



Reimagining Physical Education In India: From Neglect To National Priority

Siddhartha Bhadra

Associate Professor of Economics

M.U.C. Women's College, Burdwan West Bengal, India 713104

Abstract

Physical Education (PE) is an important component of the school and college curriculum in India, intended to promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of students. Regular engagement in physical education contributes to improved immunity, fitness, discipline, teamwork, and emotional balance. However, despite its recognized value, the subject is increasingly neglected in practice. Students often show limited interest, institutions provide inadequate emphasis, and infrastructure, particularly playground facilities, remains insufficient in many regions. As a result, many students grow up with sedentary lifestyles, weak physical fitness, and low immunity, which may adversely affect their future careers and overall quality of life. The shortage of accessible playgrounds poses a serious problem, especially for students who wish to engage in recreational sports alongside their academic pursuits. Most available grounds are controlled by clubs that primarily cater to aspiring professional players, leaving little space for ordinary students. In this context, the present paper analyzes the historical evolution, present condition, and ongoing challenges of physical education in India and offers policy suggestions for strengthening its role up to the school level.

Keywords: Physical Education, School Curriculum, Sports Policy, Physical Fitness, India, Youth Development

Introduction

Physical education has long been recognized as an essential element in the development of physical fitness and mental alertness at the school level. Daily PE classes keep students active, energetic, and emotionally balanced. The presence of trained physical education teachers is crucial because they organize routine classes, games, and sports activities while also imparting essential knowledge about healthy living. A well-structured allocation of regular PE periods ensures that students remain physically and mentally fit. The curriculum of physical education varies from place to place but ideally includes activities such as running, catching, throwing, volleyball, karate, dance, athletics, exercise, gymnastics, tennis, cricket, and football. Participation in these activities encourages healthy and active living, sportsmanship, cooperation, group behavior, and community spirit. Physical education thus contributes not only to bodily strength but also to social and moral development. India possesses a rich tradition of physical culture. Physical exercise and yoga were integral parts of daily life from ancient times, possibly dating back to the Vedic period around 1500 BCE. Physical fitness, meditation, and spiritual discipline were inseparable aspects of life. The earliest official record of organized sports, however, comes from ancient Greece, where the Olympic Games began in 776 BCE. These early examples demonstrate that physical activity has historically been regarded as

fundamental to civilization. Despite this deep-rooted heritage, physical education today struggles to receive the attention it deserves within India's modern education system.

Review of Existing Literature

Several scholars have examined the current scenario and development of physical education in India. Arunabha Ray (2019), in his study published in the Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, analyzed the contemporary status of physical education in India. He observed that although physical education has been incorporated into the curriculum of most colleges and many universities offer it as a subject, practical challenges continue to limit its effectiveness. He also described physical education as an established profession in India. Ashwani Kumar (2018), writing in the International Journal of Physiology, Nutrition and Physical Education, discussed the growth of education and research in physical education and sports in India. His findings suggest that government policies have contributed to rapid expansion in this field, yet India's progress remains unsatisfactory when compared to international standards. Chavan and Mule (2022) examined the multidimensional scope of physical education in India and emphasized its integral role in society and educational curricula. Their study highlighted the evolving importance of physical education in modern times. More recently, Shirotriya and Kapri (2023), in Sports Science & Health Advances, studied Indian school students' attitudes toward physical education. They found that both students and parents generally hold favorable views toward the subject. However, improvements in infrastructure, curriculum design, and implementation are still necessary to raise standards. Taken together, these studies indicate that while policy recognition exists and attitudes are relatively positive, effective implementation remains inconsistent.

Historical Evolution of Physical Education in India

Physical education has deep historical roots in India. During the Vedic period, physical training, meditation, and yoga were central components of life. Education and physical development were closely interconnected, and physical fitness was considered essential for spiritual and intellectual growth. In ancient Greece, physical education was systematically organized to prepare soldiers and athletes. Children began physical training at the age of seven, engaging in boxing, horse riding, and chariot racing. The Olympic Games, first held at Olympia around 776 BCE, became a symbol of organized athletic competition. The modern Olympic Games were revived in 1896 in Athens through the efforts of Pierre de Coubertin, often regarded as the father of the modern Olympics. India's participation in the Olympic movement began during the pre-independence period. Norman Pritchard of Kolkata represented British India in the 1900 Summer Olympics and won two silver medals. India officially sent a team to the Summer Olympics in 1920 and has participated in every Summer Olympics since then. Participation in the Winter Olympics began in 1964. Formal physical education in India developed during British rule. In 1882, the Hunter Commission recommended the introduction of physical education in schools. By 1894, efforts were made to make it compulsory. The British popularized sports such as cricket, hockey, football, and gymnastics in India. Several institutions were established to train physical education teachers, including the YMCA College of Physical Education, Madras (1920), Lakshmibai National College of Physical Education, Gwalior, Punjab Physical Education College, Amritsar, and Bengal Physical Education College, Calcutta. However, these institutions largely catered to urban elites. After independence in 1947, the Government of India undertook significant efforts to improve physical education. The Tara Chand Committee (1948) and the University Education Commission under Dr. S. Radhakrishnan emphasized its importance. The Kothari Commission (1964–66) recommended making physical education compulsory. Policies such as the National Sports Policy (1984) and the National Sports (Development) Bill (2011) further aimed to strengthen sports and physical education. Institutions like the National Institute of Sports (1961) in Patiala were established, and universities began offering B.P.Ed., M.P.Ed., M.Phil., and Ph.D. programs in physical education.

Present Status of Physical Education in India

In contemporary India, physical education is officially recognized as a compulsory subject at the primary and secondary levels. Schools are expected to allocate regular periods for health education, physical activity, sports, and yoga. However, in practice, the subject is often treated as secondary. In CBSE-affiliated schools, physical education is included in the curriculum from classes IX to XII. For classes XI and XII, it is frequently treated as an optional or additional subject. Under the “best of five” rule in board examinations, marks obtained in physical education are typically not counted in the overall percentage unless they replace a failed subject. Although students receive marks in their mark sheets, the limited academic weight reduces motivation. In ICSE/ISC schools, physical education can be chosen as a main subject and may be included among the best five subjects for overall percentage calculation. This gives it comparatively greater academic value. India also offers various professional courses in physical education, including Bachelor of Physical Education (B.P.Ed.), Diploma in Physical Education (D.P.Ed.), sports management courses, diploma courses in yoga, and B.Sc. programs in Sports Science. Postgraduate programs such as Master of Physical Education (M.P.Ed.), M.Phil., and Ph.D. are available for those pursuing academic or professional careers in the field. Despite these opportunities, serious challenges remain. The shortage of playgrounds, particularly in urban areas, restricts student participation. Many grounds are controlled by clubs, limiting access for recreational players. Additionally, the lack of adequate funding, trained teachers, and proper infrastructure continues to hamper effective implementation.

Discussion

Although India has a long tradition of physical culture and a wide network of institutions and policies supporting physical education, the subject continues to suffer from neglect in practical implementation. Academic subjects that directly influence board examination percentages and competitive examinations receive greater attention from students, parents, and schools. This imbalance has broader social consequences. Sedentary lifestyles among young people contribute to rising obesity, lifestyle diseases, and reduced physical endurance. Mental health issues such as stress and anxiety may also increase in the absence of regular physical activity. Physical education should not be confined to producing elite athletes. Its broader objective is to cultivate physically literate citizens who can lead healthy, productive, and socially responsible lives. A nation’s human resource strength depends not only on intellectual capacity but also on physical well-being.

Conclusion

Physical education was incorporated into India’s formal education system during British rule and further expanded after independence through various commissions, policies, and institutional developments. Nevertheless, despite its formal status as a compulsory subject, it remains marginalized in practice. To ensure a healthy and efficient workforce, the Government of India must place greater emphasis on expanding physical education infrastructure, strengthening curricula, and promoting student engagement in physical activities. A balanced education system must integrate intellectual achievement with physical fitness. Only then can physical education regain its rightful place as a central pillar of national development.

Policy Suggestions

To improve the status and effectiveness of physical education in India, several measures may be adopted. Physical literacy camps should be organized at local and regional levels to create awareness among students and parents. Increased financial support should be provided for playgrounds, equipment, and teacher training. Competitive examinations, especially for defense and police services, should give due weightage to strong performance in physical education. The subject should be made compulsory up to the secondary level with mandatory passing marks. Additionally, compulsory yoga classes should be introduced in schools and colleges to promote holistic development.

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