

# Cricket as a Cultural Phenomenon in British India

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## Abstract

When cricket is discussed in the Indian scenario, it is almost always brushed aside as a mere sport, one that was accidentally introduced by the British, and appropriated by the natives. However, it is the sphere wherein India has been unable to sever its colonial links from. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai, Ramachandra Guha and Brian Stoddart have emphasised time and again that the games of Britain cannot be passed off as recreational activities; that culturally, they carry more significance than that. According to the Gauri Viswanathan, in an effort to pitch their own image as being wiser, just and humane than the natives, the British looked to establish the all-important self-representation, 'or the production of an image of the "ideal" Englishman'. Her essay titled "Currying Favor: The Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-1854" contributes extensively to understand how the literature and arts of England were used to convey the image of the Englishman. But, an important cultural aspect that played no less a role than the literature and arts of England, is the game of cricket. However, does the sport of cricket receive a similar status to the other cultural components of colonisation?

This paper looks to give the game of cricket its due place, as a representational cultural source, and the manner in which the English used the sport to popularise their own image of the 'ideal' Englishman.

**Keywords:** Cricket, Colonisation, Acculturation, Postcolonialism

## Introduction

If one were to research to understand through sports, the theories of colonisation, decolonisation and post-colonialism, he is sure to read about cricket in India, from varied perspectives. The works of Ramachandra Guha and Boria Majumdar are seminal as they have documented the lost pages of Indian history by focussing on the playing fields across the nation. Other writers like Ashis Nandy, Keith Sandiford, John Simons and Satadru Sen have brought rigor to research on cricket, with particular emphasis on the impact of the game in England, and thereby in her colonies. It has been insightful to explore these writings and read them to gain an in depth understanding of the colonisation of India from a very different perspective. Dare say, one that has not got its fair share of attention from academia.

Among such writings, a particular piece titled "Currying Favor: The Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-1854" by Gauri Viswanathan, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, caught my attention. Citing Antonio Gramsci, she sets her argument on the basis that cultural domination works through consent, and is the precursor to conquest by force. Her essay looks to examine the methodologies of the British that preceded the political conquest of India, with specific focus on the cultural policies deployed by them in the period spanning 1813-1854. She contends that 'the importance of moral and intellectual suasion in matters of governance is readily conceded on theoretical grounds as an implicit tactical manoeuvre in the consolidation of power' (85). According to the author, in an effort to pitch their own image as being wiser, more just and humane than the natives, the British looked to establish the all-important self-representation, 'or the production of an image of the "ideal" Englishman' (86). This image could be transferred onto the natives either through the *actual* or through the *representational*. Hoping that their strategy would convince the colonial subjects of the superiority of the English ideals, representational sources were relied upon to do this task, she says. Her essay contributes extensively to understand how the literature and arts of England were used to convey the image of the Englishman. But, an important cultural aspect, that played no less a role than the literature and arts of England, is the sport of England, the game of cricket. And surprisingly, that does not find a word of mention in the entire article. This paper looks to give the game of cricket its due place, as a representational cultural source, and the manner in which the English used the sport to popularise their own image of the 'ideal' Englishman.

### **The Rise of English Education in India**

Brian Stoddart, in his essay *Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire* remarks that the British were able to hold on to their vast empire for very long not because of their military prowess or naked bureaucracy, but because of the continuity of Britain's 'cultural power' which he defines as:

... the set of ideas, beliefs, rules and conventions concerning social behaviour that was carried throughout the empire by such British servants, as administrators, military officers, industrialists, agriculturalists, traders, financiers, settlers, educators, and advisors of various kinds. (650)

Stoddart's view is that the continuance of British domination lay with cultural power. He concedes that this cultural power gained success because the imperial power used informal authority systems to transfer its main social tenets of appropriate forms of behaviour. In fact, this opinion is also mirrored in Gauri Viswanathan's essay, where she argues that power operates at two levels: one of sheer domination and the other, based on intellectual and moral leadership.

The intellectual part of power would refer to the cultural moorings of the dominant race.

Both Stoddart and Viswanathan use Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony. Gramsci's theory that cultural domination works by consent, and is often the precursor to conquest by force, corroborates the point made by Stoddart, that the British in India resorted to other means to influence the natives. Gauri Viswanathan, however, raises this in the context of the British in India beginning to feel a sense of urgency to emphasise to the natives their superiority, quoting a high-ranking British official in whose opinion: "The natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers could possibly have" (qtd. in Viswanathan, 86). With an expanding empire and a larger number of subjects, the British began to explore the methods by which they could increase the reach of their 'civilising' mission. Even as the British pondered over the options with which to engage with the natives, there came in reports of extravagant and demoralised life-styles of the servants of the East India Company, raising serious questions about the ethics of the British presence in India. This prompted the Parliament in England to remedy the wrongs committed against the natives by attending to their improvement and welfare. This is a 'peculiar irony of a history' says Viswanathan, 'in which England's initial involvement with the education of the natives derived not from a conviction of native immorality as the later discourse might lead one to believe, but from the depravity of their own administrators and merchants' (87). This degeneration of the coloniser's lifestyle and values prompted the British to take corrective course of action. The first task on hand for the British, then became, to strengthen native institutions and traditions to act as a defence against the changes being influenced by the British presence. This led to the 'Orientalist' phase in which the British adopted an official policy to promote the native tradition and languages as they believed their administration would be efficient if it were to rest on an understanding of the local culture. At this point, led by Warren Hastings, reverse acculturation took place, since the goal of the British was to train the administrators and civil servants to fit into the culture of the ruled. This is seen in their sentiment that 'we rule over them and traffic with them, but they do not understand our character, and we do not penetrate theirs. The consequence is that we have no hold on their sympathies, no seat in their affections' (qtd. by Viswanathan, 88). This phase did not last long, as the administrators following Hastings did not subscribe to his views. The countermovement of 'Anglicism' promoted by Lord Cornwallis, grew as an expression of discontent against promoting eastern learning. The oriental forms of social organisation were blamed for the laxity of the officials earlier reported, and the rulers now believed that promoting the "English" character, and turning to English principles of governance and jurisprudence was the only solution, and that this alone would set the norms

for public behaviour and responsibility for the administrators. In fact, Cornwallis believed that it was contact with the natives in their 'base' state that had led to the declining European morals, and to eliminate this possibility, he began to exclude all natives from responsible posts.

### **The Evangelical Mission**

Unable to shake off their own vulnerabilities, and accept that their morals were lax, the British decided to enforce their power through domination. The rulers had convinced themselves of the 'backward' and 'corrupt' state of the native, and sought to rectify not the fault within, but that which they deemed as faulty in the native. For this, they now shifted their focus onto the 'Indian' character, and believed that it needed to be moulded to suit the needs of the ruling English. At this particular point of time, there was a group of missionaries, known as the Clapham Evangelicals, who argued in the British Parliament that the domination of the British in several colonies, made little or no sense if the natives were neither reformed, nor benefitted from the 'civilising' mission. By petitioning for their right to bring in moral values in the colonies through Christian values, they gained access to the colonies albeit on conditions that they do not disturb the delicate nature of the existing religious practices of the natives or the prevailing religious ideologies, by enforcing their own. And privately, Viswanathan remarks, the Parliament needed "little persuasion about the distinct advantages that would flow from missionary contact with the Indians and their 'many immoral and disgusting habits'" (92).

The efforts of Macaulay influenced the English Education Act in 1835 which made it mandatory for the natives to learn the English language. And while it was kept as a separate course of study, very soon it took the pride of place amidst other native languages. The promotion of education in India, followed by the heightened focus on English language and literature, brought the Missionaries into play. Stoddart too, like Viswanathan, names the English language as one of the obvious agents in that informal authority process. The language, apart from facilitating information exchange between different groups, was also instrumental in the transfer of moral codes and social attitudes, he claims. This was reflected in the fact that a large number among the colonised believed that a proper command over the English language alone showed them in the right perspective to the coloniser.

The Empire, even as it looked towards alternate modes of social control, sought to establish more public schools and colleges in many parts of the country. And as it was the case in Britain, the function of providing authority for the individual's action and belief, as well as for dispensing moral laws rested with the church-controlled educational institutions. The alliance between church and culture expressed itself through the former's methodology of formative education and social control. Viswanathan notes that even in the social history

of England, character building was a task traditionally carried out through the educational institutions controlled by the Church. And as she remarks, it is quite obvious that the educational development in India went through the same recourse as it did in England (94). Even as the English sought to sort out the manner of educating the natives to be more 'English' than native, it must be noted that the game of cricket emerged in the picture. The two most powerful agents of social change in the British Empire, Education and the Church, both believed in the ability of sports to bring about a mass transformation in the behaviour of its subjects. Brian Stoddart notes the importance that sports had in this process of cultural transfer. As Stoddart marks 'Through sport were transferred dominant British beliefs as to social behaviour, standards, relations, and conformity, all of which persisted beyond the end of the formal empire, and with considerable consequences for the postcolonial order' (651). One of the major reasons that allowed sport to become an agent lies in the fact that it had a reputation as an egalitarian and apolitical agent, and that it alone transcended the divisions of social order in colonies.

The administrators from the Churches and the Colleges preferred cricket over some of the other violent contact sports like football, rugby, cock fighting and bull running. As the Empire expanded, so did the influence of English education and the Christian missionaries. With their extension came the expansion of sports in general, and cricket in particular. This development, Stoddart claims, was not uncontrolled, but natural. This is because the British were quite particular about the sports that they introduced into the colonies, as they were about the manner in which those games spread. The fact that cricket as a sport gained priority in colonial states was not an accident. Stoddart comments thus '... of all the games so carefully introduced to the empire by colonial rulers, cricket received primary emphasis. Cricket was considered the main vehicle for transferring the appropriate British moral code from the messengers of empire to the local populations' (658). The colonial governors too were keen to emphasise cricket as a ritual that demonstrated British behaviour and moral codes of private and public life. The British clearly wanted to ensure that the desirable, rather than undesirable social habits, would be sown amongst the subject populations.

### **Why did Cricket emerge as a remedy?**

The Victorian values, are known to have been found in all the three C's: namely the Church, the classics and cricket. Even as the Church sought to expand its reach through the selective classics that were prescribed in the church-sponsored public schools and colleges, they recognised the keen acumen and interest that the native displayed in the game of cricket, a fact, that is surprisingly ignored by Gauri Viswanathan.

In her essay Viswanathan remarks that the coloniser conducted an intensive search for other social institutions to take over from religious instruction, but

fails to record or recognise that cricket was one of those institutions. Crucial to this is the fact that sports had gained a reputation of being an egalitarian and apolitical agency in the colonial social order. And in the process of cultural transfer from Britain to her colonial empire, it remains the most neglected agency, notes Stoddart (651). It is also pertinent to know that in parallel, there was a games revolution that was taking place in the home of the Empire, the effects of which were bound to be felt across her colonies.

The games ethic was embraced by all the English schools, as mentioned earlier, the Church began to have a strong tilt towards 'muscular' Christianity. Consequently, many empire clerics were keen players or supporters of mainstream games as a part of the process of education. They stressed on the importance of games as a training ground for life. Given the social responsibility and significance placed on games, Stoddart observes that the introduction of the same into the colonial system was a natural development, as well as one that was monitored closely so that the social characteristics imbibed be the desirable ones and not otherwise (656). He reserves his opinion that cricket, among all the other games introduced in India, received primary emphasis (658). This was seen in the attitude of successive colonial governors like Lord Harris, Lord Willingdon and Sir Stanley Jackson who emphasised that cricket was a ritual demonstration of British behaviour, standards, and moral codes for private and public lives. Being adept at the game themselves, they sought to inculcate the 'English' values amidst the natives and make them more capable, and morally more principled. In fact, Stoddart marks that Lord Harris even believed that select Indians could be ready for political responsibility if and when they demonstrated their assimilation of the playing and behavioural codes of cricket (658). For this reason, the British were also selective of the groups that they gave access to, to their sports like polo, tennis and especially cricket. This selective cultural reinforcement is also because the standards of behaviour demanded was very high, therefore care was exercised in selecting the social groups admitted to the process. The informal assimilation of the game continued to be in play, but for this formal process, the British targeted the wealthy pastoralists and princes. This set of people had already taken up sports as a means of building a cultural identity with Britain, and the costs involved certainly allowed them to be a part of the growth of the game. They had slowly begun to realise that they needed to adapt in order to survive the colonisation process, and the British too needed a local class of nobles who would implicitly obey their orders, ceding power, yet who could be trusted more than the common man. In order that the native princes be more like them, the British encouraged the princes to study in the schools and colleges established by them. As Stoddart observes, for the ruling colonists, sport had a major role to play both in determining, and in exhibiting the ranking of social groups; It was but natural that the ones, like the princely class, who wanted to maintain an elitist preserve, chose to be saved

by embracing that sport. Admission to the playing ranks was not always about ability but more about 'status, social respectability, and group relations' (662).

Another reason attributed to the princely class being a case of preferential treatment is the adoption of the downward filtration theory. The British government, as well as its officers like Lord Macaulay for instance, did not think it possible to educate the masses with their limited means. Therefore, they are credited to have developed the filtration model by which they would educate the upper or middle classes only, and leave it upon them to spread education among the masses. This 'filtered culture' was therefore conferred only on the nobility who would then fulfil the aim of the government, of distributing some of the knowledge acquired thereof. In this process, they also hoped to patronise a group of educated people capable of running various jobs in the administration of the country as well. As a part of these efforts, the government established three universities at Calcutta, Madras and Bombay apart from the many schools set up by the missionaries. By the close of the nineteenth century, the public-school system had been established throughout the empire; staffed by British born masters, the institutions were 'firmly dedicated to producing young men who subscribe to the ideals of empire and to British modes of thinking and playing' (qtd. in Majumdar 53).

When one turns to understand what this promotion resulted in at the school level, it is important to note that the British masters did not divide the students on caste / class lines. For the British, there were only two divisions, their own 'superior' white race, and the natives. But as it is well documented, India was and possibly still is, divided seriously on many counts. At the school level, playing cricket meant transcending all those barriers, and playing together as one team. The game, within a short span of time, achieved considerable popularity as seen from this description:

Aligarh students loved cricket for its own sake, but also as a means to social advancement. Thus, 'the good cricket players of our college have achieved popularity amongst the local Englishmen.' Proficiency in cricket helped students get jobs, which their academic records would have denied them. Captains in cricket went on to become police officers, judges, and teachers (qtd. in Majumdar 56).

The desire to gain recognition from the British, seen as essential in countering racial inferiority, prompted many students to take to the sport. Their efforts were accentuated with the patrons among Indians and the British alike, also looking to spread the game and its benefits outside the playing field. Among the most famous of these schools were the Chiefs' colleges at Rajkot, Indore, Ajmer and Lahore in the northern parts of India. The primary objective of these schools, in particular, was to turn princeling sons into loyal British proxies. Being modelled on British public schools, character-building and team sports were a major part of the curriculum, to which end cricket was used in the academic framework. There were many princes who went to these schools,

to learn the 'English' way of life, manners and social behaviour. Of these, the brightest and most popular was Kumar Ranjitsinhji of the Jamnagar kingdom. In Ranji, and the nameless many others who passed out, the British found loyal upper class whom they could trust with the methodology of education, and governance of their empire. In return, the princes found a 'language' they could use to talk to the British, and gain acceptance in the eyes of the master. What is interesting to note is that, just like the natives of the common class, who found advancement in society through the sport, the natives of the aristocracy also used cricket for social mobility. And this remains among the primary reasons for them to have indulged in the sport and also be seen as encouraging of and patronising it.

### Conclusion

The English carried the game to wherever they went, colonies included. Like their religion taken abroad by the missionaries, their administration taken abroad by their aristocrats, their sports were taken to the colonies by their soldiers. In a hostile and alien culture and climate, books and games provided the best possible consolations for the 'outsider'; as Nirad C. Chaudhuri remarked, 'to the Englishman abroad literature was his wife and sport his mistress' (qtd. in Guha 3).

A game that was a social paradox in the country of its origin, merely extended the distinction when away. The game which in the Victorian age, served to bring together the commoners and the aristocracy, albeit on the field, at first, did not do the same when it came across the commoners of another race. The study has led me to believe that there are reasons for the same. To begin with, the British did not, by and large, set out to popularise the game in India. To them, it was a badge of their national identity that they could have wanted to preserve. Besides, when Astill quotes a cricket theorist James Pycroft saying: 'The game of cricket, philosophically considered, is a standing panegyric on the English character. None but an orderly and sensible race of people would so amuse themselves.... Cricket is essentially Anglo-Saxon' (qtd. in Astill 10), it is clearly suggestive that they didn't think native Indians or any other race but the Anglo-Saxons to be orderly, sensible or ever be able to develop, if not appreciate an English 'character'.

Among the other reasons the English did not think too high of the natives is their presumption that the natives could not 'appreciate' something as 'English' as cricket simply given what the British believed were underexposed tastes. Ramachandra Guha quotes A.G. Bagot's recollections of the game in India, published as early as 1897:

The native mind had not grasped the delicacies and intricacies of 'yorker', 'longhops' and 'half volleys', but were rather apt to look on a cricket match as proof of the lunatic propensities of their masters the sahibs,



and to wonder what possible enjoyment they could find in running about in the sun all day after a leather ball. (qtd in Guha 9)

The British assumed that Indian 'sensibilities' of nuances, strategy and rules were under-developed, but this is disproved by the medieval Indian game of *chaturang* or chess. It is a game which needs great mental skill, invented by the native Indians much before cricket finds mention in history. Even in medieval England it was recorded that the game had in itself a division of sorts, delineating batting as the more skilful task, preserved for the gentry, while bowling and fielding, considerably more strenuous and harder work by nature was handed out to the lower strata of society. The British officers in India too believed that the 'lower' class of native Indians would not grasp the technique required for batting or fielding, and hence would tip the natives to bowl in the field all day. Guha quotes the self-conscious exclusiveness of an expatriate Army officer A.G. Bagot, who came out with a work *Sport and Travel in India and Central America* in 1897. It was Bagot who observed that an English expedition to even the North Pole would not be complete without a consignment of bats, stumps and balls. In the aforementioned work, the officer remarks of a native Indian:

Batting with him was an unknown science, and one he did not care to learn. He threw and earned his 'talub', picking up unconsidered trifles also in the way of tips, and there his cricket ended. His day's work over, I have no doubt that over his hubble-bubble he was wont to dilate on the folly of the sahibs to an admiring circle of his fellow-countrymen (Guha 9).

And in order to establish their own supremacy, it was necessary that the coloniser sought to stand out in ways that would show the natives as incapable, inferior and inept. By playing a sport like cricket, that was alien in comparison to their own native games like *chaturang*, *kabaddi* or *malyudh*, the British found an avenue alongside language, to make the native feel like an outsider in his own land. This binary separation of the coloniser and the colonised tends to assert the naturalness of the colonising culture and views. Showing the native that such a sport was beyond his skills and abilities was required for the coloniser to emphasise to the native of his 'backwardness' and to kindle in him the desire to be more like the white man. This is a fine example of the characterization of the 'other' through the discourse of primitivism that was employed by the coloniser. By instigating the native to want to be like him, the coloniser would then grow in the eyes of the native, making him surrender himself and the country unto the coloniser. As Astill remarks: 'For the self-aggrandising Britisher in India, playing cricket was what separated him from the natives outside the club' (Astill 10).

When one looks at the Indian scenario from the perspective of cricket, it is thus quite evident that cricket was as important a cultural reinforcement as any other representational artefact thought of being 'English'. To start with, the coloniser looked at the native as degenerate, and considered him too primitive in sensibilities and skill to understand and play the game. But once the coloniser

decided to treat the subject as a 'child' of the empire, he not only allowed him to observe this game, but gradually allowed him to play it, and even went on to help the natives acquire the game's nuances as well. For the British in India, a native who could speak the English language and wield a cricket bat was a sign of their victory over the native community and an acknowledgement of the native's advancement from primitivism. And if one were to observe the process of acculturation in India, cricket remains one of the strongest fragments of the colonial rule. Indeed, education and the Christian missionaries have their influences in a post-colonial Indian country, but to ignore the influence of cricket would tantamount to an incomplete understanding of the process of colonisation, and show as lacking in understanding crucial elements.

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