

# Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Women's Sporting Achievements in Kerala: A Historical and Developmental Perspective

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on the socio-cultural influences on women's participation and governance in sports in Kerala. The research assesses the socio-cultural context in Kerala (historical reforms), as well as investments in infrastructure, family support systems, and social attitudes that have influenced/increased female participation and governance in sports. In doing so, it described the journey of women athletes in Kerala in the context of Kerala's unique development model with an emphasis on health, education, and women's empowerment & gender equality; it also acknowledged the significance of resilience and innovation among women athletes, and how they have navigated the fences of socio-economic and socio-cultural nature. Through the use of Gender Studies and Comparative methodologies and the wealth of existing academic literature in these fields, the results of this study demonstrate that Kerala's unique mix of cultural conditions and broad governance strategies, as well as the state's strong cultural value of sport and athletic achievement, position Kerala as a leader in the area of women's sporting achievement within India. The findings of this study provide recommendations for ongoing/supporting the continued or increased participation of women in sport in Kerala, as well as future research directions.

**Keywords:** Kerala, Women Athletes, Socio-Cultural Context, Sport Development, Women's Empowerment, Infrastructure, Resilience, Sporting Achievements.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women's participation in higher level competitive physical activity via sport has been limited because of social roles established based on gender. Social perceptions and historical context have at times created barriers to women's physical ability, but creating and reinforcing gender constructs continues to provide barriers to women's access to sports at all levels. The historical legacy of Kerala's development & sport is a complicated one. Socially progressive and reformist are also keywords in how we study Kerala, but this means we have the opportunity, through a unique socio-cultural site, to understand how those characteristics of Kerala have positively impacted our female athletes and their chances of success in the sport. The past 10 years have seen a surge in female participation in sports in Kerala. There are many factors, including continued support of athletes and facilities through established reforms, as well

as continued family support and changing attitudes toward women's participation in sport.

Earlier work conducted by Kunjumon (2012) and Thomas (2017) acknowledges the importance of social and infrastructural support in building women athletes. As necessary as these studies are, we still see a gap in research that hinders the development of a more comprehensive understanding of women's participation in sport in Kerala, highlighting the influences of cultural constructions of gender, regional differences, and individual aspects of resilience. More broadly, however, current literature is directed towards achieving "success stories" of women's sports participation, with scant regard for the ongoing social-cultural barriers women's participation in sport continues to face.

This study aims to bridge the gap by examining these complex influences within Kerala's socio-cultural context, while also providing a comparative perspective on Kerala's model in relation to other Indian states to identify best practices and areas for development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Khandelwal (2009) discusses the educational reform options for building physical education and promoting women's participation in physical activity, observing that the more states prioritized physical education early in schooling, the greater the number of successful women athletes. He states that this is true in Kerala, where education reform for women was fundamental to providing literacy and health to the population, as well as creating possibilities for women's empowerment and sports.

Ranjan (2018) and Singh (2020) described other important influences, including social attitudes towards women in sport and family support. Ranjan contended that the government's progressive developments in Kerala were intended to counter traditional stereotypes and provide women with opportunities for competition.

Chatterjee's (2014) research discusses the enabling factors that allow women athletes to participate at such high levels, including the development of sports infrastructure such as sports facilities and training centers.

Kerala's investment in such infrastructure, along with policies promoting gender equality, has created fertile ground for women's sports.

### ➤ *Research Gap*

Although research has addressed social, infrastructural, and policy supports, there is a lack of critical work examining how regional differences, cultural attitudes, and individual fortitude influence women's sports engagement across various contexts in Kerala. The long-term sociocultural consequences of women athletes' success on their attitudes are also poorly understood.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses secondary or pre-existing data, including government documentation, peer-reviewed literature, the views of athletes and coaches, and case studies of high-profile Kerala women athletes such as P. T. Usha, Shiny Wilson, and Anju Bobby George. Content analysis was employed to examine the meanings and themes related to socio-cultural factors shaping women's sports in Kerala.

## IV. DISCUSSIONS

### ➤ *Historical Context and Education Reforms*

The sporting culture of Kerala emerged from the social reform movements of the early 19th century, itself influenced by Walter Bentinck's reforms on the importance of physical education (1835), which initiated an important legacy, especially from the European and missionary schools, all of

which were then instituting sporting practices into their curriculum. The emphasis on physical fitness in Kerala was revealed through sports, which promoted athletic and health issues and, in turn, formed the basis of social attitudes regarding social fitness. Sree Narayana Guru held equal importance as a social reform leader, despite accepting traditional gender norms. His recognition of gendered differences enabled him to advocate for an agenda of equality and respect for women participating in sports. Parental support was inherent for women in sport, and, as expressed and confirmed by the family model, which engaged daughters in sports as an occasion of empowerment for both daughters and their families, sport became a means by which the family could challenge overt gender roles.

### ➤ *Gendered Socio-Economic Factors and Resilience*

Almost all women athletes come from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds, meaning they come from less developed rural or remote locations. Their stories suggest multiple contexts of resilience, persistence, and resourcefulness despite limited access to infrastructure and resources. There are multiple personal stories about their journeys, including Usha's, which show how women athletes took ownership of their cultural frames of reference and pursued various opportunities of resilience and persistence to 'break through' barriers. Resilience created spaces to foster individual talent while also serving as a leading example for many younger girls. Illustrating how male stories previously limited by gendered socio-economic constraints can now also be challenged through reality, effort, and commitment to sport.

### ➤ *Infrastructural and Policy Support*

The willingness of the Kerala legislature to invest public funds in developing sports infrastructure and policies played a significant role in supporting women's involvement in sports. For example, according to the state budget of Kerala, it is estimated that at least 99% of the expenditure was allocated to sports infrastructure (including training centers and stadiums), scholarships, and sports development in the state of Kerala, which demonstrates a commitment from the highest levels of political will and goodwill. The Kerala Sports Policy (2014) focused on women athletes and financing sporting institutions to support their participation, making recommendations to continue supporting women's sport athletes in achieving success in the sporting space. Support through infrastructure and policy will play a major role in promoting sustainability in women's sports.

### ➤ *Role of Women Athletes as Role Models*

Kerala has produced many iconic athletes since the 1980s, including P. T. Usha, Shiny Wilson, and Anju Bobby George, among others, across various sports. Elite women athletes with international careers elevated the status of women's sports and women athletes, and, with an enhanced understanding and higher expectations of sport, interest in women's sports grew. Re-defining sport as a journey, people began identifying role models in athletics for a new generation of girls. Through examples such as P.T. Usha, who inspired them and other successful female athletes, new opportunities began to arise in women's sports at both the

school and college levels. The growth of sports education for women and girls has accelerated dramatically in recent years and has played a significant role in creating lasting improvements in the way women athletes are viewed in our society.

#### ➤ *Kerala's Development Model and Women's Empowerment*

Kerala is renowned for its mature, humanistic, and social development model. Development refers to early conditions of living (health), education, learning, and educational opportunities, as well as equity and gender equality, which are values that support social-cultural conditions that facilitate women's participation in sporting activities, reflecting participatory women's sports. The overriding element of Kerala's state development model is state human resource development, and the reference to the Kerala State Planning Board (2020) human capital development reflected in the 'state unique' successes of women and girls' sporting achievements. An examination or analysis of the empowerment of women to participate in the societal conditions of sport across every sector of the sporting society reinforces attitudes towards women and the acceptance of women athletes, and clearly improves rates of participation and achievement.

### V. FINDINGS

#### ➤ *Historical Legacy*

The emergence of physical education in the 19th century, stemming from social reform movements, has created a legacy of participation in the culture of fitness and sports for women in Kerala.

#### ➤ *Cultural Attitudes and Family Support*

Progressive social reform and family support have contributed to changing cultural stereotypes of female participation in sports.

#### ➤ *Socio-Economic Resilience*

Athletic women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are determined, resourceful, and resilient, continuing to shine despite their socio-economic limitations.

#### ➤ *Facilities and Policies/Financial Resources*

The Kerala Government (2014 Sports Policy) has spent significant funds to build and maintain significant facilities, allocate financial support, and create various opportunities, impacting women's sporting performance levels.

#### ➤ *Role Models*

P T Usha, Shiny Wilson, and Anju Bobby George are athletes who have also served as role models or precedents for women who now view sporting engagement seriously as a career path and have entered the field of sports as pre-adolescents or adolescents.

#### ➤ *Holistic Development and Empowerment*

Kerala's model of development focused on health, education, and gender construction to improve development

within women's sport, and the sporting culture was more inclusive overall.

### VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kerala demonstrated that progressive thinking, awareness of the socio-cultural context, and adequate funding infrastructure and policies can positively impact women's success in sport. Based on this study, it can be assumed that there are opportunities to reshape social constructions and socio-cultural behaviors surrounding participation in, but not limited to, sport, as well as family and government support for women's sport, when changes in those behaviors occur. More research using mixed-methods that combine qualitative interpretation with quantitative data is needed to develop a better understanding of these dynamics and inform policy and programming for women's sport in Kerala and other locations.

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