



SEXISM IN SPORTS AS REFLECTED IN CINEMA OF INDIAN CULTURAL BACKGROUND

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Abstract

Sexism in sports is a quite common thing and it has been represented faithfully in cinema. The present paper is a thematic study revealing sexism in sports as shown in two movies of Indian cultural background: 'Bend It Like Beckham' (2002) and 'Chak De! India' (2007). It underpins the problems faced by the Indian sportswomen of those sports that are traditionally linked to men and also shows how women are discouraged from participating and competing in sports. It also highlights the male view of women as weak and less competent. The protagonists of the movies under discussion suffer sexism at familial, social and professional levels in sports because of their being women. The paper throws light on various types of barriers -such as socio-cultural, biological and psychological- which women players have to cross, in addition to dealing with a bizarre and weird kind of treatment which is never offered to their male counterparts. It depicts how family pressures and restrictions, cultural inhibitions, lack of support and biased attitude of society can ultimately yield to the determination of women players. The paper suggests that sports can be used as an effective tool for women empowerment.

Key Words: Sports, Sexism, Cinema, Women, Indian.



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Introduction

Sports is a social activity accepted across societies, cultures and individuals and practised for recreation, physical fitness, and at times, for competitive purposes as well. Like all other social activities, it is also influenced by social characteristics like Sexism. Sexism (sometimes

alternatively called Gender discrimination) is said to refer to prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls and an ideology or practices that maintain patriarchy or male domination (Masequesmay 2008).

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2015) it is “prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls and that sexism in a society is most commonly applied against women and girls” and its function is to “maintain patriarchy, or male domination, through ideological and material practices of individuals, collectives, and institutions that oppress women and girls on the basis of sex or gender”.

Sexism in sports has been there since antiquity. The first recorded mega sports event in history is the ancient Olympic Games. Before the beginning of these games, there would take place women sports events, called Heraea Games of 6th century BC (the first recorded competition for women- a footrace). Apart from this, participation in most events was only for male athletes. Women were allowed to take part only by entering horses in the equestrian events. Further, married women were not allowed to even see the games. Sexism has continued even in the later times as well, though with relaxations. In the modern Olympic games of 1896 even, women were not allowed to participate. Pierre de Coubertin who spearheaded the organization of modern Olympic Games was against the participation of women in the Olympic Games: “As to the admission of women to the Games, I remain strongly against it. It was against my will that they were admitted to a growing number of competitions” (Coubertin, 1928). In one of his later writings he reiterated his belief that “association with women's athleticism is bad, and that such athleticism should be excluded from the Olympic program - that the Olympiads were restored for the rare and solemn glorification of the individual male athlete...” (Coubertin,1934). The tradition has continued to date.

Cinema being an art and a media form has been faithfully reflecting as well as influencing social structures for more than past 100 years. In the opinion of Lasswell (1948), a media through its communicative role performs three key functions: (1) the surveillance of the environment; (2) the correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment; (3) the transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next. Cinema, an influential media form and a communicative process performs these three functions honestly; additionally, it endeavors to suggest their solutions as well. Having a narrative or story-telling function, it artistically presents "richly layered cultural practices" (Corrigan, 2003) which are the outcome of the interrelationship of cinema with culture (Coleman 1994). Sports is an

area which has been effectively dealt with by cinema all over the world. In Indian context, in this decade particularly, there has been a considerable rise in the number of movies depicting the life or activities of sportspersons with special focus on kinds of problems faced by them. The present paper is thematic study of the problem of Sexism or Gender Discrimination faced by Indian sportswomen at different levels. It studies two movies -one British and one Indian- with Indian cultural background to reveal the problem of Sexism in sports. The term Indian sportswomen here refers to women players of Indian origin living as a sportsperson in India or abroad and practicing sports in cultural surroundings Indian or largely Indian.

Analysis of the British Movie

The British comedy drama movie *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) directed by Gurinder Chadha celebrates the theme of sexism in sports. It tells the struggle of an 18-year-old Punjabi Sikh girl Jess living in London to play football first as a pastime and then as a team player. Being a girl she is discouraged by her conservative parents from playing football, as in Punjabi society grown up girls or women are not allowed to take part in outdoor games- particularly those traditionally belonging to men. The talent of Jess as a football player is noticed by a football coach who promotes her and finally she is able to participate openly in the game.

But the road to success does not run smooth. As a player Jess has to face opposition from her family first. When Jess's mother sees Jess in shorts playing football in the park, she feels bad as in her culture girls shouldn't be appearing bare legged publicly, particularly when men are around. Besides, the mother does not want people to know that Jess has a scar on her leg because this might harm her marital prospects as far as her getting married in her community is concerned. A worried mother, she believes that playing outside in the sun might darken Jess's complexion, thus creating problem in her marriage. Instead of football she has a better option for her and that is learning house managing qualities. She thinks that Jess should be learning things- like cooking-that would make her an ideal (or at least good) Indian wife. Jess's mother believes that no mother in law will ever want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can't make round *chapattis*. Father too does not think much differently.

Girls in Indian culture are expected to be docile, respectful and agreeing in family matters. They are also expected to sacrifice obediently their interests and desires when it comes to family repute or cultural values. Jess understands this and tells her friend Jules that "Indian girls aren't supposed to play football" (Chadha, 2002). Brought up in a Punjabi

family Jess agrees with her parents' wishes and at first gives up playing football but when her friends insist and convince her, she begins playing again.

A strong, empowered, highly skilled female athlete is generally held as in direct opposition to heteronormative constructions of femininity (Giardina, 2003). Jess belongs to a culture which strongly believes in this idea. Surprisingly, this notion hold true in British culture as well. There is no professional league for women in Great Britain. When Jess says that Indian girls are not allowed to play, her British Friend Jules replies, "It ain't just an Indian thing, now is it? I mean, how many people come out and support us?"(Chadha, 2002).

Jess fully understands her culture. In the Hounslow Harriers changing rooms she tells her team mates, "Indian girls aren't supposed to play football". When someone remarks that it a bit backwards, she replies, "It's just culture, that's all". She here appears to be fighting two battles: one against the family which represents the culture and the other with her own self. Belonging to a culture that considers obedience to parents as *dharma* or duty of a child, she has to deal with her own conscience to continue playing. As far as fulfillment of her desire is concerned, she battles with the society. As a result, the matter- apart from being individual versus society- also becomes of desire versus duty. Jess with her good luck and better sense, ultimately finds a better fortune ahead. Through the metaphor of the game of Football, the effort is to highlight the ability of women to make decisions for them, to be independent and take control of their own lives. Jess is not a rebel. Deeply rooted in the cultural and familial values, she is able to find a middle path, thus establishing an acceptable agreement between her desires and societal, cultural and familial demands.

Analysis of the Indian Movie

Another movie that represents the problems faced by women players at different levels is *Chak De! India* (2007) directed by Shimit Amin. The movie is about a group of 16 women hockey players who struggle to prove their mettle in the world of sports for themselves. Distrusted and almost rejected by the people, they are trained by Kabir Khan an ostracized former hockey captain of the national team. Facing and surpassing problems such as gender discrimination, lack of moral support, denial of opportunities, they ultimately emerge triumphant.

Here the biggest obstacle is the attitude of the male dominated world towards women sportspersons. Women sports as well as sportswomen are discouraged at each step. Komal Chautala has to argue with her parents to get permission to play hockey and to be a part of the national hockey team. The team captain Vidya Sharma too has to face opposition at different

levels. Preeti's fiancé- the Vice Captain of national cricket team- feels insecure because of her involvement with the team. Almost everybody believes that investing money or even hopes in women hockey team is futile and of little worth. Nobody is keen to coach women hockey team and it surprises people when Kabir Khan offers to train the women hockey team. Mr. Tripathi, the ultimate authority in Indian Hockey Association, doesn't have any hopes from the women team; he rather believes that the only long term role for women is to do household chores like cooking and cleaning. To get the permission to play the World Cup, the women hockey team is to 'convince' the authorities with its performance: it has to play a match against Men's hockey team and beat the latter to get a green signal for the World Cup. For male players these women players are nothing to be taken seriously and they believe that they can beat them very easily. Women will always be inferior because they are women, they think. In the boys versus girls hockey match girls nearly beat the boys, and are able to convince the authorities to give them permission to participate in the World Cup tournament.

These women players have to battle many times: they have to fight against the opponent team and also against their own people who distrust in their abilities, in addition to grappling with the factionalism within the team. They have to fight one more battle and that is with lack of confidence that might creep in them because of distrust shown by the society in them. They fight alone and win. Women have to answer the men back through their performance and this is what they do in the final match. The movie is not just a fictive account of things; it is in fact a representation of reality. The movie with its feminist stance stands for belief in abilities of women. Pitched against the crowd of anti women sports authorities, biased male sportspersons and a disinterested general public is a determined team supported by a committed coach alongwith his dedicated helpers. Despite all odds, the coach stands unflinchingly on side of his team and proves their worth, ultimately swaying the attitude of the general public in favour of the women. The movie indicates women empowerment when we see self confidence growing in women, so much so that they give a tough fight to the boys team, and also physically beat eve teasers. They prove at different levels that they are not inferior to men.

Conclusion: Cinema in India and almost everywhere generally shows a positive ending. Both of these movies show their respective protagonists achieving their targets finally because the film makers have to end the story at a positive and hopeful note. Unfortunately not all the stories in real life do so. Sexism is deep rooted in human institutions though efforts are always on to deal with the problem. With print and visual media and social media

growing more popular and strong, acceptability to women sports and women in sports will gradually make its way in the course of time, of course faster than it did in past.

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