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Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sport in South Asia

Edited by
JAMES H. MILLS

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii
Contributors to this Volume viii

Introduction 1
James H. Mills

1. ‘Kalarippayatu is Eighty Percent Mental and Only the Remainder is Physical’: Power, Agency and Self in a South Asian Martial Art 19
Philip Zarrilli

2. Empowering Yourself: Sport, Sexuality and Autoeroticism in North Indian Jori Swinging 47
Joseph S. Alter

3. Indigenous Polo in Northern Pakistan: Game and Power on the Periphery 61
Peter Parkes

4. ‘The Moral that can be Safely Drawn from the Hindus’ Magnificent Victory’: Cricket, Caste and the Palwankar Brothers 83
Ramachandra Guha

5. The Peasants are Revolting: Race, Culture and Ownership in Cricket 107
Satadru Sen

Paul Dimeo

7. Warrior Goddess Versus Bipedal Cow: Sport, Space, Performance and Planning in an Indian City 139
James Heitzman and Smriti Srinivas

8. ‘Nupilal’: Women’s War, Football and the History of Modern Manipur 173
James H. Mills
CONTENTS

9. ‘Playing for the Tibetan People’: Football and History in the High Himalayas 191
   Alex McKay

10. Community, Identity and Sport: Anglo-Indians in Colonial and Postcolonial India 205
    Megan S. Mills

Notes 217

Bibliography 227
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INTRODUCTION

James H. Mills

Sports and Subalternity

Subalternity, in this collection, has been interpreted in its widest possible sense. As defined twenty years ago by Ranajit Guha, the concept appears narrow and limited by its origins in Marxist theory (Guha 1982: 1–7). As it has been used over the last two decades it has taken on a broader meaning so that the ‘subaltern’ is the dominated party in any power relationship and the study of subalternity is of relationships characterised by ‘dominance without hegemony’. The importance of the concept of subalternity lies in its recognition of the ‘autonomous domain’ of the subaltern agent or agents. While dominated, the subaltern is not entirely obliterated and retains values, ideas and modes of action that are not prescribed by the dominant and which can draw upon beliefs and experiences exclusive to the individual or group. In other words the subaltern always has the potential to oppose or resist the dominant as he or she may draw upon alternative values and ideas and can refer back to different experiences and behavioural expectations. As such the position of the dominant group is often a precarious de facto arrangement rather than a generally accepted de jure agreement (Ludden 2002; Chaturvedi 2000).

Sports invite subalternity. In the first place this is because sports, especially those organized games of the modern period, are all about contest and competition in which victory or defeat are the anticipated outcomes of the exercise. In an ideal world however, it is the competitor with the most suitable combination of skill, prowess, concentration and guile that will triumph. These attributes are not necessarily gifts bestowed by wealth, social status or political manipulation and as such the sporting arena is a world in which societal elites are stripped of their traditional head starts and privileges, and in which they have to face the challenge of others with only the resources of their own bodies to secure ascendancy.
Yet sports invite subalternity in other ways. Preparation for sporting contest often involves a prolonged period of self-absorption in which a focus on training, special diet or even sexual abstinence can demand that an individual or group temporarily withdraws from the usual social obligations and relationships. In other words the ‘normal’ world can be disrupted and suspended by the status of ‘competitor’. The individual may suddenly find that a new body is required as the demands of sporting success fashion the physique in different ways from the demands of labour or reproduction. Indeed, a body unsuited to labour or reproduction, or reluctant to submit to their demands, may suddenly find worth or value, escape even, in sports (see Hong 1997). On the other hand, many sports demand some sort of community activity as this is necessary in order to raise a team or a club. To this end the very process of assembly may present all manner of interesting new possibilities to those gathering ostensibly for the purpose of organizing a game. The experience of unity of purpose and effective communal action can awaken the participants to the potential of coordinated action in other fields.²

As a set of activities in which individuals withdraw from their usual social roles, in which they can forge new and unexpected relationships and in which they face challenges where the rules of the society around them do not apply, sports are pregnant with the possibility of contest and resistance. Of course, once the game is over and the contestants and their supporters contemplate a return to the ‘real’ world, they are forced to consider the prospect of the usual order being reinstated and of the ‘normal’ rules being reapplied. However, they can retain a vivid impression from the game that those rules do not always apply and that the normal order has been ignored.³ That these impressions can live long after the game is over is partly down to a particular feature of sports. Participating in or witnessing these contests adds a physical intensity to an experience of reversal or contestation. The exhilarating effect of dopamine and adrenaline in a moment of victory over the team representing a foe or oppressor can add an immediacy and energy to a resentment or rivalry that discussion would struggle to produce.⁴

The spectator adds to the possibilities of sport as subaltern practice as he or she is a witness to – and at times a participant in – the contest, and it is the presence of the spectator that turns an event into a performance; for this reason historians argue that ‘the spectacle has always been a potent political weapon’ (Harvey 1989: 88). The inspiration drawn by a competitor from a supportive crowd can revitalize his efforts, while intimidation of the opponent can undermine the latter’s determination. The relationship between player and spectators can often be based on the identification of the crowd with the competitor, who comes to represent the crowd; his physical trials are seen as manifestations of their daily struggles and difficulties.⁵ But there are often
instances when a neutral spectator will support one side of the contest because that player or team is considered the underdog and the spectator’s support is extended simply because he desires to see the power relations of the moment reversed or undermined. There is a thrill here in such a moment, and a sense that the danger of such a situation is exciting, but safely contained within the parameters of a sporting event.6

The spectator’s participation converts the game into a spectacle rather than simply a contest between active participants, meaning that the significance of defeat on the field can reverberate far beyond the confines of the pitch or stadium. As witnesses, the spectators carry the story of the setback with them into the community, not simply as a tale to be told but as an experience to be related and relived, animated by traces of the passion and energy that fired them at the spectacle. Today it is not even necessary to be present at the game or in the arena to participate in the experience of the contest, and gathering around the radio set or the television becomes an event in itself. Sporting clashes are now among the most watched and interpreted events in the modern world (Tomlinson 2002: 44) and much of the consumption of these activities through the media is communal. Indeed, the power of the sports event to generate a crowd, whether at the stadium or around the radio or television, can be enough to incite collective agitation. Alternatively those gathered for some other purpose, or in support of a political or social agenda, may find themselves suddenly emboldened or empowered by the passions of sports spectatorship.7

If sporting activities invite, even incite, subalternity then they can at the same time act as mechanisms by which subaltern groups are oppressed and through which dominant groups assert their power. The imposition of sporting regimes can be a way of forcing modes of discipline on, and taking control of bodies in, groups reluctant to submit to the rules of work, military discipline or modern educational institutions. Victory at sporting events can be used to carry triumphal messages about the superiority of the group represented by the winning competitors, or more subtle ideas about the benefits of a certain way of life or mode of behaviour. The architecture of a sporting arena (Eichberg 1998: 68–86; Bale 1994; Vertinsky and Bale 2004) or the deliberate management of the experience of the spectacle (Giulianotti 1999: 80–85; Nielsen 1995: 21–44) are often exercises in control or pomp designed to emphasize the competence of the elites. Sporting events have been used to propagate everything: from fascist regimes to multi-national commercial interests; from national identities to racial stereotypes; from colonialism to cultural imperialism (Mangan 2000; Maguire 1999; Sugden and Tomlinson 1998; Armstrong and Giulianotti 2001; Cronin and Mayall 1998; Mills and Dimeo 2003; Klein 1991; Klein 1997). All of this simply enhances the
subaltern potential of the player, activity or arena. It is important for historians to examine sport because it is such a volatile and unstable medium, in which all the grand designs of an elite can be publicly mocked or shocked by a moment of individual brilliance or a show of determined teamwork.

Sports in South Asia

It seems particularly appropriate that ‘subalternity’ should be examined within the sporting practices of South Asia given the significant contributions made to developing the term by academics studying the region. Yet it is only in recent years that serious academic attention has been given to the subject of sport in South Asia. The work carried out in this field was reviewed in detail recently (Mills 2001a) but is briefly worth summarising here. An older generation of historians did display an interest in sports but tended to compile either narrative histories of the formation of clubs and the emergence of star players, or to focus on the role played by British colonizers in introducing and encouraging their games among the locals (Docker 1977; Bose 1990; Cashman 1980; Mangan 1985; Guttman 1994; Mason 1990; Holt 1989). From the late 1980s onwards a greater degree of critical complexity has been brought to the subject. Writers like Nandy, Appadurai and McDonald examined the theme of cricket’s indigenization in the postcolonial period and pointed to its central place in a range of emerging positions and identities in the years after Independence in 1947. Nandy (1989) has argued that the underlying rhythms and mythic structures of the game make it profoundly Indian and that it is therefore appropriate that the game should be most enthusiastically appropriated by those from South Asian cultures.

Appadurai and McDonald have instead argued that postcolonial politics and culture explain the rise of cricket in India to the status of the nation’s most popular sport. Appadurai points to state support and commercialisation as the driving forces behind the promotion of the game to the masses, who adopted it because ‘it became an emblem of Indian nationhood at the same time that it became inscribed, as practice, into the Indian (male) body’ (1996: 45). The appropriation of the game has been a self-consciously anti-colonial process argues Appadurai, who concludes that ‘cricket gives … the sense of having hijacked the game from its English habitus into the colonies at the level of language, body, and agency as well as competition, finance and spectacle’ (46).

McDonald similarly finds that cricket has been a vehicle for the articulation and invention of postcolonial identities insisting that these are less national and more communal in nature. He points to the range of transforming social and economic forces that have swept through India in the 1990s, and argues for the emergence of a ‘lumpen middle class’ that wishes to express its new
wealth and power through extreme Hindu politics. Such politics provide this class with an identity it can assert over minority groups within India, and by which it can challenge others on the international stage. Cricket, as a ‘national’ sport, is something that the ‘lumpen middle class’ wish to dominate and control in order to advertise its power: ‘due to its place in civil society and as a significant element of popular culture, international one day and test cricket offers fertile terrain for the articulation of Hindu chauvinist and communalist ideologies’ (McDonald 1999: 232).

Ramachandra Guha has looked more closely at the history of cricket and the way in which the sport was first used as a vehicle for expressing anti-colonial and nationalist emotions (Guha 1998: 165–9). In 1906, news of the victory of the Hindu team over the European team in Bombay quickly spread beyond the borders of the Bombay Presidency and was celebrated by nationalists across India. Guha quotes an article in the Lahore Tribune as an example of how meaning was attached to this victory. The report compared the Indian cricketers with the Japanese soldiers that had made up the first Asian army to defeat a European force in modern times when they had soundly beaten the Russians in 1905. A cricket victory here was represented as more than just a sporting result; it became a symbolic reversal of the discourses of British superiority and it acquired the significance of an important battle in the struggle between Europeans and Asians of the colonial period. Indeed, Guha goes on to develop this theme of how sport articulates – and maybe even exacerbates – political tensions in Indian society by looking at cricket as a site for the development of communal (Muslim and Hindu) identities during the 1930s and 1940s (ibid.: 175–9). Central to this development was the so-called Quadrangular competition. This competition pitted the British against the Muslims, the Hindus and the Others (Parsis, Sikhs and Christians) in Bombay. As the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim political groups intensified in the 1930s, so the games between the teams representing these communities in the Quadrangular took on added significance. Guha notes that ‘in towns hundreds of miles from Bombay college students would divide up between classes into Hindu groups and Muslim groups each following the radio commentary from their distinctive point of view’. After a rare Hindu victory in 1939 the celebrations were concluded with a singing of Bande Maatram, a hymn with Hindu nationalist overtones. In short, Guha argues that cricket became so important in Indian society in the period before 1947 as this was a time when new identities were emerging and the game was one arena in which they were constructed and articulated (ibid: 189).

While writers like Nandy, Appadurai, Guha and McDonald have looked at the modern sport of cricket, Joseph Alter focused his attention on the indigenous discipline of Bharatiya kushti or Indian wrestling in north India. This is an