

Political Actions and Sports Policy: A Critique

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The Indian government's response to the banning of Pakistani players from the Hockey India League, and the Tamil Nadu government's decision of not permitting the Sri Lankan cricketers to play in the IPL matches at Chennai raises grave concerns about the efficacy and desirability of such boycotts. It represents an entirely piecemeal approach of addressing diplomatic conflict, which will only incentivise political opportunism and devalue sporting contests.

Sports and politics do not have mutually exclusive spheres of operation, and sport has often been used as a medium to achieve foreign policy objectives. For instance, the "Ping-Pong diplomacy" represented a massive step in the normalisation of US-China relations, and it remains one of sports diplomacy's greatest success stories.¹ Political ideologies shape a nation's policy initiatives and decisively influence a nation's sporting landscape. The boycott by the United States (US) team of Moscow Olympics (1980), and the subsequent boycott of Los Angeles Olympics (1984) by the former United Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) contingent, underlined the idea that foreign policy imperatives conclusively determined the direction of a nation's sporting policy.

In *De Frantz vs. United States*² Olympic Committee, the US District Court (District of Columbia) dismissed a motion praying for an injunction against the US Olympic Committee's decision to not field an Olympic contingent. It held that an Olympic boycott did not give rise to any actionable claim for an infringement of the athletes' constitutional rights and adjudged that non-sports considerations were a permissible basis for the boycott.

Sports diplomacy

This line of reasoning finds resonance in India's boycott of the 1974 Davis Cup (Tennis) final against South Africa due to its opposition to apartheid. The Indian government led by Indira Gandhi decided against permitting its national team to travel to South Africa. In doing so, it ranked its political morality over potential [sporting glory](#).³ However apart from the Indian government's decision to boycott sporting ties with an apartheid-practicing South Africa, its experience with sports diplomacy has almost entirely been shaped by its engagement with Pakistan and recently Sri Lanka.

Political leaders at different points in time, be it Rajiv Gandhi and General Zia ul Haq or Atal Bihari Vajpayee and General Pervez Musharaff, have found it convenient and even necessary to use bilateral cricketing engagement as part of their broader [diplomatic initiatives](#).⁴ It is in keeping with this that the Prime Ministers of both countries attended the 2011 Cricket World Cup semi-final match between India and Pakistan at Mohali. In the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, this initiative was seen as a major confidence-building measure between the two [nuclear powers](#).⁵

The recent episodes of gruesome violence at the Line of Control quickly undid all episodic warmth generated by the cricket series. The first casualty of this heightened tension were the Pakistani players who had signed up to participate in the inaugural Hockey India League. They were asked to return to Pakistan and not allowed to participate in [the tournament](#).⁶ This marks the first instance where players have been asked to leave midway through a tournament on account of a political standoff. At a time when both countries have chosen to adopt a hawkish stance, criticism has been quickly labeled as being hostile to national interests. Despite the same, I find it necessary to strongly disagree with the Indian government's decision.

Political Opportunism

Right wing political parties such as the Shiv Sena contended that such participation insults the legacy of martyred army personnel, and led the protest against the Pakistani [players' participation](#).⁷ Apart from the mere pyrrhic symbolism, yet a politically expedient measure, of disallowing Pakistani sportspersons to participate in an Indian tournament due to their nationality alone, the Shiv Sena has refused to offer concrete solutions about how the martyr's family, or for that matter the entire nation can adequately recover from the recent barbarity in Jammu & Kashmir.

In its misplaced bravado, it has also refused to acknowledge that there exist more potent tools that can crystallise the Indian state's outrage at the border conflicts. The Indian government on its part has found it convenient to acquiesce to this Shiv Sena's demand. By doing so, it has emboldened the party in registering more such ill-conceived protests without holding it accountable for its thinly veiled threats of resorting to violence unless its demands are met.

Similarly the opposition to the Sri Lankan players participating in the Indian Premier League (IPL) games hosted by Chennai, is yet another case of political opportunism. The Dravid Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK) withdrew its support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) since it felt that the UPA had not been vigilant in safeguarding the rights of ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. However, the Hyderabad Sunrisers, a franchise owned by DMK chief's grandson, continues to have Sri Lankan [players on its roster](#).⁸

I believe that the decisions of the UPA as well as the Tamil Nadu government are incorrect.

In enforcing such ill-judged bans, it devalues a tournament by robbing the spectators of participation by skillful players. It has also been contended that this expulsion will make the affected players question their national leadership, thereby building pressure on their states to mend ties with the Indian government. I believe that this argument is particularly weak because it only alienates the sports loving public that is likely to view it as a deliberate slight by another government to their apolitical sportspersons. This is counter-productive because it makes it even easier for Islamabad and Colombo to label the move as an affront to their national pride and further complicate matters of diplomatic engagement.

Ambassadors of Peace

The Indian state has on previous occasions described its sportspersons as agents and ambassadors of peace. It therefore begs the question as to why it would not choose to extend this same privilege to the visiting [foreign athletes](#).⁹ Desirous of demonstrating that adequate steps are being taken in the aftermath of the incidents in Sri Lanka, the lowest hanging fruit in the form of sportspersons has been plucked out by the government.

As a mark of respect, numerous football clubs and other sporting bodies often observe a minute of silence, or play with a black armband to honor those that have served the sport and at times even those who have served the nation. Since the intended actions were supposed to have a symbolic effect only, it would have been far more appropriate to maintain a moment of silence before the inaugural match as a mark of symbolic respect. Additionally the tournaments could have set aside a portion of their revenue to extend monetary relief to those who have experienced anguish in Jammu & Kashmir as well as Sri Lanka. I believe that this would have reflected a greater political maturity on part of the government. Furthermore, this would have also permitted to constructively use a sporting platform to register political dissent and equipped it to monetarily support the aggrieved individuals.

Sporting ties must not bear the brunt of collateral damage each time the bilateral relations deteriorate as it reflects extremely poorly on the health of the government's foreign policy, especially when there are other methods that are capable of constructively addressing such deadlocks.

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