

# SPORTS IN A MARKET TRANSITION

Jinendra Basnayake

**E**xcept for a passing editorial that denounces playing cricket under floodlights when the country is faced with an unmerciful war and rampant poverty, sports in Sri Lanka has successfully evaded privileged intellectual scrutiny. This makes one wonder whether there is such a subject worth examining. While this intellectual detachment may be due to particular characteristics inherent within sports that make it relatively autonomous from other social activities, sports continues to maintain a sanctioned position as an enduring social phenomenon, which is aggressively mobilized as a wholesome, non-political form of entertainment.

Although the explicit biases in sports along gender and urban elitist lines, as well as issues concerning a humanist metamorphosis of modern sports are significant matters for exploration, these topics will not be dealt with here. The intent here is to reveal and explore certain unintended objectives that may be nurtured and realized through sports in the present political-economic transition, and more specifically to focus on the role of sports in influencing values and interests necessary to make the market work.

With the 6th South Asian Federation Games commencing in Bangladesh in December, the president of Sri Lanka has appealed to the private sector to be actively involved in the sponsorship of athletes and sports in general. This attempt at sports promotion, directly related to a paucity of state funding, has always plagued amateur sports with the possible exceptions of cricket and rugby. For the private sector, or essentially big business, sports promotion is mainly a publicity gimmick. However, there may also be a deeper purpose in that the integral socialization process of individuals, participants as well as spectators, encourages a market consciousness.

With foreign teams visiting the country, local teams on foreign tours, and numerous challenge trophies being awarded at a multitude of competitions, sports is a thriving social phenomenon, predominantly in urban areas. Especially for the NIC directed, competition minded urban capitalist elite, sports is an essential facet of 'high' culture, illustrated by the acclaimed membership of sports clubs. Consequently, it is this group that can derive the ultimate benefit by promoting sports in this market oriented accumulation process.

This historically emergent mode of accumulation, supported by an increase in productivity, has created a surplus consciousness not necessarily limited to a small elite

of leisure class; even the unemployed, partly by destitution and by default, demonstrate this surplus consciousness. But this critical energy of the people, which looks for alternatives, is suppressed; sometimes it is harmlessly channelled through entertainment. In a benign form of coercion, sports can be effectively utilized to further market orientation, an internalization process of market consciousness and competition as the necessary mechanism of a capitalist mode of production.

The apparent social benefit of sports, in a national realm, is its capability to promote spontaneously a patriotic, populist ideology of unity. This may be denoted simply by the radio and television audience that converge during a Cricket test match.

The second visible reason is that the unemployed and frustrated youth can be productively engaged (also strategically distracted from any anti-establishment protest) in a self-satisfying, socially interactive activity. With rural and urban unemployment from ages 15 to 19 close to 35 per cent, not to mention underemployment, sports can be mobilized as a form of appeasement for their marginalization from mainstream economic activity.

But a principal unrevealed benefit of sports, especially in this political-economic transition from state paternalism to free-market capitalism, is its potential to foster the spirit of self-interest and competition that is fundamental for the present economic processes.

Transcending the naive Protestant ethic where profit is piety, sports can be effectively mobilized as an impetus to promoting a market system where fair competition, rather than the ruthless accumulation of profits by any means, is honoured. In the socio-economic context of Sri Lanka, the approach must be targeted toward, and solicit the participation of, the rural men and women who are economically constrained and were culturally isolated from participation in sports. As a result, marketed sports must be broad based in participation, low in material investment, with ease of access to facilities and equipment.

Significant principles that complement and reinforce a market consciousness must also be emphasized through sports promotion. Thus the ideology of the system, as opposed to the actual imperfect mechanism of the system and seriously flawed logic, will reflect the utopian economic convention of perfect competition.



First, all competitors must accept and adhere to predefined rules of the games. For instance an athlete doing the 100 meter dash must line-up behind the start-line, start when indicated, and running within the assigned lane, try to optimize his/her potential to reach the finish-line before other competitors. In the market place similar principles and transparent rules which can be interpreted as fair, are promoted.

Second, the players are made to decide on the best strategy according to their endowments. An agile, fast player will be compelled to be strategic against a challenger who is prone to rely on brute force. Here, the motive to have a clear business strategy, according to strengths, weaknesses and an objective, can be socialized through sports.

Finally, the spirit of competition. If the players have conditioned themselves pre-game to perform at their peak ability and utilize their optimum strategy while abiding by the rules, then the spirit of the competition has been achieved. In the market process this can be seen as the collective effort of business in enhancing the competitive realm. Cooperation and discipline in enforcing and sustaining self-regulation of the market, advocating ecological and social welfare standards are then parts of the effort to achieve the spirit of market competition.

I agree this is a tenuous argument, comparing the closed system of sports with historically emergent, open social systems, where rules are seldom neutral and endowments seriously warped. Further, the distinction between our knowledge concerning social objects and the independent existence of those objects reinforce the transient nature

of the thesis. But the theoretical underpinnings of prevalent economic doctrines of the market, based on individual maximization and competition, are equally dubious.

Nevertheless, the fundamental thesis is that, sport is a real, existing, social practice, which can be effectively utilized to complement and promote a capitalist market consciousness.

The next SAF games are to be held in Bangladesh where, at present, the poor in Dakha are under severe threat of increased water borne diseases due to excessive rainfall and lack of access to sanitary living conditions. But the government is prepared to spend valuable and scarce resources on the games which will go on, sustaining and escalating contradictions in society.

The irony of glorifying sports in mass poverty conditions is the reproduction of a social structure that complements the consciousness of the dominant mode of accumulation. Since sports manifests this capacity to socialize a market consciousness, the capitalist and the bourgeois naturally focus their energy on structures that promote mass based sports. Specific types of sport, because of their historical continuity and propagation by the media, have maintained a superior status. Thus the macho brutality of rugby and the gentlemanly finesse of cricket have both enjoyed privileged positions, regardless of the peculiarities of these games; thus, the impetus to expand into more mass based sports activity. Although competition in sports can never be paralleled with the structures of the market place, at least the ideological framework can be socialized, especially to transform those pre-capitalist structures which resist capitalist transformations.

*The connection between sports, national unity and the processes of state formation referred to in the above article are highlighted by a recent event in Palestine which we want to bring to our readers' attention.*

*Last October, the Palestine national football team, for the first time in nearly 50 years, played a match in Jericho against the French national team. The chief guest at the match, played under the "patronage of President Yasser Arafat", was Saev Erakat, a negotiator of the Palestinian peace accords. In a speech before the match commenced, he said: " This marks the beginning of the Palestinian state".*

*Nabil Abu Znaid, a Hebron University official said: "For the first time in most of our lives, we can today carry our national flag, sing our national anthem, cheer our national team. This is the kind of event that turns people's minds from the depression of occupation to the optimism of state building".* **P**

# ONE WEEK IN TAMIL EELAM

Selvy Thiruchandran

**K**armegam, the journalist from the *Dinamani* paper, is originally from Jaffna and at present he is an Indian citizen. He visited Jaffna in April 1992 and in his article he has given an account of his journey. The conversation between him and a captain of the army that he has recorded, as part of the account of his journey, is given below. The sentiments expressed by the soldier break many myths and, I think, are worth sharing with your readers.

**Captain** : *Are you an agent of RAW*

**Karmegam** : *Does my face give you the impression that I am a spy, I am a working journalist. (K. thinks that the captain wants to talk to him and he feels that he speaks very clearly)*

**Captain** : *Both are same to us (Being a journalist and being a member of RAW). OK you look very tired. Would you like a cup of tea or a 'cool' drink ?*

**Karmegam in soliloquy** — *I am surprised. Even beneath the rugged army uniform there is tenderness of heart.*

**Captain** : *You are coming from India. There is something we can do for you. Saying so he offered him a 'cool drink'.*

**Karmegam** says *"I felt I should give him something in return, so I gave him the packet of 'mixture' (a mixture of savory grams and nuts) which I bought with me from India."*

**Captain** : *You said you are a journalist. Can I ask you a question? Look at us. We are living in the dense forests heavily armed. We are going in search of the Eelam Tigers like hunting dogs. We kill them. Till yesterday (till very recent times), we lived like brothers as sons of Mother Lanka. Today we are trapped in fratricide. I am a soldier, I have taken up arms. Under the circumstances, I should not bother about brotherly relationships. I have to humbly obey what I have been ordered to do. However, we are not animals. We are human beings. within us (our chests), there are no hearts of stones. The small little brats calling themselves Tigers of Eelam are coming forward to shoot us. We shoot them to kill. We are*

*troubled in our hearts. Our Buddhist religion tells us, that lord Buddha shed tears for the goat that broke its legs. After having been exposed, from childhood to concepts such as love, compassion and mercy expounded by that compassionate and noble soul, we can't regard human lives with such disrespect. Who are these Eelam Tigers? They are also of our same blood. We are in such a situation today, that when we are fighting each other without discussing and solving our problems. India should not be an idle on-looker. We have love and affection towards India in our blood. If India wants, she can stop the rivers of blood running across Lanka (Illankai). I am not expressing this as a fighting soldier but as a patriotic Sri Lankan. When you return to India write about these (in your journals). As journalists you can do much. You can achieve a lot.*

*(Translated from Kanaiyali June 1992 Page 38-39 "Tamillelatil Oru Varam" by Karmegam, Kanaiyali Press Madras)*

Buddhism, while rightly seen as a universal doctrine of compassion and love, the soldier here regrets that he cannot live according to that doctrine. Patriotism here is redefined as different from the contemporary definitions of nationalism, as the politics of seeking separate identity. Narrow and divisive 'isms' are discarded for more positive thinking. He doesn't see a crisis in our identities. Patriotism is loving and pricing both the ethnic communities as belonging to one and the same polity. The little brats with arms are viewed as human beings sacrificed on the altar of counter nationalism. India is not seen as invader, but as neighbor nation which can effectively play a role towards minimising the rivers of blood let loose. This soldier's wisdom has also correctly assessed the role of responsible journalism by which, the conscience of the human mind can be awakened to a realisation of the obligation of citizens to follow citizens even across nations.

The soldier with perhaps folk wisdom, if not subjected to scholarly disciplines, has dismantled rather unconsciously a racist and divisive theory to which our pseudo-scholars succumb very easily — that the Aryan/Dravidian races apply only to the two ethnic committees in Sri Lanka who



merely speak Aryan and Dravidian Languages. He says emphatically that Eelam Tigers are of the same blood as his. With the same breath he regrets the Indo-phobia, that was built up in stages in Sri Lanka today, by political chauvinists. He is alive to the socio-cultural and historical connections Sri Lanka has with India when he asserts that India cannot be an idle on-looker, as the love

and affection for India is in our blood and should be reciprocated.

And the soldier, it has to be reiterated, is part of our state. Shouldn't we all, politicians and the rest, learn from this soldier and salute him if he is still alive or, if not, his memory?

## DOCUMENT

# COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

*The International Committee to Protect Journalists has written to the President expressing its concern over threats made to Iqbal Athas and the staff of **Yukthiya** over their reporting of certain aspects of the war in the North. We reproduce this letter below.*

**P**

The Committee to Protect Journalists is deeply concerned by a recent campaign of harassment and intimidation directed against members of the Sri Lankan news media. While our records indicate that this is sadly not a new phenomenon, the latest round of threats is especially alarming both for its severity and its sustained nature.

Iqbal Athas, defense correspondent for the *Sunday Times* of Colombo, has been the most conspicuous target of these threats. On October 10, the *Sunday Times* published a lengthy article by Mr. Athas on Operation Yal Devi, a recent Sri Lankan army offensive on the Jaffna Peninsula, revealing the number of casualties sustained and weaponry lost. Mr. Athas says that beginning that evening he received several threatening phone calls, including one in which the caller asked him whether he was "trying to teach the army how to do its job," and another in which the caller threatened to kidnap his three year-old daughter if he continued writing "false reports" to subvert "the good deeds of the Army Commander [Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne]." And following the publication of Mr. Athas' article, the Army Commander himself reportedly told *Sunday Times* publisher Ranjit Wijewardena that "Eelamists" [Tamil separatists] in his news organisation deserved to be "burned on tires".

It is our understanding that Mr. Athas wrote to Gen. Hamilton Wanasinghe on October 18, and that the General subsequently promised Mr. Athas that he would speak to Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne and that his safety would be assured. However, those promises were undermined by the delivery of a funeral wreath to Mr. Athas' home on November 6, addressed to his wife and bearing the names of two army units which participated in Operation Yal Devi.

Two other newspapers have also received threats in connection with Operation Yal Devi. After running a front page story about the intimidation campaign against Iqbal Athas, the Colombo tabloid *Yukthiya* claims to have received a phone call in early November warning its staff to "be careful" and to refrain from criticizing the military. Bernard Soysa, former General Secretary of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), recounts a similar episode regarding an article he co-wrote in Mid-October on the loss of life and equipment in Operation Yal Devi. He says the day after the article was published in the LSSP organ, *Sama Samaja* an anonymous caller told him, "You'll be finished before the end of November." According to Mr. Soysa, his contacts have informed him that a faction within the military will take action against their perceived opponents, and that these actions will be timed to coincide with the birthday of Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), on November 26.

As a nonpartisan organization working to defend the rights of journalists throughout the world, the Committee views the threats against Mr. Athas and the staffs of *Yukthiya* and *Sama Samaja* as flagrant violations of the right to "seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media," guaranteed under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. We therefore call upon Your Excellency to safeguard their right to operate in an atmosphere free of harassment or intimidation. We further respectfully ask that the threats in question be fully investigated and that appropriate action be promptly taken against any and all responsible parties.

Thank you very much. We welcome your comments.

**William A. Orme**  
Executive Director