

**VVS LAXMAN**

**Published 16.11.17**

**Lanka will need to be at their very best to beat India**

Memories of the 3-0 drubbing in their own backyard just a couple of months back must have come flooding back to Sri Lankan minds as they set foot on Indian soil last week for the multi-format tour starting with the first Test in Kolkata from Thursday. Dinesh Chandimal's men will be aware of how formidable this Indian team is and therefore know what lies ahead of them, but they will derive plenty of confidence from having subsequently defeated Pakistan 2-0 in the UAE. That, coupled with the return of Angelo Mathews, will give them a great deal of heart, though they will need to be at their very best if they are to upset India's applecart.

Having seen the ruthlessness and total focus with which India hunted down Sri Lanka in July-August, I don't see any let-up in intensity this time around either. India's formula during the successful home season last season and in Sri Lanka revolved around posting huge first-innings totals and then allowing the quality of their bowlers and scoreboard pressure to work on the opposition. Victories at home against New Zealand, England, Bangladesh and Australia were primarily eked out on good cricket pitches, which is a huge shot in the arm for Virat Kohli and his team.

Overlooked for the limited-overs matches in recent times, the core bowling group of Mohammed Shami, Umesh Yadav, R Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja will be raring to go. All of them have played in the Ranji Trophy and have sharpened their skills, but the one thing they must guard against is over-trying and looking to make a statement. They are all proven performers at the top of their respective games and, so long as they stick to the basics, they will be perfectly fine.

India have a couple of tricky selection choices to make. Since it was re-laid a year and a half or so back, the Eden surface has assisted the quicker bowlers more than it has the spinners, and Bhuvneshwar Kumar picked up a five-for in India's last Test there, against New Zealand. With Hardik Pandya rested, does the think-tank stick with the five-bowler option with Bhuvni as the fifth component, or does it play the extra batsman in Rohit Sharma? I think the answer is fairly obvious.

The other happy headache is which two openers to pick from KL Rahul, Shikhar Dhawan and M Vijay. Shikhar has been in terrific form since his comeback in Sri Lanka, Rahul has been a picture of consistency in Test cricket, and Vijay has been India's best Test opener in the last four years or so. Furthermore, both Rahul and Vijay stated their cases with big knocks in their last Ranji outing. I am glad I don't have to take that call!

**Published 22.11.17**

### **India showed who was boss in difficult conditions**

In extremely bowler-friendly conditions, Sri Lanka started the first Test strongly, but were gasping for survival by the finish, bringing a fascinating game to an exciting end. Even though a majority of the first two days was badly affected by the weather, fortunes swung one way, then the other before India showed who the boss was.

This was perhaps Sri Lanka's best chance to record a maiden Test win in India. Dinesh Chandimal won a crucial toss on a grassy, damp surface but apart from Suranga Lakmal, the other seamers didn't make the kind of impact they should have. The Eden surface has been a fast bowler's ally since it was re-laid more than a year and a half back, but Sri Lanka frittered away a golden opportunity after excellent work by the ground staff ensured prompt start of play once the rain stopped.

As difficult as the conditions were, India will be disappointed with some of their choice of shots in both innings. Cheteshwar Pujara showed with his application and grit in the first innings that the surface was anything but unplayable. Shikhar Dhawan, KL Rahul and the gifted Virat Kohli stamped their class in the second innings, and India will have gleaned valuable lessons ahead of a challenging 2018 when they have away series lined up in South Africa, England and Australia.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Mohammed Shami were outstanding throughout the match. With Umesh Yadav somewhat off colour, Bhuvni and Shami stepped up to embrace responsibility. Bhuvni extended his white-ball form to red-ball cricket, his excellent wrist position and the ability to land the ball on the seam wonderful virtues on any track. Now that he has added a couple of yards of pace and has zeroed in on the right lengths for different pitches, he has become an even more dangerous customer.

Shami started off a little gingerly, which is perhaps understandable, but the more he bowled, the better he visibly got. Unlike Bhuvni who relies a little more on swing, Shami is a hit-the-deck kind of bowler which was what was needed on this Eden surface. These two and Umesh, who I am sure will bounce back strongly, will be crucial to India's plans next year.

Virat must be commended for breaking open the game on the final day when he could so easily have allowed it to drift. He is now in that rare club of batsmen with 50 international tons, and is rapidly evolving into an excellent, attacking leader. Another half-hour of play, and India could now be sitting on a 1-0 lead.

**Published 8.12.17**

### **Lanka will be buoyed by their youngsters' showing**

Sri Lanka finally put up the kind of resistance everyone except the Indian team had been hoping for. Their excellent rearguard batting on the final day of the series was notable for more reasons than one. Sri Lanka will be encouraged by the fact that the draw in the Kotla Test was fashioned not by their established stars, but by youngsters still finding their feet at the top level.

Dinesh Chandimal was Sri Lanka's best batsman on tour and Angelo Mathews the most experienced. Against that backdrop, to see Dhananjaya de Silva and Roshen Silva on debut put their hand up and take up the responsibility of saving the Test was heartening. They showed character and application, but they also backed themselves to play their natural game on an admittedly flat surface. It is clear that there is excellent potential in their batting but going forward, Sri Lanka must find more wicket-taking options if they are to eye victories rather than face-saving draws.

India got almost everything they wanted out of this series before their tour of South Africa. I say almost because, while they might have desired pitches with grass and bounce, they didn't get them except in Kolkata where the strip has helped the fast bowlers since it was re-laid. Having said that, almost the entire batting unit except Ajinkya Rahane stacked up big runs with Virat Kohli clearly the leader of the pack. The skipper finished with more than 600 runs, an outstanding achievement in a three-Test series. For me, however, the highlights were the performances of Murali Vijay and Rohit Sharma. India need an in-form, confident Vijay heading to South Africa, and the opener celebrated his return to Test cricket after eight months with back-to-back hundreds. Rohit had been out for even longer, and his consistent run is a good sign ahead of the stiffer challenges.

I thought Mohammed Shami and Ishant Sharma were outstanding. Ishant has worked very hard and that has translated into an excellent wrist position that also allows him to bowl a bit fuller. This is easily the best I have seen him bowl. R Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja were somewhat blunted by the Kotla strip. I know people will talk about their inability to bowl Sri Lanka out on a final-day pitch, but you have to give credit where it is due – in this case, to the Sri Lankan batsmen.

The one area India must improve in is the close-in catching. For a side that prides itself on fitness and ground fielding, India's slip catching in particular has been poor for a while now. It is important that they identify people to man the slips, and then persist with them so that they get better. Even the best will put down catches, but that doesn't mean immediately taking them off. Slip-catching will be a crucial component overseas, and if India are to remain the No. 1 team they are, they can't afford to give top batsmen a second chance.

**Published 12.12.17**

### **It's hard to shake off the feeling that India is too reliant on Virat**

In the absence of the rested Virat Kohli, this was a wonderful opportunity for the Indian batting unit to show the world that there was more to them than just their inspirational captain. Unfortunately, and even though the conditions were stacked against them, they failed to deliver the goods. While the temptation to dismiss this as a one-off can be overwhelming, India have found the going difficult in tricky conditions. It happened against Australia in Chennai this year, in the T20 game against the same opponents in Guwahati and in the T20 match against Sri Lanka in Pune last year, and that is an area that needs addressing.

It is hard to shake off the feeling that the team is too reliant on Virat, and on the opening combine. Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma, in his first match as India captain, received very good deliveries, but the same can't be said of some of the other batsmen. It was left to Mahendra Singh Dhoni to show them the way. MS was proactive from the time he came to the middle, using his feet in a bid to throw the bowlers off their rhythm. He showed the intelligence and the adaptability which comes with experience, but also realised that you can't just remain scoreless, just as he had done in Chennai and in Pallekele against Sri Lanka in August.

The pitch in Dharamsala wasn't ideal for one-day cricket. There was more lateral movement and for longer than expected, but it is exactly these situations that test not just your skill, but also temperament and character. MS drew from having played 300 ODIs, but the others aren't entirely new apart from Shreyas Iyer and will all do well to take a leaf out of the former skipper's book. That being said, they were also up against excellent bowling, Suranga Lakmal reiterating his standing as a quality bowler.

India's only chance after being bowled out for 112 was to strike through their excellent new-ball pair of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Jasprit Bumrah. While they did pick up two early wickets, Bumrah's no-ball that threw Upul Tharanga a lifeline decisively tilted the momentum in Sri Lanka's favour. It wasn't the first costly no-ball from Bumrah – Fakhar Zaman in the Champions Trophy final comes to mind – and it must be sorted out immediately before it becomes a bad habit hard to get rid of.

The initiative in a three-match series is clearly with the side which takes the early lead, but India can derive encouragement from having defeated New Zealand 2-1 in October from a similar position. The one big difference, however, is that the influential Virat isn't around this time. This is a real test of character for captain Rohit, and his somewhat new-look batting group.

**Published 20.12.17**

### **Rohit's manificent double effectively killed the contest**

After the embarrassing stutter in Dharamsala, India stepped up to brush Sri Lanka aside in the next two games and extend their winning streak in bilateral ODI series to an impressive eight. It was imperative for the senior batsmen in the side to lead the way after the abject capitulation in the first match, and Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan did so in successive games with telling results.

Thisara Perera's luck with the coin exposed the openers to a tricky phase in Mohali, the 11.30 am start making their task even more difficult. To their credit, they put their heads down and negotiated the first 10 overs with great care. Only 33 came in that period, but crucially, no wickets had been lost.

Shikhar then took charge but threw it away with a hundred beckoning. Rohit did not. The longer he stayed in the middle, the more he grew in confidence. He is the kind of batsman who can effortlessly switch gears and send even good deliveries out of the park. He went from 100 to a magnificent third double hundred in just 36 deliveries, effectively killing the contest by the interval.

Sri Lanka showed little intent when they came out to bat, sticking to the same conservative batting order. However, they still managed to get to 250 on the back of a century from Angelo Mathews, showing up the Indian bowling a little. India had just five bowlers of whom two were all-rounders – Hardik Pandya and Washington Sundar. Going forward, they must identify a sixth and seventh option within the playing eleven when they run into more challenging opposition.

The decider in Visakhapatnam was also one-way traffic once Upul Tharanga was dismissed for a fluent 95 in the 28th over. Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal, the two young wrist spinners, reiterated their continued growth as a potent force, and Shikhar made up for the Mohali profligacy by cruising to a deserved hundred.

I was most impressed with Shreyas Iyer in both the second and third matches. He could have been bogged down by the fact that he was coming in for Virat Kohli and that he had a poor debut in Dharamsala. But without being reckless, he batted with natural freedom and brought a touch of class with his strokeplay. As much as his touch, it was his mindset that caught my eye. I foresee big things for him going forward.

As for Sri Lanka, they need strong leadership now more than ever. They have been in transition for far too long, and would do well to see how India handled their recent transitional periods. India had powerful personalities in charge — Sourav Ganguly (2000-01), Mahendra Singh Dhoni (2013-14) and then Virat — as the team moved from one era to another. Unless Sri Lanka follow suit quickly, the road to redemption will be long and arduous.