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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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INDIAN FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE SUMMER OLYMPICS OVER TIME

***Phurailatpam Laxmikumari Devi**

Assistant Professor, School of Physical Education and Sports, Rashtriya Raksha University

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*Corresponding author:

Phurailatpam Laxmikumari Devi

ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of gender representation in India's participation in the Summer Olympics from 1900 to 2024, tracing how policy reforms and societal changes shaped women's involvement and success. Using quantitative and historical analyses, it charts India's progress from its debut with no female athletes in 1900 to near gender parity at Tokyo 2020. Drawing on data from the IOC, IOA, and key policies National Sports Policy (2001, 2011), Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), and Khelo India the research identifies four phases: exclusion and structural barriers (1900-1980), early breakthroughs (1984-2000), expansion (2004-2016), and contemporary achievements (2020-2024). Milestones include Karnam Malleswari's 2000 bronze and the successes of Mary Kom, P.V. Sindhu, and Mirabai Chanu, which reshaped perceptions of women in sports. While programs like TOPS and Khelo India improved access to training, disparities persist in leadership, funding, and rural participation. Grounded in feminist sports theory and sports sociology, the study argues that increased participation has not yet translated into institutional equality or fair media portrayal. India's Olympic gender journey thus reflects broader struggles over gender, class, and identity, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive governance, equitable investment, and cultural recognition of women athletes as national role models.

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INTRODUCTION

The Summer Olympics not only symbolize the most extensive international sporting event but also represent how society is constantly evolving, such as in the case of acknowledging gender equality (Georgiadis, 2010; Theodorakis *et al.*, 2024). For India, a country with a diverse socio-cultural makeup, the timeline of gender representation at this Olympic level sporting event has changed meaningfully over the last century (Dashper, 2021). This change provokes one to think about the questions concerning gender balance, public policy, and the socio-political development of women in India. Globally, the Olympic Games have gradually moved towards gender parity. From a mere 2.2% of female athletes in the 1900 Paris Games to nearly 49% in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has increasingly mandated equal representation (Citaristi, 2022). India's participation in the Summer Olympics began in 1900 when Norman Pritchard won two silver medals in athletics (Majumdar & Mehta, 2009a). However, Indian women made their Olympic debut only in 1952, with the participation of Nilima Ghose and Mary D'Souza in track events (Jamadar & Talvelkar, 2022). The first important milestone was witnessed during the 2000 Sydney Olympics when Karnam Malleswari became the first Indian woman to earn an Olympic medal, winning bronze in weightlifting (Jamadar & Talvelkar, 2022). This victory sparked a wave asserting the need for further women's representation in Indian sports policy, which has unfortunately remained on the fringe.

According to studies, Indian female athletes frequently face patriarchal social constraints, a lack of finances, and restricted access to training facilities (Adapa & Yarram, 2024; Das *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, even if the percentage of women in India's Olympic teams has risen consistently, from 3.8% in 1984 to over 49% in 2020 (Adapa & Yarram, 2024; Citaristi, 2022; Jamadar & Talvelkar, 2022), this figure conceals more significant disparities. Class and geography are still important axes of exclusion, as evidenced by the fact that female athletes frequently come from urban and economically privileged households (Naik & Bavadekar, 2024). Although inconsistent, India's policy responses to these issues have been noteworthy. Projects such as the "Target Olympic Podium Scheme" and the "Khelo India" program have aimed to make elite sports training more accessible to everybody (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). The number of women competing in the Olympics has gradually increased on a global scale, while regional differences in inclusion, equity, and pace have been notable (Lenskyj & Wagg, 2012; Sands *et al.*, 2012; Wilson, 1996; Zheng *et al.*, 2019). An analysis of Olympic data over time revealed a rise in female representation, but it also highlighted the persistence of male dominance in terms of exposure and involvement (Meier *et al.*, 2021). Although Nilima Ghose, India's first female athlete, competed in the 1952 Olympics, female participation remained low until the last few decades (Majumdar & Mehta, 2009b). Despite these late starts, the nation has produced several legendary female athletes, including P.T. Usha, Mary Kom, Saina Nehwal, and P.V. Sindhu, who have challenged gender stereotypes in Indian sports (Awal, 2023). It is impossible to separate the theoretical framework of feminist sports theory from the gendered

evolution of Olympic participation in India. Feminist criticism has long highlighted the institutional obstacles women encounter in sports, such as unequal access to facilities, training, and financing (Glass, 2008). Sociological investigations that consider how media representations uphold gender hierarchies also support these criticisms. For example, Indian media frequently emphasize female athletes' personal lives and looks over their accomplishments, which undermines their validity in the workplace (Trehan, 2022). Research indicates that while female athletes are frequently portrayed in ways that uphold conventional gender norms, male athletes are typically covered more thoroughly in Indian newspapers, with a stronger focus on performance. (Chattopadhyay, 2017) further demonstrated the disparity in the way male and female sports achievements are framed through in-depth case studies of athletes such as Mirabai Chanu and P. V. Sindhu (Trehan, 2022). The interaction between gender, caste, and class in Indian athletics is another important factor. Casteist and classist systems that dictate who gets to participate, who receives institutional support, and whose achievements are rewarded frequently amplify gender disparities (Chander, 2022). Some of these inequities have been addressed by government programs like the "Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS)" and the "Khelo India" initiative. These programs seek to develop potential at the local level and provide top athletes with the tools they need to compete internationally. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing debate on how well these policies work to eliminate ingrained gender biases. There is limited evaluative research to affirm that these schemes have substantially closed the gender gap in Indian Olympic representation (Verma *et al.*, 2025).

To comprehend gender representation in the Indian Olympic context holistically, it is necessary to integrate ideas from feminist theory, sports sociology, media studies, and public policy. Although progress has been made, especially in the past 20 years, research indicates that systemic disparities still exist and need to be addressed by both policy reform and cultural change (Coche & Tuggle, 2023). Institutional efforts, such as the "Khelo India" initiative and the "Target Olympic Podium Scheme" (TOPS), have aimed to democratize access to sports infrastructure and financial aid. Research by (Adhikary and Dhapola (2022) and Pathak (2024) notes that these schemes have increased the number of females in sports camps and exposure trips. Gender representation at the Summer Olympics, particularly in India, reflects development and paradoxes, requiring ongoing scholarly focus for a gender-neutral sports environment. This study examines the historical evolution of gender representation in India's Olympic participation, highlighting key events, policy changes, and sociocultural shifts affecting Indian female Olympians. It aims to provide insights into the interaction between gender and sport in postcolonial India, addressing issues of visibility, empowerment, and national identity, while analyzing the evolution of male and female athlete participation and performance.

Primary Research Questions

How has the gender ratio of Indian Olympic athletes changed since India's first Olympic participation?
What trends can be observed in medal achievements by gender?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The research employs a quantitative descriptive methodology utilizing a thematic historical analysis approach. It follows the development of Indian female's involvement and achievements in the Summer Olympic Games throughout various timeframes.

Data Sources

The study is based entirely on secondary data, collected from:

- Official Olympic databases (IOC, Olympedia)

- Sports Authority of India and Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports reports
- Archival records from the Indian Olympic Association (IOA)
- Published research articles, books, and conference proceedings

Study Period: The analysis covers Indian participation in the Summer Olympics from 1900 to 2024, allowing a longitudinal understanding of trends and changes.

Sampling Technique: A purposive sampling method is used. This study examines all Indian female athletes who participated in the Summer Olympics, the events in which they represented the nation, and both medal-winning and non-medal performances for comparative understanding.

Variables of the Study

- **Participation variables:** number of female athletes, sports disciplines, event categories
- **Performance variables:** medals won, historical milestones

DATA ANALYSIS

- **Quantitative analysis:** frequency counts, percentages, and trend comparison of participation and medals
- **Comparative analysis:** female's participation vs overall Indian Olympic representation across Olympiads.

Limitations of the Study

- Dependence on secondary data sources
- Possible gaps in early Olympic records

Limited access to athlete-level qualitative experiences

Performance-Based Gender Analysis

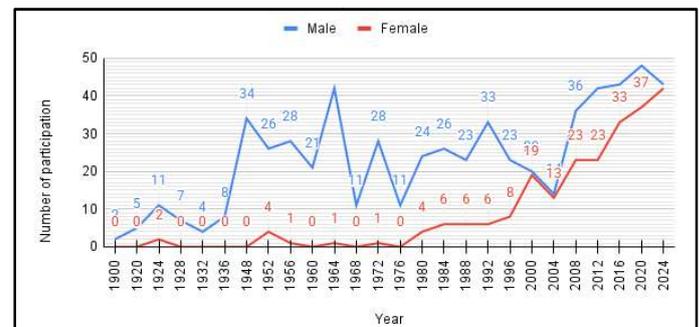


Figure 1. Historical Trends of Indian Male and Female Olympic Participation in summer Olympic Games (Chronological Analysis)

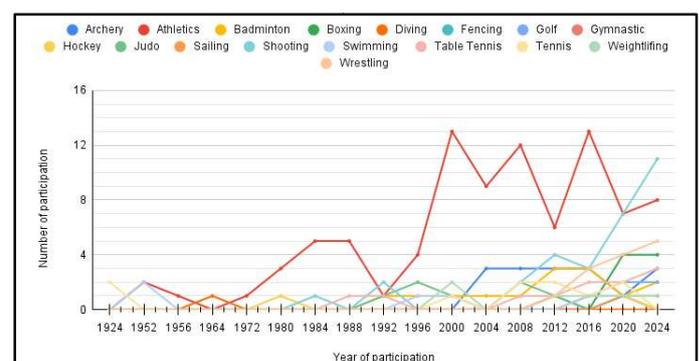


Figure 2. Participation of Indian female athletes in the Olympics by sports and year

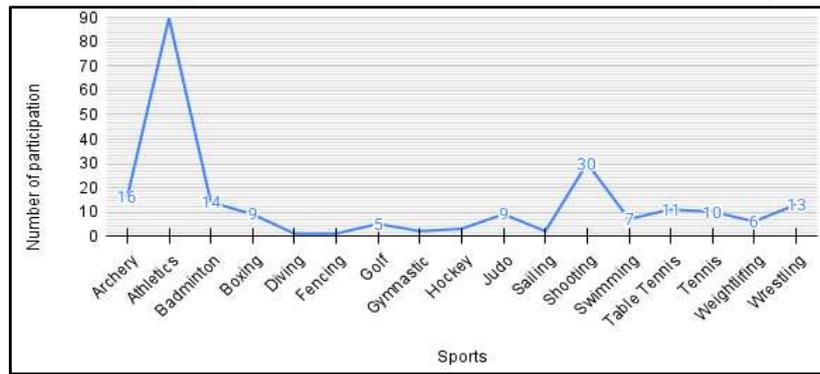


Figure 3. Total Female Olympic Participation by Sports (1900-2024)

Table 1. Indian Female Medallist in Summer Olympic Games

Year	Olympic Games	Athlete	Sport / Event	Medal	Historical Significance
2000	Sydney	Karnam Malleswari	Weightlifting (Women's 69 kg)	Bronze	First Indian woman to win an Olympic medal. Marked India's entry into women's Olympic success.
2012	London	Saina Nehwal	Badminton (Women's Singles)	Bronze	First Indian badminton player to win an Olympic medal. Inspired a new generation in Indian badminton.
2012	London	M. C. Mary Kom	Boxing (Women's Flyweight 51 kg)	Bronze	First Indian woman boxer to win an Olympic medal; from the debut year of women's boxing at the Olympics.
2016	Rio de Janeiro	P. V. Sindhu	Badminton (Women's Singles)	Silver	Youngest Indian Olympic medalist at the time; first Indian woman to win a silver medal.
2016	Rio de Janeiro	Sakshi Malik	Wrestling (Women's Freestyle 58 kg)	Bronze	First Indian woman wrestler to win an Olympic medal.
2020 (held 2021)	Tokyo	Mirabai Chanu	Weightlifting (Women's 49 kg)	Silver	Opened India's medal tally at Tokyo; first Indian woman weightlifter to win silver.
2020	Tokyo	P. V. Sindhu	Badminton (Women's Singles)	Bronze	First Indian woman to win two individual Olympic medals.
2020	Tokyo	Lovlina Borgohain	Boxing (Women's Welterweight 69 kg)	Bronze	Third Indian woman boxer to win an Olympic medal; from Assam, symbolizing India's expanding sports reach.
2024	Paris	Manu Bhaker	Shooting (Women's 10 m Air Pistol)	Bronze	First Indian woman shooter to win an individual Olympic medal.
2024	Paris	Manu Bhaker (with partner)	Shooting (Mixed 10 m Air Pistol Team)	Bronze	First Indian woman to win a medal in a mixed team event; marks India's shooting resurgence.

Table 2. Indian female participants in Summer Olympic Games more than once

Name	Olympic Games Participated	Total	Medals Won	Sport/Event(s)
Sania Mirza	2008, 2012, 2016, 2020	4	0	Tennis – Women's Singles, Women's Doubles, Mixed Doubles
Deepika Kumari	2012, 2016, 2020, 2024	4	0	Archery – Women's Individual, Women's Team
P. T. Usha	1980, 1984, 1988	3	0	Athletics – 100m, 200m, 400m, 400m hurdles, 4x400m relay
Saina Nehwal	2008, 2012, 2016	3	Bronze (2012)	Badminton – Women's Singles
Bombayla Devi	2008, 2012, 2016	3	0	Archery – Women's Individual, Women's Team
Mary Kom	2012, 2020	2	Bronze (2012)	Boxing – Women's Flyweight (51kg)
Heena Sidhu	2012, 2016	2	0	Shooting – 10m Air Pistol, 25m Pistol
Vinesh Phogat	2016, 2020, 2024	3	0	Wrestling – Women's Freestyle 50kg, 53kg
P V Sindhu	2016, 2020, 2024	3	Silver (2016), Bronze (2020)	Badminton – Women's Singles
Mirabai Chanu	2016, 2020, 2024	3	Silver (2020)	Weightlifting – Women 49 kg
Apurvi Chandela	2016, 2020	2	0	Shooting – 10m Air Rifle
Aditi Ashok	2016, 2020, 2024	3	0	Golf – Women's Individual
Anjum Moudgil	2020, 2024	2	0	Shooting – 50m Rifle 3 Positions
Manu Bhaker	2020, 2024	2	2 Bronze (2024)	Shooting – 10m Air Pistol, 25m Pistol, Mixed Team
Lovlina Borgohain	2020, 2024	2	Bronze (2020)	Boxing – Women 69 kg, 75 kg

Early Absence and Structural Barriers (1900–1980): A key moment occurred at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, when Indian female athlete first participated in athletics and swimming. Athletes like Nilima Ghose, Mehnga Singh, Dolly Nazir, and Arati Saha showed early determination, and Saha later became the first Asian woman to swim across the English Channel. However, participation remained limited in later events, including the 1956 Melbourne Games, where Mary Rao competed in athletics. A notable achievement occurred in 1972 in Munich, when Kamaljit Sandhu became the first Indian woman to reach the quarterfinals in athletics, demonstrating her potential in competition. The 1980 Moscow Olympics marked a turning point, featuring P. T. Usha's debut and the formation of India's first women's hockey team. Although no medals were won during this time, this period laid the foundation for future success.

Initial Breakthrough and Growing Visibility (1984–2000): In the 1980s, Indian female athletes began to gain notable recognition at the

Olympic level. The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics became a crucial moment for P. T. Usha finishing fourth in the 400m hurdles, just missing a medal. Her performance, along with those of M. D. Valsamma and Shiny Abraham, established Indian women as strong competitors in athletics. The 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 1992 Barcelona Olympics featured a wider range of sports, with Indian women participating in table tennis, badminton, shooting, and judo events. Athletes such as Madhumita Bisht, Abha Dhillan, and Sangita Mehta represent this growth beyond traditional athletics. This era peaked at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where Karnam Malleswari won a bronze medal in weightlifting, marking the first Olympic medal won by an Indian woman. This achievement changed societal views and validated women's sports in national discourse.

Era of Expansion and Recognition (2004–2016) : After 2000, Indian women's involvement in the Olympics has seen clear growth and greater recognition. At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, athletes like Saina

Nehwal, Mary Kom, and Deepika Kumari became national symbols, showcasing India's emerging strength in badminton, boxing, and archery. The 2012 London Olympics represented a significant turning point, with female athletes achieving remarkable results in various sports. Saina Nehwal and P. V. Sindhu advanced Indian badminton, while Sakshi Malik and Geeta Phogat brought women's wrestling into the limelight. The increase in participation in shooting and other technical sports reflected improved training facilities. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, Indian women earned the country's only medals, with P.V. Sindhu winning silver and Sakshi Malik winning bronze. Dipa Karmakar's near-podium finish in gymnastics and the resurgence of a complete women's hockey team highlighted both impressive performances and diverse representation.

Contemporary Progress and Emerging Challenges (2020–2024):

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics featured an unprecedented level of participation and diversity in Indian women. The wins of Mirabai Chanu and Lovlina Borgohain showcased India's strength in weightlifting and boxing, while first-time entries in fencing, golf, and new athletic events signaled significant progress. The 2024 Paris Olympics built on this momentum as India sent its largest female team to date. Established athletes like P. V. Sindhu and Deepika Kumari were joined by rising stars Antim Panghal and Jyothi Yarraji. Despite the increase in participation and visibility, challenges remain in converting participation into medals, ongoing support, and consistent performance.

Policy Analysis: Gender Equity in Indian Sports Governance

National Sports Policy 2001 and 2011: A Gender Equity Lens: The National Sports Policy (NSP) 2001 was India's first detailed effort to organize sports development; however, its treatment of gender equality was mostly implicit rather than explicit. While the policy recognized the necessity of promoting women's involvement in sports, it positioned women mainly as a "special group" in need of welfare-oriented support, instead of viewing them as key participants in elite sporting achievements (GOI, 2011). The lack of measurable gender-specific goals, accountability frameworks, and designated funding paths hindered its efficacy in tackling the structural inequalities encountered by female athletes. The National Sports Development Code/Policy Framework 2011 signified a progressive move towards inclusivity and institutional changes. This highlights the need for transparency, athlete welfare, and enhanced governance, while indirectly benefiting women through improved access to training facilities, equitable selection processes, and representation of athletes in decision-making entities (GOI, 2011). Nevertheless, from the perspective of gender equity, the policy fell short of explicit gender mainstreaming, such as requiring equal representation in leadership positions, gender-disaggregated performance metrics, or mandatory high-performance programs focused on women athletes. As a result, advancements for women were largely reliant on the practices of implementation rather than being mandated by the policy. However, it has seen a significant increase since then, as support structures have expanded. This growth coincided with several important initiatives aimed at creating more opportunities for women in sports (Banerjee & Manna, 2021). Scholarly research indicates that policies lacking gender equity as an essential element often struggle to convert their aims into effective outcomes, especially within male-dominated sports environments (Kay, 2011; Meier et al., 2021). Thus, while NSP 2001 and 2011 created a foundational structure, they fell short of addressing deeply embedded gender disparities in Indian sports.

Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and Its Impact on Women's Olympic Preparation: The Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), introduced in 2014, marked a change in how India prepared its elite athletes. Unlike previous policies, TOPS does not distinguish between genders when it comes to eligibility. It focuses on the potential to win medals rather than gender classification (MYAS, 2014). This approach has helped female athletes by providing them access to top coaching, international experience, sports science support, and financial aid. Research shows that government funding

and targeted programs greatly affect female sports performance worldwide. They improve training environments, coaching quality, and the chances of participation in high-performance settings. For Indian women athletes training for the Olympics, TOPS funding has opened doors to specialized training and international competition opportunities that were previously scarce (Hasan & Kote, 2024). Recent Olympic cycles shown that many Indian women medalists and finalists, especially in weightlifting, boxing, badminton, and wrestling, benefited from TOPS support (Khatri, 2025). Research on developing elite athletes highlights that targeted funding methods significantly improve women's preparedness by addressing the long-standing unequal distribution of resources (De Bosscher et al., 2015). Nonetheless, critics contend that TOPS primarily caters to the elite segment of the development hierarchy. This strategy overlooks numerous budding female athletes who miss initial opportunities owing to social and economic obstacles (Sharma, 2020). Analyzing this from a gender standpoint suggests that although TOPS enhances performance results, it fails to adequately address entry-level gender disparities. Therefore, while it is essential, it is insufficient for attaining enduring gender equality in Olympic sports events.

Khelo India Scheme: The Khelo India Scheme, which was started in 2017 by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, marks a major shift in how India approaches sports at the grassroots level. It focuses on growth, inclusion, and performance improvement. Aimed at "reviving the sports culture in India," the scheme includes 12 parts, such as talent scouting, building infrastructure, coaching help, and supporting athletes (MYAS, 2018). Events such as the Khelo India Youth Games and University Games create a nationwide system for identifying talent and combine competitions with scientific training methods. The program offers annual scholarships of ₹5 lakh to deserving young athletes and has established more than 1,000 Khelo India centers. Facilities for developing talent at the district level have also been established. The initiative promotes gender equality and inclusivity by providing support specifically for female athletes, individuals with disabilities, and traditional sports in indigenous cultures. Despite challenges related to funding and uneven infrastructure distribution, Khelo India has initiated a significant change in the Indian sports scene, strengthening the link between grassroots participation and international success. One key initiative is the Khelo India Scheme, created in 2018 to develop grassroots sports talent nationwide. Currently, there are few specific studies on the impact of Khelo India on female athletes; however, existing research on sports policy in India shows that continuous, inclusive policies are vital for increasing women's participation (Singh, 2024). In this context, the Khelo India Scheme's focus on improving access to facilities, identifying talent, and providing competitive opportunities offers essential support to emerging female athletes, helping them overcome initial structural barriers.

Sports Authority of India (SAI): The Sports Authority of India (SAI) was founded in 1984 under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. It is the main organization for developing, training, and improving sports in India. SAI operates through a network of National Centres of Excellence (NCOEs), regional training facilities, and sports hostels across the country. Its responsibilities include selecting athletes, coaching, researching sports science, and carrying out national initiatives like Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) (MYAS, 2022). The SAI functions as both an administrative and technical body. It collaborates with international federations and scientific organizations to improve training methods and increase India's participation in the Olympics. It also plays a vital role in promoting women's sports by ensuring equal access to coaching and facilities. Despite facing criticism for bureaucratic delays and limited resources, SAI's strategic reforms, such as digital monitoring, athlete data management, and partnerships with institutes like IIT Delhi for sports science, show its growing role as the main driver of India's elite sports performance and policy implementation. Research on government policy shows that better infrastructure and professional training environments are crucial for improving women's performance in competitive sports (Hasan & Kote, 2024). Along with government initiatives, research highlights the broader social and cultural benefits

of female participation in sports. Participating in sports helps boost confidence, agency, and social inclusion, leading to higher participation rates (Singh, 2024). These advantages work with formal programs to create a supportive environment where women are more likely to participate in competitive sports at both national and international levels. In summary, the integration of national initiatives such as Khelo India and TOPS, enhanced training infrastructure via SAI, and evolving societal perspectives on women in sports have all played a role in increasing both participation and achievement of Indian women in the Olympics. Studies support this multi-faceted approach, demonstrating how policy backing, resources allocation, and shifts in cultural norms collectively aid women athletes from foundational stages to elite competition.

Institutional Gaps in Implementing Gender-Parity Measures: Despite progressive initiatives and policies, India still faces major issues in implementing gender equality measures in sports. One significant problem is the lack of gender-specific monitoring and evaluation systems in place. This gap makes it difficult to assess how policies impact female athletes' participation (Meier *et al.*, 2021). Without regular data collection, achieving gender equity is challenging. Another major issue is in leadership and governance frameworks. Women continue to be underrepresented in coaching, administrative, and decision-making roles within sports organizations. Studies have shown that having women in leadership positions improves inclusive policy outcomes and athlete well-being (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). The absence of enforced gender quotas or pathways to leadership reduces accountability of institutions.

Policy Implications: The analysis shows that while India's sports policies and elite programs have helped improve Olympic results for women, achieving gender equity seems to be more of a byproduct than an intentional goal. Incorporating gender mainstreaming into the national sports policy by setting enforceable objectives, ensuring leadership equality, and providing support for athletes throughout their careers is essential for turning participation gains into lasting success.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings: The thematic analysis of Indian female representation in the Summer Olympics reveals a clear and progressive trajectory from marginal participation to global competitiveness. The findings highlight that Indian women's Olympic experience unfolded in four distinct stages: early absence and structural obstacles (1900–1980), initial breakthroughs and increased visibility (1984–2000), growth and recognition (2004–2016), and current advancements along with new challenges (2020–2024). Early participation was mainly symbolic, hampered by socio-cultural traditions, poor infrastructure, and little institutional support. However, the emergence of pioneering athletes laid the foundation for future inclusion. The period after 1980 saw a steady increase in participation and a wider range of sports, leading to India's first women's Olympic medal in 2000. The era after 2004 showed significant growth, with women athletes not only increasing in number but also playing a crucial role in India's Olympic medal count. Recent Olympic events reflect record participation, entry into non-traditional sports, and leadership by women athletes, although challenges remain around converting opportunities into medals and maintaining consistent performance.

Contribution to Literature and Public Policy: This research contributes to the understanding of the role of Indian women in the Olympics by offering a longitudinal, thematic view. It goes beyond specific events or stories about individual athletes. By linking historical achievements to policies, this study examines the connections between sports history, gender studies, and Olympic research. It highlights how supportive systems relate to athletic success, stressing that achieving greatness is closely tied to inclusive

policies. From a public policy viewpoint, the findings highlight the positive impact of national initiatives like Khelo India, the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), and Sports Authority of India training programs in improving women's participation and performance. This study stresses the need for continued investment, consistent institutional support, and policies that consider gender. It also provides evidence for policymakers to see female athletes not just as recipients of welfare programs, but as key players in achieving national sporting success and global recognition.

Recommendations for an Inclusive Sports Ecosystem

Based on the insights, it is important to use a well-rounded approach to create an inclusive sports environment for women. We need to focus on organized talent identification and athlete development models that cater to gender from grassroots to elite levels. Investing in safe, accessible, and women-friendly facilities, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, is crucial. Holistic support from qualified female coaches and sports science experts is essential. Maintaining policies with strong monitoring systems will ensure that support continues beyond Olympic cycles. Better media representation and the creation of dual-career pathways can improve visibility, inspire others, and offer long-term security for female athletes.

Ethical Considerations: As the study used publicly available secondary data, no ethical clearance was required. Due care was taken to acknowledge all data sources and avoid misrepresentation.

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