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# ETHICAL PRACTICES IN LEAGUE GAMING IN INDIA

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### *Concept Note*

The Indian sports environment has been abuzz with activity in recent years. According to reports, sports sponsorship has grown 12.3% to a whopping INR 5,185.4 crore (~US\$800 million) in 2015 from a modest INR 4616.5 crore (~US\$700 million) in 2014. Especially, the brand value of the Indian Premier League (IPL) has been around US\$ 4 billion. According to the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the 2015 IPL season contributed to around INR 1,150 crore (~US\$170 million) to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There is a substantial increase in the private investment in the sport, combined with the resultant appreciation of the importance of public trust in authenticity of results. Of late it has been seen that Industrial houses and even Film Stars of the glamour world have come up to participate into sports sponsorship in a big way. Above all, the issue of participant-integrity in league gaming has come to the forefront.



By: *Upasana*

*When Penguins try to play Table Tennis*

Almost every quarter, a new private sports league is announced. The Hockey India League (HIL), founded in 2013 and organized by Hockey India, is a professional field hockey league and also the governing body for the sport in India. HIL, along with other leagues like the Indian Premier League, Indian Super League, and Pro-Kabaddi League, is considered one of the major sports leagues in the country. Since beginning, the league has proven to be a financial success for Hockey India, who were in financial disarray before the league began.

The Indian Super League (ISL), founded in 2013 as men's professional football league, serves as one of the top tournaments in India today. It is formed in an effort to make football a top sport in India and to increase the level of participation and recognition of Indian football worldwide.

The Premier Badminton League (PBL) is managed and commercially owned by the Badminton Association of India (BAI) founded in 2013.

Indigenous games like Kabaddi are also gaining global acceptance slowly. Apart from the rising powers like Iran and South Korea, teams like United States of America, Kenya, who are total beginners to the sport have expressed a keen desire to establish a league on the same lines as that of the immensely popular Indian Pro-Kabaddi League. This brings to the fore, the issue of 'India as a role model' in setting the trend in terms of the ethical standards and the overall impartial quality of league games.

However, given the increasing incidence of match-fixing, doping practices, age fraud, gender and sexual harassment, etc., Indian sport is no longer a stranger to challenges of integrity. Ever since IPL emerged, its credibility has not only been called into question by fixing allegations, but various other related events in the league have also had a domino effect, with the outcrop being the Supreme Court-appointed Lodha Committee that recommended for a complete overhaul of the Indian cricket management.

Cricket is the most admired game in India, having a following of more than a million obsessive fans, with an unquestioning belief in the commitment of cricketers. For them, to know that some of the losses which caused so much pain were manufactured as were some of the sweet victories made, gives an impression that the game had lost its meaning abysmally. With scripted and tailored performances "to fashion a specific result", some of the league games "have made a mockery" of its fans' most impassioned feelings. The short format of the league matches has however attracted everyone with its colourful entertainment and the glamour seems more prone to manufactured rules, arbitrary conventions, invented pursuits, arcane skills, etc. Cricket may only be a game, but the emotional highs and lows that it generates necessitate stringent authoritative oversight.

On the other hand, the excessive enthusiasm by the consumers of sport has created a sense of entitlement in those that perform at their behest. The players now seem to have become (well-paid) slaves or puppets whose strings are drawn by the popularity

of the sport. As aptly says Santosh Desai, “sport which is conceived of as a theatre or platform where human abilities would find their purest expression, has now been gradually dragged back into the real world, by making it the conduit to everything it was designed to be detached from. The external worldly pressure creates the motive for the cheating as well as the reason for treating the infraction as a crime.” But, is cheating at sports such a terrible crime in the legal sense of the word?

Numerous attempts have been made in the past, addressing the serious issues of unscrupulous sports practices in India. The latest of these efforts being the National Sports Ethics Commission Bill, 2016 that sets out to achieve “the purpose of fair play, a conducive environment for sports and justice to those wronged by others” by creating a set of new criminal offences and penalties relating to participant-integrity in sports – in short, establishing a formal mechanism for adjudication of sports disputes through creation of a national commission. The Bill requiring the central government to constitute a National Sports Ethics Commission to oversee and enforce the various Codes of Ethics that sport federations are mandated to frame, aims to formulate measures towards the elimination of such malpractices. Prior to this bill, the National Sports Development Bill 2013 attempted to bring certain governance structures to all national sports federations, including the issue of sports ethics. Further, the National Sports Development Code of India 2011 attempted to rationalise sports practice in the same manner but of not much help.

*This Liberal Studies* journal takes this opportunity to invite expert opinions on this intriguing issue from scholars to ponder over the future of league gaming in India as also the consequent governmental responses and actions to uplift the moral standard of sports in the country.



*By: Rajshree*

## *Ethical Issues in the Gentleman's Game*

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**Ritesh Misra\***

Ethics play a very important role in all spheres of life and it goes without saying that it is an equally important aspect in popular sports like cricket as well. So much so, in fact, that in cricket, now, there are worldwide rules to ensure that the game is played with a sense of fairness. In fact, Cricket is one of the few sports where the Rules are described as 'Laws' and this signifies how important uniformity and fairness is in cricket or for that matter in any popular sport. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) still retains the copyright for 'The Laws of Cricket' and even now, for any changes/ amendments to these laws, the same is done in consultation with the MCC even by the ICC.

If this beautiful game is not played with the proper ethics in mind, it loses most of its charm. One would always be in doubt and a little unsure as to whether the game had been played in the true spirit of sportsmanship or not. Everyone from the paying spectators to the avid followers, even including the keen analysts would then feel betrayed and cheated. So would the vast majority of cricketers who have striven to play the game honestly and in its true spirit.



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\* **The author** is an IRS Officer posted in Mumbai. The views expressed are personal.

Yet, undeniably, this wonderful game of cricket has been tarnished in recent times and that too, very often with attempts to besmirch it with the dark and gloomy spectre of fixing. On their part, again and again, the administrators have tried to revive and restore this game to its original pristine glory.

This piece of writing seeks to have a deeper look into some aspects of the ethical issues of this wonderful game as well as the shameful fixing that is taking place in cricket in recent times. I propose to have a look at the Indian Premier League (IPL), its 10th edition and a brief history of controversies during IPL history. I will also briefly look at other instances of fixing in cricket and I will conclude with an attempt to understand why fixing takes place in the first place and how it can be minimised or preferably done away with. While the same frankly seems impossible, these points too will be discussed. Finally I will wrap it all up with a few pertinent recommendations that I feel are necessary at this stage and required to beef up and help the game.

The current edition of IPL is the IPL 10 and it has been a major success so far. Venue after venues are seeing packed fanatical crowds. Tickets are being promptly sold out and the so called important people are continuously being flooded with requests for passes. This was true for almost all matches and especially so for matches representing some teams with star players such as Virat Kohli, MS Dhoni and Chris Gayle, to take a few names, where the demand for tickets/passes had reached sky high, almost the Everest heights proportions. Not only did the IPL appear to have retained stupefying proportions of spectator interest, it also appeared to have attracted new fans as well. Along with its heady cocktail of glamour, it appeared to have set the ball rolling for the next edition of IPL – the IPL 11 where all players would go in for a fresh round of bidding.

### **Latest Controversy**

Now along with its success, the IPL 10 has also appeared to have remained clean from any major allegations as in the past, such as match fixing or spot fixing. Then suddenly, from out of the blue, there was a controversy with the subsequent arrest of three suspected bookies in Kanpur after the match between the Gujarat Lions (GL) and Delhi Daredevils (DD) which was held there. Worryingly for the organisers and those who hold that IPL is purer than snow, police said that two GL Players were named by the bookies. More than 40 lakhs cash and five cell phones were also seized from the bookies. There were two WhatsApp messages which were noted, showing that two of the GL players had been “set” and will “do as asked”, and that GL will lose the match even if they will score more than 200 runs.

Now what happened? Did GL score more than 200? No, they did not! Did they lose?... Yes they did! Well, GL scored 195 and lost by 2 wickets after Shreyas Iyer scored 96 to help DD win with 2 balls to spare.

Now this could be a coincidence, but maybe it could be something more as well (as the alleged accusations by the two bookies). It is important at this stage to spare a

thought for Sheyas Iyer as well, because, for no fault of his, his 96 runs may not get the unstinted 100 per cent appreciation of his followers/fans. A few would doubt the authenticity of his efforts linking them to the WhatsApp messages which would tend to suggest that these things would be tried to be made easier for the DD Batsmen.

## **Background**

It is not that only the current edition of the IPL has run into this controversy. Rather, far from it! The IPL has been no stranger to controversy which has doggedly followed it at its footsteps very consistently year after year right from its conception and consequent successes.

Let's quickly run through this list of controversies to get a clear understanding of them and discuss a few potential problem areas as well.

The biggest controversy and setback the IPL had faced since its conception was in 2015, when it was announced that two teams, the Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and the Rajasthan Royals (RR) would be suspended for two years following a match fixing and betting scandal. This was since the owners of CSK, Gurunath Meiyappan (called an official by CSK) and of the owner of RR, Raj Kundra, had in the words of the Probe Panel, "brought disrepute to cricket, the BCCI and the IPL to such an extent that the public doubted whether the game is clean or not." Prior to this, in 2013, the Delhi Police had arrested 3 cricketers, namely Sreesanth, Ajit Chandila and Ankeet Chavan on charges of spot fixing. In a separate police case, the Mumbai Police had arrested Meiyappan and a filmstar Vindoo Dara Singh on allegations of betting and having links with bookies, passing on information to them and other similar charges.

Of course, before that too, there were major controversies like the suspension of IPL Chairman Lalit Modi in 2010 who later even left the country and till date has not returned.

In 2012 too, there was a TV sting operation by the channel India TV which accused five "uncapped" players for match fixing. These players were TP Sudheendra of the Deccan Chargers, Mohnish Mishra of Pune Warriors, Amith Yadav and Shalabh Shrivastava of the Kings XI Punjab and Abhinav Bali of Delhi Daredevils. Crucially, in such a bleak scenario, one has to make note of the fact that all the five players were from four different teams. This showed clearly without dispute that the malaise was not limited to one team or one owner but was an inherent problem of the entire system.

What did the IPL Do? It promptly suspended the five players. Was it enough?

Let us for a moment digress, and distinguish between match-fixing and spot-fixing. As is obvious from the term itself, match-fixing is an attempt to determine in advance the outcome of a match. However in a team game this is fraught with uncertainty. Robert Burns in his *To a Mouse* says: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry and no matter how carefully the project has been planned, something may still go



wrong with it.” To more or less ensure a ‘successful’ match fixing, as many as a minimum of 6-7 players of a team have to be taken on board the clandestine plan. This is somewhat difficult, if not next to impossible. Also, secrecy is a major concern. There is also the risk of an unaccounted for brilliant individual performance by an uninvolved game player which could make the entire project go for a toss.

With millions at stake, and almost certainly disreputable and notorious persons at the helm of affairs who will not hesitate to, if required even take lives, an innovative tweaking was required- and this led to the origin of the term ‘Spot-fixing’.

Now spot-fixing, as such completely distinct from match fixing is much simpler. Unlike the risk involved in assuring the outcome of a match, necessitating the involvement of several players, spot-fixing involves fixing a spot. It could be something like how many runs will be scored in a particular over, or whether ‘no ball’ or ‘wides’ will be bowled, or whether a batsman will be out run out. It could be virtually anything which could catch the imagination of the betters. This could even involve non cricket events such as decisions, as for example decision to be taken on winning the toss, or the bowling changes to be made or the batting order to be followed. These ‘spots’ become easier to fix than the outcome of an entire match

Now, this makes things much easier for the spot-fixer. There is no longer a need to have uncertainties in the “system”. Success can virtually be ensured by compromising a couple of players, and sometimes by compromising only one itself. If the captain is somehow involved then its celebration time since the captain is the most important person in the game of cricket.

This indeed had happened in 2010 when knowledge of spot-fixing first became known, when the Pakistan Captain Salman Butt was caught along with his star fast bowlers Mohd Asif and Mohd Amir. The latter were found to be deliberately bowling no-balls. In the anxiety to ensure that their part of the “deal” was met, the numbers of ‘no ball’ bowled was so huge that it aroused suspicion. A sports agent Mazhar Majeed was secretly videotaped by reporters from “News of the world” and he had informed the reporters that the two fast bowlers would deliberately bowl no-balls at specific times and the information could be used for spot-fixing. Indeed they did, and as stated earlier the ‘no ball’ numbers were so huge, and most at least half a metre over the line; then, as predicted the last ball of the over too was a ‘no-ball’. Investigations proved the allegations and finally led to the suspension of Butt, Asif and Amir from International Cricket for 10, 7 and 5 years respectively. The three cricketers were also jailed for 30, 12 and 6 months respectively. Butt being the captain, was thought to be the guiltier of the lot as it was much easier for him to influence his other players.

This has also been seen earlier when the match fixing controversy was at its peak and the International cricket playing captain of South Africa, Hansie Cronje confessed to match fixing and also named the then Indian Captain Mohammed Azharuddin for being heavily involved.



The obvious conclusion drawn from these incidents is that the captain's job is the most sensitive and whatever he does will be subject to intense scrutiny. Therefore, not only should the selection of the captain be done with utmost carefulness, but once selected/chosen as the captain, he is expected to maintain himself with dignity, as he has a responsibility to carry out, for his country, his team, and to himself and actually, at the basic level, to the sport itself.

### **Positive Moves over the Years**

The administrators have taken lot of positive moves over the years, mainly to combat the bad publicity accompanying all these controversies. Let us have a look at a few of them.

Frequent tours to controversial venues (where the likelihood of match fixing and spot fixing are high) like Sharjah, Toronto and Singapore have been reduced to very few in a year, quite drastically. While nothing can be held against these venues, the fact remains that such "holiday" destinations offer more scope for dubious bookie or bookie like persons to approach the players. It is also quite likely that in such non regular cricket venues, many of the novice players may be slightly off guard and especially for the younger players, one minute of letting down of their guard may be enough to put their entire life and career of sports in jeopardy.

One more positive move by the IPL was to remove the ban on uncapped players, not being part of the auction pool. This was a very critical and essential move as potentially, an uncapped player may be very crucial to a team and a great buy with various teams that are vying for him. Yet, as per the older rules, there could be no bidding for him and he would get a predetermined fee like all the other uncapped players. This meant two major risks, and both are very dangerous for the morale of the players and ultimately that of the game. First was that a player would be paid extra money by the Franchisee. This in fact was the allegation against Ajit Chandila that apart from his regular fees as an uncapped player he was getting more money unofficially, under the table. The second risk is that to bring the uncapped player into the auction pool, he would be aggressively promoted and even pushed for selection to the National team so that his designation is no longer that of an uncapped player. This would mean that the selectors and other important people too would be approached by bookies and other disreputable persons, leading to unfortunate and unethical practices and thereby malpractice controversies.

Removal of the after-IPL match party was another good decision, as such parties were the main platforms that provided an opportunity for various unscrupulous elements to approach the novice players and compromise them with unethical proposals during the fanfare and glamour that such parties usually entail. There also rested the risk of younger rookie players being swayed away by the glamour aspect of such events, distracting them from their main job of playing cricket.

## **Can Spot-Fixing be Eliminated?**

In my frank opinion, ‘No’ .... This is simply because, as stated earlier in this write up, it does not need the involvement of a large number of players but only of a few. Further, with cricket being a glorious game of uncertainties, it is extremely difficult to determine and know for sure, which the regular cricketing events are and which the pre-determined ones are. Without a single doubt, there is big money in betting and as long as human-nature feels the need to beat the system, such attempts will continue. It is also pertinent that the “signals” of the on field player to indicate that the fix will be made can be as varied as bowling with sunglasses on, or wearing the watch on right hand or seemingly absentmindedly twisting and turning wrist bands or any such seemingly innocuous gestures. How is one to know whether these are genuine or fake? It is just impossible to assume or unassume that foul play has or has not taken place. There are huge sums of money in fixing, and as long as people will hanker after easy and big money, (which will be for as long as mankind lives, I guess) there will always be people who will seek to be involved in such unscrupulous and unethical activities.

## **Should Betting be Legalised?**

The bullion dollar question: ...well, this is certainly food for thought, considering that betting and gambling is well above the 30 billion dollar activity throughout the world and legal betting in UK alone supports more than 100,000 Jobs. And since we have already concluded that gambling or betting is going to exist as long as mankind exists, it only makes sense to legalise it with a set number of rules to limit the unscrupulous nature of the act itself. However in India, in general, there is much opposition to making it legal. And this, in spite of the fact that there is a likelihood of possibly, thousands of crores of rupees shifting from the dubious black economy to the white economy. However, it is up to the policy makers to take a call on this matter and if an appropriate decision is taken by the Government and other authorities on this issue, it will definitely be beneficial to all involved.

## **Recommendations**

Strategic time out is certainly not a requirement of the hour, in my view. Test matches have fixed periods of play of two hours each, and a drinks interval after an hour, and lunch and tea breaks after two hours each. ODI’s have a couple of drinks breaks and a lunch interval after one innings is over. Why then are strategic time-outs required only in the T20 matches of IPL. Advertisement revenue surely can’t overtake more serious considerations like giving time to bookies to redraw their strategies, take bets, etc. From the sports angle and cricketing point of view too, it disrupts momentum. Far too often we have seen that the team doing well loses steam after the strategic timeout and loses its way. While this could definitely be genuine, it unnecessarily raises suspicion.

The Selection Committee Meetings are obviously secret and should remain so but once the team is announced, the need for secrecy dissimilates and there should be a

press conference where the Chairman of the selectors addresses the press and outlines the reasons for selection of the players. As it is, most of the players in the team select themselves and only one or two spots require discussion and decision. So it makes sense to tell the broad reasons for the same. The new selection committee of India headed by MSK Prasad is doing this which is an extremely viable and healthy practice and should be continued.

Ultimately, the selection of players should be on the basis of their first-class performances and not on the basis of IPL. Here too, the current selection committee is trying to do just that, which by itself is a good practice and needs to be pursued.

BCCI could consider increasing the salary of Ranji Trophy cricketers so that young cricketers will be motivated to play 1st class cricket. After all, not all go on to play International Cricket and have a big IPL contract. Ranji players, if paid more, will certainly help the cause of cricket in India. Harbhajan Singh has taken this cause up and said that he himself has become aware of this scenario only in the last 3-4 years after being out of the National team. BCCI should consider this seriously.

It is understood that there are regular lectures, discussions and awareness training programmes conducted for cricketers where they are told about the important do's and don'ts. This is an extremely important activity and should be promoted on a regular basis for the betterment of the game.

Strict action should be taken against the cricketers involved in match fixing or spot fixing. No one should be spared irrespective of their stature and past performances, etc. Then only will all future cricketers be cautious enough not to get involved in such nefarious activities.

To conclude, cricket is a gentleman's game. Let us all strive to ensure it remains so. It is high time now that all the stakeholders should introspect on this all important aspect of ethical issues and come out with worthwhile suggestions and solutions on how to take this noble game forward and not allow it to go down the drain due to a few unethical practices.