



Participation Of Indian Women In Sports – Historical Approach

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Abstract: The participation of Indian women in sports has witnessed a significant transformation over the years. From being restricted by social and cultural barriers to achieving international recognition, Indian female athletes have played a crucial role in shaping the country's sporting landscape. This paper explores the historical evolution of women's participation in Indian sports, examining key milestones, policy interventions, societal perceptions, and the challenges that persist. By analyzing the impact of government initiatives, institutional support, and the growing influence of global sporting movements, this study highlights the progress made and the areas that require further development.

Keywords: *Indian Women, Sports, History, Government Policies, Gender Equality, Challenges*

1. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in sports in India has historically been constrained by socio-cultural norms and gender biases. Over the past century, however, there has been a gradual shift in perceptions, leading to increased representation of women in various sports disciplines. This paper aims to trace the historical journey of Indian women in sports, focusing on significant developments, policy interventions, and ongoing challenges.

India, a huge and diverse country, has long embraced sports and its athletes. However, for all of its history, sports participation has been overwhelmingly male-dominated, relegating women to the sidelines. Gender gaps in sports have been exacerbated by deeply embedded social conventions, cultural practices, and traditional beliefs. Traditional gender roles have frequently discouraged women from participating in physically demanding activities, resulting in a lack of access and opportunity for aspiring female athletes. Furthermore, widespread beliefs that women's sports are less exciting or relevant than men's sports have reinforced bias and discrimination in the sector. Though comprehensively on women's participation in sports on a comparative study before and after 1947 was conducted by an Indian national body – National Commission for Youth in 2004 whose report is currently not in public domain which restricts this study on utilization of those data. An another study conducted by Suchitra Akoijam deduces following: Firstly, "National Games data from 25th (1979) to 34th (2011) National Games, Orissa, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Jharkhand are the states whose average women participation remains above other states" (Akoijam, 2012), Secondly, the larger states in India "Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have comparatively lesser average women participants" (Akoijam, 2012), and thirdly, "Manipur though a small state in the North Eastern India is among those states whose women participants as well as total participants are high" (Akoijam, 2012). This study conducted by Suchitra Akoijam depicts an analysis from 1971 to 2011 about the participation of women in National Games and an assessment by statewise participation which provides a microscopic approach to probe the gender equity on statewise.

An account provided by P. Chinappa Reddy in a book titled *Beyond the Threshold- Indian Women on the Move* elucidates the participation of women in sports between 1950-60 where he states "The Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952 was the first games in which the Indian women participated in an international athletics. The eager participants were Mary D'souza (sprinter) and Nilima Ghose (Hurdler). India had a

spectacular win in the 4*100m relay at the second Asian games at Manila. Mary Leela Rao performed well and earned her place in the Indian Olympic Team in Melbourne in 1956. She led the Indian – March past in the games” (Reddy, 1995). That same book also indicates “After independence, the trend set by them formed the basis and women particularly from Bombay, Bangalore and Calcutta” (Reddy, 1995).

Another study conducted by a team of Dr. Sandip Sankar Ghosh and his associates deduces the increase in the Indian women participation in Olympics and also the pattern observed during the period 1900-2016 also indicates the increase in winning percentage such increase in turn out depicts “Female participation has increased steadily since then, with women accounting for more than 44 per cent of the participants at the 2012 Games in London, compared with 23 per cent at the Games in 1984 in Los Angeles and just over 13 per cent at the 1964 Games in Tokyo. In the last 20 years, the IOC has also increased the number of women’s events on the Olympic programme, in cooperation with the International Federations (IFs) and the Organising Committees. With the addition of women’s boxing, the 2012 Olympic Games in London were the first in which women competed in every sport on the Olympic programme. Also, since 1991, all new sports wishing to be included on the Olympic programme must feature women’s events” (Ghosh, Debsarma, Bhowmick, & Sarma, 2018).

The Indian Government explicitly concentrated on sports through a comprehensive policy introduced almost 35 years since 1947, that is on 1984 by the first kind of National Sports Policy. The pilot policy was framed with the objective to “raise the standard of sports in the country” (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2001). Another scholarly article written by Joanne Clarke on reviewing the sports policy of India comments “India’s early sport policy in 1984 separated physical education and sport from each other as two distinct focus areas. In the subsequent years, while sport policies and sporting ecosystems were embedded in many other nations, there was no sport policy update for 16 years in India, until 2001” (Clarke & Mondal, 2022). As the policies were crafted in the decade before to the advent of the 1991 reforms, the care to promote the women in sports was lately recognized till the first Olympic gold medal was attained by Karnam Malleswari in 2000.

The story of Indian women in athletics is one of tenacity, determination, and breaking down boundaries. Women in India have encountered several hurdles and societal constraints that have limited their participation in sports over the decades. However, their journey from marginalisation to amazing achievement has been both inspiring and transformative. After the feat of Karnam Malleswari various women have emerged significant players to earn spotlight. Throughout the later half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, contemporary to Karnam Malleswari, many Indian women have excelled in sports whose demonstration in International stages have rose prominent display in the international stage. P.T. Usha, often known as the “Payyoli Express,” rose to prominence in sports throughout the 1980s. She narrowly missed out on a bronze medal in the 400m hurdles at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. By breaking the stereotypes in her religion, the tennis sensation Sania Mirza broke barriers in 2005 by becoming the first Indian woman to win a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) title whose accomplishments cleared the path for many women in India to pursue tennis as a viable career option. Indian women have succeeded in a variety of sports in recent years, including badminton, wrestling, boxing, and shooting. Internationally acclaimed players such as Saina Nehwal, PV Sindhu, Sakshi Malik, Mary Kom, and Manika Batra have brought countless honours to the country. Women's cricket has also seen a significant increase in popularity and recognition. The Indian women's cricket team, headed by stalwarts such as Mithali Raj and Harmanpreet Kaur, advanced to the finals of the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup in 2017, garnering significant acclaim and support. The history of Indian women in sports demonstrates their unbreakable spirit and endurance. Indian women have gone a long way from ancient times, when they participated in numerous physical pursuits, to the current period, when they compete and excel on the global arena. Their accomplishments have broken down barriers and set new standards. As India progresses, it is critical to build on this development by offering equal chances, support, and recognition to female athletes, who continue to bring honour to the country while inspiring future generations.

2. EARLY YEARS: COLONIAL AND POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

During the British colonial period, sports were predominantly considered a male domain, with limited opportunities for women. However, a few pioneering women participated in traditional games and elite sports like tennis and badminton. After India’s independence in 1947, there was a slow but steady effort to promote sports for women, particularly through government schemes and institutional support.

3. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The Indian government has played a crucial role in promoting women's sports through various policies and schemes. Key initiatives include:

- **The National Sports Policy (1984, revised in 2001)** – Aimed at encouraging women's participation in sports at all levels.
- **The Khelo India Program (2018)** – Focuses on grassroots development, with special incentives for female athletes.
- **The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme (2015)** – Though primarily aimed at education and welfare, it indirectly supports female sports participation.
- **Reservation in Sports Quotas** – Various government jobs and educational institutions offer sports quotas to female athletes.

4. MILESTONES IN WOMEN'S SPORTS IN INDIA

Several Indian women have made remarkable contributions to the country's sporting achievements. Some of the significant milestones include:

- **P. T. Usha (1980s)** – One of India's first female track stars, inspiring generations of athletes.
- **Karnam Malleswari (2000)** – Became the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal (bronze in weightlifting).
- **Sania Mirza (2000s)** – Revolutionized Indian women's tennis with her international success.
- **Saina Nehwal & P. V. Sindhu (2010s)** – Global badminton champions with Olympic and World Championship medals.
- **Indian Women's Cricket Team (2017, 2020)** – Their strong performances in ICC tournaments have led to greater recognition.

5. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN SPORTS

Despite progress, Indian women in sports continue to face numerous challenges:

- **Social and Cultural Barriers** – Conservative attitudes often discourage girls from pursuing sports as a career.
- **Lack of Infrastructure** – Many rural and semi-urban areas still lack proper training facilities.
- **Gender Pay Gap** – Female athletes receive significantly lower financial rewards compared to their male counterparts.
- **Limited Media Coverage** – Women's sports receive less attention, affecting sponsorship and visibility.
- **Harassment and Safety Concerns** – Reports of misconduct and inadequate protection mechanisms have been barriers to female participation.

6. THE WAY FORWARD

To ensure sustained growth and success of women in sports, the following measures are essential:

- **Enhanced Grassroots Programs** – More investment in training centers and scholarships for young female athletes.
- **Equal Pay and Sponsorship Opportunities** – Bridging the financial disparity between male and female athletes.
- **Media and Awareness Campaigns** – Increasing coverage and promoting role models to inspire future generations.
- **Stronger Legal Protections** – Implementing strict policies against harassment and discrimination.
- **Involvement of Private Sector** – Encouraging corporate sponsorships and mentorship programs for female athletes.

7. CONCLUSION

The journey of Indian women in sports has been marked by resilience and determination. While significant progress has been made, achieving full gender parity in sports requires continued policy support, societal change, and increased investment. By addressing existing challenges and fostering an inclusive sporting environment, India can ensure that its female athletes continue to excel on national and international stages.

8. REFERENCES

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