

Evolution of Women's Cricket in India and Need for Female Role Models

SWASTIKA SHARMA

Abstract

The evolution of women's cricket in India has been a remarkable journey marked by perseverance, resilience, and significant milestones. From its humble beginnings to its current status, women's cricket in India has faced numerous challenges, including societal perceptions, gender biases, and inadequate infrastructure. Despite these obstacles, the sport has seen tremendous growth, driven by the dedication of pioneering female cricketers and supportive initiatives. This paper explores the history and rise of women's cricket in India, highlighting the comparative analysis of men's and women's cricket, the contributions of prominent female cricketers, and the future prospects of the sport. It also examines the role of female role models in inspiring the next generation and the importance of gender equality in sports. The media plays a crucial role in crafting the stories that the public consumes. The impact of media on women's cricket extends beyond individual players. Female cricketers often receive sporadic and inconsistent media coverage, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. Additionally, this paper also investigates the role of social media platforms which can be used by female players and content creators to share their stories and connect directly with fans, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers.

Keywords: societal perceptions, gender biases, Indian women's cricket, prominent female cricketers, social media platforms

1. Introduction

Cricket, a sport deeply rooted in colonial history, has evolved into a significant part of Indian culture (Mustafa, 2013) (Devan, 2012). The men's game has traditionally dominated the cricketing landscape, with legendary figures like Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli becoming household names. Women's cricket, on the other hand, had a delayed and challenging start. The history of women's cricket in India is a tale of perseverance and progress, marked by the efforts of pioneering women who defied societal norms to carve a niche in a male-dominated sport. The journey of women's cricket in India began in the early 1970s and has since evolved into a significant aspect of the nation's sporting landscape.

a) Early Beginnings

Women's cricket in India can trace its origins back to the 1970s. The first organized effort to promote the sport among women was initiated by the Women's Cricket Association of India (WCAI), established in 1973 by Begum Hamida Habibullah and Mahendra Kumar Sharma. This marked a pivotal moment, providing a structured platform for women cricketers to showcase their talents and compete at higher levels.

Prior to the formation of WCAI, women who attended cricket matches were often mocked and seen as out of place. They were stereotypically portrayed as lacking an understanding of the game (Naha, 2012). This perception was countered by many women who passionately followed and understood cricket, as evidenced by letters to the editor and other public assertions of their knowledge and interest in the sport. The first women's cricket team in Bombay, known as the Albees, was founded by Aloo Bamjee in 1969. This team was a precursor to the organized women's cricket structure that was to come. The Albees' formation indicated a growing interest among women to participate in the sport actively, beyond being mere spectators.

b) Growth and Development in the 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s saw significant developments in women's cricket in India. The inaugural Women's Inter-State Nationals were held in Pune in April 1973, featuring teams from Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Bombay. This tournament marked the beginning of competitive women's cricket in the country.

By the end of 1973, the second National Championship in Varanasi saw an increase in participation, with eight teams competing. This growth continued, and by the time of the third tournament in Calcutta, there were 14 teams. The establishment of these tournaments provided a much-needed competitive structure for the sport, encouraging more women to take up cricket seriously. During this period, women's cricket also received support from major organizations like Railways and Air India, which formed their own teams and participated in national competitions. This institutional support was crucial in sustaining the early momentum of women's cricket in India.

c) **International Exposure**

The international exposure of Indian women cricketers began with the Australia U-25 team's tour of India in 1975, which included a three-match Test series. This series was significant as it marked the first bilateral cricket series for Indian women, showcasing their talents on an international platform. Subsequent tours and matches against New Zealand, England, and the West Indies further helped in honing the skills of Indian women cricketers. These matches also highlighted the stark differences in how women's cricket was perceived and supported in different countries, with Indian and West Indian players wearing trousers, while players from Australia, New Zealand, and England wore skirts.

d) **Institutional Support and Challenges**

Despite the growing interest and participation, women cricketers faced numerous challenges, including inadequate facilities, subpar equipment, and a lack of funding. Unlike their male counterparts, female cricketers did not enjoy the same level of fame, wealth, or resources. Their training was often compromised due to these limitations, but they continued to pursue the sport with determination and passion. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) eventually took women's cricket under its wing in 2005. This integration was a significant step forward, although it took several more years for female players to receive central contracts and achieve pay parity with male cricketers. The BCCI's involvement brought more professional support, better facilities, and increased visibility for women's cricket.

e) **Modern Era and Recognition**

The modern era of women's cricket in India has seen increased recognition and support. The performance of the Indian women's team in international tournaments, particularly the 2017 World Cup, brought widespread acclaim and drew attention to the sport. This visibility has inspired a new generation of young girls to pursue cricket professionally. Prominent figures such as Mithali Raj and Jhulan Goswami have become role models, proving that women can excel in cricket and compete at the highest levels. Their success has challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypes, contributing to a cultural shift in the perception of women's sports in India.

2. Comparison of Men and Women's Cricket

a) **On-Field Differences**

The differences between men's and women's cricket are evident in their on-field dynamics. Men's cricket is often characterized by higher levels of physical intensity, faster bowling speeds, and greater power in batting. Women's cricket, while equally competitive, tends to emphasize technical skills and strategic play. These differences are influenced by physiological factors, training regimes, and historical development paths (Sandhu, Goel and Singh, 2017).

b) **Techniques and Physical Fitness**

In terms of techniques, both male and female cricketers employ similar batting and bowling styles, but the execution can vary due to physical differences. For instance, fast bowlers in men's cricket can reach speeds upwards of 150 km/h, whereas women's fast bowlers typically bowl at speeds between 110-130 km/h. This difference necessitates different training focuses, with women cricketers often emphasizing accuracy and swing over sheer pace. Physical fitness regimes also differ, with male cricketers undergoing more intensive strength and conditioning programs compared to their female counterparts.

c) **Batting and Bowling Statistics**

Statistically, men's cricket has a broader range of high-scoring matches and individual performances. The highest individual score in Test cricket is 400 by Brian Lara, whereas in women's cricket, the highest is 214 by Kiran Baluch. Bowling statistics also reflect similar trends, with men's cricket having a greater frequency of five-wicket hauls and ten-wicket match performances. However, these statistics do not undermine the skill levels in women's cricket; instead, they highlight the different developmental trajectories and opportunities available to male and female cricketers.

3. **The Need for Female Role Models in Cricket**

The role of female role models in cricket is crucial for inspiring the next generation of athletes and challenging entrenched gender biases. Historically, sports have been dominated by men, with women's contributions often overlooked or undervalued. This disparity is evident in cricket, where male cricketers have traditionally garnered more attention and accolades than their female counterparts. However, in recent years, the rise of prominent women cricketers in India has begun to reshape societal perceptions and provide young girls with tangible examples of success and resilience in the sport (Amalijth N.K, 2021).

Female role models in cricket are essential for several reasons. First, they provide inspiration and motivation for young girls who aspire to pursue careers in sports. Seeing women succeed in cricket challenges the stereotype that it is a male-dominated sport and encourages girls to believe in their potential. Role models also serve as tangible proof that success is attainable, regardless of gender (Akoijam and Scholar, 2017). They demonstrate the importance of hard work, perseverance, and dedication, values that are critical for achieving excellence in any field. Moreover, female cricketers who achieve success at national and international levels become symbols of empowerment (Awal, 2023). They break down societal barriers and challenge traditional norms that often restrict women's participation in sports. These athletes not only inspire future generations but also contribute to a broader cultural shift towards gender equality in sports and beyond.

Prominent Figures in Indian Women's Cricket

The journey of many Indian women cricketers is a testament to their determination and passion for the sport. Here are some of the prominent figures who have significantly impacted Indian women's cricket:

Mithali Raj

Mithali Raj is arguably the most iconic figure in Indian women's cricket. She is the highest run-scorer in women's international cricket and has led the Indian team to numerous victories. Mithali's calm demeanor and strategic acumen on the field have earned her immense respect and admiration.

Jhulan Goswami

Renowned for her fast bowling, Jhulan Goswami is one of the leading wicket-takers in women's cricket. Her career has been marked by numerous accolades, including being named the ICC Women's Player of the Year in 2007. Jhulan's dedication and performance have made her a role model for aspiring female cricketers.

Anjum Chopra

Anjum Chopra is a former captain of the Indian women's cricket team and a prominent commentator. Her contributions to the game, both on and off the field, have been instrumental in promoting women's cricket in India. Anjum's insightful commentary and analysis have further popularized the sport.

Smriti Mandhana

Smriti Mandhana is known for her aggressive batting style and has been a consistent performer for the Indian team. She was named the ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year in 2018. Smriti's dynamic presence and style of play have made her a fan favorite and an inspiration for young girls.

Harmanpreet Kaur

Harmanpreet Kaur's explosive batting and leadership qualities have been pivotal for the Indian team. Her unbeaten 171 against Australia in the 2017 World Cup is one of the greatest innings in women's cricket history. Harmanpreet's performances have showcased the potential of Indian women cricketers on the global stage.

Shikha Pandey

An all-rounder, Shikha Pandey has been a crucial player for India with both bat and ball. Her journey from serving in the Indian Air Force to representing the national cricket team is inspiring. Shikha's story highlights the diverse backgrounds from which successful cricketers can emerge.

4. The Role of Media in Promoting Female Role Models

The media, including social media, plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and narratives, particularly in the realm of sports. For female athletes, especially in cricket, media representation is pivotal in recognizing their achievements and promoting them as role models.

i.Traditional Media's Role

Traditional media, encompassing newspapers, television, and radio, has historically dominated the narrative around sports. In the context of women's cricket, media coverage—or the lack thereof—directly affects how female cricketers are perceived (Saravanapriya, 2019)(Amalijth N.K, 2021). Historically, men's cricket has dominated the sports pages, leaving women's cricket in the shadows (Singh, 2016). This disparity in coverage has contributed to the perception of cricket as a predominantly male sport. When female cricketers do receive media attention, it often centers around their personal lives or appearance rather than their athletic achievements.

Yet, there has been progress. High-profile tournaments like the ICC Women's World Cup and standout performances by Indian cricketers such as Mithali Raj and Harmanpreet Kaur have begun to capture media interest. Coverage of these events and athletes helps to elevate their status and inspires young girls to pursue cricket. Positive stories and features in mainstream media validate the achievements of female cricketers and help to challenge the entrenched gender biases that perceive cricket as a male-only sport popularity (Open *et al.*, 2021).

ii.Social Media's Influence

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping narratives and promoting female role models (Trivedi, Soni and Kishore, 2020). Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook offer female cricketers a direct line to fans, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This democratization of media allows athletes to share their stories, highlight their achievements, and engage with a global audience.

Social media campaigns and hashtags dedicated to women's cricket can amplify the visibility of female athletes. For instance, movements like #ShePlaysWeWin and #WomenInCricket have garnered significant attention, helping to promote equality in sports. These platforms also enable fans to rally around female cricketers, creating a supportive community that can drive broader media coverage and sponsorship opportunities (Deep Prakash and Majumdar, 2021).

iii.The Synergy Between Media and Social Media

The interplay between traditional media and social media creates a robust framework for promoting female cricketers. While traditional media can provide authoritative coverage and legitimacy, social media offers immediacy and personal connection. When these two forms of media work in tandem, they can significantly enhance the visibility and recognition of female cricketers.

For example, a stellar performance in a major tournament might be reported by traditional media, while social media buzz can sustain interest and engagement long after the event. This synergy helps keep female athletes in the public consciousness, encouraging continued media coverage and public support.

iv. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the progress, challenges remain. Traditional media often provides sporadic coverage of women's cricket, and social media can sometimes amplify negative stereotypes or sexism. Therefore, a concerted effort is needed to ensure consistent and respectful representation of female cricketers across all media platforms.

Media organizations must commit to equitable coverage, highlighting women's cricket with the same enthusiasm and depth as men's cricket. Educational initiatives for sports journalists can help sensitize them to gender issues, ensuring fair and balanced reporting. Meanwhile, female cricketers should continue to leverage social media to build their brands and connect with fans, while also advocating for greater representation and support.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of women's cricket in India is a story of resilience, determination, and gradual acceptance. Despite facing numerous challenges, female cricketers have made significant strides, inspiring a new generation of athletes. The comparative analysis of men's and women's cricket highlights the disparities but also the unique strengths of women's cricket. Prominent figures like Mithali Raj, Jhulan Goswami, and Harmanpreet Kaur have played crucial roles in this journey. The media, in all its forms, plays an indispensable role in shaping the narratives around women's cricket and promoting female role models. By providing comprehensive and positive coverage, traditional media can help to dismantle gender biases and elevate the status of female cricketers. Simultaneously, social media offers a powerful platform for athletes to share their stories and engage with a global audience. Together, these media channels can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women's cricket, inspiring future generations of female athletes to pursue their dreams with confidence.

Bibliography

Akoijam, S. and Scholar, R. (2017) 'Participation level of Indian women in sports in National and International Arena', *International Journal of English Language, literature and Humanities*, 5(1), pp. 199–200. Available at: www.ijellh.com.

Amalijth N.K (2021) 'Gender Representation in Sports: a Perspective Through Indian Sports Films', *Brazilian Journal of Policy and Development*, 3(1), pp. 93–107.

Awal, M. (2023) 'Shattering Stereotypes: The Power of Women in Indian Sports for Societal Transformation', *Proceedings of the International Conference on Women*, 1, pp. 29–41. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.32789/women.2023.1003>.

Deep Prakash, C. and Majumdar, A. (2021) 'Analyzing the role of national culture on content creation and user engagement on Twitter: The case of Indian Premier League cricket franchises', *International Journal of Information Management*, 57(October 2020), p. 102268. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102268>.

Devan, P. (2012) 'Cricket and the global Indian identity', *Sport in Society*, 15(10), pp. 1413–1425. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.744210>.

Mustafa, F. (2013) 'Cricket and globalization: Global processes and the imperial game', *Journal of Global History*, 8(2), pp. 318–341. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022813000247>.

Naha, S. (2012) 'Adams and eves at the Eden Gardens: Women cricket spectators and the conflict of feminine subjectivity in Calcutta, 1920-1970', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29(5), pp. 711–729. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2012.675204>.

Open, A. et al. (2021) 'BOLLYWOODIZATION OF SPORTS : A FEMINIST', *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review (AJMRR)*, 4(1), pp. 36–44.

Sandhu, R.S., Goel, M. and Singh, N. (2017) 'A critical study on women varsity cricketers with reference to their psychological profile', *International Journal of Yogic, Human Movement and Sports Sciences*, 2(2), pp. 407–410.

Saravanapriya, S. (2019) 'Women Sports and Medicines: Case Study of Indian Women Cricket and Scientific Conception', *IRE Journals*, 2(7), pp. 16–20.

Singh, R. (2016) 'The media ' s role in enhancement of cricket in India', *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health*, 3(3), pp. 501–504.

Trivedi, J., Soni, S. and Kishore, A. (2020) 'Exploring the Role of Social Media Communications in the Success of Professional Sports Leagues: An Emerging Market Perspective', *Journal of Promotion Management*, 27(2), pp. 306–331. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2020.1829774>.