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The Gendered Dimension of Competitive Sports in a Multicultural Context: The Mauritian Scenario

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Introduction: Sport as a Masculine Endeavour

Sport has been a historically male dominated preserve that epitomized masculinity and barred women from participating. When the Olympic Games were revived in Athens in 1896, activities were reserved for men only and according to the founder, Baron Pierre de Courbertin, 'women have but one task, that of crowning the winner with garlands' (Howe 1978). The feminist and radical critiques of sport both emphasize the essentially masculine and patriarchal nature that it shares with society (Hoch 1972; Theberge 1981). Indeed, qualities associated with sport such as competitiveness, aggression and instrumentality are qualities that are associated with contemporary notions of the 'masculine' (Sabo and Runfola 1980; Theberge 1981). It was only very gradually that women's presence in sporting events and competitions became accepted. Yet, despite the space for women to participate in sports, globally, women's participation in competitive sports is much lower than that of men. Cortis (2009) attributes this discrepancy to the fact that women perform more domestic work and care throughout their life course and as such, have less time and money for sport and leisure than men. In the Australian context, Cortis (2009) notes that smaller proportions of women than men participate in sport and recreation overall, and women choose activities that provide flexible timings which would minimize clashes with household schedules - for instance as walking or attending fitness classes rather than organized team sport. Women are also under-represented in decision-making bodies of sporting institutions (Sever 2005). Consequently, sport policies are often constructed without awareness of structural gender inequalities (Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994).

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The view of sport as a male endeavour is largely fostered through the educational system, governing bodies of sport, government agencies, sports promoters and most significantly, the media (Graydon 1983:8). Graydon (1983:8) also notes that 90 per cent of sport reporting in the media consists of men's sports; and even when women's sporting successes are reported, it is done in a superficially positive manner, highlighting the women's physical desirability. Other media reports of women's sporting success have placed the women in their domestic roles, viewing them in the family context, surrounded by their spouse and children (Scott & Derry 2005; Koivula 1999; Myers 1978).² Hence, such views either focus on women's sexuality or on their domestic roles, expecting them to conform to male-defined societal values. The dominant view here is that sport is a masculine activity which emphasizes male values and is therefore no place for a 'real' woman. Media reports of the Caster Senmeya saga highlight this issue very pertinently, as attempts were made to prove that a strong and powerful woman athlete was not a 'real' woman. Throughout history, women's entrance into the masculine domain of sports has been counteracted by claims that the athletic female body is a gender-deviant body (Cahn 1994). In this context, Hall (1988:333) critiques the work of Western sport researchers exploring the conflicting relationship between femininity (but never masculinity) and sport, to 'prove' that female athletic involvement has positive psychological benefits without producing a loss of femininity.

In recent years, sports and physical education have begun to appear on the development agenda of many countries and international bodies and the focus on women and sport has consequently been enhanced. The First World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Brighton, UK, in 1994, leading to the Brighton Declaration and the establishment of the International Working Group on Women and Sport. In 1995, sport was included in the Beijing Platform for Action (paragraphs 83, 107, 290) and subsequently in the Beijing+5 resolution five years later (Sever 2005). The Second World Conference on Women and Sport took place in Windhoek, Namibia in 1998 and the Windhoek Call for Action goes beyond lobbying for women's participation in sport to promoting sport as a means of realizing broader goals in health, education and women's human rights (Sever 2005). These issues were further promoted at the Third World Conference on Women and Sport in Montreal, Canada in 2002. Sport is now incorporated as part of development by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNDP 2003). The UN General Assembly recognized sport as an important tool to promote education, health, development and peace³ and the United Nations proclaimed the year 2005 as the International Year for Sport and Physical Education.

Women's practice of sport and participation in sporting competitions hold major importance for the empowerment of women. Scientific literature has already documented the physical and mental health benefits of sport, especially the relationship between sport and physical fitness, its contribution to the reduction of chronic disease and its links to enhancing mental health by reducing symptoms of disease. Indeed, sports carries major personal significance for its participants, especially since it is an institution which has social and political impacts which extend far beyond the lives and interests of the individuals concerned (Graydon 1983). In fact, sporting heroes and heroines often become national celebrities and role models to the younger generation. Studies conducted in Western contexts have shown that girls' practice of sports in high schools has led to a decrease in alcohol and drug use, a decline in teenage pregnancy, higher grades and increased self-confidence.⁴ The practice of sport among women and girls therefore needs to be encouraged at all levels.

Most sport activities occur in areas that have come to be known as 'public spaces'. These are designated places where citizens go for recreation, education, entertainment as well as participation in political life – such as stadia, swimming pools, gymnasiums and training grounds. Brady (2005:39) observes that the kinds of public spaces that are considered to be legitimate venues for women most commonly are markets, health clinics or tailors – all of which are areas that confine women to fulfilling their domestic roles as homemakers and mothers. However, women have much less access to, and are sometimes completely excluded from public spaces where sports are practized and that men are able to visit freely. These include town halls, parks and sports stadia among others. Often, women are only able to enter these spaces if they are accompanied by a male family member despite the fact that these spaces may have been intended for general public use (Brady 2005). Girls and women often feel intimidated to use these spaces for fear of physical or psychological harassment by men and consequently, 'public space' becomes 'men's space' (Brady 2005:40).

Due to parental concerns and social norms governing respectable femininity, girls face greater restrictions on their mobility, which eventually lower their participation in sports activities. In the context of multicultural societies, women's access to public sporting grounds is even more complicated. A study carried out on women from different cultural backgrounds who were living in Australia (Cortis 2009) revealed that women from minority, especially Asian and Muslim, backgrounds experienced greater difficulties of access to sports largely because of cultural restrictions. Issues pertaining to dress and female physicality, as well as self-consciousness and body image came out strongly in Cortis' (2009) study. The women highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate sporting spaces, greater consideration to privacy as well as a culturally appropriate dress code that

did not conflict with their religious beliefs and cultural values. Muslim and conservative women from Hindu and Christian faiths emphasized the importance of modesty and flexible dress requirements for women's participation in sports (Cortis 2009). In order to encourage more women and girls to practise sport, it becomes imperative to set up safe spaces and a supportive environment for them to participate in sports activities while giving adequate consideration to cultural and religious beliefs in multicultural contexts.

Following on from the introductory section on gender and sport, the chapter goes on to analyze the gender dimension of sports in the multicultural Mauritian context. The next section briefly discusses the pertinence of gender issues in Mauritius, before moving on to analyze the gendered aspect of sport in the country. There is a dearth of research and a lack of data on gender and sport in Mauritius. This chapter is in fact one of the first attempts made to analyze gender and sport in Mauritius from a social science perspective. As a result, it is largely an exploratory study which highlights the gendered inequalities in sports and calls for more extensive research in the area.

Gender Issues in Mauritius: A Brief Overview

Mauritius is a small island of 720 square miles, located in the south western Indian Ocean with a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. It is one of the three small islands collectively called the Mascarene Islands. Mauritius lies on longitude 57 east of the Greenwich Meridian and its latitude ranges from 19 58' to 20 32' in the Southern Hemisphere, just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. The Island of Mauritius has experienced successive waves of colonizers from the Dutch to the French and finally the British. The French played a highly significant role in the history and development of Mauritius, initially as colonizers and then as a local dominating group. Mauritian society is a plural one with the population presently made up of different groups. Class and ethnic divisions in the population of Mauritius are very pertinent.

Mauritius gained political independence in 1968 and became a Republic within the Commonwealth in 1992. Compared with most SADC countries, Mauritius combines a long tradition of democratic governance since independence, with a relatively high ranking on the gender development index. From the perspective of a small developing country endowed with limited resources, Mauritius has made commendable progress. Mauritius ranked 65th in the 2008 Human Development Report, with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.802,6 at high human development' level (UNDP 2008). However, the figure for the Gender Empowerment Measure7 for Mauritius is relatively lower, at 0.509 in 2006,8 indicating that Mauritian women still experience difficulties in acceding to positions of economic and political power.

The post-independence government introduced a comprehensive welfare package that included free education and health services, and a subsidized food scheme. The country also resisted pressures from the IMF and World Bank to scale down welfare benefits, in order to maintain social cohesion in its plural society. The maintenance of the welfare state led to a rise in literacy rates for girls and the country has almost eradicated illiteracy. Mauritius is known for its sustained political stability and its ability to preserve basic democratic rights for every citizen in a society consisting of different religions, ethnic backgrounds and languages. There has also been reference to the 'Mauritian Miracle' with Mauritius being considered as a model of development. Mauritius has maintained a democratic system of government and is now a Republic within the Commonwealth.

The Mauritian state was modelled on the British colonial system, which is characterized by male hegemony at all levels of its structures. At independence, Mauritius thus inherited a structure whose ideology was designed to systematically promote male privilege and power while consolidating women's subordination. The gendered quality of the state becomes clearly visible within its key institutions, such as cabinet, parliament, the judiciary and the police force, which remain male dominated. Moreover, gender-based subordination has been and, still is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of men and women in Mauritian society, and tends to be viewed as a natural corollary of the biological differences between them. Gender-based subordination is reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems that assign to women a lower status and less power. The spheres of politics, sports and religion are yet dominated and controlled by men. Moreover, the sexual division of labour remains strong in the country, with domestic and reproductive work still largely considered to be 'women's work'. For many Mauritian men, performing such work is considered demeaning to them and their manhood.

Women's accession to citizenship at the civic, political and social levels was a gradual process, often hindered by religious and cultural patriarchal norms and beliefs. Women's full civil citizenship was held back by religious and communal lobbies which delayed the process (Ramtohul 2008a). Women's organizations had to group together to form a strong voice to be able to counter the religious and communal lobbies that had denied them equal rights. Global factors, especially the UN and the international women's movement in the 1970s, provided critical support to the Mauritian women's movement. This was when the state became more receptive to the plight of women in Mauritius. The response of Mauritian postcolonial leadership to cumulative gender inequalities that were historically embedded in the stratified and pluralistic society was primarily a policy of breaking down formal barriers to women's access to legal, political, educational and economic institutions, assuming that this would bring about significant changes in women's participatory roles. Wide-ranging opportunities became avail-

able to women. This included improved access to health services and reproductive health facilities, state provision of free education at all levels, employment opportunities and legal amendments to eliminate sex discrimination.

The Constitution of Mauritius, which is the supreme law of the country, currently enshrines a philosophy of equality such that all citizens irrespective of sex, ethnic background, religion and creed are equal before the law. Discriminatory clauses have been amended such that men and women are now legally entitled to equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms, including opportunities and responsibilities on the social, economic, cultural and political spheres (Patten 2001). Mauritius is also a signatory of a number of international conventions on women including CEDAW, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development. These international conventions act as a guide to NGOs and women's organizations on issues pertaining to women's rights and entitlements and in the process, indirectly safeguard women's rights in the country.

The Gender Dimension of Sports in Mauritius

The practice of sports in Mauritius takes place in a variety of settings ranging from the public designated sports grounds to private spaces such as sports clubs and homes. Competitive sports nevertheless mainly take place in public spaces. The Government of Mauritius has adopted a policy of encouraging the population to practise sport through its Ministry of Youth and Sports. The Sports Division of this Ministry aims to create awareness about the practice of sports by providing adequate means to all citizens across the country and it believes that sports can act as a catalyst to consolidate national unity in the country. It provides means and support to athletes and sports clubs, free public access to sports infrastructure and assists sports federations to promote and develop their disciplines. The Ministry currently works with 34 recognized federations, but the management boards of these federations remain very masculine. In 2003 for instance, there were only 3 women presidents of sports federations and 2 women vice presidents. In an article on the top 16 sports federations in the country, the December 2009 press features only one sports federation which is presided over by a woman, namely the Mauritian Federation of Swimming presided over by Doreen Tiborcz (Weekend 27.12.09). This state of affairs clearly highlights the male domination of decision-making instances of Mauritian sports federations which, according to Hall (1996) and Hargreaves (1994), would affect Mauritian women's opportunities in sport as sport policies may be constructed without awareness of structural gender inequalities.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports unfortunately does not compile any gender disaggregated statistics on participation in competitive sport. As such, it becomes difficult to carry out a gender analysis of access to and the practice of competi-

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tive sport in Mauritius. To undertake this task, I wrote to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, requesting information on men's and women's participation in sports and gender disaggregated statistics on participation in different sports disciplines. My request was forwarded to the office of Mr Ram Lollchand, who is a senior officer at the Ministry. I then contacted Mr Lollchand and was given a date for an interview –12th October 2009. I enquired on the state of affairs concerning men's and women's participation in the different competitive sports disciplines, statistics on men's and women's participation in competitive sports, the presence of the different ethnic groups in competitive sports and the leadership of sports federations. Given the absence of any published data on these issues, the interview was a major source of information on these important issues.

Another source of data on this pertinent topic was a 2003 report of the Ministry of Youth and Sports on women's participation in sports. Although this report was not very detailed, it nonetheless provided an overall picture of women's participation in sport in Mauritius. More recent reports with similar focus were not available. The press was also a source of data, but I was aware of the fact that media reports of sports are highly male biased, with the primary focus being on male athletes. Although the names and pictures of some women athletes and champions do appear occasionally, such occurrences are rather rare when compared to the coverage given to male athletes. Women's participation in the male dominated sport, football, is rarely covered by the media. As a feminist researcher, I have always found the sports sections of the Mauritius newspapers very alienating and disempowering.

In terms of women's participation in competitive sports, Mauritius does not differ from the rest of the world as women's presence in sport is still at minority level. The Ministry of Youth and Sports provided the following data on the number of male and female licensed practitioners in a few key sports disciplines in Mauritius.

Number of Licensed Sport Practitioners in Different Disciplines¹¹

Discipline	Male	Female	
Football	11,000	325	
Volleyball	360	96	
Basketball	240	84	
Athletics	800	175	
Badminton	300	150	

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The above data highlights women's marginal presence as competitive sports participants at national level. This area remains highly male dominated till date. In terms of the promotion of sports among women and girls, this task is undertaken by the following official bodies: the Commission Nationale du Sport Féminin (which is a department in the Ministry of Youth and Sports), the Ministry of Women's Rights, Family and Children and the Women's Commission of the Mauritian National Olympic Committee. These organizations provide support and services to women in the domain of sport at different levels. The Women's Commission of the Mauritian National Olympic Committee for instance, provides support to women athletes, especially in terms of motivating workshops for these women. In 2003, it organized a residential seminar for women sports practitioners on the following theme - 'Girls' and Women's Empowerment in Sports'. It organises leisure activities and fun days for these women as well. The Ministry of Women's Rights, Family and Children on the other hand, carries out sensitization campaigns on the importance and benefits of sports and exercise for women and sponsors aerobic and Yoga sessions in its Women's Centres. The target group is women who participate in the activities organized by the Women's Centres of the Ministry of Women's Rights, who are primarily housewives. The emphasis here is mainly on women's health and not so much on the practice of competitive sports.

At the level of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Commission Nationale du Sport Féminin (CNSF) which was set up in October 1992, seeks to promote sports among women by encouraging women to practise sports to maintain good health. The Commission also focuses on developing specific physical training programmes and policies based on the needs of women. Another focal objective of the CNSF is to design structures aimed at increasing women and girls' participation in sport, leisure as well as recreational physical activities. At first glance, the CNSF appears to be the main organization with the mission and objective to encourage women's participation in sport at all levels, which could eventually undo some of the male bias in Mauritian sport. Yet, the main activities of this Commission so far has been the organization of aerobic, yoga, swimming and aqua gym classes for women, and according to Mr Lollchand, housewives have been the main beneficiaries of these activities, given the timings at which activities were organized. He states, with regard to the CNSF I do not believe that this Commission has attained its set objectives. 12 The CNSF can direct young women who are interested in practising competitive sports to the relevant sports federations, but the organization in itself has no programme, plan or strategy to recruit and train young women in different disciplines. Apart from activities such as swimming classes in the government facilities and aerobic courses, the rest of the activities of the CNSF take place on an ad hoc basis. For instance, it

organizes recreational and sports days, but there is no long term regular activity in this respect.¹³ A key problem in this context that Mr Lollchand highlighted is the fact that members of the CNSF are nominated by the government of the day and as such, it is largely a political body. This issue is discussed in the press as well, which states that the positions in this sports body have been created for political agents to be remunerated (Weekend 03.01.10). Moreover, when government changes following elections, the board members are also changed by the new regime. The CNSF therefore does not have any real sport affinity or affiliation since its members very rarely come from sports backgrounds who could have served as role models to younger women.¹⁴ Most often they have very little interest in competitive sports themselves. In an article on the output of sports bodies at the end of the year 2009, the press questions the work of the Commission Nationale du Sport Féminin (Weekend 03.01.10). In fact, the article reports that for more than two years, this organization and its president, Maryanne Joyjob, have not produced any results or outcome in the sports domain. The Commission Nationale du Sport Féminin is actually described as the least active state sponsored sports organization in the country and the press questions the allocation of government funds to this body especially since it is not functioning efficiently and has not produced any concrete results. I tried to contact the CNSF for clarifications on these issues, but without success as most of the time, nobody answered the phone at the office of the organization.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports has been working towards getting more women sports trainers. Over the past 10 years, this Ministry has been providing training courses to individuals wishing to work as trainers in sporting disciplines. This is a one-year training course, following which a person becomes a qualified trainer or sports instructor. At this level, according to Mr Lollchand, the Ministry tries to ensure that at least 10 per cent of the trainees are women. It thus has an unofficial quota system geared towards making space for more women to become sports trainers. Many of these trainers work in schools as physical education teachers, others train the young athletes in sports federations and a few are employed by the Ministry as coaches. Even at the level of training of leaders of sports groups, the Ministry tries to ensure a minimum of 10 percent female presence. The operation of this quota remains unofficial and in principle as the Sports Act does not provide for quotas or reserved seats for women as directors of sports federations. Hence, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, through its unofficial quota system, has been trying to increase the visibility and presence of women in the domain of sports.

Another pertinent factor affecting women's participation in sport in Mauritius is the conservative culture which forges dominant notions of respective femininity and women's and girls' restricted access to public spaces where sports activities

most often take place. At the level of secondary schools for instance, among students from the lower classes of ages 12 to 15, there is a relatively good participation of girls in sport.¹⁵ However, among the higher classes aged 15 to 18, the Mauritius Schools Sports Association¹⁶ observes a significant decline in teenage girls' participation in sports, when compared to that of teenage boys.¹⁷ Reports of the Ministry of Youth and Sports on the promotion of women's participation in youth and sports activities (Ernest 2003; Cadressen 2003) highlight gendered obstacles to women and girls' participation in sports. These include conservative norms of respective femininity which limit women's and girls' freedom and access to public spaces as well as strict parental control on girls' extra-curricular activities. Moreover, girls also reported feeling uncomfortable in male dominated public spaces such as sports grounds and youth camps. Girls' time is also taken up by domestic tasks in the home, for instance taking care of younger siblings and general household chores. Boys' time however, is not taken up by these tasks and as such, the gender division of labour in Mauritius limits the time girls can attribute to sport. At this level therefore, there is a need to sensitize parents on the importance of girls' practice of sport. It is also important for special consideration to be given to the conditions of access to public sports grounds and if necessary, to set up female public spaces, where girls could feel more comfortable and parents reassured of their safety.

In the multicultural Mauritian society, the practice of competitive sports also has an ethnic bias where the majority of national athletes, both male and female, come from the Creole¹⁸ section of the population. There is a concentration of Creole female athletes in high level sports. 19 Very few Hindu and Muslim teenage girls would practise sports in public spaces. This is an issue that warrants further research. The issue of dress code in sports and need for consideration of cultural norms and specificities with regard to boys' and girls' access to public sports facilities are issues that become pertinent in the Mauritian context. Apart from the ethnic, there is also a class bias regarding participation of competitive sports. In general, those who excel in sports are those young people who have not done well in their academic studies²⁰ and spend more time practising sports. There are some young people from upper class privileged backgrounds who train and excel in selective sports disciplines such as tennis, swimming, horse-riding and table-tennis. At this level, there is also an ethnic bias as most of these athletes from upper class backgrounds belong to Chinese and Franco-Mauritian ethnic groups. Hence, in Mauritian sports, gender and class interact with ethnicity in determining who participates in competitive sports as well as in which disciplines.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some of the major gender dimensions of competitive sports in the Mauritian multicultural context, where women's presence has remained marginal. Although the country offers facilities for both boys and girls to practize sports and organizations that specifically focus on the promotion of women's and girls' participation in competitive as well as non-competitive sports, there is a strong gender bias at this level. Women and girls are still minority participants in sports, and the institutional mechanisms instituted to promote women's and girls' presence in sports are not functioning to optimal capacity. There is therefore a need for greater consideration of cultural norms and values when addressing the problem of girls' minimal participation in competitive sports. But most important is the need for in-depth research on the gender dimensions of sport in multicultural Mauritius before any concrete policy can be formulated. Research on women and girls' participation and interest in competitive as well as non competitive sports, which also considers cultural sensitivities and differences becomes necessary. An equitable participation of men and women in sports is important for Mauritius, to keep the population healthy and to promote the sporting careers of young men and women.

Notes

- 1. Howe, E., 1978, 'A Little too strenuous for Women', Report of the 1st International Conference on Women and Sport. (cited in Graydon, 1983).
- 2. Myers, C., 1978, 'Sport and Media Workshop: Report', Report of the 1st International Conference on Women and Sport. (cited in Graydon, 1983).
- 3. UN Resolution 58/5 adopted in November 2003.
- 4. Cahn, 1993, Krane, 2001 and Veri, 1999, cited in Adams et al., 2005.
- 5. Mauritian society is composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups, namely, the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles who are Catholic; the Indian community, Muslim and Hindu; and the small Chinese community, either Buddhist or Catholic.
- 6. http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MUS.html (accessed 13.03.09). The UNDP classifies countries having a HDI score of 0.800 and above as being at 'high human development' level whereas those having scores ranging from 0.500 to 0.799 are at 'medium human development' level.
- 7. The gender empowerment measure (GEM) reveals whether women take an active part in economic and political life. It tracks the share of seats in parliament held by women; of female legislators, senior officials and managers; and of female professional and technical workers- and the gender disparity in earned income, reflecting economic independence. (UNDP, 2008).
- http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MUS.html (accessed 13.03.09).
- According to the 2000 census, the literacy rate of the population aged 12 and above was 88.7% for men and 81.5% for women (EISA: http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2.htm - accessed in July 2006).

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- 10. Brautigam, 1999a, 1999b; Alladin., 1993.
- 11. Source: Ministry of Youth and Sports 2009 figures. These are not published statistics, but were taken from the registers and files at the ministry.
- 12. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 13. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 14. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 15. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 16. The Mauritius School Sports Association is a department of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It organises inter-school sports competitions among students.
- 17. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 18. Creoles are descendants of the former slaves of African origin.
- 19. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).
- 20. Interview with Mr Ram Lollchand, senior officer, Ministry of Youth and Sports (12.10.09).

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