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Game of Competing Loyalties: Sporting Nationalism and NIT Srinagar

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Students from National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar along with NSUI supporters staging a protest demanding safe and secure campus, permanent deployment of the CRPF on campus for better security, reshuffling of college administration and formation of a students' council' in solidarity with the NIT Srinagar students at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi on Sunday, April 24, 2016.

*The institutionalisation of hyper-nationalism through sport is reflected in the oft-successful attempts by states to claim identities based on sporting loyalties. In this article, **Roshni Sengupta** places the events that occurred at the National Institute of Technology in Srinagar in a theoretical context and argues that states, regimes, and governments have often used sporting arenas to push various ideologies and that in the current international system, sporting arenas have become temporary battlegrounds where wars of ideology and identity are played out.*

Any debate on nationalism tends to elicit varied, often volatile responses. The political situation in India, particularly in the past few months, has provided a bird's eye view of the larger deliberation on nationalism and, as a corollary, on anti-nationalism predicated on parameters such as religious affiliation, faith and political loyalties. In the years leading up from the Partition, the core or the mainstream of the nation was identified as 'Hindu' by several strands of nationalist thought and, as a result, the minorities - primarily Muslims - were defined as entities or groups that existed outside this core or national mainstream. A clamour arose for proof of loyalty and genuine belonging from those who did not inhabit this core ¹. Even as the founders of the Indian republic designated 'secular' nationalism as the 'only form which can be called nationalism in the modern sense of the word', ² demarcations in the vocabulary - between the 'Hindu', the 'Hindu nationalist' and the 'Nationalist Muslim' - went beyond being simply cosmetic and semantic; they were fundamental to the evolution of India as a democratic republic.

The homogenised view of what came to be popularly known as the 'Muslim question' encompassed the filters of loyalty that members of the community were judged against and the added burden of making a choice and then proving their sincerity towards it. This almost completely decimated the possibility of engaging with the question on cultural, ethnic, and regional terms - what Talal Asad refers to as 'ideological hybrids'. ³ These strict distinctions, therefore, earmarked that even though the difference between Hindu and Indian was contingently irrelevant, the distinction between Muslim and Indian was not. Since then, the Muslims have repeatedly been asked to 'prove' their loyalty to India.

Nowhere has this demand for proving loyalty resonated more than in the field of sport - particularly cricket, owing to its manic following in the sub-continent since independence. Recent events in the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar campus reflect the gradual, long-drawn and eventual effects of hyper-nationalism being transplanted into the arena of sport, giving rise to what broadly could be referred to as 'sporting nationalism'. ⁴ Under the rubric of sporting nationalism then, not only does a cricket match between India and Pakistan metamorphose into a virtual war between the two traditional rivals, but the eventual impact of the outcome of these matches recurrently posit the 'loyalty' question for Muslims in India. For an Indian Muslim making visible noises in support of the Indian team somehow protects him from being incriminated as a 'closet Pakistani' or a 'traitor'.

When an incident of this kind occurs in Kashmir - systematically disenfranchised by the Indian state and military machine since 1947 - the implications are exacerbated manifold. Hyper-nationalist irrationality combines with insidious sporting nationalism to create a potent mix, dissolving civic cultures and relationships and inter-communal trust - precisely what happened on the NIT Srinagar campus on March 31, 2016. ⁵ India's loss at the T20 Cricket World Cup to eventual champions West Indies led to a few Kashmiri students celebrate the team's exit from the championship, which was objected to by a group of non-Kashmiri students. A day later, non-Kashmiri students attempted to hoist the Indian flag near the administrative block shouting slogans like 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Pakistan Murdabad'. Kashmiri students countered this by chanting 'Hum Kya Chahte - Azadi'. ⁶

Until this point, the matter appears to have been one of rhetoric, some ultra-nationalist drama and disaffection. The scenario is fairly comparable to the events that occurred at the Jawaharlal Nehru University on February 9, 2016, when an event on Kashmir and against death penalty was organised by former members of the now-defunct Democratic Student's Union (DSU). ⁷ Interference by the state apparatus in issues internal to the university points towards a definitive and planned strategy to discredit an institution that continues to be severely critical of fascist forces, trenchant Hindu nationalism and persecution of minorities. ⁸

In Kashmir, the disaffection with the occupation-like presence of the Indian armed forces and the prevalence of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) creates a smorgasbord of divisions and frictions, hinging on narratives of mutuality, territoriality, secularity and religiosity. Abuse of the rights of common Kashmiris has caused at least two subsequent generations to mutate into quasi-citizens having little or no access to education, employment, economic opportunity, and, more importantly, basic human rights. The recent killing of young men by army soldiers in a confrontation arising out of an alleged molestation bid on a Kashmiri woman by an Indian soldier and the abject silence of the state stands in stark comparison to the active role the state played in the NIT Srinagar incident . ⁹

II

Sport provides a harmless backdrop for the construction of ritual and iconography. A collective exercise that builds group identities, sport in this regard, is similar to obvious and visible body symbolism in the public sphere. Sporting arenas have been used the world over to strengthen and vocalise nationalist ideologies. States make use of sporting competitions for their basic meaning and symbolic functions to achieve their goals of solidifying territorial boundaries and maximising advantages for the economy. For example, Franklin Foer argues in his fractious *How Soccer Explains the World*, that soccer, which everywhere but in the United States is the most popular team sport of the poor, provides an alternative focal point to both globalised economies and traditional religions and cultures. Capitalists and theocrats are unable to compete against a sport that manages to change its image in protean ways to suit local conditions. ¹⁰

On March 17, 1955, a riot was sparked in Montreal by the suspension of Canadiens player Maurice Richard. The Quebecois viewed the suspension as unfair punishment for a Francophone player by the Anglo-Canadian National Hockey League commissioner. The violence came to signify an important formative moment in the Quebecois nationalist movement, which would go on to develop into a mainstream force in Canadian politics while also sparking a brief but violent separatist movement. ¹¹ In Tito's Yugoslavia, expressions of national identity were strictly prohibited. As the country disintegrated, however, teams that were formerly associated with professions became nationalist symbols - the Red Star Belgrade fan club came to be used as a foundation for assembling paramilitary units to fight in Bosnia and Croatia. ¹² Foer also distinguishes between soccer nationalism and tribalism which roughly translates into this - nationalism is when you root for the Netherlands because you are Dutch or for Germany because you are German and tribalism is when you are friends with a Catholic from Glasgow who not only loves the Celtics but also vocally despises the Rangers Football Club (traditionally Protestant). ¹³

In his book *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization*, Alan Bairner argues that nation states seek to promote themselves, or simply carry out their business, using sport as a useful and highly visible medium. ¹⁴ The 1936 Olympic Games - intentionally awarded to Germany - became a show-board for Hitler and the Nazis, only trumped by African-American Jesse Owens winning four gold medals in track and field events. ¹⁵ After the end of the war, in 1948, Germany and Japan were not invited to participate in the Olympic Games due to the roles played by them during the conflict. ¹⁶ Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon sat out of the Melbourne Games in 1956 to protest Israel's invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. ¹⁷ Apartheid South Africa was debarred from participating in the Rome Games (1960), preceding their expulsion from the International Cricket Council and the ceasing of all sporting contact with the country by the Commonwealth in 1977. ¹⁸

The Cold War era produced some of the most obvious - often entertaining - instances of sport being held up as the crucible of nationalist fervor. While the Soviet Union and a number of its East European neighbours used sports, particularly the Olympic Games, to promote their brand of communism, the Americans sought to boycott the

Moscow Games in 1980. Propagandists on both sides presented the sporting competitions between Russian and American athletes as a clash between the respective ideological systems. ¹⁹

According to James Dorsey, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, 'rallying around nationalism is not automatic'. Often citizens choose to root for teams other than the national side and hosting of large-scale sporting events such as the soccer World Cup does not necessarily translate into national pride. ²⁰ Brazil experienced anti-World Cup protests since the preparations went underway. Earlier, leading up to the World Cup in South Africa in 2010, there was mass anger against the utilisation of public funds to build soccer stadiums and other infrastructure. A Pew Research Centre survey conveys the ominous public mood in Brazil and the plummeting ratings of President Rousseff following Brazil's successful bid to host the 2014 World Cup and posits that six out of ten Brazilians were of the opinion that hosting the World Cup was taking away funds from healthcare, education and other public services. ²¹

As traditional forms of nationalist thinking in the West Indies gave way to newer and more globalised forms of belonging and nationhood, cricket gradually lost its grip on the nationalist pulse of the population of the Caribbean isles. Hilary Beckles notes that the fall of cricket as a metaphor for nationalist society indicates the ascendancy of new, more potent social forces within the region. ²² In *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*, Hubert Devonish equates the cricket field with a stage on which the 'drama' of West Indian society is often starkly projected. He goes on to explain how the sport is a gladiatorial event in the islands, where the players are expected to perform more than just their roles on the field - they are upheld as icons and motifs of identity and difference. ²³

III

Post-colonial histories of cricket in India - arguably one of the most enduring legacies of the British - proscribe the communal nature of the development of the game with the Parsis stepping into the cricket field first, followed by the Hindus and the Muslims. ²⁴ Despite being a vehicle of national pride, cricket could not escape the inherent discriminations of Indian society. Ramachandra Guha has written about the life and times of Palwankar Baloo, one of India's cricketing greats, a Dalit, who could never captain the Hindu team because of his caste location, ²⁵ had to sit away from his teammates during tea breaks and drink from a clay vessel while the rest of the boys sipped from porcelain cups. The game progressively, however, became a symbol of resistance against the British, as internal divisions were glossed over, even though momentarily. As the nationalist movement for self-rule and total independence attained the status of a mass struggle against oppression and occupation by the British, cricket emerged as a unifier of sorts particularly after the bloody manner in which the country had been partitioned.

The post-Partition history of sub-continental cricket has oscillated between being the progenitor of mass hysteria and hyper-nationalism and a fulcrum of friendship - however temporary - between the two warring neighbours. Thus, while the Hindu nationalists tried to disrupt the India-Pakistan test match in Delhi, spectators in Chennai gave the Pakistani team a standing ovation. ²⁶ Emily Crick concurs in her work on cricket nationalism in India - cricket has become a way of expressing national pride and consciousness. ²⁷ Varun Sahni alludes to the 'inextricable' link between being Indian and supporting the Indian team in cricket. ²⁸ Some of these unpleasant aspects of mixing sport with nationalism, therefore, appear on the horizon every now and then - Indian Muslims being forced to prove loyalty to India by rooting for the Indians, the frequent description of India-Pakistan matches as 'war' and the invocation of hyper-nationalist rhetoric prior to every bilateral series, tournament or game. ²⁹

The unexpected champion of the 1983 Cricket World Cup - India - was in for a shock when they took the field against runners-up West Indies in a one-day international at the picturesque Sher-E-Kashmir stadium in Srinagar

on October 13, 1983. Not only were the Indians booed and jeered as they warmed up before the match, deafening roars went up in the stadium as the Indian wickets started to fall. ³⁰ Sunil Gavaskar notes in his biography *Runs 'n Ruins* that even though they played West Indies on the day, some sections of the crowd continuously chanted 'Pakistan Zindabad'. The contextualisation of sport as a metaphor for politics came to symbolise the events of the day at Sher-e-Kashmir.

India and Pakistan - like the Australians and the English - for all purposes of functional sport could be best described as traditional cricketing rivals, although cricket matches between the two teams can rarely be described as team sport. Not only are these matches preceded by a media blitzkrieg riven with jingoistic fervour and hyper-nationalist phrases such as 'war', 'battle royale' and so on, ³¹ team members from both sides are driven to issue statements and make comments that more often than not come to haunt them later. ^{32 33} The symbolism of a team sport being a simulated war of a kind tends to appropriate collective public imagination, providing the fundamentally explosive atmosphere with a bulwark - that of nationalism. A citizen's loyalty to India (or Pakistan) comes to be measured by the visibility and vociferousness of support for the respective team. Muslims in Gujarat and elsewhere in India, for instance, have been summarily accused and stereotyped - as a monolithic group devoid of internal fractures in terms of caste, sect, region, or occupation - of being 'Pakistan supporters', often culminating in communal violence. ³⁴

When sports historian Gideon Haigh wrote 'cricket is nationalism by other means', he perhaps had India and Pakistan in mind. ³⁵ Muslim youth in India are routinely harassed not only by the police, but also by institutional authorities as well for 'supporting' Pakistan instead of India - two students of Bangalore University were summoned by the police and made to sign 'good behaviour' bonds. ³⁶ Earlier, in 2015, 67 Kashmiri students of a private university in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh were booked for sedition for having rooted for Pakistan during a cricket match. ³⁷ Parvez Rasool, the Jammu and Kashmir captain, was arrested on terror charges in Bangalore in 2009, which were dropped later. ³⁸ Support for Pakistan in Kashmir remains the single most poignant indicator of the depth of the geopolitical problem. 'Kashmiris applaud Pakistan to hurt India's ego,' says Gowher Geelani in an article for Dawn, and perhaps it could not have been said better. ³⁹ That patriotism, nationalism and identity creation should have no role in competitive sport - which by definition remains a singular or group activity promoting human effort - does not demonstrate even a sliver of acceptability in the high-octane cauldron of what has now become fanaticism through cricket. Often perverse, the reaction of Pakistanis - mirror image of the Indians as far as ultra-nationalist jingoism is concerned - after a loss to India in cricket ranges from the digging of graves for the players to stoning of their homes. Former captain Wasim Akram routinely received death threats, the plane bringing Pakistani players home was once diverted to Karachi after the team had lost to India on one occasion because of the presence of a huge mob carrying abusive placards and rotten eggs at the Lahore airport. ⁴⁰

Devoid of its larger-than-life mis-en-scene, what happened on the NIT Srinagar campus signifies a vital breach in the system and structures of education in India which have, over the past few months, been embroiled in controversies. The response of the state to a cricket-induced skirmish which blew out of hand and, in a tense milieu, took on gargantuan proportions, remains one of interest. The Indian Home Minister was quick to assure the non-Kashmiri students of NIT of security, ⁴¹ while not being so forthcoming with assurances to those in either JNU or Hyderabad Central University. Certain quarters of the right-wing Indian government have been heard threatening Kashmiri students with dire consequences following the NIT Srinagar incident. Clearly, the response of the state has been discriminatory, heavy-handed, and blatantly against Kashmiri students. Perhaps the killing by Indian security forces of a promising young cricketer in Kashmir ⁴² and the ambivalence of the state to acknowledge it as an extra-judicial murder makes for a fitting epitaph to the brazenness of nationalism in the sporting field.

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