

## **SPORTS AND MASCULINITIES- A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL BOYS OF KOLKATA**

<sup>1</sup>Madhurima Dasgupta, <sup>2</sup>Atish Chakraborty

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Adamas University & PhD Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata – 700010, India.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Faculty of Legal Aptitude, Prime Tutorial & Penultimate Year Law Student, Amity Law School, Amity University, Kolkata-700135, India.

### **ABSTRACT**

Masculinity is socially constructed and dynamic. It is not a fixed gender identity but rather a collective gender identity of men. Sports still continues to be equated with violence since it's the only leisure activity during adolescence which reinforces notions of masculinity that value physical prowess and dominance. In this context, the present paper explores how boys construct their notions of masculinity by engaging in leisure activities, especially different forms of sports followed by the participation of both heterosexual and homosexual boys in sports and whether such sports allows for the expression of aggression or violence by using **mixed methodology** in order to study twenty boys (aged **16-18** years) who studies in XI and XII standards of their school in North and Central Kolkata. The findings reveal that the High school going boys practice and construct their notions of masculinity by participating in sports like Football and Cricket since it allows them to conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity by portraying physical strength, toughness and aggression followed by rejection of homophobic tendencies.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic masculinity, homophobia, jockocracy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Masculinity is socially constructed and dynamic. It is not a fixed gender identity but rather a collective gender identity of men. Masculinity is a collective gender identity and not a natural attribute. It is socially constructed and fluid. There can be no single universal masculinity but different forms of masculinities, each with a characteristic shape and set of attributes. The contours of these masculinities changes over time, being affected by changes in society and producing a significant impact on society itself.

A strong relation exists between sports and masculinity since sports create an ambience where traits of traditional masculinity like competitiveness, aggression and physical strength is regarded as acceptable and normative. Sports occupy an important position not only in Western culture but also in Indian culture as one of the major means of leisure for both boys and girls.

Masculinity based on bodily performance continues to prevail in mainstream sports culture which operates not only in organized sports but also in sports activities involving gay men and lesbian women, heterosexual women and disabled people. According to R. W. Connell, masculinity in school is reflected through sports practiced by boys from where they derived their sporting prowess, even at the reluctance of those boys who did not develop an interest in the activity.

Sports still continues to be equated with violence since it's the only leisure activity during adolescence which reinforces notions of masculinity that value physical prowess and dominance. The sporting performances by reputed sports personalities involved display of aggression and violence which was valorised by media creating celebrity '*bad boy*' images even though at the expense of causing injury to its opponents. Even during international cricket tournaments, sports commentators and spectator valorises the sporting hero by reinforcing the use of aggression as normal and acceptable as a part of the activity.

Though there has been immense research on masculinity in Western societies, India is a country where hardly any such research on masculinity and sports has been carried out. Against this backdrop, the present paper explores how boys construct their notions of masculinity by engaging in leisure activities, especially different forms of sports.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

An overview of current research on men and sports is being provided by **McKay, Michael Messner and Sabo** (2000). They regarded that feminist theory is embraced by critical study of masculinities and sports and should also include the constructions of masculinity and femininity.

According to **Messner**, sports exemplify dominant form of masculinity where body is used as a weapon to achieve goals which even goes to the extent of bringing physical harm to its opponent players, team-mates, women, ethnic minorities and even gay men. Sports are an arena where *covert intimacy* is prevalent which involves more of physical activity and strength rather than conversation.

**Young** who worked extensively on Sociology of Sports regarded that the concept of ideal male body is socially constructed in male athletes since such body can be build during the self-destructive pursuit of sports by neglecting pain and injury in the game. Such 'ideal male body'

which should be masculine, physically strong, should be able to endure excessive pain inflicted upon it is a product of traditional mainstream sport fuelled by consumerism which has equally contributed to a greater expectation for the presentation of '*masculine body*'. (Featherstone 1991, Mort 1996). Such quest for ideal body is constructed in order to abide by the standards of beautification of society and to attain social identity which benefits commercial industries and increases the demand for products related to different forms of body modification like cosmetic surgery, tattoo inscription and dieting.

### **Impact of masculinity in the construction of physical body:**

For **Raewyn Connell**, though body is one of the central means through which gendered identity is constructed, other factors also influence its construction. For example- she regarded that research on sports focus on the ways in which disciplinary practices produce gender and is unable to capture the pleasure one gains from the physical activity (**Connell 1995: 61**).

Subordinated masculinity can be depicted in certain openly gay professional sports players. Some of the renowned players exemplify gay athletes. **Ian Roberts**, former Australian rugby player was a successful sportsman who came out as gay. However, research on his masculine identity emphasizes on his presentation of normative masculinity through his body than his gayness which hypothesize that Roberts was not subordinated the way women's participation in sports are. Simultaneously, **Meyer (1991)** elaborates how movie star, **Rock Hudson** could present an accepted version of masculinity which masked his sexuality through the social projection of his body and keeping his sexuality confidential from the public. In certain situation, gay men are bound to comply with hegemonic normative masculinity, especially in areas of traditionally male-based employment (**Nardi 2000**).

### **Link between Sports and Homophobia**

The term '*homophobia*' signifies dislike for homosexual people. Sports is an arena which produces an orthodox masculinity which is rigid and elusive for most men and women. **Todd Crosset** portrayed that '*sports were produced as a masculine preserve in order to deter boys from becoming effeminate in an emerging industrial culture*'. This signifies that if everything changes around sports, then it will either have to transform itself or will lose its significance and be regarded as a In other words, if everything changes around sport, sport will either have to change or it will lose its social significance and be viewed as a fragment of archaic model of masculinity.

Stigmatizing a boy as gay challenges his masculinity due to which most boys police their gendered behaviour to cater to the norm of orthodox hegemonic masculinity. *Hegemonic masculinity has been defined as a configuration of gender practice which affirms the dominant*

*position of men and subordinate position of women. In order to displace any kind of homosexual suspicion, most boys at a very early age don't intend to ask for any help from women and tend to hide their emotions and weakness and disguise intimidation. They learn to fight in any challenging situation in order to overcome it. This mechanism is regarded by Pollack as 'boy code' which "puts boys and men into a gender straightjacket that constrains not only them but everyone else, reducing us all as human beings, and eventually making us strangers to ourselves and to one another."*

**Judith Butler** regards that "*homonegative discourse changes the perceptual frameworks of gay identities, so that the gay identity itself includes notions of deviance*". Sports are valorised only when violence is highly projected in the name of victory since victory is the symbolic method by which masculinity is portrayed in post-industrial culture. Violence is always normalised and institutionalised against other boys in sports, especially in hockey or baseball game.

### **Problematizing Sports Culture**

Power is exercised and expressed through the means of sports among adolescent boys since sports comprise the major leisure activity which teaches violence and aggression as acceptable to boys. Sports is valorised where violence is actually practiced in the name of victory since defeat is the symbolic means by which masculinity is practiced and distributed in post-industrial society. Thus, any form of physical violence among players is normalized in sports -----  
*football, rugby, hockey or baseball match.*

Sports is such an activity where any kind of fight between two school kids during a high school football or soccer match is regarded as normative, while the same action within the school premises is treated with apprehension and leads to the suspension of boys from school. These are the different ways by which boys and men are socialised to be aggressive against other men during sports which also teaches them to practice such aggression in future. This turns out to be the factor due to which boys and men tend to become receptive victims of violence. However, such expectation never questions the value of sports either to its spectators or the society.

As pointed out by **Hickey (2001)**, the idea of violence and oppression of others who do not fit the norms of the group or their masculinity is presented. Due to the hyper-masculinity in male sports, there is this idea of creating norms within the group and sticking to them if one wants to fit in. Even though this is looked at from the perspective of the group (team), Hickey also presents the idea that these attitudes can come back into the school since they tend to be school sports or teams.

Most boys during sports are socialised to ignore the pain involved in injury in order to ignore the injurious behaviour which might be a hurdle to carry out the game. Thus, physical injury during sports is regarded as acceptable where boys and men are not allowed to criticize the system due to the fear of being stigmatised or labelled of '*not being a man*'. This endurance of pain, injury followed by the use of violence socialises men to regard aggression not only as a part of game but also an important component of masculinity. This lead **Michael Messner** to proclaim that "*participation in sports is nearly culturally compulsory and is made obligatory through its association with public education, the aggression in sport is naturalized, ubiquitous, and all-inclusive.*"

### **Practice of hegemonic masculinity in School (Sports):**

School is the initial and one of the major arenas where hegemonic masculinity is displayed and practiced and even applauded. It is mainly through sports (physical education) that masculine stratification is carried out and valorised. This kind of school ambience has been termed as *jockocracy* by **Jackson Katz** which signifies a stratified picturesque of high school culture where such discrimination is carried out around athletics and not academics.

*Jockocracy* is a game which rewards those boys who conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity ---- those who can achieve goals or baskets occupy the apex of the hierarchy and discards boys who possess homophobic and misogynistic tendencies. It either places boys who are effeminate (weaker, softer and more feminine) at the bottom of the hierarchy or ostracizes them from the masculine terrain altogether. Boys who are placed at the top of the hierarchy (with the most masculine capital) are bound to maintain their social position by continuous surveillance of their masculine behaviour in order to comply with the expected norms of hetero-normative masculinity. This process of rewarding behaviour which abides by hegemonic norms and chastising aberrant behaviour which does not conform to the dominant norm of masculinity is a form of *homo-social patrolling* described by **Michael Kimmel**. Sports is an arena which escapes critical analysis which equally gets reflected among boys since sports accepts and valorises boys who can perform with better physical capability and ostracizes boys who are effeminate.

School-going boys practice masculinity through *athletics* which creates masculine stratification even though athleticism (the ability to physically dominate others in sports) has little practical value in modern society. The apex of the masculine hierarchy is occupied by the most athletic boys while the least athletic (softer, feminine) occupies the bottom of the hierarchy. This means that boys possessing masculine traits are benefitted with social prestige from athletics which indicates the strong association between masculinity and athletics. Since masculine capital is

achieved through athleticism, and masculinity is incompatible with homosexuality, so it follows that athleticism prohibits any kind of homosexual behaviour among boys.

### **Nature and scope of Research**

The core of the present paper involves the following objectives:

1. To explore how boys construct their notions of masculinity by engaging in different forms of leisure activities, especially sports.
2. To analyse the relation between violence and sports.
3. To analyse the participation of heterosexual and homosexual boys in sports.

### **METHODOLOGY**

P.V. Young defined social research, *“a scientific undertaking which by means of logical methods, aim to discover new facts or old facts and to analyze their sequences, interrelationships, casual explanations and natural laws which govern them.”*

The present research is carried out by using **mixed methodology** in order to study twenty boys (aged **16-18** years) who studies in XI and XII standards of their school in North and Central Kolkata.

**Mixed Methodology:** Mixed methodology can be defined as a research design (or methodology) in which the researcher collects, analyses and mixes (integrates and connects) both qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or a multiphase program of enquiry.

### **DISCUSSION**

1. **MEANING OF BOYHOOD OR MASCULINITY:** Majority of college going boys define boyhood as being dominating & authoritarian which allows them to exert their power over others. While the remaining college boys regarded that it meant taking up responsibilities, taking care of others and to be brave and courageous.
2. **REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE DESIRED LEISURE ACTIVITIES:**
  - (a) **Movies-** Most of the high school boys responded that they watch action movies for their self-entertainment since it helps in the expression of their masculine traits and even due to their fascination towards a series. While other school boys expressed their negation in watching movies.
  - (b) **Sports-** Most respondents preferred playing Football since they had played the game since childhood followed by their continuous participation in school and college games. Also

playing football allows school boys to express their notions of heterosexual norms of masculinity. The remaining respondents preferred playing cricket and chess over football due to their self choice.

(c) **Surfing net**- All the respondents regarded that they use net in order to find information, to work for academic assignments and also to surf through social media for self-entertainment or to connect with people. While the remaining respondents used internet in order to reduce boredom in life.

(d) **Reading Magazine**- Majority of the respondents' regarded that they don't prefer reading magazines. However, the rest of respondents like reading Technological magazines, Travel magazines, Law Reviews, Lifestyle Magazines etc.

(e) **Other Activities**- Apart from other activities discussed above, all respondents responded they prefer hanging around with their peers followed by clubbing, partying as a part of their leisure.

#### **SPORTS AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:**

- 1. MEANING OF SPORTS:** Majority of high school boys defined sports as a form of physical activity of recreation which helps to rejuvenate their mind. The remaining school boys regarded sports as a form of activity which provides them happiness and contentment.
- 2. REASONS BEHIND THE PREFERRED SPORTS:** Majority respondents regarded that they preferred laying Football and Cricket mostly since playing such sports help them to conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity by portraying physical strength, toughness and aggression. The remaining respondents preferred playing other forms of sports like Chess as a form of recreational activity.
- 3. PARTICIPATION OF BOYS IN SPORTS WHO CONFORM TO THE NORMS OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:** Majority school boys affirmed that participation in sports like football, rugby and cricket helps to conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity since sports as an activity is always associated with toughness, strength and physical prowess followed by aggression which are the dominant traits of masculinity. On the other hand, the remaining boys showed their lack of interest in drawing the relation between sports and hegemonic masculinity.
- 4. IMPACT OF SPORTS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY:** The school boys, largely responded that sports does provide a significant impact in the construction and practice of masculine tendencies as it provides an outlet to express the traits of masculinity involving capability, physical strength, violence, competition

followed by lack of emotions. The remaining boys regarded sports as a form of recreation which helps to reduce stress and boredom in their hectic life schedule.

5. **MEANING OF HOMOPHOBIA:** The school going boys defined homophobia as a form of hatred and dislike towards homosexuals followed by their negligence towards them. The rest of the school boys expressed their negation regarding the concept of homophobia.
6. **RELATION BETWEEN SPORTS AND HOMOPHOBIA:** Most of the respondents regarded that homosexuals are socially constructed not to participate in sports as it's an activity which helps to express the hegemonic norms of masculinity like physical prowess, strength and aggression which are dichotomous to the traits possessed by homosexuals whom they regard as '*effeminate*'.
7. **RELATION BETWEEN SPORTS AND VIOLENCE:** Majority school boys affirmed that a strong relation does exist between sports and violence as participation in sports conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity which includes expression of players'' physical aggression and strength which even goes to the extent of causing physical injuries and harm to the players of the opposing team. While the remaining school boys regarded that violence is expressed in sports accidentally and occasionally.
8. **PROBLEMS DURING PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS:** Majority of the school boys responded that they did not encounter any hurdle or problem while participating in sports as they regarded it as an activity which helps to release and reduce stress and is a major form of leisure amidst their hectic life schedule. On the other hand, the remaining school boys expressed their hurdles during participation in sports since they do not conform to the norms of heterosexual masculinity which includes physical toughness and capability followed by physical violence.

## CONCLUSION

School is the initial and one of the major arenas where hegemonic masculinity is displayed and practiced and even applauded. It is mainly through sports (physical education) that masculine stratification is carried out and valorised among school going boys.

High school going boys practice and construct their notions of masculinity in different forms of leisure activities like sports, body building, surfing net out of which they strongly participate in sports which helps in the construction of their masculine tendencies. These school boys participate in sports like Football and Cricket since it allows them to conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity by portraying physical strength, toughness and aggression followed by rejection of homophobic tendencies.



Violence is highly expressed in sports played by high school boys since participation in sports help to conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity which includes expression of players' physical aggression and strength which even goes to the extent of causing physical injuries and harm to the players of the opposing team.

Sports as an activity thereby help in the construction of hegemonic heterosexual norms of masculinity where there is hardly any space for participation of homosexuals who are discarded from the activity as 'effeminate'.

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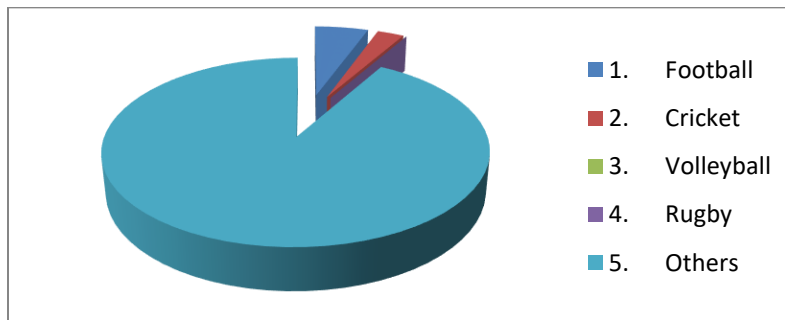
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**Tables and Figures:**

**1. PREFERENCE OF SPORTS DURING LEISURE TIME:**

<b>PREFERENCE OF SPORTS DURING LEISURE TIME</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE (%)</b>
1. Football	06	60
2. Cricket	03	30
3. Volleyball	00	00
4. Rugby	00	00
5. Others	01	10
Total	10	100



**2. PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT FORMS OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES:**

<b>PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT FORMS OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE (%)</b>
a. Sports	05	50
b. Surfing Net	01	10
c. Reading magazines	00	00
d. Body building	02	20
e. Other activities	02	20
Total	10	100

