



LIBERAL STUDIES

A Bi-Annual Journal of School of Liberal Studies, PDPU, Gujarat

Vol. 2, Issue 1
January–June 2017

ISSN 2455-9857

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ETHICAL PRACTICES IN LEAGUE GAMING IN INDIA

Concept Note

The Indian sports environment has been abuzz with activity in recent years. According to reports, sports sponsorship has grown 12.3% to a whopping INR 5,185.4 crore (~US\$800 million) in 2015 from a modest INR 4616.5 crore (~US\$700 million) in 2014. Especially, the brand value of the Indian Premier League (IPL) has been around US\$ 4 billion. According to the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the 2015 IPL season contributed to around INR 1,150 crore (~US\$170 million) to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There is a substantial increase in the private investment in the sport, combined with the resultant appreciation of the importance of public trust in authenticity of results. Of late it has been seen that Industrial houses and even Film Stars of the glamour world have come up to participate into sports sponsorship in a big way. Above all, the issue of participant-integrity in league gaming has come to the forefront.



By: Upasana

When Penguins try to play Table Tennis

Almost every quarter, a new private sports league is announced. The Hockey India League (HIL), founded in 2013 and organized by Hockey India, is a professional field hockey league and also the governing body for the sport in India. HIL, along with other leagues like the Indian Premier League, Indian Super League, and Pro-Kabaddi League, is considered one of the major sports leagues in the country. Since beginning, the league has proven to be a financial success for Hockey India, who were in financial disarray before the league began.

The Indian Super League (ISL), founded in 2013 as men's professional football league, serves as one of the top tournaments in India today. It is formed in an effort to make football a top sport in India and to increase the level of participation and recognition of Indian football worldwide.

The Premier Badminton League (PBL) is managed and commercially owned by the Badminton Association of India (BAI) founded in 2013.

Indigenous games like Kabaddi are also gaining global acceptance slowly. Apart from the rising powers like Iran and South Korea, teams like United States of America, Kenya, who are total beginners to the sport have expressed a keen desire to establish a league on the same lines as that of the immensely popular Indian Pro-Kabaddi League. This brings to the fore, the issue of 'India as a role model' in setting the trend in terms of the ethical standards and the overall impartial quality of league games.

However, given the increasing incidence of match-fixing, doping practices, age fraud, gender and sexual harassment, etc., Indian sport is no longer a stranger to challenges of integrity. Ever since IPL emerged, its credibility has not only been called into question by fixing allegations, but various other related events in the league have also had a domino effect, with the outcrop being the Supreme Court-appointed Lodha Committee that recommended for a complete overhaul of the Indian cricket management.

Cricket is the most admired game in India, having a following of more than a million obsessive fans, with an unquestioning belief in the commitment of cricketers. For them, to know that some of the losses which caused so much pain were manufactured as were some of the sweet victories made, gives an impression that the game had lost its meaning abysmally. With scripted and tailored performances "to fashion a specific result", some of the league games "have made a mockery" of its fans' most impassioned feelings. The short format of the league matches has however attracted everyone with its colourful entertainment and the glamour seems more prone to manufactured rules, arbitrary conventions, invented pursuits, arcane skills, etc. Cricket may only be a game, but the emotional highs and lows that it generates necessitate stringent authoritative oversight.

On the other hand, the excessive enthusiasm by the consumers of sport has created a sense of entitlement in those that perform at their behest. The players now seem to have become (well-paid) slaves or puppets whose strings are drawn by the popularity

of the sport. As aptly says Santosh Desai, “sport which is conceived of as a theatre or platform where human abilities would find their purest expression, has now been gradually dragged back into the real world, by making it the conduit to everything it was designed to be detached from. The external worldly pressure creates the motive for the cheating as well as the reason for treating the infraction as a crime.” But, is cheating at sports such a terrible crime in the legal sense of the word?

Numerous attempts have been made in the past, addressing the serious issues of unscrupulous sports practices in India. The latest of these efforts being the National Sports Ethics Commission Bill, 2016 that sets out to achieve “the purpose of fair play, a conducive environment for sports and justice to those wronged by others” by creating a set of new criminal offences and penalties relating to participant-integrity in sports – in short, establishing a formal mechanism for adjudication of sports disputes through creation of a national commission. The Bill requiring the central government to constitute a National Sports Ethics Commission to oversee and enforce the various Codes of Ethics that sport federations are mandated to frame, aims to formulate measures towards the elimination of such malpractices. Prior to this bill, the National Sports Development Bill 2013 attempted to bring certain governance structures to all national sports federations, including the issue of sports ethics. Further, the National Sports Development Code of India 2011 attempted to rationalise sports practice in the same manner but of not much help.

This Liberal Studies journal takes this opportunity to invite expert opinions on this intriguing issue from scholars to ponder over the future of league gaming in India as also the consequent governmental responses and actions to uplift the moral standard of sports in the country.



By: Rajshree

Stakeholders to Evaluate the Governance Framework

— **Karan Vakharia***

Over the last few years, India has witnessed a surge of sporting leagues across multiple game genres. The question therefore arises, is India becoming a sports leagues' nation? Or is it one already?

According to my observation of sporting trends in our country, there is no more scope for any one sport to dominate an era, anymore. For instance, in the early 1990s, hockey ruled the hearts and television sets of every Indian household, and was later replaced by cricket in the late 1990s.

But as the years have passed and with the onset of the twenty-first century we have seen the rise and wane as also the continuous ascent of many other sports too. In fact there has even been an increase in their fan following.



By: Rajshree

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From the Indian Premier League (IPL, cricket), Pro-Kabaddi League, Premier Fustal, Hockey India League, Indian Super League (football), Pro-Wrestling League, Indian Premier Tennis League to Premier Badminton League, the world of sports in India has only grown to include games and players that once upon time were overshadowed by the giant that we Indians call 'cricket'!

Today, companies, brands, industrialists, are all in a frenzied race to invest in and make money out of these sporting leagues by associating their products with them as brand names

So where did it all begin? The commercialization of sports in India began in 2008 with the introduction of the IPL in cricket. A number of others followed suit. An array of leagues like the Indian Badminton League, Pro-Wrestling League, Hockey India League, Indian Women's League, etc. all started inspiring players and gradually these sports and their players came forward in the limelight and became popular. Many, if not all of these leagues, are based on the franchise format in which, each team is associated with a city or state of India. Whether that is the Mumbai Indians (IPL), Jaipur Pink Panthers (Pro-Kabaddi League) or any of the others. Then, going a step further, many of these teams get star-value added to them once a Bollywood celebrity(ies) becomes the owner(s) or co-owner(s) of the teams. A wonderful and profitable fusion of the world of sports with the world of entertainment! Obviously, once the world of bling and glamour get comfortable in a new place, then start the drama of live auctions, elaborate opening and closing ceremonies, galas, charity events, etc. which do add to the weight of the proverbial money bags. And that's how the world of sports in India has reached its epitome of commercialization.

Players and sportsmen are now not just expected to play the game well, but they now have an additional role to play: that of an entertainer like in Showbiz before an enthralled audience too. Not only are they now associated with just a game but are now also related to brands and products that can make them puppets in the hands of the investor or brand company. The purity of the sport thus gets a sense of superfluous flamboyance. Sports events too, become a platform for the ambitions of celebrities and the notoriously wealthy; a team becomes their 'golden goose'.

On the fall side of this glamour, an increase in commercialization and the resulting privatization of sports related infrastructure may oust a deserving candidate just due to a want of money. Thus only those who are monetarily capable of availing all the extensive professional training may do so, thereby building their career, leaving a deserving few behind due to their economic status.

Commercialization may even discriminate between games, wherein sports that may already be popular would have an organized sports league system while the not-so-popular sports may be further pushed into oblivion.

But, on the other hand, with the numerous sports leagues taking over the country's sports scene, we are seeing an increased spurt in the inclusion of international players.

Now leagues and teams in India are not just constituted of Indian players, but talent from the world over can also play participants. In doing so, Indian players have been exposed to international trends in sports, international levels of fitness and performance and an overall exposure even at the starter level. This in turn has influenced their rankings at an international level and improved their competitive prowess. The league format in Indian sports today has further enhanced strategy building in the respective sport too; so much so that due to a simple strategy change the Indian underdogs are now capable of not only challenging but even overthrowing world champions! A mixed pool of players from different countries as well as coaches from different countries only enhances and helps the players hone their skills.

Professional leagues create a greater influx of funds that help in upgrading the infrastructure and in turn may lead to the increase in better sportsmen and a larger sports following and fans.

In a country like India, that has a very high unemployment rate, the commercialization of sports provides a platform for alternative lucrative career options, thereby attracting more eligible youth to focus on a career in sports. Even parents are now more positive towards careers in sports or those related to sport and are seen encouraging children from early on to grasp the various ropes related to this field.

Commercialization and league formation has further promoted innovations in the field of sports and thereby contributed in the form of greater revenues too.

Then again, while sporting leagues offer an opportunity for spotting genuine talent and providing a sustainable livelihood to scores of sportspersons, the amount of money spent and the highly advertised nature of such events tends to attract scrutiny by stakeholders pertaining to its operations and sports management practices. Such scrutiny, if resulting in the detection of malpractice, can cause significant reputational loss and may lead to regulatory action, thereby impacting the viability of business operations.

The money-minting businesses that sports leagues have become make them prone to various unethical practices like spot-fixing, gambling, etc. as especially seen in the past few years. And there are other issues too that can lead to unethical behavior among the leagues.

‘Conflict of interest’ management has surfaced as a central issue in the regulation of ethical conduct in sport. Players and sports persons are not properly educated in their formative years with regards to the awareness of various laws and the difference between sledging and being racist. Many a time, there are very young, immature sport persons representing a franchise, who need to be properly guided and educated in the ways of the sporting world so that they don’t land up in a soup, faced with various ethical dilemmas that can not only jeopardize the company’s reputation but also their own future in the game.

In this dynamic sector, it is absolutely necessary for stakeholders to evaluate the existing framework of governance to guarantee that it minimizes all internal and external

risks impacting them. This, in my opinion, would involve the development of a response plan for any incident that may take place in the future and potentially impact reputation; essentially a vaccine before the disease even afflicts the body.

Defined procedures for declaring the best stadium for viewership experience or say, auction of players, when independently reviewed and validated, can instill a higher level of trust and confidence thereby strengthening the recognition for fair play.

When dealing with third parties, especially when their background is not adequately known, can expose these organizations to an additional risk of fraud, noncompliance and even reputational risks. It is important to be aware of third parties with regards to various issues such as blacklisting, situations of conflict of interest, and indulging in illegal activities like betting, match fixing etc. as this can prevent potential financial loss and reputational damage.

Recently the public has had the misfortune to only see an onslaught of fraudulent cases: with regards to the misuse of authority for personal ambitions, suspicious sources of funding and of course, what unethical money hungry rug rats are quite famous for, the misuse of funds that are actually meant for other activities.

Another notable feature of today's ever expanding, competitive world is cheating and not following the rules in sports to gain an unfair advantage over competitors. The sports sector and their leagues are therefore exposed to frauds, misconduct, noncompliance and various other malpractices more than ever before. From something as simple as hiring a transport vendor for the team or contracting a security scanning machines provider to accepting kickbacks to facilitate sessions with international players or even ensuring selections in squads, fraud and unethical practices can and do exist anywhere and everywhere. And now there is even the technology to hack and to help these unethical facilitators of fraud and maleficent intentions!

This in turn leads to suspension of various teams, as we all so very well know, and a stream of controversies linking players to conflict of interest situations, use of banned substances, drug abuse, spot-fixing. And this has only added fuel to the fire of the already brimming tank of questions on the practices adopted by sporting leagues and their nominated associations. That's how the Lodha Committee came into conception.

In 2008, the IPL was launched as a platform for young players and to popularize the game amongst the Indian masses. Every season since its launch, we as the spectators have been privy to the many erupting controversies within the IPL, bringing disrepute to the players, officials and of course the game itself. In fact the launch of the IPL itself was a bit of a controversy right? What with the Indian Cricket Board taking steps to crush the Indian Cricket League under Kapil Dev! Reports of gross financial mismanagement, match-fixing, corruption, doping allegations and party scandals all came to the surface of the murky waters of the scandals. The icing on the cake was the sacking of Lalit Modi after charges of gross financial mismanagement and fraud came to the fore.

But sports ethics can get marred even on a political front. Sri Lankan players were not allowed to play in Tamil Nadu because the State Government banned them from doing so. Pakistani players after playing the first edition of the league in 2008, were not allowed. In 2016, matches at some of the venues had to be shifted due to protests related to the severe drought situation in Maharashtra.

At auctions, different franchise teams buy the players for the league and price tags for the 'star' players run into millions of dollars! So, established players continue to remain in the fray thus negating the initial purpose of this league of encouraging young blood and budding talent. Everyone eventually seems to make financial headways and monetary gains but the sport itself, by and large doesn't gain as such!

The PWL was launched in 2015 with much pomp and show. But there was a rift between the two partners and finally Pro-Sportify put up a show with the Wrestling Federation of India with top wrestlers from around the world. But the end result? There was non-payment to players, non-payment of prize money, non-payment to technical officials, interference in technical conduct in the first edition of the league itself.

Currently, the ownership of the badminton league is also being fought in court.

The Indian Super League also faced a major controversy when the regulatory commission banned the most popular FC Goa for 'indiscipline' and imposed a fine of USD 1.6 million as fine. And the reason? Because the club had boycotted the final prize distribution ceremony after players had made allegations against match officials.

We have a huge population...ergo a lot of scope to nurture talent. Unfortunately, the younger generations and even the older generations are very much aware of the goings-on with the international leagues of football more so than in the Indian clubs. And it is not just football. Indian schools also don't encourage other sports as much as sports like cricket.

The standard, therefore, remains low. At the same time there is some hope.

The main idea of a hockey league was to revive the sport, our national sport, and get spectators back to the game that India once was the king of.

Barring a few initial hiccups, the experiment proved successful. It offered a great chance for Indian players to play with the best in the world. Top teams like Holland and Australia were not keen to tour India to play a weak national side. But champion players like Jamie Dwyer, Florian Fuchs and Tobias Hauke among others played with their Indian counterparts in their respective clubs. This gave the Indian players a much needed, valuable exposure back at home and even helped them overcome their fear of the best players in the world.

The broadcasters of these sports events also introduced new technology that made the sport much more interesting and spectator friendly. After failing to qualify for the Beijing Olympics and coming in last at the Games in London, the Indian team re-

emerged as a force largely due to the conception of the League and the revival of the sport.

The International Hockey Federation (FIH) also seems to have taken a cue from the hockey league in India and has decided to launch a new annual global home-and-away league in 2019.

Other sports leagues in tennis and Kabaddi, an indigenous sport, are immensely popular and have remained largely controversy-free but need the extra push to become more popular amongst the masses in India as well as with the financial backers that mainstream sports like cricket have.

Globally, sports organizations thrive on professionals in charge of the actual administration of the game. Every aspect, be it marketing, human resources, regulation, strategy, finances, are considered keeping in mind only the development of the sport as the primary aim.

In India, where the flow of public funds are perennial, commercialization and the league trend can be the ray of hope for India's sporting talent. However, in my opinion, while the regulators, federations and league investors consider better governance and operating models, it is imperative that they proactively incorporate reforms in India and leading practices internationally.



By: Rajshree