

Sports to empower rural youth in India: the Sondara Gurukul school

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The Indian Government's landmark initiative *Khelo India* (Play, India) seeks to infuse a sports culture in the country and promote excellence through investments in sport infrastructure and coaching.¹ There is general interest in increasing mass participation in sport, including indigenous sports. Indeed, India hosted the first World Cup of the sport *Kho-Kho* in January 2025,² and in March 2025, England hosted the *Kabaddi* World Cup, another traditional Indian sport.³ The United Nations also proclaimed 21 June as the International Day of Yoga, recognising its universal appeal to promote physical, mental and spiritual health.⁴

Despite these important events, little trickles down to promoting sports participation at the grassroots level. In fact, only about 50% of children and adolescents in India meet the global physical activity guidelines, and less than half of schools provide the necessary facilities and training for sports.⁵ The realities on the ground, particularly in remote and rural communities, present many challenges to advance youth sports. Thus, it takes vision, committed leadership and community resilience to foster physical activity and sports participation in rural India.

A HEALTHY RURAL SCHOOL MODEL

One initiative to foster youth physical activity is brewing at Sondara Gurukul—a school for children from farming communities in one of the most deprived, drought-prone regions of central India.

Sondara Gurukul is a boarding school started over 40 years ago by a dedicated teacher who believed in the traditional Gurukul philosophy, that is, learning by example. Children learn from their teachers by example of good values and actions, moment by moment. The school started with only a handful of students, but now enrolls over 250 boys between 10 and 15 years, and has recently started day schooling for girls. These children are mostly first-generation learners.

This region has often been in the news for high rates of farmer suicides due to debt. The nearest railway is over 3 hours' drive away from Sondara Gurukul. Commuting over bumpy roads and across forgotten villages, one rarely expects to find a basic room to stay or a decent tea stall. Yet, you are met with the sight of young lads plunging into a swimming pool in the middle of mountains and splashing away. You know immediately this place is unique.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A STUDENT AT GURUKUL

'Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached,'—the words of Indian philosopher, Swami Vivekananda, come to life each morning at Sondara Gurukul.

Just before dawn, a prayer rings through the campus as the wake-up call. The morning routine for residential students encompasses physical activity, while instilling values of self-reliance and interdependence as a community. Students start their day with structured physical exercises for 45 min led by an instructor (figure 1). Based on a changing rota of exercises, it is not uncommon to see kids

dive into the pool in freezing temperatures, or scale up rocky hills as part of this morning routine. They are then assigned tasks such as sweeping the premises clean, farm work or assisting in the kitchen to prepare and serve breakfast to the entire school.

Students walk about 2 km to the school and walk through the day from one class to the next for different subjects. As expected, the closing bell is most awaited. They march back for evening games in open fields amidst mountains. Indigenous games such as kabaddi and kho-kho are widely played (figure 2). These require no equipment or facilities. Cricket, volleyball, badminton and swimming are also very popular.

SUCCESSSES

Children here easily meet the WHO physical activity recommendations of at least 60 min daily of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity with vigorous aerobic and strength-building activities on at least 3 days.⁶ The physical activity programme is semistructured and movement is built into daily activities. This is in stark contrast to city schools with limited open spaces to play and students being confined to desks and classrooms.

The school leadership has consistently invested in sport. Whether through building and maintaining a swimming pool in the middle of nowhere, providing modern mountain bikes, nets and equipment for cricket,



Figure 1 Morning routine of aerobic exercises.

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Figure 2 Kho-Kho game in action.

badminton and volleyball, allocating fields for different sports, and more recently a table tennis room.

Students have won medals at district and regional levels in different sports. The school pool is 12 m in length, yet students have won in 200 m and 400 m swimming races at the regional level (figure 3). Students missed gold in a district-level cycling competition by only a small margin as they did not have road bikes needed in the competition but mountain bikes suited to their terrain. Their drive to excel is evident despite prevailing limitations.

The school encourages sports excellence, but the primary motivation is for sports participation to empower these children, build confidence and foster their physical and mental well-being. Teachers report improvement in academic performance of students when they have taken a leadership role in a sports team, and even improvements in angry behaviour and bonding among students.

CHALLENGES Facilities

Sports like kho-kho and kabaddi only need an open ground to play. Yet, practice is made difficult when mud fields are washed away each monsoon, right before competition season. Students lug heavy sacks of mud and recreate the grounds for these sports each year.

The rocky terrain makes it difficult to provide standard courts for badminton or volleyball, even if equipment is provided. It also increases the risk of injuries and reduces their ability to develop specific skills required in athletics or other sports. Despite interest among students, the school is not able to support football, gymnastics or wrestling as the available grounds are largely makeshift.

Training

Sports instructors at the school highlight the need for training equipment

such as an outdoor gym for strength building, yet this has been hard to fund. Students report feeling less confident compared with their competitors in training, skills, strength and equipment, as they advance through district and up to state level competitions. They also report disappointment and frustration when they fall short in competitions for lack of training or inadequate equipment.

Trained coaches tend to seek opportunities in cities, and there is a dearth of good coaches in rural areas. Online sports coaching is seen as a benefit by these students, who prefer learning techniques from elite sport stars, over a local coach. The school has invested in some coaching apps, and interested students and sports instructors learn techniques and rules together by watching videos and following them up in practice sessions.

Nutrition

Balanced, nutritious meals are provided with vegetables and grains sourced from the school farm and nearby farmers. During training and competition, protein intake is boosted through nuts and milk. Efforts are made to identify local nutrient-rich foods. The school administration has not conducted a formal nutritional assessment but recognises that perhaps they fall short of the requirements for an adolescent athlete expected to perform in competition.

Girls in sport

Education of girls is not prioritised in nearby villages. The school recently started day school for girls, including covering their transport and meals. Engaging them in sports is on the cards despite prevailing social inequalities.

SUSTAINABILITY

The school is unaided and fees are heavily subsidised in keeping with the harsh financial realities of local families. Yet, investing in sport has been prioritised since the early days as a tool to serve as an equaliser for these children and build character and life skills.

School authorities are keen to open up sports as a career option given the impetus and opportunities throughout the country. Future plans include integrating a sports culture in nearby communities by encouraging youth to avail themselves of the school



Figure 3 Swimming session in 12 m pool.

sport facilities and organising local competitions.

CONCLUSIONS

The Sondara Gurukul school has established a unique sports and physical activity programme for students in rural India. While students have excelled in sport at times, the school tries to keep the drive afloat through challenging times and never stops pushing for the welfare of its children and communities. Their journey so far reflects belief in the power of sport and physical activity in the holistic growth and well-being of children. With such a drive to excel among youth, even a little impetus through external support such as funding for training, and infrastructure and opening up opportunities to compete could have a big impact.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank teachers and students of Sondara Gurukul for being open and receptive to sharing their experiences and

perspectives on sport and physical activity, and for showing different sports in action at the school.

Contributors AJ visited the school to study their sports and physical activity program. She interviewed teachers and students for her report. She wrote this article based on her visit. She is the guarantor for this article.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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To cite Jain A. *Br J Sports Med* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2025-109924

Accepted 5 April 2025

Br J Sports Med 2025;0:1–3.
doi:10.1136/bjsports-2025-109924

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