



Will anyone who was watching that night forget? It was the semi final of the 1996 World Cup cricket tournament between India and Sri Lanka, played at Eden Gardens in Calcutta. Batting second, India started well, but rapidly lost wickets and was struggling to reach the target. An unruly situation arose among the spectators, with bottles and stones being thrown into the field, and it was decided to abandon the match and declare Sri Lanka the winner.

Amid all this, one spectator stood holding a banner reading "We are sorry; congratulations Sri Lanka". Picked up by the television cameras, this one act helped deflect some of the chaos of the evening. But who was the lone spectator who had the presence of mind to act? Anyone who has ever wondered, is not alone in his curiosity. This, and many other incidents relating to cricket are the subject of Neil Wijeratne's book 'Batting on a matting wicket'. Tracked down by the author on a visit to Calcutta in 1998, that intrepid spectator turns out to be a soft spoken computer graduate, who, over a cup of tea, explains how he scrawled those lines on an impulse without thinking that it would travel so far.

Based on the author's column 'Sports Nostalgia' which appeared weekly in the 'Daily Mirror', the book is a sometimes amusing and informative foray into the world of cricket. Whether it is a die hard fan who obsessively monitors every development of the game, or

one of the uninitiated who is barely aware that a match is being played, there is something here to interest.

The book touches on a variety of cricket related incidents, ranging from human interest stories to descriptions of well known cricketers as well as giving accounts of the school cricket scene in Sri Lanka. A gentle meander into the past is provided through pieces where the author recalls his days of watching school cricket with affectionate nostalgia. As well as accounts of notable school matches of the past, he recalls many personal incidents, such as the 'one cent' toffee seller who frequented the author's school college grounds in the 1960s and provided schoolboys with a variety of cricketing stories as well as the coveted toffees.

The author touches on the role played by cricket in cutting across social boundaries. The book describes a photograph published in March 1938 in the 'Ceylon Daily News' and 'Dinamina'. This was taken during a 'whistle stop' match between the Australian and All Ceylon team (as it was then called). Expecting Don Bradman to play, a huge number of spectators arrived at the grounds. The photograph showed several buses parked outside the SSC grounds, half opened from both sides above seat level, and with spectators looking over the hood towards the ground. A few yards away, other spectators perched on the branch of a tree. The interesting thing, as the book notes, is that even in 1938, the spectators were people from all strata "...tie-coat-tophat wearing gentlemen to the sarong folks...the photograph reflects a total cut-out of social barriers such as caste, class and community..." Commenting on this, the author further notes that this depicts how, "...in the late thirties, cricket was no longer a bastion of class privilege, at least from the spectator's point of view."

A versatile bilingual writer and columnist, Neil Wijeratne is the author of fourteen books. Written in an unpretentious style, 'Batting on a matting wicket' provides a gentle, enjoyable excursion into the world of cricket.

The author can be contacted on

wijeneil@sltnet.lk