SRILANKAETOOR

GTOBELOSTE

Like India and Pakistan cricket offers Sri Lankans a refuge of warmth and comfort away from trouble and turmoil.

G. SANDIP

ne beauty of watching Sri Lanka cricketers at their peak was a joy forever. As though reading a fairy tale, characters with singsong names swung back and forth in the mindscape, as if they were magical creations, wandering in a state of half-truth and half-fiction.

The island is barely a good stone's throw from the Adam's Bridge at the Southern tip of India, but seemed as though it existed somewhere far away, an ethereal world of mystery spinners and insouciant batsmen, of rubbery fields-men and slithery seamers, who wrapped their necks and arms with magic threads whose long and melodious surnames exhausted most alphabets in English, who had the longest and the most tuneful national anthem on the world cricketing stage. If the tearshaped island was too close to not spot on a map, one would have imagined it as a realm of fairies and mermaids, of moonbeams and sil-

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idly. "I could hear the sound of a pin drop. The

my lips and turned to the crowd, asking them

to sort of shut up. No one made a sound, and

all I could hear was the cheering of my team-

A few seconds ago, the deafening applause

could not hear each other even when we were

standing close to each other. The moment

(Virender) Sehwag got out — I clean bowled

him — the crowd was up on their feet as

Dhoni walked out. He had smacked 183, his

highest score, a couple of ODIs before and

there was a lot of frenzy around him. And I

benign smile was the crusher of post-lunch

dreams. Zoysa could relate. "We were equally

passionate about our game and cricketers.

The Indian crowd was otherwise friendly, but

you should not get their idols out, like Sachin

Tendulkar) or Sourav (Ganguly), or Sehwag,

But after some time, the crowd would wave

at him and seek his autograph too. When Sri

Lanka won the game — the only one in the

seven-match series — a standing ovation rang

out. "I have always liked touring India, the

crowd was warm and pleasant, that is unless

you get their heroes out," Zoysa says. Those

were the peak days of the India-Sri Lanka

rivalry. They were familiar, fierce and frequent

along pretty well with each other," he says.

rivals. "It was a friendly rivalry, we all got

long-lasting episodes of rancour, except for a

brief period leading up to and after the assas-

sination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE. But

there were no bitter residues or hangovers,

except that Chennai was kept off the touring

schedule. They were more like the younger

brother, who in the teenage years, out-grew

Not a year passed without them facing each

other, from the late 1990s to the late aughts

either a multi-team series, or a hastily

There was always something or the other —

There were no fractured diplomatic ties, no

or Dhoni," he says.

the adult brother.

The left-arm seamer with a loping gait and

very mountains. The cricketers were informal and unpreten tious. Who else would be bargaining with a carpet-seller on the streets of Lahore a day before the 1996 Wills World Cup Final, the most important day of their sporting lives? Where else would a cricketer (Rangana Herath) walk into the bank he works a day after picking his 400th Test wicket? Of which country's fiction writer could even imagine a bowler of such unique skills that he could bowl any kind of delivery with either left or right hand as Pradeep Mathew, the protagonist of Shehan Karunatilaka's amazing novel The pick as many wickets as the "Smiling Assasear-splitting cauldron that was Eden Gardens in 1996 and compose the most composed 66 one could behold as did Aravinda de Silva? Where else is such mystery a reality?

Like India and Pakistan, cricket offered Lankans a refuge of warmth and comfort away from trouble and turmoil. The civil unrest, then the war, the Tsunami, plummeting economy, and floods, Sri Lankans were wading through turbulence, rather turbulence was wading through the island. But in cricket, everything melted. When a match was on. even the civil war was given the month off. In 2007, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) declared a ceasefire with the Sri Lankan Government for the duration of the World

Now, though, their cricket is bereft of joy. For the devout, they bring tears and rage; for the adversaries, an emptiness that they cannot loath them anymore. The magic has waned; the mystery has ebbed. The team has the less collapses, shoddy bowling, the knack to export, or refugee boats out of Point Pedro in Jaffna at the peak of the war.

The T20 series against India captured the 80s theme. Flashes of flickering talent faded in the dazzling light of failure. Just when thought they had taken a forward step, they would take two back the next moment. The Test series, like the T20s, does not forecast close-fought games. The build-up would be all about the century that is winking on Virat Kohli, the century that is eluding him, the first stride into a middle-order revamp and the first test of Rohit Sharma as Test captain.

There are familiar names, like Suranga Lakmal and Dimuth Karunaratne, Dinesh Chandi mal and Angelo Mathews. But they evoke neither magic nor mystery, neither awe nor dread, as they once did in what seems a distant, faraway era. Like the Beatles were to the 70s, Sri Lanka were to the 90s and aughts in cricket. An irresistible riff. The immutable silence of Motera. It is how

former Sri Lanka left-arm seamer Nuwan Zoysa remembers the most memorable moment of his career, when he nailed the longmaned MS Dhoni for a first-ball duck in 2005. "I think that is the only time he has got out first ball in ODIs, but please check," Zoysa

With sparkling clarity, he remembers the delivery: "The ball seamed late off the pitch into his pads, and he was late in getting his bat down. It was dead in front and I appealed with all the energy in my lungs. Umpire Hariharan — I even remember the umpire's name — had no hesitation in lifting his index finger." He remembers the occasion even more viv

Cup to the 2011 World Cup, they duelled 91 times, more frequently than any other team. Sri Lanka won 39 games; India 41. Tormentingly, the islanders had the upper hand in most multi-team tournaments, most harrowingly in the Coca Cola Champions Trophy of 2000, where Sri Lanka inflicted a 245-run defeat (Sanath Javasuriva 189; India 54 all out). His slash over point was often a gash into the heart of every Indian cricket fan; the short-arm pull left them short-circuited.

But familiarity did not breed tedium. Every game had a context, every game was packed out. "It was because we were two very competent sides and both teams had a lot of legends," Zovsa says.

The crowds of both countries were familiar with each other's rosters. Some were adored like Lasith Malinga, some feared like Jayasuriya, some loved like de Silva, and some loathed, second only to Javed Miandad, like Arjuna Ranatunga, who like Zoysa had once got Ganguly out first ball. Some even crept into adspace. Remember the Pallu-scoop Pepsi commercial that featured Tillakaratne Dilshar attempting to flip the pallu of a saree over his left shoulder like his patented Dil-Scoop; or Muralitharan licking his fingers in a KFC ad, r Ranatunga urging an interviewer to "get an Idea". Or Javasuriya shaking a leg with Madhuri Dixit in Jhalak Dikhla Ja, a dance reality

Memories roll out faster than the sixes that flew off Jayasuriya's willow. It had aluminium sheets underneath, didn't it? He had magnify ing lenses fitted in his eyes, didn't he? Oh, those late 1990s jealousy-drenched conspiracy theories that filled the sleepy hours in a classroom after lunch

Javasuriya liked the idea of being feared. "I enjoyed it, and I remember seeing that fear in the eyes of some of the Indian bowlers," he once said, jokingly. "He was always terrific against India, scored fast runs, and the crowds







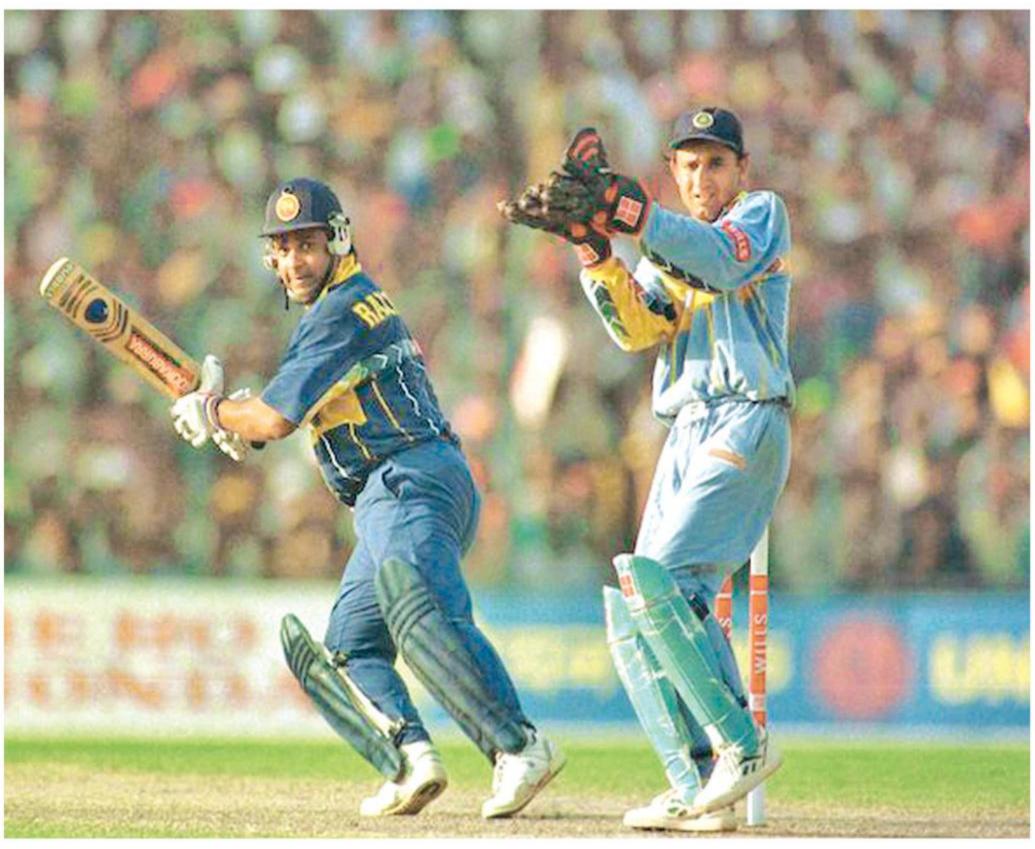


says Zoysa. He plundered 2,899 runs at 36.23 at a strike rate of 96.9, including seven hundreds in 89 ODIs. In 10 Tests, he ransacked

The 50-over numbers are middling by modern-day yardsticks, but ask Indian bowlers of that era and they would, if they are not yet numbed by those memories, retell the sheer fury he provoked.

It is no longer the case. There is a tangible emotional disconnect, almost like in the pre-90s, when Sri Lanka were still teething in and vet to be household names outside the island. It is like a popular Sri Lankan belief; "The Island came from the sea, and the sea would take the island back." Sri Lankan cricket came from nowhere and is heading nowhere. They have reverted to the 80s type, produc-

ing inspired performances sporadically, but largely an uninspired side, their performances veering the extremes. Some of the names are strange, some of the faces stranger. There is no name Indians fear, no face they dread. No Mauler from Matara, no Little Kalu - his accomplice – no Mad Max, no Slinga. And not even a fleeting semi-villain, as Zoysa was that afternoon in Motera.



March 13, 1996, the cameraman picked out banner that professed peace. "Congratulations. Sri Lanka. We are sorry," it read, the alphabets



Aravinda de Silva





Boycott boomed: "Bengalis love their cricket."

In the middle, Vinod Kambli was on the verge of tears, Anil Kumble was sullen and downcast: Muralitharan occasionally wore an impisl smile, his captain Ranatunga walked with brisk assurance; match referee Clive Lloyd was sterny belting out instructions to the on-field

but they should learn to respect the game too.

In a distant corner of the stands, Uncle Perry, or Percy Abeysekara, the effervescent fan-boy of Sri Lankan cricket, felt as if he had accidentally stumbled into a pot of fruit salad. "Once India started losing wickets (they lost seven for 22 runs), the crowd turned hostile and they started pelting fruits at me. So many fruits that I tasted like a fruit salad," he recollected that night on his 80th birthday celebrations at the Galle Stadium five years ago, his face smeared with mixed-fruit cake.

Some sections of the crowd were so violent that he feared for his life. But once the anger dissipated, apologies flew from every where. Some offered him dinner, some drink, some even welcomed him home and some told him that they wished their team would win the World Cup. There was even fear of cricketers getting hurt. Leg-spinn Upul Chandana recollects an incident. came on as the 12th man, but I saw the crowd throwing objects at de Silva. I was worried if we would get hurt, so told the captain that I am going to field in the deep and Ara (Aravinda) should field somewhere inside. He immediately made that switch. I was an unforgettable night," he remembers.

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Government for the duration of the World Cup.



Those involved in the game had myriad recollections of the night. Kambli still turns tearful, Tendulkar becomes rueful; de Silva turns into a child when he described his 66, which he keeps as close to his heart as his hundred in the final; Jayasuriya can spend hours recollecting the World Cup; Ranatunga never gets bored of repeating the making of the World Cup story. A few years ago, when the crowd interrupted a 50-over game between India and Sri Lanka, he urged the audience "to not behave like Indian fans," an obvious reference to that night at the Eden Gardens. A signature campaign was later organised for a letter of apology on behalf of all Calcuttans to the Sri Lankan skipper. "We are extremely ashamed of our behaviour and wholeheartedly apologise to you and your wonderful team," the excerpts read.

But a rivalry was now brewing. Sri Lanka



Lasith Malinga

The Indian Premier League auctions mirror this decline. Just one Lankan featured in the 2020 edition, the first stage of the next episode had none, though a couple was included after a horde of Australian and English players abstained from the second leg. Five of them were picked in the recent auction, but only two were crorepatis (Wanindu Hasaranga and Dushman tha Chameera).

they have defeated India only three times in the

last 18 match-ups.

was no longer a baby brother to be whipped

and bullied, but an equal, sometimes more

than an equal. "Beating India in the semifinal

was as difficult as the final. A lot of critics

thought we had reached the semifinals by

fluke, but that changed it. It strengthened our

belief that we could win the World Cup, and

now we should be taken as seriously as India

and Pakistan, in fact more," Ranatunga told

the next time for a tri-series in Shariah. But the

nightmare. A recurring theme Indian cricket

fans and pundits of the late 90s would painfully

recount. "But what a beautiful rivalry it was,"

they once did. The steel bands echo with the

tunes of a distant past. The stands, but for T20s

are mostly half-empty. Performances fluctuate

wildly. The series win in South Africa in 2017

was supposedly a turning-the-corner moment

but it turned out to be just an aberration, as the

stan, South Africa and England. They claimed

Lankans surrendered subsequent series to Paki-

equally wilting Windies, sorry Zimbabwe and

blunt Bangladesh. They limped off in the group

stages of the 2016 T20 World Cup as well as the

2019 50-over Cup; in the 2021 T20 World Cup

they progressed to the group stage through the

last few games against India have been tire-

The once-hot rivalries too turned cold. The

qualifiers. Their downfall was near complete.

Back in Sri Lanka, the stands do not sway as

says Zoysa, in the tone of a lament.

Inside Sports TV Show.

Some of the reasons for the downswing have been avidly chronicled — administrative incompetence, the frequent ouster of support staff whimsical selection policies, talented cricketers drifting, unhappy wages and a flawed domestic cricket system. The list of coaches in the last seven years can fill in a decent playing eleven — Trevor Bayliss, Stuart Law, Rumesh Ratnayake, Geoff Marsh, Graham Ford, Paul Fabrace Marvan Atapattu, Graham Ford (again), Nic Pothas, Tom Moody, Micky Arthur and Rumesh Ratnayake (again). Last heard, they are in the running for Justin Langer.

NO CONTINUITY

Apart from Test captaincy, which Dimuth Karunaratne has been handling admirably since the 2018/19 season, it has been a case of musical chairs. The last seven years have seen seven captains each in ODIs and T20s.

Every selection meeting drops a bombshell — the omission of dashing batsman Bhanuka Rajapaksa for the India series for fitness reasons turned out to be controversial. Those touted as future flag-bearers such as Kusal Mendis, Dhananjaya de Silva and Vishwa are still labouring to crack the consistency

But Zoysa is optimistic. "We have a proud cricketing culture, a lot of talented cricketers are coming through, there are talented guys in the team too. Now, they have to show consistency and mental toughness. They exceed ed my expectations for the Australia tour. But they have to keep building and find some inspiration from the past," he says.

Some others are disillusioned. "Sri Lanka administered and managed is so disgusting that I don't watch our national cricket anymore," Ranatunga recently told Cevlon *Today*. Last year, during the players' strike for better wages, de Silva retorted: "The important fact is they should get into the middle and play positive cricket and start winning games for the country rather than complaining." And somehow dust up the old and elusive magic that enchanted the cricket





Nuwan Zoysa

Fire in stands lit by Indian spectators after the match against Sri Lanka in 1996 at the Eden Gardens. 05/03/2022 Daily News Pg 12

World Cup Semi Finals 1996

from the central stand would soon attract the eyes of the camera, shuffling back and forth

between the chaos in the stands and the und tainty on the ground. The voice of Geoffre

Angelo Mathews