



# “Social barriers faced by Para-Athletes in Rajasthan: A Sociological Study”

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## Abstract:

For the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities, Para-sports have emerged as an important platform. However, there is an increase in the recognition of Para-athletes at various levels viz., national or international level; despite this various social barriers continue to affect their participation and acceptance within the society. The current study tries to examine the social barriers faced by Para-athletes in Rajasthan from a sociological perspective. This work is based on primary data collected during the state level games from a total of 201 Para-athletes, using a structured questionnaire including both open and close ended questions. The findings are of the view that despite the growth in this field many Para-athletes experience social challenges such as discrimination, negative societal attitudes, lack of recognition and exclusion. Respondents also highlighted that society often views Para-athletes differently from able-bodied athletes. These experiences of the respondents reflect the persisting stigma and stereotype associated with disability. Addressing these challenges requires a larger social awareness, empathy, inclusive attitudes in order to enhance Para-sports and promote a more equitable sporting environment.

## Keywords:

Disability, Para- Sports, Rajasthan, Para-athlete, Stigma, Sociology.

## Introduction:

Sports is considered as a powerful tool for social institution that shapes identities, provide social meanings, and highlights the broader structures of inequality that exists within the society. Sports have been increasingly recognised as a zone of inclusion, empowerment, and social mobility, within the contemporary societies. But, the access to participation in sports mostly remains uneven, particularly for persons with disabilities. Due to the growth of the Paralympic movement globally, Para-sports have gained a wide recognition, still the structural and cultural barriers continue to affect the lived experiences of Para-athletes.

Across the globe, the formalization of disability rights gained momentum with the adoption of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD), which recognised recreation, leisure and sports as fundamental rights (UN,2006). In the same way the WHO conceptualised disability as an interaction between health conditions and contextual barriers instead of it being merely as an individual impairment (WHO, 2001). Despite these formalised advances, it is often observed that persons with disabilities encounter exclusion rooted in stigma, social attitudes, and institutional inaccessibility.

In the Indian context, with legislation of the Rights of Person with Disabilities Act (2016) increased and strengthened the formal recognition and rights of the person with disability, but the social realities of inclusion still remain blurred and uneven. Para-athletes often observe complex intersection of disability, gender, class, caste and regional inequalities as their barriers. Rajasthan, with its diverse socio-cultural nature and

traditional setup of social structures, provides a significant context for the examination as how social and cultural factors shape and define sports participation among person with disabilities.

While, the achievements of elite Paralympians are celebrated in public discourse and also discussed by media, but limited or negligible sociological research is done to examine the everyday barriers faced by Para-athletes at the state and grass root levels. Therefore, there is a demanding need in shifting the narrative from celebratory to analytical to highlight the structure and cultural constraints that influence participation, recognition and mobility in Para-sports.

Thus, this study aims to examine the social and cultural barriers faced or experienced by Para-athletes in Rajasthan and to locate these experiences within broader sociological debated on disability, stigma and social exclusion.

Theoretical Framework:

a) Social Model of Disability:

The above mentioned model “Social Model of disability”, has emerged as an alternative or a critique to the dominant narrative of disability which is the medical model, whose focus revolve around individual body. Here, under the social model, disability is viewed through the lens of society as a socially constructed barriers rather than individual impairment (Oliver, 1990). Disabling conditions are collectively created around physical inaccessibility created around physical inaccessibility, discriminatory attitudes, institutional exclusion and cultural stereotypes.

Within the dimension of sports, the social model of disability highlights the exclusion from training facilities, lack of accessibility toward infrastructure and societal undervaluation of Para-sports are not inevitable consequences of impairment or disability instead it is an outcome of societal structural inequality. Hence, it becomes essential to examine the experiences of Para-athletes under the broader social arrangements that shape participation.

b) Stigma and Social Identity:

How disability is socially perceived can be understood by studying Erving Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma as it provides an important lens. Goffman formalised the idea of stigma as a deep discrediting attribute of society that reduces an individual from a whole person to a discounted one. Stigma often manifest around pity, stereotyping and lowered expectation especially from person with disabilities.

Under the preview of sports, symbolic inclusion is often experienced by Para-athletes – where they are being praised as “inspirational” – while simultaneously encountering structure exclusion. This dichotomy reflects the idea of Goffman described as the management of spoiled identity, where individuals must constantly negotiate social perceptions.

c) Sports Sociology and Social Inequality:

Sports sociology often views sports as a cross-section or epitome of society, reflecting and reproducing social hierarchies (Coakley, 2017). Access, recognition and reward in sporting institutions are shaped to intersect with the issues of gender, class and race.

Thus, from this perspective, Para-sports cannot be studied in isolation but must be situated within the broader umbrella of power structures that define “normal” bodies and accepted athleticism.

The role of family support, institutional backing, and infrastructure in enabling sports participation can be understood with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital. Access to resources and recognition is often attributed or mediated through social connections and symbolic capital, which may be unequally distributed among Para-athletes.

Taking together, these sociological theoretical perspectives enable us to understand sociologically as how structural, cultural and symbolic factors shape the experiences of Para-athletes in Rajasthan.

## Objectives of the Study:

The present study aims to explore the social and cultural dimensions influencing the participation of Para-athletes in Rajasthan. The specific objectives are:

1. To understand the experiences of discrimination among Para-athletes.
2. To analyse patterns of social exclusion in public spaces and sporting.
3. To situate the findings within sociological theories of disability and stigma.
4. To understand the societal attitudes towards Para-athletes.

## Methodology:

### Research Design:

The study uses a descriptive and analytical research design. It seeks to categorically document the experiences of Para-athletes and interpret that experience through sociological framework.

### Study Area:

The respective study was conducted in the state of Rajasthan, in India, during the state level competition organised at Shri Ganganagar, focusing Para-athletes.

### Sample and Sampling Technique:

The total sample size is of 201 Para-athletes, which include 136 male and 65 female participants. A simple random sampling technique is used to select respondents actively engaged in Para- sports at the state level.

### Tool for Data Collection:

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire with interview schedule consisting closed- ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire includes sections of demographic profile, social experiences, cultural barriers, family support, institutional access and government schemes.

### Method of Data Analysis:

The collected data to be analysed using a percentage based statistical method for closed ended responses. Whereas, the responses to the open-ended questions to be analysed thematically to understand qualitative insights.

### Findings and discussion:

#### 7.1 Socio- Demographic profile of Para- athletes

This study was conducted during the State games of Para-athletics at Shri Ganganagar, where out of more than 500 athletes a total 201 Para-athlete were selected using simple random sampling as respondents for the respective work. These 201 Para-athletes were participating in different sports activities hailing from different districts of Rajasthan.

Among the respondents, 65 were females and the rest 136 males, which clearly indicate the higher participation of male athletes. This gender disparity in sports participation highlights, that woman particularly with disabilities has to face multiple layers of social constraints to reach up to that level.

The respondents belongs to diverse disability categories with different socio-economic background, where majority were from rural area with agricultural background, this reflects the hardship these athletes has to face in terms of diet, training, equipment to participate at different stages of sports activities in Para-athletics. The inclusion of Para-athletes from different districts of Rajasthan provided a bigger picture to understand the social challenges experienced by Para-athletes across varied social contexts.

One thing was also noticeable, as there was not only gender disparity in participation at the state level, but regional disparity also exists.

District	No. of Para-athletes
Nagaur	8
Churu	20
Baran	2
Tonk	1
Beawar	3
Dausa	8
Balotra	2
Bharatpur	8
Pali	3
Barmer	12
Jalore	3
Phalodi	4
Sikar	6
Bikaner	17
Ganganagar	10
Jhunjhunu	16
Jhodhpur	19
Jaipur	16
Sawai Madhopur	2
Udaipur	1
Deedwana- Kuchaman	2
Karauli	3
Dholpur	5
Hanumangarh	12
Kotpuli-Behrod	2
Alwar	3
Khairtal-Teejara	4
Ajmer	3
Bundi	2
Bhilwara	3
Rajsamand	1

Table 1.1

The above table clearly indicate the disparity in participation of Para-athletes from different districts exists, this can occur due to lack of knowledge.

### 7.2 Experiences of Discrimination among Para-athletes:

Discrimination is one of the major indicators of social barriers, hence it becomes important to understand the experiences of discrimination faced by Para-athletes due to their disability.

The findings reveal that out of 201 respondents approximately 72% were of the opinion that they had experienced discrimination and the remaining were of different opinion. Respondents indicated that the experience of discrimination faced by them in social settings often took form of negative attitudes, pity-behaviour and lower expectation due to their disability.

Many were of the opinion that people tend to underestimate their capacity of playing sports, assuming their disability is a barrier for competitive sports. Such perception leads to marginalisation within the society.

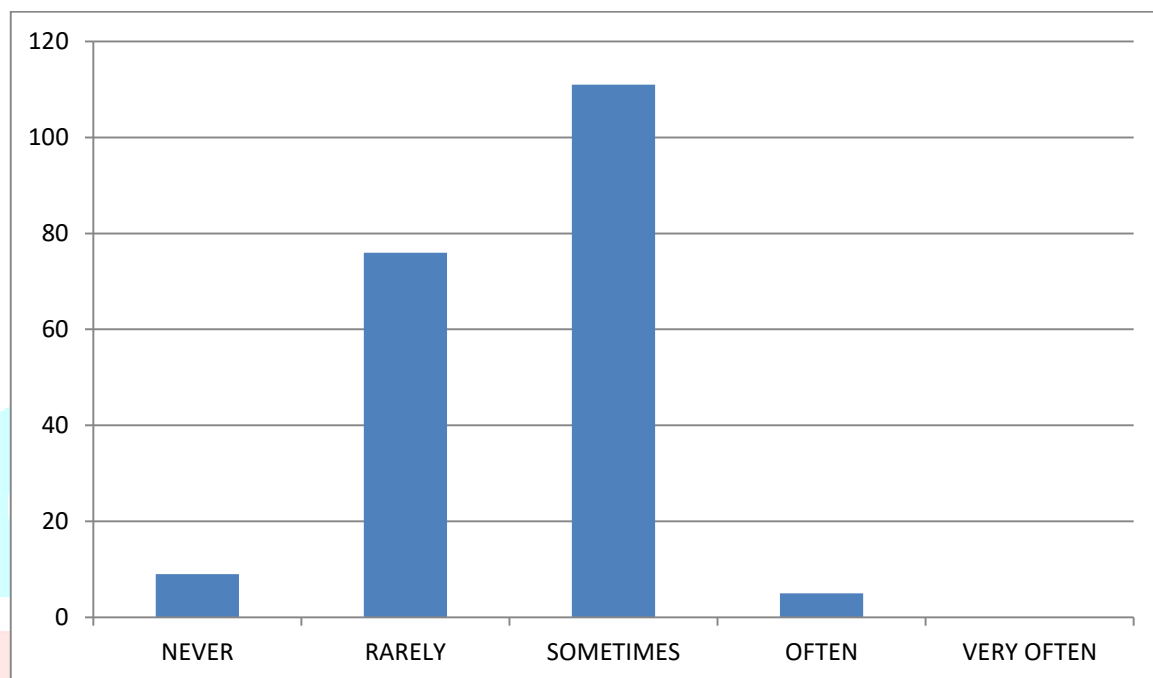
Majority of the respondents tries to ignore such harsh comments, or just accept them, as it make them feel demotivated, but some were of the opinion, that they took this as a challenge to prove their worth.

These findings can be associated with Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, which explain how "deviant" attributes are often subjected to discrimination and stereotyping.

### 7.3 Social Exclusion in Public spaces and Family

The results indicated that out of 201 respondents around 11% were of the opinion that they had felt the exclusion at family set-up, while the remaining 89% never felt such exclusion. These responses suggest that family act as a core for the Para-athletes to cope other discrimination and exclusion they face at various social arenas.

63.2% of respondents experienced exclusion at social gatherings, upon asking majority felt such exclusion by people other than their known, this can be interpreted as those families who have a person with disability within the family, they have empathy towards them while others make them feel uncomfortable or exclude during such social gatherings, as people often fail to understand their journey in sports or their dedication which is required to succeed as a Para-athlete.



Graph 1.1

The above graph indicates that how majority of the respondents faces social stigma around their disability affecting their confidence as a Para-athlete.

Such patterns of exclusion suggest how social environment can form barriers that are extended beyond merely physical accessibility. According to the social model of disability, disability is not produced as impairment instead it is a result of societal barriers, institutional structure and attitudes that restrict and affect participation. (Oliver. 1990)

Therefore, this can be concluded from above that challenges faced by Para-athletes are not just limited to physical constraints but are deeply engulfed within social relationship and societal perception.

### 7.4 Societal perception of Para-athletes:

Another facet of social barrier relates to the level of support and encouragement provided by the surrounding community. The responses suggest that some athletes receive encouragement from neighbours and friends, where majority of them remained neutral but very few of them experienced discouraging attitudes regarding their sports journey.

In another response, the respondents were strongly of the opinion that society treats Para-athletes differently from able-bodied athletes. This differential treatment received by Para-athletes not only affects social interaction but also influences the recognition and legitimacy of Para-sports within the society.

Lack of awareness regarding Para-sports within society often contributes to such attitudes. However, respondents who reported positive support from the society, peers, friends and neighbours also highlight the encouragement they receive and social networks significantly strengthened their motivation to continue in

sports. This highlights that encouragement and social recognition can play an empowering role for Para-athletes in enhancing their confidence.

#### Conclusion:

The finding of the study reveals that social barriers do exist and they remain a significant challenge in the sports journey of Para-athletes in Rajasthan. It is evident that Para-sports have gained a considerable visibility or popularity in recent years, but the experiences of the respondents indicate that social attitude within the society continue to affect their participation and recognition within sports. Most of the Para-athletes reported facing discrimination, negative attitude, negative perception, lack of proper recognition. These experiences highlights that the barriers faced by Para-athletes is not limited to physical ability instead it extend and are closely linked to broader social attitudes and cultural perception around disability.

From a sociological perspective, it is evident through the social model of disability that disability is not shaped only by impairment but also by social exclusion and barriers. Further, the stigma and stereotyping the capabilities of person with disability, often leads to marginalisation in social spaces. At the same time, the findings of the study reveals that favourable and supportive family and social environment with encouragement can play an important role in boosting confidence and motivation of Para-athletes.

Therefore, addressing these barriers faced by Para-athletes require not only improvement in sporting infrastructure but also larger societal change with inclusivity, empathy, support which will in turn help the person with disabilities to pursue future in Para-sports.

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