

Physical Education in Educational System of the Ancient Iran

Mitra Rouhi

Payambar-e Azam High Education Complex, Nasibe college, Tehran- Iran
mitrarouhi@gmail.com

Abstract: Despite that all cultural and civilization progress, Iranians in the ancient era has been benefitting an exact and coherent educational system. Certainly, Iran has been the most important country that has the priority in physical education and sports in its education system in the ancient era and among the east countries. According to manuscript wrote by historians and achieved works from the ancient Iran, sports like horse and chariot riding, shooting, fencing, wrestling, javelin throwing, gymnastics, boxing especially bat & hockey have more than 3000 years of history in Iran. Ancient sport of Iran, Gym has precedence more than 3000 years. The gym sport is one of the oldest sports of world that were acceded to other countries with the Iranian's name, sign, formalities, customs, language and characters. There were more advanced educational systems and especially, physical training systems in Achaemenid era (330 B.C. – 55 B.C.) that caused Iranian achievement to growth and development stages. In this era, there was a great interest to war, hunting and shooting among Iranians and kinds of sports and games were prevalent among them. The Sassanid era is considered as an era looking sports and physical activity from angle of body dexterity and spirit relaxation. With the dawn of the Muslim Faith, kinds of sports are more developed and Islam emphasized on spreading sports including equestrian, shooting, fencing, wrestling, swimming and running. In Safavid's Era, various sports like chess, wrestling, fencing, shooting, bat, track and field, acrobats and gymnastic had fully spread. Iranians did not look at sports as recreation and fun, but sports considered as kind of ethical rules and behavior, extension of moral, generosity, discretion, truthfulness and good behave virtues.

[Mitra Rouhi. **Physical Education in Educational System of the Ancient Iran.** Journal of American Science 2012;8(3):276-280]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>. 36

Keywords: Ancient Iran, Education Systems, Local Sports

Introduction

Iran has brilliant culture since years B.C. and has ancient precedence in culture & sports. Although, most of cultural & sports traces of Iran has became extinct through attacks and violations of different countries; but, worthy cultural & sports traces which were obtained at different parts of Iran so far are demonstrated the magnificence of culture & sports in the ancient Iran.

Iranian physical education systems since prehistoric times up to deterioration of Sassanid government has get major evolutions and developments most of which were related to governmental & political systems dominant in Iran. Iranian nations has followed the sports with the purpose of morale, generosity, considerate & veracity elevation and did not refrain from any endeavor toward spread of the sports and prevalence of these instructions to other nations.

Sports in the Ancient Iran

Iranian during the ancient era, despite of its advanced culture and civilization has benefitted from the accurate and consistent educational systems. Natural condition and location of Iran that has been mountains, dry and without water & grass in some areas caused the inhabitants of Iran make more efforts toward removing problems, preparing and providing daily instruments and confronting

foreigners pressure. This land has been continuously exposed to the attack of various ethnic groups and the Iranians have must been strong and ready for battle. The very interesting point in history of Iran that organized the intellectual spirit of Iranians in social life was their education method. This education get the source of good feelings in youths' spirit since their childhood period and in any works guided them to honesty & progress line. At the beginning, they tried to prepare their spiritual and physical powers and educated a safe and sound society that their members could perform easily their assigned duties against their nation & homeland in the future.

Certainly, Iran has been the most important country that has the priority in physical education and sports in its education system in the ancient era and among the east countries. Whereas the Chinese not have any attention to sports and physical education, Indians also has forbidden sports and physical education, Iranians found the importance of ability and body health as a most important tool toward providing warrior and victorious army.

Generally, education goals of the ancient Iran were divided into five items of religious, power, health, war & military, economical & political. The most ancient transcripts about sports in Iran was wrote by two Greek historians, Herodotus & Xenophon that pointed to different trainings and

sports competitions in Iran such as horsemanship, shooting and specially, ethical and educational contents of sports in the ancient Iran in their books.

The Greek famous historian, Herodotus wrote that the Iranians were learned three items such as horsemanship, shooting & truthfulness during their studies from 5 years old up to 20 years old. They engaged in learning different type of sports in addition to theoretical training for youth's education. In mythological history of the Iranian nations and therefore, in history of the ancient Iran, learning fighting tactician linked together with learning sciences & knowledge and have had precious place in education.

The Greek great historian, Xenophon wrote that the Iranian youth started they daily practices before sun ascent through running, stone & javelin throwing and some of their ordinary practices were living with finite diet, tolerating tiresome hotness, long walking, passing the river without wetting of weapon, sleeping in an open and fresh area, tolerating thirst and other difficulties. Riding and hunting were two common and ordinary activities which learned by the youth. Jumping on and jumping down the horse while running and generally, agility and dexterity were important goals of Iranian youth education.

The Iranian have had deliberated strength toward capturing beyond the Oxus road up to the Greek and putting different tribes in its territory. The Iranians were established masterpieces like Persepolis and applied their artistic intelligence and strong arms in creating this palace, therefore, such tribe(s) were not free of intellectual skill and combat. In historical books of Greek historians like Xenophon, Herodotus, Ktzyas and narrative sources of Iranians were expressed evidences of physical education methods. Trainings were performed in open fields but inside cities and in all specific age groups.

According to historian books and traces were achieved by Iranian sports in the ancient era, it was proved that horse and chariot riding, shooting, fencing, wrestling, javelin throwing, gymnastics, boxing especially bat & hockey have more than 3000 years of history in Iran. The great historian of world's sports history, Professor Diem (the late), founder and chancellor of Sports University of Germany, in his different historical books such as History of World's Sports – Games with Horses in Asia, commemorated Iranians as a nation trained horses for competitions like horse and chariot riding and bat which were previously played on the ground (hockey). He explicitly stated that in History of World's Sports book that the Iranians are the first nations founded the Bat as the oldest group (team) game and it was a sample for creating other games after transferring to Europe. He wrote at his book that; whereas, Bat in

Iran was sports of kings & Gods, therefore we can call it "King Games".

A French tourist named Tavrnyh in books of his travel to Iran at 16th Century expressed that, running race in Iran were performed for electing the best runner as messenger. He wrote about training and practicing kinds of running from adolescence ages for distance of 1 to 3 miles and from 18 years old with more speed and distance. He added that, Hockey & Bat races were performed in a place named field, he also referred to desert running in Iran that was held from sun ascent to sunset.

Another French tourist of the 16th century named Jean Charles de Coulomb was wrote about running competitions for distance of 1000 meter and 2700 meter. Other tourists that were traveled Iran in 19th century also pointed to running competitions for distance of 1000 m. and 2700 m. and stated that, in one kind of horse running, horsemen tried to pull down other participant competitors during the competition and last one on the horse is considered as a winner.

Ancient sport of Iran, Gym has precedence more than 3000 years. Iranians are acquainted with this sport and its historical record, gym sports is one of the oldest sports of world that were acceded to other countries with the Iranian's name, sign, formalities, customs, language and characters. Famous poets like Firdausi & Saadi were pointed to this sport and their champions in their worthy traces. In Paris National Library in France, there is a transcript of Mr. Aliakbar Benmahdi - Kashan related to year 1875 together with 83 existing pictures that regularly & constantly wrote about Gym therein and in addition to different practices were wrote about athletes massaging with almond oil, rest within practices, master's song, playing tambourine and bell. This author had has special indication to performing wrestling and boxing competitions at the end of Gym. Another trace about Gym maintains at the Britain Museum that is a couplet poems related to year 1734. The author of this trace is Mr. Mirabdolali Nejatkashan that he is also indicated to massaging with almond & jasmine oil, master's song, playing tambourine and bell while describing Gym sports and movements thereof.

One of the documentary and unique traces related to sports in the Ancient Iran that discovered by European & Iranian archaeologists a place named Hasanlu at Naghadah of Azarbaijan is "Gold Cup of Hasanlu". Different sport scenes were engraved on this gold cup and according to archaeologists' theories, it might have 3500 years antiquity and it was related to 1500 years B.C. Scenes of chariot riding and especially boxing competitions that boxers wore specific glove are truly observe. This scene of

boxing race is oldest and most important trace of boxing world's history. Two competitors stand in front of each other while wearing boxing gloves observe on this cup. Another sport scene which showed in this cup is fitness and beauty of an athlete who has broad shoulder, well-trained arms, slim waist and muscular thighs. This sports scene is truly representing the reality that sports have been considered in 3500 years ago. Physical fitness observes in athlete's body conforms to medical-sports data as a well-trained body.

Chariot riding in the ancient Iran has been the most important part of Mehregan celebration (held for honoring Mehr, light angle). Greeks borrowed this competition from Iran & Romans from Greeks. Another physical education programs of the ancient Iran is Bat game that Iranian known as its founders. Children played bat on foot and youth played on horseback and love it, Firdausi explained the starting age for bat in 17 years old. Shooting, hunting and swimming are skills that contained educational programs of the Ancient Iran's youth and have extraordinary value and importance. Championship rank in the ancient Iran has had specific importance, toward achieving the said rank, a young person in addition to complete dominance on different sport fields such as horsemanship, shooting, hunting & swimming also having wrestling skills and techniques, ethical virtues, generosity, bravery, greatness and fairness has been obligatory. Champions and hero were champions of the country during peacetime and were commanders of army during wartime. The importance of championship title in the ancient Iran is to the extent that sometimes, the result of two sides is pending on victory or fail of one of the champions who were commanders of army. Ancient Iranian has suffered much and has full planning concerning achievement a sound, healthy and well-trained society.

Educational Systems of Local Sports during Different Eras

The Achaemenid Era

There were more advanced educational systems and especially, physical training systems in Achaemenid era (330 B.C. – 55 B.C.) that caused Iranian achievement to growth and development stages. Elementary education has public aspect and all children from any rank or class were learned reading, writing, calculation, gardening and farming, started their studies from 4-7 years old in schools, their education period is depending on physical & spiritual strength and social needs of the child. Students were divided into three groups:

1. Children of courtiers, polices, frontier officials and officers that have specific martial and statecraft trainings.
2. A group that have professional trainings such as children of artisans, handicraftsmen and farmers.
3. Children of teachers, employees and merchants that learned administrative and economical sciences.

Concerning education method of children, Xenophon in "Cyrus Biography" book believes that: Iranians built a specific place named "Freedom Station" for education next to king palace which have four sections: Specific for children, adolescence, full-grown men & adults.

Herodotus, the Greek historian of 5th Century B.C. about education method of Iranian children also mentioned that the Persian nations hardly tried in education of their children. Children up to 5 years old were trained by their mother and then by teachers. They learned Zoroastrian well ceremonies, riding, shooting and veracity to their children and accustomed them with running, tolerating coldness and hotness, using different weapons, horsemanship and chariot riding and their great specification were generosity & bravery.

Ktzyas, the Greek physician of the court of Achaemenid Second Artaxerxes, stated in his book that, Persian nations trained youth for hunting, early rising in cold and hot weather, patience, walking, running and shooting. Through trumpet sound, the youth get ready, wake up before sun rising, gathered at a specific place, divided into 50-member groups and each group were consigned to one of masters. In these groups, they must talking loud and firm for fortification their lung. They learned passing the river without wetting their weapons. Hunting through javelin, bow and arrow, sling and swimming were among their daily programs. Children learned shooting by bow and arrow since childhood age and continued up to 16-17 years old. Then, up to 26 years old assigned for protecting cities and then entered to mature and strong men group and participated in wars. Cyrus repeatedly gathered different tribes and acquainted them with martial tactician.

Holding sport competitions were interested affair by the public too. In most fields such as running that considered as oldest sport of Iran, races were held in the presence of king and awarded gifts by the best runner and distinguished runners were assigned for sending orders and letters. In horsemanship, specific races were held under supervision of Cyrus.

Xenophon stated in "Cyropaedia" that whenever Cyrus found a suitable place, assigned five masters for signing (1 km) and ordered horse riding to equestrians that dividend into different groups

according to their nationality. Cyrus was a skilled equestrian too and a horse was awarded to winner. Herodotus stated in his book, while passing Xerxes from Thessaly whereas he heard that Thessalian Cavalry were well-known in Greece, he was held a competition between Persian & Thessalian horses in order to examining Persian horses and therefore, Persian horses get superiority over Thessalian horses.

In Achaemenid Era, other sport fields were customary in Iran like Bat. Bat is one of the sport fields that Iranians were master in it and considered among their inventions and sometimes was known as “Bat” and sometimes as “Ball”.

The Phartians (Arsacides) Era

The Phartians (Arsacides) were in power between two splendiferous kingdoms of Achaemenid and Sassanid, actions and tasks were performed in Iran always shown most faint against the above mentioned two kingdoms and while there is no exact information thereof, research about sports in that era will be required more research and consideration. Nevertheless, Arsacides’ attention to physical education has been fewer in comparison with Achaemenids.

In this era, there was a great interest to war, hunting and shooting among Iranians and kinds of sports and games were prevalent among them. Romans praised skill and power of Iranian soldiers in shooting that has been expressed as proverb in Virgil’s poems, a poet of Ancient Rome. Remained works from Arsacides era explicitly shows the valorization of this kingdom for physical capabilities. Some reliefs show Arsacides kings on horse riding, javelin throwing & shooting.

The Sassanid Era

The Sassanid era is considered as an era looking sports and physical activity from angle of body dexterity and spirit relaxation not from angle of readiness for war and fighting. Therefore, it has specific importance in sports history of the ancient Iran. The Sassanid’s kings were interested in sports, have participated in several sports activities, and encouraged other athletes to sports. Many of them such as Hormuz I and Shapur II called as “Valiant”. In this era, physical capabilities of kings were most important role in electing them as a king and someone could attain this rank must be strong and winner in sports competitions. In the event that, Bahram V (Bahram Gur) successfully obtained the crown bravely which placed between two lions by the great in a competition for possessing the throne with Khosrow Parviz and became the King of Iran.

There are several pictures of hunting, horsemanship, shooting with bow and throwing

javelin in most of remained traces from Sassanid era. It is noteworthy that, differences between traces of Sassanid era with previous eras are existing pictures of festivity, music and dance ceremonies. Swimming was being considered in this era and Iranians learned children swimming while bathing around rivers. Wrestling was also being considered in this era and champions and winners were get Hero rank and heroes for attaining Hero rank has wrestled once per year at the presence of kings and court officials. In addition, the hero has benefitted some privileges thereof.

In Sassanid era, horse considered as one of the family members and each Iranian young person tried to learning horsemanship and became a good equestrian. Youth following the King engaged in hunting and shooting and used their family signs on competition’s horses.

In Shahnameh and other historical books repetitively pointed to Bat in the Sassanid era. Sometimes, women also successfully participated in this game. Bat has been one of the training items of the Iranian youngers for a long time. Historians pointed an Iranian old book named “Bat Instructions for Princes” that one chapter therein indicated for expressing regulations, formalities and instructions of this game and method of taking bat and riding horse.

Board up the nuts or pellets were the ancient games of Iran that spread among Arabs after Islam. Soapberry or nuts were the small pellets made of mud or stone or lead. Sometimes it also called as the Iranian warheads. Iranians throw them up like arrow with the bow and using feral animals and birds for hunting were prevalent among Iranians. Iranians learned chess that reinforced the mental faculties from Indians and using chess in the Sassanid era has been usual.

After the Islam Era

With the dawn of the Muslim Faith, kinds of sports are more developed and Islam emphasized on spreading sports including equestrian, shooting, fencing, wrestling, swimming and running. Physicians of Islamic era such as Avicenna and Abu Bakr Bokhara, student of Zakaria Razi emphasized on importance of kinds of sports in body and soul health in their works, but, whatever was important by Iranians, their differences with Greek were in their looks and views to sports. Iranians did not look at sports as recreation and fun, but sports considered as kind of ethical rules and behavior, extension of moral, generosity, discretion, truthfulness and good behave virtues and their view look likes thoughts of the modern Olympics. In addition, Iranian approaches to sports emphasized and promoted ambition, tolerance, patience, friendship, understanding, honesty, humility,

courage and self-focused and sports also has close relation with religion.

In Safavid's Era, various sports like chess, wrestling, fencing, shooting, bat, track and field, acrobats and gymnastic had fully spread. The great masterpieces of epos after Islam were found in Shahnameh and then in Garshasnameh, Borzunameh, Bahmannameh & other epos stories.

Conclusion

People all around the world are aware of the influence of Iran in development of global civilization during the ancient era and the Islamic era and they believe that this country has been one of the most important origins of improvement of civilization around the world.

Sport in Iran is an evident of this effect. There have been a lot of religious instructions and sport capabilities which are propagated from this region to other countries and nations, and nowadays everyone enjoys their old Iranian cultural criterions whether ethical or literal, while they don't have any sign of Iranian nature.

Sports have played a very important role in education of the Ancient Iran. Iranians used to train spiritual and physical powers of their children together and prepare them for serving their country and people. Youths should have started their exercises before sunrise and performed very hard exercises for increasing their physical power. Herodotus has said about Iranians "Iranians teach their children to sit upright, tell the truth and shoot right". Xenophon who has written his history in "the Great Cyrus Education", in respect of physical education always reminds of military trainings, horse riding and prey, and tells about the education of teachers and their bravery.

Iranians had never forgotten that their children should have acceptable and honorable characteristics. Shooting, prey and swimming were such important skills included in education programs of youths in the Ancient Iran. It was very prominent to reach to the championship rank in that era. In order to reach championship rank it was necessary to be skilled in different sports fields such as horse riding, shooting, prey and swimming, and to have proficiency in techniques and secrets of wrestling, good conduct, magnanimity, bravery, noble and justice. Ancient Iranians made plenty of programs and had suffered a lot in order to have a healthy and powerful society.

In the Islamic era many social institutions had been changed, and sports – still preserving its

spiritual and bravery aspect – stepped with the same Iranian quality into a new period of civilization i.e. Islamic civilization, and placed in the situation of generosity and errantry, and trained so many brave and lionhearted champions which their spiritual aspects were situated in Persian literature, their obvious sample could be seen in Gym sports and wrestling which still have a specific place among Iranians.

Acknowledgements:

The Author is grateful to Professor Safar Soleymani for his contribution in this study.

Corresponding Author:

Mitra Rouhi

Scientific member of Nasibe College, Payambar-e Azam High Education Complex Tehran, Iran

Mobile: +989121504469

E-mail : mitrarouhi@gmail.com

References

1. Gholamreza Ensafpour (1974), Gym Club History and Culture and social Groups thereof, Tehran, State Anthropology Center.
2. Hassan Bastani Rad, Amir Hosseini, Hayedeh Sirafi (2007), History of Iran's Sport (1), Tehran, Komiteye Melli Olampic (Olympic National Committee) Publication.
3. Parto Beyzaei Kasjani (1958), History of Ancient Sport, Tehran.
4. Hassan Pirnia (1994), Ancient Iran, Tehran, Donyaye Ketab (Book World) Publication.
5. Naser Takmil Homayoun (2003), Educational Systems & Associations in the Ancient Iran, Tehran, Human Sciences Cultural Studies Research Center.
6. Henry Corbin (2006), Generosity Virtues, translated by Ehsan Naraghi, Second Printing, Tehran, Sokhan Publication.
7. Xenophon (1962), Cyrus Biography, translated by Reza Mashayekhi, Tehran, Book Publication & Translation Institution .
8. Xenophon (1971), Cyrus Biography, translated by Vahid Mazandarani, Tehran, Pocket Books Publication.
9. Roman Girshman (1995) Iran from the beginning up to Islam, translated by Mohammad Moein, Tehran, Scientific & Cultural.
10. Herodotus (1989), Histories, translated by Vahid Mazandarani, Tehran, (Book World) publication.

2.25.2012