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Women's Participation in Indian Sports: A Critical Analysis of Sports Budget Allocation, Government Initiatives, and Achievements (2016–2026)

भारतीय खेलों में महिलाओं की भागीदारी: खेल बजट आवंटन, सरकारी पहलों और उपलब्धियों का आलोचनात्मक विश्लेषण (2016–2026)

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Abstract:

India has witnessed a growing interest in promoting women's participation in sports, and several government policies over the past two decades reflect this shift. From financial incentives to training schemes and infrastructure grants, there is no shortage of official promises. The decade spanning 2016 to 2026 represents a transformative period for Indian sports, marked by unprecedented international podium finishes by female athletes alongside significant structural policy shifts. This paper presents a critical analysis of women's sports participation in India by evaluating the direct interplay between national budget allocations, policy interventions, and athletic achievements over this ten-year timeline. Utilizing a mixed-methods research framework, the study synthesizes secondary data from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS) budget documents, scheme-wise financial outlays, and performance metrics across major international events—including the Olympic Games, Asian Games, and Commonwealth Games. The analysis specifically examines key government initiatives, notably the Khelo India Scheme, the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), and the Scheme of Assistance to National Sports Federations. Findings indicate that targeted financial support, monthly stipends, and specialized foreign coaching under elite-centric programs like TOPS have yielded high returns, significantly elevating female medal contributions on the global stage. Simultaneously, grassroots talent identification through Khelo India has expanded the participation pipeline for women, particularly from non-metropolitan and rural backgrounds. However, the study highlights critical systemic bottlenecks: a persistent deficit in gender-disaggregated budgetary allocation, severe regional disparities in access to specialized training infrastructure, and a stark underrepresentation of women in sports governance, administration, and high-performance coaching. The paper concludes with strategic policy recommendations, advocating for mandatory gender-budgeting frameworks within MYAS, decentralized regional training hubs, and targeted incentives for private sector investment (CSR) to build an equitable and sustainable ecosystem for women in Indian sports.

Keywords: Women in Sports, Gender Budgeting, Khelo India Scheme, TOPS, Sports Infrastructure, Indian Athletics Policy, Gender Parity in Governance.

Introduction

Historically, sports participation in India was heavily gendered, shaped by patriarchy, socio-economic constraints, and institutional neglect (Singh, 2018). For decades, elite athletic opportunities were predominantly concentrated among male athletes, with female participation remaining marginal and largely restricted to urban centers. However, the period between 2016 and 2026 marked a paradigm shift in Indian athletic history. The watershed moment of the 2016 Rio Olympics—where India's only two individual medals were won by women (P.V. Sindhu in Badminton and Sakshi Malik in Wrestling)—served as a powerful catalyst for institutional reassessment and public reawakening regarding the potential of female sportspersons (Khasnis et al., 2021).

Recognizing that international sports success generates soft power, national pride, and social mobility, the Government of India launched an aggressive restructuring of its national sports ecosystem. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS) expanded flagship programs aimed at twin goals: "Sports for All" (mass participation) and "Excellence in Sports" (elite achievement) (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). Over the 2016–2026 decade, female athletes consistently anchored India's global triumphs, achieving historic milestones in weightlifting, boxing, athletics, shooting, wrestling, and team sports like hockey and cricket.

Despite these achievements, a critical policy question remains: To what extent have these high-profile triumphs been matched by structural, financial, and institutional equity at the grassroots level?

While elite athletes receive high-value grants under target schemes, systemic gender disparities persist in overall budget allocation, access to grassroots infrastructure, safety, and leadership roles. This research paper critically evaluates India's sports budget outlays, policy interventions, and athletic achievements from 2016 to 2026 to assess whether structural transformation has kept pace with podium success.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Socio-Economic Dynamics and Female Sports Participation

In developing nations, female participation in physical culture is mediated by intersecting factors of gender, caste, socio-economic status, and geographical location (Singh, 2018). According to Meier et al. (2021), international elite athletic success for women is strongly correlated with structural gender equality, economic security, and state-funded welfare mechanisms. In India, societal expectations regarding domestic responsibilities, body image stereotypes, and safety concerns historically caused high dropout rates among adolescent girls entering sports (Khasnis et al., 2021).

Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in Sports

Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) is an analytical tool that assesses budget outlays for their differential impact on men and women (Singh, 2012). It does not merely imply creating separate budgets for women, but ensuring that mainstream allocations explicitly address gender gaps in access, facilities, and incentives. While GRB has been integrated into several Indian ministries (such as Health and Education) under successive Five-Year Plans and NITI Aayog strategies, its application within the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has remained informal and uncoded (Singh, 2018).

The Vroom-Nixon Model of Elite Sports Development

Elite sports success relies on a structured pyramid framework: a broad grassroots base feeding into talent identification pipelines, supported by scientific training, financial security, and elite competition pathways (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). In India's sports policy transition between 2016 and 2026, the launch of **Khelo India** (grassroots base) and the **Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS)** (elite apex) represented an attempt to operationalize this pyramid model.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods archival and policy evaluation**. **Data Sources:** Union Budget documents published by the Ministry of Finance and MYAS Annual Reports from Financial Year 2016–17 to 2025–26. **Performance Data:** Official medal records from the International Olympic Committee, Commonwealth Games Federation, Olympic Council of Asia, and Sports Authority of India. **Policy Frameworks:** National Sports Development Code, Khelo India guidelines, and TOPS Executive Briefs. **Analytical Tools:** Trend analysis, percentage share distribution, and qualitative content analysis of policy implementation reports.

Budgetary Allocation & Policy Framework (2016–2026)

Central Sports Budget Overview

Over the 2016–2026 decade, the total budget allocated to the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports witnessed a substantial increase, reflecting the government's heightened emphasis on sports as a tool for national prestige and youth development.

Union Sports Budget Allocation & Key Scheme Outlays (2016–2026)

(Figures in INR Crore)

Financial Year	Total MYAS Budget	Khelo India Outlay	Sports Authority of India (SAI)	Assistance to NSFs	Estimated Allocation for Women's Programs (%)
2016–17	₹1,592	₹140	₹381	₹185	~18.5%
2018–19	₹2,196	₹520	₹420	₹240	~22.0%
2020–21	₹2,826	₹899	₹500	₹245	~24.5%
2022–23	₹3,062	₹974	₹753	₹280	~27.0%
2024–25	₹3,442	₹1,000	₹795	₹340	~29.5%
2025–26	₹3,800	₹1,150	₹860	₹390	~31.0%

Source: Compiled from Ministry of Finance Union Budget Documents (2016–2026) and MYAS Annual Reports.

Budget Trend (2016 - 2026 in INR Crore)

2016-17:		₹1,592 Cr
2018-19:		₹2,196 Cr
2020-21:		₹2,826 Cr
2022-23:		₹3,062 Cr
2024-25:		₹3,442 Cr
2025-26:		₹3,800 Cr

Critical Analysis of Key Government Initiatives

Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS)

Re-engineered post-2016, TOPS provides customized support to elite athletes identified as medal prospects. It covers out-of-pocket allowances (₹50,000/month for core group), foreign exposure, specialized scientific backing, and mental conditioning coaches.

- **Gender Parity in TOPS:** By 2024–2026, women constituted approximately 44% of the TOPS core athlete list, a significant rise from under 30% in 2016. Female athletes in shooting, wrestling, boxing, badminton, and weightlifting received direct funding for overseas training camps, proving decisive in international competitions.

Khelo India Scheme

Launched in 2017–18 by merging the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan, Urban Sports Infrastructure Scheme (USIS), and National Sports Talent Search Scheme, Khelo India became the flagship vehicle for mass participation and grassroots talent hunting (Singh, 2018).

ASMITA / Women's Khelo India Leagues: A specialized initiative under Khelo India dedicated specifically to female athletes. These leagues across multiple disciplines (judo, weightlifting, archery, football, etc.) provided competition platforms for over 100,000 girls annually at district and state levels.

Financial Incentives: Khelo India Scholars receive ₹6.28 Lakh annually (including a direct pocket allowance of ₹1.2 Lakh) for 8 years, ensuring that young female athletes from economically vulnerable backgrounds do not drop out due to financial stress.

Scheme of Assistance to National Sports Federations

NSFs manage individual sports disciplines in India. Over the decade, MYAS tied NSF funding directly to compliance with financial transparency, anti-doping regulations, and gender representation standards. However, actual utilization of NSF funds for female development pathways remains disproportionately lower than for male counterparts in disciplines like football, cricket, and hockey (Singh, 2018).

Trends in Women's Participation & International Achievements (2016–2026)

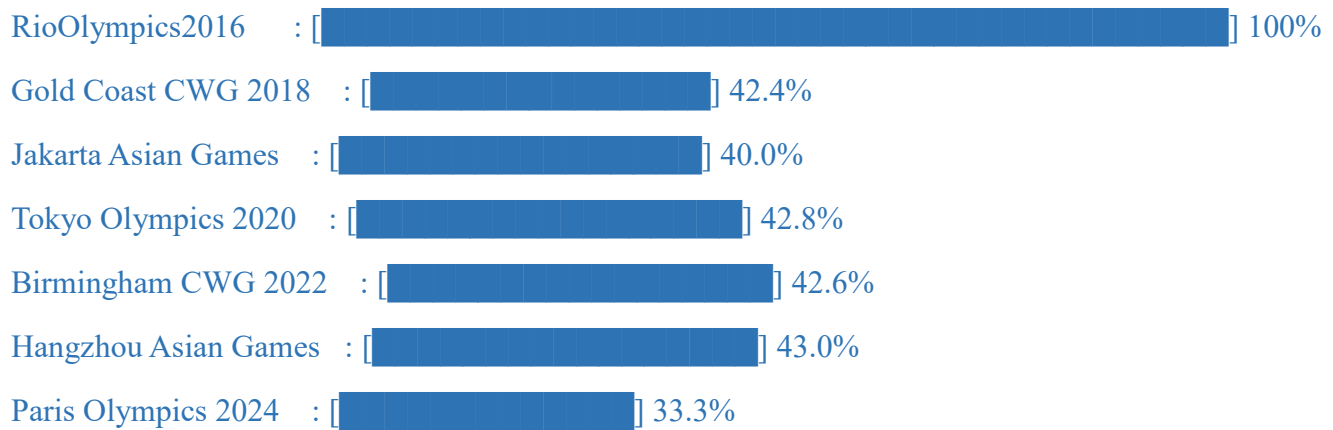
The systematic influx of financial resources and structured high-performance support produced measurable returns in international competition between 2016 and 2026.

Multi-Sport Event Medal Tallies

Contribution of Female Athletes to India's International Medal Tally

Event / Games	Total Medals Won by India	Medals Won by Women	Women's Share (%)	Landmark Achievements
Rio Olympics 2016	2	2	100%	Silver (P.V. Sindhu), Bronze (Sakshi Malik)
Gold Coast CWG 2018	66	28	42.4%	Gold in Table Tennis (Manika Batra), Weightlifting (Mirabai Chanu)
Jakarta Asian Games 2018	70	28	40.0%	Gold in Athletics (Vinesh Phogat, Rahi Sarnobat)
Tokyo Olympics 2020 (2021)	7	3	42.8%	Silver (Mirabai Chanu), Bronze (P.V. Sindhu, Lovlina Borgohain)
Birmingham CWG 2022	61	26	42.6%	Gold in Lawn Bowls (Women's Team), Cricket Silver
Hangzhou Asian Games 2023	107	46	43.0%	Historic team golds in Cricket, Kabaddi, Equestrian mixed teams
Paris Olympics 2024	6	2	33.3%	Manu Bhaker (Double Bronze in Shooting - 10m Air Pistol)

Female Athletes' Contribution to Major International Medals (%)



Key Qualitative Transformations (2016–2026)

1. **Diversification of Sports Disciplines:** Prior to 2016, female medal prospects were largely confined to Badminton, Boxing, and Athletics. Between 2016 and 2026, female athletes achieved podium finishes in Shooting (Manu Bhaker), Table Tennis, Lawn Bowls, Fencing (Bhavani Devi), Golf (Aditi Ashok), and Weightlifting.
2. **Breakthrough in Commercial and Pay Equity:** In 2022, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced a landmark Pay Equity Policy, matching the match fees of central contract female cricketers with male players. This set a crucial precedent across Indian sports federations.
3. **Emergence of Hinterland Talent:** Over 70% of female medalists in this decade hailed from rural or Tier-2/Tier-3 towns across states like Haryana, Manipur, Telangana, Assam, and Kerala, underscoring the role of sports as a engine of socio-economic mobility.

Critical Bottlenecks and Structural Challenges

Despite public policy gains and international achievements, several systemic barriers hinder the realization of full gender equity in Indian sports:

Financial Allocation Deficit and Absence of Mandatory GRB

Although overall funding has expanded, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports does not publish a dedicated **Gender Budget Statement (Statement 20)** in the national budget. Consequently, allocations for women are embedded within general schemes without mandatory minimum quotas, leading to unequal spending at state and district levels (Singh, 2018).

Underrepresentation in Governance and High-Performance Coaching

Women remain severely underrepresented in executive decision-making roles within the Olympic Association of India (IOA) and National Sports Federations (NSFs). According to Clarke & Mondal (2022), women hold less than 15% of executive committee seats across major federations. Furthermore, there is an acute deficit of certified female high-performance coaches, sports scientists, and physiotherapists, which creates comfort and safety issues for adolescent female sportspersons.

Grassroots Infrastructure and Safety Concerns

While National Centers of Excellence (NCOEs) offer elite facilities, rural and district-level training centers frequently lack basic gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as clean sanitation facilities, changing rooms, and secure hostels. Concerns regarding travel safety, harassment, and inadequate reporting

mechanisms under the POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) Act remain significant barriers for young female athletes entering sports (Singh, 2018).

Adolescent Drop-out and Social Resistance

Socio-cultural pressure, early marriage considerations, academic demands, and biological factors (such as unmanaged menstrual health in sports) contribute to a steep drop-out rate among female athletes between 14 and 19 years of age.

Policy Recommendations & Future Roadmap

To transition from sporadic elite success to an equitable national sports culture, the following policy interventions are recommended for implementation by MYAS, SAI, and state governments:

Institutionalize Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

- MYAS should introduce a mandatory **30% minimum gender allocation quota** across all scheme budgets (Khelo India, SAI Infrastructure, NSF Grants).
- Publish an annual, transparent **Gender Audit Report on Sports Spending** to track district-level expenditure on female programs.

Mandate Female Coaching and Administrative Quotas

- Enforce a statutory minimum quota of **33% female representation** in executive boards of all National Sports Federations and State Sports Associations.
- Launch dedicated national scholarship programs for retired female athletes to pursue NIS (Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports) coaching certifications and sports science degrees.

Infrastructure Modernization and Safety Frameworks

- Establish gender-sensitive infrastructure standards (mandatory changing rooms, hygiene units, female warden security) as a prerequisite for granting central financial assistance to state sports facilities.
- Form independent, accessible Safeguarding Committees across all state sports departments to stringently implement POSH guidelines.

CSR Investment Incentives

- Offer tax exemptions and incentives to corporate entities channeling Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds specifically into grassroots female sports academies, maternal healthcare support for athletes, and elite female sports leagues.

Conclusion

The decade spanning from 2016 to 2026 has proven to be a profoundly transformative and luminous era for women's sports in India. Propelled by targeted high-performance frameworks like TOPS and grassroots catalysts like Khelo India, Indian female athletes systematically dismantled deeply ingrained socio-cultural barriers to deliver historic, inspiring podium finishes at the highest international levels—from the Olympic Games to the Asian and Commonwealth Games. However, as this critical analysis comprehensively demonstrates, extraordinary elite success must not mask lingering structural deficits. Persistent challenges, including the absence of mandatory gender-responsive budgeting, acute underrepresentation in administrative governance and high-performance coaching tiers, regional disparities in grassroots infrastructure, and high adolescent dropout rates, continue to threaten long-term equity. Bridging these policy gaps through institutionalized gender-budgeting frameworks, legally enforced governance reforms, decentralized grassroots support, and robust safety protocols will be

indispensable. Only through such holistic systemic reform can India ensure that every young girl across the nation—regardless of geography or socio-economic background—is granted an unfettered and equal opportunity to pursue athletic excellence, thereby transforming elite sporting triumphs into an enduring, equitable national culture of women's empowerment.

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