

## EVOLUTION OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Since first peering cautiously around the walls of his prehistoric cave some thousands of years ago, up to around 10,000 B.C., man has had an ongoing voice at the back of his head screaming, "Run for your life! Physical development followed a natural path, as conditioned both by practical demands of life in a wild landscape and vital need from threats and opportunities for survival. The ancient period of India, particularly the early Vedic era between about 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, is a turning point in the historical development of physical education and sports. This period speaks volumes of the integration of physical activities in daily life, education, and religious activities, with an apparent reflection of the socio-religious ethos of the period. The Classical Period in India—that is, from 200 BCE to 500 CE—is the period of change in the history of physical education and development of sports, characterized with the amalgamation of intellectual growth, spiritualism, and the flowering of culture of that period under various dynasties like the Maurya, Gupta, and Southern Kingdoms of Chola and Pallava. The phase of ancient history in India, from around 500 AD to about 1500 AD, when there were many mighty empires—including those of the Guptas, Cholas, Mughals—apart from many regional dynasties. That was an age when big advances had been accomplished in the field of physical education and sports development for sure cultural exchanges, military needs, and social structures at the time. The Colonial Period in India, from the 1600s through 1947 when India gained independence, is indeed a great epoch, which bore heavily into the development of physical education and sports with great influence from the British colonial rule. The era was marked by the emergence of Western sports, the development of formal organizations designed to regulate sports activities, and immense changes in the role of sport activities and perceptions within society. Physical education and sports in India after independence, that is from 1947 onwards, were one remarkable stage in development which witnessed not only institutionalization at the national level but also induction into the educational systems and increased linkages to international sports. Post-independence, India sought to institutionalize sports education and ramp up infrastructure with the help of government initiatives like NEP-2020, calling for integrating sports into educational curricula. Such historical layers have added much diversity and richness within the sports culture of India, which too brings out the importance of physical education in the light of realization of national identity and international status.

**Keywords:** Vedic era, classical period, medieval period, the colonial period and post-independence period.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since first peering cautiously around the walls of his prehistoric cave some thousands of years ago, up to around 10,000 B.C., man has had an ongoing voice at the back of his head screaming, Run for your life! Physical development followed a natural path, as conditioned

both by practical demands of life in a wild landscape and vital need from threats and opportunities for survival (Khan, 1964). The work of one's activity included locomotion; defense; manipulation of tools and natural objects, such as stones, tree branches, etc. Early man had to run, walk, balance, jump, crawl, climb, lift, carry, throw, and catch things, and fight to survive in a hostile environment full of natural and human obstacles and enemies (Mohammad, 2023; Kamlesh, 2004). Perhaps, when their bellies were full and all the predators had disappeared, they must have gone on to do their playful or creative moves like the early forms of dancing. Such strength and mobility in early man were not attained through any set programs, methods, or schedules, but instead forged by daily instinctive necessity-driven practice of highly practical and adaptable movement skills. The rare hunter-gatherer tribe, who are left in the world today, would not even know what "primal fitness" or a "caveman workout" is, without walking into the fitness center or going cross-training, for this kind of "exercise" still runs deep into their daily life (Bucher, 1975; Khan, 1964).

Background history and development of physical education and sports in India go back to very olden times and have undergone sea changes through various historical epochs, each one governed by the social, cultural, and political superstructure. Some details are listed here from ancient period to modern period:

### **1.1 Ancient Period**

The ancient period of India, particularly the early Vedic era between about 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, is a turning point in the historical development of physical education and sports. This period speaks volumes of the integration of physical activities in daily life, education, and religious activities, with an apparent reflection of the socio-religious ethos of the period. A look into this has been done in detail below:

#### **1.2 Vedic Period (circa 1500 BCE - 600 BCE)**

Philosophical foundation: Physical health was not considered an independent issue; it was part and parcel of spiritual realization and holistic living in Vedic society. The Vedas, especially the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, refer to quite a few physical activities as being actually supposed to prepare man both physically and mentally for the rigors of meditation and religious rites.

**1.2.1 Physical Activities in Vedas:** Activities such as racing chariots, doing archery, hunting, and military training were very common. Above activities not only become important for physical fitness but also for the development of discipline, concentration, and moral values.

**1.2.2 The role of yoga:** Yoga, as mentioned in the Upanishads and later systematized in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, started as a religious practice, substantially requiring physical components such as postures (asanas) and breath control (pranayama) for enriching both meditation and bodily stamina.

#### **1.3 Epic Period (circa 600 BCE - 200 BCE)**

**Mahabharata and Ramayana:** These are such epics that serve the social role of physical education through a series of stories based on heroes who practiced several disciplines. Archery, wrestling, charjson, running, swordsmanship, and chariot racing are thus displayed not only as military skills but royal obligations or ways of individual honor.

**Dhanur Veda:** Commonly known as the Veda of Archery, one of the Upavedas, it deals with an enormous description of techniques, rituals, and importance of archery. The text underscores the strategic place of archery in war and the shaping of human concentration and physical fitness.

**Wrestling (Malla-Yuddha):** This is the common and most detailed type of warfare described in epics. It provided sport and means for conflict resolution. It was a part of the physical education of princes and warriors, laying more emphasis on strength, tactics, and valor.

#### **1.4 Classical Period**

The Classical Period in India is from 200 BCE to 500 CE is the period of change in the history of physical education and development of sports, characterized with the amalgamation of

intellectual growth, spiritualism, and the flowering of culture of that period under various dynasties like the Maurya, Gupta, and Southern Kingdoms of Chola and Pallava. This period was, however, noted for the systematization of practices like Yoga and the institutional role of physical activities within education systems and recreational life.

#### **1.4.1 Systematization of Yoga**

**Patronage and Scholarly Works:** It is in this period that the practices of yoga were taken from being a simple set of practices to a philosophical school by the systematic recording of the yoga practices in texts like Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The texts stressed the very eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga; the moral precepts (Yamas and Niyamas), physical postures (Asanas), breath control (Pranayama), meditation (Dhyana), and, lastly, enlightenment (Samadhi). In the course of time, the yoga concept had its reach to common people, ascetics, and scholars, and hence turned to be one of the important cornerstones in the history of dealing with health and spiritual practices by olden-day Indians.

#### **1.4.2 Physical Training in Education Systems**

**Gurukuls and Ashrams:** Often, education was imparted in residential schools which were called gurukuls or ashrams, where physical education formed a part of the curriculum during the classical period. Their disciples were students put into different physical disciplines supposed to make them fit for life difficulties as warriors and learned citizens.

**Military Training:** The training of martial art was also part of physical education since the martial arts are important for the security of a kingdom. This training was not only related to fighting but also covered horse riding, archery, chariot racing, and sword fighting. The four themes of training are agility, strength, and tactical intelligence.

#### **1.4.3 Recreational Sports and Games**

**Popular games:** One of the games invented at this time reflected the mental diversity of this era. There was another game, which had been common from ancient times, using a pair of dice and board; games very much equivalent to the present-day sport known as volleyball had been common, included in cultural events or courts of kings.

**Community participation:** social functions of sports provided entertainment to bring about interaction between classes. Most of these events were organized during religious festivals and followed by musical and dance programs reflecting the social and cultural integration of such physical activities.

#### **1.4.4 Cultural Exchanges**

**Influence of Foreign Dynasties:** By invading and allowing entry to foreign powers, and subsequently putting the people of those countries at the helm of administration and rule, doors were opened to the entry of various new sports and physical activities in India. For example, the Silk Road contact with Central Asia brought Polo to India, where over the next centuries, the game became very popular among royalties.

**Regional Variations:** Each separate locality developed certain sports and martial practices that mirrored the customs and geographical conditions of the given area. For example, boat racing became popular amongst the riverine and coastal regions of South India.

#### **1.4.5 Health and Physical Wellbeing**

**Ayurveda:** Developments in Ayurveda, the traditional system of Indian medicine, also supported physical education, which put more emphasis on balancing physical activities and diet with holistic health practice in order to maintain or restore health.

Thus, the Classical Period epitomizes the important phase in the evolution of physical education in India as it became deep-rooted in the social fabric and spiritual life of the people. This was to ensure that the foundation was made for the practice of yoga, and the physical culture that celebrated included various sports and recreational activities, majorly considering the wide participation that guarantees a long-term effect for subsequent development in India of physical education and sports.

## 1.5 Medieval Period

The phase of ancient history in India, from around 500 AD to about 1500 AD, when there were many mighty empires - including those of the Guptas, Cholas, Mughals, apart from many regional dynasties. That was an age when big advances had been accomplished in the field of physical education and sports development for sure cultural exchanges, military needs, and social structures at the time.

### 1.5.1 Influences of Islamic and Central Asian Cultures

**Introduction of New Sports:** New Islamic rulers, particularly during the Mughal rule, introduced fresh games such as polo through Turkic invaders. The game was developed from the training method of cavalry units into the sport known and enjoyed by the royalty and their nobles.

**Martial Education:** One thing that never stayed in arrears was martial education because of the fact that the state always remained in preparedness for war and martial recruitment was always required. They had to be good at archery and horse riding, and besides this, new styles brought by Muslim conquerors included swordsmanship and the use of firearms.

### 1.5.2 Regional Contributions to Martial Arts

**Kalaripayattu:** one of the oldest, if not very old, forms of martial arts that have continued in the world. One of the ancient combat systems to evolve, it has its roots in the Indian subcontinent. It emerged from southern India. This art is made of kicks, strikes, grappling, weaponry, predetermined forms, and methods of healing. Kalarippayattu is said to be the oldest existing fighting system.

**Silambam:** Another significant south Indian martial art, particularly from the region of Tamil Nadu, is Silambam. It is an art of fighting using a staff weapon, emphasizing speed and reflexive actions. The staff weapon was meant for self-defense; otherwise, it was used in competitive fighting, which was normally carried out at the place of religious festivals and community congregation.

### 1.5.3 Patronage and Promotion of Sports

**Royal Patronage:** The regional kingdoms were great patrons of sports for two chief reasons: sports were a symbol of cultural refinement and power. Wrestling, polo, chess were not only held under the patronage of kings and nobles but were also sponsored games and contests, actually being large social events with great attendance.

**Wrestling:** Termed as Malla-Yuddha, it continued to remain a popular sport across India, assuming regional styles. Full-fledged Akharas (wrestling schools) were created, where a very good blend of physical as well as spiritual training was imparted to the students.

### 1.5.4 Folk Games and Recreation

**Village sports:** It includes games of traditional village games and sports like Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Gilli-Danda. Those are often played games, particularly at the occasion of harvesting festivals and local fairs. Sports have become an integral part of rural life and community bonding.

**Chess:** It was an example of live representation to reflect the intellectual and strategic thinking of the period, in that Chess (Shatranj) continued to evolve and be the most popular pastime of the elite and common man.

### 1.5.5 Integration with Cultural and Religious

**Festivals Festive Occasions:** Physical activities and sports were commonly integrated into the festivals and religious ceremonies, contributing to the environment of celebration. Some of the common events carried out on such festive occasions are archery, wrestling, and racing competitions.

### 1.5.6 Impact of Socio-Political Changes

**Region-wise Variation:** This variegated political structure hence resulted in huge regional variations pertaining to the kinds of activities carried on and their cultural implications. For

example, boat racing prominently found a place in the eastern part of India and all along its coast, which reflected the geography and culture of the place.

Indian medieval times have been a phase of great importance for Indian history with respect to physical education and sports, as it was during this time that Indian traditions ran into foreign influences. These activities served not only as means for physical fitness and military training but also played important roles in social integration, cultural expression, and preservation of regional identities through turbulent times.

## **1.6 Colonial Period**

The Colonial Period in India, from the 1600s through 1947 when India gained independence, is indeed a great epoch, which bore heavily into the development of physical education and sports with great influence from the British colonial rule. The era was marked by the emergence of Western sports, the development of formal organizations designed to regulate sports activities, and immense changes in the role of sport activities and perceptions within society.

### **1.6.1 Introduction of Western Sports**

**Cricket, football, and hockey:** The very games of cricket, football, and hockey were all first brought by British soldiers, administrators, and missionaries to India. This may be one of the reasons that sports like these were quite commonly adopted amongst the Indian people, especially those in the city and within the walls of an institute.

**Golf and Tennis:** Along with the British, the games of golf and tennis had also entered India, where it was majorly played by the elites from Britain and Indians in various clubs and gymkhanas set up under the colonial rulers.

### **1.6.2 Institutionalization of Sports**

**Sports Clubs and Gymkhanas:** Sports clubs and gymkhanas in a very large number were established throughout India by the British. Most of them were clusters of British and elite Indians, which came up as centers for social interaction. Such institutions played an important role in sport organization and, therefore, popularly issued booklets on physical education, though it was meant for the upper strata of society.

**Formation of Sports Associations:** Various sports associations started taking shape from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, laying down uniform rules of the game and organizing competitions. Foremost among these are the Indian Olympic Association and the host of regional associations in cricket.

### **1.6.3 Impact on Physical Education**

**In Educational Institutions:** The British added physical education as one of the subjects to school curriculum. As such, school and college level sports were made a compulsory activity, with the result that Indian youth were receiving a heavy boost in their physical development.

**Training and Development:** The period also saw the formal initiation of training programs besides the beginning of physical education as a discipline for a study at colleges. It was these developments, therefore, which laid down the platform for a structured approach in the education of sports in the country.

### **1.6.4 Popularization and Resistance**

**Native Participation and Adaptation:** Though at inception, the same was purely restricted to the British and Indian elite class, with time, games such as cricket and hockey found great acceptance among the common masses of India. The rich sports tradition in India thus has a history.

**Role in Independence Movement:** Sports provided a platform from which nationalist feelings could be vented. Great players in games like C.K. Nayudu in cricket turned himself into national heroes, and sports events were occasions for the growth of an Indian identity and resistance against British colonial rule.

### 1.6.5 Cultural Exchange and Legacy

**Hybridity of Sports Cultures:** Traditional sports started mixing with British sports culture during the period of colonization. Simultaneous with the adoption of Western sports, traditional games like kabaddi and kho-kho were prevalent, had not yet declined, but were still playing wide and perhaps even so to this day, especially in rural areas.

**Long-Term Impact on Indian Sports:** The impact of the British was such that not only was there a spread of some sports, but even established sports had infrastructure to get developed in later years. Some clubs, associations, and structured competitions also became part of the legacy that went on to undergird the base upon which India's modern sporting framework was built.

The Colonial Period was crucial in shaping the landscape of physical education and sports in India. The period heralded in Western sports and formal sports institutions. It not only changed the manner of organization and play of sports in the country but actually added another aspect in the socio-cultural integration of sports into the daily life of the Indian populace. The period established the ground for India's successes in various forms of sports at the international level that were to come later and helped create the vibrant sporting culture that remained an essential part of India's identity till today.

## 2. POST-INDEPENDENCE

Physical education and sports in India after independence, that is from 1947 onwards, were one remarkable stage in development which witnessed not only institutionalization at the national level but also induction into the educational systems and increased linkages to international sports. Efforts toward the formation of a unified sports culture across the diversely plural nation and the use of sports for international prestige and internal unity were marked in this era.

### 2.1 Institutional Development

**National Institute of Sports:** Established in 1961 at Patiala, this became the premier sports training institute of India focusing on the training of athletes, and later, certification of coaches. The institute has been a leader in professionalizing sports training in the country.

**Sports Authority of India (SAI):** Established in 1984, SAI was the backbone in administering sports activity all over the nation. It has 35 centers for sports training and runs many schemes for talent identification and support from every nook of the country.

### 2.2 Government Initiatives and Policies

**National Sports Policy:** India has also formulated its version of the National Sports Policy (1984, 2001, and latest updates), primarily aiming at broad-basing sports for excellence to prepare champions to represent the country. These are infrastructural development, high-performance athlete support, and development from grassroots sports policies.

**Khelo India program:** It has been launched to revive the sports culture at the grass-root level by developing a strong framework of all sports played in the country and making India a great sporting nation.

### 2.3 Integration of Sports in Education

**Physical Education in Schools:** After independence, physical education was included in schools' curricula to ensure, first of all, that physical fitness is instilled right from a tender age. Inter-school sports competitions were initiated and saw schools grow competitive in sports disciplines.

**University Sports:** Organized by the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), it gives a platform to the talented lot of young athletes to showcase their potentials and grab openings at higher levels.

## 2.4 Popular Sports and Achievements

**Cricket:** Far more than a national sport, it really became a sort of quasi-religion with its phenomenal successes on the international stage, including multiple Cricket World Cup wins since 1983.

**Hockey:** Though it has suffered a little bit from its former glory in the '70s, it still remains one of the most popular games, and India has several times won Olympic medals in field hockey.

**Rise of New Sports:** Badminton, wrestling, shooting, and a host of other sports have registered commendable rises with Indian sports personalities like P.V. Sindhu, S Sushil Kumar, and Abhinav Bindra shining high with medals in the Olympics and other international forums.

## 2.5 International Participation and Achievements

**Olympics and Asian Games:** Of course, events such as Olympics and Asian Games have been witnessing increased, quality-based participation from the country. Pioneering achievements are in terms of slowly increased medal tallies and notable performances in athletics, boxing, and wrestling.

**Commonwealth Games:** It is projected that Commonwealth Games 2010 hosted in New Delhi projected India as a country having the potential to host international games and getting a record of winning the most medals.

## 3. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

**3.1 Infrastructure and Funding:** While there are remarkable improvements, the level of sports infrastructure and the budget towards the same, vis-à-vis global standards, is considered to be very less. Attending to these two aspects would become necessary for further building the sports culture in India.

**3.2 Diversity in Sports:** The overall aspect or zest for the partaking of people in a wider selection of sports, other than cricket, proves to be a mammoth challenge.

Definitely, the post-independence years in India have significantly seen growth in the development of sports, inspired by both government support and passion that the people have for it. Sustained efforts to develop sports infrastructure and policy framework, in turn, would enable India to develop not just an impression in the international area but also cultivate a culture of physical education and sports participation pervading to the grassroots level.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The history and development of physical education and sports in India take its reference from the ancient traditions to the modern-day practices followed globally, imbibing the rich cultural heritage and changing societal values of the nation. From the Vedic and Epic periods through the Classical and Medieval eras, the era of physical education was incorporated, referring to education and daily life and often related to spiritual and martial training. The Colonial period, through the introduction of Western sports, established structures of the modern sports systems. Post-independence, India sought to institutionalize sports education and ramp up infrastructure with the help of government initiatives like NEP-2020, calling for integrating sports into educational curricula. Such historical layers have added much diversity and richness within the sports culture of India, which too brings out the importance of physical education in the light of realization of national identity and international status.

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