

# Sport, History and Asian Societies

Despite a problematic history, Japan and South Korea host the 2002 World Cup together. A Tibetan lama, Khyentse Norbu, makes a film about football-mad Buddhist monks that becomes an international hit at Cannes in 1999. Approximately 130,000 Bengalis attend the 1997 Federation Cup semi-final at Calcutta's Salt Lake Stadium to witness a clash between the city's two great rivals, Mohun Bagan FC and East Bengal FC. In 2002, the team from marginal Manipur wins the Women's National Football Championship in India for the eighth time in ten years without conceding a goal. What on earth is all this about? The answer, of course, is that all this is about Asia.

Research >  
Asia

By James Mills

Even at a glance, it is obvious that these few football stories contain within them elements of religion, gender, class, colonialism, international relations, modernization, and globalization. Importantly, the stories hint both at history and at processes of change. Japan and South Korea, two nations with a complex past of cultural and political colonialism, united to exploit the opportunities presented by the World Cup cabaret. The monks of Tibet have a history of fascination with football that stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the film hints at the necessity of approaching Tibet, even of approaching its religious institutions, with fresh perspectives. Calcutta has been India's football capital for over a century, during which time the game and the local clubs have been transformed into institutions that reflect and indeed exacerbate the city's tensions and divisions. The women of Manipur draw on a fascinating history of both sporting activity and of political action to participate in a game that allows them to reverse the relationship between their state and the Indian Union and to assert, on a national stage, the unusual power of females in their region.

Examining sports in these contexts reveals that local societies have shaped sporting activity. But the reverse might also be said, as sports has been central to the processes of

change and of conflict that have shaped local societies. The physical intensity of participation in a sporting moment, either as a player or as a supporter, can give an immediacy and a charge to whatever meanings are attached to that particular instant. As such, the importance of sports in processes of social change can be explained by the fact that the alliance of sports to political, social or cultural vehicles gives a powerful, and perhaps unique, energy to such movements or processes.

It is therefore surprising that sports has not been a more important tool of analysis for those interested in Asian societies. While scholars working with this region have been the source of important new perspectives in the last two decades, the Subaltern Studies School is just one example of this - sports has remained a seldom examined realm of activity. Indeed, academics that ought to know better have gone as far as to dismiss the realm as unimportant: Suranjan Das, for example, described a football match as trivial despite the fact that it was the site and the occasion for the communal riot that he was examining. This neglect is all the more curious as it seems to reproduce the Orientalist assumptions of European colonizers who preferred to represent sports as 'un-Asian' and to see Asians as morally unprepared for, and spiritually unconcerned by, organized games and competition. One suspects that sport has been neglected as it often fails to fit easily within the tried and trusted categories preferred by Asian scholars - caste, economics, politics, agriculture, land tenure, marriage, kinship, ritual, and religion. Thus Joseph Alter found it necessary to abandon in his attempts to understand wrestling in Banaras: 'Wrestling transcends the categories

that anthropologists and others have traditionally used to interpret Indian society and culture'.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship has begun to correct this neglect. Indeed, there is plenty to work with as Asian societies have a long and a complex history of devising and organizing sporting activities and also have, more recently, a vigorous record of co-opting Western games and sports. Work to date has taken two approaches to the history of sports in the region. The first has been to examine discourses about sports, Asia, and Asians, and to explore the ways in which games and physical activities have been used by all manner of groups to construct different identities and to assert or to challenge stereotypes. The second has been to focus on sports and power, and to show how sporting moments and activities have been implicated in the formulation of, and important in the challenges to, the region's political and social systems.

The conclusion of this scholarship, as can be seen in the range of articles accompanying this one in this newsletter, is that sports has often been central to the construction of the identities and structures that shape Asia today. But, as Alter suggests in the above quotation, sporting activities have just as crucially offered opportunities to challenge and transcend those identities and structures. The Koreans busily selling fake football shirts to tourists, the monks escaping from Buddhist monasteries for a glimpse of Beckham's right boot, the East Bengal fans taunting their wealthy neighbours, and the Manipuri women drubbing all comers from the Indian Union are all, however briefly, challenging the status conferred upon them, and conferred upon sport, by others that claim power over them. This is perhaps the most important of the many reasons that it is time for Asian scholars to begin watching sports more seriously. ◀

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<sup>1</sup> Alter, J. *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1992).