
MAKING
SPORT
WORK

Sport has the power to change the world.

Nelson Mandela

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FOREWORD

RAHUL DRAVID

As I am writing this foreword, I find myself reflecting on the power of sport and its ability to influence our lives and its immense potential for development and peace, I am reminded of the countless lessons it has taught me. I cannot imagine my life without sport in it. Sport was an outlet for my passion and my pursuit to excel and, along the way, it taught me lessons that extended far beyond the boundaries of the playing field.

Sport is not just about winning trophies, medals, or matches; it is a medium that transcends boundaries, builds bridges, and unites people from all walks of life. When we come together as stakeholders, when we pool our resources and unite around our common goals to create a better world , we can unlock the power of sport.

I extend my support to the Making Sport Work initiative, which seeks to harness the transformative power of sport. This coffee table book serves as a testament to the incredible potential of sport, showcasing the journey, achievements, motivational stories, and the impact that it has had on individuals and communities across India. Through its pages, we embark on a voyage that celebrates the true spirit of sport and its ability to shape lives. The stories speak of the power within each of us to share the joy of sport and the spirit that transcends all our differences of identity and opportunity.

I commend the efforts of organizations and individuals who recognize the transformative potential of sport and commit themselves to its development. It has the capacity to shape individuals, communities, and even societies. Sport can provide the building blocks for societal change, enable the development of confidence and communication skills, and foster a healthy lifestyle.

When businesses and organizations collaborate with the common goal of leveraging sport's power for social good and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the possibilities become boundless. Each of us can foster the growth of sport in communities, ensure access and opportunities for the marginalized, and create a more inclusive and harmonious society.

I encourage you all to read the stories in this book, understand and explore the narratives that unfold, and witness firsthand the power of sport for development and peace. It is an opportunity to learn, and to perhaps be inspired to use sport to improve the lives of those around us.

Let us come together as a collective force, embracing the values that sport imparts and recognizing its immense potential. Together, we can create a world where sport thrives, individuals grow and we all benefit.

Let's Make Sport Work!

Of Grit And Glory: A Note From The Sports And Society Accelerator

Elite athletes sweating it out in their relentless pursuit of excellence. Winning World Championships. Watching the tricolour being raised as the National Anthem plays. Medalists being feted and rewarded. These are the images that might readily come to mind when you think of 'Indian sports'.

Athletes like Abhinav Bindra, Neeraj Chopra, PV Sindhu, and our incredible Paralympians bring us pride, joy and confidence, shaping what it means to be Indian. They have, once and for all, countered the trope that Indians aren't good at sports. They are, undeniably, role models and great champions, and their successes have been well documented.

There are also other champions of Indian sport whose work demonstrates that sport can be about so much more than winning.

As we move beyond 75 years of India's independence, through our #MakingSportWork series, in association with The Better India, we also celebrate those who have spent years, decades, and even entire careers, working to improve lives around them, through sport. They include a former national team player training young girls in her village at hockey, another teaching coastal communities surfing and skateboarding. We have organisations bringing football, athletics and rugby coaching to tribal kids, and another one bringing physical education to students with disabilities. These people and initiatives are all around us, though their achievements may not make it to the daily newspapers.

They teach us that social enterprise brings sport closer to home for everyone, seeking solutions to everyday situations using the radical power of sport. These contributions to the cultural commons of sport are no less remarkable than those of our medalists.

In this series, we celebrate the healing and binding power of sport and the spirit of service towards building a 'better India' for us all.

Making sport work for a billion plus Indians might seem virtually impossible. Yet, the scale of the task should not overwhelm us. Each of us can touch lives through sport.

Sport can bring social impact in many ways. When combined with the empowerment and involvement of the community, its power is multiplied manifold. We are driven by the quest for universal participation in sport and physical activity (SAPA), in whichever shape or form a person chooses. The #MakingSportWork series is emblematic of the premise that each of us can contribute, participate, and change the world around us through sport.

Through this participation and engagement, we will see the sustainable social impact that can accelerate inclusion, equality, and empowerment.

As we look at India over the next 75 years, we envisage one in which every Indian has an opportunity to experience the joy of living an active, healthy life, in a society in which sport, movement and the spirit of play are woven into our nation's fabric. This will be an India where 'the mind is without fear and the head is held high,' as Rabindranath Tagore once envisioned.

Join us on this journey as we celebrate the sports changemakers, their initiatives and the universal language of sport.

ABOUT SSA

The Sports and Society Accelerator is an independent not-for-profit organisation, registered as a Section 8 company, focused on building the Indian sports ecosystem. Its goal as an ecosystem builder is to achieve social outcomes at population scale, using the universality of the sports experience, with an eventual target of universal participation in sport and physical activity in India by 2047.

Established as a policy-to-action initiative, the Accelerator has a dual-engine approach. It uses independent research and policy interventions to drive institutional and systemic reform, and programmes and projects to enhance inclusion, empowerment and equality using sport. The Accelerator works with government, civil society, and social enterprises.

The Accelerator's theory of change is that 'sports for all' can be achieved when solutions are in the hands of participants. Its Sports Stack approach advocates a whole-of-system and open-source model to achieve universal access to sporting opportunities and universal physical literacy, working with government and civil society.

The Accelerator's board of advisors includes noted sports journalist Sharda Ugra, CEO of Pratham, Rukmini Banerji, former Director General, Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office, NITI Aayog, Dr. Sekhar Bonu and veteran sports administrator Joy Bhattacharjya.

SSA and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sports and Society Accelerator, is committed to making a positive impact on society through the power of sports. As a public-spirited and independent not-for-profit organization, it strives to shape the world around us by using sport and physical activity as a catalyst for social change. The Accelerator's aim is to achieve social goals such as inclusion, equality, sustainability, and justice through various programs, projects, and policy frameworks. SSA's methodology revolves around six of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations - SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being); SDG 5 (Gender Equality); SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth); SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities); SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions); and SDG 17 (Partnerships for Goals).

The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, the Sports and Society Accelerator envisions a future of increased collaboration and stakeholder engagement as it continues its journey of building the Indian sports ecosystem. With a commitment to achieving social outcomes at a population scale, SSA recognizes the importance of forging strong partnerships with government bodies, civil society organizations, and social enterprises. By leveraging the collective expertise, resources, and influence of a wide variety of stakeholders, the Accelerator aims to drive systemic reform and enhance inclusion, empowerment, and equality through sport. Embracing a participatory approach, SSA will continue to advocate for universal access to sporting opportunities and physical literacy, placing the power of solutions in the hands of participants. With the goal of universal participation in sport and physical activity in India by 2047, the road ahead entails fostering collaborative networks, expanding our reach, and mobilizing diverse stakeholders to create a lasting impact.

01

India's Sporting Successes Against All Odds

Victories and medals bring to the fore the life stories of their winners, shining a light on the challenges they have overcome on their paths to success. For instance, this was evident at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022. Achinta Sheuli's incredible journey, Avinash Sable being 'weeded out' of a talent identification programme as a youngster, and why Tejaswin Shankar needed the help of Delhi's High Court bar before conquering Birmingham's high jump bar made for compulsive reading.

These proved to be an unmissable backdrop to India's story at the quadrennial event. The steady upward trajectory of success for India was this edition with many first-time medalists and athletes succeeding in a variety of disciplines, including lawn bowls, judo and athletics. This was followed up in 2023 with the Indian contingent crossing the 100 medal mark at both the Asian Games and the Asian Para Games. These are positive indicators of a promising future for Indian elite sports.

While achievements at major sporting events remind us of the soft power and great joy we derive from the international successes of our compatriots, they also give pause for thought. What is sport's role in our society? What more can we do with it? Awakening the system to the full potential of sports, and the role it can play in building a healthier, fitter, more inclusive, and empowered India, is a project we must all get behind.

The health of Indian sports is, for some undefined reason, measured primarily by the country's final standing on the medal table. The National Sports Awards points system is, naturally, designed to tabulate international victories. It is not uncommon to

hear stories of parents pleading with PE teachers and coaches to develop their still-toddler wards into Olympic champions. These can be read as positive trendlines. However, to get the most out of what sport has to offer us, we must expand the measure of sporting success beyond medals alone, and recognise that sport does not have only one story to tell.

It is difficult to justify the extent of public spending on elite sports if we do not take a wider view of its role in society. While success contributes to national confidence and identity, it must also play an ambassadorial role in the campaigns for universal physical literacy and universal access, recognising that every Indian must be presented the opportunity to live an active and healthy life as a matter of right.

These goals of universality play vital social roles. They require a system-wide approach that identifies and addresses the fault lines in our population's access to play, movement, and activity. The anecdotal success of elite athletes – achieving against the odds, as they often do – and survivorship bias can paper over these cracks. They mask the reality of a vast swathe of our population that will never experience the joy of sport or have the chance to build a healthy relationship with their body through movement, activity and play.

The goal of delivering universality of opportunity and experience not only gives elite sports the chance to find their wider social purpose but also demands a multi-pronged approach from the system. Public and private participants will have to act together on many fronts, including good governance, support structures for access and progression at the population scale, enabling

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livelihoods and sustainability, ensuring safe sport, integrating rights-based approaches into decision making and finding a way for physical literacy to be embedded in education.

Several states have launched programmes and policies that could potentially position sports as a tool for social inclusion and empowerment. Odisha has launched several schemes that take a 360-degree approach to making sports a part of the State's culture and empower the youth, including the first Olympic Values Education Programme in the country.

The Haryana Sports Policy among its goals has envisioned the use of sports as a tool for social and economic development, and the promotion of positive values at home and abroad. Mizoram meanwhile in its Sports Policy has a stated goal of working to use sports for the differently-abled, older persons and women. Through its policy, it is working to increase access by reducing barriers and encouraging participation.

Additionally, Mizoram plans to run affirmative-action programs to increase participation, as well as make sporting infrastructure more 'friendly'. Jharkhand has launched the SAHAY (Sports Action Towards Harnessing Aspiration of Youths) scheme to motivate the youth of Naxal-affected areas towards a positive life by giving them an identity through sports. These are just a few examples of a growing number of such initiatives that are driving awareness and participation across the country.

Broadly, the objectives of these programmes include the development of athletes as leaders and role models; leveraging sports programming intentionally for local, state and national social development; asking sport-related sectors to incorporate social development objectives; using sports events to benefit host communities and local economies; and building a spirit of volunteerism, social entrepreneurship and giving back.

This establishes a powerful narrative to build on from national to community levels. The policy structure can target mass participation with a concerted focus on underrepresented segments of society, including gender and disability. The capacity building and skill development within government, social enterprise and civil society initiatives can be enhanced to address access barriers at national, regional, and local levels.

When sports and physical activity are pitted as opponents to academic achievement, both 'sides' lose. When they are seen as complementary aspects of a wholesome life, both can win. Using sports to drive activity levels, and promote interactivity and teamwork among diverse groups, can produce healthier, happier, more well-rounded individuals.

The things we measure and what we celebrate also deeply influence our notions of success and meaning. A great precedent for this would be to look at sports through the lens and perspective of what the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has done for the education sector.

The ASER, released by leading education non-profit Pratham, is biennially published and is a benchmark national analysis based on a citizen-led household survey that provides nationally representative estimates of children's schooling status and their foundational reading and arithmetic skills.

AS WITH THE MEASUREMENT OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN ASER, A CONCERTED EFFORT IS NEEDED TO MAP THE STATUS OF ACCESS TO SPORTS AND ACTIVITY LEVELS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ON A PERIODIC BASIS.

This will help us understand the systemic gaps and monitor progress and the success, or lack thereof, of initiatives targeted at bridging access gaps. Profiling and celebrating the efforts of social entrepreneurs, and initiatives that have selflessly used sport for social change, can result in sport being recognised as a tool each one of us can use to connect with and contribute to the lives of those around us.

With these efforts, as the gates progressively open to a wider population, the talent pool of elite athletes gets wider and deeper. Increasing opportunity puts into play virtuous cycles involving elite success and social goals. The rising tide can then truly lift all boats.

02

Bridges Of Sports

#Karnataka #Athletics

Nitish M Chiniwar had set his sights on a career in motorsports. He had worked in garages in Bengaluru, getting his hands dirty as he learned the ins and outs of engines.

Then he moved to the United Kingdom, where he earned his Masters in Motorsports Engineering. But when he began interviewing with racing teams, including some F1 teams, he kept hitting the same wall. As a non-European, Chiniwar needed a work visa but none of the teams were willing to sponsor one.

Finding his path unexpectedly blocked prompted Chiniwar to think deeply about opportunities, specifically who gets them and who doesn't. Going down that path led him to a new career.

So, in 2016 he founded Bridges of Sports (BoS), a not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to developing the next generation of Indian athletes while also creating opportunities for neglected tribal communities to become part of mainstream society.

The first community they worked with was the Siddi community in Karnataka. The Siddis were brought to India from Africa as slaves over 400 years ago. After Indian independence, they wound up living apart from mainstream society and have struggled with racism and poverty.

To identify promising young athletes, BoS worked with the Uttara Kannada District Athletic Association to conduct training camps and monitor athletic competitions across all talukas for the U-12, U-14, and U-16 categories. Those athletes who met qualifying standards were then invited to the main residential centre for testing and training to help them develop to their full potential.

“Our focus has always been to build a hyperlocal sports ecosystem which will not only produce sustainable talent but also support the social and economic development of the community,” Chiniwar says. “Over the years, we are seeing the results of our strategy and the opportunities for the model to be replicated at scale.”

In late 2022, the organisation had 25 children enrolled in their track-and-field centre of excellence in Mundgod, Karnataka, and was in the process of supporting another 240 children from the Adivasi communities in Nashik, Maharashtra.

Since their foundation, they have helped more than 10,000 kids.

According to Chiniwar, the biggest challenge they have faced so far has been convincing the members of the community to buy into the project. They solved that problem by including the community in its core team of coaches, sports scientists, and physios to the point where 60% of the team is now local. In addition, it has also built a network of community volunteers who help scout athletes and conduct training camps and competitions in the villages.

“With our model, the community has now become stakeholders of the project,” Chiniwar says. “More families are now open to their children pursuing sports as one of the career options and they understand that with BoS and the local ecosystem, their children would at least become part of the coaching, scouting and administration system if they are not able to achieve international success.”

Chiniwar and his team also convinced schools and colleges in the area to provide free admission to BoS athletes, which gives the community another reason to support the programme.

Getting the community on their side has been one of the high points so far for Tenzin Choejor Zongpa, the sprint coach and head of performance at BoS. Tenzin was born in Mundgod, though his parents are originally from Darjeeling. He has a degree in Physiotherapy and was working in a hospital in the Western Ghats when he read a few articles about India’s athletic performance at the 2016 Rio Olympics. “It made me question why to date we as a nation have missed two medals (Ed.’s note: Milkha Singh in 1960 and PT Usha in 1984) in athletics by a whisker and never came close other than that,” he says.

He decided he wanted to do something about India’s lack of athletic medals and went back to school to get his Master’s in Exercise and Sports Sciences from Manipal University. During his final year in 2019, a team from BoS visited their Sports Science Lab with some of their athletes. The more Tenzin learned about them, the more it seemed like a natural fit for him, and he joined them in July 2019.

“As a coach at BoS, it’s easier to track down and work on certain things that are needed to improve the athletes at both the performance level as well as a person, because we have a home-like system where everyone lives together,” Tenzin says. “The feeling of family makes the conversation easier and clearer with both the athlete as well as their parents.”

He also stressed the need to involve families in decisions regarding their children and to give them regular updates as a way of gaining their trust and confidence.

To determine the success of their programmes, the organisation uses training data and race performance as well as measuring the psychological and social development of the athlete. “Our long-term success is defined by success in sports along with the employment of athletes who were part of the BoS system but might not have achieved success as an athlete,” Chiniwar says.

Coping during COVID-19

The lockdown threw up a new challenge for the organisation, as it couldn’t run its regular programmes. Moreover, the Siddi community (employed as casual labourers) lost most of its income since there was no work for them. Chiniwar and his team came up with the idea of helping five families start their own kitchen gardens to provide an alternate source of income for the community. As an added benefit, growing their own food would ensure better nutrition for their children too. BoS then went a step further and bought the produce for their hostel.

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“We realised that working closely with the community outside of sports and supporting them during tough times will help build resilience for the programme itself,” Chiniwar says.

In 2022, they set up a scholarship system that rewards athletes as they progress from winning state medals to national medals by supporting their families with financial or in-kind assistance.

The coaches also benefit from being part of the organisation. Tenzin, for example, was able to complete his World Athletics Level 1 Coaching Certification from NIS Patiala in 2020. And in July 2022, Tenzin travelled to the UK to work and train at ALTIS, a leader in sports performance education that also offers an elite training environment.

The national champ Nayana Kokare also travelled with Tenzin to ALTIS to train.

Kokare was 16 when she entered a local competition organised by BoS after her teacher convinced her to compete in the 100m and 200m races. Although Kokare had never raced competitively before and ran barefoot, she qualified in both events. “I didn’t know anything,” she says in a phone interview. “Sir told me to run and that I might get a prize.”

At first, her parents were reluctant to let her leave home and live in a hostel by herself. “They were scared,” Kokare says. But the BoS team convinced her parents that it was safe for their daughter and that they would help both Kokare and her parents. Over time Kokare dropped the 100m and turned into a 400m runner instead (she also competes in the 200m). Two years later she justified the decision by winning bronze in the Girls Under-18 400ms at the 2021 Nationals with a personal best time of 58.31 seconds.

“I have got an opportunity and I want to take advantage of it,” she says. “I want to show my people what we can achieve and also bring a good name to the village.”

Along with her training, Kokare studied commerce at the Government Composite Pre-University College in Mundgod. But her ambition was to represent India and win an international medal which she did at the 2023 Asian U20 Athletics Championships in South Korea. Her idol and inspiration is Allyson Felix, the legendary American 200m and 400m runner, who is one of the most decorated track & field athletes of all time.

Training outside the country and meeting other athletes from all over the world for the first time has given Kokare added motivation and belief. “If they can do it, we can do it, and we can do it better too.”

03

Y-Ultimate

#Delhi #UltimateFrisbee

There's a sport recognised by the International Olympic Committee that does not conform to the stereotype of a competitive sport. It has no umpires or referees. Instead, it relies on the players to police the game.

At tournaments, there is a 'Spirit of the Game' award in addition to the main competition, with each player assigned an individual "spirit score". The teams, too, are of mixed gender — men and women, boys and girls, all compete with and against each other.

This sport is Ultimate Frisbee, which over the last few decades, has become one of the fastest-growing sports in the world.

How does a self-refereed, mixed-gender sport work in today's hyper-competitive world?

This was the question former Delhi University student Benoy Stephen had when, in 2015, during his final year at St Stephen's, he discovered 'Ultimate', the name by which Ultimate Frisbee is popularly known.

Curious, he joined a local club team that occasionally practised at Greater Kailash (GK) park, located in the southern part of New Delhi. During these practices, he noticed that a few kids from the area would hang around and watch. Some would even join in.

"They were from Zamrudpur [a nearby locality] and came from socially and economically lower strata," Stephen recalls. "They were housemaids' kids or daily labourers' kids."

However, most of the kids who wanted to play never got the

chance so, in October 2015, they started their own team called GK Mad.

The children in the team were between the ages of 10 to 16 and played twice daily, says Stephen, who volunteered to help them out. He was immediately impressed by their attitude, which he says fit with the values of the sport.

“They didn’t get upset about losing. There were no pointing fingers. Even if they were losing 13-0, they would keep encouraging each other,” he said.

Their limited funds meant they played mostly in Delhi and Sonipat. But in 2017, they scraped together the money to travel to Bengaluru for a national tournament. Stephen says GK Mad surprised everyone by winning Division II in their debut, but for him, “the more important and beautiful part was that the team won the Spirit Award”.

The ‘ultimate’ solution

In Ultimate, players are rated by the opposing team on five parameters — knowledge of the rules and how to use them, effort to avoid fouls and body contact, fair-mindedness, attitude and self-control, and communication.

When an alleged foul is called by a player, the rest of the players freeze in place while the two concerned players discuss the incident. They can also request input from other players, who are expected to say what they saw regardless of which team it benefits. The team with the highest Spirit rating wins the Spirit Award.

“Competition can never come at the cost of the spirit of the game,” Stephen says.

It was around this time the name came up as well, though the organisation was not formally registered yet.

“Whenever we tried to communicate what we were trying to do, almost every time the question that came up was, ‘Why frisbee? Why not football? Why not kabbadi? Why not cricket?’ So we took the name Y-Ultimate to answer that — because we believe the sport is the ‘ultimate’ solution to the problems [of lack of education] we are trying to address,” Stephen said.

He would go on to spend two years with Teach for India in Hyderabad, during which he tested how Ultimate and education might work together.

If students misbehaved in his class, they had to play Ultimate at 6 am as a “punishment.” It was an instant success. “It stopped being a punishment because it was fun, and when they were in the classroom, they were more relaxed and didn’t have the energy to cause trouble,” he said.

He says that by the end of his fellowship, three schools in Hyderabad were playing Ultimate. “The experience incentivised me to move back to Delhi and do this further,” he notes.

Beyond just a sport

When Stephen returned to GK Mad in 2018, the team was being coached by Vivekanand Srivastava (the pair knew each other through Ultimate circles). Srivastava had become “obsessed” with the sport and would go on to play for India on two occasions. At the time, he was using his savings to help fund the team, which numbered about 30 to 40 kids split between the A and B teams.

Among those kids was Sunny, who began playing Ultimate at 16, and says the sport’s unique structure has changed him for the better.

“*Mai pehle logon se baat karne mein bahut hich-kichata tha*, but *ab mai sabse baat karne mein* comfortable *hu* (I’d hesitate a lot before talking to other people, but now I am a lot more comfortable). I was also not good at resolving fouls, but playing with Y-Ultimate helped me develop patience and now I am much better at resolving them.”

Thanks to playing in tournaments for Y-Ultimate, Sunny has also received the kind of exposure that otherwise would not have had access to.

“The tournaments have a *bhhaiyya* or *didi* who is an artist, or lawyer, or a development sector worker,” Stephen says. “Meeting people like that from different spheres of life inspires the children to dream bigger than they ever had before. That sense of belief creeps in.”

“They have come up because of the effort they have put in. They have that belief that if I put in the effort, I will do better than what I am today,” he says.

He also notes that the game keeps the children out of trouble. The neighbourhood they come from is a rough one, where delinquency, drugs and petty crime are common.

“There are kids in our teams who have made multiple trips to the police station, but now they have cleaned up,” Srivastava says. “Through observation and experience, we understood the power of this sport and thought, ‘Why not spread it to more children?’”

To help accomplish their goals, the pair formally registered their organisation as Flyingdisc Development Foundation in 2019. But it remains known as Y-Ultimate among the general public.

At the time, Y-Ultimate ran three programmes. The first was training and funding GK Mad; the second was a coaching programme; and the third was a vector model where they supported other organisations with models and curricula,

providing them with a blueprint for how to incorporate ultimate frisbee into their programmes.

They impacted 1,200 kids through workshops and other activities in their first year alone.

“Before COVID-19, we were in 11 schools and communities in Delhi,” he says. “We were also in three schools in Manipur, as well as three schools in Pune and five in Mumbai through a partner organisation.”

In 2020, three of their players – Kalpana Bisht, Megha and Sanya – were selected for India’s U-20 Women’s team, with Megha as the captain.

Megha started playing Ultimate at 11 and became a coach in 2020. “When I started playing, I was a very quiet girl. I had no confidence. But now my confidence level and communication skills have improved a lot,” she said.

She also credits Y-Ultimate with impacting her life for the better. “Y-Ultimate has helped me a lot — both on and off the field. I am able to play without the tension of money. Because of Y-Ultimate, I become a really good person in life ,” Megha says. “I am and I will always be very grateful to Y-Ultimate for always supporting me.”

Unfortunately, the pandemic forced Y-Ultimate to scale down significantly. “Mission 2022 was to reach the world championship, but COVID-19 hit and took us five years back,” Stephen says. “Right now (In 2023), we are supporting four teams in Delhi. We are trying to focus our efforts in Delhi and get our footing, and then look at building further.”

Fundraising remains perhaps their biggest challenge. “Sport is the bottom of the pyramid for CSR, and Ultimate is at the bottom [among sports],” Stephen opines.

Regardless, the organisation has already had a significant impact on a number of children. Stephen says that 11 of their first 15 kids in the programme have become youth coaches, with five going to college, and three earning a degree from Delhi University.

Additionally, one of their players - Kalpana - is now a PE teacher at a trust school in Delhi, while two others have transitioned into a design career. “Seeing how much these kids have grown gives me a lot of joy,” Stephen says.

Y-Ultimate has also rethought its model since the pandemic. Previously, they would partner with other organisations and schools to keep their budget down. But when COVID-19 hit and partner organisations stopped operating, they lost contact with the kids as a result. Now they connect with the kids directly through their parents.

They have also opened a community centre where children can come and study or simply get away from home if they need to. “It is more resource intensive, but we think it will be more sustainable with the relationships we can build,” Stephen says.

04

Shreeja

#WestBengal #Football

In 2016, Shib Shankar, a social entrepreneur from Kolkata, was working with an NGO in Bihar in the space of rural development.

“I was involved in educating people about health in Gaya district of Bihar, and Kota district of Uttar Pradesh through campaigns, disseminating information that would help them,” he says.

This was his introduction to the rampant violence against women in Bihar’s villages. In a state that ranks second pan-India in cases of domestic violence, the women that Shib worked with had little agency.

He recalls a particular incident that left him shaken, while he was using mobile phones to discuss health topics with women in Gaya district.

The NGO office received a call informing them that one of the women learning from this programme was beaten mercilessly by her husband, who assumed that she was speaking to another man on the phone. He beat her for long enough that the neighbours had to intervene, Shib recalls.

“To me, that was horrifying news,” he says, adding that his colleagues, too, had seen many such cases of unrest and turmoil.

This made him wonder what support systems these women had in place. Could building a community where young girls met and connected equip them to speak up against such social evils as they grew older?

For Shib, a good way to give this idea some shape was through

sports, which could not only bring the girls together, but also portray their strength and zeal to pick up a field that women don't foray into too often. "I wanted to build a women's football team," he says.

In 2017, this thought would take shape in the form of Shreeja India, a Kolkata-based NGO that works as a sports-based, out-of-school learning facility for children belonging to tribal communities. Under its purview, there are many activities and learning opportunities.

In his quest to start this venture, Shib was joined by his brother Hari Shankar Dasgupta. The two were filled with a zeal to help girls from villages of Keledihi, Jhikra, Manik Dihi, Badhagachi and more to stand up for themselves.

Over time, the organisation went from being only a football coaching centre to one that was also academics-oriented. This, he says, was at the behest of the parents of 50-odd girls, who were all keen on taking up the sport. "Their parents asked that, along with the football, Shreeja should start an out-of-school academic coaching centre. So that's what we did," he says.

"In our village, girls playing football is unheard of. Since I did not know of many girls who played the sport, I would practise with the boys. But when I joined Shreeja, it all changed.

Today, Shreeja is that safe space that Shib was looking to create. Girls from 54 villages get to equip themselves with skills brought by their interactions with each other, skills they learn, their progress at sports, and gains in academics.

Having all these activities under one roof is beneficial, says Hari Shankar. "The physical strength and confidence acquired on the football ground are reflected during their out-of-school learning and enhance their academic performance."

He adds that the bond created on the field also equips the girls to fight social evils like early marriage, abuse, trafficking, and violence against women.

Sonali Soren has been part of the football coaching since she was ten years old. She says it all began when she saw boys in her village playing the game and was intrigued to join in.

"In our village, girls playing football is unheard of. Since I did not know of many girls who played the sport, I would practise with the boys. But when I joined Shreeja, it all changed," she says.

She also notes that the NGO takes care of all their food and nutrition requirements as well.

To add to football and academics, there is also a focus on the holistic development of the girls. For instance, they are given computer classes and learn about different topics on the smart TVs on campus.

"We also do play therapy, wherein a trained play therapist helps the children explore their emotions and deal with unresolved trauma," says Shib.

Along with this, social awareness programmes address issues such as child marriage, trafficking, menstrual and sexual health, etc., and help render meaningful information and resources to the girls. “These programmes sensitise them and give them knowledge as they often lack appropriate guidance in these matters,” he adds.

The cycle of good

The NGO also runs the Nutri-Homes project, wherein they provide 70 households from 15 backward villages in Rajnagar, Birbhum with fruits, vegetables, and training to start their own kitchen gardens.

The idea at Shreeja is to start a cycle of good. Thus, girls who are trained and clear their higher secondary board exams are further encouraged to train the next batches. This is part of Project Vidushee, launched in August 2020.

As Shib explains, Project Vidushee focuses on the foundational learning of children from tribal communities. It seeks to instil the habit of regularly attending school in first-generation learners, who are primarily aged five to 10. “This project targets both boys and girls, as Shreeja believes all genders need to be adequately informed,” he adds.

In late 2022, Shib said, there were 10 Vidushee teachers and 143 children under the programme.

We spoke to one of them, Neha Mardi, who has been associated with Shreeja since Class 10 and is now a teacher under Project Vidushee.

Recounting her own days as a student at Shreeja, she says, “I interacted with so many other girls who all came from different villages, and this helped me grow while I studied and played with them.”

She adds that along with her studies, she also learnt a lot about culture and values. When she gave her higher secondary boards, Neha made her village proud by scoring 92 per cent.

A lasting impact, on and off the field

Shreeja India’s Beyond Football programme has been running in Birbhum and Purba Bardhaman districts of West Bengal since 2017 and has helped 300 girls play football (as of 2022), says Shib.

However, challenges have been plenty for the brothers, given that age-old customs and notions are embedded deeply in the communities they work with.

“The girls live within social systems where parents, siblings, and community members are not supportive of their education,” says Shib. “These harsh conditions force them to believe that they are capable of nothing more than the life they are already leading.”

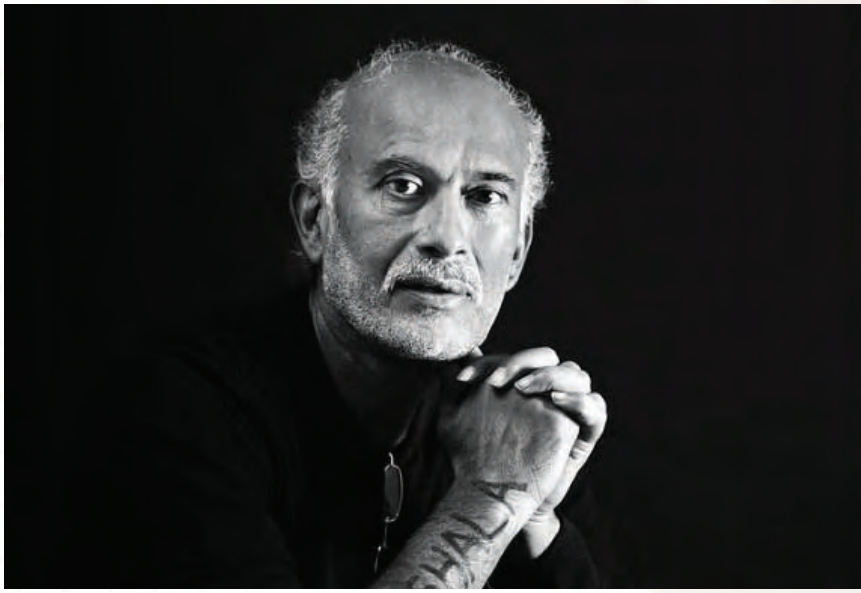
Changing notions

For now, they’re on the way to challenging these notions, he adds. Along with this, they are looking to infuse the football programme with knowledge workshops, art, dance, drama, one-on-one guidance, and mentoring.

“These enrichment programmes will move the girls beyond the ordinary behaviours into the realms of active learning,” says Shib.

He believes that Shreeja will soon be a place where discussion and dialogue will take place, not just about football and academics, but also about community concerns.

“Football integrated with academics can be a powerful vehicle for empowering women and catalysing social change,” he opines.



05

Khelshala

#Chandigarh #Squash

When Satinder Bajwa was coaching the Harvard University, USA, men's and women's squash teams, around 2006, the university's Athletic Director asked all the coaches to do something for the community. So, Bajwa created Kids Squash, a programme that gave young people in the community the chance to play squash at Harvard on the weekends.

Shimla-born Bajwa found his way to Harvard via a colourful, circuitous route. He was a trainee aeronautical engineer with British Airways, followed by a brief career as a squash pro, and then manager-mentor of the legendary Pakistani squash player Jansher Khan, during six of the latter's eight world championship titles.

Once Jansher retired, Bajwa moved to Harvard as the university's Director of Squash.

There, Kids Squash turned out to be a hit and it got Bajwa thinking. "If people in America needed this, then those in India probably needed it much more," Bajwa, who is now in his early 60s, says. "I decided I would add an academic and yoga component and opened Khelshala in India in 2009."

Together with a member of his extended family, Bajwa bought a plot of land in Attawa village that lies within Chandigarh city limits. Today, Khelshala occupies the basement and ground floors of the building they constructed, while the first and second floors have been made into a hotel.

It began with 35 children, most of whose parents were labourers,

> We found that charging nothing had no meaning.

domestic helpers, or rickshaw drivers. But by the second year, they had a waiting list. Buoyed by this early success, Bajwa opened a second site in Majra village, Punjab, in 2012, and this time focused on tennis.

The after-school programmes at both centres cater to about 125 students over the year.

Khelshala charges the parents about Rs 100 a month because the nominal fee encourages them to take the programme seriously.

In Attawa, the students arrive at Khelshala around 3 or 3:30 pm. The teachers at Khelshala help the children with their homework, lead them through an English newspaper reading, and hold general knowledge sessions. Some teachers also help those in classes 9 to 12 with advanced math and science. The kids are only permitted to play squash after they have completed their academic work for the day. They are also taught yoga three days a week. Another important ingredient at Khelshala is service – the students are given the collective responsibility of sandpapering the squash courts and keeping the facility clean.

But the biggest challenge lay in convincing the parents that sports could help their child do better in life, including academically. The parents also expected to see results immediately.

“Explaining to the parents who are not educated is the biggest challenge,” says Sujata Singh, who oversees Khelshala’s programmes. “They don’t understand that this process will take years. It is slowly changing but it remains difficult. They expect everything from us, and we have to tell them to be patient; that we are not cheating them.”

Singh works as a teacher in a local co-ed school before heading over to Khelshala. She says there is a big difference between the children who attend Khelshala and those who don’t. She adds, “[We give them] holistic development, so you can easily identify them ... There is a change in their personality, their way of talking, their way of behaving, and their thinking process.”

For her, education is the only way these children can break free of the “conservative and restrictive society” from which they come. “If we can change 200 students, then we can make a change in the wider society also,” Singh says.

Of course, this requires the children to put in long hours.

Education is the only way these children can break free of the “conservative and restrictive society” from which they come.

Subhashini joined Khelshala in 2017. Her mother is a maid while her father lost his job during the lockdown. Her day begins at 4 am and she arrives at Khelshala for squash practice an hour later. When her school ends at 2 pm, she goes back to Khelshala until 6 pm and after freshening up manages another hour of squash practice late in the evening.

The effort is worth it, she says, because the benefits are tangible. Subhashini says, “Before I came to Khelshala, I struggled to read in English. I shared that with my teachers, and they gave me a lot of help. Despite COVID-19, I got 85% in class 10 because of their help.”

That’s one of the big advantages of squash, according to Alisha Mashruwala, one of Khelshala’s trustees and a former member of the Harvard women’s squash team under Bajwa. After graduating, Mashruwala co-founded an education company called OnCourse. “A lot of people who are high up in corporates are all playing squash,” she says, adding, “The managers at Goldman all play squash. When you get the opportunity to talk to people and aspire to do things like that, it is a big deal. [And] everyone is willing to help everyone else in the squash community.”

Bajwa compares it to the kind of network a student can build by attending a good college. “When you put a racquet in the kid’s hand, you have elevated his or her network from 2 to 9 out of 10 friends.

There’s also been a change in her personality. “We know how to handle ourselves,” Subhashini says. “Thanks to squash, we feel confident that we can speak to anyone.”

In late 2022, Subhashini was pursuing her plus-2 in Arts at the local Government Model Senior Secondary School and dreamt of becoming an IAS officer. “If I focus, then anything is possible,” she adds.

Before joining Khelshala, Subhashini played kho-kho and even competed at the Nationals. But she prefers squash because she can keep playing the sport beyond school and college, unlike kho-kho.

Some of my kids at Khelshala are Facebook friends with Mukesh Ambani’s nephew because they play squash.”

One of Khelshala’s students, Priya, received a Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University, Haryana. “She is now [As of late 2022] a mentor at Teach for India. She went from strength to strength,” Bajwa reveals. “Then we have three girls right now pursuing their Bachelor’s in Physical Education. They are good at sports. One of them has already done a coaching course at the Squash Federation of India, so she will have a coaching certificate under her belt [when she graduates]. A couple of kids have been ranked in the top 10 of juniors. One got invited to the national team trials.”

There have been similar successes at the tennis centre as well. “We had a kid at Majra who is now a [tennis] coach at the Indian School of Business,” Bajwa says. “That’s a highlight. He was a boy from a village who had never seen a tennis court [before joining Khelshala]. Another kid is coaching at an elite private school in Chandigarh.”

Here, students are encouraged to explore other opportunities around the sport, such as becoming a referee or a coach, or even learning how to string racquets.

But Bajwa claims the biggest highlight of running Khelshala is seeing how “even a kid who is not good enough to play a match is enjoying squash and having a better outlook on life. Even those kids who are not naturally gifted and are average at sports and education, are showing traits of confidence and are aspiring towards a better life.”

The organisation seems to have weathered the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it took a combination of sacrifice and ingenuity to get through it. The staff agreed to a 50 per cent pay cut and switched to online tutoring. They also did a fundraising campaign to buy phones for the children.

As if that weren’t hard enough, Khelshala’s FCRA license also expired while government offices were shut, which cut off their funding from the United States, where Bajwa could tap into his squash network. According to him, half their yearly budget came from international sources.

“You can either give up or look at other channels,” Bajwa says, adding, “One of my friends – Anil Nair (eight-time India national squash champion) – kept telling me, ‘Satinder, there is more money in India than you think. Don’t just take the easy way out’.”

Forced to improvise, Bajwa leaned on his trustees to raise money to fill the gap and they have done so. Another former squash student of his also offered Khelshala Rs 10 lakh in 2021 to fund the renovation of their courts and their track. Thanks to these new funding sources, Khelshala is creating an international fund that will provide financial aid for their children to go to college in the United States.

Their experience with online teaching led to another unexpected outcome. In the middle of 2022, Khelshala started an online chess program. Someone whose son and daughter are national-level chess players in Mumbai approached Bajwa about starting online chess classes. “I would never have entertained that [before the pandemic]. But squash is physical chess and now we have mental chess and the two connect very well,” Bajwa says.

Khelshala’s Attawa location is now back to full strength, with almost 60 per cent of their students being girls. “We are very happy about this,” Bajwa says. However, their Majra site hasn’t bounced back the same way because the migrant labour left during the pandemic. Bajwa also found that when the children turned 14, they would often leave to join their parents as farm labourers. “We can’t hold on to them,” he says.

Their new strategy is to focus on the children who live in the area and to convince the local schools to send their students to Khelshala as part of the curriculum.

Then there is the desire for Khelshala to evolve as well. “I am actively looking to scale Khelshala to greater heights,” Bajwa says.

06

Umoya Sports

#Delhi #AdaptiveSport

When Aditya KV was a Teach for India fellow in New Delhi, he had four disabled students in his class who were often left out of games or sports. On top of that, they were being picked on by the other kids as well. Naturally, this affected them emotionally, socially and academically.

A passionate sportsperson who believes his time on the football field and basketball court taught him invaluable life skills, Aditya decided to use sports to help these students. He began a football programme for his class and by the end of the year, he saw a significant improvement in the attitudes of all the children, not just those four students. “The other kids became more open and friendly with these kids. Sports created an environment of inclusion,” he recollects.

That experience opened Aditya’s eyes to the obstacles Children with Disabilities (CwD) faced in Delhi NCR and how sports could help them.

So, he decided to leave his corporate career behind and dedicate himself to making changes on a larger scale. In 2017, he founded Umoya Sports to empower one million students with and without disabilities. He chose the name ‘Umoya’, which is a Zulu word that means ‘spirit’, to serve as a guidepost for the organisation.

The Umoya team identified three challenges faced specifically by CwD that they wanted to address:

- A lack of quality in-school programmes that provide holistic development to students with disabilities;
- A lack of social skills development and social integration of CwD

because of social stigmas and misconceptions about disabilities;
• And the physical and mental health issues faced by CwD as a result of frequently being excluded from sports/physical education in schools and the community.

The first part of Umoya's strategy to tackle these problems involved creating year-long programmes that build a child's fundamental movement and play and also teach them foundational sports skills. "We assess the child, understand the existing skill sets, strengths, and areas of improvement, and then we customise the programme activities so that the activity is skill appropriate and relevant for the child," Aditya says. They also make modifications to their existing programmes for those with disabilities, under the educational programme known as 'Adapted Physical Education'.

One of their students in the Adapted Physical Education programme is Mupu, a young girl with autism, who joined in the middle of 2022. "The two long years of COVID-19 threw most of the kids into inactivity, including my daughter," her father Mahesh Kumar says. "When we heard about Umoya and its plan of individualised and group sports for kids with special needs, we were keen to go and check about the plan and structure they would put forth in helping my kid learn and benefit from sports."

In Mupu's case, the teachers observed that she wasn't comfortable handling a ball, so they created fun activities where all she had to do was hold the ball and run or throw it. In this way, they built up her confidence with a ball and now she even plays basketball and volleyball. "I love bringing Mupu to Umoya," her mother Poonam Jha says. "I am a big fan of their approach to building on the individual skills of a particular game gradually. In the last two months, this has made Mupu more confident in those skills."

According to Mupu's parents, as a direct result of Umoya's programme, their daughter has become more energetic and more confident, which means she is more open to tackling new challenges. Her communication has also improved, and she is using more words and sentences. "Previously it was mostly her and me, especially during the lockdown," Jha says. "Now I can sit and relax while she learns from the Umoya team. At home also she has started following our instructions more sincerely."

For Jayanti, whose son Neil Moshahari is also autistic, the patience Umoya's team has with the children and their focus on the overall development of the child is what she appreciates the most. "I was looking for an overall sports activity but couldn't get one till Umoya's programme," she says. "Neil's transitions are better, and he is happier to come for his classes. He has made some connections with his peer group and I must appreciate the effort every member takes to build a rapport."

Umoya's programmes have also changed her relationship with her son. "It has definitely made us both more patient," she says. "Umoya has helped me see my kid beyond therapies."

According to Aditya, Umoya assesses the progress of the children, and thereby the success of its programmes, using three parameters:

- Developmental skills of motor coordination, agility, cardiovascular strength, and flexibility;
- Ball skills of shooting and ball control; and
- Social skills of confidence, teamwork, and patience.

"For us, the success of the programme is not to make Tendulkars and Ronaldos but rather to build an opportunity for children with disabilities to experience sports, build life skills, become confident, and lead an independent and enriching life," Aditya says.

The second part of Umoya's strategy is partnering with sports brands and corporates to create inclusive sports events that bring together those with and without disabilities. One example of this is the Sportability Academy at Modern School in New Delhi. Umoya is the knowledge consultant for the Academy and is designing its sports programmes for children with special needs.

Since its foundation, Umoya has reached over 12,000 children directly or indirectly, having launched pilot programmes in Mumbai and Bengaluru. "Our ultimate goal is to witness a day where every child, disregarding their (dis)ability, gender, religion, socio-economic background, has equal access to Right to Play," Aditya says.

07

Anantapur Sports Academy

#AndhraPradesh #MultiSport

When Anusha was in Class 7, her physical education (PE) teacher encouraged her to play for her school in the Rural Cricket Tournament for Girls, hosted by the Anantapur Sports Academy (ASA).

Anusha comes from a remote village called Bandlapalli in Anantapur district, Andhra Pradesh. Her parents are farmers who have a small plot of land, and her father also works as a tractor driver for hire. Playing sports seriously was not considered an option for her. But the then 13-year-old left-arm spinner was named the best player of the tournament and received a scholarship from ASA to attend their residential academy.

Anusha, has since played for the Andhra Pradesh Under-16, Under-19, and Women's Senior State teams.

"Playing sports at the ASA has helped [me] in many ways," she says. "It made me more confident than I ever was. It gave me exposure and financial help through playing for the senior State team, which I needed ... Alongside, playing sports at ASA has given me the opportunity to train in one of the best cricket facilities in the state as I was able to improve cricketing skills."

Anusha, an undergraduate at PVKK Degree College, pursued a B. Com in computers. But her dream is "to continue to play cricket at a higher level and [one day] represent the Indian women's team."

The ASA is part of the Rural Development Trust (RDT), which has been working in communities in Andhra Pradesh for over 50 years. In the late 70s and 80s, the Trust taught kabaddi to

encourage children to be active, but this was done in an informal way. Sport became a formal, and integral, part of its programmes only in the late 90s. That's when the ASA was born. Over time, the ASA programmes have expanded to include eight sports — cricket, football, hockey, judo, tennis, kabaddi, softball and archery.

"In the beginning, our programme used to provide financial and material support to teams travelling out to participate in tournaments," Moncho Ferrer, programme director of RDT, says.

> **A major emphasis lies on the grassroots**

"Later on, we started organising events such as grassroots level tournaments and camps to ensure children access their fundamental right to play in a safe and quality playing space, which later grew to a year-long programme with an emphasis on holistic development of children at all levels of the programme."

The organisation's programmes follow a traditional pyramid structure. At the bottom is their grassroots programme, which is conducted entirely in government schools in each community. Then there are the development centres, and at the top sits the residential programme, which is based at the ASA sports village that was built between 2000 and 2002.

"The major emphasis lies on the grassroots," Sai Krishna Pulluru, executive director of the ASA, says. "All the sports have a grassroots programme except tennis. We also have around 104 or 105 [development] centres, which include youth clubs, government schools, and sports centres."

According to Pulluru, the difference between the grassroots and development centres is that the latter have their own physical infrastructure, such as computer labs and classrooms, and they provide English classes as well as nutrition. The residential programme at Anantapur Sports Village is for children who have the potential to excel at sport.

The ASA also runs leagues from August to December for each of their sports where matches are held every Sunday. The rural cricket tournament is the longest-running league, and arguably the organisation's crown jewel. According to Pulluru, over 100 villages used to participate in the tournament, with the final being held in Anantapur at a pristine cricket ground. However, it was restructured and now features 16 teams each in U-12 mixed-gender, U-16 and U-19 age categories. It has also been renamed the Ananta Premier League (APL).

The programmes have been tailored for children ranging between the ages of 6 and 18. Over time, life skills were added to the programmes. For instance, a coach may conduct a session on topics such as communication, inequality, or gender awareness.

Pulluru estimates that 6,700 children were part of the programme at the beginning of the season, and roughly 1.5 lakh have gone through the programme over the years.

“It is a dream for me to be part of this kind of programme,” he notes. “When I finish my work, step out of my office, and watch the children playing, I can see the real joy on their faces. That is what gives me a sense of joy and happiness. That is one thing that really drives me.”

“I like playing [football] because I can make a lot of new friends and also visit other places,” Lahari says. “I can maintain fitness by playing sports regularly.” He credits the ASA with teaching him new skills such as teamwork and communication, as well as values such as respect and fair play.

“I am interested in refereeing,” he adds. “I want to become a professional FIFA referee where I can referee national and international matches.”

The ASA relies mainly on volunteer coaches and physical education teachers – “They are the backbone of the programme,” Pulluru says. The programme has also created a

JOY AND HAPPINESS

In 2016-17, the ASA started a mixed-gender festival where girls and boys compete together, though this is reserved only for younger children. The age depends on the sport — for cricket it is U-12, for football U-9, and for softball U-14. Participants are brought to a single location once in two months and the festival is held over two days, with the final round being played at the Anantapur Sports Village. Y Lahari, from Dharmavaram, was first introduced to ASA when he played in the mixed-gender U-9 football cup a few years ago. In 2021, at the age of 11, he was given a scholarship to attend the academy.

pathway for participants to become coaches. “Not everyone can make it to the next level. To build a sports culture, you need more coaches.”

The ASA encourages those who are interested to join the one-year Youth Leadership Programme and become volunteer or shadow coaches. As part of the programme, they are given the chance to organise events and conduct workshops. The ASA then supports those who complete the programme and wish to become professional coaches by helping them get their coaching licences from the various state associations.

In particular, the ASA wants to increase the number of female coaches in rural areas. “Though there is still a long way to go, it’s worth noting the changing perceptions among the wider community (particularly parents, teachers) about boys and girls equally playing sports,” Ferrer says. “The programme has enabled youth to gain skills to enhance their higher education and livelihood opportunities, particularly as a coach and/or a referee.” One of those coaches is P Hindu Kumar. He was selected for the residential programme as a 14-year-old in 2014 and is a coach with the organisation. He comes from a village called D Honnur, and says his parents were “very happy” when he was selected, because it meant he would get a good education and could also keep playing sports.

To measure the outcomes of its programmes, the ASA uses different parameters for each level of their pyramid – Grassroots, League and Empower. At the grassroots level, they use the number of the children they have in the programme plus the number of clubs they have set up. In the case of the leagues, which are open to all the clubs, they measure the number of children who participate from each club in the league. At the empower level, they track the number of youth leaders and volunteers in the programme, as well as the number of internships and employment opportunities that they can facilitate.

‘Sports made me who I am today

“Sport made me who I am today,” Kumar said. “It gave me a career opportunity as a coach, [and] I learned a lot through playing sport; most importantly believing in myself and in my team, and helping each other to achieve a goal, which are the most important aspects in any part of life or profession.”

The programme also taught him to develop empathy, he says. “[The] programme supported me when I was in need, as I come from a family where my parents are farmers and daily wage workers,” Kumar says. “Today I can display the same qualities as a person and professional working with children who have the same background as mine.”

The ASA also uses a socio-emotional development index to track qualities such as self-esteem and self-confidence among the children, as well as social skills such as communication and relationship building. The organisation has also developed a gender equality index that at the programme level factors in the number of female coaches, the ratio of girls to boys in each centre, and the overall ratio of girls to boys across all their programmes. ASA also has a section on gender in its questionnaire for children between the ages of 10 to 15 that aims to measure their perception of gender equality. Students must rate how much they agree or disagree with statements, such as

“I believe members of the opposite gender can equally participate in sport” and “I believe everyone is equal”.

As far as funding goes, the ASA benefits from being part of the RDT, which has its own sources of revenue. On top of that, the academy has project partners such as the La Liga Foundation and the Rafael Nadal Foundation. However, according to Pulluru, funding from corporates remains challenging because of a lack of information on how they can use CSR funds in tribal and rural areas.

“In the early years of the ASA, many had questioned what an NGO had to do with sports, but now we see numerous sports for development programs doing great work across India,” Ferrer says. “So, we feel humbled to see the trust we placed in a new programme back in the early 2000s has managed to evolve and grow to become this big in reaching approximately 8,000 children every year in eight different sports. Over the years, we have had numerous individual achievements, but of late, to share, I see Anusha, being shortlisted for the Women’s Premier League (WPL) auction as an accomplishment for her and our programme.”

08

Mahabalipuram Surf n Skate

#TamilNadu #Surfing #Skateboarding

The year was 2011, and Áine Edwards, a Chennai-based IT consultant, found herself again in Mahabalipuram on her weekend before she locked eyes with a three-year-old girl and thought she'd found an old friend. Much separated Kamali Moorthy and Edwards, age and background the least of it. What they immediately sensed was their shared love of surfing.

Edwards would spend much of her weekends surfing off the Mahabalipuram shoreline at the newly opened Mumu Surf School, interacting with the local surfers and the children. When Edwards saw Kamali for the first time, standing next to her mother in their new house, "She was so tiny," as Edwards, says. The pair connected immediately "like old soul friends who had found each other again."

Kamali was the only girl surfer in the community, and she helped draw Edwards deeper into her world. Originally from Ireland, Edwards spent more time in India over the next 10 years than in her home country, helping the surfing and skateboarding community with everything from getting equipment to handling the media while also running her consultancy. "I do what I do because I love it. It keeps me young at heart; therefore, I can balance my time between work, as this is my passion – to help young athletes as best as I can," she says.

The first time Edwards visited India was in 2003, when she spent six months volunteering at a school with 250 pupils in North Chennai. The project she was working on had three goals; two of them were to set up a computer lab and to fundraise for a school building and a bus. The third was to encourage sports, which doesn't always happen in Indian schools. Too often, sports are

seen as a distraction from education rather than an enhancement of it.

But Edwards had trained as a swimmer in her teens and played competitive hockey, so she was well aware of the benefits of sports. “I was blessed to have had sport in my life,” she says. “Team sports enabled me to build friendships with others and learn to compete with them also; to be an individual yet collaborate, which are brilliant foundational life skills to have.”

It was through Edwards that Kamali gained international recognition. Edwards met Jamie Thomas, Founder of Zero Skateboards, when he was visiting India, and she introduced him to Kamali. Thomas was impressed with the then six-year-old and gave her one of his skateboards. He also taught her some new tricks and posted a photo of her on a skateboard in a white dress on his social media. Tony Hawk, the skateboarding legend, saw that post and shared it with his four million followers, adding, “This picture of a girl in India is my new favourite skate shot.”

Kamali and her mother Suganthi were also the subjects of a BAFTA-nominated documentary titled ‘Kamali’ by Sasha Rainbow. The film won at the Mumbai International Short Film Festival 2018 as well.

Back in 2022, Kamali was focused on winning 2023’s national surfing competition. “I feel ready this year ‘cause I’ve been practising a lot,” she said. Kamali ended up winning the competition as she took home the gold

About Edwards, Kamali says, “We are great friends and have a lot of fun together in all that we do. [Edwards] takes lots of videos and does my Instagram so people around the world can follow me. I won some video surfing competitions in Australia called BlastOff. We [also] travel together. My family trusts Edwards to take me travelling, and even now [in 2022], we’re planning a trip to the Maldives.”

In 2020 Edwards was supposed to return to Ireland, but the COVID-19 pandemic kept her in India. She took stock of her situation and decided to take a break from work and dedicate herself entirely to the surfing and skateboarding community.

Team sports enabled me to build friendships with others and learn to compete with them also; to be an individual yet collaborate, which are brilliant foundational life skills to have.

“During the pandemic, we explored their needs and goals. Since there is no club, NGO, or infrastructure, I had to get involved. I’m proud of all we achieved together,” she says.

Among those achievements are four national skateboarding participants and a gold and silver for Kamali, but just as importantly, three athletes earned sports scholarships to Hindustan University in Chennai, which allowed them to continue their education while also competing on the national stage. Edwards believes that this step “changes everything…it causes positive disruption in belief systems within the community and is history in the making”.

Similarly, she believes that Kamali’s “most important role will not be as a medal winner, but as an inspirational figure and mentor for girls”.

It isn’t possible for every single athlete to win a medal. But by developing and nurturing a sporting culture, Edwards has shown

the local community how sports can benefit their children and help them expand their lives beyond what they had previously thought was possible. Today Edwards is back in Ireland but still extends support to the community over WhatsApp. “We are in touch every week by WhatsApp, video calls, messages, sharing photos,” she says. She has been helping the athletes remotely with applying for University and Surfing scholarships and connected them with Spider Murphy, a shaper in South Africa, who will make custom surfboards for them. Back in 2022, she was also in the process of collecting nine high-performance surfboards from her network of top surfers and friends in Europe to send back to Mahabalipuram. “I’ve proved that we can manage remotely. This is also learning for the future.” she said.

Nitish Varun, from a fishing community, started surfing with a broken fridge door before Mukesh, the owner of Mumu Surf School, gave him a proper surfboard. In the middle of 2022, he received a high-performance surfboard thanks to Edwards, who he says changed the lives of many surfers in Mahabalipuram. “Some surfers had quit surfing because they couldn’t get boards, but they are all surfing again after Edwards helped them get surfboards,” he said.

Edwards also takes videos of the surfers so they can see their mistakes and correct them. Thanks to her support and encouragement, everyone in Varun’s village supports surfing too. “They are also conducting local surfing competitions,” he said.

It isn’t all progress, though. In a heart-breaking demonstration of the community’s challenges, the small skatepark by which Edwards used to sit and film was dug up in July 2022 to make space for a beachside parking lot. “I felt this was the end of an era,” Edwards says. If there is a silver lining to this development, it is that the athletes have already approached the village leaders about a replacement. “This is the time for them to take the lead and ensure a similar future is given to the next generation,” Edwards says.

As with most sporting endeavours in India, sponsorships and funding are the main hurdle for the community. Edwards ran her first crowdfunding campaign to take the athletes to the Nationals in 2022. She also received donations from people who saw the community’s social media posts and reached out independently. “It’s been very organic and on a need-to-have basis. We are crossing each hurdle as it comes,” Edwards says.

That’s not to say Edwards doesn’t have bigger goals. She plans to take a team to an international surfing competition down the road. According to Varun, being able to compete in other Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Maldives “would help widen our perspective in so many ways”.

But perhaps the dream closest to Edwards’ heart is to take a team to Ireland to visit “the beautiful country” she calls home and establish a link between an Irish surfing town and Mahabalipuram, where both sides can learn about each others’ cultures through

09

Pro Sport Development

#Delhi #Odisha #MultiSport

When Suheil Tandon started Pro Sport Development (PSD) in 2013, he did so with the intention of helping talented underprivileged and marginalised youth pursue excellence in sports.

In India, resources for sports are the main problem, not ability.

PSD aimed to do its part to fill that gap and help develop the next generation of star athletes.

However, an incident at the start of their first project gave Tandon pause.

A promising 15-year-old female weightlifter did not return to school after the summer holidays. When PSD asked the school authorities about her, they discovered that her family had arranged her wedding during the break. For the girl's family, her potential weightlifting career was irrelevant to her future.

"This news hit me and the team hard," Tandon says. "We were faced with some harsh realities in the context that we were working in, and it made all the sporting achievements seem inconsequential."

In the short term, Tandon tweaked the programme to include the wider benefits of sports, but PSD was still geared towards building medal winners. By that measure, it was a success, with the athletes earning over 25 medals on the national stage. But by then Tandon had realised that focusing primarily on sporting achievement in isolation would not address the larger social barriers to playing sports in India, particularly for girls. So, in 2015,

PSD expanded its mission.

“At this point, we took a conscious and strategic decision to change our vision and move forward by utilising sports as a tool for the holistic development of young people,” Tandon says. In other words, the organisation would seek to develop a young person’s overall human potential through the promotion of an inclusive and sustainable sporting culture.

Tandon had always been passionate about sports, having played and watched multiple sports growing up, but it wasn’t until he was studying mathematics and economics in college that he discovered a career in sports was a viable option. “With some sound advice from a family friend working in the sports industry, I decided to pursue a sports management degree from Loughborough University in the UK,” he says.

That’s where his interest in developing athletes at the grassroots level first took hold, which led to the creation of PSD with the support of family and friends.

Today, PSD works in many states across India and has reached out to thousands of young people, 51 per cent of whom have been girls. Its two core teams are based out of Delhi and Bhubaneswar, respectively.

“Whenever PSD works in other states, we do so in collaboration with local organisations, while our team members from Delhi or Bhubaneswar travel to these locations,” Tandon says.

Through its activities, school children are given access to structured physical activity and sports-based programming, which in turn helps them develop soft skills such as teamwork and leadership.

PSD has also taken on the more ambitious goal of changing the perception of sports in the country. “[In India] Sports is not considered a fundamental right that all children and youth must have access to, as defined by the UN,” Tandon says. “Neither is sports considered an activity that can be utilised to drive positive change within the lives of young people and within communities.”

The impact of their work can be seen in the personality development of children such as Shibani Pradhan, whose father drives his own auto rickshaw. Pradhan was 11 when she joined the PSD program in Bhubaneswar. In 2022, a class 10 student at Saraswati Sishu Vidhya Mandir, Pradhan used to play games with her friends but didn’t know much about organised sports. Now she enjoys playing cricket and badminton in particular.

She says taking part in PSD’s programs has been “a lot of fun” and she has learned what is expected of a team player in sports, as well as learning about leadership. There have been important benefits off the field as well. “I am much more comfortable talking to boys,” she says. “We have learned there is not much difference between boys and girls. [The program] has also improved my studies because I have become mentally stronger. My communication has also improved.”

The centrepiece of PSD’s efforts is the Community Sports Program (CSP), which has reached over 3,000 children in Bhubaneswar. The CSP also involves developing community trainers and teachers thereby ensuring the program is local, sustainable, and inclusive.

During the lockdown, PSD had to switch to an online model that included live workshops for those who had access to an internet connection. Among them was Srabani Patra, then a student at Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandir school in Bhubaneswar. It was through CSP in 2021 that Patra learned about gender stereotypes, particularly in the home, where parents treat sons and daughters differently. “I want all parents to see their sons and daughters equally,” she says.

The workshops gave Patra the confidence to discuss gender norms with her father, Krushna Chandra Patra, which in turn has led her entire family to start questioning existing gender norms in their community. It’s precisely this kind of change that PSD hopes to inspire across the country as the organisation grows. It’s also how the organisation measures the success of its programs since it changed its mission in 2015. According to Tandon, the organisation uses “quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to evaluate the outcomes and impact of the initiatives”. Participants fill out surveys at the start and end of programs to analyse personal development. PSD also interviews trainers, peers, teachers, and parents to gauge the nature and extent of any changes.

> **‘We have learned there is not much difference between boys and girls.**

When it comes to the CSP, the increase in physical activity is one measuring stick. Beyond that Tandon says, “success for us is defined by the soft skills and values they are able to develop and implement in their daily lives, as well as their change in attitudes towards gender norms and stereotypes, and a better understanding of how to articulate life choices and make decisions concerning their own lives.”

While counting the number of medals its athletes won was easier, their current approach is undoubtedly more satisfying. “The best part of my job is that it does not feel like a job,” Tandon says. “During my travels, I also get to interact with young people who have benefitted from their participation in sports, which is always great to experience first-hand.”

10 Jungle Crows Foundation

#Odisha #WestBengal #Rugby

"Nobody gave them a chance," remembers rugby coach Paul Walsh, who led a motley team of tribal boys from Odisha to the TourAid Nations Cup for Under-14s in September 2007.

This is the story of how 12 boys from Odisha surprised the rugby world.

Taught how to throw the ball, and armed with lots of hope, they travelled from Kolkata to London, having been introduced to the sport just months before their departure. This bunch of young teenagers beat the teams from Zambia, Romania, Kenya and Swaziland in the league stage, and then left their best for the final against the South Africans. It all sounds like the storyline of a feel-good sports movie, and that's because it now is.

"I never set out with a great worthy objective. I always tell people that some great things have come out of it, but that was never the intention," says Walsh, talking about founding Jungle Crows Foundation, a sports and social development organisation supporting children and young people as they grow and develop. The foundation was given the same name as the local rugby club Walsh had founded in 2004 in Kolkata, with his friends John and Gary. "We found a lot of interested young people, and they got invested in it," Walsh continues, emphasising that Jungle Crows was born simply out of an interest to spread the sport he loved.

As a British diplomat in India, Walsh had sustained his love for rugby, but hadn't found a lot of local support for it. It was then that he discovered that a bunch of young people were getting interested and even passionate about it. "It just spiralled from throwing about a rugby ball," he says. Since those early days, the

Jungle Crows Foundation has transformed into an organisation that operates the Khelo Rugby community development programme and has expanded its projects to other South Asian countries.

Young Rajkishore Murmu had made the move from his village to Bhubaneswar along with his elder brother. He enrolled at the new institution Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS). In 2006, rugby was added to the suite of sports at KISS. Rajkishore initially found it very strange, having never heard of or seen the sport before.

Three Jungle Crows coaches – Sanjay Patra, Sailen Tudu and Walsh – with the support of Rudraksh Jena (the rugby coach at KISS) held an inter-school tournament in the summer of 2007. They advertised that the winning team would be able to travel to London for the international tournament. After the tournament, a total of 60 kids were selected and trained by the coaches for the next few months, taught about the sport, tactics, and fitness. Twelve players were selected from this pool, primarily for their physical prowess. In a matter of months, they had gone from never having seen or heard of the sport before to becoming a rugby team.

> **We joined as a joke. It was a bit like hunting and took us back to the times in the village.**

Walsh was convinced he wanted to take these boys for the TourAid Nations Cup in London. The training and preparation were anything but easy. Constrained by a lack of physical equipment, the coaches had to bootstrap and adapt, often using swimming across creeks and climbing trees as ways for the boys to boost their strength.

They were shown the hockey film Chak de India! (2007). They trained on the hard, dusty grounds in the Odisha heat while preparing for a tournament to be played on the grass in cold, rainy London. In the end, it all came together. By the time they reached London later that year, the boys knew the game. Over a few months, the boys were not only taught the sport but received unique life experiences as they traversed across continents. This was their first time on a flight and adjusting to things like the air conditioning in buses and other areas was a challenge, recalls Rajkishore.

The challenges off the field aside, the competition on it was fierce. What followed was nothing short of a miracle. “We didn’t know too much about the other teams or their history, so that helped a lot,” believes Rajkishore, adding, “Even before the final, we didn’t realise how big of a match or tournament it was.”

In the final, played at the London Scottish ground in Richmond, they were up against the team from South Africa. The boys initially seemed to fall short, daunted by advanced plays and technical manoeuvres and went 0-5 down. However, just as a sports movie’s story arc would have wanted, they eventually came back with three tries and went on to win 19-5. They played a simple but exciting game, and crowds flocked in to see the underdogs as

they began to defeat one team after the other.

“We didn’t think for a minute that the team would win the tournament. The organisers thought that I was a bit mad to be even bringing them there,” Walsh mentions, putting into perspective the feat that the young boys achieved. 15 years later, the triumph of the team comprising Rajkishore Murmu, Babula Melaka, Hadidhangada Majhi, Bikash Chandra Murmu, Chhitaranjan Murmu, Niranjan Biswal, Barial Beshra, Bukai Hansdah, Sahadev Majhi, Narasingh Kerai, Ganesh Hembram, Gouranga Jamuda was re-told in the movie ‘Jungle Cry’.

Walsh mentions that he still enjoys a good relationship with all the boys, who have taken many different paths. Rajkishore, who had captained the team in 2007, represented India till the Under-20s stage before turning to coaching at KISS, since having produced many state and even a few national players through the coaching set-up there. Chhitaranjan now plays on the Army Rugby Team and also heads their talent recruitment. Others have also continued their involvement in sport, while a few have found different sources of livelihood. A lot of the young people, both boys and girls beyond the team of 12 “have been given a second chance by playing rugby,” according to Walsh.

Some who have trained with the Jungle Crows Foundation have gone on to play rugby for India. The trajectory of these lives, changed by sport, is notable.

“And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair,” the Jungle Crows Foundation website, fittingly, features this quote from Kahlil Gibran. Walsh says that he did not set out with a larger goal in mind. The journey started by simply wanting to share the joy of his beloved sport. It then transformed into something much bigger than anything he expected.

“If we hadn’t won in 2007, there wouldn’t be the same name for rugby in India,” remarks Rajkishore. “There was rugby before 2007 and the changed world after — there is a massive difference.”

The wonder and drive displayed by the 12 boys pushed Walsh and others around him to chart a new course — to try and change lives one tackle, ruck and try at a time.

11

Dribble Academy Foundation

#UttarPradesh #Basketball

Basketball has been the most important part of Pradyot Voleti's life since he was 11. From representing Mayo College, Ajmer, in inter-school tournaments to representing Delhi at the Under-19 level, basketball has remained at the core of his identity. Even when Pradyot moved to Mumbai for his Bachelor's degree and returned to Delhi for his Master's in clinical psychology he never lost touch with the game.

"But I was never able to play at my highest potential. I attribute that to the low quality of training while growing up. In India, basketball is a popular sport at the school and college levels. Yet, we've not been able to nurture any high-level talent playing in the NBA or any of the top 20 professional leagues around the world," says Pradyot.

Instead of pursuing a conventional career, Pradyot decided that he would change how the game was taught in India. After completing his Master's degree (with substance abuse and addiction being an area of particular interest) in 2013, he began his journey on YouTube, watching a plethora of videos explaining basketball drills to improve the skills of young players, help them strengthen their fundamentals and develop at a faster rate.

"Watching these videos, I realised my calling was to be on the court and help children learn the game. As an ardent NBA fan, I was inspired by the NBA Cares programme, where they go into underserved low-income communities in the United States, promote basketball and do community-related activities," he recalls.

In 2014, Pradyot spent two months at the Elev8 Sports Institute in

Florida, USA. “I was fortunate to be mentored by some of the world’s best trainers such as Ganon Baker and Cody Toppert, who worked with the Phoenix Suns NBA franchise as their head of player development. In addition to my two-month stint at the institute, I also got the chance to closely observe a variety of college basketball programmes in the United States,” he recalls.

For example, Pradyot spent time at Stanford University and the University of Connecticut, two of the most storied women’s college basketball programmes in the US, producing multiple WNBA talents. He also had the chance to shadow the Northern Arizona Suns, the former G-League affiliate of the Phoenix Suns. There, he spent 10 days doing scouting reports, video breakdowns, physical therapy and other basketball-related sessions.

Setting up Dribble Academy

Armed with all this knowledge and experience, he came back to India to set up the Dribble Academy Foundation (DAF) in 2015, which he officially registered the following year. His mission began with just four children, which included his driver’s two daughters, two bamboo poles and a hoop in a makeshift dirt court in Gejha village, Noida in Uttar Pradesh.

As of 2022, there were about 450-500 children in Gejha who played basketball regularly. Every day between 3 pm and 8 pm, DAF organises multiple classes since they have only one full-fledged court. They have to run multiple batches to give all these children a space to play. To accommodate more trainees, DAF also set up a small court at the Gejha government school.

“Since setting up our programme in Gejha, we’ve managed to work with over 3,000 children between the ages of 7 and 14 across 8 villages. Children from these villages have gone on to earn full scholarships in good schools and colleges. The essence of what we do at DAF is to bridge the gap of basic sporting infrastructure in villages through basketball,” says Pradyot, who is today a professional basketball coach and skill development trainer.

With the help of their CSR sponsors, DAF has set up a programme in Gejha village at NEM Public School, a private school for children from low-income backgrounds. In total, they have been operating out of six government schools in the Noida area and two interior villages of western Uttar Pradesh in Sambhal Tehsil.

“We have built about five basketball courts in these villages. In some cases, we had an existing court which we have revamped. The entire collaboration works on trust. Our corporate partners are interested in our mission to provide a healthy and active lifestyle for at-risk children from low-income families,” he explains.

These children come from migrant families. Their parents are electricians, plumbers, gardeners, domestic help, etc. “They don’t have a lot of guidance. We aim to bring structure and discipline into their lives through basketball and keep them away from illicit activities,” he says.

Elaborating on their backgrounds further, Pradyot notes that some of the children in his programme were earlier caught stealing, but basketball has brought a change to their perspective and conduct.

“Besides discipline and structure, they also learn life skills and teamwork. These children come from homes where they witness alcoholism, and domestic violence and receive inadequate nutrition. But they still come to the court, play hard, bring results and offer no excuses. There is no bigger motivation for me to run this programme ,” he adds.

DAF also collaborates with the Delhi Government to teach their basketball programme in one of their schools. There is existing infrastructure in a lot of government schools. What they do is identify those schools with the help of stakeholders in the government, and utilise existing infrastructure to nurture talent and help them participate in district-level tournaments.

“This is a game which we can take to the streets because it doesn’t require a lot of space and investment in terms of equipment. It’s a very affordable game and a lot of children can play it at the same time in comparison to cricket,” he adds.

DAF is also promoting 3v3 (three versus three) style basketball, which is played in a half-court and gaining a lot of popularity across India.

“We’re organising small leagues, tournaments, and just making sure children fall in love with this game and decide to stick with it through the rest of their lives. Out of the 3,000 children, nearly 45 per cent are girls. Besides winning district-level tournaments, some of them have also gone on to achieve full scholarships in schools and colleges,” says Pradyot.

Before getting the CSR arms of a few corporations on board for funding, he ran a couple of private training programmes in Noida and skill development camps with boarding schools and federations. Part of what he earned would go to the Gejha village project and that’s how they were able to sustain it initially. With CSR partners on board, the funding situation has relatively improved. Support has also come from celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan.

Fun fact: Pradyot won INR 25 lakh in the Kaun Banega Crorepati game show in 2019. He used this to further expand the academy’s programme.

In the next 10 years, DAF hopes to take their basketball programme to 100 villages, where they want to set up full courts and half-courts, impacting the lives of 100,000 children.

Playing the right way

"The objective is to help them become quality shooters, ball handlers and good at defence and communicating. We also want to improve their ability to play multiple positions on the court," says Pradyot. "We focus on getting players to work on all those skills and make them better athletes. If you see any of our workouts, you will understand what we're talking about in terms of elite skill development which is what other countries have done."

He gives the example of Japan's Under-16 women's team competing against their US counterparts in the FIBA (international basketball federation) World Championships. The Japanese were significantly shorter than the American athletes, but used innovative skills to remain competitive. They still might have lost, but a country which was a minnow just a decade back is now a powerhouse in the women's game.

"That's what we are taking away. These Japanese girls are sharpshooters and good at transition basketball. It boils down to fundamentals," he explains.

In terms of curriculum, the DAF is following the one prescribed by FIBA, and all their coaches stick to it. "The bottom line is that the game needs to be fun, engaging and challenging. Players need to know their strengths and weaknesses and work on decision-making drills in their practice sessions so that they can perform at an elite level when they're coming into games. Practice sessions need to be tougher than games," he adds.

Two of their products—Dinesh Pal and Sachin Yadav—played in the Junior NBA Global Championship in Orlando, Florida, in 2018 and 2019.

Dinesh recalls, "We lost all our matches in 2018. But in the second match we played against the team from Latin America, I scored 26 points and made two assists and two rebounds. Given that I only started playing in 2016, I never knew that one day I would fly in an aeroplane to the US and represent India. Before getting selected to represent India, I played in the Junior NBA Nationals in Greater Noida where I represented Delhi. We competed with teams from other major cities like Bengaluru, Kolkata, Mumbai and Hyderabad, and won."

He adds, "What was also awesome about our trip to Orlando was that we got to meet NBA stars like Dwayne Wade, Danny Green and Brook Lopez." Sachin, who represented India twice at Junior NBA Global Championship in 2018 and 2019 says, "The exposure and experience we got was very good. The following year, we performed well. We won two or three matches, beating teams from Latin America and Europe. We qualified for the quarterfinals before losing by just two points to the Canadian team who went on to win the tournament."

Promoting a healthy lifestyle

DAF's motto is that children at a vulnerable age between 10 and 14 should have a sport that can facilitate a healthy and active lifestyle.

"In terms of an end result, a very small number of them will eventually go on to achieving scholarships. We've had about 12 students who have got full scholarships into schools and colleges,

and might have more coming through this year (2022). We are in the process of getting one of our players admission into one of India's top high-performance facilities," he says.

Both Dinesh and Sachin secured a 100 percent scholarship to St. Claret Pre-university College in Bengaluru in 2021.

"My father is an electrician and my mother a homemaker. Before I was introduced to basketball, I used to play cricket with my friends. Gradually, all my friends stopped playing cricket because Pradyot Sir had started teaching basketball at NEM Public School. Eventually, I enrolled into the academy and started playing basketball because I had nothing to do after school," says Dinesh.

Similarly, Sachin joined the Dribble Academy in 2015. "I did not join the academy for myself, but for my family as their financial condition wasn't very good with my father working as a supervisor in a private company while my mother was a homemaker. Like Dinesh, I joined the academy before eventually enrolling into NEM Public School," he notes.

"Once I discovered a passion for basketball, it was clear that this would be beneficial for me in the long term with regards to physical and mental fitness. Playing the game brought discipline and better time management to my life. I stopped doing pointless activities with my friends. My only objective was to excel in basketball and my academics," adds Sachin.

Both Sachin and Dinesh credit the academy for having changed their lives. "Pradyot Sir and Dribble Academy have helped me a lot. Besides offering excellent coaching, he has also helped me with my studies. In fact, initially, I didn't have basketball shoes because my family couldn't afford them. The academy helped me get a pair of shoes. They also took care of my nutrition requirements, feeding me milk and bananas regularly," says Dinesh.

Meanwhile, Sachin says, "Besides the sport, he taught us personality development, and communication skills and changed our mindset in terms of what we want from our lives."

While Sachin eventually wants to play the game professionally, he doesn't want to lose focus on his studies. Dinesh wants to earn a secure government job with the likes of Bank of Baroda or the Punjab Police and still play basketball after college, although he too harbours dreams of becoming a full-time professional.

"What we're also trying to do is give them enough information about the career options they desire, whether it's to become an entrepreneur, basketball player/coach, engineer or IAS officer. We will try to give them whatever possible support to help them achieve their dreams," says Pradyot. DAF also runs a literacy centre, which aligns with their basketball programme. All children going through their programme are mandated to learn the basics

> **Playing the game brought discipline and better time management to my life.**

of computers. They've got volunteers from the US teaching these children how to code.

"With these children, we are also trying to see what the job market requires five years down the line when they graduate high school or college. Through basketball, we want these children to become student athletes, where they're a student first and athletes second. These players have to earn their time on the basketball court. If they don't turn up at the computer class, they can't play the game. We're asking these children to learn and give their best, but excelling isn't necessary. Besides computer lessons, we organise English classes, art and craft, public speaking and current affairs to help them understand what's happening around them," he says.

Ten years down the line, Pradyot notes that he will be evaluating the programme in terms of how many children got to learn this beautiful game and have stuck to it even at the age of 30.

"The agenda is to play and maintain a healthy and active lifestyle. If we can keep them away from crime, substance abuse and other illicit activities, and help them become contributing citizens through basketball, we would have succeeded," he adds.

Meanwhile, in 2022 the Dribble Academy set up its Centre of Excellence, a high-performance facility in Jaipur. Here talented children from across India live and train in an environment where strength and conditioning, basketball skill development and personality development are a priority to help them maximise their potential. DAF is yet another example of a passionate individual translating his childhood love for sports into creating social impact for thousands of children and their families, one free throw at a time.

12

Brahmaputra Volleyball League

#Assam #Volleyball

Abhijit Bhattacharya cannot imagine a life without volleyball.

It is not difficult to understand why. His volleyball story starts in the shoe shops of Tezpur, Assam. In the mid-90s, a state government coach assigned to the local area had the vision of sending a player from the North East to the Indian volleyball team. What did he do next? He asked around in the local shoe shops if they had a customer who wore large shoes, in the hope of finding an athlete with the height and frame optimal for elite volleyball. This led him to Abhijit's father. An innovative, Cinderella-esque talent scouting strategy.

One thing led to another, and the coach convinced the Bhattacharyas that Abhijit must switch from playing competitive badminton to volleyball. It was a decision none of them would come to regret. Abhijit would go on to fill the large shoes of the coach's vision. He represented the country and even captained the Indian National Volleyball Team between 2003 and 2005. He remains the only person from Assam to have played in the national team. It is a record he wants to do everything to change.

It was after he retired from the game in 2006 that he put his heart and soul into leading this change.

When Abhijit decided to bring volleyball back to his community in Assam, he thought of all that volleyball had done for him. He wanted the children from his community to experience the joy and thrill of the sport. "The sport is a low investment, easy to learn and play and can be very entertaining for audiences to watch live. This makes it ideal for rural settings," he says.

During the pandemic, he went on to hold dozens of online volleyball coaching classes for kids in the far corners of the state. But when he was urged by a friend to visit a village near his hometown, he came across several children playing volleyball but hamstrung by a lack of equipment. He then made it a personal goal to not only get them volleyballs but to also gather resources for proper training to sustain their interest. Seeing participation grow, he organised a mini-tournament in the village, generating support from the community.

From these simple steps emerged his idea of the Brahmaputra Volleyball League (BVL), recognising what competition and engagement can do for kids.

He started with a WhatsApp message to his peers and friends, asking them to support volleyball by adopting a volleyball team of their choice. All it cost was a few thousand rupees to be the proud owner of a BVL team. The rest has been a journey even he couldn't have imagined.

Nine-time national badminton champion Aparna Popat describes the process of becoming a BVL team owner. "A common friend introduced me to Abhijit and he ran through the plan with me. He conveyed a lot of clarity with a basic financial plan and a vision of taking the league across as many districts as possible. He was extremely confident with his communication, in fact, it was quite unreal. He said he was only seeking support for kitting and travel. I felt a strong connection with providing kids with the opportunity to play and decided to pick up a team. Immediately, Abhijit sent me options for kitting, t-shirt colours, etc. for 'my' team."

All it cost was a few thousand rupees to be the proud owner of a BVL team.

She adds, “The whole experience of bringing on a team owner was very well thought out. Eventually, the team owners’ names were even put on the jerseys. It was a bit embarrassing at first.”

Today, the BVL is a tournament played across several different districts, bringing together thousands of players from more than hundred villages.

In the first two editions, countless success stories emerged, of which Archana Das is a shining example. Archana came through the ranks and participated in the league in 2020, only for her to go one step further and represent Assam in the U-21 National Championship.

A pro-volleyball community

Abhijit wants to take this project further and create new tournaments for younger children, who he feels get fewer opportunities to play the sport competitively. Inviting the best coaches in the country to mentor teams, he wants to make BVL a force to reckon with.

Aparna was impressed at how Abhijit always seemed to be on top of things, whether it was finance, operations, logistics or creating value for stakeholders. “It was all covered calmly and professionally,” she says. “Before the tournament started I got to speak to my team’s coach and players. I could watch my team play live with someone holding up a phone over a video call and it was wonderful. (in season 2, the matches were live-streamed). Despite not having access to huge funds or sponsorship, Abhijit was able to keep the ethos of the league alive while always looking to get better.”

The league has begun to capture dreams outside sport. Beyond playing volleyball for the first time, the children are getting the opportunity to participate in an organised competition. This means that a lot of them get to travel outside their villages for the very first time, and experience new things, all while proudly wearing a team jersey that has their name on the back. Abhijit speaks passionately about how these little things bring motivation and joy for them and for him and his team.

Aparna agrees. “I believe that the experiences sport gives us – from competition to travel to being a part of a team – has the potential to be life-changing. At the end of the day, sports does all the good things only if you get the opportunity to play. When we give kids the chance to play, we give kids the opportunity to make it the most memorable part of their childhood. That is the exciting element of this,” she chimes in.

The impact has extended to the community

Villages where the BVL is played host the children and others with open arms. People donate vegetables, cook together and serve meals for the players, and create a micro-system of support to encourage the young people further. And the teams are starting to get broad-based support, with sponsors coming in surprising ways. Aparna says she noticed Abhijit’s ability to get people to volunteer. “This is quite common in sports activities in the US, Australia, etc. but not as common in India”. He managed to tap into this, showing what is possible when you can involve the community. “They were cooking food, helping out with organizing the event and so much more. It was a team effort and helped create awareness and a culture of sport in the community,” she says.

“Sports is a medium of change. It is changing entire villages,” concludes Abhijit, seeing a bright future for the BVL.

“I don’t know how he does what he does. He is everywhere! Nothing seems to faze him and he has almost always managed to find a solution when any problem arose,” says Aparna.

Through the BVL and his community outreach, Abhijit has managed to create hope and build an ecosystem of support. The youth of Assam now have a league of their own. In the game of volleyball, service comes with many types of returns.

13

Naandi Foundation

#MultiState #MultiSport

Ganga and Jamana are twin sisters who come from a small village in Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh. Their journey with sports has not been an easy one. Being residents of a conservative village in Ratlam, education was never a first choice, let alone indulging in sports.

After relentless persuasion, which went on for six months, their parents allowed the twins to join the Nanhi Kali after-school tuition centre run by the Naandi Foundation, where they received daily academic support. Soon, they took this opportunity to play sports, which was a part of this programme.

They demonstrated exceptional skill in sports, and were soon participating in the foundation's in-house sports competition — the Toofaan Games.

The story of the Toofaan Games began in 2019 when Rohini Mukherjee, the then head of Nanhi Kali operations, thought it was time to introduce the girls to sports. "There are fundamental life skills that school classrooms can't teach you – leadership, teamwork, facing failure," she said. And that is where sports came in.

Around 1,90,000 girls, including the twin sisters, get at least 10 years of schooling and are introduced to sports once they are enrolled in this programme.

The Toofaan Games have turned into an annual sports gathering featuring four events. In the edition that started in August 2023, almost all of the girls under their wing competed right from the

village level all the way to the nationals organised by the trust.

When the organisation first looked to introduce sports, they faced a challenge of not having anyone on the staff who could lead a sports-focused initiative. Fortunately, they found the right candidate in Lisa Murawsky, who has been an international sports consultant, educator and coach for over 20 years.

Rohini (now the Head of Global Partnerships and Strategy) and Lisa together created the 'Sports for Life' programme for the foundation, which led to the birth of these games.

'Toofaan Games' And The Opportunities It Brings To Girls

Naandi Foundation, based out of Hyderabad, is an organisation working diligently since its conception in 1998 towards the eradication of poverty and upliftment of girls and women across India.

The four events of the Toofaan Games that the girls participate in are the 50m sprint, shuttle run, standing long jump, and endurance run. These four events were selected because they are simple, easy to conduct and give the girls an opportunity to demonstrate their speed, agility, lower body strength and stamina.

About 130 girls make it to the final stage of the Toofaan Games each year and for many of them, the games are the first time they set foot outside their villages.

A significant point to emphasise here is that the initiative is led by women entirely, right from coaching to the results. The existing infrastructure at Naandi — under the Nanhi Kali programme — propelled the movement in a short span of time.

The 'Nanhi Kali after-school tuition centres' are managed by a young woman from the same community as the girls. When sports were introduced, these tutors were to deliver the weekly sports drills and practices.

"In the first year it was optional for tutors to become 'sports allies'. About half of them said that they wouldn't do it because they didn't know what it was. By the second year, everyone wanted to do it," Rohini says.

The tutors initially went in not knowing what to expect, but once they experienced it, everyone wanted to be a part of it.

The first event, back in 2020, vindicated their belief about the benefits of sports and physical activity, and it was a result of the organisation inculcating sports into their work and regular programming.

Initially, videos and photos of the girls doing these sports drills were sent back and forth over WhatsApp to the sports allies. To streamline this process further, Naandi decided to create its own app called SportStar to create a database.

Now, once a week, a video of a sports drill is sent out to roughly 6,000 sports allies. This allows for feedback and collaboration among all of them as everyone shares their training videos, which ensures that the app has more content for their perusal.

"Our girls cannot relate to YouTube videos of foreigners doing these drills. With this exchange of videos, we have ended up creating more resources for our girls to imbibe information from. The app is not open to the public," says Rohini.

"If a girl is doing some exercise well, then we use that video during our drills across the country," she adds. This is what the organisation terms 'Sports for Life'.

What Do Girls Do in 'Sports For Life'?

Since its inception, 'Sports for Life' has lived up to both its name and objective to make sports a part of everyday life for girls starting from the age of six.

Under this initiative, one weekly sports class is delivered on SportStar. And, from August each year to the following January, there is a Toofaan Games sweep that goes across the country — about 6,000 villages in 9 states — as widely spread as Darjeeling in the north-east to Bharuch in the west. A subset of the girls also participate in regular football coaching.

Every young girl now enjoys one sports class per week where they not only play but also learn about body movement, nutrition and menstrual health management. It is a fun programme which lets all the girls willingly participate in it.

Inculcating sportsmanship and inclusivity while playing is another important principle that these girls are taught. "Every girl learns to include everyone else, it doesn't matter if they are good or bad at the sport," Rohini says.

While the academics programme is given in nine languages, the SportStar app uses photos and minimal English text. Limiting it to English was a deliberate decision and has had the additional benefit of helping the sports allies pick up and improve their

English, which appears to have worked.

How Was It Received At The Grassroots Level?

Vishakha Bhale Vyas is one of the 475 sports allies who work in the Bharuch district of Gujarat. This district has around 12,500 Nanhi Kalis aged between 6 and 14 years.

Responsible for mobilising and supporting the field teams in the district, she also pays attention to the tournaments announced by the local and district-level sports associations so that the girls there can participate in those events.

According to her, there is such a passion for sports that in the district they have branched out into football as well as other track and field sports and now have about 20 girls' teams.

"No one thought that in this Jambusar block, which is very backward, there would be so many girls' football teams," she says. "In fact, our girls' teams have been the only ones to participate in all the inter-district tournaments. Most other schools, even the private ones, don't even have a girls' football team.

The success of the football teams in turn led to the announcement of a training programme for coaches, open for rural women living in the neighbouring villages. "Now we have women football coaches who have D-Level Certification in Coaching from the All-India Football Federation (AIFF)," Vyas adds.

She has also benefited personally. "As a student, I played kabaddi and kho kho – I was in my college team. But I never thought that sports would enter my life again and that it would enrich my work with the community. It has helped me improve my health. I also find it to be refreshing, it breaks any monotony that may come into my routine."

Poornima Singh, who manages the programme in the Prayagraj district in Uttar Pradesh, works with 7,856 girls, along with 271 sports allies as of late 2023. She discovered that the girls did not need any motivation to play sports. "They are ready 24x7 to go to the playground and play," she says.

According to her, the biggest challenge has been persuading parents to let their daughters travel out of their district to participate in the Toofaan Games. "In many cases no one in their family has ever travelled outside the district, never sat in a train, never stayed in a hotel. For them to imagine their little child doing all these things is very difficult," she says.

The sports allies have also had to get creative to conduct events for the Toofaan Games. While villages have a lot of open space, they are either used for cultivation or are uneven and covered with plants and boulders.

So, they sometimes enlist the villagers to help clear a space for the events, or they lay down tracks which have only two lanes. "There are so many ways in which they find the solutions," Singh says.

Personally, Singh enjoyed coaching sports so much she got her E Level Coaching Certificate from AIFF earlier in 2023. "All day I work hard in the office, but in my mind, there is this excitement that I must finish all my work by 5:30 pm so that I can go to the ground and play," she says. "Another personal benefit for me from sports is that I sleep very well."

Difficulty finding suitable spaces to play in is something Ruchi Upadhyay, another sports ally, also experiences in Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh. "We would love to have good spaces," she says. "By 'good space' I mean level playing ground, no bumps, no pebbles, or stones or small bushes. And an ideal good space would be where we also have washrooms and drinking water."

Despite the lack of these spaces, the Varanasi programme has 12,603 girls and 499 sports allies as of late 2023. Upadhyay said she feels happiest when girls from her area qualify for the finals of the Toofaan Games.

Ask the students if they enjoy the event and the replies come in swiftly.

"I like all the Toofaan Games events," one participant says. "But I like football more. I want to play more and I also want to be good in my studies."

"My favourite is the sprint and shuttle run," says another participant. "I have learnt that I should keep sipping water and now I go for a run every morning."

The overall objective of the programme will always remain 'sports for all', rather than promoting excellence in sports. "There is bound to be talent that we spot," Mukherjee said. "And having spotted it, we will do what is required. But that is not our main objective. We want girls and women to play sports until their last living day."

14

Maitrayana

#MultiState #MultiSport

When Kalyani Subramanyam created the Young People's Initiative in 2006, it was with the aim to empower girls and young women through the medium of sport — specifically, netball.

This was part of her involvement with Naz Foundation's programme to use sport for development, she says. But the advent of COVID-19, which forced Naz to scale back on the YPI programme, put a spanner in the works.

For Kalyani, it was imperative that the programme continue. "We'd experienced how sports has shaped our personalities," she recalls about her time playing basketball in school. "When you come together as a team, strategise, win — or even when you don't win — sports offers the ability to come together and be strong."

At the time, Kalyani was also closely working with Corina van Dam, a sports instructor from the Netherlands. The duo decided that YPI, which till then had grown to encompass 1,15,000 girls, had to carry on its good work.

While searching for a solution on the way forward, Kalyani eventually met the founders of Maitrayana, an existing not-for-profit company that at the time did not have programmes or staff of its own. The founders of Maitrayana agreed to house the YPI programme, and so began their journey.

Kalyani has had many years of experience with working on gender and sexuality, and has always been an avid sports fan, she says. The Young People's Initiative has been built around three pillars — empowering girls and young women; influencing families and

Play is an effective way to learn through experience

communities; and ecosystem building with other stakeholders.

The programme works with girls starting from the age of 10. “The unique thing for us is that we work with girls at an age when they [typically] don’t play sports,” Kalyani says. “At age 10 and above most girls experience body changes and drop out of sports.”

The girls go through a structured 10-month programme, during which they learn how to play netball. One big advantage is that it is a sport where the girls can wear anything and play, removing the potential parental objection to a uniform. It can also be played on any surface, whether it’s grass or sand.

The sport is delivered in a way that the girls learn life skills alongside it. These off-field topics include decision-making, body image, menstruation, communication, women’s rights, and gender-based violence. Coaches hold two sessions a week in local communities as well as in government and municipal schools. Each session lasts 45 minutes to an hour.

To enable the girls to continue playing netball after they complete the programme, YPI facilitated the creation of netball clubs within the communities. “Our question was, why do boys form sports clubs, but girls don’t?” van Dam notes. “How do we facilitate these conversations and support our young leaders to take on these pathways? ”For her work in Maitrayana, she drew on her own experiences with how sports transformed her life.

“Not all girls get a chance to experience play because of the lack of facilities in their schools and access to public spaces because of gender discrimination. Parents think it is not safe for girls, [and they face resistance] from the community, boys occupy the grounds....giving girls a chance to play is a way to challenge gender norms.”

Meanwhile, Van Dam started playing football in the Netherlands in the ‘80s, at a time when girls didn’t play football. “Football has long been a male dominated sport in the Netherlands,” she says. “We were called weak, told we were ‘ugly’ to watch, that we looked like men, and that we’re all lesbians. Things have only changed most recently (as of 2023) when the Dutch women’s team performed well at the world stage and the men’s team has not been able to play as expected in any European or World Championship.”

For the programme, the duo zeroed in on netball, a sport that has a long history in India and is predominantly played by women.

Playing football led her to discover the use of sport as a tool to help others, first in terms of mental health, and then to bring about societal change. “Can society look differently at girls who play and be leaders in sports, be visible in public spaces, run around, make noise, give their opinion?” she asks.

The girls handle the management of the club — from the format to elections — while Maitrayana supports them with the training of referees, coaches and coaches. The clubs give the girls a safe space to keep practising their life skills and having conversations with each other about their rights and the issues they face.
Teenager Soni Sahu is currently a club leader at a netball club called Kamgar Club in Mumbai. Sahu, who was a Class 10 student at VVK Sharma High School (in late 2023), lives in Prabhadevi,

did not expect that and vanished.”

As of 2023, Maitrayana runs the YPI programme in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru, with roughly 10,000 girls participating per year. Kalyani estimates that since the programme started back in 2006, about 1,40,000 girls have gone through it.

“The biggest appreciation [we get] is from the communities where the girls live,” Kalyani said. “We have been able to demonstrate what it means for girls to take on leadership positions — they manage money better, they have more discipline, and there is an increase in self-esteem. Parents see the girls are more responsible. That’s the game changer.”

Creating a SAFE SPACE

Mumbai, where her mother is a homemaker, and her father is a cook. She went through the basic 10-month programme during the COVID-19 pandemic and helped form the club after she graduated.

“Before enrolling in the programme, I was only doing housework at home,” Sahu says. “I had no idea about the sports ground where we currently play netball. It was not a place where I could go...What I like about the programme is that I began owning a space in the community to play and I made friends in my area.”
Sahu’s confidence has grown so much that she said she was able to confront a man who was stalking her. “For the first time, I was not afraid, looked angry at him and asked, ‘What do you want?’ He

In fact, notes Kalyani, there has been a sea change in attitude over the last decade. When YPI first launched, she would have meetings with the parents to try and convince them to let their daughters join. She even saw the parents as barriers themselves. Over time they worked to address the concerns the parents had, and today, they have parents asking them to enrol their daughters.

“Parents come and the mothers even play, and they love it,” Kalyani said.

One important factor is that participants in the programme tend to stick around. Van Dam says 50% of her colleagues went through the programme. “They serve as role models both for the [new] girls

and the parents."

One of those role models is Sheetal Shetty, who is the Learning and Innovation Associate at Maitrayana. Sheetal, who grew up in Worli, Mumbai, joined the YPI programme in 2010 as part of their second-ever batch in the city.

She notes that she was shy and introverted, and at first mostly stayed at home. When the coaches would arrive after school, she would make some excuse or the other to leave. It was only when she saw her friends being given snacks while participating that she changed her mind.

After going through the 10-month programme, she joined the school netball league. Then, when she finished Class 10, her mother pushed her to apply to be an intern in the 18-month Community Sports Coach programme. "That time I was very scared of taking sessions," Sheetal says. "My coaches supported me so well. They told me that you can do it. Just breathe and take the session." Among the things she has learned is how to manage her finances. Her mother, who is a single parent, worked as a security guard to support the family. But now it is Shetty who supports her mother and her younger brother. "I do the budget. I pay the rent. I look after everything at home," she says. "I even paid for my wedding myself. I feel proud that I did this all by myself."

Becoming a coach also gave Shetty the confidence to get her personal life in order. She explains that she was in an abusive relationship earlier, but didn't believe she could get out of it. "The programme opened my eyes to my rights. I don't think I could have done this without it."

Shetty is determined to help other girls from similar backgrounds become leaders and agents of change. "I have seen the change." Maitrayana has the usual set of indicators to measure baselines and end-lines of those who go through the YPI. But over the course of the programme's existence, the key indicators of change are more incremental and harder to quantify. It is the girl who goes home and tells her parents that her brother needs to help around the house as well; it is the girl who stands up for other girls in the community and helps them join the programme; it is the girl who discusses menstruation with her parents.

"More than measuring, the indicators would be small incremental steps towards speaking up, talking about things that are important to them," van Dam says. "That is something we can see and hear from them. Does their mobility increase? Can they negotiate with their parents? What are they wearing when they play?"

Shweta Gupta, said that prior to going through YPI in 2016, she was an extremely shy person who lacked confidence and the programme gave her the platform to learn about her rights and

'Thousands of lives transformed'

become a decision-maker. “I got the chance to identify myself and my qualities...and I can now stand up for myself and who I am.”

Gupta, who lives in Goregaon, is a junior coach in the programme and is studying computer science (as of 2023). She is also simultaneously preparing for the UPSC government exam. She hopes to become an IPS officer so that she can influence policy on social issues and bring about change.

Even so, there are several challenges. One of them is to fight to have sports accepted as an integral part of a child’s education. “That’s not an easy argument yet,” Kalyani says. “Institutionalising sports is the bigger challenge.”

According to her, this is an important aspect because schools have some of the best [sports] infrastructure, especially in rural areas, but this often goes unused. Some schools are happy to provide access to their facilities provided Maitrayana takes the sessions because they don’t have a PT (physical training) teacher. Others see sports simply as a way to win medals and accolades for the school, rather than as something that can contribute to personal development.

At the same time, it is also important to create pathways for competition for those who excel at a sport and wish to compete. “You can’t say, ‘Play for 40 mins but don’t think of playing for the national team.’” Kalyani said.

Unfortunately, access to tournaments for most of their girls remains difficult, even at a district level.

These are problems the organisation can’t solve on its own. “We are one of the largest netball development organisations by default, but if you want to take it to scale, the investment that is needed from the government and institutions is much greater,” Kalyani said. “[Therefore] advocacy is very important for us.”

She hopes for a future in which government, business and sporting organisations can come together to make sports more accessible to women, so the gender equal society that Maitrayana envisions becomes a reality.

15 OSCAR Foundation

#MultiState #Football

Growing up in a slum area in Ambedkar Nagar, Mumbai, Ashok Rathod saw many of his friends drop out of school to work in the nearby Sassoon Docks. His own father, however, threatened to evict him from the family home if he joined them, he recalls.

So, around 2006, while attending college and coaching football at the NGO Magic Bus, Ashok wanted to offer guidance to some of the children in his neighbourhood. He knew a few children who had dropped out, and wanted to convince them to go back.

Rather than lecturing them, however, he wanted to “bring them together”, he says. He chanced upon the idea of using sport as a hook.

So he decided to coach them in football. He arranged to meet around 18 boys at Oval Maidan at 4.30 pm one Saturday. He wasn’t confident they would all show up, but they did. The boys had a good time and they agreed to do it again the following week.

Initially, some of the children refused to play with others because of caste, religion, or regional differences. Ashok decided to group those children into the same team and instituted a rule that when a player scores, the whole team has to celebrate, or the goal would not count.

“In one year, they forgot about caste, religion, etc,” he says. “I also noticed a change in them. They stopped using bad language and had more discipline.”

He also insisted that if they wanted to keep playing football, they had to go to school. Some of them had dropped out, so he enrolled them in a local NGO to improve their reading and writing. Over time, the original group of boys began to bring their friends along. “They thought if we can change, their other friends can also change,” Ashok says.

It was hard for him to manage the growing numbers financially, but in 2008 CNN-IBN gave him the Real Hero Award, which came with a cash prize of INR 3.45 lakh. Ashok used that money to buy new equipment and uniforms, and also rented a community centre in Ambedkar Nagar for the kids, which remained open 24 hours a day. The centre is still operational today.

Magnificent, Aspirational

By 2010, the programme had 300 children. “I was trying to support everyone, but then the money got over,” he recalls. When Ashok approached people for funds, he was asked if he had a bank account and was a registered NGO. “I said, ‘I don’t want to register. I just want to do it.’ But people wanted their tax deduction.”

He realised it would be difficult to support the children without registering the NGO, so in 2010, the OSCAR Foundation was formally instituted.

The name was inspired by the Academy Awards, with the idea being that the OSCAR is something “magnificent and aspirational”. The name stands for ‘Organisation for Social Change, Awareness and Responsibility’.

However, this didn’t immediately solve Ashok’s funding woes. When he would approach a corporation, they would always ask if he had any existing corporate support. When he said no, they would demur too. “[Getting] the first one was very difficult,” he said.

It eventually took a bit of subterfuge. A few employees from the Indian Hotels Company (Taj), who had heard about Ashok’s initiative, visited the ground in their personal capacity during a training session. Here, he took some photos with them.

Around the same time, an article about Ashok had appeared in Readers Digest and based on it, he managed to get a meeting with the CSR team at IDBI Bank. He showed the IDBI team the photos of him with the Taj employees. The IDBI team assumed that Taj was a sponsor and agreed to support him. Then Ashok went to Kotak Bank and told them about IDBI, and they agreed to

support him too. “Now I am not using Taj Hotels,” he laughs.

Govind Rathod was one of Ashok’s original 18 boys. He was raised in Ambedkar Nagar and knew ‘Ashok bhaiyya’. His parents worked in the fish market and he attended a local school. When he was 12, however, he dropped out and moved with his family to Panvel, where he worked in a small canteen and then in construction.

Two years later, during a visit to Mumbai, he met Ashok, who convinced him to start playing football. By the time Ashok introduced his ‘no-school, no-football’ rule, Govind was hooked. “I was totally addicted to football ... I told my parents that I want to stay here only and want to study,” Govind says. Fortunately for

“With an eye ON THE GOAL”

him, his elder brother supported him and helped him get readmitted. To pay his fees, he sold magazines and newspapers at traffic signals and washed toilets in a few buildings.

Over time, Govind picked up life skills from the football practices as well. “I learned about confidence building, the importance of education, and why we need to stop child marriage,” he said.

Child marriage was personal for him, he says, for his parents had already chosen a girl for him. “I fought with my family to not get married,” he says. “No one in my family had completed Class 10 — I wanted to be the first.” In his time with OSCAR, Govind travelled to Brazil in 2014 during the FIFA World Cup, to South Korea to attend a United Nations Youth Leadership Camp, and to Vietnam to attend an Adidas Football Exchange Program.

He also went on to finish college and earned a scholarship to study sports management in Germany. In one of those coincidences that make you think fate must be at work, Govind’s interview for the scholarship was at the Hoechst House in Mumbai, where he used to work.

“I had my interview on the 10th floor, and I used to wash the bathrooms on the 7th and 8th floors,” he recalls. “Somehow, I got selected and went to Germany for five months. I was the first guy in my family to have a passport, the first to fly in an airplane, and the first to speak English.”

“I pushed myself, but OSCAR Foundation gave me the opportunity and helped me to reach that level. From zero to hero. I can say that,” he laughs.

In late 2022, Street Football World (an organisation using football for social change on a global level and supporting OSCAR Foundation) invited him to attend the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where he watched England play against Iran.

Given all these accomplishments, it is not surprising that there has been a marked change in his community’s attitude towards

OSCAR Foundation. “In the start, the community would say I am just wasting my time,” Govind notes. “For this reason, in the beginning, a few of those 18 left the programme. They didn’t believe [in it at the time]. Now half of the community’s children are part of OSCAR’s programmes.”

As a first-generation OSCAR “graduate,” Govind has also become a role model for the next generation of kids from the community. “That is a responsibility for me and I think about how to set a good example. I want to tell all the children that nothing is impossible if you have a passion and are dedicated to your goals and dreams.”

KICKING STEREOTYPES TO THE KERB

A few years after starting the boys’ team, Ashok wanted to start a girl’s team as well, but the parents didn’t think football was for girls. They were worried about their daughters getting injured or developing darker skin from being in the sun, both of which could potentially affect their marriage prospects.

Ashok finally broke through by threatening to stop teaching the boys if the girls weren’t allowed to. “They agreed to send the girls once a week for one hour,” he says.

He then resorted to a roundabout way to form an actual girls’ team. In 2011, a girls’ tournament was held in Cooperage in Mumbai, and Ashok convinced a few girls to show up by telling them it was a picnic. The girls had never played as a team before, and didn’t even know the rules.

Ashok told them to not use their hands, to listen to the referee, and stop the other team from scoring. “They stood in front of the goal like a wall and just played defence,” he says. The girls lost the game on penalty kicks, but gained a huge boost of confidence in the process. The organisers also gave them a uniform and shoes.

All girls football sessions are also held as part of the OSCAR Foundation coaching, “They told their parents — we got shoes, T-shirts, and many other things. So, parents thought the girls would keep getting stuff and kept sending their daughters. Now (as of early 2023), we have 1,600 girls in the programme and they have been to France, Denmark, Russia, and England. They even won the Dana Cup in Denmark.”

Off the field, the OSCAR team teaches the girls about menstrual hygiene and gender equality as well as life skills.

Sonal (name changed), joined OSCAR Foundation in 2017. She lives with her mother in Bandra and attends a municipal school. Her mother is a domestic worker and is separated from her father.

Sonal says she wasn’t physically active before, but now football has become a fun hobby. “I love the vibe on the ground, and get


NO SCHOOL
NO FOOTBALL

to meet a lot of new people and make new friends. It feels good to participate regularly in physical activity," she explains.

She adds that OSCAR has helped her to develop life skills off the field as well. "My coaches take a lot of interest in helping us, beyond football. Learning about life skills and implementing the same has brought a difference in me. My communication skills are much better now."

Renu (name changed) discovered OSCAR in 2019, when some of her friends in the community began attending the all-girls football sessions near her house in Badhwar Park in Mumbai. Renu, who wants to become a teacher, says that in addition to football, she likes participating in music sessions and gender training.

OSCAR measures the success of its programme in a number of ways. Attendance at football and in school is one of them.

"We know that 90% of our kids passed their Class 10 and 12," Ashok said. "Those that don't pass, we follow up so they don't drop out. Once they fail, they don't want to continue. We counsel them and help them to continue."

They also do pre- and post-testing for life skills such as decision-making, critical thinking, and gender equality as defined by the World Health Organization. They also test football skills and have started checking if any children are at their proper weight in case they need help with nutrition. "We give milk, bananas, and sometimes eggs," Ashok explains.

As of 2023, OSCAR operated in Mumbai, Daman, Rajasthan and Karnataka with plans to expand to Daman and Rajasthan. In total, the programme (as of 2023), impacted 4,200 children, while almost 14,000 children have been through the programme over the years.

> SOMETHING **MAGICAL** MUST BE **HAPPENING**

What remains a challenge, he notes, is explaining the benefits of sport to those who have never experienced it themselves.

"It is very difficult to explain that sport brings change to the community in a very fun way, but slowly," Ashok says.

Because of this, fundraising for sports also remains a challenge in India. "As many as 90% of corporations give to education; only 0.2% is given to sports for development organisations. So, there is a challenge, but...challenges always teach you [something]."

When asked about the high points of the programme, Ashok mentions two girls from the programme who played for India in the Under-17 World Cup, as well as one who plays for the Maharashtra team. On the boys' side, two have been selected by Bengaluru FC, one by Mumbai City and one by Jamshedpur FC in the Indian Super League.

Outside of football, Ashok says, one of their former students is now a supervisor at one of India's leading health and fitness platforms, while another is doing his MBA in finance from the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies.

‘14,000’ Children Impacted

“There are many stories like this through this programme,” he notes. “These children never even dreamed about playing a sport, but now they are going abroad. They are thinking about getting a job at the corporate level, not just serving as delivery boy[s] or working in a shop.”

Ashok is also particularly pleased that many of the youth from the community come back to OSCAR to lead their programmes.

“When I reflect, I feel something magical must be happening. It’s hard to believe my journey,” he says.

16

Magic Bus

#MultiState #MultiSport

There was a time when Vidya Tamkhane was afraid to even step out of her house.

When she was in Class 10 back in 2013, her brother took her to the playground and introduced her to kabaddi. She resisted participating at first, but he encouraged her to play. It wasn't long before she fell in love with the game, she recalls, and the trajectory of her life changed.

Instead of simply accepting that she would get married when she reached a certain age, she became determined to make her own decisions. In 2022, a few years after she got her undergraduate degree, she interviewed with Magic Bus India Foundation and was hired as a kabaddi coach in Chandrapur, Maharashtra.

"The [traditional] thinking is that boys should do work because they have a family to feed, while girls are expected to get a good-looking husband with a government job. But my brother changed this outlook and gave me support," Vidya says.

Her job with Magic Bus inspired her to venture even further outside her comfort zone. She acquired the skills to effectively communicate with school principals about the value she gained from the sports-for-development and life skills education programmes of Magic Bus, and to persuade parents to enrol their daughters.

"Family permission from parents is very difficult at times," she explains. "They feel [it is] unsafe. It was very difficult for me to win their trust, but I did it."

Vidya was one of six female kabaddi coaches from similar backgrounds and ages (between 23 and 25) who joined Magic Bus around the same time. The other coaches were Komal Pachare, Nilam Verma, Shital Borkar, Poornima Chandekar and Reema Khushwah, who shared a common goal — to empower girls through sports, just as they were.

All of them are part of Magic Bus' School Completion and Livelihood Enablement Programme in Chandrapur. The purpose of the programme is to train teachers to deliver life skills education to adolescents from Class 6 to Class 10 in collaboration with the government. Operating in Chandrapur proved to be a success, leading to Magic Bus initiating a partnership with the government to further expand their impact.

Magic Bus, Founded by Matthew Spacie back in 1999, has impacted the lives of more than one million adolescents over the past two-plus decades. As of late 2023, 3,94,206 adolescents were enrolled in their programmes across 2,770 schools.

Reflecting on the initial days, he says, "About 30 years ago (In the mid-1990s), when I arrived in Mumbai, I couldn't ignore the stark contrast in living conditions within the city. On one side, there was a sizable middle-class population, living fairly ordinary lives. On the other side, there was a parallel reality of people living in poor conditions.

As an outsider, this divide deeply affected me, compelling me to respond in some way. However, there was a personal connection that played a significant role in shaping my vision for Magic Bus.

Sports for Development

Magic Bus is a pioneer in the life skills education and skilling sector in India. Their mission, as Matthew states, has always been to help young people. "When we started Magic Bus, our aim was to help young people thrive and find happiness and success. We took them on mountain trips and engaged in various activities to boost their resilience and happiness. Our community-based mentors played a crucial role, serving as role models who had conquered similar challenges. For me, the importance of mentors became evident early on. Within five years, our approach transformed from me playing rugby with young men at the Gymkhana to engaging 10,000 adolescents and young people across Mumbai in a life-changing programme led by mentors from their own communities."

Now, the organisation implements a sports and activity-based life-skills programme with the goal to equip adolescents with essential life skills and facilitate a smoother transition from school to the workforce. As of late 2023, it is operating in 24 states across 72 districts in India.

"Magic Bus has played a pioneering role in introducing sports-for-development and life skills education in India and Southeast Asia. Currently, we empower individuals to acquire essential life skills through sports. By gathering on the playground, we especially empower girls to assert their presence in a domain traditionally reserved for boys. We aim to challenge gender stereotypes, encouraging girls to break barriers while fostering equal participation from boys," says Jayant Rastogi, Global CEO, Magic Bus India Foundation.

The organisation shows that adolescents in its programmes improved their school regularity by 21.8%, a 31% increase in perceived self-efficacy, and a 34.7% boost in resilience.

In Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, a place where Magic Bus has actively engaged since 2015, a significant milestone was reached in March 2021. The organisation introduced a sports programme exclusively tailored for girls. Divided into two distinct phases from December 2021 to March 2023, this programme carried a primary objective of empowering girls aged 11 to 18 through the influence of sports.

According to Vivek Sharma, the programme manager, 10,000 girls were given sports sessions each in kabaddi or cricket. The girls also took part in tournaments within their schools. Some of them were then chosen to compete in district, state, and national tournaments.

The objectives of the programme also include the holistic development of the participants, which includes communication, socio-emotional learning, and education.

Vivek says they were able to succeed in Baddi because Magic Bus had earned the community's trust first. "We had been planning since 2015. We worked with the girls, the boys and their parents and sensitised them [to the idea of a girls' sports programme]."

The programme has also actively addressed common concerns raised by parents regarding the safety and expenses of the girls participating in tournaments held in larger cities. Recognising these concerns, the programme takes responsibility for the girls' expenses and ensures their safety by arranging for accompanying coaches during their travel. In certain cases, the programme even covers medical expenses and provides first aid kits.

Vivek emphasises, "In this way, we address any doubts community members may have about the program, ensuring that their questions are answered satisfactorily." Matthew adds, "Initially, when I played rugby with young people, I believed that helping them secure jobs would lead to economic stability. However, we realized they weren't ready for a structured work environment. This setback inspired our "Childhood to Livelihood" programme. We understood that getting them jobs was only half the battle; keeping them employed required equipping them with the right skills and guidance to enter the workforce. It's where they grasp the value of work, learn skills beyond their chosen profession, and evolve into role models, actively breaking the cycle of poverty for their families and the entire community."

'Showed me the right path'

Vivek points to the example of Prachi, a young girl who had previously never left her village. In 2022, she travelled to a national athletic competition in Ranchi, Bihar. "Her parents were in complete shock that a girl who never left the home before has performed in this kind of event," he says. "They said, 'If you had not tried with our child, she would never have reached this level.'"

Another girl who has benefitted from Magic Bus' interventions is Bittu Kumari. She joined the programme in 2017 as a Class 8 student and says she learned life skills through volleyball and kabaddi (volleyball has since been replaced with cricket). According to her, Magic Bus helped her make the optimum use of her talent as a kabaddi player. "Now (in late 2023) I am a state-level kabaddi player, and I want to play at the national level also," she says. "If I had not found Magic Bus, I would not have made it this far. They showed me the right path."

In the process, she has gone from being scared to speak to people to having the confidence to speak to anyone. "Magic Bus taught me communication skills, gave me confidence, taught me what is right and what is wrong," she says.

In 2022, Magic Bus appointed Bittu as one of their community coordinators. While her ambition is to become an IPS officer, she also plans to play kabaddi for as long as she can. "My parents give me full support. They say, 'When my daughter is on the right track, why would I stop her?'"

For Matthew, these stories motivate him further. "The emotional aspect of our work reminds me of our mission's importance and the need to stay rooted in the communities we serve. By understanding their struggles and empathising with their challenges, we ensure our programmes remain relevant and effective. This powerful motivation drives our commitment to doing right by them and striving for continuous improvement."

17 Sisters In Sweat

#MultiState #MultiSport

In 2017, professional football player Tanvie Hans moved from Delhi to Bengaluru. In the past, she had represented English club teams like Tottenham Hotspur Women and Fulham Ladies FC before returning to India.

"I moved to Bengaluru because I felt the pulse of football was growing a lot more here than in Delhi," she recalls.

In the new city, her main contact was Swetha Subbiah, a personal trainer and one of four Nike-certified fitness instructors in India, with over a decade of experience. Tanvie first met Swetha through a Nike commercial campaign in 2016.

"One evening in November 2017, after much convincing, Swetha took me out to her friend's party. At the party, her friend was super excited when she heard that I was a footballer and asked 'Why don't you teach me and a few of my girlfriends how to play?'."

"Responding to her request, we booked a ground for that weekend. We didn't have too many expectations and thought that 4-5 women would turn up for it. We thought it would be a one-time 'fun session'. Much to our surprise, however, 17 women turned up," Tanvie tells The Better India.

Tanvie and Swetha designed a 1.5 hour session for the women, who were mostly in their mid-30s. For the first half hour, Swetha deployed her skills as a fitness instructor and made them warm up to prepare their bodies for sport. Then, Tanvie organised "some fun football drills".

"We had music in the background, and the whole idea was to

For women, by women, and stitched together by sport

make sure they have a good time and maybe learn a little bit in the process. After the first session, the women came back to us and said they loved it. They wanted us to organise these sessions for them every weekend. That's how our community started and grew," says Tanvie.

This session gave birth to Sisters In Sweat, a community exclusively "for women, by women, and stitched together by sport".

Founded by Swetha and Tanvie, the objective of this for-profit organisation is to bridge the gap of women dropping out of sports, especially after school or college. With multiple sports formats including football, basketball, and touch rugby, they give a community of over 3,700 women from many walks of life regular access to sports.

"When Sisters In Sweat started in 2017, it was primarily a bunch of my friends between the ages of 35 and 40. But since 2017, we've grown significantly. The average age has come down to 25-30, but we do have girls as young as 12, 14 and 15 playing with us. As of late 2022 the oldest member that played with us was 65 years old," says Swetha.

"We have women in the corporate world, lower management executive level and upper management like CEOs of companies. We also have a handful of entrepreneurs, mothers, homemakers and college students," she adds.

"Initially, the assumption was that at least in college you had the opportunity to play sports. But what we are understanding now is that even in educational institutions, unless you make it to the school or college team, that opportunity is actually quite limited. Overall, we are catering to women of a variety of profiles and age groups."

Opening avenues for women to play sports

Why do women drop out of sports, especially after school or college?

"It has been ingrained in our mindsets and our culture that sport is essentially for boys and men, given the aggressive nature of contact sports. At the school level, some institutions offer sports for women but are very selective with the kind they offer. This is seen in colleges as well. After school and college, even having access to organised sports is practically impossible, which is why I feel women drop out. They just lack the opportunities to play

"As our community has grown and women tell us stories of how much joy sports has brought into their lives, we were really inspired"

regularly," argues Tanvie.

And so, Sisters In Sweat is trying to open new avenues for women to play sports.

"We are providing opportunities for women to play with other women so that they feel comfortable and safe. We organise it all for them so that they just have to turn up and have a good time," she adds.

Sisters In Sweat has an on-ground presence in Bengaluru and Mumbai. All their physical sessions are organised there, primarily in Bengaluru, which also doubles as their headquarters. They launched their Mumbai operations in 2023 and note that "there has been a good response". In the long run, their aim is to create a pan-India community spanning multiple cities.

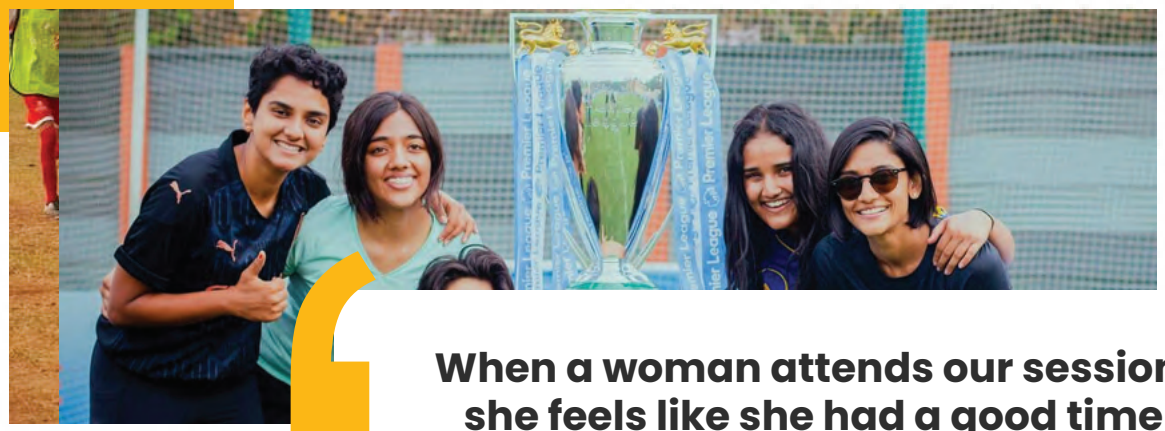
"In Bengaluru, we run weekly football, basketball, badminton, and touch rugby sessions, as well as organise runs every Sunday and cycling events every quarter. We also do swim sessions in collaboration with the Nisha Millet Academy. For everything else apart from swimming, we have hired our own coaches and organise sessions ourselves," explains Tanvie.

Sisters In Sweat also tied up with BFC (Bengaluru Football Club). They give community members tickets to watch their men's football game live at the stadium whenever it happens in the city. This is just another way for them to encourage women to be a part of the city's sporting culture and watch the sport that they are actually playing.

"We are also planning to collaborate with other such football clubs across India. We also collaborate with athleisure wear brands or brands that promote healthy eating habits," she adds.

Finding a sense of community

But how do their sessions encourage women to stick with sports?



When a woman attends our session, she feels like she had a good time burned calories and made friends

Tanvie says that for one, their membership is free and a one-time process. "Anyone, interested can go on our website, fill in the details and book any event or session. You pay per event or session but you don't pay for membership. We have kept membership free because we don't want a fee to become another barrier for women to join our growing community."

"Also, as much as possible, we design the session to be fun. When a woman attends our session, she feels like she had a good time, burned calories and made friends," she adds.

Sisters In Sweat also markets itself as an organisation that presents sports as a recreation and social activity for women.

"We emphasise a lot on the community model. Even after the session is over, we all go out for breakfast together and get to know each other. In almost every session, we have new people joining us and that is exactly what we want. We want the community to keep growing. We always tell women to start by attending one session and that they would want to keep coming back," says Tanvie.

Among the women who have found this sense of community is Tanvi Kaur, a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist with her own practice.

"As a sports person, it has been a great way to play a sport again thanks to Sisters In Sweat. Their sessions gave me the opportunity to play the team sports that I used to play in school and college. I played basketball at a national level, and picking up a ball after 15-16 years was a big deal for me," says Tanvi.

"Attending their sessions has also helped me assimilate better into the city and create a social space. I don't know whether it's a Bengaluru or a Sisters In Sweat thing, but the community or sisterhood here is extremely inclusive, welcoming and encouraging. That spirit runs in the founders of Sisters In Sweat and their whole community," adds Tanvi.

As part of their community offering, Sisters In Sweat is also trying to create an ecosystem for women in sports where they have the opportunity of finding gainful employment as coaches or in managerial roles. Within their team, they have one girl who is a professional football player and heads the operations for Bengaluru. They have several female coaches."

In fact, their first preference is to hire a female coach in whichever sport they launch. "Of course, there is a bit of a roadblock there because there aren't too many female coaches currently, but we are hoping that it will change. Whether you want to do something at the management level with us or you just want to be a coach, we try to provide those opportunities," says Swetha.

"I played basketball at a national level, and picking up a ball after 15-16 years was a big deal for me

Where women find inclusivity

Sisters In Sweat plans to expand its operations in pan India over the course of the next few years. Having said that, from time to time, they do host one-off events in different cities or plan to do so before they fully establish themselves in a new location.

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Dream a Dream

#MultiState #MultiSport

After his graduation, Bengaluru-based Vishal Talreja got a chance to visit Finland, where he noticed a significant emphasis on the idea of dignity of labour and the high quality of life that people enjoyed, irrespective of their background and the nature of their job.

“It got me thinking about my own upbringing and the caste-class system surrounding us. I wanted to go back to India and change the way we look at dignity here,” he says.

Upon returning home, Vishal decided to dedicate his weekends to meaningful volunteer work. He focused on assisting youth from underprivileged and vulnerable backgrounds where they were exposed to issues such as malnutrition, abuse, and exposure to crime at an early age. Education and life skills were not prioritised for this group, prompting him to offer his support.

Through various connections, he met a group of passionate people, all in their early 20s working in the IT sector in Bengaluru, Pune, and Delhi. Although they didn’t specifically know each other, they shared a common goal to build a roadmap that would give them a clear sense of purpose. Vishal and a team of 10 others established ‘Dream a Dream’ — a non-profit organisation dedicated to transforming the life experience of vulnerable children in Bengaluru.

They started with an after-school programme in Bengaluru to teach essential life skills to children — such as teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking — utilising sports and creative arts as mediums.

“The programme is about helping children understand who they are, what are their strengths, what is their support system, and what are their dreams and aspirations.”

What started as a weekend initiative has now evolved into a full-fledged organisation that spearheads life skills education in Indian public schools. “When we founded Dream a Dream, we never expected to become a national organisation transforming education for millions of children,” says Vishal.

Their work has expanded to six states including Karnataka, Delhi, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Nagaland and Telangana — all in partnership with the respective State Governments.

> **Directly engages with 10,000 young individuals**

How we turned our dreams into reality

At first, the group began their work with a community of children affected by HIV, investing considerable time to bring joy and happiness in their lives. By 2001, they had also started working in a care home catering to these children.

“At that point, Brinda (one of the founding members) was able to get two to three international volunteers, who organised a creative art therapy programme for the kids. It was a three-month weekend programme, and we saw a mind-blowing transformation among the kids. That was the first time we saw the impact of experiential learning in children,” says Vishal.

The art therapy programme encouraged them to widen their focus on empowering children from vulnerable backgrounds. Within two years, the organisation grew from 11 to 300 volunteers.

While working with care homes and orphanages, Vishal understood the complexities the kids faced. “Most of the care homes did great jobs to take care of the children’s basic needs and keep them off the streets but they didn’t necessarily prepare the children for life outside the home. A lot of the kids would end up returning to their care homes after a year or two of being outside post 18 years of age,” he adds.

During this period, the organisation integrated sports, arts, theatre, music, and various crafts into their weekly life skills education programme, using a unique life skills approach focused on the transformation of every child.

Pavithra KL, who is an alumnus of Dream a Dream, explains, “The programme is about helping children understand who they are,

what are their strengths, what is their support system, and what are their dreams and aspirations."

Dream a Dream programmes — such as Direct Impact, Systems Demonstration, and Building the Field — focus on implementing a life skills-oriented curriculum, pedagogy, new teaching methods, teacher training, and comprehensive assessments.

Under their 'Direct Impact' programme, the organisation employs a demonstrable model in both in-school and out-of-school learning spaces. It directly engages with 10,000 young individuals aged 8 to 23 each year, offering innovative education opportunities through sports and arts. This approach fosters crucial life skills like teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Additionally, the programme aids individuals aged 15 to 23 in preparing for an ecosystem that necessitates skills such as computer education, spoken English, communication skills, money management, and workplace readiness.

The 'Systems Demonstration' programme aims to transform public education systems in collaboration with the government. The organisation has effectively trained over 35,000 teachers and educators in the life skills approach. This training enables them to create safe learning environments within their classrooms and expand their influence, concentrating on curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluations. In addition, in partnership with state governments, as of late 2023, the organisation has introduced new curricula such as the Happiness Curriculum in Delhi, Anandam Pattacharya in Uttarakhand, a whole-child development pedagogical approach in Jharkhand and a Life Skills Curriculum in Nagaland and Telangana. The organisation also support the state education departments with new pedagogical approaches, teacher training and introducing new assessment frameworks.

The 'Building the Field' strategic approach is working to enable a mindset shift among diverse stakeholders in the learning ecosystem to bring in a collaborative approach to education, encompassing the broader community, decision makers, professionals in various fields, parents, teachers and other stakeholders. The organisation intends to maximise impact through large-scale dissemination of real world research findings, engage in critical dialogues to listen to diverse narratives of success, amplify young people's voices through collaborations and advocate for thriving as the purpose of education by weaving

together people, places and voices supported by high impact research.

Spearheading change through sports

Dream a Dream works with both affordable private schools and State Governments. For instance, they partnered with the Delhi government and other nonprofit organisations to implement the world's largest in-school Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum — the Happiness Curriculum — launched in 2018 by the Delhi Government to enhance students' mindfulness and positive productivity. This initiative positively impacts eight lakh children in the national capital.

Pavithra, the Associate Director at the Innovation Lab, which creates skill development modules for young people, states that Dream a Dream offers children numerous opportunities to participate in various games like hockey, rugby, and table tennis. As of late 2023, they have exclusively emphasised football.

"Football allowed us to include as many people as possible given its popularity. We could get many young people to play as it didn't need a lot of equipment," she says, adding that the football programme at Dream a Dream includes a weekly two-hour session.

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Pavithra further explains that children typically join the programme at the age of eight, mostly in Class 4, and can select between the creative arts and football programmes, each lasting for seven years.

The initiative has impacted over 2.2 million children across the country, she says. Among them is yet another alumnus Ranjith H, who, at the age of 12, used to play kabaddi in school.

In 2008, driven by curiosity about rugby, the jersey, shoes, and weekly snacks offered to participants, he enrolled in the rugby programme. "At the time, my father would load or unload goods in the market whereas my mother worked in the garment industry. Because of financial constraints, we did not get good quality food at home. I mostly depended on the snacks provided by Dream a Dream," he shares.

To support himself financially, he took on part-time jobs, including assisting in garment work and distributing newspapers. Despite the challenges he encountered at home, within a few years, Ranjith was competing at the national level for Karnataka. Travelling to rugby tournaments and meeting people from other parts of the country gave him the confidence to come out of his shell.

"That was the time I learned how to talk to people. I was not scared of playing rugby but I was scared of talking to people before!" he says.

Later on, Ranjith completed his Class 10 and went to college. "I realised how much sports can benefit a person. My sports certificate helped me to get into college through the sports quota. I worked part-time and completed my college," he says. After college, Ranjith joined Dream a Dream as a football facilitator.

The fundamental goal of the organisation is to ensure that no child they work with is left behind. "Can we ensure that each and every young person feels a sense of support and is moving forward? Even if they have failed academically, are they thriving? Can they still look forward to a life with dignity?" asks Pavithra.
"As we are learning more about young people, we are working to re-imagine the purpose of education in the 21st century towards the idea of Thriving," she remarks.

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Sportz Village Foundation

#MultiState #MultiSport

Saumil Majmudar and Parminder Gill run Sportz Village, a Bengaluru-based organisation that uses sports and play as a medium of education. Sportz Village Foundation, its non-profit subsidiary helps children from public schools (rural & urban) benefit from sport in terms of better educational, health and developmental outcomes. The organization also helps students become athletes playing at district, state and national levels in a variety of sports.

When Saumil and Parminder set up Sportz Village in 2003, it was to highlight why 'play' is important in a child's overall development.

Gill notes, "Some of us felt strongly that play was being missed out. When we went to schools, and then when our kids went, many things had changed. But there was no change in how schools or parents looked at play or physical activity — rather, we saw it diminishing from children's lives for many reasons [including a sedentary lifestyle, the use of gadgets as opposed to active playtime, etc.]"

And so, Sportz Village was set up to get children involved in play and sport as part of their core education. For roughly its first decade, the Bengaluru-based organisation worked with private schools that were able to pay for their sports and physical education programmes. Now (as of 2023), Sportz Village operates in 22 states — including Delhi-NCR, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Haryana, and West Bengal — and does significant work in rural areas as well.

Why play?

Saumil explains that, over the years, he had tried multiple models of getting children to play in sustainable and scalable ways before arriving on the school partnership model.

“Providing adults — who control the child’s quality and quantity of place experience — with the right data and visibility around the process, as well as on the impact on goals that they care about (attendance, grades, fitness, sports, and so on) can help get 100 million children to play,” he opines.

This, he notes, is possible through a structured programme that integrates with the school PE timetable, is designed for limited space and time, and provides resources, data, and visibility to the various stakeholders involved. Most of all, it gets “100% of the children to develop the right fitness, skills, and attitudes to play for life”.

In 2017, the organisation launched Sportz Village Foundation to help raise Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds and expand its outreach in government schools.

“The CSR law requires a corporate to invest only with a non-profit,” Gill says. “The new structure was important so that we don’t have constraints in raising funds for running programmes in government schools. The Foundation also allows us to achieve different goals, even though the structure of our programme and the quality of experience for children is uniform in private and public schools. In government schools that cater to children from underserved communities, there are different things ailing the system...the biggest piece is the socio-emotional skills.”

Some examples of socio-emotional skills are the ability to understand your thoughts and feelings and the ability to relate to others. These skills are widely recognised as vital to personal development and building healthy relationships.

50,000 lives transformed

Gill says that keeping children, especially girls, in school was another one of their priorities, as the drop-out rate in government schools is quite high.

The programme, which is called ‘Sport for Change’, functions at three levels. At the base is sports education, which involves teaching children basic physical and sports skills. “The core [of the programme] was to integrate children in play and sport because it was central to their experience and development process, regardless of whether they want to be athletes or not,” Gill said.

According to Upma Kanswa Jain, who manages marketing and communication for the Foundation, over 50,000 students are currently (as of 2023) engaged in their programmes. They also wanted to create a pathway for those who performed well in a

sport and wished to pursue it further. So, the next level is their sports excellence programme PathwayZ, where interested or selected children are given expert training in their Sports Development Centres (SDC).

These centres are located within the schools in which they work. At the highest level, they take the best-performing student-athletes from the SDCs and admit them into the high-performance learning centres (HPLC), where they are also provided with match and tournament opportunities, and given scouting information about district, state, and national selection trials.

Of the 50,000 students in their programmes (in 2023), over 2,200 are enrolled in SDCs, with roughly 60% being boys and the rest girls.

Finally (as of mid-2023), there are about 40 students in their high-performance learning centre, of which roughly half are boys and half are girls. “They get invited to trials that are happening at the district level,” Jain said. “If they perform, then state level, then national level events.”

Shaping athletes

Different geographical areas offer different sports depending on the infrastructure available in the schools. For example, in Lucknow and Noida, children can choose between volleyball, cricket, football, kabaddi and athletics. The sports development centres operate six days a week and host sessions lasting two hours a day. Depending on the school, the sessions are held either in the morning or in the evening. The children are given t-shirts, shorts, shoes and additional nutrition in the form of bananas, eggs and milk.

In situations where a child’s parents are reluctant to let them attend the sports programmes, the Foundation’s programme managers reach out to the parents to tell them how good their child is at sports, and that everything is paid for, so they don’t need to worry about any additional expenses.

According to Ranvijay Gupta, one of the programme managers in Uttar Pradesh, the Foundation has faced the odd protest as well. “[The parents] tell us, ‘You people are spoiling our kids by making them go outside and play. This is not our culture. We cannot let them go outside and play’.”

At the same time, he makes it clear that it is possible to change the minds of even these parents. “It takes time,” he says. “I take the help of the other parents whose children are in the programme. I tell them to come and support us. We have a second meeting, and a third meeting. After that, we can mostly convince them, and they send their wards to us.”

Based on his experience, around 70% of the responses they get from parents are positive.

Gupta is in charge of the programmes in Lucknow & Noida-based schools supported by the HCL Foundation. He joined Sportz Village in 2010 and moved to the Foundation in 2017. According to him, they had just 5 to 10 girls in their SDCs when they started the programme, but now (in 2023) they work with over 600 girls on a regular basis.

“We have helped more than 450 children play in district-level tournaments, more than 100 at the state level, and over 30 at the national level to date,” he said. “This is very satisfying for me.”

Building role models

One of those girls is Rukhsar, a Class 11 student (as of 2023) at Govt. Girls Inter College Vikash Nagar in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. She is an avid kabaddi player and wants to represent India one day. However, previously, her circumstances held her back. Her

father earns INR 7,000 a month working in the private sector and did not support her desire to be a kabaddi player, though her mother and three siblings did.

The Sport for Change programme cleared the way for her to play by giving her the opportunity to train with expert coaches and sports nutritionists, while also learning life skills such as leadership.

As a result, Rukhsar was selected for the Uttar Pradesh senior women's state and junior girl's state kabaddi teams. She is also a promising athlete in the triple jump, where she finished first at the district level.

"My parents feel much better now because I am travelling to different places, meeting new people and my game is getting better," Rukhsar says.

The Foundation hires specialised coaches to run its sports excellence programmes. The coaches must have played at the state level in their sport and hold a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's in Education. However, as the organisation has grown, hiring good coaches has become a constraint because funds have not kept pace.

They are also training children from their programme as coaches. Since the Foundation is relatively new, the first batch of potential coaches from within is only now (in mid-2023) on the horizon. "Very soon, we will hire two or three girls from our programme," Gupta says. The advantage of having homegrown coaches is that they are already familiar with the programme, and being from the same community as the children, can sustain the programme and serve as role models too.

Beyond the field

Sportz Village Foundation has conducted a number of studies to determine the impact of its programmes on education, health and empowerment. One of them concluded that in the roughly 390 schools supported by Ashok Leyland, the children were more likely to attend school and showed a 10% increase in fitness levels, 18 months after the programme was launched.

Another study with the Sports Authority of Gujarat demonstrated a 23% increase in female participation in after-school programmes, two years after the launch of the programme.

They also conduct an annual health survey, of which the most recent results (as of mid-2023) claim that 95% of children improved their fitness levels, 92% improved their communication abilities and 78% developed greater emotional capabilities in the face of challenges.

"There are still some barriers in our society around gender," Gupta says. "I feel that at the policy level, inclusivity should equally be a focus so that more talented girls can come forward without any hesitation, participate in sports and eventually win medals for India."

"Nurturing athletes, especially girls, can serve as a way to create role models for children and youth of India, within and beyond the field of sport," Gill says.

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It's A Living Thing: A Note From Sharda Ugra

"We know why you are taking down our names," said one of the three, grinning young women standing in front of me. The names I have in the notebook are Retika Ekka from Diglipur and Reetika Biswas and Nikita Sarkar from Kadamtala.

I asked the girls, "You know? Okay, tell me."

"Because when we do well at the National Games, you'll be able to recognise our names."

Like it always does, the recognition hits you square between the eyes. It's like being given infrared goggles to see the engine – its outline, its shape, its unshakeable weight – of what keeps Indian sports ticking.

The 'National Games', the woman was talking about, were to be held in Gujarat from September 27, 2022 to March 10, 2023.

There were other teenagers around us at the Netaji Stadium, some jogging past on a muggy afternoon in Port Blair. Others listening to their coaches' spiel rocking back and forth on their heels. Port Blair's SAI centre and hostel housed in Netaji had just re-opened after a two-year COVID-19 shut-down. The trainees had returned and their place was buzzing even under a grim, grey sky.

The athletes around the Netaji Stadium were kayakers and canoeists, whose national association secretary-general's office was in a basement in Lajpat Nagar. At the time, mention of anything on the Indian Kayaking & Canoeing Association website

was from March 2022. Port Blair coaches and athletes alike believe that in Gujarat, the Islanders will beat the pants off every mainland landlubber. Will top the watersports medals. It's what they do.

This confidence is bubbling on the basis of what, I don't know. But if every time you asked the question 'on the basis of what', the tens of thousands involved in Indian sport, elite and grassroots would laugh in your face.

A few days before going to Netaji Stadium, I had met international cyclist Deborah Herold at her home in Port Blair's Nayagaon. She was then a former World No. 4 in the women's 500m time trial event, the first Indian woman to win major international cycling medals anywhere. She shared her story about being in camp, mistreated by coaches, slapped on one occasion and then kicked out of the national camp in 2018 with no explanations. Did anyone apologise later? No. Cyclists are Andaman and Nicobar's most famous athletes and she said, they are often bullied by local coaches who ask athletes to pay them a share of their post-medal awards. It is enough to make you sick.

On the other side of a display cabinet full of medals and trophies from where we were sitting is Deborah's room. It had seven cycles against one wall and her cycling gear and helmets hanging on a clothes rail, plus a pink fluffy handbag. When we met, she was getting ready to head to Hyderabad to train for the National Track cycling event coming up in Delhi that November. She wanted to fight her way back into the national camp. There was no question of giving up, she said. There had been turmoil in Indian cycling following the sacking of her old coach due to allegations of sexual harassment by another cyclist, so maybe things had changed. Deborah shrugged. It's not relevant. Champions don't bother with the 'on the basis of what' question.

A short stroll (like 25 steps) from where the canoeists and kayakers were doing their warm-ups, was Port Blair's most important football field. The monsoon had turned it into a slushy mudflat full of groups of girls and boys running, kicking, sliding, shrieking. "Those are the athletics people – all mad," eye-rolling footballers said. Albinus belonged to the newly-formed United Brothers FC and told me about a 22-team Gateway Cup which had just ended and suggested I speak to the sturdy fellows standing around.

They were the players from NicoMadrid FC (like Real, but with Nico for their Nicobarese antecedents), mostly students who take part in football events in the region and in the Gateway Cup they were knocked out by the eventual champs United Sporting Club. NicoMadrid's entrance fees to events were paid by a man called

Akib Zaved, who was known to support local football. A local businessman, I imagine.

As journalists must, I asked the Nico Madrid boys about whether there's informal betting around their games. The response was dropped jaws and dirty looks at my dirty mind. Akib turned out to be a government employee, a wireless operator from the Indian Reserve Battalion, a former cricketer and football player, who just did what he did, well, just because. "Our contribution... something, whatever it is, is important for our sport," he said. We were on an island 1500 km east of Chennai, the closest mainland Indian city to Port Blair which took 60 hours by boat but sport had made that distance immaterial. What's crap about Indian sport was still crap here, but what was shining was just as luminous.

Akib said I should go watch the Sevens and Nines football events that happen 'paanipaar' (across the bay) in the villages of Ferrarganj and the Bamboo Flat panchayats all year round. He played better cricket but engineering studies in Kottayam got him hooked on football. And led him to support NicoMadrid FC.

At Deborah's house, I met one of the uncles on the mother's side. He answered to the dazzling name of Great Heart Nicobari, who on retirement was returning to his island home and promised he will find more cycling talent.

One of my hobbies while travelling across our vast, beautiful, baffling and infuriating country is to look for the sport. Not playfields or organisation and infrastructure, just the sight of play and I see it everywhere. Mostly boys, but yes, I know there are girls somewhere outside of sight, unlocking their physical selves. Many years ago, two young women part of the earliest batch of Khabhar Lahariya reporters told me about playing cricket on an abandoned airstrip somewhere in Banda, Bundelkhand. And then being driven away when the boys turned up. I never forgot the story.

Every Indian community finds its sporting corner. A Bengaluru friend, Asad, calls himself the table tennis champion of Michael Palya. That may be a seniors-only competition but he is not saying it. Nine pay-and-play badminton courts had been set up behind his house for INR 300-400 an hour. Not cheap but when shared by four players? My journo buddy Elora Sen tells me about an annual multi-sports event – swimming, athletics, football, cricket, table tennis, and badminton – that takes place in the catchment areas of Narendra, Sonarpur and Rajpur, in southern parts of suburban Kolkata.

India's first major MMA title winner is a former Jet Airlines flight attendant called Kario Isaac Maheo. The last time we spoke, he was setting up an MMA training school in his hometown of Senapati in Manipur. I want to visit Kolhapur during its wrestling season and watch bouts at the 60,000-seater Khasbaug Kusti Maidan inspired by Rome's Colosseum. GoogleMaps tells me there's a kabaddi academy a five-minute walk from my house and I'm ashamed I've not visited. Four Facebook friends in Guwahati, desperate to have their own football club to support rather than BFC or Barcelona, set up Guwahati City Football Club and send me regular WhatsApp messages about its progress. Gujarat's summertime night cricket needs its own socio-cultural-political Netflix documentary.

We kept getting told India is not a sporting nation and we don't have a sporting culture and we don't win medals. Now, after decades as a sports journalist, I often wonder whether by connecting those truths, we don't quite see what else is playing out in front of our eyes.

Yes, let's accept we don't have the formalised sports culture like in the Western world. Of 'sport on Saturday' with clubs and grounds and venues and seasonal calendars. Our national sports federations and their political godfathers don't push their state bodies to create busy, sustainable pathways of a competition calendar so that a national mainstream can be fed onto a higher level of events. Yes, we don't win Olympic medals like other er... medal-winning countries. Yes, our harried parents are forever trying to send kids to tuition and make them engineers and doctors. Yes, our sport is more about livelihood than leisure.

But the beauty of it is that no matter what and despite it all, Indian sports is a living, breathing, humming thing made of thousands and thousands of committed people who go about kicking 'on the basis of what' in the teeth every single day.

Every Indian community finds its sporting corner.

MISSION 100

A FULLY ACTIVE INDIA BY 2047

Sports and Society Accelerator

The transformative power of sport and physical activity, or SAPA as we call it, is on display throughout this book.

As you read the stories we have featured and reflect on how far and wide their subjects are spread, we invite you to join the movement.

You could share your own personal experiences with sport — every tale has the potential to inspire others to act.

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Join us on Mission 100 as we get every child playing and every Indian active by #MakingSportWork.

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- Desh Gaurav Sekhri and Nandan Kamath

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