

The prospect of his absence

HE WILL NO LONGER BE THERE TO ENCHANT US BACK INTO CHILDHOOD

SUPRIYA NAIR

The children were always there in Shivaji Park — young, grim, working metronomically on swinging back, crouching, blocking and adjusting their stances against the oncoming efforts of their small colleagues and coaches. Like caricatures of genteel expectations of cricketing stoicism, they spoke little, and mostly in scowls; ready to die, as Wendy says of the Lost Boys in Peter Pan, like English gentlemen. From time to time, as the water from the sprinklers evaporated in the heat, a fine, sifting red dust would begin to rise in drifts.

When I worked in Dadar, I walked around

Shivaji Park sometimes to watch these dustbowl tableaux, a few dozen of which are always going on simultaneously, and wondered what it would take to make these boys happy. Was their single-minded pursuit of cricket a symptom of their childhood, or a denial of it? Would they remember these days fondly if they ever made the Test team of one of the world's most competitive sides? Would they pause long enough to crack a smile if an IPL contract dropped softly on their ducked, sweating heads? Or was this the bloody root of Bombay cricket's notorious *khadoosi* — not the smiling grit that seems to implant itself in so many graduates of, say, the Australian



DREAM COME TRUE

Tendulkar was, in the most immediate ways, marginal to the World Cup win. But then the question of what he could do for his people had long been answered, too.



Nobody has ever come close to him and there is no question of comparing anyone with him. He is the best ever; there is no Ponting and no Lara, and not even Sir Don Bradman; Sachin is simply the best.

- Sourav Ganguly

domestic system, but the jealous rapacity of the 40-time Ranji victor?

I thought these things with a certain remoteness. You think of cricket idly, and with an ironic distance, when you have expatriated from the country of sheer joy and cringing terror where you dwelt when you were a child, feeling your heart swell as it fought its way, delivery by delivery, over by over, to an uncertain fate in match after match. That is what Sachin Tendulkar recalls for men and women who grew up – regardless of how old they were – watching him, and that, perhaps, is the overwhelming regret of his impending retirement. He will no longer be there to enchant us back into childhood.

Perhaps few other cricketers have earned the moral and emotional earnestness which Tendulkar evoked, even as a teenaged prodigy. There have been, at all times, at least ten other men on the field with him, ready to absorb the burden of those thundercloud emotions, but few others for whom they were held so closely in trust. Apart from a brief moment at age four or five when I was overwhelmed by the certainty that I would marry Imran Khan one day, I have never known cricket without knowing that kinship with Tendulkar. I remember him and Vinod Kambli, almost from the beginning, a sort of composite, aspirational alter-ego – the best, the boldest, the most dexterous we could hope to be. Something was irretrievably lost to Indian cricket as their paths began to diverge, but Tendulkar alone

proved more than capable of sustaining the most optimistic fantasy anyone has ever experienced in Indian sport. We thought he carried us with him when he played; that buoyed as he was at the crease by the shouts and cheers of millions, there was no difference between us and him; and because of him, there were no differences among any of us.

An apparent lack of poetic ambiguity in Tendulkar's game makes it difficult for amateurs to deconstruct the synthesis of flair and discipline that went into his comprehensive, bullying sort of domination. More so than with his other, more specialist colleagues, the emotions responded to his presence before the intellect did. When the brain caught up, his quantifiable successes made a wonderful, if unimaginative refuge for his fans. He elicited awe and wonder because, even on the days his body failed and bowlers showed up his usually uncanny vision, there was something about him which could not be gainsaid. Even through the dispiriting days when the lights faded over alien stadia and his unsubstantial tenor, piping acknowledgment that his India had made mistakes, there was no doubt that, with him at least, failure was temporary. Over time, that unanswerable thing became clearer and clearer. It was a clear and relentless hunger; the desire to "bat and bat and bat," as Gideon Haigh wrote, and as he fed it, he fed us, too.

It seems strange that he was loved so much in spite of such an unlikeable quality. But hunger is the



TEAR JERKER

The 154 at SCG in 2008 epitomised the sparseness of the older Tendulkar, sinews and cockles exposed by his injuries.

one aspect of genius which can be cultivated, acquired and nurtured and practised. Now that I think about it, the dutifulness of the boys in Shivaji Park, playing in shifts from seven in the morning to seven at night, makes perfect sense, because if all that misery can set you, even one among thousands, to grinding that mill, with your blood in the wheat, then it has set something in you in motion for all time.



Tendulkar was young for a very long time – wasn't it Allan Border who, after Sharjah, said, "Yes, but imagine what he'll be like when he's 28"? – but ageing, too, for a great many years. We have said many impatient things about athletes who do that before our eyes. But they are, in reality, a vital resource. I have a smug theory that female fans are vastly better equipped to absorb the shock of seeing their male sports idols grow old, since our gender circumvents the arrogance of self-identifying too closely with them. But to propound it I must forget that Sachin disproved that, too. Back home and watching a Test match for the first time in months in 2008, I sat transfixed by his 154 at the SCG against Australia, an innings that epitomised the spareness of the older Tendulkar, sinews and cockles exposed by his injuries. He bared his head slowly on achieving the century, the manner of a man receiving a blessing, and tears pricked my eyes as it dawned on me: So that's going to happen, too.

When you love and place your faith in sport and in a sports team, even the air around you can make your skin burn. I don't think I am the only person who, uncomfortable with the depraved political economy that governs cricket, unwilling to participate in its rituals of macho patriotism, had by the 2011 World

Cup victory, said a provisional goodbye to the country where cricket can do that to you. I did not wish to be repatriated simply because India had a World Cup, to add to all that it had already acquired in the new millennium. Tendulkar was, in the most immediate ways, marginal to that victory. But then the question of what he could do for his people had long been answered, too. What remains from that night at the Wankhede – the stadium where his own crowd once booed him off the field, and where he will have his last bow – are the voices of his younger teammates. Of Virat Kohli saying, he carried us for years, now we'll carry him; and of Suresh Raina, before the semifinal, saying in words what Tendulkar said to those who watched him every day for two decades: I am there. So he has been. So, after him, will remain the country that erupted in fireworks around him that night; an imaginary homeland, hovering slightly above the ground, like the cloud of red dust that rises from a cricket field on an evaporatingly hot day. ‡

SHIVAJI PARK SLOG

His exit will leave behind an imaginary homeland, hovering slightly above the ground, like the cloud of red dust that rises from a cricket field on a hot day.

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