

## Tribal Sports Talent: Our National Pride



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**President of India**

I have observed that in rural areas and forest regions, children spend more time outdoors amidst nature. They discover simple ways to play games. They create play areas by drawing lines and making shapes on the ground. They use dried fruit-seeds as dice and pieces. They make balls from dry leaves, tree roots, and rags. Using bamboo, they make hockey and football goalposts. In this way, using various natural materials, they create their own worlds of sports. Several children play enthusiastically without shoes or jerseys. Children also swim a lot in ponds and lakes. Honing this innate talent for swimming with the help of training and resources available now, Anjali Munda, a 15 year old daughter of Jajpur, Odisha has inspired the youth of the entire country by winning three gold medals on the first day of the inaugural 'Khelo India Tribal Games 2026'.

Tribal people have a natural passion for archery. In 1855, the Santhal community waged a fierce struggle against exploitation, which is immortalized as 'Santhal Hool.' British forces, equipped with modern weapons, suppressed that revolt, but in their accounts, the British made special mention of the martial skills, especially archery, of the Santhal bravehearts. I had the privilege of unveiling the statues of the heroic leaders of the 'Santhal Hool', the immortal brothers, Sidho-Kanhu and

Chand-Bhairav, and the valiant sisters, Phulo-Jhano, located at their village Uri-Mari in Jharkhand, during my tenure as Governor. Every child in India knows about the greatness of Eklavya who is revered as the greatest archer. Eklavya is an inspiring icon for every Indian, especially for the tribal communities. The 'Sports Excellence Centers' set up in Eklavya Model Residential Schools are enabling the children with modern sports facilities and methods. Similarly, schemes to identify and train sports-talent existing elsewhere, alongside the school system, are also being implemented.

Through my personal efforts, a residential school for children from underprivileged segments has been established in my village. As a part of this humble initiative, arrangements for training in archery are also provided on the school campus. Along with initiatives by the government, small individual and collective efforts will help nurture the inherent talent for sports among tribal children.

Like other tribal children in my village, I too was very keen on exercises and sports, including swimming. I often stood first in sports tournaments in my school. In one such tournament, I deliberately held myself back so that a friend of mine could enjoy the delight of winning the first prize. Sports develop team spirit and lead to stronger social bonding. Generally, it is observed that players who demonstrate fierce competition on the field have strong friendships off it.

My brother was a good football player, but he could not pursue the game due to a major injury. Several other members of my family have excelled in various sports. I am sharing this personal account to convey that tribal families have a vibrant tradition of sports. They possess immense talent, energy, interest, and the drive to excel. If such talent is nurtured through facilities and training, sports will not remain just a means of entertainment and social interaction for them but will become an avenue for moving ahead in life, achieving economic self reliance and commanding social respect. In this context, the 'Khelo India' campaign, launched by the Central Government in association with state governments and some sports organisations since 2018, has ushered in positive changes.

Till a few years ago, good sports facilities in our country were available only in big cities, whereas rural and forest areas are full of talented players. Sports academies and training facilities were not available in tribal areas. Now, from paying special attention to children's sports in Eklavya Model Residential Schools to initiatives like the 'Khelo India Tribal Games', several activities are underway to provide training to tribal sportspersons and promoting excellence among them.

I remember that during my student days, people from five or six villages would come together and organize sports tournaments. Some spiritual and cultural organizations have also been promoting sports in tribal areas. Often, even the good players participating in such rural tournaments were unable to rise above the village level. Many commendable efforts have been made in the past few years to change this situation. The 'Khelo India Tribal Games 2026' were organized to give a forward push to such efforts. In the process of organizing this event, tribal players at grassroots level have been identified and have been provided with sports facilities and training. Players from the States and Union Territories have showcased their talent in these national tribal games.

Based on the natural talent of the players, India won its first Olympic gold medal in hockey in 1928. Players from tribal communities had an important role in that victory. Right since then, star hockey players such as Dilip Tirkey, Subodh Lakra, and Salima Tete have continued to enrich India's men's and women's teams with their talent.

Under the national sports development program 'Khelo India,' of the Government of India, an inclusive effort is being made to provide appropriate sports ecosystems for all geographical regions, social segments, and institutions from the local to the national levels. Under this program, a scheme called 'Asmita', being implemented to promote the participation of girls in sports, is also developing the potential of our tribal daughters. Continued strengthening of the momentum built by 'Khelo India Tribal Games 2026' and sustained encouragement to tribal

sportspersons will create a pool of players who will establish India as a global sports superpower.

Over seven lakh players participated in the Bastar and Surguja Olympics held in the last few months. Among those players were some young people who gave up the path of Naxalism and chose the positive track of sports. The energy of young people finds constructive expression through sports. The government's efforts to identify and develop sports-talent among the youth have started delivering good results in national and international tournaments.

The sports-talent of our youth, including that of the tribal communities, forms an invaluable social capital for our nation. I am confident that, by harnessing this priceless resource effectively, our country will establish numerous glorious benchmarks of excellence in the field of sports. With this confidence, my message is: Khelo India! Khoob Khelo India!

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