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ACCESSIBILITY TO SPORTS: A STUDY OF SHOOTING IN INDIA

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DISCUSSION PAPER

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ABSTRACT

As India continues to emerge as a dominating force in the international arena in both socio-political and economic terms, one field where it continues to lag behind is sports. From its initial domination in hockey for over 30 years, to winning merely two medals at the 2016 Olympic Games, India's performance at the Olympics seems to be hitting an all-time low. The reason for this cannot simply be attributed to one particular factor, like the lack of infrastructure, shortage of investment or the paucity of a talent pool. Rather, it is a culmination of factors deep rooted into the socio-political situation of the country.

The purpose of this paper is to examine these socio-political reasons which influence sporting in India. The paper aims to do so by examining financial access to sports, for which the Khelo India Youth Games will be looked at in the context of the sport of shooting.

KHELO INDIA

Khelo India was introduced in October 2017 under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, with the vision to “revive the sports culture in India at the grass-root level by building a strong framework for all sports played in our country and to establish India as a great sporting nation,” as stated on its website (Khelo India n.d.). To achieve this, the programme identified 12 major verticals, including the promotion of community, coaching development, state level Khelo India centres, upgradation of sporting infrastructure, the promotion of sports among women and people with disabilities, and talent identification, amongst other things (ibid).



A mind map is a diagram used to visually organize information. A mind map is hierarchical and shows relationships among pieces of the whole.

It is often created around a single concept, then branches out into the details of a broad topic. It is often associated with representations of ideas such as images, words and parts of words are added.

To expand the scope of Khelo India, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports received an increase of INR 214.2 Crore in the interim budget, presented in February 2019, and Khelo India specifically received INR 500.09 Crore in the 2018-2019 revised budget. Additionally, in 2018-19 a sum of INR 199.31 crore was released to States and Union Territories for bridging gaps in sports infrastructure. Furthermore, in June 2019, the Government of India approved the construction of a National Sports Education Board, as a means to create awareness about sports on all levels. As per the Ministry, 99 academies have been given accreditation as training centers for Khelo India athletes, including academies under the Sports Authority of India, and public and private centers (PIB 2019).

A total of 2437 athletes across 20 sporting disciplines have been selected under the programmes talent search and development, and two editions of the Khelo India Games (KIG) have been held in 2018 and 2019, with the participation of 3507 and 5925 athletes, respectively (ibid).

In 2018, the Khelo India School Games witnessed a total of 16 sports disciplines with students participating in the Under-17 Category. The Games have expanded since the inception of Khelo India Youth Games with two categories, namely, Under 17 and 21, to broaden the scope of participation and include college students into the Programme as well.

The Programme has managed to start a conversation about sports in India. The multi-sport national level project has received widespread support and appreciation from various veteran athletes. The Games have managed to capture the attention of the masses using live telecasts, targeted advertising using celebrities, and daily updates of the events in national newspapers. Further, under its talent identification programme, approximately 1000 athletes are selected every year for a scholarship amount of INR 5 lakh spread across eight years, including other forms of support for training.

Previously, efforts by the government and new sports projects, especially those centred around student-athletes or junior athletes, would primarily go unnoticed by the masses. Khelo India has successfully been able to make its presence felt and has been able to provide a platform for athletes to showcase their talent.

However, starting a conversation about sports does not fully solve the problem India faces. The initial goal, with which these games were envisioned, was centred on reviving the culture of sports at the grassroots level. India is still a developing nation, with over 21% of its population living below the poverty line as of 2011 (Asian Development Bank n.d.). Inaccessibility to resources, then, has been one of the major obstacles in India's journey to becoming a sporting nation. However, poverty and lack of resources cannot be entirely attributed as the sole reason for this, and certain policy frameworks have to be put into place to ensure that resources are provided for various sports.

Khelo India, which had emerged as a possible and potential solution to India's sporting problem, has not done considerably well at making sport accessible.

| KHELO INDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF SHOOTING

Shooting as a sport in India has contributed significantly to India's achievements at the international level. Indian athletes have 4 Olympic medals in shooting, which is the highest after field hockey where India has 11 medals. India's first individual silver and gold medals were both in shooting at the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games, respectively. Further, Indian shooters won 16 out of the total 66 medals at the 2018 Commonwealth Games, and 9 medals out of the total 69 medals won at the 2018 Asian Games. India's performance in shooting has been consistent, indicating the potential for growth in this sport.

However, a fundamental problem of shooting is the cost it incurs. Athletes could be spending as much as INR 5,000 a day in practice, depending on the event they are competing for and the level at which they are competing. The accessibility to shooting is fundamentally lower than most other sports, which do not require large amounts of investment initially. The example of Gagan Narang, whose parents sold the family house to buy him a rifle, and who later won a bronze medal at the 2012 Olympics in 10m Air Rifle, is often cited during conversations about problems of inclusivity within the sport.

Khelo India, in this regard, could have emerged as a platform to encourage and empower athletes in shooting through its talent identification programme. The athletes under the programme are eligible for scholarships, training, and access to psychologists and nutritionists. However, the current framework of the Khelo India Programme in shooting does not contribute to this. Most of the shooters under the programme are a part of the Indian Shooting Team and are eligible for benefits. Few of the athletes are under the Target Olympics Podium Scheme (TOPS) of the Sports Authority of India, which identifies the top athletes in the country and incentivises them by providing various training resources, and a monthly stipend of INR 50,000 to target Olympic medals. A large part of the athletes also receive support from non-profit organisations such as the Olympic Gold Quest.

While it cannot be denied that athletes should receive all possible help and support they can get, 'talent identification' under Khelo India essentially becomes a waste of resources. All National Sports Federations keep track of the performance of their athletes and may even issue national rankings; Khelo India could then easily select a number of top athletes under its programme based on these performances. Further, shooting at Khelo India, in terms of participation, has not contributed to making the sport accessible. The first edition witnessed the participation of the shooters who had represented their state at the 2017 National School Games organised by the School Games Federation of India, indicating an approximate participation of three shooters per state in one event. The selection process for the second edition of the games was changed to be more exclusive. The 2018 KIYG witnessed selection based on the National Shooting Championship, from which essentially the top 15 shooters were selected. The 10m Pistol event thereby witnessed the participation of 11 athletes competing in the Under-17 category and 15 in the under-19, indicating the representation of less than one athlete per state. Out of these numbers, the top eight shooters qualified for the finals in each event competed for the medals. While some of these athletes may have had the means to afford the resources required to reach national-level competition, others like Saurabh Chaudhary, 2018 Asian Games Gold Medalist and 2018 Youth Olympic Gold Medalist, had to mortgage the family farm land and take a loan to buy a pistol, which costs approximately INR 1.80 lakhs. Khelo India's 5 lakhs in 8 years could contribute to solving this exact problem, of exceptional athletes struggling with resources.

The Khelo India Programme, then, becomes just another competition for already established athletes to compete against one another and win a medal. Just selecting the best performing national level athletes to compete at the games becomes a redundant step in ‘talent identification’.

STATE WISE ANALYSIS

Going back to the 15 athletes participating in the KIYG in shooting, can it be claimed that athletes from all over the country have an equal chance of qualifying for the top 15 positions? A look at the participation in Khelo India in shooting across all age groups, disciplines and events indicates that the highest participation was from Haryana, with 37 athletes representing the state, followed by 32 athletes from Punjab and 31 from Madhya Pradesh (National Rifle Association of India n.d.).

A similar trend can be found in the 2019-2020 National Squad for Shooting. The highest number of shooters in the Indian Shooting Team hail from Haryana, with 39 athletes, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 22 athletes, and 19 athletes from Uttar Pradesh (National Rifle Association of India n.d.).

States	Junior Men	Junior Women	Youth Men	Youth Women	Total
Haryana	14	15	04	04	37
Madhya Pradesh	16	07	05	04	32
Uttar Pradesh	07	17	03	04	31
Punjab	06	09	03	07	25
Maharashtra	11	06	03	04	24

*Table 1: Khelo India State Wise Participation (Highest 5) **
Junior: Under 21, Youth: Under 17

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States	Junior Men	Junior Women	Youth Men	Youth Women	Total
Haryana	15	13	06	05	39
Madhya Pradesh	10	05	06	01	22
Uttar Pradesh	12	04	01	01	18
Punjab	10	05	0	02	17
Maharashtra	07	05	0	03	15

Table 2: State-wise representation of athletes in the Indian Shooting Team (Highest 5)
Junior: Under 21, Youth: Under 18

The highest participation in both the National Squad and Khelo India comes from the same five states. The reason for the high participation from a few states cannot simply be attributed to coincidental phenomena. Sports in any society evolve as a result of various social factors. For example, cricket in India was a result of colonialism, and its adoption and popularity can be attributed, to an extent, to nationalistic pride and fervour of beating the colonisers at their own sport (Hill 2011: 59). Further, cricket's popularity in contemporary India can also be witnessed, not as a pan-India phenomenon, but concentrated in certain regions. More often than not, these regions coincide with areas which were under direct British colonial rule and influence, which could explain, to a certain extent, football's popularity in Goa and the North-Eastern States, which were not under British rule. The evolution and adoption of shooting as a sport in India can also be attributed to, and observed through, various socio-political processes. However, the problem lies in the identification and quantification of these processes, as they may not be as visible, as in the case of cricket.

Certain socio-political factors which can explain the high participation from certain states include:

1. Higher per capita income of some state as compared to other states: Shooting is an expensive sport as compared to other conventional sports, which limits access to it. The average Per Capita Income in 2016-17 was 82,931, the above mentioned 5 states with the exception of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh witnessed significantly higher per capita incomes as compared to the national average.
2. The allocation of funds to the states under the Khelo India programme: The national average for funds allocated for the year 2017-18 was approximately INR 4.3 crores. The five above-mentioned states, with the exception of Uttar Pradesh (INR 3.5 crores), received significantly higher funds, with Haryana getting as much as INR 12.8 crores (Open Data Government Platform n.d.).
3. The Construction of Playgrounds in Schools: Data related to the construction of playgrounds in schools can also be indicative of both the government and public's perception of sports in the particular state. According to government data, the Indian average of schools not having the facility of playgrounds, is 21.99% approximately (Open Data Government Platform n.d.). Haryana, Punjab, and Madhya Pradesh have significantly lesser schools with no playground facilities as compared to the national average.

States	Percentage of schools without playgrounds
Haryana	3.49
Punjab	2.56
Madhya Pradesh	8.73
Uttar Pradesh	38

Table 3: Percentage of Schools with unconstructed playgrounds

The major drawback to the above-mentioned arguments is that they only paint half a picture and might not be conclusive in highlighting why the sport of shooting has fared well in certain states, and not in others. Further, the exception of Uttar Pradesh cannot be ignored.

However, a similar but opposite trend is seen in the states which are not represented in the National Squad or Khelo India Games, such as Jharkhand, Bihar and the North-Eastern States among others. These states largely lag behind in per capita income, funding for sporting activities, and schools without playground facilities. For example, Jharkhand was neither represented in any of the shooting disciplines at Khelo India, nor in the 2019 Indian Team. Further, it did not receive any funds under the Khelo India Scheme, and has a high percentage of unconstructed school playgrounds.

Uttar Pradesh's exception can be used to reiterate the argument that access to sports does not lie purely in reasons related to the sport and policy around it. The evolution, adoption and access of any sport may be determined by various other factors (which are beyond the scope and resources of this paper) such as concentration of athletes and resources within certain regions of the state, gendered access, caste and religion dynamics which in turn determine access to resources, leading to an indirect lack or excess of representation in sports.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the need of the hour is talent identification at the grassroots level, which the Khelo India Games had initially set out to achieve. The scheme can help move beyond some of the above-mentioned factors which may hinder access to sports, providing athletes with the means to develop skills and reach their potential. While it is not logistically possible to conduct these identification programmes countrywide and a certain level of excellence will have to be determined as a cut off for being eligible, the cut off cannot be the top fifteen positions at the national level, as is in the case of shooting. Rather, it has to be determined at lower levels with higher accessibility, such as the district, state or zonal level. Khelo India can be potentially used to empower states which currently lag behind in their access to certain sports. The identification and development of talent and taking sports to the masses in these states can propel India towards becoming a sporting nation.

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