

## **Indian and IPL Matches: A Critical Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines why India has emerged as the preeminent nation in international cricket and how the Indian Premier League (IPL) is a major step in realigning the power structure in international sports. The article argues that India has been able to take the lessons of globalization (as they apply to sport) and use them to create a new national cricket league that has an international character. It goes on to argue that the success of the IPL and similar sporting ventures in nonwestern nations is likely to see these countries challenging the West's sporting monopoly and getting to increasingly determine where and how the game is played.

**KEY WORDS:** India, cricket, sport, International Cricket Council, media, globalization, corporate sponsorship

### **Introduction**

While the world focused on the Beijing Olympics, in India another exercise in globalized sports concluded with enthusiastic fanfare and little protest—the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty/20 cricket tournament. The Board for the Control of Cricket in India created eight new teams (located in some of India's biggest cities) and stacked them with cricket players from around the world. The contracts for some players ran into over a million dollars which was not bad for 45 days' work (and, more importantly, these were salaries that were previously unheard of in cricket). Sweetening the pot was a billion-dollar sale of the television rights to Sony. To top it all off, in an attempt to emulate American sports teams, one of the sporting franchises even imported cheerleaders from the Washington Redskins. More importantly, however, the advent of the IPL indicates two things: one more indicator that India is a factor to be reckoned with in the global economy and is carving out its own niche in that sphere; but also the fact that, increasingly, sporting markets and the control of international sports may be determined by forces in the nonwestern world.

#### **Twenty/20: A Brief Explanation**

Twenty/20 is a fundamental change in the game of cricket because it has made the short version of the game even shorter and thus injected more excitement into the sport. Traditionally, cricket was played in the three, four, and five (the latter being international test matches between countries) format and having a draw (an inconclusive result) was not considered a bad outcome. In fact some of the best matches in the history of the game were those that ended in a draw. The problem was that the format made it less popular as demographics changed and younger spectators were bored by the length of the game. The first real challenge to test cricket—traditionally the

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highest level of competition in the sport—came from the advent of the one-day limited overs competition. The first one-day limited overs competition was played in England in 1963 and the first international one-day game was played by England and Australia in 1971 in Melbourne. What brought the one day game to prominence was the inaugural one day World Cup of 1975 and by the 1990s one-day cricket was drawing large crowds as one international competition after another was created to accommodate the audiences demand for the one-day game.

In 2003, faced with five straight years of falling attendances in the domestic cricket league, the English cricket authorities came with the Twenty/20 format game as a filler in the middle of the season.<sup>1</sup> Each side would bat for twenty overs and, in effect, the game had been transformed into one that could be finished in three hours—thus not requiring the day-long commitment by spectators to a limited overs game. What followed was an exciting slug-fest of attacking cricket and high scores.

Recognizing the popularity of the format, the International Cricket Council (ICC), in 2007, organized a Twenty/20 World Cup that was played in South Africa. Surprisingly, India, which had left its four best players behind, won the tournament and this proved to be an incredible boost to this type of cricket since, for reasons which follow below, India is the hub of international cricket.

It was at this point of time that India's cricket politics spilled over to have a global effect. India's Zee Television network opted to create its own Twenty/20 cricket league and use this product to enhance its programming. When the Zee Network's Indian Cricket League (ICL) was announced the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) felt its monopoly was threatened and responded by creating the Indian Premier League (IPL). This is one more example of the trend that we are witnessing in global sports—the rise of nonwestern nations in the decision-making structure of international sporting institutions.

### **International Sports: The Domination of the West**

The internationalization of sports began in the 1870s and continued until the 1920s with tennis, soccer, rugby creating international administrative institutions—the most prominent achievement being, of course, the establishment of the International Olympic Committee.<sup>2</sup> Given the unrepresentative nature of the colonial international system, it was obvious that the western nations would dominate the new sporting institutions. As Douglas Booth points out, however, the west's domination of international sports continued well past the colonial period because of historical ties and financial clout. As late as 1966, the 37 Caucasian nations in the International Amateur Athletics Federation had 244 votes while the 99 nonwestern nations had 195—thus vesting decision-making power in the hands of the former.<sup>3</sup> Because western nations were the founder-members of most international sporting associations, they dominated these bodies and set the rules for a sport, dominated its finances, and determined the location of major international events.

The Commonwealth Games, which began as the British Empire Games in 1930, are a good example of the dominance of the western nations. In the Commonwealth Games' 78-year history they have been held twice in nonwestern nations—Jamaica 1966 and Malaysia 1998—while

Australia and New Zealand have hosted the game a combined total of seven times. Of the 53-odd members of the Commonwealth four countries—the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—have hosted an overwhelming majority of the games. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria—the four most populous countries in the Commonwealth—were not given the opportunity to host the games. This will change in 2010 when New Delhi hosts the games. Coupled with the domination of these international sporting institutions by the western nations has been the commodification of sports as money has come into the various games.

Miller et al. have argued that in an era of globalization, sports have been commodified to match the needs of commerce and technology.<sup>4</sup> The commodification of international sports has led to the situation where a sport's success is determined by the desire to have sporting events in television-friendly time-zones and by the need to have media-attractive teams with large fan followings in the tournament for the longest period of time. Thus the success of an international sporting event lies not just in the results but in that a certain set of financial criteria are met.

The Olympics, for example, have the lowest viewership when they are in a time zone that makes it difficult for viewers in the western world, particularly the United States, to tune in. This makes it difficult to send the games to countries whose geographical location prevents the broadcast of live events at suitable times in the west. The Seoul Olympics were a good case in point, because the long time difference made for poor television ratings (the Beijing Olympics changed this trend among US viewers but it may have had more to do with a unique event—the successful eight gold medal quest of Michael Phelps—than any change in scheduling preferences).

Further, the need to stage international sporting events in towns that are touristfriendly, have excellent transportation facilities and, increasingly, high levels of security, have made it difficult to take into account the pull of tradition and nostalgia. There was a movement, for example, to award the 1996 Olympics to Athens since it was the centenary of the modern Olympics. But financial and infrastructure considerations made the Olympic committee give the games to Atlanta, leading to the bizarre situation that one country got the games twice in 12 years (the United States having also hosted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games). This would not have happened in a less commercial era. But now, the Olympics need to go to a country that is willing to provide all the facilities to make it a commercial success and is in a television-friendly time zone.

Another consequence of commodification is that in international tournaments the teams with the biggest fan base and commercial backing are often not the ones that achieve success—and sometimes with unfortunate consequences. The 2002 football world cup in South Korea and Japan was a good example of this.

In the 2002 World Cup some of the unfancied teams pulled off the biggest upsets: Senegal beat the defending champions France whose players, in a state of hubris, had decided to not bring their families over till the latter stages of the tournament. Italy, another favoured team with World Cup pedigree (at that time three time winners of the tournament) and a domestic league that was watched globally and included some of the world's best players, was beaten by the underdog South Korean team. Instead of heralding these results as examples of why the World Cup was such an

exciting sporting event, European sports journalists began to argue that the European Champions League was better footballing fare and that the World Cup had lost much of its glamour because one could now see the Brazilian Ronaldo play the Frenchman Zidane on a regular basis in the European leagues.

In contrast, the 2006 World Cup ran true to form with three traditional powerhouses—France, Italy and Germany—making the semifinals. Further, the fact that the 2006 cup was held in Germany allowed for a friendly viewing time for both American and European audiences.

Similarly, when events in the Olympics do not have athletes from rich and media-powerful nations, they tend to get pushed into the less desirable time slots or do not even get air time. In the 1996 Olympics, women's beach volleyball was a popular event with high viewership until the American teams lost. The final was contested by the two Brazilian teams, but it got poor coverage in the American media.

The Indian Premier League, however, addresses these issues and has created a sporting event that, while benefiting from globalization, does not depend on it for the success of the event. The other aspect of the Indian cricket circus is that, unlike China, which hosted the Olympics but cannot claim a proprietary interest over it, the Indian Premier League will be a case of an Indian product acquiring international brand recognition.

### **The Changing Nature of Global Sport**

While international sporting events have been ongoing since the late 19th century, the rise of a globalized audience has only been a recent phenomenon. As Brian Oliver and Richard Gillis point out, as late as 1987 no satellite television company had been given a license to operate. Nor were there millionaire footballers or even professional rugby players. Test cricket, they continue, was shown on the BBC and barring 1983, there had never been live coverage of an overseas cricket tour by British television networks.<sup>5</sup> It was only in the late 1980s that British viewers were able to get continuous live coverage of overseas test matches. In the case of India, television broadcasting was the monopoly of the government, and in the 1980s the broadcasting of sports was dependent not on market forces but on the whims of the governmental bureaucracy. In 1994, the Board for the Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) cut a deal with the international sports broadcaster, ESPN, to set up an Indian version of the network—ESPN India.<sup>6</sup> In 1995, India saw the introduction of mobile phones. And with the advent of both cellular and satellite/cable technology, the game of cricket has boomed in India and elsewhere.

What the advent of modern technology and the establishment of specialized television networks did was to create a global market for sports and to lead the marketers of these games to look for an international audience. Thus American National Basketball Association has moved to become a global phenomenon both in terms of recruiting players internationally as well as in merchandizing the game around the world. The success of the NBA was evident in the decision taken in the 1989 to first allow professional basketball players to play in the Olympics, the United States Dream Team (the team at the 1992 Olympics), and then use the publicity generated to sell the NBA as a global product. What followed was that Michael Jordan became an iconic sporting

figure around the world—something that in the past had only been achieved by tennis players such as Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe, soccer players such as Pele, Cruyff and Maradona, and of course, the boxer Mohammed Ali.

As satellite television and specialized networks embraced the entire world in the late 1990s and the early double zeros, they brought a range of sports to the starved sporting fan. Niche channels like ESPN and Star Sports had to find programming to fill air time, so all of a sudden there were a range of sports available for the hitherto deprived sports fan. Australian Rules Football, domestic Rugby leagues from Australia, and even second-tier soccer leagues such as the Dutch league became globally available.

Coupled with this phenomenon was the attempt of sports marketers to sell their sport in hitherto uncharted territories. Football and tennis always had a global reach but with the advent of global sporting networks there was an attempt to market Formula One racing and golf around the world. Ironically, one of the most successful attempts at sports promotion was the fake sport of professional wrestling, which gained global popularity and air time as a result of the new technological innovations (in a court hearing in New Jersey the World Wrestling Entertainment group stated that its product was not a sport but “choreographed entertainment”).<sup>7</sup>

Sports, by and large, therefore, became characterized by a new imperative of commodification that required an international as opposed to a national audience. The Indian Premier League, while benefiting from some of the technological innovations brought about by globalization, also succeeded because it is a national cricket league. This is especially important given the place cricket occupies in the international sporting context.

#### Promoting Cricket in a Globalized World

One needs to make the distinction between a globalized sport and a multinational or elite sport. A globalized sport is one that is played by an overwhelming majority of nations, is accessible to the masses, and has developed a fan following that is not based on solely on national identity. Football is the one sport that is truly globalized: virtually every nation in the world is a member of the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA); the game is cheap enough that it can be played by anyone; and the fans have developed their allegiances across national boundaries. Manchester United, Real Madrid, Barcelona, and AC Milan are good examples of teams that have large fan followings across the world. As far as national teams go, Brazil is of course every football fan's favourite second team.

Multinational sports, on the other hand, are those played in a limited number of nations but do not have a global appeal—rugby is another sport that falls within this category. Within this grouping one has to draw the sub-category of elite sports like polo, golf, and yachting that, because of the high costs involved in playing or even watching the game, are restricted to a wealthy subsection of international society.

Unlike football, cricket is a multinational sport. The 2007 Cricket World Cup reflected some of the problems that are faced by all multinational sports. In terms of viewership, the number of nations that play the game, and the financial stakes involved, cricket is a second-tier international sport. It falls well behind games like football, tennis, or a mega-sporting event like

the Olympics. The International Cricket Council has 10 test match playing members, 27 associate members and 55 affiliate members.<sup>8</sup> Realistically speaking, this gives cricket a very small spectator base to operate from. Unlike football which can draw teams from every country in the world, cricket, therefore, has a limited financial base to draw upon.

Nor, in the near future, is there likely to be a major expansion of this base. In most of the associate countries the game is confined to expatriates or to a small group of locals. Thus Scotland and Holland, two of the unfavoured teams in the 2007 World Cup, have small player bases to draw upon and in neither country is the sport expected to grab the popular imagination.<sup>9</sup> Thus marketing the game and its products becomes a difficult enterprise. There are no cricketers who have transcended their game and become global icons and advertising brand names in non-cricket playing countries—as David Beckham, Tiger Woods, and Michael Jordan have done for their sports in countries like China. Brian Lara, Ricky Ponting, and Sachin Tendulkar remain legendary names in the cricket playing world, but will most likely remain unknown in China and America.

Further, unlike football, rugby, or basketball, cricket, in most countries, does not have a strong domestic league to provide the game with the necessary financial support. Even in England, where the domestic league is stronger, the English counties have only become financially independent from the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) since the advent of Twenty/20. In the other cricket-playing countries (Australia being a notable exception) domestic leagues are not profitable enough to support the national game. In football, on the other hand, the reverse is true. Even in years when their national teams are not doing well, the English, Italian and Spanish leagues make big enough profits to help financially sustain the game within these countries. The English Premier League, for example, made a profit of £1.37 billion in 2005–2006.<sup>10</sup>

In cricketing countries, however, the game depends heavily on the international component to survive. Thus, without one-day internationals and test cricket, the finances of most national cricket governing bodies would be in poor shape. The West Indies has been chronically affected by the poor finances of its domestic game and even sponsorship has not moved the game to greater financial solvency. The recent attempt to put \$1 million into a Twenty/20 cricket league has been dubbed a financial success<sup>11</sup> but it will need much more than that to stop the long slow slide of cricket in the Caribbean. It is open to debate whether the much-heralded building of new cricket stadiums will bring in new revenues or in fact threaten the game itself. In Antigua, for example, there is talk that the new stadium will be used to hold baseball matches in order to recoup outlays.

What makes the IPL interesting is that it has been able to draw upon successes of global sports marketing and modern technology to produce what is a national league with a body of international players.

### **The Indian Premier League**

The perceived success of the IPL comes from several factors. First, is India's huge sporting market of over a billion people—a market that is almost three times as large as the United States and over twice as large as the European market. Consequently, the sport, while drawing from a global talent pool, did not require a global television market to become a success. The advertising

revenues from domestic sources as well as ticket sales and merchandizing were enough to make the tournament a profitable one in the long run. According to some estimates about 220 million people watched the games on television in India, making it one of the largest television markets in the world. Added to this was the revenue that came from merchandizing. Writing in *The Guardian*, Paul Kelso commented on the impact of the IPL:

Theatrical, wildly hyped and hugely lucrative, the auction was a watershed moment for the IPL and the international game. In the last month, before a ball has been bowled, the league has raised \$1.8 billion, more than the ICC will receive for its next two World Cups. It has exposed the ICC's commercial limitations, strained relations between member states, underlined the deficiencies of the overcrowded international calendar and, by offering staggering annual salaries for six weeks' cricket, threatened the bond between players and national sides.<sup>12</sup>

Second, cricket is one of those sports where the United States is not a factor in the marketing and commodification of the sport. Like rugby, cricket has a small fan base in the United States and one that is by and large confined to the new immigrant communities in the country. As a consequence, there is no attempt by American sporting bodies or television networks to get involved bidding for or controlling the game. Cricket is, therefore, unique to international sports because a nonwestern nation is the largest single market for the game.

Couple this with the fact that cricket has become a secondary sport in the country of its birth (England) while Australia, the top cricketing nation, has too small a demographic base to provide the type of sponsorship and viewership opportunities that India does, and this explains why the epicentre of global cricket is now in the South Asian subcontinent. This is especially the case when one adds 170 million Pakistanis, 153 million Bangladeshis, 21 million Sri Lankans and 29 million Nepalese to the audience for Indian cricket.

Third, whereas in other cricket-playing nations the game has to compete with a number of sports, in India, cricket is the only game that has a huge mass following, television coverage, and corporate sponsorship. Yes, India has a tradition in hockey, but in recent years the game has fallen on hard times and has a limited fan base. Soccer still attracts significant numbers of spectators, but the game has neither the level of corporate sponsorship nor the international flavour that cricket has. Indian soccer teams compete in the Asian Cup and India has never qualified for the World Cup. Thus, cricket corners approximately 80–85% of the advertising revenue that goes into professional sports in India.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, what we have seen in the IPL is the success of journeymen and retired cricketers who are principally from Australia. Thus, Shane Watson and Shuan Marsh had a much greater impact than established test players like Ricky Ponting and Mathew Hayden. In fact, the biggest Australian star of the tournament turned out to be the retired Shane Warne, who took the cheapest franchise, the Rajasthan Royals, all the way to victory in the finals. In that way, the IPL resembles the football leagues of Italy, Spain and England (the IPL was in fact modelled on the English Premier League), where international players add talent and glamour to local teams.

Similarly, India's best and most highly paid players were not the stars of the tournament. Sachin Tendulkar was injured through most of the tournament and played a marginal role in his

team's fortunes. Harbhajan Singh was given an eightmatch ban after slapping Sreesanth. Rahul Dravid and V.V.S. Laxman failed with the bat and neither Yuvraj Singh nor Mahendra Singh Dhoni were the match winners that their 'icon' status was supposed to make them (each team in the IPL had to name an Indian player as an icon and that player was to be paid 15% more than the highest-paid player on the team).

### **India, the IPL, and Globalization**

There are two significant lessons to be drawn from the birth of the IPL. One is how it relates to India's attempts to develop set of global brand name products in the age of globalization. India's attempts to develop such brand-name products are somewhat different than those of China. India is creating a series of global brand-name products through two means. It is buying some, such as Jaguar and the Anglo-Dutch steelmaker Corus, but most of India's brand-name products are being developed indigenously. Thus various Indian companies have created a global brand presence. These include Ranbaxy (pharmaceuticals), Infosys (information technology), Jet Airways, and now the IPL. In contrast, China has bought itself a brand name by purchasing the Lenovo PC business from IBM, but there have been no indigenously created brand names.

The Indian corporate world will seek to create further brand-name products in the two areas where it has traditionally had a comparative advantage—entertainment and services. The IPL combines both these strengths. It has made a new entertainment product and sold it very effectively in the Indian domestic market. Now with a Twenty/20 champions series slated to be played in December in India (that would bring together the best domestic teams in each cricket-playing nation), the stage is being set for an international competition that will be quite unlike anything seen before in the cricket world.

The other factor that contrasts India's efforts at globalization with those of China is that Beijing cannot appropriate the Olympics and use it as a core sporting event that is uniquely Chinese. Instead, the Olympics, and the boost it will give China's image and its sports-marketing endeavours are temporary, since four years from now the Olympics will take place in another location. All Beijing will have left are memories and a fine, albeit very expensive, infrastructure. The latter should not be disregarded, since Atlanta was able to use the facelift it got from Olympics to emerge as one of the booming cities of the United States. But the Olympics are of little use for making China a leader in the realm of sports marketing and branding.

In contrast, India will be able to use the IPL and its competitor, the Indian Cricket League (ICL), to create a new sporting agenda for the country. This agenda does not require international sporting success but rather, domestic success. In that sense the model is very much like the Spanish football, La Liga or the American National Football League.

### **A Power Transition in International Sports?**

The other likely change that is coming about has to do with the potential transition of power in international sports—the nonwestern nations are going to increasingly determine the future of international sports. The western nations of Europe and North America have lion's share of

sporting revenue and influence, but will face a stronger challenge to their monopoly from the nonwestern states. The nonwestern nations, however, because of the money they bring to the game, their large fan bases and their ability to draw corporate sponsorship and television audiences will be able increasingly assert where and how the game is played. We have seen this happen in cricket, with India reshaping the International Cricket Council's schedules to play more test matches in the South Asian region. Indian influence also fast-tracked Bangladesh to the status of a test-playing nation. And the fact that India and Pakistan both lost in the early stages of the 2007 cricket World Cup adversely affected the financial fortunes of that tournament. Additionally, the IPL may have become the harbinger of things to come, because for the first time cricket faced the dilemma that has plagued international football—should a player be allowed to put club over country?

The club over country debate has become an issue in every cricket-playing country regardless of the financial health of the game in that nation. The New Zealand fast bowler, Shane Bond, faced severe criticism in his country's press because of his decision to seek early retirement and play in the rebel Indian Cricket League. Bond's hand was forced because the BCCI wanted the national boards to punish players who played for the rebel league and most boards have been willing to follow the guidelines laid down by the BCCI. Before the IPL's inaugural program there was also considerable speculation that the Australian players had put pressure on their board to cancel the proposed tour of Pakistan so that the Aussies could play in the more lucrative Indian tournament. Now the English cricket players are seeking to join the IPL, even though it may lead to clashes with their cricket board's national agenda.

The success of the IPL has spawned a series of copycat competitions as well as a power struggle for the control of international cricket.<sup>14</sup> England is working with the Texan billionaire Allen Stanford to set up a quadrangular international tournament that will be played in England in 2009.<sup>15</sup> This tournament will be followed with the establishment of an IPL-style Twenty/20 domestic competition. Australia is to have its own league in 2011 and there is even talk of setting up a Southern Hemisphere league that would include South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>16</sup>

For these leagues to succeed, however, Indian participation is necessary. Indian television audiences are what will make these leagues attractive to sponsors and televisions networks. The Australians, therefore, acknowledge that for their Australian Premier League to succeed it will require the participation of Indian players (which in effect means cooperating with the BCCI).<sup>17</sup>

The BCCI has recognized its role as the leading nation in international cricket and has sought to reward the countries that cooperate with it and penalize those that have gone against its will. Thus the Champions League Twenty/20 that will be played in India in December 2008 gives shareholdings in the tournament to those countries—Australia and South Africa—that have accepted Indian terms and conditions. England, however, was unwilling to ban English players who play in the ICL from participating in the English T20 competitions. The ECB was unwilling to do so because it was worried about an “avalanche” of restraint-of-trade actions from the players. Consequently, while England is playing in the Champions League, it has not been given a stake in the decision-making process.<sup>18</sup>

Cricket may well be the thin end of the wedge in this transition. An Indian billionaire now sponsors the country's Formula One team, while another wants to make the country into a football powerhouse and bring teams like Manchester United and Chelsea to play in India. Golf has the lucrative Dubai Open, in 2009 it will be the world's richest tournament, and soon one will expect an equally well-sponsored golf tournament in India. Moreover, the nonwestern nations are now starting to buy teams in the west and using them to improve the brand name of the buyer nations. Abu Dhabi's United Group, the sovereign wealth fund of that country, purchased the English football team Manchester City.

The winners, of course, are the fans and the players. The fans get to see world-class sporting events. The players, as seen in the IPL, will draw even more attractive salaries. The global sporting revolution is upon us.

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