

#BELIEF

Grow Them Big

The Cultivation of Big-Size Fruits and Vegetables in China is an ancient tradition



In Chinese agriculture, the pursuit of larger fruits and vegetables has become a notable trend, driven by both consumer demand and cultural significance. Among the most impressive examples are the Chinese big-size bottle gourd, watermelon, and pomegranate, all cultivated to substantial sizes to cater to market preferences and traditional belief.

Chinese Big-Size Bottle Gourd

The bottle gourd (Hu Lu) is a versatile vegetable that has been cultivated in China for centuries. Recently, farmers have focused on producing larger varieties, particularly in regions like Guangxi and Zhejiang, where the climate is favorable for their growth. The big-size bottle gourd holds cultural value, symbolizing prosperity and longevity in Chinese tradition. While large gourds are prized for their symbolic meaning, the shift to bigger sizes can sometimes affect their flavor and nutritional content, with emphasis placed on size over taste.

Giant Watermelon in China

Watermelons are a summer staple in China, especially in regions like Xinjiang and Henan, which are known for growing some of the world's largest varieties. These giant watermelons, which can weigh over 20 kg, are highly sought after for their visual appeal and sweetness. They are often showcased in festivals and agricultural exhibitions. However, the focus on producing larger melons can

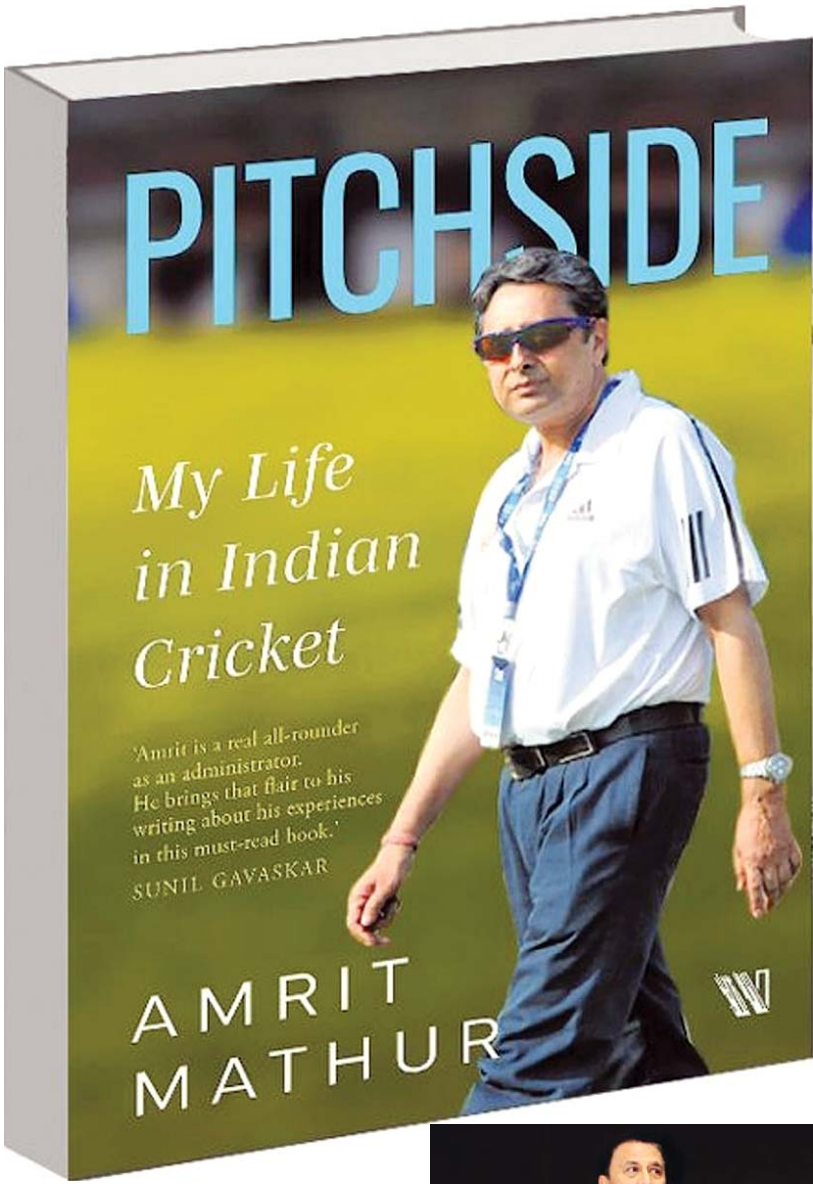


lead to issues like lower sugar content and flavor dilution, as rapid growth driven by fertilizers and genetically modified seeds sometimes compromises quality.

Big Pomegranates: Symbol of Fertility

Pomegranates, especially large ones, are widely cultivated in regions like Gansu and Guangdong. Known for their symbolism of fertility and prosperity, large pomegranates are seen as more auspicious and are often sold at a premium. Their cultivation involves selective breeding to produce bigger, juicier fruits. However, this focus on size can reduce genetic diversity and raise concerns about the environmental impact of intensive farming practices.

The emphasis on large fruits and vegetables in China, including the big-size bottle gourd, watermelon, and pomegranate, reflects both cultural traditions and market demands. While these oversized crops are visually appealing and commercially valuable, they come with challenges, including environmental strain, reduced flavor quality, and potential biodiversity loss. Balancing size with sustainability and nutritional value will be crucial for the future of Chinese agriculture.



● Asif Ullah Khan

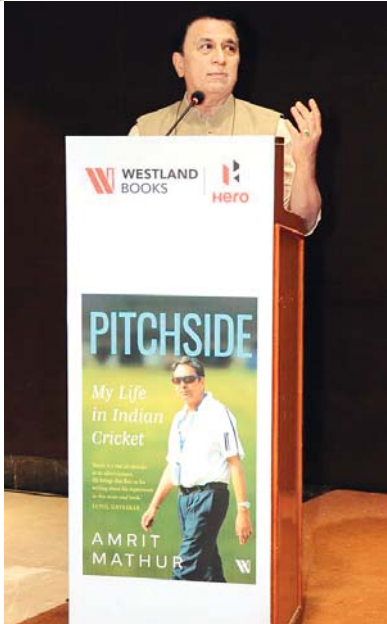
The famed American film critic, Roger Ebert, once described nostalgia as a longing for lost innocence and an ache for youthful optimism. 'That sentiment finds a natural echo in *Pitchside: My Life in Indian Cricket*, in which

Amrit Mathur, civil servant, cricket administrator, and writer, takes readers on a reflective journey through the ever-evolving landscape of Indian cricket, not from centre stage, but from the gallery, the corridors of power, and the quiet side-lines where memory lingers. Mathur's book is less a conventional autobiography and more a tapestry of recollections, anecdotes, portraits, and personal encounters woven into a broader chronicle of how Indian cricket transformed from genteel amateurism into a high-octane commercial spectacle. At its heart, *Pitchside* is not merely about matches won or lost; it is about people, institutions, and a game that mirrors the shifting rhythms of Indian society.

In the chapter, *Opening the Account*, Momtaz, as Mathur is popularly known, recalls Jaipur's cricketing nursery at the St. Xavier's School nets, where the formidable N. D. Marshall served as coach. Marshall Sahab, a member of India's historic 1932 tour of England under Col. C. K. Nayudu, epitomised and Guangdong. Known for their symbolism of fertility and prosperity, large pomegranates are seen as more auspicious and are often sold at a premium. Their cultivation involves selective breeding to produce bigger, juicier fruits. However, this focus on size can reduce genetic diversity and raise concerns about the environmental impact of intensive farming practices.



Amrit Mathur with Madhav Rao Scindia.



Sunil Gavaskar.

fundamentalist of technique, he believed a batsman should play strictly within the classical 'V'. Any flamboyant stroke, the pull, sweep, or hook, invited his wrath, often delivered in sharp, Parsi-accented Hindi. Through Marshall, Mathur resurrects a vanished ethos of discipline, restraint, and reverence for tradition.

He also revisits the legendary State Sports Council summer cricket camps at Mount Abu, a formative space for aspiring cricketers in Rajasthan. Anyone who attended these camps finds it hard to forget their encounters with the great Mushtaq Ali, who could, with a single stump hit fast bowlers out of the

Untold stories of Indian cricket

While the early chapters glow with warmth and reminiscence, the narrative gradually shifts to chart the dramatic transformation of Indian cricket. Mathur self-deprecatingly calls himself a 'concussion sub,' yet, his three-decade-long association with the sport places him at the heart of seismic changes, from cream-coloured flannels to coloured kits, from leisurely Test matches to the 'bang-bang' era of television deals, sponsorships, and franchise cricket.

#PITCHSIDE TO BOUNDARY



nets, Mathur reminisces about this experience with fondness, and I know this nostalgia personally: my brother, Arif Ullah Khan, attended the camp alongside Mathur and still recounts those unforgettable moments decades later. In this sense, *Pitchside* functions not only as Mathur's memory book but as a collective archive of Indian cricket's grassroots past.

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The rise of the Indian Premier League is like a Bollywood blockbuster, glamorous, frenetic, and crowded with characters. Alongside star players and corporate moguls came bookies, match-fixing syndicates, insider leaks, political power brokers, and administrators navigating an unprecedented flood of money. Yet, Mathur deliberately avoids washing the BCCI's dirty linen in public, he compensates by peppering the book with revealing and engaging anecdotes that underscore his deep and long-standing relationships with players and officials.

His insider status lends the book a rare vantage point. Having risen from college cricket to sports writing, and eventually to the upper echelons of the BCCI, Mathur, had he wished, could have played the whistleblower in the mould of Edward Snowden or Julian Assange. Instead, he chooses discretion. In an institution often seen as murky than Delhi's winter air, he



Amrit Mathur with Sachin Tendulkar.

honours the sanctity of the responsibilities entrusted to him.

One of the book's most engaging sections comes after the chapters on Mount Abu and St. Xavier's School, Mathur's portrait of former India captain Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi. Born into royalty, Tiger Pataudi, as he was popularly known, blended regal flamboyance with razor-sharp, often acerbic commentary on cricket. To outsiders, this sometimes translated into an image of arrogance. However, those who knew him closely suggest that this perception stemmed less from pride and more from his intensely private nature.

My former Pakistani editor at *Khaleej Times*, Tahir Mirza, who was distantly related to Pataudi, never found him arrogant. He once recalled an incident from a social gathering: despite physical discomfort, Tiger insisted on standing up whenever a woman entered the room, even when Bacchus had been particularly generous. The gesture reflected not arrogance, but old-world courtesy and deeply ingrained chivalry.

Mathur reinforces this reassessment. His long association began



Mushtaq Ali.

when Pataudi was the editor of Sports World. He recalls Tiger as a reserved, guarded, and intensely private individual, particularly in lively social settings. Far from being aloof, Pataudi was selective about friendliness, a trait often misread as haughtiness.

Mathur also dispels another long-standing myth, that Pataudi and Salim Durrani did not get along. In fact, Pataudi, who rarely indulged in ranking or comparing players, often listed five or six names when asked to identify the best Indian team, handed the paper to Mathur with a simple instruction: "Make sure Salim Durrani's name is there." The anecdote reveals a generosity of spirit and fairness that defined Pataudi's cricketing ethos.

One episode that highlights how Tiger Pataudi remained a purist until his final years comes from Mathur's memory of taking him to Feroz Shah Kotla for an IPL match. The booming, high-decibel music during over breaks and intervals felt like sheer torture to Pataudi. Within half an hour, he called Mathur and asked him to get his car, unable to endure what he saw as the sensory excess and cultural assault inflicted by this modern, carnival-like version of cricket.

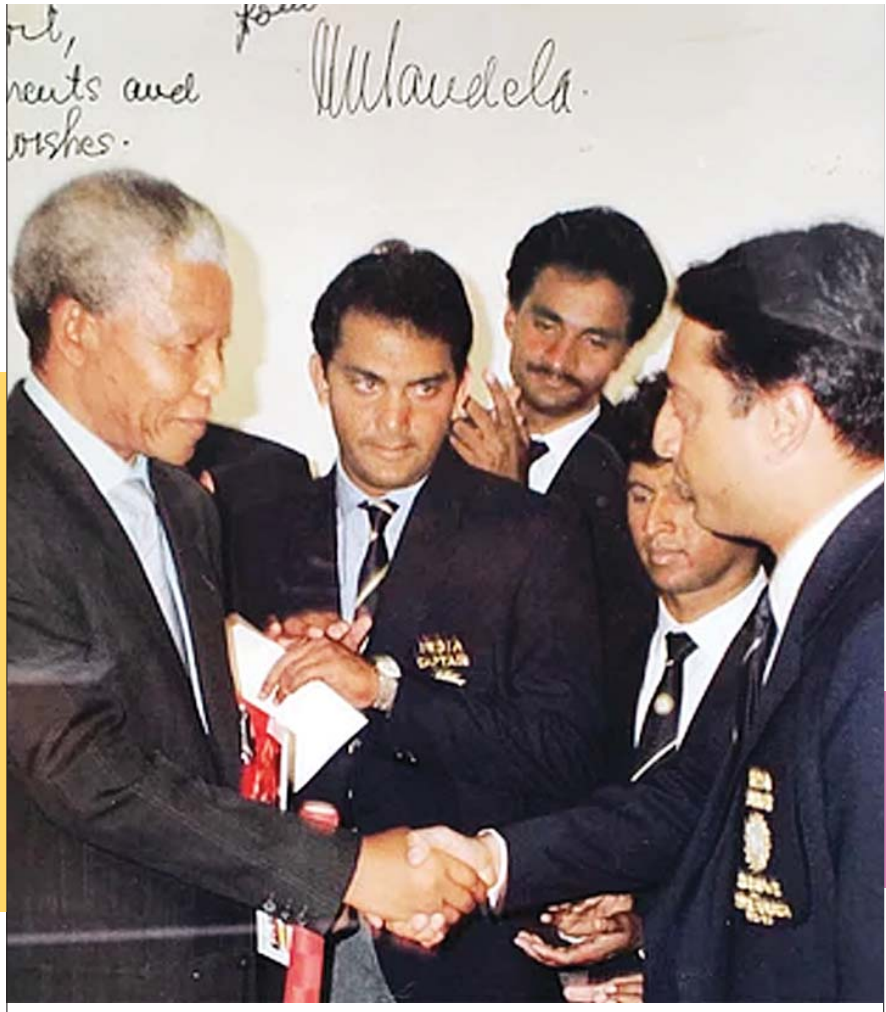
A lighter anecdote features former India captain Sourav Ganguly. During an England tour, Mathur invited Ganguly to a well-known London fish restaurant, forgetting it was a Tuesday, a day on which Ganguly avoids non-vegetarian food. As a result, the former captain had no choice but to order a vegetarian meal. One can hardly imagine a greater culinary atrocity than forcing a Bengali to eat vegetables in a seafood restaurant while everyone else feasts on an array of fish dishes.

One of the most surprising revelations in the book is Mathur's mention of former BCCI chairman



Protecting Stripes and Wildlife

International Zebra Day, observed every January 31, is dedicated to raising awareness about the conservation of zebras and their natural habitats. These strikingly striped animals are not just iconic symbols of African wildlife but also play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance. The day encourages wildlife enthusiasts, conservationists, and the general public to learn about the threats zebras face, including habitat loss and poaching, and to support protection initiatives. Schools, zoos, and wildlife organizations often host educational programs, photo exhibitions, and campaigns to celebrate these magnificent creatures and inspire global efforts for their survival.



Indian Cricket Team meeting Nelson Mandela in South Africa.



Shashi Tharoor.

Jagmohan Dalmiya speaking Marwari. Although the Dalmiya family hails from the Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan, they migrated long ago to other regions, and many members of the family were born and brought up outside the state. Mathur recalls that when they were alone, Dalmiya would often switch to Marwari in conversation, a reminder that, despite having spent most of his life in Kolkata, he had retained a strong connection to his linguistic and cultural roots.

While Mathur pays glowing tribute to Dalmiya as something of a mentor, he shies away from revisiting the most controversial chapter of Dalmiya's career: The dramatic



Amrit Mathur with Tiger Pataudi.

#STORMS

The Catatumbo Lightning Storms

The Everlasting Storm in Catatumbo, Venezuela: Nature's odd Phenomenon



Nestled in the north-western region of Venezuela, the Catatumbo River is home to one of the most unique and awe-inspiring natural phenomena on Earth: The Catatumbo Lightning Storms. Often referred to as the 'everlasting storm,' this extraordinary meteorological occurrence has captured the fascination of scientists, travelers, and nature enthusiasts for decades. Here's a deep dive into what makes this storm so remarkable, its history, and its impact on the region.

What is the Catatumbo Lightning? The Catatumbo Lightning is a series of electrical storms that occur almost continuously over the Catatumbo River, a river that runs through the western part of Venezuela and flows into Lake Maracaibo. This phenomenon is characterized by frequent, intense lightning strikes that appear to 'dance' across the sky illuminating the dark night, and can occur up to 280 days a year. The phenomenon is so consistent that it is sometimes referred to as a 'lightning factory'.

How Frequent is it? The lightning storms in Catatumbo are extremely frequent, with some estimates suggesting that the area experiences lightning strikes around 10 hours per day during the wet season. This is an astounding rate, with over 280 lightning strikes per hour during peak storm activity. The storms can last for hours at a time and often occur on the same spot, in the same region, over the Catatumbo River and parts of



Lake Maracaibo. While this lightning event is unique to Catatumbo, it is not the only place in the world to experience regular storms. However, the high frequency and duration of the Catatumbo storm is what makes it so unusual.

What Causes the Phenomenon? The exact cause of the Catatumbo Lightning is still not fully understood, but scientists have several theories. The key factors appear to be the geography, atmospheric conditions, and air currents in the region:

- Geography and Topography:** The Catatumbo River Basin is located near Lake Maracaibo, and the surrounding mountains create a perfect storm-producing environment. The region's topography, with its highlands and valleys, traps warm, moist air coming from the Caribbean Sea and cool air from the Andes mountains. This creates a unique atmospheric system that promotes the formation of thunderstorms.
- Wind Currents:** Warm air rising from the lake inter-

acts with cooler air descending from the mountains, creating a series of updrafts and downdrafts that produce the necessary conditions for frequent electrical discharges.

Humidity: Venezuela's tropical climate contributes to high humidity, which increases the likelihood of thunderstorms. The moisture-laden air, when mixed with the temperature differences between the lake and the mountains, contributes to the intensity and frequency of the lightning strikes.

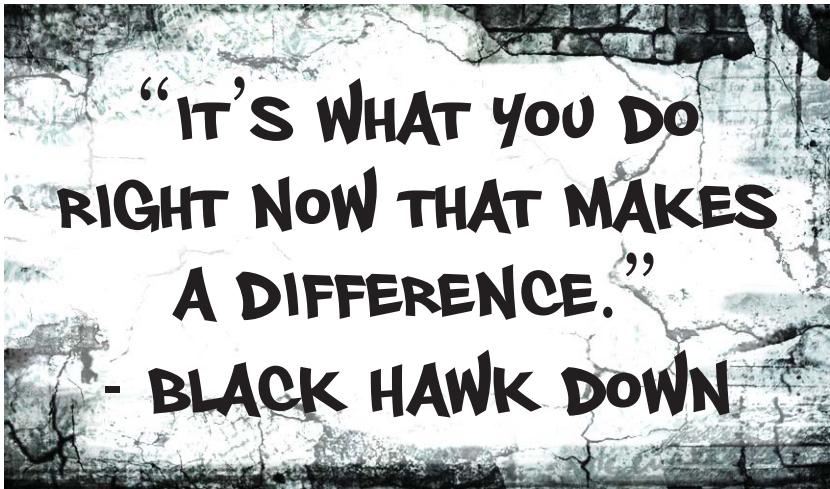
Electromagnetic Activity: Another theory points to magnetic fields and their interaction with the region's atmospheric conditions, which could potentially increase the frequency of lightning activity.

Impact on the Environment and Climate

The Catatumbo Lightning plays an essential role in the region's environmental processes. For one, the lightning storms are believed to contribute to the nitrogen cycle by breaking apart nitrogen molecules in the air. This process allows the nitrogen to be converted into a form that can be used by plants, promoting biodiversity and the growth of vegetation in the region. Furthermore, the intense thunderstorms are thought to play a role in the weather systems across the broader region, potentially influencing rainfall patterns in surrounding areas. Some scientists believe that the lightning could even have an impact on the global carbon cycle, making it a subject of great interest for environmental studies.



THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman