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## COMMENTARY

# Aspiring for inclusive sport: reflecting on intersections around exclusion

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to address the intersections of gender, caste, class, sexuality, region, and other social attributes, that constitute the social web in India influencing the possibilities and exclusions within sport. Being at the margins of this social web makes individuals vulnerable to unethical practices such as discrimination, exclusion, and erasures of their lived realities, by both systemic and everyday practices. Using the lens of social reproduction the paper attempts to capture not just the productive work that sustains a sporting milieu in society, but the labour that produces leisure, entertainment, play, rest, fitness, pleasure, well-being, and care that sustains and is further generated by families, communities and entire societies. It examines the social identities/locations of being queer and located in caste society, as specific instances but also as intersecting with other social locations that may exclude or offer opportunity within a specific sport.*

**Keywords:** *inclusive sport, queer, caste, elite athletes, ethical care*

Sport has been imagined and practised as a space for experiencing pleasure, exhilaration, liberation, embodiedness, achievement, and camaraderie, be it in competitive or recreational spaces. Apart from the fact that people seek out spaces and opportunities to play different sports, there are also systemic and targeted attempts to encourage sporting cultures for development, for peace, for engaging young people in socially relevant activities, and so on. In this, the state, and now increasingly non-governmental organisations, play a proactive role.

In addressing this issue from an ethical perspective, the questions raised are: Is sport a space for emancipation and empowerment? Is sport a space for liberation and dignity? Is the system of sport in a country such as India democratic and available to one and all? However, viewing sport in these unproblematic frames clouds the messy social web within which it is actually manifested in people's lives and how it is expressed, negotiated and governed within this socio-cultural complex. The intersections of gender, caste, class, sexuality, region, language, and other social attributes, that constitute this social web in India mediate the possibilities and exclusions within sport. At an individual level, the opportunity

to participate in sport and excel depends on the availability and conditions in which it is nurtured. Availability depends on the democratic channels and systems that create opportunities, while conditions are grounded in the situation and labour of care involved in getting access to these opportunities. Ethical sport requires that everyday conduct of the sports establishment, as well as sportspersons, is founded on non-discrimination, is devoid of racist/casteist/heterosexist and gendered exclusions, and offers protection and care to sportspersons at the margins.

A conceptual framework that centres on social reproduction would incorporate both the above dimensions. It will help us analyse the intersections of caste, class, gender, embodiment, identity, regional locations, that prevail on the social reproduction of sporting opportunities and its access, throwing light on the exclusions and injustices that come into play. The lens of social reproduction captures not just the productive work that sustains a sporting milieu in society, but the labour that produces leisure, entertainment, play, rest, fitness, pleasure, well-being, and care that sustains and is further generated by families, communities and entire societies. For instance, the care labour that goes into enabling and sustaining sporting careers through family support and nurturing of play, fitness and competition [1] or the emotional work of women that goes into building family leisure and developing healthy lifestyles for children [2] are part of social reproduction.

This reflective piece touches upon the social identities/locations of queerness<sup>1</sup> and caste, as specific instances, which also intersect with other social locations that may exclude or offer opportunity within specific sports. As sites of social reproduction, we may explore the school or local playground as spaces of nurture and opportunity, as also of exclusion. Further, the family becomes an important dimension offering encouragement, support and material sustenance. This is crucial, as the lack of familial support or even exclusions and violations perpetrated by the family can stunt or extinguish sporting lives. The state and sporting establishment can extend these circles of care, through opportunities for livelihood and employment, for participation in competitions, and support through

coaching, training and preparation. These may include mentors, allies, and other structures of support. The state has a duty of ethical care because it is often the ultimate provider of protection and well-being through its welfare and social commitment, when families and communities abandon queer individuals or violate their rights as sports persons.

Until the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment in India [3] decriminalising same sex relationships, and subsequently, the Supreme Court of India in 2018 dismissing a challenge to the 2009 judgment [4], not many people had been able to come out as queer in India. Even so, studies have revealed that sport is one among many avenues sought out by queer individuals, as it provides opportunities to be oneself and participate without being excluded, unlike other spaces. Although schools are strictly gendered environments for children who are gender non-conforming, studies have shown that formally organised sports activities were spaces they sought out themselves where gender-transgression went unnoticed [5]. And if they could also excel in competition and progress further, then the educational and sporting system seemed the most inclusive space for queer individuals. Further, it is a known fact that queer or LGBTQIA individuals face tremendous familial violence even today [6], including banishment and abandonment, with the collusion of the police, mental healthcare institutions and clinical practitioners in the violence and trauma faced in the natal family. Ironically, at the other end of the spectrum, debates and legal petitions for same sex marriage and familial rights find space in public discussions [7].

Following school, the university, state and national competitions whether in track and field athletics or cricket are the most sought after, for persons assigned gender female at birth. The school thus has the potential of being a space where, along with education, sport offers social mobility. But in India, as much as in South Asia, the skewed manner in which schooling has developed has meant that it is the marginal social groups who access the poorly endowed public education while the privileged have easy access to elite schooling [8]. Added to this disparate distribution in access is also the unequal access to sporting facilities, playgrounds, pools, or equipment and gear.

Some states like Kerala did set up sports schools and sports hostels to cater to the needs of school children and have nurtured them into promising national and international players. Soon, other states followed suit and even the Sports Authority of India (SAI) has set up several such schools across the states of India [9]. Some recent examples have also emerged of children from the state of Telangana's Social and Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society that run high schools and colleges for children from Dalit and Adivasi communities, where young girls have excelled in cricket [10]. Such spaces could offer gender non-conforming youth spaces to participate and excel in sports. Dutee Chand, an out-queer elite athlete and India's foremost sprinter in the last decade, mentions that following her exceptional

performance in local competitions she was recommended by a coach and she joined the SAI sports school in Bhubaneswar in the state of Orissa.

It is however inadequate if the systems operate at the local level, without protection and support at the elite sporting levels as well. Both Dutee Chand and Santhi Soundarajan, elite athletes of international repute, shouldered the burdens of gender identity and marginality of class and caste, and of belonging to the rural areas of India. Their examples speak volumes of the exclusions operating in the realm of governance and policy, where there is obscurity and ambivalence, resulting in gross violations of the athlete's rights. Although athletes' activism helped Dutee win her case, it is gender panic and arbitrariness that operate when authorities in sports governance and policy makers administer regulations to police women athletes' bodies. Gender panic is exhibited when individuals display gender that is at odds with expected social norms of femininity and masculinity, the binary notions of gender that keep heteronormativity in place. In 2014, Dutee Chand was subjected to Hyperandrogenism Regulations of the World Athletics (then International Amateur Athletic Federation) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) where she was singled out for gender testing. Thereafter, a Committee for Arbitration in Sport (CAS) adjudicating panel heard her case, violating her right to confidentiality and informed consent, when she was subjected to an examination by a male doctor and asked intrusive questions. Despite expert opinion on the role of multiple influences that impact an athlete's performance, the panel preferred to focus on a narrow interpretation of clinical evidence [11]. Such regulations continue to prevail, in spite of the lack of clarity within structures of governance, and contending opinions on what evidence to consider for who counts as a woman! The ethics of sex testing has been debated in the literature, especially the targeting of elite women athletes who have been subjected to harmful practices of body regulation [12,13].

A few years earlier, Santhi Soundarajan's rights as a woman athlete with naturally occurring intersex variations, were violated when she was unceremoniously stripped of her medal after she won silver in the Asian Games at Doha, in 2006. Indian officials asked her to appear for a physical examination for which no informed consent was taken. As informed consent is a pillar of global biomedical ethics models [14], it is a surprise that this was allowed to continue in sport. She was not given a reason for being forced to comply with the examination, nor consulted about the matter. It was through media reports that she came to know of her failing a "gender test". Santhi subsequently overcame deep mental distress for several years, having to return to her precarious life as a worker in a brick-kiln, besides experiencing caste-based discrimination. She was however supported by her family and her village, and later took up coaching. With some support from the Tamil Nadu State Sports Development Authority, she has managed to

secure a modest job as a coach [15]. In Santhi's case, ethical care was primarily extended by networks of family and community outside the sporting establishment.

Both Indian and international sport and medical officials and those in the governance and policy structures were uncaring about the humiliation, loss of dignity and trauma caused to the athletes both by the arbitrariness of such regulations, as also the manner in which they were conducted. Where non-maleficence is part of an oath of ethics taken by sports and medical officials, such practices seriously jeopardise the trust of athletes in the fairness in sport.

If not for the support they received from athlete rights' activists and the regional state system, that too after much struggle, Dutee and Santhi would have fallen by the wayside due to discrimination and exclusion, despite being exceptional athletes. They join numerous such women athletes from the global South, most notably Africa, who, being subject to arbitrary categorisation of gender had to end their careers and cut short their dreams. Bekker et al urge that from the local to the elite levels, there is need for building scholarship that can insist on change in governance and policy towards ethical ends. The lived experience of the struggles of both elite and regional sportspersons is evidence enough of the need to chart best practices and interventions to achieve a gender inclusive sporting system [16].

While exploring the role of caste privilege in access to opportunities and/or exclusions, the most popular sport in India, cricket, with the potential of lucrative international careers, is a fit example. In addition, it is a team sport that provides a contrast to the running examples above. While there has hardly been much scholarly writing on the role of caste in sport, popular writing skirts around the issue or ends up dismissing questions such as why there is very little or hardly any representation of players from the disadvantaged castes [17]. Those prone to caste refusal insist that it's just a coincidence that there is a preponderance of Brahmin players, or that players hardly know each other's caste, or that it had never occurred to them to even speculate on this [17,18]. However, caste is central, not peripheral, to sport and the ethical treatment of (potential) athletes.

This sort of reaction indicating the denial of caste in the public sphere, is illustrative of the way caste is conceived of, such that it evades global policy attention. While the dynamics of caste in India and South Asia has several parallels with race, it also has its specificities. David Mosse [19,20] provides a very convincing review of the caste refusal and caste denial seen in the upper echelons of policy and governance within development in India. An analysis of the capture of certain sports by privileged groups and of how changing circumstances at a systemic level can provide avenues for further inclusion is overdue. Seeing caste just as a historical residue that is more a religious and cultural matter, rather than as a key feature reflected in everyday dynamics and as a structural cause of inequality, wards off policy

scrutiny. This resonates with the middle class/upper caste refusal of caste insisting that the modern economy and meritocracy have removed caste from the public discourse, reflecting the caste-blindness of the professional policy making class [19]. Caste blindness is inherently unethical because it negates the role of caste privilege in gathering cultural resources, the abundant networks of opportunity, the availability of care and access to cultural capital within family and kin networks, and the automatic exclusion of those without that privilege within the social order in India.

There is a continuing insistence on the "merit" of players, in this case cricketers, despite preponderance of upper caste, especially Brahmin players, in the context of metropolitan-centred growth of cricket in the 1980s and '90s [17]. The metropolitan city, school, and even the locality nurturing upper caste young boys into cricket is part of the growing years of young men in Mumbai [21]. In the neo-liberal economy, in fact, caste has entrenched itself with caste-typing of jobs, caste-kin-family networks leading to opportunity-hoarding and acquisition of cultural capital [20].

The rise of cricketers from Mumbai, especially talented players such as Sachin Tendulkar offers an example of a concentration of a region, class and caste privilege. In the post-90s phase of the development of cricket, there is a coalescing of this bundle of privileges with the entry of corporate endorsement of cricket and its capture of the nationalist imagination [22]. The 1990s' liberalisation of the economy saw that commercial potential of popular cricketers from the upper castes and classes, conflated with cricket being mobilised to flag the idea of the nation. These changes in the context of development of the sport further entrench the privilege of the dominant groups.

Incidentally unlike men's cricket, women's cricket at both local and elite levels in India seem to reflect diversity of class, region, religion and caste [23]. This could be due to the already established nature of the sport as well as its dispersal within non-metropolitan spaces, a reflection of which is evident even in men's cricket in the last decade and half. Struggling to access facilities and opportunities for training and coaching, domestic matches and local leagues, to develop the sport and players' competitiveness, as well as international exposure, women's cricket possesses an outsider status. However, in recent years the very commercialisation that men's cricket has gained from has benefited women's cricket. Organisational support, too, has reduced some of the disparities [24].

We end this discussion with an audacious proposal, albeit something worth reflecting on, to address the skewed caste representation in cricket with the suggestion of caste based affirmative action for the national team. Bhawnani and Jain [25] point to an array of systemic barriers that are pervasive, yet invisible, that stand opposed to essentialist arguments such as taste or talent or merit being the reason for the underrepresentation of players from disadvantaged castes,



such as Dalits. They make convincing arguments referring to the South African example, where “transformation targets”; or racial quotas are mandated by the post-apartheid government department of Sports and Recreation. These require that on an average, the national team should include among the 11 members, six players of colour, of which two must be black. Failure to adhere to these criteria will result in disincentives coming into play.

The introduction of these targets at the local or lower levels of the sport made sure that both the grassroots as well as the elite strength of the sport were connected, and there was a flow to the top. In addition, the structures of governance and policy should be encouraged to keep parity and inclusion. Perhaps Indian sport can take a leaf from the South African book and make itself expansive and inclusive.

Drawing from the ethical lapses in the gender/sexuality and the caste/class realms, it would be pertinent to say that if inclusion and fairness are the essence of ethics in sport, then perhaps the existing categories around gender need interrogation and revision from a societal standpoint, and affirmative action for greater representation and democratic inclusion, thereby connecting both the local and elite levels of sport. It seems the last word on this is yet to be uttered.

**1Note:** *Queer is used here as an umbrella term to encompass gender and sexual identities as also non-binary presentations of body and identity. Here the discussion pertains to mostly persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB).*

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