

IN BLISSFUL APATHY



In the predictably familiar crowd of veteran public figures, retired bureaucrats, academics and social activists that gathers in the Durbar Hall of the Rashtrapati Bhavan to receive the civilian awards every year, the only murmur of excitement is caused by the presence of a sports person or Bollywood personality. For the first time the badminton star Pullela Gopichand came to receive his Padma award in 2005. The unassuming shuttler could not excite the press photographers. He was practically unnoticed. As he was walking down the steps of the magnificent storied building, one or two of them got curious. ‘Chase him?’ one cameraman asked another.

‘Nah jaar,’ the other one dismissed the idea. Then, like an afterthought he drooled on, ‘Remember the time Sachin came? It was good fun.’

Indeed Sachin Tendulkar, the cricket legend, had been there six years before to receive his first civilian award. Of course he came two more times – in 2008 for the Padma Vibhushan, and then in 2014 to be honoured with the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award marking his *deification*.

The inane chatter between the two photojournalists I overheard so many years ago unmistakably summed up the gnawing reality of Indian sports – the game of willow that obsessively occupies the Indian mindset is really no sport, with its roots deeply dug in the unsavoury colonial past. For a people struggling against the evil of imperialism, cricket was a comforting discovery, a stroke of serendipity making our colonial experience a little more bearable. But its all-pervasive presence subsuming many layers of Indian consciousness blocks every avenue for other sports. A game which in its original format would be played for five days clearly does not fit into the modern era. The levels of physical fitness and stamina required for cricket are much lower than most other sports. And still, almost 90 per cent of India’s sports landscape is dominated by it in every term – support, resources, sponsorship, corporate preference, media share. Cricket in India is overwhelming, inalienable and uninhibited.

This stasis to an extent explains the pathetic state of Indian sports, why a nation of 1.3 billion people fails to win a single gold in the Summer Olympics. It does not require any clairvoyance to predict that for many years to come India will not be able to produce sports persons of the calibre of Usain Bolt, Flo-Jo, Mark Spitz or Nadia Comaneci. Technologically we are backward, our infrastructure practically primitive, sports bodies notoriously corrupt and vile, and a bureaucracy that would kill a promising talent rather than take a bold decision. Unlike the erstwhile socialist states – the Soviet Union, East Germany or Cuba – we as a nation do not feel that our Olympic performance could be a statement of India’s arrival on the world stage. True, such countries had to face the criticism that

sports was part of their politics, their training centres actually factories to produce champions spoiling their wards' childhood. Still, as a nation we are at the other extreme lacking the commitment and discipline to be on a par with the world in sports. As a team our failure is only predictable. Only in those areas where individual talent and initiative matter more than bureaucratic intervention, players go out and fight and win. Tennis and badminton for example. Backed by sponsors and hogging the media limelight, the players are already celebrities; the babus in the sports department or politicians, wary of negative publicity, handle them with care. Leander Paes, Saina Nehwal, Sania Mirza and PV Sindhu therefore bring home a few medals. So did Abhinav Bindra, the rich kid, in shooting. For the rest a win is a fluke, an accident.

The picture, however, has not always been so dismal. There was a time when the Indian hockey team was simply invincible. Between 1928 and 1956 India bagged the Olympic gold in hockey for six consecutive times winning all their matches. India lifted the football gold at the Asian Games in 1951 and 1962. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the Indian football team finished fourth. Until the early 60s the country performed impressively in team games. Then the decline began. The rot set in. As technology played a larger role in sports in many parts of the world and our sports bodies turned their back on changes sweeping the world and indulged in squabbles and petty politics, India began to recede as a sports power.

But a nation cannot live in a vacuum, in perpetual gloom. The euphoria over a big win keeps us on the move, gets our adrenaline going; without good vibes from the maidan pushing up our buttons, moving ahead is not possible. And it is exactly where the role of cricket comes in. Though no longer the national game of yesterday's colonial masters we learnt it from, in India cricket is thriving. Actually, it's a flourishing industry. Had our cricket board been a listed public company, investors would have rushed to buy its scrips even at a high premium. This is one business which will keep turning in huge profits. Cricket therefore has been adopted by all those who have a big stake in maintaining the social status quo. Whenever the nation is depressed or demoralized, an assertive win in limited-over cricket under the floodlight, celebrities watching the proceedings from the privileged enclosure, takes us out of the blues. And send us home on a high. Cricket is a placebo. It renews our national pride – at times becomes nationalism itself. Think of the India-Pakistan matches. With the buildup over provocative primetime headlines replete with war metaphors, a limited-over cricket match between the two neighbours – they had been the same country until seven decades ago – crosses the border of sport and becomes an extension of military conflict, often provoking a heavy exchange of artillery fire between the two armies across the Line of Control. The frenzied scenes of jubilation on the streets past midnight in the summer of 1983 celebrating India's World Cup win under Kapil Dev's leadership reminded a newspaper of the ecstatic freedom-at-midnight hour in 1947. For the masses this is a game India win. The big moments hyped up by the media keep them going, carrying on with the issues of life.

In the previous issue of this magazine we carried a touching account of a Dalit family living in a Mumbai slum. Their men work as municipal scavengers and the women sweep and mop office floors. The author discovers to his surprise that they send their school-going son to Shivaji Park for cricket training paying the coach a monthly fee of `1000. If India can no longer play hockey effectively at the international level, and our footballers are way below the threshold level of Asian soccer, as a country we still need our sporting icons to launch dreams and endorse products. Cricket comes in handy, for the politicians and corporates as well. That's why a mediocre cricketer earns

much more than a sensational sprinter or long jumper. Cricket has become a passion for a people who have been ousted from the arenas of other sports. Or it has encroached on other spaces so formidably that we are now inured to other possibilities. In a sense we are on the island of the Lotus-eaters, living in blissful apathy, numbed, charmed, magicked out of reality. We do not want to go back and face the world anymore. ■

Bhaskar Roy