

# Batting in Gendered Spaces: Mapping the Struggle of Women's Cricket in India

Manjula Veerappa, D Yogananda Rao

**Abstract:** *Sport plays an important part in the growth of a human being. When the history of sport is mapped, it can be seen that it has been dominated by men. Sport was seen as a symbol of masculinity. Like in the other parts of the world, Indian women did not actively participate in sport till the dawn of independence. The prevalence of gender marginalization in sport has made it difficult for sportswomen to pursue and sustain in the sport chosen by them. Indian sportswomen have made a mark in a number of sport, despite the differential treatment experienced by them. In India the word 'sport' is synonymous with cricket. India is said to be a cricket frenzy nation. Cricket and cricketers hog the limelight and enjoy a lot of adulation. Media coverage, fame, facilities, monetary and non-monetary benefits received by the cricketers out do the ones received by non-cricketers. But the irony is that this idolizing, limelight, adulation, hero worship has been limited only to 'Men's Cricket' and 'Women's Cricket' comes nowhere close to this. However, this apathy has reduced to some extent but the fact remains that neither women's cricket nor women cricketers are treated in the same way as their male counterparts. Discrepancy is evident with regard to the opportunities, remuneration, commercial assignments, media attention and response from avid cricket followers. Cricket as game was introduced to women in India in 1913. The year 1971 saw the establishment of a cricket club for women. This paper will plot the origin, growth, and status quo of women's cricket in India. The paper will focus on the problems and marginalization faced by Indian women cricketers with reference to Karunya Keshav and Sidhanta Patnaik's, The Fire Burns Blue and Suprita Das's Free Hit.*

**Keywords:** gender, India, marginalization, women's cricket

## 1. Batting in Gendered Spaces: Mapping the Struggle of Women's Cricket in India

England was a revered place, a land of opportunities, the land that paved the way for modernization. The origin of most of the present team sport with the exception of golf and basketball can be attributed to England. The English recognize cricket as their national game. Cricket was not just a sport but also associated with the development of skills for Empire service. This game travelled with them and became popular in most of their colonies. The game was one of the cultural markers for colonial establishment. Cricket had other connotations too. In 1864 Clarendon Commission Report on public schools linked Cricket and Football with manly virtues.

“The cricket and football fields are not merely places of amusement, they help form some of the of the most valuable social qualities and manly virtues, and they hold- like the classroom and boarding school- a distinct and important place in Public School education.” (Money1997:123)

Cricket was and is considered a gentleman's game. “It's not cricket (meaning 'it's not fair') came to stand for (English) gentlemanly behavior both in sport and life”. (Beynon 2002: 43) It was a game that was a prerogative of men. Women who played cricket were criticized and the game was said not to be suitable for women as it was physically taxing and that women could not afford to stay away from their duties in their houses or their responsibility of raising their children. As such this space could be entered by only unmarried or childless women. Women who wanted to play cricket had to create a space for themselves as they did not receive any help from the men.

“When India became free, some Anglophobe nationalists called for the game to disappear along with its promoters, the British. In this they were spectacularly unsuccessful. What was an urban sport has penetrated deep into the

countryside.... The doings of the national cricket team are followed all over the country. The best players receive iconic status otherwise reserved for Hindu gods and film stars.” (Guha, 2014; xvi)

The above lines speak about the fame, and glory enjoyed by cricket and cricketers in India. In the last few years a few cricket playing nations have a women's cricket team too. This paper will plot the origin, growth, and status quo of women's cricket in India.

In India the word 'sport' is synonymous with cricket. India is said to be a cricket frenzy nation. Cricket and cricketers hog the limelight and enjoy a lot of adulation. Media coverage, fame, facilities, monetary and non-monetary benefits received by the cricketers out do the ones received by non-cricketers. But the irony is that this idolizing, limelight, adulation, hero worship has been limited only to 'Men's Cricket'. 'Women's Cricket' comes nowhere close to this. However, this apathy has reduced to some extent but the fact remains that neither women's cricket nor women cricketers are treated in the same way as their male counterparts. Discrepancy is evident with regard to the opportunities, remuneration, commercial assignments, media attention and response from avid cricket followers. The women play fewer matches when compared to the men.

There are few coincidences associated with men's and women's cricket in India. The first one being: the first to non-English men and women in India to play cricket were the Parsees and the game was played in Bombay. The need to be accepted by the British and the economic access made the Parsees play cricket. The Parsee boys started playing cricket in the 1830s. The first Hindu to play cricket was Ramachandra Vishnu Navlekar in 1861. Cricket in India was very sectarian, limited to people of a particular religion or class eg.1886 saw the establishment of Bombay Union Cricket Club and membership was restricted to people from the Prabhu caste. The game was opened to women only after

a century and that too was initiated by a woman Aloo Bamjee.

Women's association with cricket in India dates back to 1913. Anne Kelleve an Australian by origin made cricket compulsory for girls in Baker Memorial School in Kottayam, Kerala. But women in India started playing cricket in an organized way with the establishment of a women's cricket club 'Albees' in 1971. This was followed by Neeta Telang and Nutan Gavaskar forming another women's team 'Indian Gymkhana', in Bombay. The Albees had the support of the likes of Ashok Mankad, Vijay Merchant and Sunil Gavaskar.

Meanwhile the Indian Gymkhana played exhibition games in other places and were successful in spreading women's cricket in other parts of the country too. They were instrumental in setting up the Bombay Women's Cricket Association. They were steadfast in their promotion of the game that all impediments were put aside and their mantra was 'Kheelnahai'.

In the south, 14 year olds, Fowzieh Khalili, Sudha Shah and Susan Itticheria from Good Shepherd Convent, Madras called themselves 'Sky Larks' and started playing cricket. Girls in Bangalore, Calcutta and Delhi also saw girls playing cricket.

The thought of a cricket association for women germinated in Mahendra Kumar Sharma's head. He prodded the girls to play. Microphone bound he traversed through the gullies of Lucknow on a rickshaw. 'Kanyaonki cricket hogi, zarooraiye' was the announcement. The first 'National Ladies Cricket Championship' was held in 1973. The first edition of the tournament saw the participation of two and a half teams- Bombay, Maharashtra and UP. UP did not have cognizance of the fact that a team comprised of eleven players. They borrowed players from Bombay and Maharashtra. The first match for women was played on the ground in Queen's Anglo Sanskrit College, Lucknow. 200 spectators has gathered, mainly boys and the intention was not to see the match but to see the attire of the girls. The curiosity was do they play in saris or skirts or trousers? The curiosity also hovered around the ball that was used in the game. The girls wore regular whites and trousers as against the English, Australian and Kiwi girls who played in divided skirts and knee high socks.

The turning point for women's cricket in India was 1973. This was the year women's cricket in India took concrete shape. The impact of the first championship was so great that the second national championship had sixteen teams participating. The girls travelling from distant places had a tough time convincing their parents to allow them to travel as some of them came from conservative families. The Tamil Nadu team had one of their brothers accompanying them and Maharashtra team had player Nilima's mother accompanying them as the manager. What was surprising about the women's team is that they did not have to battle with the complexities of class and class like the men had to in the initial period. Most of the girls came from middle and lower middle class households. The whites they wore were

passed down to them by their brothers or some male member in the family.

Mahendra Sharma's resoluteness saw WCAI being granted affiliation to the International Women's Cricket Council. The first international team to tour India was Australia in February 1975. India then did not have a team. India and Australia played friendly matches. Rani Jhansi tournament on the lines of Ranji tournament was started and the team was picked to be trained at National Institute of Sports, Patiala. New Zealand toured India in 1976. The first two were not considered official. The West Indies match played in 1976 was the official international test match. Shanta Rangaswamy a Bangalorean is the first Indian woman to hit a six in an international match. This milestone was achieved in front of her home crowd. In the six match series 4 matches were drawn, 1 was won by India and 1 by West Indies. The match that was played in Patna was won by India and the jubilation was not limited to the stadium. "Crowds lined both sides of the street to women's catch a glimpse of the Indian women's cricket team. To them, they had done the unthinkable... It was an unprecedented moment in women's sport, not just women's cricket". (Das 2019:23)

1976-77 was Indian women's first overseas tour. They went to New Zealand and Australia. The big problem before the WCAI was funds. Players were asked to raise funds, which meant mornings dedicated to training and evenings literally begging influential and wealthy people besides friends and family for contribution. Insufficient funds found the players been put up in some Indian and natives houses.

WCAI was recognized by the Government of India in 1978. 1978 also saw India hosting the Women's World Cup. The Indians played this World Cup with no prior experience of playing an ODI. The Australians won the cup. The organizers of the tournament were commended by the visiting teams.

The origin of women's cricket in the west dates prior to India. The first international women's test match was played in 1934 between England and Australia and the International Women's Cricket Council was established in 1958. Despite the early formation and initiation of women into cricket, women's cricket did not get the response the Indian women's cricket got. The teams touring India were taken back when they saw thousands of spectators in the stadium and matches being aired on radio.

## 2. Format

Indian women play fewer cricket matches than men. So far the men have play 533 international test matches, 975 ODIs and 115 T20s in contrast to the 36 test matches, 266 ODIs and 104 T20s played by women.

All women's test matches are played for only four days as against the five days being played by men.

The boundary is less than 75 yards and the boundary for men is 65 to 90 yards. The ball used by women is lighter than

the one used by men. India did not play the 1988 Women's World Cup in Australia as they did not have sponsors.

### 3. Inconsistency in the Management

The Indian Women's team has been marred by a lot of controversies or problems, captaincy being one of the many. Captaincy issues have been there right from the first international match. Australia that visited India in 1975 played three matches. The matches were played in three different venues with three different captains. Favoritism in the selection of players was blatant. Players were dropped and included without any reason, captains are changed in the middle of tournaments- uncertainty looms large. The women's team did not have specialist coaches like the men's team. Former cricketer and women's team coach Poonima Rau says "...On a lot of ours, I didn't have an assistant coach or manager, I didn't have a fielding coach. In 2014 against Sri Lanka, I was all-in-one. Then they gave me Devika Palshikar as assistant coach and Vidya Yadav came as manager. Against New Zealand (in 2015) they sent Mithu Mukerjee 10 days after the team came together. I had to do everything from facilitating their local transport to getting tickets booked; from sorting practice sessions to handing out daily allowances. When we went to Australia (in 2016), Sunitha Sharma came a week later and I had to manage everything until then. Whatever BCCI assigned me, I did without a fuss or complaint."

#### Lack of Parental Support

Many girls lack parental support and encouragement to pursue the game. The reasons range from, cricket being a men's game to concerns about their daughters' wellbeing. Susan Itticheria former Indian cricketer's parents were concerned about her complexion.

Initially the girls from Chennai went begging from door to door to make a team.

#### Neglect from BCCI

WCAI has worked as an independent body since its inception in 1973. One of the reasons for the snail paced growth of women's cricket in India is due to the lack of an organized, funded body at the helm of affairs. Seniors like Diana Edulji and Shubangi Kulkarni wanted to moot the idea of merging WCAI with BCCI but BCCI was indifferent about this. BCCI was forced into the merger by ICC which had taken IWCC in its fold. IWCC merged with ICC in 2005. "Thus in November 2006, the BCCI the world's richest cricket board, became the last of all the cricketing nations to officially take women's cricket under its wings." (Das 2019:119) This shows the lackadaisical attitude of BCCI towards women's cricket.

The curtains never came down on WCAI as it is not officially merged with BCCI. The whole thing was done in a shoddy manner.

But since the takeover by BCCI the number of matches played by women has reduced and in 2008 the women's team was out of international action for more than a year. The positive of the takeover is that women got good accommodation and flew as against travelling in second

class compartments and sleeping on the floors of dirt dormitories. The women in the BCCI women's committee were rendered helpless. Women's cricket was dormant for four and a half years between 1986 to 1991, which means a lot of talent was wasted or did not see the light of the day.

#### Disparity in Remuneration

Grade A players are paid Rs 15 lakh a year, Group B players Rs 10 lakh per year while the male players are paid Rs 1 crore a year, Group B and C earn Rs 50 lakh and Rs 25 lakh respectively.

#### Media Representation

Women's cricket does not get the media support or coverage like the men's game. Lack of media exposure is one of the main reasons for Indian women cricketers losing the endorsement game, there are other factors as well.

The sheer dominance of the male cricket team from India is one.

"Indian (male) cricketers are undeniably among the most popular celebrities in the country, along with film stars. When brands look to associate with the game, they automatically look at the men, since they are more visible and popular," says a brand expert.

Unlike male counterparts or sportswomen in other sports, female cricketers in India have not been able to break into this scene.

While star players have brands like Hero and Bata as bat or kit sponsors, one does not see a Raj or Jhulan Goswami smiling down from TV screens or billboards, coaxing onlookers to buy a product or service.

Why?

Lenskyj's research has documented "blatant sex discrimination in government and institutional funding, policies and programs, facilities, equipment, media coverage, training and competitive opportunities for women", no wonder then that women's sports are not on equal footing with men's (2003, p. 66).

"Back in India, we do have a lot of people coming and watching the matches. It is important that we market the sport. If we are playing a series, or a bilateral series, it is important that it is broadcasted because a lot of people back home are so inquisitive to know the result of the game. They do follow it over the net, but if it is broadcasted, it can make a huge difference for the profile of the game as well as for the players."