

Sport, Choice and Social Class: Reading Indian Female Sports Life Writings

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ABSTRACT

Sports form a continuous part of any culture, created and sustained for entertainment, pleasure, competition and bonding; founded on certain standards, interests, requirements, and resources of the sports community. Yet, the classification of some sports as 'elite' goes unrecognised simply because it appears to be natural and moreover it is always 'how things are'. Traditional theories of class indicate that economic differentiation is the reason for various choices in the society. On the other hand Bourdieu has suggested that economic capital is not the only element influencing one's choice and there are other multiple non-economic criteria too. Taking into account Bourdieu's class concepts we seek to identify the non-economic factors that have led sportspersons in India to their choice of sport. Narrative analysis is performed for autobiographies of two female sportspersons, Saina Nehwal and Mary Kom, to highlight the different parameters that have influenced their choice of sport. The identification of such non-economic factors like a person's mental strength, level of angst, resilience, emotional and financial well-being, and others, provide insight into the stratifications that impact sports culture in India.

1. Introduction

French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's seminal text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), speaks about the 'state of French culture' outlining that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimising social differences" (Bourdieu 1984a:7). For Bourdieu, cultural tastes are not natural indicators of the 'good' but are socially constructed, and this breeds inequality in the field or the social space where these tastes contain or frame themselves (Veenstra 2005). This concept of Bourdieu was mainly derived from the Algerian and French societies, but it is very helpful in analysing class and divide in development and social change processes in other societies too (Navarro 2006). The focus of discourse in this study is India, a country with a population of 1.2 billion, where class and caste divisions still prevail widely.

On 31st August 2018, 'India Today' a widely read English weekly magazine, published an article titled, 'Don't be shocked. It is the poor who win you the medals.' The article listed a few champions of the Asian Games 2018 from India and claimed that all of them came from economically deprived backgrounds. The statement became a topic of much debate, but we Indians certainly are not oblivious of this. People, in general, are aware that sportspersons who excel in sports categories like athletics, boxing, wrestling, weight-lifting, and hockey, to name a few, usually belong to not so well-off families. This takes us back to the idea with which Bourdieu initiated his study on capital and social class. He stated, "all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" (1990b:65). So like all intentional behaviours, choice too derives its influence from the sociocultural context in which the choice is made (Bruner 1990). Our sociocultural contexts shape our lives, and many a times our socio-economic decisions are observed to be influenced by our class affinity. As suggested by Deshpande (2003:126), this is very much in tune with the Marxist class concept wherein "what you are (at the economic level) shapes what you experience (at the social level) which ultimately determines what you do (at the political level)." Marxism propounds that acquiring and sustaining economic power is the reason behind all social and political activities including education, religion, media, philosophy, the arts, science, and technology (Tyson 2015). This is very much evident in the way the dominant classes impose their behaviour, ideals, values, and beliefs on the subordinate classes, not in any explicit forced forms, but through subtle cultural practices that make the distinction indecipherable by the subjugated (Nayar 2017). Thus we see that the traditional theories of class indicate that economic differentiation is the reason for various choices in the society. On the other hand Bourdieu (1984a) has suggested that economic

capital is not the only element influencing one's choice and there are other multiple non-economic criteria too. Clark and Lipset (1991) have added to this notion by arguing that differentiation on the basis of economic power is gradually becoming an outmoded concept as different forms of social stratification emerge with time. This is established and elaborated further in the paper.

Autobiographies and Sports

Autobiographies, in general, have been defined as 'life writing' and 'denotes all modes and genres of telling one's own life.' It seeks to reconstruct the author's personal story within a given 'social, cultural, and historical framework' (Schwalm 2014). Even though autobiographies are supposed to be non-fictional and factual, yet at the same time the narrative is always questioned on its objectivity and exactness since it is subject to 'textual self-fashioning.' It works on the principle of reminiscence and reflection, with introspection being its strongest ally. "Oscillating between the struggle for truthfulness and creativity, between oblivion, concealment, hypocrisy, self-deception and self-conscious fictionalizing, autobiography renders a story of personality formation" (2). James Olney in his book *Memory & Narrative: The Wave of Life-Writing* (1998) has traced the evolution of the autobiographical genre and the change that it has gone through in weaving narrative and identity. He says that anybody who can write a sentence or speak to a ghost writer, or speak into a tape recorder can offer an autobiography. However lucid the narrative seems, it is the most elusive of all the literary forms as it is challenging for a critic to get a hold on it since there are no available general rules. Autobiographical writing takes many forms - prose, poetry, letters, songs, diaries - placed within the 'social, cultural and historical milieu' of a society from which it draws its experiences and reminiscences.

Autobiographical writing in India goes a long way back in history right to the time of the Mughal period. Starting from Babur's *Baburnama* (Memoirs of Babur), to Jahangir's autobiographical work *Tuzuk 'i' Jahangiri* and Abul Fazal's autobiography, have all been widely acclaimed (Agarwal 2013). In the modern period, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1940), Kamala Surayya's *My Story* (1973), A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's *Wings of Fire* (1999), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), are some of the other acclaimed Indian autobiographies that recreate the life-stories of their authors. But digressing from the traditional self-story of autobiographies is Nirad C Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951:45) which as per his own submission, rather than narrating his personal history, narrates the history of the period, "My intention is thus historical... the book may be considered as a contribution to contemporary history." As observed by Iyengar (1985:519), "It is clear, then, that Chaudhuri's real aim is to write history and the autobiographical exercise is merely a means to get the history started." In recent times quite a few sports stars have penned down their autobiographies with the objective of leaving behind their legacy of struggle and hard work in their quest for excellence, to enlighten the discerning generations of fans who follow their games.

Sport today forms an integral part of our lives, and in recent times the country has seen a sudden spurt in autobiographies and biopics based on sports. This sudden attention on sport has undoubtedly taken the sportspersons to the limelight, yet the study of sport in India as a serious intellectual discipline continues to remain underdeveloped (Majumdar 2002). A sports autobiography is thus an appropriate medium to understand the inherent class dichotomies present in our society that dictates the choices in one's life without giving too many options to experiment around. It is considered to be an accurate reflection of a player's willingness to create a living story about the player herself and the sport that she plays – a space the player herself builds that keeps her alive for posterity. These autobiographies might not qualify as great literary works, but they substantively add to the sportspersons' situations in detail. This article focuses on two autobiographies authored by two well-known female sportspersons who have very lucidly and meaningfully narrated their life-stories for the succeeding generations of followers. The authors through their autobiographies have unknowingly highlighted how gender identities get reinforced through the gender roles that society constructs for individuals within the confines of a particular social class. Amartya Sen in his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005:205) suggests that "class, in particular, has an extraordinary role in the establishment and reach of social inequality and it can make the influence of other sources of disparity (such as gender inequality) much sharper."

The two Indian sports autobiographies that are taken into consideration are Saina Nehwal's *Playing to Win* (2012) and Mary Kom's *Unbreakable* (2013). Both have represented India internationally in badminton and boxing respectively. Saina Nehwal belongs to an upper-middle-class family, while Mary Kom keeps allegiance to the working class background. Taking into account Bourdieu's class concepts we assume that economic power is not the only source of one's choice, hence in this paper, we seek to identify the non-economic factors that has led these sportspersons to their choice of sport. Narrative analysis is performed for the two autobiographies to

highlight the foundations on which these two women have made their choices for a particular sport. To further substantiate our argument Bourdieu's class concepts are used to identify the different parameters that have influenced their choice of the sport. The identification of these non-economic factors will hopefully give insight into the type of stratification that influences sports culture in India.

Bourdieu's Class Concepts

According to Bourdieu, the dominant class uses their taste to make a boundary between themselves and the economically less privileged. He explains by suggesting that rich people can afford to buy foods that are nutritious and fat-free, while the poor primarily choose foods that are inexpensive and readily available to them, irrespective of their nutritional value. As a consequence food eaten by the poor get designated as belonging to the lower class simply by association, which also designates an opposite stand to the foods eaten by the rich people. Nayar (2017) suggests that cultural practices like foods that we eat, leisure activities that we practice, our clothing habits, speech mannerisms, or our educational pursuits, are all "determined by class affiliation, or rather the economic status of the community/group." To this list, we can add sports and games activities, or be more precise our choice of sport for practice, and for a possible professional career. We observe something similar in India's sporting circles where many young sportspersons who choose sports like boxing, athletics, wrestling and weight-lifting as their passion and profession are found to be belonging to low socio-economic background. This behaviour by implication also points to the choice of the sport that the wealthy group makes and the reasons for their doing so. It is not the choices of the higher class which determines the division between the 'elite' and the others, but it is the choice of the sport of the lower classes which determines the sports varieties that the rich take up. When poor people excel in some designated sports, the other sports that they are not involved in become 'elite' by simple non-association of the poor. These differences and perceptions among the general public go unrecognised because it appears to be natural and moreover; it is always 'how things are.' The theories proposed by Bourdieu have stimulated new interest in such habituated forms of conduct. Although cultural tastes and practices can manifest themselves in many forms; for example, clothing choices, the car one drives, the food one eats, and so on, but we have chosen a sportsperson's choice of sport as her professional career for analysis in this paper.

Unlike Foucault who saw power as 'ubiquitous,' Bourdieu considered power as symbolically and culturally created through 'habitus.' Bourdieu considered that habitus is the way society influences agents to the extent that they think, feel and act in determinant ways which then guide them (Navarro 2006:16). Hence it is a set of dispositions that is created with time, shaped by social elements and in turn influences our future choices. Along with class identities, gender identities also get reinforced through the gender roles that society constructs for individuals within the confines of a particular social class. For example, men are mostly encouraged for team sports involving aggression and strength, while women are steered towards individual sports which involve grace, like gymnastics, synchronised swimming (Schmalz and Kerstetter 2006:541). Habitus is not resulted by the conscious effort of any structures nor is it the result of free-will alone; instead, it is created by the interplay between the two, over time (Bourdieu 1984a:170). The second concept which will be considered in this article is that of 'capital' by Bourdieu. He talked about different forms of capitals; social, cultural, economic and symbolic which are equally important as they contribute to the changes in society.

Cultural capital plays a significant role in societal power relations as it is connected to other capitals. It is a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy in a society, as classes distinguish themselves through taste (Gaventa 2003:6). A collection of symbolic elements such as posture, skills, material belongings, clothing, taste, mannerisms and so on, join together to form the concept of cultural capital as suggested by Bourdieu. When one becomes a part of a particular social class, he tends to acquire the above said symbolic elements of that particular class. This leads to an unconscious attempt at keeping oneself under some physical limits, and hence to a large extent, this hides the causes of inequality. For example, Mary Kom starts the first chapter in her autobiography with the lines, "My life has been a tough one, and my beginnings were extremely humble. However, I don't wish it to have been any different" (3). She claims that the hardships she faced in her formative years are to be cherished as boxing is a game that needs endurance and strength which her childhood gave her. Then she tells about her childhood where she had no time to have fun with the neighbourhood kids. Moreover, she adds that in her village it is a common sight to see seven-year-olds taking care of their younger siblings when their mother is busy working. However, she backs this statement by saying, "On the whole kids have a lot of freedom in our society" (12). In this case lack of resources breeds inequality but the preordained class divisions hide this fact. Similarly, because of the penury faced by Mary Kom's family, it was apparent on her part to do hard labour in

order to contribute to her family's sustenance. She had to help her parents along with studying for school, just as it was evident on the part of Saina Nehwal to play after school or join for extracurricular activities when she had extra time and felt bored, as she belonged to a financially-stable family. Bourdieu addresses such inequality in his book *Distinction* where through a detailed analysis of the French society he shows how the 'social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds' through 'cultural products' including systems of education, language, judgments, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (Bourdieu 1984a:471).

Field theory is the third concept among Bourdieu's trilogy. By field, he means the different institutional and social arenas where people play their part in order to acquire their share of the different kinds of capital that has been distributed (Gaventa 2003:6). Unconsciously agents start accepting their social differences and hierarchies and start creating divisions between things that they consider they are included in, and other things that they are excluded from. Goffman supports it by saying that the socially constructed stigmas control us in determining our behaviour, and this is perceived as usual (Goffman 2009:12). This notion is known as 'doxa.' "Any field is relatively bounded, not by walls or natural barriers but by constraints on who can engage in which positions" (Hanks 2005:70). Access will always be different and selective. As a matter of 'doxa' people demark certain exclusions in their lives, and hence unknowingly characterize themselves. Hence in a 'doxic' state the 'taste' of a particular person is taken for granted and natural. Due to this, individuals, in general, do not aspire for situations which are perceived to be unavailable for them. Instead, they go for what 'conditions' have made possible for them. Bourdieu gives the example of education, where high-class people have pre-enlisted schools in their minds for their children. It is taken for granted that a rich person will not send his child to a low budget school, which is also affordable for the working class people, and working-class people will always aspire to study with the privileged class as this is one sure way of breaking the class barriers. Like in the case of Mary Kom where she speaks about her father's dream of getting her admitted to an English medium school - "it was, of course, a dream way beyond his means" (11). Still, her father managed to educate her in an English medium school, but for that, they had to double their daily labour to earn more and thereby meet the expenses of her education.

Choice of Sports as a 'Classed Practice'

"Habitus, Capital and Field" make a strong bond when they come together. Among all, habitus is one of the most important concepts of Bourdieu because he says that cultural capital is visible in the habitus of the agents which they acquire through life's experiences. Bourdieu considers education to be one of the reasons for the segregation of individuals into belonging to certain hierarchies (Grenfell 2008). However, in the case of the choice of sport, we find that education is not the primary parameter of distinction in the social space. This observation is derived from the fact that Saina Nehwal and Mary Kom had similar types of school education. Both went to 'standard' English medium schools - 'standard' as defined by the place and locations of the schools - still their choices were different. Mary had mental support from her parents, but she was also toiling with her parents to afford this luxury of studying in an English medium school. Whereas Saina had financial, mental and physical support regarding her studies and sports.

Moreover, Mary says that her everyday life triggered the fighting spirit in her which made her choose a sport where she could physically fight; however, Saina chose to try badminton for fun and later it became her career. Because in reality, the choices of the dominant are a result of a "comfortable familiarity" (Allen and Anderson 1994:9) that they acquire through socialisation and the education provided by the institutions they are in. While for others it is their necessity and struggle that lead them to some available options, as exemplified in the cases of Saina Nehwal's and Mary Kom's choice of sports for their professional careers. As both Nehwal's parents were into badminton, so was her choice to opt for badminton as her sport. However, in the case of Mary, it was her poverty-ridden childhood; helping her parents by ploughing the field, collecting firewood from the forest, fishing, doing the household chores, in addition to taking care of her younger siblings, which pushed her into choosing a sport that would provide some succour from her gruelling routine life. Her deprived childhood demanded hard labour from her. After her back-breaking routine through the day, she would complete her studies and then go to sleep. Her choice of boxing did not emerge from any comfortable or easy choice, but instead, it emerged from her struggles and instinct for survival. It could be suggested here that this is a reflection of an individual's use of her so-called common-sense and life's experiences to successfully navigate adverse social environments.

Taste of Economic Freedom versus Taste of Necessity

Amartya Sen in his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005:218) mentions that "Nehru's hope of overcoming

class divisions in the economic, social and political progress of the country remains largely unfulfilled.” Nehru had envisioned the removal of the barriers of class stratification and the inequalities that arise because of these. Sen further suggests that “class, in particular, has an extraordinary role in the establishment and reach of social inequality and it can make the influence of other sources of disparity (such as gender inequality) much sharper” (205). When we analyse the texts taking into account Sen’s comments, we find that right from the beginning of the first paragraph, the differences in the ways both the sportspersons started their ‘business of living’ is quite stark and as per the established norms. Saina starts by telling about her parents and how they used to accompany her and her elder sister to the badminton court, providing that much needed mental and physical support right from day one. Saina was just six months old when she got acquainted with the sight of people playing badminton. While Mary starts her autobiography by saying that her life was filled with hard labour right from day one, and she calls it to be “extremely humble” (3). The cultural capital that they collected is visible from their first line, for Saina, it was the fun factor, and for Mary, it was the resilient life factor. Hence “Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (Allen and Anderson 1994:11). Moreover, this difference is considered to be natural.

Taking into consideration Bourdieu’s theories, it could be said that ‘taste’ is a social weapon through which ‘distinction’ is made. “Taste is thus the source of the system of distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence” (Allen and Anderson 1994:9). Saina talks about her parents throughout her autobiography saying that “at home, it was Mummy and Papa who backed me at every step” (30), and she thanks them for that. Her mother used to go with her for her practice and her sister used to do the required household chores. She adds “When I started training, my entire family had to support my routine. All of us were focused on my training” (41). She was never informed about the additional burden that her father had to face about the expenditures related to her sport. It was well taken care of, and it was ensured that she was always away from such encumbrances and remained fully focused on her training. She tells me that it is the persistent concern, support, and supervision from her parents’ side that has made her successful. Even her boredom was taken care of in an appropriate manner. She felt bored when they had to shift to Hyderabad during the summer holidays, so her parents enrolled her into karate classes. She says that “neither Papa nor Mummy demanded that I study as much I trained. That would have been impossible” (19). Her success would have been impossible if she did not have family support. Her parents used to keep up with her schedule. Moreover, she says “There are some things in life you just cannot do alone” (13).

On the other hand, Mary Kom had too much of duties and responsibilities which she had to learn to tackle at a very young age. She says about her parents that “they barely had time to enquire after my well-being” (89), but this was because in her absence her parents had to work doubly hard to ensure a relatively better future for her and her siblings. Moreover, she rarely went home because of the paucity of money. However, in the case of Saina, money was never an issue even with her playing in a large number of international tournaments. After her rigorous badminton practise, she says, “I was too tired to sit up and do my homework” (21). Mary’s training experiences, even though having similar strands running through it, had the additional burden of doing the household chores, in addition to her school work - “The moment my head touched the pillow, I would fall asleep” (17). She regrets her lost childhood, she says, “I would look into the distance, where children were playing in the village grounds. I was envious I admit. Which child would not be?” She constantly tries to assert that it was good that she had a hard time by saying, “I am strong because of my background” (2). She was of course emotionally affected by her hardships or else she would not constantly try to assert that she belonged to a wealthy bloodline, but it is just the twist of time that they were poor.

Moreover, she specifies talking about the bad times that “they made me want to fight” (4). When the times were awful for them, her father had to hunt for food, but she converts the poverty-stricken situation to tell that her father was a “powerful and famed hunter” (4). She never addressed her poverty with shame, maybe because it is something that had acted as an advantage when she joined boxing. In the future, this “sustained toil” provided her the vitalities that primed her “body for boxing” (14). Her words specify the fact that her experiences made her strong enough to excel in a sport that required a fight. On one hand where Saina proudly thanks her parents for their constant concern and taking care of her all needs, Mary, proudly tells about her village life where “parents are not overly worried” about their children (12). This in itself is a remarkable depiction of the differences in the functioning of Indian social classes where the daily interactions of individuals and the familial relationships and equations are accepted positively and sometimes stoically by all concerned, without being too discerning of things. Economically better off people focus more on physical and cultural benefits more, while economically deprived class people focus more on economic benefits. Hence it can be suggested that the taste

(sensibility) of economic freedom defines and asserts itself against the taste of necessity, and thus holds an inherent legitimacy/superiority (Bourdieu 1984a:380).

Symbolic Benefits

Bourdieu specifies that to understand the class distribution in the selection of various sports one has to focus on the symbolic benefits each sport offers. These symbolic benefits focus on the economic, cultural and physical benefits gained from each sport (Bourdieu 1984a:12). Hence these social conditions have to be taken into consideration while looking towards their taste. Risk factors are very high in sports which involve fighting; hence probably people with high economic capital preferably do not choose a sport that includes risk factors. They play primarily for passion, while people with low economic capital choose sports not only for passion but also necessarily for money. In Mary's case, rather than her passion, it was her plans for the future that made her choose boxing. She says, "Promptly, I began to make plans for the future. I would pursue a career in sports and get a job under the sports quota" (25). Her prime concern at that particular point of time was not surprisingly a strong desire to secure her future. When the Principal of her school told her father to send her to Sports Authority of India (SAI), he became worried and dropped the plan at first because he did not have the resources to send his daughter to Imphal, the state capital. Her father was at first reluctant to accept the fact that Mary chose boxing as her career. He said, "If you get injured, it will cost much money, which I do not have" (41). This statement certainly reflects poorly on Mary's father, where money seems to be taking primary concern rather than the well-being of his daughter, but we also need to understand that in a developing country like India poverty is something so preponderant that sometimes inadvertently, concern for money takes precedence over every other aspect of life. Thus Mary says, "Sometimes I wonder how I sustained my passion given that I had neither exposure to the possibilities nor opportunities" (25).

Fighting the Established Norms

Bourdieu hypothesizes that these "tastes" are internalized at an early age leading them to act, behave according to their social positions. In this course of action, sometimes because of the lack of similarities between the habitus of school and action, some people tend to challenge established practices. Bourdieu argues that "the principle of the transformation of habitus lies in the gap, experienced as a positive or negative surprise, between expectations and experience (Marsh 2006:170). Amartya Sen states that "Belonging to a privileged class can help women to overcome barriers that obstruct women from less thriving classes" (207). Sportswomen like Saina Nehwal and Sania Mirza (Tennis player) had plenty of support right from the start of their careers. They did not have to challenge any established practices at the start of their career. However, when Mary Kom approached a coach for academic training, the coach frowned at her saying, "You are a small, frail girl. With your gold earrings, you don't even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys" (31). However, women like Geeta Phogat, Sakshi Malik (wrestlers) and Mary Kom hit the taboo hard that girls cannot take boxing or wrestling as their career and have success. They faced numerous oppositions because they were girls, but maybe because of all their toils and struggles, they had acquired the resilience to fight against the system and win.

Symbolic Violence

Discourse strategies aimed at securing ends involve atonement to the demands of the field and thereby underwriting the field with its hierarchies (Hanks 2005:69). This also becomes a main influencing factor in the choice of sport. French literary genres, for instance, are hierarchically ordered, each one defining a position, and to write in a genre is to take up a position (Hanks 2005:72). Similarly in Indian sport too as argued earlier, is hierarchically structured, each one defining a position, and to play a game is to take up a position. Here the field that we are considering is the 'field of sport.' Moreover, in this field, there are dominant groups which get easy sponsorship and so carry with it the prestige that the social status gives it. Mary Kom says "For a large part of my career, I had no sponsors. I have even, on occasion, paid for my travel to participate in competitions and camps (132). On the contrary Saina constantly thanks her sponsors in her autobiography. This is the way by which certain games dominate the others.

According to Bourdieu, this domination is a type of violence which is known as 'symbolic violence.' This power relation is taken for granted and hence goes unchallenged. This sentence can be explained by the struggles that Mary Kom had to go through to popularize the professional game that she was involved in. She says, "But it was not so long ago that I had to fight for every bit of recognition. It was a recognition I sought not only for myself, but for my sport and, even more specifically, for women's boxing" (89). Both the women played for recognition, which came easily to Nehwal as she was playing an international game already established to be

suitable for women, while Mary had to struggle hard to get recognised for a sport which was considered out of bounds for women. Even Mary Kom's application was rejected for the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award, the highest sporting honour in India. The second time the International Boxing Federation (IBF) forwarded her name, "Milkha Singh of the selection committee struck it off, saying he didn't know which sport I competed in". She said, "How many more titles do I have to win for the country to believe I deserve the honour" (90). On the other hand, Nehwal's selection in 2010 was a natural process without too many barriers. This shows that the capitals the women possessed, and the others that they tried to attain, were different for each of them.

2. Conclusion

Bourdieu's framework suggests that cultural tastes and practices reflect and influence relations of power and leads to symbolic violence. As a result those cultural tastes might be used to locate and identify classes as readily as classes themselves might be used to classify cultural tastes and practices. As stated famously, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, 1984a: 6). This article offers a brief overview of sports culture in India, highlighting the habitus of two celebrated female sportspersons and the cultural capitals that moulded them towards a career in their respective sport. Our analysis shows that Mary Kom's basic need to find a job through the sports quota was the major motivating factor behind her considering sports as a career. She found that she was good at athletics but that never satisfied her as it did not quench her inner fighting spirit. Then she found boxing where she could use all the skills that her resilient life gave her, especially the strength to be strong and determined while playing a 'man's sport.' And her habitus also provided her the capability to take her own decisions from a very early age, which aided towards her struggle for excellence.

On the other hand we find that Saina Nehwal's passion for badminton made her build a career in that sport. She uses her dependence on her parents as the ladder to success. She freely asserts about the fact that her finances are always taken care of by her parents due to which she could entirely focus on her badminton practice. Her parents regularly accompanied her for her practice sessions and tournaments which was a major moral support for her during her trying times. Moreover, she cherishes the fact that she was not troubled with extra burden from her family while growing as a badminton player. It is thus seen that they both have accumulated different kinds of cultural capital and they have respectively used these in their struggles to maximise their profits. Mary Kom used her angst, strength, and perseverance to punch her way towards a successful sporting career in boxing. And Saina Nehwal used her parents' physical, mental, and financial support by entirely focusing on her sport and creating her own identity in badminton. But we really cannot ignore how all these very appropriately reflect on the respective sportsperson's social status.

There is of course freedom of choice for every individual, but despite that, their choices show a strong influence of their social positions. This is very much evident when we take into account other Indian sportspersons too, like shooters - Abhinav Bindra and Joydeep Karmakar, golfers - Jeev Milkha Singh and Jyoti Randhawa and tennis players - Leander Paes and Sania Mirza. All these players hail from well-to-do families who could adequately support them financially and take care of all their whims and fancies so that they could concentrate on the sports they were passionate about. On the other hand, people coming from humble backgrounds like Milkha Singh, P.T. Usha, Dutee Chand, Hima Das, Vijendra Singh, and Sushil Kumar, possibly chose sports which required the least of finances, and which they could practice regularly without the sport necessitating any special facilities.

Milkha Singh hailing from a humble background chose athletics as his passion as it came easily to him, while his son who hails from a relatively well-to-do family, because of his father's previous feats, chose golf as his passion. Moreover, in the case of Saina Nehwal, we can see that she chose a sport that her parents were well-equipped with. When Mary Kom started her career, women's boxing was not well-known, nor were the boxers acknowledged. She remembers her time when she won a silver medal for the first time in a world championship event. She accounts, "back home the media was not even remotely interested in the fact that an Indian had won the silver in the first edition of a world championship event" (52). However, now the scenario is changing to some extent, with women's boxing being recognised with pride, and though still few and far between, people are sending their daughters to learn boxing, particularly in the North East, the region where Mary Kom hails from. In recent years, popular culture, in the form of a biopic on Mary's life has also contributed remarkably in making Mary's life famous and well-known throughout the country. Today Mary is a celebrity, a house-hold name, and a role model for millions of girls in India. It remains to be seen which sport her children would take up in future, if at all, now that they belong to the so-called 'elite class' because of their mother's remarkable achievements in her chosen sport. "The bourgeois taste for freedom" is thus highlighted in opposition to "the

working-class taste for necessity, which serves as a mere foil in the game of distinction” (Gartman 1991:424). This is a process that has unwittingly got rooted in the highly class-conscious Indian society.

Hence cultural capital has a primary role in shaping the ‘habitus’ of the agents. It is not something acquired immediately, instead takes its shape with the passage of time and gradual interaction with the society. ‘Prole sport’ demands high-risk factors which people of higher economic status would not preferably get involved in. So Mary Kom would not have probably received the success that she is now embracing if she had chosen a game where her aggression had no significant role to play. Catherine Hakim, the author of *Key Issues in Women’s Work* (2004) observes that choices are not made in a vacuum. so it will be crucial for future research to recognise that a sportsperson’s attitude, choice, preferences or even experiences are not bereft of cultural discourse and experiences. So working class people choose sports that they can access according to their economic status. Hence it can be suggested that there is an unknown danger in the choice of sport where we can see that some sports are occupied by ‘low-class’ people and some sports by the ‘high class.’ So to diminish this invisible but very real demarcation, it is the responsibility of all the concerned stakeholders, starting from the sportspersons themselves, to their family, friends, officials, sponsors, and the society at large, to understand this and work towards making the sport free from any tag, and to be equally recognized among the followers and lovers of sports. This would then ensure regular sponsorship, which would ultimately help the sport as well as the sportspersons to progress in their chosen sport. Hence instead of diminishing the hierarchy, we should focus on to change the conditions that breed the hierarchy and universalise the “conditions of access” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:84).

Scope for Further Research

This method of analysis can be further extended in the form of empirical research in order to understand and expose the invisible powers that play various roles in shaping the tastes when it comes to the choice of sport. Other narrative forms like biographies, newspaper reports, media, and personal interviews can be accessed to understand and further establish the arguments proposed in this analysis.

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