



## **MCC Foundation Programme Visit to Nepal 2023**

### **Background**

Cricket was introduced to Nepal for the first time in the 1920s and was limited to the ruling Rana family members and the elite of Nepal. Following the 1951 Revolution and the introduction of democracy, cricket began to spread to the rest of the population and its popularity grew.

Improvements to the communication and transport infrastructure in Nepal allowed the game to expand outside Kathmandu in the 1980s, and Nepal became an Affiliate Member of the ICC in 1988. A major development programme began in the early 1990s, with regional and district tournaments established and cricket being promoted in the schools. Nepal became an Associate Member of the Asia Cricket Council in 1990 and became a full member in 1994.

Interest in cricket increased quickly and demand to play was such that the number of teams in tournaments had to be restricted until more facilities could be built. Nepal became an Associate Member of the ICC in 1996 and the National Cricket Academy was formally opened in January 2013 by the Cricket Association of Nepal to guide emerging players and to provide continuous training facilities to the men's national team, women's national team and the under-19 team.

Cricket is now the most popular sport in Nepal. There are 65 grounds with 17 turf wickets, but international matches can be played only at the Tribhuvan University International Cricket Ground. The biggest challenge is for girls to play sport in Nepal, and for them to access cricket. It remains a patriarchal society where rates of domestic violence and child marriage are high. The National Women's Team continues to face severe challenges and limited opportunities to play and expand their success.

### **MCC and MCCF in Nepal**

In 2019 MCC and MCCF joined together to form a Legacy Tour to Nepal. The plan was for MCC Playing Member teams to tour annually, starting with the Men's Team, then the Women's. MCCF would identify partners on the ground who could support a legacy for the children of Nepal following the MCC tour and help the growth of the game.

Alongside the Men's tour in 2019, MCCF launched a partnership with Kidasha, a charity working with the most marginalised children in Pokhara to support their rights and their education. Kidasha, with financial support from MCCF, put in cricket infrastructure to schools where they worked and identified coaches who could lead the programme. MCC and MCCF tour participants and coaches worked together to provide capacity building for those coaches.

Since then, MCCF's collaborations with more partners- Connecting Clubs, then Cricket without Boundaries and the Nepal Cricket Foundation- has led to an ever-increasing

impact and expansion into 4 provinces. Their Director, Sarah Fane and Head of Operations, Angus Berry, visited in March 2023 to see how the projects were going.

MCCF is now supporting projects in Pokhara, Biratnagar, Rajbiraj and Dankhuta.



Before our intervention, there was no female cricket in the areas where we work. Now, thanks to the project, around 3,500 girls and boys receive coaching each year through the Foundation.

### **Pokhara-Breaking Boundaries project (Kidasha/MCCF)**

Pokhara is a popular tourist destination, being a gateway to trekking for the Annapurna Range. Its tourist centre lines the shore of its beautiful lake and has numerous trendy cafés, spas and small shops selling everything from pashminas to Buddhist prayer flags. MCC Women visited during their November 2022 tour and did some great work with our beneficiaries.

Not far from the centre, but in what could be a different country, are the Pokhara slum areas which we visited with the Kidasha Team. This is where most of their beneficiaries



live. We walked through the narrow streets and looked out onto the sacred river where some of the worst manifestations of child labour have taken place. A few years back, thousands of children could be seen sieving silt and sand and carrying bags of it from the riverbed up the steep ravines to the road. Thanks to work by Kidasha and others, many of these children are now in government schools and it is at those schools, that we are supporting cricket. Since 2019, Kidasha has expanded the cricket programme into 17 schools, and around the cricket, they offer support to the children to tackle the challenges they face in their daily lives.

We visited the Kidasha home for street kids-all boys living in a refuge provided by the charity. It was wonderful to see some of these boys in the schools which we subsequently

visited, all looking immaculate in their school uniforms and with huge grins as they played cricket with their school friends. We were also delighted to see the nets in the schools, still in great condition and getting massive use, which were funded by MCCF pre Covid.

Most of all, it was wonderful to see so many girls playing cricket, alongside the boys, in the schools we visited. Prior to our programme, none of them was able to join in with the sport.

Two of the girls' teams from the schools came together for a tournament on our first day. We were greeted by players, coaches and teachers and presented with scarves, flowers and a "token of love".



We watched the tournament and were very impressed by the determination and skills on display- as were the boys, who came along to watch in increasing numbers.



On our final day in Pokhara, we visited more schools, receiving rumbustious welcomes from the children and watching their coaching sessions. We went to an ICC coach accreditation course funded by MCCF and led by Sarah Begg from Cricket without Boundaries. We have already supported 50 young teachers, students and coaches with accreditation courses.



### **Biratnagar-Cricket for Equality** (Cricket without Boundaries and Nepal Cricket Foundation)

From Pokhara we flew via Kathmandu to Biratnagar, a charming backwater just a stone's throw from the Indian border, with no tourists at all, so a great contrast to Pokhara. Once famous for its jute mills, it seems a step away from modernisation, relying on trade across the Indian border and its own agriculture. Colourful *haat* bazaars (weekly markets) are held each week in different parts of the city, where farmers from the rural hinterland set up stalls to trade agricultural products, spices and handicrafts. Even within the confines of the bustling city you come across goats, cows, chickens and small areas where tiny pockets of land are cultivated. Dated tractors, oxen, mopeds and tuk-tuks interweave in a bizarre kind of ordered chaos on the streets. Moslems, Buddhists, Christians and Hindus live alongside each other.

We arrived on Holi, one of the numerous national holidays in Nepal and by no means a quiet affair. Holi, also known as the Festival of Colours, Love and Spring, is one of the most popular and significant festivals in Hinduism. It celebrates the eternal and divine love of the gods Radha and Krishna and a central part of the celebration is to throw colourful paint powder over friends and strangers alike, or simply wipe a handful of it onto their faces. We were taken to the main gathering centre in the city to take part in the Holi festivities-and as the only foreigners and the tallest in the crowd, we quickly became the most targeted individuals for the bizarre paint smearing greetings of the day.



Everything was closed for Holi, so we had to wait until the following morning for the official opening ceremony of the Marylebone-Biratnagar cricket Ground, funded by MCCF, and the Equality Cup- a tournament between the different provincial teams we support, which is played each year. The ground had hosted an exciting annual MCCF inter-schools' tournament in the lead up to our visit, hosting 8 boys' and 6 girls' teams.



A central part of our Nepal programme is to work in schools, through cricket for boys and girls, with messaging around the right for girls to play sport, and around prevention of gender violence and early marriage. In this patriarchal society, cricket is helping to shape a better future.

Players in the MCCF programme receive twice weekly coaching sessions. On Saturdays, they attend the Nepal Cricket Foundation Academy and 20 of the best female players receive scholarships to the Academy each year funded by MCCF. The girls are incredibly keen and can be found from 6 am doing a pre-school cricket session and then again after school developing their cricketing skills. 5 of the best girls from our programme have already become coaches and have received ICC accredited coaching certificates.

A similar programme is running in Dankhuta and Rajbiraj-sadly we did not have time to visit these areas, but players from those provinces came to take part in the Equality Cup in Biratnagar, so we had a chance to meet them. We are delighted that 45 players from our programme in Nepal are now representing their province (equivalent of our County system) for cricket. None of them had picked up a bat before MCCF started its support.

On 8<sup>th</sup> March, International Women's Day, we went to open the new ground and to watch the Equality Cup tournament. 50 girls were taking part in 4 teams representing the 4 provinces. As a very exciting addition, we had 4 Nepal National Women players, led by Captain Rubina Chettri present at the tournament over 3 days, coaching and mentoring the girls. They gave their all to support the young players and were an inspiration to them throughout.

The Mayor of Biratnagar came along to open the ground with us. The ground is a very impressive and large levelled area which awaits the monsoon rains to green up. There was a splendid opening ceremony, complete with the unveiling of a plaque, pre-match ringing of a bell to mirror the tradition at Lord's, and many speeches.



Most of the girls who travelled from Pokhara, Rajbiraj and Dankhuta had never been out of their province before. They enjoyed the long bus journeys which transported them across the landscapes of Nepal, stayed in dormitories, made firm friendships and had the experience of a lifetime, released from the confines of their daily lives, where they face many challenges even to play sport. It was 3 days just for them and they relished the opportunity.



It was a magnificent tournament, with each team full of determination to play to their best ability and win the trophy. Huge buckets of food arrived at lunch time each day, transported in tuk-tuks. As the days went by, parents from Biratnagar started to attend and when the local team won, they said how proud they were and how they could now see the benefit of sport and would encourage their daughters to play. Slowly, slowly, the change will happen for these girls.



It was uplifting to visit the projects and meet the girls and to see first hand how cricket is bringing so much joy, opportunity and hope to children across Nepal. There is a long way to go, but the power of sport to transform lives was evident in full and an inspiration to us to continue to support.

