

All-India and Down Under

Peace, Partition and the
Game of Cricket



Richard Knott



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PART 1
THE ALL-INDIA TOUR OF 1946
April to September

The All-India Tour of 1946

The Itinerary

May 4, 6, 7	Worcestershire	Worcester
May 8–10	Oxford University	Oxford
May 11, 13, 14	Surrey	Kennington Oval
May 15–17	Cambridge University	Cambridge
May 18, 20, 21	Leicestershire	Leicester
May 22–23	Scotland	Edinburgh
May 25, 27, 28	MCC	Lord's
May 29	Indian Gymkhana	Osterley
June 1, 3, 4	Hampshire	Southampton
June 8, 10, 11	Glamorgan	Cardiff
June 12–14	Combined Services	Portsmouth
June 15, 17, 18	Nottinghamshire	Nottingham
June 22, 24, 25	ENGLAND	Lord's
June 26–28	Northants	Northampton
June 29, July 1, 2	Lancashire	Liverpool
July 3–5	Yorkshire	Bradford
July 6, 8, 9	Lancashire	Manchester
July 10–12	Derbyshire	Chesterfield
July 13, 15, 16	Yorkshire	Sheffield
July 17, 18	Durham	Sunderland
July 20, 22, 23	ENGLAND	Manchester
July 25	Club Cricket Conference	Guildford
July 27, 29, 30	Sussex	Hove
July 31, August 1, 2	Somerset	Taunton
August 3, 5, 6	Glamorgan	Swansea
August 7–9	Warwickshire	Birmingham
August 10, 12, 13	Gloucestershire	Cheltenham
August 17, 19, 20	ENGLAND	The Oval
August 24, 26, 27	Essex	Southend
August 28–30	Kent	Canterbury
August 31, September 2	Middlesex	Lord's
September 4–6	South of England	Hastings
September 7, 9, 10	H.D.G. Leveson-Gower's XI	Scarborough

Mr Gupta and Mr Arlott

April–May 1946

MR GUPTA'S blue trilby provided a flash of colour in the sober gentility of Westminster's Berners Hotel. London, in that first post-war year, was more used to khaki, bitter winter and grey skies than it was to the glittering prospect of cricket's return. Gupta was a small, harassed-looking man, only too aware of what could go wrong in the weeks ahead and of the fickle nature of an English April. The weather in England made him shiver, encouraged him to think kindly of Calcutta's unfailing heat, forgetting its clammy intensity. April 1946 in London was cold and wet; the telephone system was cranky; food was in short supply; the mood was dour, the country emphatically austere – and Gupta's cricketers were missing, scattered somewhere between India and Britain. And their kit was also at sea, which left him, the manager of the last All-India cricket team to tour England, with nothing to oversee and nobody to manage.

In the back of Mr Gupta's mind lurked the bad blood of his appointment – he was, after all, a hockey man rather than a cricketer. Then there had been the unseemly trouble over the appointment of the captain: should it be Vijay Merchant or the Nawab of Pataudi? With his urbane manner, well-heeled Bombay background, and cricketing pedigree, Merchant was the more obvious choice. But he had been turned down in a

10–8 vote in favour of Pataudi – even more well-heeled, but whose cricket was decidedly rusty. Added to that was the strange fact that the Nawab had played for England some 13 years previously. His ringside seat at the diplomatic crisis brought about by the 1932/33 Bodyline tour of Australia perhaps fed the political ambitions which, by 1946, were well-established. At all events, Pataudi's appointment as India's captain was a controversial one. As well as the cricketing tourists, he ruled his own small kingdom of 53 square miles in the north of India, close to Delhi, a responsibility acquired courtesy of history and the East India Company. Educated at Balliol College, Oxford, where he had been a triple Blue (cricket, hockey and billiards), he had an uncomfortable introduction to Test cricket – an Indian playing for England – and had been obliged to serve under the resolute, unforgiving captaincy of Douglas Jardine in Australia. The 22-year-old Pataudi had met up with the MCC party in Colombo, the rest of the players having sailed weeks before from Tilbury. He would go on to play in the first two Tests, scoring 102 at Sydney in early December 1932, followed by disappointing scores of 15 and 5 at Melbourne over the New Year. He was not selected for the remaining Test matches of that tour.

By 1946, Pataudi was 36 and had played little cricket for the previous eight years, his time spent instead on running his kingdom. In terms of cricket in India, he was inexperienced. Indeed, in his career overall, he had played far more cricket at Lord's than he had in India where he had only played in six first-class games: three in 1932 (in Patiala, Lahore and Delhi); once in Poona in 1944; and twice more in 1946 (in Patiala again and Bombay). Between 1938 and 1944 he had played no first-class cricket all. He did, however, already have first-hand experience of cricketing politics, having closely observed the combative confusion of England's 'Bodyline' tour.

Also in the hotel foyer was a man from the BBC, a radio producer (of poetry) whose cricketing credentials were largely

confined to a star-struck passion for the game. John Arlott was 32, a man with a rich radio voice, a distinctive Hampshire burr. In that April of 1946 he was about to embark on a summer doggedly following the Indian tour, equipped with a 40-year-old typewriter, a clutch of pencils and a pristine notebook, and dressed in comfortable tweed. He would make it his job to get as close to the Indians as possible, an observant friend, with the players' interests at heart.

'All-India' – the description glosses over powerful undercurrents, political sensitivities arising from the country's religious differences and Britain's bankrupt, moth-eaten empire. India's landmass was vast, stretching from Balochistan in the west to the border with Burma in the east and from Kashmir to the Madras states in the south, and while the term 'All-India' suggested cohesion and unity, in reality it described an agglomeration of varied states over which British influence held some kind of sway, a creaking, sometimes malign, sphere of influence. With the war over, but the government in London grappling with a collapsing economy and urgently seeking to extricate itself from its imperial past, the lifespan of 'All-India' was limited. All-India was on the verge of Partition, the old order dying, to be replaced by India and Pakistan.

If imperial politics induced headaches, so too did the administration of cricket. Pre-war All-Indian cricket tours had been marked by tensions about the captancy (along the shameful lines of 'would he be at home with a knife and fork?') and about the potential religious divisions within the squad (in 1932, seven Hindus, four Muslims, four Parsis and two Sikhs). Moreover, the 1936 tour had been marred by the early return home of the all-rounder Lala Amarnath for 'insubordination' (an unseemly thirst for women, it was said – although he claimed that he much preferred playing cricket).

But in 1946, at the beginning of the tour at least, the outstanding problem was the fact that the players arrived in the UK in instalments. It seemed to symbolise their inherent

differences of faith. Some flew in by flying boat – Karachi to Poole – while Pataudi, Lala Amarnath and the pace bowler Shute Banerjee arrived via New Delhi, Karachi and Cairo, their BOAC flight finally landing at Bournemouth airport. They were photographed on the aerodrome tarmac in the rain, flaunting wide smiles and fedoras, arm-in-arm, swaddled in heavy winter overcoats donned somewhere between Karachi and England's south coast. They did not look like cricketers, but to be fair, the weather was more suited to rugby. Indian optimists likened Banerjee to England's Maurice Tate but, standing outside the aircraft, he looked frankly portly, resembling a prosperous restaurateur rather than a ferocious fast bowler, while Pataudi, behind the diplomat's smile, looked haunted and careworn. He would need, one commentator suggested, to 'retain reasonably good health'.

As the rain fell and summer refused to show its face, Mr Gupta and the Nawab of Pataudi contemplated the daunting prospect of playing 33 matches over four months. It would not be easy. Only six of the squad had played Test cricket before; the batting was better than the bowling, on paper at least; Banerjee's lost years in the war had seen his fitness slowly decline – he had played only at weekends and had been caught up in war-work. The tour schedule was quixotic, shaped by someone with little grasp of geography, or a nasty sadistic streak; early nets were a farrago of mud and rain; the light after the brilliance of Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, was funereal; the food was British stodge made worse by rationing and showing little understanding of the dietary needs of Indian vegetarians. Meanwhile, post-war restrictions on clothing produced problems over the acquisition of cricket boots and white flannels. Rationing also affected the supply of cricket balls and the re-blading of bats.

Arlott's management of time and logistics was infinitely easier: pack a suitcase with pencils and a change of clothes and get to Worcester in good time for the first game of the tour. His complex system of laundry-by-post pleased his sense

of order. So, on 4 May 1946, he left his terraced house in Crouch End, north London, in good spirits and arrived in Worcester before the Indian cricketers. Their journey to the Midlands was poor preparation for a game of cricket, their coach driver contriving to get lost en route. In that motorway-free age, the web of dark country roads was evidently baffling and the charabanc's precious cargo of sleep-deprived touring cricketers turned and twisted as it headed (mostly) westwards. It was three in the morning before the coach finally turned into the hotel's darkened car park. Mr Gupta's patience had been severely tested, while the players were numbed by travel and all too aware that they were due to walk out on to the New Road grass in less than eight hours' time.

The eager Arlott was awake early on the morning of the match, looking out of his window at threatening clouds sweeping in from the north-east, but comforted by the fact that he would soon be watching his first cricket match for more than six years. Outside there was a cold wind and the light was gloomy at best. For the Indians it would be a three-sweater day and Pataudi's first big test surely would be winning the toss, thereby ensuring that only two men – the batsmen – need be out of the pavilion's warmth at any one time. He called correctly – but then chose to bowl after all, presumably to get it over with – and the Indians filed out uneasily into the English spring weather to face the music. Around the ground, a record crowd of some 8,000 spectators sat, wearing trilbies and raincoats, a ring of damp grey encircling the rich green of the pitch and surrounds. The wicket itself, though, was lifeless and the ponderous Banerjee proved to be no better than military medium, despite a gallant, rolling approach to the stumps. He looked like a man struggling against the tide, his boots weighted with lead.

What did Pataudi learn from those three chilly days of spring in Worcester? He already knew that English weather was fickle, its cold a test for fielders' fingers, the light lacking warmth and clarity. The batting might lean over-heavily on

the diminutive Merchant, while Vinoo Mankad's slow left arm was both inventive and aggressive – he had been his side's outstanding performer – and Banerjee's carefree batting was everything his bowling no longer was. Overall, Pataudi would not have been too downhearted by the 16-run defeat inflicted by Worcestershire, although perhaps worried by the weather forecast which did not augur well for the days ahead. The forecast proved accurate, the rain completely ruling out the first day's play in the next game, against Oxford University at The Parks. It confined the players to the pavilion, its windows blurred by the storm, while outside the circle of tall trees dripped and swayed in the wind, and pools of water spread across the outfield. It proved a long day for the Indians, without the compensation that Arlott found in scouring Oxford's bookshops.

While the prospects for cricket were shrouded in the gloomy downpour – would it rule out any hope of play on the second day? – the tourists' evening was pre-booked and unaffected by the bad weather. Instead of a quiet night in, it was off to a celebratory dinner at Oxford's Angel restaurant. Organised by Amalendu Bose, a student at Christ Church, it promised to be an evening of conversation far beyond the borders of cricket, since Bose was a passionate convert to the cause of Indian independence. He had taught at the University of Dhaka during the war and had been greatly influenced by the horrors of the famine in Bengal. The university was a hotbed of political activity with a strong pro-independence following. The Bengal famine was in part a consequence of Britain's wartime policies and was responsible for the deaths of several million people.

No doubt Bose had attracted the attention of Britain's intelligence agencies, while the Majlis Society – under whose banner the dinner at the Angel was being held – was regarded by MI5 as having communist connections. Imagine, then, a lamp-lit backroom and an eclectic mix of fiery radicals, high-born Indian cricketers, 'ordinary' squad members more

interested in the provenance of the food and the next day's weather than radical politics, and harassed waiters, plates held high over the sheen of players' black Brylcreemed hair, soup of dubious origin spilling on to laundered tablecloths. Three courses: a dreary hors d'oeuvre; anonymous soup and a mildly spicy chicken served with vegetables that had been boiled to a watery death. Trifle to follow, a bland concoction of gloopy custard with a fleeting drop of liquor. Finally, speeches – these were not confined by rationing, unlike the unappetising fare – votes of thanks, and then a hurried stroll through persistent drizzle to the hotel and a night of listening to a room-mate's snores. They left behind a menu dutifully signed by each of them: Mushtaq Ali sprawling across the top; Vijay Merchant's resembling a caterpillar, initials and surname shunted together; Nayudu's smudged; and Vinoo Mankad, spread across the bottom, carrying the rest of the team, names penned in a kaleidoscope of styles from spidery to assertive.

They woke to a very different England with an early-morning sun shining in a cloudless sky. There was a full day's play which John Arlott watched from a bomb crater in the company of three poets: Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day-Lewis, each of whom had worked with Arlott at the BBC. Poetry, cricket and peacetime in close harmony. The game was drawn, its highlight the batting of the New Zealand Test cricketer, Martin Donnelly (177 runs for once out). For India, Abdul Hafeez batted against doctors' orders with his fingers strapped together after a fielding injury, scoring 30 not out, batting down the order.

Later that afternoon, the Indians headed for London where on the following day they were due to play Surrey at The Oval. It was 11 May 1946, the day the County Championship fully resumed after a gap of nearly seven years, although Middlesex had begun the season three days earlier with a comfortable victory over Leicestershire at Lord's, despite a whole day being lost to rain. As well as India

playing at The Oval, there was also a busy programme of county matches at Cardiff, Gloucester, Southampton, Lord's, Trent Bridge and Taunton. In a hint of what lay ahead in that summer of 1946, Middlesex's star batsman Denis Compton scored 147 not out; the Gloucestershire and England captain, Wally Hammond, made 134 before a strained back prevented him batting again in the match; and Yorkshire's Bill Bowes, for whom the war had been particularly traumatic, failed to score a run or take a wicket against Glamorgan. Despite that, the 1939 county champions won comfortably inside two days, with Len Hutton making 90 in a low-scoring match. It seemed to be business as usual for Yorkshire, despite having to wait seven long years to begin their title defence.