Much More Than a Sport
Beginnings of Cricket in India

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Cricket Country: The Untold History of the First All India Team tells the story of the first all-India team to tour Britain, but it achieves much more. Other scholars, such as Ramachandra Guha, have explored how sport has operated in India as a social and political barometer. The strength of Prashant Kidambi's work is that it uses a particular time period—the tail end of the long 19th century—to examine how cricket captured particular tensions at the level of community, city, nation, and empire.

India's first ever cricket team went to Britain in 1911 to play a crowded schedule of fixtures. But, in the eyes of British and Indian spectators, far more was at play on the pitch.

Kidambi begins with Indian cricket's origins, showing how questions of race and community played a formative role in its development. Parsis were the first Indians to pick up the bat and ball. Cricket playing was one component of the community's steady anglicisation during the Victorian era, but they stamped their own culture on the game, even claiming that it had been played in ancient Iran. Their growing skill became a matter of concern for European cricket teams in Bombay, which played a contented series of matches with the Parsis in the late 19th century. When Parsis began beating their colonial masters at the game, it created a sensation as far away as London—and fanned some racially fraught resentment on the losing side. These victories helped spur two Parsi tours of Britain in 1886 and 1888. Phirozeshah Mehta, the early Congress leader, recognised that these tours would have political value; they would complement Indian political delegations to the heart of empire, helping shape British public and parliamentary opinion about India. They would demonstrate Indian character and promote fraternal feelings between the two races. From the beginning, Indian cricket was about much more than sport.

Community and the City
Community and race determined how cricket developed in India as a markedly urban game. In this sense, Kidambi's work is a helpful addition to the history of the Indian city, and Bombay in particular. Like everything in the urbs prima in Indis, cricket was a struggle for space: Indian cricketers fought to repel European polo players from the city's maidan. One Parsi newspaper even urged that this cause should be taken up by the newly formed Bombay Presidency Association, the city's premier Indian political body. While Parsis excelled in "native cricket," they were not always good sports about other Indians who began playing the game. Indeed, Kidambi shows how Bombay became riven by fierce Hindu–Parsi cricketing rivalries. Tensions came to a head in 1904 and 1905, when the city's Parsi and Hindu cricket clubs categorically refused to play against one another.

It was in this fraught communal atmosphere that Bombay promoters of cricket began imagining an all-India team that could tour Britain. The cricket pitch, as Kidambi argues, was one place where the idea of India developed. But in this venue, it developed in a very Bombay-centric manner. Bombay's commercial magnates—the Tatas, Peerboys, Narotamdas Morarji Gokaldas and others—emerged as cricket's chief promotors and financiers. Meetings for organising the team took place in the Tatas' offices in the city's Fort district, demonstrating how wealthy Indians, rather than European officials and businesspersons, now called the shots in the affairs of the game. However, cricket was quickly gaining popularity elsewhere in India. Indian princes became patrons and players: Ranjitsinhji was only one of many cricket-loving potentates. Aligarh became the cradle of "Muslim cricket," once more demonstrating the game's communal overtones.

A communally divided organisational committee selected, not surprisingly, a communally divided team, although one that reflected power dynamics in Bombay rather than the country at large. It was composed of five Hindu, three Muslim, and (astonishingly) six Parsi players. Organisers angled for Ranjitsinhji as captain but, when he proved indifferent to the idea, settled on Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala.

As the team prepared to depart for Britain in May 1911, it was invariably drawn into the swirl of Indian politics and nationalism. Cricket and sport, in general, now carried national significance. Kidambi argues that Indian cricket was "constituted by, and not against, the forces of empire" (p xii). He points out that many of the all-India team's organisers, such as Ratan and Dorab Tata, subscribed to a moderate brand of nationalism, one that still held out hope for India achieving a modicum of equality and autonomy within the British Empire. Revolted by the racism that infected imperial politics, they nevertheless saw cricket as a way to amicably level the playing field between the ruler and the ruled. "In the end, cricket will heal racial antagonism," declared J M Framjee Patel, the team's principal organiser (p 121). This was a keenly felt objective, given the rise of revolutionary politics in India and the backlash it spurred in Britain. Both the team organisers and some British commentators believed that the tour could dampen mutual hostility and bitterness.

Here, it is important not to fall into the trap of branding the team and its organisers as imperial stooges, loyalists, or other such terms fashionably deployed to describe particular Indian elites. The tour excited national interest and nation-building. Amongst those who sent off the team in Bombay was a young barrister named Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

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Furthermore, as Kidambi notes, sport and physical culture had become thoroughly imbued with nationalist significance, a process that raises some interesting parallels with the role of sport in Irish nationalism of the time. The all-India cricket team demonstrates one way how, before the World War 1, the Indian nationalist imagination could embrace empire and imperial links.

**Thorny Questions**

National politics intersected with cricket at numerous other angles. For Singh, the Patiala prince and team captain, the 1911 tour was part of a longer tussle for power and autonomy between his darbar and British authorities. In this sense, *Cricket Country* contributes to a new wave of literature on princely states, detailing Patiala’s delicate relationship with the Indian and Punjab governments. Singh knew that his reputation was on the line—if he comported himself with dignity and self-control while in Britain, he could overcome the sordid reputation he had earned for alleged drinking and womanising. A British official judged that the Patiala prince would be fine in London as long as he was “kept out of second-class hotels” (p 199).

Elsewhere, the all-India team raised questions about social reform. Two members of the team, Palwankar Baloo and Palwankar Shivram, were Dalits. As such, they faced incredible struggles against upper-caste chauvinism in Hindu cricket clubs in Bombay and Poona. The *Indian Social Reformer* celebrated their inclusion in the team as a sign of progress. This prognosis was a tad bit rosy. Before team members boarded their launches at Ballard Pier in May 1911, they were presented with garlands—but Baloo and Shivram were deliberately excluded from this ceremony.

Indian cricket, therefore, raised thorny national questions, just as it had done at the level of community and city. It was also fundamentally bound up with imperial (and emergent global) concerns. The Indian cricketers landed on British soil at a momentous time. The summer of 1911 was dominated by the coronation of George v and littered with attendant royal celebrations. Kidambi describes how the team was only one component of an incredible imperial tableau, including empire-themed exhibitions, sports tournaments, and conferences that drew participants and spectators from around the world. The Indian cricketers were not even the only Indian sportspersons to exhibit their prowess that summer in Britain. In the most engaging chapter in this book (ch 8), Kidambi introduces us to some of these individuals. Jamsetji Merwanji, who, for eight years, had been the world champion in rackets, travelled from Bombay to defend his title. A group of burly Punjabi pehelwans drew London spectators to their wrestling matches. They were a follow-up to Gama Baksh, the star pehelwan who toured Britain beforehand, and reputedly could run a mile a day with a 120-pound stone ring around his neck; his daily diet included half a litre of clarified butter and 20 litres of milk. Also in London that summer was Kodi Ramamurti Naidu, the “Indian Hercules” who dazzled audiences with his feats, which included breaking an iron chain with his neck muscles and being trampled by bullock carts and even an elephant.

“There was a sense among many Indians that their country had finally arrived on the international sporting stage,” Kidambi notes (p 255). This had distinct imperial connotations: Was the British Empire to become an increasingly egalitarian federation, sport and otherwise, or would it remain a white man’s club? Many Britons welcomed these Indian sportspersons and celebrated their feats. But others filtered Indian sport through a racial prism, one that helped validate stereotypes or raise alarm about the declining virility of the white race. Elsewhere, the colour bar loomed large. India was excluded from the first-ever intra-imperial sports championship, just as it had been excluded from an imperial conference held between the Prime Ministers of Britain and the white dominions before the coronation. The all-India cricket team’s performance was subject to decisively paternalist commentary from British journalists and cricket officials. If anything, the story of the Indian team demonstrates that ideas about imperial federation and imperial citizenship, which have received recent scholarly attention, were fantasy: What was the prospect of imperial citizenship when even Indian sportspersons regularly faced second-class treatment?

To return to the tour: it came as quite an anticlimax. The Indian cricketers suffered from a schedule that deliberately pitted them against the best English teams first and gave them little time to rest in between fixtures. They faced other handicaps: unfamiliarity with new innovations in cricket, English weather, and friction between team members (Hindu–Parsi cricket rivalries seem to have resurfaced). Singh and one of the star players absconded after a few matches. In spite of a lacklustre string of losses, the tour did play a significant role in further shaping the communal and national dimensions of Indian cricket. One illustration suffices: upon the team’s return to Bombay, Baloo and Shivram, who had been denied garlands just a few months beforehand, were singled out for praise and special honours. B R Ambedkar spoke at a reception for them.

*Cricket Country* is written in an engaging and accessible manner, meaning that even those who are completely ignorant about the sport of cricket (such as this reviewer) will find it worth reading. It makes a compelling case for using the history of sport to illustrate broader social and political dynamics in India and the British Empire.

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