

BORIA MAJUMDAR

## The Indian Premier League and world cricket

In the contemporary sporting world, few would doubt that India is the new cricketing superpower. It is more often than not that Indians lead, the others follow. Without exaggeration, Indian cricket is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. That reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. Cricket for a billion plus Indians is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation. In fact, for many in India, cricket has replaced religion as a source of emotional strength and spiritual passion and, since it is among the earliest of memorable childhood experiences, it infiltrates memory, shapes enthusiasms and serves fantasies.

India's position as the new nerve centre of world cricket, completing what I call the 'decolonisation of Indian cricket', has been strengthened in recent times thanks to the impact of the IPL on world cricket. The first edition of the IPL, played to packed houses for forty-four days between 18 April and 1 June 2008, was a resounding success by all yardsticks. So much so that there was talk of a withdrawal syndrome among cricket fans once the spectacle was over. In most metropolitan cities across India, as also in many cities across the world with large Indian diasporas, religiously watching IPL action had become a must in April and May 2008.

As the clock struck 8 p.m. Indian time, it was IPL time. It was a passion that was seductively intense and one that cut across age and gender. Spread over forty-four days, the tournament was full of manic moments of drama, spectacle, ecstasy and agony. At the cost of giving favourite soaps and serials a miss, entire Indian families were converted to the heady mix of cricket and entertainment on offer, a package unprecedented and one that transformed the face of Indian and world cricket. That similar passions were witnessed in 2010 during the third edition of the tournament helped demonstrate that the IPL, as a phenomenon, is here to stay, lending credence to the belief that India is truly world cricket's new nerve centre.

The IPL has also resulted in an unprecedented windfall for the BCCI and franchise owners of the eight competing teams. Contrary to fears, the board earned Rs 350 crore from the inaugural edition, much more than its entire profit of Rs 235 crore in 2007. Even before the semi-finals were played, ninety-nine million viewers had tuned in to watch IPL matches. Several franchise owners such as the leading Bollywood star Sharukh Khan had broken even in year one itself. It is this unprecedented success of the IPL, repeated in 2009 and 2010, that helped consolidate India's position as world cricket's centre of gravity and completed the process of Indian cricket's 'decolonisation'.

### Pre-tournament fears

The IPL administrators' decision to put the cricketers under the commercial hammer met with vociferous opposition from more than one quarter. Moralists and politicians throughout India were up in arms against this public auctioning in February 2008, even threatening to raise the issue in Parliament. Gurudas Dasgupta of the Communist Party of India claimed that the auction had sounded the 'death knell' of the gentleman's game. Over in Mumbai, Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray castigated then BCCI President Sharad Pawar for turning cricketers into 'commodities'.

Other key questions that confronted organisers before the start of the IPL were as follows: will the benefits of monetisation truly filter down to the grass roots and contribute to improving domestic cricket superstructure? Will fans come out to spend their hard-earned money to watch games in the oppressive heat of April and May?

Indeed, the question of fan participation was pertinent because in India fans generally only ever attend international cricket contests, pitting countries against each other. Nationalism, in other words, has been at the core of cricket-watching in India. Meanwhile, Indian domestic contests such as the Ranji or Duleep Trophy, even when major Indian stars like Rahul Dravid or Sourav Ganguly are playing, hardly attract more than 1,000 spectators per match.

It was also conjectured that, faced with teams made up of random conglomerations of players, the draw for most spectators was less the game and more the entertainment on offer. But will fans really want to be merely 'entertained' for forty-four straight days? Even in terms of television viewership, the IPL – pitted against soaps and reality-television shows – faced stiff competition. Finally, it was hotly debated whether the benefits of the new league would trickle down to the grass roots of cricket and whether the tournament could ultimately serve as a supply line for future national stars.

### Post-tournament reality

When the legendary Arthur Morris, key member of Don Bradman's invincible team of the 1940s, was asked what he got out of playing cricket, his answer was startling. Morris negotiated the question with a single-word retort, 'Poverty'.<sup>1</sup> With the onset of a cricketing revolution courtesy of the Indian Premier League, contemporary cricketers will have a radically different answer to a similar question. Most, it can be conjectured, will suggest with a welcome smile, 'We became millionaires.'

One billion dollars in TV rights for a ten-year period, 12,700 advertisement slots on Sony Entertainment Television (the host broadcaster) for the fifty-nine games between 18 April and 1 June 2008, all sold, hitherto unthinkable players' earnings, \$3 million in prize money, \$5 million for title sponsorship rights for five years, unprecedented television ratings and capacity crowds in practically all the games in its first year of existence – what the IPL has unequivocally driven home is that the shift of the nerve centre of cricket to the subcontinent is now complete.

There is little doubt that 18 April 2008 will go down in cricket history as the date when cricket changed forever. Even if subsequent editions of the IPL fail to deliver – possible if its economics go haywire – it has proved beyond doubt that cricket sans nationalism can also be made into a lucrative market proposition.

Modelled on Major League Baseball and the National Football League, IPL has come at a time when the Indian economy has opened itself to global riches, and the big corporates trying to make India home are in search of lucrative investment platforms across the country. IPL, for many, is the ideal answer. At one go, it has given them a foothold in a market of a billion plus and has generated eyeballs that millions spent on advertisements won't garner.

Add to this the fact that, for a billion plus cricket fans, filling stadiums was hardly difficult with proper marketing and hype. With celebrity owners like Sharukh Khan, India's leading Bollywood star, doing his bit in earnest, fans had more than cricket on offer for a couple of hundred rupees. With fans thronging the grounds or picking their seat in front of the TV set, sponsors queued up and paid millions for ten-second slots on Set Max, on in-stadia hoardings and team apparel.

### IPL impact

With IPL 2010 also a major success, each match across India was sold out, and with national cricket boards seemingly making room for it already, it

will be of interest to note if the ICC soon creates a window for the billion dollar league. The one time the ICC clashed with innovative private entrepreneurship in the 1970s, it was humiliated at the hands of Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer. If the IPL humiliates it again, control of the game's most lucrative version may well slip from the ICC's hands, because the IPL is that unique tournament that inspires English players to revolt against their own Board and for which Australian cricketers contemplate giving up the coveted baggy green cap.

Interestingly, even when the League had to move to South Africa in 2009 at short notice because the government was unable to provide necessary security during India's national elections, its popularity hardly waned. Half-full grounds or less than animated spectators in Durban or Cape Town could be perceived as blips only when IPL season two was compared to packed stands and wild spectators back home in IPL's inaugural edition.

For South Africa, however, the tournament was a success. Anyone with any knowledge of South African sport will agree that the IPL, a foreign import, did much to present South Africa as a perfect sporting destination before the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Social integration, still far from complete in mainstream South Africa, received a significant boost thanks to the IPL. And sports organisers, fearing a Western backlash citing under-preparedness for the FIFA event, had their hands hugely strengthened.

IPL season two was also a successful experiment with globalisation. It was India's first truly global sporting export and helped create India's first international sporting brand. Unlike most sports still controlled and dominated by the West, the IPL is an example of 'atypical' globalisation, where the West has to look to the East. It has led to the possibility wherein Indian administrators can justly claim that, in cricket at least, an Indian hegemony is finally about to commence. Unifying the global cricket world under its aegis, India has successfully consolidated its commercial hold atop cricket's global hierarchy. With leading exponents of the game like Shane Warne, Chris Gayle and others urging the International Cricket Council to create a window for the IPL, it is expected that this 'grip' over world cricket will grow stronger in years to come.

Also, the lasting gain from IPL's second edition was evident once the tournament returned home in March 2010, when it again played to packed houses. The IPL came back to its home base having established itself as a leading global sports brand with multiple global enclaves and constituencies, carefully created and nurtured in the course of the second edition of the tournament.

At a time when the actions of some global sports administrators such as the Australian Tennis Federation tried to identify India as an unsafe sports

destination, the IPL was India's best bet in reversing this unfortunate trend. Having received rave reviews in South Africa and having done much to woo the world's best, IPL 2010 continued to bring together the most impressive assemblage of the world's leading cricketers. And with resolute government support coming to its help in 2010, there's little doubt that it did much to strengthen India's claim to being a safe sporting destination months before the New Delhi Commonwealth Games in October 2010.

### IPL and the race question

Besides consolidating India's position as world cricket's financial capital, the IPL also played its part in countering the racial problem, one that continues to plague international sports contests. The discourse on 'race' in India has been historically predicated upon a position of relative underprivilege. India, considered a 'white man's burden'<sup>2</sup> during its colonial conditioning, fought for nearly two centuries to free itself of this position of inferiority. While discrimination based on conditions of colour and economic pre-eminence was a regular practice in colonial India, its vestige continued for decades after independence. Hence, every time an Indian was/is questioned by an immigration official on entering a Western country, it is immediately perceived as a deliberate act of racial discrimination. To go a step further, most Indians settled in the West were, until a couple of decades ago, expected to be living in a ghettoised urban space, hardly ever integrated into the mainstream of Western society. This understanding of the West as 'superior' made for divisions between the Occident and the Orient and allowed for the perpetuation of the doctrine of 'orientalism'.

Such a common man's understanding of race has been substantively transformed in recent times, and the Indian Premier League, a hugely successful Indian innovation, has certainly helped mediate this change. Race, in contemporary India, is no longer a discourse predicated upon notions of inferiority. Rather, of late at least, it is built upon a notion of privilege, which has largely to do with India's new-found status as a world player in an era of globalisation. At no point am I trying to claim that the IPL is a singular mover in heralding this transformation. Rather, it is my contention that the IPL has significantly enhanced the process, which, in the sporting domain, was spearheaded by India's takeover of world cricket's finances from the middle of the 1990s. With the nerve centre of cricket moving to India, a process the IPL has finally completed, there occurred three significant changes:

1. The West was much better co-opted and appropriated within the Indian imaginary.

2. It brings to light the complex and also exceptional nature of India's racialised modernity.
3. An aggressive hyper-jingoistic nationalist sentiment has emerged in India and it often results in a complete overturn of the conventional racial ideology.

This transformed race reality is borne out by an ethnography of spectator behaviour across IPL matches in South Africa in 2009. For example, when Shane Warne rushed to congratulate Yusuf Pathan after his super-over heroics against the Kolkata Knight Riders, the large Indian diasporic crowd was spontaneous in applauding Warne for his gesture. The Australian superhero, taken out of his nationalist context, had suddenly been appropriated and indigenised and was a key member of the Rajasthan Royals side. In the first edition of the IPL, too, this feature was prominent. David Hussey, the most consistent batsman for the Kolkata team in IPL season one, had soon become 'Hussey da', meaning elder brother in the vernacular. However, this co-option rests on unstable foundations, a fact evident from the venom spat at coach John Buchanan each time the Kolkata Knight Riders failed to deliver. Each failure was greeted with murmurs of a 'white man here in India just for the money'.

This behaviour, it needs to be stated, is an exact throwback to a century earlier, when the British reacted in an exactly similar manner to Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji, Indian cricket's first superhero. 'Ranji', a native chief who had no rightful claim to the throne of his principality, finally became *Jamsaheb* thanks to the British support that came his way.<sup>3</sup> This support, it can be argued, was largely a product of Ranji's cricketing prowess. Educated at Cambridge, Ranji went on to represent England against Australia with distinction and thus captured the public imagination of his peoples back home. When Ranji scored a century on his debut for England against Australia in 1896, his performance had a multi-layered impact. In England he became the people's darling and roused a 'Ranji fever'. In India, contrastingly, Ranji's batting was declared a triumph of nationalism on the sporting field, disregarding the fact that Ranji was playing for England, the 'white master'. For the colonial Indian imagination, the political reality of colonialism was relegated to a lower rung in the hierarchy, below the cardinal question of 'race'.

British administrators in India also tried to bail Ranji out of his financial difficulties on the grounds that it was unworthy of a great cricketer to suffer such ignominy. For the British in India, Ranji was a hero, having performed well against arch-rivals Australia. The British rulers saw him as proto-British and used him as a trump card in sports contests against Australia. However, every time he failed, it didn't take much time for the spectators to label him

‘dirty nigger’, displaying how sports as a social practice has always been used to signify far deeper and more significant cultural attitudes and political contours.<sup>4</sup> Another issue comes into the reckoning here. For more than two decades now scholars of postcolonialism have sought answers to the question raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’<sup>5</sup> While it would be foolhardy to suggest that the IPL’s position in world economic and political relations is anything but slight, it might nonetheless be seen in some sense as a sign of change.

### Controlling the cricket economy

Once the second edition of the IPL was over on 24 May 2009, action shifted to the UK for the world Twenty20, which was played out in June 2009. Unlike the domestic Twenty20 circuit in the UK, which is gradually falling by the wayside, an international competition like the ICC Twenty20, which is rooted in nationalism and nationalist sensibilities, it was argued, will always thrive in multi-cultural London and its surrounds.

And this is where the subcontinent comes into the equation. Put bluntly, the huge Indian and Pakistani cricket markets, both at home and in the British South Asian diaspora, held the key to the organisers making substantial profits from the competition. In fact, soon after ESPN-Star Sports (ESS), the host broadcaster, acquired the ICC telecast rights for a staggering billion plus dollars in early 2007, ESS Managing Director Jamie Davis declared: ‘This acquisition affirms our commitment to the Indian subcontinent and the world and we are absolutely delighted to bring the exciting line-up of ICC events to millions of cricket fans globally.’<sup>6</sup>

Inherent in this statement is the root of the problem. For the recovery of more than 80 per cent of the \$1.1bn spent, ESPN was/is banking on the cricket craze in India. Intrinsic to Mr Davis’s statement is the notion that cricket continues to be a licence to print money for broadcasters in the subcontinent. However, the reality, as Peter Hutton, veteran television broadcaster, suggests, is that ‘the price being paid is linked to equity valuations, mergers and acquisitions. It is a dangerous time, when advertising income doesn’t cover the rights fees being paid and there is every danger of the cricketing bubble economy going bust.’<sup>7</sup> With the economic downturn continuing to seriously affect the Western world, the cricket economy too, it is expected, will take a hit. With people’s spending powers limited and with companies shutting down every month, in-stadia advertisers are counting their pounds before agreeing to be a part of the spectacle. Even advertising rates are being tailored to suit the downturn, and this is where the reliance on the subcontinent, relatively stable in comparison, increases.

In effect, this means that India and Pakistan need to play well all the time if the huge amounts invested by the broadcasters are to be recovered. In fact, if India or Pakistan crash out at the group stage, as had happened in the Caribbean in the 2007 World Cup, advertisers' interest in the tournament nosedives. In fact, it can be argued that the World Cups in 1999 and 2003, in England and South Africa respectively, were economic success stories because Pakistan (1999) and India (2003) made it to the finals. During the 2003 World Cup, market consultants in India had estimated a total advertising spend over the six weeks as something like \$222 million – more than the net profit that India's largest private sector company, Reliance Industries, posted in the first quarter of the financial year 2002–03.

Interestingly, in a timescale less than the length of Sachin Tendulkar's career, the nature and economy of world cricket has fundamentally changed. In 1992, the BCCI, now the richest cricket body in the world, had a deficit of \$150,000. And in 1997, the ICC, cricket's apex body, had little more than \$25,000 in its coffers.<sup>8</sup> Once cricket administrators decided to marry cricket with television, the scenario changed. The cricket market became an Indian monopoly and within months the schedule of cricket worldwide was driven by the needs of multiple television players each wanting a share of the Indian pie.

### Indian cricket and the satellite television revolution

Cricket's emergence as a prime driver of entertainment television in India is a relatively new phenomenon. Until 2002, at the time when Sony Television first made its mark with the telecast of the ICC Champions Trophy played in Colombo, cricket was hardly ever covered by non-news and non-sports channels in India. Until then cricket was not entertainment; it was sport, which was profoundly different and had a distinctive sphere of its own. Then came what can justifiably be termed the *broadcast* revolution. Just like most things novel, the first attempt to promote cricket with star divas as anchors in September 2002 was a failure.

Unlike most novel Indian experiments, however, the plan was persisted with. And the biggest surprise of World Cup 2003, an even bigger surprise perhaps than India's qualification for the final, was the runaway success of the Mandira Bedi phenomenon. A minor Bollywood star, the stunningly attractive Bedi's conversion to cricket commentary proved decisive in the TV rating wars. The success was such that during the World Cup Sony Max showed a 24 per cent growth while rivals like Star Plus lost out on 47 per cent of its viewers. Said Kunal Dasgupta, CEO, Set India: 'The TAM [television audience measurement] ratings for the week ending 15 February [2003]



revealed that Max was the top channel and garnered the highest channel share amongst all C&S channels.<sup>9</sup> Statistics showed that for the first time in its history in the week ending 15 February 2003 Sony Max was the top channel with a channel share of 16.8 per cent as against 11.1 per cent of the second placed Star Plus.

What added to the Sony Max success was that it had returned excellent ratings across all markets and cities. While Kolkata returned a high average rating of 10.3 for all seven World Cup matches played that week, the ratings skyrocketed to a spectacular 20.2 during the India–Australia game on 15 February 2003. Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai all achieved a near 10 rating, making the week immensely successful for Sony Max. As reported by the Sony Max press release issued on 24 February 2003: ‘The cricket telecast on *Max* attracted a whopping 48.6 million C&S individuals across the TAM markets. Further, even before India played its first match, *Max* had already attracted 38.4 million viewers, vindicating the appeal of its cricket presentation to every kind of cricket lover in India, including the die hard purists.’<sup>10</sup> ‘Extraa-Innings’, Sony Max’s pre-, mid- and post-match wraparound programming, on its own managed to bring in an unprecedented 25.1 million individuals even before India played its first match. This further shot up to 36.9 million individuals by the end of week one of the tournament.

Interestingly, the cricket coverage also had an impact on the channel’s overall performance. During the World Cup, twenty of the top hundred programmes of the month were from Sony Max, including four programmes in the top twenty and twelve in the top fifty. The success of Sony Max’s cricket coverage also made possible other major business tie-ups for the channel. As reported by *Business Line*, the financial daily of the *Hindu*, Aaj Tak and Sony entered into a tie-up on the eve of the Videocon Super Challenge in Amsterdam in August 2004. According to the tie-up, Sony Max was to provide Aaj Tak access to its commentators and other panellists for its half-hour cricket capsule, ‘Runbhoomi’. Tushar Shah, Vice-President of Sony Max, justified this tie-up, suggesting: ‘This marks a new era in marketing in the television domain. *Max* is known for innovation, creativity and attitude, and this tie-up is an example of all three coming together to create a win-win situation for both *Aaj Tak* and *Max*.’<sup>11</sup>

Many ask whether this unique blending of entertainment with sport dilutes the essence of cricket. In other words, whether such a blending, which is anathema for the cricket purist, can ever take the game forward. Such questions, I wish to suggest, are missing the point completely. As Amartya Sen mentioned in an interview soon after winning the Nobel Prize, it is not relevant whether one likes globalisation or not, it is the defining feature of our age and we have to live with it. The pertinent question is how far we are

able to tame it to suit our needs. Similarly, after the success of the ‘Set Max’ brand of IPL cricket coverage, the important question is no longer whether this form of coverage is proper.

Rather, the question is, or should be, how the nature of the coverage can be made more interactive – thus widening the ambit of cricket spectatorship. One simple statistic is enough to substantiate the above point. In 2003, most cricket magazines and portals had rallied against the ‘invasion of the dumb belles’, but by the end of the World Cup, Sony Max’s managers themselves were surprised by the ratings: 2.2 crore had tuned in and this amounted to a massive 46 per cent of the total viewership. ‘Set Max’ had successfully become the ‘voice of the cricket-widows’. At the same time the die-hard cricket purist had not condemned the Sony Max brand of coverage. As Rajat Jain, a senior Sony Max official, had suggested: ‘A purist is someone who will watch cricket regardless of whether or not India is playing. And remember even before India had played its first match “Extraa Innings” had reached out to 25.1 million individuals. We believe that a majority of them were purists.’<sup>12</sup>

As far as TV advertising was concerned, media buyers suggested on the eve of the 2003 World Cup that Sony Max had already managed advertising worth Rs 2.1 billion, and Nimbus, which was commissioned to produce the ‘Extraa-Innings’ programme, had garnered 1.3 billion. In fact, a relatively unimportant match like the India–Zimbabwe encounter attracted 4,760 seconds of advertising. According to the findings of a TAM-S group, Sony Max had the opportunity to telecast approximately 250 commercials in these 4,760 seconds.<sup>13</sup>

Another interesting Sony Max innovation was the unique blending of Bollywood with cricket, something the channel has significantly advanced with the IPL. Given that cricket and Bollywood have been crucial in fashioning people’s identification with a consumerist ethos within a liberalising society and economy, this was a masterstroke. Sony used its feature film *Lagaan*, a film with a cricket theme and one nominated for the Oscars in 2002, effectively to build its mass base on the eve of the World Cup. *Lagaan*, which starred Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, used cricket to showcase the Indian nationalist struggle and raked in unprecedented sales in the box office. The *Sony-Lagaan* contest, held during the screening of the film, was promoted with the interesting catch line, ‘Watch India vs England on January 26; watch India vs England on February 26!’ The contest invited viewers to answer a simple question from their mobile phones and to call the designated Sony number or to log on to its website.

As reported by [Indiantelevision.com](http://Indiantelevision.com): ‘the contest promised to take eleven lucky winners to South Africa and enable them to watch the World Cup

cricket 2003 league match involving the Indians and the English players. Consider the following statistics: a total of 68,000 messages were received during the five hour period (starting 1 pm) when the movie was screened. There were 29,075 correct answers which only showed that viewers – purists and masses – were participating in a big way.<sup>14</sup>

What has helped the new brand of cricket broadcast is cricket's newest avatar, Twenty20 cricket. The similarities are indeed palpable – both have raised the eyebrows of the purists, both have proved to be runaway successes and both, to go a step further, seem defining aspects of the game's future.

In April 2003 the London *Daily Telegraph* published a poignant picture the day after the start of the English domestic cricket season. A six-column, almost half-page picture, it showed a solitary spectator watching county cricket in an otherwise empty stand. The bottom line was clear: English cricket needed a new infusion of oxygen to survive, with the very existence of county cricket in peril. This oxygen was first supplied on 13 June 2003 at the Rose Bowl in Hampshire, when Sussex Sharks played Hampshire Hawks.

Nearly 15,000 people enjoyed the action and a new phenomenon in Twenty20 cricket was born. Present at the Rose Bowl on that fateful day, I was amazed to see the high percentage of children who had come along with their parents to enjoy the action. Not many, I must confess, watched cricket. However, they did have a good time. With games, toys and a concert to follow it was a perfect summer evening out for the family. Having just watched a few baseball games at Wrigley Field in Chicago, home of the Chicago Cubs, it all seemed familiar – the music, short duration, loud drawling announcements, a little break between innings, two-word alliterating names, frenzied action and, above all, non-stop fun. Anathema for the cricket purist, it was, simply put, the 'baseballisation' of cricket. If asked to describe the origins of Twenty20 cricket in a single sentence, the best answer would be: it was a survival mechanism. The unique blending of cricket and entertainment achieved by the IPL in the Indian context is yet another survival mechanism.

Most cricket fanatics, leave alone the occasional ones, are saturated by the amount of one-day cricket being played. In such a situation it is almost imperative for television broadcasters to introduce innovations, newer techniques of coverage that will continue to attract eyeballs to the nation's most perceptible passion. More than making profits, it may be suggested, the broadcaster is entrusted with the duty to ensure that Indians don't get bored with one-day cricket. And women anchors, noodle straps, tarot cards and models amidst the fans are all such innovations, which have successfully made cricket coverage more viewer-friendly and more interactive.

The success of entertainment-focused cricket programming has led other Indian news and even global sports channels to replicate the same model. In fact, the strategy – special programming with women anchors and other innovative attractions – has become the standard way of covering cricket in India and also in some other countries. With cricket across the world in need of the infusion of new innovations, it is only a matter of time before it becomes the standard global norm. Amidst all the euphoria generated by the IPL, and more broadly Twenty20 cricket, there are some issues which Indian cricket needs to grapple with to consolidate its position at the top of the global cricket hierarchy.

### **We still play to empty grounds: Test cricket in India**

This question is especially pertinent in the backdrop of the recently concluded Test series between India and South Africa played in India in February–March 2010, labelled in the media as the unofficial world Test championship played between the number one and two ranked teams in the world. While the second Test match at the historic Eden Gardens had it all, high-intensity drama, thrills until the second-last ball of the penultimate over, fantastic batsmanship and bowling, weather disruption and, finally, controversy over the playing surface, it also had what is now considered a disappearing breed from the Test match arena in India – an almost capacity crowd on all five days of play. It wouldn't be wrong to suggest that India's best was brought out by the high voltage screaming of the 35,000-strong Eden crowd. It was truly a contest that lived up to the billing of the unofficial Test championship. This is especially so after Nagpur, where the first Test match saw no more than 1,000 spectators per day. This despite the Vidarbha Cricket Association (VCA) making free tickets available to lure a decent enough crowd to the stadium at Jamtha, some sixteen kilometres from Nagpur city.

While some ascribe the empty stadium to distance, the very same venue was packed to capacity during an India–Australia one-day international in early November 2009. At Nagpur, India's home advantage was nullified with the match being played out in an empty stadium. Cricket is not just a contest between the twenty-two players out in the middle. What makes playing cricket at the MCG in Melbourne all the more intimidating is the 60,000 plus Australian fans screaming down your throat. A similar experience awaits visiting teams at Eden Gardens, something Steve Waugh's legendary Australian team of 2001 and Graeme Smith's South Africans will testify to. The lesson Eden Gardens holds is that there should be designated heritage Test centres in the country. These are cities and venues where cricket fans

still flock to watch Test cricket, considered by a minuscule minority of fans across the world as the real test of a player's ability. There was a sizeable crowd when India played Sri Lanka at the Cricket Club of India in Mumbai in November 2009, a near full Chepauk when England returned to play Tests after the Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008, and a healthy 20,000 watched India play Australia at the Chinnaswamy in Bangalore in October 2008. The common thread between all these centres: the venues have hosted Test cricket for over half a century. In contrast, relatively newer stadiums – the VCA stadium in Jamtha and the PCA stadium in Mohali are cases in point – bear a deserted look every time the Test match caravan moves in. Even Sourav Ganguly's retirement Test match in November 2008, which could have brought Kolkata to a standstill, did not attract more than 2,000 spectators in Nagpur. Sachin Tendulkar was forced to score his 12,000th Test run in front of 500 schoolchildren at Mohali.

The BCCI must act. Kolkata and Eden Gardens have helped provide enough evidence. It is essential to have designated Test venues while other venues can continue to host shorter versions of the game. This is imperative given the vast difference in cricket-watching cultures across India, and more so because India wants to be looked upon as world cricket's real nerve centre. In England and Australia, Test matches are played only in certain venues. 'Down under', all leading international sides play Test cricket in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide or Perth. In England, too, Test matches are played at Lord's, the Oval, Trent Bridge, Old Trafford, Edgbaston, Headingley and, more recently, Cardiff. While it is a bold attempt to spread Test cricket to relatively newer centres in India, evidence suggests the experiment is premature and needs to be abandoned immediately. The point is simple: if we host a Test match between the world's number one and number two sides in an empty stadium, there's no way India can justify its tag as world cricket's centre of gravity. Just a year or so earlier, an entire Ashes series was played to packed stadiums in England and a pedigree Boxing Day Test at the MCG easily gets 50,000 plus spectators on most days. Unless Indian fans develop a composite appreciation of all forms of cricket, England, and to a lesser extent Australia, will continue to look upon India as the brash new rich kid on the block. Appreciation of Twenty20 cricket cannot elevate India to being the game's real arbiter.

India should fall back on its tried and tested venues, assured of decent crowds to cheer for the home team. This ensures shorter formats are always played to capacity. It will also help cement India's place among the world's best destinations for Test cricket. Not without reason do players of all countries look upon Eden Gardens as cricket's mecca. By providence, in February 2010 Eden Gardens yet again played host to one of the most sensational

Test matches ever, with the home side coming out on top at the very end against South Africa.

### Conclusion

Regardless of the hubbub generated by the lack of audiences in Test match grounds, it is time to accept that Indian cricket, thanks to the IPL and the advent of Twenty20 cricket, is an exciting proposition, if for no other reason than its success in commercialising cricket in a manner unthinkable just a few months ago. In the future, balancing between the needs of the market and the needs of the fan base will undoubtedly decide how well these formats are able to sustain the hype they have generated. And until a final verdict can be made on that score, observers of cricket as a phenomenon would do well to support these incarnations of the game and agree that they are indeed a breath of fresh air, which has converted the game into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise and India into the real nerve centre of the gentleman's game, completing the process of Indian cricket's decolonisation.

### NOTES

This chapter was written before former IPL chairman Lalit Modi was ousted on charges of financial embezzlement, and two IPL teams, Rajasthan Royals and King XI Punjab, were banned for flouting the rules, a ban that was subsequently revoked by the Indian law courts. The BCCI was forced to accept the court ruling. However, these events did not deter the organisation of IPL season 4 and had little effect on its popularity.

- 1 Boria Majumdar, interview with Arthur Morris, Sydney, 4 January 2008.
- 2 Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', *The Times*, 12 February 1899.
- 3 Boria Majumdar, 'Ranji's Leg Glance to the Throne' in *Lost Histories of Indian Cricket* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.
- 6 Jamie Davis, ESPN-Star Sports media release, 12 February 2007.
- 7 Boria Majumdar, interview with Peter Hutton, 8 March 2008.
- 8 Interview with Jagmohan Dalmiya.
- 9 Interview with Kunal Dasgupta, 6 May 2008.
- 10 Sony Max press release.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Set Max press release, 15 March 2007.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Rajat Jain media release, 12 March 2007.