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# **FROM A HUMAN BEING TO BEING HUMAN - PROPOSING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TOWARDS AN INDIAN APPROACH TO PHYSICAL LITERACY**

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## **Abstract:**

Physical education and sports are gaining traction and becoming a compulsory part of the Indian school system. However, its efficacy in creating the desire in every child to be physically active for life remains to be validated. Introducing Physical Literacy as a curriculum in schools to inculcate the responsibility of being active for life has been advocated in many countries across the globe since Dr. Margret Whitehead proposed the concept in 1993 (Whitehead, 1993). This paper discusses physical literacy in an Indian context by linking the desirable attributes of a physically active individual to the ethos of India by drawing strength from her rich cultural heritage of dance and yoga, rather than restrict the scope of physical activity to only sports. Further, the non-cartesian way of viewing life that is naturally prevalent in most Indians due to the social beliefs, adds to the ability to provide nuanced approaches to inculcate the spirit of physical literacy in children and adults as a personal responsibility of respect to body and self. This paper proposes a theoretical foundation towards an Indian approach to physical literacy.

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**Keywords:** Physical Literacy, India Physical Literacy, Sports, Khelo India, Fit India Movement, Maverick Physical Literacy.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Physical literacy is not the same as physical activity. It is about inculcating the desire to move to encourage participation and excellence in physical activity by building the motivation, confidence and physical competence in a wide variety of environments (Stanec, 2013). In India, physical literacy was introduced in a small way in private schools in 2014 by Maverick Fit Kids and became a national movement when National players like Pullela Gopichand and organisations like Tata Trust started devoting their attention to physical literacy in 2019.

In fitness parlance, a core description of working on the body stems from the concept of 'isolate and integrate'- meaning in order to strengthen a particular muscle or group of muscles, the preliminary action is to isolate them and work on them. However, following the isolation, once they are ready, the next step is to integrate and train a movement pattern for functional fitness and not just keep working on isolated muscle groups (Destefano, et al., 2013).

Similarly, in education, in order to teach a specific concept or highlight a particular aspect, the methodology used has been to isolate them, give them a definition, distinguish them and teach concepts about them. However, unlike in fitness, the notion of integration to the rest of our lives has not been consistently practiced in education. Therefore, hobbies, activities done in isolation appear to lose value in their impact on the rest of our lives.

That to a large extent, with honourable exceptions, is the inadequacy of the Indian education system - the isolation of thinking, movement and feeling to separate domains restricting children in separate activities.

This paper discusses the role of Physical Literacy in bridging the gap between isolation and integration. Physical literacy is not just 'about the physical' but also 'through the physical' to teach the embodied nature of learning and negate the body-mind divide. This paper presents a theoretical foundation towards an Indian approach to physical literacy.

## **II. PHYSICAL EDUCATION & SPORTS:**

Physical education has not been a very important aspect of the Indian school system for decades. Highly neglected with lack of funds, infrastructure, qualified teachers and awareness, schools and parents tend to target academic success and negate need for any physical activity (Chaitanya, 2018). The Fit India Movement was launched in August 2019 by the Government of India as a nation wide movement to encourage people to be active. "How to live' ought to be the first pillar of formal education" - says the Fit India website, with the lofty pursuit of teaching children the art of taking care of their body and health.

The *Khelo* India program was launched earlier in 2018 to promote grassroots games and identify talent to revive the sports culture in India. With over 100 million viewership and over 300 participants by young athletes, the *Khelo* India program has surely begun on its path to

revamp the Indian sporting culture though a lot of work remains to be done to achieve success (Sanyal, 2020).

However, contrary to popular thinking, there is a lot of research that points out that sports is not the ideal medium to inculcate the habit of being physically active for life. With a 70 to 80% attrition rate in children's voluntary participation in sporting activities by the time they are 15 years of age, and the increasing rate of obesity worldwide, there is a significant need to revisit the way sporting activities are presented without the current over emphasis on winning (Merkel, 2013). Children who are forced into a fitness activity and in turn endure a negative experience of sports are less likely to be physically active as adults according to research by the University of Western Australia (Carmody, 2019). Further, as success and excellence is the focus in sport, it is not inspiring for all young people especially those who are not sporty by nature (Green, 2020). As most sports are asymmetric in nature, that is, not utilising both sides of the body to equal measure, they are not ideal as a training platform for holistic development of young children (Ramos-Alvarez, et al., 2015). After all, you don't play a sport to exercise. You need to exercise in order to play better.

Physical education in schools ought to be a non-threatening way to get every child active and involved, and in turn help those inclined to improve their sport. Incorporating a physical literacy curriculum in schools is a more inclusive way to address the global trends of insufficient physical activity among the next generation. From 'training our body and educating our mind' (Green, 2020), a shift in thinking is needed towards a perspective of embodied learning, for learning happens as a result of new practices that one commits the body to and not merely in the gathering and understanding of information.

Human endeavours cannot be treated in isolation. Human beings are embodied creatures. Thinking, feeling, moving and expressing are interwoven and cannot be isolated entities. That is the essence of physical literacy - that the physical body is fundamental to the learning process because as an individual moves and interacts with the world, cognition develops intelligence expands, emotional maturity grows helping the emergence of a whole person without any demarcations.

### **III. THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM**

In order to better understand the distinction of the mind from the body in practice, this section presents the philosophical underpinning of the mind body problem. It presents three views on the mind body problem.

The world view of body-mind duality caused by the cartesian divide and its current scientific trend to a more monistic view can be contrasted against the Indian non-dualistic view that can be leveraged to teach physical literacy.

The Cartesian Divide: 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes, through his famous statement '*Cogito, ergo sum*' (I think, therefore I am) established the cartesian ontological theory of dualism - the divide between mind and matter (Watson, 2016). According to Ryle (1949) the events of the body are in the physical world and comprises of what happens in and to the body; while the events of the mind are in the mental world dealing with what happens in and to the mind - living our lives through two collateral histories (Mehta, 2011). Although this cartesian divide is instrumental in the humungous advances we have made in the study of anatomy, physiology and medical sciences, it has also resulted in the isolation of the mind from the body with significant impact on a holistic experience to life.

Monism: Monism is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a view where reality is a unitary organic whole with no independent parts - a theory that reduces all phenomena to one principle. Here the belief is that the brain and the mind are the same. The mind-body problem of whether the mind and body are separate or related, when viewed through the lens of monism takes one of two stands - (i) Materialism which suggests that human beings are physiological organisms and mental processes are physical processes of the central nervous system; and (ii) Phenomenalism or subjective idealism that claim our body is merely the perception of the mind (McLeod, 2018). Monism therefore states the perception of oneness, which in turn implies duality.

Non-Dualism: The Indian sub-continent is the birth place of non-dualistic philosophy - *Advaita* meaning 'not two'. Here, the emphasis is 'one without a second' - *ekamevadityam* - that state when the distinction between perceiver and the perceived ceases to be. Non-duality is not a theory or even an experience but a realisation for there is no 'experience' during that state of union and therefore no observer to narrate the observation.

When one views the impact of the mind as chemical reactions of the body or when one views the body as an object capable of being controlled by the mind, as suggested by Monism, there is still a subject and an object - a point of control and the object being controlled. The realisation on non-duality is the inseparable nature of the phenomena called 'I' which encompasses the body, mind, thoughts, feelings, cognition and the experience. The Indian attribute to physical literacy is the realisation that being physically active is not to gain an external control either over the body or the mind, but an intrinsic aspect to value life in its entirety.

The next section discusses the role and conceptualisation of physical literacy in integrating the mind and body.

### **IV. PHYSICAL LITERACY**

According to Margret Whitehead, physical literacy can be defined as 'the motivation, confidence, physical

competence, understanding and knowledge to maintain physical activity at an individually appropriate level, throughout life' (Whitehead, 2006). Embodied learning - where non-mental features like our body and our feelings are involved in the learning process, is the mainstay of physical literacy.

The aim of physical literacy is to ensure we do not treat physical activities of the body as a means to an end - to look good, to lose weight, to win a match or even to achieve health in numerical terms of standards. The purpose of physical activity should be an end in itself - to move from 'doing an activity' to 'being active'. Physical literacy is every such moment in every individual's life when the person performing the activity becomes the activity. The goal of physical literacy therefore, is for every individual to experience the freedom of physical movement as a cognitive action, building happy memories that motivate them to be physically active for all of their life.

Teaching physical literacy is then the creation of many such moments in every one's life and imparting the understanding of 'why' it is necessary by teaching the value of the human body, 'how' it needs a unique methodology for each individual which can be achieved only by taking personal responsibility and 'what' needs to be done as a personal choice dynamically evolving during a life time.

The purpose of learning the alphabets is to use them later to form sentences that communicate a message. Similarly the purpose of learning the numbers is to use them in the quantifiable expression of everyday happenings. The need to teach basic gross motor developmental movements and other complex movement patterns is to isolate the science of movement and impart the knowledge to aid understanding of how the human body works. But any activity cannot be a means to an end. The very philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita is to be attached to the process and not the result. The body has to be active for its own end and not as a means to become better looking, for better performance or for better acceptance.

The next section presents the ancient Indian methods of physical literacy.

## **V. ANCIENT INDIAN METHODS OF PHYSICAL LITERACY**

The Sanskrit words *Leela* and *Kreeda* are used to denote play or games (Chavan, nd). *Leela* is used even to describe life as a play. While several games like chess and cards are a part of the historical texts, the main sporting activities from ancient India were martial arts and different types of valour games like wrestling, chariot race, elephant rides and so on (Chavan, nd). However, dance and yoga though not labelled as games, are an integral part of the physical literacy journey of India.

The *Natyasastra*: The *Natyasastra* is a Sanskrit treatise attributed to Sage Bharata (1st - 3rd century BCE) which elaborates Indian drama, dance, music, poetry and aesthetics as a vehicle for self realisation. It provides training concepts for major and minor limbs (*Angha & Upangha*) which are easy to remember and reproduce as they are presented as verse or poetry set to metre with associated body movements (Bharata, 200 CE.).

As enumerated by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam (2018), the *Pramanas* or source of all learning is three fold according to the *Natyasastra*-

- (i) *Vedas* - or in this context from literature,
- (ii) *Loka* - from observing the world by internalising something that is external and expressing or externalising what one feels within, and
- (iii) *Adhyartma* - through self experience.

Another important aspect of *Natyasastra* is the 'Rasa Theory' - the aesthetic impressions created by the art or action. Generally, the concept of *rasa* is discussed in relation to a performance where the performer is able to induce a flavour of emotion in their audience by evoking certain emotions in the observer. While Sage Bharata elaborates on eight types of *rasas*, Abhinavagupta (Indian Philosopher 950-1016 CE) elaborates that at the highest level of transcendence there is only one *rasa* where the subject and object disappear and *rasa* is merely a stream of consciousness (Abhinavagupta, 1016 CE).

The enumeration of *Angha* and *Upangha* (movement of the limbs), the concept of *Adhyartma* or self experience, the value of emotions in the generation of *Rasa* or aesthetic experience of the performer, in conjunction with the knowledge and understanding required to become proficient in any form of Indian classical dance, all cohere into a perfect fitment for physical literacy.

Yoga:

Yoga, derived from the Sanskrit word 'yuj' (to unite) is a 5000 year old body of knowledge from India which has been in living tradition and practice (Basavaraddi, 2015). Sage Patanjali (400 CE), systematised and codified the yoga in his Yoga Sutra. The only description given for *asana* in the yoga sutra is '*Sthiram Sukham Asanam*' - meaning every *asana* (body posture) should be firm and grounded (*Sthiram*) and comfortable (*Sukham*) following principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence) (EkhartYoga, nd.). Hatha Yoga Pradipika of Svatiarama (1380 CE) enumerates the union principle of yoga - the union of the body, mind and breath. In the verse '*Cale vāte calam cittam niscale niscale bhavet*', (as is the breath so is the mind) the state of the mind in relation to the breath is elaborated. Breath is considered as the chord that connects the body to the mind as it is the only aspect that is primarily involuntary but can also be brought under a certain degree of voluntary control (Mohan, Mohan, 2018).

Yoga, however is not just *asana* (body movements) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques). It also describes *Koshas* or sheaths which are metaphorical layers of every human being (Pizer, 2020).

- \* *Annamaya Kosha* - the physical body sustained by food
- \* *Pranamaya Kosha* - the energy sheath that controls the flow of energy through the body
- \* *Manomaya Kosha* - the mental sheath or the mind that deals with our thoughts and emotions
- \* *Vijnanamaya Kosha* - the knowledge sheath including our perception, wisdom and intuition
- \* *Anandamaya Kosha* - the inner most sheath of unending bliss, love and peace.

According to B.K.S.Iyengar (founder of Iyengar Yoga, 1918-2014), the very idea of these *koshas* is not to establish clear demarcations but to be able to blend them all seamlessly (Iyengar, 2005).

In a discourse by Mahatria, diviner of the path infinitheism, he enumerates the spiritual dimension to energy (2016). Man is a combination of five personas - the physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. As the energy levels in the person increases, they begin to operate moving along each of these personas as their dominant trait. Physical persona makes one identify everything to their body making them operate from a sense of bodily comfort - feeling cold, seat is rough and such. People operating from the mental persona are those who create memories and wish to repeat the same events craving for repetitive indulgences - the same food, same place to visit and so on. Intellectually stimulated people need versatility and varied experiences, viewing things with greater clarity, assuming responsibility for their choices. Emotionally evolved people are those who feel beautiful from within, feeling the dignity and divinity of life. When people attain the spiritual plane, the duality is fully removed reaching the state of permanence - the ultimate state of *Advaita* with no cosmic divide.

Therefore, in an Indian context, physical literacy is not restricted or defined by the sporting skills acquired or displayed but is more in tune with cultural aspects that include dance, drama, martial arts, yoga, and primarily the philosophy of embodied activity that does not separate the body and mind.

Combining the modern developments in physical literacy with traditional approaches to physical literacy in an Indian context, the next section proposes a theoretical foundation to develop an Indian approach to physical literacy.

## **VI. PROPOSING A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR AN INDIAN APPROACH TO PHYSICAL LITERACY**

Evolutionary changes like inculcating a lifetime habit to be fit and active, is a slow and incremental process. Incorporating the science of physiology with the science

of rhythm and emotions from the *Natyasastra* and the science of *prana* and *asana* from yoga, a comprehensive approach to inculcate the ideology of physical literacy from a young age can be devised. While the tenet of treating the human being as a comprehensive whole without duality is the under current, the nuanced approach to find out which individual needs balancing of which *kosha* to seamlessly blend all aspects of his / her persona into an integrated whole will need to be addressed.

A brief overview of the four tendencies based on the personas is detailed below. Using their natural tendency to both exploit their innate talent while simultaneously providing support to strengthen the other aspects will need to be devised.

1. **Naturally Physical:** Some are born with a tendency to be naturally physical. When they operate from this physical identity, with lower energy levels they will tend to be aggressive rather than productive. With greater energy, right approach and guidance, they can gravitate towards developing physical competence and move on to be peak performers in their chosen physically expressive field. Here, a non-physically expressive field like being an IT professional may hamper with their sense of wellbeing for they naturally wish to use their body more than just their intellect or emotions. On the other hand, a naturally physical person may need extra motivation to undertake systematic study for knowledge and understanding. A naturally physical person can be groomed to take a more competitive stance in their chosen physical field by providing comprehensive training on emotional equanimity and scientific knowledge of the activity to elevate them as podium performers.
2. **Pattern Locked:** People who are not ready to change their patterns, not adventurous and perhaps therefore not willing to explore newer avenues of being active, need a very different approach. They feel more comfortable through repetition and any idea of novelty or challenge will make them shy away from the activity. Here, a constantly changing expression ground will lead to a lot of anxiety increasing their inability to cope. A more grounded approach with greater repetition for comfort while introducing smaller doses of novel changes without radical shifts will help them become more physically active. From the comfort of their confidence in certain movements, slightly variant versions can be taught and explored to slowly expand their activity base. While the science of the activity may not be of too great an interest for them, the sense of emotional wellbeing born from familiarity will act as a motivation to willingly be physically engaged.
3. **Cognitive Impetus:** Intellectual stimulation is what motivates some people. So a repetitive kind of

activity will soon drive these people to boredom and make them seek other avenues that challenge their intellect. Knowledge and understanding of the activity is key to keep them motivated and subtle nuances helps them get more involved with the whole process. An unscientific or uneducated approach to the activity will deter them from wanting to be part of the same. While they may be physically active, their drive comes from the ability to demonstrate what they know and so they are good captains and leaders who tend to learn as they share their experiences and expertise. Using rhythm or tempo with complex movements that holds their attention will keep them motivated. A form of innovation within repetition will stimulate the emotional connect to the activity.

4. Aesthetic Purpose: Emotional people relate to the purpose of life and dignity of the human body. A sense of reverence to the activity will build a greater bond to the same. They may need others to find expression for their emotions. A group activity or anything that gives them a sense of being inspirational to others motivates them to be involved in their activity. A merely cerebral approach of understanding the science will not give them the necessary involvement. Stories of overcoming challenges, being part of a larger movement and belief in a greater purpose for being physically active than mere physical fitness will drive their life journey.

With an adult population, revisiting these concepts periodically to identify and select each individual's approach to their physical literacy journey on a daily basis is being proposed. For children, incorporating all these elements and teaching them based on each of these changing phenomena in every child's daily life, presents the need for a holistic physical literacy curriculum - one that isolates and addresses each of the elements, incorporates these nuances in every activity, teaches the children how to choose the right activity based on their current condition and finally integrates the purpose of every activity to assume responsibility to be physically active for life.

### **Conclusion:**

India is known for her rich cultural heritage. Community dancing to commemorate every event, is an integral part of rural, urban and tribal India. Yoga is an accepted way of life and the non-dual concept of *Advaita* doesn't need external reiterations for the common Indian man.

In the words of Documentarian and Historian Dr.S.Krishnaswamy (1997) (elaborating on the idea of Lord Nataraja or the God of Dance), "*What is the significance of this (Indian) civilisation considering the absolute reality as a dancer? Once a poem is written, it becomes independent of the poet. The painting acquires an identity exclusive of the painter. The sculpture is indeed different from the sculptor. But the dancer and the*

*dance are indivisible. The creation and the creator are one and the same. That is the dance of Shiva.*"

Physical Literacy is when the body is capable of aiding every desire, the mind is free from the clutter of unnecessary thoughts to flow with clarity, the intelligence is well rounded to pick solutions from across genres and the emotions are passionately involved in materialising the vision irrespective of the circumstances. In that state of holistic living, with the body poised, free from patterned limitations, cognitively stimulated and emotionally involved, one no longer 'does' a physical activity, they 'are' the activity. Tapping into the Indian subconscious way of life, the future of physical literacy in India lies in integrating modern scientific research based practices with the traditional cultural ethos.

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