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The Nation State and Modern Sport

By: Mukul Kesavan

'National feeling is not something that has been injected into sport by swaggering players, corrupt politicians, and a scheming media looking to boost ratings; it is native to modern sport, something that is built into its historical evolution.'

I think I began to think about sport and nationalism a couple of years ago, when the Indian cricket team decided to take the field wearing specially commissioned military fatigue caps. This was Mahendra Singh Dhoni's idea and Virat Kohli, who was captain by then, supported it enthusiastically. The gesture was made in solidarity with the soldiers who had lost their lives at Pulwama. The team donated a substantial sum of money for the welfare of the soldiers' bereaved families.

Dhoni is keen on the military. He is a colonel in the Territorial Army. In the 2019 World Cup, he had to be asked by the International Cricket Council (ICC) to remove regimental insignia from his wicket keeping gloves.

In that camouflage-cap match, Dhoni and the Indian team literally embodied George Orwell's famous description of international sport: "War minus the shooting."

Orwell's phrase has been used so often and so widely that it has become detached from its historical context. It was prompted by his growing recognition of the political symbolism of sport, as a highly visible tool of nationalism. Dhoni and his team-mates were not really playing at military service; they were performing a particular brand of patriotism. Orwell's aphorism grew out of his strongly critical response to the 1945 tour of Britain by the Dynamo Moscow football team. He believed that Dynamo was a publicity vehicle for the Soviet Union.

The Pulwama gesture got a lot of attention at the time because Indian cricketers rarely parade a cause on the pitch. For some the gesture was not political. It transcended politics because it was a salute to the nation and its uniformed guardians, the armed forces. The belief that the nation is above politics is central to the relationship between modern sport and nationalism. This means that only words or gestures that affirm the official understanding of nationalism are politics-free. But acts of dissent that publicly question the self-image of the nation state that the team represents are nearly always described as political and divisive.

'Taking the knee' has been classified as one such divisive and political act. Each time England's footballers have taken the knee before one of their matches during the Euro2020 football championships, a section of the crowd has booed. Conservative MPs and opinion writers have condemned the symbolism of a gesture that they claim smuggles in a leftist political message in the garb of anti-racism. The UK prime minister has refused to condemn the booing of the nation's football team. Had he been an Indian minister, he would have likely described the pre-match gesture as 'anti-national'.

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But that, of course, would be untrue. One of the stars of this English team, Marcus Rashford, is the very epitome of the public-spirited citizen. During the pandemic he single-handedly shamed Boris Johnson's government into extending free meals to school children into the vacations. And then he made the prime minister perform another U-turn on furlough payments. Rashford has an MBE to show for his services to the nation. An anti-national he is not, nor are his team-mates. They happen to have a collective sense of the values their nation should embody, and, like Dhoni and company, they are willing to use the field, their *karmabhoomi*, to draw attention to those values.

But spokespersons for nation states are unlikely to see Dhoni's camouflage cap and Rashford's bent knee as equivalent gestures: the former is the flag by other means, the latter is a subversion of sport by politics.

I remember, at the time, I found the camouflage caps gesture faintly ... *filmi*. The donations were thoughtful but the sight of uniformed cricketers playing at soldiers was less impressive because war is a serious business and cricket isn't. Or, to put it another way, cricket is serious business: as in money, but not as in dying for your country.

Still, my reaction was a little precious. It was based on the unexamined assumption that there is an alternative to nationalism in the consumption of sport, namely, a virtuous or *satvik* appreciation of sport, uninflected by nationalist feeling.

Liberals who criticise sporting chauvinism assume that there is a more evolved way of competing if you are a player and a high-minded way of enjoying sport if you are a fan. Liberal critics who are also sports fans *have* to believe this. They need to distance themselves from the partisan trolls that they define themselves against. They cite, in their defence, alternative conceptions of sport: sport-as-recreation or sport-as-individual-striving or sport as rivalry between clubs or commercial franchises, and they do this to rescue sport from being swallowed whole by nationalism.

Alternatives: individual excellence and commercial leagues

I suspect the reason so many of us believe that sport minus nationalism is possible is because of our personal experience of following sport.

Many of us have thrilled to sports like tennis where individual excellence seems to transcend nationalist affiliation. I have followed Wimbledon live since the time Rod Laver won it for the last time, first on BBC Radio and then on television, rooting for players who had nothing to do with India. My children's generation follows football where foreign leagues, based on clubs and franchises, have displaced national teams in the battle for television audiences and revenues. As players and spectators, we remember loyalties and attachments that have nothing to do with patriotism. It could be our delight in Rafael Nadal or Roger Federer or a tribal loyalty to the English football club Arsenal; all of these seem to transcend distance and national difference.

These are important experiences because they remind us that the nation does not have a monopoly on the shaping of sport.

Nationalism: intrinsic to sport?

But despite this, it is difficult to separate modern competitive sport and nationalism because they are *constituted* by each other. National feeling is not something that has been injected into sport by swaggering players, corrupt politicians, and a scheming media looking to boost ratings; it is *native* to modern sport, something that is built into its historical evolution.

The wisest paragraph about the relationship between sport and nationalism was written by one of the great historians of the 20th century, E.J. Hobsbawm:

What has made sport uniquely effective as a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individual can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at something practically every man wants to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people.

Hobsbawm is making the point that sport is the most efficient way of socialising people into nationalism because it is easier to identify with eleven recognisable players than a large abstraction. He is, in passing, also saying that this identification with the nation via sport is gendered, that sport-induced nationalism has been — historically — an all-male communion.

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Let's build on that first point. Hobsbawm tips his hat at the historian Benedict Anderson's master-concept, "imagined community." By emphasising that a nation is imagined, Anderson found a memorable way of saying that the nation was not an objectively given thing, but a feeling, a subjective sense of political community, historically inculcated in people from at least the 19th century onwards.

Hobsbawm is suggesting that modern sport in conjunction with modern media are a vital part of this project of imagining, this subjective nation-building process. He is suggesting that sport is *constitutive* of nationalism. It is not the cherry on the cake, it's *baked into* the foundations of the nation state.

Late 19th century twins: modern sport and the nation state

Nation states and modern sports are the late 19th century's conjoined twins. It is not a coincidence that in the period when the balance of power between empires and nations begins to shift, when Germany, Italy, and Japan reorganise themselves as nation states between

1870 and 1914, that it is at this moment that modern sports formalise their rules, set up regulatory associations, and establish international competitions. This is the historical moment when athletes and sportspersons are redefined as representatives of their nations.

The first international cricket test match was played in 1877. This was not a match played between two nations as much as an intra-imperial competition between the mother country, England, and her dominion, Australia. But being represented at cricket in a match ‘against’ England helped Australians imagine Australia as a nation. In exactly this same way did the ‘All-India’ cricket team that toured England in 1911, prefigure and embody the idea of an Indian nation in the making. (Prashant Kidambi has a wonderful book on that tour, *Cricket Country*, that all of us should read.)

But the relationship between newly formalised competitive sports and the nation was much larger than cricket. FIFA, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, football’s governing association, was founded in 1904 to oversee international competition between the national associations of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The governing bodies for football, cricket, and tennis were set up within ten years of each other, between 1904 and the outbreak of the First World War. Even a sport as individualistic as tennis was nudged into national competition in 1900 with the Davis Cup, which started life as a trans-Atlantic tournament between Great Britain and the United States of America.

The Olympics and the nationalisation of sporting competition

Even more central to the developing relationship between nationalism and sport was the nationalisation of the Olympic Games. The revived games were imagined by Pierre de Coubertin as a festival of fraternal brotherhood where the best athletes in the world competed against each other in a sporting lull, like the ancient games at Olympia where warring kingdoms observed a truce for the duration of the Olympics. What emerged was rather different.

Till the 1908 Games, entry was not restricted to teams nominated by national Olympic committees. Mixed teams participated in some team events. But from 1908 onwards, the International Olympic Association (IOA) consisted mainly of representatives of nations. The Olympics always begin with a march past of nations, each under its own placard. Alan Bairner, a historian of sport, writes that “sport, more than any other form of social activity in the modern world, facilitates flag-waving and the playing of national anthems.” The Olympics, more than any other sporting event, has pioneered this non-stop identification of sport and the nation. As early as 1908, athletes at the Olympics became representatives of their nations as opposed to individual competitors.

There have been occasions when athletes have competed not under their national flags but under the International Olympic Association’s flag or under the flags of their National Olympic Committees, but these have always been exceptional cases to cope with civil war or national transitions or boycotts. Whenever an athlete has applied to compete as an individual the IOA has refused. When James Gilkes, a sprinter from Guyana, applied to participate as an individual to circumvent Guyana’s boycott of the 1976 Montreal Games, he was turned down. More than any other institution, the IOA made sporting competition synonymous with nationalism.

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When I think back on my memories of the Olympic Games over half a century, it’s hard to be superior about hyper-nationalist fandom. It is embarrassing to acknowledge that without national narratives, the excitement of the individual striving so close to Coubertin’s heart, would have passed me by.

People old enough to remember the Cold War, will also remember how its ideological polarisation helped spectators pick sides. The Americans rejoiced when Nadia Comaneci scored perfect 10s and pipped the Soviet gymnast Olga Korbut to gymnastic golds because Comaneci’s country, Romania, was seen as a dissident eastern-bloc nation, hostile to Moscow. Teofilo Stevenson was an icon of Cuban nationalist pride. The decline of our hockey team in the medal rankings at the Games was a narrative of national heartbreak.

There were moments of transcendence when nationalist affiliation did not matter, like the time Bob Beamon smashed the existing long jump record by 55 cm in Mexico in 1968. Or when Dick Fosbury reinvented the high jump at the same games with the bizarre Fosbury Flop. But outside of these, the Olympics taught us that individual striving made coherent, narrative sense only in the service of national glory.

Notionally, the Games are awarded to cities, a formal gesture towards the Greek city states of old, but in effect, the Games are platforms for nations to put their best foot forward. From Berlin in 1936 to Beijing in 2008, the Olympics have been extravagant ways of announcing that the host nation has arrived.

No politics in sport?

There is a contradiction, or an apparent contradiction, at the heart of the Olympian vision of sporting competition that complicates all sport because all sport in one way or another takes its cue from Coubertin's ideals. The contradiction is this. On the one hand, the Olympics hardwires the nation state into modern competition. On the other, the IOA insists that it will brook no interference from national politicians in the autonomy of National Olympic Committees (NOCs).

“Members of the IOC will not accept from governments [...] any mandate or instructions which are against the principles of the Olympic Charter.” This position is replicated by most international associations like FIFA and FIH, the Federation Internationale de Hockey.

This ideal of sporting autonomy grows out of the liberal idea that the nation state has a demarcated sphere that does not extend to the freedom of action of civil society organisations.

Regulatory bodies for sport are implicitly saying that they want to harness the cachet of the nation state to magnify the significance of sport, but they will not have the functionaries of the nation state intervene in the affairs of their national affiliates.

The ostensible reason for this is the need to keep sport free of political interference or, indeed, ‘politics’. When six nations withdrew in protest over the invasion of Hungary and the Suez Crisis from the 1956 Olympics, Avery Brundage admonished them: “these countries show that they are unaware of one of our most important principles namely that sport is completely free of politics.”

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There is something heroic about Brundage's magnificent disregard for the facts of international sport. Brundage was the same man who 20 years earlier, in the face of protests in the US against that country's participation in Hitler's Berlin Olympics because of Nazi persecution of the Jews, successfully lobbied against a boycott. Brundage was completely complicit in the anti-Semitism of the time. He once regretted that Leni Reifenstahl's film about the Berlin Olympics, *Olympia*, couldn't be shown in America because "unfortunately the theatres and moving picture companies are almost all owned by Jews". There was, however, a logic to his insistence that boycotts were political whereas racist persecution was not.

What Brundage and every advocate of the autonomy of sports associations is saying is that the nation state as the sole sovereign representative of its people transcends politics. In an international setting, therefore, the internal politics of a nation can be of no concern to a sporting association. Reciprocally, the politicians of a nation state must not impose their politics on international sport.

Brundage's position was sustainable only by turning a blind eye to routine violations of the Olympic charter. The amateur ethic that he doggedly defended was flagrantly disregarded by Eastern Bloc nations whose athletes were professionals paid to train and compete but passed off as students or soldiers. But though Brundage's time is past and amateurism is history, his idea that the nation is above politics in matters of sport, that its transcendent status requires unwavering acknowledgment, flourishes in contexts other than the Olympic movement.

Sporting loyalty as patriotic litmus test: Tebbit and dissent as treason

Fahad Mustafa has a Hobsbawmian take on Indian cricket. In his *Cricket and Globalization* he writes, “Cricket in India,” he writes, “made nationhood a consumable entity.” A team sport like cricket is the perfect candidate for nationalist framing. David Gellner, an anthropologist, helps us unpack Mustafa's insight. Gellner writes that team sport gives full play to:

individual prowess while simultaneously allowing international competition and systematic, on-going, never-ending comparison. Whatever the past, there is always hope for the future. Whatever the dire state of the national team in the present, there are usually proud memories somewhere in the past.

The first time I read Gellner’s sentence I felt a shock of recognition. Every middle-aged Indian cricket tragic knows exactly what I mean. In the distant 20th century when India lost at cricket much more often than it won, we salvaged consolation from the wreckage of defeat by lingering on heroic individual performances in a lost cause. Or else we consoled ourselves with past victories. So, no matter how comprehensively we might be thrashed by an Australian team in the future, no one can take the glory of that 2–1 victory circa 2001 away from us and, more recently, our glorious series win in Australia this last winter.

The flipside of this near-absolute twinning of cricket and the nation is that cricketing loyalty becomes a patriotic litmus test. In 1990, Norman Tebbit, a Conservative party minister of the UK, came up with a cricket test for measuring an immigrant’s commitment to his new nation. Immigrants who cheered for their country of origin instead of England failed the test.

A more virulent desi version of Tebbit’s test has been in circulation since Independence. This was explicitly aimed at Indian Muslims who loyalties were vulnerable to challenge because of the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan in 1947. This touchstone for telling patriots from traitors was given a new lease of life when stories of disaffected Kashmiri Muslim spectators cheering opposing teams in international matches played in Srinagar began to circulate in the closing decades of the century. The equation of sporting disloyalty with treachery and treason illustrates how representative sport creates a national communion where every citizen *must* be a celebrant and refuseniks must be punished.

This bond between nationality and sporting loyalty has been so completely normalised that when you come across an exception to this rule, it seems utterly perverse. Some months ago, I read the manuscript of a cricket memoir by Samir Chopra. Chopra is a philosopher by trade and a writer by vocation. He is a distinguished military historian: he has chronicled India’s air wars against Pakistan. His book is titled *The Evolution of a Cricket Fan* and it is an account of a maverick youth and childhood where he was passionately involved in cricket as many Indian youngsters are, but his sympathies lay entirely with the Pakistani and Australian sides that India played against. Even the most evolved cricket fan will be shocked and incredulous. What perversity could drive the son of an Indian fighter pilot to root for Imran Khan over Kapil Dev? If Samir’s surname was Kidwai or Ansari, that would be for some, sufficient explanation; but for a Punjabi Khatri to spend a large part of his life as a partisan of Pakistani and Australian cricket comes across as surpassingly weird. His memoir recounts a real-life thought experiment that sets up the exception that proves an iron rule: a fan’s nationality is his cricketing destiny.

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All of us are familiar with the famous (or notorious) sportsmen who publicly refused to give the nation its due. Muhammad Ali who refused to be drafted into the US Army and the Vietnam War and was imprisoned for it, is the obvious example. But the instance most relevant to us today is the dissent of Tommie Smith and Juan Carlos, two American sprinters who made the Black Power salute on the medal podium after placing first and third in the 200 metres sprint in the 1968 Olympic Games. They raised their fists and bowed their heads and stayed silent as the *Star-Spangled Banner* played. For this, they were stripped of their medals, were expelled from the Olympic Village, and endured death threats for years. Newspapers compared them to Nazis. Smith was discharged from the army and a rock was thrown through a plate-glass window at his baby’s crib.



Tommy Smith (centre) and Juan Carlos (right) offering the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics | Wikimedia

Avery Brundage, who had defended the raising of the Nazi salute in the Berlin Games in 1936, denounced the Black Power salute and steadfastly maintained that he was being principled and consistent. The Nazi salute, he argued without irony, had been a national salute in 1936 and therefore acceptable in a competition of nations whereas the Black Power salute was not and had to be denounced. Brundage’s response speaks directly to our theme. It tells us that the fetishisation of nationalism is so intrinsic to modern sport that an American sports administrator, decades after the Holocaust, could uphold without ridicule the legitimacy of the Nazi salute while outraged about a symbolic protest against racism, poverty and violence.

We also know that after decades of isolation Smith and Carlos were rehabilitated. Disgrace, retrospectively, became reverence and their story became a narrative of redemption. Statues were raised to them to honour them as heroes of the civil rights movement. Brundage

and the Americans who turned on Smith and Carlos seem Neanderthals and bigots now, marooned on the wrong side of history.

But history moves at different speeds and not always in a straight line. In 2016 Colin Kaepernick, a Black quarterback in the National Football League stopped standing for the American national anthem. He chose to kneel instead in protest against the violence suffered by African Americans in the US. Donald Trump denounced Kaepernick and NFL franchise owners and NFL fans reacted with concerted disapproval. At this distance it seems a replay of the reaction to the 1968 protests. Kaepernick fathered, so to speak, the ritual that the English football team performs each time it takes the field in the Euro 2020.

What if an Indian woman athlete followed Kaepernick in refusing to stand for the national anthem in protest against the epidemic of sexual violence against women in India?

One way of bringing these Western instances closer home is to try a thought experiment. What if Smith and Carlos's protest and Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem were replicated by Indian protestors during a medal ceremony or a flag-raising or a performance of the Indian national anthem? For the sake of this experiment, it might be useful to recall the detail of Carlos and Smith's protest. They wore no shoes to symbolise the poverty in which black Americans lived. Carlos wore a necklace of black beads for African Americans who had been lynched or thrown off ships in the Middle Passage, for whom no prayers had been said.



No politics in sport? Jesse Owens of the US and Naoto Tajima of Japan are the only ones not offering the Nazi salute, 1936 Berlin Olympics | Wikimedia

Imagine the reaction from fans, fellow athletes, administrators and public figures if Indian sports persons symbolically protested acts of violent bigotry or oppression in India. What if an Indian woman athlete followed Kaepernick in refusing to stand for the national anthem in protest against the epidemic of sexual violence against women in India? In the context of the epidemic of sexual violence in the country, this is not inconceivable. What if a Dalit athlete were to do what Tommie Smith did to protest manual scavengers dying in septic tanks or to mark the beating to death of Dalit cattle traders or leather workers for alleged cattle thieving? I suspect that the nation state, being a jealous god, would not be happy, and its displeasure might be echoed and amplified by fans, administrators, and the guardians of the nation state.

Sport sans the nation: alternatives to nationalism

What are the chances that the sport-media complex might find ways of organising and marketing sport that do not turn on national identity? At the start of this talk I mentioned professional league sports as a form of competition that might challenge or even subvert the nation's stranglehold on the sporting imagination.

This is a thesis that is often aired. The argument is that club football in Europe has created forms of tribal loyalty that have displaced nationalism as the principle of solidarity amongst football's following. The World Cup might be the biggest tournament in football's calendar but (1) it comes around only once every four years, (2) in terms of income and incentives, club football offers rewards that far outstrip anything that national competition can offer, (3) the very best club sides are consensually seen as better than the best national teams, and (4) football clubs increasingly resent 'loaning' their players to national teams because international football is seen by club managements as a distraction from the main business of a footballer's career: trying to win domestic league titles or European club competitions like the Champions League. That's where the money, the audiences, and the television coverage are. Football in Europe is principally a club sport with national competition thrown in as an occasional indulgence and pleasure.

Might the Indian Premier League, patterned on professional sports leagues in America with a stipulated number of teams called franchises, help cricket evolve from a sport where the highest form of the game is organised around international competition to a football-type circumstance? Might India's cricket fans pledge their main loyalties to franchises as football's fanatical followers pledge them to football clubs like Liverpool and Barcelona? Could the economy of the game and its livelihoods come to centre on the league game, displacing international competition into an occasional pleasure, thus marginalising nationalism as cricket's moving spirit?

Much of this has happened already. The IPL is the goose that lays Indian cricket's golden eggs. It offers wealth beyond the dreams of avarice to a larger pool of Indian players than the national team ever could. It has also created professional franchise teams where citizens of several countries play as team-mates. One of the endearing things about contemporary international cricket is the camaraderie between players on opposing sides, induced by their joint experience of the IPL and other T20 leagues.

More and more players like Chris Gayle and Mohammad Amir have made it clear that they see the lucrative shortest form of the game as their main interest. It is also clear that cricket's administrative bodies, the ICC and the national associations that constitute it, are trying to reorganise cricket's calendar to create time slots that can accommodate the Twenty20 Leagues that have proliferated across the cricket world. The World Test Championship (whose final was played in Southampton last month) was proposed as a way of providing 'context' and 'meaning' to test matches. It is, in fact, an excuse for reducing the number of Test matches in a year to make room for the short format that's most lucrative.

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So, is it time for aficionados of test cricket to reckon with the uncomfortable fact that it is their preferred form of cricket that is fuelled by nationalism, whereas the shortest form of the game, often derided as showbiz rather than sport, is the form that is transforming cricket into a professional sport? One where skilled cricketers freed from national structures become travelling mercenaries, selling their services to the highest bidder, helping cricket's fans to switch their loyalties from the nation to the club or franchise?

It is a plausible idea but it is based on the wrong comparison. We should not be comparing the IPL to the English Premier League. The proper analogy is another football code on another continent: America's NFL or the National Football League.

Like the IPL in India, the NFL is a vast country's highest grossing league. Like the NFL, the IPL is based on franchises not Premier League style clubs with their long histories in local communities. Like the NFL, the IPL's principal audience (and therefore its revenues) is local: it basically needs Indian eyeballs. The NFL, like nearly all American sports leagues, whether it is baseball or basketball, is a domestic competition played between local teams staffed with mainly American players. And here's the thing: the absence of international competition and the absence of national teams makes no difference to the superheated, militarist nationalism that virtually defines the NFL. Like India, the US is a continental nation, large enough to have an insular celebration of itself through sport regardless of the absence of other countries.

The NFL is a good way of thinking about the future of nationalism in Indian cricket because it demonstrates how much scope there is for militaristic chauvinism in a domestic league in a democratic country. It is also an excellent illustration of the ways in which corporate media, politicians, celebrity players, fans, and franchise owners use nationalism as a magic sauce to grow the game and make it (and everyone involved in it) richer.

While baseball was seen as America's national pastime and an emblem of its exceptionalism, militant nationalism came to American sport when the NFL surged in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. With its helmeted warriors, its focus on capturing or holding ground, football was the perfect receptacle for a militarised nationalism in a time of war. To this day its games feature fly-pasts, the celebration

of military veterans, and military honour guards.

‘Salute to Service’ games are held by each one of the 32 teams in the NFL every year where every player wears a sticker representing the designated military service branch on his helmet. In the NFL, wearing military fatigue caps in a game as the Indian team did would be normal. The NFL would understand Dhoni’s keenness on a uniformed nationalism completely and his attachment to the Territorial Army would not even be remarked on. NFL players and coaches routinely tour military bases. Recently, the U.S. Department of Defense was discovered secretly paying the NFL to support the military.

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Not that the NFL needed much encouraging. Its fan base and ownership is predominantly Republican and overwhelmingly white. Within the game, Kaepernick’s actions provoked massive disapproval. No team picked him afterwards and he had to go to court to extract a settlement. NFL games supply the most lucrative advertising time on television. The channels that run them have no incentive to criticise or report dispassionately on its functioning. Pat Tillman of the Arizona Cardinals, an NFL team, joined the army and was killed in Afghanistan by friendly fire. The NFL, television networks, and the US Army colluded to put out a false narrative of gallantry and heroism that the NFL has not recanted to date.



Colin Kaepernick taking the knee at an American football match in 2016 | YouTube

The reason the NFL is relevant to our discussion is that it gives the lie to the glib idea that franchised leagues denationalise sport. It might do, as league football in Europe has done, but I think the NFL is the better precedent and parallel for the IPL. American football gives us some sense of how far down that road sport can travel. Will the IPL and Indian cricket travel down that road of performative patriotism? The last six months have answered that question conclusively. Three things happened.

The first of these was the cooption of the leaders of the Indian team and its management by the Indian government in early February this year. The national government had ranged itself against the farmers agitating against the new farm laws on Delhi’s borders. Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, Rihanna, the singer from Barbados, and Dr Zeus, a British Indian musician of Punjabi descent, tweeted their support for the farmers’ cause.

Discerning in this a global anarchist conspiracy against the unity of India, S. Jaishankar, India’s external affairs minister, led a Twitter chorus of cricketers past and present: Shastri, Tendulkar, Kumble, Kohli, Rahane, Rohit Sharma, and Hardik Pandya. They tweeted out sarkari hashtags like #IndiaAgainstPropaganda and #IndiaTogether.

These players had stayed out of the controversies about the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the National Register of Citizens, the so-called love jihad laws, the cattle-trade lynchings, the communal riots in Delhi, the experiment with demonetisation, even China's violation of India's borders.

But in the face of this motley band of foreign voices, these barbarians at the gate, they chose to sing from the government's hymn sheet in the name of the nation. Once cricketers cross that line, once they go from playing for the country to role-playing for the nation, there is no going back. Having played at being soldiers after Pulwama, they were conscripted by their political patrons to defend the state.

The second thing happened a week after this Twitter chorus. These newly eloquent cricketing voices fell silent when Wasim Jaffer, a former colleague of several members of the present Indian Test team and a giant of the domestic game, was accused by a state cricket association official of being communal as a team coach, of favouring Muslims over Hindus.

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Jaffer's list of test teammates reads like a who's who of Indian cricket. He played alongside Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, V.V.S. Laxman, Virender Sehwag, Anil Kumble, and Sourav Ganguly, who is currently president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. After he was accused of being communal, only Kumble amongst these storied names came forward to offer support or solidarity.

Jaffer had played for Mumbai for 20 years, he had won eight Ranji Trophy titles and captained the team. Mumbai's cricketers man the commanding heights of every part of India's cricketing establishment. Sunil Gavaskar and Sanjay Manjrekar are fixtures in television commentary boxes; Tendulkar is India's cricketing mascot, Ravi Shastri is the manager of the national team, Rohit Sharma is the vice-captain of India's one-day-international side, and Ajinkya Rahane is the vice-captain of India's test team.

Dodda Ganesh, Manoj Tiwary, Chandrakant Pandit and Shishir Hattangadi spoke up for Jaffer, but not one major Mumbai player said a word in solidarity.

Ajinkya Rahane was asked on the eve of the second test against England earlier this year about the Jaffer affair. He refused to comment, saying, "I don't have an idea regarding this issue." Rahane was Jaffer's teammate in Mumbai's first-class side for years. It's fair to say that Rahane knows Jaffer. It's hard to credit that he did not know that Jaffer had been accused of communalism. Rahane was living in a bio-secure bubble at the time, not under a rock.

The truth was that Indian cricket's administration is run by the clients of a majoritarian state and a Muslim player accused of bigotry becomes radioactive. A week before this scandal, Rahane, Sharma, Kohli, Shastri and Tendulkar were tweeting in chorus against foreign commentary on the farmers' agitation. #IndiaTogether was Rahane's preferred hashtag. Someone forgot to tell these patriots that unity begins at home.

The third and most conclusive evidence for the complete assimilation of Indian cricket, especially the IPL, into the narratives of the nation state was the staging of the IPL well into the devastating second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The notion that franchised cricket with its multi-national teams could help cricket in India distance itself from the sweaty embrace of the nation state by creating club solidarities, was definitively refuted. Returning to India after its gap year in the Gulf, the IPL became a part of the national government's bizarre charade that it was business as usual in India.

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Delhi was one of its venues. I can speak of Delhi because I live there. In this necropolis lit at the time by constantly burning pyres, the IPL's floodlights chose to signal showtime. In a city starved of Covid-19 tests, oxygen, and cremation grounds in which to burn the dead, the IPL was sustained by dedicated ambulances, Covid-19 tests on demand and oxygen on tap, only the best was good enough for the Indian cricket board's Roman circus.

The governance of the BCCI, the deference of its players to the powers that be, and the willingness of the IPL to sustain the pretence of normalcy because the government of the day took a complacent view of the pandemic, shows us clearly that Indian cricket has

achieved a state of near-mystical union with the nation state.

Conclusions

Where does that leave the Indian spectator who might prefer watching cricket at a less feverishly patriotic temperature and watching cricketers less mortgaged to the nation state? Let us return to Hobsbawm’s take on sport and nationalism Notice that his insight was carefully gendered: “even the least political or public individual can identify with the nation as symbolised by young persons excelling at something practically every man wants to be good at.”

Nationalism and modern sport were, in their origins, ideologically male. Baron de Coubertin’s idealised athlete was an ancient Greek jock and the modern Games were meant to be festivals of fraternal brotherhood. I recently watched—for the first time, I am embarrassed to admit—a women’s Test match between India and England. It was the most absorbing cricket I had seen in years. Shafali Verma and Smriti Mandhana were the most exciting desi opening bats I’ve seen since Sehwag retired. The competition was intense and in a curious way the players looked like throwbacks to my youth when cricketers of every shape and size played the game with surpassing skill. And best of all, I didn’t once hear a player on either side exclaim or curse about forbidden congress with random female kin. Or male kin for that matter. If anyone thinks that toxic masculinity and cricketing chauvinism are not real, they should watch high class cricket played by women: their total absence in these contests makes the very air relax and magically brings the cricket to a sharper focus. Tests without testosterone: that is one road ahead.

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The other solution is to watch games on mute, without the commentary supplied by the BCCI’s indentured commentators. There is a world of talk on cricket out there in the form of brilliant podcasts, which are a form of bespoke radio. In *Cricket Et Cetera*, Gideon Haigh and Peter Lalor make cricket seem like a civilised and cosmopolitan sport by simply not talking about it as if they’ve been kidnapped and held hostage by the fatherland. To read Sharda Ugra and Kartikeya Date on cricket is to learn that empathy and numeracy can make the game bloom in your head like a many-petalled flower. I’ve learnt more about cricket from listening to Siddhartha Vaidyanathan and Mahesh Sethuraman on their podcast, *81 Not Out* than I have from listening to the BCCI’s hand-picked patriotic commentariat over decades. Best of all is an all-woman podcast on the BBC’s Test Match Special, hosted by Alex Hartley, Alison Mitchell and others. It’s called *No Balls*.

Cricket’s establishment and its male players might be in bed with the nation state but as spectators, we can, with a little help from our friends, ignore their narratives and just watch them perform. The English mathematician, G.H. Hardy, watched cricket at least partly because cricketers made elegant geometrical shapes as they went about their business and the scoreboard hosted intriguing mathematical patterns. These are excellent reasons for watching cricket. Sport, like much else, lives in the eye of the beholder.

(This is the text of a talk delivered on Manthan on 20 June 2021. The video of the talk is available [here](#).)