[**Nostalgic note for a fine sport**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1721052/nostalgic-note-for-a-fine-sport)

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A LOVELY story from Melbourne ahead of the T20 final was Devendra Pandey’s nostalgic piece for the Indian Express. It concerned Melbourne restaurateur Iftikhar Shah, who answered an SOS call from fast bowler Wasim Akram hours before Imran Khan’s team would defeat England to win the 1992 World Cup.

“They were serving sandwiches, Akram said to me: ‘Bowling kaise kar payenge yaar?’” Shah said of Akram’s trauma with sandwiches on offer. Was there any biryani left from the previous night? Wasim was desperate. “I said it will be done but give an hour or so.” What we could glean from Shah’s story was that Akram’s craving for biryani, moments before a crucial match, was probably triggered by his diabetic condition with a hectic day ahead, something he hadn’t discussed openly.

To help make cricketing history, Shah was parked by the player’s room. Piping hot biryani was served in the dressing room, and Akram went on to bowl what fellow fast bowler Aqib Javed would later describe as “two unplayable deliveries” in the famous win at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Akram took three crucial England wickets for a paltry sum besides scoring an unbeaten 19-ball 33 that lifted the Pakistan total to a challenging 249.

Other than the delicious biryani story, a lasting image from the match was not of any particular shot or a wicket taken — for these are passé in the ‘pajama cricket’ we just watched — but of two heavily bearded Asian men delirious with joy as they flanked their less bearded English skipper with the winner’s trophy. Wonder if Adil Rashid and Moeen Ali would be aware that they carried with them a part of cricketing history that shone only brighter when their English teammates toasted Barbadian-origin bowler C.J. Jordan for helping critically on the road to the cup. Basil D’Oliveira would be smiling — and why not?

The magic was about the cornucopia of characters that made up the Indian squad in 1983.

The D’Oliveira affair dogged England’s 1968–69 tour planned for South Africa. The point of contention was whether or not the England selectors would include Basil D’Oliveira, a mixed-race South African player who had played for England in Test cricket since 1966, having moved there six years earlier. With South Africa under apartheid, the potential inclusion by England of a non-white South African in their team was bound to whip up a political controversy, which it did.

D’Oliveira was of mixed Indian-Portuguese descent, the possibility of whose inclusion in the 1968–69 MCC tour rattled English and South African administrators. The MCC was keen to keep its old ties with South Africa, desiring a series with no trouble. South Africa’s prime minister, B.J. Vorster, pretended D’Oliveira’s inclusion would be acceptable. On the contrary, he secretly did all he could to prevent it.

D’Oliveira scored 158 runs in England’s final Test match of 1968, against Australia at The Oval. Days later, the MCC selectors dropped him from the team for South Africa; they claimed this was based entirely on cricketing merit, but many Britons saw it otherwise and there was a public outcry. After a player withdrew because of injury, the MCC tapped D’Oliveira as a replacement, prompting charges from South African politicians that the selection was politically motivated. Attempts to find a compromise led nowhere. The MCC was forced to cancel the tour.

Now that we have a Rishi Sunak as Britain’s prime minister or Sajid Javed as a former chancellor, the history of England’s endorsement of and struggle against racism tends to be taken for granted. For this reason and more, it was a rejuvenating image for cricket on Sunday for the sport’s social evolution.

Something the Pakistani team could learn from there too. When they raise their hands in prayer before the next interview, as some of them do, they could consider praying for a more socially inclusive country, as the founder envisaged it, with a more even spread of social representation in sports.

As for the Indian squad, they could start by displaying a little less of the needless habit of snarling into the faces of the opponents or wagging the finger at the opposition, as Virat Kohli was doing the other day. Kohli is such a fine player, and Kiwi skipper Ken Williamson is not any less capable or less competitive than him. What Williamson can do with his smile to express a disappointment or joy reveals the essence of cricket; but not so some Indian players’ atavistic tendencies. It’s reassuring nevertheless that the team slammed the communal trolls handed to Arshdeep Singh for dropping a catch against Pakistan.

Have the team members watched Kabir Khan’s celebration of India’s unexpected victory in 1983, when Kapil Dev lifted the world cup at Lords? The nostalgia was not so much about winning the trophy, which was, of course, a splendid turn of events. The magic was about the cornucopia of characters that made up the Indian squad. Beautiful, unassuming and solid players they were. “We were hoping to go on a paid vacation to the US, yaar, and our tickets were booked accordingly. The spouses would join us after the matches.” This was how flamboyant opener Krish Srikkant described the team’s planning the outing before setting off for England. There was no scope for a needless swagger. It was considered bad form.

Indian cricketers have won amazing matches at home and abroad but they were never shy of admiring bigger names and better teams. Humility is always a more loyal friend. Why wag the finger at an opponent, then lose by 10 wickets?

Indian cricket addicts were a fun-loving lot. Times have changed perhaps but there’s room for optimism. As people get beaten in north India for applauding Pakistan, there is always the Chepauk stadium in Chennai offering a standing ovation for a victorious Pakistan in a great match with India. Not permitting a fixture is another story, of course, but then that’s not cricket.

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