

Modi's Cricket Ploy: Hindutva as Twelfth Man

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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This week, the International Cricket Council's One Day International tournament will commence in India. The man who will take centre stage during the occasion will be Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, whose earthly attributes are fast becoming, at least in a political sense, celestial in dimension.

Commentators are already noting that the tournament will [usher in a pre-election campaign](#) extravaganza for Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one lasting six weeks. Modi has positioned himself as all and everything, supreme self-referencing god head in a political strategy that eclipses rivals and dooms them to irrelevance. Like other authoritarians, he is keen to find solid footing in established popular rites and customs, appropriating the features he likes (Hinduism, good), and abandoning those he dislikes (Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, bad).

India's national sport has not been spared the Modi touch. Nothing about the man speaks about the dash and panache of the Indian cricket team, but that hardly matters. Modi has previously run the Gujarat Cricket Association with his current Home Affairs minister Amit Shah. While India's Board of Control for Cricket has a nominal presidential head in the form of the ineffectual Roger Binny, true power over the organisation [lies with](#) Shah's son Jay, the body's honorary secretary. With Ashish Shela as treasurer, the BJP stranglehold seems total.

The national team has become, in effect, an extension of the prime minister's ambitions. All have come together, fused and meshed, none better illustrated than through the renaming of an enormous stadium - one of the world's largest, in fact - after the PM himself. With a seating capacity over 130,000, the Narendra Modi stadium, based in the PM's home state of Gujarat, will host the key events and matches of the World Cup.

Hard to miss in this dance is also the power of global cricket's locus. Long straddling the England-Australia nexus, cricket's hegemonic centre has moved with spectacular effect. The BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) is unchallenged in its supremacy over purse strings and glitzy promotion, with the Indian Premier League being the game's crowning,

commercial glory. In its 2023 season, the IPL drew in [over 500 million viewers](#), registering a growth rate of 32% from the previous season, while total revenues for the BCCI in 2021-22 came in at \$771 million. As the *Financial Times* [noted](#) in July this year, the BCCI “dominates global decision making and takes a larger share of global revenues than England and Australia combined.”

Despite this, the governing body remains blighted. Overseas, it is accused of buying preferential treatment for the IPL over other cricketing schedules, seducing, if not strong-arming smaller nations into accepting its agenda.

The cricket body has repeatedly stifled such anti-corruption efforts as those mounted by the former Delhi commissioner of police, Neeraj Kumar. When Kumar’s [A Cop in Cricket](#) was published, it told an all too familiar story on spoliation wrought by wealth, fed by the lucre of the IPL, money laundering and rampant bookmakers. He also found that the enormous outlay of funds otherwise “meant for the promotion of cricket at the grassroots level is diverted and misappropriated by state association officials, who adopt every conceivable modus operandi of malfeasance to do so.” Little wonder that much of Modi’s own relations with the powerful agents of Indian public life reflect a broader, dark model of the Hindutva crony state, where funds are diverted in the name of special interests.

The sheer scope, exposure, and significance of cricket, and its dramatic modernisation by Indian sporting practice, has made it pure political capital. Salil Tripathi, author and board member of PEN International, [explains the point](#). “The men’s cricket World Cup, to be staged in India from October 5, will put India, and Modi’s premiership, back on the global stage.”

Peter Osborne is [none too happy with this](#). Having written extensively about cricket on the subcontinent, a keen student and admirer of its magical play and often tortuous politics, Osborne can only look at the Modi appropriation experiment with alarm. During Modi’s tenure, dissidents, Muslims and Christians have been targeted. In an [article](#) co-authored with Imran Mulla, some symptoms of this rule are mentioned. “Since May, Hindu nationalist militants have killed over 100 Christians in northeastern Manipur, destroying churches and displaying 50,000 people in a brutal campaign of terror.”

Osborne and his co-author do not shy away from warning that the Modi-Hindutva state is showing genocidal urges. “This is a moral emergency and thus far nobody seems to have noticed. US President Joe Biden, supposedly the leader of the free world, recently gave Modi a hero’s welcome in Washington.” Modi’s renaming of the stadium sent an ominous “message that the Indian cricket team represents his own political party – the Bharatiya Jana Party (BJP) – and not the nation as a whole.”

The authors pertinently contrast the tepid coverage leading up to the Cricket World Cup with the near surfeit of moral indignation expressed prior to the FIFA Men’s World Cup held in Qatar – albeit one eventually extinguished in the glow of the tournament. “The BBC decided not to broadcast the opening ceremony live, with its star presenter Gary Lineker lecturing TV viewers on Qatar’s human rights record and Labour leader Keir Starmer boycotting the event.”

Expect, on this occasion, no videos and clips of protest by any of the competing teams complaining about human rights violations, religious intolerance, barbaric practices or appalling working conditions. Ditto that of ingratiating British and Australian politicians. Modi’s Hindutva train of religious and ideological purity has gone unnoticed in most of the

cricket world. The only question that will be asked of him at the tournament's opening is simple: Will he be able to land the ball on the square?

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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