

CRICKET, COLONIALISM, CULTURE, AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Habibul Haque Khondker

Department of Sociology

National University of Singapore

Singapore 119260

E-mail: Habib@nus.edu.sg

I have often been asked: “Is there any cricket in Singapore?” “Nothing to write home about,” has been my stock answer. “But why?” Obviously, it is a valid question. Singapore like the Indian subcontinent, consisting of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, was a British colony. The colonial rulers bequeathed many of the cultural legacies that we have in these two regions (including the language this article is written in). Cricket is one of them. What explains the feverish popularity of cricket in the subcontinent and a rather occasional curiosity by the onlookers, if not the players, in Singapore? A sport is not a sport, if the crowd is indifferent or worse, absent. In an essay, the famous British cricket writer Neville Cardus argued that crowds matter in cricket. Cardus also thought of cricket as an art form and the turning of this gentlemanly game to ferocity was lamented by Caribbean writer C.L.R. James (1993). Cricket, like baseball in the United States, has spun a literature around it. Crowd and literature are the two most important ingredients that sports history is made of.

Sports also reveal important social and historical processes. In the commonwealth countries - the former British colonies - by and large cricket is a legacy of the British imperialism. It is at once a memento of and a tribute to the colonial rule. One might ask somewhat innocently: if cricket is a colonial imposition why does it remain so popular when the nationalists in the post-colonial societies virulently criticize most other colonial legacies? This reveals a simple truth. Our so-called “national cultures”, notwithstanding the claims of the fervent nationalists, are not so national any more, as if it ever was. In fact, the very idea of nationalism, right of self-determination and the mechanism of self-assertion were learned by the nationalist leaders many of whom were schooled in England or in other colonial metropolises. Nationalism itself was a global movement *par excellence*.

The popularity of cricket, a colonial game in India or in West Indies or South Africa does not point to any contradiction, rather it signals certain important trends in globalization. First, it shows that colonialism was more than a system of economic exploitation and political domination; it was also an occasion for opening a cultural and sometimes civilizational dialogue which in turn paved the way for cosmopolitan possibilities. According to Arjun Appadurai, “For the former colony, decolonization is a dialogue with the colonial past, and not a simple dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life” (Appadurai, 1996:89). Consciously or not, we have become part of a global culture. At one level global culture reflects many of the contradictions and tensions, the fissures that characterize the world today but it also signals the possibility of the development of a truly world-embracing cosmopolitan culture. A young man from Kolkata will be just as comfortable discussing cricket with his Australian or South African counterpart as he would be in discussing Tagore or Shamsur Rahman¹'s poetry with a fellow Bengali from Bangladesh. Culture unifies by providing a common subject to talk about. Our being global does not cancel our being national. Nor does globalization of culture produce a monotonous homogeneity. This truth is revealed in the evidence that cricket is not uniformly popular in all the former British colonies. Cricket, a craze in Calcutta, is a mere curiosity in Singapore. What prevents globalization from creating a bland homogenized culture? The answer lies in two important facts: the specificity of history and the relative autonomy of human agency.

In England where modern cricket was born, it was seen as more than a game. “It was invested with a special moral worth. Cricket discourses stressed that it was permeated by a spirit of sportsmanship and fair play which expressed English character and extended to other areas of life” (Williams, 1999:1). “Cricket was much more than just another game to the Victorians. They glorified it as a perfect system of ethics and morals which embodied all that was most noble in the Anglo-Saxon character” (Sandiford, 1994:1). Cricket for the Victorians was “an expression of a distinctively English form of Christian morality and of the English character” (Williams, 1999:4). Traditionally, Cricket players wear all white to symbolize purity and puritan values. The late-Victorians equated civilization with the other three Cs – Cricket, Classics and Christianity (Sandiford, 1994:145). Cricket for the British was a tool for civilizing the colonial subjects by spreading the values of Victorian morality

¹ A famous contemporary poet in Bengali language and a leading light in the literary circle in Bangladesh.

and character building. Hodgson commented, "Cricket stands for law and order... The umpire gives you out: out you must go. The man in the white coat is a symbol of constitutional government" (quoted in Williams, 1999:12). Cricket also symbolized in addition to a commitment to authority and control of emotions. "Cricket was seen as an ideal way to socialize natives [who were perceived as lazy, enervated, and effete] into new modes of intergroup conduct and new standards of public behavior" (Appadurai, 1996:93).

The sordid history of colonialism which entailed forced migration, back-breaking work at plantation economy, economic exploitation, political subjugation and cultural domination also led to important cross-cultural transactions. Nationalism -- in both political and cultural terms -- a touchstone to understand and evaluate the condition of the colonial situation, itself was a product of that inter-cultural encounter. In the aftermath of colonialism, the nationalist leaders despite their rhetoric retained a large part of the colonial heritage. Very few argued that the institutions of democracy or the game of cricket should be banished because they were exogenous and super-imposed on the native. A civilizing process that was not just a hallmark of any particular culture and attained certain degree of universality became the property of a global culture.

The colonial incorporation of India into the western capitalist economic system was a long historical process. The British, in some parts of India created *zamindars*, a land-holding, revenue collecting class; in others it strengthened the existing landed gentry and the traditional rulers. All in all, a leisurely class was created as a by-product of colonial requirements that patronized cricket. The leisurely class of the past, the retinues of the royalty had their traditional pastimes of chess, dancing girls, music and other cultural activities. The leisurely class grew a new interest: cricket. As in some cases, where the British rulers sought to imitate the local kings and princes, the local elite in turn were equally desperate to imitate their English masters in others. Cricket along with Polo and hockey are examples of these imitative life-styles of the native elite. But over the years, cricket has not remained an exclusive preserve of the elite. Cricket is now the quintessential feature of Indian mass culture as it is in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. When children in a back alley in Dhaka or Calcutta play cricket with their improvised gears and authentic spirit, do they know it is part of a colonial, even hegemonic culture, or that it was a preserve of the elite?

C.L.R. James attributed the maturity of cricket in the West Indies to two factors: the rise in the financial position of the coloured middle class and the high fees paid to the players by the English leagues (James, 1993:10). Cricket is more than a game. It inculcated such values as restraint and loyalty. Cricket, in other words, introduced civilizing process. In the words of James, “I haven’t the slightest doubt that the clash of race, caste and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket,...The class and racial rivalries were too intense. They could be fought out without violence or much lost except pride and honour” (James, 1993:66). In India, the British Army officers, businessmen from England and senior civil servants helped implant cricket as a sports (Appaduarai, 1996:94) Needless to say, with cricket the associate Victorian values were also transplanted in the Indian settings. From the Indian side, the princes were readily available to adopt this cultural practice. Cricket along with golf, polo, rifle shooting gave the princes an opportunity to express their loyalty to their British masters whose protection they needed but it also gave them an opportunity to display their prowess and elite qualities to the masses thus renewing their loyalty. As part of their *noblesse oblige*, the princes not only played the game they began to patronize the sports of the elite to the non-elite.

The Parsi community was the first to take up cricket in India in the middle part of the 19th century. The Parsis, according to Appadurai, “were the bridge community between Indian and English cultural tastes” (Appadurai, 1996:92). With time, other communities began to adopt cricket making it the very symbol of Indian modernity. Cricket in some sense played a role in both creating a sense of community and in time a larger sense of solidarity across classes. Cricket in India today is coterminous with nationalism.

In the celebration of cricket in the commonwealth countries in general and the Indian subcontinent in particular, we become acutely aware of the meanings of culture, colonialism and cosmopolitanism. We can discern, at least, four features of culture. However, before elaborating the four points let us define culture with Raymond Williams who defined culture as “a whole body of practices and expectations, the whole of living;...our shaping perceptions of ourselves and of our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values.” (quoted in Williams, 1999:xiii). The four salient points about culture are: “a) ***Culture is relatively autonomous***, it has its own province, it spins its own myth, its own nostalgia; culture cannot be directly pegged to the economy, culture is a matter of the

heart. b) *Culture is fluid*; it does not remain an exclusive preserve of a class or group forever.. Elite culture can become popular, mass culture over time; and c) *Culture transcends geographical boundaries*. d.) *Cultural features die out as they can be created, revived or transplanted*.

Various aspects of the culture of one people, say, for example, the British, can become the part and parcel of Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan culture. The natives after a while forget that it is a game of their masters from another place. They incorporate it as part of their own cultural landscape. This ability to make somebody else's product - either industrial or cultural - as ours is what makes us human. We use hammers without worrying too much about who invented it. This deep-seated capacity for universalism makes the dawning of a globalized culture a reality. But does not that also mean that we are being colonized by the cultures of the West? As far as sports are concerned, cultural protectionism and cultural relativism would mean that we would play our games using our own rules, rendering matches between the cultures impossibility. I suggest, we play the same game by the same set of rules and if the West wants to exert its undue dominance, beat them in their own game by their rules. This would be more convincing. This is what the Sri Lankans did in the world cup cricket in Lahore.

Now I turn to the second question. Why is cricket more popular in South Asia than in Southeast Asia? Does the answer lie in the climate? Is it the scorching heat that keeps the Singaporeans cool about cricket? I think not. The Indian summer can be just as nasty and yet there is summer cricket in the subcontinent. I would vouch for it that a balmy summer would have made some difference in the popularity of cricket in Singapore. However, geography alone is not enough as an explanation, history too is important. The historically formed social structure explains the difference in popularity of cricket as a sport in these two regions. Sports are not just games; they reflect important social and economic processes, which in turn are shaped by historical forces and experiences.

Just by focusing on the present, it is easy to say that the full employment or high achieving economic system such as Singapore is not the most fertile ground for cricket. The high unemployment and the sluggish economic situation in the subcontinent provide the perfect home for cricket. A full-scale contest, known as the *test-match*, runs for 5 days. And even after that the match may end in a draw due to the lack of time! Such a narrow

economistic explanation, however, leaves out matters such as attitude, ways of life, and yes, culture. Culture is not always directly attributable to economic conditions. I do not see the jubilant -- sometimes too exuberant -- cricket-loving crowd at the Eden Gardens in Calcutta, or in Bangabandhu Cricket Stadium in Dhaka as armies of unemployed people. They are fun loving cricket enthusiasts. You need a unique mind-set to appreciate cricket. You have to be somewhat philosophical and easy-going to fall in love with this sport. Cricket is more than a game; it is a life-style. What would Calcutta be without its coffeehouses and cricket? I think of rum, reggae, beaches, a laid-back life style and cricket as the patch-works on a tapestry that is West Indies. The narrow economism does injustice to history.

In the words of Ashis Nandy, “Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English. Like chilly, which was discovered in South America and came to India only in medieval times to become an inescapable part of Indian cuisine, cricket, too, is now foreign to India only according to the historians and Indologists. To most Indians the game now looks more Indian than English” (Nandy, 1989).

The colonial aggrandizement of South Asia was a gradual process, a systemic plunder aided by an elaborate transformation of society and culture. The East India Company bled Bengal to death. It was directly responsible for the great 18th century famine in Bengal. But it also set up the first archive in Calcutta as far back as in the eighteenth century, not to mention that schools and colleges to impart modern education. Calcutta University was established in 1858.

The British engagement in Southeast Asia was lucrative but not socially so deep. The plantation economy in Malaya and the transshipment of goods from Singapore did not necessitate any thing more than a small bureaucratic set-up, a legal order and police. The job was to ensure labor control with enduring consequences. The hegemony of culture was not necessary; the brute coercion - aided by a dose of opium - was quite adequate. The fast pace of life in colonial Singapore and the nature of its economy gave rise to a thin crust of elite, numerically not enough to sustain cricket. Cricket thrives on leisure; Singapore thrived on activity. Singapore Cricket Club was established in 1852, a hangout of the colonial elite composed of military and civilian officers and merchants. The first cricket match was played between a team of the English merchants and that of the colonial military in 1853 at the *Padang*, the lovely field in front of the Cricket Club.

According to Zane Whitehorn: “The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed an explosion in the popularity of cricket in Singapore, thanks in part to the success of tours like that of Lord Harris' M.C.C. side in 1883. By the late 1880's cricket had clearly become the most popular sport in Singapore as the Singapore Chinese and Eurasians flocked to take up the willow against the Europeans. There were regular tours undertaken by the SCC [Singapore Cricket Club] to China, Hong Kong, Batavia, Ceylon, Burma and Siam. It is reported that the SCC usually won these matches, although they did suffer a shock loss to the Burmese in 1906. In 1905, the first official game between Singapore and Malaya took place and the matches between the traditional rivals of Southeast Asia have continued to raise passions between the two ever since (Whitehorn, 1998).

Cricket, remained a game of the colonial rulers. And the sports declined after the First World War. In Singapore cricket did not become part of mass culture. It was only in the 1980s cricket gradually began to stage a comeback.

It was at *Padang* that the world champion Sri Lanka along with the former champion Pakistan and India participated in the Singer Cup Cricket in Singapore in the first week of April, 1996. Star TV, a Hong Kong-based Asian network, beamed the three-way contest to the viewers in South Asia. This was the site where Sanath Jayasuriya, the fire-spewing batsman of Sri Lanka made a world record in 1996 by hammering the fastest century in one-day cricket. The crowd that came to watch the game was composed of Singaporean Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis with a sprinkle of Australians and the British. Many in the crowd flew in from Colombo, Dhaka, Karachi and Delhi to watch this event. Despite the lukewarm support from the local public, the Prime Minister of Singapore came to shake hands with the members of the Pakistan and the Indian teams. Was that an indication of official blessing of cricket in Singapore? If it was, then I would venture to predict that cricket is going to take-off in Singapore. The revival of cricket in Singapore may be related to the transformation of Singapore as an IT hub, and an information economy. To build the infrastructure of a new Information Economy, Singapore began to attract a large number of IT professionals many of whom were Indians. Cricket followed Indian IT professionals, especially the Indian students who dominate the cricket scene in Singapore. In mid 1980s cricket was kept alive by a handful of cricket clubs such as Singapore Cricket Club, Singapore Recreation Club, the Indian Association and Ceylon Cricket Club. There were only two layers of cricket league: A and B. Today Singapore boasts 40 cricket clubs who take part in 4 tiers of cricket league.

The **fourth point** about culture can be made by drawing examples from cricket in the United States. *Cultural features die out as they can be created, revived or transplanted.* The English masters brought cricket to the United States but it failed to survive as a major sport. Cricket in America lingered on even after the Americans threw off the shackles of colonialism in 1776 to emerge as the first new nation.

The first cricket clubs in the USA were established in the 1700s, not long after they made their first appearance in England. Originally played by officers of the British Army with local landed gentry predisposed to be Anglophiles, cricket became a major recreation of American gentlemen of leisure....and indeed, several Founding Fathers of the United States were known to be avid cricketers---John Adams among them. (Crickinfo).

The first annual Canada vs. USA cricket match, played since the 1840s, was attended by 10,000 spectators at Bloomingdale Park in New York. The USA vs.Canada cricket match is the *oldest international sporting event* in the modern world, predating even today's Olympic Games by nearly 50 years. Touring teams from the West Indies, England and Australia were playing in the USA and Canada until the 1920s (Crickinfo).

English cricket team periodically visited North America in late 19th century. The International matches took place in 1859, 1868 and 1872. In the match of 1859, Canadians scored 85 and 63; England scored 117 and 37 for 2. In other words, they defeated the Canadians squarely. On October 3, 1859 the England team took on the St.George's Twenty-Two at Hoboken, New Jersey and humbled them miserably.¹ The fate of the United States Twenty-Two was no better. They scored 94 and 60 against England's 126 and 29 for 3. The results of the 1868 contests were also not different. On September 13, 1868 English professional cricketers arrived in Baltimore, America. From September 16 – 18, they played with St. George Club of New York at Hudson City. Against England's first innings score of 175, they scored 61 and 88 in their first and second innings. England dealt a crushing defeat to the Canadians on September 24, 1868. Against England's total of 311, Canadians scored a paltry 28. In the contest of 1872, the English side was headed by cricket-legend W.G. Grace. England scored 82 and 235; in reply, Canada scored 48 and 67 (Chadwick, 1873:69).

¹St. George's Twenty-Two scored 38 and 54 against All England's 156.

Many of the American cities had cricket clubs in the late 19th century. St. George Club of Utica, New York was one of them. Other such clubs were Young American Club, San Francisco, California; Amateur Club of Titusville, Pennsylvania; The Detroit Club, and Stafford Club, Connecticut. The visitation of the England cricket team and the humbling defeat of the American sides were, perhaps, a faint attempt to remind the Americans of the vestiges of the English prowess. But what really killed cricket in America is not the superior team of England but America's own industrialization. One historian put it thus: "The adage that "time is money" governs the American people in every phase of their national life,... In England where there is a large class of unemployed people, who with wealth at command, find time hang heavy on their hands the style of playing the game of cricket so as to absorb as much of their surplus of leisure as possible, commands itself as quite an attractive feature" (Chadwick, 1873:3).

The decline of cricket in USA is not surprising. According to Marquese, "Everything that English people take to be "American" – brashness, impatience, informality, innovation, vulgarity, rapacious and unashamed commercialism – is antithetical to what they take to be "cricket". For the English, it is a point of pride that Americans cannot understand cricket" (Marqusee quoted in Lazarus, 1999:145). In time, baseball became the major sports in the US and with the growing American hegemony, baseball and basketball spread in the countries within the American sphere of influence as did cricket at an earlier time. The growing popularity of baseball in Japan is an example of a transplanted sporting culture. Cricket is no longer confined to the former colonies of the British Empire. The Netherlands participated in the recently concluded world cup. In recent years cricket is being popularized in the United Arab Emirates. In the International Cricket tournament held in Malaysia in April 1997, among nearly two dozen participants were such unlikely countries as Argentina and Israel. Singapore also took part in that competition. With proper patronage, cricket can be made popular in Singapore. Cricket in Singapore need not be a five-day affair, now that there are the options of one-day and limited-over cricket matches; both of which seem more appropriate for the fast pace of today's life in an industrial metropolis. The **last point** of culture now can be made. *Cultural features are not inert*. And the changes that must take place remain to a large extent unforeseeable. In the glorious days of Bradman or Barrington or Harvey¹ could any one predict that someday

¹ Bradman and Harvey were famous Australian batsmen; Barrington was a famous English batsman.

cricket will be played under the glare of floodlights with white balls while the players would mimic the playfulness of the basket-ball players or American footballers (shaking hands in innovative styles, dancing and prancing on the pitch after a remarkable “performance”) wearing their colorful jerseys?

Cricket has come a long way having originated in England in the 17th century. Even earlier reference to cricket is available. According to James Pycroft, In the Bodelian Library at Oxford there is a manuscript (Ms. No 264) dated 1344 which shows drawings of a female figure in the act of bowling, man batting, men and women fielding. The game, at that point, was called “club ball” (Pycroft, 1859:20). Modern day cricket has done away with mixed (gender) cricket, relegating women to play their own cricket separately.

Revisiting Colonialism: A Note on Lagaan:

Lagaan a 2001 Indian movie about cricket and colonialism depicts how the British wanted to subjugate the native under its hegemonic control. The local British officials struck a deal with the desperate natives that if the natives could beat them in a match of cricket, their annual land taxes would be forgiven; however, if the natives lost in the match they would have to pay the double of the normal tax assessment. In a drought –ravaged village the natives had no other choice but to accede to the demands of the colonial officials. The team of the natives learned the game of their rulers with some help from the sister of the British officer. Thanks to hard work, patriotism, resistance, and the presence of a neutral umpire, that represented the British rule of law, the team of the natives won in a match full of suspense. What was meant to be an exercise of hegemony ended up as an object lesson in counter-hegemony. The subalterns spoke with their bat.

Cricket, rather than a symbol of subjugation, in this movie became a vehicle of resistance, a source of emancipation and self-assertion. India has come a long way from the days of rag-tag cricket depicted in the movie to a team with some fine players who can beat the England team without much toil. But the irony came full circle when Nasir Hussein, an Englishman with an Indian ancestry became the captain of the English team and won the test series against India played in India (in January 2002). A recent advertisement on Indian television features Ritik Roshan, a dashing handsome movie star and Shourav Ganguly, the captain of the Indian Cricket team. In the ad the two heroes of India embodying in them two significant legacies of colonialism, cinema and cricket, promote a motor cycle named, not coincidentally, “Hero”.

The popularity of Indian movies and TV serials worldwide alongside cricket signal the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture. Both Indian films and cricket along with Indian consumer goods and food attest to the rise of a cosmopolitan culture in Singapore where Indians feel just at home. The new ingredients of Indian culture are not just an extension of traditional cultures of the Indian community who were an integral part of Singapore; the new elements are aspects of a cosmopolitan society which reflect not only the presence of a new Indian diaspora but also changes in the Singapore's cultural mosaic. Singapore is increasingly becoming a cosmopolitan society.

For the Greeks who coined the very idea of cosmopolitanism, it had a strong political connotation. It meant "citizen of the world". Cricket was only the beginning of a process of cosmopolitanism that began to incorporate India in the process of cultural globalization. Cosmopolitan in its etymological sense is "citizen of the world", nationalism is a sense of belonging, an idea, a sentiment involving a particular territory with borders, a cultural space and so on. In a simplistic sense the political opposite of cosmopolitanism is nationalism as understood in the conventional sense. The cultural opposite of cosmopolitanism is parochialism. Cosmopolitan nationalism is a form of nationalism where people belong to nations as much as to the rights of other nations. It is the idea of nation. This will make them respectful of all the nations. For example, if someone values religion per se, she/he will be respectful of all religions. A parochial view would lead one to conclude that only my religion is authentic and good and all other religions are false. The so-called threat of "religious extremism" is rooted in the globalization of parochialism. Here cosmopolitan nationalism promises a new possibility for durable peace and understanding among nation-states.

Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum uses Tagore's *The Home and the World* to make an argument for cosmopolitanism against nationalism. Tagore, according to Nussbaum, "sees nationalism and ethnocentric particularism are not alien to one another, but

akin...” (Nussbaum, 1996). In an essay on nationalism Tagore provides an enlightened or shall I say cosmopolitan view of nationalism, a brand of nationalism that is not a danger to anyone. A literal translation of Tagore’s novel “*Ghare Baire*” is “At Home and the Outside”. Nationalism has an interior as it has an outside. The operative logic of the internal arrangement is that it mobilizes a people of certain amount diversity to unite and express solidarity to fight for their common rights based on the principles of fairness, equality and justice. The idea of belonging, integrity of culture and so on can be seen as aspects of the internal, the metaphorical home. Outwardly, a nation is committed to play by a set of uniform rules of the game that would apply equally to all the nations and would adhere to a higher order of principles. This happens to be the Kantian view of nationalism and if these ideals are adhered to the idea of “perpetual peace” would become a reality.

By the idea of integrity of one’s own culture I am not suggesting that one’s own culture is sacred and is not subject to critical reflection. As Nussbaum reminds us the Aristotelian principle, we need not follow the ways of our ancestors but what is good. Who decides what is good, here we need some help from Habermas: a critical, self-reflective public through their “town hall” meetings and rational debates where we must hear all sides and not just the loudest voice. We must refer to the universal rules of the game and the procedures of fair play as in cricket.

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