

More questions than answers ahead of T20 WC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Virat Kohli's first T20 hundred certainly means a lot but counts for little. India have exited from yet another multi-nation tournament having failed to rise up to the occasion during crunch games and with a lot of questions without answers.

So isn't the sameness (three right-handers) that seemed to have hurt India during the 2021 edition coming to haunt them again?

Without an iota of doubt, if anyone among the top three misses out on the playing eleven, it will be Rahul as both Rohit and Kohli have shown that they can switch gears effectively.

There is a school of thought that Suryakumar Yadav be promoted as one drop batter but the clearer picture perhaps will only emerge once they play the home series against Australia in two weeks' time.

Rahul is a supremely talented batter with all the strokes in the book -- both orthodox and unorthodox, but at least in Asia Cup, he did not show any distinctive change in his approach. He only attacked after settling down.

Kohli in his chat with Rohit indicated that he will switch back to his 'old template' of finding gaps and hitting more boundaries than trying to hit sixes.

"If I can take 10-15 balls to settle down, then I can accelerate," Kohli told his skipper. The problem is that in 50 over cricket, 15 balls of quiet period isn't a big deal but the moment it is a match of 120-deliveries each, that quantum of balls become invaluable.

We have seen that in the second Pakistan game where Kohli got 60 off 44 balls.

MIDDLE-ORDER MUDDLE As far as the middle order is concerned, the tournament didn't provide a definitive answer if Rishabh Pant is more suitable than the team's oldest player Dinesh Karthik, who has been earmarked for a specific 15-ball role at the end of the innings.

As far as Pant is concerned, the free-flowing bat swing that we are used to seeing in the Test matches is conspicuous by its



THE TOP THREE?

And this brings us to the most basic question? Will this (Rohit, KL Rahul and Kohli), be India's top three going into the T20 World Cup?

Yes, it seems so if one sees the kind of support that both Rohit and Kohli have shown for an under-pressure Rahul, whose 'wicket preservation first' approach in Powerplay overs has more often than not put India in trouble.

"We have to keep him in good head space as we know what he can do," Kohli said during his interaction with Rohit on bcci.Tv.

One could gauge that both the seniors want Rahul to settle down with six more international games (vs Australia and SA) and two warm-up left before start of T20 World cup?

absence in this format. Karthik was played in three of the five games but haven't got to bat a cumulative 10 balls in the tourney.

So you can't really judge who will finally make it to the playing eleven if not both?

But can coach Dravid be a bit more flexible and not just set a role for Karthik -- like 10 balls in the end or something like that? Because in case of Pant, he has been used sometimes as a floater -- before Hardik Pandya or after him depending on match situation. Both without success.

For the reserve middle-order batter, the multi-skilled Deepak Hooda remains favourite but one should discount Sanju Samson at his own peril.

BOWLING OPTIONS

The absence of Ravindra Jadeja post knee surgery (he got reportedly injured during the team-bonding activity) is going to hurt India the most.

While Axar Patel is a very sincere cricketer but when it comes to judging the batting flexibility, like Jadeja coming in at No. 4 against Pakistan in first game, that will be beyond lanky Gujarat lad's bandwidth. He is a capable enough batter but certainly not as good as Jadeja.

The Indian team is also very senior dependent as it was evident when Ravi Bishnoi, despite a fine game against Pakistan, was benched in the next game. In Australia, where there will be an extra pacer required, Bishnoi could well miss the first team bus.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar gave 19 runs in the 19th over against Pakistan but he was again given the same duty against Sri Lanka and he faltered again.

While a five-wicket haul against Afghanistan is fine but as Gautam Gambhir put it succinctly in commentary, as a senior bowler, Bhuvneshwar will be expected to provide wickets with both new and old

ball without being one dimensional.

It would have been interesting to see whether Arshdeep could have done a better job with the 19th over in one of the games, as he has bowled a lot of penultimate overs for Punjab Kings.

But with Jasprit Bumrah and Harshal Patel set to get fit, Arshdeep will find it difficult to get a first XI look-in while Avesh Khan is unlikely to even find a place in the final 15 if one goes by his form.

Avesh hasn't shown a lot of cricketing smarts in the shorter version and as former coach Ravi Shastri said, Mohammed Shami should have not been dumped completely from this format.

As India travel to Australia, what looks worrisome is that there is a repeat of 2019 when till the defeat against New Zealand in the semi-finals, the Indian team couldn't find a suitable No. 4.

Here, the top three isn't looking convincing (one needs to discount the Afghanistan game) and one middle-order and one bowling slot is yet to be fixed.

There are questions and it is sooner the better if Dravid can find the answers.

INDIA LIKELY Specialist Batters (4): Rohit Sharma (captain), KL Rahul (vice-captain), Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, All-Rounders/middle-order (2): Hardik Pandya, Deepak Hooda WK/finisher (2): Rishabh Pant, Dinesh Karthik, Spinners (2): Yuzvendra Chahal, Axar Patel Pacers (5): Jasprit Bumrah (subject to fitness), Harshal Patel, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohammed Shami, Arshdeep Singh. Likely Stand Bys: Sanju Samson, Avesh Khan, Ravi Bishnoi, Shreyas Iyer, Deepak Chahar.

Need to get balance in batting order to close out games: Harman

PTI ■ CHESTER-LE-STREET

Closing out games has always been a cause of concern for the Indian women's cricket team and skipper Harmanpreet Kaur believes the solution to this problem lies in getting the right balance in the batting order.

In the Birmingham Commonwealth Games final, India, chasing Australia's 162, were on course at 118 for 2 before losing the plot and were bowled out for 152 in 19.3 overs.

"We are working on that. I know for a long time these things are troubling us. We need to show some patience and after a while we will start getting the results also," Harmanpreet said on the eve of the first T20I against England here on Saturday.

"That is why this time we have added two more batters -- Dayalan Hemalatha and -- KP Navgire -- in the side who can finish the game for us. They have done really well in domestic cricket, scored good amount of runs."



"We need to have balance on our side in the lower order, when there is balance things become easier," she added.

Having said that Harmanpreet believes the visitors need to be flexible in their batting approach.

"We need to be a bit flexible when it comes to batting because sometimes you had to see who is bowling and whose performance is better against her and who can get those runs for us."

flexible. We will take calls according to match situations," she said.

The right-handed batter looks at the limited-overs tour of England as a fresh start after their silver medal-winning effort in Birmingham, where they beat England en route to the gold medal clash.

"We have done really well in the CWG but now it's a new start for us. England have always done well against us. For us it will be very challenging. (But) CWG has given us a lot of confidence," she said.

Harmanpreet said. India are in England on a two-week white-ball tour that comprises six white-ball games -- three T20Is and as many ODIs.

The T20s will be held in Hove (September 10), Derby (September 13) and Bristol (September 15), while the ODIs are scheduled at Hove (September 18), Canterbury (September 21) and the Lord's (September 24).

England will be without their stand-in captain Nat Sciver, who has withdrawn from the series to "focus on her mental health".

But Harmanpreet said England still has enough firepower to challenge India. "She (Sciver) is missing the game but still they have a very good side and I think if we have to beat them we will have to play very good cricket.

"Last 10 days gave us enough time to prepare ourselves. We are looking in good shape, and now it is time to just go there and execute. It is very important for us to stay in the moment," she said.

Panchal, Bharat shine as India A score 229/6

PTI ■ HUBBALLI

Skipper Priyank Panchal's Slogged 87 and a fighting unbeaten 74 by keeper Kona Srikar Bharat took India A to 229 for six on the second day of the rain-hit second unofficial Test against New Zealand.

After the first day's play was called off due to rain, the truncated second day saw 66 overs being bowled, and most of the top and middle-order batters failed to make an impression.

Skipper Panchal's knock came off 148 balls, with 12 fours and two sixes, while Bharat's unbeaten knock saw him face 104 balls while hitting 10 boundaries.

The Panchal-Bharat duo rescued India A with a 117-run fifth-wicket stand after they were left in a tangle at 68 for four.

The three centuries from the previous 'Test' --

Abhimanyu Easwaran (22), middle-order batter Rajat Patidar (4) and NT Tilak Varma (0) -- were dismissed cheaply while Ruturaj Gaikwad (5) endured his second failure of the series.

Shardul Thakur (26), a late addition to the squad was involved in a 38-run stand with Bharat to take India A past the 200-run mark.

For New Zealand A, pacers Jacob Duffy (2/55) and Logan van Beek (2/39) took two wickets apiece, while spinners Rachin Ravindra (1/20) and Sean Solia (1/58) got a wicket apiece.

SARANDEEP APPLIES FOR DELHI HEAD COACH JOB

Former India spinner and more recently national selector Sarandeep Singh has thrown his hat into the ring for Delhi head coach job ahead of the upcoming domestic season.

"Delhi is known for producing world class players regularly but somehow the team has not been able to do well in domestic cricket of late. I want to take Delhi cricket back to where it belongs," the 42-year-old said.

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PCB hires Hayden as mentor for WC



PTI ■ KARACHI

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has rehired Australian batting great Matthew Hayden as team mentor for the ICC World T20 Cup in Australia.

Hayden had done a stint with the Pakistan team during last year's World T20 Cup in UAE and saw Pakistan being beaten by Australia in the semi-finals.

The PCB said that Hayden will join the side in Brisbane on October 15, the day Pakistan arrive from Christchurch after competing in the T20I series also involving Bangladesh and hosts New Zealand.

Rahane returns with double-century

PTI ■ CHENNAI

On a comeback trail, India Test discard Ajinkya Rahane and Yashasvi Jaiswal hammered double centuries as West Zone put a pedestrian North East Zone attack to the sword by amassing 590 for two in their Duleep Trophy quarter-final here on Friday.

Sent into bat, Rahane (207 batting) and Jaiswal (228) toyed with the North East bowling line-up and added 333 runs for the second wicket.

The classy Rahane, who has played many a memorable knock in the Test arena, seemed to enjoy the hit in the middle as he feasted on the North East bowling. Not known to be a six hitter, Rahane sent six over the rope, apart from his 22 fours to stamp his authority on the second day.

Earlier in the day, Prithvi Shaw was the first man to be dismissed by the opposition team when spinner Ankur Malik had him caught behind



by Ashish Thapa for a brisk 113. He had put on 206 for the opening wicket with Jaiswal. Rahul Tripathi (25 batting) joined Rahane in the middle and strung together a 51-run stand in quick time.

Speaking at the end of the day's play, Shaw said it was special to score the century and added that despite the weak bowling attack, it was important to keep focus.

"I think it was special for me because after training so much and giving myself time,

good to score a century." He also sought to downplay the inexperienced bowling attack and said, "To be honest, if they are playing this kind of level they must have done something. They have potential, that's why they are playing here.

"First 20-25 overs they bowled well. Obviously, Yash (Jaiswal) and Aju bhai getting those doubles (centuries)... I think you just need one ball to get out. We need to focus and prepare for it."

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