



Sports Diplomacy of India: Emerging Dimensions, Strategic Significance and Challenges in India's Foreign Policy

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Abstract: Sports have increasingly emerged as an important instrument of international relations and public diplomacy. In the contemporary international system, sporting competitions are not merely arenas of physical performance; they also provide opportunities for states to communicate national identity, establish interpersonal contacts, strengthen bilateral relationships, improve international visibility and exercise soft power. India, with its enormous population, civilisational heritage, expanding sporting ecosystem and exceptional popularity of cricket, possesses considerable potential to use sports as an instrument of diplomacy. Historically, India's sporting diplomacy has been associated particularly with cricket, hockey, the Commonwealth Games, the Asian Games and the Olympic movement. In recent years, however, its scope has expanded to include sports cooperation agreements, international sporting events, athlete exchanges, sports infrastructure, traditional sports, sport science, gender equality, parasports and India's ambition to become a major global sporting power. The transformation of Indian sports policy is significant in this regard. The **Khelo Bharat Niti-2025**, the **National Sports Governance Act, 2025**, India's policy towards international sporting events, and the country's long-term ambition concerning the 2036 Olympic Games indicate that sports are increasingly being connected with national development, international engagement and India's global aspirations. The paper examines the conceptual foundations of sports diplomacy, its historical evolution in India, cricket diplomacy, Olympic and multilateral diplomacy, bilateral sports cooperation, India's engagement with neighboring countries, the role of sporting personalities, sports as an instrument of soft power, and the emerging challenges associated with politicisation, governance, security and geopolitical tensions.

Key Words: Sports Diplomacy, India, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, International Relations, Olympic Diplomacy, Khelo Bharat Niti, Sports Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION:

International relations have traditionally been understood primarily through the activities of governments, diplomats, military establishments and international organisations. However, globalisation has expanded the range of actors and instruments involved in international affairs. Culture, education, tourism, cinema, technology, diaspora networks and sports have become increasingly significant components of contemporary diplomacy. Sports occupy a distinctive position because they combine mass public participation with international visibility. A sporting event can attract audiences across political, linguistic and cultural boundaries. An athlete can become an international ambassador for a country without possessing any formal diplomatic position. Similarly, an international tournament can create opportunities for governments, sporting organisations, businesses and civil society to interact. For India, this development is particularly important. India is one of the world's largest sporting markets and possesses extraordinary public enthusiasm for cricket, hockey, badminton, athletics, wrestling, shooting, boxing, football and chess. Indian athletes have increasingly achieved international recognition, while Indian sporting institutions have become more involved in the organisation of major competitions. The Indian government has also begun to connect sports with broader national objectives. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports describes the country's sporting transformation in terms of participation, international performance and the ambition to become a leading sporting nation. Government programmes such as Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme have strengthened the domestic sporting



ecosystem. The emergence of Khelo Bharat Niti–2025 represents another important stage. The policy seeks to develop sports participation from grassroots levels to elite competition and emphasises infrastructure, competitions, physical literacy, outreach and international sporting excellence. Consequently, sports diplomacy should no longer be regarded simply as the occasional use of sporting events for improving relations between countries. It should be understood as an increasingly relevant component of India's wider soft-power and foreign-policy architecture.

2. CONCEPTUALISING SPORTS DIPLOMACY:

Sports diplomacy can be conceptualised as the use of sports, sporting events, athletes, institutions, and international sporting exchanges to promote communication, cooperation, mutual understanding, and a favourable national image in the international arena. It provides states with an informal and highly visible channel of engagement that operates alongside conventional diplomatic practices. Sporting interactions can bring together governments, athletes, sporting organisations and foreign publics, thereby creating opportunities for **people-to-people** contact and cultural exchange. The concept is closely related to **soft power and public diplomacy**, as sporting achievements and sporting traditions can enhance a country's attractiveness and contribute to its international reputation. However, sports diplomacy is not limited to winning medals or organising major events; its broader significance lies in transforming sporting relationships into sustained networks of dialogue, cooperation and international engagement. At the same time, sport can reflect political rivalry and nationalism, demonstrating that its diplomatic effects are context-dependent. Thus, sports diplomacy may be understood as a multidimensional instrument of international relations that connects sport with soft power, public diplomacy, cultural exchange, and foreign-policy objectives. Unlike conventional diplomacy, sports diplomacy often operates at multiple levels simultaneously. A government may negotiate a sports cooperation agreement while athletes and supporters simultaneously create interpersonal connections. This gives sports diplomacy an important advantage: it can reach ordinary citizens directly. For example, an ambassador may communicate with the government of another country through formal diplomatic channels, whereas an Indian athlete competing internationally can reach millions of people through television and social media. Sport therefore creates an additional layer of diplomatic communication.

3. SPORTS AND SOFT POWER:

The concept of soft power, associated particularly with Joseph S. Nye, refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Sports can contribute to soft power because successful athletes and sporting events can generate: admiration, emotional identification, international visibility, cultural familiarity, national prestige, tourism, commercial opportunities and interpersonal relationships. Sports have become an increasingly significant source of soft power, enabling states to build international goodwill, strengthen national image, and expand cultural influence through attraction rather than coercion. Contemporary examples demonstrate how sporting achievements and events can create diplomatic visibility beyond traditional political channels. India's success across cricket, badminton, wrestling, boxing, shooting, athletics, and chess, particularly its growing presence at the Olympic Games, has contributed to its image as an emerging sporting nation. The Paris 2024 Olympics, where Indian athletes competed across several disciplines, provided a global platform for projecting India's sporting capabilities and diverse talent. Similarly, India's hosting of major international sporting events and its growing engagement with global sports institutions have strengthened opportunities for cultural exchange and international interaction. Cricket continues to provide significant soft-power value through India's large global audience and sporting networks, while the international popularity of Indian athletes in badminton, chess, athletics, and other sports extends this influence beyond cricket. Thus, sports can function as an important instrument of soft power by connecting national achievement, cultural visibility, public diplomacy, and international engagement. India's soft power traditionally rests upon multiple sources, including yoga, cinema, Indian cuisine, democratic institutions, diaspora networks, cultural heritage, education and information technology. Sports increasingly constitute another component of this soft-power portfolio.

4. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S SPORTS DIPLOMACY:

The evolution of India's sports diplomacy can be traced from the early post-independence period, when international sporting participation became a means of establishing India's identity and presence in the global community. The 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi marked an important early milestone, demonstrating India's willingness to use sport as a platform for regional cooperation and international engagement. During the Cold War, India's participation in the Olympic Games, Asian Games, and Commonwealth sporting networks complemented its broader policy of non-alignment and engagement with developing countries. Cricket gradually acquired a distinctive



diplomatic role, particularly in India's relations with South Asian neighbours, where sporting encounters provided opportunities for dialogue even amid political tensions. From the 1980s and 1990s onward, expanding international sporting networks and the commercial growth of cricket strengthened India's sporting influence. In the twenty-first century, India's sports diplomacy has become increasingly diversified, extending beyond cricket to Olympic sports, badminton, wrestling, shooting, athletics, chess, hockey, and indigenous sports. The growing success of Indian athletes and India's engagement with major international sporting events have therefore transformed sports into an important component of the country's soft power and public diplomacy. The historical evolution of India's sports diplomacy reflects a gradual transition from participation in international competitions to the strategic use of diverse sporting engagements for diplomatic and soft-power objectives. The 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi represented an important early milestone, as India used the event to promote Asian solidarity, regional cooperation, and its emerging international identity. During the subsequent decades, India's participation in the Olympic Games, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, and international hockey competitions strengthened its connections with the wider sporting community. Hockey, with India's remarkable Olympic legacy, became an important symbol of national prestige, while athletics, wrestling, boxing, shooting, weightlifting, and archery gradually expanded India's international sporting presence. Cricket acquired a distinctive diplomatic significance in South Asia, particularly through India's sporting relations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and other neighbouring countries. In the contemporary period, India's sports diplomacy has become increasingly diversified through badminton, tennis, table tennis, football, chess, kabaddi, kho-kho, swimming, cycling, gymnastics, para-sports, and women's sports, alongside traditional Olympic disciplines. India's achievements at recent Olympic and Paralympic Games, participation in global championships, and engagement with international sporting institutions demonstrate that sport has evolved into a broader instrument of cultural exchange, international visibility, people-to-people contact, and soft power. Thus, India's sports diplomacy has moved from a primarily participatory approach toward a multisport and multidimensional strategy of international engagement.

5. INDIA AND MULTILATERAL SPORTS DIPLOMACY:

India's multilateral sports diplomacy has evolved through its active participation in global and regional sporting institutions, multi-sport events, and international initiatives that connect sport with peace, cooperation, development, and cultural exchange. India's participation in the Olympic and Paralympic Games provides an important platform for projecting national identity and sporting excellence, while its engagement with the Asian Games has strengthened regional ties and cooperation across Asia. India's long association with the Commonwealth Games and Commonwealth sporting networks has similarly provided opportunities for people-to-people engagement and institutional cooperation. Beyond these major events, India has expanded its sporting presence through athletics, hockey, badminton, wrestling, boxing, shooting, archery, weightlifting, tennis, table tennis, football, cricket, chess, kabaddi, and other sports, thereby creating a broader basis for international engagement. India has also supported the United Nations' emphasis on sport for peace and development, recognising sport as a means of bringing people together and promoting international understanding. In regional and emerging multilateral frameworks, cooperation on sport has also appeared within the SCO, while India's wider engagement with BRICS, the G20, and the Global South creates additional platforms for linking sport with youth, inclusion, development, and people-to-people relations. India's record at the 2022 Asian Games, with 107 medals, and the 2022 Asian Para Games, with 111 medals, further demonstrates how multisport success can enhance India's visibility and soft-power potential. Thus, multilateral sports diplomacy enables India to move beyond a cricket-centred approach towards a broader strategy in which Olympic sport, Paralympic sport, regional games, traditional sports, and emerging sporting disciplines contribute to its international image and diplomatic engagement. India's growing international sporting profile has also increased its interest in hosting major international competitions.

6. OLYMPIC DIPLOMACY:

Olympic diplomacy refers to the use of the Olympic movement, international sporting competitions, athletes, and Olympic institutions as instruments for promoting dialogue, cooperation, mutual understanding, and international goodwill. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which operates mainly through governments and formal negotiations, Olympic diplomacy creates opportunities for interaction among states, athletes, sporting organisations, and global publics. The Olympic Games provide countries with a highly visible international platform through which they can project national identity, sporting excellence, cultural values, and aspirations for global engagement. Historically, Olympic diplomacy has also been associated with efforts to reduce tensions and encourage peaceful interaction, although the Games have sometimes reflected political rivalries and international conflicts. For India, Olympic diplomacy has gained greater significance through its expanding participation and achievements across athletics, hockey, shooting, wrestling, boxing, badminton, weightlifting, archery, and other sports. The 2023 IOC Session in Mumbai, India's



performance at the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Olympic diplomacy has become an increasingly important dimension of India's international sporting engagement, combining athletic achievement, international visibility, institutional cooperation, and national image-building. India's Olympic journey has evolved from participation and medal achievement toward a broader effort to use the Olympic movement as a platform for global engagement. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics marked a significant milestone with Neeraj Chopra winning India's first Olympic gold medal in athletics, while his subsequent donation of the winning javelin to the Olympic Museum strengthened India's symbolic connection with the global Olympic heritage. The 141st IOC Session held in Mumbai in 2023 was another important diplomatic achievement, bringing the international Olympic community to India and enhancing the country's visibility within the Olympic movement. At the Paris 2024 Olympics, India's achievements in shooting, hockey, athletics and other disciplines, including Manu Bhaker's two medals and Neeraj Chopra's silver, further strengthened the international visibility of Indian sport. The Olympic movement has also contributed to India's educational and cultural diplomacy through programmes such as the Olympic Values Education Programme in Odisha, which connects sport with education, inclusion and youth development. India's growing ambition to host the 2036 Olympic Games represents the next stage of this strategy, in which Olympic diplomacy is increasingly linked with global reputation, international cooperation, sports development and India's aspiration for a greater role in global affairs.

7. KHELO BHARAT NITI-2025 AND SPORTS DIPLOMACY:

One of the most important developments in India's contemporary sports policy is the Khelo Bharat Niti-2025. The Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 marks an important shift in India's sports policy by connecting grassroots development and sporting excellence with the broader objective of establishing India as a leading sporting nation. The policy builds on initiatives such as Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and explicitly seeks to develop sporting talent from the grassroots level to the Olympic podium, including the ambition associated with the 2036 Olympic Games. Its significance for sports diplomacy lies in the creation of a stronger domestic sporting ecosystem capable of producing sustained international success across Olympic and Paralympic sports, Asian and Commonwealth disciplines, athletics, hockey, badminton, wrestling, boxing, shooting, archery, weightlifting, football, chess, and indigenous sports. The policy also emphasises inclusiveness, women's participation, sports science, talent identification, infrastructure, and greater involvement of the private sector, thereby strengthening the foundations of India's international sporting influence. Recent developments, including India's preparation for the 2026 Asian Games and Para-Asian Games and participation in the 2026 Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, illustrate the continuing internationalisation of India's sporting strategy. Thus, Khelo Bharat Niti-2025 can be viewed not only as a domestic sports-development framework but also as a potential instrument of soft power, international visibility, people-to-people engagement, and sports diplomacy. The policy represents an effort to build a comprehensive sports ecosystem rather than focusing exclusively on elite athletes. It promotes sports participation at community and educational levels while emphasising physical literacy and broader sporting culture. From a diplomatic perspective, this is significant because international sporting influence depends upon domestic sporting capacity. A country cannot sustainably exercise sports diplomacy if its domestic sporting system remains weak. The policy therefore creates a potential foundation for sports diplomacy through: Grassroots development, Sports science, Coaching exchanges Sports education and International events. The development of facilities can enable India to host more global competitions.

8. BILATERAL SPORTS COOPERATION:

Bilateral sports cooperation has become an increasingly important dimension of India's sports diplomacy, providing opportunities for countries to exchange expertise, develop athletes, strengthen sporting institutions, and promote people-to-people relations. India's cooperation with Australia is a prominent contemporary example. Building on the 2023 India-Australia MoU on Cooperation in Sports, the two countries developed a new Roadmap for Sports Collaboration in 2026, covering high-performance centres, coach development, sports science and medicine, para-sports, major-event management, women's participation, and sports-industry cooperation. The roadmap also proposes exchanges in kabaddi, kho-kho, Australian football, basketball and cricket, demonstrating that bilateral sports diplomacy extends beyond a single sport. The Australia-India Sports Excellence Forum held in Gujarat in March 2025 further focused on Olympic and Paralympic preparation, elite talent development, sports science and technology, and hosting major events. India-Japan sports relations are also expanding, with a planned India-Japan T20 International in September 2026 forming part of the Sport 75 initiative and wider sporting exchanges. India's cooperation with France has similarly included exchanges in sports-industry development, high-performance training and preparation for major sporting events. Thus, bilateral sports cooperation is evolving from occasional sporting exchanges into a broader framework involving athlete development, knowledge transfer, sports technology, women's and para-sports, cultural



exchange, and joint preparation for international events, thereby strengthening India's soft power and diplomatic relationships. India's sports diplomacy is not limited to tournaments. Government-to-government sports cooperation agreements can cover a wide range of subjects. Sports diplomacy is therefore moving from the traditional idea of "playing against each other" to the broader idea of "learning and developing together." Such cooperation can create long-term institutional relationships even when no major sporting competition is taking place.

9. SPORTS DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA: India occupies a central geographical and demographic position in South Asia. Sports can therefore be particularly valuable in its regional diplomacy. Potential areas include:

- India-Nepal sports exchanges,
- India-Bhutan sporting cooperation,
- India-Bangladesh sporting engagement,
- India-Sri Lanka cricket cooperation,
- India-Maldives sports programmes,
- regional football and athletics competitions.

South Asian sports diplomacy can contribute to regional integration by encouraging young people to interact outside traditional political frameworks. The importance of such engagement is especially significant because political relations in South Asia can be difficult. Sport can provide a relatively accessible form of people-to-people diplomacy.

10. CONCLUSION:

Sports diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly important component of contemporary international relations. For India, its significance is particularly substantial because of the country's enormous sporting audience, demographic scale, growing economic capabilities and expanding international sporting achievements. Historically, India's sports diplomacy was most visible through hockey and cricket. Cricket, in particular, has played a complex role in relations with Pakistan and other cricket-playing countries. However, India's contemporary sporting diplomacy is becoming more diversified. The transformation of Indian sports policy through Khelo India, Khelo Bharat Niti-2025, strengthened sports governance and international sporting-event policy indicates that sport is increasingly being regarded as a strategic national resource. India's sporting influence can now operate through multiple channels: international tournaments, bilateral agreements, Olympic participation, athlete exchanges, sports science, traditional sports, women's sports, parasports, digital media and major-event hosting. The most important conceptual shift is that sports diplomacy should not be understood merely as cricket diplomacy. Cricket remains India's most powerful sporting diplomatic instrument, but India's future international influence will depend on its ability to construct a broader sporting ecosystem. The ultimate objective should therefore be to transform India's sporting success into sustainable international relationships. India's sporting rise can contribute to a larger national narrative in which the country is seen not merely as a large consumer of international sport but as an active creator, organiser, institution-builder and diplomatic actor in the global sporting system. If successfully managed, sports diplomacy can strengthen India's soft power, improve its international image, deepen people-to-people relations and complement its wider foreign-policy objectives. At the same time, sport should not be expected to solve geopolitical conflicts by itself. The India-Pakistan experience demonstrates that sports diplomacy operates within the constraints of broader political relationships. Its greatest value lies in creating additional channels of communication, cooperation and mutual understanding. Thus, India's emerging sports diplomacy can be understood as a strategic bridge between sport, soft power, public diplomacy and foreign policy. Its future effectiveness will depend upon professional governance, sporting diversity, international cooperation and the ability to combine athletic excellence with responsible diplomacy.

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