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Marketing Muck and Rahu Kalams - The Underbelly of the 2026 T20 World Cup

By: Sharda Ugra

The cricket on the field has been full of joy, but the cricketers have played under the shadow of an overbearing BCCI; the Board's uber-nationalism has sullied the game and its carte blanche to the money men has brought in indecent marketing. The ICC, on its part, has been rendered powerless.

As far as the International Cricket Council (ICC) World Cups go, the Indian cricket team's T20 World Cup has gone to plan. At the time of writing, the team has made the finals on the back of electric performances in the final two rounds of knockout matches and New Zealand will find it very very hard to stop them on Sunday, March 8, in Ahmedabad.

If are to assess this World Cup away from the team's on-field cricket and examine how it has panned out, we must first decide on what it should be called. Before you think 'Indian cricket's World Cup' works, it's good to remember these words by an Indian cricketer, "the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) and Indian cricket aren't the same," Indeed, so it is best to look at the event concluding on Sunday as the BCCI's 2026 ICC T20 World Cup and, other than limelights, highlights and match analysis, identify the markers it has left us with.

First, thanks to other boardroom toadies - the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and Cricket Australia (CA) being the leaders - the BCCI was allowed to take complete control of the ICC's decision-making during the sport's biggest crises in recent years.

Then, second, over the last two months, the bullying of the Bangladesh board and continued hostility towards the Pakistan board and its team have laid to rest any doubts over the comprehensive political capture of the BCCI .

Third, there came a moment of grim awareness to everyone else in the world trying to max their money in cricket's El Dorado: that they had also handed El Dorado the power to wallpaper every political animosity over each overseas enterprise its stakeholders got involved in -the Caribbean Premier League (CPL), South Africa T20, The International League (ILT) T20 in the UAE, with England's Hundred next in line.

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And finally, for Indian fans and viewers, who are the actual bank-rollers and stakeholders of the game in this country, 2026 will be the World Cup where we watched once more, a familiar degradation of our cricket and our fans through tasteless broadcast promos, game-publicity and social media content. Sup-bar appeared to be the starting point as the world watched.

The political capture of the BCCI and its impact on Indian cricket is by itself worth several PhDs, a Netflix documentary and a sub-school of sociology. The rest of these developments are the result of cricket being run not by cricket-people but by money men and revenue-managers. By cricket-people, I don't mean ex-players but rather those mostly invisible folk who officiate the sport, administer it, market it, broadcast it, and support it all over the world. People who know its SWOTs and blots inside out, who love it for its magical, lunatic self. And not merely for its cash-generating capacity, or as is growing more common in this country, for its usefulness in scoring brownie points with the powerful and generating social media trash talk.

At this World Cup, the cricket on the field, as always, lifted and lit us up. The energy and skill of the players was captured in images, reels, words and golden confetti and sealed tin our memory. It also erased the fact of the (yet again, in a repeat of the Cricket World Cup 2023) late release of the schedule. Or how tranches of tickets emerged up for sale on the morning of some games. Or the continuation of the absurd second round/ Super Eight 'pre-seeding', based on ICC T20I rankings: 'for logical and scheduling clarity' and 'broadcast and venue planning stability.'

Let's explain. In other global sporting events, second-round spots for teams are determined on the basis of how they finish in their group round-robin and then play teams from other groups based on those teams' standings in their groups. From 2024 onwards, the T20

World Cup has used pre-seeding based on a team's pre-tournament ICC World T20I rankings. All the way from No. 1 to 8, teams were given fixed slots inside the Super Eight. India's World T20I ranking as No.1 meant it would always be team X1 alongside teams ranked 3, 5, and 7, while England as World No.2 became Y1 and were in the same group as the world Nos. 4, 6, 8. It didn't matter how they did in the group stages of the tournament, this division was always pre-determined. So India's Super Eight group ended up with the other three round group toppers - West Indies, South Africa and Zimbabwe (as the Australia-slayers).

ICC's BCCI flavour

Then the ICC also produced another school-fete-type-switch - announcing a 'floating arrangement' for the venues for the semi-final. In "a change from the original (delayed) schedule announcement", if Sri Lanka had made the semis, they would play in Colombo, but only if they weren't facing India. You get the drift.

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Yet, Bangladesh were refused their request to shift their matches to Sri Lanka. The ICC cited "significant logistical and scheduling consequences for other teams and fans worldwide, and would also create far-reaching precedent-related challenges that risk undermining the neutrality, fairness, and integrity of ICC governance." Of course, there's a difference between moving one match and four, but Bangladesh had made their request weeks earlier. Bangladesh's request had come after the sudden cancellation of Mustafizur Rahman's IPL contract by his franchise Kolkata Knight Riders, due to what BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia explained vaguely as, "recent developments which is going on all across."

The tea leaves then read that this was a fall out of political tension between India and Bangladesh. It still made no sense because the opening night of the 2026 IPL was around three months away when Mustafizur's contract was cancelled.

In March 2025, equally vague, unspecified, unwritten 'government concerns' around 'security threats' were expressed by the BCCI around the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy hosted by Pakistan. The ICC then allowed India to play all their Champions Trophy matches in Dubai. But Bangladesh were first pushed around and talked down to by the ICC, before being summarily ejected from the tournament by an executive Board vote and replaced by Scotland.

On the Sky Sports podcast, former England captain Nasser Hussain said he supported Bangladesh for standing up for Mustafizur and Pakistan threatening to forfeit their World Cup match against India in protest against the treatment meted out by the ICC to Bangladesh. Hussain said that while sport, cricket and politics had always been intertwined, "...it just seems recently that link is more and more. It used to be the exception, it's now the norm and it's not just politics and politicians, it's players as well. Players I've seen in the last couple of years... as I say, it's fairly depressing, not shaking hands, not lifting the trophy. Cricket used to unite nations and countries that were finding difficulties, and now it's pushing people apart."

The cancellation of Mustafizur's IPL contract was another example of Indian cricket, its team and players being placed squarely at the service of the ever-ready social media hate-machine that now appears to drive and dictate some corners of government policy in India.

No handshake rule via, via

The Asia Cup last September then converted previous uber-nationalist posturing by cricketers - mostly copy-pasting 'viral' social media posts - into acts on the field of play. When, on external instruction, the Indian team refused to shake hands with Pakistani players before and after their matches.

The refusal to shake hands, it must be remembered, was only generated to calm down the outrage and anger generated by right wing social media handles over videos and images of Indian captain [Surya Kumar Yadav shaking hands with the PCB chief and Pakistan interior minister Mohsin Naqvi](#) during an Asia Cup's pre-tournament media briefing. The no handshake and no eye-contact at the toss deteriorated into Pakistan and Indian players on the field making signs and send-offs related to military exchanges between the two countries - these included slit throats and tail-spinning aircraft. It ended with the Indian team finally refusing to accept the Asia Cup trophy from Naqvi.

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In between came post-match references to Pahalgam, Operation Sindoor and the army by Surya and coach Gautam Gambhir in their media conferences. There are reports that the no-handshakes embarrassed a few in team management. Still, no one is willing to identify the specific individual who issued this instruction. The best you get is, "from the BCCI."

This vagueness is exactly what IPL franchise owners receive by way of instructions to stay away from bidding for Pakistani players in overseas T20 franchise league auctions. It comes, as is described, "via, via." Nobody even wants to name who even one of the two vias stand for. In the immortal words of secretary Saikia, it's all about "recent developments which is going on all across." When the BBC broke a story about how the four India-owed franchises in the English Hundred competition would not consider Pakistanis at the auction, there was a furore. It ended in the ECB and the eight franchises issued a statement in which they said players would not be "excluded on grounds of their nationality." Team selection would be based, "solely on cricketing performance, availability and needs of the team." These are terms on which franchises wanting to include or exclude anyone can hang their hats.

In his recent syndicated Sunday column, former Indian captain and batting legend Sunil Gavaskar stood in the IPL-owned franchises' corner. [Gavaskar said in his column](#) in *Sunday Mid-Day* that that no one in the Hundred so far had signed on any Pakistani player over the last five seasons. He went on to write: "So, if this time around, none of the franchises owned by Indians, who have bought them for more money than they were actually worth, don't buy any Pakistani player, how are authorities going to prove discrimination." Fair point. He said that one of the reasons that Pakistanis were not selected other than 'hardened feelings', "with Indian citizens being killed by so called non-state actors from across the border" was this: "the realisation that the Pakistani sportspersons and artistes pay income tax on the fees received from Indian and other foreign entities and their government buys arms that kill the Indian soldiers and citizens. So no Indians would like to get involved in contributing to their own people's deaths."

So what if they don't play each other bilaterally for decades, India v Pakistan never goes away. At the 2026 T20 World Cup, when previewing the India-Pakistan match on his You Tube channel, Indian commentator Harsha Bhogle [talked about](#) "provocative promos" and the fixture being "held hostage to larger economic and political ends... I don't think we enjoy the game any more, we exploit it."

Crude and rude marketing

To Indians, the visible exploitation at our end comes through the broadcasters, Star Sports/ Hotstar, now [JioStar after the merger of Viacom and Star](#) in November 2024.

Cricket broadcasters act as proxy eyes and ears for the hundreds of millions who form India's television/ digital platform audience. Over the last decade, Star Sports and now JioStar have chosen to show us the game according to how their upper management/ money men/ revenue managers see it. Not as a sport that is deeply loved, followed and played with equal passion by varied range of Indian economic, cultural, linguistic and regional demographics - each one different from the other, yet each quintessentially native. But as something to be packaged around a one-eyed view of the sport, centred around celebrity-worship and jingoism masquerading as fandom.

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What was born as KohliCam, the dire Super V cartoon film, and then 'Skyball', has grown turned into promotions around India's matches that are increasingly disrespectful and dismissive of the opposition, steeped in perpetual ridicule. Again, these are but reflection of the broadcasters' money bag mindsets and world views which the Indian viewer must endure.

Many in the industry have used the year 2015 as a starting point. It was when the ESPNStar network separated in 2013, and Star, with its flagship Star Plus general entertainment channel, took over the Indian cricket broadcast around matches - its pre-&-post-game shows, promotions and ad inserts. During the Lalit Modi era, the BCCI had gone into hiring its own production team and its own commentary panel and therefore, controlling the message and curbing the messengers' independence.

While Sony had already introduced Hindi commentary from the first season of IPL, broadcasters Star brought it into international cricket with multi-lingual commentary meant to build a new audience away from 'elite' 'English-language'-centric cricket coverage. It did not take into account the fact that the rapid burgeoning of cricket through hinterland India thanks to the 1990s satellite television boom, had taken to cricket and met their cricket heroes through this very coverage. No matter what language outside of English they speak or understand, the average Indian cricket fan would have been repulsed by the JioStar [South Africa cupcake promo](#).

South Africa defeated India in a one-sided match, and Star Sports has deleted this offensive ad it made for this particular encounter.

Perhaps this episode will teach our ad makers that arrogance masquerading as marketing is neither clever nor graceful.

pic.twitter.com/uK9W96p95Y

- THE SKIN DOCTOR (@theskindoctor13) February 22, 2026

It wasn't the only example. There were ridiculous promos and social media posts from host broadcaster JioStar - one cut-price version setting up the match against Pakistan featuring four sniggering Indians and one hapless Pakistani exchanging 'banter' outside a lift (filmed absolutely last minute, in what looks like the JioStar office). Then came the cupcake and the X post featuring a car accident from a Hindi film after India's defeat to South Africa. Questions sent to JioStar about withdrawal of the cupcake promo, the creative team behind it and the rationale behind such promos were never answered.

Star producers, it it said, often pat themselves on the back for creating the Mauka Mauka ads around the India-Pak 'rivalry.' After its first 2015 airing, which amused many on both sides of the border, the 'rivalry' promos ten years later inevitably fall into a category best defined as nauseous.

Enter ICC's 'Content Creators'

Then post India's defeat to South Africa in the Super Six in the 2026 T20 World Cup, the activity around what to older eyes looked like a bizarre, post-match viral reel turned ugly. RJ Princy Parekh, an influencer signed on as one of ICC's 'Content Creators' (CC) had to delete the reel, slow-clapping around South African batter David Miller - one of the architects of the South African victory - after she became the target of abuse and rape threats.

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When asked about the role of influencers, the ICC media office sent a detailed reply. Like had happened in other sport, the CCs had been working with them for a "number of years" (post-Covid could be a safe guess) as part of a "wider marketing approach." The CCs made social media another outreach platform particularly for "Younger audiences ... (who) engage more through short-form and personality-led digital content." No numbers were mentioned, "Given the location of this tournament, most of the creators involved are India-based, which reflects both the host market and the scale of the creator ecosystem here."

This frankly feels like preaching to the choir - except maybe broadcasters want a Choir Extension because someone in India paid around Rs 6,000 crore a year for ICC media rights for the 2023-2027 cycle. But in a 20-team ICC World Cup, wouldn't CCs from other nations -Nepalis, Italians, Scots, Emiratis? - provide an added push to an event that was outside their public gaze to begin with?

That was not a question that I had raised with the ICC, but they did respond to my query about the RJ Pinky Parekh reel. "The David Miller video you reference, the ICC had sight of it before going public..." It was pointed that the ICC worked not just with the CCs, "but [with] our other stakeholders such as teams and players to make sure everyone is clear about what is being created and where it will be published."

Given that the Miller video was approved, surely the ICC wouldn't have been unaware of the considerably misogynist, toxic side of Indian social media? Or was throwing the RJ under that bus no issue because traction is, well, traction and views are views? Did any of the Indian team's minders approve of the JioStar post about the car accident? Did the JioStar's cupcake promo not go to the ICC for vetting, given that it was going out during a major ICC event? The "ICC" here are both the money men, the marketing and sales teams and the upper management because the ICC's internal digital content team does an excellent job at its own events.

Nobody expects either clarification or introspection because the BCCI template is now in operation at the ICC as well. At no point during the crisis around Bangladesh did anyone from the ICC - neither chairman Jay Shah nor CEO Sanjog Gupta - hold an open press conference. No doubt marvellous numbers will be revealed by the ICC at the end of this world cup, it being the 'best' 'greatest', with the 'widest reach' ever.

Avoiding a tryst with Rahu

In keeping with the host broadcasters' and BCCI finger-on-the-pulse of what is politically kosher, this World Cup TV also featured repeated Vande-Mataram-ing - A.R. Rahman version, mind. JioStar had its own version around the Indian team which played every five seconds or so alongside with the team sponsors' Apollo Tyres ad spot. There was also much social media content around the team's visits to various temples around the venues where they were playing matches.

|| Another question: had there been a lunar eclipse on the day of the semi-final, would the Indian captain have refused to go out for the toss at 6:30pm?

Yet, the most delicious piece of news, was saved for the final week. *The Indian Express* reported the Indian team delayed the start of its nets at the Wankhede Stadium by around an hour, two days before its semi-final against England because it was first scheduled during an 'inauspicious time' of a lunar eclipse.

The team nets on Tuesday, March 3, were scheduled for 6-9 pm, the eclipse timed from 3:20 to 6:46pm. An unnamed source told *Indian Express*, "The team found out that since it is chandra grahan 'lunar eclipse' one should avoid doing anything good. As India is playing semi-finals against England the team wanted to start on a positive note. Many felt that we can push the practice time until 6:40 PM one should avoid doing any activity. The team management agreed to it and practice was postponed by an hour." No names of the 'many' who felt suchlike were given in the report. Naturally, it fell into the "recent developments which is going on all across" bucket.

Another question: had there been a lunar eclipse on the day of the semi-final, would the Indian captain have refused to go out for the toss at 6:30pm? And would the ICC and broadcasters have delayed the start time of the match? Don't laugh. Bet you'd never factored rahu kalam into serious cricket practice.

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