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## Women and sports: A new area of empowerment – An ethnographic study in an urban spot in West Bengal

**Dr. Abhijit Das, Sudipa Mondal and Jaydeep Mondal**

### Abstract

Sports are one of the ubiquitous activities of modern contemporary society. Pervasiveness of sports can be seen by the enormous amount of primary and secondary involvement in it by people of all ages, social strata sports penetrates into and plays a significant role in all of the social situations. Sports have emerged as a primary area of controversy about men's and women's roles. Traditionally, sex roles expectation has encouraged females to be passive, gentle, delicate and submissive. These cultural expectation clashed with those traits often associated with sports, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, physical endurance, regardless, and dominance. Thus female first puberty were encouraged to bypass sports unless the sport retained the femininity of the participants. Currently quite rapid changes are occurring. Unquestionably, the greatest change in contemporary sports is the dramatic increase in and general acceptance of sports participation by women. Evidence of the transformation that sport is undergoing in the urban sports in West Bengal observed analyzed and interpreted in the present study.

**Keywords:** Sports, modernization, gender role, socialization, status, professionalization

### 1. Introduction

Sports are ubiquitous in the modern era. As such, it is engaged with by exponents of different academic disciplines and professional groups. The emergence of gender studies has been one of the more contested developments within anthropology and sociology (of sports). One reason for this is the link between empirical subject matter (gender) and theoretical approach (feminism). While feminist theory is not to be confused with a focus on "women in sport" (Berrell, 2000:61), the central focus of all works informed by feminist theories in gender relations.

Sports have emerged as a primary area of controversy about men's and women's role. The researcher of sports studies argue that Women sports have changed a little, synthesizing elements of traditional, men's and women's sports Experience would be socially Beneficial Selective socialization as well as enculturation<sup>[4]</sup> of males and females via sport was accomplished through the shaping of " Masculine and Feminine" Sports experiences. The effect of the women's movement (and the theoretical issues of the feminism) has been adopted traditional sports as instrumentally, rather than masculinity. Anew conception of sports is presented in which the elements of traditional men's and women's sports are theoretically synthesized. Because of the post emphasis on the masculine instrumental elements of sports, it is hypothesized that a temporal focus on the feminine expressive elements is necessary to the occurrence of an ideational synthesis<sup>[1, 7, 9]</sup>.

Gender inequality is strongly evident in sports. The problem is more socio-psychological than anything else. Today as we stand in the new millennium it is deplorable that men and women are treated so differently, especially in sports. As is mentioned above gender inequality is one of the main issues because of which India is not being able to progress at a faster rate. A society which does not allow a girl to do something simple as primary education is unlikely to let her participate in sports without any hurdles. Even before taking part in a *kabaddi* team competition or 400 meter hurdles the girl has to pass many more social hurdles in her immediate family as well as mainstream society. Some researchers have suggested that participation in sport can be an invigorating and personally empowering experience for women. Being an athlete or player, especially skilled to be a professional one, can change the way a women sees herself.

It can make her feel physically and socially stronger more competent, and more control her life as an independent individual. Today the complete sports participation also provides girls and women with opportunities to reconnect the power of their own bodies and culture. Therefore it is important to understand that the synthesis of men & women's role in sports or that the gender equality in sports is a complex but pertinent issue to be encountered<sup>[10]</sup>.

The present research is a preliminary attempt to introduce and analyze the issue that women who want to shape and empower in socio-cultural lives as sports women under the era of modernization as well as globalization in West Bengal.

If the mid 1980s saw sociologists of sport produce their first theoretically sophisticated analysis of gender, by the early 1990s there were indicators the area was now firmly established a trans-disciplinary enterprise including anthropology.

First, a number of review articles attempted to map the scope of the 'gender and sports' area and/or examined the application of feminist approaches to sport (e.g. Birrell 1988; Hall 1988, 1993; Hargreaves, 1990; Cole 1993). Second, a number of 'gender and sports' readers and anthologies were published as teaching aids. Some like G. Cohen's *Women in Sports: Issues and Controversies* (1993) and M. Costa and S. Guthrie's *Women and Sports: Interdisciplinary Perspective* (1994), P. Creedon's *Women Media And Sports* (1994) combined feminist approaches with media studies of sports while Birrell and Cole's *Women Sports and Culture* (1994) was the most distinctly sociological in focus along with having an anthropological significance, examining ideologies of women and sports, the gendered organization of sports, the media's portrayal of female athletes, women's experiences of challenging the male preserve of sport and the politics of sexuality in sport. In 1994, J. Hargreaves published *Spotting Females*, perhaps the comprehensive monograph devoted to the lived experiences of women in sports and structural forces influencing participation (1994:2). Women Issues under the purview of gender now had a significant presence in the sociology and anthropology of Sports<sup>[11]</sup>.

Presently the study of gender is one of the most dynamic areas within anthropology and sociology of sports. However in contrast to the research of few eminent scholars, which was inspired by personal experience or sports related research by anthropologists of gender has still relatively limited relevance for the vast majority of women's participants in sports in contemporary Indian context.

Therefore while contemporary culture; sports remain particularly a powerful medium for illustrating the gendered nature of contemporary society. the present study partly look at relationship between sports and gender and ask what this relationships finally revile the significance of women's empowerment as coming of an age in West Bengal.

## 2. Aims and Objectives of the Present Study

Sport is considered as an area where traditional gender identities are constructed, reinforced, and contested (Humberstone, 2002). The present examines the basic relationship between sport and gender in an urban setting in the district of north 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Its preliminary focuses on the significance of sport in contributing to the gender (women) order that in the local relation between males and females in the area of traditionally male dominated sports. Here the present researches primarily have concerned with three things- how gender relations are evident within contemporary urban sports, how sports influence contemporary gender relations and also how sports is used as

an emerging vehicle to challenge contemporary relation in the urban context that is the sub divisional town Barasat as studied. The ultimate aim of the study is to develop guiding principles for incorporating socio economic and cultural consideration in the domain of women's empowerment in the context of sports.

The specific objectives of the present study are to:

- i) Identify the pattern of sports events as available for the women in the area under study.
- ii) Identify the factors which emphasize the difference between boys and girls in the area of sports.
- iii) Point out the negligence of women sports & women players.
- iv) Highlights the socio cultural and economic aspects of women players.
- v) Identify the supportive or non supportive nature of the society as well as their domestic spheres.
- vi) Identify the enhancement of the socio-cultural values and economic independence as development functions within local sports clubs, regional, national and international levels.

## 3. Methodology

The sample (purposely selected) for the study was drawn from the women players and athletes and coaches from the major clubs and associations namely, *Yubak Sangha, Subhash Institute, Satadal Sangha* and academy of sports and games in the sub divisional town Barasat district of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The present study was conducted on 82 women athletes and players who belonged to soccer (association football), Volleyball, Badminton, karate and Athletic events. The study is basically qualitative one. The method and techniques as used for data collection in the present ethnographic study were direct intensive interview (unstructured), questionnaire (open-ended) and case studies. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaires that were given to the samples covered a wide range of issues like sports events, participation through practice training and representation in competitions and different socio cultural along with health issues. The intensive interviews as conducted were unstructured but the context of the interview questions were used as guidelines to give direction to the interviewee.

The interviews that were conducted also followed a similar pattern. The sample that was interviewed was mostly sports women of excellent repute in competition sports of regional district and national levels. With the help of this tool in-depth exploration was possible. The in-depth interview also progressed from general to specific and personal issues and all interviews as conducted were unstructured and free following [6, 8, 12].

## 4. Major Findings of the Study

### 4.1 Women Players and Athletes in the Sports Clubs

It has already been mentioned that the present study has been conducted on the women players and athletes along with coaches engaged with different sports and athletic events as patronized by the sports clubs under study. In order to discuss and interpreted the empowerment as observed interpreted through the parameter as taken like levels of sports participation training socio economic status and role etc.

The empirical data have been collected using detailed questionnaire given and responded by 70 women players and athletes and intensive interview has also taken from those of 12 interviewee. On the other hand out of 09 coaches/trainers separate questionnaire were given to 06 and remaining 03 were interviewed.

**Table 1:** Sample Profile

SI No.	Sports Events	No. of Women Players	Percentages (%)
1	Football	24	29.27%
2	Volleyball	33	40.25%
3	Badminton	07	08.54%
4	Karate	09	10.97%
5	Athletics (Flat Run, short sprint, long sprint & jump)	09	10.97%
6	Total	82	100%

The sample was also differed on the basis of sports and athletes in general too the following table represents a comprehensive sample profile of the same.

**Table 2:** Sample Profile by Sports & Athletics

SI No.	Sports Events	No. of Women Players	Percentages (%)
1	Football	24	29.27%
2	Volleyball	33	40.25%
3	Badminton	07	08.54%
4	Karate	09	10.97%
5	Athletics (Flat Run, short sprint, long sprint & jump)	09	10.97%
6	Total	82	100%

**Table 3:** Sample Profile of Coaches

SI No.	Sports Events/Yoga	No. of Coaches
1	Football	01
2	volleyball	01
3	Badminton	03
4	Karate	01
5	Athletics	01
6	Yoga	02
	Total	09

Table 2 depicts that, women engaging in volleyball bears highest frequency (40.25%) and the events like badminton karate, athletics. The game is preferable due to its sample rule and lack of any phase body contact in the same.

**Table 4:** levels of participation in Organized Competition

SI No.	Levels	No. of Participation	Percentages (%)
1	Inter-school	10	26.31%
2	Inter-College	06	15.78%
3	Sub-Division	04	10.53%
4	District	03	8.00%
5	State	05	13.15%
6	National	07	18.42%
7	International	03	8.01%
	Total	N=38	100%

**Table 8:** Class Differences in Sports

SI No	Sports Participation	Upper	%	Upper-middle	%	Middle	%	Lower Middle	%	Lower	%	Total	%
1	Football	02	08.33	02	08.33	12	50.00	06	25.00	02	08.33	24	29.27
2	Volleyball	02	06.06	04	12.12	15	45.46	10	30.30	02	06.06	33	40.24
3	Badminton	04	57.14	02	28.58	01	14.28	0	0	0	0	07	08.45
4	Karate	01	11.11	02	22.22	04	44.44	02	22.22	0	0	09	10.97
5	Athletics	0	0	01	11.11	04	44.44	03	33.33	01	11.11	82	100.00

It is worth mentioning regarding the sample that the samples as selected were women consisted of players and coaches from individual and team events. They represent various levels of participation (regional school level and international level) and were the representative of the study conducted.

Table 4 shows the distribution of sample on the basis of the levels of representation in the competitive organized events.

**4.2. Socio-Economic Status**

Table 5 shows that the majority of the informant obtained high school education (46.34%) and remaining percentages of women players obtained undergraduate degree, postgraduate and technical education respectively. The data suggested that the educational; level of the sample under study was quite high.

**Table 5:** Level of Education of the Informants

SI No.	Levels	Frequency No.	Percentage (%)
1	Below High School	12	14.63%
2	High School	38	46.34%
3	Undergraduate	28	34.15%
4	Post Graduate	02	02.44%
5	Technical	02	02.44%
	Total	82	100%

**Table 6:** Nature of Habitation Context of the Informants

SI No.	Nature Of The Habitation Contexts	Frequency No.	Percentages (%)
1	Urban Dwellers	7	08.54%
2	Semi-Urban Dwellers	15	18.29%
3	Migrated/Rural Dwellers	60	73.17%
	Total	82	100%

The data in the table 6 indicated that an overwhelming majority of the informants (73.17%) were migrated/rural dwellers of the adjacent areas of Barasat town. And a meager (08.54%) were urban dwellers and semi urban-dwellers (18.29%). It is clear from the table 7 that 58.54% respondents were engaged in different services like, railways, medical, banking, police, teaching, day labors, and others, and the remaining 41.46% were engaged their own business such as shop jewelry cloth, milk, pottery, and other concerning trade and commerce.

**4.3. Class differences**

Table 8 shows that upper class women preferred football (50%), volleyball (45.46%) and mostly non-body contact sports like badminton (57.14%). On the contrary the middle and lower middle class preferred football (50%) volleyball (45.46%) and 06(25%), 10 (30.30%) respectively. The table further indicates some sports either body contacts or non body contacts like karate and athletics are popular with the middle and lower middle classes.

## 5. Discussion and Interpretations

At the close of the present study, one and the primary area of interest to achieve the aim and objectives are the growth and emerging professionalization and empowerment of women's sports in the area under study.

The study reveals that women spare time regularly for playing. It has been observed that some sporting events like football, volleyball, badminton and athletics are found comparatively popular among women in the areas under study as well as in the district of North 24 Parganas West Bengal. To be specific however only few sports could be designated favorite sports as shown in the tables. The sports such as cricket, kabaddi, swimming etc. are absent and to be organized by the clubs and the like were not seen popular in the area due to the lack of space, financial support, proper tainting and other aids and specialties. During interview it has been observed that most of the players like to participate and achieve in sporting events for gaining access in the sociocultural and economic milieu of the society. Very few among them took the leisure time sports to get free from monotonous daily boredom and also to keep body fit and healthy. To these informants under study, leisure time sports were regarded as a source of pleasure and personal transformation showing different amounts of expressivity and self control as well as social status by way of leisure time sports events. The trend that emerged from the contextual observation also showed that the concept of sports as relatively male dominated actively tended towards a female consumer sovereignty in opposition to the traditional communal order also.

In the concepts of the social distinction based mainly of characteristics such education, nature of habitation, occupational class and socioeconomic strata, it observed that women exercised influence in determining the preference of leisure time sports to achieve themselves socially, economically and the politically too.

On the more or less professional level, women in institutionalized (through organizations like club, sponsoring authorities). To come to the characteristics, the nature of habitation, it was found during investigation that those players who are living in the urban areas and semi-urban surrounding are engaged in volleyball, badminton, karate, etc. which are confined to urban spots along with sound economic status. These sports did not show any sign of change in tastes and styles even after ongoing global urbanization. On the other hand, the players who are found to be migrated from the rural hinterlands and the urban turn to those sports events which reflect their traditional rural look, such as football, *yoga*, kabaddi, volleyball and athletics activities. The preference of media based urban sports as organized by the clubs is gaining their popularity day by day. That is also the prime cause of participation the sports by the womenfolk of the area of North 24 Parganas in general. The clubs are the patrons and representatives of competitions along with modern equipment organizing and training for the players they recruited annually. On the professional level women have managed to earn money and to achieve socially as some celebrity –if not equal compensation with the men counterpart opportunities for women's professional terms sports, however, have been limited. Alternative structures have begun to emerge in recent years to meet the professional needs of this portion of the population. The consolidated salaries, donations, cash money as prizes etc. in women's leagues and knock out tournament at regional and national level is increasing than earlier. Through the representations the national level competition in athletics, football, kabaddi, Cricket, volleyball making comparatively

fare chance to get the job opportunities in the departments of AG Bengal, Railways, Income Tax, Customs, etc. Because athletics participation has traditionally been regarded as inconsistent with commonly accepted female stereotypes, the present study focus is upon the club based sports through investigation of the area of Barasat, the district sub divisional town in West Bengal.

Firstly it has been examined ideological and humanistic consideration which may emerge as women players attempt to resolve the potential conflicts between sports competition, and the "Feminine" role as defined by the socio cultural milieu of West Bengal; Secondly, with regarded to socialization and enculturation<sup>4</sup> in to the role of players. This ethnographic study seeks to determine how participants came to be involved in the media based, spectator as well as popular sports and how they acquired requisite skills through competition and training when mass awareness of non professional opportunities for participation are still so severely limited. In this concern football, volleyball, kabaddi, athletics may certainly be considered quite removed from the concept of "femininity" and the "feminine role". Data also depict that women, as participants, would find compatible with their personal views of sports. As a group, the member of each football, volleyball, etc. teams in the sample under study cannot be characterized as adopting an apologetic position. During investigation as well as interviews there is no indication that players are not taking the sports seriously and certainly football, volleyball are not a "more acceptable" feminine sports. The aggressive, physical nature of women football as a body contact sport was evident in such fatal injuries and certainly hindrances the feminine softness in morphological presentation of womenfolk, which players discussed during the Interviews.

In addition the impressive won-lost record cited above may have contributed to giving team members a sense of pride, accomplishment and also socio economic empowerment that counterbalance any potential denial of the importance of their endeavors.

In summery women players of the context under study who become involved with sports event appear to do as a result of self interest, parental encouragement in school during physical education classes and performances or requirement by peers. Further they become involved despite any lack of athletics skills, direct experience with the sport of relevant role models. Most of the players have been active in club based team sports and community athletic programmes are seen by the informants more impotent than school and college programmes. During investigation it has been provided and informed that after relatively brief period during players acquire basic skills and playing experience, through training and achievement competition, the players developed a strong sense of self confidence and faith in their abilities and rewarded locally.

Thus this study has sought to provide an overview of women's changing sport role through their participation in particular professional and for semi professional team sports. A specific objective has been to consider participant's attitude and self concepts, while also seeking to determine how women folk in sports become involved with socioeconomic empowerment under the purview of "women's empowerment" movements.

It is suggested that the increasing formalizing of women's sports has led to an embracing of the sports in West Bengal and which embodies such values as competition, discipline, teamwork, health aspects and so on. The implication is that women sports may continue to develop along the lines of professionalized male sports world, without the alternative

options, women sports are virtually all levels, most frequently lack findings, facilities and equipments training facilities (through women coaches) medical travel expenses, media coverage and adequate opportunities for participation. Obviously the lack of frequent women's competition in high school and colleges, results in no available talent pool for professional teams as patronized by regional, national, as well as international levels, such as exists in the male sports will continue to lag as long as talents at the lower levels in afforded no increase opportunity to develop; thus women's potential for a bright professional sports career appears dim. Therefore it may be concluded and finally suggested that support and encouragement must be given to women in the early stages of life – particularly in secondary education a preparation for college – in order to achieve entry into such careers as others. Likewise, support and encouragement in sports may be recognized as important to a potential sports career which finally give raise the popularity of the particular sports event and mass participation and awareness for a healthy movement of empowerment through sports.

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