[**A blend of cricket and Tagore**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1606314/a-blend-of-cricket-and-tagore)

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THE thought must be quite urgent that it broke through a riveting day’s cricket match being played in Chennai to pose the question. Since Khalistan is a bad idea, what can be good about a Hindu rashtra? And while both ideas are repugnant to the promise of a scrupulously secular state that the founding fathers wanted India to be, why are advocates of Khalistan abused by the pro-government media, while partisans of a majoritarian future are indulged as supremely nationalist? The question has been looking for an answer ever since pro-government TV anchors tainted a secular movement of Indian farmers that happened to be predominantly led by Sikhs at one stage, with sectarian colour.

The fact is that the farmers represent an idea of India that questions the neoliberal economic policies, which have intertwined with the purposes of Hindutva. The farmers seek legal endorsement of a minimum support price for their produce of mostly wheat and rice. The state that did offer them such a support was essentially striving to feed the poor with the large volume of produce it thus acquired. India is struggling behind Pakistan and Bangladesh in the global hunger index. In other words a minimum support price regime could be viable only with a welfare state or something close to it as India once hoped to be. Neoliberal economics sees that as a hostile idea. No matter how one tries to dress it up, the truth of neoliberal economics trumps the mythology of religious antagonism in India. The farmers’ demand is bad for crony economics hence they are branded terrorists and bandits.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman’s budget speech last week summoned several unrelated idioms to dress up the quest of a government, which is overtly committed to a Hindu rashtra but covertly works for a neoliberal model for India. The effort can get predictable, however. Sitharaman collared India’s improbable cricket victory in Australia to spruce up her budget. And she summoned a verse from Rabindranath Tagore to put a liberal sheen on an illiberal dream. Why would Tagore endorse anything as illiberal as Hindutva, leave alone its unequal premises.

Which advocate of religious majoritarianism can recite without blinking even a single line from Tagore’s talisman for Indians?

How would Sitharaman honestly blend her worldview with Tagore’s clarion call to the highest liberal ideals of internationalism? “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/ Where knowledge is free/ Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls/ Where words come out from the depth of truth/ Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection/ Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit/ Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action/ Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.” Which advocate of religious majoritarianism can recite without blinking even a single line from Tagore’s talisman for Indians?

Sitharaman’s effort notwithstanding, everyone wants to use cricket’s popularity to their advantage in India. Politicians from Lalu Yadav and Farooq Abdullah to Narendra Modi and Amit Shah have headed cricket bodies. Indian tycoons own and manage cricket teams today recasting themselves as latter-day Kerry Packers. For that matter fugitive underworld don Dawood Ibrahim ran cricket fixtures from his VIP box at the Sharjah stadium. That’s not what a truer cricket fan links the game with.

For the most part, their cricket team is sacrosanct for Indians and it has been like this since the colonial game sprouted more durable roots than it could in the far Pacific Gilbert and Ellice Islands where British rulers made ceaseless attempts to plant the zeal. Being Indian meant admiring the dazzling Jaisimha and Pataudi and Engineer. This was of course not always true of a large body of Indians who had a greater passion for football and at one stage for hockey.

However, cricket-loving Indians had the ability to just as easily be glued to the radio commentary when West Indies was playing Australia, say, in Sydney, or Sarfraz Nawaz was rocking English batsmen with his newly minted reverse swing on their green pitches. The searing heat of Chennai, where the England-India match looked tantalisingly poised for a draw or a decision after the fourth day’s turn of events ushered equally agreeable memories from the past. The stadium had witnessed a heart-tugging ovation to Pakistani cricketers after they beat India in a close competition there. That crowd was missing as part of needed measures against the spread of the coronavirus, but the spirit lingers.

Now, under Prime Minister Modi’s watch, Pakistan is excluded from India’s bilateral itineraries. I saw a rare World Cup match between the two teams at Manchester where Pakistan were defeated roundly. Cricket ties between the two pay for the political whims of their rulers. To his credit, after much turbulence in his equation with Pakistan, prime minister Vajpayee revived their cricketing links with a rousing ovation in Lahore, where Indian cricketers and Indian fans were overwhelmed with warm hospitality. The unlikely hero of the Pakistani crowds was Indian pace bowler Balaji, now only a very fleeting memory. Women spectators wove a song for the dark complexioned hero, a take-off from an old movie — Balaji dheerey chalna. (Walk gently Balaji.)

Sport has served politics and rarely if ever has it been the other way around. Hitler used it to flaunt the mythical superiority of Aryans. The brilliant black athlete Jesse Owens punctured the core of this Nazi belief. The presence of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Parsi and possibly animist players in the Indian cricket team showcased the secular quest of the newly independent nation that India was. On the other hand, the absence of black players in South African team summed up apartheid. The Indian cricket team’s amazing victory in Australia can be credited to the kaleidoscope of races and religions that makes up the country. And there’s nothing in it for bigotry of any stripe.

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