Cultural Playgrounds: Unlocking the Wellness Potentials of Indian Heritage Games

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the well-being advantages associated with traditional Indian games. Renowned for its cultural diversity, India boasts a wealth of traditional games that have been handed down through generations. Beyond representing the cultural heritage of the nation, these games play a crucial role in fostering overall well-being of society. Employing qualitative data and adopting the "grounded theory" approach, this research delves into the varied spectrum of traditional Indian games, analysing their positive influences on (i) physical, (ii) mental, and (iii) social well-being of the players. The study findings draw upon five indigenous games deeply rooted in Indian history—Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Gilli Danda, Chhupa Chhupi, and Kite Flying. The results underscore that traditional Indian games are not merely relics of the past; rather, they embody a cultural legacy that actively enhances the lives of individuals throughout the country. The observed positive effects on physical, mental, and social well-being affirm the enduring significance of these games. In confronting the challenges of the contemporary era, integrating these traditional games into our lifestyles emerges as a comprehensive approach to well-being, presenting a harmonious fusion of tradition and modern health practices. This study holds substantial societal benefits, encompassing aspects

such as physical health, mental well-being, cultural preservation, and social unity at both micro and macro levels.

Keywords: Gilli Danda, Grounded Theory, India, Kite Flying and Traditional games.

Introduction

Games, in their diverse forms, play a pivotal role in shaping various aspects of our lives. Apart from being a mere source of entertainment, games contribute significantly to personal development, social interactions, and overall well-being. Engagement in physical games, whether team sports or individual activities, is crucial for maintaining good health. Regular physical activities help in the development of strength, endurance, and agility (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021; Dehkordi, 2017). Researchers proved that indulging in games is ideal for fostering the socio-emotional well-being of the players (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021; Aisyah, 2017). Games or even simple outdoor activities significantly contribute to cardiovascular fitness, muscle development, and overall health (Dehkordi, 2017). Games challenge the mind, promote cognitive abilities and mental acuity. Whether it's solving puzzles, playing strategic board games, or participating in mind sports like chess, the mental stimulation provided by games enhances problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and memory retention (Deterding, 2018).

Indulging in games teaches individuals to navigate both victory and defeat with equal grace. The emotional experiences associated with winning and losing contribute to the development of emotional resilience (Espoz-Lazo et al., 2020; Gelisli and Yazici, 2015). Learning to manage success and setbacks in the context of a game can translate into valuable life skills, fostering emotional intelligence (Gulia et al., 2020). Games are social activities that bring people of diverse cultures, interests, and religions together. Playing any kind of indoor, outdoor, and/or online game, fosters social bonds and enhances communication skills. Games provide a platform for individuals to connect, collaborate, and build meaningful relationships (Espoz-Lazo et al., 2020; Dehkordi, 2017; Groll et al., 2015).

Playing games also serves as a form of stress relief and relaxation. The immersive nature of gameplay provides a temporary escape from daily stressors (Alcaraz-Muñoz et al., 2020; Akesson et al., 2018; Groll et al., 2015). This break allows individuals to recharge, reducing stress

levels and promoting overall mental well-being. Games often require the development of specific skills. From hand-eye coordination to strategic thinking, individuals hone different life-saving skills through gameplay (Bazaz, et al., 2018). These skills may be utilized in other areas of life, contributing to personal and professional development. Games teach the importance of time management, particularly in scheduled sports or games with defined rules and timelines. Players learn to allocate time efficiently, make quick decisions, and prioritize tasks—a valuable skill that can be applied in academics, professional, and personal settings (Aisyuh, 2017). In addition to these benefits, traditional and cultural games are essential for preserving and passing down cultural heritage. These games often carry deep historical significance and are integral to the identity of communities (Aisyah, 2017).

Games, in their myriad forms, significantly contribute to the richness of life. From physical health to mental acuity, emotional resilience, and social bonds, the importance of games extends across various dimensions (Bessa et al., 2019). As individuals engage in games, whether for recreation or competition, they embark on a path of self-discovery and growth. Recognizing and appreciating the multifaceted role of games in life is essential for fostering holistic well-being and creating vibrant, interconnected communities (Bazaz, et al., 2018). Whether on a field, a board, or a digital screen, the importance of games in shaping our lives is undeniable—a testament to the enduring impact of play on the human experience (Bessa et al., 2019). Against this background, this research has been conducted to explore the well-being benefits of traditional games in the Indian context as traditional games are an integral part of India's cultural heritage, and hence, studying them will help in preserving and passing on cultural practices and values from one generation to another.

Literature Review

In the intricate tapestry of life, games and physical activities weave a vibrant thread that contributes significantly to our overall well-being (Akesson et al., 2018; Aisyuh, 2017). Beyond the realms of entertainment, these activities hold a pivotal place in daily routine, influencing physical health, mental resilience, and the quality of social interactions (Alcaraz-Muñoz, 2020) of humans. Engaging in regular physical activities and games is paramount for maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Bazaz, et al.,

2018). Whether it's jogging in the morning, hitting the gym, or participating in sports like tennis or basketball, these activities contribute to cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, and overall physical well-being (Asmara and Syobar, 2018). The consistent pursuit of an active lifestyle helps prevent health issues and fosters vitality (Bessa et al., 2019). Games and physical activities serve as effective outlets for stress management and mental wellness. The endorphins released during exercise act as natural mood enhancers, alleviating stress and promoting a sense of well-being (Collins et al., 2021). Whether it's the thrill of competition or the satisfaction of achieving personal fitness goals, these activities become invaluable tools for maintaining mental balance. Engaging in strategic games, puzzles, or activities that require focus and concentration contributes to cognitive stimulation (Bhangu et al., 2023; Yadav, 2022). From chess and problem-solving games to activities like hiking that demand navigational skills, these endeavors challenge the mind, enhance critical thinking, and keep cognitive faculties sharp (Bhangu et al., 2023).

Incorporating games and physical activities into routine instills a sense of discipline and time management. Whether adhering to a workout schedule or allocating time for team sports, these activities require planning and commitment. This discipline extends beyond the realm of games, positively influencing other aspects of human life. Participating in group sports and games fosters social interaction and team building. Whether it's a game of soccer with friends or a team-building activity at work, these experiences create shared memories and deepen interpersonal connections. The collaborative nature of team sports promotes effective communication and cooperation (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021).

Games and physical activities provide a platform for self-discovery and personal growth. Setting and achieving fitness goals, overcoming challenges in sports, or mastering a new activity contribute to a sense of accomplishment. These experiences foster self-confidence, resilience, and a belief in players' capacity for continual growth. The diversity of games and physical activities encourages a spirit of lifelong learning and adaptability (Alcaraz-Muñoz et al., 2020; Groll et al., 2015). Whether trying a new sport, or exploring different forms of physical exercise, these activities cultivate a mindset of curiosity and adaptability, essential qualities for navigating life's uncertainties (Espoz-Lazo et al., 2020).

From the tangible benefits of physical fitness to the intangible rewards of mental well-being and social connections, these games contribute immeasurably to holistic development. As we navigate the challenges and joys of life, the importance of games and physical activities remains undeniable—a testament to their enduring impact on our overall health, happiness, and personal growth (Gelisli and Yazici, 2015; Groll et al., 2015).

Methodology

This is an exploratory research that aims to explore the well-being benefits of Indian traditional games. Accordingly, qualitative research methods of investigation known for their suitability for exploring complex non-quantifiable phenomena (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021; Summers et al., 2020) have been used for this research with an objective to delve into the underlying reasons, motivations, and meanings associated (Yadav, 2022) with the well-being benefits of traditional Indian games. Qualitative methods are found to be more effective in capturing the context and nuances of a situation. This is particularly valuable when studying social, human, historical, political, and cultural phenomena (Bhangu et al., 2023). All those who have played any of the traditional Indian games, i.e., Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Gilli Danda, Chhupa Chhupi, and Kite Flying in Delhi NCR, constituted the sample population for this study out of which a sample of 144 respondents (Table 1) was chosen by using the snowball sampling technique.

Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain robust, realistic, reliable, and useful (Bhangu et al., 2023; Yadav, 2022) data for this study from the selected sample. The interview process started with an informal conversation (Swain and King, 2022) to create a connecting, positive, relaxed, comfortable, and output-oriented environment (Akesson, et al., 2018) followed by the actual data collection in March 2024. The participants illustrated their actual life occurrences, experiences, observations, beliefs, perspectives, and perceptions concerning the different benefits of playing games in general and traditional Indian games in particular. Thick description strategy as suggested by Cho and Lee (2014) has been adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected responses.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Characteristics	N = 144	%	Characteristics	N = 144	%
Age (Years)			*Game(s) Played*		
Below 10	18	12.5	Kabbadi	104	72.0
10 - 20	42	29.2	Kho-Kho	93	65.0
20 - 30	39	27.1	Gilli Danda	96	66.7
30 - 40	23	16.0	*Chhupa Chhupi*	123	85.4
Above 40	22	15.2	Kite Fling	98	68.1
Gender			*Family Structure*		
Male	92	64.0	Joint Family	69	47.9
Female	52	36.0	Nuclear Family	75	52.1

The collected responses were analysed with the help of the inductive approach, i.e., grounded theory approach (Ralph et al., 2015) to study the well-being benefits of playing Indian traditional games. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the systematic generation of theory from collected data. It was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Carrillo and Bermudez, 2016; Charmaz, 2014) in the 1960s. The central idea behind grounded theory is to derive theories directly from the data, allowing themes and patterns to emerge during the research process rather than being predefined.

Conceptualization of chosen Indian traditional games

Kabaddi – Kabaddi is a contact team sport that resonates with the heartbeats of traditional communities. Kabaddi's origin can be traced to ancient India, where it was known by various regional names. The modern form of Kabaddi gained recognition through efforts to standardize rules and establish a competitive framework. In this game, two teams, each with seven players, take turns sending a "raider" into the opponent's half, while the other team defends. The raider's task is to tag as many defenders as possible and return to his half before being tackled. The defenders, on the other hand, aim to prevent the raider's return by tackling and holding him. The game unfolds in a fast-paced, continuous cycle of raids and defence, with each team striving for dominance. In recent years, Kabaddi has transcended its cultural roots and gained recognition on the global stage. The establishment of professional

Kabaddi leagues, such as the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) in India, has played a pivotal role in popularizing the sport.

Kho-Kho – Kho-Kho, a traditional Indian sport with roots that trace back through centuries, stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of indigenous games. Known for its dynamic blend of agility, strategy, and teamwork, Kho-Kho has evolved from a cultural pastime to a competitive sport that captures the essence of Indian athleticism. The origins of Kho-Kho can be traced to ancient India, where it was played in various regional forms. Over time, efforts to standardize the rules and structure of the game led to the establishment of a more formalized version. The game involves two teams, each consisting of twelve players, with nine players on the field at a time. The objective is for one team to tag all the players of the opposing team, known as "chasers," by touching them, while the other team tries to avoid being tagged. The dynamics of the game involve swift chases, dodges, and strategic positioning, creating a fast-paced and engaging experience. While deeply rooted in Indian culture, Kho-Kho has gained international recognition. Various national and state-level competitions showcase the sport's competitiveness and draw attention to talented players.

Gilli Danda - In the vibrant tapestry of traditional Indian games, Gilli Danda stands out as a timeless pastime that transcends generations. This indigenous sport, rooted in simplicity and camaraderie, encapsulates the essence of rural life and showcases the ingenuity of traditional recreational activities. The game involves two primary elements: the "gilli," a small wooden stick, and the "danda," a larger stick used to strike the gilli. The player uses the danda to launch the gilli into the air, and while it is airborne, the player must strike the gilli to send it as far as possible. The opposing team or player then attempts to catch the gilli before it hits the ground, using only one hand. Points are scored based on the distance covered and the number of successful catches. The sound of the wooden danda striking the gilli and the cheers of encouragement create an atmosphere of joy and nostalgia.

Chhupa Chhupi - In the realm of traditional Indian games, Chhupa Chhupi, the whimsical and timeless game of hide and seek, holds a special place. As a game cherished by generations, it encapsulates the joy of childhood, fosters camaraderie, and serves as a cultural touchstone. While the exact historical origins of Chhupa Chhupi are challenging

to trace, the game has been an integral part of Indian culture for centuries. Its simplicity and universal appeal have allowed it to transcend regional boundaries, making it a ubiquitous pastime enjoyed by children in diverse communities. Chhupa Chhupi, also known as Hide and Seek, is a game played with enthusiasm and exuberance. The rules are straightforward: one player, known as the "seeker" or "denner," closes their eyes and counts while other players hide. After reaching a predetermined count, the seeker begins searching for the hidden players. The goal for the hidden players is to return to the designated "base" or "home" without being tagged by the seeker. The first player tagged becomes the seeker for the next round.

Kite Flying - Kite flying, a centuries-old tradition that has transcended cultures and continents, stands as a testament to the enduring fascination with the simple yet exhilarating act of sending a colourful creation into the sky. The origins of kite flying can be traced back over 2,000 years to ancient China, where it is believed to have begun as a form of military signalling. Over time, the practice evolved, spreading across Asia, the Middle East, and eventually reaching Europe. Each culture infused its unique characteristics into the art of kite making and flying, leading to a diverse array of shapes, designs, and traditions associated with kite festivals. Kite making is both an art and a science. Traditionally crafted from bamboo and paper, kites now feature materials such as nylon and fiberglass, enhancing durability and flight performance. The designs range from simple diamond-shaped kites to intricate, multi-layered creations in various forms, including animals, birds, and mythical creatures. The mastery lies in achieving the delicate balance between weight, shape, and wind resistance that allows a kite to soar gracefully.

Data Analysis and Findings

Grounded theory, a qualitative and reflective research methodology pioneered by Corbin and Strauss (2015) emphasizes the systematic development of theory from collected data. One of the critical steps in grounded theory research is presenting the results, where the prime focus is on the rich tapestry of emergent concepts and patterns that is woven into a coherent and meaningful narrative. As stated by Charmaz (2014), "Grounded theory technique is characterised by specific techniques including interleaved rounds of data collection and analysis, inductive coding, memoing, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling". Accordingly, the obtained responses were systematically

broken down into manageable units and assigned some codes. This process has generated a vast array of codes representing different aspects of the data. In the next step, the codes were organised into different categories based on the underlying connections and patterns among codes. Then these codes were further grouped into meaningful categories that aligned with the research objectives of this study. This process involved constant comparison and refinement, ensuring that the categories accurately reflect the data. During the entire coding process various theoretical memos were also created to serve as a guide, ensuring that the research remains closely aligned with the data and concepts, providing a roadmap for writing the results of this study grouped under three focused codes, i.e., physical, mental, and social well-being.

Physical well-being

Traditional Indian games have been an integral part of the country's cultural heritage, offering not only entertainment but also a range of physical benefits. In a world increasingly dominated by modern sports and digital entertainment, the significance of traditional Indian games in promoting physical well-being is often overlooked. Respondents have stated various physical benefits (Table 2) of playing these games.

Table 2: Physical Well-Being and Traditional Games

Category	f (%)	Quoted Examples
Enhanced motor skills and coordination	101 (70%)	*"Playing games need quick reflexes, precise movements, and planning which improved my hand-eye coordination and concentration skills"*
Cardiovascular fitness	99 (69%)	*"Games are physically demanding, you need to run continuously, tackling, and evasive manoeuvres, all these have improved my overall physical fitness"*
Muscle strength and flexibility	134 (93%)	*"Engagement in games often involve a combination of running, jumping, and physical contact, which helps in the development of muscle strength and flexibility"*
Improved balance and agility	86 (60%)	*"Playing games improved my core strength, stability, and overall body control as I need to maintain balance while executing quick and agile movements"*
Weight management, joint health and bone density	140 (97%)	*"By keeping myself engaged in physical games, I am able to maintain my weight...as advised by doctors, I play kabbadi to keep my weight under control... which impacted my joint bone health positively"*

Mental well-being

Traditional Indian games have long been celebrated not only for their cultural significance but also for the myriad mental benefits they offer.

In a world increasingly dominated by technology and fast-paced living, the mental advantages of engaging in these age-old games often go unnoticed. The respondents have clearly asserted that these age-old activities offer a holistic approach to mental well-being, promoting cognitive stimulation, emotional resilience, and social connection. In rediscovering and embracing these traditional games, individuals not only enrich their cultural experiences but also prioritize their mental health in a meaningful and enjoyable manner. Significant mental benefits (Table 3) of playing these games as enlisted by respondents are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Mental Well-Being and Traditional Games

Category	f (%)	Quoted Examples
Cognitive stimulation and strategic thinking	86 (60%)	*"Playing games means you have to follow certain rules, strategies, and tactics…for which you have to think critically …in a way it improves our problem-solving abilities"*
Enhanced concentration and focus	110 (76%)	*"You need to be very focused to play any game"* *"Me and my son are sports enthusiasts… he is doing very well in studies as well…I think games have improved his focus and concentration"*
Stress reduction and relaxation	131 (91%)	*"After playing and releasing sweat, I forget the pressures of life, feel so relaxed and stress free"*
Memory enhancement	81 (56%)	*"Improved concentration and no stress have improved my memory power…. now I remember things with precision"*
Social interaction and emotional well-being	129 (90%)	*"Best part of games is that I can meet my friends, interact with them and feel part of large gathering… it improved my communication skills"* *"I can share my joy and defeat with others"*
Cultural connection and identity	42 (29%)	*"On two occasions (Independence Day and Makar sankranti) every year our whole family enjoy the Kite-flying together…I always look forward for these two days"*
Problem-solving skills and adaptability	76 (53%)	*"To be in games we have to think quickly and adapt according to the situation"*

Social well-being

Indian traditional games, steeped in cultural heritage, offer more than just recreation—they serve as vibrant conduits for fostering social well-being. In an era characterised by digital connections and fast-paced lifestyles, the social advantages of engaging in these age-old games often go unnoticed. In the intricate weave of modern society, the social well-being benefits of playing traditional Indian games stand out as pillars of connection, unity, and cultural pride. These age-old activities, often passed down through generations, contribute significantly to the social fabric of communities. As we rediscover and embrace these

games, we not only enrich our cultural experiences but also prioritize our social health in a meaningful and enjoyable manner. Through the revival and continued appreciation of traditional Indian games, the invaluable social benefits of these activities can be preserved, ensuring vibrant and connected communities for generations to come. The respondents have identified various social benefits enumerated in Table 4 of playing these games.

Table 4: Social Well-Being and Traditional Games

Category	f (%)	Quoted Examples
Building community bonds	68 (47%)	*"Traditional games are played in groups. Which promotes a sense of bonding and belongingness"*
Team spirit	107 (74%)	*"When we play team-based games. to play and win we have to work as a team"* *"I feel a sense of unity towards my team members"*
Promoting social inclusion	82 (57%)	*"Kite-flying is a game for every age group"* *"When we play, our religion and status make no difference"* *"Anyone can play games with us"*
Celebrating cultural identity	49 (34%)	*"Kite-flying is our way to celebrate two important festivals"* *"My grandfather taught me to play kabaddi and kho-kho"* *"I learnt about my cultural rituals through various games that were played by my grandparent, parents, and now me"*
Better communication skills	99 (69%)	*"Playing means interaction and communication"* *"My speaking, convincing, and expressive ability have improved since I started playing Kho-Kho with my friends"*
Strengthening family ties	89 (62%)	*"I learnt kabbadi from my grandfather and he learnt about mobile phones from me"* *"Me and my father together play various games"*
Encouraging sportsmanship and fair play	118 (82%)	*"Whether we win or lose, we only play fair games"* *"Honesty is must in games"* *"Games teaches us to accept the outcomes graciously"*

Conclusion and Future Research

This is exploratory research that aims to explore the well-being benefits of Indian traditional games. Accordingly, qualitative research methods of investigation have been used in this research to obtain more comprehensive and authentic results based on the data collected from a sample of 144 respondents who have actually played these games and resided in Delhi NCR, India. Five traditional games were chosen for this study, i.e., Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, Gilli Danda, Chhupa Chhupi, and Kite Flying. Grounded theory was applied to obtain the results of this study which are broadly summarized under three focus groups, namely the physical, mental, and social well-being benefits of playing traditional games.

The results of this study have clearly indicated that: (i) as one navigate the complexities of modern life, the role of traditional games in promoting the well-being of players is very significant; (ii) beyond their entertainment value, these games offer a holistic approach to health, encompassing physical fitness, mental stimulation, social interaction, and emotional resilience; (iii) by rediscovering and embracing traditional games, all involved not only enrich their cultural experiences but also prioritize their well-being in a meaningful and enjoyable manner; (iv) these age-old games, passed down through generations are inherently physical, often requiring players to engage in activities that promote fitness and agility; (v) whether it's the energetic movements in games like Kho-Kho, Kabaddi or the precision and coordination demanded by Gilli Danda and Kite-flying, players experience physical exercise in a natural and enjoyable manner; (vi) the regular practice of these games contributes to cardiovascular health, muscular development, and overall physical fitness, helping combat sedentary lifestyles and promoting an active lifestyle; (vii) engaging in traditional games is a powerful way to stimulate the mind and enhance cognitive functions; (viii) the mental stimulation provided by these games contributes to improved concentration, enhanced memory, and the development of critical thinking abilities; (ix) the joy and satisfaction derived from mastering game strategies contribute positively to emotional well-being; (x) traditional games are often communal activities that bring people together, fostering social bonds and a sense of belonging; (xi) whether played in family settings, communities, or organized events, these games provide opportunities for social interaction and collaboration; (xii) the shared experiences of playing traditional games contribute to the development of strong social connections, communication skills, and a sense of camaraderie which is instrumental in combating feelings of isolation and promoting a positive sense of community; (xiii) traditional games offer a healthy outlet for stress relief and relaxation, allowing players to disconnect from the pressures of daily life and find joy in the present moment; and (xiv) traditional games often involve unwritten rules and unexpected challenges, requiring players to adapt and learn in real-time by adjusting, navigating, and facing the unpredictable moves of opponents which helps in developing problem-solving skills in them.

Through the revival and continued appreciation of traditional Indian games, the timeless wisdom embedded in these activities can contribute significantly to the holistic well-being of individuals and communities

alike. The results of this study can further be examined in different settings with a bigger and more randomly selected sample by making use of quantitative research methods.

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