

STRAIGHT DRIVE

How cricket brings out the partisan in Ram Guha

Historian swears by yesteryear batting maestro GR Vishwanath, and detests ODI and T20 cricket

VINAY KAMATH
 B BASKAR
 Chennai, July 31

Test cricket is the real deal, the single-malt whisky to the Indian-made foreign liquor that is one-day cricket, and the locally-brewed arrack that is T20, cricket-historian Ramachandra Guha told a weekend audience here.

Utterly dismissive of T20 cricket, Guha said he never watches the Indian Premier League (IPL) as it had brought out the worst in Indian cricket.

Delivering a lecture titled *Five Cricketing Partisanship* to commemorate 50 years of the Sanmar Group's support for cricket in Chennai, Guha said his first loyalty lay with his local Bengaluru club, the Friends Union Cricket Club. His next allegiance was for the Karnataka State side. Gu-

ha, who grew up in Dehra Dun (then in Uttar Pradesh) belongs to a TAMILIAN family and resides in Bengaluru, where his uncle was a coach for Friends. Guha said he could thus choose to support UP, Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. He "shrewdly" chose Karnataka as it had a better record in the Ranji Trophy.

In a lecture peppered with anecdotes on Karnataka cricket, Guha spoke of how the State side beat Bombay for the first time in the 1973-74 season. GR Vishwanath, one of Guha's heroes, walked in at one-down and was plumb in front of the wicket on the very first ball he faced. But the umpire ruled him not out and Viswanath went on to score 160, setting up Karnataka's first-ever victory against Bombay. The Bengali umpire who ruled Viswa-



Kapil Dev releases a chronicle of the Sanmar Group's contribution to cricket. He is flanked by historian Ramachandra Guha (left) and the book's author V Ramnarayan. Sanmar Group Chairman N Sankar is at extreme right and Deputy Chairman Vijay Shankar on the left. M VEDHAN

nath not-out later went to Kolkata and boasted to Bengal cricketers at Eden Gardens, "I have done something you guys couldn't do all these years: made sure Bombay didn't win the Ranji Trophy!"

Bowlers have a special place in Guha's heart. He called bowlers

the underclass, the subalterns of the game, bringing out the social historian in him. The batsmen set up the platform for victory, but it is the bowlers who ensure it by taking 20 wickets, he said.

His last 'partisanship', Guha said, was generational - the

cricketers whom one idolizes in childhood always take precedence over the current generation, notwithstanding their talent and ability. And being a Karnataka fan, is it any surprise that it is Prasanna, Chandrasekhar and Vishwanath who find a pride of place in Guha's heart?

Despite his disdain for T20 cricket, Guha admitted rather grudgingly that he does watch international T20 cricket now and then. Watching Virat Kohli send the Australian bowlers to the cleaners in the recent T20 World Cup, Guha replaced Viswanath with the Indian Test skipper in his all-time Indian 11, with a hint of regret.

Kapil Dev, the chief guest at the event, had the audience in splits with his earthy, self-deprecatory humour.

He spoke of how his English teacher had asked him not to address the Chennai audience for no more than three minutes as

his vocabulary would desert him after that.

The 'Haryana Hurricane' also recounted a few amusing stories from his early days in international cricket when he struggled with English. In fact, the chief selector was very reluctant to appoint Kapil captain for the 1983 tour of the West Indies as he spoke very little of the language.

His reaction then was that the selectors could appoint an Oxford-educated captain who spoke impeccable English, while Kapil would get on with the cricket. Kapil said he had faced problems with the way English was spoken in different cricket-playing nations. In Australia, he was stumped when a cricketer asked him: "Have you come to die?" Nonplussed, Kapil replied, "No, I've come to play cricket," till former captain S Venkataraghavan nudged him and said, "He's asking if you've come today?"