

The meaning of Sachin

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My mother's relationship to cricket is limited to my brothers' and my love for the game. She didn't watch Sachin Tendulkar's farewell speech nearly two weeks back, but she cried. I asked her on the phone, why? She said, "I don't know, perhaps because of what he has meant for so many years."

He has given us joy in millions of moments of his batting, in hundreds of innings, and across 24 years of elevating us to levels rarely reached in any endeavour. He also gave us satisfaction. One from amongst us, an Indian, was dominant. Everyone else became an underdog. Not during few moments of glory, but as the natural order of things. A reversal of all that we had lived with. We grew up with him.

It also gave us hope and confidence. We could be excellent, the very best, not once in a while, but always. Since cricket has meant so much to us, his luminous game, and living through him vicariously, has meant even more.

But then, what do they know of cricket, who only cricket know? My mother, along with a nation, was left tearful, not because he will not bat again.

On 20 March 2011, in a World Cup group match in Chennai, Ravi Rampaul bowled an unplayable beauty to him. The bowler appealed, but no one else had any conviction. The umpire said not out. He seemed to consider the situation for a fraction of a second, and then he walked. The MA Chidambaram Stadium was silenced, he was out for 2. Since I have watched him, which is from the beginning, he has tried to do the right thing.

His stint as the captain of India was bad. He gave up the captaincy. When offered the captaincy again, he refused to take it up, recommending the man who is now India's most successful captain. The 13 years that he played after giving up the captaincy have been India's golden age on the cricketing field. In this period, we have had good captains, perhaps the two best ever. Despite an interval with a coach seemingly at war with his own players, it has been a period of extraordinary calm, stability and achievement.

The absolute power that he wielded, through the devotion of a billion people, could have completely disrupted Indian cricket in this period. It did not. He used the force that was his, to back his captain, keep the team together and to win on the field. How many of us can step aside from leadership, accepting our limitations? And then to back with all our might the new leader, the cause, how rare is that?

The scrutiny that he has been subject to, for more than two decades, I can't think of any man who has been put to it. Emotions have always run high, expectations have been even higher. Yet in 24 years, we can't recollect a harsh word, an ugly gesture or an unsporting action. He competed without compromising honesty, humility and decency. An arbitrary yet coherent set of actions, called a sport, has its highest meaning not in winning, but winning with its high code of honour. He did that.

Those of you, who are privileged to know him closely, may know of many failings, in his quest to be a good man. What I know is, that the good men that I have known, would have crumbled to clay, if they had faced the close scrutiny that he did day after day, borne his burdens and lived on the television for 24 years. All gods are human, if you look closely enough. And humans trying to be good will never be perfect; but like his straight drive, he has set a high standard.

He has tried to be a good man, and has been unfailingly decent. He has shown us that you can be decent and still conquer the world, and that you can conquer the world and still be decent. That has been the meaning of Sachin. That is why my mother with no appreciation for cricket, was left tearful.

A land in need of heroes has had one. A public figure, who has been emblematic of the virtuous life. In the wasteland that our public life has become, his has been the most widely visible reaffirmation of such a life, by being lived and not by homilies.

His farewell has left me with a greater hope. One could have well believed that such things have stopped mattering to us. We may not know it, but being good matters to us still. That is probably why Sachin has meant so much, with so few other anchors for the good and the right. I think that is why the average man was choked with emotion.

In his poignant farewell speech he joked, but with a lifetime of wistfulness, that "(Ramakant) Achrekar (Sachin's cricket coach) sir can now say well done". I would think the man who set him on to being a good man before being a cricketer: his father, could well say, "Well done."

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