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Indian Premier League and the Subnational Turn towards Regional Loyalties: An Exploratory Study

Dr. A. Selvam¹, Jehoson Jiresh²

¹Guide & Supervisor, Professor, Department of English Studies,
Central University of Tamil Nadu

²Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Indian Premier League (IPL) has significantly impacted the way cricket is consumed in India. It exemplifies an evident paradigm shift in cricket fandom as it fosters a shift from cricket being an object of nationalist pride to a more decentralised tool to showcase sub-national regional loyalties. This paper explores the phenomenal shift concerning fan engagement and loyalties through the lens of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities." The region-centred franchise model sporting has enhanced fan association with teams based on regional and linguistic identities. Contemporary Indian cricket fans find a stronger emotional bond with the teams representing their hometown, state and language. In this context, this paper analyses how regional symbols, player associations, team rivalries and the extensive use of local languages facilitate sub-national loyalty. In addition, the paper analyses the socio-cultural and economic impact of the sub-national shift and how it is integrated into popular cultural narratives. The paper discusses the interplay and co-existence of national and subnational spirit in the Indian cricketscape and how they inform and impact each other against the larger socio-political milieu of the nation. Furthermore, the study also discusses the futurescape of cricket consumption in India that includes a more diverse fan group fostered by the institutionalisation of local intra-state tournaments, the global reach of IPL franchises, and the information technological advancements that lead to the creation and sustenance of vibrant fan cultures within IPL. Overall, the study provides a cricketscape conscientisation on how IPL has reshaped cricket fandom in India by transforming how the Indians engage with cricket to express their diverse identities.

Keywords: Indian Premier League, Sub-Nationalism, Region Loyalties, Imagined Communities, cricketscape conscientization.

Background of the Study

The Indian Premier League(IPL) has become a vital cog in reframing the cricket landscape, termed as cricketscape in this paper. Following its establishment in 2008, the IPL has metamorphosed the sport into an incredibly lucrative and commercially effective commodity and crucially impacted the socio-cultural nuances of Indian society (Dixit et al. 2018 ; Rasul et al. 2011) It has surpassed the conventional boundaries associated with fan cultures fostering sub-national identities within the broader context of Indian nationalism (Subramaniam et al. 2020: 26). The post-IPL shift from nationalism to regionalism in fan allegiances is a crucial phenomenon. Traditionally, the cricketscape in India has been known for nurturing nationalism. The Indian cricket fandom then embodied a robust national pride and unity. The degree of patriotic fervour among cricket fans is even higher during the India and Pakistan encounters. There were instances in which patriotism transformed into jingoism(Shams 2017, Vasu 2017, Memon 2017).

However, the IPL has showcased a new perspective where regional loyalty often overtook nationalistic fervour. Regional loyalty can be determined by regional nativity biases or loyalty towards individual cricketing superstars. During the first season of the IPL, when cricketers from Pakistan were part of it, Indian fans were found cheering for names like Shoaib Akhtar and Shahid Afridi as they were playing for Kolkata Knight Riders from Kolkata and Deccan Chargers, the franchise from Hyderabad respectively. Surprisingly, the names stated above are often antagonised among Indian cricket fans when they represent Pakistan, especially those against India. The paradigm shift is also evident in the ardent support that teams like the Chennai Super Kings and Mumbai Indians have received over the years to the extent that they show support to foreign players representing their regional favourites and hatred towards Indian cricketers representing rival franchises. The social media

battles among fans substantiate this phenomenal paradigm shift in fan engagement and allegiances; recently, even the players have joined such discussions and battles (Bisht 2024, Biswas and Shah 2024, Jha 2024).

In addition, the regional franchises provide a platform for building an emotional connection between the fans and their teams using social media discussions that showcase a more focused perception of cricket's socio-economic and cultural dimensions (Agur 2013: 552). As mentioned in "Chennai Super Kings, The Face of Sub-Nationalism," the branding and marketing strategies employed by the franchise have successfully harnessed regional pride, transforming the IPL into a carnival commemorating regional identities within the larger national spectrum (Sportstar 2023). Therefore, the potential of IPL to subvert traditional nationalist narratives about cricket with regional sub-national identities demands a germane space for critical inquiry in the academic discourses.

Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" (Xidias 2017) provides an adequate theoretical approach to this phenomenon shift. Anderson contends that nations are not natural entities; instead, socially constructed communications that are visualised and imagined by people who view themselves as an integral part of a particular group. It implies that a nation does not need to be a political boundary-based group alone but also smaller, diverse communities that view it as one within a more significant national boundary. It provides a sense of being one even without meeting most of their fellow members who share the same patronage and allegiance. The IPL's franchise-driven regional city-based loyalty in India is one example of imagined communities within the larger nation-based narratives. It contests the dominance of the national imagined community in the Indian cricketscape.

The sub-national shift demands an academic inquiry because cricket's role in nurturing nationalism in post-independent India is paramount. For this reason, the magnitude of the shift is certainly high as the national unifier is now seen as a catalyst for sub-nationalism in India. During the days of regaining national pride and Independence, cricket was viewed as an ambiguous symbol of colonial hangover and a tool to assert Indian identity on the global stage, similar to the adage 'using the master's tool to destroy the master's mansion'. Defeating the erstwhile colonial master, the sport they institutionalised had multi-layered symbolic meaning. Cricket victories are considered a triumph of the nation, and losses are grieved collectively. The Indian national men's team is a source of massive national pride and emotional relinquishment of the fans throughout the nation. The patronage of Indian cricket is an integral part of the collective enjoyment and habitus of the people, playing a crucial ideological role in the politics of ethnonationalism (Anuranj and Sircar 2024).

The nationalist fervour reached its summit in the 1983 World Cup triumph and the ensuing successes of the team in the 1990s and 2000s. As stated earlier, India-Pakistan encounters became a sensitive patriotic spectacle. The team's success in the global cricketing arena reflects the nation's position, with cricket being a proxy for India's journey toward global visibility and respect. The cultural potential of cricket in nurturing nationalism surpassed match performances. It pervaded popular culture, with cricket becoming integral to films, advertisements and other media narratives (Naha 2015: 464). Cricketers endorsed brands and became regulars in commercial and social advertisements. Interestingly, their personal lives and choices were scrutinised through a patriotic lens based on the brands and products they endorsed.

The cultural construction of cricket as a symbol of nationalism aligns with Eric

Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's ideation termed "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). They are a set of practices primarily products of a symbolic ritual that aims to foster specific values and norms of behavioural patterns through repetition, hinting at continuity with the past. The rituals around the Indian cricketing context, the deification of players and the perception of associating cricket success with national pride can all be considered invented traditions that strengthened cricket's role in Indian nationalism.

The post-IPL cricketing context, on the other hand, subdued the nationalist fervour by overtaking national allegiance using regional affiliations. The fan engagement shift challenges the conventional understanding concerning the symbiotic relationship between Indian cricket and nationalism. Exploring this shift from a socio-cultural and critical point of view provides multidimensional narratives on fan culture, engagement and the ever-evolving nature of identity and belonging in the diverse Indian landscape. In addition, the potent force of IPL in nurturing subnational affiliations exemplifies the long-lasting scope of cricket in reshaping Indian society.

For these reasons, the present analysis is relevant in examining contemporary India's more significant socio-cultural and political trends. Therefore, the paper explores the ways in which IPL facilitated the subnational shift, the socio-cultural implications of the shift, and how it aligns with or contests the contemporary Indian political milieu concerning its institutionalised hyper-nationalism. The objectives of this analysis include examining the mechanisms using which IPL nurtured regional affiliations, probing the short-term and long-term consequences of this shift in Indian society and culture, and tracing the future trajectories of cricketscape democratisation and fandom in India. Overall, the analysis aims to raise critical consciousness, termed by Paulo Freire (2017) as conscientisation, understood as cricketscape conscientisation in this study, among the

participants of this sport and the enormous spectacle.

Discussion

The IPL's franchise-based model ensures the expression of subnational identities. Contrary to the national cricket fandom and identity, supporters can now show allegiance to teams representing their home towns or regions, nurturing a localised sense of pride and belonging. The following sections of this paper discuss this shift using Benedict Anderson's imagined communities to raise critical consciousness of the post-IPL Indian cricketscape.

Subnational Shift: Reason and Mechanism

As a union of states, India represents diverse regional and linguistic identities, eventually nationalised under the umbrella term 'India' during the nationalist freedom struggle movement and in the postcolonial contest. However, the inherent language use and geographical habitat differences cannot be entirely removed from the Indian fabric. A region-based franchise sport thrives on this diversity of sentiments and affiliations.

IPL is perhaps the first franchise sport in India with a potential limitation of resource differences. Over the years, the IPL franchises have created loyal, ardent fanbases that lend unconditional support to their respective teams and show hostility towards other regional teams in their conversations, actions, and social media engagements.

Team loyalty in the IPL shows how sports can create strong emotional bonds among fans. In a study conducted on fan engagement and loyalty in IPL, Singh and Sharma (2023) opine that 76.8% of fans have not changed their loyalties since the beginning of the IPL in 2008. This phenomenon resonates with Anderson's "imagined communities" ideology, which elaborates on how individuals find a sense of belonging. However, they do not personally know the other members of the community. The

IPL, consciously or unconsciously, has made smart use of India's diversity to achieve commercial success. In the process, cricket fandom shifted from a nationalist focus to a more regional one, where people root for teams based on their local identities. Even though regional loyalties are not new to global franchise sports, the fact that regional differences are also marked by differences in language use in the Indian context offers a more distinct flavour to IPL's regional loyalties and identities. A continued loyalty towards a regional franchise ensures a deeply grounded connection that transcends beyond sporting reasons and makes the franchise an integral part of the regional cultural fabric.

Strategically, teams make use of region-specific symbols to strengthen these connections. For example, Chennai Super Kings and Mumbai Indians employ specific strategies to establish a connection even without having fewer or no players representing their respective states. Chennai Super Kings tap into Tamil pride and 'localness', a glorified identity of Chennai that celebrates subcultural styles and practices otherwise considered 'local' by the elite. The team songs and the slogan "*whistle podu*" (blow the whistle) resonate with the glorification of localness. At the same time, Mumbai Indians reflect the cosmopolitan vibe of Mumbai. As the name of the team suggests, they tend to exploit the more considerable understanding that Mumbai is the cricketing capital of India. Thus, Mumbai cricket becomes synonymous with Indian cricket, hence Mumbai Indians. This clever use of local cultural contexts and cues makes teams more relatable and helps unite India's diverse fanbase. Referring again to Anderson's idea of imagined communities, this kind of local branding allows fans to feel like they belong to a unique cultural group. The IPL allows these regional loyalties to grow, creating a more personal sense of attachment among fans.

Another key factor is the involvement of local players. IPL teams celebrate regional pride

by featuring local players. A player from Maharashtra playing for Mumbai Indians, for example, becomes a symbol of regional pride. The local player becomes someone fans can cheer for because he is one of their own. For example, a player like Ravichandran Ashwin played for Chennai Super Kings from 2008 to 2015 who later went on to represent India as well. The fans celebrate such representations as the victory of an underdog. They see such players' achievements as their own, giving hope to aspiring players who hope to make the big stage. Luke Cooper's theory about how external forces shape identities helps explain this, particularly in the IPL, where a mixture of local and international players gives fans a sense of regional and global identity. The IPL brings together local heroes and international stars, making cricket fandom a blend of local pride and global reach.

Regional languages also play a significant role in shaping subnational identities in the IPL. By broadcasting matches in local languages and referencing regional culture, broadcasters make the games more accessible and meaningful for local audiences (Thakur 2021:131). This reflects Anderson's "print capitalism" concept, where mass communication helped build national identities. In the IPL's case, though, these same tools create subnational identities, turning IPL teams into more than just sports franchises, they become cultural symbols tied to their regions, immersed in India's socio-political scene.

Rivalries among different various IPL teams underscore the blend of regional and national identities. Matches between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bangalore, or Mumbai Indians and Delhi Capitals, go beyond the game, representing the long-standing regional conflicts. Anderson's idea that imagined communities often formed in opposition to other groups can be perceived in this context, as city-based teams reflect these regional tensions. This dynamic allows fans to frequently switch their loyalty between their IPL

team and the Indian national team, creating a complex space where regional and national identities coexist and inform each other. Competition and rivalries play a crucial role in building a solid base. The rivalries are more often than not connected to historical and cultural differences. The Southern Indian Derby or the Cauvery Derby between Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) and Chennai Super Kings (CSK) are touted to be one of the high-intensity clashes, which is significant not only because of cricketing reasons but also due to the socio-political and geographic reasons concerning linguistic differences and sharing of natural resources. Recently, during a test match between India and New Zealand in Bengaluru, the regional rivalry between fans surpassed their allegiance with the Indian cricket team. Instead of the regular cheering to support the Indian team, CSK and RCB chants took centre stage while Mohammed Siraj, an Indian bowler, was bowling against Devon Conway, a New Zealand batter, as they both represent RCB and CSK respectively, in IPL (Srivastava 2024). Such intricate socio-political nuances of fan engagements in the post-IPL milieu in India resonates with the famous quote by CLR James, "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" signifying that there is much more to cricket than runs and wickets which encompasses the socio-cultural context of sport and the people involved in it.

As mentioned earlier, Anderson's 'imagined communities' are groups usually formed in opposition to other groups. This emerging nuance coerces fans to juggle their allegiances between the IPL teams and the national team, providing intricate ambiguous spaces where regional passions and national loyalties coexist. In such contexts, there is potential confusion in supporting players as fans develop liking or hatred towards certain players during the IPL season but are now forced to shift their support for players. For instance, ardent fans of Mumbai Indians find it difficult to switch their backing to a player like

Virat Kohli or Mahendra Singh Dhoni since they represent their rival teams in the IPL. In some cases, audiences want India to win but only with the help of their IPL franchise stars and want the players from rival IPL teams to fare poorly, even for the national team, so that they can make fun of those players' fans on social media.

Socio-cultural Impact of the Sub-National Shift

The emergence of regional loyalties in the Indian cricketscape has significantly impacted India's socio-cultural, political and economic progress. Economically, IPL's business value in 2024 is \$16.4 billion 2024, approximately one lakh thirty thousand crores rupees (Economic Times Bureau 2024). The merits of this commercial success include the benefits for local players in terms of access to cricket infrastructure in smaller cities and towns enabled by the initiatives of the regional franchises in talent scouting for their franchises (Khan and Malhotra 2023). In a first, Robin Minz, a crickeert from Jharkhand, became the first tribal cricketer to be bought in an auction by a franchise, Gujarat Titans, in the history of the IPL(Sayang 2023). The league has also opened new avenues for revenue generation through streaming platforms, TV broadcasting, ticket sales, and merchandise. In 2022, IPL broadcasting rights cost became the second highest for any league sport worldwide, next to the National Football League (India Today 2022). It is vital to note that all other franchise leagues listed in the top 10 are played throughout the calendar year, whereas IPL is played only for two months in a year. This parallels Hobsbawm and Ranger's idea of "invented traditions," where IPL teams have created economic practices that anchor their regional importance.

Culturally, the IPL has become a powerful force, shaping new forms of popular expression in India. From team anthems to fashion trends and online communities, the league has woven itself into the fabric of Indian

popular culture. As Hobsbawm and Ranger suggest, these new cultural elements evoke regional pride, serving as modern "invented traditions" that strengthen collective identity. By blending cricket with entertainment, music, and fashion, the IPL allows fans to express their regional pride through consumer culture. The connection between subnational cricket loyalties and identity politics is crucial to understanding the IPL's broader impact. Anderson's theory of imagined communities is relevant here, as the IPL gives fans a platform to imagine their regional identities within a larger national backdrop. The balancing act played by the fans in negotiating between the complex network of allegiances between regionalism and nationalism resonates with India's ever-prevalent identity ambiguity and consequent politics, where regional and national pride not only conflict and contest each other but can coexist.

As stated earlier, being the world's second most popular sporting league, the IPL's impact on mass media and India's global presence depicts how the sport redefines India's identity on the larger stage. The league has spurred broadcasting and digital fan engagement innovations, changing how Indians consume sports media. Anderson argues that media is key in shaping imagined communities, and the IPL's use of regional languages and culturally relevant content has expanded its reach. At the same time, India's growing role in global cricket governance shows how subnational identities, nurtured through the IPL, can strengthen national soft power (Agur 2013: 541).

Finally, the IPL has opened up new paths for social mobility, especially for young cricketers from smaller towns and marginalised communities. This democratisation challenges traditional hierarchies, offering fresh opportunities for those previously excluded from elite cricket. The league's commercial success has also created a consumer culture reinforcing regional identities. Fans'

consumption of team merchandise, media, and experiences echoes Anderson's idea of "modular" identities, where fans can switch between regional and national loyalties. Through these dynamics, the IPL has reshaped cricket fandom and the socio-political and economic fabric of Indian society.

Future Directions and Discourses

The IPL is inching closer towards the completion of two decades in India, and the cricket fandom in India is projected to take new dimensions. As discussed earlier, with the advent of franchise cricket, even within states, the fans will have to juggle among native town, regional and national loyalties. The advent of more city-entered leagues could probably lead to more embedded sub-regional loyalties. Moreover, the localisation of the sport, on the one hand, would ensure democratisation but, on the other hand, would result in the organisation of smaller fragmented groups, resonating a more significant tendency toward regionalism in Indian cricket and politics in general. The multiple loyalties could exemplify the complexities of contemporary 'Indian' identity. This identity shift, or the aspect of these identities that are favoured and foregrounded by the individuals, will also be informed by the socio-political changes. The political narratives set by the national and regional parties also play a vital role in shaping these narratives. The Tamil Nadu chief minister, M.K. Stalin, hailing MS Dhoni as an adopted son of Tamil Nadu, is one example of how the political context can inform fan cultural identities (Dhar 2023). Contextually, with increasing neglect of regional sentiments and voices by imposing a national culture, the larger populace would find it crucial to express their regional affinities through popular cultural expressions, including cricket and cinema.

More importantly, adept regional political parties and factions will undoubtedly use the 'national dominance over states' to effectively evoke regional fervour, pride and

loyalties, echoing Anderson's postulates on constructing imagined communities. However, the progressive future lies in the fans' ability to express regional pride and national unity depending on the context, emphasising the passion towards the game and the spirit of sportspersonship, which surpasses emotional affinities and jingoism. This shift is pertinent considering the recent clash and toxic reaction of fans against supporters of rival teams (The Hindu Bureau 2024). Thus, envision a more layered and balanced fandom, where the identity shift is more fluidic and contextually grounded *sans* fanaticism, portraying how modern sport can foster diverse, progressive expressions in an otherwise divided world.

Another critical dimension of fan engagement in the future would be building global fan bases aimed at patronising diasporic communities by kindling their regional loyalties. The global fan base is constructed even by using the image of foreign players who are part of the different franchises. Many Indian IPL franchisees own T20 league teams in South Africa, Caribbean Islands, and the USA to extend their presence beyond national boundaries. Potentially, this can be viewed as an initiative aligned with Cooper's conceptualisation concerning the international aspects of identity formation, opining that IPL franchises can become instruments of global expression of Indian Identities. More specifically, the globalisation of cricket pioneered by franchise-based leagues and IPL's economic power could construct a hybrid form of fandom and engagement where national pride and regional loyalties interact in intricate ways. The imbricate blending of identities would, in turn, invent traditions as ideated by Hobsbawm and Ranger(2012).

Overall, the increasingly intersecting nature of identity would mirror a new paradigm in the identity-based narratives in the global cricketscape. The globalisation of the sport will be spearheaded by technological advancements such as virtual and augmented reality, which

would influence IPL fans. These technological innovations would empower fans to engage with the teams in novel ways that transform regional loyalties. As stated earlier, engaging social media handles coupled with Artificial Intelligence (AI) will redefine and expand engagement and aid in new identity formation within the sporting context and beyond the world of sports, including socio-economic and political contexts.

Conclusion

The rise of regional identities in the IPL denotes a crucial cultural shift in contemporary Indian society. By exploiting regional pride, the IPL has impacted how Indian cricket fans connect with the game. It echoes the more considerable shifting of how Indian society fathoms nationalism in a diverse cultural fabric. The IPL has democratised cricket fandom by providing a voice to the conventionally underrepresented regions. The socio-political impact of this shift is also significant as IPL franchises, by integrating local teams into the cultural narratives of specific regions, possess the potential to interact more deeply with community development, player empowerment and other social issues. However, how far the business-oriented franchises would realise such potential in empowering society depends on their commitment to narrowing socio-economic gaps through social action.

In the literary-cultural context, this shift holds the potential for literary-cultural narratives concerning IPL that are recorded as thick descriptions in various verbal and visual texts. The texts can include fictional narratives, autobiographies of players, support staff and fans, films, vlogs, news stories and podcasts. A sub-national reading of these texts using Benedict Anderson's imagined communities and Henry Jenkins' convergence culture will offer new perspectives on this fan cultural shift in the Indian cricketscape. The novel perspectives would, in turn, raise the critical consciousness of the stakeholders of Indian

cricket to democratise further the participation and accessibility of this sport, which is loved by the nation in general. As the game and league evolve, the IPL will undoubtedly be a critical lens through which evolving identities of regionalism, nationalism and globalisation can be perceived. Eventually, the IPL is not only shifting the cricket fandom but, on the whole, it is redefining the way in which identity and belonging are exemplified in contemporary Indian society, envisioning a more inclusive, democratised and diverse cricketscape and a whole culturalscape.

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