

CRICKET, NATIONALISM, AND THE SUBCONTINENTAL FAN

Sankaran Krishna

“Cricket is an Indian game, accidentally invented by the British”, thus begins Ashis Nandy’s brilliant meditation on cricket, modernity and the post-colonial predicament (see his *The Tao of Cricket*). I agree with Nandy, with the minor proviso that “Indian” in that quote be substituted with “South Asian”. After all, the main reason that Nandy adduces for his claim that cricket is quintessentially an Indian game is precisely its obdurate and ornery refusal to let itself get codified along the oppressive and hyper-rational lines of late modernity. The quality of open-ended-ness, the rules that are discovered more in the course of play than in the rule-book, the taboos that produce a revulsive shock *after* the fact of their violation but draw no attention to themselves *before* the fact, the amount of leeway accorded an umpire in adjudging an LBW decision, the relative under-emphasis on producing a “result” and declaring a winner and a loser, all these and more are appreciated by Nandy as instances of whimsical humanity in a world engulfed in utilitarian calculi. And whimsy is a quality which I firmly believe characterizes the sub-continent and not merely India.

Nandy ends his book on a rather melancholic note, observing that the juggernaut of a narrow technical rationality is inexorably sweeping all before it, including cricket, even the sub-continental variety. The rise of the one-day game, the elaboration of specific rules governing the over-rate, the methodical onslaught of super-fast bowlers, the decline of the leg-spinner, helmets, television over-coverage and slow-motion replays, and now the presence of an omniscient “third umpire”, have all minimized the role of chance and human folly.

Ambiguity is being forcefully disciplined everywhere and cricket is no exception.

This little piece is in some ways an exercise in nostalgia. I wish to reflect upon a peculiarly sub-continental phenomenon, what I describe as the strange inconstancy of the South Asian cricket fan. I argue that this inconstancy of the fan is an indicator that the Taoist qualities

that make cricket what it is continue to flourish and prosper in our part of the world.

Predicting the allegiance of this fan can be a very tricky business. Consider the following:

- * when India plays Pakistan, I understand that most Sri Lankan (*both* Sinhala and Tamil) fans support India. I wouldn’t have been very surprised about this fact, except that the series that I am talking about was going on when the IPKF had an overbearing presence on Sri Lankan soil.
- * despite (or, perhaps because of?) India’s role in the “liberation” of Bangladesh, my friends from there assure me that both before and after 1971, Indo-Pakistani series found the local populace firmly in support of the Pakistani team.
- * in the recent World Cup in Australia, once India lost, most Indian ex-patriates in Australia as well as sizable numbers of Indians in India were firmly behind Pakistan in their quest to win it all. Imran Khan, the Pakistani captain, expressed his thanks for the unstinting support accorded his team by the entire South Asian diaspora in Australia and especially the Indian community there. This at a time when India and Pakistan were, as usual, sabre-rattling over Kashmir.
- * in contrast to the above, when Pakistan lost in the semi-finals of the last World Cup cricket tournament, crackers were burst in Indian cities to celebrate their defeat. (A friend has a very secular explanation for this: the crackers had been bought in anticipation of an Indian victory in the World Cup. Once India lost, in the other semi-final match, the crackers had to be burst at an “appropriate” occasion rather than go waste. The Pakistani defeat became the excuse. I find the explanation compelling: one should resist the temptation to over-politicize all celebrations).

What is one to make of this rather jumbled up set of preferences? A neo-classical economist trying to order them along some principle of transitivity will give up in futility. Perhaps most importantly, the fans’ support does not follow lines that might be predicted if one took

Dr. Sankaran Krishna teaches Political Science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.



into account geo-political factors, the state of relations between the countries or other such political explanations. Fans seem to be both attentive to, and capable of rising above, the ever-changing characteristics of regional affiliations and politics in their support for teams. I suppose there are deep-rooted cultural, religious and historical factors that possibly explain this set of preferences: I just can't seem to fathom what they might be.

Let me turn now to the question of the sub-continental fan's support of teams outside the region. Here, the patterns seem to be slightly more predictable. In India, there seems to be a rough pecking order: when England plays the Aussies, we're usually behind the Aussies; New Zealand is usually favored over whomever it plays outside the sub-continent (I suppose the relevant rule is the one that says support the under-dog in any match up); when Australia plays the West Indies, Indians support the latter (what might be the reason? race?); and when England plays the Windies, again, usually we back the latter.

My sense is that this ordering is, by and large, true for both Indians as well as more generally, the sub-continent. Assuming that my sense is empirically founded, what does this show? Well, one thing it does show is that England is pretty much near the bottom of the barrel as far as subcontinental fans are concerned. I hasten to add that this in no way prevents fans in the region appreciating the talents of a particular cricketer. For example, I would wager that the stylish and graceful David Gower is more popular and revered in Mylapore (Madras) than he seems to be presently in his own home country. The other is that the West Indies are pretty much near the top as far as South Asian fans are concerned (ignoring, for the moment, the underdog rule).

While it would be tempting to array these preferences along racial and imperial lines (West Indies top and England at the bottom), once again I suspect the reasons are somewhat less "politically correct". The West Indies are probably more popular in the sub-continent simply because they are invariably the most exciting team at any point in time. Barring a brief period under Clive Lloyd's captaincy (when they began to resemble a well-oiled, super-efficient and ultra-modernist team), the Windies have always been known to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory just as frequently as they do the reverse. The sheer exuberance of Caribbean cricket, along with its dangerous unpredictability, I think accounts for their popularity here, rather than complex racial-colonial-historical explanations.

By the same token, barring a Botham or a Gower, English cricket more often than not evokes its equally bland

cuisine. It is hard to get terribly excited about a Boycott or Amiss or a Gooch: even after they have accumulated a century, one often finds it difficult to recollect a single stroke made on the way towards it. The Aussies can always be counted on for a terrific fight: I have lost count of the number of times opponents have run through the top-half of the Aussie batting only to find the bottom half slogging away to more than a respectable total. It will be interesting to see the effect that the re-entry of South Africa will have on the subcontinental fan's preference orderings. Again, rather than emphasize the racial composition of the team or that country's history of apartheid, my prediction is that if the Springboks can produce another generation of the likes of Barry Richards or Graeme Pollock, they will be immensely popular, no matter who history might "necessitate" that we support.

At this point, it might be valid to enquire whether all this indicates the south asian fan's historical amnesia, his inattention to questions of race and colonialism and the history of imperialism and apartheid. My response to that is somewhat counter-intuitive. I would argue that cricket is one of the few domains wherein the subcontinental middle-class sometimes reveals a refreshing ability to both laugh at itself and deal with a society such as England without the edgy defensiveness that is a hallmark of the colonized. I think one has to see the standing ovation given an Ian Botham after his brilliant counter-attack in the Jubilee Test in Bombay as a moment in decolonization. The crowd was reacting on that occasion on a purely aesthetic basis: this ability to put in abeyance our highly problematic historical relationship with Britain and appreciate Botham's innings for what it was worth is an ability that is worth cherishing, if only because it is all too rare.

To summarize, the strange inconstancy of the South Asian fan's preferences is paradoxical only if viewed exclusively through the lenses that we have been all too well trained to wear: the lenses of a defensive post-colonial rationality that over-emphasizes issues such as geopolitics, religious and ethnic differences, and the complex narratives of colonialism, imperialism and racism. The fact is that the cricket-crazy publics in our part of the world have revealed repeatedly the ability to effortlessly transcend these narratives and appreciate the game for what it is: a game, no more and no less. It is perhaps a sad commentary on our times that one has to seek out residual evocations of such transcendent humanity in domains as trivial and peripheral as cricket. But, of course, anyone even remotely familiar with the sub-continent knows that cricket here is neither trivial nor peripheral.