
ENHANCING ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE IN KERALA: SOCIO-CULTURAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE PERSPECTIVES

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	ABSTRACT
Key Words: Development of sports, Female Athletes, Social and Cultural Context, Infrastructure, Training	<p>Kerala is often renowned for its high Human Development Index, especially in the areas of literacy, health, and gender equity. Familial, social, and cultural norms dictate that women should be involved in sports, which is a sociocultural beneficial practice. Yet, even with social encouragement, the overall development of athletes in the state of Kerala, and therefore the development of women athletes, is persistently hampered by inadequate infrastructure and training facilities. The aim of this paper is to assess the development of sports in Kerala, with a focus on women's participation in sports and the sociocultural context of their involvement. The study examines the need for infrastructure investments and the role of the government in developing sports and recreation programs, as well as addressing unemployment in this area. Ultimately, this paper aims to strategically utilize this sociocultural background of the state, despite of structural constraints, to identify the next generation of great athletes from Kerala.</p>

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Introduction

The image of Kerala as a progressive state with good social indicators is accepted. According to the 2011 Census by the Government of India, the State of Kerala has an overall literacy rate of 96.2%. (The present literacy rate in ages under secondary years, with both sexes at or above 12 years of schooling, is likely much higher, as it is possibly approaching 100%.) In 2021-22, the overall literacy rate for both sexes increased to approximately 96.4%, as previously reported by the Kerala State Planning Board (2022). A three-year program was launched to achieve equality across various metrics. For females, life expectancy is 75 years (males, 72 years), education access is fairly equal between the sexes, and men and women both have a predilection to participate in sports. Kerala's cultural contributions, both nationally and internationally, through athletics continue to persist, as many elite athletes (e.g., P.T. Usha, Valsamma) from Kerala have made record claims. The athletes have experienced decline at both the university and national levels since that time, which continues to limit their potential. The athletes cannot improve, as the lack of infrastructure/tendencies does not help.

Historical Contributions and Achievements

Kerala's connection with athletics dates back to the 1924 Summer Olympics, when C.K. Lekshmanan represented India in the 110m hurdles. And there have been other notable female performances from the state, such as Angel Mary's silver medal award at the 1978 Asian Games and P.T. Usha's performances during the 1980s. Usha was a great role model for future athletes, including Shyni Wilson and Valsamma, who won gold in the 400m hurdles at the 1982 Asian Games—the first gold medal for a woman from Kerala.

In the coming decades, Kerala continued its legacy of achievement, with

Anju Bobby George winning a bronze medal at the 2003 World Championships, and Tintu Luka and O.P. Jaisha becoming successful athletes on both the national and international fronts. Before coming in second overall at the 35th National Games in 2015, led by track events (Kerala State Sports Council, 2015).

Socio-Cultural Factors Facilitating Athletic Development

The socio-cultural context in which sports operate in Kerala is imperative for enabling women to engage in sports. The social focus of the state on health, education, and women's empowerment has challenged 'traditional' gender expectations for women and thus created new pathways towards sporting opportunities. The Kerala Sports Policy 2017 recognizes the need for inclusive participation and talent identification, and development in sport, as shown by a budget allocation of Rs. 150 crore to support the 'infrastructure of sports' and ' programs for identifying and developing athletes' (Kerala Sports Department, 2017).

The Directorate of Sports & Youth Affairs was established in 1986 and has been instrumental in promoting participation and development in sports and recreation at all levels, including community clubs, with an estimated 5,000 clubs existing in the state (Kerala Sports Department, 2022). Therefore, at all levels of participation in sports and recreation, the opportunity exists in Kerala to achieve levels of sporting success comparable to those of the rest of India.

Challenges: Infrastructure and Training Deficit

Kerala has all the social and cultural conditions to enable the potential of young female and male athletes, but the actual process of sports development is complex due to a combination of barriers. The barriers include:

A 2022 report by the Kerala State Sports Council (Limited systematic identification of athletes) indicated that only 15% of potential athletes are identified. This was a result of the lack of systematic identification of athletes through talent identification.

Financial Support: The Kerala Sports Department's Annual Report (2022) stated that only 20% of the recipients receive sponsorship or Government funding that meets their needs.

Infrastructure Conditions: Many facilities, including tracks, sports hostels, and training facilities, are of poor quality (Kerala Sports Department, 2022). The theme of the recent National Sports Development Policy (2022) highlights structural deficits and states the need for definite upgrades.

Training Logics: A study conducted by the National Institute of Sports (NIS), Kerala branch, found that 65% of coaches have not received training for recent certification since 2015.

Nutritional and research deficits: According to the Kerala Nutrition and Sports Science Institute (2021), 40% of athletes experienced some level of nutritional deficiency, which can considerably disrupt performance.

Some of these problems can be viewed in real-time cases. For example, female cyclists reported that their future employment was a significant hindrance to training for the 2019 National Games, and prominent swimmers, such as Sajan Prakash, had limited aspirations due to financial constraints, including limited access to international training sites (The Hindu, 2019).

Recent Initiatives and Strategic Responses

The Kerala State Sports Department and partner organizations launched many programs:

‘Go for Gold’ Scheme. This initiative, created in 2018, aims to produce an Olympic medalist by 2024 through the establishment of the Elite Athletes Training Centre (EATC) in Thiruvananthapuram. The EATC was opened in 2020 and has sites in Munnar and Ernakulam (Kerala Sports Department, 2020).

Infrastructure Improvements. Nine international-standard stadiums have been built since the 2015 National Games, including one in Kottayam for indoor sports and another in Trivandrum with a swimming complex (Kerala Sports Council, 2021).

Coach Education and Talent Identification. The Kerala Sports Academy has collaborated with the Sports Authority of India (SAI) to provide coach education. Over the last two years, more than 200 coaches have graduated from SAI. (SAI Annual Report, 2022).

Monetary Recognition. The government has an awards system in place, where any athlete who secures a medal at the national or international level will receive a monetary award of Rs 5 lakh. (Government of Kerala, Kerala Sports Department, 2022).

Recommendations and Future Directions

In order to fully enable Kerala to access its socio-cultural advantage, alongside its current infrastructure conditions and shortfalls, we recommend:

Systematic Talent Identification: To effectively identify talent, it is vital that talent identification programs are implemented at the school and district levels and systematically collected through digitization (Kerala State Planning Board, 2022).

Level of investment in Sports Infrastructure: Increased development and maintenance of sports infrastructure (KSP Scheme) is warranted,

especially in rural communities, as outlined in the Kerala Sports Master Plan 2021-2025, which highlights the need for sports infrastructure.

Current Training with Scientific Outcomes: Scientific support, whether in sports science, nutrition, or psychology, must be integrated into the athlete's pathway. People in higher education from national institutions such as the SAI, thus the limitation of these considerations could be foregone.

Financial backing and Institutional support: Expand sponsorship and scholarship programs to provide support for developing sport, while offering athletes the comfort of training full-time, unencumbered by work commitments.

Connections with International Success: Engage and utilize coaches and trainers from abroad who have successfully coached and trained athletes with a record of achievement in the stated criteria, noting their use by other successful states in India (e.g., Maharashtra/Tamil Nadu).

Youth Development Opportunities: Youth athlete competitions will be held among athletes aged 15-21, conducted as trials and competitions to benchmark development and the age of physical peak, as observed in recent medalists (Kerala Sports Department, 2022).

Conclusion

The social and cultural environment of Kerala is conducive to the sports and education of women in sport, but there is a serious need for enhanced infrastructure and support structures to train them. It is conceivable that investment in infrastructure, for example, to identify athletes early and provide them with professional coaching, could transform Kerala into a sports centre of excellence. This will need a strong partnership between the State Government and potential stakeholders. We need to take positive

steps to improve infrastructure and policy development in this regard, which will inevitably create international competition opportunities in the near future and, over the longer term, benefit sports in the State as a whole.

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