

A Cultural Reading of Sports Narratives through Health Humanities

Dr Divya S R

Abstract: Sports are far more than competitive physical activities; they are dynamic cultural texts that articulate social values, histories, and identities. This paper examines sports through the interdisciplinary framework of Health Humanities, integrating insights from Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory to explore how sports operate as sites of cultural meaning-making, resistance, and healing. The study examines the cultural politics of normativity in sporting bodies, with particular attention to the intersections of caste, class, gender, race, and ability in the Indian context. It also highlights the role of indigenous and vernacular sports such as kalaripayattu and kabaddi as repositories of cultural memory and traditional health practices, framing them as acts of resistance against globalization's homogenizing forces.

In addition, the paper critically analyzes how media representation and commercialization shape sporting narratives, often reinforcing hegemonic ideologies while simultaneously enabling counter-narratives of inclusion and justice. By reading sports as ritualized performances of the nation-state and as commodities within the global cultural economy, this research positions the sporting arena as a contested space where cultural health, identity, and social justice are continually negotiated. Through qualitative textual and thematic analysis, the paper demonstrates that sports are indispensable to understanding the intersections of culture, embodiment, and collective well-being.

Keywords: Sports, Health Humanities, postcolonial sports, indigenous games, cultural identity, gender cultural resistance, media, commercialization.

Introduction

Sports are often celebrated as universal languages of human expression—arenas where skill, discipline, and competition converge to inspire collective excitement. Yet, to reduce them to mere athletic contests or forms of entertainment is to overlook their deeper cultural significance. Sports are, in fact, vibrant cultural texts: symbolic practices embedded in histories, social structures, and collective identities. They carry the weight of tradition, negotiate the politics of representation, and embody the aspirations and anxieties of the societies that produce them. Every game, match, or tournament is shaped not only by rules and performance but also by the cultural and political contexts that frame it.

The history of cricket in the Indian subcontinent, for example, demonstrates the profound cultural and political work of sport. Introduced under British colonial rule as a tool of imperial discipline and cultural domination, cricket was later reappropriated as a powerful emblem of postcolonial identity and national pride. Such transformations reveal the mutable nature of sports as sites where colonial legacies can be challenged, reinterpreted, and woven into narratives of resistance. Through this lens, sports function not simply as pastimes but as living cultural archives, deeply entangled with issues of power, identity, and memory.

The interdisciplinary field of Health Humanities provides an especially compelling framework for reading sports in this way. Health Humanities expands beyond biomedical understandings of health to consider how cultural practices—such as sports—shape notions of vitality, resilience, inclusion, and well-being. It invites inquiry into the ways sports both promote ideals of physical and social health and simultaneously reproduce exclusionary norms. These exclusions are often visible in who is celebrated, who is marginalized, and which bodies are deemed legitimate or worthy of participation. In India, for instance, upper-caste male athletes enjoy disproportionate media visibility and institutional support, while Dalit, tribal, female, and disabled athletes struggle for recognition despite their achievements.

Moreover, sports are not limited to the globally dominant formats such as cricket, football, or basketball. Indigenous and vernacular sports—such as kalaripayattu, kabaddi, malkhamb, and lagori—carry centuries-old cultural wisdom, blending physical training with local philosophies, healing systems, and communal values. These practices are not merely recreational but act as repositories of cultural health knowledge and as forms of resistance

against the erasures of globalization. By sustaining these traditions, communities preserve embodied forms of heritage while fostering psychosocial healing and cultural resilience.

Sports also operate as modern rituals of the nation-state, from the spectacle of the Olympics to the emotionally charged celebrations of cricket victories. These events reaffirm national narratives, mobilize collective sentiment, and bind citizens into imagined communities. However, they also risk reproducing dominant cultural hegemonies, obscuring the contributions of marginalized groups, and instrumentalizing athletes for nationalist agendas. The global commodification of sports further complicates this landscape, as athletes' images are packaged for commercial gain, and traditional values of cooperation and endurance are often subsumed under market logics.

This paper argues that sports must be read as complex cultural texts that engage with multiple and often competing discourses—of identity, power, health, and resistance. Drawing on Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Theory, and Health Humanities, it examines how sports are embedded in broader struggles over representation, belonging, and social justice. In doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between the cultural analysis of sports and their implications for collective well-being, positioning the sporting arena as both a site of cultural healing and a contested space of ideological negotiation.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine sports as cultural texts that both reflect and shape societal values, identities, and ideologies. This paper seeks to analyze how sports, when read through the interdisciplinary lens of Health Humanities, reveal deeper connections between physical performance, cultural meaning-making, and collective well-being. A key aim is to interrogate how sporting bodies are shaped by cultural norms relating to caste, class, gender, race, and physical ability, and how these norms influence inclusion, representation, and opportunities in sporting contexts. The study also seeks to explore the cultural significance of indigenous and vernacular sports, particularly their role in preserving collective memory, fostering resistance to cultural homogenization, and sustaining traditional health practices. Another important objective is to investigate the influence of media and commercialization in shaping sports narratives and identities, and to assess how sports function as ritualized performances that reinforce or challenge dominant national ideologies. Overall, the research

intends to position sports as crucial cultural phenomena with significant implications for social justice, health, and identity formation.

Hypothesis

This study is grounded in the hypothesis that sports are not merely competitive physical activities but dynamic cultural texts that embody historical legacies, socio-political hierarchies, and collective identities. It posits that indigenous and marginalized sporting practices act as forms of cultural resistance, safeguarding community health traditions while challenging the homogenizing forces of globalization. Furthermore, it hypothesizes that media and institutional representations of sports are shaped by entrenched social hierarchies, thereby reinforcing normative ideals while marginalizing non-normative bodies and communities. Through the interpretive lens of Health Humanities, this research anticipates that sports can be understood as sites of both cultural healing and socio-political contestation, offering opportunities to reimagine inclusive and community-centered approaches to well-being.

Literature Review

Sports studies have evolved beyond a focus on physical performance to encompass their social and cultural dimensions. Scholars such as Hall (1996) and Bourdieu (1984) conceptualize sports as symbolic practices that encode power relations, confer social capital, and participate in identity formation. Postcolonial readings of sport, notably by Guha (2002) and Appadurai (1995), highlight cricket in India as a colonial legacy that has been reappropriated for nationalist expression. From the perspective of Health Humanities, Crawford (2006) and Cole, Goodrich, & Gubrium (2015) underscore the importance of reading sports as sites where health, resilience, and cultural well-being intersect. The notion of normativity in sporting bodies is addressed by Messner (2002) and Hargreaves (1994), who analyze how sports privilege certain genders, races, and physical abilities, producing systemic exclusions. Indigenous and vernacular sports have been documented by Alter (2004) in his study of kalaripayattu and Majumdar (2006) in his work on kabaddi, framing them as culturally embedded practices tied to heritage and community health. Media and commercialization are critically examined by Rowe (2004) and Andrews (2019), who show how global sports media simultaneously reinforce hegemonic narratives and offer spaces for counter-discourse. Gendered representation in sports is scrutinized by Fink (2015) and Hargreaves (2000), who reveal the persistent underrepresentation, stereotyping, and sexualization of women athletes.

Collectively, this body of literature affirms that sports are deeply embedded in cultural processes, but the integration of Health Humanities perspectives in such analyses remains limited.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship extensively documents the cultural and political dimensions of sports, there is limited academic work that explicitly synthesizes Cultural Studies with Health Humanities to understand the relationship between sports, culture, and well-being in a holistic way. Most existing studies tend to focus either on the sociological aspects of sports or on the health impacts of physical activity, without examining the cultural health implications of sports narratives, rituals, and embodied actions. Additionally, research on indigenous and vernacular sports often documents their historical or regional importance but rarely situates them within the framework of cultural resilience and psychosocial healing. The intersection of normativity, embodiment, and social inclusion in sports—particularly in relation to caste, gender, and disability—remains underexplored in mainstream sports scholarship. Similarly, while studies exist on media and commercialization, there is a need for greater emphasis on how these forces shape cultural health narratives and influence collective identity. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a Health Humanities-based cultural reading of sports.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and interpretive methodology grounded in Cultural Studies and Health Humanities. The study will rely on textual analysis of diverse sources, including archival records, sports journalism, athlete biographies, documentaries, televised matches, and online sports media. Case studies will be employed to examine specific cultural contexts: cricket in India as a postcolonial text; indigenous sports such as kalaripayattu and kabaddi as repositories of cultural health knowledge; and gendered and caste-based disparities in media coverage. Thematic analysis will be applied to identify recurring motifs of identity, normativity, resistance, and healing within these narratives. The analytical framework will integrate Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital from Cultural Studies; postcolonial theoretical insights from Fanon, Bhabha, and Appadurai; embodiment theory and narrative health approaches from Health Humanities; and intersectionality theory from Kimberlé Crenshaw to account for overlapping social categories. This methodological approach will enable a comprehensive exploration of

sports as culturally and historically situated practices that are deeply intertwined with social justice, identity formation, and collective well-being.

Discussion

Sports as Cultural Texts

Sports transcend mere physical contests and entertainment—they are lively cultural texts deeply embedded in societal values, histories, and identities. The rules of any sport are never neutral protocols; instead, they are crafted within specific cultural and historical contexts that reflect prevailing social structures and ideologies. Take cricket in the Indian subcontinent as an example. Introduced during British colonial rule, this sport initially served as a symbol of imperial dominance and cultural colonization. However, post-independence, cricket was reinterpreted and reclaimed as a marker of national pride and collective identity. This shift is emblematic of a broader postcolonial cultural reappropriation, where formerly imposed practices become significant vehicles for nation-building and expressions of resistance. From the lens of Health Humanities—an interdisciplinary field that examines the intersections of culture, health, and well-being—sports are emblematic of societal ideals related to health such as discipline, resilience, and vitality. Yet simultaneously, sports expose persistent exclusionary practices related to caste, race, gender, and disability, revealing how social hierarchies are maintained even within seemingly meritocratic spaces.

Sporting Bodies and the Cultural Politics of Normativity

The concept of an "ideal athlete" is fundamentally a cultural construct, shaped by normative ideas about race, gender, class, and physical ability. These ideals dictate not only who is seen as fit or capable but also influence public perceptions, media representations, and institutional policies. In the Indian context, for instance, male athletes from upper-caste backgrounds receive disproportionate media visibility and endorsement, overshadowing the often exceptional performances of tribal, Dalit, or lower-caste athletes. Such disparities are not simply accidental but reflect broader social stratifications and gatekeeping. Health Humanities critically interrogates these exclusions by highlighting how sporting bodies that deviate from mainstream norms such as transgender athletes, disabled players, or intersex individuals are frequently marginalized, pathologized, or outright barred from participation. This dynamic mirrors larger societal patterns where non-normative bodies struggle for recognition and dignity, underscoring the intersection of sports with cultural studies and social justice.

Indigenous and Vernacular Sports: Cultural Memory and Resistance

In contrast to globalized sports like football and cricket, vernacular and indigenous games carry dense layers of cultural memory, historical continuity, and resistance. Traditional sports such as kalaripayattu (the ancient martial art of Kerala), kabaddi, malkhamb, or lagori are not simple athletic endeavors but living repositories of regional philosophies, healing practices, and community cohesion.

For example, kalaripayattu is inseparable from Kerala's indigenous medicinal and spiritual practices. Its training involves understanding body mechanics, natural elements, and mental discipline, functioning as a holistic system knowledge that blends physicality and health traditions. This positions indigenous sports as crucial artifacts for Health Humanities, which values the reciprocal relationship between body, culture, and well-being. Moreover, indigenous and tribal sports embody acts of cultural resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalization and colonization. By preserving and revitalizing these practices, marginalized communities assert identity, reclaim histories, and nurture psychosocial healing.

Gender, Representation, and the Cultural Field of Play

Sporting arenas are highly gendered areas shaped by socially constructed norms and expectations. While male athletes often embody hegemonic ideals of power and achievement, female athletes frequently navigate representations framed by struggle, exceptionalism, or aestheticized performances rather than purely meritocratic recognition. Notable sports figures like Sania Mirza, P.V. Sindhu, and Dutee Chand challenge traditional gender norms. Chand's example is particularly significant as she contests conventional notions of sex and gender in sport. These athletes do not merely represent sporting success but also provoke cultural debates around sexuality, identity, and bodily autonomy. The limited access to sports for many women reflects wider gendered exclusions impacting health, mobility, and social inclusion. Health Humanities invites us to read these gendered sports narratives as reflective of entrenched societal inequities but also as sites of feminist resistance and redefinition of health and respectability.

Sports, Ritual, and the Nation-State

Sports function as modern rituals that reinforce national ideologies. The spectacle of the nation-state unfolds in grand events featuring flag-waving, national anthems, military salutes, and heroic narratives of sacrifice and unity. They operate as symbolic performances

that forge emotional bonds between individuals and the imagined community of the nation. However, these rituals often reproduce cultural hegemonies. National victory stories may obscure minority contributions or appropriate athletes' bodies and achievements to serve dominant state ideologies. In this context, Health Humanities analyzes how collective identity and cultural wellness are negotiated through sport: victories can foster collective euphoria and symbolic healing (especially in postcolonial contexts), while defeats risk reopening social wounds and tensions. Thus, sports serve as a dynamic cultural archive, mobilizing collective memory, embodiment, and affective resonance within national imaginaries.

Media, Commodification, and the Cultural Economy of Sports

Under global capitalism, sports narratives have been increasingly commodified and commercialized. Media conglomerates play a critical role by packaging and selling these stories to global audiences in alignment with market interests and consumer desires. Athletes are often branded as products, their bodies and images sexualized or dramatized to enhance marketability. Rivalries are scripted for maximum entertainment value, and success is commercialized through endorsements and sponsorships, shifting sports from collective cultural rituals toward individualized spectacles. This commodification can dilute traditional values of endurance, cooperation, and regional identity, aligning sport more closely with consumerist culture than with community health ideals. Yet, alternative forms of sports media and collective activism—such as feminist sports journalism, Dalit sports organizations, and documentation of indigenous games—counter these trends by foregrounding narratives of cultural justice, inclusion, and community health. These counter-narratives emphasize the potential of sport to promote social transformation rather than simply entertain.

Conclusion

In sum, this cultural analysis reveals sports as vibrant, contested spaces where societal values, conflicts, and aspirations are articulated and negotiated. Through the interdisciplinary lens of Health Humanities, sports cease to be mere spectacles or individual performances and become powerful sites of cultural meaning-making and healing. Whether preserving indigenous games, challenging gender and caste norms, or critically examining nationalist performativity, sports offer profound insights into what it means to live healthily, visibly, and with dignity within society. Every match, biography, and stadium becomes a stage where cultural health and identity are embodied, contested, and reimagined.

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Bio-Note:

Divya S. R. is Associate Professor in the Department of Physical Education at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram. She has over fifteen years of experience in teaching, academic administration, and research. A PhD holder in Physical Education and a recognized Research Guide at the University of Kerala, she has supervised doctoral research and served in key academic and governance roles. Her academic interests span physical fitness, sports psychology, women's health, yoga therapy, and youth in community development.

Divya has completed a UGC Minor Research Project, edited national and international conference proceedings, contributed chapters to edited volumes, and published extensively in peer-reviewed national and international journals. A distinguished sportsperson at university and state levels, she combines scholarly excellence with leadership in sports, education, and community engagement.