

QUINTESSENTIALLY CHENNAI

Buchi Babu and the coming of age of native cricket

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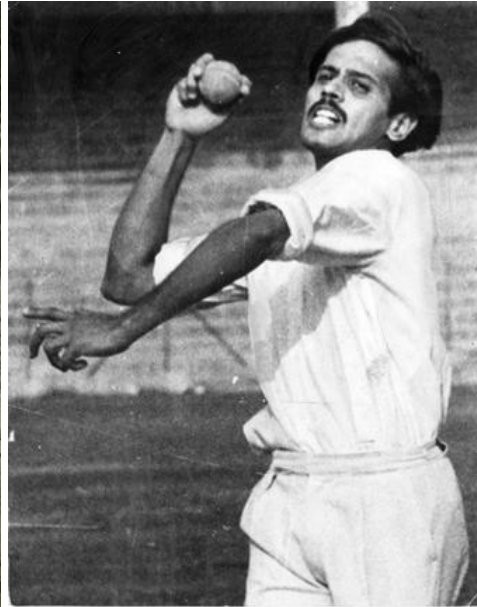


IMAGE 1: - Winners of the Buchi Babu Memorial Tournament, 1959-60, for the second year in a row, were the Mylapore Zone (Seniors). Photo: The Hindu Archives

IMAGE 2: - Srinivas Venkatraghavan at a match in 1972. Photo: The Hindu Archives

Legacy of the aristocrat who started Madras United Club – the first Indian cricket club – not only endures but also continues to thrive

August 23, 2012: - It must be serendipity that determined the timing of the Buchi Babu Memorial tournament, because none of the organizers of the inaugural championship for local teams in 1909-10 or its revival in 1967 as an (often) all-India invitation tournament would have known that August would one day be celebrated as the month of the city's birth.

This tournament has, for long, been an important part of India's cricket calendar, though televised international cricket and the IPL have robbed such domestic events – the Moin-ud-Dowlah Gold Cup of Hyderabad is another – of their past glamour.

Yet, what could be a more appropriate way of remembering the coming of age of native cricket that ended the Englishman's domination of the game in pre-Independence Madras? For it was Buchi Babu Nayudu – the grandson of a dubash and an aristocrat of the realm who, slighted by the Madras Cricket Club's denial of access to the pavilion to Indian players, them to a tree shade during matches at Chepauk – who started the Madras United Club, the first Indian cricket club with its own ground and pavilion.

The annual Presidency Match between Indians and Europeans was again Buchi Babu's brainchild, though he did not live long enough to participate in it. He died just before the first such match his trusted lieutenant B. Subramaniam organized in 1908.

B.S. Ramulu led the Indians and P.W. Partridge, partner of the law firm King and Partridge and president of the Madras Cricket Club, led the Europeans, but the match was rained out.

The Pongal Match as it came to be known, was revived in 1915 and continued till 1952, even though Ranji Trophy, born in 1934, gradually overtook it in importance, and India's freedom meant the exit of the Europeans from Madras.

Pongal, however, came to be the occasion when the Madras Test match was held for a number of years, until the BCCI's rotation policy started denying Madras its well-earned right to stage the traditional event during the harvest festival. India beat England at Chepauk to register its first Test win in 1952, but that year, the match was played in February, a full fortnight after Pongal.

A memorable Pongal Test at Chepauk was in January 1967, with India's opener Farrokh Engineer narrowly missing a century on the first day, and Sir Garfield Sobers playing two captain's innings to save West Indies the blushes in a close finish. The match almost did not take place as a gunshot, on January 12, from screen villain M.R. Radha had critically wounded matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran. MGR recovered in the nick of time.

Coming back to the man and the tournament named after him, the Buchi Babu legacy was carried on by his sons and several members of his extended family.

Of his three sons, the youngest, left-handed Cotah Ramaswami, an adopted son, became a double international, scoring 60 and 40 versus England in his Test debut at the age of 41, and distinguishing himself in tennis too. Before television brought Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and V.V.S. Laxman into our drawing rooms, the Buchi Babu tournament, like the TNCA league, drew vast crowds to numerous venues like Chepauk, the Marina and Loyola College.

At the Loyola, medium pacer B. Kalyanasundaram drew the ire of the crowd by taking a catch on the boundary line to dismiss Sunil Gavaskar, freshly back from his magnificent Test debut in the West Indies. The spectators had come to watch the Little Master.

I urge readers to flock to the Buchi Babu matches this month. Who knows, the next Little Master may take flight at one of them.

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