

An artist's own kick-off

By **Reji John** Jun 13 2010

The world Cup football season is on and we will shriek slogans as we watch the matches live on television screens even though we don't belong to any of the nations we support. As the FIFA World Cup spectacle kicked off in South Africa on Friday, Mumbai-based artist Riyas Komu opened his latest show titled Subrata to Cesar at Warehouse, an art gallery in Colaba, Mumbai. If you are wondering what the title of the show means, you are not alone.

While Julio Cesar is the goalkeeper of the Brazilian team, which has won several world cups and now ranked number one by FIFA, Subrata Pal is the goalkeeper for India's national team.

Pal saved three penalties in the Nehru Cup final against Kyrgyzstan last year to help India retain the championship for the second consecutive time.

Now, it is likely that Cesar may sound more familiar to you than Subrata. "Subrata to Cesar is about the distance between the two goalkeepers. It is about the distance between the state of Indian football and what football is to a country like Brazil," said Komu, an ardent football fan himself.

According to Komu, the show is an attempt to revisit memories of one of the oldest sports in India. The language of football is one of the colonial legacies whose lexicon is devoid of any contributions that the country can be proud of. In fact, the vocabulary is bereft of Indian flavour. "It is therefore time to move back into the locker room and take a fresh look at the game that most of us love. Our own footballers are a forgotten lot."

For Komu, football represents the marginalised. "It is a neglected sport in India. Its players are unknown and unrecognised, and largely without patronage from the state."

"We have just indulged in passing the ball amongst ourselves in our own half without making much progress. Much of the opposition in our Soccer advances has come from within," he adds.

While on the one hand, Subrata represents hope for the country's football, Komu is frustrated by the apathy the game of football gets in India. "My hope is to see Subrata and Cesar play against each other," said Komu.

Strong political undercurrents are a distinctive feature of Komu, a fiercely political artist whose works span several media and genres but primarily sculpture, photography, and video installations.

Komu has used the football metaphor even in the past to draw attention to various issues ranging from the US invasion of Iraq to the state of India's women's football team.

Komu's exhibition will be on display throughout the world cup season.

The artist will leave for South Africa soon and will send, what he calls, "An artist's perspective of the world cup football tournament in South Africa". According to him, there will be 11 such works coming to the gallery for display starting from June 25.

Komu uses his art to communicate and make statements. "At a time like this, if we don't make strong statements, then others will take our lives for granted," he said. However, the artist does not wish to stop at making statements. Komu is drawing up plans with schools in Mumbai and Kolkata to get students trained by professional footballers.

Once he returns from South Africa, he plans to put up goalposts on empty grounds in Mumbai in an attempt to see how many people will play football.

While Komu is conscious of the daunting task of making people play football in a country where people are obsessed with cricket, he does not want to see football being ignored.

"I love cricket, I have no complaints about its popularity. But don't ignore football. Cricket is a game of aspiration in India but football is not. Football is not about money. Football does not give that aspirational kick among Indians."