



Cover Page



ROLE OF SPORTS ACADEMIES IN INDIA: TALENT IDENTIFICATION, ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT AND NATION-BUILDING

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Abstract

Sports academies have become a central institution in India's attempt to move from a participation-oriented sporting culture toward a structured, performance-oriented ecosystem. This paper examines the role of sports academies in India in talent identification, athlete development, social inclusion, sports science adoption, competition exposure, and nation-building. Using a secondary-review methodology based on policy documents, official government information and selected literature on athlete talent development, the paper argues that sports academies function as the bridge between grassroots participation and elite performance. Programmes such as Khelo India, the Sports Authority of India's training network and National Centres of Excellence, and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme have strengthened the institutional pathway available to young athletes. However, the effectiveness of academies depends on equitable access, qualified coaching, transparent selection, injury prevention, education continuity, safeguarding, and evidence-based performance monitoring. The paper concludes that sports academies can substantially improve India's sporting outcomes when they operate not merely as training centres but as holistic development environments that connect schools, families, universities, state governments, national federations, private partners and sports science professionals.

Keywords: Sports Academies; India; Khelo India; Sports Authority of India; Talent Identification; Athlete Development; Sports Science; Youth Development

1. Introduction

Sports academies are among the most important institutions in the modern sports system because they convert raw interest and informal ability into disciplined, measurable and progressive athletic development. In India, the idea of a sports academy has widened beyond a simple coaching centre. A contemporary academy may include residential or non-residential training, qualified coaching, competition planning, access to equipment, nutrition support, physiotherapy, sports psychology, strength and conditioning, education support and athlete welfare systems. This institutional form is important for India because talent is geographically dispersed, opportunities are uneven, and many promising athletes come from schools, rural regions, tribal communities or low-income families where specialised training may not otherwise be available. India's sports policy environment has increasingly recognised the need for a structured pathway. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports describes Khelo India as a national programme intended to encourage sports participation and use sport for youth development, community development, gender equality, healthy lifestyles and economic opportunities. Its 2021-22 to 2025-26 components include infrastructure, sports competitions and talent development, Khelo India Centres and sports academies, Fit India and inclusion-oriented sport (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports [MYAS], n.d.). The official Khelo India platform also identifies support to national, regional and state sports academies as one of the programme verticals, along with talent search, sports for women, sports for persons with disabilities and promotion of rural and indigenous games (Khelo India, n.d.).

The Sports Authority of India (SAI) adds a second layer to this ecosystem through sports promotional schemes, regional centres, SAI Training Centres, the National Sports Talent Contest, National Centres of Excellence (NCOEs) and other athlete-support structures. SAI states that its promotional schemes aim to scout and nurture sportspersons across age groups for excellence at national and international levels; SAI Training Centres focus on junior sportspersons in the age group of 10-18, while the National Sports Talent Contest seeks talent from schools in the age group of 8-14 (Sports Authority of India [SAI], n.d.-a). These programmes show that sports academies are not isolated private facilities; they are part of a wider



Cover Page



developmental architecture involving central government, state governments, federations, schools, universities, public institutions and private academies.

This paper studies the role of sports academies in India as institutions of talent identification, athlete development and social transformation. It also analyses the limitations that reduce their effectiveness and proposes recommendations for strengthening academy-based sports development.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To explain the role of sports academies in talent identification and long-term athlete development in India.
- To examine how academies support government initiatives such as Khelo India, SAI schemes, NCOEs and TOPS.
- To analyse the social, educational, economic and inclusion-related contributions of sports academies.
- To identify major challenges faced by sports academies in India.
- To suggest practical recommendations for improving the academy-based sports development model.

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative secondary-review approach. The analysis is based on government policy pages, SAI information on sports promotional schemes and NCOEs, Press Information Bureau releases on sports academies and financial assistance, the Khelo India portal, and selected literature on athlete talent development environments. The paper does not claim to present primary field data from athletes, coaches or academy administrators. Instead, it synthesises available policy and conceptual material to develop an analytical account of how sports academies contribute to India's sports ecosystem. The approach is suitable for a policy-oriented research paper because sports academies in India operate within a layered institutional structure. Central schemes, state-level implementation, private academy participation and federation-led competition systems are interdependent. Therefore, the paper examines academies as organisations situated within a wider sports ecosystem rather than as stand-alone facilities.

4. Conceptual Framework: Sports Academies as Development Environments

A sports academy can be understood as a talent-development environment. It is not only a place where coaching occurs; it is a setting where athletic, psychological, educational, social and ethical development are expected to take place together. International talent-development literature increasingly argues that successful youth sport systems require coherent environments rather than isolated training sessions. Henriksen (2023), for example, highlights the importance of integrating efforts across the whole athlete environment and building a strong organisational culture in talent development. In the Indian context, this means that an effective academy should connect multiple actors: the athlete, coach, parent, school or college, federation, medical team, sports science staff, state department, sponsor and competition organiser. A poorly connected academy may produce short-term results, but a well-connected academy builds a sustainable pathway. This framework is especially relevant in India because the athlete pathway often begins informally and depends heavily on family resources, local coaches and state-level opportunities. Academies can reduce this uncertainty by providing structure, standards, mentoring and regular competition exposure.



Cover Page



Table 1

Core Functions of Sports Academies in India

Function	Academy contribution	Expected outcome
Talent identification	Testing, trials, competition scouting and referrals from schools, local clubs and Khelo India events	More systematic discovery of young athletes
Skill development	Regular coaching, technical correction, game understanding and training plans	Improved sport-specific competence
Sports science	Fitness testing, physiotherapy, nutrition, psychology, biomechanics and strength and conditioning	Better performance, recovery and injury prevention
Education and welfare	Academic coordination, mentoring, discipline, hostel care and life-skills support	Balanced personal and athletic growth
Competition pathway	District, state, national and federation-level exposure	Performance benchmarking and selection readiness
Inclusion	Outreach to girls, rural athletes, para-athletes and indigenous sports communities	Wider participation and social mobility
Economic ecosystem	Employment for coaches, support staff, equipment suppliers and event organisers	Growth of sports-related livelihoods

5. Role of Sports Academies in India

5.1 Talent Identification and Structured Pathways

The first major role of sports academies is to identify talent and place it in a structured pathway. In India, talent may emerge from schools, villages, akharas, local tournaments, universities or family-run clubs. Without a pathway, early promise can disappear because of poor coaching, lack of equipment, financial pressure, inadequate nutrition, social restrictions or absence of competition. Academies help reduce these losses by providing screening, age-group coaching, trial opportunities and continuity. Government initiatives have explicitly linked talent identification with academy development. A PIB release on young sports talent notes that the Ministry's schemes include Khelo India's talent identification and development vertical, the National Sports Talent Search Portal and SAI promotional schemes. It also states that identification can use competitive performance and scientifically designed testing, and that talent hubs may be mapped for specific disciplines including indigenous games (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2018). This approach gives academies an important operational role: they become the institutions where identified athletes can be trained, monitored and prepared for higher competition. Sports academies also create age-appropriate stages. A 12-year-old wrestler, a 16-year-old hockey player and a 21-year-old shooter require different training loads, education support and competition plans. Academy systems can organise these stages more



Cover Page



2 2 7 7 - 7 8 8 1



rationality than informal coaching arrangements. They can also maintain athlete profiles, performance data and progression records, which are necessary for transparent selection and long-term development.

5.2 Coaching, Discipline and Daily Training Culture

The second role of academies is the creation of a disciplined training culture. Talent alone rarely produces elite performance. Athletes need punctuality, repeated practice, feedback, self-regulation, tactical awareness and the ability to cope with failure. A good academy provides a daily rhythm: warm-up, technical drills, strength training, tactical sessions, recovery, video review and education time. This rhythm builds sporting habits that are difficult to develop through occasional coaching camps. SAI's description of its sports promotional schemes shows the importance of organised institutional support. Through its schemes, SAI provides services such as expert coaches, equipment, boarding and lodging, sports kit, competition exposure, educational expenses, medical or insurance support and stipend according to scheme norms (SAI, n.d.-b). These services are crucial because many athletes require more than coaching; they need a full support system that protects them from dropping out due to cost, travel, diet or lack of supervision. Coaching quality remains the central determinant of academy success. Academies should therefore not be judged only by buildings or equipment. The most important question is whether athletes receive technically sound, ethically responsible and scientifically informed coaching. Good coaches can adapt training to age, maturation, gender, injury history, psychological readiness and long-term goals.

5.3 Sports Science, Health and Performance Support

Modern sports academies increasingly function as sports science hubs. Earlier models of training often relied primarily on physical repetition, personal experience and coach intuition. While experience remains valuable, elite sport now requires evidence-based monitoring of fitness, workload, recovery, nutrition, mental preparation and injury risk. Academies are the practical setting where these services can be delivered to athletes on a regular basis. SAI's NCOE model reflects this shift. SAI describes NCOEs as regular coaching camps for the best available talent and notes that they accommodate both elite and development athletes. The NCOEs cover 23 focused disciplines, and their approach includes athletes, coaches, sports science support, high-quality field of play, infrastructure and diet support (SAI, n.d.-c). SAI also notes the hiring of experts in areas such as anthropometry, exercise physiology, strength and conditioning, biomechanics, sport psychology, sports medicine and physiotherapy at NCOEs (SAI, n.d.-c). This shows that sports academies are increasingly expected to integrate coaching with scientific support. The health dimension is as important as the performance dimension. Youth athletes are vulnerable to overtraining, early specialisation, nutritional deficiencies, stress and burnout. A responsible academy must therefore include injury prevention, rest, mental health support, safeguarding and education on anti-doping and ethical conduct. Performance without welfare is not sustainable.

5.4 Competition Exposure and Performance Benchmarking

Sports academies connect athletes to competition. Training gains meaning when athletes test themselves against peers at district, state, national and international levels. Competition exposure helps coaches evaluate performance under pressure, identify tactical weaknesses and decide when athletes should move to higher levels. It also teaches athletes how to travel, manage anxiety, follow rules, handle officials and recover between matches or events. Khelo India has made competition structure a policy priority. The Ministry identifies sports competitions and talent development as one of the core components of the 2021-22 to 2025-26 scheme (MYAS, n.d.). Khelo India competitions, university games, youth games and para games provide athletes with platforms that can feed into academy selection and higher-performance pathways. Academies are therefore both receivers and producers of competitive talent: they receive athletes identified through competition and prepare athletes to perform in future competitions. Performance benchmarking is also necessary for fairness. Academies that use measurable tests, match statistics, progress indicators and competition results can reduce arbitrary selection. This is especially important in a country as large as India, where athletes from smaller towns may not have personal networks or visibility. Transparent benchmarking can make sports more merit-based.



Cover Page



5.5 Inclusion, Gender Equity and Social Mobility

A significant role of sports academies is their capacity to widen access. India has many structural barriers in sport: gender stereotypes, safety concerns, financial limitations, lack of local facilities, caste and regional inequalities, disability-related access barriers and distance from high-quality coaching. Academies can either reproduce these inequalities or reduce them. Their social value depends on which path they take. Khelo India includes verticals related to sports for women, persons with disabilities and rural or indigenous games (Khelo India, n.d.). PIB information also notes that Khelo India has a component for rural and indigenous or tribal games and identifies traditional sports such as Mallakhamb, Kalaripayattu, Gatka, Thang-Ta, Yogasana and Silambam for promotion (PIB, 2022). Such components are important because they recognise that India's sporting strength is not limited to urban, commercially popular sports. Academies can preserve indigenous physical cultures while also creating new pathways for athletes from underrepresented communities.

For girls and women, academies can provide safe spaces, female coaches and mentors, hostel facilities, menstrual health support, parental confidence and visible role models. For para-athletes, academies can provide adapted equipment, accessible infrastructure, classification awareness and specialist coaching. For rural athletes, residential academies can reduce distance barriers. In this way, sports academies become instruments of social mobility rather than only performance centres.

5.6 Public-Private Partnership and Institutional Bridging

The Indian sports academy ecosystem is not exclusively government-run. It includes SAI centres, state academies, university facilities, services sports institutions, private foundations, corporate-supported academies and sport-specific high-performance centres. This mixed model is important because the scale of India's talent pool is too large for one actor to manage alone. Government information confirms that Khelo India has supported both SAI and non-SAI academies. A PIB release on financial assistance states that funding under Khelo India was provided to academies run by SAI as well as accredited government and private non-SAI academies (PIB, 2019). Another PIB release states that 247 sports academies had been accredited across the country under Khelo India by March 2022 (PIB, 2022). These facts show that the academy system is designed to use multiple institutional capacities instead of relying only on central facilities. This public-private linkage is useful when managed with accountability. Private academies may bring flexibility, specialised expertise, technology, philanthropy and discipline-specific focus. Public schemes can bring access, equity, national standards and financial support. The challenge is to ensure that accreditation, funding and athlete selection remain transparent and performance-oriented.

5.7 Contribution to International Competitiveness

Sports academies are crucial to India's ambition of sustained international performance. International success requires a long pipeline: mass participation, early talent identification, junior development, national competition, elite training, international exposure and career support. Academies occupy the middle and upper stages of this pipeline. They prepare athletes for national camps, national teams, TOPS support and professional careers. The Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) is an elite-athlete support mechanism that approves customised programmes, recommends financial disbursement, monitors progress and responds to athlete requirements (SAI, n.d.-d). SAI also describes TOPS-NCOEs as centres intended to strengthen preparation in priority disciplines, with athlete selection carried out in collaboration with National Sports Federations (SAI, n.d.-d). This indicates how academies can connect development athletes to elite pathways. However, academies should not focus only on medal counts. A mature sports system must also develop a broad base, protect athlete welfare, produce coaches and referees, improve public health and build a culture of lifelong physical activity. International medals are important, but they are strongest when they emerge from a deep, ethical and inclusive system.



Cover Page



5.8 Economic, Educational and Community Contributions

Sports academies also contribute beyond medals. They create employment for coaches, physiotherapists, strength trainers, nutritionists, psychologists, analysts, administrators, hostel wardens, grounds staff, equipment suppliers and event managers. They generate demand for sports goods, facility maintenance, local transport, food services and digital performance tools. Where academies host tournaments, they can also support local tourism and community visibility. The educational role is equally important. Many young athletes must balance sport with schooling or higher education. Academies that coordinate with schools and universities can prevent the false choice between education and sport. Such dual-career support is essential because only a small proportion of athletes reach professional or international success. A responsible academy prepares athletes for life, not only for competition. At the community level, academies can inspire participation. When local children see athletes training seriously, families may begin to view sport as a legitimate pathway. This cultural change is valuable in a country where academics have often been viewed as the only secure route to social mobility. Sports academies can demonstrate that discipline, health, teamwork and performance are also forms of education.

Table 2

Indian Sports Policy Instruments and the Role of Academies

Policy or institution	Relevant emphasis	Academy-level role
Khelo India	Infrastructure, competitions, talent development, Khelo India Centres and academies, inclusion	Identify, train and support athletes through structured programmes
SAI Sports Promotional Schemes	Scouting and nurturing talented sportspersons through regional centres and training schemes	Provide coaching, equipment, boarding, medical and competition support
National Centres of Excellence	Focused training in priority disciplines with sports science support	Prepare development and elite athletes for higher competition
TOPS and TOPS-NCOEs	Customised elite support and monitoring of Olympic/Paralympic prospects	Connect high-performing academy athletes with elite preparation pathways
State and UT governments	Primary responsibility for sports facilities because sport is a state subject	Operate and partner with academies according to regional needs
Private and non-SAI academies	Specialised expertise, philanthropy, corporate investment and discipline-specific models	Expand capacity and innovation when linked with transparent accreditation

6. Major Challenges

Uneven access and regional imbalance: India's sporting opportunities remain uneven. Metropolitan and high-performing states often have better infrastructure, while remote, rural and economically weaker regions may lack quality coaching and facilities. Residential academies can help, but only if selection and outreach are transparent. Shortage of high-quality



Cover Page



coaches: The academy model depends on coaches who understand technique, pedagogy, training load, child development, gender sensitivity and ethics. India needs more continuous coach education, not only one-time certification.

Limited sports science at grassroots level: Elite centres may have sports science support, but many district and state academies still lack physiotherapy, nutrition, psychology and strength and conditioning services. This gap can increase injury risk and reduce performance. Pressure, early specialisation and athlete welfare: Academies may unintentionally push children into excessive training or narrow specialisation too early. This can create burnout, injury or loss of enjoyment. Safeguarding policies, mental health support and age-appropriate training are essential. Education-sport conflict: Many young athletes struggle to continue formal education while training. Academies must coordinate school schedules, open schooling, tutoring and career guidance so that athletes are not left vulnerable if sporting progression stops. Governance and transparency: Selection, funding, accreditation and performance evaluation must be clear. Without transparent systems, academies can become vulnerable to favouritism, underuse of facilities or inconsistent quality. Financial sustainability: High-quality academies require recurring costs for coaches, equipment, medical care, travel, nutrition and maintenance. Sustainable models should combine public support, private partnerships and community accountability.

7. Recommendations

Develop a transparent national academy quality framework: Academies should be evaluated on coaching standards, athlete welfare, safety, education support, sports science access, infrastructure use, inclusion, financial transparency and competition outcomes. Accreditation should be periodic rather than permanent. Strengthen district-to-elite pathways: Khelo India Centres, schools, district associations, state academies, NCOEs and national federations should share athlete data and selection criteria. Athletes should understand the pathway from local participation to national representation. Invest in coaches and support staff: Coach education must include sport science, youth development, mental health, safeguarding, gender equity, disability inclusion and anti-doping. Academies should also train physiotherapists, analysts, nutrition assistants and strength coaches. Create dual-career systems: Every residential academy should have formal academic support. Partnerships with schools, colleges and digital education platforms can help athletes continue education while training. Improve safeguarding and athlete welfare: Academies should have child-protection policies, grievance redressal, mental health referral systems, safe hostel practices, gender-sensitive administration and regular welfare audits. Use technology responsibly: Digital athlete management systems can track performance, attendance, injury, nutrition and competition results. However, data privacy and informed consent must be respected, especially for minors. Promote inclusion through targeted outreach: Special talent hunts should be conducted in rural, tribal and economically weaker regions. Girls, para-athletes and indigenous sport practitioners should receive accessible facilities and mentoring.

Encourage research and impact evaluation: Universities and sports science institutions should study academy outcomes, dropout patterns, injury rates, coaching practices and athlete experiences. Evidence should guide funding decisions.

8. Conclusion

Sports academies are essential to India's sporting future because they provide the institutional bridge between mass participation and elite performance. They identify talent, provide regular coaching, organise competition exposure, integrate sports science, support athlete welfare and create opportunities for social mobility. Their importance has grown through policy initiatives such as Khelo India, SAI promotional schemes, NCOEs and TOPS. Government information shows that India has moved toward a broader academy network involving SAI, state systems, non-SAI academies and private partners. The central argument of this paper is that sports academies should be viewed as holistic development environments rather than only medal-production centres. They must protect education, health, dignity and long-term development while improving performance. The future of sports academies in India will depend on quality coaching, transparent governance, regional equity, sports science access, inclusion, athlete safeguarding and continuous evaluation. If these conditions are met, academies can help India build not only more successful athletes but also a healthier, more confident and more participatory sporting society.



Cover Page



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