



Rural Talent: The Bedrock of Indian Sports

Nearly 80 per cent of India's sportspersons come from rural areas, making villages the backbone of Indian sports. Athletes from rural background like Manu Bhaker, Lovlina Borgohain, Sakshi Malik, Mary Kom and Vandana Katariya have brought Olympic and international success across shooting, boxing, wrestling and hockey. Despite abundant rural talent, the key challenge remains access to modern coaching and infrastructure aligned with global standards. Government initiatives such as the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and Khelo India are providing structured support, training and stipends to elite and grassroots athletes.

Satyenadr Pal Singh

Despite rapid urbanisation, India thrives in its villages. Nearly 80 per cent of India's sportspersons still come from rural areas, making villages the true backbone of Indian sports. The most prominent example of this strength is javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra. Hailing from Khandra village near Panipat in Haryana, Neeraj has become the biggest inspiration for Indian athletes by winning gold at the Tokyo Olympics 2020 and silver at the Paris Olympics 2024 in javelin throw, besides clinching gold medals at

the World Athletics Championships, Asian Games and Commonwealth Games.

Out of the total ten Olympic gold medals won by India so far, eight have come in hockey, while the remaining two in individual events were secured by shooter Abhinav Bindra (Beijing 2008) and javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra. Despite hardships and limited facilities, athletes from rural backgrounds often display a stronger determination to outshine their urban counterparts. After being unable to secure any gold at the Paris Olympics, India has now set an ambitious

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target of winning 12 gold medals and a total of 30–35 medals while bidding to host the Olympics 2036.

Except for cricket and football, the Olympic Games remain the most significant platform to assess sporting excellence globally. While legendary Indian cricketers such as Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli hail from urban cities, rural talent is increasingly making its mark in cricket as well. Fourteen-year-old Vaibhav Suryavanshi from Tajpur village in Samastipur, Bihar has captured global attention with his batting exploits. Even before making their professional debut, franchises have invested significantly in young rural players.

In the Indian Premier League (IPL), franchises have acquired rural talents such as Prashantveer, a left-arm spin all-rounder from Gujipur village, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, and Kartik Sharma, a wicketkeeper-batsman from Behra village, Bharatpur, Rajasthan. Leagues inspired by the IPL—such as the Hockey India League, Pro Kabaddi League, Kho Kho League, and Premier Badminton League—have similarly showcased an abundance of rural talent. Playing alongside and against world-class athletes in these leagues enables young players to gain confidence, adapt to high-pressure environments, and accelerate their transition to international competition.

Barring cricket, most sports bodies and athletes in India depend largely on government support and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) for training and infrastructure. To enhance Olympic and Paralympic performance, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports launched the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) in September 2014 and revamped in April 2018. The revamped scheme introduced a dedicated technical support team to manage elite athletes. Under TOPS, selected Olympic and Paralympic prospects receive comprehensive support, including foreign training, international exposure, equipment, coaching camps and a monthly stipend of ₹50,000. The objective is to optimise preparation for medal-winning performances.

Presently, TOPS supports 98 core group athletes across 13 sports (including men's and women's hockey teams) and 165 development group athletes across 12 sports. With this support, rural athletes like Neeraj Chopra and shooter Manu Bhaker have already secured Olympic medals. Looking ahead to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, Neeraj, Manu Bhaker and Tokyo 2020 bronze medallist boxer Lovlina Borgohain from Baromukhiya village in Assam's Golaghat district remain prime medal contenders and have been retained in the TOPS core programme.



The Government is undertaking major reforms in sports: Prime Minister

While inaugurating the 72nd National Volleyball Tournament in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh on January 04, 2026, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi stated that initiatives such as TOPS are transforming Indian sports by strengthening infrastructure, improving financing mechanisms and providing global exposure to young athletes. Over the past decade, India has hosted more than 20 major international events, including the FIFA U-17 World Cup, Hockey World Cup and major chess tournaments. India is set to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and is bidding for the 2036 Olympics. Reforms such as the National Sports Governance Bill and *Khelo Bharat Niti* 2025 aim to enhance transparency and provide youth with opportunities to progress simultaneously in sports and education. The government has significantly increased the sports budget, shifting India's model to a player-centric approach focused on talent identification, scientific training, nutrition and transparent selection.

PROFILES OF RURAL ICONS



Manu Bhaker

Born in Goriya village, Jhajjar district, Haryana, 22-year-old Manu Bhaker made history at the Paris 2024 Olympics by winning two bronze medals in 10m air pistol (individual and mixed team). She is part of the TOPS core group for the 2028 Olympics and has multiple World Cup and Commonwealth Games gold medals to her credit.



Pritam Siwach

From Jharsa village near Gurugram, Pritam played a key role in India's gold medal victory in women's hockey at the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. Post-retirement, she established the Pritam Siwach Hockey Academy in Sonipat, nurturing several Olympians.



Neeraj Chopra

Born in a joint farming family in Khandra village near Panipat, Neeraj Chopra discovered javelin throw almost by chance. Encouraged by his family, he went on to win Olympic gold at Tokyo 2020 with a throw of 87.58 metres, becoming the first Indian track-and-field athlete to win an Olympic medal. He later became world champion at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest. Despite a silver medal at Paris 2024, he recorded a personal-best throw of 89.45 metres. His focus now is the 2027 World Championships and the Olympics 2028.



MC Mary Kom

Hailing from a poor family in Kangathei village, Manipur, Mary Kom won Olympic bronze in London 2012, multiple world championships and Asian Games medals. She is a recipient of Padma awards and the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna.



Bhaichung Bhutia

From Tinkitam village in Sikkim, Bhutia played 84 internationals for India, scoring 27 goals. Known as the "Sikkim Sniper," he became one of India's most celebrated footballers and a recipient of the *Arjuna Award* and *Padma Shri*.

Even as foreign coaches dominate hockey, boxing, wrestling, shooting, weightlifting, badminton, their India counterparts need to factor in global shift. Sports bodies too need to sync with private academies. India's sporting journey clearly demonstrates that rural India remains its strongest reservoir of talent. With sustained policy support, quality coaching and infrastructure, these villages will continue to produce champions who carry the Tricolour to global glory. ■



After being identified, rural talent is scientifically trained at SAI centres and National Centres of Excellence (NCoEs), where athletes receive expert coaching. Complementing this is the Khelo India programme, which plays a transformative role by promoting grassroots participation, identifying young talent, building infrastructure and organising competitions from school to university levels. Through initiatives such as the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG), University Games (KIUG) and Winter Games (KIWG), the programme has institutionalised annual national competitions where youth represent their states and universities.

Several iconic Indian athletes emerged from villages: footballer Bhaichung Bhutia, Olympic bronze medallist boxer MC Mary Kom, wrestler Sakshi Malik, shooter Manu Bhaker, former Indian women's hockey captain Suraj Lata Devi, and striker Pritam Siwach, who produced Olympians like Neha Goyal, Sharmila and Nisha Warsi. Post-Independence hockey legends such as Udham Singh, Ajit Pal Singh, and recent Olympic bronze-winning captains Manpreet Singh (Meethapur, Jalandhar) and Harmanpreet Singh (Timmowal, Amritsar) all hail from villages. Jalandhar's Sansarpur village is famously known as the nursery of Indian hockey.

Women's hockey icons Rani Rampal from Shahabad Markanda and Vandana Katariya from Roshanabad village near Haridwar exemplify rural excellence. Vandana holds the record for the most international appearances (320) and goals (158) in Indian women's hockey and became the first Indian woman to score an Olympic hat-trick at Tokyo 2020. Rani Rampal has played 254 international matches and scored 120 goals, earning the *Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna*, *Arjuna Award* and *Padma Shri*. In men's hockey, Dilip Tirkey from Saunamara village in Odisha's Sundargarh district holds the record for the most international appearances (412).

All eight Olympic medals won by India in wrestling have been secured by wrestlers from rural backgrounds, including Khashaba Jadhav, Sushil Kumar, Ravi Dahiya, Yogeshwar Dutt, Bajrang Punia, Aman Sehrawat and Sakshi Malik.

While rural India abounds in talent, the key challenge lies in ensuring access to quality coaching and modern infrastructure. Many domestic coaches lag behind global advancements, making foreign coaches prevalent across sports such as hockey, boxing, wrestling, shooting, weightlifting and badminton. India must invest in upgrading coaching capabilities and strengthening sports federations and private academies. ■