

Pakistani Attitudes Toward the West and Field Hockey

Written by Andrew Anzur Clement

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The Opponent Within: Pakistani Attitudes Toward the West and Field Hockey in the 2012 London Olympic Games

This paper is about Olympic field hockey and Pakistani attitudes towards the West in the age of post-colonialism. It begins in an airport. As an American visitor from the West, I got off the plane in Karachi expecting to enter into an atmosphere of overt hostility. I instead found that, while some personnel eyed me with suspicion, they also displayed a resigned deference to my presence as I cleared customs and met with the host family I would be staying with for the next few weeks.

I was in Pakistan during the 2012 London Olympic Games. Overall popular interest in the games was not that great. The Pakistani Olympic team was not that large, and was not expected to perform well (Subohi, 2012). However, I was only in the country for a short time when I heard about the major exception to this trend: the field hockey team. One of my host's relatives had taken me to be measured for a traditional Pakistani outfit, and my host's 10-year-old son tagged along. On the way, he started chatting excitedly about the team and its decent prospects for success over some Western nations. Yet he seemed much less interested in his country's athletes in other sports.

My first few experiences in the country betrayed the ambivalent attitude that many Pakistanis hold toward the West and former colonial powers. While proudly acknowledging that their country is now an independent nation, Pakistanis maintain that Britain and other Western powers continue to hold power over them. This has resulted in a kind of national inferiority complex, in which Pakistan simultaneously blames itself for failing to improve during the post-colonial period, and resents the West's perceived superiority. These attitudes have grassroots origins, which have been socially constructed through years of British rule, following civil strife and attempted invasion. In this social climate, the Olympic field hockey team served as an outlet for Pakistani frustration regarding perceived victimization by former colonial and Western powers. It did so by allowing them the opportunity to overcome more powerful states using a Western game, while in the capital of their former conqueror. In this way, the sport provided a type of referendum on the Pakistani ability to improve upon what the colonial era had left them. Pakistani attitudes toward the matches and the team's eventual defeat are an example of how Pakistanis perceive themselves as unwilling but deserving victims of post-colonial western imperialism on the world stage.

Before achieving independence in 1947, Pakistan was part of the British Raj for almost a century. It was during this period that the sport was introduced to Pakistan. Since that time, other powers have held a strong influence over the country. This has resulted in a consensus that Pakistan is routinely influenced and used by developed powers in the post-colonial era. While resentment regarding this is periodically directed at some countries more than others, there is a general perception that Western society as a whole has affected Pakistan. This societal construction has some basis in historical events. Even before Pakistan's independence, departing British authorities attempted to micro-manage the establishment of Pakistan as a state (Inskeep, 2011, 52). During the 1950's and 1970's the United States supported two of the country's military dictators, seeking to use Pakistan as a bulwark against Soviet expansion (83-84). It even supported one dictator's introduction of Islamic law into the Pakistani legal code, in return for support against the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan (Niazi, 2012). In the present, little distinction seems to be made between an attempt at colonization and American military activity in the north of the country. Thus, there is a connection between former colonial powers and the West in general.

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As a result, a perception exists that Pakistan is not capable of improving upon what colonial or western powers have granted it. Therefore, the reasoning goes, it is almost deserving of this victimization by the West. As one Pakistani journalist put it “Pakistan is a nation of beggars” (Syed, 2012, 2). Reminders of this can be seen throughout the country. The plan for Pakistan’s capital city was made by a European (Inskeep, 2012, 88-89). Much of Pakistan’s infrastructure and its court systems are derived from the colonial period and little attempt has been made to improve upon them (Syed, 2012). At Karachi University, everything from the architecture to any advanced equipment was donated from or provided by developed nations (Qureshi, 2012). Conversely, there seems to be a tacit disrespect for any artefacts or advances that are originally Pakistani. For example, while donated Western equipment is maintained at Karachi University, many of the country’s key founding documents are left deteriorating in a locked room of the University Library’s basement (Qureshi in Dawn, 2012). On my visit to this room I held The Pamphlet of The Direct Action Day of 1946, signed by Pakistan’s founder. I found it hard to believe that it was one of the nation’s most important founding documents. An article on the subject confirmed its authenticity, describing it as a “big khaki piece of paper [that] has turned brown and brittle over the years... its clumsy cover of translucent butter paper is torn from several places” (Ibid). In another example of perceived Pakistani unworthiness, my Pakistani host was arrested and tortured after developing and selling a brand of truck completely designed and assembled in Pakistan; he was apparently punished after the homemade vehicle began to out-class foreign imports, which were perceived to be superior (Niazi, 2012).

Many Pakistanis accuse the West of manipulating circumstances so as to place their country at a disadvantage. However, because of this perceived inferiority to the west, Pakistan’s problems are often blamed on Pakistan itself instead of on the acknowledged foreign meddling. For example, one newspaper article in Karachi’s Express Tribune attributed the fact that Pakistan’s World Bank ratings have dropped for 7 years in a row to the fact that “the government has undertaken no major or minor reforms to improve Pakistan’s economic competitiveness” instead of to the policies of the World Bank or other nations (Tirmizi, 2012). Despite this sentiment, most Pakistanis are not content to simply be put at a disadvantage by Western powers. Because of this, Pakistan finds itself in a paradox of social construction. This can best be illustrated by a conversation I had with Ms. Syed, a journalist at Dawn TV. I was simultaneously encouraged to use my increased credibility as a westerner to my advantage, and told that similarly motivated policies of Western powers place Pakistan in a weak position (Syed, 2012). Indeed, at Karachi University the door to the room containing the important documents was not opened until I asked to see its contents. Ms. Qureshi, then a journalist with the Express Tribune, didn’t seem surprised by this. “You are a guest from Amreeka” she said, using the Urdu word for America. “So the administration is usually nice...not so much to us”. At the same time many in that administration harbour somewhat skittish attitudes towards America and the West in general. While Pakistanis would like to see their nation as more powerful, they are trapped by their own perceptions regarding power relations between themselves and western powers, sometimes leading to resentment. Thus, Pakistanis perceive their country as a deserving, but unwilling victim in the post-colonial era.

This Paradox does much to explain the Pakistani interest in Olympic field hockey during the 2012 London Olympic Games. In the post-colonial era, sport in general is perceived as a “form of resistance” towards former colonial powers (Bale and Cronin, 2003, 5). This is true in Pakistan. Playing a western sport in the capital of their former colonizing power provided a symbolic form of resistance against the perceived dominance of Britain and other western powers. This resistance usually takes the form of manipulation of the timing of the matches, or alteration of the sport’s conventions by the formerly colonized nation (Ibid). However, during this last Olympics, the Olympic Committee was perceived in Pakistan as manipulating both of these factors to Western advantage. Still, the field hockey matches provided an opportunity for an affirmation of national ability. Through performing well in Olympic competition, Pakistan could ‘improve’ upon a construct that was introduced to the country during the colonial era. By playing and winning on terms set by the West, they could legitimize their unwillingness to be dependent on former colonial conquerors.

Yet, during the matches this contradiction of victimization was apparent in Pakistani attitudes. Many aspects of the Olympic field hockey matches, and even the Olympic games itself, were perceived in Pakistan as an attempt to by Europeans to manipulate circumstances so as to put the Pakistani team at a disadvantage. Not only did the scheduling of the Olympics during the month of Ramazan create complications for Pakistan’s athletes but, as one newspaper article pointed out, placed Pakistan’s sports economy at a disadvantage (Subohi, 2012). Most brand

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campaigns and television programs had to be organized around the Holy Month and Pakistan's independence day, which also fell during the Olympics. "For Pakistan" Ms. Subohi notes, "The Olympics may pass as a non-event unless its participating [field] hockey team somehow manages to... become a serious contender for a place on the winners' stand." Despite this, the article did not solely attribute this problem to the scheduling of the Olympics. Instead it pointed to a lack of know-how within Pakistan, opining, "The country will need to develop policies to promote sports on standard competitive lines for us to be a noticeable side in Olympics." While acknowledging that the problem of scheduling the Olympics was both disadvantageous and externally imposed, disapproval of the scheduling was accompanied by a claim that the know-how did not exist within Pakistan to mount a proper Olympic sports campaign anyway. The field hockey matches may have provided a vehicle in which Pakistan had the opportunity to prove its strength against Western powers. However, the introspective manner in which the country responded to this disadvantageous position reveals that the perception of weakness that Pakistanis were seeking to disprove to themselves as a society remained implicit in their reaction.

This assumption of inferiority was also displayed in analyses of the team's performance. There were some popular claims that the use of a blue synthetic playing surface gave an advantage to European teams (Niazi, 2012). The surface lends itself to a faster pace of play, which is better suited to the European playing style. However, the press seemed to regard the issue of 'blue turf' and other perceived disadvantages as an obstacles to be overcome, rather than a barrier to fair play (Riaz, 2012). This could indicate a perception of the necessity to defeat Western developed countries on their own terms. Thus, the disadvantageous situation of 'blue turf' seemed to be regarded, not only as manifestation of the normal but unfortunate power imbalance between Pakistan and the West, but also as a symbol of the hope that Pakistan could overcome it.

This theory is supported by the fact that post-colonial or Western nations were portrayed as Pakistan's main rivals. After the team defeated Argentina one Express Tribune article was quick to note that "Great Britain, who have home advantage, and world champions Australia will prove to be strong adversaries" (Shahzada, 2012). These countries were focused on as Pakistan's most serious opponents, although the Indian team's complete failure did remain in the press. Indeed, when the Pakistani team performed well, this was of course received positively and attributed to the skill of the Pakistani players in overcoming externally imposed obstacles. In this way, the early victorious matches served as justification for the affirmation of Pakistani ability.

At first Pakistan's prospects for advancement seemed good. The team tied with Spain, and beat Argentina and South Africa. Then Britain defeated Pakistan 4-1. In keeping with Pakistani attitudes, one account cited externally imposed circumstances by Britain, but ultimately looked at the Pakistani team's poor performance (Web Desk, 2012). The account also focused on the fact that Pakistan had managed to score one goal. That this was regarded as positive — and was not overtly attributed to the any level of skill on the Pakistani team — shows that the mindset of inferiority to Britain remained present in news accounts of the match. While attempting to measure up to their former conqueror on the field, Pakistan was again reduced to taking whatever the West allowed it to have.

Despite this important loss, the hope for national self-actualization through sport remained. In order to advance further, the team would have to beat Australia for the final spot in the semi-finals. Before that match, the Express Tribune published an interview with Hassan Sardar, a prominent retired field hockey player. He maintained that the Pakistani team skills vis a vis the Australians were such that Pakistanis still had a chance (PPI, 2012). His main reason was his description of the offense of both teams as "open and attacking". Interestingly, one of the main weaknesses he cited was that the defense "looked disoriented" during the match against Britain. Even in this analysis of the team the assumption of victimization remained implicit. While fighting to overcome Western superiority, Pakistan still lacked adequate defense against it.

Australia routed the Pakistani team 7-0, ending its Olympic aspirations. To explain this defeat, analysis of the team's failures to advance again looked towards the team performance itself, rather than to the circumstances imposed upon by the games' Western organizers. Although the team's skill was lauded for previous victories, they were dismissed after the team's elimination. "Great Britain and Australia were the real tests and we all know how we did against them" one Express Tribune article complained (Khan, 2012). The elimination was attributed to the team's incompetence. "This team doesn't have the potential to do better than this" the article continued. What started as an

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opportunity to affirm Pakistani ability over Western superiority ended in failure. Instead of providing a symbolic rationale for refusal of national victimization, the tournament served to reinforce the existing societal constructions regarding Pakistan and the West. The same article also criticized the paradox of the team management's attitude toward the Olympics, stating, "It's like they're mentally preparing fans for a disappointing finish, while also stating we're confident of doing well." This criticism reveals that the field hockey team's elimination served not only as a confirmation of current Pakistani perceptions, but also as an indictment of those perceptions themselves. Instead of resulting in a justification for feelings of frustration regarding the position of their nation in the world, the Olympics seemed only to increase the credibility of the rationale for victimization in the Pakistani mindset.

The changing Pakistani reaction towards the performance of their field hockey team in the Olympics serves as further evidence in support of the contradictory worldview that prevails in Pakistan during the post-colonial era. While Pakistanis seized upon the sporting event as a vehicle through which they could prove their national worth to themselves and to the world, the optimistic self-depreciative manner in which coverage of the event proceeded betrays assumptions about the power relations of Pakistan with former colonial and western powers. It also reflects the feeling of unwilling inferiority relative to the West that is prevalent in Pakistan. The reaction of the press towards the team's eventual elimination is typical of the introspective manner in which Pakistan accounts for failure on the international stage.

As with most sporting events, the field hockey team's defeat was quickly forgotten. However, on a societal level, it may have farther reaching implications. If perceptions of the world are constructed through socially shared experiences, then the team's defeat served only to reinforce current Pakistani views towards the West. As I prepared to leave Pakistan, these perceptions seemed to remain in force. Once again, I found myself in the airport. I approached the luggage counter and prepared for an argument about baggage fees. As I expected, The Pakistani representative told me that my bags were too large. I handed him my itinerary. It was clear that my flight from Pakistan was a separate ticket, bought after the flight back to the U.S. But, I remembered what I had observed of Pakistani perceptions. "I have to stop overnight because of when the flight to the U.S. departs." I said. The clerk looked at my documents and then replied, "Yes, sir. I see that sir." I walked toward customs without paying any extra fees thanks to what journalists, the Olympics and field hockey had taught me.

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