

Employment of Sports in Indian Children's Literature

Mukesh Choudhary,

Rajeev Tamhankar, Sanjit Mishra

Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Abstract

"Sports build good habits, confidence, and discipline. They make players into community leaders and teach them how to strive for a goal, handle mistakes, and cherish growth opportunities," comments Olympic Gold Medalist Julie Foudy¹.

India as a country has had rich sports tradition and yet when we look at contemporary landscape, India is ranked as 'The worst performing medal winning country in Olympics'16'.²⁵

This is shattering and heart-breaking and directs towards the basic question – why is India ranked so bad at sports? A lot of sports like archery, wrestling, kabaddi, fencing, chess, playing cards and swimming have Indian origins. Among modern sports, Badminton and Hockey had been initiated in India.⁸ In fact in ancient India, these sports were often taught during childhood. There are stories in epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata where young princes get training of archery, wrestling and other sports.⁹ Then why despite such rich ancient Indian traditions and origins, sports today has taken a backseat in Indian performance? Literature is an answer, more specifically children's literature. Despite the importance of sports in shaping children's cognitive and leadership qualities, the sports do not find enough space in contemporary Indian children's literature.

Introduction

Narayana Ramachandran comments, "Sport is rarely at the top of anyone's agenda - and that includes athletes and their families. Sport has always taken a back seat vis a vis education."⁹ An old saying goes as "*Kheloge Kudoge to banoge kharab, padhoge-likhoge to banoge nawaab.*"¹⁰ This saying also reflects the cultural imperialism in sports which has caused a distaste among children. This paper aims to throw light on this aspect and intends to help sports regain its rightful place in children's literature. Psychiatrist Dr Pavan Sonar stresses the role of traditional games like playing with tops, marbles and other traditional board games like chess, ganjifa in the development of better cognition and neuro-motor skills. "While cricket may have its pluses, traditional games like kabaddi and kho-kho, along with encouraging both team spirit and leadership qualities, are great trainers in strategy and thinking on-the-feet," he explains, and adds, "Compared to even catching cook and hide and seek, cricket is a relatively a slower game."⁷

Sports In Hindu Mythology

There are various stories around how during Ramayana and Mahabharata, young boys used to leave their palaces and families and used to stay at

ashramas learning different aspects of life – one of them being sports as well. The boys were taught archery, mace-warfare, fencing, wrestling and similar military sports.²⁶

Dr Pattanaik comments, "In mythology, Shiva and Parvati continuously play dice games, as do Vishnu and Lakshmi. This is why board games and cards are a popular part of rituals, especially during Diwali. Wrestling scenes are carved on temple walls. Krishna loved wrestling, though Ram is never shown wrestling, differentiating the avatar that was raised in a cowherd family from one born in a royal family. Bhima and Duryodhana are linked to swimming and holding their breath under water for long durations. In Jain literature, the brothers Bharata and Bahubali compete in several competitive games like staring until one blinks or striking each other with water in a pond till one loses balance, as a way to establish a victor while avoiding war."

Sports During Ancient India

Sports has been an important part throughout cultures and civilizations. In ancient India, racing, archery, military stratagems, swimming, wrestling and hunting were among the popular sports, as reflected in Rig Veda, Ramayana and Mahabharata.² Karel Werner states that the existence of accomplished Yogis in Vedic times cannot be

doubted, citing the Kesin hymn of the Rigveda as evidence of a yoga tradition in the Vedic era.³ Story of Mudgalani, the woman won “a car-load worth a thousand” in a chariot race is mentioned in Rig Veda, which is another example of how sports were popular during the time.¹¹

Excavations at Harappa and Mohenjodaro also confirm the existence of board games that had the use of ‘die’.⁴ Also sports like Pithoo which are played in villages⁵ were popular among children during the Harappan times as visible from the excavations.⁴ Sports continued to be popular during the times of Gautam Buddha. As confirmed by Buddhist scriptures, it can be seen that Siddhartha was an expert in archery, wrestling, sword-fighting, chariot-racing, hammer-throwing.⁶

Citing works like Tiruvedacharya’s Villas Mani Manjri (1100 AD) and Someshwar’s Manas Olhas (1135 AD), historians like Dr Srivastav comments, “Chinese travellers Hseun Tsang and Fa Hien, in fact, document sporting activities like swimming, sword-fighting (fencing, as we know it today), running, wrestling and ball games which were immensely popular among the students of Nalanda and Taxila.”⁷

Games And Sports During Mughal Period

During Mughal era, trophy hunting became popular. Lot of wild animals, especially tigers were hunted in this period. DailyPioneer.com comments, “Wildlife in India has been in a state of historic crisis since Mughal times. The tigers were then considered as “merciless blood sucking beasts” and the sport of killing them came to be known as trophy hunting. Mughal Emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar enjoyed this big-game. His reign gave rise to the tradition of trophy hunting or shikar in India. It passed on from him to his successors until his dynasty fell in 1857. The hunters would often keep a part of the hunted animals as a souvenir.”¹²

Regional games were discouraged during this period. Most of the Mughal emperors only took pride in sports like hunting and swimming.¹³ One absurd sport also included displaying trained pigeons¹⁴. This was called *Ishqbaazi*. Indian Express writes, “A common Central Asian pastime, the first Mughal emperor Babur’s father had met his untimely

death when his royal dovecote collapsed into a ravine. Mughal emperors kept up to 20,000 pigeons, which were trained to do all sorts of tricks mid-air. High quality pigeons were called khassah (‘specials’), and a khas pigeon could perform 15 charkhs (wheels) and 70 bazis (somersaults) in a single session.”¹⁴

Sports In The West

While ancient West cherishes sports events like Olympics which showcased different forms like boxing, running, long jump and other athletic events.¹⁵ However, during the Dark ages, there is very little development seen in the sphere of sports. Only the old sports like archery, hammer throwing, wrestling etc were popular.¹⁶ Later, sports became popular again post Renaissance. In 1896, Summer Olympics was the first modern Olympic event organized at a worldwide level.¹⁷ Today different sports like Cricket, Football, Basketball, Tennis etc are among popular games.

Sports in Contemporary Children’s Literature

Different books of Western children’s literature showcase and promote sports through narratives and storytelling. Popular children’s books like Harry Potter by J.K.Rowling also portray a sport as an important part of the story. A fantasy game called Quidditch¹⁸ forms base of one of the novels. Also different sports including chess and tournaments are shown as part of the book series. Even comic books like those of Superman, Batman etc show sports as an integral part of the character’s choices. Over 20 different sports have been shown as being played by Superman.¹⁹

Not just in books and comics, sports in movies and animations have also been employed to attract and educate children. Almost all major cartoon series like Duck Tales, Mickey Mouse, Goofy etc have all shown some or the other versions of Olympics.

In India, sports has been little talked about in literature, leave alone movies. Apart from Lagaan, which was later even featured among all-time best sports films,²⁴ very rarely one could find a movie that is themed around sports until 2000s. There were some mentions of sports like basketball in Kuch

Kuch Hota Hai²³ and cricket in Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, but still sports were not part of the central movie plots. With regards to how sports became popular in Indian movies, *DailyHunt* comments, “The trend of making biopics on great sports personalities like Milkha Singh, Mary Com, Geeta-Babita Phogat, MS Dhoni, etc has become very successful on box-office in recent years. However, there was one sports based movie which had released way before sports-related movies were 'cool'. Chak De! India was one movie which boosted support for women-oriented sports, especially hockey.” *Chak De! India* in one way was a path-breaking movie for representation of sports in Indian cinema. Recently movies like *Dangal* and *Sultan* have also tried to bring sports back in limelight. With regards to Indian animation, *Motu Patlu* is one cartoon series which employed archery competition in one of the episodes. In fact *Dangal* became the highest grossing sports movie of 2017 which is also a testament to the fact that people have started developing interest towards sports.²² Recently, a game of *Motu Patlu* on archery was also made live by the channel on its website.²¹ However, in the Indian Children’s Literature, sports is still not an integral part. Very recently, movies like *Dangal*, *Sultan*, *Lagaan*, *Chak De India* and few others has definitely stirred the nation back towards the love of sports, but yet, very little space for sports is seen in contemporary children’s literature. There were few attempts by Amar Chitra Katha where Krishna was shown as playing different sports with his friends. In fact recently, sports icons like Ganguly were also featured in the popular comics, which shows how the society is again opening towards the culture.²⁰ A wave to revisit sports in children’s literature in India is now therefore required.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that including sports as part of children’s literature can help in building children’s personality and overall development. They learn different aspects like leadership, team spirit, developing friendships and sportsmanship in a healthy environment. They also learn the importance of physical fitness in a fun and entertaining way. It is thus very important that sports

should be included in narratives and stories in children’s literature.

References:

1. <http://www.espn.com/espnw/athletes-life/summer-of-w/article/9364433/espnw-julie-foudy-helps-open-doors-opportunity-brazilian-girls-us-state-department-sportsunited>
2. http://sports.indiapress.org/ancient_indian_games.php
3. Karel Werner (1977), *Yoga and the Rg Veda: An Interpretation of the Keśin Hymn (RV 10, 136)*, Religious Studies, Vol. 13, No. 3, page 289–302
4. <https://www.harappa.com/category/slide-subject/games>
5. <http://www.walkthroughindia.com/sports/famous-sports-in-villages-of-india/>
6. <http://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2016/vol2issue9/PartA/2-8-136-623.pdf>
7. <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-cricket-hegemony-bowls-traditional-sports-out-of-the-indian-maidan-1530220>
8. http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/68167/9/09_chapter%202.pdf
9. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36941269>
10. <https://www.bhaskar.com/mp/ratlam/news/mp-news-playing-will-be-good-you-will-read-then-you-will-become-cool-044200-3603691.html>
11. <https://swarajyamag.com/magazine/jallikattu-the-bull-beyond-the-bullying-of-activism>
12. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/columnists/t-he-tiger---s-tragedy.html>
13. http://www.kkhsou.in/main/history/economy_mughal.html
14. <https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/learning/make-history-fun-again-eccentric-hobbies-mughals-5337033/>
15. <https://www.olympic.org/ancient-olympic-games/the-sports-events>
16. <http://www.lordsandladies.org/medieval-sports.htm>
17. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicorigins.shtml>
18. <https://www.cnet.com/news/j-k-rowling-explains-the-nutty-harry-potter-quidditch-scoring/>
19. <http://www.sportingnews.com/ca/other-sports-news/4504792-man-of-steel-superman-movie-release-date-trailer-sports>
20. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/off-the-field/Ganguly-may-be-first-living-hero-to->

- feature-in-Amar-Chitra-Katha/articleshow/29514014.cms
21. <https://www.nickindia.com/motu-patlu/game/motu-patlu-archery/>
 22. <http://zeenews.india.com/bollywood/aamir-khans-dangal-becomes-highest-grossing-sports-movie-this-year-2017176.html>
 23. <https://www.filmfare.com/features/bollywood-basketball-diaries-13770.html>
 24. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/lagaan-on-alltime-best-sports-films-list/article2485274.ece>
 25. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/sports/india-ranked-worst-performing-country-rio-olympics-2016>
 26. <https://devdutt.com/articles/indian-mythology/mahabharata/even-the-gods-played-sport.html>

Corresponding Author

Mukesh Choudhary*

Assistant Sports Officer, IIT Roorkee,
Haridwar India

mukeshchoudharyiitr@gmail.com

