Lagaan: Cricket As National Destiny

Not just a film – this is Indian cricket history, and as an exquisite blend of the only two truly pan-Indian phenomenon – films and cricket – no surprise that it’s doing so well.

A three hour forty-two minute film with a budget of 25 crores, Aamir Khan and Asutosh Gowarikar’s Lagaan is setting itself up to be one of the most successful of Bollywood blockbusters in recent years, both in India and abroad. The film’s success, as all who have seen it will testify, is not only due to the fantastic camera work, the gripping story-line or the melodious music.

Lagaan goes deep into the psyche of the Indian masses. It is a collage of the most powerful in Indian mass culture, a colourful and patriotic tale of the glories of Indian cricket, told through the medium of Hindi cinema. It brings together the two most potent symbols of Indian cultural life – the magic of Bollywood and cricket told against the setting of the traditional Indian village.

The infallibility of this formula is not accidental. Hindi films and cricket are the two pillars upon which Indian public culture rests and Lagaan deserves our kudos for blending the two successfully (unlike other films which have failed miserably whenever they have tried in the past – one involving Aamir himself, in the execrable Devanand starrer, Awwal Number)

The film is a tale of a team of village men playing cricket against an oppressive colonial regime in the village of Champaner in Kutch to save their lives, families and land. Capt. Russel the arrogant British army officer in charge of the cantonment is outraged that a young, spirited, peasant boy Bhuvan, describes cricket as feringhee version of gilli danda, a game which he, Bhuvan, has played since he was a child. He challenges Bhuvan in front of the provincial Rajah, and the rest of the villagers to beat the English team in a cricket match failing which the entire province would be charged three times their share of the annual tax or Lagaan. In case these country bumpkins achieve the impossible task of defeating the English team, their taxes would be revoked for three years.

Thus the cricket match becomes an arena for asserting indigenous strength against the colonial state. Their sporting prowess helps them emphasise that their 'Indian' identity is in no way inferior to the whites. The native mastery of a colonial sport thus becomes the leveller between the colonizer and the colonized.

Indeed there is an element of the feel good of the Bollywood blockbuster genre (Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander, Ghulam) to the plot. But, there is much more going on which distinguishes it form other representatives of this genre. Lagaan is a filmic contribution to India’s lost cricket history.

As a sport historian, working on the historical centrality of cricket in Indian socio-economic and political life, I read Lagaan not simply as a lore of Indian resistance to British imperialism, or the victory of rural solidarity against the might of the colonial state. Lagaan, for me is a commentary, in the filmic and imaginative mode, on the evolution and development of cricket in colonial India. In the last scene of the film, there is a voice-over by Amitabh Bachchan, lamenting that despite his valor on the sporting arena Bhuvan has been relegated

Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India

Ashutosh Gowariker | India | 2001 | 224 minutes

Credits

Director Ashutosh Gowariker
Screenplay Ashutosh Gowariker, Kumar Dave, Sanjay Dayma, K.P. Saxena
Music A.R. Rahman
Photography Anil Mehta

Cast

Bhuvan Aamir Khan
Gauri Gracy Singh
Elizabeth Russell Rachel Shelley
Captain Russell Paul Blackthorne
to the dusty shelves of newspaper archives. A very apt comment on the lost history of our national game.

Historians of the game have represented cricket as a sport appropriated from the British as an emulative enterprise.

The close links, if any, between cricket and nationalism are seen as a very contemporary phenomenon. That the two could be linked historically is still seen as an unfounded and fallacious proposition.

According to existing historiography, the primary factors which stimulated the Indian/Parsi initiative (they were the first Indians to play the game) to appropriate cricket was the community’s possession of capital, its western education and an urge for social mobility within the colonial framework. All these factors, it may be noted, were also present among other Indians of the early 19th century. Yet they did not take to cricket until the 1880s and 1890s. Hence the explanations advanced so far fail to successfully account for the genesis of cricket in India.

In many ways the story of cricket as told in Lagaan shows how other Indian groups started playing cricket not simply to copy the British like the Parsis did.

Further, the Parsi initiative also came to be perceived as nationalist in course of time. Interestingly, in Lagaan the match is played in 1893, just a couple of years after the Parsis had defeated the touring British side led by G.F.Vernon in a game witnessed by over 12,000 spectators in Bombay. This game, contemporary records indicate, generated considerable patriotic fervour.

In this game, as in the film, the British complained about the bowling action of an Indian bowler, H.Modi, who did bowl in the rest of the match, despite complaints against him, as does Goli in Lagaan.

When Aamir Khan playing Bhuvan appears on screen having marshalled his team of local villagers to take on the whites, the entire audience seem to hold their breath. This 1 hour 40 minutes match becomes the site in which the racial superiority debate with the whites is enacted. In the match itself when Guram, the village godman plays an impossible shot behind the wicket-keeper the audience erupts with joy. This hit can easily be perceived as that moment of departure, when an indigenous brand of Indian nationalism finds fulfilment.

An almost identical innings as the one played by Bhuvan, was played in reality by C.K.Nayadu against the touring MCC side led by Arthur Gilligan in 1926-27. This inning of 153 against the British, symbolic of Indian cricketing prowess has now become part of our cricket lore.

Further, when Deva hurls his deliveries with increasing speed at the English batsman, nationalism is at its moment of arrival, when the colonial mission of importing sport as a civilising tool is successfully turned on its head. Being a non-violent arena of assertion, cricket is successfully transformed into a tool to subvert colonial rule.

The film however, also goes beyond the cricket-field, eventually becoming an arena for the fulfilment of the Gandhian notion of the pristine village community. This community is glorified and valorised and the Indian farmer takes centre-stage in the film by becoming a modern citizen.

While the movie is based on a work of fiction, its portrayal of cricket is almost an exact comment on the evolution and development of India's national sport.

The initiation of cricket in the film as a sport played by the whites and seen by the Indian princes, is exactly what happened in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Further, the way the local achhoot is ostracised initially by the other members of the team in the film is similar to the way dalit cricketers like Baloo or Semper were treated by their counterparts.

It was in 1892-3 that Baloo, a slow left arm spin bowler (as is Kachra in the film, except that he bowls right handed) was first taken into the upper caste Hindu team. Kachra's final inclusion into the Champaner XI justified by his talent, symbolising a triumph of meritocracy is identical to Baloo’s ascendance as the leading Indian bowler by the 1911 tour of England.

Finally, the way the village team was formed, demonstrating a process of indigenisation and appropriation of a colonial sport follows the trajectory of the development of cricket in India. By the early years of the twentieth century, Indian cricket had brought within its fold a number of lower and lower middle class Indians.

While Lala Amarnath and D.D.Hindelkar came from a family of farmers, Amir Elahi was the son of a butcher.

Even the peculiar dress which the villagers play in, finds parallels in Indian cricket history. There are a number of instances of Indians playing the game clad in dhotis. These attempts, records indicate, led to major clashes with the British teams. In a match between Mohun Bagan Club and the Calcutta Cricket club on January 3, 1930 the game had to be abandoned because the natives were insulted...
by the white Governor R.B. Lagden on account of their clothing. The Indians refused to play demanding an apology from Lagden, in the absence of which the match had to be abandoned. Six months later a similar incident occurred in a match between the Vidyasagar College and the Calcutta Cricket Club.

As depicted in the film, history reveals that it had become imperative on the part of the Indians to devise an effective strategy to counter the excessive demands of colonialism by the second half of the nineteenth century. However, just as in the village, there were certain constraints upon their conduct, for such strategizing had to be done from within a society where the physical expression of such actions would be severely suppressed. Sports became the arena in which this heavily politicised, but veiled strategizing took place. We may date this development to the 1880s and 1890s.

Accordingly sport rooted in physical culture which was earlier deemed unimportant became an integral part of the Indian identity towards the close of the century.

This turn to 'European sport' came at a very difficult moment in the post-mutiny period when Indian military initiatives were crushed and most of the wars of annexation had been won by the Raj which was more secure than ever in its paramountcy. This was no time for the disarmed and defeated subject population to flaunt its armed strength. It was a time to propagate charitabal (strength of character) rather than bahubal (physical might). The Indians barred from staging violent demonstrations or other acts which would physically challenge British superiority naturally looked upon 'leisure' pursuits with new eyes. This factor clearly distinguishes Indian sports from its English counterpart. Colonialism and the realities of being a subject population were the conditions that made possible Indian cricket and informed its development and evolution.

The portrayal of a peasant cricket match as becoming an arena of nationalist assertion is unthinkable in the British context. British village cricket has always been valorised and glorified as one untainted by the rigours of industrialisation, commercialisation and politicking. In India however, in the late nineteenth century, apparently leisure settings helped provide an exciting imaginary where a certain role reversal from real life occurred.

Imitation of real life political encounters between the coloniser and colonised was key, but minus the attendant dangers and risks which would otherwise characterise these situations. A key aspect of this change was a clear critique of caste prejudices which had kept the lower classes away from the sporting arena.

Enlightened Indians like Nagendraprasad Sarbadhikary (corresponding to Bhuvan, the role played by Aamir in the film) who belonged to an orthodox Hindu family ignored all caste prejudices while establishing a series of sporting clubs. His critique of such practices is clearest in the incident surrounding the induction of a potter’s son into the Wellington Club.

The latter had a membership of nearly 500 from all classes of society. However when Nagendraprasad wanted to induct Mani Das, the potter’s son the richer members of the club protested vehemently. Nagendraprasad refused to buckle before the pressure arguing that a sporting club was beyond any prejudice and decided to dismantle the Wellington Club and by combining the various sporting clubs he had established — The Boys Sporting Club, Friends Club, Presidency Club, the erstwhile Wellington Club — founded the Sovabazar Sporting Club. Moni Das, the son of the potter whose presence was the cause behind the dismantling of the Wellington club was one of the first members of the Sovabazar Club. He later distinguished himself as one of the best cricketers of Mohun Bagan Club.

This attempt by Nagendraprasad to free sports of all caste prejudices in the 1880s was the first of its kind in India.

By the 1890s it was felt that mastery in the manly (manly by European standards) sports could be an effective reply to colonial exploitation. This veiled political motive lay at the root of the flourishing of Indian cricket in the late nineteenth century. A display of talent in English games like cricket could infuse in the Indians a sense of pride and purpose helping in articulating the desperation in the Indian soul.

Even children imbibed this feeling of superiority that came from victory in competitions against the coloniser.

A passage from the contemporary Bengali journal Sakha is redolent with these sentiments. The editor recalls a conversation he had one evening with a "young friend" who reported with glee that he had successfully beaten the sahib in a game of "bat-ball". "I wondered", he writes, "what is so great about defeating the sahibs? Boys of all nations indulge in play. So what is it that has marked out English boys as superior to their young counterparts especially the Bengalis?"

"The answer lies in the fact that while the sahibs play these manly games almost regularly, Bengalis are averse to any form of physical exhaustion. Since the sahibs practice athletics, cricket etc their bodies are strong and they acquire skills which cannot be matched by the
natives. Manly sports are therefore an exclusive English preserve. It is precisely the act of having defeated the overlord on his own ground that filled his young friend with such glee”.

From this analysis it is evident that the notion that defeating the sahibs in their own game was no mean achievement had already filtered down to young boys by the mid 1880s. Achievement in a manly sport like cricket, it was felt would contribute significantly to combat the colonial stereotyping of the natives. Thus, as depicted in Lagaan, Indian cricket can only be meaningfully analysed by placing its inception against the wider political canvas of the colonial state.

This is not to say that one can read a straightforward narrative of the rise, spread and flowering of anti-European sentiment into sports. Existing historiography of cricket in India reads very much like a simple narrative of transposition - where the specificity of sport itself is lost and it can be easily replaced with matters such as western education, or Indian entry into the civil service and still make as much sense!

In other words, Indians did not play these games simply to be like the British and to then defeat them on their own turf. It was not simply an act of mimicry which would invariably bring in its wake an allegation of not quite, not white. Its roots went much deeper – to certain ideas of self-cultivation, manliness and self worth. Cricket was not played as a simple ladder to social mobility. Rather the game became the mirror in which an Indian identity assessed itself, and in that sense these games can be seen as early breeding grounds of nationalism.

Aside from the political character, another significant aspect of cricket as an activity, was that it came with none of the violence that associated such proto-nationalist ventures which led to their failure and suppression. Sports is a sphere of competition rather than violence. This fact made early European sports in India a safe haven within which feelings of self-worth, strength of character and so on could be articulated without the tension and fury that would accompany them in the "political" sphere. I would argue that these covert yet deeply politicised moorings of cricket gave it a longevity and tenaciousness found missing from indigenous sports.

It is not only on account of its worth as a game per se, but the political message that was so inextricably linked to it from the beginning that it has endured on Indian soil. As Lagaan justifiably demonstrates, the history of Indian cricket was always imbued with meanings whose roots went beyond the sporting arena. The birth narrative of cricket only makes sense when we take into account the colonial context, read in terms of power equations between the colonizer and the colonized.

Lagaan is also a comment on the broader history of the game. Even if unknowingly, it dates match fixing back to the late nineteenth century. The way Lakha sabotages his side (his reasons are different of course) finds many parallels in late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses on the games history. Further, the practise of sledging articulated beautifully in the film had already reached a sophisticated form under figures like W.G.Grace by the 1890s. Yet the notions of virtue, fair play and sportsmanship displayed by the older generation of English officers and the umpires reflects why cricket continues to be labelled as a gentleman’s game even today despite all these persisting anomalies.

Lagaan has been released at a very interesting temporal moment in the history of Indian cricket. If the film came out a year ago its marketable potential would have been marred by the scandals circulating in the cricket world. But with victories over the mighty Australians and a test win in Zimbabwe, Indian cricket is certainly on a comeback trail. This close linkage between commerce and leisure in the Indian context evident in the release of the film is another factor that makes Lagaan worthy of study.