

ROLE OF CRICKET DIPLOMACY IN INDIA-AUSTRALIA RELATIONS

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Abstract

Cricket diplomacy has not only entertained fans but also brought India and Australia together on cricket pitch as well as in their trade, investment, defense and strategic relations. Cricket and culture diplomacy are interconnected and serve as a diplomatic bridge to build people to people contacts. India and Australia share flourishing bilateral relations and are also member of Quad and Indo-Pacific, cultural diplomacy has been an essential part of these developments. Both India and Australia understand the fact that cultural diplomacy can act as shock absorber by maintaining societal goodwill despite divergence in strategic interests. Cricket being the strongest symbol of cultural diplomacy has played and will be playing a great role in India-Australia relations.

Key Words: AIC, BCCI, Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific, Quad, Strategic,

Cricket is not only a shared sport but an example of how a shared passion can unite nations and cultures. Cricket diplomacy has not only entertained fans but also brought India and Australia together on cricket pitch as well as in their trade, investment, defense and strategic relations. “Experts believe that sports diplomacy has become increasingly important in the context of India-Australia relations.”¹ Sport diplomacy plays an important role in India Australia relations and recognizing its importance a Memorandum of Understanding on Sports was signed by Indian Ministry of Youth Affairs and Australia’s Department of Health and Aged Care. This MoU in sports not only about training, sharing expertise and medals but also focuses on building understanding and cross-cultural identity.

Cricket and culture diplomacy are interconnected and serve as a diplomatic bridge to build people to people contacts. Cricket has emerged as a unifying force with its history of sporting and cultural relations between India and Australia. Indian diaspora in Australia is more than 1 million. Various cultural exchanges and festivals like Diwali in Australia and Australia Fest in India display sharing of traditions. Indian students in Australia through student exchanges and scholarships are informal cultural ambassadors. Australians are fascinated with India because of cricket, yoga and films and Indian government promotes its landscapes, art and literature in Australia. Goodwill creation through cultural diplomacy helps promote trade and strategic collaborations.²

India and Australia are together giving new heights to sport by strengthening their ties and building sustainable talent pipelines. Australia will be hosting 2032 Olympic and Paralympic games and India eyeing 2036 Olympic games motivates for deeper engagement with their shared Olympic dream. India and Australia are together moving towards a more connected future.³ Molina Asthana GAICD Industry Chapter Head Sports, Art and Culture, at the Australia India Business Council shared her expert views with the Daily Telegraph about role sport and diplomacy plays in India-Australia relations. “Cricket diplomacy has always been key to the India-Australia relationship. Cricket, The Commonwealth and Curry...moved beyond with dialogue around minerals, defence, security, infrastructure, education and tourism...fostering collaboration and understanding between two nations.”⁴

Cricket matches between India and Australia are more or less a fierce display of rivalry on the field but shake hands and shared laugh of teams from both countries after a competitive match is not only display the spirit of game but also of the shared connection beyond sports. Cricket’s power to bring two nations together was first of all spotted by Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in early 2000s, since then matches has emerged as an opportunity for strengthening bilateral relations.

India’s first test tour to Australia was just after independence in 1947-48, was warmly welcomed by Australian captain Don Bradman and his team. Famous cricketer Bradman was delighted to play his last test series with India before retirement. Australia-India Council was setup in May 1992 on recommendation of Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade to raise mutual awareness, promote collaboration and mobilise community involvement. Former cricket captain

Alan Border was appointed to Australia India Council, AIC supported creation of Border-Gavasker Trophy for test series.⁵ Cricket diplomacy in India-Australia relations was introduced with Border-Gavaskar trophy 1996-97, named after Indian legend Sunil Gavaskar and Australian great Allan Border.⁶ It is one of the most cherished series in the world of test cricket matches. It has played a significant role in increased engagement and people to people exchange between India and Australia.

Border-Gavaskar scholarship is a joint initiative between Australia India Council and Cricket Australia started in 2000. This scholarship is financially supported by AIC. Under this scholarship, promising Indian player visit Australia to participate in coaching programs and gain experience by being exposed to different environment conditions. Australian High Commission spokesperson Mr John Fisher noted that during its initial five years the program has benefited Indian cricketers like Mohammad Kaif, Lakshmipathy Balaji and Parthiv Patel. According to former director of CBCE (Australia's Commonwealth Bank Centre for Excellence) Mr. Trevor Robertson felt pleased to provide opportunity to host talented Indian cricketers through Australia-India Council. Former AIC Chairman Darren Gribble said, "Cricket is a common bond between the two countries that help to foster people-to-people links."⁷

During his visit to India in 1998, Cricket legend Don Bradman invited Indian Cricketer Sachin Tendulkar to visit his home. Their meeting was warmly welcomes in India and Australia. Bradman mentioned about many batting skills in Tendulkar that he himself has as a young man, establishing a link between Indian and Australian cricket. India-Australia cricket matches provide an informal platform for diplomats, policy makers, business leaders and heads of state to meet and discuss important issues. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi demonstrated strengthening of their relationship during 2020-2021 Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

Australian government launched its 'New Horizons' project in India during 1996, a key cultural diplomacy initiative to strengthen engagement in South Asia by enhancing people to people connections, mutual understanding and soft power through exchange in areas like education, culture, science and sports. Sports diplomacy, particularly in cricket was used not only as

entertainment but also to promote cultural understanding. Cricket being a symbol of shared colonial identity served as a platform strengthen emotional and cultural ties. This program encouraged tours and training camps of players and coaches allowing informal diplomatic engagement. This program laid foundation for warmer diplomatic relations that grew further in 1990s and late 2000s. In early 2000 when India and Australia moved towards expanding cooperation in trade, education and defense, cricket emerged as a unifying force that appealed directly to public sentiments. India-Australia series of 2000-2001, famous for Kolkata Test comeback was symbolic of deeper connection between nations. This series acted as a soft power bridge under spirit and sportsmanship displayed by both teams- led by Steve Waugh and Sourav Ganguly.

Indian Premier League (IPL) was launched in 2008, Australian cricketers like Ricky Ponting, Adam Gilchrist and Shane Watson became household name across India creating personal and cultural bonds that were difficult to achieve by traditional diplomacy. Australian cricketer David Warner is a big fan of Tollywood films and music. He adopted Hyderabad culture and even greets his telugu fans and celebrates festivals on the internet. Bhuvneshwar-Warner bond represent golden age of Sunrisers Hyderabad and is still remembered by Hyderabad fans.⁸

Issues emerge between BCCI and Cricket Australia regarding dates of tour and availability of player, media also tend to create controversies over umpiring errors , DRS calls and sledging etc. even giving rise to conflicts between fans on social media. Australian cricketer sign contracts with IPL teams, give rise to debates in Australia that player is more interested in franchise cricket than national duty. Sometimes aggressive on field conduct is viable but sportsmanship standard is higher and appreciable. During 2007-08 Sydney Test Controversy both governments acted diplomatically to preserve game spirit, a demonstration of the fact that cricket was more than sport. It was a means to develop understanding and respect. The 2011-12 test series further strengthened healthy sporting rivalry. Cricket emerged as a cultural connector strengthening mutual understanding. Sport diplomacy was also an integral component in high level visits. Prime Minister during his visit to Australia in 2014 and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison often referred to cricket as a symbol of friendship and shared values. By 2020 India and Australia became strategic partners united by democracy, multiculturalism and shared cricket heritage.

During COVID-19 pandemic, India toured Australia in late 2020, this series was not a mere a display of sport spirit but also showcased strength of bilateral cooperation. Cricket diplomacy further continues through Board of Cricket Control India (BCCI) and Cricket Australia collaborations.

India and Australia share flourishing bilateral relations and are also member of Quad and Indo-Pacific, cultural diplomacy has been an essential part of these developments. However it sometimes get drifted from its trajectory due to strategic and political differences between two nations. As was viable during cold war, India's non-alignment policy contrasted with Australia's alignment with western bloc ANZUS. Australia was more inclined towards US and UK as compared to postcolonial nations like India. India's nuclear tests in 1998 rose the tension and Australia being an advocate of non-proliferation suspended all cultural and defense exchanges with India. Political difference affected cultural diplomacy, as a result education collaborations and art initiatives slowed down. People to people contacts were outshined by strategic differences. From 2000 onwards shared concerns over China's assertive attitude helped them move closer strategically and revived cultural diplomacy. Initiatives like Australia-India Council, Festival of Indi in Australia and cricket diplomacy emerged as symbols of renewed trust and soft power engagement.⁹

With cricket diplomacy playing pivotal role in soft power building, India and Australia are moving towards building strategic partnership through Quad- with Japan and US towards free and open Indo-Pacific and counterbalance rising geopolitical tension from China in the Indo-Pacific. Cricket being common passion provides backdrop for cooperation in security defense and regional affairs. Moving towards future both India and Australia are cooperating in defense technology, infrastructure development and environmental sustainability shaping future of Indo-Pacific wherein cricket diplomacy act as a reminder of strong ties in development of cooperation.

Australia and India are moving towards growing economic cooperation with their specific expertise. Australia having expertise in mining, agriculture and higher education while India offers expanding market opportunities in technology and energy creating numerous opportunities. As we are moving beyond 2025, cricket continues to serve as a tool for economic cooperation reminding

us of enduring partnership between India and Australia. “It’s a relationship built not only on mutual respect but also on shared passions and a willingness to use every tool whether it’s the cricket pitch or the negotiating table to further collaboration. Cricket diplomacy, in all its forms, will remain a cornerstone of the Australia-India bond, helping to shape not just the future of their bilateral relations but also the future of the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁰

Conclusion

India and Australia being comprehensive strategic partners since 2020, their relationship has reached beyond traditional strategic partnerships. Still occasional political differences like differing positions on global trade, visa policies and India’s stance on Ukraine conflict can affect cultural relations. Both India and Australia understand the fact that cultural diplomacy can act as shock absorber by maintaining societal goodwill despite divergence in strategic interests. Cricket being the strongest symbol of cultural diplomacy has played and will be playing a great role in India-Australia relations. Joint sporting Leagues like IPL and Big Bash have established commendable emotional and cultural connectivity.

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