

# **SPORTS TOURISM IN PAKISTAN: THE STATUS QUO, POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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## **Abstract**

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*Convergence of tourism and sports is increasingly becoming popular due to its capacity to generate a huge amount of foreign exchange for the country. However, Sports tourism open the door to lead up with healthy gesture for the Athletes of both countries. A country can also recognize with sports tourist if its tourism industry is flourishing. Pakistan tourism industry is in limbo for quite some time. This exploratory study is an attempt to identify challenges and prospects of this important niche of sports' tourism. Using qualitative approach, semi-structure interviews were conducted with the officials of departments/ministries of provisional and federal government and players who represented Pakistan at international events, the study identified the following bottlenecks that significantly affect the flourishing of sports' tourism, pessimistic image of the country, no comprehensive policy regarding tourism in general and sports' tourism in particular, lack of sports culture in the country, low priority for tourism in general and sports' tourism in particular and political issues with neighbors. The study designed for an elaborate policy encompassing every aspect of sports tourism and implementing the policy in true spirit.*

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**Key words:** Sports' tourism; tourism; poverty reduction; sports facilities; sports events

## **Introduction**

Tourism as a multi-facets commercial activity has huge economic and poverty reduction capacity (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2017). The potential of this industry can be judged from the fact that tourism industry contributes 10% of the GDP to the global economy (Asdullah, Ahmad, & Parveen, 2015). This figure is expected to grow further in the coming years. The rapid means of transportations and communications has made it possible for people of different regions to travel to one another region without much hardship for a limited time (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2017; Shan & Wilson, 2001). Therefore, tourism expects to flourish further. Countries are planning to get maximum share in this

promising industry. That is why, countries are directing resources in planning and projecting themselves as an ideal distinction of tourism.

Tourism does not operate in isolation, rather arrays of services and other industries also benefits from the tourist's influx (Zortuk, 2009). In combination of its capacity to contribute foreign exchange in the form of taxes, the tourists also seek services and buy items/food, while they are in the country (Beech, Andrewrigby, & Thandi, 2004). Furthermore, hotels also benefit from the arrival of the tourists, as they have to use lodging facilities (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2017; Beech, Andrewrigby, & Thandi, 2004). That is why, the industry has great potential of poverty reduction and job generation (Zahoor ul Haq, Ullah, & Sajjad, 2019). Many countries get their substantial share of GDP from this sector.

As competition among countries become tough to attract tourists, many countries are exploring different options (Bull & Weed, 1999). One promising choice is sports tourism (Mapjbil, et.al., 2015). Until recently, sports and tourism were looked upon as two distinct sectors with nothing in common between them (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003). However, the perception started changing some thirty years ago (Mapjbil, et.al., 2015). When world conference on sports tourism in Barcelona was held in 1990. Ever since, planners were convinced of the importance of this niche. Many countries planned accordingly in anticipation of sports' tourism revenue generation potential. These countries invested capital to build world class sports' facilities and are now providing facilities for practice to the players and earn foreign exchange by being host to various sports' event (Bull & Weed, 1999). As these events attract large number of foreign sports' crazy enthusiasts, which intern generate revenue to the government.

Pakistan owes many worth seeing tourism places that include deserts, mountains, sea shores, worth seeing lakes and

glacier clad mountain top (Baloch & Rehman, 2015; Dogar, Shah, & Elahi, 2021). Furthermore, culture diversity and hospitable people give further relish to the tourism (Hussain, Chen, & Nurrunabi, 2018). All this makes Pakistan an ideal place for tourism. Unfortunately, Pakistan could not match its potential of tourism to the number of tourist arriving in the country, as Pakistan suffered a colossal damage both in term of an infrastructure and economy (Dogar, Shah, & Elahi, 2021). However, conditions have considerably improved since then. The improvement in law and order situation was not tapped to project the positive image of the country and attract foreign tourists.

As earlier pointed out, tourism is a multi-dimension activity. One of its dimensions is sports' tourism. Sports tourism definition various from scholar to scholar (e.g., Hall, 2009; Ruskin, 1987; Weed & Bull, 1997). However, some elements common to all definitions are, outdoor activity, made in physical recreational facilities, vacation/leisure time activity, away from home activity, involving watching sport competition and physical activity. Sports' tourism is a slot in tourism that is motivated primarily by the desire to watch sports event (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003; Mapjbil, et.al., 2015). The sports' events around the world draw a large number of enthusiasts' spectators. These spectators sometime have to spend many days at the country, where sports event is going on, in this way their role become like tourist and become a source of earning valued foreign exchange. However, like tourism, sports tourism is not exploited by Pakistan.

The purpose of the study is to identify challenges, problems and suggests course of action that could bring positive turn around. Few studies have been carried out in Pakistan regarding barriers in attracting foreign tourists and sports tourists. The study will give valuable insight to the policy makers regarding the problems facing this industry. Therefor the study is guided by the following question

- Q.1. Why does Pakistan could not benefit from the flourishing sports' tourism industry?
- Q.2. What is the status of sports' tourism in Pakistan?
- Q.3. What must be done to flourish sports' tourism in Pakistan?

### **Literature review**

Before 1990, tourism and sports were two distant fields. Each managed in complete isolation from other. It was after 1990, the scholars realized the importance of sports' tourism as an important aspect of tourism and the benefits that accrue as a result of co-ordination among them (Mapjbil, et.al., 2015). Organizing sports events helps bring spectators to the country (Beech, Andrewrigby, & Thandi, 2004). Both tourists and sports' tourists only differ in term of their destination (Kurtzman, 2005). While tourists may be more motivated to explore landscape, physical beauty and culture of the host country, sports' tourists apart from this is also motivated by sports' competition being held in the host country (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012). Therefore, as regard the host country, both types of tourists are source of income generation.

However, sports' tourism can only flourish, if a country is ideal for tourism. In this regards, tourists are hunted by the media image created by the various electronic and print outlets (Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003; Willming, & Holdnak, 2003). However, Funk and Brunn (2007) suggest an additional factor like rich culture and expectation to learn something new are also on the tourists' mind before deciding on the destination. These researchers advised for converging of tourism and sports tourism marketing strategies for more concert results.

The beautiful landscape of Pakistan with variegated physical features in the form of lofty peaks, rugged mountains, charming lakes, deserts and beautiful sea shore offer an amazing opportunity for the tourists to explore (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2017). However, war on terrorism has given a death blow to tourism in the country. Arif, Shikirullah and Samad (2019) argue, this negative

image still hunts Pakistan, though we have come a long way from that terrible period of our history. Tandem efforts to present Pakistan as a safe country is lacking. Furthermore, government of Pakistan need to prioritize tourism (Asdullah, Ahmad, & Parveen, 2015). In this regard, investment from the private sector must be encouraged.

Sport tourism as a niche in tourism is less exploited in Pakistan. Though, there are a lot of literature available on the tourism challenges and prospects, such research studies with particular focus on the sports tourism is lacking in the Pakistani context. Given the promising prospect of this important aspect of tourism, the aspect needs full scholarly scrutiny. The present study is an attempt in the direction.

### **Methodology**

As this study is exploratory in nature, therefore qualitative approach is found most suitable for the study. Humans are influenced by the environment in which they are brought up and the people they interact with (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). That is why people give different meanings to the otherwise same phenomenon because their knowledge is socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). In order to get different perspective of otherwise same Phenomenon, multiple-case study design was found useful. Case study is an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon within a bounded system (Cresswell, 2012). Case study makes phenomenon as an object of study by carrying different types of analysis. The understanding in case study is based on the world view of both the researcher and the study participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In qualitative research, it is natural for the researcher to have his own biases. However, i tried my best to remain objective. I wrote all my prejudices on a piece of paper and pasted it at a place where I did my analysis (Dornyei, 2007).

### **Data collection and research participants**

The study participants include officials of Tourism departments of KPK, Punjab, Pakistan sports board officials and players who represented Pakistan at different events. These participants were selected based on the departments/ministries that they represent. As these departments/ministries are involved in managing and devising policies for tourism and sports. Moreover, players were also made part of the study to get insight into the prospects of sports' tourism and identify challenges.

In-depth interviews were conducted with these official. The study subjects include both males and females, as shown in Table 1. The interviews lasted for 40 to 80 minutes, as per recommendation and use by some other research studies (e.g., Groenewald, 2004; Shaw & Hector, 2010). Face to face interview enabled the researcher of the necessary interactive space and time to understand the participants' views and insight (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). Multiple perspective from the officials were helpful in in-depth understanding.

### **Data Analysis**

While analyzing qualitative data, first carried out line by line coding. For this, I used gerunds as a code, to capture the essence of the action. Using gerund for coding was to explain the stance and bring interpretive approach to the data (Smagorinsky, 2008, p, 399).

**Table-1**  
**Selected study participants through stratified sampling technique**

<b>Department/Ministry</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
Sports' board of Pakistan	17-19	4 M 1 F	42-57
Tourism department of KPK	16-18	5 M	37-51
Tourism department of Punjab	16-19	3 M 2 F	34-55
Players	-	3 F 1 M	22-27

a SB4 stands for sports board and 4 number assigned to study participant, TD stands for tourism department and PL for player.

This initial coding was followed by focus coding based on the themes of the study and literature review to develop categories. Categories are frequently occurring codes in the data (Saldana, 2010).

Next, for inter coder reliability, I shared categories with two of my PhD colleagues and sought their valuable insight. The consensus reached between us was 80% to 90% in most of the cases (Smagorinsky, 2008). I found their probing questions really helpful in drawing my attention to new connection in the categories. In the final stage of analysis, all categories broke down into the following themes.

## **Findings**

### **Contradictorily image**

Image of the country abroad play an important role in the tourist selection of the destination. Negative/ positive image abroad is a crucial factor in any serious attempt to organize any sports' activity, with the planning to attract tourists. Official of sports tourism department of Punjab and KPK, Pakistan's sport board and players repeatedly mentioned the negative image of the country as a bottleneck, "So much bad things had happened during the last ten years, especially the attack on the Sirilankan team was a deathblow to organizing sports events in Pakistan" (Interview SB3, 08/12/20). Many studies have found negative correlation between tourism and negative image of the country (Arshad, Iqbal, & Shahbaz, 2017; Hussain, Chen, & Nurrunabi, 2018). In any selection of the destination by tourists, image of the country plays an important role, "you see, few years back, when semi- final and final of PSL were decided to be held in Pakistan, many foreign players refused to come to Pakistan" (Interview PL1, 3/12/20). Though sports' tourist primarily comes to a country for some sports' event, however there is much more, that sports' tourist would like to see (Bull & Weed, 2010). However, the presence of security personnel

for their safety convey negative message to them, “the accompanying security personnel for the safety of the tourist itself convey negative perception” (Interview TD 4, 2/12/20). The free movement of tourists is obstructed by the security concern and they could not enjoy the diverse environment of the country.

“for tourism to flourish, country needs to provide diverse environment, free movement and rich culture, fortunately Pakistan has all this. However, there is a need to improve the law and order situation in the country. Alhamdulillah! Much has improved and will improve in the coming years but there are no tandem efforts to project this improvement in the electronic media” (Interview TD1, 28/11/20).

Prior image of the country influences the attitude, which itself is an evaluative response to the image created by the media. Need was felt to project the positive image of the country and bring forth the diverse environment and rich culture of the country, “Pakistan has lofty mountains, glaciers, lake, 800 meters five peaks, in short we have everything that tourist would love to see. (Interview TD2, 1/12/.20). Robust campaign needed to counter the pessimistic image of Pakistan in international media to attract tourist. Sport tourism niche can only be exploited for the benefit of the economy, when general tourism will flourish, “First Pakistan need to fascinate tourists and shun off the image created around the world. For this coordinated and concrete efforts are needed. These efforts might span over many years” (Interview TD 3, 7/12/20).

Pakistan suffered huge financial and human loss due to war on terrorism inflicting damage to infrastructure and creating image of the country as safe haven of the terrorist. Though, scourge of the terrorism has been abated, yet tourists are still hunted by the prior image created by the media. The concerned authorities in coordination with relative departments/ministries need to come with comprehensive plan to tackle the issue.



### **No comprehensive policy**

After eighteenth amendment, tourism become a provisional subject. Consequently, every province has established its own department of tourism. However, most of the issues related to tourism are handled by federal government like visa processing. Which sometime cause unnecessary delay and disappointment among the tourists, "Apathy can be seen from the state of affairs and arrangements, while one set of government issue visas and another set of governments manage tourism and there is little coordination among them" (Interview TD2, 1/12/20). The same callousness can be seen on the part of sports boards, as they act in complete isolation and without co-ordination with tourism departments,

"when you set them to work together, ego problems emerge, who will act under whom, who will be the boss. Law did not state anything about it. Every department act in its own limited sphere and are responsible to the government. It is the government that needs to take the initiative, if they really want to exploit the sport tourism niche for the benefit of the economy" (InterviewSB1, 7/12/20).

The benefits of sports and tourism integration has not yet drawn authority's attention. While many countries have started exploring this option, state of affairs seems to be totally indifferent towards this niche of sports' tourism in Pakistan, "those people who come to visit country for watching sports are not tourists and arrangements for them are not our responsibility" (Interview TD5, 2/12/20). There are many beautiful places like glaciers, flowing rivers, deserts, lofty mountains and arranging sports' events at miniature level would attract tourists and would satisfy many tourists sports craze. However, arranging these sports competitions and providing the necessary known how would definitely involve sports board. The role for which sports board is neither willing nor ready, "Sport board capacity is limited to few games like crickets and hockey. We do not have much expertise in these games" (InterviewSB2, 7/12/20).

Many events are arranged on world level to boost tourism, as it is an important industry contributing to global economy. However, effective participations from Pakistan is either marginal or non-existent, “the funds availability hinder us from taking an effective part in these events at world level and those who participate are not there to learn something but to enjoy their time” (Interview TD3, 8/12/20). Many of the officials are on the deputations in the tourism departments and lack the necessary qualification and experience for the job. Resultantly, they just kill the time, rather than making some effective policies to bring positive turn around, “All those appointments at top brass are on deputation from other departments and they are totally misfit for this job. This nepotism is causing damage to the tourism department both in term of efficiency and growth” (Interview TD4, 7/12/20).

Sports tourism is a niche in tourism that many countries are trying to abridge and attract foreign exchange. For the better exploration of this important area, sound policies cope with better co-ordination among departments/ministries is needed. So far, state of affairs in Pakistan suggest contrary picture. Unless better facilitation and steps for improvements are not taken to attract tourists, sports niche could not be better exploited for growth of economy.

### **Lack of sports cultural foundation and sports infrastructure**

While sports and co-curricular activities are very much part of school/college/universities curriculums, situation in Pakistan portray a dismayed picture. Sports are not given the due importance as it deserves, “In Pakistan students do not get any credit for sports activities, rather there is perception that only those students’ participate who are not interested in studies” (Interview PL3, 3/12/20). The perception regarding sports only reserved for only those students who are not interested in studies is so strong that many parents do not want their children to participate in sports at school/college/ university level, “My parents would tell

me, if you want to become something in life, you have to study, otherwise your future is bleak" (Interview PL2, 2/12/20). Sports is essential for healthy mind and body. Becoming a sports professional require many years of hard work and training. During these years of their professional growth, they need financial support. Which is rarely available to them, "I had really a hard time, my father considers sports total waste of time and resources and he always reprimanded me for going to play cricket. I had to go to the cricket without telling anybody for fear of insult" (Interview PL2, 1/12/20).\

The attitude of the parents is not only the last ditch hindering students from becoming sportsman of their choice. Many schools/colleges/universities lack sports facilities to cater the students' craze for sports. Not only the educational institutions but also in Pakistan at country level, there are little facilities for the general public to practice sports of their choice. Students end up playing in streets, "It was my love for cricket that would drive me to play anywhere I found open place. The place where I was raised, cricket grounds were not present" (Interview PL1, 1, 2/12/20). Lack of sports facilities and attitude towards sports in general public stop people from going to adopting sports as a profession. Unless needed sports culture is not created and needed facilities not provided, country cannot produce world class players, "This would require a lot investment by the government. So far, there is lack of will on the part of government" (Interview SB1, 8/12/20). Arranging sports events to attract tourists require world class sports facilities. Many countries have started exploiting this niche. These countries provide world class sports facilities, where players come for practice. All this results in job generation and foreign exchange and have positive affect on the economy. Such sports facilities are very rare in Pakistan, "We need to build world class sports' facilities to attract foreign players. Government needs to prioritize sports' tourism. It would convey positive image of the country" (Interview SB5, 9/12/20).

Sports' tourism has the potential of contributing huge part in boasting economy. However, tandem affords are needed to provide world class facilities. Some facilities might exist in Pakistan, however bring them to a world class status is needed. As the sports spectators and players also need some place to carry on their practices. So far such facilities are limited to only cricket.

### **Lack of "software" and "hardware" related to sports tourism**

"Software" refers to professionals in the sports tourism industry. The importance of tourism and lately sports tourism is acknowledged worldwide. Contribution of tourism to global economy is going up yearly. Countries around the world are trying their utmost to get their maximum share. As an industry, trained personals in this sector is needed. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, there are few institutions that offer degrees in sports and tourism, "Everything go haphazard here, this is a vast industry, it would require a large number of trained and knowledgeable personals. Individuals with credentials in tourism are small in numbers, as only one and two institutions offer this program." (Interview TD5, 9/12/20). As an individual at tourism department rightly pointed out, "Situation would start improving, the moment we acknowledge it as an industry with huge benefits. However, so far, this is not the case" (Interview TD4, 8/12/20).

"Hardware" refers to facilities related to food and accommodation. For example: high-level restaurants and five-star hotels. For the foreign tourists, it is imperative to have world class lodging, not only in term of safety but also facilities. In the choice of destination, tourists are also guided by the facilities available in the host country. Unfortunately, Pakistan lack needed facilities especially at the famous tourist places like Swat, Kalam, Abbottabad and Murree, "Tourism departments felt the need for five stars' hotels in many places of tourism. However, this will take many years to materialize. There is scarcity of funding" (Interview TD3, 8/12/20). Normally, such projects are carried out in partnership with private sector. However, involvement of private

sector is limited. Which results in delay as government has neither the means nor resources to carry on these projects, "Lack of transparency on the part of government and culture of corruption is the real hurdle in the private sector investment. They have to bribe many officials to be awarded contract, which intern increases the cost of the project" (Interview TD2, 7/12/20). Countries around the world are encouraging private investments in tourism related project, as it reduces the burden of the incumbent government and encourage transparency. However, Pakistan seems unable to involve private sector in tourism related investment.

Another related issue is the quality of the food and daily consumable things. Quality control departments in provinces are not active to keep eye on the quality and price of the consumable items, "Many tourists that come to Pakistan complain about the quality of the food. They bring food items with themselves and avoid buying things at the tourism places" (Interview TD1, 9/12/20). Many locals at the tourism places over charge local and as well as foreigners. Which create a bad impression about them in the tourists. The overcharging by the local is not just limited to the food or daily consumable items but also to taxi and other hireable vehicles, "They give bad name to the country, such practices have been going on for quite some time. The authorities are watching this silently as if matter of no concern to them" (Interview TD2, 8/12/20).

Pakistan needs to attract foreign tourists. Given the huge potential of this sectors, the need of the hour is to create awareness regarding this important sector. Government needs to open departments of tourism in private and public sector universities offering courses and degrees in tourism. At the same time, private sector investment should be encouraged in the tourism sector. Building five stars' hotel at many famous tourism places is the need of hour. Moreover, concerned departments must be directed to maintain strict quality and price control.

### **Lack of publicity to neighboring countries**

One of the lessons from the countries with successful tourism experience is attracting neighbor's countries tourists and later going for the international tourists (Beech, Andrewrigby, & Thandi, 2004). However, in case of Pakistan, due to mutual distrust except for China, this possibility is distant option. Pakistan needs to improve relation with neighboring countries. China has large number of outbound tourists and given close proximity and less cost, it could be tapped for the good of the economy, "We receive many thousands visitor from India but they are religious tourists, their journey is restricted to few places, other than that we do not have as many tourists from our neighboring countries" (Interview TD4, 7/12/20). As regards China's tourists, an official at tourism department of KPK told,

"though, both countries enjoy friendly relationship but we failed to tap the market of Chinese outbound tourists, partly because of our own negligence, as we could not effectively project Pakistan image as a beautiful place for tourism and partly because of negative image of the country" (Interview TD3, 7/12/20).

Pakistan first need to develop good relations with neighboring countries and attract the tourist of neighboring countries. Pakistan must properly market its potential as a tourist destination just as done by India. Visas policy towards neighboring country may be revised. Friendly relations with China may be used to attract Chinese tourists.

### **Discussion**

Tourism is a huge industry and its contribution to global economy is increasing with each year. With improved means of transportation, this sector is projected to grow further. Countries are trying to tap maximum benefits from this emerging area. Pakistan has huge potential to attract tourist and earn valuable

foreign exchange. For this happen, Pakistan needs to project its positive image abroad. As war on terrorism has done great damage to the country reputation and image. Now situation as improved considerably. However, parallel affords are lacking to portray country with rich cultural and natural resources. The task would require better co-ordination among various departments and various sets of governments. Apart from this, various events are organized around the world in order to attract tourists. Pakistan needs to effectively participate in these events and must not be participation for the sake of participation. Above all sincere efforts on the part of government is needed both in term of finance and management.

Sports' tourism is late addition to the variegated aspects of tourism but it has promising future. As countries are directing their affords to explore this niche. However, in Pakistan there remains serious challenges that need to be addressed. First, players from other parts of the world will only come to Pakistan, if there would class players and sports' infrastructure in the country. For producing world class players, country needs to have sports' culture. This culture needs to be deeply rooted in educational set up of the country. Schools must act as a primary nursery for the sports players. Later, further polished at college and university on its way to become professional players. This would require honorable place for sports in school curriculum. Awareness regarding the benefits of sports must be created, so that traditional negative perception regarding sports must be replaced.

The schools/colleges/universities need to have well developed sports' facilities and regular training in the presence of trained instructor must be imparted to them. The provision of sports facilities must not be limited to educational institutions; it must be spread across the country. These facilities need to be of world class. As apart from serving as a recreational and practicing facility for the local people, it could provide practicing places for the world class players and would be a source of income and job generation.

As building world class facilities of tourism and sports require colossal investment. The best course of action as evident from the countries with huge tourism income is to involve private sector. Involvement of private sector would bring transparency and efficient management. However, routine bureaucracy problems would surface in the face of any such step. The will of government is needed to sort things out, if it really wants this promising sector to grow. Furthermore, government will is also needed to keep check on quality and price of daily commodities especially at the tourist places.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

Government must come up with comprehensive plan to flourish tourism. This would involve comprehensive policies regarding facilitation of the tourists. Visas restrictions need to be relaxed for them. Furthermore, country need tourism to flourish before it directs its attention to exploiting the sports' niche. For this, positive image of the country is needed to be projected in the comity of nations utilizing every possible means from print to physical participation in world's events for tourism. Consequently, it requires governments' attention. If needed will is present, Pakistan would attract considerable foreign tourists. Situations in Pakistan has improved considerably. However, country needs to tap this improvement for making Pakistan hub of tourism. While achieving the goal of making Pakistan hub of tourism would require a lot of investment including building five stars' hotels and infrastructure. It is imperative government needs to give serious thought to the involvement of private sector. Furthermore, to overcome the shortage of trained staff, government needs to start tourism related degrees in various institution. Along with it, prices and quality of food and other items needs to be checked regularly.

Sports tourism follows general tourism. However, it is lucrative aspect of tourism both in term of providing facilities to the players and attracting sports' tourists. However, for this sports facilities in the country needs to be brought at the international



level. So that sports' tourists and professional player can use it. It would generate foreign exchange and jobs and would help alleviate poverty. Moreover, sports' culture needs to flourish in the country. As it would help project positive image of the country abroad and would be instrumental in attracting sports' tourist. Sports culture would starts developing, if Pakistan makes it a part of schools' curriculum. Furthermore, awareness regarding the importance of sports is also needed to be develop to counter stereotype perceptions among general and parents of the students.

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