



A good innings, but could have been better

**Indian Innings: The Journey of Indian Cricket
from 1947**

Edited by Ayaz Memon

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Indian Innings is an anthology of essays and cricket despatches aimed at giving readers a panoramic view of Indian cricket history. It is a compendium that required the sure hand of a seasoned sports editor which it has in Ayaz Memon, a much-respected sports journalist who has closely followed and written on the game for over 40 years.

Memon and I are about the same age. And we both seem to have been following cricket from around the same time, which is the early 1960s. As I settle down to read his charmingly titled introductory essay, "Pitching Stumps", it brings back memories of my own childhood: of sports-loving parents who encouraged me to play the game and also read about it; of sitting on the floor to read the sports columns on the back page of the newspaper as my father in his chair read the front page political news. Memon's father gifted him a copy of *Wisden* in 1964 to set him off on a lifelong romance with the game, which was also the time my father gave me a copy of the *Sports & Pastime Annual*.

Following an autobiographical beginning to explain how he fell in love with the game, Memon writes with a deep understanding of cricket and its place in Indian history and society. He writes with affection for the cricketers and with objectivity in calling out where India has faltered in either its game or in its governance. Explaining why he has chosen to tell Indian cricket's story through a selection of match reports and essays, Menon says, "I wanted to cast a journalist's eye on how the sport has been covered in the country, map trends in the sport as well as in the print media." Towards the end of the essay, he writes, "The attempt has been to bring alive – apart from the main characters – complexities, nuances, brilliance, failures and controversies that have shaped Indian cricket (largely in Tests) in the years since Independence."

Reading Memon's sumptuous opening one tends to, unrealistically, expect a treat in every essay. One reason why the interest of readers may flag at times is because Memon has chosen to feature many of India's finest Test matches through merely their final-day match reports. The selection of the games is faultless but final-day despatches do not do justice to the perceptiveness and understanding of our sports journalists, nor to the captivating ebb and flow of Test cricket. Perhaps some stories that tell readers about the build-up to a game, the atmospherics and the

strategic preparation may have helped bring out the complexities and nuances that Memon had stated in his objectives.

Let me explain this with the example of India's great wins at Port of Spain, in 1971 and 1976, that are featured in this book. These milestone victories were as remarkable for the atmosphere at the ground as for the exciting finale itself. The history of Indians settled in Trinidad is as much a part of cricket lore as the game itself and the description of thousands of spectators of Indian origin rooting for a motherland even their grandparents had never seen is an abiding scene from India's tryst with cricket destiny. That is missed when the anthology commits to represent a game through a last-day report.

The book, however, benefits from the inclusion of some evocative essays on India's great cricketers and many of the seminal events. The features on Vinoo Mankad by Rajan Bala, on BS Chandrasekhar by Suresh Menon, on Sunil Gavaskar by Shashi Tharoor and on GR Viswanath by Ramachandra Guha are a joy to read, while others, like the ones by Makarand Waingankar on MAK Pataudi, Rohit Brijnath on Mohammad Azharuddin, Austin Coutinho on Dilip Vengsarkar and Balwinder Sandhu on Kapil Dev are illuminating.

So much has been written on the Fabulous Four of Tendulkar, Dravid, Ganguly and Laxman that one might make the mistake of skimming over the piece on them. Don't. Sharda Ugra's article in her trademark style is refreshing. She writes, "Batting together, they have built an understanding of each other's tempo and a mutual confidence, unshaken despite a run out or two dozen. Like a long-assembled, much-rehearsed string quartet, their cadences complement rather than compete."

Most of the stories selected by Memon show his deep understanding of Indian cricket: such as the ones on the walkout by Navjot Sidhu in the middle of the 1996 tour to England; the heralding of sports celebrity management in India by Mark Mascarenhas; the advent of the Indian Premier League and the onset of the commercial boom. As perceptive is Memon's selection of an essay from 2001 by Sharda Ugra and Ramesh

Vinayak, with Ruben Banerjee, Subhash Mishra and Amarnath K Menon, titled "Small Town, Big Strides", that informs us that we were witnessing the demographic transformation of the Indian team. It is no longer the preserve of the urban middle class; watch out for the slew of fearless, talented cricketers from India's smaller towns and mofussil areas, say the authors.

One of the more compelling reports here is "By Way of Deception" by the sleuth-like journalist, Aniruddha Bahal, on the sordid match-fixing scam that rocked Indian cricket. There was enough there even 20 years ago to warn us that cleaning the muck will be difficult.

As to the writers themselves whose articles comprise the anthology, they were and are masters of their craft. From the essays of the long-gone KN Prabhu, Dicky Rutnagar, PN Sundaresan, Ron Hendricks and Rajan Bala through the masterly Suresh Menon, R Mohan, Dilip D'Souza, R Kaushik, Sharda Ugra and Sambit Bal, to the amazingly talented young generation of Rahul Bhattacharya, Anand Vasu, Bharat Sundaresan and others — this is a trip that is both nostalgia and fresh air. Take Suresh Menon's essay on Chandrasekhar, from which I quote a small passage for two reasons: as a sample of a sportswriter's felicity and because it provides readers a brilliant nugget of our cricket team of the 1960s: "Soon after Chandra's Test debut, Pataudi told him that he would be India's main strike bowler. Chandra smiles at the memory of a team led by a player with one eye and a lead bowler with one arm."

The tribute to Anil Kumble — an excerpt from Sowmya Bhattacharya's book, *All that You Can't Leave Behind: Why We Can Never Do Without Cricket* — is one where the discerning cricket follower will empathise with the bowlers' eternal complaint that cricket is a batsman's game. Describing how Kumble bowled magnificently on a batsman-friendly wicket to take 12 wickets in the Sydney Test of 2004, Bhattacharya writes: "And all some of us tend to talk about from that match is Sachin Tendulkar's 241 not out in the first innings."

One wishes Memon had done more justice to Raju Bharatan with the inclusion of any one of his classic pre-tour long features that he wrote for *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the 1970s rather than the doyen's piece on Sidhu. The cricket special of the magazine helmed by Bharatan was a much-awaited issue and would disappear off the news-stands almost immediately. It also seems unjust that there are just two pages for Indian women's cricket in a book of over 400 pages. Surely Memon could have found space for an excerpt from Karunya Keshav and Sidhanta Patnaik's *The Fire Burns Blue: A History of Women's Cricket in India* (Westland Sport, 2018).

The odd slices of satire are welcome interludes. Anil Dharker's take on our amateurish attitude to telecasting and TV commentary in the 1980s is droll and Mudar Patherya's ode to the Kolkatan's special connection with Eden Gardens is charmingly indulgent with his tongue-in-cheek descriptions of every kind of Kolkatan cricket follower. Telling us what a "participating Kolkatan" is, Patherya writes:

The Kolkatan spectator is not someone who goes to watch; he goes to influence the match...If the ball passed to the wicket keeper, the sound evaporated like a stock market crash, but if the ball snicked or hit the wicket, then that sound became a human thunder that rolled across at least five kilometres to the Exide stop on Chowringhee, where corporate types would immediately turn on their televisions saying, 'Definitely kichhu hoyechhey... dekh! (Definitely something has happened, let us see).'

A contribution that stands out is Prithi Narayanan's article in the *Indian Express*, after her husband, Ravichandran Ashwin, overcoming severe back pain, had helped save the Test at Sydney in January 2021. It provides readers a rare window into the emotions a cricketer's family goes through in the heat of a fiercely contested game. It shows how things have changed for cricketers over the past 75 years. Narayanan's article is also top rate for its jaunty storytelling.

The editing of the anthology looks a bit rushed at times, with errors that were perhaps not in the original publications creeping in. For example, R Mohan and his eagle-eyed editor at *The Hindu* would surely not have printed Casablanca when they meant Casabianca. Memon himself makes a factual error: commenting on India's victorious tour of Pakistan in 2004, he writes, "India haven't toured Pakistan since." In fact India visited Pakistan again in 2006.

Cricket history can be told in a number of ways and Ayaz Memon through this anthology has certainly chosen an interesting format to do so. But in wanting to provide a snapshot of every significant event in Indian cricket and a sample of as many writers as possible — there are 87 essays in all — Memon runs the risk of making the compilation tedious at times for even cricket-crazy readers. The reason this book seems like an opportunity not fully grasped is because you feel as if you have watched a fine action movie on a 70mm screen, but dizzily close seated in the first row. ■