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### **Ireland stop the ideal preparation for a long, demanding tour of England**

India were expected to brush aside Ireland's challenge in the two Twenty20 games last week and, to no one's surprise, they did exactly that. I am sure the Irish players themselves and their fans will be disappointed at how meekly they surrendered to Virat's mighty team. That said, like Afghanistan would have picked up valuable lessons from their two-day defeat to India in their inaugural Test, Ireland too will be better off for this experience.

The Ireland stop was the ideal preparation for a long and what ought to be a demanding tour of England. It will be crucial for India to start well in the T20 series against a seriously good white-ball team that will be full of confidence after sweeping Australia in a five-match ODI showdown recently.

Virat and Ravi Shastri will think long and hard before choosing from the plentiful batting options at their disposal. That everyone weighed in with classy runs in Ireland, and that most of them are in excellent form, will make the management duo's task even trickier. I am certain they will go less by names and more by the skill-sets the batsmen bring while keeping in mind recent form.

I personally would like to see a sixth specialist bowling option, and while the forced inclusion of Krunal Pandya can offer that possibility without weakening the batting, it will be interesting to see if Virat thinks likewise. England have shown a susceptibility to left-arm spin, and the weather is fairly hot and dry there currently, which are pretty good conditions for a spinner to operate in. Also, England have tremendous power and depth, so the best dot-balls will be wicket-taking ones. By strengthening the attack, Virat will have the insurance if one of his bowlers has an off-day.

Jasprit Bumrah's absence through injury is a setback, but it also opens the door for Umesh Yadav to continue his T20 comeback. Alongside Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Bumrah has formed a very potent pace combine, especially at the death with his searing yorkers and his excellent changes of pace. Bhuvi will now need a new partner both at the top of the innings, and towards the end. Again, there are enough men to pick from, but whereas the batting is well rounded, experienced and in excellent touch, there is a little bit of inexperience in the bowling ranks. Krunal and Deepak Chahar, both getting lucky breaks through injuries to Washington Sundar and Bumrah, will be desperate for an opportunity to showcase their wares at the highest level.

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### **With Rohit playing the way he did, only one result was possible**

Team India came through another test of character with flying colours by clinching the T20 series against England with a convincing win in the decider. It was India's eighth victory in a three-match T20 series, reiterating the confidence within the group, especially when it comes to crunch games.

England started brilliantly against an inexperienced pace attack with Bhuvni also missing through back spasms. I was a little surprised to see Kuldeep left out only one game after his match-winning performance in Manchester, but I am sure he and Yuzvendra Chahal will have a big role to play in the ODI series. England looked on course for 225 after reaching 100 in the 10th over, but the Indian bowlers came back superbly. After going for 22 in his first over, Hardik Pandya regrouped brilliantly by altering his length and bowling into the pitch to end up with four wickets, while the rest rallied around him.

Even though England probably ended up 20-25 runs short, it is never easy to chase down 200, and that too with the series on the line, never mind if it was a flat track and a small ground. But the way Rohit started, only one result was possible. He showed intent from the first ball, and when he is in that frame of mind, it is seldom that he leaves the job unfinished.

Next up is the 50-over showdown, and I expect another cracking set of contests. England are the No. 1 team, a far more dangerous proposition in the one-day game, and they will be encouraged that India's pace attack is a little weakened with Bumrah out injured and Bhuvni an uncertain starter. While this offers Umesh and Siddarth Kaul the opportunity to step up and shoulder the responsibility, the onus will be on the two wrist spinners to take wickets in the middle stages.

India's batting looks in good health and barring the unforeseen, I don't anticipate too many changes. There is plenty of class and experience, and several batsmen haven't had much to do in the five T20s on tour so far. I would, however, love for KL Rahul to continue to bat at No. 3 in the ODIs as well, like he did in the T20s. He has too much to offer the team, and if he can bat at No. 3 and Virat can stay on at No. 4, England will have more than a fight on their hands.

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### **Team India's opportunity to continue evolution as a serious travelling force**

Virat Kohli will believe he has the resources at his disposal to put it past England in the five-Test series starting on Wednesday. I am of the same opinion; this is a fantastic opportunity to build on the gains of South Africa and continue the team's evolution as a serious travelling force.

There is plenty of experience in the batting group. Almost everyone has played Test cricket in England previously, too. That is a huge plus. In 2014, most of the batsmen were on their first tour of England. Having already played there, they are in a much better space now, and better equipped to respond to the myriad challenges England will throw up. It will be important for the batsmen to make the most of their knowledge of the conditions to put up a big score in the first innings because, especially overseas, it is first-innings runs that set up victories.

The bowling unit has variety and depth. Of course, Bhuvneshwar Kumar will be missed, as will Jasprit Bumrah for the first Test at least, but because there are so many quality pacers to pick from, it makes the task of the team management somewhat easier.

India must stick with Shikhar Dhawan for the first Test. Without getting a big one, he looked in very good touch in the limited-overs games, and made a hundred in the first session of the game in his last Test appearance, against Afghanistan. He must be encouraged to go out and play freely, without the fear of failure weighing on his mind, because that's when he is at his most dangerous. Shikhar can take the game away from the opposition very early, and if he can stamp his authority on James Anderson and Stuart Broad, it will neutralise England's biggest threats.

I also feel that the bowling attack should include the proven Ravichandran Ashwin and the exciting Kuldeep Yadav. Both spinners are wicket-taking bowlers who should relish the dry conditions forecast for the match, and with Ashwin boasting four Test hundreds, India will not be light on batting either. I would love to see Hardik Pandya at No. 7, where he has already showcased his adaptability. He will also complement the new-ball pair of Umesh Yadav and Ishant Sharma. I don't believe Mohammed Shami has enough bowling under his belt in recent times to displace either Umesh or Ishant.

England will look to make their 1000th Test a memorable occasion, but Virat's men won't be accommodating or pliant.

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### **India played like they were resigned to their fate**

India's abject surrender at Lord's was a bitter disappointment. After the excellent commitment at Edgbaston, the lack of fight was galling. England did have the better of the conditions, but they also made the most of the assistance they received, while India caved in meekly, especially when it came to the batting.

As much as the technical inadequacies what stood out was a lack of belief, which manifested itself in tentativeness and a lack of positivity in body language. Once you start doubting your abilities, there is no way back. Every member of the squad must look himself in the mirror, ask tough questions and come back with honest answers. India have the wherewithal from a cricketing perspective to fight back from 2-0 down, but for that, they must first sort out the issues in their minds, which clearly are several.

In their last 10 overseas innings, India have topped 250 only twice, and on both those occasions, Virat made a big hundred. That doesn't reflect well on an experienced batting line-up that has played previously in England, and is therefore aware of what to expect. England have a top-class bowling attack with two standout performers in James Anderson and Stuart Broad, but they are not unplayable. If anything, they handed out a lesson in adaptability to India's bowlers.

In the first innings, when the ball was swinging, they bowled fuller lengths and when swing wasn't pronounced in the second, they hit the deck and relied on cutters. India might have had a semblance of an excuse for being shot out for 107 in their first innings, but they should have done much better in the second. It was as if they were resigned to their fate, which is something the think-tank must address quickly before the Nottingham Test later this week.

Communication and transparency in selection is crucial, but it is also imperative that one is flexible. At the toss on the second morning, with clouds gathering and everything crying out for a third specialist paceman, India left out Umesh Yadav and brought in Kuldeep Yadav. As well as Hardik Pandya bowled, India were unable to maintain relentless pressure when England were 131 for five, which helped Jonny Bairstow and Chris Woakes to stage a wonderful rescue act. England turned in a collective performance in conditions right up their sleeve, but India are a much better team than what we saw at Lord's. But unless they start believing that, it could be a long summer ahead.

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### **Resilient India throw series wide open**

The stirring victory at Trent Bridge must go down as one of the greatest comebacks in Indian Test history. Overwhelmed at Lord's to go 2-0 down, India showcased not just skills but also resilience and resolve to return the compliment, dominating England right from the start and throwing the series wide open.

The genesis of this result lay in the markedly improved batting performance. While Shikhar Dhawan and KL Rahul didn't make big runs, they put on 50-plus in both innings, played a lot tighter and yet were always positive. Ajinkya Rahane and Cheteshwar Pujara came up with big hands and spent a lot of time at the crease, which are excellent developments because when you are playing overseas, it is imperative to retain self-belief and trust your abilities.

There is no debating who the fulcrum of the batting is, and once again, the captain didn't disappoint. Virat made 200 runs in a Test for the second time this series, and he will be particularly delighted with his second-innings 103. It was a disciplined effort under trying conditions; even in the sixth innings of a series where he has made massive runs, he stuck to his game plan without compromise, which is a tribute to his mental strength. In my book, he is already a legend, easily the best batsman in the world currently.

Apart from the batting, the other pleasing aspect of India's cricket was their close-in catching, with Rahul leading the way. India seem to have found the right personnel to man the slip cordon, and they should stick with these players so that there is a settled feel. I was also impressed with Rishabh Pant's glovework and his temperament on debut. His second-ball six was a jaw-dropper, but also in keeping with his reputation as an uninhibited ball-striker.

No praise can be too high for the bowling group. Jasprit Bumrah's return has lent a new dimension, but no less noteworthy is the consistency with which Ishant is landing the ball. He has worked very hard on getting his wrist upright, which allows him to bowl fuller and get the ball to swing, or move on pitching when it lands on the seam. It will be no exaggeration to say that this is the best I have seen him bowl in a long time.

This could also be the breakthrough Test for Hardik Pandya the all-rounder, who too bowled to the conditions and didn't try anything fancy. To pick up a five-for in Test cricket will do wonders for his confidence. I am excited to see how this will transform him as a cricketer.

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### **India did many things right, but England seized key moments**

India did several things right in Southampton as they strived for a series-levelling win in the fourth Test, but it was England that seized the key moments. Their 60-run win inside four days gave the hosts a winning 3-1 lead. India lost their second overseas series of the year, which must be disappointing for a team that has everything it takes to be successful away from home too.

As brilliantly as the bowlers have performed, they allowed England to get out of jail in both innings of the fourth Test. England have an array of attacking talent in the lower middle-order, using those resources to recover from 86 for six on the first morning and 92 for four on the third afternoon to post 246 and 271, respectively. This, however, is not a one-off. It happened in Birmingham when Sam Curran defied them with attractive runs, a theme that was to repeat itself at Lord's. That's something for the Indian think-tank to look into, because the hallmark of champion sides lies in not repeating their mistakes.

India will feel they should have done a lot better in their first innings, when the conditions were good for batting. Cheteshwar Pujara played a brilliant hand and batted exceptionally with the tail – a hitherto unrevealed facet to his batting – to take the team to a modest lead but India squandered a golden chance to bat England out of the contest.

Like in 2014 when he picked up a bucketful of wickets, Moeen Ali was again the chief destroyer for England, his off-spin accounting for nine wickets in his comeback Test. Moeen had been low on confidence after the winter tours of Australia and New Zealand. While it is commendable on his part to have capped his return with the man of the match award, India must introspect and analyse why they have been unable to crack the Moeen mystery.

India have been more than competitive in a majority of their five away losses in South Africa and England in 2018, but Virat and his men will find scant consolation in that. The bowling has by and large been incisive but, in admittedly tricky conditions, the batting has been found wanting. Virat has been an overwhelming exception, and during his century stand with Ajinkya Rahane in the fourth innings, raised visions of a glorious victory in Southampton. But he needs consistent support, and that hasn't always been forthcoming.

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### **India didn't take their opportunities as England kept raising their game**

A fairytale ending to Alastair Cook's glorious career was the highlight of The Oval Test. As a sportsperson, nothing is more fulfilling than going out on a high. Cook ticked all the boxes in his farewell appearance, signing off with a century and playing a significant role in England's comfortable victory in the final Test.

The 4-1 scoreline in England's favour might not necessarily be a true reflection of the quality of the two sides. But it reiterated the fact that in Test cricket, you can't take your eyes off the ball for even an hour. India had their opportunities, but except in Trent Bridge, they didn't take them. By contrast, England raised their game a notch or two when it counted the most. The manner in which they bounced back in Southampton after the Trent Bridge hammering, and in the intensity with which they approached the dead rubber at The Oval, is something India must seek to emulate.

The Indian think-tank will, I am sure, introspect and look inwards in the aftermath of the series defeat. The one thing they will recognise is that they kept repeating mistakes – allowing the tail to wag after making serious inroads into the top order, and not getting off to starts which is not the hallmark of the number one Test team of the world.

In saying that, I was delighted with the attitude of KL Rahul and Rishabh Pant in a daunting run-chase at The Oval. From a position of no hope, they batted with freedom and expressed themselves beautifully with some of the best stroke-making of the series. Both men needed the hundreds; Rahul had had a disappointing tour till that point, while Pant faded away a little since his promising Trent Bridge debut. Their conviction and positivity when the chips were down is something Indian cricket can take great heart from.

India could have looked for a draw in the immediacy of Rahul's dismissal, but they kept going for the target till Pant was around, like they had done in Adelaide in 2014 in Virat's first Test as captain. That is the character of this team — to strive for a result, no matter what. Their shot at redemption will come later in the year in Australia, if they can take the lessons from this tour and apply them Down Under.