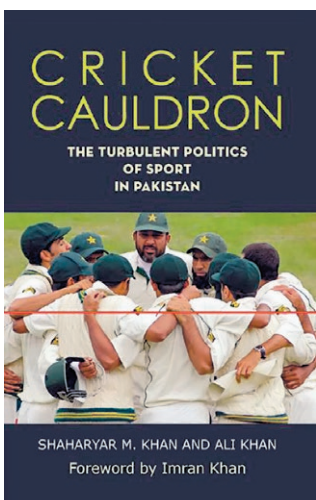


Cricket and society

Over the years, the conjured image of Pakistani cricket is one of a road show which is exhilarating at times but summons nightmares for those who experience the ordeal. As a sporting institution it is always in turmoil. The Pakistan Cricket board is probably the only international administrative body to operate without a constitution. A touring English cricketer had once dunked a local umpire in a swimming pool in protest against a string of problematic decisions. Instances of suspect on-field behaviour of the Pakistan team had led to the nation's honour being taken hostage by British tabloids. After a first round World Cup exit, the national coach died under mysterious circumstances. And finally, terrorists have shot at foreign players leading to a cricketing isolation that is still in place. These are snippets from the cauldron of Pakistani cricket, which is a melting pot of corruption, nepotism, exploitation and politics-defying, abounding talent that flourishes on the roadside and takes on the world.

Souvik Naha



Reviewed title:

Khan, S.M. & Ali Khan. 2013. *Cricket Cauldron: The Turbulent Politics of Sport in Pakistan*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 300 pages, ISBN 9781780760834 (hb)

IN THIS BOOK, former foreign secretary and Chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, Shaharyar Khan, situates cricket in a broader social history to understand the extent to which a sport can mirror and epitomise

public culture. The narrative begins with his appointment as the Chairman in 2004 as part of a political drive to replace military personnel in the Board with civilians, and ends with his premature resignation before the World Cup in 2007. The authors take the reader through the successes, disputes and failures of a nation as reflected in the prism of cricket in eleven chronologically ordered, simultaneously descriptive, speculative and suggestive chapters.

The book provides an excellent overview of the impact of educational crisis, religious extremism, social hierarchy, regionalism and the like on the making of cricket as a public pursuit. Unlike India where sports culture has recently become a subject of serious academic research, the topic has gained little or no curricular importance in Pakistan. The few books written by historians, journalists and cricketers usually describe Pakistani cricket as a product of the anachronisms that define the country at large – the common refrain being development in spite of the system. Khan's book is one of the few serious attempts to transcend popular stereotypes and bring anthropological analysis into the study of the unfolding of familiar cricketing events. The first of these was the famous 'goodwill' tour by India, organised as a ploy to thaw the diplomatic imbroglio arising in the wake of a border war in 1999. Hitherto unknown and riveting background stories of Pakistan's gradual ascendancy in the pecking order of global cricket under Bob Woolmer's stewardship, the new directions in fiscal policy and domestic cricket, the rise of player power leading to infringement of managerial directives, decline

in performance and general disorder which culminated in Woolmer's puzzling death have been recounted in detail, adding to the future cricket historian's database of resources. A wealth of structured information makes the book a compulsory read for understanding the last ten years of Pakistani cricket and by extension its society and politics. In terms of legacy, the book should be remembered more for the research it inadvertently suggests than its own formulations. I shall mention three such directions.

Firstly, the book is an interesting entry to the study of sport as a public relation exercise under military regimes. Khan's appointment as the Chairman was a response to public criticism of the military control of every national institution. His first briefing and every subsequent meeting with President Pervez Musharraf, also the Patron of the team, was underlined by the obligation to better performance. Cricket victories were reportedly capable of inclining public opinion towards the establishment, ensuring the latter's longevity. Musharraf took an active interest in cricketing affairs, attended critical meetings and even took aside time to telephone the team's captain when the situation required so. Incidentally, the military government lost favour of the people after the team's humiliating exit in the 2007 World Cup, and has since been replaced with a democratically elected government. In addition to the example of India where the leading cricketer is a nominated Member of Parliament and political parties incorporate former cricketers to exploit their fan base, Pakistan provides an interesting case study of the intermingling of sport and politics.

Secondly, Pakistan cricketers are admittedly difficult to govern or socialise with. The authors explicate the mannerisms and playing techniques of individual cricketers in terms of the society in which they are embedded. They provide adequate explanation for the spiritual and material reasons for players' association with the Tableeghi sect of Islam. Nevertheless, analysis of the impact of community, educational facilities and geographical factors on the upbringing of cricketers often relapse into a narrow Marxian understanding of class. The average Pakistani player's inability to speak fluent English or reluctance to drink alcohol can very well be regulated by choice and not social contracts, such as Islamic scriptures. The so-called 'culture' of Pakistan cricket is an illusion bred by the apparent uniformity of cricketers from a small, largely homogenous country. The image has gradually eroded over the years as agency of cricketers has fostered change. Does indeed a cricketer's lack of primary education prevent

Pakistan Cricket fans. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of J.J. Hall on flickr.

him from learning enough conversational English throughout his adult life? Which education or religion then permits him to take banned performance enhancers? The book introduces many questions worth pondering over, which should be addressed by a more critical sociology of cricketers.

Thirdly, the British media's response to the ball tampering crisis in 2006 stands in stark contrast to similar accusations made in 1992. Following disastrous defeats to Pakistan, England players Ian Botham and Allan Lamb alleged that the Pakistanis had resorted to illegal means such as ball tampering to take advantage of match conditions. Although the court ruled out their criticisms as libel, the British media rallied behind its cricketers, casting racist, disparaging remarks against the entire nation of Pakistan. The outlook has visibly changed in later years. In 2006, as Pakistan faced another allegation of ball tampering and forfeited the match impetuously, the same British media now empathetically projected them as victims of the system. Khan's narrative reductively ascribes this media response to his previous successful negotiations with the English Cricket Board and camaraderie with its CEO David Morgan, hardly acknowledging any plausible transition in intercultural relations. This changing mediascape warrants further examination of evolution of national subjectivities and cultural forms in a global age as reflected in the press.

The book could be considered the definitive thesis on cricket and society in Pakistan had it approached the topic with sharper analytical tools and avoided repetitive observations. It is possible that the authors simplified complex issues deliberately or at editorial behest so that international casual readers were not intimidated by the book's academic commitment. The book's limited temporal scope along with constant shifting between themes prevent in-depth discussion of cricket's impact on public sphere and private spaces. No bibliography is included, nor is the list of references extensive enough to encourage serious readers to travel through further literature. The book remains essentially the personal odyssey of an extremely efficient cricket administrator; its framework closer to the public history model in which a nation's history is inhabited and observed through personal encounters. Careful editing and additional attention to analysis with a focus on the main contentions would have benefitted the book immensely.

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