

When Passion Becomes Poison: How Fanaticism is Undermining Cricket in India

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CRICKET: Not just a game anymore

Abstract- The Secular Country of India follows 2 major religions: Its Movies and Its Cricket. Talking about the latter, we are all aware of the widespread popularity of the Sport of Cricket in our country. Cricket has successfully reached almost every household in the country and is gradually emerging as the Label of identification of our nation, at least among sport followers worldwide. Fans are increasing year by year and Fanaticism is at its peak. But is Cricket following up to its exponential growth? Is it on the right trajectory, as it continues to grow, nurture and develop? The aim of this article is to uncover the negative aspects of such Fanaticism and find out, where we, as fans, or Cricket, as a sport, is going wrong.

Index Terms- Cricket, Indian Cricket Team, Fans, Fanaticism, IPL, Popularity, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

The 2023 ICC Men's ODI Cricket World Cup saw a variety of records being broken, both on the field and off it. A 15-Minute clash of Indian Team Senior Batter Virat Kohli with New Zealand's gun Fast Bowler Trent Boult during the league stage match of India and the Kiwis induced a peak viewership of the match on Hotstar (Now: JioHotstar; The Digital Streaming Platform) to 4.3 Crores (Mandani, 2023b). This was further broken almost a month later during the prestigious Final between India and Australia with a peak viewership of around 5.9 Crores. The same number for the Indian Premiere League (IPL) stands at 3.2 Crore (Recorded on 30th May 2023). Such numbers suitably indicate the enormous pull Indian Cricket has and have also led the International Cricket Council (ICC) to declare that almost 85% of its Broadcast Revenue comes from the Indian Market.

Discussing things even beyond mere Numbers and Statistics, it is quite clear and evident that the popularity of Indian Cricket is at an all-time high, and the kind of Fan Culture and Craze Indians possess and display, is second to none and the global

level (*Skyscanner*, n.d.-b). Be the match at Mumbai, Guwahati, Sydney, Manchester, New York, Dubai, Colombo, or even on the Moon- you can always expect at least half the stadium to be filled with Indian Fans adorned in blue colors of the Indian jersey and with an unmatched zeal. Similarly, irrespective of the streaming sites or even the intensity of an Indian Cricket Team match, you will never be the only one to be watching it live from the comfort of your homes. Such is the kind of atmosphere we as Cricket fans have built and share.

The growth of such fanaticism can be attributed to several factors, including the massive upgradation in the quality of Cricket being played, widespread access, as well as the ever-improving performances of our very own players. IPL, Regular Tournaments and social media have fueled such empowerment. With tournaments planned all the way till 2032, IPL contracts in place till 2027, Top performers still a part of the set-up, and newer players and exciting rules churning each year- the path of Indian Fanaticism looks largely clear and seems to be on the upward track. But are we simultaneously noticing the negatives it brings to the table? Are we diverting enough attention to the many dark effects it has had, or is expected to have in different ways?

A PERSONAL NOTE BEFORE DELVING DEEPER

The fact that I started working on this article before the start of Champions Trophy 2025 and am finishing it after the completion of this year's IPL, and my thoughts are no lesser relevant, is a testimony to the fact that we have a serious problem at hand in the context of growth & popularity of Cricket in the country. In fact, if you have a read of this article from the point of view of it being written before CT, and you have gone through the watching experience of all the games after that- you would find everything mentioned, validated.

It is also to be noted here that this piece is not an open challenge to Cricket Fans. It is obvious that as a crazy one myself, I'd never do anything of that sort. I totally agree and second the fact that Cricket as a sport is reaching unbelievable heights in the country and making the country popular globally, so to say. No one would be happier than me knowing this fact. However, it is this pure love and passion for the Sport that has caused a frustration inside me that I pen down. My experiences, conversations and observations as a very pragmatic follower of the game have led to me to certain conclusions that I would like to shape in the form of the below given points.

AREAS WHERE FANATICISM MIGHT BE GOING WRONG

First, OVER COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE SPORT

Recent few years have witnessed the transformation of Cricket from just a 'Sport' to a business, if assessed carefully. Hardcore fans, and especially ones that have been following Cricket closely for a long time now, must have realized the fact that there is a much bigger involvement of Money, Advertising, Brands, Sponsors and other commercial elements now, than there was before. On the one hand, this may seem justifiable but at the same time, it is to be noted that it has reached the extreme. Unnecessary hype is created before even the most irrelevant of matches; Ads run on streams more than the time for which the match is on; Commentary is filled with Sponsor Promotions and stadiums are dressed in "Pan Masala" and "Pipelines" hoardings.

Since it is well understood that Cricket is the only sport that catches so many eyeballs in the country, it has become a favorable avenue for investment purposes and a striking opportunity for any company, organization or brand. The same stays applicable to how the lives of Cricketers have been greatly influenced by the growing involvement of brand deals and money. A player might not play for the Flag, or logo his jersey carries, but will surely look to keep his performance up so that he doesn't lose out on brand deals and offers. The last sentence will be further elaborated on in the next few points.

All of this, in a nutshell, takes the game away from its true nature. Yes, entertainment is the key and the basic aim behind any kind of Sport being played; but

attention should be given when such entertainment is provided by other elements and not the game itself.

Second, THE EXCESS OF CRICKET.

According to the basic Economics' Demand-Supply concept, we can establish the fact that as the number of fans (compared to the consumers) increases, so does the amount and variety of Cricket (compared to the commodity at hand). The recent few years have seen calendars of all kinds of Cricketers (International/Club/even Retired) jammed with bilateral matches or tournaments or leagues from all over the world. A total of 4 ICC Tournaments are currently circulating in the International Circuit; nearly each country, including Pakistan and Bangladesh have their own T20 and other format-based Leagues; Domestic Circuits too have packed calendars throughout the year and then not to forget, the regular Bilaterals that take place between any 2 countries in any one of the countries, being the host nation. Clearly, all of this leaves practically no day in the year without a cricket match or no such month without a tournament, league or competitive match (From Our Online Archive & From Our Online Archive, 2023).

It is not surprising that even the most random matches get adequate and enough viewership for the stakeholders involved to remain satisfied and invested- since at the end of the day, it is all a gameplay of Business, numbers, figures, Revenue generation and distribution. All Cricket leagues and matches are now accompanied by a chain of marketing campaigns ranging from brand deals, influencer collaborations, Adverts featuring players and social media promotions. And the majority of them either focus on a player, a rivalry or some other trending meme/material.

The sport, the skill and the "essence"- the keyword here, according to me- of the game seem to have taken a backseat somehow in this whole process of bringing Cricket to the viewers. We should ourselves ask this question, even as viewers, as to what the purpose of a particular match/game is. We should question and judge whether the objectives and motives of the Sport today actually complement the historical "Gentlemanliness" associated with the Sport's name? It makes me pain to state the fact as an avid fan and observer of the sport that today, the Sport has lost quite a significant portion of its

ingenuity, essence and features when it comes to the actual playing part.

The dying down of One-Day-Internationals, loss of Tri-Series, advent of rules and amendments like the “Impact Player” in IPL that completely ruin the strategic aspect of a 11-Man Team Sport of Cricket- are all by-products of this excess of Cricket which is born by uncontrollable and mislead Fanaticism. There is ambiguity even in my mind as to what the future is going to look like from a “Gentleman” point of view of the game. Are we still going to have matches every 2nd day, see formats and other striking features go outdated, players overloaded with match burden and the essence fade away even more and ultimately seeing the Sport becoming a machine?

Third, PLAYERS BECOMING BIGGER THAN THE GAME.

Kohli, Rohit, MS Dhoni, Bumrah- are big names. Undoubtedly. But are they bigger than the National side? Are they supposed to be bigger than the teams they play for, whichever and wherever? I am irritated when advertisements and promotion campaigns repeatedly show a single person and try to make them bigger than the Team. Mind you, Cricket was, is, and will always fundamentally remain a team sport. Yes, there have come and there have been individuals who have taken it to different levels and altered the course of it in different eras. But I seriously believe that this influence in the minds of young, innocent and emotional fans that a single player is more important than the other 10-12 players or even the nation- has killed what we call as being a fan.

It makes me distraught hearing from someone that they only watch Cricket or follow a team because of 1 Cricketer. It makes me angry when Fan clubs of a single cricketer try to gather more engagement than they could for supporting the entire team. This is not on the surface that I am talking; I am pretty sure this creates an influence in the minds of Cricketers too. Whether it is Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma or even foreigners like Ab De Villiers- none of the top Superstars have shied away from stating that they often feel overwhelmed by the kind of attention and eyeballs on them.

Making players Gods of the game either puts too much pressure on them or gives them too much liberty to be performing anyhow. It is high time we as fans return to the notion of being united as

supporters of 1 team & 1 nation. The moment the “Clash of Superstars” stops, we would see a better culture of fanaticism in the country of crores.

Fourth, NEGATIVITY & TOXICITY FT. SOCIAL MEDIA.

Watch a match. Any match. Oh, a player dropped a catch? No problem. Commentators call it a bad day, fielders around the player give high fives, bowler smiles it off, Captain is there to give a few words of encouragement. Oh, you opened social media? Well, be ready to read long articles by random people, giving death threats to that player and other posts having all kinds of abuses targeted to not just that player, but his family, closed ones, and what not!

Sadly, as Fanaticism and other factors talked about earlier increase, so does the craze & passion among fans in a negative way. The wide access to social media has created such a toxic culture of following players, teams, matches and tournaments that even the genuine ones find it tough to hang in (ESPN Digital Media Pvt Ltd, n.d.). All types of people, some who have never ever picked up a bat even once in their lives, can now comment literally anything on players, and it is no secret that majority, if I am kind enough to not say all of them, do it for the sake of it and because they have the freedom to do it. Be it memes, jokes, unnecessary hate, abuses, threats or even poor and biased analysis- social media is where Cricket dies. Even genuine, intellectual and rightful posts get masked due to the abundance of toxicity and pessimism on Social Media platforms after every game.

Yes, people do have the freedom of opinion and speech in this democratic country. But sadly, now everyone has a platform for it also. Everybody seems to be an expert of the game now :). Anushka Sharma presence with Vamika in the 3rd tier of the stadium playing a big role in India’s loss is one such analysis by a large group of these “Social Media” analysts. You get the point.

As someone who visits these platforms often and has a deep understanding of the game and its whereabouts, I can say with utmost confidence that they are filled with absolute waste and irrelevant matter regarding the game and indirectly, take away, again, the very ESSENCE of having or organizing match. Gaining engagement of fans is one thing but controlling it and keeping it in limits is another; while organizers are in a blind race for the former,

the latter unfortunately seems to be the responsibility of none. So, it should be no surprise that more and more, and genuine ones, fans are being lost, and toxicity is being built around the Sport.

Fifth, THE GROWING ROLE OF UNHEALTHY PR (Public Relations)

In the times of Kapil Dev, Vivian Richards and others, Cricket used to be the only and hence, best form of PR for any Cricketer. You perform well, you're right up there. You don't, work harder. Make your way into people's minds by toiling hard in the nets and performing well as and when you get the opportunity. Tables have turned. Cricket is now probably the last form of PR a Cricketer has! You had an average season? No issues, just come onto a podcast or ask a few celebrities to post about your "greatness", and there- you seem to become the people's favourite!

Growing concern in the minds of today's players as to how their image comes out to be in the public has transformed their priorities from being expressive on the field to being expressive otherwise, either in interviews or their social media handles. PR agencies in collaboration with them focus a lot more on off-field aspects that takes the attention away or makes these players forget the importance of performance on the field (Bhola, 2025). In such conditions, even those who are actual performers and lack just a good PR team, find it tough to survive in the competitive environment.

CONCLUSION

Fanaticism cannot be reduced. That's not the call either. It needs to be controlled, monitored, reflected upon and revised. We, as a Cricketing nation, and a nation promoting and driving Cricket worldwide, need to be mindful about our own behaviour, choices and actions. A shift in mindset is needed from the points of view of all stakeholders in this context- Fans, Broadcasters, Organizers, Cricket Boards, Media & PR agencies and the players themselves. While Cricket does pose too many lucrative opportunities for investment, business, profits, image creation and publicity- we need to be careful that we do not take the game away from the game. If that makes sense :).

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