

THE FITNESS AND HEALTH EQUIPMENT INDUSTRY AND THE CATAclysm OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The sports industry of Jalandhar has occupied one of the most prominent positions in the industrial segment, not only in Punjab but all around India. In the recent years, India experienced a surge in the fitness industry owing to an increased focus on physical fitness and health. Various elements encouraged people to participate in physical activities and as a result, the fitness industry emerged to be a lucrative segment for investment as well as manufacturing. However, the pandemic of COVID-19 distorted the health and fitness segment as well, among other sectors. While the entire industrial sector of India was struggling to survive throughout the pandemic, sports industry saw a temporary boost in their demand and sales during the first wave of COVID-19, out of which the fitness segment of the sports industry experienced an exceptional increase during the first wave but mellowed down slowly with the passage of time and is now struggling for customers. An analysis was done for the Manufacturers of fitness and health equipment segment of the sports goods industry in Jalandhar to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the industry and the challenges being faced by the manufacturers. The fitness and health equipment segment of the industry comprises of around 12 to 14 manufacturers that cater to the demand of the entire industry. The manufacturers were interviewed regarding questions concerning the impact of the COVID-19 on their units and the key challenges being experienced by them. The study is based on responses of 13 manufacturers of fitness equipment which is conducted through pre constructed questionnaires and personal interview.

Key Words: COVID-19, Sports Goods Industry, Health and Fitness Equipment, Home-based Equipment, Jalandhar

INTRODUCTION TO SPORTS INDUSTRY

Jalandhar is known to be the hub of sports goods industry not only in India but internationally as well. The industry, mainly located in Basti Nau, Basti Danishmanda and Basti Guzan, spreads over 52.75 acres of land and contributes about 65% of the total exports of sports good of the country wherein the goods are exported to about 130 countries including major countries like UK, Australia, Germany, France and USA. Now with advancement in technology, infrastructure and production, methods are being upgraded and more

entrepreneurs are setting up their units in Jalandhar and its surrounding areas. Jalandhar and Meerut together, account for 250 exporting units, 1000 manufacturing units for domestic markets and around 4000 micro enterprises. In addition to this, there are approximately 20,000 household units located in and around both the cities. Together, these MSMEs employ around 1 lakh workers directly or indirectly. The turnover of this cluster is approximately Rs 2000 crore (unofficial figure) catering to domestic and export markets. Rough estimates suggest that today, Jalandhar has more than one hundred major industries and about 20,000 small-scale industries with the most conservative estimate of an annual turnover of approximately Rs 450 crores. In the year 2000-2001, the exports measured 320 crores, which increased to 585 crores in the year 2008-09 and further to 1500 crores in 2016-17. Jalandhar's sports industry, which is worth Rs 1,700 crore, including Rs 400 crore export and Rs 1,300 crore domestic supply, provides employment to around 60,000 to 70,000 people. Table 1 demonstrates the production and employment data of sports goods industry in Punjab from 1980-81 to 2018-19 wherein it can be observed that production increased 7 times during the period of 1980 to 2019, the highest spike in production was observed in 2013-14. On the other hand, Table 1(a) demonstrates the level of export of sports goods in Punjab wherein a declining trend can be seen during the time span of 1981-2018-19.

Table1: Production and Employment in Sports Goods in Punjab

YEAR	PRODUCTION (in Lakhs)	EMPLOYMENT
1980-81	3447.40	4,242
1990-91	6282.40	8,716
2000-01	21239.38	6553
2010-11	5234.92	5792
2011-12	6771.39	6096
2012-13	6602.86	6091
2013-14	28187.52	7389
2014-15	25655.88	9056
2015-16	27657.47	9561
2016-17	29197.80	12170
2017-18	23837.47	9128
2018-19	23998.91	12383

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab 2020

Table 1(a): Value of Export of Sports Goods in Punjab

(Value in Crores)

Item	1980-81	1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2018-19
Sports Goods	2033.84	2595.28	20416	393.47	460.22

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab 2020

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The World Federation Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) and McKinsey & Company (2021) in their report titled “Sporting Goods 2021– The Next Normal for an Industry in Flux” studied the impact of the pandemic in shifting consumer behaviors wherein efforts were made to uncover the current market scenario for sports goods from the customer’s perspective and identify a variety of new developments taking place in the industry like the increased demand of athleisure apparel, the impact of digitalization, the rise in demand for home fitness products, and increasing importance of sustainability along with developing new business models and transformed supply chains due to COVID-19. The report also discussed the potential strategies that might help in moving ahead on the path.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Institute (2010) in its report titled ‘Brief Industrial Profile of District JALANDHAR’ discussed the industrial scenario of the district, laying key focus on the industrial area in the district, year wise trend of units registered, micro & small enterprises and artisan units in the district along with the large scale industries/public sector undertakings, medium scale enterprise, service enterprises and potential for new MSMEs. They also discussed the general issues raised by the industrial associations and institutional support available in the city to the industrial segment.

KPMG and Confederation of Indian Industry (2016) published a report titled ‘The Business of Sports- Playing to win as the game unfurls’ based on the 1st Summit on Business of Sports and Entertainment focused on unveiling how Government and Industry can collectively strengthen the ecosystem of sports in India. The report explored and examined the sports ecosystem in India to identify the various stakeholders and address their specific issues and challenges. The report also outlined certain recommendations for both the Government and private stakeholders so as to augment the growth of sports in India. It was also emphasized the need to collaborate and synchronize efforts from both the segments to take the Indian sporting industry to the Global Level.

Maureen A. Weston (2021) in her research paper titled ‘COVID-19’s Lasting Impact on the Sports Industry: Financial, Legal and Innovation’, examined the impact of COVID-19 key competitive sports from financial, legal as well as problem solving perspective. She highlighted the fact that in order to survive, every sport must prioritize safety and must anticipate and plan for crisis like COVID-19. In the current scenario, when live public events are non-existent,

there is a stronger need for community and hope. Long-term reforms must be initiated to increase awareness for safety, crisis management, and appreciation for sport. It was emphasized that through the commitment and expertise of all participants of the sport industry, specifically the medical, legal, media, sponsors, and logistic specialist teams, live sports events will return soon.

Mukherjee, Goswami, Goyal and Satija (2010) analyzed the impact of the surge in sports retail expansion of manufacturing capacities in the sector, in their research paper titled ‘Sports Retailing in India: Opportunities, Constraints and Way Forward’. The paper puts forth that a holistic policy approach must be adopted to develop the sports segment in India. It was also pointed out that the country should come up with a regulatory framework to allow

modernization of retail sector without having any negative impact on the self organized sector. It also states that foreign investment should not be restricted so as to give a push to the sports sector at the global level.

Priya Jhamb (2016) made an attempt to identify strategies for improving the competitiveness of the clusters, with special reference to sports goods cluster at Jalandhar. To study the problems faced by the cluster and the factors determining the competitiveness of the cluster in the sports market, primary data was collected for a sample of 150 units on which Porter's diamond model was applied to identify the sources of competitive advantage of the cluster. The study identified three levels to enhance the competitiveness of the cluster i.e. country level, cluster level, and firm level. The study concludes that sports goods cluster of Jalandhar is mainly dependent on factor conditions i.e. availability of raw material, skilled labour, presence of sophisticated customers, suppliers of machinery and competitors enhance the growth of the cluster.

Vannessa Ratten (2020) in her paper titled 'Sports Technology: A Commentary' asserts that there is a need to integrate sports and technology and further works to empirically and practically unpack its role in society. It is imperative to study in depth the role of sports technology in implementation of new products and services in the industry. It also lays stress on the field of technology management to encourage simultaneous work that takes a sports perspective. The paper also points out the need for a more holistic sports technology approach.

Jatinder Mahal (2020) in his article published in a leading newspaper 'Hindustan Times' reported that the Jalandhar's Sports goods industry was struggling to survive post COVID-19 and may not revive unless a special financial package for the industry is released by the government. He stated that the industry was already struggling with high labour costs and higher tax slabs for GST, the lockdown further hit them hard. Not only lockdowns but lack of demand from consumers was also the key threat that may force many of the units to shut down owing to lockdown blues.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

India's sports goods industry has established itself as an export hub in the global sports good market wherein the industry exports about 60% of its output. However, a major chunk of its output comes from Jalandhar which produces nearly 70% of total India's sports goods. The sports goods market in Jalandhar has demonstrated exorbitant growth rates in the past few decades but there are still certain systemic deficiencies that curtail the growth of the manufacturers. COVID-19 affected the sports industry adversely but the impact on health and fitness industry was observed to be positive in the initial phases of pandemic where a sudden surge in demand was felt. However, the problems brought by the pandemic were manifold. Manufacturers had to not only struggle to receive the payments from customers but were also experiencing quite significant increase in the cost of production and to find customers at such high prices was emerging as yet another challenge. Thus, the present study was focused upon the following key objectives:

1. Analyzing the trend of level of production and sales in the Fitness and Health Equipment Industry of Jalandhar.

2. Studying the key problems and the impact of COVID-19 on production and exports of Fitness and Health Equipment segment in Jalandhar.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has been conducted on the manufacturers of health and fitness equipment wherein a sample of 13 manufacturers was chosen to represent the health and fitness equipment industry of Jalandhar. The sample of the study included a mix of medium scale and small scale registered enterprises. A combination of questionnaire method and interview method was used to collect data from the sample of the study. Each of the 13 manufacturers were interviewed for a pre-constructed questionnaire covering a number of aspects related to production, sales and issues being faced by the industry due to the ongoing pandemic. The study mainly focuses on the after effects of the first wave of COVID-19 and also discusses the impact of second wave briefly. The data was collected from the following manufacturers located in different areas of the city:

1. Bhaseen Sports Pvt. Ltd.
2. Mahajan Gymnastics Works
3. Pandey Sports
4. Gurdass Gymnastic Works
5. Philips International
6. Sehmbi Gym Equipment
7. Anson Sports
8. P. Ram Chand & Co (Spartan)
9. Bhagwati Sports
10. Shree Ram Sports
11. Get set Sports
12. Three Diamond Sports
13. Rajco Sports

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Covid-19 has brought the economic activity to a standstill and the Rs. 200 crore sports industry is not an exclusion which has also witnessed "an unprecedented slump" since March, 2020. The demand generated by the sports events has got crippled and is undergoing major survival issues owing to the cancellation of major sports events. Schools, colleges, universities, gymnasiums and sports clubs were directed to be closed during lockdowns. The major chunk of the demand generated by these institutions has hit hard on the manufacturing activity and stocks are not cleared due to this lack of demand. The industry was already struggling with cancellation of orders both in national markets and international markets. The

severity of the second wave together with the expectation of the third wave has further aggravated the suffering of the industry. The production capacity of the industry also suffered a lot due to the pandemic. An enterprise making 20,000 - 30,000 rugby balls was reduced to making only 1,000. According to Ajay Mahajan, "Industry is going through a bad phase. Normalcy cannot be predicted at the moment". The pandemic brought many challenges in the form of high raw material cost, increased labour cost, migration of labour and closure of international markets. Thus, an attempt has been made to explore the issues and problems faced by the health and fitness industry.

The analysis of the responses filled in by the manufacturers in Jalandhar city highlights the following key aspects:

1. CATEGORIES OF FITNESS EQUIPMENTS

Though, Jalandhar is one of the leading manufacturers of sports goods, the fitness and health equipment segment is still gaining momentum. The products being manufactured in Jalandhar are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories of Fitness Equipments

Description	Proportion of Products (%)
Treadmill	50
Elliptical	50
Spin Bike	50
Dumbbells	100
Strength Equipment	100
Others	33.33

Source: Authors

Manufacturers are producing a wide range of fitness equipments from simple dumbbells to multi-gym, fitness machines and gym accessories. Manufacture of treadmill, elliptical and spin bike is not very common. Only 50% of manufacturers are producing it. Cardiovascular equipment produced in India suffers from drawbacks of poor technology and increased cost. The production requires huge investment and since there is not much demand for Indian treadmills and ellipticals, businesses do not manufacture these products. The demand is less because updated technology is not available and the cost of these is also very high. As a result, the consumer chooses imported products with better technology as they involve huge investment by the producer as well as consumer. On the other hand, dumbbells and strength training equipment are very popular. All the manufacturers have a variety of dumbbells and strength training equipment. During COVID-19, products like dumbbells, resistance training and strength training equipment for personal use and home based gyms were more in demand.

2. MARKET SEGMENTS

The fitness and health equipment manufacturers cater to the needs of wide variety of market segments. They are not only supplying to gyms and health clubs but are also catering to the

demands of offices and schools with outdoor gyms. In addition to this, they are also supplying to retailers as well as individual customers. Table 3 demonstrates the market segments along with its proportion, being catered to by the fitness equipment industry of Jalandhar.

Table3: Market Segments

Description	Proportion (%)
Personal Use	100
Health Clubs/Gyms	100
Offices	16.66667
Retailers	83.33333
Others	8.333333

Source: Authors

With increased awareness for health and fitness, the demand for gym equipments has increased more than ever before. Apart from joining gyms, people are purchasing simple fitness equipments for their homes. The demand for fitness equipments for personal use has matched the demand for health gyms and health clubs. The usage of fitness products in offices is at a low of around 16.67 %. Most of the demand is arising from retailing i.e. 83.33%. Owing to Covid-19 and closure of gyms and fitness centers, only personal use items were more in demand in the initial lockdown days.

3. DEMAND AND SALES

In the recent years, India has experienced a surge in the fitness industry due to increased focus on physical fitness and health. While amidst the pandemic, most of the businesses were struggling to have even one customer, the fitness and health equipment industry was flooded with orders. The study of fitness and health equipment industry depicts a similar picture where most of the respondents believed that the sales increased up to 50% during the first wave but categorized it to be temporary as the sales fell down significantly immediately after the lockdown started easing out. The manufacturers were able to sell the entire stock of finished goods in a few days only but restrictions on operations of industrial units combined with supply chain restrictions, created a roadblock in further catering to the demand of the customers. Since majority of the manufacturing is done manually, shortage of labour also hampered the production of products in demand. However, the demand of the manufacturers saw a sharp decline in the post lockdown period as majority of the schools, colleges, gyms and fitness centers were closed. The second wave has hit them even harder as the lockdown was again imposed making it impossible for them find customers. Though there was no restriction on industrial manufacturing, there was no demand in the market as all the main sources of fitness i.e. gyms, fitness clubs, playgrounds etc were closed. Table 5 depicts the percentage of manufacturers that encountered increase in sales.

Table 5: Demand and Sales

Description	Proportion (%)
Increase in Demand	91.66666667
% Increase in Demand	8.333333
Increase in Revenue	25

Source: Authors

When asked about the increase in demand, 91.67% said that the demand increased as soon as the lockdown was announced. A sharp rise in demand was observed. Most of the producers mentioned that demand went up by 30% to 50% during the lockdown. The growth in demand was more significant during the first wave of the covid. As physical activities were abandoned, people rushed towards purchasing fitness items for homes which spiked the demand. However, it did not impact the revenues. As production could not be increased immediately and the orders have to be fulfilled by average delays of 2-3 months, the demand increase was not long lasting.

Owner of Gurdas gymnastics said that there was a temporary increase in sales in terms of rupees but unit-wise sales had decreased even during the first lockdown period. Also, there was a shift from machines to home based products due to which the sales were unaffected.

Pandey sports explained that approximately 80% decline has been observed in sales from health clubs and gyms.

P. Ram Chand & Co. also highlighted the fact that sales went up in the first wave but there was hardly any customer during the second wave. During the first wave, the existing stock of goods cleared at a rampant speed but no new sales were there. He said not only his business was struggling to find customers; the entire industry was impacted by this.

4. PRODUCTS DEMANDED

There has always been a strong preference of Indian consumers towards foreign products over Indian goods, specifically in Fitness equipment category but the research demonstrates the contrary. Not only during the pandemic times but otherwise also, consumers prefer made in India products for strength training and gymnastic equipment whereas in cardiovascular health equipment there is stiff competition between foreign and Indian products. Foreign products still lead the market as the Indian products are still lacking behind in technology upgradation. The products that are of competent technology are not available at affordable prices making them struggle in the cardio vascular equipment segment. All the manufacturers of Jalandhar are producing Indian products while only 8.33% are offering foreign as well as Indian products.

Table 7: Source of Product and Products demanded

Description	Source of Product (%)	Products demanded (%)
Indian	100	83.33333
Imported	25	25

Source: Authors

The table shows that the manufacturers are relying more on Indian items. Only 25% of manufacturers acquire items from abroad. Only cardiovascular equipments like treadmills and spin bikes are being imported from abroad. No raw materials are sourced from foreign countries. Bhasin sports used to import dumbbells but is now manufacturing on their own. They also stopped importing treadmills. Only large scale producers are going for imports. Medium and small scale producers don't go for imports due to lack of market and huge investment.

The majority of the manufacturers are offering Indian products only owing to which the consumers are demanding more of Indian products only. Thus, 83.33% of the units reported that customers are demanding Indian products. It has been observed that the units dealing in imported fitness products had customers who preferred imported equipment over Indian equipment. This is due to the lack of technology upgradation and after sale services in Indian equipment and huge capital investment on the part of the consumer. Hence, the consumers are more inclined towards imported equipment. In addition to this, it was observed that imported products were preferred over Indian equipment in the cardiovascular segment only.

Anson Sports explained that both foreign and Indian goods are demanded equally by the customers depending on their need and preference.

P. Ram Chand & Co. and Philips Sports corroborated their statement by saying that both Indian and foreign products occupy 50-50% demand in the market.

Get Set sports reported that their customer base prefers foreign products over Indian products as they deal with both Indian and foreign products. Most of the producers deal with made in India products and hence have more demand for Indian products only.

5. DELAY IN FULFILLMENT OF ORDERS

Owing to the supply chain disruptions like cross country border controls and regional lockdowns, businesses experienced significant delays in fulfilling orders. Various countries like USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and UAE has restricted travel and in-person commercial activities. As a result, business was also being done over phone calls and conferences. The key challenge that these restrictions faced was that the fulfillment and delivery of products (especially large products) was severely impacted. Fulfillment time during the pandemic increased 433% in May, 2020 (Digital Commerce 360).

Table 10: Delay in fulfilling Orders

Description	Proportion (%)
No Delay	33.33333
1-2 Months	50

3-6 Months	16.666667
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A similar picture was observed in analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on Fitness and Health Equipment Industry of Jalandhar. 50% of the manufacturers reported 1-2 months delay in fulfilling orders and 16.67% of the manufacturers reported that they experienced delay of even 3-6 months in fulfilling orders. In addition to that, the businesses also reported that the cost of raw material also increased significantly as there was shortage of metal based products from the supplier's end. On the contrary, 33% of the manufacturers did not experience any delay in order fulfillment as they were able to retain their workforce during lockdown.

6. PAYMENT OF DUES/RECEIPTS

Payment and receipts have been equally affected during pandemic. As the payments to suppliers could not be delayed much, 50% of manufacturers said that payments to suppliers were affected moderately. Workers' dues could also not be delayed, as it would lead to workers leaving the employers which could halt the entire manufacturing. Even during first lockdown, production remained stopped for 3 months but payment to workers was made to retain them. There were certain delays in payments to suppliers and workers but it was not significant.

Table 11: Payment of Dues/Receipts

Description	Supplier Dues Proportion (%)	Workers Dues Proportion (%)	Govt. Dues Proportion (%)	Financial Cost Proportion (%)	Receipts from Parties Proportion (%)
Highly Affected	0	0	0	0	58.33
Moderately Affected	50	16.67	0	16.67	16.67
Un-affected	41.67	83.37	100	83.37	33.33

Government dues are mandatory and hence, could not be delayed. Financial payments to banks are also mandatory as default is noticed by the banks. 16.67% of the respondents reported that financial cost payments were moderately affected because the benefit of moratorium given by the banks was used by the respondents. The real burden was felt in terms of delay in receipts from customers. 58% manufacturers reported that receipts were highly affected. In some cases, the delay was over a year and many of them have still not recovered as cash inflows are low. Most of them are categorizing it as bad debts. On an average, 6 months delay was experienced in inflows, whereas 33% reported that they received in time from their customers.

PROBLEMS FACED BY FITNESS EQUIPMENT INDUSTRY

Availability of Labour

Announcement of the first lockdown and the closure of manufacturing activity brought uncertainty and labour migrated to their hometowns immediately. Only 50-60% of labour remained available in cities. Production took a backseat due to migration of labour. Production units are dependent on migrant labor from Bihar and U.P. Government has not made any arrangement for return of migrant labour. The burden to retain the labour was borne by manufacturers who paid full salaries even when production was stopped. Meerut based manufacturers said that government must release funds from the Employees' State Insurance Corporation under the Pandemic Act (Indian Express, 7 May, 2020). Given the small and medium size of the industry, it is pertinent to note that govt. help is desirable to revive the industry.

Increase in prices

Increase in prices of raw material and labour has impacted the prices of fitness equipments. It was already affected by high rates of GST. The burden of GST on sports items is 18 p.c. whereas it was taxed at 6 p.c. VAT only. Thus, the industry which was already burdened by high GST is now bearing the additional cost of increased rates of raw material and labour due to lockdown. Mr. Ravinder Khorana, spokesperson of the association of the Indian Sports Goods Industry, says given the increased burden of input costs on fitness industry, it is difficult to sustain demand.

Government Assistance

Tarun Dewan, Executive Director of SGEPC, says the govt. needs to plan a roadmap for small and medium enterprises (Indian Express, 7 May, 2020). Govt. can give a big relief to industry by providing zero interest loans. This can heal the pandemic woes of the industry. Statutory payments to workers can be waived off for the time being till business comes to normalcy. Industry also requested govt. to sanction GST refunds on priority basis and provide support for export and import to sustain the business. Govt. shall rescue the ailing business by deferring local taxes and reducing electricity charges for a year at least.

Technology Boost

The pandemic has proved to be the biggest crisis for the industry. Firms are trying to re-establish themselves. Businesses need to explore technology driven avenues to fetch new customers and increase sales. As gyms and fitness centers were closed during COVID-19, technology stepped in to provide an alternative for fitness enthusiasts. From online workout sessions to sales of home exercise and health equipment were the new consumer trends that could replace the age old shopping routines. Following the trend, even Amazon announced a Fitness Fest with heavy discounts on all kinds of health equipment and fitness apparel. Amazon reported that its search trends for treadmills has gone up 1.5 times, home gyms is up by 1.3 times and weights by 1.2 times. Other sub categories such as sports equipment, fitness bikes, yoga and activity trackers also saw a considerable uptake (The Hindu, 25 January 2021).

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has affected the Sports Industry since March, 2020 where it has faced loss of 2-3 crores in business every day. During the initial lockdown, the industry experienced sky

rocketed demand for home based gym equipment and individual sports. The sales rose up to 50% prompting the manufacturers to increase the production capacity and few businesses even launched new products. But this exhilaration was short lived as the manufacturers struggled to find customers later on. The industry also faced acute labor shortages, increased raw materials costs and supply chain restrictions hampering their ability to survive. Manufacturers were also not very enthusiastic about online modes of sales as they relied mostly on telephonic sales. Majority of the manufacturers have collaborated with e-commerce giants like Flipkart and Amazon but do not see major results in terms of sales volume. The actual hindrance turned out to be the delay in receipts from the customers as an average delay of 6 months was reported by manufacturers. As a result, the manufacturers are keen to upgrade technology and reduce dependence on labour. Product innovation and technological boost are emerging to be the cushions for sports industry and it will help the firms to re-establish themselves. The industry is adapting to the ongoing changes but not cashing upon the opportunities to survive going ahead.

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