
EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SPORTS LAW IN INDIA: LEGAL CHALLENGES, REGULATORY FRAMEWORK, AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic and rapidly expanding domain of sports in India has given rise to complex legal, regulatory, and governance challenges that necessitate a specialized body of law—sports law. This research paper, titled “*Evolving Landscape of Sports Law in India: Legal Challenges, Regulatory Framework, and the Road Ahead*”, critically examines the regulatory framework for sports in India and the legal issues prevalent in the field of sports in India. It highlights the interplay of constitutional mandates, statutory enactments, judicial interventions, and regulatory mechanisms that collectively shape sports governance. The paper explores pressing concerns such as the autonomy of sports bodies, issues of transparency and accountability, dispute resolution mechanisms, doping regulations and gender equality in the sporting sector. Ultimately, the paper argues for a comprehensive, codified sports law that balances government oversight with the autonomy of federations, ensures athletes’ rights and welfare, and addresses the commercialization and ethical dilemmas of modern sports. By outlining prospective reforms, it provides a roadmap for strengthening the regulatory landscape of sports law in India and ensuring its alignment with international standards.

INTRODUCTION

Sports serve as a vital aspect of the human practice of life. After the evolution of humans, it has grown into a key aspect of leading a fulfilling and balanced existence, and it is expanding with the spirit of friendly rivalry. Sports have been recognized as an integral aspect of the entertainment industry from the beginning of time. India's sporting prowess has overshadowed its global relevance. With its diversified sporting history, it set a global standard and produced noteworthy athletes who made significant contributions to the sport. At this point, sports in India have evolved from leisure and cultural pursuits to a significant economic and legal sphere. In 2013, the Indian sports sector grew by an astonishing 11%, reaching around USD \$1.9 billion from USD \$546 million in 2008, and the industry's long-term goal is 14.18% annual growth by 2027.¹ Sports and law are two critical facets of modern civilization, and their crossover has become increasingly important in recent years. Sports have always been an important element of Indian customs. With the country's growing interest in sports and the rapid expansion of the sports business, the function of the law in regulating and managing sports has grown more essential. The financial viability of leagues such as the Indian Premier League (IPL), Pro Kabaddi League, and Indian Super League (ISL), combined with India's increased participation in international events, has resulted in significant legal complexities in governance, player rights, contracts, anti-doping, broadcasting, and dispute resolution. The need for a comprehensive sports law framework in India is now clear. With an emphasis on the legal system, regulatory agencies, and case law that have influenced the sector, a full review of current developments in Indian sports and law is required to understand the issue. The increased interest in sports, together with the changing legal environment, will most likely increase the importance of this subject of research in the next years.

CONCEPT OF SPORTS LAW

Sports Law is a specialized branch of law that encompasses legal issues related to sports, athletes, and the organizations that govern them. It is a multidisciplinary area that draws upon various fields such as contract law, tort law, criminal law, labour law, intellectual property law, constitutional law, and administrative law. In the Indian context, sports law is an emerging legal field. Although there is no comprehensive codified statute on sports law, various existing laws

¹ Sports India, Statista (23 September 2025) www.statista.com/outlook/amo/app/sports/india

and judicial interpretations collectively form the legal framework governing sports. There are various issues under this ambit:

1. Contacts between players and other parties
2. Doping Policies
3. Harassment in Sports
4. Sports injurious regarding the liability
5. Tort Law
6. Broadcasting Rights
7. Conflict of interest regarding endorsement by players
8. Endorsement & Advertising
9. Intellectual Property Rights
10. Player Rights

The proliferation of the sports industry as one of India's major sectors has prompted the requirement for robust national legislation that integrates the whole sports system and imposes strict regulations and punishments that must be drafted and enforced domestically. Courts and other judicial authorities are unable to manage athletic-related issues because they are only concerned with everyday matters. Instead, sporting activities necessitate a distinct conflict resolution system, as well as the ability to coordinate and supervise them. Furthermore, resolving sports-related concerns would add to the already overburdened civil and criminal proceedings in the courts, resulting in inefficiency and delays.

Sports have long been a contentious legal issue in India. It has never been a significant concern for politicians or decision-makers. In Indian culture, it is mostly viewed as a source of amusement. According to Entry 33 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the state has the authority to pass sports-related legislation. It is played both nationally and internationally, but is state-governed. As a result, national sports organisations

such as the Athletic Federation of India (AFI) and the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) operate independently. The Supreme Court of India and several High Courts have ruled that national sports organisations are subject to the writ jurisdiction of High Courts under Article 226 of the Indian Constitution because they perform state-like functions like selecting national teams and representing the country in international sporting events and forums, even though they are not considered states under Article 12 of the Indian Constitution.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK OF SPORTS IN INDIA

Sports law in India is still regarded to be evolving, since the legal system has to expand further and acknowledge sports law as a unique profession with its own rules and regulations. The ability of the Parliament and the State Legislature to establish sports legislation is mirrored in the Indian Constitution under Entry 33 of the State List which reads as:

“33. Theaters and dramatic performances; cinemas subject to the provisions of entry 60 of List I; sports, entertainments and amusements.”

And Entry 60 of the union list provides for the power of the parliament to sanction films for the purpose of exhibition. It reads as-

“60. Sanctioning of cinematograph films for exhibition.”

Sports law in India is regulated and governed by: -

- A. Sports Authority of India
- B. National Sports Policy
- C. Sports Law and Welfare Association of India
- D. Sports Broadcasting Signals (Mandatory Sharing with Prasar Bharati) Act, 2007
- E. Ministry of Youth & Sports Affairs

A. Sports Authority of India

The Government of India constituted the Sports Authority of India on March 16, 1984, to supervise the development of facilities for the Ninth Asian Games. SAI's primary goal was to implement existing promotions, schemes, and development of sports pursuits, to persuade

people to conduct research projects with the goal of bringing development in the sports field, and to use and construct a variety of facilities, such as residential facilities, necessary infrastructure, various training centers, and centers to conduct tournaments, championships, competitions, seminars, and conferences at various levels. For the reasons stated above, the Sports Authority of India has four wings. These wings are academic, operational, team, and stadium. Each wing is assigned a specific set of responsibilities.

B. National Sports Policy

A draft of the National Sports Policy was created in 1984. This policy's main objective was to raise sports' level at the national level. Secondly, it demanded a five-year assessment of the effectiveness of standard-strengthening in order to determine the next step. As a result, the Policy places a strong emphasis on building infrastructure, promoting a wide range of sports, encouraging athletic brilliance, integrating sports with education, and establishing National Sports Federations. Even though the 1984 National Sports Policy had all the necessary elements to promote sports in the nation, it was never put into practice. In 2001, a revision of the 1984 National Sports Policy was made, and the 2001 National Sports Policy was created. The National Sports Policy of 2001 has three objectives:

- i) The organizations in charge of sports development and promotion have to carry out their duties in their specialized fields.
- ii) To identify the National Sports Federation, establish priorities, outline the protocols that the Federations must adhere to, and secure government support and funding.
- iii) To specify the requirements for eligibility each time the government must provide funds to sports federations.

In order to achieve national and worldwide sporting excellence, the National Sports Policy, 2001, exhorts the Central Government and the Sports Authority of India to work in tandem with the National Sports Federations and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA). For the Policy to be implemented, its goals and objectives must be substantially achieved.

C. Sports Law and Welfare Association of India

The Sports Law & Welfare Association of India (SLAWIN) is a non-profit, national,

professional organization whose joint goal is to promote sports in India through the understanding, advancement, and ethical practice of "Sports Law" by bringing together Legal Practitioners and Sports Persons. The Sports Law and Welfare Association of India has numerous objectives, including offering educational opportunities and disseminating data on specific areas of sports law, providing a platform for solicitors representing athletes, and establishing codes of conduct for sportspeople, among others.²

D. Sports Broadcasting Signals (Mandatory Sharing with Prasar Bharti) Act, 2007

Parliament passed the Sports Broadcasting Signals (Mandatory Sharing with Prasar Bharati) Act in 2007 with the goal of providing free-to-air access to the greatest number of listeners and viewers to sporting events of national importance through the mandatory sharing of sports broadcasting signals with Prasar Bharati via Doordarshan channels. Section 3(1) of the Sports Act states that "no content rights owner or holder, nor any television or radio broadcasting service provider, shall carry a live television broadcast on any cable or Direct-to-Home network, or radio commentary broadcast in India of sporting events of national importance, unless it concurrently shares the live broadcasting signal, minus the commercials, with Prasar Bharati in order for them to re-transmit the same on their terrestrial networks."

E. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports determines the requirements for various National Sports Federations to be recognized and funded to promote sporting events. Its responsibilities include supervising, supporting, and assisting the bodies in charge of sports administration in India. The Ministry also implements long-term development initiatives to achieve excellence.³

NATIONAL SPORTS DEVELOPMENT CODE, 2011

The National Sports Development Code of India, 2011 (NSDCI 2011) marked a significant step in reforming India's sports governance. Framed by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, the Code consolidates various government guidelines issued since the 1970s into a comprehensive document. Its primary goal was to streamline the functioning of National Sports

² Digvijay, Sports legislation in India: The need for a comprehensive Sports Law, 09 Journal of Critical Reviews (2022)

³ Abhimanyu Chatttree, Sports Laws in India: A Critical Analysis, 10 Cosmos An International Journal of Management, 23-26 (2020)

Federations (NSFs), ensure accountability in their operations, and promote athlete-centric policies for sporting excellence. Prior to 2011, sports administration in India suffered from fragmented rules, ad hoc decisions, and lack of uniformity. Numerous guidelines had been issued since 1975 regarding the recognition of sports bodies, funding mechanisms, and conduct of federations. To unify these into a single framework, the government introduced the NSDCI in January 2011.

The Code's objectives included

- Ensuring transparency and democratic functioning of NSFs.
- Laying down clear rules for recognition and de-recognition of sports bodies.
- Regulating tenure and age limits of office bearers to prevent monopolization of power.
- Promoting athlete welfare by guaranteeing representation in decision-making.
- Aligning Indian sports governance with international standards, including Olympic Charter requirements.

Key Provisions

- 1. Recognition of Sports Federations:** The Code specifies conditions under which an NSF can be recognized or derecognized by the Ministry. Recognition is vital for federations to access government grants, facilities, and to represent India in international sporting events.
- 2. Tenure and Age Limits:** One of the landmark reforms was the imposition of age and tenure restrictions. Office bearers of NSFs and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) must retire at 70 years of age. Presidents can hold office for a maximum of three terms (12 years), while Secretaries and Treasurers can serve two consecutive terms of four years each, after which a cooling-off period is mandatory.
- 3. Athlete Representation:** To make sports bodies more athlete-centric, the Code mandates 25% representation of sportspersons with voting rights in the executive committees of National Sports Federations.

- 4. Transparency and Accountability:** Federations are required to publish audited accounts, annual reports, and details of elections on their official websites. They must also adhere to the Right to Information Act, 2005, enhancing transparency in decision-making.
- 5. Good Governance Practices:** The Code stresses democratic elections, financial propriety, anti-doping measures, and dispute resolution mechanisms in line with international norms.

The NSDCI 2011 brought long-awaited reforms to Indian sports governance. By curbing lifetime monopolies of sports administrators and mandating athlete participation, it shifted the focus back to players. The emphasis on transparency has helped check corruption and misuse of funds in federations. Moreover, the Code aligns Indian sports administration with international governance standards, strengthening India's credibility in global sporting forums. It also empowers the government to intervene in cases of mismanagement, ensuring accountability without compromising autonomy guaranteed by the Olympic Charter.

Despite its progressive provisions, implementation remains uneven. Many federations have resisted age and tenure restrictions, often seeking judicial intervention. The question of autonomy versus government regulation continues to spark debate. Furthermore, compliance with transparency measures is inconsistent across NSFs. Going forward, stronger enforcement mechanisms, regular monitoring, and cooperation between the government, federations, and athletes are crucial. The proposed National Sports Development Code 2023/2024, which seeks to update the 2011 framework, is expected to address these gaps by incorporating lessons from the past decade.

The National Sports Development Code of India, 2011 represents a watershed in Indian sports administration. By embedding transparency, democracy, and athlete welfare at the core of governance, it laid the foundation for a more accountable sports ecosystem. While challenges in enforcement remain, the Code continues to serve as a critical benchmark for future reforms, ensuring that Indian sport moves toward professionalism, fairness, and global competitiveness.

NATIONAL ANTI-DOPING ACT, 2022

On 12 August 2022, after several failed attempts, parliament passed the National Anti-doping

Act 2022 (The Act). Protecting athletes' rights, bolstering anti-doping capacities at institutions, and facilitating major sporting events are all top priorities for the Act. Reiterating India's commitment to its responsibilities under international clean sports legislation, the government has prioritised the prompt delivery of justice to all athletes and the improvement of agency coordination in the fight against doping in sports. The act prohibits athletes, athlete support personnel and other persons from engaging in doping in sport. However, the athlete is permitted to use prohibited substance or method on the ground of medical conditions, he/she may apply to the NADA for TUE. In case of refusal by Agency in granting TUE, aggrieved person may appeal before the appeal panel. If an athlete is found guilty of using prohibited substance it may lead to disqualification, ineligibility, the loss of medals, points, and prizes, provisional suspension, financial penalties, public disclosure and other consequences as may be prescribed. Consequences for a violation will be determined by the National Anti-Doping Disciplinary Panel after a hearing.

The act empowers the National Anti-Doping Agency to collect certain personal data of athletes such as: (a) sex or gender, (ii) medical history, and (iii) whereabouts information of athletes (for out of competition testing and collection of samples). The Agency will prescribe the procedure for collection, usage, processing, and disclosure of such personal data. Further the Act mandates the central government to establish the Board for the purpose of ensuring implementation and make recommendation relating to the international obligations and elimination of doping in sport, oversee the activities of the Agency and collect necessary information. The Act also brings under its purview the already established National Dope Testing Laboratory (NDTL), and enables the establishment of more such dope testing laboratories to carry out the functions entrusted upon it. NDTL has the authority to: test the sample for any sports federation or sports event not recognized by the International Olympic Committee or the Central Government; undertake sample analysis of sports other than any national or international event and undertake any other tests or samples analysis as may be prescribed.

Without a doubt the enactment of the Act has sent a strong message to the world that India is very serious about sports, sportspersons and tackling doping. By this Act India has now joined the League of 30 Nations having their own Anti-Doping Law like the US, China, France, Australia, Japan, S Korea to have a law and dope test laboratory. The Act will ensure highest

standards of integrity while participating and preparing for sports competitions, domestically and internationally.⁴

THE NATIONAL SPORTS POLICY 2025

The new policy, which supersedes the National Sports Policy of 2001, aims to position India as a global sporting powerhouse, hosting major international sports events and enhancing its participation and medal tally in international sports competitions.⁵

NSP 2025 rests upon five strategic pillars:

1. **Excellence on the Global Stage:** This pillar emphasizes strengthening the pathway from grassroots talent to elite performance. Efforts include early talent identification, establishment of competitive leagues, world-class training centers, and governance improvements in National Sports Federations. It also underscores leveraging sports science, coaching, and technology to enhance athlete performance.
2. **Sports for Economic Development:** Recognizing sports as a significant economic lever, the policy promotes sports tourism, sports manufacturing, and hosting international events. It encourages private-sector engagement via Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and innovative financing to stimulate entrepreneurship in the sports economy.
3. **Sports for Social Development:** NSP 2025 frames sports as a vehicle for social inclusion—targeting increased participation from women, tribal communities, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups. It also aims to revive traditional and indigenous games, engage the diaspora, and support volunteering and dual-career pathways for athletes.
4. **Sports as a People’s Movement:** Aiming to cultivate fitness as a national norm, this pillar envisions mass participation through campaigns, community events, and fitness

⁴ Pooja Gautam, THE NATIONAL ANTI-DOPING ACT 2022: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS, 04 Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research(2022)

⁵ Admin, Game On: India’s New Sports Policy 2025, Fox Mandal (23 September 2025)
<https://foxmandal.in/News/game-on-indias-new-sports-policy-2025/>

indices in schools, colleges, workplaces—and improved access to sports infrastructure across India.

- 5. Integration with Education (NEP 2020):** Aligned with the National Education Policy 2020, NSP 2025 embeds sports into formal education. Schools and colleges will integrate physical education into curricula, with trained educators fostering early sports engagement. The policy also supports dual-career pathways, enabling student-athletes to balance academics and sports.⁶

To drive its vision, NSP 2025 outlines a robust framework that includes:

- Legal structures to ensure transparency and accountability in sports bodies.
- Innovative models for funding through PPPs, CSR, and entrepreneurship.
- Use of AI, data analytics, and wearables for performance tracking and injury prevention.
- Establishment of KPIs and time-bound targets to measure progress.
- Encouraging states and Union Territories to align their policies with the national model.
- Mainstreaming sports across all ministries and schemes for integrated impact.

NSP 2025 represents more than a policy—it signals a strategic infusion of sports into nation-building. By envisioning India among the top sporting nations by mid-century and possibly hosting the 2036 Olympics, the policy underscores ambition, inclusivity, and sustainable growth. Its success, however, will hinge on effective execution. Addressing gaps such as inadequately trained educators, rural infrastructure, and cultural biases will be critical. If deployed with urgency and coherence, NSP 2025 could catalyze a vibrant sports ecosystem—empowering citizens, nurturing talent, and enhancing India's global stature.

CHALLENGES IN SPORTS LAW IN INDIA

Sports in India has grown tremendously over the past two decades, fueled by the rise of

⁶ Dristi Ias, National Sports Policy 2025, Drishti Ias (23 September 2025) <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/national-sports-policy-2025>

professional leagues, increased international participation, and a shift towards viewing sports as both an industry and a career option. However, the legal framework that governs sports in India has not evolved at the same pace. Unlike other sectors that are governed by comprehensive laws, sports in India remains regulated through scattered policies, government guidelines, and judicial pronouncements. This fragmented structure gives rise to several challenges in sports law that affect governance, athlete welfare, and the commercialization of sports. Some the challenges are discussed below:

- 1. Lack of Comprehensive Legislation:** One of the foremost challenges is the absence of a dedicated sports law in India. Instead, governance is spread across the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), and National Sports Federations (NSFs). This leads to jurisdictional overlaps, inconsistent regulations, and policy gaps, creating uncertainty for athletes, administrators, and investors alike.
- 2. Governance and Autonomy Issues:** The functioning of sports bodies in India often suffers from lack of transparency and accountability. The dominance of long-serving administrators, political interference, and resistance to reforms under the National Sports Development Code of 2011 have hampered effective governance. At the same time, the demand for autonomy by sports federations sometimes clashes with government oversight, creating friction and affecting the efficiency of sports administration.
- 3. Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** Sports disputes in India—ranging from selection controversies to contractual disagreements and disciplinary matters—are usually handled through regular courts. Since India lacks a specialized sports tribunal like the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), these disputes face delays and inconsistent outcomes. The absence of a speedy, expert-driven dispute resolution system weakens confidence in the legal framework governing sports.
- 4. Doping and Integrity Concerns:** Despite the establishment of the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), doping continues to be a recurring issue in Indian sports. Limited awareness at the grassroots, lack of scientific support, and inadequate testing infrastructure undermine anti-doping efforts. In addition,

cases of match-fixing and betting scandals—particularly in cricket—highlight weaknesses in integrity regulations and enforcement mechanisms.

5. **Commercialization and Contractual Issues:** With the rise of leagues such as the IPL, ISL, and Pro Kabaddi, sports have become highly commercialized. This brings complex issues of player contracts, sponsorship rights, broadcasting agreements, and intellectual property protection. However, India lacks a standardized contractual framework for athletes, leading to frequent disputes and exploitation, particularly of young or lesser-known players.
6. **Athlete Welfare and Gender Concerns:** Athletes in India, especially outside cricket, often face issues of job insecurity, lack of medical insurance, and inadequate post-retirement support. Legal protections for women athletes remain underdeveloped, and enforcement of safeguards against harassment or discrimination is inconsistent. Moreover, unequal pay and underrepresentation of women in sports governance highlight the gender gaps in the legal landscape.
7. **Implementation Gaps:** Even where progressive policies exist, such as the Sports Development Code or the National Sports Policy 2025, implementation is uneven. Resistance from federations, lack of monitoring, and insufficient coordination between the center and states hinder the effectiveness of these measures.

THE WAY FORWARD

1. **Codification of a National Sports Law:** India needs a thorough sports law that combines athlete rights, anti-doping policies, dispute resolution procedures, and governance standards. Such laws ought to achieve a balance between federation autonomy and governmental supervision.
2. **Improving Transparency and Governance:** Federations are required to abide by the 2011 National Sports Development Code of India. For sports federations to maintain internal democracy, free and fair elections are necessary. Furthermore, the RTI Act's provisions ought to be implemented in order to guarantee accountability and transparency among the sports federations.

3. **Efficient Dispute Resolution:** A National Sports Arbitration Tribunal based on the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) is to be established in order to effectively resolve conflicts in sports. Promote arbitration and mediation in disagreements over contracts, sponsorship, and selection.
4. **Promoting Athlete Welfare and Gender Equality:** Implement anti-discrimination policies within sports federations. Give female athletes the same access to resources, facilities, and media attention. Establish insurance, healthcare, and pension plans for players who have retired.
5. **Controlling Commercialization and Intellectual Property Rights:** Establish legal frameworks for sponsorship agreements, broadcasting contracts, and image rights. Control betting and fantasy sports to safeguard customer interests and stop abuse.
6. **Understanding International Best Practices:** Take inspiration from the US Amateur Sports Act of 1978 and the UK Code for Sports Governance. Ensure adherence to the UNESCO International Convention Against Doping in Sport.

The evolution of sports legislation in India necessitates a dual focus: achieving governance improvements and protecting athletes' interests. This transformation's foundation is built on legislative clarity, institutional independence, and an ethical sports culture. The judiciary, policymakers, and federations will all play important roles in bringing India up to world sporting standards.

CONCLUSION

Sports law in India faces multifaceted challenges ranging from governance and doping to commercialization and gender inequality. Addressing these requires a comprehensive national sports legislation that integrates governance norms, dispute resolution, anti-doping regulations, and athlete rights under a single framework. The reluctance to initiate such legislation can be witnessed in the failed effort made by the central government in 2017 to move sports to a 'concurrent list' so that both the union and state legislatures can formulate laws relating to sports. The need to balance commercial interests with fundamental public rights must be addressed to ensure that the sports sector accurately reflects the nation's collective passion and

commitment to sporting excellence. Until such reforms are enacted and implemented effectively, India's ambition of becoming a global sporting powerhouse will remain constrained by legal and institutional shortcomings.

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