



# Challenging Caste: The Unheard and Untold Story of Palwankar Baloo

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## Abstract

This paper reexamines the career of Palwankar Baloo, an exceptional cricketer from the historically marginalized Chamaar caste, and to explore the complex intersections of caste, colonialism, and national identity in India. Rising from the role of a groundskeeper to become one of the era's premier bowlers, Baloo not only dismantled formidable European teams and led India's inaugural cricket tour to England in 1911, but also challenged entrenched social hierarchies. Despite his undeniable talent, he was systematically denied leadership roles and subjected to social segregation—a stark reflection of the pervasive caste discrimination of colonial India. This study draws on historical records, contemporary accounts, and sociological analysis to reassess Baloo's legacy, drawing parallels with global sporting icons such as Jackie Robinson. Baloo's journey, marked by quiet rebellion both on and off the field, underscores the transformative power of sport as a vehicle for resistance and social change. In highlighting his contributions, this paper positions Baloo as a silent revolutionary whose achievements not only transcended the realm of cricket but also paved the way for a more inclusive vision of India.

**Keywords:** *Baloo, Cricket, Bombay, Hindu, Caste, Gymkhan.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### ➤ Cricket In Colonial India

On a warm February afternoon in 1906, at Bombay's Kennedy Sea Face ground, a man from the 'untouchable' Chamaar caste dismantled the formidable European cricket team. Palwankar Baloo's left-arm spin wreaked havoc, taking eight wickets and leading his team

to a historic victory. Yet, off the field, caste barriers persisted—he sipped tea from disposable clay cups, apart from his teammates. This was the paradox of colonial India: cricket could both unite and divide.

To truly grasp India's sporting heritage, one must delve into its history, particularly the intricate relationship between sports,

nationalism, and colonial legacies. Cricket serves as a compelling focal point for dissecting pivotal themes in modern Indian history, such as race, caste, and religion. While some may argue that an encyclopedic knowledge of cricket isn't necessary to appreciate its broader sociopolitical ramifications, this perspective risks overlooking the nuanced interplay between the game's rules, structures, and rituals, and the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which it exists. The rise of cricket as a cultural phenomenon in India is not merely a story of sport; it's intertwined with the expansion of Indian television, the burgeoning middle class, economic reforms, and the forces of globalization (Mehta, 2009).

Cricket's pervasive popularity in India is inextricably linked to the country's colonial past. The British introduced and promoted the sport, initially intending it as a symbol of their cultural and political dominion, a tool for exerting control. However, the game's subsequent embrace and transformation into an integral facet of Indian national identity reveals a more complex narrative of negotiation, appropriation, and resistance between the colonizers and the colonized. It highlights the ambivalence and contradictions of colonialist culture (Bateman, 2005). Comprehending cricket's multifaceted role in shaping India's post-colonial trajectory is crucial for understanding the subtleties of the nation's sporting legacy and its deep-seated connections to broader sociopolitical dynamics. While football and hockey underwent a process of indigenization, shedding their foreign essence by India's independence, cricket, tellingly, retained its perceived "Englishness" and was often viewed as antithetical to the nation-building endeavors of the decolonization era (Nair, 2011). As such, cricket's cultural transfer to India was complex, mediated by agents of transfer, and rife with conflict (Naha, 2016).

## 2. THE PARADOX OF CRICKET AND CASTE IN INDIA

From an imperial perspective, cricket transcended mere sport. Introduced as part of the colonial agenda, cricket mirrored Victorian ideals of 'muscular Christianity,' blending sport with moral discipline. (Gilmour, 2006), (Cardus,

1930), (Sandiford, 1994) As Jack Williams eloquently states, cricket possessed a "special moral worth," embodying the essence of English character. (Williams, 1999) In this way, it served as a tool to reinforce colonial dominance, particularly among Indian elites eager to display fidelity to the British. (Ray, 2007)

Majumdar highlights the pivotal role of local rulers in pre-independence India, who supported players regardless of caste or religion, demonstrating that Indian teams were capable of defeating British opponents—an act of defiance against imperialism. (Majumdar, 2008) This clash of colonial rivalry was intricately linked to India's social fabric, as Ray's research illustrates cricket's complexities, including the significant participation of 'untouchable' player Palwankar Baloo in the 1911 'All-India' team that toured England. (Ray, 2007)

However, the portrayal of cricket as a "gentleman's game" often masked the deep social divisions within Indian society. While certain groups, like the Parsis and princely elites, engaged with colonial authority through the sport, (Majumdar, 2005) the game's spread among Hindus and Muslims starkly highlighted caste and communal hierarchies. Clubs formed along caste and regional lines mirrored these pervasive inequalities. (Guha, 1998) (PJ Hindu Gymkhana, 1994) (Dossa, 1990).

## 3. PALWANKAR BALOO: A BIOGRAPHY

Remarkably, the first India-born cricketer to attain international acclaim did not come from the ranks of a maharaja or even the elite Parsees, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or Christians, who dominated the early stages of Indian cricket. Instead, it was Baloo Palwankar, a Chamaar from a humble corner of Maharashtra. Born into the Chamaar caste, his remarkable talent as a left-arm bowler brought him recognition. Yet, systemic biases thwarted his ascent, preventing him from leading the Hindu Gymkhana team, not due to lack of skill, but because of his caste.

As Richard Cashman observed, cricket became a 'metaphor of war,' (Cashman, 1979) allowing marginalized players like Baloo to challenge caste oppression. Leaders such as Mahadev Govind Ranade and B. R. Ambedkar saw his journey as integral to broader reform

movements. His participation in both Hindu and European teams catalyzed essential conversations about caste privilege and merit. Baloo's story is not just one of cricket; it epitomizes the intersection of sport and profound social commentary.

Palwankar Baloo was born on 19 July 1875 in Dharwad to a Chamaar family. (Guha, 2002) As a member of the "untouchable" caste, he faced significant barriers. His family later moved to Poona (now Pune), where his father worked at the Kirkee munitions warehouse, performing tasks considered "polluting" by caste Hindus. (Vithal, 1948)

Baloo's introduction to cricket came serendipitously while working at a Parsi cricket club in Poona. Earning three rupees a month for pitch preparation, he often bowled during practices, catching the eye of British players like Captain Barton. Under their mentorship, Baloo honed his left-arm spin. Jungly Greig, another British officer, played with him and paid him for each wicket he took, further honing his skills. (Guha, 2002) (Pandit, 1959)

#### 4. BALOO'S STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS

By the late 19th century, cricket had grown increasingly popular among the Indian populace, leading to the establishment of clubs organized by community and region (Armstrong and Bates 2001). Baloo received an invitation to join the Poona Hindus, a team that challenged the European-exclusive Poona Gymkhana. Baloo's selection for the Poona Hindus team stirred caste-based opposition, but his undeniable talent silenced critics, with even British officers advocating for his inclusion. (Guha, 2002)

Baloo's debut for the Poona Hindus was significant; however, caste barriers still persisted. Despite playing alongside teammates on the field, Baloo faced segregation off it—drinking tea from disposable clay cups and dining separately. Additionally, he dined separately, with his plate and table set apart from those of his teammates. (Guha, 2002)

Despite these challenges, Baloo proved indispensable. In a critical match against the Satara Gymkhana, he claimed seven wickets, leading his team to victory. Leaders like Mahadev Govind Ranade and Bal Gangadhar Tilak

honored him for his achievements, recognizing his triumph as a challenge to entrenched caste hierarchies. (Pandit, 1959; Vithal, 1948; Guha, 2002)

In 1896, a plague in Poona forced Baloo's family to move to Bombay. There, he joined the Parmanandas Jivandas (PJ) Hindu Gymkhana and faced further resistance from caste Hindus. The captain defended Baloo's presence on the team, stressing his significance. Around 1902, Baloo played for the Bombay, Baroda, and Central India (BB&CI) Railways team, further establishing his reputation as a skilled cricketer. (Guha, 2002)

#### 5. PERFORMANCE IN THE BOMBAY CRICKET TOURNAMENTS

Baloo's talent became evident during a historic match held from 8-10 February, 1906 at the Bombay Gymkhana ground, where the Poona Hindus faced the Europeans. The historic three-day match between the Poona Hindus and the Europeans, held at Bombay Gymkhana from 8 to 10 February 1906, marked a watershed moment in colonial and caste dynamics. Listed alongside court sessions and circus shows in the day's events, the match drew widespread attention both on and off the field.

In the first innings, the Hindus posted a solid total of 242, with Baloo scoring 25 and his brother Shivram contributing 24. The Europeans were dismissed for 191, thanks to Erasha's incisive bowling (6 for 77) and Baloo's support (3 for 41). The Hindus added 160 in their second innings, setting the Europeans a target of 212. Baloo made 11 and Shivram remained unbeaten on 16. The final innings saw a dramatic collapse of the European side, bundled out for just 102. The bowling pair of Baloo and Erasha bowled unchanged, taking five wickets each. A turning point came when Greig, the Europeans' key batsman, was brilliantly stumped by Seshachari for 27, an act praised for its athletic finesse.

The match stirred significant press commentary. The Bombay Gazette conceded defeat with grace, acknowledging the Hindus as worthy opponents. The Indian Spectator appreciated not just the result but the symbolic gesture of Hindu and European players dining together. The Lahore Tribune went further, comparing the victory to Japan's triumph over

Russia, interpreting it as an awakening of Asia. Most notably, the Indian Social Reformer hailed the inclusion and recognition of the Baloo brothers—both chamar by caste—as a bold step towards dismantling untouchability. (Anon., 1906)(Guha, 1994)

From 1906 to 1911, Baloo became a key player for the Parmanandas Jivandas Hindu Gymkhana in Bombay. He led the team in important matches against European and Parsi clubs at the Kennedy Sea Face, drawing thousands of spectators. (PJ Gymkhana, 1954) His left-arm spin made him a formidable bowler. Respected Parsi cricketer Dr. M. E. Pavri compared Baloo's precision to England's Wilfred Rhodes, calling him 'the most deadly bowler on a sticky wicket. (Pavri, 1901)

During this time, Baloo consistently delivered match-winning performances. In the prestigious Triangular tournament, which featured teams from the Hindus, Europeans, and Parsis, he claimed a total of 42 wickets for the Hindu Gymkhana. (Guha, 2002)

## 6. THE 1911 ENGLAND TOUR: BALOO'S CROWNING MOMENT

Palwankar Baloo's illustrious journey as one of India's preeminent cricketers culminated in a momentous achievement with his selection for the 1911 All-India cricket team, which embarked on a historic sojourn to England.

The selection trials for the England tour began in January 1911 in Bombay, attracting candidates from across the subcontinent. While the goal was to represent the diverse Indian communities, societal divisions complicated the process. The team mainly included Parsis, with some Hindus like the notable Baloo. However, marginalized individuals faced significant barriers; for instance, Phaguram, an Untouchable bowler and groundsman, was denied leave by his employer to attend the trials. (Guha, 2002)(Mukherjee, 1956)

Despite Baloo's selection being a major achievement, the team captaincy was given to the influential Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh. Although a skilled batsman, Patiala's role on the tour was limited. The 1911 expedition began in May, with the team set to play 14 matches against English counties and other second-class teams. (Guha, 2002)

At 36 and battling shoulder issues, still he rose splendidly to the occasion, distinguishing himself as the preeminent performer of the tour by scoring 489 runs, claiming an extraordinary 114 wickets at an impressive average of 18.84 runs per wicket. Nonetheless, the team's overall record culminated in 6 victories, 14 defeats, and 2 draws, providing substantive lessons for subsequent endeavors. (Illustrated News, 1946)

In addition to Baloo's own exploits, his younger brother Shivram, who also undertook the tour, rendered invaluable contributions, including an impressive century against Somerset. Despite the overarching record of the team falling short of expectations, Baloo's remarkable skills garnered accolades from discerning English cricket critics. E. H. D. Sewell, a luminary among cricket writers, aptly remarked, "Baloo is a bowler most of our counties would be very glad to have in their eleven," thereby reinforcing Baloo's indelible impact on the sport. (Guha, 2002)

Baloo's return in 1911 was celebrated by the Depressed Classes, with a young and nascent B. R. Ambedkar presenting a manpatra in his honor. Ambedkar later credited Baloo's achievements as a source of inspiration for his activism. (Zelliot, 1969)

Despite offers from English counties, Baloo declined due to his age and commitment to caste reform, later remarking, 'I wish the team had been sent six years ago when I was in my best form.' (Guha, 2002)

## 7. PALWANKAR BALOO CRICKETING ACHIEVEMENTS

### 7.1 First-Class Career Overview

Palwankar Baloo represented the Hindus from 1905 to 1921, making his first-class debut on February 8, 1906, against the Europeans and playing his last match on December 8, 1920, against the Parsees. Total Matches: 33 Runs Scored: 753 Batting Average: 13.69 Top Score: 75 Wickets Taken: 179 Bowling Average: 15.21 Best Bowling Figures: 8/103 Five-Wicket Hauls: 17 Ten-Wicket Matches: 4 Catches: 12

### 7.2 International Contributions

1911 All-India Tour Baloo's standout moment came during the 1911 All-India team's



tour of England and Scotland, where he participated in 22 matches. He scored 240 runs, including a high of 55 against Somerset and 48 against the Woodbrook Club, alongside an impressive bowling tally of 63 wickets, highlighted by 8 wickets for 103 runs against Cambridge University.

### 7.3 Key Matches and Outstanding Performances

- Cambridge University (12–14 June 1911): 8 wickets for 103 runs, although the result was a loss by 71 runs.
- Leicestershire (13–15 July 1911): 5 for 50 and 6 for 75, leading to a win by 7 wickets.
- Somerset (17–19 July 1911): Captured 6 wickets for 54 run and scored 55 runs in a victory by 1 wicket.
- Ulster (11–12 August 1911): Took 5 and 3 wickets in an innings win by 233 runs.
- Woodbrook Club (14–16 August 1911): Grabbed 3 and 4 wickets while scoring 48 runs, though the team lost by 35 runs.

Domestic Performance Summary (1902–1920) In domestic competition, Baloo played 22 matches, achieving 7 wins, 6 losses, and 9 draws across several prominent formats: - Bombay Triangular: 6 matches, 115 runs (19.16 average), 44 wickets (7.33 average). - Bombay Quadrangular: 9 matches, 108 runs (12.00 average), 33 wickets (3.66 average). - Bombay Presidency Matches: 3 matches, 105 runs (35.00 average), 28 wickets (9.33 average). - Other First-Class Matches: 4 matches, 187 runs (46.75 average), 27 wickets (6.73 average). ([ESPN Cricinfo, 2025](#))

### 8. THE CAPTAIN WHO WASN'T

Despite his immense talent, Palwankar Baloo faced persistent caste discrimination that hindered his captaincy aspirations at the Hindu Gymkhana. In 1913, even with growing support from the press and fellow cricketers, the selectors chose M. D. Pai, a Brahmin, over Baloo. Pai acknowledged Baloo's experience and seniority, stating that he should have been captain. However, such sentiments did little to challenge the deep-rooted caste biases of the Gymkhana's decision-makers,

resulting in Baloo's continued exclusion from leadership. ([Bombay Chronicle, 1913](#))

The systemic injustice persisted into the 1920s, peaking with Palwankar Baloo's denial of captaincy in 1920 at age 45, despite his elite performance. The Gymkhana selectors chose younger Brahmin D. B. Deodhar instead. This decision led to public outrage, with Baloo's brothers, Vithal and Shivram, prominent cricketers themselves, protesting by withdrawing from the team. They condemned the selectors as "unsportsmanlike" and highlighted the overt caste bias, stating, "Social or educational status has no place in the sport when the claims of a cricketer of lesser social status are admittedly superior." ([Bombay Chronicle, 1920](#))

The response to their stand was overwhelmingly supportive; a community subscription of one thousand rupees was raised for the Palwankar family, signifying widespread recognition of the Gymkhana's inequity. Later that year, Baloo was reinstated as vice-captain during the Quadrangular final under M. D. Pai. Pai strategically spent time off the field, allowing Baloo to take an informal leadership role, which received acclaim. A journalist praised him for his "excellent leadership" and "fine judgment in the management of his side's bowling," acknowledging his skills despite the lack of formal captaincy. ([Bombay Chronicle, 1920](#))

### 9. BALOO'S ENDURING INFLUENCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

In 1923, Vithal Palwankar, a young man from the Depressed Class, became the captain of a major cricket team. This was a significant challenge to centuries of discrimination based on caste. Under his leadership, the Hindu Gymkhana won the Quadrangular tournament, beating the Europeans in the finals.

Vithal's achievement resonated with many, proving that skill and determination can break through social barriers. Excited crowds celebrated by carrying Vithal on their shoulders, chanting, "Hurrah! Captain Vithal! Hurrah! Hindus who forget caste prejudice!" This moment was a strong support for the anti-caste movement in India. Mahatma Gandhi recognized its significance, asserting that the removal of untouchability was as crucial to India's path to

Swaraj (self-rule) as the political struggle against British colonialism. An observer noted, "The moral that can be safely drawn from the victory is that the removal of Untouchability would lead to Swaraj—which is the prophecy of the Mahatma." ([Bombay Chronicle, 1923](#))

By 1929, at the end of Vithal's career the Palwankar family's contributions to Indian cricket were celebrated, with writers acknowledging their pivotal role in elevating Hindu cricket with a Bombay writer remarking, "Thirty years and a single family. One brother after another raising the Hindu cricket edifice higher and yet higher, spreading its brilliance all over India and beyond." ([Guha, 2002](#))

## 10. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE POONA PACT

Baloo played a key role in the anti-caste movement, inspiring marginalized communities to challenge caste-based inferiority. In 1911, upon his return from the England tour, B. R. Ambedkar welcomed him at a public event in Bombay, recognizing Baloo as a symbol of possibility for the Dalit community. (41) Ambedkar's acknowledgment of Baloo marked a pivotal connection between their respective journeys. However, ideological differences later strained their relationship. Baloo aligned with Gandhi's integrationist approach to caste reform, contrasting with Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for Dalits. During the 1932 Rajah-Moonje Pact, Baloo supported opposition to Ambedkar's proposals for separate Dalit electorates, leading to criticism from some Dalit groups. ([Pradhan, 1986](#)) ([Guha, 2012](#))

Baloo played a significant role in the political negotiations concerning caste rights during the 1932 discussions on separate electorates for Dalits. His prominence was often mentioned by leaders advocating for equality, reflecting his impact on societal perceptions. While he was not directly involved in drafting the Poona Pact, his earlier successes began shifting attitudes toward the Depressed Classes. ([Pyarelal, 1932](#))

In 1933, Baloo contested a seat in the Bombay Municipality as a Hindu Mahasabha candidate, making history as one of the first professional cricketers to run for office. Despite Dalit support, he lost to an upper-caste

opponent. Undeterred, again in 1937 Baloo contested a 'Scheduled Caste' seat in the Bombay Legislative Assembly against Ambedkar. While Ambedkar supported separate electorates, Baloo advocated for integration. Ambedkar narrowly won, with 13,245 votes to Baloo's 11,225. ([Guha, 2002](#))

## 11. CONCLUSION: BALOO ENDURING LEGACY

Baloo's bowling skill, comparable to English greats like S.F. Barnes and Wilfred Rhodes, inspired future Indian spinners such as Vinod Mankad and Bishan Bedi. Baloo's legacy lived on through his brothers, especially Vithal, who captained the Hindu Gymkhana in 1923, continuing the family's fight against caste discrimination in cricket. ([Guha, 2002](#))

When Palwankar Baloo passed away on July 4, 1955, his death resonated deeply within the national media, reflecting the impact he had made. Unfortunately, many obituaries chose to highlight only his remarkable cricketing skills, overlooking the significant contributions he made to the anti-caste movement and his tireless pursuit of social equality.

It is disheartening that even esteemed figures in sports, such as V. M. Merchant and A. F. S. Talyarkhan, celebrated Baloo's cricketing talent but failed to recognize his fight against caste discrimination. Nevertheless, his true importance was recognized by those in the Depressed Classes; numerous elected representatives in Parliament attended his funeral in large numbers at the Santa Cruz Crematorium in Bombay, demonstrating the profound respect and gratitude they held for his legacy. ([Guha, 2002](#))

Palwankar Baloo's groundbreaking role in the formative years of Indian cricket bears a striking resemblance to the later journey of Jackie Robinson, who famously dismantled Major League Baseball's racial barrier in 1947. Both men, though separated by geography and time, confronted deeply entrenched systems of social exclusion—Baloo contending with caste discrimination under colonial rule, and Robinson with institutional racism in segregated America. Their impact transcended the playing field; each became a powerful symbol of resistance, dignity, and the pursuit of equal rights through sport. Notably, Baloo's courageous challenge to caste

orthodoxy preceded Robinson's efforts by several decades, establishing him as a pioneering figure in the use of athletic excellence to catalyze social and political change. (Guha, 2002)

Despite his historic significance, Baloo's legacy remains underrepresented in dominant historical narratives. As C. L. R. James astutely reflected in *Beyond a Boundary*, towering figures like W. G. Grace in England and Baloo in India have often been denied the comprehensive recognition their cultural and sporting contributions warrant. (James, 1963)

Palwankar Baloo's legacy goes beyond his cricketer excellence, symbolizing resilience against caste discrimination in colonial India. From an "untouchable" servant to a premier bowler, his journey reflects both exceptional talent and unwavering determination. Baloo's story remains a powerful reminder of sports' role in challenging societal norms and inspiring social change.

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