

The Pursuit Of Excellence*

A group of people — connected in one way or the other with the management of human affairs — had a casual meeting and the talk turned round to the topic of fall in quality which one observes everywhere in craftsmanship, in machine-production, in academic achievement, in fact in every walk of life. After condemning it, after discussing it thread-bare, a common thought struck them: What are we doing about it? What should we do about it?

"The Indian Centre for the Encouragement of Excellence" is an outcome of that questioning — a group of like minded people, endeavouring to pursue excellence in whatever they undertake, spotting it and encouraging it by whatever means they can, instilling the idea in the mind of people that nothing but the best would do.

It is not an organisation in any formal sense. There is no membership, there is not even a set of rules and regulations. All that is required is that if you feel the same way, give the group your ideas, help it in spreading the ideal.

The Centre got off to an excellent start by organising a lecture on the pursuit of excellence in cricket by one who consciously and deliberately cultivated a perfectionist's approach to the game, dedicated to give the game nothing but the best — Vijay Merchant.

Speaking to a select audience at the SASMIRA auditorium on February 15, at an hour when the hustle and bustle had started to die down, when people's minds were at their receptive best, Vijay brought back in vivid detail and stirring drama the halcyon days of cricket — the days of Don Bradman, of Col. Nayudu, of Vijay Merchant at their scintillating best. Cricket, Merchant calmly said, was a way of life. It deserved and claimed from its votary nothing but the best. The concentration had to be 100%, not 99%. It required but one good ball to send you back to the pavillion, to rust for the rest of the innings, perhaps for the rest of match. One bad stroke, you were out of the game. The preparation for cricket did not begin or end with the playing field. Habits had to be formed; fortunately good habits were hard to break (just like bad habits) and they stayed with you for life. Discipline was necessary — discipline imposed by one's own self, rather than dictated from outside. Sacrifices had

to be made, consciously and irrevocably.

Vijay gave two examples of the sacrifices he had to make — no smoking, no dancing — the former because he did not want his health to be spoiled, the latter because he feared it would interfere with his foot-work! And he had to give to the game all the free time he had, keeping himself away from all the pleasures which a city life offered. In practice too, one had to give it all the concentration, all the attention which a first class match demanded.

Speaking about self-discipline, Vijay recalled that the two strokes which he liked — and his fans liked — were the hook and the late-cut. But he knew the danger of hooking a new ball when an alert field was ringing around him. He knew he would be back in the pavillion, caught in fine square leg. Though he knew the crowd would cheer him to the skies if he hooked the ball, he would tell himself "No hook till the score-board says — Vijay Merchant — 35." And the late-cut; there was no stroke which he liked better; it gave him a sense of immense power, a great inner satisfaction, when he cut the ball, past the three people in the slips, past the boundary line. Here again, he had made it a rule — no late cut till the score was past fifty. So, when the first late-cut came off his bat his friends in the pavillion would say, "Vijay is now well-set".

Cricket did not end with the playing field. The spirit of cricket — of fair play — must rule one's life. A cricketer must strike at injustice too. Vijay did not hesitate to do so. The occasion was when he felt that a President of the Board of Control of Cricket interfered with a Ranji Trophy Match to the disadvantage of one side. Vijay's outspokenness cost him the captaincy of India; he was deprived of the opportunity and honour of leading India. But he had no regrets.

The game required that one should give to his team, his country his best, irrespective of his personal feelings. A man who had played for India for 18 long years was suddenly pushed to the second place and the captaincy was given to a man who had never played for India before. Merchant's friends advised him to keep away from the tour. But Merchant went, because it was the decision of the Board of Control and there was nothing more

to it. He gave his best to the team and he was the most successful player of the tour — a success and a glory he would never have attained if he had to carry on his shoulders the responsibility and social duties of captaincy.

It was not enough if one had learnt to play, to score a century. One must know when to retire. Merchant learnt the lesson from one of the immortals of cricket — Patsy Hendern. After a match where he had scored a century in the first innings and a creditable two figure in the second, Patsy retired. And when Merchant asked him whether his retirement was not too early, the great cricketer had told him, "My boy, it is better to retire when people are asking 'why'. Don't wait till they start asking, "why not"!

And then Merchant turned from the pleasures of the playing field to the rigours of life. Here again, he unfolded a personal story, an experiment in industrial relations.

There were 3,300 employees in the establishment with which he was associated but the employers had succeeded in running it on a person-to-person basis. The lines of communications were direct, neither red tape nor rigid regulations were allowed to come between the employer and the employees. Merchant gave three case-histories.

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He was an old worker who had given more than 40 years of service to the company. He was ill, desperately ill. Late one evening, his son rushed to the factory. The old man was sinking, but there was something which weighed on his mind. He had some debts to clear — and he wanted to pay them off before death overtook him, so that he could meet his Maker, all his debts discharged. He wanted to collect his provident fund, his gratuity, all the money that was due to him. The Accounts Man said that he could not make up the Accounts in such a hurry. The cashier said, "How can I pay without proper accounts? But the son said that it was his father's peace of mind that was at stake — his last wish before his death — he did not want to die a debtor. Followed a hurried consultation with the top boss. A rough calculation showed that the old man's dues amounted to something like 7,300. Instructions were given to the cashier to pay the son 7,000. He took it home. All the creditors were

* Information about the "Indian Centre for Encouraging Excellence" may be obtained from Mr. N. H. Athreya, Sahakar Bhavan, Bombay 77.

called. All but two who were not in station came; they were paid off to the last paisa. The son undertook to clear off the debts of the other two. The old man's conscience was clear. He passed away at 5 a.m.

Merchant ended his story with one question: "would this, the fulfilment of a dying man's last wish have been possible if we had followed strictly all the rules, if we had allowed the law to take its own course?"

One day the wife of one of the workers came to the Health Officer. She complained of an ache in her abdomen. One cursory look was enough — the woman was in the family way. And only last year her husband had undergone a vasectomy operation. To inform the husband straightway would have meant a break-up of the home, not an ideal way of family planning.

The Health Officer and the top officials held a conference amongst themselves. They talked with the woman. The truth came out — it was a neighbour. The Health Officer congratulated the woman for telling the truth. "Don't be afraid" she said, "we will take the responsibility. We will tell your husband that once in 5,000 cases, the operation was a failure and concep-

tion did take place". The woman went home.

The next morning the husband and wife were back at the health officer's. They wanted to meet the boss. No, none else would do. And when the boss came, the man said in a few simple words that his wife had told him the truth. It was not the failure of the operation. And because she had told him the truth, he had forgiven her. And what made her confess? Only this, that for her sake, for the sake of a simple, erring, sinning woman, the health officer of the company and the top boss of the company were prepared to tell a lie, were prepared to back her up, so that a home might not be broken. Well, that was too much for her and she decided to open up.

Telling the story straight without adding gloss, or varnish Merchant said "I called the man inside and told him, 'as husband and wife you are likely to have hundreds of quarrels. But for God's sake, never bring this matter up in any of these quarrels. Bundle it up and throw it away from memory! Two years had since passed'" Merchant concluded, "and they have never quarreled again."

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The last was a story too moving for words. They had organised an eye-bank in the company and many of the employees had gladly donated their eyes. Some of them had already been used.

One day the Health Officer was called to take the donation from the youngest donor — a child of 22 days. She was taken straight to the hospital operation table and as the doctor prepared himself to take the proffered gift, the routine question was asked — the name of the donor.

The grief-stricken mother replied, "No, doctor, I cannot give you her name. She died before we could give her one."

But the donor had to have a name; so on that table, the child was christened; the name was entered and the cornea was removed — from perhaps the youngest eye-donor in India.

And as Merchant concluded this story, the audience to a man felt, "Here is Pursuit of Excellence at its best — the efforts of the supposedly humble and the lowly, to discharge one's debts to society, to face the truth and to forgive and to forget, to remember a brother's distress when one's own agony is at its bitterest . . ."