

CRICKET ON THE SUBCONTINENT.

A Review Article

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Mihir Bose, *A History of Indian Cricket*. Andre Deutsch, London, 1990. Appendices, illus., index, pp. 571. £19.95.

Mike Coward, *Cricket Beyond the Bazaar*, Allen & Unwin, N Sydney, 1990. Illus., index, statistics, pp.178. \$25.95.

Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games*. Penguin, New Delhi, 1989. Index, notes, pp.150, \$9.99.

Simon Wilde, *Ranji: A Genius Rich and Strange*, Kingswood Press, London, 1990. Illus., index, pp.257, £14.99.

The publication of these four works on cricket on the subcontinent is timely and reflects the growing importance of the subcontinent in international cricket. Prior to the 1970s India and Pakistan were part of a second division in world cricket but there has been a remarkable improvement in the standard of cricket on the subcontinent since then. India and Pakistan have been successful in two of the past three World Cups and the subcontinent was the host for the other World Cup. The improvement in the Sri Lanka side is impressive given the country's limited opportunity in international cricket.

Cricket on the subcontinent is a rich and largely untapped field of research which is now attracting some of the leading cricket journalists. Mihir Bose and Mike Coward respectively won the English and

Australian Cricket Literary Awards for their work and Simon Wilde made the short list of the British Award.

It is also interesting to note that the four books have been written by an Australian, an Englishman, an Indian based in London and domiciled Indian whose expertise is in fields other than sports history. Although cricket has put down deep roots in the subcontinent, India and the other countries of the subcontinent do not have a tradition of cricket writing. Sports history, for that matter, is still very much in its infancy though, somewhat tardily, courses have now begun to be taught at places such as the University of Baroda.

A common and rich thread which runs through all four books is that of cricket and politics. Cricket has been a focal point for all manner of politics: colonial, princely, communal, administrative (including Board versus player) and regional politics. The many configurations of politics, which are played out in the best Byzantine traditions of the subcontinent, help to explain both the variety of cricket on the subcontinent - which is an exotic but very successful bloom - and accounts for its strengths and weaknesses. The popularity of Bombay's communal tournament - consisting of competition amongst Europeans, Parsis, Hindus, Muslims and the Rest - from the 1880s to the 1940s - was a prime reason, according to Mihir Bose, for the rise of cricket to preeminence. However, the complex politics of the Indian Board of Control and its many regional power-brokers was also a prime factor for India's frequent 'roller coaster ride' - occasional outstanding success with equally spectacular failure - in international cricket.

Cricket on the subcontinent initially was very influenced and inspired by powerful colonial and imperial myths many of which found form in Ranjitsinhji (1872-1933) who was the most glittering star of cricket's so-called 'Golden Era'. While many biographers continue to churn out 'Boy's Own' hagiographies of the stars, it has become increasingly fashionable among more serious cricket writers to present their subjects 'warts and all'. Wilde's biography of Ranjitsinhji strips

away the many legends which have grown up around 'Ranji', as he came to be known. Through painstaking research Wilde disposes, one by one, of the many myths which have been perpetrated in the three previous biographies.

Behind the acclaimed modest and charming persona was a scheming, selfish and insecure individual who was frequently reckless with both his money and the truth, betraying the trust of close friends in the process. Rather than being a conscientious and progressive administrator and an ambassador between the two cultures, Wilde suggests that Ranji had a 'brazen disregard for the feelings' of both Indians and the British. Though the Indian domestic competition bears his name, Ranji contributed very little to Indian cricket. Ranji was, as Wilde puts it, 'a genius rich and strange'. He was a calculating and even ruthless individual away from cricket who was not above sharp practice on the field. He caused a stir when he 'Mankaded' a batsman in what was essentially a social game between the Maharaja's (of Patiala) team and that of the British Residents of Simla in India in 1898.

The book debunks Ranji so effectively and so remorselessly that it is unlikely to be popular in most sections of the cricket-reading public. However, there is much to admire about this book. Wilde, first of all, accepts that for all his foibles Ranji was a cricket genius, an innovative and original player who captured the imagination of the English and Imperial public of his time. The genius of Ranji becomes even more remarkable when one realises that they were achieved despite the fact that he often lived on a knife edge: he was frequently worried about debts and pursuing creditors. He was concerned over a long period about forwarding his tenuous claims for the Nawanagar gadi and, while feted in some quarters, he was the subject of racism at the same time in Victorian England.

Wilde's biography has much valuable insight into the politics of British and Imperial sport in this era. There was considerable debate about whether an Indian should play for England. The elevation of Ranji

to the English side in 1897 was equally as controversial as the election of an Indian, Dadabhai Naoroji, to the British Parliament in 1892 and racism surfaced among the members of the Marylebone Cricket Club who resented a 'nigger showing us how to play the game of cricket'.

There is also a wealth of material to suggest how important sport, and cricket, was in particular for many the officers of the Raj and the princes as well. Ranji's claim to the gadi was greatly furthered by his cricketing prowess. He was an attractive symbol both for many Indian princes and for highly-placed British civilians. To Raj official Charles Kincaid, Ranji's love of sport placed him well ahead of his predecessor to the Nawanagar gadi, Jassaji, who had not absorbed the games ethic. He later wrote that Jassaji was:

an unattractive figure. He had every advantage... Yet he never learnt to play any game properly. Nor did he ever show the least interest in sport. I, as an Agency official, attended the ceremony of installation. I well remember my disgust when I saw this loutish bastard of a lowborn concubine seated on the throne... while my unfortunate friend, the rightful heir, had not even been invited to the investiture, [p.163].

Mihir Bose, who includes a brief chapter on Ranji in *A History of Indian Cricket*, has a brief but trenchant criticism of Wilde's biography, suggesting that Wilde has gone to such lengths to demythologise Ranji that the result is an almost Machiavellian figure. Bose makes an additional and important point, that for all his obvious foibles and his seeming lack of interest in Indian cricket - when he was asked to help Indian cricket Ranji made his famous remark that 'Duleep and I are English cricketers' - Ranji was still an important and admired symbol of cricket in India. His genius, and the myths associated with his name, inspired many Indian cricketers.

While it is worthwhile to strip away the the myths about Ranji, so that we can come to terms with him as a flawed genius, it is also important not to lose sight of the potency of the myths which found in him a willing vehicle. He played at a time when cricket was becoming more popular than ever before, in Britain and the Empire, and the emerging mass media needed hero figures, such as Grace, Spofforth and Ranji. As race was an important part of the discourse of the 1890s it is not surprising that racial myths were also part of the Ranji cult: there was great emphasis on Oriental ‘magic’ and improvisation - including the famous phrase that ‘Ranji never played a Christian stroke in his life’, the suppleness of wrist and superiority of vision which were frequently considered to be Asian racial characteristics.

Ranji himself was acutely aware of the importance of image and the role of myth. No one could miss him on the cricket field in his billowing silk shirts which were buttoned to the neck. He, too, wallowed in the English respect for the exotic and aristocratic and revelled in the persona of a wealthy Indian prince when he neither had the money nor the status. Late in life he caused quite a stir when he arrived at Lord’s in 1930, in full Indian dress, jewells sparkling from his tunic and turban, virtually overshadowing his nephew, Duleepsinhji, who like Ranji scored a century in his first Test.

While this is a welcome and well-researched biography of a flawed and fascinating cricket genius, more attention could have been paid, in addition, to the imperial ideologies of cricket which Ranji encouraged through his writing and his political stance. It seems as well that Wilde has done such an outstanding ‘debunking’ of Ranji that he has lost sight of other historical possibilities which can be gleaned from a biography of this important figure. It is quite ironic that this very human and even amoral individual played an important role in the construction of a new moral universe for cricket, in that the Ranji myth was central both to the Golden era of cricket and to the spread of the game to the non-white Empire.

Ashis Nandy, author of *The Tao of Cricket*, is neither a sports historian nor a journalist. Based at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, his main works to date have been on political psychology and the cultures of science. Nandy states that 'I can at best be called a keen lay observer of India's new national game'.

This is a book which is lively, fascinating and provocative at times as the author is not afraid to make sweeping generalisations about the operation of games in the colonial, neo-colonial, anti-colonial and post-colonial consciousness. It is also fanciful, and even whimsical, such as Nandy's opening paragraph that:

Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English. Like chilli, which was discovered in South America and came to India only in medieval times to become an inescapable part of Indian cuisine, cricket, too, is now foreign to India only according to the historians and the Indologists. To most Indians the game now looks more Indian than English. They find it only natural that cricket today arouses more passions in India than in England.

While Nandy is never dull in his social observation he is glib and even pompous at times pushing his arguments well beyond his sources as befits what one might call an armchair sociologist of Indian cricket. He also allows himself to be sidetracked from his main theme. While there are some suggestive comparisons between the popularity of cricket and Hindi films and the genre of detective stories, a lengthy aside on astrology is barely relevant to the subject of the book. The concluding section represents a rather rambling statement of the cultural conservative view of Nandy's distaste for contemporary cricket, which he refers to as 'over-organized mega-sport'.

In his exploration of why cricket has developed such deep roots in India, and on the subcontinent, Nandy places a great deal of emphasis on sweeping cultural generalisations. The apparent slowness of Test

cricket was ideally suited to the '*Gita*-devouring ahistorical Indians'. The greater role of fate in cricket, as distinct from other games, is also a factor in its appeal. Nandy argues, in broader terms, that one of the cultural attractions of cricket is the 'moral universe that it invokes and sustains', such as notions of hierarchy and the 'spectacle of excess', the hero worship of cricket stars which parallels that of film stars. Nandy also reiterates the popular myth that Indian sportsmen in the past have been 'low on killer instinct'.

While there are some challenging aspects of this book, the author grossly underplays and fails to develop the role of political factors. Mihir Bose's book suggests that the popularity of cricket may be explained by more prosaic political factors: colonial and imperial Raj associations, the glamour attracted to the game by the princes, the Bombay communal tournament and the promotion of the game by the Parsis. Bose suggests, for instance, that cricket had advantages over other sports, such as hockey and soccer, in that it had friends in high places. Mihir Bose notes that despite India's outstanding hockey record from 1928, when India dominated Olympic hockey, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, did nothing for hockey but was a great supporter of cricket.

The *Tao of Cricket*, however, is a provocative read. It is worth even more than a passing thought - even if simply to ponder and to refute it at some points. There are some breathtaking and glittering broad generalisations - which may appeal to some - such as Nandy's view of cricket history as a medium of self-expression at four planes:

traditional English cricket (which is in many ways a reflection of earlier social hierarchies but is also unwittingly a criticism of the values associated with modern industrialism), modern cricket (increasingly an endorsement of the hegemonic, urban-industrial managerial culture and a criticism of the pre-industrial values now associated with defeated ways of life), imported cricket (the cricket which was exported to non-western

societies as a criticism of native life-styles from the point of view of the industrializing West but which, as reconstructed by natives, brought out the latent function of the game in the West and became a criticism of the common cultural principles of capitalism, colonialism and modernity) and new cricket (the cricket which by its close identification with the industrial-managerial ethos is becoming increasingly an endorsement of the ruling culture of the world and a criticism of the victims of history) (p.xi).

Writing a good social history of Indian cricket is not an easy task, and is undoubtedly far more difficult than writing a history of Australian or English cricket. Indian cricket is far more complex simply because its society is far more diverse and there are also many regional variants. There have, in addition, been far more political machinations and controversies occurring as regular events which makes the task of writing an objective and balanced history difficult. The relationship between players and the Board of Control has always been a difficult one partly because 'non-cricketers', including a number of Ministers in state governments, have occupied the highest administrative posts. The story is a rather complicated one in that quite different groups and regions appear on stage, disappear, and often reappear at a later stage, such as the British, the Parsis, the princes, prominent businessmen etc. etc. There has also been far less research done in the past on the subject and there are far fewer sources available than for equivalent histories elsewhere.

Perhaps an even more difficult task is to provide a balance between the events of Indian cricket - the succession of major matches, such as Test matches, and the personalities of the game, with the broader issues of the social and cultural context of the game, its rhythms nuances and meaning, all of which provides the stuff of broader interpretative analysis.

Mihir Bose, a London-based journalist who grew up in Bombay, is well equipped to write this history and has previously written four

cricket books. Ironically, his first book was a biography of Keith Miller, which probably reflects the popularity of Australian cricket and cricketers in India. He subsequently wrote a reflective but idiosyncratic book on Indian cricket: *A Maidan View: The Magic of Indian Cricket*.

A History of Indian Cricket is particularly effective in tracing and analysing the rise of cricket to prominence as a national sport. Although cricket was first played at Calcutta, the British there remained aloof from Indians and cricket was for along time an exclusively European sport. Indian cricket took off in more cosmopolitan Bombay, where there was more cooperation between European and Indian capital, and where the compradour Parsi community took up the game with enthusiasm and provided a cultural bridge between the British and Indian society. The establishment of Bombay's communal tournament did much to increase the popularity, and raise the standard, of cricket. For many decades it was the premier tournament of the country. Although it was an eventual casualty to nationalist criticism in the 1940s, Bose suggests communal matches 'rarely caused problems' even though they occurred in an era when communal riots (mainly Hindu-Muslim) were a regular feature of Bombay life.

Bose is at his best in dealing with the intricacies of princely patronage and politics of cricket in the 1930s, which was a colourful yet tragic period culminating in the disastrous tour of England in 1936 - which represented the nadir of Indian cricket. During the 1930s the two leading princely patrons, Patiala and Vizianagram (who became known as 'Vizzy'), lavished enormous amounts of money and energy to secure the top prizes in the game, control of Indian cricket and captaincy of the Indian side, a plum which 'Vizzy' secured in 1936 by astute diplomacy rather than by any cricket ability. Cricket politics was played out with great relish as it was part of a wider game, it gave princes more clout in the Chamber of Princes and enhanced their status with the British. 'Vizzy' found a useful ally in the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon. Such was the competition for the prizes of cricket that at one stage there were two

trophies proposed for domestic competition: the Ranji Trophy donated by Patiala and the Willingdon Trophy by 'Vizzy'. Patiala outmanoeuvred 'Vizzy' and Indians now play for the Ranji, rather than Willingdon Trophy.

A continuing theme of this book is that Indian cricket has been bedevilled by all manner of politics: prince against prince, one regional power-broker against another, Board versus players, one faction against another and so forth. There have been many shifts in the balance of power and regular changes in alliances in the past. 'Vizzy', who was discredited after the 1936 tour, made a comeback to the Board of Control by the 1950s. Because of the glamour, high status and money associated with the game, Indian cricket has always attracted highly-placed politicians who have not always made decisions in the interests of cricket. They have been attracted to the game for other reasons. Bose cites frequent examples of politics intruding to the detriment of morale of the national team: such as last minute decisions to decide on a team captain (as little as fifteen minutes before a game), the axing of players for trivial reasons, and the chopping and changing of team personnel particularly in the 1950s when as many as twenty-six players represented India in just one series. Bose provides plenty of evidence that many past poor performances can be explained rather more by political machinations (poor selections) and the pressure of 'home crowds' rather than any lack of 'killer instinct'. Cricket in India has continued to be played in a 'hot-house atmosphere' which places greater pressure on the players who frequently perform better outside their country.

There are many intriguing stories in Bose's book which provide tantalising, but all too brief insights, into the social and cultural context of Indian cricket. Bose describes the 'filmi' atmosphere of cricket in Bombay and how popular film stars in the pavilion once played an active role urging an Indian captain to declare the Indian innings closed. The condescending attitude of the Board to its players was manifested by the odd practice of allowing visiting cricketers to travel in air-conditioned

comfort and to stay at better hotels while Indian players enjoyed inferior travel and accommodation arrangements. There is also the fascinating story that when a full-scale riot occurred at the beginning of play at Eden Gardens in 1967 - when 70,000 tickets were sold to the ground which then accommodated 50,000 - All India Radio informed the millions of listeners, who turned in to hear the beginning of the Test, that play was called off due to fog! It then went off the air and it was not until the next day that many learnt of the riot from the newspapers.

In most respects Bose succeeds admirably in both providing a broad overview of the rise and consolidation of cricket as the national game of India. Bose is judicious and balanced in his assessments and the book provides an authoritative, informative and readable overview particularly of India in international cricket.

In any book which covers so much territory and focuses for much part on the history of India in international cricket, there is less space for the culture of cricket, its regional variations, Indian crowds, the rise of cricket media and the role of women in cricket and even the rise of women's cricket - which is not mentioned. The book is also far more effective in its first half when there were relatively few matches providing time and space for the author to sketch in the context of each series. With the dramatic increase in scope of international cricket in the 1970s and 1980s the book becomes crammed with a succession of Tests, Limited Over matches and tours - and the reader has to 'belt up' for a quick 'Cook's tour' of India in international cricket. The author has little space or time for reflection and analysis. The non-recruitment of Indians to World Series Cricket in 1977 is dealt with in just one tantalising sentence: 'Indians did not see this as a snub but as a chance to reaffirm the values of traditional cricket'.

A History of Indian Cricket is a valuable reference book, and starting point, for those who wish to explore many aspects of the social and cultural character of the game on the subcontinent. It is a welcome

and useful work for those who wish to examine further the spread of the games cult to the non-white Commonwealth.

Cricket Beyond the Bazaar mines a rich theme, that of changing Australian sporting perceptions of and relations to the subcontinent from the first tour of the 'Maharajah of Patiala's Team of Australian Cricketers' in 1935-36 to the 1980s. The book also explores the relationship between cricket in the 'developed' world and the 'third world'. Because Tests from the subcontinent have not been broadcast (on either radio or television) they have not 'rated' with the Australian public. Coward suggests that the inferior status accorded to the Madras Tied Test still rankles with Allan Border although the Madras tie was equally as dramatic as the Brisbane tie - they both finished on the second last ball.

Over the past five decades there have been remarkable changes in Australian sporting attitudes and touring practices towards the various countries of the subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The attitudes of Australian officials and players have changed from condescension in the 1930s, to outright distaste from the 1950s to the 1970s - when a tour to the subcontinent was regarded rather like going to Outer Siberia if not Hepatitis Haven - to greater acceptance of the culture of this region.

The book is worth buying alone for the chapter on the first Australian tour, an account which is based on a tour saved by New South Wales Chief Executive Bob Radford. Although the Maharaja was willing to finance the entire tour and requested players who had completed their first class cricket, the Australian Board acted in a most overbearing and condescending manner and dithered for five months before the tour actually went ahead. It was due only the persistence of Australian Frank Tarrant, who was a canny adviser and astute lobbyist, that the tour went ahead. Tarrant, an outstanding all-rounder for Victoria and Middlesex and a colourful character, became an aide to the Maharaja of Patiala and his emissary to Australia, and also did much to promote cricket in India.

Although England visited India in 1933-34, when the first Test series on Indian soil was played, an official Australian team did not tour the subcontinent until 1956, when Ian Johnson's side played a Test in Pakistan, - when they lost on the mat - and three in India, on their way home. Tours to the subcontinent were mere appendages tacked on to other tours. It was during the 1950s that players circulated lurid stories of cricket on the subcontinent including horror stories of the health risks involved and the chicanery of Pakistani official who altered the tautness of the mat to suit their bowlers. Richie Benaud was an exception to the rule in the 1950s. His meticulous planning and preparation for Pakistani conditions enabled Australia to defeat Pakistan on the mat in 1959-60.

Coward describes the remarkable changes in the relationships between Australia and the subcontinent from the late 1970s. This occurred in part because of the improvement in cricket on the subcontinent and the support which India gave to the Australian Board, when it was confronted with the World Series Cricket revolt in 1977. But there were deeper reasons for the changed relationship which occurred for wider social reasons, an Australian discovery of Asia, which occurred in sport as it did in other facets of life - trade, travel, culture and so forth.

Allan Border, who enjoys playing cricket on the subcontinent and who has played more cricket there than any other 'foreigner', typified the new Australian outlook to the subcontinent. Border, who is an immensely popular figure on the subcontinent, made an effort to come to terms with the alien conditions and different and challenging culture. One of the reasons for Australian success in the 1987 World Cup was that Australian teams in the 1980s learnt to adapt to, and even enjoy, the demanding playing conditions there. Border's work was made easier by the diplomacy of officials such as Alan Crompton - who has managed Australian teams there and who now heads the ACB. Crompton 'fervently believed in the advancement of international cricket in the Third World'. Mike Coward himself also reflects the greater Australian

empathy for cricket on the subcontinent - at least in some sections of the media.

If Australian teams learnt to come to terms with playing in India in the 1980s, they did not carry this new professionalism to Pakistan in 1988 when the management and team became obsessed with 'incompetent' umpiring and wanted to abandon the tour at the time of the First Test. Coward is scathing of the tour management which operated along the lines of a bizarre mixture of 'pride, provocation, presumption, paranoia and persecution'. The ACB instructed the Australians to continue the tour which they did under protest.

Cricket Beyond the Bazaar raises some important questions about the relationship between sport, politics and economics and the degree to which sport shapes and/or reflects Australian perceptions of the subcontinent. Since cricket is so popular in Australia and the subcontinent, it is a language which can be used for political and economic purposes. Coward's book suggests that there is a need for more research on the role of sport (and sports personnel) in shaping Australian perceptions of Asia.

All four books suggest that the politics of sport on the subcontinent is a rich field for future enquiry.