

A Potential Shift in the Political Undertones of Professional Wrestling

Written by Anubhav Roy

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ANUBHAV ROY, JUN 27 2017

World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (WWE), the US-based company selling the live entertainment form of professional wrestling, crowned a new apex heavyweight champion at a pay-per-view event on May 21. The enterprise – a popular culture giant which champions American standards – has, in the Trump era, propelled a Canadian-Indian to lead its troupe. Yuvraj Singh Dhesi, better known by his stage-name, Jinder Mahal, became only the seventh professional wrestler bearing a non-North American on-stage façade to bag the prestigious WWE Championship since 1963. If professional wrestling confesses to being stage-managed, however, does the development matter? For reasons considerable, it may. This may be a rare occasion when the WWE, known for prickling the identity-centric sentiments of its audiences worldwide for sensationalism, finds cosmopolitan political correctness more profitable than muscular, in-your-face Americanization.

For the uninitiated, professional wrestling or pro-wrestling – unlike professional boxing – is not taken seriously by enthusiasts of formal sports, who brush it aside as scripted stuntman-ship masquerading as a sport. No longer confidential in the Internet age, pro-wrestling bouts rely on predetermined outcomes and choreographed combat for theatrical charms. Yet, the performers' bid to pursue plausible realism renders them prone to career-threatening risks. This painstaking preservation of risk, the seductive presentation of violent competitiveness, and the promotion of its events with the grandiose of the Olympics combine to deem pro-wrestling, much to the chagrin of detractors, the modern equivalent of a roving circus with a cult following. WWE, the insurmountable industry leader, is slated to be worth \$3.4 billion.

A feature of pro-wrestling which abets its audiences' adrenaline rushes is its appealing story-telling. Traditionally, to influence viewer preferences and infuse high drama, pro-wrestling – as in cinema or theatre – has utilized adept script-writing to dynamically mould and remould performers into on-stage protagonists or antagonists. Viewers, thus, get to surmise whom to cheer or jeer. This aspect, however, controversially permits pro-wrestling promoters to peddle politically incorrect abnormalities for shock value.

Profit By Provocation

The WWE has historically scripted its sagas to capitalize on the political mood of the US in particular and the world in general. Hossein Ali Vaziri, a former bodyguard of the Shah of Iran immigrated to the US to pursue pro-wrestling. Billed as The Iron Sheik after the Iran hostage crisis, Vaziri walked into packed WWE (then WWF or World Wrestling Federation) arenas waving the flag of the Islamic Republic with convincing vanity, as the US-Iran enmity spiralled. Reinforcing the Middle Eastern typecast, the Persian Sheik sported an Arab *keffiyeh* and entered the ring bellowing: 'Iran, number one; USA, [spitting noise].' Crowds assembled to outrage, echoing deafening boos and chanting 'U-S-A' in unison, only massaging the WWE's viewership statistics in effect.

At the outbreak of the Gulf War, Vaziri was remodelled with comical ease into Col. Mustafa, an on-stage associate of Saddam Hussein in full Iraqi military gear. As quite the cliché, he squared off against two of the most iconic characters on the 'patriotic' extreme of WWE's cast line-up at the time, the Red-White-and-Blue-blooded Hulk Hogan and Sgt. Slaughter. Complementing the athletic prowess of performers, emotive role-play remained indispensable for

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pro-wrestling as it boomed through the 1990s with cable television.

Fast-forward to the 2000s, and the WWE's borderline war-profiteering appetite is found intact, despite its storylines appearing to dilute the brazen provocativeness of the late 1990s. In 2005, a 'foreign brute' plot caused the WWE to court real-world controversy. A character named Muhammad Hassan (played by an Italian-American athlete) represented an Arab-American antagonist embittered by anti-Muslim biases post-9/11. Just as the WWE began to milk ratings from the flamboyant indelicacy, a segment featuring Hassan unleash a pack of henchmen in ski-masks on a heroic American rival coincided with the 7/7 London bombings. The consequent bad press compelled the WWE to abruptly abandon the storyline. Obtuse gimmickry mocking foreign cultures has been a staple rabbit in the hat of pro-wrestling.

As George Orwell had warned, sports – scripted or otherwise – are often convenient vents for nationalist loyalism, which audiences pay gladly to utilize. Even when sports are studied as benevolent conduits for diplomacy and confidence-building, they, in fact, often end up being revealed as the preservers of national status, legitimacy, symbolism, and ultimately, interest. The sixty-ninth session of the UN General Assembly had, albeit, attested in 2014 that a sport, when played in a fair and sociable spirit, can act as 'a vehicle of healing political and cultural rifts [and can] be used as an educational and development tool.' When tailored for a sales pitch, on the flipside, a sport can well encourage populism for profit only to bolster Theodore Adorno's reservations about popular culture, which he saw as a means of reaping economic fruits by promoting uncritical mass consumption.

Casual Casualties

India, like several West- and South-Asian nations, has a much regarded pedigree of amateur wrestling. For the WWE, it has long inspired the on-stage strawman. Regarded WWE Hall of Famer, Larry Zbyszko, inspired his professional wrestling career from the famed exhibition wrestler of the early 1900s, Stanislaus Zbyszko. Stanislaus had, in 1910 at London, suffered his most humiliating loss to the Indian wrestling stalwart from Kashmir, The Great Gama. Yet, Gama Singh (Gadowar Singh in real life), who stencilled his persona on The Great Gama's, was hardly noticed during his WWE stint in the 1980s.

Tiger Ali Singh, his younger Canadian-Indian colleague, largely depicted the Punjabi version of The Iron Sheik, a smug flag-flaunting foreigner condescending towards Americans. His bankable notoriety rose as the trajectory of US-India relations took a dip with India's 1998 nuclear tests and its subsequent war with Pakistan. Tiger's applause-arousing denigration included the debuting American Olympian, Kurt Angle, blowing his nose into the Indian flag. He eventually quit alleging backstage racism. A more recent – and arguably more popular – Indian character in the WWE, The Great Khali, was stereotyped to celebrate his brief capture of the now defunct World Heavyweight Championship in 2007 with garland-tossing White women in Indian attire to a booing crowd. Mercifully, he was not carrying his nation's flag.

National flags have had a sad history of being the costs of storyline successes in the WWE. Controversial segments involving on-stage flag desecration – usually by an American mass hero – have, notably, signalled how the WWE's deliberate libelling of the 'foreigner' can also malleably disregard prevalent international currents. While, on one hand, the Soviet flag was spat on in 1985 as the Soviet-Afghan War was at its height and the Iraqi flag was ripped apart amidst the Gulf War, on the other, the Japanese flag was snapped in 1994 months after a heralded visit by Emperor Akihito to a memorial near Pearl Harbour, and the Canadian flag was insulted in 1997 as Bill Clinton warmly hosted his golfing mate, Jean Chretien, the Prime Minister of Canada. Toying with bilateral provocation, the WWE gainfully stimulates the nationalist sentiments of its viewers at home and overseas with such sensationalist angles. Thus, even as it propels a diasporic Indian as champion, his role remains antagonistic to suit the average, unsuspecting American viewer despite healthy India-US relations.

The WWE has long prided a patriotic spirit and upheld cherishable American values, from flaunting Red-White-and-Blue ring-ropes for decades and performing live events for troops stationed abroad to liberal philanthropy and the public celebration of American history. This mirroring of American society by the WWE, however, also subsumes a prominent defect of political conservatism in the US: reductionist simplification of the nemesis. Since the years of

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McCarthyism and the Reagan Doctrine to those of the distortions of Bush, Jr. and Trump, the alleged enemy of America has often been broad-brushed and unabashedly vilified. The trait of magnifying the 'other' has perhaps found a footing in the WWE owing to the links of the company's owners with the US' Grand Old Party.

Before Linda McMahon, the wife of WWE Chairman Vince McMahon, could manage Small Business Administration for President Trump, she unsuccessfully ran as a Republican for US Senate seats at Connecticut in 2010 and 2012. She contributed copiously to the Republican Party's presidential bid and funded an anti-Bernie Sanders drive in 2016. Moreover, the McMahons are the most generous donors to the Trump Foundation. Vince McMahon has been a long-time personal friend of Trump's, even having involved the latter in a skit for the flagship WWE pay-per-view mega-event, *Wrestlemania*, in 2007.

Brewing Change?

More recently, the WWE has prioritized athletic talent over cheap gimmickry, minimizing racist plots, and curbing the crass objectification of women, to the delightful acceptance of dedicated and casual fans alike. The penchant of its scripters to profit from 'foreigner'-centric angles, though, seems alive. The real-life nephew of Gama Singh, Jinder Mahal, clinching the WWE Championship has left the cult fan-base divided. While some argue he has superseded more deserving talent to the top rung, others are savouring the unforeseeable plot-twist. It is, though, being speculated that Jinder's propulsion is part of the WWE's temporary bid to woo the lucratively vast Indian audience – its third-largest clientele in the world – and that the character's triumph shall only last as long as the market penetration. Athletes playing 'foreign brutes' on the American pro-wrestling circuit, after all, often serve relatable protagonists to the nations being represented. 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper, portrayed by a Canadian pro-wrestler, received a hero's reception in his storyline homeland of Scotland.

On-stage, Jinder, sporting an ominous black turban and calling himself 'the *Maharaja*,' has already drawn ample heat from casual audiences by winning his bouts through unfair means and badmouthing the viewers, as typical of pro-wrestling antagonists. The representational identity card is being flashed frequently too, with him censuring American 'intolerance' and claiming to carry the dreams of 'his people.' Jinder's *Wikipedia* profile has suffered adequate defacement since May 21.

Joseph Nye, Jr., in his conception of soft power, notifies that a nation's cultural exports are limited in their ability to attract others by the values that they represent. A locally acclaimed cultural product may, therefore, lose its charm if deemed offensive or unpalatable overseas. With no notorious supremacist counter-reactions or flag-desecration incidents weaved into the script yet, the WWE appears overtly cautious in unpacking Jinder's saga. His post-victory fête on the WWE weekly show, *Smackdown Live*, showcased a traditional Punjabi Bhangra dance to a few cheers and did not garner interruptions from American protagonists appearing to be fed up with a non-national stealing the limelight. The matter, lauded as a diasporic feat, has found traction in the Indian media, meanwhile, as #DontHinderJinder trends on *Twitter*. The WWE's restraint seems warranted given India's ongoing tryst with hard-line nationalism. At its 2016 tour of India, the company had to apologize for the Indian flag vandalism incident of 1999 owing to pressures from a Hindu fringe outfit.

Jinder's case could usher a paradigm shift for the pro-wrestling industry, as a foreign culture and the character embodying it have not been ridiculed outright with a tourist's ignorance for sales points. Moreover, the depiction comes from a Trump-friendly enterprise at a time of elevated insecurity amongst non-White diasporic groups in the US. The target consumer of pro-wrestling programming, after all, is not the average American in this scenario, but India's urban commoner. Only time would tell how long this atypical political correctness shall last.

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