
CRICKET AS MYTHOLOGY

Point of view – Bhaskar Ghose – TNR – 12

The millions who are angry today are not so concerned about the game as about the players, and winning fulfils dreams and fantasies for all of them.

To the few who are not hysterical about cricket, the spectacle of the Indian cricket team losing their way in the World Cup was only a little more depressing than the reaction of millions of fans to their exit – wild anger, frenzy, depression and shock (one elderly fan seems to have died after he saw the Indian team being defeated by Sri Lanka). The houses of the Indian players are now guarded by the police as they are on the hit-list of furious and murderous fans.

Fans? One may well ask. Are these lovers of the game? Do they understand the game at all? Have any of them actually played cricket at some time as a boy or girl? There certainly are thousands who do understand the game, and love it as a game; they will watch good cricket when they get a chance to see it, and many will surely be up at night watching the World Cup games in the hope that they will see good cricket being played by some of the greatest players of the game. And among them there will certainly be a very large number who have actually played the game in some form or the other, in their neighbourhood with friends, or in schools or colleges or in some club or sports group.

But, large though their numbers are, there seem to be millions more who do not understand the game, and have never played it, but are still hysterical with rage – these are, going by reports in the media, the ones who take most easily to violence, attack the houses of the members of the Indian team, set fire to effigies and stamp and spit on photographs and posters of the players. To give them their due, had the Indian team won the match against Sri Lanka and gone into the final rounds of the World Cup, these fans would have been dancing in the streets, capering madly to loud music and bursting crackers. And that is what is so depressing.

To these millions, cricket has ceased to be a game. The players are icons, no different from Bollywood stars. They have adored the players when they do well in the same mindless and total manner, and just as there is a temple to a female

film star in Tamil Nadu, there would certainly have been one or more to the ‘heroes’ of Indian cricket, if the adulation had been sustained. But a defeat in even one game brings out a frightening outburst of rage. The heroes of the previous night become worse than the worst villains. Nor is this the preserve of the lumpen elements among the ‘fans’; the media join in, each television channel and newspaper or journal outdoing the other in searching for words that convey their rage, and sudden discovery of contempt.

Why does this not happen with other sports? Our hockey team has lost disgracefully on most of the international tournaments they have played recently, but apart from a few scathing comments in the media that were more reportage than anything else, there were no reactions at all among the vast numbers of professed sports lovers. Then there is the curious case of the tennis player Sania Mirza, who regularly loses in either the first or second round of all the tournaments she plays in, but features, nonetheless, in a number of television commercials. Perhaps that has less to do with her tennis, a game that excites no passion in this country, and more to do with her winsome good looks.

But cricket is something else. It has, with its players, moved away from the world of sports to the ultimate fantasy world, the world of Bollywood. Yuvraj Singh and M.S. Dhoni are given the adoration that is given to Aamir Khan and Abhishek Bachchan; they are considered not the boys next door but glamorous, slightly mysterious figures who lead lives not unlike Batman’s. Except for one big difference. Unlike Aamir Khan and Abhishek Bachchan they sometimes are not heroes at all.

Not that the film stars do not do what is called in the film world ‘negative’ roles; but even while they do those, they still remain heroes, and retain the adulation of their drooling fans. In the films where they play such characters, there are always the real evil ones, so that the rage and loathing of the masses has a locus, so to speak. But there is no such character to take the rage of the infuriated fan when the cricket heroes play badly; it has to be the players themselves.

Consider the logic. A hero can never fall, simply because he is a hero. Once so cast, he becomes the object of the fantasy

of these delirious, mindless millions of men and women – the men fantasizing that they are in love with them. For such people, to fail is to betray these private fantasies, to tear them to tatters, and this is an outrage, a blasphemy that drives them wild. It has nothing to do with cricket.

The players have moved away from the game itself and become icons. This move has been happily fuelled by the media and the advertisers who have spent crores in the conversion of cricketers into larger than life, macho figures in television commercials. If Yuvraj Singh smiles patronizingly at the emergence of an almost complete Mercedes Benz out of thin air, and then goes on to score a duck, he is not just playing a 'negative' role; he is destroying an image that millions had taken into their hearts and into their private fantasies.

We are only too well aware of the drabness in which these 'fans' live, the dreary daily round, beset with the despair that poverty breeds, the constant unhappiness and tensions that are relieved only by the fantasies when they sit with their friends and noisily enter the world of film and cricket heroes who appear in every channel as those – heroes, smiling carelessly, selling a cold drink or a pair of shoes or something else.

Advertising takes them away from the grim, hopeless reality of their lives and when a hero is seen driving a fast car and then goes on actually to score a century, or what is described

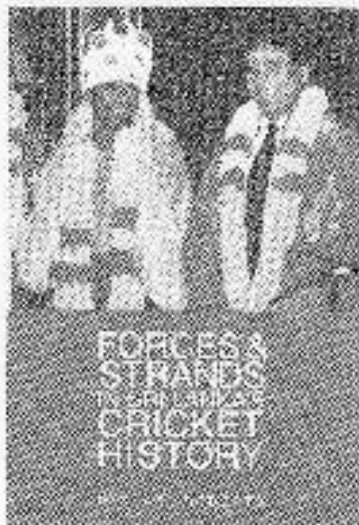
usually as a 'swashbuckling' half-century, then the illusion is complete. Dhoni, or Kohli, or Yuvraj is a hero, semi-divine, seeing whom girls will swoon or dream dreams, and men will become what they are so good at, frenzied, in an effort to demonstrate to the hero how adoring they are.

One would imagine that the real losers of cricket would have been despondent, certainly, bitterly disappointed, and upset at the Indian cricket team's performance in the World Cup; but being primarily lovers of the game they would see it in those terms, and even if they vilify the players, it would be in terms that are within limits, in terms the players deserve. They would know only too well that there are other games to be played, and other players to play them, that everyone needs to move on. They would, in the final analysis, not be too different from those who love tennis and when Sania Mirza loses in a tournament, look to the next one, and hope her form picks up on the way.

But, alas, cricket at the national level is not like that, as far as the millions are concerned. They are not so concerned about the game as about the players, and winning fulfils dreams and fantasies for all of them, just as it delights the lovers of the game. There was a time when only actors and then film stars took fans to a world of dreams; now it seems that the hapless members of the Indian cricket team can also say, with them, "We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." ■

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