



R. MOHAN BY HARESH PANDYA

If there is any man who has given a new direction and lent a totally new dimension to cricket journalism in India, it is R. Mohan. He is at the top of the totem-pole of Indian cricket writers today. Mohan has achieved so much in a remarkable career on the strength of his enviable intellectual capacity that there is no reason why he should not be accorded this exalted position.

Mohan, who has earned the respect of the players and the pressmen alike, and Richard Streeton of The Times are the only two cricket writers who have covered Test matches from all the nine Test-playing countries. It is no mean achievement. Mohan is also one of the few cricket writers to have covered more than one hundred Tests; a great feat. In fact, he completed his century in the one-off Test against Zimbabwe at Delhi in 1993.

This is Mohan's 21st year with The Hindu, arguably one of the best newspapers of the world. He has been its distinguished cricket correspondent since 1979 when he was asked by the daily's associate editor N. Ram at short notice to go to Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) and cover the sixth and final Test between India and Australia. He had to fly out the very next morning because "something happened to the previous correspondent". He recalls the incident: "I probably didn't sleep that night, thinking what I was going to write. But somehow I managed it well and pretty satisfactorily. I didn't suffer from being thrown into the deep well. Maybe that impressed my bosses."

Since then, Mohan has missed only two full series one v New Zealand (1981) and another v West Indies (1983), both of them away. About missing the New Zealand jaunt he says: "It didn't matter to us to go there. I had already spent 100 days in Australia which was the first half of the tour. In those days 100 days and ten thousand dollars meant a lot of money. So maybe they thought I shouldn't go to New Zealand." And what about not going to the Caribbean two years later? "I missed that trip because of some other circumstances. People say it was a great tour. It was just one of those things that happened between The Management and the writers. It just happened then," admits Mohan quite frankly.

Style and Knowledge

Lucid and smooth style, superb command of the English language, tendency to treat cricket writing as a medium of self-expression, courage of conviction and brilliant mental gifts have helped Mohan become one of the top-notch cricket writers of the world today. Of course, he knows the game inside out. It is not without reason that David Frith describes him as a "superb" cricket writer and other Indian cricket writers rather ordinary. Almost the same is the feeling of many other English and Australian cricket writers about their Indian counterparts. "Indian cricket writers have a bit of an inferiority complex except the top ones," is Mohan's reaction to this.

Although never influenced by any cricket writer in particular, Mohan nevertheless has been reared on Jack Fingleton. "Fingleton's opinions were far more

forthright. He knew his cricket; he didn't romanticise; he didn't make a literature out of cricket. But he was one hell of a cricket writer. I've the greatest possible admiration for Neville Cardus even if he didn't have to go through the travel-write grind of even the Fingleton era. Fingleton could relate directly to the average cricket follower whereas Cardus could be appreciated truly only by those who also follow literature," says Mohan.

He further adds: "How far artistic or romantic a cricket writer can become in his approach depends on many factors, not just one or two. There has to be base in reality. Otherwise you really can't sell a copy. Not today. I mean you can't have somebody like Cardus writing today. I doubt it. Of course, some people would still enjoy it but it would not do as daily copy. I don't think it would go in a modern newspaper, however romantic or beautiful it was. It had a time and place.

People would think him an eccentric or something like that. I mean if you write like that. Look at the English language. It is dying in India. Don't you feel that? You are also in the newspaper profession and so you would know."

Is it a lament for the language or for the game? Says Mohan: "Everybody thinks he is seeing the game. Some people say we just love the language you write in. Other people would say We just read it because of your thoughts on cricket. You can't define a public. So that's the hard part. It is so difficult different levels, different strata... The public taste has changed. The public has changed because of different lifestyles today. I doubt if you can grip a reader's attention for more than a few minutes a day nowadays.

Newspapers on the Wane?

"Total scanning time of newspapers has come down rapidly, if that's what you are led to believe is true. From my own personal experience, I would say that I don't read newspapers in depth as I would some ten years ago. It just doesn't happen because you have the television. You put on the video, you put on some music. So you've alternatives for entertainment today. People are not so dependent on newspapers today."

But Mohan does accept Cardus' genius. "Cardus must have been the outstanding cricket writer, especially because he broke a path he went away from a beaten track and showed what was possible. He changed the entire structure of cricket writing. If you look at it historically, you would feel he should be the Number One writer you would pick in a cricket writing sense. Cardus was so different from whoever was writing on the subject in those days. He romanticised cricketers and cricket whereas today it is different. Cricketers are already popular because of some other medium, say, television; they are well known personalities. So newspapers try to bring in the personalities of the players far more than even cricket! That's exactly what is happening today. Newspapers are trying to follow a trend on television. And that's why I think the change has come about," he feels.

Of the books written by Cardus, *Days in the Sun*, has impressed Mohan very much. But he hastens to add: "I still prefer to read Cardus in pieces that people pick and put in their anthologies. They make a more sensible read than a day's play reporting although I read a lot of Cardus in my younger days as soon as I joined this profession."

What has Mohan to say about the late C.L.R. James? "James was different, I mean politically. I was never a leftist; never had that inclination, not because of that, not because he was a Marxist. But he seemed to have a more vibrant type of cricket writing - points that were stated more forcefully, sometimes even very fiercely. His *Beyond a Boundary* is still one of the best books on cricket because he proved that cricket is far more than just a game. It's a kind of metaphor for life, especially in a social milieu like in the Caribbean. Everywhere sociologically is different. Cricket is different, different to different nations. But certainly more to the West Indies because of their racial background," answers Mohan.

Some modern cricket writers Mohan holds in high esteem. In his own words: “I would still read Matthew Engel. He is a good read. John Woodcock has still turned out very very good prose on a days play. I like Martin Johnson for his acid wit and very droll sense of humour. I also enjoy Mike Coward. When he writes on cricket, his heart is in the game. He is far more than just a cricket writer. He brings his love of life into his cricket writing. Thats one thing I appreciate. Of course, Peter Roebuck is the outstanding cricket writer, I think. I would say he is Number One cricket writer today.”

Mohan also sheds some interesting light on that versatile sports writer Frank Keating: “I’ve enjoyed Keating a lot. Not only on cricket but his general pieces about boxing and other sports. He’s outstanding, very very good in presenting not just a sport or a match. If you read Keating outside a match he would be even more outstanding.” But can the average reader understand whatever Keating writes? “He writes for a special audience, for his own audience. He doesn’t write for somebody else as like we do in India. He does it for his basic readers in England. So his standard of English is not necessarily high but at least I am sure a lot more people understand Keating better in England than they do in India which is obvious enough,” he says.

There are writers who go far beyond writing only about the game the cricketers play. This is what Mohan has to say in this regard: “How can you say no when your newspaper demands such stuff from you? It is not actually investigative cricket journalism. If four journalists can sit together and have an argument about a row or something like that, why cant players do the same? I mean this is very common. In a team of 11 or 15 people, a lot of things can happen, person to person. It’s just same as in an office. How is it different from that? Just because they are the focus of public attention, it doesn’t mean that the press should really blow up the kind of things that we have been reading these days. Its not fair. You look at the mans game and what he means in the field. I don’t say we do not look a peripheral issues lot more than we used to do. But we don’t make it the be-all and end-all of journalism. Thats key-hole journalism. In sports it doesn’t carry very far.”

Cricketers as Writers

There is a fashion now for cricketers to write in the press. Mohan welcomes this trend. “Its good for the readers. Sometimes they think that an opinion stated by Krishnamachari Srikanth or Sunil Gavaskar or Kapil Dev or Ravi Shastri is very important. They want to read it. We as journalists knew that they used to have ghost writers during their playing careers, so thats why we used to devalue the stuff. But if you are a newspaper editor and if you think the public is going to respond to pieces by players, why not use them? Not just to sell the newspapers alone but to give an added service to the readers. Read it frankly, there is nothing wrong in It. When The Sportstar, our sister publication, was launched fifteen years ago, there was not a single player writing in it at all but now we have many players involved, including Sunil Gavaskar and Mohammed Azharuddin. They are quite popular. It is our professional jealousy or the way we look at it professionally that we think it demeaning just because it is written by a ghost sometimes. But, so what? There is nothing wrong in presenting it to the readers who just love it,” he remarks.

Despite such an experienced, established and highly prolific cricket writer, Mohan has not yet penned any cricket book himself although he has ghosted quite a few. Did he ever think of writing one? “I have always thought about it. But you know the reading habit in India is going so fast. I do not know if its worth even writing a book on cricket. If you go to the warehouses of the publishers, you will know how many of them (cricket books) are lying there unsold. Its an horrendous thought to have a book which doesnt sell at all. So I really have not given a serious thought to writing a cricket book. A lot of people have always come and told me to write one. But I somehow have just no mood in this direction,” he explains.

Controversy

But were he ever to write one, what would be its subject? Says Mohan: “Actually I very seriously thought about it a couple of years ago. There was a book by Bernard Levin called *The Pendulum Years* which fascinated me. Its about the English society of the sixties. So I wanted to write something like that on Indian cricket. We were on top of the world in 1983 and were at bottom in 1987 when we lost in the World Cup semi-final to England. In that time a lot of things happened in Indian cricket: Kapil Dev versus Gavaskar, Mohinder Amarnath versus the BCCI, the BCCI versus Dilip Vengsarkar and so on. Just look at that period. Quite a fascinating phase of Indian cricket, wasn’t it? So, being a minor player in few of those dramas its his typical, embarrassing modesty but in reality Mohan had played a key role, especially in the players versus the BCCI issue when he had supported the cricketers to the hilt in their right fight against an excessively authoritative BCCI and the result was that even the Supreme Court of India had given its verdict in favour of the players. I thought I would have some kind of inside information that I could write about. Forget the inside information, even as a subject that particular period of Indian cricket still fascinates em. But its a dream, a faraway dream.”

Having spent many years in cricket journalism and that too while working for as prestigious and serious a broadsheet as *The Hindu*, Mohan is in a position to point out the changes in cricket journalism during that time. He feels: “Its changing. In fact, life itself is changing. There are no fixed values. Everything changes. In the olden days there were brilliant cricket writers like K.N. Prabhu. I dont think any of us can write as well as he did. But then the presentation was different. Today the public watches more cricket on television, hears about it on radio. This is publicity overkill on the cricket front. So you have got to give them something else that you think they need some brighter way to present the same subject.

“They expect three or four things rolled into one they want you to be a critic, a reporter, even a key-hole journalist. Thats the kind of thing that is evolving. Not that all of us are fulfilling this. But this is what the public expects; this is the way the public is going.”

Personal Experience

Now 45 and married to Rohini, he is a proud father of two lovely daughters, Aarti and Priti. Mohan was a keen cricketer in his youth: “In childhood I mostly played cricket, from a very young age, 7 or 8, I would say. I was playing league cricket in Madras by the time I was 12. And in shorts, I must add. People used to encourage you then, seeing somebody come in shorts and try to play with the senior guys. It was not junior grade cricket, mind you. It was something like what we call second division cricket. So even in those days it was very rare for a teenager to come and try and play at that level of the game. I had the interest, I wont say talent.”

Did he ever dream of playing first-class cricket or even higher than that? “It was very difficult in Madras, even in India, for a fast bowler and an opening bowler. I won’t call myself even a fast bowler. I was an opening bowler, a swing bowler. I don’t think they (fast bowlers) were ever encouraged in India in those days. I mean even on matting wickets we hardly got a run and spinners would come on. So nobody ever bothered about opening bowlers”.

A brilliant student with a degree in chemical engineering, Mohan says of that time: “Everybody thought I was a bright student. I probably topped the matriculation examinations. I was one of the top rankers in the Tamil Nadu state and so I had a scholarship to study whatever I wanted to. Any course was open to me because of my academic qualifications. But probably I went into the wrong line. I wasn’t fascinated by chemical engineering”.

Like any youngster fond of sports writing, Mohan would write “occasional” pieces and send them to a newspaper which “probably” never published them. It was actually Rajan Bala, formerly cricket writer with *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* who “got friendly with me and he used to say I should send my write-ups to *The Hindustan Standard* and that’s how I actually started in journalism.”

When Mohan came out of the engineering college, he really did not know what he wanted in life. After a business venture with friends which was not very successful Mohan was at a loose end.

G. Kasturi, the then editor of The Hindu, who knew Mohan's family well, encouraged Mohan in those days to join journalism professionally. Recalls Mohan: "He advised me to give it a try. He had known me very well since I was very young. So he offered me a job straightaway and that too in his own newspaper. It was that easy in those days, or so it seemed to me. So it was 300 bucks a month plus 75 rupees for transport and things like that."

But wasn't he delighted joining a newspaper like The Hindu? "Yes. But that was also a hard part. To join a big newspaper straightaway means you are not going to get opportunities coming your way soon. So it was much tougher to get into a big newspaper and then try to go up. There are certain constraints, right? It's not always easy. It rarely happens that a guy joins a big newspaper at the bottom of the rung and makes strides quickly in India."

In his early days in The Hindu, Mohan used to do "everything" as a sports reporter. It used to be women's wrestling one night, volleyball the next, then basketball and a bit of cricket and so on. But cricket used to be a major part of my work."

An Individual Style

Regarding his cricket work in those days, Mohan has things to say: "My approach was different in the sense that The Hindu had a great tradition of cricket reporting. They used to think I was a breezy writer. Maybe I was presenting cricket in a different way. Maybe at that time in 1974 and a couple of years after that I was a modern writer. You had to go by the great tradition of The Hindu. You couldn't take a chance. You couldn't say anything that was out of place. You would be heavily subbed in those days. They would always expect a narrative style, a descriptive style, in your reports though I used to defy that norm.

My editor was very very understanding. I mean he would call and explain why you should not do this and that. But he never pulled you down for that."

Undoubtedly Mohan has been the busiest cricket writer in India for more than a decade now. Obviously there is a noticeable difference between his cricket prose then and now. He agrees: "Everybody changes. If I didn't change, I would be a fossil by now."

But has this difference come because of television? "No," he brushes aside such suggestions. "We see the trend in foreign newspapers though they have gone to the other extreme of never describing the game. They just have all comments and few things and few impressions of the days play. But in India I think we still do combine the two styles we give you a descriptive as well as the things that have evolved now. Like, for instance, a lot of England supporters had come to see the India-England Madras Test in 1993. About ten of them came to me and said how much they enjoyed reading my pieces because, We don't get to see cricket writing like this in England they said.

"The Hindu was generally conservative, not to be opinionated. I was an exception. Maybe Rajan Bala was an exception; he was opinionated. I do state opinions. I'm not saying that I am opinionated but at least I would state opinions. I've been wrong many times but I have the courage at least to say what I feel about a person or an issue. I say what I believe in. So maybe that is one thing that they saw in me, that I could state an opinion, put it in print and take the responsibilities for it, whichever way it was; sometimes good, sometimes bad," he explains.

Right from his childhood Mohan has been known as a voracious reader. What does he read? “It’s very crazy. I was never a specialised reader. I read just anything that is a good read. I read just general subjects like culture, cultural essays. I had been a very regular reader of Punch. I used to subscribe even though it cost me a bomb.

I would get the Punch flown to me every week. I still read The Sunday Times, The International Herald Tribune. But quickly you just scan them.

Contributions Overseas

One of the feathers in Mohan’s cap is that he contributes regularly to Wisden and he is the India correspondent of The Cricketer. How did he join the latter? “The Cricketer had been asking me for some years for that. But I think I started in 1986 just before the World Cup in the subcontinent. On a couple of tours of England they had asked me to take over from K.N. Prabhu since he was nearing the end of his career. He was not regular in correspondence with them and so they wanted me to replace him. But I did not want to step into somebody else’s territory unless K.N. Prabhu himself gave it up. I joined The Cricketer not for the money but for the prestige.”

More than one person have accused Mohan of running Indian cricket. How does he react to such talk? “I never wanted to run Indian cricket. It’s silly someone accusing me thus. Of course, it hurts but every person has a right to his opinion, It’s a common jealousy that exists in journalism. As far as my experience goes, there is much more envy in journalists than in anybody else. It’s a human feeling. That is all,” is his frank answer.

While there are people who pay astronomical fees to see a cricket match, Mohan is one of the lucky ones watching cricket for a living. “What you look for in life is a combination of fame, money and happiness three things a person most desires. In some professions you may have more money and less fame. A Marwadi could be worth 20,000 times more than what Mohan is but nobody knows him except the guys around him. Whereas I may be nothing at all but at least I am prominent. People know me, people know your name even if you may not have met personally. So that way you have a little fame, maybe less money. But a lot more happiness, I would say. This profession gives you a nice proportion of these three things,” he says philosophically.

When asked if he has any unfulfilled ambition, Mohan says: “My ambition was only to be happy; to be a nice human being, as nice as a journalist can be. I was a nobody until the then editor of The Hindu gave me a chance to have a good career. So I really can’t complain at all. If given the chance, I’ll do it again.”

Mohan is the only Indian cricketer writer who is a fully fledged member of the Cricket Writers Club of the United Kingdom. It is indeed a very rare honour. K.N. Prabhu was the first member from India but he was only an associate member.