



Beyond The Boundary: The Bombay Pentangular, Nationalist Discourse, And The Transformation Of Indian Cricket (1892–1946)

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Abstract

Cricket arrived in India as a colonial import, an elite pastime reserved for the British and their clubs. But over time, Indians made the game their own, using it as a platform for self-expression, identity, and even resistance. Nowhere was this shift more apparent than in Bombay, where cricket became deeply intertwined with the city's social and religious fabric. The Pentangular Tournament played between teams divided along communal lines—Hindus, Muslims, Parsees, Europeans, and "the Rest"—gave Indian players a rare public platform. Yet, it also reinforced religious divisions, fueling debates about nationalism and unity. This paper explores how cricket, especially through the Pentangular, became more than just a sport—it reflected and shaped issues of caste, religion, and anti-colonial struggle in late colonial Bombay. It examines how the game was both a tool of British control and a symbol of Indian defiance, deepening divides while also forging a sense of national identity. By contrasting the communal structure of the Pentangular with the more inclusive vision of the Ranji Trophy, this study reveals how cricket played a pivotal role in India's journey toward independence.

Index Terms: Cricket, Pentangular, Bombay, Communalism, Colonialism, Nationalism

Introduction

In 1777, the 3rd Duke of Dorset famously likened life to a game of cricket¹, a sentiment later echoed in *Baxter's Second Innings*, which declared, "life is simply a cricket match."² Nowhere does this analogy hold greater significance than in India, where cricket has transcended sport to become a cultural mainstay and a symbol of social identity.

Introduced to the subcontinent by British administrators and military officers, cricket quickly became an imperial tool, reinforcing colonial values and hierarchies. While the sport's codification in the eighteenth century formalized its structure, it was Britain's global expansion that transformed it into the "imperial game". Historians Stoddart and Sandiford emphasize its deep connection to British identity³, while J.A.

¹ Hutchinson, A.C. (1994) 'Playing the game', *The Dalhousie Law Journal* 17: 267

² Mangan, J.A. (1975) 'Play up and play the game: Victorian and Edwardian public school vocabularies of motive', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 23(3): 332

³ Stoddart, B., & Sandiford, K. A. P. (Eds.). (1998). *The imperial game: Cricket, culture and society* (p. 27). Manchester University Press.

Mangan likens it to an "umbilical cord of Empire," linking Britain to its colonies.⁴ Beyond mere recreation, cricket functioned as an instrument of discipline, social control, and elite consolidation.

Unlike other colonies where cricket remained an exclusively European pursuit, British officials in India actively promoted its adoption among indigenous elites. This strategy served a dual purpose: it instilled British ideals of hierarchy and "muscular Christianity" while also assimilating native rulers into the colonial order. (Mangan, 1981) The princely states, governing a significant portion of the subcontinent, became key patrons of the game. Maharajas from Patiala, Cooch Behar, Bhopal, Jath, and Vizianagaram championed cricket, using it to assert their prestige and align with the British Crown. Among them, Jamsaheb Ranjitsinhji of Nawanagar (1872–1933) became a global icon, his successes with the England cricket team demonstrating how the sport could serve as a conduit for social mobility within the imperial framework (Majumdar, 2004). At an institutional level, the British administration leveraged cricket as a means of control. Lord Harris, a staunch proponent, declared that cricket had done "more to unite the Empire than legislation" (Holt, 1989). The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), hailed as "the most venerated institution in the British Empire" (Bradley, 1990), upheld the sport's Victorian ethos, reinforcing British dominance while allowing limited native participation.

However, cricket in India was not merely a colonial imposition—it became a site of resistance and assertion. The Parsis, the first Indian community to embrace the game, used it to signal their modernity and cultural adaptability (Guha, 2002). By the late nineteenth century, Indian teams were touring England, directly challenging British claims of racial and athletic superiority. As Cashman (1980) notes, these early victories sowed the seeds of nationalist sentiment, subtly undermining imperialist narratives.

Cricket's Early Growth in Bombay

Having established cricket as an instrument of imperial discipline, the stage was set for local communities to reinterpret the game as a means of social mobility and resistance. This transformation is vividly seen in the emergence of Parsee cricket, which marked the beginning of indigenous engagement with the sport.

Parsees as Pioneers of Indian Cricket

The Parsees of Bombay, distinguished by their wealth, education, and Western outlook, were the first Indian community to embrace cricket. Their engagement with the sport in the 1830s was more than recreation; it was a conscious effort toward social mobility and integration into colonial society. The origins of organized Parsee cricket are attributed to Mr. Boswell, an English schoolmaster who introduced the game to Parsee students in 1839.⁵ Despite initial skepticism from elders, his efforts laid the foundation for a structured cricketing culture that would flourish in the following decades.

By 1848, the Oriental Cricket Club became the first Parsee cricket club⁶, inspiring the establishment of others, including the Zoroastrian Club (1850), Mars Club (1860), Spartan Club (1865), and the Young Zoroastrian Cricket Club (1867)⁷. By the 1870s, the Parsees had firmly established themselves in Bombay's cricketing scene, with clubs like Elphinstone Cricket Club organizing matches across India.

The late nineteenth century saw further expansion, with clubs such as John Bright, Persian, and Naoroz Cricket Clubs reinforcing the community's commitment to the sport. By 1910, the Shapur Spencer Cricket Challenge Cup became a prestigious inter-club tournament, featuring elite teams like Elphinstone, Baronet, Young Zoroastrian, Sassanian, and Marine Liberal, cementing cricket's prominence among the Parsees.⁸ Their ambitions extended beyond local competitions. In the 1880s, they embarked on England tours, elevating their standard of play under British coach Robert Henderson.^{9,10}

The Rise of Hindu Cricket and Competitive Spirit

Inspired by the Parsees, Bombay's Hindu community embraced cricket in the late nineteenth century, marking a significant step in the sport's indigenization. The emergence of Ramchandra Vishnu Navlekar in 1861 heralded the rise of Hindu cricketers (Guha, 1998), culminating in the establishment of the Bombay Union Cricket Club in 1866.¹¹ Unlike their Parsee counterparts, whose clubs bore Westernized names, Hindu

⁴ Mangan, J. A. (1986). *The games ethic and imperialism: Aspects of the diffusion of an idea*. Frank Cass Publishers.

⁵ Meher Homji, 'A Century of Parsee Cricket', in Meher Homji (ed.), *Parsi Cricket Centenary 1886–1986* (Mumbai, 1986), p.45.

⁶ Shapoorjee Sorabjee, *Chronicle of Cricket Among Parsees and the Struggle: European Polo Versus Native Cricket* (Bombay, 1897), 8.

⁷ Framji Patel, *Stray Thoughts on Indian Cricket*, p. 8

⁸ Vasant Raiji, 'Pioneers of Indian Cricket', in Boria Majumdar (ed.), *Vasant Raiji on Indian Cricket* (Mumbai: Marine Sports, 2002).

⁹ J. M. Framji Patel, *Stray Thoughts on Indian Cricket* (Bombay: The Times of India Press, 1905), pp. 33–7

¹⁰ Manekji Kavasji Patel, *History of Parsee Cricket*, pp. 25

¹¹ Sorabjee, *A Chronicle of Cricket*, 29

cricket associations reflected caste and regional affiliations, with teams such as the Gowd Saraswat Cricket Club, Kshatriya Cricket Club, Gujarati Union Cricket Club, Maratha Cricket Club, and Telugu Young Cricketers gaining prominence.¹²

Instituted in 1912, the Purshottam Hindu Cricket Challenge Shield solidified Hindu involvement in the sport, initially nurturing local talent before broadening its inclusivity. Matches against Parsee and European teams allowed Hindu cricketers to contest entrenched cultural hierarchies, framing cricket as a vehicle for self-assertion and modern identity.¹³

Muslim and Other Communities Enter the Game

By the 1880s, the Muslim community also began establishing cricket clubs, spearheaded by figures such as M.B. Lukmani, B.A. Lukmani, and the Tyabjee family.¹⁴ The formation of the Islam Gymkhana (1892) provided a nucleus for Muslim cricket, bringing together smaller clubs and serving as a catalyst for the community's broader engagement with the sport. Institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University further encouraged cricket's adoption, promoting it as a medium for discipline and collective unity (Guha, 1998).

Cricket's appeal extended beyond Hindus, Muslims, and Parsees, as other communities also carved out a presence. Clubs such as the Mangalorean Catholic Cricket Club, Instituto Luso-Indian Cricket Club, and the Bombay Jewish Cricket Club enriched the city's sporting culture, reinforcing cricket's inclusive character in Bombay's multifaceted social landscape.¹⁵

Colonial Attitudes and Inter-Community Rivalries

Cricket in Bombay unfolded against a backdrop of colonial condescension and inter-community competition. Early interactions between Indian cricketers and British teams revealed Eurocentric prejudices, with British observers frequently dismissing Indian players' attire and technique. Hindu cricketers, in particular, were caricatured for their traditional dhotis, with one British account derisively describing a match as "Natives with Bats versus Officers with Umbrellas."¹⁶

Over time, however, Indian players adapted to British cricketing norms, refining their skills and attire, signaling a determined effort to modernize and challenge colonial stereotypes. Landmark victories, particularly the Parsees' triumph over the Bombay Gymkhana in 1887, underscored Indian cricketing prowess and symbolized a broader assertion of equality within the colonial sporting order (Guha, 2002).

Institutionalization and Cricket's Dual Role

The institutionalization of cricket in Bombay gained momentum under Governor Lord Harris (1890–1895), who facilitated its expansion by granting plots along the Back Bay seafront to Parsee, Hindu, and Muslim communities at a nominal annual rent of 12 rupees.¹⁷

The Oxford Authentics' 1902–03 tour of India, held alongside the Coronation Durbar, showcased cricket as both imperial spectacle and instrument of influence. Blending sport, ceremony, and political symbolism, the event reinforced British authority. Historian Cecil Headlam described cricket as a force of moral discipline, claiming it "unites... the rulers and the ruled," framing it as both a tool of control and a space for resistance.¹⁸

The Rise of Organized Tournaments

Early Rivalries and the Bombay Presidency Matches

By the late 19th century, cricket was deeply embedded in Bombay's social life, drawing large crowds to the Maidan. In 1886, the city's mayor praised the passion of Parsee and Hindu cricketers, calling it a "manly game." Competitive play had begun earlier, in 1877, when the Bombay Gymkhana faced the Zoroastrian Cricket Club in a two-day match. Though the Parsees led after the first innings, the game ended in a draw. However, tensions arose as Europeans prioritized polo, damaging the grounds while restricting local teams

¹² As cited in Guha, Ramachandra. "Cricket and Politics in Colonial India." *Past & Present*, no. 161 (November 1998): 155–190. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651075>.

¹³ P.J. Hindu Gymkhana Centenary Souvenir 1894–1994 (Mumbai: P.J. Hindu Gymkhana, 1994)

¹⁴ Patel, *Stray Thoughts*, quoted in Dossa, 'Peep into Past'.

¹⁵ M. E. Pavri, *Parsi Cricket* (Bombay, 1901); J. M. Framjee Patel, *Stray Thoughts on Indian Cricket* (Bombay, 1905)

¹⁶ F. S. Ashley-Cooper, 'Some Notes on Cricket in India', *The Cricketer* (Spring Annual, 1927).

¹⁷ Letter in Compilation No. 866, Vol. 72, PWD Records for 1890–97, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai

¹⁸ Cecil Headlam, *Ten Thousand Miles through India and Burma* (London, 1903), 168–69

from using the cricket pitch. After years of disputes, local cricketers secured equal access, reviving the rivalry in 1884.¹⁹

As cricket became more structured, the annual Presidency Matches between Bombay Gymkhana and Parsee Gymkhana evolved into a premier event, intertwining sporting rivalry with social assertion. Players like R.S. and D.H. Mistry showcased the Parsees' growing dominance, further solidified by their England tours in 1886 and 1888. Their rise peaked in 1889, when captain M.E. Pavri led them to a dramatic two-run victory, defending just 53 runs (Guha, 1998). Impressed by their competitiveness, Governor Lord Harris (1890–95) promoted matches against a combined European XI, leading to India's first recorded first-class game on August 26, 1892. That same season saw the iconic "fire engine match," where torrential rains flooded the pitch, forcing fire engines to drain it, a moment that captured Bombay's enduring passion for cricket.²⁰

The Triangular Tournament: A Defining Moment

By 1906, tensions between Hindus and Parsees reached a deadlock, with the PJ Hindu Gymkhana refusing to play Parsee clubs, leading to a mutual boycott. Yet, competition remained fierce. That same year, eager to prove their cricketing strength, the Hindus challenged the Bombay Gymkhana, the hub of European cricket, securing a dominant 110-run victory—a triumph that not only fueled nationalist sentiment but also marked a shift in Indian cricket's power dynamics (Guha, 1998).

This rivalry took a more structured form in 1907 with the launch of the Triangular Tournament, reshaping Bombay's cricketing landscape. Featuring teams from Parsee Gymkhana, Hindu Gymkhana, and Bombay (European) Gymkhana, its round-robin format placed communities on equal footing, turning informal rivalries into a prestigious competition. More than just a sporting event, it became a stage for deeper social contests, drawing large crowds. Matches, held in September's damp and overcast conditions, often resembled English pitches, adding an element of unpredictability and intrigue.

Between 1907 and 1911, the Europeans secured three titles, while the Parsees claimed two. However, the tournament's undisputed star was Palwankar Baloo, a bowler of extraordinary skill. Over five editions, he claimed 40 wickets at an average below 10, routinely dismantling top-tier batting lineups. Yet, despite his exceptional talent, entrenched social hierarchies barred him from the captaincy.²¹

Beyond competition, the Triangular Tournament reflected deep-seated communal divisions. When Hindus or Parsees faced the Europeans, the other Indian community often rallied behind the colonial side, revealing intersecting loyalties. Matches between Hindus and Parsees were particularly intense, with crowds using mirrors to distract batsmen and trading derogatory epithets—Hindus were mocked as "Tatyas", while Parsees were labeled "Kakdas," a reference to their funerary traditions.²²

From Quadrangular to Pentangular: Broadening the Communal Spectrum

The Bombay tournament underwent a significant transformation in 1912, expanding from a Triangular to a Quadrangular format with the inclusion of a Muslim team, facilitated by the Islam Gymkhana. The Quadrangular Tournament, featuring Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, and European teams, became a stage for communal pride and strategic debates. Selection controversies often arose—Muslims criticized the exclusion of rural talent, Hindus pushed for a more aggressive approach, and Parsees debated dietary influences on athletic performance. With Bombay as its epicenter, there were growing demands for broader participation from cities like Poona.²³

By 1913, the tournament had ascended to the stature of a grand national spectacle, evocative of a "Roman forum,"²⁴ drawing vast crowds to the Maidan and exerting influence well beyond Bombay. By 1929, it had become the city's most eagerly awaited event, briefly interrupting its ceaseless rhythm.

¹⁹ Ramachandra Guha, "Cricket and Politics in Colonial India," *Past & Present*, no. 161 (Nov. 1998): 186

²⁰ Raiji and Menon, *The Story of the Bombay Tournament*.

²¹ Calculated from A.A.A. Fyzee et al., *Fifty Years of Bombay Cricket* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1946).

²² Cashman (1980, 117–18) highlights the role of patrons in shaping early Bombay cricket, while Guha (1998) provides a broader political and social analysis of the same era.

²³ Guha, "Cricket and Politics," 161–62

²⁴ Bombay Chronicle, 5 September 1913. Mentioned in Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (London: Picador, 2002).

Cricket functioned as both an instrument of imperial control and a platform for nationalist defiance. While Governor Lord Harris championed the sport as a means of instilling discipline and loyalty²⁵, Indian players reappropriated it to challenge colonial dominance. The exclusion of Parsee cricketers from venues like the Bombay Oval underscored the exclusivity of colonial spaces, reinforcing demands for a more equitable sporting arena.²⁶

As nationalist sentiment grew, cricket became increasingly entwined with the struggle for self-determination. The Hindus' unexpected 1906 victory over the Europeans in Bombay resonated beyond sport, symbolizing Asian resilience. *The Tribune* likened the team's composure to Japan's triumph over Russia, while *Mahratta*, linked to Tilak, noted that a British win would have emboldened imperial arrogance.^{27,28}

In 1937, the tournament expanded further into the Pentangular, incorporating "The Rest", a team composed of Catholics, Jews, Anglo-Indians, and notable Ceylonese cricketers, adding another layer to its complex social fabric.^{29,30}

The Pentangular Tournament grew into a cultural spectacle, transforming Bombay into a vibrant hub on match days, its festive allure stimulating local commerce and public enthusiasm. With radio broadcasts in the 1930s, its influence extended beyond the stadium, deepening civic engagement. Yet, beneath this revelry lay Bombay's social fissures. While fostering inter-community exchange, the tournament also reinforced divisions. A 1906 *Indian Social Reformer* report noted how even subtle cultural distinctions, such as Hindu players' attire, stirred debates on identity and tradition.³¹

The Politics of the Pentangular

By the early 20th century, the Quadrangular Tournament was central to Bombay's cricketing scene, both as a spectacle and a colonial tool. Governor Lord Willingdon, aware of its sway, sought to harness it for political gain, calling Bombay "the nerve-centre of India." Matches became a stage for reinforcing British rule, as Willingdon engaged community leaders, blending sport with governance.³²

Hindu cricketers initially sought to surpass the Parsees, long favoured under British rule. A defining moment came in December 1919 when the Hindus secured their first victory over them, challenging perceptions of Parsee superiority and sparking widespread celebration. However, by the final against the Muslims, the political climate had shifted. Though Sir Ibrahim Rahimutullah hosted a joint banquet at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Hindu enthusiasm had waned, reflecting a growing Hindu-Muslim solidarity shaped by the Khilafat movement.³³

Cricket became a battleground for nationalist resistance during the Prince of Wales's 1921 visit, as Gandhi's call for a boycott triggered widespread unrest. While Parsi, Jewish, and Anglo-Indian communities backed the Prince, Hindu and Muslim protesters responded with violent attacks on Parsi-owned liquor stores, trams, and businesses. In retaliation, Anglo-Indians and Parsees targeted suspected supporters of non-cooperation. Many cricket fans redirected ticket proceeds to a Congress-led Relief Fund aiding victims of colonial repression. In response, British officials rigged the tournament's final, restricting it to Parsee and European teams to quell dissent.^{34,35,36}

²⁵ Harris, *A Few Short Runs* (London, 1921), 241-42

²⁶ *Cricket and Politics*, 166-67

²⁷ *The Tribune* (Lahore), February 23, 1906. Mentioned in Guha, "Cricket and Politics in Colonial India,"

²⁸ *The Mahratta* (Poona), March 8, 1907. Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field*

²⁹ Mihir Bose, *A History of Indian Cricket*, Andre-Deutsch, 1990, p. 125

³⁰ Michael Roberts, "Sri Lanka: The Power of Cricket and the Power in Cricket", in *Cricket and National Identity in the Postcolonial Age*, ed. Stephen Wagg; Routledge, Abingdon, 2005, p. 140.

³¹ 'Hindu Cricket', *Indian Social Reformer*, (18 February 1906)

³² Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

³³ Guha, "Cricket and Politics in Colonial India," 186

³⁴ Dinyar Patel, "Beyond Hindu-Muslim Unity: Gandhi, the Parsis and the Prince of Wales Riots of 1921," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 55, no. 2 (2018): 221-47 DOI: 10.1177/0019464618760451

³⁵ "A Deep Stain," in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 21 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), 462-65

By the late 1920s, the Indian National Congress was increasingly perceived as a Hindu-dominated body, pushing many Muslims toward the Muslim League. Escalating communal riots further eroded Congress's claim of representing all Indians, deepening sectarian tensions in cricket (Majumdar, 2003). The fragile unity of the Khilafat era collapsed during the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934), exposing Congress's struggle to sustain inter-community cohesion.

In 1930, Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha escalated resistance, leading to mass arrests and the suspension of the Quadrangular. When it resumed in 1934, a cricket-starved public embraced its return, but the landscape had changed. Parsee and European cricket had waned, leaving Hindus and Muslims as the dominant forces. Under Jinnah, the Muslim League had gained momentum, and cricket—once a unifying force—had become a battleground for communal strife. Spectators openly jeered rival teams, and hostility ran deep. The charged atmosphere of the Pentangular reflected this divide, as the Maharajkumar of Vizianagaram remarked: "One could see for oneself the fervor with which each community wishes the other the worst, with chants like 'Down with the Mussalmans' or 'Down with the Hindus'" (Majumdar, 2002,157).

Communal tensions increasingly defined the Quadrangular Tournament, shaping both play and spectatorship. In the heated 1936 Hindu-Muslim semi-final, hecklers relentlessly jeered batsmen, their taunts amplified by the short boundary at Bombay Gymkhana (Guha, 1998). Beyond Bombay, students across India aligned with teams along religious lines, filtering radio commentaries through a communal lens.

By the mid-1930s, Muslim teams, once underdogs, had become dominant, winning five titles between 1934 and 1940. Their rise paralleled the surge of Muslim nationalism, turning cricket into a political stage (Guha, 1998). Defeated teams faced harsher media scrutiny, post-match receptions dwindled, and by 1939, victories were marked by firecrackers and *Vande Mataram* chants, deepening sectarian divides.³⁷

By the late 1930s, sectarian divides in cricket were undeniable. Rustom Vakeel noted in 1936 that communal loyalties had eclipsed fair play (Guha, 2002), while J.M. Ganguly observed in 1938 that the Quadrangular now mirrored India's deeper fractures (Majumdar, 2003). Yet, cricket's grip on the public only tightened. Radio broadcasts brought matches to life, drawing crowds to bustling streets as office workers abandoned their desks to listen. When the Pentangular Committee attempted to ban live commentary, the All India Radio Merchants Association pushed back, insisting these were the year's most anticipated broadcasts, uniting people across "every class, community, and creed."³⁸

Resistance to communal cricket grew as the BCCI introduced the Ranji Trophy in 1934, shifting focus away from the Pentangular. The *Bombay Chronicle* dismissed the tournament as obsolete, calling for its abolition, while J.C. Maitra promoted the Ranji Trophy as a secular alternative.³⁹

By 1940, opposition to the Pentangular intensified, with nationalist leaders like K.M. Munshi urging a focus on broader political priorities, while Mahatma Gandhi condemned communal tournaments as "unsportsmanlike" (Guha, 1998). *The Bombay Chronicle* shaped public sentiment, and by 1941, the Citizens' Anti-Pentangular Committee called for a boycott. Yet, the tournament retained strong backing, particularly among Parsis and Muslims, who saw it as integral to their identity (Guha, 1998).

Under mounting Congress pressure, the Hindu Gymkhana narrowly voted (280 to 242) in December 1940 to withdraw, sparking controversy. While some saw defying Gandhi as disrespectful, others questioned why his approval had been sought at all (Majumdar, 2002; Guha, 1998). The decision divided members and triggered wider backlash. Smaller Hindu clubs, financially reliant on ticket sales, had invested in Brabourne Stadium seating and now feared collapse. They argued the team represented more than just the Gymkhana but the broader community. Attempts to field a replacement team failed, and without Hindu participation, the tournament lost its competitive edge, leading to dwindling attendance.

By 1943, opposition peaked, with Congress leaders and princely figures denouncing the Pentangular as an outdated relic of communalism (Guha, 1998). The Hindu Gymkhana, however, tried to reframe its relevance by linking it to humanitarian efforts. Despite mounting criticism, the tournament retained loyal supporters. *The Bombay Chronicle* likened them to habitual drinkers, quipping, "They are now drawn to it as a drunkard is drawn to a pub."

³⁶ De, Rohit (4 August 2020). *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic*. Princeton University Press. p. 64.

³⁷ *Bombay Chronicle*, December 2, 1939. Mentioned in Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field*

³⁸ Cited in Majumdar, Boria. "Communalism to Commercialism: Study of Anti-Pentangular Movement." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 7 (February 15–21, 2003): 659

³⁹ *Bombay Chronicle*, December 16, 1940. Mentioned in Guha, "Cricket and Politics in Colonial India," 180

By the 1940s, A.F.S. Talyarkhan, once a staunch supporter of the Bombay Pentangular, turned against it, condemning its communal structure. He argued that the tournament, "deliberately played on a communal basis," deepened sectarian tensions and may have even fueled the demand for Pakistan (Guha, 2002). Players, however, refuted such claims. In 1928, Hindu and English cricketers insisted the Pentangular fostered camaraderie, while in 1940, Syed Wazir Ali defended it as "not in the least anti-national," and C.K. Nayudu warned its abolition would mark "the funeral of Indian cricket."

The debate persisted—had the Pentangular unified communities or reinforced divisions? Orwell called sport "warfare minus the shooting," while Huxley saw it as a catalyst for nationalism. Others, like Jesse Owens, believed in its unifying power (Guha, 2002).

Cricket in India, however, outgrew its colonial origins. Ashish Nandy's remark that it became an "Indian game accidentally discovered by the British" captures this shift.⁴⁰ The 1934 Ranji Trophy, conceived as a nationalist and secular alternative, was more than a sporting reform—it reflected a broader struggle for financial and institutional control.⁴¹

Anthony de Mello played a key role in aligning the BCCI with nationalist ambitions while curbing Bombay's Gymkhana dominance. The Pentangular's dissolution in 1946 was not just about communal harmony but a strategic reordering of Indian cricket's economic and administrative framework. Yet, the transition was not seamless—the Pentangular had drawn massive crowds and revenue, whereas the Ranji Trophy, despite its nationalist appeal, struggled to match its popularity. The BCCI's push for Ranji cricket was as much about consolidating financial power as it was about promoting secularism.⁴²

With the BCCI's rise, the final Pentangular in 1945–46 marked a turning point, ushering in centralized governance. The Ranji Trophy, positioned as the new national competition, met resistance, particularly from Parsis and Muslim leaders, who saw the Pentangular's end as an erasure of their legacy. For Jinnah and the Muslim League, it was another act of marginalization.

Though often framed as a triumph of secularism, this transition was more complex. Calls for unity masked deeper political and economic agendas. While Congress and Gandhi championed non-communal cricket, financial motives were equally decisive. The Bombay Cricket Association and princely states, long opposed to the Pentangular's dominance, pushed for its removal. The BCCI seized the moment, consolidating its authority over Indian cricket (Armstrong & Bates, 2001). Sen (2001) highlights how this period marked the intersection of cricket, colonialism, and capitalism, fundamentally reshaping the game.

Beyond communal politics, the movement against the Pentangular was an economic power struggle. Business rivalries between Parsis and Hindus in Bombay influenced the debate, while the sport's growing commercialization transformed it into a tool for financial and social mobility. The shift from an elite pastime to a professional enterprise accelerated, challenging the notion that cricket's commercialization came much later.

Urbanization and capitalism were central to this transformation. As cricket became more lucrative, new alliances emerged, with princely patrons and nationalist leaders working to curtail the Pentangular's influence. By the 1930s, cricket had already become a viable career for middle- and working-class players, marking its shift from an elite sport to a commercially driven profession.

Conclusion

The Bombay Pentangular was never merely a tournament; it was a battleground where a colonized people asserted their identity and aspirations through cricket. Once a symbol of British authority, the game became an instrument of resistance, where oppression, resilience, and triumph converged.

The Pentangular also reflected competing visions of India's future. The British framed it as proof of their benevolent rule, while nationalists reclaimed it as a symbol of self-governance. Communal divisions, which would later shape the subcontinent, first emerged within its framework, making cricket both a site of unity and discord. Yet, despite these fractures, the game remained a shared aspiration, demonstrating that Indians—regardless of caste or creed—could challenge colonial dominance.

More than a sport, cricket in India became a narrative of agency and defiance. The Pentangular's legacy affirms that history is not only written in political struggles but also in everyday acts of resistance. Cricket, far from being just a game, remains a testament to a people who chose to shape their own destiny.

⁴⁰ Nandy, Ashis. 2000. *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and Destiny of Games*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.1

⁴¹ Docker, E. L. *History of Indian Cricket*. Delhi: Macmillan, 1976

⁴² Halder, Avipsu. 2021. "Capitalism and the Ethics of Sport Governance: A History of the Board of Control for Cricket in India." *Sport in Society* 24 (8): 1291–1304. doi:10.1080/17430437.2021.1933453.

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