Democracy's XI

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The Great Indian Cricket Story

Rajdeep Sardesai

juggernaut

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To my parents, Dilip and Nandini Sardesai,
for whom cricket has been life and love

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Introduction

The Great Indian Cricket Story

Unlike politics, cricket doesn't run in the blood: I am a living example of this truism. Right from childhood, I was desperate to follow in my father Dilip Sardesai's footsteps and play cricket at the highest level. I was provided the best equipment, first-rate coaching and top-class facilities. While I captained Mumbai schools and played first-class cricket at Oxford (which may be more a reflection on the quality of university cricket in England at the time), I never even came close to being an India cricketer. Once while playing for Combined British Universities against the Imran Khan–led Pakistan team in 1987, I was bowled by the magical leg-spinner Abdul Qadir for 2. On the way back to the pavilion, a Pakistani player said with a smirk, 'Arre, you come from India, and can't even play spin!' He was right: I didn't know how to pick a googly from a top-spinner. That day I decided to 'retire' to the less strenuous world of journalism, after a brief flirtation as a lawyer, my dreams of a professional career in the game shattered once and for all.

Often at a public gathering I am asked the question: why didn't you play cricket like your father? My answer is simple – a politician's son or daughter has a fair chance of getting elected and becoming a member of the Legislative Assembly or Parliament or even a prime minister, a business house may actively promote hereditary succession,

but a Test cricketer's son cannot wear the India cap without being one of the eleven most talented players in the country. Even the children of film stars can aspire and succeed in joining their parents' profession even if they may not quite make it to the A-list. But a cricketer's child may not even be chosen in his school side, leave aside a Ranji Trophy or Test team, simply on the strength of a famous surname. There are no cricketing dynasties in India quite like our political or even film universe dynasties: nothing remotely like the Gandhi–Nehrus of the Congress and their regional party clones or the Kapoors of Hindi cinema. The closest we have to a 'House of Cricket' in India are the Amarnaths: the father, Lala, was the first Indian Test centurion, his sons Mohinder and Surinder played for the country, while a third, Rajinder, played first-class cricket.

In a sense, seventy years after Indian Independence, we could well argue that cricket is one of the few largely meritocratic activities in the country, a highly competitive game that mirrors the idealism of our founding fathers and the spirit of our republican Constitution that sought equal opportunity for all. The cosy family networks, the privileges of the elite, the patron–client relations have been thwarted at the gates of a cricket ground: there is a democratic fervour that makes cricket the ultimate authentic Indian dream that can have a transformative effect on the lives of players and society. This book is a journey to discover and relive that great Indian story – a story of dreams, sacrifice, opportunity, talent and success – through the prism of cricket and what I have chosen to call 'Democracy's XI', anecdotal mini-portraits of eleven cricketers who in their own unique way represent the universal and pluralistic appeal of the sport that cuts across class, caste, region and religion and has thrown up the real heroes of our time.

Where else but in Indian cricket will you have the son of a humble water pump manager in a public sector firm in Ranchi become an iconic captain and one of the wealthiest sportspersons in the world? Or the prodigious son of a scholarly professor-poet become the most revered Indian cricketer of all time and the first sportsperson to

receive a Bharat Ratna? Or a gangly young man from the congested bylanes of Hyderabad defy the stereotype of the walled-city Muslim to achieve rapid superstardom by scoring centuries in each of his first three Tests? Or a young man whose family had never seen a Test match, whose father bought two buffaloes so the son could have a steady supply of milk at home, then go on to become a World Cup–winning captain and the greatest fast bowling all-rounder the country has seen?

It wasn't always like this. Cricket in pre-Independence India started off as a colonial leisure sport to be played in the elite clubs and gymkhanas of the presidency towns of British India. It was patronized by the princes and Parsee business elites of the Raj who saw cricket as a passport to social mobility and a chance to earn the goodwill of the ruling aristocracy. The merchants and maharajas who were the early patrons played and supported the sport as part of their loyalty to the Empire and to signal their own superior social status – is it any surprise that the early royals who played cricket were all batsmen, with bowling and fielding looked at as more menial tasks to be performed by 'lesser' men? Is it also any surprise that the first Indian team chosen to play England in 1932 had the Maharaja of Patiala as the captain and the Prince of Limbdi as his deputy? Palace intrigue and petty ambitions damaged the sport's growth in its infancy. It is purely fortuitous that the man who eventually led the Indian team for its first Test at Lord's was not a royal but the greatest Indian cricketer of his generation: C.K. Nayudu, a 'commoner', became captain only because the Patiala ruler dropped out before the tour began and the Prince of Limbdi (who was by all accounts a decent player) was injured on the eve of the Test.

Indian cricket in its early years wasn't just organized around feudal lines, it also had the odour of communal politics to contend with. The Quadrangular and Pentangular tournaments that were played in the maidans and gymkhanas of Mumbai in the early twentieth century reinforced religious identities: Hindus, Muslims, Parsees, Europeans and The Rest (including Sikhs and Christians)

had separate teams. The tournaments reflected a deeply divided society that could not mount a unified challenge to the Raj. Communal cricket at a time of nationalistic zeal was an abomination but it suited the 'divide and rule' politics of our colonial rulers. Little wonder then that Mahatma Gandhi, who was inspiring a peaceful nationalist revolution across the country, was disdainful of cricket and its baneful impact on society. Dalits, whose cause Gandhi fought for so assiduously, were first denied the right to play, and later were kept on the margins. Historian Ramachandra Guha brilliantly captures the plight of the first Dalit cricketer of repute, Palwankar Baloo, in his book *A Corner of a Foreign Field*, telling us how he was forced to sit apart from his teammates during the tea interval and drink from a disposable clay vessel while the others sipped their chai from porcelain cups.

Despite tough laws, 'untouchability' is still a curse in parts of the country: there are still instances of Dalits being beaten, denied entry into temples or not allowed to take water from a well. But on the cricket field, no one has to endure the discrimination that a Baloo was subject to: we have had Dalit Test players, all too few one might suggest, but caste is no barrier any longer. Neither is religion an impediment: we have had great Indian cricketers shine from every community with the possible exception of a genuine Adivasi cricket hero, a gap which I believe will be filled too in the near future. It is even possible that if Gandhi were to see the sport today, he might actually like it. After all, the contemporary Indian cricket team is a microcosm of the India that Gandhi wanted to see – a genuine salad bowl society that has space for people across all social divides, offering hope in times of despondency.

I still recall how cricket lifted the gloom when, just weeks after the 26/11 terror attack in Mumbai, Sachin Tendulkar scored a brilliant 103 in the fourth innings in Chennai to take India to a famous victory. Or indeed when the Pathan brothers took India to a stirring win in a one-day international within a few years of the 2002 Gujarat riots having wreaked havoc in Muslim-dominated

neighbourhoods of their home town, Vadodara. On the cricket field, there is no space for Hindu triumphalism or Muslim grievance, no question of Dalits being ostracized or a Kashmiri being alienated. Yes, cricket has been unable to bridge the India–Pakistan divide and matches between the two countries can sometimes descend into unhealthy competitive jingoism – an American cricket writer, Mike Marqusee, once described cricket matches between the two countries as 'war minus the shooting' – but I will never forget how a Chennai crowd once cheered a Pakistani team after they defeated India in a pulsating Test match in 1999 or how Pakistani spectators chanted medium-fast bowler Lakshmipathy Balaji's name in a game in Lahore in 2004. There is, truly, no line of control on the cricket field. A Parvez Rasool from Srinagar can wear the Indian cap with the same sense of unbridled joy as a Kuldeep Yadav from Kanpur or a Varun Aaron from Jharkhand. There is no space for vote banks or reservations in cricket: the only thing that counts in the final analysis is your ability to score runs or take wickets.

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Cricket then is Indian democracy's alter ego, a metaphor for hope in a 'new' and better India. When institutions of public life falter, the citizen turns to the maidan to relive the innocence of his youth, and the idealism of the fledgling nation state born in 1947. As the ball soars skyward or the stumps are shattered, the flaws of nation-building seem inconsequential for a few seconds as we rejoice in the achievements of our homegrown heroes. There, on the field, as the eleven cricketers battle for India, Indian men and women see reflections of their own struggles to make their way in their country, their disillusionment eclipsed and their optimism rekindled. Nor is this mere Bollywood escapism. Instead 'Jana Gana Mana' was never better illustrated in flesh and blood than when it is sung by Team India, comprising as it does youths from every corner of the country. Accustomed to a daily diet of political degradation and

economic drudgery, we can celebrate our cricketing success as there on the luminous green a dance of democracy plays out which is as satisfying as it is real.

How fitting too that in the seventieth year of Indian independence, this parallel universe of Indian democracy is no longer just about men. Women's cricket today is similarly hope-giving and a source of national reassurance. The remarkable run of the Indian women in reaching the World Cup cricket final in 2017 at Lord's was truly inspirational. Like the 1983 World Cup win, the march of the women in blue to a final which they were nail-bitingly close to winning is a potential gamechanger. Numbed by daily assaults on women in society, watching the buoyant confident athleticism of a Harmanpreet Kaur or the stroke play of a Mithali Raj makes our hearts skip a beat at the success of democracy in action on the pitch. In fact, Harmanpreet's innings of 171 not out against Australia in the 2017 World Cup semi-finals must rank as one of the greatest one-day innings ever. It certainly brought our entire newsroom to a grinding halt. The gender glass ceiling has been well and truly broken – yet another triumph for the sport. Jhulan Goswami, India's fast bowling spearhead and the highest wicket-taker in women's one-day cricket, tells me, 'When I was young, the boys didn't initially let me play with them, thinking I would get hurt. My parents said if I play cricket who will marry me! Now, no one will dare say that.'

Just as significantly, the sharp class divide that once threatened and even undermined Indian cricket in its early years has now almost entirely disappeared. Every year, the Indian Premier League (IPL) – the most lucrative cricket tournament in the world – makes stars out of talented young men from diverse backgrounds. Each year, there are feel-good stories of cricketers from poor families suddenly becoming crorepatis. In the 2017 IPL auction, for example, T. Natarajan, a young speedster from Tamil Nadu's Salem district, was offered a Rs 3 crore contract. His father is a daily-wage labourer while his mother runs a roadside chicken and snacks shop. When asked what he would do with the money, Natarajan grinned. 'I will build a

house for my family and fund the higher studies of my two sisters and a brother.'

As cricket becomes part of a multimillion-dollar global entertainment industry, there are many Natarajan-like stories emerging today in Indian cricket, only re-emphasizing that if you have talent and determination then opportunities will come knocking and the sky is the limit. Umesh Yadav, the spearhead of the Indian pace attack, is a good example. His father was a loader in a coal mine in a hot and dusty village near Nagpur and Umesh dropped out of school after class twelve to try to join the army or police so that his family could escape from poverty. But the muscular young teenager's ability to bowl fast did not go unrecognized. Spotted first in a Vidarbha inter-district tournament, he was playing for India barely two years later. Today he drives the latest SUV and lives in a deluxe two-storey house. No member of his family will ever have to be a daily wage labourer again. 'If I didn't have my cricket, I might be directing traffic as a constable in Nagpur,' he says with a smile.

Cricket is not just a passion any longer, it can be a high-earning profession. To put the earnings of modern-day players in some context, Indian Test cricketers in the 1950s and 1960s were paid Rs 250 per Test match; a few 'professional' cricketers like Vinoo Mankad, Vijay Hazare and Dattu Phadkar were paid an 'extra' Rs 350 in the 1950s because they were considered 'indispensable' to the team. Today, Team India players earn Rs 15 lakh per Test match, apart from well-paid retainerships and hefty sponsor deals. Even domestic Ranji Trophy players receive a decent wage: in the 1950s and 1960s, first-class cricketers were paid just Rs 30 for a three-day game (including local travel and laundry), now they get paid Rs 25,000–30,000 per day. Till the early 1960s, even Test players travelled across the country for international games by train (an exception was made for the first time in 1961–62 when India won a home Test series against England and the 'reward' was an air ticket!) and often stayed in 'B' category hotels. Now, of course, the top cricketers live in five-star luxury and could probably afford private

jets! 'We played cricket for the pride of wearing an India cap, money was not a consideration at all,' insists eighty-five-year-old Madhav Apte, one of the oldest living Indian Test cricketers, who made his Test debut in 1952.

The money-spinning IPL and the large and frenzied fan base has meant that India is now the capital of the global game. In September 2017, the media rights for the IPL were sold to Star India for five years for an eye-popping Rs 16,347 crores, more than the worth of all the other Twenty20 leagues put together. Till the 1990s, some of the world's best cricketers stayed away from playing in India, fearing disease and condemning our poverty; the likes of the English opening batsman Geoff Boycott, for example, were reluctant tourists to the subcontinent while the Australians toured India only once in the entire decade of the 1970s. Now the world itches to play in India, aware that this is the most profitable marketplace for the sport. The Indian economy has more than quadrupled in size since the turn of the millennium and is now one of the fastest growing economies in the world. From an India of scarce goods we have moved to consumerist nirvana, a country where multistorey malls and branded stores are a totem to a 'new' India of vaulting aspiration. Cricket has benefited hugely from the market expansion and the days when Indian cricketers had to struggle for an income are well and truly over.

But the real story of Indian cricket goes beyond the changing colour of money. In his wonderful Bradman Oration lecture in 2011, Rahul Dravid summed it up best: 'In India, cricket is a buzzing, humming, living entity going through a most remarkable time, like no other in our cricketing history. In this last decade, the Indian team represents, more than ever before, the country we come from – of people from vastly different cultures, who speak different languages, follow different religions, belong to different classes. I went around our dressing room to work out how many languages could be spoken in there and the number I have arrived at is 15, including Shona and Afrikaans.' (The team's support staff were from South Africa.)

So how did cricket succeed where so much else has failed and help

to unify a diverse society? Nelson Mandela said evocatively during the historic 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa: 'Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers.' That World Cup, when a post-apartheid South Africa cheered the victory of the country's rugby team, until then a predominantly whites-only sport, unified a nation sharply divided by race.

Indian cricket has gone well beyond what a single World Cup rugby win achieved for South Africa in celebrating our oneness as a nation. So dominant is the role of cricket in the lives of millions of Indians that sociologist Ashis Nandy wryly remarked, 'Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British.' Australian academic Richard Cashman in his well-researched book on Indian cricket, *Patrons, Players and the Crowd*, suggests that cricket succeeded in India because it appealed to traditional India notions of time and motion: there is a certain 'timeless' quality to the elongated drama of a five-day Test match, for example, that attracts a less modern society, one in which a blockbuster film must be three hours long! Cashman even argues that cricket was an acceptable game to Indians because it was 'non-violent' unlike a 'body contact' sport like football and fitted in with prevalent notions of 'purity' and 'pollution' in a caste-ridden society.

And yet, the cultural factors, while important, should not be exaggerated. There is something unique in the way Indians have embraced cricket much like the Brazilians celebrate 'o jogo bonito', or 'the beautiful game' of football: just sit at Eden Gardens in Kolkata to realize how a sport can enthuse a populace, almost magically transforming the humdrum of daily life in the big city into a dramatic adventure. Truth is, as cricket journalist Mihir Bose writes in *A History of Indian Cricket*: 'Nothing could be more English than cricket, and yet nothing could be more Indian than

the way the subcontinent has taken to the game.' Travel anywhere in India and the sound and rhythms of cricket resonate from every neighbourhood. I once sat spellbound watching a game of cricket being played in a remote village on the foothills of the Himalayas with the same enthusiasm as it would be played in a maidan in Mumbai or a street corner in Kanyakumari. Tennis-ball cricket, in particular, as played in mohallas and bylanes, defines an indomitable Indian spirit – matches are sometimes played in pouring rain with an intensity that is unmatched anywhere in the world. No surprise then that some of our finest cricketers started their career in tennis-ball tournaments.

How did cricket transform from an elite sport into a mass spectator sport, from recreation for the privileged into an inclusive national 'religion' where cricketers are our modern-day divinities? In 1947, when India gained independence, cricket was already a very popular sport, even though hockey prided itself as our 'national game' because of our success at the Olympics. C. Rajagopalachari, independent India's first Governor-General, was quoted as saying, 'The day might come when India would give up English, but not cricket!' And yet, the game's early popularity was urban-centric with Mumbai (then Bombay) and the more urbanized west coast of the country dominating the sport, with Chennai (then Madras) offering some competition even as Kolkata (then Calcutta) seemed to prefer football. Seventy years later, cricket is the number one sport in every part of the country with the possible exception of the northeast, Kerala and Goa, where football still attracts the biggest crowds. And while in the 1950s and 1960s the Indian cricket team lost or drew more games than they won, today they are a world champion side.

There are, to my mind, four turning points in India's post-Independence cricket history. The first is in the year 1971, when the sport was liberated from Empire, cricket's equivalent of the freedom at midnight moment of 1947. It was the year India scored overseas victories in the West Indies and England for the first time, instilling a self-belief in Indian cricket. For an adolescent nation that was

struggling to assert itself, the cricket wins of 1971 can be likened to the famous victory the same year in the battlefield over Pakistan that led to the formation of Bangladesh, to the Green Revolution that made India self-sufficient in foodgrain, the space programme that launched indigenous satellites, and the 1974 nuclear tests. Each of these landmark achievements gave Indian nationhood a boost and fulfilled a young country's yearning for self-reliance.

The second turning point is when India lifted the World Cup in 1983, an incredible win that stunned the cricket world, that sparked off huge interest in one-day cricket just when, almost serendipitously, colour television was also creeping into our lives. Until then, the crackle of ball-by-ball radio commentary was the sport's ubiquitous nationwide messenger; now television brought the cricketers into our homes in coloured splendour. Suddenly, our heroes appeared to be within touching distance. Radio was the primary medium for tracking Indian cricket till the mid 1970s – I was once hauled up in class as a schoolboy for listening to the commentary on my pocket transistor and exulting when the rival team's wicket fell. (My teacher who confiscated the radio was later spotted in the staff room ears glued to the same transistor!) The first Test cricket series to be telecast live in India was the 1974–75 India–West Indies ding-dong battle, and it was only in 1978, when India went to Pakistan for the first time after seventeen long years, that Indian cricket fans finally got to see an overseas series 'live' on our then black-and-white television sets.

The 1983 victory also lifted national morale at a difficult time: the early 1980s were a period of conflict and bloodshed that would culminate in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, arguably the most traumatic year in independent India's history and one that would firmly mark the end of an age of dreamy innocence. The assault on the Golden Temple, the horrific anti-Sikh riots and the Bhopal gas tragedy – 1984 was an unending year of pain. As always, in stressful times, cricket would provide solace to the soul.

The third defining moment is the opening up of the Indian markets in the 1990s in the aftermath of the path-breaking 1991 budget. Economic liberalization saw the unshackling of Indian entrepreneurship, allowing cricket to be a major beneficiary from the sudden spurt in the consumer goods market and an exponential rise in advertising revenues on cable and satellite television. Every match was now telecast live on private channels as the Supreme Court ruled in 1995 that airwaves were no longer a government monopoly. The financially successful 1996 World Cup played in the subcontinent was a sign that the balance of cricketing power was shifting from West to East. 'Live cricket on TV and an expanding marketplace, it was an unbeatable combination,' is how Harsha Bhogle, one of the most recognized TV cricket commentators in the country, puts it.

The fourth transformational moment, and arguably the most influential, came in 2008 when the IPL kicked off: a big-money sporting spectacle that suddenly gave cricket a glitzy Bollywood-like appeal. Growing up in the India of the 1970s, going to the circus was our ultimate night out. Under the big top, we watched acrobats perform in shimmering skirts, laughed as clowns hit each other, gasped as animals jumped through rings of fire and were dazzled by motorbike stunts. In twenty-first-century India, now the IPL is the biggest circus in town – only this is three hours of unscripted reality entertainment and the stars are top-class cricketers, with rich and famous franchise owners and scantily dressed cheerleaders in supporting roles. Six weeks of the IPL carnival every summer – where cricket becomes a television box office superhit – has dramatically altered the sport's ethos, bringing in new audiences and, importantly, taken the sport to every nook and corner of the country, riding on the power of a mighty multimedia and marketing machine. Regional IPLs in states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have become a force multiplier. With its unique 20-overs-a-side format, this is cricket that is fast and exciting, tailor-made for a younger, more aggressive India. With billionaire franchise team owners ready to spend crores

to 'buy' even domestic players in the much-hyped player auctions, cricket has become a truly aspirational sport even for rural India. Almost every district in this country now has a turf wicket and a coaching academy.

The IPL's launch was perfectly timed with the Indian economy entering an age of rapid globalization, one where every major global brand now furiously competes for market share (the top two bidders for the IPL title sponsorship in 2017 were both Chinese mobile phone companies). Fortuitously, the IPL also started just a year after the young Indian team unexpectedly won the thrilling inaugural 2007 World Twenty20 tournament. Four years later, India lifted the 2011 World Cup on home soil. If 1983 was a bit of a fluke, twenty-eight years later, the victory at Mumbai's Wankhede stadium in front of the country's largest-ever television audience only confirmed India's status as a twenty-first-century cricketing superpower. Like in 1983, the 2011 win came at a troubling time for the country: political corruption had sparked off street protests, public anger and cynicism towards the 'neta' class was peaking even as growth was slowing and inflation was climbing. Cricket, as often has been the case in this country, provided a balm and a sense of renewed hope in the future. In mid 2017, when I was finishing this book, India was formally anointed the number one Test side and looks set to stay on top for a while.

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It is in tracing this amazing rise of Indian cricket and how it links to strengthening our sense of nationhood that the story of our Democracy's XI is relevant. Each of the individuals whose life stories I have chosen to put the spotlight on is a reflection of how Indian cricket and society have evolved post-1947, of how cricket has discarded its colonial origins to become a mass sport, how cricket is a shining badge for multireligious pluralism, how the forces of market competition in an otherwise unequal society have created the democratic space for talent to flourish and for ambitions to be realized.

This is not a book about an all-time best Indian cricket eleven but a personal choice of eleven individuals who I believe in their own way shaped Indian cricket and made it the country's number one sport; it is, in a sense, a baton relay in which eleven people are participating and doing the best they can to ensure that the next generation is even better prepared for the challenges of the future. That my choice of eleven cricketers are all men could be held against me, but I have no doubt that one day a similar book will be written on the emerging women's cricket revolution.

My journey starts in the late 1950s with my late father who would probably never make it to any greatest-ever Indian team (as he would modestly tell you, 'I was good, but never great!'), but still remains the only Goa-born male cricketer to have played for the country (Shikha Pandey, an Indian women's team star, is also Goa-born). That he was born in the small town of Margao in 1940 and yet played for the country for over a decade in the 1960s and early 1970s makes him an oddity in the age in which he played the game. Cricket in that period was dominated by the major metro cities and even my father had to migrate from Portuguese-ruled Goa where he had limited exposure to the game all the way to Mumbai to realize his cricket dream. With financial constraints and inadequate infrastructure, the early years were a struggle for Dilip Sardesai. By contrast, today it is almost the norm for cricketers from the small towns to make it big in the sport, another reflection of how cricket has now transcended all geographical boundaries. Sardesai had one remarkable series against the West Indies in 1971, the year which, as mentioned earlier, gave Indian cricket a crucial self-belief to challenge the world, and where his high scores earned him the sobriquet 'the Renaissance man of Indian cricket'.

My father's captain for most of his Test career was Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, also known as the Nawab of Pataudi. He was the rare prince amid a generation of middle-class cricketers who began to sparkle in the early years after Independence. But he wasn't a prince from a colonial era: he had earned his place in the team because of

his talent and not his lineage. That he achieved success despite losing sight in one eye makes his achievements even more remarkable. He was a 'republican' prince, someone who welded a team from diverse backgrounds into a truly 'national' team for the first time. He provided Indian cricket a charismatic leadership at a crucial stage in its evolution; he was a prince by birth but Nehruvian by outlook, signalling the democratic impulses of a nation slowly shedding its feudal baggage.

The Pataudi era in the 1960s also sparked off a spinning revolution in Indian cricket, led by four unique spinners with vastly contrasting personalities. I was tempted to choose Bhagwat Subramanya Chandrasekhar in my eleven, arguably the greatest match-winning bowler of his generation. The story of Chandra, who despite a polio-afflicted arm could bamboozle the best batsmen in the world, is part of cricketing folklore. I have chosen Bishan Singh Bedi instead, who was perhaps post-Independence India's first cricket 'rebel'. He was as colourful as he was controversial, the Sardar of Spin who was both pious and pugilistic. In Bedi's combative persona, Indian cricket discovered a leader who was ready to push for player power for the first time. His bowling action was a sight to behold but it was his anti-establishment credentials in a period of political turbulence that make him an attractive choice for any team that views sport as redefining the status quo.

The age of the great Indian spinners coincided with the rise of the finest opening batsman India has produced. Sunil Gavaskar provided steel and substance to Indian cricket and, in no small measure, gave it self-respect. The stereotype of the timid Indian batsmen who were easily intimidated by fast bowling was defeated by a short man with a broad bat from Mumbai, appropriately named the Little Master. Blessed with unmatched concentration and near-perfect technique, Gavaskar took on the fastest bowlers in the world to give Indian cricket a new muscle. On the field, Gavaskar was the pride of the nation, shattering almost every record in Test cricket. Off it, he gave Indian cricket a hard, professional edge that had been missing for

decades. His success through the 1970s – a decade when socialistic economics offered limited opportunities for upward mobility – gave the salaried urban middle class in particular a role model they could look up to.

If Gavaskar began his career with the spinners in their pomp, it would end with the exuberance of pace. Kapil Dev was once chosen as Wisden's Indian cricketer of the century, an honour that has as much to do with his all-round skills as it does with the sheer excitement he brought to the sport. Only Kapil Dev could have hit four 6s in an over to save a follow-on: he was truly sui generis. If Gavaskar redefined opening batting in the country, Kapil Dev broke several barriers: the first world-class fast bowler produced by India, the first serious talent from Haryana and, crucially, the first cricketer to wear his small-town rustic origins as a badge of pride. He played cricket with an energy that was infectious and made him a national folk hero – the cheery smile with which he lifted the World Cup in 1983 is imprinted in national memory. It was the most stunning victory, one that changed Indian cricket forever, making it a sport that was ready to step into the age of colour television and commercial success.

Mohammed Azharuddin is perhaps the most controversial choice in my team: that his name is indelibly associated with the match-fixing scandal that stained Indian cricket might lead observers to wonder why he has been picked. And yet, to measure Azhar's contribution to the sport only through the prism of still unproven charges of match-fixing is unfair to one of the most successful and durable batsmen-captains India has produced. He is also a symbol of Indian cricket's multireligious character. In the winter of 1992–93 in the aftermath of the bloody post-Ayodhya rioting, I was despairing of the future. Reporting on the Mumbai riots and blasts, I felt distraught. In that moment of despondency, Azhar's leadership and batsmanship gave me and millions of others a sense of hope: a proud Indian Muslim leading the country at a time when communal conflict threatened to rupture Hindu–Muslim relations.

No cricketer though has given the Indian cricket fan greater hope and joy than Sachin Tendulkar, the country's first sporting Bharat Ratna. As a Mumbaikar who played cricket with Tendulkar's brother, I had a privileged ringside view of his spectacular rise from the maidan to the pinnacle of the sport. I still remember the surge of pride one felt when Sir Don Bradman, the ultimate batting divinity, likened Tendulkar's batting style to his. For millions of Indians, Tendulkar was, and always will be, the 'God of Cricket', someone who is hero-worshipped for his achievements. That he made his Test debut at an age when most children are struggling with their algebra, marks him as a prodigy. That he was still playing international cricket when stepping into his forties is proof that he was near-indestructible. For close to a quarter of a century, there was a permanence of identifying Indian cricket with the genius of Tendulkar.

If Tendulkar was the first superstar-millionaire of Indian cricket in the age of global satellite television, his contemporary Sourav Ganguly is a folk hero of a different kind. In a way, Ganguly is to Bengal what Tendulkar is to India: a regional 'Big Boss' who came to represent the hopes and aspirations of a corner of a country which was crazy about the sport but had never produced a major homegrown star. His role as captain in a difficult period for Indian cricket can't be underestimated: he restored pride in the sport when the scar of match-fixing had led to disillusionment. His combative machismo helped break another stereotype: no longer would a Bengali middle-class gent be seen as a soft and dreamy coffee house intellectual. Ganguly was a tough cricketer ready to walk the talk.

If Ganguly was fire, Rahul Dravid was Indian cricket's ice-man. No Indian cricketer has carried himself with greater dignity and composure in whatever he did on and off the field than Dravid, a steely character. That he played much of his cricket in the shadow of Tendulkar means that we may never quite appreciate the magnitude of some of his statistical achievements (he has faced more balls than any other batsman in Test cricket, featured in more century partnerships, taken more catches, to name just three). Dravid, in

a sense, is a throwback to an earlier era of the sport when cricket wasn't about sledging or showmanship but a hard sport played with the spirit of gentlemanliness. His career is proof that nice guys can finish first and that there is still space for integrity and values amid the cut-throat competition of contemporary sport.

If Dravid provides a comforting link with Indian cricket's genteel past, Mahendra Singh Dhoni has truly revolutionized its present. Dhoni is the iconic symbol of Indian cricket's march to the summit of the sport. He, after all, was Test captain when India became the number one side in the world and again when we lifted the World Cup on home soil in 2011. No cricketer would seem to have absorbed the pressure of leading India with greater calmness and maturity than Dhoni, one reason perhaps why he has succeeded so often in crunch situations. And yet, Dhoni's impact cannot be measured by runs made, catches taken or matches won: he is the cricketer who best represents how Indian cricket has been truly 'democratized' and become an engine for merit-driven social mobility. The first Ranchi-born cricketer to play for the country, his rise from ticket collector at Kharagpur railway station to lifting the World Cup less than a decade later, while becoming one of the wealthiest sportspersons in the world along the way, is the ultimate cricketing fairy tale. If there is a 'small-town' cricket revolution in India that has driven Indian cricket forward, then Dhoni is its poster boy.

Indeed, the 'power shift' in Indian cricket from the elite metropolitan clubs and gymkhanas to the 'aam aadmi' maidans of small-town India is almost complete. While children from wealthier urban homes have other sporting options – ranging from tennis to football – in Tier II and Tier III cities of India, cricket is a manic fixation. Small-town India has the hunger and facilities to see cricket as its ticket to breaking the class window – the majority of the players in Team India now come from outside the big cities. If the OBC (other backward caste) 'Mandal' revolution has changed Indian politics forever, then the 'Dhoni effect' has had a similar impact on cricket.

Leading the charge into a new century is Virat Kohli, the idol of the millennial generation. The torch of Indian batting has moved smoothly from Gavaskar to Tendulkar to Kohli now. And yet, like all great cricketers, he is distinctive in style, on and off the field, a batsman who can play all formats of the game with equal ease and with an unbridled aggression that mirrors the attitude of a new India. This is an India which oozes a certain self-confidence, bordering on 'me-first' arrogance, one which rewards excellence and isn't going to be meek and submissive when confronted with any 'foreign' challenge. Kohli is also a product of a hyper-globalized age where cricket is now 'cricketainment', a high-stakes sport that is umbilically tied to the global consumer marketplace. Indian cricketers from an earlier era who had to scrounge around for a proper bat must gaze enviously at the multi-crore bat contracts and brand endorsements of a Kohli. He is the prototype of the modern-day sportsperson: rich and successful, but also remarkably fit and focused. Indeed, money is a small part of the big picture: watch a Kohli fitness video on Instagram and you realize the enormous hard work and desire to succeed that has gone into the making of a champion.

In a sense, it is this burning passion for the game that unites this Democracy's XI. ('Junoon' or obsession is a word I have heard often from our cricket heroes.) Indian cricketers for almost the first fifty years after Independence may have faced many more hardships but they were ultimately the products of the age in which they lived – a pre-liberalization India didn't offer the bountiful opportunities that today's generation can revel in. And yet, who is to say that those cricketers played the sport with any less commitment than today's young men do? Or, conversely, that the lure of easy money has turned the heads of our twenty-first-century cricketers; if anything, the skill sets of today's gen-next Indian players have taken the sport to another level and made India arguably the best team in the world.

Where once the sport was played almost for fun, it has now acquired an edge of ruthless competitiveness that might also mirror the evolution of our political democracy. Electoral battles in this

country are now fought with a cut-and-thrust intensity that might have taken away from the festive air that once accompanied an election contest. The stakes are higher and so is the pressure on the participants. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the supervisory body for the game, has promoted the sport well and given it financial muscle, but the board has also been trapped in the politics of a cosy club, allegations of conflict of interest, greed and corruption soiling the image of the game. If crony capitalism is a breeding ground for political corruption, then the BCCI czars have flourished through an opaque decision-making system managed by politically well-connected interest groups. The Supreme Court perhaps overreached itself in appointing in January 2017 a committee of administrators to run cricket, but the board's steadfast refusal to reform itself is largely responsible for its predicament.

Star players too have got ensnared in a commercial merry-go-round, encircled by marketing agents and big-ticket sponsors. The match-fixing and spot-fixing controversies exposed how some of our cricketing heroes had feet of clay, seduced by the lure of easy money. The unseemly removal of Anil Kumble as India coach in June 2017 because captain Kohli wanted him out is another sign of the times. Where once the Indian captain's appointment was hostage to the cricket board's internal power equations, now the players call the shots, their supreme authority directly linked to their market value and heightened public expectations. As Gautam Gambhir, man of the match when India won the 2011 World Cup, puts it, 'I do think that your father's generation would have enjoyed the sport more than our lot. I think they were romantics of the game while we are, at times, result-oriented robots.'

But while comparing cricketers from different generations makes for ideal barroom chatter, it may not be entirely fair to those who have had the distinction of representing their country through the ages. Today's cricketers are undoubtedly fitter and more prepared than those who played cricket for India before them, a 'team of top-class athletes' is how Gavaskar describes the modern generation. The

professional edge and constant exposure to best practices in the sport place a premium on excellence like never before, best reflected in the rising fielding standards. From an era where the game was played at a languid pace, this is now a sport that symbolizes the energies and aspirations of a nation on the move.

And yet, who is to say that the batsmen of the pre-helmet era and uncovered pitches were not more gutsy or technically better equipped than the well-protected players of today? Or that the bowlers weren't as crafty? Truth is, there are no shortcuts when you want to be one of the eleven cricketers privileged to represent your country at any given time. Each cricketer who is part of this Democracy's XI has been blessed with talent, shepherded along by a kind family member, taught by an unselfish coach, adored by feverish fans and honoured by a grateful country.

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Of course, no cricket team is complete without a twelfth man, and my eleven too has one. Eknath Solkar was my first cricket hero. As a six-year-old in 1971, I would go to the Cricket Club of India (CCI) and sit in the children's stand and watch him in action. He was arguably one of the most stylish cricketers of his time and certainly the best fielder of his era (no one has fielded with greater courage and athleticism at forward short leg). Once described as the poor man's Gary Sobers for his left-handed all-round skills, he carried himself with an easy swagger and joie de vivre that I guess appealed to my boyhood dreams. I remember crying inconsolably when he got out cheaply once and beaming just as easily when he offered me a Coca Cola bottle after a game.

But Solkar was more than just any other Indian cricketer: he is one of the sport's first subaltern heroes, another truly uplifting story of how cricket can transform lives. His father was the groundsman at the PJ Hindu Gymkhana, one of the many picturesque grounds that dot the Marine Drive landscape in Mumbai. His raw talent

was spotted at the nets by the legendary Indian cricketer Vinoo Mankad, and was given support and encouragement by several club members, including my father, and the Mafatlal Group where he was employed. In 1971 in the West Indies, he and my father struck many memorable partnerships together, perhaps the duo benefiting from the comfort of having played for the same club side. In one Test, when Solkar kept playing and missing, a West Indian bowler let out a few expletives. Solkar, supremely self-confident, hit back with his own abusive words. When the West Indian captain Sobers complained, my father intervened: 'Look, Gary, Ekki [Solkar's pet name] doesn't know what you are saying and you won't understand what he is. So tell your bowler to mind his business and we will mind ours!'

Solkar died at the relatively young age of fifty-seven but his success on the cricket field ensured that his family was pulled out of poverty in one generation. The Solkar story though that stays with me is how he played a Ranji Trophy final in 1969 even as his father was on his deathbed. His father died in the middle of the game, he tearfully went and performed the last rites and then came back to guide Mumbai to a match-winning first innings lead. 'My father would have wanted me to play cricket and when I was batting, his spirit was always with me,' he later told a teammate.

It's the story which could be told just as easily by a Tendulkar when he returned to play in the 1999 World Cup after his father's death and then went on to score a magical century. Or by a Virat Kohli who as a teenager lost his father while he was batting overnight for Delhi, and yet, undaunted by personal tragedy, went out to bat the next day, scored a fighting 90 runs before lighting his father's funeral pyre. These valorous stories are part of the romance of Indian cricket and continue to inspire and motivate millions of Indians to dare to dream. This book is a story of those wondrous dreams and transcendental talents that will, hopefully, continue to illuminate our lives and this great game.

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Dilip Sardesai

Renaissance Man from Goa

It was a mournful grey monsoon morning in Mumbai. My father lay dying in the ICU of the Bombay Hospital. He had been on dialysis for more than two years after a renal failure and the regular hospital visits had begun to weigh him down. Each time he struggled to walk from his hospital bed to the bathroom, I could see he was in great agony.

His threshold to bear pain was high: he had, after all, never even winced when being struck by a hard five-and-a-half-ounce cricket ball. His body had been badly bruised and his fingers often fractured but he had the resilient spirit of a boxer in the ring. He loved a scrap and had built a reputation for batting fearlessly against the fastest bowlers of his generation. That is why he was pushed up the order to open the batting as a twenty-two-year-old in the West Indies in 1962 when no one else was willing to take up the challenge. That is why he would never take a step back in an era where three to four bouncers an over was the norm. But now I sensed he was ready to give up the fight. 'Look after everyone in the family,' he told me quietly and then gazed out of the window.

Outside the hospital stretched the Cross Maidan, one of the many cricket grounds spread across South Mumbai. The maidan was an integral part of my father's life, it was where he had played and practised for hours after first arriving in the city from Goa to improve his game. His dreams of playing cricket for India were nurtured in these maidans of Mumbai where he had scored many centuries. Even after retirement he would spend hours here talking and watching cricket. As he looked longingly from his ICU cubicle at the palm trees swaying in the monsoon breeze, the memories of a life well spent must have come flooding back. The batsman was ready to call time, looking down on this maidan of his youth as if bidding farewell to that green expanse of hope and optimism.

I knew he loved nothing more than sitting in a tent at the Cross Maidan in his shorts and a loose T-shirt, sipping chai and watching the next generation of Mumbai cricketers emerge from the shadows. It was his home away from home where the sound of ball on bat would provide comfort from any physical distress he was feeling as his body weakened.

In one corner of the hospital room was a small television showing an India–Ireland match. My father's eyes moved from maidan to match with unfailing regularity. Suddenly, almost unmindful of the pain he was in, he got up excitedly and let out an expletive. Rahul Dravid, a cricketer he greatly admired, had just been dismissed trying to fend off a short ball. 'How could he get out like that?' muttered my father. 'I can understand other batsmen getting out like that but not Rahul. He is technically perfect!' For the next few minutes, he took up an imaginary batting position and demonstrated how a bouncer should be played – eye on the ball, head swaying away at the last moment.

This is the last, most cherished memory I have of my father. Exactly a week later, on 2 July 2007, Dilip Sardesai passed away. He had played his final innings. Till the very end he remained an obsessive cricket romantic, someone for whom playing with a straight

bat was part of the journey of life, a journey that had begun in a most unlikely corner of Indian cricket.

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The stadium was swaying to the rhythm of drumbeats. You could have been in Rio, Sao Paulo, Barcelona, Madrid, Manchester or Munich – any of the great homes of football. But this was Fatorda stadium in Margao, a sleepy Goan town that awakens only to the sights and sounds of the beautiful game. FC Goa was playing Delhi Dynamos in the inaugural Indian Soccer League in 2014, the glitzy equivalent of cricket's billion-dollar baby, the IPL. Raucous Goans, around 25,000 of them, had crammed into every corner of the stadium.

Sitting next to me was the Goa deputy chief minister Francis D'Souza who would leap with delight every time a player from the home side lashed out at goal. I had been introduced to the minister as 'Rajdeep Sardesai, TV personality and son of Dilip Sardesai'. He responded with, 'Ah, you are son of Dilip baab, he is our very own pride of Goa. Great man, but you know this is a land of football, not cricket. Here, we kick the ball first, then we learn how to hit it!'

Goa is India's smallest state by area, and the fourth smallest in terms of population. To the outside world, it is defined in rather exotic terms as the country's tourist capital with its sandy beaches, warm waters, bars and shacks, alcohol and drugs. The lure of 'good times' draws lakhs of domestic and foreign visitors to its tranquil shores. But most Goans feel their state is the prisoner of an image trap. After all, the so-called swinging, free-living bohemian paradise (now increasingly a builders' nirvana, a concrete playground of holidaymakers from across India and the world) is in reality a dignified conservative society defined by the spirit of 'communidade', the Portuguese term for a tightly knit village community. It is a pious land, where wayside shrines and folk deities mark the spirit of

devotion that exists in every Goan home, whether it is Christian or Hindu. The Portuguese withdrew from Goa in 1961 after more than 400 years of colonization but Goan society still revolves around village panchayats. The state's idyllic natural beauty is matched by a sense of serene communal harmony with church spires and village temples happily coexisting in an atmosphere of 'susegad' (derived from 'sossegado', the Portuguese word for 'quiet').

The long years of Portuguese rule influenced Goa in several aspects, including its sporting interests. For the large Catholic community in particular – which in 1947 constituted well over 30 per cent of Goa's population – football was an expression of identity, with local churches supporting village football teams. It was as if the sport connected Goans with the wider Portuguese colonial diaspora from Rio to Lisbon. Amidst the swaying palm trees and lush green rice fields, the football ground was a space for young Goans to conjure dreams of following in the footsteps of idols from other lands – Pele, Maradona, or in recent times, Ronaldo or Messi. Into this football-crazy world stepped Dilip Sardesai, who remains India's only Goa-born male cricketer till date, even though nearly 300 have represented the country in Tests.

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Amidst the stirrings of the Quit India Movement in other parts of the country, in 1940 Goa was still under the firm rule of the Portuguese. Margao, its trade and commercial heartland, was relatively tiny with a population of just around 50,000.

The Sardesais were a typical middle-class Gowd Saraswat Brahmin family. The Saraswats are a small fish-eating Brahmin community along the west coast of India who trace their origins to the Saraswati river in the Himalayas. Legend has it that when the river dried up, there was a large-scale migration of the Saraswats to different parts of the country, including the Konkan coastline across Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka. 'We even fought in Shivaji's army and were

awarded a large tract of land,' my father's elder brother Anand tells me when I meet him to trace the family history.

Whether they were Shivaji's warriors or not, the sense is that the Sardesais had very little left of any land, wealth or privilege in the 1940s. My grandfather Narayan was an insurance agent while his mother Saraswati was raising a large family and like many women of that generation spending a substantial part of her life going in and out of maternity homes. The extended Sardesai joint family included several cousins and uncles and they all lived together. 'We could have put up two cricket teams of just the Sardesai men in the house,' says Anand.

The family wasn't wealthy but there was always enough food on the table, especially fish, which in Goa is a staple diet. Dilip Sardesai was the fifth child in a family of six, the youngest of the men in the house and possibly the most pampered. He would often visit his elder sister's home in the neighbouring village of Kurpe, climb palm trees, pluck mangoes and jackfruit and swim in the river. His brother Anand was a freedom fighter, part of the guerrilla-like groups taking on the Portuguese in their battle to liberate Goa. 'I would be in and out of jail but made sure that Dilip, who was much younger than me, would be kept away from any trouble,' he says.

Like in many middle-class Brahmin families, education was seen as the ultimate weapon of survival and upward mobility. Dilip was sent to the local New Era School in Margao where studying Portuguese was mandatory and English was the medium of instruction after class four. While football was the main sport, there were a handful of boys – mostly from the Saraswat community – who also played cricket. They included my father's cousins, one of whom, Sopan, would go on to represent Bombay University.

On the way to school was the Margao market where Narayan 'Master' would sit with his sowing machine outside a nimbu pani shop. The tailor loved cricket and would become Dilip's first window to the game, showing him paper clippings of Indian Test cricketers and telling him stories of Vijay Merchant and Vijay Hazare, the