



Scramble for India: Decolonising through the IPL

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ABSTRACT

The essential consequence of colonisation was the economic exploitation of the colonies. The historically infamous Scramble for Africa is a typical example. A recent Oxford Union debate famously established the economic exploitation of India as a destination for cheap labour and free raw materials to feed Britain's Industrial revolution. Theorising decolonisation, Fanon prophesies a toppling of the social structure. The paper argues how today, India stands decolonised through a sport which is a colonial remnant, and brings the former coloniser to the East again, this time, not in search of labour, but to be bought as labour. The IPL has indeed brought the last first, and the first, last, as Fanon envisaged.

Keywords: Colonisation, Decolonisation, Fanon, Cricket

Colonialism has been viewed and interpreted from multiple perspectives. Both the coloniser and the colonised are said to have benefitted therefrom. While on the one hand it is considered abject exploitation by the coloniser to fill his coffers, on the other, the routine by-products of colonisation were of absolute benefit to the colonised. The four century long period of colonisation that gripped the world is one of the most oft debated and scrutinized periods of human history. In the period beginning sixteenth century AD, trade and commerce through the sea route became a means of expanding markets in many countries. Great Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal were amongst the pioneers in taking their wares to countries far away, like Africa and Asia. One early form of colonialism that was thrust upon the colonised country was economic exploitation. Trade policies were introduced and implemented with the sole objective of developing a pattern of trade by which the colonised country

became an exporter of the primary raw materials required for the products of the mother nation.

During the decades of imperialism, the industrialising powers of Europe viewed the African and Asian continents as reservoirs of raw materials, labor, and territory for future settlement. In most cases, however, significant development and European settlement in these colonies was sporadic. However, the colonies were exploited, sometimes brutally, for natural and labor resources, and sometimes even for military conscripts. In addition, the introduction of colonial rule drew arbitrary natural boundaries where none had existed before, dividing ethnic and linguistic groups and natural features, and laying the foundation for the creation of numerous states lacking geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or political affinity ("Decolonization of Asia and Africa, 1945-1960")

This system of economic power being exerted by one state over another had a near irreversible impact on Africa. As early as the 1400s, Europeans reached Africa and set up trading posts. The traders then began to raid African towns and capture people for their slave trade. It is estimated that from 1520 to 1860 about ten to twelve million Africans were enforced into slavery in many parts of the colonial world, like North and South America. The slave trade was followed by European colonisation, which turned its attention from human beings to raw materials. Commodification of human beings in the form of slaves gave way to exploring new markets for European goods. The natural resources of Africa proved a big draw for the European powers which were on the brink of the Industrial revolution. They sought cheap raw materials, cheaper labor and more markets for their machine-made goods that would enhance profits; all of this and more was available aplenty in Africa. By the nineteenth century, there arose conflicts amongst the European powers over the territories that they owned in Africa. The impressive supply of natural resources, and the potential wealth led to rising tension amongst them. When France and Belgium began their expansion drive deeper into the mainland, the other major powers panicked. This set out a race for African colonies in the 1880s that is known historically as the *Scramble for Africa*. For hegemony with more coordination and order amongst themselves, the European powers in this scramble, met at the famous Berlin Conference in 1884-1885. Representatives from many nations negotiated means to keep at bay the clashes arising due to the competition for colonies. It is said that the Berlin Conference formalised the *Scramble for Africa*. With no African representative at the conference, this attempt to settle the disputes amicably worked well enough and the entire nation was carved into territories of European nations. Within a decade and a half of the Berlin conference, all major African kingdoms with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia had become European colonies. This was also made possible by the superior military might of the colonisers. Imperialism, thus moved to its next phase - administration of colonies to maintain order.

II

Nearly seven decades after colonialism began to fade out, on May 28, 2015, Dr. Shashi Tharoor, debating at the Oxford Union Society on "Britain owes reparations to her former colonies", brilliantly presented for the modern day Brits and the world at large, what the actual impact of colonisation has been for India. In a scalding speech, he broke "the blissful illusion that the Empire was some sort of benign boon to the ignorant natives". In his speech, Dr. Shashi Tharoor raised the question of whether colonial rule really did benefit the colonies, or if it was just unsanctioned looting. History documents that in almost all colonies, exploitation was the norm in the last two hundred years of the last millennium. Dr. Tharoor proves point by point the irreparable damage the colony faced in each sector. For instance, the Indian cultivators were compelled to boost their indigo produce, forsaking food crops because it was a more profitable product. The British systematically manipulated the import and export of Indian goods through their taxation policies so as to literally destroy the supremacy of the Indian goods over the British goods, and eventually penetrated the Indian markets with their machine-made goods. These kinds of economic atrocities were done with no real regard for the welfare of the natives. India began as a destination for trade, and eventually became a colony of the British Empire. The colonial discourse that was generated often justified this process of colonisation. And the profit-making motives of the European colonisation were repackaged into a 'civilising' enterprise. Tharoor minces no words in proving at the Oxford Union Debate that the entire colonisation of India led to more damage than good.

British rule deindustrialized India, created landlessness and poverty, drained our country's resources, exploited, enslaved, exiled and oppressed millions, sowed seeds of division and inter-communal hatred that led to the country's partition into two hostile states, and was directly responsible for the deaths of thirty five million people in unnecessary and mismanaged famines as well as of thousands in massacres and killings. That just skims the surface of the

havoc wreaked by British colonialism(Tharoor).

Tharoor, while acknowledging the impact of the railways and other largesse that came from the colonial rule, rues the fact that historians of the day present a skewed picture of British history and overlook the atrocities, romanticize the period due to their ignorance of facts. Dr. Tharoor is conclusive in his arguments about colonized India:

Of course, many see lasting benefits from British rule. But each of these supposed benefits in turn – political unity, democracy and rule of law, the civil services, the railways, the English language, tea and even cricket – was designed to serve British interests and any benefit to Indians was either incidental or came despite the British..... The British conquered one of the richest countries in the world and reduced it to one of the poorest. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, India accounted for twenty three per cent of global GDP. When the British left it was down to barely three per cent. A country where landlessness and poverty were virtually unknown before the British, found itself at independence with ninety per cent of its population living below the poverty line (Tharoor).

III

Is it true that the ‘benefits’ of colonisation were meant to serve the interests of only the British? What effect has decolonisation brought? The decolonised nations cope with their own course of action on all fronts - economic, social, political and cultural. Even as they struggle to rid themselves of the shackles of the erstwhile influences, they try to regain touch with their ‘golden past’ and also believe in a brighter future. With centuries of economic exploitation to undo, it does seem to be a daunting task. However, colonial theorists like Frantz Fanon believe that the colony regaining its place in the order, returning to its hierarchic origin is but inevitable.

Franz Fanon, in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that decolonisation alias restoring nationhood is always a ‘violent phenomenon’: “To tell the truth, the proof of

success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up.... If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: “‘The last shall be first and the first last.’ Decolonisation is the putting into practice of this sentence”(Fanon28).

Fanon, insists that it is a matter of certainty that a colonised country takes its rightful place at the top of the ladder, maybe even a notch above its erstwhile rulers. Prof. Mackenzie, who had countered Dr. Tharoor at the Oxford Debate, only corroborates the same outlook when he says:

Over millennia of history, the locus of power and wealth has shifted back and forth. When Europeans began their expansionist urges in the 1500s and 1600s, there can be no doubt at all that the great Asiatic Empires - the Ottoman, the Mughal and the Chinese - were much more powerful. It was only in the eighteenth century that Europeans began to secure dominance. Now in the post-European age, the locus of power is moving back again ("Viewpoint: Why Britain does not owe reparations to India",MacKenzie).

This paper thus far has established three things:

- a) The historical context of the *Scramble for Africa*
- b) How India slid from atop the ladder to the bottom rungs as a result of colonisation
- c) How colonial theorists have predicted that after decolonisation, the social structure of the erstwhile colonies will change from bottom-up.

IV

The ensuing discussion will illustrate how ‘The last shall be first and the first last’ has already come to pass in the context of a decolonised India. Is it believable if one claimed that India has turned the tables - of the colonial economic exploitation of the British - that too, with a colonial remnant itself, one that was left behind by the erstwhile rulers? If sportsman unconscious gift of the coloniser to all former colonies, cricket is an unconscious gift of the English to the Indians. Amongst the many games that have found their origins in England are lawn tennis, badminton, football and cricket. Ironically,

the best players of these games emerge from all parts of the world like Australia, India, Pakistan, West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand and Sri Lanka – almost all of them, earlier colonies! These games may have been invented in Britain, but are found in every former colony of the British Empire, and in abundance. And in the post-modern era, the former colonies clearly attempt to assert their national presence in the global arena through sports, and this is not seen as a scar of colonialism, but more as a tool of decolonisation.

The game of cricket is an example of a British 'product' that was exported to the colony, and has turned out to be more profitable to the colony than to the coloniser. This has left the games-masters too shocked to accept the shift in power. This tectonic shift in the power corridors of the game, has resulted in a *Scramble for India*. Even though the 'whites' are running to the 'backward' Orient again, this time it is not to exploit the reserves, but to seek a share of the pie that seems to be filling the coffers of only the Orient. How did the 'last' rise to the 'first'? This reversal in fortunes for Britain via cricket, strictly in the monetary sense, began when the World Cup tournament was moved out of Lord's, oft considered the 'Mecca of Cricket' to be jointly hosted by India and Pakistan in 1987. Although this was not easily acceptable to the 'white' bosses of the International Cricket Council (ICC), this marked a significant moment in the manner in which the game would be administered, with the voice of the Asian-bloc gathering a larger audience.

AmritMathur writes:

The 1987 World Cup was a trendsetter, an event that began the process that restructured world cricket and altered power equations within the ICC. Until then, England and Australia reigned supreme, armed with a veto that allowed them to push aside all opposition to any ideas of theirs. When the 1987 World Cup moved out of England, it marked the end of this domination and opened a window for other ICC members to assert themselves and start questioning unequal power-sharing

arrangements in world cricket ("The World Cup leaves England", Mathur).

Though this move was desisted, the financial success, and the response from the crowds made it clear to the ICC that the game has a definitive and more lucrative future if invested in the Asian region. This is proven by the fact that the World Cup came back to Asia in 1996, with Sri Lanka joining as the co-host of the tournament - another significant landmark in the history of the game; and, they went on to lift the trophy. The game of cricket has always occupied a place of pride amongst sports in the Asian subcontinent. With India being fragmented into Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh, along with Sri Lanka, the game had a mass following like no other sport in the region. Thus, when the game itself turned towards generating revenue through satellite and sponsorship deals, there was no bigger a market than Asia. The administrators of the ICC now began coming from places that were once under the rule of London. Abhishek Dubey writes:

Close to four hundred years ago, the East India Company arrived in India and overpowered trade in the colony. Now the colony had struck back. In the 50th year of Independence, M.L.Dalmiya & Co. (registered civil and structural engineers, Calcutta) arrived at Lord's to take over the responsibility of running cricket in the world. Cricket now was no longer administered by 'Lord this' or 'Sir that', but by someone holding as populist a title as 'Jagguda'. In between, the old order resisted and raised its head now and then, but soon only its remnants remained (Dubey186).

The crowds that came teeming to the stadiums or watched from home, soon wanted a more entertaining form of the game as the five-day long test format was becoming a bit drab. The One-day internationals or the fifty over format brought in that welcome change, but within a decade there was a fall in the crowds once again. English Cricket Board conducted a consumer research headed by Stuart Robertson to understand how they could cope with the falling interest among spectators. This exercise led to the invention of a further curtailed

version of the game titled T-20 or Twenty-Twenty cricket. It was at first considered by the puritans as a 'circus' show since it reduced the playing time to a mere three and a half hours. But the experimental phase carried out in England showed that it was tailor-made to suit the younger generation fans; it also caught the fancy of the players. The inaugural T-20 World Cup held in 2007 showed that the TRP ratings skyrocketed in most countries, especially in the gold mine for marketers, Asia. This led to the Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI) to explore the format in a new manner, a league-based franchise model. The league model was new only to the sport of cricket and to India since such a model existed in England's football leagues from as early as 1888. Thus was born the Indian Premiere League (IPL) in 2008 using a sport that was British, in a format that was English, following a successful experiment that was conducted in England. Yet somehow, the BCCI managed to turn it around to seem a local delicacy.

The IPL is cash rich as no other cricket tournament, and the players are paid mind-numbing sums of money to play for a single season that lasts forty-five days. In many cases, the astronomical sum far outweighs the player's regular salary that he earns playing a similar period in his country's colors. The IPL window also clashed with the international cricketing calendar of many countries, especially the county cricket season of England, oft considered a prestigious platform to prove mettle to earn a call up for national duty. Therefore it was a growing worry that the size of the salary might trample the aspirations a cricketer might have, to play for his country. But there was a steady rise in the number of players who put franchise before their national flag leading to that age-old debate of professional sport: club or country. As Dubey writes:

Not very long ago, the English, the Kangaroos and the Kiwis used to find the simplest of excuses to skip the Indian subcontinent tour. Now, India had not only become a hot destination from the cricketing and advertising view point, but many of their famed former cricketers also expressed their desire to work as coaches, consultants and support staff in one or the

other of the eight franchise team (Dubey188)

The ineptitude or indecisiveness of the ICC, which otherwise was also headed by gentry from the Asian bloc, therefore, could not check or halt the progress and popularity of the IPL. There were scathing remarks on how the T-20 format itself was harming the game's finesse and its fundamental 'refining' tendencies, but this criticism was far and few between, and this kind of discourse was mostly generated from the part of the world which was unable to find its success with this product.

Samir Chopra, in his book *Brave New Pitch*, writes:

So while the 'I' in the IPL was, for the patriot, a guarantee that he would support it, that same 'I', conversely, often seemed a handicap in the IPL's acceptance in the Anglo-Australian media; many who wrote or commented on the IPL could not apparently separate it from the preconceived notions about India, home of greedy, wily, plebian, gauche subcontinentals. It was hard to imagine English or Australian journalists being quite as contemptuous of the sporting and economic prospects of a team called the 'Sydney Surfers' as they were of one called the 'Rajasthan Royals (Chopra 27)

Thus it was amply clear that the two cricketing powers, Australia and England, were in agreement to oppose the hegemonic role that India should occupy in the world of cricket. The BCCI therein was emboldened to exert gargantuan powers upon the other boards. Countries which did not reschedule their cricketing calendars found their players being 'unsold' in the auction due to their unavailability during the IPL season. The IPL opened up a point of view that the world players were part of a labor market, (like the slaves of colonial days?) which brought in maximum monetary benefits to India, and a good remuneration to those who took part in the process, in the playing and in their boards alike. The players themselves, however, did not have any qualms about skipping national duties to be fit as well as available for the IPL. The reasons for the same need not have been only monetary, but that was definitely the clincher amongst others, if any.

Popular overseas cricketers like Brendon Mccullum, LasithMalinga, Kevin Pietersen, Chris Gayle and Darren Bravo began to express open displeasure if their national duties disallowed them to play the IPL season.

The European nations which travelled eastward for cheap labor about three centuries ago, today travel as labours themselves. Some of them, like Malinga for instance, retired from the national team in formats that were not as rewarding as the IPL. Samir Chopra recalls the words of Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the Indian captain and T-20 superstar:

In July 2008, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Indian wicketkeeper and future captain, opted out of a Test series in Sri Lanka claiming overwork and fatigue. Dhoni had just finished playing in the inaugural season of the IPL and in two one-day international tournaments- the Kitply and Asia cups. In April 2010, during the IPL's third season, after playing a crucial match winning innings for the Chennai Super Kings, Dhoni, by then a highly successful and well-regarded captain of the national cricket team, disarmingly and candidly remarked, 'Your franchise pays you so much money, you should at least make the semifinals.' Dhoni's remarks sparked controversy among those who remembered his declining Test duty for the nation, but all he had done was draw attention to the truth that there were new paymasters in town, likely to skew priorities in a manner visible to all (Chopra1).

The BCCI, the new paymasters that Dhoni referred to, became the super-daddy of world cricket, and not toeing 'their' line meant that India would not tour that nation, which was a nightmare in terms of financial losses.

For the BCCI, the tournament was not just about the money, or so they claimed. The IPL sparked positive reactions from quarters that were very important to secure the Indian self-esteem: the international media. The corporate Indian's heart was gladdened when the *New YorkTimes*, *Forbes*, and the *Wall Street Journal* began to train their spotlight on this global event. Praise from these

sections of the media excited the Indian imagination. Some believed that such attention was unprecedented in a nation that could not boast of such international attention in any other political, social or cultural field. It was hoped that the IPL would be an agent of cultural change, from professionalisation of Indian sport to showcasing that India had a platform to display not just Indian cricketing talent but also that of the world. But there were wary Indians who took strong exception to the rush of foreigners who made a beeline to either punch in their timecard to collect pay cheques as players or team support staff. Samir Chopra mentions:

When Sunil Gavaskar sounded a particularly trenchant note in accusing John Buchanan of being a 'failed former cricketer... [who was] made out to be a super coach by the Indian media [and was] milking the owners of his franchise through nepotism', he was not just noticing the age-old unseemly spectacle of the unworthy jostling for position in a gold rush...(Chopra25)

Sunil Gavaskar's tirade can be seen as an auto defense mechanism kicking in, as he belonged to the earlier generation of players from a 'coloured' nation which was brought up on a diet of rejection of India's advances by the West. The rush for the pay packets hence could have been galling for someone like Gavaskar. This rush towards the IPL, is the result of India doing a role-reversal on the 'white' powers that once yielded ultimate power on her. But to say that it is only money that drives the ICC and other cricket boards to seek concurrence with the BCCI for its decisions would be a crass way of undermining the influence that the Asian bloc has grown to achieve.

HarshaBhogle, a popular columnist, writes:

The closest similarity to the financial powers India currently enjoys in cricket is that which the United States had over world politics after the Second World War. The US openly took sides, openly protected its allies, created discord among who dared to stand up, funded rebellion, and through manipulation maintained its leadership position(Dubey190).

The criticism that the entire Asian bloc faces is that the BCCI is commercializing the game, with disregard for the overall administration of the game; that the BCCI arm twists all other financially dependent countries to toe the line or risk marginalization of profits that come from the game; these arguments maybe true at a particular level. One wonders why is it that only the IPL is targeted when its success has seen the 'league' phenomenon being duplicated by all the other countries in the form of Natwest T20 Blast in England, the Big Bash in Australia, the Caribbean League in West Indies, CSA T-20 Challenge in South Africa, PSL in Pakistan, or even the Bangladesh Premier League. These leagues also cause an impact on the cricketing calendar of nations, invite players from foreign nations to be a part of their teams by signing heavy contracts. If the other formats of the game or the standards of the game are impacted, then the cause is the exploitation by these T-20 tournaments all over the globe. It is therefore disheartening to see that all the discourse that attacks T-20 as a format or the mismanagement of the game by individuals with commercial interests, is directed largely towards India, when the cricket boards of all test-playing nations are equally culpable. The reason that the arguments are directed against India is quite clearly simple. India has managed to successfully make a goose that grew up in a quiet farm outside of London to lay golden eggs. The inability of the inventor to patent or succeed cannot be a reason to detract the one who does. If the other nations want a share of the pie for their respective boards, that is not a mandate that BCCI needs to follow. As Dubey asks, "Why would Indian companies pump the cricket boards of the entire world when they get their maximum investment and return from Indian market? Will the Gulf countries be willing to share their fuel reserve profits equitably with the entire world?" (Dubey193).

Fanon's discourse on decolonising with violence makes sense in this context:

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle

between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence (Fanon 28).

India, even in her fights for independence, did not yield to using the knife, but only bore the bullets. But her ascent to the top of the ladder, however quick, is inevitable. As Fanon says, the two protagonists will fight it out, but the struggle shall always follow the law of Nature. The one that is on top has to come to the bottom, and the one who is at the bottom, shall rise. Indian Cricket stands today in a commanding position to dictate, despite the tirades and the internal conflicts that exist in its apex body. The *Scramble for India*, the riches that her cricket tournament offers, even after ten years of the IPL, tells the world that Fanon was as prophetic as he was theoretical.

The last had indeed come to be the first.

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