
COVID-19 Impact on Youth Sports in Indian Prospect

Anand Pal Singh Gautam

Assistant Professor, Physical Education

Vivekanand Gramodog Mahavidhalya Dibiyaapur, Auraiya, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted youth sports worldwide, with India being no exception. This article examines the impact of the pandemic on youth sports in India, focusing on the decline in physical activity, the exacerbation of mental health issues, and the disruption to athletic development. The closure of schools and sports facilities, coupled with limited access to safe play areas, led to a decline in physical fitness levels and an increase in sedentary behavior among children and adolescents. Mental health challenges, including heightened anxiety and depression, were prevalent among youth, particularly among those who were unable to continue their sports routines. Additionally, the pandemic deepened existing inequalities in access to sports, with children from rural and low-income backgrounds facing greater barriers to physical activity. The disruption of athletic development, particularly for aspiring athletes, hindered long-term potential and future career opportunities. Despite these challenges, various initiatives, such as virtual fitness programs and government-backed campaigns, were introduced to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The article highlights the need for policy reform, investment in sports infrastructure, and the promotion of mental health awareness to support the recovery and future resilience of youth sports in India. Through these efforts, there is potential for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to physical education and youth athletics in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: - COVID-19 Impact Youth Sports, Physical Activity, Mental Health, Athletic Development, Fitness Decline, Sports Disruption, Adolescent Health, Physical Education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching impact on numerous sectors of society, and one of the most affected areas has been youth sports. In India, where physical activity and sports play an integral role in the development of young people, the suspension of sporting activities during the pandemic created challenges that went beyond just the cancellation of matches. With schools closed, sports leagues halted, and outdoor activities restricted, the pandemic disrupted not only the physical fitness of children and adolescents but also their mental and emotional well-being. The reduction in physical activity during critical growth years has contributed to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and physical health issues, raising concerns about long-term impacts on youth athletic development.

In India, where sports often serve as a pathway for social mobility, the consequences of the pandemic have disproportionately affected children from lower-income families, who have limited access to resources and safe spaces for physical exercise. This article explores the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 on youth sports in India, including the decline in physical activity levels, the mental health challenges that emerged, the disruption to athletic development, and the educational disparities that were exacerbated during this period. Additionally, it examines how various stakeholders have adapted and responded to these challenges, focusing on initiatives aimed at maintaining fitness and supporting young athletes through these difficult times.

By understanding the extent of the disruption caused by the pandemic, this article aims to highlight the need for systemic changes in how youth sports are supported in India, ensuring that young people are equipped to overcome the challenges of the post-pandemic world and continue their physical, mental, and athletic development.

India has sent its biggest contingent—more than 100 athletes—to the Tokyo Olympics that began on Friday. Still, most of us would struggle to identify more than 10 athletes in the squad. In our sporting hierarchy, cricket occupies almost the entire pyramid of public visibility, pushing other sports and sportspeople to the periphery. And right at the bottom of the rung are the young and hopeful, who play sports at the local, grass-roots level—for many of them, it's their main source of income.

When the covid-19 lockdown was announced in March last year, all sporting activity came to a grinding halt. In one stroke, the livelihoods of thousands of faceless and nameless sportspeople vanished into thin air. While made-for-television sports such as the Indian Premier League and Indian Super League, even international cricket, have returned, the local-level tournaments that support an entire economy of players, organizers and officials continue to struggle. Many may not get to live out their dreams of making it big, many a talent may be lost in the distress of the pandemic. Physical Activity and Fitness Decline

In India, the pandemic triggered a notable decline in physical activity levels among school-aged children. A study examining adolescents found that fewer children were meeting the recommended guidelines for physical activity. The closure of schools and sports facilities led to a sharp reduction in organized sports participation, and many children lacked access to safe, outdoor play areas. The decline in activity has had significant consequences, including increased rates of childhood obesity, poor cardiovascular fitness, and a general decline in overall physical health. According to data from Sports Village, a fitness initiative for children, the pandemic led to a worrying trend of poor fitness levels across large sections of the youth population. Two out of every five children surveyed did not meet basic fitness standards for their age, showcasing the broader impact of the pandemic on physical development.

Mental Health and Well-Being:

Beyond physical health, the pandemic severely affected the mental and emotional well-being of children, especially those who were previously engaged in regular sports. In normal circumstances, participation in physical activities has been shown to have numerous benefits for mental health, including reducing stress and anxiety. However, the absence of these activities during the pandemic exacerbated feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. Studies found that children who were unable to continue their sports routines during the lockdown experienced higher levels of distress. This disruption also had a greater impact on vulnerable groups, including girls and those from low-income households. The mental health challenges faced by children during the pandemic have highlighted the critical need for accessible, safe spaces for physical and emotional expression through sports.

Disruption of Athletic Development:

For many young athletes in India, the pandemic disrupted years of training and development. Organized sports programs, from local leagues to professional youth training academies, were put on hold indefinitely. This interruption was particularly detrimental for children hoping to pursue sports at a competitive level. Many aspiring athletes, particularly from lower-income backgrounds, were forced to abandon their dreams as they struggled to find alternative ways to train. For children who relied on sports as a potential path to scholarships or professional careers, the lack of training opportunities has hindered their chances of success. Furthermore, the impact on youth sports also affected the infrastructure supporting these

programs, including local sports clubs and coaches who faced financial hardships due to the suspension of activities.

Closure of Sports Facilities and Academies:

With lockdowns in place and social distancing enforced, most sports academies, gyms, and training centers across India shut down indefinitely. This cuts off access to professional training facilities, coaches, and peer interaction — all essential components of athletic development.

Example: Grassroots leagues like the Kolkata Football League did not conduct matches for over a year, stalling the careers of many young footballers who depended on the league for exposure and progression.

Loss of Crucial Development Time:

Young athletes have limited "development windows" specific age periods critical for mastering technical, tactical, and physical skills. Missing months or years during these periods can result in long-term developmental gaps that are difficult to recover from.

Effect: Athletes lost conditioning, stamina, and sport-specific skill levels. For example, a sprinter who missed a year of strength and speed training may fall significantly behind their peers.

Reduced Physical Fitness Post-Recovery:

Even after recovering from COVID-19, many young athletes reported reduced physical performance. A study in Nagpur found that post-COVID youth athletes showed significant decreases in lung function and endurance (e.g., lower peak expiratory flow and breath-holding capacity), affecting their ability to return to pre-pandemic performance levels.

Financial Pressure on Families:

Many families, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, faced economic stress during the pandemic. With job losses and healthcare expenses, parents were forced to withdraw children from paid training programs or sports schools.

Impact: Talented athletes from underprivileged communities had to give up training and take on work to support their families, derailing their sports ambitions.

Loss of Motivation and Mental Burnout:

The cancellation of tournaments and the uncertainty about the future left many athletes demotivated. Without regular competition and structured routines, some experienced burnout or lost interest altogether.

Psychological toll: Young athletes reported increased levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression, all of which hinder athletic performance and training consistency.

Interrupted Talent Identification and Scholarships:

Scouting events, school competitions, and state-level tournaments — essential for identifying and promoting young talent — were canceled. This limited the opportunities for youth to gain recognition, access scholarships, or enter professional pipelines.

Result: A generation of athletes missed key opportunities to discover and be supported by sporting bodies or sponsors.

COVID-19's disruption to athletic development in India has had lasting consequences, particularly for youth without access to private training or digital alternatives. As sports resume post-pandemic, it's vital to invest in rebuilding grassroots programs, supporting mental and physical rehabilitation, and ensuring equitable access to training for all aspiring young athletes.

Educational and Socioeconomic Disparities:

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing inequalities in access to sports and physical education in India. Children from rural areas or lower socio-economic backgrounds were hit hardest, as they had fewer opportunities for home-based physical activities or virtual sports sessions. In rural India, the lack of basic sports infrastructure in schools, such as playgrounds and equipment, compounded the challenge. Even before the pandemic, access to sports facilities in rural areas was limited, and the pandemic only worsened these disparities. According to the Annual Status on Education Report (Rural), a significant number of rural schools lacked the necessary infrastructure for physical education programs, and the pandemic further widened the gap in educational and extracurricular opportunities.

Urban children, particularly those in well-funded private schools, generally had better access to online sports training, virtual fitness sessions, and outdoor spaces for exercise. This divide highlighted the digital and infrastructural disparities that already existed between rural and urban schools and families. Thus, the pandemic inadvertently exacerbated these inequalities, creating further barriers for disadvantaged youth to access sports and physical activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not affect all children equally. In India, it amplified existing educational and socioeconomic disparities, particularly in access to youth sports and physical activity. These disparities had significant effects on children's physical, mental, and developmental well-being, especially among those from marginalized and rural communities.

Limited Access to Digital Resources for Remote Learning and Training

While private and urban schools quickly shifted to online classes and virtual physical education (PE) programs, many children in government schools or rural areas lacked access to smartphones, reliable internet, or digital platforms.

Effect: Children from wealthier families could continue virtual fitness sessions and skill development programs, while those from lower-income backgrounds had no means to participate in any structured activity.

Example: Initiatives like Sportz Village's "Play at Home" program were largely accessible to urban, digitally connected children.

Poor Infrastructure in Rural and Government Schools

Before the pandemic, many rural schools already lacked basic sports facilities. The pandemic worsened this situation, with no new infrastructure development during closures and some schools even repurpose existing sports areas for pandemic-related needs.

Data: The ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) 2022 showed that only 68.9% of rural schools had playgrounds — a marginal improvement from 66.5% in 2018.

Impact: Children in rural areas were further isolated from physical education and play opportunities during lockdowns.

Financial Strain on Families.

Widespread job losses and economic insecurity during the pandemic meant that families prioritized survival over extracurricular activities.

Result: Parents withdrew children from paid coaching, sports academies, or private schools with robust PE programs.

In some cases, children had to take up work or contribute to household tasks, cutting short their sports involvement altogether.

Gender-Based Disparities

Girls faced additional challenges. In many traditional households, lockdowns meant increased domestic responsibilities and restrictions on outdoor activity, further reducing their chances of continuing in sports.

Consequence: The gender gap in physical activity widened during the pandemic, especially in low-income and rural households.

Disruption of Talent Identification and Scholarship Opportunities

Sports scholarships and selections are often based on performance in school or district-level competitions. With these events canceled, students in government schools — who rely on such events for upward mobility — lost key opportunities.

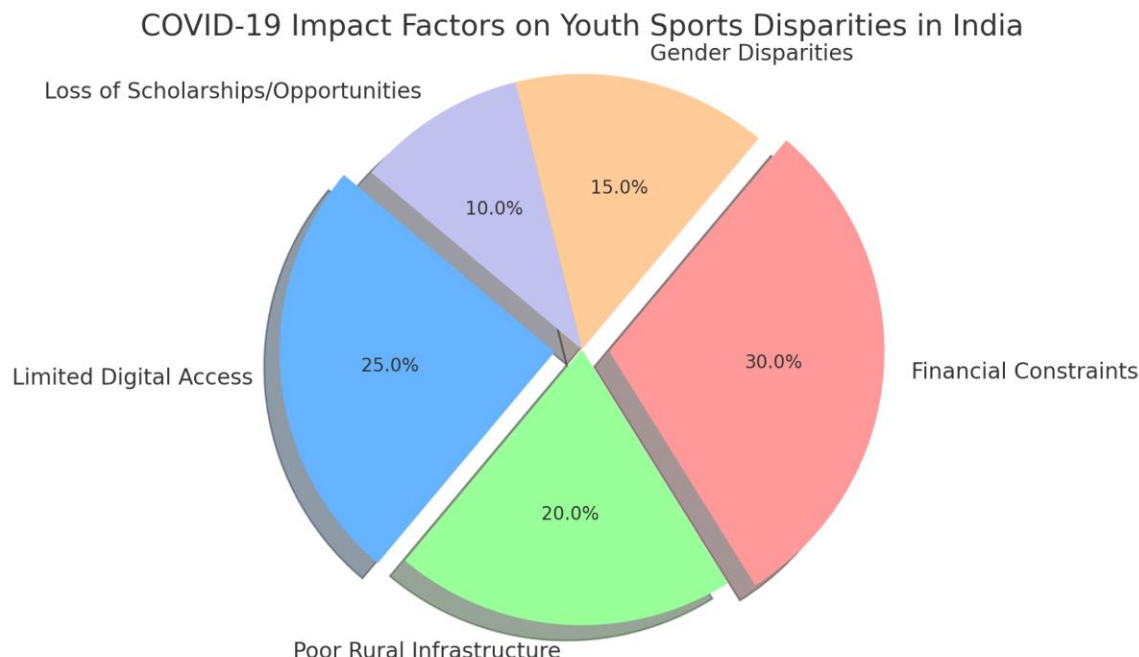
Effect: Youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds missed out on pathways that could have provided education or career opportunities through sports.

COVID-19 pandemic exposed and widened the educational and socioeconomic divides in youth sports participation in India. While children in affluent areas could pivot to virtual training or home workouts, millions of others — particularly girls, rural youth, and those from lower-income families — faced increased exclusion. Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions, including improved school sports infrastructure, community-level programs, and inclusive policies to ensure equal access to sports for all children in the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Adaptive Responses and Solutions

In response to the challenges, various organizations and schools have taken steps to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic. Initiatives such as Sportz Village's "Play at Home" program sought to keep children engaged through virtual fitness sessions, interactive games, and online coaching. These programs were designed to help children stay physically active even during the lockdown. Some schools and community organizations also focused on creating safe outdoor spaces for children to engage in socially distanced physical activities.

Moreover, as India transitions out of the pandemic's grip, there has been a renewed focus on reviving youth sports through community-driven initiatives and government-backed programs. State governments have launched campaigns to promote physical fitness and mental health awareness among children, encouraging them to return to sports and outdoor activities. These programs aim to rebuild the habit of regular physical activity and provide young people with the resources they need to recover from the physical and mental health challenges imposed by the pandemic.



SOURCE: <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2022/may/doc20225553401>.

Here is a pie chart illustrating the various factors contributing to the educational and socioeconomic disparities in youth sports in India during COVID-19. Each segment reflects the estimated impact of issues like digital access, financial constraints, and gender disparities.

The Indian government implemented several policies and initiatives to support youth sports during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some key measures:

Khelo India – Phir Se

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, through the Sports Authority of India (SAI), launched the “Khelo India – Phir Se” initiative to resume sports activities safely. This program provided Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for reopening training centers, stadiums, and swimming pools, ensuring adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols. The SOPs covered aspects like sanitation, social distancing, and health monitoring to facilitate the safe return of athletes to training environments.

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA MINISTRY OF YOUTH AFFAIRS AND SPORTS (DEPARTMENT OF SPORTS)

RAJYA SABHA

UNSTARRED QUESTION No. 798 TO BE ANSWERED ON 26.07.2020

Support to sportspersons affected from COVID-19

798 # Ch. Sukhram Singh Yadav:

Shri Vishambhar Prasad Nishad:

Smt. Chhaya Verma:

Will the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports be pleased to state:

- (a) the details of the steps taken to improve the condition of sportspersons and people associated with sports in view of COVID-19 and lockdown during the last two years and the effects thereof;
- (b) the steps taken by Government to polish the talent of the players during COVID-19 period;
- (c) the strategy to be adopted for the selection and performance of new players; and
- (d) whether Government would consider to give priority to provide more opportunities in the selection of

new talented players at village level?

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Sports Resumption

To guide the safe resumption of sports activities, the government issued comprehensive SOPs, including Sports Authority of India, Resumption of swimming training for sportspersons.

Organizing sports competitions in a COVID-19 environment.

Operation of swimming pools Opening up of stadia for sports events. (Olympic.ind.in)

Sports Authority of India. (<https://sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in/sai/covid19>)

These guidelines aimed to standardize safety measures across various sports disciplines and facilities.

COVID-19 Dashboard

Fit India Movement

The Fit India Movement, launched in 2019, gained renewed emphasis during the pandemic to promote health and fitness among citizens, including youth. The initiative encouraged individuals to incorporate physical activities and healthy habits into their daily routines, which was particularly important during lockdowns when access to traditional sports facilities was limited.

National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020

The draft National Youth Policy 2020 recognized the importance of sports in youth development and proposed measures to enhance sports infrastructure and participation. It emphasized integrating sports into education and promoting it as a viable career option for young people. The policy also aimed to address disparities in sports access and encourage private sector investment in the sports industry. (Press Information Bureau <https://static.pib.gov.in>)

Integration of Sports for Development (S4D)

In the post-COVID-19 context, there has been a push to integrate Sports for Development (S4D) approaches into grassroots and youth sports. This strategy focuses on using sports as a tool to impart life skills, promote social inclusion, and support mental health among young people. Stakeholders are encouraged to incorporate S4D principles into educational curricula and community programs to build resilience and equip youth with essential life skills.

Sportanddev <https://www.sportanddev.org>

These policies and initiatives reflect the Indian government's commitment to revitalizing youth sports and addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on safety, inclusivity, and holistic development, these measures aim to ensure that young athletes can continue to pursue sports in a supportive environment.

Recommendations and Way Forward for Youth Sports in India After COVID-19

As India emerges from the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, rebuilding youth sports demands a thoughtful, inclusive, and systemic approach. The disruption caused by the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to reshape the sports ecosystem to be more equitable, resilient, and health-focused.

1. Rebuild and Strengthen Sports Infrastructure

- **Action:** Invest in developing and maintaining sports infrastructure in **rural schools and government institutions.**
- **Goal:** Ensure every child has access to basic play areas and sports equipment, regardless of

geographic or economic background.

- **Implementation:** Launch district-level infrastructure development schemes under **Khelo India** or **state sports departments**.

2. Integrate Sports and Physical Education into School Curricula

- **Action:** Make physical education and sports a **mandatory part of the school timetable**, not just extracurricular.
- **Goal:** Improve health, social development, and academic outcomes through structured physical activity.
- **Implementation:** Work with **NCERT/CBSE/state boards** to develop a comprehensive physical literacy curriculum.

3. Bridge the Digital Divide in Sports Training

- **Action:** Provide **digitally inclusive fitness and training platforms**, accessible in low-bandwidth formats and regional languages.
- **Goal:** Ensure children in remote or under-resourced areas can benefit from online coaching, health, and nutrition education.
- **Implementation:** Collaborate with **ed-tech platforms and NGOs** to expand reach.

4. Financial Assistance for Underprivileged Young Athletes

- **Action:** Create or expand **scholarship and sponsorship programs** for talented youth from low-income families.
- **Goal:** Prevent dropouts due to financial hardship and encourage talent retention.
- **Implementation:** Offer subsidies for training, travel, gear, and nutritional support via **government and private sector CSR funding**.

5. Focus on Mental Health and Well-being

- **Action:** Integrate **sports psychology and mental health counselling** into youth sports programs.
- **Goal:** Address anxiety, depression, and burnout in post-pandemic student-athletes.
- **Implementation:** Employ trained counsellors in schools and sports academies; run awareness campaigns for parents and coaches.

6. Promote Gender Equity in Sports

- **Action:** Design programs specifically targeting **girls' participation** in sports, especially in rural areas.
- **Goal:** Break cultural barriers and ensure equitable access for girls.
- **Implementation:** Recruit female coaches, provide secure play spaces, and incentivize schools that promote girls' sports.

7. Revive Competitions and Talent Identification Programs

- **Action:** Resume district, state, and national-level **sports competitions** and **talent scouting** post-pandemic.
- **Goal:** Reconnect young athletes with the competitive circuit and identify emerging talent.
- **Implementation:** Coordinate with **SAI**, state sports bodies, and school education departments to create a sports calendar.

8. Community Engagement and Awareness

- **Action:** Run **awareness campaigns** on the importance of sports in child development and community well-being.
- **Goal:** Build a culture of sports at the grassroots level.
- **Implementation:** Involve **panchayats, local leaders, NGOs**, and schools in promotion efforts.

Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the ecosystem of youth sports in India, revealing and worsening pre-existing gaps in infrastructure, accessibility, and socioeconomic equity. The nationwide lockdowns, school closures, and suspension of sports events severely limited physical activity among children and adolescents, leading to detrimental effects on their physical and mental health. Aspiring athletes, especially those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, lost valuable training time, access to facilities, and opportunities for talent recognition and development.

Educational disparities, lack of digital resources, and financial hardship further widened the divide between privileged and underprivileged youth. While some urban and private institutions adapted to online PE and fitness programs, a vast majority of Indian children were left without structured physical engagement for over a year. Mental health concerns also surged, particularly among children who lost the social and psychological support that sports often provide.

Despite these challenges, the Indian government and various stakeholders responded with initiatives such as the Khelo India – Phir Se campaign, the Fit India Movement, and updated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for safe resumption of sports. The National Youth Policy (2021 Draft) also reaffirmed the need to integrate sports within the broader educational and developmental framework, focusing on inclusivity, resilience, and community engagement.

As India moves forward in the post-pandemic era, the recovery of youth sports demands a multi-pronged approach: reinvestment in grassroots infrastructure, targeted support for disadvantaged groups, promotion of gender equity in sports, and integration of mental health services within sports programs. Ensuring access to sports for every child—regardless of background—will not only rebuild the physical health of the youth but also strengthen the nation's social and emotional fabric.

References

- Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India – <https://yas.nic.in>
 Sports Authority of India (SAI) – <https://sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in/sai/covid19>
 ASER 2022 Report, Annual Status of Education Report – <https://asercentre.org>
 Sports Village Play at Home Program – <https://www.sportzvillage.com>
 National Youth Policy 2021(Draft) – <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2022/may/doc20225553401.pdf>
 Sport and Development India Analysis – <https://www.sportanddev.org>
 Physical Activity of School-Going Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Natural Experiment Study, Priyanka Choudhary 1, Amit Kumar Mital 2, Rajat Gupta 3, Neha Suri 4, R B Jain 3, Sujata Sethi 5, Sudhansu Sekhar Baral 4 2024 May 15;61(5):441-446. Epub 2024 Apr 5.
 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dietary behaviors among school-age children, adolescents, and young adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis.
 Na X, Zhang J, Xie C, Zeng H, Wu L, Fan D, Yang H, Shi X, Zhou Y, Yu H, Tan Y, Zhang Y, Zhao A.

Nutr Rev. 2025 Feb 1;83(2):e195-e210. doi: 10.1093/nutrit/nuae050.PMID: 38820346

School children lagging in health, fitness parameters: Sportz Village's Post Covid Health Survey reveals sports Mar 10, 2020

Orthop J Sports Med. 2020 May 13;10(5 suppl2):2325967121S00426. doi: 10.1177/2325967121S00426The Impact of sport participation on the Health of Adolescents During the CoVID-19 pandemic

Timothy McGuine 1, Kevin Biese 1, Alison Schwarz 1, James Dickman 1, Scott Hetzel 1, Claudia Reardon 1, Andrew Watson

Shrenik AvlaniPublished 23 Jul 2020,How covid-19 killed grass-roots sports in India