

The India-Australia cricket conflict: sport, profits and nationalism

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Cricket, the archetypal sport of the British Empire, was once regarded as a “gentleman’s game” to be played in the polite spirit of sportsmanship. But a bitter conflict over whether the Indian cricket team would pull out of its current tour of Australia highlights how this sport, like many others, has become dominated by a toxic mix of nationalism and the drive for profit.

For now it appears that the tour will proceed, but only after the International Cricket Council (ICC) accepted Indian demands for the replacement of an umpire involved in the scheduled four-Test series and for an appeal to be heard against the suspension of champion spin bowler, Harbhajan Singh, for alleged racist remarks. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said the tour can proceed on an “interim” basis, pending the outcome of Harbhajan’s appeal.

Behind the media furore and incessant commentary, a lot of money is riding on the outcome. The *Australian Financial Review* estimates that Cricket Australia (CA) stands to lose \$145 million if the tour is called off. Australia’s Nine Network, which bought the rights to televise the matches, could forfeit \$85 million in advertising revenue. If the BCCI abandons the tour, it could be liable to reimburse CA for losses of broadcasting, sponsorship and ticket revenues, as well as facing a fine by the ICC of up to \$2.3 million.

Long-simmering tensions between the cricketing establishments of the two countries were ignited by a series of incidents during the Second Test match between the sides in Sydney on January 2-6. When Australia narrowly won the match at the very last minute, with the help of two crucial umpiring mistakes, its team celebrated with what has become its customary arrogance. Players leaped in the air, screamed in delight and hugged each other interminably, ignoring offers of handshakes from the Indian side.

Although it may have been dubiously obtained, the victory equalled a previous Australian team’s world record of 16 consecutive Test match wins. The triumphalism was reminiscent of the boorish display after the final of the 2006 ICC Champions Trophy, a world series of one-day matches, when Australian captain Ricky Ponting asked BCCI president Sharad Pawar to “leave the podium” so his team could begin celebrating.

The immediate trigger for the BCCI’s move to recall its team was a decision by the ICC’s match referee, former South African player Mike Procter, to suspend Harbhajan for three Test matches for allegedly taunting Australian player Andrew Symonds with the term “monkey”. Ponting lodged the complaint against Harbhajan in the middle of the match, so that the charge lay over the Indian cricketers’ heads throughout the game. Then, without any report from the two match umpires—who said they did not hear the remark—Procter ignored the denials of Harbhajan and his teammate, renowned batsman Sachin Tendulkar, that the racist taunt ever took place. There was no television or sound recording of the alleged remark. Instead of ruling that he had no independent evidence to rely upon, Procter accepted the word of five Australian players over that of their Indian counterparts.

Rubbing salt into the wounds was the fact that the Australian team has become notorious in cricket-playing countries for a practice known as “sledging”—trying to upset opposing batsman and bowlers with foul, insulting or disgusting remarks. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial warned of the “bad aura” around the Australian team: “Apparently it’s fine for Australian players to question the masculinity of opposing players, the legitimacy of their birth, or the faithfulness of their wives, and for those who played in apartheid-era South Africa not to feel any embarrassment, but now Australia goes to the cricket court at the drop of a racist jibe.”

Throughout the match, the Australians applied visible pressure on the two umpires, Steve Bucknor from Jamaica and Mark Benson from England. The mistakes Bucknor made benefited the Australian team and may well have cost the Indians the match. The errors were instantly recognised by the Australians, who all, nevertheless, kept silent.

Umpiring mistakes and refereeing disputes are nothing new in cricket. In the past, they have been accepted as “part of the game”. It is distinctly possible that, had India drawn the Test, nothing would have been said about them. But today so much hinges financially—for the rival national-based cricket bodies, the competing media conglomerates and the individual players—on winning or losing, that every controversial decision has the potential to become a flashpoint.

Some sections of the Australian media, notably the Murdoch outlets, have sought to whip up hostility toward the Indian players, who insisted they would not continue the tour until Harbhajan’s suspension was reversed. The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* declared: “India dramatically held world cricket to ransom last night after threatening to abandon its multi-million dollar tour of Australia.”

The newspaper’s own readers, however, opposed the Australian team’s obnoxious display. About 80 percent of respondents to its website poll supported Indian captain Anil Kumble’s post-match remarks that Australia did not play “in the spirit of cricket” and agreed that Ponting was not a “good ambassador” for the sport.

This response provoked the ire of *Telegraph* columnist Garry Linnell, who ridiculed all those who pined for a lost era in which cricket was “played in a rarefied atmosphere where fairness and good manners rule”. He suggested that the readers should wake up to “modern sport ... and to life too”. Cricket was trying to “uphold its self-created mythology as the noble sport played by decent gentlemen” while “greedily plung[ing] head-first into the deep money pit of commercialism”.

Other media commentators sought to make scapegoats out of Ponting and individual members of the Australian team. *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Peter Roebuck called for Ponting to be sacked. “If Cricket Australia cares a fig for the tattered reputation of our national team in our national sport, it will not for a moment longer tolerate the sort of arrogant and abrasive conduct seen from the captain and his senior players over the past few days. Beyond comparison it was the ugliest performance put up by an Australian side for 20 years.”

Cricket Australia soon made clear its commitment to the “win-at-all-costs” attitude of the players, unconditionally defending Ponting and his team mates. “It has always been the Australian way to play the game hard but fair,” CA chief executive James Sutherland said. “Tough and uncompromising is certainly the way all Australian teams have played. It does not matter who is the captain.”

As Sutherland’s comments indicate, the Australian team’s conduct cannot be explained as a product of the personalities or weaknesses of individual players. Cricket, like other professional sports, has become a corporate circus. Relentless pressure is constantly applied to players to perform in a hectic, all-year schedule. Winning has become the paramount concern, because it is necessary for attracting big business sponsorship, selling broadcasting rights and filling stadiums. Traditional Test matches, played over five days, have been increasingly overshadowed by constant rounds of one-day and, more recently, 20-20 (half day) matches.

The players themselves have become highly marketable commodities, with their personal fortunes tied completely to on-field success. According to the latest *Business Review Weekly* top 50 sports earners rich list, issued on December 13, six members of the cricket team joined Australia’s highest paid stars in 2007. Ponting and vice-captain Adam Gilchrist led the way, with estimated annual earnings of more than \$2 million each from salaries, prize money, sponsorships and endorsements. One cannot turn on Australian television without seeing cricket stars peddling merchandise. Ponting’s promotional advertisements include KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), Victoria Bitter (VB) beer, Pura Milk, Rexona, Medibank Private, Valvoline, Swisse and Weet-Bix.

So much money is involved in the sporting business that the cricketers’ earnings still remain way down the list compared to those of golf, soccer, motor sport, basketball and tennis identities. Gilchrist came 21st and Ponting 24th. The record-breaking run of 16 Test victories, however, is likely to boost their positions considerably. Last month, the Sweeney Sports Report, which rates the values of sports stars for sponsorship deals, announced that Ponting and Gilchrist had become “Australia’s most marketable sports stars”, with members of the cricket team taking five of the top 10 positions.

Some of the Australian media commentary pointed to the commercial considerations underlying the India-Australia rift, and wider tensions within the international cricket establishment. Sydney *Daily Telegraph* columnist Robert Craddock urged the ICC not to “crumble in the face of a subcontinental blackmail from the world’s most powerful cricket nation... India’s cricketing wealth may be 50 times that of any rival but that does not give them the right to run the game.”

Like all forms of big business, cricket is wracked by mounting nation-state and corporate rivalries. Each national body controls the revenues generated from games played on its soil. The international body, the ICC (which began its life as the Imperial Cricket Conference in 1909) is desperately trying to bolster its own position by hosting incessant ICC one-day and 20-20 series. It sold television and sponsorship rights for the 2007 to 2015 World Cup for more than \$US1.1 billion (to a joint venture involving Rupert Murdoch’s Star network). In 2005, the ICC moved its offices from Lord’s Cricket Ground in London to Dubai, partly to enjoy tax-free status and partly to alleviate the demands of the discontented new commercial powerhouses of cricket in South Asia—India, and to a lesser extent, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Wikipedia estimates that the BCCI is overtaking the English Cricket Board (ECB) as the richest national cricket board, with an income set to exceed the ECB’s 2006 revenue of £77 million. Global media rights for international cricket played in India between 2006 and 2010 were awarded to production house Nimbus for \$US612 million; official kit rights went to Nike for \$US43 million; sponsorship rights went to Air Sahara for \$US70 million; domestic one-day media rights were sold for \$US219 million; and another \$US450 million was raised from hotel, ground and travel

sponsorships. The BCCI hopes for even bigger proceeds from its planned inter-city one-day and 20-20 competition, for which leading overseas cricketers, including Australian stars, are being recruited. The competition, due to commence later this year, has been launched to counter a new privately-run Indian Cricket League, sponsored by Zee Telefilm sports channels.

To boost its stocks, the BCCI needs victories too, both on and off the field. In the current clash with Australia, it is openly playing to its big business and popular constituencies, with hefty appeals to Indian nationalism. Sharad Pawar, the board’s president, insisted that the allegation of racism against Harbhajan was “wholly unacceptable ... the game of cricket is paramount but so too is the honour of India’s cricket team and every Indian”. Echoing the BCCI’s efforts, an opinion poll conducted for the Delhi newspaper *Hindustan Times* reported that 86 percent of respondents believed India’s national pride had been hurt. Media outlets featured pictures of people burning effigies of umpires and Australian players.

The intersection of corporate profit and patriotic tub-thumping was also on display in Australia. A *Daily Telegraph* editorial accused India of “intimidating and bullying” the ICC, while lacking the “fortitude” to win Tests. Doing their utmost to stir up anti-Indian sentiment, the editorial writers mockingly declared: “All hail India the powerful new rajahs of world cricket—at least behind closed doors.”

In both India and Australia, cricket, despite its peculiar imperial history, has long been promoted by the media and political establishments as the “national sport”. One Indian commentator even referred to cricket as the “national religion”. Together with other sports such as football, cricket is used as a means to distract masses of ordinary working people from the problems of daily life and to channel mounting anger and disaffection into socially regressive channels. In the process, cricketers are in turn elevated to the status of super-heroes, or dropped like hotcakes and condemned when it suits the immediate political and/or commercial interests.

Indian captain Kumble’s comment that only one side was playing in the “spirit” of the game was a pointed reference to the England-Australia “bodyline” series of 1932-33, when the Australians accused their English rivals of betraying the spirit of game by bowling directly at batsmen’s bodies. In the resulting uproar, the English team threatened to halt the series unless the Australian authorities withdrew their accusations. As in the 1930s Depression, when millions were thrown out of work and a second world war loomed large, the present cricket warfare is yet another sign of escalating economic and social tensions.



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