

ОШ МАМЛЕКЕТТИК УНИВЕРСИТЕТИНИН ЖАРЧЫСЫ

ВЕСТНИК ОШКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

BULLETIN OF OSH STATE UNIVERSITY

ISSN: 1694-7452 e-ISSN: 1694-8610

№1/2026, 83-94

POLITICAL SCIENCE

УДК: 327.3

DOI: [10.52754/16948610_2026_1_7](https://doi.org/10.52754/16948610_2026_1_7)

**CRICKET AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS**

ИНДИЯНЫН ЭЛ АРАЛЫК МАМИЛЕЛЕРДЕГИ ЖУМШАК КҮЧҮНҮН КУРАЛЫ
КАТАРЫ - КРИКЕТ

КРИКЕТ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ МЯГКОЙ СИЛЫ ИНДИИ В МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ
ОТНОШЕНИЯХ

Shokhan Kenbayev

Кенбаев Шокан

Кенбаев Шокан

PhD researcher, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India

докторант, Гужарат университети, Ахмедабад, Индия
докторант, Гуджаратский университет, Ахмедабад, Индия

shok81@mail.ru

ORCID: 0009-0008-7903-0056

Margie Parikh

Марги Парих

Марги Парих

Professor of Management, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India

профессор, Гужарат университети, Ахмедабад, Индия
профессор, Гуджаратский университет, Ахмедабад, Индия

margieparikh@gmail.com

CRICKET AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Abstract

This article analyzes the role of cricket as an important instrument of India's soft power in the system of modern international relations. Drawing on the concept of soft power developed by Joseph Nye, the author considers cricket not simply as a massively popular sport but as a multi-layered cultural, economic, and diplomatic resource that contributes to the formation of a positive international image of India and expands its influence beyond national borders. In the Indian context, cricket simultaneously acts as an element of national identity, a channel of cultural communication, and a mechanism of foreign policy influence, particularly in the countries of the Global South and the post-colonial world. The article emphasizes that cricket, inherited by India during the colonial period, has been reinterpreted and “Indianized” over time, transforming from a symbol of British dominance into an instrument of national self-assertion and cultural autonomy. This process reflects a broader postcolonial discourse in which former colonies utilize elements of their colonial heritage to strengthen their own agency on the international stage. The victories of the Indian national team, the growing popularity of cricket within the country, and its institutional development have contributed to India becoming one of the key centers of the global cricket world. This article focuses specifically on the Indian Premier League (IPL) as a phenomenon that combines sporting spectacle, commercial success, and elements of cultural diplomacy. The IPL is examined as a transnational platform uniting players, investors, and audiences from different countries, and simultaneously as a tool for projecting Indian “soft power.” Thanks to large-scale television broadcasts, the participation of foreign athletes, and an active presence in the digital space, the IPL contributes to the dissemination of Indian culture, language, images, and values, shaping an attractive and dynamic image of the country in the eyes of the international community. Within the framework of analyzing sports diplomacy, cricket is presented as a means of establishing and maintaining intergovernmental contacts, reducing political tensions, and forming informal channels of interaction. Cricket diplomacy plays a special role in India's relations with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other South Asian countries, where diplomatic initiatives and symbolic gestures often accompany sporting events. The author demonstrates that cricket can serve as “second-track diplomacy”, creating space for dialogue even during times of political crisis.

Keywords: soft power, India, cricket, sports diplomacy, culture, international relations

*Индиянын эл аралык мамилелердеги жумшак
күчүнүн куралы катары - крикет*

*Крикет как инструмент мягкой силы Индии в
международных отношениях*

Аннотация

Бул макалада крикеттин Индиянын жумшак күчүнүн маанилүү куралы катары заманбап эл аралык мамилелер системасындагы ролу талданат. Жозеф Най тарабынан иштелип чыккан жумшак күч концепциясына таянып, автор крикетти жөн гана кеңири таралган спорт түрү катары эмес, Индиянын оң эл аралык имиджин калыптандырууга салым кошкон жана анын таасирин улуттук чек аралардан тышкары кеңейткен көп катмарлуу маданий, экономикалык жана дипломатиялык ресурс катары карайт. Индиянын контекстинде крикет бир эле учурда улуттук иденттүүлүктүн элементи, маданий байланыш каналы жана тышкы саясатка таасир этүү механизми катары кызмат кылат, айрыкча Дүйнөлүк Түштүк өлкөлөрүндө жана постколониалдык дүйнөдө. Макалада Индия колониялык мезгилде мураска алган крикет убакыттын өтүшү менен кайрадан чечмеленип, "индиялыкташып", британ үстөмдүгүнүн символунан улуттук өзүн-өзү таануу жана маданий автономия куралына айланганы баса белгиленет. Бул процесс мурдагы колониялар эл аралык аренада өз бийлигин күчөтүү үчүн колониялык мурастарынын элементтерин колдонгон кеңири постколониалдык дискурсту чагылдырат. Индиянын курама командасынын жеңиштери, өлкөдө крикеттин популярдуулугунун өсүшү жана анын институционалдык өнүгүшү Индиянын дүйнөлүк крикет дүйнөсүнүн негизги борборлорунун бирине айлануусуна өбөлгө түздү. Бул макалада Индиянын Премьер-Лигасына (IPL) спорттук спектаклдерди, коммерциялык ийгиликтерди жана маданий дипломатиянын элементтерин айкалыштырган кубулуш катары өзгөчө көңүл бурулат. Кеңири масштабдуу телекөрсөтүүлөрдүн, чет элдик спортчулардын катышуусунун жана санариптик мейкиндиктеги активдүү катышуусунун аркасында IPL индиялык маданиятты, тилди, образдарды жана баалуулуктарды жайылтууга, эл аралык коомчулуктун көз алдында өлкөнүн жагымдуу жана динамикалуу образын түзүүгө салым кошот. Спорттук дипломатияны талдоо алкагында крикет өкмөттөр аралык байланыштарды түзүү жана сактоо, саясий чыңалууну азайтуу жана өз ара аракеттенүүнүн расмий эмес каналдарын түзүү каражаты катары көрсөтүлөт. Крикет дипломатиясы Индиянын Пакистан, Бангладеш, Шри-Ланка жана башка Түштүк Азия өлкөлөрү менен болгон мамилелеринде өзгөчө ролду ойнойт, мында дипломатиялык демилгелер жана символикалык жаңсоолор көп учурда спорттук иш-чаралар менен коштолот. Автор крикеттин "экинчи багыттагы дипломатия" катары кызмат кыла аларын көрсөтүп, саясий кризис учурунда да диалог үчүн мейкиндик түзөрүн көрсөтөт.

Ачык сөздөр: жумшак күч, Индия, крикет, спорттук дипломатия, маданият, эл аралык мамилелер

Аннотация

В данной статье анализируется роль крикета как важного инструмента «мягкой силы» Индии в системе современных международных отношений. Опираясь на концепцию «мягкой силы», разработанную Джозефом Наем, автор рассматривает крикет не просто как массово популярный вид спорта, а как многогранный культурный, экономический и дипломатический ресурс, способствующий формированию позитивного международного имиджа Индии и расширению её влияния за пределами национальных границ. В индийском контексте крикет одновременно выступает как элемент национальной идентичности, канал культурной коммуникации и механизм внешнеполитического влияния, особенно в странах Глобального Юга и постколониального мира. В статье подчеркивается, что крикет, унаследованный Индией в колониальный период, со временем был переосмыслен и «индианизирован», превратившись из символа британского господства в инструмент национального самоутверждения и культурной автономии. Этот процесс отражает более широкий постколониальный дискурс, в рамках которого бывшие колонии используют элементы своего колониального наследия для укрепления собственной субъектности на международной арене. Победы индийской национальной сборной, растущая популярность крикета внутри страны и его институциональное развитие способствовали тому, что Индия стала одним из ключевых центров мирового крикетного сообщества. Особое внимание в статье уделяется Индийской премьер-лиге (IPL) как феномену, сочетающему в себе спортивное зрелище, коммерческий успех и элементы культурной дипломатии. Благодаря масштабным телевизионным трансляциям, участию иностранных спортсменов и активному присутствию в цифровом пространстве, IPL способствует распространению индийской культуры, языка, образов и ценностей, формируя привлекательный и динамичный образ страны в глазах международного сообщества. В рамках анализа спортивной дипломатии крикет представлен как средство установления и поддержания межгосударственных контактов, снижения политической напряженности и формирования неформальных каналов взаимодействия. Крикетная дипломатия играет особую роль в отношениях Индии с Пакистаном, Бангладеш, Шри-Ланкой и другими странами Южной Азии, где дипломатические инициативы и символические жесты часто сопровождают спортивные мероприятия. Автор демонстрирует, что крикет может служить «дипломатией второго трека», создавая пространство для диалога даже в периоды политических кризисов.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, Индия, крикет, спортивная дипломатия, культура, международные отношения

Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization and the increasing complexity of international relations, states are increasingly resorting to the use of intangible instruments of influence that go beyond traditional military and economic resources. In this context, the concept of soft power, proposed by the American political scientist Joseph Nye, takes on particular importance. Soft power is understood as the ability of a state to achieve desired results through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and foreign policy, rather than through coercion, threats, or economic pressure (Nye, 2004; Nye, 2011). Soft power becomes especially relevant in a world where the direct application of hard power is associated with high political and reputational costs. Culture, sports, and mass communications play a key role in shaping soft power resources. Sport is increasingly considered by researchers as a significant factor in international politics and public diplomacy. According to several authors, international sports competitions and globally popular sports can shape a positive image of a state, strengthen the national brand, and create sustainable transnational connections (Murray, 2012; Grix & Lee, 2013). Sports diplomacy allows states to influence foreign audiences at emotional and symbolic levels, making it an effective complement to traditional foreign policy instruments. In this context, India presents a particularly illustrative example. For India, cricket is not just a nationally significant sport, but also a powerful resource of soft power. Initially introduced in India during the colonial period as an element of British cultural hegemony, cricket has since been reinterpreted and transformed into an important component of national identity and post-colonial self-affirmation (Guha, 2002; Bose, 2006). The victories of the Indian national team, the mass popularity of cricket within the country, and its institutional development have contributed to India becoming one of the key actors in the global cricket landscape. In the 21st century, the significance of cricket for India extends far beyond the realm of sport. The country dominates world cricket in terms of television viewership, financial flows, and commercial appeal, which is particularly evident in the phenomenon of the Indian Premier League (IPL). The IPL has become not only the most profitable cricket league in the world, but also a global media platform, shaping an attractive image of a modern, dynamic, and economically successful India (Majumdar, 2013; Gupta, 2021). Through cricket, India actively projects cultural images, lifestyles, and values, thereby strengthening its symbolic presence on the international stage. Furthermore, cricket plays a significant role in India's foreign policy practices, especially within the framework of regional diplomacy in South Asia and interaction with countries of the Global South. Matches between national teams often acquire political significance, serving as an instrument of "track two diplomacy" and a way to reduce tensions between states (Manjrekar, 2008; Sen, 2015). The Indian diaspora also plays a significant role in spreading Indian cricket and enhancing its foreign policy impact, contributing to the popularization of the sport and strengthening cultural ties between India and host countries. Thus, cricket in modern India represents a multi-layered phenomenon, combining cultural, economic, and diplomatic functions. This article aims to analyze how cricket functions as an instrument of India's soft power and to assess its significance in the context of international relations, considering the post-colonial legacy, sports diplomacy, and transnational processes of cultural interaction.

Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Soft Power

The term "soft power" was introduced by American political scientist Joseph Nye at the end of the 20th century to describe intangible forms of state influence in the international system. Unlike "hard power," which is based on military coercion and economic pressure, soft power implies the ability to shape the preferences and behavior of other actors through attractiveness, persuasion, and

voluntary consent (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2004). According to Nye, states can achieve foreign policy goals not only through threats or material incentives, but also through cultural attraction, the legitimacy of their values, and trust in their foreign policy. The classic concept of soft power identifies three main sources of intangible influence: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture acts as a set of symbols, practices, and meanings capable of arousing interest and sympathy in a foreign audience. Political values, in turn, enhance soft power if they are perceived as consistent and universally significant. Foreign policy becomes a source of soft power when it is considered legitimate, morally justified, and oriented towards cooperation (Nye, 2011). Thus, soft power cannot be imposed from the outside but is formed in the process of interaction and perception. Subsequently, Nye's concept gained widespread acceptance and development in studies of international relations, public diplomacy, and cultural studies. Several authors emphasize that soft power is particularly effective in the context of globalization, where information flows, transnational communications, and mass culture significantly reduce the importance of state borders (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008). In this context, the role of non-state actors, media, sports organizations, and cultural industries increases, becoming important mediators of soft power. Sport occupies a special place in the theory of soft power as part of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. Unlike official political statements, sporting events influence the international audience on emotional and symbolic levels, forming lasting associations and images of states (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). As Stuart Murray notes, sport can act as an effective instrument of "second-track diplomacy," creating a space for informal dialogue and building trust between countries, even in conditions of political tension (Murray, 2012). Within the framework of the soft power concept, sport is considered a form of cultural resource with a high degree of universality and accessibility. International competitions, leagues, and tournaments contribute to the formation of transnational communities of fans, and successful athletes and teams become symbols of national prestige. Sporting achievements are often used by states to strengthen their national brand and increase their attractiveness on the world stage (Anholt, 2007). In this regard, not only are the sporting results important, but also organizational capabilities, infrastructure, media coverage, and the values transmitted through sport.

Cricket represents a particularly interesting subject for analysis in the context of soft power, as it has a pronounced post-colonial dimension. Originally spread by the British Empire, cricket became an important element of cultural communication in countries of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. In the post-colonial period, former colonies not only retained this sport but also reinterpreted it, transforming it into a means of cultural self-affirmation and international recognition (Guha, 2002). In this sense, cricket serves as an example of "reverse cultural influence," where former peripheral actors begin to dominate the global sporting space. For India, cricket is one of the key resources of soft power precisely because of its mass popularity and transnational character. In South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, cricket serves as a common cultural code, facilitating intergovernmental and inter-societal interaction. Through cricket, India gains the opportunity to build horizontal ties with states of the Global South, strengthening its influence not through direct pressure, but through cultural proximity and symbolic leadership. Thus, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power provides a productive theoretical framework for analyzing the role of cricket in international relations. Considering sport as an element of cultural and public diplomacy allows for a deeper understanding of how India uses intangible resources to strengthen its international position. In this context, cricket acts not simply as a sport, but as an important instrument for shaping attractiveness, trust, and long-term influence, making it a significant object of study within contemporary international relations theory.

Historical Context: From Colonial Sport to National Symbol

The history of cricket in India provides a vivid example of the transformation of a colonial cultural legacy into an instrument of national self-affirmation and international symbolic influence. Introduced to India in the 19th century by the British colonial administration, cricket initially served as a cultural marker of imperial power and social hierarchy. It was closely associated with the British way of life and was part of what researchers call the "cultural infrastructure of colonialism" (Guha, 2002; James, 1963). In its early stages, cricket in India remained an elite sport, accessible primarily to British officers, officials, and members of the Anglo-Indian community. Cricket clubs functioned as closed spaces where norms of colonial superiority and social exclusion were reproduced. As Ramachandra Guha notes, cricket in colonial India was not simply a game, but "an instrument of symbolic domination," transmitting values of discipline, hierarchy, and British cultural superiority (Guha, 2002). Nevertheless, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a process of gradual "Indianization" of cricket began. Representatives of the Indian elites, primarily the Parsi community in Bombay, actively embraced this sport, viewing it as a means of social mobility and a symbol of equality with the colonizers. The creation of Indian clubs and the participation of local teams in competitions against the British had significant political and cultural importance: stepping onto the cricket field became a form of symbolic resistance to the colonial hierarchy (Bose, 2006). Thus, cricket began to lose its exclusively elitist character and transformed into a space for negotiating status, identity, and power. In the first half of the 20th century, cricket became increasingly integrated into the national liberation discourse. Although the leaders of the Indian National Congress often viewed sports skeptically, considering them a distraction from the political struggle, the mass perception of cricket gradually changed. Matches between Indian and British teams were seen as a symbolic confrontation between the colony and the metropole, and the sporting successes of Indian players were interpreted as proof of the Indians' ability to compete with the West on equal terms (Majumdar, 2004). In this context, cricket served as a "cultural arena" where key narratives of anti-colonial resistance were played out. After gaining independence in 1947, cricket acquired a fundamentally new significance. In the post-colonial period, it was reinterpreted as a means of national self-affirmation and a symbol of sovereignty. The Indian national team became a representative of the new state on the international stage, and participation in Test matches and international tournaments was seen as a form of recognition of India as an equal member of the world community (Guha, 2002). In the context of internal ethno-religious and linguistic fragmentation, cricket also performed an integrative function, acting as one of the few nationwide cultural symbols. The victories of India over England, the former colonial power, held symbolic significance. These successes were perceived as a form of post-colonial revenge and confirmation that India was capable not only of freeing itself from political domination but also of surpassing the colonizers in "their own game." As Arjun Appadurai notes, such moments play a key role in the formation of post-colonial identity, as they allow for the redefinition of the asymmetrical relationships of the past through cultural practices (Appadurai, 1996). A key turning point in the history of Indian cricket was the Indian team's victory at the 1983 World Cup. This success had significance far beyond the realm of sports. It coincided with a period of social and economic transformation and became a powerful symbol of national confidence. The victory over the established favorites of world cricket reinforced the perception of India as a nation capable of "rewriting the rules of the game" in a global context (Majumdar, 2013). From this point on, cricket became firmly entrenched in the public consciousness as a source of national pride and collective identity. In the following decades, the process of commercialization and mediatization of cricket only strengthened its importance. The development

of television, the growth of sponsorship, and the emergence of star players transformed cricket into a central element of popular culture. However, unlike the colonial period, control over the institutional and economic infrastructure of the sport was now in the hands of Indian actors. This allowed India not only to consolidate its internal identity but also to actively project its influence beyond national borders (Gupta, 2021). Thus, the transformation of cricket in India reflects a broader postcolonial process of reinterpreting the cultural legacy of the empire. From an instrument of cultural domination, cricket has transformed into a resource for national self-affirmation, social integration, and international recognition. It has become part of a postcolonial narrative in which India acts not as a passive object of external influence, but as an active subject capable of redefining global cultural practices. The historical trajectory of cricket from a colonial sport to a national symbol provides a conceptual framework for analyzing its contemporary role as an instrument of India's soft power. Understanding this context helps explain why cricket occupies such a central place in the country's cultural and foreign policy strategy and how the postcolonial experience has been transformed into a resource for global influence.

Cricket and the Shaping of India's International Image

In the 21st century, cricket has become one of the key channels for shaping India's international image, acting as an important resource for its soft power. The global popularity of this sport, as well as India's economic and institutional dominance in the world of cricket, significantly enhances the country's cultural appeal and its symbolic presence on the international stage. In the context of mediatized global politics, mass cultural practices such as sports are increasingly becoming tools for shaping a national brand and transmitting a desired image of the state (Anholt, 2007). Modern world cricket is largely oriented towards the Indian audience. According to researchers and data from the International Cricket Council (ICC), more than 90% of global cricket television broadcasting revenues are directly or indirectly linked to the Indian media market (Majumdar, 2018). The enormous size of the audience, high purchasing power, and active consumption of sports content have made India a central economic actor in the global cricket ecosystem. This circumstance has not only strengthened the country's influence on decision-making within the ICC but has also contributed to the shift of the symbolic center of world cricket from former metropolises towards the Global South. India's dominance in the global cricket media landscape has a direct impact on the formation of its international image. Television broadcasts of matches, digital platforms, and social media make Indian cricket globally visible, transforming it into an important channel of cultural communication. Through visual images of stadiums, fans, rituals, and national symbols, a perception of India as a dynamic, mass-oriented, and emotionally engaged sporting nation is conveyed. As Appadurai notes, such media flows create "imagined worlds" in which states exist not only as political entities but also as cultural brands (Appadurai, 1996). Individual sporting icons play a special role in shaping India's international image. Players such as Sachin Tendulkar, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, and Virat Kohli have become global figures, recognizable far beyond the cricket community. Their images actively circulate in international media, advertising, and social networks, transforming individual athletes into symbolic representatives of the nation. Sachin Tendulkar, for example, is often considered by researchers as a "national myth," embodying the ideas of hard work, modesty, and national unity (Guha, 2002). Virat Kohli, in turn, is associated with a modern, globally integrated, and self-confident India. The popularity of these players contributes to the formation of a positive and attractive image of the country, strengthening its soft power through the personalization of cultural influence. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, attractive symbols and successful role models play a crucial role in shaping sympathy and trust towards a state (Nye, 2011). In this sense, Indian cricket stars act as informal

"cultural ambassadors," influencing the perception of India by foreign audiences. Another significant element of cultural attractiveness is the Indian Premier League (IPL), which has transformed cricket into a global media product. The IPL combines sporting competition, elements of popular culture, and a commercial show, making it attractive to an international audience. The participation of foreign players, coaches, and investors contributes to the formation of transnational networks of interaction, within which India acts as a center of attraction for the global cricket world (Majumdar, 2013). Through the IPL, India projects the image of an open, innovative, and economically successful country capable of setting standards in the global sports industry. It is important to note that the formation of India's international image through cricket is not limited solely to the West. This process is of particular significance for the countries of the Global South, where cricket remains one of the most popular sports. In South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, cricket functions as a shared cultural code inherited from the colonial past. India's dominance in this sphere allows it to build relationships of cultural leadership based not on coercion, but on symbolic authority and attractiveness (Bose, 2006). Furthermore, the global cricket audience is closely linked to the Indian diaspora, which plays an important role in spreading a positive image of the country. Fans of the Indian national team and the IPL in the UK, Australia, North America, and the Gulf countries contribute to strengthening transnational cultural ties and increasing India's visibility in the public space of host societies. The diaspora, therefore, acts as an important intermediary between the state and the global audience, amplifying the effect of soft power through sport (Sen, 2015). Thus, cricket is becoming for India not just a popular sport, but a powerful tool for shaping its international image. A global audience, economic dominance, charismatic sporting icons, and a developed media environment allow India to project the image of a modern, confident, and culturally attractive power. Within the framework of soft power, cricket acts as an effective mechanism for long-term influence, fostering sympathy and trust towards India on a global level and strengthening its position in the system of international relations.

Cricket Diplomacy and Regional Politics

Relations with Pakistan

One of the most striking and frequently analyzed examples of the use of sport for diplomatic purposes is the Indo-Pakistani relationship, in which cricket serves as a special channel of symbolic and informal communication. So-called "cricket diplomacy" is the practice of using bilateral sporting contacts to reduce political tensions, build trust, and create conditions for dialogue in situations where traditional diplomatic mechanisms are limited or blocked (Kumar, 2011; Murray, 2012). Historically, cricket occupies a unique place in the public consciousness of both India and Pakistan. After the partition of British India in 1947, the sport, along with politics and military issues, became part of the symbolic rivalry between the two states. Matches between the national teams quickly acquired the character of "more than a game," becoming an arena where issues of national prestige, identity, and post-colonial equality were played out (Majumdar, 2004). In this context, cricket became an important mediator of emotions and collective expectations, which enhanced its diplomatic potential. For several decades, bilateral cricket series between India and Pakistan have been repeatedly used as a tool to mitigate political tensions. During periods of relative stabilization of relations, the resumption of matches was seen as a symbol of readiness for dialogue and normalization of contacts. A striking example is the 2004-2005 series of matches, which was accompanied by active diplomatic initiatives and was perceived as part of a broader process of peaceful rapprochement between the two countries (Kapoor, 2010). The attendance of political leaders and official delegations at the matches

reinforced the symbolic significance of these events. From the perspective of soft power theory, Indo-Pakistani cricket diplomacy can be interpreted as a form of "track two diplomacy," where public emotions, cultural symbols, and informal contacts play a key role (Nye, 2011; Murray, 2012). Sporting events create a space for interaction between civil societies, media, and fans, allowing for a temporary softening of the image of the "hostile other" and the formation of alternative narratives based on shared cultural heritage. The mediatization of cricket matches plays an important role in this process. Mass broadcasts and active media coverage amplify the effect of symbolic rapprochement, creating a sense of shared experience on both sides of the border. As Appadurai notes, it is precisely such collective emotions, transmitted through mass culture, that can form sustainable transnational ties, even in the context of political conflict (Appadurai, 1996). At the same time, researchers emphasize the limitations of cricket diplomacy. Despite its high symbolic potential, sport cannot replace structural political solutions and resolve the underlying causes of the conflict, such as territorial disputes, security issues, and mutual distrust (Kapur, 2010). The resumption or suspension of cricket contacts often becomes hostage to the current political climate, which reduces their sustainability and long-term effect. Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of cricket in Indo-Pakistani relations remains considerable. Even during periods of frozen official contacts, the very fact of discussing the possibility of resuming matches is perceived as an indicator of political sentiment and potential changes in bilateral relations. Thus, cricket diplomacy, despite its limitations, continues to play an important role in South Asian regional politics, acting as a tool of soft power and a channel for symbolic interaction between India and Pakistan.

Limitations and Contradictions of Using Cricket as a Soft Power Tool

Despite the significant potential of cricket as a soft power tool, its use in India's foreign policy strategy is fraught with a few structural limitations and internal contradictions. Unlike abstract cultural resources, sport is a highly institutionalized and commercialized sphere where symbolic influence is closely intertwined with economic and political interests. This circumstance complicates the application of cricket as a universal and conflict-free resource of international appeal. One of the key limitations is the growing commercialization of world cricket. Large-scale financial flows, media contracts, and sponsorship agreements, especially those associated with the Indian Premier League (IPL), have significantly changed the nature of the sport. On the one hand, commercial success enhances the global visibility of Indian cricket, but on the other hand, it reduces its cultural universality and symbolic neutrality. As researchers note, excessive commercialization can lead to the perception of the sport primarily as a business, rather than as a form of cultural interaction, which weakens its soft power potential (Majumdar, 2013; Bateman, 2021). The commercial logic also reinforces the asymmetry between the countries participating in world cricket. States with smaller markets and limited resources are marginalized in the distribution of revenues, schedules, and audience attention. This generates discontent and undermines the idea of sport as an inclusive global space. Theoretically cricket, which should strengthen cultural ties, may, on the contrary, reinforce feelings of inequality and marginalization among less influential actors. Another important contradiction is the politicization of cricket. Although sport is often positioned as an apolitical sphere, in practice, it often becomes a tool for foreign policy signaling and internal mobilization. The suspension of matches, boycotts, and political statements surrounding cricket series can provoke international criticism and undermine India's image as a responsible and neutral cultural leader. In the context of Indo-Pakistani relations, for example, cricket often transforms from a channel of dialogue into a hostage of political confrontation, limiting its diplomatic effectiveness (Kumar, 2011; Kapur, 2010). Furthermore, the use of sport for political purposes can lead to the erosion of its

unifying function. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, soft power is only effective if it is perceived as a voluntary and unobtrusive form of influence (Nye, 2011). When sporting initiatives begin to be associated with state pressure or propaganda, their attractiveness to external audiences is significantly reduced. The issue of India's dominance in the management of world cricket deserves special attention. The increased influence of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the de facto redistribution of power within the International Cricket Council (ICC) in favor of India is perceived ambiguously. Several researchers point out that such a concentration of institutional and financial power can be seen as a form of "neocolonial pressure," especially in relation to countries of the Global South, for whom cricket is also a significant element of cultural identity (Bateman, 2021). This paradox is particularly noteworthy in the post-colonial context. India, formerly an object of colonial domination, today finds itself in the position of a structural leader whose actions can reproduce the asymmetries characteristic of the imperial order. This perception can undermine the moral foundation of Indian soft power and provoke resistance from other participants in the cricket world. Taken together, these limitations indicate the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach to using cricket as a tool of soft power. Effective sports diplomacy requires a balance between commercial interests, political goals, and cultural sensitivity. Without considering these factors, cricket risks losing its appeal as a universal language of international interaction and transforming from a resource of soft power into a source of new contradictions and conflicts.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that cricket indeed occupies a special place in India's soft power system and acts as one of the most effective intangible instruments of its foreign policy influence. Thanks to its mass popularity, deep cultural roots, and global reach, cricket contributes to shaping a positive international image of India, strengthening its regional leadership, and developing sustainable transnational cultural ties. Within the framework of the soft power concept, this sport functions as a cultural mediator, allowing India to influence external audiences through attractiveness, symbols, and shared cultural codes, rather than through coercion or pressure. The post-colonial aspect of Indian cricket is of particular importance. India has managed to reinterpret and transform its colonial legacy, turning cricket from an instrument of cultural dominance by the metropole into a resource for national self-affirmation and global influence. This process reflects a broader trend of redistribution of symbolic power in the international system, within which states of the Global South are increasingly forming their own centers of cultural attraction. India's dominance in the global cricket industry, as well as its influence on the institutional development of the sport, underscores the country's ability to use intangible resources to strengthen its position on the international stage. At the same time, the study reveals that the potential of cricket as a soft power tool is not unconditional and faces a few limitations. The commercialization of the sport, its politicization, and the perception of India's institutional dominance as a form of inequality or neo-colonial pressure can reduce the effectiveness of sports diplomacy and provoke critical reactions from other actors. This indicates the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach, focused on maintaining cultural attractiveness and trust, which are key conditions for sustainable soft power. In the context of growing competition for influence in global politics, the importance of intangible resources, including sports and culture, will only increase. Cricket, being both deeply integrated into Indian national identity and possessing a truly global character, is highly likely to retain its role as an important element of India's foreign policy strategy in the 21st century. However, the effectiveness of this instrument will depend on the ability of Indian institutions to combine economic and political interests with the principles of openness,

cultural sensitivity, and international cooperation. It is in this format that cricket can continue to be a sustainable resource of soft power and a factor in India's long-term international influence.

References

1. Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
3. Bateman, A. (2021). Cricket, power and inequality: The political economy of global cricket governance. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(2), 217–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2020.1855417>
4. Bose, M. (2006). *A history of Indian cricket*. André Deutsch.
5. Cull, N. J. (2008). Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 31–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311952>
6. Grix, J., & Houlihan, B. (2014). Sports mega-events as part of a nation's soft power strategy: The cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012). *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 16(4), 572–596. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.12017>
7. Grix, J., & Lee, D. (2013). Soft power, sports mega-events and emerging states: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>
8. Guha, R. (2002). *A corner of a foreign field: The Indian history of a British sport*. Picador.
9. Gupta, A. (2021). The IPL and the transformation of Indian cricket. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 51(3), 410–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2020.1816563>
10. James, C. L. R. (1963). *Beyond a boundary*. Stanley Paul.
11. Kapur, D. (2010). *Diaspora, development, and democracy: The domestic impact of international migration from India*. Princeton University Press.
12. Kumar, S. (2011). Cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 1(2), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/234779701100100203>
13. Majumdar, B. (2004). *Twenty-two yards to freedom: A social history of Indian cricket*. Penguin.
14. Majumdar, B. (2013). *Cricket in India: Representation and identity*. Routledge.
15. Majumdar, B. (2018). Cricket, media, and the Indian market. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 35(13), 1259–1274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2018.1541846>
16. Melissen, J. (Ed.). (2005). *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
17. Murray, S. (2012). The two halves of sports-diplomacy. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 23(3), 576–592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2012.706544>
18. Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
19. Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. *PublicAffairs*.

20. Nye, J. S. (2011). The future of power. *PublicAffairs*.
21. Sen, R. (2015). Nation at play: A history of sport in India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49(5), 1341–1371. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X14000274>