**Since 1989 | The Indian Express**

This is not a reflection of the lack of strategic thinking in the military, but of the absence of political will to put vital strategic issues in writing. A plucky kid in a Lahore hotel to the embodiment of a nations spirit what a privilege to follow this journey. After holding forth on the war in Sri Lanka in some detail last month (in a three-part series beginning with Such a long Lankan journey,IE,September 11),how do I justify a cricket story as the second instalment in this new series,First Person,Second Draft? It might be useful if I repeated what I had said last month while explaining this new series: that when publishers ask me to write a book,or more specifically,a memoir of my years as a reporter,my standard excuse is,editors write books between jobs. And since that wasnt on the cards any time soon,I thought I might start putting together these first person accounts on the 20 or so big stories I had covered as a reporter,to add up to a memoir some day. But how do I justify this piece on cricket,or rather Sachin Tendulkar,in that category? Cricket is,of course,the greatest running story in India for half a century,and Sachin its greatest star. But it isnt a story I can claim to have covered in too much depth or with any consistency. I started my career with this paper in 1977,recruited by its Sports Editor K.R. Wadhwaney to cover sports,but soon moved on to less fun things described,those days,with that catch-all description: general reporting. Editors and employers,however,like reporters who can multi-task. Which is why I got to do some free labour writing about sports on the side,sort of. Or rather,living out a fantasy for which my employers should have docked from my wages. It was in one such <U+0093>general<U+0094> pursuit that I had my first encounter with Sachin Tendulkar in December,1989. He was then on his debut series in Pakistan and the cause of great curiosity and wonder around the cricketing world. He had announced his arrival with a short but ominous innings in Sialkot,coming in at number 6 with Waqar Younis,Wasim Akram and Imran Khan breathing fire,and hitting a boundary off Waqar while nursing a nose bloodied by a nasty snorter. He was still a child. So much a child,in fact,that he had not started to grow hair on his cheeks yet so he would need to shave. I was in Lahore that week,to pick up the thread on Pakistani politics as Benazir seemed to be doddering and also to pick up reactions on the big political change in India: V.P. Singh had been sworn in as prime minister just that week. And reporters luck once again found me at the right place at the right moment: the hotel in Lahore,on a Saturday,where Krishnamachari Srikkanths Indian cricket team was staying. The second Test in that all-drawn series was in progress. With no social life in Pakistan,and some security issues already rising,the players were confined to the hotel in the evenings. And cricket writer (later stock market expert) Mudar Patherya had invented at leas one idea to break the monotony: Saturday Club. Every Saturday evening,the entourage got together for a bit of fun,in some kind of fancy dress. I wasnt quite there to cover the cricket series,but was invited to that evenings party nevertheless,painted with red lipstick like most others. And while bigger,more familiar stars were all there this was the series where Sanjay Manjrekar first got the title The Wall for his 569 runs at an average of 94.83 everybodys attention was on the <U+0093>child<U+0094>,Sachin. They couldnt quite pin a beard on his <U+0093>chikna<U+0094> face,but they did find a moustache for sure. That was my first Sachin moment,and,to date,one of the most treasured ones from my years in journalism. We laughed about this later when I had my first,really long conversation with him for NDTVs Walk the Talk in October 2006 at Mumbais Shivaji Park,probably his longest,and most generously patient media interview so far. Of course,my children pulled my leg endlessly over it,because <U+0093>you sounded so much like a breathless fan than an inquisitive journalist.<U+0094> But we also talked about another of my memorable Sachin moments,though from the press gallery,at Port Elizabeth,December 28 1992,in the first post-apartheid cricket series in South Africa. With India in trouble in the second innings,Sachin was given out for a first ball duck,caught Dave Richardson (wicket-keeper),bowled Brett Shultz. Sachin stood there,transfixed. The ball had clearly gone off the top of his pad. But the finger had gone up. He had already been a veteran of 20 Tests and 1085 runs,but for those moments,he was like a baby whose rattle had been snatched away. He trudged back,eyes wet and tears drifting down his still chikna cheeks. That visual was made for TV promos and was used often to promote India-South Africa encounters. At 33,when we talked,on camera,Sachin still blushed as he recalled it. He recalled also how this had melted the heart of the umpire as well. He came to him later to say sorry,he had bungled. But Sachin was still pained,more than a decade later,as just one more good innings (besides Kapil Devs Stan McCabe-esque last-stand 100) could have saved that Test,and the series for India. Much more will be written by better and more knowledgeable storytellers on Sachins great cricketing moments,his contribution to the game you could describe as the subcontinents only secular religion,his records,averages,how he mastered Warne and Murali,Shoaib and McGrath,his enthusiasm,attitude and so on. The important thing for me,the non-expert,<U+0093>general<U+0094> type is that his rise coincided with that of a new India. His debut year,1989,marked the end of Congress dominance and the rise of many <U+0093>third<U+0094> forces and democratic mutinies,Mandir,Mandal,then the mortgaging of gold,and finally,the economic reform. If you had any doubts that cricket is a reflection of the mood and health of our society and economy,look at how our record changed 1989 onwards. You can then ascribe it to the arrival of Sachin,or economic reform,or both. Because Sachin,by himself,was a phenomenon. But there had been others before him: Sunil Gavaskar,Kapil Dev. But they were more or less lone warriors in a team that did not particularly believe it could win consistently,like the country whose flag it played under. Reinvention of Indian cricket kept pace with the resurgence of Indian economy and society. You may call it pop sociology,but look at the facts. When Sachin arrived,Pakistan had a world-beating team,spearheaded by its murderous bowling unit: Waqar,Wasim,Imran,Abdul Qadir. India was an outlier. From then on,the two teams and,frankly,societies,evolved in different directions. This was also generally the phase when the Pakistani establishment,buoyed by the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan (completed in February 1989) chose terror as an instrument of state policy against India,a replication of the Afghan strategy of bleeding by a thousand cuts. This was the year the ongoing round of trouble began in Kashmir and the Punjab insurgency was revived. India,on the other hand,decided to deal with these threats with firmness,resilience and yet managed to focus on the more important essentials: economics,internal stability and coherence. I have noted in the past how,when I went on my first reporting trip to Pakistan (in the summer of 1985,to cover the trial of Sikh hijackers) I was so taken aback by its relative prosperity. Its roads and cars,phones and electricity supply,even the telex machines from where we filed our stories at the telegraph office,the general well being of its drivers,doormen,working classes,all looked so much better than Indias. And the figures confirmed your impression: Pakistans per capita income was then a little over 50 per cent higher than Indias. But look at the figures closely,and 1989 is about the time that the picture reverses,or the worms on the graphic look like intersecting. Over the following years,as the Pakistani establishment got trapped in multiple jihads,its talent and capital fled,institutions weakened and political cohesiveness began to fray further. The army and the establishment managed to hang on to real power for nearly a quarter of a century since then and it is only now that an elected government has completed its full term. Pakistans growth slowed,but its birth rates did not. India did much better on both and now (although,ironically,as The Economist just reminded us,in the last year,Pakistani growth beat Indias) a healthy net differential has built up in Indias favour. Indias PPP per capita income in dollar terms (according to the IMF) is now substantially higher than Pakistans. Can I suggest that the fortunes of our cricket teams have also followed a very similar graph? Just look at the figures if you have doubts. Since we have ventured to jump the crease of cricket on to the pitch of politics and society,note how you can divide our history into the pre- and post-Sachin,or pre- or post-reform phases. And similarly,how you can divide Pakistans,except,in case of reform,you use jihad. But what is the connection,you might ask,with some justification. The connection is that as reform strengthened Indias economy and a more <U+0093>unstable<U+0094> but healthily competitive democracy stabilised its society and enriched its politics,it led to the rapid rise of a new middle class. It reflected fully in the changing composition of its cricket teams subsequently. Old,feudal elites disappeared,and so did the old divide of princes and commoners. Kapil and Gavaskar were the first middle class stalwarts,but 1989-91 on,that catchment widened. To such an extent that now almost the entire team represents the same middle India. This surge saved Indian cricket in the dangerous,match-fixing,ball-tampering decade of the Nineties while Pakistans self-destructed. And who saved Indias cricket then? Not the BCCI. But a new core of gentle but aggressive cricketers from the new urban middle class: Sachin,Ganguly,Kumble,Dravid and Laxman. They will be joined later by Srinath and Sehwag and together they would keep the wilder,and enormously talented ones,Zaheer,Harbhajan,Yuvraj on the straight and narrow. If no Indian Test cricketer has been caught doing anything really illegal in the post-Azhar phase,you have to mostly thank this brilliant core of moral titanium. And Sachin was the first among these. Gavaskar was brilliant,but had his detractors. So did Kapil,though not quite as many,but there was always that Bombay versus the North rivalry. But even more than Kapil,Sachin is our first sporting star with an appeal that cut across every divide in our very complex society. He would play for Bombay against Karnataka in Bangalores Chinnaswamy Stadium and the crowds would sigh in pain if Kumble or Srinath got him out. Play back old videos to see how subdued the cheer is even in the more partisan IPL when he gets out in <U+0093>away<U+0094> games. In a society so lacking in selfless,apolitical,pan-national heroes,Sachin was truly a first. His retirement,therefore,tempts me also to reveal an unreported story from my political memory bank. When the CBI was pursuing the old match-fixing and betting case (involving Cronje,Azhar etc),it also decided that it had to question Kapil and Sachin. This is when Atal Bihari Vajpayee,then prime minister,got worried. <U+0093>This country has only one or two real heroes,<U+0094> he said,<U+0093>dont ruin their image,and insult the whole country by calling them for interrogation,<U+0094> he told the CBI. The officer in-charge of the investigation,accordingly,agreed to visit Kapil and Sachin in their homes,instead,to talk to them. You can check that story with that officer. His name is Neeraj Kumar. He just retired as Delhis police commissioner,and his last famous case again had to do with match-fixing,albeit confined to the IPL. That is why if I have one complaint with Sachin,it is a diehard fans complaint. Why did he have to take a Rajya Sabha nomination in these hopelessly divided times,when nominated seats in the Upper House have lost their non-partisan nature for almost four decades? Why must we be made to look at Sachin Tendulkar in terms of our voting preferences? And why,indeed,when,if he wanted to be in our Parliament,he could get himself elected on any ticket,from any constituency in our country. POSTSCRIPT: My most revealing journalistic Sachin moment came in that NDTV Walk the Talk. <U+0093>If you had to take one stroke from each one of your four great batting peers,Dravid,Sehwag,Ganguly and Laxman,what will it be<U+0094>,I asked. <U+0093>It will be Sehwags cut,nobody cuts like him,<U+0094> he said,<U+0093>Gangulys cover drive,Laxmans flick off-the-hip and Dravid…<U+0094> he paused for a moment to think. And what will you take from Dravid,I asked,my mischievous journalistic sensors abuzz,thinking of the little issue the two had just had in Pakistan (Multan) when Dravid had declared with Sachin not out at 194. <U+0093>I will take Dravids defence,<U+0094> he said,<U+0093>nobody has a defence like his.<U+0094> I called 10 self-proclaimed cricket experts to ask if that comment was bitchy or brilliant. The verdict: 10:0,brilliant. Now,wasnt that a stroke of cricketing genius? And would you have expected anything less from its.