

Nationalism, sexuality, violence, and cricket



In his essay *From Game to War*, Alan Dundes creates a strong link between the aggressiveness males show both on the field of war and on the field of play. He believes that this instinct that is shown in sports to check, push, trip, tackle, and hit one's opponent is the same instinctual characteristic shown by soldiers in the army. This masculinity that is manifested by these athletes and warriors come from one single root. Both soldiers and athletes, he argues, attempt to feminize their opponent through aggression and not stop until their opponent has completely sacrificed.

Since these athletes manifest similar aggression and violence to soldiers and fighters, the fans, or fanatics, watching often inherit these characteristics. For example, in India, and all of South Asia in fact, cricket has become the sporting craze. It has become this craze for numerous reasons. Firstly, it is the sport that unified the country while under British-rule and helped them achieve their freedom. Secondly, it is one of the few sports countries, such as India, excel at on the international stage and thus the fans rally behind their players.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the huge rivalries that exist between countries such as India and Pakistan often mirror the amount of tension that is relevant on the international political stage between the two countries. During a given televised Indian versus Pakistan cricket match, hundreds of millions of Indians sit and watch the action from their home. This drama, history, and success is why these fanatics become so entrenched in cricket, and often riot and cause violence because of it.

Cricket is the unofficial national sport of India, and its development has been closely tied with the history of the country, mirroring many of the political and cultural developments around issues of race, caste, sexuality, and nationality. In addition, cricket not only parallels but also creates the history of late colonial India as well as modern day India, and thus becomes a national identity for the country and its citizens. Cricket, similar to most sports as Dunde points out, falls in the masculine arena and thus is traditionally understood as a masculine pursuit.

This is one of the dilemmas that Arjie, the young, homosexual protagonist of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, struggles with. After being caught playing games such as "bride-bride," Arjie is admonished by his mother and father and forced to participate in a game of cricket. However, when given the opportunity to play, Arjie runs away from the game and indulges himself in dressing up and applying make-up and jewelry to himself with his older female cousin.

Unlike cricket, this type of activity falls within Arjie's comfort zone and allows him to be himself. However, Arjie is constantly pressured by his parents and is soon bewildered by his "sexual awakening." 2 Brian Pronger, in his book *The Arena of Masculinity* contends that homosexuals, for the most part, avoid athletics because they wish to have "no interest in pretending to be straight or masculine." 3 This demonstrates that the inherent masculinity in sports often divides people rather than uniting them.

Since cricket is the national identity and craze of India, and cricket is inherently masculine, we must ask ourselves: Does this create a masculine

identity for India and/or does this masculinity create or exacerbate problems such as violence and war? Brought to India by the British during colonial times, India quickly grasped cricket and ran with it. ⁴ Not only has the intrigue and excitement captured the country, but also the politics and scandal have become infamous throughout the sport. Nonetheless, cricket has become the country's national identity ever since the yearly Pentangular tournaments began during the early 1900s.

As one observer of the tournament recalled, “ the city was swept by a furious epidemic. For nothing moves the placidity of Bombay as the premier sporting event of India... In Bombay you go on working and clogging and grubbing the whole year round – except in this week. ” ⁵ The British in India saw cricket as a vehicle for cementing relations between them and the Indians. Lord Harris, a Governor from 1890-1895, created the foundation for the Pentangular tournament. He set aside land for three cricket clubs: one for the Parsis, one for the Hindus, and one for the Muslims.

Lord Harris believed that through cricket, he could “ held bring about friendly relations between Britain and ‘ the several races on India. ’ ” ⁶ More than just uniting the British and Indians, it also helped unite the “ several races” of India. This unification is clearly portrayed through the award-winning film *Lagaan*. *Lagaan*'s story takes place in an Indian village in 1893. The colonizing British place taxes, known as *lagaan*, onto the rural village. The villagers protest furiously since they are in the middle of a devastating drought.

Out of amusement and a wish to humiliate, Captain Russell bets the outspoken Bhuvan that if the Indians can beat him and his men in a game of cricket, they will impose no lagaan for three years. If the Indians lose, the lagaan is tripled. The unification is shown through Bhuvan's attempt to gather different players from different religious and social groups to join his team and defeat the British. For example, he recruits a low-caste fortune-teller named Guran, whose crippled arm allows him to throw a tricky curve ball. There also is Deva, a muscular Sikh whose service in the British army has fueled his contempt for his former superiors.

Led by the confident, yet simple Bhuvan, the team shows courage and determination in defeating the British. Bhuvan's leadership helps the players come together and unite as a team in order to succeed. ⁷ This unification and determination help characterize India's national identity as they faced colonization. Furthermore, the film, produced in the year 2000 (decades after independence) gives modern-day Indians a sense of achievement and joy in the realization that they can and have defeated the British. However, colonial Indian cricket served as often to divide as of unite. P.

Baloo was a camar, a member of the low leather working caste. Baloo's skills with the cricket ball were first discovered by the British members of the Poona Gymkhana, where he worked as a servant. With a remarkable bowling skill, he was recruited by the Brahmin team and played very well, but was not allowed to dine with his teammates. Baloo eventually joined the Hindu team, against the will of a few Gujarathi teammates.

“ Baloo was the greatest Hindu cricketer... but he was never made captain... Equal opportunity in team selection some Hindus could stomach, but not the appointment of an Untouchable as the captain... which would represent the upturning of the caste hierarchy. ” 8 When Baloo publicly complained about not being named captain, he was dropped from the team. Years later when Mahatma Gandhi was the nationalist leader for India, Baloo’s sons were selected for the Hindu team. As Gandhi was strongly opposed to the notion of an Untouchable class, there was significant pressure to name one of the sons as captain of the team. After relenting to pressure and naming Vithal Baloo captain, the Hindus won the Pentangular tournament for the first time in years.

One Vithal supporter wrote after the victory that, “ The moral that can be safely drawn from the victory is that the removal of Untouchability would lead to Swaraj – which is the prophecy of the Mahatma. ” 9 Although rarely mentioned, this episode was a stepping stone into the abolishment of Untouchability in India, a progressive identity for India. Therefore, it is clear that cricket as a sport has the ability to spark social change in India. On the other hand, cricket matches between India and Pakistan tend to promote a different type of national identity, one defined by its focus on “ the enemy”.

These matches between India and Pakistan are not simply games; they are a manifestation of the hopes and dreams of the people of both countries. They wish to defeat their enemy in any way possible. This is evident through the riots that often follow in Gujarat between Muslims and Hindus after cricket matches. For example, as reported by Al-Jazeera on March 2, 2003, “ At least one person was killed and several others were injured in violence that broke

out between Hindus and Muslims in the western state of Gujarat following India's triumph over Pakistan in their cricket World Cup match. 10

Contrastingly, however, recent matches between India and Pakistan have seemed to be a forerunner to normalization of relations between the two countries.

Tabbed by journalists as "Cricket Diplomacy," the match on March 10, 2004 was heavy with political significance. "Cricket has been given a great deal of importance in the bilateral dialogue that's going on at government level," said Ramiz Raja, the cricket board chief. "Cricket has been included in the diplomacy. 11 Evidence of improving relations was quite obvious as Pakistan and India agreed on March 10, 2004 to restart a cross-border bus service on a route that had been suspended since the 1960s, officials said. This was only three months after they also decided to resume air travel between the two countries after a halt of nearly three years. 12 Therefore, the cricket matches between the two countries seem to parallel and provoke the normalization of relations between the two religions and two countries.

These historical parallels, ranging from colonial times to modern times, manifest why cricket is regarded as the national identity of India. Moreover, this violence that is exhibited after games between India and Pakistan show the masculine fanaticism that is entrenched in the game and its fans. This hyper masculinity that results in violence becomes problematic, but what can be done to solve it? The masculinity and violence problem that is attributed to sports is greatly due to the simple fact that there is a lack of women involved with the game.

The evidence for this is overwhelming because it inherently becomes a masculine sport because of the lack of women involved in it. Other arenas such as politics face the same concerns, until a significant amount of women become active in politics it will always have a masculine stigma attached to it. Similarly, cricket was formally introduced to women over eighty years after their male counterparts in India adopted the game. ¹³ Furthermore, in the general realm of athletics women were not permitted in the Olympic Games until 1928.

Also, women who do become athletes are often considered unfeminine. ¹⁴ Therefore, it is clear that there is an inherent sexuality that exists for athletics, specifically cricket. In India, women and girls have long been deprived of participation in games and sports by direct or indirect social inhibition compared to their counterparts in Western countries such as the U. S. or England. The earlier social handicaps included purdah, early marriage, inferiority complex, inconvenient dress, jewelry, parental attitude, and the idea that physical games “ unsex” the girls and make them into “ Tom Boys”.

Traditional India had seen a woman only as a member of the family, as a daughter, wife and mother, and not as an individual with an identity or rights of her own. ¹⁵ In her book *Indian Women & Sports*, M. K. Singh does a thorough statistical analysis which investigates the general consensus about women who play sports. In many instances, this consensus is negative and discourages women from participating in athletics. For example, the general agreement is that girls that engage in sports become more arrogant and less feminine as they lose their delicate touch.

Furthermore, a majority of the Indians believe that athletics adversely affect one's academics. On the other hand, males are encouraged to engage in athletics with the same risk of hurting their academics. This dichotomy creates the notion that athletics is solely a masculine phenomena and that women should not actively engage in that sphere. Although this anachronistic opinion has steadily dissolved in the Western hemisphere, it is still prevalent in India. Only in the past few decades has progress been made to incorporate women into the athletic scene with gestures such as the creation of a Women's Indian Cricket Team.

Nevertheless, the popularity for such teams is minimal and the negative stigma still exists concerning women's role in sports. Therefore, due to the negative perception associated with women in sports in India, sports such as cricket become inherently masculine arenas. Richard Cashman, author of *Cricket & Women in Australia*, explains that the construction of an "ideal feminine sporting physique" developed very slowly because it didn't fit in with the beautiful feminine image, which portrayed gracefulness and delicateness.

When women would become toned and their muscles were large and visible the generalization arose that they looked 'beefy' and thus concluded that she must be a lesbian. Women who played in team sports were frequently seen as unattractive. Men criticized female soccer players and cricketers that they look "butch" in their trousers or shorts. And as an attempt to change this image in order for women to be socially accepted in these two sports, women cricketers opted for culottes, trousers cut to resemble a skirt, and soccer players, wore more short and fitted shorts. 6 This marginalization of

women athletes will inherently lead to less women playing sports since they are classified as either lesbian or butch, just for being muscular and athletic.

If women are dissuaded from playing sports, sports such as cricket will have be inherently masculine if women fail to break down this barrier. This masculine arena of cricket is a major conflict in *Funny Boy* as Arjie despises the societal standard that he, as a boy, must play cricket rather than games such as “ bride-bride. ” For example, his mother tells him that, “ You’re a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys. Arjie spitefully retorts, “ That’s stupid. ”¹⁷ Although, Arjie despises playing the masculine cricket, he is admonished for playing the games he enjoys playing. Furthermore, once he begins playing “ bride-bride” and is forced to be the groom instead of his normal role as the bride; he wishes to engage in activities which are not delegated for the groom, such as cooking. Arjie’s dilemma is quite simple: in the realm of play, the boys indulge in the outdoor, physically strenuous game of cricket, whereas the girls confine themselves to the domestic imaginary of “ bride-bride”.

However, tragically, there is no space for a child like Arjie who is not attracted to the masculine sport and is “ caught between the boys’ and girls’ worlds. ” As a homosexual, Arjie’s perception is blurred about where he fits into the oppressively rigid gender typecast system. Therefore, because of Arjie’s feminine characteristics and male biology he is unable to find a suitable space for himself socially, especially with those his age. This lack of an alternative space forces him into social exclusion and sexual confusion.

With the help of literature, people who are faced with similar dilemmas are able to find an arena in which they are comfortable in. If for nothing else, their problem is simply addressed in a powerful manner. As we have seen, cricket is the national identity for India and it is typically placed in a masculine arena, from which females are often shunned and eschewed from. This masculine national identity in India often results in violence and aggression because of the country's pride and nationalism.

In the past, cricket between India and Pakistan has served as both a symbol of South Asian harmony and a quintessential example of what George Orwell called "war minus the shooting". Sport is everywhere a major carrier of national identity, but cricket between India and Pakistan tends to focus on "the enemy". In addition, this type of nationalism often targets an "enemy within." 18 In recent years, the winner-takes-all attitude promoted by hyper masculine fans seems to have inflated the values attached to victory and defeat on the field of play. The pressure on the players to succeed is enormous.

In both countries a special stigma is attached to failure against the sub-continental rival, while success is doubly rewarded. In the eyes of the more ardent cricket nationalists, the inescapable notions of luck and form are always downsized. On either side of the border, there's a tendency to respond to defeat with allegations of betrayal. 19 For example, in 1998 after a cricket match between the top ranked Australia team and an above average Pakistani team, which resulted in a Australian win, the houses of Pakistani cricketers were stoned upon their arrival back home.

Furthermore, after the India-Pakistan cricket match on March 2, 2003, “ police burst dozens of teargas shells to disperse stone-pelting mobs, which set fire to a couple of two-wheelers and attacked some shops in the minority-dominated Wadi area. ” 20 The fans also went on to shout anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim slogans, while others threw stones on the houses of the minority Muslim communities in Kalupur, Shahpur, Rakhial, Maninagar and other areas. This mirrors the daily violence that has been seen over the past decades in the debated region of Kashmir.

It is appalling to realize that this territorial and religious violence that occurs in Kashmir, is mirrored in places such as Gujarat after enjoyable and exciting cricket matches. Cricket’s inherent masculine nature turns to such aggression because it “ involves an all-male preserve in which one male demonstrates his virility, his masculinity, at the expense of a male opponent. One proves one’s maleness by feminizing one’s opponent.... No male wants to be considered a ‘ sissy’ (from ‘ sister’). Thus males must aggressively seek to parry any such threatened thrusts. 21 Alan Dundes writes this in his essay “ From Game to War” as he discusses that all games and sports are based on this violent and masculine theme. This violent trend is common in cricket as well as cricket players are forced to wear heavy padding now because of the near death of a former Australian cricket player. Bowlers often throw the ball at speeds of nearly 90 miles per hour near the batters head to intimidate the batsman. This is why in modern day cricket, the players are forced to wear nearly 20 lbs of padding just to protect themselves.

Therefore, it is clear that the violent and aggressive nature of sports such as cricket, football, rugby, soccer, hockey, etc. will have an obvious affect on

some of the fans that enjoy these sports on a day to day basis. When one sits in his house and watches a player tackle, hit, trip, check, or punch his competitor, this will trigger him into this sort of violent mindset. This is exacerbated when a country or team is playing her “ enemy” on the field. This field then turns into a make-shift battlefield between the two countries.

The pride and nationalism that is seen after a dramatic Indian win can be both beautiful and ugly. Celebrations are juxtaposed to violence and murder. Parades are mirrored by riots and lootings. The aggression displayed on the sporting field is equated with toughness and masculinity and thus viewed as character building, with its social gains outweighing any undesirable consequences. The naturalness of violence as a response to frustration is common in both sporting commentaries and interpersonal relationships.

The use of terms such as “ domestic disputes” or “ aggressive play” hides the seriousness of physical and psychological damage that can occur. 22 This psychological affect that occurs from viewing and participating in sports is integral to the understanding of why this masculine violence occurs. Once we understand that sports display a masculine aggressiveness and that translates into violence between different religious and ethnic groups, we can begin to solve this seemingly hopeless problem.