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## **Contesting the ‘Masculine’ Domain: Assessment of Women’s Role in Sports Through Selected Films**

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### **Abstract:**

*Gender/sex divide has always been the part and parcel of any discourse. The problematics of identity is built around male as superior and female as inferior beings. The changing scenario of the universe defines human beings in terms of neoliberalism, globalization, deconstruction of ideas and images, and, above all the way of interpreting everything from a post-structuralist approach has brought forth new ideas and images in the rubric of discourse analysis. Body and physical fitness have always been an issue of debate and discussion since it engages an arena of women’s participation in various physical fitness activities and games. The present paper attempts to focus on the world of games and sports as a site where established values about gender have been contested, resisted, negotiated and transformed through the analysis of selected films. Popular culture has always been a powerful medium to challenge the myth that strong and powerful women are not real. The paper will attempt to take up this terrain to focus on women engaged in the world of games and sports to show the present scenario of women’s games and sports in the Indian context.*

**Keywords:** games and sports, discourse analysis, films, performativity, women.

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**Introduction:** Since the onset of civilization, physical activities play significant role for the all -round development of the human beings. It is action which marks the existence of an individual. With the rise of the sexual division of labour, the actions are categorized and politicized- work outside home for the male and domestic work for the female. Such bifurcations create gender disparity. Women’s work is not restricted to the household. She conducts the activities both inside and outside home without any recognition<sup>1</sup>. She performs domestic chores, rears the children, rules the country; still, she is nowhere. Her identity is

contested in every sphere and she takes consistent challenges to break the bastion of androcentric politics. If she is interested in embroidery the society accepts that but her close proximity to the athletic field creates immense controversy in the society in general and in their families in particular.

**Historicizing Sports:** From the early days human beings developed prolonged attachment with games and sports. In the ancient times before the emergence of various official sports events people used to get entertained with duels, athletic activities, bull fights, wrestling, fencing and many such events. In ancient Greece several athletic activities used to entertain people and it also had its resource value. Rather than team-based competition, individual's record was more important in athletics. Javelin throwing, foot races, long jump, wrestling are some of the important athletic events in Greece. Olympic games were highly popular in ancient Greece. Apart from male athletes, women were also part of it. Cynisca, a Spartan princess was considered to be the first woman Olympic winner in chariot racing. Indian women have also set forth examples in the Olympics. To name a few from the recent list includes P.V Sindhu, Karnam Malleswari, Mary Kom, Saina Nehwal, Sakshi Malik.

Down through the ages games and sports have been an integral part of any culture. It is not only one of the popular forms of entertainment but it has other purposes too. It is an industry which creates the opportunity for many to earn their livelihood. Male female dichotomy is one of the dominant trends in any sphere of life. It is difficult to think of a single field where man-woman relationship is free from any kind of complexity, may it be professional or personal.

**The Ground Reality:** Women's participation in games and sports has evoked various debates and discussions. The main reason behind this is the androcentric society. Unlike other domains, men hold an authoritative position to control women in sports. Oppression of women in the domain of sports can be further elaborated through Catherine MacKinnon's reconceptualization of women's oppression in liberal society<sup>2</sup>. Ann Hall's finding contributes to this idea

“One of the recurring themes...is that sport, play and games are institutionalized aspects of our culture which help to maintain male and masculine hegemony, specifically by how it is defined, by the direct control of women's sport by men, and by ignoring, or at best trivializing, women's achievement in sport”<sup>3</sup>.

The present paper attempts to focus on women's role in games and sports and how they contest the male bastion through the analysis of select films. The paper intends to highlight on the situation of women in games and sports in real life in the Indian context and it will help one to develop the role of women in sports in screen as well. Since representation is part of the real-life situation, it widens the ambit of reel life to add to the existing epistemology on gender and sports. The argument of the paper is developed around the gender gap in the Indian context in sports which still persists. The following would be some of the points of clarification through this research

- 1) How far socio-political changes impact on women's sports (Indian context)
- 2) How can films as means of cultural representation indicate gender gap in sports
- 3) What would be the role of the society in eliminating such differences

**Women in Games and Sports: Myth and Reality:** The common myth that plays role in games and sports, unlike the other spheres, is that boys are more efficient than girls. Around the world, women's participation in games and sports has certain commonalities. If one thinks of women's health issue and their participation in fitness activities the picture is not so satisfactory. Sports historians have researched about the gender bias across cultures and it has now been almost a universally accepted fact that women get less opportunity than men in the field of games and sports. It begins from home at the early phase of life. Even the indoor- outdoor games are gender specific. Since girls are supposed to stay normally at home (according to the traditional norms of the androcentric society), their wish to participate in the outdoor games are restricted in several ways in many cultures. But there are exceptions.

The society's indifference towards women's participation in games began to change from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in various parts across the globe. But, initially, to consider it as a first phase to look at women's potential from the sphere of beauty to perfect health and high spirits was a significant change initiated through Popular Health Movement in the 1800s in the US which increased women's awareness in games and sports. To name a few of the changes held during this century in women's games and sports include American women's National Championship held in 1890<sup>4</sup>, Wimbledon got its first women's event in 1875 and in 1912 Swimming was considered to be the first competitive sport to be introduced in the Olympics for women. The post World War II saw the growing importance of women's sports as the second phase. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when women's education was one of the significant reformatory objectives, the schools for girls prioritized physical activities. Women's consciousness regarding health- related issues increased and they were gradually aware of their fitness activities, food and lifestyle. Jogging, walking became part of their lives. Title IX brought significant change to end all discrimination against women' participation in any physical activity including sports in educational institutions.

To talk about the Indian situation of the initial phase, in ancient India chariot racing, archery, wrestling and other such games dominated the scenario for a long time. Before women could get access to games and sports, they attained pleasure through dance<sup>5</sup>. Later on, the Indian scenario started gradually changing on women's games and sports. Girls who are from not-so-conservative background are allowed to go outside home and play the games they want. But there are certain socio-cultural factors which create problems in their participation in fitness activities. Their mobility is still restricted. There are certain sensitive zones in many states where majority of the population thinks of a girl's participation in fitness events as 'obscene'. Such prejudices create immense problem for girls. They are not allowed by their families to go outside and play for the fear of being ostracized. Specifically

in a country like India where girls' education is still not quite satisfactory, their participation in fitness activities is a yet to be achieved target. Most importantly, only girls could break such myths. But it cannot be denied that the male members of their families, although very few, try to create opportunities for girls to participate in games and sports.

Since the focus of the paper is to concentrate on the Indian perspective of women's games and sports, it will not be irrelevant here to mention certain society- created factors determining whether a girl will play games or not. Firstly, a family hardly wants the girl child to play a 'boy's game' like football, cricket and badminton. To the family members, if a girl plays the 'boy's game', her gestures and postures will be like boys which is not desirable. Such unscientific and illogical thoughts forbid them to allow the girls to play. In addition to this most of the families think of a girl's body only as a child producing machine. According to them, while playing, if a girl is injured, it would affect her reproductive organs, affecting her would be child in future. Such prejudices have always created impediments in a girl's close connection with games and sports. She is mostly convinced by her family members that a doll is her best companion. If she wishes to play cricket like her brothers, people will laugh at her.

It is important to mention here of the provision of physical education activities of girls in schools. Messner's comment is relevant to follow. Regarding the girl's play at schools, especially in the western context, he observes that girls have an expanding array of opportunity to play but sometimes the coaching they receive is substandard<sup>6</sup>. He also adds that in middle schools and high schools, girls too often have substandard athletic facilities and have to resort to legal action to push their schools to move toward fair and equal treatment for girls<sup>7</sup>. He has used the metaphor of sea-monster vs. barbie doll to make symbolic distinction between boy's and girls' sports, nonetheless a very popular concept. From the gender sociologist's perspective Messner has observed the gendering of sports from the very beginning of school levels. The segregation in sports mainly stems from the attitude of both teachers and parents. If a boy wishes to play with dolls, it creates psychological insecurity<sup>8</sup> among his parents. They quickly withdraw him from the girl to avoid further complications. Classroom and playground are the two most gender specific discussion sights where the discriminations take place. The categorical differences between boys and girls are reflected in every culture, be it a First world country or a Third-World one. The situation gets worsened in the Third world.

Thinking of the parents' handling of the 'gender' issue in sports, one finds that they are mostly guided by the child's sex, not gender. Performativity does not appear with someone's sex, it invariably depends on the gender. To add another observation, if the society is gender fluid (most societies are not, otherwise there would not have been so much discrimination between the heteronormative identities) then the names of the sports events have not been so male-specific. Walters' observation is important to mention at this juncture\

The performance of gender is never a simple voluntary act.... Theories of gender as play and performance need to be intimately and systematically connected with the

power of gender (really, the power of male power) to constrain, control, violate and configure. Too often, mere lip service is given to the specific historical, social and political configurations that make certain conditions possible and others constrained<sup>9</sup>.

Michael Messner has tried to contextualize Third Wave Feminist Theory in Games and Sports. He is influenced by Haywood and Drake's idea, worthy to mention here

Recent Third Wave Feminist Theory sheds light on the different sensibilities of younger generations of girls and women concentrating their willingness to display and play with this apparently paradoxical relationship between bodily experience (including "feminine" displays) and public empowerment. In Third Wave Feminist texts, displays of feminine physical attractiveness are not viewed as mutually exclusive or necessarily opposed realities but as lived (if often paradoxical) aspects of the same reality<sup>10</sup>.

**Specifying the Indian Context:** The above observations and remarks would work as a preamble to proceed further into the Indian context since the main objective is to focus on the Indian scenario of women's games and sports. Whether it is the observation of Messner or anyone from the First World perspective implies an absolutely different situation. On the contrary Indian perspective<sup>11</sup> on this stance is totally different. This can be analyzed from various angles.

Before specifically talking about the entertainment industry and popular culture context of women's games and sports (which is the thrust area) it is important to mention the real sources of the scripts on which the films on women's fitness activities are directed and produced. Therefore, the paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will deal with the real -life situation of women's games and sports and the next part will deal with the focused issue of women contesting the male 'panga' through the analysis of films.

At the ground level if one could look at the provision of girls' games in schools then mostly it is found that from the elementary level most of the schools offer classes on physical training, popularly known as PT classes. Many of the government aided schools across various states of India offer games and sports in both boys', girls' and co-education schools since physical fitness related activities develop not only an individual's health, but also his/her personality as well. It also works as a primary training ground for the students to participate in district, state, national and international level games and sports in future.

A small -scale survey conducted among the girl students of a university<sup>12</sup> at a selected area of South 24 Parganas of West Bengal shows that most of the girl students have attended games and sports classes from their primary school days and they have continued it till the higher secondary level since most of the schools (government aided schools) offer P.T classes. Another interesting information came out of the survey. Most of the girl students (those who were interviewed) have participated in the annual sports held at their schools but none of them have thought of pursuing their career in games and sports. The reason behind

this they stated was either their own indifference towards games and sports or their parents' reluctance. Some of the girls (among the interviewees) were not at all interested in games, sports and other such fitness activities.

Being asked about their favourite sports, most of them selected football, cricket, badminton, chess. Few of them selected carrom, kabaddi, very few swimming and one or two selected mountaineering. There were more surprising things to follow. Being asked primarily about the names of their favourite players, it was almost a shock to find that most of the students interviewed have not written a single female player's name. After receiving the list of only male players' names, they were asked about the names of the female players. Some of the names were given before them and they were asked if they have heard of them. Most of them have not. Many of them only stuck to the names of the female players like Sania Mirza, Arunima Singha, Smriti Mandana, Saina Nehawal, P.V Sindhu, Gita Phogat. They were also asked about their interest in watching women's sports events and most of the students answered in negative. Another point in the questionnaire was about their interest in watching the movies related to physical fitness, games and sports. Most of them have taken the names of the movies like Dangal, Mary Kom, Saina.

Unlike other spheres, gender disparity is the most prominent factor in games and sports. Former Indian captain Diana Edulji<sup>13</sup> talks about the indifference of Indian cricket administration towards women's cricket in India. She was the manager for the England tour in 2009. In one of her interviews given to ESPN, she was in sheer disappointment to share that it was extreme cold when they went to England in 2009 and there was no arrangement of warm clothing on the sponsor's part. When she asked for jumpers for her team-mates she received the reply that it was not included in the budget. When it becomes the question of women's events, either it may be cricket or tennis or badminton, such humiliating incidents are quite frequent. One could never think of such treatment towards male cricket players.

It is important to refer to some historical facts. Women players – either a swimmer, tennis player, badminton player, mountaineer whoever it may be there is always the concept of shifting attention towards male sportspersons. The historical imbalance is one of the significant issues. Most of the people think that men perform far better than women. They do not even consider women worthy of participating in games and sports. In addition to this, lack of resources is a severe problem. It becomes difficult to get sponsorship for women's events. Management mostly remains indifferent to secure the needs of women players. People always think of Cricket Gods but the perception of Cricket Goddesses is still a dream to achieve and it may not be possible without proper sensitization. Certain undesirable past situations speak of a very harsh truth. In the old BCCI Office, there was not a single ladies' toilet previously<sup>14</sup> and one could never find a woman team captain's photograph. Such attitudes have demeaned women's potential. Since women from all occupations are constant challenge takers, they also struggle for their own space in the field of games and sports, unlike the other occupations. During 1982 World Cup match there was no sponsorship and each woman player had to pay rupees ten thousand to go to New

Zealand. It was the Chief Minister of Maharashtra who came to help at that time and the women players were financially supported by him.

**Representation of Women's Sports Through Films: Identifying the Gender Gap:** This part of the paper deals with the representation of selected films through which the female sports personalities will contest their male counterparts. This would also initiate to identify the gender gap in sports. Through this analysis their attempt to contest the male dominated sports industry will be addressed to add to the existing provisions. The primary function of the entertainment industry is to amuse and entertain the viewers but it has the ethics of representation as part of the role, responsibility and liability towards society. It has been a tradition carried out through the representation of various social issues. The contemporary themes have been meticulously represented on the screen. Biopics have occupied a significant space in the film industry and the films under scrutiny will mostly be from Bollywood to focus on the female subjectivities in games and sports.

The analysis of the films not merely enquires about the gender discrimination in games and sports. This will also attempt to look at some very important facts. Whenever the discourse of sports historians come into question it has been the names of mostly male sports historians we enquire of. In the previous section of the paper an attempt has been made to talk about the response of the female students in the field of games and sports. It is also difficult for them to name female sports journalists. Kadambari Murali, Mayanti Langer, Ridhima Pathak and Malika Bajaj are some of the names who are among the topmost female sports journalists of India. Unlike the other 'offbeat' professions this has not been highly in practice. People's interest in female sports journalists and female sports historians is still less counted. The need to highlight women's participation in such professions is to sensitize those who are still quite indifferent towards this issue. Some of the publications on the Indian context on women's sports could take the issue steps ahead. Thadani, Sharma and Chakravarti's *Women and Sport in India and the World* (2012), Sangita Khadse's *Women in Indian Sport* (2018), Sohini Chattopadhyay's *The Day I Become a Runner* (2023) can provide the opportunity to enquire more on women's sports.

The films focusing on the female sportspersons and their attempts from ground zero to the highest level are many. A few have been selected to focus on what particular challenges they take to contest the male dominance. Some may question why it is always needed to talk of a woman's attempt in relation to a man. The inevitable answer would be since women are always discussed in relation to their male counterparts so it is always important to make an analysis of the relational value.

The films under scrutiny are from Bollywood (the Hindi film industry) and also from Tollywood (Bengali film industry). There are a number of films on sports in both the industries mentioned above but if we focus on the female role in fitness, games and sports the number is not so high. In Tollywood the most promising Bengali movie focusing on women's physical fitness, games and sports is *Kony*. 1980s was the time when the society was in a mode of transition from various angles. Women's participation in different job

spheres was something that had already been focused by many film directors. *Kony* added another feather to this field of achievement. Released in 1984 the film is directed by Saroj Dey and it is really important to note that no other film has been made on such issues before, focusing on women's physical fitness. The film is based on women's swimming, a girl's struggle with poverty to fulfill her dreams and how the instructor justifies her dream and helps her achieve the goal. The role of Kony, played by Sreeparna Banerjee, tried to do justice in her own ways and the instructor of Kony was played by none other than the veteran film personality late Soumitra Chattopadhyay. Such a movie of 1980s explicitly focussed on the challenges of a female swimmer. She was poor, her family members were not ready to allow her to go to outstation competitions and above all Kony herself was not able to dream of being a champion for several reasons. From a north Kolkata slum, Kshitish Sinha (Khidda) takes Kony to the dream world of Bengal swimming team to National Swimming championship as a duty-bound instructor who had the passion of training those who could not afford expensive trainers. Sreeparna in real life was a swimming champion, it was convenient as well as more challenging for her to convince the viewers of the struggles and hardships a girl has to face in a male dominated space like sports. Macho, masculine, aggression, vigour – such adjectives are put forth before the male names and this has been a tradition.

Khidda, Kony's instructor cum teacher's role can remind one of the role played by Shah Rukh Khan in *Chak de India* released in 2007. The Bollywood movie focussed on women's hockey team but illogically compared it with male cricket team since hockey and cricket are different from each other. The female players of Indian Hockey Team in the movie had several challenges which are worthy to mention. One's fiancé was from Indian Cricket Team and he considers women's hockey as nothing but 'goli-danda'. The grandeur of Indian male cricket team is unparalleled since women play hockey, an 'insignificant' game. The same game becomes very significant when men play that.

What makes the issue more significant is the politics women face in sports. Primarily it is the sponsors, investors who spend less money in women's sports events. In addition to this mostly there are very few female coaches. There are many additional challenges for a woman which most of them could not take for various reasons. If the coach is male then the added burden is what *Chak de India* has shown. One of the players of the team, when not given her due 'exposure', attempted to impress the coach with her 'opening the button' attitude. Here the male coach has handled all the sensitive issues of women in such a manner that it has created a feeling of sisterhood among them to tighten the bond of team work. Viewed from another angle; the girls coming from Assam, Meghalaya, Patiala, Ludhiana with their specific dreams had one thing in common. They were either to prove themselves in front of their fathers, brothers, husbands or would be husbands. Mothers' say regarding this is considered negligible evident in several films. After winning the match, one of the women players cancels her engagement, formerly being humiliated by her erstwhile lover. This is how the male bastion is broken.



Financial constraint is one of the key factors to pursue one's career in sports. Mostly the films discussed here projects an absolute real- life scenario and that is the players' very ordinary background. Girls from very ordinary families often perform surprisingly well with several constraints. They continuously struggle to achieve their goals. "If I can, so can you..."<sup>15</sup> is such a mantra which made all the players rejuvenated. No matter how much the girl's father earns, no matter up to which standard her mother has studied, the primary importance is of the girls' capability to become the athlete goddesses.

The focus of women's fitness activities in India emerged with films (Bollywood) like *Chak de India* and then the journey goes on. *Mary Kom* (released in 2014) is categorized under biographical sports film which is as convincing as the previous two mentioned. Popular culture has such a promising influence upon the viewers that the boxing champion Mangte Chungneijang Kom, in spite of her glorious achievements in her field came to be highly popular only after the release of the Bollywood film. The only woman to win World Amateur Boxing Championship six times, the only female boxer to have won a medal in each one of the first seven world championships and the only boxer to win eight World Championship medals, the first Indian female boxer to win a gold medal in the Asian games in 2014 in South Korea, the first Indian female boxer to win gold at the 2018 Commonwealth Games – popularly known as Mary Kom came through all kind of hardships including her father's objection to pursue her career. A young woman chasing the dream of boxing, defying her father's orders, choosing boxing over marriage; took enough pains to build up her boxing career. Even after all the differences with her father was over because of her immense success Mary had to undergo various challenges, very precisely represented through the film. Whenever it comes to the question of a woman to create a space in the all-male-dominated professions the struggle becomes more intensified, brilliantly focused by the director Omung Kumar, and Priyanka Chopra in the role of Mary Kom.

Sometimes it is also interesting as well as intriguing to survey the reaction of the male viewers. In most of the cultures, games and sports stands for boy's games and sports. When a girl comes in this field with passion, not even thinking of it as a profession at an initial stage, the society cannot accept that. Very few of the girl's families consistently encourage their daughters to pursue their careers in sports- based activities. Sometimes the male viewers jeer at the female players and the length of Sania Mirza's skirt is more convincing a topic for them than the number of trophies she has won and how much hard work she has to do to achieve this. Besides, it has always been a very 'hot' topic of discussion on the female players. Gaze theory and visual pleasure plays its own role.

Although popular culture is a convincing medium to focus on such issues, it is really disappointing that still we are ignorant of our indifference towards women's games and sports. When Virat Kohli scores a century, we are excited and devote our entire busy evening watching the match but Jhulan Goswami or Smriti Mandana's performance cannot restrict our priorities in the way Kohli's do.

Sexual harassment is one of the alarming concerns in this field. Not only the women sportspersons from India, women from all over the globe face this in various stages of their professional life.

The changing scenario of women's fitness activities and people's increasing engagement with that is gradually expanding the repertoire of women's sports events. Apart from the films mentioned here, other forms of popular culture representations also play an integral part. The 'Kuchh khas hai' Cadbury Dairy Milk advertisement has been revisited in 2021 with the reverse gender role which has not only been highly popularized but also indicates towards people's transforming mindset.

In the 2017 Women's World Cup, Indian Women Cricket Team struggled to appear for the final match without much of public's attention because the viewers as well as the sponsors have least to expect from them<sup>16</sup>. In the Australian match when Harmanpreet Kaur scored a not out 171 runs then she is compared to Kapil Dev's never-to-be-forgotten innings against Zimbabwe in 1983. In this way women cricketers' performance is enabling them to gain autonomy, fame and popularity. They appeared in the final match in 2005 World Cup Cricket. But then not all the days of women's cricket performance were broadcast and social media was not so active regarding this. During 2016, 'Tamanna', the popular Hindi television series acted as a great source of enthusiasm and it worked as a catalyst to increase the popularity of women's cricket. People started feeling the struggle of a woman to fulfil her dream. The way Dhara Solanki dreamt of being a cricketer, her struggle, her sacrifice and finally her success worked as an anecdote in the lives of women players. Reel life has always taken great initiatives to focus on the real life. Sometimes people cannot trace the real life of a struggling individual, therefore the representation of reel life works in much effective manner.

This statement can be explained through references. The making of biopics has a far-fetched effect upon the viewers than the readers because not many readers are updated on these issues. But it is easier to influence people through visual effects since in a country like India a large number of people find it convenient to see, not to read. After the release of biopics like *Mary Kom* or *Saina* many people came to know about the struggle of those players for the first time.

The cricket controlling authorities are also indifferent towards women's events. During 2016 women also had their T-20 World Cup but it is very demeaning to note that they were given the economy class air tickets. The excuse produced against this is the poor economic structure of the country, which could only be reflected in such spheres.

Football has also witnessed such changes. In 2019 in America the percentage of viewers of Women's World Cup match was 22 percent more than the Men's World Cup football in 2018. In 2013 U.S Open Final Tennis the television rating of Serena Williams and Victoria Azarenka was 4.9 but in Men's Final Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic event rating was 2.8. Such changes are coming up and entertainment industry is utilizing this in its own ways to convince viewers to change their attitude towards women players.

In the 1970s the prize money for the female players was the 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the prize money of the male players. Billie Jean King made a historic protest against this and Women's Tennis Association was established. She refused to play if male players' equal remuneration was not given to them. Such fight is going on. Jhulan Goswami or Mithali Raj are making their space in their own ways.

Taking a look at Sports Literature is also significant. Among many the names of some books are provided here to note the changing scenario of women's involvement in games and sports. It is important to note that the players are writing their autobiographies and it shows that their talent is not restricted to the 22 yards, they could create space in the pages of books. One could think of *The Golden Girl: The Autobiography of P.T Usha* by P.T Usha and Lokesh Sharma, *She Dared: Women in Indian Sports* by Abhishek Dubey and Sanjeeb Mukherjea, *Playing to Win- Saina Nehawal* by Saina Nehawal, *Girl Power: Indian Women Who Broke the Rules* by Neha J. Hiranandani, *She Walks, She Leads: Women Who Inspire India* by Gunjan Jain, *Unguarded: An Autobiography* by Mithali Raj, *Unbreakable- Mary Kom* by Mary Kom and Dina Serto are some of the names. The scenario is gradually changing, both male and female writers contribute a huge section in sports literature.

The context of gender in sports has a Marxian theoretical understanding from the findings of Michael Messner. He has adopted this idea from Brohm and Hoch. Since hierarchical differentiations are not only restricted between men and women but between the more privileged and the less privileged individuals, therefore the finding is important to mention here. Messner points out that most theoretical work on sports has fallen in several traps. Several kinds of power relations work in this field which is reflected in popular culture in its own ways. According to Kimmel

“The sex role paradigm also minimizes the extent to which gender relations are based on power. Not only do men exert power over women as a group, but the historically derived definitions of masculinity and femininity reproduce those power relations”<sup>17</sup>.

Since the making of a film is hugely research based, the increasing volume of sports literature has immensely contributed to them. One could assume when films are made on women's fitness activities, the directors would have come across such references to add to their existing knowledge and to make their films more contemporaneous. In this way the script and the screen make a perfect harmonious balance.

Another biographical sports-drama took the shape of a film in *Dangal*. Released in 2016, directed by Nitesh Tiwari, the film is a perfect illustration of the lives of the daughters of Mahavir Singh Phogat, the national wrestling champion. School going meek, shy, salwar kameez wearing, long braided sisters become the wrestlers and the film catches that transitional phase. In a remote village of Haryana where most of the girls are grown up only for 'chulha- chowka'<sup>18</sup>, Geeta and Babita took all the pains to go to the wrestling ground with the tremendous effort of their father. A man's humiliation of not winning a medal made

him think that his son will do that. But the birth of four daughters primarily broke Mahavir's dream. When two of his daughters beat some of their male friends for passing insulting remarks, Mahavir took all the pains to train his daughters.

The hair was cut short, salwar kameez turned into short pants, separate cauldrons were taken to cook animal flesh for adding extra protein to their diet, Mahavir Singh did everything what the villagers asked him not to do. That is something noteworthy on the part of the father. What is noticeable on the part of the daughters is how they confronted the male gaze and also the attitude of the entire village. The two sisters took some time to accept the challenge but finally broke the male bastion. The villagers jeering at them made the situation initially complicated. During their visit to school in their new 'avatar' the two sisters listened to all kinds of caustic remarks. Being entangled in their goal with much resistance from the villagers, the two sisters took all the pains to get up at dawn, started gaining strength in their legs as well as in the entire body to practice all sorts of fitness activities to gain the strength to fight as a wrestler.

The 'akhara' which is mostly dominated by men has got new female members. The perfect combination of the ground with the two new members practicing wrestling over there is what the film addresses. It has definitely given some antidote to those parents who still think that wrestling and boxing are only for boys. The village got its first female wrestlers in the form of Geeta-Babita and it was really interesting to find out that Mahavir Singh took all the pains to arrange his daughters' wrestling with male wrestlers due to the unavailability of any other female wrestler in the village. The male contestants felt reluctant to fight with an 'abala aurat'<sup>19</sup>, it hurts their ego but both the sisters took the challenge to prove them wrong. Inequality revisited and this time girls win the game. This is how 'male panga' is contested by Geeta-Babita.

The 'female dream' of wearing a bridal dress and putting mehndi, so popular a theme in most of the Bollywood films is challenged here with a reversal of thought. A girl is not only born to dream of such 'feminine' things, she could also dream of being a wrestler, which, by 'normal' standards, is unsuitable for her. She could also dream of winning wrestling world championship events. When the camera shifts from the village to the wrestling academy for Geeta's better future one could feel the need of masculinity studies to incorporate in the discourse. Geeta's coach (male) has an everlasting grudge on Geeta's coach-cum-guide father. The way Mahavir taught Geeta was discarded by the coach whereas Geeta was absolutely comfortable with her father's techniques. Geeta's father was banished from the wrestling ground on the final day of the championship event by none other than her male coach. This is how things take different dimensions.

One of the significant dimensions of the film is Geeta's transition. Her slight diversion from wrestling to spend more time to wear nail polish and grow long hair to look 'beautiful' took off one of her chances from one of the championship events. Her come back with iron determination made her win the future events and this is how she gained autonomy.

A Netflix released movie in 2018, although not entirely related to sports bears special mentioning. The movie *Skater Girl* shows the fulfillment of a girl's dream in the form of the skating park in the village Khempur, Rajasthan. Since the girls of that village only know the life of a woman in terms of kitchen and rearing children, a non-residential Indian girl came back to her ancestral village and built a skating park – Desert Dolphin Skatepark for all children, most significantly for girls so that she could also fulfil her wish to play.

*Saand Ki Ankh* (2019) is another biographical drama based on the lives of sharpshooters Chandro and Prakash Tomar who are co-incidentally sisters-in-law. The two women from the remote village of Uttar Pradesh in their sixties mesmerized the aspirants with their sharpshooting performance. From doing the household chores to the shooting ground, they left an indelible mark in the field of sharpshooters at a time when people think of superannuating from their jobs. Such films could work as source of inspiration in women's fitness activities.

*Saina*, *Panga* and *Reshmi Rocket* are films dealing with women's fitness activities and their continuous struggle to survive in this field. Any profession is challenging, whether one is a man or a woman. But the added challenging factor for a woman is the changes in her body. One could think of the pains of childbirth a woman has to go through, which a man does not have to face. Apart from this, the regular troubles of various cramps and pains in her body has always put them in more challenging situations. *Panga* (2020) is such a film. Directed by Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari and written jointly with Nikhil Mehrotra, the film focuses on Jaya Nigam's struggle to regain her lost position in kabaddi. What is important is the role of the male members of her family. Jaya's husband Prashant had been a consistent support. Her son Aditya inspired her to restart her career.

One could think of the challenges a married woman, especially a mother has to take to start fresh after many years of gap. The support of Jaya's husband and son and above all the contribution of her friend cum coach Meenal gave her ultimate confidence. From a reservation counter clerk, she resumed her fitness activities and her comeback is what the film intends to show. The film also adds a message that not all male members go for non-co-operation. The film *Saina* delivers the same message.

*Rashmi Rocket* (2021) is examined from various perspectives. The film has captured Rashmi's capacity to run as fast as rocket (therefore achieving such title). It is based on the gender testing of women players who are being diagnosed with hyperandrogenism. Players like Dutee Chand, Pinki Pramanik had to go through such ordeals. The film captures (based on several true stories) a woman's outstanding capacity in the field of sports and her harassment when other players could not reach her. Avarice plays its role and Rashmi goes through all sorts of ordeals both in the society and the courtroom. The gender test which is performed in an unethical manner places Rashmi in a situation that destroyed her reputation as a player. What is more significant is the support she gets from her husband. In most of

the courtroom scenes in movies, a woman goes through the worst of all situations, whatever may be the theme.

The film offers more crucial moments to share with its viewers. Rashmi, free from the trial after much brainstorming sessions and being asked all sorts of embarrassing questions, starts her preparation again in the stage of pregnancy. Women could accept all sorts of challenges – whether it is the question of making meal for a hundred guests without any helping hand (this is how women are still tested to prove their capacity) or a pregnant woman running in the tracks to fulfill her own dreams (which is the self-challenge she has taken) – her capacity always comes under close surveillance. Film industry has always taken the greater initiative of portraying the social issues and women's stories are always in the forefront because of the increasing gender disparity. It is the responsibility as well as liability of the media house to focus such issues which are close to life and needs thoughtful understanding.

The woman player's appearance is also under scrutiny. They are considered as 'manly woman' because of having muscular bodies. This is how they are criticized when someone finds no other ground of criticism. In his essay "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain" Michael Messner has very brilliantly explored the historical and ideological meanings of organized sports to focus on the politics of gender relations. His analysis explores some of the truths which are relevant to mention since such observations are common in many cultures. According to him

...organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Increasing female athleticism represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination. Yet this quest for equality is not without contradictions and ambiguities. The socially constructed meanings surrounding physiological differences between the sexes, the present 'male' structure of organized sports, and the media framing of the female athlete all threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by female athletes<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, from the analysis of the films, it can be concluded that female athletes and their roles are always under scrutiny. Women as fit and 'muscular' identities are contested in the ideological terrain of the dominance of the male. Commercial and male dominated structure of organized athletics (Messner, 1988) is contested by the female athletes and media plays a vital role to sensitize on this issue. This would be one of the ways to take the male panga, break the bastion and transform the male dominated sports ground into one which is for all.

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- 6) Michael A. Messner (2002) *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*. Sports and Culture Series, Volume 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.17.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) Gender socialization has set forth the stereotypes about man and woman. The division of labour, their behaviour, their activity all are under the social construction of gender. Judith Butler's theory of performativity questions this stereotype. Butler Judith, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics".
- 9) Suzanna Danuta Walters. (1999). "Sex, Text, and Context in Between Feminism and Cultural Studies". Pp 222-257 in *Revisioning Gender* edited by M Marx Ferree, J. Lorber, and B.B Hess. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- 10) Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, (1997). Eds. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 11) Developing and developed nations have larger differences in many aspects. In a developing nation like India lack of economic resources create more gender disparity and women's participation in games and sports also faces a major scarcity of resources.
- 12) The university referred to here is a women's university which has been built up to empower mostly the underprivileged girls. Most of them come from low- income group families but their attempt to take part in all kinds of co-curricular activities apart from regular studies is also noteworthy.
- 13) Diana Edulji, the former Indian Test Cricketer became the Captain in 1978. She talked about the disparities of the BCCI in treating the female cricketers.
- 14) [www.espnricinfo.com](http://www.espnricinfo.com)
- 15) Dubey Abhishek, Sanjib Mukherjea,(2019) *She Dared: Women in Indian Sports*. New Delhi: Rupa.
- 16) This particular information and all the other information mentioned in the paper has been collected from various issues of The Anandabazar Patrika, a leading daily Bengali newspaper of Kolkata, serving people for more than 100 years.
- 17) M.S. Kimmel. (1986). 'Toward Men's Studies'. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 29(5), pp. 517-530.

- 18) Since women's roles are mostly determined in terms of domesticity 'chulha-chowka' very aptly indicates that.
- 19) Women are always identified as the 'weaker sex' - therefore the use of 'abala-aurat'.
- 20) Michael Messner. (1988). "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain". *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, pp. 197-211.