‘All you have to do is be your freest self on the field’: In conversation with Keshav Maharaj

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Keshav Maharaj is a professional cricketer for South Africa’s national team.
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ABSTRACT
In May 2022, David Dabydeen and Ben Jacob interviewed South African cricketer Keshav Maharaj. Maharaj – South Africa’s most successful spin-bowler since the nation’s readmission to international sport in 1991 – is the first descendant of an indentured worker, and only the third Indian South African, to play for South Africa’s cricket team. In the conversation, Maharaj reflects on the legacies of indentureship, being part of South Africa’s post-apartheid generation, his journey to the top of cricket, and his achievements on the international stage.

KEYWORDS
cricket, apartheid, South Africa, indenture, migration, India, sport

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PREFACE

Keshav Maharaj is a professional cricketer for South Africa’s national team. A prolific wicket-taker across the sport’s major formats, he is South Africa’s most successful spin-bowler since the nation’s readmission to international sport in 1991. Keshav is also the first descendant of an indentured labourer – and only the third Indian South African – to play Test cricket for South Africa.

Keshav was born on 7 February 1990 in Durban, South Africa’s third city. His ancestors arrived in Natal in the late nineteenth century, and remained in the province as the Indian community went from plantation labourers to agricultural producers to an urbanized working class in Durban’s growing metropolis. The city was redrawn over the four decades of apartheid. Between 1958 and 1963 alone, over 150,000 Durban residents, including 60,000 Indians, were forcibly evicted from their homes. These brutal mass evictions were accompanied by state persecution, while twice – in 1949 and 1985 – the city’s streets swelled with anti-Indian violence that spilt out from the era’s racialized politics.

Keshav, however, belongs to a different generation. Four days after he was born, Nelson Mandela was freed from Robben Island, marking the beginning of the end of apartheid. Four months later, the Group Areas Act was repealed, ending the physical segregation of South Africa’s urban areas. And in 1994, when Keshav was four years old, his parents voted in South Africa’s first free elections, marking a new era in the nation’s politics. In stark contrast to the limited opportunities of the preceding generation of Indian South Africans, Keshav was sent to Northwood, a formerly all-white fee-paying sports school in the leafy, affluent suburb of Durban North. There, he developed his skills at the school’s four-lane bowling facility and three cricket fields, following in the footsteps of the England Test cricketer Robin Smith and South Africa’s fast-bowling great Shaun Pollock.
Maharaj was surrounded by cricket from the moment he was born. His father, Athmanand, was a talented cricketer whose own career was forestalled by the systematic underfunding and wider social precarity that beset Black sports during the apartheid era. Athmanand encouraged his son’s passion, and together they spent hours practising in the family’s backyard. At eleven, he joined the youth set-up of KwaZulu-Natal, and at sixteen he made his first-class debut for the province in South Africa’s second-tier three-day competition. In 2010 he was promoted to the Dolphins, KwaZulu-Natal’s premier side, making his full debut on his twentieth birthday. That year, he was included in the South Africa Academy’s squad for their tour of Bangladesh, excelling with 24 wickets across the series.

Keshav taught himself the rhythm and discipline of spin-bowling through long, lonely training sessions. Unlike his more exuberant peers, he only ever mastered two kinds of delivery, preferring control over the ball – its bounce, pace and flight through the air – to an arsenal of different spin variations. The key to this was persistence, and the long afternoons Keshav spent landing a ball on targets allowed him to bowl a consistent line and length for hours at a time, forcing the batsman to focus intently.

In October 2016, following two highly successful years with the Dolphins, Maharaj was called up to the South Africa Test squad for their tour of Australia. He made his debut one month later, taking three wickets in a famous victory for the visitors in Perth. Over the following years, Maharaj went from strength to strength. In May 2017, he was named International Newcomer of the Year at Cricket South Africa’s annual awards for his “fantastic showing on the global circuit”. The following year, he became the second South African bowler to take a nine-wicket haul against Sri Lanka in Colombo. After Test matches resumed in 2021 following the COVID-19 disruption in 2020, Keshav underlined his importance to South African cricket with a historic hat-trick against the West Indies.
When Keshav made his debut in 2016, just twelve years had passed since Hashim Amla became the first cricketer of Asian origin to represent South Africa, and eighteen since three members of the national team were fined for physically threatening Black spectators at Durban amidst racialized tensions between the crowd and the team. Black players had continued to be alienated and marginalized in the meantime. Even Amla, arguably the finest South African batsman of all time, came into the national side to a barrage of criticism for his wristy style, behind which lay the suggestion that he was a ‘quota player’ – selected to fulfil the minimum number of Black cricketers imposed by South Africa’s cricket board. Yet Keshav’s journey to the national team – coming after the cerebral brilliance of Amla and the exuberance of Imran Tahir – was accompanied by a distinct lack of such noise. He has been able to walk tall on the cricket field, celebrate lavishly, and rise to the very top of the game without a hint of the racialized scrutiny faced by his predecessors.

We spoke with Keshav in May 2022, just after he took his 150th Test wicket in a man-of-the-series performance against Bangladesh. In our conversation, Keshav reflected on the legacies of indentureship, being part of South Africa’s post-apartheid generation, his journey to the top of cricket, and his achievements on the international stage. To watch Keshav on the cricket field is to witness a triumph of quiet strength, stubborn defiance, and subtle art. His words give content to the man behind this triumph, and form to the history that shaped the man.

David Keshav, I’d like to start off by talking about indentureship. Where did you learn about indentureship – was it from your grandparents, your parents or just through reading?
Growing up my grandparents and my parents enlightened me and gave me a bit of background in terms of how we came to South Africa. When my grandmother was around, she used to talk about how the generations before me came on the ship, and we worked in the sugar cane fields. You know, the brief history. Now, because I’m probably about eight to ten generations down from my roots in India, you get those NRIs [Non-Resident Indian status] just to try and create that link. My dad also has the ship number and the village where my forefathers are from. So I have a little bit of insight. I’d love to track it [more], just to give me an excuse to travel and visit family overseas and things like that. But also to know how you’re great-grandparents went through certain struggles in life, and put us here in Africa where we are today.

Did they talk to you about India itself, and what life was like in India?

My grandmother had a brief understanding. She did spend some time with some of the generations down. She would say how things were over there, but not in depth as if she was a local.

I think when I travel to India, I have a vague understanding of how life is. You get to see how the communities live. And fortunately enough, I’ve got to see the city and the rural parts of India. It is quite chalk and cheese as to the way of life and how things have modernized. In the village you see the traditional culture, which you appreciate to see that it still exists. We still follow our traditions here [in South Africa] from a spiritual point of view. I’m a very religious and spiritual person. A lot of our family are priests and a part of the temples, so from that point of view we keep that tradition alive.
And of course your father is rather proud of India. He studied in Mysore, didn’t he?

Yes, that’s correct. He went over to study dentistry, but eventually he got sick and came back home to look after my grandmother because my grandfather passed away shortly after that. If my dad did pursue that, I probably wouldn’t be in the position that I am today.

You might be playing for India!

[laughs].

When I go to India, I feel a pang of nostalgia and a certain emotion that is very hard to explain. When I hear the sitar, something moves me. Do you have the same sense when you go to India that somehow you are still connected emotionally?

Yes, definitely. My first experience was when I went to India on a spin bowling camp in 2006. Everyone has this sort of stereotype of India, but fortunately enough I went there with an open mind, and just embraced every single moment of it, from the hustle and bustle to the noise. You know, for me it feels like my second home. Like you said, it’s that feeling of nostalgia, the sitar is very moving and touching, and you know when you walk in the lobby just to join your hands together and say namaste and greet people. It’s a very humbling and nostalgic feeling from that point of view, so I fully agree with you. I love food, so that’s an even bigger draw for me when I go to India. I think the warmth, the reception you receive upon arrival, whether it be in the hotel or on the streets of India, it is a sense of nostalgia.

Can I ask you about the burden of race? I know that Rohan Kanhai, in the 1960s and 1970s when the Black people and the Indian people in Guyana were
being tribal with each other, had to carry the burden of race. Whenever he went out to bat, we – me, my family and all the village – saw him as an Indian batting for us, fighting back for us. So whenever he made a century, it was as if we had won, even though we were being beaten up. Do you feel, as a South African Indian, that you carry that burden? Do you feel a responsibility, that people look at you as an Indian? Do they see you as ‘he is representing us’, ‘he is the best of us’?

**KM:** I’m fortunate enough to grow up in an environment where, as much as I’m an Indian, we’re all seen as one. Things have come a long from where it was twenty or thirty years ago.

But you know, I’m still an Indian at the end of the day, and [though] I’d like to carry everyone’s flag high, I know that the older generation within our communities are very proud that I’m an Indian guy on an international stage, which is humbling in a way. I mean I’m always trying to carry my family’s name especially higher than worrying about race, colour, religion and all that stuff. For me, it’s about carrying the South African flag wherever you go, and I think that’s one of our strengths as a nation, being so diverse and multicultural that everyone is seen as one. It shows in how we play as a unit and our uniformity on the field in terms of how we go about things.

So to answer your question, I don’t feel the burden of it, but I do know that a lot of people are – not to be vain about it – proud of me because I am a Hindu and an Indian coming up in the sporting fraternity.

**DD:** When you reduce, as you do through your brilliance, Bangladesh to one of their lowest Test scores ever, or when you bowl out the Indians or the Pakistanis, do you feel a little twinge of guilt or
sorrow? Or are you just bowling at them for the excellence of cricket?

**KM:** Trust me, I play cricket hard. I’m actually quite an aggressive character, though I probably show it in a different manner. When I step onto the cricket field, I’m just trying to leave cricket in a better place than it was, and hopefully inspire the next generation in terms of my skill and my art. So I don’t feel any hurt, because I’m sure that when the roles are reversed if they hit me for a six or get me out, I don’t think they feel too bad about it.

**DD:** So when you hit the England captain Joe Root for 28 in one over, which was a record, you didn’t do it because he was an old colonial?

**KM:** [laughs] No, no! To be honest, I was batting at the time when we were probably going to lose that Test match by an innings, and I just wanted to make sure that we made it really difficult for them to take it out. Something just clicked at the time, the ball was in my area, and I didn’t even know of the record at the time. No [laughs], I didn’t do it because it was Joe Root or anyone else. It just happened that way.

**DD:** I think some of us in England saw it differently! We thought, good on you, teaching them a lesson.

**Ben Jacob (BJ):** Your father has talked about how his own career was limited by apartheid. He’s talked about playing in segregated teams, on matted wickets. How aware were you of that growing up?

**KM:** When I come across the older generation at events and stuff, they always tell me ‘your dad was a lot more talented than you’. My dad’s 64 years old, but he still behaves like a 21-year-old on the sporting field, whether it’s cricket or football. So I can believe
it. People always say he had limited opportunities. Obviously I never got to see that part of history, but I do know that if he could pursue the sporting avenue, I’m sure he would have made it further. Also, in our communities, it’s very seldom that generation of Indian people push their kids towards the sporting fraternity. It still exists now. Everyone goes, ‘you need to finish your degree’, because everyone’s inclined to the academic route. When you go to family functions, it’s ‘my son’s a doctor’, ‘my son’s an engineer’, ‘my son’s an accountant’, that’s the first topic of conversation, and that’s the reality of things still today. So yeah I can understand if he had limited opportunities, [even if] I didn’t see it myself. But I can humbly say right now that my dad is a lot more talented than I am.

BJ: Do you think that was partly why he pushed you so hard?

KM: Definitely. I think when I made the South Africa team, I realized I’m living my dad’s dream in my own talents and ability. He’s always been the person that’s coached me from a young age. At the age of twenty or twenty-one he let go of that and let me spread my wings on my own, and said that he felt like he’d done his job to get me where I am and the next part of the journey is something that I have to self-teach. That’s benefited me because I’ve always believed that I’m responsible for my own destiny. I do a lot of work behind closed doors, it’s the best time for me to figure out things about myself and it’s a similar situation when I’m on the field. No one can bowl the ball for me, or think what I need to do.
BJ: It was obviously a very different time to your father’s generation. How aware were you of the fact that this was a new era that you were growing up in, and that you were the first generation to have those opportunities?

KM: Obviously you read stuff, and people speak to you. In the modern generation we don’t see colour anymore, and that’s probably one of the reasons that opportunity is a little bit better than it probably was twenty to thirty years ago, and I’m very grateful to fall in this generation where there is a little bit more opportunity. But yeah, you do hear about it. It’s part of the reason why I get upset with the youngsters nowadays, when I see them with the opportunities that they’ve been given but they just don’t want to work. I feel like the modern generation are a lot lazier with more opportunity, when the older generation were a lot more hard-working with limited opportunity. Hence why I’m a person that works really hard. A lot of people don’t see the hard work and sweat behind closed doors, which I’m fine with because I don’t need people to know how much I train. I do things to better myself, to better my game and stay one step ahead of everyone.

BJ: What are your earliest cricket memories?

KM: At three years old, I remember breaking a few windows in the backyard. It’s the first time I never got shouted at for breaking stuff. Then receiving my first cricket bat when I was five years old. My Dad came home with a brand-new laser, and he handed it to me. I felt so chuffed, like you’re not even playing hardball cricket yet and you’ve got a proper English willow cricket bat.
As you grow older, my fondest memories are receiving my first-class cap for the Dolphins, and then obviously making my debut for South Africa, that was a very emotional experience. As a youngster you dream of opportunity and playing for your country, but you make peace with the fact that realistically you might not get there, but it’s good to have a goal. When I got the call, I realized that sometimes dreams do become reality. And then getting my first Test wicket. Steve Smith was my first Test wicket. I was the happiest person alive. It was a nice feeling because my first wicket was a big wicket, and it just settled my nerves in that Test match and allowed me to just bowl. I probably wasn’t searching for wickets, but it’s nice to get that first wicket just under your belt to make sure that you settle in nicely. For me, he [Smith] was always someone who I watched batting a lot, so it was quite a humbling feeling getting him out.

**BJ:** I was actually watching that game recently. You were two overs into your debut when Dale Steyn leaves the pitch with a broken arm, leaving South Africa with only you and two other bowlers. Were you nervous in that moment?

**KM:** So the day before we got bowled out for 220 or something like that, and I’d bowled two overs to David Warner that night. I’d bowled against the breeze, but I never felt out of depth. The next morning, Dale took the wicket of Warner, and he went down immediately after that and Faf threw the ball. My mind was so clear and distracted at that time. I know it’s a bit of a contradiction, but I think I was distracted by the occasion, but I was clear in what I needed to do. I just pictured myself bowling at targets in the nets, and that’s all I tried to do for that first innings. By the grace of God, everything worked out accordingly from that day and I never looked back.
Getting your first Test wicket is obviously something of enormous significance in terms of your soul. All your life has built up to that moment on the world stage. Can I ask you about another moment in your life, which is what all bowlers aspire to, to get a hat-trick? You did that last year against us in the West Indies. I forgive you [laughs]. In fact, I was overjoyed for you. Although we were losing, cricket was winning. What was it like getting that hat-trick?

I was begging the captain for the ball. I felt like I hadn’t done much on that tour. He was actually going to take me off that over, because as much as I kept the runs tight he wanted to bring the fast bowlers back on. I was like, ‘just give me one over’. And he said, okay, I’m giving you one over. I think the first wicket was Powell, the left-hander. He played a shot in haste, and got caught on the boundary. The next ball was Jason Holder, and to be honest I didn’t even think too much about the hat-trick. I was just thinking about delivering the ball. It was probably not the best ball I could have bowled, but it was obviously the best ball for the occasion because it got the wicket. When it happened, I didn’t know what to do! I didn’t know whether to do a somersault or flip, and I just tried to land and dive, and I stopped dead in my tracks [laughs]. Only in the evening once people sent the video to me did I realize, ‘what were you thinking when you ran and dove’. I think the excitement and the occasion got the better of me. You dream about wickets, you dream about five-wicket hauls, but you never quite dream about getting a hat-trick. So yeah, it was really humbling. But most importantly, to achieve a hat-trick on the winning side of things, it’s a nice feather in the cap to have.
BJ: While we’re on the topic, I wanted to ask about Sri Lanka in July 2018, when you took nine wickets in an innings.

KM: Yeah [laughs]. I had food poisoning twice in Sri Lanka. I ventured out when I shouldn’t have in terms of my eating, but being in a new country you want to try everything. I love food and I like trying new things so it’s probably my downfall. I didn’t end up playing in the two warm-up games before that, and we were coming from a pre-season, so I hadn’t played many game scenarios, and I’d come from just doing my training. The first innings I didn’t play particularly well, I didn’t feel really good. The second innings I got it right, but we lost the Test match. We came in the second Test match, and they played one spinner which was me, and that probably helped in terms of having the workload that I did. I remember we were under pressure, they were 100 without loss. Kurunaratne and Gunathilaka were on song that day. I remember strangling Kurunaratne down leg and I got a few after that, and at the end of the day I realized, ‘you’re actually on eight wickets here’. And then Faf’s like ‘here’s the ball’, in the morning, and I was like ‘yeah, you’re not taking the ball off my hands’, and got the ninth wicket. So yeah, now that I look back at it, it still hasn’t sunk in. There’s a lot of things that I’ve achieved that still haven’t sunk in. Probably when I retire I’ll look back and think, wow, you actually did something like that. But yeah I remember that I batted on the last day of that Test match. The next day I came to the ground, I had heat exhaustion so they sent me back to the hotel to be on a drip and rehydrate and things like that. It was a bittersweet moment in the end [South Africa lost the match by 199 runs]. Most importantly when I
achieve something, I like being on the winning side of things, it just makes things that much more special. But at the end of the day, I can still say I got nine wickets in a Test match innings for my country, so it’s a humbling feeling.

BJ: And you bowled something like 41 overs of a 100-over innings.

KM: I think I ended up bowling 65 overs or something in that Test match. And it was hot in Colombo, probably the hottest place I’ve played in. But I’ve got no complaints. I’ve conditioned myself to a certain extent so I was able to last the amount of overs that I bowled. I’d do it all again if I had to [laughs].

BJ: You left South Africa as a twenty-three-year-old to play club cricket for a village in Sussex [Cuckfield CC]. How did that come about?

KM: As a youngster growing up in the first-class system in South Africa, everyone wants to go to England and play. It’s a good thing for youngsters to go. Apart from the cricketing stuff it teaches you people skills, you have to fend for yourself so a sense of responsibility. I had a mission when I went over because I had to lose weight during that time in order to keep my place in the Dolphins squad and not be left out due to fitness reasons. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Cuckfield. A great bunch of guys, a lovely club, the wicket suited me. I was the groundsman over there, I used to prepare the wickets on a Tuesday and Thursday, so I had no issues making it a spinning track. I learnt a lot. I also came back with a lot of confidence and self-belief, especially that I lost seventeen kilos in the space of eight weeks. For me it was a life-changing experience from a confidence point of view.
I came back and played my first full season at 24, my second full season at 25 and at 26 I was making my debut for South Africa.

**BJ:** So it was a proper turning point?

**KM:** Definitely. It was probably the most pivotal moment in my career from a professional point of view, and gave me that platform to kick on and become a national player today.

**DD:** You lost seventeen kilos, is that because the food here is so bad?

**KM:** No [laughs], I lost seventeen kilos because I had to cut out sugar, coke – I used to drink two litres of coke a day – and I stopped eating bread. I’m also a person that if I set my mind to achieve something, I will always do my own research. At the end of the day I do the trial and error and see what works and what doesn’t. Every day I used to stand on the scale, and if I saw a 200 gram decrease I was the happiest person alive. After a week you see proper results, especially because I was very disciplined with it. I love cricket you know, it’s all I have, so I knew what I had to sacrifice and what I was sacrificing for to make those changes in my life.

**DD:** I read somewhere that you said you love playing county cricket. Is that on the cards?

**KM:** Yeah, so I was supposed to go earlier this year, but because my marriage was postponed for the last two years due to COVID-19, it finally transpired this year, so I couldn’t go over this year.

**BJ:** Congratulations!

**KM:** In the future or come the following years, I hope there’s still opportunity for me. I feel that it’s the best thing for someone’s career, just to have that mileage and game-time under your belt, but also
being in foreign conditions it teaches you about yourself.

**BJ:** Some of your best moments – at the WACA, the Wanderers, the Basin Reserve – have all been on pitches that traditionally haven’t been seen as spin bowling surfaces. Can you talk us through that?

**KM:** You know, you only realize how difficult it is to bowl on these surfaces when you’re actually involved in the game. For me, I do a lot of target bowling. My asset is my control. I always pride myself on my lines and lengths, and if there is a bit of assistance I’ll try and utilize it. It’s about trying to get the ball to dip in the air, which if you can do on any surface it does become a little bit more difficult.

**BJ:** South Africa has traditionally been seen as a pace bowling nation. Spinners have often been the first to be dropped and the last ones into the team in South Africa. How did you deal with that scrutiny coming up in the game?

**KM:** It is a tough situation being a spin-bowler in South African cricket. It’s something that’s probably made my mind a lot stronger, haven’t dealt with it at an earlier age and being able to persevere. I reached the stage where I wasn’t the only spinner in my domestic team. You can become despondent, and I’ll be honest you want the other spinner to do badly so you get your chance. But I reached the age where I matured very quickly, and I said, ‘I don’t wish anyone badly, I want everyone to do well’. Instead, every time that I get left out of the team I’m going to work on one aspect of myself. I felt like the coach was telling me you need to go and improve your spin bowling in this sector of the game, so I’d go and work. I think that’s where my work ethic has come from. And it’s helped
me, because now I can look back and see that all those overs, I can see the results of it coming through now. Whenever I do play a match, my main job apart from trying to win games for my country is to inspire the next generation that you can make a career from becoming a spinner. I think it’s a lost art in South African cricket, and hopefully when I’m done one day I want to be that catalyst to make sure that I’m overseeing spin bowling throughout the country, and giving guys the platform to believe that they can achieve it, and show people that having a spinner in your squad is as good as having your first choice as a captain in your squad.

**DD:** Can I ask you about mental health – how do you sustain yourself given the enormous amount of pressure you’re under? Is it family, is it just the love of cricket?

**KM:** So I’m a very spiritual person, and I’d like to have the ability to deal with situations like that. But that’s where you also fall back on your wife and your family when you come back, and you just have downtime in your own environment, you know. As much as you’re able to travel the world, having off days in your own house, on your own couch, having a cup of tea, just talking over things away from cricket just rejuvenates yourself. Having your family, your wife, partner, whoever it is, on tour does make a huge difference in mental health issues. Yes we are sporting heroes and we get paid to do what we do, but there’s a lot of pressures that we deal with. You’ve got your own pressure that you put on yourself to make sure that you’re at the top of your game, you’ve got pressure from the opposition, you’ve got pressure from the media, pressure from selectors, so I can understand why a lot of people have mental health issues.
Also with the pandemic and being isolated, and not being able to move around the hotel. You’re stuck in the room with scheduled times, it has put a lot more strain than one would expect. It’s really difficult, trust me. You can sit in your room, and even though you’ve got five hours to sleep, you’re looking at the same four walls, you don’t have a couch. It is difficult. You don’t have access to a kitchen where you can open the fridge and make a salad. It’s straight room service, the same food you had the night before. It becomes monotonous. People like change, people like their own environment, they like to move about, just get a breath of fresh air.

I remember now we were in New Zealand, and obviously we had to do our quarantine under the military requirements because of COVID-19. We had yard times where we could walk out and get a breath of fresh air, then they made you go back, and it felt like you were in prison. For me, that was probably the most challenging tour I’ve ever been on, just from a COVID-19 point of view and isolation point of view. It was so difficult. It so happened that my birthday fell in isolation, so that was tough. I just sat there with my cornflakes and celebrated my birthday [laughs]. So yeah, I think there’s a lot of people who are coming forward now about mental health, and I’m glad that the various organizations are actually taking it seriously and understanding where the guys are coming from.

DD: Now you’re married, I suppose your wife will have to put up with your absences?

KM: Yeah, so I came back the day before our sangeet night. It was a bit tough because I hadn’t seen her for almost two months before the wedding. Luckily I’ve got a very understanding wife, and she understands. It does take its toll at times, and I suppose for starting a family you’ve got to be very mindful of the time spent away from home and planning. I think it’s important to have a partner who understands and is actually quite strong mentally to help
you. You could be sitting in your hotel room and you need to pick up the phone at night and you need that support. Fortunately enough I do have that.

DD: I agree with you Keshav. In my own life, I just love hanging around with my wife and kids and my sofa, where I’ve got my own beer in the fridge. Just the simple things, just to be a normal human being and to be in your comfort zone is so fantastic.

BJ: Talking of family, you recently took those seven wickets against Bangladesh. To have that moment in front of your whole family must have been quite something.

KM: Yeah. You know my dream was always to play a Test match against India at Kingsmead, and obviously try and be on the winning side and get a five-for. Kingsmead is always going to be special for me, because they’ve given me the foundations and fundamentals and opportunity to get where I am. For me it’s home; it’s my second home. I actually spent more time at Kingsmead than I did at my own house with training and things like that.

I remember with the first innings I felt I probably bowled one of my best spells, but I never got any reward in thirty-one overs or something like that. The coach came up to me afterwards and said that this innings might not have been your innings in terms of wickets, but who knows, the second innings it can happen. Simon bowled extremely well from the other end. I came out that night after we got bowled out, and in my mind I said ‘right, all you have to do is just be your freest self on the field. You know these conditions, just go and bowl’. I picked up two wickets that night, and in the morning I don’t know what happened but it just happened so quickly, that’s all I remember. My first
four wickets that morning were on the fifth ball of each over, it was so weird how it happened. To do it in front of my wife and my family was special. It’s very special having them there to witness that, and also to win a Test match at Kingsmead, because our record as South Africa isn’t great at Kingsmead, so I also want more cricket to come, because for me Kingsmead is home like I said. So to change that mindset.

And to then go to Port Elizabeth, I remember there was a bit of indecisiveness about what to do, and I know Dean, Dean likes to front up and win the toss and bat in tough conditions sometimes when he’s indecisive. The coach came to me and said, you know what, we could try and put on a good score, who knows. We went in, we had a bit of a collapse but we were still in quite a healthy position, and I remember batting and I was like, ‘oh I’m feeling okay, just try to bat one hundred balls today and you never know’. I ended up getting the eighty-four, I was a bit disappointed to fall short of my Test hundred, it’s an accolade that I really really want to achieve as a Test cricketer. Then we got out that night before. For some reason that night at PE the ball started to spin and react quickly, I think it was my second or third ball I got a wicket, then I got another two again. Then the next morning someone said to me at breakfast ‘don’t you want to go home early’, and I said yeah, but you know cricket is not that easy, and he said ‘just replicate what you did in Durban’. So I’m like yeah ok if you could press play on a button in me and repeat the process then you’re more than welcome to do it. And fortunately enough it did happen like that. And I think having another spinner on the other side, from a coaching point of view and a selectors point of view, I must take my hat off to them for believing in it because it’s often that South Africans will still go with the fast-bowling mentality, but I’m glad that mindset shift is happening. Having someone of Simon’s calibre at the other end obviously helped me and aided me to achieve what I did during those two Test matches.
DD: Thank you, Keshav, for taking the time to talk with us.

BJ: Thanks so much.

KM: A pleasure, cheers guys.