
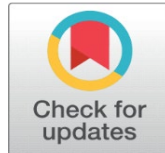
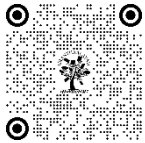


BEYOND THE AKHARA: GENDERED SPACE AND WOMEN'S AGENCY IN INDIAN SPORTS FILMS

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ABSTRACT

The cinematic realm, reflecting society's evolving ethos, has increasingly become a platform for exploring gender dynamics, particularly in sports films. In the Indian context, sports cinema transcends mere athletic narratives to interrogate entrenched societal norms, providing a fertile ground for reimagining gendered spaces. This manuscript delves into the transformative portrayal of women in Indian sports films, focusing on how these narratives carve out spaces of empowerment within a historically patriarchal framework. From akhara (mud-pit) to international arenas, sports films have spotlighted the indomitable spirit of women who defy cultural constraints to assert agency. This essay will study two films, *Dangal* (2016) and *Saand Kii Aankh* (2019), chronicling female sportsperson's journey but foregrounding their confrontation with regressive traditions that relegate women to the domestic sphere. These cinematic portrayals challenge the deeply ingrained dichotomies of strength versus femininity, public versus private spaces, and tradition versus progress. By employing powerful visual storytelling and evocative character arcs, Indian sports films serve as a cultural critique of spatial inequalities, offering narratives where women reclaim the akhara—both literal and symbolic—as arenas of identity and empowerment. The synergy of athleticism and cinematic representation redefines femininity, presenting women not as objects of aesthetic idealization but as agents of resilience and defiance. This paper examines the intersection of gender, space, and agency in sports films, arguing that these narratives do more than entertain—they disrupt normative constructs, fostering dialogue on women's rights and their rightful place in public life. Ultimately, the paper posits that Indian sports cinema, in its nuanced portrayal of gendered spaces, catalyses a broader discourse on societal transformation and women's emancipation.

Keywords: Akhara, Space, Films, Inequality, Tradition, Cinema, Dynamics, Sports

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of human civilization along the banks of river valleys, 'sports', have evolved into an essential facet of humanity's existence. More than a pastime or hobby, It sheds light on various dimensions of society, including education, health, the economy, politics, and families. Additionally, the rules, rituals, and traditions associated with sports often mirror broader social structures and power dynamics. Sports fostered unity and cohesion within communities and nations. The shared experience of supporting a team or participating in sporting events can bridge divides and create a sense of belonging among diverse groups. This has been particularly evident in moments of national pride during major sporting events such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup. Furthermore, sports have served as a platform for social change and activism. Sportspersons like Muhammad Ali, Jesse Owens, and Pele, have used sports as a platform to advocate civil rights, racial equality, and other important social causes. Their achievements, both on and off the field, have inspired millions and helped catalyze progress toward greater inclusivity and equality. Through compelling narratives and stellar performances, films on sports have inspired audiences across the country and contributed to a greater appreciation for sports as a means of empowerment and social change, promoting inclusivity and empowering women in diverse aspects.

Immanuel Kant in his essay *What is Enlightenment*, foregrounds the notion of autonomy and the capacity for reason as essential to humanity's progress from self-imposed immaturity, so, within a Kantian paradigm, 'space for women' symbolizes their rightful inclusion as autonomous agents in both intellectual and public domains. Beyond the *akhara*, the journey of women sportspersons reflects a broader cultural shift towards empowerment and breaking traditional gender norms. Historically, it represents a sacred space where wrestlers train, imbibing values like perseverance, respect for the *guru-shishya* (mentor-disciple) relationship, and physical and mental strength. For women, the *akhara* (mud-pit), has become a transformative symbolism, evolving from a traditionally male-dominated domain to a space of resistance and empowerment. This evolution signifies a reclaiming of public spaces and redefining femininity, where their narratives transcend the physical space of the *akhara* to inspire systemic change in representation, opportunities, and recognition for women in sports.

Thus, 'space', here examines through analysis of the struggles and achievements of women whose stories have been excluded from previous accounts of women's sport heroism. The women in the selected female sports films *Dangal* (2016) and *Saand Kii Aankh* (2019) have had to struggle against particularly harsh forms of discrimination to take part in sports and have constructed their own sporting identity in changing and difficult conditions. In popular consciousness, sportspersons are men and women who are 'larger than life', inspirational icons, and special people with extraordinary qualities that are constructed and represented in particular ways to encourage us to admire and idealize them. However, female sportspersons are usually defined differently. In society, the male sportsperson is required to be heroic – superior or exemplary in some way – and the female inferior by definition (Thompson, 17). Selfless and courageous acts of humanity, associated with caring, kindness, motherliness, and morality- essentially feminine attributes are ascribed to traditional females. Certainly, throughout the history of modern sports, there has always been a small number of adventuress women who have transgressed gender roles, taking up manly' sports such as boxing, baseball, car, racing soccer and shown consummate skill and broken records and creating the 'space', for the coming generation. Since the 1920s, characterized as the golden Age of Sports, the media has transformed top female performers into folk heroines and figures of international stature and some of them become household names throughout the Western world (Hargreaves,2) Now small number of women who took part in aggressive, muscular, traditional male sports had their sexuality denied, were labelled 'mannish' or 'freakish', presented as androgynous or, more usually, as 'super feminine' Male space, is being constantly challenged by women who are appropriating the narratives of maleness and transforming themselves from victims into superstars'. Through the globalization of culture and the spread of self –consciousness about the body, sports have become increasingly important in defining female identity. As, Nehwal said, 'I want to be the best, it is not about the ranking, it's about being consistent over some time' (*Playing to Win*, 2018).

The concept of 'space', is evaluated by certain feminist writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), first feminist text defines space as an avenue for women's access to education, advocating for intellectual and social equality. By contrast, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) reconceptualizes space as both physical and ideological, underscoring the necessity of a 'private space for creativity'. Woolf's statement that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction underscores the material and structural constraints imposed by gender, which restrict women's freedom and creative potential. Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir's 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman', (*The Second Sex*, 1949), asserts societal norms, expectations, and conditioning shape women into fulfilling predefined roles, rather than these roles being biologically determined. The concept of 'space' is dynamic, simultaneously reflecting women's resistance to patriarchal norms and their quest for intellectual and creative autonomy. So in the context of sports films, 'space', for women encompasses both physical arenas (like the mud pit, *akhara*, or sports fields) and metaphorical domains (such as societal roles and public recognition).

The evolution of Indian cinema started in 1913, had constantly focused on social issues. It is considered a powerful mass medium to share ideas, thoughts, views, and values with the masses due to its features and storytelling style. The intersection of sports and cinema in India represents a fascinating domain where storytelling converges with real-life achievements, societal issues, and cultural values. Over the years, Indian cinema has produced diverse sports movies that transcend entertainment and have become significant social and cultural documents. Early films like *Lagaan* (2001) and *Iqbal* (2005),⁸³ *Paan Singh Tomar* Sultan glorified male-centric narratives, often sidelining women or casting them in supportive roles. However, the landscape began to shift in the 2010s, with female-led sports films like *Chak De! India* (2007), *Mary Kom* (2014), and *Dangal* (2016) Panga (2020), *Saand Kii Anakh* (2019), *Sabash Mitthu*, have showcased the struggles and triumphs of women athletes, challenging stereotypes and inspiring social change. There are also internationally female-acclaimed films like, *Fighting With My Family* (2019), *Ride Like A Girl*, (2019), and *Nyad* (2023), capturing women's revolution to get 'space', in society through their talent.

In this research paper, I focus on the analysis of selected films namely, *Dangal* (2016) and *Saand kii Aankh* (2019). These films first time presented female sportsperson on the silver screen in the history of Indian Bollywood sports cinema. *Dangal* (2016), directed by Nitesh Tiwari, is a landmark film in Indian cinema that carved out a significant space for women in India and abroad. Based on the real-life story of Mahavir Singh Phogat and his daughters Geeta and Babita, the film addresses the deep-seated patriarchy prevalent in Indian society while championing the potential of women in sports. But despite societal ridicule and resistance, Mahavir trains his daughters in the male-dominated sport of wrestling, defying norms that confine women to domestic roles and creating a space for them in society. As Showalter calls Women's Space, "As the space of the other, the gaps, silences, and absences of discourse and representation, to which the feminine has traditionally been relegated", (Showalter, 36). The film dialogue, '*Mhari choriya chhoro se kam hai ke?*', (Are our daughters any less than sons?), becomes a rallying cry for challenging stereotypes about gender roles. It asserts that talent and determination are not bound by gender and that women, given the right opportunities, can achieve greatness. In pivotal picture 1.1 from *Dangal*, where Babita wrestles boys in the akhara, the camera work and mise-en-scène serve as powerful tools to highlight the clash between tradition and progress. The director deliberately centre son Babita and the curious crowd, creating a dual narrative: Babita symbolizes defiance and potential, while the audience represents a patriarchal gaze questioning her presence in a traditionally male space. The akhara, a stronghold of masculine power, is used as a metaphor for societal barriers, with Babita's struggle symbolizing the fight to break them. Through framing, the camera emphasizes Babita's determination, while the static crowd in the background reflects societal inertia.



Picture 1.1 (*Dangal*)

<https://dooleyonline.typepad.com/a/6a00e551a4e0f3883301bb0964c6fe970d-pi>



Picture.1.2

<https://encryptedtbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQsj6mXwso7nQRmB2i5CCuJFSBHey37UQn65A&s>

In Picture 1.2, male domination in Haryana is cinematically emphasized through the initial focus on Mahavir Singh Phogat, embodying patriarchal authority as he chides Geeta and Babita. The camera's placement asserts his dominance, reinforcing the cultural norm of male control in decision-making. However, as the narrative unfolds, the shift in camera focus to Geeta and Babita symbolizes a transfer of agency, illustrating their growing empowerment and eventual challenge to male authority. This deliberate cinematic progression reflects the transformative journey from submission to self-determination, aligning with the film's broader themes of gender equality and breaking patriarchal norms. Further, the dialogue, '*Gold to gold hota h chora lave che chori*', (Gold is gold whether won by men or women), symbolizes a paradigm shift in parental attitudes towards sports. It reflects a growing recognition of women's equal potential in achieving excellence and challenging traditional gender biases. This change signifies the increasing value placed on merit and accomplishment over gendered expectations, fostering a more inclusive view of sports as a domain for all. Moreover, this film is set in Haryana where sports was one area where gender inequalities were strongly evident. It was negligible

to think that girls could come so ahead, although the game of wrestling is deeply rooted in the culture of Haryana. But now times have changed. Girls from Haryana have paved a long way toward the road of success and have made themselves a hallmark in sports. Haryana alone, with 2% of India's population, contributed more than 50% of the gold medals mostly won by females. As Professor Tandan says: 'Earlier, these girls were not even allowed to leave their homes. Now they are leaders in their villages' (*The Hindu Newspaper*). So, Sports have the power to empower girls and women. As President Droupadi Murmu said in her speech 'the way the daughters of Haryana have raised the pride of their families and state on the global stage in the field of sports is one of the best examples of women's empowerment' (*The Hindu Newspaper*). Further the statement of Mahavir Singh Phogat, '*Ager silver jeeti to Ahaaj nahi toh kl log tanne bhoool javenge' gold jeeti toh missal ban javegi. Aur missal di jatihai beta bhooli nahi jati*', (If you win silver, people will forget you today or tomorrow. But if you win gold, you'll become a legend. And legends are remembered, not forgotten my dear). This quote highlights the transformation of societal attitudes toward women. Once ignored or underestimated by men, women's achievements in fields like sports now earn them respect and recognition. It reflects how success can challenge stereotypes and inspire a shift in perspective, turning past critics into supporters. The film presents how women's courage and identity are shaped by an intersecting system of power that is discussed by Patricia Hill Collins. Further, the concept of collective empowerment through sport aligns with Bell Hooks's essay *Sisterhood Political Solidarity* that how sisterhood can catalyze social change. (Hooks, 1986). Here in the films the support and solidarity between Geeta and Babita align with Hooks' idea about the transformative potential of women coming together to overcome obstacles and space for collective growth and empowerment. The dialogue, '*National champion to har saal koi na koi banta hai mera sapna tab poora hoga jab tu apne liye nahi desh ke liye gold lwaygi*', depicts women breaking barriers in sports, competing globally, and winning medals, showcasing resilience and skill. Their achievements inspire national pride and redefine gender roles in traditionally male-dominated arenas. Mahavir Singh's words, '*Mane apni choriyo ko etna kabil banauga k chora lunhe dekhne nahi wo choro ko dekhne jawengi*', showcase that now girls are coming ahead and parents are fully supporting them. As seen in the picture 1.3, here Mahavir Singh Phogat himself trained her daughter in wrestling.



Picture .1.3

<https://encryptedtbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcRI9VfP3WWKDt2BBGk0HE15kVHf8oTRIfrc5w&s>

Over the past decade, women and sportspersons in India have made a significant stride both on national and international stages. In India, women sportspersons have excelled in sports like Wrestling, Hockey, and Shooting. Sportspersons like, Hima Das, Dutee Chand, Saina Nehwal, Manu Bhaker, Vinesh Phogat, and Geeta Phogat have become household names, these Olympic stars chose to challenge the ordinary and pave a path for Indian sportswomen. Indian sports have seen a massive rise in the number of female sportspersons shining on the world stage since the turn of the millennium. The first movement of glory for Indian sportswomen came at Sydney 2000 when Karnam Malleswari won a bronze medal in a weightlifter. In 2012 Saina Nehwal won a bronze medal in badminton and became an icon for Olympic dreamer; then in 2012 Tokyo, Mary Kom became champion and her words depict the essence of how she creates space for herself, "People used to say that boxing is for men and not for women and I thought I will show them someday. I promised myself and proved myself depict the strength of female" (*Unbreakable*, 2013). Sakshi Malik, in 2016 becomes the first Indian female wrestler to win an Olympic Medal in wrestling in 2017 Indian female cricket team got ICC women's world cup, in 2017 Mirabai Chanu became champion 2016 Rio Olympic P.V Sindhu got the silver medal, in 2024 Manu Bhaker got Bronze medal in 10m air pistol mixed team event at the Olympic Games held in Paris, Avani Lakhera, from Rajasthan got Gold medal in shooting, so these achievements of women show that female is creating their space in the public domain by their ability, presence, and hard work. In the Paris Olympics 2024 Manu Bhaker's words, 'I can't claim this medal for myself, for the entire country has been supporting me people made me able to win the medal.' (The Hindu,

August,2024) This statement shows the transitions of female power from four walls to the ground and also the support of male power that was dominant. The initiatives of the government like Khelo India, *PYKKA*, *SPAS*, *Beti Bacho Beti Padhao*, and *Padklao Pad Pao* not only foster talent development but also create role models for aspiring young girls who can now envision a future in sports as a viable career option. Various sports authorities, both at the national and state levels have taken proactive measures to invest in infrastructure, training centre facilities, sports schools, universities, and sports clubs to promote young talent especially aimed at nurturing women's talent.

The second film taken for the study is *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019), directed by Tushar Hiranandani, is a powerfully feminist narrative that tells the extraordinary story of Chandro and Prakashini Tomar, two elderly women from rural Uttar Pradesh who shatter gender stereotypes to become sharpshooting champions. The film explores women finding their voice through sports. Prakashini's dialogue with her husband, Rattan Singh, asserts her need for self-expression and pursuit of her passion for shooting, when she says, '*jab se shauk hai, tab se sanskar mein fark hai*', (since I have a passion, there has been a difference in our tradition) this statement signifies the transformative power of sports in empowering women and giving them space. Living in a household ruled by oppressive male figures, the Tomar daddies discover their hidden talent for sharpshooting while accompanying their granddaughter Shefali to a newly opened shooting range. Encouraged by Dr Yashpal, the coach who recognizes their potential, the sisters begin practicing in secret and go on to compete in local and national shooting competitions, earning widespread recognition and inspiring a new generation of women.



Picture,1.4

<https://m.mediaamazon.com/images/M/MV5BMTY3ODQzM2EtN2EyNi00YzkyLTkxODYtYTYzYjMxMGVhNzYyXkEyXkFqcGc@. V1 QL7 5 UX480 .jpg>

This picture 1.4 shows the women their resilience against the patriarchal norms that marginalize older women and undermine their capabilities. Furthermore, the dialogue, '*Mardangi dhoti aur moocho m nai hove hai ... mardangi jigger mein hove hai*', (Manliness isn't in wearing a loin cloth and growing a moustache.. Manliness is in being courageous), it shows the self-confidence of Chandro and Prakash Tomar in themselves as Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory talked about the human being first have belief in oneself (Bandura, 66). So, here the strong remarks of Chandro and Prakash towards society show that they have self-confidence. Further, it also aligns with the concept, 'personal is political', when she says, '*Humane liye to ye shooting azadi kii talwar hai*', (For us shooting is a sword of freedom), she here not only makes a personal choice but also sends a powerful message. Again the dialogue, '*hamare kilaf sirf umar bolti hai, lekin jb hamare pass gun hota hai, toh hum kisi se bhi darr kar nahi rehte*', (People only talk about our age, but when we have a skill in our hands, we fear no one). This statement challenges ageism and also asserts that their skill and self-confidence outweigh societal judgment. It reflects that individuals overcome through talent and skill. In the film, the voice of Chandro and Prakash is the voice of every girl who wants to do something. As depicted in picture 1.5 first we faced a kind of discrimination then struggle and finally invention, here camera focused on their inner happiness after the struggle.



Picture.1.5,

[https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcTk4X5LevcM-CQBI8tzq-ZsB-bfQ4PFsVuHA&w=1000&h=1000&from=webp&source=webp](https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcTk4X5LevcM-CQBI8tzq-ZsB-bfQ4PFsVuHA&w=1000&h=1000&from=webp&source=webp&w=1000&h=1000&from=webp&source=webp)

As we see globally women are coming ahead through sports like South Africa, and Canada black women through their cinematic representation getting more respect and identity and they are creating space for coming generations. During the times of the apartheid movement female sports became a form of political and cultural resistance to white domination. Films like *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and *Against The Ropes* (2004), have got more recognition. As Margaret Lessing (1994) claims, "Never in the history of South Africa have the women of this country had the opportunities they have neither today- nor the choices. Never have they been more powerful. Never have they received so much attention. And never have they been more active". Women's sports films have been a popular feature of the reformist movement in Muslim countries like Iran, where women occupy a special place in Islam. Women from the centuries were restricted from activities like sports. But now Muslim women's sports create a space in the arena of male dominance like Nawal El Moutawakel in 1992, Hassiba Boulmerka got victory in 1500 meters at the Barcelona Olympics games. Their success was also a significant landmark in the history of Muslim women in sports, it symbolized poignantly the struggles over women's bodies throughout the Muslim world. Since the advent to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in 1979, and after the publication of The Satanic Verses and the Gulf War in 1991, the Muslim world has been shaken and transformed. In the 20th century, being homosexual –lesbian or gay was a part of the social world and also reached every socioeconomic stratum in society. Over the last two decades, there has been an explosion of lesbian and gay sports. Lesbian struggles for identity in sports have been inextricably linked to gay liberation and women's liberation.

There are many traditions, norms, and practices in our society such as dowry child marriage, caste system, etc. Many films have raised their voice against these social evils. They encourage society to break the chains of norms and go forth for a better society and a better tomorrow. Significantly, on the global platform, the recent decades have witnessed an increased change in the concept of beauty with the body changed by beauty with talent as the sports cinema comes to the front. But still, there is discrimination like, the *Matribhumii Express* special, the women-only local passenger Express train started by the city of Calcutta in 2010, at that time there were riots that why not Menbhumii, and *Pinjara Tod* movement broke the hostel locks in Delhi 2023 the movement; the *hok kolorob* movement in Calcutta, *Galbi Gang* movement in Uttar Pradesh and *Beti Bacho Beti Pado* in Haryana, these movements are launched to give space to women in the society but the condition is not much better still the daughter of India are not safe, Recently KGR hospital Calcutta

murder case and fight between *Cookies* and *Mehties* in Manipur in the state of Olympics boxer Mary Kom, where two women paraded naked on a road by a group of men in Manipur. Moreover, Delhi has become a 'rapist city'. Further, who do not know what happened with Vinesh Phogat who was disqualified after she was found to be 100g overweight in Paris Olympic 2024. Last year Olympic medalists were on the mat for being faced with sexual harassment during the games. These women become our daughters bringing pride or shame bolstering or tarnishing the image of the state and community. But Vinesh Phogat's courage opens up space not just for the women of Haryana to imagine a differently constructed future but also for the men to embody gentler and kinder forms of masculinity.

2. CONCLUSION

These films depict how the sporting figure has challenged the system, or overcome great adversity to become the legends they are. Thus these films use the underdog narrative (women) to show that, through hard work and talent, the goal of stepping into the ring is available to all regardless of nationality, class, or gender. So, sports films serve to counter the blighted image of WFI and carve a radical new path. These films depict women's transition from a working-class background to the glossy world of the Olympics. In these films through the discourse of space inclusiveness is presented. Now the dialogue like, 'don't worry about being the next me, be the first you' about women are prevalent so, it reflects the intervention in the re-foxing of female sports. So these sports films become 'cartography of struggle', sport has been called Zizek's term national thing to understand the sense of belonging of people to a nation in contemporary popular. Sports have emerged as a social entity, intervening with the lives of ordinary youth in India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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