



RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN SPORTS: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Although sports are commonly portrayed as symbols of physical ability, competition, and equality, in reality, they are deeply influenced by the prevailing structures of race, class, and gender in society. Historically, sports have never existed as a sphere separate from social realities; rather, they have sometimes reflected and at other times reproduced social inequalities. An analysis of the development of sports in India, and particularly Bengal, reveals that participation, opportunities, recognition, and representation in sports have never been distributed equally. This research paper presents a socio-historical analysis of race, class, and gender inequality in sports. It examines how colonial and contemporary sports institutions, educational systems, and state policies have enabled certain social groups to dominate sports arenas. The predominance of upper-caste and middle-class groups has historically limited the participation of lower-caste, Dalit, and indigenous communities. Similarly, class-based disparities in economic resources, leisure time, and training opportunities have unevenly shaped access to sports. Gender inequality forms a central focus of this paper. Historically, sports have been constructed as a male-dominated domain, which has exposed women athletes to social conservatism, notions of modesty, and institutional neglect. Women athletes have often been assessed more on their bodies, attire, and personal lives rather than their skills, further reinforcing gender-based inequality. The main argument of this research is that race, class, and gender inequalities in sports are not isolated problems; they are interconnected and embedded within broader social power structures. At the same time, sports have the potential to challenge these inequalities. Through inclusive policies and social awareness, sports can serve as a vital medium for social justice and equality.

Keywords: *Sports, Race Inequality, Class Inequality, Gender Inequality, Social Inequality, Sports and Society*

Introduction

In modern society, sports are not merely a form of physical activity or recreation; they are a significant social and cultural practice. For a long time, sports have been imagined as a sphere where success is determined solely by talent and skill, regardless of an individual's race, class, or gender. This 'myth of equality' presents sports as separate and impartial from other spheres of society. However, historical and sociological analysis reveals that sports never exist outside society; instead, they carry and often reproduce the existing structures of power, inequality, and social norms.

In the Indian context, race, class, and gender play a crucial role in determining life opportunities, social mobility, and identity. Sports are no exception. From the colonial period, when modern sports were introduced, sports arenas were primarily urban and dominated by upper-caste and middle-class groups. Schools, colleges, clubs, and sports organizations institutionalized sports, but marginalized communities had limited access to these spaces.

Race-based inequality has been a silent yet potent reality in the history of sports. Upper-caste dominance ensured control over sports organizations and administration, resulting in frequent exclusion of Dalit, lower-caste, and indigenous athletes from opportunities and recognition. Class-based inequality, on the other hand, shaped sports participation through disparities in economic capacity, leisure time, and access to training. For poor and working-class athletes, sports often remained an unfulfilled dream due to economic pressures.

Gender inequality in sports is even more complex and entrenched. Sports have historically been constructed as a male domain, portraying women's bodies as weak, modest, and domestic. These social and cultural notions created long-lasting barriers to women's participation in sports. Women athletes were often judged more by their attire, behavior, and personal lives than by their skills, reinforcing gender inequality in sports.

Literature Review

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), in his work *Distinction*, demonstrated that sports serve as a medium to construct and maintain differences among social classes. Participation in certain sports depends on economic and cultural capital. This concept is applicable in the Indian context, where access to sports is class-based.

Boria Majumdar (2007) analyzed sports in colonial India, showing that the British used sports as a tool of social control and cultural dominance. Club culture in Kolkata was largely open to upper-caste and educated middle-class communities, while lower-caste and marginalized athletes remained outside this framework. Various studies on sports and society have emphasized the importance of social inequality, power structures, and cultural dominance in shaping sports participation. Jay Coakley (*Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 2001) analyzed sports as a social institution reflecting societal inequalities and power relations. Similarly, Ramón Spaaij in *Sport and Social Inequalities* (2012) and *Sport and Social Exclusion in Global Society* (2014) highlighted that sports often act as arenas of exclusion rather than inclusion.

In the Indian context, Kośhik Bandyopadhyay's work on sports history and Boria Majumdar's *Cricket in Colonial India* analyze the development of sports during the colonial period, nationalism, and the dominance of elite classes. These studies demonstrate that sports were urban-centric and controlled by upper-caste and middle-class groups. Regarding women in sports, Jennifer Hargreaves (*Sporting Females*) showed that sports have historically been male-dominated, with women's participation socially regulated. In Bengal, Sharmila Rege and other scholars have examined the relationship between women, the body, and society, demonstrating how gendered control created long-standing barriers to women's sports participation. Bengali-language works such as Gautam Chattopadhyay's *Bangali Bari Ja* and Kaushik Bandyopadhyay's research on football highlight the cultural aspects of sports and Bengali identity. However, these studies comparatively underexplore the participation of women, lower-caste, and marginalized communities. Thus, previous research demonstrates that sports are not neutral arenas; they are deeply connected to power structures, inequality, and inclusion. Yet, there is still limited research on the intersection of race, class, and gender inequality in the specific context of Bengal. This paper attempts to address this gap.

1. Sports and Society – Theoretical Context

Sports are not merely physical activities; they are integral to political, economic, and cultural structures. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated that sports are closely linked to social and cultural capital and the distribution of power. Decisions regarding which social groups participate in which sports, which sports are considered 'prestigious,' and which athletes gain leadership or recognition are often controlled by powerful social groups. Thus, sports function as a social process, where every rule, institution, and training system reflects existing social inequalities. In India, race, class, and gender deeply influence access to sports, training, and recognition. From the colonial period to the present, modern sports became urban-centric and institutionalized, often remaining inaccessible to lower-caste, Dalit, indigenous, and economically disadvantaged groups. Sports, therefore, both reflect and can potentially challenge social inequalities. Understanding this dual character requires analyzing sports through the lenses of history, sociology, and culture.

2. Race-Based Inequality in Sports

Historically, race-based inequality has been a deep and powerful reality in Indian sports. During the colonial period, when modern sports became institutionalized through schools, colleges, clubs, and competitions, participation was largely restricted to upper-caste and educated middle-class communities. Lower-caste, Dalit, and marginalized athletes were often labeled as 'uncivilized' or distant from organized sports. While lower-caste athletes' physical skills were sometimes recognized, they faced barriers in leadership, administrative positions, club membership, and high-level competitions. Sports clubs and educational institutions in Bengal, such as early Kolkata clubs, often selected members based on social status and elite identity, excluding Dalit and lower-caste athletes from institutional sports. Race-based inequality also influenced social recognition, training facilities, and funding. Upper-caste athletes controlled club management, finances, and training, preventing lower-caste and indigenous athletes from accessing professional or modern sports. Schools reinforced this inequality, with sports infrastructure and coaching more accessible to upper-caste students. In Bengal, football, cricket, and hockey clubs during 1920–1940 illustrate this inequality, with upper-caste athletes leading competitions, receiving awards, and gaining recognition, while contributions from lower-caste or indigenous athletes were largely overlooked.

3. Indigenous Athletes and Marginalization

Sports were a part of daily life in indigenous communities such as the Santals, Mundas, and Oraons. Their physical labor and close relationship with nature naturally developed athletic skills. Traditional sports included stick games, running, archery, and boat races. Despite their inherent abilities, indigenous athletes' participation in modern sports remained limited due to the lack of institutional recognition, training, financial support, and administrative representation. During British rule, modern sports in clubs, schools, and colleges were primarily controlled by urban upper-caste and middle-class groups, marginalizing indigenous and lower-caste communities. This marginalization created inequalities not only in participation but also in social recognition,

leadership, training, and funding. Indigenous athletes often had the talent but limited access to organized competitions, illustrating how sports became a powerful medium for reinforcing social hierarchies.

4. Class-Based Inequality in Sports

Class significantly influences sports participation. Modern sports rely not only on talent but also on economic resources, leisure time, training facilities, and social support. Children from middle- and upper-class families often receive structured sports training and professional coaching from school or club levels, accelerating their skill development and competitive advantage. Children from poor or working-class families face limited opportunities due to livelihood responsibilities and daily labor. As a result, talented athletes may drop out due to lack of access. In rural Bengal, although many children participate spontaneously in sports, the absence of formal coaching, infrastructure, and competitions hampers skill development. Class-based inequality affects not only athletic skill but also social status, recognition, and funding. Influential urban clubs control training and finance, enabling middle- and upper-class children to compete and gain recognition, while lower-class athletes often remain excluded. Class inequality limits upward mobility in sports, reinforcing the perception of sports as a domain for select groups. However, local talent and community-based sports culture indicate that with equitable access to resources, sports can challenge class disparities.

5. Gender Inequality and Women in Sports

Gender inequality in sports is persistent and profound. Historically, sports have been constructed as a male-dominated field. Women's bodies, modesty, and social norms constrained their participation. Women athletes were evaluated more for social approval, attire, behavior, and personal life than for skill or performance. The history of women athletes in Bengal is relatively recent. Establishing and professionalizing women's sports was challenging due to barriers from family, society, and educational institutions. Schools and colleges offered limited fields, equipment, and coaching for women. Opportunities in urban and peri-urban areas were minimal. Gender inequality persists in participation, competition, and recognition. Male athletes receive better training, coaching, and funding, while women athletes' access is limited. Media coverage also favors men, restricting the growth of women athletes. Institutional underdevelopment, lack of funding, and male dominance have historically held women's sports back. However, recent years show increasing participation of women in urban schools and colleges. Overcoming gender inequality requires inclusive policies, social awareness, and infrastructure development. With sufficient opportunities, training, funding, and social support, sports can become a powerful tool for women's empowerment.

6. Intersectionality – Race, Class, and Gender Combined

Inequality in sports is rarely one-dimensional; it results from the combined effect of multiple social structures. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of "Intersectionality" illustrates that race, class, and gender operate together in sports, not only limiting participation but also affecting competition, training, social recognition, and leadership. For instance, an indigenous woman athlete faces additional barriers not only due to her gender but also her racial and economic background. Upper-caste women athletes may access urban coaching and club facilities, while lower-caste or indigenous women are often excluded from institutional competitions. Intersectionality demonstrates that analyzing a single form of inequality is insufficient to fully understand disparities in sports. In Bengal's sports history, this combined inequality is evident. Rural, poor, Dalit, or indigenous women athletes lacked institutional training, funding, and support, limiting not only participation but also social recognition and leadership opportunities. Conversely, urban middle-class women athletes were institutionally supported and socially recognized. Intersectionality thus complicates internal inequalities in sports, showing that a combined analysis of gender, class, and race is necessary. Intersectional analysis indicates that sports not only reflect participation disparities but also power relations, social status, and inclusion. Integrated policies, training facilities, and funding can help reduce these inequalities.

Conclusion

Sports are not merely recreational or physical activities; they reflect social, cultural, and political structures. The history of sports in Bengal shows that power relations, class, race, and gender-based inequalities have profoundly influenced sports. Upper-caste, middle-class, and male-centric frameworks historically controlled opportunities, training, and recognition. Colonial and modern periods clearly reveal these inequalities in clubs, colleges, schools, and competitions. Lower-caste, Dalit, indigenous, and women athletes were often excluded from institutional opportunities. Urban-rural divides and economic disparities added further complexity.

However, these inequalities can be reduced through preventive measures, social movements, policy interventions, and training programs. Ensuring inclusion in sports requires:

- Special opportunities and funding for women and marginalized communities,
- Adequate infrastructure and training in rural areas,
- Raising awareness through educational institutions and media,
- Community-based initiatives and integrated sports programs.

Recent trends in Bengal indicate increasing participation of women, indigenous, and lower-caste athletes. This demonstrates that with appropriate policies and social support, sports can serve not only as a form of physical activity but also as a powerful medium for social inclusion, empowerment, and equality. The history and present reality of sports suggest that analyzing

society's structures allows sports to be reorganized in the direction of equality. Reducing inequality and increasing inclusion in Bengal's sports are essential for social justice and the development of a strong sports culture.

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