

Sports in/and Schools

Let's play safe!

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Money-spinning school sports tournaments and games are about to be revived, albeit with COVID restrictions, even as sports grounds in schools are deteriorating and disappearing. The National Education Policy has little to say on prioritizing sports in the school curricula. Shouldn't we be rather more concerned with building our sports nurseries rather than rolling out money spinning games?

Violet Peters, India's Asian Games gold medalist hurdler passed away last week at the age of 87. She was the star of the women's team that won the 4x100 hurdles gold, the first that Indian women won, in the Asian games of 1959. She represented India in several international meets after that and continued to be a top athlete for years. In the mid 1960s to my few sports crazy friends and I, who dared to run, hurdle and jump under an indifferent 'physical trainer' in the small playground our school accessed, she was a hero. We cut out the few pictures that appeared in the media and lapped up the occasional news of her.

Today even with a surfeit of sports stars, not that many young girls will plaster their doors with posters of sportswomen. Not much has changed in the playgrounds either---young girls are simply not encouraged to participate in active sports, although a small number do buck the trend and rise to be promising sportswomen. But the playgrounds are vital for the possibilities that they present. Without safe playgrounds, kids, especially girls, have nowhere to engage in unstructured activity.

Sadly, these playgrounds are vanishing in big cities---defying the regulations that insist that schools have access to such spaces. And now the pandemic appears to be accelerating the process of obliterating the school playground. The various plans to reopen schools appear to be focused on a return to learning inside the classroom. Experts have been discussing staggered timings, social distancing in the classroom and so on. Inevitably, the discussion has also been on the need to expand classroom space, which in the case of most urban schools, would mean the incorporation of open spaces (read playgrounds). Over last month or so, parents across the country have been objecting to schools charging for facilities that are no longer being used by students. This includes school playgrounds, that they says are not in use because of COVID restrictions. Why shouldn't the students be given fee concessions, they ask? Indeed, school playgrounds have been empty and will not be in use for quite some time to come. At least not for sporting activities, for, there has also been talk of using playgrounds to set up open air classes complying with social distancing norms. And this means kids will not be playing, and nor will there be the school games, and a whole range of sporting activities that were the nurseries of sporting talent.

While the absence of sports in schools may seem like a small item in the large agenda of restarting academic lives, it is important in the long term. And especially because it underlies the fact that we don't recognize sports as an integral part of education at the school level. Why this is the case is an argument for another column; but for now, for a society recovering as ours is from a stressful time, sports and regulated physical activity for the young is critical to their health and mental well-being.

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Contrarily however, there is the news that the Mumbai School Sports Association (MSSA), one of the biggest school sporting organisations in the country, is preparing to launch its sporting season with competitions and matches for the senior groups soon. One cannot help wondering if enough thought has gone into this decision. What kind of systems will have to be put in place at stadia and grounds? Who will monitor compliance? Is there enough funding for this? Even without spectators, there will still be a large number of people involved. Without adequate regulations starting sporting competitions will be a disaster waiting to happen. So why is the MSSA ---and schools, the players, and a good section of the parents--- rushing into this? Last year MSSA held some 2500 football matches. And every year some 20 new schools are added to the list of participants. Over the 220-day season each year, 350 schools take part in the MSSA's annual sports events. A staggering 100,000 kids participate in all the Olympic category events. Playing in competitions like these is not just for sporting glory---it is to many a pathway to opportunities --- college admissions, employment, etc. to MSSA and its sponsors, it is of course a matter of the market dynamics. The schizophrenic post-COVID policy on school sports may well rest on the fact that the market is increasingly the master puppeteer in the development of sports in the country.

This close market-sports link is evident all over the world. In the US, where college sports is the heart and soul of young America, the resumption of college football has initiated a storm of discussion. On the one hand universities appear to be non-chalant about athletes health ---soe universities have continued to field teams even though a number of players have tested contracted COVID. Given that, college football produces billions of dollars for the universities, this isn't surprising, the cavalier attitude to serious health issues among players is not a surprise, say commentators. However, it revives and exacerbates other concerns over the health and safety of young college athletes and the entire structure and functioning of college sports that prioritises performance and winning over health and safety of young people. American football for instance has long been the focus of much criticism over its potential for life-threatening injuries. Among other evidence, Boston University researchers found that in about 90 per cent of college football players showed evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). A critical fact here is that a large number of college footballers are African-Americans, which has given rise to speculations of an unconcern prompted by racial perspectives. The opposition to the revival of college sports in these times is gaining some ground. As Nathan Kalman-Lamb, Johanna Mellis, and Derek Silva ('Cancelling the College Football Season isn't Enough' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 17, 2020) point out "The normalization of exceptional harm is a defining feature of our times, but that is a function of unconscionable conscious choice, not the vagaries of fate. That there is no absolute expert consensus (is there ever?) does not mean that athletes should be put in harm's way because we want to watch College GameDay and drink a Bud Light." So in the US, it isn't just the market and the billions that are pushing a premature revival of college sports. Sports is a leitmotif of American society and culture; its absence is felt deeply in the social fabric.

While sports, and success in sports don't quite have the same grand social resonance here, the market is increasingly playing a role in the structure and organization of sports. Why is there really this urgency to restart sports competitions? Should we not be more concerned about ensuring that our youth may gain the benefits of sports without necessarily becoming brightly wrapped

commodities vulnerable to the pandemic? Should our priority not be the opening of school and public playgrounds with sufficient regulations on social distancing and sanitizing, etc. rather than setting up risky competitions? In fact, sports experts have pointed out that restarting school sports will be far more challenging than starting professional competitions because compliance of regulations among school kids is will be incredibly difficult to achieve. All this isn't to challenge the notion that sports is a competitive enterprise; but to nudge public opinion towards a broader and better grounded attitude to school sports.

Indeed a serious issue today is the rapid disappearance of school sportsgrounds even though they are a mandated feature of all schools. In the aftermath of COVID, with schools under pressure to provide more space for classes that can accommodate social distancing and other norms, playgrounds, such as they are, are likely to be incorporated into built space. With all this, school sports is on the verge of becoming a token component of the school curricula, pursued for numerous reasons that have little to do with sports as an activity for itself.

The new National Education Policy just announced quite underlines this fact. Sports is mentioned several times over in the document...in the same sentence as art and culture and numerous other etcetera elements that have to be normatively included in any document on education. The three significant mentions are: one, as a pedagogic platform under the section on innovating new methods of teaching. Second, is in the section on why education means more than the three Rs and that it ought to be well-rounded (that is, include sports, culture, art and so on) and third, when the document asserts that institutes focusing on sports, arts, etc will be established. Nowhere in the document is a sense that sports is as important component as math or literature, nor for that matter, any sense that the beginnings of a sport consciousness and the emergence of a sporting nation are to be found in the school system. In countries that have excelled in sports, it is the school system that nurtures talent and instills a love for it. In these countries sports isn't just entertainment but an integral part of the national ethos.

Unfortunately, sports, notwithstanding the enthusiasm for cricket, and sometimes football or hockey, is not a part of the Indian psyche. The culture of sport is yet to be assimilated into the social and cultural fabric of the nation. But parallelly, the increasing commercialization of sports is making it a market commodity, with players and other considerations reduced to second place over profitability. While this dizzy journey to big money through sports may be unstoppable in a market economy, we can surely at least ensure that school kids get to play safely in the current context?