

Statement by Sir Ronald Sanders
At the launch on "From Ranji to Rohan" by Professor Clem Seecharan at London
Metropolitan University on 19th November 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

It is a great pleasure to be at London Metropolitan University to help launch the latest book by Professor Clem Seecharan, *From Ranji to Rohan*.

Like most West Indians, I am an avid cricket fan, but alas no great player myself.

My cricketing days ended when, as a teenaged batsman, a rather large and extremely quick fast-bowler contrived to get past my bat to a most delicate part of my anatomy that floored me for several agonising minutes in the most excruciating pain I ever experienced.

I put away bat, pads and other questionable paraphernalia after that along with my enthusiasm for playing cricket, but my passion for the game never waned.

In that connection, I believe I was among the first people to buy, directly from Hansib, the publisher of this book, one of the first copies of "From Ranji to Rohan".

Two things attracted me to it.

First, I knew from the experience of reading Clem Seecharan's previous works that this would be not just a scholarly study based on authoritative research, but also a highly entertaining account of Cricket and Indian Identity in Colonial Guyana.

The second attraction was its focus on the exploits of Rohan Kanhai, who was the cricket icon of my childhood and early teenage years.

Somewhere amongst the aging and dusty collection of my family albums is a photograph of me trying to imitate that famous Kanhai shot on the cover of this book that one cricket commentator described as "the triumphant fall" - a sweep shot to the leg side that culminated in Kanhai on his back but the ball either racing to the boundary for four or soaring past it for six.

It was not a shot emulated by many.

It originated in Kanhai's approach to the game of cricket which was to overcome the bowlers and win.

As Clem recounts in this book, Kanhai came from very humble beginnings - Port Mourant Sugar Estate in Berbice, Guyana.

That origin had a lot to do with his game as Seecharan explores in this book.

Kanhai himself said: "I play my cricket in two ways – first as a means of enjoyment (both for me and the spectator, I hope) and second to win". He shared this attitude with another West Indian batsman, who was to come after him, Antiguan Sir Vivian Richards.

What would lovers of West Indian cricket not do to see their like in the West Indian team of today – players who value the game for the game itself, and who excel at it not only for their own glory, but also because they understand that they carry the pride of the West Indian people in every stroke they play.

From Ranji to Rohan is a superbly written book. Seecharan's use of the English Language is as graceful as it is descriptive and his research is meticulous in the proven manner of his previous publications.

He calls on the work of a host of experts in almost every cricketing nation, among them John Arlott, CLR James, and Sir Hilary Beckles.

It is a book about cricket, and yet it is more than that. It is also a book about how Indians in Guyana established their West Indian citizenship by staking a claim for places first in their national teams and then in the West Indian team.

Staking the claim was not easy.

In the case of Guyana, the struggle was tied up in class differences, racial bigotry and even politics.

Like Kanhai, Cheddi Jagan, Guyana's firebrand politician from the 40s to the 60s, also came from Port Mourant, and the sugar estates of Guyana were his hotbed of resistance to colonial exploitation epitomised by the British, firm, Booker, that owned the majority of the estates and a good chunk of the Guyana economy.

Among the Indian players from Port Mourant who came to represent the West Indies in Cricket Test matches were Kanhai, Joe Solomon and Ivan Madray.

Basil Butcher also came from Port Mourant and played for Guyana and the West Indies at the same time as the others. He was not an Indian but he too faced the obstacle of breaking into a Guyana national team when the Cricket authorities resided in Demerara and belonged to its well-established clubs.

It is a measure of both Clem's rejection of the narrowness of racism and his sense of fairness as a human being that in this book he makes an apology to Basil Butcher for the way he has been treated by his Indo-Guyanese compatriots at Port Mourant and beyond.

Clem states boldly and unequivocally: "He (Butcher) is so elemental to that plantation's marvellous cricketing tradition, which is central to Indo-Guyanese cricket and identity, that he deserves a place in the Indo-Guyanese narrative. The fact that Basil is of African descent must no longer exclude him, for he played a crucial role in the development of the game at Port Mourant, when he was its Captain, just before he made the West Indian team in 1958-59 on their tour of India and Pakistan".

And, as Clem rightly reveals the Indo-Guyanese talent that languished on the sugar estates of Berbice was encouraged and given recognition through the efforts not only of a non-Indian but a non-Guyanese.

That person – the man who would transform the status of the Indo-Guyanese and help to claim their identity as West Indians – was the renowned Barbadian and West Indian batsman, Clyde Walcott.

It is paradoxical, given the difficulties that currently surround Guyanese Indian migrant labour in Barbados that it was a Barbadian that helped to unearth the cricket

talent of Indians on the Booker sugar estates and secure their places in the national and West Indian teams.

As Clem explains Walcott arrived in British Guiana in 1954 recruited “by the Sugar Producers Association following the recommendation of Jock Campbell (the progressive Chairman of Booker)”.

The political context of his arrival was continual strikes on the sugar estates and a report by a Colonial Office-appointed Commission which recommended that cricket clubs be set-up on each estate. Cricket – “a status symbol distinguishing the white managerial elite from the Indian workers created a new area in which social prestige could be won”.

As Seecharan describes it: Walcott’s “was a towering presence that infused cricket in British Guiana with a sense of purpose and resolve that had eluded it for most of its existence. Imbued with the moral compass of the black Barbadian middle class, a product of the elite school, Harrison College, he was the ideal man for the volatile Guyanese political environment of the 1950s, rendered even more hazardous by the intractable race issue”. In three years, he had four Guyanese in the West Indian test match team – three of them from Port Mourant.

It is an everlasting tribute to Clyde Walcott as a great human being as much as to his capacity for recognising cricket talent that Seecharan records Ivan Madray, one of the Indians that Walcott guided from Port Mourant, as saying: “I could have walked to the end of the earth for Clyde Walcott”.

As a true scholar, Clem supports his assertions in this book with empirical evidence. His Bibliography is extensive and his research material includes interviews with cricketers Basil Butcher, Joe Solomon and Ivan Madray. But Guyanese political leaders are there too: Cheddi Jagan and Eusi Kwayana.

For all that, as a product of a Berbice village himself and a young boy as Rohan Kanhai’s batting exploits were being hailed all over the cricketing world, Seecharan admits that “for Indo-Guyanese, including myself and boys growing up at the time of of Kanhai’s ascent”, his taste for the game and the way he played it, “came out of our

unconscious craving for a great West Indian batsman to transport us to the heart of creole sensibility – West Indian authenticity”.

This book starts with Ranjitsinghji, the Indian Prince who played for England and dazzled cricket spectators between 1896 and 1912. He was an inspiration to the Indian Diaspora in the West Indies and this is well chronicled by Seecharan. But, the book’s main theme explores the role of cricket in authenticating Indo-Guyanese as West Indians.

He does a convincing job, and has written a book that will enthrall all Cricket lovers of all races and nations.

Seecharan ends by pointing to the necessity for integrating Caribbean countries in the same way that West Indian cricket is integrated - as a representation of our oneness and a source of our pride.

“Chanderpaul and Sarwan”, he says, “could now be an example pointing the way for the politicians toward genuine regional integration, based on our diversity, not some imagined creole procrustean mould”.

Clem’s observation is particularly relevant in the wake of the recent threat to West Indian Cricket as we know it by first the stand-off between the West Indian Cricket Board and the West Indian players, and then the call by some for the break up of the West Indian team and the creation of “individual island teams”.

Those suggestions evoked a response in West Indian Poet and Writer Ian MacDonald who recently wrote:

“It is a blessing that the rush to the precipice halted just in time to save West Indies cricket. The danger loomed of break-up into territorial franchises and consequent humiliating demotion by the ICC to a status for all clearly inferior to that enjoyed by the great cricketing powers, including the West Indies.

Anyone who believes that individual CARICOM states could make their way in world cricket at the same elevated level as the West Indies and that their players could

therefore continue to benefit in fame and remuneration at that level – any such person is seriously delusional. The magnificent performance by the Trinidad and Tobago team in the recent Twenty/20 Champions League was a wonderful sampling of West Indies talent, cheered on by all West Indians, just as victorious New South Wales so admirably represented not only their own state but all Australia. Tournaments like these will become quite common in future and that is a good development. But they will not be a substitute for the great international encounters which truly define the game”.

I think Ian has said all that needs to be said on this point.

Returning to this book, it is published by Hansib here in London. And, it is fitting that in launching the book, a tribute should be paid to this small company which persistently publishes West Indian work despite the travails of competition and increasing costs that make book-publishing a very risky business.

That, it is able to produce its books at a reasonable price is a mark of Hansib’s devotion to its vision of keeping Caribbean work on book shelves, in Libraries and in the hands of a wide reading public.

Arif Ali and his colleagues at Hansib deserve the gratitude and appreciation of us all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Clem dedicated this book to his long-time friend Dr Tulsi Singh on his 60th birthday.

I would like to end my presentation by reading what Dr Singh wrote about Clem Seecharan and this book in the forthcoming 2010 edition of “The Guyana Annual”.

“Clem Seecharan and I grew up together in Palmyra Village in East Berbice. Clem is a year younger than me but when I was in the County Scholarship preparation class in 1959, he was accelerated and placed in my class for grooming for the scholarship class of the following year. We became good friends. We walked to and from school, and in the late evenings, we walked to our homes which were near to each other, just the two of us, after special lessons that were held for scholarship takers following regular classes.

One assignment we had that year was to write an essay titled " My Best Friend." Without discussing it, Clem wrote about me and I wrote about him. When we got the essays back, his was studded with stars, ticks and multiple points of our teacher's praise. I got a pass. He got a distinction. His was read to the class as a model of an essay.

It is no surprise that Clem has continued in this vein. His writing is robust, scholarly and intense. He is primarily an academic historian but at heart, he is a writer. And he enjoys a vigorous debate. His latest book, "From Ranji to Rohan " is about cricket, history, race and politics. There is enough in it to evoke profound thought, strong controversy and heated discussion. The red meat of academia. For thinkers. That is what academicians should do amidst the facts, detailed here in abundance. Clem can lift controversy by the scruff of its neck and dangle it in the reader's face. See if you can handle it".

Ladies and Gentlemen, I assure you that you can handle it, and that in doing so, you will have a mightily enjoyable experience.

I have the greatest pleasure in launching from "Ranji to Rohan", and in doing so saluting its author, Clem Seecharan. Long may he continue his fine work.