

**VVS LAXMAN**

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It has been a tumultuous three weeks since India's semi-final exit at the World Cup, with unpleasant non-cricketing issues hogging the headlines. It's time now to start focusing on the sport itself, starting with the Twenty20 International series against West Indies.

These three matches will be a stern examination of Virat and his team. I believe West Indies, the defending World T20 champions, begin favourites because they enjoy this format, they have power-hitters who relish smashing the ball out of the park, and because they believe they can compete with anyone on an equal footing.

Furthermore, with the exception of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and RavindraJadeja, India have an inexperienced bowling attack which will be seriously challenged by the formidable West Indian batting.

Having said that, I have always maintained that out of challenges arise opportunities. This is a great chance for the likes of Khaleel Ahmed, Deepak Chahar, Navdeep Saini, Krunal Pandya, Rahul Chahar and Washington Sundar to build on their impressive performances in the IPL and embrace the world stage. In many ways, this tour is the beginning of a new cycle.

Until a couple of months back, the focus was on the 50-over World Cup. Now, efforts get underway to identify the core group for the T20 World Cup in Australia in October-November next year. India have upwards of 20 T20Is lined up before that, and the build-up to that event starts in right earnest, especially considering we haven't won the tournament since the inaugural edition in 2007.

The return of Shikhar Dhawan from injury restores quality and firepower to the batting, which looks both settled and strong. I would love to see KL Rahul get a chance to extend his good form of the World Cup and bat at No. 4, and watch with keen interest how Rishabh Pant goes, now that he is a certainty across formats. Manish Pandey and Shreyas Iyer have broken open the doors to selection with a string of top performances, but unfortunate as it might seem, I feel they will still have to bide their time because I would prefer the extra bowling option for Virat to fall back on.

Ideally, two in the top seven must be able to contribute with the ball, and that's where Krunal and Jadeja come in. With both left-arm-spinning all-rounders capable of hitting a long ball, the batting won't suffer. But especially against West Indies, the insurance of the sixth bowler is imperative in this format.