



FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: ASSESSING SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE AND SPORTS EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Sports and physical education have increasingly emerged as important components of human development, public health, education and nation-building in India. Over the past few decades, the Government of India has introduced several policies and programmes to expand participation in sports, improve sporting infrastructure, identify talent and integrate physical education with mainstream education. The National Sports Policy, 2001, the Khelo India programme, the Fit India Movement, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 and, more recently, the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 represent significant policy developments in this direction. Despite these initiatives, a considerable gap remains between policy aspirations and their implementation at the grassroots level. Unequal access to quality facilities, inadequate maintenance of infrastructure, shortage of trained physical education teachers and coaches, regional disparities, limited sports-science support, insufficient integration of sports with academic structures and socioeconomic barriers continue to influence participation and performance.

This paper critically examines the development of sports infrastructure and sports education in India, with particular emphasis on the transition from policy formulation to implementation. It analyses the major policy initiatives, the changing status of sports in school and higher education, infrastructure-related challenges and issues of accessibility and inclusion. The paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical methodology based on secondary sources, including government policies, official reports, policy documents and scholarly literature. The analysis indicates that India has made considerable progress in creating an institutional framework for sports development, but effective implementation requires stronger coordination among the Union Government, State Governments, educational institutions, local bodies, sports federations and private stakeholders. The paper argues that sports infrastructure should be viewed not merely as physical assets but as part of an integrated ecosystem involving trained human resources, maintenance, accessibility, coaching, sports science and educational opportunities. Strengthening this ecosystem is essential for transforming India from a country with significant sporting potential into an inclusive and sustainable sporting nation.

Keywords: Sports Infrastructure, Sports Education, Khelo India, National Education Policy 2020, Physical Education, Sports Policy, India, Sports Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports occupy an increasingly significant position in contemporary discussions of education, health, youth development and national development. Participation in sports contributes to physical fitness, psychological well-being, discipline, teamwork, leadership and social interaction. At the national level, sporting success contributes to international visibility, national pride and the development of employment and economic opportunities. The Government of India has consequently recognised sports and physical education as important instruments of human-resource development and social progress.

The policy approach towards sports in India has evolved considerably since independence. Earlier approaches often treated sports primarily as an extracurricular or recreational activity. Gradually, however, sports came to be associated with education, health, youth development, social inclusion and national excellence. The National Sports Policy (NSP) 2001 established two broad objectives: the “broad-basing” of sports and the achievement of excellence at national and international levels. It also recognised the need for more effective integration of sports and physical education with the education curriculum (Government of India, 2001).



Subsequent programmes have attempted to translate these objectives into institutional interventions. Khelo India, launched as a major national programme for sports development, focuses on grassroots participation, sports infrastructure, talent identification, competitions, coaching, sports academies, inclusiveness and physical fitness. The present Khelo India framework includes components relating to the creation and upgradation of sports infrastructure, sports competitions and talent development, Khelo India Centres and sports academies, the Fit India Movement and promotion of inclusiveness through sports (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2026).

The educational dimension has also received renewed attention. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rejects rigid distinctions between curricular and extracurricular activities and explicitly recognises physical education alongside other areas of learning. It emphasises holistic development and provides greater flexibility for students to study physical education as part of their educational experience (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 further states that schools should accord equal importance and status to physical education and provide appropriate curriculum time, infrastructure and teacher preparation (Ministry of Education, 2023). More recently, the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 has sought to establish a stronger, more inclusive and performance-oriented sports ecosystem. The policy emphasises grassroots infrastructure, early talent identification, rural and urban access, inclusion of women and persons with disabilities, integration of sports with education, modern infrastructure and structured training systems (Government of India, 2026).

These developments demonstrate that India possesses an increasingly comprehensive sports-policy framework. However, the existence of policies does not automatically ensure their effective implementation. The central concern of this paper is therefore the gap between **policy intent and practice**. The availability of a sports ground does not necessarily mean that students have meaningful access to sports. Similarly, declaring physical education an integral part of education does not guarantee regular classes, qualified teachers, adequate equipment or institutional support.

The paper consequently examines sports infrastructure and sports education as interconnected components of India's sporting ecosystem. It argues that infrastructure, education, coaching, talent identification, inclusion and sports science must be developed simultaneously if policy objectives are to translate into sustainable outcomes.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a **qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design**. It is based primarily on secondary sources. Government policy documents, official guidelines, institutional reports and relevant academic literature have been examined to understand the development of sports infrastructure and sports education in India.

The major policy documents considered include the National Sports Policy 2001, Khelo India programme documents, National Education Policy 2020, National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 and the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025. Government sources are particularly important because sports is primarily a State subject in India, while the Union Government supplements the efforts of State and Union Territory Governments through national programmes and schemes (Government of India, 2026).

The study uses **policy analysis** as its principal analytical approach. Policy objectives are compared conceptually with implementation requirements relating to infrastructure, human resources, curriculum, accessibility, coaching, inclusion and institutional coordination. The research does not claim to provide a primary statistical assessment of individual states or institutions. Rather, it provides a national-level critical assessment of the policy-to-practice relationship and identifies areas requiring further empirical investigation.

3. EVOLUTION OF SPORTS POLICY IN INDIA

The development of sports policy in India reflects a gradual shift from a narrow emphasis on competitive achievement towards a broader conception of sports as an instrument of social and human development.

The National Sports Policy 1984 was an important early attempt to establish a national framework for improving sporting standards. However, subsequent policy reviews recognised that several objectives remained inadequately implemented. The National Sports Policy 2001 therefore sought to provide a more concrete framework with the twin objectives of broad-basing sports and achieving excellence at national and international levels. The policy also recognised the importance of integrating sports and physical education with education (Government of India, 2001).

This dual objective remains relevant. **Broad-basing** implies increasing participation among children, youth and communities, including groups historically excluded from organised sport. **Excellence**, on the other hand, requires specialised coaching, competition structures, sports science, infrastructure and long-term athlete development. A successful sports policy must therefore address both mass participation and elite performance.

The Khelo India programme represented a significant attempt to operationalise this dual approach. Its



framework includes infrastructure development, competitions, talent identification, support for sports academies, physical fitness and inclusion of women, persons with disabilities and rural and indigenous communities (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2026).

The policy environment has subsequently expanded beyond conventional sports development. NEP 2020 links physical education with holistic education, while the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 places sports within a broader framework of nation-building, economic development, inclusion and human development. This demonstrates a conceptual transformation: sports are no longer viewed simply as an activity outside the classroom but as an important component of education and social development.

4. SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE IN INDIA: FROM FACILITIES TO ECOSYSTEMS

Sports infrastructure constitutes the physical foundation of sporting participation and performance. It includes playgrounds, athletics tracks, indoor halls, swimming pools, gymnasiums, multipurpose courts, equipment, training centres, sports laboratories and facilities for persons with disabilities.

India's infrastructure needs are highly diverse. Urban institutions may face constraints of land availability and high population density, while rural and remote regions may struggle with inadequate facilities, poor connectivity and limited financial resources. Consequently, infrastructure policy cannot rely solely on the construction of large stadiums. Grassroots facilities, school playgrounds, community spaces and accessible local sports centres are equally important. The Khelo India programme explicitly recognises this requirement. Its infrastructure component seeks to fill critical gaps and create or upgrade sporting facilities, while the broader programme includes playfield development and community sports.

An important issue, however, is the distinction between **infrastructure creation and infrastructure utilisation**. A newly constructed facility may have limited developmental value if it is poorly maintained, inaccessible to local communities or not supported by coaches and regular sporting programmes. Infrastructure should therefore be evaluated through indicators such as frequency of use, accessibility, maintenance, equipment quality, availability of coaching and participation levels.

The concept of an infrastructure ecosystem is particularly important. A running track without trained coaches, sports medicine support and regular competitions cannot by itself produce high-level athletes. Likewise, a school playground without a qualified physical education teacher may remain underutilised. Infrastructure investment must therefore be accompanied by investment in human resources and

programming. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) operates several schemes involving training centres and National Centres of Excellence, providing coaching, equipment, boarding, educational support and other services to identified athletes. Such initiatives demonstrate the importance of combining infrastructure with coaching and athlete-support systems.

5. SPORTS EDUCATION AND THE CHANGING INDIAN EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The relationship between sports and education has historically been complex. In many educational institutions, academic subjects have traditionally received greater institutional priority than physical education. Sports participation may also be limited by examination pressures, inadequate facilities or the perception that sporting activities are secondary to academic achievement.

NEP 2020 marks an important conceptual shift. It states that there should be no hard separation between curricular, extracurricular and co-curricular activities and specifically includes physical education among the subjects and areas of learning that contribute to students' holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy approach is reinforced by the NCF-SE 2023, which emphasises that physical education should receive equal importance and status within the school curriculum. It calls for enabling conditions relating to curriculum, infrastructure, school operations and teacher preparation. It also envisages compulsory physical education classes for all students rather than limiting participation to students who demonstrate particular sporting interest (Ministry of Education, 2023).

This shift has major implications. If physical education is genuinely treated as a curricular area, schools must allocate adequate time, employ appropriately trained teachers, maintain facilities and assess student learning meaningfully. The role of the physical education teacher also needs to evolve from merely organising annual sports days to becoming a facilitator of physical literacy, fitness, movement skills, sports participation and healthy lifestyles.

The revised Sports and Physical Education Guidelines under Samagra Shiksha provide further institutional support. The guidelines emphasise daily sports activities, age-appropriate games, yoga, indigenous games, equipment, infrastructure development and the role of physical education teachers and school sports committees. They also provide financial provisions for sports equipment in government schools, with differentiated grants based on school level (Ministry of Education, 2023). These developments represent a significant movement from **sports as an extracurricular activity to sports as an educational component**. Nevertheless, implementation remains



dependent on school-level capacity and state-level execution.

6. THE POLICY–PRACTICE GAP

The central challenge in Indian sports development is not necessarily the absence of policies. Rather, it is the uneven implementation of policies across regions and institutions.

6.1 Regional Disparities

India's states and Union Territories differ substantially in economic resources, geographical conditions, population density and institutional capacity. Consequently, access to sports infrastructure is unlikely to be uniform. Urban and economically stronger regions may possess better facilities, while rural, tribal, hilly and remote areas may face significant constraints.

The policy emphasis on rural and indigenous sports under Khelo India is therefore important. It seeks to broaden participation and recognise sporting traditions outside conventional urban sporting structures. However, equal policy provision does not necessarily produce equal outcomes. Geographic accessibility, transportation, household income and social attitudes can determine whether students can actually use a facility.

6.2 Inadequate Maintenance

Infrastructure development often receives greater attention than maintenance. Sports facilities require continuous expenditure on grounds, equipment, sanitation, lighting, safety and repairs. Without regular maintenance, the quality and safety of facilities deteriorate. Therefore, future sports planning should move from a **construction-centric model to a lifecycle-management model**. Funding mechanisms should include provisions for recurring maintenance and measurable utilisation.

6.3 Shortage of Qualified Human Resources

Infrastructure cannot function effectively without trained professionals. Physical education teachers, coaches, sports administrators, physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists and sports-science professionals are essential to a modern sporting ecosystem. The availability and distribution of qualified personnel remain important concerns, particularly at the grassroots level. Investment in infrastructure should therefore be matched by systematic investment in teacher education, coaching education and professional development.

6.4 Sports and Academic Pressure

Students frequently face competing demands between academic achievement and sporting participation. Even where policy recognises sports as part of holistic education, institutional practices may continue to prioritise examinations and classroom performance. The successful implementation of NEP 2020 requires a change in institutional culture. Sports should not be

treated as an interruption of academic work but as a component that contributes to students' physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

6.5 Accessibility and Inclusion

An inclusive sports system must address gender, disability, socioeconomic status, geography and cultural differences. The Khelo India framework explicitly includes women and persons with disabilities and promotes rural and indigenous sports. Yet inclusion requires more than policy language. Facilities must be physically accessible, equipment must be appropriate, coaching must be sensitive to diverse needs, and participation opportunities must be affordable and safe. For girls and women, issues such as safety, cultural expectations, availability of female coaches, access to appropriate facilities and continuation of participation during adolescence may influence sporting engagement. For persons with disabilities, accessible infrastructure and adapted equipment are essential.

7. ROLE OF KHELO INDIA IN BRIDGING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Khelo India represents one of the most significant attempts to connect national sports policy with grassroots implementation. Its design combines infrastructure, competition, talent identification, coaching, physical fitness and inclusion. The programme's emphasis on Khelo India Centres is particularly relevant because sustainable sporting development requires decentralised access. National-level facilities alone cannot create a broad sporting culture. Children and young people need opportunities to participate close to their homes and schools.

The programme also recognises that talent identification should occur at different levels. A grassroots sports system can potentially create a pathway from participation to structured training and eventually elite competition. However, the success of this pathway depends on coordination. Schools, universities, local authorities, coaches, sports federations and training centres must function as connected components rather than isolated institutions. Data on athletes and facilities should be shared systematically, while referral mechanisms should enable talented students to move from school competitions to district, state and national-level programmes. The Khelo India model therefore provides a foundation, but its long-term effectiveness depends on institutional implementation, monitoring and continuity.

8. SPORTS EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities and colleges occupy an important position between school-level participation and professional or



elite sport. Higher education institutions can provide advanced coaching, competition exposure, sports scholarships, sports science and opportunities for students to combine academic and sporting careers.

University sports also have a significant social role. They can encourage students from different states and backgrounds to interact through competition and develop leadership and teamwork. However, sports facilities and programmes vary widely among higher education institutions. Some universities possess extensive sporting infrastructure, while others have limited facilities. The development of university sports therefore requires stronger institutional standards and long-term investment.

Higher education can also contribute to the professionalisation of the sports sector. Programmes in physical education, sports management, sports psychology, exercise science, physiotherapy, nutrition and coaching can create the human-resource base necessary for a modern sporting ecosystem. The future of Indian sports consequently depends not only on producing athletes but also on producing qualified professionals capable of supporting those athletes.

9. SPORTS, TECHNOLOGY AND SPORTS SCIENCE

Contemporary competitive sport increasingly depends on technology and scientific support. Athlete performance can be improved through biomechanics, exercise physiology, nutrition, psychology, injury prevention, performance analytics and recovery science. India has begun developing institutional capacity in sports science, but access to these services remains uneven. Elite athletes may receive sophisticated support while grassroots participants may have little or no access to professional expertise.

A more integrated model should gradually extend sports-science awareness to schools and universities. Basic knowledge regarding nutrition, injury prevention, physical conditioning and psychological well-being can improve both participation and performance. Digital technologies can also improve infrastructure management. A national or state-level digital sports-infrastructure database could record facility location, sports offered, capacity, accessibility, condition, utilisation and maintenance status. Such a system would allow policymakers to identify infrastructure gaps and monitor whether facilities are being effectively used.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, the following measures are proposed:

10.1 Develop a National Sports Infrastructure Audit

A systematic audit should map sports facilities across schools, colleges, universities and communities. The audit should evaluate not only the existence of infrastructure but also its condition, accessibility, utilisation, safety and maintenance.

10.2 Strengthen School-Level Sports

Every school should have access to age-appropriate opportunities for physical education and sports. Where space is limited, schools can collaborate with nearby community facilities, universities and local sports centres.

10.3 Invest in Human Resources

The expansion of sports infrastructure should be accompanied by recruitment and professional development of physical education teachers and coaches. Continuing professional development should include modern coaching methods, sports science, inclusive education and child safeguarding.

10.4 Create Sustainable Maintenance Mechanisms

Sports infrastructure grants should include recurring maintenance provisions. Institutions receiving public funding should maintain utilisation and maintenance records and undertake periodic safety audits.

10.5 Strengthen School–University–Community Linkages

A structured pathway should connect schools with colleges, universities, sports academies and Khelo India Centres. This would allow promising athletes to receive appropriate training and competition opportunities.

10.6 Promote Inclusive Sports Infrastructure

All publicly funded sports facilities should incorporate accessibility standards for persons with disabilities. Facilities should also address the needs of girls and women through safe, accessible and appropriately designed spaces.

10.7 Integrate Sports Science

Universities and specialised institutions should develop partnerships with schools and sports academies to provide access to expertise in nutrition, psychology, physiotherapy, biomechanics and exercise science.

11. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that India has moved considerably from an approach centred primarily on elite achievement towards a broader sports-development framework. The National Sports Policy 2001 established the conceptual foundation of mass participation and excellence, while Khelo India created a more operational mechanism for infrastructure, competitions, talent development and inclusion. NEP 2020 further expanded the meaning of sports by placing physical education within the framework of holistic education.

The most significant change is therefore conceptual: **sports are increasingly being recognised as an**



educational, social and developmental necessity rather than merely a competitive activity.

Nevertheless, policy effectiveness depends on implementation capacity. India's federal structure makes this particularly complex because States and Union Territories have primary responsibility for sports development, while the Union Government provides supplementary programmes and schemes. This arrangement makes intergovernmental coordination essential.

The policy-to-practice gap should therefore not be interpreted simply as a failure of government schemes. It is also a consequence of differences in institutional capacity, geography, financial resources, human resources and local priorities. Another important finding is that infrastructure and education cannot be separated. A sports ground without sports education may remain underused, while a strong physical education programme without adequate facilities may be unable to provide meaningful opportunities for participation. The two must be developed together.

The NCF-SE 2023 provides an important conceptual direction by emphasising equal importance for physical education and calling for appropriate infrastructure and teacher preparation. The challenge is to ensure that this policy principle becomes a daily reality in schools. Similarly, Khelo India provides a framework for connecting infrastructure with competition and talent development. Its effectiveness will depend increasingly on the quality of local implementation, facility utilisation, coaching and monitoring.

The recently introduced Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 provides an additional opportunity to consolidate these efforts. Its emphasis on grassroots development, inclusion, integration with education and modern sporting infrastructure indicates a move towards a more comprehensive sports ecosystem.

14. CONCLUSION

India stands at an important stage in the development of its sporting ecosystem. The country has established a substantial policy framework that recognises sports as an instrument of physical well-being, education, social inclusion, youth development and national excellence. From the National Sports Policy 2001 to Khelo India, NEP 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 and Khelo Bharat Niti 2025, policy thinking has progressively expanded the role of sports in Indian society.

The central challenge, however, is to convert policy commitments into consistent practice. Building stadiums and sports facilities is only one component of sports development. Sustainable outcomes require functional infrastructure, regular maintenance, qualified teachers and coaches, sports-science support, competitions, talent pathways and inclusive access.

Sports education deserves particular attention. The recognition of physical education as an integral part of holistic education under NEP 2020 provides an important opportunity to transform school culture. The effective implementation of this vision requires institutional commitment, adequate curriculum time, qualified teachers and appropriate infrastructure.

Similarly, infrastructure planning needs to become more decentralised, inclusive and utilisation-oriented. Rural, tribal, remote and economically disadvantaged communities should receive meaningful access to facilities and coaching. Women and persons with disabilities should be integrated into planning from the beginning rather than being addressed through separate or supplementary measures.

Ultimately, India's ambition of becoming a strong sporting nation will depend less on the number of policies announced and more on the quality of their implementation. The transition **from policy to practice** requires a coordinated ecosystem in which education, infrastructure, coaching, sports science, governance and community participation reinforce one another.

India possesses a large youth population, growing sporting aspirations and an increasingly supportive policy environment. The next stage must therefore focus on implementation, accountability and equitable access. If policy objectives are translated into accessible sporting opportunities at the school, community and university levels, sports can become a powerful instrument not only for producing champions but also for creating healthier, more confident, disciplined and socially connected citizen.

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