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India's Anti-Doping Reforms Gain Momentum Amid Commonwealth Games Setback and Clean Sport Concerns

Published On: 27-07-2026

Recent Development and Background:

- India's preparations for the **Commonwealth Games 2026** faced an early setback after two medal prospects were removed from the campaign due to **anti-doping rule violations**, creating concerns regarding India's medal expectations and sporting credibility.
- The development gained significance as India has recently strengthened its legal framework by notifying the implementation of the **National Anti-Doping Act, 2022** and the **National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025**.
- These legislative measures aim to establish a stronger institutional mechanism for preventing doping, protecting athlete rights, ensuring transparent procedures, and promoting **clean sport**.
- The issue has become more important as India prepares for major international sporting responsibilities, including its ambition to host the **2030 Commonwealth Games** and continue its bid for the **2036 Olympic Games**.

Doping Issue in India: Growing Concerns and Implications:

Meaning and Concept of Doping:

- **Doping** refers to the use of prohibited substances or prohibited methods by athletes to artificially enhance performance in sporting competitions.
- It violates the principles of:
 - **Fair play.**
 - Athlete health protection.
 - Equality of competition.
 - Integrity of sports.
- Anti-doping regulations aim not only to detect violations but also to educate athletes and create a culture of ethical competition.

Recent Concerns Regarding Indian Athletes:

- India's **weightlifting quota** for the Commonwealth Games was reduced from **16 athletes to 11 athletes** due to multiple anti-doping violations recorded within the specified period.
- Under Commonwealth Games qualification rules, every confirmed anti-doping violation committed by an athlete or athlete support personnel can lead to a reduction in the number of available athlete slots for that country.
- Such penalties directly affect:
 - Medal prospects.
 - Athlete participation opportunities.

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- India's international sporting reputation.

India's Position in Global Doping Statistics:

- According to the **World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) annual report 2024**, India recorded one of the highest doping positivity ratios globally, with a positivity rate of around **3.6%**.
- A high rate of doping violations indicates challenges related to:
- Athlete awareness.
- Availability of prohibited substances.
- Coaching practices.
- Monitoring mechanisms.
- Sports ethics education.

Importance for India's Sporting Future:

- Strong anti-doping mechanisms are essential because India is increasingly seeking a larger role in global sports governance.
- Successful hosting of major sporting events requires:
- International confidence in testing systems.
- Transparent regulatory institutions.
- Compliance with global anti-doping standards.
- A credible anti-doping framework will support India's long-term goals in international sports competitions.

National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025: Overview and Objectives:

Background and Purpose:

- The **National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025** amends the **National Anti-Doping Act, 2022** to strengthen India's legal and institutional framework for combating doping in sports.
- The Act provides a statutory foundation for:
- Preventing doping practices.
- Protecting athlete rights.
- Maintaining fairness and integrity in sports competitions.
- Improving accountability in anti-doping administration.

Alignment with International Standards:

- The legislation seeks to align India's anti-doping framework with the:
- **World Anti-Doping Code.**
- **UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport.**
- Such alignment ensures that Indian athletes and institutions follow internationally accepted standards regarding:
- Testing procedures.
- Results management.
- Disciplinary mechanisms.
- Athlete protection.

Need for a Strong Legal Framework:

- Earlier, India's anti-doping mechanism primarily depended on administrative regulations and institutional practices.
- A dedicated legal framework provides greater certainty regarding:
- Authority of anti-doping bodies.

- Rights and responsibilities of athletes.
- Investigation procedures.
- Disciplinary action.

Institutional Framework Under the National Anti-Doping System:

National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA):

- The **National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA)** is India's autonomous organisation responsible for implementing anti-doping policies and programmes.
- It was established in **2005** to promote and monitor clean sports practices in India.
- NADA functions in accordance with the principles and requirements of the **World Anti-Doping Code**.

Major Functions of NADA:

- Planning and implementing India's anti-doping programme.
- Conducting athlete testing programmes.
- Managing anti-doping education initiatives.
- Coordinating investigations related to doping violations.
- Promoting awareness among athletes, coaches, and support personnel.

Anti-Doping Education Initiatives:

- NADA conducts awareness programmes to educate athletes about:
- Prohibited substances.
- Prohibited methods.
- Testing procedures.
- Athlete responsibilities.
- Campaigns such as the **#PlayTrue Campaign** encourage athletes to participate in sports with honesty, integrity, and respect for fair competition.

National Board for Anti-Doping in Sports:

Establishment and Role:

- The **National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025** strengthens institutional oversight by providing for the **National Board for Anti-Doping in Sports**.
- The Board acts as a supervisory mechanism for NADA and provides advice to the **Central Government** on anti-doping policies and regulations.

Major Responsibilities:

- Supervising the functioning of NADA.
- Advising the government on anti-doping measures.
- Improving transparency and accountability in anti-doping administration.
- Strengthening coordination between sports institutions and regulatory authorities.

Key Provisions of the National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025:

Statutory Recognition of Anti-Doping Activities:

- The **National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025** provides stronger legal backing to India's anti-doping administration by formally recognising important functions related to:
- **Testing of athletes.**

- **Results management.**
- **Anti-doping education.**
- **Intelligence gathering and investigations.**
- The legal framework ensures that anti-doping procedures are conducted through clearly defined institutional mechanisms rather than only through administrative guidelines.

Definition of Anti-Doping Rule Violations:

- The Act defines various actions and circumstances that constitute **anti-doping rule violations**.
- These violations may include:
- Presence of prohibited substances in an athlete's sample.
- Use or attempted use of prohibited substances or methods.
- Refusal or failure to provide samples.
- Tampering with the doping control process.
- Possession or trafficking of prohibited substances.
- Clear identification of violations helps maintain consistency in enforcement and ensures that athletes understand their obligations.

Protection of Athlete Rights and Due Process:

- The amended framework focuses on maintaining a balance between strict anti-doping enforcement and protection of athlete rights.
- It strengthens principles of:
- **Natural justice.**
- Fair hearing.
- Transparent decision-making.
- Right to appeal.
- Athletes facing allegations of doping violations are provided opportunities to present their defence before appropriate disciplinary mechanisms.

Enhanced Information Access and Oversight:

- The **National Board for Anti-Doping in Sports** is empowered to obtain information regarding the functioning of:
- **Disciplinary Panel.**
- **Appeal Panel.**
- This provision aims to improve:
- Institutional transparency.
- Monitoring of decisions.
- Accountability of anti-doping bodies.

Significance of the National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025:

Strengthening Transparency and Accountability:

- The legislation improves transparency in anti-doping administration by creating clearer institutional roles and responsibilities.
- Independent oversight mechanisms can reduce procedural uncertainty and strengthen confidence among athletes.
- Better monitoring of anti-doping decisions improves accountability within sporting institutions.

Improving Institutional Autonomy:

- A stronger legal framework enhances the independence and credibility of anti-doping institutions.
- Institutional autonomy is important because anti-doping decisions must remain free from:
- External influence.
- Administrative pressure.
- Sporting interests.

Promoting Fair Competition:

- Effective anti-doping mechanisms ensure that athletes compete on an equal platform.
- Clean sport policies protect:
- Honest athletes.
- Athlete health.
- Public confidence in sporting competitions.
- Preventing doping also supports the broader objective of developing an ethical sporting culture in India.

Alignment with International Best Practices:

- The amended law brings India's anti-doping system closer to global standards established by **WADA**.
- International compliance is essential for:
- Participation in global sporting events.
- Recognition of Indian testing systems.
- Maintaining credibility among international sporting organisations.

World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA): Global Anti-Doping Framework:

Background and Establishment:

- The **World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)** was established in **1999** by the **International Olympic Committee (IOC)** as an independent global organisation to coordinate efforts against doping in sports.
- It functions as the leading international authority responsible for promoting and harmonising anti-doping policies worldwide.

Governance Model:

- WADA follows a unique governance structure based on equal partnership between:
- The global **sports movement**.
- Governments across the world.
- This partnership model ensures cooperation between public authorities and sporting organisations in developing anti-doping standards.

Core Document: World Anti-Doping Code:

- The **World Anti-Doping Code** is the fundamental document of WADA's anti-doping system.
- It aims to harmonise anti-doping rules across:
- Different countries.
- Different sports.
- International sporting organisations.
- The Code establishes common standards related to:
- Testing procedures.
- Results management.
- Athlete responsibilities.
- Sanctions for violations.

Importance of the World Anti-Doping Code:

- The Code creates uniformity in anti-doping regulations worldwide.
- It prevents different sports organisations from following inconsistent rules.
- It provides a common framework for protecting clean athletes and ensuring fair competition.

WADA Prohibited List and Global Standards:

Meaning and Purpose:

- WADA publishes the **Prohibited List**, which identifies substances and methods banned in sports.
- The list is updated annually after scientific review and consultation with experts.

Criteria for Including Substances and Methods:

- A substance or method may be prohibited if it meets one or more of the following conditions:
- It has the potential to enhance athletic performance.
- It poses a risk to athlete health.
- It violates the spirit of sport.

Scope of Application:

- The **Prohibited List** applies to:
- **In-competition periods.**
- **Out-of-competition periods.**
- Specific categories of sports.
- Athletes are responsible for ensuring that they do not use prohibited substances, even unintentionally.

Challenges in India's Anti-Doping Framework:

Athlete Awareness and Education:

- Lack of awareness among athletes, especially at grassroots levels, remains a major challenge.
- Some athletes may unknowingly consume prohibited substances through:
- Supplements.
- Medicines.
- Unverified nutritional products.
- Continuous education programmes are necessary to prevent accidental violations.

Monitoring and Testing Capacity:

- A large sporting ecosystem requires extensive testing infrastructure and trained personnel.
- Strengthening testing capacity is essential to detect violations effectively while protecting athlete rights.

Need for Scientific and Institutional Capacity:

- Anti-doping systems require:
- Advanced laboratory facilities.
- Scientific expertise.
- Efficient investigation mechanisms.
- Investment in sports science and research can improve India's ability to maintain international anti-doping standards.

Way Forward for Strengthening India's Anti-Doping Mechanism:

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Expanding Anti-Doping Education and Awareness:

- India needs to develop a comprehensive **anti-doping education system** covering:
- Professional athletes.
- Young athletes.
- Coaches.
- Support personnel.
- Sports administrators.
- Awareness programmes should focus on:
- Risks associated with prohibited substances.
- Responsibilities under anti-doping regulations.
- Safe use of supplements and medicines.
- Grassroots-level education is particularly important because many emerging athletes may lack knowledge about international anti-doping requirements.

Strengthening Testing and Investigation Capacity:

- India should enhance its anti-doping infrastructure through:
- Advanced testing laboratories.
- Trained sample collection officers.
- Scientific research facilities.
- Effective intelligence networks.
- A strong investigation mechanism is required to identify not only athletes but also support networks involved in supplying prohibited substances.
- Anti-doping efforts should move beyond detection-based approaches and include prevention, research, and athlete protection.

Ensuring Athlete-Centric Anti-Doping Governance:

- Anti-doping administration should maintain a balance between strict enforcement and protection of athlete rights.
- Decision-making processes must ensure:
- Transparency.
- Fair hearings.
- Timely disposal of cases.
- Right to appeal.
- Athletes should not face unnecessary reputational damage due to procedural delays or lack of clarity in regulations.

Improving Coordination Among Stakeholders:

- Effective anti-doping implementation requires cooperation among:
- **National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA).**
- Sports federations.
- Coaches.
- Medical professionals.
- Government authorities.
- Athletes.
- Better coordination can help in:
- Early identification of risks.
- Effective education programmes.
- Faster investigation of violations.

Importance of Clean Sport for India's Global Sporting Ambitions:

Preparing for Major International Events:

- As India aims to host the **2030 Commonwealth Games** and continues its efforts regarding the **2036 Olympic Games bid**, maintaining a credible anti-doping system has become strategically important.
- International sporting events require host nations to demonstrate:
- Compliance with global sporting standards.
- Transparent governance.
- Effective athlete protection mechanisms.

Strengthening India's Sporting Reputation:

- A robust anti-doping framework improves India's credibility in the international sports community.
- Clean sport policies help ensure that:
- Indian athletes compete fairly.
- Medal achievements remain credible.
- Sports development occurs through talent and training rather than unfair advantages.

Supporting Ethical Sports Culture:

- Anti-doping measures are not limited to punishment; they promote values such as:
- Integrity.
- Discipline.
- Respect.
- Fair competition.
- Developing a clean sporting culture is essential for sustainable growth of Indian sports.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Constitutional and Policy Linkages:

- **Article 21 of the Constitution:**
- Protects the right to life and personal liberty, which includes the right to health and dignity.
- Anti-doping measures support athlete health by preventing harmful substance abuse.
- **Article 39(f) of the Constitution:**
- Directs the State to ensure opportunities for children to develop in a healthy manner.
- Sports development and ethical training contribute to this objective.
- **Article 51A of the Constitution:**
- Promotes the development of scientific temper and excellence, which are relevant to sports science and fair competition.

Government Initiatives Related to Sports Development:

- **Khelo India Programme:**
- Promotes grassroots sports development.
- Identifies and nurtures young sporting talent.
- **Target Olympic Podium Scheme:**
- Provides focused support to elite athletes preparing for international competitions.
- These initiatives require a strong anti-doping ecosystem to ensure that athlete development remains ethical and sustainable.

International Frameworks:

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- **World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA):**
- Acts as the global authority for coordinating anti-doping efforts.
- **World Anti-Doping Code:**
- Provides common anti-doping standards for countries and sporting organisations.
- **UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport:**
- Encourages international cooperation against doping and promotes clean sport.

Conclusion:

- India's recent doping-related setbacks highlight the need for stronger preventive and regulatory mechanisms in sports.
- The **National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Act, 2025** represents an important step towards creating a transparent, accountable, and internationally aligned anti-doping framework.
- However, legislation alone cannot eliminate doping challenges unless supported by:
 - Athlete education.
 - Scientific capacity.
 - Effective monitoring.
 - Institutional coordination.
- A successful anti-doping system must protect both the integrity of sports and the rights of athletes.

For India's growing role in global sports, ensuring **clean sport** will be essential for achieving sustainable excellence and building international confidence