**Let Them Play Too…**

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If contributing to football without being a footballing nation had a prize, it would probably go to Pakistan. The country is 194 in the FIFA rankings, which stood at 205 in January 2019. Pakistani national teams have never qualified for the FIFA World Cup. Yet, stories of Sialkot, the world’s football manufacturing capital, comes under the spotlight whenever a mega football event gets underway.

The pattern was repeated as soon as the Qatar World Cup 2022 started on November 20. Many proud Pakistanis started sharing the oft-repeated story on social media – Sialkot, the city that manufactures over 70 per cent of the world’s football. Not surprisingly, Pakistan is among the primary source of footballs – around 2,000 of them, according to one estimate – for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Doha, Qatar.

While it continues to be an incredible story, even worth the occasional social media space, sometimes, such stories get overstated for unexplained reasons, perhaps merely because they look good to the eye. On this occasion, it probably got more coverage than thousands of Pakistani troops guarding the World Cup underway in Qatar.

Even in moments of glory, there is always a dark space that needs greater introspection. Pakistan would do well to keep an eye on the other side of the story-basically, what goes into making these footballs kick. More importantly, keep a vigil, so the story endures, the industry becomes sustainable, and the manufacturers and workers continue to get their due. While it is alright to express pride in the country’s feat, we, the Pakistanis, collectively should also spare a thought for the many children who have toiled to make the soccer balls roll and fly, albeit in the past.

Beyond basking in football’s reflected glory, Pakistan should keep an eye on the industry that has earned it laurels.

There are as many as 10,000 children who are using their tiny fingers to stitch these footballs. Though a lot has been done to deter child labour in Pakistan, the fact is child labour is becoming a socially acceptable workforce. The soccer ball industry is also one of them.

These children produced one-quarter of about 35 million soccer balls stitched in Pakistan. Things have indeed changed. Regulations have improved, and the proponents of child rights are far more vociferous. However, taking eyes off the ball is never a good idea, even when the world is looking elsewhere.

Industry watchers say over 80 per cent of the Sialkot-made footballs are hand-stitched. It takes three hours each, and those weaving them get an average of Rs 160 per ball, while it is sold for a staggering Rs. 36,000 each. According to Bloomberg, around 60,000 people work in Sialkot’s soccer ball manufacturing business alone. This is about eight per cent of the city’s population. Women workforce is gradually replacing children under 15. But a child is the least paid worker and one that can be easily exploited and therefore, the practice still prevails. In the year 2020, the Lahore High Court passed a groundbreaking judgement against the practice of child labour. District Vigilance Committee were made. But the reality is nothing made a difference.

Ours is a society where the poor economic situation at the micro level, rising unemployment and increasing population have somewhat made child labour kosher. Be it a domestic worker, an assistant in a mechanic workshop, a brick-maker or a stitch-maker at a football shop, these children, their families, and their employers all are now at peace to allow them to work at a tender age where they should be in the school.

If one cannot stop these children to work, one should provide them with food, health and education for free at their workplace so that we can save atleast some of their childhood in the dark rooms of factories. This is the least any factory owner can do for these angel workers.

Footballs made in Pakistan have arguably attracted the most eyeballs in the past month or so – across the 64 matches and beyond an estimated three million who travelled to Qatar for the World Cup. But we should continue to ensure more and more children get to play football, not stitch them. The pleasure of kicking the ball that has been made from tiny hands is beyond imagination. Let’s cheer these moments with these unsung heroes of footballs, who are kicked by hard realities of life.

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