**Turning the corner**

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By defeating archrival India and top-ranked New Zealand in the most crucial T20 World Cup matches in the UAE, Pakistan has made a strong statement. For a cricket team that could not play on its home ground for 10 years and confronted attempts of global isolation, the back-to-back victories are quite a comeback -- and that too with a bang.

The context needs a bit of recap: as the country limped its way to normalcy and convinced international teams to start touring Pakistan as part of their commitments, its efforts met with mixed results. While some teams did visit Pakistan -- albeit amid tight security -- for limited series, big and strong teams dilly-dallied, invoking security concerns and intentionally avoiding definitive commitments.

As the country’s stadiums remained deserted for almost a decade, the Pakistan cricket team played all its home series away from home, in the UAE, which, eventually, became home to the Men in Green. The absence of international cricket, however, cost Pakistan dearly.

The cricket team experimented with various combinations and worked on different strategies, but the decade of ‘cricket drought’ negatively affected the team’s overall performance. Except for the 2009 T20 WC and the 2017 Champions Trophy, Pakistan failed to achieve any noticeable success. It was only after the introduction of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) that the talent hunt programme started, which introduced Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) selectors to the country’s raw talent.

On the other hand, India has been at the vanguard of efforts to damage cricket here. Besides not playing any bilateral series against Pakistan, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) virtually became a mouthpiece of the Modi government and contributed its share to isolating Pakistan in global cricketing arenas.

More recently, in the run-up to the T20 WC, Pakistan’s pride was deeply hurt when the New Zealand (NZ) cricket team unilaterally opted out of a bilateral series minute before the first ODI. The immediate reason offered by NZ was ‘security threats’ from an unnamed source whose details it refused to share with Pakistani authorities. Despite PM Imran Khan’s emergency telephonic call to his counterpart Jacinda Ardern, things did not work out and the series was abandoned abruptly; not a single match was played.

As if the hurt and deep sense of anguish caused by the abrupt cancellation of the NZ tour was not enough, the impending tour of England was also called off, whereby England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) authorities cited security reasons as well as “the mental and physical wellbeing of our players” as the justification for the cancellation of the tour.

These unfortunate developments made international headlines, pushed Pakistan cricket to the corner and practically put paid to all efforts to revive the game in a cricket-crazy country. Pakistanis were justifiably incensed, considering that the reasons offered for the abandonment of the tours were too evasive to be put down to something concrete and convincing. More so the case when presidential-level security was pledged by the authorities to the visiting teams.

This background is relevant to understand and contextualise the performances of the Pakistan cricket team in the first two matches of the T20 WC. A convincing, nay historic, win against India in the opening match broke the jinx of the last 12 defeats that Pakistan suffered at the hands of their archrivals in all the World Cup matches to date.

Irrespective of the relative strengths of the Pakistan team on paper, the Men in Green were always intimidated when facing India, lacking the confidence and self-belief required to win such high-octane games. These defeats fed Indian arrogance, which has been articulated in their sweeping media commentaries that wrote Pakistan team off as an underdog, unable to take on the Kohli XI.

However, October 24 dawned to witness history in the making. As millions of cricket fans across the globe, especially across South Asia, sat down to watch the match on their TV screens, the Men in Green stepped on to the ground with a changed mindset. With eight players making their debut in the WC, the team represented a combination of young blood and experience.

From the first ball being bowled to the effortless and clinical chase of the Indian score, it was a different Pakistan team from the one we have grown up watching even during the best of our cricketing days. There was no trace of any intimidation. Confidence was writ large on the faces of the team members as they took on the ‘finely honed’ Indian side.

There was clearly a game plan in place born out of an unwavering sense of self-belief to turn the tables on the opponents. Above all, there was a hunger to win, a rare thing to witness given the history of the Pakistan-India cricket.

The way Pakistan took on India left many awestruck. The exchange of messages with some Indian friends from university days was a reminder of how Pakistan was never considered worthy of India, let alone a winner in this spectacular fashion.

This only goes to show the extent of damage the ‘manufactured reality’ created by biased media reporting and a lack of bilateral cricket can do to otherwise sensible and cricket-aware people. The defeat in Dubai established how ‘out of touch’ one can be with the reality.

As traditional and social media was flooded with post-match assessments and jubilations, it was indeed encouraging to see the manner in which former Indian captain M S Dhoni and current captain Virat Kohli reached out to Pakistani players to wish them on their success. The pictures of Babar Azam and Rizwan with Kohli immediately went viral across various media platforms and drew positive feedback from cricket fans.

At the same time, the online hate campaign against Indian bowler Mohammed Shami left a bad taste in the mouth, showing how the cancer of fanaticism has permeated the Indian body politic, almost on a cue from the ideological guardians of the ruling BJP and the RSS. The saffronisation of cricket augurs ill for the future of the game.

In the second game against NZ, Pakistan’s middle-order batting line-up, though tested by NZ bowlers, cruised home in a low-scoring match. The outcome of Tuesday’s (Oct 26) match in Sharjah cemented Pakistan’s position as favourites for the WC and put other teams on the notice, indicating that the Green Shirts mean business, this time round.

This victory is also significant in the sense that it helped heal the emotions hurt by the unilateral abandonment of the Pakistan tour by NZ.

Cricket is a perfect metaphor for Pakistan, and the rise and fall of cricket amply reflects the country’s struggle with many challenges. It is not just a sport; it welds the nation into a unity and reinforces the very idea of nationhood and common identity.

We are living in a time in which sports are less for what they are and more of an expression of a people’s yearning for lost glory, pride and self-respect.

The expression of massive goodwill generated by the viral pictures of the Pakistani and Indian players is a sign that the sport can be used to bring people together. For this, the Indian ruling junta must shed the idea of using cricket as a political weapon.

However, a few things are easier said than done.

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