



FOOTBALL FANDOM IN INDIA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF BENGALURU FOOTBALL CLUB'S FAN CLUB WEST BLOCK BLUES¹

Sohail M Guledgudd,

Research Scholar, Christ University, Bangalore

Dr. P John J Kennedy

Professor, Christ University, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

Media and the entertainment industry have often regarded football fandom as a disease in context of hooliganism. As a result of that fans who do not practice their fandom with an extreme approach of violence are often stigmatized as hooligans too (Hornby 92). Ultras² and consumers³ are type of football fans who have also been stigmatized as hooligans by the British media. While European Ultras are a culture of resistance with their anti-establishment and anti-media policies, their Indian counterparts have managed to keep the tradition of ultras intact with a positive image in the Indian media's perception. The West Block Blues are one such group of Ultras who practice the idea of a larger community without carrying out any violent measures. This paper attempts to show that identity formation of a football fan can happen without practicing violence or hostility while keeping the images of an Ultra as a vocal support group. It introduces Bengaluru Football Club's fan association as a subculture that need not be a distraction or a noise as observed by the critics of youth culture (Hebdige 91). This paper will trace the short history of the club and it's support system as a united body unlike the European football clubs who consider Ultras as a threat to the club's reputation (Giulianotti 2).

Keywords: Identity, Community, Bengaluru Football Club, West Block Blues, Ultra fan culture.

Introduction

As a game, football is neither a culture of resistance nor is it a widely practiced by a large number of people (Budka and Jancono 1). It is a culture that offers an explanation of how a society functions and how cultures are formed around notions of popularity and social acceptance. Giulianotti & Armstrong were also of the similar opinion that as a community, football is capable of explaining the functioning of a society better than any subculture of the postmodern era (1997 4). While religion, place, gender, politics have specified as the basis for imagined communities, sports have managed to break these stereotypes of communities by bringing in a romanticised and a much fluid definition of community, rather an imagined community with the help of globalization. Anderson was of the idea that a nation is imagined by its people and the feeling of being united without having the possibilities of

¹ West Block Blues- A name adopted by the fans of Bengaluru Football Club's fans based on the western stand of Kanteerava stadium.

² Ultras: football fans who are vocal with their support with chanting and elaborate choreography

³ Consumer: Consumer fans are also fans of football clubs, but they are not as vocal as the ultras in most cases

meeting each other (12). Footballing communities offer a justified explanation of being united by one common goal and even a monument as explained by Anderson himself. The home ground of every football club acts as the monument whereas the idea of being united by one single goal acts as a catalyst of attachment to these fans. Mason agrees to the universally accepted fact that there has always been a connection between sports teams and the communities they represent (Tainsky and Stodolska 801).

This paper discusses a category of football fans 'Ultras' in India by looking at their history and the ability to create identities by analyzing their practices and images reflected before games, during games and after games. This paper will look at 'West Block Blues', the ultras for Bengaluru Football Club to show the collective identities formed in popular culture's idea of "us" against "them" by exploring the notions of rivalry in augmenting these identities of statehood also.

The concept of "ultras" as violent people and rebels without a cause was a much debated topic in footballing nations. England especially had the highest tendency for violence related to football, so much so that, Margaret Thatcher called it an "English disease" during the early 90s. Similar was the case for Indian Ultras where fans of Mohun Bagan, Mohammedan Sporting and East Bengal were constantly clashing against each other and causing riots that also resulted in deaths. On the southern belt of this region are Bengaluru F.C's "West Block Blues", who were formed in 2013 with the club itself.

Studying football fandom as a subculture

Giulianotti and Armstrong's works were the first attempt to look at football fandom as a mode to study the functioning of a society. Most of the work in the early 1990s revolved around football violence, hooliganism and the role of media in perpetrating the incidents around it (Armstrong 1994, Giulianotti 1997, Moorhouse 2006 and King 1995).

Looking at football fandom as a subculture in itself was started by sociologists in the early 2000s where movement of players became prominent and listening to the active participants of the game like fans and players gave an opportunity to anthropologically analyze the concept of fandom as a cultural practice (Giulianotti and Armstrong 2).

Subcultures provide identities that do not operate under the society's notions of being 'normal'. Theorists of subcultures have called it as a "noise", a distraction from the real events and having the potential of causing anarchy to the pre-existing semantics of society (Hebdige 90), thereby exposing the arbitrariness of the societal constructs that form most of the communication. Punk/rock was one subculture that caused disruptions to the order of society, with fans wearing ripped jeans, body piercings and an array of vomiting incidents during rock concerts (90). The dominant society dealt with this problem quickly by commoditizing this subculture into its daily practices with the help of marketing strategies.

In terms of football fandom, these subcultures creating a chaotic environment is a rare occurrence. Especially with extra policing at venues of these sporting events, hooliganism has taken a backseat in the past decade with no recorded events of disturbance. It is however, important to look at this subculture of fandom as a mode of constructing identities and an ideal way to study the functioning of a society.

Within the subculture of football fandom, this paper addresses major research areas that can be studied under the ambit of football identities. "West Block Blues" also offer a brief understanding of terms that are theorized but hardly assimilated in popular culture.

1. Identity: Identity construction is a key aspect in understanding football as a subculture. The term in itself is a bifurcation of an individual from the others. It explains what unique characteristics an individual has while still under the ambit of the dominant society. Tajfel's theory of societal identity states "ethnocentrism" to determine the individual's affiliation of a particular in-group (7). This idea is also related to John Fiske's idea of "us" against "them", where the "us" refers to the supporting group and "them" refers to the rival group. In other words, it refers to people sharing similar qualities with the people of one particular group. Thus, the individual's identity of being a football fan not only stems from the idea of being one, but also from the idea of not being a part of something else.

2. Community: Community in terms of football can be related to Benedict Anderson's idea of Imagined Communities where people might not come in physical contact with each other, but their solidarity lies in the fact that they are united by a series of common tropes like the jersey, the stadium and the homestand.

3. Religion: like any other community, football also has a set of rituals and practices that resemble it to a religious community generating a symbolic gesture of unity (Budka and Jancono 2). The game revolves around the romanticised idea as a "way of life", and the supporters see the club as a substitute religion (Giulianotti 1).

4. Pleasure: The most important factor of practicing football fandom is its ability to provide pleasure during crunch situations. Pleasure is the only aspect of football fandom that sometimes challenges the social order. French philosopher, Roland Barthes' ideas of difference in "jouissance" and "Plaisir" explains the mentality of a football fan. Jouissance is sometimes out of control and can

cause disruption to the society, which is true to hooliganism. Whereas “plaisir” in simplest terms is controlled and expressed through words and expressions during moments of individual brilliance.

5. Sexuality: Football fandom was mostly considered to be a masculine practice. Instances of swearing, violent clashes and an endless string of beer brawls made it a male dominated practice (King 330). Postmodernity, on the other hand, offers a blurring between the lines of sexuality, and a lot of women are also seen at football games screaming on top their lungs.

West Block Blues: the history, the identity and the community.

The inception of the ultras culture can be traced back to Italy, where fans of AC Milan, Inter Milan and other major clubs practiced choreographed movements in the stands, smoke candles of club colours and chanting (Giulianotti 16). City identity and unparalleled devotion towards the club are the most prominent aspects of being an ultra (17). And like every other “in” group, ultras also need outgroups to identify themselves as a part of the community. Hooliganism is different from ultra because the agendas of the former sometimes harm the clubs reputation also. Ultras, on the other hand, care about the club and its reputation. Their idea of fandom is to intimidate the rival clubs with banners and choreographed movements.

History

Bengaluru Football Club was established in the year 2013 by JSW a Mumbai based company. After AIFF announced direct entry to newly formed teams by the virtue of a cash transaction, the club gained direct entry into I-League and was eligible to compete against established clubs like Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, Mohammedan Sporting and Salgaocar. West Block Blues were born at the Bangalore Football stadium’s west stand which was closer to the team, and within a span of three years, the small group grew into a large community more than 30,000 people from the city and outside the city. The West Block blues are considered as an important part of the club by the board and players, calling them the 12th man, which is a privilege for any football fan around the world. In their formative years, they were only a handful of them who filled in the West block and supported the team with whatever support they had. After a successful title-winning season, the club’s popularity increased and the fanfare also increased with the influence of social media. The West Block blues also gained recognition among the locals with their choreographed movements, chants and pyrotechnics inspired by the European Ultras.

India’s fascination towards European football started from the early 2000s with clubs like Manchester United and Liverpool cashing in on their popularity. This notion of popularity and die-hard devotion towards the club has similarities with the English clubs. Chanting, huge banners and tifos were intimidating signs for the traveling fans of other clubs. With a short history of 5 years the West Block Blues have become as famous as the club itself.

The community and the identity of being a ‘West Block Blue’

Tajfel describes three stage of social categorization, social identification and social comparison to identify a fan’s position within the community (7). This paper talks about the community as a group of people wishing to identify with an organization of their own choice. And the individual identity is different from the identity of being an “ultra”. Meaning the identity of “ultra” is both restrictive and non-restrictive whereas the societal identity is still intact. Merkel gives three categories to identify a football:

- The style
- Behavior
- Language

Dick Hebdige pointed out that style is not just a matter of presenting oneself, it becomes a mode of communication with fellow members of the society (69). Football culture is a culture of the youth, and the styling is in tandem with the youth culture. While English football fans wore jackets and sweatshirts not related to the club, the West Block Blues follow the tradition of consumer fans by sporting the club’s home jersey during every match, thereby breaking the conventional images of being an “ultra”. Apart from the home colors there are also scarves, football apparel related to the club that helps in identifying oneself as a West Block Blue.

Fan behavior differentiates from club to club. Some club fans resort to using violence whereas the others depend on their sense of belonging which is associated with a locality which becomes a part of the fan’s identity (Budka and Jancono 5). The name West Block Blues itself stems from the ‘west stand’ of the Bangalore football stadium and the present Kanteerava stadium.

Football fandom is incomplete without the fan chants. European clubs have a rich history of using popular songs as chants for their clubs. Fans of Liverpool F.C use *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, West Ham United use *I’m forever blowing bubbles*, which also form a connection between a locality, the fan and the identity (Budka and Jancono 6). The connection between the stand, the identity of being a West Block Blue and the intensity of fandom can be found in the chant

We are the West Block Blues,

I just don't think you understand.

We're Ashley Westwood's men,

We fight until the end,

We will never bow down to you,

We are the famous West Block Blues

Another chant includes the position of BFC's dominance as the best club in India

Bengaluru FC we are number 1

There is no like us under the sun,

We sing with pride we sing as one,

We won the league in the first season

We don't need no ISL, ISL needs BFC

An important part of being a community is also not being part of the other community. The collective identities are formed with the concept of "us" against "them" (Fiske 321). West Block Blues have a vocal rivalry against many football clubs. Most notable being one against Chennaiyin FC. The game between the two clubs is called the "Kaveri derby" in relation to the Kaveri river conflict between the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The other notable rivalry is with Kerala Blaster's fan club Manjappada which started as a social media call-out by the latter club.

While most "ultras" of the west oppose the idea of media and police interfering in their practice, West Block Blues on the other hand use media for their own benefit to identify as one of the most powerful forces in the history of Indian football fandom without practicing any kinds of vandalism or hooliganism. In fact, they have inculcated movements like "no to racism", "gender equality" as their trademarks in comparison with their European counterparts.

Conclusion

Fandom is capable of producing emotions that do not provide rational explanations (Giulianotti 8). As a subculture football fandom explains the way men express emotions ranging from joy to ecstasy, from sorrow to grief and from the rational to the emotional. Communities of these football fans are strung together with the concept of not being "the other". While the dominant society was of the opinion that this subculture is "noise", unimportant and a distraction, it explains the importance of cultural practices, unity in diversity, celebration of these practices in presenting a new perspective about the concepts of identity and community (Budka and Jancono 8).

Bibliography

1. Armstrong, Gary, and Richard Giulianotti. *Fear and Loathing in World Football*. Oxford: Berg, 2001. PDF. *Entering the field: New perspectives on World Football*. New York: 1997. Web. 11 Apr 2017.
2. Brown, Adam, et al. "English professional football and its communities." *International review of modern psychology*, 32.2 (2006): 159–179. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.
3. Budka, Phillip and Domenico Jancono. Football fan communities and identity construction: Past and present of "Ultras Rapid" as sociocultural phenomenon, *Kick it! The Anthropology of European Football*. October 2013, Vienna, Austria. Unpublished conference paper. Web. 18 Oct 2017.
4. Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: the meaning of style*. London, Routledge, 2011.
5. Kerr, John H. *Understanding soccer hooliganism*. Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994.
6. King, Anthony. "The Lads: Masculinity and The New Consumption of Football." *Sociology*, 31.2 (1997): 329-346. Web. 28 Jul 2017.
7. Moorhouse, H F, "Football Hooliganism and the modern world." *International review of modern psychology*, 32.2 (2006): 256-259. Web. 19 Oct 2017.
8. Phillips, Tim. "Imagined Communities and Self Identity: An exploratory Qualitative Analysis." *Sociology*, 36.3 (2002): 597-617. Web. 28 Jan 2018.
9. Tainsky, Scott and Monika Stodolska. "Population Migration and Team Loyalty in Professional Sports." *Social Science Quarterly*, 91.3 (2010): 801-815. Web. 16 Aug 2017.