

Cricketscapes and the City: A Case Study of Purnea, Bihar

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ABSTRACT

Cricket is popular culture in India. The overwhelming presence of the sport marks a notable component in the cultural landscape of a city. The paper aims to explore the cricketing landscape in small-town India by taking the case of Purnea, Bihar. It provides a geographical understanding of how cricket is imagined, performed, and promoted in the non-metropolitan urban centres of India. Purnea has witnessed a rapid growth in urbanisation and a notable expansion in cricket both as a game and its associated facilities. Using qualitative research methods, which include semi-structured interviews, participant observation and walk-along ethnography, the paper provides an insight into the cultural landscape of cricket in small town India. It examines the relationship between space and cricket by considering the playgrounds, institutions, infrastructure, teams and formats. The paper contributes to the field of geography by extending the dialogue between urban landscapes and sporting culture through the lens of cricket. In doing so, it attempts to overhaul the sporting aspirations in the region.

KEYWORDS: Landscape, Place, Space, Cricket, Ethnography.

1. Introduction

The overwhelming presence of cricket is a notable feature of Indian homes, streets, public spaces and urban landscape. The game is celebrated as a religion. The popularity has crept into people's everyday lives through tea-time discussions, advertisements on television and billboards, news and nationalism. Indians have unparalleled zeal for the game, such that cricket can be found in every nook and corner of the country. This paper looks at the micro-level occurrence of cricket and the way it establishes a cultural landscape in India's small cities. Sport is a cultural phenomenon. They play an essential role in the making up of a city. (Bale, 2002). Sports (Appadurai, 1996) impact the city beyond the stadiums or sporting arenas (Bale & Moen, 1995).

Cricket, a venerable sport in India, has a major role in shaping Indian cities. While cultural landscapes are understood as structures, forms, patterns and human influence over the natural landscape, cricket produces a landscape with a cultural content beyond the humanly created physical expressions. This paper looks at cricketscapes produced by human imagination and cognition over space. The paper's central argument is that cricket as a mass culture produces distinct cultural landscapes in Indian cities, understood as cricketscapes in this paper, that exists beyond the material and physical aspects of landscapes. For this study, the city of Purnea is taken as a case study to elaborate on the relationship of sports, city and landscape in Indian cities.

Purnea is located in the northeastern part of Bihar. It is the headquarters of the Purnea district and lies on the important transport route National Highway-31 (Ganga-Darjeeling Highway), which connects North-East India to North India. The town has witnessed economic growth in the last decade and has emerged as an important centre for education, medical and hospitality industry. The gradual urbanisation of the town has led people from surrounding regions to migrate to the city in search of a better livelihoods. As such, people from different walks of life come together in public spaces. Cricket, the most popular sport in town, binds the people together beyond caste, class and religious attributes. The game provides a medium for interaction between people and public spaces like grounds and promotes cultural integration.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we discuss the spatialisation of cricket in the city. The second section investigates how the game of cricket transforms city landscapes. The last section explores cricket's interconnections beyond the city, to scales of the state and nation. The paper contributes to the field of geography by enquiring about the cultural landscapes that exist beyond physical forms, as products of human cognition. It also highlights sports as a lens unpacking urban space and the city.

2. Methodology

A combination of qualitative research methods reveals the nuances of space-place interaction, making of cultural landscapes and people's lived experience. Qualitative methods generate high-quality information imbued with experience. (Creswell, 2013). This study deploys an ethnographic approach to reveal the nuances of space-place interaction, Cricket as a cultural artefact, and the making of the cricket spaces, produced while playing the game. Methods include semi-structured interviews, participant observation and walk-along ethnography, each of which outline the cultural and social organisation of people, settings or ways of life. (Calhoun, 2002). Professional cricket player- Mr Vijay Bharti, the first player from the town to play the Ranji Cricket Tournament from divided Bihar, amateur cricket players from the town who play with different clubs in the city as well as people occupying public grounds to play the game were part of the interviews. Public grounds in the town- Rangbhoomi Maidan and DSA Ground were sites chosen for participant Observation. The city of Purnea has been selected as the study area as the region has seen recent improvement in sporting culture in the last few years. The presence of a functioning District Cricket Association and more than 50 cricket clubs make the town an essential locus for developing cricket in the region. Scarce time and a limited number of cricket matches due to the effect of the coronavirus were a few setbacks in data collection and survey.

3. Literature Review

Literature on the landscape is associated with forms, functions and processes. (Widgren, 2004). These elements come together in different contexts to give rise to interfaces or 'readings' of the landscape, each valid in its specific social and historical context. (Palang & Fry, 2003). Landscape studies are closely linked to cultural studies, the interaction of space-time continuum and planning-management exercises. These approaches are skewed towards viewing landscape in the material form. The characteristics of landscape has been limited to visible elements present over space that one can touch, smell, see or measure (Ingold, 1993). The cultural turn in landscape studies focused on how different cultures perceive and interpret landscapes and how cultures give symbolic meanings to landscapes. It explores how human activity has modified the landscape instead of the primaevial natural landscape. This approach brings together geographic, ethnic, and socio-economic groups to explore the study of cultural heritage management.

Despite these varied means of studying landscapes, humanistic approaches that involve how landscapes are perceived are scarce. Landscape studies have a bend towards the material aspects of space. Even within the ambit of sports geography, the concept of landscape deals with the importance of stadiums for economists and spatial planners in the city landscape (Bale, 1993), stadium landscape as a blend of horticulture and architecture (Bale, 2000) and the impact of sporting events or sports stadiums on a certain area as "nuisance fields" (Bale, 1990) or "Locally unwanted Land Use" (van Dam, 2000).

There is scope of work in the field of humanistic approaches. Cosgrove (1984) sought to reformulate landscape as a concept whose subjective and artistic resonance is to be actively embraced. He posits that incorporating individual, imaginative, and creative human experience into studies of the geographical environment is an aspect that geographical science claims to have devalued at best and, at worst, ignored. Landscape analysis through humanistic methods has opened up new ways to understand everyday life, architecture, paintings and historical nuances of a place. The development of landscape study through cultural and historical approaches provides crucial groundwork for studying sports at the level of the city—a sport like cricket results from culture and human experience over spaces reflected within cities. Cricket imposes certain dynamics in public spaces where it is played. These renewed dynamics lasts over spaces until the game is in action. The public returns to neutrality once again as the game is completed. The study of a landscape in transition- produced when the game is in action, is an interesting field of enquiry, and an aspect of landscape that is rarely taken into academic consideration. This paper looks into such nuances using cricketscapes.

4. Making up of Cricketscape

Cricketscapes are conceptualised as the spaces of the city occupied by people involved in playing the game. These spaces constitute public grounds, parks and stadiums and are transitory. The growing population in the urban towns of India have rendered a contest for spaces for varied activities. Cricket as an activity has to negotiate with the other competing activities to stake claim to public space. The heightened competition and the lack of space make cricketscapes a transitory affair; that is, they appear over spaces for a short duration and disappear after the game is completed. The cricket landscape is established in Indian cities through the utmost zeal and compassion for the game that exists within people. The making up of cricketscapes has initial roots in the home spaces. It is the immediate surrounding of children that makes them take up the game. This is evident from a field interview with Vijay Bharti, who narrates the reasons behind his playing the game.

My elder brother was a cricket fanatic. He inspired me to take up the sport. He was an excellent bowler, which helped me improve my batting skills. I would play cricket on the terrace, garden and the street outside my residence. The whole family watched cricket on television, and we would cheer for India. (Vijay Bharti, Professional Cricketer, 26)

The transition from home to public spaces comes naturally to children as they grow up. Pursuing better skills and a larger space to showcase their talent makes the children occupy the town's public spaces. The case of Purnea is no different. Public grounds are present as archipelagos in the city. Choosing a particular public ground depends on social connection, distance from home, and a lack of sporting infrastructure at school. The public spaces in Purnea were found to be inclusive as they gave way to people from all backgrounds beyond race, caste, class and age. Vijay Bharti's narrative elaborates on this account of preference for a public ground.

The Rangbhoomi Maidan is nearest to my house. As a child, I would visit the ground, but there were not many people my age. So, I had to play with older adults. These people were also my elder brother's friends, so I always got a chance to represent myself. Later, I encouraged my friends from school and the neighbourhood to join me at the ground. It was problematic for us initially as older people would push us out from the ground. We had no choice as our schools also lacked sporting facilities and other grounds were too far for everyone's reach. Hence, we used to shift to corner areas of the ground to play the game. Slowly, we made it to the centre of the ground by developing contacts with elders and gathering more people. (Vijay Bharti, Professional Cricketer, 26)

Location and social connection emerge as the two most dominant factors in selecting a particular ground. Similar evidence was reflected in people playing the game on other grounds in the city. This was seen with the young police recruits joining the police academy in Purnea, playing cricket in Police Lines ground, students from district government schools occupying Zila School Ground after classes, and people living on the outskirts of the town playing the game at Polytechnic Ground located in their vicinity.

Cricket is widespread in the cities of India. It is borne out of the home spaces through television, advertisements, and social interaction among friends and family. Cricket then is taken to the public ground, where the game is developed through social ties and everyday negotiations. In this way, cricket becomes a dominating prospect of the city's landscape.

5. Dynamics of the Landscape – Amateur Tournaments

In the last section, we looked at how cricketscapes come to be in the cities from the perspective of an individual. This section looks at the dynamics of the cricketscapes at the scale of the playing ground. The incidence of organised cricket tournaments on public grounds establishes a microcosm of the cricketscapes. These tournaments are amateur but shape the functionality of public grounds. It provides a medium for people from different parts of the town to come together and share a competitive space. Organising a tournament often involves participation fee and a winning prize for the victorious team. This is followed by teams registering for the event. Matches occur on scheduled days and can last up to a week. The tournaments are a crucial juncture where the city and the sport of cricket meet. It provides an opportunity for individual cricket players to show their skills on the scale of the city and earn a name for themselves. This is evident from the interview of Aatish Anand, a popular cricketing figure in the town.

I have been playing cricket in organised tournaments for a long time. This allows me to generate money for my pocket expenses and improves my town's image. Many people, especially youngsters, know me. I love this

game and play all the matches with the intensity needed to win. It gives me an escape from my everyday life and a sense of belonging to the people and place I play. (Aatish Anand, 24)

Thus, cricket spaces are important for people's engagement in the town. At the same time, the tournaments attract enterprises and businesses from the town and provide them an opportunity to advertise their products. The sponsors are localised in their purview. Hence, the impact of the cricket landscape can be seen beyond the space in which it is played. Observations from the field reflect the nuances of the externalities induced by cricket matches.

The matches began, and many people gathered to watch them. This is surprising considering the level at which the matches are taking place. The match is between the teams Purnea Super Kings and Team Aditya Vision. The first team is inspired by the Indian Premier League Franchise, Chennai Super Kings, and has players from all around the city. The second team has people working in the Aditya Vision shop, the largest electronic goods retailer in the town. Other sponsors include mobile phone shops, clothing stores, and automobile stores in different city regions. Billboards, hoarding, pamphlets, and local hawker stalls have begun surrounding the playing area. (Field Notes, Aug 25, 2020).

Hence, when the match is in play, the landscape is transformed into an entity with a definite role in the city regarding people-to-people contacts, economic functions, and development in the cultural capital. It is important to note that even these transformations brought by tournaments are transient. Once the tournament ends, the landscape returns to its original function as a routine open public space. The picture below showcases the post-match celebration of a cricket team.

Cricket is itself a product of Indian culture and is dominantly reflected in everyday life, both at home and in public spaces, in towns and cities of India. The next section looks into these interconnections in detail.

6. Interconnections with the National Policy

Cricket, as a cultural activity in the smaller towns of India, has become a norm to replicate the sporting culture produced at the national level. Cricket finds its place in Indian culture as a measure against British colonial power, a struggle for independence, an economic reform in the country, and the emergence of a global power (Guha, 1998). The progress of cricket and India runs parallel and has been extensively dealt with through historical and sociological lenses (Majumdar, 2013). This section looks at the geographical account of cricket in India in the



Fig 1: Winners of Amateur Tournaments organised at Rangbhoomi Maidan, Purnea
Source – Field Survey (28th August, 2020)

context of changes it has brought to the landscape of the smaller towns in India. The major reason to justify the overwhelming presence of cricket in the public grounds of India emerges from the aspirations of people from smaller towns. While the issue of cricket nationalism inspires people to take up the sport, others play the game as a means of entertainment. However, they do not find any other sport which attracts as many people (mainly men) as cricket. Hence, cricket has become one of the few means of developing social contacts and finding a place in society.

We have been playing cricket since childhood. Even in my childhood pictures, I have posed with a bat in my hand. No other sport attracts the level of enthusiasm as cricket does. The only reason we switch to other sports is due to the unavailability of cricket. For example, if it rains too much, we play football, and if it gets too dark, we play badminton by switching the street lights on. Everyone has a bat or a ball at home, but you would rarely find football or badminton rackets with people. Cricket has dominated the sporting realm of India because of what we see on television, news and radio. Because of these reasons, we take cricket as the only sport, and the aftereffect of this subconscious decision is reflected in the games' fields. (Divyanshu Jha, 24)

The role of the District Cricket Association (DCA), Purnea, also needs to be accounted for establishing cricketscapes in the town. DCA is the nodal agency responsible for developing cricket in the district. The expenses of DCA are carried out by the Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI). The responsibilities of DCA include

organising official tournaments for scouting talent, maintaining infrastructure for sports and promoting a sports culture in the region. Rajeev Kumar, the elected president of DCA, talks about the recent developments of sports infrastructure in the region with the help of increased funds from BCCI. His narrative mentions the developments in DSA grounds, Purnea, which happens to be the official cricket ground in the town. Fig 2 gives insights into the working of DCA meetings headed by Rajesh Kumar.

Purnea has witnessed a drought for a long time when it comes to cricket players. We have not been able to produce cricket players from this region. However, this situation is about to change in the upcoming years. With improved infrastructure qualities like green turf surface and coaching facilities, the aspirations of the players have increased. The selection criteria are purely based on talent, and there is no discrimination regarding selection. There was a time when people from this region had to migrate to cities like Delhi and Mumbai to try their luck in cricket, but nowadays, they can receive the same facilities here. For many years, the Bihar Ranji Team was defunct because of political reasons; now that Bihar Ranji has resurfaced, it is an optimum time for developing cricket in this region. I am very optimistic about growth soon. (Rajesh Kumar, DCA President)



Fig 2: DCA Meeting (23rd August, 2020)
Source – Field Survey

The infrastructural development in the region is bound to strengthen the cricketscapes of the town, with more people actively participating in the game. The development of institutional cricket has induced positive feedback on the mindset of people now willing to take the sport as a career option. This is evident from an interview with a young fast bowler who is also part of the district cricket team.

I have always wanted to play cricket, and I like bowling a lot. There are plenty of opportunities for me in Purnea. I get to the ball with a new one in every practice session, improving my bowling style. I need to perform consistently to get selected. (Harsh, 16)

Hence, the institutional framework for cricket has positively changed the cricket landscape. Affirmative

action by the government and increased awareness about sports in the household have furthered the scope of cricket and other sports in the region.

7. Discussion

The paper explores the various facets of cricketscapes on public grounds in India by taking Purnea as a case study. The evidences in the form of semi-structured interviews and observations shed light on the genesis of cricketscapes, their existence in the town, and their interconnection with national-level sports policies. The first section talked about how cricketscapes are established in the very first place. The narrative of a professional cricket player gives an idea of the development of affinity towards cricket at the household level. Furthermore, location and social connection enable a child (mainly male) to claim and access public grounds where he becomes a part of the cricketscapes. Several people occupy the public space at the same time. Cricket is played through negotiations and contestations for space. The combined lived experience of all players on the ground gives rise to cricketscapes at the level of the town. The second section talks about an interesting aspect of cricketscapes through the amateur tournaments held in the town. It is the amateur tournaments that make the cricketscapes visible in the city. The players participating in the tournament see it as an opportunity to thrust their image into the town and access a platform for their representation. The externalities effect created by the tournament is evident from the observations taken in the field. The site at which cricket tournaments are occurring attracts enterprises and businesses. The field gets transformed into a microcosm of economic and social spheres with distinct functions in the town. The last section mentions the ties with the national sporting culture and policies that help bring positive changes in the cricketscapes of town. The narrative of a cricket follower gives insight into the reason for the domination of cricket over the public grounds. The comments by the DCA president and a cricket player account for the development of cricket infrastructure in recent times. Both project an optimistic future for cricketscapes in the region. Thus, the development of cricket spaces begins right from the spaces of home, which motivates a

(male) child to take up the sport. These then move to public grounds to improve skills and social connections. This is the first level at which cricketscapes are visible, with a large number of games occurring at the same time. A special aspect of public grounds is the tournaments, which act as nodes in the town to attract enterprises and make cricketscapes evident. Further, connection with national ties established cricketscapes by strengthening the domination of cricket over public spaces through policies and affirmative actions. However, these cricketscapes are gendered.

8. Conclusion

The paper draws on the concept of sportsapes described by Appadurai (1996) And applies it to the game of cricket. It came up with cricketscapes and defined them as spaces in the city constituting public grounds, parks and stadiums occupied by people playing the game. An ethnographic field of enquiry consisting of semi-structured interviews and observation gave depth to the micro-level study of cricket. It explores the literature gap that exists in geography as well as landscape studies. Within the subject matter of geography, sports have rarely been addressed as a spatial phenomenon. Also, the studies related to cricket have an orientation towards the historical and sociological consequences of the game. Looking at the game through the lens of geography helps us uncover the varied spatial phenomena in terms of third space, lived experience, everyday life and landscape study. The prime focus is on material and physical items, even in landscape studies. The creation of landscape through human assemblage and induced patterns over space has rarely been studied. The paper brings forward the case study of cricket in Pune to provide knowledge about how public spaces are appropriated, and landscapes are produced through human actions in space. This paper examines how cricketscapes are produced, appropriated, and contested at the level of the home, public grounds, city and national structures of culture, politics, and social infrastructure.

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