



KICKING IN THE MASCULINE FIELD: WOMEN IN/AND FOOTBALL IN DARJEELING

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ABSTRACT

Schools have been the medium through which the values of sport have been imparted to children in Britain. Darjeeling became part of the British Empire in 1835, when the Raja of Sikkim gifted the region for a nominal annual fee. In 1864, St. Paul's School was transferred from Calcutta to Darjeeling, and soon numerous other schools were established. In India, too, schools played an important role in propagating sports culture. In Darjeeling's schools, many sports were played, but football was by far the most popular. Sports such as football, rugby, and others were considered masculine. The 'masculinisation' of sport excluded women, and any resistance to normative gender roles was repressed by dominant patriarchal systems. This discourse normalised the idea that women can't play and enjoy football. However, with changing times, women in the Darjeeling Hills have shown their talent in many sports, including football.

This research is auto-ethnographic and exploratory. Data were collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews and observation. Exploring the region's sporting history, this research has investigated the qualitative and quantitative changes that have occurred and have assisted women in playing football. It attempted to investigate the contributions local residents and organisations have made to facilitate the growth of women's and girls' football in the region.

Keywords: Women, Football, Darjeeling, Schools, Natives, Masculine, Gender Discrimination.

Introduction

Darjeeling became part of the British Empire in 1835 when the Raja of Sikkim

gifted the region for a nominal annual fee. It soon witnessed rapid development, which was important to the British for strategic reasons (Palit, 2007). During the early years

of development, tea was tested experimentally and showed potential, leading to the growth of tea gardens in the area. Soon, the region's population increased from a mere 100 in 1835 to 10000 in 1859 (O'Malley, 1989). Sensing the urgency of establishing schools in Darjeeling, the British transferred St. Paul's School from Calcutta to Darjeeling in 1864; immediately, numerous other schools were established. Schools have been the medium through which the values of sport were imparted to children (Hargreaves, 1994). In India too, schools played an important role in propagating sports culture (Sen, 2015), especially after the 1857 revolt, when sport and football became popular in the Indian sub-continent (Burdsey, 2007). In Darjeeling, many sports were played, with cricket and football the most prominent. However, football was soon accepted by the schools and the local population and became a popular sport (St. Joseph's College, 1896).

There is an intrinsic relationship between sports, society, people, and their cultural practices and social influences (Tomlinson, 2004). The population of Darjeeling was predominantly working-class, and football is a working-class game (Pope, 2017; Goldblatt, 2007). The game soon captured the public imagination. Thousands of locals would watch matches played on St. Joseph's College ground from the hillside (St. Joseph's College, 1898). Watching the game helped people learn it (Foer, 2005), and teams soon began to flourish. Due to the "simplicity of its rules and scoring system, its flexibility in terms of numbers that can play, how long they can play for, the space required to play in; its

lack of equipment; and the lower likelihood of serious injury" (Goldblatt, 2007; p. 117), football became part of the symbolic capital and lifeworld of the local population.

The various Annual Reports of St. Joseph's College portray women as spectators dressed in beautiful attire. Yet, gender relations are complex and influenced by class. Women formed the backbone of the tea industry, spending much of their time in tea gardens picking the best leaves and in kitchens cooking for their families. Their economic status affected their access to public spaces; women with lower economic standing in tea gardens were more likely to use these spaces, while those in higher classes had less freedom. Over time, the influence of the Hindu religion on tribal groups became evident, deepening gender divisions. However, the Gorkhaland Movement in the 1980s demanded equal participation from men and women. Women played vital roles, also acting as a protective shield for men, which later enabled women of all ages and classes to step outside their homes and make decisions. This movement empowered women, which was reflected in various areas, including football. Still, their agency was sometimes exploited, as men organized only exhibition matches during male football finals, ridiculing and body-shaming women players. This has changed, and now many young women attend coaching academies, play the game, and some even compete at the national level.

Methods and Positionality

This research paper is based on years of researchers' observations of the region. Women's football in the Darjeeling region

was chosen as a topic because of its history and its recent growth in popularity among girls. Having grown up watching and experiencing football in Darjeeling, we have seen its evolution firsthand. One of our researchers was a renowned footballer who represented the Darjeeling district and the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council teams. He played for a well-known local club and travelled throughout the Darjeeling Hills, witnessing the region's football landscape through the years. In the 1990s, women's football mainly consisted of exhibition matches held before men's final games to draw crowds. Over time, we have observed a significant transformation in women's football, from simple exhibition matches to organised leagues and invitational tournaments. Notably, the changing attitudes of players and spectators have prompted us to explore the reasons behind this shift. As locals—one of us being a player—we have interacted with coaches, administrators, and players, allowing us to reflect on aspects of the sport that outsiders might find hard to access and to interpret these within the region's social and political context. Data for the research were collected through unstructured interviews, conducted both face-to-face and by telephone. The sample size is 100 and includes players, past and present, men and women; teachers who support the players; coaches; and club officials.

Women and Football: A Brief History

Sport in some form has been played since antiquity and continues to the present day. In the form of martial arts, today's sports such as archery and wrestling were

practised during the Mahabharata period and in ancient Greek civilisation, but women were excluded (Sen, 2015). In the modern period, sport has become a significant cultural phenomenon and social institution in almost all societies (Delaney & Madigan, 2015) and is also a significant location 'for the production and expression of gender identities' (Dunning, 1999; p. 220). Schools have been the most important medium through which sport was propagated among the people (Sen, 2015; Goldblatt, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994). However, there was a clear division of labour, with women separated from men in sport, which confirmed the biological assumption that men and women were different (Hargreaves, 1994) and reinforced the belief that it was harmful for women to participate in sport (Delaney & Madigan, 2015). The 'masculinisation' of sport excluded women and affirmed the belief that sport was not for women (Howe, 2015). Football was perceived as the sphere of men, with an undeclared consensus to exclude women (Donoso, Reina, & Álvarez-Sotomayor, 2022; Collins, 2019). There was a total curb on prospects for women to participate and compete in football (Smith & Wrynn, 2014), and any resistance to the normative gender norms and efforts to empower themselves were repressed by dominant belief systems (Theberge, 2000). This discourse constricted recognition that women can also play and enjoy football (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Some sports, such as football, cricket and rugby, were considered masculine, while others, such as tennis and croquet, were considered feminine and permitted for recreational play (Goldblatt, 2007). Football

became very popular, an important pursuit for many, even more so than religion, and an important component of tradition and history (Foer, 2005). Women also began to play football. This can be attributed to their challenging structural constraints and dominance (Scambler, 2005), but their participation was restricted and, more often, exploited for entertainment or other reasons.

The first women's football match was played in Scotland (Collins, 2019; Goldblatt, 2007). No women watched the match, and the organisers' aim was "not to encourage women to play football but to make money from the mockery and misogyny of the crowd" (Collins, 2019; p. 65). The match reinforced gender stereotypes. During the First World War, women played the game, but it was an endeavour to support the men and opened "the space for another experiment with women's football" (Goldblatt, 2007; p. 180). Despite such an adverse beginning, women's football has seen unprecedented growth, yet its exploitation continues. The President of FIFA, concerning women's football, "had suggested that women's football might flourish if the clothing were a little more revealing" (Goldblatt, 2007; p. 746). Gender disparity in sport has persisted for various reasons, but one of the most important has been the stereotype associated with gender (Buser, Müller, Schlunegger & Nagel, 2024). "Football had been established to be a resolutely male sphere with the explicit intention of excluding women" (Collins 2019; 68). However, women have played the sport with enthusiasm and have also revolted against men's dictates and control.

Overview of Sports in Darjeeling

The colonialists' agenda in the colonies was to promote their way of life, including societal structures, norms and values, and this task was carried out by missionaries through the schools. The schools sought to encourage the continued development of strong, healthy bodies, but in ways that embodied the Victorian Christian value system. Football was forced on the schoolboys under threat of a beating from the masters' sticks, and though strenuously resisted at first, it gradually came to be played freely and enthusiastically (Mills, 2002). According to O'Malley (1989), by 1894–1895 there were 109 schools with a total of 3,830 students; by 1904–1905, the figures were 142 and 3,950, respectively. Although schools had become an integral part of the ecosystem in Darjeeling, local representation was not proportionate. The impact of schools on the region's sporting culture is evident in the achievements of two pupils, Joseph T. Galibardy and Cyril J. Mitchie, of Goethals Memorial School, established in 1907, who won hockey gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Another student, Chaman Singh Gurung of Goethals Memorial School, won a gold medal in hockey for India at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. Another product of St Paul's School, Peter Hildreth, competed in athletics at the 1952 Olympic Games. Goethals is probably the only school in India to have produced three Olympic gold medalists. In colonial India, schools were also at the forefront of popularising sports, alongside the army. By the time the first school was established in Darjeeling, football and many other sports had become

popular in India. The British used sports as an instrument of diplomacy after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

The British soon established schools for the native princes across many parts of India, and “sports and outdoor activities were an indispensable part of the curriculum” (Sen, 2015, p. 60). In doing so, the British also had the hidden agenda of socialising many of the princes into the British way of life and elite culture, so they would be on their side if another mutiny took place. Thus, among the many sports, cricket and football became popular among Indians after 1857 (Burdsey, 2007; Goldblatt, 2014), and football and boxing were the soldiers’ favourites (Sen, 2015).

Football in Colonial Darjeeling

Sports had become an established annual tradition, featuring cricket, football, hockey, and tennis. Inter-school matches, as well as contests between schools and army teams, were frequent. Football, which began in Darjeeling slightly after cricket, initially aimed to fill the rainy season gap between the two cricket seasons. The first football season started in March, followed by the second after the monsoon.

Nor should such a one be far to seek, as the interest in the game dates only from last season. In former years both Rugby and Socker found some devotees, but chiefly among the military. Last year the two Hill Schools seemed simultaneously to have concluded that the best way of putting some interest into the long and dreary rainy days and to tide

over the gap between two Cricket seasons would be to place the game on a popular footing. (St. Joseph’s College, 1896, p. 30).

Football soon became popular, and the need to organise competitions was felt. A committee was formed to discuss the feasibility of a Challenge Shield, and with the generous support of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, organised football began in 1895 with eight teams participating. Two other significant tournaments at that time were the District Challenge Cup and the Poojah Cup (St. Joseph’s College, 1897). The hill population was also an active participant in the sporting culture of the place, as one report notes that the hillside between the ground and the college was crowded with thousands of neatly dressed hill people (St. Joseph’s College, 1898). By this time, the natives had also started playing football, as evidenced by the description of the match between the “servants of St. Joseph’s College and those of St. Paul’s Jalapahar”. “In conclusion, let us hope that this sporting instinct among the few of the Natives here may be encouraged, for should not they strive, as much as we ...” (St. Joseph’s College, 1898, p. 21).

By the turn of the century, football in Darjeeling was so popular that the annual report of St. Joseph’s College (1906) states, “Teams sprung up as by enchantment over the hillside; games there were and tournaments, and trophies to be played for and won, and Darjeeling was for once threatened with a surfeit of Footer” (p. 48). Crowds at the Lebong ground were growing larger with every passing year. Though the

sporting historiography of Darjeeling is not well documented, it is clear that a vibrant sporting atmosphere existed, with rivalries between schools and military teams. The role of schools in popularising and spreading sports has been acknowledged by none other than the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (Sen, 2015). However, given the circumstances in Darjeeling, schools were not instrumental in popularising or spreading sports among the local population, especially among women. By the 1930s, women had begun to take a keen interest in cricket, football, and hockey. However, the beginning of women's football in India can be traced back to the early 1970s, though the game is yet to take a firm root throughout the Indian subcontinent (Majumdar & Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

Women and Football in Darjeeling

There is little historiography on women's football in Darjeeling. Although track and field events were a regular feature at girls' schools, there was no evidence of the so-called 'masculine sport' being played. Girls' football was observed in the 1990s, but due to a lack of players and the low priority given to it, matches were played as exhibitions. Gender discrimination was evident in itself. The girls were ridiculed by spectators, and body shaming was a constant feature. At the turn of the century, the advent of satellite television and the overall empowerment of women in the region led to a proliferation of women's sport. Soon, football became popular among girls. A respondent from Pushparani High School said, "Watching the European football

matches on television made me interested in football. I started playing at a quite young age and love playing football more than anything else." A coach from Debanjan Share Football Academy said, "Mothers bring their daughters to our academy and ask us to enrol them. Football among the girls has become very popular."

Girls' football in the Darjeeling area became popular largely due to the efforts of local role models. These include teachers from St. Teresa School, Darjeeling; Ms Sushma from Ramakrishna Girls Higher Secondary School, Kurseong; Ms Merina from Kalimpong Girls Higher Secondary School; and Mr Nirmal from Turbo High School, Mirik. They serve mainly as mentors, inspiring players in a setting where uncertainty is always present. They also deal with difficult questions from parents regarding marriage and reproductive health, which they handle carefully. All of them mentioned that keeping players motivated is hard because they are easily sidetracked by distractions.

The global commercialisation of football has influenced both the financial landscape of the sport and players' lives. While football remains more affordable than many other sports, the expenses associated with playing have risen dramatically. Consequently, mentors often need to adjust their budgets and assist players financially. Sometimes they contribute personally; other times, they seek help from trusted individuals. School staff also play a vital role by contributing to teams and bringing the entire school community together. Ms Merina and Ms Sushma, despite being in

different locations, shared similar concerns and opinions. "Since the grounds are sandy in the hills, boots wear out quickly. Many girls cannot afford new boots each time. Cheaper boots are less durable, and better-quality boots are costly. This constant dilemma leads us to seek help from colleagues during financial hardships. Thankfully, the teachers are always supportive and contribute to the team," they explained.

The COVID pandemic posed further challenges to the nascent arena of girls' football in the Darjeeling region. During this period, Ms Kamlesh could perceive the frustration among some of the girls due to the restrictions. As restrictions eased, she acted quickly. She called a coach to Kurseong and organised a camp for the girls. Former football players have started coaching camps in the hills, and they are also training girls. Ms Kamlesh is instrumental in motivating the girls to play the beautiful game. The formation and establishment of coaching centres have created a value chain. The schools also utilise these coaching centres. The schools send their players to train in these centres and pay the fees charged by the centres. At times, it is very difficult to sustain such a model financially, and they request the coaches to reduce the fees. Ms Sushma said, "I send my players to the coaching centre. It is difficult for us financially, but everybody comes forward to help. However, we constantly have to negotiate with the coaches for the fees. If we ask them, then they will help us, but we also have to think that it is their source of livelihood."

The situation has somewhat improved with the opening of Debanjan Share Girls' Academy in Kalimpong. Established in 2021, it is the only residential coaching centre for girls in West Bengal. Initially, 25 girls from the region were selected through trials. The academy has addressed the lack of opportunities for girls' football development and progress. This is just the beginning, and more steps are needed. Many girls now aspire to join the academy, which offers both training and exposure. The founder, based in Kolkata, is very optimistic about the girls' potential. He states, "The girls here, especially from the hills, are talented and diligent. They only need proper guidance, which we aim to provide. I believe many will soon compete nationally from the hills and our academy."

Women's Football Tournaments

Every year, numerous football tournaments, both official and unofficial, take place in the hills of Darjeeling. Until recently, women's tournaments were rare, limited mostly to informal seven-a-side matches. However, change is underway. Since 2023, the Kurseong Football Association has hosted the Gorkha Cheli Women's Football Tournament annually, aiming to promote women's football in Darjeeling. Likewise, the Darjeeling Football Society has been organizing women's football events for the past three years. In Kalimpong, the Debanjan Share Girls' Academy Cup for under-13 and under-15 categories is held yearly, along with a separate tournament for senior girls, all with the goal of fostering grassroots girls' football. Additionally, the Association

of Heads of Local Institutions of Schools hosts an annual event for various age groups. These initiatives have successfully sparked interest among girls in football at the local level, with organizers noting a yearly increase in participation, indicating a growing enthusiasm among all stakeholders.

Achievements in the Field

Recently, the girls from Pakhabari High School qualified for the cluster-level Subrata Cup, and two of their players have been called up to attend the selection camp for the West Bengal state team. Girls from Ramakrishna Girls' High School are also putting in strong performances. They frequently participate in state-level tournaments, and one of their players is playing professionally in the Bhutan League. The girls from our region are doing exceptionally well in football, despite minimal support and facilities. The schools mentioned above do not even have a standard-sized football field.

Most of the players belong to the lower economic strata and struggle to buy proper kits at times, while also facing many other existential difficulties. These difficulties and challenges have not stopped them from pursuing the game. Rather, with their will, determination, and dedication, they have transformed the challenges into opportunities. Three players from the Debanjan Share Girls' Academy, Palmu Tamang, Sushanna Rai and Supriya Gurung, were part of the Bronze Medal-winning Bengal Women's Football Team at the 38th National Games in Uttarakhand. One of the academy's coaches said, "The younger girls

are even better", pointing to the sport's brighter prospects in the hills.

The Debanjan Share Girls' Academy has achieved great success nationally. Last year, they reached the semi-finals of the Kanyashree Football Premier League - B Division. In 2025-26, they not only became champions but also dominated most of their opponents. The players are also making significant individual progress. Anju Tamang stands out as one of the senior-most members of the Indian National Women's Football Team. Sushmita Lepcha has also been selected for the Indian Women's National Team. Several girls are playing professionally for different national clubs, and a student from Ramakrishna Girls' High School, Kurseong, is now playing professionally in Bhutan.

Conclusion

Sport in India has seen significant growth among women, both in participation and viewership. Most of sports bodies are divided into men's and women's categories, with their own associations and federations. However, most of these federations and associations are headed by male members which to a large extent has acted as an impediment to have or frame dedicated policy for women and men. Both men's and women's sports today are guided by the National Sports Policy, which does not cater to the specific needs and expectations of women athletes and sports.

The Darjeeling Hills, a marginalised area within India's sporting landscape, is prone to conflict and violence. Policymakers could leverage the cultural importance of

sport to develop targeted policies for the region, helping to reduce violence and instability. Families have influenced the sports women engage in (Pope, 2017), but today personal choice and initiative are emphasised (Raikkonen and Hedman, 2024). Ongoing developments and achievements in football by various players can help families support girls in choosing the sport they prefer. Sports organisations and policymakers at both the state and national levels must focus on this area, providing targeted support to female football players and other athletes across the region to foster the growth of sport nationwide. The region has a rich sporting history that has largely gone untapped. While cricket dominates in the country, a few areas are not primarily focused on it. This region has the potential to become a hub for developing football talent, similar to other successful regions. Local enthusiasts have already established the necessary infrastructure, and national and state organisations only need to capitalize on it.

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