



ASSESSING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT SPORTS POLICIES IN STRENGTHENING SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE AND EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Sports have increasingly emerged as an important instrument of human development, public health, social inclusion, youth empowerment and national identity. In India, the development of sports has historically been constrained by inadequate infrastructure, uneven regional access, limited school-level participation, shortages of qualified coaches and the tendency to treat physical education as secondary to academic achievement. In response to these challenges, the Government of India has introduced a range of policies and programmes intended to strengthen the country's sporting ecosystem. The National Sports Policy 2001, Khelo India, the Fit India Movement, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) programmes and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 collectively represent an important shift from an exclusively elite-oriented approach towards broader participation, talent identification, sports education and infrastructure development. More recently, the Khelo Bharat Niti–2025 has sought to provide a comprehensive policy framework extending from grassroots participation to international sporting excellence.

This paper critically assesses the role of government sports policies in strengthening sports infrastructure and education in India. It examines policy evolution, infrastructure development, integration of sports with school and higher education, talent identification, inclusion, institutional coordination and implementation challenges. The analysis suggests that government intervention has substantially expanded the institutional architecture for sports development, but significant disparities remain in infrastructure quality, accessibility, maintenance, coaching, school-level implementation and rural participation. The paper argues that future policy effectiveness will depend less on creating isolated facilities and more on developing an integrated, measurable and locally responsive sports ecosystem connecting schools, universities, communities, sports federations and high-performance institutions.

Keywords: sports policy, sports infrastructure, physical education, Khelo India, National Education Policy 2020, sports education, India, talent development, grassroots sports.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports constitute a multidimensional component of national development. Beyond competitive achievement, regular participation in physical activity contributes to physical fitness, psychological well-being, discipline, teamwork, social interaction and the development of leadership capabilities. In educational settings, sports can complement academic learning by creating opportunities for experiential learning, cooperation and personal development. Consequently, the quality of a country's sports ecosystem depends not only upon elite athletes and international medals but also upon the accessibility of playfields, trained teachers, coaches, competitions, equipment and institutional support available to children and young people.

India presents a particularly important context for examining the relationship between public policy and sports development. The country has a large youth population and considerable sporting diversity, yet sports participation and infrastructure have historically been uneven across states, districts, socioeconomic groups and educational institutions. Urban centres may possess sophisticated stadiums and training facilities, while many rural and economically disadvantaged communities continue to experience limited access to suitable playfields and coaching. Similar disparities are visible within the education system, where the availability of qualified physical education personnel, equipment and dedicated sports facilities varies considerably between institutions.



Government policy has therefore become a central mechanism for attempting to overcome structural limitations. The Sports Authority of India was established following the 1982 Asian Games and has subsequently developed programmes concerned with talent identification, athlete training, infrastructure, sports science and sports promotion. Its current institutional framework includes National Centres of Excellence, SAI Training Centres and other promotional schemes.

The policy environment has expanded considerably through programmes such as Khelo India and Fit India. Khelo India explicitly combines infrastructure development with competitions, talent development, sports academies and inclusion, while Fit India seeks to develop fitness as part of everyday life. The National Education Policy 2020 has also altered the conceptual position of sports within education by advocating the integration of physical education into the broader curriculum and rejecting rigid distinctions between curricular, extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

Against this background, the present paper assesses how government sports policies have contributed to the strengthening of sports infrastructure and education in India, while also examining persistent implementation gaps and possible policy directions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical and policy-review approach. It is based primarily on secondary information obtained from official government policy documents, programme guidelines, institutional reports and publicly available policy materials. Particular attention is given to the Khelo Bharat Niti-2025, Khelo India programme documentation, Sports Authority of India materials, National Education Policy 2020 and government guidelines concerning sports and physical education under Samagra Shiksha. These sources are analysed thematically around five dimensions: infrastructure, education, participation, talent development and inclusion.

The study does not claim to provide a statistical evaluation of the causal impact of individual government schemes because comparable longitudinal datasets covering infrastructure availability, participation, expenditure and sporting outcomes across all Indian states are not consistently available in the reviewed policy material. The discussion therefore focuses on policy design, institutional mechanisms and observable programme directions rather than attributing specific changes in sporting performance exclusively to individual policies.

3. EVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT SPORTS POLICY IN INDIA

Government involvement in Indian sports has evolved from a predominantly elite-performance orientation towards a broader developmental approach. Earlier interventions concentrated significantly on national teams, competitive success and the creation of specialised institutions. The establishment of the Sports Authority of India represented an important institutional development because it created a national organisation responsible for promoting sports, identifying talent and developing training systems. SAI currently identifies infrastructure development, talent identification, inclusivity, fitness and high-performance training among its principal functions.

The National Sports Policy 2001 provided an important policy framework by emphasising both broad-based participation and sporting excellence. Subsequently, the Khelo India programme represented a more comprehensive approach by linking playfield development, community coaching, competitions, talent identification, school and university sports, infrastructure gaps and inclusion.

The Khelo India framework demonstrates an important conceptual shift. Rather than considering infrastructure simply as large stadiums, it recognises the importance of playfields, local centres, training facilities and sports academies. Its stated components include creation and upgrading of sports infrastructure, sports competitions and talent development, Khelo India Centres and sports academies, fitness promotion and inclusiveness.

The emergence of Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 represents another stage in policy development. The policy builds on the foundations of the National Sports Policy 2001, Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme, while articulating a broader objective of creating an inclusive sporting ecosystem from grassroots participation to international excellence.

This progression indicates that Indian sports policy is increasingly being conceptualised as a continuum rather than as a collection of disconnected programmes.

4. GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure represents one of the most visible areas of government intervention. Competitive sports require appropriate grounds, courts, equipment, training centres, indoor facilities, sports science laboratories and athlete-support services. However, infrastructure policy must also consider accessibility and utilisation. A sophisticated stadium that is rarely available to schoolchildren may contribute less to mass participation than a well-maintained community playfield that is regularly used.



The Khelo India framework explicitly identifies infrastructure creation and upgradation as a central component. Government documentation has also recognised critical infrastructure gaps and the need for development of playfields. Earlier Khelo India guidelines proposed substantial financial allocation towards infrastructure and sought to develop a national inventory of playfields and sports infrastructure using GIS technology to improve utilisation.

This approach is significant because sports infrastructure should increasingly be understood as a network rather than as isolated construction projects. Schools, universities, municipal facilities, panchayat-level playfields, SAI centres and private academies can collectively constitute a regional sporting ecosystem. Such an approach can improve utilisation and reduce duplication of expensive infrastructure.

SAI also plays a central role in maintaining and operating specialised facilities. Its current network includes more than 180 training centres, over 20 National Centres of Excellence and 12 regional centres, demonstrating the scale of institutional infrastructure developed under the national sports system.

Nevertheless, infrastructure expansion alone does not guarantee sporting development. Facilities require trained personnel, regular maintenance, equipment replacement, scheduling systems, safety standards and predictable operating budgets. In several parts of the country, the more significant policy challenge may therefore be utilisation and maintenance rather than construction.

5. SPORTS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION UNDER NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020

One of the most significant developments in India's sports education policy is the changing relationship between physical education and mainstream education. Historically, sports in many educational institutions were treated as extracurricular activities, with academic subjects receiving greater institutional attention. NEP 2020 challenges this hierarchy by promoting holistic development and explicitly recognising physical education alongside other areas of learning. It states that there should be no rigid separation between curricular, extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

This conceptual change is important because meaningful sports development begins before students enter specialised training programmes. Schools constitute the largest institutional platform for identifying sporting interests and potential talent. If sports participation is integrated into routine education, the likelihood of identifying children with athletic potential increases.

The Ministry of Education has subsequently issued revised guidelines for sports and physical education under Samagra Shiksha. These guidelines emphasise daily sports activities, equipment procurement, age-appropriate games, yoga, indigenous sports, infrastructure development, sports committees and the role of physical education teachers.

The policy also provides differentiated sports equipment grants for government schools, including annual provisions of ₹5,000 for primary schools, ₹10,000 for upper-primary schools and up to ₹25,000 for secondary and senior-secondary schools under the cited guidelines. Additional support may be available where students achieve medals in Khelo India National School Games.

These measures illustrate an attempt to move from policy recognition to resource allocation. However, the effectiveness of such grants depends on purchasing power, procurement procedures, storage, maintenance and the presence of personnel capable of using equipment effectively.

6. KHELO INDIA AND GRASSROOTS SPORTS DEVELOPMENT

Khelo India has become one of the most prominent instruments for broadening India's sporting base. Its significance lies in the connection it attempts to establish between mass participation and elite development. National-level competitions such as the Khelo India Youth Games and Khelo India University Games create competitive pathways through which young athletes can gain exposure and potentially enter higher levels of training.

The programme also recognises the importance of rural and indigenous sports. Government documentation identifies disciplines such as Mallakhamb, Kalaripayattu, Gatka, Thang-Ta, Yogasana and Silambam for promotion, with support potentially covering infrastructure, equipment, coaching and training. This is particularly relevant to India because sporting development should not be restricted to globally dominant disciplines. Indigenous sports can provide culturally appropriate entry points for participation and contribute to the preservation of local sporting traditions.

Khelo India also provides opportunities for persons with disabilities and women, thereby expanding the social objectives of sports policy. The inclusion of para-sports and women's participation reflects an increasingly rights-oriented approach to sports development rather than a narrow focus on medals.

The major challenge is to ensure continuity. A child may participate in a school competition but fail to progress because of inadequate coaching, transportation,



equipment or access to higher-level facilities. Therefore, talent identification must be connected to a clearly defined development pathway.

7. ROLE OF SPORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Universities occupy an intermediate position between school-level participation and professional or elite sport. Government policy has increasingly recognised this role through university-level competitions and sports promotion initiatives. Khelo India University Games provide a national competitive platform and encourage universities to treat sports as an institutional component of student development.

Higher education institutions can contribute to sports development in several ways. They can provide specialised facilities, recruit qualified coaches, establish sports science support, develop interdisciplinary academic programmes and create opportunities for student-athletes to balance education with competition.

The university environment is particularly suitable for integrating sports with academic research. Departments of physical education, psychology, nutrition, physiotherapy, biomechanics, management and data science can contribute to athlete development. Consequently, sports infrastructure within universities should not be conceptualised solely as grounds and stadiums; it can also include laboratories, recovery centres, performance-analysis systems and research facilities.

The development of sports hubs and centres of excellence in universities, envisaged within the broader Khelo India framework, has the potential to strengthen this ecosystem. However, implementation needs institutional accountability, professional management and long-term funding.

8. FIT INDIA AND THE EXPANSION OF SPORTS CULTURE

The Fit India Movement represents a complementary dimension of government sports policy. Whereas elite programmes focus on competitive performance, Fit India is oriented towards incorporating physical fitness into everyday life. The movement was launched in 2019 with the objective of making fitness an integral part of daily living.

This distinction is important. A national sports system cannot depend exclusively on the production of elite athletes. A broad participation base creates a larger pool from which talent can emerge while simultaneously generating public-health and social benefits.

Fitness-oriented initiatives can also help alter institutional cultures. If schools, colleges, workplaces and communities regard physical activity as a routine component of life, demand for accessible sports

infrastructure increases. The long-term success of such initiatives therefore depends on whether they are supported by sufficient public spaces, safe playfields, trained personnel and inclusive programming.

9. INCLUSION AND EQUITY IN SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE

The effectiveness of government sports policy must also be evaluated in terms of equity. Access to sports opportunities is influenced by geography, gender, disability, household income and the availability of facilities.

Government programmes increasingly acknowledge these dimensions. SAI identifies sports for women, community development, social integration and gender equality among the broader social objectives of sports development. Khelo India similarly includes promotion of sports among women and persons with disabilities.

However, formal inclusion in policy documents does not automatically produce substantive equality. Girls may face restrictions on mobility, lack of safe changing facilities or inadequate access to coaching. Persons with disabilities require accessible infrastructure rather than merely nominal participation opportunities. Rural athletes may face transportation and financial barriers even when competitions technically remain open to them.

Consequently, future infrastructure standards should include accessibility, gender-sensitive design, safety, transport connectivity and community utilisation as measurable indicators.

10. MAJOR CHALLENGES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Despite substantial policy development, several challenges continue to affect the effectiveness of sports initiatives.

First, regional inequality remains significant. Sports facilities and coaching opportunities are not distributed uniformly across states, districts and rural-urban locations. A national programme requires locally differentiated implementation rather than assuming that the same intervention will work equally well everywhere.

Second, infrastructure maintenance requires greater attention. Construction is highly visible and politically attractive, whereas maintenance produces fewer immediate public signals. Yet deteriorating facilities can substantially reduce the practical value of infrastructure investment.

Third, human resources remain critical. A sports ground without a competent physical education teacher or coach has limited developmental value. Investment in continuous professional development for coaches,



teachers, administrators and sports scientists should therefore accompany infrastructure spending.

Fourth, school-level academic pressures can undermine sports participation. Although NEP 2020 promotes holistic education, implementation depends on institutional practices. Where examination performance remains the dominant measure of educational success, students may continue to experience pressure to reduce time spent in sports.

Fifth, coordination among institutions remains necessary. Sports development involves the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Ministry of Education, state governments, local authorities, SAI, universities, schools, national federations and private organisations. Fragmentation can lead to duplication, inconsistent standards and unclear responsibility.

Sixth, monitoring systems require strengthening. Policy evaluation should move beyond reporting expenditure or numbers of facilities constructed. Measures should include utilisation rates, participation levels, retention of athletes, female participation, disability inclusion, coaching availability, facility condition and progression from grassroots to higher competitive levels.

11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A stronger sports ecosystem requires a shift from infrastructure-centric policy towards integrated ecosystem development.

First, India should develop **district-level sports development plans** based on local population characteristics, existing facilities, sporting traditions and talent profiles. This would enable investment to respond to actual local needs.

Second, **school sports infrastructure should be treated as community infrastructure** wherever feasible. With appropriate safeguards and scheduling, school grounds could serve surrounding communities beyond school hours, improving utilisation and expanding participation.

Third, government should establish stronger **maintenance and lifecycle funding mechanisms**. Infrastructure grants should include provisions for maintenance, equipment replacement, safety inspections and periodic renovation.

Fourth, **physical education teachers should receive systematic professional development**. Teachers need competence not only in traditional physical activities but also in talent identification, inclusive sports, child safety, fitness assessment and basic sports science.

Fifth, **school-to-university talent pathways should be strengthened**. Khelo India competitions should be connected more systematically with institutional

scholarships, coaching opportunities, sports academies and university admissions or support mechanisms where appropriate.

Sixth, **women's and disability sports should be incorporated into infrastructure planning from the design stage** rather than treated as separate additions. Accessible changing rooms, appropriate equipment, safe transport and trained support personnel should form part of standard facility requirements.

Seventh, **digital infrastructure should support sports governance**. A national or interoperable sports infrastructure database could provide information about facility location, condition, available sports, operating hours and accessibility. Earlier Khelo India policy documentation itself recognised the value of a national GIS-based inventory of playfields and sports infrastructure.

Finally, **policy evaluation should focus on outcomes rather than inputs**. The number of facilities constructed is an input; the number of children regularly using those facilities, the retention of participants, the progression of athletes and the improvement of equitable access are more meaningful outcome indicators.

12. CONCLUSION

Government sports policies have played an increasingly significant role in reshaping India's sports ecosystem. The institutional contribution of SAI, the infrastructure and talent-development orientation of Khelo India, the mass-fitness focus of Fit India and the educational transformation encouraged by NEP 2020 collectively demonstrate a movement towards a more comprehensive understanding of sports development. The emergence of Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 further signals an attempt to integrate grassroots participation, social development, economic opportunities and international sporting excellence within a common national framework.

The principal policy achievement is therefore not merely the creation of additional sporting facilities. It is the gradual institutionalisation of the idea that sports should be connected with education, health, youth development, social inclusion and national development. Yet the effectiveness of this transition depends heavily on implementation. Infrastructure must be accessible and maintained; schools require qualified teachers and regular sporting opportunities; universities need stronger sports ecosystems; and talent identification must be connected to sustained developmental pathways.

India's future sports policy should consequently emphasise integration, equity and measurable outcomes. A successful national sports system will not be defined solely by international medals or the number of stadiums



constructed. Its deeper measure will be whether children in rural and urban communities, girls and boys, students with disabilities and young people from economically diverse backgrounds can access safe, affordable and high-quality opportunities to participate, develop and excel. Government policy has established much of the institutional foundation for such a system. The next phase requires sustained implementation, stronger inter-institutional coordination and evidence-based monitoring to convert policy ambition into durable sporting capacity.

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