

## **CAN THE BATSMEN WIN THE WORLD CUP FOR INDIA?**

*Paresh Kumar Das*

As the wisemen of Indian cricket sat down on Tuesday to pick up the 15-member Indian squad for the World Cup, they did not spring any surprises. The players chosen were on expected lines except for the likes of Stuart Binny or Akshar Patel who were nonetheless very much on the selectors' radar.

Backed by skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni, whose leadership qualities have been well documented despite the string of failures in the test arena, the team will be having a healthy-looking batting line up. Virat Kohli, who now leads India in tests after Dhoni's sudden retirement from the format, along with the likes of Ajinkya Rahane, Rohit Sharma, Suresh Raina and Ambati Rayudu will have to ensure that runs are on the board because the bowlers have not exactly displayed their ability to be match winners.

Sunil Gavaskar has described the Indian one-day batting line-up as 'formidable' but question marks do remain on the bowling strength.

Dhoni, who led India to victory in the 2011 World Cup, will be virtually captaining an almost unrecognizable team down under as only four of the 16-member team that won the final in Mumbai, figure in the present team. Besides the skipper himself, the other three are Kohli, Raina and Ravichandran Ashwin.

While stalwarts like Yuvraj Singh, who was the man of the tournament last time, Virendra Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Zaheer Khan and Harbhajan Singh have been sidelined, Dhoni has been left with an inexperienced attack.

Gavaskar described the Indian bowling as a "huge area of concern" and truly India's prospects of retaining the World Cup greatly depends on how the bowlers do. If the batsmen are required to chase totals in excess of 300 regularly, it will be a tough call on the team.

The pace quartet of Ishant Sharma, Mohammed Shami, Umesh Yadav and Bhuvneshwar Kumar have come a cropper in the test series away from home. Ishant, despite having played 59 tests and 75 ODIs, still appears to be a work in progress. While Kumar could be effective in pitches which provide swing, the others have not been consistent.

The likes of Yadav and Varun Aaron, who is not in the World Cup squad, have demonstrated that just having pace does not matter if they are unable to follow a persistent line and length.

In the 1983 World Cup in England where India under Kapil Dev were the surprise champions defeating a formidable West Indies in the final, the attack was led by players who bowled medium pace. The likes of Roger Binny, Madan Lal and even Mohinder Amarnath, who provided the pace bowling support to Kapil, were far more effective in English conditions though none boasted of raw pace.

In the World Cup to be played in Australia and New Zealand, the bowlers will get bouncy pitches while New Zealand may offer seam-friendly conditions. The selection of Stuart Binny, son of Roger of 1983 World Cup fame, thus appears a good pick as he could be the bits-and-pieces player Dhoni might need. Stuart is a decent batsman as well.

Opener Shikhar Dhawan and Raina are the only two left handers in the squad but the former has been too inconsistent as flaws in his technique has been haunting him down under. Though a right hander, Robin Uthappa could have been a better choice and a back up wicket keeper in the squad. Opener Murli Vijay, after a fine series against Australia and being consistent, must count himself unlucky not to have made the cut.

The paucity of left handed batsmen of promise, except for upcoming Vijay Zol of Maharashtra, should be bothering selectors with an eye on the future.

The other bits-and-pieces options in the team come in the shape of Ravindra Jadeja, who is not fully fit as yet following a shoulder injury, newcomer Akshar Patel and Binny. Both Jadeja and Patel, being virtually players of the same mould, are not expected to play together unless the situation demands so. However, as regards fielding, this team will be among the best. Virat, Dhawan, Rahane, Raina, Rohit, Jadeja and the rest would hate to concede easy runs to the opposition.

*(Mr. Das is a Bhubaneswar based senior journalist)*