

Perception of Indian Society Towards Sports

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ABSTRACT

Sports have played a significant role in shaping the perception of Indian society throughout history. From ancient origins where physical activities were valued as a part of cultural traditions to the influence of British colonialism introducing modern sports, India's sporting landscape has evolved and adapted to diverse cultural influences. This article explores the cultural significance of sports in India, emphasizing its historical journey and the impact of various eras on the nation's sporting ethos. Examining the present state of Indian sports, the article addresses the challenges faced by the nation, including inadequate infrastructure, gender biases, and commercialization, which hinder the growth of sports at the grassroots level. Despite these challenges, there is hope for a brighter future, as the government and other stakeholders invest in initiatives like 'Khelo India' to promote sports and identify talent from a young age.

KEYWORDS: Perception, Indian society, Sports, Cultural significance, Traditional games, Modern sports, Gender bias, Commercialization, National identity, Sports culture

INTRODUCTION

Sports have long been an integral part of human societies, reflecting their values, ideologies, and cultural norms. In the vast tapestry of Indian society, sports hold a unique place, encompassing a myriad of disciplines and traditions that reflect the diverse fabric of the nation. India's perception of sports has evolved over the centuries, shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. In this article, we delve into the deep-rooted perception of Indian society towards sports, exploring its rich history, present challenges, and potential for a brighter future. From ancient times, where sports found mention in scriptures and epics, to the colonial era, which introduced Western sports to the subcontinent, and the present-day pursuit of excellence in various disciplines, the journey of sports in India has been one of evolution and transformation. At each stage, sports have played a multifaceted role, influencing the physical, cultural, and social fabric of the nation.

The fascinating exploration of how sports have been perceived in Indian society throughout history, examining the cultural significance of traditional games, the impact of colonialism on sporting traditions, and the current state of sports in modern India. Moreover, it sheds light on the challenges and disparities faced by the nation's sports landscape and explores the potential for a brighter future where sports can thrive as a unifying force in the nation's diverse and dynamic social landscape.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

India boasts a rich history of sports dating back to ancient times. From the times of the Indus Valley Civilization, artifacts have been discovered that depict people engaging in activities reminiscent of sports. Ancient texts like the Vedas and the Ramayana mention the significance of physical prowess and athletic

skills. Furthermore, the great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana also feature episodes showcasing sports competitions.

During the medieval era, sports remained popular in various forms, including wrestling, archery, polo, and kite flying. Mughal emperors were enthusiastic patrons of sports, which led to the establishment of grand arenas and sports events across the subcontinent. However, it is important to note that certain societal segments had reservations about the promotion of sports due to concerns over the diversion of focus from intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

The historical perspective of Indian sports is a fascinating journey that spans thousands of years, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of the subcontinent's civilization. Indian sports have evolved from ancient traditions to modern practices, with each era leaving its mark on the nation's sporting landscape. Let's take a closer look at the key milestones in the historical development of Indian sports:

- **Ancient Origins:** Sports and physical activities have deep roots in ancient Indian culture. As early as the Indus Valley Civilization (around 2500-1700 BCE), artifacts depicting people engaged in activities resembling wrestling, running, and gymnastics have been discovered. The Rigveda, one of the oldest texts in the world, references the importance of physical fitness, emphasizing the concept of "a healthy mind in a healthy body."
- **The Epics and Royal Patronage:** Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana provide glimpses of sports and games played during their times. These texts mention archery, chariot racing, martial arts, and various forms of combat. Additionally, the royal courts and kingdoms were centers of sporting events, with rulers providing patronage and encouragement for sports competitions.
- **Indigenous Sports and Martial Arts:** Various regions in India developed their own indigenous sports and martial arts, reflecting the cultural diversity of the subcontinent. Kalaripayattu, a martial art from Kerala, dates back over 3,000 years and is considered one of the oldest fighting systems in existence. Similarly, wrestling, known as Kushti or Pehlwani, has a long tradition in Northern India.
- **Influence of Buddhism:** During the reign of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE), Buddhism played a significant role in promoting sports and physical activities. Buddhist monasteries had spaces for practicing archery, wrestling, and other sports as a means of maintaining physical fitness and discipline.
- **Medieval Period:** The medieval era saw a flourishing of traditional sports and games across the subcontinent. Polo, known as "Chaugan" in India, was immensely popular among the nobility and aristocracy. Kabaddi, a traditional team sport, has been played for centuries and is still celebrated in rural areas during festivals.
- **Mughal Era:** With the advent of the Mughal Empire, sports gained further prominence as the Mughal rulers were avid patrons of various sporting activities. The emperor Akbar was known for his love of wrestling and often participated in wrestling bouts. The Mughals also brought Persian influences to Indian sports, including the popular sport of Pachisi (modern-day Ludo).
- **British Colonial Influence:** The arrival of the British in India during the 18th and 19th centuries had a profound impact on Indian sports. The British introduced modern sports like cricket, hockey, football, and tennis, which gained popularity among the Indian elite and educated class. These sports became symbols of modernity and were seen as a way to align with Western culture.
- **Emergence of Nationalism:** Towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, Indian sports started becoming a part of the nationalist movement. Sporting events were organized as a means of

promoting a sense of national identity and resistance against British colonial rule. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, began using sports as a platform to foster unity and patriotism.

- **Post-Independence Era:** After gaining independence in 1947, India focused on building its identity as a sovereign nation. Sports played a significant role in this process. The government initiated measures to promote sports at the national level, leading to the establishment of sports academies and institutions. India's first Olympic medal came in 1952 when Khashaba Dadasaheb Jadhav won a bronze medal in wrestling.
- **Modernization and Global Recognition:** In the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, India witnessed a surge in sporting achievements. Notably, cricket emerged as the most popular sport, capturing the hearts of millions and producing cricketing legends like Sachin Tendulkar.

The historical perspective of Indian sports is a testament to the rich legacy of physical activities and athletic pursuits in the subcontinent. From ancient traditions that celebrated physical prowess to modern sports that have become part of India's cultural fabric, sports have played a significant role in shaping the nation's identity and inspiring generations. As India continues to evolve and thrive on the global sporting stage, it must cherish and preserve its diverse sporting heritage while embracing new opportunities for excellence and growth.

COLONIAL INFLUENCE

The arrival of the British in India brought about significant changes in the perception and practice of sports. The colonial rulers introduced Western sports like cricket, hockey, football, and tennis, which gained popularity among the Indian elite and the educated class. These sports gradually became symbols of modernity, and their adoption was seen as a way to align with Western culture. Unfortunately, this colonial legacy also had negative repercussions on indigenous sports and traditional games. Many traditional sports lost popularity and were relegated to rural areas, while the focus shifted towards Western sports promoted in urban centers and educational institutions.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Sports have always been deeply intertwined with Indian culture and spirituality. Traditional sports like Kalaripayattu, a martial art from Kerala, and Yoga, which has gained global recognition, are rooted in ancient Indian practices that not only foster physical well-being but also promote mental and spiritual growth. Festivals like Holi, Dahi Handi, and Makar Sankranti include various sports and games that strengthen community bonds and celebrate the spirit of togetherness. Cricket, as the most beloved sport in India, goes beyond mere athletic competition; it has become a cultural phenomenon that unites people across regional, linguistic, and socio-economic divides.

CHALLENGES AND DISPARITIES

While sports occupy a cherished place in Indian society, there exist several challenges and disparities that need to be addressed.

1. **Lack of Infrastructure:** A significant hurdle is the inadequate sports infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Access to proper facilities and equipment remains a major concern, hindering the development of sporting talent.

2. **Gender Bias:** Despite notable achievements by female athletes, gender bias still permeates the perception of sports in India. Women face numerous hurdles, from societal norms to inadequate support and recognition.
3. **Overemphasis on Academics:** The Indian education system often places excessive importance on academics, leaving little room for sports and physical education. This approach undermines the holistic development of children and discourages them from pursuing sports seriously.
4. **Commercialization and Corruption:** The commercialization of sports, particularly cricket, has led to the proliferation of corruption, match-fixing, and other unethical practices, tarnishing the spirit of fair play.
5. **Lack of Grassroots Development:** Identifying and nurturing talent at the grassroots level is essential for a thriving sports culture. However, this aspect has been neglected, leading to a potential loss of promising athletes.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Despite the challenges, there are positive signs of change in the perception of Indian society towards sports. A growing awareness of the importance of physical fitness, coupled with the rise of homegrown leagues in various sports, has sparked a renewed interest among the youth. Government initiatives like the 'Khelo India' program aim to promote sports at the grassroots level and identify talent from a young age. Additionally, corporate sponsorships and increased media coverage have provided greater visibility to non-cricketing sports and athletes, paving the way for more diversified sporting interests.

CONCLUSION

The perception of Indian society towards sports has evolved significantly over the centuries. From being deeply ingrained in ancient cultures to facing challenges during the colonial era, sports have continued to hold a unique place in India's cultural tapestry. As the nation moves forward, it must address the disparities and challenges that hinder the growth of sports, particularly at the grassroots level. By nurturing talent, providing adequate infrastructure, and fostering a sports-friendly environment, India can tap into its immense potential and produce world-class athletes across various disciplines. Sports have the power to unite, inspire, and shape a healthier and more inclusive society, and it is imperative for all stakeholders to come together to strengthen the sports ecosystem for a brighter future. By addressing disparities and nurturing talent at the grassroots level, India can strengthen its sports ecosystem and harness the power of sports as a unifying force in its diverse and dynamic social fabric.

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