



SPORTING NATION: NATIONALISM, DISCRIMINATION AND REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN SPORTS

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Abstract

Sport in India functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful cultural and political institution through which national identity, belonging, and social hierarchy are produced. While sporting achievements are widely celebrated as symbols of national pride, the politics of representation within Indian sport remains deeply unequal. This study examines how nationalism in Indian sport intersects with religion, caste, gender, and region to shape the inclusion and exclusion of athletes. Using a qualitative methodology based on sports media discourse, historical case studies, and theoretical frameworks from nationalism and cultural sociology, the paper analyses how certain sporting bodies are glorified as symbols of the nation while others are subjected to suspicion, erasure, and ideological discipline. The findings reveal that Indian sporting nationalism operates as a form of symbolic power that reproduces dominant social structures while marginalising minority identities. The paper argues that sport in India functions not only as a unifying spectacle but also as a site where unequal citizenship is continually produced and reinforced.

Keywords: Caste, Discrimination, Gender, India, Nationalism, Sport

Introduction

Sport occupies a uniquely powerful position in the cultural and emotional life of contemporary India. Cricket matches, Olympic contests and international tournaments are not experienced merely as games but as moments of national intensity, where pride, anxiety and political meaning converge. Victories are routinely narrated as triumphs of the nation, while defeats provoke public mourning, blame and moral judgement. This collective emotional investment reflects what Benedict Anderson describes as the nation as an “imagined community,” held together not by direct social contact but by shared symbols, rituals and mediated experiences (Anderson, 2006). In India, few rituals produce this sense of collective belonging as forcefully as sport.

The historical relationship between sport and nationalism in India is deeply rooted in the colonial encounter. Cricket, introduced by the British as a marker of imperial superiority, was gradually appropriated by Indian players and spectators as a site of cultural assertion and symbolic resistance (Nandy, 2000). After independence, sporting success came to be closely tied to ideas of national pride, modernity and global recognition. Cricketers, Olympic medalists and other elite athletes were transformed into national icons whose bodies, gestures and performances were read as representations of the Indian nation itself.

Yet this apparently unifying narrative masks profound inequalities. Not all athletes are permitted to represent the nation in the same way or with the same ease. Religious minorities, women, Dalits, Adivasis and athletes from regions such as the North-East often encounter suspicion, stereotyping and conditional acceptance. Their belonging is frequently measured against standards of cultural conformity, political loyalty and moral respectability that dominant groups are rarely asked to meet. In moments of failure or controversy, these athletes are far more vulnerable to being cast as outsiders or even as threats to the nation.



While existing scholarship on Indian sport has offered valuable insights into its economic, administrative and historical dimensions (Majumdar & Mehta, 2014), there remains a significant gap in critical work that examines sport as a site of cultural power where nationalism, identity and social hierarchy intersect. This study seeks to address that lacuna by analysing how Indian sporting nationalism operates as a system of symbolic power that both produces and polices the boundaries of national belonging. By focusing on media representations and the experiences of marginalised athletes, the paper argues that sport in India does not simply reflect the nation but actively participates in shaping unequal forms of citizenship.

Literature Review

Scholarship on nationalism has long emphasised that nations are not natural or self-evident entities but cultural and political constructions. Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" remains foundational to understanding how large populations come to experience a sense of shared belonging through symbols, narratives and media rather than through direct interpersonal contact (Anderson, 2006). Sport, as a mass spectacle consumed simultaneously by millions, has been widely recognised as one of the most effective mechanisms through which this imagined community is produced and sustained (Dimeo, 2014). Sporting events create emotionally charged moments in which individuals feel themselves part of a larger collective, often in opposition to an external "other".

In the Indian context, cricket has received particular scholarly attention as a postcolonial cultural form. Ashis Nandy argues that cricket became a symbolic site where Indians could reverse the hierarchies of colonial power, defeating their former rulers on a field that had once been used to assert British superiority (Nandy, 2000). Majumdar and Mehta further demonstrate how cricket in post-independence India has been deeply intertwined with media, commerce and politics, transforming players into national icons and sporting events into spectacles of national identity (Majumdar & Mehta, 2014). Yet much of this work tends to celebrate cricket's unifying potential while paying less attention to the inequalities embedded within this nationalism.

Feminist scholars have shown that women's participation in sport is shaped by nationalist and patriarchal ideologies. Chakraborty observes that Indian women athletes are expected to embody not only sporting excellence but also ideals of moral respectability, national honour and feminine virtue (Chakraborty, 2018). This places women in sport under a double burden: they must perform for the nation while also conforming to restrictive gender norms. Hargreaves similarly argues that across cultures, women's sport is often used to regulate female bodies and reinforce dominant ideas of femininity and sexuality (Hargreaves, 1994).

Caste and regional identity remain relatively under-theorised in sports studies, but the available scholarship reveals their persistent influence. Majumdar's historical account of Indian cricket shows that caste discrimination has long shaped access to sporting institutions, even when it is publicly denied (Majumdar, 2004). Studies of Dalit and Adivasi athletes further suggest that their successes are frequently framed as evidence of social equality, masking the structural barriers they continue to face (Deshpande, 2013). Baruah's work on India's North-East highlights how athletes from this region are often treated as culturally foreign despite representing the nation, revealing how national belonging is unequally distributed (Baruah, 2020).



Taken together, these bodies of scholarship suggest that sport in India is deeply embedded in broader relations of power. However, relatively little work has explicitly examined how nationalism itself operates within sport as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. By bringing together theories of nationalism, symbolic power and social difference, this study seeks to fill that gap and offer a more critical understanding of how sporting representation shapes ideas of who truly belongs to the Indian nation.

Results

The qualitative analysis of sports media discourse, historical examples and scholarly sources reveals four dominant patterns in the operation of nationalism within Indian sport. Together, these patterns demonstrate that sporting representation in India is structured by social hierarchies rather than governed solely by merit or performance.

4.1 Selective Construction of the “National” Athlete

Indian sports media consistently produces a narrow and idealised image of the “true” national athlete. This figure is typically male, Hindu, and culturally aligned with dominant norms of patriotism and respectability. Athletes who fit this profile are readily celebrated as embodiments of the nation, while those who diverge from it are more likely to be scrutinised or marginalised (Majumdar & Mehta, 2014). The repetition of such images in advertising, commentary and news coverage creates a symbolic hierarchy in which some bodies appear naturally national, while others must continuously prove their belonging.

4.2 Religious Surveillance and the Muslim Athlete

One of the most visible forms of exclusion within Indian sport is the differential treatment of Muslim athletes. Cricketers such as Mohammed Shami and Mohammed Siraj have repeatedly been subjected to abuse and accusations of disloyalty following team defeats, particularly during matches against Pakistan. In these moments, their religious identity is mobilised to question their patriotism, as if Muslim athletes carry an inherent risk of betrayal (Thapar, 2014). This phenomenon illustrates how sporting nationalism mirrors wider political discourses that associate Indian nationhood with Hindu identity, turning Muslim players into conditional representatives of the nation.

4.3 Gendered Nationalism and the Policing of Women Athletes

Women athletes in India are positioned within a highly gendered form of nationalism. While their victories are celebrated as national achievements, their bodies, relationships and personal choices are subjected to intense moral scrutiny. Athletes such as Sania Mirza and Dutee Chand have been criticised not for their sporting performance but for their clothing, sexuality and perceived conformity to ideals of Indian womanhood (Chakraborty, 2018; Sen, 2015). Their representation reveals that women are expected to carry the symbolic burden of national honour in ways that male athletes are not.

4.4 Caste, Region and the Erasure of Structural Inequality

Dalit, Adivasi and North-Eastern athletes frequently experience a different form of marginalisation: erasure. When such athletes succeed, their achievements are celebrated as individual stories of talent and hard work, while the structural



inequalities they have had to overcome remain unspoken (Majumdar, 2004; Baruah, 2020). This framing allows the nation to take pride in their success without acknowledging the caste- and region-based exclusions that shape Indian sport. As a result, sporting nationalism becomes a way of denying social injustice rather than confronting it.

Discussion

The patterns identified in the results section make it clear that Indian sport functions not as a neutral arena of competition but as a powerful site of cultural and political meaning. Rather than simply reflecting social divisions, sporting nationalism actively produces and legitimises them. This process can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, which refers to the ability to define what is seen as legitimate, respectable and representative within a given social field (Bourdieu, 1991). In Indian sport, symbolic power determines whose bodies can be easily imagined as national and whose must constantly be tested, disciplined or excluded.

Cricket, as the most visible and emotionally charged sport in India, plays a particularly significant role in this process. The media spectacle surrounding cricket transforms players into symbols of the nation, turning their performances into moral and political statements. However, this symbolic elevation is uneven. Muslim cricketers are repeatedly placed under suspicion, especially in moments of failure or during matches against Pakistan, revealing how sporting nationalism overlaps with Hindu majoritarian politics (Nandy, 2000; Thapar, 2014). Their loyalty is not taken for granted but must be continuously demonstrated, indicating that their national belonging remains conditional.

The experiences of women athletes further reveal how nationalism operates through gendered forms of control. Women in sport are celebrated as national heroes only insofar as they conform to dominant ideals of femininity, respectability and sexual morality. When athletes such as Dutee Chand or Sania Mirza challenge these norms—whether through their personal lives or through political dissent—they are subjected to intense public scrutiny and moral judgement (Chakraborty, 2018; Sen, 2015). Nationalism thus demands not only athletic success from women but also ideological obedience.

Caste and regional identity complicate this picture in different ways. Dalit and Adivasi athletes, as well as those from the North-East, are rarely positioned as natural representatives of the nation. Instead, their success is framed as exceptional, reinforcing the idea that they have overcome their background rather than exposing the structural inequalities embedded in Indian sport (Majumdar, 2004; Baruah, 2020). This narrative allows the nation to celebrate diversity symbolically while avoiding any serious engagement with social injustice.

Taken together, these dynamics show that Indian sporting nationalism functions less as a force of unity and more as a system of regulation. It produces a hierarchy of belonging in which some identities are affirmed as authentically Indian while others remain perpetually vulnerable to exclusion. Sport, far from being outside politics, becomes one of the most visible arenas in which the politics of identity and citizenship are played out.

Findings

Based on the qualitative analysis of sports media, historical cases, and theoretical frameworks, the study arrives at the following key findings:

1. Indian sporting nationalism is selective rather than inclusive.

Although sport is widely celebrated as a unifying force, the symbolic representation of the nation privileges



dominant identities while marginalising religious, caste and regional minorities (Anderson, 2006; Majumdar & Mehta, 2014).

2. Minority athletes experience conditional belonging.

Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi and North-Eastern athletes are accepted as national representatives only as long as they conform to dominant expectations of loyalty, cultural conformity and silence (Baruah, 2020; Thapar, 2014).

3. Sports media plays a central role in producing nationalist hierarchies.

Through commentary, imagery and narrative framing, the media constructs certain bodies as naturally national while portraying others as suspicious or exceptional (Majumdar & Mehta, 2014; Dimeo, 2014).

4. Gendered nationalism regulates women's participation in sport.

Female athletes are burdened with representing both the nation and its moral values, making them especially vulnerable to public policing and ideological control (Chakraborty, 2018; Sen, 2015).

Suggestions

In light of these findings, the following measures are suggested:

1. Institutional safeguards against discrimination

National sports bodies should implement clear anti-discrimination policies addressing caste, religion, gender and regional bias in selection, training and media representation (Deshpande, 2013; Majumdar, 2004).

2. Inclusive sports media practices

Media organisations should be encouraged to adopt ethical guidelines that prevent the stereotyping or surveillance of minority athletes and promote diverse sporting narratives (Dimeo, 2014; Majumdar & Mehta, 2014).

3. Support systems for marginalised athletes

Targeted financial, psychological and infrastructural support should be provided to athletes from disadvantaged communities to counter structural inequality (Baruah, 2020; Deshpande, 2013).

4. Gender-sensitive governance in sport

Sports institutions must ensure that women athletes are protected from moral policing, harassment and unequal treatment, especially when they speak out against injustice (Chakraborty, 2018; Hargreaves, 1994).

Conclusion

This study has examined Indian sport not simply as a domain of competition and entertainment, but as a powerful cultural arena in which nationalism, identity and inequality are actively produced and contested. By analysing media representations, historical patterns and the experiences of marginalised athletes, the paper has demonstrated that sporting nationalism in India is far from neutral or inclusive. Instead, it operates through selective recognition, allowing certain bodies to stand in for the nation while subjecting others to constant scrutiny, discipline and conditional belonging (Bourdieu, 1991; Anderson, 2006).



The cases of Muslim cricketers, women athletes, Dalit and Adivasi sportspeople, and athletes from the North-East reveal how deeply sport is entangled with broader structures of power. Religious identity, gender norms, caste hierarchies and regional marginalisation continue to shape who is celebrated, who is tolerated and who is silenced within the sporting public sphere (Baruah, 2020; Chakraborty, 2018; Thapar, 2014). In this sense, Indian sport mirrors the contradictions of Indian democracy itself: it promises equality and unity, yet frequently reproduces exclusion and inequality.

By situating sport within theories of nationalism and symbolic power, this study contributes to a more critical understanding of how cultural practices shape political belonging. Sport does not merely reflect the nation; it helps imagine, perform and regulate it (Anderson, 2006; Bourdieu, 1991). Recognising this opens up the possibility of rethinking Indian sport not as a spectacle of patriotic pride alone, but as a site where more inclusive and democratic forms of national belonging might be envisioned.

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