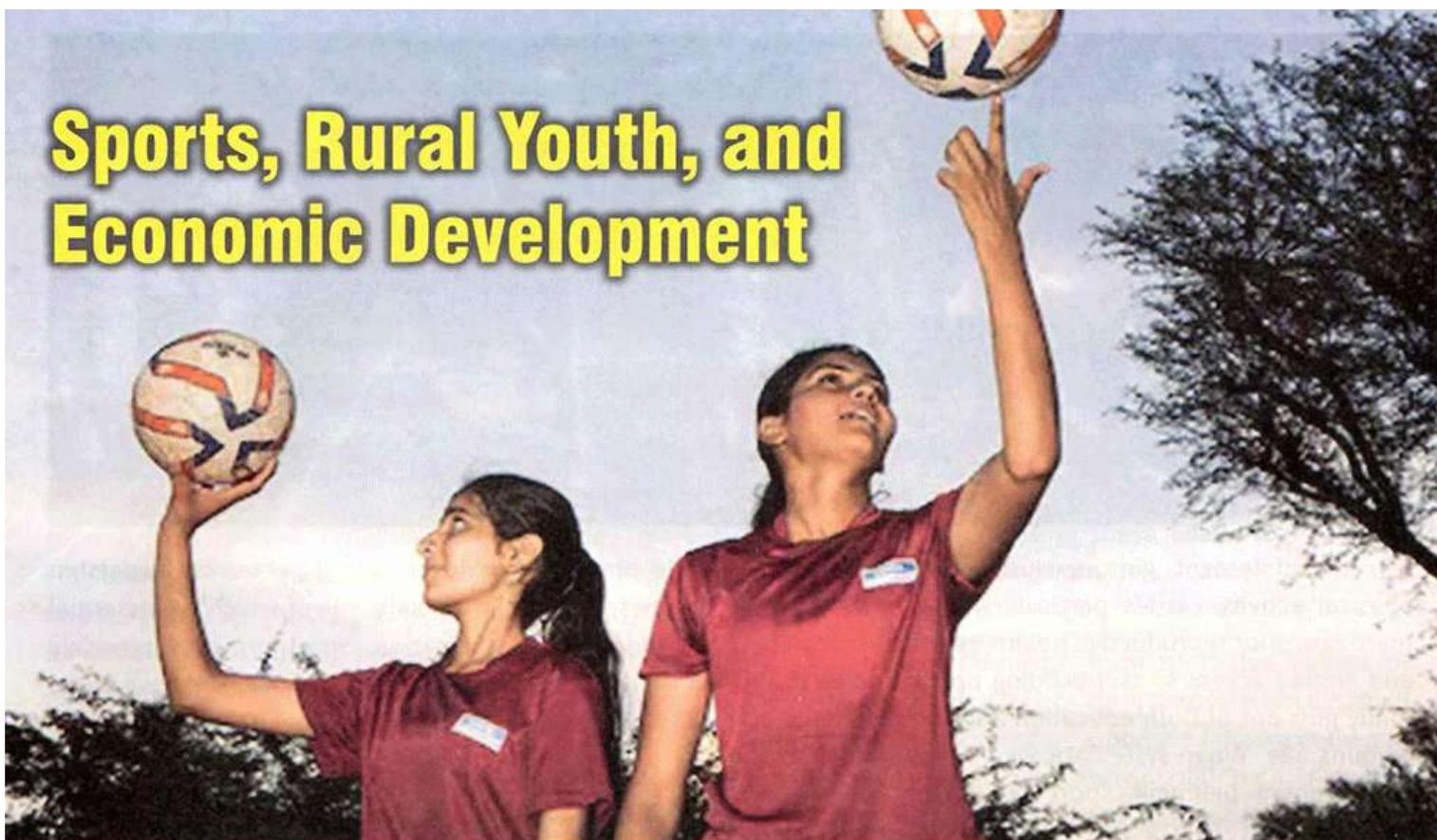


Sports, Rural Youth, and Economic Development



An integrated approach to rural sports development is essential to address persistent challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited coaching, uneven participation, and gender barriers, while positioning sport as a tool for public health and community development. Multi-sport rural stadiums and shared-use facilities, designed with decentralised and climate-sensitive principles, can expand access, nurture grassroots talent, and strengthen community ownership. Community-based sports programmes also support youth engagement, social inclusion, and drug de-addiction when linked with counselling, education, and mentorship. Backed by initiatives such as Khelo India and *Khelo Bharat Niti 2025*, and aligned with rural employment schemes, sports can be embedded in development policy to advance health, gender equality, cultural continuity, and holistic rural growth.

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In rural India, girls' participation in sport is still viewed as an exception rather than a norm. When it does occur, it is often celebrated briefly as a symbolic achievement and then overlooked.

Policy discourse has largely framed rural sport for girls as a matter of empowerment or self-expression, rather

than as a substantive developmental and economic intervention. This narrow framing is incomplete and, in many ways, counterproductive. At a time when rural India continues to grapple with youth underemployment, early school dropouts, poor health outcomes, and sharply gendered labour force participation, sport remains a significantly underutilised policy instrument.

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For adolescent girls, exclusion from structured physical activity carries particularly high costs. Early marriage, poor reproductive health, restricted mobility, and limited access to skill-building opportunities push many girls out of both education and the workforce at a young age. When systematically integrated into rural development planning, sport can disrupt this cycle. Well-designed sports programmes can delay early marriage, improve health outcomes, build employable skills, and generate local livelihoods. When girls play, the impact extends far beyond the field—reshaping household decisions, labour market participation, and rural economies.

Rural Girls, Employment Stress, and Policy Gaps

Rural India is home to nearly two-thirds of the country's adolescent girls, yet it records some of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. Survey data consistently show a sharp decline in women's participation after adolescence, particularly in rural areas where early marriage, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and health constraints limit economic engagement. This is not merely a social concern; it represents a substantial economic inefficiency.

National analyses suggest that persistently low levels of physical activity—especially among women and girls—could add more than INR 55 trillion in annual healthcare costs by 2047 if current trends continue. This projection underlines the economic imperative of promoting broad-based participation in sport, beyond the pursuit of elite athletic performance.

The rural youth employment challenge is often discussed in terms of skill deficits or the absence of local job opportunities. Much less attention is paid to the structural exclusion of girls from pathways that

build physical confidence, social networks, leadership abilities, and public visibility—all of which are essential for workforce participation. Sport provides precisely these assets. Yet existing policy frameworks have failed to leverage this potential in a systematic manner.

Schemes such as Khelo India have enhanced the visibility of women athletes at the national level, but their reach remains uneven and disproportionately concentrated in urban and semi-urban centres. At the village level, sports infrastructure is frequently inadequate, poorly maintained, or socially inaccessible to girls. Facilities often lack toilets, changing spaces, safe access routes, and training schedules that accommodate girls' schooling and domestic responsibilities. As a result, participation tends to be irregular and dependent on individual champions rather than sustained institutional support.

Sports as an Economic Intervention

Reframing girls' participation in sport as an economic intervention rather than a purely social initiative allows its full developmental potential to be recognised. The economic effects operate through multiple, mutually reinforcing pathways.

Delaying Early Marriage

Early marriage remains one of the most significant barriers to girls' education and employment in rural India. Participation in organised sport during adolescence introduces structured routines of training, competition, and peer engagement that influence household decision-making. Evidence from districts with active girls' sports programmes shows a clear association between sustained participation and delayed marriage.

Families that invest time and resources in a girl's sporting routine are less likely to withdraw her from school or arrange an early marriage, particularly when her participation is linked to local recognition or institutional affiliation. Delaying marriage extends the period available for education and skill acquisition, increases labour market readiness, and enhances lifetime earning potential while reducing long-term dependency.

Health as a Precondition for Workforce Participation

Poor health outcomes among rural women—including anaemia, low physical endurance, and reproductive health challenges—constitute major constraints on workforce participation. Regular engagement in sport directly addresses these limitations. Sustained physical activity improves nutritional absorption, mental well-being, and physical resilience, all of which are critical for consistent economic engagement.

For adolescent girls, improved health is associated with better school attendance, reduced absenteeism, and greater confidence in public spaces. Over time, these advantages translate into improved employability, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare support, fitness services, and community-based programmes. In this sense, sport functions as preventive health infrastructure, reducing future healthcare burdens while strengthening human capital.

Women Coaches as Local Economic Anchors

Rural sport also creates employment opportunities for women as coaches, trainers, referees, and physical education instructors. Female coaches play a critical role in enabling girls' participation by addressing safety concerns and negotiating social norms. At the same time, they serve as visible examples of non-traditional rural employment.

Certified women coaches at block or district levels contribute to the sustainability of local sports ecosystems. They earn regular incomes, gain social recognition, and exercise leadership without needing to migrate to urban centres. This reframes sport from a narrow pipeline to elite competition into a decentralised employment generator rooted in rural realities. Over time, these roles strengthen local capacity and reduce reliance on external interventions.

Infrastructure Design and Policy Failure

The success of girls' sports initiatives depends less on rhetoric and more on design. Infrastructure that ignores gender-specific needs excludes girls, regardless of stated intent. The absence of toilets, inadequate lighting, unsafe access routes, and inflexible training schedules constitute structural barriers to participation.

Scheduling is as critical as physical space. Training sessions that conflict with school hours or domestic responsibilities systematically disadvantage girls. Safety concerns—both real and perceived—further restrict participation, particularly during early morning or evening hours. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate planning, community consultation, and targeted investment.

Girls do not disengage from sport due to lack of interest; they disengage because systems are not designed with them in mind. Gender-responsive infrastructure and programme design are therefore not optional add-ons but essential components of effective rural sports policy.

Evidence from the Field: Success Stories

Several regional experiences demonstrate how sustained and well-designed sports initiatives can generate tangible social and economic outcomes for girls and communities.

In Odisha, long-term investment in women's hockey has transformed participation in tribal districts such as Sundergarh. Beyond producing elite players, these programmes have generated local employment for women as coaches, trainers, and support staff. The visibility of successful women athletes has also shifted community attitudes towards girls' education and mobility.

In Haryana, wrestling *akharas* that introduced women-only training hours, appointed female coaches, and provided basic facilities witnessed marked increases in girls' participation. These changes were accompanied by delayed marriage, higher continuation into secondary education, and stronger family support for girls' sporting and educational aspirations.

Across Northeast India, community-based football programmes for girls—often supported by civil society organisations—illustrate how sport can function simultaneously as a youth engagement and livelihood strategy. Women trained as referees and coaches earn regular incomes while anchoring local sports

ecosystems. These programmes demonstrate the viability of decentralised, community-led sports models in diverse rural contexts.

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges: where girls' participation is sustained through appropriate infrastructure, coaching, and community support, positive social and economic outcomes follow.

Towards an Integrated Policy Approach

To unlock the full potential of sport as a catalyst for rural development, policy frameworks must move beyond symbolic inclusion towards systematic integration. This requires recognising sport as part of the rural development and employment ecosystem, not as an isolated or discretionary activity.

Key priorities include ensuring gender-responsive sports infrastructure at the village and block levels, investing in training and certification pathways for women coaches, and aligning sports programmes with education, health, and livelihoods initiatives. Convergence with existing schemes can amplify impact without requiring entirely new institutional structures.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should track not only participation rates but also outcomes such as school retention, delayed marriage, health indicators, and employment generation. Such evidence can strengthen the case for sustained public investment and guide programme refinement.

Global and Emerging Perspectives

International evidence reinforces these findings. In sub-Saharan Africa, structured sport programmes for adolescent girls have been linked to reductions in teenage pregnancy and improvements in school retention. International experience also demonstrates how rural sporting ecosystems can generate sustained participation and economic opportunity when conditions are right. While Iten in Kenya is widely recognised as the world's most prominent "sports village", the town of Bekoji in Ethiopia is equally notable as a "little town of champions". Situated in the Ethiopian highlands, Bekoji has produced some of the world's most accomplished long distance runners, including Tirunesh Dibaba, Genzebe Dibaba and Kenenisa Bekele. Both Iten and Bekoji illustrate how high altitude rural environments, combined with sustained training culture, local role models and community acceptance of

sport as a livelihood pathway, can create dense clusters of sporting talent. However, Iten's global reputation also reflects the presence of training infrastructure, coaching networks and economic opportunities that support athletes beyond competition alone. The lesson for rural India is clear: sporting success is not accidental, but the outcome of ecosystems that treat sport as a serious economic and social activity rather than an isolated pursuit.

In Latin America, communitybased football initiatives have created parallel employment opportunities for women as coaches and administrators. These global experiences highlight that rural India's challenges are not unique, and that sport can be a scalable, crosscultural intervention.

Emerging challenges such as climate change and digital exclusion also intersect with rural sport. Extreme weather events disrupt schooling and livelihoods, but sport can serve as a stabilising routine and community anchor. Digital platforms, if made accessible, can connect rural girls to training modules, competitions, and mentorship networks, expanding opportunities beyond geography. Integrating sport with digital literacy and climate resilience programmes could multiply benefits, preparing girls not only for local employment but also for participation in broader economic transitions.

Conclusion

Girls' participation in sport has implications that extend far beyond recreation or symbolic empowerment. When designed and implemented effectively, sport becomes a powerful economic and developmental intervention—delaying early marriage, improving health outcomes, building employable skills, and generating local livelihoods. In rural India, where gender disparities in education, health, and employment remain entrenched, sport offers a practical and scalable pathway for change.

When girls play, households adjust their expectations, communities reassess gender norms, and rural economies begin to shift. Recognising and institutionalising this potential within rural development policy is not only a matter of equity but also of economic efficiency and long-term national interest. By moving sport from the margins to the mainstream of rural planning, India can transform playing fields into platforms for inclusive growth and youth-led development. ■

Rural Olympics in India



India's rural landscape is rich with traditional sports and community games that have been played for centuries. Among the most iconic gatherings celebrating these games is the Rural Olympics, an annual festival of indigenous sports, strength competitions, and cultural performances. Unlike the international Olympics, India's Rural Olympics focus on sustaining rural sporting traditions, village pride, and heritage games deeply embedded in local life.

The most famous Rural Olympics is held in Qila Raipur, a village near Ludhiana, Punjab. Known as the Qila Raipur Sports Festival, it is often referred to as India's Rural Olympics due to its scale, variety of events, and historical significance. The festival began in 1933 though over the decades, it has grown into one of India's largest rural sporting festivals, attracting thousands of participants and spectators from across the country. Held every year in late January or early February at the Grewal Sports Association grounds, the festival spans several days. Traditional events include bullock cart racing, camel races, tug-of-war, kabaddi, and tractor pulling, alongside feats of strength such as heavy tire lifting

and rope climbing. Modern athletic competitions like track races, cycling, hockey, and kabaddi are also part of the festival, blending village games with conventional sports.

Qila Raipur's Rural Olympics is notable not only for competition but also for its celebration of rural identity and physical skill. It highlights the strength and agility developed through farming and daily rural life, while also preserving cultural traditions through folk music, dance, and local cuisine.

Similar rural sports festivals are held in other states. Chhattisgarhiya Olympics in Chhattisgarh is a statewide rural sports event featuring kabaddi, kho-kho, and traditional races, attracting millions of participants. Local festivals in Gujarat also host rural Olympic-style competitions with rope pulling, running races, and indigenous games. Initiatives like Isha Gramotsavam further encourage participation across multiple states, including women and youth, fostering rural talent and preserving traditional sports culture.

The Rural Olympics, therefore, is more than a sports event. It is a celebration of India's grassroots sporting heritage, a platform for showcasing rural strength, community spirit, and cultural pride. ■

Mallakhamb: India's Enduring Tradition of Strength and Discipline

Mallakhamb is one of India's most distinctive traditional sports, representing a refined system of physical training rooted in indigenous knowledge and rural life. More than a display of strength or acrobatics, Mallakhamb reflects a long-standing tradition of disciplined body training that developed in India long before the advent of modern fitness systems.

The term Mallakhamb is derived from two Sanskrit words: Malla, meaning wrestler, and Khamb, meaning pole. Historically, the practice evolved as a method of conditioning for wrestlers, enabling them to develop exceptional grip strength, balance, flexibility, and control over their bodies. While pole-based exercises are mentioned in ancient Indian traditions and visual depictions, the organised form of Mallakhamb took shape in the early eighteenth century in Maharashtra. It is commonly attributed to Balambhatta Deodhar, a physical trainer during the reign of Peshwa Bajirao II, who systematised the practice for structured training.

Traditionally, Mallakhamb was practised in rural akharas, which served as centres for physical training and discipline. The equipment was simple and locally available: a smooth wooden pole firmly fixed into the ground or a strong rope suspended from above. This simplicity made Mallakhamb ideally suited to village environments, where elaborate infrastructure was neither necessary nor available. Training relied on consistency, discipline, and guidance from the guru rather than on external apparatus.

There are three recognised forms of Mallakhamb: Pole Mallakhamb, Rope Mallakhamb, and Hanging Mallakhamb. Among these, pole Mallakhamb remains the most traditional and widely practised form. Performers execute a sequence of static holds, transitions, and

dynamic movements by gripping the pole with their hands, legs, and torso. These movements demand high levels of core strength, coordination, flexibility, and mental focus. Several positions resemble yogic postures, indicating a shared foundation in India's traditional systems of body training and self-discipline.

Beyond physical conditioning, Mallakhamb has always emphasised values such as perseverance, self-control, courage, and respect for the guru. In rural India, it contributed significantly to shaping disciplined individuals and resilient communities. The objective was not competition alone, but holistic development of the individual.

In contemporary times, Mallakhamb has evolved into an organised sport with formal rules, judging systems, and competitions at school, state, and national levels. The Mallakhamb Federation of India oversees its development and promotion. Despite this formalisation, the essence of the tradition remains intact.

Mallakhamb is not merely a sport; it is a living heritage of India's traditional methods of physical training. Preserving and promoting it is essential to safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems and recognising the depth of India's rural sporting traditions. ■

