

## HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS IN ANCIENT INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analysis of physical activities and sports in ancient India since the Indus valley period up to medieval period. The physical and sports have remained a good passion and outdoor and indoor activities as revealed through the archeological and written records during different historical periods. Ancient India had a rich tradition of games that were played and passed on through generations and cultures for not only leisure but also to develop mental capabilities and maintain physical fitness. During ancient times, physical fitness was given prime importance, especially by the kings and the higher-class warriors. Physical education in the past was part and parcel of daily life, it was not considered merely as a vocational or free time activity. It was considered as a fundamental factor for self realization. Upanishad has strongly advocated that the attainment of the powerful soul is not possible for a weak individual.

### INTRODUCTION

The study of historical development of physical activities and sports in India more efficiently we should study the development of physical education from ancient to medieval period despite our poor cultural habits of not writing history and the fact that no concise history of education including field of physical education in India is found written. Historian has rightly remarked that "Unlike the Greeks, Chinese and Arabs, Indians in the past were not historians. This was very unfortunate and it has made difficult for us now to fix dates or make up an accurate chronology". However in the modern time people have started taking interest in writing articles, books; etc.

Ancient India in many ways was similar to ancient China. People in this country lived in existence that was very religious in nature and closely associated with traditions and culture of India.

Buddha's prohibition of games, amusements and exercises in ancient India did not totally prevent participation in such activities. The Indian physical activities such as Chariot races, riding elephants and horse, swordsmanship, wrestling, boxing, kabaddi, kho-kho, atyapatya, dancing, dands baithak, malkhamb, lezim, lathi and some local games etc. have been in practice from time immemorial. But neither the names of the inventors of the Indian system of physical culture nor the dates of their origin are known. Yet we are aware of the fact that a scientific system of physical education was in existence in India and was practiced by the people. Yoga an activity common in India and involving exercises in posture and regulated breathing was popular. This disciplining of mind and body required the instruction of experts and a person fully trained in this activity followed routine involving eighty, four different postures.

The physical activities were performed in open places / grounds because the Indian system of physical activities is such that they need little or no equipment. Besides, the religious or worship places were the institutes of physical culture where the sages and rishis were the ustads (Gurus). The places where Indian physical activities were promoted and practiced were generally called as Vyayamashalas/ Vyayam Mandirs.

In the culture aspect of physical culture of India, the age old Vedas advocated that non-violence is the best of righteous acts. This can be realized properly in its true spirit only by a strong individual and not by weak ones, because physical weakness may be attributed to cowardice. Further, protection is well assured only by a powerful one. Moreover, the Great poet Kalidas has emphasized that physique is the lease indeed for accomplishment of duty. Vedas have emphasized that just as wealth is essential for the appropriate fulfillment of desire, similarly for the salvation of life healthy physique is essential.

The history of India has witnessed that the society was divided into different classes on the basis of their occupation e.g. teachers, Warriors, merchants and servants. They were given social status which ultimately broke into rigid caste system bearing the stamps as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In all the fields of education the teachers were invariably Brahmins. Their workshop included Branayarna, Yoga, Namaskar etc. Further, the Brahmins, being teachers had to master the art of handling weapons and missiles. This included archery, sword fighting etc. The Kshatriyas as the future rulers and protectors of the country had to compulsorily learn the science of archery, 'sword fighting, horse and elephant riding. The Vaishyas and Shudras practiced many physical activities of their will; they were not compelled to learn the physical activities. Wrestling was practiced by all irrespective of castes: we also find references about first fighting in Rigveda which indicate the place of Military Science in Indian system of Physical Education. The great epics "The Ramayana" and "The Mahabharata" are full of stories of great warriors depicting their martial qualities. If we just look into the epics, we can well understand that physical fitness was considered as an important factor in all warfare and it was promoted by indigenous system of physical education. All war weapons and war tactics were also of indigenous nature. The warriors were well versed in archery, wrestling fighting, sword fighting, horse riding, elephant riding and chariot racing.

Taksila University is an example, where training of Archer (Dhanurveda) was of a very high order. In the last decade of 13th Century and during the 15th half century the army of different kings was highly trained in handling the war weapons: The great Rajput kings like Prithvi Raj, Rana Sangram Singh and Rana, Pratap were highly skilled, in using the weapons like lances, swords and horse riding.

In the days of Shivaji, the great Maratha King, the Maratha Soldiers were highly skilled in handling weapons even in, their war front. During the regime of Shivaji, the love for indigenous physical culture reached its peak.

India has faced many foreign invasions and atrocities. The atrocities of the foreign rulers helped the Indian-people to fight well against the foreign domination not in a united manner but 'Man individual way. Though, the result was not much encouraging yet definitely, the practice in indigenous physical activities increased remarkably and resulted in re-establishing a number of Akhara / Military training centers at almost every village.

The history of physical activities and sports culture in ancient India can be discussed in the following periods.

### INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

The Indus Valley Civilization is named after the Indus Valley, where the first remains were found. The Indus Valley Civilization is also named the Harappan civilization after [Harappa](#), the first of its sites to be excavated in the 1920s, in what was then the [Punjab](#) province of [British India](#). Indus Valley Civilization has also been called by some the "Sarasvati culture", the "Sarasvati Civilization", the "Indus-Sarasvati Civilization" or the "Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization", as the [Ghaggar-Hakra river](#) is identified by some with the mythological [Sarasvati river](#), suggesting that the Indus Valley Civilization was the Vedic civilization as perceived by [traditional Hindu beliefs](#).

There is no record of any physical art or Craft in vogue during the Pre-Vedic age. But an idea of the same can be formed from a careful study of the war weapons, tools and impalements seals and sculptures found at Harappan and Mohenjo-Daro During this age the object of physical exercise was achieved through a daily routine of work, games, sports and amusements.

Dancing, particularly community dancing, was the favourite recreation of pre-vedic people as it appears from a bronze dancing girl from Mohenjo-Daro in the National Museum in Delhi. The most important and interesting thing during the Indus Valley Civilization at Mohenjo-Daro was the Great Bath, which was similar to modern swimming pool. It was a part of vast dropalhic establishment, which measured 60 mts by 36 mts. The actual swimming pool measuring 18 mts by 7 mts. by 2.5 mts. 'was situated in the middle of a quadrangle having varandhas on all sides. Near the great bath was situated hammam, a kind of hot and cold shower and oil room.

Marbles balls and dice were used for games. Dicing was a very popular game as it would be evident from a large number of dices unearthed. Both cubical and tubular specimens have been, found. It is however, not certain whether the throwing of dice constituted a game in itself. Most probably dices were used along with board games. Two incomplete specimens of game boards have been found. Animal fighting was another pass time during this civilization. Hunting was the important game. Seals showing men using bows and arrows for killing wild boars and dears have been found. Punching or boxing was also played. A number of toys of children made of clay have been found which shows that children engaged themselves with lots of games.

### VEDIC PERIOD

The Vedic Period or the Vedic Age refers to that time period when the Vedic Sanskrit texts were composed in India. The society that emerged during that time is known as the Vedic Period, or the Vedic Age, Civilization. The Vedic Civilization flourished between the 1500 BC and 500 BC on the Indo-Gangetic Plains of the Indian subcontinent. This civilization laid down the foundation of Hinduism as well as the associated Indian culture. The Vedic Age was followed by the golden age of Hinduism and classical Sanskrit literature, the Maurya Empire and the Middle Kingdoms of India.

Suryanamaskara the origin of which dates back to Vedic period was performed more as a religious duty than a mere physical exercise or training. Now this has developed into a very popular exercise for health. The practice of pranayama was another important development which took place

during this period. It was considered beneficial for the lungs and as a means of prolonged life. Military training was also popular during this period, because Aryans were engaged in subjugating non-aryans and establishing their supremacy. As it demanded physical strength, vigour and martial skill they were involved in hand wrestling, use of bow and arrow, dagger fight, sword fight, mace fight, hurling the discuss and spear. Horse riding, chariot racing, hunting, elephant riding and boxing were also needed in battle.

People appear to have been fond of swinging. Ball games were in vogue during this period and were played by men as well as women. Game with ball seems to have been the chief outdoor physical exercise. Playing of dice had become very popular. It was played by young as well as the old. The art of the boxing was known to the Aryans and it was used in battles for defeating the enemies.

Hunting as sport was also Prevalent. Music and dancing was well known. Birds and animal fighting was also popular pastime. Fights were organized in fair and festivals for amusements. Great emphasis was placed on the culture of physique and Strength during the Vedic period. Physical strength was emphasized greater than academic learning. Practice of yoga was recommended for the development of spiritual strength.

#### **EARLY HINDU PERIOD/ EPIC PERIOD**

The subsequent period, between 800 BC and 200 BC is a turning point between the Vedic religion and Hindu religions and a formative period for Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. The Epic and Early Puranic period, from 200 BC to 500 CE saw the classical Golden Age of Hinduism (320-650 CE)

#### **Ramayana**

Ramayana makes a great deal of reference to physical training and recreation. Dramas and festivals played an important part in the life of citizens during this period. Ayodhya, Kiskindha and Lanka the three great places related with this period were centers of many games and sports. Hunting was very popular which was considered a royal sport. Big dogs were domesticated for the purpose of sport. Chariot-riding and horse-riding were popular. Swimming was also popular and it is learnt that Ravana had a beautiful swimming pool in Asoka Vatika where he used to sport. Gambling with dices was also well known. "Chaturang" or chess as we call it today developed during this period and India is proud to be called the homeland of this great sport. Ball games were popular with the women. Animal combats were also prevalent. Wrestling, male fight, chariot driving and archery popular games in this period.

#### **Mahabharata**

Special mention has been made of games and gymnastics during this period. Jumping, arms contracting wrestling, playing with balls, hide and seek, chasing animals were some of the games prevalent during this period. Ball games were popular and it is said that Lord Krishna played ball-games with maidens on the banks of the Yamuna. "Iti-Danda" or "Gullidanda" was also one of the games played and it involves one long and one short stick. Bhima was well versed in this and this is similar to the present day cricket. There is also a mention of the Kauravas and the Pandavas playing Gulli Danda in the Mahabharata.

Yudhisthir had a great liking for dicing and it is known that he lost his whole kingdom, his brothers and his wife in this game to his opponents. People also enjoyed water sports. Bhima was a great swimmer. Duryodhana was an expert in swimming. All the Pandava and Kaurava princes, on the invitation of Duryodhana, went to the Ganges for some water games. Balrama was a strong man and excelled in wrestling and male fighting. He was an excellent teacher in art of teaching male fighting. Bhishma was skilled in all the branches of Physical culture and weapons and was a mighty bowman.

During the era of the Rigveda, Ramayana and Mahabharata, men of a certain stature were expected to be well - versed in chariot - racing, archery, military stratagems, swimming, wrestling and hunting. Excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro confirm that during the Indus valley civilization (2500 - 1550 B.C) the weapons involved in war and hunting exercises included the bow and arrow, the dagger, the axe and the mace.

These weapons of war, for instance, the javelin (toran) and the discus {chakra}, were also, frequently used in the sports arena. Lord Krishna wielded an impressive discus or sudarshan chakra. Arjuna and Bhima, two of the mighty Pandavas, excelled in archery and weightlifting respectively. Bhimsena, Hanuman, Jamvanta, Jarasandha were some of the great champion wrestlers of yore. Women also excelled in sport and the art of self - defense, and were active participants in games like cock fighting, quail fighting, and ram fighting.

### **Puranas**

Purana is a Sanskrit word that means ancient or old. It is a genre of ancient Indian literature found both in Hinduism and Jainism. Puranas are encyclopedic texts that cover various topics such as cosmogony, cosmology, folk tales, pilgrimages, temples, medicine, astronomy, grammar, mineralogy, humor, love stories, theology and philosophy as well as the genealogies of gods, goddesses, kings, heroes, sages and demigods.

It is believed that the first puranas were composed between the 3rd and 10th centuries C.E. The most famous purana by far is the "Bhagavata Purana," which outlines the childhood and early life of Krishna, the incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. There is a wealth of information about yoga contained within various puranas. The Bhagavata Purana instructs the reader on Bhakti yoga practice, while other texts cover other types of yoga and different branches of spiritual practice.

The use of Discus was very popular. At times, the attack of sword was also rendered useless by the discus. The Munda monster is said to have used it. Rope fighting or Pasi-yuddha was also prevalent. The rope was the main weapon of some of the Gods and because of the use of rope, Varuna is called Pasi. The art of using silambu or long sticks, lathi and slings was also taught during this period.

### **Buddhism**

A religion of eastern and central Asia growing out of the teaching of Siddhārtha Gautama that suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by cultivating wisdom, virtue, and concentration.

The flowering of Buddhism in the country, Indian sport reached the very peak of excellence. Gautam Buddha himself, is said to have been an ace at archery, chariot - racing, equitation and hammer - throwing. In Villas Mani Manjri, Tiruvacharya describes many of these games in detail. In Manas

Olhas (1135 AD.), Someshwar writes at length about bharashram (weight-lifting), bharamanshram (walking) and Mall - Stambha, a peculiar form of wrestling, wherein both contestants sit on the shoulders of their 'seconds', who stand in waist - deep water throughout the game. The renowned Chinese travellers Hieun Tsang and Fa Hien wrote of a plethora of sporting activities.

Buddhist monks who travelled far and wide, mostly unarmed, to spread the teachings of the Buddha, accepted this form of self-defense, against religious fanatics, with alternatives that were suitable to their philosophy of non-violence. The relationship between a student and teacher in the disciplines of Judo and Karate could trace its roots to the guru-shishya tradition, India was, and continues to be famous for. It is quite possible that some of our martial art forms travelled to China, Korea and Japan, but as in the case of Buddhism, atrophied in India.

The technique of Pranayama or breathing control, which is a prominent feature of Tae-kwan-do, Karate, Judo and Sumo wrestling was one of the many techniques spread in the Far East by Buddhist pilgrims from India. The idea that man enters into harmony with the five elements, through the science of breathing, is to be found in the most ancient records of Indian history. If mind and body are one, the possibilities of development of one's physical and mental capabilities are limitless, provided they are united and controlled. Using this as the foundation, Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk started a new trend in the Shaolin temple in China, from which probably stemmed most of the rules and precepts which govern all martial art forms.

### **Jainism**

Jainism is a religion of India originating in the sixth century B.C. and teaching liberation of the soul by right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct. The game of chess is found mentioned in the canonical texts of Jainism. Chess was found prevalent in the campus of Nalanda. Archaeological excavations have found gambling dice in monasteries and other Buddhist sites. Another item of amusement was swimming. The Viharas offered the pleasure of bathing pools. Boxing was also popular. With the flowering of Buddhism in the country, Indian sport reached the very peak of excellence.

### **Later Hindu Period**

The subsequent period between 800 B.C. and 200 B.C. is a turning point between the Vedic religion and Hindu religion and a formative period for Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. In this period the six branches of Hindu philosophy evolved, namely Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta.

Great universities like Taksila and Nalanda developed during this period. There was a happy correlation of the physical, intellectual and aesthetic training at these centers of learning. Wrestling, archery and mountain climbing were given special attention. At Nalanda University swimming, breathing exercise and yoga formed an essential part of daily life of the student. During this period physical education was greatly recognized by the Gupta Rulers. People followed the glorious example set by their brave rulers and participated in mainly sports and physical activities. India during this period was a land of men noted for the excellence of their physique and keenness of their intellect. In the art work of Kusana period of Mathura, several scenes of combats between men and women lions are noticed. Great emphasis was laid on the military and physical art during the Ganga dynasty in

Orissa. During this period hunting was very popular pastime of the people. There were 31 ways of hunting known to the people. Cock fighting was another popular sport. There were separate officials to look after each of the eight varieties of cocks which were known to be suitable for fighting. Elephant, buffalo, and partridge fighting was also in vogue. There were more than ten swimming pools near Nalanda monastery and every morning a bell was sounded to remind the students of the swimming hours. Bodily health was considered important for the improvement of the spiritual condition. Exercises were encouraged in the monasteries. Great emphasis was laid on the maintenance of sound health and physical fitness which was achieved through regular habits, regulated diet, long walking, physical labour such as collecting of twigs and filling water etc.

### Medieval Period

It may be divided into two periods: The 'early medieval period' which lasted from the 6th to the 13th century and the 'late medieval period' which lasted from the 13th to the 16th century, ending with the start of the Mughal Empire in 1526.

In the 12th century A.D., our system of physical education was promoted in the Gurukuls (place of study where the teachers and taught lived together) by our ancient teachers in the gymnasium which enjoyed the high patronage of kings. During the 1200 to 1525 A.D. kings paid more attention towards the military training which resulted in practice of handling different types of weapons for self-defiance.

The well-known religious prophets like Shree Samarth Ramadas Swami felt the importance of physical education. He used to practise 1200 Suryanamaskars every day. He travelled throughout the country and inspired people to build gymnasium with a temple of God Hanuman and to practice namaskar every day. Because of his efforts hundreds of gymnasiums were built in the country. Hence, he can be rightly called as the "Grand Father of Indian Gymnasium Movement". However, traditionally the indigenous system of physical education was promoted the religious places, though very few gymnasiums were in operation or functional. The physical activities in the gymnasium included Suryanamaskars, Dands, Club Swinging, Malkhamb, Wrestling, Sword fight etc. The rulers of the time themselves were lovers of gymnasium work and they patronized several wrestlers.

The art of Malkhamb was revived and a new type of Malkhamb known as Hanging Malkhamb and cane Malkhamb were introduced during is period. Horse riding, Javelin throwing, wrestling, hunting, male fighting, and above all archery were extremely popular sports with the Rajputs. The Rajputs were lovers of festivals, music and dance. The Rajput girls were also tough to ride horses without saddle. The tradition of religious fairs in Rajasthan speaks of that glory. The chess was extremely popular as recreational activity not only amongst the princes but also among the masses.

Later on the Mughals gained supremacy over the entire sub-continent. The physical education continued to play an important role in the life the courtiers and soldiers. Hunting, sword fighting mace fighting, horse riding were preferred to yogic exercises, because physical activity ding to acquisition of war skills was an important aspect of the life of these people. The Mughals were great patrons of wrestling as it served dual purpose as a recreation game as well as suitable actually for war preparedness. They encouraged the wrestling schools and even kept wrestlers in their courts. Often

dands and baithaks were used to develop muscular power and elasticity. Massaging was an extremely important aspect of wrestling training. Boxing was another notable activity. Hunting, Swimming, animal fights were other activities which were popular during this period. Chagan is considered to be a precursor of polo. This sport was even played at night. Pigeon flying was another pastime very popular "during this period. Individual sports competitions especially horse-riding and sword fighting were a matter of routine in the courts.

Apart from out-door active sporting events the courtiers and the 'commoners' recreated themselves with such activities as chess, changer, Pachissi etc. This way the history owes to the Mughal rulers who had great love for games and sports and for construction of great gardens in various parts of the country which are able regarded as a big source of 'recreation.

#### Traditional Indoor and Outdoor Games

- **Moksha Patam** or Parama Padam or Gyan Chauper (Snakes and Ladders)
- **Pallankuzhi**- Ali guli mane (in Kannada) Vamana guntalu (in Telugu) and Kuzhipara (in Malayalam).
- **Aadu puli aata**- "Meka puli aata" (Telugu) or "Aadu puli aatam"(Tamil), or Aadu Huli aata (Kannada) or Pulijudam.
- **Pachisi** or **Chaupar**
- **Ashtapada Chaturanga**
- **Pandi Attam** (Hopscotch or Stappu) -Nondi or Pandi Attam, Tokkudu Billa/Tangidi Billa in Andhra Pradesh and Kunte Bille in Karnataka.
- **Dayakattai Chauka Bara**- Chowka Bara in Mysuru and as Chakaara or Chakka in north Karnataka.
- **Saalu Mane Ata** - Saalu Mane Ata or Jodpi Ata or Char-Par in Kannada and is popular as Navakankari in various parts of India.
- **Gilli Danda, Kancha**- Marbles, or Goli. **Dhop Khel, Chain, Chhaupam Chhupai** or **Hide-n-Seek, Lattoo, Chor- Sipahi, Four Corners, Dog and the Bone, Maram Pitthi, Vish Amrit, Langdi**
- **Pitthu / Satoliya/ Lagori**- Lagori or pitthu is a game which is a popular game in India. It is called Dappa Kali in the northern parts of Kerala, especially in Kannur.
- **Indian Martial Arts**- Ancient India have been the origin of Judo Karate, it was called as Kalaripayate. The art has travelled to east along with Buddhist religion. Buddhist monks who have travelled barefoot from India to the east to spread the gospel of Buddha have this art with them. This technique of defense was very helpful for them as they traveled individually or in small groups. In the all Indian subcontinent there are so many martial arts forms scattered all the states with their local specialties- Rhang Ta- Manipur, Musti Yuddha-Varansi, Gatka -Punjab, Silamba -Tamilnadu, Kalaripayattu - Kerala, Lathi Yuddha - Indian Village, Pari Khanda - Bihar



## CONCLUSION

The finding of the ancient Indian history concludes that the sports culture started from harapan/indus valley civilization and comes up to today's modern sports through various ancient periods like: Vedic period, Early Hindu Period (Vedic Literatures -Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Buddhism and Jainism) Later Hindu period and Medieval period. Ancient Indian history was rich with the knowledge of physical activities and sorts.

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