

THE SECULAR RELIGION



The enormity of evil at times is heightened not by its sinister designs but by its bizarre maladroitness. Months after a devastating Cyclone Nargis ripped apart Burma, killing an estimated 1,40,000 people, the distraught country's absolute dictator, junta boss Than Shwe, was tinkering with the idea of buying out for \$1 billion

Manchester United, the English football team he and his spoilt grandson, Nay Shwe Thway Aung, cheer for. The underlying irony was indeed grim. The xenophobic general had blocked crucial external aid at the peak of people's suffering because of his distrust of the outside world. The United Nations deplored the regime's response to the terrible tragedy as 'unacceptably slow'. What bothered the dictator at the moment was the nagging of the 20-year-old, himself an aspiring footballer, for the Red Devils! Than Shwe's move, as Burma watchers at that time pointed out, was perhaps something more than buying lollipop to indulge a favourite grandson. The idea was to distract the attention of a football-crazy people from their misery. Then, the Senior General dithered, fearing a backlash. Instead, he forced the big businessmen and powerful people to float big-budget football teams scouting for players around the world.

Often a symbol of a repressed people's aspiration, an expression of the working-class angst, football turns into a convenient tool in the hands of dictators and despots. Like Than Shwe and Nay Shwe Thway Aung, Saddam Hussein and his notoriously malevolent son Uday were great champions and promoters of the game in Iraq. In fact, Iraqi football had a boom time when Saddam put Uday in charge of the country's football association and Olympics committee. Iraq won the Arab Cup in 1985 and 1988, and the Gulf Cup in 1979, 1984, and 1988; the country's biggest achievement, however, was to qualify for the Mexico World Cup in 1986. It produced outstanding players such as Hussein Saeed, Ahmed Radhi, and Ammo Baba. But Uday was both violent and sadistic, torturing, jailing, and publicly humiliating the players if they lost a match. He took pleasure in tansuring a player for poor performance. Many star players had to serve a prison term for failing to win a match. Abbas Allaiwi, a top player of his time, had to spend 33 days in Al Radwaniyah prison. Despots in history have turned to sports for an adrenalin rush. Like Than Shwe's grandson, Uday too needed his own team. He founded Al Rasheed in 1983, and in no time, it became Iraq's leading football team leaving behind the leaders, thanks to a huge amount of money and influence he had pumped into it. Terrified by his waywardness, many players started leaving Iraq to pursue their careers overseas.

But football has not always been held captive by odious dictators. Among its practitioners are some of the finest minds who shaped the intellectual discourse and literary sensibilities of the 20th century. 'All that I know most surely about morality and obligations I owe to football,' wrote Albert Camus, the celebrated author of *The Outsider* and *Plague*. Now, he learnt a lot more about life and its uncertainties standing in the goal as a teenager than he would have otherwise. He was goalkeeper for his school team in Algiers and did the same job for his college junior team until in 1930, at the age of 18, he contracted tuberculosis. Recalling the great

French writer on the 50th anniversary of his death in a car crash, Jim White writes in the *Telegraph*, London: ‘Standing sentinel in goal, Camus had plenty of time to reflect on the absurdist nature of his position.’ Indeed, the game remained an influence in the writer’s life long after he appeared for his college team as goalie.

And when the sport crosses the Atlantic to become *futebol* in Brazil, it’s no longer a game but *arte*, an art. In fact, all over Latin America, football ceases to be a sport; it is a constant around which life revolves. It is larger than life, an ‘outsized influence’ on politics, statecraft, and culture. Football in Brazil is a secular religion with its own myths, rituals, and deities, claim Professors Ricardo dos Santos and Francisco Teixeira of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Like nations wage war in the name of religion, in this part of the world, they do the same on the issue of football too. War once broke out between El Salvador and Honduras after a highly-contested World Cup qualifier; the hostilities still referred to as the Football War.

If football meant power and a shortcut to glory for the despots in Iraq and Burma, in Latin America it is a crucial issue of identity. After a brilliant performance by the Brazilian team in the 1938 World Cup, commentators pointed out that the team followed a distinct school of football, something Europe had not seen before. Gilberto Freyre, a leading Brazilian intellectual, suggested that the team had played a kind of mulatto football, ‘as if it were a dance.’

A few years after I first started going to Calcutta Maidan to see the East Bengal matches, the arrival of two Iranians created a sensation. Majid Bishkar and Jamshid Nassiri, both signed up by East Bengal in 1979–80, were the first foreign players turning out for the club in a long time. The club bosses kept them under wraps, their whereabouts a closely guarded secret. Almost every day, the city newspapers had some tidbits about the Iranians – their favourite food, practice, their hobbies. Girls were more curious about the soccer stars than the local film actors. Then, I saw them in action, the two easily identifiable because of their

distinct features, in the fiery red-and-yellow of East Bengal. In a midfield melee, one red-and-yellow shirt flashed, the way the striped yellow coat of a big cat would gleam because of its speed and fierceness. Cutting through a knot of opponents, the predator moved dangerously deep into the enemy zone, the majesty of the fleet-footed sprint casting a spell over the stands. Ecstatic fans raised a chant: 'Majid, Majid...' That was the impression I came back with – a tiger among the regular footballers. Majid, a World Cupper, had come to India to study at Aligarh Muslim University, probably displaced by the turmoil of the Iranian Revolution back home.

It was around that time that football in Calcutta – still not Kolkata – began to be marred by violence. Fans saw the outcome of a match as a life-and-death issue, as if a loss would mean the end of the world. Club loyalties became stronger and more intense than any other allegiance. Looking back from a distance of 30–35 years, I now know those football communities had attempted to replace other conventional affiliations – caste, religion, language... A certain amount of fanaticism was needed to sustain the new identities.

Among the first to study the phenomenon of soccer violence was the British psychiatrist John Harrington. Based on data and direct observation at football matches, supplanted by information collected from the police, the St. John Ambulance Brigade and transport operators, Harrington focused on individual pathology and stressed the importance of factors like 'here and now' in fuelling violence during a match. He did not seek to probe the larger social subtext of soccer hooliganism.

Exploring the issue from the opposing viewpoint, Ian Taylor offered a sociological explanation arguing that street violence around a football match was an outcome of the sport becoming an expression of the underprivileged aspiration. The local football club, he claimed, was nothing more than a 'working

class institution'. The media stereotyping of the fan was at times blamed for violence. The soccer crowd seemed keen to live up to the image the media created for them. A popular chant of the Manchester United fans goes like this: 'We are the famous hooligans, read all about us!' This was how they would greet the bystanders entering into towns for an away match.

The Calcutta counterparts of the English fans would buy the 60 paisa tickets – the cheapest – and form the rowdiest part of the galleries, hurling invectives at the opponents, the referee for any inconvenient decisions, and their own players if the opposing team had a lead at some point. They were not without a sense of humour though. The moment the press photographers walked down the sideline to their vantage position, packets of lemon and orange lozenges would fly towards an elderly man in the group, a known East Bengal supporter! I always bought a ₹ 1.20 ticket to a more restrained part of the galleries. For the big matches, I always had passes from a senior East Bengal official, my father's friend.

The theory about the street-fighting soccer crowd as an extension of the working class came back to bother me long after I left the city and stopped going to see matches. In Paris for reporting an event in 2008, one evening I, along with a friend, went to Montmartre. Below the sprawling hill was the artists' village where some of the greatest masters had worked since the late 19th century – Salvador Dali, Claude Monet, Picasso, van Gogh. Conscious of their proud heritage, the studios, still in business, mention them and their years there. In a large central courtyard, artists spread out their ware and wait patiently for another client with a request for a portrait. Some of the most eligible Parisiennes have traditionally sat before the artists; the honour is mutual, for the artists to get a chance to capture an exquisite face with a few strokes, and for the women to be *immortalized* into sublime art. Almost half-a-century ago, an Indian artist came here to earn a living by drawing faces. He ran into trouble for not having the

permit to work.

Feeling a little out of place in the refined elegance of the art village, we climbed up the hill on to a plateau where a white-domed church stands in its quiet splendour. As we moved close to the church entrance, a spectacle – a sheer combination of magic and acrobatics – took our breath away. A young footballer, in *les blues* of the French national team, was showing his incredible skill with the ball: the large leather ball on his head; moments later, on the agile shoulders, then bouncing off his chest; his nimble feet kicking it up; his back artfully receiving it, everywhere but on the ground. And all this to the tune of turgid rock music coming off a cheap stereo placed on the kerb of the path to the church. Almost inconspicuously, his upturned beret sat in a corner, as if he was hesitant, almost apologetic, about suggesting a donation. Mesmerized, we dropped all the euro coins from our wallets into it. The black footballer with short curly hair and thin stubble seemed to be in a meditative mood, unmindful of the coins collecting in his beret.

While climbing down the hill, a light drizzle gave me a touch of cold. I looked back – the would-be Platini was still in a state of beatitude, the football his universe. Would I see him on television playing for one of the big clubs, for France in the next World Cup? For the football artist with Montmartre as his backdrop, all such issues were irrelevant. He somehow let me know there was nothing beyond football.■

Bhaskar Roy