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PICKING ITSELF, OR...

With the World Cup stretch looming, talk on the Indian squad, middle-order, key slots and their back-ups gains momentum

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Chennai: At 18-4 against New Zealand on Saturday, the Indian middle-order was under immense scrutiny. With the World Cup round the corner the gaps in the Indian batting line-up have been the topic of discussion for a while and the astonishing 92 all out two days before at Hamilton helped to add to the sense of unease. But in Wellington, Ambati Rayudu answered all those questions with an emphatic 90 that all but finished the No. 4 debate for now.

Openers Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan might have had the odd failure in Australia and New Zealand, but there's absolutely no doubt about their spots. With Virat Kohli at No. 3 and MS Dhoni at 5 being certainties, the talk has invariably centered around No. 4 and 6.

While Rayudu's Wellington innings has done him a great favour, Kedar Jadhav, with his ability to bowl off-spin with a slinging action and score those crucial runs under pressure, is well ahead in the No. 6 race. But the World Cup is a long haul, more so in England, where the ball will move around. So even if India go for Rayudu and Kedar at No. 4 and 6, some back-up is imperative. "The World Cup is some distance away and the team management has its own thoughts. But yes, back-up is a must," former chairman of selectors Kiran More told TOI.

While the ex-India stumper didn't specify who his preferred back-up was, his former teammate Dilip Vengsarkar was more categorical. The former middle-order stalwart feels conditions in England demand proper batsmanship and Ajinkya Rahane should be the one who should be in that 15-member squad for World Cup. "I am not saying Rahane has to be played in every game. But you need a batsman who knows how to deal with conditions there and Rahane is the perfect fit," Vengsarkar said.

Rahane, though, hasn't been in India's ODI scheme of things for a while now, but Vengsarkar feels the home series against Australia can be the opportunity to try him out. "He can come in at any slot, Rahane gives you options," Vengsarkar added.

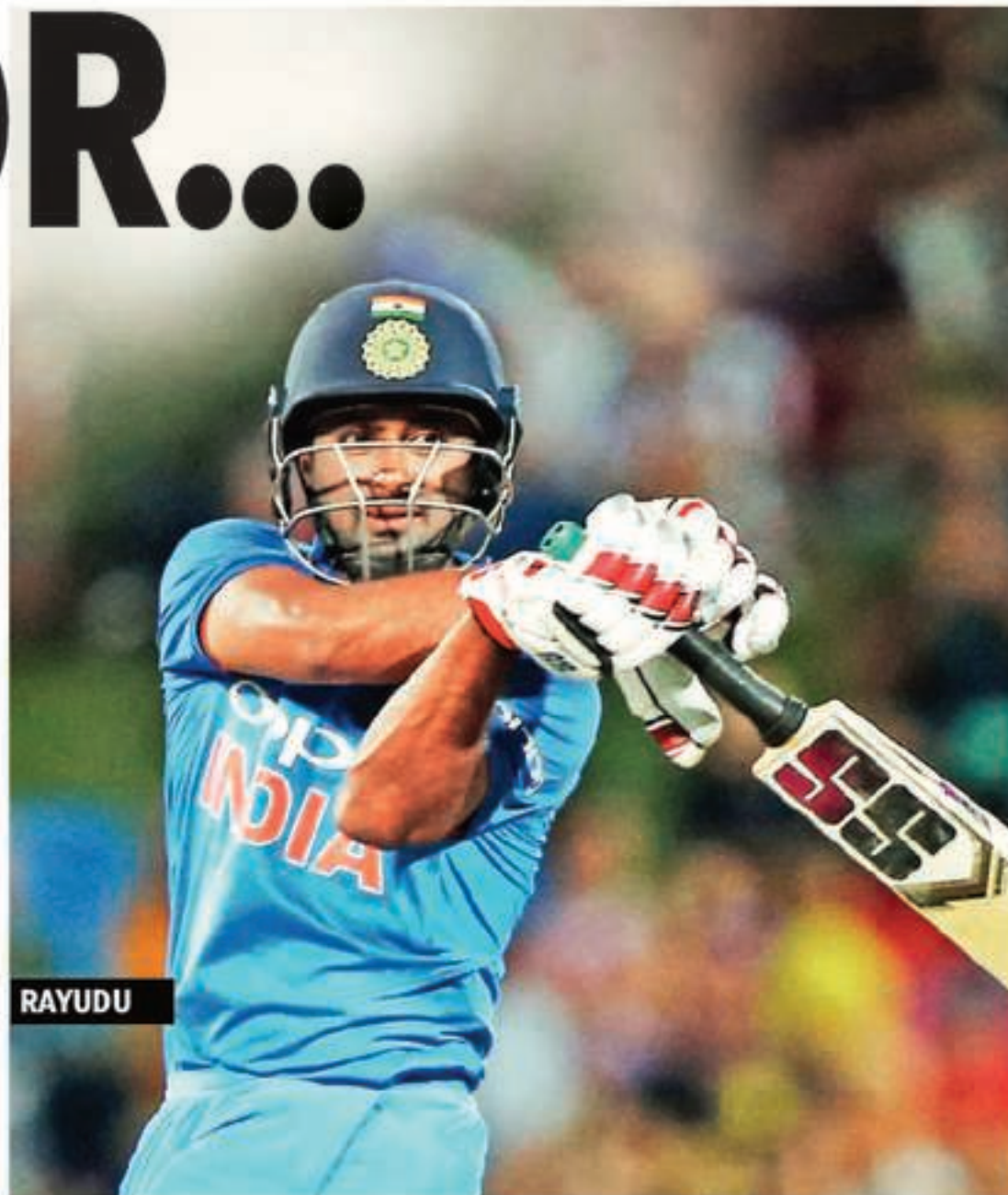
During the five-match ODI series against Australia, India were struggling a little bit with the No. 7 allrounder's slot. Hardik Pandya was serving a ban and Vijay Shankar, who had come in his place, lacked the explosive quality of the Mumbai man. But BCCI was judicious enough to send Pandya to New Zealand and in Wellington, his 22-ball 45 coupled with a valuable 2-50, showed that there is no replacement for him at the moment.

But there is a case for a back-up in the allrounder's slot and many feel Ravindra Jadeja should be the preferred option. The fact that he can be the third spinner — in addition to Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav — strengthens Jadeja's case.

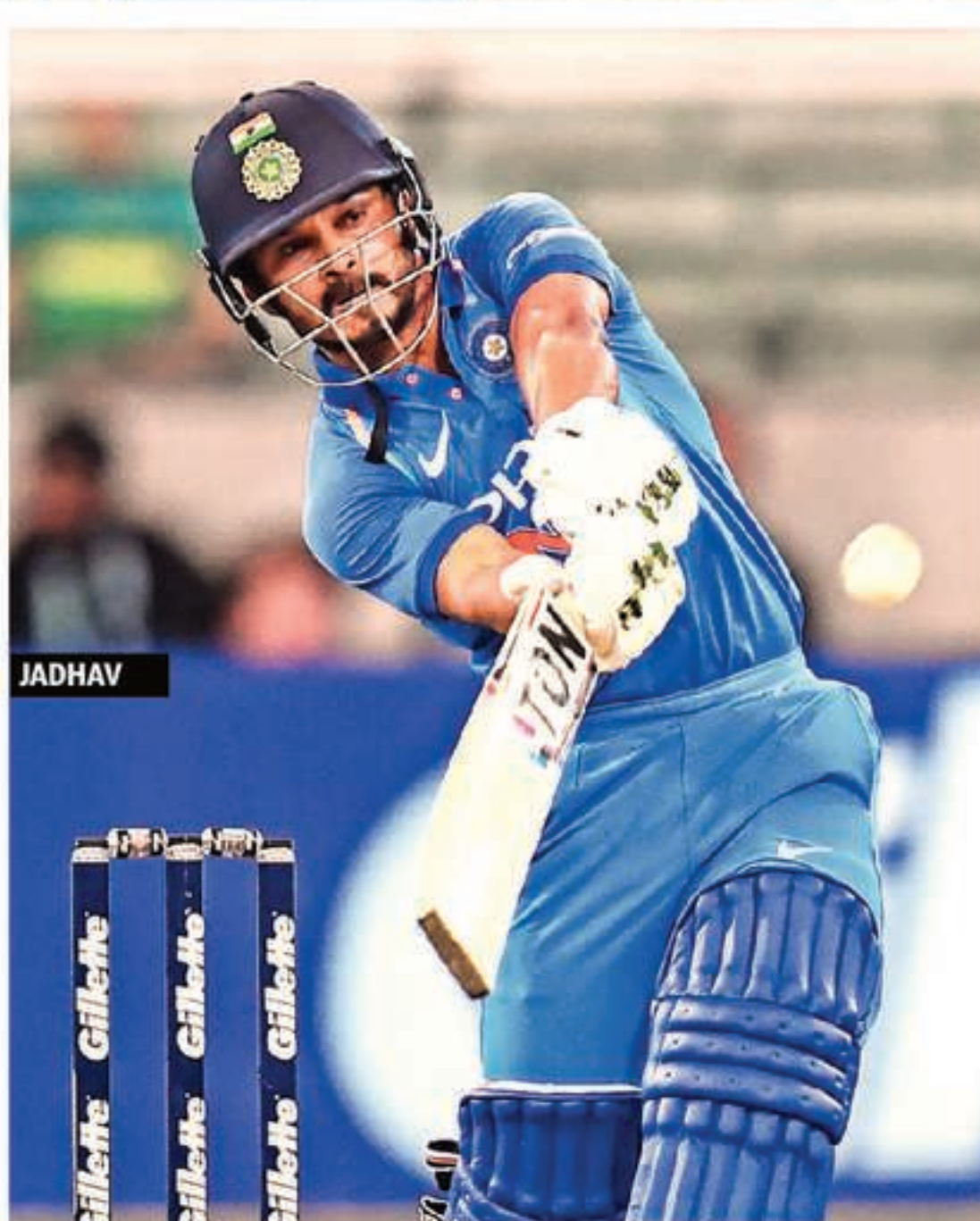
But Vengsarkar believes India should think of Vijay Shankar for that slot. "You have Kedar who can bowl a bit of spin. I don't think we need another spinner in the squad. The little bit that I have seen of Vijay Shankar, he looks an accomplished batsman and his bowling can be ideal for English conditions," Vengsarkar said.

The twin ODI series of Australia and New Zealand has seen a rejuvenated Mohammad Shami, who has been the stand-out bowler for India. Bhuvneshwar Kumar has that air of reliability around him while a well-rested Jasprit Bumrah will be back for the home leg against Australia. Left-arm pacer Khaled Ahmed and Mohammad Siraj are also in the mix, but both went for runs in the limited opportunities that they got in the two series. In such a scenario, Umesh Yadav's name may well crop up in the discussions and Vengsarkar feels it won't be without reason. "Umesh has been so good in Ranji Trophy and has been part of the Indian set-up for a while now. I don't see any reason to drop him from the World Cup squad," the former captain said.

There's another slot — that of the second wicketkeeper — that is also a point of discussion. For a while, the team management has persisted with Dinesh Karthik and the Tamil Nadu man played a couple of crucial hands in the few chances that he got in Australia and New Zealand. Definitely the one for the future, there's a strong case for Rishabh Pant with his left-handed utility but for now Karthik seems to be ahead in the race as the glove-man option.



RAYUDU



JADHAV



RAHANE

INDIAN BOWLERS VS AUS & NZ IN 2018-19 ODIS

PLAYER/M	WICKET	ECONOMY RATE
Chahal/6	15	5.11
Kumar/8	15	4.98
Shami/7	14	4.92
K Yadav/6	10	5.00
Pandya/3	4	5.23
Jadhav/6	3	5.52
Jadeja/3	2	5.17
Ahmed/2	0	6.72
Siraj/1	0	7.60
Rayudu/7	0	6.50
Shankar/4	0	4.87



SHANKAR



PANT

Make Pant bat at No. 4 or 5 against Australia: Sunny

TIMES NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi: Pointing out that having a left-handed batsman in the squad for the World Cup is 'quite crucial', cricket legend Sunil Gavaskar said India should field Rishabh Pant in the home ODI series against Australia (Mar 2-13) and make him bat at a higher position in the middle order to see how the explosive batsman-wicketkeeper is shaping up. The former India captain also batted for the inclusion of Dinesh Karthik as a 'spare opener'.

"I would look at Rishabh Pant because he brings the left-handedness into the top line-up. I would look at Rishabh playing in the 5 ODIs against Australia, because that will give a fair idea on how the young kid is shaping up with giving him a little more responsibility at No. 4 or 5," Gavaskar said.

"The left-handed option in the middle order I think is very crucial. I would look at Dinesh Karthik as third opener because you want to carry a spare opener in your 15 anyway. Even if you have three wicket-keepers in your squad, MS Dhoni, Dinesh Karthik and Rishabh Pant, so be it. I think it will give the team just a little flexibility with the batting."

Gavaskar also feels that in the event of a toss-up between all-rounders Ravindra Jadeja and Vijay Shankar for the World Cup, to be held in England and Wales, the latter would be included. "It's going to be between Vijay Shankar and Ravindra Jadeja in the squad for the World Cup, and looking at where the tournament is being held, I think it may be Vijay Shankar."

Gavaskar, an expert commentator for Star Sports, also favoured picking both Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal in the World Cup squad. "If I am playing Pakistan I will go with Yuzvendra Chahal, if you are playing with Australia, England and South Africa I will go with Kuldeep Yadav, because somewhere they do not read Kuldeep. I'll have both in my squad and pick accordingly because I do believe England, South Africa and Australia perhaps not pick Kuldeep Yadav as much as they would be able to pick a little bit of Yuzvendra Chahal."

The former opener said he would prefer India having three seamers in the squad — Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohammad Shami and Jasprit Bumrah. "If I am looking for balance amongst the seamers, I would say no I am not looking for a fourth seamer in the team. The way it's going with Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohammad Shami and Jasprit Bumrah, the fourth seamer is not coming to the party yet. I will go with three, I would say Hardik (Pandya) comes as the fourth seamer and again Vijay Shankar can come in as batsman who can bowl a little bit, so I think it gives the team a little bit of balance."

SELECT BATSMEN AT NO. 6 AFTER 2015 WC IN ODIS

PLAYER	AVG	RUNS/INN
K Jadhav	61.8	618/18
MS Dhoni	46.50	465/17
M Pandey	45.66	137/5
V Shankar	45.00	45/1
D Karthik	37.00	37/2
R Jadeja	24.00	24/1
R Pant	17.00	17/1
H Pandya	4.50	9/2
A Rahane	4.00	4/1

—Stats: Rajesh Kumar



KARTHIK

SELECT BATSMEN AT NO. 4 AFTER 2015 WC IN ODIS

PLAYER	AVG	RUNS/INN
MS Dhoni	40.72	448/12
A Rayudu	53.87	431/11
A Rahane	46.66	420/10
D Karthik	52.80	264/9
M Pandey	36.60	183/7
H Pandya	30.00	150/5
KL Rahul	13.00	26/3
V Kohli	11.50	23/2
K Jadhav	9.00	18/3



DHONI

GALLERY

India consolidate No. 2 ODI ranking; Kohli and Bumrah retain top spots

Dubai: The Indian cricket team on Monday consolidated its position at the second spot in the ICC ODI rankings in which captain Virat Kohli and pacer Jasprit Bumrah continued to top the respective charts for batsmen and bowlers. India have accumulated 122 points on the back of series wins over Australia and New Zealand and are placed behind England (126) in the fresh list, the ICC said in a statement. MS Dhoni also moved up owing to a strong showing against Australia last month, which fetched him the player of the series award. Dhoni has moved up three places to 17th position in the batting list. New Zealand fast bowler Trent Boult surged to third in rankings.

Holder suspended for slow over rate: West Indies captain Jason Holder has been suspended for the third and final Test against England due to his team's slow over-rate during their victory in Antigua last week, the ICC announced on Monday. Cricket's governing body banned Holder, despite the hosts playing four seamers and the regular fall of wickets as England were bowled out for 187 and 132. The ICC said in a statement that the Windies were two overs short of their target for the match. Holder was previously found guilty of a slow over-rate during his team's third Test defeat by Sri Lanka last June. AGENCIES

ACTION TODAY

BASKETBALL: NBA- Sacramento vs San Antonio, 8:30 am, Philadelphia vs Toronto, 6 am, Wednesday (Live on Sony ESPN, HD)
CRICKET: Ranji Trophy final, 9:30 am (Live on Star Sports 2, HD)
VOLLEYBALL: PVL- Calicut Heroes vs U Mumba Volley, 7 pm (Live on Sony Six, HD)

Saurashtra caught in a spin against Vidarbha

Nagpur: Left-arm spinner Aditya Sarwate scalped the big wicket of Cheteshwar Pujara in a game-changing spell to follow up a splendid rearguard action by their tailenders that put defending champions Vidarbha on top in the Ranji Trophy final against Saurashtra, here on Monday.

After a dull Sunday, it was an engrossing Monday that entirely belonged to the home team. They first made a remarkable recovery to score 312 in their first innings after resuming at 200/7 and then reduced the visitors to 158/5 at stumps. With spinners extracting significant turn and bounce exploiting the roughs, Sarwate (3/55) and off-spinner Akshay Wakhare (2/42) blew away Saurashtra's top half to seize the momentum.



THE BIG CATCH: Vidarbha players celebrate the dismissal of Cheteshwar Pujara (right) on Monday

was India's hero in their maiden Test series triumph in Australia and had also played a key role in Saurashtra's two victories in back-to-back knock-out matches.

Nevertheless, Pujara had come good in second innings in both the triumphs and Saurashtra would hope that Patel and Mankad would continue to erase the deficit to keep them in the game. Coming to bowl, Vidarbha brought Sarwate as early as in the third over and the move paid off immediately as he trapped Harvik Desai (10) with his third ball.

It turned a bit after pitching in line and Desai, who was on back-foot, missed the line completely.

All eyes were on India pacer Umesh but in his first five-over spell he hardly troubled the batsmen, though he hit one on Patel's right biceps.

The opener though was not perturbed and paced his innings beautifully. He easily rotated the stroke and also found three boundaries off Karnewar in the 18th over of the innings.

The third was an exquisite cover drive while the first two were on the leg-side as moved to 30s.
Brief scores: Saurashtra 158/5 (Snell 87 batting, Sarwate 3-55) trail Vidarbha 312 (Karnewar 73*, Wadkar 45, Unadkat 3-54) by 154 runs

Rayudu played a magnificent knock

Mohinder Amamath

It was a terrific ODI series for India to win because New Zealand are an equally a good side. This was a good experience for the team, which is looking good. Beating the Black Caps 4-1 in their own backyard is never easy; they are one of the good sides especially in World Cups where they have always shown heart. So beating them pretty much comfortably speaks very highly of this Indian side.

Conditions were tough in both of the last two games and batting was a bit difficult in the morning, but the boys learnt from the loss in the fourth game. Being all out for 92 is not something anyone would like but these things happen. Despite losing four wickets cheaply, they applied themselves well in the final ODI. Ambati Rayudu

played a magnificent innings and showed his experience, his performance helping India to post a decent total in the end. He did the right thing by just occupying the crease which is the correct way to play in a 50-over game when you know there are a lot of balls to come.

Rayudu was well supported by the batsmen at the other end, especially Vijay Shankar, Kedar Jadhav and Hardik Pandya who contributed with good partnerships. It reminded me of an innings in the 1983 World Cup against Zimbabwe when we were in a similar situation: the top five went cheaply before Kapil Dev took control with a super 175 and

we went on to win by 31 runs. In situations like this, you need someone to take control, apply themselves and work out how they were going to go about the innings, and this is what Rayudu did. As a batsman you understand that if you have some sort of total on the board and a good bowling line-up, it becomes easier to control the game later on.

Now the sides move on to a three-match T20 series, and here everything will depend on which team is better on the day. Honestly, there will be no favourite. In an ODI, you have more overs to play around with, and so can plan things out when things go wrong but here there is no time to

do that here. The kind of experience the Indian carries in this format will help them; they probably play the maximum number of T20s in comparison to players from other countries. GAMEPLAN

THE ULTIMATE INVERTER BATTERY

EXIDE INVERTER BATTERY

Starc leads Australia to 2-0 series win

Canberra: Fast bowler Mitchell Starc picked up his second five-wicket haul in the match to lead Australia to a comprehensive 366-run victory in the second Test against Sri Lanka and a 2-0 series win at Manuka Oval on Monday.

Chasing an improbable 516 for victory, the tourists were shot out for 149 by Australia, who won the opening Test in Brisbane by an innings and 40 runs.

The series win against Sri Lanka was the first for Australia since they thrashed England 4-0 in the Ashes early last year. "It's nice to



STARC

get some reward. I've said all summer this group has been working really hard," Australia captain Tim Paine said after the easy

victory. "I think we're starting to build towards something so it's great to get some reward for the work we've been putting in. It doesn't matter what the wicket is like or who you are playing against."

Left-arm quick Starc bowled with the same aggression and pace

that earned him a five-wicket haul in the first innings to finish with 5-46 and only his second match haul of 10 wickets.

Starc's only other 10-wicket haul in a match was also against Sri Lanka when he took 11-94 in a 2016 Test in Galle.

Man of the match Starc began the day adding the wickets of opener Dimuth Karunaratne and Sri Lanka captain Dinesh Chandimal to his tally. REUTERS

Brief scores: Australia 534/5 dec & 196/3 dec beat Sri Lanka 215 & 149 (Starc 5/46) by 366 runs