



## Historicizing Swadeshi Protest in Indian Cricket: The Empire Plays Back

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### **Abstract:**

This paper interrogates the transformation of cricket from a British colonial pedagogical tool into a potent instrument of "Swadeshi" resistance and national integration in the Indian subcontinent. Drawing upon C.L.R. James's conceptualization of sport as a "purposeful anecdote" of imperial life, the study traces the evolution of the game from eighteenth-century British cantonments to the professional mastery demonstrated by Parsi, Hindu, and Muslim communities. Initially disseminated to inculcate Victorian virtues of discipline and authority, cricket was strategically "vernacularized" by the colonized to dismantle myths of Western moral and physical superiority. The research highlights pivotal moments of athletic subversion, including the 1879 Parsi protest for "playing space" and the 1911 victory of Mohun Bagan, which catalyzed nationalist fervor. Furthermore, the paper examines the role of sport in navigating internal socio-cultural fractures, specifically through the career of Palwankar Baloo, whose success challenged deep-seated caste hierarchies and facilitated a secular space for "inter-class" interaction. By analyzing the communal structures of the Quadrangular and Pentangular tournaments, this study argues that the cricket pitch served as a unique site for constructing communal harmony and collective identity, ultimately providing a symbolic and political platform for the transition toward post-colonial sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Swadeshi resistance, coloniality, subversion, communal harmony, caste reform, Indian cricket, nationalist consciousness.

In his seminal work *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James posited that organized team sports function as a "purposeful anecdote" of life within the British colonial apparatus, serving as a microcosm for the broader socio-political dynamics of the Empire. Within the Indian subcontinent, the dissemination of European athletic disciplines—most notably cricket, field hockey, and football—was strategically advocated by agents of the East India Company, missionaries, and the British administrative diaspora. These sports were utilized as pedagogical instruments of coloniality, designed to inculcate the "civilized" virtues of temporal discipline, rigid authority, and stoic obedience within the indigenous psyche. Christopher Douglas, biographer of the controversial Douglas Jardine, underscored this Victorian ethos by defining cricket as a pursuit that mandates its pupils be "honest, impervious to physical pain, uncomplaining and civilized" (Douglas 18).

However, this colonial discourse of "disciplining" the native subject underwent a radical subversion. As colonized Indians mastered the structural nuances of these sports, they began to "pay back the Empire in its own coin," effectively weaponizing the colonizer's pastimes as modes of anti-colonial resistance. The adoption of European sports was not merely an act of mimicry but a sophisticated appropriation; by excelling in the field of play, the colonized dismantled the myth of Western racial and moral superiority.

The transformative potential of this athletic subversion is most visible in the historical milestone of Mohun Bagan's 1911 victory, which transcended the boundaries of sport to become a symbolic triumph over British Raj hegemony. This victory catalyzed the broader political struggle for *Swaraj*, illustrating the inextricable link between the sporting arena and the burgeoning nationalist consciousness. A parallel trajectory is observed in field hockey; the British colonial administration's refusal to compete against their Indian subjects in the Olympics between 1928 and 1936 betrays an imperial anxiety regarding the potential loss of

athletic (and by extension, political) prestige. This cycle of resistance culminated in the 1948 London Olympics, where a newly independent India defeated Britain 4–0 on English soil—a moment of profound post-colonial reckoning. While such a decisive victory in cricket was delayed until 1960, the sport's role in the Indian imaginary remained central.

Beyond the mere cultivation of a nationalistic fervor, the conceptualization of a "united team" served as a socio-cultural bridge, attempting to reconcile internal communal and caste-based fractures. This paper interrogates the process through which the Indian populace internalized and "vernacularized" cricket, transforming it from a colonial import into a "Swadeshi" weapon. By examining the evolution of the game, this study argues that cricket functioned as a critical site for constructing communal harmony and collective identity in the pre-independence era.

## I

Cricket established its roots in India along communal lines. Cricket was brought to India in the middle of the eighteenth century by British soldiers and sailors. They played the game among themselves, in their bungalows and in their cantonments. One can find the first record of Cricket in India during the reign of Akbar the Great in 1597. But the principal reference to Cricket in India originates from a British Sailor who wrote a passage in his journal from the Port of Cambay in 1721. According to his journal 'though the country was inhabited by the Culeys, we every day diverted ourselves with playing Cricket and to other Exercises, which they would come and be spectators of ...' (xx). Although the Indians were a mere spectator cricket at that time. It almost took a hundred more years for participating Indians in the game.

In India cricket began its adventure in the urban British centers like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and afterward it gradually advanced toward the countryside. The first cricket club

outside England was The Calcutta Cricket Club, founded in 1792. Within colonial social life, club cricket often functioned as a cultural refuge, enabling European players to momentarily distance themselves from what they perceived as the unfamiliar environment of India. The sport's carefully measured rhythms—such as the “slow stateliness” of approaching the wicket and the frequent pauses between deliveries—helped cultivate an atmosphere of order and composure. This aesthetic was reinforced by the players' “graceful clothes,” the manicured “greenness” of the ground, and the subdued sociability of luncheon and tea breaks. Together, these elements transformed the match into what contemporaries regarded as an “escape,” a temporary withdrawal from the sensory and social realities they associated with the surrounding landscape and population (xx).

## II

The first people to play cricket in India was the Parsi community. During Arab invasion in 6<sup>th</sup> century Parsis migrated from Iran to India. Parsis were mainly a ‘comprador’ class. They allied themselves with the British to great mutual benefit. They began as a merchant class but in time graduated to the colonial civil service and political reformer. Dadabhai Naoroji, the first non-white elected member of the British Parliament in 1892, was a Parsi political reformer. According to Cashman, the Parsis were ‘a wealthy entrepreneurial group who acted as a cultural brokers between the British and Indian Society’<sup>4</sup>. Parsis were later followed by Hindus and Muslims. In 1830 a group of Parsi young boys started playing cricket imitating the British Soldiers. Not only did they imitate the British style of playing cricket but they also indianized the British sport according to their own. For example the chimney-pots were used as wicket and umbrellas served as bat in hittig elliptical balls stuffed with old rags and sewn by veritably useful cobblers. Thus the game was no longer the sole periphery of the colonizers rather the oriental men adapted the game of cricket and adjusted the seam according to their means. Ramachandra Guha noted, “At least thirty Parsi Clubs

were formed in the 1850s and 1860s named for Roman gods and British Statesmen: Jupiter, Mars, Gladstone and Ripon for example.” (qtd. in Mellow xx).

Initially the game of cricket, as far as the natives were concerned, was played inside the Parsi community for the award given by Parsi businessmen like Jamsedji Tata. However soon they improved themselves a lot and went outside their communal boundary and started challenging the British team as early as in the year 1875. Finally in 1877, the British accepted the challenge of a match between all Parsi team versus the European only Gymkhana (Gymkhana is derived from *Gend-khana* meaning ball house). English papers commenting on this first match spread a rumour that this Parsi team might even tour England: “We have already received several severe drubbings in the cricket field from our Australian cousins; perhaps next we are destined to be knocked (cricketically) into a cocked hat by the descendants of the Fire Worshippers of Parsia” (“Parsis in England” 5).

Though the Parsis failed to win the match, but they played extremely well. Actually what was a royal and leisure sport for the Britishers’ now turned out to be a symbol of resistance put forward by the helpless and hapless colonized. What was merely a game to the colonizers, on the other hand for the colonized people, it was actually a matter of pride. For Indians it had a much wider and explicit political context of East versus West, an emotion that found vehement expression whenever one of the indigenous teams defeated the Europeans. This match set a model for communal matches in Bombay that occurred over the following sixty years.

### **First War against Colonizers for “Space”**

The white colonizers didn’t take this too well. With the growing popularity of cricket, especially among the Parsi community, they felt their supremacy as far as far as the game of cricket was concerned was under severe threat. Not only did they look into the game of

cricket played by the Parsis as a mere sport but they also traced this particular game as an attempt on the part of the colonized to regroup and challenge the dominant class. Their playing field was actually made unplayable by the Europeans who practiced polo in the same pitch where the Indians were trying the game of cricket. The use of open grounds by European polo enthusiasts frequently made these spaces unsuitable for cricket, gradually turning access to the field into a point of contention between colonial authorities and indigenous players. Polo riders would demarcate their turf with “black flags,” effectively barring local cricketers from entering the marked zone. Yet this spatial control was inconsistently applied. In pursuit of the “puck,” mounted players often moved beyond their own limits and disrupted ongoing matches. At the same time, European spectators—including women who arrived in “carriages”—sometimes drove directly onto the cricket ground to obtain a closer view. Such practices exposed the unequal regulation of shared recreational spaces and highlighted the everyday frictions embedded in colonial sporting culture (xx). This can be seen as a British motif to pin down any attempt on the part of the natives to recruit themselves and put up a united front against the British Raj.

In 1879, under the leadership of Dadabhai Naoraji, Parsi cricketers launched a protest for their “Playing Space”. This protest was very much like the protests of Gandhi in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Parsis complained a petition with 460 Parsi and Hindu signatures, send letters to the editors of newspapers, boycotted their annual matches with Europeans and ultimately appealed to the Governor of Bombay. After over two years of tenacity a compromise was reached that gave precedence to native cricket over European polo and the polo players were sent to other fields. In this fight which ended in a small moral victory for the natives, the Asian game of Polo, Guha argues, “...became the emblem of Patrician power, and the English sport indulged by the natives’ mark of Plebeian resistance” (21).

This protest of Parsis challenged the system from inside too. It appealed directly to the British notion of fair play and justice, and it preceded the formation of Indian National Congress four year later in 1885 by some of the same men. The question of players and the nationalists were almost same: “How could you practice democracy at home and deny it abroad”, asked the nationalists. “How could you keep your turf protected and make us play cricket on ground so manifestly unsuited to it”, asked the cricketers (Guha x).

However Parsis’ attempt the imitating art of the game cricket didn’t go well in all quarters because soon the parsis were charged of imitating the British and offer on the part of the Parsis to anglicized them. In 1886, a squad of fifteen elite Parsi cricketers (twelve from Bombay, and three from Karachi) set for Britain, to play a summer sport enjoyed by the colonizing British. On the verge of the Parsi team’s departure from Bombay, the political leader Pherozeshah Mehta framed the tour in elevated, almost ceremonial terms. Drawing on evocative analogies, he suggested that just as artists travel to Italy or pilgrims journey to “Jerusalem” in search of inspiration, the Parsis were setting out for England to pay their respects to the tradition of “English cricketers.” In this formulation, England appeared as the “chosen home” of the game, a site where the visitors hoped to refine their understanding of what he described as a “noble and manly pastime.” Mehta’s remarks thus positioned the cricket tour as both a sporting venture and a symbolic cultural pilgrimage within the hierarchies of empire (qtd. in Guha 22).

The tour was mainly self-funded and the team was captained by Dhunjishaw Patel, a fast underarm bowler. The Parsis played 28 matches against second class British clubs and managed to win only one match. A second tour to England by a Parsees team took place in 1888; they won eight of the 31 matches played, drawing ten and losing 11, with two abandoned. This tour also exhibited what one Indian Cricket historian proclaimed as “the first great Indian cricketer,” the six-foot tall doctor, Mehellasha Parvi. The premier Parsi bowler

racked up impressive numbers during three month tour, including an amazing 5000 bowls holding his opponent to less than 2000 runs.

In 1890, a travelling English team, consisting of professional players accepted the challenge of all Parsi team. The first match resulted draw, while the second was won by the Parsees. The winning of an Indian team over skilled British side induced an emotional reaction; Framji Patel put it, 'the imaginative and emotional Parsi youth felt for a day or two that he was the victor of the victors of Waterloo.' 1892 watched the beginning of an annual tournament in Bombay Presidency between the Parsis and the Europeans of India. Till 1906 the Parsees played twenty six matches, with a great record of eleven wins, ten losses and five draws.

Cricket played a vital role to the identities of Parsi Community. In a conversation with Benita Fernando, the historian Prashant Kidambi reflects on the ways in which sections of India's "colonial middle class" used cricket as a means of aligning themselves with British cultural norms. For communities such as the Parsis, participation in the sport functioned as a symbolic assertion that, despite differences in "skin colour," they could claim a shared commitment to imperial values. Kidambi nevertheless cautions against reading this process as mere imitation. He points out that, by the late nineteenth century, figures like Sir Ervad Jivanji Jamshedji Modi were attempting to trace the game's origins to the Persian epic Shahnama, thereby proposing an alternative genealogy for cricket. In this reinterpretation, the sport became associated with ideals of "masculinity," helping to craft a historical narrative that presented the Parsis as an inherently vigorous and martial community (Fernando). Ramachandra Guha in his book *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* mentioned another example of the importance of cricket in Parsi communities' identity. He narrated an incident of 1907, when Jamsedji Tata met with American President Theodor

Roosevelt, (for discussing about the opening markets for Tata's steel company in USA) he greeted him with these words: "And how is Parsi cricket getting along?" (28).

### **Hindu Cricket**

The Hindus started playing cricket imitating the Parsis. In Bombay, Hindu cricketers developed their sporting identity within a climate of sustained social and commercial competition with the Parsis. Early observers noted that Hindu players often appeared on the field in "dhotis" and even without shoes, a sign that they were still learning and prone to the "mistakes of novices." By contrast, the Parsis were widely perceived as being "more advanced," a status attributed to their closer "imitation" of European habits and methods. Yet this disparity did not produce resignation. Rather, the visible "progress of the Parsees" intensified Hindu aspirations, prompting them to organise independent teams and to adopt more formal attire and disciplined technique in their efforts to master the game (Guha 31).

The first Hindu to play cricket was Ramachandra Vishnu Navelkar. In 1866 he founded Bombay Union Cricket Club. Where the Parsi clubs were recognized by territories, Hindu clubs were by Caste.

### **Caste**

Parsis and Muslims were minority community in India as a result they were free from casteism. However the main obstacle of the Hindu community was their caste structure. In that time it was impossible to think social structures without caste and class discrimination. Within India various communities were aware of caste, class and religious differences and the "Divide and Rule" policies of the colonizers only served to increase and exploit these divisions. When Navelkar started his club it was strictly for the Prabhu Caste. Yet, as the time passed the Hindu groups understood that they should reform in the selection and ought to

incorporate individuals in the premise of talent not by Caste or Class. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 it was for the first time when various communities of India were uniting together to stand against the British power.

### **Baloo**

Palwankar Baloo was born in 1875 in a Chamar family, a caste that lies nearly at the base of the Hindu social hierarchy. Chamars primarily work with leather, as tanners and dyers, and as the producers of shoes, bottles, tents and seats. According to Caste tradition, the Chammar's, "very name connects him with the carcasses of cattle. Besides, he not only removes the skins from the cattle that have died, but also he eats the flesh" (Guha 82).

Rather than taking Hindu class discriminated occupation Baloo moved to Poona looking for a job. In Poona he took job in a Parsi Cricket Club. There his job was to tend the cricket pitch, dealing with the grounds. Interestingly he was additionally permitted to bowl the members when there were short of bowlers. In 1892, Baloo left the job of Parsi club and joined a European cricket club for better pay. In this club Baloo's job was to bowl the European batsmen of the club. But the talent of Baloo as a medium paced left arm spinner was recognized and developed by Captain J.G. Greig. Baloo perfected his delivery after spending hours of practicing in net with captain Greig.

The talent of Baloo started to spread all through the Poona. At that moment Deccan Gymkhana (dominated by Hindu Bramhins) of Poona challenged the Bombay Gymkhana. For winning against the Bombay Gymkhana, Deccan Gymkhana planned to incorporate Baloo in their squad. Bramhin members of the team were not in favour of taking Baloo as a teammate but some Telegu members contented in favour of Baloo's inclusion. Baloo's performance was very much impressive on the field. Although in the field Baloo was allowed

to play with the high castes but the deep rooted casteism didn't allow Baloo outside the field. Accounts of the match indicate that, during intervals for rest and meals, he was kept apart from both European players and elite Hindu teammates. While others were served indoors on "fine china" within the pavilion, Baloo had to remain outside, eating from "earthen" utensils that underscored his social exclusion. Yet this discriminatory treatment did not diminish his impact on the field. His sustained bowling success and the numerous wickets he claimed enabled him to secure a series of wins for his side, often carrying the burden of victory almost "single-handedly" (Guha 88).

Within a few years, Baloo earned respect through his magical bowling of his teammates as well as the Princes and Maharajas of different Princely states. In 1901 Maharaja of Natore invited him to play for his team. Baloo's talent broke down the caste barrier and he was eventually at the end agreed the privilege to accumulate with his fellow players of the field. In *Annihilation of Caste* B.R. Ambedkar declared, "Another plan of action for abolition caste is to begin with inter-class dinner" (285). Baloo's incident did the same in the cricket field. The influence of Baloo was also felt outside of Cricket field among the society too. This helped Indians to remove the barriers of caste through cricket.

In 1906, Baloo was selected for the Hindu team which is taking part in the Bombay Triangular Presidency Tournament. This tournament was initially started between the annual matches of Europeans and Parsis, and now included Hindus as well. Debutant Baloo led his team (not as captain) to win the tournament over British. *The Tribune*, a leading nationalist newspaper of Bombay interpreted the win as a sign that subdued and suppressed Asia was shaking off its shackles. This winning of 1906 was also seen variously as a triumph over caste prejudice and an assertion of a suppressed national spirit. Commenting with evident irony, The Tribune observed that Anglo-Indian newspapers had been effusive in their commendation of the Hindu players. By overcoming the British at what was widely regarded

as their “national game,” the victors seemed, the paper suggested, to have gained an unusual measure of approval within European circles. The remark implied that this sporting success had elevated their standing in the colonial public sphere to a degree that “no other qualification” might have secured, thereby exposing the politics of recognition embedded in imperial attitudes toward indigenous achievement (Guha 101). Cricket was introduced to unite the colonizers and the colonized. But for the Indians it was utilized to feature the gap between British percept and British practice. *Maharatta*, a newspaper by Tilak suggested, it was the height of hypocrisy for the rulers to meet Indians on equal terms on the cricket field and deny them equal rights in other spheres.

In 1911, Baloo was selected for Indian Cricket team touring England. The team was captained by Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh and consisted of Parsis, Hindus and Muslims. Baloo’s performance was excellent in this tour. He took over 100 wickets and his performance was also compared with the best bowlers of England Wilfred Rhodes<sup>21</sup>. This was for the first time when a player from colonized country was compared with a player of colonizer country. Ramachandra Guha hailed Baloo as “first great Indian cricketer and pioneer in emancipation of the untouchable” (202). It was said that for his low caste Baloo was never selected as the captain of Hindu team, but in 1923 Baloo’s brother Palwankar vithal was selected as the captain of Hindu. It led the wake of anti-casteism movement during the Indian Freedom Struggle.

### **Muslim Identity**

Muhammdan Anglo Oriental College was established in 1875, by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in Aligarh. This college, as the name suggests aimed to educate the Muslims with western traditions. Students of this college were the first Muslims who started playing cricket in India. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the founder of the college imagined that his

students would read Quran before classes began and play English games after they had ended<sup>23</sup>. In 1878, Aligarh Cricket Club was established with the help of Theodore Beck, the principal of the college. By 1890, they had tasted a victory on the field, over a Parsi visitors' team<sup>24</sup>.

Muslims were the last to take part in Bombay Quardangular in 1912 and won it for the first time in 1924. This win came amidst an India wide disturbance amongst Hindu and Muslim. After the triumphant of Muslims, the Hindus joined them in their victory celebration. This was a period when the connection between the two communities was at a genuine low aftermath the disappointment of the Khilafat Movement. Against this setting these two communities demonstrated a brotherly feeling on the sporting field. Jinnah also attempted to reestablish the cooperative bond amongst Hindus and Muslims through this particular sport. While extending his congratulations to the Muslim side, he voiced the expectation that their Hindu counterparts would also welcome the triumph in a spirit of "true sportsmanship." In his view, the cricket ground offered "lessons" that extended beyond the match itself, shaping attitudes in wider social relations. He particularly drew attention to the atmosphere of "brotherly feeling" that characterised the contest, suggesting that such goodwill exemplified the ethical promise of competitive play. From this perspective, he expressed the hope that Hindu players and spectators, as fellow sportsmen, would derive equal satisfaction from the Muslims' championship victory (qtd. in Guha 123).

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some nationalistic leaders, like Gandhi, Ranade raised an objection against the Pentagular tournament, which was divided along with communal lines. Some communal tensions, which started in the twentieth century, forced the nationalistic leaders to oppose for abolishing the tournament. The main question of Indian politics of this time: "Was India a nation or merely an assemblage of different communities given an artificial unity by British Rule?" (Guha 121). Political leaders contradicted for

separating the groups along religion lines rather than common lines. In 1934, newly formed B.C.C.I. started a tournament with regional teams, later it was renamed as Ranji Trophy. The communal cricket was preceded for next twelve years, till 1946 however no violence occurred in the competition.

Cricket field was the only place where Hindu Muslim communal harmony was seen during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1944 Muslims beat the Hindus in a close encounter in the final of the Pentagonal. But there was no communism in the whole game. Even after the match everyone, including the Hindus cheered the Muslim team. Vijay Merchant, the captain of the Hindu team, went to the Muslim dressing room and hugged the opposition captain, Mustaq Ali with the words, “well played Muslims, you deserve to win. It would have been a sad day for Cricket if you had lost” (123). Thus cricket played a vital role to create communal harmony.

From 1850 to 1947 cricket played a vital role constructing the psyche of the Indians. In the period of colonialism, cricket is the only situation in which colonized Indians and colonizer Britain could meet literary on a level playing field – carried tremendous symbolical weight. Along these lines cricket was no longer a leisure game, yet rather, as one commentator has put it, “the site where, during the imperial era, the colonized made culturally manifest their resistance to British rule” (Guha xv).

### III

#### **The Cricket Pitch as a Swadeshi Battlefield**

The historical trajectory of cricket in the Indian sub-continent represents a profound subversion of colonial intent. As this analysis has demonstrated, a sport exported by the British as a vehicle for "civilizing" the native and instilling a rigid adherence to imperial discipline was systematically reclaimed and re-engineered into a potent instrument of

Swadeshi resistance. By "indianizing" the game—moving from rag-stuffed balls and umbrella bats to the professional mastery of the Parsi, Hindu, and Muslim teams—the colonized subjects did more than learn a pastime; they dismantled the myth of European physical and moral superiority. Organized team sports, as C.L.R. James famously argued, served as a "purposeful anecdote" of life within the British colonial empire (28).

The primary triumph of Indian cricket lay in its ability to challenge the "Patrician power" of the Empire through what Ramachandra Guha identifies as "Plebeian resistance" (122). The 1879 protest for playing space, led by Dadabhai Naoroji, serves as a pivotal historical marker where the cricket pitch became a literal site of territorial dispute. By demanding that the Governor of Bombay prioritize native cricket over European polo, the colonized forced the British to confront their own internal contradictions regarding "fair play" and justice. This early victory provided a template for the political agitations of the 20th century, proving that the British could be beaten within the frameworks of their own institutions—provided the colonized remained tenacious.

Furthermore, the "Indianization" of cricket acted as a catalyst for internal social reform, most notably in the erosion of caste hierarchies. The ascent of Palwankar Baloo from a Chamar groundsman to a national icon serves as a scholarly rebuttal to the notion that Indian society was too fractured to achieve unity. Despite being forced to eat from disposable pottery outside the pavilion, Baloo's brilliance on the field compelled high-caste Hindus and British officers alike to acknowledge his talent. As B.R. Ambedkar suggested in his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, "inter-class dinner" and shared social spaces are essential for the abolition of caste (285). The cricket field provided the first modern, secular space where this interaction became unavoidable. When Baloo took over 100 wickets during the 1911 tour of

England, he was no longer merely a "Chamar"; he was a representative of a "subdued and suppressed Asia" finally shaking off its shackles (Guha 134).

Equally significant was cricket's role in navigating the precarious terrain of communal identity. While the British utilized "Divide and Rule" policies to exploit religious differences, the sport frequently provided a counter-narrative of harmony. The celebratory scenes following the Muslim victory in 1924, and the embrace between Vijay Merchant and Mushtaq Ali in 1944, underscore a "brotherly feeling" that often eluded the political sphere. Even as leaders like Gandhi questioned the communal structure of the Pentangular tournament, the field itself remained a rare sanctuary where competition did not descend into conflict, but rather fostered a shared national consciousness (Cashman 72).

In conclusion, the history of cricket in India between 1850 and 1947 is not merely a record of scores and matches, but a sophisticated narrative of cultural appropriation and political reclamation. By mastering the "national game" of their masters, Indians successfully turned a colonial mirror back upon the Empire, exposing the fragility of imperial hegemony. The pitch was the only "level playing field" available to a colonized people, and they used it to perform their fitness for self-rule. As the colonial middle class sought to anglicize itself, they simultaneously constructed alternate histories of masculinity and heritage (Kidambi 158). The evolution from the 1721 spectators at the Port of Cambay to the 1948 Olympic victory over Britain represents the completion of a cycle: the pupil had not only surpassed the master but had redefined the very nature of the game to suit a burgeoning, independent nation.

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