

A fitter future

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Since last year, there has been a buzz in our country to popularise sports. Much is being said in terms of getting our youngsters to play. Our sporting icons have been exhorting the government to not only include sports in the school curriculum, but also to increase funding to improve sports infrastructure, thereby creating equal opportunity for both boys and girls to participate in sports across the country. The central government, on its part, has expressed its desire to get 300 million school children to play for an hour each day.

Physical education and sports, though an integral part of education policy documents, has always remained on the fringe and has not received much importance until recent times. India has traditionally been a sports viewing country, and the proliferation of cable TV together with the different professional sports leagues that are now being played and telecast in India, has only accentuated this trend. While children can be seen playing in all fields, grounds, and open-air spaces around the country, much of this play is organized by the children themselves. The culture of playing sports in an organised manner, on a large scale, has never existed in India.

Lamentably, not much data exists on school physical education and sports in India. We do not know how many potential Sainas, Sindhus, and Himas exist in our country, leave alone what kind of facilities exist in the grassroots to produce them.

World over, in most countries, physical education is an integral part of school education, with a consistent allocation in primary and lower secondary education in OECD countries - 9% of school time in primary and 8% in lower secondary.² These countries, with higher GDPs, already have good sports infrastructure and facilities, and in recent times they have stepped up their efforts to promote physical education/sports in schools from the perspective of improving academic achievement.³

China, after a hiatus of 32 years, participated in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984⁴ and passed the Sports Law of the People's Republic of China in August 1995. The law determined that schools must offer physical education and ensure physical exercise time for students.⁵ Physical Education (PE) is part of the compulsory national curriculum set by The Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China from the first year of primary school to the second year of college. The weekly PE time for Grades 1 to 2 should be four hours, and for Std 3 to 6, three hours. Children are required to pass standardized PE tests (modified for children with special needs) in order to continue their education to the next level.⁶

Late last year, the great Sachin Tendulkar made an impassioned plea to include sports in the school syllabus.⁷ Sports, he felt, not only unites people, but also inculcates a sense of responsibility and cooperation. Mary Kom, in her year-end editorial in a leading English daily, lamented the lack of funding to improve school sports infrastructure and thereby scope of nurturing young talent. In the same editorial, she drew our attention to the fact that it is our women who are excelling in international sports, hence, there should not be any gender bias!⁸ Kom's comment on gender bias is significant, as it is our 'women power' who have been capturing global audiences' attention with their performance. Sports provides an opportunity to break the gender divide.

Perhaps responding to these comments and trends, the government of India has recently initiated a couple of important initiatives related to school sports and education. The first is Khelo India, a national programme for the development of sports. Initiated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Department of Sports, Khelo India is envisaged to be an annual national sports meet. Every year 1,000 top performing sportspersons will be selected for an annual scholarship, which they will get for 8 years, to help them prepare for international events. The 1st Khelo India School Games, a multidisciplinary

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² [http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202014--N22%20\(eng\).pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202014--N22%20(eng).pdf)

³ <http://www.oecd.org/education/ceeri/physicalactivityandlearning.htm>

⁴ Since 1984, China has been consistently ranking amongst the top 4 nations in terms of the number of Olympic medals they have won, barring the Seoul games in 1988, which has made China an object of both intrigue and envy.

⁵ https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2016/02/shsconf_sshe2016_02017.pdf

⁶ <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/240233/1420.pdf?sequence=1>

⁷ http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/66709568.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/tokyo-olympics-2020-target-olympic-podium-scheme-ssa-5517660/>

grassroot games scheme for under 17 children, were held in New Delhi in January last year. Haryana, Maharashtra, and Delhi were the top performing states. The 2nd Khelo India Games are being held in January 2019 in Pune.

The second initiative is Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, an overarching programme for the school education sector extending from pre-school to Std 12, which was announced in the last union budget. It articulates four important ways in which the new scheme will support school sports:⁹ sports equipment will be provided to all schools; sports Education will be an integral part of curriculum; every school will receive sports equipment under the scheme to inculcate and emphasize relevance of sports in the school curriculum; and support to 'Khelo India'.

Physical education and sports have also been included on the list of '17 trades' that 'the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Vocationalisation of Secondary Education has included to enhance individual employability that provides an alternative for those pursuing higher education'.¹⁰

Policy wise, school sports has never been so good! But do we know where we are at for the 'baseline' of sports expansion in India? Unless we know the status and the gaps, how can we plan adequately to fill them? With this in mind, we were tempted to add a few questions to our ASER 2018 School Observation Sheet to see what kind of physical education facilities currently exist in rural government primary schools. Given the architecture of ASER,¹¹ where our volunteers collect information on children, teachers, and infrastructure, it was not possible to add detailed probing questions. After multiple field pilots, we decided to collect information on the following aspects of physical education in schools: Dedicated time allocated to physical education, availability of a separate physical education teacher, availability of a playground inside or near the school premises, and availability of sports equipment.

Some school physical education trends captured in ASER 2018¹²

Physical education period in timetable

Two thirds of the schools visited across the country had a timetable with a physical education period. Top states included: Maharashtra (93%), Tamil Nadu (82%), Gujarat (72%), Kerala (83%), and Andhra Pradesh (78%).

Amongst the bottom 7 states with regard to a dedicated period for sports in schools, 6 are from the north-east, including almost three quarters of the schools visited in Manipur and Nagaland and two thirds in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. These findings are a little surprising because many of these states have a strong culture of sports. Perhaps sports in the north-east is organized in locations other than school. Similarly, in states like Haryana and Punjab, which have traditionally excelled in sports, only half the schools have a physical education period in the time table.

Physical education teacher

Across all states, less than 2 out of 10 primary schools have a dedicated physical education teacher. Most often one of the subject teachers was reported to conduct the physical education period as well.

Among the top states, half the schools in Rajasthan were seen to have dedicated physical education teacher, followed by Kerala, Bihar and Karnataka, where just over a third of the schools had one. A fifth of Haryana schools and a third in Punjab do not have either a physical education teacher or any other subject teacher to supervise the physical education period.

⁹ <http://samagra.mhrd.gov.in/features.html>

¹⁰ <http://mhrd.gov.in/vocationalisation>

¹¹ Every year ASER visits a government school with primary sections in the sampled village, if one exists. Preference is given to government schools with classes from 1 to 7/8, in the absence of which we visit government schools with classes from 1 to 4/5. In case of multiple government primary schools in a sampled village, we visit the government primary school with higher enrollment.

¹² This year our volunteers visited almost 16,000 government primary schools: over 9,000 schools with classes 1 to 4/5 and nearly 7,000 schools with classes 1 to 7/8.

Availability of playground

A more positive finding is that across India, more than two thirds of the schools visited had a playground inside the school premises. 88% schools in Sikkim, 87% in Maharashtra, 86% in Tripura, 84% in Haryana, 83% in Himachal Pradesh, 82% in Gujarat, and 81% in Karnataka are the top states in this category.

Many schools do not have a playground inside the school but use stretches of land just outside the school premises. Almost a third of the schools in Odisha and Jharkhand have playgrounds outside the school premises. Also in these two states, another third of the schools in Odisha and quarter in Jharkhand have no playground at all, either inside or outside the school premises.

Availability of sports equipment

In the case of sports equipment available inside schools, nationally, almost two thirds of the schools visited seemed to fulfil this objective of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. In Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, almost three quarters of schools were seen to have some form of sports equipment. Lamentably, schools in four north-eastern states: Meghalaya (20%), Arunachal Pradesh (29%), Nagaland (43%), and Manipur (49%), are once again in the bottom with regard to availability of sports equipment.

Supervised physical education activity

Our volunteers did not see much supervised physical education activity at the time of their visit to government primary schools in the sampled villages. Nationally, some form of supervised physical activity was observed in about a quarter of the schools visited. Sikkim is the top performing state in this category, with some supervised physical activity observed in just over half the schools. We cannot say that the remaining schools did not have any supervised physical activity, as our volunteers do not spend the whole day in each school. But, when we look at the states placed in the bottom in this category, we again notice these are the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura. These are states where private school enrollments are high and in most states have gone up since ASER 2016. Uttar Pradesh, which also has a similar trend in private school enrollment seems to have a better record of physical education indicators in ASER 2018 than these states.

The ASER 2018 questions on school physical education and sports are just a beginning to know what is happening in schools. There is also plenty of scope for a detailed in-depth assessment to know the perception of communities, particularly youngsters, towards physical education and sports. Are they aware of the alternate career options it provides? As we have noted earlier for OECD countries and China, we need to know more about the number of hours our school children spend a week participating in sports-based physical activity and the kind of games they play, and to maintain a record of their physical attributes. We also need to map the sports infrastructure that exists at district level. All this will not only help us plan and implement better, but also give us a fair idea of kind of allocations that will have to be made.

In conclusion, we can say that we have made a good beginning by including physical education as a component not only in our school education policy documents, but also starting pan-India school games in the form of Khelo India. We now need to ensure that physical activity becomes an integral part of school life, which leads to widespread participation of our youngsters in sporting activities. We also have to create a system whereby potential talent from this pool of youngsters can be detected and nurtured to compete and excel in various sporting disciplines. Of course, for this to happen we need to create an ecosystem in terms of infrastructure and manpower, for which an enormous amount of planning and money is required. This cannot be achieved unless industry and civil society come out to support these initiatives. The world over, potential sportspersons are selected, irrespective of the type of sports, in their early teens, of which India has aplenty.¹³ With a third of our population in the age group of 0 to 18 years, there exists great potential to provide them a meaningful vocation in physical education and sports, as well as a healthy future.

¹³ India's 0-18 population is larger than the entire population of USA, and almost touching the combined population of the European Union.