

The Rise of India in Sports: A Mirror to National Pride and Identity

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| **Sumanth S. Hiremath** |

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology

Rani Channamma University,

Belagavi, Karnataka State, India

sumanthhiremath@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intricate relationships that exist between Indian national identity and sport, emphasising how widespread participation and sporting accomplishments promote patriotism and a sense of shared national identity. Using a mixed-methods research design and based on Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities", it examines India's sporting development from 1900 to 2025, emphasising the notable increase in Olympic, Commonwealth, and Asian Games medals. Quantitative data supports a 345.7 per cent improvement in Olympic performance after 2000, a growing sports industry projected to reach \$130 billion by 2030, and a 23 per cent national sports participation rate. Qualitative insights relate changing manifestations of patriotism to important historical turning points like the hockey golden age and more recent victories like Neeraj Chopra's Olympic gold. According to the findings, sport plays a crucial role in uniting India's diverse population, especially youth involvement, through media representation, shared experiences, and growing economic significance.

KEYWORDS

Indian sports; patriotism; national identity; youth involvement

INTRODUCTION

Sport has emerged as a powerful social institution in India, acting as a crucial platform for communal identity, aspiration, and unity. As one of the largest and most diverse nations, encompassing a multitude of languages, religions, and cultures, India discovers a rare point of collective convergence within the realm of sports. Be it on the hockey turf, cricket fields, Olympic arenas, or through indigenous games such as kabaddi and kho-kho, sporting events have consistently offered shared moments of euphoria and pride, transcending social and geographic boundaries (Sen, 2015; Majumdar, 2004).

The construction of an Indian national identity through sports can be elucidated using Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities". This idea suggests that millions of individuals, often separated by distance and cultural differences, are united through shared, emotionally impactful experiences. Events such as the global spectacle of winning an Olympic medal, the exhilarating atmosphere of the 'Indian Premier League' (IPL), and the collective joy stemming from a cricket world cup victory, transcend mere athletic achievements, and they serve as significant moments of national reaffirmation. Historical instances, such as in the historic 'Indian Football Association' (IFA) Shield final on 29 July, 1911, the all-Indian Mohun Bagan team defeated the British East Yorkshire Regiment with a score of 2-1, marking the first victory for an Indian team in the tournament. Competing barefoot against booted British soldiers, this victory served as a powerful symbol of Indian resilience and capability, igniting nationalistic fervour and inspiring the growing independence movement. The goals were scored by Shibdas Bhaduri and Abhilash Ghosh, with Ghosh

scoring the decisive goal to secure this landmark win. This triumph over a British, exemplify how sports can ignite nationalist aspirations long before the achievement of independence (Mahata, 2023).

Over time, sports such as hockey, cricket, wrestling, and other sports have played a vital role in establishing enduring symbols of Indian prowess. Icons like Dhyan Chand, Milkha Singh, Sachin Tendulkar, Saina Nehwal, Neeraj Chopra, Manu Baker, and many others have ascended to the status of national heroes, embodying values such as discipline, resilience, and unity. The modern era, characterised by India's most impressive Olympic performances and the rapid expansion of professional leagues, further reinforces the role of sport as a cornerstone for patriotism and identity formation in twenty-first-century India. The successes in sport not only enhance India's image on the global stage but also cultivate a sense of participation and belongingness among the citizens, an essential thread that binds together the nation's remarkable diversity (Drishti IAS, 2024; Wikipedia, 2026; The Hans India, 2024). This paper reviews the evolving relationship between sports and national identity in India, examining how sporting achievements and culture have emerged as catalysts for patriotism, unity, and social cohesion.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical framework incorporates Anderson's concept of "imagined communities", whereby millions of Indians, despite their diverse backgrounds, can unite through shared sporting experiences—such as watching cricket or celebrating an Olympic victory. Sports thus function as collective cultural rituals, with symbolic artefacts (including the national anthem, jerseys, and tricolours) fostering emotional resonance and reinforcing identity.

Ernest Gellner's "modernist theory" posits that, sports act as a standardised force within a varied society, while *Eric Hobsbawm's* notion of "*invented traditions*" manifests in the commemoration of iconic achievements, such as Dhyan Chand's hockey era and the annual National Sports Day celebrations. *Michael Billig's* idea of "*banal nationalism*" is apparent in the regular portrayal of sports in the media, which daily nurtures feelings of belonging. Sporting events encapsulate collective memory, serving as touchstones for national pride and influencing future aspirations, while the Indian diaspora sustains emotional connections to the nation through enthusiastic support for Indian teams abroad.

'*Symbolic Interactionism*' illustrates how sporting artefacts acquire collective significance, while collective memory elucidates how past victories become ingrained as patriotic narratives. This theoretical framework encapsulates the multifaceted role of sport in shaping Indian nationalism. Together, these theories elucidate how sports embody both the emotional and symbolic dimensions of patriotism in India.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a sequential mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative analyses that encompass 125 years of India's sporting data from the Olympic, Commonwealth, Cricket World Cup, and Asian Games, alongside qualitative approaches such as historical document analysis and media content analysis. The quantitative data comprises medal counts, participation rates, and audience statistics. Conversely, the qualitative analysis discusses cultural narratives, media portrayals, and the symbolic meanings attributed to sporting events and their heroes. By integrating both methods, the study facilitates a thorough exploration of how measurable performance intersects with the evolving sentiment of patriotism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unity through Sports

The significance of studying sports and national identity in India lies in its ability to illuminate how a culturally and linguistically diverse nation constructs unity and patriotism through shared sporting experiences. Sports serve as a social glue, transcending regional, ethnic, and social boundaries, and cultivating a collective sense of pride among Indians. The explosive growth of the Indian sports industry from \$2 billion today (2025) to a projected \$130 billion by 2030; along with a historic rise in government investment, reflects the national commitment to sporting excellence and recognises it as a potent force in soft power development and social cohesion. Importantly, sports bring marginalised regions and social groups into the national mainstream, as evidenced by medal achievements from athletes in the Northeast and tribal areas. The inclusion of women and representatives from various regions in India's sporting successes highlights sport's potential as a vehicle for gender empowerment and regional integration. With about 23 per cent of the population actively participating in sports and approximately 38 per cent of youth aspiring to pursue sports careers, the sector shapes aspirations, fosters unity, and contributes significantly to the nation's development narrative. These implications extend to cultural policy, education, and international diplomacy, positioning sport as a cornerstone of contemporary Indian patriotism and identity.

India's Sporting Centenary Journey

1. *Pre-Independence- 1900-1947*

India earned eight Olympic medals, primarily in hockey, setting a foundation of national pride. This period saw the emergence of sports as a unifying force, inspiring a sense of identity among the diverse population. The achievements of Indian athletes during these years laid the groundwork for future generations to strive for excellence on the global stage.

2. *Post-Independence- 1947-2000*

India continued dominance in hockey and expansion into Commonwealth and Asian Games medals. The 1983 Cricket World Cup catalysed cultural patriotism. As cricket gained immense popularity, it transformed into a symbol of national unity and resilience. This newfound fervour encouraged a broader embrace of various sports, fostering a generation of athletes eager to make their marks internationally.

3. *Modern Era- 2000-till date (2025)*

Marked by significant performance leaps, 23 Olympic medals post-1996, a record-breaking 101 medals at the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and 107 medals at the 2023 Asian Games. This remarkable trajectory not only highlights the growing prowess of athletes, but it also underscores the importance of investing in sports infrastructure and training programmes. As India continues to nurture its talent, the potential for future success on the global stage remains promising, inspiring new generations to aspire for greatness.

These achievements serve as a testament to the dedication and hard work of the athletes and their coaches. With continued support and commitment, India is poised to make an even greater impact in international competitions, fostering a culture of excellence in sports across various disciplines.

India's Olympic Legacy

The Indian historical achievements, such as hockey's dominance at the Olympics and the other following victories, have become collective memories and serve as rallying points for national sentiment:

- India's Olympic journey began in Paris in 1900, where Norman Pritchard won two silver medals in the men's 200 metres. The Indian men's hockey team sustained its dominance by winning six consecutive gold medals at the Olympics from 1928 to 1956. Additionally, Khashaba Dadasaheb Jadhav secured an individual bronze medal in men's bantamweight wrestling at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics.
- In the latter half of the 20th century, Indian athletes began achieving success in individual sports. Leander Paes won a bronze medal in men's singles tennis at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, while Karnam Malleswari secured bronze in women's 54kg weightlifting at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore claimed silver in men's double trap shooting at the 2004 Athens Olympics.
- At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Abhinav Bindra secured a gold medal in the Men's 10m air rifle event, and Vijender Singh earned a bronze medal in men's middleweight boxing. Sushil Kumar claimed a bronze medal in men's 66kg wrestling.
- At the 2012 London Olympics, Sushil Kumar continued his impressive medal tally by winning a silver in men's 66kg wrestling. He was followed by Vijay Kumar, who secured silver in the men's 25m rapid pistol shooting event. Saina Nehwal achieved bronze in women's singles badminton, while Mary Kom also claimed bronze in women's flyweight boxing. Yogeshwar Dutt earned a bronze in men's 60kg wrestling, and Gagan Narang added to the tally with a bronze in men's 10m air rifle shooting. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, P.V. Sindhu secured a silver medal in the women's singles badminton, while Sakshi Malik achieved bronze in the women's 58kg wrestling category.
- In recent years, Indian athletes have continued to excel. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics saw a record seven medals for India, including a gold for Neeraj Chopra in the men's javelin throw. Mirabai Chanu secured a silver in the women's 49kg weightlifting category, while Ravi Kumar Dahiya won silver in the men's 57kg wrestling. Lovlina Borgohain earned bronze in women's welterweight boxing, and P.V. Sindhu also claimed a bronze medal in women's singles badminton. Bajrang Punia added to the tally with a bronze in men's 65kg wrestling, and the Indian hockey team achieved bronze in the men's hockey event.
- At the 2024 Paris Olympics, Indian athletes continued to shine, with Manu Bhaker winning bronze medals in the women's 10m air pistol shooting event. Additionally, Manu Bhaker and Sarabjot Singh secured a bronze medal in the mixed team 10m air pistol shooting. Swapnil Kusale earned a bronze in the men's 50m rifle three-position shooting, while Neeraj Chopra achieved a silver medal in the men's javelin throw. Aman Sehrawat also claimed a bronze in the men's 57kg wrestling category, and the Indian hockey team secured a bronze in the men's hockey event.

India's legacy in the Olympics has thus persisted with the aforementioned sporting victories, which have consistently ignited patriotism by creating pivotal moments of pride, solidarity, and inspiration.

Quantitative Insights

Olympic medals rose from 0.8 per game pre-2000 to 3.7 post-2000, a 345.7 per cent improvement. This significant increase reflects not only the growing competitiveness of athletes worldwide but also advancements in training techniques and sports science. As India, invest more in their athletes, the quest for excellence continues to elevate the standards of performance at the games, and sports participation stands at 23 per cent (345 million people). This surge in participation highlights a broader cultural shift towards fitness and athleticism, encouraging more individuals to pursue sports at both amateur and professional levels.

Consequently, the emphasis on developing young talent is likely to foster even greater achievements in future Olympic events.

In India, Cricket dominates, with 38 per cent of youth aspiring to related careers. This trend suggests not only a deepening interest in cricket but also a potential increase in investment and resources dedicated to nurturing this talent. As the young athletes gain access to better training facilities and coaching, they may well redefine the landscape of the sport on a global scale. Recently, the viewership for the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket matches in 2024 and 2025 surpassed 168 million. This remarkable engagement highlights the tournament's growing popularity and its ability to attract a diverse audience, both domestically and internationally. Fans are eagerly anticipating the upcoming season, with expectations for even higher engagement and innovative broadcasting techniques. Consequently, its popularity could lead to enhanced sponsorship opportunities and increased funding for grassroots initiatives, ultimately shaping the next generation of cricketing stars.

The sports industry is projected to grow thirteen fold to \$130 billion by 2030. With exponential growth, stakeholders will need to adapt their strategies to capitalise on emerging trends and technologies. This evolution will elevate the profile of the sport and ensure its sustainability in an ever-competitive entertainment landscape. The government increased sports funding, including Rs.3,794 crores in 2025-26 financial year, and support for thousands of athletes and infrastructural projects.

Social and Regional Inclusion

Indian athletes emerging from all states reflect a broad inclusiveness. This diversity highlights not only the talent present across the country but also illustrates the value of supporting sports at the grassroots level. Such representation fosters unity and encourages young athletes to aspire to greatness, knowing that their backgrounds do not limit their potential. In India, anyone can engage in sports, irrespective of class, gender, or location.

The country's sporting landscape has become increasingly inclusive, with athletes rising from nearly all states. This focus on regional inclusivity has resulted in significant contributions from marginalised regions, such as the northeast and tribal areas. Athletes from these regions have made a mark, emphasising the role of sports in fostering integration and national unity.

The growing representation of female athletes competing internationally has also been noteworthy. Women's participation in traditionally less represented events has surged, signifying a progressive change in attitudes towards gender equality in sports. The inclusion of female athletes and champions from diverse backgrounds has created opportunities for a broader sense of patriotism rooted in diversity.

The government's increased funding for Khelo India and sports infrastructure has further enhanced the democratic potential of sports, and it underscores their capacity to foster a sense of national pride among all Indians.

India's Sporting Identity - Uniting India through Sports

A historical overview, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, illustrates the transformative impact of sport on Indian national identity. This journey began with Norman Pritchard's medals in 1900 and was followed by a period of hockey dominance, during which India secured six consecutive Olympic gold medals from 1928 to 1956. Consequently, sports rapidly emerged as symbols of national strength and unity. After gaining independence, India further entrenched its presence in hockey, enhanced its medal tallies at the Commonwealth and Asian Games, and witnessed cricket's ascent as a vehicle for mass patriotism, particularly following the victory in the 1983 World Cup and again in 2011.

Since liberalisation in the 1990s, there has been a dramatic improvement in sports performance and infrastructure in India. The average number of Olympic medals won per Games increased from 0.8 (pre-2000) to 3.7 over the past two decades—a remarkable rise of 345.7 per cent—indicating enhanced training, funding, and talent identification. In the Commonwealth Games, India's medal average has surged to nearly 70 per edition, while at the Asian Games, medal totals have doubled from 51 in 1951 to a record 107 in 2023. The rise in medals and participation has led to material success and deep patriotic feelings, which have been shown in big celebrations and shared experiences. Sports have become a unifying force that goes beyond race, language, and class.

The initiatives of Government, including increased funding and the development of expansive infrastructure, highlight an awareness of the link between sporting success and national pride as well as social cohesion. These efforts have enabled young aspirants from regional and disadvantaged backgrounds to engage in sports, fostering inclusivity and diversity.

While commercialisation has heightened national pride, it also poses challenges in balancing media-driven narratives with authentic grassroots support. The media plays a significant role in shaping the narrative of sports in India, with sporting heroes emerging as symbols of perseverance and unity. Their victories act as immediate catalysts for collective emotions, sustaining and renewing a sense of patriotism.

As India continues to excel in sports, it is vital to sustain this momentum by strengthening the entire sporting ecosystem. This involves promoting grassroots development, acknowledging athletes from beyond metropolitan areas, and ensuring that every Indian is able to discover their voice and hope through sports. By doing so, India can fully realise its patriotic potential, turning sporting moments into lasting foundations for national unity and progress.

CONCLUSION

In India, sports have evolved from mere recreation to a powerful means of expressing patriotism and national pride. India's remarkable rise in international sporting success highlights the effective blend of policy support, public passion, and cultural symbolism. A truly inclusive sporting ecosystem, where every Indian feels represented and inspired, is essential for meaningful patriotism. This requires sustained investment across gender, region, and economic strata. India can forge a unified nation by maximising the potential of sports to promote national unity; it is essential to prioritise fair resource distribution, develop grassroots talent beyond metropolitan centres, and improve inclusivity. The media and commerce play a vital role in shaping the sports narrative. While storytelling and heroism are essential, it is equally important to highlight the broader ecosystem that produces champions. Ultimately, India's challenge is to convert sporting success into lasting social integration and opportunity. Doing so will help India's athletes and their families enjoy a more prosperous future together, where sports are a unifying force and a source of optimism for all.

Finally, to conclude, here is a quote from the legendary Indian field hockey player Major Dhyan Chand, known as the 'Wizard of Hockey' and referred to as 'The Magician' for his extraordinary skill, control, and goal-scoring ability, which led India to win three Olympic gold medals. He expresses the sentiment, "*It is not my country's duty to push me ahead. It is my duty to push my country ahead.*" His selfless dedication to the nation inspires a sense of responsibility and patriotism in every athlete, fostering unity and collective progress.

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