Notes on Vyayam: a vernacular sports journal in western India

The initiation of vernacular press in western India was followed by the penetration of print and proliferation of a range of journalistic endeavours by the early twentieth century. While political journalism has had its share of historians, the story of sports journalism has remained rather under-researched and obscure in mainstream narratives of the subcontinent. In this article, I focus on the contents and policy of a unique Marathi language periodical, Vyayam [Exercise], which was launched in 1915 and was committed to the popularization of sport and physical culture especially among the educated middle classes of the region.

Vyayam had categorically asserted its stance to steer clear of political issues, most probably to avoid colonial surveillance and censorship. Instead, the journal embarked upon visual sketches of anti-colonial nationalists and also occasionally of foreign statesmen like Woodrow Wilson of the USA and Benito Mussolini. The journal discovered commercial considerations, saw its primary task as that of ‘instruction’ on issues of physical fitness and general well-being. That debates about the relative merits and demerits of various systems of physical culture resolved in a balance which, the entire sphere is evident from the response of one reader who argued in favour of the journal advocating the benefits of exercise for women in particular. That the Vyayam became a regular feature of the journal.

Indeed, the production and circulation of this journal has to be located in a range of publication processes that sought to transmit physical culture. Many people whose work featured in Vyayam were producing literature on sports, particularly indigenous sports in vernacular languages. Remarkably, British sports were introduced in a similar fashion through the creation of small pamphlets in Japanese, and described as the ‘play’ movement.

Scope

The journal sought to attract sufficient numbers of subscribers from the newly educated classes. Though the literary population was ever expanding following the introduction of compulsory primary education, readers had since acquired a taste for novels and ‘entertaining fiction’ interspersed among the burgeoning Marathi periodicals of the times. As the magazine started, subscribing to Vyayam was, then, presented as a panacea for all, and the journal’s early proselytizing zeal was evident in aphorisms and explicit editorial comments: for instance, dialogues between advocates and an opponent of exercise. In such dialogues, which very well may have stemmed from editorial oral narrative genres and then set in print, one character either provided instruction to the other or they both engaged in conversation about a controversial topic. Importantly, both sides were granted space to present different viewpoints. There existed a Baroda-based team of regular contributors to the journal, though articles from interested writers were actively solicited. Furthermore, the public had translated from magazines coming from the North Atlantic region, and a comparison with the American magazine Physical Culture was a running theme right from the inaugural issue of the journal. Vyayam had evocative frontpieces as well as a plethora of photographs of renowned as well as upcoming wrestlers, physical culture and muscle training enthusiasts from various parts of western India, which in turn constitute a rich visual archive. Undoubtedly, the development of the new cult of the body was directly linked to novel ways in which the body could be viewed and ‘consumed’ through photography and mass media.

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References

1 Some of the popular ‘indigenous’ sports in western India were wrestling and boxing, although the word ‘boxing’ was largely limited to British boxing clubs. There are references to ‘boxing’ in a couple of Marathi periodicals, and also occasionally in even cartoon-based humour magazines. A preliminary overview of the rich material contained in Vyayam in fact explicates how Indians negotiated with modernity, exemplified both through sport and print.

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Hence convinced to subscribe to schools in Bombay Presidency could not be...