

## THE CASTE AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE FUNCTIONING OF YOUTH SPORTS CLUBS

**MANAVJEET KAUR**

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,  
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.8538>

### ABSTRACT

Sports leave a profound impact on the individual, promoting both their social and personal well-being. Youth sports clubs are community-based organizations or informal groups that serve as social spaces where rural youth engage in recreation, develop athletic skills, and build a sense of community identity. One of the most powerful impacts of sports is its ability to bring people together and break down social barriers. However, in many villages, traditional norms restrict what young people, especially girls, aspire to. India's rural communities, which account for 65.53 percent of the country's population, continue to face significant challenges, combined with socio-economic barriers. Youth sports clubs aim to provide underprivileged youth with the platform to break these barriers and pursue higher aspirations. However, with the caste and gender dimensions shaping the functioning of youth sports clubs in India, these programs remain insufficient to meet the widespread demand. It leaves rural youth without adequate opportunities to develop their skills and realize their potential. This highlights the need for a more inclusive and structured approach to nurturing our sporting talents.

**Keywords:** caste, gender, youth sports clubs, rural youth, social exclusion.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is an accepted fact that the basic organization of sports in any sporting country is through a system of sporting clubs. Youth sports clubs are usually non-profit entities organized and run by boards of volunteers; some have training, but many have little to no experience/knowledge of the sport or with the organization of sports. Contests are held at the local level. "Youth clubs are formed for the development of several social activities among youngsters. Youth club is a place where older children can go to meet other children, play sports, and do other social activities" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 1995). Youth Club is an association of youth who are striving towards the achievement of common goals and objectives. It is formed, managed, and run by the youth themselves for the growth and development of youth in particular and the community in general. Youth Club provides a platform for the youth in a particular area to come together, meet, discuss, and plan activities for their own development as well as that of the society. As the major human resource, the energies and potential of youth should be channelled and mobilized for national development through the formation of Youth Clubs, which also empower the youth (Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan, 1972).

In India, the wide range of youth sports clubs is registered under NYKS. Nehru YuvaKendras were established in 1972 with the objective of providing rural youth with avenues to participate in nation-building and opportunities for personal and skill development. These clubs organize

various sports tournaments at the local level. However, numerous problems persist in the field of sports development in a country like India. The problem exists at the grassroots level, such as in rural areas, where caste and gender discrimination in sports still dominate.

Social identity in India is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and economic structures that continue to influence everyday life. Identities are not confined to the individual but are embedded in communities and inherited affiliations, such as caste, religion, gender, and region. These categories determine access to opportunities, recognition, and social status, while also reinforcing hierarchies and exclusions (Sarkar et al., 2025). In this paper, the focus is on caste and gender – two most persistent and pervasive social identities shaping patterns of inequality and mobility in India. The caste system is deeply rooted and ingrained in Indian culture and practiced across the Indian sub-continent. Its existence has created great social and economic inequalities, as it follows a hierarchical order and is a critical determinant of power and poverty in contemporary India. It effectively blocks disadvantaged-caste groups from access to resources and social mobility (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). Gender inequality has existed, and continues to exist, in many societies across the world. In developing countries, gender inequality is more pronounced as resource constraints aggravate discrimination by investing less in women's human capital development (Kabeer, 2015). In addition, India operates under a patriarchal system whereby women are considered second-class citizens (Kasturi, 1995; Sinha, 2003).

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sport, as a social institution composed of social systems with interrelated parts and a plurality of individual and group actors interacting with one another, lends itself to functionalist analysis (Delaney and Madigan 2009). Interestingly, in the early 1970s, just as functionalism was being overtaken by other sociological theories such as conflict and feminist approaches, Harry Edwards was playing a critical role in creating the field of sport sociology (Edwards 1973). Many of the first sport sociologists described sport „in functionalist terms as supportive of the social order“. Stevenson and Nixon (1972) detailed five general functions by which sport helps the social system maintain equilibrium and operate smoothly and efficiently:

1. Socio-emotional function: Sport provides opportunities for conflict and tension management and release, camaraderie and community bonding, and ritualistic behaviors that people find comforting.
2. Socialization: Through the socialization process, people learn society's expectations, and cultural values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Sport serves as a significant agent of socialization.
3. Social integration: A commonly cited function of this is its ability to provide opportunities for diverse groups and individuals to interact with one another. Functionalists ignore, however, sport's ability to create „us versus them“ allegiances, which also sow the seeds of conflict between different factions of fans (as well as players).
4. Political functions: The role of politics and sport is both functional and dysfunctional. Political leaders often seize opportunities to associate themselves with winners and champions, basking in the glow of others' victories.

5. Social mobility: Functionalists argue that sport provides individuals with opportunities to improve their socio-economic status. Sport does provide for social mobility that is both direct (through professional sport participation) and indirect (such as through college scholarships for young athletes leading to better job market opportunities).

Conflict theory focuses on ways in which power, privilege, and oppression are organized by race, class, gender, and other systems of domination (e.g., sexuality, religion, age, and ability status). The race, class, and gender (RCG) theoretical framework was largely developed by African American and multiracial feminists (Anderson 2001; Baca Zinn and Dill 2005; Collins 1994, 2004; Davis, 1983; King 1988). This theoretical paradigm is built on the premise that systems of stratification built on hierarchies, including race, gender, and class, create relationships of privilege and oppression. These systems of oppression exist independently and interact in what Baca Zinn and Thorten Dill (2005) refer to as a “matrix of domination”. Race, class, and gender theory specifically means that we will examine the ways in which the race of the athlete, the sport that he plays, and the intersection of race and the sport in question all shape the types of consequences that a male athlete faces when he engages in an act of violence against a woman – which, of course, is always an expression of his position as a male in the system of gender stratification.

## 2.1 How Caste Affects the Functioning of Youth Sports Clubs?

In rural India, caste remains a dominant axis of social organization, shaping access to land, education, and community resources — including sports. Youth sports clubs, though presented as inclusive spaces of talent and teamwork, often mirror the existing social hierarchies of their villages. Membership, leadership, and participation frequently follow caste lines, with dominant caste groups (such as Jat Sikhs in Punjab, or dominant peasant castes in other states) controlling the clubs’ functioning, decision-making, and resources.

Most rural sports clubs are founded or managed by dominant caste youth, who possess greater social capital, financial resources, and landholdings. They often decide who gets to play, represent the village, or access facilities such as grounds and equipment.

For example, in Punjab, Jat Sikh youth typically dominate kabaddi and football clubs, reflecting their historical association with strength, landownership, and masculinity. Dalit youth, despite interest and skill, often face informal exclusion or are relegated to subordinate roles like maintenance or support. This hierarchy is reinforced by funding patterns — NRI or local patron sponsorship usually flows through dominant caste networks, reproducing unequal access. Caste-based exclusion may not always be explicit but manifests subtly: Dalit players may not be invited to club meetings or post-match gatherings. Teams may form along caste lines, or marginalized players might feel unwelcome on grounds owned by upper-caste farmers. Club identity itself often becomes a marker of caste pride, where winning tournaments reinforces the social prestige of the dominant caste group. These patterns echo Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “social capital reproduction”, where participation in sports becomes a means of maintaining group power and identity.

Upper-caste dominance in caste-divided areas has been seen in formal sports over the decades, partly due to the availability of facilities and coaching. Social separation was often perpetuated

by the exclusion of lower-caste communities in the local clubs and tournaments, as well as in school teams. There was even segregation in sports grounds, where marginalized players were not allowed to participate or had little roles to play (Jain, 2025).

Both grassroots sports organisations and elite sports policies should work to ensure that more Dalits can exercise their right to participate in sport and that talent is identified and nurtured so that we can see more Dalit talent in sport in the near future. It is essential to create support structures at the grassroots level to tackle structural inequality at its core. This would also ensure that the players who benefit thereby are not buried under a hailstorm of comments about sport being the domain of meritocracy when they perform poorly (Mohamed Prince, M., 2021).

## 2.2 Gender Dimension of Caste Hierarchies

Dalit and lower-caste women face double exclusion — both as women in a patriarchal sports culture and as members of marginalized castes. Their participation in rural clubs is rare due to spatial restrictions, family disapproval, and a lack of facilities. In contrast, dominant caste men often view sports as arenas to express community honor and masculinity, reinforcing both caste dominance and gender hierarchy.

To a large extent, caste attitudes are also shaped by the city and culture in which a sport or a player is situated. In certain parts of India, a player's caste is occasionally brought up. But then this is by trolls and trouble-makers and not the sport's stakeholders. In 2021, after the Indian women's hockey team lost in the Tokyo Olympics semi-final against Argentina, a few upper caste men lit crackers near the home of striker Vandana Katariya, who is Dalit, in Roshnabad, Uttarakhand. A casteist remark was allegedly made about the number of Dalit players in the team. In women's boxing, Thulasi Helen comes from the Dalit community. She had made allegations of sexual abuse against the Tamil Nadu boxing association's A K Karuna, and after that, her career fizzled out. The solution lies in making sports more accessible to Dalits, training and mentoring them regularly, so that they organically increase their chances of selection, and get the respect and opportunities they deserve (Sawai, 2024).

## 2.3 How does Gender Affect the Functioning of Youth Sports Clubs?

The gender dynamics within rural youth sports clubs reveal the complex interplay between patriarchy, cultural norms, and institutional structures that shape access, participation, and power in the sporting domain. While sports are often celebrated as instruments of empowerment and equality, the functioning of these clubs reflects deeply rooted gender hierarchies embedded in the rural social fabric.

Club committees, coaches, and sponsors are overwhelmingly male, which shapes programming, scheduling, and priorities toward male sports and preferences. Even if there are "women's" spots on committees, they often lack decision-making power; leadership roles translate into real resource control only for men. Indian society, like many others, has been marked by traditional gender roles and stereotypes. These stereotypes have often discouraged girls from actively participating in sports. The lack of female role models and limited access to sports facilities have further contributed to gender disparities in sports involvement (Pareek & Vertika, 2022).

Several studies conducted in India have shown that boys are more likely to participate in organized sports compared to girls. These gender disparities are influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations surrounding gender roles in India. Girls often face barriers due to traditional perceptions that sports are more suitable for boys, leading to limited opportunities and less encouragement to participate (Malhotra & Rao, 2017)

Gender roles in society encourage males and females to participate in physical activities that reflect their societal roles. Society is more aware of gender stereotyping in physical activities and games, but traditional gender stereotypes for females still continue. The author claims that female athletes have a secondary position in sports. In order to maintain this subordinate position of female athletes in the sports world, the idea is perpetuated that sports and physical activities are more suitable in the masculine domain (Wilde, K., 2007).

A study explores the current state of female sports participation, as well as women's attitudes towards sports and the myths that exist in society regarding sports participation. The study covered the four districts of Haryana state, namely Hisar, Rohtak, Karnal, and Sonapat, with a total sample size of 200 participants ranging between the age group of 14-19 years from various schools and colleges. The study revealed that the attitude towards women's participation in sports is not considered as positive as that towards male sports participation. The investigator also found that participation in sports and physical activities may create hurdles in marriage as well as childbearing for the women sportsperson (Chahal, 2002).

The prevalence of gender discrimination in sports stems from a patriarchal mode of structure, thinking, meaning, and orientation. It is the process of socialization conducted through various agencies, such as family, peer group, neighbourhood, community, state, education, and media, that determines the place of women in sports. This is the societal consciousness that hinders the enthusiastic and equal participation of women in sports compared to their male counterparts (Vadhera, 2012).

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

The study examines how sports spaces—often portrayed as neutral and meritocratic—reflect and reproduce entrenched social hierarchies. The review engages with key theoretical frameworks, such as conflict theory, and studies on the sociology of sport in India. Existing research indicates that caste continues to influence patterns of participation, leadership, and access to sporting infrastructure, with dominant caste groups exercising control over club management and resource distribution. Simultaneously, gender-based barriers persist through cultural expectations, unequal funding, and limited institutional support for women's participation in sports. The literature also highlights how the intersection of caste and gender creates compounded disadvantages, particularly for Dalit and lower-caste women, whose participation is constrained by both social stigma and material exclusion.

### REFERENCES

Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan. (1972). Nyks.Nic.In. <https://nyks.nic.in/>

- Sarkar, S., Chakravorty, B., & Lyonette, C. (2025). Caste, gender, and intersectionality in labour market aspirations: evidence from a skill-training programme in India. *Oxford Development Studies*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2025.2570943>
- Zulfiqar, G., & Prasad, A. (2022). How is social inequality maintained in the Global South? Critiquing the concept of dirty work. *Human Relations*, 75(11), 2160-2186.
- Kabeer, N. (2015). Gender, poverty, and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development. *Gender & Development*, 23(2), 189-205.
- Kasturi, L. (1995). Development, patriarchy, and politics: Indian women in the political process, 1947-1992.
- Sinha, K. (2003). Citizenship degraded: Indian women in a modern state and a pre-modern society. *Gender & Development*, 11(3), 19-26.
- Delaney, T., & Madigan, T. (2009). *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction*. McFarland & Company.
- Edwards, H. (1973). *Sociology of Sports*. Dorsey publications.
- Stevenson, C.L. & Nixon, J.E. (1972). A Conceptual Scheme of the Social Functions of Sport. *Sportwissenschaft*. 2. 119-132.
- King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14, 42–72
- Pareek, & Vertika (2022). The Impact of Gender and Socioeconomic Status on Youth Participation in Sports. *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*, 19(3), 2230-7540.
- Malhotra, R., & Rao, S. (2017). Gender equity and sports for development: A study of perceptions of rural Indian women. *Sport in Society*, 20(5), 548-565.
- Wilde, K. (2007). *Women in Sport: Gender Stereotypes in the Past and Present*.