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Transformative Power of Cricket in India:

Its Potential and its Limits

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The first All-India cricket team to tour England opened a small window for the game to be a site for social justice. But a century later that promise in a cricket-mad country remains unfulfilled. A review article around Prashant Kidambi's "Cricket Country".

Earlier this month, at the *India Today Conclave East*, the newly-installed Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) President Sourav Ganguly urged everyone to look beyond surnames. The former India men's captain was responding to criticism of the 'election' of Jay Shah, the son of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, as Secretary of the new BCCI.

In defence, Ganguly cited the names of cricketers sharing the same family name who had gone on to represent their country in cricket and did so well. Steve and Mark Waugh of Australia were an example mentioned. During the same chat, Ganguly also spoke of his desire for people to be judged fairly. As he saw it, charges of nepotism or conflict of interest were stopping "good people" from offering their services to the sport. This is not an unfamiliar argument. Most people involved in sport are keen to emphasise its emancipatory potential, although questions of justice and fairness are not always welcome.

In fact, looking at the way the BCCI has now set the wheels in motion to return to the old ways of functioning—it remains to be seen if the Supreme Court will intervene again to halt the regression—it is clear that external intervention for a more just and fair alternative is contentious territory. Autonomy is deeply valued by administrative bodies in sport. In fact, it would not be wrong to suggest that they actively themselves to be above public scrutiny.

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This matter assumes serious import when sport is invoked as a site to remedy historical injustices. The idea of caste-based reservation in Indian cricket belongs to that category of concerns. It is a matter not entirely irrelevant to sport, although it may seem so at times. In fact, cricket or for that matter no other sport is impervious to public debate around caste in the current political moment where reservation for economically weaker sections has become a reality through the 103rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution.

It is, however, a question that is more germane to the most popular sporting pursuit in India – men's cricket. As Sukanya Shantha noted in a piece for *Round Table India* a couple of years ago, the Indian women's side that reached the World Cup final in England in 2017 had nearly half the squad from Dalit-Bahujan backgrounds. The thrilling run of the women's side coincided with the Indian men's team loss in the Champions Trophy final to Pakistan – a result that elicited a demand of [25 per cent reservation](#) for cricketers from the Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Member of Parliament Ramdas Athawale.

Although Athawale's remark seemed like a knee-jerk reaction to a loss to Pakistan—an occasion of national shame for some—it is worth thinking about how we could begin to talk about caste in men's cricket. A recent work of history, *Cricket Country* by Prashant Kidambi, suggests a way forward. Through its narration of the first-ever tour undertaken by a representative Indian side to the British Isles, in 1911, *Cricket Country* tells a story that unsettles many of the popular assumptions about cricket in India.



The Indian cricketers at Hove, Sussex, August 1911; Baloo Palwankar is standing second from left and Shivram Palwankar is seated on the ground (left) | Penguin India

It is a book that assumes greater relevance in a context where the BCCI is on the verge of undoing many of the key recommendations of the Supreme Court-appointed Lodha Committee¹. In his later remarks at the *India Today* conclave, Sourav Ganguly justified the current setup's desire to extend its term, which would contravene the restrictions set in the new BCCI constitution, on the ground of a need for 'continuity'.

The former cricketer pointed towards South Africa to make his case. "You look at the other countries. South Africa. When I came into international cricket in 1996, they were probably the best side in the world. A team which had (Shaun) Pollock, (Allan) Donald, (Jacques) Kallis, (Lance) Klusener. And you look at the current South African team...They speak about how the relationship with the administration [has fallen off](#), how the sponsors want to back away because cricket is not being run properly."

As a work of history, [Cricket Country](#) seeks to question the accepted narrative about cricket in India before Test status became a reality in 1932.

South Africa is often invoked when politically-charged commentary turns its gaze on sport. Its current predicament is relevant when we start discussing reservations or quotas. Across disciplines, the sporting associations in South Africa are expected to meet transformation targets, which are racial quotas designed to ensure that the Rainbow Nation's sporting sides are truly representative of the country.

But a racial quota is also a straw man that observers from other countries are quick to mention, especially when a similar idea for reservation is suggested in their own context. Much of commentary on sport is obsessed with the quota system in South African cricket; it is invoked to explain everything from the exodus of white cricketers to the United Kingdom to the failure of South Africa to reach the 2015 World Cup final after losing a close contest.

Do you want to be like South Africa? This is a question meant to raise alarm. Ganguly was just reinforcing the sense of chaos that is evoked when one speaks of Proteas cricket. The aversion to caste-based quotas in Indian men's cricket, a supposed meritocracy, is of course legion. Even the mention of caste is often met with mocking disapproval.

When *The Wire* [published](#)² an abridged essay by Shubham Jain and Gaurav Bhawnani, former Indian batsman Mohammad Kaif took to [Twitter](#) to express his outrage: "How many prime time journalists are SC or ST or for that matter how many senior editors in your organisation are SC or ST? Sports is perhaps one field which has successfully broken barriers of caste, players play with inclusiveness but then we have such journalism to spread hatred (sic)."

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The point about journalism aside, it is worth asking the question about caste and cricket. As Jain and Bhavnani revealed, only four known Dalits have represented India in Test cricket. So, is men’s cricket actually a field that can break barriers of caste or other forms of structural discrimination as Kaif suggested? To answer this question in monosyllables is to overlook the complex history of cricket, of other possibilities and of different times.

Prashant Kidambi’s *Cricket Country* has a conversation with this question of caste, among other things, and helps us to think in productive ways.

As a work of history, *Cricket Country* seeks to question the accepted narrative about cricket in India before Test status became a reality in 1932. The years before then are generally described as a period of antique curiosities when the princely states, in their desire to mirror the colonial royalty, took to cricket as a pastime. However, as Kidambi notes, cricket also turned out to be a site for political negotiations among religious communities, and its popularity spread deep and wide.

Many histories animate *Cricket Country*. From the life story of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala—the *de facto* captain on the tour—to the situating of the Indian tour within an English summer that was in the throes of cultural and political ferment, Kidambi draws disparate threads together. But it is his account of the Palwankars, four Dalit brothers (Baloo, Shivram, Vithal and Ganpat) who excelled at cricket and hockey alike that evokes the popular fascination with cricket and recovers “the small voice of history”³. The story of the lives of the Palwankar brothers, two of whom (Baloo and Shivram) made the team for the 1911 tour, is a stirring highlight of *Cricket Country*.

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Palwankar Baloo and his brothers were afforded long overdue prominence in an English-language work of history by Ramachandra Guha in his much-celebrated *A Corner of a Foreign Field*. Yet the name of Baloo and his riveting career in cricket remains consigned to the backburner of Indian cricket memory. It is an account that is barely invoked in the popular imagination; rather it remains a trivial concern.

The story of the Palwankars is relevant as it allows us a glimpse into the history of Dalits in Indian cricket. When set against the remarkably low presence of Dalits in organised men’s cricket in independent India, it is worth noting that the historic tour over a century ago had two cricketers from the Chambhar (Chamar) community: Baloo and Shivram. The duo’s brother Vithal could have been a part of the tour as well, but he was unlucky to miss out as communal quotas were strictly enforced to keep all parties happy, namely, the Parsis, the Hindus, and the Muslims.



The All-India team at the Kent county Cricket Club; Baloo Palwankar is seated to the right of the legendary WG Grace
| Penguin India

As Kidambi describes it, the tour was the result of a historic compromise that was reached following past failures to undertake a tour to the colonial metropole. But it is the ever-shifting compromise with the status of Baloo within the Hindu cricketing fraternity that suggests why we still have very few Dalit men in organised cricket. In fact, this may be the final frontier for what is the most popular game for the Indian masses. Post-Independence, it has not been unusual to see cricketers from different religious dimensions. But caste lines remain firmly entrenched.

Baloo's inclusion, as noted by Kidambi, was motivated by a collective self-interest of the Hindus. Such were his exploits with left-arm spin bowling that the desire for communal supremacy in the Bombay Quadrangular⁴ ensured his selection. Anecdotes and accounts about Baloo's talent travelled far and wide, helped in no small measure by his success on the 1911 tour where he was the leading wicket-taker. Nor was he a mug with the bat, playing a few crucial knocks over the course of the English summer.

Baloo's indefatigable displays were a highlight in a side that had been considerably affected by late withdrawals of key figures and riven with disagreements. The Parsis and the Brahmins experienced continuing friction that had its roots in animosity bred on the cricket fields of Bombay. The tension was borne out particularly in the matter of dietary preferences. As recalled in *Cricket Country*, one of the Parsi cricketers explained the fragile fitness of a Brahmin cricketer by asserting, "He is a vegetarian and in Great Britain meat must be eaten if one is to keep fit." What the Parsis thought of Baloo, beyond his cricketing abilities, is unknown.

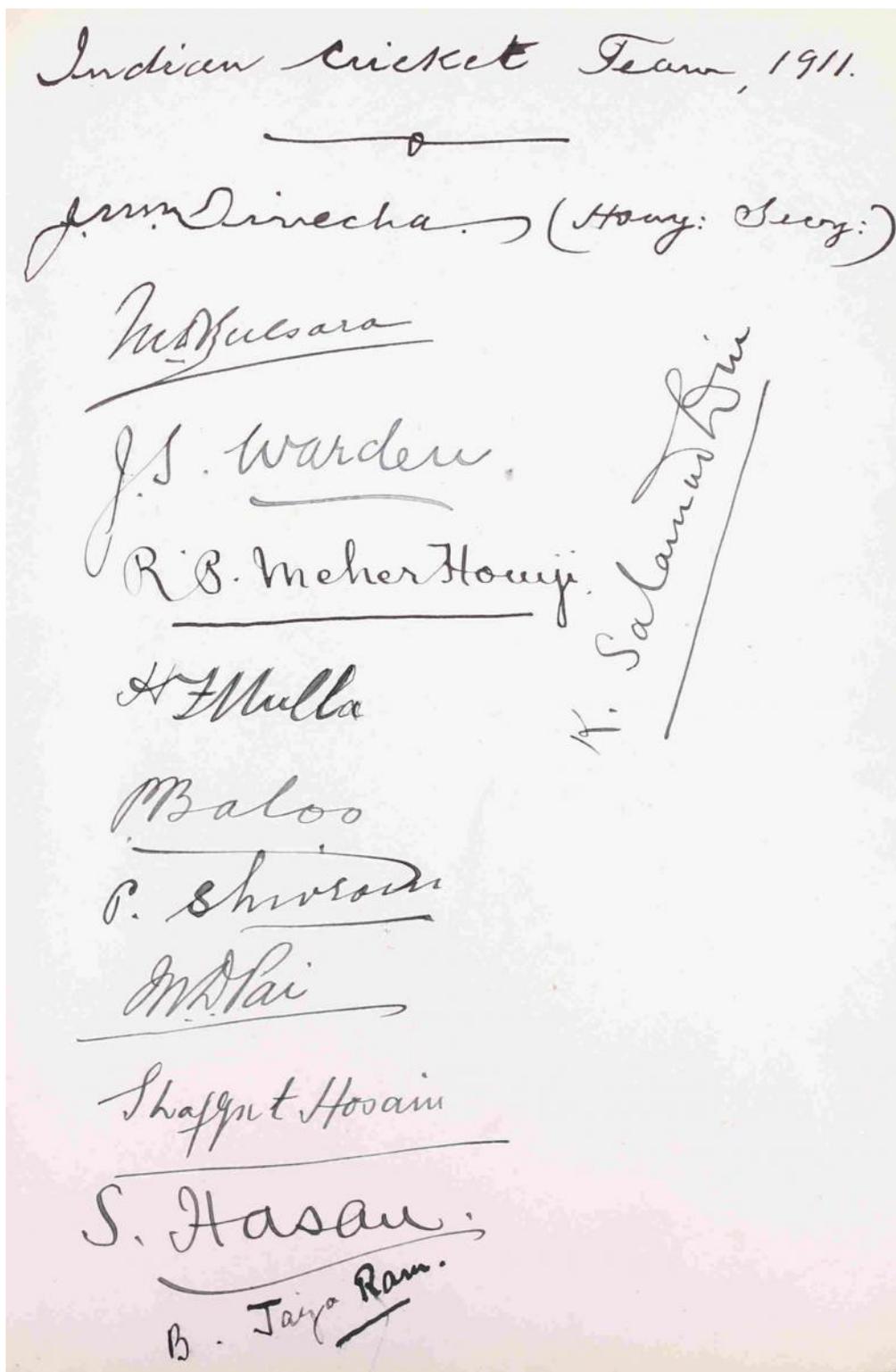


Baloo Palwankar, close up (Wikimedia)

Although Baloo's immense talent broke down enough barriers for him to become a part of Hindu cricket team, not to mention the representative Indian team, Baloo experienced and, in some cases overcame, more entrenched obstacles. Before boarding the ship that would take the team to England, Baloo and his brother Shivram were the only ones not garlanded at the Parsi Gymkhana. This was just another incident in a long series when Baloo was made to feel alienated. For instance, he was served food separately from his teammates when he played for the Hindus. The Hindu Gymkhana in Mumbai remained impervious to Baloo's success, remaining committed to biased treatment of their star cricketer. The demand for Baloo to be made captain had popular approval throughout the final decade of his career, but he was never handed the captaincy (except for a short while during his final match in 1920).

It is interesting that many colonial officers had actively backed Baloo's inclusion in his earlier playing days. But their motivations were certainly not limited to cricket alone. As Kidambi writes, the support for Baloo could be understood as a 'civilising mission' by European missionaries where education and other cultural totems like cricket were actively promoted for the "lower" castes. In fact, Baloo's initiation into cricket was made possible by his proximity to colonial officers through his father and grandfather who were employed in the 112th Native Infantry regiment.

In his autobiography (written in Marathi), Vithal was keen to acknowledge the role played by his elder brother, Baloo, in paving the way for the rest of the family. The four brothers—the youngest Ganpat died young—were proficient in cricket and field hockey; the Palwankars helped Bombay Pioneers win the all-India Aga Khan hockey Championship in 1908.



Autographs of the members of the Indian team | Penguin India

But it is Baloo's later foray into politics that foregrounded his struggle on the cricket field into wider public life. Baloo had returned a hero from the 1911 tour. Interestingly, the Hindu Gymkhana celebrated his and Shivram's success by honouring them with a gold medal and silver cup, respectively. The brothers were also invited to a 'Depressed Class' felicitation where Bhimrao Ambedkar addressed the gathering.

It took another 15 years for the next representative Indian side to undertake a foreign tour, which coincided with Baloo's entry into formal politics. In 1932, at the height of M.K. Gandhi's fast at Yerawada jail in protest against the separate electorate on the basis of caste, Baloo was chosen by Ambedkar as one of the negotiators in his parleys with Gandhi. However, five years later, the ex-cricketer fought an election on a Congress ticket against Ambedkar that he lost. It was still possible for the seasoned politician to outdo a cricketer in elections back then, unlike the trend we have seen recently in Indian politics⁵.

It is worth remembering that when Baloo passed away in 1955, an outpouring of love was seen on the streets of Bombay and noted Dalit figures were in attendance at his cremation. The famous Parsi cricket observer A.F.S. Talyarkhan's words upon Baloo's death resonate even today, "It is our national misfortune that the young of today know nothing about the men who made Indian cricket much of what it is. Cricket will miss Baloo, but always remember him." Cricket in fact went on to wilfully forget him, especially in India. The young and the old were united in this act of erasure.

The rousing displays of the Palwankar brothers facilitated the imagination of cricket as a site for social justice, just like anti-colonial politics would later have it.

The life story of the Palwankars matters because, as Kidambi notes, they "saw cricket as a route to dignity and justice". When cricketing elite like Ganguly urge us to look beyond surnames, it is not a call for either dignity or justice. Instead it is marked by a desire to make cricket "an avenue for power and prestige", in the historian's words. *Cricket Country* is also important because it reflects "an imperial-nationalising" conjuncture⁶ when the nation was given a shape by the Empire to serve its own ends.

However, the colonial power's subjects in the subcontinent were not passive recipients to this call. Instead, they responded to the possibility of a cricket tour through a conversation between communities that had hitherto been fractious in tone and tenor. The success of Baloo and Shivram suggested a different harmony, although it remains unrealised. The displays of the Palwankar brothers facilitated the imagination of cricket as a site for social justice, just like anti-colonial politics would later have it. The redemptive story of the Palwankars is also very close to the illusion about cricket harboured by Mohammad Kaif and others.

The nation imagined through its cricket team had arguably greater transformative potential in 1911 than it has in 2019. In its composition and its political pronouncements, the current cricket team seems to represent the dominant register of Indian-ness. Money and prestige are the overwhelming drivers of Indian cricket's recent success, but the BCCI's running of the game does not articulate possibilities for social, even ethical, justice. Ganguly, Jay Shah, and the BCCI administration's case for continuity is built on pasts willfully forgotten, memories that now exist only in bits and pieces. Kidambi's *Cricket Country* brings them back to life.

Footnotes:

1 The Lodha Committee was appointed by the Supreme Court at the start of 2015 following the 2013 spot-fixing scandal that engulfed the Indian Premier League. Its mandate was to recommend the appropriate punishment for franchise owners involved in betting and to formulate the overhaul of the BCCI's constitution.

2 A longer piece was carried by *Economic and Political Weekly*.

3 As Ranajit Guha described the objective of the *Subaltern Studies* group in his famous essay.

4 The Bombay Quadrangular/Pentangular was a cricket tournament in the first half of the 20th century that was based on communal lines. It can be traced to the early encounters between the Europeans and Parsis from the 1870s onwards. It became the Pentangular in 1937 when the "Rest" were added to the Quadrangular of the Europeans, Parsis, Hindus, and Muslims. The competition continued until 1946.

5 Gautam Gambhir won a handsome victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha election from East Delhi, triumphing over former local favourite Arvinder Singh Lovely of Congress.

6 The historian Mrinalini Sinha identifies the post-First World War period as an imperial-nationalising conjuncture when the imperialist force sought a recourse to the national as a response to the political pressures of the anti-colonial struggle. Although the 1911 tour was not an anti-colonial assertion, the composite team did offer a vision of the later post-colonial Indian state.

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