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## Making sense of Bangladesh's World Cup obsession

A farmer in Bangladesh unfurled a German flag stretching 5.5 kilometres (3.4 miles) in an act of devotion to his favourite footballing nation ahead of the World Cup. Photo: AFP

**Adnan Morshed**

British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, recently reported on Bangladesh's quadrennial FIFA World Cup frenzy this way: “Rival supporters of Argentina's Lionel Messi and Brazil's Neymar fought with machetes in the town of Bandar. One man and his son were critically wounded in the incident, according to police reports.”



A farmer in Bangladesh unfurled a German flag stretching 5.5 kilometres (3.4 miles) in an act of devotion to his favourite footballing nation ahead of the World Cup. Photo: AFP

Violence among machete-wielding fans has been reported across Bangladesh since the World Cup kicked-off. People got electrocuted while hanging large flags from electric poles. One Argentine supporter committed suicide, unable to bear his favourite team's humiliating defeat by Croatia. The fans who died have been called “World Cup martyrs!”

We may choose to consider this obsession an innocent national “fun” or a forgivable expression of the derogatory term *hujuge Bangalee*. But, is there something deeper than the mere love of World Cup football?

As I saw Brazilian, Argentine, and German flags flying high in Sunamganj (Sylhet) or Anwara (Chittagong), I kept wondering why Bangladeshis become so enamoured with countries that are so far away, with no ethnic or blood ties.

Argentine supporters in Feni brought out a raucous procession through the city with a kilometre-long blue-white flag! In Narayanganj, a fan has named his high-rise apartment building “Brazil Bari,” literally a three-dimensional Brazilian flag and an improvised museum of Brazil's World Cup paraphernalia! And, Amjad Hossain, a 69-year-old farmer in Magura has made a tricolour German flag, stretching 5.5 kilometres (3.4 miles), and requiring an entire village to unfurl it in a local school ground. Where did he get the money for this “lengthy” aspiration? He reportedly sold a portion of his inherited farm land.

Some people are also deeply offended by this zealotry and dismiss it as a peculiar cultural infantilism. The fanatic devotion may well have deep roots in the era of electronic media, globalisation, Bangladesh's own socio-political history and the cultural evolution of its people, its vulnerable geography, etc.

But let's start with a few basics. The fascination with Brazilian football started with the Pele myth, a pre-TV phenomenon that neatly transitioned into the global era of live telecast in the early 1980s. Argentina's football domination began with the World Cup championship in 1978. The country's football legacy that Mario Kempes created that year reached stratospheric heights with the emergence of the demigod, Diego Maradona, and his otherworldly skills that helped Argentina win the championship again in 1986. I recall how electrified Bangladesh was by Maradona's “hand of God” goal against England (Argentina's defeat by the United Kingdom at the Falklands War in 1982 already generated much popular sympathy for the country) and one-man demolition of Germany. In the popular imagination, Argentina and Brazil offered some kind of challenge, albeit through sports, to Western hegemony.

The football rivalry of the two South American neighbours found its most unlikely but animated host in Bangladesh during the 1980s, 1990s, and onward. Argentina was champion in 1986 and runners-up in 1990. From Maradona to Lionel Messi, there has been a soaring narrative for many Bangladeshis. Brazil was champion in 1994, 2002, and runners-up in 1998. Germany, too, began to be popular with Bangladeshis as they were runners-up in 1986, champion in 1990, and again runners-up in 2002. Many Bangladeshis seemed eager to adopt these countries as their own football “nation”. Despite Zidane's immense popularity, France never quite became a star in the firmament of Bangladesh's football love.

The admiration for football prowess is hardly enough to explain Bangladesh's extreme emotionalism, and affiliated violence, during the World Cup.

Does the country's geography have to do something with the emotional character of its people? Crisscrossed by rivers and canals, and prone to cyclones, storms, and floods, the deltaic land and its people have long developed an existential angst for survival against natural calamities. Bengalis tend to inherit this mental state as a form of “genetic memory”. To overcome the wrath of nature, people internalise a perpetual and innate need for beneficial myths, heroes, and a host of other sociocultural anchors that serve as a lighthouse, a source of inspiration. Our popular myths are often related to our precarious riverine geography and the heroes who guide us during hard times, during deluge, river erosion, or storm.

Our need for heroes is an existential one. They can be from here, there, or anywhere. They can be real or imaginary. We are eager to believe in, and augment, their supernatural powers. When they help us rise above all kind of adversities, we gravitate toward them like moths.

From Khudiram, Master Da Surya Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, Begum Rokeya, and Bangabandhu to boxer Muhammad Ali, Mother Teresa, Mandela, Zidane, Messi, and Neymar, we somehow persuade ourselves to see these figures as saviours or some kind of existential anchors with which we figure out the meaning of our lives and social spheres. When we survive our struggles with their guidance, we become overwhelmed with joy, emotion, and a desire to thank them with extreme, sometimes absurd, devotion.

How else does one explain the processions across the country to reverse the death sentence of Baker Bhai, a fictional Robin Hood character in Humayun Ahmed's famous TV serial *Kothao Keu Nei* (1990)? The Magura farmer Amjad Hossain identified his supposedly successful German homeopathic treatment as the reason for his quadrennial obsession to stitch the longest

flag as an homage to the German football team. These acts should not be dismissed as frivolous instances of extreme piety or stupidities. Rather, they should be anthropologically analysed as windows into the emotional state of our national character.

As writer Ahmed Sofa suggested in his acclaimed essay, “The Mind of the Bengali Muslims” (1976), acts of irrational dedication can often take place in moribund spaces of cultural stagnation. He argued that the kind of social enlightenment that defined the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the Umayyad Caliphates in Damascus and Andalucía never reached the Indian Subcontinent with the arrival of Islam.

Richard Eaton, the American scholar of pre-modern South Asia, suggested that Islam came to the Bengal delta as a “religion of the plough”, meaning that mass conversion to Islam happened about 500 or so years ago when foreign Islamic saints or dervishes employed local tribes to cultivate their agricultural lands. Extending this hypothesis, we can reason that Bengali Muslims as a people have historically remained more interested in the seasonal bounties of the fertile land than developing a collective cultural ability to abstract the world around them. The uneasy question here is how material wellbeing as a motivator of the devotional character could compromise people's ability to analyse, and sometimes take a dispassionate distance, from the subject of their interest?

While this may sound like a high-brow reasoning from an urban bourgeois perch, it may be a necessary question we need to ask to expand the definition of development beyond economic advancement. Bangladesh has been frequently described in recent times as a “success story” in economic advancement—some social indicators are also better than neighbouring counties. Yet, how capable are we as a people to think about the world in their complexities and contradictions?

Economic growth may not necessarily translate into sociocultural developments. While Amjad Hossain has every right to do whatever he pleases with his land or money, his wish to create the longest German flag reveals an uncomfortable cultural pattern. Did Bengalis inherit some kind of enduring cultural paralysis due to a host of historical evolutions, prohibiting them from seeing the seeming irrationality of their extreme emotionalism? I keep wondering.

Meanwhile, I am a supporter of the Brazilian football team. I like it a lot when Brazil scores a goal or wins the cup. Growing up with the Maradona generation, I also appreciate Messi's magical dribbling skills.

Yet, am I willing to pay for the longest Brazilian or Argentine flag? Should I?

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