

*"India would give up English but not cricket."*¹

In Victorian England, cricket was thought to epitomise the English national character, with its elements of fair play, loyalty to the team, sportsmanship and a suppression of exuberance. It was therefore used as a cultural tool to integrate the Empire and impart such solid values upon the wayward peoples of the subcontinent. The 'effeminate' Indians could do with some good colonial stiffening up, the English thought, and be united through the common ideals of the gentleman's game.

The Indians took to cricket all right, but imparted their own values: flamboyance, unconventionality, effusive crowds, entertaining play. Cricket became a mode of self-expression. One of the earliest Indian players was Ranji, a true prince, a 'descendent of the moon.' With his light-footed movements and unconventional strokes—blue flames were said to flicker around his bat—Ranji revolutionised the way cricket was played. With ancestry that went back to Jamshid, king of Persia and the Lord Krishna himself, Ranji could only have cut a glamorous figure. "A strange light was seen for the first time on English fields," wrote cricket writer Neville Cardus at the time.

In making cricket their own, the Indians discovered elements to the game that the English had never considered. Nuances and idiosyncrasies emerged that fitted perfectly with the Indian temperament. The game attained a fluidity, an altered pace. Such 'effeminacy' was at odds with the self-perceived virility of the English, yet it was no less powerful, and certainly no less effective on the field. The Indians presented a different kind of masculinity, one more at ease with itself, perhaps. It allowed for sensuality and freedom of movement. It acknowledged the viewer. In a sense, India made cricket beautiful.

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1. From an article by Dharminder Kumar, *The Tribune India*, Chandigarh, Sunday, June 20, 1999