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It's not just cricket: sport, social cohesion and belonging

How members of Australia's South Asian diaspora have created culturally safe spaces through cricket, and how Australian cricket is responding.

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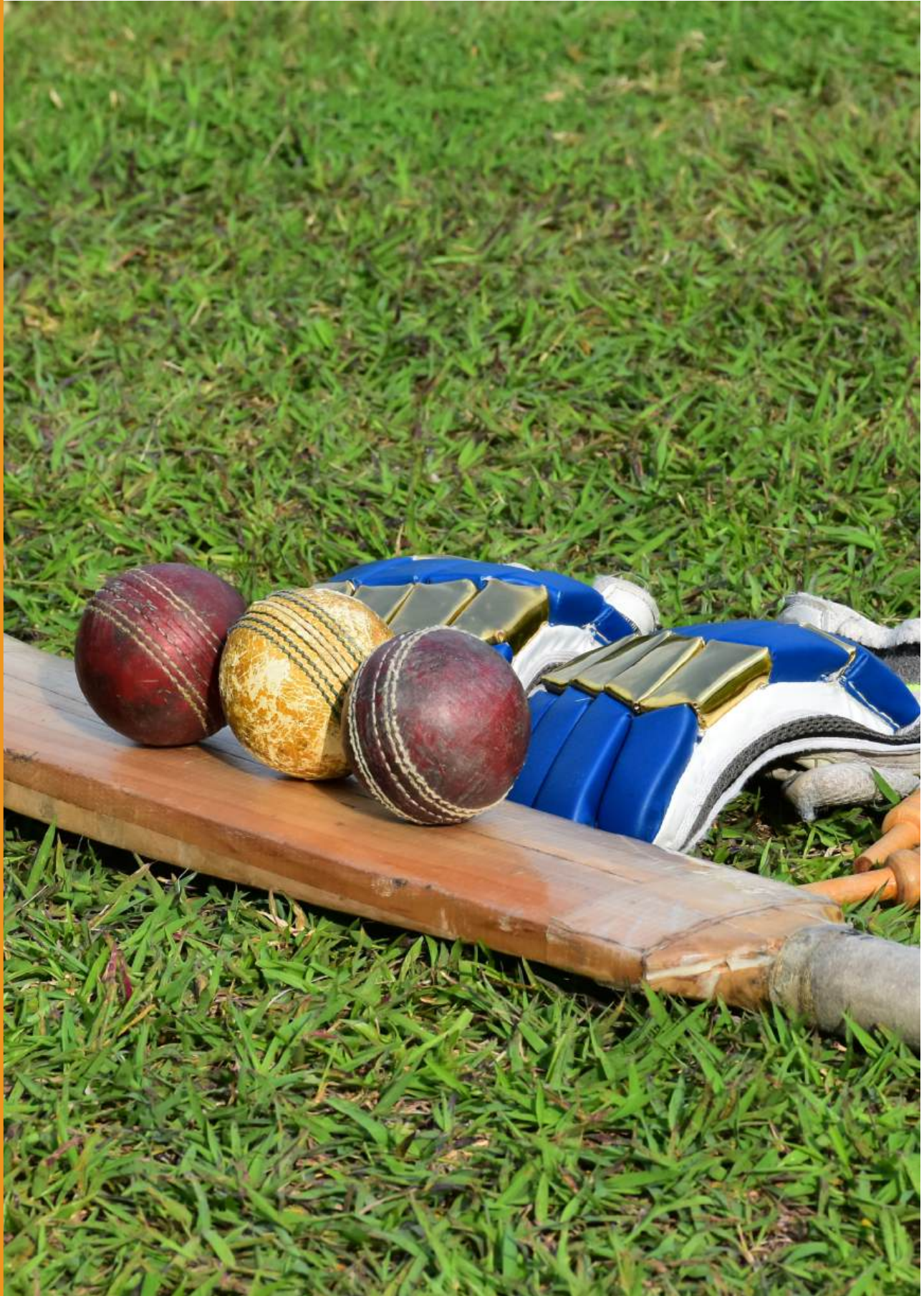
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Vanessa Murray is a writer and journalist with a background in literature, social anthropology and healthcare research. She has diverse interests including social change, social impact, sustainability and education, healthcare and sport, and literacy and accessibility. Born and raised in New Zealand, Vanessa has lived in Melbourne since 2004. She has written for media at home and abroad, has authored one book and contributed to several others, and works with clients doing meaningful work to positively impact communities and society at large. She is also a 'cricket mum', with two school-aged children involved in a local cricket club. *It's not just cricket* is Vanessa's first piece of work for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.

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1. Introduction



Australia and South Asia have many things in common. This includes geographic and regional proximity, our trade and economic partnerships, varied climates that include desert and tropical regions, our status as former members of the British Empire, and a mutual love of cricket.

This shared love of cricket is an influential factor for many South Asians when choosing to migrate to Australia. They like the idea of being able to play cricket in Australia, and figure it will be a good way to meet people and build community and social capital.

Give or take some wrangling over geopolitical history, there are seven, eight or nine countries in South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. People born in or descended from India currently represent Australia's second-largest diaspora and its fastest-growing major diaspora community. They account for nearly 10 per cent of Australia's overseas-born population, and 2.9 per cent of the total population.

Over the past two decades, as Australia's South Asian diaspora has steadily increased, the presence of South Asian-Australians in cricketing nets, pitches, clubs and stadiums around the country has also grown. Just as the face of Australia – one of the most multicultural nations in the world – is changing, so too is the face of Australian cricket.

However, participating in Australian cricket is not as easy or equitable as many South Asian-Australians imagine or hope. There are many intersecting reasons for this, including the cost of playing cricket; a lack of systems literacy; a clash of cultures and cultural identities; visa status and requirements; systemic and individual bias; discrimination and racism; language and religious barriers; gender norms; inequitable access to resources;

lack of cultural and psychological safety; lack of representation; lack of childcare; non-inclusive policies and practices, and the Anglocentric nature of the Australian cricketing ecosystem.

To overcome these challenges, members of the South Asian diaspora have started their own cricket clubs. In a multicultural cricket club environment, participants can create and be in control of their cricketing experiences. They are in charge of decision-making and selection processes. They are free to speak their languages of choice, and to express, celebrate and explore their cultural identities within and through their love of cricket.

Multicultural club cricket has emerged and grown inside and at times, outside of the Australian cricketing ecosystem – a federated hierarchy involving all levels of government that is heavily reliant on a volunteer economy and its love of cricket to keep grassroots community clubs going. Within this ecosystem, access to infrastructure, resources and the pathway from grassroots to elite play is not experienced equally by all. The sport's peak body, Cricket Australia, has responded with an ambitious Multicultural Action Plan, through which it hopes to become genuinely representative of the community it serves.

This narrative explores the relationship of members of the South Asian diaspora with cricket, the phenomenon of multicultural club cricket within the wider Australian cricketing ecosystem, systemic and intersectional barriers to participation – particularly systems literacy, cost, volunteering, gender and gender norms and lack of representation – and how Australian cricket as a brand and a seminal cultural space is being reconfigured into a sport for all.

2. Finding familiarity



2.1 Cricket as a bridge between South Asia and Australia

Bala Balachandran is a Hindi from Delhi in India with a lifelong passion for cricket, which he says grew stronger after he came to Australia.

Born in 1942, Balachandran, his wife Maila and their two children migrated to Australia under the family migration program in July 1986. He describes cricket as a bridge between nations.

“I am not much of a cricket player, but I have been watching and very much interested in cricket for the last 65 years. Cricket has brought many, many Indians and Australians together as nations but also as individuals,” says Balachandran, whose volunteering efforts include being a guest services volunteer at the 2022 International Cricket Council (ICC) Men’s T20 World Cup.

Fond memories of listening to, playing and watching cricket during his childhood and youth, along with a keen awareness of and interest in Australia as a cricketing nation, draw meaningful threads between India and Australia for Balachandran. He references the MRF Pace Foundation, a coaching clinic founded in Chennai (India) in 1987 with the help of former Australian pace spearhead Dennis Lillee, as an example of the kind of bridging that has taken place. Fast bowlers travel there to train from all over the world, including Australia.

“The MRF Foundation created a cross-cultural exchange between India and Australia. And guess who has been there developing their fast-paced bowling? Glenn McGrath, Shane Warne, Dennis Lillee – they’re all household names in India.”

Along with his educational and professional nous, cricket enabled Balachandran to quickly develop a sense of belonging, worth and participation in Australian cultural life. It was a means of finding familiarity in his new country, while retaining a sense of connection to his

country of birth.

Balachandran sought cricket out almost immediately, as a premier league fan and cricketing parent in local community clubs. He attended his first Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in 1987, just a year after his arrival in Australia and says that he hasn’t missed one since.

For later generations of South Asian cricket lovers, it was television, not radio, that brought the sport to life in an immediate and ever-present way.

“The year India first won the World Cup, 1983, is the year after colour television came to India. My dad had one, and all our neighbours and friends from the street would come together in our house to watch the game on that little TV screen,” says Preeti Daga. A media professional, Daga is the inaugural National Chair of the Sports Chapter at the Australia India Business Council, Chief Secretary at the Jain International Trade Organisation Australia, and one of Cricket Australia’s 54 Multicultural Ambassadors.

“People would bring home-cooked food and drinks to share, and the kids would play. It was a community get-together and a celebration, and a wonderful way to share and learn about each other and develop a deeper understanding of each other’s culture,” she says. Daga can’t wait to introduce her preschool-aged daughter to the sport through her local chapter of Woolworths Cricket Blast.

Many members of Australia’s South Asian diaspora are similarly educated and cricketing mad – such as Sathish Rajendran, who arrived on a student visa in 2004 and is now an Australian citizen. Growing up in India, Rajendran’s parents prioritised academics over sport, and were ambitious for him to migrate.

“My professors discussed opportunities in the US, the UK and Australia. I liked cricket and thought that if I went to Australia, I could play there and continue my passion,” says Rajendran, a player turned multicultural club founder, volunteer and coach who owns two successful 7-Eleven businesses.

Rajendran joined a cricket team soon

after arriving in Brisbane to study at the Queensland University of Technology. He played with an existing grassroots club for five years before founding a multicultural club, the Brisbane Super Kings, where he is a manager and coach.

engage with you because they share the same interest. Cricket became a bridge connecting two cultures, languages or backgrounds. It was one of my main ways to find community and connection in Australia.”

“I found that if you talk about cricket, there are many people who like it and will

South Asia: a fast-growing diaspora

Today the India-born population is Australia’s second-largest and fastest growing diaspora. Its 750,000+ members make up 9.8 per cent of Australia’s overseas-born population, and 2.9 per cent of Australia’s total population. Between 1996 and 2006 the number of India-born residents in Australia almost doubled, and more than quadrupled between 2006 to 2020.

Other South Asian diaspora groups are also growing in Australia, but less quickly. The Nepalese diaspora makes up 2 per cent of Australia’s overseas-born population and 0.6 per cent of its total population – an 80 per cent increase on June 2012 figures. The Sri Lankan diaspora comprises 1.9 per cent of Australia’s overseas-born population and 0.6 per cent of its total population – a 37 per cent increase since June 2012. The Pakistani diaspora accounts for 0.4 per cent of Australia’s overseas-born population and 1.3 per cent of its total population – a 61 per cent increase from June 2012 (Department of Home Affairs, 2024).





Bala's story

“When we came here there were hardly any Indians. There were only one or two Indian grocery shops in our suburb, but now there are many, and lots of restaurants too. Not only that, but the cross-cultural revolution has taken place beyond imagination. Now everybody wants to know about everybody else’s culture. Every week there’s something, like Diwali, the Shara, Holi — all happening on a national scale in every big city. Such a real cross-cultural fusion is taking place. My son and daughter grew up playing club cricket, and my grandchildren play too. They are even named after cricket players! When my children were younger, we’d play in the park when it was a nice bright, sunny day. We’d go with a bat and ball and just start hitting with our children, with other friends...whoever it is that the community brought out. You just make it happen.”

-Bala Balachandran, Melbourne



Sathish's story

"In India, I started playing street cricket when I was seven. I also played for the school team at a young age. I enjoyed playing cricket, but my parents disapproved. They wanted me to focus on academics and couldn't see cricket as a full-time career, so I stopped focusing on cricket training due to my studies.

I came to Australia in 2004 to pursue my Master's, and soon after, I joined a local cricket club. I felt out of place and wasn't comfortable being on the team. I struggled to blend in because I thought I was not welcome. Things have changed; I now have an extensive network of multicultural friends and feel at home. We have a larger Indian population and community organisations that come forward to help Indian students, unlike in my time. I am happy to see these positive changes."

-Sathish Rajendran, Brisbane

2.2 How cricket fosters a sense of belonging

People can participate in Australian cricket as fans, players, coaches, umpires, industry professionals and volunteers at grassroots, semi-professional and professional levels.

When Preeti Daga arrived in Melbourne in 2008, she volunteered with sporting organisations – first football, then cricket – to find and build community and a sense of place for herself.

“Cricket is part of our DNA, it’s part of our identity. We grow up watching and playing it almost every day. When I arrived in Australia I started volunteering with Cricket Victoria, which was amazing because the people I met, the friendships I’ve formed and the opportunities I’ve gotten, have really helped me become part of Australia and feel connected and that this is home,” says Daga, who grew up in New Delhi (India).

“One thing led to another, and I got involved with other community organisations, including the Australia Indian Business Council. I became part of the Victorian committee and ultimately led the national sports chapter. And then Cricket Australia was looking to engage with multicultural communities and spread the love for the sport and encourage grassroots participation from migrant communities into cricket. And they saw people like me who were doing this work in the community as a bridge for that.”

In 2020 and 2022 Daga was an ambassador for the Women’s and Men’s T20 World Cups, which is organised by the ICC. In July 2024 Cricket Australia invited her to become a Multicultural Ambassador. *“Sport plays a great role in integrating people into a new environment. It’s a wonderful way to break down barriers. It can create connections and friendships and brings a lot of joy and mental wellbeing. It is just a great way for communities to come together,”* says Daga.

At a grassroots level, taking part in community sport can enhance belonging, worth and participation for all, including migrant and multicultural communities. *“Sport creates a sense of belonging in a country because you become part of the community, you have increased social circles, and you have peer support. When you’re playing in a team or you’re a volunteer, you become part of a system and that creates a sense of belonging for you,”* says Molina Asthana, a principal lawyer, the founder of Multicultural Women in Sport and another of Cricket Australia’s 54 Multicultural Ambassadors.

“South Asians really identify with and love cricket, so for them to be able to do anything in cricket really creates a sense of self-worth, and worth within their own communities,” she says. Joining a cricket club also helps new migrants build social capital, in the form of community connection and support networks.

“When people come to join our team, they’re looking for connection. For somebody that looks like them. I think whether people like it or not, your appearance does break those barriers down. Before you’ve even opened your mouth, if you look like somebody else you can find comfort in that, you can approach them and you can talk. And of course, we help each other out in other parts of life too. With advice on buying properties or employment connections. Community is very important in that way,” says Karan Sharma, who grew up in Yamunanagar (Punjab, India) in the 1980s and now lives in Adelaide, where he is a senior social worker and a founding member of the Punjab Lions Cricket Club.

“Our network helps in so many ways, because we have sponsors and members from different backgrounds, from real estate to construction to HR. Whenever anyone needs anything, they can post a question in our WhatsApp group. And nine out of 10 times someone will be willing to help,” says Nilkanth Shelat, a Gujarati Indian who migrated to Australia in 2015, works for Apple and plays with the Adelaide Warriors Cricket Club.

2.3 The far-reaching benefits of sport

Government, policy makers and academics are increasingly aware of the positive impacts of sport on individual and population-level health, and economic and social outcomes.

Sport is a major contributor to the Australian economy, generating around \$50 billion each year and accounting for 2 to 3 per cent of Australia's GDP. An estimated 14 million Australians participate in sport annually, 1.8 million volunteer 158 million hours each year, and 220,000 are employed across the sector (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

We know that a child playing sport develops critical life skills, which help to produce more balanced and successful adults. Active kids have improved cognitive development, are better at learning and retaining information, and stay in school longer (Boston Consulting Group, 2017). They are more likely to become active adults, with reduced risk of chronic health problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024). Modelling shows that a strong sporting culture offers a decent return on investment, with the combined economic, health and education benefits of sport returning \$7 for every \$1 invested (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2024).

Competition early in life seems to be especially good for women and their ability to break down workforce barriers, with over 94 per cent of women in executive positions reporting having played competitive sport (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

Sport promotes physical and mental health, fosters social connections and teamwork, contributes to a sense of community belonging, and celebrates and strengthens cultural identity. Sport also encourages multicultural friendships, which help to develop a culturally diverse community where individuals are not

locked out from opportunities due to racial and background differences (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

And that's just playing sport. When we factor in other ways of being involved in the sporting ecosystem — volunteering, employment, fandom — the benefits increase.

"I feel like it gives so much peace to your mind. You've been busy Monday to Friday and a lot of us don't have a lot of friends and family here," says Nitesh Nepal, who migrated to Australia from Kathmandu (Nepal) in 2018, works in recruitment, and plays with the Canberra Nepalese Cricket Club.

"When you're going through something in life you don't always have a place to go and talk. But you can go and join your cricket colleagues, play with them, and get that mental peace."

2.4 Cricket as an intercultural and diplomacy tool

At community and transnational levels, playing sports and engaging in mutually respectful fandom can help to overcome cultural, religious and political barriers, and build intercultural connectivity and engagement.

Preeti Daga attended the 2022 India-Pakistan World Cup match at the MCG and said the atmosphere was overwhelmingly positive.

"It was a tight match right to the last ball, and I had all these different people sitting around me – people from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India and other South Asian nations, and our hearts were just pounding. Every ball was crucial, but there was mutual appreciation, respect and love as fans and as a community for the sport we love," says Daga.

Molina Asthana was at the same match.

“The atmosphere at the MCG was electric. It was pure connection. India and Pakistan are politically divided, but as fans, they were united. They were having fun, they were dancing, they were chanting, they were cheering. Cricket really can create a sense of community, when you come together and celebrate your cultures and your differences and similarities.”

In October 2024 the Australian Government released the new National Sport Strategy, Sport Horizon, which aims to drive improvements and outcomes for sport. The strategy hones in on the ‘green and gold decade’ – the years leading up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympic Games. It commits to identifying and addressing barriers to entry and progression for athletes from under-represented communities, ensuring supportive pathways, prioritising cultural safety, and protecting people involved in sport and the sports ecosystem from abuse, bullying, intimidation, discrimination or harassment (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2024).

The Australian Government is taking a renewed interest in sports diplomacy – the strategic use of sports to bring people, nations, and institutions closer together via their shared passion for physical pursuits – to strengthen Australia’s international relations.

Recent examples of this in practice include the signing of a memorandum of understanding on sports cooperation between Australia and Sri Lanka in October 2023. In October 2024 the Australian Indian Sports, Educational and Cultural Society (AISECS) organised a friendly 30-over cricket match between New South Wales ministers and Indian diplomats from Sydney and Canberra.

An example from within cricket is the 2024 launch of the Melbourne Cricket Academy by Cricket Victoria, in partnership with Indian sports company KheloMore Sport. It will deliver high-quality coaching programs and foster the growth of cricket in Indian schools from early next year.

“The academy aims to build children’s life skills through a structured cricket,

education and teamwork program,” says Harish Rao, a Non-Executive Director at Cricket Victoria who was involved in bringing the academy to life.

“The academy launched in Mumbai and has trained 22 coaches so far. We anticipate delivering the academy in other parts of India and being able to positively impact thousands of young people in India,” he says.

2.5 Multicultural clubs: cricket our way

Cricket can create culturally safe spaces and help to build connections among diaspora groups, with multicultural clubs, tournaments and communities all growing.

Multicultural cricket clubs are clubs founded by and predominantly for people from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds. Cricket Australia doesn’t know how many of Australia’s 3,397 registered community cricket clubs consider themselves multicultural. It does know that around 21 per cent of registered players are from a South Asian background, that numbers of multicultural clubs are growing, and that it’s common for such clubs to have members from more than one country of origin.

At events like Adelaide’s Pashtun Association of South Australia (PASA) Cup and Brisbane’s Multicultural T20 Cup, players are in control of selection and decision-making processes. They are free to speak their languages of choice.

Culturally safe food is often served in abundance, country of origin songs and music are sung and played, and colours and dress are sometimes sung, played and worn. Belonging, worth, social justice, participation and acceptance are fostered through a shared love of cricket.

This is a positive development for social cohesion in Australia. We know that sport

builds social cohesion, with people who play sport being 44 per cent more likely to have mixed-ethnic friendship groups than people who don't play sport (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

But just as there is diversity within the migrant and diaspora experience in Australia, there is diversity in the migrant and diaspora experience of cricket in Australia.

Some South Asian cricketers are attracted to a multicultural club environment right off the bat. Others seek one out after joining but feeling unwelcome or struggling to find a sense of place and belonging in an Anglo-Australian-dominated club environment. Yet others make the move in search of greater cultural and psychological safety after overtly experiencing bias, discrimination and racism.

Giles Gunsekera OAM is a first-generation Australian of Sri Lankan Burgher descent, an impact investor and one of Cricket Australia's 54 Multicultural Ambassadors. Born in New Zealand and raised in Frankston, Victoria, Gunsekera has played cricket since the age of five. He gave the sport up in his teens after experiencing years of racism on and off the cricket pitch. When he felt ready to return to the pitch, he chose a multicultural club.

Members of the South Asian diaspora clearly have the agency, skills, motivation and community-mindedness to create and be in control of their own cricketing experiences, and for the most part, they are better able to do that in a multicultural club environment.



Karan's story

“Growing up in India, I played cricket pretty much every day. But for many families in India, formal cricket is not a priority. It’s not cheap. You play with semi-professional stuff from the get-go in Australia, but in India, we play it quite organically. We’d just get together and start playing; we didn’t have to have the proper gear. We played with a simple piece of wood and used bricks as stumps. We’d chip in and then one of us would go and buy a ball that would last until we lost it. If you had a cricket bat back then, you came from a good family. We’d all share that one good bat; the two runners would swap the bat as they ran between the stumps. The first time I held a leather ball was when I played for my college, and it was like being given a Rolls Royce. After the game we’d take turns taking the ball home and sewing the thread back in to make it last as long as possible.”

-Karan Sharma, Adelaide



Nilkanth's story

“Cricket is in our DNA. Every child is raised watching cricket; it doesn't have any gender. Whenever there is a cricket game, the whole family watches together. It's like a celebration. Back in India when I was growing up, we didn't have a television at home. I'd go to my neighbour's house or my friend's place to watch cricket. It's a sport that we don't just love, but one that we follow religiously.”

“Most houses in India have a terrace, a fenced space on the roof. We often played cricket there. As I got older, we'd play on the oval where there were two or three pitches and one big game going on with multiple teams all playing at the same time. There was a mutual understanding that there won't be any fights, there won't be any arguments. And sometimes the fielders simply stood in the pitch and the batters and bowlers were just –boom, boom, boom– it was chaotic harmony.”

-Nilkanth Shelat, Adelaide

2.6 Case study: the Brisbane Super Kings

Keen to be part of a cricket club that felt like home, in 2012 Sathish Rajendran founded the Brisbane Super Kings Cricket Club. At the time it was Brisbane's only multicultural cricket club, and it remains a leading multicultural cricket club today.

Brisbane Super Kings hosts Brisbane's fastest-growing girls' cricket program, and its largest multicultural sporting event. Rajendran estimates that the club's membership is 80 per cent South Asian-Australians; mostly India-born, but some Pakistan and Bangladesh born members, and some Anglo-Australians too.

"We began as a very social club, but slowly people – especially people from South Asia or the subcontinent – became interested and joined," says Rajendran, an Indian Tamil from Chennai (India) who arrived in

Australia in 2004.

"Honestly, I didn't initially have a vision for a multicultural club. I was amazed by the interest from other ethnicities in joining. I made sure every player, regardless of cultural background, was welcomed and encouraged to give their best to the game. Then we had some interest from Queensland Cricket and Cricket Australia. They saw our growth and encouraged us to focus on the junior side and grassroots."

In the 2024-25 season the club will have 42 teams: 24 senior teams and 18 junior teams, including 15 boys' teams and three girls' teams.

As president, Rajendran oversees a 12-member volunteer committee and 180 actively participating families. He is also a level 2 coach and has stepped back from playing to focus on grassroots coaching for the junior teams.

The club organised its first T20 cricket tournament in 2013 with 24 teams with players identifying as Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan. The next year, participation jumped to 32 teams with players from five countries of origin: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Australia. The BSK Cup has been a fixture of the local



multicultural and community sporting scene ever since and is Brisbane's largest multicultural community sporting event.

Support from all three levels of government, and from Cricket Australia and Queensland Cricket, is fundamental to the club's success.

In 2022, the Brisbane City Council granted Brisbane Super Kings its own clubhouse at Matthew Conwell Oval in Heathwood, where it also has a synthetic pitch. This has had multiple positive impacts on the club. The girls' change room makes it easier for girls to practice straight from school, as they have somewhere safe and private to change. Rajendran and the committee now have a place to store equipment, rather than in their home garages or cars.

It benefits the wider community too, as Brisbane Super Kings partners with local council to make the clubhouse accessible for other community groups. Rajendran says the new clubhouse and other aspects of growing the club wouldn't have been possible without local body support.

"We apply for different infrastructure grants to grow and support our club yearly. Eventually, we got the clubhouse through advocacy from Councillor Angela Owens," says Rajendran. "Having local government support is crucial for us. Without council support, you can't do anything. You need state and federal support, but the local council is the first part. Every council has sports and recreation offices, which have a major voice regarding these matters."

More recently, in August 2024 Brisbane Super Kings hosted its 12th Annual T20 Multicultural Cup and celebrated its latest infrastructure achievement — the installation of a Brisbane City Council and Cricket Australia-funded traditional fence at the BSK Cricket Ground in Forest Lake. Several political representatives attended, with some even taking part in a social cricket game. *"Sport has the power to break down cultural barriers," says Rajendran. "And here we are, one of the biggest multicultural clubs today."*



3. State of play: Australia's cricketing ecosystem



3.1 How cricket works in Australia

Like Australia's other leading sporting codes, cricket is structured in a federated, hierarchical way, with all levels of government involved in shaping and delivering cricket-related policies and programs.

This includes providing support and funding to cricket organisations and clubs, investing in building and maintaining sports-related infrastructure, and sponsoring major sports events. Cricket Australia is the country's peak cricketing body. A not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, it has an approximate value of \$79 million (CNBC, 2024). It governs professional and amateur cricket in Australia, with six member and two non-member associations. High-performing professional and elite players can make a good living playing for domestic and international teams and leagues, but most formal play and participation happens at the grassroots, community club level.

Community clubs are not-for-profit, volunteer-run organisations that are guided by national and state sport policies, but have considerable autonomy in their operations. They must translate policy agendas into practice and are expected to develop a participation base and support the development of talented young players (Ramón Spaaij, 2020).

Admission to professional and elite play can only be achieved by participation in and progression through Cricket Australia-affiliated and controlled pathways. If a person was to enter and travel the formal cricket pathway from beginner to professional as it looks today, they'd join the Woolworths Cricket Blast at their local cricket club at age five, transition to junior club cricket at nine, then move on to representative cricket, premier cricket and then senior premier cricket. They'd likely spend some time in an emerging performance

squad then enter the sought-after realms of professional and elite cricket. This is the formal, organised side of cricket.

Cricket is also played informally – think backyard cricket, beach cricket and social cricket played at the park. In South Asia gully cricket (street cricket), terrace cricket and tape ball come under the banner of informal sport too (although tape ball has been formalised in its home country of Pakistan, in the UK and more recently, here in Australia).

Sport is informal when it is a semi-structured, team-based physical activity that is self-organised outside of sanctioned systems. The players in informal sport often adopt a dynamic approach to rules and participation.

In a study of informal sport by researchers at Monash University, cricket was the most popular sporting activity observed, making up 26 per cent of 13,534 observations of informal sport (Jeanes, et al., 2023).

South Asia-born cricketers fondly report playing gully cricket and tape ball on rooftop terraces, in schoolyards and parks and empty lots, and in the streets and laneways in their neighbourhoods on a daily or almost-daily basis. Some went on to play for their schools or colleges, but for many, joining an Australian community cricket club was their first experience of formal cricket, and the systems it is embedded in.

At a macro-level, Cricket Australia is operating in a highly competitive sporting environment. It is one of Australia's four main sporting codes, but not its most popular spectator sport (that is Australian Rules Football). Overall, Australians are becoming less physically active, and less fit, and the number of people playing sport in Australia is in sharp decline. Finding ways to enable and encourage grassroots participation is integral to the future viability of the game.

3.2 The South Asian diaspora: cricket's new market

For the past year or so, engaging and including South Asian-Australians in cricket has been a key focus for Cricket Australia, as it seeks to strengthen cricket's audience share and establish it as a vehicle for social cohesion.

Cricket Australia's latest data indicates that 21 per cent of cricket's registered players are from South Asian backgrounds. This same demographic is also a decent chunk of cricket's fanbase, making up around 100,000 attendances at matches each season (Cricket Australia, 2023).

Increasing the South Asian diaspora's presence in all realms of cricket is the goal of Cricket Australia's first Multicultural Action Plan, released in December 2023. The plan outlines 10 key actions it will take across five years, 2023-2027, to enhance inclusion in the game for Australia's multicultural communities. It shows great progress in this space by Cricket Australia, along with overt acknowledgement that there is work to do to ensure that Australian cricket is as inclusive as it can be (Cricket Australia, 2023).

It's one of four action plans outlined in the Australian Cricket Strategic Plan 2022-27, as part of Cricket Australia's commitment to strengthening its position as a sport for all. The other plans focus on reconciliation, women and girls, and sustainability.

The Multicultural Action Plan's core objectives are to create opportunities, break down barriers, build trust and relationships, and make a difference. Its 10 actions include enhancing talent pathways, a community coach and volunteer leadership program, a South

Asian mentoring and leadership program, a new multicultural ambassador program, and cultural awareness and unconscious bias training for Cricket Australia staff.

Among its end goals are further positioning cricket as a vehicle for social cohesion, and getting more multicultural community members playing cricket, attending games, or following the sport. It hopes to double the number of players of South Asian cultural backgrounds playing in first-class teams and domestic T20 Women's Big Bash League and Big Bash League by 2027 (from 4.2 per cent to 8 per cent), double the number of South Asians attending matches, and increase registered South Asian players by 30,000 (Cricket Australia, 2023).

Hitting this mark seems entirely possible, given the stellar turnout during the 2022 Men's T20 Cricket World Cup, when more than 150,000 fans attended two games featuring India and Pakistan. It has also seen a 60 per cent increase in girls and 16 per cent increase in boys of South Asian heritage in Woolworths Cricket Blast and junior cricket in 2022-23 (Cricket Australia, 2023) and a record year for cricketering engagement and participation with diverse communities in 2024 (Cricket Australia, 2024).

The Multicultural Action Plan has been well received, says Michael Napper.

"We've seen a lot of progress in terms of engagement and building trust since it was released. The Multicultural Action Plan is a very positive start, but it's a journey – we've got to make sure we're engaging and building trust at all levels of the cricket system, not just at the top. We need to get these messages and practices filtering right down to grassroots level."

A dedicated working group that sits across the cricketering ecosystem's state and territory representatives meets quarterly to reflect on progress and plan next steps.

"The various state territories are responsible for this area," says Napper. "We're certainly seeing some variation in how they're implementing the plan, and we've got some work to do there."

Napper points to Cricket NSW's proactive

development of its own South Asian Engagement Strategy as an example of the kind of responsiveness it's after.

"The New South Wales strategy takes a lot of the national work and then creates a region-specific plan. For example, they have developed a tape ball competition, which

has been extremely well received by South Asian communities, particularly for people with Pakistani heritage. They're really going above and beyond, and we'll see the benefits in the next couple of years."

3.3 Case study: Adelaide's Punjab Lions Cricket Club

Along with some Punjab-born friends, Karan Sharma formed the Punjab Lions Cricket Club in 2018. The team got off to a winning start but has struggled to find places to train, let alone secure a home ground.

The club has approximately 24 members, and the capacity to put forward one senior men's A grade team to district-level competitions, organised variously by the Adelaide Turf Cricket Association (ATCA), the South Australian Cricket Association (SACA), the Adelaide and Suburban Cricket Association (ASCA) and

the Pashtun Association of South Australia (PASA).

Sharma says 95 per cent of the players are from India, mostly Punjab, but they also have players from Sri Lanka and Pakistan. They were motivated to do their own thing by frustration at knowing they were high level players but not being given the opportunity to play at their level with already established clubs.

"We love our cricket, and at the other clubs where we were playing, we were punching above our weight but not getting through to the higher grades," says Sharma, who works as a senior social worker for the Government of South Australia.

In its first season, 2018-19, the club won PASA's T20 tournament. It then won the ASCA Section 3 McAvaney Trophies Cup. After that the club was admitted to ATCA to play turf cricket. It has since made the Division 2 finals twice but hasn't won.



Sharma says bias and a lack of access to training facilities are contributing factors.

Despite asking, the Punjab Lions has not been allocated a place to train by SACA or ATCA. Instead, the club, which is entirely funded by players and the local Punjab-Australian community, pays \$200 to hire an indoor training facility for up to two hours a week. Here they can only practice bowling and batting; they cannot practice fielding.

“In the grand final last year, we dropped 15 catches, and I can’t blame anybody because we can’t train properly, because we don’t have training grounds.”

Sharma reckons the team’s lack of inclusion is also about its name, and about language.

“There are two other local South Asian teams who have changed their names and earned facilities and a ground. We’ve had people suggest we make our name more generic. But we are proud to be Punjab. Why should we change our name?”

He says the team is also regularly penalised for speaking Punjabi on the field in every league except PASA’s multicultural one.

“We have been told off and walked off the ground for talking to our own players in our own language. Another team’s player was abusing us, and my player couldn’t understand as he had only been in Australia for 12 months. We were reprimanded because we didn’t talk back to him in English.”

Sharma now thinks there’s “no way” the team will ever get its own clubrooms. But he hopes to gain access to training facilities and plans to keep advocating, so that younger players and future generations can play the way they want to.

“We’re not asking for an arm and a leg; we just want training facilities for a couple of hours a week. We’re okay with sharing, but we’ve come to realise other people do not want to share with us. We’ve had incidents where we have booked the oval and another club has watered the field so we can’t train. Or they have locked the gate so we can’t get in.”

He says SACA is not interested unless you are an established club.

“But then, how do you get established?”



3.4 A clash of cricketing cultures

Cricket Australia says penalising players for using a language other than English on the field, as experienced by the Punjab Lions Cricket Club in Adelaide, is not a position it condones.

“This is definitely not a Cricket Australia policy or rule. Our policies are about treating everyone with respect and fairness, and that includes being able to speak your preferred language with your teammates,” says Michael Napper, Senior Strategy Lead at Cricket Australia.

“A ruling like this is highly likely to come down to an individual umpire’s decisions in that moment. Grassroots players and volunteers need to be aware that many languages are being used in the field at elite level cricket and international cricket,” says Napper.

He goes on to explain that just as Cricket Australia is not sure how many community cricket clubs consider themselves multicultural, it also does not know how many South Asian identifying umpires and coaches there are. In fact, it is not certain how many umpires and coaches there are at all, as many of these positions are filled by unregistered volunteers.

“Our data modelling suggests that 48 per cent of all coaches are registered, and of those, 14 per cent seem likely to be South Asian-Australian. We’re currently encouraging coaches to register and will soon start the process with umpires.”

This issue highlights the challenges of an unregulated volunteer workforce, and a dispersed, federated system. Cricket Australia anticipates its registration drive will enable better data and better regulation. It is also rolling out a cultural bias training program, which, once road-tested and optimised, will be compulsory for all staff at Cricket Australia, and at the state and territory associations.

SACA and ATCA have not responded to a request for comment on this issue.

Dr Lucas Moreira dos Anjos Santos and Dr Thomas Heenan of the Monash Intercultural Lab say South Asian migration is transforming Australian cricket’s cultural base, and that outer suburban cricket pitches are becoming culturally contested spaces (Santos & Heenan, 2023). In 2023 they completed a series of surveys of cricket club playing lists in Victoria and identified geographic areas of high South Asian participation in official Cricket Australia and unofficial South Asian competitions.

“South Asian participation is transforming the traditional Anglocentric base of Australian cricket,” says Dr Santos. *“Though Anglocentrism remains entrenched in the game’s administration and state and national teams, club competitions on Melbourne and Sydney’s outer suburban rims are becoming South Asianised.”*

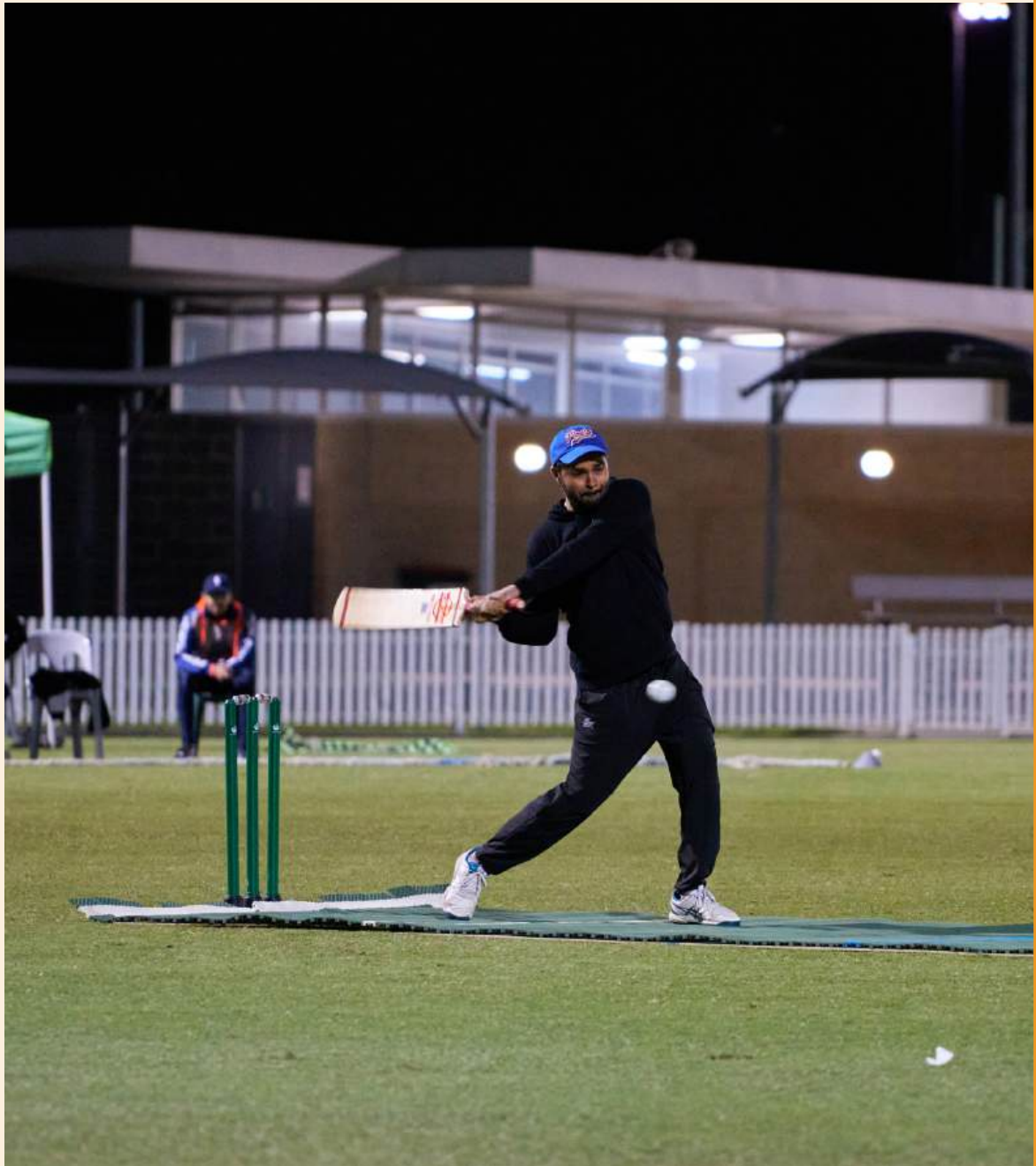
Dr Santos says this is resulting in a clash of cricketing cultures – one that is posing challenges for administrators at local and elite levels, and for municipal authorities responding to communities’ demands for access to limited sporting space (Santos & Heenan, 2023).

“South Asianisation is challenging and will continue to challenge Australian cricket’s capacity to move beyond its Anglocentric roots and meaningfully embrace multiculturalism.”

Harish Rao is a Non-Executive Director at Cricket Victoria who wants to encourage migrants to play outside of multicultural clubs and competitions. *“Cricket is like a religion in India and other parts of the subcontinent,”* he says. *“When migrants come here, they already have cricket as part of their DNA and it’s important to them that they can play cricket here. They gain comfort from playing cricket with each other, but I think it’s very important that we continue to encourage migrants to integrate into society and be part of the wider cricketing ecosystem, and not create their own clubs and competitions. This will improve social cohesion.”*

From Pakistan to the World: Tape Ball

Tape ball cricket (or just, tape ball) originated in the streets of Karachi in Pakistan in the 1960s. An informal version of cricket, it's played with a tennis ball wrapped in electrical or insulating tape and a curved, lightweight bat. Tennis balls are more affordable and available than a leather and cork hard ball, and demand less in the way of additional padding and safety equipment. Tape ball is typically played in streets, driveways, empty parking lots, or small grass areas and makeshift pitches. All this combines to give the ball speed and bounce, making for a fast-paced and exciting game. It has started to be played around the world, and in recent years tape ball has become formalised. Many professional Pakistan-born cricketers started out playing tape ball and sometimes still play in professional tape ball leagues. In early 2024 the England and Wales Cricket Board launched a new national tape ball competition, and Australia is following suit. Cricket NSW recently launched its inaugural Sydney Thunder Tape Ball League, in which seven teams competed.



4. Access and inclusion: challenges and solutions



4.1 Systems literacy, or knowing how to play the game

Before migrating to Australia, many cricket-loving members of the South Asian diaspora had not experienced grassroots or community cricket in a formal way.

While most Australians first experience sport and cricket informally, it's become clear through this research that for South Asian-Australians, particularly those who spent their childhoods in their country of ancestry, cricket is experienced in a predominantly informal way more frequently, and for much longer, than by Anglo-Australians.

This means that members of Australia's South Asian diaspora, particularly new migrants, are not always or often familiar with the intersecting roles, relationships, social conventions, rules, traditions and behaviours demonstrated or expected at a typically Anglo-Australian cricket club.

To enter, participate in and succeed in the cricketing ecosystem, people must be able to understand, interpret, negotiate, navigate and connect the dots between the various system elements to successfully participate in that system.

“Many of us learn the formal rules and regulations of cricket after coming to Australia. We had to take it upon ourselves, make ourselves educated,” says Karan Sharma of Adelaide's Punjab Lions Cricket Club.

Another multicultural club coach shared that he needs to spend a decent amount of time explaining how cricket works in Australia to new families, developing trust and understanding until they feel ready to continue.

Implicit in their words is a dearth of systems literacy. Do the current ways into cricket participation – playing, fandom, volunteering, coaching, administration –

assume systems literacy for all? Is how the cricketing system works obvious enough? How do people learn, when there's no-one who knows how (or is willing) to show them? Can cricket clubs and administrators find more inclusive and culturally safe ways to invite people in? Is there room in the system for more than one way of going about things?



Maia Tua-Davidson of Welcoming Clubs (pictured above) brings up ‘taxi driver cricket’ as an example of cricketers operating outside of the formal Australian cricketing system in a way that can cause conflict and disharmony for both parties involved – the cricketers who are keen to stretch their legs and have a match, and the club on whose grounds they’re trying to do it.

Taxi driver cricket is quite literally cricket played by taxi drivers making use of empty grounds on their lunchbreaks or downtimes. It's commonplace on the subcontinent, and increasingly, in Australia.

“The issue with people just turning up and using facilities is insurance; Australian insurance requirements require a club to know who's playing on its grounds. And to do that a club would normally like them to be paying members. So that can be a challenge for all involved,” explains Tua-Davidson.

“In many other countries, drivers go and

play cricket every lunchtime, on whatever public space they can find. So, they're doing something that makes a lot of sense to them. It's not right or wrong, it's just different, and there's an opportunity for joint learning in that.

"Newer communities have to learn about the systems here, but Australian sporting systems also have to learn that things can be done differently and must be prepared to adapt if they want to serve their core purpose of providing sports experiences and being a place for community and opening up access to elite pathways and performance."

Welcoming Clubs delivers anti-racism and cultural competence and inclusion training to sports clubs and associations around Australia.

Tua-Davidson says that systems literacy – understanding how the Australian sporting system works, and how to navigate it – is a privilege most club volunteers who have grown up within or around Australia's cricketing ecosystem do not realise they have.

"I think the piece that grassroots sports clubs most commonly aren't doing or aren't aware that they need to do or would benefit from doing to be more inclusive is self-reflect on their own personal privilege, the biases they might have, and how their experiences of access have informed the way that they engage with other people," says Tua-Davidson.

"The privilege is in just knowing how to do things, how to access things, and understanding how sport operates here. The next piece of the inclusion puzzle is then understanding that if someone who is new to Australia or from a different cultural background, if they do something differently it's not wrong, it's just different. We need to move away from an inclusion model based on people fitting into the system, and encourage the system to change to fit people in."

Rana Hussain is a first-generation Muslim-Indian Australian and former advisor and Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Cricket Australia who is now a sport and belonging leader, a broadcaster and one of Cricket Australia's

54 Multicultural Ambassadors.

She says that if cricketing culture is to be reconfigured and reimagined, the custodians of the game must relinquish control.

"Cricket Australia has finally come to the party on multiculturalism, and it's clearly landed that this is core business for them. I'm glad that they're here. The Multicultural Action Plan is a real signal of intent, and I think it's quite genuine. Changing the system or opening the Australian cricket team up to looking and sounding different is a confronting idea for a lot of people. For the Australian cricket team to look and sound different – to truly reflect multicultural Australia is going to pierce the heart of the identity crisis that we're experiencing as a nation," says Hussain.

"Diversity is bringing in the people that we haven't previously before. Inclusion is making sure that mix works and is functional. Equity is making sure the structures and the systems are fair for everybody and even up the playing field. And if we do all of that, and we do the cultural work, we should land in belonging."

Systems literacy is just one challenge members of Australia's South Asian diaspora must overcome. A mainstream club president shared with me that although South Asian families attend their club, they rarely volunteer for committee membership. Do they know that's how it works? He wasn't sure.

Other inequitable aspects of the diaspora experience that can and do subject people to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation – intersectionality – include the cost of playing cricket, a clash of cultures and cultural identities, visa status and requirements, systemic and individual bias, discrimination and racism, language, religion, gender and gender norms, inequitable access to resources, lack of cultural and psychological safety, lack of representation, lack of childcare, non-inclusive policies and practices, and the Anglocentric nature of the Australian cricketing ecosystem.

4.2 Case study: the Canberra Nepalese Cricket Club

Canberra's Nepal-born community has grown 80-fold over a decade, from less than 100 people in 2011 to 5,700 in the 2021 Census. Along with this fast-growing population has come a burgeoning Nepalese cricketing community.

The Canberra Nepalese Cricket Club is Canberra's first Nepalese cricket club. In the 2024-25 season, it is able to put forward one senior men's 1st grade team. The team is made up solely of Nepalese players, though in previous seasons there have been players from other South Asian backgrounds too.

"When I joined in 2020, we'd already won one of the local tournaments. Since then, a lot of Nepalese people have moved to Canberra from different parts of Australia. So, the Nepalese community is growing," says Nitesh Nepal, who migrated to

Australia in 2018, works in recruitment and is the club's vice president.

Since the Canberra Nepalese Cricket Club was formed in 2017, five more Nepalese teams have been established and the newly formed Nepalese Cricketing Association – Canberra, to bind them together. For the 2024-25 summer season, the association has organised a fortnightly tournament.

"We're not involving any other communities – no offence to anyone, but we wanted to do something just for us. Our focus is not just competition, it's about how people want to enjoy and play. The tournament is important because we can gather together. There's a lot of mutual respect. Before the start of the game, we play the national anthem of Nepal. This makes me very proud and brings goosebumps. Standing on foreign soil and chanting our national anthem makes us feel very united."

Nepal hopes that in the future his club will be able to develop junior teams and women's and girls' teams. But he reckons there is more community building and development to do first. He feels well supported by the local cricketing bodies but says there are times when he and his team members have "been lacking"



because they must work certain hours to meet residency requirements.

And then, the team doesn't have a home ground, so it books nets and grounds to train on. These must be shared with other teams, so availability is sometimes limited. Some of the cost of hiring the nets is covered by grants from the club's major sponsor, Success Education. The remaining cost, the players split among themselves.

"That is the goal; in the coming five years that we want our team to play premier cricket, on turf. But we've got a long way to go. Running a cricket team or club is not easy. I want to get more involved, so if I don't have any work, sometimes I volunteer as an umpire for a day. I'm not interested in getting anything back for it, that's just out of my love for the sport. But it's certainly not easy to find that time."

Nepal also shares he doesn't feel experienced enough to approach the local cricketing bodies for more support for his team – yet. He hopes to feel ready soon and is being informally mentored by a friend and peer from a more well established Indian Australian multicultural club.

"We don't have that sort of experience. So, we have our doubts in us. But I think in a couple of years we'll get that bit of polish. We'll have people who will be stress-free from their visa qualification and they'll be a resident here, and we'll be more formidable, with voices that can represent the club. From what I've seen, they are very much willing to help. It's just that we have to go with the proper proposal and a good reach out."

Welcoming Clubs

Welcoming Clubs is Welcoming Australia's overarching initiative for programs that embrace the power of sport and recreation as a vehicle for inclusion, opportunity and belonging for all members of the community. It is inspiring and activating community sport and recreation clubs and the organisations responsible for supporting them (such as local councils and associations) to foster an environment of genuine acceptance, equity and unity. It does this by delivering tailored anti-racism and cultural competence training to sports clubs and associations around Australia, and by providing internal and external measurement tools that generate valuable insights into the attitudes and readiness of governing bodies and their club communities.





Giles' story

"For many years I was the only brown person in the schoolyard and on the cricket pitch. I experienced constant everyday racism in both places, but it was much worse at cricket. I was called all sorts of names- most often while batting, but occasionally while fielding or bowling too. When I was 16, I stopped playing cricket. I was sick of being in an unsafe environment. As much as I loved the game, I didn't feel it was worth the psychological pain. I started playing again five years later, at university, where I played in a multicultural league. This was a much safer and more inclusive environment. Now I live in Sydney, and play with India Avenue, an inner western club I helped set up. The Over 50s Masters Team I play for in Strathfield is renowned for our post-game catering of Sri Lankan rice and curry - a popular change up from the usual sausages in bread!"

-Giles Gunesequera, Sydney



Nitesh's story

"I'm from Kathmandu, Nepal. I moved to Australia in 2018 for my studies, for a better lifestyle and for good opportunity. I was amazed when I first landed in Australia and started playing cricket. There is a lot of infrastructure. In every suburb in Sydney or in Canberra there's a small net where you can go and do a bit of batting or bowling; you don't have that sort of thing back home. In Kathmandu, I used to play cricket in school. We'd play on the basketball court. We used to think nothing of diving onto the cement to catch the ball when we were doing our fielding. And then, whenever we had a game, it would be in a football ground where we put our stumps down and get an old mat and nail it into place and then that becomes the pitch. That's where you're batting and bowling. That's how we started. I was just laughing with my mate the other day that now, I'm scared to dive on those good grounds here in Australia when I play on Saturdays. But back then we'd scratch our hands up on the cement and we just didn't care."

-Nitesh Nepal, Canberra

4.3 The cost of participation

While entry-level grassroots cricket for kids aged five through eight is a pretty good deal for families (thanks to the Woolworths Cricket Blast Program) the ongoing costs faced by cricketers and clubs make it an expensive sport.

The Australian Sports Foundation thinks that for many, the cost of participation is prohibitive. It estimates that the average per season cost of sport in 2021 was \$1,150. This considers registration fees, and additional costs for equipment, travel and uniforms (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024). It has also found that community sport in Australia is severely underfunded, with one in four small clubs contemplating closing and 68 per cent experiencing increased running costs in 2023. Struggles at club level are trickling down to players, with one in four athletes considering leaving their sport (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

These challenges are often compounded for multicultural clubs and their members, particularly new migrants who face personal, financial or employment-related constraints, such as having to work certain hours to fulfil visa requirements or needing to prioritise work and income over sport and volunteering as they build a new life in Australia.

At a club level, access to cricketing infrastructure – places to train and play – is controlled by local councils and cricketing bodies. To access these, a team must understand and participate in the cricketing ecosystem. Even so, gaining access to public playing grounds, ovals and pitches is not always equitable or straightforward, with demand for facilities outstripping supply and some teams missing out because often, older, more established Anglo-Australian clubs have the lion's share of access to infrastructure. This leaves more newly formed clubs – often multicultural ones – at a disadvantage. Several South Asian-

Australian players shared that to train when or as often as they'd like, they have to hire indoor training facilities. Some can do this with aid from a sponsor; others must pay from their own pockets.

Sathish Rajendran of the Brisbane Super Kings is well versed in club-level systems navigation and the cost of infrastructure. He says that finding a place to play cricket can be challenging, because cricket is an expensive sport that offers less return than many other sports.

“First, you must find a green space and establish a club. Finding green space in metropolitan areas is difficult because most are already developed and utilised. It's easier to find green space in regional areas, but your community might not be able to travel to use that ground. Once you've found a green space, you must navigate all the regulations and then, once you have all the settings for the ground, you need to secure the facilities. Because the costs are covered by the ratepayers, the council or the authorities will analyse and decide how many people will use the ground,” he explains.

“This is where cricket becomes expensive; if you're playing a whole day, only 22 people use the ground. From a cost perspective, soccer or rugby is more attractive. If you have multiple teams playing shorter games, there might be 200 people using them. The T20 format is a perfect example of maximising ground usage. We can have multiple games going on at once, allowing us to engage more players and families in the sport. The key is to advocate for access to these facilities, ensuring we can sustain our club's growth and provide opportunities for everyone interested in playing cricket.”

Nilkanth Shelat from the Adelaide Warriors Cricket Club would like there to be more grounds and ovals available but acknowledges local cricketing bodies are doing their best to accommodate everyone with the facilities they have. He suggests grants or subsidies as a practical way of improving accessibility for all.

“I don't want cricket to be available only for rich people, or for people who can afford it. I'd like to see better facilities, and a few more grounds and ovals made available, and

the grounds there are kept in a playable state all year round. Backyard cricket is gradually disappearing due to smaller houses being built, and hiring indoor nets is expensive – this means Australia could miss out on so much talent. Grants or vouchers would help to improve access to indoor training facilities or one-on-one coaching.”

4.4 Reliance on a volunteer economy

Running a cricket club is a lot of work. In 2024, finding the time and human capital to populate a volunteer workforce is a challenge being experienced across the board – including at multicultural clubs.

Grassroots cricket is heavily dependent on volunteers for its survival, with Cricket Australia describing volunteers as the *“lifeblood of our game”*.

During cricket season, cricket club managers, including those at multicultural clubs, easily spend between 20 and 30 hours a week on club business.

The Adelaide Warriors Cricket Club introduced a junior program in 2023 and has an under-10 team and an under-12 team. It also runs a Woolworths Cricket Blast program. Juniors program coordinator Nilkanth Shelat says keeping things going with a volunteer workforce is a constant struggle.

He estimates he spends five hours a week coordinating registrations and teams, answering questions, organising uniforms and liaising with council in the season lead up. Once the season starts, the focus shifts to communicating with families and coaches and organising social events. This is a big commitment around family and work, and one not all club members are able to make.

“I didn’t take up my role because I was keen on spending hours of my time behind all these things, but because I understand that, when there is a community, someone

has to step up. There must be people like me who are willing to come forward and give that time to make sure we are able to give this platform to anyone and everyone who wants to play – especially kids, who are the future of this game,” says Shelat. Securing a regular coach is his biggest challenge and one he says he has literally lost sleep over. Coaching positions are currently filled voluntarily at the club, but out of necessity, the club thinks it might have to start paying its coaches.

“Once kids enrol with us, they do not pay extra for coaching. It is the club’s responsibility to coach them and organise games. If the club is willing to hire a coach, then the cost will have to be borne by the club. We are a not-for-profit community club, which poses some financial challenges and limitations.”

Other South Asian grassroots cricketers share that they’d like to grow their club, but their visa requirements, workloads or family demands mean they don’t have the time or capacity to make it happen.

We know that, like rates of sports participation, volunteering rates are falling. Like sport, volunteering is thought of as either formal (where volunteering is done through an organisation or group) or informal (where it is undertaken directly in the community – and not necessarily considered ‘volunteering’ by the person doing it). Data analysis by Volunteering Australia shows that those born overseas in a non-English speaking country are more likely to volunteer informally than those born in Australia, and that overall, they volunteer less (Volunteering Australia, 2024).

Is a grassroots participation model that is so heavily reliant on volunteers sustainable at individual, community and institutional levels? Is sport’s volunteering model proactive, inclusive or attractive enough to members of the South Asian diaspora? Is it going to be enough for the future viability of the game? What does volunteering cost people?

“You’ll see plenty of South Asian men on the sidelines watching their kids play cricket, but not coaching or being part of a committee,” says Giles Guneskera. *“We found out it’s because no one asked them;*

no one told them how this whole thing works. No one's explained pathways to them, no one's engaged them," he says.

"There's a socioeconomic difference in people who can volunteer, and those who can't. A migrant in Sydney's eastern suburbs is typically in a white-collar job and has flexibility with time. In contrast, in western Sydney, we often see mums bringing their kids to training because the dads are working one or two demanding jobs and simply don't have the time. Engaging people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is more challenging, but they also represent a significant portion of the migrant population. This creates a disconnect that needs to be addressed."

Rana Hussain believes clubs are being *"run off the smell of an oily rag"*, and more education at volunteer level is needed.

"But how on earth do you get people who are already giving their time to give more time and get their heads around this? I think there's a useful piece of work in connecting all those dots for different communities and upskilling them and their understanding of how the system works," says Hussain.

Finding ways to safeguard volunteering is a focus both within and outside of cricketing culture.

Molina Asthana served on an Australian Sports Commission's Sports Volunteer Coalition team looking into how to get more people of diverse backgrounds into volunteering. *"We looked at how we can reward volunteers,"* she says. *"How do we understand their motivations and what drives them? Is there a way of micro-credentialing what volunteers do? That's not specific to cricket; it's for all sport. If you can motivate and retain your volunteers, sport will be much better for it."*

Preeti Daga suggests a more cohesive approach to rewards and recognition.

"I know many parents who volunteer out of love for the game and their kids. But people should be valued for their time and contribution. How do you bring them together and leverage their expertise and skills? A rewards and recognition platform that celebrates and incentivises these

heroes is a great start. It's going to get more people involved. Some clubs and regions have this in place, and some do it better than others. Is there an opportunity to do it at a broader level or in a way that that can really grow its presence?"

Volunteering Australia is recommending volunteer passports and cost of living relief through a volunteer grants program. The Australian Sports Foundation is working with the Australian Government to attract new sources of philanthropic funding to community sport across Australia. It's proposing including Community Sport and Amateur Athletes as a charitable purpose under section 12 of the Charities Act (C'th) 2013 (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024). Cricket Australia says it is engaging with the Australian Sports Foundation about the proposal but is *"not yet in a position"* to form an opinion.

"We absolutely need volunteers to keep the game running at community level. To ensure the ongoing sustainability of community clubs and associations, Australian Cricket is exploring ways to streamline administrative tasks and support professional competition administration services," says Cricket Australia's National Volunteer Manager, Ben DeAraugo.

Some of the initiatives it is exploring involve technology, micro-volunteering (breaking roles down in smaller tasks), streamlining administrative tasks, and initiatives to better support committee, coaching and volunteering roles.

4.5 Gender and gender norms: the double-glazed ceiling

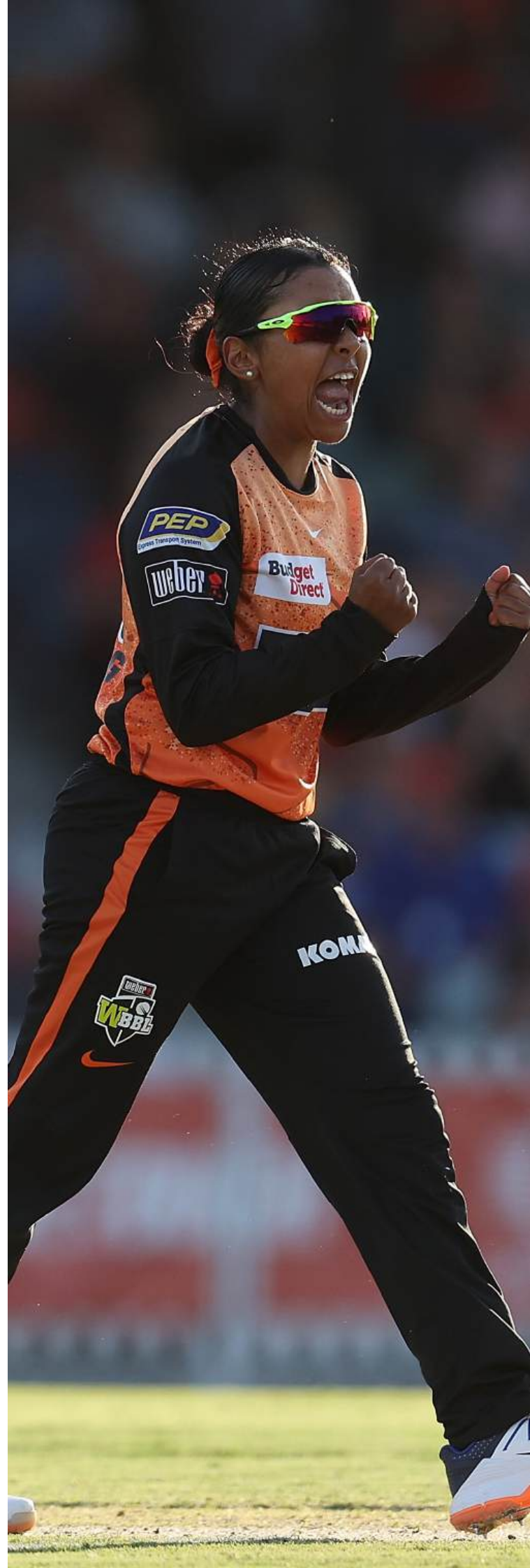
Cricket is Australia's highest paying professional sport for women. Even so, a gender pay gap still exists and at a grassroots level, women's involvement in cricket is arguably peripheral or supportive.

We know that girls and women participate in organised sport at a significantly lower rate than boys and men. Women are often the wives, partners or mothers of players and volunteers, rather than players or volunteers themselves. Barriers to participation include inadequate access to appropriate facilities, training venues and equipment, a lack of female coaches and umpires, childcare challenges and a gap in pay, resources and sponsorship for women's sport (Australian Sports Foundation, 2024).

These challenges are compounded for South Asian women, for whom sports has not traditionally been encouraged.

"Sport for women, particularly women from South Asian countries, has traditionally not been something that's really done or promoted. You're meant to be a homemaker, and there are certain gender norms associated with sport: people feel that if you are sporty, you are not feminine enough and that it promotes anti-social behaviour for women," says Molina Asthana, who migrated to Australia from India in 2004.

Asthana supports women of diverse backgrounds to participate in sport through her not-for-profit Multicultural Women in Sport. One of Cricket Australia's 54 Multicultural Ambassadors and a Change Our Game Ambassador for the State of Victoria, Asthana is also involved with AFL, gymnastics, table tennis and handball.





Molina's story

"I am originally from India. I came here about 20 years ago. I'm a lawyer by profession, but sport is my passion. I didn't participate much in sport when I was growing up in India, even though cricket was all around us. At that point there were no women playing, so I was mainly a spectator. But when I moved to Australia, I saw a sporting culture that women were able to be part of all around me, people walking, running, cycling to work and organised sport. I joined a running group and have done a few half marathons now. I found that sport really helps women, particularly of diverse backgrounds. It helps with making new friends, settling into a new country, finding peer support, confidence, a spirit of camaraderie, and strength of mind and body. But I didn't see many women of diverse backgrounds doing that, so I started my own not-for-profit, Multicultural Women in Sport, to support women of diverse backgrounds to get engaged in sport to promote greater empowerment, wellbeing and sense of belonging."

-Molina Asthana, Melbourne



Preeti's story

"As a girl growing up, the ambition or just the possibility of being a professional cricketer never came, because it just wasn't there. Women in cricket just wasn't an established concept; cricket was a men's game. And there were biases that women never would or should play cricket professionally.

"But in our backyards that wasn't the case. We'd all play together, boys and girls, everybody who lived on the street. We made makeshift wickets and bats, whatever we could get our hands on, we'd turn that into a cricket game and play. We lived in Delhi, in a predominantly Bengali community. Our family is from Rajasthan, so there was diversity in languages and food and ways of doing things. Cricket brought us together in a way that nothing else did."

-Preeti Daga, Melbourne

“It’s different in Australia, because kids start playing sport very early on in school and will participate at some level,” says Asthana. “Even so, seeing more women in sport and recognised in sport is a very recent thing for Australia. Many sporting facilities still do not have changing rooms for women or lighting for women playing and practicing late at night. There are not enough women broadcasters, women in sports media, or women in officiating, umpiring and coaching roles.”

“We are addressing these issues and it’s much better than in South Asian countries. But it is still a problem. Women of diverse backgrounds face what I call the double-glazed ceiling; barriers when you’re not made welcome in sporting spaces to overcome, and then barriers from our own culture to overcome too. So, it can be difficult for women of diverse backgrounds to participate in sport.”

Asthana thinks cricket is a good sporting choice for women of South Asian backgrounds, as it is a non-contact sport.

Cricket Australia says increasing the participation of women and girls in cricket is a major goal. It released a Women and Girls Action Plan for the decade 2024-2034 in April 2024, outlining plans to invest in facilities, ensure at least 40 per cent women in leadership roles across Australian cricket, and raise the profiles of inspirational role models like Alana King (pictured on p.36).

King is a right-handed batter and spin bowler and first-generation Indian-Australian who made her international debut in 2022. Along with Usman Khawaja, King is one of the faces of the Multicultural Action Plan.

“Australian Cricket’s Multicultural Action Plan was developed following deep engagement with the community,” says Cricket Australia’s National Volunteer Manager Ben DeAraugo.

“A key pillar is the Participation area, where a Community Coach and Volunteer Leadership Program is being established to support committee, coaching and volunteering roles. Six women from different backgrounds will take part in

Project Inspire, a new leadership program for women in cricket commencing in December 2024,” he says.

“Community cricket has been ably supported by volunteers for over a century. These volunteers were traditionally male, dedicated to their clubs and associations and with a love of the game. As society has evolved, community cricket clubs have evolved, and we now see many more women and girls and people from culturally diverse backgrounds leading programs and teams. This is something we have worked hard to encourage and a great change for the game.”

Giles Gunesequera became strategically involved in the game in response to research showing that subcontinental men were not especially supportive or interested in women’s cricket. As an ambassador for the 2020 and 2022 T20 World Cups, Gunesequera worked on engaging the subcontinental community around the women’s event.

“I worked with the ICC on that, alongside other T20 World Cup ambassadors. The end result was fantastic. More men attended than had ever attended in the past, and they brought their families, so it was successful for the whole community. The reality is that people of all ages and genders are interested in cricket. It’s about getting greater engagement in a game that is well recognised and known but not traditionally positioned in front of women. It’s about breaking those gender norms and those stereotypes at a grassroots level.”

The Australia India Women's Cricket Association

In April 2024 the newly formed Australia India Women's Cricket Association (AIWCA) conducted its first tour of India with an all-girls under-17 team. The team competed in seven matches in Delhi and Jaipur. Eight of the 14 team members identify as being of Indian origin. AIWCA's mission is to provide exemplary leadership in the Australia-India female cricket community and offer young girls quality development and high-level domestic and international playing opportunities.

"I wanted to provide a platform to ensure that Australian Indian female players can train, travel and play cricket with experiences that will drive them to achieve whatever they want. Next up, we are looking at taking the team to Indonesia to play and support their growth in female cricket," says AIWCA founder and ICC Level 3 High Performance Coach Ron 'Tiger' Woods.

"On our recent tour of India, senior players took on mentoring roles to foster cultural awareness, education, and leadership among younger team members. This nurtured their cricketing skills but also built a community where cultural heritage is celebrated."

Players were rotated through various positions and roles in different matches, giving everyone an opportunity to grow and learn under different team dynamics and playing expectations and conditions. The team suffered some hard losses on the tour but won their final game, in Jaipur.

Player Phoebe Laws told Indian Link this final match was the trip's highlight.

"After a few hard losses, close games and almost two weeks spent together, the team really banded together, backing one another to achieve our first win. The encouragement present on the field that day was unmatched and seeing all of the girls using what we had worked so hard for truly came together." (Chakraborty, 2024).

The association plans to travel to New Zealand, Asia and Europe over the next five years.



4.6 Lack of representation in elite player pathways

Seeing people like themselves playing professional and elite sports is important to diverse populations' sense of inclusion and belonging. But only a small percentage of Australia's cricket players are of a South Asian background.

"Having a South Asian player in the Australian team makes us feel connected. It gives us courage that despite all the adversities, there we are. Despite everything, Australia is a fair country. That's why I'm here," says Karan Sharma. Sharma is talking about Usman Khawaja (pictured below). Born in Pakistan, Khawaja migrated to Australia when he was four.

In the 2010-11 season, he made history as the first Pakistani-Australian to wear the Australian cricket team's iconic 'baggy green'. He is known for unapologetically calling out sledging, bias, discrimination and racism in cricket, in politics, and in the world at large.



Khawaja is one of a small percentage of South Asian-Australian elite players. Of all elite players since 2007, only a small percentage (between 2.3-5.3 per cent, depending on the league) identify as being of South Asian background. The disparity remains today, with just 4.2 per cent of players contracted to state and territory teams in 2022-23 identifying as South Asian. Yet 16 per cent of all registered community cricket players, 18 per cent of 5 to 12-year-olds in Woolworths Cricket Blast and 18.1 per cent of players across Australian pathways teams are South Asian (Cricket Australia, 2023).

What is stopping that 18.1 per cent from progressing through the pathways? Will the proportion of elite players who are South Asian-Australian grow over time? Cricket Australia hopes so and is working hard to make this the case.

"We've been introspective and had a good look at everything we're doing, and we've concluded that we need to do more research in this space to be able to get this right," says Michael Napper, Senior Strategy Lead at Cricket Australia.

"We have strong South Asian representation in the pathways at under 12s, 14s, and under 16s level. But there is quite a noticeable drop off from under 16 to under 19, and then into first class and elite teams. We noticed there is an understanding that you can make a very good living by playing cricket in Australia, but there is still a preference for more academic or professional services-focused careers. In some families there is also a real focus on financial reward and supporting families. And parents are often quite involved in those early career decisions. We've hypothesised that this could be one of a number of potential reasons why players are dropping out of the pathway."

To try to bridge this gap, Cricket Australia is launching a scholarship program for the 16 to 19-year-old cohort and will work on creating an understanding that cricket is a genuine career option for talented players.

First-generation Indian-Australian and sport and belonging leader Rana Hussain believes the generational pushback

towards more personal choice has already been made, so elite cricket should already be seeing that progression. She advocates for greater change, and a bigger focus on belonging work.

“I wonder what real sponsorship of potential talent and unbiased selection processes and working to overcome that very real cultural divide would look like.”

When you look at other sports, separate pathways and programs have worked. I’m talking Indigenous academies, culturally diverse academies, NGA [Next Generation Academies] academies in the AFL where people can access more robust, culturally and psychologically safe and inclusive programs, as we continue to improve the current systems as well to make them safer and more accessible for everyone.”

The Usman Khawaja Foundation

Improving access and participation to cricket, including cricketing pathways, is a key goal for the Usman Khawaja Foundation, of which Cricket Australia is a foundation partner. The foundation’s goal is assisting youth from refugee, immigrant, Indigenous, rural, remote and low socioeconomic backgrounds through introductory cricket programs in New South Wales and Queensland. It also hopes to catalyse social mobility through educational and sporting support by providing stationery, uniform, and school fees vouchers; iPads and laptops; and sports apparel, shoes and equipment.

A left-handed top order batter, Khawaja became the first Muslim and first Pakistan-born Australian to receive an Australian Cricket Test baggy green cap. He played his first test in 2011 against England at the Sydney Cricket Ground and has become an iconic – and at times outspoken – member of Australia’s professional cricketing elite, and a global cricketing star. He has represented Australia in all three forms of the game: Tests, One Day and T20 Internationals. Along with professional female cricketer Alana King, Khawaja is also a leading South Asian proponent of Cricket Australia’s Multicultural Action Plan 2023-2027.





Rana's story

"It never occurred to me to play cricket, but I noticed that when I spoke sport and the language of sport, people were interested in me. There was a connection that was built. Sport became my personality, particularly in adolescence. So, I leaned into watching and following cricket. Cricket was also a way to express my Indian identity. Australia was so dominant in cricket in the '90s and 2000s, so to be here and not go for Australia felt like a space where I could push back on a sport narrative that expected a kind of national pride from me, when no one wanted to claim me as Australian in any other way. It became a source of personal pride and a place to exhibit who I am. I was born here, but I'm also a migrant. This led to a lot of conversations querying, well are you Australian or not? If you don't go for the Australian cricket team, then you're not Australian! From a young age I'd argue the point that you can have allegiances in more than one place, and that's not a bad thing."

-Rana Hussain, Melbourne



Harish's story

“My father and grandfather both played cricket in India; my grandfather once played against Douglas Jardine’s English team who were returning via India, having just played against Don Bradman’s Australian team. We migrated to Australia in 1968, when I was two. I played cricket right through my schooling years here in Australia. There were only two people of Indian origin at my high school, but playing sport – in my case, cricket – meant I was able to interact and integrate well. That’s what I hope the Indian community here now can do too – strengthen their social cohesion through cricket. I haven’t played since high school, but I’ve always loved cricket. I feel honoured that I am the only South Asian-Australian presently involved at a board or executive level in the Australian cricketing ecosystem.”

-Harish Rao, Melbourne

4.7 Lack of representation on boards and executive leadership teams

Even less representation is seen at the board level, with just 2 per cent of people of South Asian descent on Australian cricket boards and executive teams across the cricketing ecosystem in 2023.

This 2 per cent equates to one person: Harish Rao. Rao is an India-born, Australian-raised finance professional with business interests in both Australia and India. He was appointed an independent Non-Executive Director of Cricket Victoria in March 2023. He has also held non-executive positions with the Australia India Institute, the Australia India Chamber of Commerce Limited, Australian Friends of ASHA, and is Director of his family's foundation, Australia India Social & Charitable Ventures Limited.

Cricket-loving Rao anticipates that the admission of more South Asian-Australians to board and executive leadership positions in Australian sports and business environments is inevitable.

"I have no doubt that greater representation from the South Asian community will happen; it's just a matter of time. This is the nature of demographics; as people from the subcontinent rise through the executive ranks of corporate Australia, we will see a rise in board representation within cricket. This is what has happened in the US and the UK, which opened their doors to subcontinental migration earlier than Australia did," says Rao.

"I hope to play a bridging role by connecting the South Asian community with Cricket Victoria. It's the fastest-growing cricket-playing community in Victoria and in Australia, and I'm keen to explore how we can bring people from the subcontinent into the broader cricketing ecosystem."

Rao says members of Victoria's South

Asian diaspora often reach out to him, and believes his presence is encouraging their interest and involvement.

Giles Gunesequera says Australia is not doing enough to embrace its multiculturalism.

"It's the same in cricket, netball, soccer, in corporate Australia. We did some work in 2020, looking at South Asian and Southeast Asian community representation on the boards at Australia's top 100 companies. Our research showed that out of approximately 1,000 people, only 15 [1.5 per cent] were from a southeast Asian or South Asian background," says Gunesequera.

Social justice – fairness, equity and equality in society – can be enhanced by improving access to resources and participation in decision-making for under-represented communities.

Molina Asthana believes that sport can indirectly help to create that access.

"I'm very much part of the sporting culture now because I sit on boards and I'm part of those inner circles and sanctums. But I sometimes still feel excluded because there are conversations and decisions that are happening behind my back, that my peers don't necessarily feel I should be included in. I feel I get constantly marginalised by other board members because I'm of a particular race, and they don't necessarily recognise or want to recognise leadership from diverse communities. I feel there is discrimination within the cricketing system itself, and bias and prejudices. That is something that needs to be addressed in an ongoing way, and something I believe Cricket Australia is looking to do," says Asthana.

Senior Strategy Lead at Cricket Australia, Michael Napper, says this is a live conversation, and better board-level representation is being worked on.

"Our goal is for cricket to be a sport for all. We're well aware of the rapidly changing face of Australia. We are very fortunate that a lot of migrants are coming from cricket-loving countries. We want cricket to be a vehicle for social cohesion and inclusion and the most multicultural sport in the country

–a place where everyone feels they can play –whether that’s social cricket or in our national teams. In 10 years, we hope there will be no need for a multicultural action plan. We want multiculturalism and access and inclusion to all aspects of cricket for all to be business as usual.”

Rana Hussain says leaders must understand and embody inclusion themselves and enable it across their boards first, and then strategically filter that down to grassroots level.

looks like at the grassroots level. It’s about accepting that people play cricket all the time and they play it the way they want and to make it easy for people to access in the way they want to. If they’re reading their business right, those boards would look drastically different. There would be plans or succession plans in place that make sure it starts to look different from board level, and then that can filter down to community and grassroots level. Leaders at all levels need to live and breathe the change they want to see,” says Hussain.

“From a cricket-specific point of view, it’s reconfiguring or re-imagining what cricket



5. Conclusion and recommendations



Australian cricket is changing. This stems from a demographic reshuffling of Australia's ethnic and cultural identity, the growing presence and influence of the cricket-loving South Asian diaspora on the formal systems and structures of Australian cricket, and a strategic push from within the Australian cricketing ecosystem towards diversity, equity and inclusion.

Over the past two decades, Australia's South Asian diaspora has steadily grown. Today, people who were born in or are descended from India currently make up Australia's second largest diaspora, and its fastest growing large diaspora community. Other South Asian diaspora groups are also growing, but less quickly.

Like Australia, South Asian countries have a historic and contemporary love of cricket. It is arguably South Asia's number one sport, likened to a religion by many and informally participated in back alleys, empty lots, school yards and on rooftop terraces by most people, from a young age.

Australian cricket, by contrast, exists in a saturated and highly competitive sporting environment. It is one of the country's four main sporting codes, but not its most popular. Play-based participation is sometimes experienced informally, but access to the pathways to professional and elite play and to sporting infrastructure like places to play and train are governed and controlled by a federated hierarchy involving all levels of government, and eight state and territory bodies and associations. This – the cricketing ecosystem – is heavily reliant on a volunteer economy to recruit and retain grassroots community clubs and players.

In *It's not just cricket*, many South Asian migrants share that an awareness of Australia's cricketing prowess and

an expectation and desire that they will be able to participate in cricket as a means of finding community and a sense of belonging informed their decision to migrate to Australia. For first- and second-generation South Asian-Australians, playing cricket was a way to feel connected to their parents' or grandparents' birthplace, to create identity and self-worth, and a sense of belonging.

However, their experiences of Anglocentric Australian cricket clubs and pathways have not always been positive. This is caused by complex, ingrained systemic, cultural and intersectional challenges to access and inclusion that are experienced both individually and collectively by diaspora populations, and that subject members of the diaspora to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. These intersectional challenges include a lack of systems literacy, the cost of playing cricket, a clash of cultures and cultural identities, visa status and requirements, every day and systemic bias, discrimination and racism, language, religion, gender and gender norms, inequitable access to resources, lack of representation, lack of childcare, and non-inclusive policies and practices.

Many South Asian players are responding to these intersectional challenges by creating and being in control of their own cricketing experiences in a multicultural club environment. Multicultural cricket clubs are founded by and predominantly for people from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds. Diaspora members are free to speak their languages of choice. Culturally safe food is often served in abundance, country of origin songs, music and dress are sometimes sung, played and worn, and belonging, worth, social justice, participation and acceptance are fostered and maintained through a shared love of cricket.

Meanwhile Cricket Australia is increasingly self-aware, and keen to bring the South Asian diaspora into the fold by increasing its presence in all realms of cricket. This is the goal of Cricket Australia's first Multicultural Action Plan, which it released in December 2023 as part of Cricket Australia's commitment

to strengthening its position as a sport for all. Among the plan's end goals are further positioning cricket as a vehicle for social cohesion, and getting more multicultural community members playing cricket, attending games, or following the sport.

In this narrative, we have explored challenges and solutions to six intersectional barriers to access and inclusion for the South Asian diaspora within the Australian cricketing ecosystem: systems literacy, cost of participation, cricket's reliance on a volunteer economy, gender and gender norms, and lack of representation in elite player pathways, and on boards and in executive leadership teams.

We have had in-depth conversations with members of the South Asian diaspora, including grassroots cricket players, club founders and coaches, sports fans and volunteers, advocates, sport and belonging leaders and strategists, business and community leaders, and Cricket Australia Multicultural Ambassadors. We have also spoken with representatives from Cricket Australia and Welcoming Clubs and drawn on research from leading sport and volunteering organisations.

We have developed eight key recommendations for improving the Australian cricketing ecosystem, and the experience of the South Asian diaspora within it:

1. **Critique and improve systems literacy** for becoming involved in playing, volunteering, including coaching and umpiring, for new migrants and new club members.
2. **Increase multicultural presence** in cricket boards and executive leadership teams, in line with target participation rates.
3. **Find new ways to recognise and reward** community cricket club volunteers, including managers, coaches and administrators.
4. **Improve data collection** to better understand who is playing and volunteering in cricketing spaces around Australia, and how their experiences and cultural safety can be enhanced.
5. **Increase regulation** of coaches and umpires and find ways to standardise and improve performance in these spaces, for example through cultural safety training and certification.
6. **Increase cultural safety** for multicultural teams and players in Anglocentric clubs, games and tournaments and within cricketing pathways.
7. **Reconfigure cricket** by involving the South Asian diaspora in its reimagining, for example through co-design.
8. **Ensure equitable access** to resources and facilities for all grassroots community clubs, including newly formed multicultural clubs, throughout Australia.

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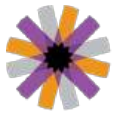
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