



Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket¹

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For the former colony, decolonization is a dialogue with the colonial past, and not a simple dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life. Nowhere are the complexities and ambiguities of this dialogue more evident than in the vicissitudes of cricket in those countries that were once part of the British Empire. In the Indian case, the cultural aspects of decolonization deeply affect every domain of public life, from language and the arts to ideas about political representation and economic justice. In every major public debate in contemporary India, one underlying strand is always the question of what to do with the shreds and patches of the Colonial heritage. Some of these patches are institutional; others are ideological and aesthetic.

Malcolm Muggeridge once joked that “Indians were the last living Englishmen”, thus capturing the fact – true at least of the urbanized and Westernized elites of India – that while England itself became gradually denatured for it lost its empire, aspects of its heritage took deep root in the colonies. In the areas of politics and economics, the

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special relationship between India and England has very little meaning anymore, as England strives to overcome economic disaster and Indians reach out increasingly to United States, the Middle East, and the rest of Asian world. But there is a part of Indian culture today that seems forever to be England, and that is cricket. It therefore is worth examining the dynamics of decolonization in this sphere, where the urge to cut the ties with the colonial past seems weakest.

The process by which cricket gradually became indigenized in colonial India can best be envisioned by making a distinction between “hard” and “soft” cultural forms. Hard cultural forms are those that come with a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform. Soft cultural forms, by contrast, are those that permit relatively easy separation of embodied performance from meaning and value, and relatively successful transformation at each level. In terms of this distinction, I would suggest that cricket is a hard cultural form that changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed.

One reason that cricket is not easily susceptible to reinterpretation as it crosses social boundaries is that the values it represents are, at their heart, puritan ones, in which rigid adherence to external codes is part of the discipline of internal moral development (James 1963, chap. 2). Not unlike the design principles of the Bauhaus, from here closely follows (moral) function. To some extent, all rule-governed sport has some of this hard quality, but it is arguably more present in those competitive forms that come to encapsulate the core moral values of the society in which they are born.

Thus, cricket as a hard cultural form ought to resist indigenization. In fact, counterintuitively, it has become profoundly indigenized and decolonized, and India is often seen as suffering from a veritable cricket “fever” (Puri 1982). There are two ways to account for this puzzle. The first, recently suggested by Ashis Nandy (1989), is that there are mythic structures beneath the surface of the sport that make it profoundly Indian in spite of its Western historical origins. The alternative approach (although it is not entirely inconsistent with many of Nandy’s insights into cricket in India) is that cricket became indigenized through a set of complex and contradictory processes that parallel the emergence of an Indian “nation” from the British Empire. The argument developed in this chapter is that indigenization is often a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity, and not necessarily of the subsurface affinity of new cultural forms with existing patterns in the cultural repertoire.

The indigenization of a sport like cricket has many dimensions: it has something to do with the way the sport is managed, patronized, and publicized, it has something to do with the class background of Indian players and thus with their capability to mimic Victorian elite values; it has something to do with the dialectic between team spirit and national sentiment, which is inherent in the sport and is implicitly corrosive of the bonds of empire, it has something to do with the way in which a reservoir of talent is created and nurtured outside the urban elites, so that the sport can become internally self-sustaining, it has something to do with the ways in which media and



language help to unyoke cricket from its Englishness, and it has something to do with the construction of a postcolonial male spectatorship that can charge cricket with the power of bodily competition and virile nationalism. Each of these processes interacted with one another to indigenize cricket in India, in a way that is distinct from the parallel process in other British colonies. (For some sense of the diaspora of cricket through the empire as a whole, see Allen 1985.)

Obviously, the story of cricket depends on the vantage point from which it is told. The remarkable implications of the history of cricket in the Caribbean have been immortalized in the corpus of C. L. R. James (1963; see also Diawara 1990 and Birbalsingh 1986). Australians have had a long struggle – dramatized in cricket – to break free of the sanctimonious and patronizing way in which they are regarded by the English. South Africa finds in cricket yet another conflicted way to reconcile its Boer and English genealogies. But it is in the colonies occupied by black and brown peoples that the story of cricket is most anguished and subtle: in the Caribbean, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka (on the last, see Roberts 1985). I do not pretend that what cricket implies about decolonization from the Indian perspective holds good for every other former colony, but it is surely one part of the larger story of the construction of a postcolonial and global cultural framework for team sport.

THE COLONIAL ECUMENE

It is no exaggeration to suggest that cricket came closer than any other public form to distilling, constituting, and communicating the values of the Victorian upper classes in England to English gentlemen as part of their embodied practices, and to others as a means for apprehending the class codes of the period. Its history in England goes back into the precolonial period and there is little doubt that the sport is English in origin. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when cricket acquired much of its modern morphology it also took shape as the most powerful condensation of Victorian elite values. These values, about which much has been written can be summarized as follows. Cricket was a quintessentially masculine activity and it expressed the codes that were expected to govern all masculine behavior sportsmanship, a sense of fair play, thorough control over the expression of strong sentiments by players on the field, subordination of personal sentiments and interests to those of the group, unquestioned loyalty to the team.

Although cricket became a central instrument of socialization for the Victorian elite, it contained from the start a social paradox. It was honed as an instrument of elite formation, but like all complex and powerful forms of play, it both confirmed and created sporting sodalities that transcended class. Thus, it was always open to the most talented (and useful) among the lower and middle classes who stumbled into it. Those among the great unwashed in Victorian England who were capable of subjecting



themselves to the social and moral disciplines of the playing field could enter into a limited intimacy with their superiors. The price of admission was complete dedication to the sport and, usually, great talent on the field. In Victorian England cricket was a limited road to social mobility. Of course, no amount of shared cricket would make an Englishman confuse an Oxford Blue with a Yorkshire working-class professional cricketer. But on the playing field (where cooperation was necessary) there was some respite from the brutalities of class in England. It has also been noted that it was the presence of these lower-class players that allowed the Victorian elite to incorporate the harsh techniques required to win while retaining the idea that sportsmanship involved a patrician detachment from competitiveness. Lower-class professional players thus did the dirty subaltern work of winning so that their class superiors could preserve the illusion of a gentlemanly, noncompetitive sport (Nandy 1989: 19-20). This inherent paradox – an elite sport whose code of fair play dictated an openness to talent and vocation in those of humble origins – is a key to the early history of cricket in India.

For much of the nineteenth century in India cricket was a segregated sport, with Englishmen and Indians playing on opposite teams when they played together at all. Cricket was associated with clubs, the central social institutions of the British in India. Indian cricket clubs (and their associated teams) were largely a product of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although there were a number of Parsi clubs based in Bombay starting in the 1840s. In this, as in other matters, the Parsis were the bridge community between Indian and English cultural tastes. Parsi teams from India toured England in the 1880s, and in 1888-89 the first English team toured India (although the majority of its matches were against teams wholly composed of Englishmen, and only a few against teams composed of Indians). Bombay was the birthplace of cricket for Indians and still retains a preeminent place in Indian cricket culture.

Although there was never a conscious policy in regard to support of cricket of colonial regime in India, cricket evolved into an unofficial instrument of state cultural policy. This was largely due to the cultural commitments of those members of the Victorian elite who occupied key positions in Indian administration, education and journalism and who regarded cricket as the ideal way to transmit Victorian ideals of character and fitness to the colony. Lord Harris, governor of Bombay from 1890 to 1893, was perhaps the most crucial figure in the quasi-official patronage of cricket in India, and he was followed by a succession of governors or in Bombay and in the other presidencies, who saw cricket as fulfilling the following range of tasks: solidifying the bonds of empire, lubricating state dealings between various Indian “communities” which might otherwise degenerate into communal (Hindu/Muslim) riots – and implanting English ideals of manliness, stamina and vigor into Indian groups seen as lazy, enervated, and effete. In this regard, cricket was one of many arenas in which a colonial sociology was constructed and reified. In this sociology, India was seen as a congeries of antagonistic communities, populated by men (and women) with a variety



of psychological defects. Cricket was seen as an ideal way to socialize natives into new modes of intergroup conduct and new standard of behavior. Ostensibly concerned with recreation and competition, its underlying quasi-official charter was moral and political. The underlying contradiction, between “communally” organized teams and the ideal of creating broader civic bonds, has influenced the development of cricket from its inception to the present and is dealt with more fully in the next section of this chapter.

On the whole, from about 1870 to 1930, in the high period of the Raj, there is no doubt that for Indians to play cricket was to experiment with the mysteries of the English upper class life. Whether it was by playing teams from England, which included men who had known each other at Eton and Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge, or during tours to England, a small segment of the Indian sporting population was initiated into the moral and social mysteries and rituals of Victorian cricket (Cashman 1980, Docker 1976).

The biographies and autobiographies of the finest Indian cricketers of this era, such as Vijay Hazare 1976; 1981), L. P. Jai (Raji 1976), and Mushtaq Ali (1931) who all had active cricket careers into the 1940s clearly show that they were exposed (in spite of their very diverse social backgrounds) to the value commitments associated with Victorian cricket – sportsmanship, self-effacement, team spirit – as well as to the hagiography, and lore of cricket throughout the empire, but especially in England.

But class and race conspired in very complex ways in the “Victorian ecumene” (Breckenridge 1989: 196) and in its Edwardian successor structures. I have already suggested that Victorian cricket involved important class distinctions in England, distinctions that to this day affect the relations there between gentlemen and professional players, coaches and players, county and league cricket. Together, white males of all classes helped to create and embody a sporting code whose patrician moral dimensions were central to upper classes, and whose “workmanlike” skills were pointers to the role of the working classes in the sport. (Clarke and Clarke 1982: 82-83 offer an interesting treatment of the peculiar inflections of the idea of manliness in English sporting ideology.) The complexity of this specific brand of colonial discourse also illustrates one variant of what has been seen, in a rather different context, as the ambivalence of colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994).

As in many other areas, including art, etiquette, language, and conduct, it is now increasingly clear that during the heyday of the modern colonialisms, a complex system of hegemonizing and hierarchizing values and practices evolved conjointly in the metropolis and its colonies (Cooper and Stoler 1989). In the case of cricket in India, the key to the complex flows that linked cricket, class, and race in the colonial ecumene was the story of patronage and coaching in India. Both the biographies referred to above and an excellent synthetic account (Cashman 1980, chap. 2) make it clear that in the period between 1870 and 1930 British involvement in Indian cricket was very complex; it involved officers of the army stationed in India, businessmen from



England, and senior government officials, all of whom helped to implant the idea of cricket in various Indian settings. At the same time, however, Indian princes brought English and Australian professional cricketers to India to train their own teams.

The princely phase in the patronage of Indian cricket is in some ways the most important in the analysis of the indigenization of cricket. First, cricket as an elite sport required the sort of time and money not available to the bourgeois elites of colonial India. The princes, on the other hand, were quick to see cricket as another extension of their royal traditions, and they absorbed such sports as polo, rifle shooting, golf, and cricket into their traditional aristocratic repertoires. This permitted them to offer new kinds of spectacle to their subjects (Docker 1976: 27), to link themselves to the English aristocracy in potentially new and fruitful ways, and to ingratiate themselves to the colonial authorities in India (such as Lord Harris), who favored cricket as a means for the moral disciplining of Orientals. The princes who supported cricket were often the less grand members of the Indian aristocracy, for cricket was somewhat cheaper than other forms of royal patronage and spectacle. Cricket had three appeals as an adjunct to the lifestyle and ethos of petty kingship in India: (a) its role, especially in the North, as a manly art in the aristocratic culture of leisure (b) its Victorian credentials, which opened doors in England that might otherwise be less well-oiled (as in the case of Ranjitsinhji); (c) its role as a useful extension of other royal spectacles that had been an important part of the obligations and mystique of royalty in India. Accordingly, small and large princes in many parts of India throughout this century imported coaches from England, organized tournaments and prizes, subsidized teams and coaches, developed grounds and pitches, imported equipments and expertise, and hosted English teams.

Most important the princes provided both direct and indirect support to many cricketers (or their families) from humble backgrounds, who were eventually able to make their way to bigger cities, more important teams and sometimes to national and international visibility. For many Indians cricketers outside the big colonial cities in the period before World War II, one or another form of subsidy from princely houses was the key to their own entry into the Cosmopolitan world of big-time cricket. Such players were thus able to achieve some measure of mobility through cricket and to introduce a considerable degree of class complexity into Indian cricket, a complexity that persists today.

The groundwork for the Indianization of cricket was therefore laid through the complex, hierarchical cross-hatching of British gentlemen in India, Indian Princes, mobile Indian men who were often part of the civil services and the army, and, most important, those white cricketing professionals (mainly from England and Australia) who actually trained the great Indian cricketers of the first decade of this century. These professionals, the most prominent of whom were Frank Tarrant, Bill Hitch, and Clarrie Grimmett, as well as the somewhat more socially established British army men, college principals, and businessmen who coached budding Indian cricketers seem to



have been the crucial links between stardom, aristocracy, and technical skill in colonial cricketing world at large. What these professional coaches accomplished was to provide the technical skills that were crucial for the patronage fantasies of the Indian princes (which in turn were tied to their own fantasies of a monarchical and aristocratic ideal of empire) to be translated into competitive Indian teams actually composed of Indians. Although there is no decisive evidence for the following interpretation, it is highly likely that small-town boys like Mushtaq Ali, Vijay Hazare, and Lala Amarnath would have had a hard time entering the rarefied world of world cricket (still dominated by English and Victorian sporting codes), without the translation of cricket into an embodied technical practice by these lower-class white professionals. Thus, it is not the case that an Anglophone officials drama was simply reproduced in India, but that in the circulations of princes, coaches, army officials, viceroys, college principals, and players of humble class origin between India, England, and Australia a complex imperial class regime was formed, in which Indian and English social hierarchies were interlinked and cross-hatched to produce, by the 1930s, a cadre of nonelite Indians who felt themselves to be genuine cricketers and genuinely "Indian" as well.

In this light, the great princely batsman Ranjitsinhji (1872-1933) is probably a sad exception, for whom cricketing and Englishness became so deeply connected that he could never take the idea of cricket as an Indian game very seriously. He was the Jamsaheb of Nawanagar, a small kingdom in Saurashtra, on the west coast of India. Ranji has a mythic place in the annals of cricket and is even today (along with a handful of others like W. C. Grace, Don Bradman, and Gary Sobers) considered to be one of the great batsmen of all time. It is worth spending a little time on Ranji, for he exemplifies what colonial cricket was all about. Ironically, it was probably just this profound identification with the empire and the crown that allowed Ranji to become the quintessential and living trope of an "Oriental" form of cricketing skill.

Ranji was not simply a great run-getter but was also seen in cricket circles as carrying a peculiar Oriental glow. The great C. B Fry said of him that "he moved as if he had no bones, one would not be surprised to see brown curves burning in the grass where one of his cuts had traveled or blue flame shimmering round his bat, as he made one of his strokes." Neville Cardus said that "when he batted, strange light was seen for the first time on English fields." Clem Hill, the Australian test cricketer, simply said; "He is more than a batsman, he's a juggler" Bill Hitch, the Surrey and England fast bowler, referred to him as the master, the magician (all cited in de Mellow 1979, chap. 9).



Ranji was seen to bring a peculiarly Indian genius to batting, hence the reference to magic and juggling, strange light and blue flames. Ranji, in fact, represented the glamorous obverse of the effeminacy, laziness, and lack of stamina that Indians were thought by many colonial theorists to embody (Hutchins 1967, chap. 3, Nandy 1983). In Ranji, while became guile, trickery became magic, weakness became suppleness, and effeminacy was transformed into grace. This orientalist glow, of course, had a great deal to do with Ranji's impeccable social credentials, his total devotion to English institutions (all the way from college to the crown), and his unswerving loyalty to the empire. He thus not only revolutionized cricket and offered the crowds an extraordinary treat when he was at bat, but English audiences could always read in his performances a loyal and glamorous offering of the mysterious .Orient to the playing fields of Eton. Ranji] was the ultimate brown Englishman. There is no doubt, however, that Ranji belonged to that generation of Indian princes for whom loyalty to the crown and their pride in being Indian were coextensive with one another, although one recent analyst has suggested that Ranji's commitments may have been expressions of deep personal doubts and conflicts (Nandy 1989b). Ranji's story is only an extreme case of a more general irony: that the Indian princes, who patronized cricket as a way to enter the patrician Victorian world, and who were largely opposed to the nationalist movement, in fact, laid the grounds for the mastery of cricket among ordinary Indians that was to blossom into a full-blown pride in Indian cricketing competence by the 1930s.

CRICKET, EMPIRE, AND NATION

Today, the extraordinary popularity of cricket in India is clearly tied up with nationalist sentiment. But in the early history of cricket India, as we have noted already, cricket fostered two other kinds of loyalty. The first was (and still is) to religious (communal) identities. The second kind of loyalty, rather more abstractly instantiated in the sport, was loyalty to the empire. The interesting question here is how the idea of the Indian nation emerged as a salient cricketing entity.

As far back as the first clubs organized by Parsis in Bombay in the nineteenth century, membership in religious communities became the salient principle around which Indians banded together to play cricket. And this organizing principle remained in place until it was dislodged in the 1930s. Hindus, Parsis, Muslims, Europeans, and, eventually, the "Rest" (a label for the communally unmarked group" brought together into cricket teams) were organized into cricket clubs. There was much debate from the very start about the pros and cons of this communal organization. Although elsewhere in princely India the major patrons of sport were the princes, who paid no regard to communal principles in their recruitment of players, in the presidencies of British India



players were divided into religious and ethnic groupings, some of which were antagonistic in public life more generally. Thus, cricket was an important arena players as well as crowds learned to think of themselves as Hindu, Muslim and Parsi, in contrast with the Europeans.

There has been much good historical work to show that these social categories were both the creation and the instrument of a colonial sociology of rule (Appadurai 1981, Cohn 1987, Dirks 1987; Freitag 1989, Pandey 1990, Prakash 1990). But the fact is that they entered deeply into Indian self-conceptions and Indian political and cultural life. Although it is true that census classifications, the control of religious endowments, and the issue of separate electorates were the major official arenas in which issues of communal identity were reified as part of colonial sociology of India, the role of cricket in this process must not be underestimated. At least in Western India, British officials like Governor Harris were complacent in their view of cricket as a safety valve for communal hostility, and as a means for teaching Indians how to live amicably with communal diversity. But deeply embedded as they were in their own fictions about the fragmentation of Indian society, what they not did realize was that on the playing field (as elsewhere) they were perpetuating communal conceptions of identity that in Indian cities might have become more fluid. Thus, we have the paradox that Bombay, perhaps the most cosmopolitan colonial city, has its major elite sport organized around communal lines.

This communal principle was bound to become otiose as the seriousness and quality of cricket in India increased. Unlike cricket in India, English cricket was organized around a system in which the nation was the exemplary unit and counties, not communities, were its lower-level constituencies. In other words, territory and nationhood for England, community and cultural distinctiveness for India. Thus, when English teams began to tour in India, the question was how to construct an "Indian" team that was a fitting opponent. In the early tours, in the 1890s, these Indian teams were largely composed of Englishmen, but as more Indians began to play the game and as more patrons and entrepreneurs began to organize teams and tournaments it was inevitable that the full pool of Indian talent be drawn on to construct a first-rate Indian team. This process, whereby Indians increasingly came to represent India in cricket, follows not surprisingly the history of the evolution of Indian nationalism as a mass movement. Cricket in the Indian colonial context thus casts an unexpected light on the relationship between nationhood and empire. Insofar as England was not simply identical with the empire, there had to be other parallel entities in the colonies against which the English nation-state could play: thus, "India" had to be invented, at least for the purposes of colonial cricket.



Yet there was surprisingly little explicit communication between those who were responsible for organizing cricket in India on an all-India basis and those, in the all-India Congress party (and elsewhere), who (beginning in the 1880s) were professionally committed to the idea of a free Indian nation. The idea of Indian talent, an Indian team, and Indian competition in international cricket emerged relatively independently, under nonofficial stimulation by its patrons and publicists. Thus, cricket nationalism emerged as a paradoxical, although logical, outgrowth of the development of cricket in England. Rather than being a spin-off of the imagined community of nationalist politicians in India, nationally organized cricket was an internal demand of the colonial enterprise and thus required cognate national or protonational enterprises in the colonies.

Nevertheless, as cricket became more popular in the first three decades of this century, and as the nationalist movement, particularly with Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress gathered momentum in the same period, cricket nationalism and explicitly nationalist politics as such came into contact in the ordinary lives of young Indians. Thus, N. K. P. Salve, a major Indian politician and cricket entrepreneur, recalls how in the early thirties he and his friends were intimidated and prevented from playing on a fine cricket pitch in Nagpur by a certain Mr. Thomas, an Anglo-Indian sergeant in charge of the pitch who “looked like an African cape buffalo, massive and hefty in size, otherwise possessed of offensive, uncouth and vulgar characteristics” (1987: 5). After several scary and abusive episodes involving Thomas (a classic subaltern figure keeping native urchins away from the sacrosanct spaces of imperial performance), Salve’s father and his friends, all influential local followers of Gandhi, intervened on behalf of the young boys with a senior British official in Nagpur and won them the right to use the pitch when it was not in official use. Throughout Salve’s narration of this story, we get a strong sense of his fear of the Anglo-Indian subaltern, the sensuous attraction of playing on an official pitch, the outrage as Indians of being kept out of a public space, and the nationalist flavor of their resentment. It is probable that cricket nationalism and official nationalist politics were rarely wedded in conscious public debates or movements, but that they affected the lived experience of play, skill, space, and rights for many young Indians in the small towns and playing fields of preindependence India. But the growth of cricket consciousness and cricket excitement cannot be understood without reference to the role of language and the media.

The media have played a crucial role in the indigenization of cricket, first through the English-language cricket commentaries aired by All-India Radio, starting in 1933. Largely in English during the thirties, forties and fifties (Cashman 1980: 145-146), radio commentary starting in the sixties was increasingly in Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali, as well as in English. Multilingual radio commentary is probably the single major instrument in the socialization of the Indian mass audience in the subtleties of sport. While coverage of test matches (involving India and other countries) has been confined to



English, Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali, other first class matches are accompanied by radio commentary in all the major languages of the subcontinent. No systematic study has been made of the role of vernacular cricket commentary in a socializing nonurban Indian in the cosmopolitan culture of cricket, but it was evidently a major indigenization of the sport.

Through radios, which are very widely available and which attract large crowds in train stations, cafeterias and other public places, Indians have absorbed the English terminology of cricket: especially its noun structure, into a variety of vernacular syntactic patterns. This type of sport pidgin is crucial to the indigenization of the sport, for it permits contact with an arcane form at the same time as the form is linguistically domesticated. Thus, the elementary vocabulary of cricket terms in English is widely known throughout India (increasingly even in villages).

The complex linguistic experiences that emerged in the context of vernacular broadcasts are exemplified in the following narrative from Richard Cashman. During the 1972-73 series this conversation between Lala Amarnath, the expert and the Hindi commentator took place after Ajit Wadekar had straight driven Pocock for four off the front foot. The dialogue illustrates this hybrid language and some of the hazards of its use:

HINDI COMMENTATOR: Lalaji, aap wo back foot straight drive ke bare me kya kahena chahte hain?

AMARNATH: Wo back foot nahin front foot drive thi [...] badi sunder thi [...] wristy thi.

COMMENTATOR: Han Badi risky thi. Wadekar ko aisa nahin khelna chahiye.

AMARNATH: Commentator sahib, risky nahin wristy. Wrist se mari hui [...]

[Translation]

COMMENTATOR: Lala, what would you like to say about that straight drive off the back foot?

AMARNATH: That was a front and not a back foot drive [...]it was beautiful [...]was wristy.

COMMENTATOR: So that was risky. Wadekar shouldn't have played like that.

AMARNATH: Mr. Commentator, risky is not wristy. It was hit with the wrist [...]

(Cashman 1980: 147)

Although Cashman's translation is not entirely sensitive, it makes it quite clear that the vernacularization of cricket has its linguistic pitfalls. What he does not note, however, is that through the discussion of such errors Hindi speakers domesticate a relatively esoteric cricket term like wristy.

The media hegemony of cricket (often a source of complaint on the part of partisans of other sports) has grown since the arrival of television. After a very modest start with small audiences in the late 1960s, television has now completely



transformed cricket culture in India. As several commentators have pointed out, cricket is perfectly suited for television, with its many pauses, its spatial concentration of action, and its extended format. For audiences as well as advertisers it is the perfect television sport.

Television is at the cutting edge of the privatization of leisure in contemporary India (as elsewhere). As public spaces grow more violent, disorderly, and uncomfortable, those who can afford television consume their spectacles in the company of their friends and family. This is true of the two great passions of the mass audience: sport and cinema. In the one case through live coverage and in the other through reruns and videocassettes, the stadium and the cinema hall are being replaced by the living room as the setting for spectacle. Test matches are still well attended, but the crowds that show up are more volatile. No longer a complex shared experience between the rich and the poor, the stadium spectacle is a more polarized and jagged experience, which many do not prefer to the cool, private, and omniscient television screen. As elsewhere in the world in regard to large-scale spectacles, the audience of live matches is itself a prop in a grander performance staged for the benefit of television viewers. The crowd is there not to enjoy the liveness of the spectacle but to provide evidence of it for the television audience. An audience of the spectacle from its own point of view, it is part of the spectacle for those at home. This, too, is part of the process of indigenization and decolonization.

Television reduces foreign teams and stars to manageable size, it visually domesticates the exotic nature of the sport, particularly for those who might previously only have heard matches on the radio. And for a country whose cinema stars are its major celebrities, television lends cinematic authority to the sports spectacle. In a civilization where seeing (*darsan*) is the sacred instrument of communion, television has intensified the star status of the great Indian cricket players. Indian test cricketers have never been the objects of greater adulation than in the past decade of intense television viewing of major games. Television has deepened the national passion for cricket nurtured by radio, but both radio commentary and television watching have been reinforced, from the view point of audience reception and participation, by a vast growth in books, newspaper coverage, and sports-magazine consumption, not just in English but in the vernaculars.

The proliferation of news, biographies of stars, commentaries, and instructional literature, especially in the major cricket-playing areas, provides the critical backdrop for the special force of television. While this vernacular material is read and heard by those who do not themselves read, radio is heard and imagined in live form, while television coverage makes the transition to spectacle. These mass-mediated forms have created a public that is extremely large, literate in many different senses in the subtleties of the sport, and can bring to cricket the passions generated by reading, hearing, and seeing.



The role of the mass vernacular literature in this process is crucial, for what these books, magazines, and pamphlets do is to create a bridge between the vernaculars and the English language, put picture and names of foreign players into Indic scripts and syntax, and reinforce the body of contact terms (English terms transliterated into Hindi, Marathi, or Tamil) that are heard on the radio. Some of these materials also are instructional and contain elaborate diagrams and verbal texts accompanying these illustrations that explain the various strokes, styles, rules, and logic of cricket to readers who may know no English. This vernacularization process, which I have examined most closely with a body of materials in Marathi, provides a verbal repertoire that allows large numbers of Indians to experience cricket as a linguistically familiar form, thus liberating cricket from that very Englishness that first gave it its moral authority and intrigue.

Vernacular commentary on radio (and later on television) provides the first step to the domestication of the vocabulary of cricket because it provides not just a contact vocabulary, but also a link between this vocabulary and the excitement of the heard or seen drama of the game, its strokes, its rhythm, its physical thrill. The Englishness of cricket terminology is drawn into the worlds of Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and Bengali, but it is simultaneously brought into intimate contact with the actual playing of the game throughout the streets, playgrounds, and building lots of urban India and the free spaces of many villages as well. Thus, the acquisition of cricket terminology in the vernacular reinforces the sense of bodily competence in the sport, which is in turn given a hefty boost by regular spots on television. The great stars of cricket are imitated, children are nicknamed after them, and the terminology of cricket its strokes and its stars, its rules and its rhythms, become part of vernacular pragmatics and a sense of lived physical competence.

The vast corpus of printed materials in the vernaculars reinforce this link between terminological control and body excitement and expertise by providing large amounts of information, statistics and lore that further support the linguistic and pictorial competence of Indians who are only partially comfortable in the Anglophone world. In the many books, magazines, and pamphlets in the vernaculars, the rules, strokes, and terminology of cricket (most often transliterated directly from the English so that they remain part of the linguistic ecumene of international cricket) are often accompanied by schematics diagrams. Discussing at length the lives and styles of cricketers both Indian and foreign embedding these discussions in detailed debates and dialogues about matters of judgment and regulation (such as neutral umpiring) these materials hitch cricket terminology to the body as a site of language use and experience. In addition, by locating these instructional materials in news, gossip, stars and sensational events surrounding cricket, cricket is drawn into a wider world of celebrities, controversies and contexts outside of sport, which further embed it in linguistically familiar terrain.



The Hindi-language magazine *Kriket-Kriket* provides an excellent example of the “interocular” world of the vernacular reader (see Appadurai and Breckenridge 1991), for this magazine contains advertisements for Hindi pulp fiction, Hindi comic books, various body products like contact lenses and indigenous lotions, and photo albums of cricket stars. There are also advertisements for various kinds of how-to and self-help pocket books, most explaining skills like electric wiring and shorthand as well as stranger subjects like methods of making lubricating grease for machinery. Finally, many lavish color photos of cricket stars and numerous news items on specific matches and tournaments place cricket in a splendid world of semi cosmopolitan glitz in which cricket provides the textual suture for a much more diverse collage of materials having to do with modern lifestyles and fantasies. Because magazines such as *Kriket-Kriket* are relatively cheaply produced and sold, their paper and graphics quality is low, and therefore it is not at all easy to distinguish various kinds of news and opinion pieces from the advertisements for other kinds of literature and services. The total effect is of a seamless web of verbal and visual impressions of cosmopolitanism in which cricket is the connective tissue. Other vernacular magazines are more chaste and less interocular than this one, but as they are taken together with other printed materials, and especially with the adjacent experiences of radio, television, and film newsreels of cricket matches, there is little doubt that the culture of cricket that is consumed by semi-Anglophone readers is decisively postcolonial and polyglot.

Perhaps even more important are the newspaper and magazine stories, as well as the books, that tell the cricketing life stories of various stars, both old and new. What these vernacular stories do is to locate the skills and excitement of the sport in linguistically manageable narratives, thus making comprehensible not just stars but proximate cricketing lives. These readable lives then become the basis for a renewed intimacy in the reception of radio and television coverage of cricket events, and the bodily hexis of even the most rustic boy, playing with poor equipment on a fallow field, is tied at the level of language and the body to the world of high-powered cricket spectacles. The fact that many of these books and pamphlets are either ghostwritten or written with professional writers does not detract from their force as tools for understanding cricket from any readers outside the Anglophone world. By connecting the life of a star to known places, events, schools, teachers, coaches, and fellow players, a narrative structure is created in which cricket becomes enlivened just as its stars are made graspable (for an excellent example of this, see Shastri and Patil 1982).

The general force of the media experience is thus powerfully synaesthetic. Cricket is read, heard, and seen, and the force of daily life experiences of cricket, occasional glimpses of live cricket matches and stars, and the more predictable events of the cricket spectacle on television all conspire not just to vernacularize cricket but to introject the master terms and master tropes of cricket into the bodily practices and body-related fantasies of many young Indian males. Print, radio, and television reinforce each other powerfully and create an environment in which cricket is



simultaneously larger than life (because of its stars, spectacles, and association with the glamour of world tests and international intrigue) and close to life, because it has been rendered into lives, manuals, and news that are no longer English-mediated. As Indians from various linguistic regions in India see and hear the cricket narratives of television and radio, they do so not as neophytes struggling to grasp an English form but as culturally literate viewers for whom cricket has been deeply vernacularized. Thus, a complex set of experiential and pedagogical loops is set up through which the reception of cricket becomes a critical instrument of subjectivity and agency in the process of decolonization.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

At the reception end, decolonization involves the acquisition of cultural literacy in cricket by a mass audience, and this side of decolonization involves the sort of appropriation of competence that we are all inclined to applaud. But there is also a production dimension to decolonization, and here we enter into the complex world of entrepreneurship and spectacle, of state sponsorship and vast private profits.

While it is true that poorer and less urbane Indian men were able to enter the cosmopolitan world of cricket through royal or official support in the period before World War II, the relatively wide class base of even the best Indian teams would not have lasted after the war had it not been for the fascinating and quite unusual pattern of patronage of cricket by major business corporations, especially in Bombay but also throughout India. Corporate patronage of cricket is an intriguing factor in the sociology of Indian sport. Its essentials are these: many prestigious companies made the choice to hire outstanding cricket Players early in their careers, to give them considerable freedom to maintain the rigorous practice schedules (“at the nets”) to assure their staying in form, and, most important, to assure them secure employment as regular members of their staffs, after their cricket careers ended. Such employment of cricketers was seen, originally in Bombay in the 1950s, as a beneficial form of social advertising, accruing goodwill to the company by its support of an increasingly popular sport, of some stars, and of the health of the national image in international competition. Corporate employment of cricketers has meant not just the promotion of talent in the big cities, but in the case of the State Bank of India (a huge public sector operation), excellent cricketers were recruited and hired in branches throughout India, so that this patron was single-handedly responsible for the nurturance of cricket far from its urban homes. Thus, corporate patronage of cricket is responsible for providing not only quasi-professional means of security for a sport whose deepest ideals are amateur, but also a steady initiative for drawing in aspiring young men from the poorer classes and from semirural parts of India.



In turn, such corporate support has meant that the state has been able to make a relatively low investment in cricket and yet reap a large profit in terms of national sentiment. While the patronage of cricket since World War II has been largely a commercial undertaking on the part of major corporations (as part of their public-relations and advertising budgets), the state in India has been generous with its extension of media support to the game. This alliance between state-controlled investments – through media and the provision of law and order, private commercial interests in providing career security to players, and a complex public (although not governmental) body called the Board of Control – provided the infrastructure for the transformation of cricket into a major national passion in the four decades since Indian independence in 1947.

The television phase in the history of Indian cricket, of course, is part of the intense, recent commercialization of cricket and the associated commodification of its stars. Like other sports figures in the capitalist world, the best-known Indian cricket stars are now metacommodities, for sale themselves while fueling the circulation of other commodities. The sport is increasingly in the hands of advertisers, promoters, and entrepreneurs, with television, radio, and print media feeding the national passion for the sport and its stars. Such commodification of public spectacles appears at first glance to be simply the Indian expression of a worldwide process and thus to represent not decolonization or indigenization but recolonization by the forces of international capital. But what it mostly represents is the aggressive mood of Indian capitalists in seizing the potential of cricket for commercial purposes.

Transformed into a national passion by the processes of spectacle, in the past two decades cricket has become a matter of mass entertainment and mobility for some and thereby has become wrapped up with winning (Nandy 1989b). Indian crowds have become steadily more greedy for Indian victories in test matches and steadily more vituperative about losses, either at home or abroad. Thus, players, coaches, and managers walk a tighter rope than they ever have before. While they reap the benefits of stardom and commercialization, they have to be increasingly solicitous of critics and the crowd, who do not tolerate even temporary setbacks. This has meant a steady growth in the pressure for technical excellence.

After a serious slump from the midfifties to the late sixties, Indian cricketers won some extraordinary victories in 1971 over the West Indies and England, both on the home grounds of their opponents. Although the 1971 team was hailed by crowds and critics alike, there were suggestions that the victories owed much to luck and the poor form of the opposing teams. Nevertheless, 1971 marked a turning point for Indian cricket under the leadership of Ajit Wadekar. There were some real setbacks after that, and yet Indian cricketers had shown that they could beat their former colonial masters on their home grounds and the formidable Caribbean players on theirs. These 1971 victories marked the psychological inauguration of a new boldness in Indian cricket.



The seventies were a period in which every test team was humbled by the West Indies, who seeming too imposing to touch, with their brilliant batsmen their extraordinary (and scary) fast bowlers, and their speed in the field. Cricket had become the Caribbean sport, with everyone else struggling to stay in the picture. In this context, the sweetest moment for Indian cricket was the victory over a strong West Indies team in the 1983 series. With that win, India established itself as a world force in international cricket, whose real competition was the West Indies and Pakistan rather than England and Australia. South Africa, New Zealand and Sri Lanka remained largely outside the top rank in test cricket. By 1983, England appeared to be a spent force in test cricket (in spite of occasional stars like Ian Botham) and India a major one.

But it is important not only that the black and brown former colonies now dominate world cricket. It is significant that their triumph coincides with a period in which the impact of media, commercialization, and national passion have almost completely eroded the old Victorian civilities associated with cricket. Cricket is now aggressive, spectacular, and frequently unsporting, with audiences thirsting for national victory and players and promoters out for the buck. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the decolonization of cricket would not have occurred if the sport had not been detached from its Victorian moral integument. Nor is this process restricted to the colonies : it has been noticed that Thatcherism in England has done much to erode the ideology of "fair play" that once dominated cricket in its home country (Marshall 1987).

Cricket now belongs to a different moral and aesthetic world, far from the one imagined by Thomas Arnold of Rugby. Nothing marks this change in ethos as much as the arrival of the professionalized, strictly commercial phenomenon of World Series Cricket (WSC), a global, mediacentred cricket package created by an Australian by the name of Kerry Packer. Packer's WSC was the first major threat both to the colonial ecumene of amateur sportsmanship and the post-World War II ethic of cricket nationalism, centered as it was on the major innovation in the sport since the war – one-day cricket – in which a single day's play (as opposed to five or more days) settles the outcome. One-day cricket encourages risk taking, aggressiveness, and bravado while suiting perfectly the intense attention appropriate to high-powered television advertising and a higher turnover of events and settings. Packer's WSC bypassed national loyalty in the name of media entertainment and fast economic benefits for players. West Indian, English, Australian, and Pakistani cricketers were quick to see its appeals. But in India players were slower to respond as the structure of patronage in India gave them much more security than their counterparts enjoyed elsewhere. Still, Packer's bold enterprise was the signal that cricket had moved into yet another, postnationalist phase, in which entertainment value, media coverage and the commercialization of players would transcend the national loyalty of the early postindependence period and the Victorian amateur ethic of the colonial period.



Today, Indian cricket represents a complex configuration of each of these historical transformations. The rule structure of the game and the codes of behavior on the field are still nominally regulated by the classic Victorian values of restraint, sportsmanship and amateurism. At the same, national loyalty is a powerful counterpoint to these ideals, and victory at any cost is the demand of crowds and television audiences. But from the point of view of players and promoters, the Victorian code and nationalist concerns are subordinated to the transnational flow of talent, celebrity, and money.

The new ethos is best captured in the recently created Australasia Cup, hosted by the tiny Gulf emirate of Sharjah, which has considerable population of Indian and Pakistani migrants. This cup brings out both the commercial and nationalist logic of contemporary cricket. In an extremely exciting final sequence in the decisive match in 1986, watched by a television audience of fifteen million, Pakistan needed four runs to win and achieved them in one stroke against the last ball of the match. The live audience for the game included film stars and other celebrities from India and Pakistan, as well as South Asian migrants making their living on Gulf money.

The Sharjah Cup is a long way from the playing field of Eton. The patronage of oil money, the semiproletarian audience of Indian and Pakistani migrant workers in the Persian Gulf, film stars from the subcontinent sitting on a sports field created by Islamic oil wealth, an enormous television audience in the subcontinent, prize money and advertisement revenue in abundance, bloodthirsty cricket – here, finally is the last blow to Victorian upper-class cricket codes, and here is a different global ecumene. After Sharjah, all cricket is Trobriand cricket, not because of the dramatic rule changes associated with that famous form of cricket, but because of the successful hijacking of a ritual from its original English practical hegemony and its Victorian moral integument. From the perspective of Sharjah, it is the Etonians who seem like Trobrianders today.

Part of the decolonization of cricket is the corrosion of the myth of the Commonwealth, the loose fraternity of nations united by their previous status as parts of the British Empire. The Commonwealth has largely become a community of sports (like the Ivy League in the eastern United States). Politically, it represents a faint shadow of the civilities of empire. In trade, politics, and diplomacy it has become a farce: Fijians drive Indian immigrants out of the Fijian polity; Sinhala and Tamils kill each other in Sri Lanka (while Sinhala cricket teams tour India); Pakistan and India teeter continuously on the edge of war; the new nations of Africa fight a variety of internecine battles.



Yet the Commonwealth Games are a serious and successful international enterprise, and global cricket is still on the face of it an affair of the Commonwealth. But the Commonwealth that is constituted by cricket today is not an orderly community of former colonies, held together by common adherence to a Victorian and colonial code. It is an agonistic reality, in which a variety of postcolonial pathologies (and dreams) are played out on the landscape of a common colonial heritage. No more an instrument for socializing black and brown men into the public etiquette of empire, it is now an instrument for mobilizing national sentiment in the service of transnational spectacles and commoditization.

The peculiar tension between nationalism and decolonization is best seen in the cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan, which involves multiple levels of competition and cooperation. Perhaps the best example of cooperation in the spirit of decolonization is the very complex process through which politicians and bureaucrats at the highest levels of the antagonistic nations cooperated in the mid-1980s to shift the venue of the prestigious World Cup from England to the subcontinent in 1987, with the financial backing of the Reliance Group of Industries (one of the biggest, most aggressive business houses in contemporary India) and the encouragement of the leaders of the two countries (Salve 1987). Yet in Sharjah, as well as in every venue in India, Pakistan, or elsewhere since partition, cricket matches between India and Pakistan are thinly disguised national wars. Cricket is not so much a release valve for popular hostility between the two populations as it is a complex arena for reenacting the curious mixture of animosity and fraternity that characterizes the relations between these two previously united nation-states. England in any case is no longer part of the equation, whether in the tense politics of Kashmir or on the cricket grounds of Sharjah.

Recent journalistic coverage of the Australasia Cup matches in Sharjah (Tripathi 1990) suggests that the Gulf states have moved into increasing prominence as venues for international cricket, and that the national rivalry between India and Pakistan has been deliberately both highlighted and contained in order to create a simulacrum of their current tension over Kashmir. While the armies face each other across the borders of Kashmir, the cricket teams provide a star-studded simulacrum of warfare on the cricket field.

CONCLUSION; THE MEANS OF MODERNITY

It remains now to return to the general issues set out in the introduction to this chapter. The example of cricket suggests something of what it takes to decolonize the production of culture in regard to what I earlier characterized as hard cultural forms. In this case, particularly from the Indian vantage point, the key forces that have eroded



the Victorian moral and didactic framework of cricket are the indigenization of patronage, both in the sense of finding indigenous patrons whose styles can accommodate the form and finding audiences who can be drawn into the spectacle; state support through massive media subsidies; and commercial interest, either in the standard contemporary possibilities for commoditization forms or in the slightly more unusual form of company patronage for players. It is only this strong alliance of forces that in the Indian case has permitted the gradual unyoking of cricket from its Victorian value framework and its animation by new forces associated with merchandising and spectacle.

Yet all these factors do not get to the heart of our problem: why is cricket a national passion? Why is it not just indigenized but the very symbol of a sporting practice that seems to embody India? Why is it watched with rapt attention in stadia from Sharjah to Madras and in every other media context as well? Why are the stars of cricket worshipped, perhaps even more than their counterparts in the cinema?

Part of the answer to these questions doubtless lies in the profound links between the ideas of play in human life (Huizinga 1950), of organized sport in mobilizing simultaneously powerful sentiments of both nation and humanity (MacAloon 1984, 1990), and of agonistic sport in recalibrating the relationship between leisure and pleasure in modern industrial societies (Elias and Dunning 1986, Hargreaves 1982). From these perspectives, cricket can be seen as a form of agonistic play that has captured the Indian imagination decisively.

But to account for the central place of cricket in the Indian imagination, one must understand how cricket links gender, nation, fantasy, and bodily excitement. It is true that among the Indian upper classes, especially insofar as they are able to insulate themselves from the masses (either in their homes or in special viewing sections while watching cricket), women have become both players and aficionados of cricket. Yet, for the nation at large, cricket is a male-dominated activity in terms of players, managers, commentators, aficionados, and live audiences. Male spectators, even when they do not dominate audiences at live or televised games, are the preferred viewers of the game because the apical spectacles, test matches or major one-day matches, involve only male players. The Indian female gaze, at least thus far, is twice removed, as they are most often watching males play but also watching males watching other males play. For the male viewer, watching cricket is a deeply engaged activity, at the level of bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1977), as most Indian males under the age of forty have either seen cricket games, have played themselves in some local version of the game, or have read about and seen its practice. Thus, the pleasure of viewing cricket for the Indian male, as with virtually no other sport, is rooted in the bodily pleasure of playing, or imagining playing, cricket.



But because cricket, through the enormous convergence of state, media, and private-sector interests, has come to be identified with “India”, with “Indian” skill, “Indian” guts, “Indian” team spirit, and “Indian” victories, the bodily pleasure that is at the core of the male viewing experience is simultaneously part of the erotics of nationhood. This erotics, particularly for working-class and lumpen male youth throughout India, is connected deeply to violence, riot just because all agonistic sport taps the inclination to aggressiveness but because the divisive demands of class, ethnicity, language, and region in fact make the nation a profoundly contested community. The erotic pleasure of watching cricket for Indian male subjects is the *pleasure of agency* in an imagined community, which in many other arenas is violently contested. (see Mitra 1986 for a slightly different angle on this process.) This pleasure is neither wholly cathartic nor vicarious because playing cricket is close to, or part of, the experience of many Indian males. It is, however, magnified, politicized, and spectacularized without losing its links to the lived experience of bodily competence and agonistic bonding. This set of links between gender, fantasy, nation, and excitement could not occur without a complex group of historical contingencies involving empire, patronage, media, and commerce-contingencies that set the stage for the current embodied excitement about cricket in India.

We can now return to the puzzle with which we began. How did cricket, a hard cultural form tightly yoking value, meaning, and embodied practice, become so profoundly Indianized, or, from another point of view, de-Victorianized? Because in the process of its vernacularization (through books, newspapers, radio, and television) it became an emblem of Indian nationhood at the same time that it became inscribed, as practice, into the Indian (male) body. Decolonization in this case not only involves the creation of imagined communities through the workings of print capitalism as Anderson (1983) has suggested, but it also involves the appropriation of agonistic bodily skills that can then further lend passion and purpose to the community so imagined. This may be the special contribution of spectator sport (as opposed to the many other forms of public culture) to the dynamics of decolonization.

Because gender, body, and the erotics of nationhood can come into powerful conjuncture through other sports (such as soccer and hockey, which are very popular in India even today), one can still ask, why cricket? Here, I must make a speculative leap and suggest that cricket is the ideal locus for national attention and nationalist passion because it affords the experience of experimenting with what might be called the “means of modernity” to a wide variety of groups within Indian society. To those groups who constitute the state, particularly through their control of television, it offers the sense of being able to manipulate nationalist sentiment. To the technocrats, publicists, journalists, and publishers who directly control the media, it provides the sense of skill in handling the techniques of televising sports spectacles, of manipulating private-sector advertising, of controlling public attention, and, in general, of mastering the media themselves. To the private sector, cricket affords a



means for linking leisure, stardom, and nationalism, thus providing a sense of mastery over the skills of merchandising and promotion. To the viewing public, cricket affords the sense of cultural literacy in a world sport (associated with the still-not-erased sense of the technological superiority of the West) and the more diffuse pleasure of association with glamour, cosmopolitanism, and national competitiveness. To the upper-middle-class viewer, it affords the privatized pleasures of bringing stardom and nationalist sentiment within the safe and sanitized environs of the living room. To working-class and lumpen youth, it offers the sense of group belonging, potential violence, and bodily excitement that characterizes football passion in England. To rural viewers, readers, and listeners, cricket (appropriately vernacularized) gives a sense of control over the lives of stars, the fate of nations, and the electricity of cities. In all these cases, while the ends of modernity may be understood (and contested) variously as world peace, national skill, individual fame, and team virility or mobility, the means of modernity contained in cricket involve a confluence of lived interests, where the producers and consumers of cricket can share the excitement of Indianness without its many, divisive scars. Finally, although perhaps least consciously, cricket gives all these groups and actors the sense of having hijacked the game from its English habitus into the colonies, at the level of language, body, and agency as well as competition, finance, and spectacle. If cricket did not exist in India, something like it would certainly have been invented for the conduct of public experiments with the means of modernity.

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