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and story brilliantly told'*

Mihir Bose

Elephant in the Stadium

The Myth
and Magic of
*India's
Epochal Win*

Arunabha Sengupta



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PROLOGUE: JIGSAW OF ILLUSIONS

IT HAD been an eventful morning for the two-year-old, and she had enjoyed every moment of it. The hour's ride in that cramped vehicle had not been too comfortable, but Bella was used to such excursions. In fact, she was used to much longer journeys. She had already made several trips in her short life. From the port to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Chessington. And before that, the extended voyage across the seas to England. She remembered them all – wasn't remembering supposed to be her forte?

It was unusually loud as she alighted. She had been there the previous afternoon as well, and it had been noisy then. But today she could feel the excitement. The strange headgear seemed a tad uncomfortable at first, but she grew used to it. People were flocking all around as she was led through the crowds, electric excitement buzzed in the air. Soon she found herself in an enormous open space, green expanses stretching in front, with those giant gasometers in the background. And she was set free, allowed to tramp around the perimeter as the huge ground enjoyed the mild sunshine. People fussed around her, and she enjoyed it.

* * *

It is Colonel Hemu Adhikari who spots her first. The manager of the Indian team sits in the dressing-room with the captain, plotting ways to get the 97 runs required to make history. With eight wickets in hand, the task does not look too daunting. But Adhikari knows they have to be cautious. Ray Illingworth's

men are sure to make them fight for every single run and a collapse cannot be ruled out. The batting line-up has been brittle throughout the tour.

Captain Ajit Wadekar has scored the bulk of the runs the previous evening. He exudes quiet confidence. Adhikari is glad to see he is not taking victory for granted. Practical, grounded common-sense – the traits that characterise the skipper.

The manager is about to touch upon the plan against Underwood when he sees the young elephant, her forehead decorated with a traditional Indian white caparison, plodding in front of the pavilion.

‘Of all things on earth ...?’ he beckons Wadekar to take a look. ‘They’ve got that elephant here again. It is Ganesh Chaturthi today. Surely this must be a good omen.’

Most of the 7,000-strong crowd are Indians. According to Campbell Page in *The Guardian*, ‘Every Indian tourist, businessman, waiter and schoolboy seemed to be at The Oval.’ England captain Illingworth will later observe that, in stark contrast to his team, the Indians had the advantage of playing in front of their home crowd.

A few of these Indian supporters have arranged for the trip of two-year-old Bella from Chessington Zoo to The Oval: 24 August 1971 is an auspicious day – the celebration of the festival of Ganesh, the elephant-headed god. Ganesh is worshipped as a remover of obstacles, a source of immense good luck. The deity is also the scribe who wrote down the great epic *Mahabharat*, breaking off one of his tusks to scribble it down as the sage Vyasa dictated the verses.

Today, Bella is there as a symbol of Ganesh, to remove any obstacle that may stand in the way of an Indian victory and to be part of the epic that is being scripted. An epic that will forever rival the *Mahabharat* in re-tellings, in popularity and myth.

Luck has already helped India profusely, without the intervention of either Ganesh or his manifestations – during the Old Trafford Test and also, arguably, at Lord’s.

Wadekar will later recall that the sight of Bella sent his hopes surging. 'I went out to bat on my overnight score of 45 with my hopes doubled, and was run out first ball.' (He was actually run out off the first ball of the second over of the day). History is not about to be written without a fair amount of drama.

* * *

The tale of Bella is a fascinating subplot in the saga of the Indian victory. Not often do animals of that size, species and symbolic significance play an important role in a cricket match.

Growing up I had heard the tale some couple of thousand times, along with increasingly mythologised versions of the deeds of the 1971 side. These were men who grew increasingly invincible with each retelling.

It was in the summer of 1986 when cricket for me crossed the fine line between love and obsession. Yes, like every other Indian kid prancing around in his shorts, I had been on the edge of my seat as Kapil Dev's unbelievable catch got rid of Viv Richards at Lord's in the 1983 World Cup final. Like every other 11-year-old's, my spirit too had climbed into the Audi with the earliest versions of the Men in Blue as they had set off on their celebratory drive around the MCG in 1985.

But it was the Test success in England during the summer of 1986 that converted me into an addict. It was then that I started clipping Malcolm Marshall off my toes and watching the ball disappear between the conductor at square leg and the office clerk at midwicket as the bus lurched past nearby playing fields and turned into Cornwallis Street. I played out many an over in my head, perhaps with one or two wristy movements of my hands, as I sat in the classroom or ran on the track during athletics training.

I had already started diving into every cricket book that the school library of Don Bosco Park Circus, and later the British Council, could offer. I had begun borrowing volumes of *Wisden's* compilations of Test cricket scores from the British Council Library. I devoured all the available issues of *The Cricketer*. My early fascination for numbers meant that I began to recreate

cricketing action from these current and ancient scorecards. I think I was about 13 when I compiled my first All-Time XI.

During India's 1986 tour of England, on my way home from school and elsewhere, my eyes and ears constantly scanned the crowds to catch the hint of a pocket transistor radio. 'What's the score?' my eternal query. One such query while boarding a bus was rewarded by a transistor-wielding gentleman informing me that Dilip Vengsarkar had followed up his 126 not out at Lord's with an unbeaten 102 on the near-unplayable wicket of Headingley. With that, India were on the verge of taking an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-Test series.

Memories can be misleading after all these years, but this is what I remember of what took place two days after that Vengsarkar hundred. Three of us, Partha, Anindya and I, all hailing from the rather congested neighbourhoods of north Calcutta, had taken a bus from our school in Park Circus to Sealdah. Waiting for our connection near the noisy flyover, our trained ears kept scanning the nearby street hawkers for the tell-tale crackle of a transistor radio. It did not take long. Sitting in front of his carefully stacked items of clothing, this splendid cricket follower was tuned into the events unfolding at faraway Headingley.

'What's the score?'

We learnt that England were eight down, and they had just about managed to pass a hundred.

'Is Gatting still there?'

The hawker laughed. The target was 408. 'Yes, but will he be able to make all those runs alone?'

Mike Gatting, the new England captain, remained unbeaten on 31 as his men folded for 128. India had clinched the series. Throughout the early 1980s, we had enjoyed our share of limited-over success. But a Test win was rare, especially overseas. An overseas Test series win was almost unheard of. It was the first in my lifetime.

It was time for celebration. It was also time for me to discover the cocoon in which much of Indian cricket nostalgia was stuck; and remains stuck to this day.

I discovered 1971. The first Indian triumph in England.

Not that I had never heard of it. My perusal of cricket literature and scorecards had already told me about the Indian triumph of that year. Especially the scorecards, most of which I knew by heart. Hence, I was rather confused.

‘That was *the* great triumph!’ I was told. ‘This 1986 English side is a poor one. *That* had been a great team. The best in the world at the time.’

I managed to lay my hands on the 1971 Winter Annual of *The Cricketer* in the British Council Library. In it, I read K.N. Prabhu’s article on the Indian summer of 1971. ‘[The English team] was certainly a disappointment to one who had been reared on the legendary feats of the cricketers of the pre-war years, who had seen Compton and Hardstaff, May and Graveney, Dexter and Cowdrey at their best, to notice the decline of standards.’

Of course, with time I have realised that, like many of his fellow cricket chroniclers, the romantically skewed views of Prabhu had a gilt-edged bias for the *glorious* past. However, it was clear that the England team of 1971 had its shortcomings.

Of the top-order batsmen in that Oval Test, only John Edrich and Basil D’Oliveira ended with Test averages of 40-plus. Not the hallmark of the best side of the world.

But that was by no means the only fable that jarred with me about the tour.

‘We had Gavaskar and Viswanath.’ ‘And Sardesai.’

‘Bedi, Prasanna, Chandra, Venkat. Spinners who could turn it like a top and win on any surface.’ NB. ‘They don’t make them like that anymore.’

‘Our batting overcame the great West Indian pacers in West Indies. Our spinners out-bowled them on wickets tailor-made for fast bowlers. And then we beat the English in their den, on green tops made for their seamers.’

Match scorecards, *Wisden*, Tony Cozier’s *History of West Indian Cricket* – all told me that there was no great fast bowler in the West Indies side of 1971. Hall and Griffith had retired; Sobers was 36, had a troublesome shoulder; and he had never

really been a great fast bowler. Roberts, Holding and the rest of them would not emerge before the mid-1970s.

I knew the Indians had been caught on a reasonably green top at Old Trafford and only persistent rain on the final day had saved them from certain defeat. Even Sunil Gavaskar's autobiography *Sunny Days* admitted as much.

Yes, England of 1986 was a rudderless and confused side. Yet, I could see that the 1971 side had been no great shakes either. True, they had won the Ashes in Australia, a monumentally long-drawn-out series of six Test matches ending 2-0. However, that Australian side was far from a great one, with a bowling attack in transition.

In the summer of 1971, England had escaped defeat against Pakistan at Edgbaston because of the weather, and had won the series after a very close scuffle at Headingley.

As for the Indian win of 1971, it was nowhere near as comprehensive as the clinical demolition of 1986. The Lord's Test could have gone either way. At Manchester, they had been saved by rain. And the Oval magic had been produced by a freak bowling spell on the fourth morning when England had been right on top.

Besides, the England side had missed the services of Boycott in two of the Tests, Snow in one.

In many ways, it was a triumph that had leaned heavily on chance.

As far as spinning out West Indians on fast wickets and England on green tops, here is Prabhu again in his 1971 article. 'In the West Indies we had expected hard fast wickets. In England we came prepared to battle against pace on green-tops. In both countries our spinners were pleased to find that the pitches suited them better than they did the opposition.'

However, while these insights provided by Prabhu and other journalists had been studiously ignored, some of their other observations, effusively riding on the understandable waves of jubilation, became integral to the Indian cricketing fables. Such as the following Prabhu nugget, 'Throughout the tour

we encountered no spinner who could have matched any of the reserves we had left at home.' He was talking about Dilip Doshi, Vithal Joshi, Naushir Mehta and others. Supposedly England had no spinner comparable to these bowlers, let alone the great ones like Bedi and Chandra.

Growing up, we were led to believe that India was the land that produced the best spinners. It was variously attributed, among other things, to the air that we breathed and the warm climate that made our fingers flexible.

Invoking the names of Hedley Verity or Jim Laker is perhaps a journey back in time too arduous for fans. But Underwood ended with a Test record significantly superior to all the members of the celebrated Indian quartet. Illingworth and a clutch of other more or less contemporary English off-spinners enjoyed careers at least comparable to the best of the Indian spinners of that era.

Many of the heroes of 1971 were excellent cricketers, but the near-mythical qualities attributed to them are often far beyond the numbers they left in their wake.

As years went by, I realised that the aura of 1971 was there to stay. Even after all these years, 1986 has never reached the height of nostalgic romanticising that still laces that pioneering triumph. The subsequent series win in 2007 has been all but forgotten. And by the time Covid stopped the 2021 series with India 2-1 up and one Test to play, Virat Kohli's men were expected to win in every corner of the world – overseas wins were getting way too frequent and celebrations becoming too familiar to bother with seasonings of mythologised ingredients.

Also, as years went by, my incurable addiction to scorecards, and later my five years at the Indian Statistical Institute, made me increasingly sceptical about the robustness of visual impression; I-was-there reminiscences and fan memories of the 'glorious past' often do not measure up against solid data.

All these years later, I understand.

I don't believe in the myths that have grown in Indian cricket surrounding 1971, or the rest of the decade that followed. They still jar with one trained in statistical analysis. The favourite cricketing

phrase ‘it was much more than numbers’ does not appeal to me. That, to me, remains a method of believing whatever one wants to.

But now I do understand the 1971 phenomenon.

Distance did help. After several years of working across three continents, wrestling with visas, work permits and residency issues, I finally settled down in Amsterdam and became a Dutch citizen. The perspective lent by time and space helped me make sense of the history that had perhaps been too close for me to look at back in India.

I realised that I had walked countless hours through the serpentine lanes of north Calcutta and under the colonnaded verandas and balconies of the Grand Hotel, taking the contrasts of architectural and urban planning features for granted. Seated in Amsterdam, those everyday images were translated into palpable history. The pillared and porticoed mansions of Dalhousie Square and Chowringhee, originally built for the Europeans, the densely populated sectors towards the north, historically inhabited by Indians, where Partha, Anindya and I grew up among the second generation after independence.

The names of the roads and landmarks became more than mere locations – Cornwallis, Elgin, Lansdowne, Ripon, Dalhousie, Curzon, Outram, Fort William and the Victoria Memorial.

Distance also helped some memories to resurface from long-neglected corners of the mind. The Benson & Hedges World Championship triumph of 1985 for instance, India beating Pakistan in the final at the MCG. I remembered the posters in the stands that day, viewed thousands of miles away on our small television set. One proclaimed ‘Down Under, India is Thunder’. Another observed ‘Benson ’n Hedges Final. Bus Drivers versus Tram Conductors.’

Seated in a faraway land, I identified with Indians at home and fellow expatriate Indians – also the Indians who came from Guiana, Trinidad, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda to England, and from Suriname to the Netherlands. I also interacted with the Pakistani residents and visitors in England and in the Netherlands.

I sought out others as well, the ones who had come from East Pakistan, and thereafter Bangladesh, with memories of the war of 1971 that cast its looming shadow even as cricketing history was being made under the gasometers at The Oval.

I interacted with several Indians who have been living in England for years, some of whom had seen Bella at The Oval on that day.

I realised that among the schoolboys and waiters and businessmen of Campbell Page, who were rooting for India during that Oval triumph, a significant proportion feared the worst as the Immigration Bill was being discussed in parliament. There were those did not know whether they would be allowed to stay on in Britain, or whether their wives and children would be able to come over and join them. Similarly there were some who had no idea of what would become of their relatives stranded in the genocide-ravaged East Pakistan.

I also spoke to Englishmen who had been there – in whose memory the India-Pakistan War is rather faint, but the trouble in Belfast still reverberates, who remember Prime Minister Edward Heath leading the British team to triumph in the Admiral's Cup and Northern Ireland going up in flames.

Down the years I covered Test tours in England. I wrote innumerable articles and eventually some books on the game. I visited the likes of David Frith, Stephen Chalke, Mihir Bose and others in their homes.

There were reviews of my work, a heady mix of flattering, balanced and critical as can be expected. Alongside, I experienced some baffled and even a few confrontational stares, some face to face, and more from behind firewalls of the two distinct virtual worlds – the worldwide web and time-tinged entitlement. There were more than a few unvoiced, and once in a while voiced, queries: why does an Indian writer write so much about topics such as the Ashes and pre-1970 England-South Africa Test matches?

It did seem quite often that the swim-lanes of cricket history were strictly defined, and other than a privileged few, historians were supposed to go up and down the lanes allotted to them.

This book does not adhere to such conventions.

After the publication of my book *Apartheid: A Point to Cover*, I received an email from a fellow cricket-writer – and an excellent one at that – an Englishman without any prejudice in his makeup. It read, ‘I was especially taken by the early chapters in your book about the pre-apartheid history of cricket in South Africa, with the reminder that cricket there was segregated from the beginning, with the collusion of the British.’

This was in 2020. And this realisation is not restricted to just cricket.

Even today the role of the British in the complications of their erstwhile colonies is rather sketchily known by the British themselves – a legacy of a deliberately skewed curriculum that is very recently and reluctantly going through adjustment and correction.

The same unawareness that today manifests itself in a murky trail of social-media footprints, leading to enquiries about and even the axing of some misguided cricketers from the national team. The same unawareness that results in huge controversies in Yorkshire cricket – controversies that are, at least initially, brushed aside as ‘mere banter’.

As fellow cricket-writer Michael Jones says, ‘The teaching of history in English schools has long been whitewashed, which perpetuates the problem of most of the country being ignorant of the nastier side of its history. I only learnt of some of the worst deeds of the British Empire through subsequent reading and discussions with people from the countries which suffered from them – not from anything I was taught at school.’

Recently more British people seemed to learn of their imperial past from the spate of destruction of statues rather than the academic curriculum.

In the words of Whisky Sisodia in *The Satanic Verses* (stripped of the stammer): ‘The trouble with the English is that their history happened overseas, so they don’t know what it means.’

The perceptions were way more skewed in 1971.

Even as India played Warwickshire on the tour, British-based Australian journalist John Pilger interviewed the Indian prime

minister in Delhi. The resulting article was published in the *Daily Mirror* under the headline 'The Most Powerful Woman in the World'. Pilger's opening question to Mrs Indira Gandhi was, 'The description of India as the world's largest democracy is often used by people in Britain to congratulate themselves on having exported a successful model of Westminster government. Could an Indian, hungry and without hope, really regard himself as a member of a democracy?'

The hunger, squalor, extraordinary economic problems ... all that was beyond question. However, it is fascinating to note that the British still 'congratulated themselves on having exported a successful model of Westminster government' to the Indians.

Perhaps many still do. For me with my Indian background, the patronising tone, along with a palpably fatuous boast, is quite difficult to come to terms with. However, I am sure the question sounds extremely reasonable to some who have grown up during the last days of the Empire, forming long-lasting associations with like-minded contemporaries.

Pilger's query also tells us that such a question, directed at a prime minister from the erstwhile colonies, was normal in those days. Those days ... when India arrived in England with a 0-15 record in the 19 Test matches they had played in the country.

Back home, only six cricketers of the Indian squad had their own cars. The daily allowance on the tour was a *princely* £3.

On the eve of the first Test match, a correspondent of *The Times* was at the Tripura border of East Pakistan. He interviewed a Mukti Bahini general who had been a highly ranked officer in the Pakistan Army and, before that, a grade-two General Staff Officer in the British Indian Army. When informed by this old military man that East Bengal freedom fighters had killed between 15,000 and 20,000 West Pakistan troops, the journalist wrote, 'The figure seemed so high that I would have been altogether sceptical if it had not come from an officer who belongs very much to the old British Army tradition.'

Such perceptions still ruled the world view. The perceptions of superiority and inferiority, of virtues and vices, of truth and

lies, that were directly and uninhibitedly linked to racial and national profiling. The decolonisation was all but complete. But the Empire lived on in much of the consciousness.

Material superiority was unquestionable. Through relentless unidirectional syphoning of wealth across several centuries, one nation had got richer, and the other poorer. The game of catch-up started after the 'Transfer of Power', and has since been tracked according to the western definition of 'development'. This game will go on forever. And till then the Pilger-like culture-shock of finding oneself amidst hunger, poverty, heat and dust will continue. A quick restoration of balance is a socio-economic impossibility.

But the illusion of moral superiority demonstrated in the second example is of a strikingly different dimension. It was a remnant of the beliefs that made colonisation such a 'natural and normal' course of history. Beliefs rooted in the archaic concepts of Social Darwinism.

It is quite astounding to reflect that these were very much in vogue just 50 years earlier as I write, even as India toured England in 1971.

While working for Cricketcountry, I wrote mainly about the history of the game. Veteran journalist H. Natarajan (Natty) was my chief editor.

On 24 August, 2013, I wrote an anniversary piece on the triumph at The Oval, 1971. Natty, a stickler for the ideal headline, ran the story as *The Day When India Ended England's Home Rule*.

On that particular day I thought it was over the top, another manifestation of the 1971-fixation. Today, more than eight years down the line, I am not so sure.

It is not that the cricketers were always knowingly taking up cudgels against the prevailing perceptions, the remnants of colonial hangover, eager to strike a blow at the heart of the illusion of superiority. No, as most often happens, they were merely playing cricket.

However, the triumph did merge with the complicated undercurrents of the times to become tinged with a defining hue.

Yes, the resulting fables often distorted facts. But it was also a function of that moment of history and the many years that had led to that point in time.

The myth and magic surrounding the 1971 triumph cannot be understood without taking into account the long and complex interactions between the British and their erstwhile prize colony.

What then about Bella, the elephant in the stadium?

There are many ways in which Bella is an allegory.

In 1885, the Empire was approaching high noon. Imperialist fever was at a high pitch and India was the jewel in the Empire's Crown.

That year, the Indian National Congress (INC) had come into existence – the industry of 70 English-educated Indians who got together in Bombay. These Indian Congressmen tried to change things in the country through the traditional method of submitting petitions. Little came of their efforts. The petitions were seldom read, and scoffed at almost every time they were.

In 1893, tired of the futile efforts of the elite educated Indians of the INC, the fierce nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak took the concept of nationalism to the masses. He infused nationalistic ideals into the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi, the festival of the elephant-headed god.

This is not meant to be read as anything more than an icon occurring coincidentally at two different points in history. But the nationalistic Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations of 1893 and the emergence of Bella at The Oval in 1971 do lend scope for historical allegory, and quite a poignant one.

An elephant is symbolic of India – especially the stereotypical image of India.

The English cricketers of yore saw elephants used to roll the pitch at the Maharaja of Patiala's personal cricket ground. Tour after tour saw cricketers riding elephants during their mandatory shooting expeditions.

Almost every western movie made about India featured elephants, be it *Elephant Boy* or *Octopussy*.

In 1997, a shot of an elephant told us that the characters of *Seinfeld* were meant to be visiting the country.

In 2018, *The Big Bang Theory* had Rajesh Koothrapali assuring his American friends, 'Of course there will be elephants' at his wedding.

In 1982, Appu the Elephant became the official mascot of the Asian Games held in Delhi.

In 1992/93, India inflicted the first brownwash on a visiting England side. Battling heat, dust, quixotic selection and a very good Indian side, a miserable Phil Tufnell grumbled, 'I've done the elephants and I've done the poverty. It's time to go home.'

That was 21½ years after the 1971 summer.

The elephant was an apt icon to romp around The Oval that day.

India in England 1971 was a special tour. Pivotal and poignant. And it was a sterling achievement.

Not just because of the result and the cricketing action that led to it, but also because of the way the results combined with the many layers of historical complexity and the kaleidoscopic background to create an indelible impression in popular memory.

This is a story about cricket, but it is also about the reactions, the elation and the reasons for the mythical retellings that followed.

It is not just about 1971. Historical recollection is never just about that tiny window in time.