**Reviving Pakistani Cricket**

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Today, a pressing concern for Pakistanis is the consistent decline of the Pakistani cricket team’s reputation on the global stage. There was a time in the 1980s and 1990s when the Pakistani team was considered one of the top teams internationally in Test, One-Day, and even T20 formats. This golden era saw Pakistan produce legendary cricketers who inspired millions and brought glory to the nation. However, the current scenario is markedly different, prompting an urgent need for introspection and reform.

The Impact of Terrorism on Pakistani Cricket

Undoubtedly, Pakistan’s cricket has been significantly impacted by terrorism in the country during the 1990s and 2000s. The nation was banned from hosting international games, and overseas teams refused to visit due to terror threats. Two major incidents led to a complete ban on international games in Pakistan. In 2009, a bomb blast targeted a bus carrying the Sri Lankan team in Lahore, and in 2002, New Zealand cancelled its tour following a terror attack in Karachi. Despite these challenges, first-class games continued domestically, and Pakistan hosted international matches in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Therefore, the decline in the standard and professionalism of the Pakistani national team cannot be solely attributed to external factors.

Talent and Innovation Amidst Adversity

Apart from the unstable conditions in the country, the primary reason for the national team’s struggles in modern competitive cricket, especially in the T20 format, is not a lack of talent, skills, or passion among individual players. Pakistani cricketers participate in various international leagues and clubs, and Pakistani-origin youth can be seen in many overseas teams. Pakistani cricketers are known for their innovative techniques in bowling and batting. For instance, street boys in Karachi invented tape-ball cricket in the 1960s, which has since gained popularity outside Pakistan. Despite this, the Pakistani Cricket Board (PCB) has not shown interest in promoting tape-ball cricket, whereas countries like England, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, and the UAE host private tape-ball competitions. Cricket NSW (Australia), with support from the NSW Government, has even launched a tape-ball cricket competition in Australia on 29 June 2024.

Structural Issues within Pakistani Cricket

The core issue with Pakistani cricket at the national level is a lack of professionalism, a fragmented management structure at district, city, state, and national levels, and rampant politics and corruption in top management.

This politicization of cricket administration hinders the development of a cohesive strategy for nurturing talent and building a competitive team. The frequent changes in management disrupt continuity and impede the implementation of long-term plans. Furthermore, favouritism and nepotism in player selection undermine the merit-based system essential for building a strong team.

Lessons from India’s Cricketing Success

In the past, before the advent of T20 cricket, Pakistan was ahead of India in Test and One-Day cricket. However, the last 30 to 40 years have seen a transformation in cricket dynamics due to modern trends, technology, digital communication, and extensive video coverage of games. Cricket has evolved from a traditional gentleman’s game into an international, profitable entity. Cricket-loving nations have adapted their strategies, transforming the sport into a thriving industry with T20 leagues that attract global viewers and generate significant revenue.

India serves as a prime example of successful adaptation. With a population of nearly 1.5 billion across 28 states, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has understood and catered to the growing demands of fans. India has developed over 30 new cricket venues in the past five years, in addition to the 60 existing stadiums. Today, India boasts over 100 first-class cricket grounds and stadiums, along with more than 10,000 cricket academies of varying levels, many run by national and international coaches.

In 2007, the BCCI launched the Indian Premier League (IPL), which has become the largest T20 premier league in the world. The IPL offers international cricketing opportunities to both Indian and overseas players, with players earning the highest salaries compared to other competitions worldwide. The IPL generated over $10 billion in 2023, with a 28% annual increase in profits. Cricket in India has thus become a lucrative industry, not just a sport.

The Commercialization of Cricket

T20 cricket has revolutionized the game, introducing commercialization, increased competitiveness, and substantial financial incentives. Following the IPL’s success, other cricketing nations have introduced their own T20 premier leagues, such as Pakistan’s PSL, England’s EPL, Bangladesh’s BPL, Sri Lanka’s Lanka Premier League, and the West Indies’ Caribbean Premier League. Australia launched the Big Bash League (BBL) in 2011, comprising eight teams from major cities.

While India has developed cricketing talent through its robust first-class cricket system, Pakistan’s national team includes players who have only played in the PSL, bypassing first-class cricket. This reflects a lack of vision, corruption, and favouritism within the PCB, and PSL operators exacerbated by the political nature of its leadership appointments.

The Way Forward for Pakistani Cricket

To reclaim its former glory, Pakistani cricket must embrace professionalism, merit, and effective management. This involves a comprehensive overhaul of the PCB to eliminate political interference and ensure appointments are based on merit and cricketing knowledge. Implementing a transparent and merit-based selection process is crucial to nurturing genuine talent and fostering a competitive team environment from the grass-root to the top.

Investing in grassroots cricket is essential to identify and develop young talent. Establishing more cricket academies with qualified coaches and providing state-of-the-art facilities will help nurture the next generation of cricketers. Additionally, reviving domestic cricket and ensuring that players have ample opportunities to play first-class matches will strengthen the national team’s foundation.

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