



A cricket lover's lament

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The effects of the Mumbai terror attacks are being felt in the stadiums of India and Pakistan.

Shahan Mufti

LAHORE, Pakistan — South Asia is home to many religions but probably none more widespread and sacred than cricket.

America has always been agnostic, if not completely atheist about the sport. But then most of the world has never had much faith in baseball and has always snickered at the fact its ultimate annual contest is called the World Series.

If Americans want to understand the cricket rivalry between India and Pakistan, they must think in terms as epic as Red Sox vs. Yankees. Add to this the explosive mix of generations of bloodshed, the threat of nuclear weapons and recent terrorist attacks, and one begins to fathom the importance of the game in a region that is home to more than a billion souls.

In the 60-odd years since the sovereign nations of India and Pakistan were carved from a single piece of British territory, a shared love of cricket has often provided middle ground for improving relations between politicians, and also for regular people from all classes of society.

I was based in New Delhi in 2005 when the Pakistani cricket team toured the country to play a number of matches against India — dubbed the "friendship series."

Hundreds of thousand of the cheering faithful from both countries packed stadiums across India to watch the matches. Many had the national flags from both countries painted on either cheek — the mood in Delhi that spring was euphoric.

President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan flew in from Islamabad for one game and sat next to the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the stands. They chatted, smiled and clapped, conscious of the cameras.

The phrase "cricket diplomacy" was coined and an Associated Press story said the "India-Pakistan cricket tour raises new hopes of peace." The two leaders even found some time to talk business and issue a joint statement proclaiming the recently initiated peace process between their countries "irreversible."

Good old days indeed.

The Indian cricket team was scheduled to tour Pakistan again in January, just as they had every year since 2004. But last month, the Indian government instructed the national cricket side to cancel the tour.

It was hardly unexpected. Since the deadly attack on the city of Mumbai in November, relations between the two nuclear rivals have turned decidedly frosty. Blame for the attacks that killed 173 people has been directed toward Lashkar-e-Toiba, the Pakistan-based militant organization.

But in this atmosphere of anger and distrust, there is much more at stake than the estimated loss of \$30 million in revenue from the cancellation of a cricket tour. Concern remains that the people of Pakistan and India, after a decade of improving relations, will begin to drift apart once again.

“It’s sad to see what is happening in the region after Mumbai,” said Musharraf Zaidi, a columnist for one of Pakistan’s largest English news dailies, based in Islamabad. In 2006, while on a business trip to India, Zaidi spent an evening in a Calcutta bar watching India beat Pakistan in a thrilling final of the cricket World Cup.

Despite Pakistan’s defeat, Zaidi says he felt proud to see the two neighboring countries make it in to the finals. “The future of South Asia is bright,” he wrote then from India to his friends in Pakistan.

Zaidi was among an estimated 1,500 Pakistanis a day who began applying for Indian visas after travel restrictions started easing on either side in 2003.

And it wasn't only cricket players and fans. Musicians, artists, actors, students and academics also routinely traveled across the border, by road, rail and air.

The Mumbai attacks provided those opposed to this relatively free flow of people and ideas with ammunition, however. The Shiv Sena, the hard-line Hindu nationalist party that has ruled over Mumbai for nearly 17 years, banned Pakistani artists and athletes from performing in Mumbai. Bookstores in Mumbai are now being told to take Pakistani authors off the shelves.

Many Pakistani artists and actors who had made second homes in Mumbai, meanwhile, are now trickling back to Pakistan.

And Pakistan is considering banning Indian movies from its theaters. "I personally believe Indian films should not be screened in Pakistan, and we are working to put a ban on Bollywood movies," Malik Shahnawaz Noon, the chairperson of the national censor board told Indian media this week. This after a 40-year ban on Bollywood movies was finally lifted in 2006, with multiplex cinemas sprouting up in major Pakistani cities to cater to the resulting huge demand.

Diplomatic relations, while intact, are strained. The two countries have suspended their "composite dialogue," begun in 2004 and involving bilateral negotiations on topics such as commerce, trade and border security.

Meantime, it is the people of Pakistan and India — divided by partition in 1947 and until recently enjoying a measure of social reconciliation — who will most sorely feel the loss of each other's company.

And that, as they say, "is just not cricket."