



Impact of khelo India youth games on competitive sports culture in India

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Abstract

India has long had a complicated relationship with competitive sports. Cricket has dominated the national sporting conversation for decades, while athletes in disciplines like wrestling, athletics, boxing, and badminton have often had to scrape together resources, train in underfunded facilities, and fight for recognition. The Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG), launched under the Government of India's Khelo India programme in 2018, was an attempt to change this narrative from the ground up. By identifying young talent, funding their development, and creating a regular competitive platform at the national level, the programme aimed to democratise sports across the country. This paper examines how the Khelo India Youth Games, from its first edition in 2018 through its fourth edition in 2022, began reshaping the competitive sports culture in India — not just in terms of medals and numbers, but in terms of attitude, opportunity, and aspiration.

Keywords: Khelo india youth games (KIYG), competitive sports culture, talent identification, youth development

Introduction

Background: The Problem Khelo India Was Trying To Solve

To understand what Khelo India Youth Games accomplished, it helps to understand what the landscape looked like before it. India, a country of 1.4 billion people, routinely punched below its weight in international sports. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, India sent 119 athletes and came back with just two medals — a silver for P.V. Sindhu and a bronze for Sakshi Malik. This was widely seen as a national embarrassment and triggered a serious conversation about the structural problems in Indian sports: lack of grassroots scouting, poor infrastructure outside major cities, absence of financial support for young athletes, and an overall cultural bias that discouraged families from encouraging their children to pursue sports as a career.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports responded with a comprehensive policy framework called Khelo India, announced in 2017. The programme had several components, including the development of sports infrastructure, support for academies, and the creation of a national-level multi-sport competition for youth — the Khelo India Youth Games. The stated goal was to identify and nurture sporting talent from every corner of India and provide a pathway from grassroots participation to elite competition.

Structure And Scope Of The Khelo India Youth Games

The Khelo India Youth Games operates as an annual multi-sport competition for athletes in the under-17 and under-21 age groups. The first edition was held in New Delhi in January–February 2018 at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium and other venues across the capital. Subsequent editions were held in Pune (2019), Guwahati (2020), and Panchkula, Haryana (2021, though held in 2022 due to COVID-19 delays). The 2022 edition, the fifth in the series, was held in Haryana.

Each edition features a wide range of sports — from traditional disciplines like athletics, swimming, gymnastics, wrestling, and boxing to more specialised ones like shooting, archery, and wushu. The 2018 edition featured 16 disciplines. By the 2022 edition, the number had grown significantly, reflecting a deliberate effort to include sports that are popular at the regional level and also ones that have Olympic relevance.

Each edition also comes with a central promise: athletes who are identified as outstanding performers are awarded Khelo India scholarships of Rs 5 lakh per year for eight years. This was a game-changing element because it addressed one of the most persistent barriers to athletic development in India — money. Families from lower-income backgrounds could now consider letting their children pursue sports knowing that there was financial backing behind that choice.

Talent Identification And The Scholarship Model

One of the most significant impacts of the Khelo India Youth Games has been systematic talent identification at scale. Before KIYG, talent scouting in India was largely informal, dependent on personal networks, or limited to states with well-established sports cultures like Haryana, Punjab, and Maharashtra. Athletes from the Northeast, from tribal regions, or from small towns in less sports-active states had very few pathways to national visibility.

KIYG changed this by making the process institutional and geographically broad. Participating athletes come from all states and union territories, meaning the competition serves as a national audition for young sportspeople. The scholarship programme that follows is built on performance data generated by the games themselves, making selection more merit-based than it had previously been.

By 2022, the Khelo India programme had identified and funded hundreds of young athletes across disciplines. Several of these athletes went on to represent India at international junior competitions, demonstrating that the pipeline was working. Wrestling, athletics, boxing, and shooting produced particularly strong performers from the KIYG talent pool. Notably, the scholarship model also created a cultural shift. In states like Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam, which have strong but historically underfunded sports traditions, the prospect of a government-backed scholarship made sports a more legitimate career option. Parents who might have discouraged their children from training seriously began to see athletic achievement as a viable path to financial stability, education support, and social recognition.

Infrastructure Development and Its Ripple Effects

The Khelo India Youth Games did not happen in a vacuum. Hosting a multi-sport event at the national level requires venues, accommodation, logistics, and administrative capacity. This requirement drove significant infrastructure investment in host cities and states.

When Guwahati was selected as the host for the 2020 edition, it prompted a round of facility upgrades across the city, including improvements at the Sarusajai Sports Complex. The 2022 edition in Haryana benefited from existing infrastructure but also added training facilities that remained in use after the games concluded. This is significant because sports infrastructure in India has historically been concentrated in a handful of cities, and the KIYG model of rotating host cities helped spread that investment more widely.

Beyond the host cities, the Khelo India programme funded the development of Khelo India State Centres of Excellence and Khelo India Small Centres, creating a distributed network of training facilities. By 2022, dozens of such centres had been established across the country, providing athletes with access to coaching, equipment, and medical support that would previously have required travel to major metros.

This infrastructure expansion had a cultural effect as well. When young athletes in a district or town see a proper training facility in their neighbourhood, it normalises the idea of serious sports training. The facility itself becomes a symbol of legitimacy — sports is not just something you do in an open field, but something you pursue with professional support.

Regional Representation And The Democratisation of Competition

One of the most striking features of the Khelo India Youth Games is how it redistributed competitive opportunity across the country. Pre-KIYG, national-level multi-sport competitions like the National Games were open to senior athletes, not youth, and participation required going through state federations that were often politically controlled and resource-constrained.

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KIYG created a separate, youth-specific national platform that was more accessible. States that had rarely featured in national sports conversations began sending competitive delegations. The Northeast, for example, produced exceptional athletes in disciplines like weightlifting, boxing, and indigenous sports. Manipur's athletes were particularly impressive across multiple editions, often finishing in the top ranks of the overall medal tally despite being a small state with limited resources.

Haryana and Maharashtra consistently topped the medal tallies, which was expected given their established sports cultures. But the interesting story was in the states that began climbing — Odisha, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh, among others, showed consistent improvement across editions, suggesting that the competition was stimulating investment and attention at the state level too.

This competitive pressure between states had a healthy effect on sports governance. State governments began paying more attention to their sports budgets and talent pipelines because KIYG provided a clear, nationally visible scorecard. Being poorly represented in a prominent national event carries political costs in a way that abstract policy failures do not.

Women's Participation and Gender Dynamics

A particularly important dimension of Khelo India Youth Games is its impact on women's participation in competitive sports. India's female athletes have historically faced additional barriers — family resistance, safety concerns, lack of role models, and cultural norms that discourage physical competition among girls. KIYG made a deliberate effort to include women's events across all disciplines and to treat women's competition with equal prominence.

The results were visible almost immediately. Female athletes from states like Haryana, Manipur, and Maharashtra dominated in wrestling, boxing, weightlifting, and athletics. Their performances were not just nationally competitive — several KIYG female athletes subsequently went on to win medals at Asian-level and international competitions.

The visibility of young female champions at KIYG served an important cultural function. When a 15-year-old girl from a small town in Haryana wins a gold medal in wrestling at a nationally televised event, it sends a signal to her peers and their families that female athletic achievement is real and respected. This kind of aspirational modelling is difficult to engineer through policy alone, but KIYG created the conditions for it to happen organically.

It should be noted that challenges remained. Gender parity in participation was not always achieved, and cultural resistance to women in sports persisted in many regions. But the trajectory through the four editions from 2018 to 2022 was clearly upward.

The Covid-19 Disruption And Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to the Khelo India calendar. The 2021 edition was postponed and eventually held in 2022 under modified conditions. This disruption affected athletes who had been training and preparing for the competition, and it highlighted the vulnerability of a programme that relies on annual competitive cycles to maintain momentum.

However, the government's decision to hold the event despite logistical challenges, rather than cancelling it outright, sent an important signal about the programme's institutional commitment. Athletes who had lost two years of competitive exposure

due to the pandemic were able to return to competition, and in several cases, the extended training period produced sharper performances.

The pandemic also accelerated conversations about sports science, nutrition, and athlete wellness within the KIYG ecosystem, as coaches and administrators had to think more carefully about athlete readiness after a long competitive hiatus. This inadvertently pushed the programme toward more sophisticated athlete management practices.

Impact on The Overall Sports Ecosystem

The Khelo India Youth Games did not operate in isolation — it was part of a broader policy environment that included the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), the National Sports Development Fund, and state-level sports policies. But KIYG occupied a specific and important niche: it was the entry point, the place where the pipeline began.

Several athletes who came through KIYG went on to perform well at senior national competitions and international events. In shooting, wrestling, boxing, and athletics in particular, the connection between KIYG and subsequent elite performance became increasingly visible by 2022. Sports federations began paying more attention to KIYG results as a form of early intelligence about emerging talent.

The media coverage of KIYG also grew across editions. While it never approached the viewership of cricket, it received significantly more sustained coverage than most other domestic sporting events, particularly from regional and digital media. This coverage helped create a wider culture of awareness around noncricket sports in India, which is itself a meaningful shift. Corporate sponsorship of young non-cricket athletes, while still limited, also began to grow in this period, partly because KIYG was generating credible data about athlete potential. The scholarship model created a kind of verified track record for young athletes, making them more attractive to sponsors who were previously reluctant to invest in unknowns.

Criticisms and Limitations

A balanced assessment of KIYG must also acknowledge its limitations. Critics pointed out that the scholarship disbursement was sometimes delayed, leaving athletes in financial limbo despite having been officially selected. Administrative bottlenecks, which are common in large government programmes, created frustrations for athletes and coaches.

Infrastructure development, while real, was also uneven. Some Khelo India Centres were well-equipped and well-staffed; others existed primarily on paper or were set up without adequate coaching support. The quality of competition coaching at the state level remained inconsistent, meaning that athletes from well-supported states had a systematic advantage over equally talented peers from less developed sports ecosystems.

There were also questions about the long-term career pathways for KIYG athletes beyond the scholarship period. Government employment, which has traditionally been the primary career destination for Indian athletes, has limited absorption capacity. Private sector opportunities in sports were growing but not fast enough to absorb the number of athletes the programme was producing.

Additionally, the dominance of a handful of states in the medal tallies suggested that the democratisation of competitive opportunity was still a work in progress. Access to good coaching, proper nutrition, and recovery facilities remained unevenly distributed, and these gaps showed up in results.

Conclusion

The Khelo India Youth Games, over its first four editions from 2018 to 2022, made a genuine and measurable contribution to competitive sports culture in India. It created a national platform for youth athletes that had not previously existed, funded hundreds of young sportspeople through scholarships, drove infrastructure investment across multiple cities and states, and gave female athletes and athletes from smaller states a level of visibility they had rarely enjoyed before.

Perhaps most importantly, it began to shift the cultural conversation about sports in India. By putting young athletes on a national stage and making their stories visible, KIYG challenged the assumption that only cricket matters and that only athletes from certain states or backgrounds can succeed at the national level. This cultural shift is slower and harder to measure than medal counts or infrastructure budgets, but it may be the most lasting contribution of the programme.

The challenges that remained by 2022 — administrative delays, uneven infrastructure quality, limited post-athletic career pathways, and persistent regional inequalities — were real and needed to be addressed

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for the programme to fulfil its full potential. But as a foundational intervention in India's sports development ecosystem, the Khelo India Youth Games established something important: the idea that India's sporting talent is deeper and wider than its international results had previously suggested, and that with the right platform and support, it can be brought to light.

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