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# Western Women, Physicality and Movement in India: On Learning Kabaddi

Todd Crosset, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



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# Western Women, Physicality and Movement in India: On learning Kabaddi

Todd Crosset

McCormack Department of Sport Management

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*A video accompanies this presentation. A link to the video is embedded in the text*

Note: Special thanks to my co-leader Easwar Iyer, the good folks at the CM Center in Madurai, our students and the students, faculty and administration of Lady Doak College for making this experience possible.

Although I have been going to India periodically for over thirty years, I have never dared turn my experiences into scholarship. The project of the sociologist, as I was taught, is to make the familiar uncanny. India to me is already both.

India is an ancient culture, riddled with traces of history unfathomable to the periodic visitor. And yet, for this American, India also feels familiar. Both countries are large and diverse, devoutly secular and yet chauvinistically religious, entrepreneurial yet corporate dominated, and democratic in spirit yet entrenched oligarchies.

India, as Patrick French (French, 2011) writes, “with its overlap of extreme wealth and lavish poverty, its mix of the educated and the ignorant, its competing ideologies, its lack of uniformity, its kindness and profound cruelty, its complex relationships with religion, its parallel realities and rapid speed of social change” –is a confounding country. Even were I to limit myself to South India or the State of Tamil Nadu I do not possess the theoretical skill to make India understandable.<sup>i</sup>

I embark on this project with a sizable caveat – this is not rigorous scholarship that will illuminate much if anything about India, South India, Indian sport or the social meaning of Kabaddi. If it is scholarship at all, this presentation, in some small way might make a contribution to our understanding of the gendered structure of force and physicality in American sport and American Orientalism as it relates to India.

American Orientalism associated with India is seductive and prevalent. Images of peace loving, meek, subservient, mystical and exotic culture beckons western adventurers and yoga aficionados to explore this “corner” of Asia. The distortions are difficult to unload as they are to escape.

Noble laureate, Amartya Sen (Sen, 2005) identifies three intellectual traditions of Western Orientalism in scholarship on India; magisterial, exoticist and curatorial. All three traditions distort India to varying degrees by emphasizing differences with the West. We tend to exaggerate/focus the non-material and arcane aspects of Indian culture. I am guilty of the curatorial approach.

My attraction to Kabaddi is driven by both intellectual curiosity and its uniqueness<sup>ii</sup>. My Indian friends/colleagues/students, have politely tolerated my little obsession with Kabaddi, this rural folk game – insignificant in the shadow of cricket – as typical of western focus on the distinctiveness. They, of course, tend to rejoice in the decolonialization (Alter, 2000) of cricket, relishing India’s recent victories in International cricket and the usurpation of the western control of professional cricket via Indian Premier League. But the “Indianization” of Cricket is just one aspect of the globalization of Indian Culture.

As Sen points out, the West’s preoccupation with the distinctiveness of India reflects back on the Indian identity, culture and politics. International successes in sport, culture and music, the pan-Indian diaspora which spawned success in

business and the academy abroad, the embrace of capitalism at home, and westernization of India and Indians creates angst. How can one be modern and be Indian (See for example Mishra, 2006). With multiple cultures and languages, Indians struggle to construct a national identity apart from what they are not -- not Pakistan, not China -- and distinct from the west, particularly given that so much of what unifies India; language, government and sport, are remnants of western colonialization. What it means to be Indian tends to be something uniquely non-western within the context of Westernization. The focus on the unique and mystical by both India and the West, obscures the abundant but not so mystical traditions and intellectual thought of India (Sen 2005).

In his comprehensive history of Kabaddi, James Alter (2000), contends the development and meaning of the sport cannot be understood apart from the “global context of mixed up modernities.” Kabaddi’s development is part of a dialectical relationship with Western Orientalism that exaggerates difference and embraces that distortion to resist the West. I wonder if we shouldn’t see the recent rise of Kabaddi’s popularity (a new professional men’s league in 2014) as parallel to the rise in popularity of other cultural/political products that both resist and announce uniqueness – like Hindu nationalist youth groups, the BJP as a party, and the re-introduction of yoga in school curriculum. And then, I wonder, if Kabaddi, reimagined as an authentic Indian sport (as opposed to a lower caste, village

school-boy game), will infiltrate ex-pat Indian communities across the globe, a marker of both Pan-Indian success and national identity. If so, then we shouldn't be surprised to see some White Westerns, in search of color, the authentic, the exotic, to "try on" Kabaddi, as they currently do with yoga and meditation.

This is the broad context, the familiar/unique, in which we introduced American students to Kabaddi.

I have prepared a 6 minute video that briefly explains the sport of Kabaddi and captures of the reflections of young professional women reflecting their experiences of learning the game while on a trip to India.

*Play video by clicking on – <http://youtu.be/jx7DSBg4ue8>*



## Discussion

The images in the video of Indian college students from Lady Doak College playing Kabaddi, no doubt, complicates and somewhat disrupts American

Orientalism. I also hope that the video complicates our understanding of physicality for Western women and the type of learning that is possible in India.

Much has changed, regarding women's motility in America since the 1970's when Iris Young penned her classic feminist phenomenological essay, "Throwing like a girl" (Young, 1980). Participation in Sport for girls has become the norm, rather than the exception. Yet, physical force continues to be a gender marking in American sport (Theberge, 1997). It is rare for American women to experience positive, playful, forceful physicality. As is illustrated in the video, some of the western women experienced Kabaddi as thrilling and fun; others had difficulty. Regardless, they were introduced to a game that both challenged and expanded what they thought possible.

For Westerner students, India is a somatic learning experience. The sounds, the chaotic confluence of traffic and people, the contradictory smells and even the colors, are felt. Students are not simply disabused of their romantic Indian orientalism, they can experience a physical disorientation when they travel to India. The very way one comports oneself to India requires a shift in motility. The taken for granted effortlessly movement on crowded streets of New York is suddenly in question when they walk the streets of Indian cities. Western women, in particular, can experience India as physically constraining. The appropriate public clothing that covers and wraps women up slows and constrains. Any means

of travel, be it taxi or train, seems to unnecessarily complicate getting from place to place and impedes motility. Additionally, the constant, leering, the occasional harassment and the threat of sexual assault makes any venture into public space burdensome (Maddox 2012).

Critical to creating this positive phenomenological educational experience is context -- an all-women's relatively private space. Public space in India is male dominated. Women rarely travel alone and buses and trains have female only sections and cars. The danger for women has only increased since "liberalization". Young urban women, are both a symbol of the "new India" and the target of backlash against change. This is complicated further for Western women. Similar to eroticization of Indian women in the west, western women in India are eroticized. (Note that the scantily dressed cheerleaders for IPL are imported from the West, reflecting and feeding the notion of western eroticization.) Were our students playing Kabaddi at a public park or venue, they would have indeed attracted a crowd that would have changed the nature of the experience.

Lady Doak College is an all-women's school. Very few men are allowed to enter the grounds. Those that are there are trusted long term employees or special guest. Historically private space tended to be female dominated, creating avenues to power for some women within home and family<sup>iii</sup>. The dichotomy of space once rigorously enforced (in 1985, when I first visited Lady Doak College the barbed



wire atop the fence around bent inward) is now contested. Nonetheless, a positive, physically expanding, cultural experience of Kabaddi for the American women could only happen in in an all-female space.

Because, physical force tends to be a gender marking in American sport, it also essential to recognize the position of “tourist” freed the America women (even/especially un-athletic ones) to explore and enjoy the playful, physical contact within Kabaddi. Consider, by counter example, introducing Kabaddi to these women on an American college campus. No doubt that activity would produce a very different experience. Already somewhat unmoored by the environment and in a frame of mind to explore and experience new cultures, the American women were more open to playing a physical game. Somewhat paradoxically, then, it is within India, a culture so many Western Women experience as physically constraining, that they are also able to explore and enjoy a form physicality they could or would not experience on their home turf.

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<sup>i</sup> It was Callie Maddox's dissertation (2012) that "outed" me as someone with an interest in Indian society. I do not wish to discount Maddox's experiences in India. Her account of harassment and the consequential disassociation with her body is terribly insightful and unfortunately too often the experience of women – particularly western women -- in India. It is an old joke that someone tells you something about India that is absolutely true and five minutes later someone will tell you the opposite and it too will be absolutely true. And it is with that spirit that I hope you will approach this presentation. That within India, through the sport of Kabaddi, Western women can experience, physical movement in ways that is pleasurable, new and expanding -- the opposite "truth" reflected in Maddox's dissertation.

<sup>ii</sup> While it is important to acknowledge the power and privilege inherent in the ability to observe and to study other cultures, as Sen points out, it would be a

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mistake to over emphasize desire for power at the expense of curiosity. My periodic trips to the Kabaddi matches over the past ten years is driven I hope, primarily from an intellectual curiosity informed by Peter Donnelly's construct "sportification" and until this point, I have resisted the temptation to capture, publish, and exoticize the cultural product, Kabaddi for my own benefit.

<sup>iii</sup> The gender dichotomy of space cannot be understood apart from the legacy of anti-colonial struggles. "During the fight to oust the British, the Hindu home was perceived as a key weapon in the nationalist arsenal. Outside the home, Indian men were ruled by Britain—its language, laws and dress. The duty of Indian women in the anti-imperial struggle was maintain the home as a bastion of spiritual purity: a defense against the colonization of the soul" (Bahadur, 2014)