

## **IPL: As Skewed as the System**

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It must be said that the recent allegations of spot fixing by three cricketers in the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL) is a consequence of the commercialised culture spawned by the cricket administrators themselves. In its rush to unleash the “animal spirits”, the Indian cricket board has engendered every vice so much so that the IPL is not quite cricket.

It is tempting to think of the Indian Premier League (IPL) spot-fixing scandal as a morality play, a case of a few young, innocent men falling prey to the wiles and threats of evil bookies who lead them into temptation with promises of instant wealth and much else. But this assessment is completely misleading—there is no morality involved, before, during or after the entire episode. This is nothing but yet another chapter in a long saga of venality that began right from the moment the first auctions of the IPL which provided a good indication of things to come.

The Indian Premier League took birth in hurried circumstances. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) had been contemplating a Twenty-20 cricket tournament but its timetable was speeded up when a private party announced its own Indian Cricket League. The BCCI went ahead and announced its own IPL, got the sponsors and rounded up buyers to bid for franchises. The entire spectacle - of players being bought and sold like so much cattle - brought together all the elements of what New India is all about—Bollywood, big business and cricket, all under the benevolent gaze of politics. Sums never seen before in Indian sport were bandied about freely. This was a good example of the famed “animal spirits” that are supposed to have been unleashed when all the fetters of an earlier era were removed. It was hardly surprising that the title rights to the first few editions of the tournament were bought by a company involved in construction and realty, the one business that remains largely unregulated despite all the pious intentions to bring it under some sort of control.

Since then, the commercialisation of every aspect of the game has been taken to new heights (or depths, depending on how you look at it.) The periphery of the field is full of advertisements; every part of the players body is covered by some corporate logo or the other and each big stroke (a four or a six) too has got its own branding. The BCCI and the franchise owners are raking it in, encashing the on-field exploits of the players. Why blame the players for thinking that they could also make a buck or 60 lakhs for their own efforts?

## **Criminal Enterprise?**

It is not merely about sponsorship or endorsements. The controversies surrounding the IPL every year have been serious and bordering on the criminal. Accusations about ownership, sources of funding, tax-status (and tax-holidays in some states) and even fixing have surfaced in the last 5 years or so and so far they have all remained unresolved.

This is a small excerpt of what the Sports Minister Ajay Maken told the Lok Sabha in November 2011:

The Standing Committee on Finance (2010-11) in its Thirty-Eight Report on the subject, as available on the website - 'Tax Assessment/Exemption and Related Matters concerning IPL/BCCI' has also made the following observations/recommendations:-

1. On the basis of such an extensive scrutiny, the Committee is inclined to conclude that the fair name of a much-loved sports in the country, which is known as a 'gentlemen's game' should not have been allowed to get sullied and embroiled in transgressions of law 'off the field'.
2. The Committee is thus constrained to conclude that the Income Tax Department has been very lenient on BCCI allowing them to enrich their coffers at the expense of the exchequer. The Committee would therefore like this matter to be thoroughly probed and an action taken report furnished to the Committee within one month of the presentation of this Report. In the meantime, the Committee desires that all the pending tax assessments in respect of BCCI should be finalized on the strength of the Department's decision to withdraw exemption originally granted to BCCI.

Equally serious, and definitely unethical if not illegal, have been the glaring instances of conflict of interest, with administrators also doubling up as franchise owners and players freely indulging in business activities involving their peers. The captain of the Indian cricket team M S Dhoni is also the skipper of the Chennai Super Kings, which is owned by India Cements whose chairman N Srinivasan, happens to be the president of the BCCI. Dhoni is also a Vice-President of India Cements. Cynics may wonder if this intimate connection did not help Dhoni retain his job as the India captain after the team's disastrous series against England at home. There is no dearth of such intricate links among players, both present and former. In such circumstances, can one really blame those cricketers who feel that the lines drawing ethical boundaries have been blurred enough to freely cross to the other side.

The BCCI on its part has never shown any great determination to clamp down on unethical behavior. It could have, for example, involved the International Cricket Council at the

beginning of the IPL series to keep a close check on any illicit activity. Or it could have put in strict security measures when some players were exposed in a TV sting last year. Indeed, it could tell franchisees in no strict terms that any breach by their players would mean the owners would be held responsible. On the contrary, everyone (including the police) is scrambling to absolve the franchise owners in the current case without bothering to even question them.

Part of this attitude is of course a desperate attempt to ring fence the tournament so that this cash cow is not destroyed. The IPL has survived all kinds of upheavals, including government pressure and the bizarre spectacle of its founder on the run because of the plethora of cases he is facing, filed not just by official agencies but also his own colleagues at the BCCI. The spot fixing is just another scandal that the BCCI must manage without it affecting the IPL.

But the mealy mouthed responses by the administrators, who have expressed shock and dismay amidst much handwringing also shows that they are confident of their immunity from any governmental interference and know that the most important thing that keeps the whole edifice standing - the diehard cricket fan - is not going to desert them. The Indian cricket fan has stood by the game and the players (and by implication the BCCI) through thick and thin. No amount of malfeasance and corruption has bothered the hordes who come to the stadium to cheer their heroes and to savour the vulgarity on display. The TRPs (television rating points) of channels where cricketing heroes of another time match dancing steps with garishly dressed girls continue to soar. Perhaps, for the young Indian of today, who has taken in a big way to this mélange of entertainment and sport, all of it - the big hits, the cheerleaders and perhaps even the spot-fixing - are part of the free-for-all, buccaneering spirit that has come to typify modern India as it rushes ahead to become a global power. Perhaps in their hearts, they always knew that the IPL was little more than the cricketing version of professional wrestling. The biggest crime of the three cricketers who are charged with cutting deals with bookies therefore was to get caught. It is also noteworthy that none of the three players have strong godfathers backing them. In which case, they can be discarded while the caravan continues to forge ahead.