

Brotherly Hands across the Cricket Pitch: *Lagaan* as Gandhian Post-Colonial ‘India’

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Abstract

The American Academy Award nomination garnered by the Bollywood film *Lagaan* in 2001 focused worldwide attention on this parable of the fall of the British Raj that unfolds in the drama of a cricket match between colonizers and colonized. The protagonist, an Indian villager by the name of Bhuvan, embodies simultaneously the iconicity of the Indian cricket captain and star batsman Sachin Tendulkar and the nationalist and inter-communal ideology of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Set in the closing years of the 19th century, the deeper discourse of the film constructs an ideal post-Independence ‘India’ in which the ideals of Gandhi, far from dying with his assassination and the ethnic cleansing of Partition, have been fully implemented in the imagined new order. The fantasy of this ‘post-dated’ Gandhian idyll, however, is problematised by the film’s treatment of the non-Hindu minority communities—the Muslims, the Sikhs and the outcaste Untouchables (Dalits)—particularly when considered in the broader context of the rise of Hindutva fanaticism and inter-religious violence in present-day India.

“For the cricket field was both a theatre of imperial power and of Indian resistance.”

Ramachandra Guha

“Cricket is the only sociopolitical practice that binds India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim.”

Grant Farred

1. Introduction: India’s twin obsessions

The population of India, still torn apart by religion-inspired violence since even before Partition in 1947, appears to come together in its shared obsession with Bollywood and cricket. Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai (Bombay), caters to the ravenous demand of India’s huge cinema-going public. The formulaic melodramas and musicals that constitute much of the enormous Bollywood output goes some way in bridging many of the gulfs that otherwise separate India’s diverse religious, ethnic and linguistic communities. It’s not just the movies themselves that offer this community-spanning appeal: equally fascinating for the Indian public are the scandals and love affairs of the Bollywood stars. Even Bollywood, however, cannot compete with the pull of cricket. Cricket has been aptly described as India’s “defining cultural practice” (Farred 2004: 94). As with Bollywood, both the sport itself and the public lives of its star players are followed obsessively. The cricketing hero *par excellence* is the incomparable Sachin Tendulkar, “India’s great cricketing superstar, the best batsman in the world” (Rushdie 2002: 215). Novelist Salman Rushdie’s words are not mere hyperbole. In a recent test match against Australia, Tendulkar completed his fortieth test match century and in the process surpassed the record of the legendary West Indian batsman Brian Lara to become the world’s leading run-scorer. In India, Tendulkar is uniquely

iconic. As the historian Ramachandra Guha writes,

The Bombay batsman Sachin Tendulkar is perhaps the best-known Indian, as well as one of the richest. There are pamphlets and books about him in his native Marathi, and in Hindi and Tamil too. When Tendulkar is batting against the Pakistani swing-bowler Wasim Akram, the television audience exceeds the entire population of Europe.

(Guha 2002: *xiii*)

Yet Tendulkar is not merely a sportsman; he is held up as a moral compass. Salman Rushdie has expressed the fear that “if one day a scandal should touch Tendulkar, it would really destroy the game” (Rushdie 2002: 215). Tendulkar, who is seen as “a proud patriot and as a role model for India’s youth” (Nalapat/Parker 2005: 435), becomes in the fullest sense the ‘captain of India’, an almost Gandhian figure who seems to unify the Indian population both through his example on the field and his perceived integrity and moral stature. This capacity to lead the Indian cricket team to victory whilst at the same time becoming a voice of unity and identity for his country was in evidence most recently on the occasion of Tendulkar’s latest century, an innings that secured a victory for India over England. More significant than leading his team to a win over the old imperial power, however, was Tendulkar’s dedication of his hard-fought century to the victims of the November, 2008 terrorist attacks on the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and other sites in Mumbai. Tendulkar, who was born in Mumbai, said:

I don’t think India winning and me scoring a hundred will help those who lost their lives, but if we can help by contributing in some small way then we will do whatever we can to do that. It is a terrible loss and our hearts are with them. From my point of view I see it as an

attack on India, not just Mumbai, and I'd like to dedicate this hundred to all those who have gone through such terrible things.¹

In this way it is possible to see that Tendulkar transcends the role of mere sportsman to become the 'voice' of India and the 'healer' of its wounded spirit as perhaps no other individual could.

In 2001, cricket and Bollywood came together in spectacular fashion with the release of director Ashutosh Gowariker's movie *Lagaan*, starring Bollywood megastar Aamir Khan.² Sriyavan Anand hit the nail on the head in one essay where he observed that, "For a Subcontinent that so obsessively watches cricket and Hindi cinema, *Lagaan* offer[ed] cinema-as-cricket and cricket-as-cinema" (Anand 2002)—rich entertainment fare, indeed. The film had a huge impact not just in India and the rest of the subcontinent but also around the world after it received an American Academy Award nomination in the Best Foreign Film category. The film critic of the *Manchester Guardian* captured its surface qualities well: "*Lagaan* is a lavish epic, a gorgeous love story, and a rollicking adventure yarn. Larger than life and outrageously enjoyable, it's got a dash of spaghetti western, a hint of Kurosawa, with a bracing shot of Kipling" (Bradshaw 2001). All of this is more or less true; nevertheless, my purpose here will be to dig beneath these glitzier aspects and examine the chief ways in which the film operates as a seemingly utopian post-colonial discourse in which 'India' seeks to get back on 'Gandhian' track and overcome the lingering trauma inflicted by Partition.

In section two, I examine the significance of the cricket match in *Lagaan* by taking a brief sweeping excursion through the history of cricket in the subcontinent as it was first played by the British imperialists and subsequently taken up by the Indians. In the third section, I turn to how the film attempts to project the protagonist Bhuvan as an inter-communal unifier in the manner both of assassinated Indian Congress leader Mahatma Gandhi and the former Indian cricket captain Sachin Tendulkar. I argue, however,

that the film's treatment of non-Hindu minorities problematises this worthy intention. In the final section, I look at how the film presents and deals with the problem of untouchability. Again, I suggest that this raises a number of questions about the nature of the 'Hindu-heavy' monolithic image of 'India' constructed in this film.

2. Beating the British at their own game

The story of *Lagaan* revolves principally around a game of cricket played at the end of the 19th century between a team of British imperialists and a rag-tag team of Indian villagers. The film is set in a place called Champaner, a village adjacent to a British military cantonment. This fictional settlement, described in the subtitles as "a small village in the heart of India," can stand for any village anywhere in British-administered India. The time is the hot season of 1893 and the monsoon rains have not arrived. The ensuing drought has made the fields around the village barren. The Champaner villagers depend upon a healthy crop harvest not only to feed themselves but also to pay *lagan* (land tax) to the local raja, who himself must pass this on as a 'protection' tribute to the British. In vain, the distraught villagers beg the raja to intercede for them with the British in order to have the tax rescinded in this rainless year. The commanding officer at the cantonment, the sadistic and arrogant Captain Russell, savours their predicament and taunts them by capriciously offering them a way out of paying the tax in the form of a wager: if the villagers can beat the British cantonment side at a game of cricket, he will waive the tax for three years; but if they lose, the villagers will have to pay the British a triple levy. The match will take place after three months. Russell gives the protagonist Bhuvan (played by Aamir Khan) the unenviable task of accepting or declining the wager on behalf of the village. The villagers, knowing Bhuvan to be impetuous and proud, wait anxiously in silence for his response. When he finally accepts the challenge, they are devastated, feeling sure the situation is hopeless.

At first, everyone in the village is deeply resentful towards Bhuvan, since nobody there, Bhuvan included, has ever played cricket or even knows the rules. Yet following his semi-convincing explanation that cricket is nothing more than a sophisticated version of *gilli-danda*, a bat-and-ball game they all played as children, some of the Hindu men side with him. Unfortunately, these men, especially Bagha the mute temple guardian and Guran the fortune-teller, are driven more by a great passion to defeat the British rather than any skill at cricket. Clearly, Bhuvan will need help from outside the narrow reach of his upper-caste Hindu brethren. This comes first from Russell's sister Elizabeth, who, outraged by her brother's cruel treatment of the villagers, undertakes to teach Bhuvan's team the finer points of cricket, and later from the three 'outsiders' who fill the remaining positions in Bhuvan's team, Ishmayeel the Muslim potter, Devan the Sikh former sepoy, and Kachra the Untouchable sweeper. The inclusion of these three men, as I will argue below, seems to embody some kind of Gandhian ideal of intercommunal cooperation as the best means not only to beat the British but also to establish a healthy post-colonial Indian nation.

The final forty-five minutes or so of the film are taken up by the drama of the cricket match itself. The game takes place over three days. The first day's play ends with the British having achieved a comfortable score in their innings. On the second day of play, a turning point comes when the Untouchable Kachra bowls three of the British batsmen out in quick succession with his devastating spin action. Eventually, it is the villagers' turn to bat, and the opening partnership of Bhuvan and Devan starts well as they pile up the runs. Soon, though, the village team is in trouble when Devan is unexpectedly run out and Ishmayeel, also a good batsman, is forced to leave the field injured after being hit by a savage delivery from the British fast bowler. On the final day, as the game comes down to the last few balls, Bhuvan, the only batsman to have survived, is partnered by the last villager, the crippled Untouchable Kachra. The situation looks hopeless for

the village side. But with five runs left to make on the very last ball, Bhuvan smashes the ball high into the air. Captain Russell, standing in a deep fielding position, catches the ball and the villagers seem to have lost. The final twist in the plot, however, is that Russell has caught the ball *outside* the boundary, meaning that the catch is void and Bhuvan has secured victory with a spectacular Tendulkar-style six. At the end of the film, the Champaner cantonment is disbanded and Russell is ignominiously transferred to the wastes of Central Africa. The film closes with the monsoon rains bringing relief and promise of a full harvest.

What can be so significant about a mere game of cricket? To answer this question, it is necessary to step outside the film and look at the place of cricket in the British Raj and the early history of Indian cricket, by which I mean cricket played by Indians. Victorian British India, with its ceaseless rounds of polo and snooker, pig-sticking and hog-hunting, was a place of games and sport. Yet no other pastime took off so spectacularly among the imperialists as cricket. As the patriotic Victorian traveller A. G. Bagot wrote,

Cricket is acknowledged to be the national game *par excellence* of Englishmen. Wherever they may be, north, south, east, or west, sooner or later, provided a sufficient number are gathered together, there is certain to be a cricket match; and climate has little or no effect on their ardour, for you will find them playing on the burning sand of the desert with as much zest as if it was the best possible pitch in the Old Country . . . Nowhere does the game flourish with more vigour than in India . . .

(Bagot 1897: 72)

Cricket helped to preserve a sense of identity for the British exiled in the subcontinent. As Gilmour argues, it “gave men a sense of release from the Indian grind, a feeling that they were still a part of England, that out there

on the pitch they were able not only to enjoy themselves but to display such cardinal virtues imbibed at school as fortitude, self-denial and team spirit” (Gilmour 2005: 164). Yet it did more than this: cricket, with its elaborate rules, dignified dress code, and ethos of gentlemanly conduct and fair play, became a means for the colonizers to embody and perform the self-image of the Victorian elite and assert a spurious moral authority over the colonized. Cricket for the British in India, then, was both a badge of identity, and, to mix metaphors, a cultural firewall erected between the white masters and the darker-skinned natives. It would be unthinkable, surely, if the indigenes were to take up bat and ball themselves. Yet that is exactly what they did.

Indian cricket did not begin as in *Lagaan* with a village team cobbled together by a real-life Bhuvan. It originated rather with the wealthy and pro-British Parsi community in Bombay setting out to ape their imperial masters. In 1877 (nearly 20 years before the year in which *Lagaan* is set), the Parsis of the splendidly named Zoroastrian Cricket Club played a match against the European (that is, British) members of the Bombay Gymkhana—and almost won! This match became an annual fixture known as the Presidency Match, a highlight of the sporting and social calendar. Over the course of the nineteen matches played annually between the Parsis and the Europeans each team won eight times and there were three draws—so honours even. Soon, the other communities wanted to join in the fun. Following the establishment of the Hindu Gymkhana cricket club, the Presidency Match evolved into a three-way competition known as the Bombay Triangular. In 1906, the Europeans were comprehensively beaten by the Hindus. A British military officer who witnessed the defeat doubtless spoke for many chauvinistic Anglo-Indians when he sounded the warning that “we rule in India by conquest, by strength, by prestige, and we cannot afford that these three bonds of empire should be loosened even through the medium of so trivial an affair as a game of cricket” (in Guha 2002: 113). At the risk of further humiliation, however, the games went on. Indeed, they

expanded, since in 1912, the Muslims of the newly formed Mohammedan Gymkhana were invited to participate in what became the Bombay Quadrangular.

The wider political and cultural significance of the Bombay Quadrangular competition is that it was played during the turbulent years from 1912 to 1936, the period during which Gandhi conducted his Home Rule campaign. Gandhi himself, of course, was no cricketer, yet his pronouncements on the political implications of the Bombay Quadrangular are highly significant. Unlike the British, who were always happy to see the Indians divided among themselves, he saw no virtue whatsoever in cricket matches that pitted one Indian community against another:

I can understand matches between Colleges and Institutions, but I have never understood the reason for having Hindu, Parsi, Muslim and other communal Elevens. I should have thought that such unsportsmanlike divisions would be considered taboo in sporting language and sporting manners.

(in Guha 2001)

In the heated rivalry between the Hindu and Muslim cricket teams in the 1920s and 30s, Gandhi saw the cracks forming of wider communal divisions that would later lead to the horrors of Partition. With anti-colonialism so much in the air, this competition—the only situation in which subaltern India and imperial Britain could meet literally on a level playing field—carried enormous symbolic weight. Thus cricket was no longer a mere game, but rather, as one commentator has put it, “the site where, during the imperial era, the colonized made culturally manifest their resistance to British rule” (Farred 2004: 94) To beat the colonial masters at “the quintessential English sport” (Paxman 1998: 204) became an existential necessity and an article of faith.

The film *Lagaan* clearly wishes to demonstrate that if a group of diverse Indians can put aside their communal differences, unite behind a ‘Gandhi-Tendulkar’ leader, and beat the British at their own iconic game, then they can also prevail in the anti-colonial struggle to create an independent India. After all, immediately following the defeat in the game, Russell is exiled to Africa and the British cantonment is disbanded, bringing to an end the British control of Champaner. Like India itself, cricket, a sport wittily described by one commentator as “an Indian game accidentally invented by the English” (Nandy 1989: 9), is thus repossessed by its rightful owners. But the discourse of *Lagaan*, anti-Raj and post-colonial, also looks forward to an idealized post-Independence modern nation in which all Indians play on and support the same ‘team’. I now turn to how Bhuvan, the ‘Gandhi-Tendulkar’ of Champaner sets about uniting his fellow villagers.

3. Bhuvan the ‘Gandhian uniter’

“Whatever I do,” Aamir Khan declared in an interview soon after the release of *Lagaan*, “I do with passion. I am like Sachin Tendulkar who goes out to play with an idea of making every innings a memorable one for the spectators. I try and do my movies in the same spirit” (Mukherjee 2001). Only a Bollywood superstar of Khan’s stature could get away with comparing himself to India’s foremost Indian sporting icon. In the context of *Lagaan*, there are implications in the comparison that Khan draws between himself and the batsman that go beyond passion and spectacle, however. Both men, the real-life Indian cricket team captain and the fictional village firebrand played by Khan, have the image of being charismatic Indian unifiers and leaders in the spirit if not the manner of Mahatma Gandhi. In this section, I examine the key ways in which Bhuvan, as a cinematic ‘proto-Tendulkar’ captaining his village ‘India’ at the very birth of indigenous cricket in the subcontinent, sets out to unite his Hindu, Muslim and Sikh brothers in their common goal, and what his efforts may signify

about a utopian Gandhian vision of contemporary postcolonial India.

Gandhi premised his vision of a united independent India first and foremost upon inter-communal harmony and tolerance between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority within the population. The catastrophe of Partition, however, all but destroyed these fraternal ideals. Since 1947 right up until the present, Hindu-Muslim animosity has been exacerbated by the shift away from moderate Congress Party inclusiveness to the extreme "India-for-Hindus" ideology of the upper-caste Hindutva movement espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) and more fanatically by Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena organization.³ The Hindu-Sikh antagonism of Partition was reprised in the bloody aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. *Lagaan*, I shall argue here, is the filmmaker's utopian vision of how a postcolonial 'India' might have developed peacefully, had Gandhi's ideas been fully received and implemented, allowing Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to coexist in harmony. Yet this vision projected in this filmic discourse, as we shall see, is subject to other interpretations.

The village community in *Lagaan*, like the India it purports to represent in miniature, is overwhelmingly Hindu in composition. Bhuvan, around whom the story revolves, is a Hindu; the dominant structure in the village, situated on a hillock overlooking the settlement, is a Hindu temple (there appears to be no Muslim mosque in Champaner); the festivals that punctuate the action and the gods to whom the villagers pray are all Hindu; and the Krishna-Radha dance dramas that act as a backdrop to the love between Bhuvan and Gauri are all Hindu. There is only one Muslim in the team, the potter Ishmayeel, and only one brief moment when 'Islam' surfaces in the story, namely when Ishmayeel and his fellow Muslims invoke Allah's blessing before the match against the British. Thus the village suggests in its Hindu-Muslim ratio the demographics of modern India. Yet the daily life in the village clearly constructs an idyll of *pre-Partition* India, a time when the

two main religious communities apparently existed happily side-by-side. Indeed, the only enmity in the village, which never goes beyond empty threats and name-calling, manifests itself in the unceasing bickering (the “Great Chicken War”) between the two Hindus Goli and Bhura. Caste Hindus form the majority in the cricket team; nevertheless, as we shall see, it is the non-Hindu—the Muslim Ishmayeel, the Sikh Devan, and the outcaste Untouchable Kachra—who contribute by far the most to the village team’s eventual victory over the British.

Ishmayeel the potter lends crucial help to Bhuvan in two ways. Firstly, by freely offering Bhuvan his support and joining the team, despite his own earlier misgivings and the sulky objections of villagers like Lakha, he raises the morale of the team and gives it and the village a more inclusive sense of common purpose. As he declares to Bhuvan, “It’s not just your honour at stake, it’s the whole village. I’m ashamed of all the things I said the other day. I swear by God, I am with you in this effort. It’s the word of a man of prayer.” The warm embrace between Bhuvan and Ishmayeel that follows seals this commitment to Hindu-Muslim cooperation. This is a key turning point in the film, the moment when Bhuvan’s struggle becomes truly inter-communal. As Bhuvan’s lover Gauri declares joyfully, “Ismayeel has raised our spirit, hasn’t he. Who can stop us now!” Secondly, Ishmayeel helps Bhuvan substantially during their batting partnership late in the game that puts the bulk of the village’s runs on the scoreboard. Though he is forced to leave the pitch injured after the malicious English fast bowler Hardy aims the ball at him, Ishmayeel shows great courage and spirit the next day by returning to the match with a boy running for him and adding further runs.

The second instance of inter-communal cooperation comes with the unexpected arrival of the gargantuan Sikh warrior Devan. This former sepoy has sought out Bhuvan because, as he boldly declares, he hates the British and wants to fight them in any way he can, “with sword or bat”. Devan, who learned cricket from the British, is fearsome both as a batsman and a bowler,

and the spirit of the whole team is raised by his inclusion. Grant Farred has suggested that

Devan is arguably the instantiation of the Gandhian ideal of transreligious and ethnic cooperation because he is the only player on the team who is not a Champaner resident. He comes in search of the village because he has heard of the match, and he comes only to offer cultural and ideological resource, as an "Indian" helping his fellow countrymen combat colonialism.

(Farred 2004: 114)

Both Devan's demonstration of solidarity with his Indian brothers and the name of the village itself carry distinct echoes of Gandhi's historic visit in 1918 to Champaran, a district in the state of Bihar. The success of the Mahatma's passive resistance campaigns there on behalf of the beleaguered indigo planters, taxed into poverty and starvation by their British landowners, propelled him into a position of nationwide leadership in the Indian Independence Movement. This is not to say, however, that Devan threatens to eclipse Bhuvan's prime position as leader; by seeking out Bhuvan's village and joining the fight already initiated, the Sikh actually lends further credibility and support to Bhuvan's leadership.

These gestures in *Lagaan* towards creating brotherhood between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh are perhaps well meant, and on the popular level can be taken at face value as a fictional representation of Gandhi's ideal of peace and cooperation between religious communities. An alternative reading of Bhuvan's efforts at 'unification', however, cannot ignore the fact that the resistance takes place overwhelming under the banner of Hinduism. The token appearances in the film of a single Muslim, a single Sikh and a single Untouchable does suggest strongly that *Lagaan* constructs 'India' and 'Hindu' as almost interchangeable concepts. Moreover, the stories and

iconography of the Krishna-Radha narratives, played out in the love story between Bhuvan and Gauri, that permeate the film make the Hindu-Indian background of the village seem natural and normal (Brown 2004). No Muslim alternative is offered. This is particularly troubling when seen against the rise of Hindutva fanaticism in recent years.

To return to Sachin Tendulkar, it is interesting to note that during his two spells as captain of the Indian cricket team, he insisted that his fellow players, who came from all over India and spoke a variety of languages, only use Hindi in the locker room. Tendulkar was concerned to create a *national* rather than a regional spirit in the team. As Nalapat and Parker observe, “Such instruction paralleled Gandhi’s insistence that Hindi be taught all over India so that the nationalist cause could be served through a common language” (Nalapat/Parker 2005: 440). From this we can see that Gandhi, Tendulkar and Bhuvan form a triangular constellation of Hindu leaders who have all tended towards the construction of a monolithic ‘Hindu-India’ in which differences of religion, caste and language are elided for the ‘greater good’ of the village and India.

4. Untouchability in *Lagaan*

In this section, I turn to the problematic treatment of untouchability in *Lagaan*. To begin with, it is perhaps useful to recall briefly the nature of untouchability in Indian society. The traditional lot of the Untouchables (Dalits, “broken people”) has been well described by Ramachandra Guha:

Like the Muslims, the Untouchables were spread all across India. Like them, they were also poor, stigmatized and often on the receiving end of upper-caste violence. They worked in the villages, in the lowliest professions, as farm servants, agricultural labourers, cobblers and scavengers. By the canons of Hindu orthodoxy their touch would defile the upper castes, and in some regions, their very

sight too. They were denied access to land and to water sources; even their homes were set apart from the main village.

(Guha 2007: 374)

Gandhi famously argued that there could no place for the evil of untouchability in post-Independence India. India would lose the moral-high-ground arguments it had employed against British rule, he maintained, if it perpetuated the similar inequalities within its own society. Indeed, Indians' subjection to the British was, he argued, the 'karmic' consequence of their own oppressive treatment of the Untouchables (Guha 2002: 140). Sadly, Gandhi's efforts may have led to a change in the legislation regarding untouchability but not in the hearts and minds of upper-caste Hindus. As Ghanshyam Shah and others document fully in *Untouchability in Rural India*, the approximately 160 million Dalits in present-day India still face intolerable violence and discrimination in every facet of their lives, despite the fact that untouchability is banned by the Indian constitution. India's so-called "hidden apartheid" is alive and well six decades after the assassination of the man who tried to excise it.⁴

In *Lagaan*, there is no sign of untouchability until very late in the plot. During a practice session the ball is whacked a considerable distance by Devan and lands at the feet of an Untouchable sweeper named Kachra. Bhuvan tells Kachra to throw the ball back to him. The Untouchable has a crippled arm, but he picks up the ball and tosses it back weakly. As a result of his ungainly action, however, the ball first bounces in front of Bhuvan and then spins away out of his reach. Immediately, Bhuvan recognizes Kachra's potential as a spin-bowler and joyfully announces his inclusion in the team. Everyone else present, however, is appalled by this prospect. The Brahminic village headman, articulating this general disgust, declares: "To fight the English is our duty but mixing with a low-caste is like poisoning milk. I will not allow this!" Bhuvan, himself appalled by this, provokes

further outrage by daring to *touch* the Untouchable in order to stop him from leaving. As the villagers gasp with self-righteous horror, Bhuvan stands his ground and challenges the headman in unmistakably Gandhian terms to look at his own caste prejudice: “You brand people untouchable and pollute humanity itself. Chief, why are you choking the very air of our village with this caste division? Is it right to destroy and shatter hearts in the name of skin colour?” And to Lakha, who has dismissed Kachra as useless, Bhuvan declares: “The man you call crippled will be our greatest strength. Wait and see.” And indeed, in the course of the match against Captain Russell’s side, Kachra not only claims a hat-trick of wickets as a spin-bowler but also lends Bhuvan staunch support as the last man in with a bat, allowing the villagers to prevail.

In Bhuvan’s championing of Kachra one can see another manifestation of the Bhuvan-Tendulkar-Gandhi leadership constellation. The character of Kachra has a real-life counterpart in the figure of the great slow left-handed spin-bowler and Dalit activist Palwankar Baloo (1876-1955), who, together with his three brothers Shivram, Ganpat and Vithal, was among the biggest stars in the early years of Indian cricket in the Bombay Quadrangular. Treated as equals on the cricket field, they often faced caste discrimination from their Brahminic fellow players and selectors off-field, to the extent that they were not even allowed to take tea with them inside the cricket pavilion but had to eat outside, using separate dishes. More significantly, Baloo was never made captain of the Hindu team in the Bombay Quadrangular despite being their most experienced and valuable member. As a result of this obvious discrimination, Gandhi was drawn during 1919-23 into a remarkable campaign to accord just recognition to him and his brothers (Guha 2001). More recently, as Indian cricket captain, Tendulkar famously insisted, in the face of upper-caste Hindu opposition, upon the inclusion in the national team of Vinod Kambli, the first Dalit cricketer to have represented post-Independence India (Nalapat/Parker 2005: 440-2).

Bhuvan's championing of Kachra, then, carries considerable historic resonance. But upon what kind of assumptions does Bhuvan's support of Kachra rest?

On the one hand, Bhuvan's apparent fairmindedness in his support of Kachra is one of the most emotion-laden and uplifting 'Gandhian' moments in the whole film. It is a scene in which Bhuvan apparently succeeds in re-educating his fellow villagers by showing them the errors of their discriminatory ways. On the other hand, the scene is also one of the most troubling, for, as the Dalit activist Siriyavan Anand argues in one essay:

Irrespective of the result of the game and Kachra's performance in it, the status of Dalits [in Champaner] will remain the same. Bhuvan's impassioned plea to the 'village elders' is limited to Kachra's inclusion in the team—and this is decided by accident—and is not about the larger social exclusion of the untouchables. What comes across as being most obnoxious is that after all the drama over Kachra's inclusion, we are told that he is a good spinner not because of ability, but because of his disability. The token Dalit is further Dalitised. When Kachra wants to throw the ball with his 'normal' hand, know-all Bhuvan insists he use the disabled hand. Kachra's being an untouchable is hardly significant; his disability is. Kachra's talent is not based on merit, the will to excel or the determination to defeat an enemy, like Bhuvan's is. It, like untouchability, comes with birth. And it is Bhuvan who discovers this 'innate' talent. Kachra knows nothing.

(Anand 2002)

Deferential and cringingly apologetic, Kachra, whose name appropriately means "garbage" in Hindi, is stripped of speech and agency. One might try to look at Bhuvan's act as kind condescension—an instance of heavy-

handed ‘affirmative action’—yet the fact remains that the captain does not even ask the hapless Kachra if he would like to participate in the match in the first place. Kachra is told that he will join, just as in his implied ‘off-camera’ existence as an Untouchable in the village, we can imagine that he would be told to remove human waste or a cow carcass. Kachra’s vital contribution to the team’s victory despite his physical disability is, of course, a metaphor for the position of Dalits then and now in Indian society. Despised they may be by members of so-called superior castes, yet where would India’s society and economy be without their work and participation? Bhuvan’s ‘Gandhian’ sentiments push the right cinematic buttons, so to speak; nevertheless, as Brown argues, it is improbable that these villagers “can be convinced within the span of one scene that untouchability and caste difference are wrong” while Mahatma Gandhi himself had little lasting impact in the eradication of this evil (Brown 2004: 79). If anything, the handling of untouchability in *Lagaan* unwittingly reasserts the reality of caste division in Indian society. How will Kachra and his unseen fellow Untouchables be treated in the village after Bhuvan and Gauri have finished dancing in the monsoon rains?

5. Conclusion

Lagaan, I have argued, is at once a story of nationalist anti-colonialism and also a parable of a utopian ‘Gandhian’ post-Independence ‘India’. The success achieved by the supposedly inclusive and communal village team, with representatives of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and—more problematically, as we have seen—Dalit communities setting aside their differences and enmities to work together, suggests what modern Indian society could achieve if only the Gandhian ideals that were all but extinguished with Partition could finally be revived and realised. Thus the purpose in *Lagaan*, I suggest, was less to address what India was at the time of the British Raj than what India might have become and might still

become if its diverse population could bury its communal hatreds. In this context, Grant Farred speaks of *Lagaan*'s "double temporality":

The film speculates the colonized of the Raj into an ethnic and religious coherence through the village of Champaner, a metaphor for "Indian" singularity; moreover, *Lagaan* posits an Indian unity that resonates across more than a century and addresses itself—as the retrospectively idealized imaginary national community—of ethnically driven, religiously tense and divided, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) India 2001.

(Farred 2004: 104)

It may be true, as Farred goes on to suggest, that Bhuvan's team is inspired more by the ideas of Gandhi than those of Nehru or former BJP prime minister Atal Bahari Vajpayee. Nevertheless, as I have argued here, there is a naivety to *Lagaan* that unwittingly undoes the good work. The character of Bhuvan draws on enormous reserves of integrity, charisma and iconicity. It is not enough that Bhuvan is played by Aamir Khan, the *primus inter pares* among the current generation of Bollywood actors. Khan himself projects himself and his on-screen character through the iconic figure of Sachin Tendulkar, almost certainly the greatest Indian ever to wield a bat. On top of this, the whole filmic discourse of self-help inter-communality, nationalism, and anti-colonialism is driven by the ideology of the greatest Indian icon of them all, Mohandas K. Gandhi. Could there be a more auspicious conjoining of Indian star power?

In his travelogue *India*, the London-born Asian Sanjeev Bhasvar visits Gandhiji's famous ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Ironically, the state of Gujarat—where *Lagaan* was filmed—has seen some of the worse communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in recent years. "Gandhi, the founding father of an undivided and unified India, and a devotee of non-

violent protest,” Bhasvar muses, “would have been truly appalled” (Bhasvar 2007: 240). Sitting on a bench outside the Mahatma’s room, Bhasvar talked with the local Jesuit priest. Father Cedric Prakash, he writes, witnessed at first hand the butchery in the 2002 riots. In response, Father Prakash has set up a local cricket team that includes members from both religious communities. Bhasvar asks one young man about the reactions from within his own community to his playing in a mixed team. “Cricket is the way forward,” he tells Bhasvar. “Who doesn’t like cricket? There should be more teams like this; after all, the Indian national team is mixed” (*ibid*: 244). *Lagaan* presents one such mixed team. Unfortunately, the message that comes through loudest in this hugely entertaining film is the primacy of the majority Hindu culture.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Mike Atherton, “India’s victory dedicated to victims of Mumbai,” *The Times*, December 16th, 2008.
- 2 It is surprising that only a handful of Bollywood films have taken cricket as their main or partial theme. The list would include *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), *Mujhse Shaadi Karogi* (2004), *Iqbal* (2005), and *Hattrick* (2007). *Lagaan* is perhaps the first movie that has a cricket match forming the backbone of the story’s plot.
- 3 The BJP was formed in 1980 and claims to represent India’s majority Hindu community. It pursues a nationalist and conservative agenda. Shiv Sena (“Army of Shiva”) is an extreme political organization that was formed in 1966 by the radical former cartoonist Bal Thackeray. Its cadres have been responsible for violent attacks on Muslims, communists, migrant workers and, most recently, Christian nuns.
- 4 This situation was laid bare in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004 that devastated the coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia. Charities, NGOs and volunteers worldwide rushed to help the victims. In the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, however, sympathy and solidarity with those who had suffered soon foundered upon the rocks of the caste system. Only weeks after the tidal wave hit, reports began to emerge of Dalits being expelled from relief camps and denied essential aid (Gorringe 2008).

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要 約

クリケット・ピッチを超えた友好

— 『ラガン』 にみる植民地独立後のガンジーの理想とした「インド」

アカデミー賞にノミネートされたハリウッド映画『ラガン』(2001)は、植民者と被植民者間で行われるクリケットの試合というドラマに展開される、英国支配インドの終焉の寓話を描き、世界中の注目を集めた。ブーバンという名のインドの村民である主人公は、インドのクリケットチームのキャプテンであり、スター打者のサチン・テンドルカの卓越した才能を象徴すると同時に、ムハンダス・K・ガンジーの国粹主義とヒンズー教徒とイスラム教徒間の調和を掲げる理念を具現化する人物として描かれている。

19世紀末に設定されたこの作品の深層にあるストーリーは、植民地独立後の理想的な「インド」を構成することにある。つまり、ガンジーの理想とした「インド」を、彼の暗殺やパキスタンの分離独立によって起こった大虐殺によっても決して消滅させることなく、想像上の新しい秩序の中で完全に実現することである。しかしながら、特に今日のインドにおけるヒンドゥー至上主義の勃興と宗教間の暴力というより広い文脈において考えるとき、この“事後日付の”ガンジー主義に基づく恋物語のファンタジーにおいてさえも、作中の非ヒンズー教徒のマイノリティ、すなわち、イスラム教徒やシーク教徒、カースト制度の最下層貧民(ダーリット)の扱いについて問題があると指摘できる。