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The retirement of a great sportsman is inevitably billed as the end of an era. This week the curtain will come down on the career of one of cricket's finest batsmen, not simply of his generation, but in the game's history. And it is likely that 40 year old Sachin Tendulkar will bow out to the grandest and most elaborate

farewell that the world of sport has ever experienced.

Even the timing of his departure has been carefully orchestrated to the point of creating a rift between two of cricket's firmest allies. Tendulkar and his Indian colleagues should have been touring South Africa, generating desperately needed television revenue for the hosts. However, there was a real danger of the aging super star struggling against the strongest pace attack in the world, and his landmark 200th Test would have taken place in a relative backwater such as Port Elizabeth. That, and the obvious opportunity that the landmark offered Tendulkar to finally retire (long overdue in the opinion of some) prompted the Indian cricket authorities to manipulate the international calendar, postpone their trip to South Africa and invite the West Indies to tour instead. Tendulkar's home city of Mumbai was awarded the honour of hosting his 200th and final Test.

Speaking as someone who has toured India many times, I cannot begin to imagine the scenes in that extraordinary city this week.

Of course, it should be a great celebration of a man who has scored more runs, more centuries and played more Tests than anyone else. Sadly, there is also the real possibility that for some it will be more like a bereavement – the passing of a figurehead who has always been a key part of their lives. For this is the role that Tendulkar has played ever since he made his debut for India at the tender age of 16. He

is not merely a sportsman, but an icon upon whom the vast developing country of a billion people depended and, rich or poor, he was their inspiration.

This was never more evident than in 2008 when, just a fortnight after the outrageous

terrorist attack rocked Mumbai, England resumed their tour to find a country in mourning and deeply angry. Tendulkar's match winning century was not simply technically brilliant, but it showed India that it could smile once more. Wherever retirement takes him, Sachin Tendulkar will always be more than merely a cricketer.

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