

A Bird's Eyeview of the History of Sports in India

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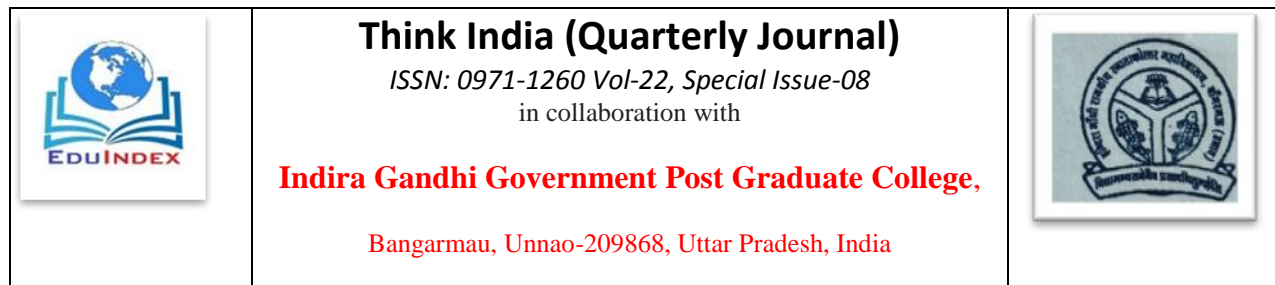
Abstract:

Sports and physical education in India has had a rich and vibrant history. While we have many sports persons bringing laurels to the country both at the national and international level we still need to do a lot to encourage physical education in schools and colleges. An all round development of the personality of an individual calls for his physical fitness which can be successfully done through encouragement of sports and fitness at the basic level of education. Sports not only build better athletes but also better people. The history of Sports in India dates back to the ancient period and is traced through this research paper.

Key Words: Gurukul, Nawabs, Chess, Spear fighting, fanfare.

The history of sports in India goes back to times immemorial. A glimpse over the literature on history of sports reveals that different sports evolved at different points of time, some developed into better formats, while some others declined to a stage of marginalization. Sports and physical education are necessary components of human development and good health, in all cultures and societies. Sports have a positive impact on the overall development of an individual's personality. Physical education teaches many life skills including team spirit and coordination. A well-played game has the power of instilling such values like self-motivating spirit, discipline, leadership, taking ownership of success as well as failures. Furthermore, brilliance in sports enhances a person's sense of achievement, national pride and patriotism.

Popular outdoor sports in India like chariot racing, bull fighting, wrestling, yoga, sword fighting, archery have been a part of the physical training of an individual during the ancient periods as well. The young students attending gurukul were trained in various sports for their physical well being. Besides, enrollment in the army and acquiring of plump posts in the royalty greatly depended on the physical fitness of any aspiring candidate. The excavations carried out at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro have revealed many evidences of the recreational activities enjoyed by the people inhabiting the civilization. The excavations conducted at the various sites also indicate towards the games and past times of the people of this civilization. Out of the many items unearthed there is a weapon which resembles the modern day javelin, round balls which look like shot put balls and a disc shaped instrument resembling the modern day discus. A



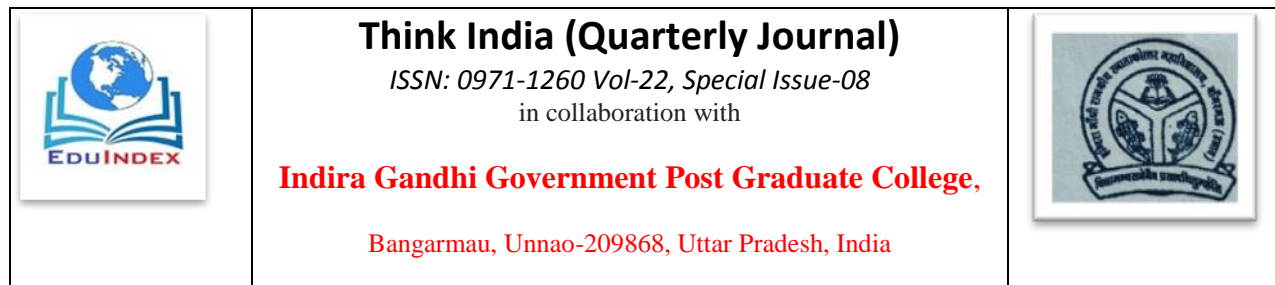
Literature review reveals that the javelin was called TORAN and the discus as CHAKRA.¹ The great bath at Mohenjodaro hints towards swimming also being a sport practiced by the inhabitants of the great Indian civilization.

Indoor games like dices, modern day chess and marble were also enjoyed while the children played with clay toys. There were some well-defined values like the *mantra* in the *Atharva-Veda*, saying, "*Duty is in my right hand and the fruits of victory in my left*". In terms of an ideal, these words hold the same sentiments as the traditional Olympic oath: "...For the Honour of my Country and the Glory of Sport."²

The famous epic Mahabharata narrates an incident where a game called Chaturanga or chaupad was played between the Pandavas and Kauravas which led to the historical war at Kurukshetra. This game over the ages evolved into the popular game of chess in the modern era. The tales associated with Lord Krishna also depict him as a playful child indulging in a game of ball with his friends. The old game of gulli danda which is similar to its European version cricket was played even during the time of the Mahabharat. The art of using silambu or long sticks, lathi and slings was also taught during this period. The Buddhist texts like the jatakas mention archery as a kind of sport played by the people. The Bhimsena Jataka tells that Boddhisatvas learnt archery at Takshila. Wrestling was popular at the time and many accounts of wrestling matches and bouts are very well described in the jataka stories. Two kinds of open air games called Udyana Krida or garden games and Salila Krida or water sports are also mentioned in the old Indian texts. Many of these games are described in the *Villas Manx Manjri*, by Tiruvedacharya.

During the medieval ages, sports and physical fitness were considered essential for the development of the personality of an individual. O'Hanlon writes about the sporting habits of the medieval Indian society, 'Archery and wrestling formed part of the education of sons of ashraf urban elites, and well known literary figures were often also skilled archers and swordsmen.'³ Even playing of cards which is a popular indoor game especially during festivals is reported to have been played, in the *Ain E Akbari* written by Abul Fazal. Various forms of martial arts also existed in India and have roots embedded in the historical past of India. Hunting and man vs animal fights, and ram fighting were all popular forms of sports enjoyed as well as indulged into by the Mughal emperors. Akbar the great is reported to be well versed in the game of polo which was known as chaugan and is believed to have been invented by the Persians. During the British era, this game was popularized once again. Joseph Shearer, along with Captain Robert Stewart, set up the first European Polo Club at Silchar in 1859 and in 1862 he founded the Calcutta Polo Club, the oldest surviving polo club in the world.⁴

The game of Polo was patronized by the Rajasthani Royals of Jodhpur for a long time. Cricket became the first English sport introduced in India somewhere in the year 1721. Mohun Bagan, the oldest football club, was established in 1889 AD. In the 20th century, India emerged as a Hockey superpower. Indian hockey team made its mark in the Olympics in the year 1928 and won on eight occasions making Hockey the national game of the country. The history of sports in India is incomplete without a mention of



the Nawabs of Awadh and their unique indulgences. During the Nawabi era in the kingdom of Awadh the sport activities happened to be distinctive and exclusive. These included kite flying, rooster fighting, pigeons flying and the nawabs were famous for spending their entire day in these leisurely activities. Kabutarbaazi (pigeon racing) and Cock- fighting are two such leisure sports that were an important part of the entertainment gamut for the Nawabs of Awadh.

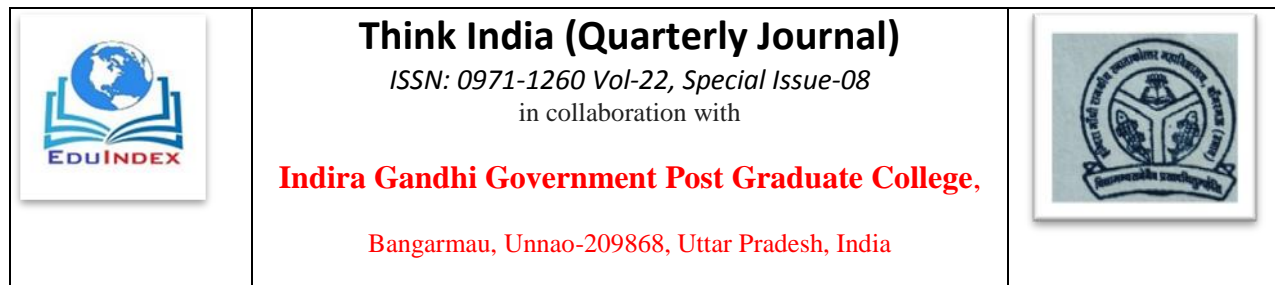
These games evoked the passionate involvement among the participants as well as the spectators. The Nawabs used to have full-fledged staff to train, feed and take care of the birds kept for these kind of sports. In Kabutarbaazi pigeons were made to compete with one another high in the sky, where winning was important for the owners of the birds. Kabutarbaazi tested the strength of the pigeons during the sky race. The competition was judged on the basis of the time taken by the pigeons to fly the projected way of the race and returning to the owner in the shortest possible time span. The winner was the pigeon which came back to its attic in the least time. The pigeons carried identification marks in the form of small rings tied around their claws specifying their name, gender, age and other details. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah got a kothi constructed for pigeons that came to be known as “Kabutarwali kothi” where the pigeons were reared, trained and taken care of by the special care takers appointed for the purpose. *Wajid Ali Shah had 24,000 pigeons in his palace including a pair of 'ReshamPara', bought at the exorbitant price of Rs 25,000 even in those times.*⁵

Cock- fighting: The fight of the Roosters

The leisure search of the kings and the Nawabs did not spare the roosters. The nawabs amused themselves with a game of cock fighting which acquired the status of a royal sport. Cock-fighting was not just a recreational activity but also involved betting as it sometimes involved huge betting stakes sometimes. The Nawabs and the Englishmen owned the best of breeds pitted against each other with their prides at stake. This had made cock-fighting something more than just an activity to kill idle time.⁶

The birds were reared with utmost care, and kept on a rich diet and groomed to win the fight. Cock fighting matches during the Nawabi era got immortalised in the form of a world-renowned painting by the famous German painter, Johan Zoffany. The painting frames a scene of cock fighting between the birds of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah and Colonel John Mordaunt.⁷

The other sport enjoyed and revealed by the Nawabs was hunting, it was a gratifying hobby which was quite mandatory to every royal born. Usually on their hunting trips Nawabs set camp-fires, a perfect ambience for a musical or poetic evening in the jungle. With time, many leisurely activities became uncommon or died with time, however people still enjoy kite flying and pigeon flying in many parts of our fabled city of Lucknow. Kite flying still remains a popular sport on special occasions like Independence day, Makarsankranti and parewa which happens to be the day after the festival of Diwali. On these days the sky is dotted with multi-coloured kites of all shapes and sizes. People of all age groups and genders are seen competing with each other on the skyline trying to cut the strings of the opponents kite.



Many other types of outdoor games were played which continue to be enjoyed by men and women right to this day. KhoKho and kabaddi being two very popular forms of physical sports in both rural and urban areas. Kabaddi requires both power and skill for its play. The origin of this game can be traced to prehistoric times when man learned how to defend in groups against animals or attack by groups of individuals.

Swimming was a very popular sport in the kingdom of Awadh, King Nasirud din Haider was an accomplished swimmer and often organized swimming competitions which were conducted with a lot of fanfare. Shooting and archery was also encouraged by the nawabs and some of the famous archers included Faiz Bakhsh in the times of nawab Asafud daula.⁸ Similarly Jahan Panah Mahal a lady of the royal harem was well versed in the art of shooting and was famed for shooting bottles and shattering them in the act. Fencing, wrestling and spear fighting were a part of the outdoor games played by many a sportsmen. Some famous names are being that of Maharaja Digvijay Singh of Balrampur, Bhawani Bakhsh Dariyabadi and Nawab Qaim Khan Bangash respectively.

Sports and physical education in India has had a rich and vibrant history. While we have many sports persons bringing laurels to the country both at the national and international level we still need to do a lot to encourage physical education in schools and colleges. An all round development of the personality of an individual calls for his physical fitness which can be successfully done through encouragement of sports and fitness at the basic level of education. Sports not only build better athletes but also better people.

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