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The new lead presenter of the BBC's resurgent TV coverage talks to Phil Walker about her extraordinary rise through an industry which until recently had appeared a closed shop



When you're hoping to secure some time with the hardest-working woman in showbiz, you take what you can get. Isa Guha has planned to meet WCM in Southampton, somewhere in the vicinity of the auspiciously bio-secure Ageas Bowl, her schedule having thrown up a sliver of free time in the short break between one match and the next, in this case the England-Ireland ODIs. This being the new abnormal, however, there's nowhere we can go. The initial

plan to find a socially-distanced spot on the adjoining golf course is swiftly outlawed, and with the hotel out of bounds we end up, well, in the car park.

Perching for the next hour on a grassy kerb as bemused golfing types amble past, her face hidden by a collaboration of surgical mask and black baseball cap, Guha attempts to make sense of her story, stitching it together via trails of adjectives that frequently settle on the likes of "surreal" and "ridiculous".

These days she may be an assured and stylish lead woman, fronting up the BBC's TV highlights package and the Australian international summer on Fox Cricket – the latter an act of such elegant and implausible infiltration that it can still stop her in her tracks – but for all that this is her life now, five years on from her first tentative presenting job for Sky at the Women's Ashes and a decade since retiring from cricket as a World Cup-winning 26-year-old, Guha's unpretentiousness remains lucratively intact.

Her appeal on TV lies in her earthiness; she's clearly having a ball. "There are way more polished people out there than me, but I just try to be as true to myself as possible," she says. To watch her at times is to get the sense that she's concealing some dark hilarity just beneath the surface, a coping mechanism, perhaps, to rationalise the strangeness, and yet it's no accident: she's worked like crazy to get here. "It's like being a player," she says. "You work on every aspect of your game until you become undroppable."

These days Guha wears many hats. She sits on the advisory group overseeing the ECB's South Asian Action Plan – a scheme she hopes can be used as a framework for neglected black communities too – and is a non-executive director of the Professional Cricketers' Association (PCA), an organisation doing "amazing work" keeping the show somewhere close to the road this summer, supporting and counselling its own staff as well as the many furloughed players it represents. She is part of the group tasked



PHOTO BY RYAN PIERSE

with leading a response to issues around diversity and equality within the professional game, and as a female British-Asian cricket obsessive, she knows of what she speaks. “That’s going to be a real priority, making sure that we’re looking at every level of equality – race, class, gender – and also including sexuality. I still think more can be done on making the game inclusive for people of all sexualities.”

She didn’t have to audition for the BBC. They just offered her the job. “It felt like a real honour. And I guess recognition of the hard work I’ve put in on the stuff I’ve done before.” The coverage itself has gone down well. The *Telegraph* reports that the highlights shows have been pulling in around 1.3m viewers per night, topping out at 1.5m for the culmination of the first Test against Pakistan. “So that’s pretty sweet, and maybe a quarter of that number are new viewers. Research tells us that there is an increased number of women and girls who are watching.”

They have sought to strike a balance, she says, between keeping the traditionalists happy and bringing a new flavour to the coverage. Fronting up an old institution now serious about realigning with cricket, at a wider hinge-point of societal hyper-consciousness, Guha finds herself in the vanguard of an extraordinary cultural moment. She’s not unaware of the responsibility, nor of the reach that her voice now carries.

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You recently took part in a PCA-organised vodcast called *Racism Through Cricket’s Lens*, alongside Mark Butcher, Dean Headley and Michael Carberry. Elsewhere in this magazine we publish the story of former Yorkshire cricketer Azeem Rafiq, who says that he played under an openly racist county captain. At the same time the ECB acknowledges that the game must face some “uncomfortable truths” regarding race and diversity. Is the game finally facing up to the deep roots of this problem? I think it’s important to hear these stories, and now there’s finally a platform for people to speak about their experiences. I think it’s a serious issue that needs addressing, and I think the tide is turning now with regards to the way you behave. Some of the comments I’ve heard... You just cannot say them anymore.

Comments that you’ve heard in the past?

Yeah. I mean, I’m not going to say that I’ve experienced anything as bad as Michael Carberry or Azeem has experienced. It’s been a cause for a lot of introspection myself, certainly during lockdown and the last few weeks. You know, I grew up in a predominantly white society. One of my best friends is black and her family is from Saint Vincent. We both grew up in High Wycombe. Now, what do you want to do as a child? You just want to fit in, don’t you. But she made the point, ‘Why do we have to change the way we are to fit in to



ABOVE: With Ebony Rainford-Brent in 2008, preparing for what would become a successful tilt at the following year’s World Cup. Guha would take 142 international wickets in all, including 9-100 in the victorious 2008 Ashes Test at Bowral

society? We should just be appreciated for who we are’. I didn’t really talk about my background too much as a child, it’s something that you just do – you adapt to fit the mould.

Did you find that as you moved further into cricket, as a young female from an Asian background, that you preferred to keep quiet?

You basically suppress it all. You turn a blind eye to it because you want to fit in. And it’s only when you look back and think about stuff that you realise you were made to feel that way. My experiences are not as bad as some others, and I feel for those who are, say, in a team, and who are afraid to speak up because they might lose their place, especially if they’re on the fringes.

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THE SOUTH ASIAN ACTION PLAN

The big question is how we engage with people to encourage them to go further with cricket. Some of it is mindset – studies come before playing cricket. Some of it is unconscious bias. An example: you’ve got a British white coach who’s looking after a team and the Asian kid can’t come to nets because he’s been told by his parents that he needs to focus on his exams. Naturally, that coach is going to choose the player who’s available and who’s showing commitment to the sport. That’s where understanding is so important, and why the ECB has implemented a game-wide strategy across the board. There’s still so much to be done but they’ve incorporated the Rooney Rule a couple of years ago; not just that but they’ve installed ‘Community Champions’ to act as mentors, because backgrounds can differ so much, and if you come from a different background you can be put off by the environment you’re about to go into. It’s so important for the players but also for the counties as well.”

Was that you once?

I probably was one of those who was afraid to speak out. But that’s not necessarily just a case of me being Asian, this is me as a human being. And similar things when it comes to sexism as well. It’s good that there are so many of us now [female commentator/broadcasters], because we can actually talk about it with each other and support each other. And you get to a point where actually your voice can be heard through the hard work that you’ve put in and you become respected. I’ve had conversations with Ebs [Ebony Rainford-Brent] about this. We are now in positions where we can actually make a difference, but would we have been able to do that 20 years ago? Probably not.

How comfortable are you talking about these things to newspapers, magazines etc?

I generally don’t like talking too much, because things can be misconstrued, especially when writers don’t write their own headlines. But I’ve had a lot of time to think about what I want to say, and I’m certainly more comfortable about talking than I would’ve been in the past.

Sexism in cricket is an everyday occurrence. It can be insidious or it can be upfront but it’s certainly prevalent. It’s an old-school mentality at times. A lot of the time the intention is not to make you feel bad, but it’s ingrained, and naturally it does. You turn a blind eye to it, and you hope that by others respecting you then you become almost... it’s that visibility of seeing a woman, and a woman of colour, on television, that can hopefully inspire and educate young people – or even adults – to believe that they can go on to do something themselves. And I think we’re in a position now where, with a lot of the guys that I work with, I genuinely believe that if they said something out of line that I could have a conversation with them. Not that they would...

Have you had to in the past?

Not me personally but I know other women have within cricket. I haven’t recently had to do that, although I probably wanted to a few years ago. I’ll give you an example: I was on a show and one of the guys, who thought it was banter, said he was too busy looking at her legs so he didn’t hear what she was saying. Live on television. I was on that show at the time, and I laughed, because I just couldn’t believe what had actually happened. But I think partly you choose your battles, and you hope that people do start to think about what they’re saying. But, you know, you go through the guilt all the time. You look back and think if I’d have said something back then, we wouldn’t be in this position now. You’ve almost enabled it, in a way. I’ve always been quite tolerant, and I think you’ll find that with a lot of the girls.

Is that partly to protect yourself?

Potentially. But I think it shows that if I were to have a conversation, I would be being pretty serious about it.

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Eighteen years ago, Isa Guha, then a bookish student who would later take a degree in biochemistry and molecular biology at UCL, was nominated for a Sony Asian Sports person of the Year award for becoming the first Asian woman to play cricket for England. At the time she felt “super self-conscious” about it, unsure how or whether to embrace its unavoidable symbolism. “I realise now,” she says, “how important representation is in terms of visibility so people of a similar background can go on to achieve something similar.”

She has had to clamber through the thickets of a male-dominated world, biting her lip and biding her time, to emerge on the other side. This was never the endgame of some intricately detailed career plan; in truth, she always thought she’d spend her professional life in a science laboratory. Instead Isa Guha is here, and this is no experiment. The game needs her. ■