

Staged Strength: Intergender Kushti in North India as Spectacle and Sociocultural Commentary

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Abstract: Intergender kushti matches, where male and female wrestlers compete, have emerged as provocative spectacles in North India. Though often staged for entertainment, these events offer rich terrain for sociological inquiry into gender performance, media framing, and symbolic disruption. Drawing on Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and the emerging discourse of sociological reckoning, this article situates intergender kushti within broader debates on visibility, agency, and cultural resistance.

Based on an analysis of 100 publicly available intergender kushti matches exclusively from India, the study codes outcomes, formats, and staging signals. Results show that women win in 38 cases, men in 44, and 18 end in draws or ambiguities. These outcomes underscore the performative nature of many bouts, where empowerment is staged as much as it is contested. The analysis also considers training-floor realities, where women wrestlers such as the Phogat sisters, Sakshi Malik, and Reetika Hooda spar with men due to the scarcity of female peers in akharas. This dual lens—spectacle and everyday practice—reveals how intergender kushti dramatizes symbolic disruption while reflecting structural gender imbalances in Indian wrestling culture.

Keywords: kushti; gender performativity; spectacle; sociological reckoning; social movements; India

Introduction

Kushti, or traditional Indian wrestling, is a long-standing practice in North India, historically dominated by men and organized through the akhara system (Alter, 1992). Although women's participation has expanded in recent decades, particularly following national and international successes, intergender matches remain unusual and contentious. In recent years, however, videos of such bouts have circulated widely online, raising questions about their authenticity, purpose, and sociocultural significance.

Methodology

To move beyond anecdotal accounts, this study analyzed 100 publicly available intergender kushti matches from India. Each bout was coded for outcome (woman win, man win, draw/ambiguous), format (solo, tag, exhibition), and degree of staging (1 = competitive, 2 = mixed, 3 = staged). Matches were sourced from CWE (Continental Wrestling Entertainment), Wrestle Square, local dangals, gym halls, and fairground exhibitions.

In coding the 100 intergender kushti videos, matches were classified along a three-point staging scale (1 = competitive, 2 = mixed, 3 = staged). The distinction was based on a combination of visual, narrative, and contextual cues. In Competitive (Level 1) category, Matches resembled conventional kushti or freestyle bouts. Wrestlers displayed sustained resistance, technical holds, and counter-moves. Outcomes appeared uncertain, with no obvious pre-determined narrative. Refereeing and scoring (where visible) followed standard wrestling conventions. In the Mixed/Hybrid (Level 2) category, elements of genuine competition were present, but punctuated by exaggerated moves, pauses, or gestures toward the audience. Outcomes sometimes appeared influenced by narrative framing (e.g., a woman's "comeback" after being dominated). These matches blurred the line between sport and performance. In the Staged (Level 3) category, matches displayed overt theatricality: exaggerated gestures, choreographed sequences, or implausible reversals.

Further, audience cues (cheering at scripted moments, camera zooms on dramatic expressions) reinforced the sense of spectacle. Outcomes consistently aligned with narrative tropes (e.g., the underdog woman defeating a much larger man). In some cases, the production

context (e.g., CWE or Wrestle Square shows, modelled on professional wrestling entertainment), signalled staging.

While the majority of kushti in North India is practiced within traditional **akhara** settings, the dataset also included matches from Continental Wrestling Entertainment (CWE) and Wrestle Square, both of which are Indian professional wrestling platforms. CWE (Continental Wrestling Entertainment) was founded in 2015 by former WWE champion *The Great Khali (Dalip Singh Rana)* in Jalandhar, Punjab. It functions both as a training academy and as a performance platform, staging WWE-style “sports entertainment” events that often feature intergender bouts. Wrestle Square, established in 2015 by *Vinayak Sodhi*, is India’s first independent pro-wrestling company. Based in India but with occasional international shows, it promotes WWE-inspired wrestling formats, including intergender contests, and maintains a strong digital presence.

Although these platforms differ from traditional kushti in their orientation toward scripted spectacle, they were included in the dataset because they represent a contemporary Indian wrestling ecology where intergender matches are most visible. Their inclusion allows for a comparative reading: staged, entertainment-oriented bouts (CWE, Wrestle Square) versus competitive or semi-competitive matches in akharas, gym halls, and local dangals. This distinction was central to the coding scheme that differentiated between competitive, mixed, and staged matches.

Results

The dataset revealed 38 women’s wins, 44 men’s wins, and 18 draws or ambiguous finishes. At a descriptive level, this distribution suggests a near balance between male and female outcomes. Yet, when situated within a sociological framework, the numbers reveal more than competitive parity: they illustrate how gendered power is staged, negotiated, and contained within the spectacle of intergender kushti.

Women’s victories, though significant in number, were disproportionately concentrated in matches coded as “staged” or “mixed.” These outcomes often appeared choreographed to dramatize empowerment, functioning as symbolic inversions of gender hierarchy rather than as evidence of structural equality. In this sense, women’s wins align with Debord’s (1967)

notion of the spectacle: they are images of disruption consumed by audiences, but rarely translated into institutional change.

Men’s victories, by contrast, reinforced the normative masculinity of the akhara. They stabilized the symbolic order by reaffirming male dominance, thereby counterbalancing the moments of female triumph. The 18 draws or ambiguous finishes are particularly revealing. They suggest a deliberate narrative strategy of suspension, where neither gender is allowed to claim definitive superiority. This ambiguity preserves the novelty of intergender contests while avoiding the destabilization that repeated female victories might provoke.

Taken together, the distribution reflects what Butler (1990) describes as the *iterative performance of gender norms*. Each outcome—whether a woman’s win, a man’s win, or a draw—re-enacts the tension between disruption and containment. The dataset thus demonstrates not only the outcomes of matches but also the cultural choreography of empowerment, spectacle, and control.

Table : Outcomes by Staging Level

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Competitive (Level 1)</i>	<i>Mixed (Level 2)</i>	<i>Staged (Level 3)</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Women win</i>	6	12	20	38
<i>Men win</i>	18	15	11	44
<i>Draw/Ambiguous</i>	4	6	8	18
<i>Total</i>	28	33	39	100

The table shows that women’s wins cluster in staged matches, suggesting empowerment is often scripted. Men’s wins dominate in competitive contexts, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Draws/ambiguous outcomes serve as narrative devices, maintaining audience interest while avoiding structural disruption.

By distinguishing competitive, mixed, and staged matches, the analysis avoids treating all outcomes as equivalent. Instead, it highlights how women’s victories cluster disproportionately in staged contexts, suggesting that empowerment is often scripted for consumption rather than emerging from open competition.

Theoretical Lens

Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity provides a critical entry point for interpreting intergender kushti. The female wrestler's presence in the akhara unsettles the normative masculinity that has historically defined the space. Yet her role is often circumscribed by the logics of spectacle: she is simultaneously a challenger to patriarchal order and an object of the audience's gaze. Each bout becomes a site where gender is not merely represented but actively *performed and reiterated*, dramatizing the instability of what is assumed to be natural difference.

Debord's (1967) theory of the society of the spectacle further illuminates this dynamic. In his terms, social relations are increasingly mediated by images, and contradictions are staged rather than resolved. Intergender kushti exemplifies this process: women's victories are consumed as images of empowerment, but their meaning is commodified and contained within the circuits of entertainment. The spectacle thus transforms potential disruption into a consumable novelty, offering the illusion of progress while leaving structural hierarchies largely intact.

The notion of a sociological reckoning (Burawoy, 2010; Haney, 2018; Schor, 2021) adds a contemporary dimension. This phrase has been used to describe moments when entrenched inequalities become unavoidable in public consciousness—whether through crises, movements, or symbolic ruptures. Intergender kushti can be read as such a reckoning: a moment when the contradictions of gender in Indian sport are staged so visibly that they demand recognition, even if only fleetingly.

Linking this to Oommen's (1990) framework of **social movements**, these matches can be understood as a form of *expressive protest* or **micro-movement**. They do not mobilize resources or demand policy change in the instrumental sense, but they dramatize resistance to entrenched gender hierarchies through embodied performance.

Additional theoretical perspectives sharpen this reading. **Goffman's dramaturgical model** (1959) highlights how social life is organized through performances before an audience. Intergender kushti literalizes this metaphor: the wrestling ring becomes a stage where gender identities are scripted, contested, and displayed, with wrestlers managing impressions for both

live and digital spectators. Meanwhile, Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity helps explain why men's victories stabilize the symbolic order while women's wins are often framed as anomalies or novelties. The matches thus oscillate between reinforcing and destabilizing hegemonic gender norms, depending on how outcomes are staged and consumed.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses suggest that intergender kushti is best understood as a hybrid cultural form: at once a performance of gender, a commodified spectacle, and a symbolic reckoning. Its significance lies less in transforming institutions than in exposing contradictions, making visible the tensions between empowerment and containment, disruption and normalization.

Discussion

Digital media amplifies the dynamics of intergender kushti in ways that extend far beyond the akhara. Online thumbnails proclaiming "Lady Pehlwan Crushes Male Opponent" and sensationalized titles frame these matches as spectacles of novelty rather than legitimate sport. Comment sections often oscillate between celebratory praise and derisive mockery, revealing how audiences negotiate the symbolic disruption of gender norms. This dual reception underscores Debord's (1967) argument that the spectacle transforms lived experience into images consumed for their shock value, while simultaneously reaffirming existing hierarchies.

The matches thus project an illusion of progress: women's victories are staged as moments of empowerment, yet they rarely destabilize the structural conditions that marginalize female wrestlers. Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity is useful here, as the female wrestler's presence in the ring both challenges and reproduces normative masculinity. Her performance is celebrated when it entertains, but constrained when it threatens to unsettle entrenched hierarchies. The ambiguity lies in this tension between empowerment and orchestration, where agency is enacted but also commodified.

At the same time, the practice of women sparring with men during training complicates the reading of intergender kushti as purely theatrical. Due to the scarcity of female peers in many akharas, wrestlers such as the Phogat sisters, Sakshi Malik, and Reetika Hooda have trained extensively with male counterparts (Selvaraj, 2024; The Better India, 2024). These encounters are not staged for audiences but arise from pragmatic necessity, reflecting both structural

gender imbalance and the resilience of women athletes. This everyday reality suggests that intergender wrestling is not only a mediated spectacle but also a lived practice that shapes skill development, confidence, and visibility.

Placing these dynamics within the framework of a *sociological reckoning* (Burawoy, 2010; Schor, 2021) highlights how intergender kushti dramatizes contradictions in Indian sport and society. On one hand, it functions as an expressive micro-movement (Oommen, 1990), staging symbolic resistance to patriarchal norms. On the other, it risks reinforcing tokenism by commodifying women's victories as entertainment rather than institutional change. The phenomenon thus exemplifies how cultural performances can simultaneously open spaces for recognition while leaving structural inequalities intact.

Comparative insights further sharpen this analysis. In Japan, female wrestlers in *joshi puroresu* have long competed in mixed-gender matches, often framed as theatrical but also as vehicles for women's athletic legitimacy. In Iran, by contrast, strict gender segregation prevents such encounters, underscoring how cultural and political contexts shape the boundaries of possibility. India occupies a liminal position: intergender kushti is tolerated as spectacle but not institutionalized as sport. This comparative lens reinforces the argument that these matches are best understood not as anomalies but as culturally specific negotiations of gender, power, and performance.

Implications

This study contributes to three overlapping fields. The first field is **gender studies**. By showing how women's victories are disproportionately staged, the analysis highlights the limits of symbolic empowerment and the persistence of structural inequality. It underscores the need to distinguish between visibility and transformation in feminist debates.

In **Sport Sociology**, the findings situate intergender kushti within a global spectrum of gendered sport, from Japan's *joshi puroresu* to Iran's strict segregation. India's case illustrates how cultural and institutional contexts shape the boundaries of possibility for women in sport. In **Cultural Policy and Media Studies** the prominence of CWE and Wrestle Square demonstrates how entertainment platforms mediate gender disruption. Policymakers and sporting bodies must recognize that while spectacle can generate visibility, sustainable change

requires institutional investment in women's wrestling, which include training facilities, peer networks, and equitable opportunities.

By bridging empirical evidence with theoretical synthesis, this article positions intergender kushti as a critical site of sociological inquiry - a practice that dramatizes contradictions, unsettles norms, and reveals the uneasy balance between symbolic disruption and structural inertia.

Conclusion

Intergender kushti in India is less a contest of athletic ability than a performance of social meaning. As staged spectacles, these matches illuminate shifting gender norms, the commodification of disruption, and the politics of visibility in a rapidly mediated sporting culture. The dataset of 100 matches demonstrates that women's victories, while numerically significant, are disproportionately framed within staged or hybrid contexts. This pattern underscores the distinction between *symbolic empowerment*, which is dramatized for consumption, and *structural transformation*, which remains elusive.

Theoretically, the phenomenon exemplifies Butler's (1990) insight that gender is constituted through repeated performances: each bout re-enacts the instability of gender norms, even as outcomes are choreographed to contain disruption. Debord's (1967) notion of the spectacle clarifies how these performances are commodified, transforming potential challenges to patriarchy into consumable images. The concept of a *sociological reckoning* situates these matches as moments when contradictions in gendered sport become unavoidable in public discourse, while Oommen's (1990) framework of expressive protest highlights their role as *micro-movements* - symbolic acts of resistance rather than organized campaigns for reform.

Additional perspectives sharpen this reading. Goffman's dramaturgical model reminds us that the wrestling ring is a literal stage where wrestlers manage impressions for audiences both live and digital, while Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity explains why men's victories stabilize the symbolic order and women's wins are often framed as anomalies. Together, these frameworks reveal intergender kushti as a *hybrid cultural form*: simultaneously sport, spectacle, and protest.

Finally, the contrast between akhara-based training practices - where women spar with men out of necessity, and entertainment platforms like WWE and Wrestle Square, where intergender matches are staged for spectacle - demonstrates the dual realities of women's wrestling in India. On the one hand, pragmatic training encounters reflect resilience and structural imbalance; on the other, staged contests dramatize empowerment while commodifying it.

In sum, intergender kushti dramatizes the contradictions of gender in Indian sport. It opens fleeting spaces of recognition and visibility, yet often reinscribes the very hierarchies it appears to challenge. Its significance lies not in transforming institutions but in making contradictions visible, forcing audiences, however briefly, to confront the uneasy interplay of empowerment, containment, and spectacle.

Footnotes

1. The term *performative* refers to acts that do not merely describe reality but actively constitute it (Austin, 1962). Butler (1990) extended this to gender, arguing that gender is produced through repeated performances rather than reflecting a fixed essence.
2. Butler (1990) conceptualized gender as performative, meaning it is constituted through repeated acts and norms rather than being innate. Intergender kushti dramatizes this process by staging gendered power relations in the ring.
3. Debord (1967) argued that in modern societies, lived experience is increasingly mediated by images, and social relations are transformed into representations. Intergender kushti exemplifies this, as the matches are consumed as images of empowerment or disruption, regardless of their competitive authenticity.
4. The phrase *sociological reckoning* does not originate with a single theorist but has emerged in the 21st century as a rhetorical device in public sociology. Burawoy (2010) used it to describe the 2008 financial crisis, Haney (2018) applied it to #MeToo, and Schor (2021) framed COVID-19 as a reckoning with inequality. Public sociology blogs (Everyday Sociology Blog, 2020) and academic essays (Shah, 2022) further extended the term to racial justice movements.
5. Oommen (1990) conceptualizes social movements as structured responses to contradictions in society, distinguishing between instrumental and expressive forms. A *sociological reckoning* can be understood as the moment when such contradictions

become unavoidable, compelling society to confront issues of inequality or exclusion. In this sense, intergender kushti may be read as an expressive micro-movement, staging a reckoning with entrenched gender norms (see also Shah, 2004; Touraine, 1981).

6. The Phogat sisters, trained by Mahavir Singh Phogat, famously sparred with boys in their village akhara due to the lack of female wrestlers, a story dramatized in the film *Dangal* and corroborated in journalistic accounts (The Better India, 2024). Olympic medalist Sakshi Malik has also spoken about training with men in Rohtak, while Reetika Hooda continues to spar with male wrestlers at the Raipur Wrestling Academy (Selvaraj, 2024; The Better India, 2024).
7. Reetika Hooda, India's U-23 World Champion, often trains against younger male wrestlers at the Raipur Wrestling Academy in Haryana, where she is an exception to the usual practice of gender-segregated training (Selvaraj, 2024).
8. In the absence of sufficient female training partners, many women wrestlers train with men in their akharas. This is particularly common in Haryana, where wrestling culture is strong but gender imbalance persists (Selvaraj, 2024).

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