THE POSTCOLONIAL SPORTING BODY

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT, VOLUME 20

THE POSTCOLONIAL SPORTING BODY: CONTEMPORARY INDIAN INVESTIGATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

A postcolonial sporting body might seem to suggest a very specific phenomenon; however, in homing in upon 'postcolonial' and 'sporting body' as the parameters from within which to curate this volume, our attentions were instead drawn towards the unsaid assumptions undergirding current studies of sport. In 2016, for our review of sociological literature on sport (Mani & Krishnamurthy, 2016), we categorised existing work under three themes: modernity and nationalism; sub-nationalisms or regional nationalisms; and gender, masculinities, and culture. This organisational rubric arrived post-facto from our extensive reading of burgeoning literatures in the field. Six years later, we re-read the literature to ask as to what vantage point might both deepen our analyses as well as open out new vistas for research, and sought new and ongoing work as part of our continued engagement with the possibility of sport studies in India.

The condition of postcoloniality suggested itself as a necessary background to this volume even as discussions on the potential death and redundancy within academia of postcolonial theory have been rife since the 2000s. Others have insisted that surely such proclamations must be located within greater stakes, as much as noticed in their rise just when 'the need for historically informed critiques of imperialism could not be more urgent' (Agnani et al., 2007, p. 634). However, our insistence stemmed from a long duration of familiarity with sport studies in India, and their imbrication within clearly postcolonial contexts. In the introduction to the recently published volume, *Sports Studies in India: Expanding the Field*, editors Padma Prakash and Meena Gopal for example, review a section of the literature in sport studies focusing on social history to show how 'the story of sports in India is heavily invested with the story of the nation in the making' (2021, p. 2). They gesture also towards how sports studies must now move to more contemporary phenomena and engage with explanatory frameworks better able to situate a 'redefining of

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the concepts of nation and nationalism' (Prakash & Gopal, 2021, p. 7). Broadly in agreement with this call, we nevertheless were curious to see how we might invoke the postcolonial vis-à-vis current and ongoing research. In other words, we asked if such redefinitions in the contemporary moment allow us a different engagement with the phenomenon of the postcolony and its sporting bodies.

Pioneering studies of sport in India, many of them social histories of cricket and football (Cashman, 1980; Dimeo, 2001; Guha & Vaidyanathan, 1994) may have led to the postcolonial context becoming a necessary condition of the study of sport. Yet, our interest stemmed from locating modalities of the postcolonial condition within and around bodies that play sport. In other words, we asked if situating the intersections between sporting bodies and their postcolonial locations and contexts might illuminate something otherwise unavailable about sports studies in India. And what would such a collection of investigations produce as a roadmap for future researchers? In our understanding, therefore, 'postcolonial' functioned as both a descriptor as well as a mode of power in relation to which bodies, spaces, and texts produce, and are produced through dispositions towards sport and a multiplicity of agendas, all of them connected to the postcolonial condition.

Postcolonial studies have, and continue to bring out the complex and nuanced relationship between the former coloniser and colonised societies. Moreover, they focus on the questions and forms of power that shape the transactions between these locations that were identified as the centre and the periphery. Different modes of desire and fear (Bhabha, 1984), manifesting in mimicry and mockery across various sites, and the ambivalence therefore in the relationships that the postcolony bears to its own histories have been discussed in multiple contexts. These contradictions and continuities inform our efforts in the shared will to critique colonial as much as postcolonial claims about history, knowledge, and justice. They are also rooted in a poststructuralist understanding which locates multiple centres and peripheries in the contemporary moment. To this extent, it is necessary therefore to emphasise that our search for a postcolonial context is also in conversation with studies of globalisation and global mobility within which sporting bodies necessarily make frequent appearances (Besnier, 2015), even as the relevance of postcolonial theory for globalisation studies has been continually affirmed (Ashcroft, 2001; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Loomba, 2002). While globalisation holds the promise of erasing borders and downplaying traditional power structures (including the modern state), postcolonial studies reminds us of the malleability and resilience of these dominant structures and identifies their new avatars and legitimisations in the name of growth, progress, and development.

The postcolonial sporting body, for this volume in that sense, is loosely invoked to understand the long history of contemporary practices of play as also their renewed, recharged, and resignified animation within new conditions and contexts.

WHAT ABOUT THE BODY?

Our focus on the body stemmed from certain obvious considerations, mainly on the body as the site through which sport enacts its spectacle as much as exerts its force (Lock, 1993).

This body of the sportsperson is always implicated within matrices of gender, race, caste, and class, and such investigations take on further complexity when located within the postcolonial condition. Yet, sport has also functioned even within these tight silos as a site of contestations and subversions that allow subjects to disturb the very same formations of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1988). In other words, sport becomes a place where binary formations, disciplinary practices, and forms of typology are frequently challenged, opening up the possibility of critiquing a deeply, racialised, patriarchal, and heteronormative society. In India, two recent events, one in the realm of law and other in popular culture, may help explain some of these intersectional provocations.

Gender

In May 2023, the Supreme Court of India heard the petition for the legalisation of same-sex marriage with oppositions staged by the Union Government and a few state governments, the latter rooted in legacies of colonial law and legislation (Misra, 2009). After a 10-day hearing, while directing the concerned bodies to attend to and secure the rights of same-sex couples, the Supreme Court (W.P. (C) No. 1011/2022,2022, 2023) declared the question to be in the realm of the Parliament. While there was no direct positive outcome for the petitioners, the hope was expressed in public discourse that at the least, such an acknowledgement of rights might also lead to certain corrective actions that ease the processes, for instance, for inter-faith and inter-caste marriages. Against the background of these discussions, the popular magazine *India Today* (Singh, 2023), chose to feature the athlete Dutee Chand and her partner Monalisha Das as their cover story. This visual representation of Dutee Chand and Monalisha Das is worth examining as a statement of assertion in the wake of larger legal and social discussions on same-sex marriage as also Chand's own life circumstances.

The life of Dutee Chand, prodigious runner, and celebrated sprinter, and the first Indian to win gold at an international 100-m event, has not been easy. Growing up in rural Odisha, Chand fought economic marginality, cultural norms, and gender expectations to become a celebrated athlete. Her meteoric rise to national championship in 2012 and then two gold medals at the Asian Junior Athletics Championships in 2014, however, did not prevent her being subject to gender tests and the subsequent charge of hypoandrogenism or 'too much testosterone' a few months later. She was banned from sport by the Athletics Federation of India, subsequently contested this charge before the international Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in 2015 and won, in that the court found the regulations not yet supported by research on sex and gender classifications (Pape, 2019). In 2019, Chand spoke about being in a same-sex relationship becoming in the process one of a small set of popular public figures in the country to openly acknowledge their homosexual identity. Their representation on the cover of India Today[1] is worth examining in this regard.

A close reading of the photograph shows its focus on depicting the conventions of a (heterosexual) Hindu marriage. Monalisha wears an ornate saree with her right hand gently touching the chain on her neck. She leans back against her partner, Dutee Chand, with a contented smile. Standing behind her, looking down

at her forehead, is Dutee Chand in a black suit, marking Monalisha's hair-parting with red *kumkum*, traditionally the patriarchal marking of a married woman. An open *kumkum* box is conspicuously placed on Dutee's left hand. Against a plain olive-green frame, this homosexual couple is projected onto a public, heterosexual frame similar to the pictures in a wedding album or an 'Instagrammable' post-wedding photo-shoot. The gendered performance – one taking on the position of a husband and the other a wife – is markedly Hindu as also entrenched in specific class and caste aesthetics. The respectability and sanctity of marriage is one of the many connotations that can be read through this India Today issue cover, specifically also as resistance given its denial to same-sex couples in India by law.

Amongst many things, this image specifically argues for two things – firstly and obviously, this declares that same-sex love exists in India. Secondly and in conversation with the first notion, this same-sex love is enfolded within the margins of Hindu marriage and through the body of an Olympian and Indian, making it simultaneously respectable and native, as also global and Indian. The image places same-sex love carefully within an ostensibly Indian majoritarian ethos. The body of an athlete, who has represented the country on the global stage, becomes extremely significant in furthering an argument for same-sex marriage albeit within traditional heterosexual norms. What this sporting body does in this postcolonial moment in defining the limits (or lack thereof) of the institution of marriage offers possibilities for advancing visual, cultural, legal, and political discussions on gender, body, law, and the nation.

The sporting body, like other bodies (Mitchell, 1996; Visweswaran, 1994), has functioned as a site of colonial knowledge, and such knowledge-making practices have traditionally solidified binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality the effects of which continue to affect the current moment. Events such as gender-verification tests are latent pronouncements of racist notions that intersect with colonial productions of gender (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2019), even as they simultaneously testify to neocolonial disciplinary regimes. Yet, discussions and controversies that accompany sex-testing, gender-verification and such, often exclusively on female-identified and transgender bodies (Pape, 2019), for example, produce new possibilities of body in the realms of law, medicine, and popular culture (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013; Jha, 2023).

Race and Caste

Likewise, in terms of racialised and caste-laden bodies, colonial knowledge-making has utilised sport for the classification of phenotypes suited to certain forms of sporting performances as well as masculinity.

Race and caste, however, as opposed to the small, but robust focus on gender in sport, are much less featured in studies on sport in India even as studies on caste in India, and of late, caste and race comprise a formidable literature. (Anandhi, 2002; Baxi, 1992; Beteille, 1996; Chakravarti, 2003; Chatterjee, 1989; Dirks, 2001; Galanter, 1984; Gorringe, 2005; Wilkerson, 2020; Yengde, 2019)

A notable contribution in this regard addressing questions of caste as well as gender is Rupal Oza's research on women wrestlers in the state of Haryana

(2018), where she argues for how the disadvantageous sex ratio in the state paradoxically allows for the prominence of women in wrestling. She locates these sporting bodies within structures of caste as well as within neoliberal promises of social mobility. Interestingly, she discusses how many older women of traditional disposition speak about young women wrestlers as having the capacity to challenge patriarchal structures in their marital homes by virtue of the government jobs available to them through their participation in sport.

Suryakant Waghmore (2019) has looked at caste as the defining feature of Hindu cosmopolitanism and urbanism which even in its capacity to bring together various cultures and races continues to solidify difference through everyday practices. Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020) compares and contrasts different systems of hierarchies in India, the US and the Nazi Germany and calls race and caste, the skin and bones, respectively, of structural inequality, Race and caste, in our understanding becomes an important aspect to study on two counts; one, in relation to the globalising nature of Indian sport, and two, in relation to postcolonial legacies of racialisation which intersect with caste practices to shape the understanding of sporting bodies.

On the one hand, any discussion of race in India is either dismissed through a projection of Indian society being a monoracial society or a race-less society (Das, 2013). On the other hand, race in India is discussed through the binary axis of Aryan and Dravidian as critiqued in Sonya Thomas's brilliant book on Syrian Christians as privileged minorities (2018). Thomas argues that the assemblage of colour, religion, caste, and class complicate the notion of race in South Asia and that questions of racialisation, and the discriminations and privileges attached to them have a complex relationship with colonialism. Others have also argued as to how processes which already existed in Indian societies, have often been attributed to colonialism, even as they emanate from older histories of discrimination. For instance, the origin of highly racialised slave trades is associated largely with colonialism and it might be true in different global contexts. Nevertheless, the slave trade in Indian societies, particularly within Kerala has a longer history than colonialism (Baby Paul, 2022, p. 200). This slave trade has its root in casteist economic practices that were further solidified during colonial times. Casteist and racist notions functioned together in these slave trades, also owing to agrarian needs, where both *savarna* and *avarna* populations[2] were traded (Mbeki & van Rossum, 2017). However, the histories of *avarna* castes are particularly and disproportionately entrenched within these practices.

Additionally, the Portuguese imported African people and exported native people as part of their slave trade. Predictably, racial and casteist stereotypes underpinned these proceedings. Mbeki and van Rossum (2017) explain how Bengali women were perceived as good at needlework, Malays were seen as trusted craftsman, Indians were allotted service work, and Africans were provided agricultural jobs. Histories of slave trades, located within (post) colonial frameworks are thus complicated through an understanding that the natives in Kerala also actively participated in the slave trades as both sellers and traders. For instance, the King of Cochin had a particular interest in slave possession and trade and so did the major business communities (across faiths/castes) (Baby Paul, 2022, p. 210) within Kerala.

These nuances push back at discourses that often get caught within simple binaries of coloniser/colonised and white/black hierarchies.

In such a scenario, the continued workings of caste upon sporting bodies must also be located within older racialised practices and histories of the postcolony before and during colonial rule. Some studies do cover the concurrent as well as conflictual workings of race and caste on the sporting field. Ashis Nandy (1989), for example, speaks about the prevalence of casteist notions inherent to the popularity of cricket, and Guha (2002) writes about how cricket moved beyond caste boundaries when players like Palwankar Baloo entered the field.

Unsurprisingly, colonial legacies of race and caste continue to appear on the contemporary sporting field. The National Sport Policy of 2001, as part of an effort to find a larger audience for sport, suggests extending infrastructure to the rural regions of the country. In a related suggestion it adds that it would also be good to attempt 'tapping such potential as swimming in coastal areas and Archery in tribal areas' (Government of India, 2001, p. 2). Such notions may seem commonsensical as they do not directly implicate or racialise bodies. Nevertheless, the form of stereotype they assume, positing continuity between the landscape, the local culture, and the sporting body is organised through racial logics. One of us, in her ongoing work on institutionalised sports in postcolonial India, also encountered the narrative of how subaltern students, especially from the mountainous regions, need to be provided only the bare-minimum facilities including some food in order for them to perform in elite sporting spaces. This notion comes from an essentialised, culturalist, and racialised understanding of certain bodies, the other side of the coin to discourses which suggest that sporting talent is natural and part of the genetic fabric of certain kinds of bodies.

THE POSTCOLONIAL SPORTING BODY

Scholarship on sport has spoken about postcolonial sporting bodies in different yet connected ways (Bale & Cronin, 2003). In *Sport in the Black Atlantic: Cricket, Canada and the Caribbean Diaspora* (2017), Janelle Joseph shows how the diasporic Afro-Caribbean community in Canada, plays cricket not only for remembrance and reliving of their 'home' but also as part of building a diasporic community which brings together food, leisure, and families. In another context, capoeira in Brazil is located within the legacy of colonial migrations and as an embodied expression of enslaved African people (Mukherjee & Sen, 2017). Capoeira inspired both fear and desire in colonial authorities and the postcolonial body of current day capoeira can therefore be understood through two axes; first, the practice of using codenames for the practitioners is a continuation of a strategy used to protect the identity of the person during the penalisation of this physical activity. This indicates a body that was simultaneously performing and protecting itself, entangled in community yet alienated for its survival. Second, a capoeirista's body is always in tune with the other. In that sense, the body is not alienated but always connected in movement. Connected bodies perform offensive and defensive moves and these forms of intersubjective movements are central

to the physical, spiritual, and cultural practices of capoeira. A martial art that could be read in comparison with capoeira is kalaripayattu practiced in South India. The kalaripayattu practitioners' body was traditionally a caste-inflected body (Pati, 2010) and therefore the Kalari, or the training space, was shaped through systemic exclusions and inclusions. The British banned this martial art in the late 18th century to disarm the colonised, but practitioners kept the art alive. Ironically, kalaripayattu re-emerged in neoliberal tourist spaces in Kerala where the audience is primarily from the Global North (McDonald, 2007).

Across these examples, we see how sport, despite being at the margins of academia, makes simultaneous, connected, and intersectional appearances. Our endeavour is to use a located, globally connected postcolonial condition as the background to explicating the possibilities and constraints of the sporting body in movement.

POLICIES, LAWS, AND PLANS

In this regard, a last realm to explore would be the efforts of the postcolonial state to engage with sports as related to the development of the nation. Such an examination of processes through which laws and policies are formulated would allow for understanding how the nation-state imagines sporting practices and sporting bodies. Work that asks as to how the nation-state makes space for the sporting body and about the notions that undergird these efforts would help us also further interrogate the structures within which such bodies thrive or deplete themselves of potential and futurity.

Shannon Philip (2015) has argued as to how Indian policy processes work with a narrow view of gender even as they marginalise the question of men and masculinities. Philip, specifically focuses on gender violence, and discusses how a few of the Five-Year Plans[3] recognise patriarchal ideologies yet fail to engage with them effectively, rendering the question of gender apolitical, technocratic, and inevitably tamed within neoliberal market logics. His argument broadly bears consonance with Elson's formulation (1999), wherein the refusal to interrogate male privilege keeps policies biased and unintentionally ineffective in tackling key issues. Similarly, in sport policies, the questions of gender and importantly, the postcolonial sporting body, are conspicuously absent.

Nevertheless, India is at a historical juncture where it has begun to address, by choice or by design, questions related to (gendered) sporting bodies.

At the moment of our writing of this essay, Indian international wrestlers are in an ongoing struggle and have been protesting in order to find justice in several sexual harassment accusations against one of the top office holders of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI). The Government appointed a committee (including Olympian Mary Kom) to oversee the issue and a report was submitted at the beginning of 2023.

Following this series of events, the National Human Rights Commission[4] noted the absence or malfunction of Internal Complaints Committees not only in the context of the Wrestling Federation of India, but also in several sporting

bodies across the country. The sporting body is also under the purview of the government within the context of anti-doping programs, following the specific commitments of the National Anti-Doping Agency to the World Anti-Doping Agency and UNESCO. In September 2023, the Ministry of Education invited proposals for grants from Higher Education Institutions for education and research on anti-doping practices in the country (Government of India, 2023).

While embodied sporting figures are at the heart of these concerns, it is yet to be seen how these bodies are understood, defined, and nourished, possibly beyond and in lieu of mere disciplinary practices. India is at the juncture where various policies and guidelines are coded in collaboration with different global sporting bodies. Involvements of numerous Think Tanks such as The Sports Law and Policy Centre have kept alive the conversation on multiple aspects of Indian sports. These platforms complement the everyday discourses produced by millions of Indian sports fans on the ground. At this moment, we strongly believe that scholarly articles discussing postcolonial sporting bodies, through ethnographic and discursive methods, have a central place in the shaping of India's future policies and practices.

The essays in this volume locate sportspersons as (possible) political subjects. They engage bodily, individually as well as collectively, with postcolonial spaces, that create and respond to existing economic and cultural ethos. At the same time, this political position of the sportspersons is not oppositional to the pleasure that these sports and games provide and exude. Rather, this pleasure is at the heart of this political energy. For in postcolonial sports (not simply defined by location, but also by the process of practice), pleasure and politics are not mutually exclusive but co-creating entities. For instance, Silambam is a martial art considered indigenous to the state of Tamil Nadu that is increasingly garnering attention in southern India. In recent times, through recommendation by an officially appointed committee, the Tamil Nadu government categorised Silambam as an eligible sport within the sport quota and assigned 3% job reservation for its practitioners in Tamil Nadu's Public Sector Undertakings (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2021). Communities in postcolonial societies that possess very few forms of capital other than their embodied selves find sport to be an important site for upward mobility. Relatedly, forms of leisure (as well as public religious practices) are also an avenue for (caste) assertions (Damodaran & Gorringe, 2017; Dickens, 2015).

Silambam in the popular imagination of Tamil cinema has specific subaltern caste connotations (Damodaran & Gorringe, 2017), even as the Tamil Nadu government has increasingly projected it as part of an unmarked and universal Tamil culture. In the process, Silambam has found practitioners outside its traditional caste-specific, gendered, and rural locations and is an important form of entertainment and a spectacle to behold at various state-sponsored festivals. This also means that certain traditionally foreclosed public spaces have now been claimed by subaltern communities with or without the help of state bodies via the performance of a newly respectable and desirable sport. Therefore, postcolonial sporting bodies become palimpsests of the shifting natures of power and resistance when interpellated by, but also when interpellating governmental discourses and practices. Sporting bodies constantly redefine the limits of the postcolonial state and often create new spaces within which claims for cultural, material, and legal belonging can be made.