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Politics of Leisure in Colonial India

'Lagaan': Invocation of a Lost history?

It is possible to read in 'Lagaan' not only evidence of Indian resistance to British imperialism but in the filmic and imaginative mode, a commentary on the evolution and development of cricket in colonial India and an attempt to recover, in fiction, some of the lost history of the game.

BORIA MAJUMDAR

I

Cricket is a fascinating subject but Indian cricket is more so because of the peculiar traits of the Indian people who play it. On the field of play the Indian, it has been correctly said, is a split second sooner in sighting the ball. His reflex is quicker and his wrists more flexible and pliant than those of his, say, English counterpart... That is why you see a Nayadu or a Constantine doing the 'impossible' things – things that shock the orthodox mind. "It's not done", they say, brought up as they are in the exactitudes of the cricketing science. They forget, though, that cricket is after all, a game and a game does not remain quite a game if it does not bring out the characteristics of an individual as much of a nation. That is why a Ranji or a Duleep, schooled in the exact science as is taught an Englishman, nevertheless revealed his national traits, unconsciously perhaps, in a flick here or a tap there which were peculiarly native but which became great contributions to the game itself. To point this out is not to extol the Indian at cricket as against others, just as Gandhiji's loin cloth does not necessarily constitute the ideal in the Indian national dress nor an example to the rest of the world. Yet, both are significant; they reveal the nation through the game or through the kit – for the better or for the worse.¹

A three hour 42 minute film with a budget of Rs 25 crore, Aamir Khan² and Asutosh Gowariker's³ 'Lagaan'⁴ has been accepted as one of the most successful Bollywood⁵ blockbusters of recent years, both in India and abroad. The film's success, as I see it, goes much beyond the fantastic camera work, gripping story line and melodious music. As a sport historian, working on the historical centrality of cricket in Indian socio-economic and political life, I read 'Lagaan' not simply as a lore of Indian resistance to British imperialism, or the victory of rural soli-

arity against the might of the colonial state. 'Lagaan', for me is a commentary, in the filmic and imaginative mode, on the evolution and development of cricket in colonial India. In the last scene of the film, there is a voice-over by Amitabh Bachchan⁶, lamenting that despite his valour on the sporting field, Bhuvan, the central character in the film, has been relegated to the dusty shelves of newspaper archives, a very apt comment on the lost history of our de facto national game⁷. In this paper, I draw on the representations of the game in the film to comment on the lost realities of Indian cricket, facts largely ignored in existing historiography on the subject.⁸ Furthermore, 'Lagaan' helps rectify certain conventional wisdoms about the evolution of cricket in India, viewing it as more than an aristocratic pastime of certain elite groups.

II

'Lagaan' goes deep into the psyche of the Indian masses. It brings together the two most potent components of Indian cultural life – the magic of Hindi cinema and the excitements of the game of cricket, told against the setting of the traditional Indian village. It is therefore a collage of the most powerful elements in Indian mass culture, a colourful and patriotic tale of the glories of Indian cricket, told through the medium of Hindi cinema. The infallibility of this formula is not accidental. Hindi films and cricket are pillars of Indian public culture, and unlike other 'cricketing' films⁹ which have failed miserably at the box-office; the success of 'Lagaan' has accrued from an ideal blending of the two.

Set in 1893, 'Lagaan' is the tale of a team of village men playing cricket against an oppressive colonial regime in the village of Champaner in Kutch to save their lives, families and land. At the outset of the film, captain Russell the arrogant British army officer in charge of the cantonment at

Champaner is outraged that a young, spirited, peasant boy, Bhuvan, describes cricket as 'feringhee' version of 'gilli danda',¹⁰ a game which he, Bhuvan, has played since he was a child. Captain Russell challenges Bhuvan in the presence of the provincial Raja and the rest of the villagers to beat the English team in a cricket match, failing which the entire province would be charged three times their share of annual tax or 'Lagaan'. Should these country bumpkins succeed in the impossible task of defeating the English team, their taxes, and those of the entire province shall be revoked for three years. With the odds so heavily against him, since twice the tax was already upon the village, Bhuvan accepts the challenge notwithstanding opposition from his fellow villagers.

The cricket match thus becomes an arena for asserting indigenous strength against the might of the colonial state. The sporting prowess of the villagers and their ultimate victory help them emphasise that their 'Indian' identity was in no way inferior to the whites'. Native mastery of the colonial sport of cricket emerges as the leveler between the coloniser and the colonised. The film however, goes beyond the cricket field. The aspirations of the village of Champaner to enjoy their own agricultural produce, the victory of rural goodness over imperial craftiness can be seen as an evocation of a Gandhian critique. Champaner becomes a filmic embodiment of a pristine village community, untainted by the vices of industrial modernity. The Indian farmer takes centre-stage in the film, emerging as a modern citizen asserting his right of self-determination by successfully ousting the foreigner from his domain.

Indeed there is an element of the 'feel good' of the Bollywood blockbuster genre ('Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander', 'Ghulam') to the plot. But, there is much more in the film that distinguishes it from other representatives of this genre. Released in the first year of the new millennium, 'Lagaan'

captures the pulse of the Indian nation state. It is a nationalist tale depicted via the fortunes of the country's most popular game. To this extent, the film is a first and crucial cinematic tribute to India's buried cricket history.

III

Historians of the game in India¹¹ have always attempted to represent cricket as a sport appropriated from the British rulers as part of an emulative enterprise. The close links, if any, between cricket and nationalism are seen as a very contemporary phenomenon. That the two could be linked historically is still seen as an unfounded and fallacious proposition, as evidenced by the following description by Richard Cashman:

Indian nationalism was less radical, in a cultural sense, than Irish where the nationalists attacked cricket and other English sports as objectionable elements of colonial culture and patronised Gaelic sports instead. The Indian nationalist leaders attacked the political and economic aspects of British imperialism but retained an affection for some aspects of English culture.¹²

This passage makes it clear that the notion of cricket being appropriated for purposes of resistance against the colonial state remains largely ignored in existing historiography. A closer look into the archives of Indian cricket reveals an entirely different story. The first Indians who played cricket were the Parsis of Bombay, an educated, prosperous and westernised community.¹³ As Ramchandra Guha writes, "In the 1830s Parsi boys began imitating white soldiers, improvising the implements of cricket by using hats as wickets, umbrellas as bats, and old leather stuffed with rags and sewn up, as balls. In 1848 these boys (now men) established the Oriental Cricket Club. At least thirty Parsi Clubs were formed in the 1850s and 1860s. They were named for British viceroys and statesmen and for Roman Gods: Gladstone, Elgin, Ripon, Jupiter and Mars".¹⁴

Mankasji Kavasji Patel, one of the earliest historians of Parsi cricket suggests, the reason behind this early patronage was the desire of the newly emerging Parsi bourgeoisie to strengthen its ties with the colonial state. Parsi intellectuals also welcomed cricketing prowess as a sign of the renewal of physical vitality of a race sapped by centuries in tropical climes.¹⁵

From these descriptions, it appears that the primary factors that stimulated the Parsi initiative were the community's posses-

sion of capital, its western education and an urge for social mobility within the colonial framework. All these factors it may be noted were also present among other Indian communities in the early 19th century. Yet, they did not take to cricket until the 1880s and 1890s. As a result, the explanations advanced in existing historiography fail to successfully account for the origins of the game in India. How was it that the Parsis, who, while they displayed the same characteristics as many others, were the only ones who started playing organised cricket in the early 19th century, while it was only in the later years of the 19th century that the game was taken up by the rest of the country? Generalisations, on the basis of the Parsi experience, such as the ones documented above, fail to take into account the complex historical reasons that spurred the introduction of cricket in the rest of the country. Accordingly, regional variations need to be taken into account in order to invoke what is now a lost history of the game.

IV

In many ways the story of Indian cricket as told in 'Lagaan' brings light to the lost history of how other Indian groups started playing the game, often for reasons more complex than simply trying to emulate the British. Furthermore, the Parsi initiative, a deeper probe reveals, also started to have nationalist resonances in course of time. Interestingly, in 'Lagaan' the match is played in 1893, just a couple of years after the Parsis had defeated the touring British side led by G F Vernon in a game witnessed by over 12,000 spectators in Bombay. This game, as indicated in contemporary records generated considerable patriotic fervour all over the country.¹⁶ As in the film, in this historic match against the Parsis, the British complained about the bowling action of an Indian bowler, H Modi, who continued to bowl in the rest of the match, as does Goli¹⁷ in 'Lagaan'.¹⁸ That cricket was much more than an emulative enterprise, even for the Parsis, becomes clear from a close analysis of the early histories of Parsi cricket:

The Parsis have proved that Indians possess physical and moral qualities which, under given circumstances stand favourable comparison with those which the Europeans themselves possess.¹⁹

When Bhuvan, played by Aamir Khan in the film, appears on screen having marshaled his team of local villagers to take on the whites, the audience holds its breath. The one hour 40 minute match becomes the site for an assertion of racial

superiority. As Guran, the village godman,²⁰ plays an impossible shot hitting the ball over the wicketkeeper the audience erupts with joy. This shot can easily be perceived as that 'moment of departure',²¹ when an indigenous brand of Indian nationalism takes off. When Deva²² hurls his deliveries at an English batsman, nationalism is at its 'moment of arrival'.²³ The colonial mission of importing sport as a civilising tool is successfully turned on its head. A non-violent arena of assertion, cricket is successfully transformed into a tool to subvert colonial rule.

'Lagaan' also leads us to rethink certain claims that have been made on behalf of nationalism; namely that it arose in the 'spiritual' realm of society.²⁴ Yet, in many ways the process of cricket's appropriation in the film resembles a 'derivative discourse'. What marks the experience shown in the film as singular is that although it manifests itself in the arena of leisure, it is not leisure of the kind that earned much ridicule for the Indians in the first half of the 19th century. There was none of the frivolity associated with leisure activities like cockfights, pigeon racing, kite flying in playing games like cricket and football. Its substance was political—a politics typical of colonial conditions and a rapidly westernising society.

An almost identical inning as the one played by Bhuvan, was played in reality by C K Nayadu against the touring MCC side led by Arthur Gilligan in 1926-27. This inning of 153 by Nayadu against the British, symbolic of Indian cricketing prowess has now become part of our cricket lore. The following description of this inning by Edward Docker testifies this point:

Nayadu played circumspectly forward to two balls from Boyes then danced out to the next one and hit it back over the bowler's head and onto the pavilion roof. The crowd was stunned. Was that the first six ever hit by an Indian batsman against the MCC? How would the bowlers react to that? The next over Jai played quietly though the restless murmuring of the crowd and Boyes bowled again to Nayadu. Crack! Another six, this time to the right of the pavilion and not only did the ground burst into a tremendous sustained roar but even the umpires were seen to clap vigorously. At the other end now the same treatment was meted out to a still – two balls met defensively, the next one despatched over the sight screen and onto the maidan... It was amazing how fast the news spread, considering the city was still without a wireless set. When Nayadu and Mahale returned to the wicket after lunch every tree was black with human spectators, every roof top that commanded even a

partial or distant view of the game.²⁵

The huge crowd that had gathered to watch the proceedings of the match in the film comprised villagers from all over the province. People had occupied all possible vantage-points celebrating every single hit by Bhuvan in a manner almost identical to the above description.

The introduction of cricket in the film, as a sport played by the whites and watched by the Indian aristocracy, is exactly the story of the way in which the game took roots in India in the second half of the 19th century. It was not until the mid/late 19th century that the Indians had started playing the game on an organised basis.

The following passage in an European travelogue, (1843) is telling of the English monopoly over the game of cricket:

In such a climate as that of India those who have never entered through the *ghauts* of Calcutta might conclude that no such laborious sport as cricket would be pursued there. Yet if the voyager arrived during the comparatively cold season and land in the evening at the Chandpal Ghat, he will at once ascend to the first view of the City of Palaces, looking upon it across a plain forming the most magnificent cricket ground in the world, and where the Calcutta Club play regularly. On the cricket ground stand two spacious tents, not like the paltry affairs bearing that name in England, but lined with fancy chintz, furnished with looking glasses, sofas, chairs and each player's wants are supplied by his turbaned attendants whether it be a light for his cigar, iced soda water or champagne. The natives do not at all enter into the pleasures of this manly game, neither do the servants of the players, if desired to stop a stray ball, think it at all meritorious to risk stinging their fingers by stopping it while in motion, they amble by its side until it has ceased rolling and then pick it up.²⁶

From this account it is clear that Indians stayed away from this sport until the mid-19th century.

The description of the game in the film as being similar to the Indian game of 'gilli danda', also finds striking parallels with a description of cricket in the first ever tract on the sport written in Bengali in 1890:

Bengali boys who have not seen or played danda gulli are very rare. Cricket can be justifiably described as a variant of danda gulli. However, like the great difference in the Bengali and Sahib way of eating fish, there is an even greater difference between the Bengali and Sahib version of danda gulli. While the playing of danda gulli is a very trivial pursuit for the Bengali, for the Sahib, cricket is a national treasure. The respect accorded to a good cricket player by the Sahibs finds no parallel.²⁷

Again, the initial objection by most members of the Champaner team to the

inclusion of Kachra, the local 'achhoot',²⁸ parallels the way dalit and low caste cricketers like Baloo and Semper in Bombay and Mani Das in Bengal were treated by their counterparts.

Like Bhuvan, there were 19th century figures like Nagendraprasad Sarbadhikary²⁹ who voiced a critique of caste-based discrimination in the arena of sports. Nagendraprasad belonged to an orthodox Hindu family. Who while establishing a series of sporting clubs, chose to ignore all caste prejudices. His staunch position against the discriminatory actions based on caste status is clearest in the incident surrounding the induction of a potter's son into the Wellington Club. The club had a membership of nearly 500 from all classes of society. When Nagendraprasad wanted to induct Mani Das, a potter's son, the richer members protested vehemently. Nagendraprasad refused to buckle under the pressure arguing that a sporting association should be free of any prejudice and decided to dismantle the Wellington Club.

Greatly irked by the intrigues carried on behind his back, Nagendraprasad dissolved the Wellington Club and by combining the various sporting clubs he had established – The Boys Sporting Club, Friends Club, Presidency Club, the erstwhile Wellington Club – founded the Sovabazar Sporting Club. Mani Das, whose proposed induction was the cause behind the dismantling of the Wellington Club was one of the first members of the Sovabazar Club. He later distinguished himself as one of the best cricketers of the Mohun Bagan Club.³⁰ This attempt by Nagendraprasad to free sports of caste prejudices in the 1880s was the first of its kind in India.

Soon after this, in the 1890s, Baloo,³¹ a left arm slow spin bowler, (as is Kachra in the film, except that he bowls right-handed) and a chammar by birth, was inducted into the upper caste Hindu team.³² Kachra's inclusion into the Champaner team, an act justified by his skill in spinning the ball and symbolic of a triumph of meritocracy is an episode reminiscent of the ascendancy of Moni Das in Bengal and Baloo in Bombay, players who were eventually looked upon with great respect.

The champion bowler of the Hindus is Baloo, a chammaar. Indeed it is not Bombay that rubbed of this caste exclusiveness. Years back Baloo was a bowler in the Poona European Gymkhana. The Poona Hindus who consisted mostly of upper caste Hindus found that chammar though Baloo was his inclusion in the Hindu team would improve matters considerably. With the pluck and spirit which the Poona Hindus of the 1890's had, they admitted

him as their member and so far pollution from touch with a low caste went, the plucky brahmins of Poona gave the slip to orthodoxy.³³

At the beginning of the match in 'Lagaan', when the Champaner men are still unaccustomed with the norms of fielding, the entire village team runs after the ball when a stroke is played. This image of a group of Indians running wildly are described in Indian cricket tracts of the late 19th century:

I have noticed that in India while the players can bat fairly well, their standard of fielding is considerably lower than that of the sahibs. The sahibs do not miss a single ball. It is as if they know beforehand which way the ball will travel. It is never the case that all fielders run after a ball. In contrast to this, in India it is often noticeable that five or more fielders run after a ball. On other occasions all fielders stand rooted to their positions while the ball goes past. Owing to this uncontrolled physical exhaustion our (Indian) players often get tired after half an hour.³⁴

The way the village team is formed, symbolising a process of indigenisation and appropriation of a colonial sport, replicates the trajectory of the development of cricket in India. By the early years of the 20th century, Indian cricket had brought within its fold a number of lower and lower middle class Indians. While leading players like Lala Amarnath and D D Hindelkar came from a family of farmers, Amir Elahi was the son of a butcher.³⁵

The 'dhotis' and 'kurtas' in which the villagers played in the film is also based on historical fact. There are a number of accounts mentioning Indians playing the game clad in dhotis, a fact leading to major clashes with the British. In a match between Mohun Bagan Club and the Calcutta Cricket Club on January 3, 1931 the game had to be abandoned because the Indians were insulted by the British governor R B Lagden on account of their clothing. The Indians, demanding an apology from Lagden, refused to play. Since no apology was forthcoming, the match was abandoned.³⁶ Six months later a similar incident occurred in a match between the Vidyasagar College and the Calcutta Cricket Club. Matters of clothing also led to clashes among the Indians themselves. In Bombay it led to major ill-feeling between the Hindus and the Parsis. The Hindu boys played in dhotis, without shoes or boots, bowled underhand and made all the mistakes of novices. Parsi players, far more advanced by then, ridiculed the Hindus for their dress and style of play.

This episode, the *Indian Social Reformer* states, resulted in bad blood between the two communities.³⁷

Finally, as evident from the film, history reveals that by the second half of the 19th century it had become imperative on the part of the Indians to devise effective strategies to counter the excessive demands of colonialism. However, just as in the village, there were several constraints upon their conduct, for such strategising had to be done from within a society where the physical expression of such actions would be severely suppressed. Sports became the arena in which this heavily politicised, but veiled strategising took place. We may date this phenomenon to the 1880s and 1890s when sports rooted in physical culture, which was earlier deemed insignificant, became an integral part of the Indian identity. This fact is reiterated in the introductory speech by H E Stapleton, I E S M L C director of public instruction, Bengal on the occasion of the opening of the Government Training Centre for Physical Education, Ballygunge, Calcutta. July 1932:

I have been surprised to find how few facts are available as to the early development of interest in games and physical training. Prior to 1890 there seems to have been little public interest in the matter, even in Calcutta, and it is only during the twenty years between 1890 and 1910 that interest seems to have been gradually aroused. Taking football first, the earliest competition began in 1889 when the Trades Cup was presented. This was won by St Xavier's in 1893, by the medical college in 1894 and 1895, 1903 and 1904 and on three subsequent occasions by the Shibpur Engineering College in 1896, 1901 and 1905. It was not however till 1893 and 1894 the football began to play a prominent part in the life of the city of Calcutta, the Indian Football Association being established in 1893, in which year also the Cooch Behar Cup for Indian teams was presented: while the Elliot Challenge Shield for Indian students of schools and colleges was presented in 1894. This proved to be of greatest use in encouraging the development of students interest in games and the names of nearly all the leading Calcutta colleges appear in the list of winners.³⁸

V

However, the cultivation of masculine strength by participating in indigenous sports like wrestling and body-building soon came to be regarded as insufficient to counter the politics of the colonial state. Drawing upon the political controversies of the 1880s it is clear that the charge of

effeteness levelled against the Indian male remained rampant well into the late 19th century.³⁹

It was precisely this failure to secure acceptance in European eyes that led the patrons of sport, who had hitherto taken the lead in acquiring physical prowess, to shift their focus to European sports like cricket and football. The importance of European sports in the closing decades of the 19th century is also evident from the numerous advertisements published in the newspapers of the 1880s and 1890s.⁴⁰ Marketing and promotional strategies were made full use of demonstrating the element of competitiveness among the various concerns.⁴¹ Indian enterprise in this field may be dated back to 1895 with Saradaranjan Ray establishing 'S Ray and Co'.

This turn to 'European sport' came at a very difficult moment in the post-mutiny period when Indian military initiatives were crushed and most of the wars of annexation had been won by the Raj, which was more secure than ever in its paramouncy. This was no time for the disarmed and defeated subject population to flaunt its armed strength. It was a time to propagate 'charitrabal' (strength of character) rather than 'bahubal' (physical might). The Indians, barred from staging violent demonstrations or other acts that would physically challenge British superiority naturally looked upon 'leisure' pursuits with new eyes. This factor clearly distinguishes Indian sports from their English counterparts. Colonialism and the realities of being a subject population were the conditions that made possible the origins of Indian cricket and informed its development and evolution.

The portrayal of a cricket match played by country folk becoming an arena of nationalist assertion is unthinkable in the British context. British village cricket has always been valorised and glorified for being untainted by the rigours of industrialisation, commercialisation and politicking.⁴² In India however, in the late 19th century, leisure settings helped provide an exciting imaginary where a certain role reversal from real life occurred. Imitation of real life political encounters between the coloniser and colonised was key, but minus the attendant dangers and risks which would otherwise characterise these situations.

By the 1890s it was felt that mastery in the manly (manly by European standards) sports could be an effective reply to colonial exploitation. This veiled political motive lay at the root of the flourishing

of Indian cricket in the late 19th century. It was believed that a display of talent in English games like cricket would infuse in the Indians a sense of pride and purpose, helping in articulating the desperation in the Indian soul.

Even children imbibed this feeling of superiority that came from victory in competitions against the coloniser. A passage from the contemporary Bengali journal *Sakha* is redolent with these sentiments: The editor recalls a conversation he had one evening with a 'young friend' who reported with glee that he had successfully beaten the 'sahib' in a game of 'bat-ball':

"I wondered", he writes, "what is so great about defeating the sahibs? Boys of all nations indulge in play. So what is it that has marked out English boys as superior to their young counterparts especially the Bengalis?"

"The answer lies in the fact that while the sahibs play these manly games almost regularly, Bengalis are averse to any form of physical exhaustion. Since the sahibs practice athletics, cricket, etc, their bodies are strong and they acquire skills which cannot be matched by the natives. Manly sports are therefore an exclusive English preserve. It is precisely the act of having defeated the overlord on his own ground that filled his young friend with such glee."⁴³

From this account it is evident that the act of defeating the sahibs at their own game was considered no mean achievement, and had already filtered down to the Bengalis by the mid-1880s.

It is important to note here that the above analysis of the appropriation of European sport by the Indians, might seemingly portray the entire exercise as a limited enterprise. It appears that this process was spurred by a desire to simply defeat the sahibs at their own game. The picture, however, is much more complex, and to capture its nuances we need to look at the manner in which Indians devoted themselves to sport organisation in the closing decades of the 19th century. For instance, the flowering of club and local cricket highlights a complex psychological investment in the adoption of European sports. The growing patronage of cricket clubs by the Indians was closely linked with perceptions of fashioning a new identity for the Indian male. This becomes clear from an analysis of the motives of the Indians who played against an Australian team in Calcutta in 1885:

The visit in the past of Lord Hawke's team to India is of great interest to cricket historians specially in Bengal. While in Calcutta, His Lordship evinced great eagerness to play against a Bengali team. Before this, Bengali Cricketers played against a

team of Gentlemen Cricketers who came to Calcutta from Australia, not indeed for the purpose of playing there but on important business errand in connection with Calcutta International Exhibition of 1885. Amongst them there was one Shand a resourceful lefthand bowler. It was a twelve a side game – the result being a drawn one. The Bengali team was skippered by N P Sarbadhikary. This was before the Parsis played against any foreign team in Bombay.⁴⁴

In this match the performance of the Bengali cricketers was so commendable that they were invited to a party by His Excellency Rear Admiral Free Mantle of the battleship H M S Bodecia, something unheard of in contemporary Indian society.⁴⁵

The above episode shows that the Indians' hopes that prowess in manly games would enhance their social respectability, were at least, partly fulfilled. A letter to Nagendraprasad Sarbadhikary from Lord Hawke attests to the recognition which the Bengalis earned from the colonial rulers:

Dear Sarbadhikary, Please accept my heartiest congratulations. European sports in India have a brief lineage, more so for a costly sport like cricket which has barely begun here; but your phenomenal talent has ensured that your name is not unknown in distant England.⁴⁶

VI

Thus, as depicted in 'Lagaan', the origin and development of Indian cricket can only be meaningfully analysed by placing it against the wider political canvas of the colonial state. This is not to say that one can read a straightforward narrative of the rise, spread and flowering of anti-European sentiment into sports. Existing historiography of cricket in India reads very much like a simple narrative of transposition wherein the specificity of the game itself is lost, and it can easily be replaced with matters such as western education or Indian entry into the civil service and still make as much sense! Further, the indigenous adoption of European sport was not simply an act of mimicry⁴⁷ (understood in the literal sense of the term) which would have invariably brought in its wake an allegation of not quite, not white. Its roots went much deeper – into certain ideas of self-cultivation, manliness and self-worth. Cricket was played not simply to facilitate social mobility. Rather, the game became a mirror through which an Indian identity assessed itself, and in this respect the appropriation of European sports by the Indians can be seen as early breeding grounds of nationalism.

Aside from the political character, another significant aspect of cricket was that it was characterised by none of the violence that was associated with other proto-nationalist endeavors which led to their failure and suppression. Sports is a sphere of competition rather than violence. This fact made early European sports in India a safe haven wherein feelings of self-worth and strength of character could be articulated without the tension and fury that would accompany such articulation in the 'political' sphere. I would argue that these covert yet deeply politicised moorings of cricket gave it a longevity and tenaciousness found missing from indigenous sports.

It is not only on account of its worth as a game per se, but on account of the political message that was so inextricably linked to it from the beginning, that cricket has endured on Indian soil. As 'Lagaan' justifiably demonstrates, Indian cricket was always imbued with meaning whose roots went beyond the sporting arena. A narrative of the origin of cricket on Indian soil makes sense only when we take into account the colonial context and read the trajectory of the spread of a cricketing culture in terms of power equations between the coloniser and the colonised.

VII

'Lagaan' is also a comment on the broader history of the game. Even though the film rather anachronistically situates the menace of match fixing in the Indian context in the late 19th century, Lakha's sabotaging of own his side⁴⁸ (his reasons are different of course) finds many parallels in late 19th and early 20th century discourses on the game's history.

Corruption and vice in cricket can be traced back to the early 1740s. S M Toyne establishes this fact in his *The Early History of Cricket*. He writes:

After the game had become fashionable in the 1740s betting rose to fantastic sums of one thousand pounds or more. Of one match it has been stated that the side bets among spectators and players totaled twenty thousand pounds. In the early part of the 19th century the game itself was in danger of ruin since it had become the chief medium for national gambling. Bookmakers attended the matches, odds were called as the fortunes of the game fluctuated, and side bets on the score of individual players led to bribery and cheating. One noted player took hundred pounds to lose a match...Even the Hambledon club was said to have usually staked five hundred pounds on each match.⁴⁹

Even the practice of sledging, articulated beautifully in the film, had already reached

a sophisticated form by the 1890s under figures like W G Grace.⁵⁰ Yet, the notions of virtue, fair play and sportsmanship displayed by the older generation of English officers and umpires in the film, helping to bring about the eventual victory of the Champaner team reflects why cricket continues to be labelled a gentleman's game.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the release of 'Lagaan' coincided with a period of renewed interest in Indian cricket. If the film had been released even a year before it did, its marketability would have been marred by the scandals of match-fixing circulating in the Indian cricket world⁵¹. But with victories over the mighty Australians⁵² and a test win in Zimbabwe,⁵³ Indian cricket had certainly emerged from the shackles of match fixing.⁵⁴ This close linkage between commerce and leisure in the Indian context, a fact evident from the timing of the film's release, is yet another factor that makes 'Lagaan' worthy of study. [27]

Notes

- 1 Berry Sarbadhikary, *Indian Cricket Uncovered*, Calcutta, Illustrated News, 1945.
- 2 The film's producer and lead actor.
- 3 The director of the film.
- 4 Released in June, 2001, the title 'Lagaan' designates the annual tax to be paid to the colonial state by the village.
- 5 Derived from Hollywood – a name by which the Mumbai film industry is commonly known.
- 6 Megastar of Hindi cinema. Has been nominated superstar of the last millennium.
- 7 While hockey is the de jure national game of the country, cricket has over the years marginalised hockey in the Indian sporting hierarchy. This fact becomes evident from a comparison of the earnings and iconic status of cricketers and hockey players, as also the statistics of spectatorship of the two sports.
- 8 Ram Chandra Guha, 'Cricket and Politics in Colonial India', *Past and Present*, November 1998; Edward Docker, *History of Indian Cricket*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1976; Richard Cashman, *Patrons, Players and the Crowd*, Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1979; Mario Rodrigues, *Statesman*, Calcutta, November 1, 1997, Vasant Rajji, *India's Hambledon Men*, Tyeby Press, Bombay, 1986; Mihir Bose, *History of Indian Cricket*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1990.
- 9 Earlier films on cricket like 'Kabhi Ajnabi The' which starred Indian cricketer Sundeep Patil, 'All Rounder' and 'Awwal Number' which starred Aamir Khan had all failed in the box office.
- 10 A local Indian game played with a thick stick and a wooden ball similar in shape to a rugby ball, though smaller in size. This game was extremely popular among the rural Indian youth upto the 1950s and 1960s. The player uses the stick to raise the ball in the air and then to hit it with all his might. If the fielder catches it the hitter is out. If the fielder fails to catch the ball the hitter continues with his stint. A certain score is agreed upon by the players before the start of the match. Whoever achieves it first is the winner.
- 11 Ram Chandra Guha, 1998 op cit, Edward Docker, 1976 op cit; Richard Cashman, 1979 op cit; Mario Rodrigues, 1997, op cit.

- 12 Richard Cashman, 1979 *ibid*, pp. 22-23.
- 13 Ram Chandra Guha, 1998 *op cit*, Edward Docker, 1976 *op cit*; Richard Cashman, 1979 *op cit*; Mario Rodrigues, 1997 *op cit*.
- 14 Ram Chandra Guha, 1998, *ibid*, pp 158-59.
- 15 Cf Mankasji Kawasji Patel, *A History of Parsi Cricket*, Bombay 1892.
- 16 The Parsi victory led to major celebrations in Bengal. The contemporary Bengali journals, *Sakha*, *Pradip*, are full of praise for the Parsis urging the Bengalis to gear themselves up in trying to achieve a similar feat.
- 17 One of the villagers who plays for Bhuvan's team.
- 18 For a detailed analysis of this controversy see *The Times of India*, January 1890.
- 19 Cf Mankasji Kawasji Patel, 1892 *op cit*; Quoted in M E Pavri, *Parsi Cricket*, Bombay: J B Marzban and company. Steam Printing Works, 1901, p 38
- 20 The astrologer of the village who would predict the future of the villagers, suggesting remedies for forthcoming misfortunes.
- 21 Partha Chatterjee, 'Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World', *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, OUP, 1999.
- 22 Deva Singh Sodhi; the Sikh from Dhaulpur who had earlier played cricket for the British army and had already mastered the game. He joined Bhuvan's team declaring that whether it is the battlefield or the cricket field he was always ready to take on the oppressive colonial state. His inclusion into the Champaner team considerably increased its strength.
- 23 Partha Chatterjee, 1999, *op cit*.
- 24 See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Fragments', in *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, OUP, 1999, Chatterjee's argument by now well known in Indian historiography is about a discursive distinction between the material and spiritual realms of society. The former coincides with the world of work, money, commerce and politics while the latter refers to the home, religiosity and family. Nationalist men, being overshadowed by the coloniser in the material realm asserted their sovereignty first in the spiritual sphere which became the site for the take off of nationalist impulses.
- 25 Edward Docker, *History of Indian Cricket*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1976, pp 2-3.
- 26 George W Johnson, *Three Years in Calcutta, Or Stranger in India*, London, 1843, pp 60-63. This fact also becomes clear from other accounts of cricket published in the sports magazines of the day, *Bengal Quarterly Sporting Magazine*, Calcutta, 1828; *India Sporting Review*, Calcutta, 1845.
- 27 Saradaranjan Ray, *Cricket khela*, Mukul, 1890, reprinted in Siddhartha Ghosh and Prasad-ranjan Ray, *Cricket Major Cricket*, Saibya Prakashani: Calcutta, 1999, pp 130-136.
- 28 The untouchable, whose touch it was believed would pollute the ritual purity of upper-caste villagers.
- 29 Leading Bengali social reformer and sporting patron of the late 19th century.
- 30 Saurindra Kumar Ghosh, *Krida Samrat Nagendra Prasad Sarbadhikary 1869-1940*, Calcutta, 1964, p 120.
- 31 Born in Dharwad in 1875, Palwankar Baloo a chammar by birth had become the leading Indian bowler by the time of the English tour of 1911. His brothers, Vithal, Shivram and Ganpat were all leading players of the day. Vithal also captained the Hindu team in the Bombay Pentangular tournament in 1923.
- 32 'Hindu Cricket', *The Indian Social Reformer* - 1906, p 292.
- 33 *Ibid*.
- 34 *Bilate Cricket Khela*, Hemchandra Sarkar, Pradip, 1898, pp 393-96.
- 35 'Social Background of Indian Test Players', Richard Cashman, 1979 *op cit*, pp 173-89.
- 36 *Anandabazar Patrika*, January 3, 1930.
- 37 'Hindu Cricket', *The Indian Social Reformer*-1906, p 292.
- 38 *St Xavier's Magazine*, St Xavier's College, Calcutta, 1932, p 70.
- 39 John Roselli, 'Self Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in *Past and Present*, 86 (February 1980), pp 121-48; Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity, The manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995.
- 40 For advertisements on cricket and football see the *Statesman*, *The Times of India*.
- 41 *The Statesman*, Calcutta, January 22, 1901. The text of the advertisement reads: 'Cricket bats', ours are the cheapest, because they are priced the lowest and last the longest and because with every bat above 10 we give a superfine quality extra stout rubber bat handle free. S Ray & Co, 62, Bowbazar Street, Calcutta, patronised by the Calcutta Cricket Club.
- 42 In all monographs on British cricket, village cricket is glorified as an ideal, far removed from the vices of industrialisation. For one of the best illustrations of village cricket see Hugh De Selincourt, *A Cricket Match*, Oxford University Press, 1979.
- 43 *Sakha*, Volume 12, December, 1883.
- 44 Eskari, *Hitabadi Sporting Souvenir*, 1935; Saurindra Kumar Ghosh, *Krida Samrat Nagendra Prasad Sarbadhikary 1869-1940*, Calcutta, 1964, pp 125-26. This is a startling fact for recorded history regards the Parsis to have been the first Indian team to have played an international match during their tour of England in 1886. Vasant Rajji, *India's Humbledon Men*, Tyeb Press, Bombay, 1986; Mario Rodrigues, *The Statesman*, Calcutta, November 1, 1997; Mihir Bose, *History of Indian Cricket*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1990.
- 45 *Ibid*, p 126.
- 46 *Ibid*, p 128.
- 47 For an entirely different understanding of mimicry, see, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994.
- 48 Lakha, another member of the village team, jealous of Bhuvan enters into an understanding with the English captain to sabotage his side. He was in love with Gauri, the village girl who in turn liked Bhuvan over him, forcing Lakha to resort to unsportsman like behaviour.
- 49 S M Toyne, *The Early History of Cricket*. For an analysis on the corruption and vice plaguing cricket from the mid 18th century, see Boria Majumdar, 'Indian Cricket - Myths and Reality', *Outlook*, March 7, 2001.
- 50 There are a series of stories about W G and his ways on the field. A story goes that on one occasion he was all praise for the bright weather upon which a young batsman who was batting looked up to the sky to appreciate the glories of the sun. With the sun in his eyes he was soon bowled allowing W G to have the last laugh. Despite many other similar instances WG is hailed as the father of cricket and the best gentleman cricketer ever. There are a series of stories about W G and his ways on the field. On one occasion he was all praise for the weather upon which a young batsman who was batting looked up to he sky to appreciate the glories of the sun. With the sun in his eyes he was bowled allowing WG to have the last laugh.
- 51 After the match fixing controversy had come to light, there were wild speculations across the world as to whether the death warrant of cricket had been signed. Indian cricket had lost its credibility and cricket's popularity all over the world had taken a nosedive. For an exposition of these sentiments see Rudrangshu Mukherji, *The Telegraph*, November 4, 2000.
- 52 June 2001. This was India's first test win abroad since a solitary win against Sri Lanka in 1993.
- 53 In one of the most keenly fought test series on Indian soil India defeated the Australians 2-1 in a three test series played in February-March 2001.
- 54 Boria Majumdar, 'Cricket Remains Gulliver', *Outlook*, April 10, 2001, 'Cricket abar Madhyagagane', *Anandabazar Patrika*, March 27, 2001.

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