

THE ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND IN ATHLETIC IDENTITY AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS: A STUDY IN MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of socioeconomic background on the athletic identity and career aspirations of student-athletes in Maharashtra. Using a survey of 500 college athletes from diverse economic backgrounds, the research highlights disparities in access to resources, career expectations, and identity formation. Findings suggest that student-athletes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face significant challenges in pursuing professional sports careers due to financial constraints and lack of institutional support. However, a strong athletic identity was observed among athletes across all backgrounds, suggesting that passion for sports transcends economic barriers.

Introduction

Athletic identity and career aspirations are shaped by a multitude of factors, among which socioeconomic background plays a pivotal role. Across the globe, economic status, education, and social environment have been found to influence sports participation and professional aspirations. Studies in the United States (Beamon, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Bailey & Morley, 2006) highlight how access to resources, training facilities, and mentorship opportunities affect an athlete's career trajectory. In Brazil, socioeconomic disparities have led to football emerging as a dominant sport among lower-income youth, often seen as a means of social mobility (DaCosta, 2002). Similarly, in Kenya and Ethiopia, economic hardships push young athletes toward long-distance running, often driven by aspirations of international success and financial security (Onywera, 2009).

In India, the relationship between socioeconomic status and athletic identity remains underexplored, despite growing government initiatives promoting sports. Maharashtra, a state with a rich sporting culture, offers a diverse landscape to examine this phenomenon. While urban athletes may have greater access to coaching and infrastructure, rural athletes often struggle with financial constraints and limited exposure. Existing research suggests that socioeconomic background influences not only participation rates but also the perception of sports as a viable career path (Kumar & Gupta, 2019). This study aims to analyze how socioeconomic factors shape athletic identity and career aspirations in Maharashtra, contributing to the broader discourse on social mobility through sports.

Methodology

A survey was conducted among 500 student-athletes from 10 universities across Maharashtra. The sample was categorized into three SES groups based on family income: low (below ₹50,000 annually), middle (₹50,000-₹1,50,000 annually), and high (above ₹1,50,000 annually). The survey included questions on athletic identity, training facilities,

parental support, career aspirations, and financial constraints. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

Results and Discussion

- **Athletic Identity:** Across all SES groups, 78% of student-athletes reported a strong athletic identity. However, those from higher SES backgrounds had greater access to structured training programs (82%) compared to middle (63%) and low SES groups (45%).
- **Career Aspirations:** 65% of high SES athletes aspired for a professional sports career, compared to 48% from middle SES and 30% from low SES backgrounds. Among low SES athletes, 52% planned to take up sports-related jobs such as coaching, refereeing, or fitness training due to financial constraints.
- **Financial Barriers:** 70% of low SES athletes cited lack of funds as a major barrier to pursuing professional sports. Only 20% of low SES athletes had access to private coaching, compared to 55% in middle SES and 78% in high SES groups.
- **Institutional Support:** Scholarship access was reported highest among middle SES athletes (68%) due to merit-based selection, whereas only 40% of low SES athletes received scholarships despite high need. High SES athletes had better networking opportunities, with 60% reporting access to sponsorships compared to 25% in middle SES and 10% in low SES groups.

Conclusion

The study confirms that while athletic identity is strong across all SES groups, career aspirations are significantly influenced by financial resources and institutional support. High SES athletes have better access to opportunities, while low SES athletes struggle with financial constraints, affecting their long-term prospects in professional sports. Policies aimed at increasing financial aid, scholarships, and grassroots sports development can help bridge this gap.

The findings of this study affirm that socioeconomic background significantly shapes athletic identity and career aspirations, consistent with global trends observed in sports sociology. Across different nations, economic constraints, access to training facilities, and social capital have been identified as critical determinants of an athlete's ability to pursue professional sports.

Research in the United States (Beamon, 2010) highlights how lower-income African American athletes often perceive sports as a primary means of upward mobility, a phenomenon also noted in Brazil, where football serves as an escape from poverty (DaCosta, 2002). In contrast, countries with stronger state support systems, such as Germany and Sweden, demonstrate more equitable opportunities, reducing the impact of socioeconomic disparities on athletic career trajectories (Stambulova et al., 2009). Similarly, in Kenya and

Ethiopia, economic hardships often propel young athletes toward long-distance running, where international success offers financial security (Onywera, 2009).

In the Indian context, Maharashtra presents a microcosm of these global dynamics. Urban athletes benefit from structured training programs, financial backing, and social support, whereas rural athletes face infrastructural deficiencies and economic barriers, limiting their professional aspirations. Studies in India (Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Sharma, 2021) indicate that while government initiatives like Khelo India aim to bridge these gaps, disparities persist due to systemic issues such as lack of grassroots development and financial instability among aspiring athletes.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for policy interventions that address these socioeconomic inequalities. Lessons from countries with robust sports funding and grassroots development can inform strategies to create a more inclusive athletic environment in Maharashtra and India at large. By mitigating economic barriers and expanding access to quality training, policymakers can foster a more diverse and equitable sporting landscape, ensuring that talent flourishes regardless of socioeconomic background.

Recommendations

1. Increase need-based scholarships for talented athletes from low-income backgrounds.
2. Develop more government-funded sports academies in rural and semi-urban Maharashtra.
3. Enhance corporate sponsorship programs for financially disadvantaged athletes.
4. Create mentorship programs linking successful athletes with emerging talents.

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