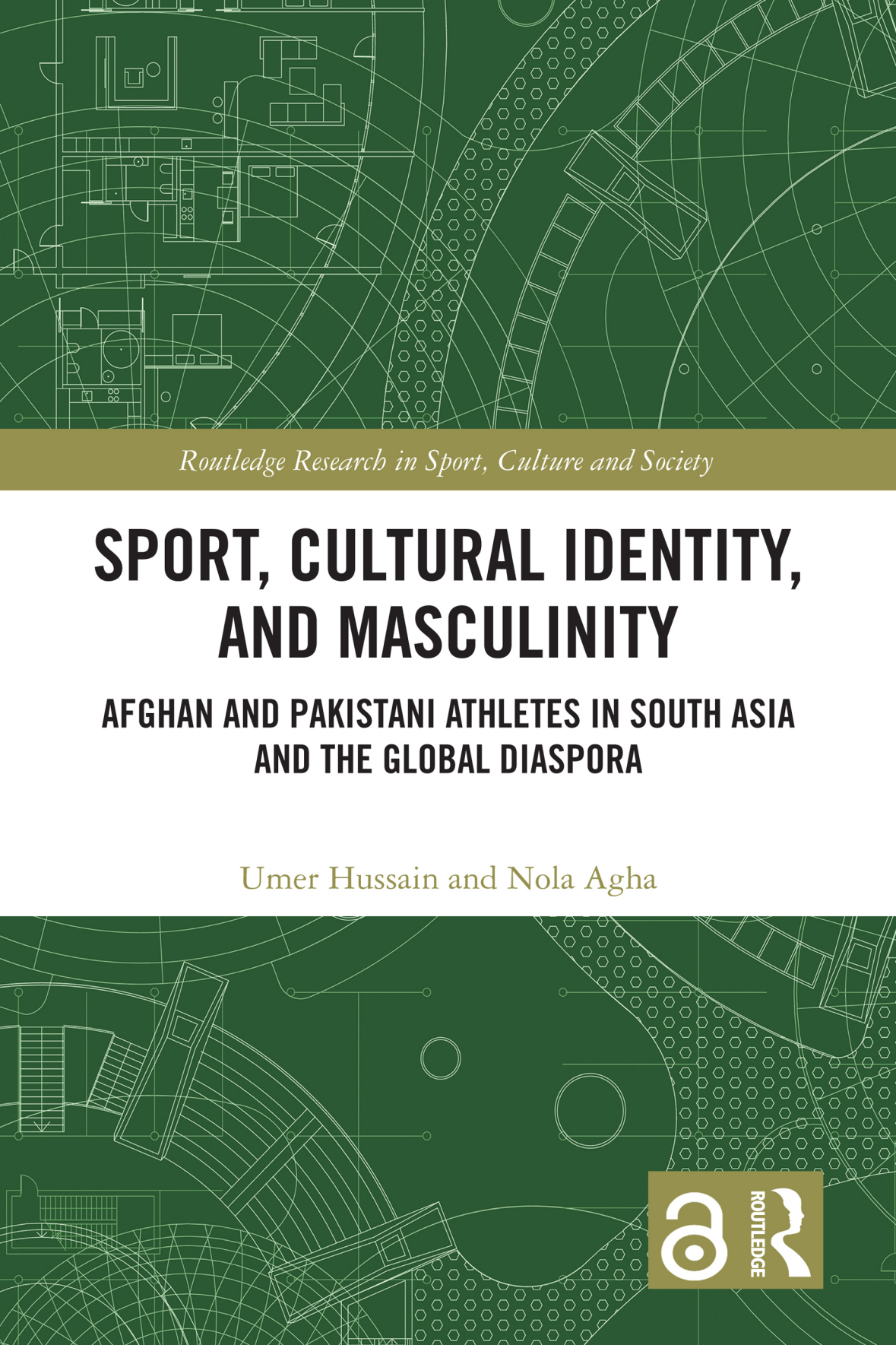




Routledge Research in Sport, Culture and Society

SPORT, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND MASCULINITY

**AFGHAN AND PAKISTANI ATHLETES IN SOUTH ASIA
AND THE GLOBAL DIASPORA**

Umer Hussain and Nola Agha



Sport, Cultural Identity, and Masculinity

This is the first book to shed light on the nuanced relationship between sports, cultural identity, and masculinity by examining the experiences of male Afghan and Pakistani athletes, within their respective regions and abroad.

This book draws on various sociocultural frameworks, such as decolonization theory, to dissect power dynamics, critique the influence of neoliberal policies in contemporary South Asian societies, and unpack the concept of masculinity by challenging widespread yet often unexamined beliefs. Presenting important new material on sports, including cricket and traditional sports like *buzkashi*, this book investigates the far-reaching impact of key geopolitical events, such as the fall of Kabul in 2021, in order to understand how these pivotal moments reshape the landscape of sports in these countries, from participation rates to the meaning and experience of athletic pursuits, especially for those who have migrated or are considering migration. It also offers a critical analysis of how Western media narratives often oversimplify and homogenize the representations of Pakistani and Afghan athletes, and challenges stereotypes that contribute to systemic issues such as inequities and violence against Afghan and Pakistani athletes in the Global North and against Afghan athletes in Pakistan.

Going beyond conventional discussions by examining sports as not only a cultural but also a geopolitical battleground, this book is essential reading for any advanced student, researcher, or policymaker with an interest in the sociology of sport, postcolonial studies, anthropology, religious studies, security studies, migration, or South Asian studies.

Umer Hussain is an assistant professor at Missouri State University, USA. His research areas include exploring the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and gender in sports. Hussain has more than nine years of experience in academia and practice. Dr. Hussain's work has been published in journals such as the *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *International Review of Sociology of Sport*, *Sport in Society*, and *Games and Culture*.

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This book is dedicated to Afghan and Pakistani athletes living within their homeland and abroad, especially to those who have carried not only a bag but an entire life across borders. To the ones who have trained in silence, swallowed humiliation, and kept showing up anyway. To those told they don't belong, treated as invisible, or made to feel like their dreams are too much for the places they live.

For every time you were overlooked, every time your name was mispronounced, every time you were doubted, every time you ran, lifted, fought, or played while the world questioned your right to stand there, this is for you. You are not "animals."

May these pages hold what too many people have refused to give you: recognition, dignity, and the simple truth that your struggle matters. We see your resistance and stand by you!



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Preface

This book began in the places where sport stops being an abstract idea and becomes something urgent and human.

The idea for this book was a joint one, born from shared conversations, shared questions, shared interests, and a shared belief that sport deserves to be studied as a serious social force. Nola Agha and I (Umer Hussain) kept returning to the same realization: sport is often treated as entertainment on the surface, but in many communities, it functions like an institution. Sports can shape identity, opportunity, belonging, and power.

At the same time, the earliest groundwork for this project grew out of my own on-the-ground experience. As a sport management researcher, I was working directly with Afghan refugees and Pakistani migrants for various research projects. In that context, sport was never “just sport.” I saw the barriers, such as clearly limited resources, difficult logistics, and cultural and structural constraints, that shaped who could participate and how.

Those experiences stayed with me, and I began documenting stories, observations, and field insights. When I shared them with Nola, our collaboration deepened. We recognized that these narratives were not only meaningful, but they also raised analytical questions that deserved careful, scholarly attention. Our joint idea became a manuscript: one that connects lived experience to research, and practical realities to the larger debates in sport management and sociology of sport.

This book does not romanticize sport, and it does not claim sport can “solve” displacement. Instead, it takes sport seriously, both its potential and its limits. We hope readers will find a grounded, honest exploration of what sport can do in difficult contexts, what it cannot do, and what conditions are required for sport-based initiatives to support communities with respect and accountability.

We are deeply grateful to the individuals and communities whose experiences shaped these pages, especially the Afghan refugees I met in Pakistan. We also thank reviewers and the publishing team who strengthened this work through critique, care, and commitment.

This book exists because we cannot ignore what sport reveals about society, and because we believe academic scholarship can honor real lives when it stays close to the truth.

Umer and Nola

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACB	Afghanistan Cricket Board
BBL	Big Bash League
BCCI	Board of Control for Cricket in India
BCCP	Board of Control for Cricket in Pakistan
BPL	Bangladesh Premier League
CPL	Caribbean Premier League
DSCB	Diasporic Sport as Conditional Belonging
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ICC	International Cricket Council
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IPC	International Paralympic Committee
IPL	Indian Premier League
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISPR	Inter-Services Public Relations
KJP	Kamyab Jawan Programme
KJSD	Kamyab Jawan Sports Drive
KPL	Kashmir Premier League
MLC	Major League Cricket
MLS	Major League Soccer
MMA	Mixed martial arts
MSP	Militarized Sports Praxis
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NOC	No-Objection Certificate
NSF	National sports federations
NWFP	North-West Frontier Province
ODI	One Day International
OPGT	Orientalist Proxy Gatekeeping Theory
PCA	Professional Cricketers' Association
PCB	Pakistan Cricket Board
PIA	Pakistani International Airlines

POA	Pakistan Olympic Association
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PSB	Pakistan Sports Board
PSL	Pakistan Super League
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
PTV	Pakistan Television
SAF	South Asian Federation
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
UFC	Ultimate Fighting Championship
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USL	United Soccer League
WAPDA	Water and Power Development Authority
WWE	World Wrestling Entertainment
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the first author (Umer Hussain) upon reasonable request via email. Most of the data collected is qualitative in nature (e.g., interview notes and observational records). As a result, full public sharing may risk revealing sensitive information or participant identities and could raise confidentiality and ethical concerns. Where feasible, de-identified excerpts or summarized/aggregated materials can be provided to qualified researchers upon request, subject to applicable ethics approvals and data-use conditions.

Part I

The Intersection of Politics, Culture, and Sports in Afghanistan and Pakistan



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Introduction

Sports in Afghanistan and Pakistan After the Unannounced End of the Global War on Terrorism

Introduction

In the jagged terrains of South and Central Asia, where borders blur and histories tangle, sports rise not as mere chance of physical activity but as battle-grounds of identity, resistance, survival, and inspiration. On cricket pitches, field hockey turfs, football (soccer) grounds, and *buzkashi* fields, young men and women grapple with dreams, their bodies carrying not only national colors but also scars of displacement, colonial past, economic oppression, and agitation. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, every game or act of play carries a deeper meaning. From Afghan international cricketer Rashid Khan's googly (Haand, 2024) to Pakistani 2024 Paris Olympic gold medalist Arshad Nadeem's record-breaking javelin throw (Yam, 2024), there exist stories of inspiration and resistance. In fact, athletic participation in sports in Afghanistan and Pakistan is often a testament to endurance, a ritual of belonging, and a confrontation with ghosts of post-British colonialism, religious extremism, patriarchy, capitalism, American imperialism, toxic masculinity, and war (see Chen, 2022). Unfortunately, the boundaries between sport and politics sometimes dissolve in the region, leaving a landscape where every goal, every boundary, every stroke, and every victory is counted not only in points but also in survival.

Imagine over 70 cyclists racing along the Karakoram Highway, the famous 807.8-mile-long road that connects Pakistan to China by winding its way through the confluence of the Himalayan, Hindu Kush, and Karakoram mountain ranges. As riders follow portions of the ancient Silk Road under the shadow of the world's largest mountains, they drink Red Bull while traveling through small villages with messages on walls, such as “جو امریکہ کا یار ہے، وہ غدار ہے” (“Whoever is a friend of America is a traitor”). They pass near ancient rock carvings of Buddha, dating from when Chinese and Tibetan forces controlled the region, before the Turkic and Mughal Empires controlled it, and eventually the princely states of Jammu and Kashmir. And as the race winds through the Hunza Valley, they see grounds being used as pitches for the wildly successful, privately managed, Hunza Women's Premier League, which organizes football for young girls.

This race, the 2018 Tour de Khunjerab, was a joint venture of the Pakistan Cycling Federation and the Gilgit-Baltistan government to increase tourism to the northern region of Pakistan. Teams and riders were drawn from every Pakistani province, Afghanistan, Spain, and Switzerland to race 280 km from Gilgit, at an elevation of 1,500 m (4,900 feet), to Khunjerab Pass, the world's highest paved border crossing between Pakistan and China at 4,693 m (15,397 feet; see Figure 1.1). The magnificent grandeur of the race, which



Figure 1.1 Map of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Source: Delara Agha, "Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Provinces," printed by permission.

was recognized and legitimized by the world governing body for competitive cycling (Union Cycliste Internationale), in some ways masked many local sociopolitical realities. The region, known for many years as the Northern Areas and since 2009 as Gilgit-Baltistan, is not technically an official province of Pakistan due in part to its disputed border with Jammu and Kashmir. At the time of the Tour of Khunjerab, any non-Pakistani was required to register with the local police, and foreigners were often required to be accompanied by armed guards if they were not under the supervision of an official tour operator. The region is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse in all of Pakistan. As the only Shia-majority area in Sunni-majority Pakistan, it was susceptible to violence perpetrated by religious fanatics. Also, in recent decades, its borders served as the backdrop for the war on terror, which led to various forms of occupation and migration. Given this setting, other events, such as marathons held at Khunjerab Pass, were also jointly organized by national sports federations (NSFs) and local hotel and tour operators to promote tourism, but they were also required to partner with the Pakistan Air Force, which escorted participants throughout their travels (Z Adventures, 2025). Military involvement in organized sport is common in Pakistan.

Like many global sport events, the 2020 Tour de Khunjerab was canceled due to COVID-19 and struggled to continue thereafter. Thus, this event, like all sport in Afghanistan and Pakistan, was filled with juxtapositions: modern energy drinks from Western corporations and ancient Silk Road paths; girls' sport empowerment and religious conservatism; unified goals to increase tourism and the risk of religious violence; government control of sports competitors and the successful private management of sport participation; Pakistani military check posts and local democratic government support; an inspiration to be inclusive to the world but still being bounded by patriarchy and hegemonic forces. Hence, sporting events in the region help to understand postcolonial societies in the new world order under capitalism.

Like the curving roads that the Tour de Khunjerab followed along the Karakoram Highway, this book winds its way through the intersection of cultural identity, migration, and masculinity among Afghan and Pakistani athletes. The complete story cannot be told without first understanding the history, political structure, cultural context, and sporting context of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, as you can imagine, there are very few linear stories in a region that has evolved through myriad extreme external events such as colonization, military conflict, and Taliban rule.

The first section of the book involves the intersection of politics, culture, and sports. The purpose of Chapter 1 is to provide the current understanding of sport in the region to contextualize the subsequent exploration of Afghan and Pakistani male athletes' experiences within broader historical and sociopolitical frameworks. Meanwhile, we try to answer in Chapter 1 and the upcoming chapters: "What do sports mean to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and what are the challenges faced by a male athlete in the region?" We also

move our focus to the broader question: “Where do we go from here, ethically, politically, and structurally, if we accept that sport is both wounded by power and capable of challenging it?” Therefore, Chapter 2 traces how colonial legacies, partition, Kashmir, and evolving soft power strategies turn sport into a durable grammar of Pakistan–India rivalry. Chapter 3 follows the Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship through cricket’s shift from mentorship to friction, reading on-field conflict as a mirror of deeper geopolitical wounds shaped by Taliban-era upheavals. Chapter 4 examines Imran Khan’s rise and fall to explain how sporting fame converts into political power, and how reforms, memory, and nationalism reorganize sporting institutions across the region. The second section of the book focuses on transnational movements and the athlete diaspora. Chapter 5 broadens the lens to athlete mobility, mapping Afghan and Pakistani sporting migration and the transnational ties, remittances, and gendered pressures that travel with it. Chapter 6 zooms into Islamabad to theorize “Threshold Play,” where informal fields become liminal civic arenas in which displaced youth temporarily reorder urban hierarchies and practice belonging. Chapter 7 moves to Qatar to foreground migrant athletes’ lived experiences, showing how sport becomes a tool for visibility, solidarity, and survival within layered regimes of marginalization. Chapter 8 shifts to Europe to unpack how Western media frames Afghan and Pakistani athletes through Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes, culminating in an account of how narratives become a mechanism of sanction and control. Chapter 9 then offers an auto-ethnographic view of the United States, arguing that diasporic sport is a form of “conditional belonging” where heritage, integration, and systemic barriers collide. The final section of the book considers sport as a mirror of sociopolitical realities and identity. Chapter 10 shows how Pakistan’s civil–military establishment mobilizes sport as statecraft and propaganda, introducing Militarized Sports Praxis (MSP) as a framework for understanding politicized sporting institutions. Chapter 11 centers masculinity and faith, explaining how South Asian Muslim men in sport negotiate piety, power, and Western Islamophobia through emergent ethical forms of masculine subjectivity. Finally, Chapter 12 synthesizes these threads and argues that if sport is entangled with imperialism and neoliberal power, then the ethical task ahead is decolonial transformation, meaning we need to re-imagine sport through justice, dignity, and collective life beyond the borders that wound. Let the resistance begin!

Pakistan

On August 8, 2024, at the Paris Olympic Games, Pakistan’s Arshad Nadeem threw a javelin 92.97 m (305 feet) to win the gold medal. Not only did he exceed the previous Olympic record by a shocking 2 m, but he also became Pakistan’s first-ever individual Olympic gold medalist by beating India’s javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, the winner of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic gold medal.

Nadeem became an instant international sensation. News stations around the world broadcast his achievement as the epitome of the Olympic ideal. Nadeem is a humble athlete who persevered despite a lack of formal training facilities, but whose athletic skill carried him to the top of the world. At home, Pakistan celebrated its first medal in 32 years (men's field hockey bronze medal in 1992 in Barcelona) and its first gold medal in 40 years (men's field hockey gold in 1984 in Los Angeles). As a reward for his success and hard work, Nadeem's home province of Punjab awarded him 100 million Pakistani rupees (PKR) or 359,195 USD (Bukhari & Shahzad, 2024), an astonishing amount in a country with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of 1,589 USD, where about 45% of the country's population lives under the international poverty line (Kiani, 2025).

Organized Youth Sports

Nadeem's journey to sporting success reflects a typical existence in Pakistan, the world's fifth most populous country with an estimated 255 million residents (Worldometer, 2025). He lived in Mian Channu, a town of approximately 140,000 residents that supports a large agricultural economy. He was one of eight children, a common occurrence in a country with an average age of 20 years (Statista, 2024).

As a child, Nadeem played a variety of organized sports through school, including athletics (track and field), football, and cricket, the most popular sport in Pakistan. In many schools in Pakistan, timetables include a weekly physical training (PT) or games period. Where facilities allow, students are able to play different sports, most commonly, football or cricket. Arshad's athletic ability allowed him to play competitively in tape ball, a derivative of cricket invented in Pakistan in the 1980s that uses a tennis ball wrapped in tape (Dyson, 2009). Softer than a cricket ball, a tape ball allows cricket to be played nearly anywhere without the risk of injury or damage and without the need for a formal pitch. The innovation brought cricket to the masses; about 80% of cricket played in Pakistan is actually tape ball, and the Pakistani diaspora has taken the game to multiple countries around the world. In his teens, Nadeem shifted entirely away from cricket to focus on athletics, javelin in particular. He trained primarily in his home and the nearby fields, built weights from household items, and made javelins from eucalyptus branches with iron tips (Yam, 2024). Despite his lack of access to formal training facilities, Nadeem also earned gold medals in two Punjab Youth Festivals (Goheer, 2020). This event began in 2012 as a massive Punjab government initiative under former Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif (the current Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2025) aimed to promote youth sports and mostly aimed at breaking Guinness World Records. In 2015, the first three years of the event (2012–2014) were hit by allegations of wasting public money, being used for political image-building, mismanagement, and even dubious or unverified records ("Punjab

Youth Festival Fraud,” 2015; Raza, 2015). Now the big stadium spectacle of the Punjab Youth Festival has largely faded, and the festival name only appears off and on in smaller, lower-profile activities, with its legacy still being argued over.

Formalized Government Support

Nadeem’s gold medal success in the Punjab Youth Festival earned attention and offers from various forms of organized, sponsored sport organizations. In the Pakistani sporting context, private business (banks, energy companies), the military (Army, Air Force), and government agencies (Pakistan Police, Pakistan Railways) all financially patronize athletes, fund teams, and maintain sport infrastructure. This “departmental model” sustained high-level sports and athletes since the 1970s, including Nadeem. By the age of 17, he officially signed with the government Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), where he accessed their formal training facilities to prepare him to compete in the 2015 National Championships. By the age of 19, he was a national champion and had earned a bronze medal in the 2016 South Asian Games (Goheer, 2020).

Pakistani athletes competing in global competitions receive various forms of support from their employers, NSFs, and global sports federations. For example, Nadeem received a scholarship in 2016 from World Athletics (previously known as IAAF, or the International Amateur Athletics Federation) to train for eight months in Mauritius. In the following years, Nadeem continued to set personal bests and national records while winning medals at various Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, and World Athletics Championships. In preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Athletics Federation of Pakistan arranged for him to train in China, Turkey, and Finland, although they were all canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Goheer, 2020).

At the domestic level, a government entity called the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB) oversees all national sport federations (except the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB)) and manages most of the funds for sport given by the Federal government. However, by 2024, national support for athletes had shifted. In the previous 2022–2023 fiscal year, Pakistan’s economy encountered serious setbacks, leading to a minimal GDP growth of 0.29%, a sharp drop from the 6.1% expansion seen in 2021–2022 (Rana, 2023). This downturn came after Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister and a famous ex-cricketer (see Chapter 4), departed from office following a turbulent political transition (Goldbaum, 2024). As a result, Nadeem famously had to petition the government for a new javelin to train for the 2024 Paris Olympics because he had no corporate sponsors for his equipment. The lack of national support for Nadeem and other athletes was not unique to athletics, as most national sport funding in Pakistan is allocated to cricket and field hockey (Bukhari & Shahzad, 2024).

Cultural and Political Importance

Nadeem's gold medal win at the Paris Olympics was notable not only because of his improbable success story but also because the silver medalist, Neeraj Chopra, was the defending gold medalist from India. In modern history, the relationship between the two nations involves political posturing, religious differences, nuclear deterrence, and intense sporting rivalry (see Chapter 2). From 1858 until 1947, most of what is now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, along with numerous princely states, was part of the British Indian Empire and was ruled directly or indirectly by the British Crown. British administrators frequently leaned on and intensified existing religious, cultural, and communal distinctions as part of a broader "divide and rule" approach (see Chapter 2). Over time, political organizations formed along these lines. For instance, the All-India Muslim League (founded on December 30, 1906, in Dhaka and later led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah—also known as Quaid-e-Azam in Pakistan, the founder of Pakistan) increasingly advocated that Muslims constituted a distinct nation that required its own state. Meanwhile, the Indian National Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi), and other leaders broadly favored a single, formally secular Indian state that included multiple religious communities. When British Rule ended in August 1947, the region was divided into two new dominions: India and Pakistan, with Pakistan comprising both West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). The partition set off a massive, chaotic migration in which an estimated 10–15 million people (primarily Hindus and Sikhs heading toward India and Muslims moving toward Pakistan) crossed the new borders (Khan, 2007). Somewhere between several hundred thousand and around two million people were killed in related violence during partition (Hill et al., 2008; Talbot & Singh, 2009). In the years that followed, India and Pakistan fought several major conflicts, including wars in 1947–1948 and 1965 centered on Jammu and Kashmir, and the 1971 war that resulted in the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, as well as the 1999 Kargil conflict in the Kargil sector of the Kashmir region along the Line of Control. Both states eventually developed nuclear weapons: India first tested a device in 1974 and conducted further tests in 1998, while Pakistan carried out its own nuclear tests in 1998. These developments entrenched a long-term, nuclear-armed rivalry, shaped by unresolved issues from partition and continuing territorial disputes.

Despite the political tensions between Pakistan and India from these historical events, Nadeem and Chopra had much in common. They both were from rural areas, made their Olympic debuts in Tokyo, and were the first to win an Olympic gold medal for their nations in athletics. Although Chopra began training five years earlier than Nadeem in the formal government Sports Authority of India training center, the athletes developed deep respect for each other during many global competitions (Yam, 2024). Arshad Nadeem's story helps us understand important aspects of sport infrastructure and government

design in Pakistan. Although Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2,670-km border, their sporting environments share only some similarities.

Afghanistan

At the International Cricket Council (ICC) Men's T20 World Cup in 2024 in the United States and Caribbean, Afghanistan defeated New Zealand, Bangladesh, and former champion Australia to reach the semifinals for the very first time. The year before, they beat three cricket powerhouses and former World Cup Champions: England, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This was a remarkable achievement for a nation of around 43 million (World Bank, 2025) people that had experienced four decades of war and violence and that only gained full ICC test-cricket member status in 2017. Cricket had gained widespread popularity, and players like Rashid Khan, Mohammad Nabi, and Mujeeb Ur Rahman gained global recognition and became household names in Afghanistan (Albone, 2010; Suthar, 2016). Specifically, bowler Rashid Khan had a speedy ascent to becoming a global superstar in part due to his leg-spin deliveries and more complicated googlies.

In 2015, at the young age of 17, Khan made his international debut for the Afghanistan national cricket team in a One Day International (ODI) tournament. Two years later, he earned the best bowling stats in an ODI match and became the fastest to 100 ODI wickets in cricket history (Khanna, 2023). Next, he joined the Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Indian Premier League (IPL) and earned the 2017 Associate Cricketer of the Year award. In 2018, he became the youngest player to top the ICC Player Rankings for bowlers in ODIs and International T20s and became the youngest player ever to captain a national team during the International Cricket World Cup Qualifier. In 2020, at the age of 22, he was given the ICC's T20 award for Player of the Decade, although he had only played for a handful of years in that decade (Khanna, 2023). By 2025 (while writing this chapter), he achieved the record for the most wickets taken ever in T20 (Wilde, 2025).

As a leading bowler, Khan was paid handsomely to play for T20 leagues across the world in the IPL, Pakistan Super League (PSL), Caribbean Premier League (CPL), Big Bash League (BBL), and Major League Cricket (MLC). In 2025, he earned around 83,000 USD from the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) and 1.8 million USD from his IPL salary (CricToday, 2025). Compare this to the per capita GDP in Afghanistan of 414 USD, a figure that is less than 30% of the per capita GDP in Pakistan (World Bank, 2025).

The Lack of Organized Youth Sports

Khan was born in 1998 in Nangarhar Province, a region in eastern Afghanistan that borders Pakistan's third-largest province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These regions share profound cultural similarities rooted in their entangled

histories, rich traditions, and linguistic connections through the Pashto language. Whereas Afghanistan's diverse population is primarily Pashtuns (42%), followed by Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), and Uzbeks (9%), across the border, the major ethnicity of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is also Pashtuns (Britannica, 2024; World Population Review, 2025). When American forces began bombing the region in 2001, hundreds of thousands of Afghans migrated to refugee camps in and around Peshawar (UNHCR, 2002). Khan's family, including ten siblings, also relocated to Peshawar in 2001. Like Pakistan, Afghanistan also has a young population, with a median age of around 19.5 years, with 40% of the country's population under 14 years old (World Population Review, 2025). Given security concerns, Khan was not allowed outside to play with friends, so he spent his time playing tape ball with his brothers. He taught himself bowling skills by watching other famous bowlers like Shahid Afridi (Pakistan) and Anil Kumble (India) online. This alone was rare; in Afghanistan, only 18% of the population has access to the Internet (World Bank, 2025). In and around the Peshawar refugee camps, cricket was often played with improvised tape balls and makeshift stumps. Moreover, cricket was learned largely informally through older players, local clubs/schools, and watching matches, rather than through well-resourced coaching systems. Like generations of refugees before him, Khan acquired most of his world-class skills through this informal training, which he imported back to Afghanistan in 2007 when his family returned from Pakistan.

Khan's story is a valuable case for thinking deeply about what "access" actually means, and how unevenly it is distributed. His childhood was by no means easy; nevertheless, his pathway also reflects the urban-leaning opportunities that shape those who can pursue sport. When his family fled Afghanistan, they relocated to Peshawar, a provincial capital and established urban center of Pakistan. That mattered. Many Afghan refugees in Pakistan, by contrast, have been settled in refugee villages/camps or in low-resource rural and peri-urban areas across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (South and North Waziristan, Swat, and Dera Ismail Khan) and Baluchistan, where services are thinner, living conditions are often harsher, and sporting opportunities are more limited. In Khan's case, living in or near a major city made it more plausible to access televised cricket, learn by watching elite players, and find nearby spaces to play and improve. That kind of proximity and connectivity is far less available to many Afghan children growing up in rural Afghanistan, or to refugees living in more marginal settings, even when their determination and talent are just as strong.

Limited Formalized Government Support

Throughout Khan's life, Afghanistan's government changed from oppressive Taliban control (1996–2001) to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and tribal coalition pseudo-democracy (2001–2021), and back to restrictive

Taliban control (2021–present). Military battles and leadership changes were associated with periods of massive migration. Between 2001 and 2011 alone, after the fall of the Taliban, over 4.6 million registered refugees returned to Afghanistan, mostly from Pakistan and Iran (Willner-Reid, 2017). After being in a continuous state of war or political unrest for four decades, especially since the Soviet Union's entrance into the country on December 24, 1979 (Maley, 2020), the country was desperately poor, offered few social services, and had very few government-supported domestic sports leagues (IWPR Afghanistan, 2015). During this time, Khan continued to hone his skills with friends and was inspired after watching the Afghanistan national team play in the 2010 World T20 in the West Indies, the nation's first major ICC global event (Atherton, 2019). Most of those national team players had learned the game in refugee camps around Peshawar during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and, less than a decade later, had reached the international stage.

In the absence of clear training networks in Afghanistan, Khan again returned to Pakistan in 2013 but not as a refugee. His cricket skills allowed him admission to the Islamia College in Peshawar, Pakistan, to study computer science and play on the college team. When Afghanistan's cricket team toured Pakistan in 2014, they discovered Khan, and he quickly achieved international success (Atherton, 2019).

Cultural and Political Importance

In 1893, the British and the Afghan ruler agreed to the Durand Line, a boundary that still roughly marks the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Afghanistan was a British protectorate for a few years and fought three Anglo-Afghan wars to defend and reclaim its independence, it differs from Pakistan in that it was never a province of British India. Therefore, the success of the Afghanistan men's national cricket team is noteworthy not only because of its improbable success despite few resources but also because the game had virtually no associations with colonialism—the opposite of every other cricket-playing nation which adopted the game through Commonwealth empire-building efforts. Instead, cricket in Afghanistan is primarily associated with the Pashtun community, influenced largely by the sport's prominence in neighboring Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Furthermore, the national team has inspired, provided hope, and drawn Afghans into a shared identity. However, the Taliban's support of cricket as a pathway to further legitimize their domestic rule has added considerable controversy, raising questions about whether the men's stars have a responsibility to advocate for the addition of women's sports or to speak out against human rights abuses by the Taliban. The situation is further complicated by the ICC consenting to Afghanistan's full membership in the ICC despite the ACB's failure to comply with the ICC's requirements for member nations to host women's teams, as covered in more detail in Chapter 8.

The stories of Arshad Nadeem and Rashid Khan are bright lights respectively in Pakistan's and Afghanistan's recent sporting success and serve to highlight important aspects of migration, sport infrastructure, and government design. However, the current landscape of sport in the region is incomplete without understanding how the histories of these sports have led to the current sporting environment.

Modern Sport in Pakistan: Post-Independence Period of 1947

As strongly as geopolitics and history have driven India and Pakistan apart, cricket is a unifying passion across the subcontinent. Indeed, sports such as field hockey, squash, and cricket are prominent hangovers from the British Raj, the era of direct British Rule over the subcontinent, which spanned from 1858 to 1947 (Khan, 2023). Moreover, these sports are among the few in which Pakistan has achieved global sporting success, and all of them have persevered through periods of military control, as detailed in Chapter 10.

Cricket

Although cricket came to the region through the British Empire (see Chapter 2), it is currently more popular than ever in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Ray, 2008). Pakistan's first landmark moment in cricket came in 1952, when it toured India for its inaugural test series (five-day cricket). The 1952 series introduced figures such as Fazal Mahmood and Abdul Hafeez Kardar, who soon became national icons. However, its symbolic weight was even greater. The matches provided one of the earliest opportunities for large-scale, peaceful contact between citizens of the two new states after Partition (Pakistan and India). At the same time, victory in the series allowed Pakistanis to see themselves not as a vulnerable offshoot of British India but as a capable, independent cricket nation with its own style and heroes. In a Pakistani state that was then only four years old, the team's success helped stitch together a national story that could cut across linguistic, ethnic, and regional divides.

Four decades later, cricket once more functioned as Pakistan's primary site of global visibility during a period of intense regional and international reordering. The 1992 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup (staged jointly by Australia and New Zealand) unfolded in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, amid recalibrated strategic interests in Afghanistan and the Islamic extremism ascendancy in the region. Pakistan began the tournament in disarray and hovered on the brink of early elimination. Nevertheless, the team mounted an improbable resurgence that culminated in a victory in the final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on March 25, 1992, under the captaincy of Imran Khan (see Chapter 4). Later international successes, most notably the 2009 ICC Men's World T20 championship, repeatedly invoked this same narrative

template. Collectively, these achievements were mobilized to cast Pakistan's cricketing performance as evidence that the nation could transcend diplomatic marginalization, internal political volatility, and the stigmatizing frames of global security discourse.

If test and ODI cricket triumphs helped shape the national imagination in the second half of the twentieth century, the professionalization of the game in the twenty-first century has increasingly focused on the T20 format. The PCB officially launched the PSL in 2015, with the first season held in 2016 as a franchise-based T20 league modeled after other global competitions. The league started with five city-based teams playing mainly in the United Arab Emirates due to security concerns. It quickly expanded to six franchises representing major urban centers such as Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar, Quetta, and Multan.

Economically, the PSL has transformed Pakistan's cricketing landscape to some degree. At its inception in 2016, franchise rights sales quickly attracted tens of millions of PKR in private investment. By 2025, popular teams like Lahore Qalandars saw their valuations more than double, from 425 million PKR (around 1.5 million USD) to 980 million PKR (around 3.5 million USD; ESPNcricinfo staff, 2025). Likewise, the PSL title sponsor, HBL (Habib Bank Limited), has seen its deal grow from about 5.2 million USD in the first cycle (2016–2018) to 22.2 million USD in the 2022–2025 cycle, with the latest renewal for the next two PSL seasons (HBL, 2025; Times of Sports, 2025). The revenue and sponsorship boost from the PSL has helped the PCB to fund domestic cricket projects. Player contracts in the PSL are currently organized into clearly defined categories of Platinum, Diamond, Gold, Silver, Emerging, and Supplementary (Asad, 2025). While exact figures fluctuate, recent seasons have featured a per-team salary cap in the low millions of U.S. dollars, with some top players earning six-figure sums. Even emerging local cricketers are receiving professional-level wages that would have been unimaginable under older departmental or regional structures.

The PSL's influence is not just about big salaries; it is also deeply tied to developing new talent. League rules require each franchise to pick and regularly play "emerging" cricketers, meaning every team must include a young player from the domestic system. The Lahore Qalandars have pushed this idea even further by building formal talent pathways: they hold open trials in several cities, operate high-performance centers, and even send standout youngsters on overseas training tours to accelerate their growth.

Nevertheless, cricket's shift and popularity were profoundly shaped by the country's security and militancy problems. A stark example occurred on March 3, 2009, when armed attackers targeted the Sri Lankan national team's bus near Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium. This attack led to the killing of several Pakistani policemen and civilians and injured several Sri Lankan players and officials. In the aftermath, both Pakistani officials and international media connected the attack to militant groups operating in and around Pakistan. The

episode intensified global fears about terrorism in the country, turning cricket into a high-profile symbol in the larger battle over Pakistan's security situation and international reputation.

The impact of the Lahore attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team was immediate. Pakistan lost its co-hosting rights for the 2011 Cricket World Cup. Moreover, most international teams refused to tour Pakistan for several years. Pakistan had to play its "home" matches at neutral venues in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. This loss of international cricket hurt Pakistan's cricket economy and damaged the country's image and morale. Stadiums that once hosted major celebrations stood mostly empty. They became visible symbols of Pakistan's growing isolation. When the PSL began, for instance, it was scheduled to be held outside Pakistan, as foreign players and cricket boards still viewed Pakistani grounds as too dangerous.

Over time, a sequence of improved security measures, diplomatic efforts by the PCB, and the gradual return of touring sides began to reverse the global narrative of Pakistan being a terrorist state in the sporting communities. Cricket officially returned to the country in 2015, with Zimbabwe touring Pakistan (Chughtai, 2017). By the late 2010s, PSL matches were being moved back to Pakistan, and by the mid-2020s, the country was once again hosting multi-team events. Security remains highly visible at these events, with army and paramilitary deployments around stadiums, and occasional violent incidents continue to lead to stricter protocols and venue changes. For many Pakistanis, the return of international cricket is deeply meaningful. They see these tours as proof that outside narratives of terrorism and extremism cannot simply define Pakistan.

Field Hockey

Field hockey, which became the official national sport of Pakistan in 1960 (see Chapter 10), was also introduced to the Indian subcontinent by the British Raj (see Chapter 2). However, after Pakistan's independence, it became the face of Pakistan. During the early 1950s, Pakistan was considered an emerging force in field hockey and claimed its first Olympic hockey gold medal in 1960. This victory during the Olympics interrupted India's dominance and signaled the beginning of a fierce field hockey rivalry between the two nations. In hockey, this success gave Pakistan a new identity in the world of sport. For instance, the front page of *Dawn* (the leading English newspaper of Pakistan) had a headline of "Pakistan the world hockey champion: India's 32-year supremacy ends" (Niaz, 2016). Despite wars with India in 1965 and 1971 and an uprising in East Pakistan (which would later become Bangladesh), the Islamic Republic of Pakistan won the first-ever Men's Hockey World Cup in 1971.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan's field hockey success began to decline as the international game shifted from natural grass to artificial turf. This transition demanded new physical skills and substantial investment in facilities.

The move to synthetic surfaces tended to favor European and Australian teams, whose federations and governments were generally better able to finance the installation of modern pitches (“Collapse of a hockey empire,” 2008).

By contrast, Pakistan operated under tight financial constraints in the sport sector. Scarce state resources, the growing budgetary and commercial pull of cricket, and weak long-term planning for hockey infrastructure meant that relatively few artificial-turf pitches were built. As a result, many Pakistani players had limited regular access to synthetic surfaces. They were expected to compete on high-quality artificial turf at major international tournaments, contributing to a widening performance gap. These funding and infrastructure imbalances made it challenging to adapt playing styles and modernize training systems, eroding Pakistan’s capacity to sustain its former supremacy in world hockey.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of resources, field hockey athlete Sohail Abbas made his mark on the global stage as one of the most outstanding penalty corner specialists of all time. He played field hockey for Pakistan between 1998 and 2012. During this time, he amassed 348 international goals, a tally that makes him all-time leading scorer in modern (artificial turf) field hockey and one of the most prolific players in the sport’s history (Sahni, 2020). Hence, despite minimal resources, Pakistani athletes such as Sohail Abbas and Arshad Nadeem remain resilient against all odds.

Squash

Squash, like cricket and field hockey, arrived in the Indian subcontinent via British colonial rule (see Chapter 2). Nonetheless, it became one of the few individual sports in which Pakistani athletes have established long-term worldwide dominance. Beginning in the early 1950s, primarily, that supremacy was embodied by Hashim Khan. Born in Nawakille near Peshawar into a Pashtun family, his father used to work as a steward at a British officers’ club. Hashim started out there as a barefoot ball boy, only getting court time after the British officers were done playing. After independence in 1947, he was hired as a squash professional by the Pakistan Air Force. In 1951, he became the first Pakistani to win the British Open (then effectively the world championship). After that, Hashim went on to take the title seven times between 1951 and 1956, and again in 1958 (Conrad, n.d.). His younger brother, Azam Khan, then won four straight British Open titles from 1959 to 1962 (Rehman, 2020). That is, the British Open men’s championship from 1951 through 1962 was held every year by Hashim Khan (1951–1956, 1958), Roshan Khan in 1957, or Azam Khan (1959–1962).

In the 1980s, Jahangir Khan ushered in an era of extraordinary dominance, reshaping Pakistan’s legacy in squash. At just 17, he claimed the World Open title in 1981 as its youngest-ever champion. Jahangir also embarked on an unprecedented 555-match winning streak from 1981 to 1986. He concluded his

career with six World Open and ten British Open titles, prompting many to regard him as the most remarkable individual athlete in Pakistan's history. Jansher Khan extended Pakistan's dominance through the late 1980s and 1990s, winning eight World Open titles (his eighth in 1996) and six British Opens, and holding the men's world no. 1 ranking for a record 97 months, last topping the rankings in January 1998.

In the early 2000s, Pakistan was no longer dominant in squash and men's field hockey. Other countries began investing in professional coaching, sports science, and modern facilities. Meanwhile, Pakistan's sport policies and funding focused mainly on cricket. Sports like hockey and squash depended on small federal grants and inconsistent sponsorships, making it hard to improve their facilities. These sport organizations also faced criticism for using old training methods, having weak systems for finding new talent, and dealing with ongoing mismanagement.

Security concerns and the resulting challenges in hosting international tournaments in Pakistan further limited exposure to elite competition and deterred foreign investment. Collectively, the history of Pakistani squash, spanning from colonial officers' clubs and military patronage to the remarkable achievements of the Khan family and the later era of underfunding and institutional neglect, demonstrates that exceptional individual success may coexist with—but is ultimately vulnerable to—weak national sporting infrastructures.

Modern Sport in Afghanistan: With and Without the Taliban

As detailed in the story of Rashid Khan, Afghanistan's sport history reflects a deep connection to the region's indigenous values and resilience in the face of long periods of war (Azoy, 1982). Violence, occupation, and the associated poverty and famine have positioned Afghanistan as a nation with few organized sports beyond cricket and football. On the other hand, *buzkashi*, a fierce horseback sport, is widely considered Afghanistan's national sport. With roots in the nomadic traditions of Turkic and Mongol tribes, *buzkashi* riders vie to seize and maneuver a goat carcass toward a goal (Azoy, 1982). Every discussion of sport in Afghanistan, whether modern or indigenous, is shadowed by the periods of Taliban control (1996–2001 and 2021–present) and those without (2001–2021).

Football

Football, which is widely practiced in Afghanistan, was introduced during the reign of King Amanullah Khan in 1920 (Fekrat, 2014). The Afghanistan Football Federation was established in 1922 and became a member of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 1948. The men's national team played its first international match at the 1948 London Olympics. Further, the

Afghan team continued to compete until 1984, when the Soviet war and insufficient funding led to the team's dissolution. However, domestic leagues organized by the Afghanistan Football Federation have continued since 1946, including the Kabul Premier League (1946–2013), the Afghan Premier League (2012–2020), and the Afghanistan Champions League (2021–present).

In 1994, with the backing of the Pakistani military and its Western allies (the United States), the Taliban emerged as a significant political and military force in Afghanistan after the country's long civil war (see Rashid, 2000). By 1996, the Taliban seized control of the capital, Kabul, and declared Afghanistan an Islamic emirate (Rubin, 1997). After coming to power, the Taliban announced they would enforce a strict interpretation of Sharia law (Islamic jurisprudence) as a tool to control Afghan society. The Taliban viewed sports, especially those involving physical contact or public gatherings, with suspicion, often deeming them Western propaganda, frivolous, and morally or religiously inappropriate (Roehrs, 2015). The Taliban instituted strict dress codes and limited spectatorship for various sports, and banned women altogether from participating in sports and physical activities in public spaces.

Football was subjected to extensive alterations. For instance, athletes had to grow beards and wear long trousers instead of traditional shorts. Moreover, the Taliban used football stadiums, including the main Ghazi Stadium in Kabul, for public executions and punishments (Dorsey, 2016). These punishments often unfolded during halftime, warping stadiums from arenas of sport into chilling stages of domination, where power was performed, and fear was the loudest spectator. Hence, by turning public sporting venues into sites of spectacle and coercion, the Taliban weaponized shared civic spaces to demand obedience, while also trying to broadcast their grip over Afghan society.

After the fall of the Taliban, the men's national football team re-entered international competitions in 2002. By 2011, they reached the semifinals of the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) championship, and in 2013, they won the championship and received the 2013 FIFA Fair Play Award. In the same year, they also qualified for the 2014 Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Challenge Cup, successfully ran the Afghan Premier League, and even hosted international football again in Kabul (a 3-0 win versus Pakistan) after a long gap. Domestically, the Afghan Premier League (founded 2012) helped build a recognizable club scene, and Shaheen Asmayee became the league's most decorated side and the first Afghan club to compete in the AFC Cup.

Cricket

Refugees returning to Afghanistan after the Soviet war brought cricket home with them from the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. In response, the ACB, the country's national governing body, was founded in 1995. Due to the Taliban's takeover a year later, the men's national cricket team did not field a team

until the Taliban's fall in 2001. Between 2003 and 2007, around 5 million Afghan refugees again returned home, about 3 million of whom came from the same refugee camps in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (Adelman, 2016). Again, they brought a passion for cricket that translated to government support.

By 2010, Afghan refugees from the Soviet war were old enough to play in the Afghanistan national team's first ICC event—the 2010 World T20 in the West Indies (Atherton, 2019). In 2013, the ACB organized a professional, 12-day T20 tournament called the Shpageeza Cricket League, which has continued to run annually with sponsor support from the United Arab Emirates-based telecom company Etisalat (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024). Further international cricket investment in the post-Taliban era came from various countries. For instance, India contributed infrastructure by signing a 2015 memorandum of understanding (MoU) that let Afghanistan train and host “home” matches at the Shahid Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex in Greater Noida. Likewise, as part of continued post-war rebuilding efforts, India spent 618,000 USD on a new cricket stadium in Kabul with another 360,000 USD dedicated to adding a guest house, gymnasium, and pool (Perzad, 2018). Despite dire social conditions in Afghanistan, billions of USD in redevelopment funds spent on rebuilding basic infrastructure, and with limited financial resources in Afghanistan, the former President Ashraf Ghani's government announced its priority to build a new 35,000-seat cricket stadium in Kabul (Ariana News, 2020).

Currently, the ACB has received millions of USD from the Taliban and ICC to support their activities, and they continue to receive sponsor support to run domestic cricket leagues and tournaments throughout the country (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024). Despite this funding, the Afghanistan men's cricket team plays “home” games in the United Arab Emirates or India, and no foreign teams play cricket in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (Wilde, 2025). Chapter 3 explores the topic in more detail.

Other Sports

As a nation that experienced decades of war, there are few formal, nationalized systems of sport that have been historically funded by the government, especially the more expensive team-based sports. Instead, Afghanistan's international successes have come via individual sport athletes. As part of a military sports diplomacy program, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee provided support to the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee in the years between Taliban control, helping the nation to develop some excellence in martial arts and taekwondo (DVIDS, 2011). For instance, Rohullah Nikpai earned bronze medals in taekwondo at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics. Likewise, Nesar Ahmad Bahave (Bahawi) won the silver medal at the 2007 World Taekwondo Championships and

Hamid Rahimi won the World Boxing Union (WBU) championship in 2012. Afghan-born athletes, such as Siyar Bahadurzada and Nasrat Haqparast, have even competed in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

The above-highlighted achievements serve as an inspiration for a war-torn nation and are proof of the resilient nature of the Afghan population. Whereas “Western” sports are now the most popular spectator sports (and by default the sports that young people want to play to become professionals one day), the low availability of sport infrastructure in Pakistan, and especially Afghanistan, lends itself to myriad indigenous sports.

The Cultural Legacy and Resilience of Indigenous Sports

Kabaddi and Kho-Kho in Pakistan and South Asia

Hussain and Cunningham (2021) highlighted that British colonial masters devalued indigenous games of the region by promoting Western sports like cricket, squash, and field hockey. This systematic marginalization of traditional and indigenous sports helped to control colonial subjects’ subjectivity and agency within colonial rule (Edwards, 2009). Two traditional and indigenous sports of the region, *kabaddi* and *kho-kho*, hold profound historical and cultural significance. Scholars have also emphasized that indigenous sports rooted in the region’s ancient heritage can offer more than mere recreational pursuits; they can encapsulate values, skills, and community bonds that have persisted across generations (Hussain & Cunningham, 2021; Dubnewick et al., 2018). Unlike sports introduced through Western influence, traditional sports are deeply embedded in the local culture of the Indian subcontinent. Hussain (2021) argued that *kabaddi* and *kho-kho* resonate with people from various social strata, especially within the province of Punjab, and they appeal to both men and women, especially in areas where social norms may restrict conventional forms of athletic participation for women athletes (Hussain, 2021).

Often celebrated as one of the oldest sports from the subcontinent, the sport of *kabaddi* traces its origins back approximately 4,000 years to the Vedic era of ancient India where it was not only a form of physical exercise but also an avenue for developing courage, mental acuity, and resilience (Hussain & Cunningham, 2021). Folklore narrates that Hindu deities, such as Lord Krishna, participated in *kabaddi*, and thus it has a revered place within the spiritual and cultural narratives of the Indian subcontinent (Hussain & Cunningham, 2021). Similarly, some Buddhist scriptures have unveiled that Gautama Buddha engaged in *kabaddi* (Hussain & Cunningham, 2021). Hence, *kabaddi* has a long historical appeal and is considered a significant unifying cultural practice across religions and regions (Chronicles of Cultures, 2019; Nambiar, 2016). *Kabaddi* is a high intensity contact sport as demanding as it is exciting. Two teams of seven compete as a “raider” enters the opponent’s

half, tags defenders, and tries to return safely. The catch: the raider must hold their breath and keep chanting *kabaddi* the whole time. Tagged defenders are out until their team completes a successful raid, making the game a sharp mix of endurance, strategy, and control.

In a similar vein, *kho-kho* is believed to date back over 2,200 years, even before the composition of the Mahabharata. While *kabaddi* emphasizes strength and endurance, the sport of *kho-kho* is popular among schoolchildren and often played at the community level. *Kho-kho* involves two teams of nine players each. At any given time, one player from the team serves as the “chaser,” tasked with tagging members of the opposing team, who act as “defenders.” The chaser navigates a confined rectangular field by maneuvering around teammates who are seated in alternating directions in the center, attempting to tag opponents without stepping out of bounds. Players alternate between chasing and defending, with each team aiming to achieve the highest number of successful tags within a set time limit.

The rich histories and enduring popularity of *kabaddi* and *kho-kho* in the Indian subcontinent underline how these sports extended beyond simple physical activity to cultural symbols of endurance, strategy, and identity. Hussain and Cunningham (2021) claimed that traditional games can also allow women in conservative or underrepresented communities a space to engage in physical activity that aligns with cultural expectations, thereby fostering a sense of agency, pride, and resilience. In providing culturally attuned pathways for empowerment, these sports can be an important avenue as significant counterpoints to the limitations often imposed by sociocultural norms. Thus, indigenous sports can offer participants a vital means of expression and community connection, which Western sports might not provide.

Indigenous Sports in Afghanistan

One of the most iconic traditional Afghan sports is the equestrian game of *buzkashi*, broadly recognized as the Afghanistan national sport. With its origins traced back to the Mongol Empire, *buzkashi* exemplifies a sport of toxic masculinity and strategy. It is played on horseback, where teams of riders—typically armed with whips and mounted on influential stallions—vie to gain control of a headless goat carcass, known as a *buz*. The objective is to steer/guide the carcass to a specific goal post, outmaneuvering rival riders who use all means to prevent its retrieval. Azoy (1982) conducted a seminal anthropological study about the culture of *buzkashi* and its role in Afghan society. The author argued that the embodiment of power and authority within *buzkashi* arenas mirrors the broader power dynamics that govern Afghan tribal and societal hierarchies (Azoy, 1982). Moreover, *buzkashi* grounds serve as an arena where ideals of masculinity are intensely performed and valorized. Riders, or *chapandaz*, embody the qualities of strength and skill, central to Afghan definitions of manhood and honor. Furthermore, the author found that

there is an element of social hierarchy and alliance in this sport. For instance, there are patrons responsible for sponsoring riders who use sport to assert their wealth, power, and community standing. These patrons are pivotal for promoting the game, underscoring *buzkashi*'s function as a socially binding and stratifying institution. *Buzkashi* is not merely a sporting activity in the country but a cultural institution deeply ingrained in Afghan identity.

Unfortunately, *buzkashi* became highly sanctioned under the Taliban's first rule, with limitations on the frequency of gatherings and regulations to ensure that any celebrations aligned with their moral standards (Agence France-Presse, 2022). Even so, the sport remained primarily played and watched by men, as the Taliban strictly barred women from participating or even attending as spectators. This restriction on public gatherings for sporting events, along with the enforced attendance of Taliban guards to monitor for any non-compliance, stifled the traditionally communal and celebratory atmosphere of *buzkashi* matches and transformed them into rigidly controlled events. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, *buzkashi* has continued (and in some areas is even officially organized and publicly staged), but it remains tightly controlled, and women are still barred from participating or attending as spectators (France 24, 2024).

Although less globally famous, Afghanistan is home to various other indigenous games. One such game is *topay danda*, often compared to Western games like cricket or baseball. The game is played with a wooden stick (*danda*) and a small ball (*topay*), which requires players to hit the ball as far as possible and then complete a series of runs to score points before the opposing team retrieves the ball. *Topay danda* is traditionally played by young boys in the country's rural villages. As a sport that needs fewer resources, children from various socioeconomic statuses regularly participate in this physical activity. Another traditional Afghan sport with roots in South Asia and Persian culture is *pehlwani* or wrestling. Afghan *pehlwani* has its own unique style that focuses on physical strength with technical skill. This sport is often performed at local fairs or during festive gatherings. Compared to *pehlwani* in Pakistan and India, Afghan *pehlwani* integrates aspects of traditional Central Asian wrestling styles like *kokpar* and *gushtiniri* by focusing on holding skills.

Conclusion

Across Afghanistan and Pakistan, sport is never "just sport." For many, it is a public language through which ordinary people negotiate extraordinary pressures. Those pressures include colonial inheritances, partition's unfinished wounds, militarization, sectarianism, patriarchy, economic austerity, displacement, growing religious extremism, and the long afterlife of the war on terror. From Arshad Nadeem's self-made javelins and departmental patronage to Rashid Khan's refugee-camp apprenticeship and global T20 stardom, athletic achievement becomes a kind of social testimony. That is, athletes in

both countries need to prove that life can still be built where institutions fail, and dignity can still be claimed where politics narrows the horizon. Even the landscapes of play—the Karakoram Highway’s touristic spectacle under watchtowers, informal grounds in cities, and tightly monitored arenas under Taliban rule—reveal how bodies in motion are read as political symbols, whether states intend it or not. In this region, every boundary and goal is also an argument about belonging.

However, the Pakistan and Afghan athletes’ stories also refuse a romantic ending. Sport can inspire, but it can also be recruited by regimes seeking legitimacy, by markets seeking profit, and by media frames that flatten Afghan and Pakistani athletes into stereotypes. The task ahead is therefore not merely to “promote sport,” but to transform it: to widen access beyond elite patronage and urban privilege, to protect women and marginalized communities’ right to play, to confront toxic masculinities without surrendering cultural pride, and to treat indigenous games not as nostalgic relics but as living archives of community knowledge. In that sense, the book’s central claim sharpens into a challenge: our existence is resistance not because sport automatically liberates but because, when reimagined through justice and dignity, play can become a practice of decolonial life beyond the borders that wound.

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Historical Landscape of Sports in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Introduction

Sports history in the subcontinent and Central Asia is profoundly knotted with the region's precolonial and colonial past (see Dimeo, 2002; Gems & Pfister, 2022; Hwang, 1998; McKay, 2001). As underscored in the first chapter, British colonial rulers (1858–1947) used an Anglicization policy to familiarize and promote the sports of field hockey, squash, and cricket as instruments of cultural indoctrination and social control in the Indian subcontinent (Basu, 2018; Majumdar, 2004). For instance, the British used their divide-and-rule strategy by having cricket matches between Indian communities of Parsis, Hindus, and Muslims to prevent unity against colonial rule. This was evident in the Quadrangular Tournament (1912–1946; also known as the Bombay Triangular, Bombay Pentangular, or Bombay Presidency match), which pitted teams based on religious lines to foster division (Guha, 1997; Majumdar, 2008). Initially started in 1907 as a triangular tournament among Hindus, Europeans, and Parsis, it became a regional phenomenon after Muslims joined the tournament as a fourth team in 1912 (Guha, 1997). Even Mohandas K. Gandhi, acknowledged widely as the father of Modern India, in 1940, voiced against this cricket tournament and considered it a method of social control by the British colonizers (Majumdar, 2019). The historical divide and religious tensions created by the colonizers, especially between Hindus and Muslims, can be seen in the postcolonial era in the form of ongoing hostility between Pakistan and India in various sporting arenas (see Belmekki, 2024; Hussain et al., 2024). Much of the extant discourse focuses on how social activities, including sports, were used as a method of cultural indoctrination by the British Empire. We add additional insight into how sporting structures and rivalries were used as a method of social control by the colonial masters.

Much of the current scholarly understanding of South Asian sporting history remains predominantly framed through the lens of British colonialism (see Hussain & Cunningham, 2020; Majumdar, 2008; Mustafa, 2013; Sen, 2001). Nonetheless, following this approach overlooks the significant impact of earlier invaders and civilizations (e.g., Central Asian invasions, Arab

invasions, Mongols, and Timurids invasions) on the region (see Dutta, 2023; Mills, 2001). For instance, the Kushan and Scythian Central Asian nomadic tribes played a significant role in developing equestrian sports in the region (Kelekna, 2009). Meanwhile, the Mughal Empire (1526–1857) considerably influenced the leisure and sporting culture of the region. Polo, also known in parts of the Indian subcontinent as *chowgan*, was adopted by the Mughals as their most beloved leisure activity, which they dubbed the “Sport of Kings.” Zahir Ud-din Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent, institutionalized *chowgan* as an official sport within the Mughal court (Hindustan Times School, n.d.). Likewise, the third Mughal ruler, Jalal Ud-din Akbar, also referred to as Akbar the Great, formalized various rules of *chowgan* in his era (Hindustan Times School, n.d.). In modern-day Pakistan, polo is played in the northern regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral with a unique freestyle approach that differs from the structured, Western style adopted globally. This traditional version of polo closely resembles the *chowgan* played during Mughal rule.

While Pakistan directly inherited British sport structures upon independence in 1947 (Ganjera, 2007), Afghanistan’s modern sporting traditions are subtly shaped by a combination of historical interactions. These include its engagement with British India during the three Anglo-Afghan Wars (between 1839 and 1919), refugee migrations into neighboring Pakistan (1979–present), and the cumulative influence of various invasions throughout its history. From the early introduction of polo by Central Asian nomads to wrestling practices introduced by Persians to the more recent adoption of cricket through exposure in refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989), Afghanistan’s sport culture reflects a complex layering of indigenous traditions and external influences, evolving through centuries of conflict, migration, and cultural exchange. The US-led NATO invasion after 9/11 further influenced the sport culture of the region.

This chapter’s purpose is to trace how successive imperial and colonial projects—Mughal-era imperialism, British Anglicization, post-9/11 American interventionism, and Taliban rule—have gradually shaped the region’s sporting cultures. We analyze how precolonial leisure practices, colonial sport policies, and postcolonial governance arrangements shape contemporary sporting institutions, rivalries, and athlete experiences. We first examine Mughal uses of physical culture and precolonial community-based leisure, then analyze the British Raj’s introduction of cricket, hockey, and squash as tools of social control and communal division. After that, we explore how colonial administrative legacies underwrote contemporary Indo–Pak sport antagonism and the Kashmir dispute, before turning to Pakistan’s evolving sport governance, including the 18th Amendment and symbolic projects such as the Kashmir Premier League (KPL). The chapter then critically assesses American soft power and exceptionalism in Afghanistan, through basketball, baseball, sport for development programs, and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), alongside the distinct regional trajectory of Afghan cricket. In

doing so, we show that sport in Pakistan and Afghanistan remains a key arena in which empire, security, soft power, and local resistance are continually negotiated.

Mughal India and Sports (1526–1857): Precolonial India and Imperial Values

The Mughal dynasty reigned over much of the Indian subcontinent from the early 16th to the mid-eighteenth century (1526–1857; Richards, 1993; Singh & Sahu, 2020). As the descendants of Timur and Genghis Khan, the Mughals originated from Central Asia; however, they were substantially influenced by Persian and Islamic Arab cultural traditions (Dale, 2010). Zahir Ud-din Babur is known as the dynasty's founder in 1526 after his phenomenal victory at the Battle of Panipat against Ibrahim Lodi (the Sultan of Delhi). Bahadur Shah Zafar (also called Bahadur Shah II) was the dynasty's last ruler before the British Empire officially took control of the region through the East India Company. Before the British colonizers, the Mughals had the most historical influence on the leisure activities of the subcontinent (see Armstrong & Bates, 2001).

The Mughals adopted and promoted various physical activities during their reign, such as wrestling, swimming, archery, polo, and hunting (Gaur, 2018). Still, many physical activities introduced by the Mughals were not solely for recreational or utilitarian purposes but were emblematic representations of hyper-masculinity that facilitated imperial authority (Gaur, 2018; Lal, 2005). While promoting sports, emphasis was placed on aligning with the militaristic and hierarchical framework of Mughal society. Furthermore, physical activities like wrestling and polo were made integral to Mughal rulers' courtly rituals and governance; thereby, it was an ongoing effort to consolidate power and establish an imperial ethos of masculinity and dominance (Gaur, 2018; Lal, 2005). For instance, the Mughal administration implemented the *mansabdari* system to classify and remunerate officials across military, civil governance, and fiscal management domains (Gaur, 2018). The *mansabdari* system integrated physical culture into the preparation of its officials as a criterion for ranking. The officials engaged in martial sporting activities that enabled them to earn acknowledgment while enabling advancement within the hierarchical structure of the Mughal court (Gaur, 2018).

Moreover, a significant aspect of the Mughals' engagement with sports was the emphasis on their inclusive and performative dimensions. While the imperial court largely valorized male physicality as an emblem of hegemonic masculinity (Lal, 2005), one exceptional example is Nur Jahan, the twentieth spouse and primary consort of Mughal monarch Jahangir, who defied traditional constraints by participating in physical activities like polo and hunting (Gaur, 2018). Nur Jahan, therefore, was able to subvert entrenched patriarchal norms by becoming one of the earliest women to partake in physical activities in the Indian subcontinent. Competitive events in this era also allowed individuals from lower social strata to demonstrate their abilities (Gaur, 2018). This approach

aided the Mughals in fostering a deeper connection between their reign and the broader populace. In summary, the complicated synthesis of spectacle (e.g., polo matches), technical skill (e.g., physical strength), and hierarchical validation (e.g., the *mansabdari* system) illustrates how physical culture was a strategic mechanism for consolidating governance, constructing collective identity, and asserting political dominance during the Mughals' reign.

In the Mughal era, physical activities like polo remained an elite pastime grounded in hegemonic masculinity. Although the Mughals created their own regulations of sporting activities, there was no official equivalent of today's competitive leagues. The lack of formalized sporting bodies at that time highlights how sports and physical activities were deeply interconnected with the sociopolitical and cultural ethos of their time, rather than existing as standalone recreational or competitive entities. The emphasis on showcasing power, hierarchy, and cultural sophistication overshadowed the development of organized sport systems. Consequently, while the Mughals notably advanced physical culture in the Indian subcontinent, their overall approach remained rooted in reinforcing imperial authority and promoting social stratification. The legacy of the Mughals' contributions, especially in integrating physical activities into governance (the *mansabdari* system), courtly rituals, and societal frameworks, continues to inform historical perspectives on sport and leisure in pre-modern South Asia.

Before colonial and Mughal rule, regions such as Punjab and Bengal were renowned for rich indigenous leisure traditions. Leisure activities such as kite flying, traditional dances like *bhangra* and *giddha*, and wrestling tournaments (known as *kushti* or *pehlwani*) were featured during annual Basant festivals, a significant cultural event celebrated in Punjab (the current Punjab territory is divided between Pakistan and India; Parvez, 2018). Basant festivals have Hindu religious roots, marking the arrival of spring. Widely celebrated on the fifth day of the Hindu month of Magha (January–February), Basant Panchami (also known as Vasant Panchami) is dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, the deity of knowledge, music, and arts. Even after independence from the British Empire, the Basant festival has been celebrated by both Muslims and Hindus together, particularly in the Northern Punjab region of Pakistan in cities like Lahore, Gujranwala, Kasur, and Sialkot. Furthermore, men and women participate equally in various leisure activities during the Basant festival. Hence, indigenous structures of sporting and leisure activities existed before colonial and Mughal rule, and those activities were based on the idea of community bonds and cultural values rather than religious division or valorizing masculine values.

British Raj (1858–1947): Anglicization Policy and Colonial Hangover

Cricket

The earliest mention of cricket in the Indian subcontinent dates to English sailors playing cricket in the seventeenth century in the vicinity of Cambay

(a place near the current Mumbai ports) while traveling to India for business purposes (Guha, 2002). In 1792, the Calcutta Cricket Club was established by British expats from the East India Company ("Board of Control for Cricket in India," n.d.). A decade later, the Calcutta Cricket Club played a match against the Old Etonians, during which Old Etonian Robert Vansittart scored a century, marked as the first documented hundred made on Indian territory ("Board of Control for Cricket in India," n.d.). However, the sport of cricket mostly gained popularity in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka during the British Raj (Majumdar, 2008), the era of direct British Rule over the sub-continent, which spanned from 1858 to 1947 after the fall of Bahadur Shah Zafar II, who was the last Mughal emperor of India (Dalrymple, 2008).

During the British Raj, cricket served as an avenue for social acceptance and integration, as Indian elites, initially under British patronage, adopted the game to develop ties with colonial masters (Guha, 1998; Majumdar, 2008). Numerous local rulers and influential communities, such as the Parsis, embraced cricket as a method to align themselves with British customs and norms, therefore hoping for social acceptance within colonial structures. In 1848, in Mumbai (now Bombay), the Parsi community laid the foundation of the first cricket club in India, named the Oriental Cricket Club (Guha, 1998). Parsis of Mumbai were considered a highly educated and Westernized social group among the locals (Guha, 1998; Yazdani, 2024). Other princely states and elites of the region followed the footsteps of the Parsis and tried to adopt cricket to develop a relationship with the British Empire. Furthermore, in Bombay, the Luxmani and Tyebjee families played a pioneering role in promoting Muslim participation in cricket. Widely known for their contributions to education and law, the Tyebjee family was particularly influential, founding a Muslim cricket club in 1883 (Guha, 1998). Other minority groups also established cricket clubs that reflected their community identities, such as the Bombay Jewish Cricket Club, the Mangalorean Catholic Cricket Club for migrants from the port city of Mangalore, and the Instituto Luso Indian Cricket Club for individuals from Portuguese-ruled Goa (Guha, 1998).

Importantly, following the decline of the predominantly Muslim-led rule of the Mughal dynasty, there was significant mistrust between the British colonial authorities and the Muslim community, which began to see participation in British-influenced social activities, particularly cricket, as a means of integration with the colonial structure. The Parsi community, known for its Zoroastrian faith, initially led efforts to foster a cultural connection with the British, setting an example later followed by other religious and ethnic groups (e.g., the Tyebjee family). Likewise, the distinguished Muslim figure, Khan Bahadur Aminul Islam, also founded The Mohammedan Sporting Club in 1891 in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), recognized as one of the pioneering sport institutions established by Muslims in India ("Our history," n.d.). While its primary focus was originally on football (soccer), the club incrementally broadened its scope to embrace cricket. In doing so, it offered Muslims a structured arena for physical activity participation. This enabled Muslims of the region to compete alongside British and other Indian teams. This initiative not only raised

the profile of Muslim athletes but also allowed them to immerse themselves in a wider athletic culture shaped by British influence.

Among numerous figures responsible for promoting cricket in the Indian subcontinent, one name remains the most prominent: Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji, commonly known as “Ranji” (Sen, 2001; Wainwright, 2008). Born into a royal family in the princely state of Nawanagar in India in 1872, Ranji moved to England for his education, as was common with royal family members at the time. Ranji quickly gained recognition in the English cricket scene. Although facing numerous racial and cultural biases, he broke the barrier by being the first Indian cricketer to represent England in Test cricket in 1896 (The Wire Staff, 2024). He also played for the English county team in Sussex. Ranji’s legacy transcended the boundaries of the cricket field, reshaping the narrative around Indian athletes and sparking inspiration across generations in both England and India. Upon his return to India, he rose to the throne of Nawanagar, where he remained a devoted patron of cricket, championing its growth until he died in 1933. A similar story relates to Iftikhar Ali Khan Pataudi, known as the Nawab of Pataudi Sr., a significant Muslim figure in Indian cricket history. Educated in England, he played for the English team before eventually joining the Indian team. His involvement in cricket served as an inspiration to many Muslims in the Indian subcontinent to take up the sport. While numerous Muslims embraced cricket as a means of engagement, some conservative religious leaders regarded participation in social activities related to the British as *haram* (prohibited in Islam), perceiving it as an endorsement of British influence over the Indian subcontinent. A famous example of such religiously framed anti-colonial activism was the *Fatwa Tark-e-Muwalat* (boycott of British goods) issued through the *Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind* in 1920. This *fatwa* was signed by hundreds of Muslim scholars and urged Muslims to boycott both British products and any cooperation with the colonial state.

In the extant scholarship, researchers have underscored that cricket helped British colonial masters implement their Anglicization policy in the region (Hurley & Heffernan, 2023; Hussain et al., 2024). This policy was a strategic attempt to make colonial subjects adopt English customs and norms while localized practices were considered uncivilized, shady, immoral, and barbaric (Chattopadhyay, 2021). For instance, British colonizers used terms such as the “Gentleman’s Game” for cricket to showcase its superiority as a sport or a social activity. This led to indigenous sports (e.g., *kho-kho* and *kabaddi*) being devalued or considered inferior (Hussain & Cunningham, 2020).

Anglicization policies were successful to some magnitude in the sport context, as cricket gained acceptance over time across various social and cultural groups, including the middle- and lower-income classes of the Indian subcontinent. This expansion transformed cricket into a platform for different communities to either express their national identity or challenge colonial authority, and sometimes both simultaneously. The nationalist fervor around cricket grew within India in the late 1930s and 1940s, especially when Indian cricketers contended against English athletes, as triumphs on the field defied

British supremacy and reinforced India's push for independence. Therefore, cricket turned from an avenue of social integration with British customs to an avenue for resistance against the British Empire.

The popularity of cricket in the twenty-first century might appear unexpected or surprising to the historians of the nineteenth century, but only if one presumes England maintains an enduring role as cricket's leading authority, not simply the original initiator. Cricket, currently, has transformed from a symbol of resistance and a colonial legacy in the Indian subcontinent and in Afghanistan to a means of social cohesion, providing social identity to the general public (Morse & Popalzai, 2024).

Field Hockey

Field hockey was introduced to the subcontinent by British soldiers and was also used as part of the Anglicization policy. The extant record shows that in 1895, the Beighton Cup was organized as the region's earliest field hockey tournament (West Bengal Youth and Sports Department, n.d.). Similarly, the Aga Khan tournament in Mumbai aided in promoting the sport on a mass scale and eventually led to the Indian Hockey Federation being formed in 1925. This institutional structuring of field hockey was a pivotal moment in Indian subcontinent history as it shifted from a popular pastime to an organized, institutionalized sport that helped forge national identity, international recognition, and long-term sport development in the region (Venkat, 2024).

In 1928, the Indian team formally debuted in the Amsterdam Olympic Games by beating Austria, and they sealed the gold medal by defeating the Netherlands in the final (Bharatiya Hockey, n.d.). The Amsterdam Olympic Games victory aided in establishing India as an international hockey powerhouse and heralded an era of unique success for the nation. Between 1928 and 1956, the Indian men's field hockey team achieved a streak of six consecutive Olympic gold medals, a record in the sport's history. These six straight Olympic hockey titles are officially counted as India's; however, their meaning is more layered. The pre-1947 triumphs were earned by teams representing British India as a whole, drawing players from territories that would later become both India and Pakistan. They can therefore be seen as part of a shared sporting lineage. By contrast, the post-independence gold medals belong squarely to the Indian nation-state, set against the parallel rise of Pakistan as a separate hockey power and rival. Pakistan attained its first Olympic gold medal in men's field hockey at the 1960 Rome Olympics by defeating India 1–0 in the remarkable finals.

Squash

Squash was introduced to the Indian subcontinent in the late nineteenth century by British officers who had access to specialized courts through military garrisons and elite social clubs. The difficulty of playing squash without

specific courts made it an elite sport, even among the British, and left it essentially inaccessible to the general public. Hence, squash operated as a small but pointed instrument of Anglicization: it was embedded in spaces governed by British language, dress, and etiquette, and its postcolonial survival within the same military cantonments and exclusive clubs in Pakistan can be read as a sporting form of colonial hangover. For example, in today's Pakistan, the Chief of the Air Staff of the Pakistan Air Force serves as President of the Pakistan Squash Federation by convention, therefore keeping the sport closely tied to military and elite institutional power.

Root Cause of the Rivalry Between Pakistan and India: From the Government of India Act of 1858 to the Kashmir Dispute

The development and governance of sport in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan remained substantially centralized from the nation's inception until the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was enacted in 2010 (Rana, 2020). This centralized approach to administrative power was primarily inherited by both India and Pakistan from British colonial rule (Khan, 1999), as discussed in Chapter 1. The colonial British Crown applied a governance system in the subcontinent that strategically integrated pre-existing indigenous political structures such as local rulers, chieftains, and traditional administrative frameworks (Fisher, 1984). Therefore, the indigenous structures were not dismantled but rather co-opted and subjected to stringent oversight by the British colonial administration (Gasparyan, 2019). This approach assured the consolidation of colonial authority and maintenance of indirect control over vast territories while leveraging the legitimacy of established local systems (Fisher, 1984; Haynes, 1990). Thus, British colonial rulers tried to ensure uniformity in policy implementation and efficient resource extraction for themselves. Nevertheless, localized governance systems distorted by the British rulers led to the alteration of indigenous political structures and ultimately to communal and ethnic divisions, which were further exacerbated by the influence of sporting activities (Newbury, 2000). British colonizers effectively exploited existing ethnic and religious divisions in the Indian subcontinent to maintain control, and they strategically used sports as a platform to deepen religious and ethnic splits, such as through the Quadrangular Tournament.

The initial centralized sport system was formally established by the British Crown under laws such as the Government of India Act of 1858. It effectively consolidated decision-making authority into the hands of the British Crown and its representatives in India (Cohn, 2012). A three-layered power structure was formulated per the spirit of the Government of India Act of 1858, with the Governor-General/Viceroy being the highest-ranking official in British India, directly appointed by the Crown (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). At the same time, the Indian subcontinent was divided into provinces, with each province

headed either by British-appointed governors who directly ruled territories or by local maharajas (princes) in the princely states, who pledged allegiance to the British Crown. On the other hand, at the local level, district collectors served as the primary administrative officers. Here, it is important to note that the current rivalries within the PSL (Pakistan's largest T20 league) and the IPL (India's largest T20 league) are rooted in the provincial divisions initially created during the precolonial and colonial eras. For example, the PSL's teams—Lahore Qalandars and Multan Sultans (Punjab), Karachi Kings (Sindh), Peshawar Zalmi (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Quetta Gladiators (Balochistan), and Islamabad United (Federal Capital Territory)—are based on provincial capitals and regions. Therefore, not only did the British colonial structures create a centralized system of resource extraction but they were also a method of ethnic and religious divide, which continues in the modern era in sports.

Nonetheless, the provinces' establishment in the Indian subcontinent was a gradual process, sculpted by successive empires and then finally by the British colonial power. During the precolonial era, large empires such as the Mauryan and Gupta dynasties implemented territorial divisions based on geographic and cultural considerations (Fischer-Tiné & Framke, 2021). At the same time, the Mughal Empire formalized various territories into *subahs* during its reign over the subcontinent. Each *subah* was governed by appointed *subahdars*, who were responsible for administration and revenue collection (Roshangar et al., 2024). The British colonial period, however, played the most pivotal role in institutionalizing the modern provincial framework in the region (see Keith, 1937). The British East India Company initially established administrative regions such as the Bengal, Bombay, and Madras Presidencies to manage its expanding territories. Following the British Crown's direct rule over the Indian subcontinent in 1858, the provinces were reorganized to serve British administrative and economic interests. Key legislative acts (e.g., the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935) further helped expand provincial autonomy and restructure territories to enhance governance and revenue collection for the Empire (Keith, 1937). However, the restructuring of territories for control by the colonizers often disregarded cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic boundaries. The British governance system, hence, prioritized administrative convenience and political control over the subcontinent rather than local autonomy and empowerment. After independence, India and Pakistan inherited the British Empire's designed provincial framework, which significantly influenced their postcolonial political geography and governance structures. This has also been the root cause of unequal resource distribution in sports within Pakistan.

Overall, the British colonial provincial system was primarily designed for administrative efficiency rather than aligning with cultural nuances. This has significantly contributed to post-independence conflicts between India and Pakistan, especially the Kashmir dispute (Lyon, 2008) and the current sporting rivalry within the respective countries. At independence in 1947, the hasty

partition of British India into India and Pakistan relied on the religious demographics of Muslims and Hindus to draw boundaries. However, the provincial framework inherited from the British was not designed to account for the complex ethnic, religious, and cultural diversities of the subcontinent. This left several contentious areas unresolved between India and Pakistan (Mir, 2014). For example, the princely states of Jammu and Kashmir exemplify how British administrative policies created enduring tensions between both countries after independence (Naitthani, 2019). Under the colonial charter, princely states in the subcontinent were semi-autonomous and maintained nominal independence while adhering to British suzerainty (Jhala, 2019). At partition, princely states were given the choice to accede to either India or Pakistan based on their rulers' decisions, irrespective of their population's demographics. The Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir was ruled by a Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh, who initially sought to remain independent. However, his eventual decision to accede to India led to the first India–Pakistan war in 1947–1948. The unresolved status of Kashmir, compounded by conflicting claims and repeated wars (in 1965 and 1999), remains the core issue of contention between the two nations to date.

The continuing adverse relationship between India and Pakistan not only has caused structural issues in the region but has also been the root cause of Pakistan's military dominance in governance. After its independence, Pakistan was insecure, in part due to having a smaller land area than India and in part because Pakistan was not formally recognized as a separate country by the Indian political elite. In this context, the Pakistani military felt vulnerable to India and, as a consequence, actively searched for external allies. The situation was further aggravated when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, leaving Pakistan's military horrified by the thought of two hostile neighbors on its border. The Iranian revolution in the 1970s also enhanced this paranoia within the country, as Iran is a majority Shia Muslim country, while Pakistan is a majority Sunni Muslim country. The persistent fear of external forces in the region has led Pakistan to become a "security state" rather than a "welfare state," which has also influenced how sport policies have been adopted and how the state uses sport in contemporary times.

The Special Case of the KPL and the Pakistani Method of Soft Power: Learning From the Colonial Masters

In 2021, the KPL was launched in the region of Pakistani-administered Kashmir. Although the KPL is primarily a cricket league, its significance extends far beyond the sport. The league brought forward a historical-political clash between India and Pakistan. Pakistan already had the PSL as a prominent national T20 franchise managed by the PCB. However, the establishment of the KPL was widely seen as a symbolic political move by the Pakistani military, likely aimed at countering India's political maneuvers in the disputed region

of Jammu and Kashmir (ESPNcricinfo, 2021). For instance, Shahid Afridi (the former cricket captain of the Pakistan national team) was made the brand ambassador of the league. Afridi, though an outstanding cricket player, was also widely acknowledged in Pakistan's political circles for having a close relationship with the Pakistani military (Dunya News, 2025).

The timing of the KPL's emergence was particularly noteworthy as it came after the Indian government's historic passage of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act in 2019. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led Indian government abolished the special autonomous status of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The Pakistani government had severely criticized this move by the Narendra Modi-led government (Modi has been the Prime Minister of India since 2014). This decision significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of the South Asian region, prompting Pakistan to explore avenues to assert its historical stance on Kashmir. The KPL, as a result, was perceived as part of a broader strategy to promote and legitimize Pakistan's narrative that the Pakistani-administered Kashmir should be a sovereign region.

Moreover, the KPL sparked controversies even before its first edition. Various media reports suggested that the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) discouraged international cricketers from participating in the KPL due to the sensitive nature of the Kashmir conflict. The former South African national team cricketer Herschelle Gibbs was one such player who openly accused the BCCI of pressuring him not to participate (Ali & Mughal, 2021). He claimed that the BCCI threatened to deny him entry into India for any cricket-related work if he participated in the KPL. He expressed his frustration on social media, stating that it was "completely unnecessary" for the BCCI to bring their political agenda into the sporting equation (Ali & Mughal, 2021). However, the act of barring international cricketers further amplified the KPL's visibility and framed it as a platform for political expression. The Pakistani government leveraged this controversy to portray itself as a victim of political interference in cricket by India, therefore reinforcing its narrative on the Kashmir dispute.

In response, the PCB expressed its displeasure. Moreover, they proclaimed plans to raise the issue with the ICC and blamed BCCI for interfering in the internal affairs of ICC members. The BCCI, however, defended its position, asserting that it was within its rights to make decisions concerning cricketing matters in India (Geo Super, 2021). The KPL is clearly more than just a cricketing event; it embodies Pakistan's attempt to use soft power through sport and cultural diplomacy. This was a strategy to assert its claims on Kashmir and challenge India's influence in the region. While the KPL's success as a cricketing venture is debatable, its role in Pakistan's broader geopolitical strategy underscores the evolving ways nations use soft power in contested regions. Furthermore, Pakistan's use of sport as a geopolitical strategy demonstrates the persistence and lasting impact of British colonialism; the divisions and

issues created between Pakistan and India by the British Empire have shaped new forms of rivalry in the region.

Pakistan Sport Governance After the 18th Amendment: Chaos or Decolonial Strategy?

During the tenure of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government under the former presidency of Asif Ali Zardari and the Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, the 18th Amendment to Pakistan's Constitution was enacted in 2010. The PPP came into power in 2008 after nine years of a dictatorial regime led by the former Army Chief of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf (Shafiq et al., 2020). The 18th Amendment profoundly reshaped sport governance by devolving authority from the federal level to provincial administrations (Ali et al., 2023). The transfer of power from the central government has been part of broader reforms to enhance provincial autonomy and an ongoing demand of democratic leaders in Pakistan. This decentralization is believed to be essential for addressing longstanding inequities in resource distribution across the country. Moreover, the decentralization via the 18th Amendment has been framed by many democratic actors as a step to strengthen constitutional checks and balances and, indirectly, to limit the avenues through which the military can dominate civilian politics (Shah, 2012). Despite these potential gains, numerous democratic political leaders and ministries in Pakistan have faced challenges in devolving power to the provinces.

In practice, the shift in 2010 after the 18th Amendment created considerable administrative and operational challenges for sport governance. The PSB, once the centralized body for sport governance in Pakistan, saw its influence significantly reduced in the country. Provinces were granted control over sport development, yet many regions of the country lacked the infrastructure, expertise, and clear frameworks to effectively assume responsibility (Ali et al., 2023). This confused the roles of federal and provincial entities by limiting progress in creating a cohesive sport strategy that addressed both domestic and international objectives. Furthermore, not having a centralized system has created an essential issue of not attracting private sponsorships.

Financial challenges have further exacerbated the structural issues. With the devolution of powers, provincial governments became responsible for funding sports, although discrepancies in financial resources among provinces led to unequal development. NSFs (considered the backbone of Pakistan's sport governance), which traditionally relied on federal funding, faced reduced subsidies, leaving many unable to support athletes or adequately host events. Numerous reports indicate widespread inefficiencies, with allegations of mismanagement and corruption undermining the potential impact of allocated funds for sporting activities. For example, the Punjab Squash Association administration was alleged to be involved in 50 million PKR corruption (Hassan, 2021). In 2017, an MoU was signed between the Punjab

Squash Association and the Punjab government for squash sports promotion in Punjab, but the president of the association at that time, Nadeem Mukhtar, failed to provide financial information about where these funds were utilized (Hassan, 2021). This example illustrates the failure of the provinces to have checks and balances despite Punjab being the largest province of Pakistan.

In the past few years, the federal government has introduced various schemes to enhance participation in sport in the country. Initiated by former Prime Minister Imran Khan (see Chapter 4) during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government (2018–2022), the Kamyab Jawan (Successful Youth) Sports Drive (KJSD) was launched under the broader Kamyab Jawan Programme (KJP) in 2021. KJP, overall, was a flagship youth initiative announced in 2019 with an allocation of 100 billion PKR to support young people through loans, skills development, and entrepreneurship opportunities. In this broader framework, the federal government, in collaboration with the KJP and the Higher Education Commission, approved four youth and sport projects totaling 4 billion PKR to revive the sport culture, expand infrastructure, and fund talent-scouting activities across the country (“PM launches,” 2021). During its inaugural phase, the KJSD focused on nationwide talent hunts in 12 sports for young people aged 11–25, with official statements indicating that around 10 million youth would undergo a formal selection process to access further training and competitive opportunities (“PM launches,” 2021). Nevertheless, large-scale youth and sport initiatives under the KJSD umbrella have raised concerns about transparency and governance. In particular, recent inquiries and audits have criticized the Higher Education Commission’s handling of sport-related funds and programs such as the FISU (Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire) World University Games. They have further called for stronger financial oversight and safeguards against nepotism and mismanagement (Abbasi, 2025). In part, this is because the Higher Education Commission has minimal to no expertise in sport management or sport governance. It is a centralized federal statutory body, established by the Government of Pakistan in 2002 under the chairmanship of Atta-ur-Rahman, responsible for funding, overseeing, regulating, and accrediting higher education institutions across the country. Put simply, the problem is not only the scale of funding but also the fit between mandate and expertise, with sport initiatives placed in institutions not designed to plan, regulate, or evaluate sport systems.

Pakistan’s sport governance history, overall, is profoundly shaped by its colonial and precolonial past, which has consequently shaped its contemporary structures and policies. Prior to colonial rule, the Mughal Empire meaningfully shaped the region’s sporting traditions by integrating activities like polo and wrestling into cultural and governance frameworks through the *mansab-dari* system. The Mughals’ basic impetus for using sport was to promote masculine hegemony and have imperial control over the Indian subcontinent. While British colonial rulers introduced modern sports like cricket, hockey, and squash as instruments of social control, they left behind a centralized

governance model that Pakistan inherited at independence. This legacy has influenced the country's sport culture, with tensions between provinces often reflecting the colonial emphasis on division and resource centralization. In modern Pakistan, initiatives such as the KJSD aimed to revitalize sports among the youth. However, challenges such as provincial disparities, governance inefficiencies, corruption, political favoritism, lack of sport governance expertise, and the lingering effects of colonial centralization continue to hinder progress.

American Soft Power and Exceptionalism in Afghanistan Through Sports: A Failed Strategy

After the US-led coalition ousted the Taliban in 2001, there was a resurgence of sports in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the question remains: Were US-led Afghan regimes able to create a sustainable sporting culture or enhance sporting opportunities for Afghan athletes? Especially in the two decades of control, did they enhance women's participation in sports in Afghanistan? These inquiries are pivotal, given that one of the principal justifications for the NATO-led invasion was the liberation of Afghan women, including enabling their participation in societal activities, such as sports.

While the U.S. government allocated approximately 141 billion USD for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021 (Government Accountability Office, 2021), specific data detailing the exact amount spent exclusively on sport development within this broader reconstruction budget is not readily available. The official records and news reports indicate that reconstruction funds encompassed various initiatives, including security, governance, infrastructure, and social programs, including numerous sport development programs under the U.S. government kinship. For instance, the U.S. Department of State's Sports Diplomacy Division (previously known as Sports United) facilitated Sports Envoys and Sports Visitors programs. Likewise, the "Promote Women's Leadership Development (WLD) Jawana Program" was introduced under the umbrella of USAID (USAID, 2017). This program trained young Afghan women to become business, government, and civil society leaders. For example, in Herat province, the Peace Runners group was established to organize a women's running competition to promote women's participation and leadership in sporting activities (USAID, 2017). Similarly, numerous sport for development organizations collaborated with the Afghan government and other civil society organizations to promote sport participation in various conservative areas of Pakistan. For example, Women without Borders (WwB) collaborated from 2003 to 2005 with local partners in Kabul to introduce basketball training programs for girls in schools (Women without Borders, 2003–2005). This initiative of WwB included teachers' training, facility construction, and instructional materials development in Dari to assist program adoption nationwide. The Ghazi Stadium in Kabul was also

rehabilitated as an arena for sporting activities rather than a site of public executions under Taliban rule. Various US-led funding projects were used for American sports like basketball and baseball among the Afghan community, which were relatively unfamiliar sports in Afghanistan. Hence, overall, the US-led NATO forces and Western organizations used sport to increase their soft power in Afghanistan, focusing on gender equality.

As initially theorized by Nye (1990, 2004), soft power refers to a nation's capability to influence others and achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than focusing on hard coercion such as war. In the realm of sport management scholarship, the soft power concept has been used to understand various states' funding of sporting events, especially mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics. Beyond soft power, events such as Qatar's 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup hosting have been considered a method of sportswashing (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Hussain, 2021). Sportswashing is the strategic utilization of sport-related affiliations or events by an entity to mitigate or obscure negative perceptions and unfavorable narratives (e.g., human rights abuses) surrounding its reputation (Bergkvist & Skeiseid, 2024). Furthermore, studies have additionally emphasized a strong connection between hosting mega-events and a nation's efforts to enhance its favorable soft power reputation (Grix & Lee, 2013). For instance, Grix and Houlihan (2013) registered that by hosting the 2012 Olympic Games, the UK successfully portrayed itself as a forward-thinking, diverse, and dynamic nation. Germany also leveraged the 2006 FIFA Men's World Cup to challenge and dismantle various stereotypes. Similarly, in Afghanistan, US-led NATO forces and Western organizations used sport explicitly as a soft power tool, often emphasizing media visibility and diplomatic symbolism over sustained local impact (see Brown, 2011; Campbell, 2011; Robertson, 2012; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016; Thorpe et al., 2018). Our critique here echoes wider critiques in the sport for development and peace literature about neoliberal, image-driven interventions, especially by Global North organizations (see Darnell, 2010; Giulianotti, 2011; Hayhurst et al., 2010).

Various American-introduced sports like basketball and baseball briefly gained a foothold but largely disappeared from the region as of 2025. The failure of sport programs introduced by U.S. government-led organizations follows from a lack of foresight and strategic planning in embedding sport as a sustainable aspect of Afghan society (Hussain & Cunningham, 2020). The absence of robust institutional frameworks and long-term support mechanisms for these programs left them vulnerable to political upheaval. This failure also reflects broader issues within the cultural and societal rebuilding approach of Western organizations, where Western sports were prioritized over indigenous games.

In contrast to the short-lived sustainability of many sports in Afghanistan (some introduced by the American-led forces), cricket is a notable example of a sport successfully embedded within contemporary Afghan society.

USAID programs contributed to the construction and rehabilitation of various cricket grounds from 2002 to 2021, ensuring cricket players had access to facilities meeting international standards. For instance, the Alokzay Kabul International Cricket Ground (one of the primary cricket venues in Afghanistan) benefited from international support from USAID and Care International, including US-linked projects promoting community development (Khaama Press, 2011). Although the United States played a supportive role in fostering the growth of cricket in Afghanistan after invading the country in 2001, cricket's roots in Afghanistan were established primarily through the influence of Pakistan. Cricket gained traction during the 1990s, when many Afghan refugees from Pushtun communities living in refugee camps in Pakistan were introduced to the sport. Over time, it evolved into a unifying activity that resonated with the local population because of its widespread popularity in neighboring South Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Thereby, cricket's success in Afghanistan is primarily driven by local enthusiasm and regional influences rather than by the United States and its partners' supportive funding.

American Soft Exceptionalism and WWE in Afghanistan

When U.S. troops were stationed in Afghanistan, one of the prominent entertainment brands that regularly visited to boost the troops' morale was WWE. Notable WWE superstars such as John Cena (John Felix Anthony Cena Jr.), The Undertaker (Mark William Calaway), and Triple H (Paul Levesque) participated in various visits as part of WWE's Tribute to the Troops initiative. Scholars previously argued that WWE played a critical, unique role in buttressing the idea of American exceptionalism (see Avery, 2020; Koh, 2022). Characters like Hulk Hogan and Lex Luger symbolized American patriotic ideals, rallying audiences with their battles against foreign adversaries. Likewise, the binary good versus evil morality created by WWE offers a clear and cathartic resolution that contrasts with the complexities of real-life conflicts to the American audience (Koh, 2022). Once, former WWE CEO Vince McMahon called Sabu (Terry Michael Brunk) a "Taliban" as part of a now-defunct storyline, and described him as "homicidal," "genocidal," and "suicidal."

The WWE's entertainment, patriotism, and imagery diplomacy in Afghanistan helped promote the brand's signal of entertainment integrated with nationalism. For the soldiers, the shows were a distraction from the brutal conditions of deployment that connected them with their homeland and the country they served. These trips by WWE, for the American viewers, helped maintain the nation's unity and global adherence to Americanism, thus highlighting WWE's position as a sociocultural institution in American culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reflected upon how the historical narrative of sports within Afghanistan and Pakistan profoundly impacted the current sporting traditions in both countries. From the strategic use of sports as instruments of cultural hegemony during the precolonial and colonial periods to the lingering colonial centralization in governance, the intersection of sport, history, and politics continues to shape the identities and aspirations of both nations. The British Empire's legacy of institutionalizing modern sport as a mechanism of social control and division starkly contrasts with the precolonial era's indigenous sporting traditions (e.g., the Basant festival) that emphasized community cohesion, inclusivity, and cultural expression. Moreover, the evolving role of sport as a medium of soft power, whether through state-led initiatives like the KPL or foreign interventions in Afghanistan, highlights its potent influence in both fostering unity and perpetuating divides. In the future, we argue that a nuanced and decolonial approach to sport governance is warranted for fostering sports in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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Sport Under Taliban Rule

The Fall of Kabul (2021), Human Rights, and Afghanistan–Pakistan Cricket Politics

Introduction

In 1996, the Taliban, with the international backing of the Pakistani army and its Western allies, captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Rashid, 2000). During their first reign from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban imposed harsh interpretations of Islamic Sharia law to control the country based on conservative religious ideology enacted through severe limitations on women's and minority rights, brutal punishments, and the suppression of dissent while also providing a semblance of order after years of civil war (Jami, 2022; Zada & Zada, 2024). The Taliban regime faced international isolation due to their human rights abuses and harboring of extremist groups like al-Qaeda, which culminated in their overthrow by a US-led coalition in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks. Hence, from late 2001 through August 2021, Afghanistan's internationally recognized national government was not the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. An interim administration in Afghanistan was established under the Bonn Agreement in 2001 (Kumar, 2001). Next, a transitional authority replaced the interim administration. In 2004, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was formed under a new constitution. The Afghan Republic operated with formal state institutions such as a presidency, ministries, courts, and an elected parliament. Nevertheless, the new system relied heavily on international financial support and foreign security assistance, especially from the United States. However, the Taliban remained outside the official governing framework during this period (late 2001–2021), and they continued an insurgency across parts of the country. In some areas, they also ran a "shadow" administration, controlling territory and enforcing conservative laws.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban again swept into Kabul with a resolute mission to dismantle Ashraf Ghani's government and reassert its dominion over the capital (Andisha, 2022; Seir et al., 2021a). The current revival of the Taliban movement is not born merely of their political ambitions but of a confluence of geopolitical events that took place over the two decades that left the nation vulnerable (Arya, 2021; Herd, 2021). Most notably, the withdrawal

of United States and coalition forces, initiated under the shadow of the joint US–Taliban 2020 Doha Agreement, was one of the root causes of the power vacuum that the Taliban exploited with disquieting precision. This process was finalized by former U.S. President Joe Biden’s announcement of a September 11, 2021 deadline for American military withdrawal, accelerating the Taliban’s resurgence (BBC News, 2021). What many political gurus believed would be an impossible transition unraveled with alarming speed, as the Afghan military, expected to resist with the strength of conviction and preparation, failed to do so. Instead, the Afghan military at that time collapsed like brittle sand under the weight of a desert storm (Basit, 2021). The abrupt fall of Kabul, steeped in both strategic miscalculations and the lingering echoes of foreign policy inertia, left Afghanistan shrouded in uncertainty, its people burdened by the heavy specter of promises unfulfilled, and all hopes being eroded (Herd, 2021; Sanger & Cooper, 2021).

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the Taliban’s two periods of rule have reshaped Afghan public life through the regulation of sport and related cultural practices, with particular attention to human rights and gendered exclusion. We frame the ideological roots of Talibanization alongside shifts in Pashtun identity. We then briefly examine the Taliban’s first reign from 1996 to 2001 by showing how authoritarian governance extended into recreation through the prohibition of women’s sport, strict control of men’s sport and spectatorship, the use of stadiums for public punishment, and the outlawing of various leisure activities, as part of broader cultural suppression. Next, we turn to the period since 2021 to outline the immediate ramifications for women athletes and women’s sporting spaces, while also analyzing the expansion and state endorsement of men’s sport, especially cricket, and the uneven response of international sport bodies to Afghanistan’s continued participation despite women’s exclusion. These strands are drawn together by demonstrating how sport, and cricket in particular, has become a site where Taliban social control, Afghan nationalism, regional politics, Afghanistan–Pakistan tensions, and the enduring Durand Line dispute intersect and are publicly performed.

The Roots of Talibanization and the Remaking of Pashtun Identity From Madrasa to Cricket Ground

The Taliban materialized as a substantial force in Afghanistan in the early 1990s following the Soviet Union’s withdrawal in 1989 (Maizland, 2023). The group was primarily composed of Pashtun religious students and former mujahideen (resistance fighters) who fought against the former Soviet Union. Most of these people were trained by the Pakistani military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), mainly within the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa territory formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) (Datta, 2015; Peters,

2009). Therefore, Pakistani sociopolitical culture, especially the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region's culture, profoundly influenced the Taliban movement. For instance, Haroon (2008) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the extensive impact of Deobandi Islam on the religious and political dynamics of both colonial India and post-independence Pakistan, spanning the period from 1914 to 1996. The Deobandi branch of Sunni Islam has historically strictly adhered to the Qur'an and opposed any variations or interpretations from the original text. It gained prominence in the late 1800s through the Darul Uloom Deoband madrasa (religious school) in northern India, which advocated for Muslim interests under British Rule (Haroon, 2008). After the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, Pakistani Deobandi scholars, especially those residing in the NWFP, upheld their identity by influencing legislation and securing Pakistan's status as an Islamic state. With growing resources and support of the Pakistani establishment, especially in the 1977–1988 era of the Islamist leader General Zia-ul-Haq, Deobandi scholars in the NWFP expanded their pull through madrasas (Haroon, 2008). They continued their expanded influence during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, as they aligned with Afghan resistance groups in Peshawar. Even after the Soviet Union's withdrawal, the Deobandi sect continued to provide scholarly support for religious resistance groups, which facilitated the shaping of the initial Taliban religious movement in 1996 by strengthening its conservative interpretation of Islamic scriptures (Haroon, 2008). These events cemented the connection among the militancy, politics, Pashtun nationalism, and religious conservatism in Afghanistan.

The rise of Talibanization in the early 1990s coincided with the emergence of Pashtun cricketers on the Pakistan national team, including Shahid Afridi, Younis Khan, Mohammad Akram, Arshad Khan, and Wajahatullah Wasti. Their presence on the international stage, representing Pakistan, helped shape a new dimension of Pashtuns' regional identity in sports. Among all the Pashtun cricketers representing Pakistan, Shahid Afridi, a leg-spinner and explosive batsman who later captained the Pakistan national cricket team, undoubtedly became a role model for countless Pashtuns on both sides of the border. Born in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018), Shahid Afridi is a member of the Afridi tribe, one of the most prominent Pashtun tribes with presence on both sides of the colonial-era Durand Line, which delineates Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Taliban's First Reign (1996–2001): Human Rights and Sports

Under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban controlled almost two-thirds of Afghanistan from its official takeover of the country in 1996 until 2001 (Maizland, 2023). In their first reign, the Taliban established a theocratic government grounded in an extreme interpretation of Islamic Sharia

law (Kleiner, 2000). The regime became notorious for harsh governance and human rights abuses and was widely known for the systematic repression of women, girls, and minorities (Kleiner, 2000). For instance, the Taliban regime established the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (*Amr bil-Maruf wa Nahi Anil Munkar*), which was responsible for enforcing draconian restrictions on women's daily lives. In 1998, Physicians for Human Rights conducted research to analyze the impact on Afghan women's health and overall well-being. They found 71% of participants reported a decline in health conditions, 53% disclosed being denied medical treatment despite experiencing grave health concerns, 97% exhibited symptoms of major depressive disorder, 42% displayed characteristics associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and 21% reported recurrent feelings of self-harm or suicide (Palmer, 1998).

The Taliban's policies in their first reign also devastated sports, particularly women's sports (Sadat, 2024). Although historical documentation is limited, available records indicate that a significant number of Afghan women previously engaged in sports as a result of their integration into the school curriculum. Various records show that Afghan women competed in athletics (track and field), volleyball, and swimming in the 1970s and 1980s (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2016; "The evolving role," n.d.). Notably, in 1986, Afghanistan witnessed the formation of its first women's cycling team (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2016). When the Taliban came into power in 1996, women were strictly forbidden to compete, train, or participate in any form of sport or physical recreation per the Taliban's limited interpretation of Sharia, which led to international repercussions. For instance, Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee was suspended from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1999 because of the Taliban prohibition on women's competitions (ABC News, 2000). As a result, the country was excluded from the 2000 Sydney Olympics as the regime refused to send any women athletes, violating the IOC's gender inclusion requirements (ABC News, 2000).

In contrast, men's sports were officially allowed but were heavily regulated under strict rules designed to enforce the Taliban's conservative values and ideological framework (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2016; Kallini, 2021; Schulz & Schulz, 1999). For example, male football (soccer) players were required to dress modestly by wearing long pants or long shorts with high socks and full beards. These rules were made to make athletes avoid skin exposure or breaking religious codes as interpreted by the Taliban. Popular sports and games deemed "un-Islamic," such as the traditional Afghan game of *buzkashi* (horseback polo with a goat carcass) or even kite flying, were outlawed as they were perceived to promote un-Islamic values or excessive violence.

Sport spectatorship and public enjoyment of sports were also heavily impacted during the Taliban's first reign. The regime barred most forms of mass media entertainment, notably television, music, and cinema, which made watching sports on television or listening to sports commentary virtually

impossible inside Afghanistan. Nevertheless, some public sporting events, such as local football matches, did continue for men. However, women were not permitted to attend as spectators due to the ban on their unaccompanied presence in public spaces.

Stadiums and various types of sporting facilities, which under normal circumstances might unite communities for sporting games, instead became notorious sites of fear. The Taliban often used Kabul's main sporting facility, Ghazi Stadium, and other stadiums throughout the country for public punishments and sometimes even for religious executions (PBS NewsHour, 2023). Often ensuing at halftime, especially during football games, these punishments turned stadiums from places of athletic display into venues for displays of power, intimidation, and fear. This practice underscored the Taliban's manipulation of public spaces to instill obedience and demonstrate their control over Afghan society.

Despite these restrictions, the Taliban recognized cricket in 2000, perhaps because its players were gaining international success, or perhaps more because of the deep support of cricket within the Pashtun community.

Outlawing of *Gudiparan Bazi* (Kite Flying)

Kite flying, or *gudiparan bazi*, has been integral to Afghan cultural life for centuries (International Rescue Committee, n.d.; Podelco, 2020). This cherished pastime embodied freedom, artistic expression, and communal unity, with complicatedly crafted kites serving as a canvas for Afghan cultural identity and creative innovation (Podelco, 2020; "Kite Runners return in Afghanistan," 2010). Historical records suggest kites arrived in Afghanistan or broadly in Southeast Asia through Silk Road exchanges from China (Yolen & Young, 1967). Moreover, this leisure activity became profoundly embedded in Afghan society by the early twentieth century. Over time, kite fighting evolved from a recreational pastime into a highly skilled and competitive pursuit, where participants manipulated their kites to sever opponents' strings using glass-coated lines ("Kite Runners return in Afghanistan," 2010). *Gudiparan bazi* gained widespread popularity across Afghanistan as it transcended social barriers, allowing people from all backgrounds to participate equally. Unlike traditional sports such as *buzkashi*, which remained historically tied to social hierarchy and elite patronage, kite flying fostered inclusivity and a shared cultural experience among Afghans of all classes.

The *gudiparan bazi* practice reached its peak popularity in urban centers such as Kabul and Kandahar, where people organized public kite battles. Despite its sociocultural impact on the country, the Taliban's first regime (1996–2001) imposed a strict prohibition on kite flying by categorizing it as an un-Islamic distraction that diverted young men from religious obligations (Al Jazeera, 2021a). The ban was part of the Taliban's broader campaign of cultural suppression, which endeavored to target music, sport, and various

forms of artistic and cultural expression. Enforced through brutal crackdowns by the Taliban's moral police, the ban destroyed kites, closed kite shops, and punished those who defied the order. This suppression deprived Afghan communities of a cherished tradition and contributed to the erasure of public joy by reinforcing the Taliban's oppressive grip on daily life. However, even under these harsh restrictions, kite flying persisted in various private spaces. Some Afghans secretly crafted and flew kites as an act of quiet defiance. The Taliban's attempt to erase this cultural tradition underscored the extent to which authoritarian regimes seek to control not only political and religious life but also the social and recreational customs that shape national identity.

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 led to the rapid resurgence of kite flying. Thousands of Afghans started to reclaim the skies in a vivid display of cultural resilience. The revival of the *gudiparan bazi* tradition became a potent symbol of Afghanistan's renewed freedom by illustrating the population's determination to restore lost aspects of their heritage. Kite shops opened, kite-flying tournaments returned, and this cultural practice once again flourished as a fundamental element of Afghan life. In subsequent years, after the end of the Taliban's first era, kite flying gained global recognition, with international festivals celebrating the tradition and Afghan literature—such as Khaled Hosseini's 2003 book *The Kite Runner* and a subsequent Hollywood movie—bringing its significance to worldwide audiences. Therefore, the Taliban's ban ultimately failed to erase the deep-rooted cultural affinity Afghans hold for kite flying. Instead, the prohibition inadvertently reinforced its status as a powerful emblem of resistance.

The Taliban's first reign (1996–2001), in summary, was marked by extreme authoritarian control that inflicted severe human rights violations, especially against women and minorities (e.g., the Shia Hazara community). For instance, after the Taliban seized Mazar-i Sharif in August 1998, Human Rights Watch (1998) reported that fighters conducted organized door-to-door searches to locate Hazara residents and then carried out on-the-spot executions of at least 2,000 Hazara young men and boys. Moreover, they reported Taliban fighters made some people “demonstrate” they were not Shia-Muslims by having them recite Sunni prayers (Human Rights Watch, 1998). The regime's gender-apartheid policies, furthermore, stripped women of fundamental rights, such as education, employment, and freedom of movement. This era was marked by repression with violence, and fear. After the Taliban were ousted in 2001, Afghan women slowly regained their rights—girls returned to school, women rejoined the workforce, and female athletes even competed on the international stage once again. However, the legacy of 1996–2001 serves as a stark reminder of how fragile these gains can be. The Taliban's first regime left lasting scars on Afghanistan's society, and its policies cast a long shadow—one that has tragically reappeared with the Taliban's return to power in recent years. The period of Taliban rule in the late 1990s stands as a cautionary tale of how wholly and swiftly fundamental rights can be overturned,

underlining the critical importance of protecting human rights and inclusive cultural life in Afghanistan.

Taliban Current Reign (2021–Present): Immediate Ramifications on Sports

Human Rights and Women's Sports

After the fall of the Taliban's first regime in 2001, prohibitions on sport participation were lifted, though many cultural practices and expectations continued to shape access to sport and participation. Women were allowed to practice sport again, typically in venues that were not open to male spectators, and Afghanistan sent two women to the 2004 Summer Olympics in Greece. In 2007, a women's national football team began play, and by 2012, they reached the semi-finals of the South Asian Football Federation Cup. In 2010, a women's cricket team was created, though it was disbanded a few years later due to conservative pressure (Khanna, 2023). In 2020, the ACB made another attempt to build a women's national cricket team; however, it was dismantled a year later when the Taliban returned to power (Khanna, 2023).

After the Taliban regained *de facto* control in 2021, their officials publicly promised broad amnesty and suggested women's rights and media freedom would be respected under their interpretation of Islamic law (Al Jazeera, 2021b; Seir et al., 2021b). Since then, however, Afghanistan's human rights landscape has sharply deteriorated. UNESCO (2024) reported that at least 1.4 million girls have been deliberately excluded from secondary schooling since 2021, and girls and women remain barred from secondary and higher education. Women's participation in public life has also been curtailed through restrictions on most employment and bans on many public spaces and recreational activities, such as parks and gyms (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). Civic space has narrowed as well: Reporters Without Borders (2021) documented the closure of 231 media outlets soon after the takeover. A United Nations human rights report describes widespread intimidation, arbitrary detention, and ill-treatment of media workers (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Meanwhile, women protesters and civil society critics have reported unlawful force, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances, while ethnic and religious communities (including Shia-Hazara) have faced continued marginalization (Amnesty International Canada, 2024).

In the context of sport, many female athletes fled for their lives. All of the members of the newly formed women's national cricket team, for instance, fled to Australia. Also, those who could not escape essentially live in hiding, fearing reprisals or bans on their activities ("Afghan IOC," 2025). The women's football team was evacuated during a chaotic rush for people to escape,

though any family members who did not escape were beaten by the Taliban (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024). American human rights activist Shannon Galpin evacuated over 120 female cyclists to seven different nations (Amanat, 2023), and the women's cricket team sought asylum in Australia. Sport facilities that previously served women were either permanently shut down or transformed for exclusive male usage. Sadat (2024) described a female gym owner who shared the heartbreak of watching her fitness center, established as a safe space for women's health and empowerment, being forced to close. Those who did not flee are essentially in hiding in Afghanistan. One former volleyball player recounted how she once pursued excellence in her sport but now lives in constant fear and cannot even step onto a playing field without risking her life (Sadat, 2024).

The Taliban's current blanket ban not only violates international human rights law but also blatantly contravenes the Olympic Charter, which demands non-discrimination in sport. Despite Human Rights Watch and other advocates calling for Afghanistan's men's sports teams to be suspended from international sports competitions until women can once again freely and safely participate, men's teams continue to compete internationally. There are clear shortcomings of international interventions. Sporting regulatory bodies such as the IOC, the ICC, and FIFA, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have offered limited assistance to Afghan female athletes in exile, such as the women's cricket team in exile in Australia (Buckle, 2025). However, these organizations have also refrained from implementing decisive measures, such as suspending Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee or banning the Afghan men's national cricket team from playing in ICC tournaments (Sadat, 2024).

Men's Sports Under Taliban Rule

At the same time that women's participation in sporting arenas remained strictly prohibited by the Taliban, men's sports were growing. For example, the Afghan men's futsal team reached the FIFA Futsal World Cup in 2024 (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024). In 2025, the Taliban-controlled National Olympic Committee announced a 700,000 USD pool of stipends to be paid to 3,767 athletes participating in *vovinam* (a Vietnamese martial art also known as Viet Do Dao), *zurkhaneh* (an ancient Iranian form of martial arts), full-contact fighting, powerlifting, and skiing (Inside the Games, 2025).

More importantly, cricket is currently thriving with considerable state endorsement. The regime facilitated the growth of privately funded cricket academies, allocated millions of USD from the central government to the ACB, and announced plans to build cricket stadiums across the country (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024; Noack, 2024). External funding into cricket continued to flow to Afghanistan, with the ICC contributing about 16 million USD annually to the ACB (Noack, 2024).

The Taliban strictly controls the media and prohibits many forms of digital entertainment, yet cricket receives many exemptions. Because Afghanistan's national cricket team often plays its "home" fixtures abroad, most fans follow matches through a mix of domestic broadcasting and the circulation of highlights via phone. On the broadcast side, Ariana Television Network (ATN) broadcasts various cricket tournaments in Afghanistan, while the state broadcaster Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA) distributes programming via a live streaming platform. When many Afghans cannot watch full matches live, they stay updated through short-form videos and official messages posted by the ACB on its YouTube channel. Moreover, international cricket media outlets such as ESPNcricinfo provide free live scores, schedules, and match reports.

The Taliban's engagement with men's sport reflects a balance of ideological rigidity with a pragmatic interest, especially in the context of cricket, which holds a distinctive place in Afghanistan's national identity (Rahim, 2020). The Afghan national cricket team continues to compete under the tricolor flag of the former republic rather than the Taliban's white banner. The team has also been forced to play its "home" matches in exile, often in the United Arab Emirates. Despite these symbolic divergences from the Taliban regime's ideology, the Taliban leadership has demonstrated a degree of tolerance toward the Afghan national team. This was evident during the 2024 T20 World Cup when Afghanistan reached the semi-finals, prompting Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's foreign minister, to personally congratulate team captain Rashid Khan ("Taliban Minister congratulates," 2024). The ACB later released a video of their exchange by framing the achievement as a moment of national pride. Abdul Ghafar Farooq, a spokesman for the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue, stated simply, "Cricket brings the country together" (Noack, 2024). The Taliban gained domestic legitimacy by associating themselves with national cricket heroes, while simultaneously receiving international legitimacy from sending national teams to international competitions (Bekmurzaev & Shanori, 2024).

However, this accommodation applies solely to men's cricket. The international cricketing community has responded to Afghan women's exclusion from cricket with measured resistance and bewildered signals. In early 2023, Cricket Australia canceled a scheduled series against Afghanistan's men's team, citing the "marked deterioration" in human rights for women under the Taliban's current rule (Hytner, 2024). This was the second such cancellation in a year, which signaled a broader opposition to engaging with Afghan cricket while women remain barred from participation. Nevertheless, the ICC's role in this situation remains questionable.

The ICC has faced mounting criticism for maintaining Afghanistan's full membership despite the Taliban's restrictions on women's cricket (Sirat, 2025). According to ICC regulations, member nations must field a women's team and invest in women's cricket development (Goldschmidt, 2024). Obviously,

Afghanistan currently fails to meet these conditions. Nevertheless, the ICC has refrained from imposing sanctions or suspension. In a statement justifying their decision, they said:

The ICC will not penalise the ACB, or its players, for abiding by the laws set by the government of their country. We will continue to constructively use our influence to assist the ACB in developing cricket and playing opportunities for both men and women in Afghanistan.

(ESPNcricinfo, 2025)

Therefore, the ICC has opted for a cautious approach that avoids formally recognizing the Taliban government while hoping for internal change. This hesitancy has sparked debate over whether allowing Afghanistan's men's team to compete constitutes a form of sportswashing by providing the Taliban with a veneer of international legitimacy despite its systematic repression of women in sport.

Men's Cricket and Boiling Afghan Nationalism

Afghanistan versus Pakistan: The New Cricket Rivalry

The rise of Afghan cricket is profoundly knotted with national identity, refugee experiences, and regional geopolitics (Khan, 2013; Rahim, 2020). From its humble beginnings in refugee camps in Pakistan to competing at the highest levels of international cricket in recent international ICC tournaments, Afghanistan's journey in this sport reflects resilience and shifting regional alliances. Pakistan was pivotal in nurturing Afghan cricket by providing training grounds, competitive exposure, and mentorship to Afghan players during their formative years (see the example of Rashid Khan in Chapter 1). However, as Afghanistan's cricketing stature has grown, the sport has become a vessel for national assertion and geopolitical alignment. For example, amid recent heightened tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban authorities, particularly Pakistan's concerns about an increase in militant violence and the growing relationship between the Kabul and Delhi governments, Afghanistan withdrew from a T20 tri-series scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2025 (Reuters, 2025b). This episode illustrates how decisions about Afghan government participation in international sport now function as a form of geopolitical signaling rather than merely as athletic scheduling. This geopolitical strategy was especially important for Afghanistan to signal to the Indian government that it supports its stance of isolating Pakistan from international cricket, especially after terrorist attacks in Kashmir in 2025.

Moreover, the former President of Afghanistan from 2014 to 2021, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, routinely criticized Pakistan for being responsible

for the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan (Putz, 2016). The Taliban's historical links with the Pakistani military establishment have also raised concerns about Pakistan being the primary supporter of the Taliban in the region. This has created a sense of strong resentment against Pakistanis, especially against the Pakistan Army, among numerous Afghans, especially those who fled the country because of Taliban repression. Additionally, India's increasing support for the Afghan men's cricket team in the last decade, including the provision of home venues and financial assistance, led to a shift in Afghanistan's cricketing ties, creating tension with Pakistan. This transition away from Pakistan mirrored the broader geopolitical reorientation of Afghanistan toward India, with cricket serving as an extension of diplomatic and nationalistic narratives. Overall, there is a tense relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which can also be seen in sport stadiums. In recent high-stakes encounters at ICC events, crowd violence, nationalistic rhetoric, and heated exchanges have been observed between Pakistani and Afghan cricket fans (Williams, 2022). For instance, during a thriller match between Pakistan and Afghanistan at the Asia Cup in Sharjah Cricket Stadium in 2022, there was an extreme level of tension within and outside the cricket ground. However, the fluctuations in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations should not be viewed solely through the lens of recent decades; instead, they require a deeper historical analysis, starting with an understanding of the Durand Line conflict.

Durand Line: The Historical Colonial Boundary Between Pakistan and Afghanistan

The Durand Line is an approximately 2,600-km boundary delineating the territorial division between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Khan, 2017). This boundary is one of South Asia's most contentious and geopolitically significant borders. Established in 1893 through an agreement between British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghanistan's Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, this boundary was considered a strategic measure to counter the growing Russian influence in the region (Omrani, 2009). More specifically, the British Raj sought to establish a strategic boundary between its Indian territories and Afghanistan as a part of a policy known historically as the "Great Game" (Anwar et al., 2020). Hence, Sir Mortimer Durand primarily divided the region to prevent potential incursions into British India and considered Afghanistan as a buffer state between Russia and the British-controlled areas.

Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, the Durand Line emerged as a persistent, 80-year source of conflict and division by fueling tensions between the Afghan and Pakistani communities. For example, when Pakistan applied for membership in the United Nations in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country to oppose its admission. The Afghan leadership at that time cited the Durand Line as a colonial line and claimed Afghanistan had rights over various Pashtun territories, which Pakistan currently controls. Several historians

and locals contend that the Durand Line Agreement was established under coercion during the colonial period and was never envisioned as a lasting demarcation (Satia, 2021). Furthermore, they argue that the treaty was a bilateral arrangement between Afghanistan and British India, rather than with an independent Pakistan, thereby implying that it should have been terminated following the dissolution of British Rule in 1947. Likewise, evidence suggests that Afghan leaders, including King Zahir Shah (1933–1973) and later President Mohammad Daoud Khan (1973–1978), openly supported Pashtun movements against the Pakistani establishment, with the claim over the Pashtun regions of Pakistan. In 1961, diplomatic relations between the two countries broke down completely, which led to border closures for several years between Pakistan and Afghanistan. They only reopened in May 1963, after Daoud's resignation and an Iran-mediated Tehran accord restored relations and trade.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989), Pakistan played a crucial role in supporting the Afghan mujahideen (resistance fighters) with the help of the United States (Hoodbhoy, 2005). This profoundly shaped the conflict's trajectory. While the mujahideen waged guerrilla warfare against Soviet forces, over four million Afghans were displaced by violence and instability, and many of those refugees sought refuge in Pakistan (Albrecht et al., 2021). The mass migration temporarily strengthened bilateral ties, as Pakistan became a vital sanctuary for Afghan fighters and civilians. However, despite this period of relative cooperation, successive Afghan governments have consistently refused to recognize the Durand Line, dismissing it as a colonial relic devoid of legitimacy in an independent Pakistan.

Fast forward, under the Taliban's first regime (1996–2001), the Durand Line issue remained largely unaddressed at the official level. While the Taliban refrained from making explicit official declarations, many within the group implicitly rejected Pakistan's territorial claims (Imran, 2024). Following the Taliban's fall in 2001, successive Afghan administrations continued to deny formal recognition of the boundary, leading to exacerbated tensions between Kabul and Islamabad. The dispute reignited with greater intensity in 2021 as the Taliban regained power. Unlike their previous rule, the Taliban's current administration has openly challenged Pakistan's border policies by dismantling border fencing and resisting Pakistani control over key crossings, such as Torkham and Chaman. These actions have led to frequent clashes, further straining bilateral relations. Beyond the border dispute, Pakistan faces security challenges stemming from cross-border militant activities. The presence of militant Deobandi groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating from Afghan territory has heightened tensions. Pakistan's military continues counterterrorism operations, but the porous border and the Taliban's ambiguous stance on the TTP's movement across the border complicate these efforts. Ultimately, the Durand Line remains a focal point of historical grievances and power struggles between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As tensions escalate, the

dispute persists as a major obstacle to regional stability, with profound implications for diplomacy, security, and geopolitical alignments in South Asia. Beyond history, politics, and security, strained relations and deep resentment within the Afghan community against the Pakistani establishment have also spilled over into sports, particularly cricket, where diplomatic hostilities have fueled on-field rivalries, disrupted bilateral series, and intensified competitive spirit between the two nations on the global stage.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined how the Taliban's two periods of rule have changed Afghan public life. Their control of sport and related cultural activities has acted as a form of social regulation, most clearly through gender-based exclusion but also through control over public spaces and leisure. In both eras, sport is not seen as a neutral activity. Instead, it is used as a political tool to show authority, enforce norms, and display nationalism, especially through cricket.

During the Taliban's first reign (1996–2001), women were categorically barred from sport and physical recreation, a prohibition that carried international consequences, including the suspension of Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee and exclusion from the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Men's sports, while permitted, were tightly regulated to align bodies, clothing, and conduct with the regime's ideological framework, while leisure practices deemed "un-Islamic," including kite flying, were suppressed as part of broader cultural control. Most chillingly, stadiums were transformed from civic gathering places into stages of intimidation, with public punishments and executions turning athletic infrastructure into architecture of fear. Even within this restrictive landscape, cricket's recognition signaled an early glimpse of its distinctive political utility and resonance within Afghan society.

Since 2021, similar patterns have returned more quickly. Despite early promises, Afghanistan's human rights situation has worsened. Girls and women are still excluded from education, and women's participation in public life has been further restricted, including bans from parks and gyms. In sport, this has had serious effects: many female athletes have fled or are in hiding, and women's sport facilities have closed or been repurposed. Moreover, the Taliban's ban directly conflicts with the Olympic Charter's non-discrimination rule. Meanwhile, men's sports, especially cricket, have grown with government support. This has helped the Taliban gain support at home by linking themselves to cricket stars and gaining international attention through ongoing participation. International sport organizations have responded unevenly, offering limited help to women athletes in exile and avoiding strong sanctions. There is an ongoing debate about whether allowing Afghanistan to compete is a form of sportswashing that hides the reality of women's exclusion. In addition, tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially over the Durand

Line and terrorism, have turned into sporting (cricket) rivalries. Cricket, in other words, has become a threefold instrument of Taliban governance: it disciplines public life through regulation and exclusion, manufactures nationalist legitimacy through staged success and symbolism, and operates as a geopolitical signal that amplifies Afghanistan–Pakistan antagonisms historically anchored in the Durand Line. Taken together, these examples show us why Afghanistan’s experience warns us about the fragility of human rights and inclusive public life when sport is used for political power rather than serving the people. Therefore, we advocate to international bodies to stop normalizing and supporting gender apartheid in Afghanistan. We also call for urgent protection and support of Afghan women and minority athletes in exile and under threat.

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The Rise and Fall of Imran Khan and Its Enduring Impact on Sports in the Indian Subcontinent

Introduction

The transition of athletes into political roles within the Indian subcontinent after their retirement from sport provides a rich arena for academic discourse. As early as 1928, the captain of India's Olympic gold medal-winning field hockey team, Jaipal Singh Munda, forged a political career in India's Constituent Assembly. However, no other athlete in the subcontinent's history influenced the sporting discourse as profoundly as Pakistan's Imran Khan (Sadiq, 2019), whose impact transcended athletic achievement and reshaped the intersections between sport, society, and politics in the entire region. The extensive historical record of romance between sport and politics in the subcontinent underlines the broader context within which Imran Khan's subsequent political ascension unfolded and can be unraveled through various theoretical viewpoints.

This book chapter explores Imran Khan's rise and fall, examining his substantial impact on the sporting and political landscape of Pakistan and all of South Asia. In addition, we unravel the impact of Imran Khan's governmental structural reforms on Pakistan's sporting institutions. Therefore, this chapter offers not only an understanding of the case of Imran Khan in the sporting-political context but also of the unique sociopolitical background that shaped overall sporting consumption and governance in Pakistan. Lastly, at the end of this chapter, we present the Capital Conversion Continuum of the Athlete-to-Politician Transition model in the Indian subcontinent context. The continuum illustrates how athletes in the Indian subcontinent convert sporting capital into political power through identity advocacy, nationalism, and elite privilege, using Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction theory as a lens.

Tribes, Titles, and Transformation: The Making of Imran Khan's Public Persona

Ethnically from a Pashtun background, Imran Khan was born in Lahore on October 5, 1952 (Javaid, 2023). On his paternal side, he belongs to the Sher-mankhel sub-clan of the Niazi tribe, while his mother belonged to the famous

Burki tribe, a Pashtun group with historical ancestry in Logar, Afghanistan, and Kaniguram, South Waziristan. Imran Khan's ascension as the 22nd Prime Minister of Pakistan reignited public fascination with his ancestral roots as well as sparked broader sociocultural debate within Pakistan concerning the appropriate attribution of his surname, as numerous individuals wondered whether he should be more accurately recognized as Khan or Niazi (Khanzada, 2018). The term Khan, derived from Mongol origins (e.g., Genghis Khan), historically denoted rulership (Khanzada, 2018). This term was later adopted across South Asia as a mark of prestige, especially among Pashtun tribal hierarchies. However, in contemporary usage, the term Khan is often detached from specific ethnic lineage and is instead a symbolic title rather than a genealogical indicator. In contrast, the name Niazi holds deeper tribal specificity, which traces back to the progenitor Niazaey, a descendant of Qais Bin Rashid, who was the mythical patriarch of the Pashtun communities (Khanzada, 2018). Moreover, despite being raised in Lahore in Punjab Province, Imran Khan's familial lineage linked him to Mianwali, a district on the cusp of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, contributing to ongoing discourse over whether his cultural identity aligns more with Punjabi, Saraiki, or Pashtun heritage.

Khan's ethnic identity of being Niazi has been a key element of his political discourse, yet his political opponents attempted to discredit him by drawing a controversial association with Lieutenant General Ameer Abdullah Khan Niazi, the military officer who surrendered to Indian forces in the 1971 Bangladesh war (Malik, 2014; Mir, 2015). Khan shared the surname of Niazi, but there was no direct familial or ideological connection between them.

On the other hand, Imran Khan highlighted his Pashtun identity multiple times while discussing his viewpoint about the Taliban (who are mainly from a Pashtun ethnic background). Critics argued that his softer stance toward the Taliban was basically because of his family roots, with some calling him "Taliban Khan" (Afzal, 2019; "Imran says," 2016; Qureshi, 2024). Nevertheless, Imran Khan's religious beliefs underwent a significant alteration over the past 50 years, transferring from a liberal Casanova cricketer to a politician with strong right-wing views.

Playboy: The Heartthrob "Mr. Handsome"

Khan's ascent to global prominence in the early days of his sporting career derived from a dual reputation: athletic excellence on the cricket field and an aura of cosmopolitan glamour off it. In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous Western and South Asian media routinely applied the epithet "playboy" to describe Khan's public persona. Periodically captured at exclusive social gatherings and romantically associated with high-profile models and socialites, he embodied a stylish nonconformity that fascinated admirers while simultaneously provoking disquiet among Pakistan's more traditional constituencies.

That early image of the urbane “playboy” persisted throughout his subsequent personal life, intersecting most visibly with his marriages and the controversies they generated. The 1995 union with British heiress Jemima Goldsmith was widely interpreted as evidence of growing domestic stability; however, it dissolved in 2004 amid pronounced cultural frictions. A decade later, Khan’s brief 2015 marriage to journalist Reham Khan collapsed within months as well. This followed a wave of allegations, including those advanced in Reham’s later memoir, of emotional manipulation and infidelity, thus reinvigorating dormant “playboy” narratives. His 2018 marriage to Bushra Bibi, his spiritual mentor, contrasted sharply with earlier relationships and signaled an overt embrace of religious devotion and moral rectitude.

Although Khan later in life cultivated an image of piety and reform-minded leadership, the “playboy” trope remained a salient lens through which critics interpreted his conduct. To date, his supporters continue to refer to him as “Mr. Handsome” on social posts. Opponents leveraged his private history in political contests, while legal difficulties—from corruption accusations to electoral disqualification—reinforced public polarization. Consequently, the tension between Khan’s flamboyant youth and his later claims to austere integrity exemplifies the complexity of his character and sustained a divided national discourse regarding his legacy and personal life.

The Rise of “Skipper”: Imran Khan, an Exceptional Cricketer and Captain

Imran Khan’s progression from a talented young cricketer to a globally recognized political figure embodies a compelling narrative marred by significant triumphs, allegations, and continuous challenges (Sehri, 2024). For Khan, understanding cricket naturally came from his maternal family roots in this sport. His maternal uncle, Jahangir Khan, was an established cricketer who played for British India before the partition in 1947, and two of his cousins, Majid Khan and Javed Burki, were also prominent Pakistani cricketers (Sen Gupta, 2024). Therefore, Imran Khan was heavily influenced by his maternal side during his childhood in his choice of cricket. Khan received his early education at Aitchison College, one of Pakistan’s most prestigious schools, before continuing his studies at the Royal Grammar School in Worcester, UK, and later at Oxford’s Keble College. His time at Oxford played a significant role in shaping both his cricketing prowess and his broader ideological worldview. For example, in his political speeches, he often referenced the impartiality of the British justice system. He also built a network of social connections in the UK that would prove valuable in his later philanthropic and political career. Finally, Khan played first-class cricket and refined his skills on the English county circuit, most notably with Sussex.

Imran Khan made his Test debut for Pakistan in 1971 against England at Edgbaston. With a towering athletic frame, a smooth, elegant action, and early international exposure, Khan quickly caught the eye of cricketing circles

as a fast-medium bowler celebrated for lively pace and, above all, his mastery of reverse swing. Khan learned the dark art of reverse swing from Sarfraz Nawaz and passed it to a golden generation (e.g., Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis) whose thunderous deliveries would redefine fast bowling.

He gradually developed into a genuine all-rounder by blending aggressive fast bowling with solid and, at numerous times, flamboyant batting. As an all-rounder, he achieved the vaunted triple of 3,000 runs and 300 wickets, which is a testament to his dual brilliance. In 1982, Khan was appointed as the Pakistani national team captain. Moreover, in 1983, he received the prestigious Wisden Cricketer of the Year award. Khan's charismatic leadership guided Pakistan to a historic Test series victory in India in 1987—their first on Indian soil against their long-time rivals (Paracha, 2017).

Imran Khan was also known for finding raw talents, such as Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis, and Inzamam-ul-Haq, who ruled the cricketing arenas for more than two decades after Khan's retirement. Khan, moreover, etched his name in the world's cricketing history in 1992 by steering Pakistan to its first—and thus far only—ICC One Day Cricket World Cup triumph. Playing through injuries and on the verge of retirement, Khan was able to galvanize a struggling squad to rebound from early losses and reach the final against England in Melbourne. In the finals, Khan entered the field wearing a shirt emblazoned with "Cornered Tigers," transforming the slogan into a powerful visual symbol of defiance and resilience for his team. Capturing the message that a tiger is most dangerous when trapped, he urged the team to see themselves as underdogs who could transform pressure into fearless, all-out performance. He effectively rallied his side, and Khan contributed a decisive 72 runs in the final, leading to a historic victory. His leadership in high-pressure moments in the 1992 tournament earned universal admiration.

Under his leadership, Pakistan conquered foreign cricket pitches in India and England, victories that reverberated far beyond the boundary. Imran Khan also provided a new aura to cricket, where flamboyancy was unheard of in South Asian cricketers; he soon became a heartthrob of teenagers. However, as a politician and later as the Prime Minister of Pakistan, he often took the right-wing viewpoint of the world and was a vocal supporter of religious reforms in the country, which contradicted his Western lifestyle during his cricketing career.

Influence of the 1992 Cricket World Cup on Pakistan in the Sociopolitical Context of the 1990s

India's 1983 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup win under the helm of legendary Kapil Dev dealt a stinging blow to Pakistan's sporting pride. The nation was left disheartened and craving its own moment of global recognition to escape from its sociopolitical misery. Sports such as cricket provided them with this means. Nonetheless, at the start of the 1992 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup, Pakistan did not perform well and was considered an underdog. However,

beating England, their former colonial masters, in the finals awakened a dormant collective pride, igniting in every alley and street of Pakistan a belief that miracles could happen in sporting arenas.

The 1992 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup stands as a monumental chapter for Pakistan and aligned perfectly with a broader communication boom in South Asia in the 1990s (Kim, 2008; Sonwalkar, 2001). Cricket, once followed through the imagination and crackle of radio commentary, was replaced with vibrant television screens, allowing the Pakistani nation to bear witness not just to a victory but also to a transformation in how sporting stories were experienced. This was a dramatic shift from sound to sight and from solitary listening to collective watching, which caused a cultural awakening driven by the glowing box in the corner of every home. Hence, people were able to see the charismatic Imran Khan rather than imagine him from radio commentaries or newspaper pictures.

Beyond the scoreboard and the cricketing world, the win reverberated through the nation's sociocultural corridors as well. This victory redefined the ethos of ambition in Pakistani youth. The 1992 ICC Men's World Cup became a parable taught in homes, bazaars, and classrooms. The next generation started to dream larger than their circumstances. Thereby, cricket emerged not just as a sport but as a national identity that weaved itself into the very fabric of Pakistani life. Media, education, and public discourse echoed with metaphors drawn from the game, turning numerous players into national heroes. Imran Khan, in particular, transcended the boundary rope, evolving from captain to statesman, his leadership on the pitch foreshadowing a future role in guiding the nation itself.

Today, the 1992 ICC Men's World Cup victory lingers not just in memory but in legacy as it continues to cast a long shadow over Pakistan's cricketing and overall sporting aspirations (Kamran, 2023; Ransom, 2022). More than 33 years on, its influence endures in the ambitions of young cricketers and every athlete, in the dreams of citizens seeking national revival, and in the poetic chorus from unity amidst adversity. The 1992 Cricket World Cup for Pakistan was not merely a trophy; it could be considered a turning point, which echoed the existence of Pakistan after 1947.

Furthermore, from a political perspective, the end of the 1980s and early 1990s was also an era of hope for the end of sociopolitical unrest in South Asia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and increasing optimism for a new global order, there was renewed expectation that longstanding regional conflicts could finally move toward resolution (De Silva, 1994). After having a hostile attitude toward each other in the 1970s, the Pakistan and Indian governments began to improve relations. Nonetheless, the early 1990s also brought political turbulence back to Pakistan's internal politics. Democratic political parties, coming to power in 1988 after the long dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, were blamed for corruption and misuse of power (Shaikh et al., 2019). Thereby, Pakistan as a nation was going through lulls of despair

after a few years of optimism about change. Hence, the 1992 Cricket World Cup had a significant social as well as political impact on developing Pakistan's identity.

The Next Steps After Cricket: Imran Khan as a Philanthropist and Politician

Philanthropy

After retirement in 1992, Khan harnessed his considerable fame from cricket to establish himself initially as a philanthropist and subsequently as a nationalist political leader. Following the death of his mother, Mrs. Shaukat Khanum, from cancer in 1985, Khan resolved to establish a facility in her name that would deliver equitable oncology care in Pakistan. Intensive domestic and diaspora fundraising, initially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, garnered more than 25 million USD. This sum of money was largely raised through small individual donations, even from schoolchildren, so that a generation of Pakistanis who never saw him play was nonetheless affected by his influence. The donations enabled Pakistan's first cancer hospital, the Shaukat Khanum Hospital, to officially open on December 29, 1994, in Lahore. The facility was constituted as a not-for-profit trust, and the business model has since ensured that roughly three-quarters of all patients receive treatment free of charge.

Understanding Imran Khan's Legacy on the Sporting World Before Coming to Power

Before ascending to political prominence, Imran Khan profoundly impacted the sporting world, particularly cricket, through his advocacy for neutral umpiring. Khan's pivotal role in introducing neutral umpires began with appointing Indian umpires V. K. Ramaswamy and Pilo Reporter for a Test match against the West Indies in Lahore in 1986 (Rajesh, 2011). This was considered an innovative step to quell accusations of biased home umpires. This initiative eventually led the ICC to adopt a system of neutral umpiring, initially with one neutral umpire per Test in 1992 (Rajesh, 2011). In 2002, the ICC fully executed a policy of two neutral umpires. ICC's move drastically increased the integrity of international cricket. Later in his political career, Imran Khan often used the introduction of neutral umpiring in his political discourse as an example to substantiate his claim about believing in the rule of law (News Desk, 2022; "‘You must win fair and square,’” 2020).

Our “Kaptan Khan”: Imran Khan, as the Prime Minister of Pakistan

After reaching heights of popularity through cricket and philanthropy, Imran Khan decided to formally join politics by starting his own political party

in the mid-1990s. Founded in Lahore on April 25, 1996, PTI initially described itself as a movement for justice. The party's manifesto aimed to combat corruption and promote welfare-oriented governance. Nonetheless, PTI's debut in the 1997 general election proved disappointing: Imran Khan contested seven constituencies yet failed to win even one seat. Moreover, the party's nationwide voting share was negligible. A solitary breakthrough came in 2002 when Khan captured his native Mianwali seat. However, the party's overall vote remained below 1% despite Imran Khan's initial support for General Pervez Musharraf during his referendum, who later became Imran Khan's most significant political rival in that era. PTI boycotted the 2008 polls in protest against the electoral framework of former dictator President General Pervez Musharraf. A watershed moment arrived on October 30, 2011, with a mass rally at Minar-e-Pakistan (a large public monument in Lahore that commemorates the first official call for an independent homeland for the Muslims of British India in 1940). Televised nationally, the gathering signaled PTI's evolution from a fringe movement to a plausible electoral contender. This energized urban middle-class youth and attracted "electable" politicians. This was also the era in which Imran Khan sought support from the Pakistani establishment. His opponents alleged that Khan was the military establishment's favored candidate, and that this support helped him build social capital in Pakistani politics by attracting "electable" politicians and securing favorable coverage from state-controlled media.

In the 2013 general election, PTI secured 32 National Assembly seats (second only to the conservative Pakistani Muslim League Nawaz party in popular votes) and formed its first provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. From the opposition benches in the National Assembly, Khan mounted persistent anti-corruption agitation, including the 2014 Islamabad sit-in, which consolidated PTI as a major force in national politics. PTI achieved federal power in the July 25, 2018 election, campaigning on a populist anti-graft platform under the slogans "Naya (New) Pakistan" and "Riyasat-e-Madina" (literally State of Medina, a reference to the beneficent rights and responsibilities of the city established by Prophet Muhammad). PTI emerged as the largest parliamentary party (149 seats after reserved allocations). However, they forged a coalition government in the elections and Khan was elected prime minister on August 17, 2018.

His tenure as Prime Minister (2018–2022) was historic in numerous ways, including becoming the first Pakistani premier to be removed via a parliamentary no-confidence vote. Throughout, Khan's persona straddled two realms: the unifying figure of a cricket hero and the polarizing figure of a right-wing nationalistic politician. Moreover, Khan's unique position at the intersection of sport and politics offers a distinctive lens for exploring how athletic culture, political processes, and national identity converge in contemporary Pakistan. His transformative impact on cricket serves as an exceptionally insightful case study, which elucidates how sport can both mirror and actively influence wider societal and political developments within the

nation. Therefore, in the upcoming sections, we review his sport policies and initiatives during his tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan. Moreover, we also unravel changes in sport development and public morale following his political downfall.

Sport Governance During Imran Khan's Tenure as Prime Minister

Youth Sport

Imran Khan's ascension to power sparked considerable optimism among various stakeholders in the sporting community, who believed his professional athletic experience and insights would enable the government of Pakistan to formulate targeted policies and implement meaningful structural reforms in sport governance. Indeed, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Imran Khan introduced numerous policies for restructuring sport governance in Pakistan, some of which were highly praised while others were criticized.

On October 17, 2019, Khan launched the KJP and on December 6, 2021, under the umbrella of the KJP, his government launched the ambitious KJSD to discover and nurture young sporting talent across various disciplines, foster inclusivity through infrastructure development, and offer accessible opportunities in rural and disadvantaged regions ("PM Imran Khan," 2021). In the first phase, the program endeavored to conduct a talent search in 12 different sports. The targeted population for this program was individuals aged 11–25, with the intention of granting professional training to ten million young people in the coming years ("PM Imran Khan," 2021). Just four months after its launch, Imran Khan's tenure ended on April 10, 2022, when he was removed from office through a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly. Hence, there is no publicly available record of this program's effectiveness or any relevant outcomes.

Several experts raised concerns about the broader KJP, which was officially launched two years before the sport-focused component. The initial KJP program was launched in 2019 with an allocation of 100 billion PKR (Staff Report, 2019). Yet, its implementation was marred by institutional bottlenecks, which included insufficient planning, vague eligibility criteria, and a lack of cohesive administrative oversight (Raja, 2020). The first phase's shortcomings reflected a broader systemic issue where policy formulation outpaced institutional readiness in Pakistan. Furthermore, female participation fell short of even the modest 25% target, illustrating the persistent sociocultural and logistical barriers to Pakistani institutions that the initiative failed to address adequately (Raja, 2020). Moreover, offering subsidized loans for youth was also part of the KJP initiative. Various experts argued that the initiative failed to account for the heightened risk of default associated with offering support to

youth who lacked prior entrepreneurial experience. This also raised questions about the sustainability of such financial mechanisms (Raja, 2020). While the program encapsulated the government's strategic shift from job-seeking to job-creating mindsets among youth, its disjointed integration with national development frameworks and absence of robust post-training support diluted its transformative potential (Gabol, 2025; Raja, 2020). Overall, the initiative of KJP illustrated a policy with strong rhetorical appeal which was constrained by executional fragility and uneven accessibility.

National Sport Organizations

During his tenure, Khan repeatedly stressed limiting political meddling in sport bodies and publicly advocated for merit-based appointments, especially within the PCB. This advocacy on merit reflected his wider anti-corruption, pro-transparency appeal, which resonated with citizens long accustomed to nepotism and favoritism in Pakistani institutions ("Merit-based appointments," 2018). Therefore, once in power, he set in motion an overhaul of the PCB to boost efficiency, tighten accountability, and raise the standard of sport both nationally and internationally. He argued that his reforms included decentralized decision-making, upgraded facilities, improved coaching, and welfare programs for athletes ("PCB restructuring," 2020).

However, Khan's governance of sport was mired in controversies and criticisms. Numerous stakeholders alleged Khan's government exhibited favoritism toward his former colleagues, friends, and cricketers in appointments, which some reasoned negated his publicly stated meritocratic principles. Empirical evidence also undercuts the PTI administration's meritocratic self-presentation. For instance, only days after Najam Sethi's resignation in 2018, Prime Minister Khan, acting as PCB patron-in-chief, single-handedly nominated long-time associate and former ICC president Ehsan Mani as chairman. He was then elected unopposed by the nine-member Board of Governors. The process for selecting Ehsan Mani was devoid of open competition or public scrutiny. This pattern persisted under the PTI government. In April 2019, five of the seven Board of Governors members staged a revolt in Quetta, tabling a resolution that declared the new managing director position for ex-county cricketer Wasim Khan "unconstitutional" and demanded its annulment, framing the hire as a personalized favor rather than an institutional necessity. Likewise, in August 2021, Imran Khan again bypassed the competitive search procedures by nominating his 1992 Cricket World Cup teammate, Ramiz Raja, as PCB chairman. Taken together, these episodes, summarized in Table 4.1, established how the Khan government's appointment practices repeatedly replicated Pakistan's old, entrenched, patron-client dynamics and nepotism, thereby substantively contradicting Imran Khan and his party's avowed commitment to meritocracy and institutional transformation.

Table 4.1 Prominent PCB Appointments Challenged for Favoritism Under Imran Khan's PTI Administration (2018–2022)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Appointment (Body)</i>	<i>Why It Was Branded "Favoritism"</i>	<i>What the Critics Said</i>
2018–2021	Ehsan Mani, Chairman, PCB	In his role as the PCB's patron-in-chief, Khan personally installed Ehsan Mani—a longtime associate and former ICC president—within days of Najam Sethi's removal, dispensing entirely with a public search or interview process.	Sport experts noted that Khan placed Mani directly on the Board of Governors, enabling an uncontested election and casting suspicion on the process's transparency.
2019–2021	Wasim Khan, Managing Director, PCB	From 2019 to 2021, Wasim Khan occupied the newly created post of Managing Director at the PCB, yet the legitimacy of his appointment was immediately contested: five of the seven Board of Governors members passed a resolution branding the position "unconstitutional" and calling for its annulment.	Critics reasoned that the British–Pakistani former cricketer was installed as Khan's preferred choice rather than selected through a competitive open process. The ensuing Quetta protest by the Board of Governors spilled into the public sphere, with dissenters insisting the hire contravened the Board's own regulations and sidelined key stakeholders.
Sep 2019	Misbah-ul-Haq, Head Coach and Chief Selector, national team	Granting the two most influential technical posts to a single individual ran counter to international governance standards and sparked conflict-of-interest concerns, as Misbah was simultaneously serving as a PSL franchise coach.	Numerous critics observed that the PCB had effectively accepted the inherent conflicts of interest in Misbah's twin roles, thereby weakening its assertion that appointments were strictly made on merit.

(Continued)

Table 4.1 (Continued)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Appointment (Body)</i>	<i>Why It Was Branded “Favoritism”</i>	<i>What the Critics Said</i>
2021–2022	Ramiz Raja, Chairman, PCB	Although Ramiz Raja possessed only limited executive experience, Khan advanced the candidacy of his former World Cup teammate and long-time commentator, leading critics to dismiss the appointment as the caprice of a lone decision-maker.	Crickets experts maintained that Pakistan was ceding control of the cricket board on the basis of a mere “gut instinct,” framing the decision as yet another case in which personal proximity trumped an open, competitive selection process.

Abolishing Departmental Cricket in Pakistan Under Imran Khan

Among the various structural reforms implemented in the sporting sector during the PTI government’s tenure, the discontinuation of departmental cricket emerged as one of the most debated policy shifts. In the departmental cricket model, state agencies and corporations fielded cricket teams, directly employing, paying, and sponsoring their athletes. Under this PCB-administered structure, Pakistan’s flagship first-class competitions, such as the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy, featured 16 sides in their final years before reform, with eight departmental teams competing alongside eight regional associations. This model was ultimately replaced in 2019 by a streamlined six-team regional system inspired by then-Prime Minister Imran Khan’s vision, a change that significantly reduced salaried playing opportunities and sparked sustained criticism from many former players and analysts. Khan reasoned that focusing on elite talent would sharpen match intensity and “produce world-class players” once the system had matured (Press Trust of India, 2020).

Advocates for this change noted several short-term gains (Press Trust of India, 2020). Central contracts for the new first-class pool doubled to roughly 50,000 PKR per month, with top performers estimated earnings up to 2 million PKR a season, giving domestic cricket a clearer professional pathway (Samiuddin & Farooq, 2019). The thinner schedule also aligned formats, coaching resources, and high-performance centers under a single PCB umbrella, theoretically fostering better talent identification and more competitive fixtures against established provincial identities.

Nevertheless, numerous experts were critical of this change, reasoning that the reforms impacted the complete ecosystem of cricket in Pakistan (“PM Shehbaz,” 2022). Similarly, celebrated batsman and former Pakistan captain Javed Miandad cautioned that eliminating departmental teams could leave hundreds of players without jobs, comparing the decision to stripping athletes of a crucial safety net (“Miandad blasts govt,” 2019). A former National Cricket Academy director estimated in 2022 that the change sidelined over 3,000 clubs, 16 regions, dozens of departments, and “thousands of jobs,” shrinking grassroots capacity and leaving many players with a single employer—the PCB—on non-negotiable contracts (Yaqoob, 2022). The backlash was sharp enough that in January 2023, the PCB, under a new management committee, formally invited 27 departments to re-enter domestic cricket, signaling a partial retreat from Khan’s model (“PCB invites,” 2023).

Nonetheless, Khan’s impact on sport governance set lasting precedents. His reforms sparked ongoing dialogues on sport governance in Pakistan, showcasing both potential benefits and challenges inherent in politically influenced sport administration. Khan’s tenure provides a reflective case study on the complex interplay between athletic success, political leadership, socio-economic realities of the country, and their combined influence on national sport policy frameworks and institutions.

The Fall of Imran Khan and the Sport World’s Reaction

Imran Khan’s ousting from power in April 2022 ignited widespread national unrest and exposed deep fissures within Pakistan’s power structures. His subsequent arrest in May 2023 on corruption charges further polarized the populace, with supporters decrying the move as a politically induced endeavor to silence dissent. Moreover, Khan directly blamed the Pakistani military establishment for being behind his removal from power and the crackdown on his political party. This led to mixed responses from the sporting world. Numerous Pakistani athletes came out publicly to support Khan, while others hesitated because of the fear of prosecution.

Nevertheless, the reverberations of Khan’s political downfall extended beyond the corridors of power. Various policies of Khan’s tenure have been rolled back, especially within the PCB. The earthquake of his removal also permeated the realm of sports fans, where his legacy was once unassailable. For instance, the PCB’s omission of Khan from an Independence Day tribute video in August 2023 sparked outrage among fans and former players alike. Wasim Akram, a cricketing legend in his own right, publicly criticized the PCB’s decision, emphasizing that political differences should not eclipse Khan’s monumental contributions to the sport. This act of erasure underscored the extent to which political animosities had infiltrated even the sanctified halls of cricket, challenging the notion of sport as a unifying force above the partisan divide. Likewise, former women’s captain Urooj Mumtaz castigated

the PCB for “weaponizing memory itself” (Al Jazeera, 2023). Various athletes’ and celebrities’ indignation also lit a hashtag revolt that forced administrators to splice Khan back into the video only 48 hours later. Thus, the cricketers’ chorus became a counter-narrative to the state’s curated forgetting, insisting that the 1992 captain’s silhouette could not be edited out of the nation’s imagined historical memory.

Moreover, despite concerted efforts to marginalize Khan, his influence endured within and outside the stadium. His PTI political party demonstrated remarkable resilience in the 2024 general elections by securing a significant number of seats despite systemic obstacles and allegations of electoral manipulation. From his prison cell, Khan continued to galvanize support, embodying a narrative of resistance against entrenched military and political establishments. His enduring popularity, particularly among the youth, signals a profound shift in Pakistan’s political consciousness.

Capital Conversion Continuum: A Model of Athlete-to-Politician Transitions in the Indian Subcontinent

Historical Examples of Athlete-to-Politician Transitions

There is a long history of athletes moving into political roles in South Asia. Jaipal Singh Munda, for instance, who captained India’s groundbreaking gold-medal-winning field hockey team at the 1928 Olympics, emerged as a pivotal figure in India’s Constituent Assembly by passionately advocating for the rights of tribal communities (Constitution of India, n.d.). Likewise, Dr. Maharaja Karni Singh, a renowned Olympic shooter representing India in multiple Olympic Games from 1960 to 1980, also concurrently held office from 1952 to 1977 as a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha; Basu, 2019). Nevertheless, the intersection of cricket and politics in the late twentieth century was most notably brought to the limelight in the Indian subcontinent by Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi (1941–2011), who was nicknamed “Tiger Pataudi.” Formerly one of the successful captains of the Indian cricket team (1962 to 1969–1970, and for a short term in 1974–1975), Mansoor engaged in electoral politics through multiple parliamentary campaigns, such as the 1971 and 1991 Lok Sabha elections, although most of them were unsuccessful (Srivastava, 2011). Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi had an elitist Muslim background and was the son of the last ruler (Iftikhar Ali Khan Pataudi, the eighth Nawab of Pataudi) of the princely state of Pataudi, India. He was married to renowned Indian film actress Sharmila Tagore and this unique union between two well-known celebrities brought the world of cricket for the first time closer to the glamour of Hindi Cinema. Other historical examples include Aslam Sher Khan, a celebrated member of India’s victorious 1975 Hockey World Cup squad, who transitioned into significant political roles as a Member of Parliament (Mandapaka, 2024). Chetan Chauhan, a former Test

cricketer, also successfully secured a parliamentary seat with the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1991 (Wisden, 2021).

In the early 2000s, known for his elegant batting style (Priyansh, 2023), colorful personality, and, later in his career, being accused of match-fixing, Mohammad Azharuddin, a former captain of the Indian cricket team of Muslim background, entered electoral politics. Azharuddin was elected to the Lok Sabha in 2009 as a representative of the Indian National Congress. Likewise, Sri Lanka also saw numerous notable transitions from sporting arenas to politics. For example, Kiri Banda Ratnayake, whose athletic background shaped his roles as Sports Minister and later as Speaker of the Sri Lankan Parliament. In recent times, Arjuna Ranatunga, the former captain of Sri Lanka's 1996 ICC Cricket World Cup-winning team, made a prominent transition into politics. He also served in various capacities, including Minister of Petroleum Resources Development, Minister of Ports and Shipping, and Deputy Minister of Tourism. In Bangladesh, meanwhile, Sheikh Kamal actively contributed to sports promotion and briefly engaged in political roles prior to his untimely death. Table 4.2 identifies not only these athletes but also how they fit into the Capital Conversion Continuum (see Figure 4.1) proposed in the next section.

Capital Conversion Continuum

Examples of Imran Khan and other athletes from the Indian subcontinent who transitioned from sport to politics warrant a better theoretical understanding. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction can help illuminate why so many Indian subcontinent sporting icons effectively cross into politics. For Bourdieu (1986), agents accumulate economic, cultural, and social capital within a given *field*, such as elite sport, and then convert that stock into symbolic capital (e.g., public prestige) that carries weight in other *fields*, such as electoral politics. In this view, the widely varied trajectories of Imran Khan, Mary Kom, Mohammad Kaif, Sanath Jayasuriya, Arjuna Ranatunga, and Mohammad Azharuddin all represent strategically different but structurally similar acts of capital conversion that ultimately reinforce pre-existing hierarchies.

By drawing on Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) work and building on previous scholarship, we argue that, theoretically, athletes who enter politics can generally be classified into three groups: those from marginalized communities focusing on identity or indigenous politics, those perceived as nationalists, and those from elite backgrounds. Here, it should be noted that these classifications are not fixed but rather a fluid continuum in which individuals' identities can shift.

At one end of the continuum, identity politics captures athletes who transition into political roles primarily driven by their marginalized community identities and social justice aspirations. For example, Mohammad Kaif, a former Indian cricketer known for his role in India's famous NatWest Series

Table 4.2 Examples of South Asian Athletes Who Have Entered Politics

Name	Nation	Identity-Based Advocacy	Nationalist Mobilization	Elite Sociopolitical Leveraging
Abdul Hafeez Kardar	Pakistan		x	x
Arjuna Ranatunga	Sri Lanka		x	x
Aslam Sher Khan	India	x	x	
Chetan Chauhan	India		x	
Dr. Maharaja Karni Singh	India			x
Gautam Gambhir	India		x	
Imran Khan	Pakistan	x	x	x
Jaipal Singh Munda	India	x		
Kiri Banda Ratnayake	Sri Lanka		x	
Kirti Azad	India		x	x
Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi	India			x
Mary Kom	India	x		
Mashrafe Mortaza	Bangladesh		x	
Mohammad Azharuddin	India	x		x
Mohammad Kaif	India	x		
Qasim Zia	Pakistan			x
Robina Jalali	Afghanistan	x		
Sanath Jayasuriya	Sri Lanka		x	
Sheikh Kamal	Bangladesh			x

win in 2002, came from a Muslim minority background in India. Kaif transitioned into politics by joining the Indian National Congress. Although he contested the 2014 Lok Sabha elections from Phulpur, his campaign heavily relied on religious symbolism and cricket-based goodwill. Likewise, Mary Kom, a celebrated boxer from the ethnic minority state of Manipur, India, leveraged her sporting success to advocate strongly for regional development, gender equality, and minority rights. Although Kom did not conventionally join any political party, she was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament, in April 2016, and her term ended in 2022. She significantly impacted policy discourses surrounding minority rights. Athletes from historically marginalized or racialized communities, such as Jaipal Singh Munda, successfully utilized their political platform to advocate for social justice and the rights of their communities. Similarly, Robina Jalali, also known as Robina Muqimyar, was born in 1986 in Kabul and became a 100 m sprinter who represented Afghanistan at the 2004 Athens and 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. She competed under the name Muqimyar on the track, gained worldwide attention as one of the first two Afghan women ever to appear at the Olympic Games, and ran in a hijab, long pants, and a T-shirt. Later, using her family name Jalali, she was elected in 2019 to the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of Afghanistan's parliament, as a member from Kabul. As a politician, Muqimyar focused on advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan.

These examples reflect a unique form of social activism for equality in the Asian context. Although this group of athletes as social activists is common in Western countries (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement led by numerous Black athletes in the United States), little has been documented about it in the South Asian context. These athletes’ paths illustrate Bourdieu’s claim that actors with limited economic resources can nevertheless “invest” symbolic capital to renegotiate their social position, yet must constantly re-legitimize that capital through advocacy (see Figure 4.1).

Moving toward the center of the continuum, nationalist mobilization explains athletes whose political transitions are heavily influenced by their sporting accomplishments, resonating with national pride and patriotism. These nationalist-oriented athletes have a similar identity to most of the people in the country. For instance, Sanath Jayasuriya, a cricket icon in Sri Lanka, successfully leveraged his sports-based nationalist image to secure political roles. He aligned himself closely with broader nationalistic narratives and policies that appealed to wide voter demographics. Figures like Gautam Gambhir (former Indian cricketer) and Mashrafe Mortaza (former Bangladeshi cricketer) leveraged their patriotic appeal and public admiration to engage effectively in politics. This aided them in capitalizing on their sports-based popularity to transition seamlessly into political advocacy. At this level of the continuum, athletes might be able to obtain symbolic power. Therefore, here, the athlete’s prestige and the nation’s imagined community might reinforce one another.

At the opposite end of the continuum in Figure 4.1 lie individuals from elite backgrounds, representing athletes who use their privileged backgrounds and

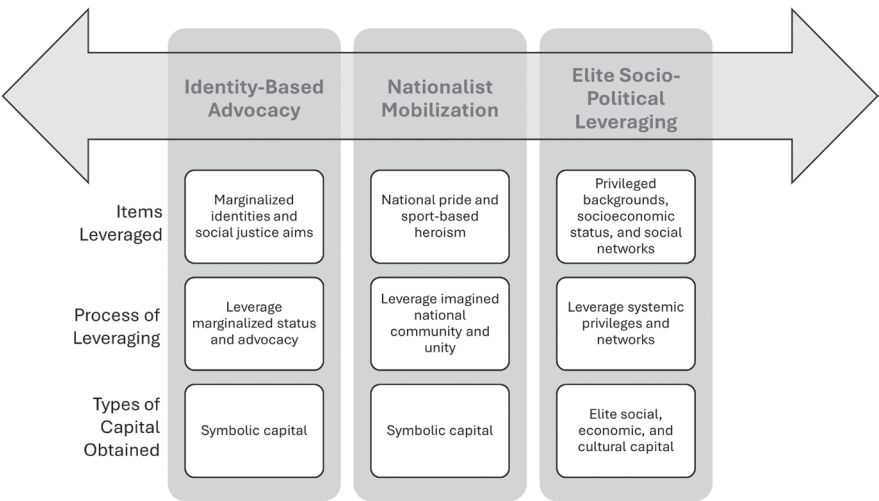


Figure 4.1 Capital Conversion Continuum of Athlete-to-Politician Transitions in the Indian subcontinent.

established socioeconomic status to gain political influence. Examples include Arjuna Ranatunga of Sri Lanka, who transitioned into influential ministerial roles. This was supported by his elite educational background and robust socioeconomic networks. Similarly, Mohammad Azharuddin of India, whose elite cricketing reputation and status facilitated his smooth entry into mainstream politics with the Indian National Congress, leveraged extensive social connections and his celebrity status. Athletes from elitist or influential familial backgrounds, such as Kirti Azad (former Indian cricketer) or Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, were able to capitalize on their socioeconomic status and existing public influence to enter politics. Drawing on extensive networks and prestige, athletes from elitist or influential familial backgrounds can have more influential roles in the political arenas. These athletes' cases exemplify Bourdieu's reproduction thesis (1986) that the powerful convert multiple capital forms across *fields* with minimal resistance, thereby stabilizing the very hierarchies from which they benefit.

Finally, Imran Khan uniquely embodies all three categories: his Pashtun and Saraiki heritage reflects engagement with marginalized community concerns in Pakistan. His 1992 Cricket World Cup triumph furnished unmatched nationalist symbolism, and his public persona exuded nationalism, as evidenced by his advocacy for national sovereignty and economic independence from the West. His philanthropic hospital projects built moral capital. Finally, his upper-middle-class background, status as a scion of Pakistan's landed elite, bolstered by his education at the University of Oxford and celebrated international cricketing career in the UK, provided him with substantial economic and social capital in his political endeavors. By the time he became Prime Minister in 2018, he had fused these capitals into the ultimate form of political legitimacy. This multifaceted background significantly contributed to Imran Khan's extensive political influence and the broader sociopolitical discourse in Pakistan. Analyzed through Bourdieu (1986, 1991), Khan's rise—and those of his fellow athlete-politicians—does not rupture Pakistan's or India's social order; rather, it illustrates how sporting fame is routinely repurposed to reproduce that order under the guise of popular mandate.

Taken as a whole, the Capital Conversion Continuum of the Athlete-to-Politician Transition model in Figure 4.1 illustrates how sporting fame is recontextualized within political hierarchies without disrupting existing power structures. Ranging from identity-based advocacy at one end, nationalist-driven mobilization in the middle, and elite sociopolitical leveraging at the other end, athlete politicians in the Indian subcontinent strategically transform their sporting capital into symbolic political power. The categorical distinctions underline the complex motivations and strategic advantages that athletes sometimes harness as they transition from sport to politics by illuminating the multifaceted nature of athlete political engagement across the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

Taken together, Imran Khan's trajectory from tribal-elite cricketer and global "playboy" celebrity to philanthropist, prime minister, and polarizing opposition icon reveals both the transformative promise and structural limits of athlete-led political change in the Indian subcontinent. His 1992 World Cup triumph, combined with philanthropic ventures, reconfigured cricket from mere spectacle into a vehicle of national identity, moral authority, and populist aspiration. Meanwhile, his subsequent governance of sport demonstrated how sporting capital can be converted into policy influence with uneven, often exclusionary, consequences. The political reactions to his downfall, including attempts to erase and then restore his cricketing legacy, further underscore how struggles over memory and symbolism in sport are inseparable from broader contests over power. Conceptually, the Capital Conversion Continuum developed in this chapter, grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) work, shows that athlete-politicians in South Asia move along fluid axes of identity-based advocacy, nationalist mobilization, and elite leveraging rather than occupying fixed categories. Imran Khan's singular position at the intersection of all three dimensions illustrates how sporting fame can consolidate, rather than disrupt, entrenched hierarchies even as it opens new avenues for political participation and resistance. In this sense, his rise and fall do not simply mark a closed chapter in Pakistan's sporting-political history; they crystallize enduring patterns through which sport, power, and social order are negotiated across the Indian subcontinent and in Afghanistan.

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Part II

Transnational Movements and the Athlete Diaspora



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Athlete Migration and Sport Diaspora

Afghan and Pakistani Pathways Across the Global North and South

Introduction

Every migration tale has a starting point and an ending point. However, the voyages of Afghan and Pakistani athletes, regionally and worldwide, elucidate a fluid middle ground: a transnational arena where people, practices, hopes, adversities, neo-capitalist forces, nostalgia, and ambitions, all congregate and continually reshape one another (see Popal, 2025; Toorpakai & Holstein, 2016). Since the Soviet–Afghan War in the 1980s, an interplay of conflict, financial insecurity, and the promise of a better life propelled hundreds of Afghan athletes onto sporting stages around the globe. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), after four decades of war, roughly 2.6 million Afghans were officially registered as refugees in 2024; one of the world’s largest refugee communities (UNHCR, n.d.). Of those, about 2.2 million were living in the two neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan. Moreover, various reports claim that millions of Afghan refugees remain undocumented globally (UNHCR Web Archive, n.d.). Inside Afghanistan itself, as of 2024, a further 3.5 million people remained displaced within their own borders (UNHCR, n.d.). And in the first half of 2025, over 1 million refugees in Iran were forced back to Afghanistan, further stressing and destabilizing already precarious social services in Afghanistan (AP, 2025).

Likewise, in Pakistan, economic instability, political uncertainty, swelling inflation, a decrease in employment opportunities, and rising religious extremism, combined with an ever-growing population, led numerous professionals to leave. This emigration was particularly pronounced after Imran Khan’s (former Prime Minister of Pakistan) ouster in 2022. Government-collected data show that 859,846 Pakistanis, including roughly 100,000 highly qualified professionals, registered for overseas employment in 2023 (Hijazi et al., 2024). This outflow remained high in 2024 with 727,381 departures, and another 172,144 in just the first quarter of 2025 (ANI, 2025; ProPK Staff, 2025).

The journeys of Afghan refugee athletes who engage in social advocacy stand as bold acts of resistance against oppression. Breakdancer Manizha Talash wore a “Free Afghan Women” cape in the Olympics, while former captain of the Afghan national team Khalida Popal created foundations and

wrote a book on Taliban oppression. Cyclist Masomah Ali Zada, cycling sisters Yulduz and Fariba Hashimi, and para-taekwondo star Zakia Khudadadi were all forced to flee Afghanistan to continue competing. Likewise, Maria Toorpakai, born in South Waziristan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan), cut off her hair, adopted the alias “Genghis Khan,” and entered local weightlifting and squash clubs disguised as a boy because girls were barred from sport. Once Toorpakai’s identity was exposed and Taliban militants issued death threats, she spent more than 3 years hitting balls against her bedroom wall to keep training until former world champion Jonathon Power secured her safe passage to his academy in Toronto in 2011 (Toorpakai & Holstein, 2016). By daring to compete, these athletes have turned sporting arenas into powerful stages for hope, defiance, and the pursuit of freedom and equality.

In the past few years, the trends of Afghan and Pakistani athletes’ migration usually followed two paths. One path led to the Global North (Western hemisphere): England’s County cricket clubs; Swedish martial arts gyms; North American boxing gyms; and Australian football (soccer) schools. The other path led across the Global South: cricketers moved from Pakistani provinces of Punjab and Sindh to rich Gulf states; other cricketers moved from Kabul to the PSL, the IPL, or the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). Moreover, numerous agents and online groups guided these moves. Skills, coaching tips, and money traveled back home nearly as fast as the players left. Sport became a busy two-way street that changed both the places the athletes left and the places they went to.

This chapter explores how historical and contemporary migration flows from Afghanistan and Pakistan have shaped, and been shaped by, the sporting lives of athletes across the Global South and Global North. Tracing movements from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan through Taliban rule, megadam displacements in Pakistan, the war on terror era, and the rise of global sport economies, it situates athletes’ journeys within broader dynamics of conflict, development, labor markets, and shifting visa regimes. Drawing on concepts such as transnationalism, diaspora, sporting remittances, and embodied nationalism, we highlight how athletes act as cultural brokers who connect and transform multiple sporting and political landscapes. Ultimately, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a holistic, historically grounded theoretical discussion for understanding sports migration between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and their diasporas, setting the stage for the more fine-grained, athlete-centered analyses in subsequent chapters.

Historical Contexts of Sports Migration: The Case of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Migration Trends of Afghans: Soviet Invasion to Taliban Takeover of Kabul (1979–2021)

The earliest significant wave of migration from Afghanistan, both among athletes and the general population, occurred from 1979 to 1992. Historically,

Afghanistan's four largest ethnic groups are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks; together, they form the vast majority of the population (Rahimi, 2017). Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks are mostly Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras are predominantly Shia Muslims (Hakimi, 2022). This sectarian and ethnic divide between Afghan communities impacted their migration trends to different regions. For example, after the Soviet Union invasion, the early records show that numerous Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan migrated to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan (at that time called the North-West Frontier Province or NWFP). Meanwhile, Hazara minority refugees chose to settle in Quetta because of their close ties with the local Hazara community (CSSR, 2005) or in Iran because of their sectarian background (Kuschminder & Dora, 2009; Monsutti, 2004). Existing discourse primarily emphasizes general migration trends (Avis, 2021; Dashti, 2022) among civilians and professionals rather than explicitly analyzing the trajectories or motivations unique to Afghan athletes in this era. Nonetheless, numerous locals agree that various Afghan wrestlers, football players, and boxers migrated to either Iran or Pakistan during the Soviet invasion. For instance, local football and cricket clubs in cities like Peshawar and Quetta saw an influx of Afghan athletes who joined Pakistani sporting structures to sustain their athletic aspirations amid the conflict.

Meanwhile, the 1990s brought a second exodus, driven by civil war in Afghanistan. During this time, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region in Pakistan became the most prominent destination for Afghan Pashtun athletes. Numerous reports suggest that around 1.5–2 million Afghans lived in Pakistan during the 1990s, before the Taliban's first takeover in 1996. During the second exodus, numerous Pashtuns again moved toward Peshawar. This was also the period when cricket became Pakistan's national identity after its triumph in the 1992 ICC World Cup, as discussed previously in the book. Thereby, numerous Afghans, while living in refugee camps in Pakistan, developed an interest in cricket.

The new millennium layered fresh dynamics onto these flows. The post-9/11 NATO intervention briefly drew Afghan sports back home through reconstruction funding by the United States and other countries, yet security remained fragile. After the NATO intervention and formation of the Afghan government backed by the United States, there was increased migration from Afghanistan, seen also in the Global North, especially toward Australia, the United States, and European capitals. Moreover, Arab countries increased investment in sport, which created lucrative alternatives to Europe. Most recently, the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021 triggered a humanitarian evacuation that included almost the entire Afghan women's football team to Melbourne as they lobbied FIFA for official recognition. By 2025, the cumulative effect was a multi-sited diaspora of Afghan athletes whose experiences differed sharply by gender, sport, class, and legal status. Mapping those experiences requires attention to both the structural forces that shape mobility, conflict, labor markets, federation politics, and the agency of athletes who leverage sport to craft viable futures in exile.

Nearly four decades of Afghan migration pathways have also had an apparent influence on the sports that Afghan refugees adopted in exile. Pashtun communities, for instance, raised in the cricket-centered camps of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, embraced cricket as both a leisure activity and a marker of shared identity, and many of the players who learned the game there later spearheaded Afghanistan's national cricket revival. Tajik and Uzbek migrants in Central Asia maintained equestrian games, such as *buzkashi* and traditional forms of wrestling, sports that resonated with their pastoral background and remained culturally valued in their new surroundings. In contrast, Hazara refugees in Quetta and Iran often lacked open playing fields and faced social discrimination, so they gravitated toward indoor and low-cost combat sports, such as boxing, karate, and taekwondo, which also offered them a sense of personal security, community prestige, and opportunities for upward mobility. For example, a 20-year-old boxing athlete in Quetta explained to the first author:

Out there, they see our faces and shut their doors. Don't allow us to play cricket with them. When we play cricket with them, they usually make us do the fielding and do not allow us to bat or bowl. In here, on these mats, my fists and kicks speak a language they can't silence.

More recently, Afghan evacuees who resettled in Europe and North America have also been drawn into mixed-ethnicity refugee football, futsal, and basketball leagues organized by aid agencies, using globally familiar team sports to build language skills and social networks. The intersection of settlement context, facility access, and the wish to preserve, or sometimes transcend, ethnic and sectarian identities has overall channeled Afghan migrants into particular sporting practices, hence turning sport into both a cultural anchor and a pathway to integration.

Pakistani Athletes' Historical Migration Trends: Historical and Contemporary Perspective

Pakistan's very first Olympics in London in 1948 included a 35-man male-only squad drawn hurriedly from the sports hubs of Lahore and Karachi (Olympedia, n.d.). By the 2024 Paris Olympics, the delegation included only seven athletes, clearly illustrating the deterioration of elite-level participation in sport in a country with a population of an estimated 250 million (Engineer, 2024). Coaches, media commentators, and officials in Pakistan often point to the country's persistent infrastructure gap, which funnels most athletic talent into cricket, as the chief reason for few athletes reaching the highest levels in other Olympic sports (see Aslam et al., 2023). Moreover, Shah et al. (2024) claimed that 42% of Pakistanis engaged with cricket facilities, while all other organized sports combined drew barely 13%. In the absence of multi-sport

pathways at home, ambitious non-cricket athletes have increasingly started to migrate for scholarships, coaching, and professional leagues abroad. Likewise, the lack of financial stability, prevalent discrimination, and alleged corrupt practices in the local cricket system have led numerous cricketers to leave the country for better opportunities abroad as well.

Moreover, terrorist attacks on the Sri Lankan cricket team bus in Lahore on March 3, 2009, shut Pakistan's gates to visiting sides almost overnight. For the next six years, no full-member nation set foot in the country, leading to the near decimation of local international cricket in the country. Pakistan's home fixtures were shifted to neutral venues in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. This was also an era when numerous cricketers started to think of leaving the country because of terrorism. With empty stands and closed gates at home, players and fans alike were left searching for hope beyond the boundary ropes. For some, this hope came from migration. The drought finally broke when Zimbabwe agreed to a short, limited-overs tour of Lahore in May 2015. This symbolically ended a 72-month exile of all international cricket on Pakistani soil. Even so, the game's longest format (i.e., test cricket) stayed away until December 2019, when Sri Lanka returned for a two-test World Test Championship series in Rawalpindi and Karachi. The Sri Lankan test series finally closed the era in which terrorism had emptied Pakistan stadiums.

Furthermore, many non-cricket athletes who stay active in Pakistan's sport scene either are already employed by state institutions, such as the Pakistan Army, Air Force, Navy, Railways, Police, or WAPDA, or secure positions with these organizations as their sporting careers progress. The state-led institutions, such as WAPDA, provide a steady salary, sometimes housing, and time to train. The Army's sports wing historically won the most medals at the Pakistan National Games. Similarly, WAPDA hired many athletes as employees, such as Olympic javelin star Arshad Nadeem, while he trained overseas. These "institutional," or departmental, teams and Pakistani military-led sporting structures also sometimes help women athletes. Shooter Kishmala Talat, for example, practiced at an Army range in Jhelum, Pakistan (AFP, 2024). Likewise, winter sporting activities, such as ski championships, in which women also participate, are frequently organized by the Pakistan Air Force in coordination with the Winter Sports Federation (Nagri, 2024). In short, military and state-owned institutions keep many non-cricket sports alive inside Pakistan, even as the wider talent drain continues.

Hydropower Reservoirs and Pakistani Displacement

The historical outward flow of Pakistani professionals echoes an earlier, more dramatic displacement because of infrastructure developments and environmental changes. For example, the construction of Pakistan's mega-dams was the cause of large displacement toward the Global North (especially the UK) from Pakistan. The epic construction of Mangla Dam in 1966–1967 near the

city of Mirpur in Azad Kashmir (the Pakistani-administered part of Kashmir) submerged around 280 villages and uprooted more than 110,000 people (Institution of Civil Engineers, n.d.). Many of the displaced individuals received work permits for Britain, helping create a Mirpuri community that now numbers more than 70% of all British Pakistanis (Hafeez-Bore, 2011; Maqbool, 2012). A few years later, Tarbela Dam on the Indus inundated around 135 villages and displaced another 96,000–110,000 residents, many of whom drifted to Pakistan's big cities or onward to oil-boom Gulf states (Terminski, 2013). Previous research shows that livelihoods have still not been restored to half of the population that was displaced because of the Mangla and Tarbela hydropower projects, and numerous cases from the 1970s remain pending in various Pakistani courts (Ali et al., 2022; Yuefang et al., 2021).

Among the exodus from Mirpur was the grandfather of England's Birmingham-born cricket all-rounder Moeen Ali and the parents of Bradford leg-spinner Adil Rashid (Berry, 2006; Crictoday, n.d.; Dobell, 2015). These two great cricketers share major ICC tournament victories for England's men's national team. Fellow England-reared football defender Easah Suliman, now playing for Pakistan's national team, traces his lineage to the same Kashmiri city through his grandparents, who are proud of their Mirpuri roots (Hafez, 2023). Beyond Kashmir, boxing champion Amir Khan's grandfather left Kahuta in northern Punjab during the early 1960s textile-labor drive to work in Bolton's cotton mills ("Amir Khan," 2014). Meanwhile, Leeds-born forward Nadia Khan qualified for the Pakistan international team because of parents from the Punjab belt. These second- and third-generation Britons show how a mix of dam-driven financial displacement and wider Punjabi labor migration forged a transnational pipeline in which the children of rural migrants now headline cricket grounds, boxing rings, and football pitches on both sides of the world.

Today, history feeds a self-reinforcing "mobility spiral." For example, Olympic javelin gold medalist Arshad Nadeem shuttles between playing in Pakistan's limited domestic camps, getting training from coaches in South Africa (Terseus Liebenberg), and competing on the global athletics circuit. Numerous Pakistani athletes, including swimmers, cricketers, wrestlers, and shooters, have secured college scholarships in Western countries, while cricket's T20 franchise economy lures dozens of youngsters to various global leagues. Conversely, resource-rich nations with superior facilities (e.g., the UK and the United Arab Emirates) continue to naturalize foreign-born performers and athletes, making global allegiance-shopping an accepted career path.

Trajectories to the Global North: Visa Issues, Reverse Migration, and Other Contemporary Challenges

Europe continues to symbolize the most lucrative prospect, especially for Pakistani male cricketers. Take cricket's 2025 County Championship in England

as an example. The championship featured five Pakistani internationals: Shan Masood, Hasan Ali, Mohammad Abbas, Kashif Ali, and Zafar Gohar, representing teams such as Essex, Nottinghamshire, Hampshire, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire (“Shan Masood,” 2025). Historically, before the boom of T20 franchises in South Asia, county stints let South Asian players train in world-class facilities and earn steady, hard currency pay that once eclipsed home match fees. Now that the IPL and PSL offer substantial pay, county cricket allows athletes access to scouts from the IPL and PSL. Therefore, an English summer remains both a finishing school and a springboard to franchise riches for Pakistani and Afghan cricketers.

Since England left the European Union in 2020 through Brexit, overseas county cricketers, including those from South Asia, have been required to hold short-term, club-sponsored sport visas to work in the UK. These visas, tied to active contracts, could be revoked if a player’s contract was canceled or not renewed due to injury, poor form, or other reasons, potentially threatening their right to live and work in the UK with little notice. The Professional Cricketers’ Association (PCA) and other cricket experts acknowledge the mental health challenges posed by this visa uncertainty, which continues to hinder the seamless integration of overseas talent into county cricket. Consequently, until a more durable immigration pathway supplants today’s fragile, contract-bound visas, the county circuit will remain a gateway lined with opportunity on one side and persistent uncertainty on the other for South Asian cricketers.

Growing Reverse Migration

In recent years, there has been an increase in “reverse migration” from athletes who return to Pakistan after benefitting from more advanced training infrastructure in other countries. This is especially true for women born and trained outside of South Asia who are exploited by the patriarchal systems that have reduced or eliminated pipelines to various women’s sports within Pakistan.

As an example, in women’s football, British-Pakistani midfielder Layla Banaras was born on February 11, 2006, in the UK. This rising star made headlines in the UK and Pakistan after she honed her skills in England for Birmingham City W.F.C. and Wolverhampton Wanderers W.F.C. and then proudly donned Pakistan’s famous green after joining the national team (Rasheed, 2025). Her career reached a milestone when she earned her first international cap for Pakistan during the AFC qualifiers versus Indonesia, and she quickly underlined her talent in a 2–1 triumph over Kyrgyzstan by orchestrating a memorable goal with Mariam Mehmood. Likewise, Aqsa Mushtaq, born in England, playing for Omilos Filathlon Irakliou (OFI) Crete W.F.C. in Greece, accepted a Pakistan national team call-up in 2025. These examples of reverse migration have prompted debate in Pakistan on whether foreign-raised players should displace locally nurtured talent.

Different types of tensions have emerged in the Afghan context. The Melbourne-based women's football side remains barred from official competition, but several squad members have secured semi-pro club contracts in Denmark and Sweden, exporting a fast-paced, pressing style learned under European coaches. However, within the Afghan local context, the debate remains whether these women's sporting teams based outside the country truly represent the nation or not.

Furthermore, in recent years, France, Norway, and Sweden have emerged as hubs for Afghan taekwondo, boxing, and wrestling athletes, in part because asylum policies grant refugees welfare packages that include free time for training. For example, Afghan taekwondo refugee Marzieh Hamidi, now training in France, pledged to keep fighting for Afghan women's rights and to defy the Taliban through her sport-based activism (Ciesnik, 2025). Likewise, after the Taliban outlawed mixed martial arts (MMA) in Afghanistan in 2021, Parwaiz Arabzai and his compatriots carved out nascent pro-fighting careers in Europe (Rhys, 2023). Although they earned only modest fight purses and endured lengthy asylum processes, they held fast to MMA as both their ticket out of hardship and a beacon of possibility (Rhys, 2023).

North America: Visa Categories and the Political Economy of Im/mobility

International athletes coming to the United States often experience labyrinthine bureaucracy as they rely on P-1 or O-1 visas. A P-1 visa is for those competing at an internationally recognized level, while an O-1 visa is for individuals with extraordinary athletic achievement. In addition, many aspiring student-athletes enroll at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) schools on an F-1 student visa, which lets them study full time and compete collegiately. F-1 status requires maintaining a full academic course load. It does not itself authorize paid professional play, but it is the pathway of choice for those combining scholarship athletics with higher education. For most, nevertheless, North America functions as an aspirational marketplace visible through social media but materially distant.

Officially founded in 2023, MLC is the United States' premier professional T20 league and has now provided a new avenue for South Asian cricketers to showcase their talents in a rapidly growing market. Featuring six city-based franchises, including Mumbai Indians (MI) New York, Los Angeles Knight Riders, and the Texas Super Kings, the league has attracted stars from India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. During matches, thousands of spectators, mostly South Asian immigrants, packed the stands to watch these cricket teams play, highlighting a rapidly expanding market for live cricket in the United States. MLC's South Asian ties run deeper than its local fan base, as four of its six franchises are owned by IPL teams. Nevertheless, a June 9, 2025, travel ban on Afghan nationals

imposed by President Donald Trump barred all Afghan players, including Rashid Khan, Gulbadin Naib, Fazalhaq Farooqi, and Azmatullah Omarzai, from competing in MLC despite an exemption for athletes and coaches at “major sporting events” (Cricexec Staff, 2025). The only Afghan to compete was Noor Ahmad, whose team flew him to the country the day before the ban was announced. Moreover, though MLC remains operative, South Asian cricketers who want to play at the minor league level have recently complained about not receiving visas due to stringent policies imposed by the Republican (Trump) administration after coming to power in January 2025 following the 2024 elections.

In Canada, express-entry pathways and multicultural branding have also lured South Asian cricketers into leagues like the Global T20, though the PCB’s reluctance to issue No-Objection Certificates (NOCs; permission for athletes to play in non-domestic league competitions during a domestic season) have blocked numerous national stars from competing such as Shaheen Afridi, Mohammad Rizwan, Babar Azam, Mohammad Nawaz, and Mohammad Amir (Khaliq, 2024). Meanwhile, Afghan refugees in Toronto have formed futsal and cricket clubs that also work as mental-health support groups and community-building initiatives.

Many South Asian athletes now pursue careers along Global North pathways, seeking training and contracts in European county cricket and North American professional leagues. In doing so, they confront precarious visa regimes shaped by post-Brexit migration rules and increasingly restrictive American immigration policies. Alongside this outward movement, some athletes engage in reverse migration by choosing to represent their ancestral homelands. Refugee athletes also harness the support structures of asylum countries to build careers in taekwondo, MMA, and football, revealing how sport operates both as a gateway to global markets and as a terrain marked by enduring mobility barriers.

Australasia: Safe Havens and Symbolic Politics

In the past two decades, Australia has occupied a unique position as both refuge and battleground for recognition politics, especially for Afghan refugees. For example, the Afghan Women’s National Football Team moved to Melbourne after evacuating in 2021 amid the Taliban’s brutal crackdown on women’s sports (Lomas, 2023). Numerous athletes were separated from their family members during the chaotic escape and are currently trying to reconstruct their lives in Australia by studying, working, and learning English (Lomas, 2023). However, while busy in their life, their locally organized football matches aid in emotional therapy and offer opportunities for social advocacy. Hence, the Afghan Women’s National Football Team is using its platform to amplify calls for women’s rights in Afghanistan, where female participation in public life remains seriously controlled.

In parallel, the displacement and advocacy done by the Afghan Women's National Football Team have activated a powerful development in cricket. Following the Taliban's prohibition of women's sports in Afghanistan, the ICC merged forces with Cricket Australia, England, and India to establish a specialized task force ("Afghanistan women's team," 2025). The purpose was to allocate dedicated funding and devise a high-performance initiative to assist Afghanistan's displaced women's cricket team. These moves by the ICC in 2025 marked the formal backing of sporting governing bodies to recognize refugee teams globally representing their home country, especially in the case of Afghan refugees. The ICC's move underlines sport's wider role as a stage for inclusion, recognition, and resistance. These steps also add momentum to the Afghan athletes' ongoing campaign for legitimacy within international sporting bodies.

Meanwhile, Pakistani athletes in Australia have traditionally followed more conventional labor pathways, including coming on sport scholarships. Most notably in cricket, Pakistani superstars such as Babar Azam, Shaheen Afridi, and Usman Qadir have leveraged Australia's prosperous BBL to both showcase their talent and secure short-term stays. For example, for the 2025–2026 season (BBL 15), a substantial contingent comprising 74 male and 11 female Pakistani cricketers registered for the men's and women's drafts, respectively, reflecting a surge in Pakistani representation ("74 Pak players," 2025). The standout among them, marquee batsman Babar Azam, secured a landmark deal worth nearly 100 million PKR with the Sydney Sixers, making him one of the league's highest-paid overseas players ("74 Pak players," 2025). In addition, younger athletes are using tournaments such as the Australian Junior Squash Open as platforms for international exposure to bolster their professional prospects and sometimes pave the way for future migration (Engineer, 2025).

Contemporary Movements Across the Global South

Gulf Cooperation Council States: Petrodollar Patronage

The influx of sovereign wealth from Gulf states into sport has established a new, robust sporting nexus bridging countries across the Global South. For instance, Qatar's 200 billion USD investment in the FIFA 2022 World Cup made global headlines. Despite the government's focus on football, more than 87% of the Qatar population is immigrants, including more than 1.5 million South Asian migrant workers for whom cricket is a major part of life (McManus, 2022). Cricket matches are usually tape ball: games played with tennis balls on empty lots, parking spaces, or open land, using simple gear and improvised boundaries. Despite the lack of proper funding, the sport of cricket is thriving. Pakistani migrants have had a strong influence on the growth of cricket in Qatar; numerous players on Qatar's national cricket

team are from Pakistan, and Pakistani expats have developed specialized bats (imported sometimes directly from Pakistan) to suit local tape ball cricket (McManus, 2022). Leagues such as the Qatar Expat Cricket Local coordinate matches for hundreds of teams every Friday, demonstrating the scale and energy of the cricket scene. These community-run competitions show how the game continues to expand through collective effort rather than formal institutions. This informal yet vibrant cricket culture highlights the increasing visibility of Pakistani and other South Asian migrants in Qatar. Their participation is gradually reshaping the country's sporting landscape and everyday leisure practices.

In 2018, the United Arab Emirates served as the home of the Afghanistan Premier League, officially the Gulbahar Afghanistan Premier League. Under a five-year agreement from 2025 to 2029, Abu Dhabi officially became the training and development base or "second home" for Afghanistan cricket (ESPNcricinfo Staff, 2025). The deal between the ACB and Abu Dhabi Cricket and Sports Hub secured venues in the United Arab Emirates for all ACB training camps, Afghanistan A and youth-level matches, and any potential future senior men's bilateral series (ESPNcricinfo Staff, 2025). With political instability limiting Afghanistan's ability to stage international fixtures at home after the Taliban came to power, the partnership with the United Arab Emirates offers stable infrastructure and long-term developmental support.

Nevertheless, sports in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states present substantial challenges for migrant athletes. While top-tier sport professionals might benefit from preferential visa policies, lesser-known athletes frequently endure unstable conditions under the *kafala* sponsorship labor system, such as temporary contracts and heavy reliance on sponsors. For those who migrate primarily for employment and engage in sports recreationally, navigating this environment can be especially difficult. South Asian athletes, in particular, often face social marginalization and discrimination, as Gulf societies tend to prioritize the interests of their citizens (Arabs). Integration opportunities are scarce, particularly for those without long-term residency status. Additionally, reports have surfaced about delayed wages and abrupt deportations of immigrants (Kim, 2024; Thomas, 2022). Gender segregation adds another layer of complexity, limiting opportunities for women; consequently, many Afghan and Pakistani female athletes are steered toward administrative roles rather than athletic ones. Chapter 7 more deeply unravels the lived realities of South Asian athletes in Qatar.

South and Southeast Asia: Regional Leagues and Cultural Affinity

The sporting landscape of South and Southeast Asia encompasses vibrant regional leagues like the IPL, PSL, BPL, and Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. These platforms serve as a dynamic forum where athletes from Afghanistan and

Pakistan are able to showcase their talent. For example, the BPL has historically been a magnet, especially for Afghan cricketers, including stars such as Mohammad Nabi and Amir Hamza Hotak. Similarly, numerous Afghan cricketers like Rashid Khan, Karim Janat, and Rahmanullah Gurbaz have been part of the IPL (Yousofi, 2024). Linguistic and cultural proximity ease adaptation in Bangladesh for Pakistani and Afghan athletes, while lower-tier Pakistani players join Sri Lanka's domestic competitions to escape Pakistan's cash-strapped system. Although Pakistani cricketers have been part of the BPL, after the 2008 season, the BCCI barred Pakistani cricketers from participating in the IPL because of Islamist terror attacks in Mumbai, which were tied to rogue actors within Pakistan.

Across Southeast Asia, athletes of Pakistani and, to a lesser extent, Afghan heritage are also increasingly shaping the region's sporting landscape. Nowhere is this more palpable than in Hong Kong cricket, where Pakistan-born stars such as all-rounder Nizakat Khan, power-hitting former skipper Babar Hayat, pace-bowling all-rounder Aizaz Khan, and versatile veteran Irfan Ahmed have become the backbone of the national side. Meanwhile, Attock-raised winger Jahangir Khan recently broke new ground by earning a football cap. A similar pattern appeared in neighboring nations: Lahore-born seamer Amjad Mahboob and compatriot Saad Khan Janjua anchored Singapore's cricket revival, both on the field and in administration, whereas Peshawar-born Khizar Hayat Durrani represented Malaysia. Collectively, these examples underscore how South Asian migrants have leveraged cricket (and, increasingly, football) to integrate into their adopted homelands and, in turn, diversify and strengthen national teams across the region.

Inter-Asian and African Circuits

Less celebrated than the headline-grabbing Asia-to-Europe or Asia-to-Gulf transfers, but just as consequential, is the quiet pipeline feeding South Asian talent into Africa's emerging sporting structures. For instance, Hunza-born all-rounder Riazat Ali Shah recently represented Uganda in the 2024 T20 World Cup hosted in the United States and the Caribbean. However, until recently, no male cricketer from Gilgit-Baltistan (the Pakistan side of administered Kashmir, per the United Nations' law) had appeared at a senior World Cup; therefore, this was considered a significant achievement. Riazat left Gilgit-Baltistan's lone hard-ball ground at 18 for Kampala, Uganda, after being spotted by the well-funded Aziz Damani club (Ali, 2024). On June 6, 2024, in Guyana, Riazat's gritty 33 rescued Uganda to beat Papua New Guinea, delivering the country its first ICC event victory and prompting televisions under one of Gilgit-Baltistan's highest peaks, Rakaposhi, to flicker on days before Pakistan's own upcoming match. For Ugandan fans, Riazat is now "purely Ugandan," despite his journey from streets in Gilgit to the world stage. Likewise, Pakistani-born Zimbabwean international cricketer Sikandar

Raza Butt has been able to make international headlines because of his fabulous performance. The examples of Sikandar Raza Butt and Riazat Ali Shah illustrate how Africa's expanding leagues are furnishing alternative international pathways for players who might otherwise be crowded out at home.

Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Sporting Subjectivities

A theoretical understanding is required to understand Afghan and Pakistani athletes' migration from South-to-South, South-to-North, or North-to-South, and its broader implications. The notion of transnationalism emphasizes the sustained cross-border ties that extend migrants' social worlds beyond nation-states (Schiller et al., 1992). The extant scholarly discourse of diaspora studies elucidates the affective dimensions of home and belonging by emphasizing how collective memories combined with imagined futures coalesce in dispersed communities (Axel, 2002). In various social contexts, such as sports, these diaspora frameworks can help illuminate how immigrants function as "cultural brokers" (Cooper, 2014) by bridging training methods, tactical knowledge, and even political messages across multiple locales. Cultural brokerage can manifest in various social spaces and forms, such as cultural centers, informal gathering spots, and educational settings. Such social interactions underline migrants' agency in navigating complex cultural terrains, thus shaping cross-cultural dialogues and exchanges that can transform both sending and receiving communities.

In the recent past, social activism by diasporic communities emerged as an important theme, especially in the context of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These diasporas have often mobilized to address issues such as human rights violations, political instability, and humanitarian crises in their home countries. Moreover, the utilization of digital media and global communication networks from these communities has successfully raised international awareness, impacted foreign policy debates, and provided critical support during crises, such as advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan and challenging sectarian violence and extremism in Pakistan.

Furthermore, two more notions deserve special emphasis. First, sporting remittances encompass far more than cash; they include the knowledge, technology, and other resources that athletes abroad channel back home. For example, British-born Pakistani-origin boxer Amir Khan started his own boxing academy in Pakistan. Second, embodied nationalism describes how an athlete, draped in national colors on a global stage, effectively relocates the homeland onto their own body. When refugee taekwondo fighter Zakia Khudadadi captured the Refugee Paralympic Team's maiden medal in Paris in 2024, she carried Afghan aspirations with her, even while competing under the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) banner. Other important theoretical themes also emerge from athletes' migration from Afghanistan and Pakistan and require further exploration below.

Gendered Dynamics and the Politics of Visibility

Alongside various socioeconomic constraints, male Afghan and Pakistani athletes also navigate powerful regimes of masculinity that shape who becomes visible, celebrated, or expendable in transnational sport (Ghanchi, 2025; Kukreja, 2023). For many migrant men, sporting success is folded into a wider script of respectable, heteronormative Muslim masculinity in which the athlete is imagined as breadwinner, moral exemplar, and embodied proof of national resilience. Cricketers abroad are routinely hailed as “sons of the nation,” tasked with demonstrating toughness, piety, and self-sacrifice on demand, even as their working conditions remain precarious and their legal status in host countries remains fragile. At the same time, diasporic spaces, from county cricket dressing rooms in England to MMA gyms in Scandinavia, expose these athletes to alternative models of manhood that prize emotional openness, care work, and mixed-gender collaboration. The resulting tensions surface in fan debates over “soft” versus “proper” masculinity, and in online policing of athletes’ clothing and celebrations. South Asian male athletes are often pushed to share their views on various sociopolitical issues, including their religious beliefs. Thus, the politics of visibility in Afghan and Pakistani sport within their home nation or abroad is also about which masculinities or viewpoints are authorized to represent the nation, and which are marginalized, contested, or rendered unspeakable.

Gender, moreover, operates as a structuring axis of immobility for numerous women athletes. Nevertheless, Afghan women athletes face double exclusion. First, internally from Taliban edicts banning female sports, and second, externally from sporting bodies wary of political controversy. For example, Breakdancer Manizha Talash was disqualified at the Paris 2024 Olympics for displaying a “Free Afghan Women” cape. Such acts renegotiate the boundary between political speech and sporting performance. Her garment, according to the organizers, violated Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which bars athletes from exhibiting political slogans during Olympic competitions. Officials, in the case of Talash, ruled the message as propaganda. Nevertheless, the ruling exposed an Olympic enterprise that parades refugee athletes in glossy promos to burnish its benevolent image, only to gag them the instant their speech threatens corporate ease. Talash willingly embraced that consequence, as her cape was never about chasing medals but was a rallying cry on behalf of Afghan women and girls who, since the Taliban’s 2021 return, have been barred from classrooms, sport arenas, and everyday freedom.

On the other hand, Pakistani women also confront subtler constraints, including patriarchal norms, inadequate domestic laws, and limited media coverage. Previous literature highlights the pervasive harassment of Pakistani women athletes by various stakeholders (e.g., male coaches). Diaspora participation, therefore, sometimes serves as both escape and ambivalent privilege. Nevertheless, diaspora players, especially those who are part of reverse migration at the national level, gain caps but risk accusations of “flag of convenience” selection.

Diaspora Communities and Grassroots Transformations

In host countries, sport functions as a social glue for numerous Afghans and Pakistanis. Community-run cricket clubs in Birmingham's Sparkbrook district mix first-generation Pakistani immigrants with second-generation Brits. Likewise, futsal nights in Toronto sometimes serve as informal job-hunting networks for Afghan refugees. And on Islamabad's training grounds, an annual UNHCR-backed friendly game has blended Afghan refugee and Pakistani women's squads. Many of the Afghan players had not laced up since fleeing Kabul, yet they drilled together, modelling an "invest-in-women" agenda that transcends the geopolitics of passports. Such spaces, both in the Global North and the Global South, complicate assimilationist narratives, fostering what Anthias (2008, 2012) calls translocational positionality, which describes how people and communities are situated within social relationships and power dynamics. Thereby, this concept recognizes that humans' positions in societies are fluid, molded by context, meaning, and time, resulting in evolving and sometimes conflicting senses of identity and belonging. Various Afghan and Pakistani athletes constantly toggle between exile and belonging. Therefore, they might leverage sports to store memories of home while accruing "bridging" capital (e.g., language practice, job leads, and inter-ethnic trust) inside host communities.

Conclusion

The journeys of Afghan and Pakistani athletes illuminate migration not as a linear path from periphery to center but as a complex choreography of detours, returns, and cross-cutting affiliations. Whether navigating England's village greens, Doha's climate-controlled stadiums, or makeshift futsal courts in refugee housing, these sportspeople enact identities that are at once rooted and radically mobile. Afghan and Pakistani athletes' stories challenge binary notions of home and away, revealing sport as both sanctuary and stage. Most importantly, they compel policymakers, federations, and fans to view athletic migration through a holistic lens, one that acknowledges structural injustices while celebrating the border-bridging possibilities of human movement. Upcoming chapters focus more on the lived experiences of Pakistani and Afghan athletes.

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Afghan Refugee Athletes in Islamabad, Pakistan

Introduction

Planned as a showcase of postcolonial modernity, Pakistan's capital of Islamabad was constructed with a meticulously ordered grid of parks, boulevards, and residential sectors to project an image of bureaucratic rationality combined with spatial discipline (Moatasim, 2019; Sarshar, 2019). However, within this seemingly coherent urban design, cricket pitches and football (soccer) fields have been improvised into various marginal and interstitial sites, vacant plots, flood-lit corners near shopping malls, and roadside verges near the suburbs ("60 Afghans," 2025). In these spaces, young Afghan refugees sometimes gather at dusk or late evening. Such physical activity spaces in Islamabad are neither officially sanctioned facilities nor entirely informal wastelands. These spaces are threshold urban areas that emerge in the gaps between municipal planning and growing migrant improvisation. For Afghan teenagers navigating the insecurity of temporary documentation (Varghese et al., 2024) and the stigma of *katchi abadis* (informal squatter shanty towns; Gilani, 2016), the painted football goalpost on a wall or the chalked cricket crease on packed dust is more than physical activity apparatus; it is an entry-way into a parallel civic order in which skill, teamwork, and ritual gestures of fair play outweigh ethnic markers or refugee status, if only for the duration of the game.

Guided by Victor Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1967, 1969), in this chapter, we endeavor to interpret sports grounds used by Afghan refugees in Islamabad as ritual stages where the social hierarchies and social classes of the capital are partially suspended. Clearly codified rules govern both cricket and football (Fraser, 2004; Holden, 2008). These structured temporalities offer participants an alternative sense of order and duration. Refugee life, by contrast, is shaped by uncertain timelines of waiting for permits, employment, or resettlement. The games' rhythmic discipline and daily schedule overlay that uncertainty with a more predictable cadence. Moreover, Afghan and Pakistani youths (especially from Islamabad and Punjab) who rarely mingle in social situations often experience a fleeting *communitas* (i.e., an egalitarian

fellowship; Haggar, 2024) when they huddle for a coin-toss or exchange handshakes after a decisive goal. The pitch or field thus becomes a liminal corridor that enables participants to step out of ethnic stratifications into a provisional community of rule-bound equals.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how young Afghan refugees use informal sporting fields in urban spaces in Islamabad. By focusing on Afghan refugees' narratives, we define Threshold Play to show how sporting playgrounds function as a unique space where codified rules and embodied skills temporarily reorder urban hierarchies and create moments of egalitarian interaction. Therefore, the chapter contributes to urban and migration studies by conceptualizing improvised sports grounds in Islamabad as liminal civic arenas that mediate the making of belonging and identity for displaced youth in a planned postcolonial capital.

Theoretical Lens: Liminality and Belongingness in Urban Sporting Arenas

The term liminality initially originated in Arnold van Gennep's 1909 study of rites of passage, labeling the threshold stage that lies between separation from an old social state and incorporation into a new one (Babcock, 2001; van Gennep, 2019). Anthropologist Victor Turner elaborated on the concept of liminality by emphasizing its experiential dimension (Turner, 1969). He argued that liminality is an intermediate state of being "betwixt and between," a state in which established social hierarchies and status distinctions are momentarily dissolved. Hence, being part of a liminal state enables participants to experience symbolic transformation (Turner, 1969). Scholars also introduced the idea of *communitas* to represent a potent form of egalitarian fellowship that tends to emerge during liminal moments (Haggar, 2024). These liminal moments are instances when, sometimes, conventional hierarchies of rank and class are temporarily suspended (Buechner et al., 2020; Faucher-King, 2005; Tolmie, 2024).

In the realm of sport management and sociology of sport, the concept of *communitas* has been widely used as a valuable concept for understanding collective behavior in sport, particularly by applying Turner's anthropological framework to rituals such as team chants and other group practices (Boyd & Stahley, 2008; Masumoto, 1985; Rich et al., 2021). Later research identified tensions between *communitas* and *corporatas* in sport public relations as organizations often struggle to reconcile community values with commercial priorities (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). Other studies examined *communitas* within hazing traditions among NCAA athletes, where roughly 80% reported initiation experiences that, rather than strengthening bonds, often damaged team cohesion (Johnson, 2011). Subsequent research suggested ways to cultivate *communitas* through sporting events by highlighting their capacity to create social value and to promote collective celebration (Chalip,

2006). Nevertheless, despite its rich theoretical potential, *communitas* combined with liminality remains underexplored within South Asian and other non-Western sociological contexts. The paucity of discourses on liminality in Asia exists despite distinct histories of migration (Bates, 2023), urban marginality (Sengupta & Nielsen, 2025), and postcolonial identity (Dryland & Syed, 2011), which can offer vital reinterpretations of collective sporting experience.

Furthermore, contemporary migration research has extended the concept of liminality to capture the prolonged state of in-betweenness experienced by displaced populations, such as being situated between homeland and host land, legality and illegality, settlement and return (Haggar, 2024; Marotta, 2025; Menjívar, 2006). For many refugees, liminality no longer represents a temporary ritual stage but a persistent socio-spatial condition, materialized in visa lines, refugee camps, and informal settlements. Scholars have previously noted that such conditions generate both precarity and creative adaptation, as migrants develop livelihoods and cultural forms within spaces that remain outside formal state recognition (Owen & Chambers, 2024; Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015; Waardenburg et al., 2019). This reconceptualization of liminality, from a momentary passage to a structural condition, can illuminate how Afghan communities in Islamabad continuously inhabit thresholds of belonging, both in their living environments and in their everyday sporting and leisure practices.

Lastly, the notion of liminal space clarifies how various sporting fields become spaces for the negotiation of hybrid identities (Noussia & Lyons, 2009; Peralta-Catipon, 2009; Pöyhönen, 2018). However, liminality simultaneously exposes its own constraints: the egalitarian spirit cultivated in the sporting arenas rarely endures beyond its boundaries; gender exclusions remain entrenched, with Afghan girls largely absent from participation; and the symbolic recognition achieved through sport seldom translates into sustained civic inclusion. Viewing Islamabad's cricket and football grounds through the lens of liminality can reveal their dual character as fragile, however, potent arenas of transformation, where displaced migrants momentarily inhabit equality amid enduring structures of marginalization.

Negotiating Belonging and Identity in Liminal Contexts

The notion of liminality can also offer a valuable foundation for identifying how belonging is shaped within ambiguous or sometimes unsettled social contexts. Building on Turner's (1969) formulation of liminality, for instance, contemporary scholars have extended the concept to urban margins, informal infrastructures, and precarious forms of everyday life (Thomassen, 2014, 2015; Vigh, 2009). In these in-between spaces, belonging does not function as a fixed right or formal status. Instead, it can take various shapes as something provisional, which is crafted through everyday acts of cooperation, emotional

ties, and the subtle negotiations that draw lines between inclusion and exclusion (Anthias, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Researchers have previously registered that everyday gestures, cooperation, hospitality, and mutual recognition can produce provisional communities that momentarily stabilize social life even under conditions of structural marginalization (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Probyn, 1996). Thereby, approaching the concept of belonging through liminality highlights how people cultivate fleeting forms of social attachments in spaces where their inclusion is never fully secured.

Identity scholarship likewise can also benefit from being read through a liminal frame (De Luca Picione et al., 2025; Beech, 2010), as liminality foregrounds how individuals negotiate who they are in contexts marked by uncertainty. Instead of viewing identity as stable, extant scholarship stresses that it is a fluid and context-dependent process (McEntee-Atalianis, 2022; Onorato & Turner, 2004). Identity, therefore, is shaped by how individuals present themselves and how they are recognized, categorized, or cast by others in divergent settings (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2008). Liminal conditions might heighten this fluidity. This is because when individuals inhabit thresholds, they often engage in forms of improvisation, experimentation, and performance through which new or alternative identities become thinkable (Butler, 2004). Scholarship on displacement further illustrates that identity is continually reworked in response to unequal visibility, unstable recognition, and fluctuating opportunities for participation or legitimacy (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Powell, 2015). Reading these scholarly discourses together shows how identity can operate as a dynamic practice of becoming within liminal spaces rather than a static category imposed from above.

The Context

Unlike Karachi's sprawling port economy or Peshawar's historically porous Pushtun culture, Islamabad is an administrative capital whose spatial order was designed to embody bureaucratic control, while promoting middle- and upper-middle-class modernity (Daechsel, 2013). Wide avenues and strictly zoned greenbelts form a grid system with purpose-built amenities. For example, the diplomatic enclave is located in G-4, the National University of Science and Technology in H-12, working-class neighborhoods in G-9 Markaz Market, and multiple *katchi abadis* are generally found in the I-, G-, F-, and H-sectors. These sectors were designed to project an image of planned harmony; however, they also enforce sharp boundaries between elite enclaves, labor class living, and informal settlements. Many of Islamabad's *katchi abadis* originated when laborers brought in to build the planned city settled in "temporary" encampments near construction sites; over time, these zones of provisional housing consolidated into semi-permanent low-income settlements.

In 2020, UNICEF estimated that underserved areas or slums housed 38% of Islamabad's inhabitants, 8% of whom were migrants from outside Pakistan.

Although not all migrants are registered, about 3% of Pakistan's officially registered Afghan migrants live in Islamabad (see Table 6.1). Several forces have pushed Afghan refugees to increasingly move to Islamabad beyond the older camps and settlements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The city's informal economy has expanded, especially in construction, transport, and service work, creating job opportunities that are often better than those available in crowded areas of Peshawar. Islamabad is also seen as relatively safer and more politically stable, which matters for families and young people living with long-term uncertainty. The capital concentrates universities, colleges, schools, NGOs, businesses, and state offices, so it offers pathways to education, training, services, and documentation that are much harder to access in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On the urban fringe, the spread of *katchi abadis* had also historically opened up cheaper housing options and rented rooms. Together, these conditions make Islamabad a strategic and attractive destination within the broader landscape of Afghan displacement for numerous refugees.

While migrants and refugees might blend anonymously into the commercial bustle of Karachi or into the historic bazaar networks of Peshawar, in Islamabad, they find a city that is visually open but socially gated, where access to public parks, sport clubs, and even neighborhood playgrounds is regulated by social class and ethnic backgrounds. The combination of physical proximity to state power corridors and persistent civic exclusion produces a distinctive experience of liminality. In Islamabad, the cricket pitch or roadside football goal is not just recreational but also a fragile foothold in a city meticulously ordered to keep informal communities at the edges. Therefore, urban sporting spaces, such as the informal cricket pitches and football grounds scattered across Islamabad's *katchi abadis*, the roadside clearings near the suburbs of Tarnol, Bani Gala, and Barakahu, and the neglected grounds of G-sector, can be understood as micro-ritual arenas situated within the migrants' broader condition of liminality.

Table 6.1 Afghan Nationals in Pakistan Holding Proof of Registration Cards

Region	Afghan Nationals with Proof of Registration	Percent of Total
Azad Kashmir	4,448	0.33
Balochistan	317,000	23.58
Islamabad	42,718	3.18
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa	709,278	52.75
Punjab	196,000	14.58
Sindh	74,117	5.51
Total in all of Pakistan	1,344,584	

Note: Data as of April 4, 2025.

Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2537827/60-afghans-rounded-up-in-twin-cities>

Method

This chapter adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach (Hafeez & Ahmad, 2024; Reeves et al., 2008) to examine how young Afghan refugee men in Islamabad engage with informal cricket arenas as liminal spaces. Moreover, we analyze this engagement through the conceptual lens of *communitas*. The data presented here derive from a broader ethnographic project conducted by the first author across multiple regions of Pakistan with a master's student in Pakistan (Fiza Hussain). However, this chapter focuses specifically on observations and narratives from Islamabad. The emphasis on male participants reflects the demographic realities of these sporting sites, where nearly all visible players are adolescent or young adult men. The research design prioritized sustained observation and narrative inquiry to illuminate participants' lived experiences of belonging, agency, and identity negotiation, dimensions often overlooked in quantitative or survey-based studies.

Refugees were identified through snowball sampling. The first author initially met several Afghan refugee players while working with a non-profit (American Refugee Committee, now Alight) supporting Afghan communities in Islamabad. These first contacts with Afghan refugees introduced the first author to various Afghan refugees playing sports. Over time, he regularly observed and played with a relatively stable group of young men who participated in various sporting activities. Although the games were technically informal, they were not random "pick-up" encounters. The same players and teams tended to return week after week, especially on Fridays. Moreover, Fiza Hussain followed these recurring groups over time and collected primary data through sustained participant observation. The observations spanned from April to August (five months). During this period, the researchers attended games on average one to two times a week, making it possible to trace both the stability and the fluidity of these informal sporting networks. The study was conducted through fieldwork in three informal sporting spaces in Islamabad. These included open-air grounds in Afghan-majority neighborhoods on the urban periphery of Islamabad (I-sector, G-sector, and H-sector). To protect participants, the precise location of the sporting spaces cannot be revealed.

Detailed fieldnotes documenting spatial arrangements, entry rituals, modes of verbal exchange, and post-match interactions were taken. This observational work was complemented by 15 semi-structured interviews, conducted in Urdu and basic English, with 5 focal athletes and 10 additional players by Fiza Hussain. Meanwhile, the first author of this book had informal discussions with the participants via Zoom. The interviews explored participants' understandings of fairness, inclusion, aspiration, and the social meanings attached to the ground. Informal discussions with other stakeholders, spectators, and volunteer coaches further contextualized community perceptions of young Afghan men's engagement in sports in Islamabad. Given the participants' legal precarity and social vulnerability, all interactions were preceded

by verbal informed consent, and pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity. No personal documentation was collected. The narratives presented from the five focal athletes are composite accounts, synthesizing elements from multiple individuals to ensure confidentiality while preserving ethnographic authenticity (Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2010). This ethical approach foregrounds the protection of participants without compromising the interpretive richness of their lived experiences (Ellis, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Findings: Five Athletes in Islamabad's Liminal Sporting World

The following interactions are from five Afghan refugee athletes using the pseudonyms of Bilal, Dawood, Farisban, Phushun, and Samiullah. Each athlete used to play sports three to four times a week. Phushun, an 18-year-old fast bowler, discussed the aspirational potential of sport. Known for his sharp yorkers (a type of fast cricket delivery toward a batter's feet) and tireless energy, he explained,

When I'm bowling, people shout my name . . . that gives good feeling, positive feeling, for that time, they don't see me as Kabuli or Khan or Afghani, just as a player . . . as a sportsperson like them.

His experience underscored how athletic mastery can act as a currency of belonging and equality. Moreover, his experiences illustrated the conversion of technical skills into symbolic visibility that briefly counteracts the stigma of refugee identity. In Bourdieu's (1958, 1977, 1984) terms, Phushun had accumulated symbolic capital (Meadows, 2009) through athletic mastery, converting bodily technique into social recognition. The pitch thus became what Lefebvre (1991) would call a produced space, where marginalized subjects generated meaning through embodied practice.

Nineteen-year-old Farisban, an agile football striker and competent lower-order cricket batter, offered a more tempered perspective. While he enjoyed the thrill of the matches, he reflected that

Once the whistle goes, everything changes . . . on the ground, I'm part of the team . . . we are brothers . . . but sometimes outside, I'm the refugee again . . . an Afghani illegal in this country . . . [he laughs].

His view captured the transient nature of *communitas* within the playing field, the fleeting moment of equality that dissolved as soon as the game's temporal frame closed. Moreover, Farisban's realism highlighted the illusory autonomy of the *field*: sport offered temporary inclusion, but it could not dislodge the wider apparatus of documentation, exclusion, and surveillance that governed refugee life.

Bilal, a 22-year-old tire-repair worker living in the suburb of Tarnol, demonstrated how recognition in sport extended into broader forms of agency. Admired for his ability to hit sixes in weekend tape ball tournaments, he used his sporting reputation to create a social network with local shopkeepers. As he described, "If I can manage a team and run matches, maybe one day I can manage my own shop . . . I have learned a lot from sport. I have other friends [shopkeepers], who also play with me." Bilal's story revealed how organizational and leadership skills honed through unstructured sporting activities could translate into small but significant pathways to economic self-determination. His narrative, moreover, exemplified what anthropologists call ritual competence, or the acquisition of social and organizational skills within bounded play that can be extended into other domains of life (Carter, 2012). Through Bilal, sport's structured hierarchy of roles as captain, player, and umpire became a rehearsal for civic participation, transforming liminality into an instrument of self-fashioning.

Dawood, an 18-year-old, tall and composed central defender and a cricketer who often played in mixed Afghan-Pakistani teams near the Barakahu construction corridor, drew attention to the temporal experience of play. Reflecting on his routine, he observed, "During the match, time moves differently; it feels like something is happening . . . like life is not on hold . . . it's always fun . . . or you can say escape." Dawood's reflection hinted at how the rhythm of play created an embodied sense of forward motion that countered the stagnation of bureaucratic temporality.

Finally, Samiullah, a 20-year-old all-rounder known for his spin bowling and lower-order hitting, exposed the ruptures in the ideal of sporting equality. Despite his talent, he recounted several incidents of exclusion:

Sometimes if I drop a catch, they say, I dropped it because I am Afghani . . . that basically means, I don't have mind . . . I am mad, like I am Pathan, that's why, hot tempered . . . they might not then allow me to play, whereas if a Punjabi drops a catch, they are not treated like this.

On other occasions, he faced ethnic taunts during matches, as he said, "We are always reminded that we are others, not them, as we are called as 'Khan,' or 'Kabuli,' and I am proud of being a Khan . . . like Imran Khan." These experiences revealed how prejudice infiltrated sporting arenas, which undermined the egalitarian promise of *communitas*. Theoretically, here, Turner's *communitas* is ruptured by what Bourdieu (1958, 1977, 1978) would call social distinction: the persistence of hierarchies of ethnicity and legitimacy that even ritualized equality cannot dissolve. Samiullah's experience warned against romanticizing sport as inherently integrative, which instead emphasized its vulnerability to the broader politics of belonging.

The participants' experiences revealed how sport operates as a liminal social practice, shaping moments of belonging, recognition, and transformation

within the margins of the city. Living on the physical and social margins of Islamabad, these young men transformed neglected spaces into arenas of recognition. Moreover, sometimes these sporting spaces even led to temporary equality. The participants' narratives collectively illustrate how improvised *fields* momentarily suspend the hierarchies of class, legality, and ethnicity, while simultaneously revealing the fragility of that suspension once play ends.

Liminal Fields and the Promise of Equality via Sporting Activities

Taken together, the five narratives present the ambivalent geography of liminality in Islamabad's informal sporting worlds (Waardenburg et al., 2019). Stepping onto a pitch demarcated by chalked creases or makeshift goalposts represents a symbolic transition from the stratified realm of bureaucracy, surveillance, and social stigma into a bound yet egalitarian order for Afghan refugees. The standardized regulations of cricket might, for a moment, supplant the city's uneven hierarchies with a shared framework of fairness and predictability. This can help in generating a fleeting experience of *communitas* in Turner's sense (1967, 1969). The *field* operates simultaneously as a sanctuary and a border; it enables transient equality while mirroring the inequalities it seeks to suspend. For some, like Phushun and Bilal, sport generated both symbolic and social capital (Esposti & Antonellini, 2019; Hussain & Cunningham, 2021). For others, like Samiullah, it reinforced the fleetingness of inclusion.

Dawood's reflections remind us that beyond space, sport reorganizes time, producing moments of agency within the stasis of displacement. A crucial dimension of liminality is its reconfiguration of time, as it suspends ordinary temporal rhythms and replaces them with its own structured rhythm (Chaney & Goulding, 2025). In this sense, cricket, with its overs and innings, with dedicated evening leisure time slots, creates bounded intervals that stand in sharp contrast to the indefinite waiting that defines refugee existence: waiting for documentation, legal enquiries, or employment. Through the structured duration of leisure sports, sometimes refugees might experience a rare sense of temporal control, engaging in leadership, decision-making, and collaboration within the predictable frame of the game's clock. The sporting *field* thus functions as a pedagogic space of self-fashioning, where participants rehearse forms of agency that, however unevenly, extend beyond play into the uncertain timelines of refugee life. In this sense, the sporting *field* functions as what Bakhtin (1982) might term a *chronotype*. Thereby, these arenas become a time-space of transformation where identity and belonging are rehearsed through ritual play. However, the return to everyday life reimposes the hierarchies of class, legality, and ethnicity for Afghan refugees. The liminal equality experienced during a sporting match, thereby, becomes a symbolic rehearsal rather than a structural change.

Finally, the experiences of these five athletes underscored that liminality in urban sport is both generative and fragile. Urban sporting spaces produce fleeting *communitas* and micro-worlds of fairness within a city, otherwise defined by exclusion, but only within strict temporal and spatial limits. Islamabad's improvised cricket and football grounds, therefore, should be read not merely as recreational zones but as threshold civic arenas, spaces of imaginative participation where displaced refugees momentarily experience the promise of equality, even as they remain bound by the structures that deny it.

Conceptualizing Threshold Play in the Margins of a Planned City

In this chapter, we introduce the new concept of Threshold Play to demonstrate how marginalized communities, especially Afghan refugees in Islamabad, reclaim and reimagine urban spaces through sport. The idea of Threshold Play builds on Victor Turner's concept of liminality but places it within the spatial and social contexts of postcolonial urbanism (Turner, 1967, 1969). In Turner's anthropology, liminality sometimes is a temporary phase of transformation where established hierarchies are suspended. During this phase, participants may experience *communitas*, a spontaneous, egalitarian sense of fellowship (Buechner et al., 2020). However, current discussions emphasize that contemporary displacement often turns liminality from a brief passage into a prolonged state of suspension (Marotta, 2025). For displaced Afghan migrants in Islamabad, liminality is experienced daily through the temporality of waiting for permits, jobs, recognition, and a sense of belonging. In this ongoing state of in-betweenness, many refugees find informal sporting grounds as threshold zones. These zones are spaces where marginalized migrants temporarily reshape the city's social hierarchies via sporting activities.

On this basis, we conceptualize Threshold Play as a distinct configuration of sport with four interrelated features. First, it is *spatially liminal*, unfolding in interstitial spaces so that Threshold Play happens in overlooked or marginal urban sites that lie at the edges of formal planning or regulation. Second, it is *temporally bounded*, meaning it imposes a structured, predictable game time that contrasts with the open-ended waiting of refugee life. Third, it can be *socially reordering*, as the rules and ethos of the game temporarily redistribute status, authority, and recognition among participants. Finally, it is *politically ambivalent*. Threshold Play creates provisional experiences of equality, belonging, and civic participation while remaining permeable to, and constrained by, wider regimes of exclusion. These criteria distinguish Threshold Play from both institutionalized sport and more diffuse notions of play, which uniquely anchors it in the lived conditions of urban marginality and displacement faced by numerous refugees and migrants. Crucially, none of these features depend on a fully planned city; they depend on patterned inequalities

and spatial marginalization, which can arise in both master-planned capitals and more organically grown urban environments.

Therefore, Threshold Play further extends Turner's theory by embedding it within the spatial grammar of the postcolonial planned city (Turner, 1967, 1969). In this chapter, we have focused on Islamabad because its modernist style, comprising geometric sectors, wide boulevards, and controlled zoning was intended to embody bureaucratic order and middle-class civility (Moata-sim, 2019). Our focus on Islamabad does not imply that Threshold Play would be irrelevant in less "planned" cities such as Karachi or Peshawar. Rather, we treat Islamabad as a particularly sharp case in which the contrast between formal planning and informal occupation is starkly visible. In more historically layered or less rigidly planned cities, threshold zones may emerge in different urban forms (e.g., alleyways, rooftops, inner-city vacant lots, or older industrial areas), but the underlying dynamics of marginalization, improvisation, and temporary reordering of hierarchies can be similar. The concept of Threshold Play, therefore, travels beyond Islamabad; what changes across cities is the specific morphology of the spaces in which it is enacted, not the core logic of the practice itself.

We further argue that urban space is not a neutral container but a social product, continually rewritten through everyday practices (Hall, 2015; Noursia & Lyons, 2009b). The emergence of informal pitches and football fields in interstitial sites, such as Islamabad's *katchi abadis*, the vacant plots in sector H-13, or Tarnol's roadside verges, demonstrates how displaced migrant communities tactically reclaim urban fragments excluded from official planning. In these pockets of neglect, young Afghan refugees inscribe new forms of belonging, generating spatial tactics and improvised acts of occupancy that subtly resist the logic of exclusion (Clausen & Elmholdt, 2018; De Certeau, 2011; Gill et al., 2014; Munro & Jordan, 2013). Within such reclaimed terrains, Threshold Play names the act of converting overlooked space into a self-governed civic arena structured by the rules of the game rather than the regulations of the state.

The cricket pitch or football arena thus becomes a micro-civic sphere, an ephemeral common where fairness, teamwork, and discipline temporarily displace bureaucratic hierarchy. Drawing from Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1998), these sites operate as *fields* of symbolic capital in which recognition is earned through performance rather than pedigree. For numerous athletes, the sporting playing field served as a laboratory for alternative social legitimacy, where bowling precision, leadership, and tactical skill garnered respect from peers that exceeded and, at times, countered their refugee status.

Moreover, Threshold Play introduces a crucial temporal dimension to liminality. Games impose an order (e.g., overs and innings in cricket) that counters the indeterminate time of refugee life. Dawood's reflections exemplified how structured play rhythms grant refugees a sense of temporal agency. This re-temporalization allows participants to rehearse rhythms of control,

progression, and closure within an environment where bureaucratic waiting routinely suspends such experiences. Through leisure sport, time is momentarily humanized: it becomes structured, purposeful, and imbued with agency rather than passivity.

However, as the narratives of several athletes revealed, the threshold is never impermeable. Racism, exclusion, and class prejudice leak into the ground, disrupting the fragile equilibrium of *communitas*. Gendered absence is even more pronounced; Afghan girls remain largely invisible within these sporting worlds, their participation curtailed by cultural expectations. *Threshold Play*, therefore, illuminates not only the generative but also the limiting dimensions of liminality. *Threshold Play* shows how entrenched power relations persist within spaces that outwardly perform equality. Indeed, the very conditions that enable the threshold to exist (urban neglect, social marginality, and economic precarity) simultaneously delimit its capacity to transform the broader social order.

Theoretically, then, *Threshold Play* reframes informal sport not as escapism but as a pedagogic practice of urban citizenship. Within the liminal zone of play, displaced migrants learn to negotiate visibility, leadership, and fairness. Sporting grounds become civic laboratories where marginalized actors rehearse forms of belonging that are both real and aspirational. In this sense, *Threshold Play* aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) idea of the "right to the city," the right to participate in shaping urban space, even from the margins. In Islamabad, the phenomenon is particularly revealing because of the city's planned rigidity. Across these contexts, migrants and refugees are no longer merely subjects of policy but agents of play. These arenas crystallize the paradox of postcolonial urban modernity; the very spatial orders meant to signify control, whether master-planned or incrementally produced, generate their own edges of resistance. We thereby argue that *Threshold Play* is a mode of social creativity through which marginalized communities reimagine fragments of the city as provisional democracies of movement. For refugees, the cricket pitch turf in urban spaces can offer both the promise and the precarity of civic life under displacement. Within these improvised arenas, the choreography of play converts exclusion into participation, producing ephemeral audiences bound not by citizenship but by the act of sport itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored how Afghan refugees in Islamabad use informal sporting grounds within the constraints of displacement. By introducing the concept of *Threshold Play*, we have discussed that these improvised sporting arenas act as temporary civic spaces where marginalized players momentarily experience fairness, agency, and recognition. The sporting games thereby do more than provide recreation; they represent small but meaningful acts of urban participation in a city (Islamabad) designed to exclude them. At

the same time, our findings also show the limits of such transformation. The equality achieved on the ground remains fragile, interrupted by racism, class barriers, and gender exclusions that mirror the inequalities of city life. The very conditions that make these spaces possible (e.g., neglect, informality, and marginality) also constrain their potential to create lasting social change.

Future research could expand this work in several directions. First, more attention should be given to gendered experiences of liminality, especially by exploring how Afghan girls and women engage, or are prevented from engaging, in sporting or other public activities. Second, comparative studies across other South Asian cities, such as Karachi, Peshawar, New Delhi, or Dhaka, could show how urban form and local culture shape different expressions of Threshold Play. Third, mixed-method or longitudinal research could trace whether participation in such informal sports eventually influences displaced migrants' social mobility, civic inclusion, or leadership. Finally, scholars might extend the idea of Threshold Play beyond sport to include other creative practices, such as music, art, or digital media, through which displaced migrants negotiate belonging in urban spaces. By continuing to study these everyday forms of resilience and imagination, future research can deepen our understanding of how marginalized communities transform the edges of the city into arenas of hope, visibility, and participation.

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Afghan and Pakistani Athletes' Migration in the Arab World

Unique Lived Experiences of Athletes in Qatar

Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholarly engagement with the sporting culture of the Middle East has increased, a trend catalyzed, though not confined, by Qatar's fruitful bid to stage the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup (e.g., Al-Emadi et al., 2022; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014; Dorsey, 2014; Griffin, 2019; Millward, 2017). The expanding corpus concerning Qatari sporting culture, and more broadly the Arab world, now encompasses monographs, edited volumes, and themed journal issues that collectively map an emergent regional sport studies terrain (see Amara, 2022; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Raab & Khalidi, 2016; Reiche & Sorek, 2019). Parallel to growing scholarly proliferation, research articles have multiplied across cognate topics about the region, from governance and soft power to media narratives and cultural politics, reflecting a diversification of theoretical lenses (e.g., Al-Emadi et al., 2022; Boykoff, 2022; Grix & Lee, 2013; Hajjaj et al., 2024; Parvez, 2024). Media and academic conversations alike have gravitated toward issues of labor exploitation, human rights, and migrant precarity, particularly in relation to Qatar's preparations for its mega-event and the visibility of South Asian workers (Boykoff, 2022; O'Rourke & Theodoraki, 2022; Thani, 2021).

However, within this burgeoning discourse, the subjectivities of migrants themselves, especially those from Afghanistan and Pakistan, remain elusive. Moreover, much of the existing literature foregrounds structural critique (e.g., human rights, democracy versus monarchy in the region, infrastructural development, or geopolitical branding) while comparatively limiting the everyday sporting life for migrants whose presence sustains and diversifies local sport ecologies. This lacuna is particularly striking given Qatar's markedly imbalanced demographic profile, in which expatriate communities numerically eclipse citizens. For instance, there are around 360,000 Qatari nationals (11.6%) versus 1.82 million South Asians from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (55.9%) in the country (Global Media Insight, 2025). With a South Asian-to-Qatari ratio of 5:1, South Asian populations provide the critical mass that drives participation across multiple sports, including cricket. Cricket's remarkable diffusion, frequently explained elsewhere

through colonial diffusionist narratives (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005) or broad accounts of sport migration and transnational flows (see Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Engh & Agergaard, 2013; Maguire, 1994), is emblematic of wider processes whereby migrant networks seed and sustain vibrant competitive and recreational spaces. However, a narrow focus on the sport's macro-spread risks (e.g., human rights abuses) obscures the intimate negotiations of identity, belonging, masculinity, religiosity, and racialization enacted by individual Afghan and Pakistani migrants operating within Qatar's distinctive socio-cultural context. Moreover, some of these immigrants migrated to Qatar for economic opportunities and use sport, such as cricket, as recreational activities.

Furthermore, concentrating on Afghan and Pakistani athletes within the Arab world can broaden the conversation beyond the frequently generalized category of "South Asian workers in the Global North" (Europe and the United States), foregrounding heterogeneity in migration accounts, geopolitical imaginaries, and community structures. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to interrogate how Afghan and Pakistani migrants in Qatar interpret and manage their sporting and social trajectories. Moreover, we endeavor to focus on how migrant athletes leverage sport in the Middle East to negotiate visibility, forge solidarities, and navigate layered forms of marginalization. We also discuss how masculine norms intersect with cultural and religious identities, and how participation contributes to both integration and the maintenance of transnational ties. By centering athletes' narrated experiences in this chapter, we seek to recalibrate scholarly attention from macro-level spectacle (e.g., 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup) toward the micro-processes of adaptation, identity work, and intercultural encounter that underpin Qatar's evolving sporting landscape. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the growing discourse on migration in the Arab world. Lastly, at the end of the chapter, we highlight the need for policy frameworks that recognize migrant athletes not solely as labor inputs or sometimes as symbolic resources but as agents who shape pluralistic sporting cultures.

Pakistani and Afghan Migration to Qatar

Previous research elucidates that the everyday lived experiences of immigrants in Qatar are contingent upon intersecting variables, such as country of origin, ethnicity, educational and professional credentials, and gender (Bruslé, 2010; Nagy, 2006; Pessoa et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019). Many foreign laborers struggle with precarious employment, abusive labor conditions, congested living quarters, restricted healthcare access, and other sociopolitical challenges (Nikhil et al., 2025). Nepalis living in Qatar, for instance, tolerate both geographic and societal seclusion, as some of them live in segregated labor compounds apart from the wider population (Bruslé, 2010). Likewise, the children of Filipino essential workers have to confront scholastic, social, and emotional obstacles because of their parents' severe

work schedules (Real et al., 2022). Among highly skilled female expatriates, experiences are further modulated by marital status and domestic responsibilities, with the job sponsorship (*kafala*) framework engendering divergent professional trajectories and personal circumstances relative to their male peers (Khattab et al., 2020). Nevertheless, migrants in Qatar frequently cultivate a strong sense of resilience through the formation of tight-knit social networks, engagement in spiritual or religious rituals, and the adaptation of their cultural practices to their new environment (Al-Thani, 2025). For instance, numerous South Asian immigrants are often seen playing cricket in parks or on streets, especially during weekends after Friday (Jumma) prayers.

Migration flows from South Asia, especially from Pakistan, first began in the 1970s due to an oil-fueled economic surge in Gulf nations. Decades later, Qatar's rapid infrastructural development, particularly in the lead up to the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup, also increased and sustained a demand for both semi-skilled and skilled laborers. Although many Pakistani-origin migrants relocated to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates after the FIFA World Cup ended, Qatar still remains one of the leading Arab destinations for the Pakistani community to migrate because of common religious and cultural norms. As of 2024, there were 300,000 Pakistanis in Qatar, making up 10% of Qatar's total population (Mallick, 2024).

In academic research on Pakistanis, Saeed (2024) explored how first-generation migrant mothers and their Qatar-born daughters diverged in their experiences and expressions of belonging in Qatar. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the author highlighted that mothers are generally hindered by the *kafala* sponsorship system and the instability it creates (Saeed, 2024). They therefore safeguarded their ties to Pakistan by maintaining "backup" homes and grounded their sense of belonging in the welfare of their transnational families. In contrast, daughters raised and educated in Qatar tended to focus on personal advancement, participated less in transnational networks, and cultivated attachments to Qatar that were largely independent of collective family obligations.

In the context of Afghanistan, following Kabul's fall in August 2021, Qatar served as a critical transit point for the United States to evacuate tens of thousands of Afghan refugees and U.S. citizens. During Operation Allies Refuge, roughly 58,000 evacuees passed through Al Udeid Air Base and Camp As Sayliyah in Doha, Qatar, to the United States (Pointer, 2021). By 2025, approximately 1,500 Afghans were in transit at Camp As Sayliyah, awaiting relocation to America, and several thousand more Afghan nationals were long-term residents (Bailey, 2025). Overall, Afghan migration to Qatar was driven by three primary factors: first, evacuation and temporary resettlement following the collapse of Kabul; second, emerging governmental negotiations aimed at deploying Afghan workers abroad, including an initial agreement set to dispatch laborers to Qatar in 2025; and third, broader economically driven migration.

Capital, Hegemony, and the Pitch: Integrating Bourdieu and Masculinity Theory to Illuminate Afghan and Pakistani Migrant Athletes in Qatar

The phenomenal growth and development in the Middle East in the past five decades have attracted thousands of immigrants to Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (Amara & Theodoraki, 2010; Fargues, 2011). The immigrants are not only the backbone of those economies but also populate Friday night football (soccer) tournaments, buy tickets to watch motorsports, and play in park cricket leagues. However, these immigrants' lived experiences still remain largely invisible within Gulf sporting scholarship or sport media discourse. To untangle how migrant men navigate belonging, status, and gendered expectations, especially within sporting arenas, it is essential to use a theoretical framework that sheds light on both the structural foundations of their lives and the nuanced, personal ways they enact and reshape masculinity. Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) sociological lens (i.e., theory of practice grounded in social reproduction framework) and Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity, further augmented by Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity, can deliver corresponding vantage points that, when synthesized, can generate a layered explanatory ocular capable of linking macro-level power relations to embodied, everyday actions of immigrants within Qatar's normative sporting systems.

Bourdieu argued that social spaces are a constellation of semi-autonomous *fields* in which actors continuously compete over economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, employing dispositions guided by an individual's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Meanwhile, habitus is defined as the set of deep-down habits and ways of thinking individuals pick up from their upbringing and social background that guide how they act unintentionally (Bourdieu, 1977). Moreover, in Bourdieu's terms, a *field* is a structured "playing ground" with its own rules of competition and players (Thomson, 2012). Qatar's cricket and football scenes broadly fit this description, as they operate inside the larger Gulf economic order and within the constraints of the stringent sponsorship labor system. This *kafala* system is a Gulf-sponsored labor framework that links a migrant's visa and work permit to a single sponsor called the *kafeel*. It places employers in control of migrant employees' ability to switch jobs or leave the state and has been broadly employed across various GCC countries, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Robinson, 2022). Although Bahrain and Qatar have asserted that they eliminated the *kafala* system in the past few years, various media critics and human rights organizations contend that lax enforcement means the changes fall far short of true abolition (Robinson, 2022). For instance, Qatar began dismantling the *kafala* system in 2016 by shifting to contract-based employment (BBC News, 2016). Further breakthroughs came in 2020 when the NOC (or required

approval for an employee to change jobs) scrapped exit visas and instituted a universal monthly minimum wage of 1,000 QAR (about 274 USD; Ghani, 2020). The International Labor Organization (2019) largely applauded these moves by the Qatari government and called Qatar the first Gulf state to seriously loosen *kafala*'s hold. In reality, though, enforcement is still patchy: employers still confiscate passports, delay wages, sometimes do not pay the employees, and file "absconding" charges, while domestic workers must give 72 hours' notice before leaving (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Human rights groups and other critics have also emphasized that ambiguities in the labor law of Qatar continue to perpetuate exploitation. Hence, the authentic abolition of the *kafala* system will warrant much stricter oversight by various government and non-governmental stakeholders. It is important to note that the steps toward abolishing the *kafala* system in Qatar were made possible because of the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup, as it led to increased scrutiny of the country (Hussain & Cunningham, 2024). Nevertheless, the sponsorship system and overall labor laws of the Qatari state are widely condemned for facilitating the abuse and exploitation of numerous migrant laborers (Amnesty International, 2021).

Bourdieu reconceptualized resources and power as four interlocking capitals: economic (financial assets), cultural (knowledge and competencies), social (relationships and networks), and symbolic (honor and esteem; Bourdieu, 1986). These capital forms may be amassed, traded, or transformed, often at some expense, and their worth shifts with the social *field* in which they are mobilized, constructing status hierarchies and competitive struggles (Bourdieu, 1986). South Asian migrants, especially athletes, often arrive in Qatar with substantial cultural capital in the form of technical skill (e.g., cricket lore and knowledge of South-Asian playing styles), yet they possess very limited economic capital. Most athletes reach Qatar on other categories of work visas and treat sports, including cricket, primarily as a pastime or secondary pursuit. Moreover, they lack legal capital (a type of cultural capital) because residency hinges on employer goodwill. Many of these athletes' habitus, forged in Punjab's tape ball backstreets or Kabul's harsh pitches, is manifested by creativeness, animated celebration, and reverence for age seniority, but they must recalibrate to a Qatari sporting environment administered by Arabic bureaucracy and stringent Gulf codes of normative modesty. Bourdieu's framework (1977) can aid in mapping how unevenly allotted resources shape the prospects and obstacles that South Asian migrant athletes face while navigating Qatar's sporting arenas and various networks within it.

Connell's (1995) work offers a different perspective than Bourdieu's—that gender discourse is at the heart of structural hierarchies. He underscored that a culturally idealized form of manhood, hegemonic masculinity, validates men's dominance over women and over alternative masculinities (Connell, 1995). This peculiar type of masculinity tries to describe men as powerful in all circumstances, despite their marginalized context (such as migrant

athletes, in the case of Qatar). Moreover, Connell (1995) explained that hegemonic masculinity functions as a normative standard; not all men personify it, but countless benefit from its authority. In the Gulf sport scene, hegemonic masculinity fuses global sport aggression and the neo-capitalist economic system with local cultural norms and racialized labor hierarchies. Across patriarchal societies, the model athlete is anticipated to demonstrate competitiveness, discipline, heterosexual assertiveness, sometimes visible respect for religious customs (especially in religious countries), and deference to authority. Those athletes whose physical appearance or demeanor match this ideal accumulate what, from Anderson's (2009) lens, can be termed as masculine capital, which can lead to coaching positions, media recognition, or informal team leadership. Conversely, individuals who stray from this prevailing ideal by exhibiting emotional vulnerability, struggling with normative language (Arabic, in the context of Qatar), or seeming less athletically muscular can be sidelined or even ridiculed.

In Qatar, like in many other patriarchal cultures, displaying dutiful compliance with authority figures can serve as a kind of social currency or social capital because overt religious devotion and respectful deference are seen as hallmarks of "true" manhood. Bourdieu's (1977) lens, therefore, moves us past the simple question of who has what capital and toward seeing how the local gender order assigns value to particular capitals, and how migrant men can actively trade one form of capital for another. For instance, a Pakistani cricketer might draw on his ties to religious leaders (social capital) to obtain a municipal pitch permit (institutionalized cultural capital), hence turning religious credibility into physical playing space for his team. Likewise, an Afghan cricketer may display marked deference to Arab managers (social capital) to protect his visa (an administrative subtype of cultural capital). These acts of deference, moreover, can aid the person in converting his embodied humility into bureaucratic refuge (e.g., cultural capital–legal status). Each of these subtle exchanges also carries masculine meanings and can either reinforce or subtly reshape the prevailing gender pyramid of power in a particular culture.

Nevertheless, inclusive masculinity theory proposed by Anderson (2009) contends that when homophobia and rigid gender policing weaken, men can gain discursive and real-world space to express care, sometimes emotional honesty, and even egalitarianism. While the Arab culture remains culturally and historically conservative, multi-ethnic locker rooms and digital diasporic networks can whittle out micro-arenas where migrant athletes can experiment with more horizontal masculinities. For instance, joint *iftar* meals (eaten after a day of fasting) that transcend Indian/Pakistani rivalries, communal remittance assembling for injured teammates, and open collective acknowledgements of homesickness and nostalgia can demonstrate practices that reallocate masculine capital away from authority toward communal solidarity. Moreover, such communal moments can expose cracks in the hegemonic edifice and suggest that gender orders, like *fields*, are never fixed but recurrently negotiated.

In this chapter, we have endeavored to bridge Bourdieu's (1977) ideas with masculinity studies (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995), resulting in three closely knitted contributions. First, we link the Qatari labor sponsorship rules to the everyday politics within teams, while keeping the two levels distinct: labor laws provide the backdrop, but power and ideas about masculinity actually drive the action. Second, we highlight migrant agency, showing that immigrant men are not passive victims of structure but active strategists who mobilize, continually exchange, and revalue capitals to reposition themselves in the normative system. Lastly, we extend inclusive masculinity research (Anderson, 2009) beyond its Western, middle-class origins by illustrating that care-oriented masculinities can germinate among precarious Muslim workers navigating transnational obligations.

Method

The results shared in this chapter are nested within a broader, multi-year project led by the first author that has endeavored to examine South Asian cricketers' lived experiences in Qatar. This book chapter represents one analytic slice of that larger research project that has not been previously reported. Guided by a descriptive phenomenological design (Willig et al., 2017), the findings herein explored how male migrant athletes interpret their careers and identities while navigating expatriate life in Qatar. Phenomenology was chosen as a methodology of exploration because it centers participants' lived experience, rather than the researcher's perspective, in line with Husserl's (1931) broader understanding of this approach.

Male cricketers were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy, targeting those athletes who are most knowledgeable about elite and club-level cricket in Qatar. This includes the lived experiences of five Pakistani athletes who had either represented Qatar at the national or club level and possessed first-class or national-level experience in Pakistan. It also includes the lived experience of one Afghan migrant who used cricket as a recreational activity while trying to transit to the United States. Ages ranged from 24 to 38 years. Semi-structured interviews (40–60 minutes) conducted in English or Urdu via Zoom were transcribed, and fieldnotes tried to capture non-verbal cues as well as reflexive insights. The interviews were further corroborated with online media reports, non-profit organizations' reports, and migrant athletes' interviews on local media. This approach supported the triangulation of data sources and enhanced credibility.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were examined using a three-phase inductive content analysis approach (preparation, organization, reporting) as described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Initial immersion readings led to open coding, generating

preliminary codes. Through constant comparison and abstraction, these were refined into subcategories, generic categories, and ultimately six main themes. To enhance credibility, member checks were conducted, fieldnotes and media reports were triangulated, and the primary researcher, a South Asian, managed personal biases by keeping reflexive memos.

Findings and Discussion

Passion versus Patriarchal Authority: Family and Capitalist Economic System as First Gatekeeper

The study revealed that, in the household context, Pakistani cricketers initially had to justify cricket as a legitimate pursuit against patriarchal norms that conflated manhood with serving as the primary wage earner. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1977) work, the family constitutes the primary arena (i.e., *field*) in which cultural capital (embodied passions and competencies) seeks validation. Meanwhile, if the family control on choices is viewed through Connell's (1995) framework, family influence on decision-making reflects hegemonic masculinity, where paternal authority is prioritized, and economic stability is valued over athletic pursuits for many South Asian athletes. For example, one of the participants (Respondent 1) stated:

First, my family was not able to understand at all what I was doing. They cannot understand what cricket is, or I can be a cricketer. Especially my father cannot understand. Many times I was beaten by my father. Many times, I used to wake up after sleeping, and my bats were broken. All my equipment was all over the place. I was beaten many times by my father, but you know I had a passion for playing cricket, and if you have a passion, anything is possible. So one of my uncles supported me; he knew I could play cricket and one day can represent Pakistan. My uncle believed in me. He made me understand my father, and then my father was a bit soft.

In this context, paternal authority is enacted through both corporeal coercion and symbolic domination, whereas the male uncle's intervention illustrates how kin-based social capital can unsettle and reconfigure the doxa that cricket does not constitute legitimate labor. Another migrant athlete (Respondent 4) layered economic strain onto this dynamic:

My family was against cricket from day one; my father didn't like cricket at all. Allah gives my father, Jannat. Nothing bad against my father, but you asked about family support; I am telling you due to it. [he laughed] My father has beaten me many times for playing cricket [laughed heavily]. My father was working in Qatar from a small age, my father was working here, and we were living in Pakistan. From day one, my father didn't like

me playing cricket, and he was really against me playing cricket now he is not alive, and that was an issue as well I had a lot of family burdens, and I needed to have some source of income for my family. My father was not in favor of cricket, so those could be the family challenges I have. But I had support from my friends and my cousins, who liked to see me playing cricket, but no one in my family had ever played cricket. No one in my family knows anything about cricket as a profession; they have only seen the Pakistan cricket team on the national channel, and they have not seen me playing cricket; they thought that I was wasting my time and that they were against me. I was working as well when I was playing in Pakistan; I was working as a clerk on the Pakistan railway; I had a very small salary, around about 20,000 [PKR]. But still thankful to Allah. Due to my very less salary, I could not support my family, and I needed a job when my father died I decided to come to Qatar and see if that could be a place where I could live for a very long time and support my family and bring my family here as well, right now my family is with me in Qatar but in Pakistan salaries are very low. This was the main reason I came to Qatar, and I was getting old I knew that I could not be selected for Pakistan national team for the national camp, so I decided to come to Qatar.

Here, the athlete's quote elucidated the general mentality in the various Indian subcontinent families about the "men must earn, not play" rule. The athlete's father used to beat him and trash his gear, turning cricket into "wasted time" and stripping his skill of value. With no one at home who saw cricket as real work, he leaned on friends and cousins for backing. When his father died, small wages and bills pushed him to cut a deal with patriarchy and neoliberal economic barriers—go abroad, make money, keep the family afloat—even if that meant letting Pakistan's national cricket representation dream fade. Moving to Qatar is thus a *field* switch, but he calls it a last option, so Pakistan still anchors his sense of who he is. Thanking Allah also helps the athlete to frame all this sacrifice as meaningful, not just hardship. This shows a unique intersection of the neoliberal economic system, capitalism, religion, and patriarchy, deeply ingrained in the *field* of numerous Pakistani athletes.

Likewise, Respondent 1 registered that:

Men in Pakistan are the breadwinners, so the family wants a good career for them. The family is dependent on them. So playing cricket is not a good option for many of the people from villages. Additionally, in the villages, we have small families. Everyone knows each other if you play cricket people in the family might joke about you and then your family might not like it.

This quote again illustrates the deep framing of "men" to be understood as primary providers, so families treat paid work as legitimate capital. Meanwhile, they might dismiss cricket as non-productive by devaluing the player's

cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In tight village *fields*, gossip about income level, which is generally associated with masculinity, operates as social surveillance and symbolic violence. This might pressure male athletes to conform to respectable breadwinner roles and policing deviations like pursuing sport. Overall, taking these quotes together, these accounts position the family as the initial testing ground where South Asian athletes rehearse the tactics (e.g., cultivating allies, negotiating authority, and enduring constraints) they later use with employers and federations to translate passion into socially validated capital. Moreover, “home” to numerous Pakistani and Afghan athletes’ serves as a primary battlefield, where they need to not only win but also show their masculine dominance.

Parchi Politics versus Performance Logic: Comparing Fields in Pakistan and Qatar

Respondents from Pakistan characterized the Pakistani cricket landscape as overcrowded and deeply politicized, where upward mobility depended largely on mobilizing social networks and political leverage. For instance, the athletes emphasized that access to various resources across the cricket hierarchy of Pakistan was a function of city origins and the infamous *parchi* (reference) system in which an athlete must know an influential person who refers them for an advanced placement. In contrast, Qatar was depicted as a smaller *field* where cultural capital was more visible and thus more easily converted into selection, even if some favoritism lingered based on nationality. The following accounts illustrate athletes deliberately shuttling between the Pakistani and Qatari *fields* to enhance the exchangeability of their capitals. For instance, Respondent 1 from Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan, said:

When I started to play cricket in Sialkot, there was too much competition. It was like playing for Pakistan when you play first-class cricket in Sialkot. There are so many good players. But yes, favoritism is there, corruption is there, and sometimes people like me who do not have big support are not able to play cricket at the national level. But I will not fully blame the system; it might be I was not competent. I might not have worked hard.

The above quote captures both structural criticism (favoritism and corruption) and self-discipline. This is a classic example of symbolic violence: the player partially internalizes systemic exclusion (“I was not competent”) as personal failure, reproducing the meritocratic myth that effort alone should suffice. Meanwhile, the Respondent 6 account makes the *parchi* mechanism explicit:

Favoritism or preference in the selection process is there, especially when you talk about getting into the national side or going for the national camp,

or getting the central contract. See the examples of Ahmad Shahzed, he is a true *parchi*. Other *parchis* are also there. Therefore, there is a lot of favoritism, I think that there is more preference if you are from the main city. . . . There is also the *parchi* system; you should have a strong reference to get into Pakistan national team. I know many players, it is not a good thing, and that is why our cricket is not improving as compared to Australia or England or India, where the competition has become tougher. Our domestic cricket is destroyed, only because of Allah, we are performing well at the international level. At the grassroots level, our cricket is dead. We do not have cricket played in the schools, now children like to play those video games, not cricket and children cannot bear the heat like we used to do.

Again, the above quote details how sociopolitical capital (references, city status) dominates Pakistan's selection processes, while also lamenting structural decay. The invocation of Allah and nostalgia for tougher past conditions illustrate moral framings around effort and decline. Meanwhile, Qatar was highlighted by athletes as a more meritocratic space compared to Pakistan. For example, one athlete (Respondent 2) elucidated:

Actually, in Qatar, if anyone performs. He will get a chance. If he performs, he will get into the camp, and if he performs in camp, he will play for Qatar. Yes, favoritism, liking, and disliking are everywhere, but Qatar is a small town; if anyone performs, selectors and people get to know. But it is not like Pakistan.

Overall, athletes' critiques spanned multiple levels, micro (references), meso (cities, camps), and macro (national cricket culture), demonstrating how capital hierarchies are institutionalized. Within Pakistan's cricket *field*, social and political capital are privileged above cultural capital; thus, players lacking robust networks face stalled mobility regardless of on-field performance. Qatar, by contrast, constitutes a reconfigured *field* for many Afghan and Pakistani athletes in which cultural capital converts more readily. Still, because bias or discrimination is grounded in both *fields* (Pakistan and Qatar), no specific context is genuinely meritocratic. Athletes' stories toggle between structural critique and self-reproach, showing how merit-and-effort myths saturate even those marginalized by favoritism. This contradiction propels migration as a calculated effort to realign *field* conditions with one's capital portfolio, an embodied assessment of where one's skills can actually register as value.

Bread or Bat: Employment Precarity and the Absence of Contracts

Participants also framed cricket in Qatar as an ongoing bargaining process with employers who monopolize control over visas, time off, and wages.

Taking Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) ocular, their cultural capital (sporting skill) struggles to convert into economic and symbolic capital because access to time and money is mediated by Qatari *kafeel* gatekeepers rather than a professional sport apparatus. Within the Middle Eastern *kafala*-based sponsorship system, employers control key legal resources, such as approval for absences and travel, pushing many migrant cricketers into a taxing "dual-career" juggle, in which earning a wage routinely takes precedence over their sporting aspirations. For example, Respondent 3 highlighted,

If companies are promoted then we will get the leave very easily. We will get paid leave for playing cricket. Right now sometimes companies deduct our salaries [if we go] to play cricket. There are many companies who deduct our salaries when even we go for the international tours. If we are gone for 15 days, we get a loss of 15 days.

According to the above quote, in this environment, the prospect of an employer-granted "promotion" is imagined as a device to confer legitimacy on cricket, illustrating how symbolic capital (e.g., public acknowledgment) can be converted into material concessions such as paid leave. Lacking such recognition, salary deductions recast international duty as a personal financial burden. This renders sport, such as cricket, an expense rather than a livelihood. The quote below from Respondent 1 confirms this:

Yes, even some players might get fired if they go for long international tournaments. We have said many times to [the Qatar Cricket] Association to involve our companies. We have asked them to invite them to prize distribution ceremonies, so they know what their employees are doing for Qatar. There should be some respect and honor for the cricketers. Many times because of work commitments, we are not allowed to play cricket. We are now handling this situation tactfully by ourselves, we take with the administration to not give us paid leave or deduct from the annual leaves, so we can go and represent Qatar. If companies do not allow our national team combination is also affected a lot. It is about choosing your passion or bread sometimes. So obviously you need bread for your children and passion has to let it go.

In Qatar, numerous cricket clubs operate under the sponsorship of private companies that recruit South Asian players ostensibly for their sporting talent, yet employ them full time in physically demanding, low-status jobs. Under the *kafala* system, firms retain control over visas, leave, and travel, compelling these athletes into a perpetual "dual-career" arrangement where cricket is secondary to wage labor. The arrangement allows corporations to appropriate athletes' embodied cultural capital (e.g., fitness, discipline, and skill) while offering minimal institutional recognition of cricket as legitimate work. The irony was that several cricketer respondents also reported being diverted to

labor on FIFA 2022-related projects, underscoring how corporate sponsors mobilize athletic bodies for broader economic and prestige pursuits.

Infrastructural Scarcity and Climatic Constraints

Athletes also emphasized Qatar's resource shortfalls, such as few playable grounds, wickets that consistently favor batters, no dedicated gyms or medical personnel, and even sporadic access to the sole stadium. When asked about concerns in Qatar, Respondent 4 remarked:

The facilities like we do not have too many stadiums. The pitches are only favoring batsmen, not bowlers, there is no particular gym or good coaches, and the fitness level of athletes is not good because of not having good coaches or physicians. Those are the concerns in Qatar; there is also not much support income-wise. The companies we are working for do not support us too much as well for playing cricket; those are the problems here, not favoritism. We have one stadium, and only this stadium is not open all the time; we cannot sometimes practice on vacations, and the stadium is closed, which is the problem.

Moreover, the results unveiled that climatic extremity in Qatar compounds infrastructural scarcity. For instance, heat renders summer training "impossible," while sparse fan attendance in club and other cricketing tournaments undermines revenue, which in turn weakens institutional capacity. For example, Respondent 5 stated:

You're saying correctly about it; in summer, it is impossible to play cricket in Qatar. The stadium is so much hot; the environment is so hard it becomes really impossible to play cricket in summer. This is another reason that our fitness level is very much low. The facilities are not good. I want to also tell you that because there are not too many fans coming to the stadium. This is the main reason that we do not have too much, you can say, funding or money as compared to large boards. Large cricket associations such as the Indian cricket board or Pakistan cricket association. Our cricket association comes under the Olympic Committee. We do not have a proper cricket board that can govern our cricket because we do not have too many funds to play. To develop funds, we need more people watching cricket; people coming and buying tickets is important. We do not have that level of support. We also do not have a proper league level as well.

Theoretically, the above quote can link environmental constraints (extreme summer heat) to structural underdevelopment: when it is "impossible" to train, players' physical/cultural capital (fitness, skill) erodes; few fans then show up, so symbolic and economic capital (visibility, gate receipts, sponsorship) never

accrue. Without money, cricket stays under the Olympic Committee instead of an autonomous board, so the sport lacks the institutionalized capital (governance, leagues, contracts) that could reinvest in facilities and programming. Hence, the underdevelopment of cricket in Qatar remains structurally cyclic.

Community Networks as Social Capital

Without strong institutional systems for talent scouting or development, Pakistani and Afghan athletes' inclusion in the Qatari cricket system is highly dependent on tight-knit migrant communities to identify, endorse, and recruit skilled individuals. Thus, social groups act as bonding social capital in Bourdieu's (1977) sense. There are dense, high-trust ties through which information and opportunities circulate internally, while also modeling a gentler, more inclusive masculinity that prioritizes care, mutual respect, and collective morale over solitary heroism. For instance, an athlete (Respondent 1) highlighted:

One reference invited the other one, we knew each other and know our talent. When the local club is looking for players, we tell them about each other, and they recruit those people. Our relationship through cricket is very strong. This is the reason our team morale is very high. Our national team is getting better because of this, as we all know our game. We play as one unit. There is a lot of respect for each other.

Therefore, recommendation chains ("one reference invited the other one") substitute for formal trials. Knowledge of "our talent" is embodied and relational, not bureaucratically certified. Morale, unity, and mutual respect are presented as competitive advantages. In theoretical terms, these networks compensate for the *field's* structural deficits (few tournaments, scarce coaches) by internally generating opportunities and cohesion. Moreover, social capital is not merely supportive; it is strategic. By circulating players into clubs and camps, the network increases each member's visibility, hence, enhancing the chance that cultural capital (skill) will be noticed and converted into selection. In a small *field* like Qatar's, where "everyone gets to know" who performs, these peer-led referrals accelerate that circulation. At the same time, dependence on informal ties can reproduce insularity (i.e., outsiders without connections may struggle to enter). Therefore, bonding capital created through informal ties can have gatekeeping effects.

Migration as a Last Resort and Identity as a Dual Anchor

The respondents also described migration to Qatar as a reluctant, survival-driven move, more as an "exit" taken only when structural doors (selection bans, low wages, family crises, and security issues) in Pakistan and Afghanistan

are closed. Taking Bourdieu's (1977) approach, these athletes shifted *fields* to find a setting where their cultural capital (cricket skill) might still yield economic or symbolic returns; however, they continued to anchor their identity in Pakistan or Afghanistan. This produces a dual belonging: gratitude to Qatar for livelihood and opportunity; simultaneous loyalty to Pakistan and Afghanistan as "home." For instance, a Pakistani cricketer (Respondent 3) registered:

Coming to Qatar is not an easy decision; when you are playing for your country, you want to play for Pakistan. That is my country, and this is in the mind of an athlete when he starts playing in Pakistan. So coming to Qatar is the last option. I told you after my father's death, we had financial issues, and I was banned from Pakistan for two years. It was really difficult for me to live in Pakistan without financial resources. So I got an opportunity to come to Qatar, the place where my father died, and get to know people here. Note, coming to Gulf countries is the last decision for any cricketer because now cricketers know he has no future left. If you hope in Pakistan, no one comes here, but once there is no hope in Pakistan, then only you come to Qatar.

In the above context, migration is bordered as a patriarchal bargain (meeting breadwinner duties) and as an act of symbolic loss (abandoning the dream of representing Pakistan). The "last option" language underlines how migrant athletes internalize national-team selection as the pinnacle of symbolic capital; once foreclosed, they recalibrate toward economic security abroad. However, even in Qatar, they measure success against Pakistani horizons, as Respondent 5 maintained:

I can never be a Qatari, I'm a Pakistani, but yes, I will support Qatar because Qatar is my second house. Qatar has given me many things; it has given me a job, and my family is secure here. We have good health facilities and other stuff, but yes Pakistan is my home, and I follow the Pakistan cricket team more than the Qatar cricket team. Obviously, my whole life has been living in Pakistan; how can I disassociate my identity from Pakistan? Pakistan is an important aspect of my life.

The above quote reiterates dual anchoring: national identity ("I'm a Pakistani") coexists with pragmatic affiliation ("second house"). Symbolic capital tied to birthplace and national team fandom persists, even as economic capital and everyday safety derive from Qatar. The ellipsis of allegiance, supporting Qatar while emotionally following Pakistan, illustrates how transnational habitus enables simultaneous, layered loyalties.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to illustrate how Afghan and Pakistani migrant athletes in Qatar interpret and manage their sporting and social trajectories, using

the sport of cricket to gain visibility, build solidarities, and negotiate layered marginalizations and masculinities. The results unveiled that for numerous migrant athletes, the “household” is the first arena of struggle, where often patriarchal expectations of male breadwinning collide with athletic passion. The workplace, organized through the *kafala* regime, emerged as a second gatekeeper that converts visas, leave, and wages into levers of control over athletic aspiration.

The athletes exposed Pakistan's *parchi* (reference) politics (i.e., corruption in Pakistan) and claimed that infrastructural scarcity and oppressive heat in Qatar further eroded their cultural capital by limiting training and spectatorship. In response to all the external challenges, tightly knit migrant networks functioned as crucial social capital, circulating talent and shoring up morale where institutions fell short. Ultimately, migration itself was framed as a reluctant last resort that produced dual anchorage: gratitude to Qatar for livelihood alongside enduring identification with Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Theoretically, the chapter's synthesis of Bourdieu's *fields* and capitals with hegemonic and inclusive masculinity theories yielded a multi-scalar optic by linking labor law backdrops to locker-room politics and embodied gender work. Central here is the insistence on migrant agency: men are not merely acted upon by structures but actively convert, trade, and revalue capital to reposition themselves. These athletes' moves also stretch inclusive masculinity beyond its Western, middle-class origins, revealing care, vulnerability, and solidarity practices germinating within precarious Muslim diasporas.

Overall, the findings demand policy architectures that recognize migrant athletes not as expendable labor, symbolic tokens, or objects of pleasure but as co-authors of Qatar's plural sporting culture. Persistent blind spots in the body of knowledge underscore the need for comparative, longitudinal, and multi-sport inquiries that take gender, religion, and legal status seriously. Future research should also track how reforms to sponsorship regimes are enforced on the ground, and examine how climate adaptation, facility access, and fan development can be aligned to sustain both performance and well-being. Overall, centering migrants' lived sport worlds shifts the conversation from spectacle to structure, and from passive subjects to strategic agents whose practices are already reshaping the Gulf's athletic fields.

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Afghan and Pakistani Athletes' Migration in Europe

Media Framing and Western Discourse

Introduction

Western sporting institutions and, more broadly, their aura are often portrayed as pure meritocracies in which ability alone determines success. The media that shape how most fans follow those sports remain potent gatekeepers of racial narratives (see Cranmer et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Turcott & Boykoff, 2022). For example, Samie and Sehlíkoglu (2014) examined how Western media characterized Muslim women athletes from 28 nations during the 2012 London Olympics. They determined that dominant media portrayals framed women athletes as “out of place” and “inept.” This matched with extant research showing Muslim women are often framed in the West as people who need rescue by Western men and Muslim women are regularly reduced to exoticized “veiled” spectacles (Afshar, 2008; Tayyen, 2017; Zine, 2008). Likewise, Hussain (2021a) scrutinized 57 news pieces on the Khabib Nurmagomedov–Conor McGregor UFC 229 clash to map how each media bloc in the West versus the East constructed the fighter’s image. The author unearthed a mirrored prejudice in reporting: Western outlets cast the Muslim Dagestani Russian champion Khabib Nurmagomedov as emotional, unpredictable, and uncivil, while Eastern outlets acclaimed him as a heroic guardian of Islam battling an Islamophobic and satanist West. Thereby, Hussain (2021a, 2021b) exposed mutually racialized narratives in global sporting coverage.

Moreover, a proliferating corpus of scholarship contends that Western news discourse habitually constructs Muslim societies as anachronistic and even inhumane (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Malcolm et al., 2010; Samie & Sehlíkoglu, 2014). Malcolm et al. (2010), for example, established that British media coverage following the sudden death of Pakistan cricket coach and British national Bob Woolmer cast the Muslim world as chaotic, hyper-emotive, eccentric, and irredeemably violent. Similarly, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) synthesized 345 post-9/11 studies and revealed a persistent racial inflection in journalistic portrayals of Muslims. Moreover, researchers focusing on sport and media have shown that media framings of Muslim immigrant athletes

in Euro-American contexts not only reproduce but also amplify Orientalist tropes and cultural essentialisms, thereby reinscribing civilizational hierarchies (Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2024; Samie & Toffoletti, 2018). The existing polarized social media has further intensified racist depictions and narratives of the Muslim world.

Although various researchers have comprehensively interrogated the racialized framing of Muslim male athletes in Western sport media (Amara, 2013; Burdsey, 2008; Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2024), there still exists a lacuna in the body of knowledge regarding how the migratory trajectories of athletes and Muslim male athletes, specifically from Afghanistan and Pakistan, are narrated. The current lack of scholarly engagement is striking, particularly in light of the contemporary anti-immigrant climate in the West, especially toward Afghans and South Asians. This climate has intensified since Donald Trump's electoral victories in 2016 and 2024 in the United States. In parallel, a series of right-wing governments across Europe has helped to maintain nativist rhetoric. These developments have deepened public suspicion toward Muslim mobility and discourses associated with Muslim communities (Marko, 2019; Mudde, 2019). Therefore, athletes from Afghanistan and Pakistan who have journeyed from the Global South into Western cricket grounds, football (soccer) academies or clubs, boxing arenas, and Olympic delegations can help in exposing how longstanding Orientalist tropes, contemporary Islamophobia, and color-blind post-racial rhetoric coexist in the Western discourse, especially after right-wing politics have become popular across the world. Moreover, illuminating the stereotypical presentation of Muslim athletes from Pakistan and Afghanistan is crucial for advancing scholarship on mediated Islamophobia and for comprehending how sport serves as a cultural arena in which larger struggles over belonging, citizenship, and racial capitalism are endlessly performed and disputed (see Carrington & McDonald, 2001; Hartmann, 2024; Spaaij et al., 2015). Therefore, this chapter's purpose is to dissect how historical Western narratives shape the stories of athletes from Afghanistan and Pakistan, often persistently oscillating between adversity and achievement. We first ground the chapter in Orientalism (Said, 1978) and neo-Orientalism frameworks, then present three cases side by side: Azeem Rafiq's whistleblowing (tracing a shift from moral testimony to institutional crisis); British coverage of the 2010 spot-fixing scandal of Pakistani three cricketers (displaying how individual wrongdoing is stretched into civilizational indictment); and debates over Afghanistan's men's cricket team (illustrating proxy penalties for state policies players cannot influence). Taking together these materials and our previous research, we present at the end of the chapter an inductive framework, which we call Orientalist Proxy Gatekeeping Theory (OPGT). This framework can help explain how a media-institution loop translates harm into risk management, the individual into civilization, and state politics into squad or individual-level sanctioning.

Historical Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism: The Media and Muslim Athletes' "Otherness"

Contemporary decolonial literature on the Muslim world, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the London bombing in 2005, has been strongly influenced by Edward Said's (1978) noteworthy theoretical framework of Orientalism (e.g., Ali & Hussain, 2025; Hussain, 2021b; Samiei, 2010). Their work revealed how Western researchers and Western-influenced groups, experts, and commentators described the East in their writing and general discourse (Said, 1978). According to Said (1978), numerous Western scholars depicted Eastern societies as rigid, intellectually weak, traditional, conservative, less developed, exotic, and sometimes barbaric, while the West was relentlessly portrayed as advanced, rational, civilized, modern, and superior. This biased depiction pattern was more prevalent concerning Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, which were often treated as a monolithic, homogenous, and radical bloc not eager to change or accommodate any human rights (Hussain, 2021b). This type of framing continues to help Western warmongers dehumanize entire Muslim populations (e.g., Palestinians) for their colonial interests. Said (1978) noted that scholars and scientists sometimes unintentionally fell into this bias trap by judging Muslim cultures against Western values, leading to distorted findings. He also pointed out that some Eastern academics repeated Orientalist views because Western ideas governed the academy and the popular discourse (Said, 1978). Said's (1978) basic thesis was that Western discourse was grounded in creating binaries that depicted the West as superior and the East as inferior, which has led to the homogenization of the identities of thousands of communities and cultures residing in the East. Since its release, Said's work (1978) has become a key reference for scholars seeking to challenge biased research on the Muslim world (Hussain, 2021b; Said, 1992; Samiei, 2010).

Recently, especially after the Western invasion of the Muslim countries of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, a new theoretical term, neo-Orientalism, has been increasingly used by scholars (Wahid, 2025). Neo-Orientalism can be best described as an updated iteration, or more precisely, an extension of earlier Orientalist thinking about Islam and Muslim societies. Classic Orientalism relied on a stark West–Islam split and the dehumanization of the "Other" (Akman, 2018; Samiei, 2010), whereas its contemporary neo-Orientalism form grows out of globalization, neoliberal economic systems, hyper-capitalism, and shifting geopolitical ties (Mutman, 2019). For instance, rich Arab and South Asian corrupt Muslim leaders are not only recognized but celebrated by the Western ruling elite and their media cronies. However, immigrants from those countries (South Asian and the Arab world) with low economic status are considered a threat to the Western value system and, overall, to its civilization. Thus, today, Orientalism often advances Islamophobic narratives less through overt cultural supremacy than through

strategic and security logics. At the same time, it still fractures knowledge of the “Orient,” selectively extracting “spiritual” value from Eastern traditions while ignoring their lived religious contexts (Bartholomeusz, 1998). This discourse underwrites familiar storylines developed based on prejudice, such as the “clash of civilizations” and the “war on terror.” The new version of neo-Orientalism, therefore, calls for reimagining identity, articulating global ethical frameworks, strengthening civil society, and embracing converging diversity (Samiei, 2010).

Said’s (1978) insight that Western writing routinely imagines the East as foreign, primitive, and in need of Western cultural instruction continues to structure the Global North’s sport journalism and the broader sporting discourse. For instance, match reports, feature profiles, and even sometimes commentary about athletes from Muslim-majority nations or Muslim immigrant communities still perpetuate a divided discourse focusing on a rational, self-disciplining West and an emotional, conservative, and barbaric East. For instance, Amara’s (2013) close reading of coverage of Muslim players in the West illustrated how the binary narrative remains the baseline against which “integration” is generally assessed or narrated. Moreover, while discussing the 2006 FIFA Men’s World Cup final incident involving French footballer Zinedine Zidane’s sudden headbutt of Italy’s Marco Materazzi, Amara (2013) argued that the incident was quickly interpreted as evidence of a cultural divide. Several sport commentators and media figures positioned Zidane as a symbolic representative of the “Muslim world.” They grounded this framing in his background as the son of Algerian migrants and as someone raised in the multi-ethnic banlieues of Marseille, which are frequently portrayed as “troubled” suburban communities. At the same time, Materazzi was depicted as exemplifying a supposedly rational, disciplined West. In much of the ensuing analysis, Zidane’s action was described through familiar Orientalist tropes of being largely impulsive, violent, and rooted in an alleged North African machismo associated with disregarded French suburbs (Amara, 2013). Moreover, the French media not only recycled images of animal-like aggression and irrationality while discussing Zidane but also insinuated links between Muslim identity and global terrorism when speculating about Materazzi’s provocation (Amara, 2013). Hussain’s (2021a) analysis of media reaction to Khabib Nurmagomedov’s victory in UFC 229 analogously established Western outlets’ usage of civilizational tropes when confronted with a dominant Muslim athlete.

While writing about the media portrayal of South Asian athletes in football, Kilvington (2012) previously argued that British sport media have historically framed South Asians via a prejudiced lens of the “Asian frame.” This biased ocular treats South Asian athletes as physically inferior, a commonly used narrative that grew out of colonial thinking and still shapes how football is discussed in present-day times (Kilvington, 2012). In the British imperial era, officials and writers cast Indians, especially Bengalis, as weak and effeminate

(Dimeo & Mills, 2001), and employed sport to mark them as the racialized "Other." Nevertheless, moments on the field sometimes broke that narrative in the colonial era. For example, Mohun Bagan's Indian Bengali football team's win over a British regiment in 1911 was widely celebrated in the press as proof that Indian players could match Englishmen, thereby unsettling the myth of innate British superiority (Kilvington, 2012). Nevertheless, the racialized frame of "Otherness" largely persisted about South Asian bodies for centuries within the Western sport media discourse, sometimes explicitly and mostly implicitly. The bias in the media against South Asian athletes exists despite researchers and scientists continuously emphasizing the notion of race as a social idea without a scientific basis or any empirical fact. Stereotypes about South Asian bodies have continued to circulate in popular sport talk and commentaries as well.

Still, media portrayals have also swung over time in the past 50 years from older depictions of South Asian men as passive and law-abiding to newer images of hyper-masculinity, barbarism, terrorism, and disorder. The shift has changed tone but still marked them as outsiders and became more prominent after individuals from a Pakistani background were involved in terrorism or other crimes (e.g., sexual abuse in the UK) in the West. Moreover, media gatekeepers have further reinforced this with talk of "build," "genes," and even "diet," homogenizing "Asians" and tying culture to supposed physical limits. Such views do not stay on the newspaper pages or social media tweets; they can also shape scouting and selection, discouraging visits to British Asian areas, and narrowing pathways into the professional game. Taken together, these patterns show how colonial ideas were repackaged for modern media and continue to influence who is seen as "appropriate," especially in British football.

Thangaraj (2015), furthermore, conducted ethnographic research of athletes in South Asian-only basketball leagues in the United States. The author underscored that South Asian male basketballers sometimes used the sport to assert Americanness and hyper-masculinity against stereotypes of "model minority," terrorist, and geek, even as these arenas reproduced exclusions by gender, sexuality, class, and intra- and inter-racial dynamics (e.g., borrowing Black style while distancing from Blackness; Thangaraj, 2015). Burdsey (2015), meanwhile, examined the experiences and identity construction of British Asian Muslim international cricketer Moeen Ali. The author described how the "racial state" and its biopolitics rendered British Asian male athletes recognizable and set the terms for which versions of Asian masculinity could be celebrated. Thereby, Burdsey (2015) illustrated how South Asian athletes were simultaneously formed and undone in public life, in accordance with what was acceptable in British society. For instance, being a Muslim man might be acceptable in the West but talking about human rights related to the Muslim world (e.g., the Palestinian cause or deaths of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan) might be presumed as a danger to Western cultural values or even

to its civilization. To explore this phenomenon further, we present the case study of Azeem Rafiq, a Pakistani-born English cricketer.

Case Study 1: Azeem Rafiq Saga Through the Lens of Neo-Orientalism

In 2024, Hussain and Bien-Aimé explored how sport media “Othered” Azeem Rafiq’s whistleblowing against the Yorkshire County Cricket Club. We now extend this by tracing how Azeem Rafiq’s identity was constructed in the general media through the lens of neo-Orientalism.

Born in Karachi on February 27, 1991, Azeem Rafiq moved with his family to Barnsley, located in South Yorkshire, UK, at the age of 10 (BBC News, 2021). He tore through Yorkshire County Cricket Club’s academy, captaining England’s Under-15s in 2006 and the Under-19s at the 2010 Under-19 Cricket World Cup (ESPNcricinfo, n.d.). Being an enterprising off-spinning all-rounder, he debuted for Yorkshire’s senior side at 17 in 2008 (ESPNcricinfo, n.d.). Soon he stroked his maiden first-class hundred against Worcestershire, thereby becoming one of the county’s youngest centurions ever. Nevertheless, Rafiq’s major breakout came in 2012: standing in for the injured Andrew Gale, he became Yorkshire’s youngest—and first British Muslim Asian—captain. During the same summer, Rafiq played a central role in Yorkshire’s rise in the Championship when he took 26 wickets over the course of the campaign. He also contributed two determined half-centuries with the bat and produced a pivotal five-wicket haul against Essex. However, after his impressive 2012 season, he continued to face knee problems. Subsequent reports highlighted both a significant knee injury and ongoing issues with his bowling action (Sky Sports, 2013, 2022), but they did not present any formal medical analysis connecting the two. Because of a few championship matches and a deteriorating body, Rafiq decided to leave the club at the end of 2014. In 2016, Yorkshire re-signed Rafiq, but just two years later, he was released by the club without a new contract. Ultimately, this led to the end of his career at the Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

The club’s management officially cited Rafiq’s release as being due to his on-field performance, recurring injuries, and financial constraints. While Rafiq mostly admitted these arguments, he maintained that the real impediment to his career at Yorkshire was a pervasive racial environment. Moreover, he argued that racism, combined with bullying, severely impacted his mental well-being, family life, and performance. Rafiq primarily alleged institutional racism with routine racist slurs (including repeated use of “Paki”) and normalized segregationist treatment (“You lot sit over there near the toilets”). Moreover, he revealed religious abuses, such as being pinned down and having red wine forced down his throat despite the religious prohibition of alcohol consumption for Muslims. Rafiq went public with his allegations in September 2020. He gave interviews to various media platforms and even claimed that

because of racism in the club, he was about to commit suicide. When speaking to Sky Sports, he said, "At my worst, I was right on the edge, stood on my balcony. I would regularly come home from training and cry all day. It was a challenging time for me" (Sky Sports, 2022).

The Yorkshire County Cricket Club launched its inquiry a month after Rafiq's allegations (October 2020), and Rafiq submitted a legal claim in December 2020. However, by February 2021, no findings had surfaced about Rafiq's allegations, and a June tribunal noted the stalemate. In August 2021, the club apologized for their inapt and unprofessional behavior but still denied claims of systemic racism, until leaked excerpts from a draft report exposed racist slurs and prompted sponsors to walk away. Three months later, in November 2021, Rafiq told Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sports committee in an emotional interview that racism had effectively ended his cricketing career.

To untangle the identity construction of Azeem Rafiq in the British media through the lens of neo-Orientalism, we extend the previous analysis of Husain and Bien-Aimé (2024) by presenting and analyzing data that were not considered previously in their study. Specifically, we employed Elo and Kynäs's (2008) inductive content analysis framework to inspect 1,424 unique UK-based news articles covering the Azeem Rafiq racism case at Yorkshire County Cricket Club. The dataset was initially cleansed to certify that all records originated from UK publications and to eliminate duplicates. Thereby, we retained only unique articles for analysis. The unit of analysis included each article's headline and lead content related to Azeem Rafiq, as these elements most directly shape public framing.

Inductive content analysis, using Elo and Kynäs's (2008) approach, identified six key categories that shaped the British media's framing of the Rafiq case. First, perpetrator-centered coverage was prominent, with reporting heavily oriented around Gary Ballance's admission to using a racial slur and his portrayal of the remark as reciprocal "banter." Second, a victim narrative also emerged, foregrounding Rafiq's testimony, the emotional toll of his experiences, and his allegations of being subjected to a smear campaign. Third, institutional accountability was a focal point, as coverage scrutinized the club's handling of the investigation and its reliance on the "banter" defense. Fourth, the media highlighted political and public pressure, citing condemnations from senior figures such as then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson and then-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid. Fifth, commercial backlash was documented through sponsor withdrawals and the resulting financial consequences for not only the club but for county cricket overall. Finally, the case was situated within the wider category of systemic racism in sport, linking the incident to longstanding patterns of racial exclusion within British cricket of South Asian athletes. From these categories, three overarching themes were abstracted. The first was a crisis of trust and governance, rooted in the club's opacity and its tendency to minimize racism. The second

concerned public accountability, which appeared to be driven more by external political, media, and commercial pressures than by genuine internal reform. The third involved the discursive redefinition of “banter,” which in contemporary contexts was framed as a form of racial abuse incompatible with prevailing social norms.

Across the above themes, traces of neo-Orientalist logic were concretely discernible. Rafiq’s grievances were subtly represented as a disruption to cricket’s cultural “tradition,” and enduring cultural binaries continued to position whiteness as the rational authority over sporting norms. While overtly hostile racial stereotyping was less evident than in earlier Orientalist sport narratives, structural and discursive mechanisms persisted in “Othering” the Pakistani-born athlete, casting his challenge to institutional racism as both exceptional and subverting to the reputable image of county cricket. Moreover, Rafiq’s emotional response was framed through a particular lens of being dramatic.

Case 2: Reevaluating the 2010 Pakistan Tour: From Individual Offense to Civilizational Indictment

A major 2010 cricket fixture between Pakistan and England jolted the cricket community and the sporting media worldwide when three Pakistani players were alleged to have engaged in spot fixing (Mehmood et al., 2021). The spot-fixing scandal was sparked by a tabloid sting done by the *News of the World* (a British tabloid that closed in 2011) during the Lord’s Test (Lord’s cricket ground is considered the home of cricket). Three Pakistani cricketers, Salman Butt, Mohammad Asif, and Mohammad Amir, were identified as the primary culprits; however, the British narrative quickly tilted more toward the wrongdoing of more than three players.

Numerous headlines and studio talk leaned on a moralizing lexicon, such as shame, disgrace, taint, and culture of corruption, turning a single incident into an essence claim by implicitly targeting the entire nation. For instance, *The Guardian* ran a story with the title “Salman Butt: Pakistan’s rising star who fell to earth in disgrace” (“Salman Butt,” 2011). Another headline in *The Guardian* read, “Pakistan spot-fixing: Trio guilty of all charges” (Scott, 2011) while the BBC’s headline stated, “Pakistan ‘shame’ over fixing cricket spot-fixing scam” (BBC News, 2011). Various media channels, moreover, showed looped images of cash bundles, anonymous hotel spaces, and a “fixer” styled as a market broker. This coverage was staged as an Orientalist set piece that cast the spot-fixing episode as a Pakistani cultural flaw instead of the specific wrongdoing of individuals.

Viewing the 2010 spot-fixing coverage through a neo-Orientalist ocular can further aid in untangling how Western media and sporting gurus quietly resurrected the old rational-West versus unruly-East division. What fell out of public discourse were the structural enablers of fixing: uneven board

governance, insecure and underpaid players, poor economic background of the athletes, lack of exposure and education of athletes, exhausting tours, neoliberal economic logic, and the hyper-capitalist economy set by Global North colonial masters which influenced young athletes to get involved in match-fixing. A better 2010 framing would have been (a) separating individual guilt from national identity construction, (b) scrutinizing incentives within the PCB and ICC, (c) focusing on cricket governance, and (d) emphasizing concrete remedies (e.g., contracts, education, and oversight) rather than recycling "Eastern duplicity." In the third case, we further discuss how Western discourse, grounded in hypocrisy, seeks to claim moral superiority over the Muslim world.

Case Study 3: Afghan Men Cricketers Blamed for Taliban Ban on Women's Sports

Following the Taliban's 2021 return after capturing Kabul and their shuttering of women's sport, global media offered considerable commentary regarding Afghan athletes' participation. This included Manizha Talash's disqualification at the Paris Olympic breakdancing event for wearing the phrase "free Afghan women" on her outfit (BBC Sport, 2024) and the Afghan men's cricket team taking the field. Western outlets, commentators, and human rights groups frequently equated the Afghan men's national team with their rulers, recasting cricket matches as morality theatres. For example, Cricket Australia twice scrapped a men's bilateral series by explicitly pointing to worsening conditions for women in Afghanistan (Ravindranath, 2024). This move was hailed as principled by various media outlets and commentators (Wu, 2025), even though it effectively pinned the regime's sins on male Afghan players with zero policy power. Moreover, most of the current Afghan cricket athletes on the national side were representing the country before the Taliban takeover of Kabul and were internationally recognized with no ideological or real connection with the Taliban's theological philosophy.

Calls for a blanket boycott of Afghanistan's men's cricket team also periodically resurfaced within UK media commentary and parliamentary debate. For example, Labour Member of Parliament Tonia Antoniazzi urged England's men to refuse fixtures against Afghanistan (Shemilt, 2025). However, the same media outlets and commentators were often conspicuously quiet when migrants from Afghanistan (both men and women) in Western states faced persecution and systemic barriers, and they rarely proposed analogous bans on Western teams. For instance, as of 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump curtailed immigration protections of Afghans, including many migrants with Temporary Protected Status (Kim, 2025). Most of the Afghans with temporary visa status were those who fled Taliban persecution, many of whom also assisted U.S. forces against the Taliban in the past. Reading through a neo-Orientalist lens, this asymmetry follows a familiar script: the putative rescue of "oppressed

Eastern women” is pursued by disciplining visible cultural emissaries and foregrounding Western interest, while contradictions within Western policy and practice are left unexamined.

Afghan men’s cricketers and fans have expressed their anger at the hypocritical politics of the Western media, sport commentators, governing bodies, and some officials. For instance, renowned leg-spinner Rashid Khan threatened to withdraw from Australia’s Big Bash League after Australia’s 2023 cancelled match with Afghanistan (and later relented). He argued that Cricket Australia’s move of not playing the Afghan men’s national team was actually about punishing athletes rather than shielding women; similar tensions reverberated across Eastern cricket media, especially in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, among Afghan diasporas and activists, there were split opinions. Some, for example, have commended calls for boycotts to maintain pressure over Taliban bans on girls’ education and sport (BBC Sport, 2025). On the other hand, others warned that isolating the men’s side only hardened the regime and silenced Afghan women’s own organizing (McKay, 2025). Therefore, mainstream commentary reduced the issue to a stark policy query: do sanctions on the men’s team really help women? There is no empirical evidence to answer this question.

At the level of governance, inconsistencies have also proliferated. Afghanistan remains the lone ICC full member cricket team without a women’s side; hitherto, the men have not been expelled despite ICC rules requiring a women’s team. Instead, the ICC opened channels to directly fund and support Afghan women cricketers in exile while keeping the men eligible. This settlement intrinsically acknowledged women’s exclusion but avoided blanket penalties on the ACB. Numerous sporting analysts cast Afghanistan as an ICC conundrum, where criteria for membership were persistently weighed against geopolitical veracities (Chakraborty, 2025; Goldschmidt, 2024). Overall, deciphering the divergent discourse associated with Muslim athletes from Afghanistan unveils a Western media policy field that defaults to disciplining conspicuous Muslim male athletes as stand-ins for state repression, while Western media stays silent on their hypocritical role of creating barriers for Afghan men and women globally themselves.

Construction of Orientalist Proxy Gatekeeping Theory (OPGT) in Sports

Based on our analysis of Azeem Rafiq’s whistleblowing, the 2010 Pakistan spot-fixing scandal, and debates over Afghanistan’s men’s cricket team, together with our earlier analysis of Rafiq’s media treatment (Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2024) and focus on Orientalism/neo-Orientalism (Said, 1978), this section presents a new theoretical framework of OPGT in Western sport media and general discourse (see Figure 8.1). This theory is inspired by the original gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950), which primarily explains

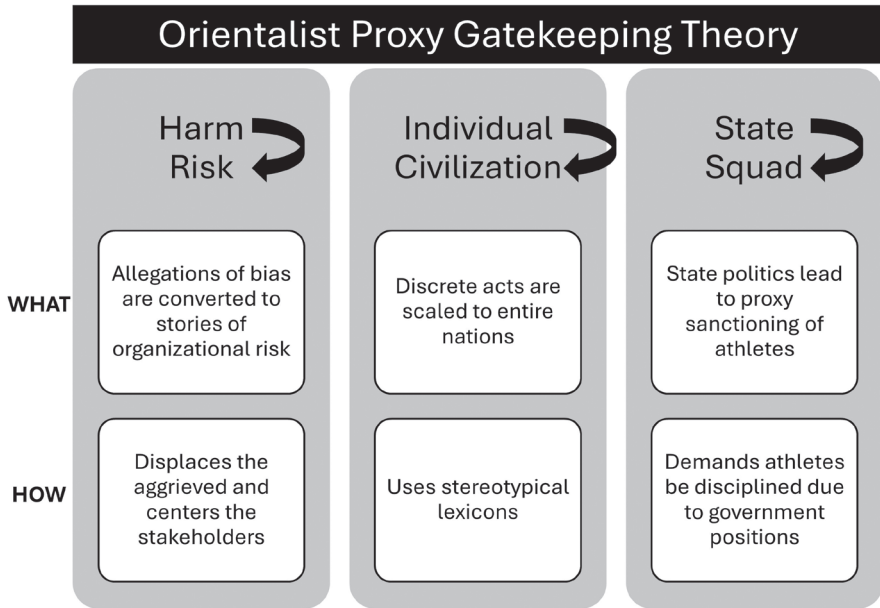


Figure 8.1 Orientalist Proxy Gatekeeping Theory (OPGT) in sports.

how contemporary information is filtered before reaching the general public. Gatekeeping theory is originally grounded in communication and journalism studies and overall underscores that the processes and individuals (gatekeepers) are the ones who elect what content passes via media “gates” to the broader general audiences (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950). In Hussain and Bien-Aimé (2024) and the three cases above, observed patterns of racist or religious harms to South Asian athletes were repeatedly reframed as organizational crises. Meanwhile, individual misdeeds by Muslim athletes from Pakistan were often stretched into judgments about culture or nation. And, lastly, teams, or migrants in Western countries, were often disciplined for state policies they neither set nor could realistically influence. This particular type of framing about Muslim athletes from Afghanistan and Pakistan points to the broader gatekeepers as responsible parties for filtering messages about the athletes to a Western audience. At the core of OPGT, then, is a media-institution loop that sometimes prioritizes dehumanization and Western value systems over finding solutions to solve Islamophobic tropes in the Western discourse. The loop unfolds through three routine translations.

1. Harm → Risk: allegations made by Muslim athletes of racism or religious exclusion (like Islamophobia) in Western contexts are often converted into “process” stories about investigations, sponsors, and brand safety. This

method of framing displaces discussion of remedies and accountability and creates a focus on stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, the alleged party, and political figures' stance) rather than the grieved party. For example, in the case of Azeem Rafiq's allegations against the Yorkshire County Cricket Club, the media sometimes tried to spin Rafiq's narrative into what the local politicians' or sponsors' stance was on the issue.

2. Individual → Civilization: discrete acts are sometimes scaled up to civilizational narratives through various stereotypical lexicons (e.g., shame, taint, or disgrace), while comparable scandals in White-majority settings are more often personalized and even sometimes correspond with redemption arcs. For example, Salman Butt, Mohammad Asif, and Mohammad Amir's spot-fixing allegations in the media were not only against the three players but also against the 220 million population of Pakistan.
3. State → Squad: despite having no leverage over their home state policies, distant government actions in their home countries trigger boycotts, cancellations, or chilled contracts for athletes and teams from the Global South. For instance, Afghan cricketers are frequently pressed by Western media and activists to take a public stand against the Taliban or face media shaming or boycotts. These demands are often issued from distant, comfortable settings, while the players' own families remain in Afghanistan, navigating the very dangers such statements could intensify.

The OPGT framework can also illuminate the roles of editors, commentators, sponsors, and federations as "proxy gatekeepers" who translate claims into newsworthy crises and administrable sanctions. The vital sensitizing concepts are *risk talk* (language that centers liability and optics), *scaling* (movement from the individual to the civilization), and *proxy sanctioning* (punishing athletes for external state acts). Overall, these concepts can aid researchers in tracing how headlines, standard images, studio exchanges, and policy decisions by Western sporting organizations pull Muslim athletes from Afghanistan and Pakistan into moral dramas that reaffirm a West versus Islam boundary and position Western logic as supreme.

Lastly, the OPGT framework can guide inquiry into practice. Researchers in the future can employ process-tracing (interviews, editorial memos, and sponsor correspondence) and close reading of headlines and broadcast segments to follow the loop from claim to consequence and to identify when the three translations are resisted or reproduced. Practically, the theory we present in this book chapter implies a need for a shift in professional norms by centering remedies when harm is reported and avoiding disciplining athletes for policies beyond their reach. In short, OPGT explains how Muslim "Otherness" is sometimes reproduced through everyday gatekeeping in the general Western media discourse, including sport journalism, and where interventions can disrupt that cycle.

Discussion

The comparative reading of the three cases in this chapter underscores how a common narrative machine operates across very different events and contexts when it comes to Afghan and Pakistani athletes. Moreover, the cases presented in this chapter do more than register bias; they also unveil how stories frame sport. Across whistleblowing (Azeem Rafiq), scandal (spot fixing), and geopolitics (the call for banning Afghan athletes), courts or commissions are not the ones making the final decision against racial allegations. Instead, narratives created by stakeholders, such as news desks, sponsors, commentators, sport experts, and federations, set the terms of response by deciding what counts as the “real” issue and who should carry the consequences. Moreover, stakeholders decide what deserves amplification, what should be backgrounded, and which labels follow an athlete’s name. By taking this approach, we argue that the media is not simply a mirror of events in sport, it is part of the machinery that validates. And that machinery is overall not race-neutral.

In this chapter, associating Orientalism with today’s platformed media economy can aid in clarifying why certain types of framing have negative outcomes. We observed recurrent tendencies that help explain the durability of Muslim “Otherness” constructed in the Western discourse. Discrimination voiced by Global South athletes (e.g., Azeem Rafiq), for instance, tends to be transformed into matters of optics, a shift that reduces space for repair and expands space for brand management. Moreover, misdeeds by individual Muslim Pakistani athletes are oddly “elastic”: they stretch outward to stand for culture or nation, generating a representational surcharge. Furthermore, political decisions in faraway capitals are characteristically entrusted to teams and professionals who lack any plausible leverage over those decisions. These tendencies might be encouraged by newsroom incentives for producing drama, brands’ approach of avoiding difficult stances, and by Western federations’ craving to be seen “doing something” morally superior. Muslim athletes, moreover, who are sometimes migrants in the West, occupy a double exposure: they are visible on the field and susceptible to immigration politics off it. The result is a visibility-risk trade-off. Success brings attention, but attention invites civilizational stereotypes. Also, sometimes it can lead to collective penalties when controversy arises.

Rather than only unveiling biases against Pakistani and Afghan athletes, we suggest a way for future researchers to decipher the biases. Scholars in the future should perform a close reading of various elements, such as headlines, imagery, studio exchanges, and administrative statements. Moreover, instead of treating “bias” as an article of faith, researchers can track how risk language grows or shrinks during a news cycle, how often national labels are attached to names, and when sanctions against teams follow political shocks rather than athlete behavior. Studying episodes where media outlets centered

remedies, refused to scale up blame, or declined to punish teams for state actions can also help identify the conditions under which the loop of bias can be interrupted or disrupted.

Conclusion and Limitations

We argue that if Western sporting stakeholders seek to live up to their professed meritocracy and to the moral claims historically invoked to justify Western power and imperialism, including colonial projects, then fairness must explicitly include narrative fairness. Who is allowed to express the problem, whose identity is foregrounded, and who bears sanctions when politics intrude are not cosmetic questions; they are constitutive of opportunity. This chapter unearthed the “Otherness” of Pakistani and Afghan athletes in the broader Western discourse. It also presented OPGT, which offers a map of the pathways through which narratives and their outcomes can be defined.

Nevertheless, our work has numerous limitations. First, rather than conducting rigorous research on new articles, we present this paper as part of cultural analysis. Future work should focus on how the OPGT presented in this chapter can be presented as a stand-alone theoretical framework with boundaries through more rigorous research. Second, cricket’s colonial history and strong national symbolism make it a high-risk site for narrative overreach; replication in football, athletics, or Olympic contexts will test the reach of our claims. Third, diaspora and non-Western media sometimes reproduce the same logic in reverse, suggesting that the underlying mechanism is not exclusive to the West (see Hussain, 2021a). Thereby, a non-Western narrative also needs a thorough evaluation and sometimes comparison as well (e.g., how Pakistani immigrant athletes are represented in the arch-rival Indian media). Fourth, social-media dynamics almost certainly accelerate moral panic and future work should treat platform affordances and influencer economies as part of the gatekeeping system rather than as a separate sphere. Lastly, intersectional variances within “Muslim athletes,” such as class, sect (Sunni and Shia Islam), language, and gender, also need systematic attention when exposing how “Otherness” is being created in the Western discourse.

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Afghan and Pakistani Athletes' Migration in the United States

An Auto-Ethnographic Study

Introduction

In recent decades, the notion of diaspora has emerged as a powerful lens in the realms of social sciences for examining migration, identity, community, and postcolonial experiences of migrant communities (Brazier & Mannur, 2003; Burdsey et al., 2013). For example, Tsagarousianou (2020) registered that the concept of diaspora has transformed migration studies by redirecting focus away from short-term migration toward long-standing migrant communities and their ongoing transnational ties. Moreover, the diaspora framework offers researchers a more flexible vehicle to unravel how migrants and their descendants situate themselves within overlapping global identities, linking past, present, and imagined futures (Burdsey et al., 2013). As the global sporting world becomes progressively shaped by neoliberal economics, the “new normal” is a complicated circulation of players, goods, money, and media across borders. Thus, diaspora emerges as a critical lens that can aid in pushing scholarship beyond the narrow boundaries of methodological nationalism, which frequently constrain the analysis of sport (Burdsey et al., 2013). Many researchers advocate applying diaspora theory to examine the experiences of Global South migrants in sport (see Burdsey, 2006; Burdsey et al., 2013; Joseph, 2011; McSweeney & Nakamura, 2019). Following this call, this chapter examines how Afghan and Pakistani immigrants in the Global North employ sport to preserve identity, negotiate belonging, or confront postcolonial and often neo-capitalist realities.

Moreover, Afghan and Pakistani immigrants' stories in North America are not simply about sport participation or consumption; they also involve a story of movement, memory, and adaptation. For instance, Stack and Iwasaki (2009) conducted interviews with 11 Afghan immigrants who migrated to Western Canada. The authors argued that immigrants' participation in purposeful leisure not only strengthened community ties but also served as a vital tool for resilience in a new socio-cultural environment (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Likewise, this chapter highlights the post-industrial landscape of Northeast Pennsylvania—far from the bustling streets of Kabul, Sialkot,

Lahore, or Karachi—where Afghan and Pakistani migrants find themselves in a world where the sporting culture they grew up with is often indiscernible to the mainstream eye. On community football (soccer) fields, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) community centers, and makeshift cricket pitches sometimes carved out of baseball diamonds, the Afghan and Pakistani diaspora navigate the entangled challenges of migration and coexistence with American sporting culture. Although most of the migrants came to the United States seeking education, family reunion, jobs, business opportunities, or refuge, sport unexpectedly became a vital thread in their process of settling in and sometimes navigating the complex American system.

The purpose of this book chapter is to elucidate and critically discuss the multifaceted experiences of Afghan and Pakistani diasporic communities in the United States, particularly in the small urban cities of Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, located in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Unlike major metropolitan hubs such as New York and Chicago, where diasporic communities are larger, these comparatively smaller towns are characterized by dense, nonetheless deeply interconnected networks that shape sporting participation, identity, and belonging in unique or mostly complex ways. To achieve the chapter's aim, the first author employed an auto-ethnographic approach, drawing on his own lived experiences and interactions with Afghan and Pakistani community members while employed in Wilkes-Barre. The first author of this study is originally from Pakistan where he was a community-level cricketer. He came to the United States in 2018 for his PhD, and after finishing his education, he was able to secure academic jobs in various parts of the United States. In this chapter, the methodological choice of using auto-ethnography not only allows for his personal, insider perspective but also situates the narratives within broader diasporic and postcolonial frameworks. Hence, the auto-ethnographic account offers insights into how sport operates as a tool of resilience, cultural continuity, and adaptation in the Global North. Moreover, to expand the scholarship, the focus of this chapter will be on the broader debates about identity formation, cultural hybridity, and social integration through the lens of diaspora theory (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991; Vertovec, 1999). We therefore treat sport in this chapter as a microcosm of society, where the dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, recognition, and cultural negotiation are constantly in motion. We argue that the "American dream," with its all-encompassing promises of opportunity and upward mobility, looms large in the narratives of Afghan and Pakistani migrants but is also tempered by the realities of systemic barriers. Thereby, the sporting environment becomes a place where ideals of the American dream are sometimes cherished and at other times continuously contested. Lastly, based on our research findings and previous literature, at the end of the chapter, we propose a new framework, Diasporic Sport as Conditional Belonging (DSCB) theory, to untangle the experiences of Afghan and Pakistani diaspora while participating and consuming sport in the United States.

Diaspora Theory, Sport, and the American Dream

Diaspora theory can offer an important approach to analyze sporting phenomena as a cultural and sociopolitical practice (Joseph, 2012; Spaaij & Broerse, 2018). This framework redirects attention from simple patterns of dispersal to the lived processes through which displaced communities keep homeland ties alive, assemble hybrid identities, and negotiate layered forms of belonging across multiple places (Shuval, 2000; Shain & Barth, 2003). Various scholars argue that people in a diaspora build their identity through memories, stories, and everyday cultural habits (Brah, 1996; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990). In other words, who they come from and what they remember and do, not from a fixed “core” identity they are born with. Hence, when set alongside theories of global cultural flows, a diasporic lens can verify how sport functions as an instrument for cross-border attachments (Appadurai, 1996). In addition, migrants’ sporting identities exist in public arenas where definitions of national membership are often contested.

Central to diaspora theory is the notion of displacement. Because of being displaced in a new culture, migrants often try to employ different socio-cultural activities (e.g., sports) in their new locations to build community. These social activities also provide them with a means for nostalgic bonds. Cricket, for instance, has been used by South Asian and Caribbean communities to develop inter- or sometimes intra-group ties in the UK and Australia (Raman, 2014). Cricket has historically functioned as a bridge between colonial histories and postcolonial existence. Moreover, this sport functions as a vernacular institution that often organizes the neighborhood life of the migrants, intergenerational storytelling, and sometimes even political visibility (Burdsey, 2015; Fletcher, 2014; James, 1963). For instance, in towns like Leicester and Bradford in the UK, informal neighborhood cricket leagues are considered weekend rituals for numerous South Asian migrants. Moreover, athletes with South Asian backgrounds, like Usman Khawaja, Azeem Rafiq, and Moeen Ali, have been at the forefront of sociopolitical advocacy and community representation. For instance, Usman Khawaja, born in Islamabad but raised in Australia, has been one of the few cricketers to support Palestinian causes publicly (Al Jazeera, 2023). Similarly, English cricketer Moeen Ali has been one of the vocal voices concerning racism in cricket against South Asians (Walker-Khan, 2025). These and other migrant athletes’ actions do more than preserve sporting heritage; they are able to transform local sporting cultures and make claims on public space, thereby re-siting the notion of “home” and “community” within the host society.

In diaspora scholarship, one of the central themes is the idea of hybridity. Hybridity could be described as the mixing of cultures that takes shape when migrants, ideas, and traditions from diverse backgrounds meet and interact. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) coined the term “Third Space” to describe an interstitial arena where cultural mixing transpires, neither the colonizer’s tradition

nor a pure, precolonial origin, but a new site of expression in which identity is continually renegotiated. The Third Space can aid in untangling how migrant athletes and fans stitch together styles, tactics, and aesthetics from multiple traditions, thus creating forms that are neither reducible to origin nor host culture. In the world of football, for instance, the movement of players and coaches continually reshapes local styles and sporting cultures, a process often labeled as glocalization, as tactics and fan cultures evolve across cross-border networks (see Han & Xiong, 2023; Li et al., 2025). The outcome of this movement of players is also sporting practices that are both local and global, blending practices, speech, rituals, and cultures.

The realm of sport, moreover, illustrates the conditional nature of belonging that can also be elucidated by diaspora theory. Winning often leads to celebrations of multicultural success, whereas failures can reignite exclusionary forms of nationalism. The French men's national team illustrates this tension perfectly as victories are often promoted as individual heroic contributions framed as proof of an inclusive French identity. Meanwhile, defeats frequently trigger racialized questions about certain migrant players' legitimacy, such as former French player Zinedine Zidane's infamous headbutting of an opposing player in the 2006 World Cup. This exposes the fragile and contingent recognition afforded to citizens of immigrant origin (Dubois, 2010). Such fluctuations are not exceptional but rather reveal how sport becomes a focal point for unresolved debates around race, ethnicity, citizenship, and national identity.

Similarly, this notion of conditional success was also observed during the U.S. men's cricket team at the 2024 ICC T20 World Cup, co-hosted in the United States and the Caribbean. The U.S. national team roster was ingrained in migration, featuring India-born captain Monank Patel, India-born software engineer seamer Saurabh Netravalkar, Barbados-born Aaron Jones, and Pakistan-born quick pacer Ali Khan. Team USA, led by mostly South Asian immigrants, produced multiple upsets during the tournament, including overcoming the national team of Pakistan, which triggered a rush of celebratory coverage providing global attention to cricket's diasporic roots in America. Nonetheless, much of the praise plainly framed the win as an "immigration story," while viral "H-1B visa" memes and quips about an "India H-1B" team underscored how public recognition was filtered through immigration status and heritage. Diasporic fandom at the same time put "double belonging" on exhibition in New York, where Indian American spectators waved signs such as "USA is home. India is the heart." Nonetheless, that same framing indicates a type of conditional success: when success fades, the same stress on origin can be equipped to question who counts as authentically being an "American."

The asymmetrical hierarchy of belongingness can also lead to identifying the new modes of neo-colonial extractions (Hussain, 2025). For example, various cases demonstrate that young athletes from African countries are

often exploited in European football leagues (Okwechime & Adetiloye, 2019; Poli, 2006). Likewise, an O1 visa, which allows for those with extraordinary athletic ability to work in the United States legally, can be considered a neo-colonial/neo-imperialist approach by the government to extract athletic acumen out of the developing world. Therefore, diaspora theory can assist in interpreting migration routes not as linear departures but as continuous cycles of obligation, remittance, and return that keep social worlds, families, neighborhoods, and hometown clubs entangled with divergent sporting culture.

Nonetheless, sport historically remains a strong medium of nostalgia and sometimes even resistance in the diaspora communities. For instance, Capoeira (an Afro-Brazilian martial art) grew out of the struggles of Afro-Brazilians, born from slavery, suppression, and the creativity of communities (Assunção, 2005). Capoeira shows us how movement and practice can carry hidden histories and build new spaces of resistance, even far from where they first began (Assunção, 2005). Boxing can also function as a space for asserting identity, such as when Canadian Sikh boxer Pardeep Singh Nagra contested discriminatory regulations that sought to exclude him from competition because of his beard and turban (Heiskanen, 2006). His resistance extended beyond the sport itself. Pardeep's actions are also a defense of religious identity, and his resistance was a demonstration that sport can serve as a powerful site of struggle, dignity, and visibility in various contexts.

Overall, seen through the lens of diaspora theory, sport as a social institution is a muddled, border-crossing terrain. Moreover, sport sometimes stitches communities together; however, it is also grounded in structural hierarchies and racial gatekeeping. Thereby, sport is not outside politics; it is a living arena where ideas of nation, race, and belonging are built, challenged, and rebuilt. For example, literature on the Black sporting diaspora underscores how athletic success can magnify voice and rattle dominant stories even as it risks sliding back into spectacle and commodification (Carrington, 2010). To comprehend sport through diaspora, then, is like tracing globalization and the capitalist systems as they subsist in bodies, stadiums, and on screens, where solidarity and exclusion, nationalism and internationalism, reminiscence and yearning repeatedly intersect and evolve (Maguire, 1999). Hence, in this chapter, we focus on the Afghan and Pakistani communities through the lens of diaspora theory to see how they are living within the Third Space and facing conditional belonging.

Elite-Level Sport Participation Among Afghan and Pakistani Athletes in the United States

Pakistani and Afghan-origin athletes' participation in elite-level sport in the United States is most noticeable in two arenas. First, in the professional cricket ecosystem shaped by Major League Cricket (MLC). Second, the American football pyramid that begins with the second-tier United Soccer League

(USL) and concludes in Major League Soccer (MLS). For instance, Pakistani-born right-arm fast bowler Ali Khan is a member of the U.S. national cricket team and is one of the MLC league's standard-bearers through his play for the Los Angeles Knight Riders (Abbas et al., 2025). Likewise, Pakistan internationals such as Shadab Khan (San Francisco Unicorns) and Imad Wasim (Seattle Orcas) produced match-tilting performances in the league's inaugural season. On the other hand, Afghanistan's global star Rashid Khan was signed by MI New York in 2023, highlighting how MLC has unlocked US-based elite opportunities for South Asian cricket talent.

Meanwhile, there are fewer instances of South Asians in the U.S. football circuit. One example is Afghan American midfielder Adam Najem, who signed a contract with the Philadelphia Union in 2017. He also debuted internationally for Afghanistan the following year. Najem's case is an ideal example of sport delivering upward social mobility from the NCAA to USL to MLS to the Afghan national team. Meanwhile, only one Pakistani-born player, Kaleemullah Khan, has competed in U.S. football when he joined the then-third-tier Sacramento Republic in 2015 and the Tulsa Roughnecks in 2016.

Recent trends in the American elite sporting environment, overall, have created both openings and hurdles for Afghan and Pakistani athletes. On the opportunity side, MLC provides a clearly defined, elite platform. However, it should be noted that MLC is currently sustained by private investment and by the sport's growing profile in the United States. The MLC platform also carries a sense of familiarity for South Asian diasporic communities. In football, MLS has built a steady ladder of club academies that provide underrepresented players with advancement opportunities. However, the constraints remain equally concrete: norms around late specialization, a long history of limited scouting in South Asian communities (especially for Afghans), visa issues, and lack of community-level support are a few of the impediments toward the upward mobility of athletes from Afghan and Pakistani backgrounds. Nevertheless, the resettlement of Afghan women footballers in Houston (khou.com, n.d.), for instance, remains a positive first step. Various trends indicate that focused investment in scouting, earlier skill development, and support for displaced players could accelerate the next wave of representation in MLS. In this chapter, however, we do not concentrate on participation in elite-level sport. Instead, we focus on community-level participation among individuals of Afghan and Pakistani origin to examine systemic barriers and aspirations at the grassroots level.

Auto-Ethnography as a Methodology: Afghan and Pakistani Migrants in Northeast Pennsylvania

In this chapter, the first author adopted an analytic auto-ethnographic approach (Anderson, 2006; Denzin, 2006) to understand the experiences of Afghan and Pakistani migrants living in Pennsylvania. The methodology centers

on the first author as a visible, reflexive insider who systematically connects his personal experience and community interactions to diaspora theory and sport studies (Adams et al., 2013; Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). To situate the autobiographical insight of the first author within a wider communal fabric, the first author also integrated community ethnography (i.e., participant observation and unstructured discussions) with the Afghan and Pakistani community in sporting and physical activity neighborhood spaces, such as football fields, YMCA wellness centers, and informal cricket matches played every Friday in local parks in Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Participants were those who lived there for more than six months, participated in or organized sport, or engaged in sport as fans/community builders. The first author conducted sustained participant observation during weekly games. He also jotted brief notes on site and later on those days expanded them into fieldnotes rich with thick description, dialogic snippets, sensory/embodied dimensions of play, and provisional analytic insights (see Emerson et al., 2011).

Data analysis of the fieldnotes and unstructured interactions with participants followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thereby, themes were constructed by iterating from immersion and open coding to patterned coding and then refined while the first author actively investigated for disconfirming cases (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). The narratives were overall braided with community data to retain insider analytic visibility. Trustworthiness of analysis, furthermore, was made certain through lengthy engagement across sites and the triangulation of auto-ethnographic notes, observation, and thick description to bolster transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). The first author's insider position, we believe, was a valuable source of knowledge that requires ongoing reflexive accountability. Therefore, positionality memos were documented to focus on role changes (player, organizer, and researcher), mapped power relations, and noted moments when inclusion or gatekeeping influenced both access and interpretation (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Below, we present an analysis of the themes and discuss them in the overall context of the extant literature.

Findings

Sport as a Space of Conditional Belonging

For Afghan and Pakistani migrants in Northeastern Pennsylvania, sporting and physical activities offered both an element of continuity with their pasts and a fragile foothold in their presents. Cricket, in particular, offered migrants an emotional anchor. This is because community-driven cricket games provided an element of sustaining cultural rhythms and momentarily eased the stress of dislocation. For instance, the first author recalls that soon after arriving in Wilkes-Barre, he was invited by a group of Pakistani doctors based in Scranton

to play on Fridays. The field had worn grass with no real cricketing facility, yet the atmosphere was filled with familiar rhythms, Urdu banter, the smell of chai (brought by one of the participants), and children chasing stray balls. Hence, there was a sense of belonging in the community, which is difficult to sense in the hyper-individualistic society of the United States. During one of the cricket games, the first author met a group of Afghan migrants, including some who were undocumented, their legal status shadowing their everyday lives with fear and uncertainty. They spoke of arduous journeys across borders, of leaving behind family members in conflict zones, and of the grief carried from Kabul, Kandahar, and Peshawar into the quiet neighborhoods of Pennsylvania. Some recalled harrowing experiences with immigration authorities. Others described the loneliness (while working in food carts, small restaurants, or gas stations for minimum wage) that seemed to stretch endlessly until Fridays or Sundays arrived with the promise of cricket.

One of the migrants discussed growing racism in the United States against Afghans. In addition, they alluded to increasing hostility between Pakistani and Afghan communities living abroad. Over the past couple of years, particularly since the Taliban's return to power, many Afghan groups, especially those who live abroad, have increasingly come to believe that the Pakistani establishment played a direct role in empowering, propagating, and supporting the Taliban's current dominance in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, while playing cricket at that moment, the dislocation of migration felt lighter among the Afghan migrants, as the game of cricket aided in collapsing the distance between past and present. Still, passersby's puzzled glances reminded the group of their conditional belonging, where cricket was both a source of pride and remained a marker of unique difference.

For many immigrants in the United States, the experience of belonging is conditional rather than secure (Masuoka & Junn, 2013). Athletes playing cricket in Scranton/Wilkes-Barre often discussed feeling "at home" while absorbed in play; yet that sense of ease was unsettled when their games met external audiences. On college campuses, for instance, US-born peers expressed seemingly benign curiosity by describing cricket as "different." This description appears to acknowledge the cultural identity of cricket players. At the same time, it subtly relegates their practices to the margins of the dominant culture. These dynamics resonate with diaspora scholarship on hybridity and conditional membership (Dubois, 2010; Hall, 1990), indicating that inclusion in sport is frequently celebratory only in appearance.

The conditionality of belonging also had racial or ethnic undertones. Several participants recounted how their legitimacy in sport or physical activities was questioned when things went wrong. For instance, while participating in football, Pakistani participants were sidelined from particular positions (forward or center) because of their racial background and physique. One Afghan football player reflected that while playing with Mexican peers, "When we lose, people joke that we are playing the wrong sport anyway." Thereby,

defeat becomes racialized, a reminder that migrant's participation is often tolerated but not embraced. This matches the larger Western media narrative, where victories and moments of excellence of migrants are often framed as American society's success, rather than simply athletic talent. Meanwhile, failure is generalized to the community rather than American society. For Afghan and Pakistani migrants, sport arenas thus became a double-edged space of simultaneously stabilizing yet being fraught with exclusionary undertones.

Community, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Recognition

A prominent theme across participants' accounts was the familial role assumed by sporting teams. For example, Afghan footballers routinely addressed teammates as "brothers." Similarly, Pakistani participants characterized their weekly cricket matches as a "place of asylum" from daily life troubles. These kin-like ties among team members also spilled beyond the pitch into shared meals, mosque-based gatherings, and sometimes into informal mutual-aid networks. Thereby, these migrants embodied familial bonding and were able to create the bridging forms of social capital outlined by Walseth (2007), where sport not only fosters intimacy within the migrant group but also becomes a unique channel for navigating the larger host country landscape. For many participants, sporting gatherings also evoked a strong sense of nostalgia by re-creating memories of home: village tournaments; neighborhood city-based rivalries (Lahore versus Karachi); and festive gatherings they had left behind.

Nevertheless, the politics of these sport communities being recognized unveils a sharp division based on social status. Cricket matches, most often organized by precariously employed students and immigrant workers in service and labor, receive only scant acknowledgment from formal institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania. The weekly games are maintained through shared equipment purchases, a rotating system of hospitality, and reliance on informal, uncompensated labor. In contrast, sports tied to wealthier demographics, such as tennis, football, or even pickleball, receive localized municipal support, as numerous parks in the region have tennis, badminton, or pickleball courts. This hierarchy mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the *field*, where the cultural and economic capital of participants shapes which social activities are deemed "worthy."

Participants were acutely aware of this disparity. However, they believed that playing cricket was part of being invisible here and had no expectation for change. For example, one participant expressed,

If we are playing in New York, maybe the city would notice us. But cricket is for our well-being here, it's not for any commercial interest, it's better to be invisible here, it's more about our hobby rather than getting something out of this.

In this way, the surrogate familial communities formed through cricket became a direct rejoinder to the neglect of immigrant athletes by institutions. Their bonds of solidarity countered out-group exclusion and functioned as a process of in-group inclusion.

Networking as Survival, Opportunity, and Point of Social Hierarchy

As discussed previously, beyond maintaining cultural ties and personal bonds, cricket and football in Northeastern Pennsylvania frequently functioned as important networking spaces. For newly arrived students, workers in unstable jobs, and recent refugees from Afghanistan, the informal relationships formed on the sporting fields extended into sharing advice about employment, housing, and how to deal with local offices or legal issues. One participant explained that a teammate's recommendation led to his first job at a gas station, and another said that connections made during Friday cricket aided him in finding an affordable rented place. The first author himself remembered being able to do a tax return based on a cricket teammate's advice. In this way, sport is more than recreation; it commonly functions as a community-based market for jobs, housing, or legal issues, where trust built on the pitch turns into practical support of the community members. These examples cement the migration literature on "social capital in motion," in which shared cultural practices support exchange networks that lower uncertainty in precarious host-country settings (see Spaaij, 2011; Xin, 2018).

Nevertheless, networks created through sport also revealed ethnic or social hierarchies of access and opportunity. Even within Afghan and Pakistani groups, small silos remain, such as Pashtun or Punjabi circles, and even sometimes these silos are based on sect. For instance, the first author remembers the first question asked by a mosque preacher playing cricket with him was whether he was Sunni or Shia. This was asked because the surname Hussain is a common Shia name, while the forename Umer is a common Sunni name. Meanwhile, the first author's birthplace of Gilgit-Baltistan also often leads to people affiliating his sectarian background with the Aga Khani sect of Shia Muslims. The first author of the study unveils that many times he has used code-switching of being an Aga Khani Muslim or a Sunni Muslim to fit into various silos. Here, it should be noted that Aga Khani Muslims of Gilgit-Baltistan are often considered liberals, while Sunni Muslims from that region are considered conservatives. Therefore, the first author's code-switching behavior depends on the context and space (e.g., mosque versus social gathering). Moreover, job leads, housing tips, and institutional know-how also often travel along ethnic or sectarian lines. Likewise, religiosity and mosque attendance also shaped the in-group bonding. For example, the first author found that his liberal views of feminism and gender occasionally made him feel like an outsider

within his own community. As a result, the same playing fields that brought people together could also reproduce boundaries, shaping who received timely information and who stayed at the margins. Hence, sport acted as both a resourceful bridge and a reminder of unequal footing, accentuating that networking is not simply about communal solidarity but also about navigating the stratified realities of ethnicities, religions, and ideological differences in the United States.

Cultural Exchange and the Uneven Terrain of Dialogue

Cricket, while it remains an important cultural anchor across the South Asian diasporas, also underlines the uneven terrain of dialogue among Afghan, Pakistani, and Indian communities in Northeastern Pennsylvania. On the face, shared cricket passions often act as a medium of cultural exchange. For example, cricket games often draw together migrants who, in South Asia, might rarely interact because of rigid national or political divides (e.g., Indians and Pakistanis). Thereby, informal cricket matches at local parks become one of the few spaces where cross-border socialization is even possible. This unique form of socialization provided opportunities for storytelling, food sharing, and light-hearted wit about cricketing heroes such as Virat Kohli, Babar Azam, or Rashid Khan. In these unique moments, cricket operates more as a symbolic bridge that enables South Asians to craft fleeting solidarities in a foreign land. For example, many participants noted that cricket worked like a shared sign of belonging, a way to recognize one another, especially when the American mainstream ignored or misunderstood the sport and the community's social activities. In the diaspora, this opens space for easy togetherness: brief moments when differences fade and people lean into familiar traditions and sometimes into collective memories.

Nevertheless, cricket's shared appeal does not erase older political and historical rifts among migrant communities. In practice, games among South Asian migrants can revive divides shaped by geopolitics. For example, sometimes Indian and Pakistani migrants carried subcontinental rivalries into the diaspora setting, where cricket could become a venue for subtle exclusion, pointed teasing, or quiet avoidance. Therefore, sport is not a neutral arena or social activity (Meeuwssen & Kreft, 2022; Sengupta, 2004). However, sporting events between Indians and Pakistanis or even between Afghans and Pakistanis also provided a platform for political dialogue and an avenue to understand divergent points of view. Overall, in Northeastern Pennsylvania, interactions among South Asian groups were thereby layered, as they were both joyful and unifying, at other moments cautious and fractured. The cricket *field* thus works as both a bridge and a border, a place where diasporic South Asians seek harmony while still negotiating the lingering histories of conflict, struggle, and inequality.

Futures Shaped by Intersecting Barriers

The first author's experience with the community unveiled bold and hopeful plans, especially among the college students participating in sport such as cricket. For instance, numerous students discussed the growing trend of cricket in the state; some have even imagined formal collegiate cricket leagues. The community members also called for opportunities that include women. Yet, in the Northeast Pennsylvania communities, women who wanted to participate in physical and sporting activities were constantly facing dual pressures: expectations inside their communities and structural obstacles across U.S. sport.

Fees at facilities like the YMCA, uniform costs, and transportation produced class-based financial barriers. Numerous migrant men faced pressure to maximize earnings, which led some to reduce or abandon regular participation in cricket or football or pay for facilities for leisure or physical activities (e.g., YMCA). The constant need to meet rent, send remittances back home, or cover immigration-related expenses further crowded out investments in organized sport or leisure activities. The economic hurdles are more glaring for migrant women, as many are financially dependent on men, especially because of visa regulations. For instance, the first author's wife cannot legally work on an H4 spousal visa, making her financially dependent. At the same time, stereotypes about Muslim women's modesty, especially for those who wear hijab or athletic attire, often further reinforce gender-based exclusion.

Considered as a whole, the intersectional lived experiences show how race, gender, and class intersect to determine who receives access, rather than upholding a simple American dream of endless opportunity. For numerous migrants, real equity, therefore, requires dismantling entrenched hierarchies and systems in sporting arenas.

Diasporic Sport as Conditional Belonging (DSCB) Theory

We ground our analysis in key concepts from diaspora theory (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991). We also draw on broader migration scholarship (see de Waal, 2020; Mijić, 2022) and on the first author's ethnographic research. Therefore, in this chapter, we extend the previous body of diaspora work by proposing the theory of DSCB. Furthermore, we integrate diaspora theory with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital, Hall's (2011) understanding of identity, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, and Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and Third Space. Through this synthesis, we argue that sport does not operate as a neutral leisure activity. Rather, it constitutes a politically charged, border-crossing arena in which recognition, belonging, and exclusion are continually renegotiated.

We further argue that while sporting activities often provide migrants with nostalgia, community, and resilience, the belonging they afford is not fixed but conditional. Hence, “belongingness” of the migrants is shaped by performance, visibility, sociopolitical context, class, ethnic background, and the dominant group’s willingness to extend recognition. Hence, studying migrants in the United States necessitates reframing the American dream through this lens, as the theory emphasizes not unified mobility but the everyday struggles through which diasporic communities fight for the right to play, belong, and be seen.

DSCB theory spans multiple levels of analysis (micro, meso, and macro) and is inspired by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model and Cunningham’s (2012) multi-level model. At the micro-level, Figure 9.1 shows that sport shapes how individual migrants negotiate identity and belonging, endure cultural rhythms, and express hybridity within host cultures. At the community level, we underscore that sporting spaces such as local leagues,

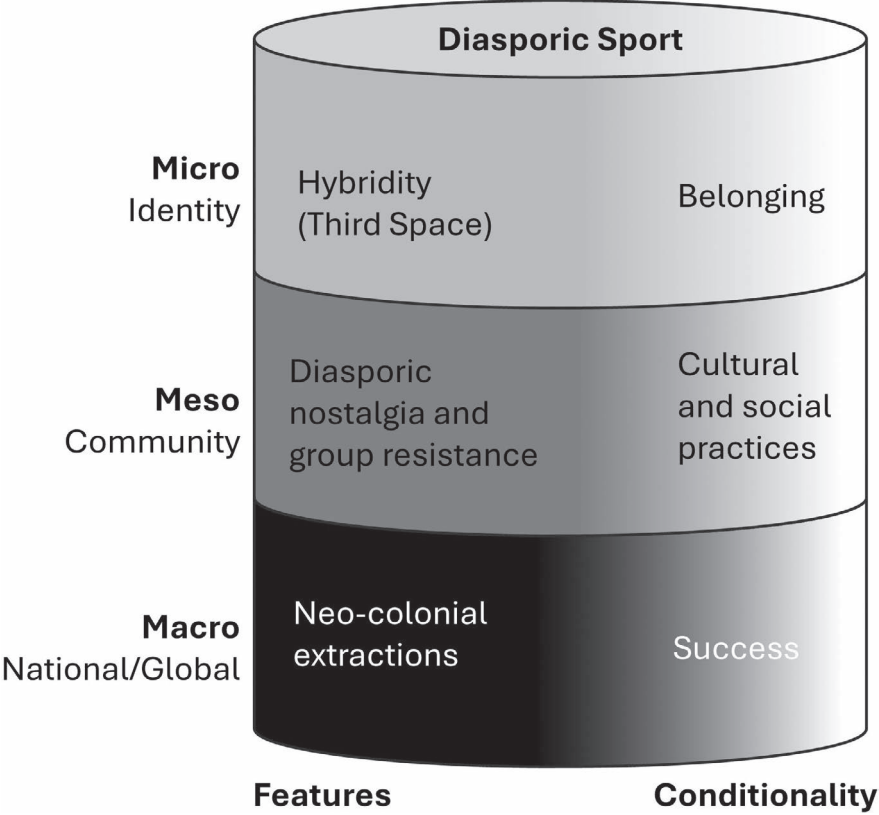


Figure 9.1 Diasporic Sport as Conditional Belonging (DSCB) theory.

YMCA centers, or informal cricket matches act as “vernacular institutions,” simultaneously inclusive in building solidarity through nostalgia and resistance yet exclusive in reproducing cultural and social hierarchies of class, ethnicity, age, gender, and religion. At the macro-level, we propose that diasporic athletic skill is extracted and celebrated on national and global stages in ways that remain mostly conditional. For instance, their successes are narrated as immigration success stories (e.g., fulfilling the American dream), but their defeats are often racialized or tied back to questions of authenticity and loyalty. Moreover, the global movement of athletes reveals patterns of neo-colonial extraction, where Global South talent is celebrated and commodified but rarely affords full belonging.

There are six interrelated elements central to the DSCB theory. First is the theme of hybridity and the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994) at the micro level, where sport enables cultural mixing that challenges binaries of “authentic American” versus “outsider.” Second is the larger concept of conditional belonging, where the “belongingness” migrants experience through sport is not fixed but fragile and contingent. This type of belongingness is shaped by performance and visibility, sociopolitical context, class and ethnic background, and the dominant group’s willingness to extend recognition. Third is diasporic nostalgia and resistance at the meso level, in which sport becomes a mnemonic practice for sustaining memories of home. This helps individuals assert their identity against the notion of erasure. Fourth, we take the notion of cultural and social capital from Bourdieu’s work and highlight the uneven and conditional distribution of recognition and resources across sports tied to class, ethnicity, and community standing. Fifth, we again underscore the macro force of ongoing neo-colonial extraction, where the migration of athletes under specific visa categories or academy pipelines reflects broader inequities in global sporting economies. Finally, migrant athletes’ legitimacy largely hinges on performance and sometimes symbolic value, a form of conditional success.

DSCB theory implications are significant for both scholarship and practice. For example, we argue the American dream narrative is not simply seamless upward mobility via sport but, instead, a precarious struggle for acknowledgment and visibility within systemic hierarchies. This framework also underscores the necessity of institutional and policy reforms. Efficient reforms related to migrants and sporting facilities are particularly important in smaller urban settings. In such contexts, diasporic groups frequently lack municipal support and adequate infrastructure. Moreover, the theory underlines the importance of probing diasporic communities’ lived experiences via the framework of intersectionality (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991), concerning how race, class, gender, sect, and religion combine to shape the uneven terrains of belonging in sporting spaces.

Looking forward, DSCB unlocks multiple directions for future research. Comparative studies could examine how conditional belonging manifests

across different diasporic groups, while attention to gender and youth would illuminate how women in particular navigate sporting participation amid community expectations and various structural barriers. Digital diasporas also provide fertile ground for exploring how online sporting fandom rewrites identity and the notion of belongingness across borders. Lastly, a profound focus on the intersection of sport, religion, and politics can further explain how sporting practices tangle with broader edifices of community life and transnational ties.

Overall, DSCB theory adds to the scholarship of diaspora studies and sociology of sport by underlining that belonging is never fixed, but it remains conditional in nature, which ultimately shapes how diasporic communities experience sport in contemporary capitalist societies. By positioning physical activity or sport participation as a political territory rather than a neutral social activity, the theory offers a framework that bridges cultural identity, power relations, and transnational movements. We finally argue that the diasporic sport participation is a site of resilience and exclusion, solidarity and hierarchy, nostalgia and transformation. Eventually, DSCB theory compels us to rethink integration not as a linear process toward acceptance but as a relentless negotiation molded by uneven buildings of power and belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we described how sport is both a lifeline and a litmus test for Afghan and Pakistani migrants in the United States, especially in smaller cities like Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, PA. Participation in sports such as cricket and football, at the community level, carries memory, generates community, and opens practical networks for work, housing, and care. The same spaces, however, also exhibit conditional belonging. Economic background and ethnicity further sharpen these boundaries, as paying for equipment, transport, and modesty norms narrow who participates and who is seen. By pairing auto-ethnography with community observation, we traced how diasporic identities are made on Friday evenings as much as on national stages, and how the American dream is both pursued and negotiated in everyday, local sporting worlds.

Furthermore, DSCB theory links diasporic individual journeys with various forces shaping people's experiences (e.g., personal identity, work, community institutions, and national/global recognition). The practical implication is that if cities and sport bodies want genuine inclusion, they must then invest where belonging is most precarious: low-cost facilities, safe transport, early skill development, anti-bias scouting, and visa and placement supports that do not treat Global South talent as disposable. Researchers can extend our study agenda through comparative, longitudinal, and digital studies that follow how recognition rises and falls over time. Lastly, we contend that integration in sport is not a straight path; it is a daily negotiation of visibility, value,

and voice. Ensuring that Afghan and Pakistani participants can play, be safe, and be heard is not charity; it is the basic work of a fair sporting system and their human right.

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Part III

Sport as a Mirror of Sociopolitical Realities and Identity



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Sport as a Geopolitical Battleground

Pakistani Sports Under Pakistan Junta's Control

Introduction

Politicians and the popular media continuously frame sporting institutions as apolitical or neutral domains of fair play, leisure, and athletic excellence (Begović, 2025; Næss, 2018). Nonetheless, sport and politics remain historically inseparable social institutions (Abrams, 2013; Allison, 2005; Markovits & Rensmann, 2010), and the idea of neutrality is a myth (Begović, 2025; Grix & James, 2024; Næss, 2018). The social construction of sport remains profoundly tangled with power, governance, propaganda, and ideology (Bairner et al., 2016). For example, during the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union employed sport films as a means of political propaganda (Shaw & Youngblood, 2017). In the twentieth century, authoritarian regimes such as those of Salazar in Portugal and Vargas in Brazil strategically used sport as a tool of propaganda by focusing on social cohesion (Drumond, 2013). Similarly, Donald Trump's sport-related tweets, during his first term as U.S. President, used athletics as a tool for self-promotion, fandom, conflict, and national identity (Frederick et al., 2021). From Germany's 1936 Nazi-controlled Olympics to the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar, scholars have documented that sporting mega-events are forums for ideological propaganda, which has also been termed "sportswashing" by some scholars (Boykoff, 2023; Fruh et al., 2022).

In the case of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a state molded by its colonial inheritance, Cold War entanglements, complex relationship with the Global War on Terrorism, and enduring military dominance, sport also functioned as an extension of statecraft and, at times, as a constructor of national identity. This chapter enhances the academic record concerning the Pakistani military's direct and indirect influence on sport. Based on case examples, we argue that, under the recurring control of military juntas in Pakistan, sports have persisted neither peripherally nor incidentally; they are strategically mobilized as a legitimate tool of cultural diplomacy, more often as propaganda, and even at times as a mechanism for gaining soft power in the region. Thereby, the significance of sport in Pakistan must be

contextualized within its tumultuous civil–military history. After applying the theoretical concepts of soft power, sportswashing, and political sociology to a case study of Pakistan, we present a new theoretical framework of Militarized Sports Praxis (MSP).

Historical Trajectory of Pakistan’s Military Control and Sports

The historical evolution of sport in Pakistan is inextricably linked to the wider trajectory of military rule that has molded the nation’s political landscape. After its independence in 1947, the political climate oscillated between fragile civilian governments and prolonged military dictatorship. The Pakistani military directly governed Pakistan for nearly half of its history (1958–1971, 1977–1988, and 1999–2008). Military rulers of Pakistan, such as General Yahya Khan and General Zia-ul-Haq, commonly relied on practices associated with fascist governance. For instance, Yahya Khan is widely cited as the chief architect of the Bangladesh (East Pakistan at that time) genocide, where he ordered the military of West Pakistan (now the Islamic Republic of Pakistan) to rape women and kill innocents to control East Pakistan (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2019). On the other hand, General Zia-ul-Haq’s rule was known for the persecution of political opponents and promoting state-backed religious extremism (Khan et al., 2020; Nawaz, 2025). For instance, he was the mastermind of the Hudood Ordinance of 1979, which paved the way for bringing the criminal justice system under the conservative and controversial clauses of Islamic Sharia Law as a method to control the masses (Nawaz, 2025). Additionally, Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization measures created a more conservative religious–legal environment that complemented Pakistan’s support for the jihad in Afghanistan and contributed to the broader climate in which religious extremism could be justified. Meanwhile, all the military dictators of Pakistan, in one way or another, attempted to control the press, censor dissenting intellectuals, and systematically tried to curb civil liberties (Haqqani, 2005; Shah, 2014; Siddiq, 2007).

Even during periods of civilian leadership, Pakistan remained under the pervasive influence of its military from its independence in 1947 to the present day. For instance, both the current government under Shahbaz Sharif (constituted in 2022) and the preceding one led by Imran Khan (2018–2022) were frequently described by political analysts as examples of a “hybrid regime” which, in the context of Pakistan, denotes the continuation and sustenance of civilian administrations made possible only through the backing and influence of the Pakistani military establishment (Malik, 2024; Pattanaik, 2025). Although every Pakistani junta framed its sport policies according to the circumstances of its era, a chronological examination of these periods of direct military control hints that sport was not peripheral but central to the symbolic and functional strategies of military governance in Pakistan.

General Ayub Khan and Sports (1958–1969)

The militarization of sporting policies in Pakistan began with General Ayub Khan, who seized power in 1958 during the nation's first official coup. His administration was defined by a drive for modernization and industrial expansion (Arif, 2023). Moreover, his socioeconomic vision was closely tied to an alliance with the United States during the Cold War, and he was a profound supporter of capitalist economic initiatives (McMahon, 1994; Khan, 1967). During his Presidency, Ayub Khan announced various initiatives to encourage the local business community of Sialkot, Punjab, to invest in sporting-goods manufacturing, which ultimately led to its transition into a global hub of sporting goods. Within this modernization vision, sport became a showcase of national vitality and international standing.

After Pakistan's gold-medal field hockey triumph over India at the 1960 Rome Olympics, President Ayub Khan is widely reported to have declared field hockey the national sport of Pakistan (Raheel, 2014). To more fully consolidate hockey as part of his nationalist agenda, he named the ardent supporter of his coup, General Muhammad Musa Khan, also Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army, as President of the Pakistan Hockey Federation in 1960 ("From the Past," 2016). Moreover, the gold medal victory of Pakistan in 1960 provided Ayub Khan with an amazing opportunity to create a narrative that Pakistan, as a young nation, had the capacity to outshine its larger rival, India, on the world stage. For instance, Paracha (2015), while discussing the history of hockey, claimed that Ayub Khan politically appropriated Pakistan's 1960 Rome Olympic victory as proof of national "progress" under his dictatorial regime. State-controlled media further helped Ayub Khan reinforce this symbolism (or to be more correct, this propaganda) and often presented the victory as an outgrowth of his modernization policies and alignment of athletics with his industrial and infrastructural projects. In doing so, state-controlled media coverage marginalized the achievements of the athletes themselves, redirecting credit toward the state and its leadership.

Cricket, though secondary to hockey, also rose in prominence during his rule. In a classic case of sycophancy by Ayub Khan's close allies, a national first-class cricket tournament was launched in 1960 and named the Ayub Trophy in his honor ("Ayub Trophy," n.d.). International sporting tours were orchestrated to project Pakistan as modern (Ansari, 2011), welcoming, and culturally attuned to Western sporting traditions, particularly those of the British Commonwealth. Parallel to these symbolic gestures, the regime's investment in sport infrastructure, most notably stadium construction in Lahore and Karachi, rendered modernization tangible, embedding athletics within the broader developmental ethos of Ayub's iron-clad governance.

General Yahya Khan and Sports (1969–1971)

After Ayub Khan, his successor, the brutal fascist dictator General Yahya Khan, presided over one of the most tumultuous periods in Pakistan's political history

(Ouassini & Ouassini, 2019). His tenure culminated with the 1971 war and the secession of East Pakistan to form Bangladesh. Yahya Khan's regime was short-lived and marked by crisis. Hence, he had limited ability to systematically mobilize sport for political purposes. Nevertheless, during this period, the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF) remained under the control of senior state elites. For example, leadership passed from Air Marshal Nur Khan to other establishment figures and, by 1970, to Lieutenant General Khwaja Mohammad Azhar Khan, who later became the chairman of the PCB as well ("K. M. Azhar," 2006; Salahuddin, 1999).

In the Yahya Khan era, changes in the sport federation's leadership reflected how key appointments were made within the same military–bureaucratic circle that governed the country. However, even in this period, sports were not absent from the main media discourse. The first men's Hockey World Cup took place in Barcelona in October 1971 after being shifted from Pakistan due to the Bangladesh Liberation War. Pakistan emerged as the inaugural champion, edging Spain 1–0 in the final. The World Cup victory briefly provided Yahya Khan's regime with an opportunity to promote a narrative of national unity amid deepening political fragmentation. Moreover, cricket matches against India in the late 1960s and early 1970s were imbued with symbolic significance, representing contests of national pride amid intense polarization (Bose, 2011). Yahya Khan's use of sport was more symbolic than institutional, as his tenure was marked by political uncertainty in the country. Nonetheless, his regime continued the pattern of making political appointments in sporting bodies, even as the state itself was fragmenting.

General Zia-ul-Haq and Sports (1977–1988)

The militarization of sport in Pakistan intensified under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who assumed power in 1977 and governed until his death in 1988. His regime was marked by the aggressive Islamization of politics and society, Pakistan's strategic entanglement in the Cold War following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the consolidation of an authoritarian order. Within this context, Zia-ul-Haq followed Ayub Khan's lead and intensively transformed sport into a pivotal tool of internal propaganda and external diplomacy.

In pre-Zia Pakistan, sport lived comfortably beside the bottle; from racecourses to gymkhanas, bars and whisky were part of the games' social life, even if they stayed just off the field or on the field via sponsorship (Hashmey, 2012). In Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan, sports were purged of alcohol sponsors and reimagined through the language of Islam through the Prohibition (Enforcement of Hadd) Order, 1979. This ordinance declared drinking for adult Muslims illegal, prescribing 80 lashes for those convicted, and officially paved the way for alcohol to transition from "socially frowned on" to a grim "Islamic crime." Silva (2003) even claimed that Zia's Islamization policies led to *fatwas* (non-binding Islamic legal opinions by a qualified scholar) banning women's

hockey and other sport participation in public spaces. Moreover, by promoting state ideology, cricket as a cultural emblem was transformed into a political weapon. Externally, cricket also carried diplomatic weight. In February 1987, Zia-ul-Haq surprisingly flew to Jaipur, India, under the guise of watching a cricket match, but he used the occasion to warn Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that any war between the arch-rivals would escalate to nuclear levels and devastate both nations. Zia-ul-Haq's blunt message, followed by talks over dinner, helped ease tensions, leading to troop withdrawals and marking a milestone in "cricket diplomacy" between India and Pakistan and revealing sport's power to soften enmities (Aziz, 2015).

Beyond cricket, Zia-ul-Haq's regime celebrated continuous achievements in field hockey. Most notably, Pakistan's gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics created numerous headlines across the globe. Hockey triumphs during Zia's era were presented as proof of the nation's vigor under Islamic leadership, which helped reinforce the general's claims to both religious authenticity and Pakistan's international competency (Paracha, 2015). Simultaneously, sport served as a means of political distraction: while opposition political parties were banned and dissent was systematically suppressed, cricket tours and hockey victories generated moments of collective euphoria that lent legitimacy to his authoritarian rule. The state-run Pakistan Television (PTV) exemplified how sports were used to distract people from everyday life issues and human rights abuses by the government (Paracha, 2015).

The militarization of sport was further knotted with Cold War geopolitics under Zia-ul-Haq. As a frontline state in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, Pakistan projected itself as disciplined and resilient, with athletic successes folded into a broader narrative of national strength that underscored its role as both a dependable American ally and a credible international actor.

For instance, Pakistan boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Further, during Zia-ul-Haq's regime, sport administration in Pakistan remained tightly controlled through state-backed appointments, which often favored military officers and his cronies. For example, retired Brigadier Manzoor Hussain Atif served as Secretary General of the Pakistan Hockey Federation from 1978 to 1990. He was also the first director of sports at Pakistani International Airlines (PIA; the flag-ship carrier of Pakistan) in 1978 and remained in this position until 1984. In cricket, the head of the Board of Control for Cricket in Pakistan (BCCP; now known as the PCB) was typically appointed by the President, which ensured the board remained aligned with the Zia-ul-Haq regime's ideological stance. Overall, the brutal dictator, Zia-ul-Haq's management of sport was characterized by the placement of senior military generals, air marshals, and brigadiers at the helm of cricket, hockey, and other national sport institutions. This concentration of authority enabled the regime to instrumentalize athletic victories as formidable vehicles of national pride, propaganda, and diplomatic signaling.

Movement Toward Democratic Governance

A plane crash in 1988 claimed the life of General Zia-ul-Haq and brought an abrupt close to more than ten years of military dominance in Pakistan. His unexpected death left behind a political void, giving long-marginalized democratic movements the opportunity to re-emerge. Out of this shift came a tentative democratic movement led by Benazir Bhutto, who broke historic ground as the first woman to govern a Muslim-majority state through democratic means. However, this new democratic era in the country remained precarious, as it was burdened by the lingering power of the military, bitter rivalries among political factions, widespread corruption, and persistent economic troubles.

At the same time, Pakistan's sporting landscape continued to illustrate the military's far-reaching grip on civilian life. Leadership roles in institutions such as the PCB, Pakistan Olympic Association (POA), and the PHF continued to go to military officers, leaving civilian administrators with little control. For example, even in moments of national pride, such as Pakistan's joint hosting of the 1996 Cricket World Cup alongside India and Sri Lanka, the military's presence was evident. While the event showcased Pakistan on the global sporting stage and provided an opportunity for the country to show its soft power by having the tournament in an era when a Muslim woman was leading the country, much of the organizational authority rested with military-backed administrators. Thus, even as the country moved toward democratic governance, its cultural and recreational spheres continued to mirror the enduring imprint of the military establishment.

General Pervez Musharraf and Sports (1999–2008)

The return of direct military rule in Pakistan came with General Pervez Musharraf, who assumed power in 1999 after deposing former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. His government navigated the dual pressures of a post-Cold War and post-9/11 order: international isolation in the wake of the Kargil border conflict with India and renewed integration as a frontline U.S. ally in the war on terror. Against this precarious geopolitical backdrop, sport re-emerged as a central instrument of diplomacy and a source of image construction. For example, Musharraf's attendance at India–Pakistan matches, most notably his 2005 visit to New Delhi, was presented as a gesture of peace and pragmatism. International coverage and Western elites' unwavering support of the general amplified this image, portraying him as modern and approachable, thereby obscuring the authoritarian realities of his domestic governance (Ahmed & Norris, 2002; Ramesh, 2005; Shahid, 2023). Moreover, during his rule, President Pervez Musharraf consciously used sport as a tool of image building (e.g., soft power), for example, by reviving the India–Pakistan "Friendship Series" cricket tours, personally attending high-profile matches in

India, and promoting large cross-border fan exchanges to encourage people-to-people contact and soften Pakistan's post-9/11 image.

Although Musharraf came to power on a pledge to end corruption in Pakistan, his tenure was instead marred by corruption scandals and military interference in the PCB. For instance, immediately after his coup in 1999, Musharraf appointed retired Lieutenant General Tauqir Zia as PCB Chairman, where he served until 2003. After Tauqir Zia failed in his appointment as PCB chairman (which is discussed in more detail in an upcoming section), Musharraf gave this prestigious position to his close aides (Shaharyar Khan and, afterwards, Nasim Ashraf), not based on their cricket management experiences but on how well they could flatter the dictator (Ashraf, 2024; Mir, 2007).

Furthermore, in 2004, another close confidante of Musharraf, retired Lieutenant General Syed Arif Hasan, secured the appointment of POA president. This appointment paved the way for embedding military influence in the Olympic sphere for decades. Even squash, the sport that once symbolized Pakistan's global dominance, was drawn into this apparatus, with Air Marshal Mushaf Ali Mir and later bureaucrat-generals presiding over its decline. Nor were other sports spared: the PSB and federations for football (soccer), athletics, and beyond were systematically placed under retired or serving officers or political cronies of President Musharraf, ensuring their loyalty to the regime's authority. Therefore, the centralization of control reflected Musharraf's broader authoritarian style, as the military assumed stewardship over all sporting institutions. Militarized security around sporting events further exposed vulnerabilities, culminating in the 2009 Lahore attack on the Sri Lankan team, an episode that, though post-Musharraf, exposed the failures of such policies and suspended international cricket in Pakistan for nearly ten years.

Summary

Per our reading of the historical arc of military involvement in Pakistani sports, we argue that Pakistan's sporting evolution reveals patterns of both continuity and adaptation. Ayub Khan initiated the practice of framing athletic triumphs as markers of modernization and national prestige. Although constrained by political turmoil, Yahya Khan upheld the symbolic role of sport in shaping national identity. Zia-ul-Haq intensified this politicization, particularly through cricket. Moreover, he tried to harness sport for diplomatic outreach. Musharraf, in turn, recalibrated these strategies in the post-9/11 era by focusing on presenting Pakistan as a responsible global actor and ally of the West. Across these successive regimes, sport was systematically appropriated as an instrument of propaganda, diplomacy, and legitimacy, firmly embedded within the broader architecture of authoritarian governance. In the upcoming section, we analyze theoretically how the Pakistani military has influenced the country's sporting culture.

Theorizing Pakistan's Military Dominance Over National Sporting Culture

Theorization of military dominance in Pakistan's sporting culture can be approached through three interlocking perspectives: political sociology (*field*, symbolic power, and hegemony), sportswashing, and soft power.

Political sociology views sport as a social institution embedded within larger structures of domination. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) notion of the social *field* is particularly insightful, as it helps frame sport in Pakistan not as an independent or apolitical arena but as a site of ongoing contestation where military power exerts significant influence. Viewed through the framework of symbolic power, triumphs in cricket or hockey were often co-opted by the Pakistani military establishment and recast as evidence of the nation's strength, thereby bolstering the narrative of the armed forces as the ultimate custodians of Pakistan's future. Pakistan's sporting victories were consistently folded into military narratives of power: the 1982 Men's Hockey World Cup win was framed by Zia-ul-Haq as proof of discipline; the 1996 Cricket World Cup co-hosting showcased stability under military oversight; Lieutenant General Tauqir Zia's leadership of the PCB epitomized institutional control; and international cricket triumphs in the late-1980s Sharjah Cup were broadcast as symbols of resilience amid political uncertainty. In each case, athletic success was less a neutral achievement than a vehicle for reinforcing the armed forces' claim to national guardianship.

Similarly, the national cricket team's training camps were often held at the Pakistan Army School of Physical Training near Abbottabad, where sniper training and military drills were emphasized under the direction of military instructors (NDTV Sports Desk, 2024). These camps allowed the armed forces to project themselves as custodians of discipline, symbolizing how athletic training in Pakistani cricket is explicitly aligned with military authority and reinforced through media framing. Furthermore, in 2016, after landmark cricket victories, the Pakistan national team's captains, Misbah-ul-Haq and Younis Khan, offered military-style salutes, explicitly framed as a tribute to the army trainers who had overseen the squad's pre-tour fitness camp. These gestures visually reinforced the army's role as custodian of national pride, illustrating how the military's symbolic power persisted across generations of Pakistani sport.

Viewed through the lens of political sociology, Antonio Gramsci's (1971) idea of hegemony can further elucidate how the ritualized celebration of sporting victories by Pakistani sporting teams worked to normalize military authority, winning popular consent by weaving ideals of discipline, sacrifice, and unity into the fabric of sport. In a complementary fashion, Michel Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality can also help highlight how systems of sport administration, mediated representations, and even the discipline of athletes' bodies (NDTV Sports Desk, 2024) served as channels of subtle

regulation through which the Pakistani military steered collective sentiment at home and projected an image of strength abroad.

The second theoretical anchor that can help understand Pakistani military influence on sport is the concept of sportswashing. The sportswashing literature has gained prominence in recent years and is described generally as the way in which authoritarian regimes utilize sport to launder reputations and deflect criticism about human rights issues of their countries (see Bergkvist & Skeiseid, 2024; Boykoff, 2022; Skey, 2022). For instance, Fruh et al. (2022) explained that sportswashing encompasses not only the hosting of mega-events but also the broader use of sport to project legitimacy and modernity. For example, the 2004 South Asian Federation (SAF) Games in Islamabad were staged under Musharraf's military regime and functioned as a classic case of sportswashing. By presiding over the opening ceremony and placing military officials at the forefront of the event's organization, Musharraf used the Games to project Pakistan as stable and regionally influential, despite ongoing political repression at home (Naazer et al., 2017). Media portrayals emphasized national unity and progress, allowing the military government to launder its image internationally through the language of sporting success and regional cooperation ("Colourful opening," 2004). Another striking instance came in March 2006, when U.S. President George W. Bush visited Pakistan during Musharraf's rule. As part of his tightly choreographed state visit, Bush was taken to the U.S. Embassy grounds in Islamabad, where he briefly played cricket with school-children in front of the media (see Figure 10.1). This carefully staged photo opportunity symbolically linked Pakistan's most popular sport with US–Pakistan diplomatic ties, projecting an image of normalcy, friendliness, and soft cultural connection at a time when Musharraf's military government faced criticism over authoritarianism and its role in the war on terror.

Likewise, Zia-ul-Haq's attendance at an India–Pakistan test match in Jaipur in 1987, staged amid a tense military standoff, illustrates how sport was mobilized to ease regional hostilities while bolstering his own authority at home. Nearly two decades later, Musharraf's strategy of cricket diplomacy during the 2005 India tour served a comparable purpose, enabling his government to project pragmatism and a willingness for peace even as Pakistan drew criticism for its involvement in the Global War on Terrorism. However, the strategy of sportswashing in Pakistan historically displayed inherent limits. Unlike resource-rich Gulf monarchies or the imperial Western powers capable of hosting global mega-events, Pakistan's efforts were always modest and localized, typically centered on bilateral cricket exchanges, field hockey triumphs, and carefully managed media performances. Nevertheless, persistent doubts about the country's political volatility, human rights practices, and ties to militant groups meant that these sporting displays struggled to effectively sportswash Pakistan's international image.

Finally, the theoretical framework of soft power, coined by Joseph Nye (2004), can further help explain Pakistan's regional use of sport in its military

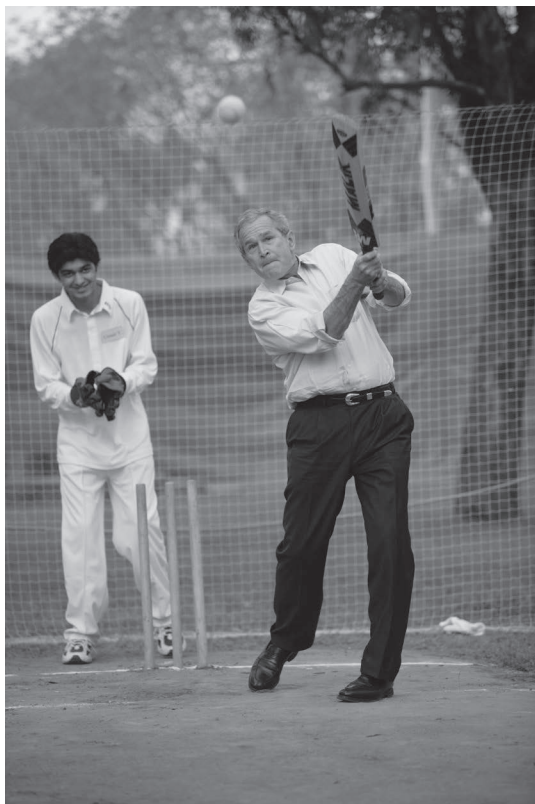


Figure 10.1 President George W. Bush participating in a cricket clinic with Pakistani youth at the Raphael Memorial Gardens, U.S. Embassy, Islamabad, March 4, 2006.

Source: Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library.

strategy within South Asia. Nye (2004) defined soft power as the ability of states to attract and co-opt rather than coerce. Sports represent a potent form of soft power because they embody narratives of excellence, cultural pride, and collective identity that resonate across borders. Pakistan's military rulers repeatedly sought to harness this potential, deploying sports as instruments of cultural diplomacy and sometimes signaling national unity. For instance, after a week-long suspension of the PSL due to armed clashes with India in 2025, the tournament resumed in Rawalpindi with a match between Karachi Kings and Peshawar Zalmi (Aiman, 2025). The event was notable not only for the cricket but also for its overt political symbolism, as top military leaders—Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir, Interior Minister and PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi, and the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations

(ISPR) Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry—were prominently seated in the VIP box. Their presence transformed the game into a display of military influence at a time of heightened national tensions. Likewise, across different ISPR leaderships in Pakistan, the visible presence of ISPR figures at major cricket matches was a deliberate military action to reinforce the fusion of sport with state power and contribute to the normalization of military authority in public life.

Sport has also functioned as a bridge to the Pakistani diaspora, especially in the UK and the Gulf, where expatriate communities embraced cricket victories as affirmations of belonging, pride, and national identity. However, Pakistan's efforts to convert such moments into durable forms of soft power were repeatedly constrained by deeper structural realities: terrorism, political turbulence, and authoritarian governance regularly eclipsed sporting successes, limiting their effectiveness as instruments of international influence.

Bringing the above theoretical lenses of public sociology, soft power, and sportswashing into the conversation allows this chapter to build a layered account of how sport operated under military rule in Pakistan. From the perspective of political sociology, sport appears as a tool domesticated within the armed forces' hegemonic project and a medium through which symbolic authority was extended into the realm of popular culture. The concept of sportswashing draws attention to how regimes deliberately staged sporting spectacles to mask repression and to project images of progress, modernity, and responsible governance. Soft power theory, in turn, situates Pakistan's cricket tours and hockey triumphs within international politics, where they functioned as instruments of cultural diplomacy and geopolitical signaling. Taken together, these approaches reveal that professional spectator sport in Pakistan is far from a neutral entity; it is consciously cultivated as a *field* through which authoritarian rulers have historically disciplined bodies (NDTV Sports Desk, 2024), shaped emotions, and managed perceptions at home and abroad.

Military Officials and the Militarization of Sport Governance: Historical and Contemporary View

The military history of Pakistan highlights many instances of military personnel's entanglement in national sport organizations. The broader pattern extends across even more federations and sporting bodies. In this section, we offer two historical case studies of the military–sport nexus, followed by a contemporary analysis of national federations.

Case Study: Retired Lieutenant General Tauqir Zia and the PCB

The elevation of retired Lieutenant General Tauqir Zia to the chairmanship of the PCB in 1999 formally encapsulated the fusion of military authority with

the administration of cricket in the country. Installed immediately after General Musharraf's coup, Zia, who was a trusted confidant of the new ruler, was tasked with overseeing cricket because of its centrality to public sentiment and political symbolism. Previously, Zia held the position of Director General of Military Operations during the 1999 Kargil border conflict with India. At the time of Musharraf's coup against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on October 12, 1999, Zia was posted as Corps Commander Mangla, a role regarded as one of the most influential commands in the Pakistan Army after that of Corps Commander Rawalpindi. Numerous political gurus argued that for not opposing Musharraf's coup and supporting the dictatorial regime, he was awarded the position at the PCB, despite having no real qualifications to run this institute. His four-year tenure, the second longest in the board's history at that time, unfolded under conditions of unchecked authority, where accountability mechanisms were conspicuously absent. By his own admission, his continuation after Pakistan's dismal 2003 Cricket World Cup performance was ill-judged ("PCB chairman," 2003), yet his presence at the helm underscored how cricket governance was co-opted into the consolidation of Musharraf's broader authoritarian agenda, rendering the sport an extension of military dominance in civic life.

Zia's leadership of the PCB is chiefly recalled for its controversies, which often eclipsed his reformist agenda, most prominently linked to the inclusion of his son, Junaid Zia, on the national team. Junaid was selected for Pakistan's 2003 ODI series against Bangladesh, despite modest domestic achievements and a bowling action questioned by the ICC. Fast-tracked into the national team, Zia's son played only four matches, leaving no meaningful impact, yet his inclusion undermined the credibility of selection processes. Even former Pakistani cricketer Aamir Sohail, a vocal advocate of meritocracy, faced criticism for endorsing Junaid's place, reflecting how institutional pressures compromised decision-making.

Critics described Zia's tenure at the PCB as "the darkest chapter" in Pakistan's cricket history ("PCB chairman," 2003). He was castigated by various cricket and media experts for neglecting grassroots development and prioritizing allegiance to the Musharraf regime, thereby reinforcing the perception that cricket was subordinated to authoritarian imperatives rather than national sporting progress. The team's erratic performances, including embarrassing defeats, combined with repeated changes in captains and coaches, underscored the absence of coherent management and institutional stability.

Critics further charged him with consolidating authority within the chairman's office, weakening oversight mechanisms, and cultivating a culture of limited accountability, while subsequent boards and financial audits denounced his era for financial mismanagement and irregularities ("Special audit," 2009; "Butt accuses," 2009). The episode of the PCB chairman helping

his son join the national team became a recurring reference point in discussions on institutional responsibility, nepotism, favoritism, and compromised meritocratic principles in Pakistan cricket, while also deepening public skepticism about military control over civilian spheres. More broadly, it symbolized the logic of Pakistani praetorianism, where military intrusion fostered inefficiency, mistrust, and corruption.

Although Zia launched initiatives such as Vision 2005 to restructure and enhance cricket in Pakistan, many regarded these projects as unfulfilled promises (ESPN, 2003) resulting in a legacy defined more by disputes and administrative excesses than by enduring development. Zia's resignation in 2003 followed a series of controversies but did little to halt the entrenched pattern of military influence within the PCB. Under Musharraf, subsequent appointments to the chairmanship continued to privilege political allegiance over cricketing acumen, thereby reflecting the durability of praetorian structures in sport.

Case Study: Retired Lieutenant General Syed Arif Hasan: Dictatorial Rule and the POA

President Pervez Musharraf appointed retired Lieutenant General Syed Arif Hasan as chairman of the Pakistan Sports Trust while he was simultaneously elected President of the POA and later the vice president of the Olympic Council of Asia, highlighting the ease with which Pakistani state institutions were appropriated by military elites (Al Jazeera, 2008; Zuberi, 2008). Hasan led the POA for nearly two decades, beginning in 2004 and ending with his retirement in 2024 (Lakhani, 2023). While in charge, he introduced hierarchical command norms into the POA, a sporting domain that was ostensibly meant to remain athlete-centered and autonomous. Although the POA under his leadership formally upheld the Olympic Charter's principle of independence from government interference, in reality, it was embedded in state patronage networks, embroiled in recurring disputes with the PSB, and reflective of the broader civil–military balance that shapes Pakistan's institutional landscape.

Furthermore, Hasan's departure in early 2024 coincided with the Federal Investigation Agency's launch of an inquiry into billions of rupees in financial irregularities at both the POA and PSB ("FIA launches probe," 2024). This investigation by the premier anti-corruption institute of Pakistan further cast a shadow over his legacy and reinforced concerns that Pakistan's sport governance remained entangled in opaque financial practices under military control. The governance model consolidated under Hasan was characterized by centralization of authority, personal incumbency, and persistent institutional disputes (Ali, 2014). While the POA under his leadership defended its autonomy on the grounds of Olympic norms that prohibit state interference

in National Olympic Committee affairs, the PSB and successive governments sought to justify intervention through appeals to accountability, funding oversight, and national interest. This recurring conflict produced parallel election claims, legal petitions, and rival factions, often drawing the attention of the IOC in Lausanne. The IOC's repeated reminders that political interference could jeopardize Pakistan's standing in the Olympic Movement underscored the fragility of the country's compliance with international governance standards. Although Pakistan narrowly avoided suspension many times, the pattern of IOC caution enhanced Hasan's legitimacy as the internationally recognized head of the POA. At the same time, this external validation reinforced a leadership style resistant to turnover and entrenched the militarized logic of continuity that shaped his presidency.

It is significant that during Hasan's two decades of leadership, Pakistan failed to win a single Olympic medal. During his presidency, formal compliance with global sporting norms coexisted with the deeper militarization of domestic governance. By ensuring uninterrupted participation in the Olympics and Asian Games, the POA projected an image of stability even as national sport development remained stagnant. This outward continuity performed a sports-washing function, preserving Pakistan's international visibility while concealing fragile athlete pipelines, politicized governance, and organizational decline at home. At the regional level, multi-sport events hosted or negotiated under his tenure further reinforced narratives of state competence and order. In this way, Hasan's leadership aligned the country's sport governance with the broader soft power strategies characteristic of the military-led state.

Overall, Hasan's prolonged, military-rooted presidency cultivated a system where loyalty and continuity were rewarded more than reform-oriented policies toward athletes. Instead of fostering collaborative planning, the POA's structural relationship with the PSB and various federal ministries repeatedly degenerated into jurisdictional disputes, leaving national federations with conflicting signals about funding, selection, and oversight. The praetorian—or corrupt, influential military power—imprint was also visible in public discourse, where athletes, coaches, and journalists criticized the opaque decision-making, the absence of performance metrics, and the marginalization of athlete voices in governance. The overall outcome was a paradox: Pakistan retained international visibility while its domestic sporting system stagnated.

Analytically, we argue that Hasan's leadership illustrates four distinct dimensions of praetorian influence. First, institutional capture is clear in the origins of his presidency, as a retired general assumed control of the POA in a military-led political environment and retained power for nearly two decades. Second, legitimacy was reinforced indirectly, since uninterrupted participation in the Olympics and Asian Games symbolized national continuity and prestige amid political turbulence (Bourdieu, 1991; Gramsci, 1971). Third, sportswashing emerged at the systemic level: adherence to IOC language on autonomy and regular appearances abroad obscured a domestic landscape

marked by politicization and fragile performance pipelines. Finally, contestation surfaced repeatedly through media debates, legal disputes over recognition, and athlete critiques that cast the POA as detached from development realities. Still, it would be simplistic to interpret Hasan's tenure as wholly negative. In a context defined by scarce resources and political volatility, he maintained Pakistan's international representation and managed relations with the IOC through turbulent cycles. However, the long-term pattern remains consistent with praetorian governance: stability was preserved through militarized incumbency rather than structural reform, evidence-based performance planning, or athlete-centered empowerment.

Contemporary View

To more systematically document the entanglement of Pakistan's NSFs and military authorities, we analyzed data from the POA's official portal and individual federation websites to map current military leadership. The appointment of current and retired military officers to 16 senior positions in 11 of Pakistan's 41 sports federations in Table 10.1 illustrates a visible form of militarization within the country's governance structures, even after 17 years of democratically elected heads of state. From archery to winter sports, leadership is entrusted not to professional athletes or trained sport administrators but to senior figures of the armed forces or their close allies. The problem is so enduring that in 2025, the PSB found leaders in baseball, taekwondo, judo, sailing, and karate federations overstayed their term limits in violation of the 2005 National Sports Policy (Abbasi, 2025). While there is no official record of the maximum number of NSFs that were led by military appointees, there is some evidence that military influence is slowly waning. Specifically, the major federations of cricket, hockey, and football no longer have military leadership. Yet the enduring PCB training camps at the Army School of Physical Training and the team engaging in military salutes underscore the extent to which the culture of cricket has been appropriated by the military in a format that is unlikely to decrease over time. This effect, termed "coercive patriotism" by Jenkins (2013), was also observed in the increased and ongoing militaristic rituals in American professional sport after 9/11 (Butterworth, 2022).

The entrenchment of militarized leadership in NSFs demonstrates how authoritarian practices have gradually become institutionalized. Mapping these arrangements makes visible the enduring role of the armed forces within the civilian sports bodies of Pakistan. Secondary sources, including scholarly works and investigative news reporting, point to chronic issues of financial mismanagement, opacity, and patronage politics that have stunted Pakistan's pursuit of sporting excellence (Al Jazeera, 2008; Ali, 2014; Khan, 2014; Lakhani, 2023; Paracha, 2015; Salahuddin, 1999; Siddiq, 2007). In the next section, we link institutional analysis with broader theoretical concepts to develop a framework that integrates militarized sports infrastructure.

Table 10.1 Current and Retired Military Officers in Leadership Roles in Pakistan's Sports Federations as of 2025

<i>Sport Federation</i>	<i>Military Officer</i>	<i>Appointment</i>
Archery Federation of Pakistan	Retired Army Colonel Sadaf Akram	President
Pakistan Basketball Federation	Retired Army Brigadier Iftikhar Mansoor	President
Pakistan Boxing Federation	Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Nasir Ijaz Tung	President
Pakistan Boxing Federation	Retired Army Major Irfan Younis	Secretary General
Pakistan Golf Federation	Retired Army Lieutenant General Qazi Muhammad Ikram	President
Pakistan Golf Federation	Retired Army Brigadier Sajid Akram	Secretary
Pakistan Sailing Federation	Navy Rear Admiral Muhammad Saleem	President
Pakistan Sailing Federation	Navy Commander Muhammad Akram Tariq	Secretary General
Pakistan Swimming Federation	Retired Army Major Majid Waseem	Chairman and CEO
Pakistan Swimming Federation	Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Ali Khan	Secretary General
Pakistan Squash Federation	Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmad Babar Sidhu	President
Pakistan Taekwondo Federation	Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Waseem Ahmad	President
Pakistan Tennis Federation	Army Lieutenant Colonel Ziauddin Tufail	Secretary General
National Rifle Association of Pakistan	Retired Admiral and Ex-Chief of Naval Staff Zafar Mahmood Abbasi	President
Winter Sports Federation of Pakistan	Air Force Air Marshal Zahid Mahmood	President
Winter Sports Federation of Pakistan	Air Force Air Commodore Ashar Jamil	Secretary General

A New Theoretical Framework: Militarized Sports Praxis (MSP)

Based on the discussion above, we present a new theoretical framework, MSP, to explain the role of sport within praetorian states, such as Pakistan (see Figure 10.2). Existing approaches, such as Nye's (2004) concept of soft power and Fruh et al.'s (2022) and Skey's (2022) work on sportswashing, have

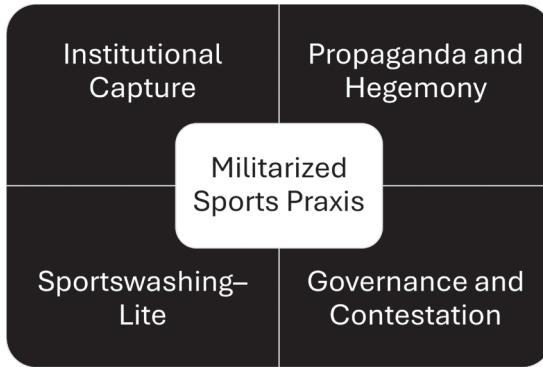


Figure 10.2 The theoretical framework of Militarized Sports Praxis (MSP).

provided useful insights, yet both are limited when applied to contexts like Pakistan. Soft power explains the ability of states to attract and persuade, but it can often underplay the coercive infrastructures and command logics through which the military embeds itself in sport. Sportswashing, in turn, has been largely theorized with reference to resource-rich monarchies, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where global mega-events are staged to launder reputations. By contrast, Pakistan is a middle- to low-income, politically unstable state where sport is mobilized less through expensive spectacles and more through symbolic, episodic performances. MSP therefore extends the previous literature on soft power and sportswashing by placing the praetorian condition at its center, emphasizing how military dominance over political, cultural, and social life transforms sport into a praxis of governance rather than a sphere of autonomous culture.

At its core, MSP conceives elite sport governance as a *field* of power in Bourdieu's (1991) sense, structured by the military's values of hierarchy, loyalty, and discipline. In this *field*, victories and defeats are never simply athletic outcomes; they are reinterpreted as metaphors for the strength or weakness of the regime. By consistently reframing sport as a surrogate battlefield, militaries turn arenas of leisure into spaces of legitimacy production. Pakistan illustrates this dynamic vividly. Victories in hockey or cricket have routinely been celebrated as proof of national vitality under military stewardship, while defeats are politicized as betrayals of the homeland (AFP, 2023; Paracha, 2024). In this sense, sport is tightly woven into the fabric of authoritarian governance.

The framework of MSP unfolds along four interrelated dimensions. The first is *institutional capture*, in which militaries insert retired or serving officers into the leadership of sport federations, boards, and Olympic committees. This practice embeds command logic within organizations that should otherwise be athlete-centered, privileging loyalty and hierarchy over professionalism.

The repeated leadership of the PCB and POA by generals and air marshals exemplifies this pattern in Pakistan.

The second dimension, *propaganda and hegemony*, draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural leadership to show how sporting victories are appropriated by regimes as endorsements of authoritarian rule. State-controlled broadcasters like PTV routinely militarized the commentary of cricket matches, particularly against India, equating them with symbolic battles. Leaders who gained control through military coups, such as Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf, capitalized on such moments to align athletic pride with regime legitimacy.

The third dimension, *sportswashing-lite*, adapts the existing concept of sportswashing to resource-constrained settings. Unlike Gulf monarchies that rely on costly mega-events, Pakistan's military rulers have staged more episodic and symbolic performances, such as the cricket diplomacy of Zia-ul-Haq in Jaipur in 1987 and Musharraf in India–Pakistan matches in 2005. These low-cost interventions were designed to project images of peace and pragmatism at moments of crisis, temporarily laundering authoritarian reputations in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.

The final dimension is affective *governance and contestation*, which emphasizes how militaries attempt to regulate emotions, discipline bodies, and manage collective sentiments through sport. Army-run training camps for cricketers, victory celebrations featuring press-up salutes, and the prominent presence of generals at matches are clear attempts to normalize military authority in everyday culture. However, this strategy also invites resistance: athletes, journalists, and fans frequently criticize the inefficiency, corruption, and exclusionary practices of military-led sport governance. Drawing on Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, MSP highlights how regimes seek to govern not only institutions but also the affective attachments of citizens, even though such governance remains fragile and contested.

By integrating these dimensions, MSP makes several theoretical contributions. Our framework extends Nye's (2004) account of soft power by embedding attraction within coercive institutional structures and command hierarchies. MSP refines the concept of sportswashing by theorizing forms of image management that are episodic, symbolic, and resource-lite rather than dependent on mega-events. We also bridge Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital and Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, showing how sport functions as both a site of authoritarian legitimation and a space of popular negotiation. In doing so, MSP treats sport governance, athlete training, and media performances as practical arenas where military logics are reproduced.

Although grounded in Pakistan's praetorian experience, MSP has broader comparative utility. Latin American juntas, postcolonial African regimes, and Middle Eastern military-led states all provide evidence of sport being deployed to bolster military legitimacy, demonstrating the transportability of the

framework. Beyond its analytical value, MSP also carries normative implications. If sport is systematically militarized, then democratizing sport governance becomes part of the broader struggle for democratization itself. Reforms such as athlete representation in federations, the enforcement of civilian oversight, financial transparency, and independent media coverage are not merely technical improvements; they are essential steps toward loosening the grip of praetorian militarism over cultural life. In this way, we try to reframe sport in this chapter as a key site where authoritarian logic can either be reinforced or dismantled, highlighting its significance for both political sociology and democratic practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that sport in Pakistan is neither an apolitical leisure sphere nor a peripheral cultural pastime; national sport is a constitutive site of governance through which praetorian power is produced, displayed, and normalized. Tracing a historical arc from Ayub Khan to Pervez Musharraf and into the present hybrid order, we discussed how athletic institutions and leadership appointments have been routinely folded into projects of authoritarian legitimacy. Cricket and field hockey, in particular, have functioned as symbolic battlegrounds. This pattern is not episodic but systemic, sustained by organizational capture of NSFs and reinforced by state-mediated scripts that bind sporting pride to Pakistani regime authority. The result of military command displacing athlete-centered governance and long-term development planning has been a paradox of visibility without vitality: Pakistan has maintained international presence and spectacle, yet struggled to convert participation into sustainable performance pipelines, transparent institutions, or athlete welfare.

Theoretically, we advanced MSP to synthesize and extend existing lenses of soft power and sportswashing to explain how military authority is reproduced and entrenched. While anchored in Pakistan, the framework travels to other contexts where militaries straddle politics and culture to offer testable propositions and comparative leverage beyond petro-mega-event paradigms.

Normatively, our analysis implies that sport reform is democratic reform. If federations remain extensions of the coercive state, technical fixes alone will not suffice. Meaningful change requires insulating sport from military logic: term limits and conflict-of-interest rules that bar serving officers from leadership; transparent selection and procurement; independent audits; protected athlete representation with voting power; and plural, nonpartisan media environments that decouple commentary from propaganda. These measures are not merely managerial; they are constitutional for the sporting field.

Finally, we acknowledge limits and avenues for future research. Better data is needed on budget flows, selection criteria, athlete pathways, and media effects to adjudicate causality between militarized governance and

performance outcomes. Comparative designs across South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America can refine the scope conditions under which sportswashing-lite succeeds or fails, and mixed-method studies can also help in tracing how publics negotiate pride and protest in real time. By placing Pakistan's experience within a broader repertoire of authoritarian strategies, this chapter reframes sport as a consequential arena of power, one in which democratization can be stalled or, with institutional redesign and civic pressure, meaningfully advanced.

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South Asian Muslim Men, Masculinity, and Sport

Faith, Flesh, and the Reconstitution of Masculinity

Sporting practices among South Asian Muslim men offer a distinctive context for analyzing how faith, physicality, and modernity mesh with everyday cultural life (see Alter, 1992; Farooq & Parker, 2009; Snape & Binks, 2008). As previously discussed, in the Western world, South Asian athletes from a Muslim background continue to face various forms of societal oppression (e.g., Orientalism; Hussain, 2021b; Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2025). Burdsey (2015), for example, argued that British Asian male athletes, such as renowned cricketer Moeen Ali, are made sociopolitically “legible” within the racialized landscape of the British state. The author argued that their visibility and acceptance in sport are shaped by biopolitical control, contested forms of belonging, and pressures to conform to dominant norms of citizenship and representation (Burdsey, 2015). Additionally, throughout this book project and earlier scholarly work, it has become evident that exploring the athletic worlds of Pakistani and Afghan men unveils a terrain of both ideological and corporeal contestation in which manhood, Islamic beliefs, neo-liberal order, and modern identity are persistently reworked. These findings match the growing scholarly work on Global South athletes, masculinity, and sport (Besnier et al., 2018; Biyanwila, 2018; Henne & Pape, 2018; Hussain, 2021a). Thus, within South and Central Asia, sport should not be understood as a neutral domain of leisure or entertainment but as a charged social space in which Islamic ethical principles, postcolonial structures, and global hierarchies of gendered power converge (De, 2013; Hussain et al., 2023; Mani & Krishnamurthy, 2021).

Previously, the extant critical scholarship on masculinity within sport has been widely shaped by the theoretical legacy of Connell’s (1987, 1995, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity (English, 2017; Hussain et al., 2025; Ncube & Chawana, 2018; Pringle, 2005), which elucidates the hierarchical ordering of gendered power relations through embodied and institutional practices. However, because hegemonic masculinity’s universalist orientation is anchored in Western, secular, and liberal epistemic traditions, it sometimes

fails to fully capture male subjectivities (Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Peletz, 2021). In particular, Muslim male subjectivities are constantly forged at the intersection of faith, colonial afterlives, market-driven modernity, Orientalist representations, and uneven global power (Dunne & Crossouard, 2020; Husain, 2021c), which need to be deciphered from a more regional or theology-based framework. For instance, among South Asian Muslim communities, masculinity is constituted not merely through hierarchical relations with others but sometimes through moral responsibility before God (*taqwa*), the cultivation of restraint (*sabr*), and the pursuit of spiritual and ethical refinement (*ihsan*; Maidugu et al., 2024; Nafisah et al., 2025). In this sense, the sporting body functions not simply as a performative or resistant entity but as an ethical corpus animated by spiritual aspirations.

Building upon the ethnographic and empirical discussions developed earlier in this book, the purpose of this chapter is to situate the athletic experiences of Afghan and Pakistani male athletes within the converging trajectories of faith, nationalism, and migration across borders. We previously found that in Islamabad-based fieldwork (Chapter 6), sport emerged as a threshold civic domain through which displaced Afghan youth enacted belonging and reassembled communal fragments within an urban order that systematically excluded them. In the Gulf, migrant athletes navigated ambivalent social terrains (Chapter 7), celebrated as bearers of cultural vitality while simultaneously being effaced by the racial logics of the *kafala* regime. Within Western settings, Muslim athletic bodies became objects of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist scrutiny, caught between admiration and anxiety (Chapter 8). Together, these cases illustrate a transnational matrix of masculine formation shaped by the knotted flows of labor migration, religious ethics, and sport. This chapter, therefore, transitions from descriptive analysis to theoretical articulation, aiming to capture the structural unity that binds these seemingly disparate life worlds. The analysis developed here begins from the premise that South Asian Muslim masculinity in sport is organized around a generative paradox: the simultaneous demand to embody piety and power. Within South Asian patriarchal contexts, dominant ideals of manhood extol physical strength, endurance, and assertive authority, traits historically tied to both colonial disciplines of the body and nationalist visions of virility (Chattopadhyay, 2011; Chowdhry, 2013). However, Islamic ethical frameworks prize humility, modesty, and moral self-regulation as the true marks of virtuous masculinity (Khalil, 2020; Zargar, 2020). Muslim athletes from Pakistan and Afghanistan who inhabit this dual horizon are expected to simultaneously perform excellence and restraint, visibility and humility, competition and submission. Rather than a contradiction, this tension constitutes a dynamic field of negotiation through which new forms of Muslim masculine subjectivity emerge.

To clarify this tension, we advance two linked concepts. First, Authentic Piety names the embodied ways Muslim athletes materialize faith within

competitive, often secular arenas, through practices like fasting, post-victory *sujud* (the Islamic act of prostration), and ethical refusals that bind discipline to devotion. Second, Islamic Embodied Sovereignty captures how those same bodies assert moral self-rule under regimes that would commodify, secularize, or erase religious subjectivity. Read together, these lenses let us analyze Pakistan's largely state-institutionalized piety and Afghanistan's resilient, defensive piety under coercion, while also tracking how athletes negotiate Western Islamophobia and intra-community moral policing. We therefore approach sport as a post-secular moral economy, not mere leisure: a site where the masculine self is continually forged through synchronized demands to be powerful and pious, visible and modest, competitive and submissive. The result is neither surrender to hegemonic masculinity nor retreat into private devotion but an evolving ethical masculinity grounded in accountability before Allah. In the upcoming section, we will discuss the theoretical foundations that connect hegemonic masculinity, Global South perspectives, and Islamic conceptions of manhood within sporting contexts. This will help in paving the way to conceptualize Pakistani and Afghan athletes' masculine ideology.

Theoretical Constellations: From Connell to Qur'an

In the realms of sociology of sport and sport management, numerous scholars (e.g., Grindstaff & West, 2011; Sartore & Cunningham, 2014; Skirbekk et al., 2025) have employed Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity to conceptualize gender as a dynamic configuration of power relations sustained through social practice. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was initially inspired by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (Bates, 1975) and later applied to gender by Carrigan et al. (1985). Connell (1987, 1995, 2005) underscored that hegemonic masculinity represents the culturally exalted ideal at any historical moment. Thereby, this is a standard masculinity which is embodied not by the majority of men but often by a privileged minority (Hussain et al., 2025; Skirbekk et al., 2025). Hence, this framework is typically associated with heterosexual, White, and Western men, who are associated with aggression and the capacity for violence (Hussain et al., 2025; Skirbekk et al., 2025).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later refined this framework by emphasizing that hegemonic masculinity should be understood not merely as a set of expectations or an identity but as a pattern of social practice (e.g., behaviors and cultural norms that secure men's dominance over women; Skirbekk et al., 2025). Other masculinities are measured against this idealized standard, making hegemonic masculinity a normative reference point that all men must negotiate in relation to (Skirbekk et al., 2025). At the ideological level, this concept legitimizes gender inequality globally (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2024). Men who do not actively enforce patriarchal power yet still

benefit from it are described as embodying complicit masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The power of hegemony lies precisely here: it does not rely solely on coercion but is sustained through cultural consent, institutional reinforcement, and social persuasion.

Furthermore, Connell (2005) emphasized that masculinities are not fixed traits but are shaped across social contexts. Hence, masculinity emerges through personal histories, relationships, situational demands, and wider structural conditions, including national cultures. Consequently, masculinities are always arranged within hierarchies of power (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Tjøndal et al., 2023). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) observe that sport often institutionalizes these hierarchies of power. Thus, sport serves as a symbolic arena where male dominance is rehearsed and reaffirmed (Bryson, 1987; Segrave et al., 2006). Furthermore, the glorification of physical superiority in sport has even been mobilized as a reactionary discourse against feminism, reinforcing the irrational argument that men are “naturally” suited to leadership.

Over the past two decades, scholars of gender in the Global South have sought to provincialize hegemonic masculinity by accentuating the heterogeneity of masculine formations outside the Euro-American context (Hussain & Cunningham, 2021; Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2014). This line of critique emphasizes that masculinity cannot be understood through Western frameworks alone, as it is shaped by intersecting forces such as race, religion, class, and the afterlives of colonial rule, resulting in complex and sometimes contradictory masculine expressions (Thangaraj, 2022). For example, among numerous South Asian Muslim men, ideals of strength and virility (rooted in colonial histories of militarized discipline) exist alongside Islamic ethical expectations of piety, restraint, and humility (Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2025; Thangaraj, 2022). Masculinity in this context is thus not a uniform assertion of power but an ongoing negotiation between competing moral and social frameworks: patriarchal authority, colonial discipline, and spiritual obligation.

Previous literature highlighted that Global South masculinities often embody what could be termed as situated hegemonies: localized articulations of manhood embedded within specific moral economies and sociohistorical structures (Morrell et al., 2012; Thangaraj & Inhorn, 2024). In Pakistani and Afghan contexts, these localized hegemonic masculinities are further shaped by cultural codes of *izzat* (honor), *biradari* (kinship solidarity), and *ghairat* (male protectiveness and moral guardianship). However, unlike the secular masculinities of Western sport, these cultural codes are not independent of religious doctrine. Instead, Islamic virtue ethics infuses them with theological legitimacy. This helps situate masculine virtue within a cosmology of accountability before Allah. To understand the Muslim male athlete's identity, therefore, requires an analytical expansion that bridges Connell's sociological framework with theological anthropology.

Islamic Conceptions of Masculinity

Islamic ethical and textual traditions present an alternative genealogy of masculinity that resists reduction to Western theoretical paradigms. Rather than equating manhood with dominance, the Qur'an frames masculinity in terms of *qawwamun*, a moral responsibility grounded in justice, compassion, and disciplined self-control (Al-Qur'an 4:34, trans. A. Ali, 2001). Although it is often interpreted as a responsibility to protect and maintain (often of women), the Prophet Muhammad's examples widely cited in Hadith literature reinforce a broader ethic by modeling humility, emotional openness, and unwavering moral conduct (De Soudy, 2014). Moreover, De Soudy (2014) in their book argued that rigid and exclusionary interpretations of Islamic masculinity, often portrayed in the popular discourse, have been drawn from selective Qur'anic readings, historical precedents, and social expectations. This has generated a crisis within Muslim communities by marginalizing men who reject narrow gender norms. Through an examination of Qur'anic figures and South Asian Islamic history, De Soudy (2014) demonstrated that Islamic masculinity has always been diverse and contested. The author contends that efforts to enforce a fixed model of manhood misuse both religious authority and gender power, overlooking the profoundly personal nature of the human relationship with God, which cannot be reduced to rigid social roles. Furthermore, contemporary scholars have now repeatedly claimed that Islamic masculinities are historically diverse, encompassing traditions of spiritual devotion, warrior ethics, and nurturing paternal care (Ghannam, 2013; Inhorn, 2012). Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of scholarship in conceptualizing Islamic masculinity in sporting realms.

However, when applied to contemporary sport, Islamic moral principles can acquire fresh relevance, as athletic training echoes the Qur'anic notion of *jihad al-nafs*, the inner struggle for ethical refinement. The sports field becomes, therefore, a site of disciplined self-cultivation where endurance and perseverance serve simultaneously as athletic goals and acts of spiritual devotion, aligning with the Islamic ideal of *'amal sālīh* (righteous action) performed through the body. Viewing sport through this theological lens challenges purely sociological explanations of Muslim masculinity by emphasizing its ontological grounding: the self is understood not only as a physical being but also as morally accountable to God (Allah). This perspective unsettles secular divides between sacred and profane, revealing sport as a space in which Islamic faith and modern athletic practice can coexist. Moreover, they can also shape each other mutually.

Moving Toward a Post-Secular Framework

A post-secular theoretical stance is warranted to integrate the strands of hegemonic masculinity, Global South critique of Western masculinity, understanding embodiment, and Islamic moral philosophy (see Gorski et al., 2012;

Habermas, 2008; Hussain, 2021c). This post-secular framework can aid in acknowledging that religious belief remains a potent force in shaping modern identities, rather than a residual or regressive feature of premodernity. Within this perspective, the Muslim athlete's body represents a form of post-secular agency: a corporeal negotiation between divine submission and neoliberal individualism (Hussain, 2021c).

By reconceptualizing sport as a moral economy rather than a purely competitive enterprise, we posit that South Asian Muslim masculinities manifest a distinctive synthesis of spiritual and material rationalities. The athlete's pursuit of victory parallels, without replacing, the quest for divine approval, revealing a form of masculinity grounded not in domination but in ongoing moral effort. This dual commitment unsettles secular liberal notions that equate freedom with individual autonomy as well as conservative Islamic interpretations that confine manhood to rigid patriarchy. Instead, we argue that masculinity appears more often as a continuous ethical endeavor: a lifelong process of aligning bodily discipline with a higher spiritual purpose.

From Connell's analysis of hegemony to Qur'anic injunctions on moral responsibility, the conceptual journey of this chapter underscores the necessity of pluralizing the theoretical vocabulary of masculinity studies. South Asian Muslim men's participation in sport illustrates that masculinity is not solely a sociopolitical construct but also a theological practice. By situating the athletic bodies at the intersection of secular and sacred discourses, we challenge the epistemic dominance of Western gender theory. Moreover, we endeavor to open new pathways for theorizing faith-inflected masculinities within the Global South. The subsequent sections apply the above notions to examine how Pakistani and Afghan athletes embody Authentic Piety and ethical masculinity across settings ranging from refugee camps to global competitions. In doing so, the chapter proposes an alternative understanding of Muslim manhood, one in which the relationship between faith, the body, and power is not a contradiction to be resolved but a foundational element of masculine identity.

Pakistani and Afghan Athletes: Embodiment of Authentic Piety and Ethical Masculinity

The extant literature hints at treating Muslim bodies as a homogenized site upon which faith, masculinity, nationalism, and migration converge (Allouache, 2023; Hussain & Cunningham, 2023). Nevertheless, our work highlights that within their shared religious and cultural universe, Pakistani and Afghan athletes embody Authentic Piety and ethical masculinity in distinctly different ways, shaped by state politics, Taliban influence, class inequality, sectarian variation, and uneven global visibility. This section examines those differences by drawing from narrative accounts and ethnographic observations (Chapter 6) about athletes from both nations. Using a postcolonial

phenomenological perspective (Said, 1978), we unveil how Muslim athletes from Pakistan and Afghanistan execute masculinity not merely to compete but to authenticate moral worth, negotiate belonging, and sometimes confront global stigmas.

The Body as Worship: Discipline as Ethical Praxis

For numerous Pakistani and Afghan athletes, sporting life is framed through Islamic cosmology, meaning sport is not considered a standalone phenomenon but as *ibadah* (devotional practice) for some. This connection stems from Islamic virtue ethics in which disciplined bodily conduct is seen as a path toward moral refinement (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). For instance, visible Islamization within the Pakistan national cricket team became especially prominent after 2003, during Inzamam-ul-Haq's captaincy, when regular team prayers and public expressions of Islamic identity increasingly entered team culture. He even brought contentious religious clerics into team gatherings, contributing to the rise of an intensely Islamist culture within the national team (Paul, 2023). Although numerous commentators and sport gurus criticized this approach (Paul, 2023; Shahid, 2016), some athletes defended Inzamam's position of using religion to promote discipline among the team. The first author, while working with orphan students in Punjab, Pakistan, at a *madrasa* (religious school that often teaches the Qur'an, Islamic law, and theology), also noted that some athletes believed sport training to be a means of *ibadah* (devotional practice).

This aligns with Bourdieu's (1990) notion of *habitus* as an internalized system that guides embodied practice, yet it moves further by grounding such practice in an explicitly theological purpose. Afghan refugee athletes in Islamabad articulated a similar view but with a deeper undertone of existential struggle. For instance, one Afghan refugee athlete (Phushun in Islamabad) highlighted that sport is a continuous site of "disciplining bodies against worldly desires," which might help refugees in overcoming thoughts of financial inequality.

The Islamic moral philosophy largely has framed discipline (*tahdīb*) as a unified bodily and spiritual practice directed toward moral purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). Classical scholars like Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE) emphasized that virtue is not innate but acquired through disciplined repetition, reflection, and embodied struggle (al-Ghazālī, 2000). Within this moral tradition, physical training parallels spiritual asceticism, functioning as a microcosm of the ethical struggle of *mujāhada al-nafs*, the effort to overcome the ego. As discussed previously, the lived experiences of Pakistani and Afghan athletes reveal this fusion of faith and discipline: whether by fasting during Ramadan, rejecting sponsorship from non-halal entities (such as gambling organizations), or upholding modest conduct under public scrutiny, these men sometimes frame athletic rigor as a form of *ibadah* (worship) where intention

(*niyyah*) gives spiritual meaning to physical exertion. In this way, sport becomes a site of moral education, where virtue is not just taught but cultivated through embodied practices.

State and Faith: Institutionalized Masculinity versus Resilient Masculinity

In the extant literature, there remains a scarcity of research concerning how states can institutionalize masculinity. We argue that historically, the Pakistani state has institutionalized Islamic masculinity in sport through national religious–political narratives. From cricket academies to military sport schools, athletes are trained to see themselves as representatives of the *ummah* (the Muslim collective identity) and Islam against global disrespect. Masculinity, therefore, is framed as honorable guardianship (*qawwamun*) rooted in courage and discipline but mediated through state patriotism.

During the late 1990s and 2000s, for example, the PCB, operating under state oversight, allowed Tablighi Jamaat preachers (conservative missionaries with historical ties to the Deobandi movement) into national training camps, effectively turning elite sport into a venue for Islamic instruction. As mentioned above, under captains like Inzamam-ul-Haq, team prayer sessions and religious sermons became routine, with preachers even traveling with the squad on international tours to England in 2004 and 2006. Similarly, at a national training camp held at the National Stadium in 2013, former Pakistani cricketer Saeed Anwar and ex-pop icon Junaid Jamshed addressed the team with a religious sermon. After the sermon, talking to the press, former cricketer Saeed Anwar said,

The idea of talking to the players was to tell them how important it is as Muslims for us to follow the teachings of Islam. I told them they can improve as human beings and become better players if they follow the principles of Islam in their life.

(The Times of India, 2013)

This Islamization of sporting culture in Pakistan is not incidental but part of a larger project of religious nationalism, in which athletic achievement is framed as a sign of divine favor. After Pakistan's 2021 T20 World Cup win against India, for instance, federal ministers celebrated the win as a "victory of Islam," linking sport to Islamic identity and geopolitical pride (India Today, 2021). State-sponsored competitions such as the National Games open with Qur'an recitations, further institutionalizing Islamic legitimacy within national sport. These examples illustrate that in Pakistan, religion is not just present in sport; it is structurally embedded. Faith functions as an instrument of moral governance, national identity, and masculine formation, enabling the state to define ideal Muslim manhood as publicly pious, nationally aligned,

and spiritually disciplined, while using athletes as living representations of Islamic modernity.

Afghanistan, on the other hand, presents a stark counterpoint to Pakistan: whereas Pakistani sport reflects a state-directed model of Islamic masculinity, Afghan sporting masculinity emerges from abandonment, coercion, and survival amid state collapse and protracted war. The Taliban cynically parade themselves as guardians of Islam while enforcing a brutal, militarized distortion of religion that twists the Qur'an into a tool of intimidation and control. There are numerous examples of their barbaric rules, in the present and past, including banning goal celebrations in football (soccer), barring players without beards from competing, dragging athletes into compulsory indoctrination sessions, and carrying out public executions in sport stadiums. Meanwhile, these atrocities are falsely justified by the Taliban as Sharia. This is not Islam by any measure; it is the ruthless exploitation of Islamic language and symbols to impose terror, crush dissent, and secure absolute obedience. Hence, currently, in Afghanistan, sport is being manipulated as a tool of ideological control rather than national development, with male athletes pressured into conformity. At the same time, women are erased from public sporting life altogether. Unlike Pakistani athletes who gain recognition (social capital) through public displays of piety, Afghan athletes practice a form of defensive piety, faith as survival rather than performance. Afghan athletes' bodies have become battlegrounds where fear, belief, and dignity are negotiated daily, and their participation in sport becomes a quiet act of resistance against erasure. What emerges is a form of resilient masculinity, not built through dominance or institutional validation but forged in refusal: refusal to surrender faith under tyranny; the refusal to be silenced; and the refusal to disappear despite systemic violence.

The Politics of Moral Visibility: West versus East

Faith, for Muslim athletes, is never a private matter. Across the sporting world, it is constantly watched, measured, and judged. In global sport, every *sajdah* (prostration), every prayer gesture, every utterance of *Alhamdulillah* (Thanks to Allah) is subjected to dual surveillance: Western Islamophobia on one side and community moral policing on the other. In Western sporting culture, Muslim athletes are denied the presumption of neutrality routinely extended to Christian or non-religious athletes. For instance, in the Western world, when a Catholic athlete makes the sign of the cross after scoring in football, it is accepted as a harmless expression of faith. However, when a Muslim athlete performs *sajdah* in gratitude, it is often treated as a political statement or viewed with suspicion as a sign of extremism. Pakistani cricketers like Mohammad Rizwan have been criticized for "bringing religion into sport" ("Playing Religion Card," 2024), even while Western athletes regularly invoke religion without any hesitation.

Within Muslim societies, these athletes face a different burden: they are criticized as insincere if they display piety and denounced as morally compromised if they do not. Whether they pray publicly or choose privacy, their faith is relentlessly scrutinized, forcing them to navigate constant pressure to perform religiosity while guarding against being misunderstood or condemned. For instance, former Pakistan opener Ahmed Shehzad harshly criticized wicketkeeper-batter Mohammad Rizwan by accusing him of hiding behind religious displays to excuse his poor performance in the 2024 T20 World Cup.

If Pakistani athletes face religious scrutiny, Afghan athletes are constantly facing ontological suspicion. For instance, their participation in international sport is rarely acknowledged by the popular media based on talent or achievement; instead, they are reduced to humanitarian labels and portrayed primarily as “refugee athletes,” “survivors,” or “escapees from Taliban oppression.” Moreover, Western media constantly refuse to let them exist outside trauma; they are narrated as grateful refugees, rarely as professionals or thinkers. They must typically demonstrate gratitude, resilience, and politeness to remain palatable to international audiences. Worse still, Afghan Muslim athletes must navigate another layer of fear: faith becomes a survival necessity against brutal Taliban retaliation. Therefore, we argue that, unlike Pakistani athletes, who perform respectable piety to maintain moral legitimacy, Afghan athletes perform defensive piety, a shield against cultural erasure. Their piety might not be expressive, but it is sometimes protective.

The first author’s extensive research highlights that despite constant scrutiny and distortion, Pakistani and Afghan athletes have repeatedly rejected the colonial stereotype that portrays Muslim men as violent, backward, or excessively aggressive. They put forward a different model, an ethical masculinity that challenges colonial logic by grounding manhood not in domination but in service, moral discipline, and communal responsibility. This reimagined masculinity draws from Islamic principles such as *adab* (ethical conduct), *sabr* (steadfast patience), and *amanah* (moral accountability and trust). Moreover, we argue that numerous athletes believe that their bodies carry not only athletic performance but also moral purpose within the *ummah*, a direct refusal of Western masculinity frameworks that equate strength with domination. In their words, “Strength is not arrogance. It is composure” (Farisban, an Afghan refugee athlete in Islamabad, Pakistan).

Conceptualizing Authentic Piety and Islamic Embodied Sovereignty

The discussion thus far demonstrates that numerous Muslim athletes from Pakistan and Afghanistan do not merely “practice” religion; instead, they live faith through flesh, making belief visible through the disciplined body. To frame this dynamic, we propose the concept of Authentic Piety. This concept

can be defined as an embodied expression of faith where religious commitment is made visible through intentional moral actions carried out in public settings in sporting realms. We argue that Authentic Piety is not a superficial or performative performance nor an act of religious propaganda; rather, it is a theologically grounded moral practice through which Muslim athletes might align athletic discipline with divine accountability (*taqwa*). Through gestures like performing *sujūd* after a win, training while fasting in Ramadan, saying *bismillah* ("In the name of Allah," typically spoken before beginning an action) before competition, or refusing sponsorships tied to alcohol or gambling, Muslim athletes make their faith visible and intelligible through embodied action. In contrast to secular readings of performance as symbolic display, we argue that Authentic Piety functions as ethical embodiment. This allows athletes to simultaneously resist assimilationist secularism in sport and secure moral credibility within their religious communities. Thus, Authentic Piety functions simultaneously as an act of worship and a form of resistance, asserting Muslim identity in a sporting landscape that frequently pressures athletes to suppress their faith.

However, the idea of Authentic Piety alone is insufficient to account for the broader political stakes of how Muslim athletes embody their faith. While Authentic Piety clarifies how faith becomes visible in sport, it does not account for why Muslim athletes deploy faith as a form of resistance, dignity, and moral agency under conditions of surveillance, marginalization, and geopolitical pressure. Building on this gap, we theorize the concept of Islamic Embodied Sovereignty. This frame explains how Muslim athletes assert moral self-determination through bodily practice in contexts that attempt to regulate, commodify, or erase their religious subjectivity. Islamic Embodied Sovereignty challenges the Euro-secular assumption that modern sport must remain ideologically neutral, instead demonstrating that Muslim athletes claim sovereignty not through institutional power but through ethical action. This becomes especially evident in the case of Afghan athletes who persist in training, competing, and practicing their faith while playing sport, despite Taliban repression and patronizing Western humanitarian narratives, as well as the case of Pakistani athletes who reject the pressures of secular commodification by refusing to conceal or privatize their religious commitment.

Islamic Embodied Sovereignty, we contend, redirects the study of masculinity by shifting the meaning of agency from domination over others to disciplined moral self-rule before Allah. Rather than equating power with hierarchy and control as in Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity, this concept understands power as spiritual independence. That is, it maintains ethical action even under coercion, surveillance, or marginalization. Therefore, this concept moves beyond secular theories of subjectivity by rooting male agency in a theological horizon of divine accountability. Hence, we frame masculinity as not only a social construction but a moral and ultimately eschatological undertaking. Within this vision, the athlete's body is

transformed into a site of struggle, devotion, and refusal, a place where Afghan and Pakistani Muslim men assert authorship over their existence in defiance of state paternalism, Islamophobic policing, and the exploitative demands of global sports capitalism. We furthermore argue that Islamic Embodied Sovereignty does more than extend the idea of Authentic Piety; it embeds it within decolonial politics of faith, embodiment, and resistance, providing a critical lens for understanding how Muslim men in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and across the diaspora mobilize sport as a domain of ethical sovereignty rather than secular assimilation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we endeavored to highlight how sport is not just about winning or entertainment for many Muslim men belonging to Afghanistan and Pakistan; it can also be a space where faith, the body, masculinity, and modern life come together to shape what it means to be a man. Instead of seeing sport only as performance or entertaining drama, we argued that Pakistani and Afghan athletes move within a moral world. Through visible acts of worship, such as prayers and fasting, and through daily habits of patience, discipline, and responsibility, they build a form of masculinity based on ethics rather than domination. Using ideas from Connell (1995, 2005) but also challenging them with Islamic moral thought and Global South research, we explained how state-led religious nationalism in Pakistan and survival-based piety in Afghanistan shape different, however connected, versions of Muslim manhood. We further argue that numerous Pakistani and Afghan athletes are pushing back against Western Islamophobia, local moral judgment, and the profit-driven nature of global sport. In this world, for many athletes, prayers are not decoration; they are a public claim that faith belongs in life. The athlete's body is not just trained muscle; it carries trust and meaning.

From this understanding, we introduced the idea of Islamic Embodied Sovereignty to explain how Muslim athletes keep moral control over their lives in systems that try to secularize, sell, or silence them. Islamic Embodied Sovereignty defines power not as control over others but as staying true to Allah through patience (*sabr*), ethical conduct (*adab*), and responsibility (*amanah*). This becomes the foundation of our discussion about how we perceive masculinity in Afghan and Pakistani athletes. The implications of our work are both practical and scholarly: policymakers and federations must recognize religious embodiment as a legitimate dimension of athlete welfare and rights. We encourage researchers to move beyond universalist masculinity models to interrogate how theological worlds shape gendered subjectivity. Meanwhile, media institutions must abandon Orientalist frames that flatten Afghan and Pakistani athletes into trauma or tropes. Nevertheless, we argue that state-led masculinity ought to be challenged, while athletes' agency to practice religion should be promoted.

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Conclusion

Where Do We Go From Here?

Returning and Reframing the Central Question

This book idea began with a simple but urgent question: “What does sport mean in places where life is defined by displacement, surveillance, and political fragility?” Through the lives of Afghan and Pakistani athletes, we saw that sport is not just about play or competition. For many communities, sport remains a means of survival, negotiation, and, at times, resistance (Klein, 2018; Schulenkorf et al., 2014; Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, 2020). Our analysis cemented earlier research showing that sport is a social and political institution bound up with power (Carter, 2002; Darnell, 2010; Swain, 2019). Nevertheless, it became clear throughout this book that organized sport does more than mirror global inequality; it vigorously produces, maintains, and imposes it. We saw this brutally exposed in Afghanistan after August 2021, when the Taliban regained power. Sport became a casualty of political collapse. Stadiums shifted from hosting public competitions to once again enforcing public fear. Afghan women athletes, once symbols of hope, were banned, hunted, and forced into exile. Men who remained were compelled into ideological conformity. And yet, global sporting organizations responded not with principled action but with procedural silence disguised as “neutrality.” For instance, the ICC ignored its own bylaws on gender inclusion to preserve revenue-generating matches. Neutrality became complicity.

Across the border in Pakistan, the crisis is different but still has the same thread of oppression. The Pakistani military remains in control structurally. Pakistani athletes are celebrated as national heroes one day and politically silenced the next. Sport is sometimes used to manage dissent, reinforce ideology, and project the Pakistani state’s image. Even Islam, purposefully invoked by the state in sporting arenas, functions as a regulatory narrative rather than a spiritual practice in Pakistan. Moreover, when Pakistani and Afghan male athletes move abroad, there is still no respite. They experience constant social oppression with Western Islamophobia and Orientalism, frequently remaining under the Western gaze to prove that they are not “uncivilized animals.” Therefore, going beyond mere exploration of Afghan and Pakistani athletes’

lived experiences, we tried to critically examine multifaceted issues, such as Talibanization, migration, post-colonization, Islamophobia, neoliberal economics, and Orientalism, among others.

The book was divided into three sections. The first section offered a comprehensive examination of how sports in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been influenced by the region's political and cultural shifts. This set the stage with an overview of sport's historical transformation in the post-conflict era within the region, focusing on the impact of the Pakistani Army's involvement in sport and the effects of migration and rising extremism. It further traced the historical evolution of sports from colonial times to their role in expressing national identity. Additionally, it addressed the immediate consequences of the Fall of Kabul and the rise of Taliban influence, along with the establishment of covert military governance in Pakistan, on the sport sector. Finally, Chapter 4 underscored Imran Khan's influence on sport and politics, highlighting the interconnection between athletic culture and national identity in Pakistan. Overall, section one established a nuanced understanding of the interrelations between sport, politics, and culture in shaping the social fabric of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, in the second section of the book, we examined the migration trends of Afghan and Pakistani athletes and how their movement has shaped sporting cultures across the Global North and South. We traced their journeys from Cold War displacement to today's labor migration. We explored the rise of cricket among Afghan refugees in Pakistan, analyzed Pakistani athletes' experiences in Qatar, and investigated how European and American media portray them. Through interviews and media analysis, this section highlighted how sport serves as a tool for survival, identity negotiation, and social integration, while also exposing discrimination, Orientalist narratives, and the need for more inclusive sporting policies. Ultimately, the book's final section examined how sport, politics, and identity intersect in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Chapter 10 analyzed the Pakistani military's use of sport as a tool of state power, diplomacy, and propaganda. Chapter 11, meanwhile, illustrated how South Asian Muslim men in sport navigate cultural pressures, faith, and competing expectations of masculinity.

The purpose of this final chapter is not simply to restate the findings of earlier chapters. Instead, it advances a proposition: if sport is a continuation of politics, and politics is shaped by empire and neoliberal economics, then sport must be reimagined through decolonial transformation. Afghan and Pakistani athletes, far from peripheral figures, reveal the structural failures of global sport and offer alternative ways of thinking about mobility, identity, ethics, resistance, and the future of collective life. The question guiding this conclusion is not the one we began with. It is no longer, "What does sport mean?" Instead, it is, "Where do we go from here, ethically, politically, and structurally, if we accept that sport is both wounded by power and capable of challenging it?"

Colonial Continuities: Sport as a Border Regime

To understand the present conditions of Afghan and Pakistani athletes, we must confront an uncomfortable truth: the global sporting order is a continuation of a bloody empire by other means (e.g., White supremacy and masculine hegemony). Competitive or organized sport in the Indian subcontinent has never been a neutral or purely recreational activity (Armstrong & Bates, 2001; Guha, 1998; Hussain, 2021). British Colonial masters engineered major sporting activities as a tool of discipline, social control, and racial hierarchy. In this book, we have claimed that colonial legacies were never dismantled. They were absorbed into postcolonial nation-building projects.

In Pakistan, for example, competitive sport organizations retained the hierarchical structure of colonial bureaucracy. Selection processes still favor elites based on class, language, and region, while systematically marginalizing rural communities and ethnic groups like the Baloch. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the monarchy and later the Soviet-backed regimes centralized sport to project modern statehood internationally; however, access remained urban and elite. What was presented as “national sports development” often simply repeated colonial sporting logic by prioritizing discipline and state control over genuine participation.

Today, this legacy lives on worldwide through sporting borders and institutional, legal, and geopolitical systems that control who gets to move, compete, and belong (Ali & Hussain, 2025). International federations and bodies, such as the IOC, ICC, and FIFA, uphold formal rules while participating in what scholars call “border imperialism” (Walia, 2013). International sport federations and Western governments (the actual colonial projects) impose mobility rules that heavily disadvantage competitive athletes from the Global South, especially those from war-affected countries like Afghanistan. Afghan athletes are frequently denied visas for competitions, while Pakistani athletes face security profiling. In contrast, powerful nations use diplomacy to bypass such barriers. Just like in global politics, passports in sport operate as racialized tools of privilege and exclusion. We argue that institutionalized inequalities are not incidental; they are structural. Sport turns belonging into a privilege controlled by powerful states rather than a basic right. This is why stateless athletes are forced to compete under “neutral flags,” why refugee athletes are used as humanitarian showcases at the Olympics, and why Afghan women athletes in exile are still denied full recognition by the IOC. The message is clear: athletes from politically disrupted nations are only allowed to compete on conditional terms. It must also be acknowledged that many of these disruptions are the direct result of Western military, political, and economic interference driven by capitalist greed.

The struggles of Afghan and Pakistani athletes are not only tales of personal resilience; they expose how global sport is built on borders and power, where only some are allowed to dream. The international sport system hides this truth by celebrating a few success stories while ignoring the deep inequalities

that keep most athletes excluded. This book rejects that narrative. If sport is to have a just future, it must confront and dismantle the colonial systems that still control who participates, receives visibility, and moves freely.

Knowledge, Method, and Decolonizing Sports Research

Afghan and Pakistani athletes' struggles are not only political, geographical, or economic; they are also epistemic. Throughout this book, one reality has become evident: the problem is not only that global sport is governed unfairly but also that it is studied unfairly. Knowledge about sport, migration, gender, and identity continues to be produced through Eurocentric frameworks that claim universality while ignoring the lived realities and intellectual traditions of the Global South. For decades, dominant sport scholarship has been built through Western epistemologies, secular humanism, liberal individualism, rationalism, and capitalist modernity. The Western discourse assumes that sport is a space of meritocracy, fairness, and progress, and only occasionally acknowledges structural inequality. When Muslim or Global South athletes appear in scholarship, they are too often framed as objects of study, not producers of knowledge (Ali & Hussain, 2025; Hussain & Cunningham, 2022). They are made into "cases" that "illustrate" theories that already exist, rather than voices capable of transforming academic theory itself.

This book rejects that model. Chapters 6 through 11 have shown that Afghan and Pakistani athletes think about sport, ethics, migration, gender, and faith with intellectual clarity and complexity. Their ideas about ethical conduct (*adab*), moral struggle (*jihad al-nafs*), communal responsibility (*um-mah*), and honor (*izzat*) are not cultural curiosities; they are philosophical frameworks. Their insights must not be translated into Western theory to gain legitimacy; they should stand as theory in their own right. This is what decolonizing sports research requires: epistemic equality.

In Chapter 11, we introduced Islamic Embodied Sovereignty and Authentic Piety not simply as descriptions of behavior but as concepts generated from Muslim athlete experience. These are not derivative theories; they push beyond the limits of existing frameworks like hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), or social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977, 1978). These Western frameworks remain useful, but they do not fully explain how spirituality, moral accountability, and postcolonial struggle shape athletic subjectivity. Therefore, theoretical expansion from the Global South lens is not optional; it is necessary.

Methodologically, this requires rethinking how researchers engage with athletes. While this book used narrative inquiry, ethnography, interviews, and transnational fieldwork to foreground athletes' voices, simply "centering voice" is not enough if it turns athletes into sources to be mined. Decolonial research (Omodan, 2025) demands a shift from studying athletes to working with them, building relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Nachman

et al., 2023). Knowledge must be created collaboratively, with athletes treated as co-thinkers and co-interpreters, not as objects of academic extraction (Nachman et al., 2023). This also means rejecting the myth of “neutral” research. All knowledge is shaped by power and position. Western sports science and sociology are not universal; they privilege certain bodies, histories, and ways of knowing while dismissing others (Singer, 2005). A decolonial approach exposes this bias and insists that place matters: Kabul is not an academic outpost of Lausanne, Quetta does not exist in the shadow of Oxford, and Islamabad does not need Missouri State University to define its reality.

We argue that the future of sport research must be plural, transnational, and rooted in ethical responsibility. We should value oral histories, lived experience, and embodied understanding just as much as statistical data. We must move theory beyond Western frameworks and make space for multiple ways of knowing. Above all, it must ensure that the people who were once only “studied” are now recognized as producers and authors of knowledge.

Final Synthesis: The Future Is Already Being Made

The lives of the athletes in this book uncover realities that global sporting institutions work hard to hide. They show how borders create inequality, how systems of power keep colonial hierarchies alive, how media distorts truth, how states control bodies, and how international institutions defend systems instead of justice. However, we also reveal that resistance is not a slogan; it lives in the body. Rashid Kahn learning cricket as a refugee, Arshad Nadeem training with improvised weights in nearby fields, Manizha Talash practicing her breakdancing in exile; each act is a refusal to be erased, each movement a future being built. Thereby, stories of Afghan and Pakistani athletes are not a story of defeat but defiance. Across borders, under surveillance, and within oppressive systems designed to limit them, they continue to play, train, and believe. Their fight is not just to compete; it is to live with dignity in a world that constantly questions their place.

Afghan and Pakistani athletes’ actions also pose a direct challenge to the institutions that claim to govern sport. To the ICC: your silence on gender apartheid in Afghanistan is complicity. To the IOC: neutrality is not ethical when it protects power over people. To FIFA: your tolerance of *kafala* exploitation is a betrayal of the athletes who sweat on your pitches. To the PSB and military-run sport programs: development without justice is discipline in disguise. And to Western humanitarian sport narratives: athletes do not need saving, they need systems to stop exploiting them.

However, we must also acknowledge that change will not come from institutions alone, nor should it. Power does not reform itself. The future of sport will be built by athletes, communities, and scholars who reject hierarchy and reclaim agency. This is already happening. Athletes are forming underground

training networks. Afghan footballers in exile are building independent federations. Pakistani athletes in working-class neighborhoods are forming self-run academies outside state control. Diaspora communities are building transnational teams that refuse political borders. This is not idealism. It is already real. The next step is recognition and solidarity.

So where do we go from here as scholars, sport students, and readers? We go wherever athletes move, wherever borders try to stop them, wherever dignity demands a field. We go to Kabul, Quetta, Karachi, Peshawar, Doha, Oslo, Toronto, Melbourne, and London, into migrant leagues, refugee pitches, village tournaments, and silent gym basements, because that is where the future is being made. The future of sport will not be decided in Lausanne, Washington, Zurich, or Dubai. Sport's future will be decided by those who refuse to accept exclusion as destiny. The geography of sporting power is shifting, from empire to exile, from institution to body, from governance to resistance. The world may try to silence Afghan and Pakistani athletes, but they have already spoken. Through motion, through faith, through persistence, they have declared a simple truth:

We are still here. We are still playing. And we are not finished.

Hence, as sport management scholars based in the Global North, we call for global resistance, defiance, and solidarity with the Global South.

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