

SOURAV GANGULY

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World Cup anywhere in the world is a huge event and it makes it even more special and attractive when it's played in the UK, a country which continues to maintain the history and the cultural heritage of the sport over the years. Also, the new format will help supporters and fans plan their trip as the uncertainty with the oppositions does not exist this time. For me, this is the best format. There will be no easy games. The best play the best, the strong play the strong and finally the best four make it to the semifinals.

The most improved team is Australia. As I was watching India tour Australia last November, I was wondering what happened to the best side of my generation! Just when everyone started saying, 'here we go' with another strong cricketing nation, they have bounced back quite strongly, happily surprising all and sending a strong signal to the teams in the competition.

England to me, look the strongest. The freedom with which each and every one is playing is tremendous. They have consistently scored and chased 350 in the last few years and the understanding and knowledge of their own conditions will be a big strength for them.

A new sensible administrative set up, good relations between the administrators and the players, has helped West Indian cricket to regain the faith of the world. The presence of experienced Chris Gayle along with youngsters like Shai Hope, Hetmyer, Nicholas Pooran, will entertain the crowds and make this unit a strong one. Also the hugely improved Andre Russell will be determined to set the stage on fire this summer. I will be looking out for Russell.

Also, one has to look out for Pakistan. They may be inconsistent but the trend of Pakistani cricket has been an emotional one. Teams will take them lightly at their own peril.

Now, my team India. Their top 3 is the best in the business at the moment and more so for the presence of a special player in the name of Virat Kohli. Is India too top heavy? My answer to it will be depending on how the middle-order play. Dhoni's form for me will be crucial and more crucial will be the way he approaches his batting.

It's very, very important for the Indian middle-order to fire because with the likes of Kuldeep, Chahal, Bumrah and Shami the lower-order of the Indian batting is weak and they need their number 6 and 7 to be in good form.

The fast bowling unit led by Bumrah and backed by Shami is at its best and the spin of Chahal and Kuldeep will help them pick wickets in the middle. This is where India is stronger than the rest of the teams. India's spin power is the best in the competition along with the Afghans and this will allow Virat Kohli to attack right through the 50 overs.

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At last, India start their campaign after everyone has got into motion whereas South Africa play their third game of the tournament. It has not been a happy time for South Africa. People are talking about their weak batting but I think their bowling has been pretty ordinary as well. With Ngidi injured and Steyn out there is not much in the cupboard.

I remember first playing South African in 1999, my World Cup debut. What a team that was! We had them in a spot of bother after getting 260 but the depth in their batting saw them through. The likes of Pollock, Klusner were not only outstanding fast bowlers but also capable of getting hundred runs down the order under pressure to see through the game. Well, they are once in a generation players. You don't expect countries to keep producing such players year after year but this South African team is a poor shadow of their past.

India will be a big opposition for them. The Indians will be just keen to get onto the park after a surprisingly long gap after the warm-up matches. It will be the first game for them in their start to what seems to be a very competitive World Cup. It's been a lot colder in June in the UK with a lot of rain around than it had been in the past. It has forced a lot of captains because of early starts to win the toss and bowl first. Not that it has worked for everyone.

Both the teams have weaknesses. India's middle-order has not been tested. K L Rahul and MS Dhoni were magnificent in the warm-up game but the South African pace attack may test them a lot more. As much as KL Rahul is a tremendous player and I personally believe that he is India's answer to number 4, he has found batting in these conditions at times very tough. Hopefully he can turn it around as this could be his career breaking tournament. India will still depend on the top 3 who have looked a little bit out of touch in the warm matches, a little bit tired after the long IPL but after this five day long break and cometh the big stage they will turn it around. Their record in fifty over format is just fantastic. And India's success in the 2013 and 2015 Champions Trophy has a lot to do with their success.

The world talks about India's batting but to me the bowling is a key area. Bumrah, Shami have been exceptional and if Kuldeep and Chahal are in form they can win India the World Cup. I'm sure Virat will utilize and attack with his spinners much more than any other team. The World Cup has started on the 30th but this will probably be the real start of the World Cup with India getting off the mark. You walk around UK you will only see Indian supporters waiting for their team to kick start the campaign.

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It's going to be a huge game on Sunday, probably the two strongest teams in the tournament will clash against each other in an iconic venue. The result here will send a strong message to the other teams in this tournament about who is the strongest one, and more so who has the mental capability to go till the end in the World Cup.

Australia's win against West Indies has just confirmed what huge strides they have taken in the last 6 months. Their trip to India has been a huge game changer for them. It was not just a series win but a win which got a great cricketing nation back on track. They were beaten convincingly when India went there and more than the defeat, the side looked well below par at that stage. But the back to back wins against Pakistan has turned a team of good players to a very confident bunch.

India also were brilliant against South Africa. The win was a lot tougher than it seemed and hadn't it been for a weakened pace attack of South Africa the runs to chase could have been enough on a tough Southampton pitch. South Africa missed Steyn and Ngidi hugely and the 20 overs of spin allowed the Indian batsmen to plan their innings a lot better.

Rohit Sharma probably played the best innings of his one day career and I say that with conviction. It was an innings of control and discipline and if he continues with that mindset, it will be great news for India for the remainder of the tournament.

The overhead conditions are so important at this time of the year in England. Oval has been a good surface so far but there has been a lot of rain in the last couple of days and that can play a huge part in the game.

The Australian pace attack has looked superb and the likes of Starc and Cummins will be looking for some help from the pitch, especially against the Indian top order, who has scored so many runs in the last few years. They will know that the key to India's success has been those 3 and it could have a huge bearing on the game.

The Australian batting looks very formidable. When a side recovers from the position they were in against the West Indies, it makes it even stronger. The challenge for Australia will be to counter the Indian spin duo of Chahal and Kuldeep. Chahal was brilliant against South Africa and the period of 20 overs in the middle will decide which team gets an upper hand in the game. It's a Sunday and there will be millions watching this game all around the world and I bet you it will be a cracker of a game.

SOURAV GANGULY

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Summer has not arrived yet in the UK but the enormous amount of rain in the last two days and subsequent lowering of temperatures must be a great relief for the tourists in this part of the world whereas the wash-outs have become a huge headache for ICC. The demand for a reserve day has increased enormously but I am not sure whether the ICC can afford to have a reserve day for such a long tournament. The headache will be even more as India play New Zealand at Trent Bridge on Thursday because an India game holds extra value to any competition. The tickets are already sold out and a washout will not only mean a loss of massive revenue but at the same time an opportunity loss of a brilliant cricket match.

In the midst of wash-outs and all the hustle-bustle at the World Cup, Yuvraj Singh decided to hang his boots from all forms of the game. What a career it has been! One of the best in the white ball game where he has been an absolute match-winner. He should be extremely happy with what he has achieved for his country. He is a winner, not just in the field of play but in life as well. To come back from cancer and play again and that too successfully spoke volumes of his character.

Coming back to cricket and India, one has to admit they were brilliant against Australia and the margin of victory was a lot more than what the statistics show. The batting was brilliant and with Virat Kohli's captaincy spot-on in both the games, the side looks even more solid than before. Shikhar showed once again why his position in the shorter format is unquestionable and what an innings he played! He will now be out for a while with a thumb injury and will be very hard to replace. K L Rahul will open and this will allow Vijay Shankar or Dinesh Kartik to bat in the middle. My choice will be Vijay at number 4.

The conditions will be bit different at Nottingham tomorrow and the Kiwis might just feel good about it. The overhead conditions and the rain will keep the pitch alive and this is exactly what the Kiwi fast bowlers will want. They did well on a helpful track at the Oval in the warm-up game and if Kane Williamson manages to win the toss, it will be very handy for him. Maybe he will opt to bowl first.

India, who will go unchanged other than Dhawan, a win or loss at the toss does not matter as they look to be a side with all bases covered. They showed great character in picking Bhuvneshwar ahead of Shami and Bhuvneshwar for me, is an example of how tremendous attitude makes a player better, mixed with amazing courage and guts.

SOURAV GANGULY

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Manchester will be host to THE big game as India and Pakistan face off at Old Trafford on Sunday. Why Old Trafford, would be the question on many a fan's mind. The main reason is that Manchester has possibly the largest Asian community in the UK, so we can expect the hype around and attendance at this game to be beyond belief!

Over the years, Asians have filled the stands at cricket matches in England, and I was not surprised to see Oval turn completely blue when India played Australia last week. However, that might not be the case at Old Trafford where there will be a huge representation of blue and green.

The concern this time is that very often the quality of cricket in an India-Pakistan encounter has not lived up to the hype and expectations around the game. I hope we have a cracker of a game tomorrow so that fans on both sides have something to remember.

India has a tremendous record in World Cups against their archrivals but I stick to my belief that past has no meaning. Two years ago Pakistan beat India at the Oval in the Champions Trophy final and this will be at the back of the minds of the Indians.

The Old Trafford wicket has always been a terrific one with opportunity for both fast bowlers and batsmen alike, making the contest more even and engrossing. Supporters come to watch good cricket expecting lots of runs to be scored and the venue is perfectly set up for that. The only concern will be the huge amount of rain throughout the week in England. This will leave a lot of moisture on the surface and will bring the fast bowlers into the game at a very early stage. Both teams have very good fast bowlers in good form and it will be a huge challenge for the batsman.

Jasprit Bumrah, Bhuvaneshwar Kumar and Mohammed Amir are all in terrific rhythm and could have crucial roles in overcast conditions.

India will miss Shikhar Dhawan as his form in world cups have been exceptional and it will be a big void in the team to fill. Having said that it will be a great opportunity for KL Rahul. He is a superb player and enjoys batting as an opener. It's an opportunity for him in and he hopefully will make the most of it. The more critical question is: who will bat in the middle order? The word going around is that India will opt for the experience of Dinesh Kartik ahead of Vijay Shankar's all round capabilities. It will be interesting to see at what position he bats at.

For Pakistan, they will have to be at their best to beat this strong Indian team. They will need special performances at the top of the batting to put pressure on India. Fakhar Zaman did that in the Champions Trophy final two years ago and Pakistan will hope that one of them stand up again. If Pakistan does not score big they will find very hard to get past this strong Indian side. I do not see many changes in the Indian eleven other than Dhawan, as the side looks compact and strong. There will be a lot of interesting contests during the course of the game but the one between Amir and Virat Kohli will be the one everyone will be looking forward to. Hopefully the weather gods will not scupper this delectable Sunday special. All eyes are looking at the grey Manchester skies at the moment.

SOURAV GANGULY

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Any sporting event is incomplete without fans and they are not only an integral part but also a major source of off-ground inspiration for any sportsperson. Be it a Maradona, a Pele, a Federer, a Tendulkar or a Kohli, all performers when they strive to succeed at the topmost level and ultimately do, the first expression of ecstasy is always shared with the fans.

I still remember the night of April 2, 2011. India won the world cup at Wankhede stadium and after completing my official work I got out to get back to the hotel. It was a sea of people and there was absolute delirium on the roads. The car hardly moved. There was a very famous Bollywood actor that day with me in the same car. Once the fans made out that we two were in the car they got extra wild with joy, rocked our car, got on top of it and danced on it to express their feeling of joy. After all, India had won the World Cup after a gap of 28 years. This will remain with me forever.

Even the Indian commentators face challenges while reaching and leaving stadiums before and after their commentary stints. The fans definitely take note of them, approach them for selfies or autographs or may be just to shake hands and one cannot deny them. I will never say that such situations are not enjoyed by the commentators!

I have witnessed that wherever India plays, the Indian fans just take over. I remember in the 2002 Natwest Final, the Englishmen were out-numbered at the home of cricket. In 2015 in Australia at Melbourne, India was playing South Africa and the entire stadium was a sea of blue. It is the same in England in 2019. It was very surprising that at Manchester it was blue all over and I say this because Manchester has a sizeable number of Pakistanis residing in Yorkshire.

People have often asked me how the Indian fans outnumber fans of any country across the globe. Firstly, the Indians are extremely passionate about cricket. Also, there is a huge population of Indians staying across the globe and for them to travel to various places at times is much easier than the others. In fact, they plan their holidays in a way that includes watching India matches. This year itself, I was in Nottingham where India was to play New Zealand. I met a group of 20 Indians from the US who had come down for a week to UK and their schedule included India matches. There lies the answer.

SOURAV GANGULY

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Rarely a team goes through a World Cup unbeaten and that happened with India against England. At times these jolts serve as a wake-up call and India who had been unbeaten so far and in outstanding form will learn from this loss to come back stronger at the business end of this competition.

That India will get to the semifinal is just a matter of time and as the current format does not carry points forward, what will be important for all the four qualifying teams is how they play on that particular day.

India will take belief from their experience in 2011 World Cup, where they lost to South Africa in the group and then came back with remarkable character to win the World Cup at home and become the first team to do so.

For England, this game had far more meaning and they played as per the standards they have set for themselves in one-day cricket over the last few years. For England, the return of Jason Roy was the best thing to happen. Both he and Bairstow play well together and they took the game away from India. What they did well and what no other team in the competition has done so far was that they played positively against Bumrah and Shami and that put a lot of pressure on the spinners after they were wicket less in the first 10 overs.

India on the other hand will have to put this loss behind, which they will. For the first time in the World Cup they were asked to bowl first by an opposition after winning the toss and this was one challenge they had not encountered before. They faltered and this will help them to relook at the plan to chase in the future.

Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli were exceptional again. What a World Cup Rohit is having! He and Kohli batted with ease but they have to accept that they could have gone a bit harder in the first 10 overs. There is lot of talk about the Indian middle-order but I believe they are very good. With the arrival of Pant, who did well in his debut game, the likes of Kohli and Rohit can rely on them a bit more and take the attack upfront specially in a big run chase.

India also gave up a bit early specially in the last 7 overs. Yes, they had mountain to climb and both Plunkett and Archer gave nothing away but we believe that the likes of Dhoni and Jadhav have it in them to hit a boundary every over at that stage, which unfortunately did not happen. Kohli sounded a bit disappointed at the press conference and he had all the right to do so.

SOURAV GANGULY

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India has not just been good but extraordinary so far in the tournament but it is this last one week that everyone plays for. All the effort and the excellence shown by teams in the group stages will have to reach its pinnacle at this point of the tournament. It does not matter whether you are an underdog or a super-power, it's the performance and nerves on that particular day that matters.

We saw dominant Australia getting beaten by weaker South Africa and it did turn the table around, so for India there is a lesson there. Not that they will look at this NZ team as a weak link, there are enough mature heads in that dressing-room which will remain switched on for the knock-out. The words of Rohit Sharma after getting five centuries is a reflection of that, where he put the trophy ahead of his personal landmark and for me this is the change in Indian cricket for the last 20 years. The team is important.

People talk about Kohli in world cricket and rightly so, but in white ball cricket, Rohit has matched every performance of the champion in the last 3 years. 18 centuries each for both and that shows how important Rohit Sharma is for India.

There is a bit of doubt about the team combination India would play for this game and that is because of the inclusion of Jadeja in the playing eleven in the game against Sri Lanka. No team changes a squad before the knock-outs without a reason and along with the inclusion of Jadeja, the word going around is that India might play 6 bowlers and leave out Kartik. Kohli spoke about risks in big games in the press conference and that will keep everyone interested before the team sheet is announced in the morning. This means Mohammed Shami comes in as well. It's become a norm as the tournament has progressed that teams look to bat first and it won't be different here as well and this will reinforce the thoughts of a 6th bowler at this stage. Two spinners is a must in Manchester as the ball has spun here and with Kuldeep having a great record at this ground it will be hard to leave him out.

There has been a lot of talk about Indian middle order. It's not weak by any means. People find a mismatch in the hundreds column between the top 3 and the rest, which is quite natural as the time left is not much for the rest but trust me this is a strong batting side. They will also be up against a good New Zealand bowling attack, probably the next best after Australia and England in this World Cup. So, the real time starts now and good luck to India.

SOURAV GANGULY

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'Play-offs are play-offs, the equations are different, the pressure is different and all the form of the group stage means nothing'. Who knows it better than India one day after that long semifinal in Manchester. India hadn't lost in Manchester since 2015 but was below their best in the very important game. Pressure is always enormous in a semifinal and at times more than a final.

New Zealand played differently when they batted. They were put under consistent pressure by a very good Indian bowling unit, a unit which was just pure quality led by the very best Bumrah. When they finished at 239 even the fiercest supporters of the Kiwis felt that this Indian batting lineup would get past it with ease and the only case they had in support was the score-board pressure in big games.

Right throughout the World Cup and maybe even before, Indian fans have had a fear, what happens if we lose Rohit and Kohli early? Especially with Dhawan injured. Well that's what happened in this crucial tie. 3 down with 5 runs on the board was too much for India to recover from. New Zealand were superb with the new ball and the wicket of Kohli was a case of fantastic set up by Boult and Williamson. At times, one's strength can become a weakness and as the ball thudded into the pads of the mighty Kohli and the brave finger of Richard Illingworth went up, India were looking down.

India, who were outstanding in the group stages made a few surprising decisions in this game. Leaving Dhoni for so late, when 3 wickets are down was a blunder. They needed to consolidate and if anyone was a perfect foil to young Rishabh at that stage, it would have been Dhoni. India needed the exuberance of youth and the calmness of Dhoni at that stage to hold the innings together and rebuild and that was a mistake by the team. Also, the omission of Shami was tough to understand. I have tremendous regard for Bhubaneswar Kumar but the form which Shami was in, especially in the wickets column, should always have been preferred in any format of the game.

For India, Jadeja was terrific. His bowling was good but his batting under pressure was a tremendous example of courage and heart. Had Dhoni accelerated a little earlier, this game could have gone India's way. The partnership was incredible with but it was left with too much for Jadeja at the end. New Zealand deserves credit, Kane Williamson's captaincy deserves credit but what one needs to remember is that there are no underdogs in this game, doesn't matter where you finish in the table, it's 'that day' which matters.

SOURAV GANGULY

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July 14th, Lords, World Cup final, what an opportunity for both New Zealand and England. It will be a day when by 6pm London time one of the teams will have their names engraved on that trophy for the first time.

England had the chance in '75, '87, '92 and after 27 years they will get one more crack at it and maybe as favourites. West Indies were in '75, Australia in '87 but now in 2019, at their very back yard they will probably walk out as the stronger team of the two at the home of cricket. What a moment it will be not only for the players and their families but also for the ardent English supporters who for years have turned up to the grounds supporting their team.

England have not won a World Cup in cricket and this could be their moment of glory. After their very poor show in Australia 4 years ago they went a complete change in their one-day set up under the guidance of Andrew Strauss the former captain. They played differently for the last 4 years and what a satisfaction it will be if and when they pick the trophy up at the Lords balcony.

They are a strong team - the bowling has looked very strong with Woakes and Archer with the new ball against Australia and the conditions will help them at Lords where it swings more than any other English ground. Along with the bowling the two men who have had the most influence on this England side is Jason Roy and Johnny Bairstow. The likes of Root, Morgan, Stokes, Butler have been brilliant but the approach of these two at the top with amazing consistency over the last few years has made this team the most formidable and feared opponent. The consistency which they showed in getting more than 350 number of times in one-day cricket in the last few years have given them enough self-belief to win big tournaments. They fear no one.

For New Zealand it's another final since 2015. They lost to Australia then and once more they will have a crack at another home team. They won against India a few days ago in the first semi-final and this must have given them enough rest to get ready for the big day. Mental fatigue of semi-finals are very important and these few days will allow them to get refreshed. They are up against a very good side, so was the case against India too, so don't underestimate them by any means. A calm captain at the top is their advantage but how they bat will decide where they finish on Sunday.