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It's just not cricket: US exports baseball to India

Chidanand Rajghatta, TNN Nov 5, 2006, 01.02am IST

WASHINGTON: Kolkata 'Cowboys' meet Cleveland 'Indians'. Cricket fans who may be in despair about Team Blue's current form have an opportunity in the coming weeks to defect to/ enjoy/ reject a fraternal sport when the United States brings its Major League Baseball to the subcontinent.

If you thought McDonalds and Monsanto were the only threats of American 'expansionism,' beat this.

Top level American baseball coaches will be hosting a month-long series of baseball camps throughout India starting November 5, in what is being described as "the most extensive coaching program Major League Baseball has conducted in India to date."

The first two participants in MLB's Envoy Program, former Minnesota Twins pitcher Jeff Brueggemann and Rochester University's assistant coach David Palese, will start the tour with a 'Camp Manipur' in Imphal.

Unbeknownst to the rest of India, it appears the northeastern state has stolen a march -- or run -- when it comes to baseball. The tour is a joint venture of MLB (which is like the Cricket Board in India), the US Embassy in New Delhi, and First Pitch, which describes itself as a New York-based US-Manipur Baseball Project that supports Manipur's 20 clubs and 700 baseball players -- 'a model for the rest of India.'

MLB's Envoy program has taken the quintessentially American game -- which is to Americans what cricket is to India -- to countries such as Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines.

Baseball is of a more recent vintage than cricket, and is in fact, said to have derived from it. It enjoys about the same limited worldwide reach, being played mostly in the US, a few Latin American countries, and East Asia (mainly Japan, South Korea and Taiwan).

The two sports also have many common terms and objectives -- runs, batting, and fielding among others.

But partisans of each find the other sport boring. The American humorist Robert Benchley famously suggested that 'England and America should scrap cricket and baseball and come up with a new game that they both can play -- Like baseball, for example.'

Hollywood star Robin Williams likened cricket to baseball on valium. Cricket aficionados are no less contemptuous of baseball, wondering how some teams score only a run or two in nine innings after four hours of play and how it is the only game where stealing is legal.

The American pitch for baseball comes at the same time India is also trying to spread its gospel of cricket.

At the UN this week, former union home minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed told the General Assembly about the virtues of cricket as an instrument of diplomacy and urged the UN system to 'undertake greater activities related to sports to promote peace.'

The Indian cricket board is also trying to drum up a one-day series in the United States involving India, Pakistan, and the neighbouring West Indies. There are also plans to revive the one-day series in Canada on the lines of the now defunct Sahara Cup that was played in Toronto in the 1990s between India and Pakistan.