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Moeen Ali and the post-imperial world of cricket

TOBY MILLER writes about commercial power, multiculturalism and sectarianism in cricket

Three aspects of Indian cricket are coloring life in the UK at present, even after the departure of this summer's touring team. One is the sport's governing body. The second is an Indian organization. And the third is an English cricketer. Each aspect tells us something about the legacy of empire. The first two also inform us about commercial power, and the third about multiculturalism and sectarianism.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) (once the Imperial Cricket Conference) has become subject to the immense economic power of India in much the same way as it was



once run by England the white-settler colonies, notably Australia (1). Today's ICC runs in step with the needs of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (2). The new regime upsets many white traditionalists, and India complains that it is tired of bankrolling impecunious members (3,4).

The Indian Premier League (IPL) is another symbol of the country's dominant place in world cricket (5). This is not necessarily a comment on sporting prowess. Rather, it is a sign of economic power. The former English cricketer and contemporary commentator Ian Botham has called for an end to the IPL because of its power and the ease with which it could supposedly be corrupted (6). The BCCI has responded in kind, pointing out Botham's pitiful endorsement of the disgraced, imprisoned fraudster Alan Stafford's rival 20-20 initiative (7). Why all the fuss?

Difficulties arise when a sport is loosened from its origins. Everyone wants cricket to grow, in the same way—it's almost the same mantra—as everyone wants the economy to grow. When that happens, control is inevitably changed in some way. It may mean greater centralization of power, or decentralization, or recentralization. In this case, a former fiefdom of empire has been turned on its head by a former imperial 'possession.' That applies to the ICC in its role as cricket's governing body, and with reference to the more specific and newer 20-20 game, also supposedly invented in the UK but imported and now dominated by India's League.

So what we see here is a discomfort with a change of regime, as the good old Anglo boys of imperial history are displaced by the good old Indian boys of South Asian capital. The rights and wrongs of how cricket is run are surely secondary to that glaring and uncomfortable fact. English press coverage of

the ICC and the IPL is often quite negative and demeaning.

The other aspect of India and cricket that has been significant in the UK this northern summer concerns Moeen Ali, an English cricketer. He made his debut for the national team and looks established as a front-line batsman and bowler.

Like the former England captain Nasser Hussein, Moeen is a Muslim; but he identifies very differently. Hussein was born in Chennai and came to the UK at six, whereas Moeen was born in Birmingham. Hussein rarely speaks about religion, politics, or ethnicity. But Moeen does just that, even as he allows his nationalism and cricket relative autonomy from his religion (8).

He identifies publicly as Muslim, and his beard and teetotal conduct are visible signs in a largely clean-shaven but full-glassed English team. In addition, Moeen has made political statements about the Arab/Islamic world, both verbally and visually.

He has spoken out against British Muslims going overseas to fight for the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (9). And he wore wristbands supporting the Palestinian cause against the Israeli siege and bombing of Gaza. The latter brought opprobrium from the ICC, which decrees that Test cricketers eschew political signage and conduct while representing their countries. Moeen had obtained permission for his 'Free Palestine' and 'Save Gaza' wristbands from the English cricket authorities, but not "India's" ICC. And the ICC permitted him and other team members to participate in two extremely political activities during the Test Match: commemorating the First World War and raising money for the charity 'Help for Heroes,' which supports British soldiers

injured in action in Afghanistan (10).

Throughout all this, Moeen was of course playing against India. When the majority of the crowd at venues was South Asian, as was the case with some short-form matches, such as one-day games and 20-20 fixtures, he was heavily criticized and mocked by Indian supporters. Moeen himself did not complain about these remarks, but his father did (11). Moeen's trade union, the Professional Cricketers' Association, blundered into the story, announcing that he should view the booing as a spur to further achievement, then realizing that was ill-advised (12). His fellow England international Ravi Bopara has also suffered: he is sometimes labeled 'gaddar' (13).

This has ironic resonances with an earlier time. Notoriously, the Conservative Party politician of the 1980s, Norman Tebbit, proposed a cricket test to establish the loyalty of people migrating to the UK—would they support England against all comers, regardless of their ethnic or immigrant status (14)? Hussein has expressed confusion that few UK Asians support England, and Moeen calls on them to do so (15).

These events, from control of the ICC to disparagement of the IPL to distaste for Moeen Ali, are inevitable outcomes of the blight of empire. When a country invades and seeks to enslave another, governs it for generations, sub-divides it, dominates its language and administration, then departs and becomes one of many destinations for that country's diaspora, the consequences will be intense and tense. And when that invaded country becomes economically powerful in areas of comparative advantage, such as the size of the middle-class audience to cricket, the outcomes will be complex and controversial.

'I am a Muslim, yes, but I am also very English,' says Moeen (16). He rides a complex boundary, with people circling him, ready to deride his every move. The origins of this confrontation lie not with him or them so much as the thankfully incomplete, necessarily flawed project of imperialism itself.

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