

SPORTS IN TRIBAL SOCIETY- A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

Sports is an essential part of the society, which exists in various forms throughout the evolution of the society. The presence of sports can be witnessed as much in simple society as in a complex advanced society. Thus sports are a very important part of the society as well as the members of that society. This chapter looks favorably towards sports and how it impacts a society. In doing so, the narrative takes an undertone of historical past and also brings forth the contemporary location of sports in postmodern society. This chapter looks at sports in tribal society in India and identifies the underlying factors and impact of sports in tribal society.

Keywords: Sports, Tribal Society, Sociological Analysis, pathalgadi.

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Sports is a worldwide phenomenon and people discuss about sports at workplace, at home, on campuses, with friends and colleagues. Conversations with strangers also emit from a common topic of sports. Social relations often revolve around sports. Individuals identify with teams and athletes in such an extent that the outcomes of games influence their behaviour, actions and interactions. Sports not only creates opportunities for conversations but it also forms and nurtures relationships. It further enhances their personal status as they describe and critique athletes, games, teams, coaching decisions, and media commentaries. Sports often broadens the social networks which extends to workplace, politics, education and other spheres of their lives. The experience of playing sports is often remembered as special and important in their lives. The emotional intensity, group solidarity, and sense of achievement that often occur in sports make sport participation more memorable than many other activities.

According to the census of 2011, India is home to around seven hundred tribal communities which compose a population of one hundred and four million. These indigenous people constitute the second largest tribal population in the world after Africa. Their land has been encroached upon by industrialists leading to mass displacement and a struggle to protect their homes or for a fair compensation.

By taking away forest lands for industries and plantation forestry instead of preserving natural species that provide livelihood to these people, the government was depriving them of the basic means of livelihood. This narrative is a long standing one with little to merge change, throughout the passage of time. It seems as if the world has been spinning a little faster and yet the stories/ biographies of these indigenous people stand still.

The success stories are rare but it is worth mentioning the conflict over Niyamgiri which was won by Odisha's Dongria Kondhs as well as the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh who have become the first indigenous people to get habitat rights in India after a century-long struggle. Challenges seem to become a part of the existence of indigenous lives which looks inevitable. The research embarks upon and looks at these indigenous society through the lens of sports and understand the impact and significance of sports in the lives of tribal people. The study would be carried out in the states of Jharkhand and Orissa. The rationale of choosing these states lies in the fact that these two states were a part of the Chotanagpur plateau.

Before we engage with the socio-political debates, understanding the meaning of contemporary sports is essential. To begin with, it is crucial to understand what is sports. According to widely used definitions, sports are physical activities that involve challenges or competitive contests¹. Sports includes all forms of physical activity focusing at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing. It also builds up social relationships. Sports are organised so that the participants can assess their performances. These performances are then compared with other performances or to their own performances later in times or even compare their performances in various different situations.

Allen Guttman sees seven defining characteristics of modern sports in his seminal work *From Ritual to Record* (1978). He contrasted these characteristics of modern sports with the primitive sporting events. These distinguished characteristics are:

¹ Jay Coakley, *Sports in Society issues and controversies*, (McGraw Hill 2014), page no-6

- secularism
- equality
- specialization
- rationalization
- bureaucratization
- quantification
- records

He compared the Greek games and contests (between 1000 BC and 100 AD) and modern sport (from 1800 on) runs as follows.

It is important to note that these characteristics of sports are present in many sports played in India, like hockey, cricket, football, archery, boxing and athletics. To illustrate this to Indian context, we would like to look at the sports of Hockey, which is also our national games.

This research proposal aims to study the role or function of sports in tribal societies. The tribal societies have been experiencing displacement, systematic oppression and poor life chances. A study published recently by Sama Resource Group for Women and Health (2018), titled 'From the Margins to the Centre' focuses on the health inequities among the tribal communities in selected districts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha'. It was supported by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and emphatically highlights the link between the poor health status of tribal communities and their marginalised location in the socio-economic and political contexts.² Land alienation, loss of access and control over forests, enforced displacement due to development projects and lack of proper rehabilitation, and indebtedness have been some of the key reasons for the marginalisation of Adivasis³. Displacement of tribes is caused by large projects which results in a transfer of resources from the weaker sections of society to the more privileged ones. Mega dams, in particular, create victims of development - mainly tribals who never share the gains of development. It can be said that the bigger the development project, the greater the centralised control over it. This centralisation has a bias in favour of large landholders, rich farmers, engineers, bureaucrats and politicians.

The principal agents of displacement in India are construction of dams. India has the largest number of river valley projects in the world. Dus to these projects the tribal regions and tribal population is being adversely affected, since they reside in mineral rich regions. Indigenous areas produce most of the country's essential minerals like coal, mica, and bauxite. An example of Orissa can further illustrate the picture to give us a clear understanding.

Odisha occupies a unique position among the Indian states due to a large tribal population. The tribal population of the state constitutes 22.85 percent of the state's total population, according to census 2011. The state has the third largest concentration of tribals constituting as many as sixty-two indigenous communities which encompasses thirteen

² Sarojini Nadimpally, Deepa Venkatachalam and Adsa Fatima,(2019) Eviction Of Tribals: Forced Displacement And Its Links With Poor Health the wire, <https://thewire.in/rights/supreme-court-eviction-tribals-displacement>

³ Ibid

primitive tribal groups. About 44.70 percent of the state's geographical area is designated as Scheduled Areas which extends over one hundred and eighteen out of three hundred and fourteen Blocks in twelve districts. Most of the tribal population live in hilly and forested regions which are mostly remote and isolated.

Ever since the execution of the First Five-Year Plan, several development projects have been introduced nationwide. These projects displaced large number of people and tribal population constitute a sizeable proportion of the total displaced people. Forest and forest produce, livelihood from the surrounding, religion and culture of tribal population are deeply blended. The highest development-induced displacements in the world is recorded in India. Studies show that a total of sixty million people were displaced between the year 1947 and 2000. (Fernandes, 2006) As the tribals reside in the forested areas and hilly regions, construction of dams directly submerged the tribal villages. The Narmada Valley Development Project affected as many as 25 million people, majority of which were tribals.⁴ In addition to direct displacement, mining activities also affect the livelihood of thousands, as water tables get disrupted, an excess burden is dumped on fertile agricultural land and forests are cut.⁵

Land alienation, displacement and systematic oppression, has made it very challenging for the tribal societies and communities to develop and prosper. For any society to develop and grow, stability and peaceful environment is essential. Struggling and fighting against unlawful encroachment, being displaced from the home land, and to begin a livelihood in a displaced land has become an integral part of tribal narrative and history.

One has witnessed a wave of Adivasi struggles and resistance in the colonial and post-independence eras over issues of jal, jungle and jameen (water, forest and land). Some of the notable social movements have been the birsa munda movement, the kol movement, tilka majhi movement, sidhu kahnu movement, koel karo movement and so on. The nature of many of these protest has been marked with violence and chaos, where as few protests have been carried out on papers and on grass root levels. In these protests, certain cultural symbols have become dominant and popularised during the process of resistance. For instance, in the pathalgadi movement, huge stone slabs are erected. The erected stones can be used for various purpose, from educational purpose to spreading legal awareness like carving the contitution or carving the customary laws on these erected stones. If one looks back in history, it would be interesting to note that the Munda tribe first used these pathalgadi in certain religious rites especially for burying their dead, to demarcate a land, as well as perform other social and cultural rituals.

The meaning of the term "pathalgadi" means "erecting a stone slab". The first part 'pathal' means stone and 'gadi' means to erect or to fix. To answer the first question, "what is pathalgadi movement?", one needs to understand what is pathalgadi in the tribal culture. Pathalgadi is an erected stone slab which is practised by the entire village community. It is a

⁴ Panda, Dash. Dam and Tribal Displacement: A Case Study of Odisha. The tribal tribune.
<https://www.tribaltribune.com/index.php/volume-8/mv8i3/dam-and-tribal-displacement-a-case-study-of-odisha>

⁵ Biswaranjan Mohanty(2005) Displacement and Rehabilitation of Tribals, Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 40, No. 13 (Mar. 26 - Apr. 1, 2005), pp. 1318-1320 (3 pages) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4416394>

symbol of Adivasi customary rights, practices, beliefs, and culture of the tribal community. The practice of Pathalgadi is carried out in various rituals like burying the dead, remembering the existence and contributions of the ancestors, demarcating the village boundary, to spread information of any village settlement, their customary laws and land rights as well as it is also practised for general awareness or educational purpose. According to Virginius Xaxa, this custom is more frequently practiced among the tribes of Mundas and khasis, who have Austro-Asiatic linguistic family. According to this custom, the Adivasi community display messages on large stones, locally known as Pathalgadi, that are painted green and measures around 15ft by 4ft. Since the PESA(Panchayat...)1996, Pathalgadi symbolises the sovereignty of Gramsabha over all laws. Eva Davidsdottir, in her article Our rights are carved in stone: the case of the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega, Jharkhand portrays the Pathalgadi movement through historical and geopolitical perspective of the struggle and resistance of the Munda tribe of Jharkhand. The Birsa Munda movement during 1885-1900, marks the hero as celebrated freedom fighter against the British colonial rule. The tribal movements fighting for the land rights and forest, have asserted their rights through the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT act 1908), and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPT Act 1876). Anjana Singh describes this movement as a Multifaceted movement due to political , ethnic and ecological implications. The movement upholds the customary practise and conforms to their indigenous manki-munda or parha Pnachayat system. Singh also echos the indigenous system of village governance is soveriegn , “making gram sabhas the supreme authority”(Singh 2019). This idea of self-rule and autonomy is associated with a memory where there is no fear of dispossession or alienation from their ancestral land or negation of their ideologies regarding governance and development.

I. WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING FACTORS THAT HAS CAUSED THIS MOVEMENT?

This foundation of this movement was laid when the Jharkhand government organised a global investors’ summit called , “Momentum Jharkahnd” in Ranchi in February 2017. The aim of this summit was to make the state, a hub of investment in mining and other industrial ventures where numerous memoranda of understanding were also signed. The “land bank” policy was initiated, where thousands of acres of non-cultivable land were to be given away to the companies for the purpose of development. Given the Adivasi history, the adivasis have had experienced land alienation and displacement at the hands of the colonial and Indian Government. Thus, they viewed these announcements as renewed attempts to take away their land. Prior to 2017, there was an attempt by the Jharkhand government to eradicate the Chotanagpur tenancy Act (1908). The government set to amend the laws to ease the process of transferring land from tribals to non-tribals, in 2016. These suggested revisions in the CNT and SPT act where met with huge resistance across the state. Several villagers erected Pathalgadis with the details of laws that protect their rights.

In contemporary times, the Pathalgadi movement in reminds us of the renewed struggle of the Adivasis to assert their authority over their landscape. The research problem that can be identified as a dichotomy between the state law and the customary laws, as the tribal history is marked with land alienation from their ancestral land and mass displacement in the name of development. Thus, it is crucial to consider that the Adivasi communities in Jharkhand have an intricate history of dominion and resistance, since the colonial to post-colonial times. The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) was enacted and adopted in 1996. Many villages inscribed the provisions of the Act in stone as a means to

raise awareness of rights. In the contemporary political climate, the tradition has come to prominence to symbolise Adivasi rights with over hundred villages in the district of Khunti and Simdega. This act is to declare their rights to govern as per the existing legislations of decentralisation. The Pathalgadi movement is a radical movement that aims for autonomy in governance and self-rule.

Similar protest has been seen in Netarhat for field firing range. The tribal communities in the area that had been protesting artillery training by the army for over three decades. The then-undivided Bihar government in 1954 gave 8 square kilometres in seven revenue villages of the Netarhat plateau to the Army for cannon firing. The land was given to the army under Section 9 of the Army Manoeuvres Field Firing Artillery Act, 1938 and regular artillery exercises were carried out in the area from 1964 to 1994⁶.

When we talk about tribal narrative and tribal history, we seldom forget to notice their presence in the larger context or in other social institutions. One needs to understand the presence of tribes and tribal contributions towards sustainability of environment, for example, Simon Oraon who is the waterman of Jharkhand, plants 1000 plants every year for water conservation and prevention of soil erosion. Apart from environment and conservation, we have to look at political domain. Here the presence of tribal movements, political demands and assertion can be seen through the Jharkhand movement, the constitutional speech of Jaipal Singh Munda, Ram Dayal Munda and Draupadi Murmu. Of the above names mentioned, it is very interesting to note that Jaipal Singh Munda and his contributions for India has never been celebrated nor has it been recognised. Jaipal Singh Munda was the captain of the Indian hockey team which brought India her first gold medal in Olympics. He was the captain of the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics team which won India's first hockey gold. Jaipal Singh is also known to be a contributor towards the establishment of Mohun Bagan's hockey team. The presence of tribal sportsmen in Indian sports has been present for a long time yet little recognition or no recognition is given to these players.

Sports as an institution is an important aspect of every society. One may find the presence of sports in every form of society, whether it were ancient Greek or the modern states. Most sports are governed today are governed Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all notion of competition. Games on the other hand captures the spirit of most informal, unorganized youth sports. There are also many recreational sports played with friends and strangers alike and what might be called "folk games." Those activities, though highly organized and institutionalized, are not commercialized and, therefore, do not offer the participants the promise of a professional career.

Thomas Hobbes discusses the natural state of humans in his classic work *Leviathan*, which was first published in 1651 (Hobbes, 1907). He inferred that the natural state of man is a state of conflict, which is also referred to as a "state of war." The alternative to the state of war and the means to peace is found in what he termed the "laws of Nature." The laws of Nature identified by Hobbes can be applied to the sporting environment in an effort to illustrate how one may compete in sport and contribute to the creation of a wholesome and positive competitive environment. One may apply Hobbes' laws of Nature

⁶ Satyam Shrivastava, (2022) Victory for Jharkhand tribals: Netarhat firing range not be renotified, down to earth. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/victory-for-jharkhand-tribals-netarhat-firing-range-not-be-renotified-84468>

in the competitive sports environment as a means to making the world a better place. Human Beings naturally live in a State of War because people are inclined to serve their own needs and desires, they engage in actions which result in conflict, thus alienating themselves from others. Hobbes believed that human beings experience conflict and live in this war-state with others for three reasons, “first, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory” (Hobbes, 1907, p. 80). All are existing within the sporting environment.

Abraham Arden Brill wrote about restrictions of modern life that deprives people of activities, achievements, claims and celebrations. Brill exposed a dark truth about human nature; he described the human being as “an animal formed for battle and conquest, for blows and strokes and swiftness, for triumph and applause” (1929: 434)⁷.

In Brill’s view, it is through sports, that one resembles their natural state where they could “achieve exaltation, vicarious but real” and be “a better individual, better citizen.” Sports, actually contributed to building a better citizenry for the modern nation state.⁸

II. SPORTS IN INDIA

Looking at the Indian context, there are many sportsmen who hail from humble background, having little or no means of livelihood. For example- in hockey, we can look at the Dilip tirkey who hails from Orissa but went to become a celebrated person in Indian sports arena, especially in Hockey. In contemporary times, we should also look at other players like M.S Dhoni, Suresh Raina, Irfan Pathan, Yusuf Pathan, Rinku Singh in the IPL. Women cricket team also sheds light in this context.

In the same spirit, I want to look at how sports has impacted the lives of tribal / Adivasi communities in India, especially in the tribal region of Orissa and Jharkhand. These tribal states have presented many notable sportsperson (both sportsmen and sportswomen) like Jaipal Singh Munda, Ignius Kujur, Dilip Tirkey, Nilam Sanjeep Xess, Birendra lakra, as well as deep grace ekka, salima tete, Lazraus Barla (Olympian) are some of the women who have made effective contributions to the Indian Sports. Nikki Pradhan, who was named a member of the Indian women’s hockey squad which will travel to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for the upcoming Olympic Games, has become the first female hockey player from the state to participate in the international sporting event. Nikki Pradhan, India midfielder and the first female player from Jharkhand to represent the country in Olympics, spoke favourably about Jaipal Singh’s contributions.

Jharkhand has the honour of producing sports persons in various fields of sports, be it athletics, weight lifting, hockey or cricket. The rural sports programme in Jharkhand has helped to find new talents in the field of athletics, weight lifting, wrestling, hockey, kabaddi and kho-kho etc. The teams constituted at the state level are given the opportunity to represent at the National Rural Games competition. Sports Authority of Jharkhand (SAJHA) is an organisation set up to promote and encourage various sports activities in this region. It aims at creating awareness among the younger generation regarding the importance of physical fitness and well-being that can be attained through active participation in various sports activities, yoga and other techniques. It also organises various events, tournaments,

⁷ Ellis Cashmore (2005) Making sense of sports, Taylor & Francis page – 03.

⁸ Ellis Cashmore (2005) Making sense of sports, Taylor & Francis page – 04

sports activities and training sessions for the people here, and to implement various policies proposed by the state government and central government, from time to time, regarding the development and promotion of sports activities in this region. Events and activities in Mega Sports Complex, Birsa Munda Football Stadium, Panchayat Yuva Krida aur Khel Abhiyan (PYKKA) and other upcoming sports camps and centres are such instances. Tata Athletics Academy (TAA), Jharkhand Athletics Association (JAA) and other efforts like Panchayat Yuva Krida aur Khel Abhiyan are some sports bodies for popularising sports among the youth today. Some of the contemporary sports which are popular in Jharkhand are Hockey, Football, Cricket, archery, Boxing.

Odisha is one state of India where sports are given a lot of importance and many steps are taken to encourage the youth to involve in sports and pursue them as their career. The government of Odisha ensure to provide every possible facility to the youth and develop their interest in these activities. Odisha has produced some of very renowned sportsperson like Padmashree Dillip Tirkey, Padmashree Ignace Tirkey and Rachita Mistri Panda who have begged Olympic medals for India. Apart from them a lot many other players from Odisha have achieved heights in different sports. The craze for sports in Odisha is not new but has been carried forward from generations, though the likings for games have now changed a lot. Few games that are liked and enjoyed in Odisha are basketball, kabbadi, wrestling, table tennis, gymnastic, baseball, Wt. lifting, cricket, hockey, Football, boxing, athletics etc. Some of the great hockey players of repute like Dilip Tirkey, Ignace Tirkey and Lajrus Barla hails from Odisha. Gudu, Kelibadi, kabadi, Nadia Phinga (Coconut Throwing), Rasi Tana (Rope Pulling), Kho Kho and Puchi were some of the traditional games played in Odisha. These sports have, in fact, become the part of life of the people. Schools in Odisha are letting no stone unturned to keep up the craze of traditional games of Odisha in children.

Such is the quality of hockey in Jharkhand that in June this year, five female players were selected for a sports and cultural exchange programme in the United States. They were selected as part of the East India Hockey Project, which works towards the empowerment of youth as well as the development in young female residents of Jharkhand.

Odisha, the host of the 2023 World Cup, is another Indian state famous for producing gems in the sport. Arguably, the most famous name is that of former Indian captain Dilip Tirkey, also known as 'The Wall of Indian Hockey'. Amit Rohidas, who comes from the Saunamara village in Sundergarh, the same as Tirkey, called him an 'engineer of change'.

In an international career spanning 15 years, Tirkey experienced many firsts. He was the first player from Odisha to represent India in the Olympics (1996). He was also the first player from the state to captain an Indian hockey team. Furthermore, he is the only Adivasi player to have led India in three Olympic events, three World Cups and three Asian Games.

Dilip Tirkey's father, Vincent Tirkey, was a state-level hockey player himself and responsible for the future India captain taking up the sport. His entry into the SAI hostel in Sundergarh (1989) changed not only Dilip's fate but India's as a whole.

In addition to Rohidas, many young hockey players in India admire Tirkey and aspire to achieve the same kind of legacy if not better. Dilip played a total of 412 matches for India before calling it a day. It is a record achievement for any Indian hockey player to this day.

Prabodh Tirkey, Lazarus Birla, Ignace Tirkey, Sunita Lakra, and Birendra Lakra are just some of the many names to come out of the tribal lands of Odisha in field hockey. And these won't be the last.

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