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Keywords: Peace, Indo-Pak, Communication, Disputes

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Introduction

In the modern world, sports diplomacy can resolve political disputes and bring peace and harmony. Sports can provide neural grounds for political adversaries to discuss and resolve their differences and grounds for cooperation. During political rifts and crises, there is a trust deficit but shared experience in sports can replace such deficits with trust, confidence, and mutual understanding. Sports competitions whether friendly, bilateral, or multilateral can introduce peace talks or can mediate disputes. Sports diplomacy brings unity and cooperation rather than division and dissection. During the Cold War era, rivalries and proxies were at their peak. At that time adversaries and sports diplomacy proved to be a beacon of light. US and China, the two

hostile powers came close to each other in 1971 through table tennis. With the success of Ping Pong diplomacy, both states exchanged official visits and interactions. China was also welcomed into the family of nations, UNO in 1971. Due to the anarchic nature of the world, sports face many hurdles nowadays. In International Relations, sports diplomacy is also essential in conflict resolution but at the same time, it is influenced by politics. States used sports for propaganda to sustain their power and influence over their foes. Although sports show equality, however, when they are politicized, some communities are marginalized with no representation or opportunity in sports. Sports are good for nation branding but it should not happen at the cost of marginalizing or ignoring the rights of others.



In International Relations, sports diplomacy is a non-traditional tool that can strengthen formal peacebuilding initiatives by creating opportunities for talks, cooperation, and understanding. Although it cannot take the place of formal negotiations, it can serve as a catalyst for peace and negotiations through shared experience and people connection. Pakistan and India, both neighbors had a bitter past and the past is still hurting their present and future affairs. Pakistan and India have fought wars several times over Kashmir. Kashmir is the bone of contention and both parties showed no compromise over their Kashmir policy. Both are fighting and will continue to fight until they reach a political settlement. With huge political challenges and pressure, sports like cricket and hockey emerged as key factors in uniting the two most hostile nations in the world. Cricket diplomacy can initiate informal dialogues as matches are watched by a massive audience.

Statement of the Problem

Several efforts in the past have been made to resolve conflicts between Pakistan and India yet their diplomatic relations are strained with uncertainty. Traditional diplomacy has been restricted to achieve very little in improving their bilateral relations. Sports diplomacy somehow proved to be a new beacon of light how far this tactic can be implemented in the face of political challenges is uncertain.

Research Questions

1. Can sports diplomacy contribute to long-term peacebuilding or its influence is merely symbolic?
2. What are the key opportunities and challenges hindering sports diplomacy between Pakistan and India relations?

Research Methodology

The secondary data is used in the research work as primary data is difficult to organize due to geopolitical sensitivities and lack of access. In academic literature, data is collected by analyzing various journal articles, research reports, books, diplomatic documents, and government reports. News sites like Dawn, The Express, and The Hindu are also examined to check what kind of information the media is sharing about sports and how their ideas are influential in shaping public perceptions. The data is also collected through exploring historical events which can assist in comprehensive research work.

Prominent news articles, policy statements, journals, reports, and magazines are used for the

collection of data. The methodology has utilized a structural approach to understand how prominent sports like cricket, hockey, and other sports have influenced the minds of the general public and decision-makers in shaping India and Pakistan relations. By examining secondary data comprehensively, the research aims to present an effective way of understanding the most contentious bilateral relations between Pakistan and India.

Research Objectives

- To assess the historical role of sports diplomacy in Indo-Pak relations
- To analyze the social, political, and security challenges hindering sports diplomacy
- To explore potential opportunities in strengthening bilateral relations
- To evaluate whether sports diplomacy has a lasting impact on Indo-Pak relations

Research Limitations

The study relies on existing sources, which may have biases or gaps in coverage. Access to data collection is limited as primary sources and relevant documents are hard to find. It is also difficult to gain data from key sporting personalities. The shifting political landscape is rendering key findings outdated. These research limitations do not invalidate this study but somehow undermine the complexities of examining sports diplomacy in a highly contested political context. Findings may not apply to other conflict zones with different dynamics. Indo-Pak relations are highly volatile, and recent developments may not be fully captured. Qualitative analysis may be influenced by the researcher's perspective.

Literature Review

In the article "Power Politics of Sports in International Relations and Its Effects on Cricket" (2021) the scholar Qadeer stated sport is a diplomatic tool. Sports are followed by millions of people across the borders. However, the feelings of the masses sometimes are ignored by the political leaders to promote their own agendas. Cricket has proved to be a diplomatic tool for both India and Pakistan. It melted the ice several times but it failed to securitize itself. The cancellation of the New Zealand cricket tour of Pakistan at the last moment was such an example of politics in sports. On the cricket ground, matches are no less than a war between Pakistan and India. Players are considered soldiers competing with each other without guns. Pitches are the

battlegrounds. This kind of sports nationalism is highly presented by the media houses of both nations. Sports are a source of goodwill and relieving tensions. But in the case of India and Pakistan, sports face boycotts, threats, and denial of visas to players (Qadeer, [2021](#)).

“Examining Sports/Cricket Diplomacy as a Tool to Instigate Political Interests: A Comparative Analysis of Media Portrayal of Cricketing Relations between India And Pakistan”, (2020) in this article the scholars Ibtisam, Fateh Muhammad, and Safeena all have explored the positive impact of cricket and media in Indo Pak diplomatic relations. Cricket matches from 2005 to 2007 paved the way for peaceful coexistence between Pakistan and India. Pakistani cricket fans were warmly welcomed by Indians and in 2005 Indian team fans were welcomed by the same energy on Pakistani soil. It showed the love and affection of neighbors for each other. Musharraf's visit to India resulted in the opening of highly contested Kashmir borders and the retreat of soldiers to regular positions. These years considered to be golden days of relaxation of political relations until the 2008 Mumbai attacks took place and tensions were again rose, resulting in the banning of cricket with Pakistan at all levels. Politics has severely affected Indo-Pak matches hence remains the hurdle in the smoothening of ties. From Dawn to Hindustan Times, the news was about the positive outcome of cricket diplomacy (Mazahir, Muhammad, & Yaseen, [2020](#)).

"Can India-Pakistan Sports Promote Peace? A MCDM Approach" (2020) in this article, the scholars Yousef, Fahad, Bilal, and Amin described the importance of sports in improving relations among states. Sport is an important instrument in defining relations among political entities. Sport-related tactics are almost adopted by every nation to harmonize its relations with other states. Pakistan and India shared long borders and had a very unpleasant history. They shared a vicious history with no efforts ever made for long-lasting peace. There are many initiatives to regulate their relations and cricket diplomacy is one of them. The most popular and most-watched sport in South Asia is cricket. India and Pakistan played against each other on many sporting grounds but no sport is close to cricket. Due to tense political background, the teams playing against each other is reduced. Pakistani players are not allowed to play IPL and the same is the case with Indian players in PSL. There are instances where cricket broke peace between them. There is a need to leave the past behind and politicians must show positivity in their behavior and media talks to improve the relations. Sports must be given a proper chance (Ali, Arif, Munir, Azeem, & Khan, [2020](#)).

Theoretical Framework

The soft power of sports is about the improvement and aptness of sports systems (Xiaoqiao & Lihui, [2014](#)). Sports can be helpful in brainstorming. From the early years, each kid while playing games can learn the importance of teamwork, mutual respect, and discipline regardless of their social background. This world often seems to be divided, but sport is helping in bridging the gap. Sports diplomacy has gained significant consideration in the mainstream discourse of International Relations.

Nation branding through sports has emerged as a perilous strategy for states to pose a constructive image and status at international forums (Kelechi, [2024](#)). As soft power is about gaining desired objectives without any coercive means, it can also best serve Indo-Pak interests as well. Soft power plays a crucial role in encouraging bilateral relations, overwhelming political rifts, and acting as a bridge to unite people from both sides. Between India and Pakistan, sports can act as a cultural bridge, connecting both nations. Both India and Pakistan have many differences but they share one thing in common and that is the sheer love for cricket. Cricket intervenes at emotional levels even with political differences. Sports are the marketing communication vehicle with the primary objective of attracting people and building a positive image (Musante, [2006](#)).

Sports Diplomacy in the Globalized World

In this modern world modern ways are used to solve problems. The political issues of the modern world are now being resolved with the unprecedented use of sports. In such a scenario the slogan, 'sports outside politics' doesn't support the notion as there is a vital connection between sports and politics (Medvedev, [2023](#)). Their relationship is diverse and multifaceted with many similarities and differences. With the advancement in the world, the concept of sports also transformed from traditional to modern. In modern times, sports are not just about the physique or performance of athletes but have become a source of politics and communication. At international sporting events different races, nations, and ideologies meet and collide hence sports became a source of interconnectivity (Budiasa, [2024](#)). Games are also pursued for political propaganda and the promotion of ideological norms and values. The national governments recognized the significance of sports hence devised strategies to get maximum outcomes through sports. In the International domain, sports diplomacy emerged as a crucial element

leveraging global demand to bridge division and nurture diplomatic communications among states.

The diplomatic use of sports is a complex phenomenon as political differences exist among states. Due to political pressure, sports and athletes are greatly influenced as competitions sometimes are no less than a battleground when two rival states are competing against each other (Sergienko, [2024](#)). Sports were extensively intervened by politics during the 20th century. Athletes and their glories were manifested for political objectives (Prozumenshchikov, [2023](#)). After the 2nd Great World War, athletes were tasked with winning competitions to glorify the country's image and prestige. USSR wanted to strengthen its power in sports as well so players were tasked to win international sporting events to lionize the Soviet image at the global athletic level. So participating in the Olympics and other regional games became the central policy of the Soviet Union in the 20th century.

It is a reality that there are differences of opinion on whether holding mega sporting events are good idea or whether it is someone's personal ambitions or in favor of the political elite (Canan, Zardo, & Starepravo, [2018](#)). Differences of opinions and ideas may emerge in this divided world over the role of sports but still, sports contribution towards unification, enhancing cooperation, and strengthening of national prestige is indubitable. Sport inherits common shared values and pursuits of excellence which can overcome division. Sports can bring rivals inch closer to each other as the world sees the flags of South Korea and North Korea together at the inauguration of the Pyongyang Winter Olympics (Ein, [2018](#)). That is an extraordinary example in International Relations where state actors can learn from such examples where sports act as a unifying force among bitter rival nations. Such opportunities must be created at global levels to counter division and animosity.

Sport like some other cultural activities influences the mindset of the masses. Sport acts as a diplomatic asset in assuaging tensions and improving relations among countries. Due to massive fan following, sports can bridge gaps but on the other hand, political leaders may exploit such opportunities and use them for their political interests. Pakistan and India is such an examples of such scenarios where cricket with massive fan following on both sides of the border is usually exploited by political elites (Qadeer, [2021](#)). Pakistan and India negotiated several times during intense scenarios and all happened due to their cricket diplomacy, but cricket failed to securitize itself. Games are a social association that positions at the edge of the civic and administrative

community. Among the separated societies, sports are an element of communal hatred, violence, and separation but also a significant player in peacemaking, reconciliation, and conflict resolution (Sugden & Tomlinson, [2018](#)).

Opportunities To Improve Bilateral Relations Between India and Pakistan Through Sports Diplomacy

Sports diplomacy is of an exceptional kind in a world full of anarchy and dissection in uniting the people across the borders. Sport is a language understood by all. It is a powerful soft tool that crosses borders and transcends all ideologies. Its capability is quite visible and is more contentious as it can be seen in complex relations of the hostile nuclear-powered neighbors in the South Asian region. Sports like cricket, hockey, and kabaddi played the role of bridge in uniting them.

Engaging People-to-People Connectivity and Integration

Sports diplomacy is one of the most influential tools in today's changing discourse of International Relations, facilitating connectivity and nurturing reciprocal respect and understanding among states. Sports diplomacy has a great role in international stability. It connects different cultures, and people and promotes peaceful coexistence (Acharya, [2024](#)). In this globalized world quality and quantity of sports both increased significantly. A number of sports events, participant nations, athletes, fans, and spectators amassed in recent years. These made sports highly competitive. Sports cannot significantly alter geopolitics, yet they can strengthen interpersonal communication which can reshape the attitudes and perspectives of policymakers (Seyyed, [2022](#)). Pakistan and India compete against each other in various fields of sports but cricket remains the sole element of bringing people closer to each other.

Sports diplomacy is an influential force in today's International Relations enabling states to establish peaceful relations and forging long-lasting bonds (Masood, [2023](#)). Sports can initiate other channels of diplomacy, permitting states to move beyond their foreign policy positions. It could be understood in the instance of sports diplomacy in the midst of Pakistan and India that the people of both nations have massive interests in sports regardless of the acrimony of the past. The crisis of 2002 over Kashmir led both nations to stand on the verge of full-scale war but national governments proposed cricket matches in 2004 to de-escalate and to defuse tensions (Murray & Pigman, [2013](#)). In the most

inhabited regions, South Asia remained the center of multiple sports with massive public support in sports.

Confidence and Peace Building

The international sporting events provided ways and platforms for political bodies and groups to discuss their political disputes and resolve conflicts. Several diplomatic breakthroughs have occurred in the past due to sports mainly during Olympic Games. Ping Pong diplomacy during the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship is such an example where the two opposite blocs' i.e. communist China and the capitalist USA negotiated over political differences and agreed upon mutual peaceful coexistence, respecting the sovereignty, integrity, and self-determination of each other (Goytom, 2024). Sports events emerged as a unique tool in promoting diplomatic relations. Sports represent a unique intersection of politics, sports, and culture on the world stage, enhancing mutual confidence and peace among states.

Since cricket diplomacy's emergence in 1987, several efforts have been made by both sides to normalize their relations. 2005-2007 was a golden cricket era between Pakistan and India but throughout history, some unpleasant events like the Mumbai attacks took place to put both countries back to their positions with much more hatred and violent sentiments (Ashraf, Shah, & Adnan, 2022). Although Pakistan and India shared a history of hostility there are certain moments where sports like cricket played a crucial role in diffusing volatile tensions. Cricket diplomacy strengthened their confidence and they opted for peace instead of showing consistent hostility against each other.

A Platform for Track II Diplomacy

Track two diplomacy is an unofficial channel of communication that originated during the Cold War era when interactions at official diplomatic spheres were inconvenient. Track two diplomacy is carried out by individuals or groups who are not a direct part of national governments and can enhance communications, build mutual trust, and create ideas that government officials cannot take due to the political environment (Akindoyin, 2024). Track two diplomacy is more suitable for making dialogues more adaptable and transparent. Different means are used in track two like cinema, NGOs, and sports as well to create an environment suitable for dialogues. South Asia experienced track-two diplomacy during the 1990s mainly due to territorial disputes in the region. Pakistan and India had severe territorial disputes especially over Kashmir which led to

several wars and instability in the region. Various unofficial tactics were introduced in the region to overcome political tensions (Kaye, 2007).

Diplomacy through sport is considered as a fragment of track two that improves relations between two or more states when official channels are difficult to open to negotiate. So sports diplomacy is considered as informal diplomacy where it can help in improving ties between nations although at a small scale (Mokhtari, Siraki, & Sheikhneshin, 2021). Sports can ease political tensions as cricket did between Pakistan and India. Cricket diplomacy several times provided a stable environment for diplomats and policymakers to start diplomacy through back-door channels. Pakistan used sports diplomacy in track two diplomacy spheres several times to overshadow the political tensions with its neighbor India. From Zia's unofficial visit to India during the 1987 standoff to Musharraf's visit with the same purpose when Pakistan's cricket team toured India in 2004. The objective of such visits was to utilize unofficial means to reduce tensions and move forward toward a better future (Mahanta & Deshpande, 2019).

To Assess Economics Benefits

Sports are the best source of diplomatic and economic connectivity as there is the presence of elements of mutual respect and harmony. States can utilize such opportunities in strengthening their economic interconnectivity as can be seen among BRICS nations. Russia served as the host nation for the FIFA World Cup in 2018, and the scenario of visitors increased to 18% helping to generate huge tourism revenue and also promoting Russia's image abroad (Ramazan, Salikzhanov, Aktayev, & Baitassov, 2025). As the world is utilizing such events to generate a lot of revenue, why Pakistan and India can't use such an approach? The reason is that both states lack confidence and trust. Trust can be built if the doors of sports are opened between these two.

It is an era of economic growth and connectivity. Any activity where a significant public is involved must yield economic benefits. Without economic benefits, any activity engaging the mass public is a burden to the state's economic growth (Idrees, 2022). Sporting events whether at local, national, or global level must be arranged in enterprise activity. New ideas and technological advancements can result from such enterprise activities, resulting in an increase in commercial activities. India is a global sports-related equipment exporter. Today Indian sports industry competes in the global sports markets contributing positively to the Indian economy. Indian sports goods

export was US\$ 4.5 billion in 2020 and is expected to increase 6.6% till 2027. Although Pakistan lost its dominance in sports as it had during the 90s in hockey and squash, but still competes in the sports goods industry globally (Shaikh, [2023](#)). Movements of athletes and the public across the borders can also enhance tourism in both India and Pakistan. The lives of the common poor people can be improved through such economic friendly policies.

Before 2014, sports goods export contributed 25% of international trade but its decline started after that era from 338,776 million in 2014 to 174,850 million in 2020 (Zafar, [2017](#)). Sports have a positive role in the economic growth of both countries Pakistan and India. Sports boost foreign exchange, generate employment, and enhance tourism. It is expected that the Indian sports industry will hit US\$ 130 billion by 2030 while Pakistan's sports industry stood at US\$ 177 million in the year 2020. During the 1990s, Pakistan's sports industry had a monopolistic rank in international markets with Sialkot as its center of the sports industry. However, monopoly started to diminish due to massive competition. Pakistan mainly exports soccer balls, gloves, hockey sticks, and bats (Shahzad, Aslam, & Javaid, [2023](#)). Due to intense political rivalry, sports competitions between Pakistan and India are thrilling with massive audiences. Cricket rivalry between them attracts not only the public of both nations but also foreign spectators as well making headlines in international media. A lot of revenue is collected whenever both nations compete with each other on cricket grounds. So frequent cricket interactions can not only generate massive revenue but also enhance public connectivity, improving the lives of the general public.

Youth Participation and Engagement

There are various examples where sports camps were organized for the betterment of youth by powerful sports organizations like FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). These sports camps and exchange programs not only provided a platform for youth to showcase their talents but also provided an opportunity to foster friendship and understanding across political boundaries (Hussain & R, [2024](#)). With such experiences, youth can act as sports ambassadors while understanding sports diplomacy at the grassroots level and can promote goodwill and positive perceptions about their respective nations. The hatred and lack of trust since the inception of both neighbors, Pakistan and India into the political world has derailed the mindset of young people. Instead of working for peace and stability, politics blinded them with negative propaganda and anti-

state sentiments (Madani & Khan, [2024](#)). The friendship between two javelin throwers Neeraj Chopra and Arshad Nadeem is an ideal example for the youth of both nations to respect and cooperate with each other. Such gestures should be praised at governmental levels to engage the youth towards a better future.

The practical aspects of sports diplomacy have effectively enhanced the leadership abilities of youth with exposure to the international environment. The active participation of youth in sports can improve their communication skills, conflict resolution abilities mutual understanding, and teamwork (Gong & Chang, [2024](#)). Pakistan and India with a massive youth population can use such techniques to put the youth on the right track. The brainwashing through media platforms is highly disturbing the minds of young people. 60% of the population of both India and Pakistan are below 30, giving both nations an opportunity to reconsider their hostile policies towards each other, creating possibilities for youth to engage in a friendly environment. The perspective among youth is changing in both countries and somehow they are urging their political governments toward reconciliation (Mohsin, Janjua, & Khokhar, [2025](#)). Instead of promoting negativity and extreme thoughts among youth, the national governments of both India and Pakistan should introduce sports programs to engage youth in a suitable environment.

Challenges Obstructing Sports Diplomacy

Due to the anarchic nature of the world where states are busy safeguarding their own interest and neglecting the needs and requirements of other nations, sports diplomacy faces several complicated challenges. The role and contribution of sports are highly influenced by some political, social, or economic factors.

Political Environment

States and other polities use sports for political ambitions at domestic and global levels. Sport is an attractive source for national governments that's why it is sometimes part of their political agenda. Time is gone when sports were just showcasing the skills and talents of athletes but in modern times due to over politics in all spheres of life, sports are being considered as national prestige and asserting influence in global politics (Darnell, [2023](#)). Pakistan and India have several political disputes and sports like cricket are being marginalized. Cricket once considered as a connecting force is now creating hysteria in Indo-Pak relations. Cricket rescued both nations from inciting conflicts to safe zones several

times in the past. Cricket acted as a diplomatic bridge in Indo-Pak relations. For instance, due to reciprocal cricket tours in 2004-2005, a ceasefire was brokered between the two neighbors (Bhuiyan, [2025](#)).

Geopolitical Conflicts

Sport is considered a non-political activity where politics has no role. Political neutrality is the core principle of sports. The notion of apolitical sport is embedded in the minds of the general public and no media can question its credibility (Juric & Rogelj, [2025](#)). But critics have pointed out that political neutrality in sports is a myth, when sports are examined closely, political neutrality is missing. In a geopolitical context, relations with neighbors cannot be ignored. Sports are one of the tools to acquire power at national and transnational scales. Sports at the global level are essential for the public to compare their achievements with other nations. Pakistan and India are two such neighbors that are always in a state of geopolitical warfare with many outstanding disputes yet to be resolved.

Pakistan and India had deep-rooted political tensions and their relations can be examined through their long-standing rival history. They are rivals from day one of their independence from the British Raj (Matoi, [2025](#)). Many key issues like Kashmir, disparity over territorial waters, Sir Greek Line, and Siachin led to the confrontation. There is a lack of cooperation in all fields of their relations including sports. India used sports i.e. cricket as a political tool against Pakistan. India in order to sabotage Pakistan's sports, canceled playing against Pakistan, putting political pressure on athletes not to interact with Pakistani players and fans.

Nationalism Over Diplomacy

Sports have multi-dimensional roles and contributions. As a political tool, sports are used as a symbol of national identity, promoting nationalism among the public. For instance in China, gold-winning athletes are presented as a symbol of nationalistic identity (Chaeroni, Musparidi, Ahmed, & Talib, [2024](#)). The same is the case with Pakistan and India where sports are used for political aspirations to ignite nationalistic feelings. The political leaders and media cherish the glories of their sports victories in mass gatherings and social media platforms. Sports like cricket, hockey, kabaddi, and even football are cherished for political objectives. Losing is highly indigestible on both sides due to nationalistic sentiments connected to sports. If athletes perform well against rivals, they are highly praised by the public and the

media. Nationalism is an obstruction in the revival of India and Pakistan sports relations.

Patriotism reinforced by sports defines concepts of national sport, creating national awareness among the masses about global sports and injecting pride and unity into the public consciousness. Sports are used as symbols of unity by some political and other groups for their own interest (Şahin, Fatih, & Çolakoglu, [2010](#)). In India, Cricket is being used for minority hatred and national chauvinism, especially against the Muslim population in India, and as a political tool against Pakistan. The cricket rivalry is a testament for the Muslim population to prove their patriotism towards India and hatred towards Pakistan. Games are no less than a war and grounds not less than a battlefield (Navin, [2017](#)). Pakistan is most favorite for communal groups to fulfill their agendas, promoting religious divides in almost all fields. That is the reason Pakistani athletes are not invited to IPL, football, and hockey leagues held in India.

Interference by Governments

Cricket is considered a gentlemen's game but it has become a political weapon when it comes to the Pakistani and Indian nations, 'ever-growing cricket rivalry. The matches of cricket seemed to reflect political rigidities between both nations. Still, cricket can be a handy diplomatic tool but the question is how far governmental involvement is necessary (Kumar, [2019](#)). India has a great impact on cricket. Even international matches are interrupted due to the IPL. Indian influence is so dominating that players opt to play IPL matches ignoring their national duties. The Indian government and BCCI interfered in 2011 to press the ICC to change the venue of matches from co-host Pakistan to India and they succeeded. Such interferences by the board and government are costing the vitality of cricket.

Politicians used cricket in India for politically oriented goals, like Modi while criticizing Congress said in a speech that if Congress came to power they would use it for communal purposes (Priyansh, [2024](#)). National governments of both sides are destroying the nature of sports. Governments in order to increase their vote bank, implement such policies which affect sports for their own political interest. Indian government several times refused to send its teams to Pakistan or play against Pakistan because their move might be interpreted as a weakness in the public domain. The same is the case with Pakistan, where politically supported candidates are running sports boards. We see it in the past in the form of Najam Sethi who was head of PCB, a political loyalist to the PMLN government,

Faisal Saleh Hayat, a PPP loyalist headed PFF, and now Mohsin Naqvi as head of PCB. Such unprofessional candidates ruining the sports and a key hurdle in the smooth flow of sports between Pakistan and India.

Visa Denials and Travel Bans

The denial from governments not to send or host any team is not surprising in the current era. On several occasions, India refused to send its sports athletes to Pakistan and vice versa. In November 2024, India refused to play scheduled kabaddi matches against Pakistan due to political tensions (Khan, [2024](#)). On April 22, 2025, the Pahalgam terror attack took place and Pakistan was blamed for sponsoring it. As a result, visas were provoked for Pakistani nationals. It is not the first time where India used such tactics to ban Pakistani nationals from entering India.

Pakistani hockey players are denied visas to travel to India for the Men's Hockey Asia Cup due to ongoing political rifts that emerged after Pahalgam. There is no official statement from the Asian Hockey Federation on whether the tournament will be held as per schedule or relocated if Pakistan challenges Indian agony (Khalid J., [2025](#)). Such tactics by the Indian side are unfavorable for player and sports development. Such restrictions would only promote mutual hatred, animosity distrust, and lack of cooperation.

Social Challenges

Pakistan and India, geographically and culturally share various similar things like language, customs, dress, food, and way of life. India is a dominant Hindu-populated country where Muslims are in the minority and in Pakistan, Muslims are in the majority while Hindus and other religious groups are minor (Rizvi & Ejaz, [2016](#)). Still, both are at odds with each other due to some ideological differences. The bloodshed during the

partition changed the mindset of society. Instead of cooperating and helping each other, the hatred and religious differences greatly affected the social fabric of both countries. After partition when Pakistan and Indian cricket teams met in the early 1950s, there was a change in the behavior of players due to changes in their social life. Most of the players of that time played with each other in the same team but partition separated their ways and they found themselves against each other. Kashmir is a bone of contention between both neighbors and societal pressure is so high that both failed to settle it peacefully. Due to its Muslim population, Pakistan wanted it to be acceded to it while India wanted to accede it to the Indian side to secure its secularity (Akram, Ahmad, & Zahra, [2021](#)).

Conclusion

The ideological, social, and political differences between Pakistan and India made their bilateral relationship complex and volatile since their partition in 1947. Against such a historical backdrop, sports diplomacy emerged as a prominent tactic of soft power, providing them with other channels to communicate and reconcile. This research work is focused on exploring the potential of sports diplomacy in reforming and manipulating bilateral relations between Pakistan and India. The research work has revealed that sports especially cricket have long served as a catalyst to initiate reconciliatory measures but outcomes are highly dependent on the political environment. From 2004 India's tour of Pakistan and high profile semifinal contest at Mohali in 2011, sports diplomacy has achieved significant success in reducing tensions and encouraging people to people contact. Sports created informal diplomatic channels for political leaders to negotiate under less pressured circumstances to showcase peaceful gestures for local and international spectators.

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