrition, and travel, enabling them to focus on performance rather than survival.

Through rural sports centres and local hubs, Khelo India is narrowing the rural-urban divide in access to sport. Thousands of village girls now train on modern facilities while remaining connected to their communities.

ASMITA: Creating India's Largest Women-Only Competitive Platform

The ASMITA League (Achieving Sports Milestone by Inspiring Women Through Action) has emerged as a transformative force for women's sports, particularly for athletes from rural, tribal, and economically under-served backgrounds. Designed as a nationwide women-only competitive ecosystem, ASMITA ensures equal opportunity, visibility, and structured progression.

ASMITA leagues are conducted across 27 sports disciplines, including athletics, wrestling, hockey, kabaddi, weightlifting, archery, boxing, football, judo, and cycling, at district, state, and national levels. During 2024–25, more than 53,000 women athletes participated in over 550 leagues across 34 States and Union Territories, making ASMITA the largest women-only sports league system in India.

For many rural girls, ASMITA represents their first exposure to organised competition, professional officiating, and performance benchmarking. The league structure allows talented athletes to be identified and seamlessly linked with Khelo India Centres, Sports Authority of India academies, and national coaching

camps. Beyond competition, ASM/ITA plays a crucial role in reshaping social attitudes by normalising women's participation in sports within families and communities. Hosting leagues in districts and small towns integrates schools, local institutions, and parents into the sporting ecosystem, making sport a socially accepted aspiration for girls.

KIRTI: Identifying Potential Early

Launched in March 2024, the Khelo India Rising Talent Identification (KIRTI) programme represents a significant shift in India's approach to talent scouting. Its objective is to scientifically identify sporting potential among children aged 9–18 years, especially in rural, tribal, and remote regions.

In its first phase, KIRTI recorded over 3.6 lakh registrations and conducted nearly 51,000 athlete assessments across 28 States and Union Territories, covering 11 sports disciplines. The programme uses digital platforms, ICT tools, and data analytics to ensure transparent, objective, and merit-based selection. Each participant is assigned a unique digital profile linked to national portals, enabling long-term performance tracking.

KIRTI aims to conduct 20 lakh talent assessments during 2024–25 by treating districts as units of evaluation, thereby creating the country's largest grassroots talent pipeline. By identifying potential early and connecting athletes to appropriate training centres and coaches, KIRTI ensures that gifted rural girls are not overlooked due to geography or socio-economic constraints.

Rural India as the New Sporting Powerhouse

Several rural belts have emerged as specialised sporting regions with national significance. Sundergarh district in Odisha is recognised as India's hockey nursery, producing multiple international women players. Haryana's Rohtak–Sonapat–Hisar belt has become synonymous with wrestling and boxing excellence, consistently contributing Olympic- and world-level athletes. Satara and Kolhapur in Maharashtra form the cradle of Indian athletics, particularly middle- and long-distance running. Manipur and Mizoram together represent India's most prolific women's sports region, producing champions in weightlifting, boxing, and football. Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are emerging as powerhouses in shooting and archery, drawing on tribal sporting traditions.

These regions demonstrate how rural ecosystems, when supported by policy and infrastructure, can deliver sustained sporting excellence.

National Sports Policy 2025: Sport as Social Movement

The National Sports Policy 2025 marks a decisive shift by placing social inclusion and mass participation at the centre of sports development. Women and girls, particularly from rural and under-served communities, are identified as priority groups. The policy recognises long-standing barriers such as restrictive social norms, limited facilities, and lack of organised platforms, and seeks to address them through proactive inclusion.

By aligning with the National Education Policy 2020, the policy integrates sport into the education system, ensuring structured programmes in schools with trained physical education teachers. Sport is envisioned not merely as competition but as a social movement that empowers women, reduces gender gaps in physical activity, and enables girls to aspire to sporting careers.

Beyond Medals: Transforming Rural Society

The impact of rural women's participation in sports extends far beyond podium finishes. Sports scholarships and hostel facilities are helping girls stay in school longer. Financial independence through scholarships, government employment, sponsorships, and prize money is strengthening economic empowerment. Women athletes are emerging as leaders and role models within villages and self-help groups. Family attitudes toward girls' education, mobility, and professional ambition are shifting, contributing to declines in early marriage and greater acceptance of gender equality. Entire villages gain recognition and pride through sporting achievements, reinforcing sport as a tool of nation-building.

Conclusion

Rural women athletes are no longer exceptions in India's sporting story; they are becoming its backbone. Supported by forward-looking government policies, expanding infrastructure, and changing social attitudes, rural girls are stepping onto global podiums with confidence. From village mud grounds to Olympic arenas, they are not only winning medals but reshaping society, empowering communities, and building India's sporting destiny. Their rise reflects a new India—fearless, inclusive, and ambitious where talent, not geography or gender, defines opportunity. ■



Rural India's Para Athlete Champions

The article highlights the rising contribution of Divyang athletes to India's sporting success, especially through Paralympic achievements that reflect better opportunities, guidance, and institutional support. Many emerge from rural India, turning adversity—poverty, stigma, and limited infrastructure—into resilience, skill, and global excellence. It documents journeys leading to Paralympic medals, world records, and national honours, while highlighting unsung athletes who overcame barriers. The writer underscores the need for inclusive, well-funded, and technology-enabled support to ensure rural India continues producing para-sporting champions.

Satya Sindhu

The contribution of athletes with disabilities has today become an integral part of India's sporting history. India's steadily improving medal tally at the Paralympic Games is clear evidence that when opportunities, guidance, and institutional support are provided, athletes with disabilities can bring pride to the

nation on the global stage. India's sports narrative is not limited to modern stadiums, glittering trophies, or high-value sponsorships. Alongside this visible world exists another India—one of dusty rural fields, broken facilities, and limited resources, yet marked by extraordinary resilience and determination. From this very India emerge athletes with disabilities who have transformed physical impairment into a source

The author is a senior journalist. Email: satya2000@gmail.com

of strength rather than weakness. Through the Paralympics, they have carried India's flag onto the world platform. Disability in sports is not merely about physical limitation; it represents exceptional mental toughness and discipline—qualities that are often rare even under normal circumstances. For a long time, Indian society viewed disability through the lens of sympathy or incapacity. This mindset was even more entrenched in rural India, where *divyangs* were often addressed with insensitive and hurtful labels.

Recognising their inner strength and extraordinary potential, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi formally encouraged the use of the term *Divyang* (divinely empowered), reflecting respect for those who inspire society with their courage and achievements. Their struggles and successes have become enduring examples for the nation.

Arunima Sinha: Triumph Over the Impossible

At the age of 22, in 2011, Arunima Sinha's life changed forever during a train journey from Lucknow to Delhi. A promising sportsperson aspiring to join the CISF, she resisted a robbery attempt and was pushed out of a moving train. The accident led to the amputation of her left leg, and she lay helpless by the tracks through the night. Yet, her resolve remained unbroken. After four months of treatment at AIIMS, Arunima met renowned mountaineer Bachendri Pal and decided—while still in her hospital bed to climb Mount Everest. Despite using a prosthetic leg and a rod-supported second leg, her determination was unwavering. In 2013, she scaled Mount Everest, enduring extreme challenges, including her prosthetic leg detaching before the final ascent. Driven by sheer willpower, Arunima went on to become the first female amputee to climb the highest peaks of all seven continents, creating history from her small hometown of Ambedkar Nagar in Uttar Pradesh.

Deepthi Jeevanji: Strength Born of Adversity

Born on September 27, 2003 in Kalleda village of Telangana's Warangal district, Deepthi Jeevanji was diagnosed with intellectual disability at a young age. She faced social stigma, ridicule, and discrimination due to her condition and physical features. Born in a family of daily wage labourers, she encountered repeated attempts to undermine her confidence. Yet, her inner strength only grew stronger. Her determination translated into success when she won two gold medals



Sheetal Devi: A Unique Story Written with Courage

Sheetal Devi, hailing from the picturesque district of Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir, is a daughter of India who has proved that dreams are powered not by the body, but by courage. Born without arms, Sheetal's life was far from easy, yet she possessed an extraordinary determination to achieve something meaningful. At a very young age, she developed a deep passion for archery. She holds the bow with her feet, draws the string with her teeth, and releases the arrow using her shoulder. This was never easy, but Sheetal never gave up.

Recognising her confidence and relentless hard work, the Olympic Gold Quest (OGQ) team began supporting her when she was just 15 years old. In a short span, Sheetal brought laurels to India on the international stage. At the Para Archery European Cup held in the Czech Republic, she delivered an outstanding performance in her very first international competition. She won a silver medal in the Compound Open individual event, a gold medal in the mixed team event, and a bronze medal in the women's doubles. Behind this success lay OGQ's support, proper nutrition, modern equipment, and the dedicated guidance of coach Kuldeep Vaidwan.

at the All India Inter-University Championships. This success propelled her to greater heights, culminating in a gold medal at the 2022 Asian Para Games in Japan. In recognition of her achievements, she was conferred the prestigious *Arjuna* Award last year.

"Understanding the Abilities and Needs of Para Athletes is Essential" – Dr. Satyapal Singh, Paralympic Coach

Dr. Satyapal Singh is a faculty member in Physical Education at Acharya Narendra Dev College, University of Delhi. For the past 20 years, he has been actively involved in training para-athletes, particularly in para-athletics. In recognition of his significant contribution to this field, he has been honoured with the *Padma Shri*.



However, when a person is Divyang in a rural setting, the struggle takes on a different dimension.

One of my students, Ankur Dhama, is completely visually impaired. He is the first fully blind athlete to participate in the Paralympics and to receive the Arjuna Award. In villages, people

often say that a blind child should be left at a temple to sing or play music and somehow get through life. Did anyone imagine that a completely blind child could, through hard work and dedication, reach the level of the Arjuna Award? When Dhama was being honoured, the then President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind, himself expressed surprise, recognising the immense struggle that must have gone into such an achievement. Dhama made his mark in running.

What kind of challenges do such athletes face?

Athletes with disabilities face challenges at every step. From getting out of bed at home to stepping outside the house, their daily lives involve constant struggle. By the time they reach the sports field, it is difficult to even imagine how much adversity they have already overcome. When such children enter Paralympic sports, their foremost requirement is a competent coach, and there is still a significant shortage of such trained professionals. Nevertheless, I am glad that substantial and meaningful work is now being done for Paralympic athletes.

Do you see any policy-related challenges?

Policy issues come later. First and foremost, there must be awareness and understanding of this field. In my view, the role of society is even more important than that of the government. People need to develop a more positive mindset. As far as training is concerned, a coach is also a teacher and plays a major role in transforming society. Such coaches must remain aware of global developments, continuously learn essential skills, and adapt to change. We live in the age of social media; what required is sincere effort and commitment.

What are your views on the Paralympic Games?

After the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, the Paralympic Games have also gained considerable popularity. These are commonly referred to as the Paralympics. Apart from athletes with speech and hearing impairments, persons with all other forms of disabilities can participate in the Paralympics. I believe that the primary objective of sports is not merely to win medals. Its core purpose is to promote a healthy world and foster friendship among people. *Divyangs* need both health and social inclusion even more, and therefore participation in para-sports is extremely important for them. Medals have their own significance, but they are not the only goal.

What kind of changes do you observe in Paralympic sports?

When I began training para-athletes, very few people in the country were aware of para-sports. I pursued my PhD in athletics because working in this field felt both meaningful and necessary. While I have experience with mainstream athletics as well, I started training Paralympic athletes in 2005. Since then, awareness has increased to some extent, which is a positive development.

What is the situation of children coming from rural areas?

We all know that this field requires strong and highly motivated children. Most such children come from rural backgrounds. Even among those training here, about 95 percent are from villages. Their lives and childhoods are often marked by struggle, which makes them resilient and capable of hard work.

Sumit Antil: A Teacher's Faith, A Champion's Will

Born on June 7, 1998 in Sonipat, Haryana, Sumit Antil lost a leg in a childhood accident. Raised in a farmer's household, he grew up facing social stigma and emotional pain. While others ran and played, Sumit watched from the sidelines—absorbing inspiration silently. One day, his school sports teacher noticed him holding a javelin and encouraged him to throw it. Sumit's powerful throw marked the beginning of a remarkable journey. With strong self-belief and dedicated mentorship, Sumit won gold medals in the men's javelin throw (F64 category) at the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Paralympics, setting world records and bringing international acclaim to India. Today, with the support of a prosthetic limb, he travels the world as a symbol of courage and excellence.



medals, give your 100 per cent." A childhood road accident left her wheelchair-bound at the age of 11, plunging her into depression. A visit to a shooting range with her father changed everything. Despite physical limitations and limited resources, she

Avani Lekhara: Precision Beyond Limitations

Jaipur-based Avani Lekhara, India's Paralympic shooting champion, credits Prime Minister Narendra Modi's words for her success: "Do not think about

India and the Paralympics: A Historic Journey

1968 – Tel Aviv

- India's first participation in the Paralympic Games

1984 – New York / Stoke Mandeville

- India won its first Paralympic medal
- Murlikant Petkar
- Gold medal in swimming (1984)
- India's first Paralympic gold medallist

A New Ascent After 2000

- Increased government support
- Strengthening role of sports institutions
- A positive shift in societal attitudes
- The beginning of a new era for Indian Paralympics
- The Special Journey Begins

Devendra Jhajharia (Javelin Throw)

- Athens 2004 – Gold
- Rio 2016 – Gold
- Emerged as India's most successful Paralympian

Deepa Malik (Shot Put)

- Rio 2016 – Silver
- India's first woman Paralympic medallist

Mariyappan Thangavelu (High Jump)

- Rio 2016 – Gold

- Tokyo 2020 – Silver
- A champion who scaled new heights

Sumit Antil (Javelin Throw)

- Tokyo 2020 – Gold
- Paris 2024 – Gold

Avani Lekhara (Shooting)

- Tokyo 2020 – Gold and Bronze
- Paris 2024 – Gold and Bronze
- India's most successful para shooter

Bhavina Patel (Table Tennis)

- Tokyo 2020 – Silver
- A symbol of confidence and determination

Sheetal Devi (Para Archery)

- 2024–25 – International gold medals
- 2025 – World No. 1 para archer
- The face of the new generation

India's Medal Progress

- Rio 2016 – 4 medals
- Tokyo 2020 – 19 medals (best-ever performance)
- Paris 2024 – A historic, record-breaking performance with 29 medals: 7 gold, 9 silver, and 13 bronze

persevered. Her resolve paid off when she won India's first-ever gold medal in para-shooting at the Tokyo Paralympics, followed by a bronze medal. Her journey exemplifies how focus and determination can redefine limitations.

Many More Unsung Heroes

India's Paralympic success is enriched by countless such stories. Sheetal Devi from Jammu and Kashmir, born without arms, mastered archery using her feet and won international medals. Ankita from Bihar, affected by polio, learned swimming in a village pond and became a national-level para-swimmer. Devendra Jhajharia, who lost his left arm in an accident, emerged as a javelin throw gold medallist. Deepa Malik became the first Indian woman to win a Paralympic medal. Mariyappan Thangavelu clinched gold in high jump at Rio 2016, while Bhavina Patel won silver in table tennis at Tokyo 2020 despite cerebral palsy. Girish Sharma, a seven-time national badminton champion, and Varun Sawant, a powerlifter overcoming Down syndrome, are further examples of resilience and excellence. Across disciplines, their struggles are similar—poverty, social neglect, lack of infrastructure, and complex government procedures.

Yet, through perseverance, they have emerged as global ambassadors of Indian grit.

Policy Challenges and the Way Forward

Addressing the challenges faced by para athletes requires focused policy interventions. Transparent and dedicated budgets for para-sports, accessible sports infrastructure in every district, and modern training centres through public-private partnerships are essential. The high cost of sports equipment and advanced prosthetics, unequal access to coaching and financial support, and limited reach of government schemes in rural areas remain pressing issues. Early identification of Divyang children at the school level, tailored guidance, sensitivity training for coaches, fair remuneration, and the use of technology such as virtual coaching can significantly bridge existing gaps. A comprehensive digital mapping platform linking schemes, equipment, and training centres can further improve accessibility and efficiency.

From village fields to global arenas, Indian para athletes embody the spirit of resilience. Their journeys reaffirm that with inclusive policies, societal support, and sustained awareness, rural India can continue to nurture champions who redefine what is possible. ■



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India



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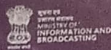
Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 Driving Holistic Development

The National Sports Policy 2025 marks a transformative shift in India's approach to sports, positioning it as a strategic driver of national development, social inclusion, and global excellence. Approved on 1 July 2025, the policy replaces the 2001 framework and adopts a holistic vision anchored in five pillars—global excellence, economic development, social empowerment, mass participation, and education integration. By strengthening governance, infrastructure, technology, and private participation, NSP 2025 aims to build a fit, inclusive, and globally competitive sporting nation.

In recent years, sport in India has undergone a profound transformation—from being perceived largely as a recreational or extracurricular activity to being recognised as a strategic instrument for national development, social inclusion, youth empowerment, and global engagement. As India advances towards its vision of becoming a developed

nation by 2047, sports has emerged as a key enabler of physical fitness, social cohesion, economic opportunity, and international prestige.

In this context, the approval of the **Khelo Bharat Niti (NSP) 2025** by the Union Cabinet on July 1, 2025, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, marks a historic milestone in India's sporting journey. Replacing the National Sports Policy of 2001,



**Cabinet Approves
National Sports
Policy 2025**

CABINET DECISIONS
July 01, 2025

 **Supersedes the existing National Sports Policy, 2001**

 **Lays out a visionary & strategic roadmap to establish India as a global sporting powerhouse & a strong contender for excellence at International sporting events**



NSP 2025 provides a comprehensive, future-oriented roadmap to transform India into a global sporting powerhouse and a strong contender for excellence at major international events, including the **2036 Olympic Games**.

The NSP 2025 is the outcome of extensive consultations involving Central Ministries, NITI Aayog, State Governments, National Sports Federations, athletes, domain experts, and public stakeholders. This collaborative process has resulted in a holistic and integrated policy framework that positions sports not merely as a competitive activity, but as a catalyst for economic growth, social empowerment, educational reform, and national well-being.

Vision and Strategic Pillars

Anchored in a long-term developmental vision, the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 is structured around five strategic pillars: global excellence, economic development, social inclusion, mass participation, and integration with education. Together, these pillars aim to create a vibrant and inclusive sporting ecosystem that nurtures talent from the grassroots, builds world-class infrastructure, strengthens governance, and creates sustainable career pathways for athletes and sports professionals.

Excellence on the Global Stage

The first pillar focuses on strengthening India's performance in international sports. It envisages a

robust pipeline from grassroots to elite levels through early identification and systematic nurturing of talent. The policy promotes the establishment of competitive leagues and tournaments, alongside the development of sports infrastructure across both rural and urban areas.

A strong emphasis is placed on creating world-class systems for training, coaching, and holistic athlete support, including sports science, sports medicine, and the use of advanced technology to enhance performance. The policy also seeks to strengthen the governance and capacity of National Sports Federations, and to expand the pool of trained sports personnel such as coaches, technical officials, and support staff.

Sports for Economic Development

Recognising the growing economic potential of the sports sector, NSP 2025 positions sports as a driver of economic growth and employment generation. The policy seeks to promote sports tourism and attract major international sporting events to India, thereby boosting local economies and global visibility.

It also aims to strengthen the sports manufacturing ecosystem and encourage startups and entrepreneurship in areas such as equipment manufacturing, sports technology, fitness services, and event management. Private sector participation is actively encouraged through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and innovative funding mechanisms.

Sports for Social Development

The policy underscores the role of sports as a powerful tool for social inclusion and empowerment. Targeted initiatives are proposed to enhance participation among women, economically weaker sections, tribal communities, and *Divyangs*. Special emphasis is placed on ensuring equitable access to facilities, coaching, and competitive opportunities.

NSP 2025 also aims to revitalise and promote indigenous and traditional games, recognising their cultural significance and community value. By integrating sports with education and skill development, the policy positions sports as a viable career option, promotes volunteering, supports dual-career pathways for athletes, and engages the Indian diaspora through sporting platforms.

Sports as a People's Movement

To embed sport and fitness into everyday life, the policy envisions sports as a nationwide people's movement. It proposes large-scale campaigns and community-based events to drive mass participation and foster a culture of fitness across age groups.

The introduction of fitness indices for schools, colleges, workplaces, and other institutions is intended to promote accountability and awareness. The policy also seeks to enhance universal access to sports facilities, particularly in rural and underserved areas, ensuring that physical activity becomes an integral part of daily life.

Integration with Education (NEP 2020)

In alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, NSP 2025 emphasises the integration of sports into formal education. Sports and physical education are to be embedded within school curricula, recognising their role in holistic development.

The policy proposes specialised training for educators and physical education teachers to improve the quality of sports instruction, promote awareness,

and identify talent at an early stage. This integration aims to create a seamless link between education, physical fitness, and sporting excellence.

Strategic Framework for Implementation

To translate its vision into measurable outcomes, NSP 2025 outlines a comprehensive implementation framework. This includes strengthening sports governance through a robust regulatory and legal framework, ensuring transparency and accountability.

The policy encourages innovative financing models and sustained private sector engagement through PPPs and CSR initiatives. Technology and innovation form a core component, with the use of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital platforms for performance tracking, research, and programme delivery.

A National Monitoring Framework with clearly defined benchmarks, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and time-bound targets will guide implementation and evaluation. NSP 2025 will also serve as a model policy for States and Union Territories, encouraging them to revise or formulate their own sports policies aligned with national objectives. Importantly, the policy adopts a whole-of-government approach, integrating sports promotion into the schemes and programmes of all Ministries and Departments.

Conclusion

The Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 represents a paradigm shift in India's approach to sports—from isolated excellence to ecosystem-driven development, from elite performance to mass participation, and from recreation to nation building. By integrating sports with education, economic growth, social inclusion, and technological innovation, the policy establishes sports as a powerful driver of holistic national development.

With its focus on grassroots talent identification, world-class infrastructure, scientific training systems, governance reforms, and private sector participation, NSP 2025 lays a strong foundation for sustained sporting excellence. More importantly, it envisions sport as a people's movement—one that promotes fitness, discipline, teamwork, and national pride across every segment of society—towards building a healthier, stronger, and more confident India. ■

Khelo Bharat Niti 2025



-  **Nation-Building**
Foster unity and pride through sports.
-  **Economic Growth**
Drive tourism and startups via sports.
-  **Social Inclusion**
Empower women and marginalized groups.
-  **Olympic Excellence**
Target 2036 Olympic success and hosting.
-  **Sports Industry Ecosystem**
Boost investment through PPPs and CSR.
-  **Career Pathways**
Make sports a viable career option.
-  **People's Movement**
Promote national fitness campaigns.
-  **Diaspora Engagement**
Connect globally via sports.
-  **Education Integration**
Embed sports in school curricula.

Source: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports



Revolutionising Sports Training with Technology

Indian sports are undergoing a structural transformation as technology and data-driven training replace chance-based success and individual struggle. The National Sports Policy 2025 and allied reforms have enabled early talent identification, continuous monitoring and systematic athlete development across regions. Affordable digital tools, mobile-based coaching and wearable technologies are extending scientific training from elite centres to grassroots and rural areas. Advanced analytics, AI and predictive biometrics are improving performance consistency while significantly reducing injury risks. Together, these developments are building a scalable, inclusive sports ecosystem aligned with India's ambition for global sporting excellence by 2036 and beyond.

Irtif Lone

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he year 2025 marks a turning point for Indian sports. For decades, India's athletes possessed immense natural talent and determination, yet their progress was constrained by uneven infrastructure, limited access to scientific training, and inconsistent coaching standards. Sporting success

often depended on individual perseverance rather than systemic support, making excellence the exception rather than the rule.

That phase is now decisively receding. India is transitioning from being perceived largely as a cricket-centric nation to emerging as a diversified and credible global sports ecosystem. Training, performance

The author is Incharge, Centre for Innovation, Incubation and Business Modelling, JKEDI. Email: irtiflone@gmail.com

Shot on

optimisation and injury management are increasingly driven by technology, data and evidence-based decision-making. High-performance centres in cities such as Bengaluru now function alongside upgraded local grounds, academies and traditional training spaces across states and regions. Crucially, facilities that were once accessible only to elite athletes are steadily reaching the grassroots.

This transformation is not merely about adopting advanced technology, but about how India is contextualising and deploying it. Rather than replicating foreign models wholesale, global sports science is being adapted to Indian realities. Affordable wearables, mobile-based video analysis and data-supported coaching are strengthening experience and instinct. The result is a training ecosystem where traditional knowledge is sharpened by measurable insight.

Policy direction has played a critical anchoring role in this shift. The National Sports Policy 2025, supported by the National Sports Governance Act, places science, technology, education and inclusion at the core of sports development. Together, these frameworks signal a structural transition: Indian sport is moving away from chance-driven outcomes and individual sacrifice towards a system that identifies talent early, supports it consistently and enables excellence across regions and disciplines.

The Grassroots Technology Revolution

For many years, quality coaching in India was concentrated in few cities and elite academies. Outside these centres, athletes relied heavily on personal networks, chance encounters or sporadic exposure to expert guidance. In 2026, this imbalance is being steadily dismantled. Digital platforms and mobile technologies are extending high-quality coaching beyond urban hubs into villages, small towns and local training grounds.

The smartphone has emerged as the most powerful equaliser. Through AI-enabled applications, a young sprinter training on a mud track can record a short video and receive structured biomechanical feedback from a qualified coach located hundreds of kilometres away. Elements such as stride length, foot placement, posture, hip alignment and arm movement—once analysed only in expensive laboratories—are now assessed using simple video inputs and intelligent software.

This shift has significant implications at the grassroots level. Training is no longer limited to what a local coach can observe unaided. Technical errors that suppress performance or increase injury risk are identified early, corrections are precise, and progress is objectively measurable rather than assumed. The result is a more informed and safer training environment for young athletes.

Mobile-First Coaching

Platforms such as Kreedon and StepOut illustrate how technology is reshaping everyday training. These applications allow athletes to upload practice footage for frame-by-frame analysis. The system flags issues such as inefficient foot strike, poor knee lift or inadequate hip stability, and delivers clear, actionable feedback.

For many athletes, this represents the first exposure to scientific technique analysis rather than generalised advice. Importantly, digital coaching does not replace physical coaching; it enhances it. Expert input becomes continuous, affordable and location-independent. At the grassroots level, technology is transforming access to quality guidance from a privilege into a right, with profound implications for the future depth of Indian sport.

National Sports Policy 2025: From Participation to Precision

This grassroots momentum has been sustained and scaled through strong policy support. A defining feature of the National Sports Policy 2025 is its shift from broad participation metrics to precision-driven athlete development. The emphasis is no longer only on how many children participate in sports, but on how effectively identified talent is nurtured, monitored and supported over time.

Historically, one of India's greatest weaknesses lay in the transition phase. Promising athletes performed well at school or district levels but disappeared due to lack of follow-up, inconsistent coaching or poor coordination between institutions. NSP 2025 addresses this gap by treating athlete development as a continuous pipeline rather than a series of disconnected competitions.

The evolution of the Khelo India programme illustrates this approach. What began as a participation-oriented initiative has matured into a data-backed talent management system. Through a centralised digital dashboard, the physiological growth, performance



to 2020 levels, underscoring the preventive value of data-driven training.

Artificial intelligence and big data analytics have further shifted coaching from intuition-based decisions to evidence-led strategies. In professional leagues such as the IPL and Pro Kabaddi League, AI systems analyse thousands of hours of footage to detect subtle opponent patterns, including grip changes or directional preferences under pressure. At the elite level, Digital Twin technology is being used to create virtual physiological models of athletes. These simulations

benchmarks, training loads and competition outcomes of more than 50,000 identified athletes are now tracked systematically. Coaches, administrators and sports scientists can monitor development trajectories across multiple years rather than at isolated events.

This continuity enables early detection of stagnation, injury patterns or performance decline. Interventions—technical, nutritional, medical or psychological—can be planned proactively instead of reactively. Equally significant is the impact on regions outside traditional sporting hubs. States and Union Territories, including geographically challenging areas such as Jammu and Kashmir, are now integrated into a common national framework, reducing the risk of talent being lost during critical developmental stages.

Core Technologies Redefining Training

In 2026, Indian athletes have moved well beyond basic fitness trackers. Discipline-specific wearables and predictive biometrics are redefining training and recovery. Devices such as bat-mounted sensors in cricket and GPS-enabled vests in football and hockey monitor parameters including metabolic power and heat-related fatigue. These “silent coaches” generate continuous data streams that support both performance enhancement and injury prevention.

Predictive modelling enables coaches to identify “red zones”—periods when training load exceeds recovery capacity. As a result, stress fractures and ACL injuries have declined by nearly 30 per cent compared

allow teams to test training loads and environmental conditions virtually before implementation, ensuring peak performance while minimising risk.

India and the Global Context

India’s approach to sports technology differs from that of established sporting nations such as the USA, UK and Australia. Developed countries benefit from decentralised, high-end infrastructure embedded in university systems and decades of longitudinal data focused on marginal gains. India, by contrast, is pursuing a more centralised high-performance model combined with large-scale technological scalability.

By leveraging AI-driven talent scouting and smartphone-based coaching, India is prioritising the democratisation of elite tools for a vast and diverse population. At the same time, the country is selectively adopting Western expertise in sports engineering to bridge performance gaps in precision disciplines. Advanced equipment calibration in shooting and archery, inspired by global best practices, is reducing the margin between podium finishes and near-misses.

A Growing Sports-Tech Ecosystem

India’s sports-technology ecosystem has expanded rapidly, with over 250 active startups by 2026. Companies such as Stupa Sports Analytics have evolved from single-sport specialisation to multi-sport AI performance platforms serving amateurs and professionals alike. Initiatives such as smart courts,

equipped with computer vision systems, are providing professional-grade statistics to recreational athletes in urban centres. This growth is reinforced by the expanding “fan economy,” where revenues from fantasy sports and immersive viewing experiences help fund research and innovation in training technologies.

Challenges Ahead

Despite substantial progress, challenges remain; primary being ‘cost and accessibility’. High-end 3D motion capture laboratories and advanced sensors are still concentrated in metropolitan areas. The next phase of development must prioritise low-cost, high-impact solutions for Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. Equally important is building data literacy among traditional coaches, many of whom require structured “train the trainer” programmes to effectively integrate analytics into practice. As biometric and physiological data collection expands, ethical frameworks for data privacy and athlete

consent are becoming increasingly critical. Establishing robust safeguards will be essential to sustaining trust and long-term adoption.

Conclusion

As India advances towards its bid to host the Olympic Games 2036, the focus has shifted from merely building stadiums to creating an integrated ecosystem of excellence. In 2026, technology is no longer a luxury but a foundational component of athlete development. This distinctly Indian approach—combining digital capability with ambition and inclusivity—is creating a scalable blueprint for sustainable sporting success. The objective is clear: to ensure that future Indian podium finishes are the result of scientific preparation, systemic support and optimised training pathways, rather than chance. In doing so, India is laying the foundation for a resilient, data-driven and globally competitive sporting future. ■

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The Sports Economy

Rural Youth, Real Jobs

Sports in India has evolved from recreation into a structured employment ecosystem, offering rural youth sustainable livelihoods through sports quotas, coaching, infrastructure development and allied sectors. Initiatives such as Khelo India, TOPS, ASMITA Women's Leagues and the *Khelo Bharat Niti-2025* have institutionalised talent identification, financial support and inclusive access. Recruitment by Indian Railways, armed forces and public sector undertakings ensures social security, performance-linked incentives and career stability, while infrastructure expansion has generated employment across coaching, administration and sports science—positioning sports as a tool of inclusion and nation-building.

Narayan Singh

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n a dusty playground in rural India, a barefoot child runs after a ball. What begins as play often turns into purpose, and in many cases, into a profession. For millions of young Indians living beyond the big cities, sports has quietly evolved from recreation into a reliable pathway to employment, stability and national pride.

Over the last decade, India's sports ecosystem has seen a remarkable transformation. Sports, once

viewed as an uncertain career option, has now become a structured and respected livelihood, particularly for rural youth. From government jobs under the sports quota to coaching roles, infrastructure development, equipment manufacturing and emerging opportunities in sports technology, the sector is creating jobs across the country. Central to this shift is focused government intervention, grassroots initiatives like Khelo India and the recognition of rural India as the nation's biggest talent reservoir.

The author is a sports journalist at DD News. Email: narayansinghrps@gmail.com

Sports as a Gateway to Government Jobs

One of the strongest employment avenues in sports comes through recruitment under the sports quota in government and public sector institutions. At present, athletes from 43 recognised sports disciplines are eligible for jobs based on their sporting achievements. These include athletics, cricket, hockey, wrestling, badminton, archery, weightlifting, football, kabaddi, shooting, chess, cycling, rowing, gymnastics, tennis, table tennis and traditional games such as kho-kho and atya-patya.

The Indian Railways is the largest recruiter under the sports quota, followed by the Indian Army, police forces, government banks, universities and major public sector undertakings such as ONGC, Indian Oil and Air India. For rural youth, these jobs provide stable income, social respect and long-term security.

Athletes who perform well at recognised platforms such as the Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, World Championships, Khelo India events, National Games, Federation Cups and inter-university tournaments become eligible for direct recruitment in Group 'C' and 'D' positions. Even third-place finishers in several competitions are considered, making opportunities accessible to a wider group of athletes.

Eligibility, Selection and Career Growth

While sporting excellence opens the door, eligibility criteria ensure transparency and fairness. Most departments require minimum educational qualifications, generally Class 10 or Class 12, depending

on the post. Athletes are graded based on the level of competitions they have represented, ranging from international to school-level events.

The selection process typically includes a written examination, sports trials, medical tests and interviews. Participation alone is not sufficient. Athletes must have represented their state or country and secured top-three positions in recognised tournaments or earned national awards under the National Physical Efficiency Campaign.

Once appointed, performance on the field continues to shape career growth. Medal-winning athletes are eligible for promotions, special leave for training and competitions and institutional support. Success at major international events often accelerates promotion, reinforcing the link between sporting excellence and professional advancement.

Pay Scales That Reflect Performance

Government jobs under the sports quota offer structured pay scales aligned with sporting achievements. Athletes appointed at higher grade pay levels of ₹2,400 to ₹2,800 are usually Olympic, World Championship, Asian Games, or Commonwealth Games medallists with graduation degrees. Those appointed at ₹1,900 to ₹2,000 grade pay typically include national and inter-university champions who are at least Class 12 pass. Entry-level positions at ₹1,800 grade pay are available to athletes who have excelled at state and junior national levels.

For many rural youth, these salaries exceed local earning opportunities and provide a clear alternative to migration or unstable employment.

Rural India as the New Sports Powerhouse

Rural India has emerged as the backbone of the country's sports ecosystem. Nearly 59 percent of India's 655 million sports fans come from rural areas, while women account for 36 percent of the fan base. This growing engagement reflects the deep reach of sports into India's heartland.

Programs such as Khelo India have played a pivotal role in nurturing this talent. Under the scheme, athletes receive annual financial support of ₹6.28 lakh, covering training, equipment, nutrition, medical care and competition exposure. More than 2,781 athletes have benefited so far. The impact is evident, with 124 Khelo India athletes contributing to India's 42 medals at the 2022 Asian Games and





28 representing the country at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Collectively, these athletes have set thousands of national and international records.

Infrastructure That Creates Employment

Investment in sports infrastructure has become a major source of employment in rural and semi-urban India. Over the past 11 years, the government has approved 323 new sports infrastructure projects with an investment of ₹3,074 crore. Additionally, 1,041 Khelo India Centres and 32 Khelo India Centres of Excellence have been established, supported by 301 accredited sports academies.

These facilities generate employment for coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, nutritionists, grounds staff, and administrators. Institutions such as the National Sports University in Manipur and the Major Dhyan Chand Sports University in Uttar Pradesh further expand academic and professional opportunities in sports science and coaching.

Inclusion Through Sports

India's sports growth has been accompanied by a strong focus on inclusion. Initiatives like the ASMITA Women's Leagues have expanded structured sporting opportunities for women across 20 disciplines. Programs such as the Rajasthan Women's Kabaddi Initiative have created professional opportunities for over 1,200 rural women, many of whom report improved income and financial independence.

The Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 builds on this progress by ensuring equitable access to sports infrastructure for

Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, persons with disabilities and economically weaker sections. The policy also focuses on reducing the rural-urban gap and integrating sports with education and community participation.

Beyond Athletes: A Growing Sports Economy

Employment generated by sports extends beyond players. India's sports goods industry, centred in cities like Meerut and Jalandhar, employs thousands of rural artisans and has grown steadily in recent years. Traditional equipment such as cricket bats, kabaddi mats, and wrestling gear continues to find markets in India and abroad.

Traditional sports like mallakhamb, gatka and kalaripayattu are also witnessing renewed interest. These disciplines are creating demand for trained coaches and performers while preserving cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the sports technology sector is emerging as a new employment frontier.

According to the Google-Deloitte report titled Think Sports: Unlocking India's \$130B Sports Potential, India's sports sector is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 14 percent and reach a valuation of \$130 billion by 2030.

Rural Icons, Global Impact

The rise of athletes from rural India highlights the success of this ecosystem. Neeraj Chopra from Haryana, Hima Das from Assam, Mirabai Chanu from Manipur, Deepika Kumari from Jharkhand, Avinash Sable from Maharashtra and Rupa Bayor from Arunachal Pradesh are shining examples of how rural talent, when supported, can succeed at the global level.

Sports as a Sustainable Career Path

India's sporting journey today is about more than medals and podium finishes. It is about employment, empowerment, and nation-building. Through sustained policy support, infrastructure development, and inclusive schemes such as Khelo India, TOPS, ASMITA and Khelo Bharat Niti-2025, sports has emerged as a credible career option for rural youth.

As opportunities continue to expand, sports is no longer a gamble. It is a profession that offers stability, dignity and growth. For rural India, the playground has become a launchpad for livelihoods and leadership. ■



Rural Sports for Community Well-Being

Sports are integral to India's vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, contributing to physical and mental well-being, youth empowerment, and social cohesion in rural areas. Creation of multi-sport rural stadiums and shared-use facilities, supported by decentralised and climate-sensitive designs, can expand access, nurture grassroots talent, and strengthen community ownership. Community-based sports programmes also function as effective instruments for drug de-addiction, social inclusion, and youth engagement, particularly when combined with counselling, education, and mentorship. Supported by government initiatives, and convergence with rural employment schemes, rural sports can be mainstreamed into development policy to promote health, gender equality, cultural preservation, and holistic rural development.

Dr. Madhubanti Dutta

Sports occupy a central place in India's vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, where youth empowerment and holistic rural development are key national priorities. Beyond physical fitness, sports contribute significantly to mental well-being, discipline, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and social cohesion. In rural India, where young people often face limited opportunities for structured recreation and personal growth, sports can become a powerful catalyst for individual development as well as collective community well-being. Mainstreaming

sports within rural development policies, supported by government initiatives, strengthened through gender-responsive interventions, and anchored in community participation—can unlock the latent potential of rural youth and position sports as a strategic driver of health, empowerment, and national progress.

Despite this potential, rural sports development continues to face structural and social challenges. Inadequate infrastructure, limited access to trained coaches, lack of organised competitions, and uneven participation—especially among girls and marginalised



groups—restrict talent identification and sustained engagement. As a result, sports in many rural areas remain sporadic and recreational rather than structured and developmental. Addressing these gaps requires a shift in perspective: sports must be viewed not merely as leisure activities but as strategic tools for public health, youth engagement, and social development. An integrated approach to rural sports development is therefore essential, one that simultaneously addresses infrastructure deficits and strengthens community well-being.

Infrastructure as the Foundation of Rural Sports

Infrastructure is the backbone of any effective sports ecosystem. The development of rural stadiums and modern sports complexes is crucial to provide safe, standardised, and motivating spaces for training and competition. Such facilities should be designed as multi-sport complexes capable of supporting athletics, football, kabaddi, volleyball, wrestling, and other popular rural sports. Catering to different age groups, these spaces can facilitate regular participation while nurturing grassroots talent.

A cluster-based and decentralised infrastructure model offers particular advantages in rural settings. Under this approach, one well-equipped facility serves a group of neighbouring villages, supported by adequate transport connectivity. This model ensures optimal utilisation of resources, cost efficiency, and wider accessibility, while allowing complexes to function as hubs for training, competitions, fitness programmes, and community events. These centres can also become focal points for social interaction, reinforcing their role in community life.

Infrastructure development must, however, extend beyond physical construction. Facilities should be embedded within a framework of social inclusion, community ownership, and long-term sustainability. Upgrading existing assets—such as converting school playgrounds and community or panchayat lands into multipurpose sports grounds through shared-use models—can significantly expand access. Provision of basic amenities including drinking water, changing rooms, lighting, first-aid facilities, equipment storage, and seating arrangements is essential for safe and regular usage. Equally important are safety standards, accessibility for persons with disabilities, and gender-sensitive design features.

Integrating digital and training infrastructure—such as basic sports technology, online coaching modules, and digital coordination tools—can further enhance outreach and efficiency. Low-cost, climate-sensitive designs using local materials, renewable energy solutions, and community-led maintenance systems ensure long-term viability. Such an approach not only reduces costs but also fosters local ownership and embeds sports infrastructure firmly within rural development planning.

Community-Based Sports and Drug De-Addiction

Community-based sports have emerged as an effective tool for addressing substance abuse among rural youth. In many regions, unemployment, seasonal migration, and limited recreational avenues create conditions that make young people vulnerable to drug and substance abuse. Organised sports offer a structured, healthy, and discipline-oriented alternative that can counter these trends.

Participation in sports helps build routine, responsibility, and self-esteem, while fostering positive peer relationships. Team sports, in particular, promote collective accountability and mutual support—critical elements in preventing and addressing substance abuse. Sports function both as preventive and rehabilitative tools by keeping youth engaged, focused, and goal-oriented. When combined with counselling services, health outreach, and awareness programmes, sports-led interventions can contribute meaningfully to improved public health outcomes.

Local sports clubs, village leagues, and mentorship initiatives involving trained coaches and respected role models further strengthen the impact of community-based sports programmes. Over time, such sustained engagement can bring about behavioural change, reduce substance dependency, and enhance overall social well-being.

Gender Inclusion and Girls' Participation

Ensuring gender inclusion is fundamental to equitable rural sports development. Girls in rural areas often face multiple barriers to participation, including restrictive social norms, safety concerns, domestic responsibilities, and the absence of gender-sensitive facilities. Overcoming these challenges requires targeted and sustained interventions.

Focused programmes should include girls-only training sessions, the appointment of female coaches, and the creation of safe and accessible sports spaces. Flexible training schedules that accommodate educational and household responsibilities can further encourage participation. Basic facilities such as sanitation, adequate lighting, and safe transport play a critical role in enabling girls to engage confidently in sports activities.

Linking sports initiatives with education, nutrition, and life-skills programmes can strengthen community acceptance and encourage families to support girls' involvement. Increased participation not only improves physical health but also builds confidence, leadership abilities, and social empowerment. Sports provide girls with opportunities for self-expression and collective identity, contributing directly to broader goals of gender equality and inclusive rural development.

Institutional Support and Partnerships

The success of rural sports initiatives depends on strong institutional support and effective partnerships.

Panchayats, schools, sports bodies, non-governmental organisations, and community groups each have complementary roles in planning, managing, and promoting sports activities at the grassroots level. Decentralised governance enables local needs assessment and community participation, ensuring that programmes are responsive, inclusive, and context-specific.

Public-private partnerships and corporate social responsibility initiatives can provide vital support for infrastructure development, coaching programmes, and talent identification. At the same time, capacity building of local coaches, physical education teachers, and community volunteers is essential for sustaining quality training and long-term engagement.

Policy efforts should prioritise accessible infrastructure through the creation of multipurpose sports grounds and mini-stadiums at the panchayat level, using cost-effective and climate-sensitive designs. Integrating sports infrastructure with rural employment schemes and transforming school playgrounds into shared community hubs can significantly expand access while optimising public resources. Such convergence ensures that geographical or financial constraints do not exclude rural youth from organised sports.

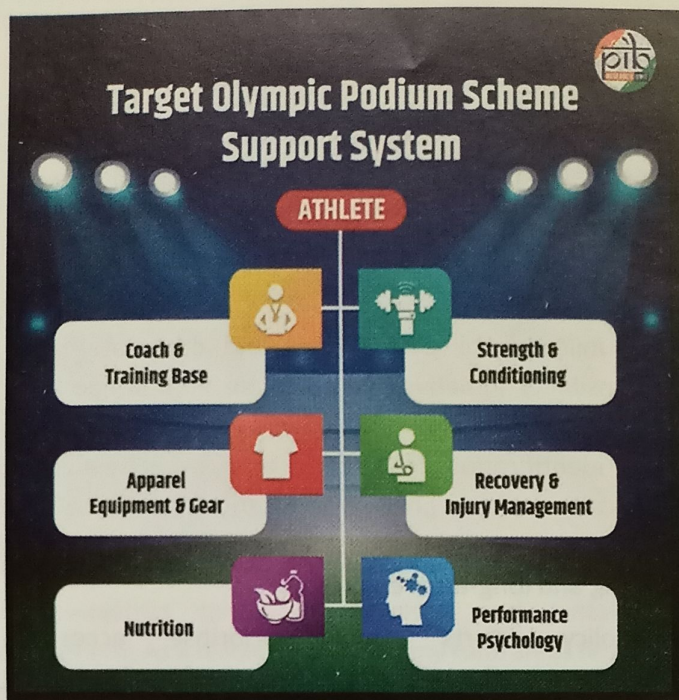
Community Sports for Social Well-Being and Youth Engagement

Community-based sports programmes have the potential to drive social transformation in rural areas. Organised leagues, regular training sessions, and mentorship opportunities can channel youthful energy into constructive pursuits, addressing challenges such as substance abuse, social alienation, and disengagement. When aligned with health and education initiatives, sports promote discipline, teamwork, and mental well-being, strengthening social cohesion and resilience.

Local governance institutions should play an active role in planning and managing sports initiatives. Panchayats can be incentivised through performance-based grants and public recognition for maintaining facilities and promoting inclusive participation. Community ownership leads to better upkeep, higher utilisation, and long-term sustainability of sports assets.

Promoting Inclusion through Targeted Participation

A focused national policy framework is required to ensure systematic sports infrastructure coverage in



rural areas. Every *gram panchayat* should have access to at least one functional sports ground or mini-stadium designed for multiple sports. Low-cost and climate-appropriate models can reduce regional disparities while ensuring sustainability. Bringing training facilities closer to rural youth reduces migration pressures and strengthens grassroots talent development.

Integrating sports infrastructure development with schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) can generate employment while creating durable community assets. Activities like land levelling, drainage, boundary construction, and basic lighting can be supported under rural employment programmes. This approach embeds sports spaces within village planning processes and enhances cost-effectiveness.

Governance and Policy Initiatives

The Government of India has launched several initiatives to strengthen rural sports and nurture grassroots talent. Flagship programmes such as Khelo India emphasise rural and indigenous sports through infrastructure support, coaching, and scholarships. Initiatives like the *Panchayat Yuva Krida Aur Khel Abhiyan* and the *Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan* provide village- and block-level facilities, competitions, and youth engagement opportunities. In his Mann Ki Baat address on the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025, the Prime Minister underscored that “villages, the poor, and daughters are the priority of the policy,” highlighting an integrated

approach to grassroots sports, youth empowerment, and community well-being.

Sustaining these initiatives requires embedding them within local governance structures and fostering community ownership, consistent with principles of community-led development. Regular competitions, leagues, and talent identification pathways aligned with Khelo India can ensure continuity and progression for athletes. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to track outcomes such as improved fitness levels, reduced substance abuse, increased girls’ participation, and enhanced youth employability. At the same time, policy gaps related to long-term funding, facility maintenance, and integration of sports indicators into rural development and public health programmes require systematic attention.

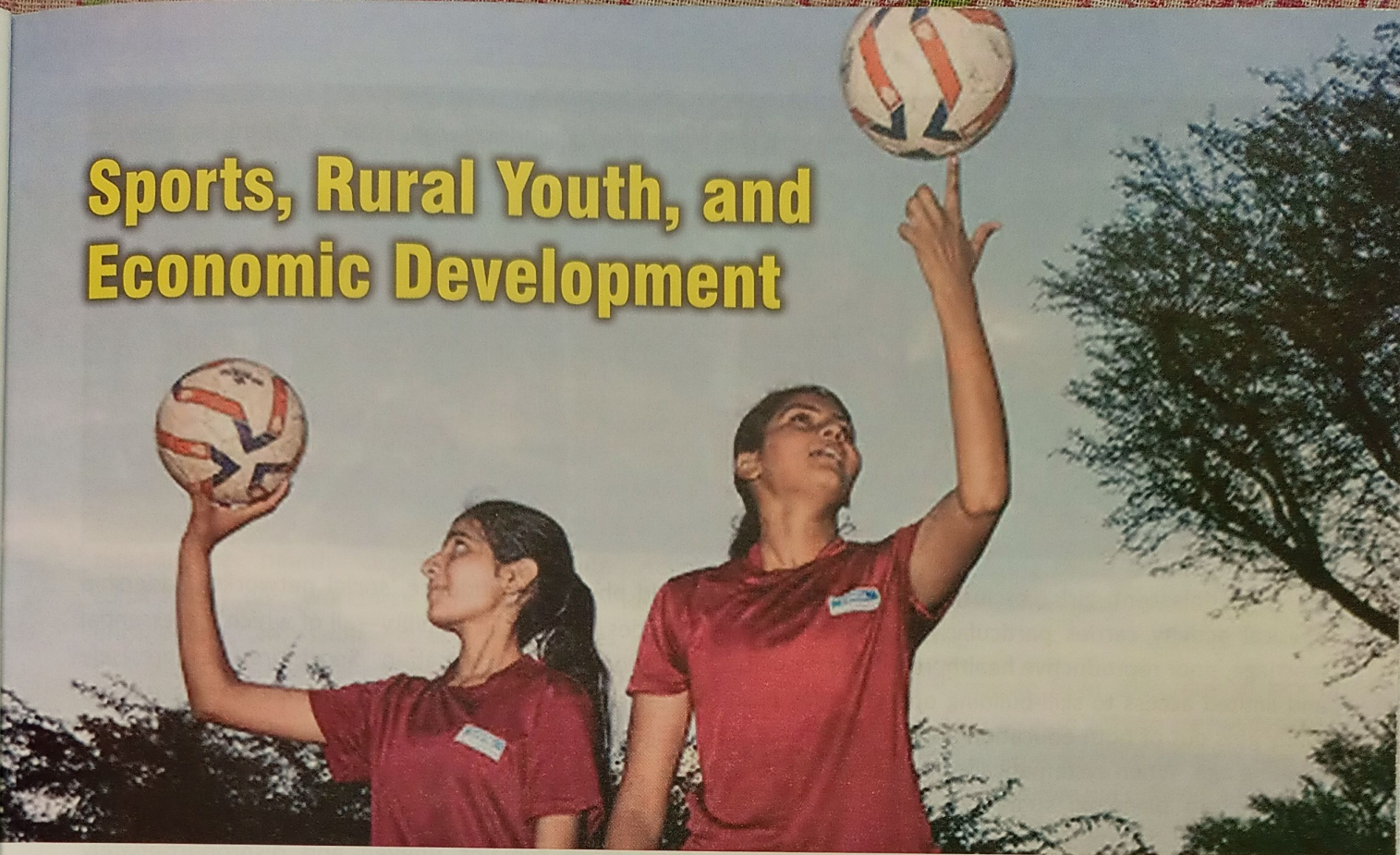
Supporting traditional and indigenous sports—such as *kabaddi*, *kho-kho*, archery, and wrestling—through recognition, funding, and integration into school curricula helps preserve cultural heritage while creating competitive pathways. Complementary initiatives like the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), Fit India, and KIRTI (Khelo India Rural Talent Identification) further promote fitness as a mass movement and position sports as a driver of national pride, economic growth, and global leadership.

Conclusion

Rural sports development is not solely about building facilities; it is about nurturing healthy, inclusive, and resilient communities. An integrated, community-driven approach that combines infrastructure development, social inclusion, institutional support, and sustainability can transform sports into a powerful instrument for community well-being and youth engagement. Sports must be mainstreamed as an integral component of rural development policy rather than treated as an isolated sector.

By leveraging existing government initiatives, strengthening convergence across programmes, implementing targeted gender-responsive interventions, and ensuring active community participation, rural sports can become a cornerstone of health promotion, social transformation, and youth empowerment. Such an approach aligns sports development with the broader goals of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, ensuring that rural youth are active participants in India’s journey towards inclusive and sustainable national development. ■

Sports, Rural Youth, and Economic Development



An integrated approach to rural sports development is essential to address persistent challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited coaching, uneven participation, and gender barriers, while positioning sport as a tool for public health and community development. Multi-sport rural stadiums and shared-use facilities, designed with decentralised and climate-sensitive principles, can expand access, nurture grassroots talent, and strengthen community ownership. Community-based sports programmes also support youth engagement, social inclusion, and drug de-addiction when linked with counselling, education, and mentorship. Backed by initiatives such as Khelo India and *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025*, and aligned with rural employment schemes, sports can be embedded in development policy to advance health, gender equality, cultural continuity, and holistic rural growth.

Urvashi Prasad
Ankeeta Maheshwari

In rural India, girls' participation in sport is still viewed as an exception rather than a norm. When it does occur, it is often celebrated briefly as a symbolic achievement and then overlooked. Policy discourse has largely framed rural sport for girls as a matter of empowerment or self-expression, rather

than as a substantive developmental and economic intervention. This narrow framing is incomplete and, in many ways, counterproductive. At a time when rural India continues to grapple with youth underemployment, early school dropouts, poor health outcomes, and sharply gendered labour force participation, sport remains a significantly underutilised policy instrument.

Former Director, Office of Vice Chairperson, NITI Aayog; Senior Fellow, Pahlé India Foundation)
Email: urvashi.prasad@pahleindia.org
Fellow, Pahlé India Foundation. Email: ankeeta.m@pahleindia.org



For adolescent girls, exclusion from structured physical activity carries particularly high costs. Early marriage, poor reproductive health, restricted mobility, and limited access to skill-building opportunities push many girls out of both education and the workforce at a young age. When systematically integrated into rural development planning, sport can disrupt this cycle. Well-designed sports programmes can delay early marriage, improve health outcomes, build employable skills, and generate local livelihoods. When girls play, the impact extends far beyond the field—reshaping household decisions, labour market participation, and rural economies.

Rural Girls, Employment Stress, and Policy Gaps

Rural India is home to nearly two-thirds of the country's adolescent girls, yet it records some of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. Survey data consistently show a sharp decline in women's participation after adolescence, particularly in rural areas where early marriage, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and health constraints limit economic engagement. This is not merely a social concern; it represents a substantial economic inefficiency.

National analyses suggest that persistently low levels of physical activity—especially among women and girls—could add more than INR 55 trillion in annual healthcare costs by 2047 if current trends continue. This projection underlines the economic imperative of promoting broad-based participation in sport, beyond the pursuit of elite athletic performance.

The rural youth employment challenge is often discussed in terms of skill deficits or the absence of local job opportunities. Much less attention is paid to the structural exclusion of girls from pathways that

build physical confidence, social networks, leadership abilities, and public visibility—all of which are essential for workforce participation. Sport provides precisely these assets. Yet existing policy frameworks have failed to leverage this potential in a systematic manner.

Schemes such as Khelo India have enhanced the visibility of women athletes at the national level, but their reach remains uneven and disproportionately concentrated in urban and semi-urban centres. At the village level, sports infrastructure is frequently inadequate, poorly maintained, or socially inaccessible to girls. Facilities often lack toilets, changing spaces, safe access routes, and training schedules that accommodate girls' schooling and domestic responsibilities. As a result, participation tends to be irregular and dependent on individual champions rather than sustained institutional support.

Sports as an Economic Intervention

Reframing girls' participation in sport as an economic intervention rather than a purely social initiative allows its full developmental potential to be recognised. The economic effects operate through multiple, mutually reinforcing pathways.

Delaying Early Marriage

Early marriage remains one of the most significant barriers to girls' education and employment in rural India. Participation in organised sport during adolescence introduces structured routines of training, competition, and peer engagement that influence household decision-making. Evidence from districts with active girls' sports programmes shows a clear association between sustained participation and delayed marriage.

Families that invest time and resources in a girl's sporting routine are less likely to withdraw her from school or arrange an early marriage, particularly when her participation is linked to local recognition or institutional affiliation. Delaying marriage extends the period available for education and skill acquisition, increases labour market readiness, and enhances lifetime earning potential while reducing long-term dependency.

Health as a Precondition for Workforce Participation

Poor health outcomes among rural women—including anaemia, low physical endurance, and reproductive health challenges—constitute major constraints on workforce participation. Regular engagement in sport directly addresses these limitations. Sustained physical activity improves nutritional absorption, mental well-being, and physical resilience, all of which are critical for consistent economic engagement.

For adolescent girls, improved health is associated with better school attendance, reduced absenteeism, and greater confidence in public spaces. Over time, these advantages translate into improved employability, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare support, fitness services, and community-based programmes. In this sense, sport functions as preventive health infrastructure, reducing future healthcare burdens while strengthening human capital.

Women Coaches as Local Economic Anchors

Rural sport also creates employment opportunities for women as coaches, trainers, referees, and physical education instructors. Female coaches play a critical role in enabling girls' participation by addressing safety concerns and negotiating social norms. At the same time, they serve as visible examples of non-traditional rural employment.

Certified women coaches at block or district levels contribute to the sustainability of local sports ecosystems. They earn regular incomes, gain social recognition, and exercise leadership without needing to migrate to urban centres. This reframes sport from a narrow pipeline to elite competition into a decentralised employment generator rooted in rural realities. Over time, these roles strengthen local capacity and reduce reliance on external interventions.

Infrastructure Design and Policy Failure

The success of girls' sports initiatives depends less on rhetoric and more on design. Infrastructure that ignores gender-specific needs excludes girls, regardless of stated intent. The absence of toilets, inadequate lighting, unsafe access routes, and inflexible training schedules constitute structural barriers to participation.

Scheduling is as critical as physical space. Training sessions that conflict with school hours or domestic responsibilities systematically disadvantage girls. Safety concerns—both real and perceived—further restrict participation, particularly during early morning or evening hours. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate planning, community consultation, and targeted investment.

Girls do not disengage from sport due to lack of interest; they disengage because systems are not designed with them in mind. Gender-responsive infrastructure and programme design are therefore not optional add-ons but essential components of effective rural sports policy.

Evidence from the Field: Success Stories

Several regional experiences demonstrate how sustained and well-designed sports initiatives can generate tangible social and economic outcomes for girls and communities.

In Odisha, long-term investment in women's hockey has transformed participation in tribal districts such as Sundergarh. Beyond producing elite players, these programmes have generated local employment for women as coaches, trainers, and support staff. The visibility of successful women athletes has also shifted community attitudes towards girls' education and mobility.

In Haryana, wrestling *akharas* that introduced women-only training hours, appointed female coaches, and provided basic facilities witnessed marked increases in girls' participation. These changes were accompanied by delayed marriage, higher continuation into secondary education, and stronger family support for girls' sporting and educational aspirations.

Across Northeast India, community-based football programmes for girls—often supported by civil society organisations—illustrate how sport can function simultaneously as a youth engagement and livelihood strategy. Women trained as referees and coaches earn regular incomes while anchoring local sports

ecosystems. These programmes demonstrate the viability of decentralised, community-led sports models in diverse rural contexts.

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges: where girls' participation is sustained through appropriate infrastructure, coaching, and community support, positive social and economic outcomes follow.

Towards an Integrated Policy Approach

To unlock the full potential of sport as a catalyst for rural development, policy frameworks must move beyond symbolic inclusion towards systematic integration. This requires recognising sport as part of the rural development and employment ecosystem, not as an isolated or discretionary activity.

Key priorities include ensuring gender-responsive sports infrastructure at the village and block levels, investing in training and certification pathways for women coaches, and aligning sports programmes with education, health, and livelihoods initiatives. Convergence with existing schemes can amplify impact without requiring entirely new institutional structures.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should track not only participation rates but also outcomes such as school retention, delayed marriage, health indicators, and employment generation. Such evidence can strengthen the case for sustained public investment and guide programme refinement.

Global and Emerging Perspectives

International evidence reinforces these findings. In subSaharan Africa, structured sport programmes for adolescent girls have been linked to reductions in teenage pregnancy and improvements in school retention. International experience also demonstrates how rural sporting ecosystems can generate sustained participation and economic opportunity when conditions are right. While Iten in Kenya is widely recognised as the world's most prominent "sports village", the town of Bekoji in Ethiopia is equally notable as a "little town of champions". Situated in the Ethiopian highlands, Bekoji has produced some of the world's most accomplished long distance runners, including Tirunesh Dibaba, Genzebe Dibaba and Kenenisa Bekele. Both Iten and Bekoji illustrate how high altitude rural environments, combined with sustained training culture, local role models and community acceptance of

sport as a livelihood pathway, can create dense clusters of sporting talent. However, Iten's global reputation also reflects the presence of training infrastructure, coaching networks and economic opportunities that support athletes beyond competition alone. The lesson for rural India is clear: sporting success is not accidental, but the outcome of ecosystems that treat sport as a serious economic and social activity rather than an isolated pursuit.

In Latin America, communitybased football initiatives have created parallel employment opportunities for women as coaches and administrators. These global experiences highlight that rural India's challenges are not unique, and that sport can be a scalable, crosscultural intervention.

Emerging challenges such as climate change and digital exclusion also intersect with rural sport. Extreme weather events disrupt schooling and livelihoods, but sport can serve as a stabilising routine and community anchor. Digital platforms, if made accessible, can connect rural girls to training modules, competitions, and mentorship networks, expanding opportunities beyond geography. Integrating sport with digital literacy and climate resilience programmes could multiply benefits, preparing girls not only for local employment but also for participation in broader economic transitions.

Conclusion

Girls' participation in sport has implications that extend far beyond recreation or symbolic empowerment. When designed and implemented effectively, sport becomes a powerful economic and developmental intervention—delaying early marriage, improving health outcomes, building employable skills, and generating local livelihoods. In rural India, where gender disparities in education, health, and employment remain entrenched, sport offers a practical and scalable pathway for change.

When girls play, households adjust their expectations, communities reassess gender norms, and rural economies begin to shift. Recognising and institutionalising this potential within rural development policy is not only a matter of equity but also of economic efficiency and long-term national interest. By moving sport from the margins to the mainstream of rural planning, India can transform playing fields into platforms for inclusive growth and youth-led development. ■

Rural Olympics in India



India's rural landscape is rich with traditional sports and community games that have been played for centuries. Among the most iconic gatherings celebrating these games is the Rural Olympics, an annual festival of indigenous sports, strength competitions, and cultural performances. Unlike the international Olympics, India's Rural Olympics focus on sustaining rural sporting traditions, village pride, and heritage games deeply embedded in local life.

The most famous Rural Olympics is held in Qila Raipur, a village near Ludhiana, Punjab. Known as the Qila Raipur Sports Festival, it is often referred to as India's Rural Olympics due to its scale, variety of events, and historical significance. The festival began in 1933 though over the decades, it has grown into one of India's largest rural sporting festivals, attracting thousands of participants and spectators from across the country. Held every year in late January or early February at the Grewal Sports Association grounds, the festival spans several days. Traditional events include bullock cart racing, camel races, tug-of-war, kabaddi, and tractor pulling, alongside feats of strength such as heavy tire lifting

and rope climbing. Modern athletic competitions like track races, cycling, hockey, and kabaddi are also part of the festival, blending village games with conventional sports.

Qila Raipur's Rural Olympics is notable not only for competition but also for its celebration of rural identity and physical skill. It highlights the strength and agility developed through farming and daily rural life, while also preserving cultural traditions through folk music, dance, and local cuisine.

Similar rural sports festivals are held in other states. Chhattisgarhiya Olympics in Chhattisgarh is a statewide rural sports event featuring kabaddi, kho-kho, and traditional races, attracting millions of participants. Local festivals in Gujarat also host rural Olympic-style competitions with rope pulling, running races, and indigenous games. Initiatives like Isha Gramotsavam further encourage participation across multiple states, including women and youth, fostering rural talent and preserving traditional sports culture.

The Rural Olympics, therefore, is more than a sports event. It is a celebration of India's grassroots sporting heritage, a platform for showcasing rural strength, community spirit, and cultural pride. ■

Mallakhamb: India's Enduring Tradition of Strength and Discipline

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allakhamb is one of India's most distinctive traditional sports, representing a refined system of physical training rooted in indigenous knowledge and rural life. More than a display of strength or acrobatics, Mallakhamb reflects a long-standing tradition of disciplined body training that developed in India long before the advent of modern fitness systems.

The term Mallakhamb is derived from two Sanskrit words: Malla, meaning wrestler, and Khamb, meaning pole. Historically, the practice evolved as a method of conditioning for wrestlers, enabling them to develop exceptional grip strength, balance, flexibility, and control over their bodies. While pole-based exercises are mentioned in ancient Indian traditions and visual depictions, the organised form of Mallakhamb took shape in the early eighteenth century in Maharashtra. It is commonly attributed to Balambhatta Deodhar, a physical trainer during the reign of Peshwa Bajirao II, who systematised the practice for structured training.

Traditionally, Mallakhamb was practised in rural akharas, which served as centres for physical training and discipline. The equipment was simple and locally available: a smooth wooden pole firmly fixed into the ground or a strong rope suspended from above. This simplicity made Mallakhamb ideally suited to village environments, where elaborate infrastructure was neither necessary nor available. Training relied on consistency, discipline, and guidance from the guru rather than on external apparatus.

There are three recognised forms of Mallakhamb: Pole Mallakhamb, Rope Mallakhamb, and Hanging Mallakhamb. Among these, pole Mallakhamb remains the most traditional and widely practised form. Performers execute a sequence of static holds, transitions, and

dynamic movements by gripping the pole with their hands, legs, and torso. These movements demand high levels of core strength, coordination, flexibility, and mental focus. Several positions resemble yogic postures, indicating a shared foundation in India's traditional systems of body training and self-discipline.

Beyond physical conditioning, Mallakhamb has always emphasised values such as perseverance, self-control, courage, and respect for the guru. In rural India, it contributed significantly to shaping disciplined individuals and resilient communities. The objective was not competition alone, but holistic development of the individual.

In contemporary times, Mallakhamb has evolved into an organised sport with formal rules, judging systems, and competitions at school, state, and national levels. The Mallakhamb Federation of India oversees its development and promotion. Despite this formalisation, the essence of the tradition remains intact.

Mallakhamb is not merely a sport; it is a living heritage of India's traditional methods of physical training. Preserving and promoting it is essential to safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems and recognising the depth of India's rural sporting traditions. ■





Rural Games on the Global Stage

India's rural games, once confined to village commons and seasonal gatherings, have evolved into globally recognised sports. Indigenous games reflect deep cultural roots while demonstrating how grassroots talent can enter the modern international sporting ecosystem. Professional leagues, international tournaments, and diaspora participation have played a decisive role in expanding their global reach. Government initiatives have strengthened talent identification, training, and infrastructure. Together, these developments show how traditional rural games have become instruments of cultural diplomacy, inclusive development, and national pride on the world stage.

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ndia's villages have long nurtured a vibrant tradition of physical games rooted in community life, cultural practice, and everyday resilience. Played on open grounds during festivals, harvest seasons, and social gatherings, these games demanded little infrastructure but immense physical skill, teamwork, and mental agility. For generations, they remained largely confined to rural landscapes. In recent decades, however, several indigenous games have made a remarkable transition—from village commons to national arenas and, increasingly, to the global sporting stage. This

transformation reflects not only the sporting merit of these games but also the impact of institutional support, media exposure, diaspora engagement, and targeted government policy.

Traditional rural games today are emerging as instruments of cultural diplomacy, grassroots talent development, and inclusive growth. They demonstrate how local traditions, when systematically organised and professionally presented, can find relevance within the modern global sports ecosystem. The journeys of Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Carrom, and other indigenous games illustrate this transition from soil to stadium.



Rural Games as Cultural Heritage

India's indigenous sports are deeply embedded in local culture and social organisation. They evolved organically, shaped by geography, climate, and community needs, and emphasised physical endurance, strategy, and collective participation. Unlike equipment-intensive modern sports, most rural games required minimal resources, making them accessible across socio-economic divides. This inclusivity ensured widespread participation and sustained intergenerational transmission.

As India modernised and urbanised, many of these games faced decline. Yet, rather than disappearing, some adapted to new contexts. Through codification of rules, formation of federations, and integration into educational and sporting frameworks, they began to move beyond their rural origins. Media and global connectivity further amplified their reach, enabling them to resonate with international audiences.

Kabaddi: From Village Strength Test to Global Sport

Kabaddi is perhaps the most prominent example of a rural Indian game achieving global stature. Its origins are widely traced to ancient India, with references found in Sanskrit literature and associations drawn to the Vedic period (1500–500 BCE). Traditionally, Kabaddi was played in villages as a test of strength, breath control, strategy, and teamwork, often without formal rules.

The early twentieth century marked a turning point. During the 1920s, efforts were made to formalise the game, leading to organised competitions. The establishment of the All India Kabaddi Federation in 1950 provided institutional structure. Kabaddi gained early international exposure when it was showcased as a demonstration sport at the Berlin Olympics 1936 and later became a regular medal sport at the Asian Games from 1990 onwards.

A decisive moment in Kabaddi's globalisation came with the launch of the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) in 2014. By combining traditional gameplay with modern broadcasting, professional franchises, and refined rules, PKL transformed Kabaddi into a major televised sport. It became one of India's most-watched sporting leagues, with viewership reaching hundreds of millions and players attaining celebrity status. The league enhanced competitive quality and spectator engagement while retaining the sport's core identity. (Sports Gazette)

Today, Kabaddi is played in more than 50 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. International tournaments such as the Kabaddi World Cup, including editions held outside Asia—such as in the West Midlands, United Kingdom, in 2025—have further expanded its reach. New initiatives like the Global Indian Pravasi Kabaddi League, launched in 2025, feature teams with players from countries including

Egypt, Germany, and Argentina, reflecting the role of diaspora communities in internationalising the sport. Kabaddi now stands as a symbol of how rural simplicity can coexist with global professionalism.

Kho-Kho: A Traditional Chase Game Goes Worldwide

Kho-Kho originated as a simple chase-and-dodge game played in rural India, particularly in Maharashtra. Requiring speed, agility, teamwork, and spatial awareness, it was traditionally played on open fields with minimal equipment. The sport's formal journey began in 1914, when the Deccan Gymkhana Club in Pune standardised rules and promoted organised play, enabling Kho-Kho to expand beyond local settings. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

In recent years, systematic efforts have been made to modernise Kho-Kho and enhance its global appeal. Refinement of rules, improved presentation, and structured competition formats made the sport suitable for broadcasting and international adoption. Organised leagues such as Ultimate Kho-Kho have brought professional visibility, while national and international federations have ensured uniformity in rules and training.

Kho-Kho is now played in over 60 countries across multiple continents. A significant milestone was the inaugural Kho-Kho World Cup 2025 held in New Delhi, which saw participation from 23 countries across six continents. This event marked an unprecedented global assembly for a sport that originated in rural India. Cross-border competitions, institutional backing, and inclusion

in school and university programmes have collectively positioned Kho-Kho as an emerging international sport rooted in Indian tradition.

Carrom: From Local Parlours to International Competition

Carrom represents a different but equally significant journey from local leisure activity to global competitive sport. Believed to have originated in the Indian subcontinent in the late nineteenth century, Carrom evolved from informal parlour play to structured competition. Early evidence includes a glass Carrom board preserved in a palace in Patiala, indicating its popularity among diverse social groups.

The spread of Carrom beyond India was significantly influenced by Indian diaspora communities, who carried the game to South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Institutional development followed with the establishment of the All India Carrom Federation in 1956 and later the International Carrom Federation, which standardised rules and organised world-level competitions.

India hosted the World Carrom Championships in 1991 and 2000, reinforcing the game's international stature. Indian players have consistently dominated global competitions, underscoring both technical excellence and the depth of domestic talent. Today, Carrom is recognised worldwide as a competitive sport as well as a social game, illustrating how indigenous recreation can attain global resonance through community networks and formal governance.



Other Indigenous Games Gaining Recognition

Beyond Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Carrom, several other traditional games are witnessing renewed interest and organised revival.

Lagori, also known as Seven Stones or Sitoliya Pitto, is an ancient South Asian game involving a ball and a stack of seven stones. Historical accounts trace its origins back over 5,000 years, with references in ancient narratives, including stories associated with Lord Krishna. In recent years, structured initiatives such as the Indian Lagori Premiere League and World Cup events have modernised the game. Adjusted rules, formal leagues, and promotional efforts have helped bring Lagori into contemporary sporting discourse.

Atya Patya is another indigenous tag sport traditionally played in rural areas, particularly during harvest seasons. Recognised by the Government of India under indigenous sports categories, it continues to enjoy regional popularity and organised competitions. Such games highlight ongoing efforts to preserve traditional play while adapting it to organised sporting formats.

Government Initiatives and Institutional Support

The global emergence of rural games has been significantly supported by government policy and institutional frameworks. The Government of India has actively promoted traditional sports through multiple schemes aimed at grassroots development and international exposure.

The Khelo India Programme plays a central role in identifying young talent, supporting training infrastructure, and encouraging participation in indigenous games such as Kabaddi and Kho-Kho. By integrating traditional sports into structured competitions and coaching camps, Khelo India has strengthened the talent pipeline from rural areas to national and international platforms.

Under the National Education Policy 2020, the Bharatiya Khel (Indian Games) initiative seeks to introduce traditional games into school curricula across the country. Seventy-five heritage games, including Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Seven Stones, have been incorporated into structured school programmes. This early exposure fosters awareness, participation, and cultural continuity among younger generations.

The Sports Authority of India (SAI), established in 1984 under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, functions as the apex body for sports development. SAI's mandate includes talent identification, training, infrastructure development, and international preparation. Through programmes such as the National Centre of Excellence, Khelo India, and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme, SAI provides scientific training, professional coaching, and global exposure to promising athletes, including those from rural backgrounds.

SAI also operates a nationwide network of sports training centres and academies, upgrades stadiums and sports complexes, and supports the organisation of national and international tournaments. Collaboration with national federations, state governments, educational institutions, and private stakeholders has strengthened India's overall sports ecosystem. Importantly, SAI promotes sports as a tool for social inclusion, with special initiatives for women athletes, para-athletes, and those from rural and tribal regions.

Financial assistance through schemes such as support to National Sports Federations and inclusiveness programmes under Khelo India helps cover coaching, participation, and tournament costs. These measures enable athletes from rural areas to compete at global levels and ensure that traditional games receive sustained institutional backing.

Conclusion

The journeys of India's rural games from village fields to global arenas are stories of cultural resilience, community strength, and strategic evolution. Games once played informally on dusty grounds have, through organisation, media visibility, and policy support, secured places on the international sporting map. Kabaddi and Kho-Kho demonstrate how indigenous sports can thrive as professional, globally recognised disciplines, while Carrom exemplifies the power of diaspora networks and institutional governance. The revival of games like Lagori and Atya Patya reflects ongoing efforts to preserve traditional play within modern frameworks.

Together, these developments show that local traditions can achieve global relevance when grassroots passion converges with professional platforms and cultural pride. Rural games today represent more than athletic competition; they embody India's living heritage, now shared confidently with the world. ■



Viksit Bharat–G RAM G Act 2025 Reforming Rural Employment

The Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 marks a comprehensive statutory reform of MGNREGA, aligning rural employment with the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. It expands the guaranteed employment entitlement from 100 to 125 days per rural household while safeguarding agricultural labour availability through seasonal no-work periods. The Act integrates employment generation with productive rural infrastructure, water security and climate resilience through four defined development verticals. A restructured financial and administrative framework strengthens cooperative federalism, accountability, transparency and digital governance. Overall, the Act repositions rural employment as a strategic tool for sustainable growth, higher incomes and resilient rural livelihoods.

R

ural employment has remained a central pillar of India's social protection architecture for nearly two decades. Since its enactment in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) played a transformative role in providing wage employment,

stabilising rural incomes and creating basic rural infrastructure. However, rural India today is markedly different from what it was two decades ago. Rising incomes, improved connectivity, digital penetration and diversified livelihood opportunities have fundamentally altered the nature of rural employment needs.

Viksit Bharat–G RAM G Act, 2025 At a Glance



- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Replaces MGNREGA
A modern rural employment framework aligned with Viksit Bharat 2047</p> <p>2 Enhanced Employment Guarantee
125 days of wage employment per rural household</p> <p>3 Focused Nature of Works
Four priority areas covering water security, rural infrastructure, livelihood infrastructure and climate resilience</p> <p>4 Local planning with National Integration
Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans linked with national spatial platforms</p> | <p>5 Support to Agriculture
Pause in work for aggregate 60 days during peak sowing and harvesting seasons</p> <p>6 Predictable Funding Framework
Shift to normative funding with protected employment guarantee</p> <p>7 Strong Transparency and Oversight
AI based monitoring, real time dashboards and mandatory social audits</p> <p>8 Centrally Sponsored Structure
Shared Centre–State responsibility with calibrated cost sharing</p> |
|--|---|

Source: Ministry of Rural Development

In this changing context, the assent of the President of India to the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025 marks a major milestone in India's rural development journey. The Act represents a comprehensive statutory overhaul of MGNREGA, aligning rural employment policy with the long-term vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, while strengthening accountability, infrastructure outcomes and income security.

Rural Employment Policy in India since Independence

Since Independence, rural development policies in India have focused on poverty reduction, agricultural productivity and employment generation for surplus and underemployed rural labour. Wage employment programmes gradually emerged as important tools for livelihood support and infrastructure creation, evolving with changing socio-economic conditions.

Early initiatives included: Rural Manpower Programme 1960, Crash Scheme for Rural Employment 1971. These were followed by more structured interventions such as the National Rural Employment Programme and the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, which were later merged into the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana 1993. In 1999, these schemes were consolidated into the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana to improve coordination and coverage. Parallel programmes such as the Employment Assurance Scheme and the Food for Work Programme addressed seasonal unemployment and food security.

A defining moment came with the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act, 1977, which introduced the concept of a statutory right to work. These cumulative experiences culminated in the enactment of MGNREGA in 2005, which provided a nationwide legal guarantee for rural employment.

MGNREGA: Evolution and Structural Constraints

MGNREGA guaranteed at least 100 days of wage employment per rural household annually for unskilled manual work. Over time, several administrative and

technological reforms strengthened its implementation. Women's participation rose steadily from 48% in FY 2013-14 to 58.15% in FY 2025-26. Aadhaar seeding expanded rapidly, the Aadhaar-Based Payment System was widely adopted, and electronic wage payments became nearly universal. Geo-tagging of assets expanded, and an increasing share of works resulted in individual household assets.

Field-level staff played a critical role in sustaining the scale and continuity of implementation, often with limited administrative resources. Despite these gains, deeper structural issues persisted. Monitoring across states revealed instances of works not found on the ground, mismatches between expenditure and physical progress, use of machinery in labour-intensive works, and frequent bypassing of digital attendance systems. Misappropriation accumulated over time, and in the post-pandemic period only a small proportion of households could complete the full 100 days of employment. These trends indicated that while delivery mechanisms improved, the overall architecture of MGNREGA had reached its functional limits. Incremental reforms were no longer sufficient.

Rationale for a New Statutory Framework

The case for reform was also driven by broader socio-economic changes. Rural poverty declined sharply from 27.1% in 2011-12 to 5.3% in 2022-23, fuelled by rising consumption, financial inclusion and expanded welfare coverage. Rural livelihoods became more diversified and digitally integrated, making the

open-ended, demand-driven design of MGNREGA less aligned with contemporary realities.

The Viksit Bharat–G RAM G Act, 2025 responds to this transformed context by modernising the rural employment guarantee, strengthening accountability, and linking employment generation with long-term infrastructure development and climate resilience.

Key Features of the Viksit Bharat–G RAM G Act, 2025

The Viksit Bharat–G RAM G Act, 2025 guarantees 125 days of wage employment per rural household per financial year, extending income security beyond the earlier 100-day entitlement. To safeguard agricultural operations, it provides for an aggregated 60-day no-work period during peak sowing and harvesting seasons, ensuring adequate labour availability for farmers. Workers remain eligible for the full 125 days of employment within the remaining 305 days of the year.

Wages are to be disbursed on a weekly basis, or in any case not later than a fortnight after the work is done. Employment creation is integrated with infrastructure development through four priority verticals: i) Water security through water-related works, ii) Core rural infrastructure, iii) Livelihood-related infrastructure and, iv) Special works to mitigate extreme weather events.

All assets created are aggregated into the Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack, ensuring a coordinated national development approach. Planning is decentralised through Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, which are prepared locally and spatially integrated with national platforms such as PM Gati Shakti.

Financial Architecture and Cooperative Federalism

A major shift under the new Act is the transition from a central sector scheme to a centrally sponsored framework, recognising the inherently local nature of rural employment and asset creation. States now share both cost and responsibility under a normative allocation framework, strengthening incentives for effective implementation and preventing misuse.

The total estimated annual requirement for wages, materials and administrative components is ₹1,51,282 crore, including the

State share. Of this, the estimated Central share is ₹95,692.31 crore. The standard cost-sharing ratio is 60:40 between the Centre and States, 90:10 for North-Eastern and Himalayan States, and 100 per cent Central funding for Union Territories without legislatures.

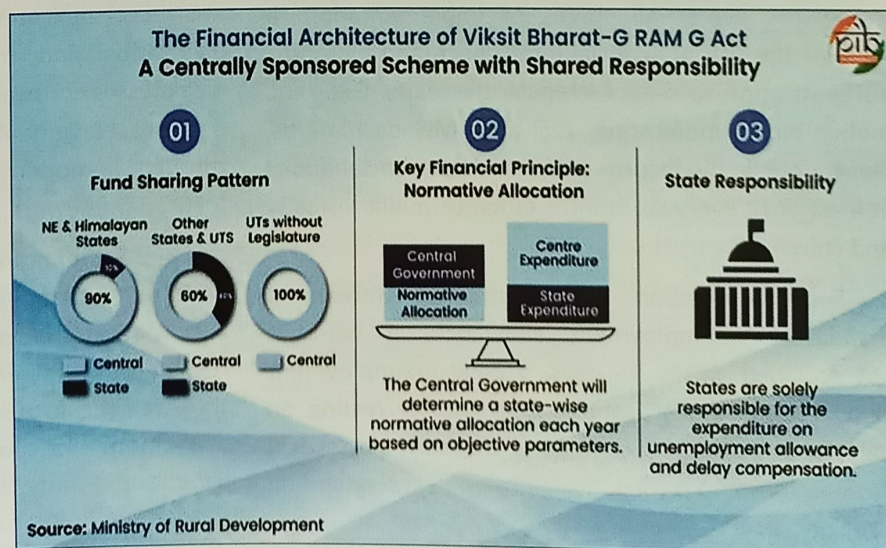
This structure does not impose an undue financial burden on States, which were already bearing part of material and administrative costs earlier. Predictable normative allocations support sound budgeting, while provisions for additional assistance during disasters and stronger oversight mechanisms reinforce fiscal sustainability and accountability.

Strengthening Administration and Accountability

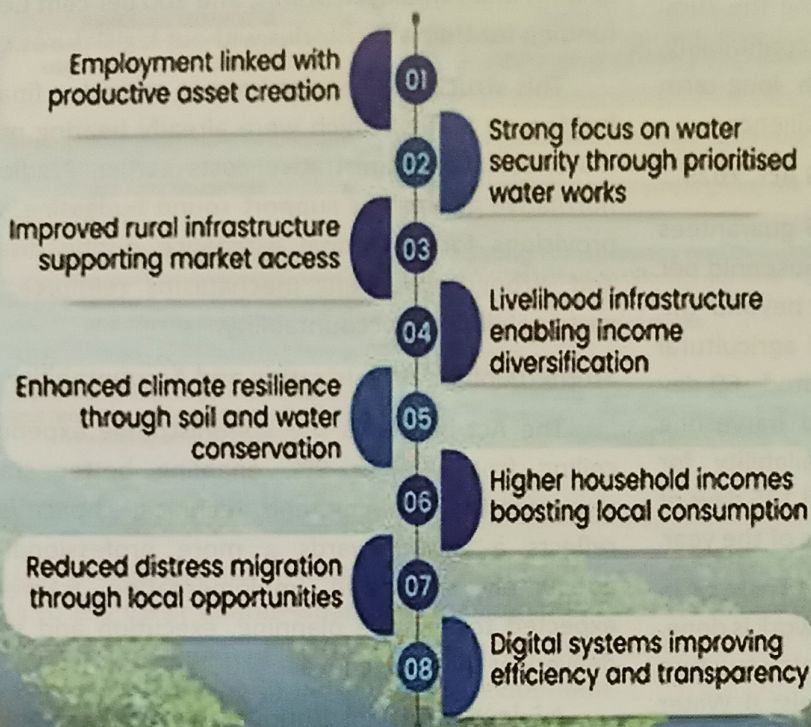
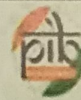
The Act increases the administrative expenditure ceiling from 6% to 9%, enabling better staffing, remuneration, training and technical capacity. This reflects a shift towards a more professional and adequately supported implementation framework, expected to improve planning, execution and service delivery at the village level.

A 5-level robust institutional structure is established to ensure coordinated, accountable and transparent implementation of the Mission:

- Central and State Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Councils for policy guidance and review
- National and State Steering Committees for strategic direction and convergence
- Panchayati Raj Institutions, with Gram Panchayats implementing at least half of the works by cost
- District Programme Coordinators and Programme Officers for planning, payments and social audits and,



Viksit Bharat-G RAM G Act Benefits for the Rural Economy



Source: Ministry of Rural Development

- Gram Sabhas, with a strengthened role in transparency and social audits

The Government of India is empowered to investigate complaints, suspend fund releases in cases of serious irregularities, and direct corrective measures, ensuring financial discipline and timely intervention.

Transparency, Technology and Social Protection

The Act establishes a comprehensive transparency framework across all stages of implementation. It enables the use of artificial intelligence and biometric authentication to detect irregularities early. GPS- and mobile-based monitoring, real-time MIS dashboards, weekly public disclosures and mandatory social audits at least once every six months enhance public visibility and community trust.

Social protection is strengthened through a mandatory unemployment allowance. If work is not provided within 15 days, a daily unemployment allowance becomes payable, with liability resting on the States. Rates and conditions are to be prescribed through rules, ensuring flexibility while safeguarding workers' rights.

Benefits for Rural Economy, Farmers and Labourers

By linking employment with productive asset creation, the Act strengthens the rural economy, raises household incomes and enhances resilience. Priority to water-related works supports agriculture and groundwater recharge. Investments in roads and connectivity improve market access, while livelihood infrastructure such as storage and markets enables income diversification. Climate resilience is enhanced through water harvesting, flood drainage and soil conservation works.

Farmers benefit from assured labour availability during peak seasons, prevention of wage inflation, and improved irrigation, storage and connectivity. Labourers gain from higher

potential earnings through 125 days of guaranteed work, predictable employment through local plans, secure digital wage payments and direct benefits from the assets they create.

Conclusion

The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 represents a decisive shift in India's rural employment policy. While MGNREGA delivered significant gains in participation, digitisation and transparency, persistent structural weaknesses constrained its impact. The new Act builds on past achievements while addressing these limitations through a modern, accountable and infrastructure-focused framework.

By expanding guaranteed employment, embedding strong digital governance, aligning works with national development priorities and climate resilience, and strengthening cooperative federalism, the Act repositions rural employment as a strategic instrument for sustainable growth and resilient livelihoods—fully aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. ■

Kalaripayattu: The Traditional Rural Sports Heritage of Kerala



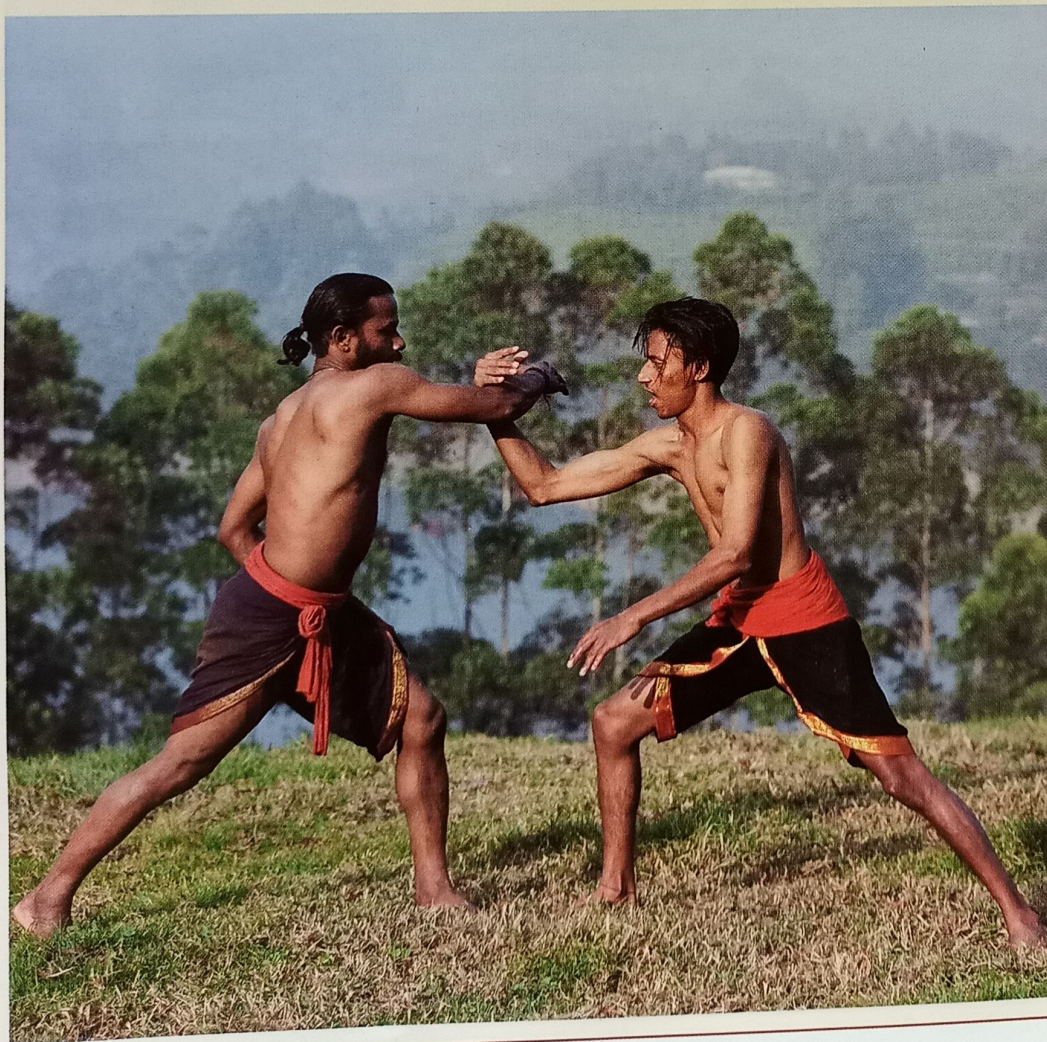
In India's rural society, sports have historically played a significant role beyond mere recreation. Traditional rural sports have served as tools for building physical strength, mental discipline, courage, and social unity. Among such indigenous practices, Kalaripayattu, the traditional martial art of Kerala, occupies a unique and respected position.

Kalaripayattu originated and evolved in the rural landscape of Kerala. Traditionally, a kalari (training arena) was an earthen space constructed near villages or temples. These arenas were centres of learning where local masters known as Gurukkals trained village youth. The training was not limited to combat techniques alone; it focused on self-defence, discipline, endurance, and character building. In a rural setting, Kalaripayattu played an important role in preparing individuals for both physical challenges and social responsibilities.

One of the defining characteristics of Kalaripayattu as a rural sport is its practice with minimal resources. An earthen arena, simple wooden or metal weapons, and indigenous knowledge formed the foundation of training. There was no dependence on modern infrastructure or expensive equipment. This simplicity made the art accessible to rural communities and allowed it to flourish within village life. The training develops flexibility, balance, coordination, courage, and self-control — qualities that align closely with the philosophy of traditional rural sports.

Kalaripayattu is also deeply connected to Kerala's folk culture. The Vadakkan Pattukal, popular folk ballads of northern Kerala, narrate the heroic deeds of Kalaripayattu warriors. These stories were passed down orally through generations in rural communities and reflect the cultural and social importance of the art. Through these narratives, Kalaripayattu became an integral part of village identity and collective memory.

In the modern era, Kalaripayattu has been systematised and recognised as a traditional and indigenous sport. Formal rules, competitions, and scoring systems have been introduced, enabling its inclusion in organised sporting events at state, national, and international levels. Despite this transformation, the rural essence of Kalaripayattu remains intact. Its training methods, values, and cultural roots continue to reflect its village-based origins. Kalaripayattu is not merely a martial art or a competitive sport; it is a living representation of India's rural sports heritage. ■



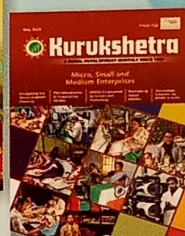
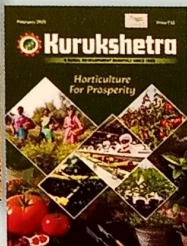
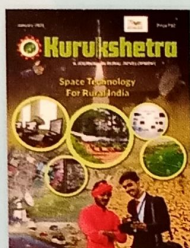
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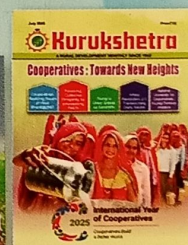
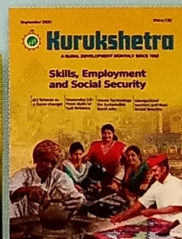
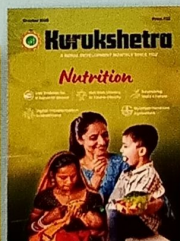
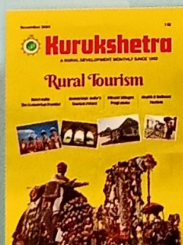
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