

Framing Female Athleticism: Gendered Representation of Sportswomen in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, the sportswomen have shifted from being on the fringes of Hindi cinema to its centre of the story. Previously female athletes were treated as minor characters, but now they are the main characters whose training, failures and successes drive the storyline. The study analyzes the change in five popular films, namely Chak De! India (2007), Mary Kom (2014), Dangal (2016), Panga (2020) and Rashmi Rocket (2021). Released between 2007 and 2021, these films span across sports like hockey, boxing, wrestling, kabaddi and track athletics. The rhetorical thrust is not so much about the fact that Indian cinema now depicts more and more women playing sports than it used to, but the impact that role of sportswomen has on the assumptions of the patriarchy and nationalism that it seems to be challenging. This analysis, using feminist theory and cultural studies, reveals that visibility is connected with subordination, not one after another in a fixed order. Both recognition and restriction can exist together. These movies celebrate women's accomplishments while regularly grounding their success in a family's approval, male protection and norms of femininity. Representation is not emancipatory, nor is it just a regressive process, but rather ideologically layered, with the promise of change and the residue of the older hierarchies. The paper uses the term 'conditional visibility' for this arrangement and ends by making a call for a narrative that will handle caste, class and regional difference more readily than the exceptional individual.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian Cinema, Sportswomen, Gender Representation, Nationalism, Cultural Studies and Body Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in Indian cinema has changed considerably alongside broader social transformations. Female characters once confined to supporting or decorative roles, now, frequently occupy the narrative center, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent wave of sports films. The timing is not coincidental. Indian sportswomen have achieved a public prominence over the same period that popular culture has found increasingly difficult to ignore, and cinema has responded by building commercially ambitious films around them. This convergence has itself become a subject of public commentary. The success of films such as Dangal, which travelled well beyond India and became one of the most widely seen Indian films internationally, demonstrated that stories about female athletes could command global audiences rather than remaining a niche domestic concern. Streaming platforms have accelerated this process, commissioning sports dramas and documentaries that circulate alongside theatrical releases and extend the shelf life of older titles. The sportswoman, in other words, has become a recognizable figure in a transnational media economy, not merely a domestic one. Yet, cinema rarely functions as a neutral mirror. Hall (1997) argues that representation produces meaning rather than recording a reality that already exists, and on this account the on-screen sportswoman is less a character than a site where ideas about gender, national belonging and bodily discipline are negotiated for a mass audience. What a film chooses to celebrate about a female athlete, and what it quietly requires of her in exchange, tells us something about the conditions under which female achievement becomes culturally legible.

This paper, therefore, asks a narrower question than one of frequency. Given that sportswomen now appear at the center of mainstream Hindi cinema, does their presence unsettle patriarchal norms in any durable way, or does it repackage those norms in a more contemporary and ostensibly progressive form? The answer, this study arrives at, is that both occur simultaneously, and that the simultaneity is the point.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist film scholarship provides the starting point. Mulvey's (1975) account of the male gaze remains a durable framework for understanding how women's bodies are framed and consumed on screen, and it retains particular force in sports cinema, where the female athletic body is admired and regulated in the same gesture. Complementing this, de Beauvoir's (1949) argument that gender is socially produced rather than biologically given, subsequently extended by Butler's (1990) theory of gender as performance, supplies the vocabulary this paper needs for discussing how athletic femininity is assembled and maintained across the corpus.

Within Indian film studies, Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2013) and Viridi (2003) document a gradual expansion of female agency and visibility while cautioning that patriarchal structures seldom vanish outright; more often they persist in modified form. Majumdar (2012) adds the dimension of sport and nationalism, showing how athletes are routinely conscripted as symbols within projects of nation-building. Together these works establish the two pressures, patriarchal and nationalist, that this paper finds operating on the cinematic sportswoman.

2.1 Recent Scholarship on Sportswomen in Indian Cinema

Recent work has sharpened this picture, though usually by examining a single film, a single theme, or a corpus drawn from outside India. Chakravarty (2020), writing on the classroom use of Indian sports films, observes that despite the commercial visibility of women-centered sports cinema, scholarship treating these films specifically as gendered texts remains thin, with most commentary approaching them as inspirational case studies rather than as objects of ideological analysis.

Routray and Gaur (2025) offer one of the more substantial recent interventions, examining how Mary Kom, Saand Ki Aankh and Panga negotiate the relation between motherhood and athletic identity. Working within a postcolonial feminist framework, they argue that these films unsettle the assumption that motherhood and elite competition are incompatible while continuing to route the athlete's legitimacy through family approval and marital sanction, a pattern they connect to the nationalist coding of the maternal body in Indian cultural discourse. Their analysis is confined to motherhood, however, and does not extend to the wider set of institutional and nationalist dynamics examined here.

Yadav and Jha (2023) study a different set of women-centred Hindi films, among them *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga*, *Thappad* and *Paglait*, and argue that contemporary Bollywood increasingly stages resistance to patriarchal norms through its female protagonists, assisted by the cultural momentum of movements such as #MeToo. Their work matters to this paper because it establishes that Indian cinema scholarship has begun tracking a broader shift toward female agency. Their corpus contains no sports films, however, which leaves open the question this study pursues: whether the same pattern of resistance holds when the female body in question is simultaneously athletic, competitive and nationally symbolic.

A useful comparison comes from outside India. Sudre's (2025) study of twenty-four sports fiction films centered on young female athletes identifies a recurring structural arrangement in which female achievement is placed under the authority of a decision-making male figure, while maternal figures are diminished relative to an idealised father. Sudre's corpus is drawn largely from Western cinema, but the structural resemblance to the Indian films examined here is close enough to suggest that the mediated empowerment this paper identifies may reflect a transnational convention of the sports-film genre rather than anything peculiar to Bollywood.

2.2 Sport, Media and the Making of the Female Athletic Celebrity

A second body of scholarship, less concerned with narrative than with media circulation, helps explain why these films appear when they do. Work on the mediatization of sport has shown that female athletes enter public consciousness through highly selective channels, in which a small number of disciplines and a smaller number of personalities receive the overwhelming share of coverage. This concentration is not neutral. It means that the athletes most likely to become cinematic subjects are already those whose visibility has been secured through exceptional performance, and it means that the films which result inherit a pre-existing hierarchy of newsworthiness rather than creating one from scratch.

The digital environment has complicated this picture without overturning it. Social media platforms allow athletes to address audiences directly, bypassing some of the gatekeeping that once shaped sports coverage, and they have been credited with giving women's sport a visibility that traditional broadcasters withheld. Yet the same platforms reward the personal, the emotional and the visually striking, which can reinforce rather than disrupt the expectation that female athletes present themselves in readily consumable terms. The cinematic sportswoman is therefore embedded in a wider media ecology that already governs how she may be seen, and any analysis of these films that treats them as self-contained texts risks missing the conditions under which their images become legible.

2.3 Research Gap

Read together, these studies leave a specific opening. Chakravarty (2020) confirms that Indian sports films remain under-examined as gendered texts. Routray and Gaur (2025) provide a detailed but single-theme account that does not extend beyond motherhood to nationalism, embodiment or institutional critique. Yadav and Jha (2023) demonstrate an active scholarly interest in female agency in Hindi cinema while excluding sport from their corpus. Sudre (2025) establishes that the mechanisms at work are not exclusive to India but says nothing about the particular inflections of nationalism, caste and region that shape the Indian case.

No existing study brings together five of the most commercially and culturally significant Indian sportswomen films, spanning five different sporting disciplines, within a single framework attentive to both feminist and

nationalist dynamics, while also foregrounding the near-total absence of caste, class and regional difference from these narratives. That is the gap this paper addresses.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursues four related objectives. It examines how contemporary Indian cinema constructs the figure of the sportswoman across a range of sporting disciplines and narrative forms. It assesses the extent to which patriarchal norms continue to shape these narratives even where the films present themselves as challenges to such norms. It explores the intersection of nationalism with female athletic identity, asking what is gained and what is lost when individual achievement is absorbed into collective pride. Finally, it identifies the ideological contradictions embedded within these portrayals, on the understanding that such contradictions are not flaws in otherwise coherent films but the characteristic form these films take.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design organized around close textual and interpretative analysis, an approach suited to examining how cultural meaning is constructed within cinematic texts. It draws deliberately on several disciplines, combining feminist theory, cultural studies and film analysis rather than treating any one of them as sufficient.

4.1 Research Design

The orientation is interpretive rather than quantitative. The concern is with how meaning accumulates through narrative structure, characterization, visual composition and dialogue rather than through variables that can be counted. The method accordingly rests on close reading of individual films as cultural artifacts situated within particular socio-political conditions, with comparison across the corpus used to distinguish patterns from isolated instances.

4.2 Selection of Corpus

Five films constitute the primary corpus: *Chak De! India* (2007), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Dangal* (2016), *Panga* (2020) and *Rashmi Rocket* (2021). Several overlapping criteria governed their selection. Each places a female athlete at the narrative center rather than in a supporting position. Each achieved substantial commercial and cultural reach, making them part of a shared popular vocabulary rather than specialist objects. Together they cover five distinct sporting disciplines, namely hockey, boxing, wrestling, kabaddi and track athletics, which prevents the analysis from generalizing from a single sporting context. Their release dates span fourteen years, allowing the study to observe whether representational patterns have shifted over time. They also differ in narrative form, since *Mary Kom* and *Dangal* are biographical while the remaining three are fictional, which permits some comparison between the constraints of the biopic and those of invented narrative.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through thematic coding, tracking five recurring concerns across the corpus: the scope and limits of female agency; the representation of the female athletic body; the role of family members and male authority figures in enabling or constraining achievement; the symbolic uses of national identity; and the depiction of institutional structures such as sporting federations, selection committees and the sports media. These themes are then read through three interlocking lenses. Feminist theory foregrounds questions of gender construction and patriarchal control. Cultural studies examines representation and ideology more broadly, particularly the ways in which popular texts negotiate social contradictions. Film theory addresses visuality and narrative structure; including how framing and editing position the viewer in relation to the athletic body.

4.4 Analytical Procedure

The films were viewed repeatedly and in full, with attention to narrative sequence, dialogue, mise-en-scène, musical accompaniment and the placement of key scenes within the overall arc of each film. Rather than beginning with a fixed set of categories imposed from outside, the first pass recorded recurring motifs in the films' own terms, including training sequences, the moment of familial permission, the figure of the coach, the national emblem and the closing victory. These motifs were then grouped into the five thematic concerns named above, and each concern was traced across all five films so that patterns could be distinguished from features peculiar to a single text. Only after this internal comparison were the themes read through the theoretical lenses described in the previous section. This sequence matters methodologically, since it reduces the risk of finding in the films only what the framework already expects to find. Where a film departed from a pattern, the departure is noted rather than smoothed over, and *Rashmi Rocket* in particular is treated as a partial exception whose critical impulses nonetheless resolve in conventional ways.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

Three limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis concentrates on mainstream Hindi cinema and gives limited attention to regional-language films, which may well handle these questions differently and which would repay separate study. The five selected films, however significant, cannot represent the full range of cinematic treatments of sportswomen, and a larger corpus might qualify some of the patterns identified here. The study also relies on textual analysis alone and incorporates no audience reception data, which means it can describe what these films offer viewers but not how viewers actually take them up. Within these constraints, the study offers a focused account of the dominant patterns governing the representation of sportswomen in mainstream Indian cinema.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 From Marginality to Centrality: Repositioning Women in Sports Narratives

The movement of female athletes from supporting roles to narrative centre is among the more striking developments in recent Hindi cinema, and *Chak De! India* offers an early and influential instance, constructing an entire film around a women's national hockey team at a moment when women's team sport had little presence in mainstream Indian film.

Male authority is nevertheless woven through the narrative. The team's transformation is channeled consistently through its coach, whose own quest for redemption supplies much of the film's emotional architecture and whose tactical and disciplinary authority is never seriously contested. *Dangal* presents a more concentrated version of the same structure, where the father's ambition initiates his daughters' wrestling careers, dictates their training and remains the standard against which their success is measured. The pattern that emerges across both films is one in which female achievement becomes legible as achievement partly through its association with a male figure who authorizes it.

This paper describes the resulting arrangement as conditional visibility. Agency in these films is real rather than illusory, and it would be a mistake to read these protagonists as merely passive. But that agency is granted within boundaries it does not set for itself, operating within existing patriarchal limits rather than against them, and remaining dependent on a male sanction that the narrative treats as natural rather than as something requiring justification.

It is worth noting how the broader industrial context has shaped this shift. The period covered by the corpus coincides with the consolidation of what commentators have loosely called a new phase in Hindi cinema, marked by a greater willingness to build films around female protagonists and by the growing influence of streaming platforms on what kinds of stories are commissioned. This has widened the range of female-centered narratives without necessarily altering their ideological grammar. The sportswoman benefits from the expanded space available to women in popular cinema, and, at the same time, inherits the conventions that governed earlier representations of women on screen. Centrality, in other words, is not the same as autonomy.

5.2 Biopics and the Ideology of Exceptionalism

Mary Kom and *Dangal*, both drawn from real lives, construct their subjects as figures of extraordinary attainment rather than as representatives of a broader collective experience. Three features recur across them. Personal struggle and perseverance receive sustained emphasis, with obstacles presented primarily as tests of individual character. The athlete is framed as a national figure rather than simply as a successful competitor, so that her victories acquire significance beyond the sporting result. And the socio-economic conditions surrounding her rise are simplified, with material constraint appearing as adversity to be overcome through determination rather than as a structural condition affecting many others similarly placed.

These narratives are genuinely inspiring, and their popular success is not difficult to understand. The inspirational form carries a cost, however. By locating the explanation for success in individual willpower, the films leave little room for structural critique, and the systemic inequalities embedded in Indian sporting infrastructure, including uneven access to training facilities, coaching and institutional support, remain largely unexamined. The exceptional athlete becomes the subject of the story precisely because she is exceptional, which means the conditions facing the unexceptional majority fall outside the frame.

The biopic form intensifies this tendency because it comes with an inbuilt justification. A film that claims to tell a true story can present its selection of events as a matter of fidelity rather than choice, and the audience is invited to receive the narrative as a record rather than as an interpretation. Yet, every biopic selects, compresses and arranges, and the selection here consistently favours moments of personal triumph over moments of structural blockage. The result is a form of realism that feels documentary while remaining carefully shaped, and it is precisely this combination that makes the exceptionalist logic difficult to dispute from within the film's own terms.

5.3 Body Politics: Discipline, Surveillance and Femininity

The female athletic body itself becomes contested terrain across the corpus, and Rashmi Rocket makes this contest explicit. Its plot turns on a gender verification test, dramatizing the institutional scrutiny directed at bodies that fail to conform to conventional expectations of femininity and exposing how readily athletic capability in a woman can be reinterpreted as grounds for suspicion.

The film's significance lies in its willingness to name a form of policing that the other films register only implicitly. Across the corpus, muscularity and physical strength are celebrated, yet that celebration is carefully bounded by the preservation of conventional beauty standards, with costume, styling and framing working to reassure the viewer that athletic development has not compromised femininity. Empowerment and conformity consequently sit alongside one another in an uneasy arrangement, in which the athletic body is permitted its strength so long as it remains recognizably feminine by prevailing standards.

This arrangement can be read as a specific instance of a broader tension in the presentation of women in Indian popular cinema, where the female body is expected to signify both capability and desirability at once. In sports films the tension is sharper because the body's instrumental capacity is the explicit subject of the narrative. Training sequences dwell on sweat, exertion and muscle, but they are typically composed so that the athlete remains visually coherent with the conventions of the film heroine, and moments of physical strain are balanced by moments of styled presentation. The camera, thus, performs two functions simultaneously, documenting the labour that produces athletic excellence and managing the threat that this labour poses to normative femininity. What Rashmi Rocket adds is not a resolution of this tension but a rare acknowledgement that it is enforced by institutions rather than merely observed by audiences.

5.4 Negotiating Domesticity and Professional Identity

Panga takes up the tension between domestic responsibility and professional ambition directly, following a former kabaddi player attempting a return to competition while managing the obligations of household and motherhood. Two observations follow from the film's treatment of this tension. Motherhood is not set aside in favour of a sporting career but redefined and incorporated into it, so that the protagonist's return is presented as compatible with rather than opposed to her maternal role. At the same time, family support functions as an indispensable precondition for that return, which the narrative presents as generous rather than as an indication of how much a woman's ambition depends on the consent of others.

The difficulty is that the film ultimately asks its protagonist to manage both domains at once. Domestic labour is accommodated rather than redistributed, and the household's willingness to adjust is framed as exceptional goodwill rather than as an ordinary rebalancing of responsibility. The result is a narrative that presents itself as a story of empowerment while leaving the underlying allocation of domestic work substantially intact.

The contrast with the male-centered sports film is instructive. Where a male athlete's domestic arrangements are rarely treated as a narrative problem at all, the female athlete's household is a persistent source of complication, and her success is measured partly by how well she has managed it. The films are not unaware of this asymmetry, and several of them gesture toward the unfairness of the double burden. But gesture is not the same as analysis, and the resolution typically arrives through the goodwill of individual family members rather than through any change in the arrangement that produced the burden in the first place.

5.5 Nationalism and the Symbolic Construction of Sportswomen

A device recurs across the corpus: individual female success is aligned with collective national pride. Victories are rarely framed as personal accomplishments alone but staged as triumphs of the nation, with the flag, the anthem and the crowd recruited to convert a sporting result into a statement about collective identity. Chak De! India and Dangal both develop this alignment to the point where the athlete functions as a metaphor for the nation itself.

The effect is genuinely double. National framing raises the visibility of women's sport considerably, lending it an importance that a narrative of purely personal achievement might struggle to command and it grants female athletes a claim on public attention that is difficult to dismiss. Yet, the same framing absorbs individual identity into a national narrative, and in doing so it narrows the space available for criticism. An athlete who represents the nation is awkwardly placed to indict the institutions that nation maintains, and the films largely decline to press the point.

There is a further dimension to this dynamic that has become more visible in recent years. As women's sport has acquired greater public standing, the language of national pride has been used both to celebrate female athletes and to discipline them, with questions of patriotism occasionally attached to their conduct or their criticism. The films in this corpus predate the sharpest form of these debates, but they establish the symbolic grammar within which such debates become possible. By presenting the sportswoman as a vessel for collective honour, they make her achievement available to a nationalist vocabulary that can, in other circumstances, be turned against her.

5.6 Institutional Power and Structural Constraints

Rashmi Rocket confronts institutional obstacles more directly than any other film in the corpus, addressing gender testing, bureaucratic gatekeeping and the absence of adequate support structures for athletes, and allowing these to function as antagonists in their own right rather than as background conditions.

Even here, however, the resolution follows a familiar pattern. Conflict is settled at the level of the individual protagonist, through her particular vindication, rather than through any sustained interrogation of the system that generated the conflict. The institution is shown to have failed one athlete rather than to be structurally disposed to fail many, and the narrative closes once her case is resolved. This tendency, consistent across the corpus, marks the limit of these films' critical ambition.

The pattern is worth stating precisely because it is so easily mistaken for critique. A film that depicts a flawed institution has done something that a film ignoring institutions altogether has not, and Rashmi Rocket deserves credit for putting the apparatus of selection, verification and appeal on screen. But depiction and interrogation are separable, and the film's closing movement converts a systemic problem into a personal victory. The audience is invited to feel that justice has been done, which is true for the protagonist and false for the many athletes whose circumstances the narrative does not follow.

6. INTERSECTIONALITY AND SILENCES

What the corpus does not address is as revealing as what it does. Caste receives almost no attention, despite its continuing centrality to Indian social life and its well-documented influence on access to sporting opportunity, training and patronage. Class appears mainly through narratives of upward mobility, in which economic hardship functions as a starting point to be transcended rather than as a structural condition shaping who reaches elite competition at all. Regional representation skews toward urban and semi-urban settings, with the result that athletes from more remote or less served geographies remain largely absent, notwithstanding their substantial presence in Indian sport.

These omissions are connected rather than incidental. Together they produce a notably homogenized image of the Indian sportswoman, one whose obstacles are personal and familial rather than structural, and whose eventual success implies that determination suffices. Whatever inspirational value this image carries, it excludes the experience of women for whom caste, class and geography constitute obstacles that individual resolve does not dissolve.

It is worth asking why these silences persist even as the films become more willing to address gender. One answer is commercial: a narrative organized around caste or regional exclusion risks dividing the broad audience that mainstream cinema depends on, whereas a narrative organized around family and personal struggle addresses viewers across social positions. Another is generic: the sports film is built around the arc of individual triumph, and structural disadvantage resists that arc because it cannot be overcome within a single narrative. These explanations are compatible, and together they suggest that the omissions are not oversights but consequences of the form. That makes them harder to correct than simple neglect, since addressing them would require rethinking the conventions that make these films appealing in the first place.

7. FINDINGS

Six patterns emerge consistently across the corpus. The first is increased visibility: sportswomen now occupy central rather than peripheral positions in mainstream narratives, and their stories sustain commercially significant films. The second is conditional empowerment: female agency is genuine but operates within patriarchal boundaries it does not itself determine, typically requiring sanction from a father, husband, coach or family. The third is a preference for exceptional narratives, in which extraordinary individuals are favoured over collective or ordinary experience. The fourth is regulation of the female body, celebrated for its strength while remaining subject to normative expectations of femininity and, in one case, to explicit institutional verification.

The fifth pattern is nationalist framing, through which individual achievement is folded into narratives of collective pride, raising the visibility of women's sport while constraining the criticism these films are able to voice. The sixth is limited intersectionality, with caste, class and regional difference substantially unaddressed across the corpus. Taken together, these patterns suggest that the advances registered by contemporary Indian sports cinema and its continuing limitations arise from the same set of narrative choices rather than from separate ones.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate a hybrid ideological formation: progressive at the level of representation, comparatively conservative in the values it finally endorses. It would be inaccurate to describe these films as regressive, since they extend recognition and narrative authority to figures previously marginal to popular cinema. It would be equally inaccurate to describe them as straightforwardly emancipatory, since the terms of that recognition consistently reassert the structures they appear to challenge.

This combination is best understood as characteristic rather than contradictory. Popular cinema addresses a broad audience holding divergent views, and a film that celebrates female ambition while affirming familial authority can satisfy both progressive and conservative expectations without requiring either to be surrendered. The tension visible in these narratives mirrors a wider social negotiation between tradition and modernity, and between patriarchal expectation and the now widely available language of gender equality.

The sportswoman on screen accordingly functions as a site of negotiation. Empowerment is offered, but under conditions that remain largely unspoken: she may compete provided her family consents, may develop physical strength provided she remains conventionally feminine, may achieve provided her achievement accrues to the nation, and may challenge an institution provided the challenge concludes with her individual vindication rather than with systemic change. The conditions are rarely articulated within the films themselves, which is precisely what makes them effective, since a requirement that is never stated is difficult to contest.

This analysis carries implications beyond the corpus. If the conditions attached to female visibility are largely implicit, then criticism that focuses only on explicit content will miss them, and celebration of increased representation will mistake presence for progress. The framework proposed here, attentive to the terms on which visibility is granted, offers a way of reading other contemporary representations of women in popular culture where the surface appears progressive and the underlying arrangement less so. The same logic may apply to the growing number of films and series about women in other male-dominated domains, from politics to policing to business, where recognition and constraint frequently arrive together.

9. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The growing presence of sportswomen in contemporary Indian cinema represents a genuine cultural shift toward greater visibility and public recognition. That shift nonetheless stops short of transformation. The narratives examined here remain embedded within patriarchal and nationalist frameworks that continue to shape, and in places constrain, the agency they depict.

These films celebrate strength, resilience and achievement, yet they do so within limits that ultimately reinforces conventional gender roles rather than dismantling them. Their recurring emphasis on exceptional individual success further obscures the systemic inequalities and routine difficulties that most women in Indian sport continue to face, since a narrative organized around someone extraordinary has little occasion to consider the conditions facing everyone else.

For Indian cinema to serve as a genuinely transformative medium in this domain, it would need to move past symbolic gestures of empowerment toward sustained engagement with structural inequality, intersectional identity and a wider range of lived experience. Films willing to depict athletes whose obstacles are institutional rather than personal, whose success is partial rather than total, or whose caste and class position materially shapes their opportunities would offer representations that are not only more accurate but better able to deepen public understanding of gender, identity and power in contemporary India. Whether commercial cinema will undertake that work remains an open question, and one that further research incorporating audience reception and regional-language film would be well placed to pursue.

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