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Gooroodas Banerjee (1844-1918): One of the pioneer educationalist to emphasize physical education in India

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Abstract

A great deal of scholarly work has been done on the educationists of the early twentieth century. Though a major research gap in the existing studies on the history of physical education is that none explored the thoughts of the educationists of the first half of the twentieth century on physical education. Thus this paper attempts to explore the views on physical education of one of the influential educationalists of colonial India, Gooroodas Banerjee (1844-1918). The unfolding of the thoughts on physical education of Gooroodas Banerjee in particular and other prominent educationalists of the early twentieth century can explain why physical education is considered an integral part of any comprehensive scheme of education.

Keywords: History of physical education, Gooroodas Banerjee, colonialism

Introduction

British colonialism in India was embedded on the assumption that Indians were the most effeminate people of the world unsuitable for taking the responsibilities of self-government. Colonial ideologues of imperialism Lord Macaulay alleged Bengalis physical organization as feeble even to effeminacy that lives in a constant vapor bath. Courage, independence, and veracity are qualities; the Bengali constitution unfavorable for^[1]. Whereas even at the end of British colonialism in India, George Macmunn, Lieutenant General of Royal Field Artillery, still holds the colonial stereotyping of Indians as an effeminate race as he considers that Indian's neither have martial aptitude nor courage^[2]. However, as a response to the colonial stereotyping of Indians as effeminate and effete, there emerged a class of Indian nationalists; many of them were educationalists who were ardent advocates of inculcating vigor and courage in Indians through physical education and sports. Swami Vivekananda, Gooroodas Banerjee, Sri Aurobindo, Annie Besant, Rabindranath Tagore, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, to mention prominent educationalists of the early twentieth century who greatly emphasized the necessity of physical education for Indian students studying in schools and colleges.

Gooroodas Banerjee thoughts on physical education

Many questions related to educational reforms engaged the attention of Indian educationists in the early decades of the twentieth century. The subject of physical education also intrinsically got been involved with nationalist politics. Therefore, it was deemed necessary for the educationalists of the then time to offer for consideration the suggestions on different educational problems in India. In this context, Gooroodas Banerjee (1844-1918), a distinguished educationalist who was the first Indian Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, raised a voice for the introduction of physical education in schools and colleges of India. Discussing the question of physical education, Banerjee, in a book, *A Few Thoughts on Education*, published in 1904, argues that the control of education in India rested on those who, from their early training and imperfect knowledge of India, considered western methods and systems equally efficacious in India and seek to enforce them accordingly^[3].

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¹ Lord Macaulay, 1898. *Critical and Historical Essays*. George Rutledge and Sons Limited, London, p. 636.

² Sir George MacMunn, 1936. *The Martial Race of India*. Sampson Low, Marston & CO., LTD. London, p. 22.

³ Gooroo Das Banerjee, 1904. *A Few Thoughts on Education*, Thacker, Spink and Co., p. v.

Therefore, to improve India's educational system, Banerjee gave some suggestions that covered a wide range of educational problems, viz. physical, intellectual, moral, religious, literary, scientific, technical and commercial education.

As far as physical education was concerned, Gooroodas Banerjee thought that some sort of physical training was essential in all ages of schooling. Writing on the importance of physical education in infancy, he opined that physical activity "demands special attention during infancy because it is the first and the most important period of growth and development and because it is the period of utmost helplessness in resisting adverse forces" [4]. According to Banerjee, the matter chiefly required consideration under infancy were, feeding, clothing, exercise, and play, and there should be no difference between a child's exercise and his play during the first five years of his age. He further suggested that a child should be left free to choose his own modes of exercise or play in the earliest years. However, care should be taken to prevent a child from hurting himself/herself and others. It is worth mentioning that Banerjee's thought on physical education during infancy and boyhood was much shaped by the educational ideals of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), a German pedagogue who laid the foundation of the Kindergarten system of education. Banerjee himself gave a reference to Froebel while explaining that the play of children is of profound significance and quoted, "*Play is the highest phase of child development,*" from Froebel's book *Education of Men*. However, Banerjee strongly believed that physical education should be put into operation without any compulsion and asked to regulate it as per the need for infants. As he writes in *A Few Thoughts on Education*:-

Though a child's exercise or play may be regulated by inducing him to take certain forms of it, it must not be interfered with by constraining him to have his exercise or play only in certain ways; for in that case it will lose the character of play, cease to be attended with pleasure, and may prove injurious to healthy and vigorous growth...By proper direction, and without using any compulsion, we can make a child's play serve much useful purpose in training him [5].

On the nature of physical education for boyhood, Banerjee thought that as the child grows, his exercise or play may be slightly regulated to help train all his powers harmoniously. He favors exercise or plays in moderation and was quite critical towards extreme movements. In other words, he was not in favour of risky gymnastics exercises and opined that physical exercises should be done for gaining health and strength, rather than for becoming acrobats. Therefore, as an educationalist, Gooroodas Banerjee considered physical education necessary for boy's healthy physical growth that must be utilized to help their intellectual, moral, and even spiritual development [6]. He wants play to be regulated to support mental development, a technique usually practices in the kindergarten system of education. Describing the technique, he writes, "*In walking or running, a boy may be made to describe different figures; in playing with small coloured balls he may be taught the numerals and portions of the multiplication table; in playing with pieces of card, he may learn to make solids of different shapes; and so on*" [7].

For physical education of youth, under this head, Banerjee keeps students above sixteen years of age; he suggested that exercises should be regular and hard, but not strained and violent. Risky games and exercises should be avoided, and the best form of exercise for the youth, Banerjee thought, was walking at a rapid pace. However, it is essential to mention that, against the physical education conception of other early twentieth-century educationalists who demanded compulsory provision of physical education in schools and colleges of India, Banerjee acquired a critical understanding of physical education. It was not that he was against physical education, but as a mature educationist, he was aware of the grass-root realities of the Indian households. As such, he does not consider physical education prevalent in the public schools and colleges of western nations suitable to be followed in India. Banerjee warned college authorities not to lose sight of Bengali family condition. He suggested colleges avoid making exercises irksome and painful for the student. The reason for Banerjee's suggestion can best be discerned from the following piece of his writing.

It sometimes happens that a student does not take any food at college, and his house is not near enough to enable him to go home, refresh himself there, and return to college for exercise. In such a case, to insist upon his going through a course of exercise at college is often attended with positive physical discomfort which is far from being conducive to health [8].

For Banerjee, another matter worthy of consideration was that sports must not be allowed to run into excess. He feared the indications of which he already been noticed. Looking at students taking games and sports to the neglect of their studies in colleges of Calcutta, he laments arguing that at one time, the colleges that were used to have the largest share in the lists of successful candidates at the different examinations loosed their position in that respect. The decline in academic performances was attributed to the greater attraction towards the recreation grounds in the metropolis. It's difficult to understand why Banerjee attributed sports to the decline in studies in Calcutta, as evidence speaks another story. Almost all his contemporaries' educationists who demanded physical education repeatedly talked about its utter negligence in schools and colleges of India. Most importantly, educational philosophies that led all major educationists of the early twentieth century to include physical education as an integral part of the complete educational system were based on the premise that physical education and sports pedagogy explicitly lead to better performances in studies [9]. Thus, what made Banerjee comment that games and sports cost Bengalis in their studies could be understood in his belonging to a *Bhadralok* class; the class most unwilling to take any physical labour. Nevertheless, Banerjee still thought that the training of the body and the training of the mind should receive due attention in proportion to its relative importance, and both the student and his trainer should bear this in mind [10].

Ten years later, Gooroodas Banerjee, in another book, *The Educational Problems in India*, published in 1914, once again discussed the matter of physical education. Though much of his views on physical education remain the same, some new important suggestions regarding the subject also appear. He still holds that physical education should include only such

⁸ Ibid, p. 198.

⁹ See, Charles A Bacher, 1960. *Foundation of Physical Education*, The C. V. Mosby Company, St. Louis, & Ronojoy Sen, 2015. *Nation at Play A History of Sport in India*, Columbia University Press.

¹⁰ Gooroo Das Banerjee, 1904. *A Few Thoughts on Education*, Thacker, Spink and Co, pp. 198-199.

⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p. 33.

⁷ Ibid, p. 34.

education and training as may be calculated to make students healthy human beings, not athletics or acrobats, and should not be made compulsory. The element of compulsion, he opined, would deprive it of the attendant feeling of pleasure without which it will fail to be conducive to health. Further explaining the matter, Banerjee argues that violent physical exercise, though it may suit a cooler climate, is unsuitable under India's tropical climate. And when such exercises resorted to under the overpowering and unhealthy stimulus of competition for prizes, it's expected injurious to health instead of being conducive to health. Thus, by giving instances of young Indians who permanently ruined their health by taking too many athletic games and sports, Banerjee made the point that physical education should be so organized and conducted so that it must be conducive to ordinary health and better calculated to make young men enduring, hardy, and diligent in doing regular work^[11]. However, the most remarkable development in Gooroodas Banerjee's understanding of physical education was that he suggested including the teaching of the principles of hygiene and sanitation in the scheme of physical education^[12]. On the teaching of hygiene and sanitation, he writes, *"That is the only way in which education may as our government desire it should help sanitary improvement, and that is the only way to make our students physically fit for athletics"*^[13].

Conclusion

The paper has revealed that Gooroodas Banerjee was one of the early Indian educationists who proposed to extricate the physical decadence of the Indians through the provision of physical education and sports. As an educationalist, he suggested different kinds of physical activities as suited to the age of the pupils. The paper also discloses that physical education as proposed by Banerjee to different age groups should be regular and moderate, not strained and violent, and also should not be made compulsory. Thus, considering the colonial background when Indians were deprived of self-rule on the ground of their physical decadence, Gooroodas Banerjee's thoughts and suggestions on physical education proved instrumental in introducing physical education in educational institutions in modern India.

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¹¹ Ibid, p. 49.

¹² Gooroo Das Banerjee, 1914. *The Educational Problem in India*, S.K. Lahiri and Co., Calcutta, pp. 21-22 & p. 48

¹³ Ibid, p. 48.