

## **SOURAV GANGULY**

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### **A different kettle of fish but India can do well in SA**

It's the start of Virat Kohli's first away series, and a tough one at that to South Africa. India has had a phenomenal year in 2017 and they will be looking to continue that momentum. One must also understand that it will be a totally different kettle of fish to playing at home but I believe that this team has the ability to make a difference.

Virat's form will be very important for the side. It is his first overseas tour as captain and it will be very important for him to strike a balance as a captain and a batsman. His form as captain in the two previous instances in Adelaide and Sydney were brilliant and hopefully those memories will remain fresh for him and help him.

It will be important for India to get their combination right and I would want Hardik Pandya to play. It will give them the option of five bowlers which will be important to if they want to pick 20 wickets. With Pandya, Wriddhiman Saha and R. Ashwin, who are capable with the bat, and Bhuvneshwar as well it is a chance worth taking.

The first Test of a series is very important and the length of the bowlers will be vital for success. They will need to bowl full to make sure that the ball is hitting the stumps. Bowling short even with pace will mean playing into the hands of the Proteas.

It will also be an important series for Ashwin. He is at this juncture where he needs to remind everyone that he is still as good as the next bowler and a good performance in South Africa will clear all questions. What he must remember is that 300 wickets do not happen if you are not good enough.

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### **India's overall batting performance needs to be fixed soon**

The first match between South Africa and India was a great exhibition of Test cricket where the ball dominated the bat. The great part about the surface was that even on the fourth day the bowlers were in the game. I have played on the Newland pitch and at some stage of the game the conditions always got better for batting. This, however, was not the case this time. I have played on similar sorts of pitches in the past, at Headingley or the Wanderers, and though India finished on the winning side then, the bowlers were always in the game. To be honest, this was a tough pitch for Indian batting as it was the first Test of the series and the boys were still taking time to get used to the conditions.

There has been a lot of talk about the combination. India did the right thing by going in with five bowlers. As much as scoring runs is important in a bid to win Test matches, getting wickets is also key. The reason why we were thinking of an Indian win at some point is because the bowlers got 20 wickets and that will continue to be an important criterion over the next two Tests.

Hardik Pandya came good with the bat and India should persist with him. The problem lies with the overall batting performance, and this has to be fixed soon. There will be lot of talk about players who were not in the playing eleven. That's always the case when you lose.

Virat Kohli should not worry about such things. Although KL Rahul and Ajinkya Rahane have a good history of scoring runs away from the sub-continent and have better records as batsmen, India can't just chop-and-change in every game. They have shown faith in the current batting and that should continue in the next Test as well.

The Indians have lot of Test matches away from home this year and it will be important for them to keep showing faith in the unit. They still have two more Tests to play in South Africa and I feel the matches will all have decisions. The key will be to show guts out in the middle and make adjustments on the off-stump.

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**The batting unit needs to believe, fight for every run**

There is a general feeling that the final Test against South Africa is a dead rubber but I believe there is still a lot to play for. The hype is obviously about the pitch, about what India will get to play on. The groundsman has spoken about a green pitch but till a ball is bowled you can never say what the track will be like exactly. There is also word that India will play five fast bowlers but they will have to be very careful because spin will be useful in a five-day game and variation is also important in a longer format.

Ravichandran Ashwin's effectiveness with the bat should not also be discounted. The Indian bowlers have been in superb form this series. They have picked 20 wickets in both the Tests and it is important for the batters to stand up and put runs on the board. There is enormous talent in this batting unit, they have done it before and I find no reason why they can't do it again. They will need to believe in themselves, need to fight for every run as a batting unit.

The question for India will be whether to play five bowlers, or four. If the pitch remains green till the start then they can go in with four bowlers and should pick that extra batter. If not, they must continue with the five bowlers.

There is lot of talk going around about Virat Kohli's leadership qualities. It is important to be patient as it is his first big overseas tour. Nobody really comes as a born leader and it is important that leaders are allowed to develop and grow and I am convinced that Kohli will keep getting better at this.

It is very important that as a leader you keep performing – that is the biggest challenge and this is where Kohli has done remarkably well. There is no doubt that he is and will continue to be a very good captain. India has lot of cricket away from home coming up and he needs everyone's continuous support. I also take this opportunity to congratulate him for being the ICC Cricketer of the Year.

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### **Get the feeling that India have taken the upper hand**

The last 10 days in South Africa have been brilliant for the Indians, led by an exceptional Virat Kohli. It just goes to show, as it has in the past, that the Indian team gets better and better after spending some time in overseas conditions and I am not surprised to see the performance of Kohli and his boys. The victory at Wanderers' will remain long in the mind of the Kohli brigade. The value of this sort of win is not measured as just another win – its effect is far reaching and we saw that in the ODI at Durban where India dominated South Africa.

The match referee had to take a call on whether the Test should continue on Day 4 at the Wanderers' and fortunately they took the right one otherwise it would have been grossly unfair to India who showed unbelievable guts and courage throughout the match. I must also mention Dean Elgar – he will remember that innings for a lifetime and it would be one of his best despite all the runs he may get in the future.

I am extremely happy to see the way Ajinkya Rahane and Bhuvneshwar Kumar stamped their authority once again. I must say they are invaluable to this team. That Rahane's performance has not come as a surprise to me is because he is a class act. Along with his quality as a batsman, what he needs to learn from his skipper is how to get a hundred. May be a dinner together will help! His knock of 80 in the ODI was as good as Virat's but the difference is that Virat very rarely misses a ton once he is set.

There is still a lot of cricket left to be played but I have a feeling that India have given the first psychological blow to South Africa over the last two matches. South Africa, without De Villiers and Steyn, have a hole in their side. Also to leave out Ngidi and Phehlukwayo was not the right decision. It will be hard to stop India if Phehlukwayo is brought in and he and Tahir are the fourth and fifth bowlers. I don't think this six-match series is going to be easy for the Proteas.

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### **Kohli and his boys showing a lot of character**

It has been a superb performance from India, and to see them 3-0 up in a six-match, one-day International series in South Africa especially after losing the Test series speaks volumes of the character shown by Virat Kohli and his boys.

What is there to say about Virat? I have been fortunate enough to play with and against the likes of Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, VVS Laxman, Virender Sehwag, Ricky Ponting, and Brian Lara, and this man is right up there with all of them. What stands out for me is not just his amazing control and his ability to adjust but also the energy and intensity he brings to his batting in each and every innings.

To get to 34 ODI centuries so quickly in his career is just out of the world. The fact that no other Indian batsman has touched a three-figure mark so far on this tour and only one South African has got a century shows what quality of batsmanship Kohli has displayed on this trip. And we still have a while to go!

What has been equally commendable is the way Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav have bowled. To get 21 out of 30 wickets in three matches says much, not just about the number but also about the psychological effect the spin duo is having on the South African batting line-up. What is even more satisfying is that this performance has come on pitches that have not been turning ones.

The dismissal of South Africa captain, Aiden Markram, was a perfect example of the fact that the Proteas are not watching the revolution of the ball and lost the mental battle against the two spinners. One couldn't help but notice the smile on Kuldeep's face when he went pass the bat of Andile Phehlukwayo in the later stages of the game.

There are three more games left in the series and the good news for South Africa is that AB de Villiers will be back, but his just being there will not help the fortunes of his side. He has to do a Kohli for his team to turn its fortunes around. The South Africans have had some selection issues which have surprised many. Morne Morkel being left out on Wednesday raised some eyebrows, and he is a must in the next three games for them. Also, if Khaya Zondo and Phehlukwayo have to play for South Africa, they will have to raise their game more than what has been on display till now in the series. One has to deserve a place in an International side and at present that is not happening for them.

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### **South Africa keep 'pink' record intact**

South Africa managed to pull one back to continue their 100 per cent record in pink clothing. There will always be that question whether Saturday's curtailed game made life easier for them. Well, it just might have.

More than the number of overs, however, it is the rain that probably made it difficult for the Indians, especially the spinners, to bowl. Not that the spinners have turned the ball enormously in the previous three games of the series. Rather, it was a question of very poor batting by the South African batsmen which resulted in 21 wickets for the spinners. On Saturday, the moisture in the surface due to the rain actually allowed the ball to skid on to the bat and that helped the South African batsmen.

The return of AB de Villiers was also a positive psychological advantage for the Proteas. He may not have got many runs on the board on his immediate return but it was a huge plus to their middle order. The South Africans also probably did the right thing by leaving the spinner out and playing an all pace attack.

The Indians, however, shouldn't worry too much about the loss as they have been playing well and can well close the series at Port Elizabeth.

Shikhar Dhawan and Virat Kohli have continued their dominance with the bat and are really playing very well. The good thing when they bat is that the run-rate remains healthy. If either of them – more so Kohli – are dismissed early, then the others will have to take the innings forward. This didn't happen in the last 15 overs at the Wanderers.

The Indian spinners may have had an off day but the shot selections of Miller, Klassen, Marakram and Phehlukwayo will keep them interested for the remainder of the series. Port Elizabeth is not known for being a high scoring ground, and it will be a very important game for South Africa.

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### **Virat has been the difference in the 5-1 over SA**

After losing the Test Series, India were super-dominant in the ODIs against South Africa and it has been such a pleasure to see Virat Kohli bat the way he has in the 5-1 win. He was the major difference between the two sides and what stands out for me is the way he batted even in the dead rubber.

India proved themselves to be the superior one-day side they are and I am sure they will continue to do so in the upcoming three-match T20 series. There is a distinct possibility that they will finish off this South Africa tour on a high. Of course, one understands that the shorter the format, the difference between the two sides reduces but this South African unit will have to raise their standards immensely to compete with this Indian side.

It will be a completely new set of players and looking at the importance of the series I find it hard to understand some of the selections. A tour by India is always special to any country and the South Africans have surprised with some 'non-selection'. The exclusion of David Miller in the last ODI itself was surprising, as is the keeping out of Kasigo Rabada in the T20 squad. JP Duminy will be leading in the T20 format but was not included in the final one-dayer while Shamsi, who bowled well at Port Elizabeth, was replaced by Imran Tahir in the last game. Yes, a team makes changes when it loses but the changes have not made sense for South Africa.

Also, the problem for South Africa has been the poor form of AB de Villiers. He has been a shadow of his past performances. We know it is not easy to come out of breaks, and the Indian bowlers consistently put pressure on him. He must have also watched how Kohli took charge of his team. For South Africa, once again the challenge will be the eight overs in the middle. The first game is at the Wanderers, and it's an early start, so the wet ball which haunted the Indians in the ODI there will not be an issue.

For India, Suresh Raina will be back and it's a great opportunity for him to establish his presence. The Indian middle-order in the 50 over game has still not been taken care of and a good performance from Raina in the T20s just might create that space for him as he is an outstanding fielder.

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**Virat was outstanding with his batting, and leadership**

India are back home and will be extremely happy that after a difficult start to the tour of South Africa they really turned it around and returned with heads held high. It was also very creditable to win that last match at Cape Town, where they lost the first Test (and the series) and then came back to win both the ODIs and T20s. And it was creditable that they won the last game without the services of Virat Kohli, who had a tight back.

One hundred and seventy-two was not a big total looking at the way the T20 series went but India defended really well. The difference in the win may have only been seven runs but, to be honest, South Africa had a lot of catching up to do. Although Jonker was brilliant, it was too much for him at the end. The South African management, I am sure, would have asked Miller and Duminy what they were trying to do in the first six overs when they scored only 24 runs.