

Introduction

Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, in Calcutta (since renamed as Kolkata) on the way to London for the 1951 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, was taken by surprise seeing people playing cricket in a country ravaged by colonialism.¹ He said,

When I was driven round Calcutta to my joy I found that on every piece of park lawn people were playing cricket. I pointed to this and said to the gentleman who was accompanying me, 'well, there you are. There is nothing wrong with this country from anybody's point of view. Everybody is playing cricket on the park lawns.'²

What was so special about cricket and why was it so important to a large number of people? 'Is cricket a sport or a pastime?' asked an advertisement of the Central Tea Board in India in 1951.³ There is no pithier one-line encapsulation of cricket's public history in India. A sport is defined as a structured, goal-oriented, competitive activity, whereas a pastime is a freewheeling indulgence, presumably devoid of conflict, politics and struggle.⁴ A letter written by the schoolteacher O. H. T. Dudley to *The Times* in 1932 shows that Indians might have started to think of cricket as a way of life, more than a pastime, at the turn of the twentieth century. In the letter, Dudley wrote, 'Twenty-five years ago I went out to India to teach English. I have come back with a rich reward in the following sentence from an Indian schoolboy's essay on cricket: "Cricket is a very comfortable game: in it we disremember all our condition."⁵ In his analysis of the characteristics of Indian cricket in a 1946 book, journalist Berry Sarbadhikary wrote that cricket in India was 'more of a pastime than a grim science', referring to the ad hoc nature of the game's organisation at recreational level and the hybrid

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cultural attitudes resulting from the integration of Indian and British cultural traditions.⁶ When a letter-writer introduced the India–England Test match in Calcutta in 1972–73 as the battle between the bat and the ball that had solved all of Bengal’s socio-political problems, he did not come across as sarcastic but rather entranced by the impact an event spread over five days could have over the long-term woes of a state of 45 million people.⁷ For historian Sarvepalli Gopal, cricket was ‘one of the few lasting and refreshing legacies of the *raj*’.⁸ The journalist and author Khushwant Singh wrote in 1973 that the Indian’s obsession with cricket needed to be psycho-analysed, adding that the cricket pitch had become the paradise of millions of Indians.⁹ The journalist Soumya Bhattacharya recalled that cricket was a ‘surefire conversational opener’ during his student years in England in the 1990s. ‘If you’re Indian, you must be crazy about cricket’, so went the assumption.¹⁰ Reflecting on the attachment of Indians to cricket, Jonathan Rice, author and editor of several cricket books, unreservedly assumed in 2011 that cricket sat next to god and family for Indians.¹¹ Cricket, it seems from these accounts, is important for Indians. This book tells the story of this banal humanity that historians tend to forget.

Regardless of whether cricket has delivered radical social change or produced a sense of ethnic or cultural affiliation, the identities built around it have generated intense public conversations. It would be sheer naiveté to think of cricket in India as either a pastime or a sport, on account of the multiple meanings the sport has embodied since its introduction in 1721 by British seamen.¹² Over the next three centuries or so, cricket has built up a nationwide spread and mobilised a large and diverse popular following. Its networks have crisscrossed the dynamics and domains of colonialism, nationalism, economy, culture and various forms of identity. As an imperial game, a vehicle of colonial modernity and cultural hybridity, and a tool of nationalist resistance, cricket has simultaneously been a Western fetish and an indigenous cultural form in modern India. Why do postcolonial Indians identify with the colonial game the way they do? Is the engagement with English culture a mechanism for empowering and modernising themselves? What does cricket tell us about the making of a public culture? This book uncovers the various modes through which the public have been moulded as cricket followers and examines the emergence of a postcolonial society through the lens of cricket.

The public’s diverse appreciation for elements such as skill, spectacle and tradition pluralised the culture of spectatorship. Hence, a study of cricket

spectators need not defer to the somewhat limited historicist convention that the consumer necessarily represents a distinct social class and culture just as it generates inequality. Sport, and cricket in particular, resists division of class and culture. It blends human actions in all its cultural practices and aestheticism, leading to interpenetration of the class categories of subjects. The consumption patterns of the masses give sports new but no inferior meanings than those made by the highbrow cognoscenti. Why is cricket an appropriate device for understanding the life world of a postcolonial society? The game's palimpsest is layered with social, political and economic connotations that have produced a public culture in dialogue with historical contexts. The cycle of its production, circulation and consumption has defined much of the society's quotidian practices and beliefs. Various promotional activities have taken place as part of the widening sphere of cricket's commercialisation since the onset of international cricket in India in the 1930s. Two overseas Test series victories in 1971, an uninterrupted supply of excellent players throughout the 1970s, the World Cup victory in 1983 and the hosting of the tournament in 1987 gradually elevated India's status in world cricket. The proliferation of satellite television, internet and consumer culture in India added fresh dimensions to cricket's publicness, popularity and appropriation. More than cricket's success as a sport, this book argues, the beliefs and attitudes it has generated through media and other social practices have had an immense bearing on the making of a postcolonial society.

HISTORY, POSTCOLONIALISM AND CRICKET

The task of reinterpreting colonial history with greater agency to the indigene has taken historians of colonial India to unusual sites and practices – disease, insects, paperwork, punch houses, cricket, and so on. Paying attention to the vulnerabilities and collaborative nature of the British Empire, these works articulate a bottom-up version of how indigenous groups participated in colonial governance and in the nebulous process of *colonial modernity*.¹³ A study of the interaction between British and Indian people, objects and practices enables one to understand colonisation and modernisation at both symbolic and institutional levels. This perspective has informed the studies of the emergence of Indian nationhood through colonial sport. The historians of colonial Indian cricket, Richard Cashman, Ashis Nandy, Ramachandra Guha, Boria Majumdar and Prashant Kidambi, in chronological order of

the publication of their monographs, have all shown how little the British invested, materially and intellectually, in spreading cricket in India.¹⁴ Their works do not explicitly engage with the colonial modernity framework, but they have used its tools to move beyond Eurocentric histories of sport and refuted the importance that British sports historians usually gave to cultural imperialism in the diffusion of sport. They have argued that since the mid-nineteenth century, Indians across class, caste, religious and gender divides have collectively, and sometimes in collaboration, shaped their identities around cricket. In the colonial period, participation through a number of ways – mimicry of the Victorian approach to team sports, resisting the British Empire through cricket, constructing identities and successful commercialisation – generated an indigenous cricket culture in which the British were more often than not uninvolved. In a way, their works echo historian C. A. Bayly's research in indigenous commercial and intellectual groups who appropriated certain colonial institutions for their own benefit.¹⁵ Studies of cricket or sport in independent India, though relatively scarce, have addressed issues of identity, politics, communalism, caste, celebrity culture and the impact of media on leisure.

This book pursues two questions that this literature leaves unresolved. First, while these historians have convincingly refuted the primacy of cultural imperialism and established the process of a two-way transfer of culture, studies of how the vestiges of the colonial period shaped cricket in independent India are few. Second, they have not systematically considered cricket as a source of identity and popular culture in everyday postcolonial life. Through addressing these two questions, the book expands our '*historical understanding*' of postcolonial India.¹⁶ The game's postcolonial history, where I employ the term 'postcolonial' to denote both the temporal and ideological transition from the British Raj to an independent polity, raises a number of new questions in regard to the whys and hows of cricket's popularity.¹⁷ In this book, postcolonialism is a process of reconstructing a region's political, social and cultural spaces, with emergent ideas and identities transforming, subsuming or replacing colonial institutions.

The book makes two key contributions: one, it decentres the nation as the fulcrum around which much of South Asian history and history of sport has been written; second, it interrogates popular attitudes and helps rethink the construction of postcolonial history outside conventional archives. It starts with the simple premise that cricket was important to at least some Indians and seeks to understand what this attachment meant for Indian society,

mindful of cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah's assertion about the pitfalls of assigning undue importance to historical actors and processes. As Appiah said, the bicycle was invented and taken across the globe by the white person, but the bicycle's popularity in Africa was not a by-product of colonial modernity and the civilising process. The machine won over Africans because of its usefulness rather than foreignness and modernising capacity.¹⁸ In the same way, I contend that cricket thrived in India mainly because a large number of Indians liked it, and the impact of outside influences (such as gender divide, economic stagnation, overpopulation, and so on) on cricket provides a useful context for analysing Indian society.

CRICKET AS HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Sport has been a blind spot for historians of postcolonial India. Historian Anne Firor Scott once argued that historians write about what they are willing to know and neglect what they personally consider unimportant, even if the subject in question is widely significant and richly documented.¹⁹ Except in Swati Chattopadhyay's discussion of street cricket in Calcutta as an index of a public space's performative possibilities, sport finds little mention in monographs and anthologies that chart the making of a modern Indian city in the twentieth century.²⁰ The method of historians of Indian sport has been the structuralist use of sport as a component of the nation to fully or partially account for the nation's development. They tend to impose a national framework on regional characters often enough. Assigning a totalising explanatory potential to one sport can be problematic. While this book does not attempt any aggregated or comparative analysis, it recognises that a single sport can neither answer every question nor claim academic sanctimony on the exclusive strength of its visibility.

The Indian nation's long shadow across the playing field is manifest in the subtitles of two monographs on the history of cricket in India: 'An Indian History of a British Game' and 'A Social History of Indian Cricket'.²¹ Although the authors, Ramachandra Guha and Boria Majumdar, respectively, demonstrate that there was scarcely anything 'Indian' about Indian cricket, they write histories of the nation through the lens of cricket. Prashant Kidambi too asks, 'How the idea of India took shape on the cricket pitch?'²² Historian Paul Dimeo criticises the tendency of historians such as Guha to consider cricket as a mimetic text, saying this has resulted

from a subconscious mythologisation of the sport as the pulse of the nation.²³ Satadru Sen questions the treatment of cricket in the prevalent historiography, contending that nationalism has been so deeply grafted onto Indian cricket that matches which did not convey overtly political messages of nationhood left no impression on popular memory, and, by extension, academic studies. This is why ‘memorable’ performances in regional tournaments are hardly remembered unlike even brief episodes from international matches.²⁴ The emphasis on the national model is a routine, one which Ranajit Guha terms the ‘statist predicament of South Asian historiography’ and exhorts historians to avoid.²⁵ Guha is uneasy about the uncritical acceptance and application of the state-centric models and methods of European history by many historians of India. This book moves away from the nation-state pattern, dwelling instead on a single site in which the local, the national and the global intermittently intermingled on the occasion of cricket matches. Even if Calcutta speaks for India, it uses its own vocabulary and not that of the nation.

India’s independence in 1947, a watershed event in many histories, is not too important for this book, which straddles the late colonial and the postcolonial, repudiating the idea of a division based on the official end of imperial rule. The postcolonial in this book is a category of analysing tradition–modernity debates and the creation of difference. It conceptualises cricket as an allegory of colonialism and postcolonialism. It frames the identity of the postcolonial subject within a contentious exercise of mediation and collective inclination as exemplified by the public sphere around cricket in Calcutta. The identity cumulatively embodied by the actors in this book is simultaneously very local and global, across the worlds of ideology, occupation and ethnicity. Politics, both bureaucratic and cultural, plays a paramount role here in stringing together the beads of mediated public action.

It is noteworthy that historians of sport in India have not tailored ‘pre-owned’ sociological or anthropological concepts into history to give their texts the aura of interdisciplinary research, preferring instead the positivist historical method of rigorous assessment of sources.²⁶ Cashman, Guha and Majumdar established the history of Indian cricket as an inalienable aspect of political and social history, using the structuralist method of understanding a part of society in terms of its pertinence to a larger structure.²⁷ They have admirably engaged with a variety of sources, recovered little-known memories and debunked myths from a reconstructivist perspective. However, their writings often gloss over the textual nature of an event and the immense

subjectivity of the administrative and press reports that are used as empirical evidence. This book appraises the nature of sources in addition to treating them as founts of knowledge. It does not deconstruct sources into narrative categories and analyse each of the constituent elements. However, it questions the privileging of one source over another as the authenticity of no text is beyond doubt.

A part of the book deals with a period in which I grew up to be a cricket follower, indulging in the rituals of spectatorship and readership that I explore here. A meaningful personal or anecdotal history incorporating one's personal experience into a larger context – from the neighbourhood to the nation or the globe – can possess great explanatory power.²⁸ The historian's position in the narrative can be both intimate and apathetic. One of the many problems of alloying oneself into a text is the trespassing of rhetoric and judgements. The presence of multiple and undifferentiated perspectives in a text demands very careful reading for one to decipher the meaning. It also brings into question the author's historical ethics, connections and function as a member of society.²⁹ I have not used autoethnography as a historical method in this book to avoid inconsistency with the rest of the chronology of which I have no lived experience. The historians of cricket in India who have incorporated personal experience into their writings have quite uncritically mingled presentism into interpretation of the past. Chronic appearances of the first person, such as Guha's conversation with Palwankar Baloo's descendants, effort to meet Alan Knott and the experience of watching the India–Pakistan match during the 1999 World Cup offer valuable perspectives about the context.³⁰ But as stray subjective impulses, these enrich only selected segments of history, sometimes without justification. It is unthinkable for a sport historian to have never watched the sport one writes about. Lived experience generates empathy and inclinations of plotting the narrative. Autoethnographical methods ought to be uniformly and rigorously applied to history-writing alongside other relevant sources; otherwise, the author is reduced to footnotes in one's own writing.

This book departs also from the focus on social formation and economic explanation as in the previous studies. Guha's analysis of the anti-Pentangular movement highlights contours of Hindu–Muslim relations and contemporary nationalist criticism of the tournament as a threat to communal harmony.³¹ Majumdar has argued that the tournament's commercial viability so frustrated the organisers of the rival tournament, in this case, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the Ranji Trophy, that they implicitly

supported the campaign to eliminate this threat.³² It has been argued that members of the national team do not represent the social demographics and that a conspiracy to exclude the scheduled castes from any level of cricket is afoot.³³ The release of *Lagaan* in 2000 stirred a debate about the film being a synecdoche of the present in its exhibition of the conditions of subalternity.³⁴ Additionally, scholars have reflected on the convergence of nationalist and communalist impulses in the theatre of cricket in postcolonial India.³⁵ This book refers to these social, political and economic aspects of cricket in connection with how these have been narrated in the media and analyses social relationships.

Finally, this book foregrounds the mediated discourses about cricket's position within the state, corporate and private patronage networks. It does not focus as much on infrastructure and operation. Historians have written about the introduction of the 'games ethic' through schools and colleges³⁶ and cross-cultural interactions such as the migration of foreign cricket professionals to the physically defined space of the nation.³⁷ While writing about the diffusion and resistance models, historians have barely considered the more complex processes of perception and translation of cultural codes. The accounts of the production of an indigenous brand of cricket among the upper-middle classes of colonial Bombay (now known as Mumbai) and Calcutta have elided the bridges of transfer, the conflicts in the ideational space mediated by agents of transfer, and the hypertexts of the transferred culture across social strata. Hence, they tend to advocate the logic of nearly identical group identities and mechanisms of appropriation across the nation. This book offers a corrective to this methodological problem by analysing the dilemma of cricket's appropriation in the light of the ambiguities of cultural transfer.

Scholars and dilettantes have mapped the transition from colonial patronage to post-independence sponsorship, stressing the advent of non-governmental enterprises, expansion of the media and creation of financial clusters around cricket. Cashman has written about the rise and fall of princely patronage and the subsequent seamless shift of cricket into a corporate structure that reflected the independent country's experiments with capitalist endeavours.³⁸ Among the works dealing exclusively with the post-independence years, Nalin Mehta and Boria Majumdar's articles explore the critical role of new media technologies such as satellite television in the proliferation of cricket's popularity.³⁹ The articles by Abilash Nalapat and Andrew Parker, Prashant Kidambi and Shamyas Dasgupta have predicated

the celebrity of Sachin Tendulkar on socio-economic transformations in contemporary India.⁴⁰ A number of studies have addressed the recent market economy and globalisation of Indian cricket.⁴¹ The global business and cosmopolitan assemblage of sport cultures as ushered by the Indian Premier League has received probably the maximum attention from scholars.⁴² Nearly all of these articles are fixated on administrative structures and thus overlook cricket's public dimension. This book shifts the spotlight away from the isolated domains of economy, spectacle and mass entertainment, turning it on to the ensemble arena of the sport's public culture.

POSTCOLONIAL CALCUTTA

The book studies the history of the cricket-loving people of Calcutta in the twentieth century, exploring cricket's place in the popular imagination from the beginning of international cricket in the city until a riot in 1999 spurred a reassessment of what cricket has meant to people. The game's entanglement with the city's everyday life, the sites of play and the audience metaphorically merged when Bengali poet Amitabho Dasgupta described the civic unrest in the 1960s–70s as:

Calcutta is bowling fast. Play forward.
Look carefully at the fielder at mid-on.
Defend two balls, then jump out of the crease
To hit a six over the bowler's head.⁴³

The figurative translation here of the adversity of urban life as the aggression of a fast bowler that is to be countered with confident batting – a bold and straightforward mode of living – invested cricket with great symbolic capaciousness. The city did not live and breathe cricket round the year since international matches were hosted for a limited period. Football had a comparably mighty presence in Calcutta. Popular enthusiasm around local football far outscores the negligible attendance in domestic cricket matches. Yet this book explores the dynamics of cricket, arguing that popularity has many layers and football does not quite measure up to cricket's social significance on several levels.

Calcutta carved out a niche as the 'emotional headquarters' of this national obsession.⁴⁴ The city has represented cricket in Bengal, 'governing

the game and making history' since long before the beginning of Test cricket at the Eden Gardens in 1934.⁴⁵ The combination of a ground considered by many as one of the most beautiful in the world, a crowd that considers silence heretical, and authors bent on establishing cricket as a metonymy for life has produced a unique sporting culture in the city. The polysemic nature of culture creates methodological problems, with value judgements enhancing the perplexity of what can be called culture. A veteran of three first-class matches for Bengal between 1964 and 1969 emphatically denied the existence of any 'culture' among local spectators in a personal interview with me.⁴⁶ On the contrary, Mike Denness, captain of England in 19 Test matches in the 1970s, considered the Test match 'atmosphere' created by spectators and the character of the stadium in Calcutta to have been rivalled only by Melbourne.⁴⁷ A correspondent of the Bengali sports periodical *Khelar Asar* wrote in 1979 that the spectacle appealed more to the spectators than the game itself. That is the reason why, he claimed, youth Test matches never generated the same degree of popular interest as would the ones involving the senior national team. He further argued that the decline in the number of knowledgeable spectators and the standard of play, both very subjective categories of assumption, in the 1970s discouraged many discerning cricket followers from going to the stadium.⁴⁸ These epistemic binaries about the routine of sport and spectatorship show how trivial empiricism can sometimes appear to cultural perceptions. Sport is one of the forms of culture whose public life is a 'dynamic field of competing voices forever commenting on each other'.⁴⁹ Sports media is the principal site of the coaction of these contending voices.

The history of football in Bengal began as a fin-de-siècle flag of unitary social identity, progressed as a short-lived emblem of nationalism, and culminated in social difference expressed through communal, ethnic and regional overtones.⁵⁰ The people of Calcutta spent the summer watching domestic football and the winter watching club and international cricket. A major reason for the lukewarm interest in domestic cricket was the lack of local cricket heroes. Only seven Bengali cricketers made it to the national team, playing between themselves 11 Test and 10 One Day International (ODI) matches, in the period between 1960, when Pankaj Roy retired, and 1992, when the talismanic Sourav Ganguly made his debut. Three others who played for India from the state were not ethnic Bengalis – Dilip Doshi, Ashok Malhotra and Arun Lal. The public would be more likely to watch local football teams, comprising players who won the national-level championship