

The Indian Premier League, the Spectacle, and the Illusion of a Nation

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Abstract

The Indian Premier League (IPL) cricketing tournament is a misnomer, issuing images in the name of Indianness while ultimately veiling the country's mass cricketing public. Submitting to a modern-day obsession with spectacle, the IPL stages a highly visual representation of India and its cultural character. Yet, its tactics ultimately work to undermine any valuable cultural potential, in that it relinquishes its capacity as a would-be act of postcolonial resistance in favor of serving commercial interests. The individual acts of cricketers within the IPL—the idiosyncratic styles and skills of singular Indian players—acts that may theoretically contribute to a narrative of Indian culture, are appropriated by the competition's corporate workings. An emphasis on looking and on the obsessive making visual of IPL gameplay finds its zenith in the fetishization of the most valuable cricketing shot—the six—with the result being an overwhelming devaluation of both the act and the proponent himself.

Keywords

India, IPL, cricket, nationalism, spectacle, sign-exchange, scopophilia, fetishization

The Indian Premier League (IPL)

In 2014, the seventh edition of the IPL began on foreign soil. In fact, the opening 20 matches were all staged between three emirates cities: Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai. The reason behind the relocation was logistical, it was said, for the start date coincided with India's general election. And so, one mid-April evening, from beneath the immaculate semicircular canopy of the grandstand at the Sheikh Zayed stadium, Abu Dhabi,

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the Mumbai Indians and the Kolkata Knight Riders took to the field along lush rolls of blue carpet, flanked on either side by showers of pyrotechnics, not on Indian ground at all. The Anglophone commentator addressed his global audience (with a gentle South African lilt): “Welcome to the biggest cricket show *on earth*.” It took only a couple of minutes for the game to yield its first moment of drama when the Kolkata batsman, Gautam Gambhir (a known Delhiite), misjudged the path of the ball and was thus bowled out without scoring a run, the wooden stumps wrenched from the ground. “The first wicket of the 2014 IPL . . . *Pepsi* IPL . . . belongs to [Lasith] Malinga,” the commentator noted, praising the Sri Lankan bowler who captured this accolade; and not, but nearly, forgetting his endorsement duties in the process. The first “four” of the game, meanwhile—that is, one of the more valuable scoring shots in cricket, wherein the batsman strikes the ball to the outermost limits of the field—was secured by an ungainly swipe, the batter’s feet all askew and the willow swashed wildly. By the end of the game, the standout performances were both given by Kolkata players: an impressive, match-winning score of 72 runs by Jacques Kallis (a South African) and a haul of four wickets by the bowler Sunil Narine (a West Indian). Off the players went, then, back along the blue carpet, as the television coverage captured concluding shots of more fireworks, exploding against the Abu Dhabi night sky.

I am being intentionally misleading here, in seeming to hint only at the disintegration of regional identity, the rampant commercialization of sport and the relegation of cricketing tradition in the name of entertainment. Actually, it is more complicated than this, and I hope here to explain the plurality of forces at work in the IPL—from commercial to national to individual—while considering their collective contribution to the production, and projection, of Indian space. For now, it is enough to note that, in final reckoning, it mattered little that this and the following 19 IPL games took place in Middle Eastern climes, or that non-Indian cricketers may have stolen the final glory, or that the commentary team throughout the competition consisted largely of non-Indian pundits, or finally, that the logos of non-Indian brands were emblazoned on virtually every visible surface. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, the actual cricket that happens on the field in the IPL is but a small part of a much larger, orchestrated projection of images issued in the name of India. Second, the earth beneath the feet of the players and the actual bodies on the field are far less important—that is, less important to those with vested interests in the IPL as an imagining of India—than the way in which the whole theatrical spectacle is broadcast. Which is to write, in other words, that whatever takes place within the televisual frame can be made to *appear* Indian. We are somewhere close to Barthesian territory, it seems, and the Frenchman’s talk of “Italianicity” concerning the now well-known Panzani advert, along with his due declaration: “Italianicity is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting” (Barthes, 1977, p. 48). My contention here, though, is that the IPL manages through its television broadcasting to construct a powerful synoptic Indian space, one that panders to a 21st-century fascination with the spectacle; yet, as a very consequence of this latter fact, obscures in the process the natural artistry of the cricket on show.

A word is necessary on the modern-day manner of viewing sport, which has become an overwhelmingly televisual experience, and which has structured the boiling down of complex cultural, historical, and political arrangements to neatly packaged sets of images. I am wary of lodging grandiose claims about the omnipotent sweep of globalization and its accompaniments, for one can easily be lured into misleading and triumphant assumptions about the evenness of its spread, but the massive international selling of television rights has indeed meant that regional sporting (and news) events are increasingly received globally—and visually. In an age of specialist sports networks, every minute of the IPL tournament can be witnessed live in the likes of Canada and the United States, across sub-Saharan Africa and in perhaps unlikely parts of Asia, as well as in the more traditional cricketing nations. Live coverage has also been made available through YouTube, meaning that its reach is greater still. No longer do cricketing audiences await match reports penned by Oxbridge journalists whose eloquent dispatches once broke the news of a day's play in the back pages of *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

As much as the sheer breadth of coverage itself plays a hand in the mass availability of the images, though, I am also interested in the actual nature of the IPL's coverage, which, in line with what I see as a wider trend, indulges in the production of theatrical spectacle, creating for the would-be viewer a seductive, entertaining, and thoroughly modern Indian space. Not only this, its treatment of the actual sporting action is similarly—and damagingly—spectacular, fetishizing the game's most dramatic moments to the detriment of all else. In other words, television broadcasters, armed with greater image-capturing technologies and operating in line with an ever-increasing pressure to get closer and closer to the action, have come to prioritize the most visually striking—the most “imageable”—elements of the sporting event, with deleterious consequences for the grander narratives they form part of. In the sporting arena, for example, it has become commonplace for broadcasters to place cameras within sporting equipment—inside helmets or goal nets, mounted onto basketball hoops and racing cars—seemingly so that viewers are able to embody the action when, say, a goal is scored, or when a crash happens and so on. But the reduction of sporting action to spectacle such as this is harmful to the overall narrative of sport as a contest, for the ebb and flow is lost amid the desire for the visually striking event. In the midst of this, and relating to cricket particularly, I locate an acute problem: the diminished cultural potential of the sport. Cricket's place as a sport tied inherently to British imperialism has historically made it an avenue for anti- or postimperial challenge, but that avenue, I argue, is somewhat closed off by way of the aggressive and spectacular framing of the IPL, which transforms historically contingent Indian bodies into ahistorical televisual commodities.

Cricket at the Boundaries

If one notes only the most rudimentary of details, that cricket's arrival on Indian shores was down to the colonizing British, it follows rather unsurprisingly that it became, in India and elsewhere, an important form of resistance. For, as Manthia Diawara (1990) observes, cricket was “another way of introducing Englishness to the rest of the world”

(p. 838). As a retort, then, the modulation of the sport in non-British hands has held a high value. How important it was, for example, to witness a crop of tall, burly West Indian fast bowlers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s repeatedly steaming in and knocking over the wickets of cowering English batsmen (noted here, it must be mentioned, through the gritted teeth of an English cricket supporter). Of the West Indian team, Diawara writes,

The appropriation of cricket at the margins of Englishness will liberate modernization in the West Indies, too, and do for Caribbeanness what it did for Englishness: i.e., it will create a collective West Indian will which traversed race and class belongings. It was a will that was made up of the desire to be different and equal to English people, at least on the cricket field. (p. 840)

For Indian cricket teams past and present, meanwhile, there has been something particularly rewarding about beating the English at their own game—as there has been for most cricketing nations when they have achieved this (and they have often done so). It speaks to that indubitably politico-cultural dimension of the game. When, in August 1971, the hirsute Indian spinner B. S. Chandrasekhar took six wickets for only 38 runs at Old Trafford, Manchester, it set up India's first ever series win on English soil. In the footage of the game, it is difficult to make out the ball as Chandrasekhar bounds in and rips through the English batting line-up with his leg spin, but it mattered as little as the fact that the Indian batsmen then stumbled at snail's pace to victory, losing six wickets of their own along the way. India had beaten the English in their own back yard. Not only has it been important for these postcolonial cricketing victories to happen, equally important has been the need for these nations to forge cricketing identities by their own designs. I call to mind another West Indian player, Vivian Richards, who in the 1970s and 1980s swashbuckled his way through games almost without fear of failure, dismantling from the very first delivery the spirit of bowlers who steamed in only to see the ball zip off to the boundary time and time again. The Antiguan would lean languidly on his bat between deliveries, always without a helmet, with an air of arrogance that was a thorn in the side of English reserve and orthodoxy. When the ball arrived at him, though, Richards would swipe ferociously and lightning quick, with all the vigor and the hip-twisting of a baseball shot—an elegant nonconformism—and he would often drag the ball across his body from way out beyond his eye line when, contrary to the counsel of cricketing wisdom, it would seem most imprudent to do so. In the context of the era, which saw acute social unrest among Britain's Afro-Caribbean community, who felt undervalued and underrepresented particularly in Thatcherite Britain, Richards's bludgeoning swipes, mammoth scores, and general indomitability served as much as cultural and political blows as they did as sporting ones. One need only think of Richards's innings in the first one-day international of the summer tour, at Old Trafford in 1984, when his individual score of 189 dragged the West Indies from a modest total to what was ultimately a winning position. The batsman's counter-punching was compelling: With the Windies one wicket away from being bowled out for a meager 170, it looked for all the world that England would be left chasing an

easily reachable score. Richards, though, put the English bowlers to the sword and repeatedly subjected them to the ultimate ignominy by clearing room for himself when facing perfectly good deliveries and, offering a clear view of his stumps and playing with a circular golf-swing strike, hitting the ball back over the bowler's head. The West Indies eventually posted a total of 272, to which England could only reply with a meek 168. The game—and that whole cricketing summer of 1984, in fact—proved to be a chastening experience for England, team and country, whereas for the West Indies, it was another significant act of defiance against the British, against their now waning myth of superiority and, in a way, against the country's neo-colonial politics. In the middle of it all, Richards was a fitting icon: a nerveless batsman who always demonstrated artistry that challenged cricketing wisdom, and who was incredibly successful doing so.

Of late, world cricket has succumbed to the pressures of modern-day sporting trends, notably in the induction of Twenty-20, a condensed version of the game that, by way of fitting a full match into around 3 hr, has encouraged more of the sport's most exciting elements: big hitting and balls crashing into the stumps. In simple terms, cricket's historic prestige had not been particularly lucrative for a time. By the turn of the 21st century, both forms of the game then in circulation—a longer version played over the course of several days and a shorter form completed in a day—were seen no longer to offer much appeal, or, at least, not in a way that transferred to revenue. One could not question the dedication of the cricketing purists, as it were, who would gladly sit through long days of sedate, meandering play; but a huge cohort of would-be spectators (and consumers) remained untapped. Hence the creation of Twenty-20, which began as a competition in England but was later adopted by all of the cricket-playing nations, notably in India where arguably the format has been embraced with more vigor than anywhere else. Although at first there was a certain amount of light-hearted irreverence about it, so detached did it seem from the pomp associated with cricket, Twenty-20 steadily emerged as a spectacle that pulled in crowds. They indulged in its quickened pace and, perhaps above all else, its huge rise in the number of sixes, the highest value (and most visually striking) shot in the sport, wherein the ball is hit over the boundary without bouncing. In rising to prominence, Twenty-20 effected two important changes. On one hand, because of the more pressurized playing conditions—the limiting of an innings at 120 balls (20 overs, six balls in each)—it gradually compelled players into devising new methods, for there was now little room for error and great value in trying to score from every shot. If in the past, a batsman had been able to play reservedly, sometimes happy only to occupy the crease (simply keeping the bowler at bay without much thought of accumulating runs), the limited gameplay of Twenty-20 required that he began to exercise a certain amount of attacking ingenuity in his shot selection, particularly considering his bowling counterpart was at the same time devising his own new methods of defense. Thus, cricket in this form cast off the sport's most celebrated characteristics, the lauding of patience and gentility—those traits that were undeniably and unshakably English. In doing so, it created a more level playing field, so to speak, in that the discourse of cricket as the game of the English (colonial) gentleman was discarded, allowing for the re-inscription of the game

in new, more fluid terms. In other words, it offered a valuable space for new forms of cultural challenge, and for new sites of enunciation.

On the other hand, though, that the game was somewhat taken down from its lofty pedestal meant that it was opened up to more than just those who played it. Most visible has been the massive commercial influence on Twenty-20, particularly so in the IPL, where advertising is now a presence at every turn. Not unlike other sports, team kits are emblazoned with brand logos, as are the pitches and their surroundings. However, one must look further than the very intentionally visible marketing behaviors of sponsors to see that in the large-scale packaging of these competitions—from the limits set on overseas players to each team's financial input allowance, for example—the decisions made effectively contribute to the way in which the national space is projected. This factor cannot be played down, particularly in the case of the IPL. There seems to me to be a handy parallel between India hosting sporting event of this magnitude and, say, the design of many Eastern European nations to host the Eurovision Song Contest. Not necessarily because it *is* a mark of political stability and cultural progressiveness, but certainly because such an image may be projected. I include here only a number of key details that begin to shed light on the competition as being not so much an Indian cricketing event than a spectacle of Indian interests. Due to the massive financial investment in the IPL, it is now considered to be one of the richest sporting spectacles in the world, and by far the most lucrative cricketing tournament. All the teams in the competition are franchises, and are owned by some of India's largest businesses—Indian Cements, the GMP Group, and the United Breweries Group among them. Because of the large sums of money invested in the competition, cricketing talent from across the globe is signed up to play for teams, arguably to the detriment of homegrown Indian talent. Equally, the domestic geography of each team does not necessarily relate to its player-base or fan-base. And finally, it must be noted that competition has been broadcast through a much dramatized Indian media lens, so that the on-field action appears as only a small part of greater theatrical spectacle in which players, coaches, and owners are at the same time cast as celebrities. The acerbic words of Vikram Bedi (2006), writing in *Economic and Political Weekly*, are useful here in explaining how such a cocktail of influences have been greeted with relative success in each edition of the competition so far:

All of this only works so powerfully because it has the moral sanction of the “national.” And so players making obscene amounts of money, often entirely undeserved, self-indulgent, and ignorant judgmental fans, a galaxy of selfish corporate sponsors, and frivolous media coverage of even minor cricketing events are all exonerated in advance by the implicit or explicit appeal to national grandeur, national will-to-prove-oneself, national excellence, strength and virility. (p. 2521)

For Bedi, then, that the IPL has managed to sustain itself is in no small part due to the fact that the competition issues a projection of Indianness, even if its workings suggest overwhelmingly that other interests are served before the nation. And thus, one might begin to see the conflicting forces at work in the IPL. In no uncertain terms, the competition is an

orchestrated carnival in which the anarchy and innovation of the on-field action takes place within a controlled arena of noncricketing interests. There is a(n uneven) balancing act between, to use a cricketing analogy, the artistic output of cricketers “in the middle,” and myriad market forces controlling from “the boundary.”

Ultimately, my argument runs as follows. An Indian batsman strolls to the wicket, takes his guard, and sets about playing his innings. On this particular day, a combination of skill, good judgment, and luck all help him put together a fine score. He plays a full repertoire of shots, some unavoidably defensive, some extravagant, and some unremarkable by contrast. In the space of an hour his work has contributed significantly to the shape of the game in question and a little to the narrative of his own personal cricketing history. The innings is full of nuances: Moments of good fortune allow him to continue when on another day things, might have been otherwise; moments of high skill give him confidence to play more and more expressively; and his shot selection gives his entire innings some manner of guiding sentiment, be it innovative, explosive, or courageous. But, even before any of this takes place, the very structure of the IPL, with all its governing principles firmly in place, ensures that any sense of individuality his innings might have produced is evinced by a grand narrative that runs out of his control. What the viewer observes on screen is indeed an Indian player representing an Indian regional team in a domestic Indian tournament. Unfortunately for him, it is not an authentic Indianness at work, but only a seductive projection of it.

Ownership of the Shot

One of the widely agreed-upon hallmarks of English gentility on the cricket field is the English batsman's execution of the cover drive. When the ball is delivered by the bowler and it pitches on a good length outside off-stump—meaning that it arrives at the batsman in a favorable position for him to extend his arms and strike it away from the body—the English batsman has typically lent forward with the most elegance, taken a purposeful stride forward, swung the bat in an immaculate upward arc and, with a resounding thump, sent the ball fizzing across the outfield at 45° to the boundary rope. “The cover drive is a statement of technical superiority or undentable self-belief,” writes Rob Steen (2012), “exuding authority or oozing effortlessness, radiating efficiency” (para. 11). (A secondary point is being handily proven here, I hope, that the very language of cricket conjures an unmistakably English pretention.) As such, it was a case of the “empire striking back” when, say, Indian or West Indian batsmen began to make the cover drive their own, playing the stroke with all the graciousness that the English found so praiseworthy. One calls to mind Sir Garfield Sobers, a West Indian, and one of the game's greatest batsmen, striking through the ball so loosely, such was the fluidity of his movement. But never was his cover drive anything other than controlled. Of Sobers's play more generally, C. L. R. James (1973/2005) writes,

Never was such ease and certainty of stroke, such early seeing of the ball and such late, leisured play, such command by a batsman not only of the bowling but of himself. He seemed to be expressing a personal vision. (p. 344)

Particularly in the Twenty-20 game, though, a form somewhat untethered from cricket's obstinate sense of Englishness, there has been scope for new forms of artistry, less reliant upon mimicry, and it is something that Indian cricketers have undoubtedly seized upon as well as any. The cricketing shot described at the very opening of the chapter—the ungainly swat for four runs—is precisely the sort of practice I am hinting at, for it was, as I have suggested, not one to be found in the English cricketing manual. Thus it was an appropriation, a way of being different but equal; in Twenty-20, four runs are four runs are four runs, no matter how they are scored. Watch any IPL match and one finds young Indian batsmen engineering shots such as this in every innings, carving their bats wildly, but not inelegantly, through the air and sending the ball flying to all parts of the ground. If the beauty of the cover drive is to be found in its sense of order—foot planted, knee bent, arm perfectly angled, head still—these new shots are praised for the unlikeliness of their efficiency, the ingenuity of the action. There are raucous cheers for the batsman who manages somehow to retrieve a darting ball an inch from his toes and scoop it back over the bowler's head to the boundary. The Indian captain, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, for instance, has become known for a shot seemingly conjured from nothing, “the helicopter shot,” a last-minute circular swipe of the bat that resembles a turning propeller—a shot that often manages to dispatch the ball at wonderfully unusual angles. Bowlers, too, have discovered their own sleights of hand, perfect for this condensed version of the game in which containing the flow of runs is their main objective. Perhaps more than any other nationality, it has been nimble-fingered Indians (and namely spin bowlers) who have most effectively honed their art, always skillfully manipulating the flight, the speed, or the rotation of the ball after its release with myriad variations. Each shot played by the batsman, each delivery thrown down by the bowler, each moment of action in the field, and each collective game played is a performance, not necessarily dissimilar from those performances given by actors in theaters or by writers on the page. Ultimately, I am suggesting that, as India's premier domestic cricket competition, the IPL is theoretically an important stage for not insignificant cultural acts. Nevertheless, bringing this cricketing demonstration back round to the issue at hand, I want to argue that the trickle-down effect of the obsession with theatrical spectacle threatens to mute the artistic potential of Indian cricket.

I have just watched the last ball of an innings in an IPL game between the Chennai Super Kings and the Mumbai Indians. The Chennai bowler, having taken two wickets and conceded only two runs in the crucial last over, delivers a slower final ball (something of an art form in Twenty-20, often confusing the batsman who swings wildly and too early at thin air) that pitches dead in line with the stumps. Harbhajan Singh, the right-handed Mumbai batsman, takes a lolling left-footed step backwards, drops his right knee nearly to the floor and, only at the last second realizing the slower pace of the ball, swings the bat brutishly in stages from somewhere behind his head, connects, and hits the ball high and over the ropes for six runs. In isolation the shot is spectacular, a sort of skewed and collapsed version of a traditional hook shot. The contortion of the batsman's body is strangely dexterous, and the sheer power of it is immense. In the context of the game, meanwhile, this final flourish marks a shift in momentum,

giving the Mumbai side a fillip for the second half. For the crowd in the stadium, too, there is joy to be had in witnessing (and hearing), first hand, this shot in real time. Yet for the television viewer—and, clearly, most spectatorship is undertaken in this way—I find something ultimately disempowering about the way in which the spectacle is subsequently handled by the broadcaster, who we must regard here as the arbiter of an aggressive visual culture. For not only is the second-long footage of the shot shown again once in real time and perhaps half a dozen more times, slow motion, from various vantage points—including from cameras embedded within the stump and attached to the brim of the umpire's hat—but the footage is then shown close-up and in ultra-slow motion, a theatrical soundtrack added, a loud bang effect timed for the moment the ball strikes the bat. My reservation is not necessarily with the footage itself, which affords the interested viewer an insight into its very anatomy. I am instead bothered by the outright fetishization of it and what the knock-on effect is on the esteem in which the whole thing is held. The shot is made purely theatrical, transformed from sport into spectacle. Cricket, lauded as a game epitomized by the sharp snap of leather on willow and all that the sound summons up, is reduced here to that and that only: the repeated, fetishized staging of the game's most striking moment.¹ Are we not treading once more here on a Barthesian footing, in terms of his thoughts on the spectacle of wrestling? "The spectator [of wrestling]," Barthes (1973) writes, "is not interested in the rise and fall of fortunes; he expects the transient image of certain passions" (p. 16). When Barthes draws upon the differences between the sport of boxing and the spectacle of wrestling, and duly notes that, "a boxing-match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time" (p. 16), can we not suggest that the difference has now narrowed? Is not spectacle coming to define the way of all sports? By extension, one might well suggest that Twenty-20 is to earlier forms of cricket what wrestling is to boxing—which is not to downplay the merits of wrestling per se, but simply to contend that the very heart of cricket has been shifted from story to style. Professional players have lauded the Twenty-20 format for freeing the imagination and the bodily mechanics of the cricketer, who is liberated from the traditional expectation of, say, taking guard in a particular position, keeping still as long as possible at the crease, or, as a bowler, releasing the ball from the hand in a particular manner. But that liberation is short lived, for a given ownership of the shot is claimed from above, neatly packaged, and presented in a way that curtails its organic value.

Let us return to the matter of Harbhajan's shot, and the distillation of the whole context of the game of cricket—not just this particular game, but the sport at large—to a single frame, an image almost sexualized in its phallic symbolism, in which the batsman's contribution to proceedings becomes a moment of mere looking, untethered from all else. Put simply, it is no longer the batsman's shot. Something about this fetishization of the shot is reminiscent of a development traceable in modern-day pornography, which we might consider to be the height of spectacle, and which is worth discussing here on the basis that it tells us something further about the span modern-day trends in visual culture. The closer and clearer attention paid to the act of sexual penetration in pornography—enabled by better quality camera equipment and structured by

the mass availability of material online, which drives forward the need to outstrip a standard—has had the harmful consequence, among others, of detaching the genitalia of performers from their bodies, physically and socially. In a pornographic video of a female, for example, wherein the viewer is granted an ongoing close-up of the woman's vagina, given the detachment between sexual organ and body the viewer is left watching only the theatrical spectacle of penetration of a, not *her*, vagina; that is, an indefinite, rather than a definite, article. This, for obvious reasons, is dangerous territory. Returning to the six shot in cricket, I observe its elevation to what we might call a “money-shot” image (sexual penetration, bat on ball) to an unassailable apex at the top of our hierarchy of representational forms, in which the isolated and repeated clip of the six is detached from the larger contest and viewers are left to delight in the spectacle. The classic money shot itself, the on-screen display of male sexual climax in pornography, is an evidently fetishizing act, foregoing the natural (and visually unspectacular) conclusion of sex in favor of a manufactured graphic display: the visibly ejaculating penis. Linda Williams (1989) puts it that the money shot affords “maximum visibility” (p. 94), “the sense of an ending” (p. 93), and “visual evidence of the mechanical ‘truth’ of bodily pleasure” (p. 106)—in sum, an orchestrated and truly striking spectacle that is an unnatural elucidation of sexual intercourse. This finds something like its equivalent in the IPL in the similar inflation to a zenith of the point-of-contact image, when in ultra-motion the would-be defenseless cricket ball (which is clearly not the case in reality), gliding harmlessly through the air, finally meets with the would-be phallus—the bat—wielded by the cricketer, and the camera captures the most muscular and powerful moment of the action. (Something can be said of the moment that the bowler hits the wickets, too, at which point the television viewer's perspective changes and, from within the slow-motion stump camera, one bears witness to the now deadly ball increasing in size, expertly avoiding the swing of the bat, until it appears to penetrate the very lens itself. Importantly, it is an image that cannot sustain itself, for, a split second after contact is made, the stump is wrenched from the ground along with its wires and the stream of footage is broken.) If it is too simple to note just that this inclination toward the money shot in both modern pornography and cricket reduces broader wholes to concentrated images, then one must begin to consider what exactly is lost in the process. Or, perhaps more importantly, what is it that cannot be retrieved? True, in the case of cricket, the actual game continues to an unscripted, organic conclusion regardless of the fetishization of images that takes place en route—which is to note that the actual outcome of the gameplay is, in theory, always above being influenced—but there is something damaging about the culture that this behavior begets. Cricket invariably moves toward valuing not the action itself, but always how it looks. Put differently, overwhelmingly the spectator (the television viewer) is put before the artist (the cricketer). For the Indian cricketer playing in the IPL who might have held, through his innovative manipulation of bat and ball, a cultural potential, it is dispiriting to see that his labor is taken from him as quickly as he has made it.

There is a strange logic at work in the IPL. In the very act of creating a platform issued explicitly in the name of India, on which Indian cricketers can theoretically

perform important cultural acts for themselves, for ordinary Indians and for more around the world—acts that might well contribute over time to the development of a narrative history of Indian cricket—there has been the unfortunate corollary that those performances are always already prey to larger forces (commercial, national and so on). Those forces have both enabled the cricketing performances in the first place and yet, at the same time, almost entirely diminished the potential of them in one fell swoop of the bat.

A Narrative History of Indian Cricket

In *The Cambridge Companion to Cricket* (2011), Boria Majumbar writes triumphantly of the IPL, suggesting that “India’s position as the new nerve centre of world cricket, completing what I call the ‘decolonisation of Indian cricket,’ has been strengthened in recent times thanks to the impact of the IPL” (p. 173). True, the contribution of Indian cricket to an historical understanding of India and Indianness cannot be overstated—the title of Bedi’s article, “Indian Cricket as Synecdoche for Our Times,” makes clear this judgment—but I find Majumbar somewhat overstates the potential of the IPL. True, there is little doubt that, as he says, India has become cricket’s new nerve center; such is the vast monetary worth of the tournament that this is largely beyond question. Leading international cricketers have shown willingness to forego their national commitments in order to play in the IPL, which clashes with many international ties. I would argue their decisions are overwhelmingly financially motivated, though. I would also stop somewhere short of the claim that the IPL completes “the decolonisation of Indian cricket,” because it assumes the tournament as a bona fide Indian vehicle. It is curious, for Majumbar also concedes the “aggressive hyper-jingoistic nationalist sentiment [that] has emerged in India” (p. 178) as a result of the IPL, hinting at the transience and the instability of beliefs it spurns among the Indian cricketing public. He also cites examples of non-Indian players and coaches who have been “appropriated and indigenised” (p. 178) as members of IPL teams, only to be derided later for performing badly. He writes,

David Hussey, the most consistent batsman for the Kolkata team in IPL season one, had soon become “Hussey da,” meaning elder brother in the vernacular. However, this co-option rests on unstable foundations, a fact evident from the venom spat at coach John Buchanan each time the Kolkata Knight Riders failed to deliver. Each failure was greeted with murmurs of a “white man here in India just for the money.” (p. 178)

Majumbar implicitly acknowledges the IPL as an entertainment spectacular parading as a national competition, and as one driven by an aggressively financial—rather than cultural, social, or national—heart.

In a roundabout way, then, I argue that the structure of the IPL, given its superficial treatment of cricket, its dismissal of more than it includes, delegitimizes the tournament’s claim to act as a history-producing entity. And yet, the development of an historical cricketing narrative of India is of considerable import. Written or otherwise,

understanding India's cricket culture in cogent terms is particularly valuable, not only as a way of narrativizing the national team's on-field successes in recent times but also articulate the sport's place among the Indian social fabric. There have been a number of literary-historical works published, most notably Ashis Nandy's *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (1989) and Mihir Bose's (1990/2002) *A History of Indian Cricket*, both of which come too early to record the latest chapter in India's cricketing and economic history. Tellingly, Bose warns in the revised edition of his book of the country's cricketing plight in the early years of the new millennium, suggesting that,

Indian cricket has entered its most critical phase. When it was growing up in the years after independence it could plead poverty. Now it has money to finance its dreams, but unless its administrators can provide the far-sighted leadership the game desperately needs, the danger is there may be a growing gap between boardroom riches and on-field poverty leading to a growing public disillusionment from which Indian cricket may find it difficult to recover. (p. 476)

Written only 5 years before the inaugural IPL tournament was held, Bose's comments illuminate how unprecedented the magnitude of the competition has been.

That noted, the IPL has not been a panacea to its country's cricketing shortcomings. Instead, it has been something a *trompe l'oeil* in which a highly commoditized international spectacle has masqueraded as domestic competition. Rather than occupying a place in the narrative history of Indian cricket—the would-be success story Bose had hoped for—the IPL reveals only the extent of India's industry-level fixation with image projection. With watertight commercial and media packaging, the competition has not only secured a global sporting interest, in the sense that cricket fans are bound to be captivated by the world's best players taking part all at once, but also traded on Indian audiences' inclination toward "darshan" (auspicious seeing) and "tamasha" (grand show). Again, I look to Bedi, who writes (before the inception of the IPL),

How has cricket become a sort of epic democratic-capitalist-nationalist soap opera for all, complete with heroes, villains, heroes-turned-villains-turned heroes? The answer, perhaps, lies in the conjugation of the transcendental, devotional power of nationalism with the equally enchanting power of the commodity spectacle. (p. 2520)

Which is to suggest, of course, that what has driven this recent reengagement with cricket has not been the participants who have, play-by-play, performed their way to sporting success (and its positive public corollary), but the receptacle through which this narrative has taken place.

What, then, is the value of the IPL to Indian cultural economy? The answer is two-fold, of course. On the surface, it provides an impermeable depiction of India in images. When each broadcast begins, satellite-style images display a quick swoop from an all-encompassing map of India down to an overhead view of the host stadium. These pictures cut to footage of scenes within the ground itself. The production values are slick: Sweeping shots of the crowd are shown, often focusing on well-dressed and

cheering members; the on-screen illustrations, which give details of players' statistics and so on, are flecked at their edges with typically Indian motifs; the kits the players wear pay similar homage to the Indian aesthetic; carefully chosen music is blared out of the public address system throughout the game; and, for the final game in the 2014 tournament, the stadium footage opened with a theatrical demonstration of the on-duty commentators (among them South Africans, New Zealanders, and a Zimbabwean), encircled by a camera on the pitch, while all wore traditional Indian garb—as though they too were characters in the drama. Away from the ground (I write only of the British coverage here), the London studio continues the aesthetic: Against the swirling orange-green backdrop and the window-view of the Thames sits Shonali Nagrani, the pale-skinned model-cum-presenter, dressed in flattering western attire, whom we viewers are perhaps meant to see as the representative modern Indian woman. All told, the IPL as spectacle is an illusionary but powerful projection of India, the success of which is difficult to tell. Nevertheless, it is a set of images that cater to the contemporary obsession with spectacle, and, on this scale, they are undoubtedly effective.

By contrast, the second estimation of the IPL as a national form must necessarily be valued in less visual terms. Aside from the allure of the spectacle, the question must be asked as to whether the game of cricket itself retains any sense of value in this charged arena. While I have stated already that the artistic potential of a single cricketer in the IPL is diminished by the stage constructed around him, I might add that the competition as a whole cannot contribute a great deal to the overall narrative of Indian cricket. To those who might find something innately revolutionary about the IPL, in its adaptation of a elitist British colonial sport, its repackaging for an Indian audience, one might respond by arguing that the IPL has been equally noninclusive; that, as Ramani (2008) suggests, it only “[panders] to the voyeuristic desires of the consumerized spectator” (p. 15). “The anarchic nature of a market-driven sport,” he continues, “ensures that only a small coterie of readily recognisable talent gets attention” (p. 15). His contention is that the upshot of this is a system that recognizes not skills but brand appeal. Thus, if the competition does not draw players democratically from the Indian citizenry—which is all but to essentially preclude the dreams of those who aspire to rise to the top from the very bottom—and if it trades in the individuality of every Indian player who *does* make it into the competition, one can mark conclusively that the revolutionary potential of IPL is minimal.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I am inclined to lean more heavily upon this second appraisal for the reason that, ultimately, the enduring allure of the spectacle will prove unsustainable. Indeed, there have been signs already that this is the case with popularity in recent years struggling to reach the peaks of the first few editions of the IPL. If the drive at the heart of the competition is primarily entertainment, there is surely a limit to which it can be pushed. Similarly, if at the zenith of the IPL game itself is the shot bludgeoned for six runs, what can be more of a spectacle than that, unless the rules of the game itself are changed to incorporate a shot that scores eight runs, or 10, or 12? In the 2014 tournament, nearly 720 sixes were scored in the 60 games played, averaging around 12 in each. With some loose calculations, and taking into account that each maximum shot is replayed on screen some four or so times, one reaches a

figure in excess of three-and-a-half thousand times that a six hit was broadcast. I draw attention to this because the pleasure of the image cannot continue to hold its value. By extension, entertainment cannot continue to operate in these conditions. Pointing out the obvious, it should be acknowledged that cricket is a sport, the joy of which has always to have been found in its unpredictability. Each cricketing nation has known its ups and downs (again I write through gritted teeth as an English supporter) and is all the richer for having experienced both. The IPL, on the contrary, cannot secure this nuanced manner of unpredictability and thus will, I argue, increasingly resemble a scripted soap opera. Woe betide the tournament whose total number of sixes falls short of the number in the previous year, for what manner of spectacle will that be?

Conclusion

The nationalist-capitalist mechanics of the IPL chime with a reality well-known to the postcolonial nation, one concerning the discussion over right to space. In its aggressive manufacturing of an on-screen visioning of India—one that is at any one time entertaining, multicultural, cosmopolitan, and egalitarian—the IPL has something of a monopoly over the representation of Indian space, much to the detriment of that which exists just beyond its shown boundaries. In other words, the images the IPL projects, particularly in the context of a contemporary visual culture that prioritizes television images, are more highly valued than the myriad off-screen realities. Within the built space of the IPL, meanwhile, the cricketer who takes to the field is always secondary to the on-screen space's guiding principle of engineering a theatrical spectacle, meaning that his performance is always at risk of being bundled up and lost to the greater carnival. Let us consider this a moment. How often the IPL viewer has seen the likes of Chris Gayle, arguably the West Indies' current best batsman (and suitably aggressive enough in cricketing terms to fit perfectly into the IPL mold), take to the crease and swing the bat violently, attacking right from the off. One particular innings in the 2013 tournament, in which he blasted his way to a score of 175 from 66 balls, simply set the tone for more innings in the same vein. That is, rather than recognizing the performance on the basis of its obvious merit (never has a score been made more quickly, or astonishingly), the nature of the IPL format meant that it served only as a benchmark to be emulated or evinced over and over, not only by other players keen to gain the record but by Gayle himself. The wild swinging of the bat from the very first ball has never been a sound cricketing tactic—one should always get one's eye in first, so to speak—but Gayle has been somewhat coerced into a role that essentially requires an exaggerated projection of his normal game, or his normal self. When on occasion he has played in a manner more conducive to overall team success, in doing so playing with more awareness of the wider state of the particular match, there have been cries of, "Where is Chris Gayle?" Might we not ask, by extension, who exactly is that player at the crease?

Elsewhere, amidst the accompanying IPL paraphernalia, players are utilized to endorse the products whose makers have made the IPL possible at all. These players are seemingly obligated (but well paid, too, one imagines) to have their bodies sprawled across billboards and buses, not just with the products they endorse, but

often consuming them too. For it is not enough to see M. S. Dhoni with a bottle of soft drink, one must also see him imbibe the liquid. Interestingly, in 2011, as part of a Pepsi advertising campaign for the Cricket World Cup, Dhoni featured in a number of print adverts shirtless, a flame motif seemingly superimposed onto his torso and waves of (one can only assume) Pepsi breaking dramatically at his flanks. The text reads, ironically, “Rules are for followers.” A complementary television advert, meanwhile, sees Dhoni in a bucolic India being taught by a villager how to operate a piece of machinery. Conveniently enough, the action required is almost identical to that enacted in Dhoni’s helicopter shot—a swift wheeling of the arms. For proving himself (and for proving also that cricketing stardom has not alienated him from the ordinary Indian body), Dhoni is rewarded with a bottle of apparently cold Pepsi, which, upon drinking, transports him to the wicket of an international cricket game, where he repeats the same circular action and sends a ball flying for six runs. When the advert ends, with Dhoni gulping from the bottle and proclaiming, “the helicopter shot,” against a blue background and the trademark Pepsi logo, one barely need ask to whom the shot now belongs. What I am keen to point out here is the extent to which the very labor of the cricketer is owned, particularly in the IPL, from both inside and out. I am hinting at a double movement of, on one hand, the claim laid by broadcasters, sponsors, and commercially minded owners who work to frame cricketing labor from the outside in their own terms; and, on the other hand, and as something of a direct consequence of the former, the sense that the cricketing labour performed is always already subject to regulations issued from outside the playing arena. Ramani (2008) provides telling evidence in precisely this regard when he writes of the basis of the IPL’s player auction:

The establishment of this commodity market was kicked off by an auction system that instituted market value for the players through a valuation process. This valuation process considered not just the skill levels of the players but also their brand building capabilities. So it is that Ishant Sharma, a tyro who has promised a great future . . . was valued at \$950,000 as compared to the established Umar Gul valued at just \$150,000 although he took the most wickets playing for Pakistan in the World Twenty20 tournament. Sharma’s value as a representative for brand building the franchise, owing to his Indian nationality, trumped over the *real value* of Umar Gul. (p. 14)

In sum, one might go as far as to note that the IPL claims ownership of the cricketing body and, by extension, its actions. Cricketing bodies are not rated in terms of use- or exchange-value, in the old Marxist sense—that is, not for their cricketing skill—but by Baudrillardian sign values.² Moreover, the players do not remain players per se, but emerge in ambassadorial roles representing those who have secured their place on the stage itself.

Part of the power of history, much like the best cricketing performances, is to be found in its internal battles over time. The cricketer at the wicket, batsman or bowler, cannot ever hope for instant or unhindered success, and must learn to revel equally in the unpredictable turns his game takes. For a sport that captivates the nation’s public imagination, it is important that Indian cricketing history can be understood in cogent

terms, for it occupies a significant place in the national culture. In turn, the contributions of individual Indian cricketers must be allowed to take up their own small places within the larger narrative. The IPL, though, threatens to become an historical anomaly, reducible to an ultra-motion clip of a batsman, muscularly and agonizingly slowly, heaving a cricket ball from his bat over the boundary rope. Without a frame of reference, this image will have no greater resonance than one based purely on shallow aesthetics. But so long as its images of India do hold onto a certain value—that is, as long as one is seduced into seeing the IPL as a bona fide Indian entity—it will continue its illusion. The competition was borne out of vanity and excess during a boom time in the mid-2000s when India had the resources to act accordingly. Yet it never had any design of genuinely serving the desires of the Indian cricketing public, which has always remained outside its narrow frame, or has been called upon only in the manner of sweeping camera shots across its cheering mass, for visual effect. Offering a warning, Ramani (2008) writes, “History tells us that the period of excess is followed by a period of collapse” (p. 15).

One should be careful not to overstate the revolutionary potential of cricket, as though the heaving swipes of an Indian batsman, the sharp turn of the Indian spin bowler, and the raucous cries of spectators could hold the same social value as they do during gameplay itself. But it is important that the Indian public itself is not seduced by the spectacle totally, to the point that it cannot see cricket’s larger antecedent history, in which it plays an important part. Because if (or, more likely, when) the gleaming façade of the spectacle can no longer be contained, and duly shatters, ordinary cricket-loving Indians will be the ones left to pick up the pieces. The narrative of Indian cricket begins in England, takes a turn through dusty Indian village maidans, city squares, and informal games played just outside the walls of Eden Gardens, Calcutta. It cannot be reduced to this vulgar base level of fetishized images and expect to continue, untroubled. Perhaps it is only fitting that the final word go to he who is, and quite rightly should be, at the center of the debate: the cricketer himself. And, in the spirit of the game it seems only right to take up a cricketing cliché or two as pieces of advice to him. Play your shots, we might say to him. Look to build an innings. Play the ball, not the occasion. And if in any doubt, occupy the crease. Just occupy the crease.

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Notes

1. I have witnessed this elsewhere: the phenomenon of the ultra-motion replay at the boxing match, the strangely roused gasps of the crowd when the moment of one boxer’s knock-out

blow is shown over and over at an agonizing pace on a big screen. It is as though the rest of the drama is supplanted by the one frame showing the head of the losing participant shudder and his body crumple to the floor.

2. Baudrillard suggests that a proliferation of signs and spectacles is a corollary of the mass production of commodities and that, as a consequence, over time value comes to be measured by the sign accompanying the commodity. In other words, value comes to be premised on, say, prestige rather than as on utility.

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