

Can Sports Be The Harbinger Of A New Dawn In India-Pakistan Relations?

BY SIRSHENDU PANTH

India's Tokyo Olympics gold medalist javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra virtually reemphasized the Olympic Charter when he berated those using his name and twisting his comments to foment anti-Pakistan propaganda and promote their "dirty agenda". Demonstrating the spunk that has made him a world champion in his sport, the farmer's son from Haryana gave lessons in sportsmanship to those assailing Pakistani javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem on social media and television channels. "Sports teaches us to be together and united," said India's latest sporting hero, adding that he was "extremely disappointed to see some of the reactions from the (Indian) public".

Chopra's comments highlighted the spirit of sportsmanship went far beyond the animosities and mutual demonization induced by political factors, which have left India and Pakistan endlessly bickering for decades, causing much bloodshed, drain of finances due to defense and security considerations, and prevented healthy people-to-people contact between two neighbors with a shared history and culture.

The social media outbursts targeting Nadeem, who has repeatedly said that he idolizes Chopra, began after the Indian athlete told Times of India that he attempted his first throw at the Olympic finals hurriedly as the Pakistani competitor was "moving around" with his javelin. Though Chopra had commented casually, it was soon picked up by news channels and hawks active on social media. They smelled a "Pakistani conspiracy" and accused Nadeem of "tampering with", "stealing" the Indian's javelin, and keeping the spear with himself so that Chopra ran out of time for his throws.

As the hate messages continued to pour in a toxic social media, Chopra sprang to Nadeem's defense. He explained that all throwers kept their javelin together, and it was no big deal that the Pakistani was moving with his javelin, and returned it immediately when he requested.

"There was nothing wrong with Arshad Nadeem using my javelin to prepare; it is within rules and please do not use my name to push a dirty agenda," he told The Wire, an Indian website.

The Fundamental Principles of Olympism, part of the Olympic Charter, lays down that the "goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, to promote a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity". Chopra has aptly conformed to this spirit in his bid to protect fellow sportsman Nadeem's dignity while bringing out mutual respect among athletes, irrespective of their intense rivalries, for sporting glory.

SUPPORT FROM SPORTSPERSONS

After Chopra's forthright comments, other leading Indian sportspersons like Tokyo medalist and wrestler Bajrang Punia, Rio Olympics bronze winner Sakshi Malik, veteran table tennis player Sharath Kamal and golfer Jeev Milkha Singh strongly endorsed his sentiments

about the syncretism that sports achieve and against the fomenting of India-Pakistan hatred in the sporting arena.

Jeev Milkha, in a signed article for Indian Express, called Chopra "a true champion" for the way he supported Nadeem and remembered the friendships he struck during his many trips to Pakistan with celebrated Pakistani golfers like Taimur Hassan Amin.

He also recalled the love and respect his father – India's legendary quarter-miler Milkha Singh, who finished fourth in the Rome Olympics (1960) – got in Pakistan as an athlete, despite having had to flee from that country as a child during the 1947 partition. In fact, the name Flying Sikh – by which Milkha is



Reuters

India's Neeraj Chopra and Pakistan's Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi

fondly called for his lightning runs – was given by Pakistan's military dictator Field Marshal Ayub Khan after the former's famous run. After winning the 200 metre International Athletic Competition in Lahore against his Pakistani rival Abdul Khaliq, General Ayub Khan had said to Milkha Singh that he did not run in Pakistan but flew instead, and gave him the sobriquet "Flying Sikh".

While it's true that some sportspersons – like star cricketers Gautam Gambhir and Virender Sehwag on the Indian side and Pakistan's Javed Miandad - have through their social media posts or aggressive comments on television channels often, wittingly or unwittingly, pandered to the hawks in both nations and their hate agenda, there is also a section of players who have wondered aloud why sportspersons should fight each other away from the sporting arena, going against the very spirit of sports.

Two years back, Pakistan's former fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar quizzed another cricketing great Indian off-spinner Harbhajan Singh on the issue.

"What happens to us cricketers on television? When we are at some news channel, why are there such differences?" asked the man, called the "Rawalpindi Express", on his YouTube channel.

"Political context should be kept separate. But I have always said that my cricketing heroes are from India, from Pakistan. Even from Australia," responded Harbhajan Singh, who is known by his nickname "Bhaji".

But Akhtar wanted a more categorical reply.

"A part of it is because of the media," said Harbhajan, the world's second-highest wicket-taker off-spinner.

"A simple match is scandalized like anything. It should be fun. Two countries come together, sit with each other. We look so similar, we speak like one another, enjoy the match together."

CRICKET AND TWO WORLD CUPS

A look back down the years brings out instances of close bonding between players and sports organizers of the two countries, with the relationships at times going beyond the sports field into the personal domain. The marriage between Indian tennis star Sania Mirza and top Pakistani cricketer Shoaib Malik is a prime example.

The biggest collaboration between the two countries in terms of organizing sporting events happened in cricket –

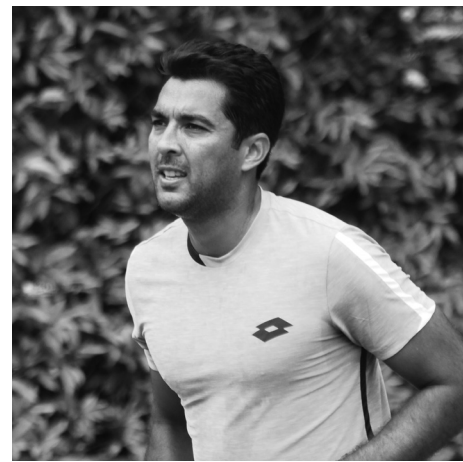


Photo: commons.wikimedia.org

partition years, several footballers from Pakistan plied their trade for Kolkata soccer giants East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting. Particular mention may be made about Masood Fakhri, a professional footballer, who turned out for East Bengal from 1953 to 1955 and then donned the Mohammedan Sporting jersey for the next two years.

A talented forward, he played as a left-winger and helped both clubs win several top-rated tournaments.

Rupak Saha, in his Bengali book Itihase East Bengal (East Bengal in History), detailed some interesting happenings about Fakhri and another Pakistani player Niyazi. In those days, things were a bit relaxed, and the Pakistani players used to play in India without taking international clearance from their sports association. In 1953, when the two footballers were part of East Bengal, the Indian Football Association demanded the club produce the international transfer papers of the two players. East Bengal, which had entered the IFA Shield final, failed to comply.

As a result, East Bengal was placed under suspension. East Bengal moved court against the decision, but following an out-of-court settlement, the suspension was revoked. East Bengal was, however, adjudged runners-up. Incidentally, the final had remained drawn despite two play-offs.

INDO-PAK EXPRESS

While all these instances given so far relate to the past, a recent example of the two nation's sports bonhomie is provided by the "Indo-Pak Express" – comprising tennis stars Pakistan's Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi and India's Rohan Bopanna, who have been playing together in men's doubles circuit off and on since 2003. They have bagged five ATP doubles titles together, and also reached the 2010 US Open final. They parted ways in 2010, reunited in 2014, but decided to go their separate ways that year itself. But in 2021, they joined forces in March, albeit for a week.

But apart from their on-court success, what distinguishes the pair is their championing of the 'Stop War, Start Tennis' slogan, promoting peace in South Asia and calling for the decoupling of sports and politics.

None can deny the problems and the deep distrust that exists between the two countries – particularly related to the military, political and intelligence establishments. Each blames the other for terror incidents on its soil. Amid the thorny political and diplomatic issues, sports can act as the much-needed balm to remove distrust and promote understanding between India and Pakistan.

Unfortunately, sports has become a prisoner to political and diplomatic disputes. One only hopes that, sooner rather than later, the pendulum swings the other way, with renewed sporting ties - whether in cricket, hockey or athletics - acting as catalysts to improve bilateral relations between two nations, which were once one.

(THE WRITER IS THE EDITOR, SOUTH ASIA MONITOR. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE PERSONAL. HE CAN BE CONTACTED AT S.PANTH@SPSINDIA.IN)

WITH PERMISSION FROM SOUTH ASIA MONITOR