



# A cricketing nation

Sport reveals a great deal about nations and is a legitimate field of academic study, argues **Ramachandra Guha**. Here he draws on his highly acclaimed book *A Corner of a Foreign Field* to chart the Indian relationship with cricket.

Cricket was first played in India by its colonial rulers, yet it quickly took root. As a result, instead of dying a natural death when the British left in 1947, it continued to flourish. There are a number of reasons why Indians and cricket are particularly well matched – indeed, cricket's development by India's own people is bound up with the overarching themes of Indian history itself: race, caste, religion and nation.

First, unlike football, cricket can be played in the narrow streets and alleys of crowded cities, where bowling and batting straight are a necessity. Second, physique is not as important as in other sports – anyone of any shape, athletic or otherwise, can take part. The structure, too, is significant: in its purest form it is a slow game, suited to the pace of life and to the sociability of the Indian people, who enjoy observing every detail, discussing every nuance of play and debating (heatedly) team selection. Nationalism is the other crucial ingredient: besides hockey, it is the only sport in which the country excels on the international stage.

Initially, cricket was played in imitation: the Parsis (the Indian community most closely allied to the British rulers), having watched this curious activity practised by Europeans in Bombay, then took it up themselves and in 1848 established the Oriental Cricket Club so that they could play formally. In 1877 they were invited to play a match against the Europeans, which turned into an annual event. In turn, the Hindus strove to emulate the Parsis, founding the P J Hindu Gymkhana, and in 1907 the first Triangular tournament, involving

all three teams, took place. By a similar process, a Muslim team made it a Quadrangular in 1912; eventually, in 1937, the Pentangular was established. The fifth team, designated the Rest, included Sinhalese Buddhists, Jews and Indian Christians, and underlines the chauvinism both endemic in British rule and between Indians themselves: Indian Christians could not play with the Europeans, for they were not white, but nor were they permitted to join the Parsi, Hindu or Muslim clubs.

The Europeans could accept being taken on at their own game as long as they kept beating the subjugated locals, for they came to see it as a unifying and civilising force. But of course, while endorsing the playing of cricket along communal lines, they reinforced the divisiveness inherent in Indian society (typical of imperialism's strategy: divide and rule). However, when first the Parsis and later the Hindus began to beat the British on occasion, the victories were relished as joyfully by the Indians as any on the battlefield.

The hero of the early Hindu teams was a left-arm spin bowler named Palwankar Baloo, and it was through discovery of this figure that I first became interested in the social history of Indian cricket. Despite Baloo's prowess, he never became captain of his side. Although bowlers seldom are captains, the chief bias against him arose from his caste: he was a Dalit, or Untouchable. His younger brothers, who also became good cricketers, went on strike in 1920 when he was overlooked for the position, and even the Brahmin appointed ahead of him

publicly acknowledged the stronger claim of Baloo. After retiring from cricket, Baloo became a key associate of Gandhi – who campaigned against Untouchability – but he is still relatively unknown in history: the victim of his caste, of his role as a bowler, and being eclipsed in the political imagination by Bhimrao Ambedkar, a later low-caste politician and reformer.

By the 1920s, cricket was followed by everyone in India. The Quadrangular was the main vehicle for the spread of cricket, and from 1934 it could be followed across the country on the radio, when ball-by-ball commentary began. Despite the societal divisions, anyone could play, and star players were feted by Indians in every walk of life. In time, the Hindus and Muslims became more evenly matched, but their rivalry further intensified as the case for a separate Muslim nation, after the departure of the British, became increasingly prominent. In fact, Partition led in the end not to the banishment of cricket but to its reincarnation in a tournament involving state-based, rather than communal, teams, as well as to a new international cricketing and political rivalry, between India and Pakistan.

Cricket remains a colourful obsession for the vast majority of Indians, a passion fuelled further still by early success in the one-day form of the game (they won the World Cup in 1983 and 2011) and exploited by the progenitors of the more recent Indian Premier League, the Twenty20 competition. On this game of bat and ball have been superimposed notions of communal and national loyalty, honour and pride. Cricket has been fully Indianised. ■

*As spoken to Hilary Weale, external relations executive.*



**Ramachandra Guha** holds the Philippe Roman Chair in History and International Affairs, based in LSE IDEAS. You can listen to Professor Guha's 6 March 2012 lecture "Sport and the Nation: interpreting Indian history through the lens of cricket" at [lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio](http://lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio) on the public lectures and events channel. *A Corner of a Foreign Field: the Indian history of a British sport* is published by Picador (2002).

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