

## **COBBLING TOGETHER THE DREAM INDIAN ELEVEN**

Whenever the five selectors, often dubbed as the five wise men with the onerous responsibility of cobbling together the best players comprising India's test cricket team, sit together to pick the team they feel the heat of the country's collective gaze resting on them.

Choosing India's cricket team is one of the most difficult tasks as the final squad is subjected to intense scrutiny by anybody and everybody. Generally the point veers round to questions such as why batsman A was not picked or bowler B was dropped from the team.

That also makes it a very pleasurable hobby for followers of the game who have their own views as to who should make the final 15 or 16 when the team is preparing to leave our shores on an away visit or gearing up to face an opposition on a tour of our country.

Arm chair critics apart, sports writers find it an enjoyable professional duty when they sit down to select their own team as newspapers speculate on the composition of the squad pointing out why somebody should be in the team at the expense of another. The reports generally appear on the sports pages on the morning of the team selection.

This has been a hobby with this writer for over four decades now and once the team is announced, you are either vindicated or amused. And when the player, who was not in your frame goes on to play a stellar role for the country, you inwardly congratulate the selectors for their foresight and knowledge.

Having watched and covered cricket as a scribe for years, at times one is made to feel what a team it would have been had all the best cricketers of different eras could have come together to form a formidable squad. You need to choose players for different slots like the opening batsmen, middle order, all rounders, wicket keeper, medium pacers and spinners picking the best from different generations.

When this writer started following cricket from the 1969-70 season, Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi was the captain. New Zealand under Graham Dowling was touring India and though India managed to draw the three-test series 1-1 with difficulty, the team was decimated by Bill Lawry's Australians 1-3 in the 5-test series that followed soon after. The batting, despite boasting such names as M.L.Jaisimha, Ajit Wadekar, Pataudi, Rusi Surti and Syed Abid Ali, the last two all-rounders of calibre couldn't post a decent total. Opener Chetan Chauhan, middle order batsmen Ashok Mankad, Ambar Roy, Eknath Solkar and Ashok Gandothra were blooded in that series against the Kiwis.

It was the bowlers, led by some of the finest spinners India has produced, who took the fight to the opposition camp.

It was in the 1971 away series in West Indies (of six tests), facing the might of Gary Sobers' Caribbeans, and in England playing a three test series, that Indian cricket tasted rare success winning both series 1-0. A 20-year-old opener named Sunil Gavaskar made his historic debut in the West Indies amassing 774 runs in five tests. It was in the seventies that Indian batsmen could face sheer pace with confidence with players like Gavaskar, Mohinder Amarnath and Gundappa Viswanath showing the way.

Looking back, one feels some of the cricketers of the bygone eras were players of greater calibre. They lurk in the mind as one sits down to pick the eleven.

Opening batsmen are of great importance as they virtually give shape to the total the team is able to post on the scoreboard. And thinking of openers in different eras, one would not need to look beyond Gavaskar for his technique and elegance though illustrious openers like Mushtaq Ali, Vijay Merchant and Pankaj Roy played for India.

To partner him at the top, there could be several contenders but no one would possibly argue with the choice of Virender Sehwag whose explosive batting can destroy any bowling in the world.

There could be several claimants to slots in the middle order as India had a number of middle order stalwarts like Vijay Manjrekar, Hanumant Singh, Dilip Sardesai and Chandu Borde who dominated the sixties and early seventies.

For the number three batting slot, the tussle will be between Mohinder Amarnath and Rahul Dravid. But despite Amarnath's all round ability, my vote will be for Dravid for sheer solidity and shot selection. Gundappa Viswanath, who turned batting into sheer artistry, will be ever remembered for his fantastic shot selection against a ferocious Andy Roberts on the fast Chepauk wicket many winters ago.

The contenders for the number four slot in the batting order could include Vijay Hazare of the bygone era and the likes of Mohammed Azharuddin and Dilip Vengsarkar of more recent past. But Viswanath would get my vote. And no one can grudge Sachin Tendulkar trotting in to bat after the fall of the third wicket. VVS Laxman, whose monumental 281 against the Aussies in Kolkata has been voted the innings of the last 50 years, will be my choice to bat at number six.

Laxman should be followed by bowling all rounder and captain of India's 1983 World Cup winning team Kapil Dev, undoubtedly India's greatest all rounder ever though Vinoo Mankad would rate very high on that scale.

As far as wicket keeper's are concerned, SMH Kirmani should get the nod ahead of the likes of Farokh Engineer and Mahendra Singh Dhoni. The current Indian test stumper Wriddhiman Saha is also an accomplished keeper and should be rated high in days to come. But Kirmani's work behind the wickets was flawless when he did duty for India. He was also a very useful batsman.

The medium pacer to partner Kapil should be left arm seamer Zaheer Khan. Javagal Srinath should be the third in the pacers' list though he could face competition from Mohammed Nissar of the bygone era. Other worthies like Venkatesh Prasad, Manoj Prabhakar, Ajit Agarkar and Chetan Sharma could also be considered.

It is the spin department that offers the most fascinating choices. Bishen Singh Bedi, often in the news for his utterances today, would go down in history as India's best left arm spinner while EAS Prasanna, who bowled in tandem with the former, was the most accomplished off-spinner. Other bowlers who merit consideration include S Venkatraghavan, also an off-spinner and the mysterious BS Chandrasekhar whose balls could bamboozle opponents on any surface. Incidentally, all four played together in the same era.

Another bowler of fabulous achievements is Anil Kumble. He could walk into any team but as a spinner would face great

competition from the likes of Bedi, Prasanna and Chandrasekhar.

Consider this line up: Sunil Gavaskar, Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, Gundappa Viswanath, Sachin Tendulkar, VVS Laxman, Kapil Dev, SMH Kirmani (WK), EAS Prasanna, Bishen Singh Bedi and **Zaheer Khan**.

Players like Mohinder Amarnath, Vijay Hazare, Farokh Engineer, BS Chandrasekhar, Anil Kumble and **Javagal Srinath** could make up the 17. Kapil Dev could be a good choice to captain the team though there are five others in the XI who skippered India.

Cricket, for many of its followers, is a journey. When looking back, this writer has misty memories of the 1969 series against New Zealand with many of the cricketers, including the captain of the Indian team Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, no more. But a couple of decades from now, the name of one Pranav Dhanawade may pop up when someone sits down to list the best eleven for the country.

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