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CRICKET IN SOCIAL HISTORY

ZULFIKAR GHOSE

Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin

Playing Out the Old English Obsession with Class

On the cricket field, English discrimination was not a case of racist bigotry as much as the old English obsession with class. But finding employment in England in the mid-twentieth century was fraught with racial prejudice.

The first international cricket team to tour India after the end of the British Raj in 1947 was the West Indies. There being no such country as the West Indies, the team was composed of players from the English Caribbean islands and Guyana, all still under British rule where the white ruling class enjoyed exclusive business privileges while the dark-skinned natives, and the brown-skinned workers who had been transported halfway across the world from India, performed the slave labor for the white rulers. Just as in India, the non-English population in the West Indies had learned to play the English game of cricket, and what's more, many of the natives were extraordinarily good at it, playing with a flamboyant style that was thrilling to watch. And so, when it came to selecting a team to represent the West Indies, it inevitably had to include black players, and there not being enough Caribbean-born Englishmen as good, the team came to be dominated by the dark natives. Though two of the names of the black players in the team to tour India—

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Clyde Walcott and Everton Weekes—remain vividly alive in the minds of cricket connoisseurs, few will know the name of the white English gentleman, John Goddard, who captained the West Indies on their 1948–49 tour of India.

I was a thirteen-year-old cricket fanatic, like any other Indian boy, living in Bombay as one of a cosmopolitan group that included Bengalis, Punjabis, Tamils, Maharashtrians of different religions—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, Sikh—that gave such a united democratic air to Bombay, all united by our love of cricket. We had had little opportunity to see the game at the national level. The British, in their quiet quest of keeping the country divided, had introduced a tournament based on religion, with each team made up of young men of a particular religion, which inevitably led to the final being played between the two dominant religions, Hindus and Muslims. It was enough to spark tempers flaring, even riots. By comparison, the game played by the white Sahibs back home was presented as calm, cool-headed and gentle.

So, when the West Indies came for their 1948–49 tour, it was a thrill for me to go see them play in Bombay's Brabourne Stadium. I could only afford to see one day's play, which coincided with the West Indians going out to bat. At one point in the afternoon, at the fall of a wicket, out walked Clyde Walcott, head held high in his maroon cap, a large muscular body striding out to the crease. An over later, seeing him step back and drive the ball like we'd never seen it struck before, sending it smashing to the long-off boundary, or stepping forward to another delivery to send it sailing over the fence, he had the crowd roaring and clapping thunderously with each stroke. He hit a hundred in ninety-eight minutes. I've seen hundreds of matches since then and watched many great players, but the image of Walcott striking the ball remains the most vivid in my mind over seventy years later. For the crowd of Indian spectators, seeing a black player perform in such a magnificent style seemed like an affirmation of our independence. For us cheering Indians, it was like watching the British rule being crushed to the



ground. John Goddard, the captain, must have made an appearance at one stage that day but not even his shadow remains in my mind.

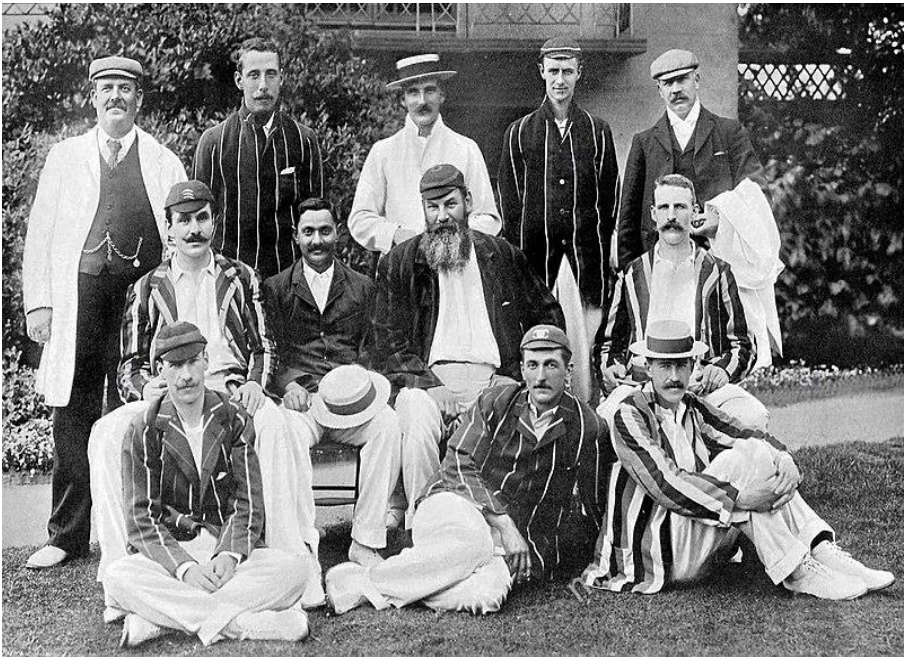
A mediocre cricketer, Goddard's appointment was in line with the long-standing English practice of choosing an upperclass gentleman as a leader, a practice that had been followed by the pre-independence Indian team that had toured England in the summer of 1946 captained by the princely Nawab of Pataudi. After the 1948-49 tour of India, Goddard led the West Indies on tours of England (1950) and Australia/New Zealand (1951-52). These were the tours which dazzled cricket followers and imprinted in our minds the imagery of stylish batting brilliance and an amazing bowling subtlety by the colored players the likes of which we'd never seen from the white Sahibs.

When Goddard led the West Indies to England in 1950 and the English saw the three great batsmen known as the W's—Walcott, Worrell and Weekes—and the incredible spin bowlers, Sonny Ramadhin and Alf Valentine, they had to admit that their former colonial subjects were not a bunch of junglees after all.

It is important to note, however, that the English discrimination was not a case of racist bigotry as much as the old English obsession with class. They still strongly held the belief that an Old Etonian, even one who had been a third-rate student, was qualified to be a leader, for he was a cultivated gentleman as anyone could tell seeing he wore the Old School tie. Cricket had always been a gentleman's game. It cost money even to dress as a cricketer to say nothing of having to buy bats, balls, gloves, pads, etc., whereas the people's game of football required only one ball—even an old one would do—for twenty-two pairs of not-always-booted feet to kick around.

Long before Test matches between countries began to be played, the most important cricket match in England was the annual Gentlemen vs. Players, the first of which was played in 1806. Even 150 years later (when as a schoolboy I saw the match at Lord's) one was awestruck when the Gentlemen took the field: we had been brain-washed to believe that here

were noble young men who played for the love of the game while the Players were wretched professionals for whom the game offered a living and therefore had to be merely a job that had to be done. Until the 1960s, when the Gentlemen vs. Players event was abandoned, all English sports had been played by teams composed of amateurs and paid professionals. For tennis players, to have qualified to play at Wimbledon was supposed to be payment enough.



The Gentlemen XI vs. The Players at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, 1899. Back row: (L-R): Sherwin (Umpire), W.M. Bradley, A.C. MacLaren, C.L. Townsend, West (Umpire). Middle row (L-R): G. MacGregor, K.S. Ranjitsinhji, W.C. Grace, R.M. Poore. Front row (L-R): F.S. Jackson, C.B. Fry, D.L.A. Jepson. Image, by the courtesy of Wikipedia, is in the public domain.



Then came the dramatic change that abolished amateurism. It was triggered by the worldwide popularity of the new medium of television. Where the sports spectators spending a day at Lord's or at Wimbledon had at most been in the thousands, the same matches were now watched by millions in their homes, generating enormous profits for the television sponsors. All the old prejudices, whether of race or class, collapsed before capitalism which sat smiling like Ganesa or Plutus, while worshipping humanity filed past throwing bundles of bank notes in its lap.



The author, Zulfikar Ghose, was the Captain of the Cricket team of the Sloane Grammar School in London. He is seated in the front row (third from the left) in this July 1954 photo. Image by the courtesy of Zulfikar Ghose.

The days were gone when a white Sahib or an aristocratic gentleman captained a cricket team. For all their imperialist past, the English were not racist as I found when in 1952 my family was among the early groups of

immigrants to England from the post-Partition India. Within weeks of arriving in London as a teenager, I was playing for the Cricket First XI of a grammar school, the Sloane Grammar School in London, where I was the only non-white boy. In my final two years at the school, I was appointed captain of the cricket team, and the appearance out of the pavilion of a brown boy leading ten pink English boys to take the field raised no eyebrows. Though immigration from India and from the West Indies had begun to increase, it remained rare for more than the occasional coloured person to be seen in public to the end of the 1950s when I graduated from university. This is when I first encountered racial prejudice: all my white fellow graduates immediately found jobs while I, who had excelled at college where I had been President of the Debates Union and begun even when an undergraduate to publish my poems and essays in national magazines, was rejected by the companies that hired my friends.

After remaining unemployed for over a year when I collected 100-plus job rejections, mere chance led me to meet the sports editor of *The Observer* who took me seriously enough as a writer to make me a cricket correspondent. It was free-lance work on odd Saturdays in the summer months, paying only for each printed report, and put me in the curious position at age twenty-five of becoming known as being associated with one of the world's best Sunday papers without having a sufficient income to live independently. This irregular Saturday work took me to county grounds all over England where the other journalists in the press box usually were middle-aged agency reporters or younger correspondents from the local papers; in each press box I found myself isolated from this group of Englishmen who eyed me curiously, seemingly wondering who this coloured foreigner was. Perhaps there was a touch of racial prejudice in their reaction to my presence but when a year later *The Observer* sent me on the England team's 1961-62 tour of India and Pakistan, I found the same curious expression on the faces of the native journalists who, seeing me in their midst and physically appearing no different than they themselves, had them



confused about my identity. This is when I coined the label “Native–Alien,” for I was a native sitting in the press box in Lahore or in Eden Gardens in Calcutta and yet seen there as an alien, and back in England, which had become my home and my work as a writer had made me accepted as a native, when sitting in the press box at Lord’s or at Old Trafford I was seen as an alien.

The 1960s saw more of the former colonies receive their independence and a great influx of colored immigration into England. While there was prejudicial resentment among the working classes and one sometimes witnessed abusive remarks being hurled at colored people, international cricket persuaded the most intolerant prejudiced minds who saw players like Vinoo Mankad and Gary Sobers bat and bowl that the color of one’s skin did not make one an inferior human being. With the passing years, each new touring team from the West Indies or from one of the South Asian countries brought some new magnificently talented player unlike any seen before: players like Chris Gayle, Imran Khan, Sachin Tendulkar and on to Virat Kohli and a lot more brought enchanted audiences to their feet. Indeed, cricket could be said to be becoming a racial leveller: even the composition of the England team began to foreshadow the racially inclusive society that England was destined to become. Where until the mid-twentieth century the captaincy of the England Test team had been entrusted only to a white English gentleman, in 1999 the only player who was considered worthy of the appointment was named Nasser Husain who had been born in Madras. By that year, a whole generation of the children of colored immigrants had grown up as British-born citizens, and soon names like Rashid or Moeen Ali would appear wearing England’s cap.

As went cricket, so did the larger society. In 2016, a man named Sadiq Khan was elected Mayor of London. A few years later the Chancellor of the Exchequer was Sadiq Javid and the current Home Secretary in the British government is Priti Patel.

No longer neither race nor class, but cable television's 24-hour need to entertain the masses changed the culture of the world; and corporate greed fostered by the triumph of capitalism over socialism, together with the social media addicting humanity to a new opium of the masses, brought about a viral dumbing down of culture as a whole. Where cricket spectators used to enjoy a five-day Test match as the height of sporting experience, finding intense excitement even when two batsmen held on for over after over without scoring but just defending their wicket to prevent their country from suffering a humiliating defeat, now even a fifty-over a side in a one-day match was too long and slow for television watchers not to switch channels to some other mindless entertainment, and so a twenty-over a side was launched for prime time television audiences. The Cricket Board of India created the Indian Premier League for which the teams representing different parts of India and flaunting American basketball style names—Delhi Daredevils, Rajasthan Royals, Chennai Super Kings, etc.—paid previously unheard of sums of money for famous players. The money was such that the biggest names in international cricket were happy to be purchased, and one would watch, for example, a famous Australian or a South African come out to hit sixes for the Kolkata Knight Riders against a West Indian bowler playing for the Mumbai Indians. The huge success of the Indian Premier League led other countries to launch their own leagues. The love of money eliminated racial prejudice.

As for the original inventors of cricket, the English have been a fair-minded people on the whole. During my years as a cricket and hockey reporter for *The Observer*, I was also publishing poetry and fiction and was active in the London literary scene in which I was friends with writers both white and colored. In all our dealings with publishers, agents and magazine editors, we experienced no racial prejudice. The only incidence of racial prejudice against Indian writers that I know of happened long before I was in London, back during the years of the Raj.



This is the one case of racial bigotry from an eminent Englishman. Ironically, he happened to be one of the most liberal and broad-minded British writers. Reviewing one of the early novels published by an Indian writer, *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) by Mulk Raj Anand, the best praise this English reviewer could give it was that “Mr. Anand’s novel would still be interesting on its own merits if it had been written by an Englishman” but, he added, it was “a cultural curiosity.” Following that nasty insult, he went on to criticize Anand and other Indian English-language writers by suggesting that their English was a peculiar dialect form, and then solemnly predicted that as Indian writers they were unlikely to have any successors when British rule ended. The Indians simply could not write proper English. Indeed. Go tell that to Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa and a dozen others. The reviewer making that prophecy had himself been born in India during the Raj. He was named Eric Blair. The world knows him as George Orwell.

(Exclusive to *Rising Asia Journal*).

Note on the Author

Zulfikar Ghose (b. 1935) is the author of eleven novels, a collection of short stories, six volumes of poems, six books of literary criticism, and an autobiography. Born at the time of the British Raj, he grew up in Bombay and emigrated to the U.K. in 1952. He was active in the London literary scene in the 1960s when his first six books were published, and in 1969 he was invited to teach at the University of Texas at Austin. The wide range of his literary work has attracted serious critical attention, including *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* with its Summer 1989 number in which he was noted as a world writer of the first rank. Now Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas, he lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife, the Brazilian artist Helena de la Fontaine. Ghose’s illustrious literary career started when he received a special award from the E.C. Gregory Trust that was judged by T.S. Eliot, Henry Moore, Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée in 1963. His novels are: *The*

Contradictions (Macmillan, 1966); *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (Macmillan, 1967); *The Incredible Brazilian: The Native* (Macmillan, and Holt Rinehart, 1972); *The Beautiful Empire* (Macmillan, 1975; and Overlook Press, 1984); *A Different World* (Macmillan, 1978; and Overlook Press, 1985); *Crump's Terms* (Macmillan, 1975); *The Texas Inheritance* (as William Strang) (Macmillan, 1980); *Hulme's Investigations into the Bogart Script* (Curbstone Press, 1981); *A New History of Torments* (Holt Rinehart, and Hutchinson, 1982); *Don Bueno* (Hutchinson, 1983; and Holt Rinehart, 1984); *Figures of Enchantment* (Hutchinson; and Harper, 1986); and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* (Bloomsbury, 1991.) His Poetry volumes are: *The Loss of India* (Routledge, 1964); *Jets from Orange* (Macmillan, 1967); *The Violent West* (Macmillan, 1972); *Penguin Modern Poets 25*, with Gavin Ewart and B.S. Johnson (Penguin, 1974); *A Memory of Asia* (Curbstone Press, 1984; and *Selected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 1991.)