THE BRITISH-ASIAN QUESTION

Winds of change blow ever stronger

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At Sharjah in November, English cricket's most ethnically representative team of the 21st century took the field. Since the ECB themselves acknowledge that British Asians make up almost 40% of recreational cricketers in England and Wales, the historic selection of Moeen Ali, Adil Rashid and Samit Patel for the Third Test against Pakistan was not before time.

It should have been the culmination of a concerted and inclusive campaign to tap into the talents of a vast and under-represented community. Instead, the trio existed as an anomaly on the team sheet. Their simultaneous selection owed more to a separate, equally unresolved, English cricket crisis: an alarming dearth of Test-quality spinners. That's not to say the selections were not on merit, nor to play down their significance. But their route to recognition had been circuitous: Patel and Rashid had both made their England debuts in the previous decade, yet remained on the fringes, while Ali had been ignored until the age of 27, and owed his selection to the weaker of his two suits.

Yet, by England's next Test, at Durban on Boxing Day, only Ali remained. It was a case of as you were: the path for Asian cricketers to England's Test team – such as it exists at all – is as underdeveloped as the inner-city parks on which so many of their communities play.

Take Springfield Park, a publicly owned cricket field on the banks of the River Lea in Stamford Hill. It is a picturesque part of one of London's more diverse neighbourhoods, but the facilities are spartan. Teams get changed on a pile of logs by the northern end of the pitch, or under the trees at cow corner, where Orthodox Jews and canal-boat-dwelling refuseniks form the bulk of the passing spectators.

It is not the sort of place you would expect to encounter a No. 1-ranked international batsman. However, Zubair Ghardiwala, the star player for GB Strikers – winners of the North East London League – is a talented and hard-hitting opener whose final act of the 2015 season was to score 55 of the 58 needed to beat the Camel pub team, and secure a nine-wicket win in the space of six overs. Zubair's claim to fame lies in the Last Man Stands format – an eight-a-side competition endorsed by the ECB and now played in 11 countries by more than 40,000 cricketers. His highest score in the 20-over format is 151 not out, while his ranking stems from a career strike-rate that is a shade under three a ball. On the back of his exploits, North London Muslim CC – GB Strikers' parent club – were last summer crowned regional LMS champions. Yet no one expects anything to come of Zubair's exploits. "We've made a few enquiries, but no one has approached him," says Haroon Ali, NLM's colts manager. "To be honest, he's a bit old now, 27 or 28."

Gareth Copley, Getty Images

Step in the right direction: England's three spinners – Moeen Ali, Samit Patel and Adil Rashid – take the field at Sharjah, November 2015.

Since their foundation in the 1980s, NLM have been a fertile source of British-Asian talent, despite a hiatus in the early 2000s, when their ground was compulsorily purchased to make way for the Olympic Park, and the club was temporarily disbanded. In 2009, Maaz Haffeji, then 22, captained his side in the inaugural Wisden City Cup, and weeks later was bowling in the nets to the Australians before the Lord's Test.

But, with no obvious pathway from park cricket to the professional game, Haffeji – like so many other British Asians – was always playing on borrowed time. "He went over to Twickenham and played Premier Division for a while," says Haroon. "But he soon realised his time was over, so he left cricket. We've produced three or four guys with real talent, guys who have captained London Schools, but we've always known the probability of any of them going on and progressing is tough."

These tales are echoed up and down the country. For 40 years, Asian cricket in England has been as marginalised as it has been ubiquitous. Enthusiasm alone has allowed its league structures to thrive as a subculture, in spite of the indifference of the mainstream – a situation diametrically opposite to the crisis besetting the English club scene.

It took a devastating player survey in November 2014 to ram home the concerns that every club cricketer in the land had been feeling for years. Traditional clubs were going out of business at a rate to rival traditional pubs. A year-on-year fall of 64,000 players went hand in hand with the fact that 5% of matches were conceded because one or both sides were unable to raise a team. Society, we are told, is time-poor, and the ECB know urgent action is required to arrest the seepage of interest.

John Bolloten Photography

On the fringes: scorers at Great Horton Church CC in the Bradford Mutual Sunday School League.

"We recognise that the landscape has changed," says Gordon Hollins, the board's chief operating officer. "It used to be a captive market: you were told what your sports were, and got on with them. Now there are some 35 different sporting options available for kids aged seven to 17, not to mention laptops and other distractions." Hollins has around him a team of like-minded progressive thinkers, including a director of participation and growth, the Australian Matt Dwyer, whose championing of the Big Bash helped reinvigorate spectator interest in his native country. However, the most obvious solution to the participation crisis has been staring the sport in the face since the earliest stirrings of the Asian league structure in the 1970s.

Asian cricket, wrote Mike Marqusee in 1998, "represents an immense potential resource for English cricket, provided that English cricket is prepared to redefine its notions about what constitutes 'Englishness'". Back then, the sport – still a year away from admitting women to the Long Room at Lord's, let alone immigrants to the inner sanctum – clearly wasn't ready. That year, academic study by Ian McDonald and Sharda Ugra posited that mainstream leagues "hid behind league regulations and cultural stereotypes… to prevent the admission of black and Asian clubs into the official leagues".

In theory, the creation of the ECB in 1997 as a single unified body for all levels of cricket in England and Wales ought to have been the first step towards tackling that disconnect. And yet those cultural differences have been allowed to calcify, leaving a legacy of mistrust that cannot be resolved simply with a change of attitude at the top.

As recently as November 2015, Ali Cricket Club in Merton, south London, were expelled from the Surrey League, only weeks after being presented with the League Championship Cup for the second year running. Their crime was

to have been awarded zero points for sportsmanship by the other nine teams. Separately, the ECB have been threatened with legal action by an east London team owner who accused them of racism following the barring of his club from the National Club Championship. The lack of a home ground for his wandering side, who wish to remain anonymous, meant they failed to attain the ECB Clubmark accreditation required to continue in the competition.

Such threats exist as a legacy of previous decisions, but Hollins is phlegmatic about the game's current direction. "Are we doing the right thing?" he asks. "If we are, and a lawsuit still comes in, then we will deal with it. I'd be much more worried if we weren't trying."

Nevertheless, the issue of ground ownership is arguably the single biggest stumbling block for the acceptance of Asian teams into the mainstream. It is especially galling given how many village teams with pavilions and grounds to maintain are struggling to fulfil their fixtures. Some administrators, however, believe the sport is in the process of catching up with its needs.

"Communities become communities because they are comfortable in their surroundings," says Gulfraz Riaz, the development manager of the Club Cricket Conference. "It is a fact that traditional Sunday cricket is declining and grounds are becoming available. So, if you have a South-Asian community on your doorstep who are willing to pay the going rate to play on a grass wicket and leave it as they found it, surely that represents a fantastic integration opportunity."

Reports of senior management trying out turbans

Riaz is the driving force behind the National Asian Cricket Council, the nascent organisation that is seeking to present a unified front to a governing body who are finally ready to listen. His efforts began in the summer of 2012, when he toured the M25 to gauge interest among the many, disparate Asian leagues. It takes a rare cause to persuade all of South Asia's competing cultures to speak with one voice, and the urgency of his work reflects the recognition that the credibility of cricket is at stake.

In 2014, Riaz arranged a one-day seminar at Edgbaston, attended by representatives of 65 Asian clubs from all creeds, cultures and corners of the country. Within five hours, the majority of attendees were agreeing in principle to the NACC's formation. At the Asian Cricket Awards in October 2015, Hollins made a solemn but significant pledge about the partnership the ECB were ready to forge.

There have been hiccups and headaches, with frustrations on both sides about what might constitute – as Hollins puts it – the "low-hanging fruit" that would enable a greater mutual understanding. There has been cynicism, too, about some of the ECB's attempts to fast-track a culture of inclusivity – among them eyebrow-raising reports of senior management trying out turbans for size in a quest for better cultural insight.

Sadi Khan, the founder of Khan Noble, the cultural and religious consultants to whom the ECB have turned, defends the board's efforts. "Inclusion is about people, and if you don't understand the people who make up the second-largest population in the country, how are you going to get them to buy into what you

are doing?" she says. "We all learn French at school, but how many of us know how to say good morning to our Bangladeshi neighbours, or even which culture they belong to in the first place?"

Hollins asks: "Would we, in hindsight, have started this process ten years ago? Of course we would. But good things start with rhetoric. Before you can take action, you have to get people to believe you are serious. Only then can we see results."

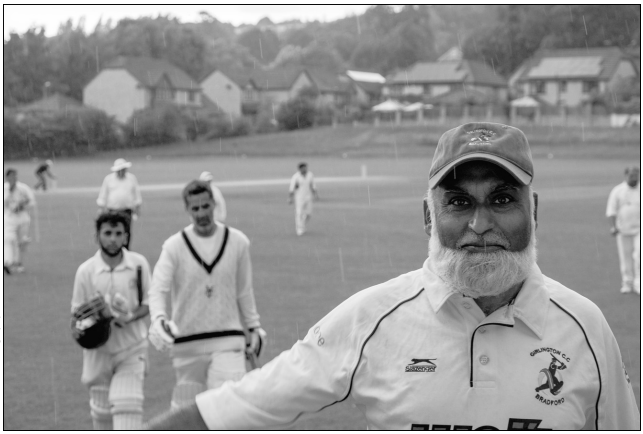
Money, inevitably, was crucial in confirming the shift in the ECB's attitude. In the wake of the London Olympics, Sport England provided cricket with a grant of £20m (with a further £7.5m going to the Chance to Shine charity), largely with a view to "harnessing the inherent appeal of the game within South-Asian communities". The challenge was clear: it would no longer suffice for the ECB to pay lip service to the notion that they represented all cricket in all communities. A proper strategy was needed, and that has manifested itself in the selection of five target cities – London, Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester and Leeds – with high Asian populations that have already benefited from Sport England's four-year investment. Among the most notable projects is the £5.5m refurbishment of Yorkshire's Bradford Park Avenue ground, primarily as a community hub for the city's burgeoning league scene, but also with a view to regaining its first-class status in time for the 2019 season.

Even so, with the next round of funding in 2017, the onus is on the ECB to demonstrate a return on that investment. For that reason, some at the NACC have argued that "the ECB need us more than we need them" – though the relationship is changing, and Hollins readily admits that a board in need of good PR have to earn the trust of those they wish to represent.

But there is an acceptance within the Asian communities that some of the fault of the past 40 years lies in their own intransigence. Riaz is adamant that, if they now miss their chance to embed themselves in the mainstream culture, there is no guarantee of another. "It's too easy to blame the ECB for all of Asian cricket's problems. There's no doubt they shoulder a lot of the blame but, equally, there are some guys who have been in charge of their leagues for 25 years. What have they done for their young players in that time? Have they ever picked up the phone to the counties, or found out when the trials are? It's a two-way thing, and they have a duty of care."

He sees alarming parallels with the fate of Caribbean cricket in the UK, a demographic which had a big head start on its Asian counterpart, not to mention the gift of a once-in-a-generation Test team to inspire new recruits. In 2016, that culture is all but extinct. African-Caribbean kids play football, rather than cricket (the name Walcott is synonymous with an Arsenal and England forward, not a great West Indies batsman), and Riaz warns that the same could happen to the Asian communities. "If you fail to invest in your junior set-ups, you basically have 50 years before that community disappears. The Caribbean elders admit it to this day: they held the game too tightly, and their kids went off to play football, athletics and basketball.

"It is only a matter of time before we get the first British-born Asian football star," he adds, citing the emergence of Aston Villa's Easah Suliman, captain of England Under-17, and a player who has already taken advice from Moeen



John Balloten Photography

Generation game: experience and youth help cricket flourish at Girlington CC in Bradford.

Ali. "When that happens, think of the parents, the taxi drivers and restaurant workers. Will they encourage their sons to play football, with low overheads and massive prospects, or cricket, which needs expensive equipment and offers limited prospects? It will be a no-brainer."

The question of cricket's prospects is arguably the biggest obstacle to the ECB's ambitions. It stems once again from the rootlessness of many Asian leagues, but manifests itself in the county coaching structures that have been conditioned to know what they like, and like what they know. County cricket's current bias, for instance, is towards the 6% of the population privately educated; the proliferation of South African-born cricketers on the circuit is another factor. Yet the volume of Asians in the recreational game means more than a handful ought by now to be finding their way through the system.

Inevitably, mutterings of institutional racism are rarely far from the surface. One Asian hopeful reportedly turned up to a county trial to be told by the director of cricket: "You've got six balls to impress me, son." It cannot help, either, that many of the coaches who decide on the year-group squads also provide extra tuition to those kids whose parents have sufficiently deep pockets.

But Mohammad Arif, an ECB coach-education tutor who also works as an Under-14 assistant coach at Warwickshire, says the race card should be used with care. "Some Asian parents believe their kids are a lot more talented than they actually are," he says. "The managing of expectations is crucial." Warwickshire, who recently added two more South-Asian coaches – Mo Sheikh and Kadeer Ali – to their roster of full-time staff, have also introduced a feedback form to help triallists who don't make the grade. "Rejection is rejection, whether you are South Asian or not," says Arif. "But constructive criticism is most important when you fail."

Ultimately, the future of English recreational cricket will depend on the cultural alignment between the old ways and the new. But if, as the ECB and NACC both acknowledge, the long-term aim is for such Asian-focused initiatives to become redundant, then the experience of one club in Oxfordshire provides a ray of hope. Ten years ago, Checkendon CC – a traditional village team on the outskirts of Henley – had been staring into the abyss. "We were failing to draw new members and to attract youth in a rich area of south Oxfordshire, where a good handful of equal-level teams were all vying for a diminishing pool of cricketers," says Stewart Manning, their captain.

The answer to Checkendon's prayers lay in the burgeoning IT industry of nearby Reading, where a wave of first-generation Indian immigrants were starting new lives in an otherwise alien culture, and regarded cricket as a means of embedding themselves. And they encountered a culture that was delighted, not to mention desperate, to embrace them.

A decade down the line, the needs of both parties have been handsomely met. The pool of available cricketers is now a harmonious 50–50 split of white and Asian players, one of whom, Vikas Chib, is the first-team captain; his young family have made the club the focus of their new lives.

"These guys grew up playing with tennis balls on dustbowls," says Manning. "They love the fact that they now belong to a lowly grassroots village club, and they love the associated traditions. They soak up the English culture, then give it back in terms of club days, when their families produce vats and vats of various curries, and laugh at how little chilli we can cope with."

Chib confirms the benefits cut both ways. "If it wasn't for the club I'm not sure we'd have taken the decision to make our home in England," he says. "We love the social life that cricket gives us. It has really bound us to the culture, and it has opened so many doors."

Such tales are a reminder of the difference that sport in general, and cricket in particular, can make to British society. "No other recreational pastime can compete with cricket in that regard," says Hollins. The responsibility on the ECB's shoulders is as vast as the opportunity that awaits them – as long as they can work the common ground that has been lying uncultivated for so long.

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