

THE WORLD CUP ISSUE

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PUTIN'S FOOTBALL

A GAME IN HISTORY
BY SIMON KUPER



AT FEVER PITCH IN RUSSIA

TWO STARS AND
A CONSTELLATION

ROMANCING BRAZIL

LETTER FROM ARGENTINA
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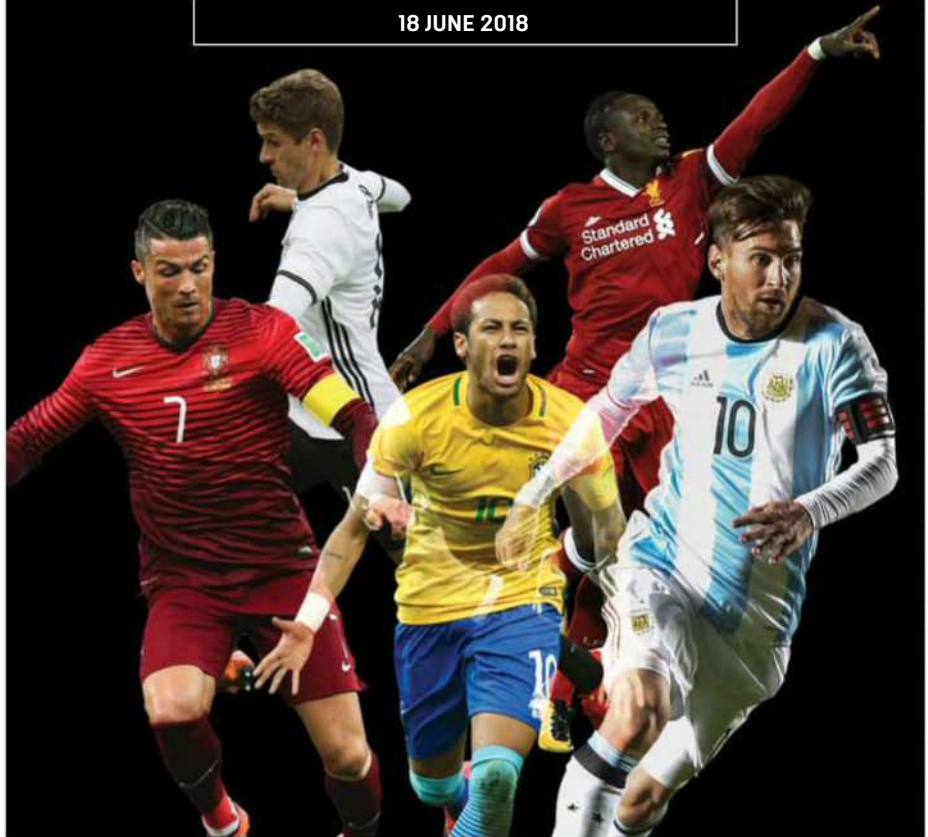
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S PRASANARAJAN

EDITOR'S NOTE

PUTIN'S FOOTIE AND EL DIEGO

The map was torn apart by history. Russia is on the mind, again. In another time, when Russia ruled the imagination, it hurtled across the pages as Gogol's troika, a violent leap into the future. Then, a few breathless passages later, it was a conflicted soul, as portrayed by Dostoevsky. Russia was the name of an emotion, the depth of which only novelists could fathom even as emperors and revolutionaries added to its legacy of hurt.

The past still drives the passions and pathologies of its new emperor. Vladimir Putin returns to the great yesterday to retrieve fresh armour for the cult of the eternal leader. When he seeks the legitimacy of a sham democracy as a nationalist shaped by the secret service, it is the past that guides him, for an autocrat needs the exaggerated memories of greatness to package his present transgressions as a gift to the people.

When I read the new book by Timothy Snyder, a historian with the craft of a novelist who further convinces us that some of the finest storytellers at work today are to be found in non-fiction, I realise that even the neo-tsarist has a mind controller. In *The Road to Unfreedom* (Tim Duggan Books), Snyder writes that the apostle of Christian fascism, Ivan Ilyin, holds a semaphore for the wounded nationalist in these dark times.

Born in Russia, died in exile, and reburied in his liberated homeland by his posthumous protege, Ilyin abhorred a political system sustained by individual choices. 'The principle of democracy is the irresponsible human atom,' he wrote. So what Russia needed was not a leader born out of the arithmetic of elections, but a redeemer brought to the top by God's



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

will, the one who would ensure the ‘spiritual attainments’ of the nation.’ Writes Snyder, ‘The Russian nation, summoned to instant war against spiritual threats, was a creature rendered divine by its submission to an arbitrary leader who emerged from fiction. The redeemer would take upon himself the burden of dissolving all facts and passions, thereby rendering senseless any aspiration of any individual Russian to see or feel or change the world.’

The redeemer of the fascist imagination, in practice, would become the robber oligarch. Ilyin gave a divine aura to the spiritual fascist who cared more about the illegitimate wealth of the few than about the rule of law. ‘In the 2010s,’ Snyder writes, ‘Ilyin’s ideas served post-Soviet billionaires, and post-Soviet billionaires served them. Putin and his friends and allies accumulated vast wealth beyond the law, and then remade the state to preserve their own gains. Having achieved this, Russian leaders had to define politics as being rather than doing.


**IN HIS CULTURE
WAR WITH THE
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HE BADLY NEEDED
A MOOD BOOSTER**

An ideology such as Ilyin’s purports to explain why certain men have wealth and power in terms other than greed and ambition. What robber would not prefer to be called a redeemer?’

The redeemer-dictator is a child of what Snyder calls the politics of eternity in which facts can’t change the ‘story of progress’. Its opposite is the politics of inevitability in which ‘the specifics of the past are irrelevant’. Eternity politicians such as Putin are mythmakers who travel in time to manufacture a narrative of seduction and domination. They need theatre. They need the drama of a crisis—Ukraine or Syria. They need the spectacular, its glorious display of nationalist masculinity. The frisson it generates is more rewarding than the dramatic tension of a nerve-agent attack on a renegade spy and his daughter in the cathedral town of Salisbury in England.

As the host of the FIFA World Cup, Putin has scored the redeemer’s goal even before the official kick-off. The Cup—is there anything more spectacular?—comes to Russia at time when he, in his bestselling autobiographical sketch in the domestic market, is the scarred nationalist, alone, his pride intact, pitted against the West, still steeped in a false sense of superiority. Sanctions may squeeze his economy to some extent, but the aura of suffering for the sake of the greater nation only strengthens the mythology of the eternal saviour. An autocrat at home, he is also accused of being the remote controller of Western democracy, and in the unwritten post-Cold War thriller, a super computer in the Kremlin could be the secret manipulator of freedom, the secret brain behind global domination. Putin badly needed a mood booster.

As Hitler needed one in 1936. In the Summer Olympics held in Berlin, the Führer wanted to tell a story larger than what Jesse Owens gifted to America. In the first televised Olympics, the spectacular kitsch filmed by Leni Reifenstahl, Aryan supremacy was at play—Germany beat America in the final medal tally—for global consumption. More than 80 years later, Putin—who is not Hitler and whose political ancestry stretches back to the defeat of Nazi Germany—needs a global blockbuster. In his culture war with the West, the most domineering strongman of the day has the biggest troupe at his disposal to play for the world—and to heal his wounded ego.

Still, as Snyder writes, ‘the politics of eternity cannot make Putin or any other man immortal. But it can make other ideas unthinkable. And that is what eternity means: the same thing over and over again, a tedium exciting to believers because



what the score.' Then why bother, as you have more than enough to deal with?

That said, even non-fans are allowed the luxury of mythmaking, of claiming ownership of a fantasy hero. In my private football lore, Diego Maradona is the one. He was not God at play, though they called him one. He was not a machine made to perfection. Still, he won on pure magic—or a 'bloody miracle' in the words of his victims. He was that crazy little rascal who was better than all those noble men before and after him. In that match against England in the 1986 Cup, a classic to which we return to savour the sorcery, he is a figure animated by Michelangelo, the creator's finger reaching out not to Adam but to a mystical ball in the air. Off-field, he was a man damaged by his own tortured soul. When he stopped playing, he wanted the magic to linger. It was as if a beautifully imagined character had lost its home, and fallen to bad reality. Cocaine nearly killed him. His flaws only accentuated his authenticity as a hero, even though, as Kuper writes in *The Football Men*, 'never has a great athlete looked less like a great athlete'.

Maybe I like El Diego because he is the last great unimagined character of Latin American fiction. *El realismo mágico*, at its best, gave liberators and dictators a life more enduring than their historical relevance. In Argentina itself, Evita comes back to millions in the pages of Tomas Eloy Martinez. El Diego waits for his Borges.

* * *

THE UNWRITTEN MYSTERY

I'M NOT SURE who said this, maybe Martin Amis, about the inherent conflict of mediums in book reviews and literary criticism. A review of what is written is not the same as that of a painting or a performance. In the first instance, one writer uses the same craft of language, not to the same degree of success or failure, to assess, appreciate or debunk another. Two writers are at work, and the original has more reason to feel let down. What about a review of a game of football? An essay on a perfect goal? A doctoral thesis on Maradona's Hand-of-God catharsis? Or on the balletic dribble of Messi? Is there a word that can capture the surge within a player's head when the ball defies the barrier of human possibility and hits the net? It is the nameless mystery of creation that makes every player, a lone figure in the whirl of 21 others, a work of singular wonder. Words retreat so that the mystery alone lingers in the end. ■

of the illusion that it is particularly theirs.' In Russia today, the redeemer-dictator's struggle for eternity has a spectacular backdrop.

* * *

MICHELANGELO'S MARADONA

WON'T GO ANYWHERE near them as they debate who's the GOAT (the Greatest of All Time), Maradona or Pele? Or Messi? That should be an aficionado's privilege, and I watch the game only when the 'fever pitch' forces me to make my choices, which are not driven by football knowledge but by what one of the game's smartest interpreters, Simon Kuper, who has written elsewhere in these pages, calls 'innocent happiness'. I am not a fan either, for every fan is a fanatic who has an excess baggage of emotions to spare, to the discomfort of others. And I think there is truth in what Nick Hornby writes in his fan memoir, *Fever Pitch*: 'The natural state of the football fan is bitter disappointment, no matter



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EL DIEGO
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INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor



AN INTERESTING BATTLE seems to be on the cards for the control of the Delhi and District Cricket Association. (Why they still persist with the colonial name baffles me. Why not simply make it Delhi Cricket Association?) At long last, now that the court-nominated managers of Indian cricket are reluctantly making way for elected representatives, a time-line for DDCA elections has been set. Among the first to throw his hat in the ring was Rajat Sharma, the owner-editor of a Hindi television channel. Crucially, in his corner is Om Prakash Sharma, a BJP MLA. Narinder Batra, the current head of the Indian Olympics Association and formerly an active office-bearer of the DDCA, has also come out in support of Sharma and Sharma. Theirs seems to be a winning panel thus far for the poll scheduled for June-end.

But a couple of other challengers have emerged. Vikas Singh, a senior advocate and current head of the Supreme Court Bar Association, has made it known that he is contesting the top job. Confirmation of his intention was available at a lavish dinner hosted for DDCA members by 'friends of Vikas Singh' a few days ago. Then there is this group which calls itself 'supporters of CK Khanna and Chetan Chauhan'. It has come up with its own panel for various posts in the DDCA. Khanna, incidentally, makes much of the fact that he is the court-appointed acting head of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, while Chauhan, a former Test player, is now a minister in the Yogi Adityanath government of UP. Given the line-up, it might

turn out to be a close contest, though my money is on my old friend Rajat, who is not unfamiliar with the guiles involved in such contests. A huge change this time—I would call it a revolutionary one—is that members have to take the trouble of trekking to the polling booth in the DDCA instead of handing over their proxy ballots to whoever they so pleased, as was the case all along.

SOME JOURNALISTS NEVER retire. They go on to write memoirs. Well, a fellow hack during the decades I was an active reporter, P Raman, has surprised me with his interesting insights into the media based in the capital in the four decades leading up to the early 2000s. *The Post-Truth: Media's Survival Sutra* is, as Raman calls it, a foot soldier's version of the good, bad and ugly of the print media (the noisy and largely frivolous television news was still a few years away). And it's not as if governments or 'ownerjees' left the media well alone back in those days. Raman details the corruption and weaknesses of fellow pen-pushers. Even then, there were lists of unfriendly journalists; according to him, I featured on the top of an Intelligence Bureau list for phone-tapping by the Morarji Desai Government. Fortunately, there were

no cell phones in the late 1970s.

Politicians would mentally note which journalists were soft on them and go out of their way to give them 'exclusives' while pointedly shunning unfriendly scribes. Others would resort to simple bribes. Like one from a major newspaper group whom the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, the controversial AR Antulay, is supposed to have gifted a brand new car, the long forgotten Premier NE-118, launched in the late 1980s by the makers of the once much-in-demand Fiat. And some in the media thought it was Sharad Pawar.

The book has a lot of information on the working of the media departments of various political parties. Even back then, Raman insists, the BJP was good at it. And though the CPI was one of the first parties to have its own building, even those days it did not have funds to give journo's a half-decent cup of tea. The shelves and tables in the CPI building were layered with so much dust that some sympathetic journalists offered to clean it up (the offer was declined). Corporate lobbyists stood out like a sore thumb in the media. They spread misinformation, wore synthetic safari suits popular in the 70s, and went on all-paid junkets.

It seems nothing has changed. With such intense competition in the political bazaar now, the media appears to have shed all pretence to neutrality, taking sides, rather than telling it as it is.

Raman's book is a must-read for all those keen to know all about the decline and fall of the so-called fourth estate. ■



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HAY NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker

THE SUN RARELY shines on Hay. I know that's a poor pun, but the literary festival's name lends itself to such wordplay, besides which the weather often plays spoilsport. Not that it deters the crowds, which on the festival's two weekends, resemble a Mumbai local train.

You could divide the big draws of this year's event into four broad categories: the literary, the political, the scientific and the spiritual (this last more for convenience than accuracy). The literary stars were undoubtedly Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, Alexander McCall Smith and Philip Pullman. The political brigade was led by Gordon Brown, former UK chancellor and prime minister, and David Milliband, president of the International Rescue Committee. Some of you might remember that David was pipped to the post of Labour Party leader and leader of the parliamentary opposition by his younger brother, Edward, reason enough to take political *sanyas* and work directly for good causes, rather than pretend to do so indirectly as a politician. To their ranks one can temporarily add AC Grayling, the philosopher, because he spoke of 'Democracy and its Crisis'. You can certainly add Germaine Greer, who spoke about rape (what is feminism but a political movement?). Greer proved that being provocative is good, provided you make sense and have your arguments worked out first in your own head: who on earth would support her Big Idea of punishing rapists? Don't call it rape, she says, call it sexual harassment and reduce the punishment; ergo, you will get more convictions.

The scientific category had talks on how trees and plants communicate with each other, the peculiarities of the teenage brain (they are wired to sleep late), and a talk on Artificial Intelligence which surprised everyone by not sounding the Doomsday bell. It gave, instead, hope that robots and



machines would become our intelligent allies rather than our masters. You could add to this science list Chelsea Clinton, who narrowly missed the distinction of being the offspring of two US presidents, instead becoming the daughter of only one. She, however, has taken up her mother's cause of public health and become its passionate advocate.

Shashi Tharoor's conversation with me on his book *Why I Am a Hindu* was a 'Spiritual' one, although given the politicisation of religion in recent times, it could easily have become a political diatribe against Hinduism. We made it a philosophical discussion on the tenets of Hinduism, its many virtues, its plurality and inclusiveness and also its society-driven dogma of the caste system and its recent institutionalising by political parties.

One learnt with some surprise that Margaret Atwood's brilliant dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was written as far back as 1985, which means it predates the Taliban, ISIS and Boko Haram, yet is so prescient about these abominations. The book sounds freshly minted also because the British TV adaptation is being telecast right now. To cash in on this—if one can use such a vulgar term for a literary festival—Margaret Atwood was led to her session by a procession of hooded and red-robed women.

Atwood herself, frail at 78, was feisty on stage. So much so that Hay's festival director, the charming and erudite Peter Florence, soon gave up trying to guide the conversation. Atwood was no submissive handmaid; rather, she was the commander of the dialogue, and took it where she wanted it to go.

There's much to be said for age. Salman Rushdie was at his wittiest best discussing his latest novel *The Golden House* with Tishani Doshi, but there was a mellowness that kept it at a civilised level. The book is set in New York in the year of Trump, although the writing commenced before The Donald's election, so "I invented him". Two other 'mature' gentlemen writers were around to delight the audience: Alexander McCall Smith (70) and Philip Pullman (71).

McCall Smith burst on the literary scene in a most unexpected way. Born in Zimbabwe, he studied law and became professor of medical law at the University of Edinburgh. His writing career is only 20 years old, beginning with *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* set in Botswana. This soon became a series, but its success owes nothing to his publisher's advice: "Nothing happens in your books," the man said, "No murders, no daring crime, no clever detective work. Make your books more edgy." "But I am not edgy!" McCall Smith replied and continued to write his own way. When the series sold 20 million copies in English and was translated into 46 languages, one hopes the publisher took a vow of silence.

McCall Smith himself comes across as a man of quiet wisdom and good cheer, and laughs uproariously at his own jokes. If he has written 80 books in 20 years, it's because he writes a phenomenal thousand words per hour, and doesn't need a revision. Even Philip Pullman, whose output is large and edgy and successful, must envy the roaring speed of McCall Smith's gentle words. ■

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By Bibek Debroy

Change the Chamber Music

For a Rajya Sabha that truly reflects the interests of the states

WHAT IS THE Rajya Sabha and why do we have it? This debate keeps surfacing once in a while, with strong views put forward on either side. It is not a new debate.

The Constituent Assembly debated it too. Gopalswami Ayyangar replied to the debate: “After all, the question for us to consider is whether it performs any useful function. The most that we expect the Second Chamber to do is perhaps hold dignified debates on important issues and delay legislation which might be the outcome of passions of the moment until the passions have subsided and calm consideration could be bestowed on the measures which will be before the Legislature; and we shall take care to provide in the Constitution that whenever on any important matter, particularly matters relating to finance, there is conflict between the House of the People and the Council of States, it is the view of the House of the People that shall prevail. Therefore, what we really achieve by the existence of this Second Chamber is only an instrument by which we delay action which might be hastily conceived, and we also give an opportunity, perhaps to seasoned people who may not be in the thickest of political fray, but who might be willing to participate in the debate with an amount of learning and importance which we do not ordinarily associate with a House of the People.”

In this quote, there is a slight patronising tone towards the *hoi polloi* members of the Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha will not be swayed by temporary passions and will delay matters. It will be a second chamber with a reviewing kind of function. There was also something else that does not come out that strongly in Ayyangar’s words. The Rajya Sabha would reflect the interests of the states. There is a 2006 Supreme Court judgment that should be quoted in its entirety. I am referring to *Kuldip Nayar vs Union of India and others*. What was the issue? Quoting from the judgment: ‘Petitioner seeks to challenge amendments made in the Representation of People Act, 1951 through Representation

of People (Amendment) Act 40 of 2003 which came into force from 28th August, 2003. By the said Amendment Act 2003, the requirement of “domicile” in the State Concerned for getting elected to the Council of States is deleted which according to the petitioner violates the principle of Federalism, a basic structure of the Constitution.’ There were other issues connected with the open ballot system, but those aren’t germane for our purposes. The Supreme Court decided no such domiciliary requirement is necessary (under the Constitution) for election to the Rajya Sabha. Indeed, were States to be important, you would expect debates in Rajya Sabha to reflect issues concerning them. If you compare debates in the two Houses of Parliament, you will detect no such difference, at least not anymore.

The Rajya Sabha is just another chamber, with a couple of differences. First, since its political composition is often different from that of the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha is like an opposition party of sorts. Second, let me refer to Union of India’s argument in the Kuldip Nayar case. ‘Union of India would also claim that several persons whose presence could add to the quality of debates and proceedings in the Council of States had, under the dispensation before amendment, been constrained to enroll themselves as voters in another State just in order that they could be elected from such State. It has been further submitted that unless they did so, some States would remain unrepresented in the Council of Ministers due to the non-availability of such talented members of these States in the House of the People and the Council of States and, thus, the opening out of the residential provision was meant to help in this regard. The Constitution under Article 19(1)(e) guarantees the freedom to a citizen to choose a residence of his choice. There are several cases of elected representatives who may have multiple residences and may have to choose any one of them as a matter of convenience where to vote. ..We are not concerned with the political compulsions or considerations that are implied by some of the above- mentioned submissions of

the Union of India and others supporting its stand. It is not necessary for us to examine the plea of the Union of India as to the competence or talent of, or the addition to the quality of debates or discussion in Parliament due to participation by, certain specific members of Parliament reference to whose names was sought to be made by the learned counsel in the course of arguments contesting the contentions of the writ petitioners.' To put it more bluntly, Rajya Sabha is a channel to appoint as ministers individuals who cannot be elected through the rough and tumble of Lok Sabha polls.

To be sure, the Rajya Sabha has a few specific powers. Ideally, Parliament should not legislate on matters that are in the State List. Therefore, under Article 249 of the Constitution, it can only do so if two-thirds of Rajya Sabha members think this is in

the national interest. This is probably the only significant one. There are others, like all-India services, and Article 352 (emergency powers) when there is no Lok Sabha. I think these specific powers are not as important for the purposes of our discussion as a broader debate on the utility of the Rajya Sabha. As I pointed out earlier, there is little difference now between the composition of the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha, apart from their method of election and term of membership. There was a debate in the Constituent Assembly, but that presumed a difference in composition between

members of the two Houses. This difference no longer exists and circumstances have changed. The 2006 Supreme Court judgment was only about the constitutional validity of an amendment to the Representation of People Act. That does not prevent us from having a broader debate, a revisit of what was discussed in the Constituent Assembly. If the argument is only about a second chamber as a countervailing force, logically, why stop at a second? Why not a second, or a third? The Constitution mentions (Article 171) Vidhan Parishads (Legislative Councils) as upper houses or second chambers in States. Not too many States have them. Some that had have now abolished them. If the argument is in favour of a second chamber, we should argue for Legislative Councils in all States.

There are some countries that have abolished their upper houses of parliament (which I do not advocate). The abolition of the Rajya Sabha is not a new idea. The first such resolution seeking to abolish it was moved in the Lok Sabha in March 1954. Then there was a barrage in the 1970s. Another resolution in 1973 and separate Private Members' Bills in 1971, 1972, 1975 and 1981. The Lok Sabha has a Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions. The Committee ignored these, taking such proposed changes to be against the basic structure of the Constitution. But that's no reason for us not to flag issues that might even affect the so-called basic structure of the Constitution.

I keep harping on the theme of resources and opportunity costs. PRS is an excellent source for information on Parliament's productivity. The last such statistics report

is for the 2017 Winter Session. 'During the session, Lok Sabha worked for 78% of its scheduled time, while Rajya Sabha worked for 54%. So far in the 16th Lok Sabha, the average productivity of Lok Sabha is 92% and that of Rajya Sabha is 73%.... Lok Sabha has spent more time discussing each Bill passed as compared to Rajya Sabha. Since 2014, 65% of Bills passed by Lok Sabha have been discussed for over two hours. The corresponding figure for Rajya Sabha is 35%.' In 2018-19, the Rajya Sabha will cost us Rs 388 crore, compared to Rs 775 crore for the Lok Sabha. In 2014, the Rajya Sabha Secretariat produced a book with

statistical information on it from 1952 to 2013. It has interesting breakups about this kind of aggregate expenditure. I am not aware of this book having been updated. But in 2012-13, most expenditure was on salaries, domestic travel and subsidies. You should look at the details of expenditure on Members and the Secretariat (something we often forget) and then decide whether we need this second chamber.

As for me, I am in favour of a Rajya Sabha that truly reflects the interests of the states. This will be much more than merely rolling the domicile requirement back. As Union of India argued convincingly, legality can always be circumvented. Since we want to get away from passions of the moment, perhaps we should only have nominated members in the Rajya Sabha. ■

SAURABH SINGH






THE LAST GLORY

A game in history and the
tradition of defeat in Russia

— BY **SIMON KUPER** —





**DURING STALIN'S
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In 1992 I spent a month having the traditional foreign journalist's experience of confusion while getting lost around Moscow. The city's size, greyness and filth were reminiscent of South London circa 1976, but otherwise the place felt alien. Then, one Sunday afternoon, some Russians took a few of us Brits to the Spartak Moscow vs CSKA derby in the giant Luzhniki Stadium, with the statue of Lenin in front. 'Horses! Horses!' the Spartak fans chanted at the CSKA fans, on the logic that CSKA was the army club, and army equals cavalry equals horses.

It was a gorgeous sunny day in August (already autumn in Moscow), and I realised that this was the perfect Russian tourist event: it was an authentic Russian occasion, because the game wasn't being staged for our benefit, and in fact nobody even cared that we were there; there were real local passions on display; good football; and all that for about three pence. On June 14th, on the same spot, Russia and Saudi Arabia will kick off the World Cup 2018—albeit in a stadium expensively rebuilt from scratch for the tournament after the old Luzhniki was razed.

Football still renders Russia a little less incomprehensible. The game—past and present—offers a surprising window onto the country. For most of the last century, the game had a signifi-

cance for Russian fans that it lacked in happier, freer countries.

British merchants introduced the game in Tsarist St Petersburg. Later, two northern English textile manufacturers, Clement and Harry Charnock, brought football to Moscow. In 1893 they set up the Orekhovo Sport Club for their local factory workers. After the 1917 Revolution, Felix Dzherzinsky, head of Lenin's secret police, rechristened the club Dynamo Moscow, which it remains to this day. One Charnock tradition survives: Dynamo still play in the blue-and-white of the brothers' beloved Blackburn Rovers. The Charnocks had brought over kits from home.

In the early 1900s, Russia's male urban masses began falling for the game. Andrei Starostin—one of four brothers who make up Russian football's most storied family—reminisced much later about taking a tram as a ten-year-old across a rapacious and drunken pre-Revolutionary Moscow, his ten-kopeck piece to pay for his match ticket safely hidden in his mouth, until he swallowed it. Soon afterwards, Andrei's elder brother Nikolai and some friends founded the club that under the name Spartak would become the most beloved in Russia.

During Stalin's forced industrialisation in the 1930s, peasants flocked to the growing cities. About the only thing that gave them a sense of belonging there was supporting a football club. In the terrible years of Stalin's purges, just before the equally terrible German invasion, the stadium was a haven. It was about the only place in Stalin's USSR where you could shout and feel almost whatever you liked. 'Not one match have I missed in the last few years,' wrote the composer Dimitri Shostakovich to a friend in 1940. He kept stats on the Leningrad clubs Zenit and Dynamo, and followed them to away games.

In Moscow, Dynamo was the club of the secret police, CSKA of the army, but Spartak didn't belong to any Soviet institution. Fans who chose to support it—one of the very rare choices in Soviet life—felt they had created a sphere of autonomy. Between 1936 and 1940, Spartak's average home attendance nearly doubled to 53,900. Nikolai Starostin wrote: 'For most people, football was the only, and sometimes the last, chance and hope of retaining in their souls a tiny island of sincere feelings and human relations.'

But Starostin spent these years waiting to be arrested. Stalin's football-mad secret police chief Lavrenti Beria had put himself in charge of Spartak's great rival, Dynamo Moscow. To quote the American historian Robert Edelman, it was as

ALAMY



The Starostin brothers, who make up Russian football's most storied family, formed Spartak Moscow, the country's most beloved club

if the owner of the New York Yankees, head of the FBI and chief of the Gestapo had all been rolled into one single human.

Finally, one night in 1942, Starostin was woken by a torch shining in his eyes and two pistols pointed at his head. He was accused of plotting with the German embassy to assassinate Stalin and turn Russia into fascist state.

But, explains Starostin in his not totally reliable memoirs, he and his brothers were too popular to be killed. Instead they were given ten years each in Siberia—such a mild sentence that it seemed almost a let-off. They had more fun in the gulags than most. Nikolai saw 'hills of corpses' in his first camp, but was greeted as a celebrity and quickly appointed camp football coach. 'Even

inveterate recidivists would sit quiet as mice to listen to my football stories,' he wrote. As for the camp bosses: 'Their unlimited power over people was nothing compared with the power of football over them.' The poet Osip Mandelstam died in the gulag, but all four Starostins survived their camp years in relative comfort. They were released in 1954, and returned to their old apartments. Nikolai would serve as Spartak's president from 1955 until 1992, the year after the USSR collapsed.

Throughout those decades, football remained a source of frustration for the state's rulers. They had worked out how to win in Olympic sports: toddlers with the ideal body shape for a particular sport would be picked out, trained up for years, and stuffed with doping. But the method didn't work well with football. Stalin even dissolved the national team after its failure in the 1952 Olympics. In his words: "If you are not ready, you do not need to participate."

The *Sbornaya*, as the national team is known, won the inaugural European Championship in 1960 in which few countries bothered to participate. But after that, the team consistently underperformed. It suffered from the USSR's harsh climate, the state's international isolation, the lack of any football tradition in many regions, but also from the dictatorial nature of Soviet workplaces. The coach was the boss and players had to obey unthinkingly. For decades, they displayed the 'I only work here' demeanour of *Homo sovieticus*. They shoved safe square passes into each other's feet, because that way nobody could ever shout at them. There was *zaorganizovannost*, over-organisation, and none of the creativity that wins World Cups.

Only in the late 1980s did the *Sbornaya* experience a brief flowering. The brilliant, vodka-sodden Ukrainian coach Valeri Lobanovski built a great team at Dynamo Kiev, modelled on the Western free-thinking Dutch. In international tournaments most of his Ukrainians would play as the national team, albeit, as the Soviet joke went, 'weakened by a few players from other clubs'. The USSR reached the European Championship final in 1988, and won Olympic gold that same summer.

In football, as in life in general, the first post-Soviet decade was criminal and poor. Moscow spent the 1990s transforming from post-communism to late-capitalism (the exact opposite of Marx's prophesy). Players were squeezed between mafiosi telling them which matches to lose, and Soviet-era coaches still screaming at them. There was a spate of football murders, most

notably the gunning-down of Spartak's director-general Larissa Nechayeva and her aide in her *dacha* (a Russian country house) in 1997. (Nikolai Starostin had died the year before, aged 93.)

With communism gone, the stadium ceased to be a rare zone of freedom, and newly impoverished Russians stopped going. Many of those who stayed loyal to football were hooligans—an aspirational identity for many Russian boys, just as many girls told pollsters they wanted to be prostitutes when they grew up. The riots in Moscow after Russia lost to Japan at the World Cup 2002—two people were killed, and Japanese music students attacked, while Japanese, Koreans and Vietnamese hid in a downtown McDonald's—were merely versions of the race riots common after Spartak matches.

In 2002, I went to a league match at the Luzhniki. Virtually the only human figure visible outside the stadium just before kick-off was Lenin's statue. The 1,000 spectators (about 99 per cent of them men) were guarded by about as many conscript soldiers, who tried to warm themselves with tea from a *samovar*. At Sportivnaya metro station afterwards, baton-wielding conscripts showed us to the trains.

Gradually the violence of the 1990s faded—one reason why most Russians still support Vladimir Putin, president since 1999. His anointed oligarchs bought football clubs and imported foreign stars. From 2000, the Russian economy boomed as the oil price rose. Russia's relations with the West warmed. On May 21st, 2008, Moscow staged its first ever Champions League final, Chelsea vs Manchester United. That week may have been the peak of Russian international modernity. The Moscow stock market hit a record high that it wouldn't return to for years afterward, and for the first time in centuries, visitors were allowed into Russia without a visa; showing a match ticket was enough. Putin's security forces invited 40,000 English supporters to party at Red Square. None was arrested.

One Russian security officer later described working three consecutive sleepless nights around the match. The day after, he slept until evening. He was woken by a phone call from a friend, who joked, "I have good news. From now on the Champions League final will be held in Moscow every year." And the official said, "I'd be very happy with that."

Even the *Sbornaya* peaked in summer 2008. They reached the semi-finals of the European Championship, and their freewheeling play



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The Soviet Union national team with the 1960 Euro trophy

that he cares most about: Russians. Many of them have noticed that the World Cup has already enriched his cronies. Most spectacularly, his hometown St Petersburg now boasts the most expensive stadium ever constructed, delivered years late at a cost of \$1 billion, despite being partly built by North Korean labour. Russian social media are full of grumbles about overpriced stadiums.

Meanwhile, the *Sbornaya* just keep getting worse. Their FIFA ranking is now 66, their lowest ever. By chance (or perhaps not) they have been drawn into a group that statisticians have identified as the weakest in the World Cup's history, with Uruguay, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Still, only 4 per cent of Russians now believe their team will win the tournament, according to a poll by the state-backed Public Opinion Fund in April.

under Dutch coach Guus Hiddink prompted Moscow's largest spontaneous street parties since 1945. In the euphoria, Putin decided to bid to host the World Cup 2018. Like most Russians, he isn't a football fan; he prefers judo and ice hockey. However, he probably conceived of the World Cup as his coming-out as a respected member of the international community—his version of China's 2008 Beijing Olympics. He probably even thought the *Sbornaya* could win playing at home. He personally met several members of FIFA's executive committee, and on December 2nd, 2010, in Zurich, Russia was chosen as host. Were bribes paid? Nobody knows, partly because when FIFA's ethics committee asked to see the Russian football federation's computers, the Russians explained that unfortunately they had all been destroyed after the bid.

In the decade since Putin's decision to bid, the international climate has transformed. Now he is the West's pariah, after his invasion of the Ukraine in 2014 and subsequent meddling in various Western elections (most spectacularly on Donald Trump's behalf). Very few Western dignitaries will come to the tournament. But Putin will have to put up with thousands of mostly critical foreign journalists poking around the country for a month—probably the largest international media contingent ever to be let into Russia.

He may also fail to impress the constituency

Naturally, the state has tried its traditional sporting remedy: doping. The McLaren report for the World Anti-Doping Agency in 2016 spoke of more than 150 suspicious doping tests of Russian footballers. It suggested there was a special 'urine bank' containing clean samples for footballers, and implied that the whole *Sbornaya* squad at the 2014 World Cup may have benefited from manipulation. Even so, Russia exited that tournament in the first round. Doping is of limited use in skill-based, tactical football.

No wonder Putin is keeping his distance from the team, while the Russian media play down the World Cup. There's no equivalent of the 'One Nation-One Team' PR campaign rolled out for the Sochi Olympics of 2014.

Football's traditional function in Russia is to provide a little innocent happiness. No doubt the World Cup will achieve that, especially for Russia's upmarket urban young, who tend to prefer foreign stars to the national game. Putin will have a month to parade in front of a bitter West. But the traditional outcome of football in Russia is defeat. ■


**THE *SBORNAYA*
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Simon Kuper is one of the world's foremost writers on football and a columnist with Financial Times. His books include Football Against the Enemy, Socceronomics and The Football Men

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TWO STARS AND





In the end, it's all about two geniuses
and one superteam. Nothing else

BY ADITYA IYER

A CONSTELLATION

THE FIFA World Cup in Russia is *not* going to be about Russia, its politics or its national team, *Sbornaya*—or, for that matter Vladimir Putin—once this edition begins on June 14th (6 pm Moscow Standard Time). Russia's successful bid to host the Cup may have been forged in the fires of political grime and corruption, but FIFA's greed, Putin's brazenness and his inept football team (who, magically, find themselves in the weakest group of the tournament) are nothing more than pre-tournament talking points.

Don't be swayed by the drum roll either. The opening ceremony and Will Smith's promised cameo and the *ultras* in the stands of Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium; the mismatched colours on soccer boots, the suspicious refereeing, the slanting dabs by corner-posts; the next England calamity, the predictive octopuses and the biting strikers; these are but distractions to veil the truth.

Russia 2018 isn't about the resurgence of five-time winners Brazil, who went on a 17-match unbeaten streak during the qualifiers under their new coach

Messi plays against Peru at a World Cup qualifier, 2018; (below left) Ronaldo during the Euro 2016 final against France



RONALDO AND MESSI. TWO SIDES OF THE WORD 'ARTISTRY'. SYNONYMS FOR EFFORT AND EFFORTLESSNESS, RESPECTIVELY

Tite (pronounced 'chichi') to become the first team to qualify for this edition; and it isn't about the absence of four-time winners Italy, who missed out on their first quadrennial in 60 years thanks to the dire mismanagement of (erstwhile) coach Gianpiero Ventura. No, this World Cup is not about mass participation either: the Atlas Lions from Morocco, returning to the world stage after two decades, or debutant Iceland, the smallest nation ever to qualify for the most widely watched tournament in this universe. Most of the 32 participating countries are here to make up the numbers. Here to put the World in the Cup.

Distilled to its essence, Russia 18 (more than any other edition in recent memory) is focused, magnified through the lens of a few billion watching eyes, on the twinkling feet of two men—Argentina's Lionel Messi and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo. Not since France 98 has fanfare over individual finesse been as complete, as absolute (back then, the world's attention was on France's Zinedine Zidane and Brazil's Ronaldo and the two met in the final, the unworldly pressures making the former rise to the occasion with two goals and crippling the latter with high fever). And as long as one or both of them

remain in this tournament, everything else in Russia is just noise, colour and pilferage.

Messi and Ronaldo. Two sides of the word 'artistry'. Ronaldo and Messi. Synonyms for effort and effortlessness, respectively. It is universally accepted that both are geniuses and that one of the two is certainly your god (depending on which side of the debate you squat). But gods and geniuses come in many forms, occupy several bodies; no such wiggle room with the title of 'greatest', whose pedestal is placed on a roof so sharp and small, it has barely enough space to allow one man to hang on by a fingernail.

Several eras can and have passed with many greats and not a single occupancy on the rarefied roof. But now, simultaneously, miraculously and for a long while, two separate fingernails have hung in there, Real Madrid's Ronaldo and Barcelona's Messi shoving and feigning and dinking and floating and sidestepping their feet in this quest to get a better handhold at the top. The endgame, however, is in sight and both can feel with their fingertips the word's embossed alphabets. The one with a maiden World Cup trophy in hand would've also firmly, instantly and unanimously gripped the title of 'greatest' with the other.

As club players, and without going into the specifics, it is impossible to tell their achievements apart. Both have scored countless goals over countless seasons to win countless Spanish and European titles, all while playing against each other for the two most storied rivals in world football. The only way to pry them apart is to prod them with crowbars into their respective national jerseys. Still, the similarities far outweigh the differences. Both Ronaldo and Messi have featured in three World Cups—the same ones in 2006, 2010 and 2014—and four intercontinental championships each (Euro for Ronaldo, Copa America for Messi). And herein lies the difference. While Messi has made three Copa America finals to Ronaldo's two, Messi's *Albiceleste* has fallen at the final hurdle on all occasions. Ronaldo's Portugal, on the other hand, won the most recent edition of the Euro two years ago in France.

The Euro 16 title, one must understand, is football-crazed Portugal's only international silverware of worth. It catapulted Ronaldo's celebrity status from star to the country's greatest mortal, dead or alive. Greater than the revered Luis Figo (alive). Greater than the venerated Eusebio (dead).

Argentina, unlike Portugal, haven't been starved for international glory, with 14 Copa America titles and two World Cup trophies—none of them thanks to Messi; one thanks to Diego Maradona. So, on the streets of Argentina, it perhaps explains



why a coke-snorting, rule-bending, death-cheating Maradona is considered a saint; and a God-fearing, rule-following, game-studying Messi, who gets his kicks from football and football alone, a sinner.

In 2015 and 2016, Messi lost two back-to-back Copa America finals to Chile, the second of which broke his will badly enough to push him into international retirement at the age of 28 (he, mercifully, returned the following year to help Argentina qualify for Russia with a hattrick in their last match against Ecuador). But the loss that had the most devastating effect on Messi's life was at the final of the 2014 World Cup in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where, two minutes before the match would be sent into a penalty shootout, Germany's Mario Götze found the back of Argentina's net.

In each of Messi's three World Cup appearances, Germany had sent him and his team packing. As individuals, the Germans range from good to great. But as a unit, as a team—and this makes them a much-watched side in Russia 18—they function with the force of 11 Messis. When the final whistle blew at the Maracanã and Götze walked up to the sobbing Argentines with an outstretched hand, Messi held his face in his palms and his legs buckled. When his knees crashed against the grass, the tremors, it is said, could be felt all the way to Buenos Aires.


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WORLD CUPS DON'T end quietly. The sonic dome of firecrackers and the popping corks of champagne, those are the soft sounds; heard only by fans of one nation. A lot louder are the cries of anguish—broken seats, broken bottles, broken knuckles and giggling walls. When hosts Brazil lost to eventual champions Germany in the semi-finals of the 2014 edition, the boom of exploding hearts echoed across its vast lands on a carnivalesque scale. But the loudest sound is always



Germany after their 2014 World Cup win in Brazil

produced by the losing finalist, and their loyalists.

During Brazil 14, hundreds of thousands of Argentines drove across the border and arrived in Rio de Janeiro a day before the final, occupying every parking lot, peaceful nook and quiet cranny in the city. They were boorish and brilliant, crass and clever, loud and lovable, teasing their neighbours, the mourning Brasileiro. Hours later, at the Maracanã, Argentina lost. And hundreds of thousands of men and women in Messi's sky-blue-and-white stripes drove back across the border far more noisily than they had arrived—in ear-pricking silence.

Of the 211 nations registered under the FIFA banner, 210 spend the next four years licking their wounds. Club football proves to be a worthy distraction, but the silent agony of the previous World Cup lives on, through international friendlies, intercontinental championships and World Cup qualifiers. And sometime during these sporadic interactions with their countrymen, the anticipation for the next World Cup begins to slow-cook; the lid of pressure sitting heaviest over the defending champions, akin to an uneasy crown. Since the turn of the century, three out of four World Cups held so far have witnessed the title-holders fizzling out in the group stages itself: France in 2002, Italy in 2010 and Spain in 2014. The strain on Germany—winners of the 2014 edition in Brazil—to buck this trend in Russia this summer, hence, is immense.

Die Mannschaft, or the German national team, did more than simply win their fourth World Cup in Rio; they proved that they were indeed worthy of the label of 'Golden Generation'—or, the greatest set of players to represent Germany at the same time. Planned, produced and prepped with the future in mind after an ageing German side lost in the final of the 2002 World Cup, the likes of Philipp Lahm, Bastian Schweinsteiger, Per Mertesacker, Miroslav Klose and Lucas Podolski became the key pistons in


GERMANY DID MORE THAN SIMPLY WIN THEIR FOURTH WORLD CUP IN RIO; THEY PROVED THAT THEY WERE INDEED WORTHY OF THE LABEL OF 'GOLDEN GENERATION'

Germany's heart for close to a decade. This universally feared engine-room, however, spluttered on the biggest stages, always seizing just short of the trophy in two World Cups and as many Euros—in the final once (Euro 08) and in the semis on three occasions (World Cups 06 and 10, and Euro 12).

By the time the quadrennial in Brazil came around, it was all but certain that this was going to be the final opportunity for Germany's finest, led by captain Lahm, to preserve the word 'gold' in 'Golden Generation'. When they did, in the penultimate minute of a month-long campaign, Lahm achieved a feat even more remarkable than becoming the first captain of a unified Germany (West Germany had won the trophy thrice) to win a World Cup. By hoisting the Jules Rimet trophy into the crimson Rio air, Lahm had inadvertently played god with the storyline of two World Cups.

The overwhelming theme of 2014, *Copa das Copas* (or Cup of Cups, since the spiritual guardians of the game were hosting it), lay in tatters after Germany's 7-1 win over the hosts in the semi-finals. And by denying Argentina the trophy in the final, Germany had set the predominant narrative for Russia 18 four years in advance: Messi, and his quest to stitch another star on the *Albiceleste* jersey.

Argentina and Portugal, teams powered by one-man turbines, find themselves in relatively easier groups than Germany, whose title-defence will depend on an all-new engine-room (Lahm, Schweinsteiger, Mertesacker, Klose and Podolski all retired following their World Cup success). While Messi faces up against midcards Croatia, Nigeria and Iceland in Group D, Ronaldo is up against an ageing heavyweight and two featherweights in Group B—a transitioning Spain and the non-entities that are Morocco and Iran. Germany, meanwhile, find themselves in this edition's group of death, surrounded by Mexico, Sweden and South Korea in Group F.

Still, finding a safe passage to the knockout stage shouldn't be much of a problem for Germany, given that its core now consists of Toni Kroos, Jerome Boateng, Thomas Müller, Mesut Özil and Mario Götze—all men who know what it takes to win a World Cup; all men thrilled not to be in either Messi or Ronaldo's shoes for one month every four years. ■



Aditya Iyer is the sports editor at Open. He covered Brazil 2014 and is on his way to Russia 2018



The World Cup
countdown clock
outside the
Kremlin, Moscow



PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

BIG BEAR HUG

The pain and pleasure of hosting the greatest game on earth. A report from Moscow

— BY EKATERINA MOTYAKINA —

WITH THE WORLD Cup kicking off in a week, political tensions between Russia and the West seem to be at their worst in decades. However, ordinary Russians are hopeful that if all goes well the tournament could boost the country's image as well as push the national team's game to a higher level.

Walking through Moscow's city centre, even one who may have not been aware that Russia is hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2018 will find that out one way or another. Authorities seem to be using every single opportunity to draw attention to the World Cup, which is to kick off on June 14th in the capital's Luzhniki Stadium. For instance, a daily light show dedicated to Russia hosting the tournament has been launched on the facade of the Manege exhibition centre, located metres from Red Square. Most key tourist locations have some form of FIFA-related decoration ranging from the surrealistic countdown clock and colourful flags hoisted on street lamps across the city centre to giant football-themed graffiti on buildings.

"Moscow is preparing for the opening. It's pleasant to see how the city is changing right in front of



your eyes,” says local resident Zinaida, 58, “Today I see flags and [other World Cup] attributes everywhere.”

There seems to be a sense of anticipation among Moscow residents. “I’m wholeheartedly waiting to hear the first whistle,” says Mikhail, 22, who works at Galaxy studio in central Gorky Park. Popular with the young and overcrowded during warm summer days, the park has been chosen to temporarily showcase the gold trophy awarded to the winners after it toured Russia, visiting 24 cities.

Residents are expecting hundreds of thousands of tourists to flock to the city. Amid the tense political atmosphere and talk of a new Cold War, some are hoping that when foreigners visit the country, they will discover that Russia is an open and welcoming nation. “Russia will be seen in a different light, without those Soviet stereotypes,” says Dmitry, 35.

Others say at a time when Russian sportsmen are being accused of doping, the country’s image will be revamped. According to a recent poll conducted by Nielsen, a research agency, 70 per cent think Russia’s reputation abroad will improve.

“We are expecting spectators to come from around the world, who will learn about Russia not from the newspapers. Who will learn about Russia live and hopefully will take a part of Russia back home with them,” Russia’s UN envoy Vassily Nebenzia said on June 2nd, speaking to reporters at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Ekaterinburg Stadium with a temporary stand that extends outside the premises



**THE
EKATERINBURG
STADIUM IS
HOME TO ONE OF
THE COUNTRY’S
OLDEST FOOTBALL
CLUBS, URAL.
BUILT IN
1953, IT WAS
REFURBISHED FOR
THE WORLD CUP**

But what do Russians think of their role as World Cup hosts, given that the country cannot be called a football superpower?

Some muse that the championship will enhance the skills of its professional footballers. “Maybe the standard of playing will change in Russia and we could become champions in the near future,” says Oleg, 33, a manager in Moscow.

But chances of that are very slim. Russians were a major player in world football during the times of the Soviet Union when the team attended seven World Cup finals. Notably, the Soviet team won the inaugural 1960 European Championship and participated in many Olympic tournaments, earning the gold medal in 1956 and 1988. However, after the collapse of the Union, the Russian team has rarely challenged others for major international honours.

Only in Euro 2008 did Russia excite many when it advanced to the final four teams in the playoffs. Led by Guus Hiddink, the team beat the Dutch 3-1 in an unexpected victory that was called ‘a miracle’ by local media. “Nobody expected this,” a State TV correspondent reporting live from the streets of St Petersburg said amid fans cheering, ‘Russia, Russia...’ and eventually silencing him with their cries.

High on such success, the Russians submitted their bid to host the World Cup in early 2009. “A bid to hold the World Cup is not a simple decision for



A replica in Moscow of this year's mascot, Zabivaka

the sports ministry or for the government. But we need to look ahead. Crises come and go, but football remains," then sports minister Vitaly Mutko said. Russia was chosen the following year.

During this World Cup, there will be a lot of pressure on the Russian team to perform better than their usual standards. Russia's President Vladimir Putin is expected to attend the opening game in Moscow, when for the first time in its history Russia hosts the tournament. Putin has said he wants to see the team lift the trophy on home soil—something even the most optimistic Russian supporter cannot see happening.

"We know that we are not the favourites, but this does not mean anything," Russia's World Cup coach Stanislav Cherchesov said in a TV interview in April. "We want to be ourselves and then see whether that will be enough, how far that takes us."

There's also pressure on the government to organise the event well. Russia has been heavily investing into the construction of stadiums and related infrastructure, spending an estimated \$11 billion.

Moscow is one of the 11 cities chosen to host the 65 matches of the tournament. The Luzhniki Stadium is the centrepiece of the event—it will host both the opening fixture and the final on July 15th. With a seating capacity of 81,000, it is one of the largest football stadiums in Europe. It was also main stadium for track and field during the 1980

Olympics that the Soviet Union hosted.

The other venue—the Otkritie Arena, with a seating capacity of 45,000—was temporarily renamed for the tournament as Spartak Stadium. Built in 2014, it quickly became the home ground of the local club Spartak Moscow, which never had a stadium of their own despite their immense popularity in the capital city.

St Petersburg, which is Russia's former imperial capital, is the secondary venue of the championship, this stadium hosting as many as seven fixtures, including one semi-final and the third-fourth place match. For those not in the know, the St Petersburg Stadium, designed by the late Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, is home to the city's club Zenit, who have done better than most other Russian clubs on the European scene.

It also comes as no surprise to anyone that large-scale international sporting events have been under scrutiny over increasing budgets and fears that the venues won't be finished on time. Russia wasn't an exception to the rule. The St Petersburg Stadium construction spending went over budget more than once during a decade plagued by a chain of corruption scandals. The city's head recently said that the cost of the construction work could be estimated at about \$723 million, although legal proceedings with its former contractor are still going on, so he added that the estimates could be inaccurate.


**MOST KEY
TOURIST
LOCATIONS HAVE
SOME FORM OF
FIFA-RELATED
DECORATION,
RANGING FROM
THE COUNTDOWN
CLOCK TO GIANT
FOOTBALL
THEMED GRAFFITI**

Another venue, the Cosmos Arena in Samara, which will host six matches, was also embroiled in a corruption scandal where the construction company demanded extra funding for the work. Until recently the stadium didn't have a pitch, but hopefully it will be completed in time for the start of the tournament. It has a seating capacity of 45,000, a huge dome and spaceship-like features as a tribute to Samara's role in the Soviet space programme.

The most easterly city to host games will be Yekaterinburg situated almost 1,800 km from the capital and seated at the foot of the Ural Mountains, the physical divide between Europe and Asia. This year also marks 100 years since the execution of the Russian Imperial Romanov family, which was exiled to Yekaterinburg after the 1917 Revolution. The Ekaterinburg Stadium is home to one of the country's oldest football clubs, Ural. Built in 1953, it was refurbished for the World Cup. It, however, has retained its historical facade with Soviet neo-classicism features. A temporary stand positioned partly *outside* the stadium was especially built for the tournament with the highest seats a long way from the pitch.

Nizhny Novgorod, a city which was closed to foreigners during the Soviet era to safeguard the security of Soviet military research and production facilities, has a new stadium for 45,000 fans, built in a picturesque location perched on the Volga river. Locals, however, have voiced criticism against this structure, saying that the stadium blocks the historic view of the city. Also, the future-use of the venue is shrouded in doubt, given the city's local club, Olympiets Nizhny Novgorod, does not compete in the country's top-flight Russian Premier League.

Kazan is another host city on the Volga—the longest river in Europe—with a 45,000-seater stadium that has been open since 2013, serving as the home ground for Russian Premier League side Rubin Kazan. The newly-built Rostov Arena, located on the left bank of the Don river, will become home to Rostov, the 2014 Russian Cup winners.

The most westerly stadium is located in Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania. It's a new construction, with a seating capacity of 35,000 built at an estimated cost of \$280 million. Following the World Cup, it will be home to the small local club, Baltika.

Kaliningrad is not the only small city that was gifted an unnecessarily large stadium, far larger than the requirement to host the insignificant crowds than are drawn during local matches. A 45,000-seater has sprouted in Saransk—a tiny republic in the province of Mordovia with a popula-

tion of about 835,000. The same holds true for Volgograd, which now boasts of an arena that can soak in nearly 50,000 spectators. Once the World Cup ends, the Volgograd Arena will be home to football club Rotor, which saw an average of 3,800 spectators in the most recently concluded season.

The city of Sochi isn't even blessed with a local club team that could take over the Fisht Stadium, which was built for the 2014 Winter Olympics. The authorities claim they have other plans for this off-track venue—use it for the Russian national team's training camps and also channel a majority of their international friendlies in the coming years.

The allure of this World Cup in Russia is that its vastness and geography ensures travelling fans will be forced to embrace these satellite centres that aren't on Russia's tourist trail—rural cities and small towns that one wouldn't have visited otherwise. This is good for Russian tourism. With close to two million fans expected, Russian officials are certain tourism alone can boost the country's economy.

Leonid Slutsky, former head coach of the national team, may have once infamously described his country as a "non-footballing nation" (he was fed up with their poor performances and poorer ticket sales) and many may have grudgingly agreed with him. Just 30 days of football across the country, with the entire world watching, shall set the record straight; that football, indeed, is the Russia's number one sport, greater even than their other love, ice hockey.

"I think football is the greatest love of our population—kids love it, adults cheer for their teams, for Spartak, Lokomotiv," says Georgy, 22, a student at the People's Friendship University of Russia. "Football plays a really big role in our sports culture. People sometimes don't realise that we have a lot of fans closely following the national team as well as other foreign teams," says Ivan, 23, a sailor.

Whether football is truly the most popular sport in the country is a debate for another time. But what hosting this World Cup will most certainly do is draw the interest of every man, woman and child in Russia towards the game for the duration of the tournament. Whether their collective interest remains piqued once it ends will depend on how well the national team performs on home soil. But for now, the world is watching. As are we. ■


**AMID
THE TENSE
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ATMOSPHERE,
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DISCOVER RUSSIA
IS AN OPEN AND
WELCOMING
NATION**



Ekaterina Motyakina is a Moscow-based freelance journalist who writes on Russian culture and society

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Ramana M, Hyderabad



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GOLDEN FEET

32 TEAMS. 32 STARS

BY ADITYA IYER



MO SALAH

EGYPT 

Until the season gone by began, Salah was a nobody in the larger scheme of things. He was a Chelsea reject and had been sold by Roma to Liverpool—where he would go on to have one of the greatest breakthroughs ever; so great that he would now be spoken about in the same breath as Ronaldo and Messi. In the 2017-18 season, the forward netted 44 goals, 11 of those to take outsiders Liverpool all the way to the Champions League final (even the staunchest Scouser wouldn't have expected that) and 32 goals in the English Premier League to ensure his club's European participation next season. Then, during his finest hour at the Kiev final, two weeks ahead of his first-ever showing at a World Cup for the Pharaohs, disaster struck in the first half of the match. Salah was wrestled to the ground by Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos—a move that caused enough damage to his shoulder for him to be ruled out of Egypt's opening World Cup game, but thankfully not the entire tournament.



LUIS SUÁREZ
URUGUAY 

Suárez is Uruguay's leading goal-scorer with 50 goals, five of which were scored in the last two World Cups. The Barcelona striker was the hero of his country's campaign in the 2010 World Cup (they finished fourth) and the villain of the 2014 edition, after he was suspended for nine games for biting Italy's Giorgio Chiellini.



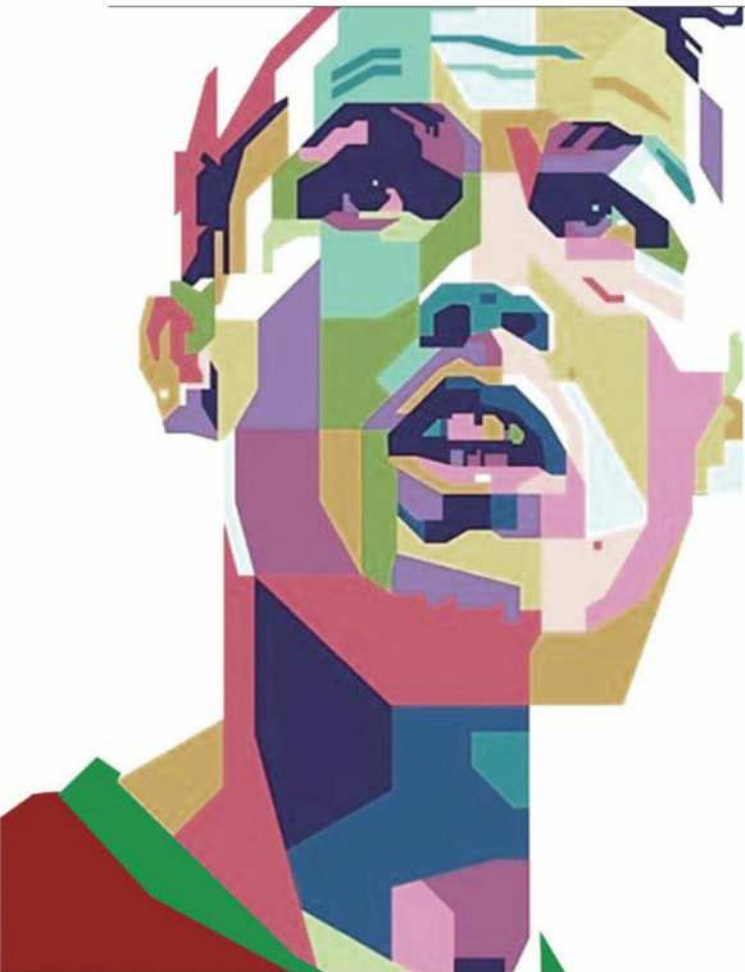
IGOR AKINFEEV
RUSSIA 

Akinfeev is Russia's most capped goalkeeper ever, with 105 appearances, and the unanimous leader of a mediocre football team. The 32-year-old stands between his side's slim chance of making it to the knock-outs and becoming only the second host nation (after South Africa) to crash out in the first round.



AL-SAHLAWI
SAUDI ARABIA 

Al-Sahlawi netted 16 goals in the World Cup qualifiers, the most by any player anywhere in the world, to drag Saudi Arabia to their fifth World Cup appearance, ending a dozen-year wait. Although he hasn't attracted the European scouts yet, Manchester United did invite him to train with their first team to prep him for Russia 2018.



CRISTIANO RONALDO

PORTUGAL 

Since Portugal's group stage exit at the previous World Cup, Ronaldo has spent the last four years collecting trophies. Between Brazil and Russia, he has single-handedly won three consecutive Champions League titles for Real Madrid, where he has maximised his potential to become an all-time legend, reflected in his four Ballon d'ors (FIFA's top prize for player of the year). Apart from that, Ronaldo has also led Portugal to a most unexpected intercontinental win in the form of the Euro 16 cup—overwhelming proof that teams powered by the brains and willpower of one man can be the difference in a fiercely-contested tournament. Still, World Cups are rarely, if never, won by teams consisting of just highly-talented individuals. But Ronaldo, and for that matter Portugal, will be keen to prove otherwise in Russia. With his explosive presence anywhere on a football field (including by the manager's tramlines, as seen in the Euro 16 final), it will be fair to say that Ronaldo personifies his country's prayer for success.



DAVID DE GEA

SPAIN 

The finest goalie in the world today, De Gea is yet to play a World Cup match—benched for the entirety of Spain's calamitous 2014 campaign. But now his time has come, having replaced World Cup-winning captain Iker Casillas as La Roja's first-choice goalie. Those are big gloves to fill; but the 27-year-old is used to it, having helped Manchester United fans move on from the Edwin Van Der Sar era.



SARDAR AZMOUN

IRAN 

Azmoun is no Ali Daei (Iran's leading goalscorer with 109 goals, a world record) yet. But with the attack-minded Daei as his team's coach and with the experience of having played in Russia (for club Rubin Kazan), the 23-year-old striker is the singular hope of a nation that hasn't gone past the first round of a World Cup in four previous attempts.



MEHDI BENATIA

MOROCCO 

The 31-year-old Benatia is Morocco's most decorated player ever, having played nearly his entire career in top-flight European clubs—Marseille, Udinese, Roma, Bayern Munich and his current side, Juventus. The centre-back played a crucial role in ensuring Morocco reaching Russia—the Atlas Lions were the only African side to end the qualifiers without conceding a goal.



ANTOINE GRIEZMANN

FRANCE 

Griezmann's finest achievement, even greater than his stellar role as the heart of Atletico Madrid in the last few seasons, has been to get his country to focus on football when France's squad for the 2018 World Cup was announced. Because, in the recent past, Le Bleu squads sparked incredible controversies. Whether it was slapping striker Karim Benzema with a suspension before Euro 16 (for allegedly blackmailing teammate Mathieu Valbuena with a sex tape) or banning centreforward Nicolas Anelka for celebrating with an anti-semitic salute ahead of World Cup 14, or snubbing forward Samir Nasri, France have entered tournaments in a wrangle of off-field problems. With the 27-year old Griezmann in the prime of his goal-scoring life, all the talk back in France (and around the world) is now about his promise. During his first Euro appearance in 2016, in front of demanding home fans no less, the Atletico striker slotted in six goals to win the Golden Boot and also get France into the final.



CHRISTIAN ERIKSEN

DENMARK 

Denmark would've missed out on their second straight World Cup if not for their new superstar Eriksen and his glut of goals (11)—including a hattrick against Ireland in the final play-off match. Tottenham's attacking midfielder, who is widely considered to be Michael Laudrup's reincarnation back home, could well power the Danes into becoming the dark horse of the tournament.



TIM CAHILL

AUSTRALIA 

Cahill is to Australian football what Don Bradman is to their cricket—he holds every Socceroos record in town. He has played the most matches (105), scored the most goals (50), played the most World Cups (this will be his fourth) and scored at least one goal in all of them. At 38, Cahill will be the oldest striker on display in Russia.



JEFFERSON FARFÁN

PERU 

Peru might not have been to a World Cup for 36 years, but they head to Russia at a time when their greatest-ever footballer, Farfán, is still around. He has been the apple of Peruvian eyes since he was 14 and for a while in his twenties, was even considered a heavyweight winger in European clubs. Now in his mid-thirties, Farfán has his first and final chance to repay his country's love.



LIONEL MESSI

ARGENTINA 

As remarkable as it sounds, Lionel Messi's legacy hinges on Russia 2018. Messi in the Albiceleste stripes is a dark, conflicted superhero compared to the white knight in Barcelona's colours. Since he shanked a free-kick high over Manuel Neuer's net in the dying seconds of Brazil 14, Messi's Argentina has lost two more major finals—to Chile, both on penalty shootouts, in back-to-back Copa Americas, the second of which sent him into (temporary) international retirement. But football romantics will believe all roads have led here. Russia might just be it for him. Twice over, this might have been a Messi-less World Cup—he not only un-retired himself after three consecutive final defeats, but also single-handedly dragged a below-par Argentina through qualifiers, scoring a hat-trick against Ecuador in their do-or-die game game. Now Argentina are here. As an underdog. And the shadow of Maradona is looming large. The greatest to have ever played the beautiful game looks incomplete without a Jules Rimet trophy in his hands.



LUKA MODRIC

CROATIA 

Technically, Luka Modric is the finest footballer Croatia has ever produced. His club side, Real Madrid will vouch for this fact, with the 32-year-old playmaker having played an integral role in Madrid's four Champions League wins in the last five years. But in Croatia, he continues to live in the shadow of Davor Suker, who took his country all the way to the semi-final of the 1998 World Cup.



GYLFI SIGURÐSSON

ICELAND 

Iceland made a fairytale big-stage debut at Euro 16 in France, where they made the quarters, relegating England on the way. In the whirlwind that was their campaign, Sigurðsson's style-of-play held the romance together. Everton's attacking midfielder prefers to find the back of the net during non-friendlies, with nearly every international goal scored in Euro and World Cup qualifiers.



VICTOR MOSES

NIGERIA 

Nigeria have been World Cup constants for 24 years. Not once, though, have they moved past the pre-quarters. The 27-year-old Moses can change that. The Chelsea wingback was a product of England's youth system. But snubbed by its senior team, Moses decided to move back to the country where his parents were killed, instantly handing Nigeria their only intercontinental trophy in 20 years.



NEYMAR JR

BRAZIL

The last time Brazil won a World Cup, in 2002, a great striker had found salvation after living with the horrors of a campaign-gone-sour for four years. Brazil's Ronaldo could well be Neymar's inspiration for Russia 18. Until Neymar was kneed in the spine by a Colombian defender in the quarter-finals of the 2014 World Cup, the Brazil edition was all that it was built up to be—Copa das Copas, or the Cup of Cups. But when Neymar went down, clutching his back and his eyes sprinkling tears, it was a sign of things to come; a bad omen that would soon go on to erupt into a nation-wide nightmare. The country's great hope and top-scorer of the World Cup had been ruled out with a broken vertebra. And without their inspirational No 10, Brazil lost 7-1 to Germany in the semi-final. All of Brazil slipped into mourning and the Paris St Germain striker began counting down the long days to redeem himself in Russia.



KEYLOR NAVAS

COSTA RICA

Navas was the breakout goalkeeper in Brazil 14, keeping clean-sheets against both Italy and England to help Costa Rica make it into the knock-outs. He was the star in the penalty shootouts versus Greece in the pre-quarters and the valiant hero in the penalty shootouts versus Holland. All that got him a gig with Real Madrid, where he has been their No 1 goalie in a hattrick of Champions League titles.



XHERDAN SHAQIRI

SWITZERLAND

Switzerland's only claim-to-fame moment after 1954 was defeating Spain during their World Cup winning campaign. Until, in 2014, the Kosovo-born Shaqiri showed up, scored a hattrick against Honduras, sealed his country's presence in the knockouts, and all hope broke loose. A nation's hope to do better lingers in Russia, in the form of the prolific Stoke City forward.



NEMANJA MATIĆ

SERBIA

Matić is quite simply the biggest name among many Serbians who have found first-team homes in big clubs all over Europe. Manchester United's defensive midfielder, Matić plays just ahead of defenders Branislav Ivanovic and Aleksander Kolarov—the three constituting the bedrock of Serbia's defence. It also tells you why Serbia lost just one match during the qualifiers.



THOMAS MÜLLER

GERMANY 

Müller could possibly be the player that opposition think-tanks spend the most amount of time discussing, strategising against and mulling over before a game against Germany at a World Cup. The Bayern Munich playmaker has played all of two World Cups—2010 and 2014—and has slotted home a total of 10 goals, split precisely into two halves of five in each edition. In Russia, going by how blessed these quadrennials have been for him, he will surely surpass the great Pele (12 goals in 4 editions) and reel in compatriot and fellow Cup winner Miroslav Klose, the all-time leading goalscorer in World Cups, with 16. Despite playing a pivotal role for Munich, who've won the last six Bundesliga titles in a row, Müller has had a couple of quiet scoring seasons with his club. But if Germany are to successfully defend their title in Russia, they will rely heavily on their vice-captain's assistance. After all, a Müller goal for Germany can't be too far away.



JAVIER HERNANDEZ

MEXICO 

Hernandez is the only Premier League player in Osorio's squad to travel to Russia. The West Ham striker is Mexico's leading goalscorer with 49 goals in 100 appearances. All eyes were on Chicharito (or 'little pea' as he is known) during the 2014 edition as well, but he scored just once in Mexico's run to the pre-quarters. Four years on, the nation turns to him once again.



SON HYEUNG-MIN

SOUTH KOREA 

No South Korean team has relied as much on one star as Shin Tae-Yong's side depends on the 25-year-old Son. Tottenham's incredible winger and playmaker has a penchant for finding the back of the net too—he is now Asia's top goalscorer of all time in the English Premier League, with 30 goals. Son will have the support of the next best (24 goals) on the EPL list, Swansea's Ki Sung-Yueng.



EMIL FORSBERG

SWEDEN 

In Germany's Leipzig, Forsberg is already quite the legend, having helped the club during their breakthrough season in the Bundesliga in 2017. But at home in Sweden, the winger is still living in the shadow of Zlatan Ibrahimovic—the country's alpha male despite not having taken Sweden to the last two World Cups. Ibra has now retired and Forsberg has his chance to wean his country off an old obsession.



HARRY KANE

ENGLAND 

Riding on Kane's chiselled shoulders are not just the hopes of English football, but also the burden of history; a history of devastation following World Cup failure. The Tottenham striker, and England's brightest prospect in Russia by a country mile, has to pull off what Hoddle, Lineker, Gascoigne, Shearer, Beckham, Rooney and Gerrard (men previously in his shoes, in his predicament) failed to do in the past—return home from a World Cup campaign with a smile on his face. But in Kane, England trusts a clean slate. The 24-year-old is too young to be scarred by the past (this will be his first World Cup) and has gone on a goal-scoring run never seen before in the English Premier League. In 2017, the man known as the Hurricane—Harry Kane, get it?—set the record for most goals scored in one calendar year: 39. The streak wasn't specific to the year as he finished the 2017-18 season with 41 goals, Kane's fourth consecutive season as Tottenham's leading goalscorer.



KEVIN DE BRUYNE

BELGIUM 

De Bruyne has replaced Eden Hazard as the face that represents his country's era of glut. The playmaker was one of the primary reasons why his club, Manchester City, won the league with a handful of games to spare. No one was surprised when Belgium made the quarters of Brazil 14, and few will bat an eyelid if De Bruyne takes them a step or two further in Russia.



GABRIEL GÓMEZ

PANAMA 

Panama's maiden appearance at the World Cup stage is being credited to Roman Torres, the defender who scored the all-important goal against Costa Rica that booked Panama's spot in Russia. But the real engine of this side is midfielder and captain Gómez, who has earned quite a reputation for creating moments at Atletico Bucaramanga, the Colombian club he represents.



NAÏM SLITI

TUNISIA 

An injury has ruled out Tunisia's leading man, winger-striker Youssef Msakni, making 27-year-old striker Sliti the focus of a nation's prayer. After their glory days of making three back-to-back World Cups, the north African country is back on the big stage after 12 years—with the hope of Tunisia making it past the group stages for a first time resting on Sliti's shoulders.



SADIO MANÉ

SENEGAL 

Mané was a 10-year-old when Senegal last made it to a World Cup in 2002, which was also his country's first appearance. The current Senegalese superstar must have watched in awe as his heroes, led by Aliou Cisse, took the Korea-Japan edition by storm—defeating defending champions France in the opening game and going on to bulldoze their way to the quarters. That performance was seen as a one-off, until Cisse became coach in 2015 and with a little help from Mané, navigated a struggling team through terrain fiercer than the fabled Dakar Rally, all the way to Russia. And once again, hopes have soared in Senegal, given that their team boasts of one of the finest finishers in the game today. In the final of the Champions League, Mané scored Liverpool's only goal; but his greatest feat that night was to take charge of a weakened side, coming into his own once Mo Salah limped off. It showed everyone watching what Mané is made of.



ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI

POLAND 

Lewandowski wasn't even born when Poland had peaked on the global stage—finishing third in two World Cups, 1974 and 1982 respectively. But now, the Bayern Munich striker is singlehandedly threatening to help his countrymen relive those days of glory, having thumped in a European record 16 goals during the World Cup qualifiers.



JAMES RODRIGUEZ

COLOMBIA 

All of Colombia panicked when their superstar goalscorer, Radamel Falcao, didn't recover in time for Brazil 14. Falcao who, asked James Rodriguez, then a 22-year old upstart—scoring and assisting goals for fun. He scored in each of Colombia's group games and twice—the second of which was the goal of the tournament—in the pre-quarters. The Golden Boot was his and a superstar was born.



KEISUKE HONDA

JAPAN 

If not for an eleventh hour change of Japan's head coach, Honda, the only Japanese player to score in two World Cups (2010 and 2014), wouldn't have featured in Russia. The versatile midfielder, incredibly, was made a pariah by former coach Vahid Halilhodžić for the World Cup qualifiers. In April, Halilhodžić got the sack, replaced by Akira Nishino, whose first call of duty was to reach back for Honda.

VIT RECEIVES GREEN AWARD FROM TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT

Chief Minister Mr. Edappadi K. Palaniswami hands over award to VIT Vice President Mr. G.V.Selvam



In recognition of its immense contribution towards increasing green cover of Vellore, its efforts to protect and rejuvenate Palar river also to conserve natural resources in Vellore district, India's Premier Private educational institution – Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) has been given the Green Award for the year 2017 by the Tamil Nadu Government.

Chief Minister Mr. Edappadi K. Palaniswami handed over the prestigious award to Mr. G.V.Selvam, Vice President of the VIT at the Secretariat.

The coveted award is given each year

to District Collectors, Industrial Units and Educational Institutions by the Tamil Nadu government. The award is recognition of efforts to conserve and protect nature and natural resources, promote and create the concept of environment protection and also to acknowledge efforts taken to reduce pollution.

VIT has been acknowledged as the best educational institution for protecting the environment. It is to be noted that VIT has planted several thousand saplings year after year not just in Vellore town, but also in different places in the rest of the

district to reduce the impact of the heat wave in the district. The institution has a VIT Nature Club under the Green Vellore Project and has distributed several thousand saplings to students as part of efforts to imbibe the spirit of environment protection from a very young age.

The Green Vellore project, launched in 2008 aims at increasing green cover, water body restoration, and creation of traffic Islands and parks in and around Vellore city. Further, VIT also launched the Palar River Clean Up Project and has reaped rich dividends from all quarters. ■



ROMANCI

By defeating Germany in the 2002 World Cup final in Yokohama, Brazil won their fifth title

The beautiful legacy of the last redeemer

— BY DILEEP PREMACHANDRAN —

IN THE 68TH MINUTE, Júnior, the marauding left-back, cut infield, ran towards the area and then played a nonchalant pass with the outside of his boot. With the Italian defenders dropping back to keep an eye on the players further forward, Falcão shimmied this way and that to create space before lashing a left-foot shot past Dino Zoff and into the far corner. Italy had led from the 25th minute, when Toninho Cerezo's careless square ball let in Paolo Rossi for his second of the game, but with just over 20 minutes remaining, Brazil were on their way to the semi-finals of the 1982 World Cup.

“That was the moment we should have shut up shop and said, ‘Let’s get players behind the ball and everyone defending,’” said Serginho, the oft-criticised centre forward, in a documentary on international football’s greatest teams. “And I’m sure Italy wouldn’t have scored against us. We lacked intelligence. That’s the best word.”

Luizinho, the centre-back, tells a similar story. “I remember in that game, Oscar and I shouting at the full-backs [Leandro and Júnior] to stay back when it was 2-2. But they wanted to win the game. Our coach, Telê, wanted to win the game. To be honest, I don’t think we played with enough humility. We all lacked humility, from the management to the

NG BRAZIL



players. We had two chances to hold on to the draw and we went for the win instead.”

Seven minutes after Falcão’s goal, the 15th that Brazil had scored in five matches in Spain, an Italian corner was cleared only as far as Marco Tardelli on the edge of the penalty area. His mis-hit shot found Rossi in acres of space in the six-yard box. The denouement was inevitable. In the quarter hour that remained, a defence immaculately marshalled by the legendary Gaetano Scirea repelled every Brazilian effort to find a third equaliser. And just like that, the dream was over.

“That team was football in its purest form,” said Júnior. “If Brazil had won, I think other national teams would have copied us and our style. But that didn’t happen. Whoever wins is doing it right. And as Italy won, everyone wanted to copy Italy.”

But it wasn’t just a dream that died on July 5th, 1982, at the Estadi de Sarrià in Barcelona. A style of play was jettisoned too, and replaced by more pragmatic, some would say colourless, methods. When Brazil won the World Cup in 1958, they did so scoring 16 goals in six matches. In 1970, the team widely considered the greatest ever, put 19 past their opponents in six games.

Those that argue that such numbers were the


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result of mediocre defending have no clue what they’re talking about. In 1970, Brazil’s toughest game was against an England side that had Bobby Moore in imperious form. A video of his performance in that game could still be used as a training manual for aspiring defenders. In the semis, Brazil beat Uruguay, who had conceded one goal in their previous four games. The team they overwhelmed in the final? Italy, masters of the defensive arts.

Even in 1982, Brazil didn’t have it all their own way. The Soviet Union, denied two penalties, kept them at bay for 75 minutes. It needed magical goals, from Sócrates and Éder, to give Brazil the points. Scotland too took the lead before being brushed aside by Zico’s banana free kick, Éder’s impudent chip and Falcão’s precise drive into the corner. Argentina were seen off with the help of an Éder free-kick that nearly broke bar—Zico tapped in the rebound—and a marvellous team goal that Júnior finished off.

With defeat, however, the narrative was distorted. “We all look back on that game with great sadness,” said Éder. “It didn’t just change Brazilian football. It changed world football. All the Spanish newspapers said the World Cup was over when we were knocked out.”

“We didn’t win, we didn’t even reach the semi-



final,” in Éder’s words, “And it’s not just in Brazil, the whole world remembers our team from 82, and that makes us so happy.”

After the game, when Telê Santana, the coach, walked in for the press conference, hundreds of journalists gave him a standing ovation. But more than three decades on, Santana is a symbol of failure in a world increasingly obsessed with the bottom line. “I’d rather coach a team than a group of great players,” said Jose Mourinho in an interview. “Italy was a great team, with a square, pragmatic, objective coach.”

Brazil weren’t the only story of that World Cup though. The first tournament to feature 24 teams, Spain 1982 offered us the first hint that there was more to football than Europe and South America. There had been stray instances earlier—North Korea upsetting Italy in 1966, Tunisia holding West Germany in 1978—but it was in 1982 that the new order really began to make its presence felt.

Algeria beat both West Germany and Chile and were eliminated only as a result of the disgraceful complicity between the Germans and Austria. Cameroon drew each of their three games, including against Italy, and exited the tournament only on the basis of goals scored. What many of those teams lacked, however, was the tactical

The team at the 1982 World Cup in Spain; (left) Brazil beats Italy in a penalty shootout to win USA 94


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GENERATION**

discipline to control games.

That began to change as the world’s finest players made a beeline for Europe’s leagues. South Korea’s Cha Bum-kun was one of the Asian pioneers, while Rabah Madjer, who scored for Algeria against West Germany, would go on to score the winning goal in a European Cup final. African football, with its best players now playing across the Mediterranean, took its next big step in 1990, as Cameroon’s Indomitable Lions reached the quarter-finals, losing to England only in extra time.

Nigeria would have emulated them, if not for a late, late goal from Italy’s Roberto Baggio in the round-of-16 clash at USA 94. The Nigerians upset Spain four years later, but as with their predecessors from Cameroon, they were let down by lack of discipline and discord behind the scenes. Asia’s big moment came in 2002, as South Korea, the co-hosts, reached the semi-finals, even if some of the refereeing decisions that went in their favour against Spain and Italy left much to be desired.

That was the year Brazil won the World Cup for a fifth time. Ronaldo, Rivaldo and Ronaldinho provided sprinklings of stardust as they scored 18 goals across the seven games, but the style of play was almost European, based on excellent organisation, a sound defence and midfielders who worked hard with and without the ball. Gilberto Silva and Kléberson were excellent at breaking up play and feeding the ball to that exceptional front trio, but no one would ever have accused them of being in the Sócrates-Falcão-Cerezo class.

Still, they were an improvement on the 1994 champions led by Dunga. By then, after 24 years without the trophy and driven by the need not to repeat the mistakes of the past, Brazil were almost unrecognisable from the entertainers of an earlier generation. Romario and Bebeto up front provided flair and goals—just 11 across seven matches—but the workmanlike midfield with Dunga at its heart was far removed from fantasy.

And Brazil weren’t the only ones. Pace and power became the primary concerns for most coaches, with the maverick playmakers increasingly sidelined. The most ludicrous example of that came in 1998, when Daniel Passarella refused to pick Fernando Redondo for the Argentina squad. The heartbeat of a wonderful Real Madrid side, Passarella left him out allegedly because Redondo, a liberal who had been uncomfortable with the idea of playing under Carlos Bilardo—another win-at-all-costs coach—as well, wouldn’t cut his hair.

France, whose Euro 1984 side were almost as good to watch as the 82 Brazilians, also went the

dour way. The 84 midfield of Michel Platini, Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana and Luis Fernandez was as good as any Europe has seen, and Platini—the captain and talisman—scored nine of the 14 goals (in just five games) as France swept to the title. But when France finally won the World Cup 14 years later, they did so with a target man, Stéphane Guivarc’h, who would have struggled to hit a barn door.

That side, of course, had Zinedine Zidane, but in most cases, teams didn’t risk fielding more than one such ‘luxury’ player in the XI. The idea of Brazil-1970-like attacking options—Pele, Jairzinho, Gerson, Tostao and Rivelino—was almost unthinkable.

But after three straight World Cups won by European teams, the tide may finally be on the way out. Spain in 2010 and Germany four years later were hardly boring to watch, producing some sensational displays on their way to the trophy. But both played a system that came naturally, and with the personnel perfectly suited for it. A Brazil or an Argentina, when they tried to imitate them, usually floundered. At his Barcelona peak, Lionel Messi was surrounded by Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Luis Suarez and Neymar. The Argentine national team has Ever Banega in midfield. Xavi, he isn’t.

African nations too have disappointed in recent years by trying to fit their players into a tactical straitjacket that doesn’t fit. Cameroon and Nigeria were so frightening a generation ago because they allied pace and power with the trickery of men like Cyril Makanaky and Jay Jay Okocha.

The biggest transformation has been in Brazil, humiliated 7-1 by Germany on home turf four years ago. Under Dunga, they often played dire football, what Argentine great Jorge Valdano once referred to as ‘shit on a stick’. But under Tite, you can see glimpses of the old Brazil. The coach who was mentored by Luis Felipe Scolari, another of the pragmatists, cut his teeth in his homeland instead of following the gravy train to Europe. And in Tite’s sides, you can see the best of both worlds.

The defence and midfield have a solidity that is the envy of many European sides, and the attacking options are capable of playing Samba football. Where four years ago, the onus was squarely on Neymar, the load now is shared with the likes of Gabriel Jesus and Philippe Coutinho. Liverpool’s Roberto Firmino, not even likely to start, is as complete a forward as any.

Marcelo on the left brings back memories of Júnior and his rampaging runs, and in Allison and Ederson, Brazil have two goalkeepers of the highest quality. Since Tite took charge after the Copa America



Pele holds aloft the trophy after Brazil defeated Italy in Mexico, 1970

TIME WILL TELL IF BRAZIL’S TITE DOES AWAY WITH THE HANDBRAKE AND LETS THE ATTACKING QUINTET RUN RIOT AS THEY DID IN 1970 AND AGAIN 12 YEARS LATER

debacle in 2016, Brazil have won 15 and drawn three matches. The only loss was in a friendly against Argentina, who they thumped 3-0 in the World Cup qualifiers.

Time will tell if Tite does away with the handbrake and lets the attacking quintet run riot as they did in 1970 and again 12 years later. For some, there is more at stake than results. Sócrates, who passed away in 2011, was convinced that there was more to Brazilian football than victories and trophies. “I come across as football’s Che Guevara, don’t I?” he said in an interview with *FourFourTwo* 18 months before he passed away. “I notice that. There’s a need, in the modern society, for people who instigate thinking, who don’t accept the status quo.”

“There’s a fascination with people who question established ideas, like I do. I wish much more people had that attitude,” he added. “I measure success by the experiences we live; and to play for a side like that [1982] is like dating the woman you’re in love with.”

We’ll soon find out whether the inheritors of that magnificent legacy are imbued with the same romantic spirit. ■



Dileep Premachandran is a sports columnist for The Independent, Mint Lounge and Arab News. He was formerly editor-in-chief of Wisden India

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THE FAULT IN THEIR STARS

You cannot mention Messi without bringing up Maradona. The mood in Argentina is one between gratitude and grudge

BY **MUGIL BHASKAR**
IN BUENOS AIRES



ONE OF THE favourite sports journalistic tropes is the setting up of a player, preferably a great, in the larger context of the aspirations of the country. The idea that you begin with the simple-enough story of the rise of this genius, and you keep pulling on that thread and before long you have the entire social tapestry. Kids growing up in the 90s anywhere in India would later be told how Sachin Tendulkar came to symbolise their generation; that of post-liberalisation India. It does make for good copy,

Messi with Maradona, who was Argentina's coach then, at Johannesburg 2010

whether or not the assertion is true. It is the kind of story you would want to believe in, lending as it does a respectable sheen to more complicated feelings about identity and nationalism.


With Lionel Messi, on the first signs of a tug, what (or, rather who) tumbles out in conversations is Diego Armando Maradona. ('Complicated Tango' is the *New York Times* description of the association.) It seems you cannot mention Messi without bringing up Maradona, and after the pleasantries ('Yes, they are both great players'), there is always the lingering feeling that, with Messi, despite his tremendous success at the club level, there is a debt



REUTERS

that remains unpaid to the country. Another *NYT* article runs with the uncompromising headline of 'In Argentina, Messi is not as loved as Maradona'.

Argentine writer Eduardo Sacheri, in his article *No Es Tu Culpa* (It Is Not Your Fault), makes a point about how this need to build narratives around heroes gets in the way of appreciating someone like Messi as he is, or deserves to be. Sacheri is the author of the book on which was made *The Secret in Their Eyes* (2009), which remains only the second Argentine movie to win an Oscar. The author also collaborated on its script. A particularly memorable sequence is pictured in the stadium of club side Rac-


**MARADONA IS
REMEMBERED
WHILE MESSI IS
EXPERIENCED.
WHICH IS TO SAY,
IN REMEMBRANCE,
MARADONA
BELONGS TO AN ERA**

ing. An aerial shot tracks a passage of play in which the ball pings off the crossbar and into the crowd, and seamlessly, we are with the hero Ricardo Darin and his side-kick, on the lookout for a suspect in the crowd. Though he left Argentina at the age of 13 and has practically lived in Spain since, it is said that Messi retains the accent of his native Rosario and counts Darin as his favourite actor.

Riffing on the 'It is not your fault' scene from *Goodwill Hunting*, Sacheri in *No Es Tu Culpa* plays the shrink to Argentina's obsession with Messi, or more exactly, Messi leading Argentina to World Cup glory and matching Maradona. He insists it's

not Messi's fault that the country isn't coming out of a dictatorship or a disastrous war, as was the case with Maradona in 1986, it is not his fault that the two had different personalities—within the same conversation, people mention Messi as a role model for youngsters while simultaneously yearning for the spirit of Maradona, his *viveza creollo*, the street-smartness and disregard for rules, to take hold of the national side (for anyone familiar with fandom, this holding of contradictory beliefs will not come across as a surprise), and that it is a disservice to compare a player whose career was done and over with that of someone who still had plenty left to give (the article was written when Messi was in his early 20s).

La Nación, one of Argentina's leading dailies, runs a grim infographic under the headline: 'World Cups and crisis, the constants that mark Argentina's history', listing World Cup years with the corresponding domestic catastrophe: 1974 and the death of General Juan Perón, 1978 and the military dictatorship, 1982 and the war over the disputed Malvinas/Falkland Islands, 1990 and hyperinflation, 2002 and the sovereign default and economic crisis that plunged millions of middle-class Argentines into poverty.

In May 2018, Argentina went back to seeking IMF assistance after the peso fell by more than 20 per cent. The decision of Argentina's President Mauricio Macri to seek IMF help to restructure the country's external debt (which was becoming more difficult to pay back after the devaluation) and calm the financial markets has been met with a lot of scepticism. The IMF and its conditionalities are believed by many to have exacerbated the economic woes of the country, leading to the default, the crisis and *corralito* (the freezing of bank accounts) of 2001. The failure to pay creditors back locked Argentina out of the international debt market. Unsurprisingly, a TV commentator uses a football analogy to make his point. "The referee blows for a penalty. Even if you don't agree, you concede the goal and play on. You don't walk out of the World Cup in protest." To further complicate things, inflation in 2018 is expected to be over 30 per cent. In 2017, it was 24 per cent. In 2016, it was above 40 per cent. The years before that, inflation was so high that the country's then government simply decided not to publish the data, it is said.

The weakening peso and complicated history with the IMF brought several thousand protestors on to the streets. An Argentine sports journalist remarks wryly that Messi just needs to win the World Cup, and a report he has filed opens with an Earl Warren quote ("I always turn to the sports pages first, which records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but man's failures").



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It is not perhaps the lack of a crisis (or World Cup win) that holds the Messi myth back, but the fact that though still alive, Maradona is primarily remembered while Messi is experienced. Which is to say, in remembrance, Maradona belongs to an era. His later day shenanigans do not really matter. He is relived through the words of writers, through songs and movies. Sacheri, Eduardo Galeano, Roberto Fontanarrosa and Osvaldo Soriano (whose vignette on El Diego remains my favourite), to name a few, have written and spoken about Maradona extensively.

Soriano's story goes like this. The author runs into Maradona in a bar in Rome and feigns indifference to the star's stardom. It works, and Maradona places an orange on his head and in a few seconds makes it dance and bounce over every curve of his body without dropping it once. He turns around and asks the writer how many times the orange touched his hand. "Never," shouts Soriano. "No, once," replies Maradona with a grin. "But there is no referee in the world quick enough for me." The anecdote is prominently fixed in the Soriano universe. It may well be true. There is no way to find out.

THE WIKIPEDIA ENTRY on Maradona lists 11 songs and three movies in his honour among plenty more. I have met people who recalled verbatim the frantic, hallucinatory commentary of the Uruguayan Víctor Hugo Morales who happened to be on air the day Maradona scored the double against England in the 1986 World Cup. The English translation, inadequate and soul-killing, as Morales calls it on air during the second of the two goals, widely con-



GETTY IMAGES

Supporters cheer as the bus with Argentina's football team leaves a training centre in Buenos Aires

sidered 'the goal of the century', runs:

"There he has the ball, Maradona. There are two marking him. He steps on the ball. He sets off to the right, the genius of world football. He can pass it to Burruchaga, but Maradona forever! Genius, genius, genius, tá, tá, tá, gol, goool, gooooooool!! I want to cry, dear God, long live football! Golazoo! Diegol! Maradona! This is to cry for, so pardon me. Maradona, on a memorable run, in a play for all time. The cosmic kite, which planet did you come from? To leave in your wake so many Englishmen, so that the land is a clenched fist, screaming for Argentina! Argentina 2, England 0. Diegol, Diegol. Diego Armando Maradona. Thank you God, for football, for Maradona, for these tears."

In contrast, in the must-win World Cup qualifier this year against Ecuador, as Messi dragged Argentina into the lead after having conceded in the first minute, the commentator on national television finds his world shrink. "Mesiiiiii, gol, gol gol! Messi, Messi, Messi, fútbol, fútbol, fútbol." With Maradona, the joy of watching him play was more or less restricted to experiencing it live or through radio or TV, and later, if lucky, to catching a few of the more memorable moments on VHS tape. The rest was down to recollections, shared memories and the produce of culture, both high-brow and popular. In Messi's case, videos of each of his goals, each feint and swivel are easily available on the internet. The oversaturated coverage requires little or no additional commentary.

Messi, of course, is a relatively constant presence on TV, especially during the World Cup season. Beyond the ads for a range of products, from cars to chips (in which he appears comfortable with the camera on), Messi is a part of popular culture in unexpected ways. The morning news speaks of 'Nenes bien' or good kids, used ironically to refer to a band of

20-somethings who held day jobs (one of them even worked for the city government), but on weekends broke into unoccupied houses in the richer suburbs of the city. To break through, they use what the band referred to as 'la gran Messi', their crowbar. A restaurant chef in a cook-off proffers his best offering, a hamburger, as "nuestra ganador, nuestra Messi" (our winner, our Messi). A friend remarks that Messi is not so much seen or experienced as he is consumed.

After the friendly win against Haiti, powered once more by a Messi hattrick, the Argentine squad is ready to leave for Spain (where they would train, travel to have an audience with the Pope) before travelling to Russia. It is also the day the Upper House is to pass a resolution to cut back on skyrocketing utility prices (gas and light bills, heavily subsidised earlier, have gone up by 10-15 times over two years, comfortably above the rate of inflation or increase in wages in the period). President Macri promises to veto the resolution as the law threatens the government's fiscal consolidation plans.

News coverage (typically, all TV shows on football are high on the passion-meter—five to eight experts disagreeing with each other for the length of the show, mimicking each other as a form of put down) alternates between footage of the Congress and scenes at the Ezeiza international airport in greater Buenos Aires. HD cameras zoom in on Whatsapp conversations of a Congressman readying for the vote ('Lucila threatens to abstain. I think I convinced her,' says a message. 'She is scheming,' comes the reply). At Ezeiza are gathered fans with banners ('Messi, bring us the Cup'), celebrating, chanting. The newscaster announces that the president, even as the Congress was getting ready to vote, would find time to meet the players before they leave the country. Can Messi save the government? So asks the ticker. And then a panellist says not what many would say in Argentina, let alone on national television.

"What is football today? It is a business. They use it to launder black money," says the anchor. "What if Messi wins the World Cup for us? We are where we are and we come back to the same mess." The programme ends, giving way to a broadcast of the lottery results of the province of Buenos Aires. Numbers flash as Black Strobe's *Madonna and Me* is pumped out in the background. The scenes at the airport, fans with Messi banners, continue to appear on a screen within the screen.

No Es Tu Culpa, Messi. It is not your fault. ■


**PEOPLE MENTION
 MESSI AS
 A ROLE MODEL
 FOR YOUNGSTERS
 WHILE
 SIMULTANEOUSLY
 YEARNING FOR
 THE SPIRIT OF
 MARADONA TO
 TAKE HOLD OF THE
 ARGENTINE SIDE**

Mugil Bhaskar is a translator based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He writes on economics, chess and football

CONFESSIONS ^{OF}/_A
FOOTBALL
HOO-LIGAN



FIGHT FOR YOUR TEAM



The emotional hurt of supporting England and other acts of violence

BY ANDY NICHOLLS

WORLD CUP TRIPS, following England, are never dull. They are, for the most part, fantastic in every sense. Other than the results, performances and inevitable failure in a penalty shootout, of course. Oh, and the fact that every hooligan, thug and member of the police force worldwide, rightly or wrongly, sees us, the followers of our national side, as the main enemy.

I was born in the early 1960s, and was just too young to remember the greatest day in English football history—when Bobby Moore proudly lifted the Jules Rimet Trophy following a 4-2 victory over (our) arch-rivals, West Germany. That day, how we celebrated as a nation and the song was born: 'Two World Wars and One World Cup... do dar do dar day.' How that song came back to haunt us. Far too many times.

Four years later, in 1970, I can just about remember my late father waking me up with the heart-breaking news from Mexico; that England had thrown away a two-goal lead against the same opposition (the West Germans) and were beaten 3-2 at the quarter-final stage. Even in 1970, that wretched song was being thrown back at us as the Germans began to dominate us on the football pitch.

At this point, English football fell upon hard times, so much so that we spectacularly failed to qualify for the 1974 tournament in West Germany. And then failed to make it to Argentina in 1978, where the hosts won the Cup on home soil. Those eight years were a low point in our history—the country that invented the beautiful game was so pathetic they couldn't make it to two back-to-back



IT SOON BECAME APPARENT THAT WATCHING ENGLAND PLAY ABROAD COULD BE PROFITABLE TOO. WE PILLAGED EVERYTHING WE COULD GET OUR HANDS ON

quadrennials. It was also no great surprise that within the English ranks, Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst and Alan Ball—our World Cup winners from 1966—had been replaced in the team by Emlyn Hughes, Kevin Keegan and Jimmy Case, respectively, and the beautiful game actually turned quite ugly.

By now the national side had inherited 'The English Disease' (the term widely used for people like me, UK hooligans) and football hooliganism was transported from the terraces at home to the countries hosting the England football team abroad. And the trail of destruction left on a far too regular basis meant that as a nation we not feared but hated.

For those who do not understand why and how one becomes a hooligan, it is probably hard to understand why thousands (yes thousands, and that's no exaggeration) of men simply decide to fight, rampage and pillage every town, city and country they visit while following the Three Lions around the world.

I will try and explain.

In the 70s and 80s, the United Kingdom had become a crumbling shit-hole. Our industry was on its knees, unemployment at its highest since the end of World War II and the unrest in our inner cities saw several outbreaks of mass rioting, as the youth on the streets had decided that enough was enough. The riots received global news, but the reports covered only the symptoms of the disease and not its cause. For years, the same youth had been behaving in a likewise manner, only this passion was concentrated inside the confines of a football ground on Saturday afternoons.

Why, you ask? Because it was exciting, a buzz from the mundane existence of our lives. And because we could freely give the two-finger salute (English for 'stuff it') to the authorities that we hated

so much more than they hated us. Of course, we also loved our football teams; mine was Everton and I followed and fought for them for the best part of forty years. During that time, I received everything from beatings to fines and bans (I was even sent to prison for my sins), but it didn't bother me one bit. I loved being who I was and I must confess that there was no better buzz in the world. Fact.


Back to the Three Lions; apart from the thrill of standing up for our team, it soon became apparent to us, the travelling fans, that watching England play abroad could be profitable as well. I won't flower it up. The truth is that we pillaged everything we could get our hands on, from tills full of cash, jewellery shops full of gold and silver, and even the continental sports shops, laden with designer sports clothes, weren't spared. We took the lot and the Football Casual (a term for hooligans wearing expensive casuals) culture was born. But that's another tale.

On the pitch, things got better during the World Cup in Spain in 1982 as England returned to the world stage. That joy too was short lived as we were eliminated in the group stages—by some bizarre goal difference permutation—despite not losing a game. Of course, then, England's elimination brought its fair share of problematic issues off the field as English fans fought with the locals, their rivals, the police and within themselves (in-house club rivalries were strained) after too much sun and far too much beer.

Mexico was the next country to host the world's greatest football tournament in 1986 and our hopes were high as manager Bobby Robson had assembled a great side with the likes of Gary Lineker and Peter Beardsley. We were hoping to emulate the 'Boys of 66' and we came so, so close. After a poor start, England gained momentum during the group stages and breezed into the quarter-finals, where we faced our (new) arch-rivals, Argentina. Why arch rivals? Because four years earlier we had been at war with them over the Falkland Islands and 255 British troops died fighting to take back an island which lay nearly 13,000 km away from Britain, I still can't work than one out to this day.

This fervour, this palpable hate between the two countries was expected to spill over on to the football stands of the enormous Stadium Azteca in Mexico City. A bloodbath was feared. But fortunately for all concerned, the Argentina vs England game, which was watched live by close to 115,000 spectators, was well secured and the hooligan element did not rise. In fact, the day passed off peacefully despite Diego Maradona's two goals in five minutes—the first was the infamous 'Hand of God' goal and the second an act of sheer brilliance—which edged out




**WITHIN HOURS
OF US SHOWING
UP, RIMINI HAD
TURNED INTO
A WAR ZONE.
WE FOUGHT
ALL THROUGH
THE NIGHT
WITH ITALIAN
LOCALS AND
THEIR POLICE**

England 2-1. I can assure you this. Had that very match unfolded anywhere in Europe at the same time, there would have been deaths in the stands.

We moved on to the next World Cup, Italia 90, and our brand of hooliganism had been earmarked as a major risk, to the extent that the authorities ensured that England's group games were played on the remote Islands of Sardinia and Sicily. We felt cheated, for it was a blatant attempt to keep us out of the big cities. But to be honest, we got rather fond of the Sardinians and Sicilians, who welcomed us English with open arms and in return they were given the peace and respect that their hospitality deserved.

Once again Robson's England qualified for the knock-out stages, and with our young and talented striker Paul Gascoigne pulling the strings, the newspapers back home in the UK had already begun making enough noise about winning the bloody



thing that we travelling supporters could hear it in Italy. The moment England made it to the Round of 16 we moved out of the islands and descended upon Rimini—within hours of us showing up, the place had turned into a war zone.

We fought all through the night with Italian locals and their police, who were not as welcoming as their island neighbours. As the blood and dust settled, we progressed past Belgium in the pre-quarters and then Cameroon in the quarters and we danced long into the night after both games. Partly because we were celebrating England's wins but mostly because Ecstasy had become the new craze. Now, us beer-swilling thugs had become pill-popping hugs.

The semi-final in Turin (against West Germany, who else) was billed to be the biggest game in the history of English football since that glorious Saturday in 1966. But delight quickly turned to despair


**WE ENGLISH
FANS DIDN'T
JUST BUMP
HEADS WITH
TUNISIAN GANGS.
WE SLICED AND
STABBED WITH
KNIVES FOR
AN ENTIRE DAY.
YES, ALL DAY
LONG**

as West Germany beat us on penalties. This loss by shootouts would set the precedent for future England teams as the highest paid footballers on the planet would fail miserably over and over again to hit the target from 12 yards, repeatedly failing us fans on the big stages. In Turin, we waved goodbye to the World Cup and the Italians waved goodbye to us—hoping we would never return. Such was the trail of injuries, the destruction left in our wake.

The emotional hurt of supporting England got worse four years later, as we once again failed to qualify for the World Cup. USA 94 beckoned until Graham Taylor's boys missed the boat at the expense of, well, Norway. We were now the laughing stock of the world. How the Germans laughed. 'Do dar do dar day.' Luckily, we didn't miss two World Cups in a row and I was on my way to France in 1998. The experience was bad, very bad.

On the field, we were poor but limped into the knock-out stages, where we would meet Argentina (again) in the Round of 16. Off the field, Marseille was the scene of some of the worst violence I have ever been a part of at any World Cup as English fans clashed with Tunisian gangs. We didn't just bump heads, we sliced and stabbed with knives for an entire day. Yes, all day long. We, of course, had become a liability for the French Police and they too joined in, beating and arresting anyone who remotely looked like 'an English thug'. There were plenty of easy pickings and the local jail was so full that several aircraft had to be chartered to deport us back to the Blighty. I, somehow, managed to stay back.

Following the arrests and the deportations, our numbers had dwindled and didn't have the resources for a fight. Lucky, I would say, as in the game against Argentina, David Beckham was sent off and once again we lost the game on penalties. Little did I know then that this would be my last World Cup as a travelling supporter for a while, for the next tournament was in South Korea and Japan and the British government decided to take control of the hooliganism that was getting out of hand and began placing FBOs (Football Banning Orders). Many of our passports were confiscated for the duration of the tournament, including mine.

Anyone with a history of causing violence was banned from travelling to Korea and Japan, which was a bit extreme because many of us wouldn't have travelled even without the ban. Why? The threat of being jailed in Japan put many of us off. We didn't miss much, another quarter-final, another defeat, another false dawn. The World Cup returned to Europe (Germany) four years later in 2006. As did the violence. But there was a small dif-



ference. We English fans had gone from being the hunters to the hunted, as local gangs—especially Eastern European thugs—began emulating us and became the worst hooligans on the block.

The story, however, was status quo on the field. The England team was the worst in many years and once our star striker Wayne Rooney was sent off during the quarter-final against Portugal, our slim chance had all but disappeared. It went to penalties. And that meant we were gone—England managed to score just once from the spot.

Travel costs and more football bans ensured that I, and many others, missed out on travelling to the World Cups of 2010 and 2014, in South Africa and Brazil respectively. Strict fan control policies didn't help England's chances either—we lost both in a whimper, but at least without the embarrassment of more penalty shootout failures. Our performance in Brazil especially was one of utter disgust, where we didn't make it out of the group stage. Still, thankful that the spot kick didn't cost us.

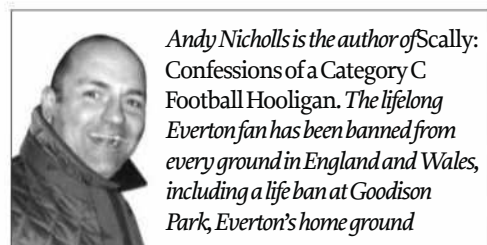
Now, to Russia 2018, where we will be travelling later this month. I say 'we' as I have not been served with a banning order... yet.

But I know what to expect if I indeed go to


**THE RUSSIANS
 ARE MAKING
 THEIR MOVE TO
 BECOME THE
 WORLD'S MORE
 FEARED FOOTBALL
 HOOLIGANS.
 THEY'RE THIRTY
 YEARS TOO LATE**

Russia. Online videos are awash of Russian gangs practising their fighting skills in forests. And we, the English, will be far from welcomed as the Russians are making their move to become the world's more feared football hooligans. But, in reality, they are thirty years too late, as most of us have long given up the fight. Unless it is forced upon us.

Still, I can foresee some serious violence, reminiscent of the bald old days of the 70s and the 80s. Why? Because during the European Championships in France two years ago, Russian thugs conducted their own championship on the streets to be the most feared hooligans—guilty of beating to a pulp anyone who got in their way. That was in France. Imagine what it is going to be like in Russia. ■



Andy Nicholls is the author of Scally: Confessions of a Category C Football Hooligan. The lifelong Everton fan has been banned from every ground in England and Wales, including a life ban at Goodison Park, Everton's home ground

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A scene from
Khyentse Norbu's
Tibetan language
Phörpa (The Cup)

SOCCER



Action and emotion
merge seamlessly in
football films

BY RAHUL DESAI

S ECONDS AFTER SKIPPING across the ‘Water Mirror’—a concrete reflecting pool symmetrically dotted with misty water jets—I swerved into one of the several cobble-stoned streets of central Nice. The pubs of Place Messina were packed, the cafes overflowing. I was too late. From running on a liquid sky, I came barrelling down to commercial earth. As the 2014 FIFA World Cup final between Argentina and Germany kicked off at the distant Maracanã stadium in Rio de Janeiro, I found myself bundled up with other unfortunate latecomers against a vegetable truck. Each of us stretched, flexed and squinted to steal a glimpse of the adjacent bar’s oversized plasma screen.

One of them was a Portuguese backpacker who had been on the road for six months. She adored Cristiano Ronaldo, but cheered for Lionel Messi because Germany had demolished Portugal in the group stages. Another, a Chinese exchange student, rooted for Joachim Löw’s boys because his ex-girlfriend was half-Brazilian, and Germany had destroyed the South American giants 7-1 in the semi-final. Another was Norwegian; this was the first match he was watching after his country’s failed qualifying campaign. The driver, a heavy-set Parisian man, insisted that his late grandfather, once a prisoner in Nazi-occupied France, would have given anything to be in Rio that night.

Those 120 minutes, in hindsight, were impossibly cinematic. They were made up of moments that ‘World Cup cinema’ thrives on. It wasn’t just the game. Any one of us could have been the far-flung protagonist of a classic ‘football-fan’ film—the kind where the sheer universality of the quadrennial tournament drives a particular era’s sociopolitical narrative. The sport itself is barely seen or heard



here; it serves, instead, as a romantic device that unites cultures, bridges generations and cements over the cracks of language.


We might have well been the girls from disparate backgrounds herded together in the holding pen of Tehran's Azadi Stadium, agonisingly close to the football action in Iranian master Jafar Panahi's *Offside*. Set within the confines of a crucial World Cup 2006 qualifier between Iran and Bahrain, *Offside* is a clever snapshot of a country's gender-distinct civil system through the eyes of five women arrested for trying to enter an 'all-male' arena. 'Azadi', ironically, means 'freedom'. The film opens with a nervous girl who, disguised as a boy to fool the guards, breaks down at the prospect of being touched during security protocol. The camera initially follows her, conditioning us to mark her as the sole protagonist. The nearer she gets to the game, however, the lesser it becomes about a singular point of view; once she is caught, it occupies the general space shared by the frustrated girls. Panahi expertly employs the 'suggestion' of football the way horror-movie directors use jump scares—the anticipation, the sounds and rhythm of a tense match serve as the sensory grammar that connects everyone for one patriotic evening.

Ditto for Cao Hamburger's Brazilian period drama, *The Year My Parents Went On Vacation*. The feeling of football acts as respite for a 12-year-old boy, Mauro, abandoned by his left-wing parents in a multi-ethnic São Paulo neighbourhood during the country's oppressive military regime. It's no coincidence that a kid who must survive on the hospitality of Jewish strangers aspires to be a goalkeeper—alone, waiting, fearing the worst in enemy territory. Even as the locality shields him, he *waits* for elusive phone calls, taxis and letters from a family on indefinite 'vacation'. Set against the backdrop of Brazil's Pelé-inspired run to the 1970 World Cup title, the real film occurs through his experiences on a turf that isn't truly his.

This template bridges the details of German director Sönke Wortmann's *The Miracle of Bern*, too. We see a jittery post-war nation react to West Germany's unlikely 1954 World Cup triumph through the eyes of a passionate 11-year-old boy from the town of the team's star striker, Helmut Rahn. In the film's finest scene, the boy's ex-POW father dribbles on an empty pitch. He punctuates the moment by scissor-kicking the ball into a makeshift goal. This brief burst of energy helps him rediscover the young free man that once wanted to shoot balls into the net rather than bullets into bodies.

Another frontrunner in this genre is Bhutanese filmmaker Khyentse Norbu's 1999 Tibetan-language *Phörpa* (The Cup). The director, a Buddhist




**THE BRITISH
DOCUMENTARY
NEXT GOAL WINS
IS A REMARKABLE
EXAMPLE OF
HOW FOOTBALL
IS INHERENTLY
A FILM ABOUT
FINDING
THE RIGHT
PERSPECTIVE**

Lama himself, paints a beguiling 'human' picture of a religion that prides itself on transcending the excesses of humanity. Set within a Tibetan monastery-in-exile in the Himalayas, the quaint little story explores the friction between traditionalism and modernity by pivoting on the efforts of some young monastic students to secure a black-and-white television set to watch the 1998 World Cup final between Brazil and France. Whether it's sporting a hand-painted No 9 vest under their robes, comparing their shaven heads to Ronaldo ("but he is no monk"), or rooting for other nations while being away from theirs, the boys make for a disarming access door into an ecosystem at the crossroads of evolution. Most of them are refugees who, like Mauro, are exported by their families for a safer future. "Two civilised nations fighting over a ball," the Head Lama is told, on asking about the sport that invigorates the otherwise placid kids. "What do the countries get out of this?" he inquires further. "A Cup," the warden replies, grinning, as he watches the Lama wryly sip on hot tea from a clay cup. It's only inevitable that a movie made by a monk presents the idea of football in its most spiritual light yet.


The definitive image of football fever—that of remote fans desperately wrestling with technol-



Mike Brett and Steve Jamison's *Next Goal Wins*

ogy on the outskirts of civilisation—is repeated in Gerardo Olivares sweeping multilingual comedy, *La Gran Final* (The Great Final). Not unlike the Buddhists, in a last-gasp bid to catch ‘reception’ for the 2002 World Cup final, representatives of three tribes from distant corners of the planet—the Mongolian steppe, Sahara desert and Amazon rainforests—find themselves atop solitary poles and 300-year-old trees punching the air hopefully with TV antennas. For a people whose identity transcends the concept of nationalism, it is somewhat therapeutic to see them freely cheer for a sport that officially ranks up to 210 countries. It’s this fleeting sense of inclusivity—both on the pitch and off it—that a truly perceptive sports movie recognises.

There is, however, an unfiltered pureness that accompanies the sight of history being created, not recreated. The most affecting of them are stories that strip the beautiful game down to a messy desire. It’s why some of the aforementioned movies (*Offside*, *Phörpa*) are shot in a low-budget, docudrama format; this allows their environments to stylistically meld into our perception of the game’s controlled chaos. But it’s when the little films unravelling within the football become just as important as the football within films that the hallowed ‘World Cup’ starts to


FOOTBALL AND FILMS REQUIRE AN ABILITY TO OPERATE AGAINST INSTINCT, AND YET PRODUCE A RESULT THAT EMULATES THE NATURALISM OF INSTINCT

look a little more like the intimate Jules Rimet Trophy. By virtue of form, there is nothing like the non-fiction narrative to recognise this precise balance.

For instance, months before I struggled to watch the Rio final on a balmy French night, a documentary crew had followed the weakest football team in the world as it bravely attempted to qualify for the 2014 World Cup. The heartwarming result, Mike Brett and Steve Jamison’s *Next Goal Wins*, is a remarkable example of how football is inherently a film about finding the right perspective. This British documentary about the national team of American Samoa—an unincorporated US territory in the South Pacific—is the perfect manifestation of the fact that the most compassionate sports movies are, by design, movies about anything but sports.

Sample the littler films within: a traumatised goalie who spends nights shot-stopping on an Xbox after he let in a world-record 31 goals against Australia in a 2002 qualifier, a federation determined to heal an island still reeling from a tsunami, a winless team yet to score a goal after conceding 228 of them, the world’s first transgender footballer to play a men’s FIFA qualifier, the import of veteran Samoa-born semi-professionals at the twilight of their careers, an atheist coach out to slay his own personal demons while adapting to a religious culture, and a final derby between two low-ranked rival islands. These parts form a whole so rousing, so primal, that some of the criticism levelled at it singled out the ‘predictability’ of the tropes. When you call a documentary clichéd, you are essentially blaming life for imitating the movies. Which, in a way, is an unwitting compliment to its makers.

In a pep talk before a do-or-die game, the team’s Dutch coach, once a journeyman footballer in Amsterdam, spurs them on with an inelegant speech that outlines the privilege of opportunity. “I’d have cut off my penis to play a World Cup qualifier,” he declares. Without an ounce of irony, he then smiles at the transgender defender, Jaiyah Saelua, only days after he anointed her ‘Woman of the Match’ in American Samoa’s first-ever international victory. Unlike previous coaches, he refuses to use her birth name (Johnny) while gesticulating to his players on the pitch. *Next Goals Wins* is the rare kind of inclusive documentary in which one suspects that such moments might have existed—as they do, across the globe, even as you read this—even if the cameras weren’t on them. They happen *despite* the coverage and not because of it.

In contrast, around the time goalie Nicky Salapu conceded 31 goals to the Socceroos, another Dutchman, Johan Kramer, counted on the power

of a camera to 'create' the story of his documentary, *The Other Final*. Disappointed by Netherlands' failure to qualify for the 2002 World Cup, Kramer was so disillusioned with the notion of competition that he conceived a parallel narrative to counter the exclusivity of the elite FIFA tournament. He arranged for two of the lowest-ranked nations to play a friendly on the day Brazil faced Germany in the final at Japan's Yokohama stadium. And so Bhutan, ranked 201, took on the tiny Caribbean island of Montserrat, ranked 202, at Thimphu's Changlimithang Stadium in 'the worst match in the world'.

It's not the teams but the prospect of the match itself that becomes the underdog. Six months of preparation, resigning coaches, delayed flights and several setbacks later, the winning moment occurs even before a ball is kicked: after a 40-hour journey, the tall, strapping and exhausted Montserrat players step onto Bhutanese tarmac to the tune of their calypso anthem, *Hot Hot Hot*. A night later, they belt out the classic on stage at a formal function, while their pint-sized opponents look amused, presumably pondering their different perceptions of Gross National Happiness.

The film constructs the 'event' of football through these two endearing teams—showcasing the game as a melting pot of sociocultural interaction rather than a clash of action. It even paints the actual World Cup as something of a capitalist villain, dwelling over the refusal of Nike and Adidas to sponsor their modest kits. "Japan may have 528 loudspeakers to our one today, but we both have two goal posts," an official remarks, before adding that spectators can watch this historic match free of charge. The 4-0 score line—Bhutan's first official victory—becomes a side note. The trophy is, quite literally, split into half.

And yet, an hour after the game, the ground is empty. The excitable voices of television commentators waft out of the town's windows into its deserted streets. Cheers spill into the air. Ronaldo has scored, in 'The Other Final'.

It's this unlikely fusion of cultures that also defines the BBC documentary, *The Game of Their Lives*. Not to be confused with the middling Gerard Butler starrer about a ragtag American team that upsets arrogant England in the 1950 World Cup, Daniel Gordon's 2002 film enters modern-day North Korea—a cinematic peg, if there was ever one—to chronicle the story of the famous team that defeated Italy to reach the 1966 World Cup quarter-final. A combination of archival footage and interviews throws us back to a time when, for two weeks in the swinging 60s, North Korea defied diplomatic convention to become the most popular country on the planet.



Iranian master Jafar Panahi's *Offside*



SET WITHIN THE CONFINES OF A WORLD CUP 2006 QUALIFIER BETWEEN IRAN AND BAHRAIN, OFFSIDE IS A CLEVER SNAPSHOT OF A COUNTRY'S GENDER-DISTINCT CIVIL SYSTEM THROUGH THE EYES OF FIVE YOUNG WOMEN

It's a little unnerving to see the surviving members shed loyal tears for Kim Il-sung, the deceased 'Supreme Leader' who had demanded a memorable performance in England. But they drop their guard as soon as they step into a stadium. The glow on their faces intermittently cuts through notoriously regimented personalities as they reminisce about the clever through balls and adoring English fans. The best parts of the film humanise the young Korean players—we see genuine wonder in their eyes, while the industrial towns of Middlesbrough and Liverpool embrace them as the 'home team' and chant their names in stadiums whose administrations had marked their qualification to be a bad precedent that might encourage other Eastern trenches of communism. All it took was a ball, and a camera tracing it.

Then there are the tragedies. The stories of how not even World Cup football could withstand a country's cultural crisis. Before they made the frightfully stereotypical biopic, *Pele: Birth of a Legend*, Jeff and Michael Zimbalist pieced together the toxic puzzle of 90s Colombian football in their effective ESPN 30 for 30 documentary *The Two Escobars*. A few years before Netflix series *Narcos* delved deep into the legacy of drug-lord Pablo Escobar, the Zimbalists circled the other dimension of his regime—'narco-soccer'—through their master-



fully assembled film. By juxtaposing the rise and fall of the 'bad' Escobar with that of the good one, star defender Andrés Escobar, the makers reveal the fragility of a game so beautiful that it inadvertently seduces everybody from gangsters to politicians.

The sport becomes a reluctant symbol, torn between being abused and used. Narco-terrorists abuse the 'business' of Colombian football by employing it as a money-laundering device, while a defiant president uses the same national team to soothe a violent nation in the run-up to the 1994 World Cup. When Andrés, the captain, accidentally turns the ball into his own net against hosts USA, the film presents an unforgettable image. His face. He knows, right then, that his team isn't the only thing that is going to be eliminated. The soft-spoken, religious Colombian superstar wears the look of a soft-spoken, religious Brazilian superstar who had, not long ago, woken up in Italy with a similar sense of foreboding. Eventually, Andrés Escobar was killed only two months after the death of F1 great Ayrton Senna.

On a milder level, it's this sinking feeling that engulfs the private space of England manager Graham Taylor in the British Channel 4 documentary, *An Impossible Job*. A crew traces his reign during England's doomed qualifying campaign for the 1994 World Cup. We see long stretches of Taylor reacting to every


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JULES RIMET
TROPHY**

tackle in real time, like an exasperated football fan stuck in the dugout. It's impossible not to feel sorry for a man who is hounded so heavily in those 18 months that Princess Diana sent him a thank-you note for distracting the paparazzi. The fly-on-the-wall documentary, ironically, uses the gaze of a rabid media lens; the very cameras out to immortalise him end up sealing Taylor's footballing mortality.

The film, often hailed as a 'black comedy', is so embedded into English conscience that it resulted in the biting satire, *Mike Bassett: England Manager*, less than a decade later. The unsparing mockumentary tries to 'correct' history, too, by making the incompetent manager lead the team to not only qualify through a stroke of dumb luck but also reach the (fictitious) World Cup semi-final against all odds.

In this context, I wonder if a crew stalked Italian coach Gian Piero Ventura as his team stumbled out of contention earlier this year. Heck, I hope one is shadowing the Icelandic team right now; the Viking war chant might make for a rousing soundtrack. I wonder if a few more disgruntled Dutch entrepreneurs have been driven to look further outward—maybe arrange for the first-ever international in Antarctica to coincide with the Moscow final.

Perhaps it's only appropriate that football and films form the most organic of unions. In one, the legs do what the hands are designed to do. In the other, the camera does what the eyes are designed to do. Both mediums require an inherent ability to operate against instinct, and yet produce a result that emulates the naturalism of instinct.

Maybe it's also no coincidence that the first talkie was released in 1927, three years before the first World Cup match in 1930. Because when hosts Russia take on Saudi Arabia in the first match of the 21st FIFA World Cup, you can be sure that the stories began a while before the opening whistle. Some might have begun the moment Mario Götze's extra-time volley hit the back of the net in Rio—not least his own, about a debilitating muscle disorder and pressures of the spotlight. And others, when Jaiyah Saelua made a heroic last-gasp clearance in the dying seconds of American Samoa's first triumph.

Either way, come June 14th, two worlds of art are set to renew their vows: football will find a home on the big screen, and cinema will find a home on the fields of Russia. ■



Rahul Desai is a film critic based in Mumbai. He writes for Film Companion and The Hindu



WHAT ARE WE DOING THERE?

With no dog in the fight, Indians still travel the world to see the Cup


BY DEEPAK NARAYANAN

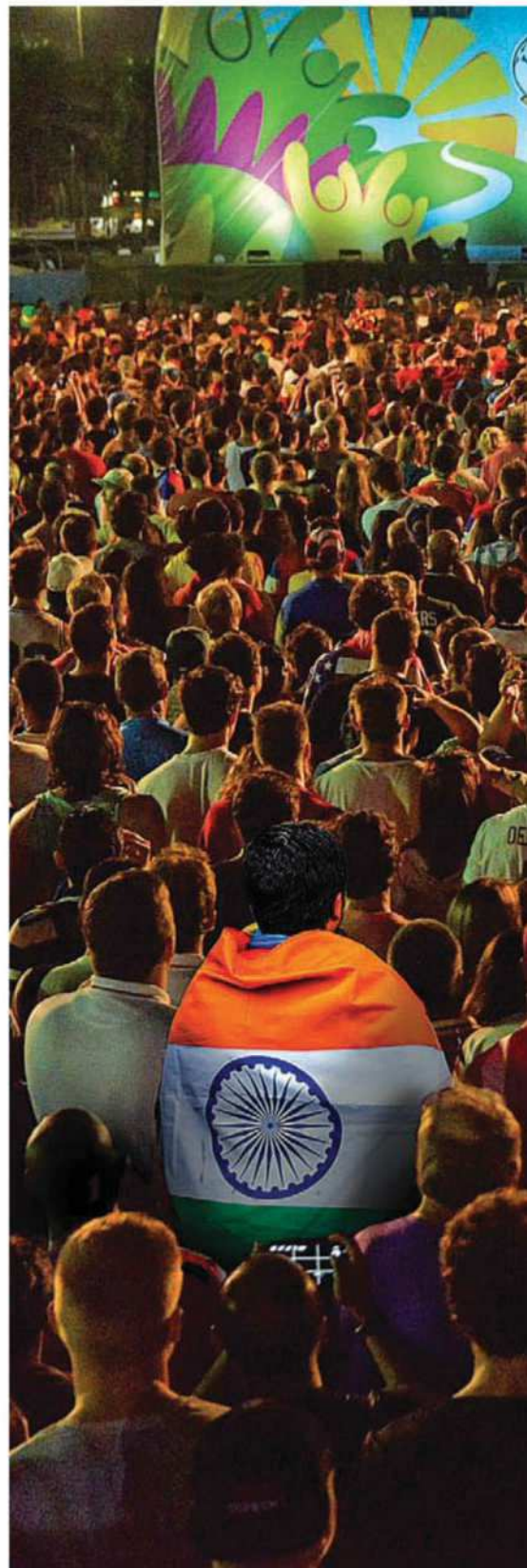
THE DECISION TO go to Brazil for the World Cup was taken the day they won the bid to host the 2014 finals—in July 2007. A friend-colleague-boss and I were at work and our logic was simple: South America's turn to host the tournament—based on FIFA's continental rotation policy—would next come in a couple of decades. And it was extremely unlikely that Brazil—the home of football if there ever was one—would host another one in our (for want of a better word) primes.

Now, by the time 2014 rolled along, the bravado of the twenty-seven-year-old me had been replaced by general middle-aged pragmatism—no time, no money... no point?

What changed? The friend-colleague-boss with whom the pact was made seven years ago was definitely going. Their tickets were booked, their hotels were sorted. "Are you guys coming?"

My wife and I discussed it for a week (maybe it was a month) before taking the only logical decision: max out our credit cards. And let me tell you one thing, maxing out our credit cards was possibly


BY THE TIME
THE 2014 FIFA
WORLD CUP
KICKED OFF,
EIGHT OF US HAD
BOOKED OUR
FLIGHT TICKETS
AND WE WERE ON
OUR WAY TO THE
BIGGEST PARTY
ON EARTH





the single greatest decision we've taken in our lives.

The next few weeks were spent convincing others, and by the time the 2014 FIFA World Cup kicked off, eight of us had booked our flight tickets and we were on our way to the biggest party on earth—our very own version of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*.

Let's be clear what this is about: it's one part self-indulgent recollection of the best vacation of my life. It's also, at some level, an attempt to convince you to get into the World Cup ticket draw—for Russia (too late now, but give it a shot), Qatar, or maybe the one after that; to consider making the journey.

When all this started, it was about 'going for a World Cup in Brazil'. Having been there, I can assure you it's actually about 'going for a World Cup'—even if you don't watch football.

Here we go then, an attempt to piece together something coherent from what was a long, manic, exhilarating blur.

WE GET THERE in time for the first semi-final—favourites Germany versus hosts Brazil. We don't have match tickets, but watching the game with 20,000 Brazilians at the fanzone in Sao Paulo is exciting enough (80 people at Cafe Mondegar in Colaba, Mumbai, was probably the largest football-watching 'mob' I'd been a part of).

I usually support Germany at international tournaments, but that day I really do want Brazil to win—I want to see the hosts explode out on to the streets to celebrate.

Brazil lose 7-1, and there is only the silence through those excruciating 90 minutes, and the ironic cheers when Brazil score a consolation goal at the end.

So how does a proud footballing nation respond to such public humiliation? What was the immediate aftermath of a result described in the papers the next morning as 'the disgrace of all disgraces' and 'the biggest shame in history'?

Not wanting to get caught in any kind of rioting, we pick out a little roadside bar close to the apartment our friends are staying at. Here we meet a very angry bartender. He is pissed about the result, he is pissed with his boss, he is generally pissed with the world.

He has an interesting way of dealing with his misery—pouring giant drinks. I see him pour half a bottle of *cachaca* in a *caipirinha*. I switch to whisky. He pours me a glass topped up with whisky—that's approximately a 220-ml drink. He truly gets our party started.

The only clear memory left of the night is of

GETTY IMAGES



eight Indians sitting outside the bar chanting 'Sachiiiiin... Sachin'. I blame the bartender.

THE SECOND SEMI-FINAL is being played between two old favourites—Argentina and the Netherlands. We're at Vila Madalena, a street lined with pubs and bars packed with football fans who've travelled from all over the world.

Argentina win a tense penalty shoot-out to seal their place in the final. Outside the bar, a true football party is kicking off. The hosts—dealing with their hangovers—have ceded the street to the visitors, and a globe-trotting collection of football fanatics are making the most of it.

The only real street party I'd experienced before this was when India won the 2011 World Cup. We ended up at Carter Road in Mumbai, packed to the gills with singing, dancing, flag-waving, horn-tooting Indians. It was mad fun.

This is different, and not only because there's also a lot of very chilled beer—*cerveja*—being sold out of thermocol boxes (if there's one thing you learn very quickly about Brazilians it's that they take the temperature of their beer very, very seriously).

A group of Sombrero-sporting Mexicans start a chant, 'Messi-Messi-Messi'. As they raise the tempo, they sneakily switch to 'Mexico-Mexico-Mexico' leading to much amusement all around.

A bunch of Englishmen spot my Arsenal jacket (tip: football club accessories can be used for instant bonding) and we spend an hour buying each other drinks and singing Arsenal songs. We're friends on Facebook even now.

The Argentinians sing loudest and proudest:


**THE ARGENTINES
SETTLED ALL
ALONG THE
COPACABANA
STRETCH—
LITERALLY, AS
IN THEY'RE
COOKING THERE,
WASHING THERE,
DRYING CLOTHES
ON TEMPORARY
LINES THERE**



Dejected fans after Argentina lose to Germany in the 2014 World Cup final in Rio de Janeiro

Brasil Decime Qui Se Siente/ Tener en Casa tu Papa.
Brazil how does it feel/ to have your daddy in your house.

And later in the chant...

*A Messi lo van a ver, la Copa se va a traer/
Maradona es mas grande que Pele.*

Messi with no fuss, will bring the Cup to us/
Maradona is greater than Pele.

This song will ring in our ears for the next four days. You literally can't move 10 yards without hearing another bunch of Argentinians breaking into it.

This night is a celebration of a sport, not a result. It's a coming together of fans from around the world, many of them with similarly maxed-out credit cards, bonded only by the love of watching 22 people kick a ball. It's absolutely brilliant.

WE LAND IN Rio de Janeiro. We do a lot of sight-seeing. Some of us are exhausted. One of us has a toothache. We're walking proof that there is such a thing as too much partying. We need some rest. So what do we do? We drag ourselves to Lapa, the nerve centre of Rio's nightlife. We've sipped on a few *cervejas*, partaken of pastels but even though the streets are heaving, our heart's really not in it.

This trip has been fairly unique in that we've been here almost a week and still haven't run into any fellow Indians. Our ears perk up when we hear a group speak in Hindi on the next table. "India se?" we ask. "*Nahin*, Pakistan se."

I don't know if you've experienced this, but there's an incredible and instant feeling of brotherhood I've felt every time I've met someone from Pakistan (in press boxes around the world, a hospital in

Singapore, a pub in Nottingham... always the same).

This was no different. Within seconds, two tables become one. Within minutes, we're best friends with Salman, Ali, Hassan and Noor. In ten minutes, we're practically family. We discuss cricket. We discuss movies. We discuss how Argentina winning the World Cup at the Maracanã would be like Pakistan winning the cricket World Cup at the Wankhede. We might have discussed politics, I don't remember.

Four hours later, we're still at it, except that high-fives have now turned to hugs.

Four years later, I message Salman: 'Hello Hello'.

His response, moments later: '*Merey bhai!*'

See, I told you, we're family.

“HEY, CAN WE bum a smoke?”
“Sure, have you smoked Indian cigarettes before?”

Many, many conversations started with this exchange over the three weeks we were in Brazil, but none turned out to be as entertaining as the one on the night before the final.

We're walking down the promenade adjoining the Copacabana. As you'd expect, there's a street party of fairly epic proportions along the four-kilometre stretch.

“So, do you recognise this guy?” one of the cigarette-bummers asks, pointing at his friend.

“Nope, should I?”

“He's Jimmy Jump. He jumps at football matches.”

“What does that mean? Don't most fans jump at football matches?”

“No, he jumps the fence and runs on to the field.”

“Ah, got it, like the guy who almost got to the World Cup trophy before the final in South Africa?”

“That was Jimmy Jump! This is Jimmy Jump!”

The next few minutes are spent verifying this (apart from football matches, he has also managed to find his way on stage at the 2010 Eurovision. Google him on a rainy day, it's guaranteed to impress you).


We start again, now playing the role of wide-eyed fans: “What happens once the cops tackle you?”

“Not much. A night in jail, a fine. Cops have bigger problems than a man running on to a field. In South Africa, they were strict. Two nights in jail... Hey can you get me tickets for a cricket match in India? I've never jumped at a cricket match.”

“I could, but I don't know what the cops back home will do to you.”

“Don't worry about that. I'll manage.”

Really, Jimmy? Doesn't going to jail put you off even one bit? For most people, one time in prison


**WE'VE MADE
HALF-HEARTED
ATTEMPTS TO GET
OUR HANDS ON
TICKETS FOR THE
FINAL, BUT AT
SOME POINT IT
BECAME OBVIOUS
WATCHING THE
MATCH ON THE
BEACH WOULD BE
PRETTY AWESOME**

would be one time too many.

Not really. “Tonight jail, tomorrow legend.”
Someone needs to put that on a t-shirt.

IMAGINE YOU’RE part of this massive crowd described above. You spot a news camera, and a journalist valiantly trying to interview some fans. What do you do? The answer is universal, you sneak into the frame and wave.

Now imagine your surprise when you realise of all the cameras you could’ve jumped in front of—there were 40 or 50 of them from all over the world that night—the one you’ve picked belongs to an Indian news channel. Twelve hours and a few Whatsapp messages later, we have a clip of my wife maniacally video-bombing a broadcast, recorded off a television screen back in Chennai.

This was, without doubt, the most bizarre moment of the trip.

I WAS ROOTING FOR Brazil in the semi-final against Germany because I was hoping to see an entire country out celebrating on the streets. We got to see exactly that, but with Argentine fans instead.

Through the World Cup, they’ve been taking over Brazilian cities where Argentina have played, descending in such large numbers that it’s been described in a few places as an ‘invasion’.

The semi-final win seems to have been the cue for anyone left in Argentina to get into cars, vans, mini-buses, any set of wheels, and drive to Rio in time for the final.

The takeover of the Copacabana is complete. They’ve settled all along the stretch—literally settled, as in they’re cooking there, washing there, drying clothes on temporary lines there.

Rio’s locals—Cariocas—love this stretch. They play football here, work out here, hang out with their mates here. Every day. For these few days, they’ve been driven out to Ipanema, a few kilometres away.

Copa is officially base camp for the Argentine World Cup dream.

WE’VE MADE half-hearted attempts to get our hands on tickets for the final, but at some point it became obvious that watching the clash on the beach would be pretty awesome. The renovated Maracanã has a capacity of 75,000 people. Around 500,000 are expected to watch on this four-kilometre stretch of pristine, white sand.

Three of us are in Germany colours—three in


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QUI SE SIENTE,
AND EVERY OTHER
CHANT HE HEARD
THAT WEEK**

a sea of blue-and-white. They treat us with amusement. For days now, the Copa stretch has been split down the middle: on the beach side are the Argentines singing, dancing, playing football; the other side of the stretch, at the fancier hotels, cafes and bistros, is where you see the German fans.

The fact that we’re from India wins us some points with the Argentinian fans around us, as has the fact that one of our gang has gone full Argentine (he had mugged up the lyrics of *Brasil Decime Qui Se Siente*, and every other chant he heard from any Argentine that week).

We find a spot four hours before kick-off, at one of the five or six giant screens that have been set up. Clear view of the screen? Check. *Caipirinhas* guy within shouting distance? Check.

By kick-off time, both boxes have been unchecked. The crowd’s packed in so tight that no one except the tallest among us has a really clear view of the screen. And we’ve been there for so long now that we don’t really need any *Caipirinhas* any more.

Unlike most football games, I remember very little of the match itself: I remember Gonzalo Higuain’s miss in the first half, which sparked the loudest collective groan I have ever heard. I remember Mario Götze scoring towards the end of injury time, which sparked the loudest collective silence I have ever heard. I remember being ushered out before the final whistle by friends we had made that day. They’d spotted trouble brewing and knew the German colours would not go down as well now as it had done earlier in the day.

And I remember a lot of people. Not just from the beach that day, but from the entire trip. The angry bartender in Sao Paulo, the Arsenal fan at Vila Madelena, *merey bhai* from Pakistan, Jimmy Jump, the couple that tapped us on our shoulder at Copa to say “go, go quickly now... this way”, the brothers from Uruguay who made the best *Caipirinhas* in the world, the Cariocas who my friend played football with (brave man), another friend meeting a journalist he follows on Twitter. So many people from so many countries and so many different cultures all packed into one great memory.

Maxing out your credit cards to go for a party is never a good idea—if that party is the football World Cup, it becomes kind of acceptable.

PS: The bills have finally been paid off. ■



Deepak Narayanan is a Goa-based freelance journalist

SALON

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**'IF YOU'RE ASHAMED OF
YOUR DARKNESS, YOU
WILL NEVER GROW'**

Tabu, Hindi cinema's
most versatile star of
the 90s, now finds new
meaning in her work **70**

Streaming Me Softly

The liberating future of listening

By Akhil Sood

LISTENING TO MUSIC is rarely about just listening to music. The process is tied up in all kinds of knots. For instance, whenever I'm on a train gazing out the window heading to a faraway land like the star of a French film from the 70s, I end up falling in love with whatever is playing in my ears. Put me in a Delhi Metro during peak hours and, well, all the romance is sucked out of the moment. It's about the 'experience', that elusive, fragile, indescribable emotion. The speakers or headphones you have, the device you're using, the mood you're in, the time of day, the weather—there are so many moving parts that help craft the perfect listening experience, the kind where you, for only a second or two, forget where you are. When the music stops playing on the outside and starts playing on the inside.

Something happens whenever I stream music. I feel conflicted: guilty and free together at the same time. Recently, I dipped into the world of Saavn, an Indian streaming platform. They claim to have 30 million songs, in Hindi, English and other languages. I can't verify that claim since it'll take me 200-odd years (human, not dog) to get through every single song on their list. But I do believe it. Apple Music has over 40 million songs; Spotify has over 30 million too. Depending on your taste, there's an app that exists catering to your exact needs. The possibilities are endless.

Streaming, then, has become like this uncertain new future of music. We've gone from badly scribbled notations to live performances to LPs, tapes, CDs, MP3s/WAVs, to now playing infinite music on internet platforms for a small monthly subscription fee. Apple Music comes at a ridiculously cheap Rs 190 a

month for a family pack. Gaana, another big hitter in the streaming space in India, offers its paid version for Rs 99 a month, same as Saavn. Amazon Prime Music is another new entry into the market, among a host of others. And then there's good ol' YouTube hanging around on the fringes. Most of these companies function on a 'freemium' model, where you get basic access for free but need to shell out a fee to get extra features. In addition to streaming, you get a bunch of other services, such as personalised or specially curated playlists, radio, exclusive releases, and commissioned content. Saavn, for example, has Artist Originals (AO), an artist development programme for South Asian artists.

The case of Spotify, arguably the company to break open this space worldwide in a struggling industry, is a bit more curious. You have many yuppie users already on it in India. This is through some techie-nerd wizardry, where you run a VPN, a virtual private network, to gain access. Yet the company hasn't officially launched in India yet. It's been in the pipeline for a while now.

Earlier this year, Spotify went public, and was valued at close to \$30 billion. Last

year, there were reports that it was in a 17-year lease agreement for its World Trade Center office, which amounted to \$566 million in rent (an obscene \$2.77 million per month).

And yet, there's the underbelly. A few years ago, Thom Yorke, the vocalist of Radiohead, called Spotify the "last desperate fart of a dying corpse". (Today, Radiohead's music is on Spotify.) It's a criticism pointed out widely by artists across the world, that Spotify—and streaming in general—doesn't pay artists much. As per reports, artists get \$0.003 per play, or 20 paise.

That amount adds up when it comes to the big names—say a Kanye West or a Taylor Swift—who can afford to pull whatever stunts (exclusive releases, favouring one platform over the other; the usual popstar antics). It's the smaller artist who loses out: the musician who spends all her savings on a new guitar, who has a day job so she can manage the Rs 250 an hour it costs to book a rehearsal space, who'll hunt the market for an affordable producer willing to work on her songs for Rs 8,000 apiece.

The underground, in a way, gets lost in the shuffle. Especially the grassroots movements that exist everywhere. The non-playlist friendly artists trying something new, something different. Getting people to pay for music has been a seemingly impossible task ever since Napster redefined music listening forever through its piracy-driven model. But now it's practically nonexistent. At under Rs 200 a month on Apple Music for access to just about *every song ever written*, the idea of paying for music is somewhat of a mirage.

Artists have recalibrated their approach to fit the new model, focussing instead on extensive touring and mer-

**GONE ARE THE DAYS OF
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chandise to survive. Gone are the days of the excessive and excessively insufferable rock stars. Today, you have driven young folk trying to game the system in a way that lets them get by, and maybe make some pocket change along the way. In India, most indie bands survive by investing their earnings back into the band, or pumping their income from a dreary day job to fund their passion. It's a depressing state of affairs, and the odds are stacked against actual creators. And still there's this air of positivity about streaming, as a model that's yielding returns (possibly because the big bad labels are back to minting it after a few years in the red).

It's complicated. While young, forward-thinking artists might be falling by the wayside in a congested space controlled by algorithms and major label sway, in the same breath there's the idea that streaming provides accidental

exposure to artists. It could take your music to a new audience.

THE FIRST TIME I heard, say, Nirvana, it changed my life. It was dumb luck and nothing else: I heard *Lithium*, accidentally, on a friend's brother's assorted MP3 CD, got myself a tape of *Nevermind*, and was never the same again. Streaming streamlines discovery. It's thrilling; on any given day, there's the chance that you could stumble upon something that could potentially change you. The pre-internet age, in India especially, meant that you had to go out of your way to find what you like. You had to scan old magazines, trawl the internet, rely on recommendations from unreliable narrators. Wait for magic. Access was limited. Of course, all meaningful art demands a degree of time and effort from the consumer. But

this kind of access eliminates a major logistical obstacle. Users can spend all day jumping from one artist to a similar-sounding other, until something eventually sticks.

The flipside to this, of course, is that excessive choice can be daunting. And then there's the omniscience of the internet. I need to turn off my phone, my WiFi periodically, just to maintain an illusion of sanity. Streaming music poses a distressing sense of reliance on the internet, and a difficulty in getting away.

Further, do I really 'own' the music I'm listening to? Ownership of art is a tricky concept to begin with. By paying \$9 for a digital version of an album on Bandcamp, or picking up a band's CD from a gig I go to, does it make that music *mine*? Does it solidify my relationship with an album if I've sought out a physical copy, or a digital download, and spent *my money* to acquire it, even though I don't really need to? Am I a lesser fan if I steal it off Pirate Bay? Can I, or anyone, ever really 'own' a work of art, or am I just borrowing it? Streaming muddies these already dense waters.

Serious listeners tend to share a personal relationship with the creators of music that moves them. I often buy CDs or online albums despite already owning said music as a tiny form of support to its creators. And it provides me with an intangible sense of satisfaction that I have some kind of 'right' to that music—another word for this is being smug, perhaps—but I don't get that same joy when I scroll through a playlist to find what I'm looking for.

That's what it's all about, really. The logistics—the process, the methodology—of how, when, where, why you listen to music is no more than a means to deriving the most joy out of the act. Of occasionally feeling that ephemeral emotion of transcendence. If this is the future, then I will learn to embrace it too, because it's the end that matters most. But these reservations complicate matters. Streaming music is liberating—and it can be such a revelatory experience. But there's all this baggage to contend with. ■

CINEMA



'If you're ashamed of your darkness, you will never grow'

Hindi cinema's most versatile star of the 90s now finds new meaning in her work.
Tabu in conversation with **Divya Unny**

IT'S TAKEN SOME coaxing to get Tabu to give me this interview. She has been an actor from a time when social media was unheard of, smart phones didn't exist and talking too much about oneself was considered pompous. "What more can I say about me?" she asks with a humility and grace that you wish other actors could borrow. Sitting in her comfortable home-turned-office in suburban Mumbai, in a kurta, with her shiny long hair half open, Tabu's face is free of make-up and her demeanour casual. About five minutes into a conversation with her, you forget she's a celebrity. She's terribly unintimidating, yet carries an aura only a few of her calibre do.

It's been over a month since the release of her last film, *Missing*, where she plays a mother whose young daughter is absconding while on vacation with her family. The film did little to empower Tabu as an actor, but what's noteworthy is that this is her second release in six months (including the hit *Golmaal Again*), a rare occurrence for her. "Five films in the last four years, not bad *haan...*?" she asks, well aware that her average is much lower. "There's a whole new space for films that has opened up these days which makes me inquisitive and excited as an actor. Fortunately, through my career I've been part of films that have broken the norm in some way or the other. But I think these days, in a short span of time, people are making films that are trying to say something important, which is great because then actors like me won't go hungry for good roles," she says.

Tabu has always been an actor one longs to see more of. She has been choosy with her films, but in the last few years she has been more receptive to roles that demand her craft. She's shooting a film a year, and it almost seems like a new professional phase for her. "I think it is now that I've started to understand the meaning of really enjoying my work," she says, "I used to think 'enjoy' means having fun and being on a high all the time,

but that's not it. Enjoyment is when you really interpret your work in a way that you derive joy out of it. It's not about the result or about what it's bringing to you. It's just about loving what you're doing that very moment."

She sounds content, almost as if she finally feels like she's getting her due. But that may not be it. Thirty years and 84 films later, she confesses that one needs to find reasons to rejuvenate oneself. "I started working when I was 16. And there has been so much work that you end up feeling like an absolute burn-out. You don't want to do it anymore because you're simply fed up. There have been times when I've just gone to my mother and said, 'All I want is a house in the mountains and want to go lie there.' But of course it's all wishful thinking," she says.

Tabu is the only female actor of her time (her contemporaries include talents such as Kajol, Preity Zinta and Karisma Kapoor) who is doing any noteworthy work currently. Her recent filmography—with fearless and bold characters—would give younger performers acting goals. Be it the jilted half-widow in *Haider* (2014) who draws empathy even while manipulating her own son, or the astute yet helpless cop in *Drishyam* (2015) looking for her lost child, or the dejected ex-wife of a super busy cop in *Talvar* (2015), she's never played black-and-white roles. They are complicated, confused, passionate, progressive, ones that refuse to toe the line. They exude this power, which most of us feel only in our most trying circumstances. And Tabu, the performer that she is, underlines that power with complete control and grace.

"I found it pretty boring to play the good girl. I never thought it's a wrong thing or a risky thing to play morally incorrect people, or layered people or lustful women for that matter. I didn't understand why not. I told myself that society's idea of what is moralistic should never come in the way of my saying 'yes' to any character. That's why I could play a suicide bomber

or a militant or a woman who has an extramarital affair in a film like *Astitva*,” she says.

In a scene in *Astitva* (2000), Tabu, a housewife, questions expectations of women being loyal to their husbands when men are often unfaithful to their wives. It was a rare Hindi film that touched upon adultery from a woman’s perspective. “These characters exist in the world. They exist in us. We are not as simple as we portray to the world. If you’re ashamed of your darkness, you will never grow, and these were characters who celebrated their dark side. I found it very interesting to bring them out on screen through myself,” she says.

She chose roles that were unconventional, a reason why she never got stereotyped despite such a long run in Hindi cinema. She’s got a clay-like quality, which she credits to the fact that she began so early. “When I came to Mumbai from Hyderabad, I was just 13. My sister was already in films, and like they always spot the sibling, they spotted me too. When I set foot on the sets of my first few films, I had no idea what I was doing. I had 20 people saying 20 different things to me and I could hardly hear the sound of my own head. My first director K Raghavendra Rao (who directed *Coolie No 1*) said to me that I only had to keep a few things in mind. I should always be on time. I should always be financially independent. And I should know that no matter what happens, it’s just work. I feel like that made me confident and I have held onto that till today.”

In the first film she was recognised for, she was divested of all glamour. She played Mohanlal’s love interest in Priyadarshan’s National award-winning Malayalam film *Kaala Pani* (1996), a film she maintains she struggled with. In the same year came *Maachis*, where Tabu played a Sikh girl from a simple family who turns to militancy. It got her her first national award. Gulzar, the director of *Maachis*, spoke of her as an actor who was fearless and belonged to an era much earlier than the 90s. “*Maachis* gave me hope to go on doing what I was doing,” she says, “It changed the way I approached myself as an actor. Gulzaar *saab* gave me so much freedom to play that part that I realised that it can be so empowering to do it. After that film, even people who were not very sure of my taking this path were validating the choices I made. It was very gratifying.”

It wouldn’t be wrong to say that the 90s—which was a bleak decade for Hindi cinema when it came to good content—belonged to her. Or at least, she starred in films where the female lead had a meaty role to play. Be it *Virasat* (1997), *Chachi 420* (1997), *Hera Pheri* (2000), *Chandni Bar* (2001), *Filhaal* (2002) or *Maqbool* (2003). For every three or four commercial films, there was one meaningful film that paved her way ahead.

She says, “Some characters might take more from you emotionally than others. That’s what *Maqbool* did. I had never ventured into that kind of dark space before. I was completely taken aback by the entire experience of that film.” There’s a scene where Nimmi wails in Maqbool’s arms after a meltdown. You experience what she did during the film, thanks to that one scene. Even today, Nimmi, the woman who destroyed Maqbool with her love, stands apart as one of the top ten roles ever



With Manoj Bajpayee in *Missing*

I told myself society’s idea of what is moralistic shouldn’t come in the way of my saying ‘yes’ to any character. That’s why I could play a suicide bomber or a woman who has an extramarital affair”

TABU

written for a female Indian actor. It falls in the league of what Meena Kumari did with *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962) or what Rekha did with *Umrao Jaan* (1981). Tabu recognises it was an unparalleled role, saying, “I can’t ever think of that film as something I just shot for or just another good film. It was something that changed something in me, forever.”

Despite her love-hate relationship with acting, she has given us other gems like *The Namesake* (2006), *Life of Pi* (2012) and *Cheeni Kum* (2007). Ask her about her process and she replies, “I don’t think you can ever deconstruct or intellectualise the process of an actor. It’s become a fashionable word, ‘process’. Every day you are feeling differently, you are different characters, you are working with so many different people; the weather, the colour you’re wearing, the fabric you’re wearing, everything affects you. Everything is part of what comes on that screen. As an audience, you only see the actor as a solitary figure on screen. But when you zoom out, it’s an entire set of 500 people who have worked towards that,” she says.

Her understanding of the craft is far more than one can deconstruct on paper. The best part for her is the absence of an image to go by. She is happy to travel the world whenever she wishes, and shoot a film when she wants. The smaller, simpler things in life keep her going, like the smell of popcorn in a movie hall. “These days they have those recliner chairs. I love going and sitting on them. I feel like for three hours I’m just cut off from all the chaos. It’s so blissful,” she says.

She will continue to act, or maybe she won’t. Tabu likes to remain unpredictable, and that makes her the happiest. ■

The Mythmaker

A spy thriller travels back in time with élan

By Akshaya Pillai

IT IS ONE of those vivid childhood memories, the Sunday morning walk with my grandfather to the grocery store. The *galli* would be vacant, harbouring a plague-struck silence that would be punctured only by synchronised dramatic dialogues and occasional peals of monstrous laughter from the Mahabharata, and other mythological serials that aired on *Doordarshan*. These would escape from the windows to form the city's voice on a Sunday. Ravi Shankar Etteth's *The Brahmin* evokes the nostalgia of the early 90s when television embraced history and an entire country waited to watch tales of shrewdness that helped save a kingdom.

The Brahmin (a title that seems rather problematic today) transports us to Pataliputra. It is the year 267 BCE and an agitated Ashoka is seated on a gilded wooden bench in his royal garden. Facing him is the chief spy-master of the kingdom, the Brahmin.

SAURABH SINGH



The atmosphere is tense as one of the king's concubines has just been brutally murdered. Her body was found abandoned, partially charred next to a pyre. Through the seven days that the king has granted for the murder to be resolved, we follow the Brahmin and his beautiful part-Vietnamese aide Hao, as they cross forests, dine at taverns and search the neighbouring kingdoms for an assassin who leaves a *rakthapushpa* (blood flower) beside each of his victims.

Etteth, through a network of spies, illustrates the picture of a kingdom on the brink of war. While the book succeeds topographically, conjuring the grandeur of the palaces, the comfort of wide roads that sport caravans from various ports and the intricate details of a neatly planned Mauryan city; the storyline is not special, and the characters, shallow.

Many intriguing—but often one-dimensional—characters populate the

pages of this book, like the descendants of Greek soldiers who came to India along with Alexander the Great, the warrior monks who justify violence when it is time to attack evil and fight for the light, or the hermaphrodites who spar like tigresses from hell.

The main characters converse mostly to row the plot forward. Dialogues feel urban, like when Ashoka begins a question with 'What the hell is a...'

It is against the backdrop of the deep woods, where danger camouflages in the dark, that the better conversations in the book take shape. Riding horses that come galloping at the call of a whistle, the spies pass rivulets and strange scented flowers. Sometimes even a bat hurrying back into its cave leads to an amusing anecdote about a poet-turned-hermit who once inhabited the same cave after his love life turned sour.

Etteth is a storyteller in a hurry and once you step into this thriller, the pages turn quickly. The latter half of the book is set in the palace of Ujjain, in the days leading up to the Queen's birthday. The Brahmin and Hao reside in the palace along with their suspects, feast on duck roasted in honey, braised fish served on rose petals and quietly go about investigating a few interconnected murders. To the writer's credit, the grand reveal leaves behind no loose ends.

The story has most of the stock characters that are likely to occur in 300 pages of a George RR Martin book, for example, though minus the fantasy elements.

Readers not familiar with the sweep and majesty of *Game of Thrones* might enjoy this book. ■



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RAJEEV MASAND

A Seismic Shift in Hindi Cinema

The back-to-back successes of *Raazi* and *Veere Di Wedding* suggest a seismic shift in Bollywood. Every naysayer who has ever said films with women as central protagonists—those with no big male star to prop up the women—do not and cannot make big bucks, are likely eating their hat right now. **Alia Bhatt** was the only A-lister in the recent spy drama *Raazi* that has taken in more than Rs 100 crore at the box-office. *Veere Di Wedding*, an all-girls romantic comedy on the lines of *Bridesmaids* and *Sex and the City*, will likely do that number sooner than it took *Raazi* to get there.

To be fair, these aren't the first women-led films to make a splash at the box office. **Vidya Balan's** *Dirty Picture* was a huge hit, but industrywalas credit the lure of sex-and-skin to that film's success. The encouraging numbers of *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* were attributed to its being a sequel to a much-loved hit (and its inbuilt appeal). Bollywood, as you can see, will find any excuse to slight its women.

But no more. *Raazi* and *Veere Di Wedding* have truly broken the glass ceiling. Rest assured, those conversations around pay parity will be revived, and expectations from other actress-driven pictures will be high. **Kangana Ranaut's** *Manikarnika*, slated to release before year-end, could well serve as an acid test. It is, after all, a big-budget historical with a woman at its centre.

Big Budgets for Women-Led Films

Speaking of women leading from the top, *Bareilly Ki Barfi* director **Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari** has not one but two big movies on the cards. The first is a *kabaddi* film that insiders say **Kangana Ranaut** will star in. Sources reveal it's a Mary Kom-like empowerment story about a *kabaddi* champ who gives up her career to have kids and start a family. She returns to discover that she must up her game in order to stay relevant. And she does.

The second film is reportedly a remake of the uplifting French drama *La Famille Bélier* about a young

girl born to deaf-mute parents, torn between her responsibility to her family and her love for singing. Unlike **Sanjay Leela Bhansali's** 1996 tearjerker *Khamoshi*, which it sounds suspiciously like, this one's reportedly a comedy. **Alia Bhatt** is slated to play the central role.

Expect budgets for both films to go up considerably in the wake of the audience's sudden love for women-driven movies.

Image Makeover Time

This star son, who's been going through a rough patch in his career for some time now, is working towards an image overhaul. His first step towards that was signing a movie with the poster-boy of indie cinema. It's a *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*-style love triangle in which he plays the sympathy magnet.

Next up, he's being strongly pitched to star alongside our 'global female star' in a film based on the true story of a girl with a fatal health condition who had great success as a motivational speaker before her passing at the age of 19. The actor, along with the female star, will play the parents of the protagonist, a role that has gone to the child artist who made a huge splash in two movies produced by a top superstar recently.

Apart from mixing up his film choices and picking material that makes him step out of his comfort zone, the actor has also signed up to be 'handled' by one of Bollywood's top agents, who was responsible for the image-reinvention of one of the industry's most infamous bad boys. Sources reveal that the agent—who had a falling out with the bad-boy-turned-superstar—has taken up this actor's work as a challenge, and is determined to turn around his career and people's perception of him. By all accounts the actor himself has taken charge; the indie director whose film he next stars in insists that on the set he was professional, committed, and hungry to be challenged.

Well, who doesn't love a good comeback? ■



Rajeev Masand is entertainment editor and film critic at CNN-NEWS18



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