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Gender and the Making of Modern Sport in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

The present paper examines the role played by colonial sports in the lives of women in British India and its connection with the emergence of Indian nationalism, with special emphasis on colonial metropolitan regions. Historically, women have experienced discrimination in the realm of sport, yet they struggled to carve out a niche and demonstrate their capabilities. This paper traces the entry and participation of Indian women in colonial sports, focusing particularly on the colonial history of Bengal. It also examines the introduction of these sports in India, how they were absorbed by the native population, and the role of caste and racialism in shaping sports. Furthermore, this paper analyzes how sports were used to propagate nationalism and the fight against imperialism. The scope of the study extends from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Keywords: Gender, Masculinity, Akharas, Bhadrak, Soccer, Women in Sports, Nationalism

Introduction

The term 'gender' refers to the socially constructed differences between women and men, while the term 'sex' refers to the biological and physical differences between males and females. In studies of gender and sport, the concept of gender is analytically distinguished from that of sex, even though the two are often used synonymously in everyday language ^[1]. Sport occupies an important part of social life. A study of sports is crucial not only to understand the evolving sporting heritage of a nation but also to appreciate seemingly unrelated political processes such as nationalism and colonial culture ^[2].

Since the 1970s, gender has become an important category of analysis in the sociology of sport. Research has demonstrated that sports are gendered activities as well as social contexts in which boys and men are more actively encouraged to participate compared with girls and women. Evidence shows that more males than females participate in organized competitions, and sport is theorized to operate as a site for the inculcation, perpetuation, and celebration of a masculine identity based on physical dominance, aggression, and competitiveness. Associated with such masculine imagery, sports serve to legitimize a perceived natural superiority of men and reinforce the marginalization of women, who are often defined with reference to relative weakness, passivity, and grace—the characteristics conventionally associated with femininity. Therefore, sports have often been described as a 'male preserve' ^[3].

Women, Nationalism and Colonial Urban Space

Historically, women have experienced discrimination in the realm of sport. In many ancient societies, for example, women were not allowed to participate in or even watch events such as the ancient Olympic Games. In colonial India, sports increasingly became a vehicle for nationalist self-expression. Nationalism was situated in the public sphere, while women were conventionally relegated to the private domain. Traditionally, women contributed to nation-building primarily as biological reproducers of the nation ^[4]. Because sport was widely considered a masculine domain, women were often confined to the role of homemaker.

British colonial authorities initially settled in Bengal with Calcutta as their administrative centre, and until the capital was shifted to Delhi in 1911, Calcutta functioned as the nerve centre of British administration. Most colonial urban amenities, including playgrounds, gymnasiums, and facilities for Western sports, were established in Calcutta. These amenities

contributed to the rise of a new urban middle class that increasingly spent leisure time engaging in sports. The Calcutta urban landscape created public spaces that facilitated intermingling among different communities. The first Indian communities to adopt Western dress and colonial games and to mingle with the European authorities were the Parsis and the Jews. These communities encouraged their women to participate in recreational sport. Anglicized women from privileged social backgrounds emulated the lifestyle of British women, playing tennis, hockey, basketball, and similar games in various colonial clubs [5].

The Anti-colonial Movement and Physical Culture

The anti-colonial nationalist movement in Bengal gained momentum by the turn of the nineteenth century. Bengali women came to the fore in political movements, notably during the anti-partition or Swadeshi movement of 1905. Activists such as Sarala Devi emphasized the importance of health and physique for the youth as prerequisites for the success of the freedom movement. To improve women's health standards, Sarala Devi established an akhara (club) and a byayam samiti (gymnasium), which maintained linkages with revolutionary circles [6].

Prior to the 1920s, women were largely restricted from direct operations within many political organizations. However, after the 1920s the changing political and social climate created a more favourable environment for women's participation. This period witnessed the impact of increased contact with foreigners, the circulation of new ideas through journals and books, and the emergence of mahila samitis in both metropolitan and district settings. The Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms and Gandhian constructive programmes further opened opportunities, and women began to participate more actively in public life.

Physical fitness became an important prerequisite for women's participation in political and revolutionary activities, and its foundation was often laid in school and college. For example, both Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddadar—participants in the Chittagong armoury raid—played badminton together at Khastagir Girls' High School in Chittagong; they continued sporting activities as students of Bethune College. British higher education introduced Western sports into the curriculum, familiarizing Indian women with these activities. Student organizations such as Deepali Sangha at Bethune College promoted playing tennis, badminton, and hadudu regularly [7]. Apart from sports, some women also received weapon training in revolutionary circles. Thus, a physical culture developed around akharas and colleges that often fulfilled both revolutionary and fitness objectives.

The All-India Women's Congress in 1918 emphasized matters related to women's rights and emancipation, and contemporary journals also asserted the relevance of sports for women. A report in the journal *Deepali Patrika*, for instance, argued that Bengali women should concentrate more on physical exercise than on dance [8]. A complex attitude prevailed among the male intelligentsia: on the one hand, many men wished women to move beyond traditional gender expectations; on the other hand, women's claims for equal opportunity, physical empowerment, and respect were often mediated by male and institutional forces [9].

The typical Bengali bhadralok (middle class) permitted women's participation in sports chiefly not for personal

recreation but because physical culture was believed to inculcate qualities valuable for motherhood and respectability. British women who lived in India and engaged in sporting activities also served as an inspiration for Indian women. As a result of these developments, Bengali women became increasingly conscious of the importance of sports.

Football

Among various British sports played by Indian women, football (soccer) occupied a prominent position. It has often been assumed that football is inherently masculine, and the links between women and football are sometimes regarded as contemporary. However, archival evidence suggests a longer history of women's involvement in football in India. The origins of women's football in India can be traced to the late nineteenth century. In the closing years of the 1890s a series of matches were organized between men and women, with teams consisting of six members from each sex [10].

Brajaranjan Ray, a noted Bengali sports journalist, promoted the development of women's football in educational institutions and clubs in Bengal from the late 1920s. Ray took the initiative in establishing a National Youth Association in Calcutta. When one of its members, Purna Ghosh, attempted to play football, she became the subject of ridicule in some sections of society. Newspapers such as *Anandabazar Patrika* publicized these events by publishing photographs and reports. The dress code of women many still wearing sarees was a major practical obstacle to playing football, as sarees hindered free movement [11].

In 1929, Brajaranjan Ray established the Women's Sports Association in Calcutta. Under the auspices of this organization an annual football tournament for girls' colleges of the city was planned. The proposal encountered widespread opposition, with critics arguing that the association sought to promote vulgarity and that some members harboured improper intentions. When organizers approached nearby colleges, many put forward conditions for participation. For example, Bethune College agreed to field a team only if the referee and linesmen were women and if no male spectators were allowed entry to the stadium [12].

The first tournament was therefore held under strict supervision without male spectators. Reports after the competition claimed that some women footballers who played in sarees were injured, and these incidents were widely reported in the media to mobilize public opinion against women's football. Despite considerable opposition, the early women's football tournaments continued for four years and eventually contributed to the establishment of the Women's Sports Federation in 1938. By the third year of the tournament, some college women had discarded the saree and started playing in shorts a revolutionary development in colonial Bengal. However, women's football in Bengal declined in the early 1940s.

Golf

Golf was primarily viewed as a leisured pastime for women of elite families. It could be pursued without violating prevailing notions of 'true womanhood.' Most of the women who played golf were English or Anglo-Indian, as suggested by names recorded in contemporary accounts [13].

Cricket

In Calcutta, women's cricket did not achieve the same popularity it did in Bombay, Delhi, and Rawalpindi, where the game gained more ground among women. In Bengal, European and Anglo-Indian women predominated in cricket. During the period from 1935 to 1942 a Bengali sportswoman known as Ila Sen (as recorded in some sources) established herself as an accomplished athlete, proficient in athletics, basketball, and badminton. She represented India in international competitions and thereby demonstrated the potential of Bengali girls in sports ^[14].

Conclusion

Women's initial entry into the field of sports primarily took place in colonial metropolitan centres, where social changes brought about by colonial modernity enabled urban middle-class women to participate in sports and club activities. Calcutta, which remained the centre of colonial administration in India until 1911, and Bengal, which experienced nineteenth-century social reform and the early growth of national consciousness and political organizations, together created a milieu that facilitated women's early involvement in sports.

The evolution of women's sports in Bengal occurred during a period when the region was immersed in the nationalist movement. The conflict between colonizers and the colonized extended beyond the political arena into the world of sports, and sports became a symbol around which anti-colonial consciousness developed. To some extent, participation in sports emancipated Indian women from the constraints of traditionalism and contributed to healthier and more public forms of social life.

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