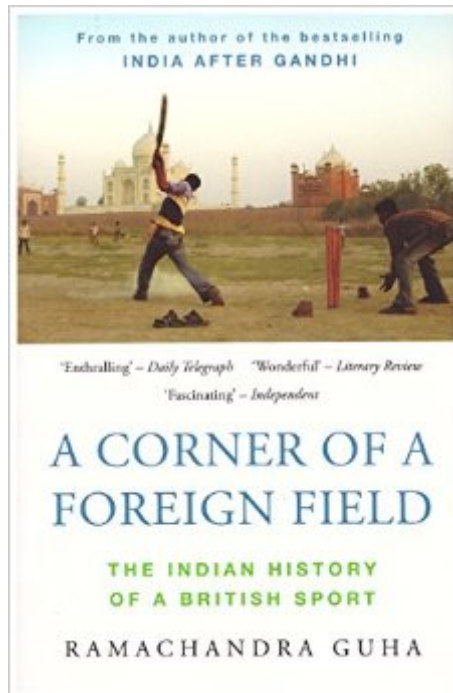


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A Corner Of A Foreign Field: The Indian History Of A British Sport



Synopsis

C. K. Nayudu and Sachin Tendulkar naturally figure in this captivating history of cricket in India, but so too—in arresting and unexpected ways—do Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The Indian careers of those great English cricketers Lord Harris and D. R. Jardine provide a window into the operations of Empire, while the extraordinary life of India's first great slow bowler, Palwankar Baloo, introduces the still-unfinished struggle against caste discrimination. Later chapters explore the competition between Hindu and Muslim cricketers in colonial India and the extraordinary passions now provoked when India plays Pakistan. An important, pioneering work, this is also a beautifully-written meditation on the ramifications of sport in society at large, and on how sport can influence both social and political history.

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Customer Reviews

Why did the Indian sub-continent take to cricket so completely? And why can't India have a proper sporting relationship with Pakistan? Why are the fans so passionate, and why is Sachin Tendulkar revered as a God? No Australian can really answer these questions, so I was glad to see Ramachandra Guha's "A Corner of a Foreign Field" which is an attempt to answer some of these questions. For such a cricket mad nation, India has been surprisingly lax about chronicling its cricket history, but Guha has done what digging he can. The cover of my copy is swathed in praise; the Literary Review calls it "wonderful". From a literary point of view, I cannot own that it is that good; the prose occasionally plays out a few maiden overs and it struggles to maintain a proper length. From a historical point of view, though, it is excellent, and explains a great deal not just about how the game started in the subcontinent, but also it explains the attitudes of the people to the

game. And, it might be said, about other things. The communal hatreds of India and Pakistan make a lot more sense when you understand the Pentangular tournament that was the focus of Indian cricket until India became a serious Test nation. As an Australian, I got a mild sense of embarrassment reading this tome. It is clear that India's board and cricketing society have faithfully copied everything crass, commercial and nationalistic in the Australian game, and applied it to the subcontinent. Australians, cynical as we are, have managed to cope with this; Indians have not, and the result is displays like the 1996 World Cup semi-final. This book is not exactly the Indian version of 'Beyond a boundary' but it is well worth a read, especially for the "Anglo" reader.

The title is deservedly flattering but then there are only a handful of Indian books on Indian cricket (Guha's own "Wickets in the East" is the 5 star rare-to-find masterpiece.) The book begins with a meticulous and stirring history & commentary on early Indian cricket. The focus gradually shifts onto the Quadrangular-Pentangular 'communal cricket' in Bombay from 1900s to the 1940s until MK Gandhi wisely raised his walking stick and put a stop to it. The high point of this book is Guha's reliving the cricketing struggles and exploits of the chamar (a still oppressed Indian caste) Palwankar brothers. After this Dr. Guha moves onto more contemporary stories in Indian cricket. This falls flat because in my opinion, it is too early to talk about the social ramifications of Indian cricket. (FYI, the Indian cricket is usually comfortably upper caste/class, despite the barriers broken by the Palwankar brothers many years ago.) But the story of early Indian cricket, the Palwankar brothers, and the description of early Indo-Pak cricket are more than enough to make this book a worthy read. Guha's writing talent lies in being able to provide a passionate commentary to this history while making sure one does not intrude on the other.

Ram Guha is both an environmental historian and an avid cricket enthusiast. He dons the latter avatar here to write a fantastic history of Indian cricket. This is not just a history of cricket, but a history of Bombay in the late 19th-early 20th centuries as well, along with commentary on the battle fought by the Untouchables, and a biography of the Baloo brothers, all rolled into one. He also introduces what he calls the 'Empire of Cricket' hypothesis- that the English were encouraged that the Indians took to cricket, because they thought it was some sort of justification for their imperial mission. One of the things I like about this book is that there aren't long winded descriptions of cricket matches. He picks out key matches, key innings, and doesn't go into laborious descriptions of the perfect square cut. By keeping it pithy he makes it way more exciting. My only grouse is that I wish occasionally he'd be a historian more than a cricket writer. There is a lot of material there that

is ripe for analysis, but I feel he deliberately subdues the historian in him to be accessible to the lay reader. I wish he'd looked at issues like land and space in Bombay a little more closely, using cricket as the nucleus.

Guha's book is an wonderfully researched work on the evolution of cricket in India starting from the early adoption of a British game by the Bombay Parsis to the 1999 world cup. The book meanders through the history of British India - interestingly, cricket & politics were largely more separate then, than after the Indian partition, particularly since Kashmir emerged as an issue of central importance - the kings & commoners, the religious commune of the pentangulars, the MCC teams & the ambivalent loyalties of the British in India, not least divisive among them the team captained by Douglas Jardine. Combine this with the complex caste hierarchies, the constitutional & the revolutionary nationalists, throw in a little Gandhian intervention & you get quite a concoction of history, politics & sports stirred up with something mischievously spicy. But of particular interest to me was what I learnt about Indian cricketers before Pakistan was another country, & what I learnt about India & Pakistan, after they separated but before cricket really established itself as a mirror of popular sentiment & a benchmark of national prestige. There are certain interesting notes on why cricket is indeed so popular in India or the Indian subcontinent - the most popular one being a sort of national pride in beating the British at something, the more exalted ones around the cosmic sensibilities of a 5 day game to the Hindu. Interesting also are the notes on contradictory positions on cricket when it comes to India playing Pakistan - largely in the final decade of the twentieth century with India rife with riots & religious divide as is the ubiquitous & timeless gentility of the men who have played this game for more than a century separated from the social, historical, religious, & racial biases of its gargantuan following. If history & cricket both interest you, then this book is your poison. @souvikstweets

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