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SHASHI THAROOR'S *SHADOWS ACROSS THE PLAYING FIELD*: A UNIQUE CRICKETING NARRATIVE

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's Shadows Across the Playing Field is an insightful examination of the complex relationship between India and Pakistan through the lens of cricket. Tharoor, along with co-author Shaharyar Khan, delves into the sporting rivalry that has mirrored the political, historical, and cultural tensions between the two nations. This paper explores the significance of cricket as a cultural symbol in both countries, examining how Tharoor articulates the game's role in national identity, diplomacy, and soft power. The research also explores the broader socio-political implications of these matches and how Tharoor uses cricket as a metaphor for India-Pakistan relations. Through a close reading of the text and critical commentary, the paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the unique cricketing narrative in the context of subcontinental politics and cultural ties by following MLA ninth edition of literary referencing.

Keywords: Indo-Pak Relations, Cricket Rivalry, National Identity, Diplomacy, Soft Power, etc.

Introduction:

Shashi Tharoor's *Shadows Across the Playing Field: 60 Years of India-Pakistan Cricket* co-written with Shaharyar Khan, and published in 2009, provides a deep exploration of cricket as more than a mere sport in the subcontinent. It symbolizes national pride, political tensions, and cultural ties between two neighboring nations. The work takes the reader on a historical journey of India and Pakistan's cricketing rivalry, tracing the trajectory from pre-independence times to the contemporary period. Cricket, for these two countries, has acted as a medium for expressing nationalism, competitiveness, and, at times, diplomacy. The paper explores how Tharoor uses cricket to examine India-Pakistan relations, using it as a lens to analyze the social, political, and diplomatic dynamics between the two nations.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, focusing on textual analysis and critical interpretation of Shashi Tharoor's *Shadows Across the Playing Field*. The study involves a close reading of the text to explore Tharoor's commentary on cricket's role in shaping the India-Pakistan relationship. Additionally, it includes a review of critical literature on cricket, nationalism, and diplomacy in South Asia. The study also incorporates secondary sources such



as interviews, critical reviews, and journal articles to enrich the analysis and provide multiple perspectives on the subject matter. The methodology prioritizes interpretative analysis while contextualizing the text within the broader socio-political dynamics of India-Pakistan relations.

Review of Literature:

Cricket has long been recognized as more than a sport in the South Asian context. Scholars such as Mihir Bose, in *The Spirit of Cricket*, have discussed how the game has been used to represent larger political and social dynamics between nations. Tharoor's work fits within this body of literature, as it focuses on cricket as a tool for diplomacy and national identity in India and Pakistan. Cricket matches between the two nations are often charged with emotions, functioning as a 'substitute for war,' as Tharoor himself describes (Tharoor and Khan, 45).

Historians have often highlighted the role of sports in diplomacy, with James Der Derian noting that 'soft power' strategies like sports diplomacy often play a crucial role in shaping international relations. In the case of India and Pakistan, cricket has at times offered a "bridge" between strained political ties, particularly during peace efforts such as the famous 2004 India-Pakistan series. Tharoor's text aligns with these interpretations, suggesting that cricket has often provided an opportunity for dialogue in the midst of political tensions.

Cricket in the subcontinent is not only about diplomacy but also about national pride. In *Cricket and Nationalism in Colonial India*, Ramachandra Guha underscores how cricket in colonial India became a tool for expressing resistance and self-assertion. After independence, the sport became a powerful symbol of national identity for both India and Pakistan. Tharoor builds upon this understanding, discussing how the India-Pakistan rivalry has come to symbolize the broader historical and political relationship between the two countries.

Analysis:

Cricket as a Metaphor for India-Pakistan Relations:

Shashi Tharoor masterfully uses cricket as a metaphor for the tumultuous and complex relations between India and Pakistan. In the text, he draws parallels between the two countries' political dynamics and their cricketing contests. Tharoor suggests that these matches serve as a microcosm of the larger political landscape. He writes, "Every match between India and Pakistan is not just about winning or losing; it's about asserting national identity and often reflects the state of bilateral relations" (Tharoor and Khan, 63).

This idea resonates with how cricket has historically been used as an outlet for expressing nationalism in both countries. Tharoor also highlights the role of cricket in diplomacy. For instance, during periods of political thaw, cricket matches between India and Pakistan have often been arranged to soften diplomatic tensions. The 2004 tour of Pakistan by the Indian cricket team is often cited as an example of 'cricket diplomacy.' Tharoor notes, "The cricket tour was not just about sport, it was a part of a wider peace process that symbolized a thaw in relations" (Tharoor and Khan, 77).

Here, Tharoor views cricket as a tool for diplomacy and soft power, echoing the sentiments of scholars like Joseph Nye, who argues that non-traditional means like sports can significantly impact international relations.



National Identity and Cricket:

In both India and Pakistan, cricket is closely linked to national identity. Tharoor points out those cricketing victories which are celebrated as national achievements often transcending the sport itself. He discusses how cricket has become a platform for asserting dominance, especially when India plays against Pakistan. Tharoor writes, "For the masses in both countries, beating the other on the cricket field is akin to a national triumph, almost as if the pride of the entire nation rests on the outcome" (Tharoor and Khan, 102).

This view aligns with the post-colonial understanding of sports as an avenue for asserting identity. In a region still grappling with the legacies of colonialism and partition, cricket matches are imbued with deep historical and cultural significance. The sport provides an outlet for expressing collective identity, where the binary opposition of "us versus them" becomes a dominant narrative.

Political and Social Contexts:

Cricket acts as a common language for people across the border, allowing them to interact in ways that politics often prohibits. The social impact of cricket, according to Tharoor, can sometimes surpass the influence of political agreements. Cricketing tours and matches are viewed as opportunities for both nations to showcase a more amicable side of their relations, highlighting the importance of cultural diplomacy in the social fabric of South Asia.

On the social front, the book examines how cricket has become a powerful tool for fostering cultural exchanges and soft diplomacy between the citizens of India and Pakistan. Despite the hostility at the political level, cricket creates an avenue for social connection. Tharoor emphasizes the role cricket plays in bringing people together, not only as a sport but as a shared cultural heritage. He states, "Cricket had become, by the turn of the century, more than just a game; it was a form of expression, a way for millions on both sides of the border to project their hopes, frustrations, and anxieties" (Tharoor and Khan, 78).

Tharoor also examines the broader socio-political contexts surrounding India-Pakistan cricket matches. He notes that these matches have often taken place in highly charged political atmospheres, with tensions running high both on and off the field. Tharoor writes, "The cricket field has often reflected the battlefield, with matches between India and Pakistan becoming emotionally charged contests that mirror the broader political tensions. (Tharoor and Khan, 122).

This view is supported by scholars like Prashant Kidambi, who argue that sports, particularly cricket, have historically mirrored the political dynamics of the region. The text also explores the impact of cricket on public sentiment. Tharoor discusses how cricket matches have sometimes exacerbated tensions, with political and religious undertones influencing the game. The 1999 Kargil conflict, for example, affected cricketing relations between India and Pakistan, as the political climate became too strained for the sport to serve as a diplomatic tool. Tharoor observes, "At times of conflict, cricket has often been suspended, with matches canceled or postponed as relations between the two countries worsened (Tharoor and Khan, 141).

Critics of *Shadows Across the Playing Field* have acknowledged its insightful exploration of the relationship between India and Pakistan through cricket, while also noting



the limitations of viewing the rivalry solely through the lens of sport. In her review, Smitha Rao notes, “While Tharoor and Khan provide an engaging history of India-Pakistan cricket, the book sometimes leans too heavily on cricket as a metaphor for broader political issues, leaving out crucial economic and social factors that also shape the nations’ ties” (Rao, 312).

This suggests that while cricket is an important aspect of the relationship, the political and social contexts are more complex than the game alone can capture. Tharoor’s work has been praised for its nuanced understanding of the ways in which politics and society intersect in cricket. A review by Mehta states, “Tharoor’s analysis of cricket’s role in India-Pakistan relations is compelling, particularly when he delves into the symbolic power the game holds in both nations. However, one might wish for more discussion on how class and religion further complicate this rivalry (Mehta, 225),

Thus, the text, *Shadows Across the Playing Field* uses cricket as a lens to explore the political and social dynamics between India and Pakistan. Tharoor demonstrates how the sport has been influenced by historical events like the Partition, and how it continues to reflect the political tensions between the two nations. At the same time, cricket serves as a platform for social connection, providing a means of cultural diplomacy that transcends political boundaries. However, critics suggest that while cricket is an effective metaphor, the book could further explore other socio-economic factors that play a role in shaping the complex relationship between India and Pakistan.

To sum up, the discussion, Shashi Tharoor’s *Shadows Across the Playing Field* offers an in-depth exploration of the India-Pakistan cricket rivalry and its socio-political implications. Tharoor and Shaharyar Khan use cricket as a lens to explore the broader dynamics of India-Pakistan relations, emphasizing how the sport has often mirrored political tensions while also serving as a tool for diplomacy. Cricket, as portrayed in the text, is not just a game but a powerful cultural symbol that reflects national identity, pride, and the complex history between the two nations. By analyzing the game through this lens, Tharoor provides readers with a nuanced understanding of how sports, politics, and culture intersect in the subcontinent.

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