

Journal of Management & Public Policy

Vol. 17, No. 4, June 2026 Pp. 14-22

ISSN 0976-0148 (Online) 0976-013X (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2026.v17i4.003>

Interview

Games and Sports as a Strategic Imperative to Empower the Vulnerable Sections of Indian Society

Malathi Krishnamurthy Renati*

ABSTRACT

This article is based on an interview with Ms Malathi Krishnamurthy Renati who is working as the Head of Policy School at the Takshashila Institution, an independent think tank. A former national-level hockey and baseball player for Karnataka, she researches and writes on the intersection of the Indian sports ecosystem and policy, looking at the interplay of society, governments and markets. She is also an educator, teaching project management, and runs two online sports policy courses viz., Building a Sporting Nation and Transforming Women's Sport in India. In this interview, Ms Renati articulates her views on issues and challenges faced by sportspersons as well as sports federations, how games and sports can empower the vulnerable sections of the Indian society and what stakeholders need to do in the matter. The article provides a holistic critique of the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025. Excerpts from a candid conversation between Ms Renati and Dr Srirang Jha are presented in this article as a starting point of bringing games and sports as mainstream agenda in wider academic and policy discourse in the country.

KEYWORDS: Games and Sports, Empowerment of Vulnerable Communities, *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025*, India

* Head of Policy School, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru, India

E-mail: malathi.renati@gmail.com

What are the major issues faced by the sportspersons and the sports federations in India?

Issues faced by athletes varies between the junior and senior levels. In the former, recurring issues are around poor facilities & nutrition, limited opportunities and social barriers especially for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or the rural areas. Meanwhile, at the senior level, deep-rooted issues linger: limited funding, poor governance, a persistent doping cloud, and an underdeveloped Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework — particularly around post-career opportunities for athletes. Only the crème-de-la-crème in popular sports enjoy income security; the ecosystem needs viable options from the ground up. This is an area the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 has begun to address under Pillar 1, "Athlete-Centric Support Systems."

Across the 60+ NSFs in India, barring BCCI, poor governance, rent-seeking and incompetent leadership has contributed to a host of problems. On governance, India's National Sports Federations (NSFs) operated for over a decade under the National Sports Development Code of India 2011, a set of executive guidelines, good on paper but having no legal backing. Because compliance was voluntary, several federations saw office-bearers with no sports administrative experience holding indefinite terms, , fiefdom & nepotism, weak financial disclosure, and recurring disputes over elections and team selection. The NSF for each sport plays a guardian role and has very crucial responsibilities vested upon it, this includes promotion of the sport, organising competitions & trials, securing sponsorship and selection of the Indian national team. The 2023 protests by national wrestlers against their federation leadership over harassment allegations were a visible symptom of a structural gap in grievance redressal. While the National Sports Governance Act 2025 (NSGA 2025) carries a lot of promise with respect to ironing out these kinks, till we see results on the ground, we remain watchful.

On infrastructure, the gap between urban and rural access remains wide. Sports is a State subject under the Constitution, so the Union schemes, like Khelo India, depend on State governments for last-mile delivery, and evaluations of the scheme have flagged uneven fund utilisation at the district and block level. These are compounded in our country when we bring in caste, religion, persons with disabilities (PwDs), and economically weaker families, who face the general problems above with fewer resources to work around them.

To what extent does the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 address the genuine concerns of the stakeholders of Indian sports?

KBN 2025, replaces the 24-year-old National Sports Policy (2001), and is candid about concerns faced by stakeholders. It explicitly names women, tribal communities, PwDs, and economically weaker sections as constituencies to be served under Pillar 3 "Sports for Social Development", and it was drafted after consultations with central ministries, NITI Aayog, State governments, NSFs, athletes and domain experts, a wider net than the 2001 policy cast, favourable sign.

Its companion legislation, the NSGA 2025, passed by Parliament in August 2025, is where the governance concerns from Question 1 are addressed more concretely: mandatory term and age limits for office-bearers, at least two athlete representatives and four women on federation executive committees, a Safe Sport Policy, an internal grievance mechanism, applicability of the Right to Information Act to national bodies, and a National Sports Tribunal headed by a sitting or former judge to resolve disputes outside ordinary courts. Taken together, the policy and the law respond to genuine, long-standing complaints. What remains untested is whether the implementation will be done as efficiently and transparently.

How do you see the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 unfolding in coming years?

There are 3 tracks which need to be observed closely. The legal architecture: the National Sports Board and the National Sports Tribunal under the NSGA, will be tested first, as federations go through their next election and audit cycles under the new rules. Early friction is likely: some legal commentators have already framed the Act as sitting somewhere between "reform" and "reinforced (read 'central') control," and federations that value their autonomy under international federation bylaws may contest specific provisions.

The policy track will move more unevenly. Because KBN 2025 asks for a "whole-of-government" approach, it would require inter-ministerial coordination, from the Education, Tribal affairs, Rural Development to Women & Child development ministries, historically the hardest part of Indian policy execution. Additionally, the State governments choose to align their own sports budgets with the Union's framework. The only saving grace is with India hosting the Commonwealth games 2030 and signalling its intent to be an Olympic host, the Overton window is shifting favourably and alignment across ministries would have to be

expedited. The implementation & adherence track: While both have a reasonably effective mandate on paper, a policy or act is only as good as the system it resides in. Each NSF should use the autonomy they have to carry forth the mission for their sport with integrity and sound work ethics. Everything else will then slowly fall into place.

What are the distinctive features of Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 which can reinforce sporting culture from villages to international events?

There are two pillars spelt out in the KBN2025, first, the "Sports as a People's Movement", this pillar talks about accessible infrastructure (rural and urban), nationwide fitness programmes and a fitness ranking and indexing system for schools & workplaces, primarily focusing on the importance of physical literacy. Though India is currently enjoying the benefits of being a young nation (~60% are < 35 years), by 2050, this peak will start to flatten out and as the senior (>60yrs) demographics expands, we will see a rise in healthcare costs especially geriatrics. So, unless nationwide fitness focus becomes a mantra, our citizens would have to bear the brunt of national economic progression and urban sedentary lifestyles.

Second, its integration with the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) means sport is meant to enter every school's timetable, not just Sports Authority of India camps and talent scouting efforts, this will help widen the base of children who participate in organised sport. Beneath the policy, the Khelo India Scheme already operationalises a village-to-international pipeline. It funds infrastructure, coaches and scholarships for rural and indigenous games, Mallakhamb, Kalaripayattu, Gatka, Thang-Ta, Yogasana and Silambam are formally recognised for support, feeding into the Khelo India Games (School, University and Youth), which drew over 20,000 athletes across recent editions and have identified athletes for sustained scholarships. The inaugural Kho-Kho World Cup, held in New Delhi in January 2025 with 23 countries and won by both the Indian men's and women's teams, is a useful proof of concept for how this pipeline can carry an indigenous game all the way to the global stage.

What are the major shortcomings of the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025?

The most consequential shortcoming is implementation challenges & funding limitations. Since sports remains a state subject, the responsibility of execution and the money for reaching rural and semi-urban athletes still rests primarily with State governments. Apart from the MYAS sports annual budget, National Sports Development Fund (NSDF) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), funding for many of the ambitious plans outlined in the KBN2025, needs

to be creatively plugged in by the markets, with NSFs for each sport taking the lead. One of the expectations of the NSFs are they can find creative ways to find funding pipelines like via sponsorships, investments and Public Private Partnerships, thus relying on Union's funds. But often efforts are not made to break away from the Union or State funding. BCCI is a fine example of how to not just be self-sufficient but to also prosper.

A second shortcoming is specificity: the document sets an ambitious goal of India becoming a top-five sporting nation by 2047, aligned with the Viksit Bharat vision, but does not prioritise which sports receive investment or tie federation funding to measurable reform or performance benchmarks. Third, there are no KPIs or quantified, time-bound targets for the inclusion outcomes it names, participation rates for women, Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste athletes, or PwDs are referenced as intentions rather than tracked indicators, which weakens accountability. Finally, prior evaluations of the Khelo India Scheme already flagged that funds and facilities do not always reach the district and block level as intended; KBN 2025 does not introduce a new monitoring mechanism to close that specific gap, leaving it to the existing scheme architecture.

How can we strengthen the governance and institutional framework in the federations of various games and sports?

The NSGA 2025 has laid useful foundations, term and age limits, a minimum athlete and gender presence on executive committees, RTI applicability, and a National Sports Tribunal, building on these principles are paramount if we are to have transparency and clean governance.

Following measures are required to strengthen governance and institutional framework of sports federations:

1. The subordinate rules under the Act should require federations to proactively publish audited accounts, selection criteria and executive-committee minutes, rather than leaving disclosure to RTI requests filed after the fact.
2. Athlete representation should carry real voting weight on matters like selection policy and anti-doping compliance, not just be restricted to being a mute spectator.
3. The Safe Sport Policy should be backed by grievance officers external to the federation being complained against, to ensure no conflict of interest.

4. The same rigour applied to national federations needs to reach State-level associations, since that is where most athletes have their first encounter with sports administration.

With ‘Ahmedavad 2030’ round the corner and a visible move to host international multi-sport events, the Overton window has shifted, and the time is ripe to make those tough governance and administrative calls towards building a sporting culture in India.

How do you think the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 can foster larger participation of vulnerable sections in games and sports in the country?

KBN 2025's pillar 1 (Elite pathways/ grassroots talent identification) and pillar 5 (Integration with Education – NEP2020) can directly help foster larger participation. NEP 2020 points out how Physical Education should be a co-curricular subject instead of an extra-curricular one. A mandatory school sports period reaches children regardless of family income in a way that private academies never will. Complementing this, the Khelo India Scheme's dedicated rural and indigenous games component and its Khelo India Para Games, which drew over 1,300 para-athletes in recent editions, already give the policy an evidence base to expand from. Meanwhile Pillar 3 (Sports for Social Development) and Pillar 2 (Sports for Economic Development), the former with inclusivity (women, tribal, LGBTQ+) and the latter with sports tourism, equipment manufacturing and event management is a catalyst for local, non-athletic livelihoods in the same underserved regions. This matters because participation becomes sustainable when a family, particularly one that is economically vulnerable, sees a genuine economic ecosystem around sport, not merely a slim chance at a podium finish.

That said, rising participation numbers are necessary but not sufficient. Khelo India Games have crossed 20,000 athletes but converting that grassroots base into sustained pathways for marginalised athletes specifically will need scholarship and bridging mechanisms with explicit targets, which the policy gestures toward without mandating. The markets can play a huge role here, with sponsorships, investments and media amplification. It's not just the elite who deserve visibility; it is more so those who have moved the needle in the tough and often unforgiving strata of grassroots sports development. Effective media narratives and storytelling can bring this to the fore.

How can we revitalize the indigenous games and sports in India?

India is blessed with diversity across the length and breadth of the subcontinent, spanning geography, language, cuisine, ethnicity, and culture. It is this diversity that has traditionally given rise to a rich lineage of games, now termed "indigenous", each shaped by the region it originated in. One can observe that they are broadly games around combat & strength (Gatka, Kho-kho), strategic (chess, Pachisi, Pallanguzhi), water (Vallam Kali) or animals (Jallikattu, Kambala). Pillar 3 talks about the 'revival of indigenous games' which is already underway. The Khelo India Scheme's rural and indigenous games component funds infrastructure, coaches and scholarships for many and documentaries have been produced to record and popularise them. Commercial leagues have shown these games can sustain broadcast and sponsorship interest on their own terms: the Pro Kabaddi League, running since 2014, and the Ultimate Kho-Kho League, since 2022, are proof that indigenous formats do not need to imitate Olympic sport to draw audiences. The Kho-Kho World Cup's success in January 2025 was played to a full house and extends that logic internationally.

State-level models are also worth scaling: Punjab's Qila Raipur Sports Festival in Ludhiana, often called India's "rural Olympics," gives traditional games a recurring, well-attended calendar slot rather than one-off exhibitions, and Kerala's Kalaripayattu Academy, shows how a martial art can be taught through a formal, examinable syllabus without losing its cultural character. My suggestion would be to standardise rules and formats for a handful of these games so they can run structured inter-State and international circuits, the way Kho-Kho now does, and to route CSR and private investment into indigenous-game leagues, using the Pro Kabaddi model as a template. But it's equally important to keep alive the spirit of community sport at melas and local festivals, not with elite pathways in mind, but rather to enable the longer-term vision: community spirit, trust, camaraderie, and physical activity as part of our core culture.

How can games and sports help in empowering vulnerable groups in India who are otherwise well poised to succeed in the arena?

Sport is one of the few genuinely meritocratic ladders available to a first-generation participant, this is reinforced by limited but tangible institutional pathways, sports quota recruitment into the Railways, public sector undertakings, defence forces and police gives athletes from modest backgrounds a route to stable government employment that is independent of continuing to compete at the highest level. This has been the incentive that has attracted many an upcoming athlete especially from the rural areas.

Visible role models matter here too, and the evidence from the most recent Paralympic cycle is instructive: India sent a record 84 para-athletes to the Paris 2024 Paralympics and won 29 medals, 7 golds, 9 silvers and 13 bronze, its best-ever performance, up from 19 medals at Tokyo 2020. Avani Lekhara became the first Indian woman to win two individual Paralympic gold medals. Results like these do more to shift community attitudes toward disability and women in sport, toward what is possible for other vulnerable groups, than years of awareness campaigns can achieve. I would add one caveat, in the interest of realism: sport empowers most durably when paired with parallel investment in education, health and safe transport for these communities, as these are underlying pain points.

How can the state governments play a role in promoting traditional rural sports in their regions?

Because sports sit in the State List of the Constitution, State governments are the key stakeholders and closer to the action on the ground, especially at the panchayat & district levels. Practical steps that already have working examples include giving traditional sports a recurring, funded calendar slot rather than treating them as occasional festivals. We have seen how traditional Akhara's, for example from Kohlapur (MH), Varanasi (UP), Delhi and Harayana, have been the cradle of wrestling talent, with many going on to win laurels for the country. Linking Panchayati Raj institutions directly to talent scouting is another promising route. Naturally, States that align their own sports policies with KBN 2025's rural and indigenous games framework stand to draw more effectively on Khelo India grants for infrastructure, coaching and scholarships, since central funding for this component is explicitly tied to State-level implementation, but NSFs should strive to be financially independent of government support as mentioned above.

How do you visualize the future of Indian games and sports?

I would describe my outlook as cautiously optimistic. The Overton window has shifted on some aspects, but as the Kingdon schema outlines, unless there is political will, we can't see sweeping changes especially with regard to governance. Paralympic medals nearly doubled between Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024, India is consistently hosting international events and our athletes from various disciplines like chess, squash, boxing, shooting, archery, hockey, track & field are proving we have the mettle to perform at the highest level. Commercially viable domestic leagues in kabaddi and Kho-Kho show that public appetite for sport in India is broader than cricket alone, even if cricket still dominates revenue and attention. For perhaps the first

time since independence, India also has a reasonably coherent institutional stack in place at once, a national sports law (NSGA2025) with enforceable governance standards, a national policy (KBN2025) naming social inclusion as a co-equal pillar with elite performance, and a curriculum reform that puts sport into every government school day.

Whether this stack delivers a top five sporting nation by 2047 is, honestly, debatable, and I would be wary of anyone claiming certainty either way at this early stage. The ball is in our court, but the coming five years, through the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics and the 2030 Asian and Commonwealth Games cycle, will reveal far more than the policy text does today. How it gains momentum over these years will determine the strides we will make as a sporting nation. What I would urge policymakers, businesses and this journal's readers to hold onto is that the deeper strategic value of this moment may lie less in medal counts and more in whether the pipeline genuinely widens citizenship and opportunity for India's most vulnerable communities. That is a harder outcome to measure than a podium finish, but it is the one this policy window is designed to deliver.

RESOURCES

IOA Safe Sports Policy <https://olympic.ind.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/IOA-Safe-Sport-Policy.pdf>

Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 (National Sports Policy 2025)
https://yas.gov.in/sites/default/files/Khelo-Bharat-Niti-2025_0.pdf

National Sports Governance Act 2025
<https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/22045/1/a202525.pdf>

National Sports Development Code of India 2011
<http://yas.nic.in/sites/default/files/File918.compressed.pdf>