

SRI LANKAN OF THE YEAR



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Jayantha Dhanapala – a one-time Sri Lankan Of The Year – pays tribute to the men who have done a nation of 20-odd million proud

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THE SRI LANKAN CRICKETER



AFP PHOTO/IRAKASH SINGH

Many nations are associated with sports archetypes. Over the years, Brazil conjures up the image of a soccer player, especially the immortal Pele mesmerising opponents with his magical dribbling.

Likewise, rugby football is inseparable from New Zealand's All Blacks, and the mention of the Marathon recalls Ethiopia.

FLASHBACK TO 1996 Sri Lanka, amidst all the vicissitudes, remains firmly associated with cricket, especially after we won the 1996 Cricket World Cup, thanks to Arjuna Ranatunga and his glorious team. That won that national squad the Sri Lankan Of The Year (SLOTY) award, from LMD, among many other plaudits.

SPIRIT OF CRICKET The most eloquent telling of the story of Sri Lankan cricket is unquestionably contained in Kumar Sangakkara's finely crafted MCC Spirit of Cricket Cowdrey Lecture of 4 July 2011 (for which he won LMD's SLOTY accolade that year).

Apart from his own brilliance as a player, Sangakkara is our C. L. R. James and Neville Cardus rolled into one.

Tracing the history of the game, and interlacing it with the history of the country, Sangakkara said: "It is remarkable that in a very short period, an alien game has become our national obsession, played and followed with almost-fanatical passion and love. A game that brings the nation to a standstill; a sport so powerful, it is capable of transcending war and politics."

Grudgingly granted official Test status in 1981, after skillful negotiations conducted by the late Gamini Dissanayake with the ICC, the national team struggled against great odds within the country and abroad, until they found their métier in the 50-over form of the game.

Dramatically, the reservoir of pure, unvarnished talent grew, drawing on the entire countryside – well beyond the limited circle of elite schools – to include the "sarong johnnies" that Kumar Sangakkara mentioned in his memorable MCC lecture, producing a nation of wily spin bowlers and unorthodox stroke-playing batsmen playing an innovative and bold brand of the game.

SAGA OF HEROISM From the World Cup of 1996 to the T20 championships of 2014, it has been a saga of heroism surmounting obstacles created by the incompetent and corrupt governance of the game by politically aligned officials who have, at times, even lured players away from the spirit of the game.

That heroism shone through in the team's united response to the December 2004 tsuna-

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mi that devastated Sri Lanka, while the team was on tour abroad. It earned the united support of terrorists, insurgents and peacefully patriotic Sri Lankans alike, throughout the conflicts that tore our island-nation apart. Ironically, it was in a foreign land – Pakistan – that the team bravely survived an attack by terrorists. The chucking controversy over spin wizard Muttiah Muralitharan was another challenge that united the team, with the country – led by Ranatunga, on the field – solidly behind them. In a hapless nation that was hungry for inspirational leaders, the Sri Lankan cricket team filled an emotional void.

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD Surviving the tempestuous turmoils of a conflict-ridden nation; remunerated erratically, even after protracted negotiations; subjected to frequent changes of coaching staff; victims of interference by a politically manipulated Cricket Board; and Sports Ministry officials riding on the coat-tails of the team's success – the team has melded together a merit-based professional side irrespective of ethnic, religious and class differences.

A 27-year-old Tamil-Catholic from Colombo now skippers the Test and ODI squads, and a 31-year-old Sinhala-Buddhist from Rathgama – in the deep south – leads the T20 team through sheer undeniable talent.

CRICKETING CULTURE Spectators the world over saw the touching spectacle of past captains join in, helping the current captains in collective decision-making on the field. The relationship between the senior and younger members of the team is the warm intimacy of a traditional 'Aiya-Malli' family bond that is so deeply embedded in Sri Lanka's culture, blended with the professionalism of the experienced transferring their knowledge of the game to the newcomers.

Sangakkara has said it in his own words, during the Cowdrey Lecture: "In the new team culture forged since 1999, individuals are accepted. The only thing that matters is commitment and discipline to the team. Individuality and internal debate are welcome. Respect is not demanded, but earned. There was a new commitment towards keeping the team from board turmoil..."

BUNGLING AUTHORITIES "We have to aspire to better administration. The administration needs to adopt the same values enshrined by the team over the years: integrity, transparency, commitment and



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discipline. Unless the administration is capable of becoming more professional, forward thinking and transparent, then we risk alienating the common man. Indeed, this is already happening," he added.

That note of optimism may not be borne out by the Cricket Board politics of today, let alone the politics in the country at large. We now have a mature team of cricketers, playing an elegant game of cricket and conducting themselves in a manner that brings pride to our country and its culture. This is in contrast to others who have recently represented us on foreign soil.

THE COMMON BOND What sustains the team is, without doubt, their bond with the people of Sri Lanka. Sangakkara said as much, in his 18 May 2014 interview with Donald MacRae of the Guardian newspaper: "But no one expected the reception we got back home. There was a 40-kilometre unbroken chain of people, and it was very moving – because we saw every single Sri Lankan of whatever religion or creed."

Sangakkara continued: "It was one big family, welcoming home 15 of their children who had achieved something they really valued. It touched me deeply, because cricket has always been more than a sport; and that continues – even more so today, in the context of post-war society and building inter-community relationships."

At a time when the cash nexus is sullyng personal relationships, and when advertising and sponsorships are soiling sportsmanship, it will be a challenge for The Sri Lankan Cricketer to maintain his principles... when the rest of international cricket has seemingly compromised itself. The game of cricket – which had its early origins in Britain, and flourished in the old British Empire – has developed a unique set of values around it, so much so that we all know, in behavioural terms and instinctively, what is done and what is simply not done.

The Sri Lankan Cricketer has successfully fused that set of values with our own indigenous values of gentility, consideration, tolerance, a sense of community, and loyalty to the team, to the spectators and to Sri Lanka.

As the embodiment of the spirit of Sri Lankan cricket, I am confident that the Sri Lankan Cricketer – LMD's 2014 Sri Lankan Of The Year – will triumph at the forthcoming 2015 ICC Cricket World Cup!