



# THE EVOLUTION & FUTURE OF PAKISTANI CRICKET

A Fireside Chat with Mirza Iqbal Baig

**What did you make of the recent series with Afghanistan, in terms of standout performers, squad selection, and areas for improvement?**

As far as that particular series is concerned, the standout performers for me were Saim Ayub, whom I saw a lot of potential in, Imad Wasim was extraordinary, and Ehsanullah on his debut was tremendous – he was deemed the ‘find of the series’ by many in the cricketing world. Ehsanullah in particular reminds me of Waqar Younis in 1989, who debuted against the West Indies in an ODI and was also referred to as a key finding in the tournament at the time.

On the other hand, personally I don’t understand the decision to field Azam Khan as a wicketkeeper at the international level. I think that is where we lacked. We could have won the second T20 in my opinion, but Azam seemed to be the weak link: giving away far too many runs. Our middle order batting was also quite vulnerable – and I’ve also mentioned my grievances with the wicketkeeping. When our senior players return for the series against New Zealand, I think we ought to focus on these areas when considering room for improvement.

**What was your assessment of the recent iteration of PSL and how do you evaluate the evolution of the franchise, in terms of its growth over time, sponsorships, and potential to incubate new/emerging talent?**

This year’s PSL was notable because matches were played in four major cities of Pakistan: Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. When the PSL first started off, no one would have thought the tournament would grow to the extent it has – with 8 years of the tournament in the books so far. Hardly anyone was interested in investing in the PSL franchise at the outset, but over time more and more individuals have gotten involved – which has led to a quadrupling of its value. Corporations now wish to be attached to the PSL via sponsorships, and I think the boom in the franchise will further attract great talent. In order to make the most of this trajectory, we need to focus on improving the quality of our pitches around the country – which are far too dull at the moment and likely discourages emerging talent. We have seen our youngers lot shine on other pitches

such as Sharjah, and I reckon we will see the same here if we can improve our pitches. Ehsanullah, Abbas Afridi, and Saim Ayub are for me Pakistan’s shining stars in terms of emerging talent.

**What measures would you take to rethink the role and domains of responsibility of the Pakistan Cricket Board: should it be less politicized and what are some key performance indicators that can be used to measure its performance under a specific chairperson?**

I agree. Compared to Sri Lanka, and even Bangladesh, Pakistan’s cricket board is overly politicised. Appointments really should stop being made on the basis of political affiliation – which we’ve seen constantly in Pakistan’s history, with chairmen being replaced whenever new governments come in. This cannot continue. In India, for instance, presidents of the BCCI come in at the back of formal electoral processes – and good people attract others. Following Ganguly’s departure, Roger Binny came in. Jagmohan Dalmiya served as chairman for a considerable time period. Sharad Pawar’s tenure was significant, as was Shashank Manohar’s. In Pakistan, appointments are made on the basis of politics – which is why we have not seen this sort of continuity in terms of leadership ability. In my opinion, the board should be assessed based on the performance of the team alone – and little else. If the PCB operated on the basis of merit, we will see an improvement. Furthermore, I believe a culture of internal democracy within the PCB should prevail – whereby all stakeholders have a fair hearing and involvement in key decision making.

**How do Pakistani cricket players differ from their international counterparts in terms of playing style, training methods, and overall approach to the game?**

Our players are lagging far behind in comparison to their international counterparts. Don’t get me wrong, we have an immense amount of talent. We see the ‘street talent’, following years of playing with taped balls, in our players. Having said that, our playing style and training methods – as well as overall approach to the game – are all sadly far behind. Furthermore, we seem to be overly defensive in our orientation. We are afraid of defeat, and if that psychology continues to prevail we can never be successful.

You look at England, for instance, in terms of how its team moulded itself over the years. Since Brendan McCullum came in as head coach, they have adopted what is known as the 'Bazball' approach: which is a courageous style based on offense and determination. They are not afraid of playing cricket, and we can learn from that. We have our own unique style, sure, but even our training methods are questionable – and they need to be enhanced. Our players naturally also need to take an interest in these domains and adopt a collaborative approach. Overall, my advice to the team would simply be to not be so afraid of defeat!

**What role do domestic cricket leagues and tournaments play in the talent pipeline for the Pakistan national cricket team, and how can these leagues be optimized to develop and showcase talent effectively?**

Across the world today, we see the emergence of leagues. In 2005, when T20 began, most did not appreciate it but from a financial standpoint they were quite lucrative and consequently grew at a rapid pace. In our case, however, we seem to base our approach on inducting whoever performs well in the T20 format. Personally, I don't think we should be overly focused on leagues when it comes to developing our first teams. Those who perform well in T20 leagues can be inducted into the T20 international squad, but not in ODIs or Tests. Our talent will emerge when we improve the quality of domestic cricket as a whole. What we did last time, for instance, when we had 6 teams was poor because our domestic cricket was constrained to a total of 194 cricketers. If we do not expand the scope of these initiatives, then we will not be able to improve. Domestic cricket can play a pivotal role in that regard. T20 leagues have their own place, and a lot of youngsters – both Pakistani as well as international – are interested in partaking in these because of the financial incentives. They can earn more in less time and do not have to invest too much time and energy into the endeavour. You see a lot of players taking early retirement from Test cricket, and in some cases ODI even, because of this. Again I say: improve the domestic structure of the game.

**Why do you think women's cricket has taken so long to get off the ground in Pakistan, and what are some strategies you may have in mind to promote it going forward?**

There was a time when women cricket had to really struggle, particularly in the early stages in 1996-97 with the Khan Sisters (Shahiza and Sharmeen). Since then, women cricket has entered the fold of Pakistani cricket with funds being allocated by the PCB. However, despite these positive developments I think the domain of women cricket in Pakistan operates almost like a mafia – with excessive levels of 'groupbandi' (tribalism) whereby nepotism tends to reign. If the Chief Selector puts together a team, like in the case of Jalaluddin, the captain would say things like, 'You may have selected the team, but I will play them.' Things of that sort. The number of coaches that have been disposed of in an

arbitrary fashion in this domain is also a case in point. As long as this mafia system prevails in women's cricket, and merit is not granted top priority, things will not improve.

There is a significant audience for women's cricket. People enjoy watching it. They can, and should, explore remote areas to promote women's cricket. There are efforts being made in this direction, and funds are also available for it – but naturally it should be used in an efficient manner. As things stand, the culture of favouritism holds women's cricket back. We cannot be satisfied when our women's team beats teams like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, we need to set the bar higher for ourselves and aspire for greater heights and eventually get to the point where we are competitive with teams like India, England, Australia, etc.

**Journalists covering cricket are generally seen as overly focused on gossip and politics, not enough on the technical aspects of the game. Why do you think this has happened and how can this culture be replaced with one that prioritizes productive discussions?**

With the rise of social media, every person in the country with a camera and microphone is now a cricket 'journalist' – and the ethics of journalism have taken a back seat as a result. That is why we see an excess amount of gossip and politics in the domain today. A significant number of 'journalists' simply operate as mouthpieces for certain organisations or individuals. Even when it comes to more serious journalism, most attempting to engage fail to articulate their stances or findings in a technical manner – which is a real shame. I like seeing the emergence of youngsters in sports journalism, but I fear that a lot of them are in it for the wrong reasons – such as tours, scoops, 'breaking' news, etc. This is disappointing. They are also quick to be political. If a player refuses to give them an interview, they will make it a point to attack them: sometimes in an unprofessional manner. They should learn from other countries – which also have elements of gossip, mind – where there are certain standards and rules of operation. I think young journalists have to be groomed by their seniors, who are in the position to inform them about what to prioritise and what not to. You do not just become a 'journalist' if you own a camera/microphone or pen/paper: you have to go through all the difficult phases of the discipline.

**What are your thoughts on infrastructure? Youngsters often complain of not having access to any pitches or training grounds in their neighbourhoods, which prevents them from developing their abilities. Is this not a major reason why we have been struggling to produce superstars in the game?**

This is the bane of Pakistan's cricket. Look at IPL, the quality of their stadiums. Extraordinary. The recent renovation of National Stadium, Karachi involved an expenditure of Rs. 1.5 billion – only to install a new ceiling and some seats. We do not seem to prioritise the development of infrastructure. Look at Faisalabad's, for instance. Or Rawalpindi's. There are only two proper stadiums under the PCB today in my opinion,

Lahore's and Karachi's, Multan's cricket stadium, which is under the district administration, is too far away and difficult to access for most people. The PCB ought to develop the infrastructure. Youngsters are right to complain about the lack of accessibility. Turf wickets in Karachi and Lahore require players to rent out the space – and even here, for instance, they are not allowed to wear spikes while fast bowling. All these little things add up to make a huge difference. Take the example of India, where infrastructure is superb. Over here, we are just engaged in politics all the time – about who gets to be on the Board, etc. You ask about superstars: I don't see any with the exception of Babar Azam and Shaheen Afridi. We can only produce superstars when we begin offering accessible facilities to youngsters and arrange for proper training procedures for them. Our National Cricket Academy in Lahore is used for boarding and lodging! You might have access to great food and accommodation there, but little else. These spaces ought to be used better.

**How did the relocation of the Pakistan national cricket team to the United Arab Emirates between 2009 and 2019 impact the sport's development and fan base in Pakistan, and what are the implications of this relocation for the future of cricket in the country?**

Naturally this was based on necessity after the attacks on the Sri Lankan team around the time. When we shifted over the UAE, we saw that their pitches were not anything extraordinary: not suitable for spin bowling and generally quite dull. I do not think we particularly benefitted from the UAE in that regard. It was not a positive development for the sport as I see it. When you play in your own country, it attracts fans and inspires youngsters to take up the game. In the UAE, the bulk of fans are simply the expats who live there – most of whom are not particularly interested in becoming cricketers themselves. I think the relocation was not beneficial. But now that international cricket has begun again in Pakistan, with teams like England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. having played recently – I think this will be good for Pakistani cricket, especially for youngsters. When they go see all these talented players, they will derive a sense of inspiration from it and can learn a lot. The recent PSL was packed – most games were attended by huge numbers of fans. This is great and should continue.

**From among Mohammad Rizwan, Azam Khan, and Sarfaraz Ahmed, who do you believe is the best wicket keeper batsman for T20?**

At this moment, there is no doubt that Mohammad Rizwan is the best wicketkeeper batsman in the T20 format. Sarfaraz is also good, but he has been confined to Tests for the moment. Azam needs a lot of time, I think: he must work on his fitness. He batting was impressive in the recent PSL – he was seen as a 'power hitter' – but if he isn't keeping then where are they going to hide him in the field? For the time being, we have Rizwan at the moment. In the future, Mohammad Haris can be a good wicket keeper batsman but he is

already – at this early stage – trying to be overly smart about things. He should focus on his game: he has a lot of potential and can go far.

**There has been a lot of criticism around Babar Azam and his captaincy, where do you fall in that debate?**

The PCB handed over captaincy duty to Babar in 2019, and there is already so much criticism. Sometimes the Chairman puts forth statements about it, other times it's the press, etc. We recently saw a 'war of captaincy' take place against Afghanistan prior to the series. They forcefully gave Babar a rest period and news was spreading that Shaheen would be made captain. Some said it could be Imad Waseem, others said Shan Masood has a chance. Still others rooted for Shadab Khan – who eventually assumed the duty. I think the criticism around Babar's captaincy should end: it is not the right time for it. He has been doing well as captain in white ball cricket. We have two major events coming up: the Asian Cup and World Cup. This debate about Babar's captaincy should cease for the time being, and the decision from the board on this should come after October. At the moment, it is counterproductive in my opinion.

**If you were made PCB Chairman today, what are some courses of action you would take to strengthen the Pakistani team – in all formats?**

First of all, this is never going to happen. If it does, the first thing I would do is to completely depoliticise regional and club cricket – in terms of the nepotism/favouritism that tends to prevail. I would ensure that the most talented and dedicated players from their respective regions rise to the top. All things will operate on the basis of merit. If someone is the PCB Chairman, they cannot have a free hand in employing people purely on the basis of connections and friendships. Excessive politicisation has ruined us. We won the Champion's Trophy in 2017, and have failed to win anything since. Prior to that, it was the World Cup of 1992 and the T20 World Cup of 2009. These are the only three major titles under Pakistan's name. If we can rid ourselves of the politics, prioritise merit, develop infrastructure, and invest in the right things rather than on fancy tours and dinner parties etc. Those are the kinds of things I would personally focus on and which I feel will be of immense benefit to Pakistani cricket over the long haul.

[\*The above was a conversation that took place between Mirza Iqbal Baig and Abbas Moosvi, Editor of PIDE's Discourse Magazine. We are grateful to Mr. Baig for taking out the time for us.]

*The interviewee is one of Pakistan's top cricket journalists, analysts, and cricket commentators. He is a renowned name in the realm of sports journalism, and journalism more generally – and has been a key voice in the coverage of Pakistani cricket for several decades.*