from the timing, is that it is less formal than evening league games and a winning squad is lifting the trophy in under a month.

While this T20 entertainment in the evening for the last few hours of the fast proved very popular with many keen to come along just to socialise, Taj also noticed that evening net sessions at his local club, Great Horton Church CC, were far better attended during Ramadan.

There are also both practical and spiritual considerations for cricketers. There might be less energetic warming-up before a game to conserve energy, and perhaps more understanding when teammates lose concentration in the field. However, the spiritual aspect of Ramadan on cricketers, when competitive juices are flowing, feels like it could be at odds with the expectation of generosity towards others. So is there a change of behaviour by cricketers during Ramadan with more respect shown to opponents?

Amjid believes so – up to a point: "I would like to say 'yes' but I don't think it's quite as simple as that. I think people are sometimes more respectful, quieter and more focused on the game and less on 'losing it', as it were. … Having said that, some of the nicest guys I've met do suffer from 'white-line fever.' When they cross the boundary, they're not the nicest people because their competitive edge gets the better of them, and I don't think Ramadan dulls that for some people."

Over the past couple of years as a cricket journalist in Yorkshire, I've got a sense of Ramadan but it was only when talking with Amjid about his daily routine that it really struck home. With sunrise in the region of 2am, just staying awake until then or getting up beforehand to eat breakfast is a battle against the body clock.

Before sunrise, Amjid gets by on a bowl of cereal, unable to manage anything more. After all, Ramadan isn't intended to be easy, it's about feeling closer to God and making a sacrifice to appreciate those less fortunate. Routines are not intended to change as far as possible so for Amjid, that means doing the school run before a day of work. Some take time off during the holy month but, much like the intensity of cricket, concentration at work can help channel the mind. He remains adamant that achieving enough sleep is the toughest part: "I find what disrupts things more than anything else during Ramadan is sleeping patterns."

This year, here in Yorkshire the fast is broken at 9.45pm and additional prayers in the mosque take until midnight – then there's the prospect of the first meal of the new day at 1am. Whether five hours of sleep are possible thereafter or a few more are tacked on later in the day, it's not consecutive, uninterrupted rest – and amongst this disruption, there are 190 overs of cricket to get through each weekend.

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THE RACE FOR EQUALITY

Nick Thomas gets a close-up look at modern South Africa

I was lucky enough to be in South Africa this past January. It was my fifth visit to the country but the first where I was able to take in some cricket. I have a very personal stake in the country because I have a six-year-old son who lives there – a beautiful, energetic boy who is a rare thing even in the South Africa of 2016: bi-racial.

As with all the previous visits, my purpose was to see my son and spend time with him. Only this time I was also able to see four days of Test cricket as a very welcome bonus. As a UK native who has lived in the cricket desert of the US since 2002, you can imagine the joy I felt at being able to attend an England Test series abroad for about five pounds a day.

I saw England clinch the series with their win at The Wanderers and then succumb to post-victory malaise at Centurion, where I persuaded my son to endure one and a half sessions with me on the third day.

Aside from the enjoyment of watching so much live cricket, the trip turned my thoughts to the nature of the intersection of race and cricket in current-day South Africa and beyond. Taking my son to the game – combined with all my impressions formed of the country during several visits, and conversations with local people – led me to a fundamental questioning of how to approach the stark realities of racial prejudice in all its forms.

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There are some astonishingly bad statistics about the presence of black South Africans in the national team since the Proteas were allowed back into international cricket some 25 years ago. It wasn't until this most recent series against England, for

example, that a black South African, Temba Bavuma, scored a Test century. That does not point to a lack of batting talent among black South Africans but to the reality that only seven black players have represented their country at Test level since it came back into the fold in 1992. Of those, fast bowler Makhaya Ntini has been the only one to have cemented his place in the team, winning over 100 caps. The others – though Bavuma and opening bowler Kagiso Rabada appear to have bright futures – have mustered very few caps between them.

Lamentable, but hardly surprising given the obvious racial divides in the country both now and during apartheid, and the position of cricket there as a bastion of white privilege. Nothing unusual there – plenty of other cricketing nations have similar histories. For instance: a token white player once had to be the captain of the West Indies team; the *Daily Telegraph* criticises Moeen Ali for his perfectly reasonable assertion that his Muslim faith trumps everything else (it's hard to imagine them criticising this if he were white and a devout Christian); Margaret Thatcher's right-hand man Norman Tebbit famously once said young England-born Pakistanis should support the country of their birth rather than the country they perhaps most identified with. So maybe South Africa's predicament is simply the most extreme and current manifestation of a racial divide that has existed consistently throughout the history of this great game.

Of course, cricket reflects the society in which it is played and racism is unfortunately everywhere.

South Africa's economy is in tatters and the political dynasty of the African National Congress is on shaky ground because of corruption from the very top down, a shadow of what it was under the greatest leader of them all in Mandela. English cricket fans surely enjoyed the tumbling value of the rand as they drank their Castle lager for the equivalent of a pound but, anecdotally at least, I heard from native South Africans that people were becoming meaner and that the crime rate, already high, was exploding. Away from the glitzy offices and the smoothness of the Gautrain journey between Johannesburg and Pretoria, black South Africans continue to walk miles and miles to underpaid jobs and poor whites beg at the stoplights. Maybe 'twas ever thus but there continues to be a sharp contrast – and perhaps an ever-sharpening one – between the haves and the have-nots.

Nobody is going to pretend that simply ending apartheid could ever have ushered in a perfectly stable, democratic and racially fair society, a land of equal opportunity. Twenty years or so after the ending of institutionalised white supremacy, public education – at the forefront of Mandela's dream – remains largely dismal, a third of the population relies on generous government hand-outs to fund their lives, and the tax base is a paltry five million in a population of 52 million. Infrastructure is poor, the bureaucracy is bloated with one in five people working in government jobs and poverty is everywhere, mostly black of course, but also white. Pouring an apparently increasing lack of economic opportunity for the majority of the population on top of the racial divide makes for a potent mix.

I feel there can only be one way forward and that has to be through the prism of younger generations where race essentially doesn't really matter. Naive, you might say but, to me, there is no other option than to find shreds of hope and fight against the ugliness of racism in all its forms and, as in so many other situations, it's children who can point the way forward when adults have failed.

So I prefer to look at the perfectly-turned-out schoolchildren on the second day of the Wanderers Test and see some hope for the future in them. Born into post-apartheid South Africa, they seemed to have little notion of race. Black, white, Asian, they sang their hearts out to the famous South African "Shosholoza" song as a good-natured retort to the Barmy Army. No taunting at all on either side. Both sides were making an effort, albeit a small one, to create something, build some bridges and not put up higher walls. That can only be a good thing.

I for one hope Bavuma goes on to score many more hundreds and Rabada continues to take many more wickets and hopefully inspire young black South Africans to overcome the huge obstacles they face on a daily basis. And that such youngsters get a chance to show such talent. Just as I hope the likes of Moeen and Adil Rashid become role models for aspiring English cricketers of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds.

I want such inclusive societies for my child as I do for everyone else. And I want to see national cricket teams reflecting such progress and shutting up the old white male cynics in their ivory towers.

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