



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN IMPLEMENTING COMPETENCY-BASED SPORTS EDUCATION UNDER NEP 2020: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN INDIAN SCHOOLING

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a watershed moment in the Indian pedagogical landscape, fundamentally redefining the role of physical activity within the formal schooling system. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the transition from a traditional, peripheral physical education model to a robust Competency-Based Sports Education (CBSE) framework. Central to this shift is the concept of sports-integrated pedagogy, an innovative approach that utilizes physical activity as a cross-curricular tool to enhance cognitive understanding and academic engagement.

The study identifies and analyzes critical challenges hindering this transition, most notably the "infrastructure-divide" across rural and urban institutions, the persistent socio-cultural bias favoring rote academic performance, and the significant gap in professional training required for educators to implement complex, rubric-based competency assessments. Conversely, the article highlights transformative opportunities afforded by the policy, including the formalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems through traditional Indian games, the creation of diverse vocational pathways aligned with the global sports economy, and the use of digital analytics for early talent identification and holistic health tracking.

By synthesizing policy objectives with ground-level realities, this paper argues that the success of NEP 2020's sports mandate relies on a multi-stakeholder approach—integrating technology, community resources, and inclusive "Adaptive Physical Education" for Divyangjan students. Ultimately, the article posits that a well-implemented competency-based model will not only improve national fitness indices but will also cultivate essential 21st-century life skills, such as resilience, teamwork, and ethical leadership, thereby fulfilling the policy's vision of creating holistic and well-rounded global citizens.

Key words: NEP 2020, Competency-Based Education, Sports-Integrated Pedagogy

Introduction

The landscape of Indian education is currently undergoing a systemic metamorphosis, driven by the ambitious directives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Historically, the Indian schooling experience has been characterized by a stark dichotomy: the "scholastic" domain of rigorous academic inquiry and the "co-curricular" domain of physical activity. For decades, Physical Education (PE) remained trapped in a "drill-and-command" silo, often marginalized during high-stakes examination seasons and viewed as a secondary pursuit rather than a core component of human development.

The NEP 2020 seeks to dismantle this long-standing hierarchy. By advocating for the "pedagogical integration of sports," the policy shifts the focus from physical activity as an isolated event to a multifaceted tool for holistic learning. This transformation is rooted in the concept of Physical Literacy, which suggests that the development of physical competence is inextricably linked to cognitive growth and emotional well-being (Whitehead, 2019). Under the new framework, sports are no longer an "extra" to be added to the curriculum but are woven into the very fabric of the instructional process.

The move toward Competency-Based Sports Education (CBSE) is particularly significant. Unlike traditional models that measured success through attendance or standardized physical tests, a competency-based approach focuses on measurable, skill-oriented outcomes. It emphasizes the "what" and "how" of learning—identifying whether a student has developed the resilience to handle a loss, the strategic thinking required for a team play, or the coordination necessary for lifelong health.

However, the implementation of such a radical vision within a vast and diverse nation like India is a complex undertaking. It requires navigating a landscape of disparate resources, deep-seated cultural biases, and the urgent need for a new generation of "specialist" educators. This article explores the dualities of this transition, examining the significant systemic hurdles that must be overcome and the unprecedented opportunities to redefine the Indian playground as a primary site of 21st-century skill acquisition. By aligning school-level fitness with national initiatives like the Fit India Movement, the NEP 2020 aims to cultivate a generation that is not only academically proficient but physically robust and socially resilient.

Objectives of the Article:

1. To analyze the theoretical shift from Instructional PE to Integrated Pedagogy.
2. To identify the socio-economic and administrative barriers to policy implementation at the grassroots level.

3. To highlight the role of Indigenous Indian Games in creating a cost-effective, inclusive sports culture.
4. To propose strategies for the professional upskilling of educators to meet the demands of competency-based assessment.

The Vision of NEP 2020: Sports as Pedagogy

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a radical departure from the traditional "physical training" model, elevating sports to the status of a core pedagogical tool. This vision is predicated on the belief that the playing field is not merely a space for physical exertion but a dynamic classroom where cognitive, social, and emotional learning intersect.

1. The Concept of Sports-Integrated Learning

At the heart of the NEP's vision is Sports-Integrated Learning, a cross-curricular approach that utilizes physical activity as a medium for teaching academic concepts. This shifts the focus from "learning a sport" to "learning through sports."

Kinesthetic Mapping: By involving the body in the learning process, students develop a deeper "muscle memory" for abstract concepts. For example, the principles of angles and force in Mathematics and Physics can be demonstrated through the trajectory of a ball or the positioning of players in a game of Kho-Kho.

Multidisciplinary Connections: Sports-integrated pedagogy encourages teachers to break away from departmental silos. A single game can become a lesson in History (origin of the sport), Geography (climatic conditions for the sport), and Biology (human anatomy and heart rate).

2. From "Extracurricular" to "Curricular"

The policy explicitly mandates the removal of the rigid distinction between curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities.

Mainstreaming Physical Literacy: By categorizing sports as a curricular subject, the policy ensures it receives the same weightage in terms of credit hours, assessment, and administrative priority as Science or Language.

Holistic Development: This integration is designed to ensure that the "Holistic Progress Card" reflects a child's physical competence and sportsmanship as essential markers of their overall educational growth.

3. Development of 21st-Century Skills (Life Skills)

The vision extends beyond health to the cultivation of "soft skills" that are critical in the modern workforce. The NEP 2020 identifies sports as the primary vehicle for:

Ethical Leadership: Learning to lead a team, making split-second decisions under pressure, and adhering to the spirit of "fair play."

Collaboration and Teamwork: Understanding the importance of synergy, where the collective effort of the team outweighs individual performance.

Resilience and Mental Toughness: Developing the emotional regulation to handle both victory and defeat with equanimity—a core component of mental health.

4. Inclusion and Universal Access

The pedagogical vision is fundamentally inclusive. It seeks to bridge the gap between different strata of society by providing a level playing field.

Gender Parity: By integrating sports into the daily curriculum, the policy ensures that girls have the same mandatory access to physical education as boys, challenging long-standing social stigmas.

Adaptive Pedagogy: For students with special needs (Divyangjan), sports as pedagogy means "Adaptive Physical Education," where activities are modified to ensure every child experiences the joy of movement and the benefits of social integration.

5. Synergy with National Movements

The pedagogical vision of NEP 2020 does not exist in isolation; it is designed to work in tandem with the Fit India Movement and the Khelo India initiative. This creates a seamless "school-to-stadium" pipeline, where the school serves as the primary site for identifying grassroots talent through a structured, pedagogy-led approach to physical literacy.

Feature	Traditional (Instructional)	PE NEP 2020 (Pedagogical)
Primary Goal	Physical Fitness	Holistic Learning (Cognitive + Physical)
Methodology	Drill and Command	Inquiry and Play-based
Integration	Isolated Activity	Cross-curricular (Integrated with Math, Science, etc.)
Assessment	Attendance / Physical Tests	Competency-based / Observational Rubrics
Student Role	Passive Follower	Active Problem Solver

Challenges in Implementation

While the NEP 2020 provides a visionary framework for integrating sports into the core curriculum, the transition from policy to practice encounters deep-seated systemic and cultural barriers. These challenges are multifaceted, ranging from physical resource scarcity to the psychological inertia of the traditional education system.

1. The infrastructure-Divide and Resource Scarcity: The most tangible obstacle is the severe disparity in physical infrastructure across Indian schools.

Space Constraints: In densely populated urban centers, many private and government schools operate from "vertical" buildings or small plots with no access to open playgrounds. This physical limitation makes the implementation of sports like football, cricket, or athletics practically impossible.

Geographic Inequality: While some elite institutions possess world-class facilities, rural schools often lack basic amenities such as flat playing surfaces, drinking water, or changing rooms. As noted by Kumar and Singh (2022), the lack of "safe and inclusive" spaces prevents the effective rollout of competency-based modules.

Maintenance and Safety: Even where infrastructure exists, the lack of recurring funds for the maintenance of equipment and sports surfaces often leads to safety hazards, discouraging active participation.

2. Deep-Rooted Socio-Cultural and Academic Bias

The "academic-first" culture in India remains a significant psychological barrier.

The "Study vs. Play" Binary: There is a persistent perception among parents and even some educators that time spent on the playground is time stolen from "serious" subjects like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math).

High-Stakes Testing Pressure: As students reach secondary and senior secondary levels, the pressure of board examinations and entrance tests (like JEE/NEET) leads to the marginalization of physical education. "Poaching" of PE periods for remedial academic classes is a common, albeit detrimental, practice (Rani, 2023).

Gendered Expectations: In many conservative or rural pockets, social norms continue to limit the participation of adolescent girls in sports, viewing it as "unbecoming" or secondary to domestic responsibilities.

3. Teacher Preparedness and Pedagogical Shifts

The shift to Competency-Based Sports Education (CBSE) requires a fundamental change in the identity of the Physical Education Teacher (PET).

Instructional vs. Facilitative Roles: Traditionally, PETs have focused on "drill and command" styles of instruction. The NEP 2020 requires them to become facilitators who can integrate sports with academic concepts (e.g., teaching geometry through the layout of a kabaddi court).

Assessment Literacy: Assessing "competencies" (such as teamwork, strategy, or emotional regulation) is significantly more complex than recording the time of a 100-meter dash. Many

educators currently lack the training to use qualitative rubrics, portfolios, and 360-degree feedback mechanisms envisioned in the policy.

Digital Divide: The policy's focus on technology-driven fitness tracking assumes a level of digital literacy and access to devices that is currently not uniform across the teaching workforce.

4. Systemic and Administrative Hurdles

The administrative machinery often lacks the flexibility required for a multidisciplinary approach.

Timetable Rigidity: Integrating sports into other subjects requires collaborative planning between PE teachers and subject-matter teachers. Current school schedules are often too rigid to allow for such interdisciplinary coordination.

Standardization Challenges: Given India's diversity, creating a standardized competency framework that is equally applicable to a school in Ladakh and a school in Kerala is an immense task.

Lack of Specialized Personnel: For the "Adaptive Physical Education" mandate to succeed, schools need access to physiotherapists and special educators. Currently, there is a severe shortage of such specialized professionals within the school ecosystem.

5. Funding and Budgetary Constraints

While the policy advocates for a shift, the corresponding financial allocation for sports in many state budgets remains insufficient. Implementing competency-based models involves higher costs for specialized training, technology subscriptions for fitness tracking, and the procurement of diverse equipment for indigenous and modern sports alike.

Challenge Category	Key Issue	Impact on Student
Physical	Lack of playgrounds/equipment	Restricted access to diverse sports
Psychological	Academic-only mindset	Increased stress and sedentary behavior
Pedagogical	Gap in teacher training	Outdated "drill-based" instruction
Administrative	Timetable and assessment silos	Sports remains an "extra" activity
Social	Gender and disability stigma	Exclusion of marginalized groups

Opportunities for Transformation

The paradigm shift initiated by NEP 2020 transforms physical education from a peripheral activity into a cornerstone of national development. By moving toward a competency-based

model, the policy creates several strategic "windows of opportunity" that extend far beyond the school playground.

1. Revival and Global Branding of Indigenous Sports

NEP 2020 emphasizes the "Indian Knowledge System," providing a formal platform for traditional games such as Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Mallakhamb, and Silambam.

Cost-Effectiveness: Unlike Western sports that require expensive specialized courts or equipment, most indigenous sports are low-cost and highly adaptable to rural settings.

Cultural Identity: Integrating these games into the curriculum fosters a sense of national pride and preserves intangible cultural heritage.

Global Recognition: By standardizing these sports within the school system, India can create a pipeline for athletes to represent the country in international forums where these sports are gaining traction.

2. Multidisciplinary Vocational Pathways

One of the most significant opportunities lies in the integration of sports with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF). This allows sports to be viewed as a professional skill set rather than just a hobby.

Career Diversification: Students can now earn academic credits for vocational courses in sports journalism, sports medicine, physiotherapy, event management, and nutrition.

Economic Impact: As the Indian sports industry grows (projected to reach billions in valuation), a workforce trained from the school level provides a competitive advantage in the global sports economy.

3. Data-Driven Holistic Development

The opportunity to utilize technology for health monitoring is unprecedented under the new framework. The synergy between NEP 2020 and the Fit India Movement enables:

Digital Health Lockers: Schools can maintain digital records of a student's physical growth, Body Mass Index (BMI), and fitness milestones over 12 years.

Early Talent Identification: Analytics-driven assessment tools help identify gifted athletes at a young age (grassroots level), allowing for targeted intervention and specialized training as per the "Target Olympic Podium Scheme" (TOPS) philosophy.

4. Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Life Skills

Competency-based sports education provides a "controlled laboratory" for developing essential soft skills that are often difficult to teach in a traditional classroom setting.

Resilience and Ethics: Managing a loss on the field teaches emotional regulation and ethical conduct (fair play).

Leadership and Inclusion: Team sports require communication, strategic planning, and the inclusion of diverse teammates, directly aligning with the policy's goal of creating "global citizens."

5. Adaptive Physical Education for Inclusive Excellence

NEP 2020's focus on "Equitable and Inclusive Education" opens doors for Divyangjan (students with special needs).

Customized Competencies: Rather than a "one size fits all" fitness test, schools can implement adaptive sports modules tailored to individual physical capabilities.

Social Integration: Inclusive sports programs reduce the social stigma surrounding disability by encouraging peer-to-peer support and collaborative play between students of all abilities.

Table 1: Opportunity, Previous Status, and NEP 2020 Transformation

Opportunity Area	Previous Status	NEP 2020 Transformation
Indigenous Sports	Marginalized/Rural only	Formalized Curricular Component
Vocational Growth	Limited to Coaching/Teaching	Broad spectrum (Tech, Med, Mgmt)
Inclusion	Often excluded from PE	Adaptive PE (Mandatory Inclusion)
Technology	Absent in most schools	AI & Analytics for Fitness Tracking
Academics	Sports vs. Studies	Sports for Studies (Integration)

6. Sports-Integrated Pedagogy as a Teaching Tool

The policy treats sports as a "pedagogical shortcut" to understanding complex academic concepts.

Kinesthetic Learning: Concepts of projectile motion in Physics can be taught through basketball; angles in Mathematics through billiards or football; and coordination/biology through dance and yoga.

Increased Engagement: Using sports as a medium for learning significantly reduces "math anxiety" and academic burnout, leading to higher retention rates and better overall learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The transition toward Competency-Based Sports Education (CBSE) under the NEP 2020 framework marks the end of an era where physical activity was a mere peripheral "period" and the beginning of an era where it is a fundamental pillar of human development. This policy

shift acknowledges that the attributes required for success in the 21st-century workforce—resilience, agility, ethical leadership, and collaborative problem-solving—are often cultivated more effectively on the playing field than through traditional classroom instruction alone.

However, the journey from policy vision to ground-level reality is fraught with systemic hurdles. As discussed, the successful implementation of this model requires a departure from the "infrastructure-first" mindset to a "pedagogy-first" approach. While playgrounds and equipment are essential, the true catalyst for change will be the professional empowerment of educators. Schools must move beyond viewing physical education as a break from learning and start viewing it as a conduit for learning.

To bridge the existing gaps, a three-pronged strategy is essential:

Administrative Reform: Decoupling sports from "extracurricular" budgets and integrating it into core academic planning, supported by technology-driven fitness tracking.

Socio-Cultural Advocacy: Engaging parents and the wider community to dismantle the academic-sports binary, emphasizing the correlation between physical literacy and cognitive performance.

Inclusivity by Design: Ensuring that the "sports-for-all" mandate is not just a slogan but a reality for Divyangjan students through adaptive curriculum design.

In conclusion, NEP 2020 provides the blueprint for a "Fit India" that is not just physically robust but mentally and socially resilient. By institutionalizing indigenous games and creating diverse vocational pathways, India has the opportunity to become a global leader in holistic education. The playground is no longer an escape from the curriculum; it is the laboratory where the character of the nation's future citizens is forged. The success of this mandate will ultimately be measured not by the number of medals won, but by the number of students who exit the school system with a lifelong commitment to physical well-being and the social intelligence to lead in a complex world.

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