

Culture and Sports: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Abstract

Culture represents the collective way of life of human society, encompassing behaviour, values, beliefs, customs, traditions, knowledge systems, and creative expressions developed over generations. Sports, as an integral component of culture, reflect societal values, historical experiences, and collective identities. From ancient survival-based physical activities to modern organized and professional sports, games have evolved alongside human civilization. This paper examines the conceptual relationship between culture and sports, highlighting how sports function as cultural heritage, instruments of social integration, and vehicles for human development. Special emphasis is placed on Indian sports culture, tracing its roots from ancient civilization to the contemporary era marked by leagues, policies, and government initiatives. The study further analyses material and non-material dimensions of culture, characteristics of culture, and the role of sports festivals, professional leagues, and national schemes in strengthening sports culture in India. The paper concludes that sports are not merely competitive activities or career options but a vital cultural force promoting health, social harmony, national pride, and holistic development.

Keywords: Culture, sports culture, material culture, non-material culture, cultural heritage, leagues, sports schemes

Introduction

To understand the relationship between culture and sports, it is essential to first comprehend the meaning of culture. Culture broadly refers to human behaviour, lifestyle, customs, traditions, values, beliefs, knowledge, innovations, and creative activities developed through long historical processes. It represents the rules and values of thought and conduct that societies inherit from their past and transmit to future generations. In this sense, culture is both inherited and continuously evolving.

The term culture literally signifies refinement or improvement. Human beings are inherently progressive, constantly striving to enhance art, literature, music, architecture, religion, philosophy, science, and sports. Culture is therefore a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon in which obsolete practices are discarded while meaningful traditions are preserved and enriched. The inherited collective legacy is described as cultural heritage, which includes both tangible and intangible elements.

Sports form an inseparable part of cultural heritage. From ancient physical activities undertaken for survival—such as running, throwing, climbing, and combat—to their transformation into structured games and competitive sports, physical culture has evolved alongside human civilization. The journey from the ancient Olympic Games to the modern Olympics (1896–2024) exemplifies the continuity and refinement of sports traditions through changing rules, values, and organizational systems.

Concept and Definitions of Culture

Sociologists and scholars have defined culture in diverse ways:

- **E. B. Tylor** defined culture as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities acquired by humans as members of society.
- **Joseph S. Roucek** described culture as the total way of life of a particular people living at a particular time and place.
- **MacIver and Page** viewed culture as the expression of human nature in daily activities, ways of thinking, art, literature, religion, recreation, and enjoyment.

These definitions collectively emphasize that culture is learned, shared, transmitted, and continuously reconstructed.

Characteristics of Culture

Culture, including sports culture, possesses certain universal characteristics:

1. **Culture is Learned:** Individuals are not born with culture; they acquire it through socialization and interaction with family, community, and institutions.
2. **Culture is Transmitted:** Cultural values and practices are passed from one generation to another, ensuring continuity.
3. **Culture is Dynamic:** Culture evolves with time, adapting to social, technological, and environmental changes.
4. **Cultural Diversity:** Every society and nation has a distinct culture shaped by geography, history, and social conditions.
5. **Time-Dependent Development:** Culture takes centuries to develop and cannot be created instantly.

Types of Culture: Material and Non-Material

Culture is broadly classified into material and non-material forms.

Material Culture (Bhautik)

Material culture refers to tangible and physical objects created and used by humans. It represents civilization and material progress and can be quantitatively measured. Examples include housing, monuments, food habits, clothing, means of transport, tools, technologies, entertainment media, sports equipment, playgrounds, and training infrastructure. Sports stadiums, gymnasiums, sports academies, and equipment form an important part of material culture.

Non-Material Culture (Abhautik)

Non-material culture includes beliefs, values, language, norms, morals, traditions, customs, folklore, religion, ethics, and emotional expressions. It reflects mental and spiritual progress. In sports, non-material culture is reflected through sportsmanship, discipline, teamwork, fair play, respect for rules, ethical conduct, and adherence to philosophies such as Yoga and moral values.

A balanced society requires harmony between material and non-material culture, as material advancement alone cannot satisfy human psychological and spiritual needs.

Sports as Cultural Heritage

Sports are a powerful expression of national and regional culture. Many nations regard indigenous and traditional sports as symbols of identity and pride. Kabaddi represents Indian cultural heritage, while wrestling, archery, gymnastics, fencing, football, cricket, hockey, and polo reflect the cultural contributions of different civilizations including Egypt, Greece, Europe, and Asia.

In India, sports culture dates back to the Vedic period. Ancient practices such as chariot racing, horse riding, archery, wrestling, Mallakhamb, Kalarippayattu, chess, Kho-Kho, Kabaddi, Gilli-Danda, Lagori, Gatka, Thang-Ta, Silambam, and Yogasana were integral to social life and physical education. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization and references from the *Mahabharata* period confirm the prevalence of physical games, dice, boxing, and hunting.

Culture significantly influences sports by shaping rules, rituals, values, and modes of participation. At the same time, sports reshape culture by promoting social interaction, collective identity, and moral values.

Sports, Culture, and Human Rights

Sports and culture are closely linked to human rights and social inclusion. Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, emphasized sport as a tool for international understanding and peace. The Olympic Charter recognizes sport as a fundamental human right and advocates participation without discrimination. Sports promote dialogue, reduce prejudice, and foster social and cultural harmony across nations.

Contemporary Sports Culture in India

In recent decades, India has witnessed significant transformation in sports culture. Youth participation has increased due to role models, media exposure, and improved infrastructure. Fitness awareness and professional aspirations have revitalized traditional and modern sports alike.

Key factors contributing to the growth of sports culture in India include government investment, private sports academies, parental encouragement, social media influence, talent identification, and the National Education Policy (2020), which emphasizes sports and physical education as part of holistic development.

Sports Leagues, Festivals, and Schemes

Professional leagues and sports festivals play a major role in strengthening sports culture:

- **Indian Premier League (IPL)** – Established in 2008, IPL revolutionized cricket and popularized sports entertainment.
- **Pro Kabaddi League (PKL)** – Launched in 2014, PKL revived Kabaddi as a professional sport.
- **Indian Super League (ISL)** – Promotes football development in India.
- **Hockey India League and FIH Pro League** – Enhance domestic and international hockey standards.

Government initiatives such as the National Sports Talent Contest Scheme (NSTC), Army Boys Sports Company Scheme (ABCS), Come and Play Scheme, Khelo India Games, and the Target Olympic

Podium Scheme (TOPS) aim to identify talent, provide scientific training, and promote a lifelong sports culture.

Conclusion

Culture and sports are inseparable dimensions of human civilization. Sports are not merely competitive or career-oriented activities but a vital component of cultural heritage that promotes health, happiness, social interaction, and national unity. India's rich sports culture, rooted in ancient traditions, is undergoing a positive transformation through policy support, professional leagues, and increased social awareness. For sustainable development of sports culture, it is essential to encourage participation across all age groups, integrate sports into education, and balance professional aspirations with cultural, ethical, and health-oriented perspectives. A holistic approach that respects tradition while embracing modernity will ensure the flourishing of sports culture in India.

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