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CRICKET— THERE IS POLITICS IN IT!

It is cricket, but not lovely cricket any longer in Sri Lanka. Cricket has generated feelings of shame, anger, despair and all those passions that are not supposed to enter the realm of the game which was once played, until not so long ago, by 'gentlemen'. But, who will say that Arjuna Ranatunga and his 'boys' are not gentlemen? Once treated as boys in world cricket, Sri Lankan cricketers suddenly became gentlemen members of the world sporting elite when they won the World Cup in 1996. They went to England in May 1999, promising to bring the World Cup back while Sri Lankan army's 'Operation Ranagosa' was progressing in Vanni jungles. Failing to go beyond the preliminary round of the tournament—or the "carnival", as the head of the English cricket board aptly described it—they returned home in disgrace. Gentlemen of world cricket have now fallen back to the status of local boys, boys deserving a good thrashing. And the Sri Lankan media in the entire month of June has been replete with suggestions as to how to punish and discipline the errant boys.

In Pakistan and India, campaigns for the cricket World Cup under conditions of a late English spring were paralleled by a real war at home in snow-capped mountains. During the preliminary round of the tournament, the two South Asian states started a war with shooting in Kashmir, giving a patriotic-martial significance to even a single run to be scored, or a wicket to be snatched. When Pakistan battled it to the final while the Indian team was returning home, the Nawaz Sharif regime perhaps thought that the war on Kargil with India was virtually over. The unexpected and inexplicably tame surrender of Wasim Akram and his ten men before the Australians at Lords was more than what Pakistani patriotism could come to terms with. Allegations of match fixing, betting and bribery were liberally hurled at the Pakistani World Cup team while demands were also made to bring the cricketers before military tribunals. For the patriotic citizens of Pakistan, it was more than a defeat at the most prestigious world event in cricket. It was purely an event of national shame.

To return to Sri Lanka's own public culture and politics of cricket, one may see a number of contradictory forces at work. As Ajith Samaranayake's essay in this issue of *Pravada* shows, the sociology of Sri Lankan cricket has gone through a class transition which coincided with the country's global success in one-day cricket. The present failure in Sri Lanka's cricket probably has a complex background of which the inability of cricketers and cricket administrators to manage the 1996 success is just one component. It is after becoming world champions that Sri Lankan cricket entered the global economy of sports. After this transformation, playing and managing cricket became more than a conventional sports activity of the leisure class. It became entangled with the demands of the global economy of sports which is dominated by giant media companies, huge multi-national corporations, advertising companies and of course, the players in the global market of speculative capital. As Mike Marqusee's book on the World Cup of 1996 clearly demonstrates, two of the world's largest consumer product companies, Coca-Cola and Pepsi used cricket as a ploy to capture the enormous market in South Asia. All the allegations of bribery, match-fixing, commissions worth millions and mis-administration of cricket make sense only in the context of formal and secret workings of the global economy of spectator sports. The days are gone when the national cricketers were accountable to their local cricket boards and the local boards to the ICC. Global institutions and individuals dedicated to profit making too became a parallel set of agencies that managed individual cricketers as well as cricket administrators. The fact that big businessmen entered the realm of cricket administration in Sri Lanka as well as in India and Pakistan is not an isolated event. From the mid-1990s onwards, cricket became a highly marketable and immensely profitable capital good. The crisis of both the standards and ad-

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ministration of Sri Lankan cricket in the post-1996 years is partly a consequence of cricket's sudden and unanticipated transition to a framework of global political economy. The resultant crisis is often described as the lack of discipline among players and secret business deals among the administrators. The rules of speculative capital have indeed eroded the traditional regime of discipline imposed on cricketers, rules that were a queer synthesis of feudal-agrarian notions of male 'gentlemanship' and submission to authority as demanded by the pre-globalization capitalist state.

Success in cricket also has had its meaning in the politics of the nation-state. Usually, international sports competitions are organized on the basis of nation-state identity. Cricket is international only in a specific sense. England and a dozen of its ex- colonies play cricket in the global arena. Even among them only eight have the full membership of the exclusive club called the International Cricket Conference. In terms of the hierarchic principles of its organization, cricket is then the least international of all the world sports. Yet, with the worldwide migration of people from ex- British colonies to the rest of the world, cricket as a sport has acquired a global interest and presence. At the same time, against the backdrop of cricket becoming a mass spectator sport and a visual media spectacle, it has also assumed a thoroughly nationist political identity. As demonstrated so often in cricket encounters between India and Pakistan, political contradictions among nation-states have filtered into the realm of cricket. Just last year, Bal Thakeray's VHP tried to Hindu-ise Indian cricket to such an extent that the Pakistani tour of India was salvaged only after the Indian government intervened. Even when the two countries play the game, nation-state hostilities tend to be re-enacted. One has to only read the Pakistani and Indian press coverage on cricket matches between these two countries to feel shocked by the crudely militaristic metaphors and imagery used so freely to describe what happens on the playground. Patriotic cricket reporters perhaps imagine an actual war between the two nation-state adversaries. George Orwell's famous epithet needs to be revised. Cricket is no longer war minus the shooting. It is war minus the nuclear missiles. Kapil Dev and Sachin Thendulkar have now echoed the subjection of India's cricketing relations with Pakistan to ultimate nation-state politics when they suggested the other day that Indo-Pakistan cricket exchange should not continue in the face of "Pakistan aggression" in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, the politics of one-day cricket in Sri Lanka has had its own peculiarities. As David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya argued in a previous issue of *Pravada*, one-day cricket has become the opiate of the Sri Lankan masses. When the economic and political spheres of public life were crumbling and the promised heroes-and of course, heroines—of redemption were proving themselves to be anti-heroes, a bunch of young men suddenly emerged as world conquerors. With a rustic innocence and Sinhala-school English accent, they could hardly complete a sentence in English to the television mike while accepting best-so-and-so awards. Nonetheless, just eleven of them became the world conquerors overnight, while tens of thousands of the Sri Lankan army, under the leadership of many generals, had been fighting for more than fifteen years an insurgency of the ragged-trousered Tamil guerillas. A nation that has been going through a painful political process of self- demoralization could then find pride in a collective fantasy of a world conqueror.

This political identity of the nation-state and cricket among cricket playing countries also has an element of mutual racism. English and Australian attitudes to South Asian teams have been noted by commentators as a combination of white supremacist aggression and racism. In response to 'white' racism, South Asians have also adopted a racist attitude towards England and Australia. Arjuna Ranatunga's recent statement in a controversy with Australian spin bowler Shane Warne that he, Captain Ranatunga, represented a nation with a history of 2,500 years is only a public acknowledgement of this defensive racism that has been surreptitiously going on for many years. Indeed, Ranatungas encounter in Australia with Umpire Ross Emerson--an unprecedented act of sheer bravado by a cricket Captain to defy a decision by an umpire and argue his case aggressively in the field with live TV coverage--was greeted with approved in Sri Lanka and South Asia. The South Asians saw in that transgression of the rules book a coloured man challenging white authority. And indeed, Sri Lanka's victory over Australia at the World Cup finals in Lahore in 1996 had that added dimension of 'strike back at the Empire' by ex-British South Asia. The fact that Australia itself was once a British colony did not matter in this encounter of 'whites and the rest of us'. What really mattered was that white Australia represented a white empire that many post-colonial South Asians would love to hate. In the political unconscious of the South Asian, the 1999 world cup has left a strong feeling of self-hate. "Why did our South Asians —India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with so much cricketing prowess — allow white Australia to run away with the championship cup?" The macho Pakistani team would not be forgiven for the abject capitulation they staged at Lords on June 21, 1999.

Cricket is not a game for and among gentlemen. Those who know the history of cricket in England would tell us that it was 'gentlemens game' in the 19th century only in the sense of class superiority of those who owned and managed cricket clubs. It is quite right to admit that cricket has not been, or will never be, a gentlemen's game in its naively moral and ethical sense as school boys are told by their principals and coaches, or as cliché-loving sports journalists would like the public to believe. What has been happening in the working of cricket, in its own style of transparency, is unveiling of the true self of a sport which is being transformed in the age of economic globalization. What is amazing is that the masses and the state are forced into a struggle to maintain cricket in the old paradigm where as international capital is all out to change the paradigm. It is a field for politics and profits, an arena in which the nation-states and international capital place their bets. It is also a site where the colonial past and the post-colonial present meet through the intermediary of mass anxieties and expectations created in the dreadful world of nation-state politics.

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