

**NO COUNTRY FOR ATHLETES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
STRUCTURAL REASONS BEHIND INDIA'S SPORTING
FAILURES AND A ROADMAP FOR REFORM**

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Abstract

India, home to over a billion people, is internationally recognised for achievements in technology, entrepreneurship, and the arts, but has not made an impression in international sporting competitions, particularly at the Olympic level. Moving beyond medal tallies and performance statistics, a deeper structural analysis reveals systemic factors that shape athlete performance and sporting outcomes at the international stage. Many of these challenges are not newly identified; they have been acknowledged in policy discussions, government reports, academic literature, and public discourse, but not examined through an integrated framework. The central challenge in India's sporting landscape is not a talent deficit or population scale, but rather systemic barriers embedded within social and institutional structures. Additionally, India is at a transitional moment, where regulatory reforms, sports policies, and new laws indicate a positive shift. However, it remains necessary to critically evaluate whether these reforms address the entrenched structural barriers that have historically held India back. Learning from high-performing nations will help India overcome these challenges. A comprehensive examination of policy frameworks, governance models, athletes' experiences, and resource allocation patterns is essential for understanding the operational realities of sport in India and for identifying pathways to sustainable reform and international competitiveness.

I Introduction

VINCE LOMBARDI, the legendary coach, once said, "*Winning is not everything, winning is the only thing*". This phrase conveys more than a motto; it also reflects how nations view winning in sports as a means of enhancing national pride, increasing global influence, and building unity. Unfortunately, India's national governing bodies and laws do not support that winning mentality and therefore do not create an opportunity

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for India to be in a position of strength on the international sporting stage. India has successfully sent missions to the Moon and Mars, built billion-dollar unicorn companies, and created one of the largest higher education systems in the world; however, in international sporting events, particularly the Olympics, India continues to underperform. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, where India won seven medals, was touted as its best performance, yet the country was still placed 48th in the medal tally.¹ At the next and most recent Olympics, in Paris 2024, India performed even worse, securing zero gold medals and dropping in the rankings to 71st, placing it behind nations such as Uzbekistan, Kenya, Dominica, and Pakistan.² A similar disappointing pattern can be observed in international championships beyond the Olympics, where India has consistently failed to achieve any notable success, aside from occasional victories in cricket and, more recently, a breakthrough in chess. These recurring underperformances point to a deeper problem and not mere isolated failures. China can be taken up as an example of how athletic excellence can be systematically cultivated through a top-down, state-led model. It did not become a sporting superpower by accident; it achieved this through the implementation of a carefully planned national strategy supported by robust legal frameworks, well-structured governance systems, and targeted resource allocation. India has often attributed its underperformance as a sporting nation to funding constraints; however, equally significant contributors include the lack of sustained political vision, competing national priorities, and prevailing cultural attitudes towards sport. The broader structural and systemic causes of India's limited success in international sport require critical examination, as it is unlikely that this challenge will be resolved without targeted intervention.

The problem is not primarily one of talent availability or logistical capacity, but of institutional intent and strategic prioritisation. Sports have not been treated as equally as other sectors that generate immediate political or economic returns; instead, they have been a low-priority area because of their weaker correlation with electoral outcomes. Thus, sports have been ignored and treated as low-priority matters, even in parliamentary debates.

II Cultural neglect: Academics over athletics and the legal vacuum in sports education

For centuries, Indian society has accorded sports lower priority than academics, owing to cultural influences and the historical precedent of prioritising mental development

1 Rahul Venkat "Medals won by India at Tokyo 2020 Olympics: Know them all", *available at*: <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/india-tokyo-2020-olympics-medals> (last visited on Aug. 20, 2025).

2 Utathya Nag "Paris 2024 Olympics: India medals tally and winners list", *available at*: <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/paris-2024-olympics-india-medals-tally-winners-table> (last visited on Aug. 12, 2025)

over physical development. The British established a colonial education system that produced clerks and similar office workers who could write and communicate in English; this legacy remains a significant influence on contemporary educational systems.

Most modern schools emphasise mental fitness through degrees, certificates, and diplomas, while ignoring or giving minimal attention to the development of physical skills through sports or athletic abilities. Education is the most dependable means of increasing one's earning capacity and securing future employment; this is the reason behind Indian society's continual focus on education, coupled with a belief in the gambler's win-lose scenario regarding a career in sports, and not having enough support and resources for pursuing any meaningful success within this area. Until India establishes a robust support system that can offer stable sporting careers and infrastructure across socioeconomic strata, this mindset will persist.

India's preference for academics over sports isn't just anecdotal; real data backs it. A Puma Nielsen Survey (2023) found that children spend an average of only 86 minutes per week on sports, far short of the World Health Organisation's recommended 420 minutes, because "focus on studies" is cited by 46% and "lack of time" by 53% of respondents.³ In comparison, 46% stated that their need to concentrate on academics prevented them from participating in sports or fitness routines.⁴ Meanwhile, *ASER: 2024 report*⁵ shows that 69% of schools have playgrounds, only 16.5% have a dedicated Physical Education (PE) teacher, and 23.9% have no such facilities.⁶ Schools struggle to provide PE to students; they schedule PE classes, but rigorous exam pressure often converts those into extra academic lessons.⁷ These figures clearly show that sports in India are still seen as secondary. For many parents, academics remain the safer path, as sports are not viewed as a reliable means of earning a living.⁸ To develop a true sporting culture in India, it will be necessary to establish a national system of fully integrated sports schools that fosters a sporting culture from elementary school, integrating academics and sports. Additionally, while the National Education Policy

3 Business Standard, "Indian kids now spend less time than adults on physical activities: Survey", *Business Standard*, Mar. 27, 2023.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, *ASER Centre*, available at: https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER_2024_Final-Report_25_1_24.pdf (last visited on Aug. 15, 2025).

6 Reshma Ravishanker, "Over 23 % schools in India have no playground: Report", *Education World*, Nov. 8, 2022; Kevin Mendonsa, "As govt schools lack PE teachers, kids deprived of physical education", *The Times of India*, July 2, 2025.

7 Education for all in India, "Sports as a subject in school education in India: Current status and future directions", available at: <https://educationforallinindia.com/sports-as-a-subject-in-school-education-in-india-current-status-and-future-directions/> (last visited on Sep. 15, 2025).

8 R. Kumar, "Building a healthy nation: A white paper on Olympic sports and the Indian education system" 13 *J. Fam. Med. and Primary Care* 2805 (2024).

(NEP) outlines an educational framework for sports, it does not treat sports as an essential tradition of education in the same way it does other forms of education.⁹

The NEP identifies sports-integrated learning as a way to promote teamwork, fitness, and well-being; however, like many educational methods, it presents sports as merely one of several forms of physical activity that can support education. Sports and physical education will not be mandated as components of the school or higher education curriculum.¹⁰ Similarly, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for School Education 2023 recognises physical education as a mandatory component of the school curriculum.¹¹ Yet, it permits schools without playgrounds to use public spaces and allows non-specialist teachers to substitute for trained physical educators, effectively undermining the seriousness of sports in institutional practice.¹² These diluted norms and flexible workarounds suggest that sports are still viewed as supplementary rather than core, creating loopholes that allow institutions to deprioritise physical education in favour of academics, often without consequence. The absence of a statutory mandate and the failure to treat physical education as a legal right under school education law suggest that it continue to view it as option rather than essential.

III Political heads of sporting federations

India's sports federations are highly politicised. Most are led not by sports professionals or athletes but by politicians and bureaucrats who see these organisations as tools to extend their influence. Instead of appointing technically proficient, athlete-centric professionals, India often selects figureheads, politicians, bureaucrats, or businessmen whose priorities are influence, contracts, or legacy creation. A former chief and Member of Parliament managed the federation as if it were his personal domain until allegations of sexual harassment and abuse of power led to large-scale protests by prominent Indian wrestlers in 2023.¹³ Although he has been partially cleared of

9 Many countries have established dedicated sports schools. China runs over 2,000 state sports schools focused on early talent development. Germany, Finland, and Australia integrate sports into public education, balancing training and academics. Singapore has a national sports school, while Russia and South Korea also follow similar models. In India, sports schools exist under SAI and state initiatives, but they are limited, less integrated with academics, and lack a nationwide scale.

10 Ministry of Education, "National Education Policy 2020", available at: https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf (last visited Jul.20, 2025). See- Para 4.6, 4.8, 5.15, 5.25 etc.

11 National Council of Educational Research and Training, "National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023", available at: https://dse.education.gov.in/sites/default/files/guidelines/ncf_2023.pdf (last visited on Aug. 1, 2025).

12 *Id.*, s. 8.2.

13 M. Sebastian, "India's Ex-Wrestling Chief Cleared of Sexually Harassing Girl", *BBC News*, May 27, 2025.

the criminal charges brought against him, ongoing protests and dissatisfaction among India's top wrestlers, including Olympic medalists and world champions, indicate that discontent remains unresolved. The governance crisis in Indian sports federations is exemplified by another major federation, which is surprisingly chaired by the owner of SpiceJet Airlines. Although the federation's official term ended in February 2025, elections have been postponed indefinitely, raising concerns about transparency and accountability.¹⁴

Despite the National Sports Development Code of India, 2011, which establishes democratic norms, term limits, age caps, and requires at least 25% representation of elite athletes in executive bodies, political interference continues to affect the governance of Indian sports federations. The High Court of Delhi judgment in *Rahul Mehra v. Union of India* (2022)¹⁵ reasserted that compliance with the Sports Code is "non-negotiable," mandating uniform adherence across national and state-level federations and linking government recognition to compliance with the Code's constitutional, electoral, and functional mandates. Yet in practice, most NSFs do not comply with the code or related policies. Thus, India's federation crisis is not one of regulatory absence, but of regulatory defiance tolerated by the State.

The National Sports Governance Act, 2025, (NSGA) introduces statutory mechanisms for athlete representation, ethical oversight, and election supervision that, in theory, could weaken the long-standing political capture of sports federations.¹⁶ By mandating athlete presence within executive committees and subjecting federations to recognition-based regulatory control, the Act creates institutional entry points for accountability. However, since leadership positions such as President and Secretary General are not exclusively reserved for former athletes, the possibility of political dominance remains structurally intact. The Act therefore offers a framework for reform, but whether it dismantles the culture of political federation will ultimately depend on its enforcement, not on its text.¹⁷

IV The policy mirage

The Indian sports system has developed lofty goals through sports policy statements but because of the lack of any legal mechanism mandating these aspirations, there

14 S. Bhogle, "BFI Postpones Elections; 'Impossible to Complete Process', Says Boxing Federation", *The Indian Express*, May 21, 2024.

15 W.P.(C) 195/2010 (Delhi High Court, Aug. 16, 2022).

16 National Sports Governance Act, 2025, s. 4(2) proviso:

Provided that a person shall not be qualified to contest for election or seek nomination to, the posts of the President or the Secretary General or the Treasurer, unless such person is a sportsperson of outstanding merit or has previously served as a member for at least one full term in the Executive Committee of the National Sports Body or as the President, or the Secretary General or the Treasurer in its affiliate unit.

17 *Ibid.*

has been no ultimate fulfilment of Indian sports policy goals within the last 50 years. The National Sports Policy, 2025 or *Khelo Bharat Niti*, is the latest such initiative with high aspirations for India's sporting future, including establishing it as one of the five best countries in terms of sporting success by 2047; hosting the Olympics by 2036; and using Public Private Partnership (PPPs) to increase participation in mass sports and thereby improve the potential for international scouting.¹⁸ While the document sets forth such ambitious objectives, it does so without legal authority to impose penalties on NSFs for failing to fulfil their respective obligations to achieve them. The NSGA, 2025, partially institutionalised aspects of this vision by introducing statutory norms governing the structure, recognition, and internal governance of NSFs, including provisions on the eligibility of office bearers and regulatory oversight. In this respect, the Act gives legal form to certain aspirations contained in the policy framework and moves beyond earlier reliance on executive guidelines and non-binding codes.

At the same time, many of the broader ambitions set out in the policy have not yet found expression in the statutory framework. Global sporting excellence, increased mass participation through public-private partnerships, hosting major international sporting events, and strengthening athlete welfare systems are emphasised in the policy framework.¹⁹ The policy-statute balance needs to be struck for better implementation. While governance reforms have been given statutory recognition under the NSGA, many of the policy's broader objectives relating to participation, performance, and athlete-centred development have not yet been incorporated into a binding legal framework capable of creating enforceable rights and duties. Formerly, NSDC (2011) granted the government the authority to withhold funding or derecognise non-compliant sports federations; however, these measures were seldom enforced effectively or promptly. They are usually implemented only after media backlash, athlete protests, or court orders, rather than through proactive governance. In countries such as Australia and Germany, where funding is closely linked to adherence to governance and performance standards through enforceable laws, India's framework lacked legal authority until recently. Although codes and policies are in place, a lack of accountability and enforcement often prevents them from producing concrete results. Thus, the problem lies not in the absence of regulatory structures but in their weak implementation.

V Budgetary myopia: Why India refuses to fund sports properly

While India allocated 3,794.30 crore (approximately USD 420 million) to its sports sector in 2025, this amount is small relative to the per-capita and absolute spending

18 Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, "National Sports Policy 2025: Khelo Bharat Niti (2024)", available at: https://yas.gov.in/sites/default/files/Khelo-Bharat-Niti-2025_0.pdf (last visited on Aug. 20, 2025).

19 *Ibid.*

of other nations. Australia's federal government committed AUD/1.3/billion in 2024–25 towards physical health, including AUD 494.2 million just for elite sports, despite its population being less than one-twentieth of India's.²⁰ China's *Healthy China 2030* initiative explicitly targets a multi-billion-dollar investment in sports, with some estimates placing annual funding at approximately USD 10 billion.²¹ Russia plans to allocate approximately 60.9 billion (USD 628 million) to physical culture and sports in 2025. Following a global comparison that highlights the relative neglect of sports funding in India, it is equally important to examine domestic budget priorities that reflect a clear political intent. In Budget 2024–25, the government allocated approximately 3,794 crore to sports, yet caste-based welfare schemes received disproportionately higher funding, with 1.65 lakh crore for Scheduled Castes and 1.21 lakh crore for Scheduled Tribes.²² Investment in educational infrastructure also far exceeded sports funding, with the PM-SHRI schools initiative alone budgeted at 6,050/crore and central funding for Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas totalling around 15,103/crore.²³ Additional allocations to media and public relations also tell how vote-sensitive sectors command far more resources than grassroots athletics.²⁴

The real issue is not a lack of funds, but rather the absence of political will. Sports often receive less attention in policymaking, perhaps because they are not seen as directly influencing votes or election outcomes. While symbolic investments, such as those made in commemorative infrastructure²⁵, reflect efforts to preserve historical and political legacies, grassroots sports funding remains piecemeal and *ad hoc*.

VI Coaching and infrastructure: A regulatory and human capital failure

India's poor Olympic performance is closely linked to its weak coaching and sports infrastructure. Some argue that poor coaching standards at the early stages are what is setting India behind in the global sporting events. Beginner-level coaching plays the most critical role in an athlete's life, as the foundations once set become crucial in

20 Commonwealth of Australia, "A Fit and Healthy Australia: Budget 2024–25", Budget Paper No. 5 (2024), available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/budget-2024-25-a-fit-and-healthy-australia.pdf> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

21 Pixellot, "Unveiling China's Sporting Renaissance: A Tech Driven Journey" (Feb. 2023), available at: <https://www.pixellot.tv/blog/unveiling-chinas-sporting-renaissance-a-tech-driven-journey-towards-a-healthy-nation/> (last visited on Sep. 9, 2025).

22 Government of India, "Government Budget 2024–25," available at: <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in> (last visited on Sep. 10, 2025) (see allocations under "Welfare of Scheduled Castes" and "Welfare of Scheduled Tribes").

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 "Govt spent 3,000 cr on Patel statue, 2.64 cr more in advertising it", *Business Standard* (Jan. 16, 2019) available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/govt-spent-rs-3-000-cr-on-patel-statue-rs-2-64-cr-more-in-advertising-it-119011600405_1.html (last visited on Aug. 9, 2025).

later stages; if they go wrong, it takes foreign coaches to correct the basics from scratch. According to FICCI, India has one certified coach per 500 athletes, compared to one per 50 in China and one per 30 in Australia.²⁶

India's professional coaching pipeline is vastly inadequate. According to the SAI Annual Report 2023–24, Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports (Patiala) and its regional centres produced only 743 diploma-certified coaches.²⁷ Over the same period, the National Sports University (Imphal) graduated a mere 14 Bachelor of Science and 17 Master of Science coaches.²⁸ Over six decades, NIS Patiala and its sub-centres have produced only 23,867 diploma holders, a figure grossly inadequate for a nation of over 1.4 billion people.²⁹ Additionally, a six-week certificate course trained approximately 3,681 individuals in May–June 2023 and 3,719 in December 2023–January 2024; however, such short-term courses lack the depth of comprehensive diplomas.³⁰ Despite India's aspirations to become a global sporting powerhouse, coaching remains a fallback option rather than a mainstream career. There is no centralised legal framework mandating national standards for accreditation, ethics, safety, or career pathways in coaching. Most coaches are employed on short-term contracts with low remuneration and minimal job security, and they often work without grievance redressal systems or opportunities for professional development.

Many countries worldwide view coaching as an official/professional career that requires knowledge and training to succeed (*e.g.*, through programs such as Australia's National Coaching Accreditation Scheme (NCAS), administered by the Australian Coaching Council, which provides formalised education and accreditation accessible to practitioners).³¹ Apart from all this, it's a highly paid job.³² China's All-China Sports Federation (under the General Administration of Sport) has established a National Coach Education Division that issues licenses at five levels, from Level 3 (beginner)

26 Sports Authority of India, "Annual Report 2023–24, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports" *available at*: https://sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in/sai/assets/news/1737368346_SAI_AR_English_2023-24.pdf (last visited on Jul. 18, 2025).

27 National Sports University, "Prospectus 2024–25, Imphal, Manipur; BSc and MSc intake statistics listed under 'Academic Programmes' section" *available at*: <https://www.nsu.ac.in/prospectus-2024-2025> (last visited Aug. 18, 2025).

28 G Rajaraman "India must urgently get sports coach education on track to compete with the best" *One Turf*, *available at*: <https://www.oneturf.news/news/india-must-urgently-get-sports-coach-education-on-track-to-compete-with-the-best> (last visited on Aug. 18, 2025).

29 *Ibid.*

30 Australian Coaching Council, Australian Coaching Framework (2025), *available at*: <https://australiancoachingcouncil.com/index.php/framework/> (last visited on Aug. 22, 2025).

31 *Ibid.*

32 Dennis Whitby, Zhu Peilan and Zhang Baoluo, "Professional Training – Sports and Physical Education in China", in *Sports and Physical Education in China* 163–180 (123dok.com) *available at*: <https://123dok.com/id/article/professional-training.10219535> (last visited on Sep. 23, 2025).

to National Coach.³³ Progression requires formal education, refresher courses, practical experience, proficiency in foreign languages, and academic publishing at higher levels.³⁴ Japan has developed its coach licensing through the Japan Sports Association (JSPO) in coordination with the Ministry of Education and national federations.³⁵ Their system categorises more than 18 licence types, ranging from Kids' Leader to Coach 4 and Junior Sports Coach.³⁶ As of 2022, over 648,000 instructors are registered under JSPO's framework.³⁷ Japan also added the NSSU Coach Developer Academy to train metacoaches, ensuring continuous professional development.³⁸

India has systems for training coaches, such as those run by Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports (NSNIS) and the Sports Authority of India; however, it lacks a central, legally backed authority that sets clear, mandatory standards for who may coach, how they should be trained, and how they're held accountable. Without that, coaching in India remains scattered, undervalued, and far from the professional standards, it requires.

VII Athlete welfare: Beyond policies to legal guarantees

The success of athletes in India is typically attributable to their own hard work and determination, rather than to any measures undertaken within the country to support them. Athletes struggle with many issues that hold them back when training, including a lack of appropriate nutrition, over-exercise, inadequate access to sports medicine (physiotherapy), and a lack of mental health resources (support). The Government of India lacks an established framework for athlete welfare. Instead, the policies developed by the Government of India outline areas of support for India's athletes, but do not provide any direct support. As a result, India's Athletes do not have the same level of legally guaranteed rights (to health, mental health, career security, *etc.*) as athletes from other countries. Many successful athletes have emerged from India over the past few decades, including Dipa Karmakar, who trained with equipment made from a discarded scooter, and Neeraj Chopra, who trained abroad in countries

33 *Ibid.*

34 Japan Sport Association (JSPO), Sports Instructors, *available at*:<https://www.japan-sports.or.jp/english/tabid648.html> (last visited on Aug. 23, 2025).

35 Japan Sport Association (JSPO), White Paper on Sport in Japan 2023, Sasakawa Sports Foundation, Table 4 2, *available at*: https://www.ssf.or.jp/en/features/white_paper_on_sport/2023_4_2.html (last visited on Aug. 23, 2025).

36 *Ibid.*

37 Nippon Sport Science University, NCDA Coach Developer Academy, March 2025, *available at*:<https://www.ncda.tokyo/aboutncda> (last visited on Sep. 22, 2025).

38 Yash Matange, "Too Many Functions Comes in Way of Training, Competing in India: Chopra" *Business Standard*, May 9, 2024, *available at*:https://www.business-standard.com/sports/olympics/too-many-functions-comes-in-way-of-training-competing-in-india-chopra-124050900930_1.html. (last visited on Dec. 22, 2025).

with better facilities.³⁹ There remains substantial scope for improvement in sports infrastructure.

Indian athletes face numerous challenges throughout their careers. For example, at the grassroots level, athletes face challenges in recruiting talented individuals. This is typically accomplished through nepotism, inadequate coaching facilities, equipment and funding. These challenges make it difficult for many qualified athletes from being able to advance further in their athletic careers. After getting to a higher level of competition in India, athletes may also experience harassment from coaches, the lack of resources needed to participate in their sport, not receiving any attention when they raise concerns to their governing body, due to the influence of federation board members on how complaints should be handled, *etc.* There is also no transparency into how disciplinary panels and arbitration bodies operate, and the legal resolution process takes a significant amount of time and ultimately demotivates. In 2025, the passage of the National Sports Governance Act will reform some aspects of federations; as a result, the Safe Sport Practices and Robust Grievance Policy will be established. Overall, protecting an athlete's rights at every level of the Indian sports system will help ensure an equitable and prosperous sporting climate in India.

Athlete dissatisfaction is directly connected to poor performance. When players feel they are not heard, they cannot perform at their best. In June 2025, a young girl at the SAI National Boxing Academy in Rohtak filed an FIR documenting persistent mental and physical mistreatment by her coach. She reported slipping into depression as her training support vanished.⁴⁰ Sexual harassment remains alarmingly common: between 2010 and 2020, the SAI received 45 formal complaints against coaches. Yet the outcomes were mostly limited to mild reprimands, short suspensions, or transfers, measures far too weak to serve as real deterrents.⁴¹ Various scandals have triggered public outcry and formal protests from women wrestlers. In Karnataka, 31 state-level athletes were suddenly evicted from a government-run sports hostel after being labelled "underperformers", a decision that not only cut off their accommodation

39 "National-Level Minor Boxer Alleges Sexual Harassment by Woman Coach; Parents Lodge FIR", *Deccan Herald*, June 30, 2025, available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/national-level-minor-boxer-alleges-sexual-harassment-by-woman-coach-parents-lodge-fir-3608832> (last visited on Jul. 7, 2025).

40 Avishek Roy, Rutvick Mehta and Sharad Deep, "Why Harassment in SAI Goes Unchallenged", *Hindustan Times*, Feb. 16, 2023, available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/why-harassment-in-sai-goes-unchallenged-101676397412770.html> (last visited on Jul. 7, 2025).

41 Future Tense for 31 Athletes after B'loru Sports Hostel Dismisses Them, *The Times of India* (Mysuru), May 30, 2024, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/future-tense-for-31-athletes-after-bluru-sports-hostel-dismisses-them/articleshow/121503469.cms>

but also their access to professional coaching⁴². Meanwhile, para-athletes in Uttarakhand consistently report a lack of basic support, including trained coaches, suitable facilities, and hostel accommodation, which forces many to abandon their sporting ambitions or relocate elsewhere.⁴³

In contrast, countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom have taken concrete legal measures to protect their athletes. Canada's Safe Sport Program is overseen by the *Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport*⁴⁴. It requires all federally funded sports bodies to adhere to the *Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport*.⁴⁵ It also establishes independent systems through which athletes can safely report concerns and seek redress. In the UK, following the *Whyte Review* (2022),⁴⁶ UK/Sport and Sport England adopted enforceable standards for athlete protection, establishing national welfare systems and dispute-resolution channels.⁴⁷ India urgently needs a National Athlete Protection and Welfare Act to guarantee access to medical treatment, mental health support, legal aid, livelihood protection, and representation in decision-making for athletes, backed by the authority of law rather than goodwill.

It has been consistently held by the Supreme Court that the right to life under Article 21 includes the rights to health, dignity, and humane working conditions. For athletes, whose bodies serve as their primary means of livelihood, Article 21 is directly implicated when medical support, mental health care, and institutional protection are denied.⁴⁸ Similarly, the State is under a positive obligation under the Directive Principles to protect youth, promote health, and ensure social security. The failure to legally guarantee athlete welfare in India may therefore be viewed not merely as a policy gap

42 "Para Athletes Struggle amid Lack of Support and Facilities", *The Times of India*, Aug. 29, 2024, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/para-athletes-struggle-amid-lack-of-support-and-facilities/articleshow/112870146.cms> (last visited on Jul. 7, 2025).

43 Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, "Safe Sport Framework" (Ottawa, 2023), available at: <https://cces.ca/safe-sport-framework> (last visited on Aug. 7, 2025).

44 *Ibid.*

45 The Whyte Review, published in 2022, laid bare the painful experiences of young gymnasts in the UK—many of whom endured emotional abuse, overtraining, and were too afraid to speak up. Led by barrister Anne Whyte KC, the report served as a wake-up call for British sport, prompting UK Sport and Sport England to reassess how athlete welfare is protected and resulting in stronger safeguards and accountability mechanisms across the board. Anne Whyte KC, *The Whyte Review: An Independent Review into Allegations of Mistreatment in the Sport of Gymnastics in the UK* (June 2022), <https://www.ukspor.gov.uk/resources/the-whyte-review> (last visited on Jul. 7, 2025).

46 UK Sport and Sport England, "Strengthening Safeguarding & Welfare in Sport: A Joint Statement" (Mar. 2023), available at: <https://www.ukspor.gov.uk/news/2023/03/strengthening-safeguarding-welfare> (last visited on Aug. 7, 2025).

47 *Consumer Education and Research Centre v. Union of India*, AIR 1995 SC 922.

48 The Constitution of India, arts. 39(e), 41, 45 and 47.

but as a departure from the broader constitutional mandate.⁴⁹ Modern constitutional thought no longer views the State as a passive observer of rights. It requires the State to actively create conditions in which rights can be lived and protected. In the sporting context, this means ensuring safe training spaces, fair grievance mechanisms, livelihood security, and accountable institutions.

VIII Sports dispute resolution

For many years, ordinary courts in India have primarily adjudicated sports disputes, often resulting in long delays, procedural difficulties, and, in some cases, adverse effects on athletes' careers. The enactment of the NSGA, 2025, created expectations that India would adopt a specialised sports arbitration system based on international best practices. Instead, the Act introduces a tribunal-based model, the National Sports Tribunal (NST) thereby departing from the framework of independent sports arbitration.⁵⁰ The long-standing vision and hopes of creating an institutional sports arbitration framework based on speed, expertise, independence and transparency have not been realised. The NST has been structured to function as a quasi-judicial authority and is subject to considerable governmental control. In contrast, autonomous sports arbitration mechanisms have been successfully institutionalised in countries such as the *United Kingdom*⁵¹, *Canada*⁵², and *Australia*⁵³, as well as in smaller sporting jurisdictions such as *Qatar*⁵⁴ and *Portugal*⁵⁵, where disputes are resolved efficiently while maintaining institutional distance from direct governmental influence.

The same delays and rigid control mechanisms observed in ordinary tribunals are likely to be reproduced under the NST model. Owing to its limited jurisdiction, particularly the exclusion of anti-doping and internal federation disputes, sports disputes continue to be handled through a combination of courts, federations, and

49 "A Tribunal Too Much: India's Missed Chance for Sports Arbitration", *Bar & Bench*, available at: <https://www.barandbench.com/view-point/a-tribunal-too-much-indias-missed-chance-for-sports-arbitration>(last visited on Oct. 7, 2025).

50 Sport Resolutions (UK), *Arbitration Rules*, available at: https://www.sportresolutions.com/assets/documents/D_3_-_Arbitration_Rules_Nov_24.pdf(last visited on Aug. 7, 2025).

51 Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada, "Canadian Sport Dispute Resolution Code", available at: https://www.crdsc-sdrcc.ca/eng/documents/EN%20-%20Code_SDRCC_2025%20Final%202025-04-01.pdf. (last visited on Dec. 7, 2025).

52 National Sports Tribunal, "Dispute Resolution Methods", available at: <https://www.nationalsporttribunal.gov.au/dispute-resolution-services/dispute-resolution-methods> (last visited on Oct. 5, 2025).

53 Qatar Sports Arbitration Foundation, available at: <https://qsaf.qa/en/> last visited Dec. 7, 2025).

54 An Introduction to Portugal's Court of Arbitration for Sport: A Unique Arbitral Body, *Law In Sport*, available at: <https://www.lawinsport.com/topics/item/an-introduction-to-portugal-s-court-of-arbitration-for-sport-a-unique-arbitral-body>(last visited on Dec. 5, 2025).

55 National Sports Governance Act, 2025, s. 20.

administrative bodies.⁵⁶ Rather than establishing a unified and independent system of sports arbitration, the current structure impedes the development of a coherent body of sports law. In this context, the shift toward a centrally controlled tribunal may be viewed as a departure from the widely accepted model of independent sports arbitration.

IX Conclusion and way forward

India currently stands at a critical stage in its sporting development. While it has achieved instances of international success, the underlying sports ecosystem continues to face constraints due to inadequate funding, limited institutional prioritisation, and weak legal support structures. Rather than focusing solely on medal outcomes while overlooking the sports governance structures that enable them, India must undertake substantive reforms in sports governance and athlete protection frameworks to facilitate long-term improvements in athlete performance and the broader governance environment.

The government must shift its focus from the continued announcement of new policy frameworks towards a systemic redesign of sports governance and the institutions responsible for administering sport and ensuring athlete safety. Such reform should rely on evidence-based policymaking, strong accountability mechanisms, and long-term national planning. As an initial step, India should establish a National Standing Committee on Sports Governance Reform and Athlete Welfare. This body should include athletes, judicial members, medical professionals, coaches, sports scientists, and experts in sports governance. It should be entrusted with conducting comprehensive and independent assessments of India's overall sports ecosystem. The committee's findings should align with the key principles reflected, such as in the UK Whyte Review, as discussed above.⁵⁷ These findings should serve as the foundation for drafting comprehensive legislation on Sports Governance and Athlete Protection within a clearly defined legislative timeline. Concurrently, the establishment of pilot programmes or independent and impartial dispute-resolution mechanisms for addressing athlete-related grievances should be undertaken by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS) until a formal legislative framework is operational. This would require establishing independent sports arbitration and grievance redressal mechanisms

⁵⁶ *Supra* note 49.

⁵⁷ India's Olympic gold medalist in shooting, emphasized the critical need for systemic investment in sports, stating that "each medal costs the UK \$7.13 million," and underscoring that India cannot expect consistent success at the international level without establishing robust systems domestically. He attributed the Indian contingent's failure to secure medals at the Rio Olympics to systemic shortcomings, including inadequate athlete support and infrastructure. Abhinav Bindra, "Bindra blames system for failure to win medals", *The Tribune* (Aug. 17, 2016), available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/sports/bindra-blames-system-for-failure-to-win-medals-281447/>. (last visited on Sep. 5, 2025).

for safe sport to restore athletes' trust in sports governance systems. Such mechanisms should be vested with the authority to impose penalties on individuals or entities found guilty of violating athletes' rights or engaging in inappropriate conduct towards athletes.

Both the Prime Minister's Office and state leadership must recognise sport as a long-term national priority and integrate it into mainstream public policy and everyday national discourse, rather than treating it merely as entertainment. Positioning sport as a tool of nation-building can strengthen social cohesion, promote discipline and public health, and enhance India's global standing through sporting diplomacy and soft power. The new NEP should expand the role of sports to include "sport assessment" and integrate this component into the evaluation process alongside academic evaluation for all students, beginning in primary education (*i.e.*, grades 1 to 8). All students should participate in P.E. classes, supported by the award of credits, scholarships, and opportunities to gain entry to universities and colleges in the public and private sectors. To help reduce the motivation gap that persists in sports, governments should shift their focus from rewarding success to providing support during the preparation phase. To achieve this, "Structured Preparation Recognition" programmes must be created to provide financial assistance (monthly payments), nutritional support, mental health resources, and basic career security for athletes while they prepare for competition. Only when athletes are supported during training and preparation can excellence be achieved at the competitive level. India's policy on athlete nutrition must account for cultural and regional food consumption patterns, particularly given that the majority of the Indian population is vegetarian. Thus, physician- and dietitian-approved nutritional menus and supplements for athletes must be developed for each region by registered sports nutritionists. The current government budget for sports should be significantly revisited.⁵⁸

The Sports Authority of India and NSFs, similarly, should transition from administrative compliance funding programmes to athlete-development funding, meaning funding based on the experience of those organisations in producing athletes and administering competitive opportunities, rather than on the actual results achieved on the field. Athletic federations that do not identify, nurture, and sustain successful athletes or teams should face reductions in financial and administrative resources, as well as increased scrutiny and oversight. District and regional governing bodies that promote

58 The term "ping-pong diplomacy" refers to the use of sports, in this case, table tennis, by China in the 1970s, to open diplomatic relations and improve international standing; similarly, India can use sports strategically to promote national unity and enhance its global image. See U.S. Department of State, "Ping-Pong Diplomacy: Artifacts from the Historic 1971 U.S. Table Tennis Trip to China", *National Museum of American Diplomacy*, Aug. 5, 2021, available at: <https://diplomacy.state.gov/ping-pong-diplomacy-historic-1971-u-s-table-tennis-trip-to-china/>. (last visited on Jun. 5, 2025).

and develop sport through their organisations should be regularly audited and held accountable to specific benchmarks for identifying athletic talent.

In addition to building physical facilities and providing financial support to athletes, India needs to view physical education and sport as a vital component of the broader process of national development. The lift in national pride created by international representation through an athletic success provides the country with a form of “global soft power” that, like in the case of the “ping-pong diplomacy” of China.⁵⁹ According to the opinion that sports can be utilised as a vehicle to promote national unity and build India’s international reputation, sports should figure prominently in India’s national priorities over the next decade. The implementation of the NSGA should be guided by clearly defined benchmarks and measurable targets, such as securing a position among the top 20 nations in the Olympic medal rankings. In addition, a structured strategic planning process should be undertaken to identify the sporting disciplines in which India demonstrates the highest medal potential. This would enable targeted allocation of resources, coaching expertise, and scientific support towards areas where the probability of international success is greatest. Compliance with the provisions of the NSGA must not only be ensured, but its effectiveness should also be demonstrated through measurable and meaningful outcomes. At the same time, the government should ensure that, while the Act promotes transparency, accountability, and athlete protection, sports organisations retain their functional independence and are not subjected to unwarranted regulatory interference.

To align India’s sports governance framework with international standards and ensure meaningful access to justice for athletes, the dispute-resolution architecture needs to be reconceptualised around an independent and specialised sports arbitration system. The NSGA should be amended to establish a fully autonomous National Sports Arbitration Tribunal with exclusive and comprehensive jurisdiction over sports-related disputes, including selection disputes, disciplinary matters, governance conflicts, and anti-doping cases. Such a body should function independently of ministerial control, with appointments based on expertise in sports law, medicine, and athlete welfare rather than administrative seniority.

At the end, it is important that athletes do not fear reprisals from their sports federation; otherwise, the federation has failed in its responsibilities as an institution. Conversely, in an ideal world, a sports federation should be held accountable; this is what should exist in a just environment. Reform of the sports governance system cannot be limited to the creation of additional policy frameworks; it requires a fundamental shift in the national approach to sport, moving from isolated recognition of individual athletic success towards the development of institutional systems that consistently support athletes in achieving their highest potential. India’s meaningful entry into the global sporting arena will depend on sustained investment in funding mechanisms and the establishment of rights-based institutions dedicated to long-term athlete development.