



Styling the Uniform: Sport and Clothing in Colonial India

Anupama

Assistant Professor, M.M. Mahila College, Ara, Bihar

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Abstract- Early-twentieth century books and journals focused on the idea of sports and in the process defined forms of new dressing for Indian women – elite and domestic middle class. Dress for western women was supposed to reflect comfort, mobility and femininity but for Indian women these ideals had to go along with a concern with identity and tradition.

We see how the popularity of sports was a slow process among women and so was the adoption of sports costume. Works on sport history in India have largely focused on men's sport and the question of women's involvement in sports during the colonial period is completely absent. This chapter hoped to fill this gap. We see that there was a culture of native games and there was popularity of English sport too. However, professional sport for women gained importance very late. In the contemporary period as well we see that women's sport at the national level is an area that has been neglected and there has always been a lack of funding.

Keywords : Styling, Uniform, Sport, Colonial, Popularity, Early-Twentieth

The coming of sport costumesought to offer uniformity and equality toeveryday clothing. Many studies on dress have focused on the changes brought by sport in the realm of everyday clothing. However, these studies mainly locate the dress reform brought by sport in the western countries from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Elizabeth Wilson shows that throughout the 1920s when education became a focus of the youth and adults alike it led to increased participation in sports such as swimming, tennis, golf and horse riding that became an important part of college sports programmes.ⁱ Simultaneously, there were dramatic changes in the clothing worn during participation in such sports.ⁱⁱ To keep up with the new needs of women who were engaged in these activities, it was important to modify their dress for greater mobility, comfort and freedom. Along with the changes in the clothing of women, sport also made crucial contribution to the changing lines of women's clothing in general, by creating a new aesthetic ideal of femininity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most available studies reveal the history of clothing mainly for sport in the European countries. The available studies on dress familiarises us with the themes generated for a discussion of the ideal costume for any sport and exercise. These studies show that the debate on sports clothing for women is interlinked with the questions of comfort, femininity and simplification of clothing in the west during the late –nineteenth to

the twentieth century. However, there is a dearth of work which have studied sport in the Indian subcontinent especially on female sport. The works which are available mainly study history of cricket for Indian men. Women sports have been a neglected area in the scholarly works. There is limited discussion on sport clothing as well. So, this paper seeks to fill this gap.

By the 1920s, with the establishment of several women organisations in various parts of India, sports and physical education became a part of the women's movement.^{iv} Women participation grew in sports during the first half and accelerated by the 1930s with the physical education becoming compulsory in most of the schools and colleges. We find instances of women sports players and teams during the 1930s. In the early 1930s we see a focus on indigenous games and exercise for women in the journals and newspapers. In North India, women's journals had become an important mouthpiece of the elite Indian men and women. In the process of encouraging Indian women (various classes) to engage in sports and exercises, these platforms introduced the idea of clothing to be worn for these particular occasions. The discussion of sport clothing seems limited in the Hindi journals which were published and circulated in North Indian but there was focus on various sports and exercises. Most importantly, there were illustrations which were used to explain how to perform various exercises. These representations inform us of various clothing options which was suggested to the women readers in North India during the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, English newspapers and journals introduced the notion of western sports clothing to the Indian elite and middle class as well as the European readers in India. By the 1930s, the English print media began introducing the notion of Indian costume for women worn during sports too. Sometimes, the alternate models were western clothes and sometimes the Indian dress was modified for sports. However, as already pointed out the popularity of sports among women was not much. The narratives of the women written by themselves offer some instances of their experience of sport.

Sports and Development : This paper looks at indigenous sports and the origin of English sports in India. It traces how and why popularity of the English sports grew among Indians? Did costume worn during the games by Indians such as cricket, football and tennis bring any changes in the way Indian men and women dressed? Did indigenous Indian sports incorporate the concept of costume? We have seen that cloth has been a marker of distinction of various categories such as caste and class in the twentieth century in India. Did sports clothing create any space where dressing of the Indian men and women ceased to be marker of these categories? What were the developments which accelerated popularity of sports in India? Did gender play any role in the politics of sports and sports clothing?

India had its own culture of sports before the British brought the English sports in India as early as 1721.^v In India sports like wrestling, hunting, shooting and archery were famous and some of these were adopted by the British too. Sports like polo go back to several centuries during the Mughal period when they were known as *chaugan*.^{vi}

With the coming of British, various English sports became popular in India especially cricket. The first British sports club was formed for playing cricket in Calcutta around 1780. Soon other clubs were formed in Calcutta and elsewhere and games such as badminton, rugby, billiards were played. One of the most popular place Bombay gymkhanas brought together all kinds of sports under one roof in 1875 and simultaneously membership grew too. Initially, membership was restricted to the whites only. Many writers

on sports such as Ramchandra Guha and Majumdar opine that the real transformation came after 1857 in the attitude of Indians towards physical culture. In Calcutta, Bengali middle class men found it imperative to devise an effective strategy to counter the colonial charge of inferiority. Mrinalini Sinha argues that second half of the nineteenth century in Bengal was marked by an attempt to revive the culture of akharas and gymnasium in order to cultivate and instill a sense of pride in the physical prowess of the Bengalis. In the 1880's, when nationalist resistance in Bengal was gathering momentum, the sporting field contributed in a large measure to challenging British supremacy. That's why the gymnastics class was made compulsory for all students of the college in 1891.

What was the initial experience of the Indians men who took up British sports? What we know that by the late nineteenth century most of the games were popular in some cities of India. Cricket was the first game to attain popularity in Bombay. Other games such as football, tennis, polo etc acquired popularity too among selected sections of the Indian society. Initially, the British did not aim to popularize their games among the native Indians. Guha points out that during the late nineteenth century the British thought little of the attempts by their subjects to take up their national game.^{vii} However, due to various concerns such as imitating the British, nationalism and the community feeling of possession some sections in India did take up sports. All these reasons operated at different levels for various groups. For example; the reason behind the Parsee's early patronage was the desire of the newly emerging Parsee bourgeoisie to strengthen its ties with the colonial state.^{viii}

Sports played by the Indians men were mocked by the British. In this criticism dress of the Indians worn for the play and the style of the game became the prime reason. According to Guha, the British sneered at their Indian clothes and their technique. He describes further, that a Bombay journalists made critical remarks about the Indians who were playing cricket. The journalist said in the 1870's that, 'some Hindu players interfered (when batting) their kilted garments with running and they threw the ball when fielding in the same fashion as boarding school girls.' Guha opines that slowly the Indians became proficient as they decided to discard the cumbersome dhoti for the cricketer's flannel trousers.^{ix} A photograph from the year 1900 by Dewjee Popal captioned 'Hindu cricket players' seems to be a good example of visual representation.

Men cricketers in the costume.^x This image is dated around the beginning of early twentieth century. We see that the players wear *dhoti* as well as trousers. The debate around *dhoti* and game of cricket led to a famous controversy termed as 'the dhoti war' in the 1930s. The image belongs to the earlier period, but it suggests that *dhoti* was worn as a sport dressing.

The Bombay journalist's statement seems to share the sentiments of other British officials who equally criticized the new Indian players. The dress of the player was attacked at in more than one incident. Nevertheless, the *dhoti* was considered to hinder quick movement and running. In this case, the trousers were presented as a better option to play which the Indians adopted in this case. Available photographs from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century show that trousers were one of the royals. However, it was not adopted by everyone. There were some players who continued to play the game in the Indian dress *dhoti* and kurta till the 1930's. As we know it was one of the popular modes of clothing in the early twentieth century in most of the regions of India.

We know of number of conflicts which took place during the 1930's on the clothing issue. Boria Majumadar notes that number of Indians played cricket wearing dhoti and it led to clashes between them and the British.^{xi} According to her, on 3 January 1931 a match played between Mohan Bagan Club and the Calcutta Cricket Club was abandoned because the Indians were insulted by the British governor R B. Lagden (President of the club and captain of cricket team) on account of their clothing.^{xii} The Indians had refused to play and demanded an apology which Lagden did not give. As a result the match was abandoned.

National newspapers reported this incident which took place in 1931 as 'dhoti war'. *TheTimes of India* carried articles on Lagden view of Indian dress for cricket and the response of Mohan Bagan Club to his criticism was reported too. These articles described the nature of the dispute which arose around *dhoti* and cricket. One of the correspondents from *TOI* reports Lagden's views in 1931: ^{xiii}

The Calcutta Cricket Club and I myself have been accused of refusing to allow Indians to play cricket at the Eden garden cricket at the Eden Gardens in what is called their "National kit"...that the Mohan Bagan Club decided to play in *dhotis* as a try on and with an intention of giving affront to their hosts in point of fact the captain and some other players of the Mohan Bagan team, I think five played in the recognized cricket costume and the kit of the remainder of the players varied to such extent as to give the impression to the onlooker that the C.C.C. were playing against a team collected on the spur of the moment instead of against one of the leading Indian clubs in Calcutta who for many years past had recognized the fact that trousers and a shirt are the most suitable kit for cricket. As regards to *dhotis* being suitable. I suggest to those cricketers non cricketers who may be interested that however well draped dhoti may be if a shirt is worn outside which is invariably the case when there is breeze blowing one ends of shirt flaps and therefore both to the umpire and wicket keeper the playing of cricket as it should be played becomes impossible. I do not think any reasonable man can argue that dhoti is suitable for Cricket."

We see that practical reasons were given by Lagden to discourage the Indian cricketers from wearing *dhotis* while playing during the 1930s. Wearing of *dhoti* by some of the Indian players was seen as a deliberate act of disrespect to the white hosts. According to him, the wearing of the short and trousers had been accepted as a costume for the game.

The Mohan Bagan Club's Secretary Mr. D. N. Guin replied to his criticism: ^{xiv}

In the first match last season between Mohan Bagan and Calcutta on the Eden, Gardens around at least two of the Indian players turned up in dhotis and no objection from the C.C.C. Similarly, in other matches this season including games against Ballygunge, some of the Mohan Bagan players were in dhotis without any objection from the opposing teams. " I may also say from my personal knowledge that during the last ten years Mohan Bagan as well as and other Indian teams when they played had some of their members in dhotis. It was left entirely to individual members to dress according to convenience.

Response of Guin was in opposition to that of C.C.C. secretary Lagden. To him the objection to the wearing of *dhوتي* by few Indian players was unnecessary. He pointed out that the act of wearing *dhوتي* should not be understood as a way to insult the opposite team. The reasons cited by him showed that the Mohan Bagan Club and other Indian teams had a tradition when the players wore *dhوتي* during the game. However, the reason behind this objection by the other teams around the clothing of the Indians leading to controversy needs to be located in the political ferment of the Indian subcontinent during the 1930s.

As a writer in *Times of India* writes that, 'whether Mr. Lagden raised the question as a point of interest, asked it in fun, or was making a stand for the traditions of Indian cricket, at the present time, with nationalist feelings always ready to surge to the brain on the first occasion, reasonable or otherwise, it would have been more tactful to overlook the point.'^{xv} He notes further, that it was preposterous of the Bengal cricketers to turn his remark into an affront to their national costume. Thus, the nature of the conflict was political and it was ensued because the symbol of *dhوتي* represented the Indian culture.

However, there were many who considered *dhوتي* as disadvantageous for the games. Madras official non Brahmin paper Justice opined that a *dhوتي* was obviously not the best garment for cricket.^{xvi} It said that *dhوتي* was of no use if the player was allowed to catch the ball with it. Similarly, another writer K. M Ghoshal presented the *dhوتي* as unfit costume not only for cricket but for any sport.^{xvii} He opined that except for the persons who are obsessed with the fad that the *dhوتي* stands for nationalism and must be worn for its own sake everyone agreed that *dhوتي* was not suited for either cricket or football.

According to Guha, one of the approaches to study sports views it as a relational idiom, a sphere of activity which expresses, in concentrated form, in sports the values divisions and unifying symbols of society. For some groups the unifying aspect of the sports appropriated the costume too. The members of a same team share similar clothing which is aimed at inculcating unity and instill feeling of competitiveness too. This aspect of sports clothing was enjoyed by the members belonging to various groups in India. The photographs show members of hockey, polo, cricket in similar uniforms of Indians and British in same team however, it was a later development. As we said that the intermixing of the Indians and the British happened only by the first half of the twentieth century. However, the British cantonment was the place where we find instances of intermixed groups in various sports.

Female sport and the question of uniform : We traced some of the functional aspect of sports clothing for men in the early twentieth century. Similarly, sports were becoming popular among females in India by the second decade of twentieth century. Initially, it was restricted to few women from the royal families. The Indian royals were one of the very first groups to take up sport in an organised manner.^{xviii} As the royals went to the public schools where sport was an important part of the curriculum for much of the first half of the twentieth century they were enthusiastic about outdoor games and sports. In these schools boys were expected to take part in all kinds of activities, including athletics, polo, hockey, football, tennis, etc. Along with cricket, polo was one of the popular sport and it allowed them to mix with the British officials. Almost all the princely states Hyderabad, Gwalior and Jodhpur were patrons of polo. Even the girls belonging to the royal families were exposed to sport. The Maharaja of Scindia advised in his 'notes on Education and Upbringing of the Ruler' (1925) that children of both sexes should be taken out shooting once a week without fail and when they have advanced in years they should, as a rule, be made to spend not less than a couple of

weeks annually on tiger shooting. Ronojoy Sen points that this was a sort of environment in which Gayatri Devi, who originally belonged to the Cooch Behar Royal family of north Bengal and later married the maharaja, grew up.^{xix} She went on her first shoot at the age of five and shot a panther when she was twelve.

Several photographs are available showcasing Gayatri Devi's life.^{xx} We see that she was a figure of a modern fashionable woman during her times who defied the *pardah* system unlike Rajput maharanis of her times. She was equally talented in sport: was as an excellent rider and an able polo player. As her husband was one of the famous polo players, she played polo regularly. Her participation in various sports activities can be traced through the available photographs (Figure 22) which show her riding horse, driving car, playing tennis, playing golf, hunting and presenting winning prizes to polo players during the 1930s -1960's.^{xxi} These images show her in various attire such as shirt and loose pants while playing golf, shirt and divided long skirts while playing tennis and at the same time she is dressed in expensive chic sari on other occasions.^{xxii} We see that she adopted western clothing in her everyday life including for sport, but she retained the Indian sari in her dressing for most of the social events. The example of her experiment with western clothing for sport does not suggest that sport led to westernisation in clothing but certainly wearing sport clothes was easier for those who were already westernised and fashionable. Gayatri Devi and other royal and elite women were involved in sport to some extent. However, the popularity grew among other women by the second decade of the twentieth century but the process was slow.

What was the reason for the shift in the attitude towards women sports by the 1920s? According to Boria Majumdar, the origin of soccer in India was closely tied with the movement for women's suffrage and emancipation in colonial India.^{xxiii} With the establishment of the All India women's Congress in 1918, the move for women's suffrage gathered momentum. With the establishment of the All India women's congress, attempts were made to give women a voice that had been absent throughout the nineteenth century.^{xxiv}

The first All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform was held from 5 to 8 January 1927. The educated participants made physical exercises an important part of the curriculum for Indian women. Between 1928 and 1931, the conference also began examining social problems associated with women and girls. Physical education was made mandatory for girls in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies.^{xxv} During this period only other religious bodies such as the Brahmo Samaj, Ramkrishna Mission, Arya Samaj etc. also took up the cause of women's education. The schools which were proposed in cities for girls during 1930-31 such as Bihar, Ajmer and Lucknow, focused on physical culture.

Around this time some women commentators espoused the cause of women's soccer, demanding better sports facilities for women. As part of this broader movement for emancipation, sport, especially cricket and football gained currency among Indian women. Vernacular tracts of the period commented on the virtues of these sports, claiming that sporting prowess would stimulate the movement for women's emancipation. By the 1920s things changed. While it was possible for the boys or men to go through regular physical drills in the akharas thus developing their sporting skills, women were not allowed to do so. This was because the akharas were considered a male domain and rigorous physical exercises for body building was considered opposed to femininity. Accordingly, women's football which was only starting to mature underwent a rapid decline.^{xxvi}

Brajarajan Ray who was considered father of Indian of Bengali sports journalism, tried to promote the development of women's soccer in the educational institutions and clubs of Bengal from the late 1920s. In this period the number of Indian sportswomen in Bengal was minimal. However, women from the English and AngloIndian communities actively participated in sports like cricket and soccer. In 1928 Ray took an initiative in establishing the National Youth Association at Calcutta.^{xxvii} When one of its members Purna Ghosh, attempted to play soccer, she became the subject of ridicule in many sections of society. However, Anand Bazar Patrika, the leading Bengali Newspaper gave her considerable support by publishing her photograph on more than one occasion. As the traditional women's dress, the saree, obstructed freedom of movement, women had to discard their conventional attire if they were to play the sport seriously. Rejection of the traditional attire provoked another wave of criticism in the province.^{xxviii}

Despite considerable opposition the first women's football tournament of the country continued for four years, eventually resulting in the formation of women's sports federation in 1938. By the third year of the tournament, some college women had discarded their sari and had started playing in shorts, a revolutionary development in colonial Bengal. However, such initiatives were short lived and women's soccer in Bengal had declined by the early 1940s. The growth of women's soccer was limited and the traditional attire of the Indian players was considered as a hindrance.

Conclusion : Early-twentieth century books and journals focused on the idea of sports and in the process defined forms of new dressing for Indian women – elite and domestic middle class. Dress for western women was supposed to reflect comfort, mobility and femininity but for Indian women these ideals had to go along with a concern with identity and tradition.

We see how the popularity of sports was a slow process among women and so was the adoption of sports costume. Works on sport history in India have largely focused on men's sport and the question of women's involvement in sports during the colonial period is completely absent. This chapter hoped to fill this gap. We see that there was a culture of native games and there was popularity of English sport too. However, professional sport for women gained importance very late. In the contemporary period as well we see that women's sport at the national level is an area that has been neglected and there has always been a lack of funding.

In the context of clothing, women were burdened with the responsibility of upholding ideals of modesty, identity and tradition. Women were motivated to build up their moral and physical strength to be healthy for the nation and to stay beautiful. So we see how even in the context of sport the burden of reform fell on the women. The anxiety of the reformer writers was reflected in the portrayal of rich women as lazy and sick: they wasted time in gossiping.

The focus on women's health and sports seems to be a significant development in this period. These were somewhat responsible for advocating removal of *purdah* as well. These vernacular texts acted as spokesperson for women's issues and offered a platform for debate on status of women. The very fact that these debates were taking place on a wider scale reveals that sport, dress and health acquired a significant place among the social issues that needed to be reformed. The question of sports clothing operated sometimes beyond the strictures of caste, class and religion; however, sometimes it operated within these realms. The

space of sports was gendered as the reasons behind popularity of physical culture for men and women were different. The difference was extended to the realm of clothing as well.

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