

Cricket: sporting interest of a nation



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1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Aashish Nandy once remarked that Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British shepherds. Today, the Indian sub-continent, rather India has become the best market for the game of cricket. Globally, over the last two decades sport has moved from being a pastime to a business as a result of the process of commercialization. The story of cricket is no different. In fact, commercialization of cricket started way back in the 1970's. In 1978, Kerry Parker, the Australian business tycoon started the Parker series which revolutionized the way the game was played till then. Parker Series, still has its impact in the form of colored jersey, day-night matches etc. The International Cricket Council (ICC) was initially opposed to Parker, but they later compromised for the good of the game. The game has changed by the time the Parker series concluded in the 80's the game changed forever.

1983 is a landmark year in the history of Indian sports. On the 25th day of June that year India captained by Kapil Dev won the Cricket World Cup. The victory was totally unexpected but the magnitude of it was so much that it changed the sporting interest of a nation. Rarely can such things happen. After that victory, Indian's fell for the game. In 1987, the Indian sub-continent hosted the World Cup successfully. Nine years later, in 1996, India organized the Cricket World Cup again. This time it was commercially successful as well as took the game to almost every part of the country. India became the best market for the game. The game had such a big impact that, we Indians consider Cricket to be our national game, though Hockey is the national game.

What makes the game of Cricket special? Though diverse answers are possible to this question, I personally feel that it is the game's ability to adapt to changes that makes it special. Going by the history of the game, this has always been true. For e. g. starting from 1878 till 1960's test cricket was the only form of the game. The game in the 1930's underwent modification from being played for unlimited time to a limited time of 5 days. In the 1960's, test cricket began to look boring. This led to the start of One Day Cricket in England. Eventually, the first One Day International was played between England and Australia at Melbourne in 1971-72. Within 4 years, ODI cricket became the leading form of the game as the first World Cup was organized in 1975. As said earlier, Kerry Parker launched his ODI series in 1978 which revolutionized both ODI and the game of Cricket. In course of time, ODI became sort of boring especially with many lopsided matches and being unable to offer the kind of thrill that it used to offer earlier. This led to the start of a new brand of Cricket called Twenty-Twenty, where each side gets to bat twenty overs each. It is a faster version of the game with all spicy elements in it.

The first T20 was between Australia and New Zealand in 2005.

As always India was a late entrant in the T20 format as well. The turnaround however came in 2007. India was out in the first round of the ICC Cricket World Cup. Talks of organizing a T20 tournament to discover new talents for the team and to improve the existing talents were suggested by Kapil Dev and Subhash Chandra of the Zee TV. They decided to start a T20 tournament named the Indian Cricket League (ICL). The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) was against a private body taking international players and

running a T20 tournament. BCCI in the ICC used its full strength to ban those players who take part in the rebel league. Just as the ODI picked up steam in India, the T20 picked up steam in India when India won the first ever T20 World Cup in South Africa. Soon, the talks of organizing a league parallel to the rebel league arose and it was called the Indian Premier League (IPL). While ICL was launched in December 2007 the IPL was launched in April 2008. The IPL is the brainchild of Lalit Modi. Just as Kerry Parker revolutionized the ODI cricket, Lalit Modi revolutionized the T20 Cricket.

2. THE INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

The Indian Premier League was founded on ' My City My Team' principle. 8 franchisees are there representing eight cities namely, Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mohali & Jaipur. They were called Franchisees. Each franchisee was bought by a group or individual. There are 8 franchisees. The names of the franchisees and there owning group is given below:

Darbari Lal Foundation or DLF, a real estate company based on Dubai sponsors the entire event. Together, the entire event is called the DLF IPL.

Perhaps for the first time ever in the history of the game, the cricket players registered with the IPL were auctioned. The IPL and the player auction have attracted a lot of attention and comments. The auction for the players underlined the fact that cricket is not just a game anymore and it is a business and a big one at that. Just think of the business concept at its most elementary level – the product is the game, the players are the assets, the spectators inside the stadium and television viewers are the market, the

revenues will come from in-stadium advertising, player endorsements, entry tickets, share of television rights and lot, you have a complete business.

When we bring the concept down to this elementary level, it may be easier for die-hard cricket fans, to digest a Sachin Tendulkar or a Rahul Dravid being auctioned off like an inanimate asset. Players, much like land or machinery, are assets for the business and just as when a businessman spots a prime piece of real estate that he thinks will be good for his plant or showroom and bids for it, so when he finds a class player on the block he bids for him.

Finally the extravaganza began on 18th April 2008. Though, before the start of the IPL, there were some reservations about the success of the event, especially whether the audience will throng the stadiums or not. But within few days from the start of the tournament all those fears were disproved. Audience came to the stadium in large numbers. IPL thus became a huge hit. Even though this time the IPL is held in South Africa, the local audiences are responding in the same way as Indian audience did. So, the brand of IPL is a huge success. Cricket, as a game and as a business has certainly come of age. But couple of questions arise in this regard:

1. Is cricket losing its innocence?
2. Does cricket need to be commercialized to such a great extent?

The IPL has caused emotional trauma to some fans of the game who consider themselves as purists and who claim to watch and play the game just for the joy of it. The advent of big money, they say, somehow robs the game of its charm. There is no doubt something to be said for the concept of

players donning the national colors and playing the game for their country. But then, the IPL is not going to be a substitute for international cricket played among national teams. It is going to be yet another dimension to international cricket. Of course, the great players are not going to play for national honor but for money. But what's wrong with that? Why should they be grudging the money they earn for showcasing their awesome skills that gives so much entertainment and joy to millions of people? Why should cricketers not be valued based on their skills just as an investment banker or a CEO is and paid accordingly? We do not complain when we hear of the multi-million dollar salary packages and bonuses earned by top flight investment bankers who may after all have earned that just for lending to sub-prime clients!

Till the advent of the IPL or for that matter the Indian Cricket League of the Zee group, cricketers had a single employer – their respective national cricket boards. Of course, most of these boards took good care of their players but there was never really a market to determine the real worth of a cricketer. And again, talent was at the mercy of the Board and it is not difficult to point out instances, especially in India, where talent was ignored or even suppressed for reasons other than cricket alone. That will no more be possible with a market developing for cricketers, a market that respects performance alone and does not care about anything else. Here, the pioneering initiative of the Indian Cricket League (ICL) should be acknowledged. But for the ICL and the threat it posed to the BCCI, the latter might not have conceived of the IPL at all.

For those bemoaning the loss of innocence in cricket, the answer is that this is the age of free markets and marketing. Cricket cannot remain insulated to market forces when everything around it dances to the market's tunes. The commercialization of cricket was inevitable after it became a profession years back with players depending on the game for a living. The game ceased to be a gentle sport played for the love of it long ago just as other sports such as football, basketball or rugby. It is just that cricket managed to retain its “innocence” longer than the other sports.

And again, there is also something to be said for cricketers of different nationalities playing together in the same team. At a serious level it will help players understand each other better.

Whatever, be the views IPL is a hit with the masses.

3. SOCIAL IMPACT OF IPL

At its simplest level, the IPL is all about businessmen sensing an opportunity to profit from the game's craze among a growing mass of people with high spending power. There is big money waiting to be made by all concerned – the businessmen now bankrolling the league, the players, advertisers, the media and, of course, the BCCI. The first edition of the IPL was highly successful. The way it united India for 45 days was simply amazing. Cricket is a game that unites India- whether it is rural or urban. The kind of support that cricketers enjoy in India is unique and unparalleled. Once I met a Bihari worker. He asked me where am I from. I said I am from Kerala. Though he did not know much about Kerala, the first thing that he asked was about

Sreesanth and what do you say about the slap that he got from Harbhajan. This is an indication of the kind of support that the cricket players enjoy.

India is a diverse country. Unification of the country thus becomes very different. Divided by religions, languages and many other factors, we need something that can unite us. Cricket is the only sport capable of doing it. The role played by IPL in that regard is spectacular. For e. g. Jaipur blast occurred a few days before a Rajasthan Royals match in Jaipur. It was presumed that the turn out will be low following the blast. But that was not supposed to be. Sports are a good healer and IPL proved it when people dared to come out of their households to support the team. This incident can be analyzed at another level also- IPL as an instrument of strengthening regionalism. As I have seen over the last few days, people supporting the team from their region like a person from Kolkata for Kolkata Knight Riders, a Rajasthani for the Rajasthan Royals. This strength is in a positive sense. But regionalism is not regionalism as in the case of a language or culture as manifested by the MNS or other such organizations. The reason behind this is that even though the team or franchise hail from a region, the number of players speaking the language and sharing the culture is very few. For e. g. the Kolkata Knight Riders claiming to represent the city of Kolkata, has 4 people from Kolkata, namely Saurav Ganguly, Ashok Dinda, Wridhiman Saha and Arindam Bose. Then how does IPL strengthen regionalism when there is hardly anyone from the region? The answer is that even though there is hardly anyone from the region, it is ensured by the team owners are that the regional tastes are catered. This is done through the icon player, who happens to hail from that city. Secondly, the home matches of the teams which were played at their

home grounds. All these are good ways to throng the audience to the stadium. For e. g. whenever a Kolkata Knight Rider match was played at the Eden Gardens, the atmosphere was electric and hardly any seats were empty. Similar was the mood in Chennai as well.

IPL was not about any nationality, it liberated us from that moral restriction. It was acceptable to cheer Shane Warne or Adam Gilchrist performing well, especially against India. Earlier what used to be the case was that there was that moral restriction, which prevented us to some extent from cheering a foreign player openly. It is only post IPL that we have really started enjoying cricket more as a sport. IPL strengthened the relations among countries. Cricket diplomacy is something that has become synonymous with Indo-Pak relations. Though the relations among countries at the higher level may be worse, the lower level may not be the same. In 2008, the Pakistani players were cheered by the Indians especially players like Akthar, Tanvir, Asif etc. Later, when IPL decided to organize the Champions League, i. e. a tournament featuring top two T20 sides from India, Pakistan, Australia and England, Pakistan willingly sent its teams. However due to Mumbai blast and consequent events, the Champions League did not become a reality. This year it is the diplomatic relations at the top level and some security issues in Pakistan prevented Pakistani players from taking part in the second edition of IPL. Nevertheless, IPL and Indian fans miss Pakistani players.

IPL also changed the T. V. viewing habits and strengthened the depth of cricket in rural-urban India. Last year, during the 45 days of IPL, the TRP i. e. television rating of IPL was very high. It was a good break from the T. V. sops focusing on ‘ saas-bahu ‘ and other family themes. People sat in front of the

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T. V. sets, whether it be a posh hotel in Mumbai or an ordinary tea stall in the rural area of U. P. or Bihar, to watch an IPL match and encourage their favourite players and teams. IPL was the bigger threat to multiplexes than the recession. All in all IPL was a tremendous success with the masses and will always continue to be a huge success.

4. CONCLUSION

The Australian Airline company QANTAS has an amazing tagline which reads: “ It is the spirit that brings us home”. Going by that style, IPL should have a tagline that it is the spirit that connects us. Cricket is the best healer in a country like India divided by languages and cultures. If there is anything on which the rich and poor can have a commonality in India, it is Cricket and Cricket stars. This unity, though for short time is achieved by IPL. If not IPL and cricket, then what else can unify the country?

In 2009, due to General elections in India, IPL is being played in South Africa. South Africa is one country with whom India has a great relationship with. By taking the IPL abroad, Indian culture and tastes are given a global appeal. Even though, the game is played in South Africa, there is no dearth of excitement for it in India. Every evening all of us sit together and watch the match. The reaction if the favourite team loses or the favourite players perform badly is that of one of sadness and disappointment. This is what happened two weeks back during a match where the pendulum was swinging either ways and after an intense finish in which his team lost, a supporter was very sad. So sad to such an extent that another supporter commented that the reaction is as if his dad’s money is involved in it. Such is the emotional attachment one feels to a team. Cricket is being discussed

wherever you go. From tea stalls to posh hotels, from markets to super markets, among the rich and the poor, rural and urban India, IPL is a super hit with the masses. It is the perfect example of marrying business with sports and thereby uniting a country. Entertainment has thus achieved a new name.

IPL has thus changed from Indian Premier League to India Patriotically Liberated.