



Uneven Playing Field: An Exploration of Women in Sports through a Study of Moti Nandi's Fiction

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ABSTRACT:

Donna Harraway in her path-breaking book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) suggests that with the collapse of hard boundaries between man and animal, man and machine and the physical and the non-physical, the human body has become so malleable that it cannot be defined in terms of absolutes. Strangely, till this date, despite women having advanced in every conceivable field, face discrimination on the sports field. Reified notions of what the acceptable female athletic body should look like has given rise to tests such as the most humiliating "gender test" - that several female athletes, including Indian field athletes Dutee Chand, Pinki Paramanik and Shanthi Soundarajan have failed to clear, thereby barring them from participating in competitive sports. This paper studies the representation of the female

athletic body by a male author, the most first sports fiction writer in Bengali, Moti Nandi. Nandi, an active sports journalist and editor of the sports section of Ananda Bazaar Patrika, wrote in his fiction, in Bangla, about a world that he was only too familiar with: sports. Nandi, like Austen, has often been called an artist in ivory. Those more critical of his works consider his range to be rather limited. This paper suggests that this is a range carefully studied and the 'two inches of ivory' that Nandi works on, deeply explored. The paper focuses on 'Koni', his much anthologized novella about a young, poverty-stricken swimmer and 'Kalabati'r Dekha Shona', the first volume in a series of novellas about a young girl aspiring to become a sports journalist. Nandi highlights the trials and tribulations of two women out to defy societal norms, fight class and gender politics, and make a mark for themselves in fields considered improper for them in Bengal of the 1980s. Commenting unequivocally on the corruption that mars the very spirit of sports and gaming competitions, Nandi charts the chequered careers of these two rebels, which this paper studies.

KEYWORDS:

female athletic bodies, Moti Nandi, Koni, Kalabati, Chak de! India, women in sports, sports literature, male gaze on the female athlete's body, media coverage of women's games, gender on the playing fields

Sports journalism is a field dominated by men – football, cricket, tennis, every popular game in Calcutta is dominated by men. I have never seen a woman reporting on these games in any newspaper. The players are men, and therefore the reporters are men as well. Do you think you, being a woman, will ever be able to work with them? (Nandi, *Kalabati* 5)¹

Kalabati Sinha and her classmates were asked by their headmistress one day what their career goals were. The young adolescent, a cricketer in her own right, after some hesitation confessed in front of a room full of incredulous young girls that she wished to pursue a career in sports journalism in the future. That Kalabati was the best cricketer in her family, that she had helped her family win the last friendly match that was played in her little town albeit dressed as a man, that she had represented her club at the State Level, that she had played for the Bengal women's cricket team are laurels that are quickly dismissed by the apprehensive or sniggering faces in the class. Malaya Mukherjee, the headmistress of Kalabati's school, an unmarried woman, in her forties, "smiled suggestively" (Nandi, *Kalabati* 5) at Kalabati's naiveté. Informing her that sports journalism in Calcutta was a male-dominated field, *Bor'di*² asked Kalu³ –

¹ All passages from Moti Nandi have been quoted in translation in this paper. The page numbers refer to the original Bangla passages. The translations that have been used are mine.

² *Bor'di* is the shortened form of *Boro didi* which literally means "elder sister". This term of endearment, carrying with it a sense of respect is not only used for elder siblings or cousins in Bengali households but conventionally for headmistresses of educational institutions as well.

³ Every Bengali has a nickname – yes, that's true! Kalabati's is Kalu.

Do you think you, being a woman, will ever be able to work with them? (Nandi, *Kalabati* 5)

It is interesting to note that Moti Nandi, the male author creating his unforgettable female characters through a decade of active writing, ensures right at the beginning of his *Kalabati* series, in the first book itself – *Kalabati'r Dekha Shona* (Kalabati's Foray into the Journalistic World) - that the impediments on a woman's way to success are posed not only by men (which, of course, is far too predictable and therefore, in a way, anticipated) but by other members of their own sex as well.

India in the 1980s, when the novel had been written, and the period in which the novel is set, was in a unique period in history as far as the position of women in this society was concerned. In many ways, Indian women at this point of time were seen as more powerful and exuding more authority than ever before. Indira Gandhi had already made her mark as the first female Prime Minister of the country. She was serving her second term as premiere before being controversially assassinated. She wasn't however the only woman to make her mark in the realm of Indian politics. Of course, there were others. P. T. Usha's contribution in athletics, her performance in the Olympics, led her to being hailed in every little Indian household. Kalabati herself ruminates on how women had made a mark for themselves internationally, in politics, as scientists, as pilots, and police officers even, but the field of sports journalism was conspicuously wanting in their participation.

This paper attempts to study the reasons behind the aforementioned lacuna. Through a survey of Moti Nandi's often anthologized novel *Koni* and his immensely popular novella *Kalabati'r Dekha Shona*, the first in the series of eight novellas collectively called *Kalabati Samagra* (The Kalabati Series), this paper looks at the presence of women in the field of sports and sports journalism, in Bengal of the 1980s particularly, and the sports-field in general. The paper also refers to Saroj De's 1986 motion picture based on Nandi's *Koni* and the 2007 Shimit Amin Bollywood motion picture *Chak De! India* to explore the male gaze at the female athletic body and the politics behind the absence of women in sports arenas.

There was a time when outdoor games were considered a male thing. That is ancient history. There are very few games now which remain exclusively under the domain of men. Despite their involvement in the games, paradoxically "women in sports" sounds like an oxymoron to many a ear. Deborah Stevenson in her essay 'Women, Sport and Globalization' argues that women's sporting events do not receive the media coverage necessary to take their competitions to a national audience, let alone a global audience. There aren't enough female reporters to cover these contests and give a push to their own kind. Consequently, women and their games get marginalized. Stevenson points out that other than "international tennis and the Olympic Games, women's sporting contests rarely receive the media coverage required to enter the national ... [or] global sporting marketplaces" (211-212). It is therefore the media that

creates images, frames narratives and thereby gives impetus to one game over another, one gender over another. Hence Stevenson writes –

Even a cursory glance at the literature on sport ... provides evidence of the masculinist nature of the debate ... (211).

Moti Nandi, an active sports journalist and editor of the sports section of *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, writes in his fiction about a world that he was only too familiar with. Nandi, like Austen, has often been called an artist in ivory. Those more critical of his works consider his range to be rather limited. However, my contention is that this is a range critically studied and the ‘two inches of ivory’ that he works on, deeply explored. In both *Koni* and *Kalabati'r Dekha Shona* Nandi highlights the trials and tribulations of two young women out to defy societal norms and make a mark for themselves in fields considered improper for them in Bengal of the 1980s. Commenting unequivocally on the corruption that mars the very spirit of sports and gaming competitions, Nandi charts the chequered careers of these two rebels. *Koni* and *Kalabati'r Dekha Shona* to that extent fall in the category of the *bildungsroman*, tracing the development of the two sports women striving to carve out a niche for themselves in a man's world.

Kanakchapa Paul⁴ comes from one of those innumerable families in Bengal whose struggle for day to day living goes largely unnoticed. Her father died in an accident, as did one of her younger siblings. She lived with her mother, her elder brother and other younger siblings in a one roomed shanty with a thatch roof in one of

⁴ Koni is Kanakchapa Paul's nickname.

Greater Calcutta's slums. She went to school, as did her elder brother – but that was once upon a time. Her elder brother aspired to be a swimmer but Fate had other hurdles for him to cross. He had to swim across destiny's crude sea to keep his family alive, after their father, the only earning member died. Soon, however, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and breathed his last thereafter. Koni took over the faltering reigns of the family.

Kalabati Sinha, on the other hand, hailed from a family of erstwhile *zamindars*, the Sinhas of Aatghora. Kalabati's mother died soon after her birth. Her father Dityashekhar retired from worldly life when his daughter was two. She was brought up her maternal aunt for a while and then she returned to her paternal family when she was ten, to be nourished, cared for and looked after by her grandfather, Rajshekhar and her father's younger brother, the unmarried lawyer, who loved and lived to eat, Satyashekhar. The omniscient, third person narrator clarifies at the beginning of the story that Kalabati was pampered to the extent that her grandfather and her uncle rarely ever refused to grant her any of her wishes.

The difference in Koni's and Kalabati's ranks in life, so apparent from this introduction, determine the choices they make and how life turns out to be when they try to exert their will. It is noteworthy that both Koni and Kalabati are orphans⁵ – it is as if by orphaning them Nandi gives them an agency, free from dominating parental

⁵ Koni's mother remains voiceless in the novella; her elder brother has some sway over her. Similarly, Satyashekhar and Rajshekhar, though not overtly dominating patriarchs, have some sway over Kalabati.

control; he perhaps removes one stumbling block from their way. Koni, however has to earn, in whatever way possible, a meal for herself and her family. Kalabati has another obstacle removed from her path there. She does not need to worry about the pangs of hunger. Koni cannot selfishly take independent decisions – she has to consider the welfare of her ailing brother, her widowed mother and dependent siblings. Kalabati on the other hand can declare one fine day that she wishes to be a sports journalist. She only has to battle patriarchy; when she informs her grandfather and her uncle that she wishes to be a sports-reporter she finds them unsupportive; her uncle casually brushes aside her words, considering them to be a passing whim –

I think she said she wants to be a sports reporter or some such thing. (Nandi, *Kalabati* 12)

Her grandfather takes her words a little more seriously and cautions her –

In this country women do not work as sports journalists – they cover different beats: entertainment, politics, cinema, fashion, arts, religion, literature – everything, but not sports. (Nandi, *Kalabati* 12)

Koni does not have the luxury of making such choices. There is no one who will hear her out in the first place. Competitive swimming was almost thrust upon her (or one could see it as a stroke of sheer good luck) – it was not an independent decision.

A quirky coach, who lived in his world of idealism, spotted Koni swimming across the Ganges one day. Seeing the potential in her he asked the teenager –

Do you want to learn swimming? (Nandi, *Koni* 24)

Koni, confident of her own prowess, made it amply clear to him that she did not need to “learn” swimming. What she knew was sufficient to see her through.

One has to pause at the initial presentation of Koni. In the opening pages of *Koni*, the god-like voice of the narrator describes a scene to the readers. A few young boys are shown as swimming across the Ganges. Devotees can be seen worshipping the Holy Waters of the Ganges and throwing mangoes into the water in obeisance after performing other rites. The young boys being poverty-stricken recognize the wastefulness behind this act of reverence. They swim across the river, collect the mangoes and sell them later at lower prices by the banks of the Ganges.

Koni was among these young men. Her short hair, the strength of her limbs, her physical prowess (she is faster than most of the other boys scampering for the mangoes floating on the water body) and her aggressive spirit (she is shown as engaging in a fist fight with one of the boys who tried to hold her back thereby costing her a mango) ensure that she melts into this homogenous mass of men and loses her femininity entirely. The roughness of her body and her language, defying conventional notions of femininity, which the observant coach was a witness to, already make us wonder about the common perception of female bodies in sporting arenas. The description of her stamina and near “masculine traits” as if prepare the readers to shout out in exclamation that this girl *can* – her strength, adrenaline rush and physical structure

almost make her a natural athlete; unlike other girls, who have to strive to arrive at a certain level of physical consistency.

On another occasion the coach, Kshiteesh *Babu*, saw Koni participating in a local swimming competition. She lost the competition to one who was abler than her. Kshiteesh pointed out to Koni that she lost the competition because she lacked the technical know-how that the young girl, Hiya, trained in an elite swimming academy, and hailing from a doting, well-to-do family, like Kalabati, had. Swimming was an art that had to be learnt, a craft that had to be mastered. What Koni lacks in terms of technical know-how, she more than makes up for with her sense of self esteem. She finds her defeat excruciatingly humiliating and recognizes for the first time perhaps the chasm in her education. However, it is not only Hiya's expertise that the audience notices. People gathered around the Rabindra Sarobar lake to see the one mile swimming competition, took note of Hiya's flawless complexion, and charming looks as well. She is almost like a "wax-doll" (Nandi, *Koni* 27), the crowd's favourite. Koni hailing from the cruder side of the world obviously has none of Hiya's enchanting physical attributes. Nandi, here, is grossly stereotypical in the binaries that he creates.

Kshiteesh subsequently approached Koni's elder brother, Kamal. The brother confessed to Khid Da, as Kshiteesh was called by the people around him, that he had once dreamt of becoming a swimmer himself; he would live his dream vicariously through his sister if the coach was willing to guide her; the family, of course, could not afford to pay him any fee for his services. He worked in a factory in the city and earned

around Rs. 150 a month with which he looked after his family. The noble Kshiteesh takes Koni under his wings.

Kshiteesh has his own demons to fight. Childless, in his mid forties or early fifties, his relationship with his wife Leelabati, a strong-willed woman, wearing the proverbial “pants in the family” to make up for the absence of her husband, is getting strained. He is so engrossed in the club in which he trains young boys and girls to become swimmers that he has almost given up on all other material concerns of life. His idealism is tested in this Frankensteinian world of modernity. There is no place for the innocent, idealistic and the hardworking. His students are against his autocratic ways. The owners of the club, Jupiter Swimming Club, reproach his audacity and integrity. They insult him at a meeting and ensure that he offers his resignation. He does. His principles are more important to him than the hypocrisy that goes on in the club in the name of sports. He sees swimming, or sports for that matter, as a form of meditation – one has to be dedicated to the craft to be able to succeed. Sacrifice, suffering, patience, penance, abstinence are required to conquer the Bitch Goddess, Success. Koni’s struggle to rise from the rubble and make a mark for herself gets inextricably linked with Kshiteesh’s struggle to rid sports of corruption and establish an ideal, utopic environment for young sportspeople.

Kshiteesh is not above trying to manipulate an unsuspecting man who harboured plans of contesting elections, to sponsor him in small ways so that he in turn could sponsor Koni. Koni is also often shown as egoistic and not above asking for

money from her coach for all the effort that he makes her put in. Of course, the ego comes from her sense of self esteem and her hurt pride – the constant blows dealt out to her by the big, bad world of rich, established, mean people make her jittery, almost vehement. Of course, she has to ask for money from her coach because she is poor – the money is used not to buy food for herself alone, but for her entire family (Kshiteesh gives her an allowance of around Rs. 50 per month and also gets her a job in his wife’s tailoring shop in Shyambazar, eventually). Of course, Kshiteesh exploits the would-be politician, Bishtu *Babu’s* self doubts and uncertainties for the larger good of sports. It is as if Nandi tries to suggest that the ends can indeed justify the means. Such a portrayal also ensures that the characters appear human – of flesh and blood – and not untainted by human follies and foibles, not beyond making errors, not scrupulously clean but essentially good at heart; they make mistakes; sometimes they win, sometimes they lose; they are basically decent people, humane, with minor flaws, trying to further a noble cause. This concretizes the process of identification – the readers recognize in these characters something of themselves; they are not pristine; but they are gutsy, and honest to their dreams.

The smooth transition from ‘her and him’ to ‘they’ in my paper, vis-à-vis *Koni*, suggests that somewhere by merging *Koni’s* struggle with Kshiteesh’s Nandi almost forces the young protagonist to share the stage with another man. This is not Kalabati’s story, however. Kalabati’s struggles are her own. Her decision is an independent one, an informed one. What she suffers on the field she suffers alone.

The allegations by students on the basis of which the head honchos of the club want to officially remove Kshiteesh must be noted. Haricharan, the other trainer in the club who aspired to be the chief coach and therefore conspired to have Kshiteesh removed, tells the board members, including the new President of the club, Binod Bhar, who was given the president-ship not on the basis of his sporting abilities but because he was a Member of the Legislative Assembly, influential and moneyed, that the students had raised some serious charges against Khid Da –

Khid Da insulted Shyamal in front of the junior lads by comparing the time that he takes [to swim] to the time taken by twelve year old girls in America. (Nandi, *Koni* 15)

The insult appears more severe not because it was hurled in the presence of juniors but because the comparison was between a strapping young man and twelve year old *girls*. Amiya, the girl who had represented her club and won laurels for it at the State level left Jupiter and went to its rival club –

Amiya and Bela left Jupiter and went to Apollo only because of Khid Da. He had wanted to chop off their hair. He insisted that they should exercise using dumb-bells like the male swimmers. He always had issues with the sort of clothes they wore, the kind of make-up they applied ... (Nandi, *Koni* 15)

Two things are imperative for us to note in this context. Firstly, that there are certain “mainstream ideas about what the feminine body should look like” in competitive

sports, as Jasmijn Rana points out in her essay (n. pag.) and that influences the careers and “ambitions” (Rana, n. pag.) of many women. Rana, a doctoral fellow researching on the daily life of young Muslim women in kickboxing, also suggests that there are, of course, other stereotypical notions of how the female body should look like in general – lean, trim – which in the first place pushes some women to take up sports, to “achieve a strong, self-confident, and health-conscious notion of the self” (n. pag.) and try and achieve a physique close to the popular image of the woman’s body. Stevenson in her essay, alluded to earlier in this paper, explores the media coverage of a particular event in sporting history – the Australian Tennis Open 1999, for women. Talking of the media’s coverage of the uber-feminine Russian Anna Kournikova – the blue-eyed, long blonde haired, heavy breasted, fair, pin-up girl of the tennis world before Maria Sharapova entered the court – and the hyper-masculine Frenchwoman Amelie Mauresmo – openly lesbian, strong shouldered, appearing on court in shorts and not thigh-high, body hugging dresses or miniskirts – and everyone in between, the African-American sisters Venus and Serena Williams, the “Swiss Miss” Martina Hingis and others, Stevenson notes that “within women’s tennis today there are a number of competing versions of femininity and body shapes being played out that defy simple polarized explanations in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ femininity” (209). The media coverage of these events (of course, these events being limited to international women’s tennis and some women’s events in the Olympics) tries to create a hegemonic image of what’s acceptable, what’s not. Kshiteesh has a particular image of a sportsperson in his head and he expects both women and men to live up to that image – in that he is

democratic, not patriarchal. He treats a woman as a representative of the game first, and as a representative of her sex only second. However, it is not surprising that some of his students react negatively to his autocratic conduct and take offence at his comments on the markers of their gender – their long hair, their attire and such other attributes. As Stevenson notes, “The body and hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity are central to the discourses and representation of both men’s and women’s sport” (212). The issue arises in *Kalabati’r Dekha Shona*, as well.

When Kalabati first steps into the portals of *Bangabani*, the newspaper house that she approaches with her grandfather’s help and recommendation to intern with as a sports reporter, Nandi writes –

Instead of wearing a pair of jeans and baggy shirt she is wearing a saree today.
(17)

The twelve yards draped around the young woman’s body enhances her femininity; this could either get her the job (obviously, the world still believes that some women are not above using their sexuality to get their work done), or it could cost her the job (since we have been repeatedly told how sports-journalism is an exclusively male thing). Kalabati bags the internship and we realize that her saree has little to do with it – what works instantly for her is her grandfather’s letter of recommendation to the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, whom he knew and whom he had helped out monetarily at some point of time in his life. However, what is noteworthy is that Kalabati chose to

wear something to the interview that she was not entirely comfortable in. And this occasional outfit, for the occasional appearance, had been suggested to her by none other than her uncle –

Kalabati feels far more at ease in a salwar-kameez set, or a pair of jeans, or a skirt. There is this swiftness and confidence in her gait then. However, today she dressed up completely as a woman, as her uncle had suggested to her, and had willed herself to go to *Bangabani*. (18)

The confidence that the writer talks about that Kalabati draws from her clothes cannot be undermined. In Bengal in the 1980s women were still expected to move about in sarees, no matter where they went. Some of course were so used to it that they wore it with absolute ease and élan. Others like Kalabati felt that they could stretch their limbs more freely when not confined within the twelve yards. The question is not, of what one should wear or should not wear – the real issue at stake is that women were dictated to wear what they wore. Some internalized it, others struggled – the garments here are not only literal but also metaphoric of the constant pressure that women survived under. From the glamour versus power binary that was created by the media hype around the muscular, big boned Mauresmo and the more petite, feminine tennis players in the Australian Open '99 what emerged was that women's sports which got the media's attention were a lot about what Stevenson calls "packaging" (222) –

Glamour and sex appeal are pivotal to the marketing of women's international tennis, the securing of international television rights, and the gaining of sponsorship. (Stevenson, 222)

Martina Hingis who played Mauresmo in the final of that historic Australian Open, is credited to have acknowledged the role that media played in governing their outfits and general attitude on court –

It's business that wants this from us, and we're playing the game – me and Anna [Kournikova] and Venus [Williams]. We're the Spice Girls of tennis.
(quoted in Stevenson, 222)

Hingis's confession points to a number of things – a) obviously, the media governs the tastes of the society and thereby creates a pressure on female players to look and behave in a particular way; b) the female players are often aware of these hegemonic forces and sometimes succumb to these forces in hope of sponsorships or favourable reviews or simply to remain on the right side of the legitimized power blocks; and c) Hingis by referring to Anna Kournikova and herself in conjunction with Venus Williams (they stood for very different kinds of body types and fashion) shows that there is some hope left still – that there cannot be only one acceptable physical form of the female athlete; that there is always space to push one's way through and assert oneself no matter how frozen the situation might look on the surface.

The second thing that one needs to consider about the allegations against Kshiteesh as a coach is that he appears like a dictatorial figure to his students. One cannot really accuse him of patriarchy because Khid Da treats his students, irrespective

of sex, equally. What one can identify in him however are authoritarian tendencies. I had pointed out earlier in the paper that Koni somehow loses out on space and despite being the titular protagonist of the novel, the story is not entirely about her. In that context it is important to bring in the reference of the movie rendition of Nandi's work. The 1986 movie produced by the Government of West Bengal (Film Development Corporation) was about the towering presence of Soumitra Chatterjee, the veteran, highly regarded Bengali actor. The movie was no longer about Koni; or about the director; or about the other actors. It was about Chatterjee. That is how the movie was marketed. That is how the movie succeeded. Of course the director, Saroj De, was playing to the demands of the movie-going audience. While De did not really alter the story, he successfully managed to give primacy to Chatterjee's role - Kshiteesh was the real "hero" of the movie; Koni, only his protégée. The first shot is that of Chatterjee; the last scene shows a close-up of Chatterjee's impassioned face followed by a long shot of a figure (of course we are not supposed to be able to make out the gender of this figure - such was the initial description of Koni, even in the novel) swimming into the horizon. The figure is Koni's we presume. And we can hear Chatterjee's voice-over in the background, as Kshiteesh egging her on -

Fight! Koni, fight! Fight!⁶

This is a refrain that is used at least thrice the movie. Koni fights not only for herself but for Kshiteesh too. Even in the novel Nandi shows us that some of the hardships that she

⁶ The words are said in English in the movie.

has to go through are because she is under Khid Da's tutelage. The owners of Jupiter, who had most unceremoniously turned Kshiteesh out of their portals, do not embrace Koni, despite her obvious talent because she is Khid Da's protégée. These wanton men, who turn sports into a money making avenue, pose impediments on Koni's way more to teach Kshiteesh a lesson and less to victimize her personally. An extremely powerful performance by the young Sreeparna Banerjee as the sometimes carefree, sometimes concerned, sometimes fuming, sometimes shattered Koni ensures that the character does not get completely overshadowed by Chatterjee's imposing persona.

It is in this connection that I wish to discuss the success of the immensely popular Bollywood motion picture, *Chak De! India*. One look at this 2007 movie poster will reveal to us who the real "hero" is, to go back to a phrase that I had used earlier. There is the monolithic image of Shah Rukh Khan in the foreground with indistinct faces of some women in the background, seen as a homogenous mass. However, this homogeneity is challenged by stereotypical distinctions initially in the movie. The girl from the "jungles" of Jharkhand, Soimoi Kirketta is illiterate. The girl from Punjab, Balbir Kaur, is loud, boisterous and temperamental. Of course the North-easterners are treated as "guests" in their own country. This motley crew of around eleven women make up the Indian women's hockey team. Once they identify themselves with the nation the regional differences begin to evaporate. However, these distinctions as I pointed out, were far too typical to be considered seriously. Of course, we see various body types in this teams well - tall, dark, short, heavy, lean, fair; there are all types on

display. While that is a heartening plethora given the discourse on trying to straightjacket the female body and reduce it to fit an absolutist image, these differences, like the other aforementioned differences, are unimaginative, stereotypical. The figure that towers over this crowd is that of the superstar of Bollywood, Shah Rukh Khan. The trajectory of the popular hero all but replacing the woman/women in the story as I pointed out in the case of *Koni* (1986) can be seen in this movie too, perhaps more intensely. The space given to Shah Rukh Khan's character Kabir Khan is immense. The story is less about the corruption in Indian sports - the bureaucracy that ensures that women's sporting events are completely neglected - or, the trials of the members of the dying Indian women's hockey team and their victory; the story is more about Kabir Khan, former captain of the Indian men's hockey team who failed to score a penalty thereby leading to India's loss to Pakistan in a world cup match; it is about Kabir Khan being ostracized by the Indian hockey fanatics on religious grounds (they alleged that the Muslim Khan had sided with the Islamic team of Pakistan and plotted India's defeat at their hands); it is about Khan returning to coach the Indian women's hockey team and leading them to victory - their triumph is his triumph. This treatment is familiar to us, now that we have discussed *Koni* (1986) along these lines. Also familiar therefore should be the figure of the autocratic coach, Khan. His authority is to go unchallenged. Of course, there is a rationale behind it. Sports commentators believe that the autonomy of the coach should be accepted without question - it benefits a diversified team in the long run. Indeed the women in the Indian hockey team benefit from Khan's dictatorship. Yet, one cannot entirely leave unquestioned the arrogance that Khan

displays, as an experienced player, now out to coach the fledgling women's hockey team of inexperienced novices. In fact, Khan categorically points out to the captain of the team, Bindiya, that his decisions would remain undisputed –

There can be only one ruffian in this team!⁷

Needless to say the “goonda” (the word used in the Hindi original) in the team has to be Khan, and not the over-reaching Bindiya. The media had to en-cash on Shah Rukh's star-power. To foreground him, the individuality of the female athletes had to be sacrificed.

Koni, Kalabati and women athletes by virtue of being women have to fight extra hard for things which come easy to their male counterparts. However, Koni has to fight for the rights of her class more than for her gender. By the 1980s the presence of women in competitive swimming was an established reality. Kshiteesh gives her money to buy bananas, milk, butter and eggs for herself. The body, its stamina and its build, are of primary concern in athletics. Of course the allowance of Rs. 50 that Kshiteesh gives her, as pointed out by his more worldly-wise wife, Leelabati, is insufficient to buy all those protein rich food items. In fact Koni also uses her allowance to buy basics like rice grains for her family. Hiya, Koni's rival and co-competitor, on the other hand, can afford to throw chocolates to Koni, albeit in a gesture of friendliness, given that she has enough money to splurge. Kalabati too, given the social background that she hails from can bite on a delicious sandwich while penning a report in her office in *Bangabani*

⁷ Translation mine.

during her internship. She can share fruits with her fellow colleagues. She can roll her eyes at her uncle whose one major sin in life was probably gluttony. Koni has to fight to feed herself and her family.

Kalabati, unlike Koni, has the social position to make independent choices but her society also expects her to follow certain norms. She can participate in a friendly cricket match between the Sinhas of Aatghora and the Mukherjees⁸ of Bokdighi – who were ancient rivals on the one hand, fellow neighbours on the other – but she has to dress as a man –

Kalu batted, disguised as a male player and eventually led her team to victory.

(6)

As Kalabati's grandfather points out, after all "cricket is a gentleman's game" (7). Kalabati, a young educated high-school goer, and a cricketer of immense promise, also has to be subjected to such parochialism. The concerned grandfather, relating to his granddaughter stories of unfortunate circumstances that scar sporting events – stampedes, fire in the galleries, throwing of pebbles at players and audience, to mention some instances – is scared to permit Kalabati to chase her dreams –

When the times are so bad and the sports scene is so unwieldy, how can I allow a girl to become a sports reporter? (13)

Kalabati on stepping inside the portals of *Bangabani* was disappointed with the shabby, dark, dingy interiors. She had anticipated a place more upscale, updated with the modern technical facilities of the twentieth century. However as Kalabati herself notes,

⁸ This is also the family that Malaya Mukherjee, the headmistress of Kalabati's school, hails from.

“antiquity seemed to dominate” (17) the *Bangabani* office. The crumbling walls and ancient architecture were only an extension of the “ancient mindset” (17) of the employers and employees of the agency. Kalabati makes a mental note –

They probably will not agree on giving a job to a woman here (17).

Indeed, her anticipation proves true. She meets with the response that she had met with from her grandfather and uncle before she could tactically convince them to allow her to intern with *Bangabani*, even in this office. A dejected Kalabati observes –

Bangabani seems to have a lot of money. Why then is their mindset not sufficiently modern? (18)

The nexus between class, caste and attitude in the Indian society is inextricable. Starting from the peon in the office to the chief-editor, Kalabati’s very presence in the agency is a source of disturbance for them –

My child, what do you want to learn from us here? That too with regards to sports? Don’t you know that the sports field is dominated by men? (20)

The term of endearment that the editor had used for Kalabati, and which I translated here as “my child”, was “*Maa*”⁹. The endearment too was gendered for obvious reasons.

Kalabati’s expeditions lead to shocking discoveries. As she forays into the sporting world (the novel talks of four separate incidents) she realizes that this world is mired in money games, muscle power, bureaucracy, and red-tapism. Talent plays second fiddle to corruption. Petty politics rule the roost. But wherever she goes she

⁹ Mother

meets with the same response. A rickshaw-*wala* transporting her to a playground where she was asked to go by her senior Bhabanath Da to cover a small match between Baguiti Sporting Club and Kadamtala Sporting Club “checks her out from head to toe” (54), before charging her Rs. 4 as fare. The match was never played between the two teams because they “did not feel like playing” (56); however the scorebook had been updated with fabricated results. A stunned Kalabati, out on a mission, decided to bring to the fore the evil forces out to ruin the sports field. Of course her passionate report never got printed – who, after all would believe a young girl, who in her rage had forgotten to carry any substantial proof back from the field? On her first assignment, Kalabati was again seen as an out of place figure when she reached the famous *mairdaan*¹⁰ in Calcutta

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The man [another member of the audience that had gathered to see the match] seeing a girl, sitting on the playground, watching a game between two small clubs in a league match, was justifiably surprised. (32)

In this match too Kalabati was stunned to see how the score-keepers, umpires and the players were all sold out – to promote one player, with a slightly better track-record than that of the others, so that he stood a chance to get selected to represent Bengal in the Ranji trophy matches, the scores were shamelessly tampered with; in broad daylight; in the presence of an audience, no matter how thin. Kalabati of course had written a rather long report expressing her grave concerns about the future of cricket in

¹⁰ Mairdaan literally means a playground – this is usually where small league matches between assuming clubs are played in Calcutta.

Bengal – the report never got published by *Bangabani*. A dejected Kalabati, rising from the Blakian state of Innocence to Experience leaves the internship that she had fought with a considerable section of the society to get. She goes back to her school after the summer break, having been a witness to, as a sportsperson herself, blasphemy –

She was done with her dreams of becoming a sports journalist. This would be her last day. The playing field appeared very filthy to her. She felt suffocated in there. (66)

Sports, as this paper through a study of some fictional narratives portrayed, not only disciplines the body but also reinforces existing gendered, classed and regional mechanisms. Therefore, Sertaç Sehlíkoglu argues that “sport can be used as a powerful tool for social change” (n. pag.). Sports as a tool for nationalism and colonialism, is a discourse that we are now familiar with. But that sports is also highly gendered is a study which has only recently emerged and attracted the close interest and attention of ethnographers. Scholarship on literature related to sports and the female athletic body, only recently emerging, has not been paid much critical attention to and therefore has not gained much impetus. In this paper it has been my endeavour to engage in this sort of scholarship and establish that our attitude to sports or exercise is related to broader public attitudes towards games with their historical and cultural connotations; these attitudes can consequently be linked with women’s aspirations and desires.

Koni’s rivals are really Kshiteesh’s rivals. The head honchos of Jupiter Swimming Club go all out to prevent the young girl from rising. However, Koni is also victimised

by her fellow swimmers, other young girls like herself who came from affluent families – they taunt her, reproach her, abuse her, accuse her of stealing, slap her or simply ignore her. They keep her name out of most events. Eventually, though, victory is hers. In a crucial relay swimming competition in Chennai, they seek her help (because another member of the “official” team had injured herself) and Koni does the impossible – she leads Bengal to victory against the defending champions and the crowd’s favourite – Maharashtra.

Just when Kalabati had lost all faith in the sporting world she met Parimal Bera, a veteran player, a quirky, old man, who was struggling to defend the reputation of one of his fellow competitors, Henry Rebello, whose image was about to be tarnished by the false claims made by another player of the same generation, Barun Basu Ray. Barun’s claims would never substantially hurt Rebello, Parimal knew that. Yet he was quick to rise in protest. When questioned why he was going to such great lengths to defend Rebello’s name, Parimal’s poignant reply leaves Kalabati with a lesson for life –

An athlete *should* defend another athlete’s dignity. (64) [italics mine]

This is not a utopic world. Koni, though finally hailed by her team-mates and cheered on by Kshiteesh’s rivals from the Jupiter Swimming Club, will have to go through a lot more in life to establish herself. Kalabati has many more battles to fight before she can become a sports journalist, before she can work freely and fearlessly, before she can rid the sports arena of corruption and hypocrisy. Yet, both novels end on a note of hope. Koni, now that she has somewhat found the acceptance that she always

sought, desired and deserved, will probably lose the bitterness that was such a big part of her life and become an even better swimmer and a superior person. Kalabati on discovering a person like Parimal Bera, who was willing to go to any extent to defend another athlete's hard earned reputation and prestige realizes that though the sports arena is a dark, dirty world, there are some gems left in the gutters still. The diamonds are waiting to be discovered. She will probably not give up on her dreams of sports-journalism entirely and return sooner than later *to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield*.¹¹

¹¹ Swami Vivekananda's epigrammatic words.

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