

The journey towards a Football Stadium: Football Fandom in Iran and Jafar Panahi's *Offside* (2006)

Manas Ghosh*

Introduction: Football as Public Culture in Iran

Football Iranian Style (2001) is a documentary film made by Maziar Bahari which explores and documents the personal emotions and national feelings of football fans of contemporary Iran. Iranian soccer lovers, both boys and girls, eloquently articulate their passion for football and express their desire for being present in the arena on the occasion of the national soccer team's performance in international matches. Cultural critic Shiva Balaghi (2003, p. 54) explains: "The stadium [...] has become a rare social space where Iranian youth can transcend boundaries of authority and express themselves with relative lack of inhibition".

In the last two and half decades, the Iranian national soccer team played several important international matches. In the year 1997, they drew a match against Australia in Melbourne and consequently qualified for the France World Cup finals. In March 2005 they beat Japan by a 2-1 score-line in a World Cup qualifier held in Tehran's Azadi stadium. They defeated Bahrain by 1-0 in the same year and same venue and paved their way again for the world cup finals. Following their national team's success in international matches, massive euphoria and gala festivity among people from all strata of the society swayed Iran. In the streets, teahouses, buses and educational institutions – men and women came out and joined celebrations by lighting candles, exploding firecrackers, dancing on the street, shouting and singing spontaneously.

As the news of Iran's victory spread through radio and television, the jubilant crowd transformed the public spaces into sites of carnival. At least for a few hours, social inhibitions, religious prohibitions and legal restrictions were visibly subverted by huge public celebrations. Men and women danced on the street; women forgot to take care of their *hijab* and

* **Manas Ghosh:** Manas Ghosh, PhD., Assistant Professor, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, India.
Email: manask.ghosh@jadavpuruniversity.in

cops were hardly found around. Bahari's documentary shows how a victory in a football match gifts the moment of transgression in Iran's national life. Balaghi (2003, p. 54) explains: "Under the spell of football, complex ideological, political and economic divides seem fading, [away...]".

Bahari's documentary includes footage of mass celebrations in Tehran streets on the eventful evening of November 29, 1997. Iran drew against Australia a few hours ago and the national team was elevated to the final round of World Cup football after two long decades. Noted journalist Mahin Gorji recalls that night's mass celebration over the historic success: "I think we heard the silenced scream of the Iranian youth for the first time in 20 years" (Balaghi 2003, p. 54). In a final round match of the 1998 soccer World Cup, Iran got an impressive 2-1 victory over the USA. Iranians all over the globe proudly cheered the incident. Bahari (2003, p. 55) comments: "That victory unified all the Iranians. For 25 years, the Iranian diaspora and Iranians inside the country didn't have a common cause to cheer for. Football gave them a chance to do that".

The victory in an international football match put up an emotional bridge that connected home and exile. Since the 1960s, several nationalist and radical thinkers of Iran – poets, journalists, writers, politicians, professors, filmmakers, activists and social workers were forced to leave their country. In the post-Islamic Revolution decades, the situation merely improved. The exiled Iranians took refuge in Germany, France, Italy, the USA, the UK and other countries (Haghighat, 2011). Most of the expatriate Iranians nurtured nationalist feelings in the core of their hearts. Not too many glorious events took place in the national history of Iran in the last few decades which could make them proudly announce their Iranian national identity. Globally acclaimed films made by contemporary Iranian filmmakers and Iran's victory in World Cup football matches had been the only exceptions. Film and football brought worldwide recognition to them in the milieu of global culture. Bahari's film addresses the feelings of different sections of people toward football. From a progressive university student to a cleric, Bahari's camera interacts with a large spectrum of citizens.

The film infers that not merely a genuine passion but enthusiasm for soccer has had a deeper root in contemporary Iranian society. This "deeper root", as we witness in Bahari's documentary, is found if we look at the huge and die-hard soccer fandom associated with domestic football in Iran. Two major teams have been *Persepolis* (estd. in 1964) and *Esteghlal* (estd. in 1945 as *Dočarxe Savârân*).

Balaghi (2003, p. 56) rightly explains: "The power of Bahari's film lies at the confluence of film and football, showing the ways that both arenas

refract and reflect the complex ways that various social groups engage with the political structures". In front of Bahari's camera, the people who are interviewed communicated their strong opinions and rational ideas tinted with love and personal feelings for football. Bahari's film shows that the game transcends the boundary of mere entertainment and becomes a part of the democratic-popular aspirations. Filmmaker Jafar Panahi (2007) also talks about football in a similar way: "In Iran [...] football is very important. As you can imagine, majority of distractions are limited. [...] It's an opportunity to shout, let themselves go, expels all the pent-up energy within them" (Jafar Panahi on *Offside*).

The euphoria and popular sentiment associated with the football culture in Iran is being communicated regularly to the public by the Persian newspapers with great importance. The frontline Iranian newspapers including the sports newspapers regularly publish reports and opinion pieces on Iran's success in international football. Ali Ziaee, Adib-Moghaddam et. al. (2021) studied the language of some reports and editorials regarding football published in leading newspapers like *Abrar-e-Verzashi*, *Khabar-e-Varzeshi* and *Iran-e-Varzeshi*. The study reveals that most of the write-ups described the Iranian football team (during FIFA tournament 2018 and AFC cup 2019) as "determined and conscientious". Some write-ups emphasized that "our team" is "oppressed but great". It is needless to mention that almost all write-ups equated national pride with the Iranian soccer team's bright presence in the international arena. On 25 June 2018, *Abrar-e-Verzashi* described the Iranian team's performance in the FIFA tournament, "the national team underpinned its matches on the principles of courage, truth, commitment and sacrifice." On 27 May 2018, *Khabar-e-Varzeshi* remarked, "Iran is a team of 80 million people not only 23 people" (Ziaee, Adib-Moghaddam et. al. 2021).

The use of the words like "conscience", "truth", and "sacrifice" very clearly signifies that it is not limited to mere accountancy of victory/defeat or success/failure. The words hint toward the connection between soccer and the emotional and ethical values of public life in Iran.

The umbilical relationship between football and Iranian modernity has been referred to by the Iranian masters since the rise of the new wave in Iranian cinema in the early 1970s. Abbas Kiarostami, in the early phase of his career, made several short films that referred to football directly. His first feature-length film *The Traveler*, 1974 is based on the story of a football-crazy boy whose only aspiration is to go to watch the Iranian national side's soccer encounter with a foreign team. The sole narrative motivation in Kiarostami's film comes from the boy's effort to reach Tehran and get inside the stadium. To fulfill his dream, the boy ensues desperately.

He breaks moral and social codes – he absents classes; steals money from his mother; cheats other boys and raises funds to go to Tehran and to buy a ticket to the match. Finally, he runs away from home on the previous night of the match and takes a bus off to Tehran. The stadium is set as the ultimate goal in this journey of transgression.

In *Bread and Alley* (1970), a short film made by Kiarostami, a boy, with a large piece of bread in his hand, is seen engrossed in kicking an emptied and abandoned beverage can on his way back home. In a long take, his camera captures the boy who is preoccupied with kicking the object with great footballing skills. The pleasure of the boy and the innocence of his actions are depicted in Kiarostami's signature style. In another short *Recess* (1972), Kiarostami's camera opens with a scene where a schoolboy Dara who is obsessed with playing football is punished by his teacher because he has broken window glass as his kick led the ball bang on it.

In Majid Majidi's globally acclaimed film *Children of Heaven* (1997), soccer plays a vital role in the development of the narrative. The film tells the story of two children of poor parents – a brother and a sister. The boy Ali, a student and a part-time worker love football passionately. In his poverty-ridden life, euphoric moments come when he talks about football. Football is a part of the quotidian culture, but it brings moments of redemption as well. Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1985) is another film that deserves mention. The film narrates the hard life of a group of orphan children who work in a dockyard. It appears in the film as one of the rarest beautiful moments when they are playing football at daybreak.

Methodology

The article will show how in *Offside* Jafar Panahi qualitatively transforms the space of confinement into a space of liberty. The article will also note how the narrative and visual strategies of communication adopted by the film director construct a radical feminine (public) sphere in the film. The article will present a close reading of the film texts. The analysis of the film will be done by invoking the methods and tools of hermeneutic study evolved in the disciplinary framework of cultural studies and film studies. Panahi's film will be critically read in a larger context of the development of Iranian modernity in contemporary decades.

Women and Football Fandom in Panahi's *Offside*

Jafar Panahi has made a film on the Iranian youth's craze for football but this time the protagonist is a girl. The entry of women into a football stadium is prohibited in Iran in the current regime. In 2005 Iran took on Bahrain in a significant World Cup Qualifying match in Teheran's Azadi

Stadium. A girl tries to enter the stadium masquerading herself. At the entrance of the stadium, she is identified and caught by the guards. Panahi sets this film on the very day of the match; the location is also real. The film intends to present the documentation of space, time, character and reality (Wisniewski, 2007).

The idea to make such a film evolved in his mind a few years before he conceptualized the film. After Iran's tie with Australia in the away match in December 1997 which lifted them to the France World cup's final round, the team came back home and the government organized a felicitation in Tehran's Azadi Stadium. The ministry of culture requested "sisters" to watch the event on television since women's entry into the stadium was prohibited. But thousands of women assembled outside of the stadium and finally five thousand women crashed the gate. They pushed aside the policemen using physical power. The women entered the stadium forcibly and enjoyed the match. They sang, raised the slogan and danced in the gallery; some of them removed scarves from their head (Chehabi, 2002). For that few hours, most of them put out of their mind the social inhibitions and legal restrictions. To the modernists and democrats of the country, it was a historic moment.

Panahi mentions about two of his contemporary experiences which worked in the back of his mind and motivated him to make the film on the issue of women's attempt to get inside the football stadium to watch the Iranian national soccer team's encounter with a foreign side. In 2005, Iran beat Japan in a FIFA World Cup primary round match at the Azadi Stadium and endorsed the dream of qualifying for the world cup finals. Outside the main gateway of the stadium there stood an army helicopter cordoned by military personnel. As the match ended, the huge triumphant mass of Iranian football fans was exiting through the gate. Some overjoyed people came closer to the helicopter. The security personnel pushed them back forcefully and charged baton. As a result, huge chaos and pandemonium broke out. Many people were stampeded and seven lost their lives. The next morning newspaper published photographs of six persons. The identity of one person was not disclosed. Many people in Iran believed that one among the seven dead persons was a girl in masquerade whose photograph was not published and whose identity was never disclosed. Panahi himself knows in person, not the dead one, but one or two girls who got injured in the accident (Jafar Panahi on *Offside*).

He recalls another incident. Iranian National side's practice camp was organized in a stadium that was not very far from Panahi's residence in Teheran. Often in the afternoon, Panahi would go to watch the national soccer team's practice. One day his little girl expressed her desire to

accompany him. He tried to make her understand and explain the rules that girls were not allowed to sit inside the stadium with male spectators. But she could not be resisted. As expected, she was stopped by the guards at the gate. Having assumed that she would go back home, Panahi alone got inside the stadium. But after some time, he noticed with utter surprise that she managed to sneak inside the stadium perhaps through a little hole in the wall of the complex (Shahrokni 2020).

Panahi was moved by her fraught passion for football! And he could not afford to lose the immediate opportunity to make a film on the issue of Iranian girls' strong desire to be present in the gallery in a football match. As the schedule of the next match of Iran against Bahrain at the Azadi Stadium was fixed, Panahi got prepared to make his film. He told the outline of the theme of his film to the government authority and got permission to shoot. He told he was going to make a film with male protagonists only (Panahi and Maruf, 2006).

Anyway, before the authority noticed that the story of the film focused on the female protagonists (in the disguise of male), Panahi could find ample scope to complete the real location shootings outside the stadium on the very day of the match. In *Offside*, Jafar Panahi retains the form of documentary realism that has become his signature-style. The film is shot mostly in real locations. The characters are played by girls who are students of Teheran University and are very keen to watch Iran play at the Azadi Stadium. All characters in the film are played by non-professional actors who are passionate about football. Panahi also restores the continuity of real-time in this film. That is, the narrative of the film tries to retain the "ninety minutes" span of the play time (Wisniewski, 2007).

Jafar Panahi, so long the filmmaking style is concerned, carries forward the legacy of social realism developed in Iranian Cinema since Darius Mehrjui's *Guv* (1969) and he could build up his style as an auteur. Panahi started his filmmaking as an assistant to Abbas Kiarostami. Also, the screenplay of Panahi's two films *The White Balloon* (1995) and *Crimson Gold* (2003) was co-written by Kiarostami. Though Panahi started as a disciple of Kiarostami, his filmmaking style and narrative treatment gradually became different from Kiarostami's. While Kiarostami's goal was philosophical Panahi's has been social and sociopolitical. In that sense, Panahi's style and objective are closer to Neorealism. His every film shows a social commitment at the end of the day. His mode of filmmaking has been informed by documentary realism, minimalist deployment of craft, exploring outdoors and the use of non-professional actors. In particular, the construction of physical and social space in Panahi's film looks very interesting. And his films masterfully connect the space with the subjects/characters. *The Circle* (2000), *Crimson Gold* (2003), *Offside*

(2006) and *Taxi* (2015) are very good examples where the action of the character(s) intervene(s) in the institutionalized nature of the social and physical space and finally attempts to radicalize it.

The girl in *Offside* has been caught at the final entry point of the stadium and taken to the rooftop of the stadium. There, the police construct an open-air make-shift prison by barricading a space with movable iron railings. The girl finds three other girls who have been already arrested for their attempts to enter the stadium masquerading their identity. Now the way Panahi arranges the pro-filmic space is interesting enough. The camera primarily concentrates on the defined space of the temporary prison occupied by the arrested girls. When the camera photographs them frontally, they are usually shown against the background of a flat high wall on the rear side of the gallery. At one corner there is a narrow emergency gate of the stadium through which only a small part of the field is visible. It is really interesting to note how in course of the progression of the narrative the defined space of "confinement" of the captive girls is qualitatively transforming into a space that offers relatively a sense of vitality, warmth and "liberation".

The captive girls request a soldier to watch the game carefully through the small emergency gate and to give a running commentary of it. As the soldier is delivering the commentary, the girls are often seen getting excited by the dramatic consequence of the match. They pass comments; they throw their hands in despair as Iranian players miss easy scoring opportunities. They often seriously discuss technical aspects of football. Gradually, as the girls get involved in the match, the small barricaded space of the temporary prison with a visually flat and dull background is getting enlivened up.

In the meantime, two more girls have been caught by police, one from inside the stadium. They are brought to the rooftop and put behind temporary bars. They readily obtain a warm welcome from the other captive girls. A girl among them employs a trick to escape. She requests soldiers allow her to go to the toilet. A soldier escorts her to the washroom. Finally, she can befool the soldier. She escapes and mingles with the huge crowd of the gallery. However, as she dramatically comes back after a few minutes of her own will, other girls surround her and eagerly inquire how Iranian players are performing on the field. She enacts the game that she has just witnessed. Their excitement, enthusiasm, discussions and actions convert the small arena of confinement into a quasi-social feminine public sphere full of vitality and youthfulness.

It is important to note that the film never shows much interest to demonstrate the visuals of the field where the match is going on. The excitement of the match has been routed through the confined girls. We

come to know about the match as the girls are discussing the match. Since the girls are not allowed to watch the match, Panahi's camera never allows the viewer of the film too to watch the match directly. The visual strategy posits the spectator to an extent the position of the confined girls who have been deprived of watching the match being present in the gallery.

Meanwhile, a father enters the scene who is searching for his daughter in the stadium. The narrative of the film started with a sequence where a father crazily tries to find his daughter in the street. Her daughter had reportedly run away from her college and presumably in the disguise of a boy journeyed towards the stadium. The father finally locates his daughter among the captive girls. The father, who must be loyal to the highest "government rule" starts scolding his daughter madly but is readily resisted and pacified by the soldiers. The soldiers refuse to devolve the girl to her father. The dejected father is seen waiting seated down lonely in a corner. The girls continue their conversation about the football match ignoring the presence of the father. Jafar Panahi's narrative strategy and the strategy of spatial construction as well seclude the father. As far as the moral economy of the narrative is concerned, the seclusion of the father de-legitimizes his authority as a patriarch, at least for sometime.

Conclusion

The primary resolution is attained in Jafar Panahi's *Offside* as the captive girls transform the space of their incarceration into a relatively sovereign and vivacious feminine sphere. The resolution is not based on the utopian concept of freedom and humanism but is supported by historical facts. Iranian women have not responded passively to the slow process of reformation; rather they have confronted the state and the patriarchal order by organizing strong mass movements and socio-political and cultural activism. The modern women of Iran, by the long history of the feminist movement, have been able to achieve a space for raising their voices independently in social, political and cultural affairs.

The final resolution in the narrative is reached in the ultimate sequence of the film as the euphoric crowd liberates the girls. The girls finally come out and mingle in the crowd; a song titled *Ey Iran* is sung in the background. The people on the street are also singing the same song collectively. The song refers to a significant chapter of the national history of Iran. To understand the implication of the song, let's discuss some salient points of the cultural history of modern Iran in brief.

The Constitutional Revolution (1906-11) attempted to modernize the politics and society of Persia (later known as Iran). Its success was quite significant yet very limited. The Revolution brought many changes but

failed to achieve a proper democratic system (Abrahamian 1979). Hamid Dabashi notes that in the 1920s "Iran was ruled by a weak constitutional monarchy; [...] a self-conscious national bourgeoisie is increasingly dependent on the colonial economy" (Dabashi, 2001, p. 17). As a result, the formation of the modern individual subject as democratic citizen remained unfulfilled. In the mid 1920s, a counter-revolution that betrayed the constitutional revolution brought back monarchy in Iran as Reza Shah Pahlavi enthroned himself as the new legal monarch. As a result of which the democratic aspiration of the nation faced another major setback.

But in the 1940s, at the onset of World War II, foreign military forces camped in Iranian territory. Reza Shah Pahlavi left Iran in 1941. The Iranian territory was virtually divided into various parts controlled by foreign forces. As a result of the political turmoil, the authoritarian command of Shah over Iranian politics and cultural activism was slackened. The democratic-nationalist voice of the Iranian people which was strangled by the Shah government was rejuvenated. The radical thinkers in politics and culture started raising their strong voices against the foreign invasion from outside and the fundamentalism-authoritarianism nexus from inside the country. They demanded the end of colonial and neo-colonial dependency on the Iranian economy and politics (Matin-Asgari, 2018).

The latter half of the 1940s brought the springtime for all kinds of modernist thinking in Iran. In the year 1946, Hossein Gol-e-Golab, a scientist, physician and modern poet of Iran, wrote the lyric of a patriotic song popularly known as *Sorud-e-Ey Iran*. The song was his poetic response to an ugly incident that he witnessed. He saw that a native Iranian greengrocer was being beaten up in the city street by an American soldier. He wrote the spirited song *Ey Iran* as a protest and a call for decolonization. Gol-e-Golab's song later became the *de facto* national anthem of Iran. Though the song could have the status of "official" national anthem only for a very short time (1946-1957) in history, the radical counterpart of Iranian people accepted *Ey Iran* as their national anthem. In fact, in the transitional years between the fall of the Shah regime and the establishment of the new Islamic Republic, the song was popularly used as the national anthem of Iran (Mottahedeh 2019).

Panahi (2007) says: "The song speaks of our country and our people, not the States that have governed it. That is why we love it more and more with the passing day" (Jafar Panahi on Offside). He invokes *Sorud-e-Ey Iran* in the concluding scene of *Offside* to historically relate the moment of popular carnival with the spirit of radicalism. Thus, the final resolution is

achieved in the film. The journey of Iranian women toward the stadium is transformed into a metaphor for a journey through history.

Postscript

On 10 October 2019, after four decades of the ban, Iranian women were finally allowed to enter the Azadi Stadium to watch Iran's soccer encounter against Cambodia in a FIFA qualifying match. More than 3000 tickets were sold to the women spectators though the demand was much higher. *Aljazeera* webpage reported the match with the headline *Iran beat Cambodia 14-0 in a historic match attended by women* (Aljazeera, 2019). The report went with a colorful picture of ecstatic Iranian women football fans spectating a match at the gallery of the stadium proudly holding Iranian national flags. Alireza Hassanzadeh's (2019, p. 93) anthropological study on the female representation of Iranian soccer fandom rightly concludes: "Women played a discursive role through soccer in the public sphere and space, and this elevates their role as the creators of national symbols. [...] While the normative policy shows a formal culture, female club liminality uncovers a kind of spontaneous and informal culture."

But this long-standing demand of women is achieved only after the tragic death of woman football fan activist Sahar Khodayari, popularly known as the *Blue Girl*, on 9 September 2019. She set herself ablaze outside a Tehran court in protest of her victimization and punishment after she attempted to enter Azadi stadium in disguise as a male to watch the football match between her favorite team Esteghlal and UAE's al-Ain in March 2019. She had been caught by the police outside Azadi stadium, detained and ordered to appear before the court later. Khodayari's death created massive repercussions in social media and the public sphere in Iran. Many important personalities from the film world including Jafar Panahi criticized the government on this issue. The captain of the Iranian national soccer team Masoud Shojaei also mourned the death of Khodayari. Esteghlal footballers in the next match observed one minute's silence in memory of the woman fan Sahar Khodayari. Several members of the parliament who belong to the liberal side raised their voices in *Majlis*. The FIFA authority wrote a strong letter to the Iran government to withdraw the ban on women's entry into the stadium (Shahrokni & Sofos, 2019).

The cumulative result of all these incidents and decades of sustained movement finally forced the Iranian government to allow women football fans, though in limited numbers, to enter the stadium with men. The dream of Jafar Panahi has come true.

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