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India kicks off World Cup quest with hard-fought win

India kicked off their quest for the World Cup title with a clinical, professional victory on a difficult surface against South Africa, ticking several significant boxes along the way.

South Africa were low on confidence after losing their two previous matches and being hit by injuries to Lungi Ngidi and Dale Steyn. It was important for India to further dent their morale by beginning well, and that's exactly what Jasprit Bumrah did in admittedly favourable conditions. For India's point of view, they had to make an early statement and set the tone for what is to follow. Bumrah delivered like he has made a habit of in recent times, with a brilliant first salvo in which he was too good for Hashim Amla and Quinton de Kock.

I was also very impressed with how well the two wrist spinners bowled in the middle overs. Yuzvendra Chahal in particular was excellent, getting significant drift and turn. One of the keys to India's success in the last couple of years is the wickets that Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav have been picking up in the middle stages of the innings. Between them, they again took five wickets in 20 overs, making sure that South Africa were left with no breathing space.

Even though the lower order fought on gamely, South Africa were some 30-40 runs shy on the spicy Southampton surface. Their only chance of winning the match was to bowl India out, and Kagiso Rabada threatened to do precisely that with a spell that was on par with Bumrah's.

Fortunately for India, they had Rohit Sharma to thank for his defiant hundred. Rohit was distinctly uncomfortable early on, but he fought on gamely. He was willing to play the waiting game and take the route less travelled to another ODI century, the backbone of India's successful run-chase. Rohit is someone who is used to imposing himself on the opposition attack; to see him bat differently in keeping with the need of the hour was just the kind of encouragement India would welcome.

India got so much out of this game apart from the two points. KedarJadhav slipped in four overs, while Virat, KL Rahul, MS and Hardik Pandya all spent some time at the batting crease. There is nothing more satisfying than a tough, hard-fought win like this to begin a tournament such as the World Cup. India will definitely be better off for this examination of their skill and character.

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India defeats Australia decisively, thanks to sterling individual and team effort

Given the profusion of big-name opponents lined up in the first half of their league campaign, it was imperative that India back up their win against South Africa with another strong performance, and that's precisely what they did at The Oval on Sunday against Australia. As much as the result, what pleased me was the stellar contributions to the victory from ShikharDhawan, the finishing touches applied by the middle-order, and the bowling of Bhuvneshwar Kumar. It now means that almost everyone in the playing eleven has played his part in one or both of the wins, which is wonderful from the team's point of view.

While the move to bat first was the right one, the conditions were a little tricky and there was a reasonable grass cover on the surface. In Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc, Australia had a gun new-ball attack, so it was impressive to see the way Dhawan and Rohit Sharma applied themselves during that difficult phase. Once Dhawan found his rhythm, he was up and running quickly, not trying to over-hit the ball and yet scoring freely. This century will do wonders for his morale going forward, while RohitSharmamade his good form count with another eye-catching effort.

Kohli's reassuring presence allowed the power-hitters to lash out at the other end. I thought the decision to promote Hardik Pandya to No. 4 was well thought out, because the situation was ideal for him to cut loose. He played some breathtaking strokes, while Dhoni and Rahul also weighed in with muscular runs right towards the end. Their ball-striking converted a potential 325 to 352, which would always challenge Australia despite their depth and experience.

I thought JaspritBumrah and Bhuvneshwar Kumar bowled really well up front to the circum-spect duo of Aaron Finch and David Warner, who played uncharacteristically slowly while bringing up another half-century. India kept plugging away but the game-settler was the over in which Bhuvi dismissed the proven Steve Smith and Marcus Stoinis. The dangerous Glenn Maxwell was gobbled up by YuzvendraChahal in the next over, and from then on, the game was always in India's grasp. These three wickets were decisive because as Alex Carey showed towards the end during his very fine fifty, Australia have the depth and the firepower to attack any target.

I was also touched by Kohli's gesture to the Indian fans, asking them to not boo Smith. The two have had their issues in the past, but it was magnanimous of the Indian captain to put all that aside and showcase his respect for another champion performer.

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Washout match after washout match raises concerns about inadequate planning by the ECB

To turn up at the ground and watch the rain come down is one of the most frustrating experiences for any cricketer. The Indian and New Zealand players must be extremely disappointed at the washout in Nottingham on Thursday, the fourth time no-result of this World Cup. As much as the players, the fans too will also feel shortchanged. Most of the sport's main stakeholders would have planned their trips well in advance, and invested plenty of money, time and energy into the whole process. To travel from across the globe and watch only the rain must be heart-breaking.

While it is true that there is not much one can do against the elements, certain measures can be put in place to ensure plays starts not long after the rain stops. One of them is covering the entire outfield, like they do in many parts of Sri Lanka and at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata. This is, after all, the World Cup, the Olympics of cricket, if you like. It can't be treated like a local club match; therefore, the responsibility is on the ICC to demand adequate steps from the ECB to counter the threat of the weather.

Hindsight also suggests that the scheduling of the tournament could have been better. There are more chances of getting by without intervention from the rain in the second half of the summer, which is when England schedule their marquee Test series such as the Ashes this year. Maybe there is a lesson that the organisers can imbibe when the World Cup next returns to England.

Hopefully, we will have a full game in Manchester on Sunday, at the biggest league match of the tournament. Any India-Pakistan game is a massive occasion, but when the stage is as huge as the World Cup, it assumes an added edge. The team and the players that are more emotionally detached are the ones more likely to court success. Despite their overwhelming record against Pakistan in World Cups, India can't afford to take them lightly because already in this tournament, we have seen both sides of Pakistan – the brilliant and the ordinary.

ShikharDhawan's absence just when he was coming back into form is a big blow, but this is a chance for KL Rahul to show what he can do in a familiar position. If it continues to be over-cast, I would like to see Vijay Shankar at No. 4 – his medium pace will be an added string – and Mohammed Shami coming in for Kuldeep Yadav so that India can unleash all three pace-men on the Pakistan top order.

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A composed, uncompromising India outclasses Pakistan

For all the hype and expectation generated ahead of this high-voltage contest, it was apparent that India were the clear favourites against Pakistan because of their class and depth. The only way Pakistan could have pressurised India was if they won the toss, and their bowlers used the conditions to make inroads into the top-order. However, even though Sarfāraz Ahmed won the toss, it became clear inside the first eight overs which way the momentum was heading.

While Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul came out with a definite game plan and stuck to it with discipline, Pakistan bowled too short with Mohammad Amir as the sole exception. Rohit is brilliant off the back foot, and gorged himself to the freebies as he extended his purple patch. He is batting as well as I have seen him, and it speaks volumes of how driven he is that even after making 140, he was disappointed that he couldn't go on and bat out the entire innings.

Rahul was another huge plus from this outing. For India to go all the way, they need their top-order fit and firing. Rahul ticked another box with a polished half-century in his first match as opener in the tournament. Shikhar's injury opened the door for him and Rahul made the most of his chance, which is exactly what you want to see in a top-class team – competition for places and players pushing each other.

Once Rohit and Rahul had put on 136, the base was set for Virat Kohli to come and do his thing. He marshalled the middle of the innings beautifully, until the rain interruption took some of the rhythm away from India's finish. Where they were eyeing 350, India settled for 336, but even that was a massive total in a pressure game.

I was impressed by how composed the team was when Bhuvneshwar Kumar hobbled off with a hamstring injury. All the other bowlers put their hand up, and it was great to see Vijay Shankar and Hardik Pandya among the wickets. But the standout was Kuldeep Yadav. Even though he was still bowling at a little less than 80 kmph, he was getting drift and then turn on pitching, signs that he is putting more body into his bowling. The ball which got Babar Azam was out of the world, it deserved a wicket in any format of the game.

Pakistan will feel they have been ambushed, but they will also recognise that they were outplayed by a superior side that not only played a more rounded brand of cricket, but was also smarter and more uncompromising.

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Injuries apart, Team India looks good

While there might be a feeling that after three tough opponents, India are now set for an 'easy' game, I know the team itself will not approach Saturday's match against Afghanistan in that frame of mind. India have reaffirmed their commitment towards focusing more on their cricket than worrying too much about who they are playing, so I don't expect any drop in intensity despite the vast gulf in rankings and experience between the two sides.

India will no doubt miss the class and versatility of Shikhar Dhawan. My heart goes out to Shikhar. The World Cup is the biggest event on the 50-over calendar and comes around only once in four years. Cricketers look forward to pitting their wares against the best in the business on such a massive stage and helping their country march towards victory. Shikhar had hit his straps, and his century against Australia was indication of the touch he was in. His injury and subsequent withdrawal from the tournament will have come as a massive blow.

In Shikhar's misfortune lies an opportunity for KL Rahul. With Shikhar and Rohit Sharma having formed a brilliant opening partnership, he has had to bide his time. The odd chance he got came in the middle-order. He now has the rest of the tournament in his preferred opening slot to show the team what he can offer. He will take heart from his half-century against Pakistan, and I foresee him making a bigger impact before the World Cup is over.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar's injury is also a bit of a setback, but I feel even if he is 100% fit by the time of the match, India will be better off giving Mohammed Shami a go. Not only will it give Bhuvneshwar a few more days to strengthen his hamstring, it will also mean Shami is match-fit should the need arise for him to figure in the eleven later in the tournament. By the same token, I would like to see Vijay Shankar and Kedar Jadhav get more batting-time. India have been flexible with their order, and rightly promoted Hardik Pandya to No. 4 in the last two matches on the back of excellent platforms. However, like Shami, Vijay and Kedar will welcome the chance to spend time in the middle at this stage of the competition.

I also expect Rashid Khan especially, and Afghanistan, to bounce back from the mauling at the hands of England. They will, however, need to be on top of their game against a team as ruthless as India if they are to arrest their string of massive losses.

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Bowlers step up, give India winning edge

India played at about 70% of their potential against both Afghanistan and West Indies, yet managed to pull the fat out of the fire in the first game and won with plenty to spare in the second.

That was mainly because Virat Kohli had a fantastic bowling attack to fall back on. He is blessed to have four wicket-taking bowlers at his disposal, while Hardik Pandya is beginning to blossom as a fifth bowler with the knack of picking up a wicket or two without going for too many. Mohammed Shami's dismissal of Shai Hope came off the ball of the match, the tremendous seam movement on an otherwise unresponsive track indicative of the rhythm and belief with which he is bowling.

There, however, remain concerns over the batting group which, in Shikhar Dhawan's absence, is overly reliant on Rohit Sharma and Kohli. KL Rahul has been guilty of getting starts in the last three innings and getting himself out, while despite his half-century against Afghanistan, it is clear that Kedar Jadhav is still a little rusty and struggling for fluency.

Vijay Shankar blew two glorious opportunities to make a name for himself while batting alongside Kohli, which was very disappointing. And while Dhoni caught up with the strike-rate towards the end of the innings against West Indies, he will be the first to admit that he ate up too many deliveries in the first half of his knock.

Indeed, if not for Pandya's blitz, India could have found themselves in a spot. These are areas India will be keen to address when they take on England in Birmingham on Sunday. The batsmen can take a leaf out of Kohli's book. The captain always carries a positive mindset and that reflects in his footwork, be it either in defence or while playing his strokes. I was also impressed with his captaincy against Afghanistan. Both his field placements and rotation of bowlers was spot-on, further evidence of his growing stature as a leader.

India have a great chance to push under-pressure England further down the creek and reassert their championship credentials. The hosts are coming off successive defeats, with question marks hanging over their ability to tailor their natural aggression when confronted with slow tracks which stymie stroke-making. They have already ceded the No. 1 ODI ranking to India, and I am curious to see how, given the noise surrounding their implosions against Sri Lanka and Australia, they will come out against an Indian side that is high on confidence and self-belief.

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Pacers contain an experienced Bangladesh as Indian team course-corrects

India had to immediately address a few issues following their defeat to England on Sunday, and it was great to see them make instant course-corrections during Tuesday's victory over Bangladesh that formalised their semi-final entry.

While a lot of questions were understandably raised about India's intent in the last ten overs of their chase, it was also surprising that even with Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli in the middle, they managed only 28 in the first 10 while chasing 338. With the pitches getting drier, and therefore forcing the pace against an older, softer ball getting harder, it was imperative to set the tone early against Bangladesh, and that's exactly what Rohit did.

Rohit was aggressive and happy to play his strokes, translating his consistency to a remarkable fourth hundred of the World Cup. I am convinced he will continue in the same fashion till the end of the competition. At the same time, KL Rahul needs to be more proactive. He has looked extremely subdued and got out at the wrong times, most notably against Bangladesh when he was dismissed not long after Rohit when, as the set batsman, he should have played on till at least the 40th over.

Rishabh Pant played a very mature hand, refusing to go into his shell despite the loss of three quick wickets. It was his energy and approach that pushed India to 314, well below what they threatened at one stage but definitely a steep ask on a wearing and used surface.

If there was one side that could have hunted the target down, it was Bangladesh with their experienced and in-form batting unit. However, India's pacers were excellent up front, and even though Shakib Al Hasan played another excellent hand, the match seemed in the bag when he fell to Hardik Pandya. India had taken a big risk by going in with only five bowling options, but Hardik was exceptional with his cutters and by bowling to the dimensions of the ground.

Sabbir Rahman and the young Saifuddin threatened to upset India's applecart, but Virat has the luxury of falling back on Jasprit Bumrah, and his pace ace didn't disappoint. India did the right thing by bringing Bhuvneshwar Kumar in for Kuldeep Yadav, but against Sri Lanka, I would like Ravindra Jadeja to replace the seventh batsman, Dinesh Karthik. To go into a knock-out game with only five bowlers is a big risk, and Jadeja is a more than capable batsman too. Against Sri Lanka, I would play the same eleven that will figure in the semi-final.

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India rides into semi-final, team composition for next match of greatest significance

As expected, India dominated their final league tie against Sri Lanka, riding a wave of feel-good into the semi-final against New Zealand on Tuesday. When Sri Lanka lost four quick wickets, an early finish loomed but the experienced Angelo Mathews rallied them to respectability. However, given the form and quality of the Indian top-order, 264 was never going to be enough, not with Rohit Sharma in such terrific touch.

It was great to see Rohit once again play a free-flowing innings of authority and composure. To score five hundreds against the same opposition in a bilateral series is almost impossible; to make those in the World Cup against different teams in varied conditions is testament to his maturity and hunger for runs. He has started every innings knowing that the previous knock doesn't count for anything anymore. There is a very thin line between confidence and complacency, and Rohit has walked that line quite beautifully.

His stroke-making is breathtaking in its simplicity, and I sometimes feel that Rohit has no idea of the delight he brings to the connoisseurs. To me, he is poetry in motion when in full flight, which he has been for much of the World Cup. What has also stood out is the ease with which he has changed roles since pairing up with KL Rahul.

With Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit used to take his time building an innings because the former was the aggressor. With Rahul finding his feet back at the top of the order, Rohit has now embraced the attacking role, allowing his partner to ease into his innings. Nowhere has the significance of batting as a pair been more apparent than in Rohit's approach, and I am sure Rahul has learnt a lot by seeing the senior pro operate. Rahul's own state of mind will be a lot better after finally getting to three-figures. The timing of the knock, just before the semis, has to be the icing on the cake.

India will not take New Zealand lightly even though they are coming off three successive losses. If there is one thing about the Kiwis, it is that they never give up. In World Cups, the tight-knit group finds ways to bounce back, and that's something Virat Kohli and his men will be mindful of. I am interested to see what combination India put out – whether they go for the sixth bowling option, like I would, or if they play the extra batsman as insurance against New Zealand's strength, their pace bowling.

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Identical pattern to both semi-finals, World Cup to see first-time winner

There was an identical pattern to the two semi-finals of the World Cup, with new-ball spells decisive in New Zealand and England's victories. Matt Henry and Trent Boult broke a billion Indian hearts by getting rid of Rohit Sharma, KL Rahul and Virat Kohli with just five runs on the board, while Chris Woakes and Jofra Archer fired out the form duo of Aaron Finch and Davey Warner to end Australia's title defence.

Even though India bowed out at the last-four stage, they can look back on an exceptional campaign that took them to the top of the league table. They were again excellent with the ball against the Kiwis, and once the top-order failed during the chase of 240, it was an opportunity for the middle-order to step up. Their task was very difficult against a disciplined attack and a mounting required-rate. India were being outplayed when Dhoni and Ravindra Jadeja, batting in the tournament for the first time, nearly threatened the impossible. Jadeja was breath-taking to watch, and his uninhibited ball-striking was further proof of the value he brings to the team, while Dhoni was his calm, unperturbed self until Martin Guptill's brilliance in the field ended his, and India's, hopes.

It's this all-round persistence that has served New Zealand well over so many years. They may not appear the most glamorous or in-your-face team, but they are so quietly efficient that they almost slip into the knockouts each time largely unnoticed. Kane Williamson batted beautifully alongside Ross Taylor as the two senior pros assessed the Old Trafford pitch astutely. Kane's captaincy was also spot-on. He knew the only way he could stop India was by taking wickets, so he attacked with close-in catchers and men in the circle.

The second semi-final was expected to be a close contest but Australia's soft underbelly was exposed after the openers departed cheaply. Steve Smith fought hard and Alex Carey showed courage despite being hit by an Archer bouncer, but 223 was never going to test the new England, all aggressive and energetic. Jason Roy in particular launched a stunning onslaught, while Jonny Bairstow, Joe Root and Eoin Morgan bossed over Australia, who looked flat and listless during the second half.

Man for man, England look the stronger side going into the final. They will also have the advantage of home support and knowledge of the conditions, but if anyone is equipped to beat them, it is the under-stated Kiwis. I anticipate a cracking contest, knowing that on Sunday, we will have a first-time winner.

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New Zealand wins hearts, England lifts Cup

What a final! It was an absolute privilege to be at Lord's on Sunday to witness first-hand one of the true classics of our great sport. There was absolutely nothing that separated New Zealand from England. Unfortunately, because there had to be a winner, someone had to come second-best, but Kane Williamson and his team came away with their heads held high.

I have been a big fan of New Zealand cricket for a long time, and this tournament reiterated their commitment towards values, desire and an uncompromising work-ethic. They barely scraped into the semi-finals, but picked up their game when it mattered the most and showcased their resolve and character both while defeating India and then running England so close in the final. Kane handled his team beautifully, and even though his colleagues did not support him with the bat as much as he would have liked, he got the best out of his bowling unit. New Zealand will take a lot of time to recover from this heartbreak, but I am sure they will come back stronger because that is in their nature.

As for England, they were magnificent. The tag of favourites sat lightly on their shoulders, and they deservedly emerged champions for the first time. This was a victory for the planning and preparation which started after their first-round elimination in 2015. Credit to Eoin Morgan and the leadership group for not just reinventing their one-day game, but also picking the right personnel and backing them. It goes to show that World Cups are not won overnight, and that success in big tournaments is the culmination of a process.

Like he has been all tournament long, Ben Stokes was brilliant in the final too. You could see the steel in his eyes even when he was losing partners after his century stand with Jos Buttler was broken, and it was heartening to see him bounce back after a couple of rough years, both in his personal life and as a professional.

I liked the concept of the Super Over, though I would be happier with a different way of settling stalemates than the boundary countback. Perhaps wickets taken could be one criterion, or the head-to-head result in the league phase, but overall, my thumbs-up to the format where all teams played each other. The four strongest and most consistent teams usually advance to the next stage, which is what happened this time. This World Cup was a great celebration of cricket; you can't ask for more.