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## Beyond the BCCI

By: Sushant Singh

*If we want to know how the country is being run, we only need to look at how the Board of Control for Cricket in India is managed.*

The phrase “cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British” has found such wide acceptance that it is often forgotten that Ashis Nandy made this catchy observation in 1989. Writing *In The Tao of Cricket*, Nandy claimed that “cricket today arouses more passions in India than in England”. This was well before the economic reforms in India in the early 1990s. The famous 1996 World Cup, hosted in the subcontinent, which changed the commercial and social dynamics of cricket in India, was not even on the horizon.

The recently re-released *War Minus the Shooting* by Mike Marquesse reminds us of the seeds of uber-nationalism and uber-commercialisation sown in 1996, which everyone can now see have grown into wild forests that have engulfed Indian cricket. Marquesse used cricket to make larger points about life and politics in India. This is a facet ignored by most sport writers, who are obsessed with dissecting technical and tactical details of the game, while ignoring the context in which sport is played, followed, and administered in India.

Even worse are those journalists who have turned Indian cricketers into celebrities, publicising their social media posts, clothes, and banal utterances with great precision. Courtesy both these groups of content creators, Indian cricket is always in the news. Or rather, everything about Indian cricket is news. This has bred an arrogance and sense of entitlement in all the stakeholders in Indian cricket, who have internalised the statement made by current Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) chief and former Indian captain, Sourav Ganguly, at the International Cricket Council (ICC) Centenary Conference in Oxford in 2009: “India is now the centre of world cricket.”

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India last won a T20 World Cup in 2007 and an ODI World Cup in 2011. It lost the final of the inaugural test championship to New Zealand in 2021. The current BCCI team may be a very good cricket team, the best that India has ever produced in test cricket, but it has not achieved the kind of on-field global dominance the West Indies displayed in the 1970s and 1980s, or the Australians in the 1990s and early 2000s. Indian dominance is in controlling the finances through marketing of Indian television rights. Ganguly would have been more accurate if he had said that India is now the centre of the *commerce* of world cricket.

Such is the Indian commercial dominance that the ICC has decided to carve out India rights — both broadcast and digital — for the next global television rights cycle that starts from 2024. The process will start after the BCCI completes auctions for the Indian Premier League (IPL) media rights and looks to gain as the losers of IPL rights make a desperate grab for ICC rights.

### BCCI'S riches

Current [estimates](#) place India's contribution to ICC revenue at around 70%. The BCCI has not been shy to extract its pound of flesh. It does not seem to care that such extractive demands come at the cost of the health of the global game. In 2014, it joined hands with its English and Australian counterparts to form a 'Big Three' that demanded, and got, a contribution-based revenue distribution system put in place. The BCCI's projected share was \$570 million for the 2015 to 2023 rights cycle. Thankfully, the ICC dismantled the Big Three model in 2017 and BCCI's revenue share fell to a little over \$400 million. Many smaller cricket-playing countries thus survived.

BCCI is one of the richest bodies in world sport. During the financial year 2020-21, when two waves of Covid-19 crippled the country and the Indian economy shrank by 7.3%, the [net worth of the BCCI grew by Rs 1,594.67 crore](#). Its net worth at the end of 2020-21 was a colossal Rs 18,011.84 crore. Yet BCCI is rather tight-fisted in using this money for promotion of sport domestically in India.

Sharda Ugra has [explained in great detail](#) how “domestic cricketers, match officials and others in the board's ecosystem are treated not as stakeholders or even shareholders due their dividend earnings, but as dependents trying to reduce the fixed deposit corpus.” Its treatment of women cricketers is no better. In May last year, the UK-based *The Telegraph* newspaper [reported](#) that the BCCI had not given members of the Indian women's team their share of the \$550,000 prize money for being runners-up in the World T20 Cup held in March 2020. The BCCI initially denied the report; it had to be shamed into making the payments.

BCCI's discriminatory treatment of women cricketers goes beyond payments. It extends to a general “lack of respect—over access to opportunities, playing time, tournament calendars, that are their due,” in Ugra's words, even as all major sports are moving towards gender parity.

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Most readers would shrug their shoulders and ask, “What's new about it? Wasn't the BCCI always an exclusive male club of selfish, power-hungry men?” It is easily forgotten that this is not the same old BCCI, but a ‘reformed’ BCCI after the changes proposed by the Justice Lodha Committee were implemented under the supervision of the Supreme Court. When the matter was being heard in the Supreme Court in 2016, BCCI's senior counsel K.K. Venugopal — who is now the country's Attorney General — argued that the BCCI was a private trust, and the Supreme Court had no jurisdiction over a private body's activities. *Ipsa facto*, the cricket team that takes the field was not an Indian cricket team but a private trust's team.

## Status Quo at BCCI

“Are you refusing to be reformed?” The famous rhetorical question [posed by the apex court's bench during that 2016 hearing](#) has received an unequivocal answer from the BCCI in the last few years.

The Supreme Court can make all the stringent rules, but the BCCI could not care less about them. They have been dealt with the same impunity with which Rohit Sharma deals with a waist-high full toss. After BCCI ombudsman Justice D.K. Jain retired in June, no replacement has been found to date to deal with the ‘conflict of interest’ cases.

Technically speaking, all these matters are subjudice. The cricket board and its affiliates have filed more than a dozen petitions in the Supreme Court demanding major changes in the BCCI constitution that had been approved by the apex court. The BCCI's own petition seeks six major amendments to the constitution; the most significant among them is about the tenure of the three top office-bearers who, the BCCI argues, should be allowed to continue.

These three top office-bearers are Sourav Ganguly, Jay Shah, and Arun Dhumal, respectively the chairman, the secretary and the treasurer of the BCCI. According to the BCCI constitution, they should have been ‘cooling off’ for three years each after spending six years as cricket administrators in a state association or at BCCI. Their terms officially ended around June 2020. Eighteen months later, *status quo* keeps them in power, pending a decision by the apex court.

Ganguly is a former Indian captain, and much was expected of him as the head of the BCCI by those who had forgotten how he behaved with his own coach, Greg Chappell, once his captaincy and place in the team was in peril. His sole intention now seems to remain in power and that suits Shah and company very well. Ganguly provides the cricketing face, a convenient façade to the real power wielders, an ex-cricketer who can be trotted out to deal with uncomfortable issues like the sacking of Virat Kohli as captain of the ODI team. That the Indian media can quickly paint it as a personality clash between Ganguly and Kohli works to the advantage of those who wish to avoid shining the spotlight on the shenanigans of the BCCI.

Dhumal is the brother of union minister Anurag Thakur, himself a former BCCI secretary. But it is Shah who provides the direct connection between the BCCI and the top political leadership of the country. His father, Amit Shah, is the second most powerful politician in the country and the country's home minister. Shah senior was president of the Gujarat Cricket Association (GCA) from 2014, taking over from Narendra Modi, under whom he had served as the vice president of GCA since 2009. In his profile, [the GCA website notes](#) that “Shah too became the national president of BJP but took upon his shoulders the responsibility to realize (sic) dream of Shri Narendra Modi to make Motera the world's largest stadium.”

Under Shah junior, the reconstructed Sardar Patel stadium in Motera was named after Narendra Modi by the president of India, in the presence of Shah senior. Jay Shah's star has risen dramatically in the past few years. He acts as the sole authority controlling the

BCCI. *Newslandry reported* that Shabir Hussein Shekhadam Khandwawala, a former director-general of Gujarat police, was appointed as the head of BCCI's anti-corruption security unit by Shah without inviting any applications. The former cop had also crossed the age limit of 70 years, mandated by the Supreme Court as the cut-off for BCCI officials. Khandwawala has moved a proposal to buy snooping equipment, ostensibly to check match-fixing. *Newslandry reported* that “BCCI officials, especially those not in sync with the present set of administrators (read: Jay Shah or Union Sports Minister Anurag Thakur's group) are worried that surveillance could well be done against them to crush the opposition in the board.”

### Office-bearers' power and influence

If there are shades of the Pegasus cyberweapon allegedly deployed by the government in this action, it should not surprise anyone. Today's BCCI mirrors the government of the day; in fact, they are joined at the hip. State-level politicians have always been associated with the BCCI at various levels but never has the top political leadership of the country been involved in running the BCCI so intimately. When global pop star Rihanna tweeted in favour of the protesting farmers, the players and commentators contracted with the BCCI were lined up to support the government on social media.

Two incidents depict the power of the BCCI and the way it is being wielded by Jay Shah. Just before the Indian sports contingent was to leave for Olympics in June, the BCCI (read Jay Shah) decided to provide monetary support of Rs 10 crore for the Indian Olympics Association. Lest there be any doubt, cricket is not an Olympic sport, at least not yet. The money was thus not being spent on promoting cricket, which is mandated by BCCI's charter.

Then in November, the Mumbai branch of the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal (ITAT), in an appeal filed by the BCCI, upheld its arguments of the sports body that even though it was making money through the IPL, the object of promoting cricket remained intact and hence its income ought be exempt from tax. The BCCI's status as a charitable organisation was upheld. This charitable organisation has, since 2014, budgeted [at least Rs 830.32 crore to fight court cases](#). And its lawyer happens to be the government's favourite: the country's solicitor general, Tushar Mehta.

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Along with the involvement of top politicians with cricket administration, we also have the country's top businessmen getting involved in the sport now. Mukesh Ambani's family owns the richest IPL team, Mumbai Indians, and he is [now entering sports broadcasting](#) as well. The Adani group bid for a new IPL team and may still get one, if one of the winners of the auction is disqualified due to their connections with e-betting firms in the UK. The cosy ties between the two richest Indians and BCCI replicate the cronyism displayed by the government with its favoured businessmen.

If you want to see how the country is being run, just look at the BCCI. It treats the country's highest court with disdain, flouts all rules and norms, controls and uses money power to the hilt, and bullies the weak (domestic and women cricketers) and the disadvantaged (scorekeepers and groundsmen). The media is managed through control of access to the most lucrative sport in the country.

Just like the government, the BCCI also maintains total silence on communal attacks on its current and former cricketers, whether it be the incident involving Wasim Jaffer or Mohammad Shami. Current Indian coach Rahul Dravid observed in 2011 that "In this last decade, the Indian team represents, more than ever before, the country we come from - of people from vastly different cultures, who speak different languages, follow different religions, belong to different classes." What then happened with Shami and Jaffer?

|| When will Indian cricketers display a gesture in support of oppressed communities like the Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis?

The diversity argument is perhaps overblown. In his book *Cricket Country: The Untold History of the First All India Team*, Prashant Kidambi has noted that in the first composite Indian team took to the cricket field in the summer of 1911, there were six Parsis, five Hindus, and three Muslims. But the most remarkable feature of the cricket team was the presence of two Dalits in that side — the Palwankar brothers, Baloo and Shivram — who overcame the resistance of upper-caste Hindus to become top cricketers of their time. As Kidambi notes, “the composition of this team shows how in the early 20th century, cricket took on a range of cultural and political meanings within colonial India.” There are questions about the political and cultural meanings of cricket in today's India. The BCCI

instructed its team to take the knee in support of ‘Black Lives Matter’ moment but conveniently ignored the racism ( [highlighted by former West Indian captain Darren Sammy](#) during the IPL) and caste oppression prevalent in Indian cricket. When will Indian cricketers display a gesture in support of oppressed communities like Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis?

The only place where the parallel has failed is in geopolitics and in foreign commentary. The BCCI acts like a bullying superpower in the ICC, getting its way on all issues, and that is something the government cannot do geopolitically. Leave alone China, even India’s smaller neighbours have refused to blindly follow New Delhi. Similarly, while the western press is extremely critical of the Modi government, most foreign commentators kowtow to the BCCI to earn their livelihood with lucrative contracts in IPL and other tournaments featuring India. The government must surely be jealous of the BCCI on this front.

Steve Waugh did us a great disservice when he noted that “In India, cricket isn’t just a sport, it’s a religion.” We know the insidious manner in which religion has been deployed by the government in India. The use of cricket by the BCCI, in cahoots with the government, is no different.