

Gavaskar gave Indian cricket respectability

That Sunil Gavaskar is a legend in India is well known. He gave Indian cricket respectability. Of course, there were others too, but then he stood out because of his consistency. When people hailed his 29th Test century, Gavaskar was the first to point out that it should not be treated as a record since he had taken more innings than Australian Sir Donald Bradman to reach that mark.

And although he stopped playing in 1987, not even today's Indian star batsman Sachin Tendulkar can match his fan following. Of course, comparisons are drawn between Tendulkar and West Indian star Brian Lara, but this legendary cricketer stands out. He does not even figure in such discussions because he is rated above them both.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to talk about Gavaskar without recalling the India-West Indies series of 1971. When the team left India for the West Indies, Gavaskar, who was to become the star of the series, was only in the team as a reserve opener. However, as faith was to have it, he got his chance to display his talents, when selected opener Jayanthilal suffered an injury. The rest is history.

The 21-year-old opener made such a sensational debut into Test cricket that Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Relator composed a song on him which in part said that "He is just like a wall . . . we can't get Gavaskar out at all . . ."

Since that series, Gavaskar has gone on to more glories, but he will be facing one of the greatest events in his life when come October 5, he will be inducted into the Cricket Hall of Fame at ceremonies to be held at the Radisson Hotel, Cromwell, Connecticut. The "Little Master" as he is affectionately called, will join the ranks of many former Test stars which included Sir Garfield Sobers, Sir Frank Worrell, Sir Everton Weekes, Lance Gibbs and Alfred Valentine that have been inducted into the prestigious Halls. Last year's inductee was former West Indies great Sir Vivian Richards.

Gavaskar ended the series in the Caribbean with 774 runs in eight Test innings at an average of 154.80, including a double century and three other hundreds, leading one writer to declare that it is no coincidence that with the arrival of Gavaskar that India began tasting victories abroad. It was only because of him that India achieved one of the greatest results in their history - the first, and so far only, series win in the Caribbean. His aggregate of 774 was only five runs short of Weekes' aggregate of 779, the highest in a series between the two countries. No batsman, of course, has scored more runs in his debut series. In four Tests in 1929-30 George Headley had scored 703. Till then, only Australian Sir Donald Bradman against South Africa in 1931-32 and India in 1947-48 had a better average.

Apart from the statistics Gavaskar also showed plenty of pluck and character that is now sadly missing from the Indian ranks. For instance, in the second innings of the final Test of the series, Gavaskar made 220. And all through the innings which lasted eight hours and 50 minutes, he batted with a severe toothache without even flinching. Such was his authority and domination that the next highest score was only 54.

In the West Indies it is said that no cricketer would have signed as many autograph as Gavaskar. Even today one can see Gavaskar being mobbed by his fans whenever he visits any island in the West Indies. Needless to say, he enjoys it.

Nowadays, the "Little Master" sits in the commentators box, where he analyses the game for the benefit of arm-chair experts, seldom discussing the past.

In this position he still somehow manages to command popularity and has remained a great ambassador for his country.