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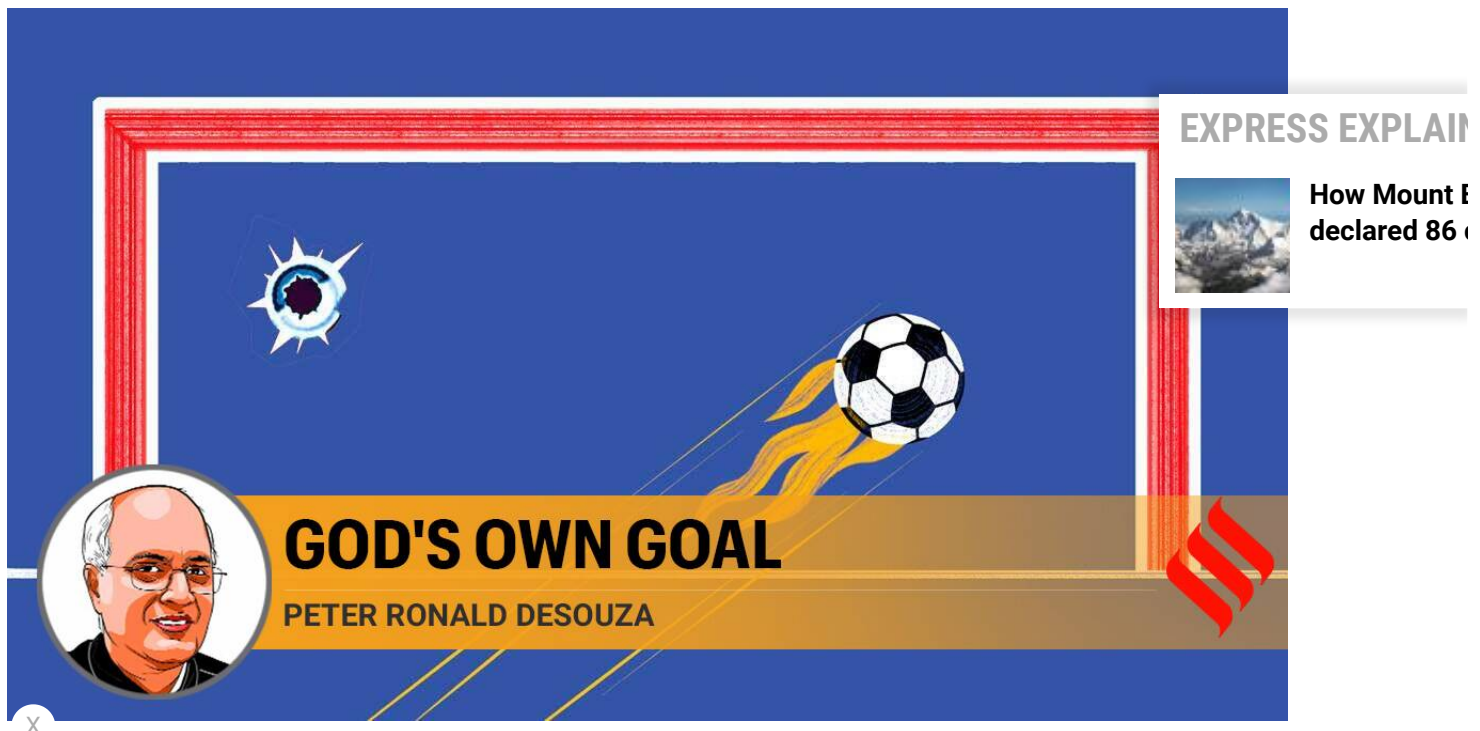
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Maradona was a rebel against a system that oppressed you by its rules

Maradona was a rebel against a system that oppressed you by its rules, created them to hold you down and tore them up when the calculus of power changed.

Written by **Peter Ronald DeSouza** | Updated: November 28, 2020 9:01:23 am



Maradona was the consummate artist, the passionate sportsman, the footballing virtuoso. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Maradona's first goal in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals in Mexico against [England](#) — the “hand of God” goal — has been universally condemned as a cheat goal that has no place in football. Some called it the “hand of the devil”. If one had read only the European commentators, one would tend to endorse this severe moral verdict. European fury is understandable. Football has rules. The handball goal was a violation of these rules. England should not have lost 1-2 to Argentina.

Since this is an article only about ethical judgement regarding the “hand of God” goal, let me limit the discussion only to it and not to the English outrage, which I see as duplicitous. But that is another matter. The fact that [Maradona](#) followed this goal with another four minutes later, referred to as the goal of the century, when he dribbled past five English defenders, is not of relevance here. The seriousness of the ethical issues concerning the “hand of God” goal is not diluted by this second brilliant goal. Therefore, if one is to look at the “hand of God” goal only in terms of football's rules, where a handball is a foul, then the goal, even though it was not seen by the referee, was unacceptable. Football stood devalued. The name of the beautiful game was badly tarnished. Maradona should have been punished for it.

However, if you look at the goal from a different perspective, it does not seem so wrong. If you build in context into the argument, calculate the dignity gains for Argentina, and look at the goal from a “dirty hands” angle, then it is possible to argue that the English should have taken the result “with a cheery and self-confident sense of un-batterability”, as Mary Beard said when she opposed the students’ Rhodes Must Fall campaign at Oxford. Maradona did not learn his football on the playing fields of Eton where, apparently, they teach you the rules of sport though not of colonial governance. He learnt his football in the bylanes of the Buenos Aires slums where he lived. Here, football is everything. If you are good, it gives you a way out of your vulnerability. It makes you a hero, earns you a livelihood and makes you a star. Maradona was a genius, who rarely comes to football. His parents were Peronistas. He was a rebel against a system that oppressed you by its rules, that, in fact, created rules to hold you down and then tore them up when the calculus of power changed.

EXPRESS EXPLAIN

**How Mount Everest declared 86**

Editorial | **Ball loses foot: Through a turbulent life and career, Diego Maradona never failed his partner in a hypnotic tango**

Facing an open goal — all five foot five inches of him — Maradona, who had jumped higher than Peter Shilton, the English goalkeeper, was not going to be held back by just a rule. Too much was at stake. England needed to be defeated. The loss in the 1982 war in the Malvinas had to be avenged. The young victims of that war had to be honoured. English had to be taught a humiliating lesson. He had to score a goal. He was prepared to use everything in his power to do so. And god paid compensation for making him short by offering Maradona a hand.

The instincts of the boy from the slums of Buenos Aires took over. Using all his cunning, he disguised a handball as a header and sent the ball into the open goal. It was for the referee to call him out. Perhaps even punish him. In English law, this is called “rules as deterrence”. The referee did not see the handball. The goal was given. Argentina erupted. To burden Maradona with the weight of rule observance when he was playing for higher stakes, for his people who the system had held down, for his country that had been defeated by England in war, for the honour of those who had died, is just plain naïve. Rule observance was the job of the referee, who had the authority to enforce it. Maradona gambled that the referee would miss it. Maradona won.

In moral theory, there is, in addition, the “dirty hands” argument that can also be used to defend Maradona’s goal. The Princeton philosopher Michael Walzer and the Cambridge philosopher Bernard Williams approve of it. Simply put, it states that in exceptional situations committing immoral actions is justifiable – that is having dirty hands — if that is necessary to achieve some higher moral ends. In such exceptional situations, one has no other option than to dirty one’s hands.

Maradona’s goal, I believe, meets these conditions. How could he think of rules when he saw an empty goal before him, when he imagined what a goal would mean for Argentina? A little help from his hands was no great moral transgression. Nobody died. The moral theory of “dirty hands” was not forged to justify this goal.

Interestingly, the “dirty hands” argument is repeatedly deployed in the Mahabharata. Lord Krishna guiding Arjuna’s chariot in the battle against Karna, sees Karna set down his weapons as he alights from the chariot to lift the wheel which is stuck in wet clay. Seeing him defenceless, recognising that this is the only moment when Karna could be killed, which, if allowed to pass, would mean that Arjuna would lose the duel, Krishna urges Arjuna to shoot an arrow at Karna. This is in violation of the rules of war. No one is to be attacked when they do not have their weapons with them. Fighting can only take place when both are armed. Arjuna hesitates to break the rule. Lord Krishna compels him to fire the arrow at an unarmed Karna. He does. Karna dies. The hand of god is once more at work.

Opinion | Diego Maradona was a magician on the field, and a charmer off it

EXPRESS EXPLAIN



How Mount Everest declared 86

So why is Maradona pilloried for his handball goal? Unfairly, I believe. The second goal ended the debate on Maradona's genius. He was the consummate artist, the passionate sportsman, the footballing virtuoso. He was the boy from Buenos Aires who faced the system, challenged it, was crushed by it, but was never co-opted. He was the footballing equivalent of the painter Vincent Van Gogh, the chess prodigy Bobby Fischer, the ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev, the mathematician John Nash. His life force did not allow him to achieve a state of equilibrium with the world. Such a life force never does. Maradona has just died. Long live Maradona.

This article first appeared in the print edition on November 28, 2020 under the title 'God's own goal'. The writer is DD Kosambi Visiting Professor at Goa University.



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