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Hero, celebrity and icon: Sachin Tendulkar and Indian public culture*

When he completed twenty years in international cricket in November 2009, Sachin Tendulkar reaffirmed his status as one of the greatest public icons of post-independence India. Ever since his genius was first glimpsed on the *maidans* of Bombay over two decades ago, Tendulkar has reigned supreme as a sporting idol, his popularity cutting across the boundaries of caste, class, gender, region and religion. Curiously, however, there has been relatively little scholarly scrutiny of the Tendulkar phenomenon and what it might tell us about the changing nature of Indian public culture.

This chapter attempts to understand, and account for, Sachin Tendulkar's enduring hold over the Indian public imagination by exploring three facets of his remarkable career. The first section considers, in historical context, Tendulkar as 'hero': someone who displays superlative skills and performs spectacular feats. An analysis of popular sporting figures needs to reckon with the ways in which their attributes and accomplishments on the field of play are crucial to their elevation as heroes. However, the analytical prism of the 'hero' is insufficient in itself in accounting for Tendulkar's fame. The second section suggests that Tendulkar's celebrity is an attendant effect of the intensified relationship between cricket, television and money in contemporary India. At the same time, the immense power and resonance of Tendulkar's image within Indian society makes him more than a frothy confection of the sport-media nexus. The final section argues that as a national icon Tendulkar embodies the aspirations of millions of Indians. The symbolic meanings they have invested in his persona derive their charge from the interplay between cricket, nationalism and the middle classes in contemporary India.

The cricketer as hero

In the pantheon of Indian heroes, the sportsman has not always constituted a discrete entity. Prior to the colonial period, the paradigmatic hero

figure was generally a warrior, who displayed martial prowess and earned renown on the battlefield, often sacrificing his life in a lost cause.¹ Of course, warrior-heroes were also known to excel in sports such as archery, swordsmanship, wrestling and hunting. But their sporting pursuits were an intrinsic part of the elite martial culture of the period and ‘symbolised the expansive powers of the king, particularly at important moments in the public ritual of the court’.²

As the British disarmed and pacified Indian society during the course of the nineteenth century, the martial ethos of the pre-colonial social order began slowly to diminish in significance. Simultaneously, the archetypal warrior-hero began to make way for other kinds of heroes. Perhaps the most notable development in this regard was the emergence, within the sphere of civil society, of a new embodiment of heroism: the selfless, public-spirited individual who dedicated his life to the service of others.

But the ideals of heroism associated with the martial culture of the warrior did not disappear. On the contrary, the hero as an embodiment of physical prowess and skill was reconfigured within a newly demilitarised context and reappeared within the modern public sphere in the distinctive figure of the sporting hero. In this context, four developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were crucial. First, in a bid to inculcate in some of their Indian subjects a version of the Victorian games ethic, the British introduced sporting activities in the schools and mission colleges that they established in the subcontinent.³ Games like cricket, football and hockey acquired a foothold in educational institutions, thereby enabling Indians who excelled in them to become well-known sportsmen. Second, sport was also an integral part of life in the British Indian army and this afforded the opportunity for some Indian soldiers to make a name for themselves as sportsmen. Third, the need to refute colonial stereotypes about the effeminacy of educated Indians, anxieties about racial decline and a desire to engage in forms of national self-strengthening, all combined to prompt elements within the emergent Indian middle classes to take a new interest in physical culture and sporting activities.⁴ Finally, even though they had been stripped of their substantive military power, the Indian princes continued to uphold the culture of physical prowess that had once been integral to the royal courts by offering substantial patronage to a variety of sporting activities from cricket to wrestling.⁵

In one way or another, these developments opened up the space for the emergence of the modern Indian sporting hero at the turn of the twentieth century. The most famous of these was undoubtedly Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji, whose dazzling batting exploits on the cricket fields of England made him one of the most recognised public figures within the British Empire during

the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. And, coming from the opposite end of the social hierarchy, there was Palwankar Baloo, a Dalit, who was the most famous bowler in India prior to the First World War.⁶ But sports other than cricket also furnished heroes. Thus, we have Jamsetji Marker, the Parsi squash player from Bombay, who was the world champion in his sport during the first decade of the twentieth century. Likewise, the legendary Gama, an illiterate Muslim wrestler from the Punjab, acquired national and international renown as a fighter in the early twentieth century.⁷

From the 1930s, however, cricket began gradually to outstrip other sporting activities in popularity. Even though India achieved significant sporting successes in games like hockey, and other pastimes continued to attract a sizeable following among the subaltern classes of the provincial towns and villages, cricketers such as C. K. Nayudu and Lala Amarnath (among others) were increasingly the most prominent sporting heroes.

The cricketer continued to dwarf other sportsmen in the national imagination in the immediate post-independence decades, even though India's performance in international cricket in these years was scarcely worth trumpeting. By the 1970s the premier status of the cricketer was well established, with the emergence of a new generation of heroes who played a key part in India's memorable cricketing triumphs in that decade: the batting duo of Gavaskar and Vishwanath; the famed spin quartet of Bedi, Chandrasekhar, Prasanna and Venkataraghavan; and the trailblazing Kapil Dev. A number of developments in the 1980s – the Indian cricket team's improbable victory in the 1983 World Cup, the failures of the Indian hockey team and the country's continued poor performance in international sporting events – only served to reinforce the pre-eminence of the cricketer as hero. It is against this historical backdrop that we need to set the emergence of Sachin Tendulkar.

The career of sporting legends has often been marked by an extraordinary performance at the outset that presages what is to follow. Tendulkar announced himself with a series of astounding feats that are now an essential part of the folklore of contemporary India. Indeed, C. L. R. James's words about W. G. Grace could easily apply to the Tendulkar phenomenon in its early years: 'He was news, and as he continually broke all precedents ... before he had passed the middle twenties, each amazing new performance told the public, cricketing and otherwise, that here was one of those rare phenomena, something that had never been seen before and was not likely to be seen again.'⁸

Tendulkar first stirred the public imagination as a precocious fourteen-year-old schoolboy in February 1988, when he compiled a world record batting partnership of 664 runs with his schoolmate Vinod Kamble in the

Harris Memorial Challenge Shield, Bombay's oldest inter-schools cricket tournament. Before the end of that year, he became the youngest player to play first-class cricket for the city, known for its competitive and hard-nosed cricket culture, marking his Ranji Trophy debut against Gujarat with an assured century. In November 1989, aged sixteen, he made his international debut at Karachi against Pakistan, becoming in the process the youngest Indian to play Test cricket. Two months later, on India's tour of New Zealand, he narrowly missed becoming the youngest centurion in the long history of Test cricket. Shortly thereafter, he scored his first century against England at Old Trafford, a match-saving performance that marked him out as a special talent on the international stage. But it was the two thrilling centuries that he reeled off at Sydney and Perth during India's ill-fated tour of Australia in 1992 that conclusively sealed his reputation as a player destined for cricketing immortality.

From the outset, Tendulkar manifested different aspects of the 'heroic ideal' in cricket. For one, he faced fast bowling with reassuring certitude and confidence. This was significant in a sport where, even after the introduction of modern protective equipment, the reputation of batting heroes has crucially depended on their ability and skill in coping with genuine pace. In India especially, as Mukul Kesavan has noted, 'being suspect against fast bowling isn't just a weakness; it is a moral defect, a stigma'.⁹ Tendulkar easily passed this test of 'manhood' in his debut series. Thus, even though his overall performance in the series was hardly spectacular, the physical courage and poise that he displayed against the daunting Pakistani pace attack elicited praise from all quarters.

The unbridled ferocity with which he assailed opposing bowlers also captivated spectators. In this respect, he was a startling departure from the restrained orthodoxy that had traditionally defined the 'Bombay school of batsmanship'. An early demonstration of this aspect of Tendulkar's play came in that epochal debut series in Pakistan. In a friendly exhibition match at Peshawar, the teenager launched a breathtaking assault on the great Abdul Qadir, one of the craftiest spin bowlers in the world. The encounter quickly entered cricket folklore when it transpired that Qadir had challenged Tendulkar to demonstrate his prowess; the suitably chastened bowler prophesied that the boy was going to be a fearsome tormentor of bowlers.

Over the course of the next decade, Tendulkar confirmed Qadir's assessment as he repeatedly destroyed bowling attacks in a manner that enthralled cricket followers across the world. His batting in these years was a heady cocktail of risk-taking intent and daring improvisation, frequently in circumstances where the rest of his team had failed. Indeed, the explosive drama of a heroic Tendulkar performance could simultaneously evoke collective

awe and anxiety. After a dazzling, but doomed, batting display against the Australians in the 1996 World Cup match at Bombay, one cricket writer described the experience of watching him play: 'Each stroke was like a shot of adrenalin, yet each was accompanied by fear and trembling. There would be one too many daring shots, and it would all end, suddenly and catastrophically.'¹⁰

In the second decade of his career, however, there occurred a notable change in Tendulkar's batting approach. The swashbuckling boy wonder gradually gave way to a more circumspect elder statesman, prone to ponderous bouts of self-denial in the larger team interest. In 2005, *Wisden* declared that 'watching Tendulkar became a colder experience' and that 'he seemed to reject his bewitching fusion of majesty and human frailty in favour of a mechanical, robotic accumulation'.¹¹

At the same time, after a decade in which his batting performances had seemingly defied the law of averages, Tendulkar began to appear more susceptible to the vagaries of form. Moreover, a series of niggling injuries raised the prospect of a tame end to a spectacular career. Increasingly, too, his fans began to grow restive with their hero's faltering performances. In 2006, after yet another failure against the touring English side, he was greeted with jeers at his own home ground in Bombay. And when India made an inglorious exit from the World Cup held in the Caribbean the following year, a growing number of critics believed that it was time for Tendulkar to quit.

Fortitude in the face of failure and the quest to reclaim a lost domain are also integral elements of the heroic ideal. In the final stretch of his long career, Tendulkar also fulfilled this requirement in ample measure. In the three years after the disappointing 2007 World Cup, he rediscovered his touch and scored prodigiously in both Test matches and one-day internationals. But more than the sheer number of runs that he scored, it was the manner in which he did so that was significant. Cricket fans were treated once more to the sight of a rejuvenated Tendulkar batting with the aggressive intent of yore. Two incandescent exhibitions of batsmanship, on the threshold of his third decade in international cricket, stand as testimony to his astonishing resurgence as an attacking batsman. In a one-day international against Australia at Hyderabad in November 2009, he scored an epic 175 as India chased a monumental score of 350. Barely three months later, against South Africa at Gwalior, he became the first batsman to score a double-century in the history of one-day international cricket.

Allen Guttman has noted that 'the unsurpassed quantified achievement, which is what we mean by "record" ... is a constant challenge to all who strive to surpass it and thereby to achieve a modern version of immortality'.¹² Measured by this yardstick, Tendulkar's immortality is assured since it is

certain that he will exit the international stage in secure possession of almost all the major batting records in the game. But, as a cricketing hero, Tendulkar will be remembered not so much for the incessant toil that he inflicted on cricket statisticians, as for the sense of enchantment that his wondrous skills induced in those who watched him play.

The hero as celebrity

In order to understand how Tendulkar's image came to dominate the Indian public imagination, however, it is necessary to look beyond the boundary and engage with his celebrity. Like many contemporary sporting superstars – David Beckham, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, among others – the key to Tendulkar's singularity as a modern sporting celebrity lies in the highly intensified interplay between commercial sport, the entertainment media and consumer capitalism.¹³

Two factors, acting in conjunction, provided the matrix within which Tendulkar's image as a sporting celebrity came to be fashioned in the 1990s. The revolution in the sport–media relationship triggered by the entry of satellite television into India played a critical role in constituting the star status of leading international players like Tendulkar. Relatedly, the growing reach and popularity of cricket aroused the interest of corporate sponsors keen to market their products and brought money flooding into the game. These twin developments propelled the commodification of the cricketer as celebrity, of whom Tendulkar is the supreme exemplar.

The history of the cricketer-celebrity in India is integrally linked to the role of the modern mass media in the 'vernacularisation' of the game. Mass-mediated forms of communication – print, radio and television – enabled 'large numbers of Indians to experience cricket as a linguistically familiar form, thus liberating cricket from the very "Englishness" that first gave it its moral authority and intrigue'. In the process, they also created a large cricket-obsessed public that followed the game and its players with 'the passion generated by reading, by hearing and by seeing'.¹⁴

Newspapers began to report cricket extensively in the early twentieth century, and the process accelerated even further after 1947. Until the 1970s, the bulk of this coverage was in English and catered largely to the metropolitan middle classes. But by the end of the twentieth century, a growing body of mass vernacular literature – newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and books – also came to be devoted to cricket. Saliently, by focusing on the 'lives and styles' of great cricketers in the form of information, anecdotes and gossip, this burgeoning print culture contributed to the construction of their celebrity status.¹⁵

Radio broadcasts of cricket in India began in the 1930s and were in English during the first two decades.¹⁶ However, from the 1960s onwards, All India Radio, the public service broadcaster, began to air commentary in Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil and Bengali. Multi-lingual commentary was not only an 'important instrument in the socialization of the Indian mass audience into the subtleties of the sport', but also a crucial factor in making cricketers famous across the land.¹⁷ At one level, because the action was heard, and therefore necessarily *imagined*, radio accentuated the mystique surrounding its stellar performers. At another level, however, by closely describing the activities on the field of play and fostering a sense of collective intimacy, radio commentary simultaneously rendered the leading cricketers *familiar* figures to their listeners.

From the 1970s onwards, cricket became a major cultural spectacle when Doordarshan, the state-owned broadcasting corporation, began to telecast Test matches. Cricket was ideally suited for television for a number of reasons: the restricted spatial confines within which the main action took place; the number of pauses and breaks in the play; and the fact that camera technology made it easier to watch the game on screen than in the stadium.¹⁸ Importantly, in a country where cinema stars had hitherto been the most prominent celebrities, television lent 'cinematic authority to sports spectacles'. It thus turned cricketers into major celebrities by enhancing and intensifying their star appeal.¹⁹

At first, the role of television in transforming cricket into a spectacle was not readily apparent. In the 1970s, the live telecast of cricket matches was restricted to the biggest cities and its audience was relatively small.²⁰ However, by the time Tendulkar made his debut at the end of the 1980s, the role of television in broadening the mass appeal of the game was undeniable. Two concurrent developments were responsible for this transformation. First, the growing affordability of television sets and the rapid extension of Doordarshan's broadcasting network took the game to a mass audience that was historically unprecedented in its size. Second, the expansion of television coverage coincided with, and fed off, a new phenomenon that gripped the Indian public: one-day cricket.²¹

The shorter format of the game had grown increasingly popular in Australia and England in the late 1970s, following the revolution wrought by Kerry Packer's World Series Cricket. In India, its impact was relatively muted until a glorious summer day in June 1983, when an unheralded Indian cricket team pulled off a stunning victory over the mighty West Indians in the finals of the World Cup. Two years later, the Indian team scripted yet another improbable triumph, winning the World Championship of Cricket in Australia. Suddenly, the Indian public, whose innate cultural dispositions

had allegedly predisposed it to the slow rhythms of Test cricket, demonstrated an insatiable appetite for the frenzied rhythms of limited-overs cricket. The panjandrums of the Indian cricketing establishment were only too happy to follow where the crowds led them. Between 1974 and 1979, India had played thirteen one-day internationals; in the years between 1980 and 1989, however, the figure shot up to 155. Millions were transfixed by the live telecasts of these matches, which proved beyond doubt that one-day cricket was India's most popular sporting spectacle.

It was in this situation that satellite television made its entry into India in 1991. From the very beginning, cricket was the principal focus of the slick new channels that challenged Doordarshan's monopoly of sport. Their impact was immediate and radically transformed cricket coverage. For one, they deepened the hold of cricket in remote towns and rural areas that had previously been lightly touched by it. At the same time, they also repackaged cricket (especially the one-day game) as a spectacle in novel ways, ranging from innovative camera angles and slow-motion replays to the role of expert commentators who explained rather than merely described the unfolding action. Furthermore, the 'individualizing production aesthetic' that governed the culture of satellite television had at its core a relentless focus on star performers – like Sachin Tendulkar, Shane Warne and Brian Lara – who became the most visible symbols of the sport.²²

Tendulkar's larger-than-life image was carefully nurtured and ceaselessly celebrated by these new sports channels. The sense of visual intimacy engendered in viewers by the new technologies, and the modes of presentation that they deployed, consolidated his star status. His presence thus attracted vast audiences to the one-day games (often played at night under floodlights) that quickly became the staple fare of these channels; in turn, the televised coverage of his exploits made him India's greatest sporting celebrity.

The growing popularity of cricket in the 1990s, and the commercial possibilities inherent in this development, made it an increasingly attractive proposition for corporate capital. In turn, the rapid influx of big money into the game turned leading cricketers into marketable commodities. Of course, corporate engagement with Indian cricket was by no means an entirely new development. Indeed, after 1947, when princely support for cricket began to diminish in significance, commercial firms in the public and private sector emerged as the biggest patrons of the game. But until the 1970s their role was largely restricted to offering secure employment to cricketers with a view to garnering favourable publicity and goodwill for their business.²³

The first signs of enhanced corporate involvement in cricket became manifest in the 1980s, when the mass base of cricket in India began to expand rapidly. Thus, the 1987 World Cup was sponsored by Reliance, one of India's

biggest business companies. Simultaneously, leading cricketers such as Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev and Ravi Shastri began to appear in advertisements for a range of products from suits to shaving cream. Indeed, these cricketers were the first to pursue actively the commercial possibilities opened up by the game's growing popularity in the subcontinent.

However, it was only in the 1990s that the structural relationship between cricket and commerce was decisively transformed. The context within which this shift occurred was a momentous one. In 1991, India began to dismantle the 'licence-permit raj' and embarked on a path of economic liberalisation. With the opening up of the Indian economy and its closer integration with the world market, foreign firms began to eye the country as a major growth area for their products. Faced with the challenge of gaining a foothold in an unfamiliar terrain, and quickly recognising cricket's status as a national passion, multi-national corporations – most notably, Pepsi, Coca Cola, Nike and Adidas – latched on to it as an ideal promotional vehicle. To this end, they sought to tap into the popular appeal of leading Indian cricketers, who now came to dominate their lavish advertising campaigns.²⁴

A number of other companies also followed suit and sought to associate themselves with cricket. Some paid out vast sums of money to sponsor one-day cricket tournaments; others clamoured for the right to advertise their products at cricket stadiums or else to emblazon their logos on the players' apparel; and yet others sought to sponsor the team, its kit or, all else failing, its travel and accommodation. Cricket's potential as a generator of massive advertising revenues prompted media companies to engage in frenetic bidding wars to procure the exclusive rights to telecast major one-day tournaments. Huge sums of money now began to be proffered for television rights. In 2006, for instance, Nimbus Communications, a leading Indian television company, paid \$612 million for four-year rights to telecast India's domestic and international matches.

The major beneficiary of this financial bonanza was the BCCI. In 1992, the BCCI was faced with a deficit of \$150,000; by 2007–08, its revenues were a staggering \$213 million.²⁵ It had in the process become, by some distance, the richest organisational body in the sport. But leading Indian cricketers too reaped the rewards of this commercial revolution. Their match fees rose exponentially from the early 1990s, as did their earnings from endorsements. In turn, the growing involvement of star cricketers in commercial activities led to the emergence of professional sports management companies to look after their public relations and endorsement portfolios.

Sachin Tendulkar was the biggest brand name of them all. From the very early years of his career, he was much sought after by corporate firms eager for him to endorse their products. The reasons are not far to

seek: he was young, dynamic, successful, scandal-free and possessed a fan following that numbered in the millions. Saliiently, too, these companies quickly grasped that Tendulkar's recognisably middle-class social background made him highly appealing to the principal consumers of their products. Tendulkar's commercial value became clear in 1996, when he signed a five-year deal worth \$6 million with World-Tel, a sports management company. When the contract was renewed in 2001 for another five years, Tendulkar's pay cheque had more than doubled, making him the highest earner in the game. The deal with World-Tel made Tendulkar an omnipresent celebrity, his cherubic face beaming out of billboards and television screens across the length and breadth of the country, endorsing everything from cars to colas.

'When a man appears as a hero and/or celebrity, his role as celebrity obscures and is apt to destroy his role as hero', observed Daniel Boorstin in an oft-cited essay on the modern culture of fame.²⁶ In one sense, at least, the remark could well apply to Tendulkar's career as a celebrity. Arguably, his very ubiquity, and the sense of familiarity produced by this, has meant that Tendulkar has been divested of the romance and mystique that surrounded sporting heroes of previous eras.²⁷

The celebrity as icon

Seen from another perspective, however, Sachin Tendulkar is a unique national icon who has dominated Indian public life in a way that none of the great cricketers of the past ever did. As we have seen, the production and marketing of his image as a celebrity played a crucial part in this regard. But to understand fully the Tendulkar phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the popular reception of his image and the ways in which this has been shaped by the changing politics of nationalism and class in contemporary India.

Tendulkar's iconic status was a function of two interlinked developments. As cricket was transformed into a money-driven mass spectacle in the 1990s, the Indian cricket team became a prime vehicle for the expression of an increasingly bellicose nationalism that demanded constant success on the playing field. And, as the team's most accomplished performer, Tendulkar was the gleaming receptacle into which were poured the steaming expectations of the Indian public. This, in turn, was related in important ways to the profound transformation in the nature of the Indian middle classes, who have traditionally constituted the most significant and vocal followers of cricket in the country. In particular, Tendulkar came to symbolise the globalising ambitions and cultural self-assertion of the rapidly expanding Indian middle classes.

Cricket and politics have been mutually implicated from the very beginnings of the game in the Indian subcontinent. Since colonial times cricket has served as a site for the expression of the principal 'values, prejudices, divisions and unifying symbols' of Indian society.²⁸ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the fissures that were most apparent, most notably in the communal basis of prominent cricket tournaments like the Bombay Pentangular and the overt discrimination that players from the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy had to confront.

However, from the early twentieth century cricket had also begun to engender nationalist sentiments and to bring together Indians of different communities. As anti-colonial nationalism became a mass phenomenon in the inter-war years, cricketing encounters with the English increasingly became occasions for patriotic self-expression. Moreover, even though 'cricket nationalism and official nationalist politics were rarely wedded in conscious public debates or movements ... they affected the lived experience of play, skill, space, and rights for many young Indians in the small towns and playing fields of India before independence'.²⁹

The link between cricket and nationalism continued to endure even after the British left India in 1947. The rare victories that the Indian cricket team achieved in international encounters in the first two decades after independence were occasions for decorous national rejoicing. Indeed, they were treasured precisely because of the fleeting nature of the triumph that they represented.

The 1970s marked a watershed in the relationship between cricket and nationalism. The catalyst here was the series of famous overseas wins that the Indian team pulled off against the dominant cricketing powers of the time: England, West Indies and Australia. These victories have been widely interpreted as India's coming of age as a cricketing power. The lustre of the Indian cricket team was further enhanced in the 1980s, following its extraordinary success in major international tournaments.

The public response to India's cricketing conquests in these two decades heralded important changes in the nature of sporting nationalism. Perhaps its most benign manifestation was the sense of patriotic pride that the achievements of the Indian team evoked, in a context where the country otherwise had very little to cheer about in the sporting sphere. More worryingly, though, Indians now came to *expect* victory in international cricket encounters as a matter of course. But the most ominous trend of all was the extent to which the cricket team gradually came to be equated with the nation itself. When India won on the cricket field, the victory was celebrated as a national triumph; when it lost, the defeat was treated as nothing less than a national calamity.³⁰

Sachin Tendulkar's career unfolded against the backdrop of a dramatic intensification in the interplay between cricket and popular nationalism. On the one hand, this development was spurred by cricket's transformation in the 1990s into a highly commercialised and commodified form of mass entertainment. Commercial promoters, advertisers and media interests associated with the game insistently mobilised the idea of the nation in their marketing strategies and inflated the expectations that were placed on the Indian cricket team.³¹ On the other hand, this sporting nationalism was sharply accentuated by the tumultuous changes in the larger political landscape. Even as India began to assert itself more stridently on the world stage on account of its growing economic clout, the *fin de siècle* witnessed a profound political churning in which many of the founding ideals of the republic were ferociously contested. A nation buffeted by political turbulence increasingly looked to its cricketers for succour.

Together, these two developments generated a shrill cricket nationalism that was wildly exuberant in victory and savagely vituperative in defeat. This belligerent chauvinism was most visibly on display when India met Pakistan on the cricket field. As political relations between the two nations steadily deteriorated in the 1990s, the cricketing contests between them became 'war minus the shooting'.³² But the prickly intolerance of Indian cricket followers was also expressed in other ways, from rioting to stop contests in which their team was headed for defeat to the studied refusal to applaud opposing teams.

Tendulkar's image as a national icon crystallised in this volatile context. His heroic performances during the 1990s electrified a cricket-obsessed nation and offered the reassurance that it could produce genuine world champions in the sporting arena. Moreover, in a politically fraught era, his significance transcended the realm of sport. His assertive style of play resonated well with those who were keen to contest their own marginal status in the world. Some saw him as a rare symbol of unity in a nation racked by divisive political conflicts. For others, he was a ray of light in a horizon darkened by national failures on every front. In the words of the writer C. P. Surendran: 'Every time Tendulkar walks to the crease, a whole nation, tatters and all, marches with him to the battle arena. A pauper people pleading for relief, remission from the lifelong anxiety of being Indian, by joining in spirit their visored savior.'³³

This is an evocative image that conveys the enormous burden of public expectation that Tendulkar has to shoulder. However, it is inaccurate in one crucial respect. It was not the 'whole nation' but a particularly vocal section of it that figuratively accompanied – clad, it is worth noting, in the shiny accoutrements of modernity – Tendulkar every time he went out to do battle.

For above all, it was the nation's middle classes who gloried in Tendulkar's achievements and came to venerate him as a secular version of divinity.

The middle classes have formed the core constituency of Indian cricket for the better part of its history. During the colonial period, even though the major patrons of cricket were princely aristocrats, it was the English-speaking, urban middle classes who took most enthusiastically to the game and its rituals. This trend was consolidated even further after 1947. A vast majority of the players who have represented India at the international level have been from middle-class backgrounds.³⁴ Moreover, while the mass appeal of cricket has expanded exponentially, it is this 'conveniently elastic category' that has furnished the most sizeable chunk of the game's following in India.³⁵ The changing values and orientations of the middle classes have thus crucially shaped the culture of Indian cricket.

Prior to the 1980s, the Indian middle classes (especially the salariat that constituted its dominant element) were economically constrained, culturally conservative and politically moderate. This influenced the manner in which they engaged with the game. Driven by the requirements of stability and gentility, the middle classes played cricket in a '(sh)amateur' fashion.³⁶ Their relatively modest financial circumstances also placed strict limits on the extent to which they could patronise the game.³⁷ And, most importantly, the middle-class followers of cricket had internalised its Victorian governing conventions and traditions.

Sachin Tendulkar's career coincided with a fundamental transformation in the nature of the Indian middle classes. This development is widely linked to the policies of economic liberalisation initiated in 1991. The deregulation of the Indian economy and its subsequent receptivity to the forces of globalisation had a profound impact on its middle classes. Most notably, even as they grew in numbers and affluence, the middle classes became more internally diverse, upwardly mobile and hungry for recognition on the international stage.³⁸

In turn, the remaking of the middle classes had decisive consequences for the culture of Indian cricket. The new claimants to middle-class status raucously embraced cricket in their eager quest to acquire the trappings of metropolitan modernity.³⁹ For these elements, the consumption of cricket afforded a 'sense of cultural literacy in a "world" sport ... and the more diffuse pleasure of association with glamour, cosmopolitanism, and national competitiveness'.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, as a growing number of middle-class Indians migrated and settled abroad, cricket became a means of affirming their ties with the country that they had left behind. The spread of satellite television and the arrival of the Internet facilitated and consolidated these trends.⁴¹ It was thus the new middle classes who were most visible and

voluble – at cricket grounds, on television and on the Internet – in their support for the Indian cricket team.

As the nation's most consistently successful performer in its most popular game, Tendulkar became a totemic figure for India's new middle classes in the era of economic liberalisation and globalisation. For one, his life story powerfully encapsulated the emergent middle-class aspirations of upward social mobility: a boy from an ordinary service background who succeeded in gaining entry, through his talent and hard work, into a rarefied world of money, power and fame. Moreover, consuming the alluring images of the global brands that Tendulkar endorsed allowed Indian middle-class males to experience 'the pleasure of being a modern consumer-citizen'.⁴²

But, above all, it was the poise with which Tendulkar was perceived to have coped with the pressures and perils of modernity that made him an ideal role model for the new middle classes. On the one hand, as one writer noted, he was admired as a 'modern man playing a modern game in a modern style in the modern world'.⁴³ On the other hand, his conduct was seen to epitomise traditional middle-class values and morality.⁴⁴ Thus he was lauded for being a devoted family man, and for remaining humble and restrained in his public conduct despite being a globally recognised sporting celebrity.

Two events at the turn of the century served to confirm Sachin Tendulkar's status as an exemplary middle-class icon. In April 2000, the Delhi police produced startling evidence that implicated major South African and Indian players in a scandal involving the fixing of cricket matches. The controversy severely eroded the game's public image and abruptly terminated the career of a number of leading international cricketers. Tendulkar, however, emerged unscathed from this distasteful episode, which further enhanced his reputation as an honest and trustworthy public figure.

The extent of the public faith in Tendulkar's probity was vividly demonstrated a year and a half later, on India's tour of South Africa. During the second Test, Mike Denness, the English match referee, penalised six Indian players for illegal conduct. Among the accused was Sachin Tendulkar, who was held to have tampered with the condition of the ball. The incident triggered a major furore, with the Indian public rushing angrily to defend their hero. Repeatedly, in newspaper columns, in television studios and in countless Internet 'chat rooms', middle-class India lashed out at those who had dared to question Tendulkar's integrity, and repeatedly invoked his unblemished track record on and off the field of play. The controversy, wrote Ramachandra Guha, highlighted 'Sachin Tendulkar's status as the only flawless Indian'.⁴⁵

Ashis Nandy once observed that in contemporary South Asia 'popular heroes of the worlds of sports and entertainment are expected to be

exemplary social beings but they are also continuously suspected of being severely flawed'. This was because such heroes embodied 'the secret fears, anxieties, ambitions, hopes and especially, the unfulfilled temptations to deviate from social norms' of ordinary citizens. Inevitably, given his exalted status in Indian public life, Sachin Tendulkar has been the object of such intensely contradictory attitudes throughout his playing career. But he has also been more successful than most of his ilk in negotiating the 'ambivalence in the middle-class culture towards its heroes'.⁴⁶ This is perhaps his most remarkable achievement.

NOTES

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