



# EVOLUTION OF CRICKET: FROM A GAME OF AMATEURS TO A BILLION-DOLLAR MARKET

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The media rights of the Indian Premier League (IPL) for 2023-27 are worth USD 6.02 billion, an incredible feat given that the Board of Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) had to pay broadcasters, just forty years ago, to telecast its matches live. There are currently dozens of international players playing in the ongoing IPL, skipping their national duties, which would have been unthinkable just a decade ago. The change was imminent given the massive market that IPL has become and the million-dollar contracts it offers to the players.

It is intriguing to understand how a game that emerged in the United Kingdom around the 16th century became a global phenomenon and a highly lucrative sport.

Cricket began in the United Kingdom in the 16th century (some accounts trace it back to the 13th century) as a leisure game for kids, which adults adopted later on. The laws of cricket were first written and adopted in 1744 by 'Star' and 'Garter Club', the precursors of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), which is the custodian of the game of cricket since its foundation in 1787 at Lords. The first international match was played in 1844 between Canada and the United States of America, while the first recognised Test match was played in 1877 between England and Australia. Professional County Championship in England began in 1890, which helped the game evolve into a big market.

Any sport can become a global phenomenon if it is followed by a huge chunk of the world's population. The globalisation of cricket came about with the rise of colonialism, and one of the consequences of British colonisation was the spread of cricket in its colonies. British colonialists introduced cricket in North American colonies in the 17th century, while the East India Company familiarised it in India.

By the 19th century, cricket had spread to every nook and cranny of the world with a huge fan following. But it was not until the dawn of the 20th century that cricket was played by many nations under one umbrella organization that could institutionalise the game.

The cricket boards of England, Australia and South Africa cofounded the Imperial Cricket Council, the governing body of international cricket in 1909, which was later renamed as International Cricket Council (ICC) in 1987. Many countries joined soon afterwards, including India in 1932 and Pakistan in 1953. Currently, ICC has 108 members, with 12 Test-playing nations and 96 associate teams. Cricket was still a game of semi-professionals as late as the mid-1950s, as the revenue-generating mechanisms were not yet developed. With half of the world's population following the game, it was imminent that money will follow it.

Limited overs (One Day Internationals) cricket began in 1971 to cater to the changing demands of the audiences, who wanted to witness more drama and suspense in a limited time span. ODI World Cups started from 1975 onwards that modernised cricket according to the demands of the day. However, it was Kerry Packer and the World Cricket Series (1977-1979) that revolutionised the world of cricket and modernised it to attract large audiences through live telecasts and other technical changes to the game.

Kerry Packer, an Australian Media giant and the owner of Channel Nine, wanted to telecast Australia's Test matches and made a startling bid of USD 1.5 million for three years, but his offer was refused. He famously said to the representative of the Australian Cricket Board: "There is a little bit of the whole in all of us, gentlemen. What is your price?" Failing to attain media rights, Packer contacted international cricketers individu

-ly and offered them lucrative sums to join his newly formed 'World Series Cricket'. As many as 35 famous international cricketers signed deals with Packer, including Australian Skipper Greg Chappell, West Indian Captain Clive Lloyd, England's captain Tony Grieg and Pakistan's Imran Khan. ICC retaliated and banned the WSC, barring them from using its grounds, rules, or nomenclature. Packer came up with the idea of drop-in-pitches to host matches on football grounds. Other changes WSC introduced were colourful kits, white balls, day-night matches, amongst many others. Four teams were made: Australia XI, England XI, West Indies XI and World XI, and the test games were named 'Supertests'. Although Packer's moves were driven by profit motives and he discontinued WSC after gaining media rights from Cricket Australian in 1979, it benefited the game in many ways and it can be said without an iota of doubt that from a financial perspective, no one was of more benefit to cricket more than Kerry Packer and his WSC.

ODI World Cups were one of the main introductions that revolutionised the game from a financial viewpoint. Before the 1983 ODI WC that India won, India was bound to pay the broadcasters to live telecast its matches, but after being crowned as the champions, money started pouring in. Within thirty years, by the early 2010s, India was the richest board in the world and the world cricket hegemon.

ODI cricket became an instant hit, as it was less time-consuming than Test cricket but had more drama and suspense. It paved the way for T20 cricket, further condensing the game to appeal to the huge populace that is too busy with their lives. Batting-friendly pitches and shorter grounds made the game further interesting as people could enjoy batting exploits in just four hours. T20 Cricket was being played in Karachi's North Nazimabad region, primarily the Ramadan Tournament that featured international cricketers. The first professional T20 game was played in England in 2003 while the first international game was played between Australia and New Zealand in 2005. The first T20 WC in 2007 paved the way for T20 leagues on the model of football leagues, and it was here the rebellious Indian Cricket League (ICL) emerged, the WSC of the late 2000s.

ICL modelled itself around Kerry Packer and invited teams from around the world to participate in a T20 league, where teams from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh participated, wherein many international players were part of the Indian teams. The Indian cricket board outlawed the ICL and initiated its cricket league, the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2008. The emerging markets and large population of India coupled with the popularity of cricket in India made IPL a brand name. Within five years of its inauguration, IPL had replaced the hegemony of the ICC – and ICC doesn't host matches during the IPL anymore. Many of the famed international players interestingly prefer the IPL over national duties. It should not come as a surprise if within a few years, international cricket is pushed to only WCs and leagues occupy the whole year.

As ODI cricket is on the brink of collapse and Test cricket is on the ventilator, oxygen is being provided through the Test Championship, an integrated cycle of two years' test matches where the top two teams play the final at Lords.

As ODI cricket is too boring for the new audience who want to see a flurry of sixes and fours, leagues like IPL are the answer. A 20-second ad in an IPL match costs around 8 lakh Indian rupees, which is what drives the popularity of the league. Money buys talent and talent attracts viewership, and the viewership, in turn, attracts money, and the cycle keeps repeating. Before the advent of the IPL in 2008, India generated 98% of its revenue through the broadcasting of international matches. Today, it has dropped to only 29%, as IPL generates 71%. Similar cases can be seen in Pakistan (PSL), Australia (Big Bash), West Indies (CPL) and others, where domestic leagues have surpassed the popularity of international games.

With ICC's revenues shrinking, many countries, which are dependent on ICC for revenue, such as West Indies, are experiencing challenges in paying salaries to their players. Players from these countries resultantly prefer lucrative leagues over national duties, which brings disparity amongst different teams. It remains to be seen what the future holds for the game of cricket and its lucrative leagues, whether they completely replace international matches and push it to the background like football or if the increasing number of leagues would eventually bore audiences and pull them back towards international matches.

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