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**Cricket and Indian
National Consciousness**

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
History of Cricket in India	2
Post-colonial Cricket in India	4
Cricket and the Media	7
Cricket as a Unifying Factor in India.....	9
Conclusion.....	12

Introduction

It is recognised that there are close links between sport and politics,¹ and in particular between sport and national consciousness. The Olympic Games and the football, rugby and cricket World Cups have often been used as platforms for the expression of nationalistic sentiments. The Olympic Games, revived at a time of expanding international trade, was a manifestation of global capitalism.² However, they have also been used to express political statements – the Munich Olympics of 1936 were used by Hitler to highlight his belief in German racial superiority³ and during the Mexico Olympics of 1968, two African-Americans raised their fists in the Black Power salute and were consequently banned from representing the USA again.⁴

The political consciousness most affected by sport is nationalism, and vice versa. Sport can reflect and shape national consciousness just as national consciousness can reflect sporting character.⁵ Sporting nationalism peaks when a nation feels insecure or threatened.⁶ Competitive sports can reflect or maintain a collective psychology; the mythic structures within sport can help give rise to collective identities; sport can also be used to achieve political motivation.⁷

There is a strong link between cricket and Indian national consciousness which requires detailed analysis. Coming to a clearer understanding of the relationship between the two can demonstrate and provide insights on how these elements of Indian identity can become more relevant.

¹ A Guttmann, "Sport, Politics and the Engaged Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2003, p. 383.

² J Sengupta, "Globalizing Patriotism? – Some Lessons from the Cricket World Cup of 2003," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 21, Nos. 3 and 4, June 2004, p. 586.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 585 and Guttmann, n. 1, p. 364.

⁴ Sengupta, n. 2, p. 585.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 586.

⁶ R Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 350.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339 and Sengupta, n. 2, p. 586.

History of Cricket in India

The history of cricket in India shows that it has fostered both nationalism and communalism; therefore it is relevant to outline a short history of the development of cricket in some regions of India. It is important to note that the sport developed differently at different times in and in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The links between cricket and independent 'Indian' consciousness can first be seen in the late 19th century.

Many social historians of Indian cricket have concentrated on the Quadrangular and Pentangular tournaments in Bombay which started in the early 20th century.⁸ Parsi merchants were the first to take up cricket in the late 19th century with Hindus and Muslims participating soon after the turn of the century. The Quadrangular tournaments in Bombay consisted of English, Hindu, Parsi, and Muslim teams. Later, they developed into the Pentangular – the fifth team being known as 'All the Rest,' comprising Indian Christians, Buddhists and Jews.⁹ By the 1920s and 1930s the tournaments had become very popular – about 20,000 fans would attend a match.¹⁰ Some academics suggest that this was in part because they were communal, no other tournament was as popular and the organisers recognised their commercial potential early on.¹¹

The tournaments were halted in 1945, some say, because it was decided that they were deeply divisive.¹² However it has also been suggested that the Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI) put pressure on the

government to stop them because they were more popular than the Ranji Trophy which it organized.¹³

It should be noted that whilst cricket in Bombay was organized along communal lines, elsewhere in the country it was not. In Bengal, cricket was adopted by the middle classes and the elites in conjunction in order to beat their colonial rulers at their own game; in the southern cities such as Chennai (Madras) cricket was also used as a way of 'beating' the British.¹⁴ It has been argued that in Bengal, the middle classes took up cricket in part as a way of countering charges of effeminacy in the aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny.¹⁵ It has been argued that indigenous sports such as wrestling did not bring acceptance in British eyes. Therefore, participation in 'European' sports was encouraged by the elites of Bengal as a way of challenging the occupiers at their own games.¹⁶

The founding of the Indian National Congress (INC) party in 1885 came about at the same time as the establishment of cricket as a popular sport in Bombay – the first Indian team to tour England was a Parsi team in 1888. These developments occurred at a time when in England writers such as John Ruskin were proposing new ideas regarding socialism and nationalism – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi said that Ruskin had a huge influence on his life.

These 'English' ideas were being publicized while the English game of cricket was being promoted at the same time and some argue that the growth of both is linked.¹⁷ Cricket

⁸ B Majumdar, *Twenty Two Yards to Freedom* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2004), p. 13.

⁹ Guha, n. 6, p. 123 and 248.

¹⁰ Majumdar, n. 8, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² R Bhattacharya, *Pundits from Pakistan: On Tour with India 2003-4*, (London: Picador, 2005), p. 15.

¹³ Majumdar, n. 8, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14 and Guha, n. 6, pp. 340-41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁶ B Majumdar, "The Politics of Leisure in Colonial India – *Lagaan*: Invocation of a Lost History?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 35, 1 September 2001, pp. 3399-404.

¹⁷ Interview with K N Daruwalla, 25 April 2007.

was actively promoted by the British in India as a way of promulgating 'English' values.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview with Ashis Nandy, 26 April 2007.

Post-colonial Cricket in India

Despite the emphasis on cricket instilling 'English values' in the Indian mind, many who have written on the rise of cricket in India note the game is naturally suited to the Indian consciousness. Ashis Nandy goes so far as to argue that "Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English."¹⁹ He also points out that it is a pre-industrial game that acts as a "critique of urban industrial society."²⁰ Many other writers also suggest that the game of cricket sits well within Indian society. Others say that the long form of the game can be more appreciated by Hindus who are used to understanding the world through a cosmic timescale rather than clock time.²¹ It also reflects agrarian society: there are long periods of the game when one must watch the weather and wait for it to alter; one must also prepare for adversity; the boredom that can accompany a game, allows one to plan ahead.²² Others have argued that the non-linear nature of the game appeals to the Indian mind.²³ Nandy also notes that in a game of cricket one is not only playing against the opposing team but also "fighting your own destiny and Indians love this theme."²⁴

Once India gained Test match status in 1932, cricket became a way of settling scores with their colonial rulers. When the Indian team beat the British team, editorials appeared in Indian vernacular newspapers claiming that political equality should follow sporting equality.²⁵ While it would be too simplistic to argue that cricket became

popular in India purely because of its associations with some form of early Indian nationalism, there is no doubt that this was an element that explained its appeal.²⁶

After Independence, cricket was equated with patriotic virtue – being a good cricketer meant that one was a 'good' Indian, Pakistani or Sri Lankan.²⁷ As cricket lost its associations with colonialism, it became a means for developing national and masculine identities.²⁸ It has been argued that early Indian players like the Nawab M Pataudi (Sr) and K S Ranjitsinhji, for example, were such key figures in Indian cricket that they could be described as nationalists even if not in the way that nationalism is understood today.²⁹ They were seen as role models in a newly developing national consciousness because they were able to stand on the international stage as Indians and compete equally with representatives from more developed nations.³⁰ Ramachandra Guha notes that "India will never be a tiger [in terms of economic power] to match the other Asian tigers [e.g. South Korea, Malaysia]. India ranks about 150 in the World Development Report, just below Namibia and above Haiti. It is the cricketers and they alone, who are asked to redeem these failures, to make one forget, at least temporarily, the harsh realities of endemic poverty and corrupt and brutal politicians."³¹

Many commentators on Indian cricket argue that India's cricket World Cup win in 1983

¹⁹ Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On games of Destiny and Destiny of Games* (Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2000).

²⁰ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

²¹ Guha, n. 6, pp. 337-38.

²² Sengupta, n. 2, p. 586.

²³ Interview with T C A Srinivas-Raghavan, 20 April 2007.

²⁴ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

²⁵ Guha, n. 6, pp. 340-41.

²⁶ Majumdar, n. 14.

²⁷ Guha, n. 6, p. 341.

²⁸ Sengupta, n. 2, p. 601.

²⁹ Majumdar, n. 8, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14 and interview with MAK Pataudi, 11 April 2007.

³¹ R Guha, "Batting for India," *The Guardian*, 31 August 2002. In the recent 2006 UNDP Human Development Report, India ranks 126th out of 177, just below Namibia and above Cambodia.

had a big influence on the popularity of the game.³² However, this should be linked to the decline of hockey as the ‘national sport’ of India. By the 1970s India’s hockey team was not doing as well as it had done in previous decades. The change in rules and the move to astroturf negatively impacted on India’s success in the game.³³ With the move to astroturf, physical strength and stamina became more important than skill and individualism, attributes that had previously benefited India in hockey.³⁴ Some people have argued that cricket suits the Indian physique more than other sports.³⁵ Most nations have a strong association with one particular sport: in Canada it is ice hockey, in Japan it is sumo wrestling and in Germany it is football. In India, even though cricket was popular in the first half of the 20th century, hockey was the sport that brought the most national pride. The last gold medal that India won for hockey in the Olympics was at the Moscow Games in 1980. The decline of sporting success in hockey happened in parallel to India’s growing prominence in cricket, which helped develop cricket as the prime national sport in the country.

India is seen as a cricket crazy nation; cricket has become a way of expressing national pride and consciousness. Varun Sahni argues that “cricket and Indian national consciousness are inextricably linked. [Cricket is] tied to identity politics – to be Indian is to like cricket.”³⁶ This linkage at the time brought about some of the more unpleasant aspects of sport and nationalism such as Indian Muslims being accused of supporting Pakistan in India-Pakistan matches and the association between ‘hyper-nationalism,’ ‘war’ and ‘entertainment.’³⁷

³² Interview with Pataudi, n. 30.

³³ Ibid. and Ashis Nandy, 26th April 2007.

³⁴ Interview with Pataudi, n. 30.

³⁵ Interview with Ajay Jadeja, 14 May 2007.

³⁶ Interview with Varun Sahni, 18 April 2007.

³⁷ K Bandopdhyay and B Majumdar, “Cricket as Everyday Life,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, Nos. 14 and 15, 3-10 April 2004, pp. 1450-54.

Indians take accusations of cheating as a slur on the nation. In 2001, when match referee Mike Denness banned Indian cricket hero Sachin Tendulkar for one match for ball tampering, effigies of Denness were burnt in the streets in response and the BCCI threatened to withdraw from the International Cricket Council (ICC), an act that could have split the cricketing world.³⁸

Varun Sahni suggests that cricket, like Bollywood, is a form of affirmative action. This is “one reason that selection process is still zonal... [Cricket] also gives Muslims a chance to participate.”³⁹ He compares it with baseball in America where Afro-Americans and Hispanics are given the chance to excel. He argues that cricket in India is connected to “identity politics... in terms of what you may chose to call some sense of national identities, regional identities. Cricket again has played a very critical role there... It also speaks to a certain kind of threat in terms of relations between Hindus and Muslims which is one of those fundamental drivers of Indian society.”⁴⁰

Others also argue that cricket, like Bollywood, is able to transcend class and religious boundaries throughout the Indian subcontinent. Bollywood exploited the links between nationalism and cricket with the movie *Lagaan* – a story of a group of plucky Indian villagers who beat their British rulers at cricket to rid themselves of the cruel colonizers.⁴¹ While Bollywood has made a number of movies that focus on the game of cricket, for example *Iqbal*, *Hattrick*, *Say Salaam India* to name but a few, *Lagaan* has been by far the most commercially successful. It is possible that this is in part because it is the only movie that explicitly links cricket with anti-colonialism and Indian nationalism.

³⁸ Guha, n. 6, p. 354.

³⁹ Interview with Sahni, n. 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Guha, n. 6, p. 354.

Boria Majumdar argues that “Indian cricket makes sense only when it is placed within the broader politico-economic context.”⁴² In order to analyse the link between cricket and Indian national consciousness further it is important to look at the factors that have helped develop this link.

One factor in the growing link between cricket and national consciousness was the political classes. Even before cricket took over from hockey as the most popular sport in India, politicians had used it to broaden their appeal. India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, played cricket and his daughter Indira Gandhi used photos of him striding out to bat, dressed in his cricket whites, on political pamphlets during the Emergency of 1975.⁴³ The cricket boards of Mumbai and Bihar have been run by former chief ministers⁴⁴ and one of them, Sharad Pawar, a former defence minister and now agriculture minister, is presently head of the BCCI. Indian team selections are even debated in parliament. Nandy argues that cricket is “an easy peg” on which to hang your nationalism.⁴⁵ Others argue that the relationship between sport and politics in India is mutually beneficial, sport needs politicians in India to get money and cut red tape and politicians use cricket as a way to gain popularity.⁴⁶ It should be noted that the links between sport and leaders were developed even before Independence. The BCCI was formed by the Maharajahs of the Princely States, and cricket boards have always been supported by the most powerful people in the area.⁴⁷

⁴² Majumdar, n. 8, p. 3.

⁴³ Guha, n. 6, p. 332.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁴⁶ Interview with Pataudi, n. 30.

⁴⁷ Interview with Jadeja, n. 35.

Cricket and the Media

Another crucial factor that has increased the link between cricket and national consciousness is the deregulation of the television industry that took place in 1993.⁴⁸ The success in the World Cup ten years earlier combined with the spread of new television stations brought cricket to whole new audiences throughout India. Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch's Star Sports and ESPN channels have become the mainstay for bringing cricket to an ever-widening audience.⁴⁹ "Radio, and more particularly television, has made cricket the most popular game in India.... Men, women and children who had no interest in the game earlier have now become ardent fans – all because of its broadcast by radio and television..."⁵⁰

Cricket on television is a boon for advertisers because commercials can be shown every five minutes or so, after each over, this combined with the need for the new channels to fill their schedules meant more and more matches being shown.⁵¹

Multinational corporations (MNCs) entered India as the Indian economy opened up and they needed brand ambassadors with whom the population identified. Cricket players provided the perfect vehicle for this which in turn boosted the popularity of the star players.⁵² MNCs have exploited the subcontinent's love of cricket, and also for Bollywood. Using movie stars and cricketers to advertise their products, MNCs gained an extraordinary reach in the subcontinent – in India, billboards with cricketers like Tendulkar or movie stars

Shah Rukh Khan holding a Pepsi or Coca Cola are ubiquitous. This also allows the poor to interact with global capitalism and forget their own situation for a while.⁵³

It should also be noted that as the Indian economy was liberalized and 'big money' poured in a proportion of the population had more money to spend. The developments also brought about a growing middle class who, Nandy argues, "expanded the scope and range of national consciousness."⁵⁴ He points out that the middle classes in India are the standard bearers of nationalism and encouraged the links between cricket and national consciousness.⁵⁵

The media has deepened this link between cricket and nationalism,⁵⁶ and nowhere has this been more obvious than in the recent 2007 ricket World Cup. *The Hindustan Times* advertised the World Cup as 'War in WIndies'; PepsiCo used the slogan 'Blue Billion' to link Indian's passion for cricket with national consciousness and their brand. Varun Sahni argues that such links are positive, "If your national identity is expressed... predominantly through sport, ... that's actually a rather good thing. A lot of us were very relieved to see German nationalism [for example] re-emerge during the football World Cup, in such a healthy... non-xenophobic manner, [it was] felt that the Germans have come of age. I think the media makes the most of it."⁵⁷ This hyper-nationalism comes to the fore particularly when India plays Pakistan in cricket. In the run-up to the India/Pakistan match in the quarter finals of the 2003 World Cup, the media went into overdrive portraying this as

⁴⁸ Interview with G K Arora, 3 May 2007 and with Nandy, n. 18.

⁴⁹ Amit Gupta, "The Globalization of Cricket: The Rise of the Non-West," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 21, No. 2, March 2004, p. 264.

⁵⁰ Supreme Court Case 161 in 1995, as quoted in Majudmar, n. 8, p. 367.

⁵¹ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁵² Interview with Sahni, n. 36.

⁵³ Sengupta, n. 2, p. 603.

⁵⁴ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interview with Daruwalla, n. 17 and with Sahni, n. 36.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

‘mimic warfare’:⁵⁸ a Bengali newspaper represented the match as war, with the cricket pitch as the battleground;⁵⁹ a Gujarati newspaper used computer generated imagery to turn the Indian and Pakistani cricket teams into soldiers, complete with military uniform and guns.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ George Orwell, “The Sporting Spirit” in (eds.) Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, *The Collected Essays: Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vols. 1-4, (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 322.

⁵⁹ K Chatterjee, “To Play or Not To Play: Fabricating Consent over the Indo-Pak Cricket Series,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 21, Nos 3 and 4, June 2004, p. 625.

⁶⁰ J Dasgupta, “Manufacturing Unison: Muslims, Hindus and Indians during the India-Pakistan Match,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 21, Nos 3 and 4, 2004, p. 577.

Cricket as a Unifying Factor in India

Another important question to be addressed relating to the theme of cricket and Indian national consciousness, is whether the game has a unifying effect on the populace. There seems to be a divergence of opinion here. Some suggest that “in victory cricket is a unifying factor”⁶¹ although “that does not mean they are unified on other things.”⁶² Ramachandra Guha argues that “The institutions that keep us together are those bequests of the British: the civil service, the army, the railways, and cricket.”⁶³

Whilst most people agree that cricket does bring the country together, this is only part of the story. Muslims in India are often suspected as supporters of Pakistan. Until the 2003 cricket World Cup, during each India/Pakistan cricket match, there was evidence that some Indian Muslims would support Pakistan.⁶⁴ There is also evidence that this support was disapproved of.⁶⁵ When Muslims did try to celebrate an Indian win over Pakistan, they were actively prevented from doing so, sometimes ending in violence.⁶⁶ This phenomenon has been explained as, “Cheering for Pakistan in cricket is the way to express a different identity.”⁶⁷ Using cricket as a way to express an alternative identity is not an exclusively Indian preserve. In Sri Lanka, there is plenty of documentary evidence of Tamils supporting teams other than their national side, whether it be the Australians in the recent World Cup final⁶⁸ or India.⁶⁹ Similarly, non resident Indians (NRIs) throughout the West Indies, UK and South

Africa often support the Indian team against their national side.

In 1990, Norman Tebbit, a British Conservative minister, argued that South Asian immigrants in the UK should support the English cricket team rather than the Indian or Pakistani teams as proof of their commitment to the UK.⁷⁰ During the 1990s, Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena supremo, devised his version of the ‘Tebbit Test.’ He claimed that Indian Muslims must prove that they were not Pakistani sympathisers or anti-national by supporting India in cricket rather than Pakistan: “I want them with tears in their eyes every time India loses to Pakistan.”⁷¹ The contradictory demands placed on Indian Muslims point to a contradiction in the national consciousness about the role of Muslims in the country.

This dichotomy in Indian consciousness can be understood as the “good” Muslim/”bad” Muslim representation. Bal Thackeray and L K Advani of the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) have praised “good” Muslims such as former Indian cricket captain Mohammed Azharuddin or the music composer A R Rahman as role models for the Muslim population of India.⁷² For Azharuddin, this view was reversed when he was banned for life from cricket for his part in the match fixing scandals of the 1990s; some went as far as suggesting that this proved he was a ‘bad’ Muslim and a traitor.⁷³

Some historians have linked the rise of cricket nationalism in the 1990s to a change in the political climate.⁷⁴ The rise of the BJP

⁶¹ Interview with Sahni, n. 36.

⁶² Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁶³ R Guha, “The Miracle that is India,” *Outlook*, 7 May 2007.

⁶⁴ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 576.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 579.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 581-82.

⁶⁷ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁶⁸ “Cricket buys peace in times of war,” *Hindustan Times*, 27 April 2007.

⁶⁹ Interview with N Manoharan, Senior Fellow, IPCS, 9 May 2007.

⁷⁰ BBC News, “Can British Asians be England cricket fans?” 31 August 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/cricket/england/5296056.stm>.

⁷¹ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 576 and Guha, n. 6, p. 410.

⁷² Dasgupta, n. 60, pp. 576-80.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

⁷⁴ Guha, n. 6, p. 352 and Sengupta, n. 2, p. 605.

brought communalism back to the fore. It has been argued that “due to its place in civil society and as a significant element of popular culture, international one-day and Test cricket offers fertile terrain for the articulation of Hindu chauvinism and communalist ideologies.”⁷⁵ This rise of Hindu chauvinism was shaped in part by the Hindutva consciousness proposed by the BJP,⁷⁶ which was connected in part to support for the reconstruction of the Ram temple – the remains of which were said to lie under the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya – and was actively promoted by the BJP’s Advani. The mosque’s eventual destruction caused much communal bloodshed and unrest. India was founded as a secular nation, in contrast to Pakistan’s religious basis; by the 1990s, however, the Hindu ‘self’ saw itself as directly opposed to the Pakistani theocratic religious ‘other’.⁷⁷ This opposition helped strengthen Hindu consciousness and in turn threatened the security of Muslims in the so-called ‘secular’ republic. As the communal riots of Mumbai in 1992 and the Godhra riots of 2002 show, this tension has never completely dissipated. The emotive issues of Partition and the role of Muslims within the secular state of India are often brought to the fore during India-Pakistan cricket matches when nationalistic sentiments are at their highest.

The World Cup of 2003 is an interesting case study, because, unlike previous occasions, there was little or no public support for Pakistan from Indian Muslims.⁷⁸ In Calcutta, a discussion was held within the

⁷⁵ Ian McDonald, “Between Saleem and Shiva: The Politics of Cricket Nationalism in “Globalising India,” in *Sport in Divided Societies* (eds.), J Sugden and A Bairner (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer, 1999).

⁷⁶ Hindutva was defined by the BJP as a way to “bridge our present to our glorious past and pave the way for an equally glorious future: it will guide the transition from *swarajya* to *surajya*,” BJP Manifesto 1998. See also Chatterjee, n. 59, p. 623.

⁷⁷ Ibid, pp. 623-25.

⁷⁸ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 575.

police force, which decided that Muslims should be prevented from supporting Pakistan during the match. While this proposal was not carried out, it suggests that the authorities were sufficiently concerned that some Muslims would support Pakistan and that this support was against the ‘national interest.’⁷⁹ India went on to win the match and there were wide-scale celebrations throughout the country. Indian Muslims joined in these celebrations, but were, in some areas, actively prevented from doing so. In Ahmedabad this caused rioting.⁸⁰ Violence had similarly occurred during the India-Pakistan encounter in the 1996 World Cup.⁸¹

After the 2003 quarter-final match was won, the Indian Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister phoned the Indian cricket team to congratulate them; this was unusual as normally such phone calls would only be made if the team won the tournament.⁸² The Indian Finance Minister, Jaswant Singh, took the extraordinary move of announcing that the Indian team would not have to pay income tax on their earnings from the match, in stark contrast to the Pakistan team who had their tournament fees slashed by 50 percent for losing to India.⁸³ The BJP used the win to assert their communalist Hindu ideology and highlight India’s hegemonic aspirations.⁸⁴

In exploring the reasons why there was little outward support for Pakistan from Indian Muslims during the 2003 World Cup various reasons have been put forward. Many scholars argued that the support was probably still there but was kept hidden⁸⁵ owing to a variety of factors. Sahni suggests that since the World Trade Centre bombings of 11 September 2001, being a

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 579.

⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 581-82.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 582.

⁸² Chatterjee, n. 59, p. 626.

⁸³ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 577.

⁸⁴ Sengupta, n. 2, p. 606.

⁸⁵ Interview with Sahni, n. 36, with Nandy, n. 18 and with Boria Majumdar, 5 May 2007.

Muslim was not necessarily the most comfortable identity to have.⁸⁶ Another pertinent point is the fact that the 2003 World Cup match between India and Pakistan was held almost exactly a year after the riots in Gujarat in which an estimated 2000 people were murdered. All these possibly made the Muslim community feel uncomfortable with expressing a different identity.

India's failure in the recent 2007 cricket World Cup was greeted with outrage from all communities throughout India. The heartbreak the country went through was only a little alleviated by the fact that India's greatest rival, Pakistan, was also ejected in a similarly traumatic way.⁸⁷ It seems that during the two most recent World Cups support for 'Team India' has been almost 'universal' in the country – "Cricket had finally achieved for the nation, that level of unity that (s)he had dreamt of for so long."⁸⁸

This can be explained in a number of ways. In 2003, India made it through to the finals and Sahni argues that "one of the reasons is that India [was] doing well." He also suggests that "you privilege the identity that you think will do well."⁸⁹ Another important argument for why Indian Muslims are outwardly supporting the Indian team more is that there have been more Muslims in the team since 2002 than at any time since Independence.⁹⁰ There are, in fact, two or three players from Gujarat in the team, Zaheer Khan, for example, is a Muslim from Vadodara, one of the areas worst affected by the communal riots in Gujarat.⁹¹ It has been suggested that this has helped

encourage Indian Muslims to support the Indian team.⁹² There have been a number of studies on sport as a means to assert contested identities which back this view; sport can give ethnic or religious minorities the chance to participate in society whilst maintaining their individual identity.⁹³

It must be emphasised that while this study has paid particular attention to the relationship between Muslims and support for the Indian cricket team, India has many other identities, apart from religious ones. The selection of the Indian cricket team has always been based on a regional selection policy; some have argued that this "has helped create a pan-Indian team" which gives "a kind of equal opportunity... to every... region"⁹⁴. The BCCI's philosophy is not unique, the United Cricket Board of South Africa (CBSA) and the Zimbabwean Cricket Union (ZCU) have race selection policies.⁹⁵ Whether this has been good for cricket in these countries might be debated, it could be argued that "society has gained what the game has lost."⁹⁶ After India's disastrous showing in the recent World Cup however, the BCCI has decided to abandon the regional selection policy.⁹⁷ There is also no real evidence that these affirmative action policies actually change the way a supporter feels about their national team, irrespective of presence of a player from his or her region.⁹⁸

⁸⁶ Interview with Sahni, n. 36.

⁸⁷ Daily Times, "Editorial: Shame on Inzi and his men," 19 March 2007, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\03\19\story_19-3-2007_pg3_1.

⁸⁸ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 575.

⁸⁹ Interview with Sahni, n. 36.

⁹⁰ From 2002-2007 there have been up to four Muslims in the Indian cricket squad which is more than at any other time since 1932.

⁹¹ Dasgupta, n. 60, p. 576.

⁹² Interview with Ashis Nandy, 26 April 2007.

⁹³ Guttman, n. 1, p. 369.

⁹⁴ Interview with Daruwalla, n. 17 and with Sahni, n. 36.

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Interview with Nandy, n. 18.

⁹⁷ Interview with Pataudi, n. 30.

⁹⁸ Interview with Pataudi, n. 30 and with Srinivas-Raghavan, n. 23.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that several elements have contributed to the close links between cricket and Indian national consciousness. From a historical perspective, it was a major factor – both as a way of ‘fitting in’ with the British as the Parsis and the local rulers desired, and as a form of non-violent dissent against the colonisers. These two paradoxical reasons for taking up the game in pre-Independent India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries illustrate the complex role that cricket has played in the country. In India, cricket represents different things for different people.

The connections between cricket and South Asian national identities are not however the only links that have firmly established cricket on the subcontinent. Once the colonisers left, the game continued to flourish which suggests that the roots are deeper than mere anti-colonial or pro-colonial expression. As argued in this paper, cricket suits the mind of those on the Indian subcontinent – its non-linear format fits with the regional consciousness in South Asia as do the pre-industrial elements of the game.

Once the game was established, the media and politicians used cricket as a way of boosting their ratings and popularity. As

cricket rose in the national consciousness of India, MNCs latched onto it as a way of enhancing their sales figures. Bollywood also capitalised on the links between anti-colonial feeling and national consciousness, with the movie *Lagaan* providing the most successful example of this..

Finally, cricket has been used by different polities to consolidate a shared Indian identity and also as a way of expressing alternative identities. This dichotomy reflects the contradictory reasons operating when the game was initially established in India.

In conclusion it can be argued that cricket both unites and divides the people of India, and which of these happens depends on a variety of factors including the team’s success, the relationship minorities have with the centre and the who the Indian team is playing. These inconsistencies are not seen only in India – they are present in Sri Lanka and England as well. Such contradictions are not surprising, however, because the Indian national consciousness is not a homogenous identity; it means different things to different people in a country where everyone has a regional and religious identity, as well as a national identity. Support for the Indian team encompasses all these identities and more.

About the Author

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