

BANGLES TO THE CAPTAIN!

Cricket has been on everyone's mind recently what with Sri Lanka's spectacular defeats at the One-Day game and the antics and punch-up at the elections to the Cricket Board. While patriotic enthusiasm about war has failed to excite the masses, the game of cricket certainly gripped them. And now Sri Lankan cricket enters the realm of serious discussion in terms of nationalism, masculinity and social class. All such debates seem to agree that cricket has indeed become the new opiate of the Sri Lanka masses. As David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya wrote:

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.

Dunham and Jayasuriya link the immense popularity of One-Day cricket to the growth of a mass audience (through TV), the spread of cricket to rural schools and the national crises of various types (economic, social and ethnic) that made people feel that “cricket was the only arena in which Sri Lanka seemed to be winning”. One-Day cricket “captured the public imagination... and bridged traditionally entrenched divisions of caste, class and ethnicity” (*Pravada*, Vol.6, No.1).

The cricket euphoria at the time of the World Cup in 1996 was a signal that South Asians are hysterical winners but the world's worst losers. At a time when Sri Lanka was winning, the losing Indians and Pakistanis were stoning their captains' houses, alleging they were foreign agents for the ‘other side’ -indulging in match-fixing. The final insult (also a typically South Asian one) was sending bangles to the Captain. If you win you are a MAN, if you lose you are a WOMAN, with all that that entails. And believe it or not the bad performance of one Sri Lankan player was blamed on his “unlucky bride”!

In 1996 it was the feminists through the Cat's Eye column who warned of jingoism and nationalism in cricket and discussed “masculinity” of the game, not to mention the “false consciousness” that a WIN at cricket is a win against other countries. Hence a defeat is also equivalent to a national humiliation.

Perhaps the key to understanding the cricket scene in Sri Lanka is the prevalence of a culture of shame and humiliation that is rampant. For example, as long as we were winning, millions watched the

matches on T.V. This time it is remarkable that when we were losing, many switched off their T.Vs and radios since they could not emotionally bear the humiliation of defeat. So what happened to the GAME itself and the GLORY OF SPORT? Why didn't all the cricket fans stay and watch the record-breaking partnership of Rahul Dravid and Saurav Ganguly? Why are they not enthusiastically watching the rest of the series?

Cricket Karma

Unfortunately cricket has also got tied up with all kinds of rituals. We hear the team went to see Sai Baba. We hear they had *poojas* at temples and kovils in Sri Lanka, and the team members (imitating politicians) had *pirith nool* (holy thread) up to their elbows. Since the Gods and Goddesses were not listening, we lost. Sins in a past birth maybe. As a former cricketer remarked, our cricketers should get on with cricket and leave the mumbo-jumbo to the specialists.

Ashok Mitra, former Minister of Finance in the West Bengal Marxist government — and a writer on cricket, described Sri Lanka's victory in the World Cup in 1996 as a triumph of a new unspoilt, incorrupt side which went out and played the game and won. He predicted, however, that commercialism, the advertising business, ‘big money’ and corruption would soon set in and tarnish the teams' pristine ‘innocence’ and spirit.

This forecast seems to have come true and all sorts of crazy unreal things happened. The conquering Heroes became Celebrities aided and abetted by politicians, the media and the private sector. Prime urban land was gifted to members of the team by the government (an unheard of practice anywhere in the world), and all the members of the team (including the 12th man and reserve who had not played at the World Cup) were given the highest honours in the land including the *Deshamanya*!

Moreover we were treated to accounts of lavish weddings by players on a scale not seen for a long time, attended by local and foreign celebrities. But alas, Wedding of the Year became Divorce of the Year, symbolic perhaps of the Decline and Fall of our cricket.

The Fallen South-Asian Heroes

It is not surprising that since South Asians are bad losers, and did not learn the lessons the white masters taught us (It matters not if you win or lose, but how you played the game etc), we are now busy bad-mouthing our cricket teams. They were champs turned chumps; they are old, fat, arrogant, can't bat, can't run, can't catch etc. And now to crown it all, there are questions about their earnings (*Daily News* 7/June). No doubt Inland Revenue is also looking their way, and the powers - that be are wondering if they

can take back the land, honours, and presents — and the advertisers are left with damp squibs. As one wag remarked, the only good batting by “our boys” occurred in the advertisements.

In India, the humiliation is “unbearable” — and of course all are shouting for the Captain’s blood. Earlier, Indians disgraced themselves by trying to ban Pakistan playing in Bombay (This was Hindu chauvinism’s contribution to sport) and at the last World Cup, India pioneered the art of stopping a match — if you are losing by running on to the pitch and throwing bottles (as the crowd did in Calcutta).

In Pakistan, there is elation and depression of a manic kind (“we are winning against South Africa”, “now we lost”). Where is the Captain? Instead of showering him with gold coins, perhaps they

will stone him to death or think up some other Islamic punishment. Blood money from the team to the State?

As Mithra predicted, cricket is now a big industry, with politicians, advertisers, businessmen, and thugs muscling in for a share of the pie. Hence the anger. “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” say Dunham and Jayasuriya. If that is so, Cat’s Eye hopes that the defeat will prove to be the proverbial blessing in disguise. An old-style morality lesson which will bring us back to reality. We cannot indulge in the mass escapism of cricket. After all it is only a boys’ game and should be treated as such. Otherwise we’ll be switching off TV when we lose, and taking our sticks to the airport to hit our players for more than a six. And give bangles to the Captain! ■

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THE WORLD CUP-WINNERS AND LOSERS

The first round of the World Cup played in England concluded a few days ago. Sri Lankan team comprised of a few players of international repute, led by one, who up to the time was looked upon as the best in the world, played very well true to their form to lose every match except the two played against Zimbabwe and Kenya. The team’s best performance was with our immediate neighbour, India. It was indeed a bloody massacre at Taunton of the kind that took place a century and half years ago at the black hole of Plassey, Calcutta. The team was disgraced and humiliated. The contribution made by each member of the team will go into the record books. The whole drama is over and it should be a big relief for every Sri Lankan, the Electricity Board, in particular.

The boys, truly, the majority of them are uncles, failed miserably because the climatic conditions didn’t favour them, the pitches were uneven and wet and the ball used to swing making it difficult for the batsmen to negotiate, the ball was not the normal one used in these encounters, the important toss was either won or lost and it did not come off in the way the team wanted, there was not much of a crowd support, had no “buth curry” and cut off from their loved ones for a considerable period of time, practising for long hours and feeling fatigue, tired and weary, the bowlers and fielders found the run-up slippery, they could not bowl to a good line and length because their arms were round stiff and benumbed, didn’t have a proper coach and a manager, disunity and mistrust among the players, their headquar-

ters in Sri Lanka is in a mess, come or go Chicago mentality being Cup holders. In a nutshell nothing favoured them.

Every match the Sri Lankans played caused us enough frustration and agony. Added to that, we were unwittingly forced upon to watch an advertisement match shown simultaneously over the Swarnavahini TV channel. We were tormented, agonised and punished. Swarnavahini, of course, boasted for months that unlike the other TV channels, it would not disturb the viewers with advertisements during the play. Swarnavahini violated all the norms of decency and fairplay making the Agreement it entered into with the viewers a big farce and a comedy. We have been fooled and badly let down both by the Sri Lankan team and the TV.

While we feel defeated and disappointed, the winners are the members of the Sri Lankan team, the Sri Lanka Cricket Board, the TV and the advertisers. All of them may now be in a very happy mood enjoying the stake that was on offer. No one can deny the fact that we have been taken for a ride, duped and deceived by all these parties.

Hopefully, we would have another opportunity to see the same team participating in the next World Cup. Let the poor fellows eye that possibility once again for the third time. Let us have some mercy on our boys and uncles. After all, they are yet the champions! ■

Colvin Karunaratne