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A New Era for Women’s Cricket or a Poor Sequel?

By: Priyansh

The ongoing Women’s Premier League shows that creating a tournament with a high standard of competition has taken a backseat as gimmickry takes over cricket. Much like the IPL was pitched as an “action-packed reality show”; the WPL is an attempt at tilting the balance in the favour of entertainment.

Not even a week had passed since she turned 20 when Harmanpreet Kaur served notice of her six-hitting ability at the 2009 50-over World Cup. In only her second match for India, Harmanpreet Kaur launched a shot that travelled 91 metres at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Those who witnessed the strike against the hosts Australia probably have not forgotten the brute force of the then unknown Indian batter.

Nobody could believe their eyes that day, not even the officials at the ground. As Harmanpreet told the *Times of India* later, “That six was the turning point. No one believed a girl could hit a ball so high and far. There were apprehensions that I had taken energy-boosting drugs. I underwent a dope test but I came out clean.”

Of course, such high-power shots went on to become a trademark for the current Indian skipper. Harmanpreet Kaur is still recognised for her ability to clear the boundary, but there are many more like her today. In the ongoing Women’s Premier League (WPL), she is ranked joint 13th for sixes (as of March 20). The women’s game has changed in many ways since 2009, and the advent of T20 franchise leagues has only accelerated power hitting. This transformation alone should have been enough to make women’s cricket attractive to organisations looking to cash in on its growing popularity.

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But for the richest board in the world, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), it would appear that the spectacle of entertainment cannot depend on the ability of the cricketers alone. No good time can exist without the mandatory fireworks. Consequently, for the inaugural WPL, the creation of a tournament with a high standard of competition has taken a backseat as gimmickry dilutes the quality of cricket.

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The Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) captain [Sophie Devine](#) has already suggested that the boundaries should be pushed back. Gujarat Giants coach and [former Australian batter Rachael Haynes](#) was in agreement with Devine when she said, “The nature of players at this level and what they are capable of, means that they are able to clear the boundaries easily. With the outfielders being super quick as well, the ball just runs away. If mishits are going for six, that’s probably not quite right. At this level, you have to make sure the batters are hitting it clean. The poor bowlers haven’t been helped at times. Moving forward, the boundaries can be extended a bit.”

The cricketers involved in the WPL are, not surprisingly, keen to play in a contest that is fair to both batters and bowlers. This is not a novel concern. In the opening lines of his most provocative chapter “What is Art?” from *Beyond a Boundary*, published 60 years ago, C.L.R. James laid out an audacious task for himself. He wrote, “I have made great claims for cricket. As firmly as I am able and as is here possible, I have integrated it in the historical movement of the times. The question remains: What is it? Is it mere entertainment or is it an art?”

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The working out of this question remains one of the great intellectual triumphs in relation to cricket. James undertook the task with alacrity, convinced that the artistic characteristics of cricket emerged from the structure of the game and its inherent dynamism. These attributes of the game as analysed by James put cricket on the same pedestal as drama and painting, but the case for the aesthetic appeal of the game derived its energy from his political project that sought to burst the edifice of low and higher art. A turn to the popular appreciation of culture animated James’ arguments, moving the conversation away from the bourgeois tendency to see sport as merely entertainment or leisure that provided respite from labour.

The question of art and entertainment remains central to our understanding of the world of sport. It is not merely a problem for intellectuals, but anyone who cares about sport deeply as the words of cricketers at the WPL attest. Hucksters and administrators too cannot overlook the demand for conceptualising sport as a meaningful human enterprise.

More than four decades after James posed his persuasive response to the question, [Lalit Modi](#) came down heavily on the opposite side of the argument in an interview to *Outlook Business* magazine. When asked whether the Indian Premier League (IPL) could work, Modi said, “The IPL is an action-packed reality show. We are not pitching IPL against cricket; we are pitching it against the prime time (7 to 11 p.m.) of general entertainment channels ... It’s an evening out. A Bollywood movie is three hours. This is a three-hour function. A lot of good food and catering and popcorn and ice cream for the kids.”

While his argument did not match up to the delicacy of a CLR James’ position, Modi’s task was of a different nature. The upcoming administrator and his friends at the International Management Group (IMG), the organisation that was responsible for running the first 13 editions of the IPL until 2021, knew they had a daunting task on their hands. They could not succeed by merely putting the IPL in

competition with international cricket—the project had to aim bigger. The WPL is the latest attempt at tilting the balance in the favour of entertainment.

We now know that the IPL succeeded in fundamentally changing cricket in ways that even its creators possibly could not have imagined. There are many consequences of the IPL that are often stated to outline the deep rupture it has caused in the fabric of the game. The rise of India as the undisputed hegemon in international cricket, the growing depth of players in Indian cricket, the increase in the number of cricketers who became franchise-only players internationally, the player auctions, and the influence of T20 cricket on the popularity and the playing style of other formats tend to make the list. All of these developments are recounted with much glee, especially by those who swear by the audacious project, although some of them are valid only at face value.

Nevertheless, the success of the IPL made another crucial breakthrough. The very model of franchise cricket with its super-rich owners came to be an acceptable model of running cricket. Until the advent of the IPL, the cricket board was the sole purveyor of the sport within a country. The networks of patronage and flourishing corporate alliances had always been the driver of the game, as Richard Cashman traced in his delightful work *Players, Patrons, and the Crowd*, but the nature of that relationship underwent a seismic shift with the emergence of the franchise model.

Now the team owners, who paid astronomical amounts of money, emerged as decisive players in not only running their teams but also the organisation and the future of cricket. As we have seen in recent years, the IPL model has been exported to the West Indies, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, to name a few, while leagues on a similar design are in operation in other popular cricket-playing places such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and England (in the case of The Hundred).

Franchise for Women

It is important to highlight this significant shift because the franchise model has become the accepted wisdom for women’s cricket as well. As the WPL’s inaugural edition rolls on in India, the women’s game itself is being changed in its character and its organisation.

One of the franchise model’s defining features is the process of evaluating a cricketer in financial terms through a public auction. Putting a price on the labour of female workers gives rise to unease that has been hardly expressed within India but cricketers abroad have been more open about their discomfort. On the occasion of the International Women’s Day, [Australian wicketkeeper Alyssa Healy shared her view on the auction](#), “As a player, the WPL auction was really weird. To be sold off like a commodity based on how other people rated your skills was a completely foreign experience. I personally didn’t want a bar of it. It took me back to that terrifying feeling in school PE class when you didn’t want to be the kid who was picked last.”



Of course, this is a sentiment that is not unfamiliar to male cricketers. Former Australian cricketer Lisa Sthalekar, who is working as a mentor at UP Warriorz (one of the WPL franchises), [commented on the potential shift in mood](#) of the women’s game on [the Cricket, Et Cetera podcast](#). Since the auction was conducted during the Women’s T20 World Cup in South Africa which concluded in February, Sthalekar discussed the possibly uncomfortable situation within the Australian camp over that an all-rounder like Ashleigh Gardner

became the most expensive foreign player at Rs. 3.20 crore while prominent leg-spinner Alana King was overlooked by the five teams.

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With the logic of a player auction ensuring that some players get wealthy at the expense of their teammates and counterparts, a difficult conundrum is posed for those in charge of the women's game and those who play it. The historical absence of fair wages in women's cricket means that a redressal of the imbalance has never been more urgent. Yet, cricket administrators have responded to the problem by dividing the sudden riches at their disposal in an unequal and unfair manner.

The popularity of the women's Hundred in England (started in 2021) and the amount of interest, hype, and money generated by the WPL suggests that the enthusiasm for the league is undoubtedly high. The latter's similarities with the IPL, after all, bring expectations that the women's game will no longer have to strive for the privileged place it deserves.

Modi is long gone from the scene of cricket administration but the face of this new world order in women's cricket is Secretary Jay Shah and his coterie of administrators at the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). Ever since the Supreme Court-led reformist plan failed to ensure that previously powerful factions would cease to have an influence in cricketing matters, the Shah section has been the de facto ruling power in Indian cricket.

Welfare alongside Peanuts

With its proximity to the Bharatiya Janata Party government in the centre, the Board has been able to rely on drumming up political and financial support for its various ventures. The Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad (opened after refurbishing in 2020) is one such example. Its two bowling ends are named after the two major "New Capitalists"—as the Ambani and Adani groups are perceptively described by historian Jairus Banaji—who remain committed supporters of the Narendra Modi regime. The venue has become the de facto home ground for Indian cricket as it is the stadium of choice for the IPL finals, and a mandatory spot for marquee visiting sides since its opening.

This flourishing relationship is not just limited to one venue. The bidding process for owning the five WPL franchises fetched US\$572 million dollars (Rs. 4,725 crore) to the BCCI this January. Not surprisingly, the two biggest bidders for the teams were Adani Sportsline for Gujarat Giants (US\$158 million) and the Reliance-owned India Win Sports for Mumbai Indians (US\$111 million). Moreover, the television rights for the first five editions of the WPL were sold to Viacom18, another Reliance subsidiary, at US\$ 117 million. Not to mention, Viacom18 also holds the digital rights for the IPL.

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The "action-packed reality show" then has become the preferred mode of entertainment for those running cricket, helped in no small matter by financial investment by wealthy friends. The suddenly inflated value of women's cricket is of course a result of the hard work of the women who have enriched this game. But the "reality show" now places a different set of demands on those whose labour sustains cricket.

Sthalekar commented that with the proliferation of franchise leagues, it would not be a surprise to see female cricketers having to make tough choices over the games and the tournaments they play. This has been a recurring question in the men's game for a while, and it has already seen the emergence of T20 specialists who do not appear in other formats or have to give up international cricket. The recent retirements of South Africa's Lizelle Lee and the West Indies' Deandra Dottin from international cricket, who is conspicuously absent from the WPL, suggest that franchise cricket may soon take priority for others as well.

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While such pressures are inevitable because of the hectic scheduling of cricket, whether the franchise model will continue to have a familiar impact on the women's game may well rest on factors outside the playing field. The transformative change engineered by T20 cricket was its tilting of the balance towards the individual in a team sport.

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The owners of franchise teams recognise that not only their results but also their media promotion strategy depends on the emergence and cultivation of stars. Rajesh Menon, Vice President and Head at the Royal Challengers Bangalore, [acknowledged this need in a recent statement](#) to Forbes India. “The growth of each sport comes with icons. Look at what Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo has done to football, or Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar or Virat Kohli has done to cricket. We would want our players to acquire such stature,” Menon told the magazine ahead of the WPL.

The future will bring new faces and stars but it was the growing popularity of the current generation of female cricketers that forced the hand of the cricket administrators. Until its sudden embrace of a T20 league, the BCCI had shown immense reluctance to support the women’s game. While the calls for a WPL have existed for a long time, the relationship between the board and women’s cricket can be best defined as negligent.

The women’s calendar has been long characterised by yawning gaps between games rather than a steady stream of contests. Even though men’s cricket resumed in 2020 following a short-disruption caused by Covid-19, the Indian women’s side did not play a game for a year after making the 2020 T20 World Cup final. While the Board pulled out all stops to ensure that its favourite child, the IPL, was able to complete its 2020 season in the UAE, [Indian women cricketers remained out of the loop](#) without any communication.

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As if the silence was not bad enough, it [emerged in May 2021](#) that the BCCI had withheld the prize money won by the women’s team at the 2020 T20 World Cup in Australia worth US\$ 500,000. Only after uproar on social media and pressure from the international press did the Board release the funds. Such callousness is hopefully a thing of the past, but misdirections persist.

Last October, the BCCI announced equal pay for the Indian men and women’s cricket sides. However, a careful reading of the statement revealed that while both sets of players would receive the same match fees across formats, the massive gap in the retainer amount for players, which causes the biggest disparity in wages, remained.

All of these incidents suggest that the particularities of women’s cricket do not receive due appreciation by the people in charge of running the game in India. Although the profile of women’s cricket is much bigger today when compared to its status in 2006—the year when the BCCI was forged to merge with the Women’s Cricket Association of India (WCAI) to meet the International Cricket Council’s (ICC) mandatory requirements—it is likely to be organised as the poorer cousin of men’s cricket.

There are reasonable grounds to worry for the future when we consider the queasy mood of the international game for men with the “Big Three” (India, England, and Australia) calling the shots while the rest of the nations become more financially dependent upon them. Domestically, the arrival of the WPL does not necessarily mean that the welfare of women’s cricketers will be the primary objective of the Board. In the case of men, despite promising compensation for the cancelled 2020 domestic season owing to Covid-19, the BCCI did not begin to [disburse a part of the funds to first-class cricketers until 2022](#), which left [some with no source of income for months](#) at end.

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Player welfare, of course, is an afterthought when, in the long tussle between art and entertainment, it is the latter that seems to have won the day. When Jay Shah announced the sale of the WPL franchises in January of this year, he termed the decision to start the league as a “revolution in women’s cricket” that “paves the way for a transformative journey ahead not only for our women cricketers but for the entire sports fraternity.”

Making great claims for cricket has a long history, as *Beyond a Boundary* reminds us. But the revolution and the transformations that were claimed by Secretary Shah are defined by a desire to repeat the follies of the recent past, which are a legacy of the IPL. As far as stirring visions go, the latest foray by cricket’s aristocrats entertains very little and bears no resemblance to art.

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