

# THE THREE CYCLES OF SRI LANKAN CRICKET

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We are all cricket pundits these days just as we were all cricket fans (even fanatics) once. Between now and then we became world champions and have now made an ignominious attempt to defend the title. The ecstasy which accompanied Sri Lanka's elevation to championship status has therefore petered out in bitter disappointment and according to a peculiar local law yesterday's most fervent fanatics are today's sternest critics. In the days to come more and more dirges to Sri Lanka's cricket can be expected in the rolling acres of our prolific press.

This column's interest in cricket, however, centres not so much on the theory or practice of the game as its sociology, its position in the national scale of values. It is only such an approach which can explain both the heights of ecstasy as well as the depths of disappointment in our collective psyche over this game introduced to us by our colonial masters. Make no mistake we took to the game like ducks to water. We imbibed not merely the game but its whole ethos and body of values. Perhaps we were Kilpling's original 'flannelled fools' who knew not only how to wield the willow and the leather and keep field but also how to dress for dinner and the right spoons, knives and forks to use. We spoke with the proper accents and some of us had been to Oxford or Cambridge. The whistlestop matches which England and Australia deigned to play on the way to each other's countries were the high points of the local social calendar.

That was the time when the Saravanamuttus spoke only to the de Sarams and the Sarams perhaps only spoke to God. Cricket was a religion and the SSC (its first name spelt 'Singhalese' in the proper colonial manner even long after Independence) and the Oval were its main shrines. Every March Colombo's elite marched to the Royal-Thomian conducted on the radio in the urbane tones of Lucian de Zoysa and Bertie Wijesinghe.

That then was the first cycle when the English-speaking elite educated at Royal, St. Thomas' and Trinity basked in their self-important mastery of the white man's game. It was not only the game but the whole culture which went along with it. Cricket was played by the MCC's rules and to the early Sri Lankan politicians after Independence there did not seem to be any essential difference between cricket and Westminster-style parliamentary practice. On the field you had the umpires and in Parliament the Speaker. The umpire's word was law and the country changed Governments regularly at General Elections.

We Sri Lankans are basically amateurs and at cricket we were excellent amateurs. The 1950s and the 1960s were the golden afternoons dominated by the likes of P.I.Pieris, Michael Tissera, Dr.H.I.K.Fernando, Neil Chanmugam, Abu Fuard and Anura Tennekoon. They were players as well as gentlemen but to take Sri

Lanka to the councils of the ICC something else was needed. So dawned the second cycle of Sri Lankan cricket.

The next cycle was characterised by a sense of anti-elitism compounded perhaps by a sense of class envy. This coincided with the emergence of secondary schools outside the charmed circle of the anglicised citadels asserting their own right to hold their own at cricket. The Buddhist revival had created schools such as Ananda and Nalanda Colleges in Colombo, Dharmapala in Kandy, Mahinda in Galle and Rahula in Matara. The emergence of these schools into the cricket field was therefore accompanied by strong feelings of nationalism. On the day of one Royal-Thomian in the 1970s Mr.Prins Gunasekera, then an Independent MP, complained in the columns of this newspaper that while the elitists were at play there was no bread for the populace of Colombo. Snide remarks were made about the habit of eating ham and bacon, those favourite hate symbols of nationalism from the days of Piyadasa Sirisena, apparently the staple diet of Royalists, Thomians and Trinitians who went on to 'creep' in estates after playing cricket or rugger. Presumably in our more demotic age of consumerism ruled by television the sausages marketed by a leading batsman are a popular mass food in the market. The moral of our post-modernist times Mr.Gunasekera, is that you eat sausages if you can't get bread.

The Ananda-Nalanda battalions therefore led the new assault on the ivory towers of cricket and nothing became more of a representative symbol of this new sense than Bloomfield. Here of an evening you could find not only the new cricketers but also writers, dramatists and film-makers, the other new wave, with figures such as the late DhammaJagoda, Dharmasena Pathiraja, the late Somasiri Dehipitiya, Daya Tennekoon, the late U.Ariyawimal, W.Jayasiri and others of that gang. An added attraction was the presence of Ananda, the son of the legendary 'Simion Aiyya' of the old Press Club as the barman.

But the new assault needed robust leadership and this came from the political front. It is true that even during the leisurely 1960's quasi-political figures such as Robert Senanayake (Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's brother and election agent at Dedigama) had given leadership to the Cricket Board but it would be no exaggeration to say that it was only with the ascension of the late Gamini Dissanayake as President that the Cricket Board was given aggressive political leadership. There had been other politicians before such as Dr.N.M.Perera and T.B.Weerapitiya and others after such as Lakshman Jayakody and Tyronne Fernando, but the Dissanayake tenure at the helm marked a watershed in the affairs of the game.

The question now with Sri Lankan cricket lying prostrate is whether that second cycle which was fuelled by anti-elitism and aggressive political leadership has exhausted itself. While it might be pre-ma-

ture to offer any speculations one thing is clear. That is that during this crucial second cycle Sri Lanka was not offered a proper chance to mature internationally. We had barely been accepted by the ICC when we became world champions. We were then the under-dogs. If during the first cycle Sri Lanka (or Ceylon as it was called for much of that time) played like gentlemen but polished amateurs during the second cycle we proved that we could hold our own with the most astute and the punishing of them. But compared with the former fellow colonies of India and Pakistan (with which Sri Lanka's history at cricket is terminous) Sri Lanka received a raw deal from the ICC. It is only enough to take into account the fact that we have yet to get a full tour from Britain.

The result was that Sri Lanka which as world champions should have matured fast during the second cycle had been overtaken by the newly emergent countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe by the time of the present World Cup. International isolation was compounded by domestic politics, the hubris that we were the top dogs, by the jockeying for positions mostly by politicians in the national and provincial cricket associations and the emergence of cricketers as celebrities in their own right.

Now this last phenomenon is not necessarily a bad thing. Sanath Jayasuriya, the swarthy, balding young man from Matara, for example, has contributed much more than anybody else in recent times to engendering a sense of national pride. Mutiah Muralitharan, the boy from Kandy, the son of a provincial confectioner, did much to bind the country together during a time of fractious racial strife.

But all this was accompanied by their appropriation by the media. Touting various products over the media they became celebrities. Sanath Jayasuriya's wedding was made into a media event to the great glee and the greater benefit of the mudalali owners of the mass media.

It is against this back cloth that Sri Lankan cricket enters upon its third and yet indeterminate cycle. It is tempting to see in the recent confrontation at the Cricket Board elections the contours of an emerging new scenario. If the old leisurely cricket administration of the 1960s gave way to the aggressive new politics of the 1970s and part of the 1980s both have today been replaced by corporate power. The big businessmen and the top executives of the powerful corporate sector have today become the messiahs of cricket. Can they salvage cricket from the doldrums or do we have to look back to the old elite for leadership? Whatever we do, however, the future lies with the young.

The cry is heard again that there are so many talented young men who are not given a chance because they are outside the pale.

In other words those who sallied forth once upon a time to challenge the rule of the old elite have now entrenched themselves as a new caste. But we can do without castes or clans. Whatever the future holds the third cycle of Sri Lankan cricket will lie firmly with broadening the game's base and range, a further thrust against elitism and to the very heart of the future. ■

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