

HE WHO PAYS THE PIPER: MEPHISTOPHELES AND THE OPIATE OF ONE-DAY CRICKET

David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya

Not since the heyday of the West Indies can any nation have sold its soul to cricket with such resounding and such obvious delight as Sri Lanka after its victory in 1996. They had reached the pinnacle; they had snatched the World Cup from under the nose of an unbelieving Australia, and they had done it with audacity, and with their own unique blend of hard professionalism and nerve-tingling panache. The Sri Lankan team were transformed, almost overnight, from minnows to masters of the one-day game who could empty pavilion bars and who could hold an audience enthralled and on tenterhooks. They were the champions, and — for all the poverty, suffering, ethnic conflict and the violence throughout the country — there was passionate identification with the team and an exuberant expression and outflow of national consciousness. They had burst onto the scene as the "master blasters" of international cricket. And the celebration of success dulled any sense of deprivation, inequality, conflict or political mismanagement.

It was an extraordinary achievement. Sri Lanka transformed the way the world looked at one-day cricket; they opened up new dimensions to the game, and provided enormous excitement and pleasure. But the rise of Sri Lankan one-day cricket also had wider economic and social significance, and reflected a congruence of powerful international and domestic forces. Our contention in this paper is that it reflects broader changes

in Sri Lankan society—changes in social structure in the wake of economic reforms, profound changes in the political arena, the rise of Sinhala nationalism, and the way the country was being integrated into the global economy. For a country that had suffered a decade of violence and that had seen earlier visions of a just society evaporate, cricket offered an almost ideal palliative. It opened up an avenue for mass escapism.

The one-day game may be relatively new, but cricket has a long pedigree as an appendage to colonialism and a symbol of social prestige and sophistication. With developments in media technology, it is now a commodity, widely available and accessible to the masses. It has emerged as a highly profitable industry and a lucrative source of economic gain and political patronage. It offers professionally-packaged mass entertainment, aggressively marketed throughout the world by the multinational media. It has also been harnessed, nurtured and subsidised by the state for political advantage. Those who control the domestic industry control access to fortunes.

In this paper we focus on the rise of the one-day game in Sri Lanka and on its role as an opiate. We first ask why there was need for an opiate; we then ask why one-day cricket was so appropriate, and we then go on to analyse how it assumed that role and how it flourished, relating it to broader changes in Sri Lankan politics and society.

The craving for an escapist route

After the hardships of the early 1970s, the victory of the UNP in 1977 promised an era of economic growth and social justice. However, when the public sector investment boom ended, growth faltered and the vision of a dynamic, prosperous and democratic society began to fade. It gave way to authoritarianism, blatant abuse of power and a readiness to intimidate and crush organised opposition whether from Tamils, the unions or youth. The crushing of the 1980 public sector strike, manipulation of law and

the constitution, state connivance and condoning of the 1983 riots, the subsequent Eelam war and the IPKF fiasco, and the JVP insurrection in the south, severely undermined public confidence in the country's future. A by-product was that Sinhala-nationalist pride was also seriously dented.

Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet bloc had created an ideological vacuum. Whatever the fortunes of left politics in Sri Lanka, to many there seemed a plausible

socialist alternative until the late 1980s. Even the youth insurgency in 1987-89 was "legitimised" in their eyes by a vision of a new society. But its defeat, the total impotence of the old left and failure of the Soviet experiment closed such options off. With election of the People's Alliance government in 1994 there was a brief flicker of hope that the transition to a fully-fledged market economy could be somewhat kinder — that there would be an end to blatant abuses of power, cronyism, widespread corruption and, in particular, the war. But, from the outset its policies stamped out hopes of any real change. The failure of negotiations to end the war led to a progressive realisation that it was there to stay. With the UNP continuing to be haunted by its past, disenchantment with and distrust of mainstream politics became pervasive.

It was precisely at this point, when everything seemed to be going wrong, that Sri Lanka began to win convincingly in the one-day game — and to win in the international arena, with global visibility and massive international publicity against the world's best teams.

For a country that suffered a decade of violence and that had seen earlier visions of a just society evaporate, cricket offered an almost ideal palliative.

There was a wave of success from test victories over New Zealand and Pakistan to Sharjah, to the World Cup (which began only days after the LTTE attack on the Central Bank) and indeed beyond. Moreover, it was not a victory at just any game, it was victory at cricket. So what was so special about success at cricket that it could be such a powerful opiate?

Cricket as a social phenomenon

The social significance of cricket in the early years was never uniquely Sri Lankan. It was much the same in all British colonies. But while the British introduced it for their own entertainment, it was soon adopted by the "brown sahibs" who imitated their masters "in language, in dress, in culture and of course in cricket. The phenomenal value that English men placed on cricket, the "secret language" of the initiated and the uniforms, ceremony and rituals made it something special. Brown sahibs in Sri Lanka were craving to be accepted and to prove that they too could be "gentlemen". And what better way to do it than "to play the game"?

Cricket in Sri Lanka came with the consolidation of British rule; the first recorded game was played on Sri Lankan soil on 8 September 1832 between the 97th Regiment of the British Army and the British "civilians". But it was soon an established part of the education of young gentlemen in the leading schools, Royal and St Thomas'. In 1879, there was the first Royal-Thomian "big match", and by early twentieth century a leading school had to play cricket. The "father of cricket", Dr. W.G. Grace — the first of many illustrious players to visit *en route* to or from Australia — played at Galle Face Green in 1891, and fleeting glimpses of great figures invigorated the local game. But it was not a game of the masses. Cricket reflected, and was nourished by, attitudes and relationships of the indigenous "elite" to the colonial masters: they wanted and they were looking for a partnership with the British on all matters that they saw to be of real importance.

With the introduction of universal franchise, politicisation of the masses and the emergence of a powerful left movement in the 1930s, mimicry and imitation were increasingly less tenable and, by the post-independence era, the social significance of cricket had become much more ambivalent. There was a continuing (if more selective) admiration of many things British, but there was a firm rejection of subordination or inferiority. There was also a gradual spread of cricket into "non-elite" schools that saw it an important facet of upward mobility. A wider spectrum of social groups came into the country's first class (club) cricket teams, and the game's popularity was widened through the spread of radio, and in time through commentaries on major inter-school and international matches in Sinhala. Administration of the game at national level nevertheless remained firmly in the hands of the "old elite".

The mass audience that grew from the early 1980s saw cricket emerge as yet another expression of the conspicuous consumption and status-driven consumerism of the post-reform economy. We have pointed out elsewhere that command of English assumed new importance in the liberalised economy, rewarding those who were

proficient in it.¹ The poor and the underprivileged, particularly from the rural areas, lacked both the wealth and the English to appropriate the material benefits of a deregulated economy: but they could now at least get cricket. And this was translated into everyday life; cricket became popular amongst children in both cities and villages and, by the mid-1980s, it was the national sport.

Given the situation of crisis that had been building up and the fact that, in the mid-1990s, cricket was the only arena in which Sri Lanka seemed to be winning, it was hardly surprising that it should have come to assume such major importance in the national psyche. It was not just that Sri Lanka won the World Cup in 1996 (and continued its run of success well into 1998). One-day cricket captured the public imagination in a way that nothing had before. It bridged traditionally entrenched divisions of caste, class and ethnicity. The atmosphere and the action at Khetterama (now the Premadasa) stadium under floodlights was pure theatre. It had saturation coverage on television, cricketing greats from the past were commentating, and when the national team was playing most of the nation was following (if not actually watching) the match. One-day cricket provided the country with mass, popular entertainment of a distinctive brand. It cast the Sinhalese nation — with a Tamil wizard (Muralidharan) — in an Olympian struggle against foreign foes, against giants and against infidels. The game, with its fluctuating fortunes, created its (inter) national heroes, its firmament of larger-than-life stars and role models. The national mood swung between elation and despair.

So was it simply that eleven good men and true happened to come together at this particular juncture? Or were there other explanations? We argue it was both. Exceptionally talented and skilled individuals arrived on the Sri Lankan cricketing scene who could carry the day and record remarkable successes. But what was happening in cricket was at the same time more complex.

The Cricket Industry

Cricket has always had a commercial dimension to it. Dr W.G. Grace was one of the first highly successful professionals in the history of sport, demanding large appearance fees and exploiting lucrative opportunities in commercial advertising. But it was only with developments in the media (particularly the electronic media) that the commercial potential of the game could be fully exploited and that there was a qualitative change in its nature and in its links to big business. The huge commercial opportunities in international cricket were seen and seized upon by the Australian media mogul Kerry Packer in the late 1970s. His challenge to the established order of cricket administration and to the traditional nature of the game with the introduction of one-day-limited-over matches and World Cup competitions was dramatic and it was driven by innate concerns about product marketability. It was directly and openly aimed at producing and selling cricket as "packaged mass entertainment". The emergence of international media empires and satellite television provided the necessary marketing technology and went hand in hand with a massive surge in the commoditisation of mass spectator sports. An enormous international market was soon developing for the new brand of cricket —

where competition was fierce, but where the gains were potentially immense if the product could be structured and packaged to meet consumer needs.

The historical traditions of its domestic cricket meant that Sri Lanka was particularly equipped to meet these standards. The nature of the Sri Lankan version of first class cricket — two day inter-club cricket for the Sara (vanamuttu) trophy — ensured a premium on flair, quick-scoring and adventurous play. But it remained a Neville Cardus "golden age" of correctness and politeness, when gentlemen showed they were a class apart from the common players. This had been woeful preparation for five day test cricket. The new stars of the late 1970s, the Duleep Mendises, Roy Dias and the young Arjuna Ranatunga carried on the tradition of scintillating and cavalier batting of the M. Sathasivams and C.I. Gunasekaras.

The introduction of one-day-limited-over matches changed that picture. New skills were now in demand in the international market, and Sri Lankan cricket had honed many that fitted well into the one-day game. Key raw materials needed to produce for this growing demand were in abundance in Sri Lanka. All it needed was "the right technology" — tighter management, more rigorous training, hardness and professionalism to blend individual stars into a national team — and its comparative advantage could be exploited. It could produce a commodity that met the stringent quality standards of the global market. Demand was present in the international media empires. And there was enormous commercial mileage in the idea of minnows or underdogs winning. Conditions were propitious for the birth of a new export industry in Sri Lanka.

International demand stimulated a supply response because the new market opened up avenues to undreamed of riches: international television rights, advertising revenues and a plethora of lucrative contracts. It was an opportunity not to be missed in the post-reform policy environment and the aggressive search for export-oriented, profit-making opportunities. But it was not one that was open to everyone: access to the international market was firmly in the hands of those who held powers of control over cricket in Sri Lanka. In this most highly competitive sport, cricket administrators suddenly found themselves with an export monopoly of a highly profitable product that could be exploited by the international media empires and domestic cricket administrators in a hugely profitable joint venture.

The scale of the potential profits dwarfed those from most other commercial ventures. In the past, the Board of Control for Cricket had on the whole been staffed by people with a passion for and/or substantial expertise in the game. Leading political figures held the office of President, but before the mid 1980s it was in a largely ceremonial capacity. Now, control of the game was no longer a matter of academic or ceremonial interest: fortunes could be made. Governments provided subsidies and made significant infrastructural

investments, and they increasingly asserted political control over the Board as a lever for the dispensation and exploitation of political patronage and for massive economic gain.²

As in so many other areas of the liberalised economy, it provided new, and more profitable ways of extending existing systems of patronage and rent extraction. Politicians in government (and well-connected bureaucrats) gained the power to allocate export quotas (garments), to sell state assets (public utilities, transport), to award both international and domestic contracts (telecommunications). With cricket, the politicians in power won control over a highly lucrative industry supplying a potent political opiate.

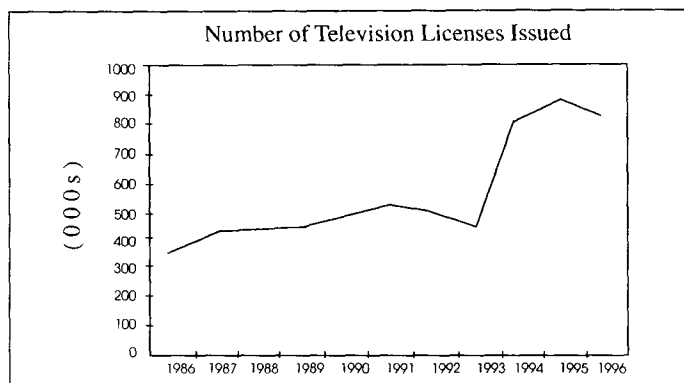
And the scale of state support was to prove significant. President J.R. Jayewardene — who, in the early 1980s was even reluctant to go as far as to get the government involved in lobbying England to support Sri Lanka's request for full-membership of the International Cricket Conference (the governing body of world cricket) jumped on the cricket bandwagon. He was to decree only four years later that the state should meet all costs of the live television coverage of test matches. When Sri Lanka secured its first test victory (over India on

11 September 1985), he was personally present on the final day and immediately declared the following day a public holiday. The World Cup tournament of 1992 was televised live by the state broadcasting service and, in collaboration with the Australian High Commission, experts from the Australian state-run Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) were brought down to train a crew from their Sri Lankan counterparts in Rupavahini. And when Tyrone Fernando (Minister of Law and

Prison Reform, and also President of the Cricket Board) made screening available to prisoners, it was the first time they had been given access to television. "Watching the match" had suddenly emerged as a civil right.

State sponsorship and promotion of the game stimulated large-scale private sector involvement, in the form of commercial sponsorship of tournaments and tours, advertising hoardings and dress advertising, television rights etc — albeit at times with some encouragement from those who wielded political clout (Fernando: 1998). A massive market was created with the aid of state subsidies. Television coverage of important matches carried the game (and the commercial messages that accompanied it) to every nook and cranny of the island, and the drama of the one-day game captured public imagination in a way that no other commercial advertising campaign could ever have achieved. It could ram home its message to a captured audience between every over. The new-found fascination with the game was also a boon to the television industry: the number of television licenses (admittedly a very imperfect indicator of the actual number of sets) doubled between 1993 and 1994 (see Figure 1). And the proliferation of sets was a boon to the sellers of other consumer goods and to the politicians in power.

With cricket, the politicians in power won control over a highly lucrative industry supplying a potent political opiate.



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, *Statistical Abstract 1997*, Colombo, 1998, Table 12.1

The involvement of politicians to such a degree in any industry naturally affects its performance. Politicians (and those who owe their positions to them) tend to have shorter horizons and very different aims from those with longer-term developmental and commercial objectives. Well-publicised squabbles, tensions and conflicts between politicians and administrators, and within the Board of Control itself, show that cricket is no different. The reported pervasive interference of individuals and families with political clout in team selection, training and more generally in the formulation and implementation of strategic plans and international contracts is a manifestation of the dominant influence of political and personal prestige (and individual gain) in the administration of cricket. There is every indication that it is already beginning to affect the Sri Lankan game.

Society and politics

In Sri Lanka, the social significance of the one-day game is now immense. It has a passifying role as an opiate, or as mass escapism, but it is also a reflection of, and a facade that helps hide major (and less attractive) transformations in Sri Lankan society — the rise of Sinhala fundamentalism and the marginalisation of Tamils, the growth and increasingly brash bravado of the *nouveau riche*, and crass consumerism as a substitute for social mobility, greater personal dignity and a more just society. It gives political leaders an opportunity to be simultaneously snobbish-Oxbridge and blatantly (evenly crudely) populist, and it provides an ideal cover for covert personal gain because cricket is a far less suspect arena for advancement than, say, privatisation.

But perhaps most significant has been the way it has mirrored changes in social structure. President Jayewardene embodied a "gentlemen versus players" attitude when it came to political leadership. He had been part of the old, assertive UNP leadership of the post-independence period that looked down on the Cyril Mathews

and Ranasinghe Premadasas who had their roots in the poor or the lumpen proletariat. These "players" — despite their undoubted value in drumming up popular support at elections (that were increasingly nasty and brutish) and in the normal cut-and-thrust of day-to-day politics — were never accepted as social equals in the UNP because of major class and caste differences. By the early-1990s, the political scenario had changed dramatically. Premadasa had become president. He had ruthlessly crushed the JVP insurrection; he retained and strengthened the concentration of executive power, and he was determined to repay the old elite for the humiliation they had showered on him. He looked to reshape the social base of his party, to appeal to non-elite groups (particularly the poor) and to foster the rise of a new Sinhala-speaking entrepreneurial stratum in exchange for political loyalty.

A confident, highly successful and extremely aggressive Sinhalese-nationalist entrepreneurial class with a strong lumpen base sprang up very rapidly alongside the more traditional western-oriented industrialists and businessmen. A *nouveau riche* was emerging with strong political backing, taking advantage of an increasingly discriminatory allocation of public resources, and with close links to the party political machine and to underworld politics. It was also a period of increasing marginalisation of Tamils in mainstream political and social life that was reflected in their diminishing involvement in national cricket. Jaffna schools with established cricketing traditions were now excluded by the war and

Colombo Tamils found it difficult to make the national team.

The upsurge of a rich, self-opinionated, often violent stratum in Sri Lankan society coincided with the rise of the new approaches to one-day cricket. There is a new generation of politically-protected, super-confident, intolerant and arrogant youth with a brash and buccaneering life style, taking for granted a common inheritance of wealth, privilege and power. The ethos of one-day cricket appeals to and reflects these increasingly prominent values in Sri Lankan society. The chivalry of the Arthurian days of shining white flannels has given way to the raw *machismo* of the Arnold Schwarzeneggers of one-day cricket.

Conclusions

The rise of one-day cricket in Sri Lanka in the 1990s was therefore a far more complex phenomenon than appears at first sight. It resulted from a unique combination of external and internal factors — the growth of a massive global market for one-day cricket (driven by satellite communication technology and multinational media empires), existing skills that proved particularly suited to the one-day game, internal social and political developments that had created a yearning for mass escapism, growing appreciation of the domestic commercial potential of cricket on the part of the wider business community and strong

The upsurge of a rich, self-opinionated, often violent stratum in Sri Lankan society coincided with the rise of the new approaches to one-day cricket.

political support for personal and political gain. Together, they conjured up a potent opiate for the Sri Lankan people.

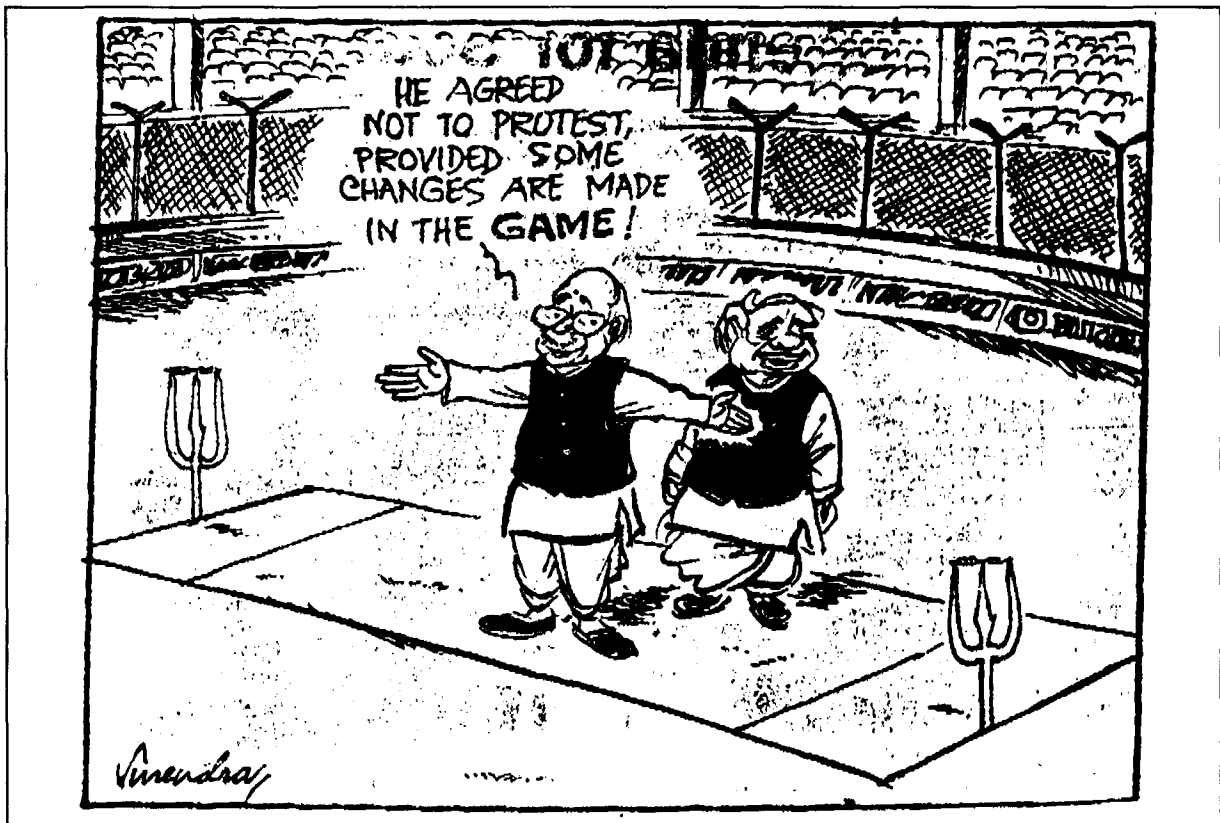
But what are the prospects? There is no doubt that Sri Lanka has sold its soul to cricket. It has become the national game and that is unlikely to change. However, the future role of cricket in social and political life will never be immune to domestic and international developments and, to be effective as an opiate — to provide the necessary "high" — the team has to keep winning. That will not continue forever, and commercial success may carry the seeds of its own undoing. From the standpoint of the industry, international financial incentives will eventually provide a powerful antidote to attempts by any particular politicians and their cronies to appropriate benefits at the expense of the long-term commercial viability of the national game. But, with the global economic downturn and its likely impact on the livelihoods of ordinary people, the efficacy of

cricket as an opiate is bound to evaporate. Fundamental social and class contradictions in Sri Lankan society will begin to re-emerge.

Note

1. See David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya, "Economic Crisis, Poverty and War in Contemporary Sri Lanka: On Ostriches and Tinderboxes", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXIII, no. 49, December 5 1998.
2. The state paid for the development of cricket infrastructure at the Ketterama stadium in Colombo, the Tyronne Fernando stadium in Moratuwa and Asgiriya stadium in Kandy, and leading politicians were subsequently to be seen at all major matches.

The authors would like to acknowledge their debt to Tyronne Fernando's, *Kings of Cricket: Sri Lanka's Path to Victory at World Cup 96*, (Colombo, Deepanee and Publishers, 1998) for stimulating this paper and to D. Johnston and Co. for additional assistance.



Courtesy *The Hindu* 22 January 1999.