

Sporting the government: Sportspeople's engagement with causes in India and the USA on twitter

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Abstract

With the ubiquitous reach of social media, influencers are becoming increasingly central to the articulation of political agendas on a range of topics. We curate a sample of tweets from the 200 most followed sportspeople in India and the USA since 2019, map their connections with politicians and visualise their engagements with key topics online. We find significant differences between the ways in which Indian and US sportspeople engage with politics—whereas leading Indian sportspeople tend to align closely with the ruling party and engage minimally in dissent, American sportspeople engage with a range of political issues and are willing to publicly criticise politicians or policy. Our findings suggest that the ownership and governmental control of sports affect public stances on issues that professional sportspeople are willing to engage in online. Also, depending on the government of the day, speaking up against the state and the government in power has different socioeconomic costs in the USA and India.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The conversations on information and communications technology for development (ICTD) in the past decade have increasingly spread beyond the traditional domains, such as healthcare, education and agriculture, to issues dealing with gender rights, democratisation and media. Perhaps the most significant change in the technology landscape in the Global South in recent years has been the meteoric rise in access to mobile devices, which, in turn, has led to a corresponding increase in social media use (International Telecommunication Union (Development Sector), 2021). This has made social media important to millions of new technology users, serving as a primary point for accessing news and other media for citizens across various strata of society. This has dramatically affected the democratic process, with more politicians moving their outreach strategies online (Pal & Gonawala, 2016) alongside the rapid radicalisation of online politics (Cosentino, 2020).

Has an increase in access to social media, however, created new forms of information regulation? In this article, we interrogate the role of social media in

regulating voices in a democratic society—whether the development of, and access to, technological tools changes the quality of democratic discourse, specifically through the behaviour of online influencers. At the heart of this question is the extent to which citizens can consume the output from free and responsible media, but also exercise their own right to free speech, particularly when it opposes the government in power.

We conducted a two-country study, comparing leading sportspeople in India and the USA. These two nations, the largest democracies in the world, have seen a massive expansion of political activity on social media, as major national events and election campaigns get mediated through Twitter and other online platforms (Panda & Pal, 2019; Yaqub et al., 2017). The professional sporting environment in the two nations however is different. In India, there has been a massive rise in professional spectator sports in the past two decades, especially in games such as cricket (Haque Khondker & Robertson, 2018), kabaddi (Jayakumar, 2020), and soccer (Mondal et al., 2022). However, in general, sport tends to be regulated directly or indirectly through various state agencies. The potential of government jobs

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under sports quotas as well as the possibility of representing the nation have been key drivers of engaging in sporting careers (Khasnis et al., 2021; Majumdar & Mehta, 2009). In the USA, most public sporting figures are part of private enterprise in which the state exercises minimal agency. Sports including basketball, hockey, golf, tennis, soccer and baseball have well established professional leagues and teams, and even sports with smaller spectatorships have significant sources of private funding and sponsorship (Jay, 2004). The voice of federal or state governments with the day-to-day governance or selection into teams of individual sportspersons is largely absent, except for some oversight in Olympic or Paralympic sports, or college sports.

What a sportsperson in the USA can or cannot say about the government has a limited direct impact on their professional possibilities, unlike in India. In this study, we examine what a public figure feels free to discuss in public fora, such as Twitter and Facebook, as reflecting how they feel, as influential citizens, about engaging in public discourse. These questions therefore are in turn related to the broader issues around social media and the consolidation of political power in nation-states.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Sportspersons and spokespersons

It is often said that sports and politics should not mix. This, however, has never been true of sports at the highest levels, especially when sportspersons become representatives of their nation-states. Perhaps, George Orwell overstated this idea when he famously described sport, in the context of Cold War politics, as 'war minus the shooting' (Orwell, 1945). A more nuanced analysis of the connection between sport and nation has been offered by the historian E. J. Hobsbawm: 'What has made sport uniquely effective as a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individual can identify with the nation as symbolised by young persons excelling at something practically every man wants to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people (Kesavan, 2021). The Olympics are perhaps the best example of an international sporting contest, which was conceived by its founder Pierre de Coubertin as a means to bring about fraternal relations between nations but has become 'synonymous with nationalism' (Kesavan, 2021).

Sports are part of the national imagination and provide an aspirational frame, in part because sports are among a few activities, despite its gendered inequities, that engage citizens across class. Consequently,

citizens often do not usually grudge extremely substantial remuneration for professional sportspersons (Seippel et al., 2018), and hero worship of leading sportspersons is common (Berg, 1998). Sport has traditionally enjoyed an important space in both identity and politics (Bowman, 2015) and often serves as a common language for integration in diverse societies (Zec & Paunović, 2015). Nation-states have sporting events as large spectacles, hold up individual sportspersons as international heroes and have even gone to war over sports (Chirinos, 2018).

Sporting brands have been highly monetised in both professional club sports and international competitive sports such as the Olympic games (Smart, 2018). There exists an economic ecosystem around star sportspersons including sponsorships, tourism (Gammon, 2014) and entire industries dedicated to the management and articulation of sportspersons' brands (Zhou et al., 2020), which affect an individual or team's behaviour and its perceived value (Yoon & Shin, 2017). Sportspersons' brands have consequences for the social alliances and causes they undertake (Madrigal, 2000) and are increasingly an important part of corporate social responsibility (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007).

Countries also hold close sports that are considered central to their national identity among large parts of their population. Thus, team sports such as rugby in South Africa or New Zealand (Black & Nauright, 1998), soccer in much of Latin America or Europe (Bar-On, 1997; Seippel, 2017), ice hockey in Canada or Norway (Watson, 2017), or cricket in South Asia (Perera, 2000) are central to cultural practices and public discourse. Individual sportspersons, including those outside some of these sports who capture public attention, are often important public figures who are influential in a range of spheres outside their immediate expertise. Depending on the country and sport, individual sportspersons' public lives may extend well beyond their immediate playing years (James & Nadan, 2020). Having popular positions can further a sportsperson's immediate career but affect their post-sporting career through alignment with adversarial framings (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020).

The USA, largely governed by a free-market ideology in the economics and management of sports, offers an important set of cases around the intersection of sports and politics and popular sentiment. A critical part of religious identity in the USA, the sports arena, is a place where faith identities may be publicly performed by major sports stars (Parker & Watson, 2015). In the USA, political engagement by sportspersons has been particularly central to racial politics, marked by key moments of protest such as boxer Muhammad Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam (Gorsevski & Butterworth, 2011) or the raised fist protest at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic games by sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, which, although iconic, eventually led to the two

athletes being widely criticised and ostracised by the sporting community (Hartmann, 2003). Although some positions—such as that of sportspersons expressing strong popular positions such as the on-field praying by American football quarterback Tim Tebow—can be projected as heroic (Butterworth, 2013; Watts, 2014), positions antithetical to the dominant institutional or political discourse have been fraught.

Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the systematic economic attack on rugby quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who unlike the praying Tebow, took the knee while the American national anthem was playing to protest racism, an act that cost him his professional career (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Chaplin & de Oca, 2019). Although sportspersons who follow the lead of pioneering protesters do not always face vociferous or systematic boycotts, they nonetheless deal with distractions by way of public rebuke, trolling, economic losses, and threats of bodily harm (Schmidt et al., 2019).

In India, it is well known that sporting contests, especially in cricket between India and Pakistan, bring forth intense nationalist feelings (Appadurai, 1995; Guha, 2003; Majumdar, 2004; Sen, 2015). Conversely, cricket is also seen as a tool to foster better relations between India and Pakistan, which has led to the coining of the term 'cricket diplomacy'. On both counts, a heavy burden is placed on the cricketers. The India–Pakistan sporting contests are also often seen as a test of loyalty, particularly for India's large Muslim minority population.

Most sports federations in India are headed by politicians and riddled with nepotism and corruption (Sen, 2015), which has led to periodic, albeit futile, interventions by the state and the courts to cleanse the system (Ugra, 2017). Cricket administration is often in the news for its politics, the prestige associated with the game and, in recent years, its huge revenues with the professionalisation of the Indian Premier League (Astill, 2013). Unsurprisingly, some of India's top politicians, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, have been involved with cricket administration (Sen, 2019), often wielding more power than either star players or retired cricketers turned administrators (Shah & Tomar, 2022). With many current and retired players employed nominally in state agencies including the Indian Railways or the police, players are additionally subject to restraint in speech or expression on administrative matters (Sen, 2015).

2.2 | Sportspersons on social media

Social media have become very important to sportspersons to express themselves beyond sports and interact with their fans. Various studies (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) demonstrate that top American athletes used Twitter significantly to interact with fans or

share personal and nonsports content. Another study (Sanderson, 2013) explored how early career athletes in the major leagues in the USA posted stories and pictures from their personal life and made pop culture references along with their training regimens to build their identities in the public sphere.

Athletes can also benefit as businesspersons through their activity on social media. A study of Twitter behaviour revealed that, by commenting on important events, sportspersons are able to increase their following and extend their brand value (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). They also point out that less successful sportspersons are also able to build a better brand for themselves using these strategies. Some studies have focused specifically on the engagement sportspersons have with sociopolitical issues. Shmargad (Shmargad, 2021) found that low-ranking candidates and challengers in the 2016 US elections were more likely to gain larger voter percentages if they were retweeted by highly influential users such as celebrity sportspersons. Another study (Yan et al., 2018) using network analysis of social issue hashtags, found that athletes display organisational dynamics on Twitter, whereas other studies have investigated visibility and gendered economies of sport to find differences in the content of tweets of top athletes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). There is a body of work that has investigated the impact of a newly emerging group of influencers, that is, online influencers on social media platforms and the content they disseminate (Bakshy et al., 2011; Cha et al., 2010; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Lalani et al., 2019; Zarei et al., 2020) with one specifically looking at Indian celebrities' partisan engagements on Twitter (Kommiya Mothilal et al., 2022). However, there are no large-scale comparative analyses of influential athletes' tweets across countries, specifically analysing their politics. Although these studies use offline popularity, numerous network centrality measures and so forth, to define influence, we specifically use the number of followers of a given account as the measure of influence.

3 | METHODOLOGY

In the absence of an off-the-shelf list of the most followed athletes in the USA and India, we used a 'wisdom of experts' approach to curate a list on Twitter (Ghosh et al., 2013). Although there have been other efforts which use friendship graphs, LDA clusters based on profile information (Pal & Counts, 2011; Weng et al., 2010), finding a highly precise list of the most followed accounts on a specific topic remains a challenge. One study (Ghosh et al., 2012) revealed that by utilising the 'lists' feature on Twitter, which allows users to group other users based on what they think their topic of expertise is, we can build such a

list with greater precision. However, the method also relies on crawling the data of numerous Twitter users similar to the methods outlined earlier. They also found that relying solely on list names and their descriptors to automatically group users led to problems of synonymy and inaccurate curations by nonexpert users.

To address the scalability issue and reduce noise attributable to subjectivity, we manually curate lists maintained by topic experts such as sports journalists and news media. We curated 33 such Twitter lists for Indian sportspersons and 47 lists for American sportspersons maintained by a set of journalists sampled from a pre-existing database (Arya et al., 2022). We then combined the members of all lists, sorted them by their follower count and annotated these users to find the top 200 athletes based on follower counts from both the USA and India.

A part of our study also explores the direct engagement of sportspersons with influential politicians in their respective countries. To this end, we curated accounts of 5000 highly influential accounts of politicians in India and the USA from pre-existing databases (Anonymous, 2021; Panda et al., 2020). We first included legislators and senators from the USA and elected representatives, specifically members of India's Parliament and state legislative assemblies, and further appended the list with strongly followed politicians' accounts. We used Twitter's Academic API to collect tweets from January 2019 to April 2021 for all sportspersons' accounts. We retrieved 102,878 tweets from Indian sportspersons and 158,705 tweets from American sportspersons in this time frame. Our logic for using this time frame was that it included a five-month buffer before and after general elections in both countries, which helps craft the activity on influencer engagement during, before and after a key political event.

4 | ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 | Interactions with politicians

In Figures 1,b, we chart the total number of tweets by sportspersons interacting directly with politicians on Twitter by way of mentions, quotes and replies. In general, we see many more tweets interacting with politicians on the Indian side than those on the American side. However, the higher representation on the Indian side does not indicate greater political commentary. The major spikes on the American side are around George Floyd's death, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and the US presidential elections. On the Indian side, we see major spikes around the initial COVID-19 lockdown, the 2019 general election results and on Modi's birthday in both 2019 and 2020 when more than a third of the top athletes engaged.

To analyse the contents of the tweets that engage with politicians, we plot the chatter plots (Figures 2a,b)

of the most frequent words occurring in these conversations. In both countries, we see that many tweets are courtesy messages thanking politicians. However, we also see a number of messages particularly in the USA calling people to 'vote', engaging with the 'Black' lives matter movement, talking about the 'rights' of people and raising issues around the 'economy'. It is also important that, although the American sportspersons were engaging with the BLM movement, the government in place in the USA was generally seen as opposed to the movement. In contrast, there is very little engagement of Indian sportspersons with political positions or calls to vote that are explicitly opposed to the ruling party.

Indian sportspersons' most frequent engagements are wishes to politicians on their birthdays. The semantic construction of most of these tweets is formal, using such terms as 'sir' and 'honourable', suggesting subservience to political actors. Another stylistic pattern is that the tweets often do not converse directly with politicians but mention them at the end, as if to alert a politician that a certain tweet was posted. We see that Indian sportspersons are far more likely than their American counterparts to engage in content popularised by the government—a common example is '#indiafightscorona', which was used largely by members of the ruling party. We also see a mobilisation around other state-sponsored social media campaigns including '#fitindiamovement'. These underline the role of personality sponsors as outreach champions, which is recognised and mobilised by the politicians belonging to the ruling party for governmental programmes. Figure 3, showing a tweet by Yuvraj Singh, has a shoutout both for a public engagement initiative of candle lighting, as well as a personal endorsement for a privately audited fund set up using the branding of Modi.

4.2 | Political tweeting

In this section, we analyse tweets that do not necessarily engage directly with politicians, yet talk about issues of sociopolitical importance, and analyse the stances sportspersons take on issues of national attention. To do this, we selected issues that took centre stage in either country in our window of study. On the Indian side, the events we picked were protests centred on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of December 2019 and the Farm Bills passed in the Parliament in September 2020. Along with these, we also look at conversations of Indian athletes on prominent topics concerning caste, gender and sexual orientation.

We examine similar topics in the USA during discrimination-related events including BLM and anti-Asian violence. Finally, we examine how sportspersons reacted to COVID-19 and general elections (which took place in both countries during the period studied), because both events had high degrees of engagement by politicians.

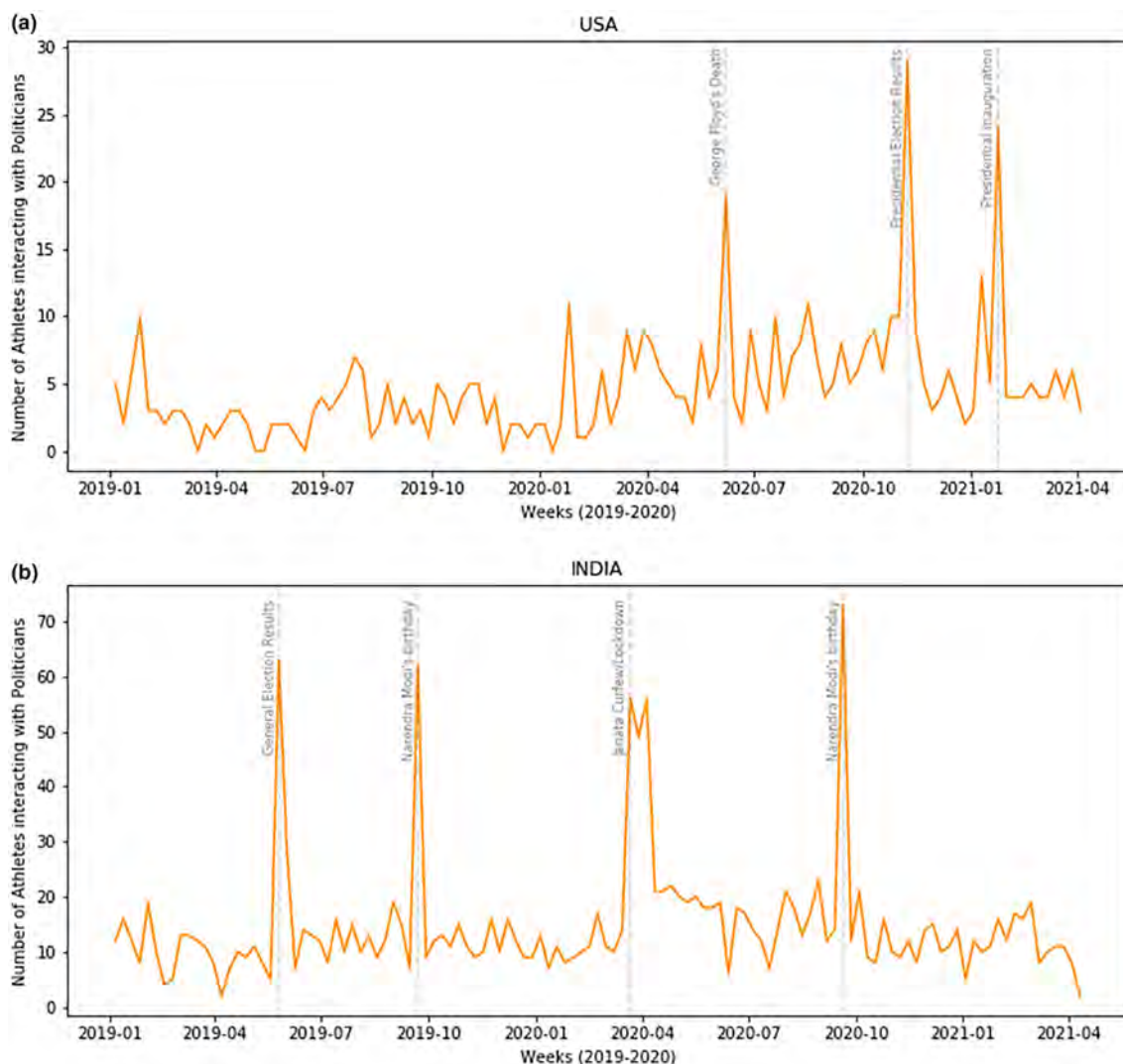


FIGURE 1 (a) a weekly timeline of US athlete engagement with US politicians; (b) a weekly timeline of Indian athletes' engagement with Indian politicians

We defined a list of seed terms for each event/topic and trained a Word2Vec (Mikolov et al., 2013) model on the tweets containing these terms to get a continuous distributed vector representation of terms and capture the context surrounding each term in the tweets. Using a cosine similarity-based shortlisting procedure (Vijayaraghavan et al., 2021), we added terms most like the seed terms and that are most representative of the issue or topic. We captured the final list of tweets related to each topic or event by simply filtering them using this query set. A selection from the expanded query sets for each topic/event is presented below (Tables 1 and 2).

4.3 | American sportspersons

In the USA, we find that NBA players are relatively vocal on social media including LeBron James, Jamal

Crawford and Kyle Kuzuma, who have tweeted often on issues of race and polarisation in the USA. Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, feature significantly in the messaging from sportspersons (Figure 4).

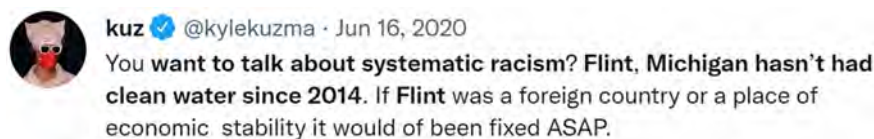
Although events that grabbed the public imagination and went viral on social media were key drivers of sportsperson engagements, conversations on broader social inequities on gender, race and orientation found purchase among a range of sportspersons across gender, race and sport. Several female athletes spoke up on pay disparities between male and female sportspersons. The 2019 American presidential election was a point of convergence with a vast majority of posts from athletes being opposed to the incumbent president Donald Trump. American sportspersons move away from mere tokenism—there are confrontational messages on systemic racism, calls to action aimed at voters and attacks on specific institutions seen as complicit in discrimination including the presidency and the police (Figure 5).

TABLE 1 A selection of keywords and hashtags for each event/issue in the USA

Topics	Keywords and hashtags (stemmed)
Protests around race and ethnicity	#blacklivesmatter, #georgefloyd, #stopasianhate
On issues related to gender and sexual orientation	lgbt, #metoo, #timesup, #equalpay, #wagegap, rape, sexist, #orangetheworld, #lovewins
On elections and voting	election, #morethanavote, #registeredandready, vote
On COVID-19	covid, mask, vaccine, social distance, corona, pandemic

TABLE 2 A selection of keywords and hashtags for each event/issue in India

Topics	Keywords and hashtags (stemmed)
Prominent protest events	#farmersprotest, #caa, #nrc, #indiatogehter
On issues of caste and ethnicity	reservation, caste, bahujan, Dalit, hathras, #rajputboy
On issues related to gender and sexual orientation	rape, hergamentoo, #womenpower, #metoo, hathras, #pridemonth, #bharatkilaxmi
On elections and voting	#votekar, #everyvotecounts, #deshkamahatyohar, elections
On COVID-19	covid, pandemic, vaccine, #janatacurfew, corona

**FIGURE 4** NBA player Kyle Kuzma on systemic racism in America**FIGURE 5** Direct calls to action by Citizens from NBA player LeBron James and coach Steve Kerr

Professional basketball player and YouTube influencer Jeremy Lin and tennis star Naomi Osaka messaged prominently on issues of Asian hate in the aftermath of COVID. A differentiating factor of these tweets is that they do not simply condemn behaviour that is widely accepted as despicable, such as attacks based on identity, but rather that they specifically call out blame to the institutions and individual leaders that enable such hatred (Figure 6).

American sportspersons also engaged on topics around masking up and social distancing, despite their

negative financial impact on spectator sports, as well as the fact that a significant portion of sports fans were strongly opposed to masking.

4.4 | Indian sportspersons

As with US sportspersons, in India too, we see sportspersons urging citizens to vote through hashtag campaigns such as #votekar, #festivalofdemocracy and #getinked. Unlike in the US, where sportspersons



FIGURE 6 Tweets on Asian American hate incidents related to COVID



FIGURE 7 PM Modi directly calling on influential cricketers to inspire citizens to vote

explicitly noted who they felt their audiences should vote for, Indian sportspersons were less direct, though unmistakably coming from a certain direction. The calls to vote were direct responses to Modi's personalised calls to action mentioning these sportspersons, which by extension implicitly supported the incumbent party. Although a few sportspersons such as shot putter Deepa Malik and badminton player Saina Nehwal endorsed Modi directly by using his campaign hashtags, most simply endorsed his call for voter turnout (which he also did in 2014). The overwhelming number of celebrity political engagements were congratulatory notes to Modi and the party after its eventual victory (Figure 7).

The first wave of COVID-19 saw sportspersons urging citizens to obey lockdown and masking rules by using the government-sponsored hashtags #jantacurfew and #indiafightscorona. A specific case in which we see a flurry of activity is the trending of the ruling party's initiative, #9baje9minute, which asked citizens to light candles in their homes for nine minutes on 6 April 2020. Sportspersons were also important voices in pledging and asking donations for the #PMCAresFund. This was

a mass mobilisation of and granting legitimacy to a fund that the public cannot ask to be audited. Unlike in the USA, where sportspersons tweeted about pandemic mismanagement, we see little if any evidence of that in India, despite the massive toll that the crisis took on Indians (Figure 8).

One issue that saw some confrontational messaging by sportspersons was the controversial CAA and NRC, which sought to reframe citizenship laws based on religious affiliation. The protests against CAA–NRC did get tweeted about: whereas boxer Manoj Kumar tweeted against the protests calling them anti-Hindu and conspiratorial, declaring his support for the government's move, a handful, including former cricketers Irfan Pathan, Sanjay Manjrekar and Aakash Chopra, Badminton player Jwala Gutta and Olympian Shiva Keshavan, condemned the violence against protesting students by the police. No currently active, high-visibility sportsperson made any statement against the government. Indeed, only one sportsperson, former soccer player C. K. Vineeth, came out in open support of the protests.

On discrimination in society, we found little active engagement by sportspersons. Although research

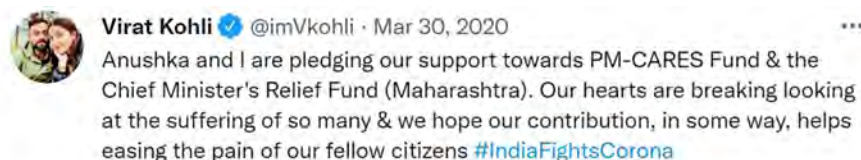


FIGURE 8 Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli pledging support to the PM-CARES fund

demonstrates that groups such as Dalits are underrepresented and discriminated against in sports (Barua, 2019; Sarmah, 2020; Shantha, 2017), there was no nationwide, anti-caste movement on social media comparable with what we see with BLM in the USA. When incidents of caste violence took place, such as the rape of a Dalit woman that sparked protests across the country, sportspersons including influential cricketers such as Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma did take to their handles to condemn the violence but dodged the elephant in the room by not addressing the question of caste.

In general, sportspersons, like most other people in public life, tend to tiptoe around caste, and engage minimally with caste issues. Basketball player Divya Singh and boxer Manoj Kumar spoke out against caste-based reservations or affirmative action in India, whereas at least two major sportspersons from privileged castes—Ravindra Jadeja and Shikhar Dhawan—actively celebrated their caste heritage. Although there was complete silence among highly visible sportspersons on discrimination in India, a handful, including cricketer Hardik Pandya and swimmer Sumit Nagal, took to their handles to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Figure 9).

On gender issues, there was more engagement from sportspersons in India, but here too we see an intersection with the 'official line'. A case in point is the campaign #BharatKiLaxmi campaign started by Modi in September 2019. The hashtag went viral after Modi's initial engagement, and a number of sportspersons used it thereafter. However, the hashtag was not controversial in any functional way—it was presented as a hashtag that honoured the contribution of women in

Indian society, alluding to the goddess Laxmi, revered around the Diwali festive season.

Such hashtags provide inoffensive tokenism (unless aggressively called out by trolls) and many sportspersons actively engaged in it. Yet the same year, there was a different social media campaign that was somewhat more controversial—the demand for closing the gender pay gap. Here, it was largely female sportspersons such as cricketer Mithali Raj and Olympian Dipa Karmakar who spoke up, alongside retired cricketer Aakash Chopra. When LGBTQIA+ rights started trending on social media, sportspersons were almost universally silent, with a lone, openly queer track and field athlete Dutee Chand actively talking about it on her feed and celebrating pride month (Figure 10).

One of the most important topics on social media in India in 2020 was the farmers' protests that followed the passage of the controversial farm laws, later repealed in 2021. Unlike other events, those opposed to the incumbent government in this case were the farmers, who are both politically powerful and culturally revered. Furthermore, the sporting establishment draws a large share of its stars from the two states of Punjab and Haryana, which were key in protesting the farm laws because of the direct economic impacts in the state. Prominent sportspersons from these states including wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat, and hockey players Poonam Rani Malik and Sandeep Singh spoke up against the central government for police action, and supported the farmers' demands, although the same stars have at various points made social media statements supportive of the central government.



Ravindrasinh jadeja
@imjadeja

A "SWORD" MAY LOOSE IT'S SHINE,BUT WOULD NEVER DISOBEY IT'S MASTER #rajputboy



hardik pandya
@hardikpandya7

#BlackLivesMatter



12:27 AM · Oct 26, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

FIGURE 9 (left) cricketer Ravindra Jadeja wielding a sword to show his caste pride; (right) cricketer Hardik Pandya kneels in solidarity with the BLM movement



FIGURE 10 (top) badminton player PV Sindhu on the #bharatkilaxmi campaign; (bottom) Aakash Chopra calling attention to unequal opportunities for women cricketers

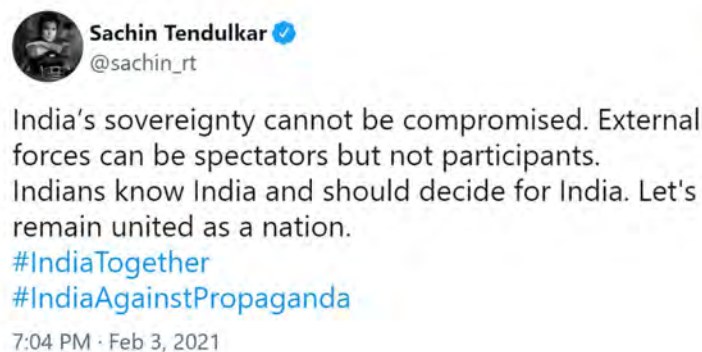


FIGURE 11 (left) star cricketer Sachin Tendulkar condemning Rihanna's tweet on the farmers' protest; (right) wrestler Bajrang Punia condemning the government in support of the protest

The most influential accounts, most of whom are cricketers, remained silent on the issue barring a few such as the former cricketers Harbhajan Singh and Wasim Jaffer. However, after prominent singer and businessperson Rihanna called attention to the issue, there was a flurry of tweets almost in a coordinated fashion (Mishra et al., 2021) from India's most influential sport stars such as cricketers Virat Kohli and Sachin Tendulkar and badminton stars such as Saina Nehwal. Trending the hashtag '#IndiaAgainstPropaganda', they called for India to be together and for the noninterference of 'external forces', referring to Rihanna, Meena Harris, Mia Khalifa and Greta Thunberg, among others. A few others such as Divya Singh questioned the integrity of the protests and called for arrests of the farmers (Figure 11).

5 | DISCUSSION

The timeline data of Indian sportspersons' engagement with politicians are telling in more ways than one. Unlike in the USA, where the sitting head of government's birthday is not a particular event of public engagement, the massive engagement of sportspersons on Modi's birthday has the effect of 'paying tribute'. Unlike in the USA, where we not only find that sportspersons feel empowered to engage their president negatively,

we found no instance of a direct attack on the prime minister by any sportsperson. This could be the result of Modi's populist and authoritarian politics (Jaffrelot, 2021), which makes sportspersons wary of taking on either him or the government. Modi and his supporters are also very well organised in the social media space, and anyone, including sports stars, taking a contrary stand is likely to be heavily trolled. As mentioned earlier, the presence of politicians in sports administration and the role of the Indian state as a benefactor of sports act as a deterrent for Indian sportspersons. In the USA, we found that most political messaging was antagonistic towards Trump, though very little was particularly celebratory of Biden either except for congratulations after the election results.

In India, on the other hand, we see sportspersons are highly influential amplifiers of the government's hashtags, systematically employed at times when there are initiatives that need popular support. This suggests an effective capture of sportspersons' social media accounts in the interests of state initiatives. American athletes tend to engage more directly with social and political issues that are presumably their own or through their independent endorsement relationships, because we see no comparable pattern of structured engagement in state-sponsored campaigns.

Although we do see the less influential sportspersons, who are mostly noncricketers and depend more

on the government for funding and opportunities, actively engaging in issues such as the farmers' protest, the silence of star cricketers, who also hold private club contracts, offers an important case in point. Only a handful of retired cricketers engage in any messaging that is explicitly opposed to the government's positions. It might be conjectured that many Indian sportspersons believe in the causes that the government puts out, and so, their engagements cannot be called outright sycophancy. Nonetheless, even for sports that do not have explicit state intervention, sportspersons fail to leverage their huge social media influence to raise issues of the marginalised. In short, the differences we notice between the public commentary by sports influencers in the two systems serve as a window into the ways political culture can influence, guide or command sporting culture, and vice versa.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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