

Cricket, an oddity in the Arab-Gulf lands or a mirror of an enduring South Asian diaspora?

El cricket, ¿una rareza en el Golfo Árabe o un reflejo de la diáspora del sur de Asia?

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Abstract

The article highlights the apparent anomaly of the rise of cricket in the Arab-Gulf region. It argues that the evolution of cricket in the six Gulf Cooperative Council countries (GCC) from essentially an expatriate sport to its status today, with evident strengths and weaknesses, reflects the quality of the consolidation of the South Asian community, and especially of the Indian diaspora. The relationship between sports and the diaspora remains relatively unexplored. Using an empirical and comparative method, the paper adds to the current literature by studying the link between cricket and the diaspora in the Gulf region.

Keywords: Cricket/the Arab-Gulf/ Indian-SouthAsian Diaspora/ Sport/ expatriate-foreigner/

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la aparente anomalía que supone el reciente crecimiento de la afición por el cricket en la región del Golfo Pérsico. Plantea que la evolución del críquet en los seis países del Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo (CCG), que ha pasado de ser esencialmente un deporte para expatriados a su condición actual, con evidentes puntos fuertes y débiles, refleja la consolidación de la comunidad del Asia meridional, y especialmente de la diáspora india. La relación entre los deportes y la diáspora permanece relativamente inexplorada. Utilizando un método empírico y comparativo, el documento profundiza en la actual literatura actual que analiza el vínculo entre el críquet y la diáspora en la región del Golfo.

Palabras clave: cricket/ Golfo árabe/ Diaspora india sudasiatica/ Deporte/ Expatriado-extranjero/

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In the latest ICC T20 International team rankings, UAE remains the highest placed team in the Gulf region at 15th, followed by Oman at 18th, Qatar at 21st, Saudi Arabia at 24th, Kuwait at 27th and Bahrain at 47th...¹

Introduction

At first instance, the mention of cricket as a sport in association with the Arab-Gulf region might surprise someone unfamiliar with the sport and with the region. The region comprises six countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (hereafter, the GCC) namely Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. The paper draws attention to the phenomenon of blossoming cricket that might appear as somewhat anomalous to the Gulf region. It is emerging beyond a mere “expatriate sport” on the territory of the host states of the GCC, which jealously proclaim their exclusive Arab and the Gulf (or *Khaleeji*) identity.

Unlike the dominant perception, not all the “foreign” population in the GCC countries originated with the advent of petro-dollar economy in the region from around the mid-twentieth century. Migration for trade between the two regions of the Arab-Gulf region and the Indian subcontinent (it comprises the present-day states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, potentially part of Afghanistan and Nepal, which currently have a good number of their migrants in the Gulf states, and includes Maldives and Bhutan) thrived much before the oil industry’s take-off. The two regions also have a shared history of the British rule, formal or informal. The South Asian expatriate is highly visible in the region today. However, the length of his association with it is not as evident. It is also why cricket appears an anomaly in the GCC countries. The reason that some resident communities of multiple generations continue to be referred to as foreign is due to the Arab-Gulf states’ closed immigration and naturalization policies. The paper highlights the expanding phenomenon of cricket and its link with the diaspora in the region.

The paper first introduces the conceptual frame and methodology. It next presents the evolution of cricket from essentially an expatriate sport in the Arab-Gulf countries and its sources of support, also using the example of Oman for a closer look. It then suggests in conclusion that the status of cricket in the GCC countries reflects the corresponding quality of consolidation of the South Asian diaspora.

A case of diaspora consolidation

The paper applies empirical and comparative methodology. I develop a case study, based on fieldwork for my doctoral research in the GCC region between 2008 and 2011 (Kanchana 2016, Thesis). The paper uses the concept of diaspora and its implications, informed by sociology and political science approaches. Manifestations of a diaspora include its institutions in the host territory, including sports. I present the evident consolidation of cricket in the Arab-Gulf region as an expression of a mature South Asian diaspora.

The diaspora characterization might seem incongruent, owing to the dominant discourse of “temporary” foreign labour in the Arab-Gulf region and the technical parameter of legal status. However, Myron Weiner captured the reality of the diaspora formation already as early as in 1982, when he termed the South Asian populations in the Arab-Gulf region, particularly the Indians, as an incipient diaspora. We understand a Diaspora community as a unique kind of social formation, different from the other migratory groups, explained in the works of scholars like Butler (2001), Cohen (2006), Safran (1999) and Vertovec (1997). Although a widely misused term, there is consensus among most scholars that a diaspora exhibits four basic features. A diaspora community must be: 1. ‘consciously’ part of an ethno-national group; 2. dispersed to a minimum of two destinations; 3. in some relationship with an actual or imagined homeland, and 4. at least two-generations in existence.

¹Cited from a sports website on 10 March, 2020.

Myron Weiner (1986) described the phenomenon of labour migrations transforming into “incipient” diasporas. He cited examples with the foreign worker-incipient diasporas in Western Europe and in the Persian Gulf. The Incipient or diaspora-in-the-making represents an early stage in the continuum of diaspora formation, compared to the Mature or established diaspora that has become an integral part over a lengthy association within the host society (such as the Italian diaspora in the United States), and that of the Classical or Old diaspora typically linked with the experience of forced exile and dispersal (such as the Jewish diaspora worldwide). The host Arab-Gulf governments targeted policies to maintain the migrants’ temporary position. Weiner noted how despite being alienated from certain privileges and rights extended to the rest of the population and living in ambiguity, the groups might persist by retaining their identities, establishing infrastructures of community life through social structures like schools, sports clubs, restaurants, churches or temples, etc. Subsequent scholarship after Weiner also noted the strength of the Indian diaspora community in the Arab-Gulf region. While writing about Kuwait and the expat experience there in general, Longvanoted (1997: 166): ‘the Indians had the largest number of associations, organized along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines,’ and that, ‘since the Indian community was a relatively well-settled community, the Indian associations tended to be dominated by the older generation of “respected men” (mostly long-time resident businessmen), and the members usually participated as families’.

Some notable works threw light on the deeper association and activity of the Indian community in the region and in specific Gulf states, beyond the visible and limited status quo of the expatriate populations here in general. Franklin (unpublished thesis, 1985) gave an early ethnographic account of the Indian community in Bahrain and has detailed the diversity in its composition of different groups and the dynamism of its numerous social organisations. Gardner (2010) updated this ethnographic detail and critically positioned the Indian community “in the structure of the Bahraini citizenry and state”. He highlighted the inherent structural violence in the society given differential treatment, including within the expatriate populations, for example, *vis à vis* the Arab communities and suggests a common experience of the South Asians in all the GCC states. Vora (2013) focused on the elite Indian businessmen of mercantile-origin in Dubai, to observe that they in effect perform citizenship (belonging) in different ways, and participate in the Gulf state’s project of exclusive ethnic and cultural identities by keeping community boundaries and “Indianness”. Other scholars’ work also commented about the Indian/South Asian diaspora or concerning certain sub-groups: Onley (2012) on the historical connections between the Gulf region and the Indian subcontinent; Allen (1981) and Jain (2007) on the Indian elites in the Gulf, particularly of Gujarat and Sind origin; Venier (2007) and Osella and Osella (2010) including on Muslim entrepreneurs from Kerala in South India. My work also contributes to this expanding corpus (Thesis 2016), (2012).

Sport and diaspora remains a relatively understudied relationship in scholarship and is relevant to our discussion. Scholars like Seippel (2006) and Sökefeld and Schwalgin (2000) recognise that sport is among important social institutions. This applies to the social institutions of the diaspora communities in the world, where sport is an organised social activity to achieve the goals of leisure/recreation or entertainment, or of culture. Our case involving the sport of cricket and the South Asian diaspora in the Gulf region evidently has parallels in the larger context. Similar cases observed with other sports and other diasporas in other regions of the world emphasize the relevance of the relationship between sport and diaspora. Darby (2003), Darby and Hassan (2013) make a notable contribution to this scholarship. They present the more classic case concerning the

Irish diaspora and the Gaelic sports worldwide. This is a story about how the Irish emigres particularly in the contexts of USA and Britain, introduced Gaelic sports and enlarged the sports scenarios both in their host environments and in the international sphere. It is also a story about how participation in the sport helped them to overcome prejudices and gain footing in the societies they encountered. Using a more recent example of the Somali diaspora in Netherlands, Spaaij and Broerse (2019) shows, how sport, also as an “embodied aesthetic practice” allowed diaspora communities to materialise as “real” and tangible, from being imagined identities. In addition, they highlight how such manifestations fostered also sense of belonging to the host nation among the participating subjects.

Burdsey et al (2013) observe that studying the South Asian diasporas’ relationship with sport is useful, and acknowledge the diversities inherent in their specific forms, manifestations, and implications. They stress that diasporas might help to explain contemporary sport trends locally and globally and, that sporting practices might mean sites of identity formation. Ugra (in Wagg 2005) explains the special passion for cricket and for identity in the Indian consciousness. Discussing cricket in the larger globalization process, Gupta (2004) notes that the non-Western periphery – including in the diaspora spaces such as the South Asians in the Gulf region – is uniquely influencing how the game, which is traditionally a Western domain, is and will be played.

This paper thus contributes to the literature on the relationship between sports and diasporas, with the story of the Indian/South Asian diaspora behind the emergence of cricket as a local sport on the map of the six GCC states.

Cricket reflects the strength of the South Asian diaspora in the GCC region: essentially an expatriate sport

Cricket traditionally involved the South Asian expatriates and among them, predominantly the Indians and the Pakistanis in the GCC region. The level of cricket activity is also a good gauge of the extent of the communities’ engagement in the host country. We mainly focus on the Indian community in this paper. The subject initially caught my interest as I repeatedly heard random references to cricket from my respondents during field research. Cricket is evidently expanding in each of the GCC countries and so is the region’s presence in international cricket.

The British introduced cricket to the Arab-Gulf region like also in the Indian subcontinent. They played mainly with the South Asian expatriates in the early years of cricket in the region, such as with the Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel stationed in Bahrain. In Kuwait, the employees of the oil company and the contracting company played together around the mid-1940s. The sport progressively developed in structure in the region from the 1980s. Cricket received marginal attention compared to other sports in the Gulf region such as football, racing or athletics, owing to perhaps perceived as temporary and to be primarily a non-Arab and expatriate sport. Writings that touched sports in the GCC states generally missed or gave a passing reference to cricket, for instance Bromber and Krawietz (2012), Dorsey (2017) and Reiche and Sorek (2019). The sport appears relatively stronger particularly in Oman, the UAE and Bahrain. These countries also have a larger concentration of the Indian community, especially with origins from the old trade ties. Cricket thus benefited from their sustained support. And Kuwait shows more activity compared to Saudi Arabia possibly because it is relatively more liberal to accommodate the expatriate sport and the British also had engaged with it here more. The sport’s take-off in the respective countries was largely proportional to the financial and the structural support that cricket received, in addition to the strength of the players.

Table 1.1 Country-wise relative strength in cricket

	ICC Membership; Ranking	ACC Membership; Ranking	Main achievements	Ranking to field Arab players	Women's team (Y/N)
Oman	2000 Associate #25	2000; #6	ODI status 2015 qualified for 2016 ICC World Twenty 20	#1	Y
UAE	1990 Associate #14	1984; #5	ODI status 1994 ICC Trophy 2012 (and 2011) Gulf Cup 2015, 1996 The only GCC country to qualify for World Cup 1991-93 The only GCC country to field ACC President	#3	Y
Bahrain	2001 Affiliate #37	2003; #7	2009 Debut in the ICC World Cricket League 2006 the first ACC Middle East Cup	#6	N
Qatar	1999 Affiliate # n/a	2000; #11		#5	Y
Saudi Arabia	2003 Affiliate # n/a	2003 #12	2011 and 2008 the ACC U-19 Challenge Cup	#4	Y
Kuwait	2005 Associate #38	2005; #10	2001 the first ICC Under-13 Gulf Cup (hosted by it) 2003 the first ACC Gulf Cup (hosted by it) 2010, 2014 The only GCC country to play cricket in the Asian Games	#2	Y

Source: Local media and the official websites of the national cricket boards up to 2016

The GCC region has secured a presence at the international cricket level, although since more recent times. The Table 1.1 shows a comparative picture of the achievements and trends of the GCC states in cricket up to year 2016. All the GCC countries acquired a minimum membership and recognition of the International Cricket Council (ICC) by the 1990s. The UAE was the first (1990) and Kuwait was the last to enter the club from the region (2005). The UAE was also the early one to get the regional Asian Cricket Council (ACC) accreditation in 1984. Oman, the UAE and Kuwait have upgraded their status to Associate member with the ICC. The other three neighbours Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have remained with the Affiliate status.

The UAE is first GCC country to participate in the ICC top-level competition. It played in the 1996 ICC World Cup and again in 2015. The UAE is also the only GCC nation to play in the ICC Twenty-20² in 2010 and 2014. Oman achieved its first at international level in 2015 when it qualified to play in 2016 ICC World Twenty 20 game. In terms of ranking, the UAE leads in the GCC region among the ACC-level member countries at the 5th, and in the ICC-level at the 14th position. Saudi Arabia appears at the bottom in the region. From the Gulf region, the UAE and Oman won the coveted One Day International (ODI) qualification³. It was also a notable achievement by the UAE to have fielded a President to the ACC from the Gulf region in 1991. Kuwait secured the first ICC Under-13 Gulf Cup in 2001. At the regional level competitions, notably the Gulf Cup and the ACC Middle East Cup organized since 2003, the UAE and Oman won the maximum number of times.

² It is a qualifier game involving 20-over format to play in the World Cup level.

³ The ODI is a challenging 50-over format. The qualification puts a team in progression to acquire the test-nation status, which only a limited number of countries have.

The ACC-ranking shows that Oman comes a close second to the UAE at the regional level. Bahrain won its place with the ACC Middle East Cup in 2006. Saudi Arabia has advanced slowly winning the ACC U-19 Challenge Cup in 2008 and in 2011. Qatar appears yet to break ground.

The national teams were often ineligible to participate at various international level competitions for their insufficiency in the national composition. It was for this reason that the UAE for instance, was unable to participate in the 2010 ACC U-16 Elite. And, it was for the same reason that Kuwait succeeded to play in Asian Games (in 2010 and 2014), which has an all-nationals requirement to participate. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also aggressively tried to rope in their citizens by extending targeted support at the school-level. A native captain led the Kuwait National Team in 1998. Kuwait fielded a completely nationals-team in the 2014 Six-Nations Cricket Festival that it hosted (Kuwait, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka)⁴. Qatar has made efforts in this direction as well. Oman strategically boosted its strength by also grooming native players, apart from the consistency in the quality of its game over the years. As the ACC Development Manager remarked in 2010, ‘Oman’s support of this from the start and their continuing efforts stand as an example to all the other Arabian countries as to what is possible’. Oman already stood out by 2013 as the only Gulf country to encourage native Omanis to play at the highest level. It organized an All-Omani Summer T20 Cricket Tournament since 2009⁵. Women’s cricket has been slow to take off significantly compared with the men’s cricket in the Gulf region. Promisingly however, all the GCC states except Bahrain today field a women’s cricket team playing competitive game.

Differential growth of cricket in the GCC countries

The differential growth and status of cricket in the GCC countries today is due to variations in the patronage and infrastructural support from the business and the local elites and by the government.

Table 1.2 Variations in the national cricket bodies, in the capacities and organizational structures

<i>Oman Cricket Board (OCB)</i>	<i>Emirates Cricket Board (ECB)</i> - 5 regional councils	<i>Cricket Bahrain Association (CBA)</i>	<i>Qatar Cricket Association (QCA)</i>	<i>Saudi Cricket Council (SCC)</i> - 6 regional associations	<i>Kuwait Cricket Association (KCA)</i>
. estd. in 1979	. 1989	. N/A	. 1996	. 2001	. 1996
. 2 turfs	. 14 turfs	. 0 turfs	. 2 turfs	. 2 turfs	. 4 or 5 turfs
<i>Chairman-</i> Kanak Khimji (from 1979) <i>Patron-in-Chief-</i> Minister of Heritage and Culture, Sayyid Haitham Bin Tarik Bin Taimur Al Said VC- H.H. Qais Khalid Qais Al Said (national player)	<i>Chairman-</i> Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Shaikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan (from 2009)	<i>President-</i> Saleem Elyas (from 2012) <i>Patron-</i> Government Organization of Youth & Sports	<i>Chairman-</i> Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al Thani VC- Fahad Hussain Al Fardan	<i>CEO-</i> Nadeem Nadwi <i>Patron⁶-in-Chief-</i> Dr. Faisal Mohammad Bin Saud Bin Abdulaziz	<i>Chairman-</i> Emad Al Jassam (- Jeff de Lange until 2014, a British) <i>President-</i> Shaikh Dhari Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah VP- Faisal Al-Marzouk (national player)

Source: Local media and the official websites of the national cricket boards up to 2016

⁴ Mahmoud Bastaki, the longest serving Kuwaiti player, leads Kuwait’s national team (2014). He ‘fell in love with cricket during his schooling days in India and continued playing cricket with the expat players upon his return back to Kuwait. A dashing all-rounder who can excel in all department of the game has been playing cricket in Kuwait since the last 30 years’.

⁵ In 2011, it had five teams only of the native players: ‘There were 780 senior cricketers in Oman’s national league in 2010, of which almost 100 are Arabs’. It requires clubs to have at least one Omani player in the 11-member team, who must not bat lower than at number 5 in the game.

⁶ SCC had the Initial patronage of HRH Princess Ghada Bint Hamood Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saoud.

We see in Table 1.2 that cricket across the six Gulf states shows differences on the structural side: the periods of organisational formation, the physical capacities (turf facilities), the specific forms of organisation and their composition. The variations in the organization structures of the national cricket boards might reflect the stories of their respective evolution and their present status in the GCC countries. We explore some preliminary observations. The varied composition of the national cricket organisations could suggest sources of important support and quality of direction. Largely, the patron or the nominal head in the Boards is a native-elite. In the case of Qatar, the Board appears to comprise mostly the Qatari unlike the rest. The composition of the managerial/executive members, however, shows active involvement of expatriate and leadership. Bahrain organisation faced certain political challenges and disruption at intervals and might reflect the same. Oman showed more representation in composition as we shall see later. Hence, the organisational structures could be helpful to indicate the actual dynamics on the ground for cricket such as key actors, mobilisation, control, and involvement of the state.

Oman formed a Cricket Board first in 1979 among the GCC countries. Therefore, it had an early and more consistent organisational support compared to the rest of the countries. UAE currently shows the strongest support. The game in Bahrain is strong and regularly played since early on, but it suffered from inconsistent support. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the weakest in cricket among the GCC countries at the moment. Although both entered the field later, they are catching up by investing strongly in infrastructure-- for instance, financing the turf grounds. Kuwait stands out as a country that had very good backing from the government. However, the UAE, Oman and Bahrain were generally in a better position in terms of the pool of their available players from the size and the diversity of the expatriate population. Therefore, although cricket existed in the region since at least the mid-twentieth century, it had differing structural limitations at the formal level in the six countries. For instance, the availability of standard playing infrastructure like grassed grounds depended on the resources of the national organizing bodies. The composition of the national teams, with a sufficient level of native representation, was another important limitation.

International cricket tournaments are only played on fully-grassed grounds and hence, the existence of turf grounds in the country for training is important for the national teams to compete at a higher level. Such an infrastructure required significant capital investment for the building and upkeep of a fully-grassed ground at standard conditions. The sandy and desert landscape of this region poses a serious practical difficulty. In addition, getting the land for it is the more important challenge. The governments must grant the land for the purpose of the sport because of the restriction particularly on the expatriates to purchase land in the GCC region. The availability of the turf grounds was therefore another serious limitation for cricket in the GCC region, especially as cricket here has largely been an expatriate-run activity. Oman has the turf grounds as late as 2013 after the government granted the land for it in 2006⁷. Bahrain has no turf grounds to date. A crisis in Dubai in 2006 showed the underlying weakness of organized cricket in the region in its critical reliance on, notably, supportive native/state patronage.

Kuwait stands out as a country that had very good backing from the government and played regularly. It is an example to indicate the importance of patronage support. Jeff de Lange was the chairman of Kuwait Cricket Association for a considerable length until his retirement in 2014. He is credited to be instrumental in Kuwait's gaining an early affiliation with the ACC (1996) and ICC

⁷ The Ministry of Sports Affairs allocated a plot of land measuring 60127 square metres in 2006 at Al Amerat.

(1998) and whose influential reach supported the sport's evolution in the country. A British engineer working with the Ministry of Public Works, he was associated with the city planning in Kuwait since 1974. He was also Development advisor to the Bahrain Royal Family (1990-94) and Vice-Chairman of the British Business Forum in Kuwait (1994-2014). Kuwait decisively entered the scene around 2003. Since then, it regularly hosted international events in the grounds it had newly built. But Kuwait lacked the expatriate pool and participation to match, for instance, that of the UAE or Oman.

The UAE had an early and quicker growth with for example, the story of Sharjah (and Bukhatir) that was instrumental to inspire the spread of cricket in the region and to increase its profile. Sharjah had the first and the only turf ground and stadium in the country and the GCC region for a long while- in 1982⁸. It introduced the region to the global cricket fraternity by organizing international tournaments. Its Sharjah Cup hosted the highly popular and competitive matches between the Indian and Pakistani sides and also encouraged the rise of teams like Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The Stadium had regular international game until early 2000s⁹. Abdul Rehman Bukhatir was the force behind it, an Emirati notable and businessman (Bukhatir Group of Companies¹⁰), and the first to represent the GCC region as the ACC President (1991-93). The Cricketers' Benefit Fund Series (CBFS) was an efficient innovation he launched, providing early support to cricket in the emirate during the 1980s. The Emirates Cricket Board in 1989 united the regional cricket and formalized it at the national level. The international body, ICC, is headquartered in Dubai since 2003. But the UAE also had its challenges. Despite its greater structural resources and its visibility from its achievements in international cricket, there was a crisis for UAE cricket in 2006. The Dubai Cricket Council was literally out on the road overnight, when its ground was confiscated for the development of Dubail Health City and the government had not allocated an alternative land. It resulted in eventually greater facilities¹¹ and the reorganization of the ECB. But the crisis exposes the fragility of cricket in the region.

The external accreditation gave the sport a more formalized status and has off-set the structural limitation as an expatriate game. Things improved since the cricket associations affiliated with cricket at the international level- through membership of the International Cricket Council (ICC) and its regional body, Asian Cricket Council (ACC). The ACC introduced a rule from 2011 for all its junior level games (Under-16 years). It requires the XI-member teams to feature at least three native players, who held the passport of the playing country. Its objective was to develop cricket from remaining a marginalized sport in the playing regions, which is has been the case in the Arab-Gulf region¹². Therefore, the level of official influence, including the direct support of the government impacted the level of development that cricket achieved in each of the six countries.

Relationship between cricket and level of diaspora consolidation: the case of *Oman Cricket*

We have seen that the status of cricket is different among the GCC countries. The quality of support it enjoys is unarguably an important reason for the variation in its development. In this section, we will explore the key factors influencing this support. On one aspect, state's investment is always important for the growth of any sport at the national level. State support for cricket

⁸ Sharjah Stadium got in the Guinness world records in 2011 for hosting the most number of the one-day international cricket matches. It hosted 206 ODIs and Test matches from 1984 to 2003.

⁹ Sharjah suffered a blow from the negative publicity as the alleged "betting den" or hub after the ICC started investigation into the match-fixing controversy in 2000 (it implicated also a few other international grounds)

¹⁰ The Group sponsored the Bukhatir League since 1974.

¹¹ New turf grounds in the UAE include: Dubai International Cricket Stadium in Dubai Sport's City (a joint project of Bukhatir, with fellow Emirati businessmen Abdulrahman Falaknaz and Khalid al Zarooni in 2009), The Sevens' on Al-Ain Road (built by the Emirates Airlines), and Al Dhaid Cricket Village (since late 2000s; its chairman is Bukhatir's son).

¹² It explains the rationale for native composition thus: 'restricting cricket to just one or two pockets of the population prevents countries from being part of the Olympic movement, limits state funding and keeps cricket marginalized in societies'.

remains relatively inhibited in the Gulf region. On the other aspect of popular support for the sport, cricket is much-loved among the Asian expatriate population. This is the source, from where comes the main pool for participation in the game and for its consumption. Let us explore Oman and its principle cricket organisation, *Oman Cricket*, for a closer detail to understand the key sources of support behind the growth of the game in the region. It was during my fieldwork in Oman that I first recognized the central import of cricket among the Indian community and had the fortune to access initial material and interviews.

Oman Cricket (OC) was set up in 1979, which became the national cricket body representing Oman's national team playing at internationally competitive level today. It received State's recognition in 2005, which was important to play internationally, and is registered under the Ministry of Sports Affairs. But only after its accreditation with the Asian Cricket Council (ACC), in 1999. It steadily climbed up the ladder, beginning with winning its ACC Trophy in 2002, and its more recent triumphs including the ACC Cup in 2015 and by qualifying¹³ twice for the ICC World Twenty 20 (WT20) in 2016 and in 2020¹⁴.

Kanak Khimji, the Chairman of OC since its foundation (1979-2019), received *the Lifetime Achievement Award for Leadership* from the now Sultan of Oman (since the death of Sultan Qaboos on xx), SayyidHaitham bin Tarik Al Said¹⁵ on the occasion of celebrating 40 years of Oman Cricket. Earlier in 2011, the ICC Development Programme¹⁶ also recognised this "God-father of cricket in Oman" for his service to the sport. Originating from the Kutch region in the Indian state of Gujarat, he heads the *KhimjiRamdas* business empire (the KR Group of Companies in Oman) founded in 1870. Sultan Qaboos bestowed citizenship to him, an extremely rare honour among any of the Gulf countries, and the title of "Sheikh of the Indian community"¹⁷. Cricket thus gained a boost from this family's special dedication and its reach with the royal family¹⁸. Corporate sponsorship especially from expatriate trader-businessmen, however, remains the lifeblood for cricket in the Gulf region. They are consistently in the top leadership in Oman, with the Khimjis in the lead. The *Souvenir of Oman Cricket* for 2009-2010 shows that the key sponsors for cricket are Indian businessmen with origins in old trade-links with the region: KhimjiRamdas Group (Pankaj Khimji), Al Turki (Chaitanya Gulabsi), Muscat Pharmacy & Stores (Dilip Mehta), Raha Poly Products (Syed Anwar Ehsan, the GM), and Al Ansari (Kiran Asher).

OC built quality infrastructure and support relatively earlier among the GCC countries, firmly with an eye for professional-level competition. It developed the first grass turf in late 2012 in Al Amerat on land allocated by the Ministry of Sports Affairs, a second turf with flood lights at same complex in late 2015 and then state-of-the-art Oman Cricket Academy (OCA) with training and facilities complying with international standards in November 2018. In the same month of opening the

¹³The team must finish in the top six in the 14-nation international tournament

¹⁴ It won the Qualifier in 2019 to play in ICC World T20 2020, scheduled to take place in Australia in October 2020

¹⁵ He was the Minister of Heritage and Culture at the time, and the Patron-in-Chief of Oman Cricket

¹⁶He won *the Pepsi ICC Development Program Annual Award for Lifetime Service* in 2011. The award recognizes 'groups and individuals instrumental in the development and expansion of cricket throughout the world'.

¹⁷Owing to this title, Kanak Khimji, aged more than 80 years is referred as "the only Hindu-Indian Sheikh in the world", and represents the presence of some families with sub-continent origin living in the Sultanate that claimed it as home for at least five-generations

¹⁸ Kanak Khimji played cricket in Oman in the 50s and 60s; Helping the game in Oman might be the passion shared among the royal family as well - one of the members of the royal family who studied in Africa had played cricket in school.

OCA, Oman hosted the ICC World Cricket League Division 3¹⁹, its first ICC tournament in the country, highlighting the value of this new infrastructure. OC also ambitiously nurtured international support and visibility. Kanak Khimji and his son Pankaj (Director of KR) became members of UK's Marylebone *Cricket Club* (MCC), which opened for cooperation²⁰ for instance, in training and practice abroad. At the annual ICC meetings, Pankaj Khimji represents the OC. The Asian Cricket Council (ACC) elected him to its executive board in 2016. The ACC and the ICC are important sources of institutional support that includes funding for national teams for the development of cricket. OC extends its support as well. For example, it supported the participation of Uganda's national team *Cricket Cranes* in ICC WCLDivision 3 event in Oman in Nov 2018, interested to develop the game in both the nations. The Khimji family's passionate investment in cricket shows in their active involvement in OC. Kanak Khimji's son, Pankaj Khimji is Board member of the OC since more than 20 years and evidently carries the mantle. Nephew, MadhuJesrani (General Manager of Khimji Watches), was first Treasurer then its Secretary (since 2005 till date) and Team Manager, whose daughter is Manager of the Women's cricket²¹ team in Oman.

OC also began early to groom grass-root domestic game and local participation. It promoted training and competition engaging the youth including the natives at school-level²² and to develop cricket in the interior regions (Salalah and Sohar are now hubs with independent Committees). Despite such long-term oriented effort to nurture and sustain talent at the ground-level, the Team Manager admits that "(OC) faces the perpetual problem of players leaving and returning to their home countries"²³. The essential "amateur" quality of cricket across the Gulf region is among the fundamental challenges, to develop sufficient "depth" to play at its highest international form, the One-Daytestseries(ODI). It is evidently a serious hurdle to produce fixtures and professional players when "the overwhelming majority of Omani players are Indian and Pakistani expats whose local residency is based on the work visas sponsored by their corporate employers"²⁴. It is a perennial challenge to retain the players, including the task to persuade the employer-sponsors for accommodating demands on time for continuous training and participation in overseas tournaments.

Toward cricket's long-term sustainability in Oman thus, OC consciously invested in the native Arab-Omani players, including as a "solution" to counter the above challenge. The representation of the Baluchi community (Omani citizens of origin from Gwadar²⁵ in Pakistan) among the players and in the organization, such as late Khalid Al Balushi²⁶ and perhaps a more recent presence of the Lawati community²⁷ (one of the members of the Board is MaqboolMoosa Y. Al Lawati since the late 2000s) – is certainly positive for the game's growth. Cricket in Oman thus shows an expanding trend of attracting more native participation both to play in the game and to sponsor it. The Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Conference in 2014 gave *the Best Cricket Development Programme Award* to OC for its National Youth Development Project (NYDT)²⁸. OC fully sponsors the NYDT team to develop the native-Arab talent. In the short term, Oman possibly lost ground competitively– for

¹⁹ Oman won this 6-nation championship

²⁰OC drafting Derek Pringle as Technical Advisor through MCC for the OC team to train for the alien conditions of Ireland, helped the team eventually win qualification for the World T20 tournament in 2015

In 2016, MCC made its overseas cricket tour in Oman to play four matches and to conduct coaching clinic for 60 local children.

²¹ Women's Cricket started from 2007 in Oman.

²² OC signed an MoU with Oman's Ministry of Education to include cricket in the schools' curriculum

²³"Coffee with Deeba: MadhursinhJesrani", *Y Magazine*, 21 Jan 2016

²⁴"The millionaire family that built cricket in Oman", www.espnricinfo.com, 20 May 2017

²⁵Gwadar was under Oman until 1958

²⁶ Former Manager of the National Youth Development Team (NYDT)

²⁷A prominent Shia-Muslim community in Oman, with alleged origin from the Sind region of present-day Pakistan (Allen 1981).

²⁸NYDT winning the A-Division league in 2016 comprised 14 Omanis and 6 expats. In 2015, it had 10 Omanis and 10 expats ("Oman Cricket: NYDT emerge A Division champions", *Times of Oman*, April 4, 2016)

instance, to the UAE. However, it achieved greater success in increasing the proportion of the Arab participants²⁹ in cricket and a greater government support.

Pankaj Khimji proudly claimed at OC's 40th anniversary event, 'Oman is ranked 15th in the world of white-ball cricket out of 104 member countries... an accolade that Oman has achieved in any team sport at global scale'. Cricket in Oman shares the same structural and resource challenges as in the other Gulf nations. For instance, the sport's primary support-base and denomination is the essentially transient expatriate population in each of the six countries. In addition, corporate sponsorship is essential for cricket in the Gulf region. In Oman, cricket benefited from steady support and visionary leadership via *Oman Cricket*, strongly backed by powerful elite support (KR). Muscat Cricket Team (CT)(also backed by KR), Assarain, Gulfar Team, Al Turki, Al Rah, Passage to India, STS, and Enhance are some of the other prominent domestic teams with corporate sponsorship. The number and diversity of national-level playing teams underscore the community-wide support for cricket in Oman. The sport apparently achieved recognition at the national stage: the month-long Oman's 48th National Day celebrations in 2018 commenced with the inauguration of the Oman Cricket Academy (OCA). At the international level, cricket took the credit to become the first sporting team to represent Oman in a global World Cup sporting event, when it first qualified for ICC World Twenty-20 in 2016. With ambitions for the ICC WC ODI in 2023, Oman advanced notably in international cricket in about 18 years since first its winning the ACC Cup in 2002.

In sum, therefore, the key backbone of cricket in the Gulf region to date, continues to be mainly its South Asian expatriate-base. The composition of the players clearly shows the expatriate-dominance. The non-Asian expatriate participation is less: for example, the British expatriates do not play in the local cricket anymore. However, cricket, now, begun to widen with the native participation as well. The domestic-level cricket tournament in the GCC countries is active. Corporate sponsorship has extended significantly also at the grassroot and junior-school level play. The case of Oman Cricket that we explored in detail shows us that the sponsorship of the expatriate entrepreneurs is evidently an important source of support in the Gulf region. The backing for the sport increased and proved to be commercially viable, a further sign of the increasing growth of cricket in this region, parallel to the strengthening of the diaspora. The Indian diaspora enjoys a relatively stronger and more stable economic and social status in Oman and the UAE compared to Bahrain. Shyam Bhatia in Dubai is another example among prominent expatriate-businessmen giving high-profile support to cricket in the UAE. Bhatia also represented the UAE as a prominent player in international cricket for many years. In Bahrain, the sensitive sectarian context perhaps limits more support from the local regime. The Pakistani expatriates appear to have a larger representation in the sport. Lack of sufficient support by the government evidently crippled cricket's growth and local participation is also lesser. Cricket has been weaker in the other three Gulf countries: Kuwait, and especially, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The game remained informal for a longer time and could not sufficiently grow deeper. The formal development of cricket here started late, and it is more a top-led growth with the governments giving the push. The quality of support of the diaspora community seems therefore, to influence the growth stories of cricket in each of the GCC countries.

²⁹ In domestic cricket Oman in 2013 (www.omancricket.org): there were 166 Omani players out of the 1345 players participating in the 70 League Registered teams (about 1%). 58 Teams participated in Division 'A' to 'G', which included five All-Omani Teams (about 9%). And, Inter-School Tournament in Under-19 attracted 5 teams including an All Omani Team.

Conclusion

The paper argues that despite the official line about the GCC states being “not-immigration countries” and that migrant labour is largely blue-collar and temporary, the growth of cricket in the Gulf region is an expression of some resident diaspora communities. Sport and diaspora demonstrate a link, although scholarship has relatively neglected this relationship. Earlier in the paper, we saw as among examples in the past and elsewhere in the existing literature, the classic case of the Irish diaspora in the United States and of the Somalis in Netherlands. This paper hence introduces the contemporary story of cricket in the Arab-Gulf region and the South Asian/Indian diaspora to the scholarship.

In addition, the case of cricket in the region testifies a mutually reinforcing relationship between sport and diaspora. The status of one could indicate about the position of the other. In the earlier sections, we traced the evolution of the sport. It was initially a British-introduced colonial-leisure activity, then it evolved essentially as a sport for and among the expatriate community consumption and now in its present form, it is a burgeoning sport consistently gaining an independent recognition, both locally and internationally. Its advance across the GCC region shows a linked and yet, varied trajectories. Cricket demonstrates varying strengths in the six GCC countries, in accordance with the specific challenges and resources in each site, and with the specific status of the diaspora community such as in size, stability and resources.

Cricket had minimal visibility and infrastructural resources, compared with the sports like football and racing, in contrast to its visible popularity on the ground among the significant expatriate population. State support in its indifferent or facilitative attitude was evidently an important factor. Some Gulf states took a more active role to develop cricket at different points in time. For instance, Kuwait and Sharjah, in the UAE. However, it appears that the degree of consolidation of the South Asian community in each host country of the Gulf countries, and particularly of the Indian diaspora, played a primary role. This is because the South Asian population represents the essential source of demand and for participation in the sport. In addition, it defined the success to mobilize and sustain support to develop the game, from the host state and the society but also from beyond, including from the larger diaspora community, the home country, and the professional cricket community worldwide. For instance, cricket in Oman and the UAE grew consistently. The community had a relatively less stable status in other Gulf countries, which perhaps reflects the sport’s more unsteady growth here. Hence, this sport shows to have evolved in corresponding degrees along with the progressive consolidation of the South Asian community in the respective host countries.

Cricket thus simultaneously signals the inherent fragility of the Indian/South Asian diaspora as well as its consolidation in the GCC region. This “expatriate” sport is evidently blooming in the Arab-Gulf countries and managed to secure a visible place and status in the public sphere and in official policy – as among the recognised sports of the states, as well as for its value in international triumphs and in sports tourism. We noted its increasing achievements at the international game, for instance, at the regional ACC and at the ICC tournaments. Professional participation in cricket within the domestic terrains is also expanding, as seen with the below-16 and the women’s cricket teams. A “temporary” population certainly could not develop young talent and a professional sport that demands growth over a long-term, such as cricket is now in the Gulf region. We thus see a direct relationship between the vibrancy of cricket and the status quo of the diaspora-expatriate community in the host country, which underlines promise as well as constraint.

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