

Politics and Sports in India: A Critical Analysis of Influence and Impact

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Abstract

Sports in India is not merely a field of athletic performance; it is deeply interwoven with politics, governance, and policymaking. However, the most influential factor in sustainability of any sports or the sports organization is the involvement of government to sustain and function properly. But when there is involvement of politics in sports, and its influence goes to a new height either in the welfare and engagement of athletes or appointment of office barer based on political will. The relationship between politics and sports in India is complex and multifaceted. Political influence extends from sports governance and athlete selection to funding, infrastructure development, and international representation. While political involvement has enabled the creation of policies, resources, and global recognition, it has also led to corruption, favoritism, and organizational inefficiency. This article critically analyzes the dual role of politics in Indian sports—highlighting both its contributions and challenges—and explores reforms needed to ensure transparency, fairness, and athlete-centered growth. From the appointment of administrators to funding, representation, and international relations, political influence has shaped both the growth and challenges of sports. This article critically examines the positive and negative impacts of politics on sports in India, including governance issues, athlete welfare, the role of political figures in sports bodies, and how political decisions influence national and international sporting events.

Keywords: Politics, Sports in India, Governance, Athlete Welfare, Sports Policy

Introduction

No one can deny the pervasive and undeniable influence of politics in India, a force deeply intertwined with various facets of society, including the realm of sports. While historically sports

and politics might have gone hand-in-hand, with political figures actively participating, the modern scenario presents a distinct shift: individuals increasingly engage in politics specifically to gain control or influence within the sporting arena. Nevertheless, sports continue to play a profound role in reshaping political landscapes, both nationally and internationally. Public attention often galvanizes around sports when athletes either actively protest governance or transition into political roles themselves. Although politics fundamentally shapes the future of a state, the unique ability of sports personalities to sway public attitudes and garner support often proves to be a more potent factor in changing demographic opinions in favor of political figures. Even in today's social context where ancient traditional sports like wrestling, Mallakhamb and kabaddi are being organized by the political candidates, often serving both as cultural promotion and a means of strengthening their connection with local constituencies in which all they can show their identity and connection from the soil of their constituency. To secure widespread societal support, political entities must unequivocally demonstrate their commitment to public welfare, a will be often highlighted through their promotion of sports at the constituency level, which simultaneously reinforces their ideology and asserts dominance within their political strongholds. In states renowned for their sporting prowess, such as Haryana and Maharashtra, public sentiment regarding government's backing of sportspersons, federations, and the organization of sporting events—be it financial, governance-related, or popular support—significantly sways electoral outcomes. Thus, while sports undeniably serve as a potent unifying force in India, transcending divides of caste, creed, and religion, the pervasive influence of political interference is a historical reality, shaping sports development since independence. Although political involvement can furnish crucial structural support and funding, an overabundance of interference frequently culminates in mismanagement, favoritism, and a detrimental absence of professionalism within the sporting ecosystem.

Historical Context

Since independence, Indian sports governance has shifted from being stewarded by royals and bureaucrats to being heavily influenced by politicians. In the early phase (1947–1960), leadership such as Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala at the Indian Olympic Association epitomized this elite era.^[1] The 1970s ushered in increased involvement of MPs and MLAs in state-run cricket associations ^[2]^[4]. A pivotal moment occurred in the 1982 Asian Games, when Congress MP Suresh Kalmadi gained prominence and later served as IOA President (1996–2011) ^[3]^[9]. During the 1990s, political figures like Arun Jaitley at the DDCA and Sharad Pawar entering

BCCI (1999) further entrenched political power in sports [4][5]. The 2000s saw this trend expand: Anurag Thakur led HPCA from 2000, Rajeev Shukla rose within BCCI, and Praful Patel headed AIFF from 2009 to 2022 [5][8]. In the 2010s, scandals like the 2010 Commonwealth Games under Kalmadi [3][10], the suspension of IOA by IOC (2012), and judicial reforms via the Lodha Committee (2016) [6][11] attempted to curb political dominance—but figures like Thakur and Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of WFI remained influential. [5][16] In the 2020s, external challenges like FIFA’s intervention ending Patel’s AIFF tenure in 2022 [17] and wrestler protests ousting Singh in 2023 [18] showed resistance to entrenched power, yet the continued influence of Anurag Thakur and Jay Shah in cricket confirms that political entrenchment in Indian sports remains deeply rooted [7][15][16].

Political Influence in Sports Governance

As we discussed earlier, the political will or power decides the policies, governance and regulations of sports federation, policy making and funding, that is being controlled by the Government of India through various functional body like Ministry of Youth Affair and Sports, Sports Authority of India, and Indian Olympic Association. In the process of formation of these bodies, government involves various concerned ministries, ministers, and concerned authorities. Again, favoritism works, and their chair is being occupied by the individuals who are in power, who support power or who work for power rather than the greatest and eligible personality who served their whole life in sports field, either coaching, practicing, or managing. Although politics influence the selection process of athletes, hosting of the sports tournaments, and distribution of finance or funds, ensure stability and access to resources but also results in conflicts of interest. Again, this interference may have positive aspects or may have negative aspects that have been discussed below.

Positive Impacts of Politics in Sports: The politics may or are influencing positively on sports in India in multiple ways. Some of them are discussed below:

1. **Funding & Infrastructure Development** – Government initiatives and political will also cause the will have led to the creation of various sports schemes such as *Khelo India* and investments in stadiums and academies such as government sponsored research and study. Involvement of government causes the easy collaboration and partnership with public and private companies in sports development which leads to increase the chance

of getting funds from both public and private sector to develop sports infrastructure, and sponsors to team, athletes, and events.

2. **International Diplomacy** – Although the sports events between cause the better relationship building between the nations, either continental or global. Various countries of this world were in conflicts in past either due to its geographic area or other, but sports engagement between them created the improvement of their relationship in terms of relationship or diplomacy. So, it can be concluded that sports often serve as a tool for building international relations, e.g., cricket diplomacy with neighboring countries. **Example:** India-Pakistan cricket diplomacy shows how sports influence international relations. Cricket series between the two countries have been used to ease political tensions and promote dialogue. Similarly, India hosting events like the 2010 Commonwealth Games enhanced its global image and strengthened diplomatic ties.
3. **Policy Formulation** – Various steps were taken with the help of political will to formulation of policies and rules in order to control and govern the various sports institution and organization. Government institutions like *Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports (Patiala, Punjab)*, *National Sports University (Manipur)*, *Lakshmbai National Institute of Physical Education (LNIPE)*, and *Sports Authority of India (SAI)* were shaped under political frameworks, which directly contributes to formulation of sports policies and control and coordination of sports organizations.

Negative Impacts of Politics in Sports: However, there are also few adverse consequences that were faced due to political interference. Some of them are-

1. **Corruption & Mismanagement** – Various governing bodies which engage in organization and management of various events and organization are facing allegation financial irregularities, some are under trial, and some decision had been made by honorable court. Some of the irregularities like wrestling controlling bodies are under the trial. International Olympic Committee also suspended the Indian Olympic Association due issues and irregularities in governance. Example: The 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi faced widespread corruption and mismanagement, including inflated contracts, delayed infrastructure, and poor planning. Political interference in organizing committees was a major reason, damaging India's reputation in international sports.

- 2. Favoritism in Selection** – Sometimes athletes face political bias in selection rather than merit-based opportunities. Favoritism in sports selection occurs when athletes are chosen based on personal connections, influence, or political pressure instead of talent and performance. This demotivates deserving players, lowers team morale, and can harm performance in competitions. Such practices undermine fairness and transparency, discourage young talent, and weaken the overall sports culture. Implementing merit-based selection is essential to ensure equal opportunities and strengthen national and international competitiveness. A clear example can be of favoritism in Indian sports is Ruturaj Gaikwad's exclusion from the T20 World Cup 2024 squad. Despite scoring over 500 runs in 17 T20I innings, he was omitted while underperforming players like Shubman Gill were selected. Former cricketer Krishnamachari Srikanth criticized the BCCI, highlighting bias in selection decisions (Times of India, 2024). This case underscores how favoritism can undermine meritocracy and demotivate talented athletes.
- 3. Overlapping Interests** – In many sports organizations, athletes aim for fair selection and performance recognition, while coaches may prioritize team strategy or personal preferences. Federations and administrators often focus on medals, funding, or political visibility, whereas sponsors seek marketing and publicity benefits. These overlapping interests can lead to tensions, such as biased selection, prioritization of marketable players over talented athletes, or manipulation of events for political gain. Politicians holding multiple offices in sports bodies restrict reforms and professionalism. In Indian cricket, player selection is sometimes influenced by overlapping interests of selectors, sponsors, and media, where commercially appealing or popular players may be favored over equally talented but lesser-known athletes (Kree don, 2023; ResearchGate, 2023; Banaras Hindu University, 2022; LinkedIn, 2023; Ad gully, 2023).
- 4. Conflict in Hosting Events** – Political tensions often affect India's participation or hosting rights in international tournaments. Political conflicts can significantly impact India's ability to host sports events. For instance, the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi faced delays, cost overruns, and organizational issues due to disputes between the Delhi government and the Games Organizing Committee, along with allegations of corruption. Such political interference affects infrastructure readiness, athlete

performance, and the country's international reputation (Guha, 2011; Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2011).

- 5. Administrative Delay** - Administrative delays in Indian sports are often caused by political interference in decision-making, funding, and event organization. Bureaucratic disagreements between government bodies, sports federations, and organizing committees can postpone event preparations, disrupt athlete training schedules, and inflate costs. A notable example is the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, where political disputes and mismanagement led to infrastructure delays, corruption allegations, and criticism from international sports authorities (Guha, 2002; Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2011). Such delays not only affect the quality of the event but also undermine the credibility of India as a host nation.

Implications and Way Forward:

Imagine Indian sports freed from the grip of politics, blossoming with fairness and efficiency. To achieve this, clear and open rules are needed for everything, from how money is spent to how athletes are chosen, and training facilities are built. These policies must be clear, fostering trust and inspiring athletes to reach their full potential. We need strong rules like the National Sports Governance Code and the National Sports Development Code, but with teeth – meaning real consequences for those who break them, stopping corruption and slow decision-making. Let us empower skilled sports managers, not politicians, to run the show, bringing professionalism and unbiased judgment. Most importantly, athletes must have a real voice in decisions, making sure policies meet their needs and fostering a sense of belonging and equality. By taking these steps, India can become a respected host of international competitions, boost the spirits of its athletes, and build a solid foundation for sports at every level.

Conclusion

Politics significantly influences the landscape of sports in India, affecting everything from athlete selection to event organization and the country's image on the world stage. Instances of favoritism in cricket selections highlight how political ties can compromise the principles of fair play, while administrative hiccups during the 2010 Commonwealth Games reveal the inefficiencies that political involvement can create. Furthermore, the fusion of commercial interests with political agendas often undermines transparency and even competition. To foster

a robust sporting culture, it is essential for India to reduce political control, strengthen governance systems, and promote independent management of sports. Additionally, ensuring that athletes have a voice in decision-making processes can help protect sports from undue political pressure. By implementing these approaches, India can achieve fair governance, elevate athletic performance, and improve its reputation internationally in the world of sports.

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