

“Shorts in my town square, honour in my town”: Development History and Women Athletes in Kerala, India

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Women from the south Indian province of Kerala, India, have put themselves on the international athletic map since the mid-1970s, when Angel Mary John won a silver medal for India at the Bangkok Asian games in 1978, followed by P T Usha, M D Valsamma, Shiny Wilson, Bobby Aloysius, Anju Bobby George, and many others. Preliminary research suggests that women had been representing Kerala in national level meets for several decades by then. Since this period, Kerala has produced some of the best athletes the nation has ever seen, a significant number of them women, track-and-field performers, and hailing from religious minority and working-class contexts. What explains this phenomenon? What has been the role of the state and other institutional mechanisms in these developments? How can this phenomenon be explained in the context of the socially conservative attitude to gender freedoms that have otherwise existed in Kerala? Are female athletes changing these circumstances in any way? These are some of the initial themes that inform the landscape of this enquiry. The paper will explore the diverse institutional trajectories that coalesce in explaining the emergence of female athletics from a socio-historical perspective, making the case for a development history of the phenomenon. These trajectories span across pre- and post-independence Kerala, and consist of the following structural and institutional factors: (i) policy and the state (ii) land, labour and migration patterns (iii) educational institutions (iv) community organisations (iv) media and (v) individual biographies of sports organisers, athletes and coaches.