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Socialization of tribal girls into soccer: identifying the potential socializing contexts

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex, multi-level socializing contexts that shape marginalised tribal girls' trajectories toward becoming professional soccer players. Utilizing a grounded theory methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 female athletes from the Santhali tribe in West Bengal, India. Data were evaluated through thematic analysis employing constant comparative coding. Grounded in a socio-ecological framework underpinned by interactionist and internalisation paradigms, the research identifies four pivotal socializing contexts: interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and mass media. Findings reveal that the interpersonal context serves as the paramount catalyst for sports socialization. Diverging from traditional, club-based, and parent-centric models of sports socialization, this study highlights the unique roles of mothers, elder siblings, neighbourhood peers, and local retired coaches. These specific actors formed an informal network that facilitated opportunities, financial and emotional support, and the substitution of household work responsibility. Furthermore, the girls' sporting ambitions were reinforced by village subcultures, their self-perceived physicality, and the aspirational influence of televised sports celebrities. While situated within a specific tribal group, which limits broad generalisability, this qualitative study offers theoretical insights and illustrates that sports socialization and gendered athletic behaviours do not occur in a vacuum; instead, they are deeply embedded within complex, multi-layered social contexts that actively shape, and are shaped by, the deliberate negotiation and choices of young women navigating their way into the sporting world.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a cultural behaviour that requires socialization (Pot et al., 2016). Socialization is a process of learning and social development, which occurs when we interact with other people or in social contexts. It is not passive learning; we actively participate in our socialization, forming relationships, ideas about who we are and what is important in our lives, and influencing those who influence us (Coakley, 2009). In other words, we learn directly from social agents about proper behaviour, and indirectly by observing others. Similarly, socialization into sport is a process in which an individual is encouraged by agents of socialization to participate in sport (Delaney & Madigan, 2014).

People often make decisions about sports participation through their interactions in the larger social world or the social contexts in which they live. In society, much socialization occurs across a variety of settings, such as social organisations and institutions. These social organisations influence people's values, beliefs and attitudes (Gecas, 2000; Stolley, 2005).

The process of socialization varies across societies and by gender. People learn to take on socially approved roles for males and females. This process of learning reflects gender-role socialization. It influences the way we approach social relationships, leisure activities, and even our jobs. Therefore, girls' and women's decisions to participate in sports are influenced by their social relationships and the people close to them.

In a society characterised by patriarchy, male domination and female subordination (Dube, 2016), women's presence and position in the decision-making process or in the power structure is practically non-existent. Under such social conditions, it is unlikely that girls or women will make decisions about sports participation. However, many girls and women, particularly the tribal girls and women, have been participating in sports despite being dominated by men. This means that some environmental factors or social contexts are conditioning these consequences, i.e., the increased participation of tribal girls in soccer teams and clubs. The contexts that condition these tribal girls and how they are becoming soccer players merit scholarly attention for understanding the socializing contexts that influence tribal girls to take up soccer.

Several earlier studies have identified the complex interplay of different social contexts influencing sports participation, such as family, school, and peers (e.g., Devís-Devís et al., 2013; Wright, MacDonald, & Groom, 2003, as cited in Pot et al., 2016). However, some studies have suggested that, despite family, school, and peers being the primary socializing contexts, other socializing contexts may also influence youths' sports socialization (Bernstein, 1974; Bourdieu, 1984; Stuij, 2013, as cited in Pot et al., 2016).

Earlier scholarly work on socialization into sports was mainly based on the internalisation model of social learning theory. This model emphasises that those who entered and performed sports roles underwent a social learning process shaped by an internalisation approach, in which those being socialised are assumed to be influenced by external social forces emanating from significant people. However, this model is inherently deterministic and precludes considering the person as an active, creative, and even resistant agent in the socialization process. This approach says little about the social context in which participation decisions occur. On the other hand, the Interactionists' approach to socialization focuses on social relations and social actions rather than on social learning. This model views a person as an active agent making their own decisions and choices in the process of socialization. However, to understand the potential socializing contexts influencing sports (soccer) participation decisions of tribal girls, we employed both the internalization

and the interactionists' approaches to socialization (Ruddell & Shinew, 2006) within the broader theoretical framework of the socio-ecological model (Kilanowski, 2017), social learning and imitation theories of socialization (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023) for guiding the present research process.

The socioecological framework emphasises multiple levels of influence. It supports the idea that behaviours both affect and are affected by various contexts, and it provides a framework to capture the multi-level nature of interactions (Scarnecio, Kerr, Johna, K. Hosokawa, 2019; Defever, Randall, Jones). The socio-ecological framework assumes that the behaviour of children and adolescents is directly influenced by multi-level social interactions and contexts at intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public policy levels (Defever, Randall Jones). This theoretical framework provides an important insight into understanding the sports socialization process.

In addition to the socioecological framework (Teare & Taks, 2024), two other socialization theories were also deemed fit in guiding this study: the social imitation theory and the social learning theory (Wang et al., 2022). Citing the scholarly work of McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, Beamon (2010) further explains social imitation theory and suggests that in the socialization process by observing others and modeling behaviours, an individual as a passive learner learns social behavior, attitudes, and emotions and perceives values, beliefs, and norms of socializing agents such as parents, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches and television personalities. This idea is helpful in the current study as the tribal girls in their neighbourhood may observe local soccer players playing professionally and making careers and fame through soccer.

The social learning theory emphasises the role of others as agents of reinforcement and involves cognitive processes. Sports sociologists have adapted this theory to understand the acquisition of athletic roles in group socialization. Several elements of the socialization process, particularly socializing agents and the socializing environment, are thought to have worked together to socialise minority groups toward sports (Beamon, 2010).

These earlier accounts on socialization into sports are mostly from the scholars of the West and on Western societies, which differs from the Indian

context. This means that very little is known about the socializing contexts of sports socialization in India, particularly the socialization of tribal girls into soccer. This offers a unique research gap for examining the process of socialization of tribal girls into soccer in India. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the process of socialization of tribal girls into soccer, and thereby to identify the socializing contexts shaping the tribal girls' transition to professional soccer. This was explored through a case study of Santhali tribal girls from Birbhum district of West Bengal, India.

METHODS

Approach

The study aims to understand the process of sports socialization. It seeks to identify the potential socializing contexts influencing the sports (soccer) participation decision of Indian tribal girls with special reference to the Santhali tribe of West Bengal. A grounded theory approach was employed because its advocates have acknowledged that, for exploring processes, events, and activities, a case study or grounded theory approach is appropriate (Creswell, 2018, p. 293). The present study adopted the grounded theory approach with interpretivism and constructivism as epistemological and ontological assumptions. Data derived inductively from the In-depth interviews guided the construction of a framework for explaining the socializing contexts. Together, the grounded theory approach, interpretivism, and the social constructivist paradigm were deemed appropriate for this study.

Participants

Initially, the investigators visited several local football clubs, village playgrounds, and tournament venues in the Bolpur-Santiniketan area of Birbhum district, West Bengal, India. In this preliminary visit, it was observed that most of the female footballers belonged to the tribal community. Of the several girls playing for the clubs, thirteen Santhali tribal girls were selected for this study. Girls with 4 years of club experience and aged 16 to 20 years were considered eligible participants in this study. However, the girls who were married and were irregular in their participation were excluded from the study. The selected tribal girls included Murmu, Baski, Tudu, Hemram, Kora, and Kisku, who belong to the Santhali Tribal community in West Bengal, India.

According to the Census of India 2011, there are 19.06% Schedule Tribe (ST) out of the 202553 total population of Bolpur. Of this, 60% live in villages, including tribes. The sex ratio of Bolpur is around 972. Table 1 illustrates the background characteristics of the participants of this study. The study was carried out in the Bolpur-Santiniketan area of Birbhum district, West Bengal, the eastern province of India. This place was purposefully selected because it is surrounded by many tribal villages, namely Gosaldanga, Bishnupati Adivasipara, Kamalakantapur, Bandhalodanga and Ashadulapur. The girl participants from these villages are the representative sample for the present study.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants: Age, level of education, playing experience in the club, educational qualifications of parents, Occupation of Parents, and number of Siblings.

Subject	Age	Education level	Club Experience	Parents' Education		Parents' Occupation	Number of Siblings	
				Father	Mother		Elder Brother	Elder Sister
P1	17	11 th Std	4years	10 th Std.*	9 th Std	Farmer	1	1
P2	17	11 th Std	4years	8 th Std.	8 th Std.	Farmer	1	0
P3	16	11 th Std	3years	10 th Std.	8 th Std.	Farmer	0	3
P4	16+	10 th Std	3yeas	5 th Std.	4 th Std.	Farmer	1	1
P5	16	9 th Std	3years	illiterate	illiterate	Farmer	1	1
P6	17	11 th Std	4years	illiterate	illiterate	Farmer	1	2
P7	18	12 th Std	4years	10 th Std.	5 th Std.	Farmer	1	1
P8	16+	9 th Std	5years	graduate	illiterate	Farmer	1	1
P9	17	11 th Std	4years	10 th Std.	8 th Std.	Farmer	1	1
P10	18	11 th Std	3years	illiterate	illiterate	Farmer	0	1
P11	19	12 th Std	5years	illiterate	8 th Std	Farmer	2	2

P12	18	UG	4years	5 th Std.	illiterate	Day Labour	2	1
P13	17+	12 th Std	3years	illiterate	illiterate	Day Labour	3	1
P14	16+	11 th Std	4years	5 th Std.	6th Std.	Day Labour	3	1

Source: Fieldwork data (March to May, 2022) * Std – class Standard, UG-undergraduate

Sampling process

Sampling in the grounded approach begins by recruiting participants who are believed to best address the research purpose (Gurgis, Kerr, and Battaglia 2023). Therefore, participants were selected purposively for this study. Purposive sampling is used when an investigator wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation. The purpose of this type of sampling is less to generalise to a larger population than to gain a deeper understanding of the types (Neuman, 2007). A similar notion of sampling was employed in this present study.

Data collection process

Ethical approval was obtained from the departmental-level committee, as the study was part of the master's degree dissertation submitted to Visva-Bharati University, India. Participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and that the interview would be recorded. Participants were informed that they could end the interview at any time and that their participation was voluntary. After participants agreed to participate, informed consent was obtained.

Data collection was conducted between March and May 2022. Thirteen face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with tribal girls for data collection. The assistant investigator conducted the interviews in their natural settings (on the playing field). Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes. Although the interviews were relatively short, it was possible to address the research questions outlined in the interview guide. An interview guide was pre-tested in a pilot study with a 16-year-old girl, and necessary modifications were made to improve it. At the start of each interview, the assistant investigator introduced himself, explained the purpose of the interview to the participants, and assured them of anonymity. Interviews began with easy-to-answer questions such as Can you describe the first moments in which you came in contact with football (soccer)? Tell me about your source of inspiration. When did you play in the club for the first time? Then open-ended questions were asked,

for example, "Tell me about how your family members, people around you, and your local environment helped you become a footballer." What have been the most influential factors for you becoming a professional footballer? In addition, probes were used to uncover further underlying issues that help understand the socializing contexts, asking questions such as: 'Is there anything else you think I should know regarding how you started playing soccer (football) professionally?' Is there anything more you would like to share?

All interviews were audio-recorded, and during the interviews, the investigator also took notes on issues to be considered during coding. All the interviews were conducted in Bengali and later translated into English by a multilingual expert who was a native speaker and well-versed in both Bengali and English. To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms were used in each transcript.

The investigators

Two investigators were former soccer players, locally known, and fluent in the language of the state where the subject footballers spoke. This positionality of the Investigators influenced both access and interpretation, and enriched receiving insiders' views within the socializing contexts. The assistant investigator conducted all interviews and audio-recorded them. To conduct the interview efficiently, the investigators spent time reviewing the literature on interviewing techniques before going into the field. The books on qualitative research by Norman & Jan (2017), Bailey (2018), Charmaz (2006), and Straus & Corbin (2015) were found helpful for understanding qualitative research, particularly the grounded theory approach. Based on experience from pilot interviews, participant feedback, and literature, the investigators established effective interviewing techniques. Possible problems, such as adequacy of the respondent's account, probing, biases, and phrasing of the question, were also addressed. Moreover, the investigator, a native-language speaker and former footballer, had prior knowledge of how these tribal girls participate in football. The

investigators' backgrounds helped build rapport with the respondents, which in turn facilitated approaching them for interviews.

Data analysis process

Two investigators independently read the transcripts line by line repeatedly to familiarise themselves with the transcript data and subjected the data to open coding. The first open coding process started with the first participant's interview data and the second case. After coding the second case, it was compared with the first one. This process of constant comparison helped identify similarities and differences among the codes, thereby revealing emerging conceptual categories and themes.

After open coding, axial coding was applied, in which the investigators sought to identify relationships among codes, particularly the links and associations that allow specific codes to be tagged under broader headings or categories. After thorough reiteration, the investigator, through the selective coding technique, identified the core codes or themes that emerged during open and axial coding, as these core codes are vital to any explanation of the complex social phenomenon (Denscombe, 2010)

To authenticate the emergent themes or categories, the investigators met to compare the identified themes and refine them through reflection and discussion. As a measure of the credibility and validity of the research findings, the final transcripts were read out to the participants for members' checking, and they were requested to ensure they reflected their responses and to ask for any additions or corrections to the transcript. QDA Miner Lite v.3.0.2 was used for first- and second-order coding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While exploring the research questions and the inductively derived data from the interviews, the present study identified four potential socializing contexts: interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and mass media. The interactions that occurred in and through these contexts were found to have influenced tribal girls' sports participation decisions.

Using the coding process and the constant comparison method, the following themes and sub-themes were identified. The following indented

statements were found to be mostly recurring and substantiate each theme and sub-theme.

Interpersonal context

The roles and relationships of/with the mother, elder siblings, local retired soccer players, neighbourhood boys, and peers were found as a significant interpersonal context of sports socialization.

1. Role of family members

The encouragement and reinforcement from family members, particularly the mother, helped the girls take up football seriously. The following statement by a participant indicates that their mother is their multifaceted support system, encompassing financial support and logistical support such as sports kits. "My mother helped me in all aspects. Other than school books and dress, she also provided me with the money to buy football kits" (participant-4).

This maternal support and intervention is found as a major change in the traditional patriarchal view where the father is often internalised as the primary sports model. In the Indian context, where women have historically been centred in the domestic sphere, a mother's decision to fund a daughter's football kit is a legitimising act. It signals that the daughter's athletic career is as valuable as her academic one.

Similarly, several other participants expressed that how their siblings provided them with exposure and inspiration to take soccer seriously. The following statements from participants 3 and 12 highlight the "sibling effect" in talent exposure and development. "I started playing when my brother took me to a playground where some older brothers motivated me to play soccer, and they even took me to various other places to participate" (participant-3). "I got inspired by my elder sister, who used to play football. I took the opinion of my sister and decided to play football" (participant-12).

In the above context of 'sibling effect', the brother by taking his sister to the playground legitimises the girls' presence in a space that might otherwise be masculine preserves where women are either excluded or treated as spectators. On the other hand, the elder sister's participation helped the younger one to view herself as an athlete without the same level of perceived stigma or loss of femininity that the pioneer sister might have faced. This process of normalisation reduces the traditional

gender role expectation and thereby carved out a space for girls' athletic aspirations. These siblings at the playground then become secondary socialization agents who provide technical motivation and exposure to sports.

2. Local retired players, neighbourhood boys & peers

Many participants praised the role of local retired players acting as coaches in motivating them to take up football. One of the participants who has been playing football since class 6 said – “One day, a senior retired player from our locality came to my house and told me that he had formed a girls' football (soccer) team from other villages, so if I joined and played for the team, I would enjoy it and feel good. He even took us to witness local football matches outside the village, which inspired us a lot” (Participant-1).

The act of a retired player visiting a participant's house is a significant sociological event. It represents a bridge between the private, often gender-segregated domestic sphere and the public, traditionally male-dominated sports field. The prestige and recognition culturally afforded to senior retired soccer players give them the authority to influence both participants and their parents. This symbolic power is used to legitimise girls' participation in a context where they might otherwise be marginalized.

Another respondent reported that their local coach primarily pushed them towards soccer by acknowledging their physical abilities and sensitising them to the scope of soccer. As one of the participants said - “My coach finds me capable of playing and can grow my skills” (participant-2). “Several retired players have told me that there is scope in football; if you play, you can excel, and you are capable of playing it. With their support and motivation, I started this journey” (participant-8).

The retired player's intervention effectively recalibrates this cost-benefit analysis. By emphasising that the participant would “enjoy it and feel good”, the coach, as a socializing agent, addresses the emotional and psychological benefits of play. Furthermore, by discussing the “scope in football”, the retired player highlights potential economic or social returns that may outweigh the costs of foregone domestic labour.

The invitation from a neighbourhood “boys” to join the game highlights the role of peers as

significant others who inspired them to play. One of the participants, aged 17, explained how she and her friends were introduced to football by neighbourhood boys – “We used to see our neighbourhood boys playing football in our village. By seeing their practice every day, we started liking the game. Then, one day, one of the brothers told us to play with them. So we started playing, and later we also joined the football academy. My friend helped me a lot, she used to call me to go to the field to play soccer” (participant-9).

The above experience of participant-9 represents the initial stage of socialization through observation, which cultivates a positive affect toward the sport participation. By actively inviting girls into traditionally male-dominated neighborhood spaces, these boys act as informal gatekeepers who help diminish gender-based biases and enhance the participants' social competence.

Another participant, aged 19, whose parents are daily wage labourers, whose father has completed only primary education, and whose mother is illiterate, narrated the story of her re-engagement in football with the help of her sisters, who were already playing professionally. She said – “When I had left playing in between, Monika di, and Tumpa di (Pseudo names for elder local sisters) motivated me to rejoin the team, and then I again started playing for the team” (Participant-12).

Despite a marginalised socioeconomic background characterised by daily wage labour and low parental literacy, the re-engagement of participant 12 emphasises the critical role of “elder sisters” as transformative agents of socialization. In this contexts, the address of “Didi” often functions as a form of fictive kinship—socially constructed bonds that provide the emotional warmth and nurturance necessary to sustain athletic involvement. These elder sisters serve as “significant others” whose higher status as professional players and perceived similarity make them exceptionally powerful role models according to social learning theory. By becoming immediate context for support and motivation, these “Didi” as mentors facilitate a socialization process that helps at-risk athletes overcome the structural barriers of patriarchal systems and reclaim their identity within the professional scope of the game.

Cultural contexts

The influence of playing soccer (football) every day by village elders and perennial trends of organising soccer tournaments at village playground demonstrates how sports particularly soccer is woven into the community's habitus—the embodied cultural setting that reproduces social behavior through observation of everyday practice and matches.

1. Every day Football (soccer) practice - a village subculture

Many participants explained that they were influenced by seeing village elders play football every day. The following statement reflects the influence of everyday football-playing culture on village girls. One of the participants explains: “We first started to play at our nearby village ground. We used to see the older brothers in the locality playing football every day, and we got inspired by them. Then we decided to make our own team” (participant-1).

The “older brothers”, categorically mentioned by many participants, act as significant others whose constant presence on the village ground provided the observational modeling necessary to cultivate a positive attitude among young girls. After observing the elders at play, the girls decided to make their own team. This reflects the participants transition from the play stage of passive admiration to the game stage of serious, rule-bound practice and collective development. This localised socialization illustrates how an informal football culture acts as a catalyst for bridging social capital, allowing girls to internalise athletic values and reclaim public spaces traditionally dominated by men.

2. Trends of organising soccer tournaments in the village

The village playground found as a vital site for sensitisation and the cultivation of a positive affect towards sports among young girls. One of the participants said – “I used to see live matches in the village and got inspired to play a similar match one day” (participant-5). A similar feeling was expressed by another participant, who said she was inspired by witnessing football matches in her village playground. She said – “When I saw the Bahiri team (an outsider team) in local tournaments, I was inspired by them. They really play quality football, and I used to admire them. I used to

wonder why I could not play like them. Then, I started getting passionate about playing this game and started practising it seriously” (participant-7).

Witnessing live matches acted as an indirect form of learning. This process of learning is driven by the “looking-glass self,” as girls like Participant 7 engage in a reflexive evaluation of their own physical capability against the quality of outsider teams, internalising an athletic identity by imagining their own potential for similar excellence. This community-led mobilisation effectively transforms the village ground into a gender-integrated social field that builds social capital and disrupts traditional patriarchal boundaries of public space.

Institutional context

While historical residential schools for indigenous peoples were often sites of cultural erasure and abuse, contemporary models such as the one discussed in the following paragraphs can be conceptualised as “castles of hope”, as these institutions aim to provide quality education and holistic development that are otherwise inaccessible in rural areas.

1. Village soccer club and the support

The residential school run by a non-government organisation in the village were found to provide social spaces that facilitated social interactions and enabled the girls to decide to play soccer seriously. One of the participants, aged 16, whose parents are illiterate and work as farmers, explained how she joined the club. She explains – “When I was studying at a coaching centre, we were provided with a club membership form. I filled out the form, and then we were told to attend practice regularly at the club” (Participant-5). Another participants strongly acknowledged the club for providing all the facilities required to play soccer. One of the participants, aged 17 years, who has been playing for the club for four years, points out that: “The club provides us with football, and during the tournament, they provide us with jerseys and shoes” (participant-1).

Participant-8, aged 16 years and playing for the club for 5 years, explained how the support they received from the club was helpful for their football career. She went on to explain that – “The club has supported us in many ways. They have provided sportswear. Once they had distributed two T-shirts,

which we could not purchase, we used them for our daily practice” (participant-8).

The above findings emphasise that the establishment of local sports clubs and NGO-run residential schools represents a critical shift toward the rationalisation and institutionalisation of women’s sports within rural tribal contexts. These organisations function as annihilators of economic inequality and social stratification faced by participants from marginalised backgrounds—such as the children of illiterate farmers—by providing the necessary logistics (sportswear, shoes, and equipment) that would otherwise be inaccessible. By offering "safe spaces" for social interaction, these institutions facilitate the accumulation of bridging social capital, enabling a transition from informal neighbourhood play to a professionalised game stage where athletic identity is formalised through institutional membership. Ultimately, this structural support effectively lowers the opportunity cost of participation for at-risk youth, transforming soccer from a simple leisure activity into a viable pathway for individual development and social mobility.

2. The residential school and soccer

The establishment of a new residential tribal school in the village was found to have helped these tribal girls not only towards participation in soccer but also in every aspect of their lives. One participant expressed how her residential school helped her. She said: “Suchana (a residential school for underprivileged children) has helped us in every aspect of our lives. It helped us even with our medical expenses. Once, one of our friends was suffering from an eye problem, and the school authority took her to the private hospital for treatment at its own expense” (Participant-6).

Similarly, another participant describes how her school team and its daily practices influenced her to take football seriously. She said that – “At our school, we had a football team, and we practised every Friday. From this school team only I started playing football” (participant-5).

In the above context, the education institution, by professionalising informal play through Friday soccer practices, facilitates the development of physical self-concept, effectively transforming soccer into a central mechanism for identity reconstruction and social mobility.

This institutional support system, encompassing both specialized healthcare and dedicated sporting facilities, fosters a collective “sense of achievement” and group solidarity that allows marginalised youth to challenge traditional gender roles and act as "change agents" within their wider socio-economic landscape.

The context of mass media

The influence of mass media on tribal girls' soccer participation represents a form of ‘mediated socialization’ in which televised matches and global sports celebrities serve as powerful agents of socialization. The following socializing contexts further substantiate this point.

1. Impact of televised soccer matches

The media exposure seemed to be acting as a vital information and entertainment source that facilitates social change, allowing marginalised tribal girls to internalise the instrumentally rationalised characteristics of modern sports. One of the participants said – “I used to watch live football matches on TV and get inspired to play the game one day” (participant-5).

Another participant expressed, in the same tune, that she was captivated by the live television soccer matches. She said – “I used to watch international women’s football teams and players on Television, and I used to get engrossed to the jersey number-14 player for her skills, and I used to get inspired by her” (participant-7).

This Televised infotainment effectively professionalised the girls at informal play and fostered a sense of individual agency against traditional gendered constraints. Consequently, the television screen serves as a critical site for the accumulation of symbolic capital, transforming a ‘role model inspired dream’ into a tangible catalyst for athletic engagement at grassroot level and identity reconstruction within the tribal community.

2. Influence of sports celebrities

Most participants were found to have a predilection for sports (soccer) celebrities, as many considered them as role models and a source of inspiration. One of the participants stated – “When I was small, I used to watch Ronaldo on Television. I was attracted and got inspired by his skills and performance. After that, I started playing this game bit by bit” (Participant-8).

By identifying with international sports celebrity like Ronaldo, these girls engaged in

symbolic identification, in which the emotion and perceived professional skills of elite athletes provide a blueprint for their own aspirations. Drawing on the socio-ecological model, social learning and imitation theories of socialization, and the internalisation and interactionist approaches to socialization, the study's findings highlighted the multiple socializing contexts influencing the girls' decision to participate in sports.

Elsewhere, sports sociologists, relying on qualitative inquiry, have identified family, peers, schools, community, and the mass media as the major socializing contexts or agents (Beamon, 2010; Espedalen & Seippel, 2022; Pot et al., 2016; Strandbu, Bakken, & Stefansen, 2020). However, informed by these perspectives, the present study identified four major socializing contexts, such as interpersonal context, cultural context, institutional context, and the context of mass media (Kim & Lee, 2023; Nosal & Lopez, 2023), which have been discussed in the following sections.

Several studies on Western society have shown family as the major socializing force for sport participation because when children accompany their parents from a young age to the parents' sporting clubs, and this introduction, the studies claim, can have a substantial impact on the sports socialization of the children (Pot et al., 2016; Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Wheeler & Green, 2019). But in the present study, the role of mother and siblings was found to differ from that of Western parents, as only the mother and siblings, not the father, helped their daughters financially, physically, and emotionally. This aligns with some recent studies that found matriarchal figures and siblings as the primary facilitators for female athletes in traditional contexts where patriarchal norms may limit paternal involvement (Blazo & Smith, 2018; Tekavc et al., 2020).

Similarly, Ann Macphail and David Kirk's study on young people's socialization into sport emphasises the family as an important socializing agent (Macphail, Gorely, and Kirk, 2003). This premise has been consistently supported in contemporary youth sport literature (Dorsch et al., 2022). In Indian society, particularly in rural villages, parents taking their children to clubs or the gym is a rare everyday practice due to socioeconomic constraints, gender role

expectations, and a lack of accessible sports infrastructure (Das & Sharma, 2021; Sen, 2020).

While studies across numerous contexts have established that the educational and economic background of the family serves as a major socializing determinant of sports participation, which is often otherwise constrained for lower-income household girls (Pot et al., 2016; Strandbu et al., 2020; Vandermeersch et al., 2017).

However, in the present study, a prominent divergence emerged. Despite family members having limited educational and economic backgrounds, they provided unequivocal support for the girls in their pursuit of becoming professional soccer players. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Spaaij and Thorpe, suggesting that the context, the successful career prospect in sports, can motivate low-income families to transcend socio-economic barriers and thereby establish the social fact that sports act as a vehicle for social mobility and empowerment (Spaaij et al., 2019; Thorpe et al., 2022). Consequently, this explains why, within this ethnic group of the Indian population, the assumed negative correlation between parents' limited education and economic background and their daughters' participation in sports proved irrelevant in the present context, as the tribal girls received unequivocal support from their families.

Similarly, the roles of elder siblings and neighbourhood boys were found to be unique in this study, which differs from previous studies and represents a distinct departure from the highly institutionalised, parent-centric models of sports socialization often emphasised in the literature (Wheeler & Green, 2019).

The tribal girls' elder brother and sister provided not only physical help by doing domestic work on their behalf—a critical negotiation of traditional gender expectations within Indian society (Sen, 2020)—but also exposure, taking them to local soccer matches to witness them. This dynamic aligns with recent sociological findings that frame siblings as crucial facilitators who can buffer against socio-cultural constraints and provide alternative pathways into sport (Blazo & Smith, 2018).

Furthermore, the informal coaching provided by neighbourhood boys, who took the girls to the field and taught them how to play soccer, highlights

the democratising power of "informal sport" spaces in marginalised communities (Jeanes et al., 2019).

Moreover, the peer group was found to play a significant role; viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this peer network served as a vital space for shared meaning-making and the formation of athletic identity. It not only facilitated robust communication but also generated essential bonding social capital, enabling the girls to establish micro-economies of mutual financial assistance to sustain their collective sporting pursuits (Spaaij et al., 2019).

Within the Interpersonal context, the local retired soccer players or coaches - predominantly non-tribal males, were identified as having a significant role in influencing the tribal girls. They influenced the girls by acknowledging their physical abilities, informing them about prospects in soccer, taking them to witness local soccer matches, and narrating the benefits of playing soccer. Viewed through a sociological lens, these non-tribal coaches act as crucial institutional agents who transfer navigational capital to marginalised youth (Dixon et al., 2020).

However, their mentorship was exclusively directed at tribal girls, noticeably bypassing non-tribal girls in the same village. While the exact mechanisms driving this exclusivity warrant further research, from an intersectional perspective, this phenomenon may reflect entrenched societal assumptions about the "natural" physical capital and hardiness of marginalised indigenous tribal bodies compared to non-tribal bodies (Ratna & Samie, 2018; Sen, 2020).

Furthermore, this targeted socialization may lead to an over-representation of tribal girls in future sports cohorts. At the same time, sport offers a theoretical vehicle for mobility; excessive socialization into soccer risks early foreclosure of athletic identity (Ronkainen et al., 2016). By disproportionately channelling these tribal girls into athletic labour, this intensive socialization may inadvertently reproduce structural inequalities, severely limiting their exposure to and pursuit of other vocational skills or alternative educational career prospects outside of sport (Coakley, 2021; Tekavc et al., 2020).

In institutional contexts, the local soccer club and the private residential school in the village were identified as providing social spaces that facilitated

interactions through which the girls could decide to pursue professional soccer. In contrast, the role of government schools was found to have a lesser impact on girls' sports socialization.

Within the institutional context, local soccer clubs and the private residential school functioned as critical microsystems, providing specialised social spaces that facilitated the interactions necessary for girls to decide to pursue professional soccer. This aligns with a recent sociological study that examined the role of localised, private sporting institutions in generating essential social capital and "safe spaces" for female athletes in traditional societies (Zipp et al., 2019).

In contrast, governmental schools were identified as having a minimal impact on the girls' sports socialization. Viewed through the lens of conflict theory, this disparity underscores the systemic under-resourcing of public physical education in developing rural contexts; structural inequalities often limit marginalised youth's access to basic sporting infrastructure and formal mentorship, effectively restricting state-sponsored avenues for sports socialization (Das & Sharma, 2021; Kirk, 2020).

In terms of the cultural context, despite persistent socio-cultural challenges, the localised sporting environment served as a profound agent of socialization. The opportunity to play at the village playground, witness local soccer tournaments, and observe the everyday soccer practice of neighbourhood boys were identified as significant elements. These consistent, hyper-local interactions foster a distinct sporting habitus, normalising female presence in athletic spaces through continuous observational learning and community integration (Eime et al., 2016; Light et al., 2019). Furthermore, the macro-level cultural influence of televised soccer matches and sports celebrities was found to be highly significant in shaping the girls' participation decisions. This echoes contemporary research on the mediatisation of sport, illustrating how globalised media representations can penetrate rural boundaries, providing marginalised girls with aspirational role models that challenge traditional gender norms and offer alternative narratives of female empowerment (Meier & Mutz, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2022).

The above findings appear to be identical with other studies grounded in structural theories and the

internalisation model of socialization. As Coakley (2021) established—a premise continuously supported in contemporary sociology of sport—sports participation is contingent upon a triad of factors: a person's physical abilities, the influence of significant others, and the structural availability of opportunities to play.

However, moving beyond a purely deterministic lens, the data also strongly support an interactionist approach to socialization. According to symbolic interactionism, individuals are socialised as active agents making their own decisions and choices within their environments, focusing on dynamic social relations and meaning-making rather than passive social learning (Ronkainen et al., 2016; Wheeler et al., 2020). The present findings are highly congruent with this theoretical understanding; through robust interpersonal interactions, the majority of participants actively navigated, negotiated, and learned the cultural behaviours required to become professional soccer players.

Ultimately, these dual realities are best understood through a socioecological framework, which posits that behaviours both affect and are affected by reciprocal interactions across multiple environmental levels (Dorsch et al., 2022; Scarneo et al., 2019). The present study strongly corroborated this. The findings revealed the multi-level contexts (micro, meso, and macro) through which the tribal girls made their decisions to play soccer professionally. In this holistic process of socialization, the tribal girls did not merely absorb and internalise the norms, values, and ideas imposed by external structural forces; instead, they operated as empowered, active agents capable of shaping their own sporting trajectories.

CONCLUSION

Synthesising the socio-ecological framework, social learning theory, and interactionist and internalisation models of socialization with the present findings, this study conceptualises the sports socialization of tribal girls into professional soccer across four distinct but interconnected contexts: interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and mass media. Of these ecosystems, the interpersonal context emerges as the most critical catalyst. Deviating from traditional, parent-centric models of sports socialization, the findings highlight unique

roles of mothers, elder siblings, neighbourhood peers, and local retired coaches. Rather than relying on conventional patriarchal or high-socioeconomic support structures, these specific actors collectively functioned as an alternative support system. They provided the necessary financial backing, informal coaching, household work substitution, and emotional inspiration required to navigate and transcend the girls' immediate socio-cultural and economic barriers.

Beyond these interpersonal networks, the girls' sporting trajectories were heavily shaped by the surrounding cultural and institutional milieu. The village subculture, characterised by daily informal practices, local tournaments, and community clubs, fostered a localised sporting environment that effectively normalised female athletic participation. This local engagement was simultaneously amplified by the girls' intrinsic perceptions of their physicality and the macro-level influence of mass media. Televised matches and sports celebrities provided aspirational role models that helped shape their decision to pursue soccer professionally.

Throughout these multi-level interactions, the tribal girls consistently operated as empowered, active agents. Rather than merely absorbing and internalising externally imposed cultural norms and values, they continuously negotiated their social realities. They engaged in robust meaning-making and made deliberate, autonomous choices to pursue their athletic ambitions despite systemic constraints.

While situated within a specific tribal group, which limits broad generalisability, this qualitative study offers theoretical insights and illustrates that sports socialization and gendered athletic behaviours do not occur in a vacuum; instead, they are deeply embedded within complex, multi-layered social contexts that actively shape, and are shaped by, the deliberate choices of young women navigating their way into the sporting world.

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