Business & Economy (Https://Timesofindia.Indiatimes.Com/Toi-Plus/Business-Economy-114042737)

We Make Bats, We Don't Call The Shots

Sports goods manufacturing in India has huge economic potential. Yet, Pakistan's Sialkot outperforms us. For more clusters like Jalandhar & Meerut, policies, investments & infra need to happen in tandem

Sanjeet Singh (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-sanjeet singh-479279302) & **Ashish Dhawan (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-ashish dhawan-479258454)**

Apr 30, 2026, 22:29 IST

India's recent World T20 championship, was only the latest reminder of how sport now commands global attention on a scale few other things can. And Fifa World Cup football is an even grander spectacle, whose shots will soon thunder around the world.

Behind the spectacle, billions of dollars of footballs, cricket bats, training gear, protective equipment, and athletic infra move through international supply chains each year, produced in specialised manufacturing clusters that most fans have never heard of.

India has such clusters. And they are hiding a remarkable, if underexploited, story. The towns of Jalandhar and Meerut, together, form the backbone of India's sports equipment industry, their origins tracing back to the skilled artisans who resettled there after Partition.

Walk through Jalandhar's Basti Sheikh locality today, and you'll find workshops producing footballs that have been kicked around in European leagues, and inflatable balls that carry the “Made in India” stamp at the Fifa World Cup.

Meerut, meanwhile, is home to a cluster that supplies a majority of the cricket bats used on international pitches – the same hand-crafted English willow blades wielded by Test players from Australia to West Indies.

These are not cottage industries: they represent deep generational expertise that global buyers quietly depend on.

And yet, taken together, India accounts for only around 0.5% of global sports equipment supply. This is a country of 1.4bn people, with one of the world’s largest and fastest-growing sporting populations. The gap between our sporting ambitions, and our manufacturing footprint, could not be more stark.

There’s much more than pride at stake. Large-scale employment, a diversified manufacturing base, and accelerated export growth all depend on closing that gap. Recent Union and state govt policies have underlined the importance of this goal, through sector reforms, production incentives, and investment in industrial infra.

While electronics and automobiles have dominated the narrative, durable industrial growth will also depend on sectors that combine strong domestic demand with export potential. Sports equipment manufacturing is precisely such an opportunity – and its time has come. Consider three reasons why the case for a structured policy push is now compelling.

First, the sector is both jobs-rich and export-hungry. According to Annual Survey of Industries, sports manufacturing generates roughly 25 jobs per crore rupees of investment – second only to apparel and footwear. Global trade in sports equipment alone is estimated at $50bn annually.

China commands nearly half of all exports. Pakistan’s Sialkot, responsible for roughly 70% of the world’s hand-stitched footballs, and exporting sports goods worth over $350mn in a year, outperforms India’s entire sports manufacturing sector.

Vietnam and Indonesia are catching up too, each steadily absorbing orders from global brands diversifying away from China. India, with far greater scale, skill depth, and sectoral overlap with textiles, leather, plastics, and light engineering, has been a bystander in a race it should be leading.

Second, the timing is strategically aligned with India's growing sporting ambitions. India will host Commonwealth Games 2030, and is simultaneously pursuing a bid for Olympics 2036. Hosting mega sporting events requires large volumes of specialised equipment across disciplines – from athletics infra to sportswear to training accessories.

Importing the majority of that would impose avoidable fiscal costs, and squander a rare moment of domestic demand concentration.

The Li Ning story after Beijing 2008 Olympics, shows what is possible when industrial policy and sporting ambition are pointed in the same direction: a domestic brand transformed into a global competitor, on the back of the Games' visibility.

India should be writing a similar playbook now, by showcasing a range of made in India products at the games that are second to none in quality and price.

Third, rising domestic participation is restructuring demand in India's favour. The past decade has brought a genuine cultural shift – organised sports, recreational fitness, private academies, and govt-backed grassroots programmes, have collectively enlarged the market for sports goods in ways that reduce risk for manufacturers, and underpin export competitiveness.

Global supply chains, still scarred by pandemic-era disruptions, are actively looking for a credible China+1 partner. India's established cluster base, cost-competitive labour, and deepening domestic demand make the proposition attractive.

The hard part is for India to get its rising tide in order. Industry consultations suggest that Indian manufacturers face a meaningful cost disadvantage versus competing geographies, driven by higher raw material costs, elevated logistics expenses, and the prohibitive cost of obtaining international certifications – a particular barrier in a sector where Fifa, ICC, and BWF approvals are prerequisites, not nice-to-haves.

These pressures are compounded by the absence of anchor brands capable of generating scale, facilitating technology transfer, and building long-term buyer confidence.

Addressing this will require targeted action on both sides of the ledger: rationalising input costs, investing in cluster infra and modern logistics, and establishing internationally accredited certification facilities within India.

Equally important is a coherent brand-building strategy – one that strengthens domestic labels in high-volume sports, while attracting global partnerships in emerging segments.

India's manufacturing ambitions are often expressed through the language of mega-factories and frontier technologies. Those investments are critical. But broad-based industrial growth will also be built on sectors that combine labour intensity, export potential, and rising domestic consumption.

Sports equipment sits firmly at that intersection. If the coming decade is to be one in which India not only hosts the world's biggest sporting events, but also supplies the equipment that powers them, then the case for bringing Jalandhar and Meerut – and the talent they represent – into the centre of India's industrial strategy has never been stronger.

Singh is senior adviser, Niti Aayog (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/niti-aayog), and Dhawan is founder-CEO, The Convergence Foundation