



The Sports Economy Rural Youth, Real Jobs

Sports in India has evolved from recreation into a structured employment ecosystem, offering rural youth sustainable livelihoods through sports quotas, coaching, infrastructure development and allied sectors. Initiatives such as Khelo India, TOPS, ASMITA Women's Leagues and the *Khelo Bharat Niti-2025* have institutionalised talent identification, financial support and inclusive access. Recruitment by Indian Railways, armed forces and public sector undertakings ensures social security, performance-linked incentives and career stability, while infrastructure expansion has generated employment across coaching, administration and sports science—positioning sports as a tool of inclusion and nation-building.

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On a dusty playground in rural India, a barefoot child runs after a ball. What begins as play often turns into purpose, and in many cases, into a profession. For millions of young Indians living beyond the big cities, sports has quietly evolved from recreation into a reliable pathway to employment, stability and national pride.

Over the last decade, India's sports ecosystem has seen a remarkable transformation. Sports, once

viewed as an uncertain career option, has now become a structured and respected livelihood, particularly for rural youth. From government jobs under the sports quota to coaching roles, infrastructure development, equipment manufacturing and emerging opportunities in sports technology, the sector is creating jobs across the country. Central to this shift is focused government intervention, grassroots initiatives like Khelo India and the recognition of rural India as the nation's biggest talent reservoir.

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Sports as a Gateway to Government Jobs

One of the strongest employment avenues in sports comes through recruitment under the sports quota in government and public sector institutions. At present, athletes from 43 recognised sports disciplines are eligible for jobs based on their sporting achievements. These include athletics, cricket, hockey, wrestling, badminton, archery, weightlifting, football, kabaddi, shooting, chess, cycling, rowing, gymnastics, tennis, table tennis and traditional games such as kho-kho and atya-patya.

The Indian Railways is the largest recruiter under the sports quota, followed by the Indian Army, police forces, government banks, universities and major public sector undertakings such as ONGC, Indian Oil and Air India. For rural youth, these jobs provide stable income, social respect and long-term security.

Athletes who perform well at recognised platforms such as the Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, World Championships, Khelo India events, National Games, Federation Cups and inter-university tournaments become eligible for direct recruitment in Group 'C' and 'D' positions. Even third-place finishers in several competitions are considered, making opportunities accessible to a wider group of athletes.

Eligibility, Selection and Career Growth

While sporting excellence opens the door, eligibility criteria ensure transparency and fairness. Most departments require minimum educational qualifications, generally Class 10 or Class 12, depending



on the post. Athletes are graded based on the level of competitions they have represented, ranging from international to school-level events.

The selection process typically includes a written examination, sports trials, medical tests and interviews. Participation alone is not sufficient. Athletes must have represented their state or country and secured top-three positions in recognised tournaments or earned national awards under the National Physical Efficiency Campaign.

Once appointed, performance on the field continues to shape career growth. Medal-winning athletes are eligible for promotions, special leave for training and competitions and institutional support. Success at major international events often accelerates promotion, reinforcing the link between sporting excellence and professional advancement.

Pay Scales That Reflect Performance

Government jobs under the sports quota offer structured pay scales aligned with sporting achievements. Athletes appointed at higher grade pay levels of ₹2,400 to ₹2,800 are usually Olympic, World Championship, Asian Games, or Commonwealth Games medallists with graduation degrees. Those appointed at ₹1,900 to ₹2,000 grade pay typically include national and inter-university champions who are at least Class 12 pass. Entry-level positions at ₹1,800 grade pay are available to athletes who have excelled at state and junior national levels.

For many rural youth, these salaries exceed local earning opportunities and provide a clear alternative to migration or unstable employment.

Rural India as the New Sports Powerhouse

Rural India has emerged as the backbone of the country's sports ecosystem. Nearly 59 percent of India's 655 million sports fans come from rural areas, while women account for 36 percent of the fan base. This growing engagement reflects the deep reach of sports into India's heartland.

Programs such as Khelo India have played a pivotal role in nurturing this talent. Under the scheme, athletes receive annual financial support of ₹6.28 lakh, covering training, equipment, nutrition, medical care and competition exposure. More than 2,781 athletes have benefited so far. The impact is evident, with 124 Khelo India athletes contributing to India's 42 medals at the 2022 Asian Games and



28 representing the country at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Collectively, these athletes have set thousands of national and international records.

Infrastructure That Creates Employment

Investment in sports infrastructure has become a major source of employment in rural and semi-urban India. Over the past 11 years, the government has approved 323 new sports infrastructure projects with an investment of ₹3,074 crore. Additionally, 1,041 Khelo India Centres and 32 Khelo India Centres of Excellence have been established, supported by 301 accredited sports academies.

These facilities generate employment for coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, nutritionists, grounds staff, and administrators. Institutions such as the National Sports University in Manipur and the Major Dhyan Chand Sports University in Uttar Pradesh further expand academic and professional opportunities in sports science and coaching.

Inclusion Through Sports

India's sports growth has been accompanied by a strong focus on inclusion. Initiatives like the ASMITA Women's Leagues have expanded structured sporting opportunities for women across 20 disciplines. Programs such as the Rajasthan Women's Kabaddi Initiative have created professional opportunities for over 1,200 rural women, many of whom report improved income and financial independence.

The Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 builds on this progress by ensuring equitable access to sports infrastructure for

Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, persons with disabilities and economically weaker sections. The policy also focuses on reducing the rural-urban gap and integrating sports with education and community participation.

Beyond Athletes: A Growing Sports Economy

Employment generated by sports extends beyond players. India's sports goods industry, centred in cities like Meerut and Jalandhar, employs thousands of rural artisans and has grown steadily in recent years. Traditional equipment such as cricket bats, kabaddi mats, and wrestling gear continues to find markets in India and abroad.

Traditional sports like mallakhamb, gatka and kalaripayattu are also witnessing renewed interest. These disciplines are creating demand for trained coaches and performers while preserving cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the sports technology sector is emerging as a new employment frontier.

According to the Google-Deloitte report titled Think Sports: Unlocking India's \$130B Sports Potential, India's sports sector is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 14 percent and reach a valuation of \$130 billion by 2030.

Rural Icons, Global Impact

The rise of athletes from rural India highlights the success of this ecosystem. Neeraj Chopra from Haryana, Hima Das from Assam, Mirabai Chanu from Manipur, Deepika Kumari from Jharkhand, Avinash Sable from Maharashtra and Rupa Bayor from Arunachal Pradesh are shining examples of how rural talent, when supported, can succeed at the global level.

Sports as a Sustainable Career Path

India's sporting journey today is about more than medals and podium finishes. It is about employment, empowerment, and nation-building. Through sustained policy support, infrastructure development, and inclusive schemes such as Khelo India, TOPS, ASMITA and Khelo Bharat Niti-2025, sports has emerged as a credible career option for rural youth.

As opportunities continue to expand, sports is no longer a gamble. It is a profession that offers stability, dignity and growth. For rural India, the playground has become a launchpad for livelihoods and leadership. ■