

Khelo India Water Sports Festival: a springboard for global success

Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Kerala coaches break down Dal Lake victories and say the race to achieve international success has begun

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The sun may have set on the Khelo India Water Sports Festival 2025, but the first-ever consolidated, national-level, open-age competition featuring kayaking, coaching and rowing has set a new chapter in the history of water sports in the country.

The Games, hosted by the Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council under the supervision of the Sports Authority of India (SAI), has lifted the enthusiasm of water sports athletes and their coaches as they eye qualification for Los Angeles Olympics 2028 and aim to win medals in other global competitions. All the 24 gold medals, which include 10 in rowing, decided at Dal Lake from August 21-23 were Olympic events.



Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Kerala emerged the top three states in the Khelo India Water Sports Festival. An iconic lake in Bhopal, a water sports training centre alongside the Bay of Bengal and a SAI Centre of Excellence in the lap of Kerala's enchanting backwaters in Alappuzha made headlines after athletes from these facilities made a big splash at the Dal.

The performance of water sports exponents like Rasmita Sahoo, Bidya Devi Oinam and Shruti

Tanaji Chougule, who train at SAI's Jagatpur centre in Odisha; Dally Bishnoi, Shikha Chauhan and Pallavi Jagtab of MP and, Vishal Dangi of Uttarakhand have given the kayaking and canoeing fraternity great hope. Shikha and Pallavi were part of an Indian troika that recently won a historic silver in the Asian Canoe Slalom Championship in Guizhou, China.



The performance of kayakers and canoeists who train at the five SAI centres across India were noteworthy. Forty-seven SAI athletes won five golds, seven silvers and three bronze medals. Jagatpur, which had 15 athletes at KIWSF 2025, was the best with three golds and five silvers.

Under the new sports policy (Khelo Bharat Niti) aimed at upliftment and exposure, the KIWSF festival can be a gamechanger. The Dal Games have already motivated the water sports fraternity and given government's support through its TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme) and TAGG (Target Asian Games Group) schemes, the impact could be seen in the Asian Games in Japan next year.

More than 30 gold medals each are at stake in the Olympics and Asian Games in kayaking and canoeing alone and India can certainly think of winning a medal at these global meets, feel experts. Coaches associated with SAI's National Centres of Excellence in Odisha and Kerala sound motivated already. Team champions Madhya Pradesh, which won 10 of the 24 gold medals in KIWSF, are equally bolstered.



The powerhouse performance Madhya Pradesh displayed in Srinagar wasn't by chance. It was a product of a carefully nurtured ecosystem of discipline and ambition at the MP State Water Sports Academy of Excellence.

"This is the result of months of intense preparation, a disciplined schedule, and the trust these young athletes placed in us," said Ankush Sharma, Madhya Pradesh's kayaking and canoeing coach. "Each paddle stroke was backed by purpose. Every finish was a reflection of our training philosophy."

Assisting Ankush was Champa Mourya. She played a pivotal role in motivating the team behind the scenes. "We worked not just on physical endurance but mental strength too," she said.

"These kids learned to thrive under pressure. And today, they are champions not just of Madhya Pradesh but the entire country," added Champa. The aspiration to win global laurels is only getting stronger, she said.

Coach at Jagatpur, Laisharam Johnson Singh said Odisha's performance signals a shift in India's water sports map. "This is only the beginning for Odisha. The talent pool is deep, and with more investment and support, we will be leading soon."

Johnson, known for his patient mentoring style, emphasised the importance of exposure and competitive experience. "Our paddlers are learning to trust the process. Silver today, gold tomorrow," he said. "The process has to go on and the results will come."

While Kerala came third with seven medals, including three gold, one silver, and three bronze, their performance was nothing short of inspiring. Coach Prithviraj Nandkumar Shinde said: "Kerala has always had a legacy in water sports. This year, we added another chapter to it." He added that building on the fundamentals will make the athletes perfect and better.

The top three teams, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Kerala, walked away with not just medals but also with stories of grit and growth. Behind every podium finish was a coach's unshakable belief. Now it's all about making the next level.



Dalip Beniwal, SAI's High Performance Manager and senior coach at Jagatpur, feels the Khelo India Water Sports Festival in Srinagar is a springboard for the fraternity, especially kayaking and canoeing. "We have rowers representing India in the Olympics and Asian Games. Our kayakers and canoeists can surely do the same if they get the exposure they deserve. The Games here have been an eye opener," said Beniwal.

For more on KIWSF 2025: www.water.kheloindia.gov.in

For Medal tally: <https://water.kheloindia.gov.in/medal-tally>

ABOUT KHELO INDIA WATER SPORTS FESTIVAL:

The Khelo India Water Sports Festival is an addition to the Khelo India calendar. Organised between August 21-23 at the iconic Dal Lake in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, the KIWSF features six sports like rowing, canoeing, kayaking, water skiing, shikara race, and dragon boat race. Twenty-eight states and Union Territories took part in the first-ever Games, which was an open age category meet. This water sports carnival was the second Khelo India event in J&K after the Khelo India Winter Games in Gulmarg. Launched in 2017-18, Khelo India is a mission to promote sports culture at the grassroots level and also aimed at organised talent identification, structured sporting competitions, and infrastructure development.

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