
Romancing the Game

A Memoir Straight from the Heart

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I first encountered Ramachandra Guha in his book *Wickets in the East: An Anecdotal History*. This was in the early 1990s. While India did have fine sports journalists, there were not many cricket books by Indian writers, the exceptions being a Sujit Mukherji or a NS Ramaswami. Guha's book was like a fresh breeze, a proclamation of rare talent. But even before his arrival as a writer of cricket history, he had announced himself with his first book, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (1989).

Through all these years and all his books, if there is one thing that defines his writing, it would be the lucidity of his storytelling. There may be 90 pages of references and archival notes at the end of his *India After Gandhi* (2007) but through the other 700 pages, Guha the writer is focused on the joyous task of taking his readers through the fascinating history of the times.

A Personal Journey

The Commonwealth of Cricket: A Lifelong Love Affair with the Most Subtle and Sophisticated Game Known to Humankind is as delightful as any of his other books. This one is different though. It does not have a single page of annotations or references. This is Guha sharing a deeply personal experience of an entire lifetime with a game that he has loved since childhood. This is not wistful, not nostalgic—it is vibrant and more. It is an ode to the game, a treasure trove of memories and experiences, of cricketing heroes and anecdotes, aided by prodigious recollection of events presented through very gifted writing. One can sense his gratitude at having discovered so early in life, a sport that he loves as well as feel his happiness that he could play it to the limits of his capacity and potential.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Commonwealth of Cricket: A Lifelong Love Affair with the Most Subtle and Sophisticated Game Known to Humankind by Ramachandra Guha, Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2020; pp 347, ₹699.

Reading how young Guha learnt the game from his uncle, N Duraiswami, and then played well enough to bowl offspin for school at Dehradun, one will be reminded of one's own experience of learning and playing. At times, you will remember R K Narayan and his *Swami and Friends*. Or you might halt and dwell upon the pleasure of reading P G Wodehouse and his stories of Mike Jackson's cricketing exploits. And you will certainly recall your own exploits, be they in gully, school or league cricket. There were times where I had to stop and call a couple of my old friends to rekindle our own cricketing memories.

An endearing quality in this personal account is Guha's self-deprecatory humour. This is a man at peace with his cricketing prowess, proud of his love for the game and transparent about his adoration for his cricketing heroes. That is why while narrating his meeting with Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, Guha can laugh at himself. In a terribly gushing fan boy moment, Guha tells Pataudi that the first time he saw him was when he was having a fried egg, sunny side up and goes on to conclude with this memorable self-castigating line,

The visiting scholar and expert Professor Guha, so highly recommended by the venerable Professor Beitel, had turned out to be a frothing, blabbering fan. (p 140)

These are the touches with which Guha includes the reader, with a finesse akin to putting an arm around a cricketing friend. There are many ways to win over a reader and this one cannot but succeed.

To represent St Stephen's College in cricket, one must play good cricket, make no mistake. But Guha is charmingly modest while comparing his own abilities with mates who either played for state or country. When the legendary Polly Umrigar met Guha's 11-year-old son at a book function and enquired about the plaster on the boy's hand, he replied that he injured it while failing to take a return catch. Hearing this, an onlooker said he would not have missed the catch if he only had large hands like Umrigar. Guha caps this anecdote with this sentence:

The onlooker was wrong; it was not the hands, but the genes. My son's father rarely caught a hard-struck cricket ball either. (p 147)

Guha having played cricket at college level, had certainly taken his share of hard catches.

In all this effortless prose, there are many lovely touches. For instance, conveying in a sentence how first-class cricket is losing its pre-eminence over the last few decades. Guha says that he has seen Sunil Gavaskar play Erapalli Prasanna but sadly never seen Tendulkar bat against Srinath and concludes, "I think that this did not—could not—happen might be one of Tendulkar's few cricketing regrets, as well" (p 179).

Changing Times

Another example would be the way Guha sums up the changing social milieu over time by describing the difference in the persona of two of India's most loved cricketers, G R Viswanath in the 1970s and Rahul Dravid 30 years later. Guha conveys the essence of changing times, as he explains that while there was a gaiety to Viswanath's bearing in the 1970s, the compulsion on Dravid, 30 years later, was to radiate balance and self-control, thus sacrificing the spontaneity that Viswanath could afford:

That is why we remember the one as the "best-loved" cricketer of his day; the other as the "most-greatly admired" cricketer of his. (p 129)

Like any genuine cricket lover, Guha is saddened by the jingoism that has seeped into the very nature of our cricket

viewing. Go to any stadium and you will see that a fortuitous inside edge by an Indian batsman to the boundary will be greeted with raucous cheers while a pristine cover drive by an opposing country's batsman will be greeted by sullen silence. Guha's question is important. Should we go with fanaticism only to watch India win or should we go as sports lovers to enjoy the game in all its beauty even as we, of course, want our team to win. Guha is passionately partisan about his club, Friends Union Cricket Club (how he exults telling readers that he wore this club tie to a meeting with Oxford University dons) and about the Karnataka cricket team. He wants Karnataka to win every game, win the Ranji Trophy every year. But the reason his fierce partisanship for club and state does not sit at odds with his exhortation to eschew jingoism while watching India play is that Guha remains the quintessential cricket lover. If Gavaskar square cuts Prasanna for a four to take Bombay closer to victory, Guha the cricket lover will still applaud. At the 1996 World Cup game against Pakistan at Bangalore, as Javed Miandad walked out of a cricket ground for the final time in his illustrious career, Guha was the only person standing and applauding the player.

He has reserved his disgust at the lack of governance and brazenness with which Indian cricket is run, for the later part of the book. By this time he has already taken us on a fairy-tale ride, holding us expertly in his palm as we nod and smile at his reminiscences and indulgently ignore some of his strong opinions. It is clear he took his role as the Supreme Court-appointed cricket administrator seriously and was frustrated to a point of no return as most of his suggestions were blocked or vetoed. The financial power of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the dazzling success of the glitzy Indian Premier League (IPL) and the very strong current Indian cricket team (its bench strength in all formats is the envy of all cricket playing nations) are what everyone sees. However, wisdom lies in recognising that if we ran our cricket and held the administration to requisite standards of governance and accountability,

the game would be immeasurably better for everyone.

In a narrative of such charm, to point out the odd factual error would seem churlish. However, there are a couple that could have been avoided. Guha writes that Sunil Valson, a left arm fast bowler, should have gone on the tour to England in 1979. Which is alright as opinion, but Guha goes on to say that he was not selected because he was seen as Bishan Singh Bedi's man while Gavaskar was now captain. But the captain of the team to England was S Venkataraghavan, not Gavaskar, and perhaps in the need to underscore the fraught relationship between Gavaskar and Bedi, such an error crept in. In his chapter, "Handshake with Heroes," he speaks of the off-spinner Venkataraghavan as an engineer from MIT (Madras Institute of Technology), while the fact is that Venkataraghavan studied at the Guindy Engineering College. A trivial oversight, but then Guha wrote an almost identical piece on him in a leading newspaper some years ago and so while incorporating that old essay into this book, this could have been rectified. Even allowing that this is a memoir, there are a few instances where fact and opinion are combined in one fluid beguiling sentence.

There is an even-handedness in the way Guha analyses every player, star or superstar, as well as administrators on the matter of conflict of interest. He is fulsome in praise of their cricketing excellence—for instance, acknowledging Gavaskar as the best opening batsman—but calls them out sternly on this issue. Amidst all this, is his complete admiration for Bedi, whom he sees as the most up-right among all Indian cricketers. Early in the book (p 48), Guha praises the cricket

administrator, M Chinnaswamy for his devotion to cricket and for giving Bangalore its first cricket stadium. Tellingly, he also closes that section with the rueful comment that despite all his fine qualities, Chinnaswamy succumbed to vanity and allowed the stadium to be named after him—instead of a cricketer.

Guha abhors the IPL and for good reason. But what we also learn is that while Guha detests the sleaze, the brazen conflict of interests and mind-corrupting shenanigans, the cricket lover in him appreciates the beauty and skill in the shorter formats of the game. That is why he is generous while recalling a great innings in a T20 World Cup or an incisive spell in a 50 over World Cup contest.

The book begins with his love and admiration for Uncle Durai, who overcame physical disability to become a fine cricketer. That affection for Durai and Durai's club keeps the book aglow. That is why I wish, in the concluding pages, Guha could have avoided obliquely telling us that on matters of politics and political judgment, the nephew was proving to be more perspicacious than the uncle.

I have gifted Guha's *A Corner of a Foreign Field* (2002) to a few friends whose interest in politics, sociology, history and cricket are inseparable. This time, I shall gift *The Commonwealth of Cricket* to my daughter. At 34, to my great delight, she has discovered the multilayered beauties of Test cricket. I am sure she will consider this book as one of the nicer gifts I have given her in a long while.

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