

# CRICKET MANIA, MEN, AND POLITICS

Janaka Biyanwila

"Nothing that ever came out of England has had such an influence on character and nation-building as the wonderful game of ours".

M.A. Noble, "The Games the Thing", London 1926

"Shopping is for sissies".

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister after an Australian cricket player expressed fears he could be caught up in a bombing while shopping in Colombo.

Winning the Singer Cup Cricket tournament in Singapore was meant to be "icing on the cake" (*Sunday Observer*, April 7, 1996) for the Sri Lankan cricket team, world champions of one day cricket. Even a record breaking batting performance by a Sri Lankan player failed to deliver the world champions a victory. As expected, politicians and bureaucrats who were abundantly present after the World Cup victory were nowhere near them now.

Along with the clamor of the game itself, it is the politicization of cricket, particularly nationalist fanaticism, that resonated during the recent cricket World Cup melodrama. This nationalist fanaticism backed by ideologies of ethno-nationalism, patriarchy, and "pristine" notions of cricket were all linked with the profit maximization of commercialism. Thus it might be useful to look at some of the events that took place and to reassess the ideological content of the sport with a view to constructing social intervention through sports.

It was necessarily a melodrama at one level. It began with the Australian and West Indies teams refusing to play in Sri Lanka after the devastating LTTE bomb attack in Colombo. Here it was the Sri Lankan foreign minister, and not the sports minister or some other sports bureaucrat, who promptly assumed center stage. By ridiculing the Australian decision and fabricating a sense of normalcy amidst the violent ethnic conflict, the foreign minister went so far as to remark that any Australian attempt to deter other teams from playing in Colombo would be considered a "hostile act". The organizers of this sporting event, officials from India Pakistan and Sri Lanka, then immediately arranged a joint India-Pakistan team to play a friendship match in Sri Lanka. Naturally, generous praise was extended to this show of solidarity in the subcontinent, concentrating particularly on the fact that, for the first time, Indian and Pakistani players were members of one team. Nevertheless, the buzz-word at all the subcontinental venues was "security". Heavily armed guards escorting teams to the field seem to further elevate the significance of competition.

The next highlight was the India-Pakistan game, which was the fifth win for India in their past twentyseven meetings with Pakistan. This loss was not taken lightly by the Pakistani sporting public and other ethnocentric chauvinists, who regarded it as a symbolic loss to the "infidels" of India. As a result, the Pakistan team was reluctant to return home fearing a hostile reception. The team captain's home in Lahore was stoned, while some players had received threatening phone calls. One Pakistani member of parliament suggested that the national team had lost because the country had a woman prime minister. Of course, Sri Lanka was not in his misogynist, racist geography. Adding to the frightening absurdity of fanaticism, two suits were filed in the Lahore high court, seeking to confiscate the assets of the Pakistani team members for "gross treason". These are just some snippets round a sporting event debased to reflect the extent of ethnocentric masculine neurosis in the subcontinent.

The next notorious moment was the debacle during India-Sri Lanka match, played at the immodestly named "Eden Gardens" in Calcutta. Here, in the "city of joy" no less, the fans, anticipating the loss by the Indian team, retreated to hooliganism; they burnt part of the stands at the stadium and threw missiles at the players. The game was forfeited, and the victory was awarded to Sri Lanka.

Like the final action scene of a Bollywood film, the World Cup final was a "show down" between the primadonna Occidental favorite, the Australian team, and the marginalized Orientalist, the Sri Lankan team. After all the controversy during the Australian tour prior to the World Cup and the no-show in Colombo, the Sri Lankan team was the sentimental favorite, seen as representing not only the nation but also the sub-continent. The game was played at a stadium with a manageable crowd of about 45,000 as opposed to 1,000,000 in Calcutta. The Sri Lankan team realised these expectations with a superior performance and was duly awarded the World cup by Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

After the month long mass cricket hysteria in the sub-continent, local politicians capitalized on the event and made their public statements congratulating the team on their return. The Buddhist clergy were liberally displayed on television and newspapers throughout the tournament, dispensing cosmic favours on the local cricket team. And some of the players were often seen with a blessed thread or the "pirith nula", a symbol of Buddhist piety. All members of the team participated in Buddhist rituals on their return, despite their other religious or atheist preferences.

Occultism aside, it is the more worldly, profit oriented commercialism that is the prominent feature of professional cricket now. This was not just the quadrennial cricket World Cup, it was the Wills

World Cup, the main sponsor of the event being the Wills tobacco company of India, not quite the producer of a healthy nutritional supplement for young cricketers. The organizing committee had to raise \$39 million to co-host the 12 nation tournament, and Coca Cola paid \$3.5 million to become the official drink furthering the "coca-colonization of the planet".

With consumerism as the theme, cricket was not the sole provider of entertainment. Compulsive advertising gimmicks were addressed to the expanding middle-class of the subcontinent and the mass media was flooded with commercial icons and jingles. In a subtle subversion of tradition, the Coca-Cola television ad campaign also included the melody, "masta-masta", from a traditional Muslim devotional song expressing ecstasy and exaltation. So the imaginative and almost Machiavellian struggle for market share between Coca Cola and Pepsi, as the "official" and the "unofficial" drinks, spilled across geographic boundaries, simultaneously dismissing and manipulating nationalist fervour.

How did cricket become such a mass phenomenon in south Asia? How did a sport that was the pastime of white colonizers achieve this level of mass participation? It has to do with the process of cultural globalization through mass media and the processes of political and economic transformations in the region. The globalization process is a historically emergent world economic and political structure; technological advances, particularly in communications, have also globalized the cultural productions of the capitalist world economy. Its prime characteristic is a cultural homogenizing process embedded in a contradictory unity. Thus, homogeneous consumers and commodities co-exist along with particularist images of traditional identity.

Unlike other sports, cricket, the "imperial, gentleman's game", is symbolic capital. With most local elite male leaders stepping into the vacuum left by the colonial masters, cricket was one of those credentials that legitimized status. Today, it continues to parody the imperial illusion of etiquette and morality. Even though the game has been infiltrated by non-elite players, participation in this "imperial" sport, as a player or a spectator, still represents the acme of the bourgeois imagination of the post colonial patriarchal nation.

Interlinked with this cultural representation is a more secular imagination of the game. In one of its several interpretations, cricket matches become exaggerated to represent "civilized world's alternative to war". This invented interpretation is easily packaged and reduced to a binary explanatory narrative. It is "us" and "them" in a game to "win" or "lose". Euphemized as war, the rule-governed, sometimes violent excitement of play becomes mixed with the pathology of warfare. It serves as a militarist ethic digressing from the play aspects of sports. So expressions such as "All hail the conquering heroes" (*The Island* Editorial March 19th, 1996), and the batting "attack" can actively forget the real destruction and suffering of violence and armed conflict.

But, what explains the mass fanaticism? The permissive use of the term "masses" needs to be qualified at this point. The game of cricket is securely interwoven with the male dominant taken-for-granted-world. In such a context, it is predominantly males that participate in cricket, although women's cricket is also an emerging phenomenon. So it is "our boys" or "the glory boys" that epitomize all dominant masculine virtues including aggression, physical dominance, impersonal detachment, and hostility.

The fanaticism can also be attributed as a primal reaction to the generalized commodification of social life and the inability of any hegemonic ideology to give meaning to some fundamental social contradictions. Fuzzy notions of harmony and human solidarity are momentarily crystallized by a collective fusion to support one's team. But at a deeper level, it highlights a modern individualist, libertarian attitudes.

According to some reports, in winning the World Cup, the Sri Lankan team has established the sub-continent as the epicenter of world cricket. It is possible that the cricket euphoria has temporarily displaced the anxieties of inescapable political and material deprivation of a large segment of the South Asian population. But the mass hysteria, even in its multiple contradictions, is bound to link cricket more firmly with commercialism, nationalism, patriarchy and violence.

Professional Cricket, is about a money economy where the players (the thoroughbreds) are financially remunerated for their labour since it legitimizes and promotes certain corporate capitalist interests. The players are devoting their life to it because it's their livelihood and not only because of some ascetic thrill of competition. It is through a critique of the pristine notion of cricket, that one can move the boundaries of discussion. What does it mean to win or lose in a sport? What about the contradictions of universalizing exuberance of play and particularist fanaticism and violence?

It is the element of play or "having fun" that is the dominant motif of sports in general. Thus, however entrenched in all the degrading networks of power, sports activities reproduce themselves in an idiom that is seemingly beyond contamination. It is this social emergence and social reproduction of sports that must be carefully surveyed. Along with the euphoria of winning are we capable of gracefully losing in present formulations of fanaticism?

However much the individual is glorified, winning in cricket is a combination of collective hard work, individual brilliance and a healthy portion of luck (also tied with umpire decisions). Events at Eden Gardens were not unusual phenomena. The media, the players as well as the sponsors must anticipate similar incidents with increasing expectations of cricket obsession. Once the World Cup euphoria dies down, it is time to put cricket in the context of the subcontinent and to rethink socially relevant strategies to promote cricket along with a healthy attitude towards all other popular sports.