

How Cricket is Changing the Lives of Afghans

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Imagine coming from a country known just for Terror and Taliban, but being able to break all such stereotypes on an international stage. That's how 20-year-old **Rashid Khan** felt when he became the first Afghan cricket player to join the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2017. It's important for Afghan players to participate in tournaments like the IPL because such platforms provide them the opportunities to be recognized internationally and strengthen their skills further. Even in the state of turmoil and the ever-spreading conflict in their homeland, the Afghan national team's rise has been spectacular and its popularity amongst the youth has made it even more remarkable considering the insecurity and lack of infrastructure in the country.

Unlike any other nation, the birth of cricket in Afghanistan was the result of Afghan refugees fleeing the Soviet occupation to Pakistan in the 1980s.

The refugees growing up in Pakistan subsequently learned to play 'TAPE-BALL' cricket and thus, cricket became a popular amateur sport for Afghan refugees living there. Among these refugees, *Taj Malik and Allah Dad Noori*, who lived in Peshawar set up the Afghanistan Cricket Federation in the 1995.

The initial donations (both logistics and financial assistance) to the federation were facilitated by one of the oldest cricket clubs, **Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC)**.

During Taliban era, the cricketers used to play in Kabul with prior permission. The golden years for Afghan cricket came with the fall of the Taliban. The return of millions of refugees boosted the game on Afghan soil and it began to develop rapidly. In May 2003, the federation conducted its first trials in Kabul, with players coming from across the country.

The proudest moment in Afghan cricket journey was during the opening match of the ‘First Olympia Lube Oil Cricket Tournament’, when an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) team lost to Malik’s Kabul Academy.

The first international victory was marked in the **Asian Cricket Council Elite Cup, 2004**, when all ICC members competed and Afghanistan beat Bahrain. By winning their **first international trophy**, which was the **Asia Cup in 2007**, the Afghan National Cricket team showed the world that the situation in their country could never affect their talent. The year 2012 was a milestone in their cricketing journey as Afghanistan played its first ever one Day International against Pakistan in Sharjah. The importance of the moment in Afghan cricket history was highlighted when even the Taliban’s spokesperson sent a message of support to the Afghan team. Since then, the Afghan National Team has been winning titles and trophies, marking their status in the international arena.

Afgan players have received training in Bangladesh along with technical support from Australia and the MCC in England. They even had an opportunity to train under the Pakistani

batting legend **Inzamam ul-Haq** before the Pakistan Cricket Board recalled him to be the chief selector for the Pakistani national cricket team. In terms of financial assistance, India has been funding to build a national cricket stadium in Kandahar. Assistance has also been offered by non-cricketing nations like Germany with funding worth €700,000 to build a stadium in Khost. The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and the government of UK have also led development strategies to support the construction of cricket pitches in 20 schools in Kabul, Kunduz, Laghman, Nangarhar and Wardak. Another NGO called Afghan Connection, founded by Dr **Sarah Fane**, which is British and supported by the MCC, has made its presence felt in twenty-two provinces. It has nurtured cricketing talent and built local cricket facilities. Therefore, it is evident that cricket is one field where international cooperation has truly been working.



Initially, cricket in Afghanistan was associated with Pashtuns ethnic group, particularly easterners who live in border with Pakistan. However, players from **Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Pashai and Nuristani** ethnicity have been playing cricket recently, making their way into domestic cricket teams. So, now cricket is considered a sport that brings **national unity** among youth from different ethnicities.



However, the country still has a long way to go in creating opportunities for women's cricket. **Diana Barakzai** created and captained a women's team in 2009 and the following year, the **Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB)** established its women division to encourage women's participation the sport. In 2014, On the other hand, Diana Barakzai resigned from the team claiming that the Board had obstructed its progress because of a belief that women should not leave home and be given the chance to play sport.

She said to Reuters, “Afghanistan's cricket board does not support cricket for women, even though I have 3,700 girl cricketers across Afghanistan.” If Afghanistan Cricket Board wishes to become a full time member of the International Cricket Council and be eligible to play test matches, it will have to uplift and support women in its cricketing structure.

Finally, Afghanistan's cricket future depends on number of factors i.e. financial means and creating an environment of support to reach to the international level. However, we must salute the spirit of the Afghan players. Cricket has been helping Afghans in healing their pain amid constant strife. In a country ravaged by decades of war, and facing possibility of civil conflict, the development of cricket is no less than an achievement.