



## ISSUES IN REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE ATHLETES IN INDIAN SPORTS FILMS

Author: \*Dr. Benu Gupta \*\*MounicaSreesai

\*Associate Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sports Sciences, Kirori Mal  
College University of Delhi

\*\*Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics University of Delhi

### Abstract

*Over the last three decades sports sociologists have convincingly demonstrated that media representations of women's identities in sport relate their athleticism to deeply held stereotypical interpretations of femininity and sexuality. Cinema, a subset of media, plays an important role in constructing the impressions and perceptions about the social conditions of a society. While it is primarily a source of entertainment, it also plays an important role in communicating to the masses and influencing their thoughts. This research deals with the representations of female characters, more specifically female athletes, in popular Hindi cinema or the so-called Bollywood cinema and is an attempt to examine the relationship between representation of sportswomen and Hindi cinema to shed some light on the deep rooted stereotypical definitions of gender roles, femininity, and sexuality prevalent in the Indian society which in turn influence the representation of female athletes in India, more specifically in mainstream Hindi cinema. Through the analyses of the seven 'women-centric' sports film released since the year 2000, the authors critique the underrepresentation and the misrepresentation of gender in India's mainstream Hindi cinema. Highlighting the heteronormative context of cinematic representation and the over emphasis on the conflicting demands of emphasised femininity and athleticism in the films, the authors argue how these so-called 'progressive' 'feminist' films are situated within the heterosexual hegemonic discourse wherein the performative and ascriptive gendered roles and identities are reproduced, reinforced, and reconstituted. This paper further contends that the absence of the critical outlook of the structure of the institution of sports in cinema and the lack of acknowledgement of the institutional discrimination and inequality, results in themis-recognition of the gender problem, in turn invisibilising or at the least marginalising the agencies of sportswomen. It also tries to point to the implications of such partial and skewed gender representations on the possible policy outcomes and tangible change.*

Keywords: Sports Cinema, Gender Representations, Women-centric Films, Female Athleticism



## Introduction

Douglas Kellner (1995) argues that media culture has become the dominant cultural form which provides ideological and concrete materials for identity formation. He further argues that media shapes the prevalent views by reflecting and reinforcing a society's most deeply held values. Finally Kellner outlines the ways in which the media help to define common culture, particularly as it relates to dimensions of control and power.

Scholarly critiques on representations in Sports media echo Kellner's claim. Over the last three decades sports sociologists have convincingly demonstrated that media representations of women's identities in sport relate their athleticism to deeply held stereotypical interpretations of femininity and sexuality. These representations reinforce the prevalent view that female athletes are, by definition, a less authentic version of their male counterparts. One reason might be that sports media provides us with endless stories, symbols, and spectacles that equate male athleticism with strength and competence; while simultaneously equating female athleticism with sexual appeal, 'femininity', and a so-called limited physical(biological) capability (in comparison to their male counterparts) (Kane 1996, Willis 1982). These representations and their interpretations can be seen even more prevalent in the Indian context, primarily because it is still a developing nation.

Cinema, a subset of media, plays an important role in constructing the impressions and perceptions about the social conditions of a society. While it is primarily a source of entertainment, it also plays an important role in communicating to the masses and influencing their thoughts. With India being the largest producer and consumer of films by volume, it becomes even more significant to study this topic in the Indian context.

Using the pioneering work of Will Wright (1976) in *SixGuns and Society*, it is central to our analysis that the popular films operate at a level of contemporary myths. *"If a myth is popular, it must somehow appeal to or reinforce the individuals who view it by communicating a symbolic meaning to them. This meaning must, in turn, reflect the particular social institutions and attitudes that have created and continue to nourish the myth. Thus, a myth must tell its viewers about themselves and their society"*.



This research deals with the representations of female characters, more specifically female athletes, in popular Hindi cinema or the so-called Bollywood cinema. While India is one of the most diverse democracies in the world, with 22 official languages (Eighth Schedule to the constitution of India) and more than 750 total languages, the purpose of specifically choosing the Hindi film industry as the base for our analysis of the Indian context is that India is a majority Hindi speaking country so the reach of this industry (in terms of possible audience members) is the largest when compared to other Indian film industries such as the Assamese, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu etc. film industries. At the same time it would be fair to say that despite the diversity in languages, cuisine and cultural practices, the population as a whole shares a similar ideological apparatus.

This research is an attempt to examine the relationship between representation of sportswomen and Hindi cinema to shed some light on the deep rooted stereotypical definitions of gender roles, femininity, and sexuality prevalent in the Indian society which in turn influence the representation of female athletes in India, more specifically in mainstream Hindi cinema. Through the analyses of the seven 'women-centric' sports film released since the year 2000, the authors critique the underrepresentation and the misrepresentation of gender in India's mainstream Hindi cinema. Highlighting the heteronormative context of cinematic representation and the over emphasis on the conflicting demands of emphasised femininity and athleticism in the films, the authors argue how these so-called 'progressive' 'feminist' films are situated within the heterosexual hegemonic discourse wherein the performative and ascriptive gendered roles and identities are reproduced, reinforced, and reconstituted. This paper further contends that the absence of the critical outlook of the structure of the institution of sports in cinema and the lack of acknowledgement of the institutional discrimination and inequality, results in the mis-recognition of the gender problem, in turn invisibilising or at the least marginalising the agencies of sportswomen. It also tries to point to the implications of such partial and skewed gender representations on the possible policy outcomes and tangible change.



## Method

We start with the identification of mainstream Hindi movies relevant for our analysis that have released in the theatres since the year 2000. This identification is done based on the following characteristics:

- a) Percentage share of the total screens in the country on which the film was released on its opening day.
- b) Box office collections (adjusted for inflation).
- c) Either the protagonists of the film are athletes or the plot of the film majorly revolves around sports.
- d) Given the idolization of male and female actors in India and hence their presence in films being the primary force behind the popularity and publicity of a film, we look at the films with such mainstream actors in them.

We are able to identify a total of 25 films that satisfy the said characteristics. Those 25 films are as follows - i) Lagaan [2001] , ii) Iqbal [2005], iii) Chak De India [2007], iv) DhanDhanaDhan Goal [2007], v) Ta Ra Rum Pum [2007], vi) Apne [2007], vii) Jannat [2008], viii) Dil Bole Hadippa [2009], ix) Victory [2009], x) Paan Singh Tomar [2010], xi) Patiala House [2011], xii) BhaagMilkhaBhaag [2013], xiii) Mary Kom [2014], xiv) HawaHawai [2014], xv) Brothers [2015], xvi) Dangal [2016], xvii) SaalaKhadoos [2016], xviii) Sultan [2016], xix) Azhar [2016], xx) M.S. Dhoni [2016], xxi) Mukkabaaz [2017], xxii) Soorma [2018], xxiii) Gold [2018], xxiv) Saand Ki Aankh [2019], xxv) Panga [2020].

Out of these 25 films that were identified, only 7 revolved around stories of female athletes which serve as the sample for analyses for the purpose of this study.

## Gender In Media

A lot of studies have been done on the issue of gender and its representation on various mediums. For instance, some looked into the male bias of print media (Sue Alexander 1994), whereas a few others have focused on the low amount and poor quality of news coverage of women's sports despite their enormous increased participation and have argued that it builds audiences for men's sport while silencing and marginalising women's sport (Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, Robin H. Hextrum 2013). Similarly, IngeClaringbould, Annelies Knoppers and AgnesElling (2004) too, have focused on the



exclusionary practices of sports journalism, highlighting gender and ethnicity. The more recent studies have attempted to illustrate how the new technologies in media (such as social media platforms like Facebook, twitter, etc) hold the potential to challenge the regressive representations of women in sports (Dawn Heineken 2015). In the same light, the mainstream cinema has been explored as a powerful influential medium that could potentially illuminate and counter the stereotyping of performative gender roles and identities. However, Jayne Caudwell (2009), Katharina Lindner (2011), and others have depicted how ‘female-centric’ sport films, under the garb of ‘progressive/feminist’ films reconstitute the very gender identities they were to dismantle. The genre of such films, the type of athletic activity, the heteronormative backdrop, and so on were seen to further a negative female body image and reinforce the dominant heterosexual discourse of gender.

In the Hindi mainstream cinema or the so-called ‘Bollywood’ of India, the issue has been less researched, though highly criticised by feminist film critics, reviewers, scholars, and academics alike. Chak De India (2007) marks a breakthrough in the category of sports films as the first mainstream Hindi movie on sportswomen and on the less celebrated, less popular national sport, Hockey. Dil Bole Hadippa enters the theatres two years later, a remake of a Hollywood film, She’s The Man (2006), in which the female protagonist has to disguise herself as a man to be able to play in a team. It took five years for the next one to be made, a ‘hit’ in the commercial world, Mary Kom (2014), a biopic of the venerated boxer. SaalaKhadoos (2016) and Dangal (2016) were released in the same year, and Saand Ki Aankh (2019) only came out three years after, while the most recent one, Panga (2020), a movie about a wife and mother making a return to Khabaddi, was released in the beginning of this year. On the other hand, there’s at least one sport film released every year on average.

The fact that there is a separate genre/category aka ‘women centric’ in cinema implies and confirms Simone De Beauvoir’s (1973) argument about the abstract universal human always being male. Joan Acker’s (1992, 1993) theory of gender and organisations furthers the same notion of the universality of the male. She argues that though ideologically and technically, the construction of work, professions, organisations, profiles, etc. are gender neutral, they are skewed in favour of the male. From this perspective then, the male is representative of the human in turn allowing for structures and spaces to be perceived as gender neutral.



Claringbould, Knoppers and Elling (2004) in their study on the exclusionary practices of sports journalism use Acker's theory and argue that though sports journalism seems neutral, it is very much gendered with a male bias. Similarly, cinema too exhibits this bias, that is, unless specified and categorised as a 'women centric' (sports) film, the assumption is that the 'general' films are about men.

### ***Who's the Protagonist?***

It becomes useful here to note that these 'women centric' sports films are popularly perceived as 'breakthroughs' in mainstream cinema and are placed under tags like 'progressive', 'feminist', 'empowering' and the like. However, a closer analysis of these films throws light on the same dominant heteronormative context of cinematic representation wherein the heterosexual hegemony, and gendered roles and identities are reconstituted and reproduced, as being the backdrop within which these films come to be situated in. There is almost always either an underrepresentation or a misrepresentation of the gender problem in all these films, most feminist critics and sportswomen would agree. The most common and striking trope that cuts across all these films is the presence of a strong heroic male character/protagonist *because* of who these women achieved what they did. The women need these men to believe in them, have conviction in them, to validate their experience and talent, to coach, support, motivate, push and encourage them to pursue or make a return to sports. And in doing so, they emerge as 'heroes', the progressive supportive extraordinary men, the central figures in the movie, around whose beliefs, support, and goals, the movie revolves. The man here is glorified and romanticised as progressive, supportive, extraordinary man and his character/role is often under the spotlight, sometimes even more than the women in the film. The presence of such a central figure, the male, becomes very vital for the plot of a movie which then points to the question of who exactly is the film about? Is it about Shah Rukh Khan's lost reputation he has to gain back by coaching a 'loser' team and making them win (Chak De India), about Aamir Khan's dreams imposed on his daughters against their wish (Dangal), or about Madhavan's revenge and dreams for which the woman is a mere instrument (SaalaKhadoos).

Interestingly, another striking feature of these 'women centric' sports films are their posters through which the above discussed trope becomes vivid. Almost all the posters barring Mary



Kom (2014) and SaandkiAankh (2019) have the male figure (the protagonist), and mostly at the centre taking the spotlight. Another interesting observation is the portrayal of these women as wives and mothers, highlighting their gendered roles as evident from the film posters of Mary Kom (2014) and Dangal (2020). These women are celebrated in the film not merely for their achievements and success in the field of sports but for their resilience, going against all the odds of patriarchy. Here, the resilience is navigating their gender roles and their careers as sportswoman. Most films require a plot of drama, of conflict, and the resolving of that conflict in the climax, providing a closure and a ‘happy’ ending to the audience. In the ‘women-centric’ sports films, this conflict is largely based on the performative and ascriptive status and roles of their gender. They are celebrated figures precisely because they excel *despite* familial and social obligations related to them being ‘women’. These characters are seen to struggle both internally and externally and oscillate between their identity as mothers and wives and as sportswomen.

### ***Gender Roles***

In all these films, again, there’s an over emphasis of a woman being able to do what a man can do, and hence she is entitled to be given a chance at sports. They all point towards becoming more like a man to be able to achieve success in this field. A woman needs to not care about anything else, be free of social and personal obligations, actively disengage with her femininity to prove herself, to prove that she can be as committed and invested as a man, and hence she deserves to be invested in. There’s an implicit correlation here, that is, the association of the ‘rough’ and rustic nature of sports with masculinity and masculine characteristics. The more rustic a sport is, the more male it is, and hence a married woman’s body along with her performative roles as wife and mother, is not equipped to go through the intense training that a sport requires.

It is often portrayed and generally perceived that marriage or motherhood implies the end of careers for women which is especially believed to be true in the field of sports since it requires immense investment and commitment and because the body is directly an instrument for one to excel. These films become tales/feats of personal victories, of personal resilience, underlining the conflicting demands of emphasised femininity and athleticism. The incompatibility of femininity and sports is often another common trope across the films. The



balance between the public and the private, between being a ‘good’ mother or wife and a good athlete is often stressed on contributing to the drama of the film. For instance, in *Dangal* (2016), the woman is not supposed to embrace her femininity or indulge her feminine characteristics of wanting to grow her hair, paint her nails, etc. because it’s a distraction. In *Mary Kom* (2014) too, she is advised against getting married or becoming a mother since that would hamper her career in sports ultimately leading her to ‘sacrifice’ her passion for boxing.

In a similar fashion, *Panga* (2020) depicts a kabaddi player who has internalised this perceived incompatibility of motherhood and sports who herself lets go of her passion for the sport after marriage and after giving birth. In the movie, she refuses to practice and use a certain ‘risky’ technique because in her words, “*meraekchotabachchahai*” [Trans: I have a small kid]. She was already working in the railways before she decides to make her return to the sport and never was she seen as compromising with her care work. However, throughout the movie, it is shown how her husband and her child are suffering and are having to adjust once she starts pursuing the sport because she is not there to take care of them but it is all well and good since at the end, she makes her team win. This particular trope/motif implies that a woman can let her of duties and responsibilities as a wife and a mother as long as she is doing something *great*. In *Chak De India* (2007) too, there are a couple of instances where the captain is shown to be in a conflict with her role as a daughter-in-law and wife and as a hockey player. In the same film, another woman is shown to fight with her fiancé, a national cricket player, who assumes she will let go of her career once she gets married, ultimately resulting in her calling off the relationship. This emphasised incompatibility results in the portrayal of a successful sports career as a trade off for marriage and motherhood. Unlike the man, a woman cannot have both, and has to inevitably sacrifice one for the other. The climax usually involves resolving of this conflict between the two apparently opposite sides through the involvement of the mediating role of a male figure (a husband, a coach, a father, etc.) who supports and encourages her career, ultimately becoming the ‘hero’.

### ***Agency and The Institution of Sports***

There is an absence of the agency and autonomy of the sportswomen in these films, wherein they are often mere instruments through who the male protagonists in these films to achieve



their dreams, recover their lost reputations, and become the *real* ‘heroes’ (Chak De India, Dangal, SaalaKhadoos). They are the ones, through the women, challenging the patriarchal society and teaching the women to be resilience. In other words, it is these male figures who are shown to be empowering these women. Moreover, these men, as coaches and mentors, are portrayed to strategise and plan the training and practice, preparing the women for tournaments and competitions. Their involvement is so much so that the achievement becomes ‘shared’, it’s not solely the woman’s talent or rigour that got her success but the work and investment of these men in them.

The agency of the woman is almost totally invisibilised here and by highlighting such struggles, and only such struggles, there is also an invisibilisation of the structural inequality and discrimination in the organisation of sports. The institution of sports and its infrastructural apparatus are almost never held responsible for the gender inequality in the field of sports. And in the little instances they are depicted in the movies, they only reflect the thought processes of the people constitutive of them mirroring the attitudes of the larger society but not the institution and its structure itself. Even in the movies, as in the reality, the board members, the trustees, the committees, that is, the decision makers are almost always male. Women are either not represented at all or are underrepresented in such bodies of importance leading to the negligence of their needs, their rights, and infrastructural allotments to suit their experiences and lives.

In the movies, there’s also an invisibilisation of sexuality. For instance, through a recently filed Right to Information (RTI), there came out around forty five sexual harassment cases in twenty five Sports Authority of India(SAI) centers across the country in the past ten years. What is more shocking is the fact that the majority of victims are minors and the majority of complaints are against those who mentor, teach and train the athletes, with numerous complaints still pending against coaches<sup>1</sup>. By not acknowledging such issues in the popularly

---

<sup>1</sup><https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/athletes-sports-coach-metoo-sexual-harassment-sports-authority-of-india-6230436/>

[https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/12/14/7-times-indian-sportswomen-reported-of-facing-sexual-harassment\\_a\\_21627488/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/12/14/7-times-indian-sportswomen-reported-of-facing-sexual-harassment_a_21627488/)

<https://thewire.in/sport/rti-sai-sexual-harassment>



consumed media and by restricting the issues women have to face in the field of sports to gender roles and conflicts, the film industry is not doing justice to the kind of experiences women have to go through within the institution of sports, probably leading to a lot of them quitting sports altogether. By not acknowledging the existence of such problems, the film industry refuses to hold the institution and structure of sports accountable and responsible to create safer, equal, and non-discriminative spaces for women. The institution then is supposedly alright and it's only the societal attitudes regarding women as sportswomen that needs to be changed. But as evident, it's the institution that requires a redesigning of itself to accommodate the varied experiences of women and provide infrastructural and institutional support for the same. The oppressive structure needs to be pointed out for there to be a tangible change in the society. Take the example of *Chak De India* (2007) where the senior most player offers to 'sleep' with the coach in order to become the captain of the Indian hockey team. This scene and the conversation between this player and the coach implies that this is perceived to be a common scenario in sports and given her seniority, it can be suggested that this was how things worked until this new coach got there. Imagine a similar conversation in sports films that are male centric. It simply cannot be the case that a man can 'sleep' his way to the team, instead the emphasis is his talent and probably his social capital.

Thus, there is a visible lack of a structural critique of the institution of sports and even when a couple of films did attempt to do so, it is an uncertain attempt, just another struggle of a sportswoman. However, the need to acknowledge and recognise that this is one of the primary struggles that acts as a major obstacle in the pursuing of sports as a profession and as a career for women, proves to be very vital, more so in a scenario wherein the effects of cinema are not only colossal on the populations and their attitudes but also at the level of policy and potential tangible change. Thus, the films also need to focus on the restructuring of the institution as a whole instead of separating the individuals from the institutions such that these stories become mere personal tales of victory.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to improve the understanding of the relationship between representation of Female athletes and Hindi cinema. The substantial variation between male and female representation in media is well recognised and the literature modeling this



analysis has expanded significantly in recent years which has enabled better understanding of the important factors and outcomes of these variations. However, much of this literature has not talked about the various subsets of media in the Indian context. With this paper we have attempted to shed light on one of these subsets i.e. cinema as mode of mass communication.

The analysis highlights the issues in the existing institution of sports' representation which in turn is, as has been presented so far, not free of the deeply rooted and dominant heterosexual patriarchal discourse. It also highlights the impacts that it may have on the Indian society by continuing to create a shortage of role models for women to look up to for motivation and inspiration, leading to the reinforcement of the stereotypical definitions of gender roles which then ends up becoming a barrier on the path of correction of inequalities.

It might be useful to examine other markers of identities like race, ethnicity, caste, class etc. and their intersectionalities in order to hold the institution of sports accountable so that these inequalities can be worked upon and the institution can be made truly inclusive and accessible to everyone.

## References

1. Acker, J. (1992). Gendering Organizational Theory. In A. J. Mills & P. Tancred (Eds.), *Gendering Organizational Analysis* (248–262). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
2. Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4, 139–158.
3. Alexander, S. (1994). Newspaper Coverage of Athletics as a Function of Gender. *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 17, Issue 6, 655-662.
4. Basu S., Kak S. and Krishen P. (1981), Indian Popular Cinema: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor. *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 8 (1),57-76.
5. Bruce, T. (2016). New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave. *SexRoles* 74, 361–376.
6. Caudwell, J. (2009). Girlfight and Bend it Like Beckham: Screening Women, Sport, and Sexuality. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13:3, 255-271.
7. Claringbould, I., Knoppers, A. & Elling, A. (2004). Exclusionary Practices in Sport Journalism. *SexRoles* 51, 709–718.
8. Cooky C, Messner MA, Hextrum RH. (2013). Women Play Sport, But Not on TV: A Longitudinal Study of Televised News Media. *Communication & Sport*, 1(3), 203-230.



9. Douglas, D. D. (2005). Venus, Serena, and the Women's Tennis Association: When and Where "Race" Enters. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22(3), 255-281.
10. Heineken, D. (2015). "So Tight in the Thighs, So Loose in the Waist". *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:6, 1035-1052.
11. Kane, M. J. (1996). Media Coverage of the Post Title IX Female Athlete: A Feminist Analysis of Sport, Gender, and Power. *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, Vol. 3 (1), 95-130.
12. Kellner, D. (1995), *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
13. Lindner, K. (2011). Bodies in Action. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11:3, 321-345.
14. Tremblay, R. C. (1996). Representation and reflection of self and society in the Bombay cinema. *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 5 (3), 303-318.
15. Wenner L. Staff. (1998). *Media Sport*, London: Routledge.
16. Willis, P. (1982). Women in Sport in Ideology. In Hargreaves, J. (Ed.), *Sport, Culture and Ideology*(117–136). London: Routledge.
17. Wright W. (1975), *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. University of California Press: California.