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An overview of sport in modern India

Packianathan Chelladurai and Swarali Patil

Introduction

India is a constitutional republic comprised of 29 states and seven union territories. With a population of 1.3 billion, India is the second most populous democracy in the world.¹ With approximately one-sixth of the world's total population (17.50 percent), it is characterised by its diversity in terms of religion, culture, language and ethnicity. There are 22 major languages in India, written in 13 different scripts, with over 720 dialects.² The Indian population is made up of numerous regional ethnolinguistic groups, the majority of whom are Indo-Aryans (72 percent) and Dravidians (25 percent). India is a religious nation, with 79.8 percent of the population practicing Hinduism, followed by Islam (14.2 percent), Christianity (2.3 percent) and Sikhism (1.7 percent).³ Though conflicts arise among different groups defined by religion, ethnicity, language and caste, India thrives as a democracy where all segments of the society are respected.

The current value of the Indian economy is USD 2.30 trillion, the seventh largest in the world. In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) the Indian economy ranks third in the world and is pegged at USD 8.52 trillion.⁴ In contrast, India ranks 122nd in PPP per person at a measly USD 7,783, as a result of its vast population.⁵

Currently, 50 percent of India's population is below the age of 25 years and 65 percent of its population is below the age of 35 years. In 2020, the Indian population is expected to have an average age of 29 years, compared to 37 for China and 48 for Japan.⁶ Economically, India's middle class is expected to comprise 40 percent of its population, accounting for more than 60 percent of its annual consumption.⁷ With a growing middle class and a young population, there is no dearth of human capital to help India pursue sporting excellence.

India's traditional sport

Like other ancient civilisations of the world, India has its own tradition of sport and physical fitness. Hinduism, the religion of the majority of the population in the country, promotes the virtues of physical perfection based on a clear understanding of the body and its functions. One manifestation of this tradition is the practice of yoga, 'an ancient discipline designed to bring balance and health to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the individual.'⁸

Yoga originated in India in approximately 2700 BCE, and is now practised worldwide because of its focus on harmonising the mind and body.⁹ Sport indigenous to India include *kabaddi* and *kho kho*, which are mostly played in community settings at the grassroots level. Kabaddi has gained tremendous popularity in India, particularly with the success of the Pro Kabaddi League.¹⁰

Sport in modern India

The Indian sporting landscape is dominated by cricket, but it has other major sport, such as field hockey, football, badminton and tennis. Traditional sport such as *kabaddi* and *kho kho* are primarily played at the grassroots level. A brief description of the major sport in India is provided here.

Cricket: Cricket, the most popular and profitable sport in India, was introduced to India by the British in the early 1700s. India has won three World Cup trophies and is currently the number one team in all three formats of the game (i.e. one-day test, five-day test, and T20 – a version where the competition is restricted to 20 overs by each team. An over consists of six consecutive balls bowled by a single player from one end of the pitch). The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) organises popular national tournaments featuring athletes from different regions of India. The BCCI introduced the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2008 – an eight-team professional league featuring Indian and international cricketers.¹¹ The IPL has achieved tremendous commercial success and is valued at USD 6.3 billion.¹²

Badminton: Badminton was introduced to India by the British late in the first decade of the twentieth century. The sport has gained popularity in recent years due to the success of young Indian players, such as Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu and K. Srikanth, on the international stage. The Badminton Association of India has initiated a professional league comprised of six teams located in six of the largest cities in India, with prize money of USD 1 million. The association has also launched the *Shuttle Time–India* programme, encouraging youth from the six franchise cities to compete in professional competitions.¹³

Field Hockey: Commonly known as hockey, it is India's national game. Hockey was introduced to India in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century by the British. Hockey is India's most successful sport on the international stage. The Indian men's Olympic hockey team has won eight gold medals and the 1975 Men's Hockey World Cup.

Football: Football was introduced to India by the British in the same time period as field hockey was introduced. The Indian football team was the first Asian team to qualify for the semi-finals at the 1956 Olympic Games.¹⁴

Tennis: Introduced by the British late in the first decade of the twentieth century, tennis is governed by the All India Tennis Association and is a sport popular in the urban areas of India. Popular and successful Indian tennis players include Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupati, Sania Mirza and Vijay Amritraj.

Gymnastics: Gymnastics is a relatively new sport in India. Ashish Kumar won the Bronze medal in the 2010 Commonwealth Games held in India, which was India's first medal in gymnastics in an international event.¹⁵ Similarly, Dipa Karmakar won a bronze medal in the 2014 Commonwealth Games held in Scotland, becoming India's first female gymnast to do so, and she won a bronze medal in the 2015 Artistic Gymnastics Asian Championships.¹⁶ Given the lack of popularity of gymnastics in India and the fact that the Gymnastics Federation of India has been characterised as inefficient, the achievements of Kumar and Karmakar are praiseworthy.¹⁷

Other Sport: Sport such as basketball, chess, billiards, snooker and golf have a long history in India, but they do not enjoy commercial success and popularity. Lack of success on the international stage in recent years has likely resulted in public indifference towards these sport.

Table 26.1 India's Medal Tally in Commonwealth, Asian and Olympic Games

<i>Commonwealth Games</i>					
<i>Year</i>	<i>Organising Country</i>	<i>Gold</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>Bronze</i>	<i>Total</i>
2010	India	38	27	36	101
2014	Scotland	15	30	19	64
2018	Australia	26	20	20	66
<i>Asian Games</i>					
2010	China	14	17	34	65
2014	South Korea	11	10	36	57
2018	Indonesia	15	24	30	69
<i>Olympic Games</i>					
2008	China	1	0	2	3
2012	United Kingdom	0	2	4	6
2016	Brazil	0	1	1	2

However, attention from popular international sport leagues interested in gaining viewership and following in Asian nations has the potential to attract sport fans in India. For example, The NBA Academy in India provides elite-level training to aspiring athletes and this may result in the development of talented basketball players and help popularise the sport in the country.¹⁸

India's Performance in International Competitions: As demonstrated in Table 26.1, the success of Indian athletes at securing medals in the Olympic, Asian and Commonwealth Games has been rather mediocre over the last three iterations of the events.

Sport policy and practice

Sport in India is delivered through government and non-government agencies that are interconnected and serve allied mandates.

Policy of Sports Authority of India: The Sports Authority of India (SAI), a unit of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, was established in 1984 with the aim of promoting sport and games in the country. The SAI also maintains various stadia in New Delhi, such as the Jawaharlal Nehru Sports Complex, the Indira Gandhi Sports Complex and the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Ranges.¹⁹ The objectives of the SAI include:

- identifying talent at the grassroots level and nurturing it towards excellence,
- providing aspiring athletes with training and opportunities to compete in international events,
- supporting athlete training with appropriate equipment and licensed practitioners,
- assisting in the training and preparation of national teams,
- developing and maintaining sport infrastructure, and
- developing coaches and physical education professionals of the highest calibre in different sport.²⁰

To achieve these objectives, the SAI has established 12 SAI Regional Centres and Educational Institutes, 56 SAI Training Centres, 19 Special Area Games Centres and 11 Centres of

Excellence.²¹ The SAI has differentiated the processes of training coaches for the pursuit of excellence in sport and training physical educators for the promotion of participation in sport. The Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports (NSNIS) focuses largely on training coaches, sport psychologists and experts in sport medicine. The NSNIS is affiliated with recognised universities to offer graduate degrees, post graduate diplomas and certificates in sport coaching, sport medicine, sport massage and grounds management. The SAI's larger Lakshmibai College of Physical Education in Gwalior was renamed as the Lakshmibai National Institute of Physical Education (LNIPE) and is now deemed a university. It operates independently of the SAI but under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. The LNIPE is affiliated with the University of Kerala and offers a master's degree in physical education (MPE), a postgraduate diploma in health and fitness management (PGDHFM) and a master of philosophy degree (MPhil).

Programmes of the Ministry for the Development of Sport and Promotion of Physical Activity

The programmes (or schemes) initiated by the Ministry for the Development of Sport and Promotion of Physical Activity are set out in detail here.

National Sports Development Fund: The National Sports Development Fund was established in 1998 to (a) support specific sport and athletes, (b) provide training and coaching to sport persons, (c) construct and maintain sport infrastructure, (d) identify research-based solutions to barriers, (e) promote international cooperation and exchange programmes, and (f) provide interest-free or low-interest loans for sport-related projects.²²

Human Resources Development in Sports: In 2013, the Department of Sports established a programme named the Scheme of Human Resources Development in Sports, which offers funds for advanced graduate sport studies; organisation of seminars, workshops and conferences; inviting qualified experts from other nations; training of referees and umpires, coaches and other support personnel; providing grants for research projects and publication of sport-related research; and developing an online platform for dissemination of knowledge in different languages.²³

Khelo India Scheme: The *Khelo India* (Let's play, India) programme was established in 2017 with the vision of encouraging youth in the country to participate in sport indigenous to the nation, to popularise them and bring them into the mainstream.²⁴ This programme aims to (a) develop playing fields, community coaches and state-level Khelo India centres, (b) identify and develop aspiring athletes, (c) organise sport competitions, (d) maintain and upgrade sport infrastructure, (e) provide support to national, regional and state academies, (f) encourage sport and physical fitness in schools, and (g) promote sport as a medium of peace and development.

Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat: The *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat* (One India, Great India) programme was established in October 2015 to bring together the Indian states to carry out joint ventures in sport, language, literature, cuisine and festivals.²⁵ Each state is paired with another state for the duration of a year to (a) celebrate the diversity of the nation, (b) promote the spirit of national integration, (c) illustrate the rich culture and heritage of the nation, (d) establish long-term engagements, and (e) share best-practices and experiences. Teams in competitions are composed of players from both states to promote cultural understanding and harmony.

Programmes for International Competitions: In addition to the programmes just discussed, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, from time-to-time, establishes specific programmes to enhance the performance of Indian athletes in international competitions. Some examples of these programmes are the *Scheme for Preparation of Indian Athletes for Commonwealth Games – 2010* and *Operation Excellence for London Olympics – 2012*. The amount spent in supporting teams and

athletes for these games ranged from INR 678 crore (approximately USD 96 million) and INR 135 crore (approximately USD 21 million).²⁶ These efforts yielded remarkable results for the country, as India won six medals (2 silver and 4 bronze) at the London 2012 Olympic Games and 64 medals (15 gold, 30 silver, and 19 bronze) at the Commonwealth Games.²⁷

Come and Play Scheme: Instituted in 2011 as part of the legacy plan, the scheme specifies that the sport stadia and other facilities are to be used not only for the pursuit of excellence but also for recreational purposes by the masses.²⁸ This scheme provides youth and sport enthusiasts with an opportunity to train with qualified coaches in well-maintained facilities and with the correct equipment. Competitions are organised among teams within each age group, and athletes who display talent during these events are encouraged to train and compete for higher-level training schemes.

Community Connect: Established in 2014, the *Community Connect Scheme* encourages citizens to participate in activities held in the infrastructure under the jurisdiction of the SAI.²⁹ This ensures the existing infrastructure is utilised in the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among the population. The scheme has also created academies for football, cycling, swimming and shooting to develop talent. There is also a proposal to establish a national sport museum under this scheme.

National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC) Scheme: Instituted in 1985, the National Sports Talent Contest scheme is aimed at identifying talented sport persons in the age range of 8–14 years and to develop them into medal prospects.³⁰ Students who perform well in district, state and national level competitions are accepted into the scheme. Selected students are paid an annual stipend of INR 4,150 (approximately USD 59) to support the costs of their sport equipment, insurance and competition-related expenses, as well as an additional annual stipend of INR 3,000 (approximately USD 42). The educational institution is also provided an annual grant of INR 20,000 (approximately USD 282) to assist with the purchase of sport equipment.

Coaches trained at the SAI's National Institute of Sports are assigned to academic institutions that have performed well in sport events and have the use of good infrastructure. These coaches, in turn, are expected to enable promising youth sportspersons to pursue excellence in sport. The distinct feature of this programme is that talented youth are trained at their home institutions. Currently, the scheme includes 14 schools for international sport and 10 schools for indigenous sport and wrestling, which train 805 boys and 255 girls for a total of 1060 athletes.

SAI Training Centres: Established in 1995, the *SAI Training Centres* programme is a collaboration between the SAI and state governments, where the state government provides the infrastructure for the training of athletes between the ages of 12 and 18 years and the SAI provides board and lodging, scientific training and equipment to the trainees.³¹ The trainees are chosen from their performance in the NSTC Scheme discussed earlier. Currently, there are 56 such centres across the country where 5,394 trainees (3,807 boys and 1,587 girls) are being trained.

Army Boys Sports Company Scheme: Established in collaboration with the Indian Army, the scheme aims to utilise the army's extensive sport infrastructure and 'disciplined environment' to train young male athletes between the ages of 8 and 16 years.³² These young athletes are identified through their performances in state and national level competitions in archery, athletics, basketball, boxing, diving, fencing, football, gymnastics, hockey, rowing, shooting, weightlifting and wrestling. The programme provides for the board, lodging, equipment, competition, insurance and medical expenses of over 1,000 youth who are training at 18 different army centres. An additional benefit for the trainees is the opportunity to join the Indian Army around age 18.

Special Area Games Scheme: The *Special Area Games Scheme* (SAG) was established with the aim of identifying talented sportspersons from inaccessible tribal, rural and coastal areas of the country.³³ The programme aims to identify talented youth in the age range 12–18 years and provide

them with training and support. The SAI supports the budding athletes with their expenses for board, lodgings, competition, education, insurance and equipment. Currently, there are 1,676 trainees (961 boys, 715 girls) at 19 SAG Centres.

Centre of Excellence Scheme: Athletes who have excelled in the aforementioned programmes are recruited into the SAI's Centres of Excellence, where they are provided with advanced technical training with all expenses borne by the SAI.³⁴ Selection criteria include athletes between the ages of 12 and 25 years who have won or placed second at national championship events. Currently, there are 15 Centres of Excellence training 556 athletes (288 boys and 268 girls).

Vision 2020: The SAI's ambitious plan labelled *Vision 2020* has set the goal of winning 25–30 medals in the 2020 Olympic Games, and this plan is expected to cost INR 984 crore (approximately USD 139 million).³⁵ The process involves identifying approximately 2,500 talented athletes in various sport recognised by the IOC, grooming that talent in national coaching camps and exposing them to international competitions. The cost includes a stipend of INR 3,000 (approximately USD 42) per month per individual and an incentive of INR 300,000 (approximately USD 4,234) for individuals who qualify for the 2020 Olympic Games or INR 150,000 (approximately USD 2,117) for members of sport teams that qualify for the same event.

Development of Coaches: Following the National Skill Development Corporation's (NSDC) forecast that the demand for sport coaches, nutritionists and physiotherapists would increase to approximately 49 billion hours or 0.8 million persons by the year 2022, the Ministry instituted programmes for training coaches. *The Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan* (Rajiv Gandhi sport campaign) aims to train community *kridashrees* (coaches) to serve as trainers in rural regions,³⁶ and the National Coaching Scheme deploys SAI trained coaches to serve in the SAI programmes previously discussed.³⁷

The role of non-governmental organisations and the private sector

The non-governmental sport associations in India include national sport governing bodies (NSGBs), including the Indian Olympic Association, and their respective members at the state, regional and *panchayat* (town) levels. An NSGB is responsible for the governance and promotion of its sport within the country, and its state associations are charged with the administration of its sport within their respective jurisdictions.

A rather unique feature of sport in India is the participation and influence of the armed forces and the Indian Railways in sport. The Railway Sports Promotion Board of the Indian Railways and the Services Sports Control Board of the armed forces of India are also members of most of the national sport governing bodies. The regional units of Indian Railways (e.g. Southern Railways) and the Services Board field their own teams in various tournaments.

Private Academies: A growing trend in India is the entrepreneurial role of former athletes in establishing sport academies in various sport such as cricket (e.g. Sehwag Cricket Academy), tennis (e.g. Britannia Amritraj Academy, Bhupathi Tennis Academy), badminton (e.g. Gopichand Badminton Academy, Prakash Pudukone Academy) and football (Baichung Bhutia Football School). The efforts of these academies have produced outstanding athletes and medal winners, such as Tintu Luka (gold medal in the women's 800 metres race at the 2015 Asian Athletics Championships), tennis star Leander Paes and badminton star Saina Nehwal (ranked second in the world in badminton).

Corporate Social Initiatives: Another emerging and encouraging feature of the Indian sport scene is the involvement of industrial and business enterprises (e.g. Tata Steel, Vijaya Bank) in the promotion of sport as one of their corporate social responsibility initiatives. For example, TATA

organises nationwide talent searches to identify talents and train them in its own sport academies, such as the TATA Archery Academy, TATA Athletics Academy and TATA Football Academy.³⁸ TATA also sponsors other sport academies, such as the Prakash Pudukone Badminton Academy. These efforts have produced several players who have represented India on its national teams and earned medals in archery and badminton at the Commonwealth and Asian Games.

State sport authorities

The policies and programmes of the central government are replicated in the 29 states of the Indian Union. For example, the state of Tamil Nadu, situated in the southernmost part of India and one of the largest and most populous states, has its own *Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu* (SDAT), which aims to promote sport and physical fitness throughout the state with a special emphasis on talent identification and development, competition culture, sport infrastructure and appropriate coaching methods.³⁹ SDAT provides monetary support to the state level sport organisations, organises and/or supports residential and non-residential coaching camps in various sport, has established a talent identification scheme, offers cash incentives to high level performers in sport and runs its own centres of excellence and sport hostels. SDAT has established specialised academies for several sport, such as cricket, volleyball, diving, field hockey, table tennis, swimming and squash. SDAT organises and/or supports competitions in various sport at the district and state levels. Finally, the state body implements the programmes assigned to it by the SAI.

A unique way several states support sportspersons is through guarantees of admission into highly coveted educational programmes, such as engineering, agriculture and medicine. Government, non-government and private organisations also adopt this practice of promising employment to promising athletes. This is commonly referred to as the 'sport quota' in India, and has proved to be an incentive for youngsters to pursue excellence in sport.

Conclusions

The considerable involvement of the Indian government in promoting sport and physical activity is laudable. However, youth athletics and sport in general are under the purview of state governments in their respective states. To maximise a return on investment, coaching and technical education programmes may be delivered through the state level educational ministries and/or through the state level sport authorities. An additional benefit of the involvement of the state governments in promoting and channelling excellence in sport may lead to the growth of interstate rivalries, which may kindle the enthusiastic support of the citizens of a state. Rivalries between proximate and similar teams may contribute to higher levels of motivation, effort and performance of team members.⁴⁰ These rivalries may also have an impact on the involvement of coaches, managers, sponsors and fans.

SAI may consider providing financial assistance to privately owned sport academies that have been successful in producing champions. SAI may also pursue partnerships with private academies and educational institutions to leverage the diverse expertise among government, academic and private enterprises to address the coaching and training needs of the nation. The emerging public-private sport partnerships in Western nations may serve as a model for such a move in India. SAI may also focus on encouraging women coaches to pursue training and education to be eligible for high level coaching positions in Indian sport.

Sport consumption in India is expected to grow at a rate of 8.9 percent per annum to USD 6 billion in 2025 as a result of the increase in disposable income among households.⁴¹ With the increased levels of education, travel and exposure through digital means, Indian consumers are

becoming aware of their physical health.⁴² The authors also note that the culture of the workplace in India is evolving, and employee fitness is being promoted and facilitated.

Another encouraging feature is the growth of the middle class in India. Currently, 250 million individuals are estimated to be middle class, and this figure is expected to climb to 600 million individuals by 2030.⁴³ With the abundance of discretionary income in the hands of the middle class, the demand for excellence in sport is bound to rise. Taken together, these variables should see games and physical activities prospering at the grassroots level, genuine and honest efforts to hone greatness and the rise of world-class competitors in India.

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