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Dec 14, 2023 by [Arunima Gupta](#), [Aparna M Sridhar](#)

India Trumps in World Cup Cricket Diplomacy ^[1]

From the stands overlooking the cricket greens, at a match between India and the Netherlands on Diwali day this November, it was clear that the sport has become India's most celebrated festival. For spectators of the recently concluded ICC Men's Cricket World Cup hosted by India, it was a demonstration of how festivals are celebrated in India — with fanfare, fireworks, joyous chanting, pounding of drums, a suffusion of color and communities uniting. Participating teams and nations were brought together in the true spirit of sport, unshadowed by foul play, sledging or politics.

Viewership metrics indicate an unprecedented popularity with over 364.2 million viewers. The tournament attendance was a record high, with over a million fans flocking to the 10 venues to watch over 48 matches. The finals held at the Narendra Modi stadium — the largest cricket arena in the world — hosted nearly 100,000 fans and the online viewership on over-the-top platform Disney+ Hotstar alone was 59 million.

As reported in *The Economic Times*, while the 2019 World Cup brought around INR 36 billion to the UK, this edition will bring in revenues to the tune of INR 130–200 billion to India. This is a reflection of not just the popularity of the game but also the unique elements that India as a host brings to such international events.

Cricket, the second most-watched sport in the world after football, has also become a powerful instrument of India's sports diplomacy and soft power. Sports diplomacy, a subset of public diplomacy, has long been a tool for promoting goodwill between nations, as well as being an economic driver and nation-branding activity.

Tapping Cricket For Sports Diplomacy

In the case of cricket — which was introduced by the British in the Commonwealth — State leaders, sportspeople, cricket boards and citizens have been part of a transformative process that has seen the sport shift from village greens to grand international venues and big branding.

India has seen significant developments in the past few years both in terms of enhancing its cricket performance to become a leading cricket-playing nation, as well as strengthening people-to-people relations as a world-class organizer.

While the Indian team is picked based on performances in zonal matches, the current team represents the cohesive diversity of a large and multicultural country. Also bringing diverse representation to other teams are cricketers of Indian origin totaling six in this World Cup, playing for the Netherlands, New Zealand and South Africa. Most notably, Indian-origin Urmila Rosario managed the Australian team that lifted the World Cup this year.

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Global stars from other sports are also engaging with cricket. The earliest was the friendship between race driver Michael Schumacher and Sachin Tendulkar. One of the world's most recognizable football players, David Beckham, witnessed a semi-final match this Cricket World Cup. Taking to Instagram, he also shared his fondness for Indian cuisine, hospitality and interactions ranging from children to cricket stars and Bollywood celebrities. Commenting on how sports can drive change, Beckham said, “1 in every 5 children in the world is in India, when India progresses, the whole world progresses.”

Redefining Cricket

Going beyond the thrill of the sport itself, India has come up with innovative ways of promoting the sport and the country. The Indian Premier League (IPL), started in 2008, created a new model for the game with different leagues having players from several countries. While the usual format of the game involves nation-to-nation rivalry, IPL allows cricketers from different nations to compete together as one. The franchise model of creating teams, often named after Indian cities or states, has also made IPL a lucrative business. These city-based teams are brands in their own right, owned by eminent personalities such as actor Shah Rukh Khan and industry leader Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Group. In 2015 alone, IPL contributed INR 11.5 billion to India's GDP. Furthermore, the recently held ICC World Cup also reaped the rewards of IPL's success, with people recognizing international players who have played in local teams and cheering them on.

IPL's success enhanced global familiarity with India, and the ICC World Cup also became a driver of tourism in the country. This provided an opportunity to promote Destination India by exhibiting infrastructural development, evolved hospitality, and diverse experiences.

Looking at the economic impact, the 2023 World Cup, for instance, is estimated to have benefitted various sectors, especially aviation, hospitality and retail. The aviation industry saw a 20 percent hike in bookings between cities where matches are being played, as compared to previous year's bookings in the same period. Similarly, food and beverage as well as retail was estimated to add INR 30 billion to the Indian GDP combined. It also invited sponsor money worth INR 19 billion from industry giants like HUL and Indusland Banks, while partners include global brands such as Emirates, Bookings.com and Coca-Cola. This shows how cricket has also contributed to making India an attractive destination for global investments.


Lastly, at the governmental level, New Delhi has used cricket to exercise its foreign policy and augment soft power. India has actively helped smaller nations build their sport. A case in point is the team from Afghanistan that has been training in exile in India due to the prevailing conditions in war-torn Afghanistan. India has not only provided practice grounds but has also provided sponsorship for the team since 2015, with Amul one of the oldest and leading dairy brands from India being one of them. This assistance hasn't gone in vain as demonstrated by the stellar performance of the Afghan national team, which defeated 2019 ICC World Cup winner England by a margin of 69 runs in the 2023 World Cup.

Furthermore, with the guest list of the ICC World Cup finals including important political and diplomatic figures, India left no stone unturned to demonstrate its sporting prowess. Indian PM Narendra Modi and Australian Deputy PM Richard Marles together presented the World Cup trophy to Australia for winning the tournament.

Conclusion

The fan-driven popularity of cricket in India provides immense opportunity for the government to use it to foster a sense of national pride within the country, while offering non-Indians a chance to become cultural icons globally.

Going forward it would be helpful to get greater evidence of the connection between foreign policy and sport and also to see how it is actively being explored in bilateral relations. As a

recent report , published by the University of Edinburgh, points out, the concept has not resulted in substantial scholarly investigation or policy impact studies. Sport is often seen as one of the many tools of soft power but not the most important for most nations. Another study on the practice of sports diplomacy suggests that research on sports diplomacy should focus on the economic benefits of hosting international sports events and extrapolate it to soft power.

The 21st century has seen India host the Cricket World Cup, the Hockey World Cup, the Under-17 FIFA World Cup, the Motorola GP Championship, Formula One and the Commonwealth Games. India also hosted the 141st session of the International Olympic Committee after a gap of 40 years. All of these events have given a great boost to a developing country looking to hold its own in sports.
