

to keep up with the changing priorities of the state as opposed to taking directly oppositional stances—sometimes on the lines of incrementality that he so vividly describes in this book.

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NATION AT PLAY: A History of Sport in India. *Contemporary Asia in the World.* By Ronojoy Sen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xi, 382 pp. (Illustrations.) US\$35.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-231-16490-0.

At first glance, picking up a book about the history of sports in India seemed to me, as a scholar of East Asian sport, like studying the ice cream of Iceland. Sure, there must be some kind of history about the topic, I thought to myself, but what is the point? After all, India is hardly known as a global sporting power. At the 2016 summer Olympics in Rio, for example, India tallied just two total medals, which is even more remarkable when you compare that total to India's substantial population (approx. 1.3 billion). But then I began reading *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India*, by Ronojoy Sen, and I was pleasantly surprised by its bold narrative blend of anthropological analysis, primary historical sources, and modern journalism.

Western sports like soccer, tennis, baseball, and cricket spread from Europe and North America to Asia in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century during the period of colonization. Many (such as rugby, soccer, cricket, golf) had origins in the United Kingdom, were incubated in that nation's public schools, and were played and taught throughout the British Empire. Others (such as baseball, basketball, volleyball) were American inventions brought to Asia by teachers and missionaries living abroad.

Throughout the modern period, sports have at once been seen as symbols of colonialism and also used as tools of national self-assertion. Today they often reflect a global consumer culture that has developed during our most recent surge of increased contact and economic interdependency, what many call "globalization." *Nation at Play* makes a significant contribution to that conversation regarding globalization and sport.

Sen follows a chronological path of sports from "elite, kingly pastimes and their encounter in successive stages with colonialism, nationalism, the state and globalization," but he also "dwells on ... two issues: first, the intensely political nature of sports in both colonial and postcolonial India, and, second, the patterns of patronage, clientage, and institutionalization of sports" (5).

No event was more significant in shaping those politics than the arrival of the British in the seventeenth century. With the British came all sorts of cultural institutions, including sports like cricket. Indian elites of the day used cricket to curry favour with the British, thereby helping to spread the sport across the subcontinent and also to spread the value of using the sport

to climb the social ladder. Many Indians travelled to the UK to learn British ways, too, and upon their return further spread this particular sport and its “elite” values. Cricket would ultimately become almost synonymous with India itself; in fact, like many die-hard sports junkies, I had known about India’s national obsession with cricket, and Sen did not disappoint in documenting the details of that sport’s history. But before reading *Nation at Play*, I did not know, for example, that the sport was just once included in the Summer Olympics (in 1900). I imagine that even knowledgeable cricket fans will find new information here.

Meanwhile, I was also surprised to learn that the British adopted the Indian “sport” of polo and sent it back to the motherland, where it was used not only as an entertaining diversion but also as a way of maintaining social classes; junior British polo players were required to buy and care for their “mounts.” Thus the history of sport was not simply one of Indians adopting British games; as Sen notes, it was not “one-way traffic” (34).

In addition, when Indian cricketers had success against British teams, the victories were hailed as national moments marking the Asian nation’s ascent to modernity, just as sporting prowess was said to indicate national power throughout Asia. For example, Japanese victories over Americans in baseball were hailed as an indicator of Japan’s modern strength in the Meiji Period (1868–1912) (Allen Guttmann and Lee Thompson, *Japanese Sports: A History*, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001, 89–90).

Sen, who holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and is a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute, spent many years as a journalist and editor for *The Times of India*, among other publications; his prose is clear and highly readable.

While Sen dismisses the claim, made by Ian McDonald (“India,” in *Handbook of Sports Studies*, eds. J. Coakley and E. Dunning, Sage, 2000), that the “sociological study of sport in India essentially remains virgin territory” (9), he does agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty that “social historians of India have paid more attention to riots than to sports, to street-battles with the police than to rivalries on the soccer field” (10; see also, “Introduction” in *Sport in South Asian Society: Past and Present*, eds. B. Majumdar and J.A. Mangan, Routledge, 2005). In that sense, Sen’s history is indeed a welcome contribution to a field of study that has been unduly dismissed, in some cases as a result of the same biases I myself had before this review. It turns out there is actually a great deal to learn from a book about Indian sports. Ice cream in Iceland? Of that I am not so sure.