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# Sports Act 2025: A Constitutional Promise or Missed Opportunity?

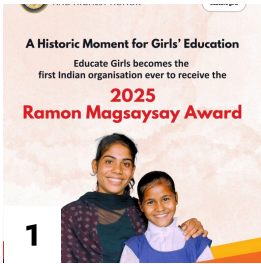
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## A Law Born in the Shadow of 2036

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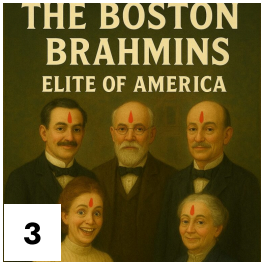
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India is dreaming big amidst growing whispers of an [Olympic bid](#) in 2036. In an effort to rebrand the nation as a sporting powerhouse, the Parliament recently enacted the National Sports Governance Act 2025 (“the [Act](#)”), a revolutionary piece of legislation which proposes an Athletes’ Rights Charter, accountability reforms in federations, specialist dispute resolution mechanisms, and the recognition of new-age disciplines like e-sports, adventure sports and para-sports.

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Nonetheless, a scratch beneath glossy press releases reveals a different picture, whereby the Act continues to remain silent on the underlying biases of caste, religion and region that have determined Indian sport for decades. In a nation where social identity often dictates who has access to nutrition, coaching and opportunity, this silence projects not just a policy vacuum, but also a constitutional one. The Indian Constitution provides the golden fundamental rights of equality, non-discrimination and dignity under Articles 14, 15 and 21 respectively. But the Sports Act 2025 fails to operationalise these assurances on the one site of equality which ought to be most visible: the field of play. Insofar as this legislation is concerned, is it a milestone that will carry India to Olympic glory, or a half-baked measure that buffs the veneer while leaving deep structural inequities untouched?

## What the Act Gets Right

To dismiss the Act entirely would be unfair, given that there have been substantial **advances** that deserve recognition. In a first for Indian sports law, athletes are framed as [rights-bearing](#) through an Athletes' Rights Charter that promises protection from harassment, fair contracts and support for career transitions. Thereby, it imports global best practices, inspired from the [World Players Association Universal Declaration of Player Rights \(2017\)](#). Governance reforms such as term

limits, conflict-of-interest rules and stricter financial transparency tackle the private fiefdoms of sports federations. This move has been paramount in enforcing [federation governance reforms](#) nudged by courts in cases like [Rahul Mehra v. Union of India](#). Another avantgarde method employed by the Act is widening the legal ambit of conventional sports to inculcate e-sports and para-sports, which opens up avenues for funding, representation and regulation. Lastly, the creation of specialist dispute resolution routes, including dedicated forums for sports arbitration and mediation, offers athletes speedier redressals, as well as aligns with global norms pioneered by the [Court of Arbitration for Sports](#) (CAS) in Lausanne. These are the real wins – yet, rights mean little without access, transparency is meaningless without representation, and dispute resolution is a distant dream if one cannot afford to hire a legal counsel. The Act has taken a bold step forward, but unless it bridges the gap between **paper rights and lived reality**, its victories will remain confined to the privileged few.

### **Equality Beyond the Playing Field**

[Article 15](#) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of *religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth*. Often times than not, sports in India have barely upheld this vision of a level playing field. Instead of being the great equaliser, it has too often reproduced the inequalities entrenched outside the stadium, with Dalit athletes repeatedly facing humiliations in hostels and training

camps, Kashmiri athletes battling through political instability and security restrictions, and northeastern states remaining underrepresented as well as unfunded.

Against this backdrop, the “non-discrimination” clause under the *Sports Act 2025* constrains its ambit to gender and disability, blatantly ignoring factors such as religion, caste and region. This reflects a persistent discomfort in Indian policymaking: an unwillingness to name the hierarchies that actually shape access to opportunity. The refusal to name these categories is more than a technical oversight – it is a **failure of courage**. The Act, however, risks becoming another example of **progressive language wrapped around regressive silence**.

Further contributing factors are selection bias, regional neglect and intersectional discrimination, each of which pose challenges of imbalance in equality.

**Primarily**, trials and selections at district and state levels are governed by networks, not performance. Athletes without high caste or political connections are routinely overlooked. Additionally, infrastructure promises without prioritised regional quotas will keep funds flowing to metropolitan areas, whilst Kashmir, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and much of the Northeast region remains as an afterthought. **Finally, an assurance of** “non-discrimination” does little when athletes live at the intersection of multiple disadvantages. Caste exclusion intersects

with gender-based prejudice, creating a **double disadvantage**. Women in sport already face sexual harassment, pay gaps and cultural scrutiny.

The crux of the critique is that the *Sports Act 2025* assumes all athletes compete on a level field once governance is cleaned up. However, India's field is anything but level, insofar as aggravating factors such as **caste, religion and regional inequities** are not addressed.

## The Global Benchmark

In comparison, many countries have confronted uncomfortable histories head-on, using sport as a deliberate instrument of social justice. The difference lies in their willingness to **name the problem** and legislate directly against exclusion.

South Africa confronted the brutality of apartheid with [racial quotas](#) to ensure [equal representation](#). The United Kingdom's [Equality Act 2010](#) imposed binding obligations on sporting bodies to administer equal treatment and access across race, religion, gender, age and disability. It reinforced the principle that equality is not an option when it is the law. Further, Australia ran dedicated [Indigenous Sports Programs](#) with targeted funding and training pathways, recognising the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These examples share a simple insight: neutrality in an unequal society preserves privilege. The child in Delhi with access to



private coaching, balanced diet and influential selectors does not compete on the same terms as the Dalit sprinter in Jharkhand or the Muslim footballer in Kashmir. Pretending that all athletes start from the same baseline ignores the invisible hurdles that caste, race and religion construct. If India wants sport to be an instrument of justice, the law must address structural disadvantage directly.



### The Way Forward: Striving for Perfection

Sports Act 2025 is progress shrouded in silence. It talks the language of reform, clarifying the governance deficiencies, the athletes' rights to better security, and the need to link India's sports structure to global best practices. On paper, it

modernises. But on the ground, it tiptoes around the structural inequalities that have for so long defined Indian sport. It's a paradox for a nation that glorifies sport as a source of unity and a projector of soft power. A country does not get to preach sport as a meritocracy while consigning whole communities to structural disadvantage. The true test of the *Sports Act 2025* will not be measured in gold medals or Olympic bids alone. It will be measured in whether a Dalit sprinter from Jharkhand, a Kashmiri cricketer from Srinagar, or a tribal footballer from Manipur can find a fair and dignified pathway to belong. Not as exceptions wheeled out for symbolism, but as equal heirs to India's sporting dream. Sport is more than entertainment. It is a stage where the ideals of Article 14 and 15 can find flesh and blood. The *Sports Act 2025* gestures towards that promise, but without naming caste, religion and regional inequities, it will only be remembered as a missed opportunity.

For India to use sport as a tool of social transformation rather than a mirror of social hierarchies, the Sports Act 2025 requires radical strengthening. The following changes would move the Act toward a constitutional instrument of justice.

First, the Act must extend non-discrimination protections beyond gender and disability to explicitly prohibit bias on grounds of caste, religion and region, with enforceable penalties for federations and



other key stakeholders. Naming these categories gives athletes legitimate grounds to challenge exclusion, rather than leaving them voiceless against systemic prejudice.

Second, introduce affirmative action for grassroots development, by making provisions for quotas in national and state academies, as well as targeted scholarships for minority athletes. This is not about diluting merit; it is about ensuring raw talent from marginalised communities is not filtered out before it can compete. Global precedents from South Africa and Australia, as discussed above, show how targeted interventions can reshape representation.

Third, establish an independent Equal Opportunity Commission for Sport empowered to investigate complaints, audit selection and funding allocation, and recommend sanctions. Self-policing in sports federations cannot be trusted due to reasons of impartiality and conflict-of-interest. Therefore, a sports-specific ombudsman with members from marginalised communities and civil society would provide a credible avenue for grievance redressal.

Further, the Central and State governments shall proactively earmark a portion of sports funding for underrepresented regions, including but not limited to Kashmir, Northeast India, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, etc., and tie grants to measurable infrastructural outcomes, such as training facilities, coaching, nutrition and regular competition exposure.

Additionally, cultural sensitisation shall be mandated amongst coaches, selectors and administrators. Bias is often subtle, nudging the confidence of an athlete through an offhand remark, lowered expectations for a female athlete, or the quiet dismissal of a player from a “backward” caste. More importantly, compulsory anti-discrimination education, like anti-doping training, can reshape ingrained mindsets and practices.

Finally, measures shall be taken to end opaque selection processes, possibly through digital recording or live streaming mandates, publishing definite scoring criteria, and providing accessible appeal mechanisms. Transparency is a simple but powerful safeguard against nepotism and selection bias.

Taken together, these reforms would transform the Sports Act 2025 from a governance law into a constitutional tool of justice. **Constitutional justice cannot stop at the courtroom. It must be played out on the field.**

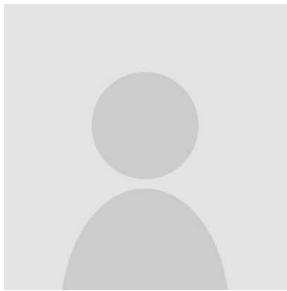
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