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The Indian Chess Spring and the Sagar Shah Phenomenon

By: Arvind Subramanian

A YouTube channel with more than a million followers is participating in the current surge in competitiveness of Indian chess. Chessbase India has a host, Sagar Shah, who carries his audience with him by performing multiple roles in a friendly and quiet way.

George Orwell famously distinguished patriotism from its malign mutant, nationalism. Around the world, as politics, religion, the economy, and even sports become infected by illiberalism and nativism, one question looms: is there any space or reason for rejoicing as a patriot without crossing Orwell's lakshman rekha?

For this writer, the answer is increasingly: Indian chess. These are thrilling, uplifting times to be an Indian chess fan. And for two reasons: the performance of young Indian talent on the chess board and the Sagar Shah phenomenon off and around it.

India, for the first time, is truly competitive in, and populating at the highest levels, a global sport. Indian excellence is cricket, even when not episodic, is always asterisked by its Commonwealth confinement. Indian domination of hockey did not survive the sport's transition from languid grass to kinetic turf especially when the Europeans and Antipodeans took up the sport seriously.

Chess is different. Since 2012, India has produced more chess grandmasters than even the traditional powerhouses, Russia and America. Another 10-15 are waiting in the wings. Indian chess teams – men and women – performed brilliantly and won medals at the 2022 Chess Olympiad held in Chennai between 28 July and 9 August. Indian youngsters have won a variety of international tournaments. Teens and pre-teens are surging up the ranks and in all forms of the game—classical (test match), rapid (one-day), blitz (T-20), and armageddon (Super over?).

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In Arjun Erigaisi, D. Gukesh, R. Praggnanandhaa, and Nihal Sarin, all under 20, India has the raw material to produce a world top 10 player, possibly even a championship title contender. Three of that fab four have now beaten Magnus Carlsen, the world's current champion and one of the all-time greats. Recently, R. Vaishali played a game, eliciting comparisons with the legendary Mikhail Tal. Indian chess players are now hunting ferally, in packs.

The rise of Indian chess owes to several factors, especially the digital revolution in India which has allowed millions of Indians to learn, play and teach chess. Modern search engines allow players to know and learn good and bad combinations of moves at least up to a certain stage in a chess game. Prodigious memory going into a match is now becoming as important an attribute as brute calculation over the chess board. And perhaps this favours young Indian players who are brought up in an educational system that emphasises learning by rote. That also seems consistent with Americans of Indian origin being so accomplished at Spelling Bee contests.

But the current golden age of Indian chess owes to a Superstar effect. Vishwanathan (Vishy) Anand's achievement as 5-time world chess champion spawned interest in the game much like what Bjorn Borg's ascendancy did for Swedish and Scandinavian tennis. Vishy has been the defining personality of Indian chess for the last three decades first as inspiration and now as mentor to young Indian talent.

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The second and surprising reason for patriotic cheer is the arrival today, of a new and second superstar of Indian chess. Neither player nor coach nor official, Sagar Shah is a unique and uniquely Indian chess phenomenon. Along with his wife Amruta Mokal and their team, he has created a YouTube channel – [Chessbase India](#) – with over a million subscribers and growing. One could make the case

that Sagar Shah – as much as Vishy Anand or the talented youngsters – is the face of Indian chess today.

Chessbase India is a channel for following live chess with expert commentary and analysis, especially on Indian chess players; a medium for providing entertainment and making chess a fun activity; a community that organises events, raises awareness of the game and mobilises funds for less well-off, talented players; a platform for teaching and learning; an Agony Aunt column; and a forum that brings together coaches, players and their family. Chessbase India is a microcosm of India in all its wholesome, aspirational multi-facetedness.

Sagar Shah possesses indefatigable energy, dedication and expert knowledge, having been a former international master himself. But it's the sensibility that elevates him and allows the creation of the bubble to enjoy the patriotism within while keeping the nationalism and majoritarianism without.

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That sensibility is the antithesis of that of the anchors and pundits that inhabit today's media. Good humour peppered with banter, unrelenting positivity, studious non-gotcha-ness, and serious expertise worn lightly and wielded collectively, all packaged in the best of desi informality is the Sagar Shah shtick. When an Indian player loses, the follow-up is always cheerily consoling with Sagar conjuring up the silver lining even if there isn't one. When a Chinese player wins there is generosity and acknowledgement uncontaminated by even a whiff of geo-politics. And when an Indian player performs well, there is joy and exultation, innocent not triumphalist.

The Chessbase India/Sagar Shah oeuvre has many offerings. His interview of the father of the youngest grandmaster ever, the Indian-American Abhimanyu Mishra, was remarkable for the delicacy in handling the tricky issues surrounding an apparently over-bearing, sports parent pushing a young talent.

His recent interview of Magnus Carlsen after he had crushed the young Praggnanandhaa in the final event of the Champions Chess tour was masterful in a different way. The technical post-mortem led naturally in one case to an honest admission that Magnus had missed the drawing combination; and in another to the reluctant confession by Magnus that he had in fact seen the winning combination but had refrained from executing it to avoid crushing his young opponent. That Carlsen the chess player was human after all, and Carlsen the human was a magnanimous chess player too was teased out by Sagar Shah.

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And then Chessbase India brings heart-rending, uplifting stories of chess in India. The first two episodes of a series called Super Heroes of Chess feature visually challenged individuals playing chess against all odds with the help of siblings and friends. A series called Chess Warriors tells the story of Abdul Rahman, a Muslim worker from Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh whose circumstances impeded him from pursuing the game competitively. However, even in his middle age, the passion for the sport has remained, as he plays 100-150 blitz games online every night after an exhausting day's work as a plumber in a Hyderabad mall. Watch Chessbase India capture the glint in Abdul's eyes when he speaks about Steinitz, Lasker and Tal, and coax out his achievements and aspirations in a display of majestic pride not self-pity.

The staple of the multi-product Chessbase India line is the 10-15 minute post-match analysis by Sagar Shah of games won by Indians. These become even more unmissable when the analysis is done with the victor: Why the particular opening? What was preparation and what was calculated over the board? What was missed or mis-played?

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Unlike other channels, Sagar takes the live chat function seriously and engages with participants patiently and continually. That is the distinctiveness of Chessbase India and a secret of its success. Even at the risk of losing track of the game, Sagar will ask his chat followers for the best move umpteen times during a game and painstakingly read out the 10, 15 names that have provided the right

answer. That reading out is almost Proustian in recalling the languorous afternoons of Vividh Bharati's Hindi film music program of the 1960s and 1970s: "farmaish kar rahein hai, Nasik se Zubair, Jhoomri Talaiya se Kanhaiya, Itarsi se Anita..." In addition, chat questions are vocalized and answered. Information is provided about future events. Gratitude is expressed for the compliments and donations.

The result is that Sagar Shah has become Sagar-bhai to his million-plus followers, a YouTube channel has been transformed into an online community or rather an extended Indian joint family.

The Agony Aunt role was then inevitable. "Sagar-bhai, my wife complains that I am watching too much Chess-base and not giving her enough attention. What should I do?" The prompt response: "Pay attention to your wife." "Sagar bhai, how should I increase my concentration in studies." "Sagar bhai, how should I get my children to become interested in reading?" etc. etc. Occasionally, Sagar is upbraided, "Sagar please learn how to properly pronounce Kolkata. The way of yours is disrespect." The earnest, un-provoked response. "Ok! please tell me how."

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One distinctive aspect of chess as a live sport is the continuous excitement that comes from technology evaluating for the spectator every move against an objective standard, the computer and a relative standard, the opponent. Chess commentary is built on this technology. Tension is created in anticipation of whether a player will find the theoretical best or second-best move. And when players find it there is the wow factor of watching objectively measurable genius in real time.

A related thrill comes from the relative dimension. As games are being played, chess engines evaluate every move in terms of winning and losing odds against the opponent. Evaluation bars can fluctuate wildly as blunders are committed or good moves found. In chess every move and its anticipation are pregnant with double drama and suspense. The adrenaline flow is non-stop. With a stretch, one might say that classical chess is the ultimate spectator sport because it combines the subtle, undulating rhythms of Test match cricket where apparently (only apparently) little happens for spells of time punctuated by the periodic thrill of cricket's shorter versions.

For these reasons, Chessbase India's uniqueness comes alive when livestreaming chess events. Other channels provide slick, expert commentary. On Chessbase India, especially for many an exciting game, commentary might typically begin with Sagar then joined by his wife, then joined by one or two Indian chess grandmasters as more chairs are pulled up by their sides, followed by the comedian Samay Raina and joined virtually by a foreign grandmaster, often Anish Giri, a Dutch top 10 player and long-time buddy of Sagar's. Commentary and banter rise proportionally to size.

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It is all too wonderfully reminiscent of travelling on an Indian train where one's reserved berth eventually witnesses multiple occupancy. Each arrival eases in to the progressively shrinking physical space with the gentle plea to the last incumbent "zara adjust bhai-saheb" even as he is opening his lunch box for collective consumption. One man and his berth become an adda and communal dining room. That is sort of the vibe of Sagar Shah's Chessbase India.

And when the games become exciting, Sagar's infectious enthusiasm and decibel level rise. A typical sequence: "Guys, will Arjun find Rook a3? Guys, will Gukesh trap Magnus' queen in the centre of the board?" "He finds it! He finds it! Amazing, guys," as all the other commentators join Sagar in a crescendo of collective shrieking and celebration.

The Sagar Shah phenomenon seems sui generis because other sports don't seem to have a counterpart. He is allowing us to revel as patriots without having us chest-thump as nationalists. This media age privileges self-promoters and preeners, hustling to alchemize public attention into private gain. Sagar Shah is that refreshing counter-example who is deploying his personal talent and energy into providing a massive public good for Indian chess.

Don't take my word. Just ask Magnus Carlsen. Or the 1 million fans and followers of Sagar-bhai.

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