

Not the most sporting of nations: Sports have never been integrated into India's social fabric

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A pall of gloom has descended upon India since Sunday evening and knives are out for those who shamed India. The Virat Kohli-Anil Kumble differences will be ripped apart now and the CBI or Enforcement Directorate may actually be tasked to find out which bookies may have sold the game away. And not without reason, because public memory is still fresh about the sentence that Pakistan's Mohammed Aamir was handed in Britain in 2010-11, along with two of his teammates. Not that India or some other cricketing nations are too far behind in playing games with games, but some players in the three nations on this subcontinent are either more vulnerable or much too greedy. At a time when Indo-Pak relations are on the verge of an explosion (God forbid!), this defeat could be viewed by incensed populaces on either side of the border as 'round one' of 'Kargil 2'. Pathos, anger and frustration are all quite natural, especially when taunting green flags and jeering faces leap out from the Oval to invade 150 million television homes in India.

But, to what extent? Are we taking games too seriously? Or, is it that we just cannot handle either defeat or victory? History and sociology may help us with some answers. The Indian value system emphasised a lot on obedience, subservience to fate, duty to one's family, virtues of procreation and enjoyment, acquisition of wealth, personal purity, yoga and personal discipline, strict dietary taboos and so on. But unlike other societies, India hardly ever encouraged physical prowess, adventure or competitive sports. We do, of course, have some wrestling but it is restricted to a tiny section of male pehlwans. We read of how the Kshatriyas jealously guarded archery from doubtful aspirants like Karan and how Ekalavya had to pay with his right thumb for daring to excel in an upper-caste elite sport. But, frankly, one sees no evidence of Kshatriyas organising sporting contests, once the Mahabharata was over and done with. Tribals, on the other hand, were more devoted to archery and organised regular hunting meets, but their increasing integration into the mainstream meant that they lost many such traditional skills. What about kabaddi or other village games? We are not saying that no one ever played games: we are simply stating that we did not value sports as highly as many European or African societies did and do. Kerala had rowing contests, though not as glitzy and poly-packed for tourists like now, but we are nowhere near world-class in this sport. Sherpas took to mountaineering as a necessity for survival and livelihoods, but until the white man arrived to challenge the sheer cliffs, mountaineering was hardly given the status of a macho sport.

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But why? We must understand that, occasional wars notwithstanding, society in this subcontinent was not basically geared towards warfare as a regular inevitability. Invaders had, thus, quite a walkover in most cases and a Porus offering battle to Alexander or a Rana Pratap standing up to Akbar were so rare that they are the stuff of legends. Some ethnic groups were more 'martial' as the British discovered and exploited, but even among them 'sporting events' were not central to existence. We were hardly a sports-crazy nation until colonial games brought the Lagaan-best out of us. Football and cricket were lapped up and hockey made us famous, many decades ago, and did bring a tiny spot of cheer in London on the same Black Sunday.

But Brahmanism injected a me-only gene, not only when the priest encouraged us to fight our way into overcrowded temples and pray only for one's own family and well-being, but also to trample on and hurt other equally selfish worshippers, with impunity. This me-only trait comes out in the silvers and bronzes and rare gold medals that we win, as almost all are for individual excellence: shooting, wrestling, sprinting, boxing, archery, et al. A nation of 128 crores cannot get eleven Indians to play football as a team, though Manchester United, Real Madrid and Arsenal are household names. Cricket is different as it is overheated with several crores and offers vicarious wars, but the fact is that though we lust to win everywhere, we are still centuries away from accepting sports for their own sake. We need to learn how the Battle of Waterloo was actually won years ago on the playing fields of Eton, where teamwork and good cheer were imbibed forever.

The author is a retired civil servant and the former CEO of Prasar Bharati. Views expressed are personal.