

# Cricket and the rise of modern India

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*LSE's Mukulika Banerjee moderates a discussion on the rise of cricket in India and its relationship to the country's politics and culture.*

What can cricket tell us about modern India? Last week, at the Asia House [Festival of Asian Literature](#), James Astill and Ed Hawkins attempted to answer this question. Astill is the author of "[The Great Tamasha: Cricket, Corruption and the Turbulent Rise of Modern India](#)", a new book that traces how cricket became an outlet for Indian nationalism both under colonial rule and in the decades since independence, and how it contributes to Indian culture and politics. While Astill focuses on how Indian cricket articulates the country's experiment with modernity, Hawkins, the author of "[Bookie, Gambler, Fixer, Spy](#)", gets at the game's underbelly—the corruption that has come to define the sport in recent years.



At Asia House, Hawkins discussed the anatomy of match-fixing in India, a timely concern. Last week, three players from an Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise, the Rajasthan Royals, were arrested by Delhi police. They allegedly performed pre-arranged actions, scripted by bookmakers, during matches in this year's tournament. One of the accused, S. Sreesanth, was part of India's 2011 World Cup-winning squad. Indian cricketing authorities have been criticised for their relative [reticence](#) on the matter.

Hawkins' book focuses on the World Cup semi-final between India and Pakistan in Mohali in March 2011, inspired by a 'script' of the match he received from a bookie before the game. As part of his investigation into whether or not that seminal match was fixed, Hawkins spent time in India with a bookie, watching him bet on matches, bribe police officers and engage with members of India's mafias. During his talk, Hawkins argued that the roots of present-day match-fixing lie in India, but was careful to point out that there has always been corruption in cricket—the first recorded instance of match-fixing occurred in the 1700s, and the laws of cricket were drawn up in the first place to settle betting disputes.

Taking a broader view, Astill argued that corruption in Indian cricket reflects the weaknesses of Indian institutions, and the fact that the game is growing at a time of soaring wealth within the country. However, Astill felt that the problem would recede as the country's institutions matured, and as the Indian public's growing cynicism about levels of probity in the public sphere – manifest in Anna Hazare's anti-graft movement, which was buoyed by middle-class support – began to apply to cricket too.

Astill began writing about cricket in India while based in Delhi as the South Asia correspondent for *The Economist*.

While reporting on the launch of the IPL, he realised that the game reveals much about changes in Indian society, including its economic growth and zesty appetite for enterprise as well as politics.

Speaking at Asia House, Astill also described how cricket both reflects and shapes India's shifting consumer culture. For example, with the rise of cricket as a *tamasha* – a great spectacle – Bollywood is for the first time finding itself relegated to second place as India's preferred form of entertainment. Astill suggested this is a consequence of soaring television ownership in India. Nowadays, Bollywood film releases are planned with the country's cricket schedule in mind, and producers avoid the dates of the IPL tournament and other games when promoting blockbusters. Meanwhile, cricketers have begun to appear in reality television shows, commercials, and even films, often earning almost as much as top-grossing Bollywood stars through their on-screen appearances.

But, as last week's spot-fixing scandal suggests, the *tamasha* of Indian cricket could yet be undermined by the taint of corruption. That's why Hawkins is calling for practical solutions to address the rampant corruption in the game as it is evolving in India, including criminalising match-fixing and spot-fixing and legalising betting on games, which would improve transparency. Of course, these measures would require a greater strengthening of India's law-making and law-enforcing institutions. As such, cricket will continue to offer a glimpse into Indian society for decades to come.

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