

NOTE

False Pride at Stake

A B writes :

Currently the World Cup of cricket is being held, and the host countries are India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It is noteworthy that cricket culture in the sense of increasing curiosity among the people about international cricket matches, and particularly about limited over matches has considerably expanded in these countries, and the incomes of cricketers playing for India have gone up astronomically.

Everywhere there are discussions on cricket, and speculations are rife about the chances of India winning the World Cup. Just on the eve of the inauguration of the World Cup, there were newspaper headlines for consecutive days about the failure of the Cricket Association of Bengal to get the permission to host a match, and one leading daily went on to suggest that it was Kolkata's shame. Certainly the coexistence of dazzling affluence on one side and horrible poverty and squalor on the other is not a matter of shame. Cricket culture has been successful in the sense that it has made the mind of the educated middle and lower middle classes insensitive to this degradation of life.

Now a pertinent question is: how many cricket-playing countries are there in this universe? Altogether fourteen nations are participating in this cricket extravaganza, and four of them are without test status. There are no qualifying rounds, as in the World Cup in football. Yet there is euphoria all around the country. Huge amounts of money have been poured into cricket, and various companies who control the sports channels show not only cricket matches, but advertisements of their products as well. Cricketers of this country particularly are now multi-millionaires. Cricket has traditionally been a game of the affluent, and examples of a boy from a modest income background coming out to play in international cricket are at best rare. If India wins the World Cup,, it will be an occasion for nationwide jinks and junketings. Cricket players whose gap with the average Indian is ever widening in terms of capability and entitlement will be considered national heroes, as if they have come to cure all the chronic ills of the country.

Of course the sponsors who are patronizing TV sports channels are advertising their products and hoping to get the money back via increased sales and profits. These products are not goods of mass consumption as far as the Indian standard is concerned. Unemployed youths working in the informal sector of the economy will enjoy, and are perhaps enjoying the cricket culture to their heart's content. If one cannot provide them with enough entitlement so as to afford enough food (the recent rise in food prices is astonishing) and clothing and basic medical facilities, at least give them the big circus in the shape of cricket. After all, the number of billionaires (in terms of dollars, not of rupees) in this poor third world country has increased fabulously, thanks to the policy of state-sponsored liberalization, and this phenomenon must have some reflection in the sports culture as well. It is not culpable and objectionable.

One point is perhaps worth mentioning. While India's elevated cricket status has been almost an object of adoration, India's declining position in the hockey and football map of the world is little discussed. Now India has to struggle hard to qualify for playing in the Olympics or World Cup in hockey, while not even the greatest football-optimist of this country will ever venture to suggest that India will qualify for participation in these international tournaments in the near future. It is also common knowledge that compared with cricket, football and hockey are relatively plebian games. Yet the cricket euphoria will go on unabated, along with the

relentless effort to project India as a big economic power with high rates of growth of income, but with very little growth of employment and growing economic inequality. The inebriating effect of the world cup will, for the time being, keep people in a state of false paradise. □□□