



A field all to herself

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Imagine an Indian city with open spaces full of girls playing, running, laughing. Imagine playgrounds spilling over with girls playing football, cricket, hockey. Imagine girls and their mothers in shalwars, saris, tights, shorts and hijab running across open fields chasing a ball, scoring goals, and loudly cheering. If you can imagine all this, you're imagining a radically different Indian city! It's different because girls don't play. They certainly don't play as much as boys. They definitely don't dominate the playgrounds and maidans of our cities. Mostly they wait on the side-lines, that is, if they make it to the playground at all.

It's a reality that non-profit collectives like Parcham, who use football to engage with girls from marginalized communities in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, work hard to change.

Their most recent initiative is the takeover of an empty plot of land adjacent to Mumbra's Maulana Azad Stadium to create an exclusive sports ground for girls, the first of its kind in Maharashtra. 'Parcham has been in dialogue with the Thane Municipal Corporation for a few years to create a safe space for women/girls to exercise their right to play and public space,' says Sabah Khan, co-founder of Parcham Collective. 'Now that dream has been realized.'

Though the plot has still to be levelled and cleared of construction debris, more than 100 girls and women recently staked their claim to it by participating in the Third Fatima Bi Savitri Bai Football Tournament held on the new ground.

'Reserving a plot for girls to play is a big achievement, for women minimally access public space,' says Salma Ansari, who

IMAGE CREDIT: SIDDESH
RAGHAVENDRA FOR PARCHAM
COLLECTIVE

REPUBLISHED FROM THE HINDU
WITH DUE PERMISSION FROM
SAMEERA KHAN.

PUBLISHED 16TH APRIL 2019

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trained in football with Parcham and now helps manage its football programme. ‘It’s also a major change in the image of Mumbra’. Like many Mumbra residents, Salma moved here with her family from Byculla after the 1992-93 Bombay riots. Since then, Mumbra has largely been perceived as a haphazardly planned Muslim ghetto, hitting the headlines related to terrorism or building collapses. ‘That Mumbra will now set the benchmark in working towards gender equality in public is clearly revolutionary,’ says Sabah. Those Muslim girls will lead that change is also quite transformative.

This was part of Parcham’s goal when it initiated a football programme for 20 girls in Mumbra in 2012. ‘We wanted to make women visible in ways that were rarely seen, moving beyond narratives of victimhood reserved for Muslim girls,’ explains Sabah. ‘We wanted women to visibly stake claim to public space, girls, to access play and have fun.’ The football programme now extends to 99 girls and includes Mankhurd, Bandra and Nerul as well.

The all-girls sports ground is a commendable initiative, but the question that arises is whether the segregation of women from men is the only way to further women’s access to the public. In the current scenario, where any space in a building compound or open ground gets quickly overtaken by boys, it might be a viable short-term strategy. ‘In our experience when girls take the field, it’s like a mela – men hang around leering, staring, commenting, taking videos (that we ask them to delete),’ says Salma. How do girls then develop the confidence to run freely, hold their bodies less rigidly, focus on developing game skills? How do their families then accept that girls can and should play on a regular basis? ‘While we maintain our claims to mainstream public space, till they accept girl’s presence in the open field, till girls feel more confident, their families more assured of their safety, a girls-only field may be a solution,’ says Sabah, who’s witnessed the transformative power

of the game. 'Once the girls are hooked, it does not matter where they play; it's only about making or saving a goal.' And in the end, that's all that should matter.