



Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam

**An International
Journal of
Humanities and Social
Sciences**

An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal

www.modernresearch.in

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Consciousness in Pre-independence India, as
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**Volume 3, Issue 2
June 2016**

pp. 286–293

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Cricket, Nationalism, and National Consciousness in Pre-independence India, as seen in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*

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Abstract: Nationalism and national consciousness are integral to a country's formation. As a political ideology, it forms the binding factor between citizens of a nation. Sports have always encouraged nationalism. Be it football or cricket, citizens come together and support their team and their country with heightened patriotic feelings. This paper looks at the game of cricket, as seen in Ashutosh Gowariker's Academy Award nominated film *Lagaan*, and examines the role played by the game to foster the spirit of national consciousness in pre-independent India.

Keywords: cricket, nationalism, *Lagaan*, nation, postcolonial, India, visual culture.

In 1936, Hitler used the achievements of Germans in the Munich Olympics to highlight his belief in Aryan racial supremacy. Cricket and football World Cups have been used as a platform for the expression of nationalistic sentiments. It's a time when the entire nation comes together as one and assumes a homogenous mask of oneness, leaving behind their differences and religious identities. India saw the semi-finals of the ICC World Cup 2011 as almost a cold war against Pakistan, as seen from the amount of media attention given to it, along with the Prime Ministers of both countries coming to witness the game (Gollapudi 2011). It was a moment when the match unified India, a country tore by caste differences, gender biases, economic hierarchies, into one nation and re-established national consciousness.

Lagaan, the 2001 Bollywood movie portrays a similar cricket match that unified all Indians against the British. It rekindled feelings of unity and nationhood. This essay attempts to understand terms like nationalism and national consciousness and the influence of Cricket (as portrayed in *Lagaan*) in the context of Pre-independence Indian state. *Lagaan* is a 2001 Indian epic sports drama film written and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. Aamir Khan, who was also the producer, stars with Gracy Singh in the lead roles; British actors Rachel Shelley and Paul Blackthorne play the supporting roles. The film is set in the Victorian period of India's colonial British Raj. The story revolves around the small village of Champaner whose inhabitants, oppressed by high taxes, find themselves in an extraordinary situation as an arrogant officer challenges them to a game of cricket as a wager to avoid the taxes. The narrative spins around this situation as the villagers face the arduous task of learning the alien game and playing for a result that will change their village's destiny. Cricket as a game forms the stage for uniting against the British and expressing national consciousness and nationalism. The film portrays a pre-independent India which shows cricket as the unifying factor in developing the idea of a nation and attempts to form a national consciousness.

Nationalism is a political ideology that involves a strong identification of a group of individuals with a political entity defined in national terms, i.e. a nation. In the 'modernist' image of the nation, it is

nationalism that creates national identity. National consciousness is the awareness and identification of a group of individuals as one, unified in every way in the path to forming a peaceful nation state (Smith 71). One can see the evolution of these ideas in the movie *Lagaan*. It shows the subaltern masses join hands against a hegemonic rule and their attempts to overcome the tyranny. National identity and nationalism are played out dramatically, although not all of the depictions are accurate, or even hold any resemblance to events in history.

The first step towards achieving national consciousness is by establishing the English as the 'other', people that do not belong to the place. They are seen as aliens and are derogatively referred to as *firangees*. This automatically creates a hierarchy from the point of the subaltern – in this case, the people of Awadh, particularly Champaner. They find the English cruel and unjust. They have such fixed ideas about them that when Elizabeth offers to help Bhuvan and the others in learning the game, Bhuvan's first reaction is that of suspicion. He immediately asks why she would do so when she herself is British. The scene where the Raja's messengers inform them of the double taxation that year, all villagers blame the British government. The people have found grounds to unify and include even the King of the region with them, clearly demarcating the 'other'. The people of Awadh have identified themselves and the Raja as 'us' and the British as 'them' or the 'other' (Mannathukkare 4582). It shows that although the game of cricket in the plot of *Lagaan* came much later, people already were unified against the British. They came together against the unfair regimental rule of the British. Faint ideas of nationhood and national consciousness were already brewing.

However, if this is to be seen as national consciousness, newer problems arise with defining the term. If national consciousness in this case came only because the people of Awadh were threatened by the British Government, does it indicate that national consciousness cannot arise unless the people are threatened by an alien force? In Easterine Kire's novel *Mari* (2010), which describes the town of Kohima before the British came in control of it, the people are more or less free and complacent. They do not care about a nation state. The ideas of

nationality and national consciousness emerge only when the town is left rummaged after the World War II and Indian forces take over the land. To fight the new rulers who have taken over their lands, the people unite and form an alliance. The state which was torn in tribal wars came together as one in opposition to the forced upon Indian rule and occupation of the state. The people who had never craved for a national identity of their own, who were very content with the tribal demarcations, began to demand for a free sovereign state.

In the film, the people of Champaner have their own differences. Although the director has taken several liberties in showing the relations between the people of the village as more or less peaceful, one can see that once they are challenged to the game of cricket, they see this as a chance to fight on equal grounds with the British. The reason they felt inferior earlier was because the British had strong forces and capital, while they had none. Only in the game of cricket, they could compete with the British on equal grounds. The game of cricket tests sheer physical agility and strength. Hence they unite and come together as a team to fight against the British. This further problematises the term 'national consciousness' and 'nationality'. Do these feelings of oneness and nationality come only when the threatening entity is seen at equal power as of those being threatened? The people of Champaner had already suffered a lot under the regime of the colonialist rule. They had been subjected to the payment of more taxes than before, and had lost the right of the lands to the colonial powers. But the idea of a nationality and national consciousness arises only when the game of cricket is put on the table. It is seen as a chance to unite and fight against the *firangees*.

The game of cricket forms the final piece to the puzzle working its way towards achieving national identity and national consciousness. As Nissim Mannathukkare (2001) puts it in his essay "Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silences of *Lagaan*", cricket was seen as a game of the elite in pre-independent India. The cultural hierarchies gave this game an upper hand, it being the game of the 'powerful'- the ruling classes. To connect with the British, and in an attempt to display their eliteness, the Rajas and rulers of the various princely states began to

patronage the game and even participated in it, so that they could be viewed as elite as the *firangees*. Cricket seemed the only medium where the colonial power, their economy and military control could not play a part, and hence, Indians flocked to the game. It was the only 'fair' way of defeating them. After the unsuccessful Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, this seemed like a less bloody way to assert themselves. Hence, eventually, a sense of nationalism and national consciousness got attached to the game. People felt proud of knowing the game, playing it, and winning an occasional match against the British players.

Having introduced the relation of cricket to national consciousness, the value of the game in *Lagaan* can be fully understood. The people, the subaltern also understand the same about the game. The entire village tried to reason with Captain Russell to reduce the taxation in vain. They actually had to wait for more than an hour to talk to their own King as the British were having a match of cricket. Although they tried, they could not talk to the King before the match ended. Earlier, Bhuvan is shown trying to save a deer during one of the hunting trips led by Captain Russell. He fails at it and Russell threatens to kill him if he interferes again. Thus, cricket became the only place where they can assert themselves and be on equal grounds with the British. It becomes a site for assertion of racial supremacy.

Once the practice for the match begins, the national consciousness among the people of Champaner grows. When Bhuvan decides to include Kachra, a low caste member of the village, in their team, many oppose. However, the idea of paying three times the normal taxes dubs their idea of caste hierarchy. They learn to accept Kachra as a crucial member of the team. This indicates that for the idea of a nationality and national consciousness to evolve, people must let go of struggles within themselves and stand as one against the enemy. The same idea is also expressed in Easterine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). As a state fighting Indian occupancy, the author stresses on several occasions through her characters that independence can be achieved if only the people let go of their feuds amongst themselves and concentrate on the larger problem.

Another dimension that exists to this is the need for parallel entities in the colonies against which the English nation state could play; thus 'India' had to be invented, at least for the purposes of colonial cricket (Lele 204). Hence, cricket in India can be seen as an extension of the growing affinity towards cricket in England. The need to invent other players, other teams form a clear political underplay which needs domination over the 'other' in the field of cricket as well. In *Lagaan*, Captain Russell challenges the people of Champaner to a cricket match for this very same reason. He wanted to prove that the English were the best at cricket, their national sport. In a way, the whole process of creating national consciousness through cricket is initiated by the British themselves.

To achieve distinctive ideas of nationality and help character develop a national consciousness, the British characters have been strategically designed. It's a generalization of racial culture and behaviour (Mannathukkaren 4584). The British have been depicted as essentially bad and evil. They are purely capitalist and firmly advocate the Eurocentric stance of life. They have no concern for humanity; in fact, they appear as inhumane and brutish characters, almost in sharp paradox to the esteemed civilization they belong to. Thus, the audience learns to hate the British characters, as do the Indian characters in the movie. It is in opposition to these characters that the Indian characters unite and form an alliance despite their differences. The Indian characters are the binary opposites of the British characters, and the audiences readily love them and imbibe in them the idea of a national identity and national consciousness.

The only character that does not have a national consciousness or patriotic nationalistic feelings is Elizabeth Russell. She does not entirely believe in the capitalist ambition of the English, nor does she contain any racial prejudice towards the Indians. She justifies her helping the Indians learn cricket by stating the unfair treatment of them by the British as a reason. She belongs to the utopian essentialist school of people which believed in the good of mankind. However, she too cannot escape embracing a national consciousness as the movie progresses. Once the practices begin, she gets involved, and one cannot

help but observe her enthusiasm during the actual game. She puts on a *bindi*, learns the language and starts believing in the Hindu gods and goddesses. During the last few scenes of the movie when she is leaving for England for good, she steps out of her carriage to bid the people of Champaner farewell, and touches the feet of Bhuvan's mother. Her transformation is thus complete. As a character, she has imbibed the Indian national consciousness, and sets the Indian view of cultural supremacy.

Nationalism and national consciousness are both crucial elements in forming a nation state. They unite and form the base for a greater body of similar citizens, sharing common beliefs and ideas. *Lagaan* brings out the power of national consciousness and nationality as one of its major theme. The game of cricket soon unites an otherwise subjective population against the British objectively. Although the term 'Bharatvasi' or 'Indian' is never used in the movie, one can make out that the game has created a national identity for its characters. They unite, and fight against the British, driving them away from Champaner once and for all. Nationalism cannot be taught, it evolves automatically. The term is also fluid, with no fixed definitions. This justifies the different types of nationalism that exists (based on land, religion, etc). The film has also demonstrated how popular cinema can enable the subaltern subjects of postcolonial India to engage in debates on colonialism and modernity (Chakraborty 1883). It reveals that for postcolonial nations, history is often merged with fiction. What really happened is of less concern. It's a politicized history that is presented, in an attempt to strengthen national consciousness and national identity. It also further strengthens national consciousness by presenting the subaltern as a contributor to the glorious past of the nation, something that is not entirely true considering the inhumane treatment of the subaltern in pre-independent India.

And so the next time India plays a cricket match, we know that Indians are watching it, unified, and supporting their team with a reinforced sense of nationalism.

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