

WOMEN AND SPORTS - GENDER POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY KERALA

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Abstract. This essay aims to analyze the relationship between patriarchy and sports in contemporary Kerala, southern state of India. By looking at the institutional and other realms of sports in the state, the paper explains how the gendered practice of sports marginalizes women in multiple ways. The experiences of female athletes and other sporting women illustrates the discrimination and exclusion prevails in this field. The theoretical discussion on female body and sports unravels the complexities of the notion of masculinity and femininity. The empirical facts generated from the documents, writings on women experiences and the narratives of female athletes, substantiated the theoretical framework postulated on gender and sports in this essay. The social context of the Kerala society that acts as the ground for gendered practices in sports is brought into the picture. The review of the historical junctures of the complex relationship between sports and gendered practices in the world wide and India is juxtaposed with the Kerala scenario. It outlined the problems of Kerala sporting women and continuing legacy of gendered practices in Kerala.

Keywords: Sports, Kerala, Women, Gender

1. Introduction

It is difficult to find out the status of women in a society because gendered practices are not always directly visible, be it in the public space or in the private space. Therefore, it is not desirable to trust the statistics reports and other kinds of government surveys that deal with the status of woman in a society. The status of woman in Kerala is high when we compare to the position of women in other states in India by seeing their high rate of literacy and the developments in the field of health. Kerala is known for its distinctive social development. High literacy rate, better health conditions, good standard of living etc are the major idioms in the discourse on social development in Kerala. Interestingly, the development discourse also highlighted the higher participation of Kerala women in Indian sports to substantiate the dominant argument. But this notion of social development and relative gender equality in the public space is questioned in recent studies. There have not been any serious studies done on the women in sports till now to understand the reality at ground level. The government statistics reports do not explore the problems of the Kerala sporting women. Since the status of the sporting women in Kerala is vaguely understood, the essay illustrates some micro as well as macro level realities of sporting women in Kerala. Concerned to Kerala, it produced a large number of outstanding woman athletes. So generally there is a notion that sporting women have equal status with sporting men in Kerala. The essay challenges this notion by looking at ground realities.

2. Contradicting Kerala Picture

The census 2011 reports show that there are 1084 females Per1000 males and the female literacy rate is 92.0%. These statistics reports show that Kerala is the only Indian state which has a sex ratio and literacy rate that is above the national level. Moreover, the life expectancy, the age of marriage for women etc are also relatively high. The role of women is significant in the Kerala model of development, which owes its attributed success to the developments in the field of health and education. The government report highlights

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that high rate of literacy and good health facilities have made the Kerala women to question the patriarchal obstacles and come out of the house and participate in public fields. A large number of women occupy high positions in the educational, judicial, medical and engineering professions both inside and outside Kerala. As a result of these social changes, the women in Kerala also started to earn and they contribute to the expense of the family in a significant way. This new role made women visible in the public space which enabled women to enter into the field of sports too. There is a strong representation of Kerala women in Indian society especially in athletics. In contrast to this ground realities shows that women are facing many problems in the field of sports due to the discriminations and exploitations still prevails against women in Kerala society. Therefore the politics of gender in sports cannot be examined without understanding the gender practices in Kerala. While the above mentioned reports highlight the achievements of women, it has undermined the reality that women are still vulnerable in different realms of social life. There are a lot of hype created by the state and the Media about the high status of the women. However, some government reports itself, like the National Crime Records Bureau (1998-2000), Reproductive and Child Health (District Level House Hold Survey-2001) etc reveals the problems of women in Kerala. The suicide rates among females are very high and domestic violence is severe in Kerala [1].

3. Women, Body and Sports

In the twentieth century, society witnessed a number of various feminist movements against the existing patriarchal social structures; sports also came under the attack of these movements. Athletic events are considered as one important factor that brought the political consciousness to the debate over women's place in sports. Sport is a social phenomenon and is socially organized. According to the gender role, the public space is allotted to male while the private space is allotted to the females in the society. This sexist ideology perverted women from the field of sports. Boselooper & Hayes point out the notions about the sporting women both in classic and contemporary periods. They argue that the Sporting women in the ancient time were called Amazon whose image is big, burly single breasted female, hostile, unattractive, a woman who has chosen to act like a man who lived in the golden age of Greece. It is believed that they had a bloody vengeance against the male sex [2]. The Russian women athletes in the contemporary period are called the Amazon who also had a similar connotation. The competitive sports make women's body masculine. Sangiovanni says that the general notion about the Sport which considered as physical exercise as well as an entertainment [3]. The physical exercises help human beings to be aggressive, strong and competitive which have been considered as the characteristics of the male body at the same time women should be silent, nurturing, tolerating and feminine so that the sport is masculine and not suitable to her.

M.K. Singh says in her book "Indian Women and Sports" that the most important factor which is based on the sexist theory preventing girl from entering sports is that her body especially in the time of menstruation is so weak and she cannot play [4]. Padma, Praksa discusses the public notion about the female body in her article "Women and Sports: Extending Limits to Physical Expressions" that the women don't need any physical exercise. Dance is the only one exercise allowed to women because it is not considered as an exercise but an entertainment for men throughout the ages [5]. According to Boutilier there are two kinds of sports which are called masculine sports and femininity games [2]. She distinguishes these games based on their nature. Masculine sports are very competitive and aggressive in the nature while the femininity games are almost less competitive and individual games. The femininity games reinforced the dominant attitudes towards women in the society.

Jennifer Hargreaves point out the main reason behind the less participation of women in sports is that the concept of the nature of the women and the false notion about the sexual orientation of the sporting women [6]. Generally people think that the sporting women are lesbians because they have already challenged the space of men in sports. Because of the label as lesbians most of the girls are not ready to participate. Social Darwinism and its key notion of the survival of the fittest became fashionable towards the end of the nineteenth century. Evolutionary theory justify that motherhood is the primary duty of a woman which was questioned by the feminists in the later periods. According to Theberge Nancy "Every where women are minority in coaching, Women coaches experience the marginalization and exclusion common to token members of a work group" [7]. Carty stated about the attitude of the media towards the sporting women that the magazines are more interested in the female body than their atheletism. When we look on the participation of women in sports history even they could not be spectators in the athletic events.

Indian society considers woman as an ideal wife and mother. There are so many stories about the ideal wives and great motherhood in the Hindu Puranas and epics. In India, the woman is treated as the second sex. There are not many records on sports and games in India historically. During the Vedic and epic periods though women were allowed to play indoor games, after marriage they were not allowed to engage in the physical exercise or any kind of outdoor games [4]. The situation continued in the medieval period, the right of women to engage in sports items debated for the first when physical education for women became part of the curriculum in 1891 [5]. But Women began to participate in sports only in 1930 [4]. Sports items like Swimming, tennis, badminton and golf and hockey provided the ground for the participation of women at a lower level though the authority did not issue any certificate or rewards to them during that period. In the Post-colonial context, the game has been considered as a means of developing National identity and idealised masculinity [8]. There are not much significant changes in the realm of women's sports for a long time. The period after 1980 witnessed the establishment of a number of sports institutions in all over India with the assistance of the central government which helped women to participate more. Though government polices helped rural women of different regions to participate in spots substantially it had several drawbacks [5].

4. Sports and gender in Kerala context

In the pre modern period, Kerala was a war society and they wanted more strong bodies as physical exercises were very important at that time and it was very difficult for the girls to enter sports [9]. During the medieval period Kerala women were not used to cover their upper part of the body which showed that Kerala society has a totally different notion about the body from the western notion about the body and nudity. "The point is that the covered female torso does not seem to have had the connotation of modesty in general sense" [10]. Though female body was not given attention by the society, their mobility was controlled which prevented their entry into sports. The change in the dress culture of the Malayalee women with modesty and the sign of morality, sports became more alien thing to women. During the colonial period the introduction of modern education brought the Victorian ideology to Kerala which influenced the physical culture. The prominent colonial sports were cricket, football, basket ball, tennis and badminton. Clubs were formed by the British officials and the western educated Kerala youth started coaching centers of these colonial sports. But, at this time the dressing style of women changed and she became more of a sexual object. Her freedom was much more curtailed and she could not enter sports because of the consciousness of the society towards female body. During this time, the concept of masculinity and femininity became very popular in the colonial society and this created a clear distance between the private work and public work. Post independent Kerala sports are a continuation of the colonial sports.

After the formation of Kerala as a state, the government of Kerala formulated many policies for the development of sports including the Kerala Sports Council. During 1980's, Kerala witnessed a large number of the gulf migrations, the flow of gulf money to Kerala introduced a commercial culture in the society. Sports also became a part of the commercial culture in this period due to the emergence of professional clubs. The same period witnessed the emergence of middle class people and middle class sports. There is a categorization of sports like the subaltern sports and middle class sports. The subaltern sports are played by the lower class of the society and the middle class sporting people are from the middle class. It is very difficult for a lower class woman to enter the middle class games like shooting because of the high expense. Kerala women have a great history of athletics for a long period. Though the Malayalee women were concentrating on athletics from the middle forties they sent a group of six members with a lady manager as a team for the first time at Jabalpur national athletics by the recommendation of G.V Raja, the father of Kerala sports.

Though, the attitude of Kerala government is better than any other states in India, they have also a discriminative attitude to the women's sports in Kerala. Sporting women are always complaining about the lack of financial support from the government which put them in crisis. They also talk about the discrimination between Kerala male sports and women sports. In order to help the men sports, government allots a large number of financial schemes; the same government doesn't provide any help of cash funds for the development of women sports. Though the Kerala Sports Council organized tournaments (educational and general) for boys, there are no tournaments organized for girls. For the example; the council is very much caring about the Kerala male football, but there are no basic facilities for the Kerala women foot ball team. The district councils are affiliated to the Kerala sports council for the development of regional sports.

But the government didn't allow funds for even keeping a library. These district councils organize summer camps for children but they are focusing on male sports than female sports. During these days, with the aim of regaining the fame of women basket ball the earlier basket ball players formed a club for girls in Calicut, but the sports council doesn't agree to give a separate identity for it by rejecting it as an independent organization. It cannot register any tournament on its name as it should register the tournaments through the boys club. It indicates that the government considers girls club only as a part of boys club. The government usually appoints male coaches while it always shuns the women coaches. Nowadays the coach can continue in his profession for a long time, unlike the earlier times. This makes him more powerful and bold enough to misbehave to his students.

The most severe problem is that Kerala women are subject to sexual harassments and mental tortures. The sporting women are sexually harassed by either male coaches or the members of team management. Kerala girls are also becoming the victims of these evil by the coaches and team management. But the girls are scared to complaint against these criminals. There are no sponsors for the Kerala women sports competition while the men sports have so many sponsors. Usually medias are negligent towards coverage of Kerala sporting women. They have never considered the victories of the sporting women as central news except few occasions. Usually their achievements appear in only one or two columns in news papers or magazines. TV channels also follow the same strategy by not coverage it. Child marriages are also common in the rural villages of the Kerala. Religious perception like the dress code for women is the other important problem that restricts women to enter into sports. This type of religious practices argues that girls should be prohibited from participation in those games which require scanty clothing [4].

5. Concluding Analysis

The status of sporting women is linked with the status of women in general. The statistical reports in Kerala claims that Kerala women hold a higher status compared to their counterparts in other states of India. Facts shows that Kerala women are subjected to domestic violence, and problems like women suicides are increasing every year. We can see the same paradox in the case of Kerala sporting women as well. Recently the media reported the sufferings of the Kerala sporting women including the enquiry about the suicides of the earlier women athletes in Kerala. The large number of participation of Kerala women in Indian sports gives us an idea that their status is higher when compared to women of other states. This we need to see as a hyper situation created by government and media about the status of Kerala sporting women. Though a large number of Kerala women participate and win laurels in sports, they are victims of gendered practices in Kerala. The essay tried to explore this ambivalent status of Kerala sporting women.

6. References

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