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FROM PHYSICAL FITNESS TO LIFE SKILLS: REPOSITIONING PHYSICAL EDUCATION FOR A DEVELOPED INDIA

Ravita Saini

Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, Dashmesh Khalsa College, Zirakpur

ABSTRACT

Physical Education (PE) has traditionally been associated with physical fitness, sports participation, motor development and health promotion. However, the changing requirements of higher education and the emerging vision of a developed India demand a broader understanding of its educational purpose. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education, life skills, employability, values, experiential learning and the development of well-rounded individuals. Within this framework, Physical Education can be repositioned from a predominantly fitness-oriented subject to a multidimensional educational platform for developing physical, psychological, social, emotional and transferable life skills. This conceptual paper examines the role of Physical Education in preparing young people for the demands of Viksit Bharat 2047. It draws upon NEP 2020, national curriculum and sports-education initiatives, UNESCO's quality physical education framework, World Health Organization perspectives on physical activity and adolescent well-being, and recent evidence concerning the developmental impact of sport and physical activity in India. The analysis suggests that structured participation in Physical Education and sport can foster teamwork, leadership, communication, discipline, resilience, decision-making, self-confidence, empathy and problem-solving alongside physical competence. Such outcomes have direct relevance to employability, citizenship, social inclusion and lifelong well-being. The paper proposes a five-dimensional repositioning framework comprising physical competence, personal development, social-emotional skills, employability skills, and responsible citizenship. It argues that higher education institutions should integrate experiential sports-based learning, reflective activities, leadership opportunities, community engagement and assessment of transferable competencies within PE programmes. The paper concludes that repositioning Physical Education as a life-skills and human-development discipline can strengthen the educational objectives of NEP 2020 and contribute to the development of healthy, capable, resilient and socially responsible citizens required for Viksit Bharat 2047.

Keywords: Physical Education, Life Skills, NEP 2020, Employability, Viksit Bharat 2047

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of education extends beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge. A developed society requires individuals who are physically healthy, emotionally resilient, socially responsible, capable of collaboration, adaptable to change and prepared to participate productively in economic and civic life. In this context, Physical Education occupies a distinctive position because it provides opportunities for learning through movement, participation, competition, cooperation and practical experience.

Traditionally, Physical Education has often been evaluated through physical fitness indicators, sports performance, participation rates and knowledge of health-related practices. While these outcomes remain important, contemporary education requires a broader understanding of what students learn through physical activity and sport. Quality Physical Education can develop physical, social and emotional competencies and contribute to educational and employability outcomes. UNESCO describes quality physical education as an approach that combines physical and psychosocial well-being with rounded skill development.

This broader conception is strongly compatible with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy calls for holistic and multidisciplinary education and explicitly includes sports, physical education, life skills, value-based education, community engagement and practical learning within its vision. It also recognizes sports as an area that should be strengthened within multidisciplinary higher education.

The seminar theme, "Vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 and the Indian Education System: A Reconstruction Based on Cultural Heritage, Skill Development and Innovation," provides an appropriate context for reconsidering the role of Physical Education. The central argument of this paper is that Physical Education should not be positioned merely as a mechanism for producing physically fit students. It should be repositioned as a life-skills laboratory in which students learn to lead, collaborate, communicate, make decisions, manage emotions, respond to failure and demonstrate responsible behaviour.

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2. PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NEP 2020

NEP 2020 represents a significant shift from fragmented and examination-oriented education toward holistic, multidisciplinary and experiential learning. It states that higher education should facilitate intellectual, social, physical, ethical and emotional development and recommends greater integration of disciplines, vocational learning, community engagement, value education and life skills.

The policy also recognizes the importance of sports within higher education. It envisages multidisciplinary institutions in which areas including sports are strengthened and integrated within broader educational environments.

This has important implications for Physical Education. Rather than treating PE as an extracurricular activity separated from academic learning, institutions can position it as an integral component of student development. Sports clubs, fitness programmes, leadership activities, community sports projects, indigenous games, wellness programmes and experiential learning can all contribute to the larger educational mission.

The National Curriculum Framework also emphasizes that Physical Education should receive appropriate importance and that students should have opportunities to participate irrespective of their level of ability or interest. Although the framework primarily addresses school education, its underlying principle of inclusive participation has relevance for higher education as well.

3. FROM PHYSICAL FITNESS TO LIFE SKILLS

Physical fitness is an essential outcome of Physical Education, but it represents only one dimension of educational development. The contemporary concept of life skills includes cognitive, personal and interpersonal capabilities that help young people respond constructively to challenges, communicate effectively, solve problems, build relationships and develop self-worth.

Sport provides a natural environment in which these skills can be practiced rather than merely discussed.

3.1 Discipline and Self-Regulation

Regular physical training requires punctuality, consistency, goal-setting and adherence to rules. Students learn that performance improvement generally requires sustained effort rather than immediate results. These behaviours can transfer to academic and professional environments.

3.2 Teamwork and Communication

Team sports create situations in which students must communicate, coordinate actions, understand different perspectives and work toward shared objectives. Such experiences develop interpersonal competencies that are relevant to contemporary workplaces.

3.3 Leadership and Decision-Making

Sports provide repeated opportunities for students to assume leadership roles—as captains, organizers, officials, peer mentors or event coordinators. Players must make decisions under time constraints and respond to changing circumstances. These experiences can contribute to leadership confidence and decision-making ability.

3.4 Resilience and Emotional Regulation

Winning and losing are integral components of competitive sport. Appropriate sporting environments teach students to handle disappointment, recover from failure, accept feedback and persist toward improvement. Such resilience has significance beyond sports, particularly in academic and professional environments characterized by uncertainty and competition.

3.5 Empathy, Respect and Ethical Behaviour

Rules, fair play and respect for opponents provide opportunities for ethical learning. UNESCO emphasizes that sporting values can contribute to respect, responsibility, creativity, critical thinking, social cohesion and inclusion.

Thus, Physical Education provides an experiential environment in which values can become behaviours.

4. PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

The relationship between Physical Education and employability deserves greater academic attention. Employability is not limited to technical qualifications. Modern workplaces require communication, teamwork,

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adaptability, leadership, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, resilience and the capacity for lifelong learning.

UNESCO's Quality Physical Education framework specifically connects rounded skill development with educational and employability outcomes.

A student who organizes a sports event, leads a team, resolves a disagreement between players, manages a tournament schedule or mentors junior participants is developing competencies that can be relevant to employment. Consequently, PE programmes can deliberately incorporate employability-oriented experiences.

For example, students can be given responsibility for:

- organizing inter-college tournaments;
- managing sports equipment and facilities;
- coordinating teams and volunteers;
- maintaining event documentation;
- designing fitness programmes;
- conducting peer fitness activities;
- promoting health and wellness campaigns;
- managing sports-related digital content; and
- participating in community physical-activity programmes.

Such activities transform PE from a participation-based subject into an experiential learning environment.

5. PHYSICAL EDUCATION, WELL-BEING AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Physical activity is strongly connected with health and educational well-being. WHO identifies physical activity as an important component of health-promoting education systems and recommends a whole-school or systems approach to strengthen its educational and health benefits.

The relevance of this approach is particularly strong for young people because adolescence and emerging adulthood are formative periods for establishing long-term behavioural patterns. WHO emphasizes that young people require opportunities to develop life skills alongside supportive environments that promote health and well-being.

Higher education institutions can therefore use PE as part of a broader student-wellness ecosystem. Fitness activities can be linked with stress management, sleep awareness, healthy nutrition, emotional well-being and responsible lifestyle choices.

The objective should not be to impose a single model of fitness. Students differ in physical ability, interests, gender, culture and health status. An inclusive PE model should provide multiple forms of participation, including recreational activities, yoga, indigenous games, individual fitness activities, team sports, adapted physical activity and wellness programmes.

6. PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND THE VISION OF VIKSIT BHARAT 2047

The concept of Viksit Bharat 2047 requires human capital capable of supporting India's social and economic development. A developed nation requires healthy and productive citizens, but physical health alone is insufficient. Citizens must also possess resilience, collaboration skills, ethical awareness, adaptability and a sense of social responsibility.

Recent India-specific evidence strengthens this argument. UNESCO's Sport and Physical Activity Impact Framework for India, launched in 2026, identifies four interconnected domains through which sport and physical activity can contribute to development: health and well-being; education and lifelong learning; livelihoods and economic growth; and equality and social inclusion. The framework was developed using evidence from programmes involving more than 2,000 learners across eight Indian states.

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This framework provides a useful conceptual bridge between Physical Education and the development agenda of Viksit Bharat. It demonstrates that the contribution of sport extends beyond physical fitness into education, economic participation and inclusion.

Physical Education can therefore contribute to Viksit Bharat through five interconnected pathways:

Healthy citizens → productive individuals → skilled workforce → socially responsible communities → sustainable national development.

This repositioning also supports the seminar's emphasis on skill development, holistic human development, youth empowerment and nation building.

7. A PROPOSED LIFE-SKILLS FRAMEWORK FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Based on the preceding discussion, this paper proposes a Physical Education–Life Skills Development Framework consisting of five dimensions.

Dimension	Core competencies	Possible PE experiences
Physical Competence	Fitness, coordination, health literacy, motor skills	Fitness training, sports, yoga, indigenous games
Personal Development	Discipline, confidence, goal-setting, resilience	Training plans, individual challenges, performance reflection
Social-Emotional Development	Communication, empathy, cooperation, emotional regulation	Team sports, peer learning, group activities
Employability Skills	Leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, time management	Tournament organization, team leadership, event management
Responsible Citizenship	Fair play, respect, inclusion, social responsibility	Community sports, inclusive games, volunteering

The framework changes the question from “How fit is the student?” to “What capabilities has the student developed through physical activity?”

This distinction is central to repositioning Physical Education within contemporary higher education.

8. INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR REPOSITIONING PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Higher education institutions should consider five strategic interventions.

8.1 Integrate PE with Institutional Development

Physical Education should be included in institutional plans for student well-being, holistic development and campus engagement. NEP 2020 already envisages institutional mechanisms supporting student clubs and activities, including sports.

8.2 Assess Life Skills, Not Only Physical Performance

Assessment should include leadership, teamwork, communication, participation, discipline, problem-solving and reflective learning alongside fitness and sport-specific skills.

8.3 Strengthen Experiential Learning

Students should receive structured opportunities to organize sporting events, manage teams, conduct community programmes and participate in peer leadership.

8.4 Promote Inclusion

PE should accommodate students with different abilities, interests and backgrounds. Gender inclusion, disability inclusion and equitable access should be treated as central components rather than peripheral concerns.

8.5 Connect PE with Emerging Technology

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Digital fitness assessment, wearable technologies, activity-tracking platforms, video-based skill analysis and sports analytics can enhance learning. However, technology should support—not replace—the teacher's role and human interaction.

9. CHALLENGES

Several barriers may affect this repositioning. First, Physical Education can continue to be perceived as secondary to conventional academic disciplines. Second, institutions may lack adequate sports facilities, trained personnel and dedicated resources. Third, assessment of soft and life skills can become subjective unless clear rubrics are developed. Fourth, excessive emphasis on competitive performance may exclude students with lower athletic ability. Finally, technology-enabled PE requires attention to data privacy, digital access and teacher competence.

These challenges indicate that repositioning PE requires institutional change rather than simply introducing additional sports activities.

CONCLUSION

Physical Education should no longer be understood narrowly as a discipline concerned primarily with physical fitness and sports performance. In the context of NEP 2020 and the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, it can become a powerful instrument for holistic human development.

The evidence and policy frameworks examined in this paper indicate that quality Physical Education can contribute to physical health, psychosocial well-being, teamwork, leadership, communication, resilience, ethical behaviour, employability and social inclusion. UNESCO's recent India-specific Sport and Physical Activity Impact Framework reinforces this multidimensional understanding by connecting physical activity with health, education, livelihoods, economic growth and equality.

The central proposition of this paper is therefore that fitness should remain a foundation of Physical Education, but life skills should become one of its principal educational outcomes.

For Viksit Bharat 2047, India needs young people who are not only knowledgeable and technically capable but also healthy, confident, resilient, collaborative, ethical and socially responsible. Physical Education is uniquely positioned to cultivate these characteristics through experiential learning.

Repositioning Physical Education from “fitness training” to “life-skills development through physical activity” can strengthen its academic legitimacy and align it more closely with the transformative vision of NEP 2020. Such a shift can enable Physical Education to contribute meaningfully to the creation of a healthier, more skilled, inclusive and human-centred developed India.

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