

Tracing the Idea of Fit and Healthy Students in the thoughts of Some Eminent Educationalists of India

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Abstract

Studying the history of education develops a better understanding of the educational problems we are facing today. Most importantly, it offers an entry point to deal with contemporary educational questions, thus, paving the way to frame the right educational policies. The matter of student's health and fitness has always been central to educational philosophies and policies in India. With the goal of healthy and fit students, the honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has initiated Fit India Movement in schools all over the country. Considering the importance of Fit India Movement, this paper proposed to trace the idea of healthy students in the educational thoughts of our educationalists, viz. Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Syama Prasad Mukherjee. The paper would reveal about the health and fitness of Indians, with reference to the philosophies and arguments of these educationalists who appealed for the inclusion of physical education and sports in schools, colleges, and universities of India.

INTRODUCTION

On 29 August 2019, on the auspicious occasion of National Sports Day, the honourable Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi launched the

nationwide campaign named 'Fit India Movement' to encourage the people to include physical activities and sports in their everyday life for living a healthy life. He called the

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Fit India Movement initiative, need of the hour that would take the country towards a healthier future. Highlighting the relationship between fitness and success, PM Modi said, “The relationship of success and fitness is also interlinked. Take any field today, look at your icons, see their success stories, whether they are in sports, films, business, most of them are fit” (*The Hindu*, 2019).

The launch of Fit India Movement was followed by forming a committee comprising government officials, National Sports Federation, Indian Olympic Association, private bodies, and celebrity fitness promoters. The committee’s task is to advise the government on how to make the campaign effective and successful. Significantly enough, as per recommendations of the committee, the Ministry of Human Resource Development directed States and Union Territories to raise funds to procure listed fitness items for children studying in government schools. The schools were also encouraged to include traditional and regional games in their curriculum (*The Times of India*, 2019). In compliance with Fit India Movement, PM Modi in November 2019, also announced the Fit India School grading system. On his appeal, Fit India Week was celebrated in CBSE and State board schools across India in the first week of December 2019 to motivate students, teachers and parents to make fitness a way of life. He added, ‘I appeal that all schools should enroll

in the Fit India ranking system and Fit India should become innate to our temperament. That it becomes a mass movement and brings awareness is what we must strive for’ (*The Shillong Times*, 2019).

PM Modi’s Fit India Movement, indeed, is an attempt to make India a healthy nation. The notion that good health is central to human happiness and national prosperity is very much intrinsic to India’s culture and civilisation. PM Modi acknowledged this fact as he speaks at the Fit India Movement’s launching ceremony. His initiative towards making our nation healthy gives us an opportunity to look back at the thoughts of our nationalists on physical education and sports. A century ago, when our country was ruled by a foreign nation, which alleged India as an effete country on the ground of the physical degeneration of its people, our nationalist leaders launched the self-consciousness movement of physical culture and sports. Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Syama Prasad Mukherjee were nationalist leaders who envisioned a great role for physical education and sports in the ideal national education system.

NATIONALIST THOUGHTS ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Colonial ideologies of imperialism stereotyped Indians as the most effete race in the world. Macaulay described Bengali as: “The physical organisation

of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy that lives in a constant vapor bath. Courage, independence and veracity are qualities to which the Bengali constitution and his situation are unfavourable for (Macaulay, 1898, p. 636). Whereas, Lieutenant General of Royal Field Artillery, George Macmunn, as late as 1936, wrote that Indians neither have martial aptitude nor courage (MacMunn, 1936, p. 22). The physical degeneration of the Indians was used as an explanation and justification for colonial rule. Thus, as a response to the colonial allegation, there emerged a class of Indians who were ardent advocates of inculcating vigour and courage through physical education and sports. In the background of the national movement, where a hegemonic battle was fought against colonialism, the idea of a fit and healthy body became an intrinsic part of the nation's building. Many questions related to educational reforms in India occupied the Indian educationalists. After examining the problems of the education system, most educationalists repeatedly argued for compulsory physical education and sports in India's schools and colleges.

Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo

The evocation of strength and vigour was fundamental to Vivekananda's vision of the physical renaissance of India. Being a yoga practitioner, he very well knew that a sound mind

exists in a healthy body. Once in a conversation with one of his disciples, he said, "The body and mind must run parallel. When the necessity of strengthening the physique is brought home to people, they will exert themselves of their own accord. It is to make them feel this need that education is necessary at the present moment" (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Volume 7, 1947, pp. 169–70). Vivekananda's exhortation on the importance of physical culture was best articulated in his famous aphorism on football. In a lecture, 'Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life', describing the *Upanishads'* greatness, he bluntly spelled out the physical weakness of the Indian body. He insisted on physical culture as a means of eradicating physical weakness and building a healthy mind and body. Thus he spoke, "...in spite of the greatness of the *Upanishads*, in spite of our boasted ancestry of sages, compared to many other races, I must tell you that we are weak, very weak. First of all is our physical weakness. That physical weakness is the cause of at least one-third of our miseries. We are lazy, we cannot work...And are we not ashamed of ourselves? Ay, sometimes we are; but though we think these things frivolous, we cannot give them up. We speak of many things parrot-like, but never do them; speaking and not doing has become a habit with us. What is the cause of that? Physical weakness. This sort of weak brain is not able to do anything;

we must strengthen it. First of all, our young men must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. Be strong, my young friends; that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the *Gita*. These are bold words; but I have to say them, for I love you. I know where the shoe pinches. I have gained a little experience. You will understand the *Gita* better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the *Upanishads* better and the glory of the *Atman* when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Volume 3, 1958, p. 242).

Vivekananda's vision of physical revivalism of India greatly appeals to youths of his time and generations. He became a prophet figure for revolutionaries who lay great stress on physical education. The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda profoundly influenced Sri Aurobindo. As early as 1902, he helped establish *Anushilan Samiti* (bodybuilding society), and in an article written in *Karmayogin* on 16 October, 1909, described it as a physical training institution whose foremost motive was to improve the physique of the race. (Sri Aurobindo, 1997).

Aurobindo embraced physical education as an important element in nation-building and development. He further added that for even individual

growth and development, it has to be engaged with the moral and physical strength needed for individual growth. This engagement's explicit testimony distinctly reflected in Aurobindo's article— 'British Protection or Self-Protection', published in *Bande Mataram* on 18 March 1907. A fragment from his article read as follows, "...we must organise physical education all over the country and train up the rising generation not only in the moral strength and courage for which Swadeshism has given us the materials but in physical strength and courage and the habit of rising immediately and boldly to the height of even the greatest emergency. That strength we must train in every citizen of the newly-created nation... And the strength of the individuals we must carefully organise for purposes of national defense... It is high time we abandoned the fat and comfortable selfish middle-class training we give to our youth and make a nearer approach to the physical and moral Education of our old *Kshatriyas* or the Japanese Samurai." (Sri Aurobindo, 1973).

Later, when Aurobindo retired from active politics and settled in Pondicherry, he evolved an educational philosophy of *purna* (integral) education, in which physical education and sports constituted the essence of Aurobindo's Integral Education. His rationale for physical education revolves around two ends. First, in terms of metaphysics concerns, i.e., perfection of a body or for the divine realisation of universal harmony, and

second for the role which the physical education could play in nation-building. While the former deals with his spiritual quest of yoga philosophy. The latter is concerned with educating the student's body that comprises the educative merits of physical education viz. character building, inculcating healthy habits, and building a healthy body and mind.

Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Education contains five principal aspects corresponding to the human being's five principal activities: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. He opined that all five principal aspects of education are interdependent and interpenetrated, and even the mental and vital faculty requires sound physicality for expression. That is why, he argued that educating the body should be effective, rigorous, detailed, far-sighted, and methodological. In a bulletin of the Aurobindo Ashram published in April 1951, three principal aspects of physical education were described as: (1) control and discipline of the functioning of the body, (2) an integral methodical and harmonious development of all bodily parts and movements, and (3) correction of any defects and deformities (Sri Aurobindo, 1979, p. 12).

In the very first volume of Bulletin of Physical Education (1949), Aurobindo elaborates the virtue of physical education and sports in the following words, "In their more superficial aspect, they appear merely

as games and amusements which people take up for the entertainment or as a field for the outlet of the body's energy and natural instinct of activity or for a means of the development and maintenance of the health and strength of the body; but they are or can be much more than that: they are also fields for the development of habits, capacities and qualities which are greatly needed and of the utmost service to a people in war or in peace, and in its political and social activities, in most indeed of the provinces of a combined human endeavor" (*Bulletin of Physical Education*, 1949, p. 3). Further highlighting the health and disciplinary benefits associated with the sports, he said: "Of a higher import than the foundation, however necessary, of health, strength, and fitness of the body is the development of discipline and morale and sound and strong character towards which these activities can help. There are many sports that are of the utmost value towards this end because they help to form and even necessitate the qualities of courage, hardihood, energetic action, and initiative or call for skill, steadiness of will or rapid decision and action" (Sri Aurobindo, 1953, p.6).

In his school at Pondicherry Ashram, Aurobindo arranged facilities of playground, tennis court, volleyball and basketball court, hockey ground, swimming pool, weight training in gymnasium, boxing and wrestling rings besides the programme of indigenous exercises, yogic asana and

pranayama. Being an educationist, he acknowledged the role physical education can play in nation-building. Describing the relevance of physical education, he clearly stated, "At any rate, in school like ours and in universities sports have now a recognised and indispensable place; for even a highest and completest education of the mind is not enough without the education of the body. Where the qualities I have enumerated are absent or insufficiently present, a strong individual will or a national will may build them up, but the aid given by sports to their development is direct and in no way negligible. This would be a sufficient reason for the attention given to them in our Ashram (*Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Physical Education*, 2012, pp. 4-5).

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, one of the foremost educationists of modern India and founder of Banaras Hindu University, India's first residential-cum-teaching and research university, was very determined to the cause of physical education in India. Raising the question of physical education culture on several occasions, Malaviya lamented at the deteriorated physique of Indians. In an address, 'Discontent in India and The Reform Proposals', delivered at the second United Provinces Conference held at Lucknow in 1908, he regretted looking at the abandonment of the

physical culture tradition, which was once prevalent among our forefathers.

He was worried about very little provision of physical exercises and games in government schools and colleges. Malaviya argued that in the higher and middle classes of India that were educated in colonial schools, the taste for physical exercise had perceptibly diminished. This lack of any culture of physical education in Indian society, he explained, aggravates people's economic weakness when hit by plague and famine. The people are not so healthy, so they are used to succumb to diseases much more easily (*The Hon. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya His Life and Speeches*, 1919, pp. 146-148).

Hence, Malaviya appealed for reviving the interest of Indians in physical exercises. He urged parents to encourage their children to participate in school and college tournaments and advised elders who had passed out of colleges to devote some time and attention to the preservation and promotion of a healthy and strong physique. He asks Indians to learn from the Englishmen who, even at the age of sixty, take part in sports like badminton, tennis, cricket, or some other exercise (*Ibid*, p. 148). He firmly believed that for any education scheme to be complete, comprehensive, and all-embracing must include physical education and sports. Thus, he supported the movement to revive an indigenous gymnasium called *akharas* in

northern India and established a huge gymnasium at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). Physical Culture has always been greatly encouraged in BHU, as is evident from the fact that it was practically compulsory for university students' participation in physical fitness building. Besides, on Malaviya's instruction, extensive playgrounds for cricket, hockey, football, tennis, wrestling, and a large hall for physical exercise were built in the University (Sundaram, 1936).

Malaviya was also instrumental in leading the movement to form the University Training Corps in India. The current NCC (National Cadet Corps) had its roots in the University Training Corps. The students enrolled in the University Training Corps undergo fine physical training and drill exercises. Malaviya argued that the course of these healthy physical exercises and training would instill discipline, comradeship, and sportsmanship among the students. BHU had the largest University Training Corps at that time. It is worthy of mentioning that Malaviya also pioneered the Scout Movement in India. He founded Seva Samiti Scout Association (Humanity Uplift Service Society) in 1917. Thus, for Malaviya, "the deterioration of the national physique" was a matter of serious concern, and as a remedy to it, he vehemently called for paying attention to physical education (*The Hon. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya His Life and Speeches*, 1919, p. 148).

Lala Lajpat Rai

The great nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai was also a proponent of physical education. On numerous occasions, he talked about the necessity of physical education in schools and colleges of India and tried to build up public opinion in its favour. He went on to say that, "I want my countrymen to realise that the problem of physical education in India is a national problem of the first magnitude, and they should apply themselves to its solution with all the energy and the force of soul they possess" (Andrews, 1933, p. 10).

Rai considered the diseased health of Indians a matter of civilisational crisis. Therefore, his rationale for physical education was embedded mainly around the progress of race, citizenry and nation. As an educationalist, he extensively studied the educational system of America, European countries and Japan. Dwelling upon his study, he informs that the notion of 'today's children are the citizens of tomorrow' had been recognised in the developed nations of the world. Thus, to have good citizens, physically, morally and intellectually, the educational system should consider children's physical condition. Lajpat Rai discussed the idea of healthy citizenry and its relation with race and nation's progress in his book, *The Problem of National Education in India* (1920). He writes, "It is also necessary that the children raised should be healthy and capable of contributing to the general

progress of humanity. Defective persons are only a drag on the race and involve a tragic waste of human powers, energies and potentialities... Descending from the race to the nation, the importance of children-of healthy, vigorous and potentially resourceful and powerful children-to the latter is self-evident. The children of a nation are its greatest asset. They represent its capital, upon the wise and skillful investment of which depends its prosperity-nay, even its existence and continuance. All the civilized nations of the world have accepted this truth, and are vying with each other in building their present and future position among the peoples of the world' (Rai, 1920, p. 149).

According to Lajpat Rai, the present and future interests of a nation require every one of its citizens, male or female possessing the maximum amount of health and maximum developed intelligence. He held responsible one-sided colonial education system for the degraded body of Indian students, which took no notice of the physical requirements of the students' body. On university graduates, he was of the opinion that hardly one in a hundred graduates can be confidently said to be having normal health. Founding India's educational system largely based on literary learning, in which young pupils are engaged in mastering Milton, Shakespeare, Southey, Shelley, Kalidasa and Firdausi; Lajpat Rai asserted that they had never been told, either at home or

at school, how to cultivate an erect posture, take care of their bodies, hands, legs, noses, eyes, teeth, ears, organs, muscles and nerves, teeth, and ears. They know nothing about the hygiene of living, housing, food, dress and mating. The curriculum of studies in India takes no cognizance of these things or those that provide recreation and amusement of a healthy and edifying character, said Lajpat Rai (Ibid, pp. 151-152).

Based upon the extensive study of physical education in America and Britain, Lajpat Rai wrote a chapter titled. 'The Place of Physical Education' in his book *The Problem of National Education in India* (1920). He appealed that the schools in India must accept the new industrial age condition and provide adequate opportunities for bodily exercise related to vocational skills and the fundamental bodily exercises related to health. Importantly enough, he provided a scientific explanation of the health benefits associated with physical activity. He argued that India's programme of studies had not been adjusted to meet the pupils' changing needs.

Thus, Lajpat Rai called for manual training and physical education. In manual training, he described the health of the fine neuromuscular mechanisms, and physical education vigorously involves the large muscles of the arms, legs and trunk. Considering that physical education would lead to fundamental health with organic, neural and muscular

capacity, he argued for instructions in exercises and games in schools and colleges, which could bring into play the large fundamental muscles of students. Rai suggested that physiological types of exercises that call into play vigorously the large fundamental groups of big muscles and are related to the development of vigour, endurance and power, are the best form of physical exercises. This instruction, he further opined, should be supplemented by the exercises of skill, grace and alertness, and special attention should be given to securing good postural habits while standing, sitting and exercising. Significantly enough, he contemplated physical education and sports as an educative pedagogy that could inculcate in students desirable features of character building, social and moral values, honesty, fair play, courtesy, clarity of speech, alertness, promptness and persistence (Ibid, pp. 166–167).

Syama Prasad Mukherjee

Syama Prasad Mukherjee was an educationalist of a grand vision. In his scheme of ideal national education, physical education and sports hold a prominent place. As he said on the occasion of Calcutta University convocation in March 1935, 'What is Education worth if our youths, in general, are physically weak or unfit, unable to stand the stress and strain of modern life? What is education worth if we cannot turn them into men physically strong and well-equipped as they should be intellectually sane

and robust?' (University of Calcutta Convocation Address, 1939, p. 14). Thus, as an educationist, Mukherjee was so concerned about the physical education of Indian youths that he supported the resolution regarding compulsory physical training and military drill in all schools and colleges of Bengal. The resolution demanding compulsory physical training and military drill in all schools and colleges of Bengal was proposed before the Bengal Legislative Council on 7–8 August 1929, in the support of which Mukherjee made strong arguments. Arguing that physical training of students is a matter of national importance and national interest, he vehemently declared that India could not hope to advance unless it could turn out men capable of shouldering self-government burdens and defence properly (*Council Proceedings Official Report*, Bengal Legislative Council, 1929).

Importantly, for national defence, Mukherjee was also in favour of imparting some military training to students. In 1924, on a motion passed by him, Calcutta University appointed a committee to inquire into the question of imparting physical training and, if possible, also military training to the students. Based on the committee's study, he recommended some form of drill or physical exercise to be made a part of the school curriculum, and the college should be asked to introduce compulsory drills or games. He was of the opinion that physical

education should be imparted at schools to prepare the ground for further military training of students, if they desired an army career after their schooling. Mukherjee also proposed light military exercise to be made compulsory for all students in colleges affiliated to the University. Keeping this in mind, he appealed to organise University Training Corps in universities and was involved in the formation of Calcutta University's Training Corps (Ibid).

According to Mukherjee, the colonial education system deprived Indian students of the necessary qualities of courage, resource, initiative and free thinking. Therefore, the health and welfare of students were his utmost concern, and accordingly, he took steps in this direction. He was instrumental in founding the Student's Welfare department in Calcutta that investigates the causes affecting student's health through medical examination. Under his supervision, the student's welfare department deals with the preventative and curative side of the problem that includes the supply of medicines and provision for sports, games and scientific physical education. It is to be noted that, Mukherjee's outspoken insistence on physical education greatly owe to the lessons of character building which lies in the play pedagogy. Addressing the convocation ceremony of the Calcutta University on 8 March 1935, he explained how physical education not only contributes to students' health but also helps in character

development which is essential for the highest interests of the motherland (University of Calcutta Convocation Address, 1939, p. 15).

Mukherjee reiterated the moral lessons that sports can endow at the 1936 convocation address of Calcutta University when he spoke, '...remember that in sport, as in life, victory or defeat is not the supreme factor; what is of paramount importance is that in every sphere we must bring into action our best and cleanest effort, which should be unceasing and un-yielding in character' (Ibid, p. 39). Thus, he firmly believes that physical education can build students' health and physique that would further stimulate their mental growth and inculcate in them discipline and capacity for corporate work.

CONCLUSION

The thoughts of India's greatest educationalists viz. Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lajpat Rai and Syama Prasad Mukherjee, on physical education, reveals a remarkable similarity with the thoughts of our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, whose vision is to make India fit and healthy and thus initiated the Fit India Movement. The launch of the Fit India Movement by our honourable Prime Minister to encourage people to remain fit and healthy by including physical activities and sports in their daily lives, indeed is an attempt in line with the grand vision of our

nationalist leaders of the colonial period. The paper has made it evident that our nationalist leaders, who were also eminent educationalists of their time, sought to ameliorate the deteriorated physique of their fellow countrymen through the pursuit of physical education and sports. They considered the weak body and mind of citizens as a national problem and, recognising that children of today are the citizens of tomorrow, appealed for physical education and sports in schools and colleges of India. PM Modi initiated Fit India movement throughout the country's schools and colleges for health and fitness of the students. 'Fit India grading system for schools' is an effort congruent with the nationalists' thought to impact physical education in schools

in order to make students fit and healthy.

Following the ideas and thoughts of India's most significant national educationalists, PM Modi, through the Fit India Movement, is trying to make physical activity and sports a social phenomenon in the country. He rightly said on the first anniversary of the Fit India Movement, that in the time of COVID-19, fitness has become an even more important aspect of life. Thus, the paper illustrates that the Fit India Movement, a brainchild of PM Modi, is an effort to involve citizens of the country in physical activities and sports to make India a fit nation as per the vision of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Syama Prasad Mukherjee.

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