

review the books



Imran Khan at a protest against the detention of deposed chief justice Muhammad Chaudhry in Lahore in February 2008. Khan's participation in such rallies represented a reversal of his initial support for Pervez Musharraf's emergency rule. Arif Ali / AFP

All round view

Manan Ahmed surveys the many faces of Imran Khan – cricket legend, tabloid sensation, Lahori, Londoner, would-be leader of the Pathans – and considers his attempts to channel fame into political success

Imran Khan: cricketer, celebrity, writer, philanthropist, politician. He made his cricket debut for Pakistan in 1971 at the age of 19, and went on to lead the national team in an illustrious career that spanned 22 years. One of the finest “all-rounders” the sport has ever seen, the mere mention of his name to any cricket fan will trigger a mental highlight reel of his greatest performances – against Australia at Sydney in 1977, against India at Hyderabad in 1983, against England at Headingley in 1987, against West Indies at Georgetown in 1988. To all Pakistanis, his crowning achievement remains leading the country to the World Cup in 1992, the year of his retirement.

Despite all that has been written on Khan's overlapping careers, little justice has been done to his cricket itself. Christopher Sandford's *Imran Khan* continues this trend, paying a great deal of attention to his life but capturing almost no sense of this game. So let us linger there for a moment: as a batsman, he was methodical, aggressive – especially off the back foot – and yet always calm. As a bowler, he was one of the finest that ever played the game, from his late inswinging deliveries to his rising short ball. As a captain, he led his team like a conductor, his 10 fielders perfectly attuned to his slightest gestures. He was as quick with a scold as with a pat, and always in complete control – not for nothing was Khan the captain called “the dictator”.

Khan moved to the UK shortly after his cricketing debut in hopes of getting a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge. He ended up at Oxford; after graduating in 1975, he moved to London, and which would remain his home, and the centre of his richly documented social life, until the mid-1990s. *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, commenting on his 1982 Cricketer of the Year Award, captured the general outline of British tabloid fascination with their Pakistani visitor: “As he was not married at the time, and handsome of face and build, the matter of his future wife was widely speculated upon.”

Sandford echoes this fascination, chronicling the many women linked to Khan – a “fine specimen of a man, with a gym-honed body and a leonine mane of shaggy dark hair” – with disquieting thoroughness. Inexplicably, he makes little of Khan's 1995 marriage to Jemima Goldsmith, the daughter of the financier James Goldsmith, or of their divorce in 2004. But there are scores of quotes from former “triumphs” happy to attest to his “powers”. Sandford also reveals that the late Benazir Bhutto acted “giggly” around Khan for two weeks at Oxford. (“Their relationship was ‘sexual’ in the sense that it could only have taken place between a man and a woman,” is how Sandford threads the needle.)

But Sandford never asks why Khan's sex life was of interest to the tabloids in the first place. He surely wasn't the only attractive cricketer. Nor was he the only cricketer to frequent night clubs (always ordering milk, Sandford dutifully notes). The truth is that the construction of Imran Khan as a particularly virile seducer of white British women was only a step away from the age-old tropes of the *Sheikh of Araby* – illuminating next to nothing about Khan and much about the conflicted European fascination with the sexual powers of the shaggy-haired Oriental despot.

Sandford's failure to complicate the over-determined account of Khan as a “playboy” (in the words of the *New York Times*) might have resulted from

a lack of direct access to his subject – he lists only three “long phone calls” – and a concurrent reliance on previously published accounts. For a politician and author of several memoirs, Khan is notoriously silent about his private life. His own four books – *Imran: The Autobiography of Imran Khan* (1983), *Imran Khan: All Round View* (1988), *Indus Journey: A Personal View of Pakistan* (1990), and *Warrior Race: A Journey Through the Land of the Tribal Pathans* (1993) – have nothing to say about his social, romantic or marital past. The first two deal almost entirely with his cricketing life; the more recent two are best described as travelogues shot through with national glorification and tribal triumphalism. Sandford uses these texts frequently, sometimes engaging in the unseemly practice of presenting re-workings of published passages as “quotes”.

As a result of his focus on Khan the British cricket celebrity and Khan the British gossip page playboy, Sandford's treatment of Khan the Pakistani celebrity and Khan the political figure suffers. Those interested in the other faces of Imran Khan must read between and beyond Sandford's lines.

Khan's philanthropy is the best starting point for a consideration of his post-cricket political life. After his mother, Shaukhat Khanum, died of complications from stomach cancer in 1985, he began a project to bring advanced cancer treatment to the people of Pakistan at little or no cost. The Shaukhat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Center opened in 1994 after six years of fund-raising. The hospital is now the leading care centre in Pakistan, and Khan continues to be the biggest individual donor. More recently, he presided at the graduation of the first class from Namal College in Mianwali, an accredited college that funds technical education in an area with some of the lowest literacy rates in the nation. In winning support for both of these projects, Khan relied heavily on his appeal in diaspora communities in the UK and US, and



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his connections with England and Pakistan's media and cultural elites. As such, his philanthropy represents a productive bridging of his bicultural, bi-continental life.

Khan's move into politics, however, has been markedly less successful, defined more by contradiction than anything else. In 1996, he founded Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice) with the motto “Justice, Humanity, Self Esteem”. The party's focus was to be on corruption – moral, social and political. In a December 1995 column in *The News*, Khan decried the collapsed morals of Pakistan's youth, who followed “a strange mongrel culture – a sort of mixture between India and the West”. He followed up with pointed critiques of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, then jostling as prime ministers in rapid succession, as corrupt “brown sahibs” beholden to the West for sustenance – all this without a word of reference to his own history of living and marrying

across cultural divides.

After 2001, Khan became a key spokesman of a knee-jerk anti-imperialist sentiment, issuing blanket condemnations of the American war in Afghanistan intermingled with twisted glorifications of his tribal heroes, the Pashtun, and a stricter patriarchal reading of Islam. In the 2002 elections, he supported Fazlur Rahman, the candidate of the conservative religious party *Jama'at-i-Islami*. From this one could easily surmise that Khan had gone “fundo”, as Pakistan's press labels religious conservatives. But he was also one of the earliest and most vocal supporters of the liberal Lawyer's Movement that ended the regime of General Pervez Musharraf, and he continues to strongly support an independent Supreme Court. He also condemned the Taliban insurrections in Swat and Waziristan – and publicly argued that the military operations there should be abandoned in favour of a dialogue, though he has not elaborated precisely with whom and how this dialogue should take place.

Khan's stance on Swat and Waziristan surely stems from some sense of personal connection to those regions' Pathan tribes. As Sandford notes, Khan makes frequent reference to the fact that he is a descendant of Haibat Khan Niazi, an independent-minded governor of Lahore in the mid-16th century. But what political or socio-cultural strands might connect him to these same tribes in the 21st century is a nebulous matter. As a politician, Khan certainly hasn't been able to convert his feelings of connection into any tangible political action or benefit. For despite his own romantic projections, Khan is not a leader of the Pathan people, nor of Pakistan. His party failed to get any seats in the 1997 elections, secured only one seat (his own) in the 2002 parliamentary elections, and did not even participate in the 2008 elections. But still his every speech, his every interview, his every comment, is quoted endlessly, his YouTube clips endlessly embedded in blogs around the world. How to make sense of this

failure to translate widespread fame into enduring political success?

In October 1987, a few days before the start of the cricket World Cup in Pakistan, Khan and his young team visited the most popular talk show in the realm: *Neelam Ghar*, hosted by Tariq Aziz. At the end of a question-and-answer session, Aziz turned to the captain and asked if he had any words for the nation. Neelam Ghar was, at that time, perhaps the most watched hour of television in Pakistan; it can be generously estimated that when Khan stood up to talk, he was addressing the entire country. “Don't spit on the sidewalks”, he said. “Please pick up trash where ever you see it. The world is coming to Pakistan and we should make our house clean for them.” I had never seen a cleaner Lahore – until Pakistan lost the semi-final to Australia.

That night, as Sandford reports, the city's broad streets were covered with broken window glass, and smelt of burnt rubber. Khan made no televised statement after the defeat, and left for London that very day. This story offers some clues about Khan's public life in Pakistan and his fate as a politician. As long as Khan won in cricket, he was popular and his private lives remained his own. Whenever things went sour, he could always leave – and he always did. Imran Khan has always been firmly of two worlds, London and Lahore (and making this clear is Sandford's best contribution). In cricket and philanthropy, this is an asset. In politics, it is not. Khan has tried to situate himself in Pakistan by working to erase his London past and presents, reaching for a romantic connection to the 16th century, and making political and ideological alliances with the reactionary right. Rejecting London might have appeared to him as the only possible anchor for Pakistani legitimacy. But that is his misunderstanding of Lahore.

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