



A TRIBUTE FROM SLOTY 2006

INSPIRATIONAL LEADER

The award of the 'Sri Lankan Of The Year' accolade to yet another sportsperson may at first glance seem unsurprising. A country bedevilled with polemical politics, widespread corruption and continuing violence does not easily satisfy its desperate emotional need for national icons searching among the many outstanding professionals in our midst. It looks to the less complex world of sports, where achievement is clear-cut and popular acclaim less ambiguous. In point of fact, since 1995 – when LMD inaugurated this award – among the 16 previous recipients one can only count four sportspersons, all of whom achieved unquestioned global recognition bringing pride to Sri Lanka.

But the selection of Kumar Sangakkara as LMD's 17th Sri Lankan Of The Year transcends the world of sport. Muttiah Muralitharan's choice last year was welcomed both for his legendary bowling prowess and the world records he established, as well as for his role as a unifying figure in a country recovering from the dark memories of a 30-year conflict. Very few thought of this unique Sri Lankan as belonging to an ethnic and religious minority in the country. Murali was, and is, Sri Lanka.

Sangakkara is likewise more than the wicket-keeper batsman who captained the Sri Lankan team to be runners-up in the 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup. He is an inspirational national figure, leading us on the road from reconciliation to rebuilding a new nation on a solid foundation of values drawn from our rich history as well as from modern democratic concepts. It would require the magical pen of a Cyril Lionel Robert James or a Sir John Frederick Neville Cardus to write about Sangakkara the cricketer – the elegance of his stroke play and the panther-like speed of his wicket keeping. But it is the other Sangakkara – the man who delivered the soul-stirring Colin Cowdrey Lecture at Lord's on 4 July – whose choice as Sri Lankan Of The Year must be celebrated here. That is the deeper chord at the core of our national emotions, which the nomination of Sangakkara touches and resonates with all Sri Lankans.

Significantly, both Muralitharan and Sangakkara were born and raised outside Colombo and the Western Province, which have dominated the political, economic and cultural life of the country in over six decades of our post-independence history. A lopsided 45 per cent of the nation's GDP continues to come from the Western Province, which also enjoys the highest per capita income. That centre-periphery para-

digim led to efforts at reform, such as the decentralisation process begun by former President Ranasinghe Premadasa through Potemkin projects like the Gam Udawa and the haphazard spread of garment factories throughout the country. It was an attempt to redistribute resources and opportunities equitably, which we now see continuing with President Mahinda Rajapaksa in the development of his bailiwick in Hambantota and the road development throughout the island. The 'kiri' hitherto confined to Colombo is slowly replacing the 'kakiri' which the provinces had to be satisfied with for so long.

Likewise, future leaders in all spheres are increasingly coming from provincial schools like those that produced Muralitharan and Sangakkara even though they had to come to clubs in Colombo to be recognised. It is a trend that Sangakkara himself noted in his outstanding Colin Cowdrey Lecture.

Kumar Sangakkara was born in Matale on 27 October 1977 and grew up in Kandy where his father practised as a lawyer. An English clergyman, Reverend Walter Stanley Senior – who spent several years in Kandy as Vice-Principal of Trinity – described it as a place "where river, lake and mountain meet, our boyhood's home surrounding, a path behold for youthful feet, the path of life abounding."

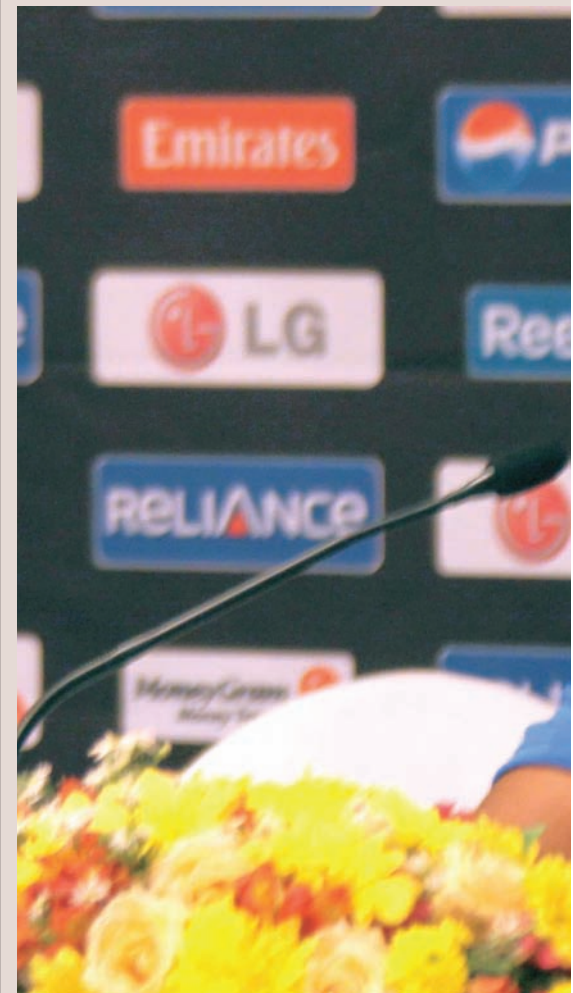
The former hill capital, with Hantana and Hunasgiriya standing sentinel, was the last bastion of Sri Lankan sovereignty till the 1815 Kandyan Convention when the entire island was ceded to foreign rule. The custody of the Tooth Relic in the Sri Dalada Maligawa, which Sangakkara's Kandy home overlooks, lends a special aura to the city. No one who has spent his entire childhood and adolescence in Kandy – as Sangakkara did – can be unaffected by its exceptional beauty, traditional customs and unique atmosphere... and even more so having met his wife there.

Trinity College – established by British missionaries in 1872 to serve the educational needs of residents in the Kandyan areas – was the obvious choice of school for Kumar Sangakkara, whose kinsmen had shone in the same institution. He emulated them all, becoming the Senior Prefect and cricket captain, and being awarded a cricketing Lion and finally, the Ryde Gold Medal for the best all-rounder in his year – an award epitomising the Western classical virtues of 'mens sana in corpore sano.' Trinity fused the best of the British public school model with the traditions of Sri Lanka in a unique ambience. The Trinity College Chapel – that stupendous architectural creation born of Principal

Reverend Alexander Fraser's inspired determination and Reverend L. J. Gaster's unique vision of a place of worship for the faith of Trinity's founders – was built in the vernacular idiom.

The Eurasian Christian David Paynter's murals of Biblical scenes in a Sri Lankan setting painstakingly and lovingly restored by the gentle Stanley Kirinde, the Kandyan Buddhist, extends the themes of understanding, fusion and synergy. This chapel truly symbolises the ethos of Trinity – its roots in the indigenous traditions of Sri Lanka, its dedication to the development of the total personality of those who pass through it intellectually, spiritually and physically, and its openness to the bracing winds of diversity and change. Sangakkara remains a loyal old boy, supporting the school in all its activities especially cricket.

Leaving Trinity, Kumar Sangakkara embarked on his career as a professional cricketer, putting his law studies on hold. His rise to cricketering stardom is too well known to



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Jayantha Dhanapala



recount. Quite apart from Sangakkara’s cricketing skills and feats, there is the grace and dignity he brings to his representative role as the quintessential Sri Lankan when he travels abroad and speaks to the global media. There is also his undoubted influence as a role model for our youth. His holistic view was illustrated in the speech he made at the launch of sports scribe Rex Clementine’s book, when he said: “To excel at something you need to know its culture, you need to embrace its history.” This was nowhere more evident than in his sparkling MCC Spirit of Cricket Cowdrey Lecture – it was a remarkable piece of oratory delivered with poise and polish.

Enough encomiums have been paid to Sangakkara on that finely chiselled speech. The sole discordant note registered by a politician has long been ignored. Sangakkara represents the youth of Sri Lanka, and a future of unity and reconciliation. His speech not only captured the spirit of Sri Lankan cricket through a perceptive recounting of its

history as a parallel trend to the broadening of the base of our democracy, but it also encapsulated the ethos of Sri Lanka. Incidents citing the generosity of the villager serving his over-sugared tea and the Sangakkara household bravely offering their Tamil fellow citizens and friends a safe haven in 1983 conveyed essential Sri Lankan traits. That eloquence upholding the values of a pluralist society spoke more cogently as a response to the brutality the country stands accused of in the report of the UN Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts and in the Channel 4 documentary than all the overheated Government statements put together.

He modestly sees himself as a part of Sri Lanka’s cricketing legacy. But he is not perfect. Like Homer, he nods when he displays impatience with a fielding lapse or engages in an unnecessary spat with Australian captain Michael Clarke. Some of his fans have been concerned about his judgement in accepting certain advertising roles.

Kumar Sangakkara’s impact on Sri Lanka when his cricketing career finally ends will be as wide as it will be deep. Whether he will continue in cricket as an administrator or move to other pastures as a lawyer, he will continue to be a leader. “Who will write a biography of Sir Donald Bradman,” noted Cyril Lionel Robert James, “must be able to write a history of Australia in the same period.”

That is how embedded Kumar Sangakkara is in the Sri Lanka of today.

Sir Neville Cardus, the other legendary sports scribe, once wrote: “We remember not the scores and the results in after years; it is the men who remain in our minds, in our imagination.” Sangakkara will long be remembered as a man of dignity and integrity who made all Sri Lankans proud at a time when we needed leaders we could admire.

The quest for a leader we can respect in 2011, and through whom we can restore belief in ourselves, leads us to Kumar Sangakkara.



Jayantha Dhanapala – LMD’s SLOTY in 2006 – writes in favour of our 2011 nomination and says that the quest for a leader we can respect this year leads us to **Kumar Sangakkara**