

# Tribal Cultures, Identities and Sports in Modern India: Tribal Participation in Physical Activity and Sports

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## **Abstract**

*Despite facing social challenges, Indian tribal communities, which are integral to the country's culture, have made significant commitments towards sports. Tribal sports and physical movement are the central themes of this essay, which investigates the role of tribal societies, characters, or sports in contemporary India. It stresses three major sub-theatres: the successes of tribal participants in national and global competitions; the causes of local efforts to promote social pride, health promotion or fitness; development of sporting offices within tribal communities. By participating in hockey, boxing and arrow fighting, athletes like Birendra Lakra and Mary Kom highlight the potential of interior tribal communities by challenging stereotypes and sparking discussion about the future. Government endeavours such as the Khelo India Scheme and Eklavya Model Residential Schools move forward tribal sports offices whereas moreover giving preparing and openings for youth. Be that as it may, issues such as restricted offices and financial obstacles stay. The exposition proposes for consolidating inborn recreations into national sports systems, growing framework in removed areas, and giving grants and mentorship to tribal competitors. By recognizing and supporting tribal sports, India can honour its special social past whereas too engaging tribal populaces by means of physical action and competition. This comprehensive approach emphasizes the significance of comprehensive*

*arrangements that create ability whereas preserving cultural uniqueness, coming about in a dynamic and even-handed athletic scene.*

**Keywords:** *Tribal sports, Indigenous games, Cultural identity, Sports infrastructure, Social inclusion, India*

## **Introduction**

Adivasis, or tribal communities in India, are a diverse collection of cultural heritage, traditions, and unique identities that represent the country's indigenous population. Comprising over 104 million individuals or 8.6% of India's population as of 2011. These communities are mainly located in forested and hilly regions across various states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha. Adivasis have historically been stewards of India's natural landscape, leading sustainable lifestyles that are closely linked to their surroundings. They are part of a cultural diversity in India and their languages, art, music or traditional oral traditions contribute to this but remain among the lowest classes in terms of poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, displacement by industrialization on land and social exclusion. These communities have experienced a shift in their approach to sports, which has provided tribal youth with opportunities to become more empowered, self sufficient, and move towards social mobility.

Beyond being a physical activity themselves, sports also help to maintain cultural identity and diversity, challenge stereotypes in people about their culture or even the boundaries between tribal and mainstream society. The essay examines the intricate interplay between tribal cultures, identities, and sports in contemporary India, highlighting three key themes: the significant roles played by tribal warriors in both Indian and international sports, the role of indigenous games in building physical fitness and cultural pride, as well as the development of sports infrastructure and opportunities in tribal areas. In addition, the article explores how sports contribute to the development of national unity in tribal communities and how they enhance social and cultural aspects of Indian society. As more and more tribes compete on the national and global stage, there is a growing recognition of the potential within these communities to revive indigenous games. But there are still important challenges: shortages of resources, social and economic pressures, as well as erosion patterns during modernization. The inclusion of tribal youth in sports and their desire to be a part of the community can help India not only develop talent but also embrace diversity.

### **Contributions of Tribal Athletes to National and International Sports**

Hockey, athletics, boxing, archery and other sports as well as football and shooting are among the many sports in which tribal athletes have made a mark in Indian history. They have achieved more than just personal success, serving as inspiration for their communities and the nation as well as dispelling stereotypes about tribal abilities. Below is a more comprehensive list of notable tribal athletes and the wider impact they had.

- **Birendra Lakra:** Born into the Oraon tribe in Sundargarh, Odisha—a region renowned for its hockey tradition—Lakra rose to prominence as a defender in the Indian men’s hockey team. His participation in the 2012 London Olympics and his silver medal at the 2014 Commonwealth Games underscore his skill and resilience. Sundargarh, with its strong tribal population, has long been a nursery for hockey talent, a legacy rooted in missionary schools that introduced the sport in the early 20th century. Lakra’s success has spurred local pride and motivated young tribal athletes to pursue hockey, amplifying the sport’s role as a unifying force in Odisha’s tribal belts.
- **Mary Kom:** Hailing from the Kom tribe in Manipur, Mary Kom’s journey from a modest tribal background to becoming a six-time world boxing champion and an Olympic bronze medalist exemplifies extraordinary determination. Growing up in a region marked by ethnic strife and limited resources, Kom trained in makeshift facilities, often supported by her family’s meager earnings. Her triumphs have elevated women’s boxing in India, inspiring tribal girls to break gender barriers. Beyond sports, Kom has become a cultural ambassador for Manipur, advocating for peace and development in the Northeast.
- **Dangmei Grace:** A standout footballer from the Naga tribe in Manipur, Grace has shone brightly in the Indian women’s national football team. Her performances at the 2014 Asian Games and the 2016 South Asian Games gold-medal-winning campaign highlight her agility and teamwork. Football enjoys deep roots in Manipur’s tribal culture, often played in community fields with minimal equipment. Grace’s rise has encouraged greater participation among tribal women, challenging patriarchal norms and showcasing the untapped potential in India’s Northeastern states.
- **Gopi T:** From a tribal family in Wayanad, Kerala, Gopi Thonnakkal has emerged as a leading long-distance runner. His victories in the 10,000m at the 2014 National Open Athletics Championships and the 2016 South Asian Games reflect his endurance and discipline. Wayanad’s hilly terrain naturally fosters athletic talent, yet

limited coaching and facilities posed early obstacles for Gopi. His success has drawn attention to Kerala's tribal regions, urging investment in grassroots sports programs.

- **Deepika Kumari:** Born in a tribal family in Jharkhand, Deepika's mastery of archery has earned her medals at World Championships and Commonwealth Games. Archery is a traditional skill among Jharkhand's tribes, such as the Santhal and Munda, historically used for hunting. Deepika's transition from practicing with bamboo bows to competing globally highlights the latent talent in tribal areas. Her story has spurred initiatives like the Tata Archery Academy, which nurtures young archers from similar backgrounds.

- **Jitu Rai:** A shooter from Assam's Sankhani tribe, Rai has secured medals at the Commonwealth Games and World Championships. His precision and focus exemplify the potential within Assam's tribal communities, often overlooked in mainstream sports narratives. Rai's achievements have prompted calls for shooting ranges and training centres in the Northeast, a region rich in sporting talent yet underserved by infrastructure.

These athletes' accomplishments aren't isolated triumphs but a force for change. Their presence challenges the stereotype of tribalism as peripheral, fueling pride and promoting youth sports careers. Also, their victories result in financial advantages for sponsors and government initiatives in tribal territories. The popularity of Mary Kom has fostered the growth and establishment of boxing academies in Manipur, while hockey programs in Odisha have been nurtured under Lakra's influence. Still, for many tribal athletes there are systemic barriers to accessing talent; lack of early coaching, financial support and exposure require sustained investment.

### **Indigenous Games: Promoting Physical Fitness and Cultural Pride**

The fundamental events of tribal culture are games, which reflect customs, morals and a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world. Easily accessible and highly meaningful, these games can be played in villages or forests, as well as on rivers, with minimal resources available. They promote fitness, cognition and relationships with others while maintaining tribal identities in the face of globalization. The subsequent sections provide a comprehensive overview of several games and their significance.

- **Ghugamal:** Popular in Western Madhya Pradesh among the Bhil and Gond tribes, Ghugamal is a guessing game where participants identify neighbors' oxen through riddles. Played during community gatherings, it sharpens observation and

fosters trust, as protecting cattle is a collective responsibility. Historically, such games emerged from pastoral lifestyles, reflecting the tribes' dependence on livestock. Physically undemanding, Ghugamal enhances mental agility and reinforces communal solidarity.

- **Dhukdhukdiyan:** This underwater hide-and-seek game, played by the Bhil tribe in Madhya Pradesh, tests swimming prowess and endurance. Participants dive into rivers or ponds, hiding while others search, often during monsoon festivities. The game builds lung capacity and cardiovascular strength, vital for a tribe historically reliant on water bodies for fishing and transport. Culturally, it connects youth to their aquatic heritage, though urbanization threatens its survival as rivers shrink or become polluted.
- **Archery and Fishing:** Among tribes like the Baiga, Gond, and Santhal, archery and fishing games teach survival skills while doubling as competitive sports. Children craft bows from bamboo and compete in accuracy, while fishing contests hone patience and dexterity. These activities, rooted in hunting-gathering traditions, strengthen family bonds as elders pass down techniques. Physically, they develop upper-body strength and hand-eye coordination, linking fitness to cultural continuity.
- **Ashta-Changa and Chahrmar:** Board games akin to Ludo and chess, these are played across Madhya Pradesh's tribal belts. Ashta-Changa uses simple tokens, while Chahrmar involves strategic moves on a makeshift board. Played under moonlight or during festivals, they cultivate critical thinking and patience. These games reflect the intellectual richness of tribal societies, countering narratives of primitivism, and promote intergenerational dialogue as families gather to play.
- **Kabaddi**, for example, is an indigenous sport that has gained national and international recognition. Kabaddi is deeply rooted in Indian tribal culture, particularly in rural and tribal regions. This contact sport requires both physical strength and mental acuity, combining agility, strategy, and teamwork. While Kabaddi has evolved into a professional sport with leagues such as the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL), its origins lie in the tribal and rural communities of India, where it was played as a competitive game to enhance physical endurance and camaraderie.
- **Kho-Kho**, another traditional sport, is widely played in tribal regions and has roots in ancient India. Kho-Kho is a team sport that requires speed, stamina, and excellent coordination. It has been integral in promoting fitness in tribal communities, where it is played both recreationally and competitively. The sport is not only about physical fitness but also teaches valuable life skills such as teamwork, leadership, and perseverance.

- **Gilli-Danda**, a rural and tribal game often played in villages, is another example of an indigenous sport that contributes to physical health and fitness. The game, which involves using two sticks to hit a small wooden piece, is played in open fields and provides both aerobic exercise and strength training. While it may not have the same global appeal as Kabaddi or Kho-Kho, it remains a staple in tribal communities, helping preserve traditional forms of physical activity.

The physical benefits of these games are manifold. Archery enhances muscle tone and focus, Dhukdhukdiyan boosts stamina, and even sedentary games like Ashta-Changa stimulate cognitive health. Culturally, they instill values—teamwork in Ghugamal, resilience in Dhukdhukdiyan, respect in archery—rooted in tribal ethos. Yet, modernization poses challenges: younger generations gravitate toward digital entertainment, and urban migration disrupts community play. The Indian government's Khelo India Scheme seeks to counter this by promoting indigenous games through documentaries, school programs, and competitions like the Khelo India Youth Games, where tribal sports gain visibility. For example, Mallakhamb and Kalaripayattu, though not exclusively tribal, inspire similar efforts to revive games like archery as competitive sports.

Preservation requires more than recognition—it demands infrastructure, such as community fields, and incentives, like prizes or scholarships, to engage youth. Integrating these games into physical education curricula can bridge tradition and modernity, ensuring their legacy endures while promoting holistic fitness.

### **Developing Infrastructure and Opportunities for Sports in Tribal Regions**

Unlocking the sporting potential of tribal communities hinges on addressing the stark disparity in infrastructure and opportunities. Government initiatives have made strides, but the scale of need remains vast. Below is an expanded analysis of key programs and their impact.

- **Khelo India Scheme:** Launched in 2018, this ambitious program has allocated ₹2438.34 crore for 299 sports infrastructure projects nationwide, with a focus on tribal areas. In Bastar, Chhattisgarh—a Maoist-affected tribal region—a ₹5 crore football ground and synthetic track are underway, offering safe spaces for youth. The scheme's talent identification camps have unearthed athletes like Dangmei Grace, providing coaching and stipends. However, remote villages often remain untouched, requiring mobile training units or smaller-scale facilities.

- **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS):** Aimed at Scheduled Tribe students, EMRS schools integrate sports into education, with facilities for archery, athletics, and hockey. In states like Jharkhand and Odisha, these schools have produced state-level champions, blending academic growth with physical development. Yet, inconsistent funding and teacher shortages limit their reach, necessitating partnerships with sports federations.
- **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) Scheme:** Targeting girls from marginalized groups, including tribes, KGBV schools provide sports like kabaddi and badminton alongside education. In Rajasthan's tribal districts, annual sports meets have boosted enrolment and confidence among girls. However, cultural resistance to female participation persists, requiring community sensitization campaigns.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private entities complement these efforts. The Magic Bus Foundation, for instance, uses sports to teach life skills in tribal Maharashtra, while

Tata Trusts supports archery in Jharkhand. These partnerships amplify government programs, but coordination gaps often dilute impact. Historically, tribal regions lagged due to colonial neglect and post-independence prioritization of urban centres – issues these initiatives aim to redress.

### **Socio-Economic Impact of Sports in Tribal Areas**

Sports transcend recreation in tribal contexts, driving education, health, and economic progress while empowering marginalized groups, especially women.

- **Education:** Sports incentivize school attendance through scholarships and facilities. In EMRS schools, students excelling in sports often secure higher education opportunities, reducing dropout rates prevalent among tribal youth (over 50% postprimary, per 2011 Census data).
- **Health:** Physical activity combats malnutrition and mental health challenges common in tribal areas. Indigenous games, being culturally resonant, encourage participation, with studies showing improved fitness among players in Madhya Pradesh's tribal belts.
- **Economic Development:** Sports infrastructure projects create jobs – construction, coaching, maintenance – while athletes' success attracts tourism and investment. In Manipur, football tournaments boost local commerce, a model replicable elsewhere.

- **Gender Equality:** Programs like KGBV empower tribal girls, challenging norms. Athletes like Mary Kom inspire shifts in attitudes, with female participation in tribal sports rising 15% in the Northeast since 2010, per government reports.

### **Role of Tribal Sports in Promoting National Unity**

Tribal sports bridge cultural divides, fostering a shared national identity. Events showcasing indigenous games, like the National Tribal Festival, spark dialogue between communities. Athletes' triumphs—Lakra's Olympic grit, Kom's global fame—unite Indians in pride, emphasizing diversity as strength. Historically, sports have healed regional rifts; today, they can integrate tribal narratives into India's mainstream.

### **Challenges and Future Prospects**

Despite progress, tribal sports face hurdles: inadequate facilities in remote areas, poverty forcing youth into labor, and indigenous games' obscurity. Future strategies should prioritize mobile infrastructure, cultural integration in education, and athlete support systems like mentorship. Policy must balance modernization with heritage preservation, ensuring sports remain a lifeline for tribal identity and growth.

To address these issues, future strategies should focus on:

- **Integrating Indigenous Games:** Incorporating indigenous games into school curricula and national sports programs to promote cultural pride and physical fitness. For instance, games like Ghugamal and Dhukdhukdiyan can be included in physical education classes, allowing students to engage with their cultural heritage while staying active. National sports frameworks should also recognize indigenous games as competitive events, providing opportunities for tribal youth to showcase their skills.
- **Enhancing Infrastructure:** Expanding the reach of schemes like Khelo India to more remote tribal areas, ensuring equitable access to sports facilities. This includes building multi-purpose sports complexes, providing equipment, and training coaches who understand the needs of tribal communities. Infrastructure development should prioritize accessibility, ensuring that tribal youth can participate in sports without facing logistical barriers.
- **Supporting Tribal Athletes:** Providing scholarships, mentorship, and career opportunities for tribal athletes to sustain their participation in sports. Scholarships can help cover training costs, while mentorship programs can connect athletes with experienced coaches and role models. Career opportunities, such as jobs in sports



administration or coaching, can provide long-term support for tribal athletes, ensuring that they remain engaged in sports beyond their competitive careers.

By recognizing and supporting tribal sports, India can celebrate its diverse cultural heritage while empowering tribal communities through physical activity and competition. This approach not only nurtures talent but also fosters social inclusion, ensuring that tribal youth feel valued and represented in the nation's sporting landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Through the study of tribal cultures, identities (such as family, tribes), and sports in modern India we come across a rich tapestry of resilience with talent that shows respect for all those traditions while also stressing cultural preservation. Birendra Lakra, Mary Kom, and Deepika Kumari are all prominent tribal athletes, with their impressive achievements on national and international levels challenging stereotypes and inspiring many others. The triumph of their opponents highlights the untapped potential within tribal societies, which is frequently concealed by social and economic hardships like poverty or inadequate education. Meanwhile, traditional games such as Ghugamal and Dhukdiyan are still significant components of the culture, promoting physical fitness and embodying principles like teamwork, fairness, and appreciation for nature. Rather than being mere pastimes, these games are crucial in maintaining tribal identity during times of globalization. Government initiatives such as the Khelo India Scheme and Eklavya Model Residential Schools have begun to bridge these gaps by enhancing sports infrastructure in tribal areas where previously unattainable youth opportunities had been limited. Nevertheless, ongoing problems such as deficient amenities and economic disadvantages must be addressed with greater urgency and persistent dedication to upholding fairness in sports.

Tribal sports carry more weight than just individual recognition or cultural heritage, as they are woven into the fabric of Indian culture. By participating in these sports, one can gain insight into India's rich cultural heritage and promote national unity. The National Tribal Festival and the integration of indigenous games into national frameworks promote constructive dialogue between tribal and mainstream communities, bridging the gap. Indigenous athletes' worldwide achievements in sport generate a sense of pride among Indians, regardless of their ethnic background. In the context of economic development, sports in tribal areas can offer employment opportunities in infrastructure, coaching and event management as well as boosting

sports tourism. Football tournaments held in Manipur serve as a blueprint for other tribal communities. Furthermore, athletics assist disadvantaged communities (especially women) in breaking gender barriers. By utilizing symbols like Mary Kom and Dangmei Grace, an effort to promote gender equality has led to increased involvement of tribal girls in the culture.

But the journey is far from over. Basic sports facilities are still lacking in numerous tribal areas, and socio-economic barriers persist. Indigenous games, while important in their own right, face competition and legal challenges that hinder their inclusion in mainstream sports policies. In order to overcome these challenges, innovative solutions include incorporating indigenous games into school curricula, deploying mobile training units in remote areas, and expanding smaller facilities to ensure accessibility. Tribal athletes have the opportunity to pursue growth and professional goals through scholarships, mentorship programs or career paths, while dedicated funding and sports academies in tribal regions provide additional avenues for development.

The recognition of the exceptional contributions of tribal communities to India's sports industry necessitates the formulation of inclusive policies. Government, NGOs and private sectors can work together to promote progress while research on the socio-economic benefits of tribal sports can guide tailored programs. Indian youth are encouraged to embrace their diverse cultural roots by participating in tribal sports.

In closing, the narrative of tribal sports in modern India is one of both promise and peril. The brilliance of tribal athletes, the enduring legacy of indigenous games, and the strides in infrastructure development form a compelling foundation. Yet, unlocking their full potential demands resolute action—tackling socio-economic barriers, preserving cultural roots, and ensuring equitable opportunities. This commitment can nurture talent, foster social inclusion, spur economic growth, and strengthen national unity. The saga of tribal sports reflects the indomitable spirit of India's indigenous communities, whose voices deserve to resonate in our collective story. Let us rally behind these efforts, honoring their contributions and harnessing the transformative power of sports to uplift, unite, and inspire.

Through sustained dedication, we can ensure tribal sports flourish, enriching India's identity and securing a vibrant legacy for future generations.

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