

# Enduring colonialism in cricket: from Ranjitsinhji to the Cronje affair

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**ABSTRACT** *Half-a-century after the end of colonial rule, the popularity of cricket in the Indian subcontinent is greater than at any point in the past. With the emergence of globalized television markets, the metropole of the sport has shifted away from England to the subcontinent and its settler colonies, such as Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and Toronto, Canada. Cricket in the decolonizing world functions as a metaphor of war between old and new metropolises, and simultaneously provides marginal populations with the means of overcoming their marginality in global popular culture. This article examines some of these battles, including the furor over K.S. Ranjitsinhji's presence on English cricket fields in the 1890s, and more recent confrontations over corruption and national character. I argue that cricket has long been a forum for contests over race, culture, gender, and moral authority in the British Empire/Commonwealth. Even as the game has functioned as an instrument for the assertion (and defense) of English-elite-male models of authority, the colonized have attempted to subvert or capture this authority. These attempts have been resisted by the defenders of the old centre, by co-option if possible but, if necessary, by casting aspersions on the morality, masculinity and centrality of the challenger.*

The popularity of cricket in the Indian subcontinent today is greater—more than half-a-century after the end of British rule—than at any point in the past. This is surprising only if the surprised proceed from the assumption that England has a permanent location as the metropole of the sport. The reality is that since the 1980s, if not earlier, the metropole has shifted, or rather diffused, to the subcontinent and its colonies, such as Sharjah and Toronto. England's status as the new periphery has been accompanied by its fading reputation as a strong side, and by its declining influence in international regulatory bodies such as the International Cricket Council (ICC). Some observers have attributed this shift in the centre of the sport to the innate 'Indian-ness' of cricket.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the merits of this supposition, contemporary cricket, in South Asia and elsewhere, is

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inseparable from nationalist as well as transnational impulses. Cricket in the decolonizing world, Arjun Appadurai has noted, tends to function as a metaphor of war, while simultaneously providing marginal populations with the means of overcoming their marginality in global popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

What I intend to do in this article is examine some of the battles in this ‘war,’ and argue that the contestation of the sport’s metropolitan core is not especially new. It is true that India versus England matches have never had the emotional intensity of India versus Pakistan, or even England versus Australia. ‘Cricket nationalism’ in India, it has been pointed out, emerged not as a facet of indigenous anti-colonial politics, but from England’s need for nationally defined opponents on the playing field.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, cricket has long been a forum for contests over race, culture, gender and moral authority in the British Empire/Commonwealth. Even as the game has functioned as an instrument for the assertion (and defence) of English-elite-male models of authority, the colonized and the decolonizing have attempted to subvert or to capture this authority. In every instance, these attempts have been resisted by the defenders of the old centre, by co-option if possible but also, if necessary, by casting aspersions on the morality, masculinity or centrality of the challenger.

### **Fall from grace: reactions to the ‘Cronje Affair’**

In the winter of 2000, the Delhi police announced that it had tape-recorded telephone conversations between South African cricket captain Hansie Cronje and an Indian bookmaker. On these tapes, Cronje agreed to ‘underperform’ in games between the Indian and the South African sides, and promised to persuade several of his players to do the same. The announcement triggered an instant firestorm of surprise, disbelief and recriminations. For weeks and months, the ‘Cronje Affair’ dominated newspaper headlines and airwaves not only in India and South Africa, but also in the rest of the cricket-playing world. As the scandal spread, and other players from other countries became caught up in the rumors and revelations, some very interesting patterns emerged in the responses of fans, players, sports administrators and the media in the various countries. Without going into the details of the scandal, these responses can be grouped into three broad categories.

First, there was a reflexive denial on the part of the South Africans, English and Australians that ‘they’ (I use the collective pronoun deliberately) could have been involved in anything so heinous. This denial was accompanied by more or less nakedly racist innuendo aimed at the source of the allegations: India in particular, and the Indian subcontinent more generally. The implication was that heroic, patriotic, Christian athletes like Cronje could never be guilty of such chicanery, and Indian investigators were incompetent and malicious. When it became impossible to evade the fact that Cronje was in fact guilty, blame was subtly shifted away from the Indian investigators and athletes towards what might be described as the Indian milieu. ‘We all know that these things happen on the subcontinent’ became a common refrain, implying that it was the

innate immorality of the subcontinent that had ensnared, seduced, and corrupted an erstwhile icon of white moral purity.

Second was the reaction on the Indian side, marked by a mixture of quiet satisfaction and morbid fascination. The aspersions that were cast on Indian investigators were perceived as a national affront and, unusually, the Delhi police found themselves basking in the glow of public support. When Cronje finally confessed, there was a discernible sense of vindication and a visible pleasure at the humiliation of those who had assumed an air of moral (and implicitly, racial) superiority. Then, the attention of the press and the public turned inwards as one Indian icon after another was flushed from the closet by investigators and each other. These exposes came with their own politics of communal animosity: Mohammed Azharuddin's protestations of his innocence were initially met with considerably greater skepticism than were Kapil Dev's denials that he had sold out the interests of the national side. '*Azhar ne pukka khaya*' ('Azhar has definitely had some') declared advertisements for Amul butter, long before the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had even begun its inquiry into the allegations.

Finally, the responses in the 'white nations' and in India both showed a certain bewilderment that bribery, gambling, match-fixing, etc., could have happened in cricket of all sports. After India's CBI named former England captain Alec Stewart in the bribery scandal, Paul Condon (head of the ICC's anti-corruption cell, and former police chief of London) expressed his chagrin: 'People want to believe it [cricket] is all about skill, courage and heroic endeavor and not about some seedy conversation in dingy hotel rooms or on mobile phones'.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the ICC has an anti-corruption unit in the first place would seem to indicate certain problems with the image of the sport, but that irony was lost on Condon and others who expressed a similar surprise. The idea that cricket is above greed and corruption has its roots in mid-Victorian assumptions about the world that are inseparable from that time in British and imperial history.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this has been a remarkably persistent vision; clearly, the moral image of the game and its players has not changed very greatly since the early twentieth century, in spite of Kerry Packer<sup>6</sup> and Bodyline.<sup>7</sup> Quite possibly the latest challenge will also pass, but there is no denying that it has triggered a desire to reassert the idea that cricket represents—or should represent—a cultural island of innocence in a world of mobile phones and globalized greed.

What all three of these responses share is an insistence that sport in general, and cricket in particular, is above politics. Referring to those who are pained at any mention of racism in cricket, C.L.R. James wrote in 1963: "They are a dying race and they will not be missed. They are a source of discomfort to their children and embarrassment to their grandchildren."<sup>8</sup> Nearly forty years later, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the dying race is still breathing, and the grandchildren are not embarrassed in the least. This is why the cricket establishments in the white countries are outraged by what they perceive as the temerity of Third World investigators, and why Indians are quietly pleased with the discomfiture of white South Africans, Englishmen and Australians. The insistence that sport is above politics allowed England, Australia and New Zealand to

play cricket with the South Africans in the days of apartheid, and there was considerable resentment in those countries when people from the subcontinent and the Caribbean, not to mention England's own non-whites, insisted on 'bringing politics' into the purity of sport. There was similar anger in the Indian press when Azharuddin played the 'minority card' after being named in the match-fixing scandal; the assumption being that the politics of religion have no place in cricket.

The irony in all this innocent posturing is that cricket in the modern world has always been about self-aggrandizement and politics. English cricket in the eighteenth and the early-nineteenth centuries was intensely commercialized and rife with gambling at all levels.<sup>9</sup> With its ritualized class distinctions and racial boundaries, and its ethos of stoicism and heroic masculinity, cricket was central to the culture of British imperialism; playing the sport trained middle-class and upper-class Englishmen to play overtly political roles as soldiers and administrators, and provided them with the opportunity to display their fitness for those roles. In India in the years after the Rebellion of 1857, cricket supplied middleman communities like the Parsis with new ways of participating in colonial society.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the 1880s, playing and sponsoring the game became a part of Indian princes' efforts to retain and enhance their relevance on a changing political stage.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1930s, cricket has become a vehicle of nationalist self-assertion not only in Britain's former colonies, but in Britain itself. It is impossible to see Indian fans with their faces painted in the colors of the flag, or England fans doing the 'Mexican wave', and escape the conclusion that far from being above politics, cricket today is more intensely political than ever before.

To fully grasp the political significance of cricket in the modern world, we need to understand that the sport has generally been played within a system of extraordinary political barriers, which have included not only class, but also race, gender and national identity. This is why the match-fixing scandal, which has threatened to subvert the moral meanings that are attached to these barriers, has generated so much international fist-shaking and breast-beating. This is also why various groups on the wrong side of the barriers—non-whites, working-class whites, women, and men who did not fit the masculine profile—have historically had to go to extraordinary lengths to gain access to the privileged spaces of the playing field and the dressing room.

### **The rise of 'his grace' K.S. Ranjitsinhji**

One of the most sustained, sophisticated and successful uses of cricket for political purposes was made in the late-nineteenth century by a coloured man; Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji or, as the British renamed him, Ranji. Ranjitsinhji was the first Indian to become a celebrity athlete in England. Later, he converted his status in England into a successful political career in India, which included a long and stormy tenure as chancellor of the Chamber of Princes<sup>12</sup> and two stints with the Indian delegation to the League of Nations.

Ranjitsinhji's career reveals two major patterns in the history of colonial cricket. (I use the term 'colonial' deliberately, although Ranjitsinhji played nearly all his cricket in England, and much of it for England.) The first pattern is that, in order to breach the racial codes of cricket and play the game at the highest levels in England, Ranjitsinhji had to overcome formidable opposition. In the process of this conflict, he had to reinvent his racial, gendered and political identities. The second pattern is that, even as England admitted Ranjitsinhji into its closed inner circle, it insisted on marking him with the signs of the colonized Other. Ultimately, this tension generated a perceptible anger on both sides. Ranjitsinhji was far from 'the ultimate brown Englishman' as Appadurai rather casually labels him.<sup>13</sup> Like the great American actor Bert Williams he was a black man performing in blackface, whose performances were successful, subversive, and painful.

Ranjitsinhji was the disinherited heir of the *Jam* (prince) of Nawanagar, a small state in the Kathiawar peninsula. At the end of the 1880s, when he was barely 20 years old, he arrived in England clutching some useful cultural resources: a prodigious talent with the cricket bat, and the hand of the English headmaster of Rajkumar College. The latter, Chester Macnaghten, was an old Cambridge blue. He was also among the first colonial educators to teach Indian boys how to play cricket. This was a violation of the prevailing Anglo-Indian sentiment that Indians could not, and should not, play a sport that was integral to upper-class English identity and the imperial ethos.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, such violations were becoming commonplace in the princely states where the rulers saw cricket as a new forum of patronage and display.<sup>15</sup> Macnaghten, who had coached Ranjitsinhji, had a high opinion of the young man's potential for racial and cultural mutation,<sup>16</sup> and he intended to lubricate his charge's entry into England.

With Macnaghten's help, Ranjitsinhji was able to establish invaluable contacts in Cambridge. He quite literally entered the sanctum sanctorum of the university when he became a house-guest of the Rev. Louis Borissow, the chaplain of Trinity College. He became a baby-sitter to the reverend's young daughters, and read the Bible aloud to them. In his spare time he wrote prayers, including this gem:

O Powers that be, make me to observe and keep the rules of the game. Help me not to cry for the moon. Help me neither to offer nor to welcome cheap praise. Give me always to be a good comrade. Help me to win, if I may win, but—and this, O Powers, especially—if I may not win, make me a good loser.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, he had learned the language of muscular Christianity, in which physical strength and athletic skill merged with moral purity, British identity, and the stiff upper lip.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, he encountered indifference, followed by determined resistance, in his efforts to play cricket for Trinity College and, subsequently, for Cambridge. While his skill was conceded, albeit grudgingly, there was an extreme reluctance to allow an Indian entry into such essentially English spaces.<sup>19</sup> When Ranjitsinhji was eventually selected to play for Trinity, his new team-mates greeted him with an icy silence.<sup>20</sup>

After Ranjitsinhji had overcome this opposition, become the star player on the Cambridge side (beginning in 1893) and the first non-white athlete to play for a major county (Sussex, beginning in 1894), the battle had to be fought all over again before he could represent England against Australia. Even Lord Harris, who as governor of Bombay did more than any other colonial administrator to promote Indian cricket, disliked the idea of an Indian playing for England. Indians, Harris made it clear, were certainly subjects of the Empire and might live in England, but that did not make them English.<sup>21</sup> When Ranjitsinhji was cleared to play for England, the Australians were given a veto over his selection.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the South Africans of 1968, who refused to accept the English selection of Basil D'Oliveira, the Australians of 1896 agreed to play against Ranjitsinhji. What is significant here, of course, is that England selectors were far from comfortable with the political implications of fielding a coloured player against a white opponent. Ranjitsinhji may have represented England, but ultimately, the Australians were closer to the racial core of Englishness than any Indian immigrant.

This marginal status in England and on the England team would not remain fixed. It evolved quite rapidly; by the end of the century, Ranjitsinhji had become very much an insider in England, and his clashes against Australians—on and off the field—were celebrated in the English press.<sup>23</sup> It is worth asking how a man who was initially kept at arm's length emerged as the darling of England's cricketing establishment. To some extent, the answer has to do with Ranjitsinhji's persistent efforts to cultivate Englishness, his calculated extravagance (supported with money that he had borrowed from friends like Macnaghten, and not bothered to repay), and his success at finding allies in high places. His Oxbridge, Sussex and England teammates F.S. Jackson, C.B. Fry and Archie MacLaren were the most influential in this respect; without their support, Ranjitsinhji would have found it considerably more difficult to advance his career.

I would argue that Ranjitsinhji's inclusion in England reflected not so much the success of his transformation into an Englishman, as the failure of that effort. That is, Ranjitsinhji was accepted by England not as an Englishman, but as a particular kind of Oriental. Nowhere is this more evident than in how he was covered by two generations of English journalists. Writing long after Ranjitsinhji's career had ended, Neville Cardus waxed nostalgic: "Ranji was the most remarkable instance in all of cricket's history of a man expressing through his game not only his individual genius but the genius of his race. No Englishman could have batted like Ranji."<sup>24</sup> As early as 1896, however, the *Daily Telegraph* compared Ranjitsinhji's wrists to jungle creepers, and declared that he had turned cricket into "an Oriental poem of action."<sup>25</sup> References to jugglery, wizardry and black magic became ubiquitous in contemporary articles about the man and his batting. The sportswriter A.G. Gardiner tried to explain the paradox of a brown man playing cricket by comparing Ranjitsinhji to "a pet kitten (that) has begun to talk tariff reform."<sup>26</sup>

At the precise time when Rudyard Kipling reminded white colonizers about their ‘fluttered folk and wild’, Ranjitsinhji was England’s living imperial exhibit, a magical trophy of colonialism. This, ultimately, was the source of his appeal; not his Englishness but his exoticism, and the sense that he belonged to England.

Thus, Ranjitsinhji’s body became a slate upon which he and his English observers inscribed their messages about imperial Selves and Others. He was, after all, not just any body. He was a celebrity athlete in a culture that worshipped athleticism and associated physical strength with masculinity, virtue, political fitness and pleasure. By the late-nineteenth century, early-Victorian misgivings about the highly exercised, brutally strong male body had largely faded.<sup>27</sup> The upper-class Victorian ideal of masculine strength—which included the capability to inflict as well as withstand pain, but which eschewed gratuitous physical contact with one’s social inferiors—was perfectly manifested in cricket and cricket players. The deployment of cricket as a metaphor of war did not, after all, begin at India versus Pakistan matches. It did not begin in Australia during the Bodyline tour, and it is older than the campaign to make Frank Worrell captain of the West Indies.<sup>28</sup> It began in nineteenth-century England, at the junction of imperialism and muscular Christianity. It was in this political context that Thomas Waugh wrote *The Cricket Field of a Christian Life*, in which the Christian team bats stubbornly against the cunning forces of evil who do not hesitate to disregard the rules of the game<sup>29</sup>—foreshadowing the ‘ball-tampering’ controversy of 1990s.<sup>30</sup>

Appadurai has observed that playing, watching, remembering and fantasizing about cricket are all related to the erotics of Indian nationalism.<sup>31</sup> For Victorian English males, similarly, cricket was inseparable from the physical pleasure of imperialism. Under these circumstances, Ranjitsinhji’s physical person was heavily loaded with moral meaning as well as erotic significance. What his English admirers typically described was not the trained, civilized cricketer, but the natural athlete: savage, animalistic, simultaneously superior and inferior to the modern Self.<sup>32</sup>

There were, however, troubling contradictions between Ranjitsinhji’s status as a heroic cricketer and the visual representations of his body. Words like ‘frail’ and ‘slight’ were commonly used by English journalists who wrote about Ranjitsinhji; Cardus described him as a vision of ‘fluttering curves’ and a ‘dark, lissome beauty’.<sup>33</sup> Ranjitsinhji’s chronic asthma, which confined him to his bed for days at a time, further underlined his distance from the robust physicality of the Victorian athlete. Even as he was at the peak of his fame in the 1890s, the Government of Bombay (which kept an eye on him because of his political ambitions in Nawanagar) speculated that his physical fragility would preclude a long career and permanent emigration to England.<sup>34</sup> Contemporary English observers were sometimes impelled to compensate for this apparent weakness. ‘He looked thin and frail, but there were steel muscles in his slender arms’, Roland Wild declared.<sup>35</sup> Other writers reassured English cricket fans that Ranjitsinhji’s wrists, although ‘small and thin to look at and feel, were in reality as supple as a fine Toledo blade and as strong as bands of steel’.<sup>36</sup> Cashman has

noted that the slender yet steely wrist of the Indian batsman has a certain pedigree in English (and subsequently Indian) discourse.<sup>37</sup> In more recent years, the 'Oriental wrist' has reappeared in descriptions of a number of Indian players, most notably Mohammed Azharuddin and G.R. Vishwanath.

Ranjitsinhji tried hard to project himself as a manly sort. His boisterous and flamboyant student life at Cambridge was consistent with the behavior that was expected of upper-class men of his age, and not only in England: Peter Gay has noted the prevalence of such patterns in contemporary Germany and the United States.<sup>38</sup> He spent a great deal of time hunting and fishing with young English aristocrats, which allowed him to be seen doing masculine things in the company of other men. On the cricket field, he cultivated a reputation for standing up to danger, fear and pain. In Australia in 1897, he was accused by the local press of being reluctant to face the fast bowler Earnest Jones; Ranjitsinhji responded by playing in spite of being unfit, and making a record score.<sup>39</sup>

Ranjitsinhji's illness offered more opportunities for displays of heroism. In England as well as in Australia, he was seen as having played brilliantly and bravely in spite of being seriously unwell, strength of character rising admirably above the weaknesses of the flesh.<sup>40</sup> He maintained this reputation long after his days of seriously competitive cricket were over. When he made his final appearance for Sussex in 1920, he was hit on the elbow. The injury was serious enough to require surgery. Ranjitsinhji insisted that the operation be performed without anesthetics, and watched the procedure.<sup>41</sup>

A nearly identical, if more elaborate, demonstration of machismo came in 1914 when Ranjitsinhji volunteered for military service in France. He survived the trenches (restricted to the rear for the most part, he was not in great danger), but came to grief in 1915. That year, in England on a break from the war, a hunting accident destroyed Ranjitsinhji's right eye. He did not show any pain, and actually carried on hunting, shooting from the left shoulder.<sup>42</sup> He was chivalrous enough to invite the culprit to hunt with him again, and to protect the man's identity even as he publicized the accident by informing the King. The King was most solicitous; he wrote Ranjitsinhji a letter of condolence and congratulated him 'on the remarkable success which attended your effort in shooting from the left shoulder'.<sup>43</sup> Evidently, the two men understood each other very well; they were, after all, speaking a common language of elite English manhood.

Nevertheless, the images of physical frailty were difficult to shake off. The cartoonist Spy (Leslie Ward), who drew Ranjitsinhji in *Vanity Fair*, depicted him as a slender, amiable, dark-skinned man; a far cry from the fierce, barrel-chested iconography of W.G. Grace, or the steely-eyed visages that typically inhabit photographs of Victorian cricketers. What Cardus, Spy, and other mediators of Ranjitsinhji's image produced was an echo from the cricket field of the colonial discourse of the feminine Orient. Revathi Krishnaswamy has argued that the primary objective of this discourse was not the colonization of the Oriental female by the Occidental male, but rather the colonization of the Oriental male by depicting him as effeminate and physically non-threatening.<sup>44</sup>



It should be noted that, in spite of his machismo on the field, Ranjitsinhji acknowledged the need to fit this neutered mould. In his relations with women, especially white women, he was extremely circumspect. He never married, and his long romantic relationship with Edith Borissow remained a closely guarded secret.<sup>45</sup>

Ranjitsinhji's willingness to accept colonial models of racial and gendered self-representation made him acceptable to England's cricket fans and governing elites. This acceptance then brought further rewards. In 1907, Ranjitsinhji became the *Jam* of Nawanager.<sup>46</sup> This was a stunning political victory, because his chances had been close to non-existent. Ranjitsinhji pulled it off by utilizing his English connections, and by asserting his ambivalent racial status; he was English enough to play cricket for England, but an authentic Rajput nevertheless.<sup>47</sup> In spite of this coup, there can be little doubt that his status as a coloured man in a racially defined empire could be a source of intense frustration and anger. The racism that Ranjitsinhji had experienced as a student at Cambridge had to be confronted all over again when he returned to India. He was rejected for membership by Bombay's Gymkhana Club that, like other elite clubs in the colonial milieu, had a Europeans-only policy.<sup>48</sup> Later, when the club changed its mind and invited Ranjitsinhji to join, he refused with a terse 'Stick to your principles'.<sup>49</sup>

In some ways, Ranjitsinhji's political position in India was rendered more precarious by his status as an insider in England. He had gained access to white privileges without gaining access to whiteness. While this may have suited his exotic appeal in England, it made him a dangerous upstart in India, where preserving the lines between whites and blacks was an especially urgent necessity. He found himself treated with cold formality and sometimes open hostility by the colonial government.<sup>50</sup> Ranjitsinhji's attempts to resolve the problem through lavish entertainment—which was his practiced and hitherto successful response to racial and political adversity—now generated more criticism, and raised the spectre of government control over his finances.<sup>51</sup> His demonstrations of loyalty to the empire—volunteering for service during the Great War, for instance—did not generate the political rewards that he had expected.<sup>52</sup> To complicate matters, the Indian press frequently criticized him as a deracinated imposter.<sup>53</sup>

In response, Ranjitsinhji fell back increasingly into a series of positions that can legitimately be described as anti-colonial, and even nationalist. Like the nationalism of early Congressmen, his critique of British racism was inseparable from a disappointed Anglophilia. 'I have trust in few Englishmen', he wrote in 1915, even as he sailed off to fight for the empire in France. 'That been my most unfortunate experience, in spite of the fact that no Indian can love the English as much as I do'.<sup>54</sup> When Ranjitsinhji came out in favour of Dominion status for India, he was openly critical of what he saw as racially-motivated foot-dragging on the part of Britain on this issue.<sup>55</sup> Having once been an immigrant in England, he became a staunch supporter of the right of Indians to settle in Britain's 'white colonies', declaring (rather like Gandhi in South Africa) that 'the British Empire

ought to treat all British subjects alike'.<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that Ranjitsinhji was never an ally of the Congress-led mainstream of Indian nationalism; he recognized that the Congress, even more than the colonial government, threatened the political interests of the Indian Princes. He accepted the British discourse that democracy was unnatural and autocracy natural in the Indian context. Unlike colonial ideologues, however, he insisted that the autocrats must themselves be Indian.<sup>57</sup>

Ranjitsinhji's anti-colonialism is significant also because it was expressed in the language of cricket. In England in 1930, addressing the Australian cricket team, he declared that the empire had not 'played with a straight bat' (i.e. been morally straight) with its Indian subjects. The empire would be a better place, he said, if only its leaders were all cricketers.<sup>58</sup> The irony here is that a great many leaders of the empire were, in fact, cricketers, literally or metaphorically. F.S. Jackson, for instance became governor of Bengal. Like Ranjitsinhji himself, they had been educated in the sport and its cultural meanings. Their behaviour as colonial administrators and civilians, which Ranjitsinhji took such exception to, was inseparable from the social values that cricket represented. Cricket, as such, could function as a moral code on both sides of the imperial and racial divide. The sport was a performance of colonialism, as well as a form of anti-colonial theatre.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude by transplating Ranjitsinhji to the world of twenty-first century cricket. Quite apart from the Cronje scandal, two recent episodes indicate that the game continues to be a potent vehicle for the celebration of insurgency, if not for insurgency itself. One is the release, this year, of the Hindi film *Lagaan*. This is the fictional story of Indian peasants who take on, and defeat, an English cricket team in the 1890's. *Lagaan* is an extraordinarily rich cultural text, and full-length academic analyses are undoubtedly brewing already. I will limit myself to a few brief observations.

Cricket in *Lagaan* functions as a metaphor for political adulthood: it is when the villagers learn the game that they become nationalist warriors. The triumph of the barefooted peasant athletes echoes the real-life victory of barefooted Mohun Bagan footballers over well-shod Yorkshiremen in 1911: a milestone in the development of Indian nationalism as well as of Indian football. Cricket in *Lagaan* becomes the occasion for sexual subversion as well: the *memsahib* falls in love with the captain of the Indian team. It is worth noting that *Lagaan* was very well received by South Asians in England. These Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis—who are, in a sense, Ranjitsinhji's direct descendents—were able to use the film to commune with their inner peasants, and to articulate a response to the racial hierarchies of modern English society.

The peasant cricketers in *Lagaan* care nothing for the "code" of the game: they brag, jeer, laugh and cry without shame. This emotionalism is precisely why nineteenth-century Englishmen doubted that Indians could play cricket, and why

the Parsi cricketers of the era were often ridiculed by English observers.<sup>59</sup> Yet with the peasants in *Lagaan*, as among the semi-proletarian crowds of Sharjah, the taxi drivers of the East End, and the newly-affluent television audiences of post-Liberalization India, the public school code is turned inside out. The appalling becomes glorious, and the colonizer is ejected, stiff-upper-lip, straight bat, and all.

The other episode is from the 2001 series of cricket matches between India and Australia. After Cammie Smith, the match referee from the West Indies, had favored the Australians in a number of controversial decisions, the Indian cricket writer Rajeev Pai grumbled:

“Why doesn’t someone give Cammie Smith a good, hard scrub and wash? If we can just get that black paint off him, we are sure to find underneath, if not a white man, an Indian ‘prince’ in awe of white skin. A pity that such Uncle Toms continue to exist in the twenty-first century.”<sup>60</sup>

It would be difficult to find a more cutting articulation of the politics of colonialism and anti-colonialism in cricket today. The tensions of the late nineteenth century game have acquired a few additional layers of complexity in the early twenty-first, as the actors and the stages have multiplied. It should be noted that Pai’s attack on Anglophile princes was directed at cricket administrator Raj Singh Dungarpore, who, along with Smith, had apparently tried to appease the Australians. Nevertheless, the broadside against Smith and Dungarpore echoes the nationalist critique of Ranjitsinhji. It echoes, also, Arjun Appadurai’s choice of the term “brown Englishman” to describe the first Indian to play cricket for England.

After Sharjah, Appadurai wrote, all cricket is Trobriand cricket.<sup>61</sup> I would like to amend his assertion, by pointing out that Trobriand cricket (Jerry Leach’s term for cricket in which the codes have been co-opted by the natives) began when Ranjitsinhji first walked into the Fenner’s ground in Cambridge. Undoubtedly, he understood the possibilities of racial transgression, and took advantage of the cultural roles that cricket allowed him to play. At the same time, he knew that these possibilities were not unlimited. Ranjitsinhji did not become a celebrity in England by becoming English. He became a celebrity by demonstrating that, although he could play English games very well, he was nevertheless alien in body and mind. It is important to recognize that there is no necessary contradiction between familiarity and exoticism; Ranjitsinhji was allowed to become familiar in England only because he was reassuringly exotic. His proliferating images reinforced various tropes of colonialism; the effeminate Oriental male, the untrained force of nature, the creature of magic. These images made it possible for the English to accept and to celebrate Ranjitsinhji’s subversive brilliance because, instead of having to concede his superiority to contemporary English athletes, they needed only to assert his essential difference. When Ranjitsinhji attempted to set aside this difference and its implicit subordination, he usually encountered resistance. This is why there was such reluctance to let him play cricket in the first place, and why his assertive behaviour on the imperial stage generated so much hostility among the British in India.

This is also why Ranjitsinhji's encounter with imperial England generated within him infatuation and anger in equal measures. That contradictory response, after all, lies at the very heart of the colonial experience. For the most part, the many myths of Ranjitsinhji served him well, just as post-colonial South Asians have benefited from the perpetuation of colonial stereotypes. Indian cricket fans of the 1960s and 1970s embraced the discourse of the 'wily' Indian spin-bowler, Imran Khan embraced the discourse of the 'wild' Pathan,<sup>62</sup> and it cannot be denied that the discourse of 'spiritual' India is good for the local economy in Benaras. Like present-day Indians, Ranjitsinhji participated actively in the making of his mythology, even though he could not always control the process of production, to say nothing of the final product. Nevertheless, like the myth of the corrupting subcontinent, with its book-keepers, dirty money, and cheating athletes, the myth of Ranji also reflected British fantasies about imperial Selves and Others: fantasies of difference, ownership, and self-congratulation.

### Notes and references

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3. *Ibid.*
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6. In the 1970s, Australian media magnate Kerry Packer lured the world's top cricketers away from their national side and paid them huge salaries to play professionally. 'World Series Cricket', as Packer's scheme was called, severely disrupted the structure of international cricket, almost destroyed the system of national teams, and led to a new commercialization of the game. It was seen by many as the triumph of money over patriotic duty.
7. 'Bodyline' refers to the tactics used by the England captain, Douglas Jardine, to defeat Australia in 1933. Jardine's deliberate use of physical intimidation was widely seen as contrary to the 'gentlemanly' spirit of the game, and nearly caused a diplomatic rift between England and Australia.
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21. *Ibid.*, pp 36–37.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, pp 50–52.
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25. Wild, *op cit*, Ref 16, p 43.
26. *Ibid.*, pp 103–104.
27. Haley, *op cit*, Ref 18, p 4.
28. James, *op cit*, Ref 8, pp 225–252.

29. Sandiford, *op cit*, Ref 5, p 36.
30. In 1992, the Pakistani cricket team was accused by English press of tampering with the ball in order to gain an unfair advantage. In an intensely acrimonious debate over race, culture, and sporting ethics, not only the tabloid press, but senior members of the England side and cricket administrators proclaimed that the tourists had 'cheated' to win, and implied (inaccurately) that ball-tampering was a peculiarly Pakistani habit. See Marqusee, *op cit*, Ref 9, pp 153–183.
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