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## A Cricket World Cup by India, for India, and about India

By: Sharda Ugra

*"The cricket played by the Indian team in CWC2023 has been the best among the cricket World Cups that India has hosted, thanks to the soaring performance of its players and the memories they have created. It has also been the most small-hearted and petty of the World Cups that India has hosted."*

Like we could do with every sporting mega-event, think of this ICC Cricket World Cup 2023 (CWC23) as a Venn diagram.

Cricket is at its core, for the ICC, for broadcast rights holders, for the TV audience and the fans of the game. Overlapping with cricket is the nuts and bolts of the tournament: its operation, delivery, image, presentation, and identity of what the 2023 World Cup was made out to be. Then the third set, that aims to maximise the space shared with the cricket (here, the Indian cricket team) and use the delivery, presentation, image, narratives of the event as delivery vehicles of political messaging. Like, for example, what was done with the 1995 rugby World Cup in South Africa, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, or Qatar's FIFA 2022 World Cup.

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Get the sport right at the heart of the competition and the rest disappears behind the confetti and firework smoke, drowned out by triumphal music, closing ceremonies, hashtags, clips, reels, memes, posts. It is what is due to happen with CWC23 over the next few days.

The world's cricketers have delivered with runs, wickets, and drama. None more so than the Indian cricket team who have competed with cut-glass efficiency never seen before from teams of our past. They have done so in irrepressible style, individuality, skills, joy, dignity, and lashings of magic. Win Sunday's final – and India will be monstrously hard to beat – and the other components of the Venn diagram will be treated as irrelevant, baseless, can't-bother-don't-care, work-of-imagination.

Yet what happens on the margins around the cricket is what must be put down in words before the images and emotion overwhelm memory. Everything else will always have a YouTube clip.

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This is the fourth time India and the BCCI have hosted a cricket World Cup, their first as solo host. India and Indian cricket were very different entities in 1987 when the BCCI ensured the World Cup left England, sharing hosting rights with Pakistan because we did not have enough top-quality international grounds then. The post-liberalisation 1996 World Cup marked the first time we heard the silence of an Indian stadium when an opponent struck a boundary or took a wicket. In 2011, Indian crowds turned up, loud and loyal, packed in from ball one, a profusion of colour, noise, spontaneity, celebrating madly after India won the cup after 28 years and then went into the IPL within a week.

This World Cup, in its presentation for Indians, in television coverage and organisation appears to have had no space for anybody else. In what was meant to be a feast of international 50-over cricket, the hosts have put out a re-heated IPL dish slathered with *deshbhakti* sauce. Why, in the video of the official song, *JashanJashanBole* there's no room for cricketers or cricket footage either. The song features a film star, a TV host, folk dressed as fans and players. Instead of capturing the real energy of Indian cricket, its fans, and our music, what we have instead is the tacky re-creation of the a train called the One-Day Express, shot in a studio made of CGI, cardboard, and plywood. Talk about a shabby metaverse.

At every venue, ICC planted a few sets of two volunteers around the boundary waving flags supporting the two teams with random slogans on them. Because, well, the television world feed just could not find flags of other countries being joyously waved in the stands. The *Sydney Morning Herald* told us about, "[How India Took the World Out of the World Cup.](#)"

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This is both by accident and design. Except, the accident of slacking off over the schedule announcement or ticketing timetables was accompanied by a philosophy: CWC23 could be treated like an Indian wedding where everything would fall together miraculously at the last minute. Which it did not for several reasons. No state association knew until the release of the schedule whether they were hosting World Cup matches or not, leading to a rescheduling less than two months before opening night.

There was no question of attracting fans from overseas or filling stadia with Indian fans who wanted to watch non-India games. The total number of fans supporting other teams at CWC23 matches would perhaps not be over 1,000. Include NRIs and OCIs, maybe we are looking at 5,000, tops. If CWC23 was meant to sell the familiar 'new India' trope of a confident, welcoming nation which mixed modernity with its *vishwagurunes*, it failed to even shift tickets.

After Brazil's 2014 FIFA World Cup, [official figures said the event had attracted over a million overseas visitors](#). Even if that is an exaggeration, even one-tenth of the figure is tens of thousands more than what the CWC23 bothered to pull in. [The 2016 Rio Olympics foreign visitor figures were pegged at 572,961](#); at our kindest estimate, CWC23's is 1% of that number. The beauty of it is that the *vishwagurus* of world cricket do not need to bother count.

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This is because the physical fan – Indian or foreign – is not a BCCI person of interest. Tickets went put on sale through sporadic social media announcements. Sales closed on *BookMyShow* at rapid speed only to have tickets pop up on WhatsApp groups offering them at ten times their sticker price. For the BCCI, only media-right-holders matter, and around that, eyeballs on screens. It is why the Indian team played on Diwali, not the day before or after – “for maximum views.” The matches paid the closest attention to were India games. Broadcaster Star inserted Indian victory clips in non-India games, as if viewers would switch off if they were not reminded that India were whipping the competition.

With *vasudhaiv kutumbakam* set aside, when it came to the other schtick, *atithi devo bhava*, what CWC23 also reflected was the puzzling inability of the BCCI to get the foreign ministry and the home ministry to sort out visas for some competing teams. Given that the most powerful man in the BCCI, Secretary Jay Shah, has a direct line to the second-most powerful man in the country, Home Minister Amit Shah, the delays were mystifying.

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Never mind fans or even journalists, it was the competing teams that endured visa delays. Visiting journalists from three nations – not Pakistan – have told me about turning up at Indian embassies in their country, being asked (“very nicely”) what they were going to write about during their visit to India. Some were asked to sign an undertaking that they would not write anything else about India other than the cricket.

In CWC23, the ICC's top leadership engaged with the BCCI not like the sport's governing body, but instead like as its many other sponsors or stakeholders do — waiting for responses, facing silences, tackling decision changes. The ICC CEO's office failed to manage timelines but had its 50 strong on-ground staff fight daily fires and push back when they could. It is unlikely those working long hours to get matches ticked off across the venues will get any of the ICC's \$1m a year put into the BCCI's account as part of on-ground Local Organizing Committee (LOC) salaries/costs when hosting a World Cup. The BCCI have chosen to have no visible tournament director to manage LOC. [Instead they gave their five office bearers charge of different venues to form sub-committees](#).

What about that last bit of the Venn diagram – the political project? Let's start with the plan (later cancelled) to have the Indians wear a one-time all-orange uniform in the match against Pakistan at the Narendra Modi Stadium. India vs Pakistan, Hindu orange vs Muslim green, pick your team. Get it? It was not the first time the Indians have dressed in sizeable orange. At the 2019 World Cup they wore a half-orange shirt (sleeves and back) against England on UNICEF's Day for Children, with the kit later donated for charity auction.

Except UNICEF's CWC Day for Children this time was 2 November, when India played Sri Lanka. Where a saffron uniform would not have packed the punch as it would have had against Pakistan. That was the end of the all-orange kit.

When the 'Ram Siya Ram' chorus from the film *Adipurush* played out over the PA system at the India vs Pakistan game, complaints from the Indians amongst the tournament organisers got the clip off the CWC playlist. The first time the tune showed up was at the India vs Pakistan Asia Cup match in Kandy and annoyed visiting Indian fans.

The most acerbic response to devious extras of organisation and crowd response came from the most unexpected of sources. Writing in a syndicated column, two-time World Cup winner and BJP MP Gautam Gambhir found the low turnouts during non-India games “abysmal,” making him wonder, “if we really love this game or we just love Indian superstars and the frenzy around them.” Maybe the real fan finds it hard to get tickets. Or maybe the hosts did not bother thinking about marketing, selling, pushing non-India games because well, it just was not worth the hassle.

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Gambhir was also angry with crowds at India matches booing and heckling foreign cricketers. In Delhi, it was Afghan Naveen ul Haq for standing up to Virat Kohli during an IPL match. Earlier, in Ahmedabad, Pakistan captain Babar Azam was booed during the toss. After being dismissed, Mohammed Rizwan was *jai-shree-ram*-ed by a section of the crowd all the way back to the dressing room. In the same column, Gambhir said, “It is unthinkable that a society that gave the world the very thought of “Whole World is a Family” is sounding so parochial.”

In Bangalore, a policeman stopped the lone Pakistan fan from cheering for his cricket team. Gambhir knows that the demonisation of Pakistan and the othering of the Indian Muslim is central to the ethos of his party. That this should turn up at the World Cup should not surprise even those bubble-wrapped inside Indian cricket's golden cage.

It is now being said that when India wins on Sunday – the chances of ‘if’ are now negligible – there are going to be victory parades around four Indian cities, with at least 10 of the World Cup champs around to soak in the love. Some from the triumphant Indian team may be on India duty for the five-match T20I series against Australia, which begins on 23 November, four days after the World Cup final.

This has been the best of the cricket World Cups that India has hosted, thanks to the soaring performance of the Indian team and the memories they have created. It has also been the most small-hearted and petty of the World Cups that India has hosted. Gambhir wrote “We need to wear a more neutral outlook if we have to win the Olympic Games bid for 2036. Any deviation from this can invite a negative mindset towards India as a host for the Games.” Well, GG, it's just too late.

The next Men's Cricket World Cup coming our way is CWC2031. Maybe we should hand over hosting rights to some other country because it is obvious the words ‘World’ and ‘Cup’ mean something else to the BCCI. The BCCI could just focus on staging bigger and bigger IPLs. That way, the DJs will play only your songs without grumpy complaints, crank journalists will not complain about inconsequential, and India will always win.

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