



International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Development Studies (IJHSD)

(An International Peer-Reviewed (Refereed) Journal)

Website-<https://ijhds.nobleinkresearch.com/>

Email- editor@ijhds.nobleinkresearch.com

ISSN: 3139-8235 (Online)



Transforming Sports Governance in India: Towards a Transparent and Athlete-Centered System

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Received: 12 July 2026, Revised: 14 August 2026, Accepted: 15 September 2026, Available Online: 30 September 2026
<https://doi.org/10.68219/h2zfnf63>

Abstract

Sports governance is critical to the functioning, integrity, transparency and sustainability of the sporting system in India. Competitive, professional and international sports have led to the emergence of strong governance that is accountable and puts athletes at the centre of institutional decision making. Although sports administration and policy has evolved, transparency, financial accountability, athlete representation, selection procedures, welfare, grievance redressal and institutional oversight have continued to be a topic of focus. This research examines the institutional and governance framework of sports in India and calls for an improvement in the transparency and athlete-centered system. The qualitative analysis of sports policies, institutional regulations, official reports, governance frameworks and literature as well as other aspects of sports governance is key in the study. The study looks at transparency, accountability, athlete representation, welfare, integrity and grievance redressal as the six interrelated aspects of athlete-centered governance. As a result of these dimensions, the athlete-centered sports governance framework to be developed will strengthen athlete participation, institutional accountability, procedural fairness, and recourse for grievance relief. Achieving structural change in Indian sports governance can only happen if there are institutional mechanisms for athletes to be involved in decision-making in sports governance and how the decision-making process is being done for the betterment of sports governance. The proposed framework is a conceptual framework to strengthen transparency, accountability and athlete participation in India's evolving sports governance system.

Keywords: Sports Governance; India; Transparency; Accountability; Athlete-Centered Governance; Athlete Representation; Athlete Welfare; Sports Administration; Institutional Reform; Sports Policy; Good Governance; Grievance Redressal.

1. Introduction

Sporting is increasingly being considered a key aspect of social development, public policy, youth engagement, health promotion, economic activity, and national representation. A good sport ecosystem cannot only serve to promote competitive performance but also promote social inclusion, employment, community involvement, and ultimately, the development of the entire people. In India, the increased involvement of sport at the local, regional, and international level has also made it indispensable for institutional structures to be in place (in terms of governance and transparency) to administer sporting organisations in a transparent and sustainable manner. The government of India has recognised the role of sport as a public good and sports development as a public function, even though national sports bodies are autonomous to their members but play a significant public function, as the selection of national teams and representation of India in international sporting competitions has become a part of the national game [1-4]. The governance of sport therefore goes beyond the organisation and administration of competitions and the organization and management of sport. It is about the structures, rules, processes, relationships, and accountability mechanisms through which decisions are made and implemented in the sport itself. Good sports governance should be structured: an institutionalized culture, transparent administration, clear and transparent financial management, ethical conduct, democratic engagement, institutional oversight, and governance for athletes. International sports governance principles also focus on transparent management processes, democratic processes, well-defined structures and policies, stakeholder involvement, and protection of athletes as all core to good governance [5-8].

India has developed a number of institutional and policy mechanisms to enhance sports administration and governance. The National Sports Development Code of India's 2011 developed a framework to encourage good governance of national sports bodies and linked recognition and government support for National Sports Federations to compliance with governance requirements. In recent years, the Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 (National Sports Policy-2025) has also outlined the aim of India's sporting world: to have athlete-specific support systems, fair access to sports infrastructure, sports science and medicine, good governance and institutional frameworks, sustainable funding, inclusive policies, and development of sport as a career. These developments signify policy-level recognition that sport's success is not just a function of talent and infrastructure but of the quality of institutions doing the sport [9-12].

But the effectiveness of a sports system can't be measured only through medals, rankings, infrastructure, or participation numbers. The quality of governance is as important as it is because institutional decisions are the most important for athletes' career opportunities, welfare, and access

to competitive opportunities. Issues like transparency of selection processes, resource allocation and utilisation, institutional accountability, representation of athletes in decision-making, conflict-of-interest management, safeguarding, and grievance redressal affect the relationship of athletes and sporting institutions [13-15]. The governance challenge is not just administrative efficiency but whether the institutional system provides athletes with meaningful participation, procedural fairness, protection, and access to reporting problems. A key aspect of this discussion is the role of athletes in governance. Athletes are the players (and winners) in sports, but governance decisions are often made by administrative and institutional mechanisms where they have little or no formal power. A number of Indian policy discussions have already highlighted the role of athletes in the management and decision-making of national sports bodies as an important governance issue that should also be addressed through athlete advisory mechanisms. At the international level, athlete participation is now visible in the day and age of sports governance that includes athlete representatives in discussions about the direction of the Olympic movement in the present and future [16-20].

So athlete-centered governance is a good model to think about in relation to sports organizations and athletes. An athlete-centered approach is not about reducing the autonomy or the power of professional administration of sports institutions but rather about building systems of governance where athlete interests, rights, welfare, participation, and experiences are embedded in policy and institutional decision-making. That's about transparency in rules and procedures, accountability in the way institutions act, healthy athlete representation, effective welfare mechanisms, safeguarding mechanisms, and an accessible and independent grievance-redressal process. Even though we have policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms on this subject, we need to look at these aspects together in the Indian context. In fact, the current discussions often focus on specific aspects of sports administration (e.g., policy implementation, athlete development, federation management, financial support, sporting performance), but are not necessarily in conjunction with transparency, accountability, athlete representation, welfare, integrity, and grievance redress. In this study, we seek to fill this gap by studying Indian sports governance from the athlete's perspective and by linking institutional governance to the experiences and interests of athletes. If we look at this study, we will be able to understand the institutional and policy context of Indian sports governance, what governance problems are there, and what should be done about them in order to make sports more transparent and athlete-centered [21-24]. The six dimensions of importance are transparency, accountability, athlete representation, athlete welfare, integrity, and grievance redressal. Through bringing these together, we aim to shift the focus from governance deficiencies to a cohesive model for institutional change. And the study is of the view that Indian sport development will be sustained if we have good administration in which we have a world of sports, in which we have transparent, accountable, participatory, inclusive, and responsive systems to the athletes we are supposed to serve [25-28].

2. Sports Governance in India: Institutional and Policy Context

India's sports governance system is multi-level with government authorities, autonomous sporting organisations, national and state-level federations, Olympic bodies, athletes, coaches, etc. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS) is the main government institution responsible for the formulation of policies and programmes in sports development, and competitive sports programmes take place through autonomous sports organisations and National Sports Federations (NSFs). This is because Indian sports governance is very much about the autonomy of the sporting organisation which is also the basis for both government support and public funding [29-30].

The role of the government in sports has always been bigger than financial support and infrastructure. The government of sports has a role to play in policy-making and funding, recognition of sports federations, development programmes, athlete support programs and institutional oversight. At the same time, National Sports Federations are in general responsible for technical and competitive aspects of sports (e.g., athlete development, competition planning, preparation of national teams and participation in international competitions). That is, it is the governance system - autonomy and accountability - that is at work in the sports sector. Sporting organisations need to have the freedom to take sport-specific decisions but are also constrained because they are public organisations - and, in many cases, have to invest in public resources - and hence need to be transparent and accountable.

A significant development in India's sports governance system was the National Sports Development Code of India, 2011. The code sought to institutionalise a more structured governance structure for recognised National Sports Federations and other sporting organisations. It addressed issues of elections, tenure of office bearers, age and tenure limits, financial accountability, recognition of federations, representation and compliance with governance requirements. The Code was in line with the principle that the autonomy of sports organisations must be accompanied by a good level of accountability, especially in cases where organisations have national importance and are recognised or supported by the government. The Sports Code is therefore an important reference point for understanding the development of governance principles in Indian sports administration.

The institutional framework is evolving with changing expectations for athlete development, sport, inclusion, infrastructure and governance. The National Sports Policy-2025 (Khelo Bharat Niti-2025) is a broader modern policy vision for the Indian sports ecosystem which is intended to provide a modern day vision of a strong sporting culture; access to sports, athlete support systems, sports science and medicine, institutional capacity building, sustainable investment and governance. This athlete-centric view of the sport is particularly relevant to the present study as it reflects that sports development needs systems that support athletes at different stages of their sporting career rather than focusing only on the outcome of the competition.

Another important component of India's sports governance ecosystem is the network of national and state-level sports federations. These organisations are extremely important to policy institutions and athletes in that they can translate policy goals into sport-specific programmes and procedures and thus have an important role to play in the development of the national and world sport and in the implementation of welfare measures. The governance system is highly dependent on the quality of administrative processes in these organisations and therefore its effectiveness is dependent on the efficiency of the management of their administrative procedures. Rules, transparent procedures, regular decision-making processes, financial management, and mechanisms to respond to complaints are key for institutional legitimacy in the context of these organisations to be in place.

The Indian Olympic Association and other recognised sporting bodies are also part of the national governance ecosystem in terms of Olympic and international sporting participation. They are responsible institutionally for coordination, representation and engagement with international sporting organisations. In fact, a number of institutions with overlapping or complementary responsibilities make coordination and clarity of roles important. When institutions have insufficient responsibilities or accountability mechanisms are weak, governance can be very difficult to monitor from the point of view of athletes and other stakeholders.

Financial governance is another important component of the institutional framework. Public funding, grants, sponsorships, membership revenues and other sources of financial support are important for the functioning of sports organisations. Public funding instills an expectation of responsible resource consumption, proper auditing and disclosure. Transparent financial processes are thus not only administrative requirements but also fundamental to ensure that resources allocated to sport development are used to achieve the intended purposes (e.g., athlete preparation, coaching, infrastructure, competition participation and welfare).

We must also consider the governance structure from the perspective of athletes. Athletes interact with sports institutions through selection processes, training programmes, competition structures, financial assistance, disciplinary procedures, medical assistance and grievance mechanisms. So institutional governance impacts the way they live their lives and their professional lives. A governance system in compliance with rules may need to be further scrutinised if athletes are often not given a chance to participate in decisions that directly affect them. So meaningful athlete representation can be added to existing administrative structures by bringing the experience and perspective of athletes into governance processes.

And the institutional and policy framework of Indian sports is slowly moving towards more formal governance and accountability, athlete development and the oversight of the institution. But rules and policy frameworks do not make the system work. The practical success of the system depends on implementation, monitoring and institutional capacity, transparency and the extent to which the athletes can actually participate in governance processes. This distinction between 'formal

governance structures and their operational nature is a way to examine the major governance challenges facing Indian sport [31-33].

3. Key Governance Challenges in Indian Sports

The effectiveness of sports governance is not only based on institutional structures and regulations but also how effective these mechanisms are in practice. In India, the governance environment has been developed through the National Sports Governance Act, 2025, which provides a legal framework to recognize and operate national sports bodies so that they are ethical, that athletes have a sense of responsibility for their sports as well as to resolve problems and disputes in the sport as a whole. The Act is very clear on the fact that national sports governing bodies perform very important public functions and should act in an open, fair, and transparent manner. But, the transition from formal regulatory requirements to good, athlete-driven governance is not without some institutional difficulties.

3.1 Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is crucial to the legitimacy of sports institutions because a lot of the decisions made at the sport level are very much about the careers of athletes, the opportunities they have to compete, and the opportunities they have to be represented to be more competitive in the sport world today. Transparent governance requires that rules, eligibility requirements, selection procedures, financial arrangements, institutional decisions, and mechanisms of accountability are clear and well-understood by all parties. Accountability requires identifiable responsibility for decisions, oversight, financial controls, ethical standards, and mechanisms for questioning or reviewing them. Recent government analyses have also acknowledged the importance of stronger institutional accountability. The report of a Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports task-force on the building of capacities of sports administrators has pointed to several gaps (in terms of independent oversight, athlete representation, professional leadership, transparency of elections, term of service limits, and mechanisms for filing complaints) in Indian National Sports Federations. This indicates that the reform of governance is not limited to the establishment of new rules; it includes the creation of institutional capacity to apply and monitor these rules.

The National Sports Governance Bill of 2025 seeks to address these issues. It provides the definitions of national sports bodies and establishes the National Sports Board in terms of recognition and governance framework, ethical standards, sports development, athlete wellness, and misuse of funds. The efficacy of these mechanisms will depend on the independence of institutions, the transparency of procedures, and the uniformity of implementation of policies in the area of sport.

3.2 Athlete Representation and Welfare

A further pressing point is the state of athletes in the governance systems. Although athletes are the people who are directly involved in competition, their role in decision making in institutions

is fairly weak. The importance of athlete representation lies in the fact that a decision on athlete selection, competition schedules and systems of training, disciplinary procedures, provisions for well-being, and the development of careers can directly affect athletes.

Recent trends in law indicate that this idea is gaining recognition in practice too. For instance, the National Sports Governance Act indicates that there should be an athletes' committee in national sports organizations, and the 2026 rules state that the governing organs of national sports organizations should include sportsmen of high achievements, while at least half of the aforementioned positions should be held by women. These legal acts create opportunities for athlete experiences and skills to be considered in the governance process. Representation should not be treated just as the number of sportspersons involved; it also involves their participation in the decision-making process as well as the right of them to have sufficient information for their decision-making and make use of their expertise in the processes.

The welfare of athletes includes not only monetary support or assistance while participating in sporting events. It includes all training conditions given to athletes in addition to sports science and medical assistance, safety, mental and social aid, career advancement, education, and transition after athletic careers have ended. The National Sports Governance Act specifically highlights the athlete's welfare and interests in this regard. That is why an athlete-centered system must be governed in a manner that views athletes as rights-bearing stakeholders and not only as players whose excellence is determined only by their success in sports.

3.3 Selection, Grievance Redressal and Institutional Integrity

Selection procedures in sports governance are quite sensitive as it is through these selections that one takes part in big sporting events and greatly influences the path of the athlete. An effective selection process includes objective criteria for selection, consistent selection process that is documented, fair procedures that may be challenged. The recent publication of selection procedures for the Asian Games, Para-Asian Games, and other sports events by the Ministry is an illustration of the importance of formalising the selection procedures in sports governance.

Grievance resolution is relevant to the transparency of selection procedures. Athletes need to have grievance mechanisms available to them so that they may lodge complaints related to their selections, disciplinary actions against them, decisions made by administration, etc. In this respect, the National Sports Governance Act puts forward the grievance mechanisms and establishes the National Sports Tribunal for dealing with certain disputes related to sports. Integrity also implies acknowledging conflicts of interests, ethical conduct, electoral procedures, tenure, separation of powers, etc. The 2025 Act and the regulations that followed outline the governance demands referring to the executive bodies, elections, fortifying representatives, and institutions' monitoring. These provisions indicate a trend towards regulating governance. However, one should keep in mind that effective integrity is associated with the implementation, monitoring, disclosure, and enforcement of the regulations and not just the regulations themselves. The challenges mentioned

above show that Indian sports governance is changing from the institution-based administrative model to the model that is more focused on transparency, accountability, welfare, ethical conduct, and involvement of athletes into the governance process as well as some other principles. The new legislative initiatives and policies create a new basis for a more reliable institutional framework but the most important question is how these principles are linked with the practices of the athletes who take part in sports at all levels in India, which creates the need for the development of an athlete-centered governance model.

4. Towards Athlete-Centered Sports Governance

The governance landscape in India is changing from that of an institution-centered sports administration to a system in which athletes have a role in governance. The National Sports Governance Act 2025 (as it is set out in this paper) identifies athlete welfare, ethical practices, transparency, accountability and effective resolution of sports grievances as central objectives to the national governance system. The Act also recognizes the public interest of national sports governing bodies, but retains autonomy of sports organizations. ([India Code][1]) As such, this combination of institutional autonomy and public accountability is an essential foundation for a sports focused governance model. A player-centered approach starts with an attitude shift: athletes are not to be considered just as recipients of policies, funding, training and administrative decisions, but also as the ones who are the stakeholders who contribute to sports governance. It is not a requirement that athletes are required to take on all administrative duties but to make decisions that affect athletes are transparent and to have an athlete perspective.

4.1 Principles of Athlete-Centered Governance

Transparency should be the first principle of athlete-centered system. Athletes should have access to eligibility requirements, selection criteria, competition procedures, financial support, disciplinary rules, institutional policies and grievance mechanisms. Transparency reduces uncertainty and allows athletes to know the reasons for the decisions affecting their sporting careers. The National Sports Governance Act states that transparency and accountability should be the basic tenets of sports in India. ([India Code][2])

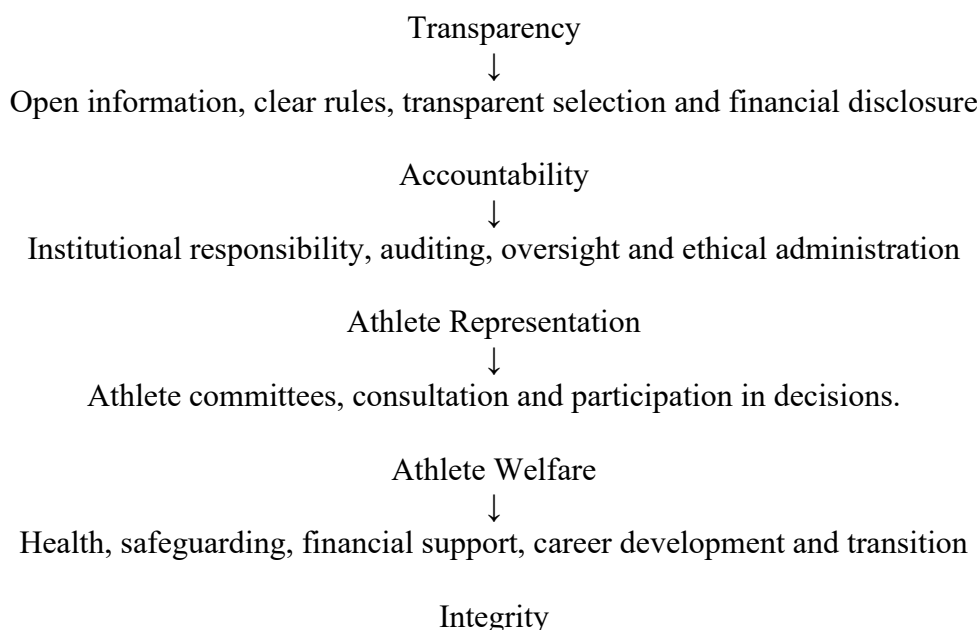
Accountability is closely related to transparency. Sporting institutions should have clearly defined responsibilities and mechanisms through which decisions and actions can be reviewed. Accountability needs to work across many levels from finance to elections to selection procedure to ethical conduct, safeguarding and athlete welfare. The governance framework should therefore differentiate between institutional autonomy and lack of accountability. Autonomy allows sport-specific decision making and accountability is to protect against arbitrary, opaque or poorly documented decisions. Athlete representation is another basic tenet. If athletes are to represent themselves in institutions, there should be clear ways to take part in discussions and decisions about policies and decision-making that will affect their careers. The 2025 Act provides for Athletes Committees in national sports organisations which is a statutory recognition of athlete

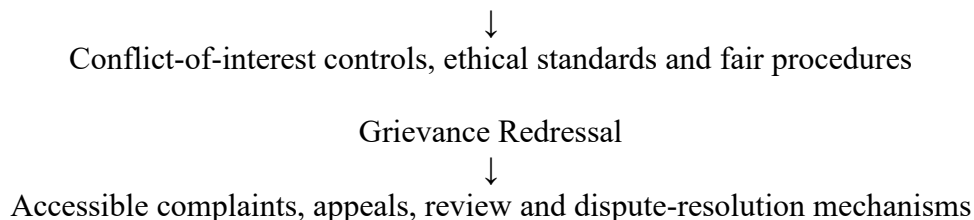
engagement as part of the governance structure. Such mechanisms are of course only effective if those representatives have the opportunity to discuss athlete concerns and participate in institutions' processes. Athlete welfare should go beyond the competitive field. A solid governance framework should cover physical health, sports medicine, nutrition, psychological support and safeguarding, financial security, education, career development and retirement from sport. A sports governance policy of 2025 specifically has the welfare and interests of athletes at its heart and is a central area of government action. An athlete-centered model means institutions need to consider the athlete's professional development and personal development far beyond just the results of sports competitions. Integrity and ethical governance are equally important. Sporting organizations are situated in a context where decisions about selection, funding, representation, competitions and disciplinary matters can have significant consequences for them. Clear conflict-of-interest codes, transparent elections, appropriate tenure provisions and independent oversight can help to maintain the integrity of the organisation. The 2025 statutory framework connects sports governance with ethical practices, fair play and established governance standards.

And finally effective grievance redressal is essential to ensure that athletes have a meaningful institutional path to feel their interests have been harmed in a way that they can feel good about it. A grievance mechanism should be accessible, timely, procedurally fair and independent enough to give athletes the confidence to go with it. The creation of formal dispute resolution mechanisms under the new governance structure will provide a legal basis for strengthening this aspect of sports administration.

4.2 Proposed Athlete-Centered Governance Framework

Based on these principles, this study proposes an athlete-centered sports governance framework with six interconnected dimensions:





These six dimensions should not operate independently. Transparency makes institutional decisions more understandable; accountability creates responsibility for those decisions; athlete representation brings athlete perspectives into governance; welfare policies address the wider needs of athletes; integrity protects the decision making process; and grievance mechanisms provide institutional remedies when problems arise. They can create a governance environment that places the athlete at the centre while maintaining professional and institutional autonomy.

So the proposed framework is to conceptualise sports governance as a ‘participatory relationship between institutions and athletes rather than a one-way process of management’. For example, in this model, athletes become active participants in governance and sports organisations take care of professional administration, regulatory compliance, financial management, and development of sport. This approach also promotes institutional trust as athletes are provided with clarity and mechanisms through which they can say their concerns are taken care of in the formalised process.

The framework is particularly relevant in the context of changing regulatory landscape in India. The National Sports Governance Act, 2025 already provides statutory recognition to several principles that are in line with the proposed framework, like transparency, accountability, athlete welfare, ethical governance, athlete committees, and dispute resolution. ([India Code][1]) So the real challenge is not just to develop additional governance principles but to develop and institutionalise them for the various sporting institutions in India. A successful transition to athlete-centered governance will ultimately require us to find a balance between ‘institutional autonomy, regulatory accountability and athlete participation’. Such a balance can help to ensure that governance reforms improve both the functioning of sporting institutions and the rights, welfare and participation of athletes. In the next section we shall discuss the institutional and policy changes needed to translate this framework into actual governance mechanisms in Indian sport.

5. Institutional Reforms and Policy Recommendations

The transition to transparent and athlete-centered sports governance is not merely a matter of regulation. It involves structural transfer of governance principles into institutional methods, administrative processes, and accountability mechanisms. India is currently on the verge of a change and reforms in laws and policy are a part of that process but this implementation will depend on institutional capacity, monitoring and the participation of athletes. The following reforms can enhance governance structures of Indian sport.

Strengthening transparency and disclosure mechanisms. Sports organisations need to have uniform disclosure standards for the disclosure of information about their organisational structure, governing bodies, elections, financial statements, funding received, major expenditures, selection policies, eligibility requirements, disciplinary procedures, and welfare programmes. Information should be given in a transparent and easily accessible manner rather than just on the basis of technically valid documents. The standardisation of disclosure across recognised sporting bodies could make organisational performance easier to track and compare over time. The digital release of governance documents would also make them accessible to athletes, coaches, administrators, and others in the organisation.

5.1 Improving financial accountability

Financial resources are key to athlete development, infrastructure, coaching, competition participation, and welfare programmes. So financial governance should be based on a transparent budgeting mechanism, regular audits, internal controls, regularly updated financial reporting, and the determination of significant sources and uses of funds. Independent review mechanisms can also give more confidence to the use of public and institutional resources. Greater financial transparency will also ensure that resources for athlete development are put to good use in sport.

Institutionalising meaningful athlete representation. Athletes should be on committees that have clearly defined roles and channels to participate. Athletes have a responsibility to be part of discussions on selection systems, competition structures, welfare policies, safeguarding, training conditions and other elements which affect athletes. Representation also needs to be diverse in the sporting community and women and athletes of different sports disciplines and their competing backgrounds should be considered. We must ensure that there is ongoing institutional conversation rather than a one-off discussion.

Enhancing transparency in selection procedures. One of the areas where governance quality is important to the athletes is selection and selection is one of the areas where governance quality can be immediate. Sporting organisations should publish written eligibility criteria and selection criteria for all competitions and record how the criteria were applied to their athletes, and the process must be transparent. Athletes have the right to review or appeal if they wish and if needed they can find specific review or appeal mechanisms. Selection governance should therefore be aimed at combining sporting expertise with procedural transparency.

Developing effective grievance-redressal mechanisms. An athlete-centered governance system needs to provide a mechanism for athletes to raise issues without unnecessary administrative hurdles. Grievance procedures should document the proper authority, submission process, time limit, review stages and remedies. If conflicts of interest exist within an organisation, independent review is needed to address them. Confidentiality and retaliation protection are also key issues, especially if safeguarding or serious institutional misconduct is involved. The purpose should be

to see to it that things are resolved immediately and in a fair way rather than that the complaint would only be looked into.

Strengthening conflict-of-interest and ethical governance. Sports organisations need clear policy frameworks to eliminate conflicts of interest between office bearers, selectors, administrators, coaches, and other decision-makers. Disclosure policies, recusal mechanisms, ethical codes and oversight must be in place in order to protect such institutions from conflicts. Governance reforms should focus on election processes, tenure, eligibility and separation of roles.

Expanding athlete welfare and career support. It is essential for athlete-centered governance to recognise that competitive careers are finite and that success in sport rests on a wider support system. Sports organisations and public institutions need to provide access to sports medicine, nutrition, psychological support, education, financial planning, career counselling and post-retirement opportunities to the athletes who are transitioning out of competitive sport. Such measures can bridge the gap between sporting performance and long-term athlete development.

Strengthening safeguarding and inclusion. A transparent system of governance will have sufficient protection against harassment, discrimination, abuse, and other types of misconduct within sporting environments. Policies for safeguarding should be well-defined, have clear standards, reporting channels, responsible authorities and procedures in place for investigation and responses. Inclusion should be a part of governance planning and consideration for women, athletes with disabilities and those from economically disadvantaged communities and other groups should also be included. So an athlete-oriented system should weigh both the ability of athletes to participate in the sport and the quality and safety of the environment in which they do so.

Creating continuous governance monitoring. Governance reform should be an ongoing institutional process and not a one-time compliance exercise. Well-known sports organisations could measure their performance in terms of transparency, financial responsibility, athlete representation, welfare, integrity, safeguarding and grievance resolution regularly. Independent governance reviews could complement internal oversight and provide the basis for recommendations to improve governance standards. Such assessments would allow governance standards to change with changing institutional and athlete needs.

All these reforms together suggest that the transformation of Indian sports governance requires a shift from formal compliance to substantive accountability. The institutional basis of governance is regulations, but how regulations affect daily decision-making and athletes' lives is to be determined by how they are applied and in what way. Transparency must therefore be accompanied by information that is readily available, representation must be accompanied by meaningful participation, grievance mechanisms must be accompanied by fair and timely resolution and welfare policies must be backed up by sufficient resources and institutional responsibility. The proposals also emphasize that athlete-centered governance should not be considered a replacement for institutional professionalism. Rather, it is a governance model where

professional administration, regulatory oversight, and athlete involvement are built upon each other. Such a model can make sporting institutions that are professional in nature but responsive to the people whose sporting careers and welfare are affected by the decisions of coaches. How do you make such reforms work?

6. Discussion

The analysis presented in this study indicates that the change in Indian sports governance is a larger institutional change going from the administration-oriented approach to a governance model based on institutional autonomy through transparency, accountability, athlete participation and welfare. The recent development of a statutory governance framework through the National Sports Governance Act, 2025 is an important institutional basis for this transition. But at the end of the day, it's not enough to have laws and governance rules that must perform in practice and the extent to which athletes can truly take advantage of these mechanisms depends on the level of implementation, institutional capacity, monitoring, and more.

One of the key findings of this study is that transparency and accountability should be seen as complementary rather than as separate principles. Transparency enables access to information about institutional decisions; accountability makes consequences for those decisions clear. When it comes to sports, both of these are of great importance as decisions about selection, access to funding/competitions, discipline and athlete welfare are very important in the professional world. A governance system may have rules but if these are not made clear to the public or are not applied consistently, procedural transparency is considered a key aspect of institutional legitimacy.

The analysis also mentions the need for 'athlete representation'. Athletes are well aware of training environments, competition structures, selection processes, welfare considerations and the challenges of sporting careers. Integrating this knowledge can therefore help to support the responsiveness of the governance system to decisions that can be made. But representation should not be limited to the presence of athletes on a committee. Representation is about certain responsibilities, access to relevant information, participation in discussions and institutional mechanisms through which what the athlete cares about is going to be felt and is important in policy making. Thus, the recognition of Athletes Committees under India's recent governance structure provides a basis for such participation, but the effectiveness of these structures will depend on how they operate in practice.

A related issue is the relationship between athlete welfare and sport performance. Traditional approaches to sports development put a lot of emphasis on medals, rankings, records and international results. These are all important but they are not representative of the quality of sport. Medical health care, sports science, psychological help, education, safety and career transition opportunities can help an athlete maintain a career in sport. An athlete-centered governance model therefore makes the development of sport more meaningful (and more professional).

We find that grievance redressal is a crucial link between governance principles and practical accountability. Rules for selection, disciplinary action, eligibility or institutional requirements can only be meaningful and effective when athletes have a way to express themselves and to be informed about the issues involved. The establishment of formal dispute-resolution mechanisms under the present governance framework is an institutional response to this. But effectiveness is dependent on accessibility, independence, procedural fairness, reasonable timelines and the belief of athletes that raising a legitimate concern will not harm their sporting chances.

Another important issue is the balance of “institutional autonomy” and “regulatory oversight”. Sports organisations need operational autonomy as the sport itself is of course a matter of technical knowledge and they need to respond to individual sports and international sporting organisations. Too much administrative activity might make it very tough to run a sports entity in a good way. But autonomy can never mean lack of accountability, and that is no longer true where the organisation is in public service or supported by the public. The best way forward is a way of doing things that provides sporting organisations with clear and accountable management in practice with transparent and ethical standards of behaviour, financial responsibility, athlete welfare and an institutional accountability system. The proposed six-dimensional framework - transparency, accountability, athlete representation, athlete welfare, integrity, and grievance redressal - also shows how sports governance is a multidisciplinary issue. And when the system fails on one of them, then the system is not working. Lack of transparency can undermine accountability; insufficient athlete representation can make welfare policies less responsive; poor grievance systems can undermine confidence in the institution; and lack of conflict of interest protections can harm the credibility of selection and administrative decisions. So a well-functioning system of governance requires an integrated system of institutional mechanisms rather than one-off reforms.

At the same time implementation is a daunting challenge. India's sporting ecosystem is very diverse with numerous sports, competition, organisational structure and financial resources. A governance mechanism which is feasible for a big national federation may need to be modified if applied to smaller or less-resourced sporting entities. There can also be administrative differences in implementing disclosure, auditing, athlete representation, and grievance mechanisms. Governance reform should thus be combined with a set of common minimum standards and flexibility to adapt from sport to sport for the sake of the development of the overall system.

The transformation of sports governance also requires a “culture of accountability” not only regulatory compliance but also, in practice, a ‘culture of accountability’. Institutions may meet the requirements of governance in an official sense but they may not necessarily establish a model of governance that is participatory or athlete-responsive. Continuous monitoring, institutional review, professional training of sports administrators, transparent communication and regular interaction with athletes can bridge this gap. Capacity development is particularly important because governance standards require administrators to understand financial management, ethics, safeguarding, legal duties, athlete welfare and current sports administration.

From the policy perspective, the findings suggest that India's new governance framework should now look at success not only as a matter of performance in the institution but also as an outcome in the athlete. Sport excellence measures can continue to measure competitive performance and governance indicators can assess transparency, accountability, representation, welfare, integrity and grievance resolution. Such a combination of both would more clearly assess whether sports organizations are achieving performance targets as well as good governance. In the end, athlete-centered governance must be seen not only as an additional policy objective but also as a way of reshaping the relationship between sporting institutions and athletes. It is not to replace institutional expertise or administrative autonomy but to create a system (professional management, accountability, participation and protection of athlete interests) that is transparent and accountable and professional in its nature. So the success of India's sports transformation can be very much about having new governance provisions implemented inclusively in the entire sports world. The resultant governance model can be perceived as a move from 'institution-centered administration' to stakeholder-responsive governance where athletes are seen as players of the sporting system. Such a transformation will enhance institutional legitimacy, fairness, and sustainability of athletes' development. The final section summarises the main points and the wider implications of this transformation on the future of sports governance in India.

7. Conclusion

Sports governance is an essential component of an effective and credible sporting ecosystem. In India, the growing scope and importance of competitive and professional sport has resulted in the growing need for governance bodies that are transparent, accountable, ethically responsible, and responsive to athletes. Such an assessment of the analysis made in this study shows that the success of sports cannot be attained without the institutional environment in which athletes train, compete, and develop their careers. Good governance is thus an important complement to investment in infrastructure, coaching, sports science, and competitive opportunities.

The study has examined India's sports governance framework from the athlete's perspective and identified six interconnected dimensions that are crucial to institutional change: transparency, accountability, athlete representation, athlete welfare, integrity, and grievance redressal. These dimensions are the basis for moving from the administrative aspect of sports governance towards those in which athletes are active players in the institutional decision-making process. The National Sports Governance Act, 2025 is a crucial step in the formulation of India's sports governance model. The emphasis on transparency, accountability, ethics, athlete welfare, representation, and dispute resolution provides a legal basis for several of the principles outlined in this work. But laws alone cannot ensure good governance. Implementation and participation of athletes in governance will depend on the institutional capacity, monitoring mechanisms, and how that is done. One of the study's main conclusions is that transparency needs to be extended beyond publishing information. Athletes and other key stakeholders need to know the rules, procedures, criteria, and responsibilities of the institutions that they are under the control of. In this way, accountability would also have to include financial auditing as well as administrative decisions,

selection processes, ethical behavior, safeguarding, and athlete grievances. Governance is only meaningful if institutional decisions are understandable and subject to proper scrutiny.

The study also emphasizes that athlete representation should be integral to sports governance and not just symbolic. Athletes are familiar with the daily life of competitive sport and have valuable insights into selection, welfare, training environments, competition structures, safeguarding, and career development. Meaningful participation can also make the sports institutions more responsive and professional in nature, and the management is also better. Athlete welfare must also be understood in a holistic way. A sustainable sporting system requires support that goes beyond performance to include health, sports science, psychological help, financial support, education, safeguarding, and career transition. If we take these concerns into account in the governance system, we will make athletes less performers and more individuals who are going to grow and develop and be good for sport. The proposed athlete-centered governance framework is therefore a transition from institutional-oriented governance to stakeholder-driven governance. It doesn't mean that the institutional autonomy or professional administration is gone. Rather, the objective is to maintain a balance of the autonomy of sports organizations in terms of transparency, accountability, ethical behavior, athlete involvement, and institutional oversight. Such a balance is especially important in a diverse sporting environment like India, in which the governance structure and administrative capacity differ by sport and organization. So the transformation of Indian sports governance can be viewed as an ongoing institutional process. In the future, we should not only focus on regulatory compliance but also on building governance capacity, professionalizing sports administration, strengthening athlete committees, improving digital disclosure, establishing effective grievance mechanisms, safeguarding, and regularly assessing institutional performance. Governance indicators could be developed to quantify transparency, accountability, representation, welfare, integrity, and grievance-redressal mechanisms in recognized sporting organizations.

Future research could further strengthen this area by objectively assessing athletes' experiences through empirical surveys and interviews, comparing governance practices across sports federations, investigating the implementation of the National Sports Governance Act, and building on these to assess athlete-centered governance. Longitudinal research could also assess athlete participation, institutional trust, grievance resolution, and welfare outcomes through institutional reform. Lastly, the transformation of sports governance in India must involve both institutional structures and governance culture. A sports system is sustainable not only when it is winning games but also when its institutions are transparent, accountable, fair, ethical, and when the athletes at the heart of the system are respected. An athlete-oriented governance model can thus provide a conceptual and institutional basis for the legitimacy, responsiveness, and long-term sustainability of Indian sports governance.

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