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Why Aren't Our Sports Celebrities Speaking Out?

By: Sharda Ugra

Protests by young Indians against the CAA/NRC/NPR have been met with violence by the State and silence from their sporting heroes. Why do sports icons steer clear of issues and actions affecting their fan base? Is it because they can't or they don't want to?

Let's address the question directly: why amidst the biggest citizen protests in India of the last 45 years do we expect our beloved athletes to offer us their views on the matter?

For me, the question first stirred in early December, when it was hard to ignore the ages of those at the end of police violence, lathis and tear gas. Standing up to the crushing might of the State were college students, whose ages coincided with the gifted young men and women I meet regularly as a sports journalist. It is these young people, the majority of them students, who form the vast majority of the Indian sports fan base. They are in fact, its constituency. The athletes I meet are their idols, their 'faves', their athletic superheroes.

The students being rounded up, detained, chased, beaten, and arrested were the ages of cricketers Rishabh Pant and Jemimah Rodrigues. Of those who would be going to the Tokyo Olympics this year – shooters Saurabh Chaudhary and Manu Bhaker — and those aiming to, like boxer Amit Panghal and badminton player PV Sindhu.

Did not the superheroes have anything to say on what was happening to Indian boys and girls like them?

Twitter produced a modest audit of those willing to speak for the young protestors. Most were not mega-celebrity category, but were well known: Winter Olympian [Shiva Kesavan](#), footballers [CK Vineeth](#) and Darren Caldeira (who said [this](#) and [this](#)) and badminton player [Jwala Gutta](#). Irfan Pathan was the first from cricket to make a [statement](#), followed by [Aakash Chopra](#), and Harbhajan Singh with [this](#) and [this](#). Then Sanjay Manjrekar [saluted](#) Mumbai's support for the JNU students who were attacked by masked intruders with the Delhi police standing outside their campus while the mob ransacked and vandalised hostels. On Christmas Eve, commentator Harsha Bhogle's [Facebook post](#) talked about “a young India speaking to us.” Later in January, VVS Laxman, Rahul Dravid and, once again, Harbhajan Singh offered their [opinion](#) on the youth protests to ESPNcricinfo. They make up the 'Somewhat Vocal XI.'

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The first public voices from sport that spoke in support of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were India's cricket coach [Ravi Shastri](#) on television and [Sunil Gavaskar](#) in a public lecture, saying the nation was in “turmoil” with youngsters out on the streets when they should be in class rooms. Asked about the CAA during a home series against Sri Lanka, India captain [Virat Kohli](#) said he didn't know enough about the CAA to offer comment.

There are reasons why athletes choose to stay silent about contentious public issues.

According to Australian Craig Foster, former Socceroo, sports analyst and a human rights activist, athletes actually underestimate their latent power. I met Foster at a *Sports Law & Policy Symposium* in Bangalore last August, where he had [talked](#) about fronting the campaign that got refugee footballer Hakeem al-Araibi released from a prison in Bangkok. Foster said modern sport (or as he called it, the “industrial complex of sport”) has decided that “athletes shouldn't have a voice and I reject that entirely.”

He puts a question for all athletes, current and former, “At what stage does an athlete stop being a human being and start being just someone who hits a ball...?” Foster said athletes, his tribe, were by nature, “team-oriented” and that athletes tended to be “very compassionate people,” qualities that they were not ordinarily recognised. Athletes may feel strongly about causes, Foster said, but were “reluctant because they are experts in their own field and often feel [*by speaking on other issues*] they are stepping outside.”

The paucity of voices from Indian sport speaking against the Government is also hardly a surprise. Indian sport, particularly Olympic sport, is in itself beholden to the state, whose framework supports livelihoods and athletes. The Government offers ‘sports quota’ jobs and fields public sector teams — from banks, petroleum, railways, Air India and (the former) Indian Airlines, the services and police

— in competitions at the state and national level. Without state support and sports ministry funding, Indian Olympic sports like hockey, athletics, table tennis, badminton, basketball, volleyball and several others would not have survived through the 20th century. Most star athletes in these sports are fundamentally, government employees. Expecting them to be marching on the streets protesting against the CAA is like expecting water to not fall down, but up.

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Then there’s cricket, where there is very little government influence in funding or operations (other than using government stadia and buying government land at cheap prices to build new grounds) but far too much of it in its centres of power. Despite Supreme Court-ordered regulatory reform and a recent spate of professional appointments, whoever controls Delhi has always tended to control BCCI. The BCCI’s recently appointed-by-unanimous-election secretary Jay Shah is the son of the Home Minister Amit Shah, the man at the centre of the controversial citizenship laws and in public opposition to the protesters.

Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah were once presidents of the Gujarat Cricket Association. How can we then expect BCCI’s also unanimously-elected new president Sourav Ganguly, to be calling out the policy decisions of his right-hand man’s all-powerful Dad? In early December, Ganguly’s teenage daughter Sana excerpted a few lines from Khushwant Singh’s writing on her Instagram post, including these words, “Every fascist regime needs communities and groups it can demonise in order to thrive.” The post was quickly deleted with Ganguly saying his daughter’s account had been hacked and asked the public to “keep Sana out of it” as she was “too young a girl to know about anything in politics”. His daughter is 18, the average age, it would seem, of the students on the streets.

In late January with anti-CAA protests into their second month and assembly elections looming in Delhi, cricket was to feel the full impact of being in bed with political power. Anurag Thakur, former BCCI president, Member of Parliament and currently Union Minister of State for Finance, was seen on Indian television exhorting an election rally crowd into a chant which ended in “*goli maaro saalon ko*”(roughly translated “shoot those bastard traitors”). We know that BCCI presidents from the past – not merely those of the political variety – were never en masse pillars of righteousness. This call for violence on the streets however, is a first. Never mind Kohli’s team touring New Zealand, Anurag Thakur’s video would have left everyone in Indian cricket (without official political positions that is), cringing. Could those in the community have said or done anything about it?

Not now and not in India. Athletes and fans, the core of a sport’s community, says Foster, don’t understand their own power. “Athletes and fans have to recognise their strength ... The players, the athletes and the fans — they are the sport. Sponsors are attached because fans are involved. No players, no game. No fans, no economic value. And there’s going to be a lot of sports administrators who are going to go somewhere else, because they are not tied to the values of sport. They are tied to the economic opportunity.” In India, add politics to the economics.

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In January, a small group of Indian students, cricket fans, however, found a creative way to protest against the CAA at the Wankhede Stadium during the first India v Australia ODI, where according to a [news report](#), placards, banners and colours were banned inside the ground. The students wore white shirts each with only a single, large letter of the alphabet on it. Together the letters formed a sign saying ‘NO CAA, NO NRC, NO NPR.’ When the sign was spotted, some sections of the Wankhede crowd chanted Prime Minister Modi’s name in response. At the next ODI in Bangalore, a fan was [divested](#) of his white handkerchief by the police, prompting the question — how many white handkerchiefs does it take to make a protest banner?



Students protesting during the India v Australia ODI on January 14 at Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai | Twitter

It must also be pointed out that those outside Foster’s “industrial complex” of sport — those with big money and the highest profile — responded like the average citizen.

Of all the sports in India, it appears that football, given its history, structure and place in the pecking order, is empowered with agency. In Kerala’s Malappuram, during the region’s most famous Sevens football tournament in December, an entire stadium [broke out](#) into the protest with [azaadi chant](#) being played over the public address system.

Less than a month later, the always-heated East Bengal-Mohun Bagan derby in Kolkata attracted a crowd of 63,756 that [unfurled](#) the largest protest posters and banners seen at a sports event in the country. The clubs are historic rivals, always divided between their east and west Bengali identities and culture, hurling abuse at each other, known for spectator violence in the past. Under the Government’s citizenship laws though, they were to find common cause. In these varied protests were heard echoes of the words of US footballer Megan Rapinoe, “If you have power or influence or platform, use it.” The Indian football fan certainly knew which platforms to use and how.

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Is this because it is ‘only’ Indian football ignored by the ‘sports industrial complex’, where athletes like Caldera and Vineeth, a former India international, felt confident about speaking? And elsewhere our superheroes find their hands tied or mouths taped over? We assume that our superstar cricketers, like our Indian celebrities, hold back from taking a stand against the Government because they fear the boot of a vengeful state. Through history, the Indian government, irrespective of who is in charge, has been known to exercise its power by hitting the more outspoken celebrity citizen particularly where it hurts — financial assets, livelihoods, reputations — using either investigative agencies or asphyxiation by the Indian judicial process. In some cases, it would seem, even speaking in the CAA’s favour becomes a road better avoided. Superheroes would rather not be painted into a corner and seen as aligned to one cause; being deliberately neutral helps protect their public and profitable personas.

In the past, such hedging of bets went unnoticed. Today, the onslaught of mobile phone media means we are living in an era of ‘continual co-presence’ (a phrase coined by MIT professor Sherry Turkle and brought to my attention by a recent [newspaper column](#) in *The New Indian Express*). Our superheroes’ ‘influencer’ selves now reach out to their ‘people,’ burnishing a brand, supporting a product, selling something sellable. On their teammates, their sport, their own sporting heroes, we hear them speak volubly, graciously acknowledging praise or lavishly handing it out, being humble, being inspiring and inspired, communicating with movie stars on new releases and their anticipation of the good things in life.

The ‘continual co-presence’ of superstar athletes must now run alongside the blood, guts, and truths emanating out of Indian towns and cities — pictures of tear gas shells in libraries, head injuries and bloodied bandages and teenagers waving pistols within the sight of a

stationary police force. The rules of the game have changed and the celebrity bubble is now under a constant hammering: *You're always telling us what you think and showing us how you feel. Now, show and tell us about today, about this day and time.*

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In the past, in times of civil strife, Indian cricketers and celebrities for their part have actively promoted social harmony like in this 2002 post-Gujarat riots [video](#). Here Sachin Tendulkar and many other worthies front an appeal created at the behest of the state machinery seeking to calm down an inflamed public.

The difference between 2002 and 2020 is that social harmony has not yet been officially sought by the Government, either in speeches or through public service advertising. Rather, in the air is a constant push for conflagration, confrontation and, through a former BCCI president and Union minister's election rally, a clarion call for 'goli maaro saalon ko.'

In 2020, official law enforcement is lined up and armed against protesting young Indians. It is the Citizen versus the agents of the State. By expecting our sporting celebrities to pick sides here, are we endangering their livelihoods, calling to their bravery or merely asking for a sign of decency and compassion?