

Afghanistan's cricket success – another pathway to peace

By Prasanna Kumar

Kudos to Sri Lanka for its well-deserved double! By lifting the Asia Cup and 2014 ICC World Twenty20 cup, both in Bangladesh, the brilliant yet humble Sri Lankan cricketers have done their beautiful island country proud. A fitting farewell it also was to the two outstanding batsmen and former captains, Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara, who announced their exit from Twenty20 cricket. To be humble in victory and cool in adversity is a virtue and a value that 'the noblest game' stands for. Sri Lankans epitomize it in their demeanour both on and off the field. That is the quintessence of cricket, which minnows Afghanistan seems to have imbibed in an amazingly short period of time.

Only a decade ago Afghanistan became a member of the Asian Cricket Council. In 2003 to be precise, just two years after a national cricket team was formed. Afghans, known for their valour, spirit of adventure and hard work even in adverse conditions, took to the game of cricket and rose rapidly in strength and stature, securing eligibility to play in the 2010 ICC World Twenty20. Their first major triumph was in the Intercontinental Cup in 2010 when they beat Scotland in the final. It was no flash in the pan as they went on to win the Asia vs Caribbean T20 title.

Making their debut in 2012 ICC world Twenty20 in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan gave a stiff fight to India in the league match, losing by just 23 runs. Afghanistan's steady, if not rapid, rise continued as in 2013 they beat Kenya to qualify for the 2015 Cricket World Cup. They also gained entry to the 2014 ACC Premier League, scheduled to be played in Malaysia next month (May).

Afghanistan's sensational win over hosts Bangladesh in the 2014 Asia Cup confirmed the landlocked country's emergence as a good side. In fielding they were sharp, their bowling accurate and batting bold and innovative. Asghar Stankzai's strokeful unbeaten 90 with six fours and three sixers and Samiullah Shanwari 81 (69 balls) inclusive of 10 fours and a six, enabled their side to rattle up 254. Hosts Bangladesh caved in against the accurate pace bowling of Shapoor Zadran and Hamid Hassan and skipper Mohammed Nabi's crafty off spin. It was a stunning but well deserved 32 run victory for minnows Afghanistan over experienced Bangladesh. The brave Afghans put up a good show against former champions Pakistan, though they lost tamely to India and Sri Lanka.

Afghanistan's best performers were Stanikzai, their star batsman who totalled 162 runs, and right arm fast medium bowler Mirwais Ashraf, who bagged six wickets. Afghanistan has a number of good all-rounders, including Samiullah Shenwari who scored 151 runs and bagged three wickets in the tournament. The tall left arm fast bowler Shapoor Zadran reminds one of the great Pakistani fast bowler Wasim Akram, who is a role model to many left arm fast bowlers of today.

Zadran's height and ability to extract bounce are among his assets, while batsmen Stanikzai and Shenwari, besides captain Nabi, are attacking stroke players. The Afghans are quick learners and they are being groomed into another good Asian side that will soon become a force to reckon with in world cricket. What Bangladesh, then little fancied, had done in World Cup cricket by shocking champion sides in league matches, Afghanistan may do in 2015 World Cup cricket.

They seem to draw inspiration from their Asian neighbours, seeking to imbibe the combative spirit and innovativeness of Pakistan, maturity and discipline of India, dedication and demeanour of Sri Lanka and enthusiasm and enterprise of Bangladesh.

There seems to be a paradigm power shift towards Asia. The dominance of Australia, England and West Indies for long years seems to have yielded to the emergence of three Asian giants - India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Giants of yesterday and today will do well to take note of the enormous talent in and

emergence of small cricket playing countries like Netherlands, Ireland and Afghanistan. The famous maxim, though a cliché now, that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playfields of Eton and Harrow, may have lost its relevance today. But not the Clausewitzian dictum that diplomacy is war by other means. Cricket could well become a pathway to peace in the beleaguered Asian sub-continent. The talented Afghanistan cricketers may well be the constructive pathfinders.

(Prasanna Kumar, director, Centre for Policy Studies, is a retired professor of politics and former rector Andhra University and sports broadcaster for All India Radio since 1964. He can be contacted at apkumar@sify.com)